

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF VAIKHĀNĀSA TRADITION

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Abstract

The Vaikhānasa philosophy is a significant tradition within Vaishnavism, rooted in Vedic principles and centered on the worship of Viṣṇu. It aligns closely with a philosophy but retains distinct theological and ritualistic features. Prominent scholars like Śrīnivāsa-makhin also known as SrinivasaDikṣita contributed to its doctrinal development through works like *Lakṣmī-Viśiṣṭādvaita-bhāṣya* and *Mokṣopāya-pradīpikā*, which reconcile Vaikhānasa tenets with Vedantic teachings. The philosophy emphasizes devotion (bhakti) and surrender (prapatti) as means to liberation (mokṣa), with worship (archana), chanting (japa), fire sacrifices (huta), and meditation (dhyāna) forming key spiritual practices. A unique aspect is the distinction between Viṣṇu's formless (niṣkala) and manifest (sakala) aspects, with iconic worship regarded as the most effective path to divine realization. The concept of mokṣa includes attaining proximity to Viṣṇu, assuming divine form, and ultimate union with the supreme. The doctrine also elaborates on the three Reals (tattva-traya)—Īśvara (Supreme God), Prakṛti (nature), and Puruṣa (individual soul)—with liberation hinging on devotion to Viṣṇu as the absolute reality. The philosophy acknowledges Lakṣmī as inseparable from Viṣṇu, reinforcing the theological foundation of Lakṣmī-Viśiṣṭādvaita. Vaikhānasa philosophy integrates ritualistic worship with deep metaphysical insights, offering a structured spiritual path rooted in Vedic and Upanishadic traditions.

Keywords: Vaikhānasa philosophy, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Mokṣa, Bhakti, Prapatti, Archana, Japa, Huta, Dhyāna, Viṣṇu, Lakṣmī, Nārāyaṇa, Vaikhānasa texts, Vedic rituals, iconic worship, Sakala, Niṣkala, liberation, Vedantic tradition.

Introduction

The Vaikhānasa tradition is a significant sect within Vaishnavism that integrates Vedic principles with a structured mode of worship centered with Lord Vishnu. It is established as an independent philosophical system and aligns closely with the Visishtadvaita school of thought, emphasizing both dharma (a way of life) and darsana (a worldview). This tradition, deeply rooted in Vedic scriptures, is attributed to Sage Vikhanasa Muni, who received divine instructions from Lord Vishnu to systematize Viṣṇu-worship practices in this world.

The philosophical works, such as *Lakṣmī-ViśiṣṭādvaitaBhāṣya* and *Mokṣopaya-Pradīpikā*, attempt to reconcile Vaikhānasa doctrines with broader Vedantic teachings while maintaining the sect's unique ritualistic and theological perspectives. The core of Vaikhānasa philosophy revolves around worship (arcana) as the supreme means of attaining

mokṣa (liberation), with other forms of spiritual discipline—Japa (chanting), Huta (fire sacrifices), and Dhyāna (meditation)—acting as complementary practices.

A distinguishing feature of the Vaikhānasa system is its emphasis on both *Niṣkala* (formless) and *Sakala* (manifest) aspects of the divine. While acknowledging the transcendental nature of Viṣṇu, it asserts that the most effective spiritual path is through *iconic worship*, where devotion to Viṣṇu in His *Archa* form leads to ultimate liberation. This synthesis of ritual practice and Vedantic philosophy highlights the Vaikhānasa approach as a unique and enduring spiritual tradition.

Vaikhānasa as a Religious System

The Vaikhānasa is essentially a religious system, but it also has a philosophical viewpoint of its own. However, that it was both a way of life (dharma) and

an outlook (darśana) was known to the medieval smṛti-writers.

वैखानसोवानप्रस्थोत्तद्धर्मप्रतिपादकशास्त्रदर्शनेस्थितः।

(Manusmṛti 6.21)

Vaikhānasa Texts and Scholars

An effort to reconstruct Vaikhānasa philosophy in alignment with its Vedic roots and its endorsement of iconic worship was undertaken by ŚrīnivāsaMakhin (also known as Śrīnivāsa-Dīkshita) in his commentary on the renowned Śārīrakasūtras, which form part of the Vedantic canon. This commentary, known as the Lakṣmī-Viśiṣṭādvaita-bhāṣya, followed the general framework of Viśiṣṭādvaita but introduced several distinctions. Śrīnivāsa-makhin, a prolific scholar, was honored with titles such as 'Sarva-tantra-svatantra' and 'Kavi-kula-tilaka'. His other works include Vaikhānasa-mahimā-mañjarī, and he is also credited with the Paramātmikopaniṣad-bhāṣya. Additionally, a later Vārtika, probably a commentary on the Śārīraka-sūtras, is attributed to him. Furthermore, another text, Uttama-brahma-vidyā, was written by a Śrīnivāsa, often identified with the same commentator.

These works collectively articulated the essence of Vaikhānasa philosophy. However, the most concise and systematic presentation of Vaikhānasa thought is found in Mokṣopāya-pradīpikā. The authorship of this work remains uncertain, except for the name RaghupatiBhaṭṭhācārya, also known as Vasudeva (Vasudevāparanāmā). The text reflects the influence of classical Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy, as evidenced by its selection of topics such as 'Arthapañchaka', 'Tattva-traya', and 'Siddha-sāddhyopāya'. It also emphasizes fundamental mantras like the 'Mūla-mantra', 'Dvaya', and 'Charama-shloka'. However, the work remains firmly rooted in Vaikhānasa scriptures and addresses these matters independently.

Written in Sanskrit prose, Mokṣopāya-pradīpikā consists of twelve sections (prakaraṇas) of varying lengths and claims to be a compilation of extracts from the works of Śrīnivāsa-makhin. However, it does

not provide references to the original passages. Much of its content appears to be derived from Lakṣmī-Viśiṣṭādvaita-bhāṣya, Uttama-brahma-vidyā, and Vaikhānasa-mahimā-mañjarī. The text also cites numerous Vedic and Upaniṣadic statements, some for the first time, but again without indicating their sources. An edition in Telugu script was published in 1948 by DiviVenkatanarasimhācārya as part of the Vaikhānasa-bhagavacchashtra-granthamālā series, based on an earlier edition from 1905 printed in grantha script at the Lakṣmī-vilāsa Press in Trichy (Tri-sirah-pura).

The text begins with a brief account of the origin of the Vaikhānasa scriptures and traces the lineage of Vaikhānasa teachers from the time of the four sages (Bhrgu and others) to relatively recent times. The author makes the unique claim that Viṣṇu imparted to the sage Vikhānas not only the Vaikhānasa-Śāstra but also the 'Mūla-mantra' and 'Dvaya', which are central to Śrī-Vaiṣṇava worship. This assertion is supported by a citation from the Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa. However, it is noteworthy that the Vrddha-harita-saṁhitā, a Pāñcharātra text, identifies three types of Viṣṇu worship: Śrauta (Vedic), Smārta, and Āgamic (involving the Mūla-mantra). This classification distinctly separates the Vedic Vaikhānasa tradition from the Āgamic Pāñcharātra approach.

The second section, titled 'Artha-pañchaka', examines five fundamental coordinates:

The objective to be attained (Prāpya, i.e., Brahman)

The seeker pursuing this objective (Prāptr, i.e., the individual soul or jīva)

The means of attainment (Prāpti-upāya)

The purpose or benefit of attainment (Phala)

The obstacles to attainment (Prāpti-virodhi)

Brahman (Paramātman) is described as both 'Nishkala' (without form and qualities) and 'Sakala' (with form). The Sakala aspect, associated with Lakṣmī (Prakṛti), is considered essential for devotion, giving rise to the term Lakṣmī-Viśiṣṭādvaita, which characterizes the Vaikhānasa version of Viśiṣṭādvaita. Although Brahman is ultimately one,

both aspects are indistinguishable (Advaita), but the Sakala aspect is more relevant for devotion.

Pratyagātman

The individual soul (Pratyagātman) falls into three categories: Nitya (eternal beings like Ananta and Sanaka), Mukta (liberated souls) and Baddha-Jīva (bound souls).

Nitya souls are never in bondage, whereas Mukta souls have attained liberation through devotion and worship. Baddha souls, on the other hand, remain bound due to beginningless ignorance (Anādyavidyā) and undergo cycles of birth and rebirth. Liberation is achieved through total surrender (Prapatti) and worship of God.

The second section also discusses the three Reals (Tattva-traya): Īśvara (Supreme God), associated with Lakṣmī, Prakṛti (material and spiritual nature), Puruṣa (individual souls).

A scriptural passage, 'Dvāvetaupakshi, acaramcarantau', is cited to describe the relationship between Paramātman (God) and Pratyagātman (the individual soul). The phrase 'acaram' (immovable) refers to Prakṛti, distinguishing it from the two 'birds' (Paramātman and Jīva), which are dynamic. Prakṛti is further classified into material (eightfold: five elements, mind, intellect, and ego) and spiritual (the individual souls). Material Prakṛti is threefold: the three guṇas (Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas), time, and pure existence (Śuddha-Sattva).

Īśvara, as the Supreme Brahman, serves as both the material and efficient cause of all creation and is identified with Nārāyaṇa. Vaikhānasas, who worship this form of God, are considered qualified by birth to adopt the path of total surrender (Prapatti), as emphasized by Śrīnivāsa Makhin in Vaikhānasa-mahimā-mañjarī. The concept of Nārāyaṇa as a 'ready means' (Siddhāpāya) distinguishes it from alternative methods (Sādhyopāya) such as knowledge, worship, self-dedication, and ritualistic actions.

The Role of Lakṣmī in Vaikhānasa Philosophy

A word about the Lakṣmī-viśiṣṭādvaita-bhāṣya of Srinivasa-makhin, which crystallized the

philosophical position of the Vaikhānasas. The title of the work suggests the doctrine that Vishnu alone, and only as distinguished by Lakshmi (Lakshmi-viśiṣṭa-Narayana) is the highest reality (ekaevaparatatva). It is possible that the author took his clue from the prescription in Vaikhānasa-sūtra:

तस्मात्तयाश्रियासार्धपूजयेत्पुरुषोत्तमम्।

Lakṣmī is not therefore to be regarded as an independent reality (tatva), but as inseparable from Nārāyaṇa. We have the description in the Vaikhānasa scriptures that Śrī (Lakṣmī) and Śrīśa (Nārāyaṇa) are related to each other as moon and moon-light are:

श्रीश्रीश्चयोस्तुसंबन्धःचन्द्रचन्द्रिकयोरिव।

The word Nārāyaṇa is taken to signify the ultimate refuge or support of the entire host of all the individual souls ('nara-sab-denajivānām samūhahprochyatebudhaih; teshamayana-bhūtatvānnārāyaṇaihochyate;.). The individual souls (jīvas) are numerous and are by nature 'non-destructible' ('nariṣyati, nanaśyatiitinarah'). If 'praṇava (om-kara consisting of three units 'a', 'u' and 'ma') signifies Brahma or Nārāyaṇa, it is because the utterance inclines the individual soul towards Nārāyaṇa ('nārāyaṇa-pravaṇatvat'; the word 'pravaṇa' for inclination has become camouflaged as 'praṇava', even as the word 'paśyaka' for seer has become 'kaśyapa'). The first unit 'a' represents Vishṇu ('akārovai Vishnu') the second unit 'u' represents Lakshmi or Prakṛti, and the third unit 'ma' represents the in-dividual soul (from 'mana avabodhane', 'to know'; the jiva possessing the faculty of cognition), who is the servant of the deities represented by the two earlier units ('makārastayordāsah').

Brahman

The term 'tattva' (that-ness) refers to the mode of Brahman's being. Brahman, the supreme self, is identified as Nārāyaṇa.

To understand this mode is to attain jñāna (gnosis), and those who possess such knowledge are

called 'Brahman-knowers'. Thus, the supreme self—also known as paramātmā or Brahman—is the object of knowledge (jñeya), while the individual soul (jīvātman) is the knower (jñātr). The Vedic scriptures constitute the body of this knowledge (jñāna).

Brahman, the supreme self or Nārāyaṇa, possesses a dual nature: 'unpected' (niṣkala) and 'pected' (sakala). The unpected form is all-encompassing, leaving nothing outside of itself. It pervades everything internally and externally, much like ghee in milk, oil in sesame seeds, fragrance in flowers, juice in fruits, and fire in wood. As an all-pervasive presence, it is akin to ākāśa (space). Within the body, it exists without being limited to the body, yet it pervades it. Viṣṇu is named as such because he pervades all existence. He is both visible and invisible, supremely radiant and pure, immutable, beyond thought and measurement, devoid of qualities, motionless, without origin or end, changeless, without a second, indescribable, and beyond human cognition. Due to his extreme subtlety, he cannot be strictly categorized as either real or unreal, as understood by the Brahman-knowers.

Viṣṇu's 'pected' nature manifests when devotees churn his presence within their hearts through contemplation and devotion. Though inherently 'unpected', he assumes the 'pected' form, just as fire emerges from wood when churned. Like sparks radiating from a burning fire, he manifests in various forms (such as Brahma, Śiva, etc.). Just as a potter molds different objects (such as pots and plates) from clay placed on a wheel, Viṣṇu appears in diverse forms according to the devotee's perception.

Viṣṇu is, in truth, all things and all forms. He is the soul that pervades all bodies and is responsible for the creation, preservation, and dissolution of everything. The sacred texts proclaim that Agni (the fire god) is the lowest of the deities, whereas Viṣṇu is the highest, with all other divinities existing within this spectrum. Viṣṇu is the primary form, the supreme

spirit, the Puruṣa—the creator, preserver, and destroyer of all things.

The individuals are different from The Lord.

Viṣṇu's power and radiance are embodied in Śrī (Lakṣmī), who is eternal and without beginning or end. Her form is subtle and beyond comprehension, and her bliss is everlasting. She represents the fundamental nature (mūla-prakṛti) and the force behind all existence (śakti). She is both the creative power (māyā) and the one who possesses it (mayi), with Vishnu as her counterpart. Together, they are the eternal Prakṛti and Puruṣa, from whom all worldly processes emerge.

All transformations in nature originate from Prakṛti. It is Prakṛti that initiates actions and facilitates their execution by living beings. Puruṣa, on the other hand, is the cause of the pleasures and pains that beings experience. Residing within Prakṛti, Puruṣa undergoes the effects of its qualities.

Prakṛti is divided into two categories: the 'living' and the 'non-living.' The 'non-living' aspect consists of eight elements: manas (mind), buddhi (individual awareness), ahaṁkāra (ego), and the five primary material components (earth, water, fire, air, and ākāśa). The 'living' aspect is represented by the individual soul (jīva). The Puruṣas are always linked with Prakṛti, and the individual souls (kṣhetrajñas) residing in it are numerous. Though eternal, they are entangled in beginningless ignorance, leading to various forms of embodiment based on past karmic actions. As a result, they experience the consequences of their previous deeds in their present lives.

The individual Ātmā

The individual soul (jīvātmā) is dark like collyrium, inherently pure, full of knowledge, and atomic in size, yet all-pervading. It enters the body and performs both good and bad actions. These actions fall into two categories: those related to the material world (aiḥika) and those that lead to liberation (āmuṣmika). The former includes routine activities like eating,

drinking, moving, and dressing, while the latter involves virtuous deeds such as non-violence, charity, righteous conduct, service to others, and devotion to God. Through these meritorious acts, the soul, upon death, transitions to other realms, where it enjoys the rewards of its deeds before moving into the ākāśa realm.

Upon departing from the body and entering the ākāśa realm, the individual soul transforms into air, then fire, then smoke, and finally enters water. It becomes part of a cloud, descends as rain, and merges with the plant world. From there, it becomes part of food, which enters the reproductive substances of males and females. The soul then enters the appropriate body, undergoes development in the womb, and is eventually born. This cycle establishes the relationship between the soul (kshetrajñā) and the body (kshetra), perpetuating the endless cycle of transmigration (samsāra) across different forms of existence.

Once the soul and body are united, attachments arise in the form of attraction between sexes. Deluded by God's māyā, the soul indulges in desire, hatred, greed, lust, arrogance, envy, and violence, leading to repeated births and suffering. Since this bondage is caused by God's māyā, one must seek liberation by surrendering to God and worshipping Him with devotion.

God, being compassionate, is easily pleased by devotion and liberates the devotee from māyā's grasp. The devotee then attains perfect knowledge (samyag-jñāna) and continues performing duties in accordance with their station in life while worshipping God. Through this devotion, the individual soul, submerged in the ocean of samsāra, ultimately has a vision of God (Nārāyaṇa). As a result, God grants divine realms for the soul's residence, thereby fulfilling its purpose.

From God emerges the golden 'egg' that contains all other symbolic 'eggs' representing various realms of existence. Above all these realms is the Vaiṣṇavānda, which is beyond human thought and even difficult for gods to perceive. Only the pure,

wise, and liberated can experience it. This supreme region consists of four Vishnu-realms—Amoda, Pramoda, Sammoda, and Vaikunṭha—each higher than the previous. In the Amoda realm, Viṣṇu resides as Viṣṇu, in Pramoda as Mahā-Viṣṇu, in Sammoda as Sadā-Viṣṇu, and in Vaikunṭha as Lord Nārāyaṇa.

Mokṣa

Mokṣa refers to liberation from all forms of bondage in samsara. It involves attaining one of four states through devotion: residing in the same realm as god (sālokya), staying in close proximity to godhead (sāmīpya), obtaining the same form as god (sārūpya), and uniting with godhead (sāyujya). These states are achieved upon reaching the four Viṣṇu realms: Amoda, Pramoda, Sāmoda, and Vaikunṭha. The final state represents eternal bliss, complete fulfilment, uninterrupted communion with godhead, and entry into the supreme light.

Seeking complete refuge in godhead takes four forms: continuous chanting of god's glory (japa), fire-oblations (huta), iconic worship (arcana), and focused contemplation (dhyāna). Japa involves the repeated recitation of Vishnu hymns from the Rgveda or the eight-lettered mantra (aṣṭākṣara) to center one's mind on godhead.

Huta entails making offerings into the sacred fire as prescribed by tradition. Archana refers to worshipping the divine image at home or in a temple following Vedic rituals. Dhyāna is the contemplation of God as the supreme self, following the eight-limbed yoga system while distinguishing between godhead's unmanifest (niṣkala) and manifest (sakala) aspects.

Among these, iconic worship is considered the highest, as it serves as a means to attain all goals. In this practice, god assumes a fivefold form. The five primary elements (bhūta), including ākāśa, correspond to godhead's five forms, as do the five ritual fires (sabhya, āhavanīya, anvāharya, gārhapatya, and āvasathya) and the five vital currents (prāṇa, etc.). The five forms of godhead are Viṣṇu, Puruṣa, Satya, Acyuta, and Aniruddha, with

Viṣṇu as the primordial form (adimūrti) and the other four as its variations.

According to the Vedic texts, Brahman is described as 'four-footed,' with the four feet being dharma, jñāna, aiśvarya, and vairāgya. From Viṣṇu, the primordial form, the other four forms arise, each emphasizing one of these four aspects: Puruṣa is associated with dharma, Satya with jñāna, Achyuta with aiśvarya, and Aniruddha with vairāgya. These four forms correspond to Viṣṇu, Maha-Viṣṇu, Sada-Viṣṇu, and Vyāpi-Nārāyaṇa.

Proper understanding of these five forms must be acquired through the teachings of a guru, contemplated upon using the eight-limbed yoga method, and invoked and worshipped accordingly.

The human body extends to 96 aṅgulas, measured using one's own fingers, while the life-force (prāṇa) typically extends an additional twelve aṅgulas. However, through the practice of prāṇāyāma, it contracts to match the body's dimensions. The middle of the body (deha-madhyā) is located two aṅgulas above the anus. Within this region lies a golden-hued triangle, the domain of Agni. At its center is the 'Person-of-sacrifice' (yajñamūrti), depicted according to Agni's iconography—golden-colored, two-headed, four-horned, six-eyed, seven-armed, three-footed, and clothed in yellow garments.

Nine aṅgulas above this is the kanda-sthāna, the bulbous root of individual existence. At its center is a wheel with twelve spokes, upon which the individual soul (jīva), supported by the life-force (prāṇa), moves about, influenced by merit and demerit, akin to a spider navigating its web.

Adjacent to the kanda-sthāna, above the navel, resides the kuṇḍalinī energy, which spreads in all directions and comprises the eight-fold 'nature.' It is coiled like a serpent, blocking the upward passage of the suṣumṇā channel, with its hoods symbolizing Brahmā and Rudra.

Above the navel, at a height of twelve aṅgulas (a long span or vitasti), is the heart (hṛdaya), the

foundational seat of everything. Within the heart lies the solar orb, within which burns a thousand-flamed fire. At its core appears Viṣṇu, depicted with traditional iconographic features—golden-hued like the rising sun, adorned with the śrīvatsa mark, four-armed, holding a conch and discus in his upper hands, displaying the gesture of protection with his lower right hand while resting his left hand on his hip. His appearance is peaceful, adorned with auspicious ornaments, and accompanied by his consorts.

Further above, at the tip of the nose, resides the lunar orb, radiating like pure crystal with white rays and exuding nectar. At its center is Nārāyaṇa, whose complexion mirrors that of a pure crystal. He is four-armed, adorned with the śrīvatsa mark, dressed in yellow garments, and has a beatific countenance. He is accompanied by his consorts and a retinue of deities.

At the top of the head, at the apex of the suṣumṇā channel, lies the gateway to liberation (mukti-dvāra). Here, the lotus of the head (śirah-padma) is found, with sixteen downward-facing petals and an upward-pointing stalk. In this location, Vasudeva must be contemplated as the ruler of this domain, immersed in a thousand streams of flowing nectar.

The heart-lotus (hṛdaya-kamala), measuring twelve aṅgulas, emerges from the bulbous root (kanda). Its stalk is liberating wisdom, its petals are the eight accomplishments (siddhis), its inner tube is prakṛti, and its filament is knowledge. Typically facing downward, this lotus, through the practice of prāṇāyāma, opens up and turns upward. Within its inner tube, a great fire arises, radiating sparks in all directions and illuminating the entire body from feet to head with its heat.

At the core of this fire resides the resplendent form of Vishnu, the supreme self, abiding in the heart. He is accompanied by Śrī and Bhū on either side. His form is golden-hued, draped in yellow garments, with lotus-like eyes and four arms. In his hands, he holds a conch, a discus, the gesture of protection, and rests

one hand on his hip. He is adorned with the Śrīvatsa jewel, and his pleasant face glows with a pure smile.

Through contemplation and the eye of wisdom, the devotee perceives this divine form of Viṣṇu. As the all-pervasive Viṣṇu is stirred by contemplation, he manifests in all his radiant splendour. This is the 'aspected' (sakala) nature of Vishnu. The devotee must visualize, invoke, and worship him, as enjoined by the Vedic hymn "*pravahpantam*", which prescribes the daily worship of Vishnu.

Conclusion

Thus, the Vaikhānasa philosophy is a unique integration of Vedantic thought and structured worship practices centered on Lord Vishnu. While it aligns closely with the Viśiṣṭādvaita school, it emphasizes devotion through rituals such as Archana (worship), Japa (chanting), Huta (fire sacrifices), and Dhyāna (meditation) as the primary means of attaining Mokṣa (liberation).

A main feature of Vaikhānasa tradition is its recognition of both the formless (Niṣkala) and manifest (Sakala) aspects of the divine, asserting that devotion to Vishnu in his iconic form leads to ultimate liberation. The philosophy maintains that Vishnu, in association with Lakshmi, is the supreme reality (Lakṣmī-Viśiṣṭādvaita), and total surrender (Prapatti) is the surest path to salvation.

Vaikhānasa thought also categorizes existence into three fundamental realities—Īśvara (Supreme God), Prakṛti (material nature), and Puruṣa (individual souls). Liberation is achieved when the soul recognizes its dependence on Vishnu and engages in devoted service. Through structured worship and spiritual discipline, the Vaikhānasa tradition seeks to harmonize Vedic principles with accessible devotional practices, ensuring a path to spiritual enlightenment and eternal communion with the divine.

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