

Aum Pranava Ashram Newsletter



March 2020

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I.1. COVID News

Since March 17, schools, colleges, shopping malls, libraries, cinema theaters, all kinds of entertainment places, most of the smaller shops (except groceries), and many offices are closed. The first day of the so-called “*Janata Curfew*” in India (1,35 billion people) was on 22 March 2020 in the face of the Corona Virus outbreak. Since then, more and more shops have closed down, the streets are almost empty, and people are strongly advised to stay at home. Police staff is patrolling the streets, making sure that no unnecessary movements take place. Anyone knowing Indian villages or small towns would be thinking that this is impossible. But today it is possible. The districts and states have closed down their borders. Busses, trains, and flights (even domestic flights) were canceled.

Most of the shops in Tenkasi and Sengottai are closed; basic foods are rationed and sold in select shops at very low prices. The wealthy Indians are donating freely to the Prime Minister’s Relief Fund, which is unprecedented.¹

Of course, food supply for the ashram’s 87 residents will be one of the challenges for us, too. We have adapted to the situation by reducing our meals to regular, but very simple foods. We are trying to minimize the risks as far as possible. The entrance gate is locked at all times.

The Government is working hard to convince us to stay within the confines of our homes until April 14, a date set for assessing the situation and making new decisions.

What does the Corona Virus mean for us in practical terms?

- Homeschooling the children
- A lot of games and creative workshops for and with the children
- Time to read books
- Time for children’s computer practice, at last
- Longer Yoga Classes in the morning
- Less stress for the kids, more pressure for us :) - but it’s not a complaint, because we like having them at home :)
- Continuous talks regarding safety measures for elders, staff members, and children

¹ One of the wealthiest corporate persons has donated around 190 Million Euros to the Prime Minister’s Relief Fund. Another actor donated more than 3 Million Euros to the Fund. The list of generous donors is much longer; I have singled out the most impressive ones. I thought this qualifies for sharing in a Newsletter.

- We organized workshops and discussions with doctors for the ashramites, but this is not possible anymore due to the constraint of movement
- A lot of documentation work and reports for the District Youth- and Social Welfare Offices
- Continuous medical supervision and regular gargling with saltwater and inhalations with herbal stuff
- Logistics is a problem which we will have to solve

The Old-Age Home accommodates 25 elders at present. Most of them are patients with high sugar levels, high blood pressure, weak kidneys, and liver function, as well as severe respiratory problems. Hence, they belong to the most precarious risk group. Two residents of the Old-Age Home are patients with substantial loss of reality. They are wanderers, and it's challenging to keep them confined in their rooms.

However, overall we are fine, and we do our best to maintain all precautions to avoid any contact with the “outside world.”

Schools might re-open their gates in the first week of June. The people in India know a little about the situation in Europe. They know about Italy and Spain, but only the numbers of infected people and the deceased ones. WE pray for our friends and all the people in Italy, in Spain and in the whole of Europa that this crisis will soon lower its head! We wish you and your whole family HEALTH and all you need to overcome the challenges in this difficult time!

I.2. Unity in Diversity

The last three Newsletters formed part of an attempt to explain and understand more about the mentality, the structure of life and society in South India in particular.



Title pages of local newspapers usually convey a lot about the local people. For this reason, I am including this title page of the biggest daily in Tamil Nadu from the 22 of

March 2020, the first day of the "Janata Curfew". The pictures are intended to give the readers funny and creative ideas about how to spend the day at home :)

It's mostly the small, everyday occurrences that puzzle an outsider or visitor who's witnessing life as it is happening in a specific part of the world. For example, why do the local people not like to smile when they pose for a photo (while others grin in the background 😊)? Why do people touch other people's feet? Why are there so many Gurus in India? Why are spirituality and devotion so omnipresent in India? Why do people have red, white, or yellow colored powder on their foreheads? ² Sometimes these experiences create images in our mind, leaving indelible impressions behind. If we have not made ourselves familiar with the customary behavior in a particular country, these images in our mind might turn into a negative attitude towards the people of that respective culture. India is vast, not only in physical size but also in terms of cultures, customs, beliefs, and social values, and it would be easy to misunderstand a lot. It was my intention with these recent Newsletters to look behind the surface of everyday life as it presents itself in these latitudes. I sincerely hope that I could help the readers to gather a more comprehensive understanding of one of the world's oldest cultures.

In terms of communication and mobility, world citizens have grown closer to each other. The fact that we can know what's going on in another part of the world while making video calls and sending a photo or document to the opposite side of the planet, all at once, amounts to having miraculous powers of olden times (called *Siddhi* in India). However, to find common ground between people of different cultures in practical life is still a big challenge. Not only between countries and continents but even within a country, Unity is lacking. We are aware that we must learn from one another. However, we still need to find that **neutral** ground, untainted by memories or negative emotions, on which peaceful and harmonious interaction is possible. We need to find, and **practice** those core tenets like UNITY in DIVERSITY that enable us to live with more truth, mindfulness, respect, and love.

Self-inquiry as a way to get there has a long history in India. It puts the trinity of **God, I, and the world** with all its diverse manifestations under scrutiny until we get a deeper understanding of the underlying unity in all this diversity³. Self-analysis is the process of examining and dismantling of the physical, mental, psychological and spiritual planes of existence of an individual soul; they are discovered to be instruments to carry out our Karmas and fulfill our destiny as a person or a distinct soul on its way home to its Divine Origin. To cognize these instruments as something different from the real "I" amounts to

² There are more delicate questions which I am not touching upon in this Newsletter, because they need in-depth analysis and answers which are beyond the scope of a newsletter.

a quantum leap in the consciousness of that soul. The veils of appearance are recognized and dissolve one by one until only the Real Self remains. The worlds of appearance and reality have kept adepts, thinkers and artists alike captivated as they tried to express their concepts in art, literature, and spiritual science.



Giovanni Strazza, *The Veiled Virgin*, ca. 1850. Behind the veils of the manifold, transient layers of personality lies the face of the true self, deeply absorbed in Divine Ecstasy (called Sat-Chit-Ananda in India).

The one who inquires, that “I” is the same in all people everywhere. That “I” is called *Atma* which is different from the tools it possesses to navigate through the world. We call them the [24 Tattvas](#)⁴, i.e. aspects of Universe and the physical body.

While mahābhūtas (the gross elements) are the basis for the material world, tanmātras (the subtle elements) are but limited aspects and views of it, in no way able to fully describe it. We cannot actually perceive the reality, all we can access are limited "bands" of information that form a description of reality. These bands of information are the five tanmātras.

⁴ The 24 Tattvas break down our physical existence into layers or tools which are animated by the Atma, the Self (25th principle). The **Antahkaranas** (“inner organs”) are:
Citta - subconscious, house of memories and impressions from the past and previous lives
Buddhi - Intellect, thinking capacity
Manas - the mind, a bundle of thoughts and desires
Ahamkara - the ego, based on the false identification with the body
These **Antahkaranas** control the “outer” organs or instruments of the body:
5 sense organs - **Jñānendriyas** (nose, tongue, eye, skin, ear)
5 motor organs - **Karmendriyas** (anus, sexual organ, leg, hand, mouth)
5 subtle elements - **Tanmātra** (smell, taste, form, touch, sound)
5 gross elements - **Mahābhuta** (earth, water, fire, air, space)

This restriction however applies only to the limited beings (jiva, or aṇu). For one who has gone beyond māyā, in the realm of the pure tattvas, there can be direct perception of reality, because as one's self is Ātman, so are the external objects. In such a state an enlightened being can perceive the world beyond the five senses (direct perception), in a state of diversity in unity and unity in diversity.⁵

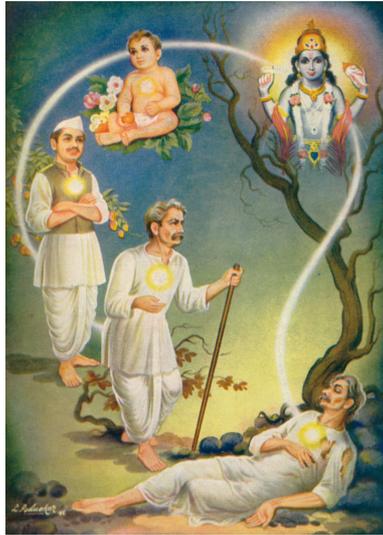
Self-inquiry does not rely on books. It requires experience as the cornerstone of actual individual transformation, testing our beliefs against the reality of oneself, of the universal self, of ONE-SELF.

At the beginning of our elaborations on *Sanathana Dharma* two Newsletters ago, I enlisted the following points to be discussed in more detail if we want to understand more about *Sanathana Dharma*. For easy reference, I am reproducing them here:

1. The four stages of human life also called the **four ashramas** (not to be confused with places called ashrams)
2. The Four **Purusharthas**, Proper Goals in Human Life: **Dharma - Artha - Kama - Moksha** (Righteousness-Wealth-Desire-Liberation)
3. **Dharma and Svadharma** (Right action and individual action)
4. The **social construct** in *Sanathana Dharma*
5. **Mata, Pita, Guru, Deva**: Mother, Father, Guru, God
6. **Karma, Bhakti, Jnana** : Action, Devotion, Wisdom
7. **Protect Dharma - It will protect you**

⁵ Institute for Encyclopedia of Human Ideas on Ultimate Reality and Meaning (2001). Ultimate Reality and Meaning, Volume 24. Van Gorcum. p. 9.

I.3.1. The Four Stages of Human Life



We speak of the four stages of life, also called *Ashramas*, concerning age-based phases in life, each dedicated to specific education, activity, and rituals pertaining to that particular time. The names of those four stages are still known to most people in India. In contrast, the correct meaning might have suffered losses over the last decades in people's awareness. However, we see customs all around us in all spheres of life, which remind us of traditional rituals for specific purposes at a certain age. A very prominent example would be the coming of age for girls (menarche), which is still celebrated with pomp and fanfare by many families. For many boys, it is customary to initiate them into a Mantra in a holy thread ceremony called *Punal* ceremony. The customs, rituals, and beliefs are community-oriented.

Here is a short outline of the names of the life-stages and their traditional meanings:

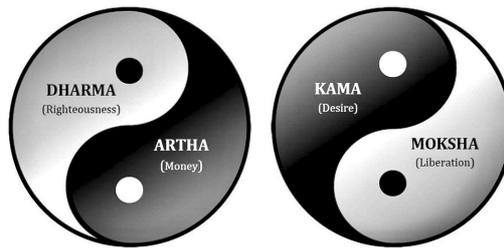
1. **Brahmacharya** - Childhood. Being a child and having to absorb knowledge about life in this world. *Brahmacharya* means to learn about discipline and responsibility, live in purity, still untainted by sensual desires, and focus on education. The acquired knowledge will be useful for the welfare of one's later family and the welfare of society at large. The term *Brahmacharya* may also apply to adult persons who have decided to live an unmarried life (in celibacy). They might become scholars or spiritual adepts, taking a religious vow later in life.
2. **Grihastha** - Wedlock. Being a married person, establishing and working for the welfare and sustenance of one's family as well as contributing to the social welfare at large. In more distant times, the roles of women and men were clearly defined. A woman was highly respected as the person who is responsible for all things related to matters sustaining the family

from INSIDE the house or taking care of whatever is needed for the family members. A man used to be responsible for the work OUTSIDE the home, sustaining the life of the family members, including his parents. Families used to be much larger, and joint families were thriving.

3. **Vanaprastha** - After 50 years of age. An orderly withdrawal from active life, retiring and preparing oneself for the last stage in life. A *Vanaprastha's* central role was to counsel the upcoming generation in carrying out their duties for family and society and then withdrawing from social life. Sometimes, they even exiled themselves into the forest and lived the life of an ascetic. This phase is dedicated to detaching oneself from worldly bonds of whatever type. In some cases, instead of living with their sons and daughters, wives would follow their husbands to the forest. But this would be her personal choice. Indian literature has many stories of kings who renounced their kingdom and lived the life of mendicants in the woods.
4. **Sannyasa** - After *Vanaprastha*; living the life of a renunciant person, devoting oneself entirely to leaving all attachments behind, including one's own body, contemplating the cycle of rebirth and death and the transient nature of the body, the senses, the mind, and the life based on these entities. *Sannyasis* live on alms, give up all possessions, and do not stay longer than three days as a guest in a house. To be blessed with the opportunity to feed a *Sannyasi* who has come to beg for alms at one's doorstep was considered a great fortune for the family, erasing the effects of bad *karma* (*pāpa*) for many generations. *Sannyasis* used to have a very high status in society, thus guaranteeing their livelihood (food and shelter) and purity (not having to cheat for food and shelter). Even though they lived away from society, they were fully integrated into the social hierarchy by placing them at the top of it.

The *Ashramas* are interrelated with the concept of *Purusharthas*, the four proper aims of life - **Dharma** - **Artha** - **Kama** - **Moksha** - in Hindu philosophy, and the social construct of Indian society.

1.3.2. The Four *Purusharthas*



The four *Purusharthas* or *dharmic* goals in life are:

Dharma: righteous conduct

Artha: wealth, health and the means of life

Kama: Love, desire, relationships

Moksha: Self-realisation, Freedom from the cycle of Birth and Rebirth.

Wise men cite the meaning of the four *Purusharthas* as follows:

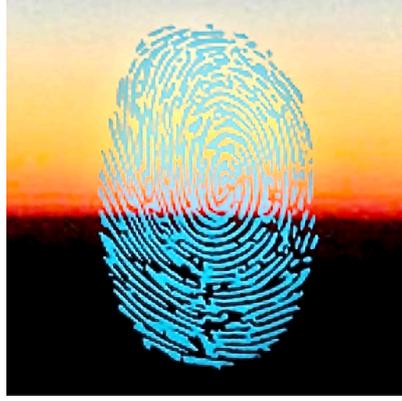
When Artha (Wealth) is acquired through Dharma (fair, lawful means), and Kama (desire) is directed towards attaining Moksha (ultimate liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth), a life in peace and harmony is possible for oneself and the environment.

There is a word in Sanskrit that describes this perfect state of well-being, including health, prosperity, harmony, and devotion, namely *Kshēma*. Somebody who is *Kshēmam* is alright. From possessing good character to being beautiful (on the inside and not vain), wealthy (not lavish), healthy (but not showing off), and in harmony with his/her surroundings (neither dominant nor submissive but well-balanced), that person is blessed with *Kshēmam*.

Beyond that, if a person's desire (*Kāma*) is directed towards God, i.e., to develop a relationship with God through prayer and meditation, it eventually leads to final deliverance from contact with pain and sorrow (*Moksha*). It is the final emancipation of human life, having arrived at the stage of absolute freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth, also called *Samsara*.

1.3.3. *Dharma* vs. *Sva-dharma*

Universal Dharma vs. Individual Dharma



The syllable *sva-* before the word *dharma* (meaning “duty or activity in harmony with the natural laws of this universe”) expresses an action that is self-born, original, individual, or natural. It happens by itself, so to say; no external force is necessary for it to emerge. It is ingrained in our DNA structure and refers to our unique nature as that specific human being. Hence, the term *svadharma* refers to our actions as they are intended to be done in this life. It is that unique path that holds all the hints and keys we need to reach our goal. We already know that we have to be active and perform *karmas* from birth to death; there is no escape. We also know that *karma* is not only one action but has a long history of causes and effects and a lengthy tail of consequences for oneself and everyone involved. So, there is a lot of responsibility for an individual to choose one’s path wisely. But does everybody already know what one wants or is supposed to do? How do we get that clarity?

In this context, let us hear (a small excerpt of) what Sri Krishna says to Arjuna about *svadharma* in the *Bhagavad Geetha*⁶

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणःपरधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् । स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः॥३.३५॥

⁶ The *Bhagavad Geetha* is the philosophical jewel of the *Mahabharatha*, an epic entwining around two dynasties, the Pandavas and Kauravas. Lord Krishna features as a central figure in those stories. The *Bhagavad Geetha* contains 700 verses spoken by Lord Krishna to his cousin, friend and devotee Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. On seeing friends and relatives on the enemies’ side, Arjuna feels desperate and loses the power to fight. While Krishna explains to him in great psychological detail how to discard the illusion of being helpless and caught in great misfortune, he regains clarity and the strength to fight in order to protect his family, the kingdom, his people, and his own life.

One's own dharma (sva-dharma), though imperfect, is better than the dharma of another well discharged. Better death in one's own dharma; the dharma of another is fraught with fear.

It is a human frailty to think less of oneself and too much of others. Comparing oneself with others and imitating or superseding others does not necessarily mean that we have done the right thing. It does not make us nor anybody else happier.⁷ The point about *dharma* and *svadharmā* is that we focus on acquiring those skills that will enable us to **give** the most to the world, as against skills that make us **accumulate** the most from the world like money or fame. Sticking to one's *svadharmā* means developing one's natural inclinations and using them to increase *kshēmam* in and all around us.

We said in the beginning that our inner nature has to emerge so that we can know what our proper *karma* is. But what exactly is our inner nature? I guess we have many personality layers as long as we are continuously swinging in between the highly erratic and faulty *Ragas* and *Dveshas* (likes and dislikes). We exhibit inert qualities like laziness and stubbornness, mercurial qualities like hatred and anger, emotional or romantic states of infatuation or desire, and so further and so on. These qualities are called *Gunās*, innate tendencies, which are formed like chemical elements in our body-mind complex. Mostly hormone-driven and selfish, these qualities need to be checked if we want to increase clarity in our lives. Hormone-driven actions are an example of how imperfect our *karmas* can be. We get agitated, nervous, and even hysteric with a small thing one day, while it does not even peripherally affect us the next day. *Gunās* can sway our actions in any way they move. What is very important to know is that we can be independent of these *Gunās*, from the chemical elements of our bodies that form mental tendencies in our minds. Our true nature is much subtler than our *Gunās* and *Karmas*, actually it is subtlety itself. Our ultimate emancipation is to detach ourselves from the delusion of being bound by *Karmas* and *Gunās*, which have been the cause of all mistaken identities.

The least evident, innate nature is the Divine Nature. An action offered with Love at the Feet of our inner Divine Nature, leaving the result of that action completely to that Divinity, becomes capable of purifying us from the slings of likes and dislikes. *Svadharmā* helps us to exhaust the stock of already accumulated *Karma*, meaning that not only does such an act not accrue new *Karma*, but reduces the inventory of previous karma. This will lead to more clarity and wisdom (*Jnāna*), helping us to fulfill our destiny in ever-improving ways. Gradually clearing our minds from the thick smog of delusions, there will be a brighter vision of what one is meant to do or at least not to do. Allow me to cite a few examples on a more practical level. If one happens to be a highly moralistic or fair

⁷ Of course, I am not talking about Cricket or Football Matches :)

and just person, it could be very beneficial for the community to get involved in matters of the law. Practically oriented people will not make themselves happier by becoming teachers. Intellectually inclined persons who can think through severe problems to a solution might not be satisfied with manual work. By steadily adhering to our **Svadharma**, we will slowly develop faith and confidence in our natural inclinations. They show us the way to fulfill our **Dharma**, which will lead to **Kshēmam** in our environment, producing peace instead of dissatisfaction.

In the interest of the readers, I would like to stop here and say something which comes to my mind as I am writing these lines:

My wisdom is minimal, and I do not lay claim to possessing more than what I have understood in all these years of spiritual practice. It would be foolish on my part. I feel like a tiny little ant standing in front of a massive storehouse of rice grains. Humbled and a little overwhelmed by the complexity of life and the tremendous amount of knowledge that is available to us on matters of spiritual science. The great masters have unraveled those issues without heroics - always bowing low before the One omniscient-omnipotent-omnipresent GOD. I bow down to their feet and thank them for their presence in my life.

Here is a simple yet deep, concluding quote from Sri Sathya Sai Baba on Duty:

Duty without Love is deplorable.

Duty with Love is desirable.

Love without Duty is Divine.

TIMELINE

1) [Cultural November Programs](#), 20-24 Nov 2019



During Suchitra Balasubramanian's Devotional Music Concert

Liked by students, artists, devotees, and speakers alike, the [Cultural November Programs](#) of the Aum Pranava Ashram are slowly turning into a locally popular function. One of the highlights of the programs was the Community Service Events in three different schools. Together with the teachers of the respective schools, we devised competitions in the fields of sport, drawing, and essay writing, which was fun for the children. We are grateful to all the school authorities and staff members who made these events possible, but above all, the students for their enthusiastic participation!



The photos were taken at Ramasamy Pillai Hr. Sec. School, Ilanji



Spectrum Hr. Sec. School



Visitors and volunteers of the Aum Pranava Ashram visited the school together with us to distribute prizes at the Spectrum School

TV-famed singer **Suchitra Balasubramanian**'s "Devotional Music Concert" enchanted all the listeners with her beautiful songs. For the pure joy of listening to one of the best performances on that day, I am uploading the song [Kātrinile Varum Gitam](#), a song composed by the great mystic Meera for her beloved Lord Krishna a few hundred years ago. Unfortunately, I had a problem with the camera and could not make proper videos during the performance. I attached some pictures to Suchitra's song.



Suchitra Balasubramaniam (in orange) with accompaniment

The concluding *Bharathanatyam* performance by the Aum Pranava Ashram girls and other students of the *Annai Academy of Arts* rounded the events off. The video of the [Cultural November Programs 2019](#) is uploaded on our [website and can be watched here](#).

2) Christmas '19 - [the Children Choir Sings For YOU](#)

The children learned a little German for this very popular Christmas Carol from Austria called [Süßer die Glocken Nie Klingen](#)(my translation, The Sound of Bells Never Sound Sweeter).



3) [Puttaparthi 24 - 30 Dec 2010](#)

We are blessed to be able to make this trip with all the children annually for the last 17 years. The bus journey started after the Christmas Celebrations on the Eve of the 24 of December. It ended on the night of the next day when we arrived safely in Prashanti Nilayam. We had a wonderful time in the ashram, and the children felt homely and happy throughout our stay at the Prashanti Nilayam Ashram in Puttaparthi. On the evening of the 30 of December, we left Puttaparthi. We arrived back safely at home on the 31 of December late at night. This journey with the children is like a spiritual renewal for us. We are deeply grateful for being able to undertake this journey and thank the sponsors for this blessed gift!

See the video of the [Puttaparthi Trip](#)



The whole crew visiting a friend in Puttaparthi

4) *Pongal*

Pongal is one of the most popular celebrations in India. This year's program was filled with *poojas*, the activities of the Sports and Talent Festival for the children, the bonfire on Bogi Pongal, and the cows' *Mattu Pongal* which we celebrated in the cowshed itself.

The competitions were highly spirited and after three days of sporting, drawing, creating wonderful Rangolis around the Prayer Hall, and taking part in all kinds of fun activities, we were all happy but exhausted :)

Hope you enjoy the following videos:

[Pooja and Games, 15 Jan 2020](#)

[Pongal Games, Part 1](#)

[Pongal Games, Part 2](#)

[Pongal Games, Part 3 \(Team Games\)](#)

[Mattu Pongal, 16 Jan 2020](#)



The girls made exquisite Rangolis for the competition. I adore this little friend! 🥰



Staff members and children together - just relaxed and happy!

5) [Varushabhishekam, 5 Feb 2020](#)

Every year, we conduct a [Varushabhishekam](#) for the Ganesha Temples within the premises of the Aum Pranava Ashram. While *poojas* are performed daily in both temples, this elaborate ritual takes place once in a year to renew the spiritual energy of the temples.

III. Preview and Concluding Words

The COVID-19 Virus is an unprecedented phenomenon. It seems to me as if somebody has taken the steering wheel out of our hands to speed up some necessary procedures and kept us, the “troublemakers,” safely in our homes. It gives us the time to reconsider our place in this world, without making up ever new ideas on how to make more money, how to “get more” out of something or somebody, or how to substitute human processes ever increasingly with artificial ones. Like other virus epidemics before, this pandemic could have its origin in the wrong treatment of animals, too.

The karmic laws work wonders, both good and bad. We may not see what is in store for us, but we must learn to gauge the quality of our karmic deeds. That’s the only way to know what we will harvest. Strawberry seeds yield strawberries, not mangoes or apples. A thorn bush does not yield anything at all, except painful needles.

Maybe it is time we started to get ready for a change. If we can accept our past mistakes for what they are, we can learn to avoid them in the future and find other solutions that are more in harmony with the laws of our nature. The human mind did not make these laws, but a force much more intelligent and efficient than our very limited minds can imagine.

In our next Newsletter, we will conclude our Santana Dharma deliberations and inform in more detail about some important aspects of the Children’s and Old-Age Home.

Thank you for your support! The Newsletter is long and I thank you for reading with patience and forbearance. I apologise for any mistake which might have crept in inadvertently.

I do hope for you and us that this challenging time will be over soon, and we wish all of you and your families to stay safe and healthy! If anyone catches the virus, we wish you all the strength to recover from it as quickly as possible! May you be blessed!

We - all the children and elders and staff members - wish that you and your whole family stay safe and healthy in this long time of crisis!

With Love and Peace,

Traude and Visvanathan

Children and Elders

Staff members

Cows and dogs... :)

In short - AUM PRANAVA ASHRAM