

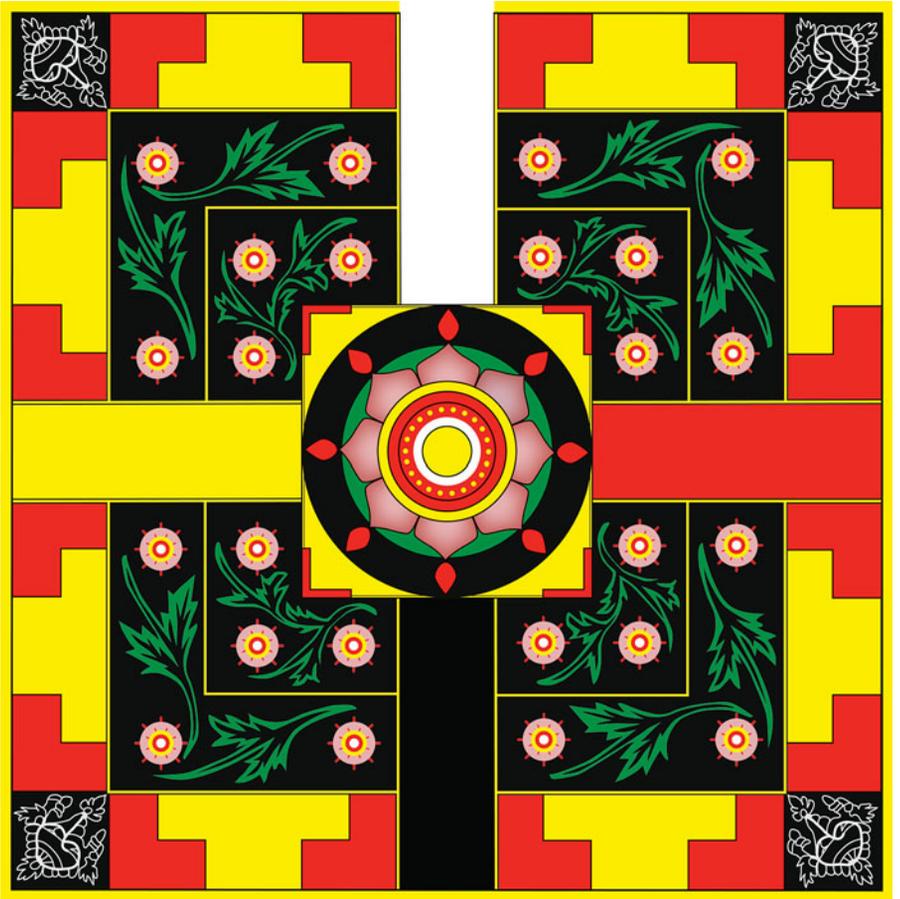
The Body of God

An Emperor's Palace for Krishna
in Eighth-Century Kanchipuram



D. Dennis Hudson

The Body of God



The chakrabja mandala: "Mandala of the Wheel and Lotus." Drawn by Case and Sandgren from an unidentified edition of the *Padma-samhita*.



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*An Emperor's Palace for Krishna
in Eighth-Century Kanchipuram*

D. DENNIS HUDSON

*Edited by
Margaret H. Case*

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*To my families
in the United States and India*

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Editor's Note

Dennis Hudson writes in his Introduction that he first began to study the Vaikuntha Perumal temple in Kanchipuram in 1979, and first visited it in 1983. It must have been in that period that I met him—as South Asian editor at Princeton University Press at that time, I sought out scholars whose work might eventually be published at the Press. I recall walking with him on a sunny path and his saying it would be a few years before he would be ready to submit a book to a publisher. I am sure that neither of us imagined it would be about twenty-five years.

In the meantime, I occasionally kept in touch with Dennis. I left Princeton University Press in 1992 and began spending time in the Vaishnava town of Vrindaban, India. In these years I came into more frequent contact with him, as we sometimes attended the same conferences and once were on the same plane from Delhi to New York. In the spring of 2003 he sent me seven chapters of his book on the temple, asking me to edit it and saying that the eighth chapter, the last on the middle floor of the sanctum, would follow at the end of the summer. I did read the manuscript, found very little to change or suggest, and put it on a shelf. At the end of the summer, he said he had agreed to write a “Guidebook” to the temple for publication in Chennai, and that it should take him no more than a year or so—after which he would resume work on the larger manuscript.

After that, I wrote or talked to him few times about the book, now called *The Body of God*, and heard his various reasons for not finishing it: his continuing work on the “Guidebook” and his preoccupation with family. I did not know that he had been diagnosed with

prostate cancer and found this out only in the spring of 2006, after he had been struggling with the illness for over ten years. John S. (Jack) Hawley at Barnard College and I talked that spring and summer about our wish to help him any way we could. Then in early October, I had a call from the historian Romila Thapar, who was visiting Dennis in Northampton for the weekend. She said that Dennis was no longer receiving treatment, was in hospice care, and probably could not work much longer. She said he would be glad if I were willing to help with the book. Jack and I drove to Northampton the following weekend, and we all agreed that I would put *The Body of God* together, while Jack would collect and edit a volume of Dennis's essays.

In assembling the book, the materials I worked with were the manuscript text of the "Guidebook," *The Vaikuntha Perumal Temple, Kanchipuram: Interpreted by D. Dennis Hudson*, which was in press in India, and a manuscript of *The Body of God* that included chapters on the whole temple. He had not considered it finished, he said, because there were always more connections that he became aware of, other paths he wanted to explore. The "Guidebook" had grown to over four hundred pages, and the other manuscript was quite a bit longer. There was overlap, of course, but Dennis's line of thought had changed as he worked, and the two manuscripts were organized differently. The approach we agreed on was to use the "Guidebook" (which we now called the "core text") as the framework, and add to it material from the longer work—as well as notes and diacritics, which were missing from the core text. Dennis was still able to work two or three hours most days, and he read through the larger text, marking sections that he wanted to include. Back home, I set to work as hard as I could to put it all together while he would still know that it was happening.

I made two more trips to Northampton for long weekends, and Jack joined us for a day or two each trip. I felt privileged to be briefly a part of Dennis and Lori's warm and vibrant household and extended family, all of whom were enormously supportive of this undertaking. The fall weather was mild, and we sat in or looked out on the garden as we talked and read manuscripts. The garden faded each week, and it was hard to see Dennis growing weaker as well. But as we talked, and Jack and I asked him questions, he seemed to draw on a deep reserve. It was clear that his wide-ranging knowledge and understanding of the temple and of Bhagavata religion were part of his core of life and strength. Despite the dire circumstances, I found these trips—and the manuscript itself—profoundly energizing.

Before Thanksgiving I was able to tell Dennis and his family that "we have a book"—it was cobbled together and had a shape, although much remained to be done. We were all relieved that Dennis's lifetime of involvement with the temple would in fact result in a book. About three weeks later, Dennis died. I heard that at the end he was clearly going through the temple in his mind's eye.

The present text, the result of several more weeks of concentrated effort, now includes virtually everything Dennis had marked, as well as some other material from the larger manuscript that I thought should not be lost. Two sections were left out: a meditation on the meaning of Krishna's many wives, and a study of the depiction of the *Devi Mahatmyam* at Mamallapuram. We hope to publish these elsewhere. Four indigestible but relevant pieces were assigned to Appendixes. Dennis intended to write a conclusion, "The Pancharatra Agama, Bhagavata Dharma, and the *Bhagavata Purana*." This was never written, so we are left to draw the conclusions ourselves, taking our cues from the interconnections he so abundantly suggests.

Dennis's writing was fluid, uncluttered, and approachable, and his attention to the details of bibliography and annotation was remarkable. The usual "housekeeping" chores of a copyeditor were virtually unnecessary. He complained that toward the end he suffered from confusion, and it is likely that some of his textual citations have become corrupted. He had put off introducing diacritics, which existed only here and there in the texts as I had them. We agreed that they should appear not in the body of the book but rather in a glossary, and much of my effort had been to construct this. Diacritics also appear in the bibliography.

Acknowledgments

Dennis Hudson was unable to compile his acknowledgments for this volume, though he was always generous in thanking the many people who helped him. He did record his thanks in the Indian publication, *The Vaikuntha Perumal Temple, Kanchipuram*, which provides the structure and much of the writing for this volume. That is reprinted here, with minor editing:

"It's impossible to acknowledge all the help with this study I've received over the years, beginning in 1979 with Marilyn M. Rhie at Smith College. Doris Meth Srinivasan introduced me to the American Council on South Asian Art and its scholarly world of art historians. Thanks to her support I received a fellowship for college teachers and independent scholars from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and during 1988–1989, with the long-suffering support of my family, I was free to work full time in 'decoding' the temple. This 'decoding' was further honed by invaluable critical responses received through lectures and talks at various forums. These include the annual workshops of the Committee on Religion in South India, meetings of the South Asian section of the American Academy of Religion, and meetings of the American Council on South Asian Art, and in classes on bhakti taught by John B. Carman at Harvard Divinity School. Steven J. Rosen opened his *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* to various papers I wrote introducing the temple,

summarizing my developing interpretation, and discussing what I see as this temple's implications for the history of Krishna worship in India. John S. Hawley carried this discussion to a climax in 2002 through a symposium he organized at Barnard College and the Southern Asian Institute of Columbia University, resulting in the *JVS* issue of Fall 2002 (vol. 11, no. 1).

"In India, Dr. K. V. Raman, retired from the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology of the University of Madras, read my early writings on the temple. His eager and continuing vote of confidence in my approach to the study of this archaeological monument he knows well has been indispensable to my continuing despite many delays. . . . The guidebook version of my study would not exist except that Ranvir Shah and his colleague V. R. Devika of the Prakriti Foundation suggested it, and with patient enthusiasm nudged me gently to its completion. They brought on Subhashree Krishnaswamy to edit it for a nonacademic audience, and Sathya Seelan to photograph it professionally.

"For critical readings of the text in its various stages I am indebted to the early guidance of my friend John Bollard, a Celticist and editor. And to my friend John Hellwig, a professor of theater delighting in South and Southeast Asian lore and performance, whose critical responses brought clarity to my later crafting of this [work]. Finally, there are my 'cheerleaders' on the sidelines these many years, growing ever more enthusiastic: David Hudson, Megan Hudson, Jake Hudson, Alexa Hudson, and Anil Pillay. Yet, for enthusiastic support, for patience, and for generous self-sacrifice over the course of these years there is no one I am more indebted to than my wife, my friend, and my spiritual companion, Lori Divine Hudson."

In bringing this volume together after Dennis's death, I very much missed his help in answering questions and filling in blanks. Many scholars were generous in addressing my questions: Vidya Dehajia, Jack Hawley, Steven Hopkins, Katherine Kasdorf, Timothy Lubin, Anna Seastrand, H. Daniel Smith, Travis Smith, and Donald Stadtner. Jack Hawley and David Mellins devoted many hours to correcting and amplifying the Sanskrit diacritics; and D. Samuel Sudanandha and Ravi Sriramachandran kindly vetted the Tamil diacritics. Dr. Sudanandha also copied the poem in Appendix 5 onto a disk. Without their help, the glossary would have been impossible, and even with it I fear that others will find mistakes, for which I of course bear responsibility. The diagrams were drafted by my son Nat Case and his assistant Chris Sandgren of Hedberg Maps, Minneapolis. The photographs are those that appear in the Indian publication; the list of illustrations below record the photographers and sources as far as these could be determined.

At Oxford University Press, Cynthia Read encouraged Dennis for many years, and for her unflinching support for this project, as for so many works of South Asian scholarship, many of us are very grateful. Linda Donnelly, the production editor, has as always been a pleasure to work with.

We are grateful to Molly A. Daniels-Ramanujan for permission to reprint the translations by A. K. Ramanujan that grace Dennis's discussion.

Above all, I am indebted to Dennis's family, especially Lori Divine Hudson and Jake Hudson, and to my husband Marston, for their support and encouragement in this enterprise, which has been as rewarding as it has been arduous.

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Abbreviations

AB	<i>Aitareya Brāhmaṇa</i>
AS	<i>Ahirbudhnya saṁhitā</i>
BG	<i>Bhagavadgītā</i>
BP	<i>Bhāgavata Purāṇa</i>
BU	<i>Brihadaranyaka Upaniṣad</i>
CU	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>
DM	<i>Devī Māhātmyamam</i>
EI	<i>Epigraphia Indica</i>
EITA	<i>Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture</i>
IA	<i>Indian Antiquary</i>
JS	<i>Jayakhyā saṁhitā</i>
Mbh	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
MP	<i>Mārkaṇḍeya Upaniṣad</i>
PS	<i>Pādma-saṁhitā</i>
PT	<i>Periya Tirumōḷi</i>
RV	<i>Ṛg Veda</i>
SB	<i>Sāthapatha Brāhmaṇa</i>
SII	<i>South Indian Inscriptions</i>
SS	<i>Satvata-saṁhitā</i>
TU	<i>Taittirīya Upaniṣad</i>
TVM	<i>Tiruvāymoḷi</i>

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The Body of God

I am . . . at bottom ignorant of all this and even somewhat fearful. . . . But so is the way and the spirit of story-telling which I embody that all it tells of, it pretends to have experienced and to be at home in it.

—Thomas Mann, *The Holy Sinner*



Introduction: The Discovery

This study began at Smith College in 1979 when Marylin Martin Rhie, in the Department of Art, and I, in the Department of Religion, decided to teach a course on “Hindu Gods in Text and Image.” We planned to correlate specific religious sculptures and buildings in India with texts, matching them chronologically as closely as possible to see what would emerge. For the Pallava period in the south (ca. 400–900), Rhie suggested we look at two relatively untouched temples in the Pallava capital of Kanchipuram.

One temple is the “Temple of Rajasimha, the Lord” (*rajasimheshvara koyil*), commonly known today as the Kailasanatha Temple. Its builder, Narasimhavarman Rajasimha, who ruled ca. 680–720, was a devotee of Shiva, had been consecrated as a Maheshvara, and followed the path of Shaiva Siddhanta. His magnificent temple is dated ca. 720. The other temple, built by Nandivarman Pallavamalla (ca. 731–796), is the “Emperor’s Vishnu-house,” which in Tamil is *paramecchuravinnagaram* and in Sanskrit is *vishnugriha*. This elegant temple is known today as the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple, and on stylistic grounds Rhie dates it to ca. 770–775.

Since I had been working on Tamil poems composed in the eighth and ninth centuries by the Bhagavata poet-saints known as Alvars, I opted for Pallavamalla’s “Emperor’s Vishnu-house.” I searched through the canon of Alvar poems known as the “Four Thousand Divine Stanzas” (*nalayira-divya-prabandha*) to find a poem written about it. I found only one, by a poet who “signs” his name as Kalikanri, but is better known as Tirumangai Alvar. The poem appears in his large anthology called *Periya Tirumoli* (2.9). Tirumangai

composed the poem sometime between the completion of the Vishnu-house ca. 770 and Nandivarman's death in 795–796, perhaps ca. 790. He wrote other poems about Nandivarman's liturgical acts, and in this one portrays him as still on the throne after an already lengthy reign. In the sixty-first year of his rule (792–793), Nandivarman responded to Tirumangai's repeated requests and gave land to sixteen Brahmins to form a village.¹ Perhaps the poet thanked him with this poem. We shall discuss Tirumangai further in chapter 3.

The poem is untitled and consists of ten four-line stanzas, nine of which follow a thematic pattern divided between two pairs of lines. The tenth stanza inverts the pattern; it is the stanza in which the poet "signs" his name and records the beneficial results of reciting it devoutly (the *phala shruti*). It was this thematic pattern that immediately caught my attention: God is the subject of the first two lines, and Nandivarman as God's servant is the subject of the second two lines. This closely resembles the architectural arrangement of the Vishnu-house the poem celebrates.

The Emperor's Vishnu-house is not huge by later temple standards, but is impressive (Figure I.1). In contrast to Rajasimha's open courtyard surrounding a mountainous palace for his Master, Nandivarman built his Master's residence as a three-dimensional mandala one enters and moves through. The tall prakara wall establishing the mandala's boundaries is about eighty-seven feet north to south and about one hundred eight feet west to east (Figure I.2). The west-facing vimana palace enclosed by it is about forty-seven feet square at the



FIGURE I.1. The Paramecchuravinnagaram in 1909. From Rea 1909.

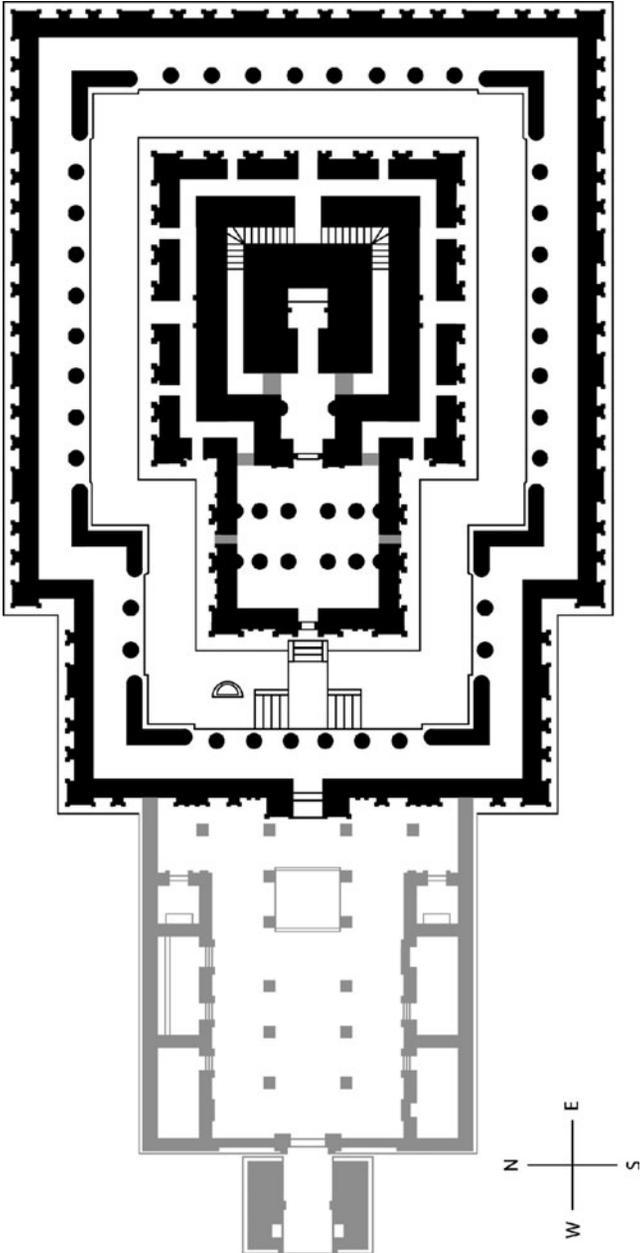


FIGURE 1.2. Ground plan of Vishnu-house mandala within prakara wall, and added mandapa. Revised from Rea 1909 and *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, edited by Michael W. Meister and coordinated by M. A. Dhaky; part 1: *South India: Lower Dravidadesa (200 B.C.–A.D. 1324)*, vol. 1, Text (New Delhi and Philadelphia: American Institute of Indian Studies and University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), figure 45, p. 69.

base. This square is the mandala's center. At first it appears distorted because the major portion of its western side extends westward to form a porch.² When this porch is conceptually collapsed back into the western side, however, the center as a square emerges clearly.

A mandala may be drawn on a flat surface and erased afterward. Examples are the kolam, an ornamental figure drawn with powder each morning at the entrance of homes, and the mandala similarly drawn on an altar to serve as the residence of devas during rituals prescribed by the agamas. But a mandala can also be a permanent three-dimensional structure like the Emperor's Vishnu-house. A devotee can walk around it, walk into it, and walk up and down it.

Devotees in Nandivarman's day who knew the *Bhagavata Purana* would recognize this scripture in the fifty-six sculpted panels on the vimana and its porch. Originally the Vishnu-house was painted, and one can only imagine today how dazzling it must have been, for it was meant to transform the consciousness of devout and learned viewers. It was designed and painted to seize their six senses of touch, taste, sight, hearing, smell, and thought, and then focus them on Deva or God, who is the subject of every spoken word and material form.

The only entrance into the Emperor's Vishnu-house mandala is through the western gateway of the enclosing prakara wall. Once inside, viewers stand inside a compact and bounded realm where the perspective is at all times partial, shifting, and intimate. The Emperor's Vishnu-house is the entire mandala arena defined by the enclosing prakara, but God is believed to live at its center. He does so in two ways: the vimana palace is His body; and He lives inside the vimana as three black stone icons. God's body as palace has three stories (*tritala-vimana*) (Figure I.3). On each story there is a sanctum (*garbhagriha*) housing God's body as icon in a specific posture. In the bottom floor sanctum He sits. In the middle floor sanctum He reclines. In the top floor sanctum He stands. These three iconic bodies and postures dwelling inside a palace that itself is a body alerts us to the fact that we are probing a realm of mystery. The Emperor's Vishnu-house is composed of stones, and these stones address Bhagavatas of considerable learning and sophistication in the capital of a powerful empire, which by this time has had its hand in Southeast Asian commerce and politics for generations. How these stones address the wealthy and sophisticated Bhagavatas of the Pallava capital and court, some of whom may have spent time in Sumatra, Java, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand, is the subject of this study. But this realm's mystery will remain a vision (*darshana*) words cannot encompass or explain, because it is the perception of God.

In the ground plan of the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple arena shown in Figure I.2, the original Parameccuravinnagaram Mandala is enclosed by the thickly shaded boundary depicting the prakara wall. A hall (*mandapa*) and a porch (*ardhamandapa*) have been added as an entrance leading to the prakara's

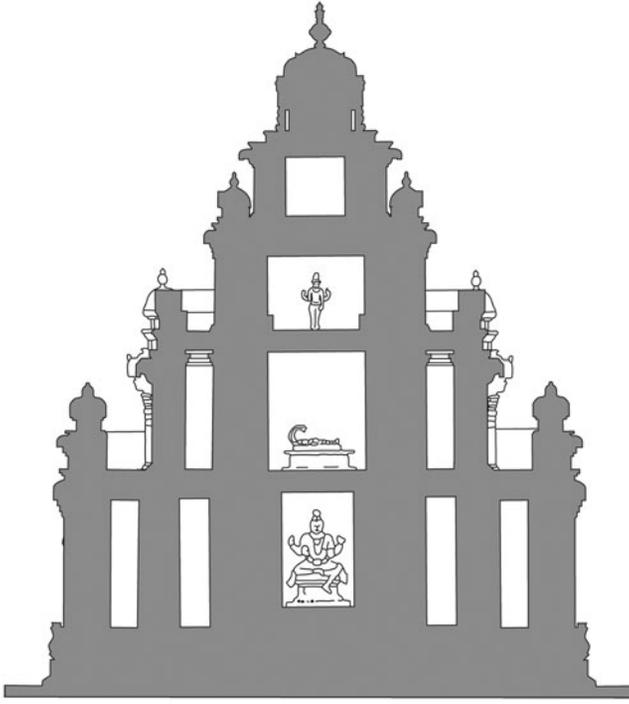


FIGURE I.3. Three sanctums on three floors facing west. Based on Rea 1909.

gateway on the western side. Inside the prakara is a covered walkway running along all four sides, which displays the history of the entire Pallava Dynasty. Next to it at a lower level is a drainage moat that surrounds the vimana palace to capture rainwater falling from it (Figure I.4). Steps on the bridge leading from the covered walkway to the vimana's porch descend into it so that when it is dry devotees may use it as a pathway for circumambulating the base of the vimana. If the moat were plugged, however, this drainage would be like a moat surrounding a palace, or an ocean surrounding a mountain. The latter appears to be its original meaning. At the center stands the vimana's square base; the central portion of the western side has been pulled to the west to form a porch (Figure I.2).

The mandala of the Emperor's Vishnu-house thus falls into two parts divided by the drainage pathway, moat, or "ocean." The three-story palace stands at the center as God's body with fifty-six sculpted panels on its exterior surface. The enclosing prakara walkway portrays ruling Pallavas facing God's body as His servants; most prominently displayed is Nandivarman. Tirumangai's poem follows a similar thematic structure. The first two lines of each stanza focus on the iconic presence of God residing in the Vishnu-house, and the second two lines focus on Nandivarman as His servant. Both building



FIGURE I.4. Moat facing northeast with vimana to the left, covered walkway to the right, and bridge on the eastern side without descending steps. Source unidentified.

and poem draw attention first to deity and then to ruler, and this bipartite structure is new in the eighth century.

Nandivarman's predecessor Rajasimha built the "Shore Temple" at Mamallapuram and had small panels carved inside its prakara, but they are badly worn, few in number, and difficult to interpret. The sequence of historical panels Nandivarman carved, however, is unprecedented in the vitality of its details, and in its function as a visual record of a dynasty's history. Similarly, none of Tirumangai's many other poems gives such a balanced attention to deity and ruler, or to historical details found in written records of the time. This striking parallelism of temple and poem gives rise to the questions that produced this study: Did Tirumangai record the organization of the Emperor's Vishnu-house in the structure of his poem? If so, did he record its meanings as intended by its designers? Does his poem verbally reproduce the Parameschuravinnagaram we now know as the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple?

Once asked, these questions would not go away. Marilyn Rhie and I taught the course together a few times and I came back to the questions as time allowed. Initially, the most intriguing and problematic aspect of the temple's organization was the significance of the difference in posture of the three icons placed in sanctums arranged vertically and hidden from view inside the vimana. Other Vishnu-houses with three floors were constructed later with icons in the same postures, but they were arranged in differing sequences. None of them, moreover, faced west as the Emperor's Vishnu-house does. This raises another question: What difference does the temple's west-facing orientation make to its intended meaning?

To answer these questions, I turned to the early reports on the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple by Alexander Rea and worked through C. Minakshi's careful

analysis of its sculpted dynastic history. I studied in the histories of India's art, and read T. Goudriaan on the Vaikhanasa Agama and H. Daniel Smith and Sanjukta Gupta on the Pancharatra Agama. I explored the history of the Pallavas and of the capital Kanchipuram, read the poems of the Alvars connected to the realm (Pey, Poykai, Putam, and Tirumangai), puzzled over Pallava texts inscribed on stone and copper, and read the historical studies of T. V. Mahalingam and others. Eventually I realized three things. First, with the exception of C. Minakshi no one knew much about the Emperor's Vishnu-house, and few had given it sustained attention. Second, some older assumptions and judgments about India's religious history needed to be reexamined. And third, little was known about the way liturgies for the worship of icons had shaped the design of the buildings in which they were housed, or about the change from one liturgical system to another in the same temple.

Thus far the study had been entirely out of books. In 1983, however, I was in Chennai (then Madras) researching another topic and went to visit the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple in Kanchipuram with my wife, Lori Divine. I took the poem and she took her camera. The temple was then, as it is now, under the jurisdiction of the Archaeological Survey of India, yet worship continues there and we met the priest who led it. He was the late M. R. Sundaravarada Bhattachari (or Sundaravaratha Pattachari). When I explained in my inadequate Tamil that I thought Tirumangai had come there and recorded the specific meaning of the temple in his poem, Sundaravarda Bhattachari's enthusiastic response told me that I could not let the question drop.

He knew Tirumangai's poem about his temple by memory and recited it as he led us around the vimana. He took us from the bottom floor to the middle floor, animatedly explaining the correspondences he saw between poem and building. I did not understand well everything he said, but I did understand from his explanations that the poem does in fact record the icons according to the sequence of their three postures moving from the bottom sanctum upward.

Sundaravarda Bhattachari's enthusiastic graciousness toward my efforts to understand his Vaikuntha Perumal Temple did not wane, nor has that of his son S. Devanathan Bhattachari, who has replaced his father as officiating priest. This is not to say, however, that he or his son would agree with all I say about it. Much of what he said at our first meeting revealed meanings in the poem that I had not seen, and each time I visited the temple his explanations revealed more about the building. Yet some of his modes of interpretation differ from the historical and critical methodology I have followed. As one example, his family follows the Vaikhanasa Agama, but I argue that it was designed according to the Pancharatra Agama. As another, he would use details to hang the meaning of an entire sculpted scene from what seemed to me to be a very slender thread. Our approaches to his temple were very different. He was Vaikuntha Perumal's hereditary servant and voiced the oral knowledge

of a worldview accepted as received. I was a scholar seeking knowledge from a stance that questions all worldviews, including the one it has received.

Due to the groundbreaking scholarship of H. Daniel Smith, I have long suspected that the liturgical basis for the worship of God as Krishna in southern India is the Pancharatra Agama, and that it underlies the poems of the Alvars. The Emperor's Vishnu-house appeared to me to confirm this hypothesis. The first sculpted figure met in the clockwise (*pradakshina*) circumambulation of the bottom sanctum, for example, is an enthroned Snake facing north sitting casually in a state of mild inebriation. In the Pancharatra system, this Snake corresponds to the Plover (*samkarshana*) formation (*vyuha*), the first of three God makes to transform himself into the universe and to act within it. This single yet highly significant correlation of theology and sculpted program at the sacred center of the mandala confirmed other evidence I observed. I therefore looked to the Pancharatra Agama to find the liturgical basis for the temple's design.

Some of the fifty-six sculpted panels on the vimana and its porch have been damaged by the weather, and important details have been clarified, interpreted, obscured, or even erased by restorations, most recently in 1998. Many panels were opaque to me, but the meaning of some was obvious. Among these are the depictions of Gajendra being saved from the "grasper" (*graha*), of the Churning of the Milk Ocean, of Man-lion grasping and disemboweling Hiranyakashipu (Golden Clothes), of Krishna dancing on Kaliya, of the Dwarf as Trivikrama, and of Madhusudana about to slay Madhu and Kaitabha. I assumed that the vimana's designers had placed the panels with a coherent program in mind, but I had no idea what it was, and did not want to rely on guesses. The panels that I did recognize, however, gave me a place to begin, and so I turned to their narratives as found in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and in the collections of "ancient lore" (*purana*) common to devotees of Krishna.

Among the latter, I gave special attention to the *Shrimad Bhagavata Purana*. It is the most influential of these puranas; and at the time most scholars agreed that it appeared in southern India sometime between the eighth and tenth centuries and is in some way connected to the poems of the Alvars. I also studied the Alvar poems with the temple in mind, returning again with special attention to those poems associated with Kanchipuram. For accurate reference, I began to make a detailed description of each panel based on personal observations and on the photographs of others.

A leave from teaching sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1988–1989 allowed me to focus on this study, and I was led to a hermeneutic breakthrough. Careful reading of the stories in the *Bhagavata Purana*, especially the prayers, revealed that it was more intimately connected to the Pancharatra Agama than I had thought. Moreover, as I read the stories that explained the sculpted panels whose subjects I recognized, the details of

the panels in turn taught me how to read the stories. Sculpted texts and written texts were interpreting one another. At times the detailed correspondence between *Bhagavata Purana* narratives and prayers and their sculpted depictions astonished me.

I began to see that the designers of the vimana had used a specific episode to encode an interpretation of the entire story, and that a story often begins and ends in places I had never noted. Some of the stories refer to other stories, and as I read those stories in the *Bhagavata Purana*, some of them explained panels on the vimana I had previously found opaque. In some cases, the newly decoded panels were nearby on the same wall, or were in a corresponding place on an opposite wall. Their locations were pointing me toward a systematic program of sculptures expressing the meanings of the vimana's four sides, and a pattern of thought was beginning to emerge. I did not yet fully understand this pattern, but the sculptural program obviously corresponded to the Pancharatra theology of God's four vyuha formations.

This evidence finally persuaded me to formulate a working hypothesis: the sculpted program of the vimana and porch document a single yet complex religious vision consistent with the *Bhagavad-gita*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, the Pancharatra Agama, and the poems of the Alvars. To test it I decided to see if, on the basis of these materials alone, I could plausibly explain the vimana's entire sculpted program on its three floors, including the sitting, reclining, and standing postures of its three icons. After much pondering and many misjudgments, the pattern emerged and the "code" of the Paramecchuravinagararam revealed itself.

It became apparent to me that this west-facing three-story palace sponsored by Nandivarman Pallavamalla about 770 was intended as an architectural "summa" of Bhagavata Dharma developed by that time. Moreover, it was designed to document Nandivarman's own liturgical career as a Bhagavata, explicitly through sculpted panels on the prakara and implicitly through sculpted panels on the middle-floor sanctum. To persuade anyone else of this, however, I knew would not be easy. Persuasion would depend on the explanatory power of the "code," on its ability to account for the details of sculpture, narrative, and design in a manner consistent with the texts and with Pancharatra liturgies. As a result, this work is an exercise in reading architectural, sculptural, written, and performed "texts" closely in order to understand the vision this Vishnu-house was intended to embody for sophisticated Bhagavatas of eighth-century Kanchipuram.

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PART I

The Approach to the Vishnu-house

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I

The Significance of the Temple

The two temples of Kanchipuram mentioned in the Introduction dramatically illustrate the religious and political conflict of the time and place, each one built as the personal place of worship by an emperor. Rajasimha articulated his Maheshvara religion majestically in the architecture and sculptures of his palace for Shiva known today as the Kailasanatha Temple. About fifty years later, Nandivarman Pallavamalla responded with his more intimate Vaikuntha Perumal Temple, which is the focus of this study. But a proper understanding of either temple requires some understanding of the rich religious context of the Pallava capital as the eighth century began.

Kanchipuram was a durga or fortress laid out between the Palar River and its branch called Vegavati. A rampart and moat enclosed this durga, penetrated only by guarded gateways. Where the west-east and north-south axes crossed stood its ancient center, which contained the royal palace and the temples for the Goddess (Kamakkottam), for Skanda (Kumarakkottam) and Trivikrama (Urakam), and perhaps a royal Buddhist shrine. The royal processional road (Raja Street) surrounded these structures on all four sides. To the west, in the prosperous section called Patakam, stood the temple of Krishna as Messenger of the Pandavas (Pandavatutar), and to the north stood the temple of Shiva (Ekamreshvara), an important center for Pashupatas. When Rajasimha built the Kailasanatha Temple, he placed it on the city's western side, facing east. Nandivarman placed his temple on the eastern side, facing west.

Outside the rampart to the south stood Buddhist sites: an Ashoka Stupa about one hundred feet tall, the royal vihara for bhikshus or

monks, and probably a shrine for Manimekalai, goddess of the trade routes to Southeast Asia, which by this time were vital to the economy of Pallava rule. A Jain temple stood southwest of the city (Jaina Kanchi). To the southeast was the hamlet of Attiyur, which contained temples for Vishnu reclining (Vehka), for Vishnu standing with eight arms (Ashtabhujaśwami), and the hill-like temple for Vishnu carved of the atti or udumbara tree (Varadarajaśwami). Modern Kanchipuram, however, has changed all this, for the city has spread over the remains of the rampart and moat to incorporate Attiyur and its temples as “Little Kanchi” or “Vishnu Kanchi.”

Kanchipuram’s eighth-century architecture reveals the variety of religions that made it their home because there was wealth to patronize them. Its port of Mamallapuram was a nexus of trade linking Dravida and the Deccan with Sumatra, Java, Champa in Vietnam, China, Cambodia, and Thailand. Wealthy merchants and rulers endowed monasteries and temples to house sadhus or ascetics of all sorts: Maheshvara, Pashupata, Kapalika, Bhagavata; shramana ascetics of Buddhist and Jain sects; and Brahmin sannyasins. Acharyas or scholar priests of different schools of ritual practice called Agamas, and acharyas of different doctrinal systems called Dharmas flourished alongside scholars and poets of a variety of languages. The elite of this city was highly literate, both verbally and visually, which explains why Nandivarman Pallavamalla constructed a Vishnu-house that is virtually a visual summary of Bhagavata Dharma. He addressed it to viewers who must have already known a great deal about the rites and doctrines of their religion, and in sophisticated detail. This is a temple meant not to teach by means of depictions but rather to remind devotees of what they already know. Its design is to use these recollections to transform consciousness, to “awaken” devout viewers to God, who gazes at them from all sides, and from within, wherever they look.

Part of the unfolding discovery of pattern and meaning in the Emperor’s Vishnu-house involves understanding the uniqueness of Nandivarman’s building and the impact it appears to have had on the Bhagavata religion among the Tamils. His temple was a new type for the time: the first completed Bhagavata vimana with three sanctums for worship placed one above the other on three floors. Its paradigm may have been the west-facing temple in Nandipuram near contemporary Kumbhakonam, where an icon sits within a single sanctum and faces west. After Nandivarman had gained final control of his realm he performed a purification ceremony at this Nandipuram temple. Judging from the poem Tirumangai composed to record the event (*PT* 5.10), Nandipuram’s west-facing seated icon was believed to embody the two dimensions within God that Nandivarman later brought into view through the reclining and standing icons of his Vishnu-house.

Nandivarman’s architect for his Master’s palace no doubt followed the lead of a scholar of agama (*agamika*), and we shall discuss such scholars later.

Guided by him, the architect hid the seated icon, and its “internal” dimensions represented by the reclining and standing icons, within the palatial and mountainous vimana. He surrounded it with a drainage pathway that fills with water when the drain is plugged. He enclosed both palace and drainage pathway with the prakara wall on which he had the history of the Pallava Dynasty sculpted, giving prominence to his emperor’s career. In other words, he produced an architectural version of God’s body seen by Brahma as the magnificent “Indra of Earth” known as the mountain Vaikuntha on White Island (*Shvetadvipa*) in the Ocean of Milk: “The Bhagavan, who houses the moving and the unmoving, appeared as Earth’s kinsman, the Indra of Earth embraced by waves with a thousand golden peaks as crown and the kaush-tubha jewel as embryo” (*BP* 3.8.30).¹

As the sponsor (*yajamana*) of this building, Nandivarman no doubt believed he would reap its fruits as Krishna describes them in the *Bhagavata Purana*: “By establishing my icon (*archa*), one gains the whole earth; by establishing my dwelling, the three realms of rebirth; by such things as worship (*puja*), the world of Brahma; and by all three, equality with me (*matsamyata*)” (*BP* 11.27.52). All three acts, Krishna explains, are to be performed according to the disciplines of rites taught by Veda and Tantra (*vaidikatantrikaih*), a combination characteristic of the Pancharatra Agama (*BP* 11.27.49). Since Nandivarman had fulfilled all three by sponsoring the Emperor’s Vishnu-house and its liturgies he was presumably qualified for eventual “equality” with Krishna. By “equality” Krishna presumably means residence with him in his Highest Home (*dhama parama*), as he explains to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-gita* (*BG* 15.4–6). Dwelling with God in his Highest Home is the mode of emancipation (*mukti*) known as *salokya*. Resemblance to Him suggests the further mode of emancipation known as *sarupa*, in which one’s shape is God’s shape. Tirumangai suggests in his poem about the temple that *sarupa* is Nandivarman’s destiny. In this final stanza, Tirumangai gives his name as Kalikanri, which means “one who put down with a strong hand the might of Kali,” perhaps an honorific title (*PT* 2.9.10):

The Pallavas’ Sovereign of ancient fame
Lives long in the land,
The Emperor who built the Vishnu-house
Well described by Kalikanri,
Ruler of Mangai’s people and her
vast fields of abundant paddy,
In this rich and beautiful garland
Of Tamil purity whose skillful singers
(By the grace of our Great Goddess Shri)
Shall rule with brilliance in that shining World

Of abundant water surrounded by the Ocean
Which thunders like the warring chariots
Of the kings who rule this world.

Nandivarman was a Bhagavata emperor, and his dharma was not to cultivate the purity of consciousness Kalikanri says will result from “skillful” singing of his poem. But his dharma did allow him to obtain the same fruits by building a residence for this Master and serving Him there, which he did.

In addition to this personal religious motivation, Nandivarman probably built the Emperor’s Vishnu-house as his response to Rajasimha’s great temple across the city, constructed some fifty years earlier. A Bhagavata emperor in Kanchipuram would not want a Maheshvara predecessor to excel him in devotion. And like that great monument, this Vishnu-house must have been splendid to behold and walk through, for many, if not all, of its sculptures were painted, probably in the same colors the *Bhagavata Purana* instructs devotees to perceive in their own visualizations (*dhyana*) (Mahalingam 1969: 184–185). It must have been a powerful visual and sensual experience for any serious devotee to enter the mandala through its western gate, walk around the enclosing prakara wall, walk into the vimana and around the bottom sanctum, climb the stairs to the sanctum above, walk around it, and then walk down-stairs and circumambulate yet again. Walking through a colorful mandala in this manner is what adepts in yoga, dhyana, dharana, and samadhi can do through their disciplined imaginations without moving an inch. But they are a minority among the devout. It is far easier for everyone else to participate in God’s enormously complex body by walking, and this is what Nandivarman enabled them to do.

According to the evidence at hand, all other three-story Vishnu-houses built in southern India appeared after Nandivarman had built this one. By 806 one was built in Uttaramerur, south of Kanchipuram, and by 808 another was built in Kuram, north of Kanchipuram. In the Pandya realm, one was built in the capital of Madurai, and one in Tirukkottiyur east of Madurai, both probably in the ninth century (Soundara Rajan 1975: 261–262). Another was built in 866 in the Ay domain at Parthavasekharapuram near modern Trivandram at India’s southern tip.² Significantly, the appearance of these Bhagavata tritala-vimanas coincides chronologically and geographically with the appearance of the four most prolific Alvar poets. Kalikanri or “Tirumangai” in the Pallava realm and Catakopan or “Nammalvar” in the Pandya realm are datable to the latter half of the eighth century. Vishnuchittan or “Periyalvar” and his daughter Kotai or “Antal” in the Pandya realm are datable to the first half of the ninth century, and perhaps later.

These unique temples and poems reveal a singular period of Bhagavata creativity in southern India, a fact recorded in the *Bhagavata Purana*, in a portion that may be dated to between the sixth and ninth centuries, but more

likely the latter. This portion is divided between Books Five (5.2–15) and Eleven (11.2–5) and consists of three stories. One is the story of the avatara of Vasudeva named Rishabha, another is the story of his son Bharata, and the third is the story of Rishabha's nine sons who are "ascetics clothed in the wind" (*shramana vatarashana*; 11.2.20.). The first two stories appear in a book that otherwise teaches cosmology, and the third appears in the Krishna story (*Krishakatha*) as it leads to the beginning of the Kali Yuga with the destruction of the descendants of King Yadu.

There are two reasons to date this set of three stories to these centuries. Padmanabha Jaini provides the first in his discussion of the Jina Rishabha's transformation into an avatara of Vishnu (Jaini 1977: 321–337). Jaini observes that although the first tirthankara, Rishabha, has always held the prime place in Jaina devotion, biographical details of Rishabha and of his son Bharata appeared among Jainas only in the sixth century, and then only in "the commentaries beginning with the *Avshyaka-nirutti* of Bhadrabahu II." These, he says, are written in Prakrit and "used primarily by Jain monks in their daily ritual and hence not easily accessible to the public abroad" (Jaini 1977: 331). But the story of Rishabha became widely known when Jinasena told it in his *Adipurana* of the ninth century. Jinasena was a Digambara acharya, the guru of the Rashtrakuta king Amoghavarsha I (ca. 814–880). He established his court in Malkhed in northeastern Karnataka. Amoghavarsha was "an apostate from his traditional Vaishnava faith" according to Jaini, and he identifies him as "the king named Arhat of Konka, Venka, and Kutaka" described in *BP* 5.6.9–11 (Jaini 1977: 329). In Amoghavarsha's court, he argues, Jinasena refashioned the tirthankara Rishabha into a godlike Jina that could compete in the minds of Jaina laity with the trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva:

The waves of the *bhakti* movement that had swept over the whole range of Indian life finally over-took the atheist Jainas and forced them to deify, as it were, their human *tirthankaras* or face the peril of extinction. Probably the move brought to the surface the emotional hunger of the Jain laity for an object of worship more gracious and glamorous than merely the austere figure of an exalted human teacher. Jinasena very skillfully provided the Jain laity with a new identity of a socially honoured caste of "neo-Brahmans," a new book of codes in the guise of a Purana, and a new mage of the Jina endowed with a grandeur and majesty that could easily compete with the Hindu trinity. (Jaini 1977: 335)

Jaini says it is highly probable that Jinasena's *Adipurana* is the reason for the account in the *Bhagavata Purana*, and he may be correct. But since details of the stories of the tirthankara Rishabha and his son Bharata had been developed among Jaina ascetics since the sixth century, it is not impossible that

the Bhagavata interpretation of Rishabha as an avatara of Vasudeva has its origins during this period, as well. Moreover, the king of Dakshina Karnataka named Arhat (Jina) may be a collective representation of royal patrons of Jainas from this same period, and not a specific reference to the ninth-century king Amoghavarsha I, as Jaini argues.

Jaina literature flourished from patronage by Kadambas of the late fourth to early sixth centuries, by the Sendrakas subordinate to the early Chalukyas from the sixth century, by the Gangas from the seventh century, and by the Rashtrakutas from the eighth century (*EITA* 1.2 Text: 6–7, 108). Intimate knowledge of Jaina thought during this period was available to Bhagavata acharyas by means of marriages between the rulers in Kanchipuram and these patrons of Jainas, notably through the maternal line.³ In the sixth century, the wife of the Bhagavata ruler Simhavarman (ca. 535–580), and mother of the Bhagavata ruler Simhavishnuvarman (ca. 560–580), constructed an Arhat temple for the Yapaniya Sangha (Yavanika Sangha) of the Jainas in the realm of the Western Gangas. Her intent was to generate glory for her husband's family and her own merit (Mahalingam 1969: 54–55). She may also have patronized the Jaina temple for Jina Vardhamana, which existed in Kanchipuram at the time (*EITA* 1.1 Text: 23, 74).

Nandivarman Pallavamalla began (or perhaps continued) generations of intermarriage with courts patronizing Jainas. Sometime after his unctio ca. 731 he went into exile among the Rasthrakutas (his career will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4). He then married Reva, daughter of Dantidurga (a.k.a. Sahastunga Dantidurga Khadgavaloka). Dantidurga ruled from an uncertain place from 733 until he vanquished the Chalukyan Kirttivarman II. By 753 he had assumed sovereign titles. Around this time he assisted Nandivarman in regaining the throne in Kanchipuram, and surrounded the capital with his troops while Nandivarman received Bhagavata consecration (Tirumangai records this in *Periya Tirumoli* 2.8). Dantidurga converted a Buddhist cave at Ellora (number fifteen) into a Bhagavata cave-temple, where he left an inscription, and may have begun the celebrated Kailasanatha temple adjacent to it (cave sixteen).⁴ Dantidurga and his daughter Reva may have been Bhagavatas, but Digambara and Yapaniya Jainas found considerable patronage in their court. Sometime in the middle of the century, the Digambara acharya Akalankadeva (ca. 720–780), a noted author on Jaina epistemology and logic, challenged the Brahmavadins in a dialectical disputation at Dantidurga's court. And this was only one example of Rashtrakuta patronage of Jaina acharyas and their scholarship before Amoghavarsha took Jinasena as his guru (*EITA* 1.2 Text: 108).

The son born to Nandivarman and Reva took Dantivarman as his coronation name, honoring his maternal grandfather Dantidurga. He was a Bhagavata with connections to the Jainas of the Rashtrakuta court through his mother. Dantivarman married Aggalanimmati of the Kadambas of Vanavasi in

Karnataka, who had long patronized several Jaina sects including the Svetambara, Digambara, and Yapaniya (*EITA* 1.2 Text: 6). Dantivarman began as the junior ruler (*yuvaraja*) at the end of his father's reign and continued ruling until ca. 845. His son by Aggalanimmati reenforced the Pallava connection to his grandmother's Rashtrakuta lineage—and to the Jainas patronized there—by taking as his wife a daughter of Amoghavarsha named Sankha. He took the coronation name of Nandivarman III in honor of his paternal grandfather. He ruled for about twenty-two years (844–866). During these years his father-in-law Amoghavarsha (ca. 814–880) ruled in Malkhed in northeastern Karnataka. His guru was the Digambara acharya Jinasena, the famous composer of the *Adipurana*, which his disciple Gunabhadra completed. And Gunabhadra was the guru of Amoghavarsha's son Krishna I (*EITA* 1.2 Text: 108).

According to Jaini, this is when the Jina Rishabha entered the Bhagavata Purana as an avatara of Vishnu.

Nandivarman III eventually divided the Pallava realm between his two sons by his two wives. He gave its southern part to his son by Sankha named Nripatungavarman (ca. 854–880). He was an ally first of the Pandyan Shrimara and then of his son Varagunvarman II, both of whom appear to have been Bhagavatas. Nandivarman III gave the northern part of his realm to his son named Kampavarman by his wife Kandan Marampavaiyar of the Palluvettariyar. He ruled ca. 847–880. Kampavarman married into another royal family who patronized Jainas through Vijaya, daughter of Prithvipati I of the Gangas, based in Gangavadi in Karnataka and allied with the Rashtrakutas at Malkhed. They had a son named Aparajitavarman (ca. 875–894).

Rivalry between these half-brothers—Nripatunga in the south allied with Pandyas sympathetic to Bhagavata Dharma, and Kampavarman in the north allied with Gangas and Rashtrakutas sympathetic to Jaina Dharma—led Kampavarman to push Nripatunga into the Kaveri River valley. With the aid of his Ganga father-in-law Prithvipati I, Kampavarman's son Aparajitavarman finally defeated his paternal uncle in 878 or 881. Aparajitavarman—connected through his mother with Jaina patrons—was then sole ruler of the Pallava realm for about fifteen years until Aditya Chola slew him in ca. 894 and brought the Pallava Dynasty to its end.

As the above account documents, generations of family connections between royal patrons of Bhagavata Dharma and of Jaina Dharma would have provided contexts for the story of the Jina Rishabha as an avatara of Vishnu to develop long before Jinasena's *Adipurana* in the middle of the ninth century. The Buddha as the ninth avatara appears in the first inscription listing the ten avatars, which is in the Adivaraha Cave-temple in Mamallapuram and is dated to the middle of the seventh century (Srinivasan 1964: 173). It is unlikely that a story of Rishabha as an avatara would not have appeared by this time as well. But this would not be the developed literary version now contained in the *Bhagavata Purana*, and Jaini may be correct that it was composed in response

to Jinasena's *Adipurana* composed in the court of Dantivarman III's father-in-law Amoghavarsha.

The second reason to think this literary telling of the story of Rishabha and Bharata entered the *Bhagavata Purana* between the sixth and ninth centuries—and most likely in the ninth—is found in an “old legend” (*itihasa puratana*; *BP* II.2.14). This legend is about a discussion between Rishabha's nine shramana sons and a king of Mithila in Videha named Nimi. When the shramana named Karabhajana teaches king Nimi he describes the greatness of the Kali Yuga (*BP* II.5.29–34). In the Dvapara Yuga, he says, the Bhagavan is worshiped with the rites of Veda and Tantra, which refer to the Pancharatra Agama. But in the Kali Yuga he is worshiped with various Tantra rites in a form possessing a black complexion brilliant as sapphire, with all his arms, decorations, weapons, and attendants. Worshipers extol his glories and names through sankirtana, and they pray a mantra that ends with a description of Rama leaving Adyodhya and chasing a wild animal made of maya desired by Sita.

The Kali Yuga is the greatest of the four ages, Karabhajana explains, because people attain their goal merely through sankirtana; no better method exists. “People for whom Narayana is the last resort (*narayanaparayanah*),” Karabhajana observes, “appear more often in the Kali Yuga than in other times, and especially in the Dravida region” (*BP* II.5.39–40). He then describes the Dravida region by its river systems. First there are the Tamraparni River and the Kritamala or Vaigai River, which sustain the Pandya realm. Second is the Payasvini or Palar River, which sustains the Pallava realm. Third is the Kaveri River “of great purity,” which sustains the Chola and Muttaraiyar realms. Fourth is “the great river flowing westward,” which sustains the Chera realm. This last in Tamil is the Great River (*periyā-aru*) known today as the Periyar. It flows from the Western Ghats into the Arabian Sea in what is now Kerala.

According to R. Nagaswamy, however, recent excavations and discoveries of coins reveal that the capital of the Chera realm, which is known both as Karur and Vanji, was located not in Kerala but on the Anporunai or Amaravati River in Tamilnadu. This river originates in the western hills of Varahagiri. It flows eastward to join the Kaveri River near Karur, where the Chera capital existed probably from the time of Ashoka Maurya in the third century BCE. It flourished during the Sangam period from the first century CE. The Pallavas of Kanchipuram dominated the Kaveri region, including Karur, from the sixth century. But in the eighth century it was still considered the Chera capital, because when Nandivarman conquered Karur he took the Chera title of Villavan. Tirumangai reports this in the first stanza of his poem about this Vishnu-house (*PT* 2.9.1). This conquest early in the second half of the eighth century is probably the occasion for the Chera to shift their capital of Karur or Vanji to “the great river flowing westward” in Kerala. From the twelfth century on, these names in Tamil literature refer to the Chera's western capital on the

Periyar, not to its original location on the Anporunai or Amaratavti River (Nagaswamy 1995: 107–108).

Since Karabhajana refers to “the great river flowing westward” as the system sustaining the Chera realm, therefore, this “ancient legend” must not be earlier than the end of the eighth century. But its description of Bhagavata devotion in Dravida points later into the ninth century, for as we have noted, the most prolific Tamil poets of Bhagavata devotion lived in the Pallava, Chola, and Pandya realms the legend describes by means of their rivers: Kalikanri or “Tirumangai”; Chatakopan or “Nammalvar”; Vishnuchittan or “Periyalvar”; and Kotai or “Antal.” Dating to the second half of the eighth century and to the ninth, they proclaim in their Tamil poems the doctrine that Karabhajana says is popular in Dravida. It teaches complete submission to the Giver of Emancipation (*mukunda*), with no debts or obligations to any other being, and with love (*priya*) focused completely on Him (*BP* 11.5.41–42). This is the Bhagavata doctrine of taking refuge in God (*prapatti*) and living thereafter as a refugee (*prapanna*) in complete dependence. In Bhagavata Dharma this doctrine of dependence exists alongside the doctrine of ritual activity, which by the eighth century we may call Bhagavata Tantra. Krishna teaches Arjuna both doctrines (*BG* 12.6–11). But in the end he urges him to live dependently as a *prapanna* refugee (*BG* 18.65–66). Kotai’s *Tiruppavai* records the *prapanna* doctrine as found in Villi’s New Town (*Villiputtur*) south of Madurai. It is devotion expressed openly to others. But in her *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* she records her own practice of Tantra. It is devotion expressed secretly (Hudson 1980 and 2000b).

Nandivarman Pallavamalla’s newly built Vishnu-house presumably played a role in the generation of this enormously creative period of Bhagavata Dharma in Dravida. It is possible, for example, that Kotai’s father Vishnuchittan had Nandivarman in mind when he composed his New Year poem for Krishna called *Tiruppallantu* or “Many Years.”⁵ Its first stanza ends with Krishna subduing the wrestler Chanura in the Mathura wrestling ring before he kills Kamsa:

Many years, many years,
 Many thousands of years,
 Many millions of hundreds
 of thousands
 May there be auspicious protection
 For the beauty of your red feet,
 O Krishna the color of black gem
 With arms so powerful
 They subdued the wrestler.

A depiction of Krishna wrestling Chanura appears on the middle-floor sanctum of the Emperor’s Vishnu-house as the conclusion of a sculpted sequence that implicitly records Krishna’s subjugation of Nandivarman through the

consecration (*diksha*) that made him his beloved slave. Vishnuchittan may have had this depiction in mind; he may have used Chanura to represent the “Pallava Wrestler” in Kanchipuram, to honor him during the rule of Pandyan Bhagavatas who replaced Maravarman Rajasimha (730–765), the Shaiva Pandya who supported the opponents of Nandivarman’s rule.

Maravaraman Rajasimha’s immediate successor was Varagunavarman I (765–815), followed by Shrimara Shrivallabha (815–862) and then by Varagunavarman II.⁶ We have already met the last as a close ally of the Pallava king Nripatungavarman, whose vassel he may have become (*EITA* 1.1 Text: 111). Varagunavarman I is identified as a paramavaishnava in the Shrivaramangala copper plates of ca. 770, and he had a minister who was known as Maran Kari and as Madhura Kavi. This minister may be the same Madhurakavi who wrote a single poem of eleven stanzas (*kannin chirutampu*) to honor the Alvar he calls “The Venerable One of Southern Kurukur” (*tenkurukur nampi*). His name is Maran Chatakopan and he lives at Kurukurnakar on the Porunal or Tamparaparni River (*TVM* 4.5.11). He holds the office of the “Nakaran of bounteous Kurukur,” which suggests that he is a village or temple master (*TVM* 4.10.11).⁷ But he is also “Chatakopan, the Pandya Lord of the Tamparaparni River” (*TVM* 9.2.11), “Chatakopan, the chief of Kurukai and the Pandya lord of fertile groves” (*TVM* 3.6.11), and “the Pandya district lord of prosperous groves” (*TVM* 8.9.11). He holds this last position for a long time (*TVM* 5.6.11). If Madhurakavi in the copperplate dated ca. 770 is the same as the poet Madhurakavi, this means that he and Chatakopan, a Pandyan official in Kurukur on the Tamparaparni River, were contemporaries of Nandivarman Pallavamalla, and of Tirumangai in the latter half of the eighth century.

Vishnuchittan and his daughter Kotai in Villi’s New Town south of Madurai appear to have lived later. In the penultimate stanza of *Tiruppallantu*, Vishnuchittan says, “Like Chelvan Apimanatunkan, king of those joined in the faultless assembly, I, too, am an old slave of Yours, Tirumal.” *Chelvan apimanatunkan* means “the prosperous man who is dear” and is equivalent in Sanskrit to *Shri vallabhah*, which is the title of the Pandyan Shrivaraman Shrivallabhan. Since Shrivallabhan ruled 815–862, and since Vishnuchittan says that both of them are old, we may date Vishnuchittan and his daughter Kotai to the first half of the ninth century. The term translated as “those . . . in the . . . assembly,” which is *kottiyar*, may refer to the Pandya ghatika, a learned assembly (*goshti*) of Brahmins connected to kingship. Or it may refer to the inhabitants of the town east of Madurai known as Tirukottiyur (Shri Goshtipuram in Sanskrit). This town will reappear below.

Further evidence of the far-reaching creative influence of Nandivarman’s newly built Vishnu-house during these years of these “waves of the bhakti movement” appears in two poems composed by Chatakopan and translated by A. K. Ramanujan. They are organized according to the same sequence of iconic postures found in the Emperor’s Vishnu-house. But Chatakopan begins at the

top with Krishna standing on earth, moves to him reclining as Brahma's origin in the middle, and ends with him sitting in his Highest Home on the bottom. The first poem is *Tiruvaymoli* 7.6.5, to which I have appended clarifying notes:

My cowherd [standing]
 my rough dark diamond
 how will this self of mine
 ever-trammeled in the three [reclining]
 worlds unfolding
 in your navel's lotus
 how will it come through
 and reach you there [sitting]
 in your overwhelming world of light?⁸

Tirumangai shares this interpretation of these three iconic postures, as we shall later see. The top sanctum is God's grossly material body (*sthulasharira*) where He stands as Krishna in the world we inhabit. The middle sanctum is God's subtle material body (*sukshmarsharira*), where He reclines as the source of our world. This is where Brahma repeatedly goes to sleep and awakens for a lifetime we experience as the repeated dissolution and emanation of our seemingly endless world of death and birth, the realm of samsara so difficult to cross. The bottom sanctum is God's body of pure material being (*shud-dhasattva*), which Krishna calls his Highest Home. It is the ultimate goal for anyone seeking emancipation from samsara. Chatakopan's problem translates into the terms of the three-story vimana this way: How can we move from the top-floor sanctum to the bottom-floor sanctum without getting trapped in the middle-floor sanctum?

He offers a solution to this problem in the second poem, which is *Tiruvaymoli* 8.7.9. It is the consecrated life of disciplined devotion according to Bhagavata Tantra—and it appears that the sadhana he followed produced astonishing results for him:

My dark one [standing]
 stands there as if nothing's
 changed
 after taking entire
 into his maw
 all three worlds [reclining]
 the gods
 and the good kings
 who hold their lands
 as a mother would
 a child in her womb—

Not a man, not a woman,
 and not a man-woman
 different from these;
 Not seen, not existing,
 but not *not* existing too;
 Appearing as the shape desired
 when the time for worship comes,
 yet not that either—
 Talk of our Bhagavan
 Is so oblique
 It falls apart completely.

How should we understand these amazing correlations between Nandivarman's Vishnu-house of three sanctums in Kanchipuram and poems composed by Chatakopan living in the Pandya realm hundreds of miles to the south? I think it unlikely that Nandivarman or his acharya expressed a new Bhagavata doctrine through their unique tritala-vimana; instead they brought into view the doctrine of three dimensions in God's body that is found in the *Bhagavad-gita* and other portions of the *Mahabharata*, and that is implied by the vyuha theology of the Pancharatra Agama, evidence of which appears in the latter half of the first millennium BCE. Acharyas in royal courts apparently taught this doctrine to their disciples by means of a mandala. For lack of a specific name we may call it "Krishna's Mandala."¹²

This mandala must have been present wherever there were consecrated Bhagavatas as adept as Chatakopan, and it accounts for the correlations between *Tiruvaymoli* 7.6.5. and 8.7.9 and the *Paramecchuravinnagaram*. The fact that Nandivarman used his three-dimensional built form of Krishna's Mandala as a summa of Bhagavata Dharma further suggests that it was the paradigm for the entire religious system. We shall discuss it in detail when we turn to the Emperor's Vishnu-house in parts II and III.

The Name of the Vishnu-house: Paramecchura as God,
 Emperor, and Architect

The official name of the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple when it was built encodes important information. Tirumangai uses it in its Tamil form, *Paramecchuravinnagaram*. Its Sanskrit form, *parameshvara-vishnugriha*, was used in an inscription carved on the vimana about 813 to record the gift of a gold vessel by Nandivarman's son and successor, Dantivarman (Minakshi 1941: 1). Paramecchura and Parameshvara literally mean "supreme ruler." As used in the poem, *Paramecchuravinnagaram* may be interpreted in three ways: as the

“Supreme Ruler’s Vishnu-house”; as the “Emperor’s Vishnu-house”; and as the “Vishnu-house of the Emperor’s Architect.”

In the first interpretation, as a title for the Bhagavan, Supreme Ruler refers to the sitting icon on the bottom floor. As we shall see, this icon embodies God’s formation (*vyuha*) called Vasudeva, the Supreme Ruler of the brahmanda, or what we may call “spacetime.”¹³

In the second interpretation, as a title for the Pallava ruler, Supreme Ruler means emperor, and the inscriber of a grant Nandivarman made ca. 753–754 describes himself as “The Majestic Emperor’s Master Woodworker.”¹⁴ This use also appears in the inscription on the south prakara walkway, which we shall examine in detail in chapter 4. The inscription’s first label refers to the Parameshvara who died before Pallavamalla ascended the throne. The third label refers to Pallavamalla as the boy who would become the Parameshvara. The tenth label describes the status of Parameshvara he received after the unctio that made him an Indra of Men (*narendra*) with the name Nandivarman.

The eleventh label adds, however, the Tamil title *Perumanatikal*. Literally, this means “the feet (*atikal*) of the Bhagavan (*peruman*).” In the context of a Vishnu-house it denotes the feet of the icon where offerings are placed.¹⁵ When applied to a person, *perumanatikal* means that he has offered his self to the Bhagavan’s feet to be his slave. The paradigm for this is the asura king Bali, who offers himself at the feet of Dwarf after he takes his three strides (*BP* 8.2–11). Since the plural “feet” (*atikal*) may also denote respect, I understand the title in Nandivarman’s case to mean the Bhagavan’s Venerable Slave. It is the Tamil equivalent of the Sanskrit title *paramabhagavata*, which means the Bhagavan’s Supreme Slave. Both terms likewise refer to the King of Kings and Supreme Ruler (*rajadhirajaparameshvara*), a title for Nandivarman that appears in a grant dated ca. 753–754 (*SII* 2. 342–361, stanza 71). The word “emperor” as used here captures all these meanings.

The third interpretation of *paramecchura* and *parameshvara* refers to the imperial architect who designed the Emperor’s Vishnu-house. We know from an inscription in the first three-story vimana built after this one, which was about 806 in Uttaramerur, that its architect was called *parameshvara-peruntacchan*.¹⁶ This may mean that the master architect’s name was Parameshvara, but more likely it means that he was the master architect serving the emperor, in other words the Imperial Architect. According to the inscription, he belonged to the area of Kanchipuram called simply Patakam, which means “the section” (*patakam*) and is the short form of Pumpatakam, which means “the prosperous (*pum*) section.” It was west of the elevated portion of the city’s ancient center.

This Imperial Architect may have been the same master architect who appears in the grant Nandivarman issued near the very end of his reign in response to Tirumangai’s request. It mentions the Master Architect (*per-*

untacchan) of Vitelvituku Pallava. The word *vitelvituku* names the oath Nandivarman took during his unction at the beginning of his career.¹⁷ This master architect is said to live in the Aimpanaiccheri section of Kanchipuram, and his son, Shri Dandi, carved the letters of the grant on the copper plates.¹⁸ Perhaps Aimpanaiccheri was the official name for the prosperous section of the city known as Patakam.¹⁹

An inscription on the foundation of the Uttaramerur temple notes that “scholars of Agama” (*agamika*) guided its architect. Given the Pancharatra basis of Nandivarman’s earlier vimana in Kanchipuram, it may be that these *agamikas* also followed the Pancharatra Agama. Gros and Nagaswamy argue, however, that the Shriveli vimana in Uttaramerur was designed according to the Vaikhanasa Agama, specifically according to the *Marichi-samhita*.²⁰ This issue cannot be settled here. But I suggest that the direction in which a vimana faces indicates its purpose, and that a vimana’s purpose accounts for its design, which means differently arranged and oriented tritala-vimanas may derive from the same liturgical tradition, in this case the Pancharatra.²¹

The Agama scholar who guided the Imperial Architect in designing the Emperor’s Vishnu-house obviously possessed a very complex vision of God’s



FIGURE 1.1. Nandivarman Pallavamalla’s acharya enthroned in a mandapa adjacent to a model of the vimana he designed. Source unidentified.

body transmitted by Bhagavata Dharma through text, liturgy, iconography, and architecture. He was no doubt an acharya, a scholar priest who consecrated devotees and taught his disciples the meanings of the mantras they received. By the mid-eighth century, lineages of such Bhagavata acharyas supported by their disciples in royal courts and private households had existed in India for at least a millennium. Nandivarman's acharya guided the Imperial Architect in designing his three-dimensional mandala properly, a fact recorded on the prakara walkway, as illustrated by the composite photograph in Figure 1.1.

These sculptures appear in an enthronement scene we shall discuss in chapter 4, which moves from north to south (the viewer's right to left). The enthroned acharya appears after a display of the ritual implements by means of which Pallavamalla's general, Udayachandra, slew his rival Chitramaya Palavaraja and then won seven battles "and more" to give his emperor "the whole realm." The acharya's place in this sequence suggests that he supervised the rites of the conch, drum, and khatvanga whose tejas brought all this about, and then designed the tritala-vimana to house the emperor's Master.

Before we turn to the poem Tirumangai composed about this vimana and to the Vishnu-house itself, let us consider six concepts important to the discussion that follows.



2

Six Concepts

In order to discuss the religious ideas that produced the emperor and his Vishnu-house, it will be helpful to examine six concepts basic to Bhagavata Dharma, as I understand it, by the eighth century. They are God as person, God as place, God as male and female, the doctrine of formation, the structure of the person, and inner vision.

God as Person

Who is God? Who becomes Krishna? According to Bhagavatas, God (*deva*) has at least one thousand names. In this study six will be especially important: Narayana, Vasudeva, Bhagavan, Vishnu, Hari, and Krishna.

Narayana

The name Narayana denotes God as Supreme Self (*paramatman*), who is Supreme Person (*parama purusha*).¹ Narayana is unchanging and unique, and transcends space and time by containing it within His Self. Brahma, who emerges from Narayana yet remains inseparable from Him, glosses His name as the “resting place or course (*ayana*) of man (*narah*), the wisdom ruling the atman of all embodied beings, the witness of all realms, who has waters as the resting place of His body, which eats men but does not compress them because of its true being, not because of His magically creative power” (*BP* 10.14.14).² Markandeya’s vision of the baby on the banyan branch in the waters of the

deluge illustrates Brahma's final statement, for when the baby swallows this seer he sees the entire universe inside him and functioning properly (*BP* 12.9).

Seers have seen Narayana as a mass of light (*vishakhayupa*) shooting forth all forms like sparks, a light of pure consciousness and being that gives rise to "formations" (*vyuha*) and to their "transformations" (*vibhava*). Among the latter, for example, are the shining devas of light, their asura opponents of darkness, humans, animals, and nonsentient elements.³ Yet everything produced by this light, including darkness and asuras, is contained within it and sustained by it. The vimana that constitutes the Emperor's Vishnu-house appears to be a built form of this blazing pillar.⁴ When it was newly painted it must have looked from a distance like a mountainous flame emerging above the enclosing prakara wall, replicating on a gigantic scale the fire burning in the square raised altar (*uttara vedi*) at the eastern end of the Vedic sacrificial arena.

Vasudeva

When Narayana manifests His glorious wealth (*bhaga*) prior to producing spacetime and its contents, he is known as Vasudeva, a name whose meaning repeats the meaning of Narayana as the abode of humans. He is simultaneously "God (*deva*) who is the dwelling place (*vasu*) for everything," and "God (*deva*) for whom everything is a dwelling place (*vasu*)." The name Vasudeva captures the mystery Chatakopan experienced, which we shall encounter repeatedly: God contains everything, yet at the same time is contained by everything. Vasudeva names the unmanifest *brahman* (*akshara brahma*) as the cause of all causes; He is the primordial essence of being (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*), and joy (*ananda*) with a "body" made of pure clarity (*shuddhasattva*) (Tapasyananda 1980–1982 1: xxx–xxxii). The vision of God's body is everything a Bhagavata can hope for. "Who sees me everywhere and sees everything in me," Krishna tells Arjuna, "for him I am not destroyed and he is not destroyed for me. . . . [But] the person possessing *jnana*, who at the end of many births takes refuge in me [saying] 'everything is Vasudeva,' he is a great atman very difficult to find" (*BG* 6.30; 7.19).

Why does Narayana as Vasudeva bring all things into being? Bhagavatas say it is for His own pleasure (*svasukha*); spacetime arises from the joy innate to the creativity of consciousness (*BP* 1.9.32). In relation to every "thing," which is a name-and-form (*namarupa*), Vasudeva's *bhaga* divides into three pairs. They are:

1. knowledge or omniscience (*jnana*) and its indefatigable or transforming power (*bala*);
2. sovereignty (*aishvarya*) and its ability to act without being affected by the action (*virya*); and
3. the potency (*shakti*) of sound and its brilliant conquering power (*tejas*).

As Sanjukta Gupta explains, omniscience (*jnana*) is God's essence and is primary; the other five bhagas are contained within it (Gupta 1989: 225).

God is called the Bhagavan because He possesses this wealth (*bhaga*) divided into three pairs. A person, whether male or female, who has been consecrated to the Bhagavan is called a Bhagavata, and anyone exclusively devoted to him is in practice a strict monotheist (*ekantikabhakta*). (Appendix 1 contains an exploration of the term *Bhagavata*.) A Bhagavata belongs to the Bhagavan in the way a slave belongs to a master. This metaphor of master and slave, which plays a highly significant role in religious thought and behavior, means that not only does the master own the slave but he is also responsible for him, protects him, and may use him as his representative. The slave's place is at his master's feet, and he is to be ready to serve him at any moment without question. He feels safe if his master is both powerful and compassionate, which God certainly is. There is an intimacy of mutual dependence in this metaphor not found in the Euro-American concept of slave as property.

Vishnu

Bhagavatas believe that because the Supreme Person as Supreme Self pervades all the things he emanates and is the one who acts within and through them, he is to be called Vishnu. This name points to him as the "pervading actor" and is found in the mantras of the *Rig Veda*. The seer Dirghatamas addresses Vishnu in three *Rig Veda* poems (1.155–157). He extols his prowess (*virya*) as like the lion, the fearful and hungry wild beast (*mriga*) of the mountains, whose roar at the end of night signals the approach of sunrise. He praises the three strides (*vikrama*) Vishnu takes to measure out directional space, only two of which, earth and sky, can humans see. His third stride places His foot (*padam*) in the realm (*padam*) above the pole star (*dhruva*) from which He looks down on devas in heaven and humans on earth. Vishnu resides in His *padam* as a young prince (*yuvakumara*), who turns chronological time like a vast wheel (*chakra*) making ninety-four revolutions.⁵ Yet Vishnu also acts in the worlds beneath Him through His descents (*avatara*) in confined modes (*nirodha*) to protect and to reveal.

Hari

While the name Vishnu denotes God's fullness (*vishvam*) as pervading everything (*vishnu*) he possesses, the name Hari denotes his color (Bhattar: 106–108). The color called *hari* in the *Rig Veda* ranges from fawn through reddish brown, brown, tawny, pale yellow, yellow and bay, to green and greenish. It suggests the color of the lion in the mountains likened to Vishnu, the color of gold as an emblem of prosperity, and the color green as the nourishment of cattle. *Hari* also suggests the Bhagavan's ability to take away evil or sin; in this

sense it also takes the form *hara*, destroyer, which is a name for Shiva (Monier-Williams 1964: 1289). In Bhagavata lore, Hari as green and greenish refers to the Bhagavan's all-pervading fullness as it resides on (or as) the hill named Govardhana in Vrinda's Forest (Vrindavana) along the Yamuna River in Vraja (BP 10.24.31–38). His color there is *hari* and he accepts the gifts cowherds offer him for the sake of prosperous increase (*vardhana*) for their cattle (*go*) and fields (Bhattar: 106, 585).

Krishna

The *Bhagavata Purana* explicitly identifies Krishna as Narayana, Vasudeva, Vishnu, and Hari—the Bhagavan fully present in human form. The bard named Ugrashravas tells Saunaka and other seers at a sacrifice that all other appearances of God are his shares and parts (*amshakala*), but “the man Krishna is the Bhagavan himself” (BP 1.3.28). This statement appears in a portion of the purana that is probably late in origin, perhaps a clarification by Bhagavatas of their belief about Krishna addressed to others who know his story but are not members of their religion. But this is not a new doctrine, because the Krishna Story (*Krishnakatha*) in the *Bhagavata Purana* makes the same point repeatedly, and this story belongs to what I think is the oldest portion of the purana.

The Krishna Story comprises Books Ten and Eleven. There is no question in my mind that later portions have been inserted into it, for example, Akrura's prayer while submerged in a clear pool of Yamuna River water (BP 10.40), the story of Rishabha's shramana sons discussed in chapter 1 (BP 11.2–5), and the long “Summary of the *Brahman* Doctrine” Krishna teaches to Uddhava in Dvaraka just before he goes to Prabhasa (BP 11.6–29).⁶ If we remove these later additions, the Krishna Story consists of Book Ten and three chapters of Book Eleven (11.1, 30, 31); and this is where we find early identifications of Krishna as the Bhagavan Himself (*bhagavan svayam*). Let us examine some examples.

At the beginning of the Krishna Story, the Bhagavan as the Self of everything tells the creative power of His unified consciousness (*yogamaya*) about His plan for His own birth as Balarama and Krishna. He begins with Balarama. “The whole of Shesha, which is my abode, will become an embryo in Devaki's womb which you shall transplant to Rohini's womb” (BP 10.2.8). His abode (*dhama*), of course, is omniscience (*jnana*), which is the bhaga at the base of all others. Jnana is the first to emanate to produce directional space and chronological time, and when the other five have devolved into it, only it remains. The word *shesha* as “first to escape” and “primordial remainder” (*adishesha*) captures both meanings. In iconography, the remainder (*shesha*) as God's abode (*dhama*) appears as a multihooded snake (*naga*) that has no end (*ananta*), because jnana encompasses spacetime and is infinite. Devaki conceives him in Mathura, but Rohini in Gokula gives birth to him as Balarama.

The Bhagavan then tells Yogamaya about his birth as Krishna: “I will then become Devaki’s son through a share of my glorious wealth (*amshabhagena*), and you, O fair one, will become [the daughter] of Nanda’s wife Yashoda” (*BP* 10.2.9). This statement makes an important theological point. A “share” of the bhaga of the Supreme Person or Self is the Supreme Person’s bhaga, because a “share” (*amsha*) of fullness (*purnam*) taken from fullness is fullness. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (5.1) explains the doctrine this way, in Patrick Oliville’s translation:

The world there is full;
The world here is full;
Fullness from fullness proceeds.
After taking fully from the full,
It still remains completely full.⁷

This doctrine is taught through narrative details. Krishna as God’s fullness will contain the moving universe within his self, which means Devaki his mother becomes the dwelling place for Him who is the dwelling place for the moving universe (*BP* 10.2.19)—the mystery of the container contained by what it contains once again. His cowherd mother Yashoda perceives this when Krishna, nursing at her breast, yawns and she sees the entire realm of the moving and unmoving inside his mouth (*BP* 10.7.34–37). In another episode Krishna eats mud, but denies it, so Yashoda forces him to open his mouth and again sees the entire universe inside it (*BP* 10.8.32–45). The seer Markandeya has a similar vision (*BP* 12.9.10–34). And Brahma, too, is astounded that Narayana contains him even as he contains Krishna opening his mouth for Yashoda (*BP* 10.14.11–17).

Kamsa will hate Krishna as the Ruler of Senses (Hrishikesha), but Brahma, Shiva, Narada, and others will praise him as the Person (*purusha*) Madhava, who earlier made descents (*krita-avatara*) not out of causal necessity (*karana*) but out of play (*vinoda*) (*BP* 10.2.24–42). He was contained (*nirodha*) as Fish (*matsya*), Horse (*ashva*), Tortoise (*kacchapa*), Man-lion (*nrisimha*), Boar (*varaha*), Goose (*hamsa*), King (*rajanya*), Seer (*vipra*), and the Learned One (*vibudha*) (*BP* 10.2.39–40). But none of these was God in His fullness.

In the dark of the night “the Pervading Actor, the dwelling place of all hearts” takes birth as the Impeller of Men (*janardana*) in Kamsa’s jail through the Kshatriya named Vasudeva and the divine shape of his wife Devaki (*BP* 10.3.8). For this reason Krishna the man is known as “son of Vasudeva” and as “son of Devaki” (*devakiputra*). But to save his son’s life, Vasudeva quickly takes him to the cowherd settlement (*gokula*) in Vraja to live in disguise as a Shudra keeper of cattle; these people have no walled city, no territory, no village, and no house, but reside in forests and on mountains (*BP* 10.24.24). Later, when his “birth” as the son of the cowherd chieftain Nanda to his wife Yashoda is celebrated, Krishna is said to be the “endless ruler of everything”

(*vishveshvara-ananta*) who is both Pervading Actor and Nanda's son (*BP* 10.5.13–16). Nanda's wandering people now prosper, because by dwelling among them Hari, the unborn protector of man (*abhun-nripa*), turns their gokula into a playground for Shri, his Dear One (*rama-krida*) (*BP* 10.5.18). When these cowherds prepare the annual sacrifice to Indra as the source of this prosperity, Krishna appears to them as Hari on the mountain Govardhana in a gigantic shape (*rupa*) that consumes their offerings (*BP* 10.24.35–38), and then holds up the mountain as an umbrella to shield the cowherds from Indra's angry rains.

Krishna's true identity is also stated in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (*CU* 3.17). Here he appears as a student of "the awesome son of Angiras" (*ghora angirasa*); Krishna is identified by his matronymic, Krishna Son of Devaki. This "awesome son of Angiras" has just taught Krishna the doctrine that a man's life is a sacrifice, a doctrine at the heart of the *Bhagavad-gita*. The sage is now without craving or thirst (*apipasa*) and near his end. In this state of clear perception he tells Devaki's son, "Take refuge in these three: You are the undecaying (*akshita*), you are the unfallen (*acyuta*), you are life breath sharpened (*pranasanshita*)." The final identification appears to denote the syllable *Om*. This upanishad begins by identifying *Om* as the High Chant (*udritha*), which is not only the essence of the *Sama Veda* but also "the quintessence of all essences; it is the highest, the ultimate, the eighth" (*CU* 1.3). And Krishna in the *Bhagavad-gita* similarly identifies himself as the imperishable atman dwelling in the hearts of all beings, as the *Sama Veda*, and as the syllable *Om* (*BG* 10.20, 22, 25).

It is possible that this "awesome son of Angiras" appears as Krishna's guru in the Krishna Story, but the evidence is only suggestive. In this story Devaki's husband Vasudeva has Purodhasa and other Brahmins consecrate Krishna and Balarama as "twice-born" (*dvija-samskriti*, *BP* 10.45.26). Purodhasa may be the same as the "awesome son of Angiras" in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, because the form *puradhasa* denotes an Angirasa (Monier-Williams 1964: 636a). If so, Krishna Devakiputra in that upanishad and Krishna Devakiputra in this Krishna Story are the same, and so is his guru. This implies that the *Chandogya Upanishad*, which may date to the eighth century BCE, provides a detail of the Krishna Story known at the time: near the end of his life, the "awesome son of Angiras" revealed to Krishna that he is the imperishable, unfallen, and life-breath sharpened, and therefore is greater than Indra, a point the Krishna Story makes repeatedly. This detail also suggests that Krishna belongs to the *Atharva-angirasa* tradition, which raises the further question of whether Krishna Devakiputra is the same Krishna son of Angirasa who composed three poems addressed to Indra in the *Rig Veda* (*RV* 10.42–44). Finally, it is significant that the *Shatapatha Brahmana* dated to the same period as the *Chandogya Upanishad* contains an early account of the Person Narayana in the context of a pancharatra or five-night sacrifice, for the liturgical tradition (*agama*) of the five-nights (*pancharatra*) is closely connected to the Krishna Story and to Bhagavata Dharma (see Hudson 2002a and 2002c).

According to the Krishna Story, after Purodhasa consecrates the brothers as twice born, the acharya of the Yadava clan named Garga consecrates them to the Gayatri vow (*gayatri-vrata*, BP 10.45.29). Afterward they dwell with Sandipani, a native of Kashi living in Avanti, where they learn sixty-four subjects in sixty-four days (BP 10.45.36). When Krishna and Balarama are one hundred twenty-five years old they leave Earth as men, and shortly thereafter our human realm of Bharata enters the present Kali Yuga, the age dominated by delusion: Earth loses her true being (*satya*), right order (*dharma*), satisfaction (*dhriti*), glory (*kirti*), and majesty (*shri*) (BP 11.31.17). Yet Krishna's presence—like that of less complete avatars, who are only shares or parts of the whole—continues on earth in the mode of icons (*archa*). They are sculpted and consecrated according to rites that “have come down” (*agama*) from Vasudeva as teachings addressed specifically to the Kali Yuga. People in this age who serve Krishna in his iconic bodies according to the mixed rites of Veda and Agama as found in Pancharatra liturgies may gain the true being, right order, and satisfaction of the previous age. And if they are Bhagavata, like Nandivarman Pallavamalla, they may also gain glory and kingship.

God as Place

The transcendent Vasudeva is person, certainly, but He is also “place” or “presence” in an extended spatial sense. The Supremely Transcendent Person (*parama mahapurusha*) is also thought of as the “Pervading Actor's Supreme Home” (*vishnor dhama parama*), as the “place” that Krishna tells Arjuna is his Highest Home (BP 3.11.42; BG 8.21; 10.12–13; 15.6). God as Highest Home or extended presence is called Vaikuntha Dhama, which means the “home without ignorance” or “the presence penetrating everywhere” or “the invincible realm.”⁸ The visual depiction of God at Home portrays Vasudeva sitting or reclining on the Snake, whose spreading hoods shelter Him like an open umbrella, because this endless and brilliant light is His Supreme Home constituted of white jnana.

God as Father and Mother

This brings us to the Bhagavata belief that the Supreme Person is father and mother together.⁹ Within Vasudeva's unity, “he” implies “she” and “she” implies “he.” God's feminine dimension is the Goddess (*devi*). She, too, has many names, the most characteristic being Shri and Lakshmi, for she is majesty (*shri*) whose mark is wealth (*lakshmi*). But she is also Bhumidevi, because she is the material realm (*bhumi*); and she is Mahamaya, because she is transcendent and magical creativity (*maya*).

Vasudeva is pure consciousness and Devi is Vasudeva's personality or "I-ness." She is the thought within his omniscience. She exists because of him and depends on him, just as our thought depends upon our consciousness. Conversely, he depends on her, because he achieves everything—all that he thinks—only through her as his thoughts manifested. Devi is Vasudeva's power to intend an act (*kriyashakti*); and at the same time, she is the power to bring this act into being (*bhutihshakti*). As conscious intent she resembles fire (*agni*), and as fruitful act she resembles liquid (*soma*), for in esoteric analysis, fire produces liquid, and liquid produces everything of earth.¹⁰

Whenever we speak of "him" acting, therefore, we must always understand that the actor in fact is "she." He empowers her because of his presence as omniscient consciousness in the same way as a magnet empowers iron filings by its presence, or a king empowers his ministers and generals through his authority. Subjects commonly say the king won a battle, when in fact he remained in the palace and his general on the field led the fighting. The ruler won because the general possessed his authority to put his will into effect in his name. Vasudeva similarly empowers Devi to act in his name.

In common with the Shaiva Agama, the Pancharatra Agama teaches that in relation to the universe, Vasudeva performs five acts by means of Devi. First, in a "place" within his omniscient and unified knowledge, he conceals himself. Within this concealed "place" he forms directional space and chronological time into spacetime and all its contents. He sustains what he has formed. He also reveals himself to some beings within spacetime. Finally, he devolves it all and the "place" disappears. Again, only he and she exist.

Repeated metaphors articulate this doctrine. One is agricultural. The farmer (male) knows his field (female), knows where to plow it, and knows when to plant his seed. Once planted, the farmer watches and guards the field as she transforms his seed into plants that produce food (*anna*). The obvious sexual dimension of this metaphor is also important. The king in the royal bed plants his seed in the queen's womb in order to produce a son as heir. He watches and protects her as she gestates his seed into a human being. Insofar as his seed is an embryonic form of himself (*garbha*), the king is "reborn" through her as the prince. In this way the queen becomes the king's "mother."

This ancient and salient idea is basic to the rites of engendering a king (*rajasuya*). Shakuntala articulates it to King Dushyanta in the ancient story of the birth of their son Bharata. As J. A. B. van Buitenen translates her speech to Dushyanta: "A husband enters his wife and is reborn from her—thus the old poets know this as a wife's wifehood. . . . A son, the wise say, is the man himself born from himself; therefore a man will look upon the mother of his son as his own mother. The son born from his wife is as a man's face in a mirror; and looking at him brings as much joy to a father as finding heaven brings to a saint" (van Buitenen 1959: 167). The queen fulfills her role as wife by giving birth to her husband as her son. But in order to obtain his embryo she must use

passion skillfully, because she must enable him to lose his self-discipline, become sexually aroused, and release his seed into her. A useful aid in ancient royal courts is liquor (*sura*).

These metaphors are used to illustrate a process beyond human knowing. By means of Devi, Vasudeva voluntarily becomes “inebriated” and obscures his unified jnana so that he “sees double.” Devi now makes herself available to him and receives his embryonic “seed” into her body, where she gestates it into their son the prince, whom they name Brahma. The seer named Kapila, who is believed to embody the mode of consciousness called “extinction” (*nirvana*) to teach samkhya ideas and bhaktiyoga (BP 3.25.28–31), summarizes this activity within God this way:

The beginningless Self (*atman*) is Person (*purusha*) without qualities (*guna*) and transcendent to matter (*prakriti*). His own light illuminates Him from within and is full of everything. Out of play (*lila*), He who is omnipresent (*vibhuh*) resorts to subtle matter that is divine and made of qualities (*guna*)—subtle matter approaches Him, as it were, and makes Herself available to Him. Their progeny, formed from her marvelous qualities, look at emerging matter, are bewildered by it, and knowledge of Him in this world instantly hides from them. (BP 3.26.3–5)

Brahma is the first of their progeny, the crown prince, so to speak. But just as Kapila says, he is born without knowing his parents despite his name. *Brahma* (with a long *a* at the end) is the masculine form of *brahman*, which means “growth,” “expansion,” or “evolution,” and denotes primordial being abstractly. In Bhagavata theology this abstract *brahman* is actually the Ancient Couple: param brahma, or *brahman* as supreme, is Father, and maha brahma, or *brahman* as great, is Mother (BG 10.12; 13.12; 14.3–4). Brahma the prince is named after both parents. He is Vasudeva the father reborn through Devi the mother, but as an ignorant son. Brahma is God’s ego; he is consciousness deluded by the sense of “This I am” (*ahamkarana*) and propelled by passion (*rajas*). To live his life as God’s deluded ego, Brahma transforms his own body into the universe of directional space and lunar-solar time, which is therefore known as Brahma’s sphere (*brahmanda*). We may call it spacetime, because directional space and chronological time form a single body for him. Brahma leads his life of days and nights under his father’s imperial authority and his mother’s unblinking gaze. The end of his night (*ratra*) when he arises for another of his days is known as Brahma’s hour (*brahmamuhurta*). This is the hour (*hora*) Brahma awakens to allow all things potential to become actual; seeds planted by intentional action (*karma*) in his previous day now ripen into the fruit (*phala*) of his new day. A similar hour ends the night among devas and asuras, among the ancestral manes (*pitri*), and among humans. In each case this hour embodies the potential from which all possibilities of the day develop.

In early Tamil poetry, Vasudeva with Devi is known as Tirumal. Krishna and Vishnu are both known as Mal, which means, as Kamil Zvelebil observes, “The Dark One” or “The Great One” (Zvelebil 1977: 238–241). *Mal* denotes God’s significant features: as “The Great One” (*mal*), he is the Bhagavan Vasudeva, and as “The Dark One” (*mal*), he is Krishna. The Sanskrit word *shri* in Tamil is *tiru*, and *tiru* it is prefixed to *mal* to form the name Tirumal. Zvelebil suggests it denotes “The Holy (or Blessed) Dark One.” But in Bhagavata terms it denotes the Bhagavan as the Ancient Couple, “Majestic Devi with the Great and Dark Vasudeva.”

Tirumal may also be glossed as the Shri Bhagavan, “Majesty with the Possessor of Wealth (*Bhaga*.)” This name appears in the title of the most authoritative collection of ancient lore (*purana*) of the Bhagavata Dharma, the *Shrimad Bhagavata Purana*. Its name literally means “ancient lore (*purana*) pertaining to the slave of the Bhagavan (*bhagavata*) who possesses majesty (*shri*.)” In this case the slave is the consecrated king together with his queen, a royal couple representing Tirumal to its realm in the way an enslaved couple may represent its master if he so chooses.

The Doctrine of Formation (*Vyuha*)

The process by which Narayana Vasudeva turns His self into spacetime is explained by the Pancharatra doctrine of *vyuha*. The word *vyuha*, often translated as “emanation,” also means “re-arrangement” or “formation.” *Vyuha*, for example, is used in the *Mahabharata* for the formations that the armies of the Pandavas and Kauravas make on each day of battle to achieve strategic goals. When an army makes a specific formation (*vyuha*), it remains a single army, but is rearranged for a particular purpose. Similarly, when God makes a formation (*vyuha*), He remains single, but is arranged for a particular purpose. The difference, of course, is that whereas an army rearranges its component warriors to effect a specific formation, God rearranges the contents of consciousness through *yogamaya*. Each time, however, God is fully present in each formation even though its particular “shape” conceals the other formations He makes.

Vasudeva as supreme (*para*) and Vasudeva as formation (*vyuha*) differ only in relation to the beings produced. The supreme Vasudeva cannot be seen from within spacetime any more than a fetus can see the mother carrying it. But Vasudeva as formation can be seen if, to continue the metaphor, the fetus is born an infant. This birth occurs for Bhagavatas through the rites of consecration (*diksha*). But perception of Vasudeva as formation comes only from the disciplined way of life (*sadhana*) the consecrated devotee (*sadhaka*) must follow, and even then few attain it. Only the exceptional *sadhaka* like Chatakopan clearly sees God in this lifetime.

Vasudeva as formation produces his body, its contents, and its actions through three specific rearrangements of himself in a specific sequence. The primary Vasudeva formation first changes into the formation called the Plower (Samkarshana). He then changes this formation into the formation called the Pre-eminently Mighty (Pradyumna). He changes this formation into the formation called the Unobstructed (Aniruddha). By means of these three formations He also produces twelve material forms (*murti*) interior to them (*vyuha-antara*). We shall discuss the formations and their interior formations when we turn to the vimana in chapter 5.

The Structure of the Person

Bhagavata Dharma accepts a concept of the human person (*purusha*) shared widely by religions that base themselves on Veda. It lies at the heart of this temple and of its liturgies and deserves careful attention. The portion of the *Taittiriya Upanishad* called Brahmavalli (*TU 2*) teaches it. The Brahmavalli analyzes a man who sits cross-legged in a stable posture of yoga, faces north, and performs rites of the Atharva-angirasas.¹¹ He is the *brahman* priest of shrauta sacrifices responsible for the correct performance by all other priests and therefore knows all four Veda collections (*samhita*). He sits south of the high altar (*uttara vedi*), faces north, and employs mantras from the *Atharva-angirasa* collection.

The scripture begins by using a mandala to describe this *brahman* priest as he is visible to any viewer (Figure 2.1). It then describes him in terms of five layers of matter, four of which are dimensions of the man invisible to us because they constitute his soul (*jiva*). The mandala is a map that begins as a point. The point extends in the cardinal directions as two equally long axes. One axis runs west to east, the other runs north to south. The axes intersect at

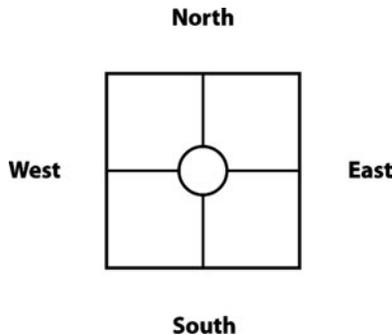


FIGURE 2.1. The mandala describing the *brahman* priest of shrauta sacrifices. Drawing by Case and Sandgren.

the center. Above the center is the point from which they emerge. The mandala thus depicts five directions normally described clockwise: east, south, west, north, and the center, which may also denote the apex.

The scripture uses the mandala's two axes to describe the yogin's visible body as he sits facing north. Its north-south axis forms his vertical alignment. The southern end of the axis is his head, the center of the axis is his torso pillar, and the northern end of the axis is his supporting posterior.¹² The west-east axis forms his horizontal alignment from shoulder to shoulder. The western end of the axis is his left side, the center is his torso pillar, and the eastern end is his right side.

Five Material Sheaths as Persons

The five layers of matter (*prakriti*) that constitute the human person are called sheaths (*kosha*) (Figure 2.2). Because matter is constantly in motion, these sheaths are ever-moving material patterns that remain distinct even as they mingle with each other. The Brahmavalli says that each sheath is a person (*purusha*; TU 2.1–6), which of course means that this man sitting in yoga performance is fivefold. Each of his material persons has the same shape, each envelops the person composed of matter less dense than its matter, and each permeates the person enveloping it. The sequence of these sheathlike persons moves from the visible body made of flesh and bone inwardly through more refined invisible bodies to end with the most refined body of all. This final sheathlike person envelops the nonmaterial atman, the yogin's Self.

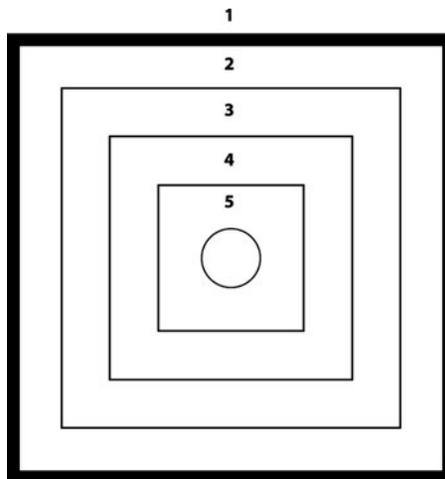


FIGURE 2.2. The five layers of matter (*prakriti*) that constitute the human person. Drawing by Case and Sandgren.