

## **Cosmic Oceans Squeezed into Atoms**

David Shulman  
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The idiosyncratic wisdom of the *Tirukkural*'s poetry is about aliveness, perhaps the most elusive of human goals.



Shankar Vincent

A statue of the Tamil poet Tiruvalluvar, author of the *Tirukkural*, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India, 2015

### **Reviewed:**

#### **The Kural: Tiruvalluvar's Tirukkural**

translated from the Tamil by Thomas Hitoshi Pruiksma  
Beacon, 214 pp., \$24.95

Suppose you are traveling on a municipal bus in the sunbaked South Indian city of Chennai, and you know Tamil. At some point, overwhelmed by the sheer density of color and form that you can see through the window, you raise your eyes to the board just above the driver's seat, where a couplet is inscribed:

Firmness of action is firmness of mind—  
All else is else

It's like a cool breath of air from the sea. You can only wonder at the miraculous economy of expression, and at its slightly unnerving poetic quality. Or the board may say:

One who lets go of any thing and any thing is free  
Of the pain of that thing and that thing

The Tamil in this case is so beautiful and so surprising that when I reread it recently, I laughed out loud. It sounds something like this (pay attention to the long vowels):

*yādhanin yādhanin nīngiyāl nodal*  
*ādhanin ādhanin ilan*

This Tamil form is called a *kural*, its characteristic meter *kural venba*. There is a sentence, sometimes compressed to the edge of silence. Always there will be two lines, the first with four metrical feet, the second with three (or two and a half), thus creating a strong syncopation. Alliteration and melodic repetition are usually present. Rhyme occurs in the opening of the two lines, not at their end—what we call head rhyme. The cadence, once heard, keeps playing over and over in the mind.

The couplets quoted above are from a classical Tamil text, the *Tirukkural* of Tiruvalluvar, by common consent one of the greatest poets—for many, the greatest of them all—in the two-millennium course of Tamil literature. The *Tirukkural* has 1,330 such couplets divided into 133 thematic chapters of ten couplets each. As we see from the examples, they contain pithy, gnomic statements that might be useful in life. In South Asian literatures generally, such words of pointed wisdom are classed as *niti*, which includes advice of a pragmatic nature along with ethical maxims, observations of the social world, and sometimes personal, introspective flashes of insight. *Niti* literature is vast, well preserved in Sanskrit and in all the regional languages of India, and the *Tirukkural* occupies a special place in it.

But the *Tirukkural* is not only a work of practical wisdom. It is traditionally divided into three sections, the first nominally about right conduct (*aram*; *dharma* in Sanskrit) but in fact ranging over quasi-metaphysical topics (fate, truth, “knowing what is real,” freedom); the second mostly about politics, economics, self-interest, and instrumental goals (all subsumed under the expansive Tamil term *porul*, “substance”); and the third, possibly the most original, about sexual desire or ecstasy (*inbam* or *kāmam*). The second section also includes, along with several beautiful chapters about friendship, some rather

negative statements about married life (couplet 901 begins, “No virtue in craving one’s wife”) and, with special emphasis, about the danger of succumbing to a courtesan’s wiles.

The three divisions overlap with but do not correspond exactly to the pan-Indian “goals of being human” (*puruṣārtha*): *dharma*, self-interest (*artha*), and desire (*kama*). There is a fourth, overriding goal, *moksha* (liberation), that also finds its way into the *Tirukkural*, though not as a topic in its own right; living wisely will, in theory, in itself make you free. Generations of scholars have argued that the Tamil author was a Jain, a member of an ancient and very influential Indian religion outside the bounds of Vedic, or what we now might call Hindu, orthodoxy. The evidence for this assertion is, however, very sparse, resting on a few ambiguous—possibly universalistic—couplets on nonviolence, vegetarianism, and an abstract deity who embodies wisdom.

The *Tirukkural*, possibly composed around the fifth century AD, has enjoyed continuous popularity through the last sixteen centuries. It was often quoted by medieval commentators on grammatical and other formal, erudite texts. It generated a very large literature of commentaries of its own, beginning with that of Manakkudavar (perhaps eleventh-century) and reaching a synthesis with those of the prestigious, still-authoritative Parimelalakar (late-thirteenth to early-fourteenth-century).<sup>1</sup> Early modern authors, such as the late-seventeenth-century grammarian Saminata Desikar, list the *Tirukkural* among the three most important Tamil books—in Desikar’s view, probably the foremost of them all. The work was also beloved of the Christian missionaries who came to the Tamil country in the last several centuries and learned the language; for them, this book of ethical wisdom seemed close to Christian teachings.

It is thus not surprising that we have a plethora of translations of the *Tirukkural*, some by missionaries such as the great Constantino Giuseppe Beschi (into Latin, but only the first two parts; 1730), W.H. Drew, John Lazarus, G.U. Pope, and Karl Graul (into German, 1856), along with others by modern Tamil writers and scholars such as V.V.S. Aiyar and P.S. Sundaram. Altogether, there are over eighty translations, including quite a few into other South Asian languages such as Sanskrit, Malayalam, Hindi, Bengali, Kannada, and Telugu.

The results, however, have been largely disappointing, and no wonder. To translate even a single *kural* couplet, bewitching in its rhythm and packed with meaning, is a formidable task. But we now have Thomas Hitoshi Pruiksma's translation, without doubt the best ever into English. Pruiksma has a poet's ear, very good Tamil (he studied with the late connoisseur-scholar K.V. Ramakoti), and a readiness to take imaginative leaps. The examples I have cited come from his book.

In seeking to capture the texture of the Tamil original, Pruiksma likes dashes and ellipses:

Many die bravely on the battlefield—few  
Stand fearless before an audience

Like good in a heart that loves grace—deception  
In a heart that loves theft

What to call folly—discarding what helps  
And keeping what hurts

In most cases, the syncopation is reproduced, and we hear some approximation of the aesthetic power of the verse. Concise but helpful notes, usually based on the medieval commentaries, take up seventy pages following the translation. Stringent semantic compression often leaves the reader or listener puzzling over what the aphorism means, both in the Tamil original and in Pruiksma's attempt to reproduce its sound as well as its sense. The sheer aural beauty of the Tamil couplets, even before their meaning is decoded by the listener, probably explains the intense love Tamilians have for this book.

Pruikisma's translation has moments of great brilliance. For example, from the section on desire:

I could remember her nature and bright warring eyes  
If I forgot—but I can't forget

A Tamil woman's eyes are, by literary convention, dangerous, even deadly; English, too, speaks of a "drop-dead beauty." But verse 1,125 is syntactically uneven in the original, as if mimicking the lover's crazed state, and thus excruciating for a translator. Here is how P.S. Sundaram, one of the best of the modern South Asian translators of the *Tirukkural*, handles this verse:

I can't *recall* her bright eyes—  
We recall only the forgotten!

The idea is there in the italics and the exclamation point, but the poem has turned into a laconic paraphrase; and even that has to be read over a few times before we understand it. Pruiksma, on the other hand, has reproduced the Tamil conjunction of two verbal forms of forgetting: *marappin marappariyen*, “if I forget, (but) I can't forget....” He also rightly goes for a counterfactual conditional clause: “I could remember.../If I forgot.” All this faithfully conveys the lover's state of mind, wavering happily between hallucination and fact.

Inevitably, there are places where I differ from Pruiksma's choices. Just two couplets before the last example, the lover says:

Image be gone from my eye—there isn't  
Any room for the brow I love

It's as if the remembered image of the beloved has sunk deep, maybe permanently, into the speaker's eyeball (*karumani* in Tamil), displacing any fresh, living vision of her. But does any English speaker obsess over his beloved's brow? Do we even remember what a brow is? And the Tamil original in any case probably refers to the bearer of that brow, *tirunutal*, a possessive compound, as the modern commentators take it. I'd replace “brow” with “person.” The eyeball, by the way, is black, thus infinitely spacious, rather like a *kural* couplet, though all that space is now taken up by the mental image of the beloved.

And what are we to make of couplet 1,221, addressed by the lonely lover to the evening hour, *malai*, cruelest of all the hours of the day?

You are not evening but the lance that ends wives—  
Time—live long

At least one dash too many. And can a lance end wives? Actually, there may not be any lance, unless, like certain commentators, we stretch the word for time or moment, *velai*, to be a personified, second-person *vel*, “spear.” The association is natural enough, but the grammar is off. I'd prefer “the time that ends lives” to the lance and wives. The final two words of blessing are meant ironically, as a curse upon nightfall.

Those familiar with Tamil literature will think of another poem about evening, from the ancient anthology *Short Poems* (perhaps AD second century, the time of the Sangam, a mythic academy of Tamil language and literature):

The sun departs, the sky  
turns red, the ache  
becomes sharp. Light fades.  
The jasmine blooms.

That's what everyone calls "evening"—  
and they're all wrong.  
When the cock crows in the wide town  
and night turns to dawn—that, too,  
is evening. Even high noon  
is evening  
for the lonely.<sup>2</sup>

Very much in the same vein, Tiruvalluvar has given us an entire chapter on the devastating evening hours. As many have pointed out, the *Tirukkural* couplets in general are replete with intertextual references to earlier Tamil poems and, specifically in this third section, to the classic scenario of Tamil love, the Sangam-period poems of *akam*, the interior landscape (in A.K. Ramanujan's felicitous translation).<sup>3</sup>

Occasionally the couplets add a new twist to the old *akam* themes of longing, sometimes patiently, sometimes desperately, as in the nicely translated couplet 1,225 in the same chapter as couplet 1,221. Again the lover/beloved is speaking:

What evil did I do the evening—what good  
Did I do the dawn

Simple, lucid, and moving, like the Tamil original. Even the dash fits in well. We should note the introspective voice, the inner dialogue of the mind with its rhetorical questions, its sadness or despair. The chapter preceding this verse explores lovers' dreams:

I sleep—he lies in my arms—I wake—  
He's back in my heart

It's as if all the pain of separation, distributed unevenly throughout the cosmos, had been condensed into a few syllables. The only bit missing in the English is the final word of the Tamil couplet, a dangling nonfinite verb, *viraintu* (rushing).

Waking, she remembers he's not there. It hits her in a flash. She still loves him, but he may never come back. He quickly, too quickly, slips from her dreaming mind into her broken heart.

This mode of painful awareness and self-scrutiny is salient throughout the section on love. Sometimes it is stated starkly, in a way reminiscent of the early Tamil poetic grammars of love:

*arāa idumbaitt' en nenju*

Unceasing pain is what I have in my heart

This is the second, resonant line in a couplet from a chapter on mental turmoil and cognitive dissonance. In Pruiksma's translation:

My heart is endless heartache—it fears not having—  
And having—fears losing

Can anyone fail to identify with these words?

Of course, the *Tirukkural* offers moments of fulfillment, of remembered or imagined sexual delight. One might even say that the entire, rather atypical love sequence of part 3 ends on a happy note: the final chapter of the book concerns the inimitable joys of a lovers' tiff. But it's hard for this poet to shake off the shadowy side of intimacy; he seems to know it too well, as when the speaker addresses her own heart:

Heart—seeing that his heart is his  
Why aren't you mine

Taken together, in the sequence we now have (thanks to the commentator Parimelalakar), the couplets from the section on love and desire constitute a strange, elliptical progression, from the moment the lovers first catch sight of each other to their celebrated and necessary quarrels after marriage. This sequence can, with some effort, be squeezed into the narrative structure that has been extracted from the oldest Tamil love poems or, with even greater effort, into the pan-Indian Sanskrit division of love into two phases: *sambhoga* (love fulfilled in body and mind) and *vipralambha* (love in separation). Not surprisingly, the latter category exceeds the former by far, in sheer quantity and also in intensity, in both the Tamil and Sanskrit literary traditions.



Parimelalakar superimposes on this categorical distinction the standard Tamil sequence of *kalavu*, literally “stolen love” before marriage (sadly, the all-too-brief and only really happy moment in the lives of the prototypical lovers), and *karpu*, “domestic love,” with its unrelenting tensions as well as its sometimes stable pleasures (arguing and sulking). The great scholar of Tamil François Gros has beautifully explicated these overlapping notions in the introduction to his excellent French translation of the section on desire.<sup>4</sup>

But the medieval commentator’s valiant attempt to make sense of the way the twenty-five chapters of this section unfold is mostly beside the point. We would do better to read these chapters as some sort of performative drama in several voices, including that of the poet-narrator himself, describing the subtle shifts in feeling and perception on the part of lovers in a long-term, passionate relationship. There are many unspoken gaps and brooding silences in these couplets; I am tempted to say that the two people, with all their torments and ecstasies, communicate primarily through the gaps. In any case, like all premodern Tamil poetry, the *Tirukkural* verses were certainly composed in order to be sung aloud to an audience capable of deciphering and relishing them, though we cannot know today what the original circumstances of performance may have been.

There is, however, another kind of commentary that helps us understand the *Tirukkural* and its putative author or compiler. What can be said about the poet who has given his name to this book of maxims and variations on the great themes of ethics, power, and love? The Tamil literary tradition produced a complicated story about Tiruvalluvar, first attested, in part, in a tenth-century collection of fifty-three poems about the *Tirukkural*, the *Tiruvalluva-malai*, or *Garland [of Poems] on Tiruvalluvar*. This collection contains an endlessly cited verse attributed to the poetess Auvaiyar, supposedly the poet’s sister, who says that each *kural* verse contains all the seven cosmic oceans squeezed into an atom. (Her colleague Idaikkadar says each verse has crammed all the oceans into a tiny, perforated mustard seed.)

The *Garland on Tiruvalluvar* also describes the ultimate moment of canonization for any classical Tamil book: a voice from heaven orders the palm-leaf manuscript of the *Tirukkural* to be placed on a wooden plank floating in the Golden Lotus Tank at the famous Minakshi temple in the city of Madurai.



This plank was infinitely expandable, capable of making room for any true poet, but no sooner were the *Tirukkural* palm leaves put there than the plank shrank dramatically, thereby dumping all other poets (there were forty-nine of them) into the turbid waters of the tank, since none of them could compare with this book's author. The critical plank of the Tamil Academy was for centuries the unfalsifiable gold standard for excellence in Tamil.

Out of this tenth-century kernel, the biography of Tiruvalluvar grew into a set of somewhat baffling popular narratives—a trenchant form of oral literary criticism. According to versions in both Tamil and colonial-period English, Tiruvalluvar was the son of a Brahmin father, Bhagavan, and a Dalit (at the bottom of the social hierarchy) mother, Ati. (Ati-bhagavan, the “first lord,” is mentioned in the very first couplet of the *Tirukkural*.) The parents' marriage was troubled from the beginning: Bhagavan flees from his new bride out of fear of pollution but eventually agrees to stay with her on condition that any babies born to them will be abandoned at birth. (God, says Bhagavan, will care for them.) They have seven children, four girls and three boys (like the four-plus-three metrical feet in a *kural* verse).

(Tiru)Valluvan (later honorifically called Tiruvalluvar) is the seventh, born in Mylapore (today a prestigious neighborhood in Chennai and home to a great temple). He is nursed by a weaver, then adopted, first by a peasant woman from the agricultural Vellala group, then by a Dalit couple, and then he is sent back to the Vellalas (or, in some versions, returned to the weavers). Finally, after various other family adventures, as a young man he becomes a weaver in Mylapore, where he makes a name for himself as a sage. He marries Vasuki, from a peasant family, after she passes the bridal test of producing a meal of rice out of grains of sand. He has a close friend and soulmate, Elelasingan, a merchant seaman, who prompts him to compose his literary masterpiece.

Elela also has a part to play in Tiruvalluvar's last rites. The aged poet has left instructions that his body be removed from the village and cast away, but Elela and other disciples decide that he should be buried in a golden coffin. The poet awakes from death and protests. The coffin is abandoned in the bushes, but crows, vultures, and other animals that come into contact with the corpse turn into gold.

This story is less bizarre than it might seem.<sup>5</sup> It has a lot to tell us about how the *Tirukkural* was perceived over the centuries. (Tiru)valluvan is the title of ritual specialists who serve some Dalit subcastes—also, it seems, a name for the low-caste drummer who works as the village herald and announcer. Tiruvalluvar is not the only great Tamil poet said to have been a drummer; we have a similar story about Kamban, the author of the Tamil *Ramayana*, another masterpiece of Tamil letters. Metrical poetry is a lot like varying drumbeats.

But the most striking theme of the folk narrative is the poet's mixed parentage and unstable history of adoption by families high and low. He is part Brahmin and part Dalit, thus uniting the two ends of the social scale, but he is not without a link to the middle-range Vellala agriculturists, the backbone of medieval Tamil society, and his alter ego is an urban merchant mariner. It is as if the tradition wanted to be sure that the *Tirukkural* emerged from the entire range of castes and professions and thus embodied values that could be affirmed by everyone. Tamil literary critics never tire of emphasizing the universalist streak in this book of wisdom.

But that streak has a specific relation to the sociality of the so-called left-hand castes—those groups of artisans, merchants, and others who are not tied to the land but belong, rather, to the mobile world of the city, with its face turned toward international seaborne trade and also toward heterodox religions, like Buddhism and Jainism, carried throughout South Asia and beyond by wandering monks and holy men. Weavers are a left-hand group par excellence, and composing poetry is often explicitly compared to weaving (the same Sanskrit verb serves both meanings). In the *mélange* of adoptive and biological parentage this poet experiences, according to the story, we can see a definite drift toward the left-hand domain, where universalist values are deeply rooted and where we also find the peripatetic magician-saints and alchemists who may belong to no well-defined religious community. Tiruvalluvar, alive or dead, belongs with these free-spirited, nonconformist, visionary wizards. There is no magic as potent as a riddlelike, half-elliptical, immortal *kural* verse.

We will have to leave Tiruvalluvar's legendary life at that, though there is much more that could be said about it. There is, however, one thing more, a major characteristic of these mantra-like verses that tends, for some reason, to be ignored by

modern critics and commentators. Works of moral maxims usually suffer from an excess of normativity. They are, in a word, moralistic. That is why so many of them are rather boring. Even pragmatic advice on how to live one's life can easily fall into a precious, pontificating mode. *Niti* texts in all the South Asian languages regularly exhibit this trait, which is not entirely absent from the first two sections of the *Tirukkural*, on ethics and power. The same could be said about Hellenistic wisdom literature and the biblical Book of Proverbs.

But the wisdom aphorisms in the *Tirukkural* are in many cases unconventional, even unsettling, as the biographical tale would lead us to expect. Embedded in chapters rich in flashes of exquisitely phrased yet somehow familiar aperçus are what sound like highly personal and creative ways of thinking:

It serves only virtue say those who don't know—but love  
Is friend to wrong too

He who proclaims the faults of others will have  
His best faults proclaimed

It takes a translator of Pruiksma's talent to catch the sharp jab of this last verse. It's all too easy to turn a witty *kural* into a platitude. Here is P.S. Sundaram's version of the same couplet; he catches the bland meaning without the wit:

A slanderer invites a searching censure  
Of his own faults.

Occasionally, the poet inserts a sly hint to see if we are still listening:

Fortune fed up with the envious consigns them  
To her wayward sister

Fortune is the goddess Lakshmi, whose appropriately named elder sister is Alakshmi (Misfortune). Envy thus is not a deadly sin, as it is in the Christian West, but rather a foolish mistake that inevitably exacts revenge on the envious. One could see this *kural* as expressing the pan-Indian theory of karma—the idea that every act, including mental acts, has ongoing effects upon the actor and his or her world, creating the world this person inhabits not merely in the present lifetime but also in future ones. But it seems to me that Tiruvalluvar, here and elsewhere, is not simply calling up the theory of karmic retribution or reward. Rather, he is telling us something of how

the human mind works vis-à-vis others and, no less, upon itself. He seems to know what envy feels like and how much it hurts. He is interested in the uneven processes of thinking and in the inner cost we pay for our worn-out habits of feeling.

A few syllables may imply an entire ethical psychology:

If one loves oneself do not think  
Even the least wrong

Loving here is from *kātal* (fierce desire). One can feel fierce desire for oneself—it's a good thing to feel—but only if that self is free from wrongdoing in mind and deed. The wider implication is that harming another rebounds on the harmer, as Marcus Aurelius says: "Has someone hurt you? He hurts himself." On a good day I think, or at least hope, that this notion could be true. There is an affinity, or a shared sensibility, uniting Marcus and Tiruvalluvar despite the vast temporal and spatial distance between them.

And then there are the lyrical touches, as befits a great Tamil poet. My favorite is:

The fertile and windswept world stands witness—those  
With compassion do not suffer

The Tamil original is even more beautiful:

*allal aruḷāḷvarkk' illai vaḷi vaḷankum*  
*mallal mā ñālam kari*

The couplet ends with the rare word *kari* (witness, proof). And the world is not only fertile but also elegant and ravishing (*mallal*), which rhymes with the opening word, *allal* (suffering). The meter gently moves the reader from everyday sorrow to a revelation of the wonder that only compassion, *arul* or *aruludaimai*, can trigger. Does compassionate empathy for another, and maybe also for oneself, really free one from suffering? It's a good question. The poet calls the entire universe as his witness to an experience he must know from inside.

As Archana Venkatesan remarks in her excellent introduction to Pruiksma's translation, a humane capacity for compassion is one of Tiruvalluvar's favorite themes. It may even define, for

him, the human being—a potentially compassionate creature.  
This topic extends to an entire chapter on vegetarianism, which begins:

He who eats flesh to fatten his own—how  
Can he embody compassion

For Tiruvalluvar, compassion, at its core, entails unstinting generosity, another major theme:

Nothing more bitter than death—but death is sweet  
If one cannot give

We find a variation on this heartbreaking statement, this time configured around the term *oppuravu* (harmony, generosity, kindness):

They live who know kindness—all others are placed  
Among the dead

Wisdom, then, of Tiruvalluvar’s idiosyncratic, appealing kind, is really about living, or rather, aliveness, perhaps the most elusive of human goals—far more elusive than, say, wealth or power or cleverness or even good loving. This poet thinks aliveness comes from compassion as well as from what Pruiksma translates as “letting go,” an unusual but precise equivalent to the Tamil *turavu*, usually said to mean renunciation, a heavy and overly abstract term. And since we started on the Chennai bus with a couplet about letting go, I think we can end by listening to it again and then adding the closing, paradoxical couplet from the same chapter, a tour de force in both Tamil and Pruiksma’s English:

One who lets go of any thing and any thing is free  
Of the pain of that thing and that thing

Hold to the hold of one who holds nothing—to hold nothing  
Hold to that hold

### **David Shulman**

David Shulman is the author of *Tamil: A Biography*, among other books. He is a Professor Emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and was awarded the Israel Prize for Religious Studies in 2016. (October 2022)

1. For an excellent analysis of Parimelalakar’s commentary, see Norman Cutler, “Interpreting Tirukkural: The Role of Commentary in the Creation of a Text,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 112, No. 4 (October–December 1992). ↵
2. Milaipperun Kantan, in *Kuruntokai*, verse 234 (my translation). ↵
3. *The Interior Landscape: Classical Tamil Love Poems* (1967; New York Review Books, 2014). ↵
4. *Le Livre de l’amour de Tiruvalluvar* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). ↵
5. See Stuart Blackburn, “Corruption and Redemption: The Legend of Valluvar and Tamil Literary History,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (May 2000). ↵