

# **The pilgrim's track: an Indian experience**

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This paper discusses the meaning of the path of the pilgrim and the relationship between the actual track and the inner spiritual journey that is represented by the track. An annual pilgrimage to the temple of Lord Ayyappa at Shabarimalai in South India will illustrate the principles involved.

There is very little authoritative material available in relation to the Shabarimalai pilgrimage. The information and understanding set out in this paper has been obtained by the author's own experience in participating in the full pilgrimage on three occasions, and from the instructions and clarifications given by other experienced pilgrims and my own pilgrimage guru. These understandings have also been informed by the author's knowledge of the teaching of Advaita Vedanta, and have since been verified by the publication referred to in the paper below. Advaita is the ancient teaching of non-duality as expounded in the Upanishads (Vedanta).

In all the great religious traditions, including that of the Australian Aborigines, seekers of the spiritual dimension have embarked on journeys to sacred places. Some of these journeys were to single places, others were longer, linking a number of sacred places with a focus on a site of major importance at the end of the journey. The great medieval Christian pilgrimages involved thousands of pilgrims, and the pilgrim routes stretched right across the Christian world. The modern pilgrim is a tourist, usually in a car and with a camera, looking at the highlights, the foci of these great journeys. However, the journey itself and its meaning has been lost in this tradition.

There are very few traditions left where the pilgrim's journey is undertaken in the time honoured way, according to ancient methods and practices. One of these can be found in India, amongst those who practise what is generally referred to as the Hindu tradition. Here in India, a traditional pilgrimage is begun with much sincere preparation and austerity and when the actual journey is made, it is made barefoot along a sacred path.

The whole pilgrimage, while it is performed on an actual physical path, is really a metaphor, a symbol for a much more profound journey within. A journey of one's awareness to the centre of the heart, to the sacred place within. Thus the pilgrim's path and his or her experience of it is really an externalised expression of an internal spiritual journey. The various parts of the path, and the features on it, merely symbols of this spiritual path.

Having taken one of these great Indian pilgrimages more than once, I am amazed at how it really does express the spiritual journey within. It is now clear to me that while the focus of the pilgrimage may be on the physical path and the goal at the end of it, the real meaning lies in understanding the journey itself and what it symbolises.

This is nothing other than a journey to the core of one's being. A journey to an experience of unification between the outer journey and the inner journey, the physical goal and the great spiritual truth at the core of one's being, between the pilgrim and the gods, between the seeker and the goal, between the soul and the Supreme.

All aspects of the journey and the path are merely symbols. The pilgrim can participate in the journey and try to remain only aware of the external aspects, but as the journey progresses, one is forced to journey inwards, to deal with inner obstacles, to seek an inner strength and guidance. When the goal is reached, we are aware that we have conquered our own fears, weaknesses and doubts, and have become more open to these inner meanings.

The pilgrimage I want to use as an illustration of this process is the annual pilgrimage to Shabarimalai in Kerala in South India which takes place over a 10-day period in January. This tiny village of Shabarimalai, set deep in the jungle and surrounded by the mountains of the Western Ghats, houses a temple to Lord Ayyappa, a child god who symbolises light, not physical light, but the effulgent light of the supreme consciousness or godhead. Until recently there were no roads to this village, only rough paths through the jungle, but now due to the pressure of the multitudes on the pilgrimage, which takes place in January, a rough road has been made to bring in supplies and building materials. However, the pilgrims still take the sacred 48-mile path through the jungle, walking barefoot, with the offerings for the temple carried on their head. They sleep on the ground and bathe in the rivers, carrying basic food and minimal clothing with them.

Preparation for the journey begins a minimum of 41 days before the pilgrimage and is in strict accordance with Hindu traditions. Cold baths and special rituals morning and evening, strict celibacy, no meat, alcohol, or even onions or heavy spices, no haircut or shaving, and many other austerities. A special mala (necklace) is worn and a coloured dhoti put on to signify to others that one is preparing for the pilgrimage. This is a society where pilgrimage and matters of the spirit and religion are taken seriously and highly respected.

To undertake this journey, one must have a guide, a 'Guru swami', usually an experienced pilgrim, to assist with advice and ritual and to encourage adherence to the various practices that are part of the pilgrimage. For the 41-day period, the primary focus of the pilgrim, regardless of other obligations, is on the journey and the deity and what it represents at the end of the journey. It is the purpose of this period, to build strength, resolve and focus for the difficult journey ahead.



When the day arrives to depart for the journey, the pilgrim undergoes an ‘initiation’ into the sacred path at a special poojah (sacred ceremony) and prepares a set of offerings that are then wrapped in a special cloth bag and carried on the head. This is called the Irumudi, and is the most visible sign of anyone taking this particular pilgrimage.



Pyyappan in his small but learned book *Lord Ayyappan – the Dharma Sasta* describes the meaning of this Irumudi:

The most important of the preliminaries is the preparation of what is called the ‘*Irumudi*’, a cotton bag in two compartments, one in front and the other behind, which is carried on the head, throughout the pilgrimage, like the Cross which Jesus carried for his crucifixion. The pilgrimage is complete only when the front part is emptied. Just as the Spirit gained victory over matter on the Cross, so the *Irumudi* symbolically proves the victory of Spirit over matter. (p. 48)

The front part is filled with offerings to the Lord, including a coconut filled with pure cow’s ghee. The ghee is inserted through the soft ‘third’ eye of the coconut and then corked and sealed. The ghee represents the precious and purified essence of the soul, carried in a sealed coconut (emptied of its milk), representing the physical body, the vehicle that houses and carries this spiritual essence, the individual consciousness. It enters the body through the third, or spiritual eye. Pyyappan continues:

The rear part contains food and other provisions required by the pilgrim for his journey. These two parts (of the bag) are first tied separately, and then together to form two separate bundles under one knot. (p. 48)

The front part represents the pilgrim's true essence and his spiritual goal, while the rear part represents those karmas and desires he has acquired, either in this life or previous. Pyappan expands on this.

The rear part is man's *Prarabdha Karma* and his desires. These are an appendage brought on by himself, and he has necessarily to carry them himself till they are destroyed. There is no escape from them. (pp. 49-50)

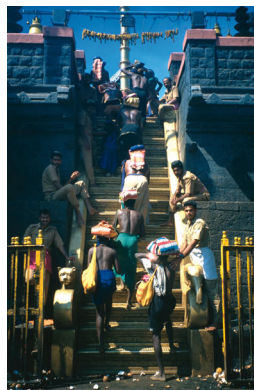
This ceremony is performed while constantly chanting the names and attributes of Lord Ayyappa – the focus of the pilgrimage. At this point, the pilgrim becomes Lord Ayyappa himself, as do the offerings. In effect, the pilgrim, now known as an 'Ayyappa swami', becomes the Lord, carrying the Lord, on a journey to the Lord, and all are but the one Lord. The pilgrim has, for the purpose and period of the pilgrimage, separated from the normal everyday world, he is dead to it. He visits as many temples and sacred places as he can during his journey, his only purpose to immerse himself in the spiritual world.



Along with his fellow pilgrims he travels, usually by bus if he has far to go, to the beginning of the 48-mile path. This pilgrimage is undertaken primarily by men, for reasons which I will not go into here. At the beginning of the path at Erumeli, offerings are made at a small temple where Lord Ayyappa is in the form of a hunter, just as we are 'hunting' for the divine. Permission is also sought from him to tread the sacred path. Blessings are sought from various deities and important persons, and the journey begins. All the way along the journey, both in the bus and along the path, songs and chants about Lord Ayyappa are sung. This is not a place for idle chatter, this is a sacred journey and the focus should be unbroken. Imagine hundreds of buses carrying thousands of devotees, all loudly chanting and singing the names of the Lord, winding their way across the country and into the mountains to begin their barefoot walk to the temple. A spiritual equivalent of a sports grand final.

Once begun, the walk is difficult, with sharp stones, tree roots and sticks, minimal sleep, minimal food, but a lot of chanting. Because many millions of people take this pilgrimage, one is surrounded 24 hours by the chanting, by the song of praise and surrender which gives the inner strength to overcome the hardship and pain of the journey. One is supported and even carried by this community of pilgrims and their singular focus. I have seen (and been overtaken by), people with major deformities and missing limbs. To see the strength of their focus and devotion is a truly humbling experience.

In the teaching associated with this temple, one must abandon all dharmas (rules, standards and laws) imposed by the ignorant mind in order to realise or merge with the divine, the supreme consciousness. This extraordinary journey is through the darkness of the forest, full of wild animals, including tigers and elephants, up and down many mountains, crossing rivers and finally ascending to a small temple in a clearing where the Lord, symbolising the light of the supreme consciousness, is finally found. The darkness of the forest, with its dangers, is but our mind with its fears and preconceptions, with our inner journey breaking through this ignorance and doubt to that light of consciousness, to a spiritual union with the divine. This is the real meaning of the pilgrim's path.



Many shrines and important places are visited along the path, each signifying an aspect of the journey, an aspect of the inner surrender to the Lord. Before the ascent of the final and steepest mountain, a ritual bath is taken in the sacred Pampa River and a celebratory meal prepared. The journey is almost over. By now, the feet are almost numb and every pebble is a spike to test one's strength and resolve.

On the way [the path] he [the pilgrim] consumes all that he has brought in the rear part of the *Irumudi*, so that by the time he reaches the shrine what remains is only the contents of the front part. Symbolically, the *Prarabdha Karma* and desires are extinguished or consumed on the way. What remains is only the body, that is the coconut, and the ghee, that is the soul. (p. 50)

When Lord Ayyappa's temple is finally reached, the sound of chanting and celebratory fireworks, gives the impression of being in a medieval war zone with everyone showing signs of both exhaustion and ecstasy. Before the temple can be entered, the final 18 golden steps must be climbed, carrying the offerings on the head. These steps are so steep and slippery that there is a real danger of falling backwards onto other pilgrims. This is the most difficult climb of all the journey and when the top is reached, one glimpses the radiant bronze image of Lord Ayyappa deep inside the sanctum.



Pyayappan describes the meaning of this final ascent and the 18 steps.

They are eighteen in number, representing the five Indriyas [5 senses and 5 agents of action], eight Ragas [moods], three Gunas [3 qualities of nature], Vidya [knowledge] and Avidya [ignorance]. Just as we climb the eighteen steps which symbolise the eighteen elements, the soul transcends within the body, in order to reveal its splendour which has hitherto been covered over by the veils of Maya [this material world, and also ignorance]. On transcending these eighteen elements, it becomes self-effulgent, feels the eternal bliss that is God within itself, comes face to face with the Supreme and merges in It. (pp. 51-52)

At the top of the step is a simple sanskrit sign 'TATTWAMASI' – 'I am that'. The coconut is broken open, (the body cast off), the ghee is poured over Lord Ayyappa, (the individual soul merges with the Supreme), and the journey is over.



The pilgrim, the path, the journey, and the goal, are all one. This is the most profound teaching of this ancient tradition. The physical symbolises the non-physical and the spiritual, and they cannot be seen as separate for the pilgrim who has walked the path with sincerity and an open heart.

#### **Reference**

Pyyappan. *Lord Ayyappan – the Dharma Sasta*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan 1988.

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