



UNIVERSITY OF
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The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation
Centre for Buddhist Studies



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF ARTS & SCIENCE

Department for the Study of Religion

Vaikunṭha

Conference Schedule



Room 317, Jackman Humanities Institute,
170 St. George Street, Toronto.
December 1-2, 2022.

Conference Convener

Srilata Raman

Professor of Hinduism
(University of Toronto)

Conference Coordinator

Jinesh Patel

Ph.D. Student, University of Toronto
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Abstract

This two-day conference will consider the concept of a Hindu heaven—Vaikuṅṭha—through the lens of textual literature of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community. As with several other Hindu theistic traditions, Śrīvaiṣṇavism closely associates ideas of heaven or hell with those of salvation. Through systematic theology building on a range of scriptural and devotional works spanning nearly 2000 years (vedic, epic, purāṇic, and post-purāṇic), Śrīvaiṣṇavaism has conceived of salvation as an entry into Viṣṇu's dwelling—depicted as a paradisaical cityscape, Vaikuṅṭha – where the benefits of opulence, proximity, community and infinite bliss can be experienced for eternity, in all their totality. There is a long textual tradition of the depiction of Vaikuṅṭha from Sanskrit mythic sources to the ecstatic Tamil poetry of the Divyaprabandham to the praise-poems and esoteric secret literature of the tradition's most important teachers. This symposium seeks to examine the genealogies and instantiation of Vaikuṅṭha as a place on heaven and on earth within the context of the history of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community.

In his path-breaking study of Buddhist heavenly and earthly utopias in his 1998 book, "Nirvāṇa and Other Buddhist Felicities" Steve Collins provided us with a wide-ranging textual study the intellectual and cultural world of Pāli literature, the Pāli imaginaire as he called it. The study shows us that the ultimate, soteriological goal of nirvāṇa was but one among manifold "felicities" in Buddhism. Thus, the book pays attention to both worldly felicities as well as Buddhist heavens, to utopian narratives as well as millennial thought in Theravada Buddhism. He also makes the claim that "any notion of eternal bliss, whether timeless or endless, Buddhist or Christian, or of any other kind, cannot coherently become an object of imagination articulated in a narrative". In this symposium on a non-Buddhist heaven, the Vaiṣṇava/Śrīvaiṣṇava Vaikuṅṭha, the panelists will also engage with and debate Collin's work, particularly the non-narratability of utopia in relation to life in Viṣṇu's paradise.

Day One

9:45

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Prof. Srilata Raman

10:00 -
11:00

Paper One - Vaikuntam Pukuvatu Maṅṅavar Vitiyē:

The journey to Vaikuṅṭha in Tiruvāymoḷi 10.9

Dr. Suganya Anandakichenin (University of Hamburg)

- Coffee/Tea Break -

11:15-
12:15

Paper Two - Pāñcarātrikas on their way to Vaikuṅṭha:
Catching a glimpse into the formation of Śrīvaiṣṇavism

Dr. Marion Rastelli (Austrian Academy of Sciences)

12:15-
1:15

Paper Three - Visions of Vaikuṅṭha: Salvation in
Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa's Supreme Abode

Dr. Sucharita Adluri (Cleveland State University)

- Lunch -

2:15-
3:15

Paper Four - The Significance of Vaikuṅṭha in Rāmānuja's
Śrīvaikuṅṭhagadyam and Nityagrantham

Dr. Francis X. Clooney, SJ (Harvard University)

- Coffee/Tea Break -

3:30-
4:30

Paper Five - How Many Heavens? Vaikuṅṭha and the Many Felicities of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Afterlife
Dr. Srilata Raman (University of Toronto)

Day Two

9:00-
10:00

Paper Six - The Supreme Realm of Vishnu: The Vaikuṅṭha Perumal Temple in Kanchipuram and Preah Visnulok
Dr. Vasudha Narayanan (University of Florida)

- Coffee/Tea Break -

10:15-
11:15

Paper Seven - Life after Liberation: Vedāntadeśika's Tamil Portrayal of Vaikuṅṭha in the Paramapatasōpāṇam
Dr. Manasicha Akepiyapornchai
(University of Texas, Austin)

11:15-
12:15

Paper Eight - The Multisensorial Experience of Vaikuṅṭha in Veṅkaṭanātha's works
Dr. Elisa Freschi (University of Toronto)

12:15-
1:00

Nirvāṇa and Other Non-Buddhist Felicities: How do we place the textual sources on Vaikuṅṭha within the context of a critical perspective on Steve Collin's work?

1-1:15

Closing Remarks
Prof. Srilata Raman

- Farewell Lunch -

Our Speakers

Vaikuntam Pukuvatu Maṇṇavar Vitiyē: The journey to Vaikuṅṭha in Tiruvāymoli 10.9

Dr. Suganya Anandakichenin, University of Hamburg

In Tiruvāymoli 10.9, Nammalvār (ca. 9th century) describes the tamar (“His people”) travelling through what the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas later refer to as the arcirādi path to reach Vaikuṅṭha, the locus of liberation. Probably rightly referred to as anyāpadeśam (in which the Ālvār attributes his own experience to another), this decade offers us a vivid description of the various landscapes, people, sounds, smells, and so forth, which appeals to all our senses, by giving the devoted listener a sample of what is to come. This travelogue of sorts, a veritable “Vaikunta-v-ārṛuppaṭai”, switches to the point of view of the receiving Ātivāhikas in the Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators’ works (ca. 12th to 15th centuries) and depicts their eagerness to welcome the newly liberated soul who is approaching. The reasons for their alacrity to serve them—as stated by the commentators—also bring out the qualities that make one eligible for such a high place/state. This paper will explore this last but one decade of the Tiruvāymoli and the corresponding passages from the Īṭu Bhagavadviṣayam commentary by Nampiḷḷai (13th c.?) as they map the progress and metamorphosis of the mumukṣu into a mukta.

Pāñcarātrikas on their way to Vaikuṅṭha: Catching a glimpse into the formation of Śrīvaiṣṇavism

Dr. Marion Rastelli, Austrian Academy of Sciences

In a paper published several years ago (On the concept of Vaikuṅṭha in Viśiṣṭādvaitavedānta and Pāñcarātra, Cracow Indological Studies IV-V [2002/2003]), I showed that the notion of the heavenly world Vaikuṅṭha only gradually found entrance into the Pāñcarātra Saṃhitās, and that this did not occur earlier than the 12th c. CE.

In this paper, I will explore the Śrīpraśnasamhitā, a Pāñcarātra Saṃhitā that was composed a few centuries later, probably after Vedānta Deśika’s lifetime, that is, in the 14th c. at the earliest. In this Saṃhitā, the notion of Vaikuṅṭha is already fully integrated into its theological and ritual concepts. In addition, the text also mentions other teachings and rituals often considered characteristic of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, but that probably did not have their origin in the Pāñcarātra tradition, such as the five forms (prakāra) of God (para, vyūha, vibhava, antaryāmin, arcā), the five saṃskāras (tāpa, puṇḍra, nāman, mantra, yāga), and taking refuge (śaraṇāgati).

The paper will offer a thorough examination of the notions related to Vaikuṅṭha presented in the Śrīpraśnasamhitā. In addition, it will attempt to shed light on the historical background of the text, the community in which it was composed, and which followed it, and on the manifold concepts incorporated into this text from various sources. In this way, the Śrīpraśnasamhitā might serve as a case study for discerning and understanding the specific role played by the concept of Vaikuṅṭha in the formation of Śrīvaiṣṇavism.

Visions of Vaikuṅṭha: Salvation in Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa's Supreme Abode

Dr. Sucharita Adluri, Cleveland State University

In Śrīvaiṣṇavism Vaikuṅṭha is imagined as the one of the 108 beloved places (divyadeśa). Distinct yet in some sense, homologous to pilgrimage sites that comprise the sacred geography of this tradition, it was the ultimate goal of all liberative practices. While the theological commentaries argued its ontological reality and soteriological significance the Śrīvaiṣṇava devotional works provide emotionally-charged and visually descriptive formulations of Viṣṇu's abode that manifests his magnificent glory. Comparing Rāmānuja's (~11th CE) discussions and descriptions of Vaikuṅṭha in his theo-philosophical works and in his devotional prose hymn the Vaikuṅṭhagadya including its attendant commentaries by Periyāvāccān Piḷḷai (12h-13th CE) and Vedānta Deśika (13th-14th CE), this paper maps a comprehensive vision of the philosophical and devotional articulations of Viṣṇu's supreme heaven as the goal of salvation in the early history of this tradition.

The Significance of Vaikuṅṭha in Rāmānuja's Contemplative Theology

Dr. Francis X. Clooney, Harvard University

Vaikuṅṭha, as the highest abode (paramaṁ padam) is not a prominent focus in Rāmānuja's main writings, though there are intimations of the concept and imagery of this supreme place — as it were, the realm of the glory of the Lord — in the Vedārthasaṃgraha, Śrībhāṣya, and Gītābhāṣya. But Vaikuṅṭha receives particular and practical notice in two of his less noted works. In the Srivaikuṅṭhagadyam, the third of his gadyas, an elaborate description of Vaikuṅṭha, seen by yogic meditation (dhyānayoga), prepares the way for the act of taking refuge with the Lord. The contemplation of Vaikuṅṭha serves to maximize the reader's appreciation of refuge, now enacted eternally in the ideal locale. In the Nityagrantham, Rāmānuja's manual of daily worship, two central sections of the worship mark off the worshipper's mental ascent to the abode of the Lord and descent back to the worshipper's place for daily pūjā. In this way the local, daily worship is set within a cosmic frame extending even to the parama padam, Vaikuṅṭha. This paper adverts to but intentionally does not focus on the commentary on the Śrīvaikuṅṭhagadyam by Periyāvāccānpiḷḷai and the brief treatment of it by Vedānta Deśika in his Gadyatrayabhāṣyam. It does, however, note interesting precedents for Rāmānuja's developing contemplative theology of Vaikuṅṭha in the Stotraratna of Yāmuna. This paper is also indebted to Gerhard Oberhammer's observations on Vaikuṅṭha in Rāmānuja's writings, and at least brief mention will be made of the role of "heaven" in Christian contemplative theology.

How Many Heavens? Vaikuṅṭha and the Many Felicities of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Afterlife

Dr. Srilata Raman, University of Toronto

In this paper I deal with the apparent paradox of Viṣṇu's highest dwelling place being more than one abode. In several epic and purāṇic sources, most notably in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa (6.4) and in the Nārāyaṇīya (MBh. 12.326.20-39) Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa's place of dwelling is the Ocean of Milk, Kṣīrasāgara, sometimes also in a white island, Śvetadvīpa, in the midst of that ocean. In the Śrīvaiṣṇava imaginary, at least in late texts, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa presents himself in the Ocean of Milk together with Śrī and other divine consorts almost identically to his appearance in Vaikuṅṭha. This paper asks us to consider how the existence of two, or perhaps even more abodes, might be doctrinally understood and reconciled within Śrīvaiṣṇavism. Who, apart from Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa himself, might be the inhabitants of these abodes, who are the wayfarers who reach them and what does this say about their soteriological significance in themselves and in relation to each other? Inasmuch as Vaikuṅṭha is treated of in the Śrīvaiṣṇava literature as the ultimate destination of Śrīvaiṣṇavas, what does the existence of several abodes tell us about its relative superiority? In posing these questions the paper also takes into account Collin's (1998) distinction between nirvāṇa as an ending of time, on the one hand, and heavenly utopias (devalokas), where time does not end, on the other, to think through how we are to conceptualize Vaikuṅṭha and the other heavenly abodes in the Śrīvaiṣṇava textual traditions.

The Supreme Realm of Vishnu: The Vaikuntha Perumal Temple in Kanchipuram and Preah Vishnulok (Angkor Wat)

Dr. Vasudha Narayanan, University of Florida

My paper explores how the Vaikuntha Perumal temple and Angkor Wat (popularly known in Khmer culture as Preah Vishnulok or the sacred Land of Vishnu) are considered to be the abodes of Vishnu. Nandivarman Pallavamalla built the Vaikuntha-Perumal Temple (Paramesvara Vinnakaram/Vishnu-griha) in Kanchipuram around 770 CE and several centuries later, in around 1135, Suryavarman II, whose posthumous name was Parama Vishnuloka, built Angkor Wat. Although these are the only two Vishnu temples which have three floors and are west-facing, Angkor Wat is a unique product of the Khmer genius. Surrounded by a moat filled with water, like Vaikuntha encircled by the Viraja river, one could see why it is called Preah Vishnulok. Does the eight-armed Vishnu who is said to have been the primary deity in Angkor invoke connections with Kanchipuram or the Bhagavata Purana? In what ways did these places of piety also function as state-temples or places of power? I will address several questions including these and argue that both sides of the monsoon-basin were probably plugged into a larger network of cultural connections from which they drew ideas, concepts, and an ideology of architecture which are associated with Vishnu's supreme realm.

Life after Liberation: Vedāntadeśika's Tamil Portrayal of Vaikuṅṭha in the Paramapatasōpānam

Manasicha Akepiyapornchai, University of Texas

In this paper, I explore Vedāntadeśika's characterization of liberation and the status of liberated souls in Vaikuṅṭha in his Tamil composition, the Paramapatasōpānam. I specifically compare Vedāntadeśika's portrayal of the souls and their relationships to God in Vaikuṅṭha with his philosophical understanding of the status of the souls based on Sanskrit and Tamil scriptures in chapter 22 on the complete enjoyment of God (paripūrṇabrahmānubhava) in his Maṅḍipravāḷa magnum opus, the Rahasyatrayasāra. In the Paramapatasōpānam which consists of twenty verses plus one concluding verse, Vedāntadeśika emphasized the souls' devotion and service to God, who enables the liberation and enjoyment of Himself for the souls. I argue that the Paramapatasōpānam pays attention to the psychological state of the liberated souls, especially their devotion and intimacy toward God, unlike the Maṅḍipravāḷa account of Vaikuṅṭha which is based on scriptures and focuses on various qualities the souls attain in Vaikuṅṭha. Importantly, Vedāntadeśika's narration of the lives of the souls in Vaikuṅṭha is parallel to their lives of service to God on earth. Through the medium of Tamil, Vaikuṅṭha is not defined as a scriptural constructed space that is distant in time and place, but it is indeed heaven on earth.

The Multisensorial Experience of Vaikuṅṭha in Veṅkaṭanātha's Works

Dr. Elisa Freschi, University of Toronto.

Veṅkaṭanātha (also known as Vedānta Deśika, traditional dates 1269--1370) was the foremost systematiser of the school now known as Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. One finds descriptions of Vaikuṅṭha in several of his works, e.g., in his Rahasyatrayasāra, composed in Maṅḍipravāḷam. These descriptions involve festooned cities and welcoming deities, they are detailed and pictorial. What is the purpose of such descriptions? Veṅkaṭanātha is a refined theologian and philosopher, why does he depict Vaikuṅṭha in a way which seems closer to Purāṇic mythology than to Vedāntic speculations? One might answer that Veṅkaṭanātha was just following what most devout Vaiṣṇavas believed about Vaikuṅṭha, but this answer is not enough for a sophisticated theologian like Veṅkaṭanātha, for whom even the depiction of a deity in a religious hymn becomes a short theological treatise. This paper will investigate the thesis that such depictions serve a theological agenda, namely showing that the soul in the condition of liberation is neither disembodied nor a pure ātman but is rather able to enjoy all sorts of sense-perceptions and emotions. This conclusion is explicitly anti-Advaita Vedānta and supports a richer view of subjectivity and of God, while at the same time addressing the problem of boredom in heaven.