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Who Is the Viṣṇu of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa?

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Abstract

Between the 12th to the 14th centuries, two commentaries on the Viṣṇu Purāṇa were composed by Viṣṇucitta (~12th CE) and Śrīdhara (13th–14th CE). Known as the Viṣṇucittīya and Ātmaprakāśa, they are interpretations from the perspectives of Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita Vedānta respectively. While the purāṇa weaves together Viṣṇu mythology of a creator god active in the world and worshipped in various forms with the upaniṣadic doctrine of the highest Self, this characterization undergoes various permutations in the hands of the two exegetes. In examining their commentarial strategies, this paper broadens our understanding of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa as not simply a root text, but a textual tradition comprising commentaries and its function as a text of persuasion for larger theological contexts, such as Vedānta.

Introduction

From the 12th century onward, the Viṣṇu Purāṇa (VP) becomes the focus of interpretation as several commentaries made it the preserve of specific Vedānta schools.[1] Two of the earliest extant commentaries on the VP are the Viṣṇucittīya (VC) by Viṣṇucitta (12th CE) and the Ātmaprakāśa (AP) by Śrīdhara (13th–14th CE), written from the Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita Vedānta perspectives respectively.[2] The VP consistently affirms Viṣṇu as the supreme being, however his nature and relationship to creation are contested issues as each exegete secures a different conception of the deity exploiting the multivalency inherent in the purāṇa

[1] The critical edition of the VP lists four commentaries by Ratnagarbha, Nṛhari, Viṣṇu Vallabhā and Gangādhara in addition to the two by Viṣṇucitta and Śrīdhara (1997: 16).

[2] Also known and Viṣṇucittīyavyākhyā and Śrīdharīya, respectively.

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itself. Commentaries on purāṇas were important in medieval South Asian religion as exegetes employed them to draw correspondences between popular Vaiṣṇava religion and philosophical systems (*darśana*) such as Vedānta.[3]

Apart from one study on the influence of Rāmānuja, the synthesizer of Viśiṣṭādvaita, on the Viṣṇucittīya, both commentaries are little studied and this paper contributes to this gap in scholarship (Ranganayaki 1999). While it has been suggested that the VP itself espouses certain fundamental Advaita doctrines, it was nonetheless a contested text as we do know that commentaries on it were written from other Vedānta perspectives as well (Mahadevan 1971). The goal of this paper is not to prove that the purāṇa expounds either of the Vedānta philosophies exclusively, rather it is to discern the commentarial strategies of each Vedāntin on specific verses of the purāṇa that elucidate the nature of Viṣṇu. Simply put, it asks, 'Who is the Viṣṇu of the VP for the two commentators'?

In their interpretation of the VP, each commentator is constrained in his interpretation of the VP by adherence to a specific Vedānta tradition. Viṣṇucitta belongs to the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition of South India that propounds Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta (unity-of-the-differenced). He was a pupil of Piḷḷāṉ, a direct disciple of Rāmānuja. Some hagiographic accounts portray Viṣṇucitta's early training as taking place under Rāmānuja himself (Ranganayaki 1999: 68–79).[4] Viśiṣṭādvaita advocates Viṣṇu as the supreme Brahman who exists in a self-body relationship with creation. Though the divine essential nature is consciousness and bliss, through his various manifestations (*vibhūti*) he is accessible to individual selves bound up in creation. The right knowledge of Viṣṇu's relationship to creation and actions (*karma*) in the form of devotion (*bhakti*) to him, are the way to achieve liberation.[5] Viṣṇu as the inner self is the inner ruler, controller and support of all, but does not suffer the vicissitudes of saṃsāra. The term, inner ruler (*antaryāmin*) has different meanings in the Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita systems. In the latter case, Viṣṇu as the inner self of all existence, including individual selves means that he exists in a self-body relationship to the world. His causal nature is real, but is not affected by the defects of his 'body', that is, the world of matter

[3] For more on the genre of purāṇas see Rocher 1986.

[4] The Guruparaṃpara Prabhāvam (3000 paṭi) considered authoritative by the Vaḍagalai tradition is composed by Trutiya Brahmatantra Svatantra Jeeyar Swami. It provides more information on this topic in its section on Ācārya Vaibhavam, p. 135ff.

[5] There is development within Śrīvaiṣṇavism, especially within the Teṉkalai tradition, of taking refuge in Viṣṇu as the only means to liberation as well.

and individual selves. When Śrīdhara invokes Viṣṇu as the inner self, the connotation is quite different.

Śrīdhara, popular for his commentary on the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, was a resident of a Śaṃkarite monastery near Puri and a disciple of Paramānanda (Gode 1949, Acharya 1965, Sheridan 1994).[6] In his benedictory verse on the commentary, he pays homage to the Advaita ācārya Citsukha (~13th CE) and claims to base it on this Vedāntin's interpretation of the purāṇa.[7] As an Advaitin, the key teaching Śrīdhara advocates is that of non-dualism—as one ceases to identify one's self with what it is not, one ultimately intuits one's own self as Brahman. Realization of the self through knowledge of scripture, is the only way to escape saṃsāra. Where does Viṣṇu fit in? How does Śrīdhara navigate the theistic sections of the VP? He equivocates between two views of Viṣṇu whom he envisions as Kṛṣṇa. On the one hand, he is a personal god (*īśvara*), and on the other hand, he is none other than one's own inner self. This is quite different from what Viṣṇucitta means when he denotes Viṣṇu as the inner self.

To facilitate such a reading, early on in his commentary, Śrīdhara introduces the distinction of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* as specific contexts within which to understand the nature of Viṣṇu. These two distinct ideologies on the practice of dharma are evident in ancient Indian philosophical systems (Bailey 1985). The path of action and social engagement, following the dictates of dharma and ritual is the way of *pravṛtti*. The end result of such a living is a meritorious after-life either in the realm of the gods or in a better future birth. Contrasted to this was the path of *nivṛtti* or social withdrawal, which calls for the abandonment of society and the dictates of dharma. Pursuit of such a life with the study of scripture was to result in liberation from the cycle of saṃsāra. Negotiation between these two distinct paths is undertaken in various ways in both the epics and the purāṇas. In his commentary, Śrīdhara admits the significance of *pravṛtti*, with its attendant ritual and devotional aspects in one's spiritual journey toward liberative realization, as it helps purify the mind. However, knowledge alone and the path of *nivṛtti* is the final means to release. His interpretations of Viṣṇu consistently push the aspirant to question and move beyond theistic, *pravṛtti*-orient-

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[6] Much has been written on Śrīdhara's commentary on the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. To begin with, S.K. De (1986), P. Sheridan (1994), and R. Gupta (2007). are helpful.

[7] He also claims that he has consulted other commentaries on the VP that are both concise and elaborate and has chosen to take the middle way: *śrīvidvatsukhayogimukhyaracitavyākhyāṃ nirīkṣya sphuṭaṃ tanmārgeṇa subodhasaṃgrahavatīm ātmaprakāśābhidhām* (Sharma 1995: 1).

ed understandings of the deity. Though he does not utilize terms such as illusion (*māyā*), and ignorance (*avidyā*), in the sections discussed in this paper, we see that in his interpretation, he is nonetheless firmly rooted in Advaita Vedānta.

The source material for this paper, to evaluate the nature of Viṣṇu as understood by Viṣṇucitta and Śrīdhara, is comprised of their benedictory verses, their commentaries on the first chapter of the purāṇa, specifically 1.1.4 and 1.1.5, and the last verse 1.1.31. Of the three sections that this paper consists of, in the first, the invocatory verses of the two exegetes are evaluated (Ia, Ib). In addition, Śrīdhara utilizes a version of the VP that has some benedictory verses that are included at the beginning of the purāṇa, on which he comments. The critical edition of the VP notes that certain manuscripts include such verses prior to the first stanza of VP (1.1.1). These passages are found only in the version of the VP that Śrīdhara utilizes. Though these are not invocations by the exegete himself, because he comments on them, we need to consider this material (Ic). In the second section, the commentary on verses 1.1.4 and 1.1.5 is examined. The VP begins with a series of questions posed by Maitreya to Parāśara. In six verses, 1.1.4 to 1.1.10, the former enquires about world creation, its material cause, its re-creation after dissolution, the place where it emerged from and where it will recede to.[8] Of these seven verses, 1.1.4 and 1.1.5 attract the attention of the exegetes, and their commentary gives considerable information on how they envision Viṣṇu (IIa-d).

Section I: Invoking Viṣṇu

a. Viṣṇucittīya maṅgalaśloka
b. Ātmaprakāśa maṅgalaśloka
c. Ātmaprakāśa introductory verses
   (part of the VP version utilized by Śrīdhara)

Section II: Viṣṇu's Causality

a. Viṣṇucittīya on VP 1.1.4
b. Ātmaprakāśa on VP 1.1.4
c. Viṣṇucittīya on VP 1.1.5
d. Ātmaprakāśa on VP 1.1.5

[8] These questions comprise the five components of purāṇas (*purāṇa pañcalakṣaṇa*) that is thought to be their subject matter. The five characteristics enumerated are 1) primary creation, 2) secondary creation or dissolution, 3) genealogies of gods and patriarchs, 4) periods of Manus, and 5) history. For more on this topic, see Rocher 1986: 24-30.

Section III: Viṣṇu's Identity with the world

a. Viṣṇucittīya on VP 1.1.31
b. Ātmaprakāśa on VP 1.1.31

In that last verse of chapter one, 1.1.31, Parāśara offers a summary answer to Maitreya's questions and proclaims Viṣṇu as the source from which the world originates and into which it is absorbed at the time of dissolution. Each of the commentators reads this verse in a different way. This offers much on their views on the supreme deity. This material is considered in the last section of the paper (IIIa-b). Together, these three sections of the paper elucidate the connection between Viṣṇu and Brahman on the one hand and Viṣṇu and the world on the other. Though both exegetes agree that Viṣṇu is Brahman who is the world, each qualifies this identity in a unique way.

I. Invoking Viṣṇu: Supreme Deity, Absolute Consciousness

In their benedictory verses, Viṣṇucitta and Śrīdhara invoke Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa respectively. The former characterizes Viṣṇu as both the transcendent Brahman and the supreme deity in some of his specific manifestations who is the focus of ritual and devotion. The personal god who is the object of devotees' ministrations is the same as the ultimate reality that is of the nature of consciousness and bliss untouched by saṃsāra (section Ia). Śrīdhara identifies Viṣṇu as Kṛṣṇa in his invocatory passages. Overall, he equivocates between descriptions of Kṛṣṇa as the non-dual absolute with the fewest of attributes such as the 'witness of the mind' and Kṛṣṇa as the Lord, the supreme deity who is the cause creation (section Ib). The last section examines Śrīdhara's commentary on certain benedictory verses that are part of the VP version he utilises (Ic). Though they are not his own compositions, since he comments on them extensively, we need to consider their significance as they offer much on his interpretation of Viṣṇu. Viṣṇucitta's version of the VP does not include these introductory verses.

a. Viṣṇucittīya's Benedictory Verses (maṅgalaśloka)

Viṣṇucitta, in his first verse of benediction, invokes Viṣṇu as both transcendent and intimately involved with the world.[9]

[9] There are five invocatory verses listed prior to the beginning of the commentary. Of these, only the first two provide information on the nature of the deity. In addition, the last of the five verses is a benedictory verse by Viṣṇucitta's disciple, Vātsya Varada, extolling his teacher's erudition.

> Obeisance to him, to Puruṣottama, the essence[10] of consciousness alone who is devoid of changes due to existence and non-existence
>
> From whom this world was born, where it exists and where all this reaches in the end.[11]

He begins by referring to Viṣṇu as Puruṣottama. This is a common epithet for the deity, but has special significance for the commentator. The term Puruṣottama, meaning the 'highest person', is 'both a divine name and a metaphysical definition of God' (Carman 1986: 159). For the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, Puruṣottama is the primordial man (*puruṣa*) of the Puruṣa Sūkta and the Lord Nārāyaṇa, whose dismemberment results in creation (Carman 1986: 159). In the Bhagavad Gītā, Puruṣottama signifies the supreme being, Kṛṣṇa, who encompasses matter and individual selves and yet transcends them as their inner ruler. For Rāmānuja, one of the systematizers of this Vedānta tradition, the epithet Puruṣottama is the divine name of choice after Brahman, illustrating the supremacy (*paratva*) and transcendence of Viṣṇu (Carman 1986: 81, 159). It has been noted that Viṣṇucitta utilizes Rāmānuja's writings frequently in his commentary on the VP and it is likely that this divine name has similar connotations for the commentator as well (Ranganayaki 1999). Puruṣottama, then, as Viṣṇucitta notes in his benedictory verse, is 'the essence of consciousness alone devoid of the changes due to existence and non-existence (individual selves and matter)'. Nonetheless, he is also the creator, sustainer and support of the world at all times even during dissolution, without suffering any modifications that are incumbent on a cause. How this is possible is addressed by the self-body analogy, discussed in the subsequent sections.

In the second benedictory verse, Viṣṇucitta portrays Viṣṇu as a personal god, the supreme deity:

> Obeisance, to the bestower of wishes to the worshipper and of the wise, to the one who rides Garuḍa.

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[10] The word translated as essence is *vapus*, it can also mean 'nature', 'body', 'figure' and so on.

[11] *yasmād idaṃ jagad ajāyata yatra tiṣṭhayante samastam idam astam upaiti yatra. tasmai namas sadasadādivikalpaśūnyacaitanyamātravapuṣe puruṣottamāya* (Sharma 1995: 1).

> To the horse-faced one (Hayagrīva),[12] one's own self, the self of the world.[13]

Mythological details of Viṣṇu take center stage here, such as being aloft on Garuḍa, or as Hayagrīva, the horse-faced manifestation who recovers the lost Vedas. Viṣṇu riding the fierce bird Garuḍa is well-known in Vaiṣṇava traditions. In Śrīvaiṣṇavism for instance, Viṣṇu along with his divine vehicle and other celestial attendants is extolled in descriptions of Viṣṇu's heaven, Vaikuṇṭha. Yāmuna, the predecessor of Rāmānuja, in his Stotra Ratna, śloka 41, invokes the bird as a divine vehicle, a seat/throne, a friend, a banner and as possessing scars due to contact with the feet of a seated Viṣṇu (Nayar 1992: 104 fn 111).

Hayagrīva is not a popular form of Viṣṇu, but he is revered in South India as the god of learning and knowledge, and his worship is a living tradition in the temple town of Tiruvahindrapuram, Tamil Nadu. In the epics and purāṇas, he is said to have rescued the Vedas stolen by a demon and also figures in the esoteric ritual texts of Pāñcarātra (Nayar 2004: 170-191). The mention of Garuḍa along with Hayagrīva in this verse is not as unusual as it might seem as this association is prevalent in Śrīvaiṣṇavism.[14] Contrary to this celestial description of Viṣṇu as Hayagrīva and riding on Garuḍa, Viṣṇucitta ends this verse by referring to the deity as the inner self of one's own self and that of the world of matter. In the earlier passage, he first mentions the transcendent aspect of Viṣṇu as Puruṣottama and then his close connection to the world as its cause. Here, in the second verse, he begins with a description of the personal god and then ends with the transcendent aspect of Viṣṇu as 'one's own self and the self of all'. Though Viṣṇucitta vacillates between Viṣṇu as the supreme deity and personal god and as the transcendent Brahman, the two are identical for him.

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[12] For more on the development of the tradition of worship of Hayagrīva, see Nayar 2004.

[13] *vidheś ca vidhuṣām iṣṭadāyine tārkṣyāyine. namas turaṅgatuṇḍāya svātmane jagadātmane* (Sharma 1995: 1).

[14] Though a successor of Viṣṇucitta, Vedānta Deśika (14th C), has an elaborate legend associated with this temple and his ability to ultimately become a literary master. This was made possible by the Garuḍa mantra and his initiation into Hayagrīva worship (Hopkins 2002: 62-63).

b. Ātmaprakāśa's Benedictory Verses (maṅgalaśloka)

In his first benedictory verse, Śrīdhara invokes Viṣṇu as Kṛṣṇa[15]

> Obeisance to him who is the form of existence, consciousness and bliss,
> to Kṛṣṇa, who is unwearied in action,
> who is known through Vedānta, to the guru, to the witness of the mind (*buddhi*).[16]

While the name Kṛṣṇa might conjure up the deity who was the hero of the Mahābhārata, the charioteer and teacher of Arjuna, the commentator's characterization points the reader away from such a context. He defines Kṛṣṇa as having the form of existence, consciousness and bliss: *sat, cit,* and *ānanda*. In Advaita, though Brahman cannot be conveyed through conventional language, certain definitions of Brahman such as *sadcidānanda* are considered to come close. These terms are not properties of Brahman, they are referred to as an essential definition (*svarūpalakṣaṇa*) of Brahman. *Sadcidānanda* defines Brahman by negating it from what it is not (Murti 1983: 83). Thus, '*[s]at* excludes *asat* (non-being); *Cit* (will or intelligence) excludes matter (*jaḍa*); *Ānanda* (bliss) excludes *duḥkha* (pain)' (Murti 1983: 83). What this means in the case of Śrīdhara is that, in as much as we can use language to define the non-dual Absolute, *sadcidānanda* is associated with the fewest superimpositions or attributions. So, Kṛṣṇa as the embodiment of Brahman's essential nature known through scripture, i.e. Vedānta, points to the non-dual self, beyond all language and conventional experience.

For Śrīdhara, this Kṛṣṇa is also a guru. In benedictory verses, usually in addition to a deity of choice, the preceptors of one's tradition and lineage are also invoked. By identifying Kṛṣṇa as the guru, Śrīdhara follows a well-known Advaita tradition of considering Nārāyaṇa as the founder of the tradition. In this context, Nārāyana is the 'most subtle personalized form of brahman, the Inner Controller and witness' (Hirst 2005: 58). Once again for Śrīdhara, Kṛṣṇa as the founder of Advaita Vedānta is Brahman bereft of all superimpositions except the sole adjunct of wisdom (Hirst 2005: 58).

Śrīdhara also envisions Kṛṣṇa as the 'witness of the mind'. In his *maṅgaláśloka* of Naiṣkarmayasiddhi, Sureśvara (~9th CE) also pays obeisance to Hari, the witness of the mind, destroyer of darkness, from whom the world, consist-

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[15] There are four verses that comprise the *maṅgaláślokas*. Of these only the first two convey information on the nature of Viṣṇu. This verse is not found in the Parimal edition, but is found in the Nag Publishers edition.

[16] *sadcidānandarūpāya kṛṣṇāyākliṣṭakāriṇe. namo vedāntavedyāya gurave buddhisākṣiṇe.*

ing of ether, air, wind, fire, and water, comes forth just as a garland appears as a snake (Alston 1971: 2).[17] In later Advaita, Citsukha (~13th CE) in his Tattvapradīpikā explains the relationship between Brahman and the witness-consciousness, i.e., the witness of the mind as 'the pure Brahman which has become all the inner selves [and] is known to be the witness-consciousness according to differences in finite individual beings' (Gupta 1995: 119). Kṛṣṇa as the witness of the mind is a way to 'point to the inactivity of the self and correct the idea that it could be the agent in [an] act of empirical cognition' (Alston 1971: 138–139). The ineffable self is inactive and is a non-agent. Śrīdhara envisions Kṛṣṇa as the witness of the mind, the seer behind the seeing, the true self, the non-dual absolute.

For the Advaitin, Kṛṣṇa is also the one who is unwearied in action—*akliṣṭakārin*. That is, the cause (*kārin*) which is unassociated with any defects (*akliṣṭa*). He is beyond the deficiencies of existence such as passion, anger, desire and so on, in that he is not affected by them as he is not in contact with them. Here, Kṛṣṇa can be understood as the Lord, the creator and the cause of creation, who is untouched by it. What we see in this verse is a continuum of envisioning Kṛṣṇa as the non-dual Absolute, in as much as this is possible, to Kṛṣṇa as the cause of the world. Suthren Hirst has discussed such a model in her study on Śaṃkara (Suthren Hirst 2005: 124–129). Thus, Śrīdhara does not speak of two Kṛṣṇas—only one with different attributions, ranging from the gross, such as Lord over the creation of which he is the cause, to the subtle, such as witness of the mind.[18]

Śrīdhara, in his second verse, pays homage to his deity of choice (*iṣṭadevata*) and other divinities important to the sacred city of Kāśi

> I bow to Bindu Mādhava, the form of Supreme Bliss, to the goddess of speech,
> to the Lord of the universe, to Gaṅgā, and to the seer, the foremost Parāśara.[19] (2)

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[17] *khānilāgnyabdharitryantaṃ srakphaṇīvodgataṃ yataḥ. dhvāntacchide namas tasmai haraye buddhisākṣiṇe*.

[18] I do not utilize the terms such as higher brahman and lower brahman or *saguṇa* brahman and *nirguṇa* brahman as Śrīdhara himself does not. He only introduces the *pravṛtti-nivṛtti* framework and so that is the only distinction that is addressed here. See Lott 1980 and Mahadevan 1968 for more on those distinctions.

[19] *śrībindumādhavaṃ vande paramānandavigraham. vācam viśveśvaraṃ gaṅgāṃ parāśaramukhān munīn* (Upreti 2011: 1).

Bindu Mādhava is a regional form of Viṣṇu as Kṛṣṇa, whose temple is located in Kāśi (Eck 1982: 206-207). One of the myths surrounding this temple manifestation is that Viṣṇu granted the sage Agni Bindu a boon to remain in Kāśi as the *mūrti* in this temple. Śrīdhara balances the theistic tenor of the verse, by referring to this form of Kṛṣṇa as the form of Supreme Bliss (*ānanda*) that we have already come across as a definition of Brahman. While paying obeisance to Kṛṣṇa as a personal god, Bindu Mādhava, the commentator points beyond this created world, over which the deity is Lord but also transcends it, as one's own inner self, alluding to a proper Advaitin understanding. Śrīdhara also invokes Viśveśvara the form of Śiva important in Kāśi, the river Ganges, the goddess of speech and the sage Parāśara, the narrator of the VP.

In these two *maṅgalaślokas*, then, two understandings of Kṛṣṇa are conveyed. These can be seen as two poles of a continuum—on the one hand, Kṛṣṇa as the absolute with a minimum of attributions such as *sat, cit, ānanda* or as the witness of the mind, as the embodiment of supreme bliss etc. On the other hand, Viṣṇu as Bindu Mādhava, a specific form of Kṛṣṇa, is more relatable in the context of name and form.[20] For Viṣṇucitta, Viṣṇu is the transcendent Brahman and the personal Lord accessible to his devotees and intimately involved in the world though its creation, maintenance and dissolution. For Śrīdhara, Viṣṇu as Kṛṣṇa is also Brahman as the non-dual absolute beyond name and form realized ultimately as one's self within. However, until such a time as that, there are degrees to which Kṛṣṇa can be associated with various attributions relevant in the conventional world. So, the answer 'yes', to the question as to the identity of Kṛṣṇa and Brahman for Śrīdhara will have to be qualified.

c. Ātmaprakāśa (commentary on additional ślokas that are part of Śrīdhara's version of the purāṇa)

We begin by considering Śrīdhara's comments on two passages that are part of the version of the purāṇa he utilizes. His commentary on them is extensive and conveys much information on how he envisions Viṣṇu. Of the four verses, two are relevant to our discussion as the others address the importance of purāṇas and sage Parāśara. Prior to his commentary on these verses, Śrīdhara by way of introduction states that:

[20] For more on the concept of name and form, *nāmarūpa* in Advaita, see Hacker 1995: 57-100 and Suthren Hirst 2005: 89-115.

> The questions by Maitreya to Parāśara, in the first *adhyāya* of the first *aṃśa* of the text, on the goal of *pravṛtti*, are found in twenty-two (chapters) of the purāṇa.[21]

By referring to the first book of the VP with twenty-two chapters as concerned with the goal of *pravṛtti* (*pravṛttyartha*), Śrīdhara offers the reader an interpretive framework within which to read the entire purāṇa. The distinction of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* imposes an Advaitic orientation. *Pravṛtti* is the realm of actions (*karma*), ritual and duality, which does not lead to brahman/self-realization and liberation. This path only perpetuates rebirth in saṃsāra. The realization of Brahman is only accomplished by severing worldly attachments, through renunciation and the study of *śruti*, which is the path of *nivṛtti*.

But, if these chapters are concerned with *pravṛtti* that is to be transcended, why bother reading or commenting on them?[22] Śrīdhara says that purāṇas have the essential nature of being the breath or extirpation (*niśvasita*) of the Lord (*īśvara*) and are rooted in Veda. Additionally, in the case of the VP, its lineage in the form of remembrance or recounting directly from the sage Vyāsa to Vaśiṣṭha to Parāśara makes its use and validity difficult to deny. After validating the authority of the purāṇas, especially the VP he goes on to say that commentaries on purāṇas are useful as their sole purpose is to illuminate various objects by refuting their respective false appearances. Śrīdhara adds, though such accounts among many purāṇas may be rare, in this very purāṇa, *pravrtti* is proclaimed as best for the practice effecting the identity (*aikātmya*) of the supreme self, individual self and the world for those desirous of liberation (Upreti 2011: 1) The significance of purāṇas is recast to accommodate the Advaita exegetical practice of negation of superimposition and false appearance to gain the true understanding of reality. In the case of the VP at least, for those seeking liberation but who find themselves in the context of *pravṛtti*, the purāṇa helps one navigate the path of purifying the mind, which is essential for the path of knowledge and eventual realization. On the topic of the myriad narratives on origins of various beings and so on, Śrīdhara notes:

> And of the genealogies of Manus, gods, sages, creation and dissolution, therein, by negation (*apavāda*) of that, liberation is the teaching. The use

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[21] *tantrāṃśe prathame 'dhyāye maitreyeṇa parāśare pravṛttyarthaṃ purāṇasya praśnā dvāvimśati kṛtāḥ* (Upreti 2011:1).

[22] Suthren Hirst (2005) has shown that in the case of Śaṃkara, the importance of the context of *pravṛtti* is connected to the Advaita pedagogical method.

> of the examination of narratives of the land of Bhārata, the earth, and virtuous conduct, for liberation alone, immediately or ultimately ought to be seen.[23]

In this way, purāṇic narratives have the ability to remove various appearances to lead to the realization of the non-difference between the world, individual self and the supreme self. This is the standard Advaita method of superimposition (*adhyāropa*) and negation (*apavāda*): '[t]he Absolute cannot be denoted through speech and negation is the fundamental process which leads to *viveka*—discrimination of the true nature of the self' (Alston 1980: 136).[24] Thus, one may begin in this context but one moves towards the realization of one's own self as Viṣṇu, either 'immediately or ultimately', and this is the overall goal of the purāṇa.

Following this introduction on the meaning of the purāṇa and its significance in liberation, Śrīdhara comments on the invocatory passages found prior to the beginning of the VP. Among these four verses, his commentary on the first two give us the most information on his conception of Viṣṇu. What we see as a general rule is that Śrīdhara, when the text allows for it, interprets Kṛṣṇa as a personal god but also frequently through negation and correction points to envisioning him as one's own inner self. The first passage is from the famous *Jitam Te Stotra* that is part of the Ṛg Veda *khila*, but is also found in some Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra texts.

> Victory to you, Puñḍarīkākṣa, obeisance to Viśvabhāvana,
> Obeisance to you Hṛṣīkeśa, Mahāpuruṣa, Pūrvajā.[25]

Śrīdhara glosses each of the epithets from this verse combining theistic connotations with more Advaitic interpretations. He offers four interpretations of the term 'Puṇḍarīkākṣa'. First he says it can mean 'he who reaches/he who pervades, the lotus called the heart'.[26] The Upaniṣads refer to the self within as the lotus within the heart. For instance, Chāndogya Upaniṣad 8.1.1 states 'now, here in the fort of brahman there is a small lotus, a dwelling place, and within it, a small

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[23] *tatra ca sargapratisargavaṃśamanvantaravaṃśānucaritānāṃ tad apavādena mukteś ca pratipādanam. sadācārabhūgolabharatopākhyānādinirūpaṇasya sākṣāt paramparāyā vā muktāv evopayogo dṛṣṭavyaḥ* (Upreti 2011: 1).

[24] Suthren Hirst's volume explores this in more detail (2005: 83–85).

[25] *jitaṃ te puṇḍarīkākṣa namas te viśvabhāvana. namas te 'stu hṛṣīkeśa mahāpuruṣa pūrvajā* (Upreti 2011: 1).

[26] *hṛdayākhyaṃ puṇḍarīkam aśnute vyāpnotīti tathā* (Upreti 2011: 1).

space' (Olivelle 1998: 273). Śrīdhara's interpretation of Puṇḍarīkākṣa means one who 'reaches', that is, realizes one's true self.

The second meaning of Puṇḍarīkākṣa, according to Śrīdhara is 'he whose two eyes are like two lotuses'.[27] This is the most common understanding of the term as an epithet of the god, Viṣṇu. A third interpretation is that Puṇḍarīkākṣa can mean, 'he by whom the eye was made into a lotus for the purpose of the worship of Śiva'.[28] This is a reference to the myth of Viṣṇu worshipping the Śiva Liṅga with lotuses. Discovering that he had one less than the thousand needed, he plucked out his eye as an offering. It is found in the Koṭirudra Saṃhitā of the Śiva Purāṇa (Shastri 2002: chapter 43). So, with the second and third interpretations, he opts for a theistic reading, envisioning Puṇḍarīkākṣa as the personal god, Viṣṇu. Whereas, with the first interpretation he focuses on Kṛṣṇa as the indwelling self.

Śrīdhara ends with a fourth possibility citing part of a passage from the Udyoga Parvan of the Mahābhārata, which offers an etymology of Puṇḍarīkākṣa. The complete verse is the following: 'He is called *puṇḍarīka* which means the abode that is supreme, high, eternal and *akṣaya* means indestructible. Because of that Janārddana strikes fear into the hearts of wicked beings' (Sukthankar, 1933). Though the reference of this passage is to Kṛṣṇa, Janārddana, for the commentator, Puṇḍarīkākṣa is one who has seen this indestructible abode, i.e., has intuited the self. Puṇḍarīkākṣa is not so much the celestial deity Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa, but the indwelling Brahman in one's heart that is finally recognized as duality is transcended.

His interpretation of *viśvabhāvana* is straightforward as one who 'is the producer of all'. This reading that underscores divine causality is more in line with Kṛṣṇa as a personal god. Śrīdhara does not interpret *hṛṣīkeśa* as Kṛṣṇa, as for instance in Bhagavad Gītā 18.1 (Sadhale, 1936). He takes *hṛṣīka* to mean the senses and *hṛṣīkeśa* as 'the lord of the senses', and he is their lord 'due to being the cause of the manifestation of them (Upreti 2011: 2). He cites Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.18 for support: 'the breathing behind breathing, the sight behind sight, the hearing behind the hearing, the thinking behind the thinking' (Olivelle 1998: 125). Here the self is spoken of as that which is real behind the vital functions, animating them and so *hṛṣīkeśa* is 'the sight behind the sight', in other words, the seer behind the seeing, a reference to Brahman.

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[27] *yadvā puṇḍarīke ivākṣiṇo yasyeti* (Upreti 2011:1-2).

[28] *śivārādhanārthaṃ puṇḍrīkīkṛtaṃ akṣī yeneti* (Upreti 2011: 2).

Commenting on *mahāpuruṣa*, Śrīdhara first explains *mahā* as referring to something that is great 'due to separation from individual self (*jīva*) and *mahat* (an evolute of *prakṛti*/matter)'. He then cites as support Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.1. This upaniṣad refers to two birds on a tree, one partaking of its fruit and the other does not do so, but looks on. Here, the latter bird is *mahā* due to the fact that, not partaking of the fruit, i.e., saṃsāra and its trappings, it has the nature of being eternally liberated (*nityamuktasvabhāva*). To explain *puruṣa*, he glosses it as 'however, due to resting in the body, results personhood' (Upreti 2011: 2) Overall, *mahāpuruṣa* is not Kṛṣṇa, a divine being, but a reference to the highest self that is embodied, but is different from the individual self, the material body and is a non-agent.

The Advaitin comments on *pūrvajā* as one who is prior to creation (Upreti 2011: 2). This is not however due to Viṣṇu being the cause. He starts from the premise that if the whole world is understood to arise from him then he is the cause. He goes on to say, 'one's self is indeed prior to creation, by the fact that creation manifests or by the fact that as cause, it is the indispensable antecedent of creation, from the dependence of the other (creation) on it (Upreti 2011: 2). Kṛṣṇa as *pūrvajā* is once again a reference to the self that is understood as the cause of creation not because he is, but because if the world is thought to arise/manifest, it must have a cause. He does not say that Brahman is the cause. According to Advaita, Brahman is the cause in as much as it is the support on which the world is superimposed. In this sense, it is prior to creation and supports creation.

Finally, Śrīdhara provides one last interpretation of all the terms taken together as epithets of Viṣṇu/Krsna. However, instead of relating them to particular mythologies, narratives, or exploits of the deity, he reads them as the 'five attributes' of Viṣṇu mentioned in Book Five of the VP. In this section, the pious Yādava Akrura sent to accompany Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma to the court of Kaṃsa, on seeing Kṛṣṇa eulogizes him as beyond matter and existing in five forms. He hymns: 'self of the elements, self of the senses, self of *pradhāna* (matter), the individual self, the supreme Self, and in that manner you are the lord who exists in five forms' (VP 5.18.50). According to Śrīdhara, *puṇḍarīkākṣa* means the self of elements, *viśvabhāvana* means the self of matter, *hṛṣīkeśa* means the self of the senses, *mahāpuruṣa* is the supreme Self and *pūrvajā* is called the individual self.

The interpretation of Viṣṇu's divine names in this way moves the reader away from envisioning a personal god with form, to an investigation into cosmic elements that make up creation and to ultimately question the support of it all. All epithets of Viṣṇu are pointers to something that lies beyond the personal god

and some can be useful for the purpose of meditation. Suthren Hirst notes that this method of 'interiorization' is found in Śaṃkara as well, where he 'takes both cosmological and psychological explorations unstructured as well as structured and turns them into interiorizing techniques that progressively focus attention on the self and enable the pupil successively to discard misidentification with what is not the self' (Suthren Hirst 2005: 83). These attributes of Viṣṇu draw focus to 'the search for the self, which is within yet other than the cosmos, within yet other than the individual, the unseen seer' (Suthren Hirst 2005: 127). Through an understanding of Viṣṇu as the self of these elements of existence, an aspirant can move beyond viewing him simply as the Lord over creation, pointing instead to one's own self.

In the commentary on the second verse that begins Śrīdhara's version of the purāṇa, he again equivocates between Viṣṇu as the self within that is to be realized and the deity as a creator, sustainer fulfilling the expectations accorded a personal deity.

> The Lord, the Person, Brahman who is imperishable existence,
> He has the quality to manifest as creation, existence, time, and dissolution.
> Bringing forth the whole world of *pradhāna*, *buddhi* etc.
> May he, Viṣṇu, gift to us wisdom, prosperity and liberation.[29]

Faced with a passage that unambiguously affirms the causal nature of Viṣṇu, he first notes that 'in order to explain the function and connection of the limbs of *pravṛtti* for the hearer this second verse is stated' (Upreti 2011: 2), meaning that the specifics of divine causality are provisional and for pedagogical purposes only. In no way are these instantiations to be taken as the end all. On the mention of Viṣṇu he says:

> He, the most celebrated Viṣṇu, has the disposition of pervasion, due to not being divisible in his essential nature by space and time. Or Viṣṇu means he who enters, one who has the disposition to enter as stated in scripture 'having emitted it, he entered it' (Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.6).[30]

The understanding of Viṣṇu as the pervader from the verbal root *viś*, is a common etymological meaning of the deity. Here Śrīdhara adds that this pervasion

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[29] *sadakṣaraṃ brahma ya īśvaraḥ pumān guṇormisṛṣṭisthitikālasaṃlayaḥ. pradhānabuddhyādijagatprapañcasūḥ sa no 'stu viṣṇur matibhūtimuktidaḥ* (Upreti 2011: 2).

[30] *so 'tiprasiddho viṣṇur vyāpinaśīlo deśakālasvarūpato vyavacchedābhāvāt. viśater vā viṣṇuḥ praveśanaśīlaḥ, tat sṛṣṭvā tadevānupraviśad iti śruteḥ* (Upreti 2011: 2).

is due to his indivisible nature, that is beyond space and time. He also gives 'pervasion' an Upaniṣadic connotation of 'creating and entering'. In the Upaniṣad he cites, Brahman emits creation and then enters it. From this, results differentiation into the distinct and the indistinct, the resting and the never resting and so on.

But to counter the charge that as the cause, Viṣṇu is susceptible to change or modification he goes on to interpret 'pervasion' i.e., 'entering' as not associated with taking form:

> If the interpretation of the quality of entering of the word 'Viṣṇu' is obtaining of material form, this is refuted with the term Brahman, or fullness, this is the meaning. So then, if it is asked, in what manner does he pervade? This is stated with *sat*, uninterruptedly connected to everything. That is to say, due to the fact of appearing everywhere from phrases such as 'this is *sat*, this is *sat*', it is undestroyed. The use of the term 'imperishable' rejects modification.[31]

Pervasion means always existing and appearing everywhere due to the fact that Viṣṇu as Brahman is existence (*sat*). *Sat*, which is 'the real [can]not be produced in the sense of 'brought into manifestation'…[f]or any character of a real thing is constant' (Alston 1971: 32). In Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.1.4, clay is spoken of as a stand-in for *sat*. Though there are many modifications of clay they are in name only. Ultimately there is only clay. Just so, all that is thought of as modifications of *sat* are in fact only *sat*. *Sat* itself does not undergo production, manifestation and destruction. All modifications of *sat* are only apparent. Interpreting Viṣṇu in this way, means not envisioning him as the lord, *īśvara*, who projects creation, enters it and manifests in many forms.

While Śrīdhara interprets Viṣṇu as the indwelling self, where possible, he also allows for a theistic view when the text calls for it. He glosses 'may he gift to us wisdom, prosperity and liberation' as follows:

> 'May he to us gift wisdom, prosperity, liberation' means that by means of the power (*bhūti*) of understanding (*mati*), with preponderance of knowledge of reality (*tattvajñānaudreka*), may he bestow liberation (*mukti*). Or based on difference among aspirants; he gifts in this manner, under-

[31] *viṣṇupadasya praveśanaśīlārthatve mūrtatvaṃ prāptaṃ nirākaroti brahmeti pūrṇam ity arthaḥ. tadapi kuta ity ata āha satsarvānusyūtam. idaṃ sad idaṃ sad iti sarvatra pratīyamānatvād anuṣṭam iti yāvat. akṣaram iti vikāraṃ nirākaroti* (Upreti 2011: 2).

> standing, which means highest wisdom; prosperity means wealth/sovereignty and liberation.[32]

He interprets *matibhūti* in the compound *matibhūtimuktida* together, rendering it as 'may he gift liberation (*mukti*) by the power (*bhūti*) of *mati* or understanding.' Here, he takes *bhūti* in the sense of 'birth', 'production'. He also offers an alternate interpretation that is based on the aspirations of the worshipper. Viṣṇu gifts liberation, prosperity, or highest wisdom. Here, Viṣṇu as the creator and controller of his creation is highlighted.

Śrīdhara's interpretation of other terms such as *pumān* and *īśvara* in the passage envisions Viṣṇu as a personal god:

> *Pumān*, 'person' means the unchangeable (*kūṭastha*).[33] In what manner? He is the bestower of death and so on, this is stated with the 'Lord', who has the ability (*samartha*) to do, not to do, or to do differently. Even so, in what manner does he remain unchanged? This is stated with quality. The qualities *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*, the appearance of them is produced from agitation.[34]

Kūṭastha in Advaita is a reference to the highest self, the unchangeable. But he takes unchangeable to mean Viṣṇu as the dispenser of death as a personal god, the Lord. He also has the capability to do whatever he pleases according to his will. Pressed by an objector, he defines the unchanging nature of Viṣṇu as a result of qualities of matter such as *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, and not the divine essential nature. Viṣṇu is *kuṭastha* because he has power over his creation as he bestows death, but is unaffected by modifications, which take place in qualities of matter such as *sattva* etc.

Lastly, in his interpretation of the term 'he has the quality to manifest as creation, maintenance, time and dissolution', he expressly indicates the Advaita doctrine of creation as a superimposition due to nescience:

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[32] *matibhūtimuktido 'stu matibhūtyā tattvajñānodrekeṇa muktidaḥ. yadvā adhikāribhedāt matim uttamāṃ buddhiṃ bhūtim aiśvaryaṃ muktiñ ca dadātīti tathā* (Upreti 2011: 2).

[33] This term can also mean 'immoveable and 'supreme soul'. Here 'unchangeable' is a better interpretation as the discussion is on modification and change.

[34] *pumān kuṭasthaḥ kutas tarhi marttyādipradattamata āha īśvaraḥ kartum akartum anyathā kartuṃ samarthaḥ. kadāpi kuta ity atāha guṇeti guṇāḥ sattvarajastamāṃsi teṣām ūrmayaḥ kṣobhajanitāḥ* (Upreti 2011: 2).

> In the phrase, 'creation, maintenance, time, dissolution', 'time' means dissolution. Among them (creation, maintenance, time, dissolution), *saṃlaya* (dissolution) means he on whom is the superimposition (*adhyāsa*), the connection. By the fact that he is the substratum (*adhiṣṭhāṇa*) of all, he is Lord is not contradictory, this is the meaning.[35]

First, Śrīdhara interprets the word 'time' in the compound 'creation-existence-time' as 'dissolution'. Then he takes *saṃlaya* not as dissolution, but in the sense of 'settling down', 'alighting', and so, the entire compound he interprets as 'he on whom is the superimposition of creation, existence, and dissolution by manifestation of qualities', instead of 'he has the quality to manifest as creation, maintenance, time, and dissolution.' He finishes by stating that being the substratum (*adhiṣṭhāṇa*) for the superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of creation, he is the Lord. In Advaita, Brahman as cause is understood as the 'unmodified ground (*adhiṣṭhāṇa*) of the appearance' (Murti 1983: 72). While Śrīdhara invokes Viṣṇu as the personal deity, a ruler over creation and Lord, he also mentions this is a provisional reality. What we see in Śrīdhara's commentary on these two passages is in line with the framework of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* he establishes in his introduction to his commentary on these verses. He utilizes interpretations that align Viṣṇu more with the personal god, the realm of *pravṛtti*, but also where possible mentions the provisional nature of this view with Advaitic concepts such as negation (*apavāda*), superimposition (*adhyāsa*) and its substratum (*adhiṣṭhāna*).

In summary, in their respective benedictory verses, both Viṣṇucitta and Śrīdhara invoke Viṣṇu. However, there is a stark difference in who Viṣṇu is for each commentator. Viṣṇucitta invokes Viṣṇu as Puruṣottama, identifying the god with Brahman, the creator, transcendent beyond all vicissitudes of saṃsāra. Yet, he is immanent as one's own self and the self of the world, accessible also through his many manifestations such as Hayagrīva. The popular theistic dimension of Viṣṇu is also underscored by reference to his vehicle, Garuḍa, as mentioned in mythological accounts and iconographic depictions of the deity (Ia). Viṣṇucitta asserts both the fundamental involvement of Viṣṇu in creation and also his transcendence, but does not explain how this is possible. He does this through the self–body analogy, as we see in his commentary on subsequent verses.

Śrīdhara invokes Viṣṇu as Kṛṣṇa, more specifically as a regional form of the deity from Kāśī, Bindu Mādhava. However, this Kṛṣṇa is identified as *sad-*

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[35] *sṛṣṭisthitikālāḥ kālaḥ saṃhāraḥ teṣāṃ saṃlayaḥ saṃśleṣo 'dhyāso yasmin sa tathā sarvādhiṣṭhāṇatvena īśvaratvaṃ avyāhatam ity arthaḥ* (Upreti 2011: 2-3).

cidānanda, as the witness of the mind, as the guru who is the source of all Advaita teaching (Ib). Śrīdhara in his commentary on the additional verses at the beginning of the purāṇa, which are absent in his predecessor's version, is quite explicit about the non-dual framework within which he envisions Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa as Brahman. He does this by introducing concepts such as false appearances due to superimposition (*adhyāsa*) and their negation (*apavāda*). The distinction between the paths of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* also works in conjunction with these concepts, as he extols the significance of the former even though only the latter leads to liberation. In the analysis of all the divine epithets of Viṣṇu, Śrīdhara makes an effort to go beyond the *pravṛtti*-oriented contexts of personal theism that are important in that they point to the reality beyond (Ic). Both exegetes agree that Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa is none other than Brahman. However, in what way Viṣṇu is Brahman or how it is that Viṣṇu is Brahman is thus far only addressed by Śrīdhara (Ic). Viṣṇucitta has not done so, but conveys this in his commentary on VP 1.1.4 and 1.1.5 (IIa, IIc).

II. Viṣṇu's Causality: Aspect of Essential Nature, Substratum of Superimposition

Having examined the invocations at the beginning of the purāṇa of both exegetes, we turn now to their interpretation of passages 1.1.4 and 1.1.5, which address Viṣṇu's causal nature. In Chapter One of the VP, which sets the narrative context for the rest of the VP, Maitreya approaches Parāśara for instruction. The thirty-one passages of this first chapter state the questions that perturb Maitreya as to nature of the world and the way Parāśara has come to hear of the VP, whose contents are the answers to the former's queries. Apart from passages 1.1.4 to 1.1.10, which are Maitreya's questions and the last passage 1.1.31, that is a summary answer to all of Maitreya's questions, the rest of the chapter is not relevant to the topic of Viṣṇu's nature. Even among several passages that comprise Maitreya's questions, only 1.1.4 and 1.1.5 are commented on by the commentators. In the next four sections the commentary of Viṣṇucitta and Śrīdhara on 1.1.4 and 1.1.5 is considered (II a-d).

a. Viṣṇucittīya on VP 1.1.4

Having bowed to Parāśara and paying him appropriate homage, Maitreya begins by requesting of Parāśara the following:

> I wish to hear from you, O knower of dharma, how the world was,
> how the world is and how the world will be, O pious one. (VP 1.1.4)[36]

Quoting Rāmānuja, Viṣṇucitta states that what is asked in verses 1.1.4 to 1.1.10 concerns the 'specific aspect of the essential nature of Brahman (*brahmasvarūpaviśeṣa*), the kinds of differences in his manifestation (*vibhūtibhedaprakāra*), and the specifics of the fruits in the form of worship of him (*tatārādhanasvarūpaphalaviśeṣa*)'.[37] The questions of VP 1.1.4–1.1.5, which we consider here, concern the special characteristic or aspect of the essential nature of Brahman.[38] As support Viṣṇucitta cites Taittirīya Upaniṣad 3.1.1:

> Because the essential nature of Brahman is understood by scripture such as 'that from which these beings are born, on which, once born they live, and into which they pass upon death—seek to perceive that! That is Brahman',[39] that very topic (causality) is questioned here. It is stated by Rāmānuja (*bhāṣyakāra*) that this is a question on the specifics of the essential nature of Brahman…. In this respect, because what is asked is about creation and dissolution, from looking at the answer (VP 1.1.31), the question of existence, maintenance and the agent of maintenance and dissolution also is intended.[40]

Not only do Maitreya's queries of world creation and so on address the essential nature of Brahman, these questions on causality are in fact important for liberation. The Upaniṣad, according to Viṣṇucitta, specifically, states Viṣṇu's causality as an important topic to be inquired into and Parāśara's response in VP 1.1.31, is about essential knowledge of Brahman and is not mere cosmology. The contrast with Śrīdhara's interpretation, which we address next, is that the questions of Maitreya in fact concern divine causality, which is a *brahmasvarūpaviśeṣa*, a spe-

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[36] *so 'ham icchāmi dharmajña śrotuṃ tvatto yathā jagat. babhūva bhūyaś ca yathā mahābhāga bhaviṣyati* (VP 1.1.4).

[37] *atra bhagavatā bhāṣyakāreṇa brahmasvarūpaviśeṣatadvibhūtibhedaprakārās tadārādhanasvarūpaphalaviśeṣāś ca pṛṣṭā iti* (Sharma 1995: 2)

[38] For more on the concept of *brahmasvarūpaviśeṣa* in Viśiṣṭādvaita, see Adluri 2014: 31-38).

[39] Taittirīya Upaniṣad 3.1.1, translation from Olivelle 1998: 309.

[40] *brahmasvarūpasya yato vā imāni ityādivākyasiddhatvāt tadviśeṣevātra praṣṭavya iti bhāṣyakāreṇa brahmasvarūpaviśeṣapraśna ity uktam … atra utpattilayayoḥ pṛṣṭatvāt sthitipraśno 'py abhipretaḥ sthitisaṃyamakarteti prativacanadarśanāt* (Sharma 1995: 2).

cific aspect of Brahman's essential nature and this very cause manifests in different forms to be accessible for worship and this very topic is important for liberation. Considering divine causality as a *brahmasvarūpaviśeṣa*, is a direct response to the Advaita view of divine causality as provisionally true. Moreover, this very Brahman, who is the cause, is Viṣṇu in his many manifestations accessible for worship to his devotees. Thus, ritual and worship that are considered as comprising the context of *pravṛtti*, and which are of secondary importance for liberation in Advaita, are here defined as directly necessary for freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

b. Ātmaprakāśa on VP 1.1.4

Whereas, Viṣṇucitta concludes that causality is an essential nature of Brahman, Śrīdhara simply states that Maitreya's questions on how the world was and how it will be again, concern the mode of production/creation (*janmaprakāra*).[41] While he admits that the topic of discussion is causality, his sparse comments on this verse underscore his perspective that world causation or dissolution are not topics of much importance. His prior commentary, as we saw, was extensive, and the reader needs to keep in mind those comments while reading the commentary on this verse as well (Ic). There Śrīdhara defines causality as a topic that is relevant in the context of *pravṛtti* only and is indirectly important as a means to purify the mind. His claim that Viṣṇu is the substratum of superimposition of the world, which is a result of nescience, is vastly different from Viṣṇucitta for whom causality as *brahmasvarūpaviśeṣa* is knowledge that is directly important for liberation.

c. Viṣṇucittīya on VP 1.1.5

Among Maitreya's questions which span verses 1.1.4 to 1.1.10, the only other verse where Viṣṇucitta offers a substantial commentary is VP 1.1.5. Here, he introduces the paradigm of the self-body as the relationship that exists between Brahman and the world. This allows him to maintain Brahman/Viṣṇu himself as the cause without undergoing modification and to admit causality as an aspect of Brahman's essential nature. Maitreya questions Parāśara:

> What is the world made of, O Brahman, from where is this world of the movable and the immovable,

[41] *pūrvaṃ yathā babhūva punaś ca yathā bhaviṣyatīti jagato janmaprakārapraśnaḥ* (Upreti 2011: 4).

> Where and in what way was it resting and where will it go at dissolution? (VP 1.1.5)[42]

Commenting on this verse, Viṣṇucitta first makes sure to establish intra-textual connectivity in that these questions of Maitreya's culminate in the last verse of this chapter, VP 1.1.31, with Parāśara's response that '(Viṣṇu) he is the world'. Second, to circumvent issues arising from the question of modification the cause might undergo, he writes that Viṣṇu's identity with the world is akin to the self-body connection

> Because with the question 'from where' what is asked is about the instrumental cause, by 'what is the world made of' and so on, how creation acquires the status of an object and what the world is comprised of is asked. For this the answer is 'he is the world' (1.1.31). Here, the sameness of the nature by means of the form of the inner self, that is, by being the self of it, is the intended condition, but not (sameness in nature) due to identity with the object. Because the answer to the question 'what is the world made of' is 'he is the world', the connection is one of coordinate predication (*sāmānādhikaraṇya*).[43]

In Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Brahman is understood to exist as the inner self of matter and of individual selves. They exist as his modes (*prakāra*). Just as the body is considered a mode of the individual self, so also matter and individual selves themselves are ensouled by Brahman. As Rāmānuja notes,

> [t]herefore all words naming these objects…first signify the objects they name in ordinary parlance, then through these objects, the finite selves dwelling in them, and finally these words extend in their significance to denote the supreme self (*paramātman*) who is their Inner Controller (*antaryāmin*). Thus, all terms do indeed denote the entire composite being (*saṃghāta*)…this entire created universe (*prapañca*) of intelligent and material entities has Being (*sat*) as its material cause, its instrumental cause

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[42] *yanmayaṃ ca jagad brahman yataś caitac carācaram. līnam āsīd yathā yatra layam eṣyati yatra ca* (VP 1.1.5).

[43] *yataś caitat carācaram iti nimittopādānayoḥ pṛṣṭavāt yanmayam ity anena sṛṣṭyādikarmabhūtaṃ jagat kimātmakam iti pṛṣṭam. tasya cottaraṃ jagac ca sa iti, idaṃ tādātmyam antaryāmirūpeṇa ātmatayā'vasthānakṛtaṃ na tu vastvaikyakṛtam. yanmayam iti praśnasyottaratvāt jagac ca sa iti sāmānādhikaraṇyasya* (Sharma 1995: 2-3).

> and its support (*ādhāra*); it is controlled (*niyāmya*) by Being and is the *śeṣa* [subordinate] of Being (Carman 1974: 124).

This is the principle of coordinate predication (*sāmānādhikaraṇya*) where 'the name of a body can properly be applied to the self ensouling that body, and the name of an attribute or mode belongs to its underlying substance' (Carman 1974: 125). To the question what is the world made of, the answer can be Brahman is the world due to the principle of coordinate predication in that an attribute or mode of a substance can be used to denote the substance. As a mode of Brahman, the world can be identified with Brahman, but it is not identity due to similarity of substance, rather identity due to Brahman being its inner self.

Viṣṇucitta then goes on to explain that the *taddhita* suffix *mayaṭ* in Maitreya's question '*yan mayam*', 'what is it made of' has the meaning of plenitude, constituted by Viṣṇu as the self of the world.[44]

> Hence, the goal of plenitude (*prācurya*) alone is the entirety (of meaning). From that, the answer to the question 'what is the world made of' is that 'he is the world' and is the relationship of *sāmānādhikaraṇya*; the basis of the relationship of the self–body connection.[45]

Viṣṇu is the material and instrumental cause without bearing substantial likeness to the world and from this, 'the connection of self-body alone is the principle sense of *sāmānādhikaraṇya*'.[46] Viṣṇucitta argues that the Advaita view of Brahman's connection to the world would not make sense. That is, if Brahman is *nirviśeṣajñānamātra*, as Advaitins argue, then Parāśara's answer 'Viṣṇu is the world' to Maitreya's question of 'what is the world made of' would not make sense.

d. Ātmaprakāśa on VP 1.1.5

Śrīdhara's comments on 1.1.5 in comparison to Viṣṇucitta are once again sparse. He simply notes that Maitreya's question what is the world made of, *yanmayam*, is a question concerning the material cause (*upādāna kāraṇa*). 'From where', *yataś*

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[44] He rejects two other possible meanings of the '*mayaṭ*' suffix namely, *vikāra*, modification, and *svārtha*, in the sense of identity as in *prāṇamaya*, or made of.

[45] *ataḥ prācuryartha eva kṛtsnaṃ jagadātmakatayā tat pracuram eva tasmād yanmayam ity asya prativacanaṃ jagac ca sa iti sāmānādhikaraṇyaṃ śarīrātmabhāvanibandhanam* (Sharma 1995: 3).

[46] *tasmād ātmaśarīrabhāva evedaṃ sāmānādhikaraṇyaṃ mukhyam* (Sharma 1995: 3).

ca, is a question about the instrumental cause or agent (*nimitta*). Where it was resting, *yatra līnam āsīd*, is a question about the ground or support (*ādhāra*) of dissolution.[47] Having mentioned earlier that Maitreya's questions concern the goal of *pravṛtti*, he does not specifically mention the world as appearance or a superimposition on Brahman, but rather simply parses the VP passage as it relates to Maitreya's question. Once again the reader is to construe his Advaita stance from his earlier comments (Ic).

In summary, Viṣṇucitta's comments on VP 1.1.4 and 1.1.5 make four points that are of significance for the topic of Viṣṇu's causality. First, he claims that causality is a specific aspect of the essential nature of Brahman (*brahmasvarūpaviśeṣa*). This serves to reinforce the Viśiṣṭādvaita view that the world which manifests is Viṣṇu. Second, this Viṣṇu who is the world also manifests in myriad forms which are accessible for worship. Third, the topic of causality is not mere cosmological specifics, but rather an important and relevant knowledge for one desiring liberation. Fourth, the connection between Viṣṇu and the world is one of self–body. This means that as the inner self of the world he can be identified as the world.

Though Śrīdhara does not provide such detail in his comments on VP 1.1.4 and 1.1.5, he has done this type of exegesis already in his comments on some of the benedictory passages (Ic). He combines theistic and Advaitic interpretations in his discussion of Viṣṇu as Brahman. For instance, we saw that in his interpretation of the divine epithets he moves the reader away from envisioning a personal god with form and to focus on the reality that lies beyond. Through the distinction of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* he can admit the theistic context but also deems this as provisional truth. Viṣṇu then is not simply a personal god to be worshipped, but is one's inner self devoid of all adjuncts, that is to be meditated on. Creation manifests from Viṣṇu, but ultimately it is to be understood as a false appearance—a superimposition on Brahman due to ignorance. What becomes clear in the commentaries of these two exegetes is that Viṣṇu is Brahman and is the cause of creation, but what this means is quite different for each.

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[47] *yanmayam ity upādānapraśno yataś ceti nimittapraśno līnam āsīd yatreti layādhārapraśnaḥ* (Upreti 2011: 4).

III. Viṣṇu's Identity with the World: Self to Body, Accidental Characteristic

In the discussion on the benedictory verses (Ia and Ib), the commentary on invocatory passages that are part of the purāṇa version utilized by Śrīdhara (Ic), and the commentary on VP 1.1.4 and 1.1.5 (IIa–d), the identity of Viṣṇu and his relation to Brahman and the world was the focus of the discussion. The main goal was to discern how Viṣṇu is Brahman and the nature of the world in relation to that. In the commentary on 1.1.31, both commentators grapple with the identity between Viṣṇu and the world that is set up by the purāṇa. Both Viṣṇucitta and Śrīdhara, agree with the VP that Viṣṇu is the world. However, for the former that identity manifests as a self–body relationship and for the latter the identity is a result of the world as an accidental characteristic of Viṣṇu.

a. Viṣṇucittīya on VP 1.1.31

We have already come across VP 1.1.31, Parāśara's answer to Maitreya's queries as the commentators have referred to it in their comments on earlier passages of this chapter such as 1.1.4 and 1.1.5. Now we examine the commentators' interpretation of this last passage of VP 1.1.

> The world originates from Viṣṇu and it exists there itself. He is the cause of preservation and dissolution of that world and he is the world. (VP 1.1.31) [48]

The purāṇa in this particular verse admits a close connection between Viṣṇu and the world as it identifies the two when it claims that 'he is the world'. Viṣṇu is the source of everything as creation evolves from him and recedes into him. The concept of Brahman as the material and instrumental cause is accepted by all Vedāntins. However, the nature of the connection is open to interpretation. Each commentator reads this passage from a Viśiṣṭādvaita or Advaita perspective envisioning Viṣṇu's relationship to the world in quite different terms. Though both agree that Viṣṇu is the cause of creation, Viṣṇucitta understands the identity as due to the world being the body of Viṣṇu who is its self. Whereas for Śrīdhara such an identity is due to the view that the world is an accidental characteristic (*upalakṣaṇa*) of Brahman.

Viṣṇucitta comments that the meaning of Maiterya's questions to Parāśara, in the first chapter of Book One, beginning with 'I wish to know' (1.1.4)

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[48] *viṣṇoḥ sakāśād udbhūtaṃ jagat tatraiva ca sthitam. sthitisaṃyamakartāsau jagato 'sya jagac ca saḥ* (VP 1.1.31).

concern the specifics on the thing that is the cause of the world (*jagatkāraṇavastuviśeṣa*) and along with that the specifics of the manner of its connection to the world (*jagatsambandhaprakāraviśeṣa*). Verse 1.1.31 is then a summary answer to those questions on the manifestation of matter (*pradhāna*) as is stated in more detail in the ensuing chapters of the purāṇa. As he has stated earlier, if the thing (*vastu*) is the cause of the world (*jagatkāraṇa*), then by the analogy of the self–body characterized as a relationship of controller–controlled (*niyantṛ–niyanta*) is the manner of connection (*sambandhaprākara*). Viṣṇu as controller or Lord, is an important aspect of his essential nature according to Viṣṇucitta.

He goes on to say that if the world is thought of as an adjunct (*upādhi*) or that it is a result of ignorance that is imagined (*avidyāparikalpita*), the relationship of controller–controlled would not be possible. Only with the manner of connection between Viṣṇu and world as controller–controlled can liberation be maintained as a legitimate goal of man (*puruṣārtha*). Only when the connection between them is of the nature of the subordinate–principle (*śeṣa–śeṣin*)—that is *jīva* as *śeṣa* and the lord as *śeṣin*—is Vedānta soteriology viable. Indeed, the fulfillment of worship and service (*kaiṃkarya*) to Viṣṇu of such an essential nature alone, as the ruler over his creation, is the goal of liberation.

With these introductory remarks that set up the overall framework for his interpretation, Viṣṇucitta comments more specifically on *viṣṇoḥ sakāśāt udbhutam* of 1.1.31:

> Here the answer (1.1.31) is to the question on the specifics of the cause of the world. *Sākṣāt* means appearance, visible appearance, knowledge. The meaning is: together with the visible appearance in the form of intention (*saṃkalparūpaprakāśasahita*) stated in scripture such as—'he thought let me create many' (Aitareya Upaniṣad 1.10) and 'he alone has expanded into many' (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.2.1-3). Or else the word *sakāśāt* means 'himself' as in from, 'the ācārya himself' (*ācāryasakāśāt*).[49]

The ablative '*sakāśāt*' from the word '*sakāśa*' means 'from' or 'from the presence of' and in VP 1.1.31, *viṣṇoḥ sakāśāt udbhūtaṃ jagat*, can mean the world originates from 'Viṣṇu himself'. It can also mean 'present' or 'visible appearance' and Viṣṇucitta reads it this way here when he references the Upaniṣad passages, where appearance has the form of intention/will (*saṃkalpa*). He goes on to say

[49] *atra jagatkāraṇaviśeṣapraśnasyottaraṃ viṣṇoḥ sakāṣād iti. sakāśāt kāśaḥ prakāśo jñānam. sa aikṣata lokānnu sṛjeyā iti tadaikṣata bahusyām' ityādy uktasaṃkalparūpaprakāśasahitād ity arthaḥ. atha vā sakāśāśabdaḥ svarūpavacanaḥ ācāryasya sakāśād ityadivat* (Sharma 1995: 6).

that the *saṃkalpa* of Viṣṇu is of the form of remembrance of the order of creation from previous epochs (*pūrvasargakramasmṛtirūpasaṃkalpa*). This is similar to Rāmānuja's description of world production, '...the Blessed One, the supreme Person remembers the previous configuration of the world, and having resolved 'Let me be many' he diversifies' into the plurality of creation (Lipner 1986: 8).

Three points to be noted in Viṣṇucitta's commentary on this purāṇic verse are that, first, the *jagatkāraṇavastu*, the thing that is the cause of the world is Viṣṇu. Second, the *jagatsambandhaprakāra*, the manner of connection or the mode of connection of Viṣṇu to the world, is a manifestation of the self–body relationship characterized as one between controller and the controlled. Third, the discussion of Viṣṇu's *saṃkalpa* and his remembrance of the past order of creation as he wills creation into being indicates immediacy and intimate involvement in world causation. Causality is not an accidental attribute, but is an aspect of the essential nature of Viṣṇu. As the self of creation that is his body, he does not undergo modification, but remains the fundamental cause, material and instrumental, as he impels the unmanifest into manifest existence.

b. Ātmaprakāśa on VP 1.1.31

Śrīdhara agrees with Viṣṇucitta that VP 1.1.31 is a summary answer to the questions posed by Maitreya earlier in Chapter One, but with an exception. He says:

> In brief, then, by way of answer to the questions (of Maitreya),
> the goal of the purāṇa is stated with the verse VP 1.1.31.[50]

Viṣṇucitta has noted that this verse is the answer to Maiterya's questions on world causality and he argues that knowing this is important for liberation (Ic). Śrīdhara does not admit that the questions posed by Maitreya are in regard to the world cause, specifically, but rather recasts VP 1.1.31 as the answer to the overall goal of the purāṇa, which for him is liberation (see Section I a). For the Advaitin, knowledge of creation and world causality is important only in the context of *pravṛtti* and in fact the first twenty-two chapters of the first book of the purāṇa Śrīdhara sees as concerning this preliminary path (Ic). Its function is to purify the mind only, but it does not directly bring about liberation as is the case for Viṣṇucitta (Ic). So, though he goes on to discuss Viṣṇu's causal nature, he undercuts its importance significantly. On *viṣṇoḥ sakāśād udbhūtam*, he notes:

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[50] *saṃkṣepatas tāvat praśnottaratayā purāṇārtham āha viṣṇor iti ślokena viṣṇor iti* (Upreti 2011: 6).

> That is to say, *sakāśāt* means appearance, visible appearance, seeing. From association with that, the world arises from Viṣṇu.[51]

He seems to be implying that by the fact that one sees the world, one begins to posit an origin for it and *from association with that*, that is seeing the world, Viṣṇu as its cause is understood. For Śrīdhara, once one is aware of existence in the mundane world, then questions as to its causality etc. become relevant and he finds support for this in scripture.

> This is established by *śruti*—'he thought (*aikṣata*) 'let me create the world" (Aitareya Upaniṣad 1.1) and 'he desired (*akāmyata*), 'let me become many" (Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.6). The power of reflection (*citśakti*) and power of desire (*icchāśakti*) are synonyms, where seeing (*īkṣaṇa*) has the nature of reflection. In this way the world arises. This is the answer to the question 'how the world was' (1.1.4), and there itself (in Viṣṇu) it remains at the time of dissolution. This is the answer to the question of the substratum (*ādhāra*) of dissolution and from the word 'and', it is said that even existence of the world is there itself. That alone is the agent of world maintenance and dissolution and of creation, but as an accidental characteristic (*upalakṣaṇa*).[52]

By means of Viṣṇu's power of desire or reflection, the world is brought into existence. The verbal root *īkṣ* 'to see' from which the word *aikṣata* is derived in the Upaniṣad passage is interpreted as reflection/thought which is the same as the power of desire. That is, through his *śakti*, Viṣṇu creates. While there may be some similarities to Viṣṇucitta, Śrīdhara essentially devalues the topic of divine causality and the importance of knowledge of it for liberation.

Padmapāda in his Pañcapādika (II.5) notes that an *upalakṣaṇa*, indicative or accidental characteristic, 'stands outside only of Brahman and yet denotes Brahman by indirect characterization and not by the description (of its nature)' (Venkataramiah 1948: 261, 263). As an illustration, Murti notes that '[a] crow perching on the house-top does serve as a mark to single out a particular house from among several others without forming a permanent fixture therein.

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[51] *sakāśāt kāśaḥ prakāśa īkṣaṇam iti yāvat tatsahitād viṣṇor jagad udbhūtam* (Upreti 2011:6).

[52] *sāikṣata lokānnu srjeya iti so 'kāmayata bahusyāṃ prajāyeya ityādi śrutisiddham. cicchakti icchāśaktiparyāyaṃ yad īkṣaṇaṃ locanātmakaṃ tena prakāreṇa jagad udbhūtam anena yathā babhuvety asya praśnasyottaram. tatraiva ca sthitaṃ pralayakāleti layādhārapraśnasyottaram. caśabdāj jagataḥ sthitir api tatraivety uktam. asya jagataḥ sthitisaṃyamayor asāv eva kartā janmano 'py upalakṣaṇam* (Upreti 2011: 6).

Likewise, the world may be 'indicative' of Brahman 'without being constitutive of it."[53] Following his Advaita predecessors, Śrīdhara envisions the deity as Brahman in quite a different sense than Viṣṇucitta. Beginning his comment on VP 1.1.31 as concerning the overall goal of liberation rather than as about Viṣṇu's causality, he follows this up with the fact that origin and cause of the world are important only from the context of *pravṛtti*. He concludes by defining causality as an accidental characteristic. Though both commentators speak of Viṣṇu's fundamental relationship to the world through his materiality and instrumentality, as one of identity, the nature of the connection (*saṃbandha*) between them is envisioned differently. For Viṣṇucitta causality is an essential nature of Viṣṇu and Visnu is the world through the self–body analogy. For Śrīdhara, causality is a topic that is relevant at the level of *pravṛtti* only and its knowledge does not directly bring about liberation. For him Viṣṇu is also the world, but causality is not an essential nature of Brahman and the world is an accidental attribute of it.

Conclusion

The three sections of this paper examine the ways in which Viṣṇu is invoked and introduced as Brahman and his relationship to creation. Viṣṇucitta's and Śrīdhara's interpretations on this purāṇa paint two different portraits of the deity. One of the reasons this is so is the ontological frameworks imposed by the commentators in their reading of the purāṇa. The main goal of Viṣṇucitta, writing from the Viśiṣṭādvaita perspective, is to identify the personal deity Viṣṇu as the Brahman of the Upaniṣads. That is, he sees Viṣṇu as the creator, the supreme deity, the sovereign ruler over his creation, but also the unchangeable, immutable absolute Brahman. To accommodate this, the strategy he employs is to define causality as an aspect of the essential nature of Brahman, *brahmasvarūpaviśeṣa*. Utilizing the paradigm of the self–body characterized as one of the controller and the controlled, Viṣṇucitta integrates the theistic vision of Viṣṇu with the language of Upaniṣads and Vedānta. Viṣṇu is Brahman, identical to the world that exists as his body.

For Śrīdhara, causality is an accidental characteristic (*upalakṣaṇa*) of Brahman and is unrelated to its essential nature. The strategy he utilizes to accommodate Viṣṇu as the non-dual Absolute and as the Supreme Deity in a theistic sense is by introducing the distinction of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* in the introduction to his commentary. *Pravṛtti* and its constituent ideology of ritual and wor-

[53] For more on this, see Murti 1983: 72-87.

ship can be useful indirectly for the aspirant when the goal is liberation, but not as an end in itself. In his interpretation of the sections of the purāṇa discussed in this paper on creation and Viṣṇu's relationship to it, he concurs with the theistic aspects of the text, but when possible interprets Viṣṇu as pointing to the nondual Absolute. The supreme deity Viṣṇu as Brahman is ultimately none other than one's own inner self. The understanding that Viṣṇu is the cause of creation and the specifics of his relationship to it, which comprise the path of *pravṛtti,* are ultimately to be transcended when one comes to realize that the world is simply an accidental attribute of Brahman.

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