

Self-Realisation And Destiny

The Advaita of Avudai Akkal

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Sri Avudai Akkal lived in the 18th century. A Brahmin child-widow, she was initiated at an early age by her guru, Shridhara Venketesa Ayyawal. Attaining the state of realisation, she composed many songs extolling the blissful state of union with the Self, Brahman. These ecstatic outpourings were memorised and recorded by the Brahmin womenfolk and passed on by oral tradition and in unpublished notebooks for some two centuries. They have only recently begun to appear in print. Two articles on Akkal, both by Kanchana Natarajan, have appeared previously in The Mountain Path, the first in Vol. 47, No. 1, January-March 2010, entitled, Avudai Akka of Chengottai and the second, in Vol.56, No.3, July-September 2019, entitled, St. Teresa of Avila and Chenkottai Sri Avudai Akka. Readers are advised to consult these sources for further information.

This article deals with two aspects of Avudai Akkal's advaitic stance. Using two of her songs as examples we shall first examine her evocation of the pure Advaitic, Non-Dual state and in the second part of the article, her treatment of the theme of *prārabdha*, the *karma* to be worked out in the current lifetime.

In the book *Conscious Immortality*, a series of *satsang* notes with Sri Ramana Maharshi, compiled by Paul Brunton, the following exchange takes place in the chapter ‘The Illusion of Ego Experience’:

Ramana: Eliminating the ‘not I’ is not enough. The process is only intellectual. The Truth cannot be directly pointed out. Hence the process. Now begins the real inner quest. The I-thought is the root now to be sought at its source. Find out who it is and abide there.

Devotee: Is the analytic process merely intellectual or does it exhibit feeling predominantly?

Ramana: The latter.

So what is this ‘feeling’ that remains over once the analytic process, the work of the mind, has reached its limit and which now becomes the focus of our quest? Ramana informs us in no uncertain terms and on innumerable occasions that it is simply the sense of being, the sense simply that one is, one exists.

There are innumerable works on Advaita that are perfectly valid on the intellectual level but relatively few are the works that, in addition to providing a guide to what we call the state of ‘real’isation of the Self on the level of the intellect, also succeed in conveying some actual sense or foretaste of that state and which, through bringing us to focus uniquely on that sense of being, spur us on and make us dare to aspire to attain it for ourselves. Amongst such works in Tamil, selecting those that are most suited to the mind-set of an individual living in the 21st century, we might mention the *Uḷḷadu Nāṙpadu* of Sri Ramana Maharshi, the *Ozhivil Odukkam* of Kannudaiya Vallalar, the *Vairagya Catakam* of Santhalinga Swamikal¹ and the songs of Avudai Akkal.

In the aforementioned category of spiritual texts the songs of Akkal hold a special place, conveying a sense of immediateness, an almost breathless excitement, as if she is unable to contain the irresistible desire to communicate the realisation of her true nature as the Self to others and thereby put an end to their suffering also, just as her own torment has come to end. A typical, one might almost say archetypal,

¹ A serialisation of this work, acknowledged to be one of the key Advaita texts in the Tamil language, is planned to begin publication in the January-March 2021 issue of the *Mountain Path*.

example of such a song is song 64 of *ñāṇa rasa kīrtanaigaḷ*² beginning with the words *āḍaḍi māṇē*. In this Akkal sings at some moments as if she is speaking to a girlfriend engaged in an ecstatic dance and at others, as if she is herself the dancer.

We give the composition in full here, followed by an analysis of its salient points:

Pallavi

Dance, my dear, as the undivided One, dance my dear, dance on.³

Aṇupallavi

Dance my dear, for I am the unfettered One. All I see is Brahman, clearly manifest, apart from which naught can be.

[Dance, my dear...]

Saraṇam

The world as manifold did I see and danced my dance accordingly. But now, apart from all of this, I as the Self, pure consciousness, exist.

The Self, the Reality of 'Thou art That' is only consciousness [at last].

[Dance, my dear...]

World and body are consciousness only. What else exists, apart from me?

'I am eternal bliss' is now the state in which I dwell.

It takes me to merge with ecstasy, of all attributes entirely free.

[Dance, my dear...]

As supernal bliss ever greater grows, free of clinging [to the world], experiencing this, the delusion of pride and attachment goes.

This dance that knows no dancing is the dance of bliss.

[Dance, my dear...]

² *ñāṇa rasa kīrtanaigaḷ* is a series of short songs contained in the anthology *Ceṅḍōṭṭati Śrī Āvuḍai Akkāḷ Pāḍal Tiraṭṭu*, published by Sri Gnanananda Niketan.

³ In the Carnatic tradition the *Pallavi* is a refrain which is repeated after the following single *Anupallavi* and each of the following *Saranam* verses, which are of indeterminate number. At times there is a grammatical continuity between the *Pallavi* and the following *Anupallavi* and the series of *Saranam* verses and at other times not. Bhagavan's *Appaḷappāṭṭu* and *Āṇmaviddai* are songs composed in this style.

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*Dwelling in the form of 'That', free of [thoughts of] 'I' and 'other',
abiding firmly, come what may, [in the Self] without dismay,
deeply sleeping but wide awake, this is the dance of joy and
bliss.* [Dance, my dear...]

The sense of breathless excitement in the song is underscored by the *Pallavi*, the refrain which is repeated after the *Anupallavi* and each verse of the *Saraṇam*, the main body of the song:

āḍaḍi māṇē akaṇḍam enru āḍaḍi māṇē.

Dance, my dear, as the undivided One, dance my dear, dance on.

In the first verse of the *Saraṇam* we learn what was the nature of the dance she had in her unenlightened state formerly danced, for she describes it as:

nāṇāvāy pārttu pirapañcattil nān inṇad[u] enr[u] āḍiya kūttu.

*The dance which I danced in accordance with my perception
of the world as manifold.*

The 'dance' she is referring to is the chaotic whirl that ensues when we try to exercise control over the illusory world of the mind and senses, convinced that we ourselves are the doer. Manikkavacagar in Hymn 50, *Āṇanda mālai* compares such a state to that of a puppet, tossed about helplessly by its strings, which are the ego-mind and senses:

*Of love and wisdom,
virtue, penance, all bereft,
like leathern puppet in the dance,
I whirled and fell, yet as I lay,
you showed me my delusion,
and the righteous way;
revealed to me your holy form,
that I might journey to that world
from which [to birth] there's no return.
With Him who came to rule me thus,
when, O when
shall I, a wicked wretch, be merged?*

In the second and third line of this first verse we learn that such is not the state she now enjoys and the reason for Akkal's elation



is revealed. It is the realisation, brought to fruition by the teaching imparted by her guru, Sri Venkatesa Ayyawal, of the truth that this apparent frenetic whirl of *māyā* is something that takes place within her own consciousness only and that this sensate world, once it is seen for what it is, is powerless to harm her, just as the snake, formerly seen in the rope, can never reassume its form as a snake:

‘tat tvam’padārta svarūpamē cittu.

The Self, the Reality of ‘Thou art That’ is only consciousness.

This is a momentous realisation for the spiritual aspirant, who, after puzzling over the meaning of formulations such as ‘Thou art That’ and having gained a sound intellectual grasp of them, suddenly comes to fully ‘real’ise in the deepest seat of her being, that the ‘That’ which she has been making the focus of her attention is nothing other than her own consciousness, her own being.

Verses two and three of the *saraṇam* go on to explore the further ramifications of this realisation. She sees now that if the Real is only her own consciousness, then the world and all the *jīva*-s that inhabit it, including herself, are only an appearance within her own Self:

cittē jagattu dēham. eṅakk[u] eṅṅa pratakku?

World and body are consciousness only. What else exists, apart from me?

She finds herself inhabiting now a state which is entirely free of the ego-mind and senses, all the conditioning factors which were formerly the cause of her bondage. If she is all that is or ever could be, then her freedom is absolute and if there is no ‘other’ to threaten her, then fear is banished forever. The state of absolute freedom and fearlessness transports her into a state of blissful ecstasy:

nirgguṇāṅandattil koṇḍu oḍuppikkum

It takes me to merge with ecstasy, of all attributes entirely free.

The frenetic dance at the mercy of the ego-mind and senses is now transformed into a dance of bliss in which she remains perfectly still as the *līlā* of the world and its activities play out upon the screen of the Self. She typifies this state as:

āḍāmal āḍum inda āṅanda kūttu.

This dance of bliss in which I dance without dancing.

Finally in verse four she describes the final term in this process of transformation, which is beyond even bliss, in which there is no longer any trace of ‘I’ or other. It is described by Sri Ramana Maharshi in the following terms:

That is the state of the *jñāni*. It is neither sleep nor waking but intermediate between the two. There is the awareness of the waking state and the stillness of sleep. It is called *jagrata sushupti*...Go to the root of thoughts and you reach the stillness of sleep. But you reach it in the full vigour of search, that is, with perfect awareness.⁴

In this state the experience of bliss is totally transcended and she has become bliss itself, merging with the Self in the state of *jñāna*. Like Sri Ramana she too characterises this state as *tūṅgāmal tūṅgum kūttu* – the dance in which I sleep without sleeping:

tān pīrar arṛu tatākaramē vaḍiv[u] urṛu
 ēṅgāmal edu vandālum nilaittu
 tūṅgāmal tūṅgum sukāṅanda kūttu.

Dwelling in the form of ‘That’, free of [thoughts of] ‘I’ and ‘other’, abiding firmly, come what may, [in the Self] without dismay, deeply sleeping, but wide awake. This is the dance of joy and bliss.

We will now examine briefly the theme of *karma* as presented in a number of Akkal’s songs. In songs 18-21 of *ñāṇa rasa kīrtanaigal* Akkal addresses the issue of *karma*, specifically *prārabdha karma*, the *karma* of the present birth, which is said to persist even in the *jīvanmukta*, the realised sage, even though the *karma* waiting to manifest (*sañchita*) and the future *karma* accruing from the current birth (*āgāmya*) have been now destroyed. How then are we to reconcile the apparent fundamental contradiction in which a *jñāni* who has merged with the supreme Self is nevertheless said to be subject to *prārabdha* that will continue to follow the trajectory decreed by that Self until the time of the body’s final dissolution? Sri Ramana states the fundamental position as follows:

⁴ Venkataramiah, M, (compl.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§609.

Karma (action) cannot be for the body because it is insentient. It is only so long as *dehātma buddhi* ('I-am-the-body idea') lasts. After transcending *dehātma buddhi* one becomes a *jñāni*. In the absence of that idea (*buddhi*) there cannot be either *kartritva* or *kartā*. So a *jñāni* has no *karma*. That is his experience. Otherwise he is not a *jñāni*. However an *ajñāni* identifies the *jñāni* with his body, which the *jñāni* does not do. So the *ajñāni* finds the *jñāni* acting, because his body is active, and therefore he asks if the *jñāni* is not affected by *prārabdha*.⁵

In other words, the *jñāni* has become one with the Self, the supreme Reality, upon the destruction of the ego and 'his' body is now simply a part of the world appearance that appears on the screen of the Self. As such there is no *karma* for 'him' whatsoever, not even *prārabdha*. However, because the *ajñāni* is quite unable to conceive of such a state and perceives the *jñāni* to be operating, as he imagines himself to be, in an external world perceived by the mind and senses, the explanation is regularly given that *prārabdha* remains for the *jñāni* but does not affect him because he no longer identifies with his body that suffers. Bhagavan goes on to elucidate this rather subtle point as follows:

The scriptures say that *jñāna* is the fire which burns away all *karma* (*sarvakarmani*). *Sarva* (all) is interpreted in two ways: (1) to include *prārabdha* and (2) to exclude it. In the first way: if a man with three wives dies, it is asked. "can two of them be called widows and the third not?" All are widows. So it is with *prārabdha*, *āgāmya* and *sañchita*. When there is no *kartā* none of them can hold out any longer.

The second explanation is, however, given only to satisfy the enquirer. It is said that all *karma* is burnt away leaving *prārabdha* alone. The body is said to continue in the functions for which it has taken its birth. That is *prārabdha*. But from the *jñāni*'s point of view there is only the Self which manifests in such variety. There is no body or *karma* apart from the Self, so that the actions do not affect him.⁶

⁵ Ibid., Talk§383.

⁶ Ibid., Talk§383.

Turning to the songs of Akkal on the subject of *prārabdha*, these seem to reflect predominantly the former point of view, not because she fails to grasp the deeper meaning given above, a fact to which the song *āḍaḍi māṇē*, quoted earlier, and so many others, provide ample witness, but, one would suspect, because that modified viewpoint would have been more accessible to the bulk of her devotees than the pure Advaitic stance of the latter interpretation. The following is song 20 of *ñāṇa rasa kīrttaṇaigaḷ*. It begins with the *Pallavi*, paramē agam enṛ[u] irundālum pirārabdam paṭṭāl oḷiya viḍumō:

Pallavi

Though they abide saying, ‘I am the Supreme,’
can there from their destiny any escape be?

Anupallavi

*Even though jivanmukti is gained, must they not consume
their karma
as long as the body remains?* [Though we abide...]

Saraṇam

*The Sun from his daily rising gains no surcease;
Great Vishnu of repeated births endures the grief,
and even supreme Lord Siva goes abegging
the pangs of hunger to relieve.
Thus the experience of karma, glorious, proceeds famously.*
[Though we abide...]

*Even though their minds in pure awareness at all times reside
and they ever in the company of the wise surely abide;
even though their voices, ‘The world’s unreal,’ daily proclaim,
and the feet of the supreme Guru in their thoughts
with love remain.* [Though we abide...]

*Even though of the taint of fear and anger in them there is no stain,
and the grace of Srimad Guru Venkatesar they come to gain,
even though they rejoice in the fleetingness of all they see
and sunk in the Self’s undivided Realm contrive to be.*
[Though we abide...]

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As is the case with all *jñāni*-s, the teachings of Akkal reflect the varying levels of spiritual maturity of her devotees. Songs like *ādadi māṅē* present a very pure Advaitic view, which for many will be difficult to grasp but will provide a profound support and inspiration for the more advanced seekers, whilst songs like song 20, whilst presenting a modified view, nevertheless reinforce an important teaching, which is that it is not our *karma* which we need to change, for we cannot. It tells us that our *sādhana* lies in the practice of viewing that karma with equanimity, whether good or bad, and not becoming identified with it, a process which is perfectly natural for the *jñāni* but a matter of assiduous practice for the serious *sādhaka* and an essential stepping-stone on the path to liberation. ▲