

The Androgynous Form of Viṣṇu and the Yet Unpublished *Vāsudevakalpa*¹

DIWAKAR ACHARYA

Abstract: Although the androgynous form of Viṣṇu is little known, some stone and metal sculptures as well as painted scrolls of the deity have been discovered in Nepal, Kashmir, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. This paper discusses literary and epigraphical references to this deity starting from the ninth century CE. It then presents additional materials from Nepal which suggest that this deity has been continuously worshipped in Nepal from at least the eleventh century down to modern times. It also gathers information to show that this composite form of Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu is still worshipped in Bengal, Odisha, and Rajasthan. Even more importantly, it reports on a Tantric text surviving in a palm-leaf manuscript dated to Nepal Saṃvat 372 (equivalent 1252 CE) that focusses exclusively on the eight-armed androgynous form of Viṣṇu, and narrates some selected themes from this text.

Keywords: Hinduism, Nepal, Indian art-history, androgynous Viṣṇu, Vaiṣṇavism

Diwakar ACHARYA, University of Oxford:  0000-0002-5482-7754

1. Androgynous Form of Viṣṇu

Ardhanārīśvara, the androgynous form of Śiva, is better known and widely depicted but only a few people are aware of its Vaiṣṇava equivalent, an androgynous form of Viṣṇu. When Pratapaditya Pal reported in 1963 the

¹ I would like to thank Prof. Godabarish Mishra and other organisers of the Rāmānuja Millenium Conference 2017, held in Madras University, Chennai, where I learnt much about Rāmānuja and Srivaiṣṇavism. Rāmānuja championed the view of the non-duality of the qualified whole, asserting the unity of multiple realities and thus acknowledging the reality of individual entities of ontological, epistemological, and moral significance. He accepted the authority of the Pañcarātra Āgamas and defended the theology they taught. He lived in the world of Pañcarātras where his philosophy was alive in the form of the unity of Śrī/Lakṣmī and Vāsudeva/Nārāyaṇa, where the entire world existed as Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa who pervaded all *cid* and *acid*, sentient and insentient, entities. The text I am describing in this paper depicts Nārāyaṇa/Vāsudeva such a way that this Vaiṣṇava ideology is vividly visualised.

androgynous form of Lakṣmī and Vāsudeva, it was thought that depiction and veneration of such form of Viṣṇu was limited to Nepal.² He had found a Nepalese bronze kept in a Museum in Basel and a painted scroll bearing a 13th-century dedicatory inscription kept in a cultural centre in Calcutta. In the following years, more images of the same kind were reported from not only Nepal but also other parts of the Indian subcontinent: Kashmir, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh.³ Scholars also traced this androgynous form of Viṣṇu in Tantric compendiums like the 12th-century⁴ *Śāradātilaka* and the 17th-century *Bṛhat-tantrasāra*, and also in the *Śilparatna*, a 16th-century Keralan work of iconology and architecture. Furthermore, D. C. Sircar's analysis⁵ of the Gaya Sitala Temple inscription of Yakṣapāla (c. 1075–85) provided evidence for the presence of the androgynous form of Viṣṇu in North India in the 11th century.⁶

2. Antiquity and Popularity

The cult of such a composite form of Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu, in fact, can be traced back more than two centuries before the time of Yakṣapāla, in the *Netratantra*, which should be dated at the latest in the first-half of the ninth century CE.⁷ The first-half of the 13th section of this text recommends that a *sādhaka* initiated in the system of Amṛteśa, the Lord of Immortality, may see him in different representations of Viṣṇu, and mentioned among them is 'the form of Viṣṇu

² It is evident from his 1970 book, *Vaiṣṇava Iconology in Nepal*, that Pal did not continue thinking in this line for very long but soon changed his mind after locating and publishing an 11th-century Kashmiri bronze image of the deity (see PAL 1973).

³ For a summary of early research on this topic and discussion of the androgynous images of Viṣṇu from Kashmir, see MALLA 1996: 45–47.

⁴ On the date of the *Śāradātilaka*, see SANDERSON 2007: 230–233; 2009: 252.

⁵ SIRCAR 1970: 92, 1983: 102.

⁶ This inscription makes only a mention of the deity as *Kamalā-rdhāṅgīna-nārāyaṇa* when it enumerates the deities installed by Yakṣapāla, without any further description or visualisation. KIELHORN 1887: 66, who published this inscription for the first time, had completely missed the point. SIRCAR 1970 got it right, though initially he was not aware of any sculpture of this composite form of Nārāyaṇa and so sounded uncertain. As he wrote (SIRCAR 1970: 92), 'The passage *Kamal-Ārdhāṅgīna Nārāyaṇa*, has been taken in Kielhorn's translation as two deities, viz. Kamalā and Ardhāṅgīna, Nārāyaṇa being omitted apparently through oversight. It is difficult to say whether the poet intended the expression *Kamal-ārdhāṅgīna* to be an adjective of Nārāyaṇa in the sense of "one half of whose body is Kamalā". Although such a conception is possible on the analogy of the Ardhanārīśvara form of Śiva in which the right half represents Śiva and the left half Pārvatī, a similar combined form of Nārāyaṇa and Kamalā is not known from sculptures.' However, he is sure about the androgynous nature of the deity in his work published in 1971 and labels the form as Ardhanārī Nārāyaṇa (SIRCAR 1971: 221–228). See also SIRCAR 1983.

⁷ SANDERSON 2004: 242–243.

that incorporates Lakṣmī as the half of his self' (*ardhalakṣmīyuta*).⁸ As the text does not provide visualisation of many of these forms, we may assume that all these forms were well-known to people at that time.

The androgynous form of Viṣṇu is not confined to the North of the Indian subcontinent, either. Inclusion of a visualisation of the deity in the *Śilparatna* (23.23 and 25.75) proves the presence of the deity in the 16th-century Kerala.⁹ In addition, I have found the common eight-armed form of the deity mentioned and an otherwise unknown four-armed form described (see below, Visualisation) in the *Pādmasaṃhitā*, a pre-13th century text compiled most probably in South India.¹⁰ This means that more than one representation of the androgynous form of Viṣṇu was in circulation and that they were present in many cultural centres of India for many centuries.

It appears that the deity gradually disappeared from many areas, but in some specific areas the deity is still worshipped. For example, the *Bronzes of India* website states that at the famous Puri Jagannath temple, Odisha, the androgynous image of Viṣṇu is worshipped as the temple is closed and the deity is put to bed. The website claims that the information comes from a Pandit Siddharth associated with the temple and publishes a photo of the bronze image, as claimed, that worshipped there.¹¹ The same website publishes another bronze image worshipped at the Neelmahadev temple, Odisha, and, citing the same Pandit, states that it represents *parabrahman*.¹² In Nepal the deity is still worshipped in both private and public shrines, and we have evidence that this has been happening since the 11/12th century at the latest. SCHROEDER 2019: 706–717 has collected and described 22 stone sculptures of the deity spanning from the 11/12th century to the 17th century.¹³ Some excellent Nepalese metal specimens are kept in a number of museums and some of them have been published, for example, in PAL 1963 and GAIL 2011. Painted scrolls (*paṭas*), which are locally called *paubhās*, too, are available from the 13th century onwards.

As DEO 1968 and GAIL 1984, 2011 have reported, a temple located in Svatha Tol of Patan, Nepal, has twelve variations of the androgynous form of Viṣṇu depicted on the wooden struts of its lower floor, although the temple

⁸ Cf. *Netratanttra* 13.14.

⁹ For the date and provenance of the text, see the editors' preface to the both volumes of the *Śilparatna*.

¹⁰ For the date of this text, see SCHWARZ LINDER 2014: 30–31.

¹¹ <https://bronzesofindia.com/vasudeva-kamalaja-orissa/>. Retrieved on 21 November 2021.

¹² <https://bronzesofindia.com/vaikunta-kamalaja/>. Retrieved on 21 November 2021.

¹³ Dallas Museum has recently returned one of the most beautiful and one of the oldest images of this deity which was stolen from a temple in Patko Tol, Patan (see Figure 1).

enshrines a common four-armed form of Viṣṇu in a standing position. These twelve variations produced by combining the twelve *vyūhāntara* forms of Viṣṇu (Keśava and others) and their consorts are barely known from other sources,¹⁴ but the first of these variations, Lakṣmīkeśava, is visualised and praised in a dedicatory inscription of a mutilated image from Bhaktapur, Nepal.¹⁵

At this point, I would like to present more information from some datable manuscript materials related to the deity and his cult from the 13th to the 20th centuries. First of all, I have located in Kaiser Library, Kathmandu, a palm-leaf manuscript of the *Vāsudevakalpa*¹⁶ dated in Nepal Saṃvat 372 (equivalent 1252 CE), together with an incomplete manuscript of a ritual manual (*paddhati*) based on this text and written in the same hand.¹⁷ The text is exclusively concerned with the cult of the androgynous form of Viṣṇu, and the deity is named here most of the time as Lakṣmīvāsudeva, and alternatively as Lakṣmīvāsa,¹⁸

¹⁴ GAIL 2011: 122 and BHATTACHARYYA 1980: 30 give the names of male and female deities in pairs, as found incised under the images, but the names of these combined forms following the rule of Sanskrit grammar (shorter first, feminine first) should be as follows: Lakṣmīkeśava, Sarasvatīnārāyaṇa, Dāntimādhava, Kāntigovinda, Dāntiviṣṇu, Vidhṛtimadhusūdana, Añcchātrivikrama, Atipṛtīvāmana (Atipāñvāmana, according to Bhattacharyya), Dhṛtīśrīdhara, Mohitāhrṣikeśa (Mohinīhrṣikeśa, according to Bhattacharyya), Mahimādāmodara (Matimādāmodara, according to Bhattacharyya), and Dharmadāpadmanābha.

¹⁵ PAL 1970: 139. Pal rightly identifies this deity as a composite form of Viṣṇu, but unaware of the *vyūhāntara* forms, he describes the deity as a slightly different form of ‘Vāsudeva-Kamalajā’.

¹⁶ As I discussed in an earlier publication (ACHARYA 2015: xiv–xv), the *Vāsudevakalpa* is one of the early Vaiṣṇava texts preserved in Nepal, all of which belong to the early ninth century at the latest.

¹⁷ There is one more item in the same bundle that is not so closely related with our text. It consists of eight folios of a manuscript of the *Jayākhyā Saṃhitā*, numbered three to ten. All these three items are bundled together and treated as one manuscript in the library record.

¹⁸ The *Pādmasaṃhitā* passage cited under ‘Visualisation’ below calls the deity Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa. This text uses the same name also to describe the pair of the Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa on one throne ideally at the scene of their marriage (*vivāhastha*) – the two seated together or Lakṣmī on the lap of Nārāyaṇa. The *Vāsudevakalpa* avoids the term Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa. In fact, the name Lakṣmīvāsudeva itself does not suggest the androgynous or otherwise nature of the deity named; the same applies to the other name Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa. Thus, it is arbitrary to reserve the name Lakṣmīvāsudeva for the androgynous form and Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa for the pair on one throne. From this point of view, Lakṣmīvāsa, the other name included in the Gāyatrī mantra, sounds better, because as a *bahuvrīhi* it can be interpreted as the form of Viṣṇu that serves as the abode of Lakṣmī. But we should not forget that according to Vaiṣṇava theology Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa always carries Śrī/Lakṣmī in his heart and therefore in any form he can be called Śrīnivāsa or Lakṣmīvāsa.

Let me incidentally mention that in Pañcarātra Vaiṣṇavism and some Krishnite traditions Vāsudeva is the Supreme divine figure distinguished from Nārāyaṇa or Viṣṇu, and the opposite is true in some other traditions. In our text, however, Vāsudeva and Nārāyaṇa are interchangeable. For a discussion on the distinction or identity of Vāsudeva and Nārāyaṇa in the Pañcarātras, see SCHWARZ LINDER 2014: 88–89.

only in the Gāyatrī mantra of the deity not to go beyond the 24 syllables limit of the metre (*Vāsudevakalpa*, verses 67cd–69; *Paddhati*, verse 124f).¹⁹

Next, all the mantras of this cult are found copied, in a Nepalese palm-leaf manuscript dated in Nepal Saṃvat 515 (1395 CE), between the text of the *Jayākhyā Saṃhitā* and the appended additional material²⁰, which has been incorporated into the *Jayākhyā Saṃhitā* in the Baroda edition of the text. Although the *Jayākhyā Saṃhitā* is a Vaiṣṇava text, it has nothing to do with any type of androgynous form of Vāsudeva; instead, the deity of this text is the four-faced Vaikuṅṭha.

I have also found a 15th-century record included in a manuscript of a text on the significance of the *ekādaśī* and other *vratas* which first invokes the androgynous Lakṣmīkeśava²¹ and then states that King Yaśamalla's priest Yaśadeva and his two brothers, Rājadeva and Śubhadeva, built a wonderful statue (*vicitrāpratimā*) of Viṣṇu and consecrated it in a temple in Nepal Saṃvat 591 (1471 CE).²² It further records that they donated two more items, a statue made of gold and a manuscript of the *Vratopākhyāna*, and closes with a blessing to all those who would protect all these three: the manuscript, the golden statue, and the image in the temple.

¹⁹ Art-historians have coined their own terms to refer to this androgynous form of Viṣṇu, for example, Pal has picked up Vāsudeva-Lakṣmī (PAL 1963) or Vāsudeva-Kamalajā (1970) and BHATTACHARYYA 1980 has Vāsudeva-Kamalajā. GAIL 2011 sticks to Ardhā-Lakṣmī-Hari found in the *Śaradātīlaka*, though he acknowledges 'the diverging names of the half-female Viṣṇu' as a problem (p. 123). One can imagine that probably they did so for the practical purpose of avoiding confusion of the androgynous images of Viṣṇu with non-composite ones that showed Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa together on a panel. As for Sanskrit texts, they are constrained by the metre they have chosen. The *Netratantra* simply mentions this form of the deity as one of the forms of Nārāyaṇa, the one sharing the half of his body to Lakṣmī (*ardhalakṣmīyuta*). The Gayā inscription describes it as Nārāyaṇa having Kamalā for one half of his body (*kamalārdhāṅgīnanārāyaṇa*; This expression is obviously coined to fit the metre of the verse.). Similarly, each of the three texts mentioned before uses a different expression to refer to this deity: The *Śaradātīlaka* calls this form *Ardhalakṣmīhari* and describes it as the unified body of Puṇḍarikākṣa and Lakṣmī (*puṇḍarikākṣalakṣmyor ekībhūtaṃ vapuḥ*). The *Śilparatna* borrows the description of the *Śaradātīlaka*, when the *Bṛhattantrasāra* defines it in similar terms as the body of Kamalajā and Vaikuṅṭha have attained unity (*kamalajāvaikuṅṭhayor ekatāṃ prāptaṃ vapuḥ*). The *Pādmasaṃhitā* (see below) calls the deity Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa, and the Upaniṣad mentioned below calls him ArdhāṅgiLakṣmīNārāyaṇa.

²⁰ *Jayākhyā Saṃhitā* Manuscript, fol. 112 verso, line 6–113 recto, line 1.

²¹ This invocation is the same as the one REGMI 1966: III, 92–93 partially reads from the pedestal of a mutilated statue from Bhaktapur. Regmi had misidentified the statue as Vāsudeva but PAL 1970: 139 has rightly identified it as a slightly different form of the half-female Viṣṇu on the basis of his analysis of the reading Regmi provided. It is probable that this is the statue the three brothers of the note consecrated.

²² Kaiser Library Manuscript C 55/5, the folio is not numbered and has the back side blank. I intend to publish a photo of the folio with a transcript and translation in my edition of the VK.

There are drawings of Lakṣmīvāsudeva with eight arms in the centre of the upper and with four arms on the lower book-covers of a manuscript of the *Vaiṣṇvāmṛtasāroddhāra* dated in Lakṣmaṇa Saṃvat 412 (equivalent to c. 1530 CE), each flanked by three *vyūhāntara* variations from one and three from the other side.²³ Thus, all twelve variations depicted on the struts of the Svatha Narayana temple mentioned above are attested here, though I am unable to trace a textual basis for the depiction of these variations. I have also seen a manuscript of the *Lakṣmīvāsudevapūjāvidhi*, a very brief manual for the worship of this deity copied in Nepal Saṃvat 843 (1723 CE), and also an undated manuscript which appears to be an early 20th-century copy of an otherwise unknown *Ardhāṅgi-Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇopaniṣad*.²⁴ All this proves that the cult of Lakṣmīvāsudeva has survived until today in Nepal whereas it has disappeared from other parts of the Indian subcontinent.

The most important among all these materials mentioned above is the *Vāsudevakalpa*. It sheds light on the cult of the deity, rites and rituals, Yogic practices, and also the iconological symbolism and the underlying doctrinal foundation. Therefore, I am going to present an overview of the text in the following.

3. The *Vāsudevakalpa*

The *Vāsudevakalpa* (VK hereafter), as mentioned earlier, survives in a 13th-century palm-leaf manuscript written in Newari script. Compared to other early Tantric texts, the language of this text is much better; there are fewer linguistic irregularities. As I described in an earlier publication (ACHARYA 2015: xv), this text contains some sort of Kaula influence and can be compared, as far as its nature and time is concerned, to the early Yoginī Tantras and Krama Texts. The text is ascribed to some otherwise unknown *Mahālakṣmī Saṃhitā*, and is exclusively concerned with the cult of the androgynous form of Lakṣmī and Vāsudeva. This text indeed falls in the category of *kalpa*, which provides mantras and visualisations of the deity and his retinue and discusses all necessary details of the cult in 478 verses but is not divided into chapters.

According to this text, the deity symbolises the unity of the combined whole that incorporates in unity all dual aspects of reality: the pacific and the sublime, the word and the meaning, the power and its possessor, and the god

²³ This text is a *smārta* Puraṇic type of text, spending pages on the things to be done in the month of Kārtika, and the depiction of these deities on the book-cover of this text suggests that the cult of the half-female Viṣṇu was not limited just within a narrow cult-boundary. Its inclusion in a *smārta*-oriented compendium like the *Śāradātīlaka* suggests the same thing.

²⁴ See References for the details of all manuscripts mentioned here.

and goddess. It begins with a brief explanation of doctrinal foundation on which the androgynous form of the deity is based (verses 1–35). Verses 36–51 are lost as one folio of the manuscript is missing and, as a consequence, we have no idea how the doctrinal preamble ended and mantric teaching commenced. What follows in the next folio is the raising of the mantras from the matrix of syllables (52–80) and the way the hand gestures (*mudrā*) used during the ritual worship of the deity are formed (81–94). This is followed by the visualisation of Lakṣmīvāsudeva and other deities in the retinue (95–125). The text then catalogues desirable characteristics of the teacher as well as the disciple (126–137). It teaches further the procedure of the ritual bath and the Yogic breath exercise (*prāṇāyāma*) needed for external and internal purity (138–157) followed by a scheme for deposition of mantras (*nyāsa*) in the fingers and other parts of the *sādhaka's* body (158–164). Then comes a procedure for a mantric bath and libation (165–184), which is followed by internal worship of the deity in the heart of the worshipper (185–195). The text addresses further the issues of external worship beginning with an instruction for the drawing of the Lakṣmīgarbha Maṇḍala on the ground (196–264). Then follows a short account of a mental mode of initiation named as *bodhadikṣā* and *vijñānadikṣā* (265–278), a procedure for sacral transformation of the ritual fire and oblation in it (279–317), and also a procedure for a regular ritual of initiation as well (318–336). The text then dwells on the themes of consecration of the images of the deity made of different materials (337–367), the procedure for the *japa* sacrifice (368–377) and mantric cultivation (378–395), yogic meditation (396–405), reflections on creation and dissolution (406–413), rewards of mantric cultivation (414–415), and the preparation of the protective amulet (416–430). Before it concludes (476–478), the text discusses the Yogic understanding of body-mechanism and then elaborates on the grounds, conditions and procedure for yogic suicide (431–475).

4. Philosophy and Symbolism

The VK briefly explains, mainly in its prologue, the philosophical and theological background behind the formation of the androgynous divine body of the deity and its mantric counterpart, looking at the reality from mythical cum esoteric point of view. As the text teaches, there are gross, subtle, and ultimate forms of reality, and also the bodily and bodiless forms of the godhead. The gross is all that which has some shape, each and every entity in the world and the same is with the bodily form. The subtle is the entity rising from mantras and that is proclaimed here as the bodiless. The ultimate form is designated as supreme bliss; it is the abode of both forms of *ātman* (*ubhayātmālaya*): the bodiless supreme self (*paramātmān*), and the embodied self characterised by

karma (*karmātman*).²⁵ Everything gets manifested in this unity, existent as well as non-existent, and so, it appears as if it has difference.²⁶

In non-difference of all beings the supreme lord is located, merged into the interior of all entities, and furnished with all-knowledge. This knowledge means the course of scriptures and the object of knowledge is defined as reality of consciousness.²⁷ That is proclaimed as the supreme self, as void, and to have the form of bliss. The scripture consists of true knowledge (*vidyā*) that indicates the true being of the *brahman* (*sadbrahma*) and false knowledge (*avidyā*) that conceptualises all different forms of individual things.²⁸

At this point, obviously a question arises, which the text puts it in the mouth of the goddess: ‘if always the reality of *brahman* is explained empathetically through non-difference, how can difference be allowed into the ultimate supreme self?’²⁹

The godhead answers: ‘transformation of the ultimate that by nature lies beyond transformation is considered to be “difference”, and produced from difference is time that has three courses. One and the same time stands in three ways, as that which has come into existence, that which is coming now, and that which has still to come: past, present, and future. Thanks to this nature of time, the world is threefold: That already arranged in a certain order and set into the mosaic of the world, that being arranged/set now in that way and that which remains there (*śiṣṭa*) yet to be created. For time itself is the lord who sets in motion entire creation.

At the primordial time, the ultimate is twofold in pacific and sublime forms. The pacific bestows wellbeing and is characterised as consciousness. The sublime is that which arises from the union of the word and the meaning, the god and the goddess. The power of the word, namely, the meaning, is the goddess; and the Lord is the soul of the word. Thus, in the form of “power”

²⁵ Every individual self, situated in the midst of these entities, is named as ‘the self characterised by karma’ (*karmātman*). He is born, dies, and is happy or angry. He also strives for ‘accomplishments’, always desires enjoyments, is hooked on the feeling of ‘mine’, is overwhelmed by thirst and burning sorrow, is tormented by avarice, delusion and fear; and regards the world as permanent, being himself hooked to its affection and overpowered by the host of entities (Cf. VK, verses 32–34).

²⁶ Cf. VK, verses 15–17.

²⁷ I feel that the term *dharma* is used here very much in Buddhist lines. So, I take *ciddharma* as the phenomenon of consciousness, not just the property of consciousness but consciousness itself.

²⁸ Cf. VK, verses 19–21.

²⁹ Cf. VK, verse 18.

and “the possessor of power”, always the same unitary entity is framed. The possessor of power is the all-pervading god, and the power comes in the form of bliss. The creation sets in motion as the two are conjoined and a union is formed. Therefore, god creates the world assuming an unified form comprised of fire and the moon.³⁰

As the VK teaches, from the ‘god’, the entity of *puruṣa* is created, and from *puruṣa* the entity of *prakṛti*. Then the ‘intellect’ comes into existence from *prakṛti*, and from intellect the ‘I-awareness’, from which in turn the ‘mind’ springs up. From the ‘mind’ then come into being ‘sense faculties’, the ‘sense organs’, the ‘subtle elements’; and then the ‘gross elements’.³¹ Thus, from ‘the source’ all entities spring up, one after the other in a row, and again in the course of destruction, each entity merges into the entity lying higher and thus finally all are merged into the ultimate entity.

5. Visualisation

According to the VK, Lakṣmīvāsudeva has eight arms, is attended by Garuḍa, and is flanked by two male attendants on the right-hand side and by two female companions on the left-hand side. The male attendants are named Sarvaiśvaryaprada and Sarvaśaktiprada, while the companions, two young ladies, are called Nalinī and Padminī. In one rare Nepalese image placed by art-historians in the 13th century (SCHROEDER 2019, Plate 220B) all these four are depicted, but instead of Garuḍa, Nāgarāja Ananta is depicted standing beneath the lotus Lakṣmīvāsudeva. In another image placed around the 16th century (SCHROEDER 2019, Plate 223E), all these four are depicted with folded hands seated below the feet on two sides. This image also shows the normal (non-androgynous) miniature images of the twelve *vyūhāntara* forms of Viṣṇu around the main image,³² something not mentioned in the VK. In the 13th century image from Patko Tol (SCHROEDER 2019, Plate 220C), only the two male attendants are depicted on two sides of the deity. In another image from the 16th century (SCHROEDER 2019, Plate 223F) only the female attendants are depicted on two sides, with additional *vyūhāntara* deities around. So, it appears that most of the time these were mentally visualised. According to the VK, Lakṣmīvāsudeva is encircled by his ancillary mantras in personified forms

³⁰ Cf. VK, verses 25–28.

³¹ Here the classical Sāṃkhya ontology is naively simplified, and of course, the ‘god’ is superimposed at the top. In the classical Sāṃkhya system, *puruṣa* is not the cause of *prakṛti*, but it is so described here.

³² Except for the two I mention above, there are two more images, which depict the twelve *vyūhāntara* forms of Viṣṇu, and one depicts four-armed female counterparts of the twelve deities. All these five images are placed by art-historians around the 16th century.

which is very usual for a Tantric deity of early times. They can be conceived either sharing the same seat with the deity or standing separately. The VK gives higher importance to this retinue of the *aṅgamantras*, and presents it before the attendants and companions are presented, when Garuḍa appears the last. Most of Nepalese images show Lakṣmīvāsudeva standing on a lotus, in some of them two-armed Garuḍa is shown in *namaskāramudrā* on the right side and rarely also a turtle on the left side. All other images except the Nepalese ones depict the deity mounted on Garuḍa, with four or eight arms. However, the VK shows him with eight-arms.

The visualisation from the VK describes only the eight-armed form of the deity in different poses: seated or standing or mounted on Garuḍa. Here is the visualisation with a translation:

ekavaktraṃ viśālākṣaṃ aṣṭabāhuṃ janārdanam |
ardhe ca pauraṣaṃ dhatte devīrūpaṃ tathāpare ||
dravatpīyūśaṃkāśaṃ śaśāṅkaśatatejasam |
ambujaṃ ca gadāṃ śaṃkhaṃ cakraṃ caiva jvalatprabham ||
dakṣiṇe bhujavṛnde tu vāme caivāparaṃ śṛṇu |
darpaṇaṃ kalaśaṃ nālaṃ pustakaṃ cāstram uttamam || (VK 96–99)

[One should visualise] Janārdana [in this system] single-faced, wide-eyed, and eight-armed. He bears the male-form in the one half and the form of goddess in the other. A lotus equal to one hundred moons in lustre and appearing like fluxing nectar, a mace, a conch, and a discus with burning flames: these are in his right hands, and in his left hands are a water-jar, a mirror, a lotus-stalk or plant (*nāla*),³³ and a manuscript.³⁴

All Nepalese images and paintings depict the deity with eight arms as described in our text, and with one exception³⁵ (SCHROEDER 2019, Plate 222D)

³³ All later texts have replaced the lotus-plant (*nāla/nalinī*) with a second lotus or water-lily (*padma/utpala*), and apparently, they had no idea what these attributes represented. It is interesting that as an art-historian SCHROEDER 2019: 707 has this to say about two different flowers in the right and left hands of the deity: ‘the lotus held in Viṣṇu’s lower right hand clearly represents a lotus flower (*padma*) with few broad petals, while Lakṣmī holds in the third hand what looks like a blue water-lily (*nīlotpala*) with narrow pointed petals’. After checking all available images, I find that the artists knew one of the two flowers they should have depicted with a longer stalk but they, too, had no clear idea and have placed it in the hand of Viṣṇu.

³⁴ Obviously, the attributes in the right hands are the attributes of the most common four-armed form of Viṣṇu, but those in the left hands are not usual attributes of a four-armed form of Lakṣmī.

³⁵ I am also aware of one painted scroll (<https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/88525/> Retrieved on 1 November 2021) and one metal specimen (<https://arjuna-vallabha.tumblr.com/>

all known stone sculptures show the deity standing. There is one four-armed variation of the deity painted on the book-cover of the *Vaiṣṇavāmṛtasāroddhāra*, as mentioned above, and B. L. Malla has published an image of this deity from Bijbehara, Kashmir, which has four arms only (MALLA 1996: figures 42 and 43). In this image the deity appears with a mace(?) and a lotus in his right hands and a mirror and a manuscript in his left hands. I have come across a Rajasthani fresco/mural painting of a standing four-armed Lakṣmīvāsudeva depicted on the wall of the Dr. Ramnath A. Podar Haveli Museum at Nawalgarh in the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan, and once again, the attributes are different: a discus, a mace, a lotus and a waterpot.³⁶ I have not found these visualisations in any text, but have found the following visualisation in which the same type of androgynous form of Viṣṇu, but named as Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa, has four arms and has some other attributes in his hands. This visualisation, at the same time a prescription for the sculptor, comes from the *Pādmasaṃhitā*, a South Indian Vaiṣṇava Āgama, and reads as follows:

*lakṣmīnārāyaṇaṃ kuryād bhujāṣṭakasaṃvītam |
 yad vā caturbhujam śaṅkhacakrādyāyudhabhūṣitam ||
 vāmbhāge tu hastābhyāṃ varadam paṅkajam tu vā |
 itarābhyāṃ ca hastābhyāṃ abhayaṃ cakram eva vā ||
 vapuṣo dakṣiṇe bhāge viṣṇur vāme saroruhā |
 pīnastanataṭo vāmaḥ śrīvatsāṅkas tathetarah ||
 vāme hemanibhaḥ śyāmo dakṣiṇo bhāga iṣyate |
 āsīnaṃ vā śayānaṃ vā garuḍārūḍham eva vā ||
 sthitaṃ vā kalpayed devaṃ (Kriyāpāda 18.50–54a)*

One should make the image of Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa³⁷ eight-armed, or else, four-armed. It should be made adorned with a conch, a discus and other emblems. In two hands on the left side of the deity, the [gesture of] boon and a lotus [should be placed], and in other two hands the [gesture of] safety and a discus. On the right side of the body Viṣṇu is depicted and on the left Saroruhā, namely, Lakṣmī. The left side [should have] the slope of a full breast, and the right side the mark of *śrīvatsa*. The image should have golden hue on the left side and the right side should be black. One may depict the deity seated, or lying, or mounted on Garuḍa, or standing.

post/633238228788527105/ Retrieved on 21 November 2021) of eight-armed Lakṣmīvāsudeva seated in lotus posture.

³⁶ <https://sudhagee.com/2017/01/02/museum-treasure-vaikuntha-kamalaja/>. Retrieved on 21 November 2021.

³⁷ This text uses the same name Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa to refer to both composite and non-composite forms of Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa. See above, footnote 18, for a discussion.

Lakṣmīvāsudeva in his androgynous form symbolises the combination and complementarity of dual aspects of reality: the pacific and sublime, the word and meaning, power and its possessor and god and goddess. As for the principles the emblems placed in the hands of the deity represent, the VK (verses 100–101) states:

padmaṃ sṛṣṭiḥ samākhyātāṃ śaṃkhaṃ śabdākhyā ucyate |
gadā ca paramā vidyā cakraṃ kālākhyarūpi ca ||
kalaśaṃ ṛtuṣaṭkaṃ ca nalinī viśvasantatiḥ |
darpaṇo bhāvasadbhāvaḥ śabdabrahma ca pustakam ||

The lotus is interpreted as the creation, the conch is said to be [a representation of] the word. The mace [represents] the highest esoteric knowledge and the discus the entity of time. The water jar [represents] the set of six seasons, and the lotus-plant (*nalinī*) the continual existence of the world. The mirror stands for the actual being of all beings (*bhāva-sadbhāva*),³⁸ and the manuscript stands for the essential reality of the word (*śabdabrahman*).

The godhead thus endowed with these symbolic attributes is adorned with a crown, a girdle, bracelets, anklets and necklaces. He is bearing the mark of *śrīvatsa*, and the *kaustubha* jewel, and shines beautifully with jewel necklaces. The godhead of gods, who can bestow both the worldly pleasure as well as liberation, whose heart is filled with compassion, who is full of the nectar of love, and who is ready to rescue the world, should be visualised according to the *sādhaka*'s choice in three forms, either standing, or seated, or ready for flying in the sky on the *brahmayāna*. He should be shown in a tightly fastened lotus posture when he is seated and excessively filled with the nectar-like sweetness of affection.³⁹

6. *Prāṇāyāma* and Other Yogic Elements

The VK insists that the breathing exercise (*prāṇāyāma*) is essential for internal purity. It teaches that one should perform it in order to get rid of internal impurities, after taking a simple bath for the sake of cleaning. Uttering the *praṇava* with its twelve units, one should inhale and fill the air inside (*pūṛaka*) without releasing the air thus filled. By retaining the air inside in this way, *kumbhaka* is formed and the body-fire (*jāṭharāgni*) is kindled. One should then

³⁸ This equation most probably implies that the actual being of all phenomenal beings is nothing more than that of the reflection in the mirror. The reflection in the mirror does not exist in real time nor space, nor does it have a real form, dimension, connection, density, etc. but appears to have all of these. Neither is it a non-entity nor has it anything for its own essence.

³⁹ Cf. VK, verses 102–105.

channel that fire mixed with vital air through the nerves. Due to this blending of fire and wind, perspiration of water occurs. This will become *kumbhaka* as long as the *sādhaka* remains in that situation filled like a pot. With three rounds of this process, he should cleanse all the filth of the channels of veins, and then gradually exhale the air. The level of purity attained through hundreds of rounds of the tough *kr̥cchra-cāndrāyaṇa* vow and other auspicious vows of self-restraint is attained through the restraint of vital air (*prāṇanirodhana*).⁴⁰

The text recommends that one should afterwards cleanse those internal impurities with the retention of mind in various levels (*dhāraṇā*). The physical body, how excellent, has arisen from the material elements, and has six sheaths but no essence. It can be described as an assemblage of illusive concepts (*avidyānicayopama*). Purification of such a body is possible only by means of mental retention at five levels: dissolve the earth element in the water, the water in the fire, the fire in the wind, and the wind in the ether, and finally, dissolve the ether in consciousness flowing everywhere equally. After attaining to that state of enlightened cognition, one would feel his self being intermingled into the entity of ultimate bliss, as if a small amount of milk had spilled into an ocean of milk, and this equanimity with the ultimate at this state renders him 'purified'.⁴¹

A *sādhaka* who is thus purified by coming into contact of the ultimate self should then carry out the symbolic burning of the body. He should think that a burning spark from the fireball of consciousness has fallen on his head and his body has burst into flames. He should then think that the flames have been extinguished leaving his body as a heap of fire embers as the ashes are brought in ten directions by the wind of cognition. He should imagine further that from the ocean of *brahman*, an ocean without waves, the immortal water representing all knowable objects (*jñeya*) has oozed out through the channel of creation, and with that water he is invigorated and so is his body, the cage of material elements. Through this process of pure creation, he should settle back into the purified material body. Having thus attained internal purity, for the sake of external purification one should have a ritual bath uttering mantras, and then perform the twilight prayer before entering the place of worship.⁴²

7. Internal and External Worship

At the place of worship, he should assume a seat, install mantras all around, and begin with the veneration of god in one's own heart (*hārdayāga*). One should discover the ultimate self in one's own self configured as the excellent

⁴⁰ Cf. VK, verses 143–148ab.

⁴¹ Cf. VK, verses 148cd–152.

⁴² Cf. VK, verses 153–157.

paśyantī form that is free from both gross and subtle forms, situated in the cavity of the heart-lotus, and recognise that as the supreme that abides in the supreme state, the imperishable supreme self that is devoid of all flaws of fancy (*vikalpamala*), is burning with his own power of cognition, is free from the calculation of elements, and is devoid of both pure and impure latent impressions (*vāsanādvaya*). This is ‘god’ defined by the property of consciousness and is delighted with the delightful experience of his own bliss. After one discovers the supreme god thus in his own self, covered with the rays of consciousness like a Kadamba flower, all his sins are destroyed.⁴³

A *sādhaka* who does not find the difference of the worshipper, worship, and the object of worship, his worship is simply the thought of such unity felt in meditative cultivation (*bhāvanābhāvyā*). Whoever has this understanding is a knower of *brahman*. Such a person can liberate anybody who comes into his contact, simply by seeing, touching, or speaking, and also his ancestors together with his kinsmen and acquaintances instantly. The gifts he gave, the oblations he offered, and the things he consumed would be ten million times superior, and whatsoever he has said, either real or unreal, all that as such would be sanctified, and anything impure purified. This is the veneration that yields accomplishment of the desire of one’s heart.⁴⁴

Also, in the process of external worship the worshipper is supposed to first worship his own soul as Lakṣmīvāsudeva following the mental course of veneration and with nice ingredients produced from his thought. He should conceive his self in the excellent heart-lotus covered with the rays of consciousness as if a Kadamba flower, luminous as myriads of suns and vibrating with his own bliss. By worshipping his self in this way, understanding worship in this way and abiding by his own nature of the supreme bliss, one is capable of worshipping the entire creation of fourteen realms: both heaven and earth, and all divine, non-divine, and human beings. Who worships his own self this way is the best and foremost of all worshippers and he would be successful in everything and have everything he desired. He should thereafter resort to duality so that he would be divided into worshipped and worshipper. Once the altar is constructed, he should emit the deity in the form of fire through the channel of breathing into the pericarp of the lotus of the *maṇḍala* and worship the deity there with all possible means.⁴⁵

⁴³ Cf. VK, verses 187–191.

⁴⁴ Cf. VK, verses 192–195.

⁴⁵ Cf. VK, verses 243cd–249.

8. Modes of Initiation

The VK gives two accounts of initiation. The first is the initiation that has to do with the esoteric knowledge and is capable of bestowing immediate success and the reward of the final release. It does not need the sacred fire, ghee and sesame seeds.⁴⁶ The other is meant for those disciples with cultivated mind, who are devoted to the god, the sacred fire, and the teacher. This is performed with all rituals, a fire sacrifice, and the cutting and oblation of ‘the thread of bondage’ (*pāśasūtra*). Both procedures of initiation, however, will have the same result. As the text states, anyone who goes through these procedures and receives initiation will have his vices and virtues eliminated and will realise the nature of the ultimate *brahman*. He will be settled in truth, defined by the property of pure consciousness, characterised by the light of the supreme bliss and filled with it. He will be located within the ultimate space in the state of union, like butter is inherent in milk and oil in sesame seeds, and fire hidden in each piece of wood.⁴⁷

Because of its special nature, let me give here an account of the first, the procedure of the enlightening initiation (*bodhadīkṣā*). As the text instructs, first the teacher should gradually gather up the host of *tattvas* from his body, and through the course of vital breath enter the disciple’s body in the form of the enlightening esoteric knowledge that furnishes the essence of the ultimate reality one must know. After gathering all the *tattvas*, he should separate and put aside the seed of consciousness. Then following the left current of the vital breath, he should reach and pour all the *tattvas* into the heart of that disciple. After this, the disciple is liberated from all his *karman*: liberated from the *karma*-related impurities and the conditions of nescience. As purification leads one to union with the ultimate entity, the teacher should engage further himself in the body of the disciple, and following the course of creation, install all of the purified *tattvas* in his self. Thus, the disciple’s initiation is completed and both of his vices and virtues eliminated. This initiation can also be performed following the opposite course: the teacher could move along the right track through the current of resonance. He should enter into the disciple’s self and should not exit. With this, the disciple will understand his true self lying inside the cavity of the heart-lotus and also the body made of elements. He should then be able to recreate all the *tattvas* in purified form and cast them outside.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Cf. VK, verses 274.

⁴⁷ Cf. VK, verses 330–331.

⁴⁸ Cf. VK, verses 265–273.

9. Knowledge of the Body and the Departure

One important component of the VK is its section on the yogic method of ‘departure’ (*utkrānti*) of the soul from the body. This section is important in the sense that it provides a good description of the yogic body with a network of vein-channels (*nāḍī*) and circles (*cakra*). It highlights the fact that it is necessary to understand the yogic body to understand the non-corporeal nature of the self. According to the text, one is called Kaula when he realises himself as the Kula in his body. Even a man engaged in all kinds of gnostic endeavours, purified and engaged in all forms of gift-giving, is unable to achieve the same level of bliss achieved by a man who has understood the material body.

One should know that the pleasures of sound, touch, sight, taste, and smell make in the body a five-spoke *cakra* where the nectar of bliss permeates. Situated there, the individual self knows everything as it is.⁴⁹ One experiences the ultimate pleasure of equanimity that brings a halt to all undertakings as one drinks water after being extremely thirsty or eats food after being extremely hungry, as one feels the blowing wind in hot summer, as one goes near a fire in cold winter, as one savours tasty flavours, as one sees light in the dark, as one is united with one’s lover after separation, as one is engaged in sexual play. The same pleasure one experiences when one restrains all operations of one’s mind, discards the filth of mental fancy and fabrication (*vikalpamala*), and turns to equanimity in the meditative state of mind. The same pleasure is experienced in the state of liberation.⁵⁰

Pleasure or bliss (*ānanda*) is the nature of *brahman*, therefore people venerate it. Through the experience of bliss, union with *brahman* is undoubtedly achieved when obstacles are removed. The body of every embodied being is the domain of enjoyment. One is called Kaula when he realises himself as the Kula in his body. Even a man engaged in all kinds of gnostic endeavours, purified and engaged in all forms of gift-giving, cannot attain the same level of bliss that is attained by a man who has understood the material body. On the other hand, if one finally realises the non-corporeal form of the self in one’s body, he is a worthy man even if he had been engaged in all kinds of evils and had failed in all duties in his lifetime. Such a man is freed from all Karma and enters the flawless state after death.⁵¹

One should make up his mind for the departure of the soul, only if one’s body is completely worn out after reaching old age and one is incapable of

⁴⁹ Cf. VK, verses 455–456.

⁵⁰ Cf. VK, verses 457–459.

⁵¹ Cf. VK, verses 460–463.

performing one's duties and enjoying any pleasures, does not sense the objects of senses, and trembles and stumbles in every step.⁵² First of all, he should completely abandon the feeling of embodiment in all states of mind. He must know the 26 steps in the course of departure, the established hierarchy of the *tattvas*, so that he smoothly moves upward. He should first utter the *praṇava*, the syllable *Om*, then gather the inhaled breath in the body (*apāna*),⁵³ and release it through the nostrils and then fill up the heart (*hṛdaya*). Now he should not release the filled air but direct it upwards leading the soul, awakened in this way and situated in the heart, through the channel of veins and after reaching the passage of the palate he should break open the aperture of *brahman*, i.e., the cranium.⁵⁴

With the help of three protracted blows of the breath through the nostrils he should break the knot located in the vein-channel of Piṅgalā. With the bow of mind and the power of cognition as the penetrating arrow, he should awaken his soul inhabited in the cave of the *brahman*-crevice (*brahmaguhā*). Then having his thought firmly resolved to his aim, he will enter the eternal abode. Having thus penetrated and departed from his body, he unites with the best of mantras (*mantravara*) that has the lustre of thousands of crores of Suns and the rays of hundreds of Moons.⁵⁵ This is the true form of *brahman*, this is the supreme abode of Viṣṇu. Once he enters it, his self is without semblance (*nirābhāsa*) but can only be characterised as a body of pure consciousness. Like a thing reached in the state of emptiness is merged in emptiness or milk poured in milk is just milk, one's individual self reached there attains unity (*ekābhāva*) with the Supreme Self and is in the state of the supreme bliss. Thus, he is in company (*sāyujya*) with the Lord and the danger of rebirth is eliminated.⁵⁶

As I am preparing a critical edition of this text with a detailed introduction and a summary, I have simply narrated a few of the themes of the text, without entering into a critical or comparative appraisal. This I hope has provided a good glimpse of subject matter of the text and fuel a desire in the reader to read the original text itself when published.

⁵² Cf. VK, verses 464–465.

⁵³ Cf. VK, verses 466–467.

⁵⁴ Cf. VK, verses 468–469.

⁵⁵ Cf. VK, verses 470–472.

⁵⁶ Cf. VK, verses 473–475.

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Fig. 1. A masterpiece stone Sculpture of Lakṣmīvāsudeva, variously dated from 10th to 15th century CE, in the Dallas Museum of Art in 2017, now returned to Nepal. © Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain File.



Fig. 2. Lakṣmīvāsudeva in Gilded copper and inlaid. 14th century, Nepal. Guimet Museum in Paris. © Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain File.



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