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Introduction

Shall I be gone long? Forever and a day.
Where will I go? Ask my song.

—C. D. Lewis

From the Formless to Form

He who has no beginning
Yet can make a beginning
Can surely make an end.

—W. Krickeberg

Once there was neither Being nor nonbeing.¹ There was neither form nor formlessness. Then . . . , That which was hidden within Itself, That One, stirring, emerging, coming to be. From Itself to the Formless to the Form. Immutable, changeless, everywhere, pervading all, yet not physically—such is the mystery.

Suddenly an ancient note piercing the darkness. A song whose birth stirred the slumbering, summoning an eternal mystery to awaken. Emerging from deep within the hidden cave, the human heart, Gaṇapati's truth flows from the ice cave of the infinite. Housed within our gated dwelling, Gaṇapati the guest loved and longed for (the subject of chapter two).

That which has no form, can take a form. That which has no name, can take a name. From the formless to form, and back again and again and again (chapter three).

The wheel of time gathers speed, and somewhere between fact and legend, vision and myth, we ask . . . Who is Gaṇapati? There are those who lovingly sing his praises. There are those who worship and adore him. There are those who represent him in art and

literature. There are those who tell stories about him. There are those who chant his glory. There are those who seek his *darśana*.² There are those who invoke and invite his blessings. The thinkers think, the scholars scholasticise, the devotees worship. But what is Gaṇeśa's hidden meaning?

Seemingly incongruous facts coincide simultaneously. Gaṇapati/Gaṇeśa embodies: an enormous popularity that transcends sectarian and territorial limits; a seemingly rather late, yet dramatic, full-blown appearance into a religious pantheon;³ a confusing, conflicting, yet interesting and intriguing mythology; and an elephant's head atop a plump human body! To further complicate the picture is the fact that the physical representation of Gaṇapati offers more iconographic variations than does that of any other Indian deity. Couple this with the fact that Gaṇapati literature is rife with a seemingly endless number of stories on an unexpectedly limited number of themes. O Gaṇapati, who are you really? Tell the others what you want, tell them anything, but between you and me, who are you really? (chapter four).

Who is this radiant, enchanting child who dwells within one's heart?⁴ Throughout history, saints, sages, and seers have declared that from eternity he dwelt hidden within the womb, in the secret heart cave, until the mother of the universe brought him forth. Then, born into the light of the world, born into one's conscious experience, tusked with bright blue light, he sings his siren song (chapter five).

That each individual human being is a child of immortality (*amṛtasya pūtra*), a manifestation of the Divine, an embodiment of the immortal Self (*Ātman*), is a fundamental tenet of most Hindu scriptures and systems. The Self sings its siren song, which impells and compels everyone, everywhere, to seek eternal happiness and not to rest content until it is found. It is a given presupposition of these philosophies that, one day or other, one incarnation or other, all individuals will realize their true nature (chapter six).

A God is worshipped in a particular form, at particular times, in particular places, for particular purposes, addressed by particular names. There are functions to perform as well as petitions to grant. The One Self may appear in many forms. Different aspects of this one great reality are personified as deities, each with its own significant legends and symbols. The singer sings (chapter seven).

You know, there are deep songs and dark songs, ethereal songs and shimmering songs. There are songs that ring and songs that roar. Some are audible, concrete, and tangible, others hover in the air just out of reach, like enticing portents faintly heard far off, and

still others await their turn patiently (or impatiently) in the unlit temple of eternity. How strange and wonderful they all are. And when two songs murmur together, sometimes they are hostile and antagonistic to each other, and they fight and hate disturbed. They cry out in anger like two mad monsters that, chained up, are biting at their fetters and beating against the bars of their prison. And sometimes two songs enchant one another, and they embrace, illuminating mystery's mask. Such is the child's journey through the forest of sounds, and round the child are a thousand forces lying in wait, beckoning to caress or devour. The singer, singing, is sung (chapter eight).

Everything is a part of one's song. Each moment is *the* moment. You are not in the world—the world is in you. You are not the physical body, Awake! The clash of forces, the dance of joy and anguish; everything that throbs or slumbers, like one searching for a hardly dared to be hope—meeting only the corpse of one's desire. Is it possible to change one's song? There is no other way in life, no other song than the one symphony from age to age (chapter nine).

A number of years ago I was asked to give a series of talks on Gaṇeśa. Subsequent to these talks I made plans to do some further research work on Gaṇeśa in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, the two strongholds of Gaṇeśa worship within India. In Maharashtra I had a strange experience. I was visiting a samādhi-shrine of a twentieth-century Indian saint. Directly under the place where his body was buried, there was a meditation cave. I entered this cave and sat down to meditate. The cave was pitch black except for the light that emanated from the flames of the oil lamps upon the altar. After sitting down with my eyes wide open, I saw before me a life-size figure of a human body with an elephant's head leaning against the altar wall. I could scarcely believe my eyes and blinked and stared and stared and blinked, yet the figure remained standing there. I observed that his right arm was raised with his right hand in *abhāya mūdā* (the gesture of "have no fear"), and the left arm was relaxed with the left hand holding the *gadā* (club). His left leg was crossed over his right leg at an angle with the left knee bent. Once I was sure he was really there, I began to search his eyes and to my surprise his large, dark brown eyes were searching mine even as I probed his. I cocked my head this way and that as I peered into his eyes, and to my surprise he was peering the same way into mine. It was as if each of us were simultaneously "checking the other out" to determine if "the other" was really there.

Suddenly the figure of Gaṇeśa turned into a figure of a man standing in exactly the same pose. He was leaning against the wall

with one hand in *abhāya mūdra* and the other holding the *gadā*. After a few moments, he dropped the upright fingers of his right hand into a fist except for the little or baby finger, which continued in an upright position. A wheel of light (*cakra*) appeared, encircling his little finger, and he slowly began to rotate the finger; this had the effect of causing the wheel of light to slowly rotate. Suddenly, upon the wheel appeared various beings in various positions. As the wheel rotated faster and faster, these beings began to fly off into space in different directions. And then this person flicked his little finger, and the wheel flew off into an arcing semicircle heading straight for my forehead. It hit me in the forehead, between the eyebrows, and exploded in a flash of light. Waves of bliss coursed through my body and I felt “drunk” with delight.

But that is not the whole story. Soon thereafter I arranged an interview with a *brahmin* priest who was not only a specialist in the *Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda* but also a *Gaṇeśa upāsaka* (a worshipper of *Gaṇeśa*). I sent him some questions the first of which was: “Do you know of a standing *Gaṇeśa* with two arms, one upraised in *abhāya mūdra* and the other holding the *gadā*?” I said that I had encountered many different *mūrtis* (images) of *Gaṇapati* during my research but that I had never encountered one like this. When I met the priest in person, he asked, “Where did you learn of this *mūrti*?” I replied, “It does not matter where I learned of such a one, do you know of this *Gaṇeśa*?” Again he asked, “Where did you learn of this particular *Gaṇeśa* in the standing position with two arms, one upraised in the gesture of fearlessness and the other holding a club?” Again I replied, “It doesn’t matter; do you know him?” He replied that such a *Gaṇeśa* is described in the *Gaṇeśa Purāṇa*, a Sanskrit text that is an important authority for the *Gāṇapatyas* (sectarian devotees of *Gaṇapati*) in Maharashtra. Tradition claims that *Gaṇeśa* in his four-armed form as *Mahāgaṇapati* will be both prevalent and popular during the early part of the *kali yuga* (the present Age of Strife), but that as time passes this two-armed form will manifest and become popular as an *avatāra* (incarnation) of *Gaṇeśa*.⁵

The *upāsaka’s* description of scriptural support confirmed my personal experience. Unexpected, it arrived “after the fact.” Wonderfully, it confirmed that which had been experienced. More wonderfully, that which was experienced had not, and could not have been, previously known to the author. Hindu tradition claims that one aspect of *Gaṇeśa* is that he is known for being “easily appeased” (*śulabham*). Is this an instantiation of that characteristic?

Within the toolbox of the world, scholasticism and devotion-
alism both exist. May the reader “feel” as well as “understand”
what Gaṇeśa, who Gaṇeśa, why Gaṇeśa, where Gaṇeśa might
mean. May the reader be allowed to free him or herself from a
purely analytical perspective and to sense another, in many ways
more culturally accurate, relationship with the material. Who is
Gaṇapati?

Mythmaker, Oathbreaker

Myriad are the ways in which Gaṇapati has been, and may be,
conceived. There are those which refer to him as . . . one’s song is
Gaṇapati and Gaṇapati is oneself and Gaṇapati is the Absolute.
God, Gaṇeśa, Gaṇapati, *Guru*, Self—not a hair’s breath’s differ-
ence. Gaṇapati is abundance overflowing and good fortune mani-
fest. Gaṇapati is the *ādi iṣṭa devatā* (one’s first personal divinity).
Gaṇapati is *Agni*, fire, sacred and mundane; priest of the sacrifice
as well as that into which the sacrifice is poured. Gaṇapati is the
antaryāmin (the divine spark within). Gaṇapati is the *Ātman*, the
indwelling immortal Self. Gaṇapati is the *nīla bindu* (blue pearl)⁶
as well as the *nīla puruṣa* (blue person). Gaṇapati is *Varada*, the
boon giver. Gaṇapati is *Brahmaṇaspati*, the creator, evoker of the
worlds, who, by his cry, creates. Gaṇapati is a child of *Pārvatī*, the
Divine Mother. Gaṇapati is cosmic. Gaṇapati dances. Gaṇapati is
the Divine Child. Gaṇapati is a divine incarnation. Gaṇapati is
elephant faced. Gaṇapati is everywhere. Gaṇapati is the gate-
keeper. Gaṇapati is the *Guru* (the Divine Teacher). Gaṇapati is
immanent. Gaṇapati is the *kuṇḍalinī śakti* (the cosmic energy that
lies coiled within each individual). Gaṇapati is the lord of begin-
nings. Gaṇapati is the lord of the mind. Gaṇapati is lord of the
multitudes. Gaṇapati is the lord of obstacles as well as the remover
of obstacles. Gaṇapati is a *mūrti* (image, icon). Gaṇapati is the
Omkāra. Gaṇapati is possessor of *siddhi* (perfection) and *buddhi*
(wisdom). Gaṇapati is potbellied. Gaṇapati is protector of the
weak. Gaṇapati is the *puruṣa-kāra* (the mediator between the
human being and the Divine). Gaṇapati is the Remover of obsta-
cles. Gaṇapati is seated in the *mūlādhāra cakra* (the fountainhead
of evolutionary energy located within each person at the base of
the spine). Gaṇapati is single-tusked. Gaṇapati is the student
(*śiṣya*). Gaṇapati is the son of Śiva. Gaṇapati is *svayambhū* (self-
born). Gaṇapati is a physical embodiment of *tat tvam asi* [that
thou art]. Gaṇapati is three eyed. Gaṇapati is the lord of the

threshold. Gaṇapati is transcendent. Gaṇapati is your own Self. Verily, Gaṇapati is your own Self.

Gaṇeśa, the knower of every beginning, bears one over every difficult crossing. He swings open all the divine doors and gives one easy passage for one's expansion. Gaṇeśa, indeed, is the visible Truth. That thou art (*tat tvam asi*). Gaṇeśa indeed produces, sustains, and dissolves the universe.

Gaṇapati is the embodiment and essence of sound. Gaṇapati is pure consciousness. Gaṇapati is pure bliss. Gaṇapati is *Brahman*. Gaṇapati is *sat cit ānanda*, Existence, Consciousness, Bliss absolute. Gaṇapati is one without a second. Gaṇapati is the visible lord. Gaṇapati is the invisible lord. Gaṇapati is wisdom and knowledge.

As the elephant-faced one, surely Gaṇapati/Gaṇeśa must be the easiest god to recognize since time began and space rolled out. Space and time themselves are his creation.⁷ He is the great God to be invoked before every act, and especially worshipped and prayed to when changes occur in one's life. Worship of Lord Gaṇeśa is immediate and experiential. Every beginning finds him present. Every moment is his manifestation. One has but to think of him and he is there. He is listening. *Gana* in Sanskrit means a "multitude," *pati* and *īśa* both mean "lord." Thus Gaṇapati/Gaṇeśa is the lord of the multitudes, of all beings.

But is that all? To enquire into Gaṇapati is to enquire into What-Is. It is to quest after what is real, what is ultimate, what is certain. In this day and age, every television/movie viewer knows that the "final frontier" is space.⁸ But space is not *the* final frontier. The *final* frontier carries with it an odor of finality, of completeness, of certainty. No matter how far one travels outward, the final frontier will always lie within. Logically, one may always doubt whatever one encounters as an "other." One could travel to heaven and look over to the throne of God and wonder whether or not that "entity" over there is really God. One may always doubt the "other." We are smart enough, sophisticated enough, to know about dreams and hallucinations and visions and illusions and relative perspectives. Think about it—all one may be certain of right now is that one is present. This book may not be real, the act of reading may not be real—but that *you* are present is indubitable.

Is there something certain, something that one may *never* doubt? Gaṇapati/Gaṇeśa, the elephant-faced, the single-tusked one, points to the fact that one can never doubt one's own Self, the doubter him or herself. No matter where one finds oneself, oneself is *always* there. Why, the very act of doubting oneself is but an affir-

mation of oneself, for, one can always ask, Who exactly is doing the doubting? To say that "I do not exist" is to affirm the "I" who is doing the doubting. Who is this "I"? That is the essence of Gaṇeśa. But I am getting ahead of myself.

A friendly, slightly chubby, elephant-headed deity is an enigma disclosing space/time's mask. What are space and time but disclosures/appearances of the Divine? Further, space and time are themselves tantalizers. The siren song of Gaṇapati alluringly *begins* there. *Begins?* When is the true beginning? Logically, one can always ask the question, What went before? *There?* Before space unfolded and the river of time from the ice cave of eternity began to flow, where was there?

Not only are space and time necessary as coordinates to order things and events in the drama known as the story of Gaṇapati/Gaṇeśa, the story of the universe, the story of you and me, but they are the foundation/presupposition upon which anything and everything in the known universe depends. Where they end, the great unknown begins. At the same time, they are immense mysteries that the mind cannot contain. They are enigmas, though for different reasons. The riddle of time is the riddle of *beginning*. When is then? The riddle of space is the riddle of *location*. Where is there? Between "no where" and "now here" is just a slip of the pen!

What is 'space'? What is 'time'? The common, everyday individual on the street regularly distinguishes between space and time and understands both. Elephants exist *in* space and *endure* through time. This book doesn't take up much space though it will take some time to read.

These two concepts, space and time, are not unfamiliar. So why is it that, no matter whether one does a little or a lot of analysis, space and time are always revealed as mysterious? No one has any difficulty in understanding me when I say that every *time* I lecture there is a lot of empty *space* in the lecture hall.

Time seemingly consists of three parts: past, present, and future. But even a little analysis reveals that the past doesn't exist anymore and the future does not exist *yet*. Further, even that which exists now, the present, turns out to be exceedingly small. It is only one moment, a single instant, a minute interval without duration. Thus, what is time but a single point without any dimension? (This sure sounds a lot like, God is a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere . . . and to have neither a center nor a circumference is not to be a circle at all . . . each half cancels out the other!)

It is relatively simple to know the exact time: “at the tone the *time* will be exactly 8:30.” Why, even a simple glance at one’s watch will suffice to determine the time of day. There do not seem to be any lurking difficulties here, do there? Obviously it is impossible to measure the past (it is gone) or the future (it is not yet come)—they do not exist! The present, we just observed, does not have any extension. Thus it, too, is immeasurable. So what exactly is one measuring when one says, “the time is 8:30”?

Space and time are immense mysteries. The more one enquires *what* they are, the deeper one’s bewilderment becomes. Not only are philosophers, religious thinkers, scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, and so on, not able to adequately define what they are, neither can they specify (with any proficiency) what they *consist* of nor *how* to measure them.

The physical universe is perceived, and, as such, it must be given its due. Space and time are part of the makeup of the cosmos. The problem for the absolutist, the transcendentalist, is to solve how the Transcendent (beyond space and time), the Pure One, became many. It is on this rock that most monistic systems break. Yet, on the other hand, the mythmaker must account for blemishes and impurities that might spoil the prototype. To account for the appearance of space and time is as difficult as to attempt to explain them away.

What is the origin of space and time? What is the human being’s origin of the concepts of space and time? Are space and time (fundamentally) physical and objective or psychological and subjective? Surely so many conundrums all point to the curiouser and curiouser phenomenon of the common everyday sense of space and time.

“The rule is jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam today.”

“It must come sometimes to jam today,” Alice objected.

“No, it can’t, said the Queen. It’s jam every *other* day: today isn’t any *other* day, you know.”⁹

Who is Gaṇapati? What is Gaṇapati? Where is Gaṇapati? Why is Gaṇapati? Obstacles are found at the boundaries of space and time—temporally at the beginning and spatially at the threshold. These are the points of entry—the *loci* of highest risk and possibility. Our quest is to discover Gaṇeśa, both in and beyond ‘space’ and ‘time’. Will this lead us to a knowledge of Gaṇeśa as such, that

is, of *That* which lies beyond all cosmic instantiations? As *mythmakers*, we gather the scattered leaves of the book of the universe. By employing the texts, the stories, the mythology at our disposal, we gain a fixed point of reference. To become *oathbreakers* we must journey beyond—break boundaries. We will wield and interpret these texts with only one goal in mind—that of breaking the mold, of transcending space and time, of experiencing Gaṇapati whenever and wherever he may lead. In one respect, texts are self-evident, knowable, and understandable to one endowed with a sharp intellect. But knowledge is definitely not wisdom. Words are not meaning. Map is not territory. Experience is the touchstone, the final court of appeal; and, ultimately, personal experience is that which will create one's own most distinctive and definitive answer to the question, Who is Gaṇapati?