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Adi Shankaracharya, also reverentially called as Shankarabhadrapada, has composed this exquisite hymn in praise of Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu, with his bow SArnga slinging over the shoulder holds in his four hands Panchajanya the conch, Sudarsana the disc, Nandaka the sword, and Koumodaki, the mace. He has as his vehicle Garuda, the chief of the feathered race and as his seat Ananta, the chief of snakes. He has as his consorts Shridevi and Bhudevi. After praying to Vishnu’s weapons, his vehicle, his seat and his consorts Shri Shankara prays to each of the parts of Vishnu’s divine form starting from his feet [pAdAdi] and ending in the hair[keShAnTa] on his head.

The rendering in English which is not a word by word translation only conveys the gist of a verse and is based on a Sanskrit commentary, ‘Bhakti mandakini’ of Shri. Purnasaraswati.

Shri Shankara first prays to Panchajanya, the conch.

May Panchajanya the king of conches, whose sound surpasses the sound of thunder
and which terrifies the clan of the Daityas protect us. Positioned in the hand of Vishnu, LakShmi’s protector, the broad white Panchajanya resembles the moon at the peak of the Niladri, the blue mountain.

Note: Shri Shankara starts the hymn uttering the auspicious name of LakShmi, who bestows things auspicious to her devotees. The sound of the conch is ‘OM’, the sacred chant. Panchajanya also signifies Shabdabrahma. Niladri, blue in colour, is a mythical mountain to the North of Meru. As Vishnu is blue or dark in colour the comparison of the conch in his hand to that of moon at the peak of Niladri is apt.

Having first prayed to PAncajanya, the conch which is a representation of Shabdabrahma, Shri Shankara now prays to the most important weapon of ViShnu, namely the disc, Sudarsana, which represents the kAlachakra, the wheel of time:

Let the disc of Chakrapani, whose edge is red with the flow of blood from the bodies of Daityas, which has the lustre of sun and which is worshipped by all, which is the ultimate end of all darkness, which is the ultimate abode of all
energy and which sages consider as the form of Entire Time starting from the shortest instance of a kShana, for ever dispense to us bounteous happiness. Note: The concept of Sudarsana chakra as a representation of kAlachakra is indeed very apt. There is nothing which is not annihilated by Time and nothing can survive its onslaught. Time only proves that Truth prevails over untruth. One twelfth part of a muhoorta is Kshana. One thirtieth of a full day is muhoorta.

Shri Shankara prays to sArnga, ViShNu’s bow:

May the sound of the expanding twanging of the bow, whose high pitch is accompanied by the ‘well done’ exclamations of the praising devas protect us. The twanging sound is like that of thunder in the pralaya-like battle emanating from clouds made of streams of arrows, which are like water and the arm of Narayana acts as the wind which drives the clouds.

Note: The construction of the verse and the metaphor are both complex and the commentator says so. Shankaracharya imagines the battle scene where Narayana is using his bow continuously against the asuras. During the battle, devas are exclaiming, ‘sAdhu, sAdhu’ and the twang of the bow is heard as high pitched sound amidst the din. The sound is like that of thunder during the deluge at the end of a kalpa. The stream of arrows is like the cloud and the arm of Narayana.
is the wind which is driving the cloud.

ShankarAchArya now meditates on the sword Nandaka:

May the sword Nandaka which is satiated with the taste of the blood from the bodies of daityas who have eyes full of fear and which (thus) pleases the slayer of Madhu (Lord Vishnu) be for our eternal bliss. The sword while being swiftly moved in the battles by the Lord’s arm which has the blue luster of a cloud causes confusion like lightening.

Note : Nandaka signifies the sword of Supreme Knowledge by which a devotee cuts asunder Avidya. The flashes of the moving sword against the blue hue of the Lord are compared to that of lightening in the blue clouds.

Now the poet prays to Kaumodaki, the mace which represents buddhi, intellect:
May Koumodaki (the mace) of Mura’s foe (Murari) which he holds tenderly in the palm of his lotus-like hand, which is perfectly spherical and has an appealing shape, which stays in front and which does not at once tolerate the sight of enemies, which rejoices by (drinking) the liquor of daityas’ blood, which is wet by the smear of blood, which is shining, which appears pleasing because of the brilliance of its rays bestow us our wish like a beloved who bestows amorous favour: a beloved who has a shapely figure and is held tenderly by hand, who has right character, who is ever present in front, who does not tolerate the presence of others, who is enjoying the intoxication arising out of liquor, who is moistened with a red ointment and the border of whose dress is glowing.

Note: The translation is woefully inadequate to bring out the flavour of double entendre employed by the Acharya. The literary embellishment called SleShAlankAra consists in using appropriate words having double meanings which are applicable to upamAna, the object to which a thing or action is compared as well as the thing or action itself, upameya. To explain:— kamrAkArA= of fine shape, having a shapely figure; samyagvRuttA= nicely spherical, has right character; pareShAm= of enemies, of others; daityajIvAsavamadamuditA= enjoying the intoxication caused by the liquor-like blood of Daityas, enjoying the intoxication caused by ‘daityajIvAsava’; lohitAlepanArdrA = wet with the smear of blood, moistened by red ointment; dIptAMShukAntA= (deepta,aMShu,kAntA) pleasing by the brilliant rays, (deepta, aMShuka, antA) the border of whose dress is glowing. KAmam = wish, amorous desire.

Now he prays to Garuda, ViShNu’s vehicle and banner
I bow to SuparNa, the king of birds who is the Vedas personified and who is stainless and golden in colour, who is the breath of Pranava (OM), and who though small in size is the vehicle as well as the banner of Hari. The very thought of him causes snake maids to abort the foetuses. His face is smeared with the slush of blood and marrow of snakes as he snaps them asunder with his wide open violently shaking beak.

Note: Garuda is considered vedAtmA. Visva can be interpreted as omkAra and therefore he is ViSvaprAna.

Now the prayer is to Ananta, the king of serpents, who is the seat of Vishnu:

May the Lord of serpents, Anantha, who acts as an exalted bed for Vishnu, the Lord of the universe, protect us from the fear of all types of poison. He is the sole bearer of all the worlds, and has become everything. His glory is vast and unsullied. He is the one who has to be known through all the Vedas. He is the eternal protector of the universe. He is the destroyer of all enemies and all sins. He is omniscient and omnipresent.

Notes: Anantha is the sole bearer of the universe as Vishnu holds the universe
in his belly. It is not very clear how some of the epithets which are more appropriate to Vishnu himself are applicable to Anantha. The commentator is not much of a help. Scholars could explain perhaps.

In the next two verses the sage meditates on LakShmi, the consort of Vishnu:

I bow to Indira (LakShmi), the beautiful-limbed, who is known by the sages as VAgdevi, Bhudevi, Gauri etc, who is to be revered by everyone, who has the chest of the slayer of Mura as her abode, and whose lotus-like face is made pleasant by her smile as white as moon and Kunda flower. When her glances which are moist with compassion are cast on persons even once, they bring all the wealth.

Notes: Shankarabhagavatpada quite clearly perceives LakShmi, Bhudevi, Gauri, Sarasvati as different facets of the same Mother Goddess. The idea of LakShmi’s glances bestowing riches is amplified by Vedantadesika in his Shristuti, ‘Oh Goddess, In whichever direction your glances are cast, in that direction torrents of wealth accumulate’.
She forever gives birth to all the sat (living and the non-living) due to the presence of Purusha (Narayana). As a consequence of the union with Him (Narayana), she holds all this moveable and the immovable beings for (their) prosperity. She is the creator, the nurse and the supporter; she is the nature, the unchanging, the energy of the universe, the bestower. I bow to her of abundant qualities who is the beloved of Vishnu, the life-force of the universe.

Notes: LakShmi is prakruti and Narayana is Purusha. Prakruti and Purusha together cause and sustain the universe and all it contains. The oft-quoted verse of Gita could be recalled, ‘తెలుగు చిదానంతపూర్వకం కానం కానం జయంతం చాతుర్వేయం | మమ మతం మయం దితం దితం దేశం దేశం దేశం చాతుర్వేయం ||’ ‘తెలుగు చిదానంతపూర్వకం కానం కానం జయంతం చాతుర్వేయం | మమ మతం మయం దితం దితం దేశం దేశం దేశం చాతుర్వేయం ||’

Now the sage meditates on the particles of dust under the feet of Vishnu:
May the dust particles present under the lotus-like feet of Vishnu, the lotus-eyed thoroughly and continuously remove the slough of sin of ours who are subservient to him through devotion. The daityas jealous of (the power of) those dust particles quickly leave the exalted and wide place (of the sacred dust) while all the devas all the time desire to carry them on their head.

Notes: Daityas represent those who are evil in their behaviour while Devas represent the good and the devoted. The commentator raises a doubt how there could be dust particles under the Lord’s feet and answers that they are the pollen of flowers worn by the Devas on their crowns. That mud is a good remover of slough is of course an observed fact.

Now the prayer is directed to the lines under the feet of Vishnu:

May the fine soft and well formed lines under the feet of ChakrapANi, which are in the shapes of wheel, fish etc. and which look like soft and graceful silk threads and which are being repeatedly massaged by LakShmi’s lovely hand which is soft as sprout and is accompanied by swarms of bees, bestow on us all that
are auspicious.

Notes: As the hands of LakShmi are fragrant, red and soft as tender sprout, bees crowd around them thinking that they are indeed tender sprouts! AmreDyamAna has to be contextually interpreted as repeated touching or massaging, although lexicon-meaning of AmreDana is ‘a repeated word’.

ShankarAcArya now worships the feet of Vishnu, when he straddled the universe as Vamana, the dwarf in vamanavatara:

May the feet of Vishnu, the lotus-eyed which are as soft as the inside of the lotus protect us. (During Vamana incarnation) when one of the feet was straddling the skies looking like a giant flag-staff made of emerald, the pure Ganga, the river of Gods, flowing from it looked like the flag. The other foot placed on the ground looked like a giant pillar of the house-like earth.

Notes: In this verse the sage visualizes the scene when Vamana occupied the skies with one foot while his other foot was firmly placed on the earth.

The sage continues his contemplation of Vamana Avatara in this verse.
I repeatedly surrender to the unconquered Vishnu’s graceful two pink-soled lotus-like feet, which bestow immense affluence and which while straddling the three worlds brought to Vairochani, the king of Asuras and to Indra, the king of Suras the pinnacle of misfortune and fortune simultaneously and together.

Note: During Vamana avatara, Bali the king of Asuras suffered utter humiliation and Indra regained his affluence. The commentator explains ekadhAma (ekadhAma) as parAkAShThA (parA kAShThA), which has been translated as ‘pinnacle’.

In this hymn Vishnu is often referred to as Ajita.

Adi Shankara now contemplates on the infinite feet of virat purusha, extolled in Purushasukta

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All the time let there be salutations to Vishnu’s innumerable great lotus-like feet which occupied the whole of the earth, while Vishnu as Viratpurusha spanned the whole universe. All the Vedas have indeed clearly proclaimed the infinitude of those feet and from those feet were born the fourth varna of the peoples at the time of Primeval Creation.

Notes: The sage visualizes the virat purusha of purushasukta and prays to the infinite feet of that Viratpurusha. ‘Sahasra’ although means one thousand really denotes the Innumerable.

May the faultless pre-eminent enchanting line of toes, at the tip of Vishnu’s feet, give us amazing good luck worthy of being prayed for by all. The line of toes looks resplendent with the spotless gem-like nails resembling a string of lotus petals resplendent with dew drops (at their tips).

Now the prayer is directed to the row of toe-nails of Vishnu:
May the row of toe-nails of lotus-like feet of Vishnu, the wielder of the disc, provide us the all-transcending wealth which leads to every type of happiness. An expanding wheel of beautiful rays emanates from the row of nails. The Devas bending low while prostrating to the Lord look at their own reflection in the spotless row of nails and have an apprehension that it is another group of Devas and feel jealous of them.

Notes: Quite clearly the type of wealth that the sage is seeking is salvation which transcends everything else. The row of nails is spotless and has a natural shine in which the Devas who have come to seek audience of Vishnu see their own reflection and mistake the reflection to be another real group of Devas and they feel jealous of them as they have already been given protection by Vishnu! A nice exaggeration indeed!

The sage meditates on the front part of the feet of Vishnu:

May Vishnu’s front part of the feet, which bestows all round well-being, terminate the sins of ours who are bent low before him. His front of the feet,
the elegance of which beats that of the shell of a tortoise made of emerald, looks colorful with the myriad hues of the gems on the Deva’s crowns as they bend low placing their crowned heads at His feet.

Notes: Shankarabhagavatpada employs an unusually long compound word, which is contrary to his style of simple lilting words. Perhaps he wanted to indicate to his contemporary pundits, that his normal style of simple words was not because of his inability to compose verses with long and complex words and constructs!

[There appears to be no suitable word in common(non-medical) English to denote the front portion of the feet.]

Next Shankaracharya meditates on the elegant legs of Narayana:

May the well-rounded lustrous legs(shanks) of Narayana, which rob the beauty of elegant staffs made of sapphire, which experience horripilation as LakShmi gently massages them with her hands, which destroy the groups of enemies(of Devas), which give happiness to the Devas and which are being praised by the great devotees ever flourish while removing all our sins.

Notes: As in earlier verses Devas represent the virtuous while their enemies represent the vicious.
Now Shankara concentrates on the knees of Vishnu:

May the unconquered Vishnu’s knees which look as though they were the round jewel caskets meant for keeping the respected mirror of the minds of the virtuous bestow happiness in our hearts. The knees look as if they are stay-beams to support continuously in the right manner, the shanks which are under strain due to the weight of the thighs.

Notes: Here utprekShA, a well known figure of speech is employed to convey two different images. Vishnu’s knee looks like a round jewel-casket for keeping a mirror. The mirror is the polished clean mind of the virtuous. It implies that the minds of the virtuous meditate on Vishnu’s knees. The knee also looks as if it is a support-beam for the shank which is under strain due to the weight of the thigh!

Now the sage prays to the thighs of Vishnu:

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May Hari’s rounded, robust, charming and symmetrical cloud-blue thighs instill bounteous joy in our minds. Vishnu instantly killed the first of Daityas, haughty Madhu and Kaitabha by placing them on those thighs amidst the ocean when they were frightening Brahma.

Notes: The reference is to the Puranic story which narrates that the demons, Madhu and Kaitabha born from the excretion of Vishnu’s ears started harassing Brahma and that Vishnu killed them by placing them on his thighs. Madhu and Kaitabha are strictly not Daityas as Daityas are those born of Diti. Commentator explains that here Daitya has to be taken as a generic name for RakShasa’s.

The sage meditates on the loins of Vishnu:

May the revered loins of Vishnu of the golden-yellow robe continuously save our minds, even by a mere descent into prayer, from the severe sins that cause us a degraded state. The loins skillfully covered by the (lower) garment look enchanting like the oceanic water made enchanting by the flames of vadava fire (submarine fire).
Notes: 1. pAtitya has been translated as ‘degraded state’. patitasya bhAVAHAhpAtityam- the state one falls to when one cannot adhere to the commands of Do’s and Don’ts given by Sruti’s and Smriti’s. 2. Shankara uses a very significant word avatarat qualifying chetovishayam. avatarat denotes the process of descending. As the commentator explains, it denotes the mind which has just started to descend into a state of meditation or prayer. A mere attempt to pray or meditate should be enough to clear one's sins!

The salutations are now directed to the girdle of Vishnu:

May Vishnu’s gold-hued elegant girdle which bestows auspiciousness and which is glowing by the radiating rays of precious gems make my mind clever and agreeable always. The waist of Vishnu, of three abodes, with the strings of the girdle tied around the loins looks like the Mandara mountain in the center of the ocean with the hoods of Vasuki tied around it.

Notes: The allusion is to the churning of ocean by Sura’s and Asura’s. Vishnu is called ‘tridHAmAn’, one who has three abodes. The three abodes, as per the commentator, could be construed as a) states of wakefulness, dream and sleep; b) Rik, yajus, Sama Veda’s; c) bhuloka, bhuvarloka and suvarloka; d) sun, moon, and
fire the three forms of Tejas. In passing, the commentator quotes this interesting verse without indicating the source: ‘న జీవ నమస్కరించి వాహ భూతం పరిచితించిన తను మనిషి ఇందులో భూమిల పదార్థాన్ని సంమానించింది’ Gods do not provide protection in the manner of a cow-herd with a stick in hand. Whomsoever they want to protect, they endow him with the right reasoning.

Shri Shankara takes us along to meditate on the navel of Vishnu:

May the swan-like mind of ours live eternally in the lotus-eyed Vishnu's lake-like navel filled with the emerald-blue water-like tremulous lustre. In that lake-like navel long back the lofty, beautiful lotus grew which was revered by Deva's and which became the seat of bee-like Brahma.

Notes: Shankara uses a fine metaphor(rUpaka) to describe the navel of Vishnu. The navel is a lake, with lustrous blue water, in which a lotus grew which became an abode for a bee called Brahma! Our mind is a swan which should eternally dwell in that lake.

Now the salutations are to the actual lotus coming out of the navel of Vishnu:
May the lotus, in which is seated Brahma singing (praises of the Lord) like a humming bee, and which is growing out of the lake-like navel of Sauri, who has a serpent as his bed, be the fulfiller of all our wishes. The learned consider the netherworlds as the stalk of that earthly lotus, the directions as its petals, the great mountains as its filament-rows and the mountain Meru as its pericarp.

Notes: The commentator points out that calling Vishnu as Sauri, which is essentially an epithet of Krishna[belonging to Shroora dynasty], clearly brings out that Krishna is a complete avatara of Vishnu.

[pericarp- A botanical word-vessel containing seed formed from wall of ripened ovary-The translator humbly leaves it at that!]

Now in the next two verses, the salutations are to the abdominal part of Vishnu’s form.

May our mind joyously play for long in the abdominal part, which manifests
itself as the sky, of Vishnu, the unconquered, whose form is extremely beyond imagination. All this expanded universe came into being from that abdomen at the beginning of the Kalpa (period of four yuga’s) and all the immovable and the movable enter into that abdomen at the end of the Kalpa.

Notes: As per dictionary, kroDa means the chest, the portion between the shoulders. Commentator has interpreted it as the abdominal portion contextually.

May our fish-like mind play for long in the ocean-like abdomen of Damodara. The lustre of Vishnu is the water; The abdominal folds are the dark waves; The deep navel is the whirl-pool; the lustre of the golden girdle around the waist of Damodara is the sub-oceanic fire, VadavAgni.

Notes: The commentator elucidates: ‘The import of the Acharya is that just as a fish cannot exist out of water, may our minds reach a stage when they cannot live away from meditating on the form of Vishnu.’ The metaphor is complete in all respects as a one to one correspondence has been beautifully brought out.
Shri Shankara’s attention travels up the navel of Vishnu along the line of hair on
the abdomen.

May the line of hair on Vishnu’s abdomen residing in our minds always continue
to bestow us deserved riches. The line of hair, the beauty of which is relished
by the revered, looks like a lustrous string of blue bumble-bees traveling from
the bottom of lotus-like navel towards the lotus-like face captivated by the
strong fragrance (of the face).

Notes: Describing the streak of hair on the abdomen above the navel is not
uncommon in Sanskrit literature. To cite an example, Kalidasa who most
probably preceded Shankaracharya, indulges in such description in Kumarasambhavam.

The sage beholds the soothing chest of Vishnu:
I surrender to the Sarngapani (Vishnu)'s chest which acts as a garden-resort to those who are weary of the journey of samsara. The radiating rays of Kaustubha gem are like new shoots; It is having an abundance of pearls(muktaphala) like custard apples(muktaphala); The presence of LakShmi (Shrivasa) is like the splendour of lotus(Shrivasa); It is marked by the blossoms of ever-fresh garland of forest-flowers(vanamala); glittering ends of shoulder(bhujanta) are like Bhurja trees(bhujanta); It is having the hue of swarm of bumble-bees; It is embellished by the Shrivatsa mark( ShrivrikSha=Aswatha tree). 

Notes: The beauty of this verse can hardly be brought out in English as the similarity brought out between a garden and the chest of Vishnu is dependant on the particular choice of words which convey two meanings. It is a case of upamA-alankAra fortified by shlesha(pun). Just as a weary traveler rests in a garden, full of blossoms and new shoots a virakta weary of samsara takes refuge in the chest of Vishnu. The commentator interprets Shrivatsa as ShrivrikSha.

Shankara hails the grandeur of Shrivatsa mark on Vishnu’s chest:

May the lustrous Shrivatsa mark of Shripati, which is dear to LakShmi like a child and which is densely mixed with the radiating lustre of Kaustubha gem, bestow
upon us the highest of riches. The Shrivatsa mark heightens the brilliance of Vishnu’s chest like the blackness on the neck of Shiva, like the mark on the moon and like a bumble-bee on the sprout of a tree.

Notes: Shrivatsa is a swirl of hair on the right side of the chest of Vishnu. Shankara explains the origin of the name by saying that it is dear to Shri(LakShmi) like a child Kaustubha is a gem which came up from the ocean of milk when it was being churned by deva’s and daitya’s and which became an ornament to adorn Vishnu’s chest. The highest of riches which the sage prays for is clearly salvation.

Now Shankara’s attention is drawn towards the brilliant Kaustubha gem. May the awe-inspiring Kaustubha gem which adorns the chest of Vishnu along with LakShmi and which illuminates all the directions, bring us prosperity like sun does. Narayana’s chest is blue like the sky. There are garlands on the chest like stars in the sky. Kaustubha gem is along with Shri(LakShmi), who was sahajA,(sister), [both having been born in the ocean of milk] like the sun which has a Shri(brilliance) which is sahajA(all its own). Kautubha gem’s brilliance masks other lustres [the garlands] like sun’s masks that of stars.
Notes: Shankara cleverly uses again pun at places to bring out similarity between Kaustubha gem and the sun. As the commentator has brought out, there is a clear suggestion to the birth of an outstanding luminary, an avatara-purusha, in this samsara-sagara who offers hopes to all.

Shankara Prays to Jayanti, the garland worn by Vishnu: The garland is supposed to represent the five elements: pancha bhuta’s.

May the garland Jayanti, tended dearly by LakShmi, never cease to quickly unite us with happiness. While the wind blows comfortably, the garland shining incomparably by the brilliance of the gem, rests on the shoulders of Vishnu gently vibrating. The garland looking beautiful with dark blue tips (of flowers) and humming swarms of bees around the flowers keeps Vishnu happy.

Notes: The most striking feature of this verse as one recites it is the repetition of groups of letters endowing it with a unique sonorous quality. At the beginning and end of each pada(quarter of a verse) we can see this repetition. vAvA yAyA, bhAsamAnA samAnA etc. This is an acrobatics in versifying

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which became popular among later poets. We need to note that although there is a repetition of syllables, words themselves are not repeated. This comes under the category of ‘Shabdalankara’, word-ornamentation and is called ‘yamaka’ (yamaka).

Suffice it to say that let alone endowing the verses with lyrical meaning, even to construct such verses with some relevant meaning is itself very difficult.

Shankara looks at the top end of the shoulder of Vishnu:

We pray to the elegant top end of the shoulder of Vishnu, the unconquered, ‘May it come in the way of the grief of bondage which greatly and repeatedly torments (us)’. The top end of the shoulder has acquired varied hues because of the long and brilliant rays from the ever-fresh garland of forest flowers, the lustre of the bracelet and the ornament on the chest.

Notes: The printed text uses ‘kabalitaruchi’ while the commentator uses ‘shabalitaruchi’. Here the version of the commentator has been adopted.

The sage contemplates on the innumerable arms of Vishnu:
May the (many) shoulders of Hari nourish the destruction of Maya in me. The shoulders carry thousands of weapons such as Sarnaga bow, sword, shield, disc, mace, lotus and conch, which are indescribable, which accomplish astonishing acts of evident great fame and which are dedicated to solely protecting the universe and accordingly efficient in creating dynamic warrior folk (Kshatriya’s).

Notes: The vision contemplated here is that of Vishnu of innumerable arms holding innumerable weapons like the Viswarupa of Gita. In Vishnusahasranama he has a name, ‘sarvapraharaNAyudha’[sarvapraharanayudha]. Anything can be a weapon in his hands even a blade of grass. The printed text has ‘spuTaguNayashasAm’ while the commentator has adopted ‘spuTaguruyashasAm’, which is the one chosen here.

Now the neck of Vishnu is worshipped:
Casting off dullness, may my mind dwell on the beautiful neck of Vishnu, who has
his abode at Vaikuntha. There are marks of bangles of LakShmi on the neck due to
LakShmi’s embrace around the neck. The neck has variegated hues arising out of
the scintillations of the jewels around the neck, the swinging golden ear-rings
and the brilliance of Kaustubha gem.

The sage visualizes the lip of Vishnu likening it to sun:

May the sun-like lip of Vishnu, the husband of LakShmi, destroy our
darkness-like sins.

Vishnu’s lip provides pleasure to padmA(LakShmi) in the manner sun provides
pleasure to padma(lotus). In the front portion of the lip, there is the lustre
of aruna(redness) similar to the lustre of Aruna being at the fore-front of the
sun. Regularly Vishnu’s lip expertly fills the moon-white conch with breath
similar to sun filling up the conch-white moon. Being at the front of the
sky-like mouth it masks the sparkling teeth in a manner that sun at the morning
horizon masks the twinkling stars.
Notes: this verse demonstrates Shankaracharya’s skill and imagination in weaving a beautiful tapestry of simile and pun, which can truly be enjoyed in Sanskrit only. The reference is to lotus blooming on sunrise. Vishnu blows the conch when he has to fight the evil forces. Sun causes the growth of moon’s face during the light-half of the month. Aruna is the charioteer of Sun, who perhaps is a personification of the red-glow that precedes the sunrise.

The sage looks at the star-like teeth of Vishnu:

Notes: This is an elegant example of exaggeration (utprekShA) where in the poet imagines that the teeth being inside the mouth is as if the stars were inside the moon! And he sees a motive behind that. Stars which are traditionally considered as wives of the moon have taken residence right inside the moon to avoid separation from him!

The sage imagines the assembly of Deva’s presided over by Vishnu:
Looking at the assembly of Deva’s and sages who are bent with humility Vishnu enquires of them with delight, ‘Oh! Brahma, I hope your mind is steadfast in concentrating on Brahman; Oh! Shambho, I respect you; Oh! Indra, are you taking care of the three worlds along with Deva’s? Oh! Narada and other sages, Are you all well?’ May the ambrosia of Vishnu’s such precious speech bring joy to our minds.

Notes: Commentator explains that even Brahma has to meditate on Brahman in order to do his duty of creation.

The sage experiences the pleasure of looking at Vishnu’s cheeks:
May the soft bee-blue cheeks of Vishnu, the foe of Mura, destroy our impending severe adversities. The lustre of the cheeks illumined by the scintillations of the ear rings in the shape of a shark made of rubies inset in Gold rivals that of an emerald mirror illumined by the rising sun.

May the nose of Murari which acts as the spreading path for his Prana vayu grant us the breath of life. The nose which appears red because of the rays from the pair of glittering ear-rings looks like the beak of a parrot descending to bite the gem-like lip, which is as charming as a ripe Bimba fruit, glittering in the lotus-like face.

Notes: The commentator remarks that as devotion to Lord is verily the Life-breath for a devotee, the sage is seeking that only. Bimba fruit gets red when it is ripe and comparing the lip to a Bimba fruit is a standard simile in Sanskrit literature. ghoNA as a feminine noun is the standard usage, but ghoNa is also encountered in literature as the commentator points out. usra is a rarely occurring word which means ray.
May those two lotus-like eyes of Padmanetra, which are charmingly coloured with redness, whiteness, and blackness and which are looking at us full of compassion protect us. The great sages consider the two eyes as the sun and the moon which are incessantly moving around the world like two lustrous lamps to indicate direction and time.

Notes: There are many references to sun and moon as the eyes of the Lord in Sruti’s and Smriti’s. Eyes are just like lotuses which have a black central portion, surrounded by a white portion and then the red petals, notes the commentator. It is a remarkable observation that both reckoning of time and direction are dependant on the sun and the moon.

The sage beholds the elegance of Vishnu’s eye-brows in the next two verses:

May the eye-brows, bowed at centre, of Vishnu, who has the chief of the feathered as his transport, save us from falling to the nether-world (Naraka).

Just by a little movement of the eye-brows of Vishnu, Deva’s along with Asura’s
are controlled at their places of duty. The eye-brows dancing in the stage-like forehead which is elegantly shaped as a half-moon are sportive and look as though like a pair of black serpents near their mother in the form of the ear-ornament.

Notes: The prayer is to make the devotee tread the path of virtue so that he may not fall into Naraka, the equivalent of hell. There is a mix up of rUpaka and utprekShA. The discerning may find it contrived. Word vAlIkA is not listed in standard dictionaries. The commentator interprets it as karNabhUShaNavisheShaH quoting Vaijayanti Lexicon. The ornament is perhaps shaped like a big snake.

May LakShminatha’s creeper-like eye-brows which are capable of generating bountiful wealth protect us. They look like the half-bent bow, the seat of Vishnu’s arrow-like glances at the assembly of Deva’s. They look like a line of bumble-bees engaged in waking up the lotus-like eyes which are half closed due to the moon-like forehead containing the hair-curls looking like the mark on the moon.

Notes: Glances are traditionally likened to arrows or darts. The eye-brows look like the bows from which the arrows of glances dart in the direction of
assembled Deva’s. The forehead looks like the half-moon. The curls of hair on the forehead look like the mark on the moon. Looking at the moon the lotus-like eyes are half closed. (Lotuses close as the moon rises). The eye-brows look like a line of bumble bees close to the lotus eagerly engaged in opening the half closed lotuses!

Now the sage looks at the Tilaka mark on Vishnu’s forehead:

May the ‘oordhvapundra’ mark of the Vishnu, Lord of the universe, arising in between the creeper-like brows, which dispels the darkness of birth and death be for my prosperity. The mark looks like a crystal-white symbol of Siva to which LakShmi, weakened by the group of arrows released from the sugarcane-bow of Manmatha is offering lotus-garlands in the form of her glances.

Notes: Manmatha (cupid) is supposed to be having a bow of sugarcane. LakShmi is tormented by Manmatha and is constantly looking at the mark on Vishnu’s forehead. Her glances are like offerings of lotus garland to symbol of Siva in the form of the mark entreating him to lessen the harshness of Manmatha’s arrows, as he is the conqueror of Manmatha!
May our wavering mind like an expert actress glittering and displaying her limbs
play the drama of concentration on the broad stage of forehead of Vishnu, the foe of Kaitabha, after removing the screen of lassitude. On that broad stage of Vishnu’s forehead, the crown of Vishnu looks like the linga symbolizing Shiva seated on the ends of curls of hair on the forehead.

Notes: The poet In Shankara visualizes a play called ‘concentration’ played by his mind on the stage of Vishnu’s forehead. In other words, he prays that he may be able to concentrate on the forehead of Vishnu. The metaphor is further elaborated. When a play begins the screen is pulled aside. In a like manner before concentration begins, lassitude is removed. On the stage there will be a symbol of God placed for worship. The crown of Vishnu on his forehead looks like the linga, symbol of Shiva.

Shankara looks at the curls of hair around Vishnu’s face:
May the curls of hair of Shripathi bestow us all the time around prosperity. People look upon it as a garland made of black lotuses or perhaps that river Yamuna is trickling down Vishnu’s face to compete with the Ganga over the head of Shiva, or Rahu is attacking the face under the delusion that it is the full moon.

Notes: River Yamuna is traditionally considered dark as perhaps its water is mildly turbid, which can be observed where Yamuna and Ganga meet.

Now he looks at the hair on Vishnu’s head in its entirety:

May the locks of hair, which are illumined and colored by the sparkling gem on the fore head of Vishnu, the foe of Kesi, destroy entirely our bundle of sufferings. When Vishnu sleeps, even the Deva's cannot fully perceive the form of the matted hair which occupies all the skies, They look as if they are the aura emanating from Vishnu’s body. They look as if they are clusters of smoke from the fire of anger arising out of burning the incense of bodies of foes.
Notes: The commentator explains that when Vishnu goes into Yoganidra, his matted hair occupies the whole of the skies. suptA is interpreted as ‘matted hair’ by the commentator quoting Vaijayanti lexicon, although standard dictionaries do not list it. There is a hint of matted locks of hair being compared to dark clouds too although it is not fully brought out. The sage prays for cutting asunder of all wordly bondages.

Shankara prostrates to the crown of Vishnu:

May the crown of Vishnu, which makes one fancy that they are the glowing flames of bright Vadava (Sub-oceanic fire) at the further bank of ocean(of milk) endow us with everlasting beatitude which destroys the darkness due to the wicked Kaliyuga. The piercing rays emanating from the priceless gems set in the crown render Vishnu’s form extremely difficult to perceive like the sky brightened by hundreds of suns.

Notes: As per the commentator Vishnu’s abode is on Northern bank of milk of ocean in Shaka island. One is reminded of Bhagavd Gita’s description of Viswarupa, ‘‘యతో పాండ్వేది కృష్ణు భవితాసుయి లాపాం రామాః రామాః లాపాం రామాః లాపాం రామాః లాపాం రామాః లాపాం రామాః’’.
Shankara beholds the entire form of Vishnu, after having had the pleasure of looking at parts of the form individually:

May the resplendent endless ocean-like form of Vishnu, the foe of Daitya’s give us ambrosia (amrita). Brahma, the father of the three worlds, after not being able to reach the boundary in the abdomen of Vishnu even after roaming endlessly like a bumble-bee for millions of years, got out from the root of the lotus in Vishnu’s navel and created a world outside similar to the one inside.

Notes: Evidently the ambrosia the sage seeks is that of MokSha.

Proceeding to conclude the hymn Shankara prays to the ten incarnations of Vishnu:
May the partial incarnations of Vishnu, namely Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, 
Vamana, Parashurama (son of Jamadagni), Rama (Scion of Kakutstha), Krishna (Slayer of Kamsa), Buddha (Conqueror of Manmatha) and Kalki (Of the future), who are the benefactors of the worlds and whose mission is to establish Dharma and who are weighed down by extreme compassion protect me.

Notes: It is significant that Shankara has recognized Buddha as one of the ten incarnations. The word hariNa in narahariNapati does not seem to denote a lion as per standard lexicons. The commentator quotes Harsha where he seems to have used hariNa to denote a lion.

Shankara reflects on the twin facets of One Reality: Brahma, beyond reach of words and mind and Vishnu, who is ever accessible and provides immeasurable joy:

May that Lustre which provides joy even to those who practice self-control, in the guise of a reflection of its self luminous, unlimited, pure formlessness protect us. Words along with mind and even the Upanishads, which advocate its existence through indirect meaning having failed through direct meaning, return
(having failed to reach it) from that lustre.

Notes: This is a verse endowed with subtle aspects of advaitic philosophy. The commentary is detailed and riddled with complex advaitic terminology. It is believed that the main import has been conveyed here. Brahman who is formless and is not accessible to words, mind or even the Upanishads in its infinite mercy shows itself in the form of Vishnu and his incarnations as if through a reflexion in an accessible form. Even sages who seek the formless Brahman rejoice at that Lustre with form. The reference to the Upanishadic statement, ‘yato vAcho nivartante aprApya manasA saha’ is very evident. The verse refers to different modes through which a word is endowed with a meaning. If one says ga NgAyAM ghoShaH one refers to a village on the banks of Ganga although the words at first seem to convey that the village is inside the river. A word acquires a meaning different from what it normally conveys through a mode called lakShaNA, which becomes operative conveying a different meaning in place of the normal meaning. The verse refers to the fact that all modes through which a word acquires a meaning fail to reach Brahman.

As a mark of his own humility, Shankaracharya pays his obeisance to a Bhagavata-Vishnu’s devotee:
Our obeisances are forever to the pure lotus-like feet of one, who holds in his mind, bereft of all the wickedness (characteristic) of Kaliyuga and having uninterrupted internal happiness, the faultless form of Vishnu from head to foot, while offering oblations of Vishnu’s deeds with the chantings of Mantra and Stotra in the fire of the tongue.

Notes: Quite characteristically Shankara stresses on the purity of mind while contemplating the divine form of Vishnu, as one chants the Mantras and the Stotras. Salutation is complete only when it has all the three anga’s, namely vAchika(by word), kAyika(by body) and mAnasika(by mind). He uses a metaphor of oblations to the fire for the chantings of stotras and Mantras. The verse echoes sentiments expressed in several passages in the Gita. ‘brahmArpaNaM brahmahaviH brahmaNA nA gna hutam’ etc.

As phalashruti, Shankaracharya bestows his benediction to one who recites this hymn with devotion:

One who, after reciting with joy Vishnu’s Padadikesantastotra thus composed bows his head to (Vishnu) intent on serving his lotus feet, enters ultimate bliss of Brahman, who becomes visible through the solar orb, when he casts off his mortal
Notes: To point out that in this hymn he has all along prayed only for the ultimate realization of Brahman, the only wish worthwhile striving for, Shankarabhagavatpada emphasises that aspect at the end.

Thus comes to completion Vishnupadadikesantastotra among the works of PramahamsaparivarAjakAcharya Shri Shankarabhagavan, who is a disciple of the revered Govindabhagavatpujayapada.

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