

# Thiruvarur - Dakshinachara and Vamachara

In all faiths of the world believing in some deity of the other, there definitely comes a stage when the said deity is viewed as the very creator of the world, the universe and everything in it. Thus, as the very source of creation, the deity is viewed akin to a Mother, where the universe and all its contents forms Her child.

However, there is one tradition that directly centers on the Universal Mother in this very role itself, as the major deity. This is the tradition of Sri Vidya of Hinduism, which has remained a lofty, esoteric, sacred and protected tradition due to its directness of approach and absence of pretense. Some of the highest divinities of Hinduism, including the very trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are seen to be disciples and propagators of this tradition, which views the Universal Mother as Lalitha Ambika, translated as the Playful Mother.

In this tradition, historically, one understands that the various approaches to Lalitha Ambika are broadly grouped into two categories - the right-handed Dakshinachara, and the left-handed Vamachara. Within their fold, they also include the equivalence dominated Samayachara and body-centric Kaulachara traditions respectively.

Looking beyond the mysteries, misconceptions and controversies surrounding the perception of these approaches, one understands that the right and left handed approaches correspond by and large to internalised and externalised modes of worship respectively.

The common aim of both systems is to attain Lalitha Ambika, who as the Absolute Parabrahman, is nothing but the Atman or the Self. This Self, also seen as Being-Consciousness-Bliss or Sat-Chit-Aanandam, is that blissful state underlying the three states of waking 'Jaagara', dream 'Svapna' and deep dreamless sleep 'Sushupti', metaphorically referred to as the three cities or Tripura, and hence, Lalitha Ambika is also called "Maha Tripura Sundari" or the Supreme Beauty of the Three Cities.

In deep sleep, with the absence of any thoughts, feelings or sensation of body or of the world and surroundings, all these entities cease to exist, and the bliss is felt in all its pureness - hence the typical statement - 'I had such a sound sleep, it was peaceful and pure bliss'.

However, through wisdom or Jnaana, it is possible to understand that the thoughts, which make up the body, mind, feelings, world etc. are nothing more than just thoughts, like in a dream, and not get deluded into thinking that all these are real. With this wisdom, a person may remain 'blissfully asleep' even in the waking state, not deluded by the world and the false joys and sufferings it brings.

Then, a person is freed from ego, the attachedness to the world, sense of doership and responsibility, and subsequently from miseries and sorrows too. Thus, the person is now in a state of liberation, called 'Mukti' or 'Moksha', where all he experiences is pure bliss or Anandam, undeluded by the illusion 'Maaya' of the world. At this stage, he lacks an ego or sense of individuality, and associates directly as Lalitha Ambika or the Atman itself - hence the Vedic Mahavakya or statement "Aham Brahmaasmi" or "I am Brahman".

However, to attain this state one undertakes a journey that primarily involves attaining Detachment or Vairaagya, and Wisdom or Jnaana. The collections of methodologies, ideas, tools, techniques and wisdom in this journey is known collectively as Tantra.

Typically, one finds the common man or woman mired in a deep ocean called 'Samsaara' of responsibility, joyous and sorrowful feelings, money, career and health, friends, family and relationships, where every action or decision one takes results in some consequences and reactions, necessitating further action, and thus caught in an endless loop of cause and effect, called 'Kaarya Kaarana'. One finds that the very basis of this state is the ego or sense of doership assumed. Letting go of this is primarily the attainment of Vairaagya.

The Left handed paths of Kaulachara or Vamachara primarily aims at such people mired in Samsaara. To drive these people away from this distractive endless loop, the destructive aspect of divinity is invoked. Thus, one finds deities such as Kaali, Mahakaala, Rudra, Veerabhadra, Karuppasami, Bhairavi, Chhinnamasta, Pechi, Alakshmi, Dhoomavathi, Neela Taara, Aghora, Sharabheshwara, Narasimha, Ganda Bherunda, Pratyangira, Bhairava etc. These deities keep throwing difficulties, losses and disappointments at the person to instill an aversion towards worldly affairs and turn his focus elsewhere.

With distractions eliminated by the grace of these deities, the aspirant or Sadhaka starts adoration of the Universal Mother. The most direct or visible form of the Mother is as Nature itself, and epitome of that is the human body. Thus, the system of Kaulachara celebrates body worship, and at this stage the aspirant indulges in various sensual pleasures of the body, concisely represented as the Pancha Maakaaras or the five 'M's of Madya (Wine), Maamsa (Meat), Matsya (Fish), Mudra (Parched Grain) and Maithuna (Human Intimacy). Even though having a limited scope, the aspirant does this as a means of honoring the Universal Mother directly as his own body. However, the amount of violence and sensuality used in Vama and Kaulacharas portray the traditions as obscene and vulgar to some people, who can at best be put away as narrow-minded. Soon however, the aspirant grows out of this stage, and seeks a more subtle form of attaining the Goddess - he shifts to the internalised traditions of Dakshinachara.

It is interesting to note that Dakshinachara starts directly at the internalised stage. How then is the aspirant directed away from Samsaara, if these terrible deities are not invoked? Dakshinachara holds the view that these deities need not be invoked, when the right time comes, the aspirant will be appropriately directed inwards to seek the self. This view holds the

implicit understanding that time has the capacity to slowly decay and eventually destroy just about everything. Thus Dakshinachara completely relies on time, which in itself is an aspect of Goddess Kaali, to perform the same role as of the Vamachara deities. However, in both systems, one understands that the role of a Guru, who is seen as the Universal Mother Herself in the role of a guide, is inevitable and crucial, and that no spiritual progress can be made without the Guru. For both systems, complete faith and trust in the Guru is a must.

Anyway, at this stage, the Dakshinachara aspirant starts his spiritual journey, whereas the Vamachara aspirant enters the Dakshinachara stage of his spiritual journey. The key component of this stage is Bhakti, where the Universal Mother is visualized inside one's heart and a deep sense of love towards Her is developed, by seeing Her in any form such as Mother, Father, Teacher, Friend, Beloved, Sibling or Offspring.

With Bhakti developing, the aspirant, now a devotee or Bhakta experiences a tinge of divine love in everything that he perceives through the five senses. Every meal he takes, every joy he experiences, every sound he hears, every decision taken, everybody and everything around him, all are seen as the Lord's blessing. It is then that the same deities who once appeared in fearful or Ugra forms in Vamachara now appear in benevolent or Saumya forms. Here one finds forms such as Lakshmi, Saraswathi, Durga, Parvathi, Shiva, Vishnu, Raama, Krishna, Hanuman, Nataraaja, Soorya and so on.

As Bhakti matures, the devotee is seen to surrender completely towards the Universal Mother. He sees the God residing in his heart, as the sole controller of his body and mind, and the world around him. Thus, he has no role to play, except as an observer, seeing how the Lord uses his body and mind as an instrument. At this stage, the devotee has shed all notions of 'I' and 'mine' and thus the ego is virtually killed. The devotee goes through a lifestyle of immense Saadhana, where distractions are put away, and any instances of ego are killed as soon as they emerge, by constant practice. At this stage, the devotee also engages in constant hearing and reading of the glories of the Lord, called Shravana, as well as contemplating on the greatness of the Lord called 'Manana'. Spiritual scriptures, texts and treatises come in handy at this stage.

As this Saadhana matures, one sees the Guru in the inside of His heart, as non-distinct from the Universal Mother. It is at this stage that one attains enlightenment or Atma-Jnaana, where, one comes to the understanding of Maaya and the falsity of the world, body, mind and ego. Through the process of channelizing and eliminating thoughts by concentration and meditation, called Dhyaana or Nidhidhyaasana, he comes into direct contact with trance or 'Samaadhi', that same pure blissful experience that he encounters everyday in deep sleep, understanding that state, free of thoughts and ego, to be the reality in all its pureness. At this stage, the practice of chanting or Japa might help in channelizing the mind and eliminating all thoughts.

Having experienced the reality directly through Nidhidhyaasana, the aspirant now enters a state of complete conviction or Nishtha, where he no longer needs external texts and sources to understand the nature of reality - his experience of Bliss is now direct or 'Aparoksha'. The

aspirant now engages in constant practice in minimizing the effort required to attain the bliss. This involves the mind getting more and more firmly convinced of reality and the strength of the mind in staying without being deluded.

Soon enough, the aspirant reaches a stage where he is no longer deluded or bothered by the Maaya around him, and is forever associated and involved only in that blissful state - this is the stage called Sahaja Samaadhi, and God or reality now becomes Anubhava, a continuous uninterrupted experience for him.

At this stage of Sahaja Samaadhi, the aspirant is far away from being deluded by the 'false reality' of Maaya, and is not at all bothered by any sorrows, miseries, joys, worries or rewards connected with it. That is, he has attained liberation or Mukti, and this is the greatest goal meaning that his purpose of life is completely fulfilled. According to Karmic theory, he has at this stage completely attained Lalitha Ambika Herself, and will no longer be reborn into this world or experience its miserable Samsaara.

This entire journey from being mired in Samsaara to attaining Mukti, seen from the viewpoint of the Sri Vidya tradition as described above, forms the context through which one completely understands the role of Vamachara and Dakshinachara. In a way, understanding that the concept of Shiva is one of pure existence, without any attributes as Prakaasha, and that of Shakti is as Prakriti or Vimarsha, which are attributes such as name and form, one understands that Kaulachara worships Prakriti or nature as Shakti in its entirety, to the exclusion of Shiva, while Dakshinachara worships Shiva and Shakti together as leading towards the Atman who is beyond Shiva and Shakti, with Samayachara in particular emphasizing the equivalence of Shiva and Shakti.

In a temple where the Goddess alone is seen, Vamacharas worship the shrine as Shakti, whereas Dakshinachara sees the Goddess as Shiva-Shakti Aikyam. Thus, both worship systems are possible in such a temple.

In a temple where Goddess is seen as a Shakti of Shiva, Dakshinachara is possible due to Shiva-Shakti equivalence. Vamachara cannot be followed in such temples, since there is a Shiva shrine seen in equal importance to Shakti.

Majority of the main temples connected with Sri Vidya fall under this category, such as:

1. Ekambaresha-Kamakshi in Kanchipuram
2. Trikotheeshwara-Tripurasundari in Thirukodikaval
3. Meghanaatha-Lalithaambika in Thirumeeyachur
4. Sundareshwara-Meenakshi in Madurai
5. Jambukeshwara-Akhilandeshwari in Thiruvanaikaval
6. Vishwanaatha-Visalakshi in Varanasi
7. Mayuranatha-Abhayambika in Mayiladuthurai
8. Nataraaja-Shivakami in Chidambaram

Given this understanding, it is interesting to note that there is only one age-old temple that honors Sri Vidya completely in both Vamachara and Dakshinachara aspects - this is a temple within the main temple complex of Thiruvavur in Tamilnadu, India, where Universal Mother Lalitha Ambika is viewed as Kamalaamba. As part of the same temple complex, there is also a Samayachara-only arrangement of Vanmeekanaatha-Neelotpalaamba shrines, together called Thyaagaraaja, the main deity of the temple complex.

There are references from Skanda Puraana and other historical sources, as well as current and 'lost' shrines of the Kamalaamba temple, to indicate how both approaches were followed sincerely, including Vamachara practices of live animal sacrifices, and that over time, the Vamachara idols had been removed, due to the violence involved. Today the idols are seen in three small temples - Pidaari, Aiyanaar and Kathayee surrounding the main temple complex.

Here is a brief discussion of the shrines corresponding to both traditions within the Kamalaamba Temple. This temple, according to the Skanda Puraana, was established by sage Agastya as 'Chitreshwari Peetha', conforming to the proper order of Sri Vidya worship, bringing together the powers of all possible Yoginis and Shaktis, to infuse the sage with the power to dry up the ocean on the request of the Gods or Devas, to expose the hidden demons or Asuras.

At the highest level, as the Universal Mother Herself Lalitha Ambika is worshipped as Kamalaamba, common to both approaches. The Goddess is shown seated in a unique Yogic posture known as Kutika Asana, and is believed to represent the combined powers of Shiva and Shakti, as well as Iccha, Kriya and Jnaana Shakti aspects.



Kamalaamba

As the Universal Mother who created the Universe, Lalitha Ambika is also worshipped in both Dakshinachara and Vamachara as an expanded form - a geometric pattern of interlocking triangles called the Sri Yantra, a 'map of the universe' best understood as nine enclosures or Avaranas leading from the outermost, which is least subtle to the innermost Avarana, which is a singular point or Bindu, representing Kamalaamba Herself. Each Avarana represents a stage in creation, and is ruled by a Yogini Devata, which is a manifestation of Kamalaamba. Apart from Kamalaamba Herself as the Yogini for the Bindu, there are eight Yogini Devatas.

1. The ninth and innermost Enclosure of Bliss, Sarva Aanandamaya Chakra is ruled by Paraapara Ati Rahasya Yogini, who is Kamalaamba Herself.
2. The eighth - enclosure of completion, Sarva Siddhi Prada Chakra, represents three levels of manifestation of Atman though Maaya such as ego, and is ruled by the most secretive Ati Rahasya Yogini.
3. The seventh - enclosure of health, Sarva Roga Hara Chakra, represents eight vibrations of the primordial energy, or Vaak Devatas and is ruled by the secretive Rahasya Yogini.
4. The sixth - enclosure of protection, Sarva Rakshakara Chakra, represents the ten Agni Shaktis, or energies of vibrations, and is ruled by the brimming Nigarbha Yogini.
5. The fifth - enclosure of accomplishment, Sarva Artha Saadhaka Chakra, represents ten manifestations of Praana, the life force, and is ruled by the exalted Kulotteerna Yogini.
6. The fourth - enclosure of fortune, Sarva Saubhagya Daayaka Chakra, represents fourteen energy channels or Naadis as well as fourteen worlds or Bhuvanas, and is ruled by the traditional Sampradaaya Yogini.
7. The third - enclosure of stimulation, Sarva Samkshobhana Chakra, represents eight activities or Ananga Shaktis, and is ruled by the most hidden Guptatara Yogini.
8. The second - enclosure of fulfillment, Sarva Aasha Paripooraka Chakra, represents sixteen controller or Aakarshana Shaktis, and is ruled by the hidden Gupta Yogini.
9. The first and outermost - enclosure of fascination, or Trailokya Mohana Chakra, is ruled by the manifest Prakata Yogini. This Avarana consists of ten Siddhis representing various powers and prowess, eight Maatrukas representing afflictions, and ten Mudras or gestures representing various levels of perceptions and world-views.

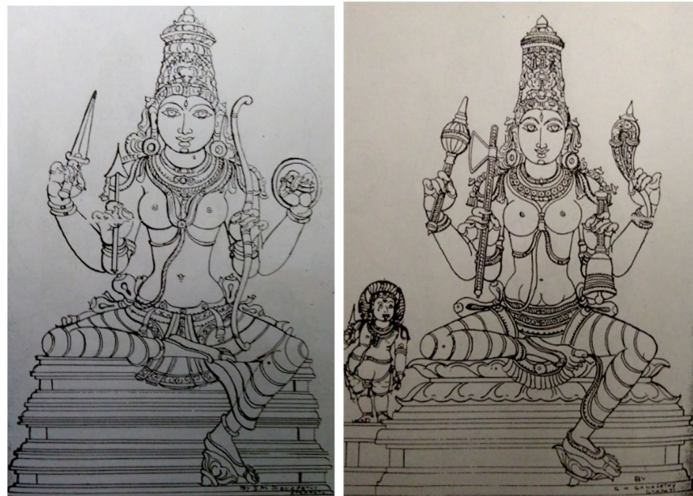


Sri Yantra





Prakata, Gupta and Guptatara Yoginis



Sampradaaya and Kulotteerna Yoginis



Nigarbha, Rahasya and Ati Rahasya Yoginis

As the ruler of the ninth Avarana, Kamalaamba or Lalitha Ambika is seen as Raajaraajeshwari, translated as the Goddess of Kings of Kings. The Goddess is often depicted seated in the palace called Chintamani Graha or Palace that fulfills all desires. The four legs of Her throne, called the Pancha Brahma Aasana are formed by Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra and Eeshwara, with the seat formed by Sadaashiva, all five deities representing the five universal acts of Creation, Preservation, Destruction, Veiling and Grace. The Mother is flanked on two sides by Lakshmi and Saraswathi, representing Rajasa and Tamasa Gunas, and is guarded by Her sons, Ganesha and Subrahmanya seen as inside and outside oriented aspects of Jnaana. The Sri Yantra is also seen under her feet.



Following this comes the Guru, whose role is extremely crucial for Sri Vidya. The Guru acts as the bridge between Nirguna, which is Lalitha Ambika and Saguna, which is everything enveloped by Maaya, and this bridge is a two way street, where divine grace descends from Nirguna to Saguna, whereas souls ascend from Saguna to Nirguna gaining liberation. As such, Guru is viewed as non-distinct from Kamalaamba Herself, as the Atman, and such a role is played by Lord Shaasta, as seen in verses from the Taittiriya Aranyaka of Yajur Veda, as well as other sources. Lord Shaasta, best understood as Harihara Putra or an aspect of Shankaranarayana, represents Nirguna-Saguna in a Shiva-Shakti form, where Shiva or pure existence is seen as Shankara corresponding to Nirguna whereas Shakti corresponds to Narayana, who as controlled of Maaya represents Saguna. Thus, the Lord as Dharma Shaasta or Ayyappan is a Saguna-Nirguna form, emphasizing Righteousness (Dharma, Bhakti) and Wisdom (Jnaana) as His left and right halves, through the conflated aspects of Shankara-Shiva and Narayana-Shakti.



Thus, even though Shaasta is the Atman itself as the Guru, one sees, in addition to Shaasta shrine, two other manifestations of the Guru, corresponding to Dakshinachara and Vamachara approaches. For the former, one sees Dakshinamurthi, which is Shaasta Himself as the form of Shiva-Shakti, as a teacher, seated under a banyan tree surrounded by disciples, holding the gesture of consciousness or Chin-Mudra. The presence of one ear-ring in left ear alone signifies His form as Shiva-Shakti, and this form of Dakshinamurthi shows the importance of Shiva and Shiva-Shakti equivalence in Dakshina and Samayachara traditions. The internalisation is seen from the Chinmudra, holding index finger and thumb together, with the other fingers held straight. Those three fingers middle, ring and little fingers are said to represent the three states of Jaagra (Waking), Svapna (Dream) and Sushupti (Deep Sleep). The index finger is the Maaya as mis-identification or Ahankaara that pervades through these states. Bringing the index finger to the thumb symbolizes killing of the Ahankaara, and merging the sense of self with the true Self or Atman, represented as the thumb.

For Vamachara, one sees as the Guru, Lord Krishna, who gave the world the supreme Bhagavad Gita, and who is seen as non-different from Kaali and the Universal Mother, in Brahma Vaivarta Puraana, Tantra Raja Tantra, and traditions such as Gopaalasundari. As stated by the Lord Himself in the Gita, He is the Atman itself, and is thus the Jagadguru. However, Krishna as completely identical with Shakti or Kaali is a conducive choice of Guru for Kaula and Vamacharas, and as a human incarnation who graced the earth along with fellow humans, Krishna is the ultimate Guru portraying the entire journey from human existence and Samsaara till Moksha. Through His Leelas or Divine plays and His teachings, Krishna reveals how one may transcend the delusions of Maaya and journey inwards, and thus, for Vamachara which is aimed at channelizing the one mired in Samsaara, Krishna as Guru is the ideal choice.



Guru: Krishna, Shaasta and Dakshinamurthi

Next come the triad of concepts - Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu. Of these, Shiva represents pure existence, without any attributes. For example, in a sentence "Apple is sweet" sweetness is the quality attributed to the fruit apple, whereas the word 'is' simply denotes that something exists, without any knowledge of its names or features. In other words, Shiva is the 'Being' in the Human Being.

The primary Shiva shrine in Thiruvarur temple complex is Vanmeekanaatha, with the Utsavar form of Thyaagaraaja. However, in Dakshinachara, Kamalaamba Herself is seen as Shiva-Shakti form, and there is no Shiva shrine inside the Kamalaamba temple. The decoration of moon in the crown of Kamalaamba signifies Her aspect as Shiva, as well as Nandi or the Divine Bull as the Vaahanam or mount of Kamalaamba. However, one finds as deities of the Chitreshwari Peetha, Shiva Lingas installed by the seven sages or Sapta Rishis - Kashyapa, Jamadagni, Vasishtha, Bharadwaja, Atri, Gauthama and Vishwamitra.

In Vamachara, there are two Shiva forms seen - Veerabhadra and Vatuka Bhairava, as the consorts of the two corresponding Shakti forms. It must be noted that Vamachara does not maintain Shiva-Shakti equality, and Shakti is seen superior to Shiva. Thus, more than consort, Bhairava and Veerabhadra are seen as the chief of the hordes of warriors commanded by the two corresponding Vamachara Shaktis. It must also be noted that while Vamachara Shiva shrine is Veerabhadra and Bhairava, the Vamachara aspirant embraces both internalised and externalised approaches and thus worships the Shiva shrines of both Vama and Dakshinacharas. The same holds for all cases where one sees Vamachara-Dakshinachara parallels of shrines.

Aimed at the internalised aspirant, Kamalaamba as Shiva represents the pure existence, beyond the three Gunas or natures of active, passive and pure, and beyond the five elements earth, water, fire, air and space. However, aimed at the externalised aspirant, Veerabhadra and Bhairava represent terrible aspects of Shiva, aimed at destroying and annihilating a false sense of pure existence called ego or Ahankaara, pertaining to Samsaara, centered on the body and mind which is finite, unreal and non-permanent.



Lord Thyaagaraaja



Vatuka Bhairava, Veerabhadra



Sapa Rishi Shiva Lingas

As the perfect complement to Shiva is Shakti, who represents attributes such as name and form. Though the Shakti form of the temple complex is Neelotpalaamba, Dakshinachara sees Kamalaamba herself as both Shiva and Shakti, theoretically, there should no separate Shakti shrine. However, as presiding deities of the eight Yogini Devatas, we find the Shiddha Shakti or pure Shakti equivalents of the top two deities. Lalitha Ambika Herself is present in Shuddha



Shakti form as Raajaraajeshwari, whereas Guru Shaasta, who embodies aspects of Hari and Hara is present in Shuddha Shakti form as Shankaranarayani.

In Vamachara, Shakti is given prime importance. Corresponding to this, there are two shrines - Amba Chandi also known as Pidaari Kaali, and Vriddha Kaali, also known as Maariyamman. Honoring these forms of Shakti as supreme in externalised worship, one also finds the sandals of these deities, called Sri Paaduka.

Remembering that Shakti is none other than Prakriti manifest as nature, one understands that Chandi Pidaari and Maariyamman represent the terrible and destructive aspects of nature instilling aversion in the minds mired in Samsaara, whereas Kamalaamba as Shakti represents the positive and pleasant aspects of nature, symbolizing the journey from worldly existence to union of Shakti with Shiva.



Shankaranarayani,Raajaraajeshwari



Chandi Pidaari, Sri Paaduka, Kaali Maariyamman

Whenever one talks about Shiva and Shakti as pure existence and its attributes, one must also talk about the realm in which these manifest - this is the realm of Saguna or existence with form, as opposed to Nirguna or formlessness. This Saguna is non-different from Maaya, since it is the illusive Maaya that creates a sense of individuality, existence, form, attributes and so on. Controller of Maaya and hence the realm of Saguna is Lord Maayon, which is an ancient Tamil name for Lord Vishnu or Narayana. Armed with the Shankha-Chakra or Conch-Discus representing Space and Time, the Lord Narayana is seen in Dakshinachara approach as the shrine of Jalashayina MahaVishnu situated directly behind Kamalaamba. From the presence of Srivatsa or Symbol of Prosperity seen on Jalashayina's right chest, as well as presence of Shankhanidhi and Padmanidhi, two of Lord Kubera's nine treasurers as the gatekeepers or dwarapalakas common to both Kamalaamba and Jalashayina, one understands that Jalashayina MahaVishnu is none other than the well known Lord Venkatesha of Tirupati.

As controller and regulator of Maayon, Jalashayina MahaVishnu represents the playful or Lalitha aspect of Universal Mother Lalitha Ambika and as such, corresponds to Baalaa, a manifestation of the Mother as a lively, playful, nine or sixteen year old girl, who plays with the universe through Maaya. As such, it is noted that Baalaa Mantra is the chief and most potent among all Mantras for the reigning Kali Yuga, and thus one sees as the Kali Yuga Vaikuntham, the shrines of Venkatesha in Tirupati, Jalashayina MahaVishnu in Thiruvarur as well as Kaatchi Kodutha Ambaal in Thirukodikkaval, where Goddess Tripurasundari as Baalaa, gave Darshan as Venkatesha to the Alwar saints coming from Tirupati.

In Vamachara, the shrine of Lord Vishnu corresponds to Karuppasami, seen carrying a sword Khadga and mace Gadha, dark-complexioned and often depicted riding a horse. Believed mythologically to be Lord Raama's son Kusha, Karuppasami is variously depicted as an aspect of Rudra, Mahakaala or combined aspects of Rudra, Bhairava, Veerabhadra and Narasimha. However, one sees more than coincidental evidence, the dark complexion, sword, horse mount



and fierceness of the deity and its resemblance to Kalki, the tenth and last incarnation of Lord Vishnu, yet to manifest to destroy evil in the Kali Yuga and redeem the righteous.

While Jalashayina MahaVishnu as Baalaa represents the pleasant aspect of Maaya, turning worldly love of the aspirant into pure and sattvic Bhakti and devotion, Karuppasami represents the terrible aspects of Maaa, its delusion, and the harsh awakening to reality by destroying the deluded ones with his sword, which represents Jnaana or wisdom.



Jalashayina MahaVishnu, Karuppasami

Within the realm of Saguna, one sees the union of pure existence Shiva and attributes Wisdom, to give rise to primordial Awareness, also called Pranava. However, one may see the Pranava turned inward seeking its source, or turned outward, propagating throughout and manifesting as the universe. These two aspects of Pranava respectively form Lord Subrahmanya and Lord Vinaayaka. Among these, Lord Subrahmanya represents pure or static inward-looking Pranava called Bindu, also known as the secret preceptor or Guruguha, since it directs an aspirant to its source, namely the Atman. Outward looking Pranava as Vinaayaka is more dynamic and filled with energy, called Naada, and forms the primordial vibration called Aum or Omkaara. This vibration forms the basis for the primordial energy spread throughout the universe, giving rise to life and creation.

In Vamachara, both aspects of Pranava are seen as a single shrine, that of Uchchishta Ganapathi. The Lord is seen seated with Goddess Neela Saraswathi in a state of union, called Kaamakalaa, which represents and mirrors the Shiva-Shakti union. The Lord is seen as representing the outward turned Pranava as Vinaayaka, yet pointing inwards as Guruguha by imitating the Shiva-Shakti union. In Dakshinachara, the corresponding shrine is Lord Siddhi

Vinaayaka seen as the very manifestation of Pranava Aum. One also finds Lord Vinaayaka gracing as a dual form -- Rettai Ganapathi. This form consists of Vighneshwara, who removes obstacles in the path of a spiritual aspirant, as well as Ganeshwara, who graces the aspirant.

While there is no Vamachara shrine of Lord Subrahmanya, there are two Dakshinachara shrines within Kamalamba temple. The first is of the Lord as six-faced Shanmukha, with the first five representing the five elements of nature - Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space, whereas the sixth face, known as Adho Mukha or facing inward is the aspect of Guruguha, directing one towards the Atman. The second shrine is of Lord as Subrahmanya, with two consorts Valli and Devasena, representing the triad of Jnaana, Iccha and Kriya Shaktis or Wisdom, Will and Work respectively.

In addition, Vinaayaka and Subrahmanya shrines also play a special role as shrines of two special deities within Sri Vidya. The first is the boar-faced Vaaraahi, who serves the role of Commander-in-Chief or Dandanaatha, whereas the second is Maatangi or Raaja Shyaamala, serving the role of Chief counselor or Mantrini. No worship of Sri Vidya is complete without these deities.

Among these, Dandanaatha is enshrined in two Peethas or shrines, which also form the shrines of Subrahmanya and Shanmukha discussed earlier. Mantrini is enshrined in two Peethas, on either side of the Vaaraahi Peethas. In the first, there is the Akshara Peetha which houses the 51 Aksharas or alphabets of Sanskrit, representing and bringing together the powers of 51 Shakti Peetha temples spread across the subcontinent. The second is the Mantra Peetha, on which is enshrined the deity of Jnaana Saraswathi, representing the power of Mantras or chants. Since both represent different forms of the alphabet, which itself has arisen from the primordial Pranava, these are to be seen as Vinaayaka shrines.



Ucchishta Ganapathi; Siddhi Vinaayaka





Rettai Ganapathi - Vighneshwara and Ganeshwara



Dandanaatha Peethas: Shanmukha and Subrahmanya



Mantrini Peethas: Akshara Peetha and Jnaana Saraswathi

After manifesting as the inward Subrahmanya and outward Vinaayaka, the Pranava, in preparation for universal creation, manifests into a threefold form known as Tri-Shakti. These are the three forms of Will, Work, Wisdom or Iccha-Kriya-Jnaana Shakti.

First among them is Iccha Shakti, the power of will, known in science as potential energy. This will provides the impetus to create, to expand, or to do any activity, and as the passion or desire, it forms the fundamental feeling of love from which all emotions arise.

In Dakshinachara, Goddess Lakshmi as the deity of wealth, fortune and prosperity is the Iccha Shakti. She represents the love and passion that fuels all activity, and turns the intense love into Bhakti or devotion. She is enshrined as Kamalini, one of the two attendants of Kamalaamba.

In Vamachara, Iccha Shakti is enshrined as Jyeshta Devi, also known as Kamalini or Alakshmi. Mythologically, She is the elder sister of Lakshmi and is the Goddess of Misfortune. Also known as Goddess Dhoomavathi, Jyeshta is determined to reorient passion channelized in the wrong, worldly direction, by throwing failures, misfortunes, losses and disappointments continuously at a person, until he realizes the futility of his efforts and attachments towards worldly delusions.



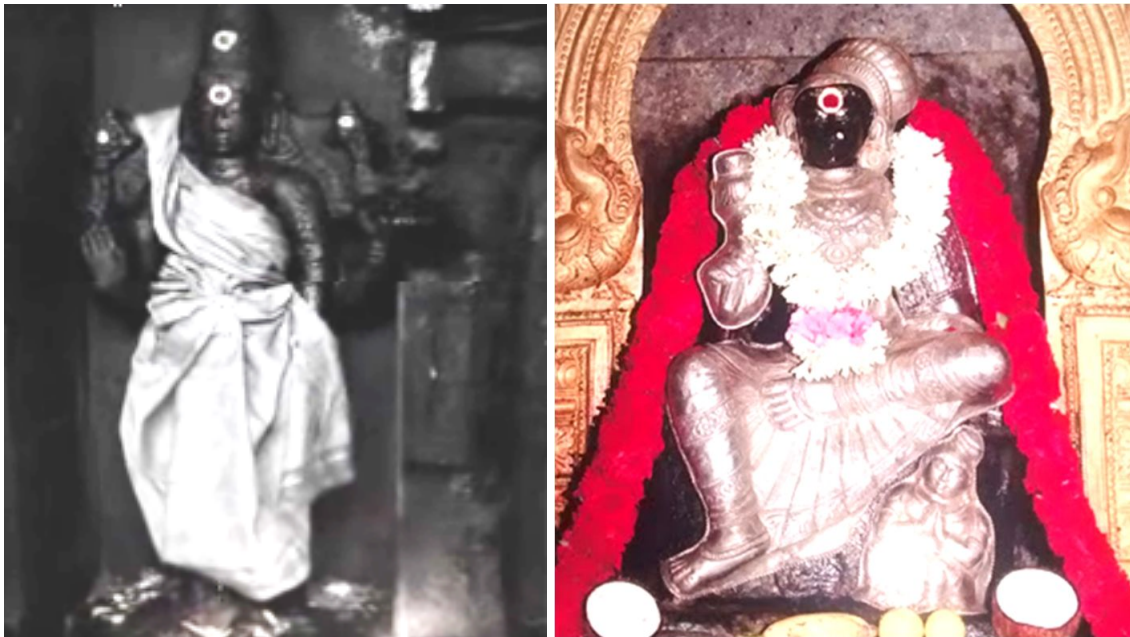
Kamalini and Jyeshta Devi

Next is Kriya Shakti, or the power of Work. As much as Iccha Shakti provides fuel and impetus towards performing activity, Kriya Shakti, also known as the kinetic energy uses up those energy and resources in the very performance of the activity. Thus, wherever there is any activity being performed, one understands the presence of Kriya Shakti.



In Dakshinachara, one sees as Kriya Shakti, the shrine of Goddess Durga. The Goddess is the very manifestation of Mahishasuramardhini, who is armed with various weapons of various deities, representing various resources involved in performance of an activity. The Goddess represents Karma or the law of causality underlying all activities, and Her slaying of Mahisha Asura, who is a symbolism of arrogance, represents cutting through bondage and the cycle of Karma by means of shedding the ego.

In Vamachara, one sees Kriya Shakti enshrined as Kathayee or Katyayani. This is the same deity as Mahishasuramardhini, but is shown seated, carrying Skanda or Lord Subrahmanya, as Skandamata, one of the nine forms of Durga. With Skanda Himself being the victorious war-God, Kathayee represents the very source of the victory - the very act and energy of the war infused within Skanda. Durga slaying Mahishasuramardhini is paralleled here by Skanda slaying Taarakaasura, with the same symbolism of shedding the ego.



Durga and Katyayani

Last among the triad is Jnaana Shakti, or power of Wisdom, known in science as information. Jnaana is fundamentally the awareness and knowledge of certain surroundings and environs, and forms a basis that directly influences the outlook, perspective, and this Jnaana plays a crucial role as various decisions taken and their positive or negative impacts.

In Dakshinachara, Saraswathi is seen as Anindika, the attendant of Kamalaamba, where the Goddess presides over knowledge and music, and together, both are seen as paths to understanding the Atman, through wisdom and self-inquiry, as well as guidance from the Guru.



In Vamachara, Jnaana Shakti is seen in a very fierce form called Pechi Amman or Vaakdevi. This Goddess presides over speech and represents the powerful and terrible aspects of words spoken when deluded by ignorance, as Thirukkural says “Aaraadhe Naavinaal Sutta Vadu”. Thus, for a person deluded by Maaya, Pechi represents the harmful effects of wrong words uttered and its repercussions, sometimes resulting in devastating consequences. This provides a jolt to the person to assess and understand his ignorance and turn focus away from Maaya.



Anindika and Vaakdevi Pechi

With the threefold manifestations now formed, the Pranava now begins to expand, and propagate, creating space and time as it expands. The Sanskrit root word for expansion is ‘Brah’, and this is the significance of the deity Lord Brahma, who represents the coordinates, which are both symbols and evidences of the space and time expansion. As such, Brahma is also seen as the Vedic God Prajapathi along with Adithi, with the name adithi translating to Infinite - a property of the space-time coordinates. As such Brahma is the Creator God and as the coordinates, He also forms a ‘container’ of infinite dimensions. What is contained within is Aaditya, or the one born out of Adithi. This Aaditya represents the entire universe and all its contents, including life. When the focus is restricted to earth, one observes that the primary representation and energy for all life is the sun, and hence Lord Aaditya is identified with Lord Soorya, the sun God.

Thus, the relation between Brahma and Aaditya is one of Creator-Created. In the Kamalamba temple, one finds the shrine of Lord Brahma, whereas Lord Aaditya, in His threefold manifestation as Sun, Moon and Fire, forms the three eyes of Kamalaamba. Also, representing

the northward and southward motions of the sun - Uttaramnaya and Dakshinamnaya, one sees the shrines of Uttara Vinaayaka and Dakshina Vinaayaka.



Uttara Vinaayaka, Brahma, Dakshina Vinaayaka

With the concepts pertaining to creation of the universe fully covered and enshrined, the focus is now on a typical person mired in Samsara, trying to progress spiritually. For such a person, the most important element is Bhakti which is faith, trust, devotion and love, primarily to the Guru. As a personification and epitome of Bhakti, one finds the deity of Hanuman or Ajaneya. The Monkey Lord, as an incarnation of Shiva, is also seen in Sri Vidya as, Shiva-Shakti Swaroopa, with His tail as a form of Shakti. The Lord combines all the powers of all the deities, and stands as a constant support to an aspirant, sincerely following Lord Rama's instructions to guide and help every person sincerely yearning to reach the lotus feet of the Lord.

In Thiruvavur, Lord Ajaneya is enshrined outside the Kamalamba temple, in the temple tower or Gopuram, and the posture of the Lord is unique, with His face and hands turned rightward suggesting Dakshinachara, but His body and legs turned leftward suggesting Vamachara, and thus common to both traditions.



Lord Aanjaneya

Finally, as guardian of the Kamalaamba temple, as well as of the full temple complex and the town of Thiruvarur, one finds Goddess Renuka Devi, enshrined few kilometres away from the temple complex. Mythologically, Renuka Devi is associated with sage Jamadagni asking his son Parashuraama to behead his wife Renuka, as punishment for a fault owing to distraction and lack of concentration.

The beheading of Renuka by Parashurama is seen as the former getting liberated from bondages and delusions (Maaya), and the subsequent resurrection is seen as the Universal Mother inducing Her own energy into Renuka Devi, who attains oneness with the Parabrahman and acquires the status of a deity. Because of this significance Renuka Devi is also seen as Chhinnamasta , whose name is derived from the words meaning Severed ('Chhinna') and head ('Masta'). In this representation, the severing denotes liberation and cutting away of bondages. While on the one hand, the aspirant is asked to cut off from traditions and norms, and seek, reason out and investigate the ultimate truth without blindly believing religious books, on the other hand, the severing denotes the cutting away of material bondages, responsibilities and norms that hold an aspirant back from seeking the inner Self. A major bondage that needs to be severed is the ego, which is the false association of oneself with the body, brain and mind. One must identify the self with the Universal Mother, eternally blissful. However, losing one's identity to the bigger Self is the philosophical equivalent of death, since, this body, brain and mind are now instruments of the Divine Mother and cease to have identities of their own. This is why, Chhinnamasta, representing this severance and philosophical death is associated with the South, whose guardian is Yama, the Lord of Death. The shrine of Renuka Devi is seen along



with a shrine of Renuka and Maatangi, the two Goddesses with heads that were interchanged upon joining.



Renuka Devi; Renuka and Maatangi

With this, a brief discussion of the various Vamachara and Dakshinachara shrines pertaining to Sri Vidya in the Kamalaamba temple is concluded. It is clearly evident that the shrines, installed by sage Agastya display a perfection of meticulously planning one, covering every aspect of the Universal Mother in the creation of the universe, starting from the Nirguna Parabrahman as Atman, to less subtle aspects such as the universe and associated creations. Both the approaches of Vamachara and Dakshinachara are equally embraced without any distinction, prejudice or controversy, with the only objective being to provide a complete path for the Sri Vidya aspirant to reach and attain the Universal Mother, as the highest objective of Moksha.

Truly, Thiruvarur Kamalaamba temple is the only one anywhere in the world that can be described as the Sri Vidya Kshetra, as the concrete and monumental living manifestation of Sri Vidya, the esoteric tradition that honors without pretense, the Universal Mother in Her most direct form - as the Universal Mother.

With the choice of approach open to the aspirant, all a person needs to start the spiritual journey is pure and sincere devotion and Bhakti, and the rest will follow through the grace of a Guru, purely by the compassion of Universal Mother Kamalaamba.

(Special Courtesy to Kumar Gurukkal, Thiruvarur, for providing valuable information on various shrines of Thiruvarur, various traditions of Sri Vidya, and most importantly for details on the 'lost' Vamachara shrines of Thiruvarur.)

[Om Sri Maahre Namah| Om Sri Lalitha Ambikaayai Namah|

|Om Sri Sai Venkateshaya Namah]