

**THE PHILOSOPHY**  
**OF**  
**ŚRĪ RĀMĀNUJA**

Śrī Rāmānuja's philosophy is first and foremost a philosophical attempt at synthesis<sup>1</sup>. His God is the supreme symbol of synthesis. It is from his conception of God that the supreme other features of his wide and multitudinous thought emerge, proceed and scintillate. Without God his philosophy has no reality, no assumption of certitude.

God is the central figure, the Lord of all process<sup>2</sup>, of change of emergence and immergence, *Srsti* and *Laya*. He is the highest being, the one without a rival, without a second; in Him all things find their refuge, sustenance and continuity. He is omnipresent, omnipervasive, omniscient. He is the Īśvara, of infinite Being, Consciousness and Bliss (*Taitti. Āranyaka*, I.1). He is not a mere spectator of the world-process but the creator and the most auspicious beneficent ordainer. He is the beauty. He is the inner self of all, the *Antaryāmin*, the immortal ruler within the sacred places of the heart; he is the Supreme Transcendent beyond all process, the Law-giver of the cosmos, the avatara descending into Humanity to lift it above its plane of life. In quality and quantity he is inexhaustible. He is the bridge between all things, all planes and all life; he is the path of all perfecting,

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<sup>1</sup>"Tattu Samanvayāt", Vedānta Sūtras, I.i.4.

<sup>2</sup> "Janmādyasya yatah" I.i.2 cf. Brh. IV.iv.22; B.G.VII.6

the synthesis of all contradictions. To him all things, all life, all existence, cling; they form his body (śarīra) inseparable (aparthaksiddha) adjuncts (prakāras). Knowing Him one knows all, reaching him one does not return to mortality. He is the essence, *rasa*, of all life, the absolute that is concrete and universal and transcendent.

Such is the description of God, the omniscient inner ruler, the central sun of all life, of whom this world is a body, a perfect expression and a perfect instrument of self-expression existing for his pure delight of existence of *Līlā* or the eternal play of his inexhaustible grace<sup>1</sup>.

From this description of God proceeds the first and foremost principle of Rāmānuja's thought: the world and God form a unity. This Unity is an organic unity.

First and foremost then our consideration would be to discover what exactly this unity means. A mechanical unity is achieved by several things being put together. But the parts could be taken away without any apparent change in any of them. The machine does not annihilate nor even modify the parts which compose it. Analysis is easy, so also is synthesis. Not so in an organism. Synthesis helps and analysis kills the organism. As A.D. Ritchie says, "In any investigation it is a great simplification to be able to treat the system dealt with as atomic and not as organic, because the investigation of an organic system is intolerably difficult". Adds Prof. Needham, "It is not merely intolerably difficult, it is impossible." It is difficult and even impossible for materialistic thinkers who find the simplicity of the mechanical and atomic conception to their liking to understand the unique nature of an organism. Not that it is itself a difficult matter but that intellectual instruments cannot facilitate the intuition into the synthetic nature of life of which the organism is a supreme example.

In an organism there is inner coordination of its members. As Prof. A.N. Whitehead writes, "A concept of organism includes the concept of the interaction of organisms", secondly, "going togetherness or relatedness is the hall-mark of an organism". Thirdly there is constant fluctuation within an organism and its members, unlike the fixity prevalent in the machine. Further in the machine there is no growth, no appropriation nor enjoyment of the environment. An organism on the other hand, enjoys its environment, appropriates certain elements of it through its nutritional and other grasping instincts. It sees, touches, enjoys and

acts on the environment. The senses facilitate its knowing the outer world. The world exists as the end or goal of the organism, the environment in which it shall grow to its full stature, achieve its fullness and complete satisfaction of its varied demands. There is thus purposiveness in an organism. There is within it life that seeks self-exceeding which is the realization of the ends of Spirit that dominates, controls and sustains it. The soul meets the world through its organic functions. Even the diversification of functions into the five sense-organs only shows the increasing range of the soul's commerce with the environment.

It may be suggested that what the sense organs reveal are all unreal sensations, figments of the mind. Rāmānuja affirms whilst it is just possible under certain specified conditions of deformity of organism or its disease, of mental states or wrong associations, of bad light, etc, that the apprehension of a rope could be mistaken for a snake, nacre for silver, it is improper and illogical to condemn the whole range of phenomena. The world as such cannot be said to be unreal or illusory. The senses and our consciousness are not misleading agencies all the time. What we perceive is all true, we do see the snake and we do perceive the silverness, but only under certain peculiar conditions. We only discover later that there has been a misapprehension or misperception and that because *certain other results which ought to follow from such a perception since they form part of that experience* of a snake or silver are absent.

This is the *Sat-khyāti-vāda* of Rāmānuja. The sense organs and the mind and the world do not exist for the sake of deluding the individual. They exist, on the contrary, for the apprehension of the greater glory of the divine creative action, the *Līlāvibhūti*. There can be no meaning in the world if it be a wholesale illusion, for the very purposiveness of this world is thus being denied. It cannot be like Bergson's finality which is just the shooting out of its élan *Spirituel* into diverse and contradictory tendencies. If God is Saccidānanda then there is no meaning in denying to his creation these three attributes. There must be reality here, there must be at the back of all this jprocess a sustaining and guiding

intelligence, even a Super intelligence, and about this world or the cosmos a glory of self delight. As Śrī Aurobindo remarked, “If you think with the Māyāvādin, that the purpose of creation is to get out of it again like the famous exploit of a general who marched up a hill in order to march down again, you had better pass me by. I am a tantrik”. The *Taittirīya Upanisad* says, ‘God is Ānanda.<sup>1</sup>, Life his activity, world his creation, are all alandamāyā. To reduce the world and its processes into illusion is not only meaningless, it is vicious. The world is real: it exists to be known and enjoyed. Every soul has a body helping it to know and to enjoy s much of the world as it can. The limit is the enjoyment of the whole world, co-extensive with the ambit of intelligence. Our philosophic endeavour is to know reality full and complete. Our knowledge capacity is infinite, not so our power of enjoyment. It has circumscribed and confined the actual area of operation. We are each of us finite in our being, infinite in our knowing. Our organism selects as much of the environment as it can act upon at any given moment. Our power is commensurate with the powers of our organs. The perfection of our sense-organs consists in their being utilized for their unique purpose of sensing, and not for enjoying. Our organs of enjoyment are not to control our sensing nor determine in any manner their reception of stimuli. It is seen thus that when our sense-organs are purified, and our mind is controlled by the will to perceive the true and our organs of activity are determined in such a manner as to obey the purified will, we shall perceive the true and act the true always.

Our organs are limited and finite. We too are finite so far as our purposive actions to, however much we may know. The additional fact that the world exists likewise for all individuals shows that it does not exist solely for any particular individual. As for its existing for all, well, that is what is meant by its existing for God, the Universal Cosmic Omniscient Being. The world in so far as it exists, exists for God, the All, the Sarva, alone, and it is destined, sustained and enjoyed by Him alone. This is the definition of a body, and the world therefore exists as His Body (*śāira*). *Yasy cetanasya yaddravyam sarvātma svārthe niyantum*

*dhārayitum casakyam, ycchestaika svarūpam ca, tat tasya sariram iti sarira  
laksana mastheyam.*<sup>1</sup>

As for our souls being the body of the Lord, it only presumes our utter inseparability and dependence on the total Universe. Our lots are cast together; we are the foci through which God operates as the invisible power and law. As our conscience He animates our visions, anticipates our co-operative endeavours and sustains our sympathies. Our bodies obey the laws of nature and cannot set at naught those laws of dynamics. It follows, therefore, in a deeper and more powerful measure, that even our bodies are not ours. In so far as our knowledge of the outer laws of nature grows, so far do we commandeer them. Likewise if we know our bodies, can control their movements, sublimate our instincts or direct them properly, we find that we are masters of the outer nature also. In Yoga-sastra, it is well known that the laws of the cosmos and the inner microcosm are identical. Whatever occurs in the macrocosm or microcosm occurs in the microcosm or macrocosm. This is the fundamental belief of mysticism and occultism and it is of modern science. The final limit of utter

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<sup>1</sup>Śrī Bhasya, II, 1, 9

understanding is the Īśvara: equally the supreme and ideal achievement of control of the body is the Īśvara. God alone can behold the universe as the one supreme instrument of his delight, not a static unknowing thing but a living organism or function of his *Līlā*. Man in so far as he makes his will identical, his thoughts synthetic and feeling synchronize with that of Īśvara also becomes complete in intelligence and delight like Him. (*samabhavat*)<sup>1</sup>

So our bodies are only in a restricted sense ours. According to Rāmānuja only the Īśvara, the Supreme Being has a body, rest of nature is His body. This reveals the one fact that when we speak of a body we usually think of our own human organism or of the lower kinds of organism. But the general definition of Rāmānuja implies a wider and comprehensive view. It includes the most flexible

society and nature. From the consideration of the nature of our being it follows that our knowledge of the outer world should legitimately follow or proceed from our own inner self, the God who is seated at the center of every being. Also it means that a metaphysical approach to the knowledge must give place to a psychological one.

It is one of the central features of the doctrine of Pāñcarātra Philosophy to which Rāmānuja owes very much of his dynamic intuition into Reality, to insist upon a comprehensive description of the Deity. God is Para, transcendent Saccidamanda Purusottama; the *Vyūha*, the cosmic creator, sustainer and destroyer aspect, the cosmic conscient Being in a triple nature; the *Vibhava*, the excellent representative exponent of the Divine life, superconscient Being or the Avatara the descent of the Godhead into human evolution to redeem and destroy, the *Arcā* or the Idol, the worshippable form; and the most important of all the *Antaryāmin*, the inner ruler of all souls and things. There are two Upanisads or should I say three, that instruct the *Antarāmi* Yoga, the *Bṛhadaranyaka* and the *Isa* and the *Subala*. Not until we know within our hearts and in our souls, the true inspirer and enjoyer of our works, who is the life of our lives and the truth of our truths, is it possible to appreciate the outer glory. One touch of sympathy, even one brief moment of ecstatic unity with any other object or being is only possible through our inner self. Direct relationship is now available between souls. All are directly related to a common center and it is only through God, their *Antaryāmin* that powerful sustaining force of unity that they know greatness, that they perceive greatness at all. We do not become units or functions in the Universe except through our becoming intelligent or aware of our unique relationship to each other through the central principle of our unity or organism, viz. God.

The organic theory of Rāmānuja, then, on the one hand, insists upon the fact that the entire universe exists absolutely for the purpose of the Divine, as an expression of God's Ānanda, and relatively it exists for the fuller and deeper realization of the individual souls of the Divine Harmony through their growing

into divine consciousness. On the other hand, the organic theory of Ramanajua unlike modern organicism is supremely personal. It insists that every soul must sink into its central Being, must know the supreme resident or pervading its heart and being as its self of whom it is just a body, vehicle of manifestation of action, the self who links all souls into one supreme and tremendous Humanity of Bhagavatas. The universe thus becomes a vast array of organisms mounting up from the simplest of atomic wholes to the world organism, of whom God, the Absolute Being of Truth, Consciousness and Delight is the self.

The implications of the Philosophy of Organism are important. Synthesis is not a loose compound or mixture of diverse elements, but a well defined dynamic congeries interrelated and still more fundamentally s it were by pre-established harmony, dependent on the central life of the Total All, that is its first and foremost characteristic. It is not by a metaphor or by way of analogy that Rāmānuja affirmed the relationship between the Divine and the world and souls. His affirmation is a real affirmation of organic relation. It is not a symbol, *linga*, but it is the reality. God is our primal substance, inner self, the Lord of all process, the source and spring of all existence.

Nor should this view or God-World-Souls relation be deemed to be just anthropomorphic. Man, so long as he belongs to the genus Homo, cannot, try as he may, arrive at any other interpretation of nature and law can only proceed from his anthropomorphism; when man ceases to be man then shall his interpretation cease to be anthropomorphic. At best our knowledge can be objective and objectivity does not in any sense reject or refute personalism or organismal view.

When God is said to be Nirguna (without qualities) and something more than Saguna (with qualities), or rather when Brahman is said to be more than God, what exactly is the intention? We may place it as due, firstly, to the feeling of having rescued God from anthropomorphism and secured for him impersonality; secondly, we may think of the possession of attributes as limiting

existence. But does description never help understanding to reach impersonal knowledge. Thus infinity and inexpressibility are said to be not of the understanding but of direct experience. Whilst in a purely abstract consideration the most fundamental 'personal' experiences cannot be adequately expressed or defined by our limited vocabulary of terms, it cannot be said that they are not experienced as definite states of consciousness. The very personal nature of experience marks it out as inexpressible in words.

As to impersonality of Brahman this is a contradiction in terms. God is the sum of all perfections. He is the repository of all virtues and excellences and greatnesses. The Upanisadic use of the word *Nirguna* then must express the definite existence of *gunas* which transcend the *gunas* we know of. All negation is determination, so said Spinoza. It was also Spinoza who said that unknown to us, transcending what we know there are attributes that qualify Being. *Nirguna* then on the one hand signifies as Śrī Aurobindo Ghose puts it qualities transcendent, and on the other hand it repels qualities that we know of as pertaining to lower matter, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, of purity, activity and inertness of darkness.

Brahmans' very attributes of Sat-chit-ānanda proclaim the definiteness of the existence of qualities which are perfect and blissful or auspicious. An equation of Being with impersonal truth, with intelligence impersonal, and with impersonal delight is on the face of it an absurd equation. Impersonality is a characteristic of laws of nature, and in general of all laws and abstract conceptions. Impersonality cannot be a characteristic of dynamic life or Brahman. Knowledge is impersonal, impartial, is universally applicable and referable. Knowing is personal. Living Being knows Reality, creates reality, enjoys reality in terms of personal experience. It may be that the manner of its knowing creating or enjoying are quite alien to our conception. But it cannot be done otherwise than by personality.



True enough it is impossible to identify the personal with our private greeds and private pleasures. Personality cannot be identified with privateness, *ahamkara*. There is in personality a basic realization of unitedness with the total all, or universality. Togetherness with the life of the universe is a characteristic of true personality, and this it is that we discover when we find that personality and *ahamkra* are anti-podal.

Therefore when we define God is personality, and the greatest Person or Purusottams, we indicate the supreme realization of the Universal supracosmic Being who is at once in the individuals as their animating Lord. The theist finds in God the fullness of life, of grace that descending into his being and vital existence pulls him upward towards his highest destiny of omnipotence and omnipresence. Universality finds its individual realization and lives for it, just as much as the individual seeks universal realization. The paradox of individuality is its nisus towards universality or universal significance and the paradox of universality consists in its effort towards individual concreteness and embodiment. The concreteness of the universal consists in its being actually in the individual by *pervading* it and bathing it. God in Rāmānuja's philosophy achieves this in the souls as their *Antaryāmin* inner ruler and sustainer and enjoyer.

Thus we are presented in the figure God, a unique spectacle of a Universal Being at once dominating and destining the Universe seeking expression in and through his infinite souls and bodies. The goal of creation is harmonious society, the law of society is harmonious life in the Lord. By speaking about the world as united with and inseparable from God there is attempted not deification of it. Nor where the famous dicta "Tat tvam asi," "So'ham asmi are intransitive relations. God is you, He is I, but I am not He nor you God. God pervades you and me. The passages enunciate the truth that God is to be known through (dvara) the individual souls as their inner Lord whose incarnate bodies they forever are. In one such mystic experience Vamadeva found himself withdrawn into a firm and superconscious relationship with his inner Self. The

implication of such an experience in a psychological sense, the only sense in which it should be taken, is certainly as powerful as Śrī Śankara's statement of identity, but in a metaphysical sense this notion of relationship as one of identity utter and complete is curiously full of pitfalls and absurdities. Our self is God and we are his eternal modes, prakāras, amsās, spiritual indeed, inseparable self-luminous finite. We form the organism.

Integral synthesis then so far as the world and the souls are concerned is achieved and is capable of being achieved only terms of an organic conception and through God who is the Spirit of all Life and Intelligence. As for our activities in this world there is needed a clear and definite synthesis of works, and knowledge. Between divine action and human performance there is needed a synthesis.

It might appear quite strange and astonishing that I should quote Karl Marx, the materialist and communist prophet in this context. Karl Marx's greatest contribution to modern thought was that he rescued reality from the airy nothings of intellectual idealists. He was definite as to his views concerning philosophy. Philosophy must be abolished, he said. But how could this be done? If we oppose one philosophy by another counter-philosophy, we but move in an abstract controversial atmosphere where ideas flit across, never coming into grips with either each other or fact. Their reality accordingly exists only when they find actual embodiment in existence. A theory needs practice, an idea an embodiment, and a thesis an experiment. So long as this implicit function of experimentation or embodiment or practice does not take place we only move on the plane of ideological contradiction, uncertain of truth. Thus to truly annihilate philosophy—and there seems to be no reason why bickering and contradicting philosophy should lead to abstract ineffectual and ineffectual existence—the practice of it alone can end it. Logic then would discover truth.

We have the Advaita of Sankar, Bhedabheda of Bhaskara, Yādava Prakāśa and Nimbarka, Viśtādvaita of Rāmānuja and Nilakantha, Dvaita of

Madhva and Baladeva, etc. On the platform of ideology between these systems there happens no agreement. There is just mutual negation. Ideas fight ideas, negation follows negation raising the dust of doubt. Compromise is impossible since every idea has congealed into a solid impenetrable atom. Syncretism ends in a loose misjoinder. The only agreement is an armistice, a resolution to suspend the battle of wits.

All the ācāryas, however, agree that there should be loyal practice of philosophy. The results are claimed to be capable of facilitating harmony. If we speak of Religion as the practice of philosophy, as that which annihilates philosophy just because it brings into being a harmonious unity or synthesis we would be profoundly right. Embodied philosophy is Religion.

For this purpose or practice or 'annihilation', as Marx said, a perfect ideology is needed. Philosophical certitude is needed if any definitive action is to take place. In the case of any action there is needed a clear visualization of a purpose, and a definition of means and the end. Without it we are bound to exert in vain. The philosopher, if he wishes to be practical, must not only understand the world and its forces, he must also become its firm exponent, Knowledge of the world leads to actions that help our adjustment to it or to actions that lift the world to a better harmony than it presents. Our applied science is the utilization of general knowledge to actual conditions. To know the true is to act the true. Our aim then is to know, since knowledge would relieve our suffering by abolishing our ignorance.

All our ācāryas are agreed that knowledge releases us from bondage. But what is knowledge? To Rāmānuja essential knowledge consists in our apprehension of the vast organic nature of reality whose central self is God, and whose limbs, *angas* are ourselves. To act in such a consciousness, under the inspiration of this knowledge, to live it under all conditions and circumstances, is the real ritual, the creative action Karmayoga of a soul. This is its inalienable *Dharma*. Any one touched with this vast *vibhūti*, this titanic organic system

iluminated, sustained, and directed and enjoyed by the supreme Godhead, having once seen cannot but proceed to act upon it. Knowledge implies action. It is an integral function of knowledge says Rāmānuja to precipitate action. Jñāna and Karma are entwined in one symbol of the ritual of the Viśtādvaita worship. An integral synthesis is affirmed by Rāmānuja between Jñāna and Karma. This is the famous Jñāna-karma-Samuccaya-vāda. This is the highest mortality.

Whilst then a theoretical conception of the Universe-God-Souls as an organism leads to the activity of the soul in a cooperative manner, as an instrument in the Divine and cannot but do so, Devotion of Bhakti, it should be noted, is neither an integral ingredient of knowledge, Jñāna that is the impersonal theory of Being, nor of karma the individual action arising from that theory of Being. Bhakti that is faith. Aspiration and fidelity, is of the individual realization of the fundamental relationship subsisting between the individual and the God, the self of all. It is in the realization of utter union, or at least the call to union with this self of all life and being, the true religious consciousness or devotion comes into being. Bhakti then is more fundamental quality that assists knowledge and Karma without which they lose their true bearings and sink into either agnosticism or human mortality. It throws its unique halo of synthesis of true personality and superior action over them. Without devotion there is no fulfillment, no urge towards universal living. It is devotion that draws out from God its complement of grace, the soul-sustaining beneficent force of life. Without Devotion to God, grace fails to reciprocate; not that grace is non-existent but it is too thin a thread that cannot sustain too great a strain. Daya is the mother, the Śrī, the great act (*vibhūti*). Aspiration, personal and intense, based on knowledge and practice draws from the universe self of all its complement of the all supporting power of God, the total all, Grace that is the mother.

The aim of life is to realize freedom or *mukti*. But what is liberation? Is it the realization of the integral bondship with God and his universe? Is it the freedom from all bonds divine and physical? Rāmānuja's view on this point is

luminous. Absolute isolated existence is impossible. Man or the soul is an adjunct, eternal and inseparable, of God. There can never happen any utter disjunction between the total all or God and man, and consequently there is possible no liberation in the abstract sense of that term. The only liberation that can happen to man is the liberation from his ignorance, ignorance that blinds him to the fact of his utter subordination to the Divine Being, an ignorance that leads to egoistic self-assertion, exploitation and competition. This is the liberation that is counselled, and this is the only liberation that is possible. Our freedom is our relationship with the total all, consciously recognized and acted upon, and not to any particular segment of nature or to any particular individual; thus we participate in the life all, grow to higher stands of consciousness till our power, consciousness and delight synchronize with the Lord's. Consciousness of the total all and absolute surrender (*śaranāgati* or *praptti*) to it is the sense of liberation for it releases us from the ego-centric predicament and we are at home with Universal Supra-consciousness of Saccidānanda.

It is held by certain thinkers that since our body, our conceptions of 'yours' and 'mine' are the causes of our non-recognition of our fundamental identity with the divine, the liberation from the psycho-physical body is true freedom. This implies that most of our psycho-physical body is brought into being by egoistic endeavours as a result of self-seeking pleasures and private activities, viz. Karma. The organism which is our body thus is said to be not an instrument of the true purpose of our existence which is the enjoyment of identity or unity in multiplicity. Therefore it is necessary to cast off this body, this misleading instrument of our great purpose, the delight in God who is the concrete figure and symbol of our transcendent society, and wear another of a transcendent pure, *sudha sattva*, substance, capable of responding to the light and life of God. There is no denying that here some kind of body is necessary for action, divine or human. The only question is what kind?

The body that we now possess, being more or less strictly a result of our grasping tendencies, must perish, and a body truly fulfilling our definition of a body, namely, absolutely and solely to pure existing for the purpose of the enjoyment of a sentient soul, supported and sustained by it alone is needed. This is the teaching of the Videhamukti. It is possible, however, very much to alter even our karmic body, make it our own through practice or yama, niyama, pranayama, dharana, dhyana and self-surrender to the Īśvara. This means that the body is made our own in the measure the *Antaryāmin*, the supreme lord and ruler within each of us, is made our true self, is made to animate every thought, word and deed. The three states of consciousness, the physical jagrat, the emotio-ideational svapna, and the absolutely passive and imperturbable susupti are interated into one soul and consciously offered to the supreme Lord within. Thus there is born the integral and synthetic consciousness, willing, initiating and creating and executing and enjoying without any let or hindrance things fully and from a self-recollected poise or being. The body then becomes a perfect vehicle of God's own purposes. This is the suggestion and the truth of the integral sound OM suggestive at once of integral oneness in oneself of the three essences of God, souls and nature. Javanmukti that is freedom within this physical karmic body is possible only in a limited or relative degree. There may be the sense and dealing of freedom even here, of liberation there would be actual realization, but as to absolute freedom and liberation it must accrue to us in a body of truth, not of reaction tendencies.

Viśtādvaita never, however, aimed at abstract freedom or even freedom in another kind of body. Bhagavatas, those who knew that this world is a glorious field of God's delight, as a profound universe of joy-manifestation in spite of its all too full spectacle of contradiction and opposition, recalcitrance and change, grief and great misery, have striven to perceive and work for the utter fulfillment of God in man, and for the realization of the world of happiness, Their worship has striven to bring eternal meaning into impermanent existences and transient events. Their creation of ritual has revealed the utter transcendent beneficence of

God in the mutable misery of man. It has opened out a new vista in Yoga itself by pointing out the possible next development in evolution of man himself. They have denied to themselves the abstract contemplation of the idea essences in a platonic heaven, Vaikunta, in order to be real organs, amass, vibhūti of God, serving the glorious unfordment of Lila of powerful grace. There is glory in this service, karmayoga, of the Divine; in this supreme consciousness, there is fulfillment of splendid relationship and synthesis in this striving for God in man and God in all, God in permanence and God in the transient. A flight from this world is literally a disobedience of God's own transcendent will. So have illumined prophets lived their full allotted span of human life, even as Rāmānuja and Desika, and some have even protracted their terms of life like the rsis of yore, for in the service of the Lord of all, there is perfection, joy, security and fullness of Life.