On the allegorization of action for health*

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On the cusp of the 17-18th centuries in Thanjavur, South India, during the reign of the Maratha king Śāhajī (1684-1712), Ānandarāya Makhin produced a seven-act allegorical play called the Jīvānandanam, or The Joy of Life. In the play’s bhūmikā we learn that Ānandarāya prepared The Joy of Life for live performance at the Bṛhadīśvara Temple Festival in Thanjavur. As a dramaturgical piece about the relationship between the cultural domains of religion and medicine, The Joy of Life is entirely unique in the history of Sanskrit literature. Moreover, innovations in Ānandarāya’s play, including the melding of ayurvedic medicine and Hindu religious practice so that care of the body is a necessary precondition for optimal religious practice, position The Joy of Life within the dynamic period of Sanskrit literary production between 1550-1750 on the Indian subcontinent, when writers fashioned innovative scientific and literary techniques and produced cross-disciplinary works.1

The Joy of Life develops simultaneously on two planes: inside and outside of the body of the play’s hero, King Life (Jīvarāja). Each character in the play represents an element of the human body, intellect, or emotion while simultaneously playing a part in an imperial Indian court. Throughout the play Ānandarāya concurrently captures both settings—human body and royal court—with the Sanskrit term puram. Quite apart from its appeal as a clever, funny, and at

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1 The two centuries leading up to British colonialism in South Asia was the topic of a multi-scholar, multi-year project led by Sheldon Pollock, “Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism,” which produced numerous outstanding articles on this vibrant period in Sanskrit literary production. For project details and open access to some of the articles, see http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pollock/sks/index.html

times bawdy Sanskrit drama, *The Joy of Life* offers a novel and (in the idiom of the modern university) multidisciplinary message: viz., the biophysiology of an individual body affects, communicates with, and is under the influence of the larger cultural physiology of its surroundings and all of the complicated ideologies and institutions that constitute culture. Endemic to the human condition, in other words, there is an ongoing series of collisions between an individual and society. And how people act in the world and negotiate these collisions impacts their physical wellbeing. This is precisely the lesson King Life learns in the play, for the wellbeing of his body and royal court is contingent upon the ways in which he engages and/or disengages from the activities around him. This task is not easy for King Life, for in addition to upholding the complex *dharma* of a king, he is under attack by the vile King Disease (Rājayakṣman) and his infectious cohort.²

In what follows I examine a power struggle that unfolds between King Life’s two chief advisors, Vijñānaśarman and Jñānaśarman, and explore the ways in which the positions they encourage elucidate Ānandarāya’s vision of a well-balanced and healthy life. On the one hand, Vijñānaśarman advises King Life to hold fast to his domestic duties of statecraft and military defense, while on the other hand Jñānaśarman endorses a life of austere religious commitment and asceticism. The behavioral models of King Life’s advisors, I suggest, may be read as two sides of an allegorical trope carefully crafted by the playwright to illustrate a fundamental dichotomy of Indian religious thought, *pravrtti* and *nivritti*, or “outward-focused action” and “inward-focused action.” This allegorical trope presents Ānandarāya’s audience with a poetics of practice about the complexities and responsibilities of human life. In the course of the play, as King Life’s advisors debate their positions, and the king engages in both social engagement and ascetic withdrawal, the playwright carefully mounts the argument that a life calibrated by both outward-focused and inward-focused actions leads to bodily wellbeing and, ultimately, the joy of life of the play’s title.

In the next section, I briefly look at allegory in Sanskrit literature in order to situate *The Joy of Life* historically in relation to works of literature on which Ānandarāya drew inspiration for his play. I then discuss the concepts of *pravrtti* and *nivrtti* and, presenting examples from Act 6 of *The Joy of Life*, explore how these ideas are allegorized in the characters Vijñānaśarman and

² For the past two centuries, translators of Sanskrit into English have rendered the term *yaksman* as “consumption” and, more recently, “tuberculosis.” The most adequate rendering of the term into English is simply “disease,” in that a *yaksman* in the Āyurvedic tradition may be of many types and occur in many locations in the body – hence the translation here, King Disease.
Jñānaśarman. I conclude with a brief reflection on the general symbolism of the king as a model for healthcare in a play designed for live performance.

**Allegory in Sanskrit literature**

In the history of Sanskrit rhetoric and hermeneutics, only recently do we find a term denoting the structural feature of narrative that is equivalent to the western category of allegory.³ For example, in 1962 Saroja Agravāła used the Hindi term rūpak-nāṭaka, “metaphorical drama” (from the Sanskrit rūpaka-nāṭaka) to describe Kṛṣṇamiśra’s famous 11th century work, the Prabodhacandrodaya. More recently, Matthew Kapstein noted that Gāyatrī Devī Bakhshī coined the Sanskrit term pratīka-nāṭaka, “symbolic drama,” to classify Vedāntadesīka’s 14th century opus, the Saṃkalpasūryodaya. That said, while the Prabodhacandrodaya is the earliest full-length Sanskrit allegorical drama, Kṛṣṇamiśra was not the first writer of Sanskrit to employ so-called allegorical techniques.

Allegorization occurs in Sanskrit literature from very early on. The Śvetāśvatara (4.6-7) and Muṇḍaka (3.1) Upaniṣads, for example, allegorize the story of the two birds in Book 1 of the Rgveda (1.164.20) to represent the opposing notions of materiality and spirit (or prakṛti and puruṣa). In the Kuvalayānandakārikā (v. 23) Appaya Dīkṣita called this type of one-for-one equation samāsokti, “abbreviated speech,” to denote the literary act of describing something present (the birds) while conveying a message about an abstraction or something not present (materiality and spirit).⁴ A “trope of abbreviation,” as Sheldon Pollock has called it, samāsokti involves the implicit characterization of something to be signified while explicitly describing only the literal source. It is a brief or isolated tactic in Sanskrit composition, however, not a structural feature with which to describe an entire narrative.⁵

Around the 1-2nd centuries C.E. we find allegorization in the fragments of Āśvaghoṣa’s Buddhacarita in the three characters Fame (Kīrti), Firmness (Dhṛti), and Wisdom (Buddhi). In the 9th century C.E., Jayanta Bhaṭṭa (au-

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³ From the Greek allēgoria, meaning “speaking about something else.”


tory of the Nyāyamañjari) wrote a highly didactic and philosophical play, the Āgamaḍambara, which contains substantial allegorical ornamentation. After Kṛṣṇamiśra’s Prabodhacandrodāya, other Sanskrit allegories appeared, such as Yaśapāla’s Mohaparājaya, Karnapūra’s Caitanyakandrodāya, and two works attributed to Ānandarāya Makhin, Jīvānandanām and Vidyāparinayām.

Why opt for allegory to convey a philosophical dichotomy like pravr̥tti-nivr̥tti? It is, after all, a somewhat inelegant literary method to wax philosophical. Matthew Kapstein recently argued that allegory “suffers from the constraint of its major premise, for it must tell a story that is in fact a second story, a double task restricting the author’s free creation and often lending to allegorical works a rigid, contrived quality.” It is true that inherent to the genre there are handicaps, and there are contrivances in Ānandarāya’s work. Yet, where Kapstein sees a constraint on creativity, I read The Joy of Life as a highly creative work by a writer who succeeds to an astonishing degree both to entertain his audience and elucidate abstract subjects. Indeed, Ānandarāya appears to be freer creatively in this text, where he interweaves lessons from Āyurveda, Nītiśāstra, and Bhakti literature, than in his other allegory, Vidyāparinayām (The Nuptials of Knowledge), where he is constrained by the tradition of the nondualist school of Advaita Vedānta. Ānandarāya tells not just a first and a second story in The Joy of Life. He actually tells three stories at once—one medical, one political, and one religious. He undergirds all three with a poetics of everyday practice: human society, he teaches us, operates best when individuals understand and counterpoise numerous courses of action in their lives.7

Pravr̥tti–nivr̥tti & vijñānaśarman-jñānaśarman

Threaded throughout The Joy of Life’s multilayered narrative is the notion of vṛtti—“action” (also “moving,” “practice,” “behavior” and “being”). Add the prefixes pra- and ni- to vṛtti, and the course of action implied by the new terms

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7 To this end, Ānandarāya’s writing also resembles “simultaneous narration,” śleṣa, which, according to Yigal Bronner, “typically involves a metamorphosis of the entire utterance—nouns, verbs, and prepositions—in a way that creates a new sentence with a new vocabulary, a new syntax, and, obviously, a new meaning” (Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 181.
presents a contrast between the outward expression of action, or a “turning forward” to the world—praṇṛtti—and a relinquishment of action in the world, or “turning back” onto oneself—nivṛtti. I translate these types of action as “outward-focused” (praṇṛtti) and “inward-focused” (nivṛtti). Early in his research on praṇṛtti and nivṛtti, Greg Bailey interpreted these two terms as mutually exclusive and opposing ideologies. He initially thought praṇṛtti pertained to the life-station of the householder, nivṛtti to the renouncer. Over time he reformulated his position, rightly on my view, to suggest that instead of two polar ideologies, praṇṛtti and nivṛtti in fact represent two ideal types that make sense only in relation to one another, and offer “a total world view consisting of two related, if opposite, perceptions of how the world and the person [operate].” Which is to say that both concepts pertain to all people irrespective of their life station.

The arc of King Life’s life in Ānandarāya’s play is a narrative lesson on the need to establish complementarity between praṇṛtti and nivṛtti in one’s lifetime. We observe the king alternate between active upkeep and defense of his fortress-body (puram) and withdrawal from these engagements to perform religious austerities in the Lotus City (Puṇḍarīkapuram). The course of action King Life takes is determined by the guidance of his two primary advisors. On the one hand, in the course of the play Ānandarāya tells us that Vijñānaśarman, “Social-knowledge” in my translation, is an advisor on the three aims of life (traivargika). The three aims here refer to the first of the three puruṣārthas (kāma, artha, and dharma), and they pertain to one’s present lifetime, experience, and responsibilities in Hindu society. On the other hand, the playwright explains that Jñānaśarman, rendered here as “Ascetic-knowledge,” is an advisor on matters pertaining to the termination of saṃsāra (apavargika), or mokṣa, release from the cycle of rebirth and redeath. The Sanskrit word śarman, meaning “joy, delight, comfort, bliss,” is a common suffix added to names of members of the Brahman class (in the same way, for example, that varman is frequently added to the names of Kṣatriyas and gupta to Vaiśyas). For the purpose of economy in my translation, I take the term śarman in the names of King Life’s advisors to be designations of their Brahman class affiliation,

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9 Greg Bailey, “The praṇṛtti/nivṛtti project at La Trobe University with Notes on the Meaning of vrī in the Bhagavadgītā” (Torino: Indologica Taurinensia 29, 2003), 13. See also Matthew Kapstein’s recent discussion of praṇṛtti and nivṛtti, which is similar to Bailey’s characterization, as “complementary facets of a common ideology” (2009, lix, fn. 13).
and do not translate this term. Other common meanings of śarman include “shelter, protection, and refuge,” and some have suggested the term is related to the word sārīra, “body.” One could translate the names of King Life’s advisors in a literal, but ultimately unusable way for publication, with these definitions in mind as: Vījñānaśarman – “He for whom refuge is Social-knowledge” or “He for whom there is Comfort in Social-knowledge” – and Jñānaśarman – “He for whom refuge is Ascetic-knowledge” or “He for whom there is comfort in Ascetic-knowledge.” It is useful to know the breadth of the term śarman as it applies to these two critical players in The Joy of Life. Their differing types of knowledge and expertise provide some context for the important directives they offer the king in the play. Yet, for a complete understanding of the play, at bottom, readers need to know that the two Śarmans advising the king are Brahmans. What is more, to cultivate reader appreciation for the play and the playwright’s literary skill, Ānandarāya’s allegorical design and description of these two central characters through the dialogue of other characters in the play is paramount. Ultimately Ānandarāya designed Social-knowledge and Ascetic-knowledge, and the positions they defend, as allegorical tropes on outward-focused action (pravṛtti) and inward-focused action (nivṛtti) respectively, with the message that when there is equilibrium between the two types of knowledge, there is balanced action in one’s life directed towards society and oneself. An overarching message to the entire play is that this balance in turn produces somatic wellbeing. Of course, bodily wellbeing in essential to clear thinking and peak performance, and Ānandarāya has a way of addressing that, too. He develops what I have elsewhere described as a uniquely medical “body dharma,” which is rooted in the Sanskrit literature of Āyurveda.10

**Act 6: pravṛtti–nivṛtti in The joy of life**

Act 6 of The Joy of Life begins with a dialogue between two attendants in King Life’s court, Time (Kāla) and Action (Karma), in which Time recounts a conversation between King Life and Ascetic-knowledge. At this point in the play, King Life is noticeably suffering from the attack of King Disease’s army. In the preceding act, we learned that several soldiers of King Disease,

such as Leprosy (Kuṣṭha), Diarrhea (Atīśāra), Goiter (Galagaṇḍa), and others,
had managed to diminish King Life’s vitality while, rather than attending to
the affairs of his court, he was residing quietly in the Lotus City doing yoga
and meditation. As Social-knowledge exits the stage to check on the condi-
tion of his army’s defense against King Disease’s chief lieutenant, Prince Pal-
lid (Pāṇḍu), Ascetic-knowledge sneaks into the king’s chambers. King Life
had not heard from Ascetic-knowledge in a while and is pleased to see him.
The king expresses regret for stopping his spiritual exercises in the Lotus City,
which Ascetic-knowledge encouraged, to follow the counsel of Social-knowl-
edge, who had convinced him that his obligation as a king, his rājadharma, was
to be fully present in his court, especially at a time of war.

Time tells Action that Ascetic-knowledge felt rejected when King Life chose
to follow Social-knowledge, so he left the court. Having learnt that the army
of Disease was beginning to weaken the king, however, Ascetic-knowledge de-
cided he must convince the king once and for all that thrusting one’s body into
action in the world—pravṛtti—is treacherous business and should be forsaken.
Ānandarāya’s personification of nivṛtti in the character of Ascetic-knowledge
and pravṛtti in the character of Social-knowledge, and their opposing natures,
takes shape in the following exchange between Time and Action:

TIME:  [quoting ASCETIC-KNOWLEDGE speaking to KING LIFE]
Because of the miserable advice of Social-knowledge, you have
unduly reached this wretched night. O Lord, desirous to be free
of my debt to you, I therefore come now with good advice.

ACTION:  What happened next?

TIME:  The king candidly replied, “Friend, Ascetic-knowledge, after a
long time you have appeared! Who else but you can make me
better?” And he implored, “Speak that usual good advice of
yours!”

ACTION:  Yes, and then what happened?

TIME:  Then, drawing close to the king, Ascetic-knowledge softly ex-
plained:

Everyone knows the body is forever transitory. It is the soil that
spouts evil. It is a form that consists of visceral fat, marrow,
muscle fat\textsuperscript{11}, bone, flesh, blood, skin, and hair.\textsuperscript{12} In it there is excrement and urine in the viscera and cavities. For discriminating folks [the body] is ultimate suffering and should be rejected. Surely, how do those who know what is proper endure here, in this kind of hell?\textsuperscript{13}

For Ascetic-knowledge, human life has a singular aim: release from the suffering that comes from embodiment. He proceeds to tell King Life that complete joy (akhaṇḍānandam) is found only in brahman, “absolute reality,” not in the terrestrial world of humanity. Ascetic-knowlege argues that if King Life follows the guidance of Social-knowlege, he will forever be trapped in a cycle of suffering and incapable of experiencing joy.

Ascetic-knowlege has to cut short his soliloquy when he hears Social-knowlege reentering the king’s chambers. As Ascetic-knowlege sneaks off, Social-knowlege enters the stage. Immediately he can tell the king’s attitude has changed. The king suddenly appears utterly at ease and insouciant about the penetration of Disease into his fortress-body. Social-knowlege rightly sus-

\textsuperscript{11} For this term, vasā, in his commentary Aiyangar cites the Suśruta Samhitā as its source, although he does not provide a specific reference.

\textsuperscript{12} This octet is unusual, falling as it does somewhere between the typical seven or ten bodily constituents (dhātus): chyle, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, semen (+ 3: hair, skin, sinews).

\textsuperscript{13} Jīvāṇandanaṃ 6.12-13

\begin{itemize}
  \item Kālaḥ: …ataḥ kila –
    \begin{itemize}
      \item viṭṭhaṣaḥarmahatākasya vṛthā kumantraịr
      \item ghorāmimāṃ sumahatāṃ gatam āpādaṃ tvāṃ /
      \item ākārṇya deva hitāvāgupadeśaheto-
    \end{itemize}
  \end{itemize}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Karma: tatastataḥ |
  \item Kālaḥ: tataṣca rājā saralapraκtītayā sakhe jñānaśarman cireṇa dṛṣṭo ’si |
    \begin{itemize}
      \item tvatto ’pi me śreyassampādakaḥ ko ’ṇyo ’sti |
      \item tat kathaya prastutocitaṃ hitam iti tam anvayuṅkta |
    \end{itemize}
  \item Karma: tatastataḥ |
  \item Kālaḥ: tato jñānaśarmā rājānampahvare svairamitthaṃ bodhayām āsa –
    \begin{itemize}
      \item šaśvannaśvaram eva viśvaviditaṃ pāpapraroḥasthalam 
      \item medomajvasāṣṭhisarudhiratvagromarūpaṃ vapuḥ /
      \item etasminalamūtrabhāṇḍakahore heye maniśāvatāṃ 
    \end{itemize}
  \end{itemize}

duḥkhe nyāyavido vimohamiha ke tanvanti nanvantine // 13 //
pects that his co-advisor, Ascetic-knowledge, has been speaking with the king. Despite his current indifference, out of respect for his advisor, King Life asks Social-knowledge what the frontline of the battle looks like. As soon as he learns the situation is dire, the king’s tenor changes:

**TIME:** [speaking to ACTION]

Hearing this, the king remembered the words of Ascetic-knowledge. His mind oscillating between the aims of both advisors, the king resolved to act. His mouth trembling, he said:

In every direction those diseases, sprung from crooked Wind and the others (i.e., the doṣas), are our natural enemies. Oh! How can there be proper refuge and self-sufficiency in this fortress / in this body (pure)?

King Life briefly struggles with the opposing directives of his two advisors. Does he retreat to the Lotus City and withdrawal from the world—the path of *nivṛtti*—as Ascetic-knowledge urges? Or does he attend to his physical well-being, to his body and his subjects, and steadfastly engage the often-harmful world around him—the path of *pravṛtti*—as Social-knowledge advises? King Life knows he must act. But he struggles with how to proceed.

Time explains to Action that Social-knowledge tried once more to make the case that King Life should not abandon the helm and run off to the Lotus City. The consequences of doing so at this stage would be fatal. Then, after quietly listening to Time recount the self-reflexive struggle of their king, Action speaks up and asks an important, probing question about how the king is resolving the different courses of action he might take:

**ACTION:** My lord, to what extent is the opposition of Ascetic-knowledge and Social-knowledge becoming harmonized?

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14 Jīvānandanaṁ 6.19

Kālaḥ: ityākarnya rāja jñānaśarmavaco ’nusmarannubhayormatayorapi
dolāyamānamānasa
itikartavyatāmavasyayannitthamāksepamukhena vyājahāra –
nisargato ye ripavo hi hi rogā vātādibhistajjanakahś samantāt /
adhiṣṭite ’śmin kuṭilaiḥ prakṛtyā svāyattatā hanta katham pure nah // 19 //
TIME: My friend, Ascetic-knowledge is focused on release (mokṣa); Social-knowledge is concerned with kāma, artha, and dharma. That is their opposition. Why do you ask?15

He asks, we later learn, because he suspected that both advisors want the king to thrive. But as readers (or attendants at the live performance of this play), we know that the social withdrawal and detachment Ascetic-knowledge teaches must be tempered by some outward looking activity. For, in the previous act, Act 5, we saw that all meditation and no leadership makes King Life a sick monarch. Realizing this, King Life again gives the reins of his fortress-body (puram) to Social-knowledge, who orders for his army a round of a special mercury-sulphur elixir that was gifted to the king by Śiva earlier in the play. This fearsome brew boosts the immunity of King Life’s armed forces, who, now reinvigorated, persevere in the battle against King Disease.

Reading Ānandarāya’s play through the lens of the pravrtti-nivrtti dichotomy, the travails of King Life suggest that a host of factors determine the extent to which a person may give emphasis to one course of action vis-à-vis another in one’s lifetime. These include such things as one’s dharma apropos life station, class, caste, and the like. For Ānandarāya ultimately bhakti, too, must factor into the equation.

This message comes across clearly in the last act of the play, Act 7. With overtones of Kṛṣṇa’s instruction to Arjuna in the Bhagavadgītā, in the play’s final act Śiva swiftly sums up the two paths of Social-knowledge and Ascetic-knowledge, underscoring their inherently joint embodiment in humanity, while adding a third path—devotion (to Śiva, i.e., śivabhakti):

ŚIVA: Since the path of your dear old friend, good-hearted Ascetic-knowledge, celebrated by sages, is difficult for you to reach, always honor me. For superior combat, however, Social-knowledge is obliged to be truthful; he alone should constantly develop what is best for you in the world. Always think about Social-knowledge as being no different from Ascetic-knowledge.

15 Jīvānandana 6.29

Karma: bhagavan jñānavijnānamayorekarūpayor iva satōḥ kuta iyān virodhaḥ?
Kālaḥ: vatsa –
mokṣe dhīrjñānamanyatra vijñānam śilpaśāstrayoh /
tayor virodha ity etat kim āścarya[karam] tava // 29 //
Ānandarāya then has Śiva explain that the king’s fortress-body must be well maintained first and foremost for the bhaktimārga (“path of devotion”) to be effective. With this, the poet links a duty to the health of the body with religious practice. Significantly, religious practice ensues from healthcare. Put another way, medical care ensures the ability to perform religious practice (which in this case is yoga and meditation).

**Conclusion: the king’s life as everyone’s life**

In conclusion, I would like to add a few words about the symbolism of the king. It is not inconsequential that the pravṛtti-nivṛtti dichotomy is superimposed on the life of a king. In premodern India many people relied on kings for protection and sustenance, and if a king went down he took many people with him. He is an important model, to be sure, one that demands attention. But King Life should not only be read as a royal sovereign of subjects and territories in *The Joy of Life*. This play was meant for a live audience of commoners from throughout South India, and the poet would have been attentive to the need to facilitate an identification of the festival audience with the play’s hero. With that mind, I suggest we read King Life as a “self-sovereign,” a person who is a leader unto himself. The various predicaments in which King Life finds himself in Ānandarāya’s play, and especially the struggles he undergoes following the counsel of Viśnūśarman and Jñānaśarman, collectively address basic questions arising from being human, questions with which most people are confronted at some point in their lives. How, for instance, do one superintend one’s physical body while facing personal and social troubles, such as illness, mental unrest, social insecurity, and religious uncertainty? In this way the playwright’s basic message of how best to comport oneself in the world—that is, Ānandarāya’s poetics of practice—is certain to resonate with a lot of people.

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16 *Jīvānandanaṃ* 7.28-29

Parameśvaraḥ:

prācitāh saci vā priyas tava suhṛdyo jñānaśarmā munistomasyāpi sudurlabhah sa bhavatā mānyah sadāham yathā / śreyassamghatanaḥ hanta bhavataḥ satyaṁ sa evārthi preyas tvaihikam ātānou satatam vijñānaśarmāpi te // saśvad jñānād abhinnaḥ san vijñānam api mānaya / evaṁ sati ghaṇeyātāṁ bhuktimuktī kare tava.