

Talk at Narayana Guru Celebration at Varkala, India
(Delivered in Malayalam)

**The Relevance of Sree Narayana Guru
for Here and Now**

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On this occasion when we remember with gratitude and homage Sree Narayana Guru: Teacher, Social Worker, Reformer, Community Leader, Vedantin and Poet, it is worthwhile that we recognize his relevance to us here and now. Those of us who have profited from his teachings recognize that. We, the immigrants in North America, form a community placed very much like the community for which he specially worked during his lifetime; and some reflection will tell us that his messages have a special relevance for us.

Some people saw the Guru as a Vedantin, a realized person helping others on the path to truth, who by his simple but exact poems like Daiva Dasakam or his many devotional hymns like Janani Navaratna Manjari expounded in simple terms the great truths, with an idiom designed to appeal to the heart and the head at the same time. Through Sree Nataraja Guru and others, this tradition has been handed down to the present time. His poetic genius has echoes in Sree Nitya Chaitanya Yati who is able to connect the absolute and the everyday life in his discourses. But to others he is seen as a social emancipator who unleashed the creative potential of the Eazhava Community and made them look inward for the solutions to social problems. He installed deities and yet he taught that the Self is the absolute. Are these questions relevant today?

It has been a great problem for many people of good will and seriousness to reconcile a formless absolute, call it Brahman (or Nature) with love and devotion. Closely related is the dichotomy between individual spiritual attainment and human compassion for the multitude. I shall borrow the phrases "vertical" and "horizontal" for these two views. Shall we follow an elitist vertical path or a compassionate horizontal path? To the extent I have understood, Sree Narayana Guru makes us realize that there is no dichotomy, both paths merge.

The secret is that it is not the individuated ego with its aggrandizing temperament that pursues the vertical attainment but the Self. And the Self finds no sharp division between the individual and the collective. When we enjoy a sunset we are transported by beauty and joy, yet we do not want to own the sunset. When you make a discovery in mathematics or Science, the ego

ego recedes and you feel a humbling, much like what we feel at the sight of a glorious sunset. It is only later that the ego comes to claim authorship of the discovery. So also in spiritual attainment. The insight is not of the ego but of the Self.

This movement from the ego to the Self and back is like the advance to the sun-centered Copernican system from the earth-centered Ptolemaic system and back again to the earth as the reference basis in everyday life. If we can understand that both these are frames of reference and each is better suited to dealing with certain questions we have no more dichotomy.

The Eazhava community which received most attention from Sree Narayana Guru was poised in limbo: so are we the resident of North America. We are well-to-do without being either indigent or affluent. We are unsure of our social position and so are others about us. For the discomfort and the ills we would like to blame others. But what the Guru taught us is this: liberate yourself from your own shortcomings and self-imposed shackles. If your house is in order others will, in course of time, come to recognize your true worth.

There are stories about Sree Narayana Guru with parallels to the stories about Jesus Christ. Jesus was traveling through Samaria. He asked a woman for water to drink. They get into conversation and she asks him: My people say that God is to be worshipped on yonder hill. But your people say, the worship must be in Jerusalem. Which is it? Jesus tells her: The time is come when God is to be worshipped in spirit and in your heart. When some conservatives challenged Sree Narayana Guru's right to install a Siva he happily told them: This is only an Eazhava Siva! And he told people that you could install a strip of mirror and see the ikon of worship in it. How simple and how profound are these teachings.

There are the leaders who win concessions and justice for us from the State. There are people who get us political or economic freedom. They are all emancipators. But the Great Emancipators liberate us from our own prejudices, habits and character defects. Sree Narayana Guru is a Great Emancipator; and his teachings are still of relevance to our life today, if only more so.