



The Breathing Clay

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In Greek mythology, there is the story of Sisyphus. As a form of punishment, he is condemned to the futile labour of rolling a rock up to a mountain top, only to have it rolling back to the bottom every time he reaches the top. A similar story is found in Kerala's treasure of myths. The myth tells us of the insane Naranath Bhranthan whose favourite pastime was rolling a big stone to the top of the nearby hill and upon reaching the top, kicking it back down, laughing and clapping his hands. He did this

repeatedly even when the stone rolled down over him, his clothes got torn off, and his body lacerated. People watch this absurd activity in complete horror and bewilderment, wondering at the madness of Naranath Bhranthan.

What do you do when once you have reached the heights you set out to climb and find out there is no further way up? The ideal solution is to approach the target afresh by repeating the process. It not only renews and strengthens the body but also the soul. The rock symbolizes the means for constant endeavour. It serves as a medium whose weight strains the body towards renunciation of comfort and increases its endurance of pain in order to reach the heights of self-actualization. When the soul carries the rock up and arrives at its destination, the rock then rolls down, symbolizing the body being discarded and worldly attachments being forsaken. It returns to the base only to be pushed up again. The uphill-downhill journey continues unabated through generations. It's a process that shows the struggle of the person and the human spirit to achieve perfection.

Sannyasa (ascetism) is just that—an uphill-downhill journey. The ascetic dreams of the heights of nirvana (salvation). As he reaches the peak, the rock of desires rolls away. The *sannyasi* (ascetic) is the one who, by penance and austerity, solitude and silence, keeps himself from forgetting that the soul is destined to scale the heights and reach the summit of divine experience. The monk leaves the world, retires to the lonely hilltop, ascending by his prayer into his highest and immeasurable expanse. The monk who has attained 'salvation' should come down and help ordinary souls make the climb. *Sannyasa* is therefore by its very nature a call to ascend and descend. C S Lewis in his article *Incarnation* says:

“In this descent and re-ascent everyone will recognise a familiar pattern: a thing written all over the world. It is the pattern of all vegetable life. It must belittle itself into something hard, small and

deathlike, it must fall into the ground: thence the new life re-ascends.”

It is the pattern of all animal generation too. There is descent from the full and perfect organism into the spermatozoon and ovum, and in the dark womb, a life at first inferior in kind to that of the species which is being reproduced: then the slow ascent to the perfect embryo, to the living, conscious baby, and finally to the adult.

“So it is also in our moral and emotional life. The first innocent and spontaneous desires have to submit to the deathlike process of control or total denial: but from that, there is a re-ascent to fully formed character in which the strength of the original material all operates but in a new way. Death and Rebirth – go down to go up – it is a key principle. Through this bottleneck, this belittlement, the highroad nearly always lies.”

Thus, ascent and descent, renunciation (death) and resurgence (rebirth) take place in nature and in the ordinary day-to-day lives of human beings. Even innocent and spontaneous desires are subjected to either control or total and death-like denial. Even God, the giver of life, underwent the same thing. It necessarily represents a new humanism where divine union and service to humanity become a cyclical celebration of a spiritual life.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara understood this two-fold call. Chavara, along with Fr Palackal and Fr Porukara, built a monastery on the high hill of Mannanam, known as the house at the top (*bes rauma*). It plays a vital role in helping compatriots to reach the heights, to renew themselves through *sannyasa*, and ensure salvation. It becomes a house of penance (*tapasubhavanam*) where members assiduously engage in ascetical practices in order to attain the boon of the mystical grace of vision. Thus, it becomes a house of vision (*darsanaveedu*) where they see God as well as His dreams about humanity and the entire creation.



Atmanutapam (*Compunction of the Heart*) bears witness to Chavara's inner journey of repentance in the *tapasubhavanam*. It is his enquiry into his spiritual position and status before the Lord.

'Who made you a priest?' 'Who made you a Priest?' 'What are your credentials to deserve these?' These are the sort of questions Chavara raised concerning his own insignificance. He demonstrates how a poem can be used as a tool to chisel and polish the soul in prayer and repentance.

Atmanutapam is the acknowledgment of his unworthiness expressed in the form of confessions. It is a poem of lamentations of a repentant soul. Chavara in recognition of his standing before God, bursts out into tears with complete remorse. His soul stands naked before God, shorn of all vestments of

ego and vanity. He declares, like Job, when he was deprived of all worldly possessions and tormented with all kinds of adversities: "What God gave, God takes back; praise be to God." This is purification of the soul. It is the soul's deep experience of worthlessness and repentance, an experience of the truth that the human being is merely perishable clay that breathes, undeservingly, the breath of God.

An exemplification of this is Soorya Krishna Moorthy's drama *Deergha Chathuram* (The Rectangle), which was staged throughout Kerala. It's about a wayward past that keeps on returning to the perpetrator's mind to torment him at critical moments of his life. The drama unfolds in the form of a television interview. A musician, Swaminathan, who is awarded the Bharata Ratna honour, is led to recall his past, especially his ascent to the summit of fame. In his climb to the top, he uses several innocent people and discards them later. The interviewer compels Swaminathan to review his past and to see the discrepancy between his words and actions. In the course of the interview, he becomes guilt-stricken. He owns up, repents and ultimately renounces the national honour. The probing questions that are put forward, turn out to be a spiritual needle that pricks deep and sensitises his numb conscience. The interview can be taken as a confrontation with the conscience, or, a confession made to the Lord by the sinner.

David recants his sins and repents before God. His prayers of repentance become the Psalms. Chavara feels sorry for the sins he committed, if any, and repents before the Lord. His lamentations become *Atmanutapam*. Chavara climbs up the mountain to encounter God, and as a result he comes down to his knees in penitence. This, in fact, is Chavara's route to sainthood. His legacy to this generation and to the future ones is the holy life of atonement expressed in poetry suffused with the breath of God.

