

The Nature of Vaikuṅṭha

Within the Puranic literature of India there are many descriptions of a heavenly realm called Vaikuntha. The Shaivites have similar descriptions of their heavenly realm known as Kailasha or Shiva-loka, likewise the other sects all have their personal and charming descriptions of heavenly realms.

In addition to these sectarian heavens there are also many descriptions of the heavens (*svarga*) of the other gods such as Indra, Brahma, etc.

Many Vaishnavas take these as literal descriptions of the heavenly paradise of Vishnu to which the virtuous go after death to sport forever in the company of other Vaishnavas in the presence of Lord Vishnu in the form of Vaikuntha-natha. Let us now investigate the concept of Vaikuntha.

The exegetical format of Mīmāṃsa methodology is called an **Adhikaraṇa** which comprises of a fivefold process.

1. **viṣaya vākya** — the Scriptural sentence under discussion
2. **samśaya** — the doubt as to the correct and relevant meaning of the sentence.
3. **pūrva-pakṣa** — the opposition's position.
4. **uttara-pakṣa** — the refutation of the former position and presentation of the reasoned interpretation
5. **nirṇaya** — arguments for the conclusion reached

1. The Scriptural statement under discussion

- What is the nature of Vaikuntha?

2. The Doubts

- Is Vaikuntha a place or a state?
- Is Vaikuntha a planet or world within the material universe or is it outside of the known universe.
- What are we to make of these Disney-land descriptions of heaven?
- To what extent should we take these descriptions as being literal?
- How are they different to the heavens of other religions?
- Are they not just simply manifestations of Spiritual materialism?
- What is the use and value of these descriptions?

3. The Opposition's position.

- The descriptions of Vaikuntha given in the Puranas are true to life, real and exact.
- If we surrender to the Lord or dedicate ourselves in love and devotion to his worship then we will be given access to this divine realm as a reward for our piety.
- When we reach this realm of peace and happiness we will engage in eternal service pleasing to the Lord.

- We will be engaged in singing the glories of the Lord, making garlands, tending the gardens, maintaining the temples and pavilions etc.

Description of Vaikuntha (Srimad Bhagavatam 3:15)

Brahma said: 12. Your elder brothers, my mind-born sons Sanaka and the others who had abandoned interest in worldly life from the start, could travel all over the universe through the sky. 13. Once they went to Vaikuntha, the realm of Mahavishnu, which is an object of adoration for all. 14. All the residents of that realm, resembling Mahavishnu Himself in appearance, had attained residence there as the result of the observance of Bhagavata Dharma (code of devotional discipline) without any self-centred motives. 15. The Supreme Being, possessed of all powers and auspicious attributes — the embodiment of Dharma, and the subject of revelation for the Vedas — abides there in a body of pure Sattva without any taint of Rajas, for blessing of His devotees.

16. They went there, where the woodland of *Nisreyasa* (liberation) spreads out full of wish-fulfilling trees ever in blossom, as if they were the state of Moksha manifested. 17. There, devotees travel about in aerial vehicles with their womenfolk, fanned by breezes bearing the stimulating fragrance of flowers blooming on the surface of the lakes. Though the environment is sufficient to stimulate the passions in the heart, these devotees are oblivious of all that, in their absorption in singing devotional hymns about their Lord. 18. Thus, when the hovering bee makes its loud and sonorous sound, as if it were singing the glory of God, the chirping of the numerous birds — the pigeon, the cuckoo, the crane, the Chakravaka, the Chataka, the swan, the parrot, the peacock and the partridge — stops for a while, as if they were all attending to the bee's devotional hymn. 19. There the numerous varieties of sweet-scented flowers subordinate themselves to the sanctity of the Tulasi leaves, though the latter be of unrefined fragrance, seeing that they found favour with the Lord who has given a wreath made of them the most important place in His decoration.

20. There the place was covered with a vast number of golden pavilions studded with precious gems of various kinds — residences which could be obtained through nothing but devotion to the feet of Sri Hari. The devotee-residents with their mind immersed in Krishna were insensitive to the exquisite charms of the large number of beautiful women present there. 21. There, reflected on its crystal walls lined with gold, could be seen the unique figure of Sri Devi, as if she were sweeping the floor with the play-lotus held in her extended arms, while she moves about producing the murmuring sound of the anklets on her feet. And this is Sri for whose grace all gods and men labour! 22. On the banks of the coral-bedded lakes with sparkling and cool water, Sri Devi, while worshipping the Lord's image with Tulasi leaves, finds in these waters the reflection of her own face with high nose and curly locks (*Alaka*), and realises that it is the kiss of the Lord that has imparted all this beauty to her face.

23. Those who avoid hearing about the activities and excellences of the Lord that destroy sin and purify the mind, but instead are interested only in other matters of a vulgar and polluting nature, destructive of one's mind's higher susceptibilities — such persons get no access to that region. Alas! These evil tendencies they have acquired drive them helplessly to regions of darkness. 24. They, indeed, are the casualties of the blinding power of the Lord's *Maya*, who fail to cultivate devotion to the Lord even after having obtained this human birth, wherein Dharma and Jnana can be achieved. Even I (Brahma) and other divinities long to get this opportunity of a human birth. 25. To this exquisite place go the devotees of the Supreme

Being, the pure and immortal ones, who have overcome the sway of Yama, the god of death, and attained to a state higher than mine. Their eyes stream with tears and their bodies are covered with horripilations owing to the overpowering emotions that well up in them, as they converse among themselves about the deeds and excellences of the Lord.

4. Refutation of the Disney Land view of Vaikuntha.

The term **Vaikuntha** is first met with in the Rig Veda Mandala 10 in which there are four suktas addressed to Indra Vaikuntha, but these hymns describe only the glories of Indra.

“Vaikuntha” simply means “unhindered”, “unobstructed”. Kuṅṭha meaning covering, obstruction, ignorance, sloth etc. Absence of any of these is termed *vaikunṭha*. So therefore Vaikuntha is a state of being in which one is free from any form of limitations or conditioning.

Vaikunṭha is also frequently referred to as *parama padam* — the Supreme State. Thus Vaikuntha and parama padam are synonyms for the ultimate goal.

The Hermeneutic.

There are a number of principles which we need to take into account when investigating the nature of Vaikunṭha.

1. Primary versus secondary scriptural sources.
2. The value of the scriptural description.

According to the rules of exegesis (*mīmāṃsā*) the primary source of Valid Knowledge (*prama*) is the Veda. *Prama* or Valid Knowledge is defined as that which reveals the Truth of a matter and is practicable — i.e leads to serviceable outcomes.

Whenever there is a discrepancy between statements of Veda and other texts such as Smṛiti and Purana then it is the Veda alone which stands vindicated. Purana only has authority insofar as it supports the teaching of the Veda, it has no independent authority.

Point #1.

According to the Veda, **Brahman** and **Paramam Gatim** are inconceivable, by the conditioned human mind and ineffable through speech. It is utterly impossible for any conditioned being — deva or human to conceptualise or to express that which is incomprehensible. The human mind cognises through contrasting the pairs of opposites, hot-cold, tall-short, good-evil etc. Anything that is free of these pairs of opposites cannot be conceived of. Likewise — we can only describe by speech that which we can grasp with our senses or think of. If something is beyond the senses then by definition it cannot be described.

Pramāna 1. — The nature of Brahman

yato vāco nivartante / aprāpya manasā saha / ānandaṃ brahmaṇo vidvān /

(Taittiriya Upaniṣad Brahmandavalli Anuvāka 4)

Whence speech recoils, along with mind, incapable of comprehending or expressing, but experiencing the bliss of Brahman.

In other words Brahman can be experienced in the depths of one's being as pure and unalloyed bliss but it cannot be grasped by the mind let alone expressed in words.

niṣkalo nirañjano nirvikalpo nirākhyātaḥ śuddho deva eko nārāyaṇaḥ || (Narayana Upanishad)
Narayana is the One Deity, immaculate, stainless, inconceivable, indescribable, pure and divine.

Pramāna 2. — The nature of Paramam Gatim

*yadā pañcāvatiṣṭhante jñānāni manasā saha |
buddhiś ca na viceṣṭate tām āhuḥ paramām gatim || 10 ||*

When the five cognitive senses together with the mind cease (from their normal activities) and the intellect itself does not stir, that, they say, is the Highest State. (*paramam gatim*) (Katha Up 4:3:10.)

This is supported and confirmed by the Puranas:—

*yadā sarve vimucyante kāmā yasya hrdisthitāḥ |
tadāmṛtatvam āpnoti jīvanneva na saṁśayaḥ ||*

When all the desires within the heart are annulled one becomes liberated, undoubtedly, even while living. (Garuda Purana 1:236:12)

*viśuddham bodhanam nityam ajam akṣayam avyayam |
avyaktam avikāram yat tad viṣṇoḥ paramam padam ||
na sthūlam na ca sūkṣmam yanna viśeṣaṇa agocaram |
tat padam paramam viṣṇoḥ praṇamāmaḥ sadāmalam ||*

That which is the Supreme State (Paramam Padam) of Vishnu is pure, conscious, eternal, unborn, undecayable, inexhaustible, unmanifest, immutable, It is neither gross nor subtle, nor capable of being defined, to that ever immaculate Supreme State of Vishnu I bow. (V.P 1:9:50 – 51)

*Pradhāna-puruṣāvyakta-kālānām paramam hi yat |
paśyanti sūrayaḥ śuddham tad viṣṇoḥ paramam padam ||*

What is beyond matter, spirit, manifestation, and time; that pure [state] which sages behold that is the supreme abode of Vishnu. (Vishnu Purana 1.2.16)

5. Arguments for the conclusion

One may also object saying that our teacher Ramanuja himself has described the Lord's form and has composed a work describing Vaikuntha — he was a fully enlightened being and therefore infallible in his conclusion.

In Ramanuja's introduction to the Gita he says "Nārāyaṇa has a divine form, which is both pleasing and appropriate. His form is **inconceivable, indescribable**, divine, eternal and immaculate."

Also in the Vaikuntha Gadyam he says:—

Caturdaśa bhuvanātmakam aṇḍam daśa guṇitottaram ca āvaraṇa saptakam samastam kārya kārāṇajātam atītya vartmane parama vyoma śabdābhidheya brahmādināṃ vanmanasā'gocare śrīmati vaikunṭhe divya loke, sanakavidhi śivādibhirapi acintya

The universe consists of fourteen realms; beyond these, there are seven envelopes which are ten times the size of these Universes; Beyond all these realms based upon Cause and Effect; there exists that which is called “transcendental space” (*parama vyoman*) which **cannot be comprehended nor expressed** by Brahma and others - That is Sri Vaikuntam, the Divine Realm **incomprehensible** by the four Kumaras Sanaka as well as Lord Siva.

In both these introduction he declares that what he is about to describe cannot in fact be conceived of or described, but still he continues to do so. Why? The answer is that Ramanuja was a *jñani* (wise person) but also primarily a *bhakta* (devotee) and being fully aware of the limitations of the human mind was also overcome with love and devotion to the Lord. Out of his outpouring of love only he has composed these works. But they are like describing round objects with square words – they are only an approximation and not a true description! They are the map but not the terrain. The map can give some idea to those who are seeking to reach the destination but they can never be the actual terrain that has to be crossed.

Attempting to describe Vaikuntha is like the *kūpa-meṇḍak nyāya* — the frog in the well axiom, a frog escaped from the well and travelled to the sea, upon it's return it tried to describe the sea to the other frogs. How big is it? They asked? Is it as big as this well? No, bigger the frog replied. As big as two wells? No even bigger. The frog could not possibly conceive of the ocean in it's totality, the only comparison it had was it's own limited experience of the well and the creatures in it.

The descriptions of Vaikuntha in the Puranas are poetic and beautiful but are not REAL. The minds of simple people require content, they require pegs upon which to hang their ideas, so the Puranas give us some positive content for our minds to play with, but all the descriptions are just figures of speech. Vaikuntha is not a heaven like the heavens of others gods or religions, Vaikuntha is a state of absorption into and a merging with the Divine. Vaikuntha is non-different from Narayana Himself. It is a state which is beyond, time, space and causation.

nārāyaṇa sāyujyam avāpnoti — he obtains union with Narayana
(Narayana Upanishad)