

# St. Teresa of Avila and Chenkottai Sri Avudai Akka

KANCHANA NATARAJAN

The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine they should see God as if he stood there and they here. God and I are one in Knowledge. The eye with which I see God is the same as that with which he sees me. — Meister Eckhart

This article is a brief comparative study of similar themes and trajectories in the mystical language used by two women contemplatives to express their spiritual revelations. These two saints were from different times, geographical regions and cultural traditions, but both used tropes of passion and ecstatic consummation to narrate their transcendent experience of merging with the Supreme. The renowned Spanish nun St. Teresa of Avila (1515-82) who belonged to the Carmelite order and spent most of her life in a

Prof. Kanchana Natarajan teaches Indian philosophy in the University of Delhi.

convent is renowned for her visceral accounts of divine communion attained through prayer and meditation. Her renowned work *The Interior Castle* or *The Mansion* (1577),<sup>1</sup> a richly-wrought symbolic text written for nuns and directing the sisterhood to shape religious life through the disciplines of poverty, service and prayer, is justly celebrated as a very influential source of personalized theology in the Catholic canon. The largely unknown 18th century South Indian saint Avudai Akkal of Chenkottai, Tirunelveli, a former child-widow, was a maverick wandering renunciate who sang about the sublime bliss/peace of non-duality, articulating the intricate metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta in vernacular Tamil. Her followers were chiefly women, and she was especially loved by widows, the most abject members of her orthodox Brahmin community. She was a unique portal to the highest philosophical knowledge, traditionally denied to women at the time, and her compositions were orally preserved until they were collected and published in the late 19th century.

‘Ordinary’ language in daily use, based primarily on sense-experience and a five-fold relationship to the sense-organs (eyes, ears, nose, skin and tongue), is greatly inadequate as an instrument for describing the ‘extraordinary’ reality that lies beyond the matrix of the senses – i.e., highly charged mystical states that transcend all corporeality and cognition, including the binary logic of ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’. Those who are thus enraptured are often irresistibly compelled by its potent energies to share their experience of radical freedom with the world, pushing past convention and inhibition.

As St. Teresa affirms, “The joy of the soul is so exceedingly great that it would like not to rejoice in solitude, but to tell its joy to all... Impelled as it is by this great joy, the soul cannot be expected to keep silence and dissemble: it would find this no light distress.”<sup>2</sup>

In every context, circumstance and condition, mystics have drawn upon a rich vocabulary of profound spiritual symbols, parables,

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the text: *The Interior Castle*; (‘The Mansions’) St. Teresa of Avila, Sheed and Ward, London, 1974. Another book *Way of Perfection* (1565-66) was written by Teresa keeping in view the “affectionate importunities of the Carmelite nuns of the Primitive Observance.” I have occasionally made use of this Text. *Way of Perfection* by St. Teresa of Avila, Translated and edited by E. Allison Peers, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> *The Interior Castle*, p 101.

allegories, paradoxes and various other narrative to transmit these and other spiritual truths, i.e., as an attempt to describe the indescribable. Very often, metaphor is used across religious denominations and mystical traditions in a strikingly similar way, and in pragmatic terms this common aspect serves as a seed for the creation of inter-faith dialogue and benevolent action.

This is strongly the case with St.Teresa and Avudai, the two contemplatives I invoke in this essay. While I find the lives of both women equally fascinating, my short account here confines itself in each case to a few biographical details. St.Teresa established a unique set of rules for the Carmelite nuns, in contrast to other schools of Catholicism that replicated for their nuns the rules that had been established for their monks. Poverty, chastity and obedience were the nuns' cardinal principles, and with regard to the first tenet, Teresa in an another text *The Way of Perfection* written exclusively for the nuns insisted that "poverty must be everywhere, in our dwelling, in our clothes, in our words and above all in our thoughts... if you have an enclosed place with few shelters wherein you can be alone and pray, that is splendid."<sup>3</sup> Inebriated with her passionate love for God, her fervour overflowed into composing hymns such as 'I die because I do not die'.

Committed to narrating her raptures, ecstasies and subtle flights of the spirit to her nuns and to the wider world, she was instructed by her confessor Reverend Velazquez to write *The Interior Castle*, even while she engaged in reform activities within the order and also endured great ill health that caused great suffering. The vigour, power and grandeur of this text remain unsurpassed to this day.

St.Teresa clarifies that her confessor "commanded" her to write the book because "the nuns of these convents of our Lady of Carmel need someone to solve their difficulties concerning prayer and as women best understand each other's language... in view of their love for me, anything I might say would be particularly useful to them."

She was intensely aware of the crucial need for spiritual narratives such as hers to be available for earnest practitioners:

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<sup>3</sup> *The Way of Perfection* by St. Teresa of Avila, Translated and edited by E. Allison Peers, 1995, pp24-25.

“I fully realize how important it is for you that I should explain certain interior matters to the best of my ability for we continually hear what a good thing prayer is... yet they tell us nothing beyond what we ourselves have to do and say very little about the work done by the Lord in the soul – I mean, supernatural work. As I describe the things He does, and gives various explanations of them, it will be very useful for us to think of this celestial building which is within us and is so little understood by the mortals...”<sup>4</sup>

She held the view that the “door of entry into the castle of the soul is prayer and meditation” (which she sometimes calls “consideration”).<sup>5</sup> Her text continues to have a very special impact on women who wish to follow the path of prayer and meditation on their spiritual journey.

Chenkottai Sri Avudai Akkal (henceforth in this essay more informally called ‘Avudai’) was born into an orthodox Tamil Brahmin family. The few available fragments of her biography reveal that she was married as per custom while a child, perhaps at the age of five, and widowed very shortly thereafter. She underwent the tortuous ceremonies of widowhood when she attained puberty and was condemned to a life of servitude and oppression, since widows of any age were stigmatized as inauspicious.

However, much to the anger and dismay of people around, the girl Avudai was rescued by Sridhara Venkatesa Ayyawal, a renowned spiritual figure of that region. Legend has it that while he was passing her village with his followers, Avudai, who was in a dark room of her house, somehow rushed out and flung herself at Ayyawal’s feet, begging him to save her from a dreadful fate. Recognizing her tremendous potential, Ayyawal initiated her into the great Vedantic *mahāvākya*, ‘*Tat tvam asi*’ (‘Thou art indeed That’, from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*), and Avudai left the village along with his group of devotees.

Under Ayyawal’s guidance Avudai spent years immersed in Vedantic contemplation and devotion until she attained *jñāna*: Supreme Knowledge of the non-dual Self. This experience of permanent emancipation catalyzed an outpouring of rapture and joy, and the self-realized *jñāni* Avudai was motivated to liberate other

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<sup>4</sup> *Interior Castle*, p. 7. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

people from bondage and illusion by sharing her experience through her songs. Though she draws largely from folk and vernacular traditions and uses the simple colloquial Tamil of her home district, her compositions are infused with exalted metaphysical utterances – rooted in her personal attainment of the Self, but distinguished from canonical discourse by being interwoven with particular woman-centric symbols that effectively transmit the central tenets of Vedanta.<sup>6</sup>

The remainder of this essay presents seven prominent examples of the strikingly similar metaphors and emotional intensity found in the spiritual enunciation of these two extraordinary contemplatives.

### I. The World-Illusion

As noted by St. Teresa's biographer who met her in 1579, the saintly nun had a vision that led her to write *The Interior Castle*: "On the eve of the festival of the Most Holy Trinity she was thinking what subject she should choose for this treatise, when God ... granted this desire of hers and gave her a subject. He showed her a most beautiful crystal globe, made in the shape of a castle, and containing seven Mansions, in the seventh and innermost of which was the King of Glory, in the greatest splendour, illumining and beautifying them all."<sup>7</sup> St. Teresa states that her book is meant to help practitioners develop spiritual 'Quietude' – the state of unperturbed equanimity, most lacking in those who are roaming distractedly outside the castle, talking to the guards, and ignorant of the structure's divine interior. Prayer and meditation constitute the door through which the seeker can enter that luminous domain:

"We ourselves are the castle; it would be absurd to tell someone enter a room when he was in it already. But ... there are many ways of 'being' in a place. Many remain in the outer court ... not interested in entering it.. Put aside all unnecessary affairs and business. Moreover, if we fill the palace with vulgar people and all kinds of junk, how can the Lord and His court occupy it? When such a crowd is there

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<sup>6</sup> For a biography of Avudai Akkal see *Mountain Path*, Avudai Akka of Chengottai, Kanchana Natarajan, January 2010, pp17-29. Also Check *Transgressing Boundaries*, 'The Advaitic songs of Shenkottai Avudai Akkal' by Kanchana Natarajan, Zubaan, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Introduction to *Interior Castle* pp. v and vi.

it would be a great thing if the Lord were to remain for even a short time... [souls are] infirm and so accustomed to busying themselves with outside affairs that nothing can be done for them... unless they strive to realize their miserable condition and to remedy it, they will be turned into pillars of salt for not looking within themselves..."<sup>8</sup>

She declares that when the soul is closest to God, "it no longer is bound by ties of relationship, friendship or property."<sup>9</sup>

Compare this with Avudai's powerful song *Paraparakanni*, where the poet sings in a similar vein about her own spiritual journey that mandated the renunciation of all relationship to home, family and community:

Father, mother, daughters and sons  
Became like a crowd in the market place,  
Like animals in a flock, like a mere number,  
While I became Timeless eternity.<sup>10</sup>

St. Teresa uses the phrase 'spiritual sleep' and 'Prayer of Quiet' to describe such a state<sup>11</sup> where the Soul is "Fully awakened to God and asleep to all that concerns attachment to any creature."<sup>12</sup> There is a remarkable similarity in the use of language.

## II. The Perishable Body

Both St. Teresa and Avudai hold the absolute conviction that human beings waste their precious life in acting on the wrong belief that attachment to the limited physical body and fulfilment of its imperatives is indeed the primary goal of life – a root error which must be corrected through being exposed as illusion if one is to realize one's true nature. Addressing the sisterhood, St. Teresa declares uncompromisingly:

"It is no small pity, and should cause us no shame, that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves, or know who we are. Would it not be a sign of great ignorance, my daughters, if a person was asked who he was, and could not say and had no idea who his father or his mother... though that is great stupidity, our own is incomparably greater if we make no attempt to discover what we are,

<sup>8</sup> *Interior Castle*, pp.11-12. <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55. <sup>10</sup> *Transgressing Boundaries*, p.87.

<sup>11</sup> *Interior Castle*, p.83. <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.91.

and only know that we are living in these bodies... All our interest is centred in the... outer wall of the castle – that is to say, in these bodies of ours.”<sup>13</sup>

She prays to the Lord to give strength to committed practitioners so that “we may dig until we find this hidden treasure, since it is true that we have it within ourselves.”<sup>14</sup>

In song after song, Avudai cautions human beings about the seductive identification of the self with the body. An autobiographical lyric proclaims her attainment of spiritual detachment:

Renouncing the stubborn notion ‘I am the Body’,  
I understood ‘I am That’.  
And I then stood forever in silent resolve...<sup>15</sup>

She further declares:

Swimming across the ever fleeting ocean of birth and death,  
And ascending the shores...  
When the house called ‘the Body’  
Became another object to be relinquished,  
I forgot cows, calves and all relatives...<sup>16</sup>

She admonishes those who are enslaved to the intractable logic of assuming that body is the Self:

Sir, tell me: Is it reasonable to regard  
this ephemeral body as ‘I’, as ‘Me’?  
The body, made of earth, water, fire, air and space,  
Is indeed but a corpse.  
You know well that its existence  
Is as uncertain as a water bubble.  
Yet you beg here and there, and you become crazy  
Pursuing its survival.<sup>17</sup>

In yet another song, she sternly rebukes her own mind:

What assistance has the body rendered to you until now?  
O mind, tell me!

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp.1-2. <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 48. <sup>15</sup> Natarajan, Kanchana *Transgressing Boundaries*, The Advaitic Songs of Shenkottai Avudai Akkal, Zubaan, 2012, pp. 85. <sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 85-87. <sup>17</sup> *Chenkottai Sri Avudai Akkal Padal Tirattu*, (Tamil) ed. Swami Nityananda Giri, Sri Gyanananda Niketan, Tamil Nadu 2002, p.217. (All translations of Avudai Akka’s songs are by the author.)

## MOUNTAIN PATH

Like a person relying on a clay horse to cross a river,  
You have lost your reason – this is surely your ill luck! ...  
Like those who suspend a cucumber safely on a hook  
For a long time, hoping it will stay fresh,  
You try to preserve this body by nurturing it well,  
But the Lord of Death will surely take it away.<sup>18</sup>

She unequivocally inscribes the body as a shackle and a cause of profound suffering:

Burdened with the body made of food –  
Why are you suffering?  
Are you not the Soul which is infinite,  
The eternal Fullness?  
Can this rancid stench called the body be the Soul?  
That which is infested with worms, the corpse –  
Can it be the Soul?<sup>19</sup>

And in another song this very image undergoes a brilliant, and just as uncompromising, inversion:

Like a babbling lunatic, like a corpse, like one drunk,  
I forgot the body.<sup>20</sup>

For both saints, the body represents one's physical frame as well as the world and all the relationships involved therein. The aspirant needs to shift attention from the imperatives of the material body in the material world to the singular focus of prayer and contemplation away from that bondage.

Both saints present the idea of one's true nature being 'covered' by the world-illusion, that begins with attachment to the body, and the need for 'uncovering' in order to 'recover', the eternal Self that is ever-existent within us.

Teresa instructs us to concentrate on the centre of the castle, the site occupied by the Lord: "Think of a palmito<sup>21</sup> which has many outer rinds surrounding the savoury part within, all of which must be

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp.218-19. <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.190. <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.191.

<sup>21</sup> The translator tells us that palmito is a shrub, common in the South and East of Spain, with thick layers of leaves enclosing a succulent edible kernel. *Interior Castle*, footnote, 1, p.7.





taken away before the centre can be eaten.”<sup>22</sup> This is quite similar to the interesting analogy found in Vedanta, i.e., that the Self is seemingly ‘covered’ by certain false notions compulsively held by ignorant human beings, such as ‘I am the body’, ‘I am the mind’, ‘I am the breathing person’, ‘I am the doer’, ‘I am the enjoyer’, etc. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, describes the *pañca kōśa*-s that constitute the mind-body nexus, and pronounces that the aspirant has to advance from one *kōśa* to another cautiously to arrive at the core which is the Light and the Truth. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* concludes its teaching by saying that just as one removes the stalks of muncha grass to arrive at the sweet kernel, so too one has to draw oneself wholly out of attachment to the five material sheaths to arrive at one’s centre, i.e., Being.

### III. The Journey to Self-knowledge

In the very first chapter of her text, St. Teresa declares that because we do not know ourselves, we are inevitably doomed to suffering. Our ignorance is a primary source of misery and confusion, and there is no greater stupidity than to fixate on the body and the material world rather than to consciously introspect and commit to practices that will help us to understand our true nature:

We know only very superficially we have souls because we have heard so, or because faith tells. Seldom do we consider what great value it is. Many souls dwell near the walls of the castle where the guards are and yet never care about going further into it. Neither do they wish to know what is within, that precious place nor who lives there nor what rooms there are. Some souls are so weak and so immersed in exterior things that they cannot by any means enter into themselves.<sup>23</sup>

In anguish, she chastises those who are apathetic to the presence of the castle, due to their worldliness, and is wary of those who are indifferent to the presence of the castle, because of worldly distractions:

“If we have the hope of enjoying this blessing while we are still in this life, what are we doing about it and why are we waiting? What sufficient reason is there for delaying even a short time... instead of seeking this Lord... Oh, what a mockery is everything in the world if

<sup>22</sup> *Interior Castle*, pp.7-8. <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

it does not lead us and help us on the way towards this end, and would we even though all the worldly delights and riches and joys that we can imagine were to last forever!... Oh, human blindness! How long, how long shall it be before this dust is removed from our eyes?"<sup>24</sup>

She insists that in order to enter the castle one should endeavour to give up all external activity that is not absolutely necessary.

Akka untiringly rebukes those who seek to escape the Truth/Self through seeking the ephemeral pleasures of the body and world. In many songs she caustically admonishes them as dim-witted, conventional and hypocritical:

Enough! Enough of having immersed yourself,  
Deluded and confounded, in the holy river Kaveri!  
Behold! Look at the Lord manifesting  
Within this body!

Enough! Enough of visiting and bathing in Setu and Kashi,  
Search! Find out who the wise master is and contemplate on this!<sup>25</sup>

In several songs she invokes the truth of transience as she urges the wayward men and women to take to the spiritual path:

If you do not will to know the Truth now, then when will you?  
Is it not better to cross the river when the boat is intact and ready?  
The body can perish any time:  
Give up the foolish attitude and begin the quest!<sup>26</sup>

The spiritual 'quest' is what will lead us to renounce our 'foolish attitude' and enable the realization that the very nature of *samsāra* that we take to be real is nothing other than misperception, error, fluctuation, illusion, duplicity, limitation and sorrow. Liberation occurs when this transformative knowledge is internalized as immutable truth that enables us to fully detach from *samsāra*, internally renounce its relentless proliferating seductions that bind *jīvatman* (individuated consciousness).

#### IV. The Silenced Gaze

Both saints attribute great value to silent gazing as a means to communing with the Divine. St. Teresa advises that:

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.90. <sup>25</sup> *Transgressing Boundaries*, pp.185-86.

<sup>26</sup> *Chenkottai Sri Avudai Akkal Pataikal*, (Tamil), p.223.

“We close our eyelids, abandon all creatures, enclose ourselves wholly in the small heaven of the Soul... not enter into much inner discourse or high and learned considerations: but simply we must within ourselves, in the depth of the heart turn the soul’s gaze upon Jesus. The spirit has to develop the habit of acting only interiorly. This interiority happens with a gradual retiring within oneself... like a tortoise withdrawing into itself... these creatures, however enter within themselves whenever they like.”<sup>27</sup>

She states with pure conviction that all one needs to do is to control one’s gaze so that one is able to experience the vision of the Lord within each of us. With committed and continuous practice, the introspection/absorption grows so deep that “the closed eyes become unable to open – effort would be necessary to hold them open.”<sup>28</sup>

Silent gazing that catalyzes a total withdrawal from the world are also central to Avudai’s spiritual experience. This practice begins with her Master/teacher gazing at her during the process of initiating her into the system of knowledge transmission. Having received instruction, she remains in speechless amazement. She celebrates her transformation in song after song, for instance:

He placed his hands on my head, dear friend,  
And reiterated, “The Absolute alone is the Truth.”  
He asked, “Do you know yourself?”  
I stood mute, gazing...

In another context she describes encountering this unsurpassed luminosity within herself:

“You are the Light of light,”  
He assured me with these words, dear friend,  
As I gazed at him with purified intent.  
Like the solitary moon  
I too merged into vast emptiness.  
Like a full moon, brimming and intoxicated  
I emptied into a radiant, infinite sky.  
The five elements receded  
Under his intent Gaze...<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Interior Castle*, pp.40-43. <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40. <sup>29</sup> *Transgressing Boundaries*, p.110.

Avudai elsewhere describes the power of her Master's Gaze in the form of a dialogue between Mind, personified as a mother, and Intellect, personified as the daughter:

Mother, who instantly transported us  
To the ocean of eternal joy, enabling  
Our profound, uninterrupted immersion in that bliss!  
O Daughter, it is the intent Gaze of the Master  
That has brought us to this ceaseless delight...<sup>30</sup>

### V. Sovereign Marriage

In the elaborately allegorized lengthy song *Sri Vidya Shobhanam* ('The Consummation of Sri Vidya') Avudai sings about the jubilant flowering of Ultimate Knowledge in a young girl (Sri Vidya) who strives tirelessly and determinedly to come to it after receiving the spiritual instructions from her Master. After much perseverance, she attains the final beatitude, a state of oneness with the Divine. This metaphysical ecstasy is symbolized as the final consummation in a nuptial bed with the blessed Bridegroom, the Lord Satchidananda:

Like the coolness in cool liquids, merged  
Like salt in water, like camphor in flame,  
Now ever free from bondage, Vidya  
Became one with Brahman, the Immaculate Light,  
The Eternal Truth.<sup>31</sup>

In her similar use of the sacrament of matrimony, St. Teresa distinguishes a corporeal marriage from such spiritual union:

"[...] the soul is made one with God, who being likewise a Spirit... He has been pleased to unite Himself with His creature in such a way that they have become like two who cannot be separated from one another; even so He will not separate Himself from her."<sup>32</sup>

"...the rain falling from the heavens into a river or a spring, there is nothing but water there and it is impossible to divide or separate the water belonging to the river from that which fell from the heavens. Or it is like a tiny streamlet that enters the sea, from which it will find no way of separating itself,<sup>33</sup> or as if in a room there were two large

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.251-52. <sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.217. <sup>32</sup>*Interior Castle*, p.135. <sup>33</sup> Compare this with the Upanishadic passage "Look at these rivers. The Eastern ones flow towards the east, the Western ones towards the west. From the ocean do they rise and into the

windows through which the light streamed in: it enters in different places but it is all one.”<sup>34</sup>

“This (union) is not a thing that can be imagined since with all our diligence we cannot acquire it. It is manifest not of our own coin, but of the purest Gold of Divine wisdom. Here the powers are not united but absorbed and astonished ...”<sup>35</sup>

“This is distinctly the union of love with love, its operations entirely pure, delicate and gentle, and essentially indescribable to those who have not experienced it.”<sup>36</sup>

## **VI. The Soul’s Crystal Radiance**

What indeed is this ‘soul’ towards which these two saints urge us to turn our attention? St. Teresa describes it in the very first chapter of *The Interior Castle* as a castle composed entirely of light, brilliant like diamonds, and clear and colourless like crystal. In enchanting prose she warns her sisters that “we should not think of our souls as dark”:

“It must seem dark to most of us, as we cannot see it, for we forget that there is not only light which we can see, but also an interior light, and so we think that within our soul there is some kind of darkness...”<sup>37</sup>

“It is not the radiance that dazzles but soft whiteness, infused radiance in which without wearing the eyes causes the greatest delight, nor are they wearied by the brightness which they see in seeing this divine beauty. So different from any earthly light is the brightness and light now revealed to us, ... the brightness of our sun seems quite dim... Not that the sun or any other such light enters into vision, on the contrary it is like a natural light, and all other kinds of light seem artificial! It is a light which never gives place to night and being always light is disturbed by nothing.”<sup>38</sup>

“We have to dig until we find this hidden treasure, since it is quite true that we have it within ourselves...”<sup>39</sup>

The ‘treasure’ is the Lord, found at the depths of the castle. St. Teresa beseeches the Carmelite sisterhood to understand that this Fountain and this resplendent sun which is in the centre of the soul

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ocean do they merge to become the ocean itself. In that state, none of them knows, ‘I am this river’, ‘I am that river’.” *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 6.10 1. <sup>34</sup> *Interior Castle*, p.130-35. <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38. <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64. <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.130. <sup>38</sup> *Interior Castle*, p.1, p. 5. p.6, p.115. <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

lose not their brightness or glory, for these always remain in it and nothing can take away its beauty.

“But if anyone should throw a black cloth over a crystal which is exposed to the sun, though the sun may shine upon it, it will have no effect on the crystal... Learn to understand yourselves and take pity on yourselves! Surely if you understand your own natures, it is impossible that you will not strive to remove the pitch which blackens the crystal...”<sup>40</sup>

This remarkable comparison is reminiscent of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* mantra which declares: “Neither the sun shines there, nor the moon, nor the stars, nor the lightning shines there, that being the Light of all lights.”<sup>41</sup>

In several compositions Avudai refers to the soul as infinite, immaculate light, and sings in elation of how:

Like the rising sun, in the space called the Heart, it shines,  
There is neither a night nor the light of the day there!<sup>42</sup>

In another song about Self-illumination, she exults that:

There is neither a caste nor creed there,  
Neither a beginning, a middle nor an end there,  
There is no delusional night of ignorance,  
There is no need to open one’s mouth to talk,  
Neither is there any silent will operating there:  
It is freedom, unalloyed, indestructible,  
Eternal Fullness, ever pure —  
This is indeed a rapturous wonder,  
This is indeed a rapturous wonder!<sup>43</sup>

And Avudai too presents the crystal as a symbol of transcendent purity:

Just as a red flower set next to transparent crystal  
Floods it with colour, suffusing its sheer clarity,  
You, enmeshed with the five sheaths,  
Occlude the *guṇa*-free, ever-present,  
Immutable Absolute.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.6. <sup>41</sup> *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 2.2.10, *Ishadi Nau Upanishad*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur. <sup>42</sup> *Chenkottai Sri Avudai Akkal Patal Tirattu*, (Tamil) p.97. <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.225. <sup>44</sup> *Transgressing Boundaries*, p.161.

## VII. Asleep to the World

Both these saints describe the ‘crystalline’ state of spiritual awakening, when the individual aspirant moves away from all relationships, as a condition where one is thoroughly awake to God though fast asleep to all worldly phenomena. St. Teresa uses the phrase ‘spiritual sleep’ and ‘Prayer of Quiet’ to describe this experience, wherein the soul is “fully awakened to God and asleep to all that concerns attachment to any creature.”<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, Avudai tells us that:

While wide awake (experiencing the Self), I slumbered:  
Unmoved by the world as though in deep sleep.  
Just as an object slips from the palm of one asleep,  
Despondence slid away from me...<sup>46</sup>

One is reminded of an incomparable description by Sri Ramana: “It is all the same to one who is fast asleep in a cart, whether the cart moves or stops, with the bullocks left yoked or unyoked. Similarly for the jnani who has gone to sleep in the cart of his physical body, it does not matter whether he works or is in samadhi or is asleep.”

Avudai’s songs are an explicit effort to rigorously wean the deluded, ‘despondent’ *jīvatman* from its desperate, agonized clinging to samsara. As a Vedantin she focuses primarily on the trajectory of consciousness – that of the suffering, transmigrating *jīvatman* needing to be spiritually redirected from tortuous entanglement in *samsāra* to the inviolate serenity of *advaita siddhi*, i.e., to merge in non-dual Brahman, the source of all. Through their metaphorical genius, as a remedy for the sickness of world-illusion St. Teresa and Avudai both prescribe the medicine of *vairāgyam* – the ‘sleep’ of dispassion, absolute detachment from the addictive and frenzied matrix of internal and external sense-objects, a purposive withdrawal that enables a total inward-turning, with the practitioner dedicating his/her entire subjectivity and practice to one concentrated object – realising the Self.

The spiritual journey is arduous, and St. Teresa warns us that it has to be undertaken with great humility and hope in order to reach inner ‘quietude’ – in Advaitic terms, the profound, unshakeable, ‘sleep’ of Self-realization, the ineffable silence of the Absolute that transcends

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<sup>45</sup> *Interior Castle*, p.48. <sup>46</sup> *Transgressing Boundaries*, p.86.



all discursive frames. In contrast to this ineffability, everything else in creation is available for linguistic discourse and translation. However, the very source of this activity, i.e., non-dual eternal Presence, the Light of Consciousness that makes all linguistic transactions possible, does not lend itself to discourse. The Absolute is not available for a description since it cannot be objectified.

For saints such as Teresa and Avudai, Truth/Realization is totally experiential. Thus, the Knower may not speak at all, remain in ‘Sleep’/ Silence, and teach through that instrument, as Sri Ramana often did. However, even while there is no ‘other’ reality for the Knower, often an impulse arises from the depths of the Knower’s purified being, an urgent call to share that exalted experience of oneness with all creation (*sarvātmabhāva*) for the benefit of humankind.

St. Teresa and Avudai Akkal are indeed such Knowers of the Self, and both lament that though human beings are so richly endowed with the capacity to discriminate between truth and illusion, few among us actively commit to the process of ‘uncovering’/‘recovering’ our illimitable true nature. And perhaps even fewer among us would acknowledge St. Teresa’s categorical statement that to neglect this opportunity is the greatest loss of all – reminiscent of the incisive verse from the *Kena Upaniṣad* which declares that those who miss their chance to take the path of Self-knowledge suffer no less than *mahati vinashtih*, ‘great irreparable loss’, the loss of all losses, in this life.

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