

## Bhagavan's Role in the Editing of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*

*Guru Vachaka Kovai* (*The Garland of Guru's Sayings*) is a Tamil poetical work that contains 1,254 verses composed by Muruganar and a further twenty-eight that were written by Ramana Maharshi. The vast majority of these verses contain teaching statements made by Ramana Maharshi. Taken together they form a vast and comprehensive summary of Sri Ramana's teachings.

In the 1920s Muruganar began to write down Bhagavan's teaching statements, usually recording what he had heard in the form of a four-line Tamil verse. Muruganar would generally show Bhagavan what he had written either immediately or within a few hours of the verse's composition, and it has been reported by both Sadhu Om and H. Vaidyanathan<sup>1</sup> that Bhagavan would occasionally make changes to these verses to make sure that his teachings had been properly recorded.

In the Tamil edition of *Crumbs From His Table* there is an interesting example of how this process worked. In 1935 a conversation took place in the hall between Bhagavan and a devotee. Muruganar, who was present, immediately composed a verse that summarised the teachings which had been imparted and passed it on to Bhagavan, who looked at it, and then showed it to the devotee who had been speaking to him.<sup>2</sup> This particular dialogue appears in the English edition,<sup>3</sup> but the extra information about Muruganar spontaneously composing the verse that summarised it can only be found in the Tamil edition, on page twenty-six. The lines that Muruganar composed on this occasion appear as verse 707 in the current edition of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*.

On a few occasions when Bhagavan was shown a verse by Muruganar, he felt inspired to compose a verse of his own on the same topic. These verses were preserved and later incorporated in *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, where they have their own separate numbering system to distinguish them from Muruganar's. Some of the verses that were composed for *Guru Vachaka Kovai* ended up in *Supplement to the Forty Verses* (*Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*), and some of the verses that were originally in *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham* were incorporated in *Guru Vachaka Kovai*.

By 1939 the number of verses that Muruganar composed exceeded 800, and it was decided that they should be published in book form. Muruganar had never attempted to put the verses in any kind of order; he had simply composed a verse whenever he heard Bhagavan say something of interest that he thought should be preserved. Bhagavan entrusted the sequencing of the verses to Sadhu Natanananda, who had previously brought out his own collection of Bhagavan's verbal teachings under the title *Upadesa Manjari* (*Spiritual Instruction*). Since Sadhu Natanananda had already written a Tamil commentary, entitled *Upadesa Ratnavali*, on 108 of the verses of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, Bhagavan knew that he had both the interest and the competence to do the work.<sup>4</sup>

Sadhu Natanananda first placed the verses in one of three major subdivisions that he entitled 'Investigation into Truth', 'Meditation on Truth', and 'Experience of the Truth'. Within these three broad categories he put verses on similar topics together, giving each group of verses a subheading that reflected the contents of the verses. The result was sections such as 'The Reality of the World', 'The Nature of Self and *Jiva*', 'The Heart', and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ramana's Muruganar*, p. 69 and p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> The Tamil edition of *Crumbs From His Table* also reports that the dialogue that appears on pages 32 and 33 (pp. 43-44 in the English edition) is the basis for verse 432 of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*. The English edition of *Crumbs From His Table* preceded the Tamil version, so these additions must have been added to the Tamil edition by the author, Ramanananda Swarnagiri. Both dialogues took place in 1935.

<sup>3</sup> *Crumbs from his Table*, 1969 ed. p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Upadesa Ratnavali* was written in 1931, but never published. Bhagavan himself went through the manuscript and made a handwritten revision to one of the comments. The original manuscript is now stored in the Ramanasramam archives.

During Bhagavan's lifetime all of Muruganar's writings were published by Ramana Padananda, a devotee who was so inspired by Muruganar and his writings, he spent years of his life collecting, preserving and publishing his poetry. When Sadhu Natanananda had arranged all the verses thematically, they were sent to Ramana Padananda to be published. At some point during the printing process Ramana Padananda printed a proof copy and sent it to Ramanasramam so that Bhagavan could have the opportunity to check and revise what had been written. This proof copy, with Bhagavan's extensive corrections scribbled all over it, still exists, and is now stored in the Sri Ramanasramam archives.

Many of the changes Bhagavan made could be classified as copy editing: in some places he improved the style of the poetry; elsewhere he made more felicitous and euphonious rhymes for some of the lines; he changed the sequencing in several places,<sup>5</sup> and on at least one page he corrected a grammatical mistake that Muruganar had made. More importantly, though, he checked each verse to ensure that his teachings had been properly and accurately recorded. Whenever he deemed it necessary, he crossed out a part of Muruganar's original verse and substituted words of his own that he felt gave a more accurate rendering of his statements.

As Bhagavan worked his way through the proofs, he composed nine more verses and wrote them down in the place where they should be printed.<sup>6</sup> When the work was ready to go to the press, there were a total of twenty-four verses by Bhagavan in the text in addition to those composed by Muruganar. Bhagavan's verses were printed in bold type and given a separate numbering system to distinguish them from the verses that Muruganar had composed. Here is a typical example of a new verse, composed by Bhagavan, and written on the proof sheet:

**சச. கன்மரகசியத்திறன்**

481. கன்மமியற் றத்தொடங்குங் கத்தனா னாரென்னத்  
 தன்மெயறி வேகன்ம தத்துவமாம்—கன்மமுதல்  
 ஆந்தன்னை யாய்ந்தறிந்தற் றுலன்றிக் கன்மமுடி  
 வார்ந்தவுப சார்த மரிது. 2

(6) வினாயுட் விபத்தி விவேகமஞ் சூன  
 கிளையவையார் தென்குயர் சூன—விபத்தி  
 யோகமென வாய்ந்தறிந்த அநியைவ லென்றுமின்பு  
 ளுமென வினாயுடைய வாக (பகவான்) க

The (6) indicates that this is the sixth of Bhagavan's verses to appear in the text, and the arrow shows where Bhagavan wanted it to be included. The verse Bhagavan wrote here says:

Simply to enquire, 'Who is it that experiences this karma, this alienation [*vibhakti*], this separation [*viyoga*] and this ignorance?' constitutes in itself [the paths of] karma, *bhakti*, yoga, and *jnana*. For when, upon enquiry, the "I" ceases to be, these [karma, and so on] are [known to be] eternally without existence. Only abiding as the Self is the state of reality.

I will now give a few more examples from the proof copy to show how Bhagavan's editorial interventions modified the meanings of the verses he chose to change. I will give the 1939 verse number first, followed, after a colon, by the number in the current edition. The 1939 edition only had 852 verses by Muruganar, whereas the current edition has 1,254. These extra verses were interpolated at appropriate

<sup>5</sup> Verses 27, 192, 303, 307 and 740 (1939 edition numbering) were moved to their final published location by Bhagavan. Presumably this was done to give a better logical flow to the ideas being presented.

<sup>6</sup> In all editions of the work Bhagavan's verses are numbered B 1, B 2, and so on. B 10, B 11, B 12 B 13, B 15, B 20, B 23, B 26, and B 28 (numbering from the present edition) were handwritten by Bhagavan on the proof copy. It is reasonable to assume that he composed these verses as he was checking the proofs.



He who is steadfastly focused in the Heart will not see anything as the ground [the substratum] except his Self. He who is that screen-like reality which exists and shines will provide the space for everything to appear within him, and he will also cause these [appearances] to shine.

Compare this with Muruganar's original version:

He who is steadfastly focused in the Heart will not regard any other thing as the ground [the substratum] except his Self. Much less will he see the one supreme existing ground that ripens into space as three different places.

The word translated here as 'place' is the same word that is used to denote the three different persons in grammar: first person, second person and third person. One could therefore translate this Muruganar verse in such a way that it indicated that one who is 'steadfastly focused in the Heart' is only aware of 'I', the one supreme existing first person of grammar.

In its original form this verse seems to be linked to verse 748, which is about time:

Those who are firmly anchored in the state of the Self will see only the Self, and no such thing as time. Much less will they see the one principle that ripens into time as the three different times.

Bhagavan's rewriting of the second half of verse 450 introduced an idea that was so different, the two original verses no longer make a symmetrical pair.

**Verse 36:57**

36. மண்டுபல வாக சீயங்குமிப் பாழலகப்  
பண்டைநிலை பல்வண்ணப் பச்சைமயில்—அண்டரசம்  
ஒன்றேபோ லொன்றா யுறுசுகமா மிவ்வுண்மை  
நின்றேபா ரான்ம நிலை. ௨௭

The revised version says:

Just as the yolk of the egg of the many-hued green peacock is only one [in colour], the original state of this empty world, which appears to be distorted into teeming multiplicity, is pure and unalloyed happiness. By abiding in the state of the Self, know this truth now, even while that Self, appearing as an effect, takes the form of the world manifesting through the power of *maya*.

Through changing only one letter here, Bhagavan makes an interesting philosophical point. Muruganar had originally written 'which shines as teeming multiplicity'. Bhagavan's correction indicates that it is the Self alone that shines, not the distorted and fragmented, unreal world that is projected by the individual self. In a similar correction to verse 274 (the original verse number was 185) Bhagavan changed 'shines as an ordinary human being' to 'appears to be an ordinary human being'. In Bhagavan's terminology only the formless Self shines; its various appearances and manifestations do not.

**Verse 4:10**

Muruganar felt that it was Bhagavan who was guiding and inspiring him to record the teachings of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*. In his original draft of verse four, which was part of a sequence that explains how the work came into existence, he wrote:

Upon examination [it will be discovered] that all these letters are certainly not those written by me, a dull-witted fool, through intellectual exertion. The one who wrote them is Venkatavan, divinity in human form.

Venkatavan is one of the names of Bhagavan that Muruganar frequently uses in his poetry. When Bhagavan read this verse in a proof copy of the text, he made some significant changes to the text:

4. **ந. அவையடக்கம்**  
இந்த வெழுத்துக்கள் யாளவ்யமே தேருங்கால்  
மந்த மதிபடைத்த மத்தனே—புந்தியால்,  
எண்ணி யெழுதியவே யல்ல வெழுதியோன்  
புண்ணியனும் வேங்கடவன் போன்ம்.

Bhagavan's alterations made the verse read:

Upon examination, [it will be discovered that] this elegant *Guru Vachaka Kovai* was not sung by me, a dull-witted fool, through intellectual exertion. It was Venkatavan, divinity in human form, who, without conscious volition, caused me to sing it.

Bhagavan's corrections hint at an important philosophical point. While Muruganar claimed in his original verse that it was Bhagavan himself who wrote the work, presumably using Muruganar as his instrument, Bhagavan makes it clear in his revision that he was merely the impersonal causal agency.

Bhagavan took the position that the Self never performs or initiates any action. However, he also maintained that one who abides motionless and desireless as the Self creates an energy or a presence that takes care of all devotees' desires or needs. Bhagavan used the Sanskrit term '*sannidhi*' to describe this energy field that is generated and sustained by the *jnani's* Self-abidance.<sup>8</sup> By amending the verse to '...without conscious volition, caused me to write it', Bhagavan was indicating that it was this *sannidhi* which had empowered Muruganar to compose these verses. This authoritative correction clearly indicates that it was Bhagavan himself who subconsciously inspired and prompted Muruganar to embark on this project and to continue with it for many years.

#### Verse 7:13

This is the final verse of the prefatory section in which Muruganar described how the work had come into existence, and how he had been inspired to record Bhagavan's teachings. The initial draft of this final verse was not composed by Muruganar himself but by someone who is merely described as 'an anonymous admirer'. This anonymous author wrote:

Holding in his heart as the supreme truth the feet of illustrious Ramana, God manifesting in the form of the Guru, [Muruganar revealed] the ambrosial truth of all things. Declare that his name is Mugavai Kanna Murugan of the Bharadwaja lineage.

Mugavai is an alternative rendering of Ramanathapuram, Muruganar's home town, and Kanna is the Tamil version of Krishna, the name of Muruganar's father.

When Bhagavan saw these lines, he crossed out almost all of the original words and replaced them with a verse of his own which read:

<sup>8</sup> See *The Power of the Presence*, part one, pp. 81-2, for an explanation by Bhagavan of how this process works.

He who [recorded and] strung into a garland a few of the Guru's instructions and announced this pre-eminent scripture to the world is Kanna Murugan, who sees through his eye of grace that the essence of all things is only the far-reaching feet of his Lord.

7. **௫. ஆக்கியோன்**  
 வா ன சித்திலபோர் கோளவயாக் கோத்தும்  
 குருமூர்த்த மாண குலமணன் றுளே  
 ம் பதர்ந்திந்  
 பரமார்த்த மாகவுளம பநறிச்—சருவார்த்த  
 மல். வரந்தான் வாக் தலை யாதவடு  
 வண்ணமதாம் பாரத்து வாகமர பானமுகவைக  
 கண்ணமுரு கப்பாக கழவ்

The word rendered as 'pre-eminent scripture' (*paramarttam*) can also be translated as 'Supreme Truth', 'Supreme treasure', or 'Treasure of *jnana*'. Whichever phrase one chooses, it is a supreme accolade given by Bhagavan to this collection of teachings.<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that in the final portion of the verse – 'Murugan, who sees through his eye of grace that the essence of all things is only the far-reaching feet of his Lord' – Bhagavan is confirming that Muruganar is having the experience of seeing everything as the Self. Overall, it is a glowing tribute by Bhagavan to Muruganar and the verses that comprise this 'pre-eminent scripture'.

### The Introduction

Bhagavan made a highly significant editing intervention in the introduction that had been written by the editor and compiler, Sadhu Natanananda. Towards the end of this introduction Sadhu Natanananda had written the following sentence:

In summary, it can be said that this is a work that has come into existence to explain in great detail and in a pristine form Sri Ramana's philosophy and its essential nature [*swarupa*].<sup>10</sup>

சருங்கக்கூறின், ஸ்ரீரமண சித்தாந்தத்தையும் அதன்  
 சொரூபத்தையும் இயல்வடிவிலே விரிவாக விளக்கப்  
 போந்த நூல் இது எனலாம்.

After the penultimate word of this sentence, *idu*, Bhagavan inserted the suffix '*ay*'. By itself the word '*idu*' means 'this', but the addition of this suffix makes a significant difference to the meaning of the verse. In Tamil the addition of this suffix '*ay*' to make the word '*iduvay*' can give two meanings that can be roughly translated as 'this definitely' or 'this alone'.

Let me explain this in more detail because Bhagavan is making an important statement here. If the sentence 'Out of all the books on the shelf this alone is worth reading' was translated into Tamil, the words 'this alone' would be translated by '*iduvay*'. The '*ay*' suffix isolates one item of a group from the rest – here, the one book from the many – and then makes a statement that refers exclusively to that one isolated component. If '*iduvay*' was given the alternative meaning 'this definitely' in the sentence I have just given, the meaning would change slightly to 'this is definitely worth reading'. It is not as absolute

<sup>9</sup> The Tamil version given here, with Bhagavan's handwritten corrections, was not the final draft. A further slight amendment was made to the third line prior to publication to make it conform to the rules of Tamil prosody.

<sup>10</sup> *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, 1939 Tamil edition, p. xvi.

and exclusive as ‘this alone’, but the meaning is substantially the same: one particular book has been given a very high recommendation.

Bhagavan’s interpolation of ‘ay’ after the word ‘idu’ separates *Guru Vachaka Kovai* from all the other books of his teachings (or at least the ones that existed in 1939) and then praises it by saying: ‘[out of all the available books on Sri Ramana’s teachings] this work alone has come into existence to explain in great detail and in a pristine form Sri Ramana’s philosophy and its essential nature’. If the alternative translation of ‘ay’ is used, it would mean, ‘this book has most definitely come into existence to explain in great detail and in a pristine form Sri Ramana’s philosophy and its essential nature’.

Whichever of the two options one takes, Bhagavan’s editorial insertion at this point gives an exceptional and unique imprimatur to this collection of teachings.

### **The Unique Authority of *Guru Vachaka Kovai* in the Ramana Literature**

*Guru Vachaka Kovai* contains the largest collection of Bhagavan’s spoken teachings that was checked and revised by Bhagavan himself during his lifetime. There are other records of his conversations – *Sri Ramana Gita*, *Maharshi’s Gospel*, the talks that precede *Sat Darshana Bhashya* – that Bhagavan went through and edited in some way, but if one adds all these other checked and revised texts together, their total still falls short of the volume of material that appears in *Guru Vachaka Kovai*. Bhagavan was shown the manuscripts that ended up as *Day by Day with Bhagavan* and *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, but he never went through them, pen in hand, as he did with *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, revising the contents to make sure that they conformed to his teachings.

In addition to the sheer volume of the text and the philosophical breadth of its coverage, it is important to note that these *Guru Vachaka Kovai* teachings were recorded in Tamil, the language in which they were originally spoken by Bhagavan. It is an astonishing and little-appreciated fact that while Bhagavan usually spoke Tamil when he answered philosophical questions, virtually all of the people, with the exception of Muruganar, who recorded what he said chose to record his statements in some other language. *Maharshi’s Gospel* and *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, for example, were first published in English, and the Tamil editions that currently exist are translations of these English texts, not original Tamil renderings of the conversations. It was Muruganar alone who succeeded not only in recording a massive corpus of teachings in Tamil, but also inspiring Bhagavan to check, revise, and occasionally completely rewrite the verses.

In an essay he wrote on Muruganar, Sadhu Om made the following remarks about the pre-eminent place of *Guru Vachaka Kovai* in the Ramana literature:

...if anyone wants a single text of Sri Bhagavan’s teachings in which clear expositions of all the various secrets of spiritual wisdom that should be known by the world are gathered together, that one text is *Guru Vachaka Kovai*...

... If we want to verify what the correct teaching of Sri Bhagavan is on any particular subject, the answer will be available in *Ulladu Narpadu*, *Upadesa Undiyar* or *Guru Vachaka Kovai*. Therefore, these three works are the true *Sri Ramana prasthanatraya* [the three fundamental texts of Sri Ramana’s divine revelation] and they are indeed a *prasadam* [blessed gift] of his grace which the world has received through the agency of Sri Muruganar.<sup>11</sup>

This idea, first articulated by Sadhu Om, that *Guru Vachaka Kovai* is a component of the *Sri Ramana prasthanatraya* was endorsed by both Professor K. Swaminathan<sup>12</sup> and by Sri T. N. Venkataraman, the former president of Sri Ramanasramam, in his introduction to Prof. Swaminathan’s translation of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ramana’s Muruganar*, p. 70.

<sup>12</sup> *Ramana’s Muruganar*, p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> *The Garland of Guru’s Sayings*, p. iii. H. Vaidyanathan in his brief article on *Guru Vachaka Kovai* in Ramana’s *Muruganar* (p. 148) makes the same claim.

The highest and most authoritative endorsement of the book comes from Bhagavan himself. As I mentioned earlier in the article, he rewrote verse thirteen in such a way that it declared *Guru Vachaka Kovai* to be a 'pre-eminent scripture', or a 'supreme treasure', and he made a significant alteration to a sentence in the introduction that either emphasised the greatness or the uniqueness of the work:

'... this work alone has come into existence to explain in great detail and in a pristine form Sri Ramana's philosophy and its essential nature.'