



śrimate rāmānujāya nāmāḥ

Introduction to the Pāñcarātra

The ritual portion of the Veda was always inaccessible to the common people of Vedic times, mainly due to financial consideration of supporting huge sacrifices lasting for many days, so these were mainly patronized by the kings and the wealthy merchants. During the course of time and with the advent of the Kali-yuga, these sacrifices fell into disuse, it was at this junction that the Āgamas or Tantras became popular in order to fulfil the spiritual and practical needs of the masses. The Tantric tradition became divided into three systems according to theology; Vaiṣṇava, śaiva and śākta. The Vaiṣṇava Tantric or Āgamic tradition is divided into two sects which are known as the Pāñcarātra and the Vaikhānasa.

1. Pāñcarātra & Vaikhānasa Āgamas.

The principal differences between these two liturgical systems are as follows;

	Pāñcarātra	Vaikhānasa
<i>Promulgator</i>	Kṛṣṇa	Vaikhānasa Rishi
<i>Eligibility</i>	All castes	Only Brahmins
<i>Goal</i>	Liberation	Worldly success, & heaven
<i>Concept of the hypostatic forms of the four Vyūhas</i>	(Supreme) Vāsudeva 1. Saṃkarṣana 2. Pradyumna 3. Aniruddha	Viṣṇu Satya Acyuta Aniruddha

In addition to these main differences there are some ritual discrepancies as well, the philosophy of the Vaikhānasa leans towards that of Advaita Vedānta. The Vaikhānasas claim superiority to other Vaiṣṇavas saying that they are "garbha-vaiṣṇavas" i.e. the sacraments of initiation are administered while the child is still in the womb and is thus a Vaiṣṇava from birth and requires no further confirmation or initiations. Needless to say there is some strained relations between the two systems and the Pāñcarātra is at times openly hostile

saying that if a Vaikhānasa touches the icon installed by the Pāñcarātra rites then the whole consecration ceremony must be repeated.

It is also expressly stated that the two systems must never be mixed together;

"*tasmāt sarva prayatnena na kuryāt tantra saṃkaram*"

2. Origin of the Name Pāñcarātra.

The literal meaning of the word *Pāñcarātra* is 'that which is connected with five nights'. There are several theories as to how the name *Pāñcarātra* originated, some of these are;—

- 1. The word "*rātra*" is taken to mean the objects of the senses; of which there are five — therefore this is a system of practice whereby the senses and their objects are overcome.
- 2. Lord Kesava (Visnu or Narayana) is said to have taught this esoteric science to Ananta, Garuda, Visvaksena, Brahma and Rudra over five nights (*panca* = five; *ratra* = night).
- 3. The five (*pañca*) sages; Śaṅḍilya, Aupagayane, Mauñjyayana, Kauṣika and Bharadvaja each taught in one day, therefore the collective teachings became known as the *Pāñcarātra*.
- 4. The Supreme Being is taught in this system as having five forms, therefore the śāstra which deals with these five theological doctrines is known as *Pāñcarātra*. The five aspects of God (called *Puruṣottama*) are — *para* (highest), *vyuha* (emanation), *vibhava* (incarnation), *antaryāmin* (indweller) and *arca* (form of worship).
- 5. In this system the daily routine of a spiritual aspirant is divided into 5 activities known as **pañca-kāla-kriya**. this gave rise to the name *Pāñcarātra* for the whole system.
- 6. The knowledge that is contained in these texts destroys all the five forms of ignorance therefore it is called the *Pāñcarātra*.
- 7. The principle text of the whole system; Mahā-sanatkumāra samhita, had five divisions; Indra-rātra, Śiva-rātra, Brahma-rātra and Bṛhaspati-rātra (which is now lost), therefore the whole system became known as *Pāñcarātra*.
- 8. The word *ratra* also means *jnana*, wisdom or knowledge. Since it teaches five kinds of knowledge it is called Pāñcarātra. These are *tattva* (cosmology), *mukti-prada* (that which gives liberation), *Bhakti-prada* (that which confers devotion), *yaugika* (yoga) and *vaisyika* (objects of desire).

The Pāñcarātra Āgama is based upon the Vedic concept of *varṇa-āśrama dharma*, and agrees with most of the injunctions of the traditional Dharma śāstras. The difference is that the Āgama does not bar anyone from the rites and sacraments. There are four usages prescribed the four divisions of society, namely;

- for the brahmins — Vedic rites and mantras are to be used,
- for the kṣatriyas a combination of Vedic and Tantrik,
- for Vaiṣyas and śūdras only Tantrika rites and mantras are prescribed,

or alternatively everyone is entitled to use the Tantrika rites and mantras. Even śūdras can undergo the sacrament of initiation with the sacred thread (*upanayana*) using Tantrika mantras alone.

All the Vedic rituals are to be found in the Āgamas but they have been modified to suit the particular needs of the age (*kali yuga*). For all the well-known Vedic hymns there are Tantrika substitutes, and many of the Vedic mantras can be transposed with corresponding Tantrika mantras. In many places the Tantrika substitutes are given preference to the Vedic usages.

The Pāñcarātra forms a complete canon governing every aspect of the life of a devout Vaiṣṇava, and all schools of Vaiṣṇavism ostensibly subscribe to the Pāñcarātra Tradition. In North India the influence of the Pāñcarātra was eclipsed by that of the Purāṇas, but in South India the tradition has always been preserved and it was Rāmānuja Acārya that organized and re-established the ordinances of the Pāñcarātra in all the South Indian Vaiṣṇava Temples. There were only two temples in which he did not succeed they were; Jaganatha Puri temple in Orissa, and Anantapadmanābhan temple at Tiruvanantapuram in Kerala. Tirupati Venkateswara temple was also made an exception and the Vaikhānāsa protocols were established there.

Many of the ancient texts of the Pāñcarātra are no longer extant and many of those that have survived are in poor states of repair with sections missing. Most of the Pāñcarātra texts were inscribed on palm leaves in the Sanskrit language but using the Telegu and Grantha scripts rather than the Devanāgarī alphabet. It was mainly due the tireless efforts in recent years of the "Pāñcaratra Parishodhana Sabha" that many of the texts were rescued from oblivion and preserved.

3. Origin of Pāñcarātra Āgama.

In the Pancaratra texts it is stated;

Pāñcarātrasya kṛtsnasya vaktā nārāyaṇa svayam
The whole of the Pancaratra is taught by none other than the Supreme Lord Himself.

It is traditionally believed that this science of religion was taught in the beginning to Nārada and that he in turn taught it to the other Sages.

Although the words **Tantra** and **Āgama** are used as synonyms there is a technical difference between them. The *Āgama* deals with 25 subjects - ranging from Theology to Architecture. While the *Tantra* deals only with 7 subjects;

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. sṛṣṭi | — Creation |
| 2. Pralaya | — Cosmic dissolution |
| 3. Arcana | — worship of the deities |
| 4. Sādhana | — spiritual practice |
| 5. puraścaraṇa | — methodology of rites |
| 6. ṣaṭ karma sādhanā | — 6 types of ritual activities |
| 7. yoga-dhyāna | — meditation |

The difference between an Āgama and a Tantra is the breadth of their scope, but in common parlance the terms are interchangeable.

4. Meaning of "Tantra"

The word itself denotes two things:—

1. injunction (*viddhi*) and
2. regulation (*niyama*),

It is derived from the root "*tan*" - to spread;

"tanyate, vistāryante jñānam aṇena, iti tantra".

Tantra refers to those sacred writings or inspired scripture whereby "sacred" knowledge is spread. The suffix "tra" means to save, so the Tantra is the knowledge or wisdom which saves from the ocean of transmigration.

The Viṣṇu Saṃhita defines Tantra as follows;—

*sarve'rthā yena tanyante trāyante ca bhayājjanāḥ |
iti tantrasya tantratvaṃ tantrajñāḥ paricakṣate ||*

The knowers of Tantra call it Tantra because it gives means of attaining all desires and protecting people from all dangers.

It could also mean the "spreading out of cosmic energy in the psyche of the practitioner". The word can also be traced to the root "**tatri**" which means "sustaining" or "lending support", hence can be understood in the sense of offering an exposition of some aspect of the Vedas. There are many fundamental concepts that are merely mentioned in the Vedas, and the exposition of these occurs in the Tantras.

5. Meaning of "Āgama"

"Āgama" is derived from the root "gam" which means "to go", the preposition "a" indicates a motion in the reverse direction; Hence the word "āgama" implies a handing down of knowledge from teacher to pupil in a disciplic succession - *sampradāya*.

6. Antiquity of the Pañcarātra Āgama.

There is evidence to show that the Puruṣa sūkta of the Rig Veda is the foundation of all later Vaiṣṇava philosophy. It has been established that the Bhāgavata religion predates both Jainism and Buddhism. *Vāsudeva* and *Baladeva* are both regarded as great personages in Jain literature and many references to the Bhāgavata religion can be found in Buddhist literature. In the Ghaṭa Jātaka, a brother of *Vāsudeva* is identified with the Buddha in a previous incarnation.

It is sometimes claimed that the worship of *Vāsudeva* as a God of Grace is not met with in the Vedic usage or in the Brāhmaṇas. The word *Vāsudeva* is encountered for the first time in the Taittiriya Araṇyaka in the 10 prapāṭhaka in the gāyatri;—

nārāyaṇāya vidmahe, vāsudevāya dhimahi tanno viṣṇu pracodayāt.

Here *Vāsudeva* is not only mentioned but is also identified with *Nārāyaṇa* and *Viṣṇu*. Some scholars claim that the 10 prapāṭhaka is a later addition. In the Chāṇḍogya Upaniṣad (iii-17.6,7) we come across a reference to a ṛṣi called *Ghōra Aṅgīrasa* and his pupil *Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa* who is none other than the Lord Kṛṣṇa of Mathura.

The Aṅgīrasa family to which this preceptor of the Chāṇḍogya Upaniṣad belonged is clearly associated with the *Bhojas* as mentioned in the Rik Veda iii-53-7. By studying the Epics, Purāṇas and the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa we understand that the Bhojas were a clan of the Sāttvatas, the tribe to which Kṛṣṇa belonged. It was for the protection of the Bhoja clan that Kṛṣṇa with the help of his brother Saṅkarṣaṇa overthrew Kaṁsa.

Pāṇini the great grammarian of the fifth century B.C.E. refers to *Vāsudevaka* as a person whose object of devotion is Vāsudeva. Megasthenes of the fourth century B.C.E. mentions in his *Indica* that Kṛṣṇa was worshipped as a God in Kleisobora (Kṛṣṇapura) and at Methora (Mathura).

There is also some epigraphical evidence to show that the Bhāgavata religion existed long before the C.E. In the famous Ghosūndī inscription the erection of a stone pūja enclosure (śilā-prākāra) for Saṅkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva at Nārāyaṇavāṭa is recorded.

The Besnagar column erected in the second century B.C.E. bears an inscription that states that a Garuḍa dhvaja of Vāsudeva the God of Gods was erected by Heliodorus the son of Dias a Greek ambassador who came from king Antialkidas to the court of Rāja Kāsiputa Bhagabhadra who was prospering in the fourteenth year of his reign. This proves beyond doubt that the Bhāgavata religion existed as an organised sect in the second century B.C.E. and that even alien Greeks were admitted into its fold.

In the Nanaghat cave inscription of Nāganikā dating back to the first or second century B.C.E. the names of Saṅkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva appear along with the names of other deities. This indicates that this Bhāgavata religion was even flourishing in the South of India.

7. Purpose of the Āgamas

The Āgamas and the Tantras in general are a class of literature dealing with Theology and the practical aspects of worship (*upāsana*) of the Supreme Being conceived of as having form and attributes. There are three sectarian groups of āgamas. They formulate three systems of practice which are characterized by three different schools of philosophy;

- śākta āgama; - advaita (monism)
- śaiva āgama; - śuddhadvaita (pure monism)
- vaiṣṇava āgama; - viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualism)

Although the actual philosophy differs there are many similarities in the actual practice between the Vaiṣṇava and the Śaiva āgamas.

8. Relationship Between the Āgamas & the Vedas

All the teachings of the āgamas claim the Vedas as their basis and origin. All the Pāñcarātra texts have the word "saṃhita" appended to them which indicates this fact. Traditional texts of the Pāñcarātra assert that it originated along with the Vedas — its source being the *Ekayāna śākha* of the Sukla Yajur Veda. Which is now no longer extant. This *Ekayāna śākha* is first mentioned in the Chāṇḍogya Upaniṣad where Nārada tells Sanatkumāra that he learnt this Ekāyana Science along with the Veda. The Vaiṣṇavas accept the Pāñcarātra as unquestionable authority, to the same degree as the Vedas, because their teachings are in perfect accordance with those of the Vedas.

Yāmunačārya has dealt with proving this in great length in the treatise known as "*āgama pramānyam*". Vedānta Deśika in his treatise *Pañcarātra-rakṣa* has also made it clear with discursive arguments that the Pāñcarātra is as authoritative as the Vedas.

The Vedas, especially the Brāhmanas, and Upaniṣads are dedicated to the investigation and approximate description of the Nature of the Absolute Reality, and the Āgamas on the other hand, are dedicated to the investigation and the most practical way to realise that Supreme Goal.

9. Classification of the Texts of the Pañcarātra.

The literature of the Pāñcarātra is very extensive and traditionally there are supposed to be 108 Saṃhitas. The total number of named texts is about 210, and there are two ways in which they are classified. One method is to classify them according to their source, and the other according to the deity on whom the text focuses attention.

Chart 1

Classification	Promulgator	Text
a. Divya	Lord Kṛṣṇa Himself;	The "three jewels" (ratna traya); Sāttvata, Pauṣkara, and Jayākhyā.
b. Muni-bhāṣita	Rishis	Isvara, Paramesvara, and Padma saṃhitas
c. Manuṣya-bhāṣita	an enlightened person	Bṛhad-brāhmaṇa saṃhita

Chart 2

Classification	Hypostatic Forms	Text
a. āgama-siddhānta	four vyuhas	Sāttvata saṃhita
b. Mantra-siddhānta	the nine or twelve forms of Viṣṇu	Pauṣkara saṃhita
c. Tantra-siddhānta	a single form of Lord Viṣṇu	Jayākhyā saṃhita
d. Tantrāntara-siddhānta	non-anthropomorphic forms of Viṣṇu e.g. Nṛsimha	Hayagrīva saṃhita

It is important to understand these differences so as not to confuse the different modes of worship which are prescribed in these texts. In addition to the Saṃhitas themselves there are various manuals and digests for practical use. (*viddhis* and *prayogas*).

10. Distribution of the Saṃhitas according to usage.

There are three Canons which are considered as the most important of all the Pāñcarātra literature and are known as the "The Three Jewels" Pauṣkara, Jayākhyā & Sāttvata; they each have a derivative text which is an elaboration and commentary, and are distributed amongst the three great Vaiṣṇava centers of the South. The Three Jewels and their derivative texts are distributed in practice as follows in the three main Vaiṣṇava pontifical seats;—

Temple	Primary Text	Derivative Text
Sriraṅgam	Pauṣkara	Parameśvara –amhita
Kāñchi	Jayākhyā	Pādma saṃhita
Melkote	Sāttvata	Īsvara saṃhita

The temple of Tirupati is the only major temple where the Vaikhānasa āgama is in vogue and not the Pāñcarātra.

11. Contents of the Texts.

The contents of all the Āgama śāstra fall under 4 broad headings called "pāda".

- a. **jñāna pāda** — deals with the philosophical doctrines, dogmas, metaphysics and cosmogenesis.
- b. **yoga pāda** — deals with spiritual practice and meditation.
- c. **kriya pāda** — treats of the construction of temples and the icons and other paraphernalia.
- d. **cārya pāda** — deals with festivals and all ritual worship associated with temples as well as the conduct and daily life of the Vaiṣṇavas.

Very few of the Samhitas actually deal with all the 4 topics, some of them focus on one particular topic, e.g.;

Saṃhita	Chief Focus
Kapinjala	expiatory rites.
Mārkaṇḍeya	initiation, selection of (temple) sites and festivals
Viśvamisra	festivals.
Viśvaksena	vessels to be used in the rites
Nārāyaṇa	yajñas or fire-sacrifices.
Lakṣmi	the Glory of Lakṣmi and her role in creation and redemption.
Ahimbudhnya	Theology, Cosmogony, Sudarśana Mantra, Yantra and Glory thereof.
Agastya	Installation of Icons
Kāśyapa	Poisonous-bites and their remedies
Ṣeṣa	Mantras

A more descriptive catalogue of the topics treated in the corpus of the Āgamas would be as follows:—

1. siddhānta — Philosophy,
2. śrṣṭi — Cosmogony
3. Brahma-jñāna — Theology

4. mantras — linguistic occultism
5. yantras — mystical diagrams for meditation
6. mudras — seals or gestures
7. yoga — spiritual practice
8. śilpa — architecture and sculpture
9. pratiṣṭha — consecration of temples
10. dikṣa — initiation of priests
11. dharma — rules of social conduct.
12. saṃskāra — sacraments and domestic observances
13. arcana — Daily temple ritual
14. utsavas — public festivals.
15. indrajāla — Practical occultism.
16. prāyaścittam — Atonements & Penances.

Principal Agamic Texts

1. **Ahimbudhnyā Samhita:** This is a fairly voluminous work with 3880 verses in 60 chapters. The specialty of this work is that it deals with the four vyuhas, or emanations of the lord, descriptions of several *mantras* (sacred syllables) and *yantras* (magic diagrams) as also rituals for curing diseases.
2. **Aniruddha Samhita:** Also called *Aniruddhasamhita-mahopanisad*, it has 34 chapters dealing entirely with descriptions of various rituals, methods of initiation, *prayascittas*, or expiations for sins, rules for making and installing the images of gods, and other similar topics.
3. **Hayasirsa Samhita:** A fairly exhaustive work in 144 chapters and distributed among 4 kandas, or sections-‘Pratistha-kanda’, ‘Sankarsana-kanda’, ‘Linga-kanda’ and ‘Saura-kanda’- it deals primarily with rituals concerning the installation of images of various minor deities as also the methods of their preparation.

4. **Isvara Samhita:** It is a work of 24 chapters of which 16 deal with ritualistic worship. Other subjects treated in this work are descriptions of images, methods of *diksa*, or spiritual initiation, practice of meditation, details regarding mantras, methods of self-control and the greatness of the Yadav Hill (now known as Melkote, a Vaisnava pilgrim centre on a hillock near Mysore, Karnataka).
5. **Jayakhya Samhita:** This work is one of the cardinal texts of Pancaratra literature. It has 33 patalas, or chapters, and deals with the following topics: a detailed account of creation; yogabhyasa (practice of yoga) and mantropasana (spiritual practice through the repetition of mantras, or sacred formulas); various Vaisnava mantras; puja (ritualistic worship) and homa (fire ritual); diksa (initiation); temples and worship there; acaras (codes of conduct) for Vaisnavas; and prayascittas, or expiations of sins.
6. **Kasyapa Samhita:** This is a comparatively small work in 12 chapters. It deals mainly with poisons and methods of remedy by suitable mantras, or incantations.
7. **Maha-sanatkumara Samhita:** This is a voluminous work of 10,000 verses spread over 40 sections in 4 chapters. It deals entirely with rituals of worship.
8. **Padma Samhita:** Dealing mainly with rituals and chanting of mantras, this work is in 31 chapters.
9. **Parama Samhita:** A work in 31 chapters, it deals with the process of creation; rituals of initiation and worship; and yoga classified as jnana yoga and karma yoga. It declares that *jnana yoga*, which includes *pranayama* and *samadhi*, is superior to karma yoga, which seems to mean ritualistic worship of Visnu.
10. **Paramesvara Samhita:** A short work of 15 chapters, it deals with meditation on mantras, sacrifices and methods of rituals as also prayascittas, or expiations.
11. **Parasara Samhita:** A concise work in 8 chapters, it deals with the methods of japa, or the muttering of the name of God.
12. **Pauskara Samhita:** Considered one of the earliest works of the Pancaratra system, this consists of 43 chapters. Apart from dealing with various kinds of image worship, it also contains certain philosophical views. It is interesting to note that some funeral sacrifices also find a place here.

13. **Sudarsana Samhita:** A treatise comprising 41 chapters, it deals mainly with meditation on mantras expiations of sins.
14. **Vihagendra Samhita:** It is in 24 chapters. Apart from meditation on mantras, it deals with sacrificial oblations. In the twelfth chapter, the topic of pranayama as a part of the process of worship is also described extensively.
15. **Vishnu Samhita:** A work in 30 chapters, it also deals mainly with ritualistic worship Its philosophy is akin to that of Sankhya with some variations like the purusa (the individual soul) being all-pervading and his activating prakrti to evolve into world.
16. **Visnu-tattva Samhita:** Comprising 39 chapters, it deals with image worship, ablutions and the wearing of Vaisnava marks, and some purificatory rites.