

Bhagavan, Manikkavachagar and the *Tiruvachakam*

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Introduction

In the seventh to ninth centuries AD there appeared in South India an upsurge of devotional fervour that completely transformed the religious inclinations and practices of the region. Vaishnava and Saiva bhaktas became infused with a religious spirit that emphasised ecstatic devotion to a personal deity rather than the more sober rites and rituals of vedic Brahmanism. It was both a populist Hindu revolt, since it expressed the people's dissatisfaction with the hierarchies of caste,¹ and a demonstration of contempt for the alien philosophies of Jainism and Buddhism, which had by then permeated large areas of South India.

The movement's leaders were the various saints who toured the countryside singing songs in praise of their personal God. The language of these songs was deliberately simple, for they were intended to be sung by ordinary devotees, either alone or in groups. While it is true that the deities addressed were ones such as Vishnu and Siva, who were prominent components of the North Indian pantheon, the mode of expression and the philosophical content of the poems were unique, being an expression of the indigenous Tamil spirit and culture. This was the first of the great bhakti movements that were to invigorate the Hindu tradition throughout India in the succeeding centuries. It was so successful in transforming the hearts and minds of the South Indian population, one commentator has gone so far as to say that these poet-saints 'sang Buddhism and Jainism out of South India'.²

The Saiva revival of this era owed much to four poet-saints who are often collectively referred to as 'the four' (Nalvar). Appar, the first to emerge, flourished from the end of the sixth century until the middle of the seventh. Tirujnanasambandhar, the next to appear, was a younger contemporary of his. They were followed by Sundaramurti (end of the seventh century until the beginning of the eighth) and Manikkavachagar, whom most people believe lived in the ninth century.

The spontaneous songs of these early Saiva saints were eventually collected and recorded in a series of books called the Tirumurais. The first seven (there are twelve in all) are devoted exclusively to the songs of Tirujnanasambandhar, Appar, and Sundaramurti, which are known as the Tevarams, while the eighth contains Manikkavachagar's two extant works. These twelve Tirumurais, along with the later Meykanda Sastras, became the canonical works of the southern Saiva branch of Hinduism. This system of beliefs and practices is still the most prevalent form of religion in Tamil Nadu.

Though two of Manikkavachagar's works survive and are both included in the Saiva canon, his justly deserved fame and reputation as being one of the foremost Tamil saints and poets rest almost exclusively on the eminence of the Tiruvachakam.

¹ In the *Periyapuramam*, which chronicles the lives of sixty-three of these Saiva bhaktas, at least forty were non-brahmins, and one was an outcaste.

Throughout this article the authors comments will be in italics. The extracts from Sri Ramanasramam books that speak of Manikkavachagar and the translated verses from *Tiruvachakam* and other works will all be in roman type.

² *Hymns to the Dancing Siva*, by Glen Yocum, 1982 ed., p. 40. Adi-Sankaracharya, who taught in South India in the ninth century, successfully vanquished the Jains and the Buddhists in philosophical debates, but at the grass-roots level it was the singing saints who reconverted the masses back to Hinduism.

All devout Saivas are familiar with the major events of the saint's life and most of them would be able to recognise or even repeat many of the verses that comprise the Tiruvachakam. In style it has much in common with the earlier Tevaram poetry of Appar, Jnanasambandar and Sundaramurti, but there are also substantial differences. The Tiruvachakam is a very personal document, for it reveals far more about its author and his varying states of mind than the Tevarams do. It is also more philosophical. Manikkavachagar, being an educated brahmin, quite naturally used technical religious terms to describe his relationship with Siva and the problems he was encountering in his attempts to attain union with Him. This technical vocabulary was elaborated on some centuries later by the Saiva philosophers who formulated and codified the Saiva Siddhanta school of thought. The Tiruvachakam can therefore be viewed as a bridge or link in the development of South Indian religious thought: it is the continuation and the culmination of the bhakti tradition founded by the Tevaram authors, while at the same time it marks the beginning of the Siddhanta philosophical tradition that was to find its ultimate fruition several centuries later in the Meykanda Sastras.

The Tiruvachakam is, and has been for more than a thousand years, one of the most well-known and best-loved works of Tamil devotional literature. It is so highly regarded that extracts from it are chanted every day in many South Indian homes and temples. Portions of the Tiruvachakam were chanted regularly during the early days of Sri Ramanasramam, and on the evening that his mother died in 1922, Ramana Maharshi asked some of the assembled devotees to spend the night chanting the whole work. Kunju Swami, who was present on that occasion, has described what happened:

During the night Sri Bhagavan sat near the place where we had put the Mother's body. Brahmachari Arunachala Swami and I sat with him. Brahmachari Arunachala Swami had originally been a cook in the big temple in town before he renounced the world and became a devotee of Sri Bhagavan. Sri Bhagavan then announced that the *Tiruvachakam* should be chanted. Sri Bhagavan and the devotees took it in turn to read from the book. While we were reading Sri Bhagavan corrected all the mistakes in our reading as and when we made them. In this way we went through the entire *Tiruvachakam* before 4 a.m.³

There were several occasions on which Bhagavan expressed his high opinion of the *Tiruvachakam*. Viswanatha Swami has reported the following incident:

While Sri Bhagavan was living in Virupaksha Cave, devotees requested him to compose a hymn that could be sung when they went out for *bhiksha*. Sri Bhagavan said, 'When there are so many excellent hymns such as the *Tevarams* and the *Tiruvachakam*, where is the need for a new one?'⁴

Muruganar has also recorded Bhagavan's opinion in three of his Padamalai verses:

Manikkavachagar's *Tiruvachakam* expresses in words the exuberant, graceful experience of *Sivam*, which transcends speech.

Tiruvachakam is a work that deserves to be experienced. The meaning of its sweet verses is beyond intellectual knowledge.

The *Tiruvachakam* is a sea of divine honey expressing the God-experience that puts an end to the birth-misery of getting caught in the womb.⁵

³ *The Power of the Presence*, part two, p. 43.

⁴ From Viswanatha Swami's preface to Muruganar's *Aksharamanamai Vritti Urai*, p. i.

⁵ *Padamalai*, p. 355. In the original Tamil text these are verses 1296, 1295, and 1325.

Bhagavan's appreciation was more than intellectual. When he read out portions of the text for the benefit of visitors, he was sometimes moved to tears by Manikkavachagar's experiences and by his poetic expression of the divine love he felt for Siva:

At my request he [Bhagavan] recited certain lines from the composition of the saint Manikkavachagar where the author spoke of the condition of the soul melted in love; hardly had the Maharshi pronounced a few lines when there was a brilliance in his face. He who rarely expresses in any outward form his inner emotion could not restrain a few silent tears. A slanting ray of the morning sun from the hillside made the scene still more vivid. A peace that passeth all understanding pervaded the whole atmosphere. For more than an hour there was perfect silence. It looked as if one of the fresco paintings of Ajanta had come to life!⁶

A similar incident took place on June 22nd, 1939, when Bhagavan announced that it was Manikkavachagar's Guru puja or aradhana day. Having made the announcement, Bhagavan 'sat in deep silence for so long that the sanctity of the occasion sank into our souls'.⁷

Bhagavan was not alone in his tearful response to hearing or reading Manikkavachagar's words. In the thousand or so years that have passed since the verses were composed, the words of the Tiruvachakam have moved successive generations of devotees in the same way. Sivaprakasa Swamigal, a distinguished Tamil poet and saint who composed Sonasaila Malai, a hundred-verse poem in praise of Arunachala, summed up the feelings of those who had been stirred by this work when he wrote:

If you were to ask which was the more glorious:
the words of the *Vedas*,
which are said to be
the utterances of the three-eyed One [Siva],
He who is the universal Cause,
and who has a body that is shared
with his beautiful bejewelled Consort,

or

the honeyed words that sprang
from the flower-like mouth
of Vadavur's Lord [Manikkavachagar],
who extolled the greatness of Siva,
the Supreme Being,

[this is how you would know:]

here upon this crowded earth
we have never observed
that the hearts of those present
soften and melt,
whilst tears flood their eyes,
when the *Vedas* are chanted.
Yet, if the *Tiruvachakam* is recited but once,
there are none whatsoever
whose hearts will not melt and flow,
be they hard as granite blocks,
whose eyes will not fill up with tears,

⁶ *Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, 'The Vedantic Tradition in Sri Ramana Maharshi', by Swami Siddheswarananda, 1995 ed., p. 44.

⁷ *Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, by G. V. Subbaramayya, 1967 ed., p. 57.

like water seeping into a hole
dug in the wet sand,
who will not tremble and quiver,
the hair of their body standing on end,
and who will not become His devotees!⁸

Manikkavachagar's life and experiences

The oldest record of Manikkavachagar's life comes from the Tiruvilaiyatal Puranam, a text that narrates the divine events that are associated with the Madurai Temple. Four chapters from this work, fifty-eight to sixty-one, are devoted to the story of Manikkavachagar. When Suri Nagamma professed ignorance of the details of Manikkavachagar's life, Bhagavan responded by giving a detailed summary of the events that the Tiruvilaiyatal Puranam has recorded:

Bhagavan: Manikkavachagar was born in a village called Vaadavur (Vaatapuri) in Pandya Desha. Because of that people used to call him Vaadavurar [The man from Vaadavur]. He was put to school very early. He read all the religious books, absorbed the lessons therein, and became noted for his devotion to Siva, as also his kindness to living beings. Having heard about him, the Pandya king sent for him and made him his prime minister and conferred on him the title of Thennavan Brahmarayan, i.e., 'Premier among Brahmins of the South'. Though he performed the duties of a minister with tact and integrity, he had no desire for material happiness. His mind was always absorbed in spiritual matters. Feeling convinced that for the attainment of *jnana*, the grace of a Guru was essential, he kept on making enquiries about it.

Once the Pandya king ordered the minister to purchase some good horses and bring them to him. As he was already in search of a Guru, Manikkavachagar felt that it was a good opportunity and started with his retinue carrying with him the required amount of gold. As his mind was intensely seeking a Guru, he visited all the temples on the way. While doing so he reached a village called Tirupperundurai. Having realised the maturity of the mind of Manikkavachagar, Parameswara [Siva, had] assumed the form of a schoolteacher and for about a year before that had been teaching poor children in the village seated on a street pial near the temple. He was taking his meal in the house of his pupils every day by turn. He ate only cooked green vegetables. He was anxiously awaiting the arrival of Manikkavachagar. By the time Manikkavachagar actually came, Iswara assumed the shape of a *Siddha Purusha* [realised soul] with many *sannyasis* around him and was seated under a kurundai tree within the compound of the temple. Vaadavurar came to the temple, had *darshan* of the Lord in it, and while going round the temple by way of *pradakshina*, saw the *Siddha Purusha*. He was thrilled at the sight, tears welled up in his eyes and his heart jumped with joy. Spontaneously his hands went up his head in salutation and he fell down at the feet of the Guru like an uprooted tree. Then he got up and prayed that he, a humble being, may also be accepted as a disciple. Having come down solely to bestow grace on him, Iswara, by his look, immediately gave him *jnana upadesa* [initiation into true knowledge]. That *upadesa* took deep roots in his heart, and gave him indescribable happiness. With folded hands and with joyful tears, he went round the Guru by way of *pradakshina*, offered salutations, stripped himself of all his official dress and ornaments, placed them near the Guru and stood before him with only a kaupina on. As he felt like singing in praise of the Guru, he sang some devotional songs, which were like gems. Iswara was pleased, and addressing him as 'Manikkavachagar' [meaning 'one whose speech is gems'] ordered him to remain there itself worshipping him. Then he vanished.⁹

Manikkavachagar's experiences with Siva, his Guru, left him in a state of irrepressible

⁸ 'Nalvar Nanmani Malai', v. 4. All the translations of poems that have no published references were done by the authors of this article.

⁹ *Letters from and Recollections of Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, pp. 5-7.

ecstasy. Many of his songs described this momentous encounter, but there was one particular sequence of lines from the poem 'Tiruvandappahudi' that Bhagavan particularly appreciated. Devaraja Mudaliar has reported¹⁰ that Bhagavan read out lines 149-182 to give him 'an idea of the supreme bliss of Self-realisation'.

In Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, Talk 215, it is recorded that Bhagavan read from G. U. Pope's English translation the Tiruvachakam. In this report it merely states that Bhagavan read 'stanzas describing the intense feeling of bhakti as thrilling the whole frame, melting the flesh and bones, etc.'. Though the exact reference is not given, Viswanatha Swami, in the Tamil edition of Talks, states that it is this portion which is being referred to:

Clad graciously in a brahmin's glorious form,
He summoned me and graciously ruled me.
At once my very bones melted through undying love.
I called aloud, roaring, roaring like the heaving sea,
rose to my feet, collapsed again all in a daze,
rolling over, wailing,
raving like a madman, raging like a drunk,
frightening those who saw, amazing those who heard,
in a state of total derangement
that even a rutting elephant would find unbearable.
Then, when I could bear it no longer,
he fashioned my limbs with a delightful sweetness,
like honey fresh from the bough.
Just as, with the flame lit by his beauteous smile,
He brought low the three cities of his demon foes,¹¹
He did that day, without exception,
destroy in the great fire of His grace
the humble [bodily] dwellings of us His devotees.
To me He became as a *nelli* fruit¹² in the palm of the hand.
Blessings upon You; I can find no words to express it!
Is this justice? I cannot endure it, dog that I am.
What You have done to me, I do not understand.
For pity, this is death itself.
This grace You have granted me, I cannot comprehend!
I have drunk of it, yet still I am not sated.
I have swallowed it down, yet I cannot tolerate it!
Like waves upon the rich, cool Sea of Milk,
like the ocean when the moon is at the full,
in a way that cannot be described,
He filled my heart to overflowing,
distilling and collecting nectar
in my body's every pore.

¹⁰ *My Recollections of Bhagavan Sri Ramana*, p. 52.

¹¹ A reference to a famous puranic incident in which Siva destroyed the three cities (the Tripura) of the *asuras* after a protracted war between the *devas* and the *asuras*, who are, respectively, the good and the demonic inhabitants of the spirit realms. In this war the *asuras*' cities were protected by a boon that stated that the cities could only be destroyed if they were all hit by a single arrow. When the *devas* appealed to Siva, he intervened on their behalf and destroyed the three cities with a single arrow. In a variation on this theme, Siva destroys the three cities with a single smile. This is the version that Manikkavachagar seems to prefer.

¹² 'As clear as the *nelli* in the palm of the hand' is a well-known proverb that means that something is clear and obvious. In this context it means that Manikkavachagar had an incontrovertible experience of Siva.

Within the body of this cur, taking up His abode,
 He caused ambrosia sweet to flow
 through every conduit of my sinful fleshly form,
 sending fulsome streams of wondrous nectar
 rushing up through the hollow of every bone.
 Taking my melting heart and making it one [with Him],
 He made for me a form saturated [in His grace].
 Like an elephant inspecting a field of bright sweet sugar cane,
 He came at last, even to me, and transformed me into pure being.
 His nature neither Mal nor Brahma knows,¹³
 yet with grace He transformed me into supreme ambrosia,
 making the pure honey of His compassion merge with me.¹⁴

Manikkavachagar's path to Siva was clearly through love and devotion. Bhagavan confirmed this when he echoed a well-known statement that the four saints (Jnanasambandhar, Appar, Sundaramurti and Manikkavachagar) had differing relationships with Siva: Jnanasambandhar saw himself as the son of Siva, Appar as his servant, Sundaramurti as his friend, and Manikkavachagar as his beloved.¹⁵

Bhagavan was once questioned about some of the more extreme manifestations of devotional ecstasy. In his interesting and informative replies he mentioned both his own and Manikkavachagar's experiences:

Devotee: Horripilation, sobbing voice, joyful tears, etc., are mentioned in *Atma Vidya Vilasa* and other works. Are these found in *samadhi*, or before, or after?

Bhagavan: All these are symptoms of exceedingly subtle modes of mind [*vruttis*]. Without duality they cannot remain. *Samadhi* is perfect peace where these cannot find [a] place. After emerging from *samadhi*, the remembrance of the state gives rise to these symptoms. In *bhakti marga* [the path of devotion] these are the precursors to *samadhi*.

Question: Are they not so in the path of *jnana*?

Bhagavan: May be. There is no definiteness about it. It depends on the nature of the individual. Individuality entirely lost, these cannot find a place. Even the slightest trace of it being present, these symptoms become manifest.

Manikkavachagar and other saints have spoken of these symptoms. They say tears rush forth involuntarily and irrepressibly. Though aware of tears they are unable to repress them. I had the same experience when I was staying at Virupaksha Cave.¹⁶

Bhagavan seems to be saying in his first reply that such extreme symptoms are only possible if one still has a mind and a subtle sense of individuality, but in his final reply he makes it clear that symptoms such as spontaneous and uncontrollable crying can also break out in jnanis.

Though Bhagavan does not make it clear in his answer which specific verses of the Tiruvachakam he was alluding to when he made these remarks, he may have been thinking of the following lines in which Manikkavachagar describes the whole gamut of extreme emotional behaviour that God-intoxicated devotees indulge in:

As *maya's* manifold delusion
 surrounds them all about,

¹³ A reference to Brahma and Vishnu's (Mal's) inability to find the beginning or end of Siva when he manifested as a column of light, the column that He later condensed into the form of Arunachala.

¹⁴ 'Tiruvandappahudi', lines 148-82.

¹⁵ *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, 26th January 1947.

¹⁶ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 372.

not succumbing to such errors,
 not wavering from their fixed resolve,
 they worship, melting
 like wax before a flame;
 they weep with body trembling;
 they dance, cry out, sing and praise.
 Crocodile jaws and an ignorant woman¹⁷
 hold on and don't let go, they say.
 They [these devotees] hold on tightly
 in love's true and unrelenting sway
 like a spike that's driven
 into fresh, green wood.
 As love's flood grows higher,
 they heave like the ocean's swell,
 minds withering away, their bodies
 quivering with delight.
 When the world calls them 'Possessed!'
 and makes a laughing-stock of them,
 they remain unabashed, wearing
 their countrymen's abusive words
 like a jewelled ornament.
 To hold onto and attain final liberation,
 free of all sophistry, knowing naught,
 is, for them, the miracle of the Supreme.
 As a cow yearns for its calf,
 they bellow and become agitated.
 Not even in their dreams
 do they think of any other God.
 Nor, thinking it of no account,
 do they spurn the majesty
 of the unattainable supreme One,
 who came in grace upon the earth
 in the *jnana* Guru's form.
 Like a shadow that knows
 no separation [from its object],
 they follow behind Your twin holy feet,
 caring not in what direction [they go].
 As bones soften and dissolve,
 they melt in yearning, and melt again,
 as love's river overflows its course.
 Stammering, their hair on end,
 all senses focussed on the One,
 'My Lord!' they weeping cry.
 The lotus of their heart blossoms,
 as hands close like a flower bud.
 Teardrops spring forth,
 and ecstasy shows in their eyes,
 as in them daily flourishes,
 the love that never dies.
 Praise be to Him who, as a mother,

¹⁷ Two examples taken from Tamil idioms.

nurtures such as these.¹⁸

Bhagavan mentioned earlier that spontaneous and uncontrollable weeping could occur in jnanis. He also sometimes said, as the following story by Devaraja Mudaliar reveals, that crying for God could be an effective sadhana:

... in the early days Bhagavan encouraged me whenever I was singing with deep feeling. He would have such a look on his face, with his radiant eyes directed towards me, that I would be held spellbound, and not infrequently, at some especially moving words in the songs, tears would come and I would be obliged to stop reciting for one or two minutes. Bhagavan told me that such weeping is good, quoting from *Tiruvachakam*, 'By crying for You [God], one can get You'.

I recollect here that Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa once said, 'If you will only cry for God with a tenth of the fervour with which you cry for your wife and children, you will see God in no time'. It was in connection with Mrs Eleanor Pauline Noye, an American devotee, that Bhagavan quoted to me the above line from *Tiruvachakam*. She had contributed an article on Bhagavan to *The Golden Jubilee Souvenir* published by the Asramam in 1946 in which she mentioned that, when after a stay of about two months with Bhagavan she had to return to America and was weeping inconsolably, Bhagavan was kind enough to assure her in so many words (a thing very unusual with him, from my fairly long contact with him) that she was not to grieve and that he would be with her wherever she might go. She writes in the *Souvenir*, 2nd edition, page 362, 'Bhagavan said, "I will always be with you wherever you go".'

It was a peculiarity with this devotee that she would often weep before Bhagavan when she was in the hall. Referring to this I told Bhagavan that Mrs Noye had captured Bhagavan by means of her tears. It was then that Bhagavan quoted the line from *Tiruvachakam* [given in the next quotation] and asked me if I did not know it.¹⁹

False am I; my heart too is false,
and my love also is false.
Yet, bound by tainted karma,
I can win You by crying for You.
Honey! Nectar! Essence of the sugar cane!
Sweet Lord! Grant to me in grace, your devotee,
the path that leads to union with Thee!²⁰

In the summary of Manikkavachagar's life that Bhagavan gave earlier, the final incident that was narrated was the disappearance of Siva. Bhagavan now describes what happened next:

Bhagavan: Fully convinced that He who had blessed him was no other than Iswara Himself, Manikkavachagar was stricken with unbearable grief and fell on the ground weeping and saying, 'Oh, my Lord! Why did you go away leaving me here?'

The villagers were very much surprised at this and began a search for the person who was till then working in their village as a schoolteacher, but could not find him anywhere. Then they realised that it was the Lord's *leela*. Some time later, Manikkavachagar got over his grief, decided to act according to the injunctions of Iswara, sent away his retinue to Madurai, spent all the gold with him on the temple and stayed there alone.

Hearing all that had happened, the king immediately sent an order to Manikkavachagar to return to Madurai. But how could he go to the king without the horses? If he wanted to purchase them then, where was the money? Not knowing what to do, he prayed to Lord Siva for help. That

¹⁸ 'Potritiruvahaval', lines 58-85.

¹⁹ *My Recollections of Bhagavan Sri Ramana*, pp. 49-50.

²⁰ 'Tirucatakam', 9.10.

night Lord Siva appeared to him in a dream, gave him a priceless gem and said, 'Give this to the king and tell him the horses will come on the day of the Moola star in the month of Sravana'.

Startled at that vision he opened his eyes but the Lord was not there. Manikkavachagar was however overjoyed at what had happened. He put on his official dress and went to Madurai. He gave the gem to the king, discussed the auspicious time when the horses would be arriving and then was anxiously waiting for the day. He did not however resume his official duties. Though his body was in Madurai, his mind was in Tirupperundurai. He was merely biding his time.

The Pandyan king, however, sent his spies to Perundurai and found out that there were no horses there meant for the king and that all the money meant for their purchase had been spent in the renovation of the temple. So he immediately put Manikkavachagar in prison, making him undergo all the trials and tribulations of jail life.

Meanwhile, as originally arranged, on the day of the Moola star, Iswara assumed the guise of a horseman, transformed the jackals of the jungle into horses, and brought them to the king. The king was astonished at this, took delivery of the horses and according to the advice of the keeper of the stables, had them tied up at the same place where all his other horses were kept. He thanked the horseman profusely, and after sending him away with several presents, released Manikkavachagar from jail with profuse apologies.

The same night the new horses changed into their real forms, killed all the horses in the stables, ate them, created similar havoc in the city, and fled. The king grew very angry, branded Manikkavachagar as a trickster and put him back in jail. Soon, in accordance with Iswara's orders, the waters of the River Vaigai rose in floods and the whole of the city of Madurai was under water. Alarmed at that, the king assembled all the people and ordered them to raise the bunds of the river. For the purpose, he ordered that every citizen should do a certain amount of work with a threat of dire consequences should he fail to do his allotted work.

There was in Madurai an old woman by name Pittuvani Ammaiyyar. She was a pious devotee of Lord Siva. She was living alone earning her livelihood by daily preparing and selling pittu [sweetened powdered rice pressed into conical shapes]. She had no one to do her allotted work on the river bund nor had she the money to hire a person to do it. She was therefore greatly worried and cried, 'Iswara! What shall I do?'

Seeing her helplessness, Iswara came there in the guise of a cooly with a spade on his shoulder and called out, 'Granny, granny, do you want a cooly?'

'Yes,' she said, 'but I don't have even a paise in my hand to pay you. What to do?'

He said, 'I do not want any money and would be satisfied if you gave me some portion of pittu to eat. I shall then do the allotted work on the river bund.'

Pleased with that offer, she began making pittu but they did not come out in the full shape but were broken. Surprised at this she gave all the bits to the cooly. He ate as many of them as he could and went away, saying that he would attend to the bund-raising work. Surprisingly, the dough with the old woman remained intact [i.e. the same amount] even though she had prepared and given bits of the pittu to the cooly. The cooly went to the work spot but instead of doing the work, lay down there idly, standing in the way of others doing their work.

The king went round to inspect the progress of the work and found that the portion allotted to Ammaiyyar remained unattended to. On enquiry, his servants told him all the pranks of that cooly.

The king got infuriated, called the cooly and said, 'Instead of doing the allotted work, you are lying down and singing'.

So saying, he hit the cooly on the back with a cane he had in his hand. The blow recoiled not only on the king himself but on all living beings there and all of them suffered the pain on that account. The king immediately realised that the person hit by him was Parameswara himself in the guise of a cooly. The king stood aghast.

Parameswara vanished and soon a voice from the sky said, 'O King! Manikkavachagar is my beloved devotee. I myself did all this to show you his greatness. Seek his protection.'

Soon after hearing that voice, the king went to see Manikkavachagar and on the way he stepped into the house of Pittuvani to see her. By that time she had already got into a *vimanam* [a

heavenly chariot] and was on her way to Kailash. The king was greatly surprised and saluted her and from there he went straight to Manikkavachagar and fell at his feet. Manikkavachagar lifted him with great respect, and enquired of his welfare.

The king entreatingly said, 'Please forgive me and rule this kingdom yourself'.

Manikkavachagar, looking at the king, said with kindness, 'Appah! [a term of endearment]. As I have already agreed to serve the Lord, I cannot be bothered with the problems of ruling a kingdom. Please do not mistake me. Rule the kingdom, looking after the welfare of the people. Henceforth you will have nothing to worry about.' So saying, smilingly, he put on the dress of a *sannyasin*, and went about visiting holy places, singing the praises of Siva.²¹

Manikkavachagar's visit to Tiruvannamalai

Manikkavachagar had been specially commissioned by Siva to tour the Tamil region and sing songs in His praise. One of the places he visited was Tiruvannamalai, which even then (in the 9th century) was a major Saiva pilgrimage centre. The Tiruvadavuradigal Puranam, a colourful and poetic retelling of Manikkavachakar's life, includes the following verses that describe his visit:

After worshipping at that shrine [Tiru-Venney-Nallur],
with love in his heart he departed,
following the righteous path,
passing through the middle lands,²²
traversing tall forests and mountains,
where lions and fearsome elephants dwelt,
until he drew near to enduring Arunai's city.²³
When he saw the palaces and *gopurams*,
the strong walls, decorated with jewels and pearls,
the great gateways festooned with banners,
towering up in the midst
of a cool densely wooded grove,
in a forest of tall areca trees,
he joyfully made obeisance,
experiencing great bliss.

'You [Siva] who abide in the form of a mountain
which appeared on that day as a column of flame
for the two to seek!
Blissful life which fills our hearts!
Thus did he worship the Supreme Mountain Lord,
receiving His grace, before proceeding forth
to enter Arunai's prosperous city.

Leaving behind the groves, the city walls,
the streets decorated with many beautiful banners,
and the various shrines of the gods,
and taking the path which led to the holy presence,
he bowed down before the temple of the One
who wears in His locks a kondrai garland,
datura flowers, the moon and the snake,

²¹ *Letters from and Recollections of Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, pp. 7-10.

²² The territory between the Chola and Tondai lands.

²³ Tiruvannamalai.

and then did he perceive the form of Him
who on that day had enslaved him.²⁴

‘Praise be to the dark-throated One
who swallowed the poison halahala
when Brahma, Vishnu and the rest of the gods,
crying out in distress, appealed to Him for protection!
Praise be to the Mountain of cool ambrosia,
mixed with the milk of green-hued Unnamulai,²⁵
which men and gods alike drink down
to cure the overpowering malady of their birth and death!

‘Praise be to the great ocean of grace of Him
who placed His feet upon my head,
the feet which tall Mal could not see,
though he burrowed deep into the earth
in the form of a powerful boar!
Praise be to the Mountain of burnished gold,
at whose side sits the slender
green-hued form of Unnamulai,
who is the earth’s protectress!

‘Praise be to Him who granted His grace
to the victorious Durga,
when She worshipped Him and begged Him
to absolve Her from the sin
of killing the powerful buffalo-headed demon!²⁶
Praise be to the beauteous Lord Annamalai,
who came to me on that day and held me in His sway!’
Thus worshipping and praising the Lord
out of heart-felt love,
he dwelt there for some days.

It was the month of Margazhi,²⁷
when, in the ten days before the ardra asterism,²⁸
the beautiful maidens go from household to noble household
calling each other out in the early dawn,
just as the darkness is dispersing,
and, banding together, go to bathe in the holy tank.

On observing their noble qualities
he sang the immortal hymn ‘Tiruvembavai’
which is composed as if sung by the maidens themselves.
Later, seeing them dance and sing

²⁴ This line has been taken by some people to mean that Manikkavachagar had a vision of Siva in the Arunachaleswara Temple. T. M. P. Mahadevan in his *Ten Saints of India* (1971 ed., p. 55) has followed this interpretation.

²⁵ The local name of Siva’s consort in Tiruvannamalai.

²⁶ The story of Durga killing the buffalo-headed demon Mahishasura appears in the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*.

²⁷ The month of Margazhi runs from mid-December to mid-January in the western calendar.

²⁸ In the Hindu calendar there is a cycle of twenty-seven days each month. Each day is named after a particular star. Ardra is one of these star days.

as they played the pretty game ‘Ammanai’,
he composed the song ‘Ammanai’ in the same manner.²⁹

*As the final verse in this sequence indicates, Manikkavachagar composed two of the Tiruvachakam poems, ‘Tiruvembavai’ and ‘Ammanai’, on his visit to Tiruvannamalai. There is a tradition in Tiruvannamalai that both poems were composed while Manikkavachagar was doing pradakshina of Arunachala. A small temple on the pradakshina road in the village of Adinannamalai is supposed to mark the spot where the two poems were composed and sung. Bhagavan confirmed the validity of this tradition when he told Suri Nagamma: ‘He [Manikkavachagar] then stood at that particular place and addressing Arunagiri [Arunachala] sang the songs “Tiruvembavai” and “Ammanai”’.*³⁰

There is a festival in winter in which devotees go to their Siva temple very early in the morning to sing songs to Siva in order to wake him up. In ‘Tiruvembavai’ young girls move from house to house, waking up their friends, and encouraging them to come to the temple to perform this rite. Though, ostensibly, it is merely a poem about young girls encouraging each other to go and worship Siva, their trips to the temple are interpreted to be emblematic of the soul’s journey towards union with Siva. It is thus a poem which encourages enthusiasm for the ultimate pilgrimage that culminates in the experience of Siva. There are also more fanciful interpretations that see in its lines various allegories for the Saiva view on how the world is brought into being.

The ‘Tiruvembavai’ is one of Manikkavachagar’s most famous poems. Indeed, judging by the number of commentaries that have been written on it and from the number of meetings that are held to expound its meaning, it can justly be regarded as one of the most famous poems ever written in Tamil. Part of its fame can be attributed to its mystical obscurity, which has inevitably prompted a large number of differing explanations, but one cannot ignore the contribution made in recent times by the former Sankaracharya of Kanchipuram, Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swami. The poem was a particular favourite of his, and he did much to encourage public awareness of it. Sri G. Vanmikanathan, who was personally encouraged to write commentaries on the Tiruvachakam by the Sankaracharya, has written that, each year, in the Tamil month of Margazhi, the Tiruvembavai poem is sung throughout the length and breadth of the Tamil-speaking world and ‘conferences and meetings in hundreds are held in that period to expound it’.³¹ Now that the Sankaracharya has passed away, the meetings are far fewer, but the poem still remains a favourite of millions of devotees, and it is still widely recited in the early morning in the month of Margazhi. During Bhagavan’s lifetime there was a special early morning parayana during Margazhi when devotees chanted ‘Tiruvembavai’ and other poems of Manikkavachagar.

Though it has a distinguished place in Tamil literary history, and a strong local connection, there is only one recorded instance of Bhagavan citing a portion to a devotee.³²

Even as the gems that thickly cluster
upon the crowns of gods on high,
when they bow down, will lose their lustre
before the lotus feet of Lord Annamalai,
likewise the sun, with bright-eyed gaze
dispels the darkness with his rays,
making stars flee, their cool light fade.
Thus does He [Siva] stand before us

²⁹ From *Tiruvadavuradigal Puranam*, ‘Tiruvambala Sarukkam’, vv. 376-384, by Katavulmamunivar. This text was written several centuries after the *Tiruvilaiyatal Puranam*, the source that Bhagavan earlier utilised to summarise the main events of Manikkavachagar’s life.

³⁰ *Letters from and Recollections of Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, 1992 ed., p. 2.

³¹ *Pathway to God through the Tiruvaachakam*, by G. Vanmikanathan, pp. 217-218.

³² *My Recollections of Bhagavan Sri Ramana*, by Devaraja Mudaliar, p. 52.

as woman, as man, as androgyne,
as the space that co-exists with the effulgent sun and moon,
as earth, yet from all these separate,
ambrosia to the eye made manifest.
So sing you then of His holy feet, O Maid,
and in the flowery flood, plunging, bathe!
*El or empaavai!*³³

The young girl who is addressed is being encouraged to go to Siva, sing His praises, and merge in His feet. The final line, which has no particular meaning, is generally held to be a cry made in children's games of that era.

*Suri Nagamma has reported that Ramaswami Pillai once recited this verse to Bhagavan at the end of the usual Tamil parayana. Bhagavan had wanted to get up and leave, but Ramaswami Pillai knew that he could probably detain Bhagavan for a few extra minutes since he knew that this was one of his favourite verses.*³⁴

Bhagavan told Devaraja Mudaliar that he particularly appreciated the line in this verse which states that Arunachala-Siva is 'ambrosia to the eye made manifest'. Devaraja Mudaliar has also reported that Bhagavan also liked a very similar phrase that appeared in 'Potritiruvahaval':

Annamalai, our Father,
praise be to you!
Ocean of nectar that delights our eyes,
praise be to you!³⁵

Tiruvachakam references in Bhagavan's replies to devotees

When Bhagavan replied to devotees' questions, he sometimes illustrated the point he was trying to make by quoting extracts from the Tiruvachakam. In this section we have put together all the instances we could find, and prepared new translations of all the lines that Bhagavan referred to:

(1)

[A young man asked] 'It is said that a *jnani* does not have happiness or sorrows, bodily ailments or the like; Sundarar and Appar are reported to have jumped with joy when they had a vision of God. Even Ramakrishna Paramahansa is reported to have grieved terribly when he did not get a vision of the Holy Mother and to have gone into ecstasies when he did get a vision. Not only that; when Ramakrishna Paramahansa had some bodily ailment, he used to cry out for Mother. What does it mean? Do *jnanis* have happiness and sorrow?'

Bhagavan answered him, 'You say all that in relation to the body, don't you? It is not possible to judge a *jnani* by his bodily ailments. Manikkavachagar sang a hymn the purport of which is, "O Iswara, you have showered on me your blessings even before I asked for them. How kind of you! Even so why is it I do not feel grieved? Is my heart made of stone? My eyes do not get wet. Are they made of wood? Not only with these two eyes, but I wish that my whole body were full of eyes so that I could weep with them. I would then be very happy. I wish my heart would melt and become watery so that it could become integrated with you." That is the purport. But then is that grief real grief? Some people give vent to their happiness by loudly expressing it when they get a

³³ 'Tiruvembavai', verse 18.

³⁴ *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, 13th December 1946.

³⁵ Both of the Mudaliar citations come from *My Recollections of Bhagavan Sri Ramana*, p. 52. The third and fourth lines of the 'Potritiruvahaval' translation (line 150 in the original poem) are the ones that Bhagavan liked. The previous two lines (149 in the original) merely give the context.

vision of God, and some shed tears of joy. It was the same with Ramakrishna Paramahansa. “Mother, how kind of you! How merciful!” he used to say and weep, and sometimes he used to laugh. Anyway, if we want to know about his real state, we should first know about our own state,’ said Bhagavan.³⁶

‘You upon whose spreading, matted locks
Ganga’s flooding waters downward plunge!
Rider on the Bull! Lord of Heaven’s Host!’
No sooner do they hear these words, Your devotees,
than, melting, gasping, thirsting in their hearts,
they tumble, like torrents rushing down a mountainside,
to stand at last in expectation of Your grace.
Yet I it was, [not them], You came to rule!
O my Father, still this body does not all heart become,
and melt from sole of foot to crown of head,
nor transformed all into eyes, does it shed
a flood unstoppable of tears.
Truly, in one of evil karma such as I,
the heart is stone, the eyes, two knots of wood.’³⁷

(2)

Mr B. C. Das, the physics lecturer, asked, ‘Contemplation is possible only with control of mind and control can be accomplished only by contemplation. Is it not a vicious circle?’

Bhagavan: Yes, they are interdependent. They must go on side by side. Practice and dispassion bring about the result gradually. Dispassion is practised to check the mind from being projected outward; practice is to keep it turned inward. There is a struggle between control and contemplation. It is going on constantly within. Contemplation will in due course be successful.

Devotee: How to begin? Your grace is needed for it

Bhagavan: Grace is always there. ‘Dispassion cannot be acquired, nor realisation of the truth, nor inherence in the Self, in the absence of the Guru’s grace,’ the Master quoted.

Practice is necessary. It is like training a roguish bull confined to his stall by tempting him with luscious grass and preventing him from straying.

Then the Master read out a stanza from *Tiruvachakam* which is an address to the mind, saying, ‘O humming bee [namely, mind]! Why do you take the pains of collecting tiny specks of honey from innumerable flowers? There is one from whom you can have the whole storehouse of honey by simply thinking or seeing or speaking of Him. Get within and hum to Him [*hrimkara*].’³⁸

Do not sip the nectar,
tiny as a millet seed
found in any flower,
but speed to that mystic dancer
and hum the praise of Him, King Bee,
He who, whenever we think of Him,
whenever we behold Him,
whenever we speak of Him,
perpetually pours forth the honeyed bliss

³⁶ *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, 4th April 1948.

³⁷ ‘Tirucatakam’, 3.1.

³⁸ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 220.

that melts all our bones to the core.³⁹

(3)

Bhagavan: These questions [about seeing Siva in visions] arise because you have limited the Self to the body; only then the ideas of within and without, of the subject and the object, arise. The objective visions have no intrinsic value. Even if they are everlasting, they cannot satisfy the person. Uma has Siva always with Her. Both together form Ardhanariswara. Yet she wanted to know Siva in His true nature. She made *tapas*. In her *dhyana* she saw a bright light. She thought, 'This cannot be Siva for it is within the compass of my vision. I am greater than this light.' So she resumed her *tapas*. Stillness prevailed. She then realised the BE-ing is Siva in His true nature.

Muruganar cited Appar's stanza:

'To remove my darkness and give me light, Thy grace must work through ME only.'

Sri Bhagavan mentioned Sri Manikkavachagar's: 'We do *bhajans* and the rest. But we have not seen nor heard of those who had seen Thee.'

'One cannot see God and yet retain individuality. The seer and the seen unite into one Being. There is no cogniser nor cognition, nor the cognised. All merge into one Supreme Siva only!'⁴⁰

Apart from the claims of the learned ones
who say: 'In all the elements You dwell!'
who dance and sing: 'You come not, neither do You go!'
we have neither known nor heard of anyone
who has seen You or has known You.
King of Perunturai, that cool rice fields surround!
You whom even thought is powerless to reach!
You who come before us, abolishing our flaws,
subjecting us to Your compassion's rule, our Lord,
Arise from Your couch, in grace, come forth!⁴¹

(4)

Devaraja Mudaliar: Bhagavan would frequently refer to the seventh stanza [of 'Koyil Tirupatikam'], especially to the line 'Approaching and approaching, getting reduced into an atom, and finally becoming one [with the Absolute]' and also to the tenth stanza.⁴²

There you stood, Your nature manifest,
granting me this day Your grace,
rising like a sun within my heart,
driving out the darkness of ignorance.
My thoughts upon that nature dwelt
till thoughts there were no more.
There is nothing else other than You.
Approaching and approaching,

³⁹ 'Tirukottumbi', v. 3. Devaraja Mudaliar has also noted (*My Recollections of Bhagavan Sri Ramana* p. 52) that Bhagavan spoke very highly of the sentiments expressed in this verse.

⁴⁰ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 450.

⁴¹ 'Tirupalliezhuchi', verse 5.

⁴² *My Recollections of Bhagavan Sri Ramana*, p. 52. Muruganar used the same image to describe the way that Bhagavan eroded his own ego: 'Radiant *Padam* [Bhagavan] destroyed my ego, demolishing it over and over again. It wore it down and down, smaller and smaller, to the size of an atom, until it became one with itself.' See *Padamalai*, p. 349. Bhagavan also mentioned the first part of this verse when he was speaking to G. V. Subbaramayya. See *Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, 1967 ed., p. 96.

I became worn down to an atom,
then worn away till I was one with Him.
Hail Siva, dwelling in Holy Perunturai!
There is nothing that You are,
yet without You nothing is!
Who indeed can know You?⁴³

The same verse was also mentioned in the following discussion:

Bhagavan continued to speak of the dvaitism of the Vaishnavites and quoted the Nammalvar song beginning ‘*Yaane ennai ...*,’ the gist of which is: ‘Not knowing myself, I went about saying “I” and “mine”. Then I discovered that “I” is “You” and “mine” was “Yours,” O God.’

He [Bhagavan] said, ‘This is clear *advaita* but these Vaishnavites would give it some interpretation to make it accord with their feeling of duality. They hold that they must exist and God must exist, but how is that possible? It seems that they must all remain forever doing service in Vaikunta, but how many of them are to do service, and where would there be room for all the Vaishnavites?’

Bhagavan said this laughing, and then after a pause he added, ‘On the other hand *advaita* does not mean that a man must always sit in *samadhi* and never engage in action. Many things are necessary to keep up the life of the body, and action can never be avoided. Nor is *bhakti* ruled out in *advaita*. Sankara is rightly regarded as the foremost exponent of *advaita*, and yet look at the number of shrines he visited (action) and the devotional songs he wrote.’

Bhagavan then gave further quotations from the eighth ‘Decad’ of *Thiruvoymozhi* to show that some of the Vaishnavite Alvars had clearly endorsed *advaita*. He particularly emphasised the third stanza where it says: ‘I was lost in Him or in That’ and the fifth which is very like the *Tiruvachakam* stanza that says the ego got attenuated more and more and was extinguished in the Self.⁴⁴

To attain through His grace, He who is unique among those who are elevated in *jnana*, I established Him in my consciousness. That too was due to His sweet grace. To gain the *jnana* that the mind, the *prana*, the body and the rest of the [apparently] indestructible entities are flawed, I crawled strenuously to the very end, till my ego was extinguished in Him.

Having realised myself the one enduring [reality], there is nothing in its attribute-free subtle nature for anyone to know in an objective way as ‘this’ or ‘that’. Even to see it is impossible. Impossible to know as either good or evil, it totally transcends objective knowledge. Approaching and approaching It, and being worn away more and more, I was destroyed without any residue.⁴⁵

(5)

Devotee: I am a sinner. I do not perform religious sacrifices [*homa*], etc. Shall I have painful rebirths for that reason? Pray save me!

Bhagavan: Why do you say that you are a sinner? Your trust in God is sufficient to save you from rebirths. Cast all burdens on Him.

In the *Tiruvachakam* it is said: ‘Though I am worse than a dog, you have graciously undertaken to protect me. This delusion of birth and death is maintained by You. Moreover, am I

⁴³ ‘Koyil Tirupatikam’, verse 7. The tenth verse will appear later in the article.

⁴⁴ *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 27th June 1946.

⁴⁵ *Thiruvoymozhi*, by Nammalvar, 8.8.3 and 8.8.5.

the person to sift and judge? Am I the Lord here? O Maheswara! It is for you to roll me through bodies [through births and deaths] or to keep me fixed at your own feet.' Therefore have faith and that will save you.⁴⁶

Dog I am and lower than a dog,
yet to me You showed Your love
and came Yourself to make me Yours.
This birth and death, *maya's* delusion,
should be placed under Your supervision,
and I should remain still.
Is it any longer my prerogative
to pass judgement on this?
You who wear an eye upon Your brow!
Put me in a body if You will.
Or place me at Your holy feet.⁴⁷

In many parts of the Tiruvachakam Manikkavachagar complains about his unworthiness or his uncontrolled desires. The Tevaram authors – Jnanasambandar, Appar and Sundaramurti – expressed similar sentiments in their own poems. Bhagavan pointed out that all four saints revealed their true experience of the Self in the very first verse that they wrote,⁴⁸ thus implying that their later complaints, which suggest separation from God, are merely poetic devices.

Bhagavan commented on this traditional practice of saints denigrating themselves in the following exchange:

In many of his works Sivaprakasam Pillai laments over his lack of devotion and his inability to follow Bhagavan's teachings.

A devotee once asked Bhagavan about this, saying, 'Sivaprakasam Pillai, who is such a good man, such an ardent devotee, and a longstanding disciple, has written a poem saying that Sri Bhagavan's instructions could not be carried out by him in practice. What can be the lot of others then?'

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'Sri Acharya [Adi-Sankaracharya] also says similar things when he composes songs in praise of any deity. How else can they praise God?'⁴⁹

In the second line of 'Siva Puranam', the first poem in the Tiruvachakam, Manikkavachagar states his experience of Self-abidance by saying that Siva's feet never ever leave his heart:

Long live [the mantra] *Nama Sivaya!* Long live the feet of the Master!
Long live the feet that never, even for an eye's blink, leave my heart!
Long live the jewel among gurus, who in Kokazhi,⁵⁰ bent me to his rule!
Long live the feet of him who, as the *Agamas*, sweetly dwells!
Long live the holy feet of the One, the Many, the Being Supreme!⁵¹

Bhagavan also commented on this line by Manikkavachagar when a devotee complained that this particular truth had not been realised by him.

⁴⁶ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 30.

⁴⁷ 'Kuzhaitta Pattu', verse 8.

⁴⁸ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 306.

⁴⁹ *The Power of the Presence*, part one, pp. 45-6.

⁵⁰ 'Kokazhi' means 'great port', a reference to Perunturai, where Manikkavachagar first encountered Siva.

⁵¹ 'Siva Puranam', lines 1-5. A translation of all the lines of 'Siva Puranam', made by the authors of this article, can be found at www.davidgodman.org.

Bhagavan: It will be realised in due course. Till then there is devotion (*bhakti*). ‘Even for a trice you do not leave my mind.’ Does He leave you [at] any moment? It is you who allow your mind to wander away. He remains always steady. When your mind is fixed you say, ‘He does not leave my mind even for a trice’. How ridiculous!⁵²

‘Siva Puranam’, the most frequently recited portion of the Tiruvachakam, was a particular favourite of Bhagavan. He once told Devaraja Mudaliar, ‘If ten persons should join together and sing it harmoniously, how grand it would be!’⁵³

(6)

Meanwhile a Tamil devotee opened the *Tiruvachakam* and began singing the ‘Songs of Pursuit’. Towards the end comes the passage, ‘O Iswara, you are trying to flee, but I am holding You fast. So where can You go and how can You escape from me?’

Bhagavan commented with a smile, ‘So it seems that He is trying to flee and they are holding Him fast! Where could He flee to? Where is He not present? Who is He? All this is nothing but a pageant. There is another sequence of songs in the same book, one of which goes, “O my Lord, You have made my mind Your abode. You have given yourself up to Me and in return have taken Me into you. Lord, which of us is the cleverer? If You have given Yourself up to me, I enjoy endless bliss, but of what use am I to You, even though You have made of my body Your temple, out of Your boundless mercy to me? What is it I could do for You in return? I have nothing now that I could call my own.” This means that there is no such thing as “I”. See the beauty of it! Where there is no such thing as “I”, who is the doer and what is it that is done, whether it be devotion or self-enquiry or *samadhi*?’⁵⁴

Mother! Father! Matchless jewel!
Rare nectar, the ripening of love!
To me in this worm-ridden fleshly form,
I who diminish my days by multiplying falsity,
You are the treasure that bestowed upon me
that state of Sivahood, perfect and true!
Sivan, our noble Lord!
In this very birth I’ve grasped You tight!
Henceforth, how can You leave and go
elsewhere, in grace Your form to show?

Wicked as I was, the love You gave to me
was greater yet than a mother’s love,
who suckles her child, anticipating its needs!
Melting my flesh, flooding me with light within
infusing me with the nectar of undying bliss,
You are the treasure rich
that wandered with me wherever I went!
Sivan, our noble Lord!
Close following You, I’ve grasped You tight!
Henceforth how can You leave and go

⁵² *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 306.

⁵³ *My Recollections of Bhagavan Sri Ramana*, p. 52.

⁵⁴ *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, 8th September, 1947.

elsewhere, in grace Your form to show?⁵⁵

What You have given is Yourself.
What You took in exchange, O Sankara, is me.
Who is the wiser of us two?
What I have gained is bliss that has no end.
What single thing have You obtained from me?
O Lord who made my mind His shrine!
Hail Siva, dwelling in Holy Perunturai!
For Your taking up residence in my body,
I cannot, my father, God,
offer you any fitting recompense.⁵⁶

(7)

A question was asked about the Upanishadic passage, ‘The Supreme Spirit is subtler than the subtlest and larger than the largest’.

Bhagavan: Even the structure of the atom has been found by the mind. Therefore the mind is subtler than the atom. That which is behind the mind, namely the individual soul, is subtler than the mind. Furthermore, the Tamil saint Manikkavachagar has said of the specks dancing in a beam of sunlight, that if each represents a universe, the whole sunlight will represent the Supreme Being.⁵⁷

The origin of the universal sphere,
composed of its [various] elements;
its immeasurable nature;
its vast and rich array of visible forms –
if one were to describe the beauty
of how these appear in manifestation,
each connected one to the other,
[one would find] that they expand
to a thousand million and more.
So great He is that all the worlds
appear like tiny specks, floating
in a sunbeam as it falls into a house.⁵⁸

Manikkavachagar’s passing away

Manikkavachagar eventually settled down in Chidambaram and spent his final years in that town. The Tiruvadavuradigal Puranam, chapter six, records a remarkable episode that took place there.

The story begins with a devotee of Siva going to Sri Lanka and singing the praises of Chidambaram and its Golden Hall where Siva resides. The king of Sri Lanka heard about him and summoned him to appear in his court. The sadhu went and gave a speech to the king in which he extolled the greatness of Chidambaram. A Buddhist scholar who was present became angry and said that he would travel to Chidambaram, convert all the Saivas there and install a statue of the Buddha in the temple. The king, who had a daughter who was dumb, decided to travel to Chidambaram as well in the hope that she might be cured there.

⁵⁵ ‘Piditta Pattu’, vv. 3 and 9.

⁵⁶ ‘Koyil Tirupatikam’, verse 10.

⁵⁷ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 15.

⁵⁸ ‘Tiruvandappahudi’, lines 1-6.

On their arrival, the Buddhist scholar challenged the devotees of Siva to a debate, saying that he would defeat them in argument and prove that their beliefs were wrong. His challenge was accepted and it was agreed that the debate would take place in the presence of the king of Sri Lanka and the king of the territory that contained Chidambaram.

On the night before the debate Siva appeared in the dreams of all the temple priests and told them that they should go to Manikkavachagar's hut and ask him to be their representative in the debate. Manikkavachagar agreed to come the next day and refute the Buddhist's arguments. When the debate got under way, both the Buddhist scholar and Manikkavachagar severely criticised and ridiculed the other's point of view.

At one point Manikkavachagar grew angry with what he said were the lies coming out of the Buddhist's mouth. He called on Saraswati, the goddess of speech, to leave the Buddhist's tongue so that he could no longer utter any falsehoods. When Saraswati complied with this request, the scholar and his associates were all struck dumb. The Sri Lankan king, impressed by this performance, prostrated before Manikkavachagar and informed him that his own daughter was dumb. He added that if Manikkavachagar could cure her, he himself would convert and become a Saiva.

Manikkavachagar called the daughter and asked her to give a public refutation of all the arguments that the Buddhist scholar had propounded. The daughter obliged and, speaking for the first time in her life, gave an erudite lecture that refuted the Buddhist position. The king, overjoyed, became a Saiva and requested Manikkavachagar to cure the dumbness of the Buddhist scholars. Manikkavachagar obliged, and the Buddhists, after acknowledging their erroneous views, also converted to Saivism.

Though Manikkavachagar had composed the songs that comprise the Tiruvachakam and sung them all over Tamil Nadu, the poems themselves had never been written down. Suri Nagamma once asked Bhagavan about how the Tiruvachakam came to be written, and Bhagavan replied by recounting the final dramatic details of Manikkavachagar's life:

Nagamma: When was the *Tiruvachakam* written?

Bhagavan: No, [Manikkavachagar] he never wrote [it]. He merely went about singing his songs.

Nagamma: Then how did *Tiruvachakam* get to be written?

Bhagavan: Oh that! He was going from one place to another until he came to Chidambaram. While witnessing Nataraja's dance he started singing heartmelting songs and stayed in that place itself. Then one day [Siva] Nataraja, with a view to making people know the greatness of Manikkavachagar and to bless the people with such an excellent collection of hymns, went to the house of Manikkavachagar in the night, in the guise of a brahmin. He was received cordially and when asked for the purpose of the visit, the Lord smilingly and with great familiarity asked, 'It seems you have been singing hymns during your visit to the sacred places of pilgrimage and that you are doing it here also. May I hear them? I have been thinking of coming and listening to you for a long time but could not find the required leisure. That is why I have come here at night. I suppose you don't mind. Can you sing? Do you remember them all?'

'There is no need to worry about sleep,' [replied Manikkavachagar] 'I shall sing all the songs I remember. Please listen.'

So saying Manikkavachagar began singing in ecstasy. The Lord in the guise of a brahmin sat down there writing the songs on palm leaves. As Manikkavachagar was in ecstasy he hardly noticed the brahmin who was taking down the songs. Singing on and on, he completely forgot himself in the thought of God and ultimately became silent. The old brahmin quietly disappeared.

At daybreak the *dikshitar* [priest] came to the Nataraja temple as usual to perform the morning *puja* and as he opened the doors he found in front of the Nataraja image on the doorstep a palm-leaf book. When the book was opened and scrutinised there were in it not only the words '*Tiruvachakam*', it was also written that the book was written as it was dictated by Manikkavachagar. It was signed below '*Tiruchitrambalam [Udaiyan]*', meaning 'the Owner of] Chidambaram'. The stamp of Sri Nataraja also was there below the signature. Thereupon all the

temple priests gathered in great surprise and sent word to Manikkavachagar, showed him the *Tiruvachakam*, and the signature of Nataraja, and asked him to tell them about the genesis of the hymns.

Manikkavachagar did not say anything but asked them to accompany him, went to the temple of Natarajan and standing opposite the Lord said, ‘Sirs, the Lord in front of us is the only answer to your question. He is the answer.’ After having said that, he merged into the Lord.

[Suri Nagamma comments:] As he narrated the story, Bhagavan’s voice got choked. Unable to speak any more he remained in ecstatic silence.⁵⁹

This version does not make it completely clear that Manikkavachagar vanished from sight at this moment by merging into the formless space of consciousness. In verse 1,324 of Padamalai Bhagavan emphasised this dramatic ending in the following words:

When asked by others about the meaning of the *Tiruvachakam*, the great and saintly Manikkavachagar pointed at the subtle *chidakasa* [space of consciousness] and merged in it.⁶⁰

Bhagavan was once asked how this was possible:

He [Bhagavan] remarked, ‘Manikkavachagar is one of those whose body finally resolved itself in a blazing light, without leaving a corpse behind.’

Another devotee asked how this could be.

Maharshi said that the gross body is only the concrete form of the subtle stuff – the mind. When the mind melts away and blazes forth as light, the body is consumed in that process. Nandanar [an outcaste saint] is another whose body disappeared in blazing light.⁶¹

⁵⁹ *Letters from and Recollections of Sri Ramanasramam*, pp. 10-12.

⁶⁰ *Padamalai*, page 355.

⁶¹ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 215.