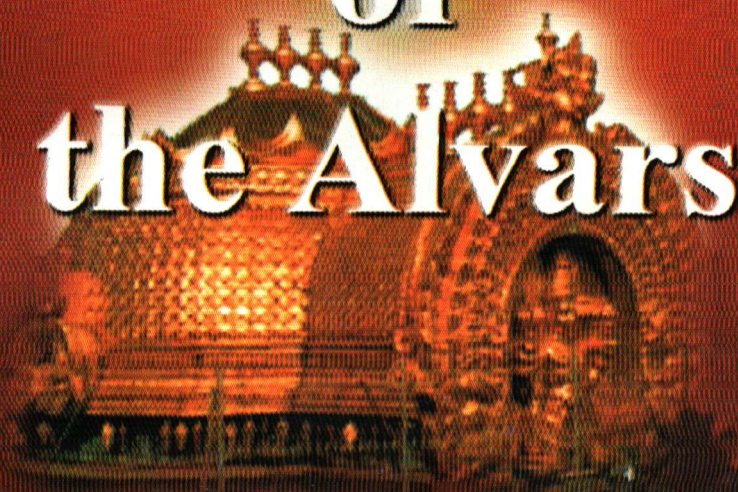


The Divine World of the Alvars



Lives and songs of the
Vaishnava saints of South India

Pravrajika Shuddhatmamata

The Divine World of the Alvars

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The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture
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Publisher's Note

India has an old and vast cultural and spiritual heritage, and all parts of the country have contributed to this heritage. As part of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture's research work on India's contribution to world culture, the Institute *Bulletin* has been publishing a series of articles on Indian saints by Pravrajika Shuddhatmamata (Cecile Guenther). The first eight articles of this series, published between September 1998 and November 2000, were on the Alvars of Tamil Nadu, and were well received. At the request of readers we are now publishing these articles in the form of a book, *The Divine World of the Alvars*. While preparing this book for publication the author has included some additional material here and there, as well as many more songs. We believe the readers will enjoy this volume.

15 March 2003
Kolkata

Swami Prabhananda

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Tirumalisai Alvar

Once Sri Ramakrishna said : 'Sometimes God acts as the magnet and the devotee as the needle. God attracts the devotee to Himself. Again, sometimes the devotee acts as the magnet and God as the needle. Such is the attraction of the devotee that God comes to him, unable to resist his love.'¹ And such was the love of Tirumalisai Alvar that the Lord could not help but follow him at his call.

Tirumalisai Alvar's name comes from the place of his birth—Tirumalisai, which was also formerly called Mahisara and is near Chennai. The Alvar is also known by the name Bhaktisara. He is said to be a manifestation of Vishnu's discus, Sudarsana. As he was supposed to be a contemporary of the first three Alvars—Poygai, Pudatt, and Pey—his probable date of birth would be some time in the sixth century.

There are conflicting stories about Tirumalisai's early life.² Legend has it that his father was the rishi Bhargava, and that he was abandoned in the woods at birth, either because he was deformed or because his mother was a nymph. A childless woodcutter (or cowherd) couple found him and brought him up. But this was not an ordinary child, by any means. He would not eat or drink anything, yet he continued to grow normally. Hearing about him, a pious couple came to Tirumalisai's home with some milk and begged the child to drink it. Tirumalisai granted their request, and they began bringing milk to him every day. One day Tirumalisai drank only part of the milk and asked them to drink the remainder. They did, and nine months

later the wife gave birth to a son, whom they named Kanikkannar.

Even as a child, Tirumalisai began studying different schools of religion and philosophy. And eventually he left home to spend his time in meditation in the forest. According to one story¹³ he first became a Shaivite but was converted to Vaishnavism when he met Pey Alvar (or, according to another story, when he met a teacher named Maharya). Tirumalisai was at that time seated in meditation. Seeing him, Pey thought of a plan to convert him. He dug up a plant from the forest and then began replanting it in front of Tirumalisai. But his method of planting was rather odd. He planted the upper part of the plant in the ground and left the roots above. He then took a pot full of holes, filled it with water, and brought it to water the plant. However, by the time he reached the plant, the water had leaked out through the holes. Nevertheless, he again and again fetched water in the pot and came to the plant with the pot empty. After some time Tirumalisai could not help noticing the odd behaviour of this stranger. Breaking his meditation, he said: 'He is such a fool. He is trying to water an upside-down plant with a pot full of holes!' This was the opportunity Pey was waiting for. 'Who is the greater fool—you or me?' he asked Tirumalisai. Tirumalisai replied, 'Why are you calling me a fool?' Pey then told Tirumalisai that he was doing his sadhana upside-down. After talking for some time, Pey converted Tirumalisai to Vaishnavism.

According to another account, the first three Alvars met Tirumalisai when they were wandering together, and they spent some time with him, talking about God and rejoicing in each other's company. Like the first three Alvars, Tirumalisai was said to be a yogi, and he also had supernatural powers. Once a magician tried to tempt him with a magic pill that could turn copper into gold. Seeing

the poisoned breast of the ogress, was still hungry. He ate up all the butter. The angry cowherd-dame Yasoda brought a knotted rope to bind him, and he patiently allowed himself to be bound like a child.' (*Tiruvantati* III, verse 91)²¹

Yet amidst all the praises of Vishnu in his various forms, Lakshmi (Sri Devi) is not forgotten. As Pey says: 'The discus-wielding Tulasi-garland lord bears the lotus-dame Lakshmi on his wide chest, like lightning on a dark cloud. She has beautiful lotus eyes, and is seated on a nectar-dripping flower. She is our refuge, today and forever.' (*Tiruvantati* III, verse 91)²²

Another theme we will come across again and again in the songs of the Alvars is divine madness—the madness of love of God. This indeed is the religion of the Alvars. In the early Alvars, however, we get only a hint of it: 'Madly raving the names of the Tulasi-garland-wearing lord, my heart is set on him alone. My tongue speaks of his glories alone. My body worships only the lord in Venkatam surrounded by Bamboo forests, O!' (*Tiruvantati* II, verse 33, by Pudatt)²³

Notes and References

1. See, *Viraha-Bhakti: The early history of Krsna devotion in South India*, by Friedhelm Hardy, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 141. [hereafter, Hardy].
2. *Akam* poetry revolves around love and separation of lovers. *Puram*, another branch of *cankam* literature, centres on war and heroes. According to A.K. Ramanujan, '*Akam* and *puram*, the poetry of love and war, are both important precedents for *bhakti*.' A.K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning* (Penguin Books), p. 112, fn. 12.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

4. Ibid.
5. *The Holy Lives of the Azhvars or The Dravida Saints*, by Alkandavilli Govindacharya. Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1982, p. 82. [hereafter, Govindacharya]
6. Hardy, p. 294.
7. Govindacharya, p. 84.
8. Hardy, p. 285.
9. *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand: Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, trans. by Srirama Bharati (Jaladampet: Sri Sadagopan Tirunarayanadaswami Divya Prabandha Pathasala, 2000), p. 622. [Hereafter, *The Sacred Book*]
10. Ibid., p. 656.
11. Hardy, p. 285.
12. *The Sacred Book*, p. 654.
13. Hardy, p. 294
14. Ibid., p. 299.
15. *The Sacred Book*, p. 632.
16. Ibid., p. 621.
17. Ibid., p. 662.
18. Ibid., p. 640.
19. Ibid., p. 651.
20. Ibid., p. 665.
21. Ibid., p. 666.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., p. 640.

begged their forgiveness and pleaded with them to return to the city. They readily agreed. Then Tirumalisai turned to the Lord and requested him to return with them. Lord Vishnu, of course, consented. The Lord of Tiruvekha has been known ever since by the name Yathoktakari—‘One who did as he was bid.’

Some time later Tirumalisai decided to go to Kumbakonam. On the way he stopped to rest at a house in a village called Perumpuliur. Some brahmins were also at that house chanting the Vedas. Seeing the Alvar they stopped chanting, thinking him to be of a low caste. But when they wanted to begin again, none of them could recall where they had left off. Tirumalisai saw their confusion. Without a word, he took a black grain of paddy from underneath one of his finger-nails and threw it on the floor near the brahmins. At this they remembered that they had been reciting a passage pertaining to the part of the Rajasuya sacrifice in which the sacrificer offers as an oblation paddy grains which his wife had husked with her finger-nails. The brahmins understood that Tirumalisai was not an ordinary person, and they immediately came to him and paid their respects.

Tirumalisai then went round the village, begging for alms. Soon people began to notice that wherever the Alvar went in the village, the face of the village deity was turned in that direction. The news of the miracle quickly spread, and some of the brahmins went to inform their village elder, who was then performing a sacrifice. The village elder immediately left to meet the Alvar. Struck by the divine light illuminating the Alvar's face, the brahmin brought him to the sacrificial site, seated him in a place of honour, and worshipped him. The priests who were assisting in the sacrifice, however, were furious. They began shouting abuses, saying that Tirumalisai had polluted the sacrificial place. The village elder was extremely pained

that such a thing should happen to someone he was trying to honour. But the Lord himself came to their rescue and visibly manifested himself within the heart of the Alvar. Seeing this, the priests were struck with awe and fell at his feet.

Tirumalisai then continued his journey to Kumbakonam, where he is said to have spent his last days. As in many temples in South India, Lord Vishnu at Kumbakonam was in a reclining position. Once the Alvar asked the Lord to get up and speak to him. Just as the Lord started to get up, however, the Alvar realized he should not have troubled him, and asked him to lie down again. But ever after the Lord remained in a half-lying-half-rising position to show people how eager he is to fulfil every desire of those who are devoted to him.

Two of the hymns of the *Nalayira DivyaprabandhaŪm* (the collected works of the Alvars) are attributed to Tirumalisai: the *Nanmukhan Tiruvantati*, containing 96 stanzas, and the *Tiruccantaviruttam*, containing 120 stanzas. In several verses of the *Nanmukhan Tiruvantati* we see the Alvar's absolute freedom and closeness with the Lord, and they seem to indicate that the Lord actually did follow the Alvar at his call. In verse 7 he says: 'O Lord Narayana! You may grace me today, or tomorrow, or some time later, but your grace is definitely coming. I cannot be without you. Nor can you be without me.'³

And in verse 51 he says: 'Who is my companion but the lord, who is his own, without a peer or superior? O Kaya-hued Lord! Nobody knows you as I do. Can the whole sky be a price for my mind?'⁴

Again, from verse 86, we can understand that he is not just saying this. It is a fact: 'See, O Heart! The supreme lord exists. Always he exists. In the hearts of devotees, he exists. The lord without a peer appears before devotees like me on his own, know it.'⁵

this, Tirumalisai scraped some dirt off his own body, mixed it with wax from his ear, and made a ball out of it. He then gave this to the magician to test. When the magician touched some copper with it, the copper turned to gold.

One day the Alvar was in great distress as he had run out of the white earth which is used to make the urdhva pundra (the sacred symbols that Vaishnavas make on the body), and he could not find any by digging in the ground. Without marking his body, he could not perform his worship or eat. At last he lay down on the ground, not knowing what to do. Just then Lord Venkateswara appeared to him in a vision and pointed out a spot nearby where he could dig. When the vision disappeared, the Alvar got up, went to that spot, and found the white earth.

After spending many years in meditation in the forest, Tirumalisai decided to visit Kanchi, the holy city of Lord Varadaraja. There he settled down in the district called Tiruvekha, near a Vishnu shrine. Soon after, Kanikkannar, the son of the couple who had given him milk when he was a child, came to live with him as a disciple. An old woman also began serving him by sweeping and cleaning the ashrama. She was so faithful and diligent in her duties that one day Tirumalisai offered to grant her any boon she chose. Overjoyed, she asked to be made young again. This was granted, and she was immediately transformed into a young, beautiful woman. (In another version of this story, Kanikkannar was the one who transformed her into a young woman.)

One day the king of the territory was out riding and happened to see the young woman. Struck by her beauty, he begged her to become his wife, and she agreed. They lived very happily together for many years. One day the king realized that though he was getting older and older, his wife was as young and beautiful as ever. When he asked her the secret of her perennial youth, she told him about

Tirumalisai's boon. He then requested her to get the same boon for him. The wife replied: 'Why don't you ask him yourself? His disciple Kanikkannar comes to the palace every day for alms. Through him you can receive the holy man's grace.'

The king then instructed his attendants to bring Kanikkannar to him the next time he came to the palace for alms. The following day Kanikkannar was brought before the king, who said: 'Please bring your Master here one day. I would like to honour the saint.' Kanikkannar replied, 'He does not go to anyone's house—especially not to a king's palace.' The king was a bit discomfited by this reply, but to save face he asked Kanikkannar to praise him with a song. Kanikkannar refused, saying he could not praise anyone but God. The king insisted, and again Kanikkannar refused. At this the king became furious and ordered Kanikkannar to leave the kingdom.

Kanikkannar hurried to Tirumalisai and told him everything that had happened at the palace. But when he asked to take leave of the Alvar, Tirumalisai replied: 'If you leave, my child, can I stay? And if I leave, will the Lord remain here? And if the Lord leaves, will others stay?' Tirumalisai then went to the shrine of Tiruvekha. Informing the Lord that he and Kanikkannar had to leave, he asked him to follow them. Without a moment's hesitation, the Lord got up and followed the Alvar and his disciple out of the city. Then other deities of the city also began following them. The whole city became dark. The king trembled in fear as he realized that he himself had brought on this calamity. Summoning his ministers, he had a hurried consultation and then left to find the Lord and his devotees.

The king finally found them resting on the bank of the Palar River. (The place is now called Orikkai, or Orira-v-irukkai—'the place where the Lord stayed for a night.') Falling at the feet of Tirumalisai and Kanikkannar, he

devotional religion in South India was the building of temples. As the temple culture developed, the temples became the centre of life for people—sometimes even in a literal sense. For instance, the whole city of Madurai was built around the Minakshi temple. And at other places, such as Srirangam and Tirupati, most of the city is the temple and everything is dependent on it. Further, the deities of the temples were beautiful, were adored, and, most of all, they were said to be there because they loved to be there among their adorers.

On the literary side, another factor was the development of *cankam* poetry. Myth and poetry are inseparable. Myth nurtures poetry, and poetry nurtures myth. The Alvares and the Nayanmar poet-saints revelled in this connection and used it to full advantage. Kamban's *Ramayana*, probably the most beautiful of the *Ramayanas*, was also a product of the *cankam* genre.

In *cankam* literature, and particularly in the *akam* branch of it,² images of nature play an important role. The six seasons (winter, spring, summer, the rainy season, autumn, and fall), plus the six parts of the day (dawn, forenoon, noon, afternoon, evening, and night), and the five landscapes (hills and mountains, the seashore, the forest, the pasture, and the desert or wasteland) with their characteristic flowers, birds, beasts, rivers or lakes, etc.—all these are used to make up the setting, or the background, of the poems. And they become codes, or symbols, which evoke certain sentiments revolving around love and separation. For instance, *mullai* [which is the name of the jasmine flower as well as of a mood] is 'the lover's mood of patient waiting for the absent one, set in a forest or pastoral landscape.'³ It includes images of bulls and cowherds, and is also associated with the rainy season,

for the jasmine bloom most profusely then. Then 'neytal [the name of another flower], set in the seashore, is the mood of anxious waiting.'⁴ It includes images of sharks and fishermen. Separation from God and the wonder at God's seemingly irreconcilable ability to be both near and far, accessible and inaccessible, were themes the Alvars would turn to again and again.

According to Alvar hagiography, the first four of the Alvars were contemporaries. In the present article we will deal with the first three—Poygai-Alvar, Pudatt-Alvar, and Pey-Alvar. These three are said to have been born on three consecutive days, probably in the sixth century, in Kanchipuram, Mahabalipuram, and Mylapore (now a part of Chennai) respectively. Like all of the twelve Alvars, they were each supposed to be an incarnation of something in Vishnu's entourage. Poygai, who is also known as Sarayogi, was said to be the incarnation of Panchajanya, Vishnu's conch; Pudatt, or Bhutayogi, was Kaumodaki, Vishnu's mace; and Pey, or Bhrantayogi, was Nandaka, Vishnu's sword.

The names of the last two—Pudatt (the demon) and Pey (the mad, or the possessed)—give us a hint of their divine intoxication for God. All three of them, it is said, shunned society and wandered alone from one holy place to another. Little else is known about their lives except for one incident when they all came to the same place at the same time. In the course of his wanderings, Poygai arrived one evening at Tirukkovalur, a town near Tiruvannamalai, during a raging storm. Seeing a small covered veranda of a nearby building, he took shelter there and lay down to sleep. A short while later, Pudatt arrived at the same place. He peeked inside and noticed that the space was very small, but he said, 'Well, if one can lie down, then

The Early Alvars

Between the sixth and ninth centuries a group of Vaishnavite and Shaivite saints appeared in Tamil Nadu who, through their lives as well as their songs of ecstatic love for God, completely changed the religious life of India. The Vaishnavite saints were called *Alvars* (i.e., 'those who are immersed in God,' or 'those who have dived deep in God'), and the Shaivite saints were called *Nayanmars* (the singular form being *Nayanar*, meaning 'leader'). All twelve of the Alvars, plus twenty of the sixty-three Nayanmars, left behind their poetry to give us a glimpse of their divine madness for God.

What makes these saints different from saints and sages of earlier times? It is that for the first time we find lovers of God establishing a human relationship with God—a relationship of a servant to a Master, of a friend to a Friend, of a mother to her Child, of a lover to the Beloved. Though the Lord was transcendent and beyond all comprehension, yet he was also the Lord who resided in the nearby temple. Again, he was the mythic God, the God of their folklore, who was far away in time and space (who, for instance, long ago danced on the head of the snake in faraway Vrindavan, or who dwelt in the north on the snowy Mount Kailash), but at the same time, he was also the Lord of their hearts whom they longed to see and experience outside of themselves. More than anything else, however, he was their own Child, or their Playmate, or their Beloved.

What was their philosophy? *Prema*—pure, ecstatic love of God, love for its own sake. That's all. They were not philosophers. They were men and women from all classes and walks of life. Some were even so-called 'untouchables.' But they had one thing in common: God was their all-in-all. And, like the rishis of ancient times, they wrote only of their experiences. It was left to others to formulate what they thought was the philosophy of these poet-saints.

Looking back from our point in time, we can see that before these saints appeared in South India, the ground had already been well prepared for the seeds of *prema* to grow and blossom. But many factors combined to produce this fertile soil. It is impossible to give a complete background here, but a few ideas can be presented. For one thing, in the south there was more interaction between the popular 'folk' religions and the Vedic religion than there was at that time in the north. And in the folk religions there was more scope for the myths of Vishnu, Shiva, and also Murugan to be nurtured—and sometimes even enacted with singing and dancing.¹

Then again, a reaction eventually set in to the Buddhist and Jain religions, which did not admit a Personal God. From the first to the fifth centuries A.D., Buddhism and Jainism were very influential in South India. Kanchipuram alone could boast of producing three great Buddhist scholars—Dignaga, Bodhidharma, and Dharmapala. At first relations were cordial among the followers of the different religions. But as the kings began to favour and patronize one religion over the others, bitter rivalries gradually broke out, stirring up very unreligious feelings. People longed for a God who symbolized love.

Still another factor contributing to the rise of

[people] will call him now 'full of *mayam*' (Mayan) and though he may be impossible to see henceforth, He-who-is-sweet is inside [my] soul.' (*Tiruvantati* III, verse 83, by Pey)¹¹

In some verses the Alvars show a clear understanding of yoga and of controlling the senses. Pey says: 'What is subtle knowledge? Close the doors of the senses and apply on them the locks of discrimination. Then study the revelatory works repeatedly, and try to understand their meaning. Gradually the ocean-hued lord will reveal himself, through Yoga.' (*Tiruvantati* III, verse 12)¹²

But at the same time there is much emphasis on using the senses to worship the Lord and enjoy his beauty, including the beauty of the Lord's image in the temple. Compare: 'Checking the five [senses] inside, taking choice flowers, their minds filled with desire [for God], knowing properly, reciting and praising his names, people of great fortune will indeed see the feet of him of the black ocean's colour.' (*Tiruvantati* II, verse 6, by Pudatt)¹³

And: 'My eyes call to each other 'look! look!' and rejoice in [looking at] the body of gold of him whose chest is radiant with ornaments and garlands, I worship with my hands the anklets of fine gold and sing in *pans* about his deeds.' (*Tiruvantati* III, verse 35, by Pey)¹⁴

And again, "The lord who wields the discuss is my love, go to him", says my heart. "Praise his strong and beautiful arms and offer worship", says my tongue. "See the lord who dispersed the past", say my eyes. "Hear the praise of the necklace-and-garland-wearing lord", say my ears!' (*Tiruvantati* I, verse 72, by Poygai)¹⁵

The Alvars adore Vishnu in his various forms and manifestations—either as an Avatar or as the Lord of Vaikuntha—yet most of them also recognize that

Vishnu is identical with Shiva. According to Poygai: 'His names are Hara and Narayana; his mounts the bull and the bird; his texts the Agamas and Vedas; his abodes the mount Kailas and the Ocean of Milk; his works dissolution and protection; his weapons the spear and the discus; his hue the fire and the cloud; and yet he is one to all.' (*Tiruvantati* I, verse 5)¹⁶

Pey also says: 'In the streaming-hills Venkatam, the lord my father seems to have both mat hair and crown. He wields both the axe and the discus, wears both a snake around his neck and the sacred thread. Two images blended into one—what a wonder!' (*Tiruvantati* III, verse 63)¹⁷

Though worship and adoration of the Lord with form predominates in the songs of the Alvars, they know that he is also beyond all forms and qualities, and again, that he pervades all forms and qualities. As Pudatt says: 'O devoted heart! The good and the bad—know that all this is he. The Earth, wind, fire, water and space—these too are he. He stands as the five senses also.' (*Tiruvantati* II, verse 24)¹⁸

Yet still this transcendent Lord takes up residence in the heart of the Alvar as well as in the temple: 'My heart's permanent resident has his feet on my head. He is the gem-hued lord who destroyed the asura's chest, the first-cause lord of deluge and creation, the discus-wielder, the resident of Attiyur, Kanchi.' (*Tiruvantati* II, verse 95, by Pudatt)¹⁹

Pey also says: 'Though he is spoken of as the wonder-lord, though they say he is hard to see, though he measured the Earth and sky with his feet, he certainly remains in our hearts.' (*Tiruvantati* III, verse 83)²⁰

In fact, it is the Lord himself who allows himself to be bound by the cord of his devotees' love. Again Pey says: 'The lord who swallowed the Earth, and drank

two can sit.' Poygai let him come in. They had just sat down when Pey also happened to come that way. He looked in and said, 'Well, if two can sit, then three can stand.' So the three holy men stood, squeezed together in that small space, waiting for the rain to stop.

As their only interest was God, naturally their conversation had but one topic—the Lord and his qualities. The three went on conversing for some time when suddenly they realized that a fourth person was squeezing in amongst them. But who was it? They could feel the presence, but they could not see anything. One of them suggested they get a lamp. But from where would they get it? And how would they light it? Poygai sang: 'The solid land, the lamp; its girdling liquid main the oil; and light, the shining Sun. And thus I shall discover the Stealing Stranger.'⁵

Then Pudatt replied: 'With love as the lamp-bowl, desire as its oil, with the mind melting in bliss as its wick, I have kindled the lamp—knowledge its light—for Narayana.'⁶

After that, Pey sang: 'Lo Her—Mercy [i.e., the Goddess Sri]—I see; and His form of Gold I see; And Their sun-effulgent hues blending, indeed I see—Proud daring Discus, and the friendly Conch I see; All this, this blessed day, in Him the ocean-hued.'⁷

At last, all three of them saw that the Lord himself was there amongst them, and they each sang his praises in a hundred verses, the first verse of each being the ones given above. These songs comprise *Tiruvantati* I, II, and III—the first three compositions of the fourth book of the *Nalayira Divyaprabandham* (the collected works of the Alvares, usually called the *Prabandham* for short). *Tiruvantati* is *Tiru* + *antati*. *Tiru* is approximately the same as *Sri*, and *antati* is a verse form in which the final word (or sound) of one stanza is

repeated at the beginning of the next stanza.

Commenting on some of the verses, Friedhelm Hardy says: 'For the early Alvars, Krishna's mythological appearances and his activities during them are full of wonder, transcend logical comprehension, cause amazement and awe. Frequently they address Krishna and ask him what it all means and how the contradictory features found in different myths can be reconciled with each other: "[People] relate that you took on the form of a baby, ate the seven worlds, and slept that day on the leaf of a banyan tree. Speak: Was the banyan that day in the water of the ocean, or in heaven, or on earth?" (*Tiruvantati* I, verse 69, by Poygai) The question here is: if you absorbed the whole universe, how could there be a banyan?'⁸

Then again, how could he manage to swallow it all? As Poygai says: 'Alone the lord of infinite glory! O Discus wielder! They say it is true that you swallowed the Earth, the mountains, the oceans, the winds and space. Come to think, was your mouth as big as this Earth?' (*Tiruvantati* I, verse 10)⁹

Again, how can one who is so powerful also be afraid? Pey says: 'Can the world understand this wonder? The lord who reclines in the ocean-deep came as a wonder child and killed an ogress. He conducted the great Bharata war and destroyed mighty kings. And yet he cringed in fear when his mother threatened him with a churning rod for stealing butter!' (*Tiruvantati* III, verse 28)¹⁰

One of Krishna's names in South India is *Mayon*, which is related to the Sanskrit word *maya*. The name is probably used in the sense of 'one who plays tricks', or 'one who performs miracles', or 'one who is unpredictable'. This, of course, can give rise to all kinds of plays on words. For example: 'Though

Like the first three Alvars, Tirumalisai also sometimes wonders at the Lord's incomprehensible actions. Here he wonders why the Lord is sleeping on the ocean: 'The lord who resides in Mayilai-Tiruvallikkeni by the sea, reclines on a five-hooded serpent in the ocean, without speaking or moving. Why, could he be tired from measuring the Earth?'⁶ [NT 35]

In a verse from the *Nanmukhan Tiruvantati*, Friedhelm Hardy gives an example of the early Alvars' love of Venkatam: 'The town of Him with the fine sapphire's colour is Venkatam that has murderous lions, gold, jewels, and pearls, trees in bloom and groves, where many gems float down on the water, monkeys, and people of the hunter tribes.'⁷ [NT 47]

According to Hardy, for the first four Alvars 'the temple of Venkatam is not just the geographical, but also the spiritual locale where the Early Alvars' life takes place. The temple (in the generic sense) is the concrete centre of their religion.'⁸

Speaking of the Venkatam hill, Tirumalisai says: 'Everywhere on the hill amid cool mountain springs, the lord appears before his devotees who sit in the forest meditating on his feet. The Venkatam lord is the permanent fund for gods and men alike.'⁹ [NT 45]

But devotees not only meditate there, they also dance. Several of Tirumalisai's songs contain references to devotees dancing in ecstasy. This one refers to the Venkatam hill: 'Wary elephants on the hill raise their trunks to catch the full Moon and offer it to the lord, when hunters surround them, but gypsies take up their bows and arrows and drive away the hunters. Good if we can gather there and dance in a circle.'¹⁰ [NT 46]

Yet, like the other Alvars, Tirumalisai knows that the Lord is everything. In one verse he says: 'O Lord! All the Universe is you, the sentient beings are you. The austerity-

god Siva, and his god Brahma too, are you. Fire, the mountains, the eight Quarters, the twin orbs—all these are you.”¹¹ [NT 20]

There is some doubt whether the author of the second hymn, *Tiruccantaviruttam*, is the same as the author of the *Nanmukhan Tiruvantati*. Some scholars feel that the *Tiruccantaviruttam* belongs to the ninth century. As Hardy says, ‘The work contains many of the features typical of Visistadvaita in nucleo: Vedism, yoga, the mantra “Om namo Narayanaya”, and the “surrender” of *prapatti*.’¹² However, much of these things are found in the hymns of the first three Alvars also. Nevertheless, a few examples can be given here:

In verse 76 Tirumalisai seems to indicate that knowledge, yoga, and ecstatic love together make up the path to the Lord: ‘Who could see Him, unless by a singular ever-increasing love: blocking the passage of the vile senses and placing a wax seal upon them, and opening up a passage for the true [or: *sattva*] sense-object, kindling the fine lamp of knowledge, becoming weak in the bones, melting away in the heart, and turning ripe and soft in the soul?’¹³

In verse 10 the Lord is the creator, the sustainer, and again the dissolver of the universe: ‘The cosmic order by which [all] moving and unmoving things arise and dissolve back into you and come to rest in you, [itself] exists in you—similar to the ocean’s nature by which it—white with its waves that billow and rise up in it—billows and rises and subsists in itself.’¹⁴ [TCV, 10]

Again, the Lord is also the maya that keeps us deluded:

You have the power to make my thoughts,
you have the power to break my thoughts.

You are above my consciousness,

I know you now, O Maya Lord!

Pray do not trap me once again

in the web of sense-illusion, O!¹⁵ [TCV 85]

Though in the *Tiruccantaviruttam* the Alvar often pleads for the Lord's grace, in the very last verse (verse 120) we find that the Lord has all along been 'the Hound of Heaven' in pursuit of the Alvar. Tirumalisai says:

Pursuing through my countless births,
the lord has caught up with me now.
The lotus-lord of cloud-like hue
has come to stay within my heart.
He revealed his glory form,
so now my soul indeed is blest.
The Karmic bonds are cut away,
the soul has found its joyous home.¹⁶

Besides the two hymns mentioned above in the *Nalayira Divyaprabandham*, other works are also attributed to Tirumalisai. According to S.N. Dasgupta:

[T]he *Prapannamrta* says that he [Tirumalisai] first became attached to the god Siva and wrote many Tamil works on Saiva doctrines; but later on the saint Maharya initiated him into Vaisnavism and taught him *astanga-yoga*, through which he realized the great truths of Vaisnavism. He then wrote many works in Tamil on Vaisnavism. Bhakti-sara [Tirumalisai] also wrote a scholarly work, refuting the views of other opponents, which is known as *Tattvartha-sara*. Bhakti-sara also used to practise *astanga-yoga* and was learned in all the branches of Indian philosophy. Bhakti-sara had a disciple named Kanikrsna, who wrote many extremely poetical verses or hymns in adoration of Visnu.¹⁷

The reference to Tirumalisai's practice of *ashtanga yoga* raises an interesting issue. Nathamuni, the first of the Sri Vaishnava acharyas and the compiler of the *Prabandham*, was 'described as a great yogin who practised the *yoga* of eight accessories (*astanga-yoga*).'¹⁸ According to N. Jagadeesan: '[Nathamuni] derived the secrets of yoga in a supernatural way from Nammalvar.

Further, Nammalvar is said to have initiated Nathamuni while in the yoga state.¹⁹

By all accounts, Nammalvar was not alive when Nathamuni collected the hymns of the Alvars, so Nathamuni's learning yoga from Nammalvar must indeed have been 'in a supernatural way.' But the tradition is clear that this practice of yoga did not start with Nammalvar. Not only was Tirumalisai said to have been 'a great yogin,' but the names of the first three Alvars—Sarayogi (Poygai), Bhutayogi (Pudatt), and Bhrantayogi (Pey)—would indicate that they also were recognized yogis.

Jagadeesan further says that Nathamuni wrote a treatise on yoga, called *Yoga Rahasya*, but it is no longer extant. That, plus the fact that there seem to have been breaks in the lineage, and that in the Sri Vaishnava tradition much emphasis is given to *prapatti* (self-surrender), may lead one to believe that the yoga tradition died out in Sri Vaishnavism. Jagadeesan, however, gives some evidence to the contrary—that an oral tradition has preserved the teachings of Nathamuni's *Yoga Rahasya*.²⁰

Notes and References

1. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, tr. by Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), p. 471.
2. Most of the material for the biographical part of this article was taken from *The Holy Lives of the Azhvars or The Dravida*
42. *Saints*, by A. Govindacharya (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1992). Some material was taken from *Slaves of the Lord, The Path of the Tamil Saints*, by Vidya Dehejia (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988); from *Temples of Tamilnad*, by R.K. Das (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2nd ed. 1991); and from *A History of Indian Philosophy*, by S.N. Dasgupta (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, reprint 1991, vol. 3) [Hereafter, Dasgupta].

3. *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand: Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, trans. by Srirama Bharati (Jaladampet: Sri Sadagopan Tirunarayanaswami Divya Prabandha Pathasala, 2000), p. 669. [Hereafter, *Sacred Book*]
4. *Ibid.*, p. 675.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 681.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 673.
7. *Viraha-Bhakti, The early history of Krsna devotion in South India*, by Friedhelm Hardy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 288. [Hereafter, Hardy]
8. *Ibid.* Actually, this is true of each temple that the Alvars refer to, and they refer to many in their works—including the Srirangam temple. Each temple is described in the highest terms. The Lord lives *there*—in *that* temple. But for the early Alvars, Venkatam probably holds a special position—in their hearts as well as in their poems.
9. *Sacred Book*, p. 674.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 671.
12. Hardy, p. 439.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 440.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 441.
15. *Sacred Book*, p. 168.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 174-75.
17. Dasgupta, p. 96fn.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
19. *Collected Papers on Tamil Vaishnavism*, by N. Jagadeesan. (n.p., 1989), p. 126.
20. See *Ibid.*, p. 126-28.

Nammalvar and Madhurakavi Alvar

22-41

23-27

I bow to the ocean of Tamil Vedas, the Vak of Sri Satakopan which gives us all. It is manna for the devotees, pleasing to everyone, and deep as the Upanishads of a thousand threads.—Invocation to the *Tiruvaymoli* of Nammalvar¹

Once, after listening to a recital of the *Tiruvaymoli*, Lord Ranganatha of Srirangam said to the priest attending on him (referring to its author, Sathakopan), 'He is our [*nam*] Alvar.' (That is to say, all the Alvars are special, but Sathakopan is special among the Alvars.) Thus Nammalvar got his name from the Lord himself. In his songs Nammalvar usually referred to himself as Sathakopan, but he also called himself Maran or Kari Maran. Another name by which he is known is Parankusa. Nammalvar further tells us in his songs that he was from the town of Kurukur (later known as Tirunagari, or Alvar-Tirunagari), which is located in the southern part of Tamil Nadu on the bank of the river Tamraparni. He was probably born some time in the 7th or early 8th century.² He is said to be an incarnation of Vishnu's attendant Visvaksena, or even a partial incarnation of the Lord himself.

According to most accounts, Nammalvar's father, Kariyar, was the son of a local ruler of the sudra caste, and his mother, Udaiyanangaiyar, was the daughter of a highly respected Vaishnava. Soon after their marriage the young couple went to visit the temple at Tirukkurungudi to pray to Lord Vishnu for a child. The Lord was highly pleased with them and blessed them. He told the priest to honour the couple and tell them that he himself would take birth as



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their son. Some time later Udaiyanangaiyar gave birth to a son. However, the joy at his birth soon turned to fear and despair as the parents found that the child would not eat or drink anything, nor would he cry. He remained calm and silent with a beautiful smile on his face.

After a few days, the parents took him to the temple of Vishnu in Kurukur, the town in which they lived. There they worshipped the Lord and named the child Maran. They then placed him in a cradle and left him under a tamarind tree outside the temple. (In another version, the parents placed him at the feet of the Lord. The child then got up, walked to the tamarind tree, and sat down, and immediately became absorbed in meditation.) The tamarind tree is still there, and it is said to be a manifestation of Adishesha, the snake on which Vishnu reclines. The child remained by the tree for sixteen years without eating or speaking, or even opening his eyes.

Some time earlier another child had been born in a brahmin family in the nearby town of Tirukkolor. He is said to be an incarnation of Vainateya, or Kumuda-Ganesa, who serves Vishnu under Visvaksena. He was given the name Madhurakavi (sweet poet) because of his poetic abilities. At one time he decided to go on a pilgrimage to the holy places in North India. In the course of his travels, when he was on his way to Ayodhya from Badarikashrama, he saw one night a strange light illumining the southern direction. He at first wondered what it was, but then he thought that perhaps a village or a forest was on fire. Throughout that night he kept waking up and would see the same strange light. Night after night went by and he continued to see it. Finally he decided to find out where it was coming from. Heading south, he hurriedly walked by night and rested during the day. Further and further south he went until at last he reached Kurukur, where the light disappeared. He then wandered

around the town making enquiries to see if there was anything unusual there.

When Madhurakavi heard about the strange sixteen-year-old boy sitting under the tamarind tree by the temple, he decided to investigate. He went to the temple and saw Nammalvar in deep samadhi. Though Madhurakavi was convinced that this was where the light was coming from, he was uncertain whether the person before him was alive or not. In order to find out, he picked up a large rock and dropped it on the ground. Nammalvar opened his eyes and cast a benign look at Madhurakavi. But could he speak? In order to find out, Madhurakavi asked him a question: 'If in the womb of what is dead, a subtle thing be born, what doth it eat, and where doth it abide?' Nammalvar then spoke for the first time in his life, saying, 'It eateth that; it abideth there.'³ Madhurakavi immediately surrendered himself to Nammalvar, and for the rest of Nammalvar's life he served him as a disciple.

Now Vishnu decided that it was time for Nammalvar to sing his praises, so he appeared before the saint with his consort Sri, seated on the bird Garuda. This vision was the catalyst. From then on verses of ecstatic devotion flowed from Nammalvar's tongue. These poems were carefully noted down, set to music, and sung by Madhurakavi.

In his verses Nammalvar sings the praises of the Lord of various temples, many of which are near Kurukur, his home town, but many more are not. Quite a few of the temples he mentions are in the central parts of what are now Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and he even mentions Venkatam (Tirupati), which is far north of Kurukur. Whether or not he visited all these temples is not clear, but he speaks as if he has. There is a legend connecting Nammalvar with the temple of Sarangapani at Kumbakonam. According to this legend, 'Lord Sarangapani

once went out of the shrine without the knowledge of Lakshmi. When he returned to the shrine, Devi Lakshmi refused to open the door, out of anger and vexation. Thereupon the great Vaishnavite saint Nammalvar intervened and patched up their quarrel. Devi Lakshmi then opened the door and Lord Sarangapani went inside. The festival of Mattai Adi is celebrated [every year] to commemorate this incident.⁷⁴

In the commentaries on Nammalvar's *Tiruvaymoli* there are two places where it is said that when Nammalvar was singing particular verses he went into samadhi and remained in that state for six months. Then there is another story about him given in Nampillai's commentary on the *Tiruvaymoli*: 'Once Nammalvar went out into the countryside to a quiet place. He sat down, covered his head with his cloth, and tried to forget about God. But just then a man came along carrying a heavy bundle; wishing to rest for a moment, he put it down and exclaimed in relief, "Sriman Narayana!" When Nammalvar heard these words he was astonished that even in so isolated a place he was still to be reminded of God.'⁷⁵

Nammalvar, it is said, lived to the age of thirty-five. For the last nineteen years Madhurakavi served him devotedly, and after Nammalvar's death Madhurakavi spent the remaining years of his own life perpetuating the memory of his master by singing Nammalvar's verses. He also wrote one work, Kanninun-siruttambu, a hymn in eleven stanzas to Nammalvar, which is included in the first book of the collected works of the Alvars. This hymn is said to teach the true import of devotion to the guru. A few verses can be given here:

I spelled his [Nammalvar's] name and found my joy,
 I served his feet and found the truth.
 I do not know another god,
 I sing his songs and roam the street. (v. 2)

I roam but everywhere I see,
 My Teva-piran, his charming face.
 Through service to the Kurugur King [i.e., Nammalvar],
 This lowly-self has found his grace. (v. 3)

For those who worship grace alone,
 By grace he sang the thousand songs.
 A bigger grace you cannot show,
 For he did grace the Vedas-four. (v. 8)

The deep sense of Vedic thought,
 He sang in song and taught my heart.
 Satakopan my lord is love—
 Alone the use of serving him. (v. 9)

To those who seek the lord's refuge,
 Madurakavi who took refuge
 In Ten-Kurugur Nambi's feet
 Has this to say, 'See Vaikunth here!'⁶ (v.11)

There was at that time a famous academy of poets organized by the Pandya king at Madurai. Any poet who wanted to be recognized had to submit a manuscript to this academy for its judgment. Hearing that Madhurakavi was singing Nammalvar's songs and declaring before all the greatness of his master, the members of the academy became angry and demanded that Madhurakavi produce a sample of Nammalvar's writings. Madhurakavi handed them a small piece of a palm leaf with just one of Nammalvar's verses on it:

Naranam [Narayana] is the holy name you have to
 meditate upon;

Besides this, let me affirm, there's none to reckon,
 Take note, ye men, yearning for the lovely pair of feet
 Of Kannan, our Lord.⁷ [10.5.1]

In those days the members of the academy would test the merit of a literary work by a magic plank. Manuscripts were placed on this plank, which was floating in the lotus

pond of the Madurai temple, and the plank would then start oscillating. What was supposed to be good would remain on the plank, while what was supposed to be worthless would be thrown off into the pond. When the palm leaf piece containing Nammalvar's verse was put on the plank along with other manuscripts, the plank threw everything off except Nammalvar's verse. The Madurai poets were impressed and from then on held Nammalvar's works in high regard.]mk

According to A.K. Ramanujan: 'Such was Nammalvar's fame and importance that, soon after his death, images of him were installed in South Indian Visnu temples, and revered as the very feet of God. In these temples today every worshiper's head receives the touch of a special crown that represents Visnu's feet and our alvar; it is named *catakopam* after him. He is called the "first lord of our lineage." He is the "body," the other saints are the "limbs." His poems have been chanted in temple services and processions since the eleventh century. Indeed, at the Srirankam temple a special ten-day festival is devoted to his work: a professional reciter (with the title *araiyar*, "king"), dressed in ritual finery, sings and enacts the hymns for the listening image of Lord Visnu.'⁸

[Before we delve into Nammalvar's works, however, we should take a look at a very important development in religion that had taken place at some point before the Alvars, but which we first see in them in a well-developed form—that is, the devotee's establishment of a human relationship with God and how this relationship is connected with mythology.

Sri Ramakrishna once said: 'The first stage [of spiritual life] is that of the beginner. He studies and hears. Second is the stage of the struggling aspirant. He prays to God, meditates on Him, and sings His name and glories. The third stage is that of the perfect soul. He has seen God,

realized Him directly and immediately in his inner Consciousness. Last is the stage of the supremely perfect, like Chaitanya. Such a devotee establishes a definite relationship with God, looking on Him as his Son or Beloved.⁹

But the goal is also the path. As Swami Satprakashananda used to say, 'Today's imagination is tomorrow's realization.' Devotees also imagine a relationship with God to help them realize God. Ramakrishna says, 'But in order to realize God, one must assume one of these attitudes: *santa* [the serene attitude], *dasya* [the attitude of a servant toward his Master], *sakhya* [the attitude of friendship], *vatsalya* [the attitude of a parent toward a Child], or *madhur* [the attitude of a lover toward the Beloved].'¹⁰ These attitudes, or relationships, are practised in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition and also by some Ramaites, such as Ramakrishna's own teacher Jatadhari. There is another attitude called apatya in which a devotee thinks of God as either the mother or the father. This was also highly recommended by Ramakrishna.¹¹ -62

Ramakrishna himself practised spiritual disciplines through many different relationships. Most of these are described in Swami Saradananda's book, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*. But Swami Premananda mentioned one—the attitude of the brother of Krishna—which is not discussed there. As Swami Premananda said: 'The Master practised all Bhavas—as a friend, a lady-friend, and a sweetheart of the Lord, and also in the attitude of Balarama, the brother of Shri Krishna. One can also practise the Bhava of Shiva.'¹² Concerning his own practice as a lady-friend of God, Ramakrishna once said: 'I spent one year as a handmaid—the handmaid of the Divine Mother, the Embodiment of Brahman. I used to dress myself as a woman. . . . One can conquer lust by assuming the attitude of a woman.'¹³

During a devotee's period of spiritual struggle, his relationship is the cord that binds him to God and helps him remember God at all times. The devotee can practise this in two ways: In one type of practice the devotee brings God into his own world. While he does his various duties, he constantly thinks that his divine Friend or Parent or Child is with him, helping and guiding him, or playing with him. Brother Lawrence is a good example of this. In the other type of practice the devotee divinizes his world. He thinks of his home and surroundings as being in Vrindavan or Ayodhya, or some other place connected with the aspect of God that he worships, and he thinks of the people around him as being members of the Lord's entourage. The devotee is then focusing on a particular mythology of God, and he thinks of his surroundings and of his relationship with God in terms of that mythology.

At the time of meditation, however, this world must be forgotten. The devotee himself must then try to enter into the realm of God, which is in the heart. Gaudiya Vaishnavas and Ramaites have specific disciplines for this based on the mythologies of Krishna and Rama. This is called *lila-smarana*—meditation on the play of God. Here we find the purpose and *function* of mythology. Not just any story will do. A story is not necessarily a myth that can be used for spiritual practice—just as not every word or sentence can be used as a mantra for spiritual practice. It must be revealed. As C.G. Jung said: 'For it is not that "God" is a myth, but that myth is the revelation of a divine life in man. It is not we who invent myth, rather it speaks to us as a Word of God. The Word of God comes to us, and we have no way of distinguishing whether and to what extent it is different from God.'¹⁴

In Gaudiya Vaishnava and Ramaite devotional sadhana the idea is to meditate that you are a participant in a particular myth—that is, that you are one of the actors or

actresses in a divine drama, or lila, of God. You have a specific role which gives you a certain relationship with God and you are acting in that role. Ultimately, when your meditation deepens, you attain a *siddha-deha*, or perfected subtle body. You then cross the boundary of imagination and enter into the divine realm, into the Lord's eternal lila, where you come face to face with the Lord himself. In some cases also, the boundary between this physical world and the devotee's divine world dissolves at this point, and the devotee sees God's lila both in meditation and in the physical realm. It is the beginning of this *lila-smarana*, or meditation on the play of God, that we find in the poems of the Alvars.

Unlike the Gaudiya Vaishnavas and the Ramaites, whose worship centres almost exclusively on Krishna and Rama respectively, the Alvars worship Vishnu (Narayana), who took the forms of Varaha, Vatapatrasayin (the baby lying on a banyan leaf whose stomach contains the whole universe), Vamana, Nrisimha, Rama, Krishna, and so on. And it is the same Vishnu who also lives in Vaikuntha as well as in the earthly shrines of Tolaivillimangalam, Srirangam, Tirumaliruncolai, and many other places. Thus, the Alvars' mythology—and following that, their *lila-smarana*, or meditation on the lila—takes in all these different forms and aspects of Vishnu. Their mythology is like a symphony with various themes weaving in and out. As Nammalvar says in one of his poems:

Before I could say,

"He became cowherd

fish

wild boar,"

he became a million million.¹⁵ [1.8.8]

Four of the works in the *Nalayira Divyaprabandham* (the collected works of the Alvars) are said to be by Nammalvar: the *Tiruviruttam*, having one hundred stanzas;

the *Tiruvaciriyam*, having seven stanzas; the *Periyatiruvantati*, having eighty-seven stanzas; and the *Tiruvaymoli*, having 1,102 stanzas.³²⁻⁴¹

(In the *Tiruviruttam* we find the greatest influence of cankam poetry—the poetry of ‘landscapes’. And, indeed, most of this poem is in the *akam* style—that is, cankam poetry of love and separation. Here the Alvar frequently takes on the persona of a young maiden in love with the Lord who is suffering the anguish of separation from him. Verse 17 uses the landscape of the seashore (*neytal*), which, in cankam poetry, is associated with the anguish of separation of lovers. And this landscape is especially appropriate for poems on Vishnu, as his colour is said to be like that of the ocean, and he is also said to sleep on the ocean on a serpent bed. Again, night is also dark and creates further anguish of separation. Here the young maiden pursues the Lord to the seashore:

O Dark Ocean, where the lord of dark effulgence—
like a black Sun spreading a blue glow of dark rays—
reclines on a serpent bed. May you live! My lord slipped
out in the dark of the night. His chariot tracks brought
me to your shore. Pray do not wipe out the tracks with
your dark-as-pitch waves.¹⁶

Sometimes, however, Nammalvar takes on the persona of the maiden’s mother or friend. In verse 26 the friend is consoling the maiden and urging her to be patient. The maiden has just come through the desert of the hardship of separation (*palai*, in cankam poetry) and is approaching a grove where there is hope (*mullai*, in cankam poetry—associated with patient waiting):

The hot-tempered Sun eats up the four-parted Earth,
sucks in the juice and spits out the dry desert. O
Precious girl who has just crossed that region! Celestials
come down to Earth and worship the lord Krishna in
Vehka, which is close at hand. Just beyond it is the

fragrant nectar-grove-surrounded Tiruttankal. It gives relief to one in any condition. So hold on!¹⁷

In verse 6 Madan (the god of love) has been defeated, but it is the maiden's own broken heart that she tries to salvage by picking up what is salvageable among Madan's weapons in order to attack the Lord:

From the litter of Madana's bent arrows and broken bows, she salvages the good ones. Looking like a pale creeper she retreats, but only to return. Run for your lives, ye World! She will strike death with Madana's sceptre on the fast bird-rider, Asura-killer lord.¹⁸

In a totally different mood, the Alvar describes the perplexity of sages who can comprehend an all-mighty and supreme Lord but cannot understand how this same Lord can appear as a child who steals butter:

The sleepless Munis, who overcome the pangs of repeated births, and all others, worship the lord without a peer or superior, who is the lord of the celestials too. But the wonder of his coming to steal butter is beyond their comprehension indeed!¹⁹ (*Tiruviruttam*, v. 98)

(In one verse of the *Periyatiruvantati* the Alvar gives us a hint of his own spiritual state—an incredible state indeed. He is not simply writing beautiful poetry. He is writing from his own experience.



O Lord who measured the Earth! When I think of you and fall into a trance, my heart swells with you inside, my Karmas disappear. When I wake up and see reality I become a part of the vast Universe that you are! How is this? Tell me.²⁰ (*Periyatiruvantati*, v. 76)

The *Tiruvaymoli*²¹ alone comprises the whole of the fourth book of the Prabandham. The importance of this work can be understood by the fact that many commentaries have been written on it, some of them quite large. According to Friedhelm Hardy, 'the five oldest

commentaries alone' on the *Tiruvaymoli* 'add up to the size of the *Mahabharata*'.²² The *Tiruvaymoli* is the best known of Nammalvar's works, and it is the most loved work of the whole Prabandham, though in fact, it is probably the most difficult. [Just to remember the *Tiruvaymoli* is to feel blessed. To have a copy in one's home is to feel blessed. But to read the whole work is to feel that one has somehow had a small glimpse of that great life, and that is to be blessed.] We shall therefore spend more time on it. ←

At the very beginning of the *Tiruvaymoli* a theme is hinted at:

We here, that man, this man, the other in-between;
that woman,
this woman, that other in-between, whoever;
those people, these people, and the others in-between,
that thing,
this thing, and the other in-between, whichever;
those things dying, these things, the others in-between,
bad things,
good things, things to be, things that were—
He became all of them, that One.²³ [1.1.4]

The original Tamil is much more terse:

Nam avan ivan uvan, aval ival uval eval,
Tam avar ivar uvar, atu itu utu etu,
Vim avai ivai uvai, avai nalam, tinku aval,
*Am avai, ayavai, ayninra avare.*²⁴

But by the sixth verse, the point is obvious—though God is everything, he is full of contradictions. Yet that point itself is contradicted by the fact that he is also the 'steadfast One':

"He sat, He stood, He lay down, He moved about;"

"He didn't sit, He didn't stand, He didn't lie down, He didn't move about:"

He is hard to know, if you think He has one nature;
thus always is His nature, my steadfast One.²⁵ [1.1.6]

What is often missed, because of the reader's absorption in the beauty of the devotional elements, is how this theme—the contradictions in the Lord, in the world, and in the Alvar himself—is sustained, sometimes in a very subtle way, throughout the work. It is almost as if the whole work is a koan. Here are a few more examples of how Nammalvar plays with this:

Who indeed can plumb the unfathomable mind

Of the Lord Supreme who could hold the worlds seven
In his stomach, big and tough,

And repose on a tender fig-leaf?²⁶ [2.2.7]

I drank and drank, without intermission, the nectar pure,
The dazzling gem, the mystic Lord of wondrous deeds,
(Gopala) the shepherd chief, bound and beaten by
cowherds

(For theft of butter) and got my nescience, matter-born,
severed.²⁷ [1.7.3]

(That is to say, ignorance is removed by thinking of an illiterate cowherd boy.)

Dwarf,

you confuse everyone.

But make me understand:

becoming oblivion, memory,

heat, cold,

all things wonderful,

and wonder itself,

becoming every act of success,

every act of good and evil,

and every consequence,

becoming even the weariness

of lives,

you stand there—

and what misery you bring!²⁸ [7.8.6]

From the examples given above, we can also get some idea of how Nammalvar plays with mythological elements. The Lord's various forms or lilas—such as his manifestation in a temple, or in one of his avatars, or in Vaikuntha—all merge together in a spaceless, timeless vacuum. There is no here or there; there is no now or then where the Lord is concerned. It is when the Alvar feels his separation from God that time and space are very much present and unbearable. In fact, the only real suffering the Alvars recognize is the feeling of separation from God. Everything else fades into insignificance next to their all-consuming longing for God. This brings us to union and separation—two themes that run throughout the *Tiruvaymoli*, but which are actually part of the main theme of contradictions.

First we will look at the play of separation, as this is where the Alvar's relationship with God comes in. Actually, in the *Tiruvaymoli* the Alvar, for the most part, alternates between two relationships with God—the relationship of the servant to the Master, and that of the lover to the Beloved. When the Alvar takes on the attitude of a servant, he is usually longing to enter Vishnu's heavenly realm of Vaikuntha, or he is wishing to serve the Lord at a particular pilgrimage site. Vishnu is far away, and the Alvar has various obstacles, such as his human body or his karma, which prevent him from joining the Lord and serving him.

Oh, radiant Lord, like unto the endless rays of a black
Sun,

With eyes like lotus, cool and red, hands, feet and lips,
all red,

Even if You appear not before me, pray, lift me on

To Your lotus feet, which did span all the worlds

And from this vassal service do command.²⁹ [8.5.7]

But Nammalvar's most intense poems are those in which he is in the mood of a maiden (*a nayaki*) whose beloved is the Lord. This is when the Alvar becomes overwhelmed with the feeling of separation from God. Sometimes the *nayaki* sends messages to the Lord through birds, and at other times she asks the moon or the wind or fire if they are also suffering from separation from him, as she sees in their features her own pangs of separation from the Lord.

You undying flame, sad indeed is your plight,
Your gentle soul stands withered; burnt are you
By the desire to get the tulaci garland, cool and bright,
Worn by our Lord with large lotus-eyes and lips of red
hue?³⁰ [2.1.9]

At other times the Alvar takes the position of the *nayaki*'s mother or friend who speak about her, describing the *nayaki*'s plight. In one set of poems the friend tries to convince the other women of the village that their remedies for the *nayaki*'s 'sickness' are all wrong. And in another she asks the women why they had taken the *nayaki* to the temple of Tolaivillimangalam. Did they not know her nature? Could they not realize what would happen to her on seeing the Lord there?

After seeing Tolaivillimangalam where people
prosperous in the enduring four Vedas dwell,
she's lost all self-control—see, she's beyond you,
women;
she cries, "Lord Kannan, dark as the sea, is everything
that can be learned!"
she has no modesty left, she keeps rejoicing,
delighted within, she melts away.³¹ [6.5.4]

In other poems the mother asks herself or her friends what to do about such a daughter. She even addresses the Lord himself in one place, scolding him for his indifference to the *nayaki*.

To behold you (of beauty exquisite)
 Who the thousand arms of mighty Vanan [i.e.,
 Banasura] smote,
 This young lady of forehead bright
 Stands consumed by a burning desire,
 But your grace on her you don't confer.³² [2.4.2]

But not all is sadness and separation. In many verses Nammalvar describes being united with God. What does he mean by this? Though arguments can be made to the contrary, it seems pretty clear that he does not mean being absorbed in the non-dual Brahman of Advaita Vedanta, as he himself makes fun of this path.

If they should merge,
 that's really good:
 if the two that'll never meet
 should meet,
 then this human thing
 will become our lord,
 the Dark One
 with the sacred bird
 on his banner—
 as if that's possible.
 It will always be itself.

There are yogis
 who mistake fantasy
 for true release
 and run around
 in circles
 in the world
 of what is and what was
 and what will be.
 It takes all kinds.³³ [8.8.9]

But Nammalvar's descriptions of his experience of union are quite mysterious. Only a few examples can be

given here. One experience we could call 'Who is who?' In this mood, the Alvar swings back and forth between his own and the Lord's identity, and sometimes he is confused. Sometimes the experience is only intellectual and does not resolve the contradictions he sees.

It's true
 even I am you
 even the unbearable hell
 of this world
 is you:
 this being so
 what's the difference?
 One may go to paradise
 and reach perfect joy
 or go the other way
 and fall into hell
 yet I being I
 even when I remember
 I am you
 I still fear hell:
 lord in perpetual paradise
 let me be at your feet.³⁴ [8.1.9]

But other times the Alvar leaves us confused:

He who took the seven bulls
 by the horns
 he who devoured the seven worlds
 made me his own cool place
 in heaven
 and thought of me
 what I thought of him
 and became my own thoughts.³⁵ [I.8.7]

Similar to this are what A.K. Ramanujan calls the 'mutual cannibalism' poems. The theme is a play on the myth of Vishnu as a baby lying on a banyan leaf during

pralaya, the dissolution of the universe. The great devotee Markandeya was the only one to survive the destruction. When in his great joy he saw the baby and approached him, Vishnu swallowed him, and Markandeya found the whole universe inside the baby. This is an example of what Nammalvar does with this myth:

My dark one
 stands there as if nothing's
 changed
 after taking entire
 into his maw
 all three worlds
 the gods
 and the good kings
 who hold their lands
 as a mother would
 a child in her womb—
 and I
 by his leave
 have taken him entire
 and I have him in my belly
 for keeps.³⁶ [8.7.9]

More intense, however, are the poems of 'possession'. 'A bhakta is not content to worship a god in word and ritual,' says A.K. Ramanujan, 'nor is he content to grasp him in a theology; he needs to possess him and be possessed by him.'³⁷ Some of Nammalvar's songs are similar to verses in the Srimad Bhagavatam describing the state of the gopis after Krishna suddenly disappeared from them. And it is quite possible that the Bhagavata got the idea from the songs of the Alvars. Here the mother of the nayaki is describing the state of her daughter:

"I'm the earth you see," she says.

"I'm all the visible skies," she says.

"I'm the fires,
the winds,
and the seas," she says.

Is it because our lord dark as the sea
has entered her and taken her over?

How can I explain my girl
to you who see nothing
but this world?³⁸ [5.6.3]

Again, in some poems the Alvar feels that the Lord has totally possessed him—and most likely so that he can praise himself through the Alvar.

Poets,

beware, your life is in danger:
the lord of gardens is a thief,
a cheat,

master of illusions;
he came to me,

a wizard with words,
sneaked into my body,
my breath,

with bystanders looking on
but seeing nothing,
he consumed me

life and limb,
and filled me,

made me over
into himself.³⁹ [10.7.1]

↓ Some writers on Nammalvar wonder why there is no sustained theme running through the *Tiruvaymoli*. The Alvar is never consistent. He seems to jump from mood to mood. But it is this idea of contradictions and inconsistencies that is itself the theme, the thread that runs through the work. How can you consistently describe someone who is so inconsistent, so contrary, someone who is impossible to pin down? As soon as you try to describe

God, he melts away like a wax figure and becomes something else.

Then again, how can the Alvar be consistent while describing someone so inconsistent? Nammalvar simply follows the Lord. At one moment the Alvar is absorbed in one mood and the next he is absorbed in another. But just as all contradictions in the Lord—and in this world—are finally absorbed and resolved in the Lord himself, so also, all the Alvar's inconsistencies and contradictory emotions are somehow resolved in the Lord's mysterious possession of him. Of this he gives but hints. This is the innermost world of the Alvar—a world we can never enter unless we ourselves are possessed by the Lord.

He is
 for he cannot *not* be
 for his men
 for others he is
 as if he is not
 our lord
 is here
 he lives here in me
 and we're done with
 growing and perishing
 waxing and waning
 like the moon—
 done with
 knowing
 and unknowing
 like sunshine and nightdark.⁴⁰ [8.8.10]

Notes and References

1. *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand: Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, trans. by Srirama Bharati (Jaladampet: Sri

- Sadagopan Tirunarayanawami Divya Prabandha Pathasala, 2000), p. 437. [Hereafter, *Sacred Book*]
2. See, *Viraha-Bhakti, The early history of Kṛṣṇa devotion in South India*, by Friedhelm Hardy [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983], p. 267.
 3. *The Holy Lives of the Azhvars or The Dravida Saints*, by Alkondavilli Govindacharya. [Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1982], 202-203. 'What is dead' refers to matter, or the body. 'A subtle thing' refers to the soul. 'It eateth that' means that the soul enjoys the body and thereby experiences pleasures and pains. 'It abideth there' means that the soul is caught in the prison of the body.
 4. *Temples of Tamilnad*, by R.K. Das. [Bombay: Bhāratīya Vidya Bhavan, 1991], p. 139.
 5. 'Living for God: Nammalvar and the Srivaisnavas of South India,' by Francis X. Clooney, S.J. In, *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture*, Vol. XLIV, no. 10, October 1993, p. 315.
 6. *Sacred Book*, p. 189-90.
 7. *Tiruvaymoli English Gloss*, by S. Satyamurthi Ayyangar. [Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1981], vol. 4, p. 996-97. [Hereafter, TVM]
 8. *Hymns for the Drowning, Poems for Visnu by Nammalvar*, trans. by A.K. Ramanujan. [n.p.: Penguin Books, n.d.], p. xii-xiii. [Hereafter, *Hymns*]
 9. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda. [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981], p. 344. [Hereafter, *Gospel*]
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
 11. The Srivaishnavas of South India are actually the inheritors and preservers of the Alvar literature. According to A.K. Ramanujan: 'Pillai Lokacarya (13th century) [one of the great acharyas of this tradition] speaks of nine kinds of intimate dyadic relationships: those between the father and son, protector and protégé, master and servant, husband and wife. the person who understands and the object that is understood, the owner and his property, body and soul, the

thing that is dependent and the things on which it depends, the person who enjoys and the thing that is enjoyed. These nine kinds of relationships are interlinked.' (A.K. Ramanujan, p. 138-39, fn. 41.) However, the Alvars themselves assume in their poetry the same kinds of relationships that are spoken of in the Gaudiya Vaishnava scriptures.

12. *Spiritual Talks*, by the First Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. [Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1991], p. 74.
13. *Gospel*, p. 701.
14. *C.G. Jung—Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffe. Trans. by Richard and Clara Winston. [London: Fontana Press, c1963], p. 373.
15. *Hymns*, p. 49.
16. *Sacred Book*, p. 686.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 687.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 684.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 701.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 716.
21. The *Tiruvaymoli* is divided into ten centums, each centum having ten decads and each decad having eleven verses, the eleventh being the *srutiphala*—a verse which gives the results accruing to a person who hears or sings the previous ten verses, and which also gives the name of the poet. The only exception is the seventh decad of the second centum. This decad has 13 stanzas, as each stanza except the *srutiphala* is devoted to one of the twelve names of Narayana. The whole *Tiruvaymoli* is in the *antati* form, which means that the last word or sound of each stanza is repeated at the beginning of the next stanza. All the 1,102 stanzas of the *Tiruvaymoli* are linked like this, plus the very last stanza of the work is then linked back to the first.
22. Hardy, p. 244.
23. Unpublished translation by Francis X. Clooney, S.J.
24. TVM, vol. 1, p. 8.
25. Unpublished translation by Francis X. Clooney, S.J.
26. TVM, vol. 1, p. 111.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

28. *Hymns*, p. 20.
29. TVM, vol. 3, p. 782.
30. TVM, vol. 1, p. 104.
31. Unpublished translation by Francis X. Clooney, S.J.
32. TVM, vol. 1, p. 126
33. *Hymns*, p. 56.
34. *Ibid.*, 39.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 76. The 'lord of gardens' is Lord Alagar at Tirumaliruncolai, near Madurai.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Periyalvar and Andal

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When it comes to flowers, South India has it all over the North. In the South the sprouts of the nagalinga dart out all up and down the trunks of the nagalinga trees, and garlands of these flowers adorn Ganesh at the Jambukeswara temple. At the flower market outside the Minakshi temple in Madurai, an ordinary rose garland is 4 roses thick. Looking at the market, you would think that all the pink rose bushes in country had sent their flowers—as if they were vying with each other to adorn the lovely Minakshi. The same is true with the jasmine garlands. And where are the tulsi garlands in the North? They have all gone south—tons of them—to the Vishnu temples there. There they are fat and dripping with tulsi leaves. In the South, it seems, Nature not only wants to give her best to the Lord, she also wants to give it in abundance.

About fifty miles south of Madurai is the small, quiet town of Srivilliputtur. 'The *Srivilliputtur Sthala Purana* . . . explains the name of the town as being the new town (*puttur*) built by a chieftain named Villi; the word Sri was added because the goddess Laksmi, as Antal, chose to take up her abode there. The hunter-chieftain Villi, following the instructions received from Visnu in a dream, searched for an image of reclining Visnu, and having found one in a forest, he built a shrine to enclose the image, and later constructed a town around the temple.'¹ Even today, Srivilliputtur seems untouched by the commercial and technological madness of most of the rest of the world. Through the grace of the two saints born in this town, it remains dedicated to the ideal of plain living and high thinking.

There, around the beginning of the ninth century, a brahmin, who later came to be known as Periyalvar (the 'Great Alvar'), spent his days growing flowers and tulsi in his garden, and making beautiful thick garlands of them to adorn Vatapatrasayi ('He who lies on the banyan leaf'—i.e., Vishnu), the Lord of Srivilliputtur.² Periyalvar was not well read in the Vedas, as were most brahmins of his day. He much preferred to spend his time worshipping Vishnu, and he loved to think of himself as a humble servant of the Lord. Because of his great devotion, he was called Vishnucitta (meaning, 'he whose mind is centred on Vishnu'). He is said to be an incarnation of Vishnu's mount, Garuda.

Once the Pandya king of Madurai, Vallabhadeva, was going about the city in disguise to see the condition of the people when he happened to meet an old pilgrim from Kashi who was on his way to Rameswaram. The king requested the elderly man to give him some advice, so the man, who did not know who his enquirer was, quoted a Sanskrit verse that said:

↪ For eight months during the year, work for the rainy season,
 During the day, for the night.
 During youth, for old age,
 During this life, for the next.³

The king was deeply gratified, but he returned to the palace depressed. 'Am I really working for my next life?' he thought. 'What do I need to do in order to secure my future welfare?' The king was continuously pondering this question. At last his minister noticed that the king seemed a bit despondent and asked him why. After the king confided to him his doubt, the minister suggested that the king arrange a debate on this question and invite all the pandits of his kingdom to attend. The king immediately agreed. A bag of gold coins was to be the prize for the winner of the

debate. Messengers were sent all over the kingdom, including Srivilliputtur. When Periyalvar got the message he immediately refused, as he felt he was not learned enough to attend such a conference. But Lord Vatatpatrasayi decided otherwise. He wanted his devotee to win the prize by proclaiming the Lord's glory. Appearing to Periyalvar one night in a dream, the Lord told him to go to Madurai and participate in the debate. Periyalvar was extremely diffident. How could he, who had hardly studied anything, dare open his mouth before those great scholars? But the Lord reassured him that he himself would see to everything and commanded Periyalvar to go. Resigning himself to the Lord's will, Periyalvar left the next day for the royal court at Madurai, where the debate had already started.

Strangely enough, as soon as Periyalvar arrived, the king and his minister both fell at his feet and gave him a wonderful reception. The other pandits there were taken aback by this, as they knew that Periyalvar was not a scholar. Then the minister invited Periyalvar to speak. Just as the Lord had promised, he filled Periyalvar with knowledge, and words of great wisdom flowed from the Alvar's mouth. He was even quoting sections from the Vedas which he had not read before. After some time the bag of gold, which had been hung above the assembly, came down on its own in front of Periyalvar, as if offering itself to him. The other pandits then all prostrated before him and sang his praises, and the king gave him the title Pattarpiran (i.e., Bhattanatha), chief of the brahmins.

In order to honour him further, the king had the Alvar seated on an elephant and taken around the city in a grand procession. As Periyalvar was thus riding on the elephant, Vishnu, along with Lakshmi and other attendants, appeared in the sky as if to witness the celebration. But instead of feeling elated and proud, Periyalvar was suddenly overwhelmed with the love and concern of a mother for her

child, and he feared for the Lord's safety. How could the Lord appear in this mortal and sinful world? Would he not be harmed? In order to protect him, the Alvar started singing a song, blessing the Lord with eternal life. He who was blessed, now became the blessing; the protected was now the protector—and that out of pure love and anxiety.

When the celebrations were over, Periyalvar returned to his quiet life of service to the Lord at Srivilliputtur. Though outwardly things were the same, inwardly his devotion had taken a new turn. Ever since his vision of the Lord at Madurai, he lived mentally in Vrindavan, thinking of himself as Yashoda caring for the baby Krishna.

One day as he was working in his tulsi grove, he was startled to see a small female baby, partly covered with earth, lying under a tulsi bush. Like King Janaka, who found Sita in a similar manner, Periyalvar was delighted and immediately brought her to his home, gave her the name Goda, and took her as his own daughter. She is said to be an incarnation of Bhu Devi, the Goddess of the Earth.⁴

In such an environment, it was not hard for the little girl, as she grew up, to think of their village as Vrindavan and the temple as Krishna's home. Her whole life was centred around Krishna, and so was her love. She felt sure that one day she would marry him. However, sometimes she had doubts whether she was pretty enough for him, so in order to make certain, she would decorate herself and look at her reflection in the water of a well. One day, seeing the beautiful, thick garlands her father had made for the Lord's worship, she decided to decorate herself with them. Looking at her reflection then, she thought she would surely be a worthy bride for the Lord. When Periyalvar finished making the garlands, he would put them in a basket, finish his other work, and later take them to the temple. Day after day went by, and Goda continued to put the garlands on, look at herself, and then return them to the



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basket. Afterwards, her father unknowingly took them to the temple and offered them to the Lord.

One day, however, Periyalvar found a hair in one of the garlands and on questioning Goda, learned what she had been doing. He was shocked and deeply disappointed. It was too late then to make new garlands, so he threw the used ones away and did not offer any that day. But that night Lord Vatapatrasayi appeared to Periyalvar in a dream and asked him why he had not offered any garlands the previous day. When Periyalvar told him that they had been defiled by his daughter, who had put them on, the Lord replied that in the future he wanted only those garlands which had been worn by her, for her love sanctified them and made them all the more fragrant.

Periyalvar woke up and thought: 'Who is she? Is she Sri or Bhu or Nila?' In the morning he informed his daughter of the Lord's command, and he also gave her the name Andal (the feminine form of 'Alvar'). From then on, Andal would wear the flower garlands first, and only after that would they be taken to the temple to be given to the Lord. She was also given the title Sudik-kodutta-nacchiyar—i.e., the consort who wore [garlands] and then gave them [to her lord].

As Andal's love for the Lord grew and grew, so did Periyalvar's anxiety about her. 'What will happen to her?' he wondered. When she reached marriageable age, he one day approached her on the subject. 'Andal responded sternly: "If I heard I had to wed a mortal, I could not bear to live." "How then should I proceed?" the father inquired. "I intend to marry the Lord alone" was the bold reply.'⁵ Periyalvar then asked her which of the 108 manifestations of Lord Vishnu⁶ she had in mind, and he started describing the attributes of each. When he came to Lord Ranganatha at Srirangam, it was obvious that he was her chosen Lord.

Now what was to be done? Periyalvar wished he hadn't

said anything, for how could he arrange her marriage to the Lord? It did not take long, however, for Lord Ranganatha to come to his rescue. One night he appeared to the Alvar in a dream and told him to bring Andal to his temple at Srirangam and he would accept her as his bride. The Lord also commanded his priests to go to Srivilliputtur and bring the bride to him with all honours. On the arrival of the priests, Periyalvar went to Lord Vatapatrasayi and received his permission to take Andal to Srirangam. The news was also sent to King Vallabhadeva at Madurai, and in great joy he sent many precious gifts to the bride.

Andal was then beautifully dressed and decorated and carried in a palanquin all the way from Srivilliputtur to Srirangam in a grand procession. The king also came for the celebration. When the procession reached the temple, the palanquin went ahead and was carried directly inside the inner sanctum, to the image of Lord Ranganatha. A large crowd had gathered by this time, but there was complete silence. Andal slowly stepped out of the palanquin, walked up to the Lord, and disappeared.

In stunned disbelief, everyone kept staring at the shrine, expecting her to reappear. She never did. Periyalvar broke into tears. Finally the priests called him into the shrine, where the Lord said to him: 'Thou hast become My father-in-law. Worship Me with Andal by My side in your own home and continue offering garlands in loving service.'⁷ Periyalvar then went back to Srivilliputtur and installed images of Ranganatha and Andal in a temple next to the tulsi grove where he had originally found Andal. Today there is a grand temple there with a gopuram 192 feet tall, said to have been built by Periyalvar from the gold coins he received at Madurai. And even today, the flower garland that Andal wears is given afterwards to Vishnu.

Both Periyalvar and Andal have left behind two works.
 [Of the two by Periyalvar, the first is the song that he is said

to have sung, blessing the Lord with eternal life, when he had the vision of Vishnu at Madurai. Seeing the pure and immortal Lord entering the impure world of mortals, Periyalvar feared for the Lord's safety. This song in eleven verses, called the Tiruppallandu, is sung every evening before the temple closes in the Vishnu temples in South India. 'The opening words of the long refrain, '*Pallandu, pallandu, pallayiratandu*', mean "Forever and forever, for thousands of years"'⁸

For many years and everlasting years and many thousands of years and crores of hundreds of thousands of years let Thine red feet's beauty be protected! O Lord of emerald-blue hue Who have shoulders that vanquished the wrestlers! (verse 1)

Let Thou along with ourselves Thine inseparable servants live for everlasting years! Let Her (Sri) adorning Thee as ornament residing on Thine right chest, live for everlasting years! Let the luminous blazing sharp disc in Thine right hand which is capable of annihilating foes be preserved for everlasting years. Let Thine conch (*Panchajanya*) whose sound pierces through the clanging din of weapons in battle be preserved for everlasting years. (verse 2)

Wearing the cloth which Thou hast worn and discarded, taking the food remaining after Thou hast eaten, wearing the garland of *tulasi* that hast adorned Thee and given to me, thus do we, Thine feet-worshippers, performing assiduously the tasks allotted to us in whichever directions, sing eternal years to Thee who art lying on the luminous serpent, during the period of Tiruvonam. (verse 9)⁹

In Periyalvar's other work, the *Periyalvar-Tirumoli*, the songs are mostly on the childhood of Krishna, and mainly in the mood of Yashoda, Krishna's foster mother. The following verses describe the rejoicing at Krishna's birth and give a glimpse of what happens even now on the day of

Nandotsava at Gokula:

When the lord Sri Krishna Kesava was born in Tirukkotiur of beautiful mansions they spilled oil and tumeric powder on one another, slushing the portico of Krishna's house.

They ran and fell, then rose and greeted joyously, asking, 'Where is our lord?' Singers, dancers and drummers everywhere thronged the cowherds's hamlet.

The cowherd-folk poured out good milk, curds and Ghee from the rope-shelf, overturned the empty pots in the portico and danced on them tossing their dishevelled hair, and lost their minds.¹⁰ (PT 1.2.1-2, 4)

Some of the songs seem to have been written for children to sing while playing games, or for mothers to sing as lullabies. According to Friedhelm Hardy, '... Periyalvar envisages the childhood of Krsna through various games and ceremonies such as a real South Indian child would play and go through. The real world of childhood is projected into the realm of myth, with the young Krsna as its main actor. . . . But we could also say that the realm of myth is projected into real life. Song I,4 is a cradle-song sung by Yasoda; the various stanzas list the different gifts the gods have brought for the new-born baby. In the refrain we have the word *talelo* which—though of obscure etymology—has a well-defined function: to mark the song-genre "lullaby".'¹¹

The following is the 4th verse of this song: 'Gods of the wide sky have sent these jewels of dextral conch, anklets, bangles, chains and waist thread. O Red-eyed cloud-hued Lord, Talelo. O Devaki's lion club, Talelo.'¹² (PT 1.4.4)

In another song Yashoda holds Krishna in her arms and asks the moon to come out from behind the clouds to see her son:

Hide not in the clouds

O lovely moon

if you wish to play
with my precious son—

Eagerly
he calls to you
my darling
his tiny hands
raised upwards
pointing to the sky—
Tarry not, come soon
come gleefully

O gentle moon.¹³ [PT 1.5.2]

There are songs to teach the infant to clap and to walk, and even a song on the ear-boring ceremony. Here Yashoda has a hard time getting Krishna to go through with this:

O Sridhara! You say, 'Giving credence to complaints of others, did you not blame me for stealing their butter, and bind me by my hands to a stone mortar for all to see?' If you stand there taunting me for all my deeds, the bores in your ears will seal. Come, let me insert this thread, so these girls don't laugh and make fun of you.'

O Hrishikesa! You say, 'If my ears inflame, what is the difference between you and those girls?' Alas, I bored your ears without a thread fearing it might ache your head. It is my mistake. O Lord who killed the bull Arishtanemi and the calf Vatasura, Dear-as-my-eyes! Look, all the village children go about with thread in their ear-bore.¹⁴ (PT 2.3.9-10)

She has an equally hard time getting him to come for his bath. When we think that this song was written in a South Indian village about the 9th century, we realize that children all over are always the same: 'O Lord of dark-ocean hue! Overturning the oil pitchers, pinching and waking up sleeping children, turning your eyelids inside out, such are the mischiefs you play. My Master, I will give you fruit to eat. Come, you must have your bath.'¹⁵ (PT 2.4.6)

In fact, some of the liveliest (and most humorous) songs

of the Prabandham are in the *Periyalvar Tirumoli*. Song 2.9 is 'The Neighbours' Complaints'. Here the voices alternate between those of the neighbours, with their complaints about Krishna's behaviour, and that of an embarrassed Yashoda, who is trying to get Krishna to come and face these complaints:

O Dame Yasoda! The child you have is a fitting partner to his brother. Like tamarind poured over a wound, alas, they gobble up the butter, then throw the earthen pots on a rock to hear the crashing sound. Call up your son. He goes from house to house deftly doing wicked deeds. We are not able to guard against the things he has learnt, you must restrain him.

Come here, come here, come here, O Vamana Lord, come here. O Lord Kakuthstha with dark hair and red lips, come! O Ladies, he is hard to catch for me today! O Dark Lord, I cannot bear to hear the complaints of the neighbours. Come here to this wicked self!¹⁶ (PT 2.9.1-2)

There are songs on Yashoda's grief at sending Krishna out to graze the cows and again on her joy at his return. Then again, there is one on the joy of the gopis at his return from the woods.

In another poem Periyalvar describes the magic of Krishna's flute and how it casts a spell on everyone that hears it—the gopas and gopis, the cows, the birds, the deer, the gods in heaven, and even the trees: 'The beautiful cowherd lord is adorned with peacock feathers having dark centre spots, and many jewels over his properly-worn yellow vestments. When he played his flute, the trees stood enchanted and rained streams of nectar, poured flowers, and bent their upper branches in every which way he stood. Oh, the things they did in supplication!'¹⁷ [PT 3.6.10]

Lest one think that Periyalvar's songs lack depth or intensity because some were written for or about children or as lullabies, we shall look at a few verses towards the

end of the *Periyalvar Tirumoli*. In one song Periyalvar reflects on old age and the need for preparing oneself for death by thinking of the Lord. In the following song, 'The Fortress is Put on Guard', he says that the Lord has saved him in this world and the next and he need not have any fear: 'Chitragupta's verdict with the stamp affixed by Yama, King of the Southern Quarter, has been quashed, the messengers of death have fled. The lord who reclines in the pearly ocean, lord of enlightened sages, the ambrosial delight of devotees, has made me his. No more like old, the fortress is on guard!'¹⁸ (PT 5.2.2)

In song 5.3 we find that the Lord is truly his very own: 'Caught you! Now I will never let you go. Lest you disappear through your magical powers, I swear upon the Lady of the lotus! You were never true to anyone. O Lord of Tirumalirunsolai, abounding in springs in which people from town and village throng to bathe and worship to rid themselves of the Karmas, O My Master!'¹⁹ (PT 5.2.2)

Again, in the following, we can get a glimpse of his intense and ecstatic love:

When you churned the ocean of milk and obtained the nectar, you poured it into a vessel; just so I have opened the mouth of my melting body, swallowed you up and filled myself with you. [PT 5.4.4]

In the longing to see the place where he sleeps a pretended sleep on the serpent which has rolled out as his mattress on the white ocean, my soul gets agitated. Lacking any comfort, I sob; my hair stands on end, I shed tears, and cannot find any sleep in my bed.²⁰
[PT 5.1.7]]₅₀

In the closing verses of each of And al's songs, she describes herself as 'the daughter of Vishnucitta,' or 'of Vishnucitta.' But does he mention her? Not by name. But a hint is given in one song in which a mother speaks about her daughter:

I have but one daughter—
 the world hailed my great fortune.
 I raised her as if
 she were the goddess Sri—
 lotus-eyed Mal [Krishna] took her away.²¹ [PT 3.8.4]

→ If, when reading Periyalvar and Andal's works, we get the feeling we are reading of the gopas and gopis of Vrindavan from the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, there is a good reason for it. It is likely that much of this material in the *Bhagavatam* was adapted from the songs of Periyalvar, Andal, and other Alvares and translated from Tamil into Sanskrit.²² And it was Andal, more than any of the other Alvares, who entered the world of the gopis. According to Friedhelm Hardy: 'In my opinion, the *Bhagavata Purana*, in spite of its lyricism and artistry, remains an academic and hybrid work when compared with some of the sophisticated and yet strikingly intense and passionately emotional songs of Nammalvar or Antal. But the factor that allowed for this excellence is at the same time the reason why the poetry fell into oblivion: it reached its height of perfection because it was rooted so deeply in Tamil cultural tradition; but in the overall Indian context, Tamil literature had no position or function since it lay outside general Indian awareness. This meant that only when "translated" into Sanskrit and Sanskrit culture could Alvar poetry and Alvar bhakti become influential in the north.'²³

In the shorter of her two works, the *Tiruppavai*, Andal describes a ritual very similar to one described in the *Bhagavatam*—the gopis' vow to worship the Goddess Katyayani to obtain Krishna as their husband. Andal's poem does not mention a goddess by name, but the purpose of the vow is similar. (And it is quite possible that the story in the *Bhagavatam* was taken from Andal's song.) Here, in the month of *Margali* (the middle of December to the middle of January—*Margasira*, in Sanskrit), the girls get

up early, bathe, and go to Krishna's house (i.e., the temple) to waken him and ask for the boon of serving him.²⁴

About the title of the work, '*Tiru* means holy, auspicious, sacred, revered, blessed and also stands for Goddess Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu. *Pavai* . . . stands, among other meanings, for a girl and also for a vow . . . taken for fulfilment of some objective, material and/or spiritual. So, *Tiruppavai* may be taken to mean a sacred vow, undertaken by a girl . . .'²⁵ Each of the thirty verses of the song ends with the refrain *el or empavai*, probably meaning something like 'O our lady!'²⁶ In this case, it is likely that the phrase is referring to a vow taken to a goddess, similar to the gopis' vow in the *Bhagavatam*. Another translation given, however, is 'Fulfill, O song of our vow.'²⁷ But many translators leave the refrain untranslated. This is how the song begins:

The month of Margali has arrived and this auspicious full moon day, dear maidens of prosperous Ayapadi, with pretty jewels, all of you who desire to bathe, come along. He who is the son of Nandagopa, possessing a sharp spear and stern in his punishment, He who is the beloved lion-cub of Yasoda, of beautiful eyes, with His dark cloud-like body, lotus-red eyes and effulgent face like the rays of the sun and the moon, He is Narayana; He will give us—He alone will give us and only to us—the drum, required for the vow we have undertaken the fulfilment of which will bring us the praise of the world.²⁸ [verse 1]

The next four verses of the work describe the vow and its objective. Besides the main goal of service to Krishna, if they fulfil the vow then material benefits will also be there: ' . . . our entire land will be blessed with rains thrice a month and will be free from ills. . . . Cows yield rich quantities of milk by mere touch of their udders, flooding the bowls. Thus, the land will be filled with unfailing and imperishable wealth.'²⁹ [verse 3]

In verses 6-15 the girls who are still asleep are woken and scolded for being late. They are asked to come quickly and join the others:

In ancient days
did Kumbhakarna lose to you?
Falling into the jaws of death
did he perhaps bequeath to you
his profound slumber?
You slothful one, bright gem,
do not sleep, open the door.³⁰ [verse 10]

But along with scoldings, Andal sings the praises of Krishna to remind them of their purpose:

Arise and join us
for the melodious name of Hari
reverberating
through the air
has entered our souls,
brought us surpassing peace.³¹ [verse 6]

In verses 16-19, the girls arrive at Krishna's house (i.e., the temple) and wake up his foster parents, Nandagopa and Yashoda; his elder brother, Balarama; and his gopi wife, 66 Nappinnai (known only in the Tamil tradition—she is unknown in the Sanskrit tradition). First, however, they get permission from the gatekeeper:

Guard of the mansion of Nandagopa, our leader, and keeper of the gate, with flags and festoons, lift the latch of the gem-set doors. Yesterday, the Mysterious One, of sapphire-blue complexion, promised to give the drum to us, the cow-herd girls. We have come here in all purity to wake Him with songs. Pray, do not hinder us, O beloved one; please open the twin doors, which stand closed like friendly neighbours.³² [verse 16]

From verse 20 on, the girls wake up Krishna and address him directly, singing his praises and asking him to help them fulfil their vow. How totally Andal is absorbed in

the mythical realm of Vrindavan and the environment of the cowherd clan is shown in verse 28:

We humble cowherds
eke out our days
roaming the forests,
grazing our herds.
Little learning ours,
but ours the fortune
that you took birth
in our clan.
O Govinda of excellence
nor you, nor we
may revoke the relationship
between us here.
O supreme Lord,
we are artless children.
Forgive us
for hailing you
in familiar ways.
Let your grace be upon us,
grant us our desire.
Fulfill, O song of our vow.³³

In verse 29 the girls tell Krishna that the real goal of their vow is to be able to serve him:

Very early in the morning we have come to worship
You and praise Your golden lotus feet, O Govinda, be
pleased to listen to the real purpose of this. Having been
born in the race which lives and eats by grazing cows,
You should not decline homage and service from us.
Note that we have not come to receive the Parai (drum)
from You. We are one with You for seven times seven
births, and we shall serve You and You alone. Convert
all our desires (into a desire for You).³⁴

The *Tiruppavai* is probably the most familiar work of the whole *Nalayira Divyaprabandham* (the collected works of the Alvars). Every year, from the middle of December to

the middle of January (the month of Margali), this work is heard daily on the radio and sometimes also in the streets in Tamil Nadu. Moreover, each day of that month is named after the first word of each of the 30 stanzas of the song.

Andal's other poem, the *Nacciyar-Tirumoli*, is a longer work of 143 verses in 14 poems, and is much more intense in its mood of separation from the Lord. The first song also describes a vow, but this time it is one to Kamadeva, the god of love, to help her attain Vishnu. In each of the verses she mentions the various offerings she is giving to Kamadeva—though now and then, along with her prayer, she does not forget to issue a threat also:

With fragrant datura and drumstick flowers
Three times a day I worship your feet.
That my heart aflame I may not abuse you,
Call you a fraud and blacken your name,
With bunches of fresh-blown flowers your darts
And the name of Govinda written down,
Will you aim at that wonderful Venkatam's Lord
And link my destiny to that lamp?³⁵ [verse 1.3]

The second poem describes a scene in which Krishna is teasing a group of young gopi girls who have been building sandcastles. In one verse she addresses him in three different aspects of Vishnu:

Fierce lion whose resting place
is the cosmic ocean,
you saved Gajendra
from great woe,
do not make our hearts ache
with your sidelong glance,
do not tease us.
With bangle-laden hands
we toiled
sifting sand and silt
to make our playhouses.

You who slumber
upon the surging ocean,
do not break our sandcastles.³⁶ [2.3]

The third poem is about Krishna stealing the clothes of the gopis. It is possible that this story in the *Bhagavata Purana* may also have been taken from Andal's song. The fourth song is one that can be sung as a game. In it a child makes a wish and then draws a circle on the ground with his or her eyes closed. If the end of the circle joins up with the beginning, then the child's wish is supposed to come true. In this song Andal asks the *kutal*, or circle, to join so that Krishna will come to her:

If the one whom Brahma and the gods
Adore and praise,
The son of lovely Devaki
Of the bright brows,
Good Vasudeva's princely son
Will come to me,
O loop I draw, come out aright
And show my luck.³⁷ [4.3]

In the fifth poem, Andal tries to entice a koelbird to take a message to her beloved Lord:

I long to gaze
upon the golden feet
of the lord of Villiputtur
where swans move on the waters.
My eyes, like fighting carps,
have known no rest.
O koel, I will give you
as companion my pet parrot
whom I have fed
on milk and sweetened rice,
if you will but call to the lord
who spanned the worlds,
make him come to me.³⁸ [5.5]

In her sixth song she describes a dream she had of her wedding with Narayana. All the details of an elaborate earthly wedding are given, but the participants are celestial: Indra and other gods choose her as the bride, Durga helps dress and decorate her, and, of course, Vishnu is the bridegroom. This is the best known of the *Nacciya-Tirumoli* poems, as it is often sung at weddings in Tamil Nadu:

A thousand elephants followed
as Narana Nampi [Krishna] walked in state.

The town was adorned
with flags and banners,

at every threshold

stood a blessed golden urn—

I dreamt this dream, my friend.

Tomorrow, auspicious day,
the wedding will take place.

A great green awning stood
adorned with shoots of palm and areca.

Entered Madhava of leonine power
the ox-like youth, Govinda—

I dreamt this dream, my friend.

Indra and hosts of gods arrived,
they blest me,

chose me as bride.

The wedding garb

Durga draped upon me,

she decked me

with bridal garland—

I dreamt this dream, my friend.

Today and in endless future births

Nampi, our lord Narayana

will be my constant companion.

With his holy lotus-hands

he placed my foot

upon the *ammi* stone—

I dreamt this dream, my friend.³⁹ [6.1-3, 8]

From here on, however, Andal's God-madness and pangs of separation from the Lord grow and grow. She is jealous of his conch, which he holds to his lips:

Your food,
the nectar of the lips
of the lord who measured the worlds.

Your couch,
the palm of the hand
of the lord dark as the ocean.

O Pancacanya
your ways are selfish, unjust.
No wonder women clamor,
quarrel with you.⁴⁰ [7.8]

Again, she insults the Lord out of wounded love. (e.g., 'Once long ago for the sake of the maiden earth forlorn in moss-ridden body, he took the shameful form of a filthy water-dripping boar.'⁴¹ [11.8] And 'the lord whose couch is the serpent, is double-tongued like his own serpent.'⁴² [10.3]) In desperation she begs her friends to take her to him, or at least bring her something that has touched him in order to relieve the burning sensation in her body:

I hunger and thirst
for a sight
of Kannan, my dark lord.
Don't stand aside
mocking me—
your words sting
like sour juice
poured upon an open wound.
Go bring the yellow silk
wrapped around the waist
of him who knows not
the sorrow of women—

fan me with it,
cool the burning of my heart.⁴³ [13.1]

And at last, in dire extremity, she issues a threat:

My soul melts in anguish—
he cares not
if I live or die.
If I see the lord of Govardhana
that looting thief,
that plunderer,
I shall pluck
by their roots
these useless breasts,
I shall fling them
at his chest,
I shall cool
the raging fire
within me.⁴⁴ [NT 13.8]

In stark contrast to the poems of extreme anguish, a rather strange and tenuous calm pervades the concluding poem of the work—tenuous because it is also a poem of separation. Here she asks various people if they have seen Krishna, and they reply that they have seen him in Vrindavan:

‘Did you see that young bull
Stinking of butter, Govardhan
Who left me desolate and has his fill
of joy in the cowherds’ hamlet?’
‘We saw one with a garland—
a dark cloud laced with lightning,
Making merry with a gang
In the woods of Brindavan.’⁴⁵ [14.2]

Unlike Nammalvar, Andal did not write poems of union. Even the poem on her dream wedding is, after all, a poem of separation because she knows it was just a dream.

Despite the seeming simplicity of Periyalvar's and Andal's poems, plus their frequent allusions to themselves as illiterate cowherd people, their poems are beautiful poetry from the literary point of view. But it is their ecstatic love and the intensity of their devotion that makes their poems living. Through their unaffected and deep love, they made God their very own child or beloved.

Once Ramakrishna said: 'The gopis had ecstatic love, unswerving and single-minded devotion to one ideal. Do you know the meaning of devotion that is not loyal to one ideal? It is devotion tinged with intellectual knowledge. . . . There are two elements in this ecstatic love: "I-ness" and "my-ness". Yasoda used to think: "Who would look after Gopala if I did not? He will fall ill if I do not serve Him." She did not look on Krishna as God. The other element is "my-ness". It means to look on God as one's own—"my Gopala". Uddhava said to Yasoda: "Mother, your Krishna is God Himself. He is the Lord of the Universe and not a common human being." "Oh!" exclaimed Yasoda, "I am not asking you about your Lord of the Universe. I want to know how *my* Gopala fares. Not the Lord of the Universe, but *my* Gopala."⁴⁶

Once two of Ramanuja's disciples, Mudaliyandan (i.e., Dasarathi, Ramanuja's nephew) and Vangippurattu Nambi, went to see Lord Ranganatha in the temple. A large crowd was there then, and Mudaliyandan went as usual to stand with the brahmins. On that day, however, Nambi stood over to the side with a group of low-caste cowherd women. Afterwards Mudaliyandan asked him, 'Brother, why did you join the cowherd women to pray?' Nambi replied: 'We are swelled with pride, and they are humble. It struck me that the Lord would look more graciously on them than on us. That is why I stood with them.' Mudaliyandan then asked, 'How did they pray?' Nambi said: 'They praised the Lord in their own language, saying: "Dear Lord, drink this

milk. Eat this fruit. Here are some clothes," and so on.' 'And how did you pray?' asked Mudaliyandan. Nambi replied: 'I addressed the Lord in my usual high-sounding Sanskrit: "Victory to you! May you be victorious! [i.e., *Vijayasva, vijayi-bhava*]" and so on.' Surprised, Mudaliyandan said: 'Well, brother, even with them you could not drop that stiff Sanskrit? Next time you had better join us as before.'⁴⁷

So also, Periyalvar and Andal won the Lord's grace, and also created exquisite poetry, simply by speaking from their hearts.

Notes and References

1. *Antal and Her Path of Love*, by Vidya Dehejia. [State University of New York Press, 1990], p. 7. [Hereafter, *Antal*]
2. Most of the biographical part of this article was taken from *The Holy Lives of the Azhvans or Dravida Saints*, by Alkondavilli Govindacharya. [Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1982].
3. Srirama Bharati, *The Children's Illustrated Book of Alvar Tales* (Madras: Sri Sadagopan Tirunarayana Swami Divya Prabandha Pathasala, n.d.), p. 16.
4. According to the South Indian tradition, Vishnu has three consorts: Sri Devi (i.e., Lakshmi), Bhu Devi (the Goddess of the Earth), and Nila Devi (identified with Nappinnai, Krishna's gopi wife). 58
5. *Women Saints East & West*, ed. by Swami Ghanananda and Sir John Stewart-Wallace. [Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1979], p. 26. [Hereafter, WS]
6. According to the Sri Vaishnavas, Vishnu has manifested himself in 107 different aspects in 107 main Vishnu temples in India, plus he has his transcendent aspect in Vaikuntha, making 108 in all. This is according to Govindacharya.
7. WS, p. 27.

8. *Slaves of the Lord*, by Vidya Dehejia. [Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988], p. 98. [Hereafter, *Slaves*]
9. *Alvars of South India*, by K.C. Varadachari. [Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1966], p. 127-28 & 130.
10. *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand: Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, trans. by Srirama Bharata (Jaladampet: Sri Sadagopan Tirunarayana Divya Prabandha Pathasala, 2000), p. 5. [Hereafter, *Sacred Book*]
11. *Viraha-Bhakti, The early history of Krsna devotion in South India*, by Friedhelm Hardy. [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983], p. 406. [Hereafter, Hardy] According to Hardy and others, the *Tiruppallandu* is included in the *Periyalvar-Tirumoli*.
12. *Sacred Book*, p. 9.
13. *Slaves*, p. 13.
14. *Sacred Book*, p. 28.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 38-39.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
19. *Ibid.*, 88-89.
20. Hardy, p. 404-05.
21. *Antal*, p. 10.
22. Readers are advised to see Hardy's *Viraha-Bhakti* for his fine research on this. ←
23. Hardy, 245-46.
24. According to a few verses, they are asking for a ritual drum, but at the end (in verse 29) they say, 'O Govinda, we have not come to ask for the ritual drum. We are your slaves, we serve only you. Forever and a day we shall be connected with you. Make all our desires flow to you alone.' [Antal, p. 60]
25. *Tiruppavai of Goda*, trans. by S.L.N. Simha. [Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1982], p. 5. [Hereafter, Simha] - DAC book 2023 -
26. Hardy, p. 415.
27. *Antal*, p. 43.
28. Simha, p. 10.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

30. *Antal*, p. 48-49. Kumbhakarna was a younger brother of Ravana, the king of Lanka. Once, under the spell of delusion, he asked Brahma for the boon of spending most of his life sleeping.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
32. *Simha*, p. 25.
33. *Antal*, p. 59-60.
34. *Simha*, p. 40.
35. P.S. Sundaram, *The Poems of Andal (Tiruppavai and Nacciyar Tirumozhi)*, trans. by P.S. Sundaram (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1987), p. 37. [Hereafter, *The Poems of Andal*]
36. *Antal*, p. 79-80.
37. *The Poems of Andal*, p. 67.
38. *Antal*, p. 92.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 95, 96.
40. *Ibid.*, 100-01.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 125-26. Andal seems to have been partly inspired here by a Tamil epic of the fifth or sixth century, the *Cilappatikaram* (The Epic about the Anklet). Kannaki's husband Kovalan was falsely accused of stealing the anklet of the Queen of Madurai and was executed without a fair trial. Burning with rage, Kannaki tore off one of her breasts and threw it in the middle of the town. It quickly set the whole town on fire. According to this epic, Kannaki was subsequently deified.
45. *The Poems of Andal*, p. 151.
46. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda. [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981], p. 228-29.
- 47. Adapted from *The Divine Wisdom of the Dravida Saints*, by Alkondavilli Govindacharya. [Madras: C.N. Press, 1902], p. 183-84.

Tiruppan Alvar

According to legend, Brahma, after creating the universe, started practising austerities to attain the boon of seeing Vishnu in his real form. After a thousand years Vishnu was pleased with Brahma's penance and appeared to him in a Ranga Vimanam ('a special chariot-like conveyance carried by Veda Murtis on their head, having Lord Vishnu inside . . .'). Brahma then begged for the privilege of worshipping Vishnu in that form forever, and Vishnu agreed. Long afterwards, however, Ikshvaku heard of the Ranga Vimanam and began to practise severe austerities to bring the Lord to earth for the benefit of all. At last Ranganatha (Vishnu) informed Brahma that he wanted to go to earth to bless the people there. Brahma reluctantly agreed, and sent the Ranga Vimanam to Ayodhya, Ikshvaku's capital.

Ikshvaku was overjoyed, and he constructed a large temple for the Lord between the Sarayu and Tamasa rivers. His descendants also worshipped the Lord with great devotion. After many generations, Dasaratha became king. As he was childless, he was advised to perform the Putrakameshti sacrifice to obtain children. All the kings from the neighbouring countries were invited to the sacrifice, including Dharmavarma, a Chola prince. Seeing Lord Ranganatha at Ayodhya, Dharmavarma became greatly attached to him and on his return to the South started practising austerities to get the Vimanam for his own country. At last, some sages came and informed him that his austerities were not necessary. The Vimanam, they said, was destined to come to his kingdom after some time.

Meanwhile, Dasaratha was blessed with four sons, one of whom was Rama. Just as Rama was to be crowned king, he was banished for fourteen years to the forest by one of his step-mothers. There, his wife, Sita, was kidnapped by Ravana, the king of Lanka, and with the help of Ravana's brother Vibhishana, Rama killed him. Afterwards Rama crowned Vibhishana the new king of Lanka. By that time, the fourteen years of exile had come to an end, so Rama invited Vibhishana and others to Ayodhya for his own coronation. After the ceremonies, when Vibhishana was about to leave, Rama gave him as a parting gift the Ranga Vimanam to take to Lanka with him. Vibhishana was delighted, and immediately left with the Vimanam.

The news soon spread that the Ranga Vimanam was to pass through the Chola country, so Dharmavarman made all preparations to receive the Lord. At the request of Dharmavarman, Vibhishana kept the Vimanam on the bank of the Kaveri River and rested at the Chola kingdom for a few days, worshipping the Lord there. But when Vibhishana was about to leave, he discovered that the Vimanam could not be moved. Again and again he prayed to Ranganatha, but the Lord would not relent. He told Vibhishana to go back to Lanka and that he would remain for many years on the banks of the Kaveri facing south, blessing Vibhishana and his country from there. Dharmavarman then built a temple for the Lord and devotedly worshipped him the rest of his life.

Some time after Dharmavarman's death, a huge flood in the river almost buried the temple in mud and silt. The king and the people all fled from the area because of the flood, and gradually, through neglect, the temple was covered by forest. Long afterwards another Chola king was out on a hunting excursion and as he was feeling tired, he decided to rest for a while under a tree. Suddenly he heard a parrot telling him that the Ranga Vimanam was buried in the forest

where he was lying. The king was elated, as he had heard of the Vimanam, and immediately brought people to excavate the temple. When it had been unearthed, he made additions to it, including a mandapam which he named after the parrot—Kili Mandapam. The king also was known afterwards as Kilikanda Chola, the Chola who saw the parrot.

How much history there is in these stories is hard to say. But there is no question that there was something very auspicious about the origins of the Srirangam temple, as it continued to grow and grow and grow, until it is now the largest temple complex in India.² More important than the temple's size, however, are the people who have been, in one way or another, connected with the temple throughout its long history. In that sense it probably has the most interesting history of any temple in India. (Ramanuja, the great saint and Vishishtadvaita acharya, made Srirangam the centre of his work and also looked after the affairs of the temple. That position was retained by a few generations of his successors. After Ramanuja's death his body was kept at the Srirangam temple in a special shrine. The stories of Ramanuja and his disciples, and of the great saints and acharyas who came after them, seem to be endless.) We shall just give one here:

Once Pillai Lokacharya (1205-1311) was given a boon by the Lord, who was extremely pleased with him, that anyone connected with the acharya would attain salvation. Pillai Lokacharya's compassion was so great that thereafter he would touch even the ants and gaze for a long time at the trees in order to gain salvation for them.³

Many of the staff at the temple were also very devoted in their service. In 1463 some of the priests committed suicide by throwing themselves from one of the gopurams of the temple in protest over the corrupt administration ! (which by that time had fallen into the hands of men appointed by the king). And in the 13th century, when

Srirangam was plundered by Muslim invaders, a dancing girl lost her life but saved the temple by luring the Muslim general to the top of a tower and pushing him off.

When Chaitanya went on pilgrimage to South India, he observed *caturmasya* (the vow of remaining the four months of the rainy season in one place) at Srirangam. There he stayed at the house of Venkata Bhatta, a priest of the Srirangam temple. Even now the descendants of Venkata Bhatta continue their devoted service to the Lord at Srirangam. One of Venkata's sons, Gopala, was just a boy then, but he became so devoted to Chaitanya that he later renounced the world and went to live in Vrindavan. He was one of the original six Vrindavan Goswamis of the Gaudiya Vaishnava school.

Sri Ramakrishna used to relate the following incident, which happened inside the Srirangam temple: 'Chaitanyadeva set out on a pilgrimage to southern India. One day he saw a man reading the *Gita*. Another man, seated at a distance, was listening and weeping. His eyes were swimming in tears. Chaitanyadeva asked him, "Do you understand all this?" The man said, "No, revered sir, I don't understand a word of the text." "Then why are you crying?" asked Chaitanya. The devotee said: "I see Arjuna's chariot before me. I see Lord Krishna and Arjuna seated in front of it, talking. I see this and I weep."⁴

The temple at Srirangam, situated on an island in the Kaveri River across from Tiruchirapalli, is considered the most sacred of the Sri Vaishnava temples. Here the Lord is manifest as Vishnu lying on his right side on the serpent Ananta in the ocean of milk. As we have seen earlier, it was the Lord of Srirangam whom Andal chose to marry, and it was in his image that she is said to have merged. All of the Alvars except Madhura Kavi wrote hymns to the Lord there. But two of the Alvars—Tiruppan Alvar and Tondaradipodi Alvar—wrote their songs exclusively for Lord Ranganatha.)

In those days, the temples were the heart and soul of the community. Everything revolved around the temples—including one's personal devotion. To see the image of the Lord in the temple was to see the Lord himself, as the image was considered to be an arcavatara—a direct manifestation of God. Thus, the darshan (sight) of the Lord was both the means and the goal of one's devotion. And being denied access to the temple meant being deprived of the Lord's grace. It was a terrible fate—but a fate which many people had to suffer. Tiruppan Alvar was one of them.

How society could go on and on enjoying the benefits of the untouchables' very skilled labour—labour that even went in to the making of the temples—and yet deny them the ordinary rights of a human being is a mystery. But it was especially strange how this happened to the class of untouchables to which Tiruppan belonged—the panars, who were musicians and poets. According to Friedhelm Hardy, the panars were among 'the guardians of traditional learning and the arts . . . who must have played a leading role in the development of Tamil devotionalism.'⁵ *De facto* this meant that certain members of the Tamil devotional movement were thereby excluded from the source of its own religion (the entrancing sight of the god in the temple).⁶

There are several versions of Tiruppan's life, but on one thing they all agree—he was carried into the Srirangam temple on the shoulders of a brahmin at the command of the Lord. This accounts for his other name, Munivahana, which means 'he who had a sage as his carrier'. According to most accounts, Tiruppan was found as a baby in a paddy field near Uraiyur, a town (now part of Tiruchirapalli) very close to Srirangam, probably around the beginning of the ninth century. He is said to be the incarnation (an *amsha*) of the Shrivatsa mark (a symbol of Lakshmi) on Vishnu's chest. The panar couple who found him were childless, so it was with great joy that they took him home. Considering

him a gift from God, they brought him up with great care.

Tiruppan, as he grew up, had no interest in the world. His sole delight was to sing for the Lord. Day after day, year after year, he would sit on the south bank of the Kaveri, across the river from the temple, playing his vina, and singing and meditating on the Lord. He dared not come closer to the temple. But Lord Ranganatha, who faces south, could not help but notice him. And 'when Saint Tiruppan-Azhvar had lovingly fastened his thoughts on Ranga, Ranga's thoughts had more intensely fastened themselves on His beloved devotee, the Azhvar.'⁷ Tiruppan, in his ecstasy, would often lose all consciousness of the world.

Once⁸ when he was lying like this on the bank of the river, completely absorbed in the Lord, Loka-Saranga, a priest of the temple, arrived there to collect water for the temple service. Seeing an untouchable in his way, he called out to Tiruppan to move. Tiruppan heard nothing. Loka-Saranga then got angry, thinking that Tiruppan was being obstinate. He picked up a stone and flung it at the Alvar, hitting him on the face and drawing blood. This brought Tiruppan back to consciousness of the world, and to the situation around him. Realizing that he had been the cause of inconvenience to the priest, he immediately got up and ran out of the way, apologizing profusely all the while.

When Loka-Saranga returned to the temple, he could not go in.⁹ The Lord made it plain to him that his services were not acceptable. Loka-Saranga was mortified. He understood the reason for the Lord's anger, but he did not know what to do to atone for his action. Meanwhile, Lakshmi, the Lord's consort, asked the Lord to arrange for Tiruppan to come inside the temple. That night Loka-Saranga had a dream in which Lord Ranganatha commanded him to carry Tiruppan on his shoulders to his presence in the temple. Loka-Saranga woke up feeling very relieved.

The next morning Loka-Saranga went to Tiruppan and begged his forgiveness. He then told him the Lord's command. Tiruppan was extremely abashed, but Loka-Saranga would not give any ear to his objections. He picked up the Alvar and carried him straight to the inner shrine of the temple.¹⁰ In one version of the story (from the *Prapannamrta*) Loka-Saranga is compared to Garuda, the carrier of Vishnu and of liberated souls to heaven.¹¹

➔ At the sight of his beloved Lord, Tiruppan went into an ecstatic state and began to sing. This was the *Amalan-adipiran*, 'The Immaculate Primeval Lord,' the only song of his that was written down and preserved.

The *Amalan-adipiran* is in ten stanzas and describes not only the Lord but also the Alvar's reaction to this darshan. As Hardy says: 'Beginning at his feet and moving upwards towards his face, the poet focuses in each stanza on some part of his body. Besides, we find in each stanza three further structural elements: references to the grand mysteries of the eternal or incarnated Visnu, some brief description of the temple of Srirangam, and rather striking phrases suggestive of the ecstasy caused by the sight.'¹² Verses one through eight describe the Lord from his feet to his eyes, and verses nine and ten describe the Alvar's reaction to seeing the whole form. We shall give six of the verses here:

Immaculate Lord, Primeval One,
I am the devotee of your devotees
O Spotless One,
Leader of the *devas*
Lord of Venkatam
where fragrant groves abound
My perfect Lord
Upholder of justice
Flawless One, who abides
in the grand shrine of Srirangam
May your lotus feet

forever shine
before my eyes!¹³ [verse 1]

Whose tall crown reached up to the world's summit
when with delight in his heart he measured the
universe;

who was Kakutstha (Rama) with the fierce arrows
that devoured the demons when they attacked him
that day;

who is the Lord of Srirangam with fragrant groves
—to the garment tied round *his* waist
runs my mind.¹⁴ [verse 2]

Who shot a single fierce arrow
that the ten heads of the king of Lanka
—surrounded on all sides by lofty walls—

fell off, after repelling him (first);

who has a complexion like the ocean's colour;

who is the lord of Srirangam where black bees hum
sweetly

and big peacocks dance

—the zone around *his* holy waist

abides inside my soul and swings about in it.¹⁵

[verse 4]

Thy lips have enslaved my mind. O Lord, Who art
a most wonderful Person, holding in Thy hands the
beautiful conch, and the disc which is death to Thy
enemies! Thy beautiful body is like the mountain
green. Adorned with *tulasi* garland and wearing the
crown of sovereignty, Thou art my father residing in
Srirangam which is an ornament, reclining on the
serpent-bed.¹⁶ [verse 7]

An infant

you lay upon

a leaf of the banyan tree—

Devouring the seven worlds

you slumber upon

the serpent couch
 at Srirangam—
 Upon your chest
 there rests
 a garland of rubies
 a necklace of pearls—
 My heart lies captive
 to the endless beauty
 of your form
 of glistening blue!

How, O how can I describe
 your splendour?¹⁷ [verse 9]

He has stolen my heart
 the Lord of azure hue
 the cowherd boy!
 the butter thief!
 O leader of the *devas*
 Lord of Srirangam
 these blessed eyes of mine
 have gazed upon
 your beauteous form
 Never again
 may they look upon another!¹⁸ [verse 10]

The Alvar's last wish was fulfilled. When he finished singing, he merged into the image of the Lord and disappeared.

About the *Amalan-adipiran*, Hardy says: '... the composition constitutes a saving act, for by singing and meditating on the song people can develop their own spiritual perfection. Thus the very purpose of the *amsa's* *avatara* finds its fulfilment here.'¹⁹

In later days the Sri Vaishnava acharyas paid great tribute to Tiruppan. Shortly before Yamunacharya's death, he told one of his disciples: 'Tiruppan Alvar, the devotee of Ranganatha, is my only refuge; he will be my helmsman

across this ocean of life.’²⁰ Periya Nambi and Tirumalai Nambi, both disciples of Yamuna, wrote stanzas in praise of Tiruppan. And Vedanta Deshika wrote a commentary, the *Munivahana-pokam*, on Tiruppan’s song.

In many of the accounts of Tiruppan’s life, he was compared to Nampaduvan, another famous Tamil untouchable, who is said to have given liberation to a ghost. Nampaduvan, an ardent devotee of Vishnu, was known for his beautiful singing in praise of the Lord. Once he was on his way to the Perumal temple at Tirukkurungudi when a hungry brahma-rakshasa (a ghost of a brahmin) caught hold of him and was about to eat him. Nampaduvan was willing to sacrifice himself, but he requested that the ghost first allow him to worship at the temple. The ghost agreed, but while Nampaduvan was at the temple, he lost his appetite. When Nampaduvan returned, the ghost told him that he would not eat him. But Nampaduvan insisted, saying that it would be breaking his word if he didn’t. Finally they agreed on a compromise: the ghost would take the results of the merit accrued by Nampaduvan for one day through his singing of the Lord’s praises. With that one day’s merit of an untouchable the ghost was freed from his accursed life.²¹

But the Sri Vaishnava acharyas did more than pay lip service to Tiruppan. They put their words into action—though it was an uphill battle against orthodoxy all the way. From the time of Yamuna onwards, the leaders of the Sri Vaishnava community tried in many ways to break down caste prejudices and barriers, but with little success. Yamuna himself had at least one untouchable disciple. According to R. Parthasarathy:

Maranernambi was an ‘untouchable’ by birth. He was a disciple of Alavandar [Yamunacharya] and a great friend of Periyannambi [a brahmin disciple of Yamuna]. He was afflicted with some chronic disease and lived on

the outskirts of the town. Periyambadi used to carry food to him there.

Ramanuja knew nothing about Maranambadi. But he once saw Periyambadi going somewhere carrying food in his hand. He followed him to find out for whom the food was meant. He saw Periyambadi serving food to the low-caste, disease-stricken Nambi and was moved by the act of the true Vaishnava. Later, when the orthodox brahmins condemned this action of Periyambadi and fenced off his house, Ramanuja came to his rescue.²²

On another occasion, Ramanuja himself went to the house of a pariah who would become intoxicated with joy singing the hymns of the Alvars. 'Ramanuja stayed with him for three hours, listening to his chanting of the hymns.'²³ 'His heart was dead set against untouchability. Indeed he had his own word for the untouchables— "Tirukulattar" (people of noble descent).'²⁴ And in a scathing rebuke, 'Ramanuja felt that the call of God to participate in His "lila" was open to all mankind and that excluding a community from all social contacts was a sin as bad as the one they [the untouchables] were believed to have committed in an earlier birth.'²⁵ In Melkote, Ramanuja was able to introduce many reforms in the temple administration and gain the right of admission to the temple for the untouchables, but he could not go so far at Srirangam because of the strong resistance from the priests there.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'Lovers of God do not belong to any caste. The mind, body, and soul of a man become purified through divine love. . . . Through bhakti an untouchable becomes pure and elevated.'²⁶

In one of his works, Vedanta Deshika wrote that Tiruppan Alvar 'appeared [on earth] to give knowledge to people and with the meaning of the many Vedas (or Upanisads) composed (his song).'²⁷ An amazing tribute

indeed to a person who could not even enter a temple without divine intervention.

Notes and References

1. R.K. Das, *Temples of Tamilnad*. [Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1991], p. 109.
2. There is also a legend 'that Adi Sankara installed at Srirangam a Yantra called Janakarshana Yantra to attract pilgrims to this sacred temple. . . .' Ibid., p. 108.
3. See Alkondavilli Govindacharya, *The Divine Wisdom of the Dravida Saints*. [Madras: C.N. Press, 1902], p. 41. According to N. Jagadeesan (*Collected Papers on Tamil Vaishnavism*. [Madurai, 1989], p. 192), the Sri Vaishnavas 'consider that the "inferior" castes and even the "lower" orders of creation are capable of attaining moksha [liberation] directly without having to pass through each one of the "higher" castes before salvation is attained. The story of Gajendra [an elephant] being rescued from the crocodile and provided moksha by Vishnu is usually cited in support of this idea.' So also is the story of Nampaduvan, the untouchable (see below).
4. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda. [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986], p. 105. [Hereafter, *Gospel*] The place inside the temple where this is said to have happened is pointed out even now.
5. Friedhelm Hardy, 'TirupPan-Alvar: The Untouchable Who Rode Piggy-back on the Brahmin,' in *Devotion Divine: Bhakti Traditions from the Regions of India—Studies in Honour of Charlotte Vaudeville*, ed. by Diana L. Eck and Françoise Mallison. [Groningen/Paris: Egbert Forsten/École Française D'Extreme-Orient, 1991], p. 130. [Hereafter, 'TirupPan-Alvar']
6. Ibid.
7. Alkondavilli Govindacharya, *The Holy Lives of the Azhars or Dravida Saints*. [Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1982], p. 139.
8. In one version the Alvar is said to have been fifty years old then, and in another version he is said to have been eighty.

9. Some versions say that the door of the temple was mysteriously bolted from within. But other versions of the story say that Loka-Saranga went to the shrine and found that the image of the Lord was bleeding at the same spot on the face where Tiruppan had been hit by the stone.
10. In Swami Ramakrishnananda's version of this story, Loka-Saranga merely circumambulates the temple with Tiruppan on his shoulders and does not go inside, but this gives no explanation for the Alvar's song. The other versions are clear that Tiruppan was taken inside the shrine and that his song was the result of his ecstasy at seeing the Lord. Compare Swami Ramakrishnananda, *Life of Sri Ramanuja*. [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math], p. 30-31 [Hereafter, *Life of Sri Ramanuja*]; and 'TirupPan-Alvar,' p. 133. ✓
11. 'TirupPan-Alvar,' p. 142-43.
12. 'TirupPan-Alvar,' p. 130.
13. Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord: The Path of the Tamil Saints*. [New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publ. Pvt. Ltd., 1988], p. 90. [Hereafter, *Slaves*.
14. 'TirupPan-Alvar,' p. 131.
15. Ibid.
16. K.C. Varadachari, *Alvars of South India*. [Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1966], 107-8.
17. *Slaves*, p. 90.
18. Ibid., p. 91.
19. 'TirupPan-Alvar,' p. 143.
20. *Life of Sri Ramanuja*, p. 113.
21. See N. Jagadeesan, *Collected Papers on Tamil Vaishnavism*. [Madurai, 1989], p. 201.
22. R. Parthasarathy, *Ramanujacharya*. [New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 1991], p. 32.
23. Ibid., p. 56.
24. Ibid., p. 44.
25. Ibid., p. 57.
26. *Gospel*, p. 155.
27. 'TirupPan-Alvar,' p. 144 (quoting Vedanta Deshika's *Pirapantacaram*, stanza 12).

Tondaradippodi Alvar

The world wants the soul to think that the soul is independent and belongs to the world. And God wants the soul to understand it belongs to him. In its ignorance the soul naturally sides with the world, but the Lord won't give up his claim. He is the 'Hound of Heaven' from whom we can never escape. So the fight goes on. This is just the argument that the great Sri Vaishnava acharya Parasara Bhattar described in a *muktaka sloka* thus:

Lord: 'You are mine.'

soul: 'I am my own.'

Lord: 'On what basis?'

soul: 'And on what basis [is your own position]?'

Lord: 'By the authority of the Veda.'

soul: 'And [my position] is based on experience from time immemorial.'

Lord: 'But that has been refuted.'

soul: 'Where is this refutation? Whose is it?'

Lord: 'Mine, laid down in the *Gita* [18.66], etc.'

soul: 'Who is the witness in this matter?'

Lord: 'A learned man will be [the witness].'

soul: 'Alas, he will be partial to your side.'

Thus, in this quarrel, [Lord], you are in search of an
arbitr¹ Judge

But suppose the soul decides that the Lord is right. It begins to feel it belongs to the Lord alone and turns away from the world. The world, however, does not always turn away from the soul. The world has its snares to keep the soul bound hand and foot, and the subtlest and last of these snares is the ego. One of the most difficult lessons the soul must learn, according to Staretz Silouan (1866-1938), a

Russian Orthodox saint, is 'that God is humility and that the man who would "put on" God must learn to be humble.'²

According to him: 'At first when a man begins to work for the Lord grace gives him the strength to be zealous after good, all is easy and effortless; and seeing this, in his inexperience he thinks to himself: "I shall continue thus zealously all my life long," and at the same time he exalts himself above those who live carelessly, and begins to pass judgement on them. And so he loses the grace that was helping him to keep God's commandments. And he does not understand what has happened—everything was going so well with him, but now it is all so difficult and he feels no desire to pray. But he should not be afraid: it is the Lord in His mercy nurturing the soul. The moment the soul exalts herself above her fellows she is attacked by some thought or impulse unpleasing to God. If she humbles herself grace does not depart, but if she does not some small temptation follows to humble her. . . . Thus the whole spiritual warfare wages around humility.'³

Though Vipra-Narayana had all other good qualities, he at last had to learn true humility to become Tondaradippodi Alvar (the Alvar who took 'The dust of the feet of the devotees'). Vipra-Narayana was most likely born in the ninth or early tenth century⁴ in the village of Mandangudi in what is now Tamil Nadu. He was a brahmin and is said to have been an incarnation of Vishnu's wild flower garland (*vanamala*). Being very devout by nature, he once came on a pilgrimage to Srirangam. At the sight of Lord Ranganatha reclining in the temple there he became so entranced that he decided to spend the rest of his life at Srirangam growing flowers and tulsi for the Lord's service. Thus, for some years he lived all alone, quietly tending his garden and making beautiful, thick garlands for Lord Ranganatha.

One day a courtesan named Devadevi happened to pass

by Vipra-Narayana's garden with some other women, and seeing the beautiful trees they decided to stop for a while and take some rest in the shade. As they sat there they couldn't help but admire the flowers and trees, and Devadevi asked the others if they knew who owned the garden. One of the women replied that it belonged to a brahmin who had dedicated his life to supplying flowers and tulsi for the Lord. Hearing that Vipra-Narayana cared for nothing in the world but serving the Lord, Devadevi was intrigued. One of her friends then challenged her, saying that if Devadevi could tempt Vipra-Narayana's heart away from his service, she would be Devadevi's slave for six months. With great confidence Devadevi agreed to the wager, and added that if she could not tempt him she would become her friend's slave for the same amount of time.

Soon after, Devadevi returned to the garden in plain clothes, divested of all her ornaments. Approaching Vipra-Narayana, she threw herself at his feet and told him a sad story that she concocted on the spot. She then begged him to allow her to work in his garden. Vipra-Narayana had compassion on her and granted her request. For six months she laboured in the garden, and at last one day she succeeded in winning his heart as well as her wager. Not only did her friend become her slave, so also did Vipra-Narayana.

Completely forgetting his service to the Lord, Vipra-Narayana now spent all his time with Devadevi. He spent not just his time, but his money also. And when his money was gone he was coldly cast off. But Vipra-Narayana was not yet ready for this. He again and again ran to Devadevi's house and begged her to let him in. He could think of nothing else. Without money, however, Devadevi would not relent. Vipra-Narayana was lost—or so it seemed.

But grace was there, grace in the form of Sri Devi.
 → According to the Sri Vaishnava acharyas, Vishnu's consort

Sri is the personification of grace. She is like 'the mother who mediates between the children and the father, for the simple reason that she is not so rigidly bound by considerations of justice and order.'⁵ The great Sri Vaishnava teacher Vedanta Desika wrote, 'O Goddess, you are my mother; the lord with auspicious qualities is my father.'⁶ In spite of being loving and compassionate, a father cannot ignore the faults of his children. 'But Sri forgives voluntarily; she needs no reason. Sri thus becomes the primary refuge of all who err: not only is it preferable to turn to her, but it is necessary. . . . For she is that aspect of the Godhead that forgives as a matter of course, whose essence is unqualified grace.'⁷ In fact, she not only overlooks the faults of her children, but she also is the mediator who makes the Lord forgive.

Sri's very name indicates her ability to save human beings. 'Desika derives the name Sri in six different ways, each having to do with her graciousness:

- sriyate*: she who is resorted to
- srayate*: she who resorts [to the Lord]
- srnoti*: she who listens [to humans]
- srâvayati*: she who makes [the Lord] listen
- srnâti*: she who removes [past karma, the faults and hindrances that stand in a devotee's way]
- srinâti*: she who makes [humans] perfect [for *moksa*]⁸

According to Vedanta Desika, Sri 'is not insentient matter (any form of *prakrti*) nor is she merely a personification of Visnu's grace (*daya*). Desika argues that Sri has a distinct personality, that she is the perfect consort of Visnu, equal to him in every way and subservient to him only because she herself wills it so.'⁹

So it happened that Sri came to the rescue of Vipra-Narayana. She could not forget Vipra-Narayana's service to herself and her Lord. One day Sri questioned Lord Ranganatha about Vipra-Narayana, and the Lord related to

her all that had happened to their servant. 'What, my Lord,' replied Sri, 'you allow your lovers to be cast away like this? Even a saint like him you catch in your inscrutable snares? What has happened has happened, but you should not punish him any more. Bring him back to your service now.'¹⁰ Lord Ranganatha consoled her, saying that he would arrange it. Just as Krishna took the humble job of a charioteer for the sake of his dearest cousin Arjuna, so also Ranganatha now took the form of a humble servant for the sake of Vipra-Narayana.

Soon after, Devadevi heard a knock at her door and on opening it found a stranger. 'I am Ranga, Vipra-Narayana's servant,' said the stranger. 'He has asked me to bring you this gold cup.' Delighted, Devadevi accepted the cup and asked to see Vipra-Narayana. Ranga immediately went and told Vipra-Narayana that Devadevi was waiting to meet him. Though puzzled by Devadevi's sudden change of heart, Vipra-Narayana did not ask any questions and joyfully went to her house.

The next morning, when the priests opened the shrine at Lord Ranganatha's temple, they found that a gold cup used for the worship was missing. The authorities were immediately informed, and the matter went to the Chola king. The workers of the temple were very afraid for they were all under suspicion, and the people of the area could talk of nothing else. One of Devadevi's maidservants happened to see some of the temple employees in an agitated state and asked one who was known to her what had happened. The man informed her about the theft of the gold cup and said that they were under suspicion. The maidservant then told him that such a cup was given to Devadevi the previous day and was now in her house. The authorities were informed, and the house was searched. Sure enough, there was the gold cup from the temple.

Devadevi was taken before the king, but she pleaded

innocent, saying that the cup was given to her by Vipra-Narayana's servant Ranga and that she did not know it belonged to the temple. Vipra-Narayana was then brought before the king, but he also pleaded innocent, saying that he did not have a servant named Ranga. The arguments went back and forth, but nothing was resolved. Finally the king levied a heavy fine on Devadevi and put Vipra-Narayana in jail.

Sri was very upset. This was not at all what she had in mind. 'Enough of this, my Lord,' she pleaded. 'Have mercy on your servant now. Save him.' But Lord Ranganatha reassured her: 'I am coming to that. Just see what I do next.'¹¹

That night Lord Ranganatha appeared to the Chola king in a dream, telling him to release Vipra-Narayana and remit Devadevi's fine. 'They are both innocent,' said the Lord. 'This was all my own doing to free Vipra-Narayana from some latent karma, and he has suffered enough.' The next morning the king immediately ordered Vipra-Narayana to be released. He then related to Vipra-Narayana the dream he had had the previous night, begged his pardon, and sent him home with due respect.

Vipra-Narayana and Devadevi both resolved to change their lives. Vipra-Narayana went back to his service of tending his garden and offering flowers to the Lord. But this was not enough, he felt. "How is my tainted nature to be purified?" he asked himself. "The only remedy is the washings of the feet of holy men to be sipped by me in all faith."¹² In his utter humility then he washed the feet of devotees with great devotion. He also gave himself the name Tondaradippodi (Bhaktanghrirenu, in Sanskrit), 'The dust of the feet of the devotees'. It is in his life that the idea of serving the devotees as the Lord himself first finds its expression.¹³

According to the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* (the

collected works of the Alvars), Tondaradippodi wrote two songs, both addressed to the Lord of Srirangam. The first of these is the *Tirumalai* (The Sacred Garland) in forty-five stanzas. Much of this song is devoted to the greatness of singing the names and glories of the Lord:

O Lord who art residing at Srirangam, O Thou First Being who dost keep the three worlds within Thyself (during dissolution) and throwest them out of Thyself (at the time of creation)! By learning [to repeat] Thy Name, the senses and the sinful objects of those (senses) are restrained, and having gone beyond and in a challenging attitude we have placed our feet on the heads of Yama [the king of death] and his hosts. [verse 1]¹⁴

'A face with the hue of a dark mountain, lips like coral, eyes like the red lotus. O Achyuta lord of celestials, beloved of the cowherds', thus and thus I sing. If I were to give up this and get a taste of Indra's power to rule over the celestials, I shall not relish it, O my lord Ranga. [verse 2]¹⁵

Standing in the encircling sins, even Ksatrabandhu by uttering the three-lettered name of thine (Go-vin-da), attained the Highest state. Lo! even though knowing that our superb loving God of Srirangam descends (to save) the devotees who do this much alone, uttering His Name, unheeding men are caught up in birth. [verse 4]¹⁶

→ But even uttering the name of Srirangam is enough to save one, says the Alvar:

All dwellers of this earth surrounded by the vast scented ocean, if only these men, though lacking the knowledge for praising the Lord of celestials wearing the fragrant tulasi-flower garland, would but utter 'Srirangam', then the entire Naraka [hell] in which the senses are caught will disperse. [verse 13]¹⁷

Or seeing or remembering the Lord of Srirangam:

Seeing the Lord of the colour of the Ocean, resting on the serpent, having placed His crowned head to the

eastern direction and His feet to the western direction, [with] His back to the north and gazing at Lanka in the southern direction, my soul has begun to melt. O Dweller of the Earth, what shall I do? [verse 19]

[If the devotees but perceive the wonderful person in Srirangam surrounded by the waters (of the Kaveri), lying on the serpent, His chest adorned by Sri, His body like the emerald, and His broad shoulders, His eyes like pure lotuses, His lips red and His mouth like the coral, and His crown large and glorious, and His effulgence, they would grow vast. [verse 20]

If the mind which from beginningless time has been going towards other things is directed towards the coral-red-lipped Lord of Srirangam in submission, then it is possible for the mind to know the wonderful purpose of the resting of the emerald-hued Lord in the beautiful golden Meru-like temple in Srirangam. [verse 21]¹⁸]

Though Tondaradippodi was himself a brahmin by caste, he considered outcastes who were devoted to the Lord more worthy of worship than brahmins without love of God:

You [i.e., Vishnu] manifestly like those 'servants' who express their love for your feet, though they may be born as outcastes, more than the *Caturvedins* [brahmins] who are strangers and without allegiance to your service. [verse 39]¹⁹

The other hymn written by the Alvar is *Tiruppalliyelucci* (A Song to Wake Up the Lord) in ten stanzas. This hymn is sung in the morning in Sri Vaishnava temples just as the doors of the shrine are opened, and was perhaps one of the first *Suprabhatam* hymns, a popular form of morning offering to the Lord. Besides this hymn, other auspicious sounds and sights, such as the sight of an elephant and a cow, are often presented to the Lord first thing in the morning.

The purpose of such a song is to increase one's yearning to see God. While introducing this song K.C. Varadachari wrote: 'The Godhead reposing in sleep is awakened with appropriate announcements about the sunrise and the arrival of the gods and men to worship Him early in the morning. Three times are prescribed for worship of God, namely the morning, noon and evening. These are *sandhya* (meeting) times. God is the ever-awake one whilst everyone is asleep. Indeed it is certainly a type of anthropomorphism to sing about morning, noon and evening to God. But they are the hours prescribed for the worship of God (*aradhana*). It is our morning that we announce to God offering ourselves to service of Him. . . . The morning Salutation and prayer is a song of awakening and necessary for feeling the presence of God, when awake, in all that one does. The poem is a moving representation of the yearning heart eagerly awaiting the dawn . . . '20

O Lord of Srirangam

It's time to awake

the sun looks over

the crest of

the eastern hill—

Night has departed

giving way to dawn—

the morning buds open

dripping with honey—

Gods and kings

throng to your shrine

they await you.

the trumpeting of

many elephants—

the resonance of

beating drums—

a sound like

the surge of

ocean waves!
O Lord of Srirangam
will you not awaken
from your slumber? [verse 1]²¹

The eastern wind blows softly over blossoms of Mullai wafting their fragrance everywhere. The swan pair nestling among lotus blossoms have woken up flapping their wings wet with dew. O lord of Arangam [i.e., Srirangam] who saved the mighty elephant Gajendra from the death-like jaws of the crocodile, pray, wake up. [verse 2]

Twilight spreads all over the horizon. The little stars disappear. The tender dew moon is disappearing. Darkness disappears. Areca fronds burst spilling their golden inflorescence, blown by the wind. O lord of Arangam, pray wake up. [verse 3]

The sounds of the cowherd's flute and the bells of the cattle blend and spread everywhere. In the fields the bumble bees are swarming. O lord of celestials who destroyed the Lanka clan with a bow and stood guard over the seers' sacrifice! O lord, Ayodhya's coronated king! O lord of Arangam my liege, pray wake up. [verse 4]

The birds in the groves are chirping, night has disappeared, day has broken, the sea has begun to roar with waves. The bumble bees are humming. The gods have entered with Kadamba garlands to serve you. O lord of Arangam worshipped by Lanka's king (Vibhishana), pray wake up. [verse 5]

This here is the Sun god, rider of the jewelled chariot. This here is the lord of the eleven Adityas. This here is the six-faced Subramanya, rider of the peacock. These here are the Maruts and the Vasus in throngs, dancing and singing in delight crowding the great hall in front of your sanctum. O lord of Arangam, pray wake up. [verse 6]

This here is a throng of celestials. These here are the

great Munis and Maruts. This here is Indra come riding on his elephant in front of your temple. With Sundaras crowding and Vidhyadharas cramping, the Yakshas are lost in contemplation of your feet. There is no place to stand. O lord of Arangam, pray wake up. [verse 7]

With celestials reciting sonorously, the great cow Kapila in front and a beautiful mirror held aloft, the good sages stand on their toes for a glimpse of your frame. The celestial bards Tumburu and Narada have entered. The Sun has made his appearance with radiant rays. The darkness of the hall has disappeared. O lord of Arangam, pray wake up. [verse 8]

The air is rent with the music of beautiful one-stringed instruments, drums, lyres, flutes and cymbals. All night long the Kinnaras, the Garudas and the Gandharvas have been singing songs. The great sages and celestials, the Yakshas, the Charanas and the Siddhas have been yearning to worship your feet. Now to grant them audience, O lord of Arangam, wake up. [verse 9]

See the lotus blooms in profusion. The Sun has risen from the sea. Slender-hipped dames with curly locks come out of the river drying their hair and squeeze drying their clothes. O lord of Arangam surrounded by Kaveri waters, you have graced this lowly serf, Tondaradippodi, bearing a flower basket, with service to devotees. O lord, wake up. [verse 10]²²

Most probably it was to make Tondaradippodi a perfect and worthy instrument to sing His praises that the Lord humbled him, for when the ego is removed, perfection is attained. As we can see from his songs, Tondaradippodi attained perfection not only in humility but also in love of God.

As the Russian saint Staretz Silouan explained: 'There are many kinds of humility. One man is obedient and has nothing but blame for himself; and this is humility. Another

repents of his sins and considers himself loathsome in the sight of God; and this is humility. But there is still another humility in the man who has known the Lord by the Holy Spirit.

‘When the soul by the Holy Spirit sees the Lord, that He is meek and lowly, she humbles herself utterly. And this is an especial humility, which there are no words to describe, which is made known only through the Holy Spirit. And were men to understand through the Holy Spirit what a Lord is ours all would be transformed: the rich would despise their riches, scholars their learning, and rulers their glory and power. Every man would humble himself and live in profound peace and love. And there would be great joy on earth.’²³

Notes and References

- ✓ 1. *The Mumuksuppati of Pillai Lokacarya with Manavalamamuni's Commentary*, translated by Patricia Y. Mumme (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1987), p. 103.
2. Archimandrite Sofrony, *The Undistorted Image—Staretz Silouan: 1866-1938*. Trans. from the Russian by Rosemary Edwards (London: The Faith Press, 1958), p. 34.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
4. See Hardy, Friedhelm, *Viraha-Bhakti: The early history of Krsna devotion in South India* (Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 268.
- ✓ 5. Vasudha Narayanan, ‘Sri: Giver of Fortune, Bestower of Grace’, in *Devi, Goddesses of India*, ed. by John S. Hawley and Donna M. Wulff. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1998), p. 93.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
8. *Ibid.*

9. Ibid., p. 95.
10. Alkondavilli Govindacharya, *The Holy Lives of the Azhvars or The Dravida Saints* (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1982), p. 10 (adapted).
11. Ibid., p. 13 (adapted).
12. Ibid., p. 14 (adapted).
13. Nammalvar, who was probably earlier, also mentioned putting the dust of the feet of the devotees on the body to relieve the anguish of separation from God. For example:
 Ye mothers, pity it is, in wrong methods you persist,
 It does only aggravate the malady; I insist
 That you on this young lady smear the dust
Off the feet of devotees of the Lord Who excels
The blue gem rare; no other remedy can work so well.
 [4.6.6]
 [from S. Satyamurthi Ayyangar, *Tiruvaymoli English Glossary* (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1981), II:361.]
14. K.C. Varadachari, *Alvars of South India* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1966), p. 86-87.
15. Srirama Bharati, *Araiyaar Sevai, Theatre Expression in Sri-Vaishnava Worship* (Chennai: Sri Sadagopan Tirunarayana Swami Divya Prabandha Pathasala, 1999), p. 44-45.
16. *Alvars of South India*, p. 87.
17. Ibid., p. 90.
18. Ibid., p. 91-93.
19. *Viraha-Bhakti*, p. 493.
20. *Alvars of South India*, p. 100-01.
21. Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord, The Path of the Tamil Saints* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988), p. 87.
22. *Araiyaar Sevai*, p. 45-46.
23. *The Undistorted Image*, p. 180.

Kulasekhara Alvar

Poets,

beware, your life is in danger:

the lord of gardens is a thief,

a cheat,

master of illusions;

he came to me,

a wizard with words,

sneaked into my body,

my breath,

with bystanders looking on

but seeing nothing,

he consumed me

life and limb,

and filled me,

made me over

into himself.

—Nammalvar¹

Thus, Nammalvar describes the precariousness of the poet-saint's life—a life totally consumed by God. One who would be a true poet must be possessed. His visions and thoughts cannot be his own. All the great poets were visionaries—the Vedic rishis, Valmiki, Kamban, the Alvars and Nayanmars, Dante, Rumi, Yeats, and so on. The Vedic rishis knew this. They understood that their visions were from a divine source, and this is why the Vedas are said to be eternal, authoritative, and not written by human beings.

Along with this, a poet must be able to enter the world of myth and become one with it. For example, there is very

little said about Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the Bible. What was she like as a child? Can we imagine her feelings when she saw her son dying on the cross? But an inspired poet can bring her to life, as Rainer Maria Rilke did in his *Das Marian Leben* (The Life of Mary). Myths are not necessarily based on historical events that we can put a date to. But again, they are not fairy tales. As Joseph Campbell, a recognized authority on myth, said: 'Now, myths don't just come pouring out. The old romantic nineteenth-century philosophers and scholars in Germany had the idea that the people produce the myths. Well, they don't! . . . Myth has always come from visionaries, and all the traditions tell us this.'²

Few poets understand this nowadays, however. As Campbell said: 'The only people who can do it [mythologize] for us are poets and artists. The scriptures themselves come from the visions and realizations of poets and artists, but all the poets and artists that I know . . . are at sea. They're at sea because the traditions [now] don't tell them that their inspirations come from a divine transcendent source.'³

Mythology is the key to our understanding of God in his personal form. It is the means by which the devotee is introduced to the Personal God, and it is also the means by which the devotee enters into the realm of the divine. The Lord's play is living and eternal. But it is up to us to use our myth and develop it to create our own relationship with God. And if we don't use it, then, like what has happened in the West, it becomes 'mute, and gives no answers,'⁴ as C.G. Jung said. If we want meaning and response from our myth, then we must respond to it.

The poet-saints are the ones who help us in this. As David L. Haberman says, 'Poetry is used both to express the meditative experience and evoke the meditative experience.'⁵ The poets are inspired, and again, they in turn



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inspire. They give us the foundation, but then we must build on that. How? For a devotee following a devotional path, one way is to imitate a paradigmatic character in a mythology. For instance, devotees who feel drawn towards worshipping God as a child, might think of themselves to be like Yashoda, Krishna's mother, or like Kaushalya, Rama's mother, or they might take on the emotions of Nanda or Dasaratha, Krishna's and Rama's fathers. Yashoda and Kaushalya, Nanda and Dasaratha, would then be the paradigmatic role models. ↩

It was Rupa Goswami, one of the six Vrindavan Goswamis, who developed this technique into a science called the Raganuga bhakti sadhana. Says Haberman, 'The generative notion behind the Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana is the realization that to obtain a goal one should imitate one who has already attained that goal.'⁶ Rupa Goswami realized: 'If the *bhakta* [devotee] could somehow take on or imitate the *anubhavas* [the natural expressions of an emotion] of one of the exemplary Vrajaloka, he could obtain the salvific emotions of that character and come to inhabit the world in which that character resides—Vraja.'⁷

In this type of devotional sadhana, the goal is not to become one with God, but rather to become identified with a paradigmatic character of the Lord's realm.⁸ ('I don't want to become sugar; I want to taste sugar.') As Haberman says: 'At first, the practitioners merely copy the character they are striving to become. But the successful practitioner's goal is to become so totally identified with a character in the Vraja-lila that he or she *really is* that character.'⁹

'Living a myth . . . implies a genuinely religious experience',¹⁰ said Mircea Eliade. Kulasekhara Alvar was one of those rare poet-saints, consumed by love of God, who genuinely lived his myth. Not content with merely hearing or writing about the Lord's lila, he also, in moments of ecstasy, put himself in the drama. ↴

Kulasekhara Alvar was most likely born around the ninth century and is said to be an incarnation of the kaustubha jewel, the wish-fulfilling gem that Vishnu wears on his chest. Legend has it that he was a king of southern Kerala, but it seems from his poems that the territory he controlled may have extended east of Srirangam and included 'parts of the Salem and Coimbatore districts' of what is now Tamil Nadu.¹¹ His father, Dridhavrata, being childless, spent much time in prayer and worship, and as a result of his prayers, Kulasekhara was born. After seeing that his son was well trained in all the branches of learning suitable for a king, Dridhavrata installed him on the throne and retired to the forest.

The life of a king had little appeal for Kulasekhara, however. His heart was on God, and his only comfort was in listening to the scriptures and serving the devotees of the Lord. He longed for the day when he could renounce everything and join the devotees at Srirangam. A twelfth-century Sanskrit sloka¹² in praise of the Alvar states that his capital was constantly filled with rumours that he was leaving for Srirangam. And, indeed, we can almost hear his sighs of longing in the first of his ten poems:

In the big city of Arangam my dark gem-hued lord reclines on Ananta, the white coiled serpent with a thousand hoods each marked with a 'U'—the lord's feet—and bearing radiant gems on each forehead that dispel the darkness everywhere. His tender feet are caressed by waves of the pure waters of Kaveri. O, When will my starving eyes feast on his subtle form?¹³ [PT 1.1]

The only remedy for his intense yearning was to invite saints and sages and devotees to his palace and soothe his ears by listening to their discussions and their readings from the scriptures. As Kulasekhara was particularly devoted to Rama, his favourite scripture was the Ramayana, and a part of it was read out to him every day.

One day the reading was from the section of the Aranya Kanda in which Khara, Surpanakha's brother, comes to Rama's ashrama at Panchavati with fourteen thousand rakshasas to kill him. The gods, the gandharvas, and the siddhas, who were all watching Rama from above, were suddenly stricken with fear, and they exclaimed: 'Here are fourteen thousand ogres of terrible deeds, while the pious-minded Rama is alone. How will there be a conflict (under such circumstances)?'¹⁴

As usual, Kulasekhara was totally absorbed in listening to the reading. But something different happened that day. That day he was not merely listening to it—he was experiencing it. All boundaries between the different levels of reality had dissolved. As the reciter came to the line, 'while the pious-minded Rama is alone,' the king became extremely alarmed. He leapt to his feet and began shouting: 'My Rama is alone! Brother Lakshmana has gone to guard my mother Sita, while Rama faces those fourteen thousand rakshasas by himself. He is in great peril. I must go to his side. Call the troops quickly! We shall march right now!'¹⁵

The king's ministers were in a frenzy. 'What has happened to our king?' they thought. 'Has he gone mad?' They tried to reason with him, but nothing worked. The troops were called, and they soon left with the king leading the way. Meanwhile, the ministers quickly consulted amongst themselves and hit upon a plan: They would immediately send another troop of soldiers to go ahead of the first troop. This second troop would then meet the king from the opposite direction and inform him that they were just returning from Panchavati and that Rama had single-handedly killed all fourteen thousand rakshasas.

The plan worked. Hearing that Rama had defeated the rakshasas all by himself, Kulasekhara was overjoyed. The king, with all the troops, returned to the capital and a celebration was held. Thereafter, the readings of the

Ramayana continued, but the reciter was now more discriminating about what he portions he read out. Wary of more abnormal outbursts, he read only the parts of the *Ramayana* where Rama was happy, and glossed over other parts.

Once, however, some other obligations called the reciter out of town, so he asked his son to do the daily recitation in court for him. Unfortunately, he forgot to tell his son about the king's peculiarities. The son went on reading everything and soon came to the part where Sita was kidnapped by Ravana and taken to Lanka. Kulasekhara was furious. 'How dare he carry my mother Sita off!' he roared. 'I shall cross the ocean right now and rescue her. Call the troops. We shall leave immediately.'¹⁶ And so they did.

This time the ministers followed him, thinking that the king could not possibly go any further when he reached the sea. But they had underestimated Kulasekhara's determination. Nothing was going to stop him. On reaching the shore, he simply plunged into the ocean, resolved to swim across to Lanka or die in the attempt. The ministers and troops were stunned. They could do nothing but stare in disbelief. What would happen to the king?

But nothing was unknown to Rama. Kulasekhara was intent on coming to Rama's rescue, so Rama also decided now to come to Kulasekhara's rescue. As the king swam further and further out in the ocean, Rama and Sita suddenly appeared before him. Rama took Kulasekhara's hand, lifted him out of the water, and said: 'The battle is over. The rakshasas have all been killed, and we are returning safely. Your efforts are well appreciated by us, though. Come, let us all go to your city.'¹⁷ After bringing Kulasekhara to the shore, Rama and Sita went with him as far as the king's capital, and then disappeared.

The ministers saw nothing, however, but the 'madness' of their king. And after this incident, Kulasekhara seemed

to them even more mad. Meanwhile, his longing to renounce his kingdom and go to Srirangam became even more intense, and he began making preparations to leave. The ministers then hit upon another plan: There was one thing the king was attached to almost as much as he was to the Lord, and that was the Lord's devotees. So every time the king was ready to leave for Srirangam, they would send a group of devotees to the court to see him. Kulasekhara would then postpone his journey in order to worship and serve the devotees.

This plan also worked—but a bit too well for the ministers. Soon the Vaishnavas began flocking to see the king. They had free access to him, and now he attended to nothing but their worship and service. This was too much for the ministers. But what was their choice? If they got rid of the Vaishnavas, the king would leave. Again they consulted amongst themselves and came up with yet another plan: If they could somehow convince the king that these devotees were unprincipled and not worthy of his respect, then he would abandon them and become normal again. But how was this to be done? The Vaishnavas were in charge of the worship of the king's deity, Rama. If the ministers could take away the precious necklace from the image, the king would naturally think that the Vaishnavas had stolen it.

The ministers had again underestimated their king. The next day the necklace was reported missing, and the ministers claimed that the Vaishnavas had stolen it, as the worship arrangements were their responsibility. Kulasekhara couldn't stand it. 'Lovers of God are incapable of stealing,' he shouted. 'It is impossible for them even to think anything wrong, much less to do something wrong.'¹⁸ Kulasekhara then had a pot containing a live cobra brought to him, and he announced: 'To prove that what I say is true, I shall put my hand in this pot. If the devotees of the Lord

are innocent, then may the cobra not bite me. And if they are guilty, then may I be bitten.'¹⁹

Kulasekhara thrust his hand into the pot and withdrew it unharmed. The ministers were ashamed. They brought out the necklace, fell at the king's feet, and confessed what they had done. The king pardoned them, but he knew in his heart he could no longer continue his royal duties or bear the company of these worldly ministers. After turning his kingdom over to his son, he left to spend the rest of his days in pilgrimage and in the company of devotees at Srirangam.

Fortunately for us, Kulasekhara left a beautiful work in ten poems called the *Perumal Tirumoli*. Another work in Sanskrit, the *Mukundamala*, is also attributed to him. His *Perumal Tirumoli* is of a particularly high quality, both in poetic beauty and in devotional fervour.²⁰ As we have already seen, in the first poem the Alvar expresses his intense longing to see the Lord at Srirangam. Besides this, however, the Alvar also desires to be among the devotees there. His ecstatic longing is expressed in the ten verses of the first poem in a variety of ways, each verse beginning with 'When then will be the day . . .'. Hardy lists these expressions of ecstasy as follows:

(When then will be the day) of praising Mayon [i.e., Vishnu] so that my mouth will ache . . . (2), of meeting His servants (=bhaktas) there and scattering flowers at His feet! . . . (3), of praising Him with joyful poems in lovely Tamil and in the Northern language [Sanskrit] . . . (4), when my heart will totally melt away on seeing the sacred face and mixing with the crowds of sages . . . (6), when dancing and looking at Him, praising Him and melting away, remembering Him and weeping floods of tears—mind's water of joy—without satiation, I sing his many qualities and join the crowd of His servants . . . (9), when I too become one of His servants, seeing them

in great joy in the sacred hall of Arankam [i.e., Srirangam]. . . (10)²¹

The second poem is similar to the first, except that it lays more emphasis on the devotees at Srirangam. In the ninth verse of this poem the description of the devotees' 'madness' may seem exaggerated to us, but there are striking similarities in it to Vrindavan Das's descriptions of Caitanya's kirtans with his devotees at Navadvip in the *Sri Sri Caitanya Bhagavata*. Friedhelm Hardy comments on this verse: 'The "madness" of religious ecstasy is the human response to the madness implied in Krsna's *maya*: ideal bhakti is "madness", and only by means of it can something of the gulf created between the *bhakta* and Krsna by the latter's *maya* be bridged.'²²

Tears flowing ceaselessly
hair standing on end
they are weak with longing and desire
they sing and dance
they fall and prostrate
rising they dance again
they bow at his feet.

Father, Master, Lord of Arangam
his slaves they be.

They who are mad for the Lord alone
they be not the ones who are mad
All those others

they indeed are mad!²³ [PT 2.9]

And in his third song Kulasekhara further expands on this theme:

I cannot mix with people of the world who consider this corporeal life as real. 'My Lord!' 'My Aranga', is all I can say. I swoon with infatuation for my lord Mal. [3.1]

To the world I am mad. To me the world is mad. Alas! What use dilating on this? 'O Cowherd-lord!' I call, mad with love for the lord of Arangam, my master.²⁴ [3.8]

The fourth poem is probably one of the most beautiful in all the Alvar literature. Here, Kulasekhara's devotion to Venkateswara extends even to the birds, fish, trees, and stones of the Lord's mountain, and he pines to be among them. Three of the verses are given here:

Would that I were a fish

in the pure springs

of holy Venkatam

where honeyed blossoms

grow in shady groves

Not for me

the endless glory

of Indra's heaven—

nor the company of

beauteous *apsaras*—

Not for me the wealth

of all this earth

nor indeed its lordship—

As a fish

may I take birth

in Tiruvenkatam! [PT 4.2]

O Lord, O Venkata

Would that I were a step

at the entrance to

your shrine

trodden upon by devotees

by gods and *apsaras*

who crowd to

worship you—

O Tirumal

who destroys our sins

that grow like weeds

Ceaselessly I need to see

your lips of coral hue

may I lie

as a step

upon your threshold. [PT 4.9]

I would be anything
 at all
 upon Tiruvenkatam
 the golden hill
 where lives
 our coral-lipped Lord—
 Were I to gain
 the lordship of
 the heavenly worlds
 it moves me not—
 Were I to win
 beauteous Urvasi
 with glittering
 girdle of gold
 little care I—
 Lord, rather would I be
 anything at all
 upon Venkatam.²⁵ [PT 4.10]

The Alvar's complete surrender to the Lord is expressed through various similes in the fifth poem written to the Lord of Vittuvakodu. Those familiar with *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* will recognize the simile about the bird on the ship's mast:

My recurring grief
 You end not
 and yet, apart from you—
 there rests for me no refuge
 O, Lord of Vittuvakodu
 of flower-filled groves of fragrance—
*When enraged mother
 drives away her child
 that child still cries for her
 So too am I, O Lord. [PT 5.1]*
 O Lord who slaughtered
 the savage elephant

if I reach not
 the refuge of your feet
 where else can I survive?
Like bird in mid-ocean
which leaves the ship
to search for shore
and returns to perch on the mast
of that self-same ship—
*So too am I, O Lord.*²⁶ [PT 5.5]

↳ Songs conveying the attitude of regarding the Lord as one's child (*vatsalya bhava*) are not uncommon. But in the seventh poem, in an unusual approach, the Alvar takes on the persona of Devaki, Krishna's real mother, who has been deprived of this joy—as Krishna was brought up by his foster mother, Yashoda. The significance of Devaki's attitude is beautifully brought out by Hardy: 'Among all the figures in the Krsna myths, Devaki resembles the human *bhakta* most closely: full of love for Krsna and longing to see him and all his deeds and to be in physical contact with him, both have to content themselves with hearing about them and imagining them.'²⁷

O Hapless me! I have not enjoyed seeing your beautiful forehead-jewel sway over your face, nor of placing a kiss on your beautiful lips, nor of seeing the image of your father in your face with a flutter in my heart, nor of seeing you put your finger in your little red mouth and babble in a fit of rage. The godly dame Yasoda has received it all!

O Krishna, with eyes like the petals of a lotus! Alas, I have not enjoyed seeing you play in the mud, then come crawling and toddling to embrace my bosom with red dust all over you, nor of eating the remains of sweet-rice savoured by you with all your pink fingers. O the terrible sinner that I am, for what did my mother beget me?²⁸ [PT 7.5-6]

I have not seen you
 put your tender hands in the butter-pot
 nor stir the butter and eat it
 I have not seen you back away at the sight
 of the rope used to beat you
 nor have I seen the white curds
 smeared on your red lips
 nor the look of fear in your eyes
 or your crying
 your sweet little mouth pouting
 your pleading look
 Yashoda who saw all of these
 knew indeed the peak of joy!²⁹ [PT 7.8]

The eighth song is a *talelo*, or lullaby, to Rama. Though it addresses him as a baby, it gives the whole story of the *Ramayana* and also identifies Rama with the Lord of Tirukkannapuram. It was obviously intended as a lullaby for mothers to use to tell their children the story: 'Sleep, O Illustrious Dasarathi with long hair adorned by a Tulsi wreath, Talelo, O King of Tirukkannapuram with a strong mountain-like chest! You gave up the wealth of kingship to your brother Bharata, and went into the forest with your devoted brother Lakshmana!³⁰ [PT 8.5]

In the ninth poem, in another rare approach to *vatsalya bhava*, the Alvar takes up the attitude of Dasaratha, Rama's father, grieving for his son after he was banished to the forest:

Like enemy lances
 sharp stones pierce your soft feet
 making the blood flow—
 choosing the deep forest
 which none chooses
 where the sun beats down
 and hunger gnaws
 you have left me, son!
 Sinner that I am

I listened to the words of
 the sinful daughter of Kekayar
 Alas! what can I do
 unfortunate that I am!³¹ [PT 9.5]

In a totally different mood, Kulasekhara takes on, in the sixth song, the persona of a gopi who has been deceived by Krishna: 'O Vasudeva! With so many coiffured cowherd-dames living in this town, I knew full well not to nurture desires for the embrace of your chest. Still like a fool, I heard your lies and waited for you on the sands of the Yamuna all night, shivering in the frost and pierced by the wind.'³² [PT 6.1]

The *Perumal Tirumoli* closes with another poem that is a condensed *Ramayana*. The following is the first verse:

Light of the world shining from the good city of
 Ayodhya surrounded by lofty walls! Beacon of the
 lineage of kings of the solar race! Hero and saviour of
 all the celestials! Lord of lotus eyes and dark frame! Our
 very own lord without a peer!—He resides in the good
 Chitrakuta of Tillainagar. When, O when will mine eyes
 feast on his form?³³ [PT 10.1]

The *Mukundamala*, though not as beautiful as the *Perumal Tirumoli*, is more widely known, as it was written in Sanskrit. The sixth verse is given here:

In heaven, on earth, in hell,
 willingly will I abide
 if it be your wish
 O Lord who destroyed Naraka—
 But always
 even at the moment of death
 will I meditate upon
 your gracious feet
 that put shame to
 the beauty of
 the fresh spring lotus.³⁴

In his discussion of 'The Role of the Sacred Book in Religion—the Ramayana', Harry M. Buck, a translator of the *Ramayana* into English, asks, 'What, then, are the functions of such stories [such as the *Ramayana*]?' One of the answers he gives is: 'When the devotee participates in the cultic anamnesis [i.e., "recollection" through story], he causes the redemptive event to happen all over again, as it were, or else you might say that he transcends any temporal barriers that may exist and participates directly in the actions of deity in his life. . . . The very words, therefore, of a saving story, place one in touch with numinous power. . . . One tells and retells the story because in such participation the events leading to salvation are recreated.'³⁵

→ How many of us, when we hear or read a sacred story, genuinely feel that we participate in a 'redemptive event'? An inspired poet, however, can more easily enter the world of another inspired poet. Kulasekhara was one such inspired poet who could enter into and participate in the world of Valmiki's Rama. And he, in his turn, left his poems to inspire us.

Notes and References

1. *Hymns for the Drowning, Poems for Visnu by Nammalvar*, trans. by A.K. Ramanujan (n.p.: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 76. (*Tiruvaymoli* 10.7.1) The 'lord of gardens' is Lord Alagar at Tirumaliruncolai, near Madurai.
2. Fraser Boa, *The Way of Myth, Talking with Joseph Campbell* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), p. 185.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 167-68.
4. C.G. Jung—*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, recorded and ed. by Aniela Jaffé. Trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (London: Fontana Press, c1963), p. 364.
5. David L. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation, A Study*

of *Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), p. 130.

6. Ibid., p. 68.
7. Ibid., p. 69-70.
8. But this interpretation, as Haberman points out, is debated. There is another view: According to Jiva Goswami, one should merely *copy* one of the characters of the Vraja lila and think of oneself as a unique character in the Vraja lila drama. To conceive of oneself as one of the original characters, he says, is improper, 'since it confuses the distinction between a human soul and one of the original models, who have never been touched by the influence of *maya* and are held to be part of the essential nature (*svarupa-sakti*) of Krsna himself.' Ibid., 83. However, people's experiences don't always follow the theories. On this, see Philip Lutgendorf, 'The Secret Life of Ramcandra of Ayodhya', p. 224, in *Many Ramayanas, The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. by Paula Richman (Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).
9. *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, p. 75.
10. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*. Quoted in *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, p. 145.
11. Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti. The early history of Krsna devotion in South India* (Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 260-61, fn. 67.
12. *Ghuryate yasya nagare Ranga-yatra dine dine*. In *Viraha-Bhakti*, p. 260-61, fn. 67.
13. *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand—Nalayira Divya Prabandham Rendered in English with Tamil Original*, trans. by Srirama Bharati (Chennai: Sri Sadagopan Tirunarayananaswami Divya Prabandha Pathasala, 2000), p. 129.
14. *Srimad Valmiki-Ramayana* (With Sanskrit text and English translation (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1992), II:707 (Aranya Kanda 24.23).
15. Alkondavilli Govindacharya, *The Holy Lives of the Azhvars or Dravida Saints* (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1982), p. 125 (adapted). Swami

Saradananda narrates a similar story about Ramakrishna's uncle Kanairam: 'Kanairam was of a devotional and contemplative nature. Once he went to a drama (Yatra) which portrayed the banishment of Sri Ramachandra to the forest. The performance became so realistic to him that he took Kaikeyi's secret plotting and scheming to be real and was on the point of striking the actor who played the part.' See *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. by Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991), I:31.

16. Govindacharya, p. 127 (adapted).
17. Ibid., p. 128.
18. Ibid., p. 131.
19. Ibid.
20. According to Hardy, "Perumal" is the title of a Cera dynasty (with, incidentally, many Kulasekharas), and thus the title can easily be explained . . . as "Tirumoli by the Perumal king".' *Viraha-Bhakti*, p. 429, fn. 1. As the poetic quality of the *Mukundamala* is not that of the *Perumal Tirumoli*, Hardy believes they were not written by the same person. See *Viraha-Bhakti*, p. 256, fn. 56(2).
21. Ibid., p. 431.
22. Ibid., p. 434.
23. Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord, The Path of the Tamil Saints* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publ., 1988), p. 94.
24. *Sacred Book*, p. 134, 135.
25. *Slaves of the Lord*, p. 91-93.
26. Ibid., p. 93-94.
27. *Viraha-Bhakti*, p. 433.
28. *Sacred Book*, p. 142.
29. *Slaves of the Lord*, p. 96.
30. *Sacred Book*, p. 144.
31. *Slaves of the Lord*, p. 95.
32. *Sacred Book*, p. 139.
33. Ibid., p. 148.
34. *Slaves of the Lord*, p. 97.
35. Harry M. Buck, 'The Role of the Sacred Book in Religion—the Ramayana', in *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, ed. by V. Raghavan (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1989), p. 45-46, 47.

Tirumangai Alvar

In an attempt to describe the type of yearning one needs to realize God, Sri Ramakrishna once said: 'One feels restless for God when one's soul longs for his vision. The guru said to the disciple: "Come with me. I shall show you what kind of longing will enable you to see God." Saying this, he took the disciple to a pond and pressed his head under the water. After a few moments he released the disciple and asked, "How did you feel?" The disciple answered: "Oh, I felt as if I were dying! I was longing for a breath of air."¹

On another occasion Ramakrishna said: 'Ah! How wonderful was the yearning of the gopis for Krishna! They were seized with divine madness at the very sight of the black tamala tree. Separation from Krishna created such a fire of anguish in Radha's heart that it dried up even the tears in her eyes! . . . Ah! If anyone has but a particle of such prema! What yearning! What love! . . . The sum and substance of the whole matter is that a man must love God, must be restless for Him. It doesn't matter whether you believe in God with form or in God without form. You may or may not believe that God incarnates Himself as a man. But you will realize Him if you have that yearning.'²

→ It is the feeling of separation (*viraha*, or *vipralambha*) from God that creates the most intense form of yearning in a devotee. Just as the disciple in Ramakrishna's story thought he would die when separated from a breath of air, and just as Radha felt she would die when separated from Krishna, so too, in this form of spiritual discipline, the devotee tries to create in himself an intense feeling of being



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separated from God. Sri Caitanya described that state thus: 'In the state of separation from the Lord (Govinda), even the twinkling of the eye seems to me a cycle, copious tears flow from my eyes like unto the rainy season, and all the world appears to me a void.'³

Though viraha, or the anguish of separation from the Lord, is usually associated with the madhura bhava (the attitude of a lover to the supreme Beloved), it was also used by Kulasekhara Alvar in association with the vatsalya bhava (the attitude of a parent towards the divine Child). As we have earlier seen, in one of his poems he took on the attitude of Devaki, who was denied the pleasures of watching her baby Krishna grow up. And in another poem, Kulasekhara assumed the attitude of Dasaratha grieving over Rama's exile to the forest.

But because of the emotional intensity of the madhura bhava, the feeling of the extreme anguish of separation from the Lord is more effective in that bhava. Speaking on the madhura bhava in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, A.N. Chatterjee observed, 'On the highest level one must love God in intimate union, which is called *sambhoga*, and, on an even higher level, one must learn to love God in separation, which is called *vipralambha*—this allows one to truly appreciate union.'⁴ The perfection of this state is called *maha-bhava*, and in its highest form 'is that stage of bliss and pain, arising respectively from the union with, and separation from, Krishna, of which all the happiness existing in crores of universes and also the pain produced by the biting of all the snakes and the stinging of all the scorpions, are just a drop in the ocean, so to say.'⁵

Describing Sri Ramakrishna's practice of the madhura bhava, Swami Saradananda wrote: 'We have heard from the Master himself that drops of blood oozed out then at times from every pore of his body under the powerful sense of the separation from Krishna. All the joints of the body seemed

loosened or almost dislocated, the senses completely desisted from functioning and the body lay motionless and unconscious sometimes like that of a dead man—all because of the extreme anguish of the heart.”⁶

↙ In a sense, we are all suffering from this state of separation from God without being conscious of it. But if we can make ourselves aware of that separation and consciously intensify that feeling, our progress towards God becomes quicker. Moreover, this is a natural path. When Sita was confined in the ashoka grove in Lanka, she did not have to make any effort to think of Rama. Her mind naturally meditated on him.⁷ So also, the devotee who cultivates intense love and yearning for God cannot help but meditate on the Lord. In his *Vidagdhamadhava*, Rupa Goswami illustrates this by humorously comparing the mind of a yogi with that of Radha:

Seeking to meditate for a moment upon Krishna,
The sage wrests his mind from the objects of sense;
This child [Radha] draws her mind away from Him
To fix it on mere worldly things.
The yogi yearns for a tiny flash of Krishna in his heart;
Look—this foolish girl strives to banish Him from hers!
(VM 2.17)⁸

Viraha bhakti—that is, devotion expressed through the feeling of separation and intense yearning—was taught as a path to God by Sri Caitanya, but it was actually introduced centuries earlier by the Alvars. We have seen it in many of Nammalvar's poems. And we have seen how Andal's whole life was centred around her desire to marry the Lord. The anguish of her separation from God was the whole subject of her *Nachiyar Tirumoli*. Yet another Alvar who expressed this attitude of the pain of separation from the Lord in his songs was Tirumangai Alvar.

Tirumangai Alvar was most likely born around the middle of the eighth century at Tirukuraiyalur, near

Tiruvali. He is also known as Nila, Parakalan, Kaliyan, and Kalikanri, and he is said to have been the incarnation of the Saranga, Vishnu's bow. Born into a robber class, his father is said to have been a commander in the army of the Chola king. Nila learned martial arts from his father and soon distinguished himself in the king's service so well that the king appointed him a ruler over a small part of the Chola territory. As the town of Tirumangai was included in that area, Nila was thenceforth known as Tirumangai-mannan, or ruler of Tirumangai. With such a background, it is no wonder that Tirumangai would possess a devil-may-care attitude towards life.

But when Tirumangai fell in love with a Vaishnava girl named Kumudavalli, his life began to take another turn. Kumudavalli agreed to marry him on two conditions: one, Tirumangai must formally become a Vaishnava; and two, in order to make sure that his conversion was genuine and from the heart, he must feed 1,008 Vaishnavas every day for a year. Totally undaunted, Tirumangai agreed, and the marriage was celebrated. Day after day, then, Tirumangai devoted all his time and money for feeding the Vaishnavas, including the money he was supposed to remit to the Chola king. And when the officers of the king were sent to collect the king's money, Tirumangai continually put them off with one or excuse or another, stalling for time. Eventually, however, the officers could not be put off any longer. When they insisted on collecting the king's dues immediately, Tirumangai resorted to force to send them away.

The king was furious when he learned what had happened. He called the commander-in-chief of his army and told him to go with some troops and bring Tirumangai to him. Tirumangai had his own army, however, and they did not take long to defeat the king's troops. The king then came himself with a larger army, and when he could not defeat Tirumangai and his men, he resorted to a ruse to

capture the Alvar. Tirumangai was then imprisoned, but his only concern was how he could continue feeding the Vaishnavas. At last, one night, Lord Varadaraja of Kanchi appeared to him and said: 'Don't lose heart, my child. Tell them you will get the money from my place.'

In the morning the king's officials came to Tirumangai and again demanded from him the sum that he owed the king. This time, however, instead of giving excuses, he told them: 'The money is hidden at Kanchi. Come with me there and I will get it for you.' After some deliberation the officials agreed, and they all left for Kanchi. Tirumangai picked out a spot at random and said the money was hidden in the ground there, but after much digging nothing was found. Tirumangai was in a fix. The officials were angry, and he did not know what to tell them. For a few days he remained silent, and at last Lord Varadaraja appeared to him in a dream. This time the Lord showed him a spot on the bank of the river Vegavati and said, 'Dig here.' In the morning, Tirumangai took the king's men with him to the river and on finding that spot, told them the treasure was there. Sure enough, they dug up a large treasure. In fact, it was more than enough to pay what Tirumangai owed the king, so with the remaining money Tirumangai continued his daily feeding of Vaishnavas.

Soon, however, even that money was gone, and Tirumangai wondered how he could fulfil his promise. After much thought he decided to turn to highway robbery. Many wealthy people travelled on the road through the forest, and he, along with his men, could easily ambush them there and plunder their jewels and money. His plan worked well—too well. One day, as he was lying in ambush with his men, he noticed a marriage procession passing through the forest. 'Great!' he thought. 'We'll get plenty of money from these people.' When the marriage party came close, Tirumangai and his men surrounded the people and

began seizing their valuables. Tirumangai himself approached the bride and groom and demanded their jewels. Without a word the couple obliged.

All the valuables were thrown into a bundle, and the robbers prepared to leave. But oddly enough, none of them could pick up the bundle. Tirumangai himself tried without success. It seemed to be stuck to the ground. Tirumangai became suspicious and asked the groom, 'So, you know tricks. What is your mantra to lift this? Tell me right now!' 'Of course I shall give you the mantra,' replied the groom. 'Repeat it after me.' He then uttered the eight-syllabled 'Narayana' mantra. Tirumangai repeated it, and immediately found that he could lift the bundle. But something else began to happen. In fact, a revolution started taking place in his mind. As he went on and on repeating the mantra, he suddenly noticed that the bride and groom were no longer in front of him. They were seated on a large bird and were flying off in the sky. He now understood that they were Lakshmi and Narayana, who were ascending back to Vaikuntha on their carrier Garuda.

In his desire to continually feel the presence of the Lord, Tirumangai started off on a long pilgrimage that took him from one Vishnu shrine to another. Hymns of ecstatic praise seemed to pour from his lips now, and at each temple he dedicated a song to the Lord. According to Govindacharya, it was at this time that Tirumangai received the title 'Arul-Mari'—the Cloud of Grace. Whether it was because the Alvar was one on whom the cloud of God's grace had rained, or because the Alvar's cloud of grace rains on others is not known.¹⁰

At last, after travelling extensively throughout South India, Tirumangai reached Srirangam, where the Lord appeared to him and requested the Alvar to remain there and renovate His temple. Tirumangai accepted the divine command in all humility. But how would he get the

necessary funds? His robber companions, who had followed him after his transformation and become his disciples, were ready to do his bidding. It is said that they even stole a golden image of Buddha at Nagapattinam and melted it down to get funds. Soon, however, the rulers of the area, convinced that Tirumangai was a genuine devotee and also probably somewhat afraid of his prowess, offered the necessary funds of their own accord. In his songs he pays tribute to two rulers—Nandivarman II Pallavamalla and a Rashtrakuta king named Dantidurga.¹¹ Possibly he received some help from them.

Like everything else he did, Tirumangai set about the renovation work with great zeal. According to one tradition, a good part of the present-day Srirangam temple was built by Tirumangai Alvar.¹² There is also a tradition that it was Tirumangai Alvar who introduced the practice of reciting Nammalvar's *Tiruvaymoli* at the Srirangam temple.¹³ And according to S.M.S. Chari, 'His biographical account tells us that he attained *moksa* at Tirukkurungudi, a holy centre in the extreme South India, where we find even today a monument in memory of his having entered into a *samadhi*.'¹⁴

The whole second book of the *Nalayira Divyaprabandham* (the collected works of the Alvars) consists of three of Tirumangai's six works. And most of this book consists of his main work, the *Periya Tirumoli*, which is almost as long as Nammalvar's *Tiruvaymoli*. The remaining five of his works are all shorter pieces (three of which are included in the fourth book). Again, three of the five shorter works, as well as much of the *Periya Tirumoli*, are written from the attitude of a nayaki, or maiden, who is separated from her Beloved Lord, or Nayaka.

The *Periya Tirumoli* is divided into eleven sections with ten decads in each section, and ten verses in each decad, similar to Nammalvar's *Tiruvaymoli*. More than half

of the work comprises the songs Tirumangai wrote in honour of the temples he visited. But there is much more to this work than that. Though probably inspired to a great extent by the *Tiruvaymoli*, it has a more ordered sequence to it than Nammalvar's work. In the very first decad Tirumangai gives us a glimpse of his reckless and hedonistic life before his transformation, and acknowledges that it was the Lord's grace and the Narayana mantra that saved him:

Weary was I
 sad, weary and worn
 sunk in deep sorrow
 I sought the company of young women
 thinking only of
 the pleasures they bring—
 I wanted to escape
 I ran and ran
 I discovered the knowledge,
 the greatest of all,
 I searched and searched—
 I realized
 the sacred name of Narayana. [PT 1.1.1]
 I became a thief
 deceitful, dishonest
 I wandered hither and thither
 yet light dawned upon me—
 I reached your feet
 and instantly your grace fell upon me
 with melting heart and choked voice
 your praises I sing
 body bathed in streaming tears
 I repeat day and night
 the sacred name of Narayana. [PT 1.1.5]¹⁵

In his temple songs, Tirumangai often starts out identifying, as other Alvars did, the Lord of a particular temple as being the Lord of various mythologies, but then

gradually within each song he moves towards the idea that it is this same Lord who resides within everything:

The lord who saved the elephant in distress and lifted a mount to protect the cows against rain resides at Nangur in Tirumanik-Kudam where the river Kaveri flows into fragrant groves everywhere, and lashes out grains of gold. [PT 4.5.1]

The lord who came as a fish, manikin, swan, boar, man-lion, and horse-rider, who is the Universe, the orbs and all else, is my master residing at Nangur in Tirumanik-Kudam amid brave warriors who put to flight the kings of the Southern Pandya kingdom and the Western Chera kingdom. [PT 4.5.6]

Doubt and certainty, truth and falsity, the spirit of the forms on Earth, and the forms themselves—all these are my lord, who resides at Nangur in Tirumanik-Kudam, where the Valai fish and red Kayal fish drink the nectar spilled by lotuses and dance enchanted. [PT 4.5.8]¹⁶

In a humorous dance song, the Alvar takes on the attitude of the surviving rakshasas in Lanka, pleading for their lives after Ravana was killed by Rama. It seems they will do anything to save their necks:

O Lord Sugriva, we salute you, Hail! We praise the name of Rama till our tongues swell. Pray tell your monkey clan not to kill us! Like entertainers, we dance the Kulamani Duram. [PT 10.3.1]

The world ruler your King Rama became the lord of death for our king Ravana. Long live your Nilan. Long live your Sushenan. Long live your Angadan. We fear them and we dance the Kulamani Duram. [PT 10.3.3]

O, Those of the Rakshasa clan! Come gather. If you want their anger to subside, here is all you need to say. Instead of boastful words, call 'Glory be!' to Hanuman, the powerful one from birth, and let the death-givers sit and watch you dance the Kulamani Duram. [PT 10.3.7]¹⁷

Again, in another humorous song the Alvar expresses his astonishment at the contradictions in the Lord:

My Lord came as Nara-Narayana and divulged the sacred texts. He is also the one who packed the twin Orbs, the Earth, the oceans, the mountains and the fires—all within his stomach! And look, now he is a child leashed to a mortar for stealing the cowherd-dame's butter! Can there ever be a greater wonder than this anywhere? [PT 10.6.1]¹⁸

But it is in the songs in which he takes on the persona of a maiden in love with the Lord where his greatest emotional fervour is expressed. In *Periya Tirumoli* 8.4 the girl asks a dragon-fly to go to her Lord and then return to her bearing the fragrance of His tulasi garland:

O Dragon-fly! What do you get from hovering over blossoming flowers! Go to my lord of Tirukkannapuram—he is the lord of the Universe, worshipped by all the celestials—come back and blow over me the fragrance of his Tulasi wreath. [PT 8.4.3]¹⁹

And in another section she asks a crane and some bees to bear messages for her:

Water, Sky, the Earth, Fire and Wind—

being all these, he is lord above all.

He denies his Tulasi wreath

to my asking-weeping-self.

He resides in Tiruvali

amid fertile watered groves.

O, Pecking-sharp-beak-crane,

learn what he intends for me. [PT 3.6.3]

On his own he doesn't pine for me,

I alone do pine and despair.

Is it right to make me thin

through the pain of fish-emblem lord?

He resides in Tiruvali,

Cowherd-lord and King of the realm.

O Honey-tongue bumble bees,
tell him of my woeful disease. [PT 3.6.4]²⁰

In *Periya Tirumoli* 9.3, in her despair after being deserted by the Lord, she addresses her own heart:

O Heart! Bow that-a-ways and arise. What can I do to forget him? He followed me into the groves by the lake bursting with pollen, and said, 'Frail One! I shall never leave you', then left me. He resides in Pullani surrounded by groves of fresh-blossom-fragrance. [PT 9.3.3]

O Heart! The lord who wields the plough and discus came as a friend and left as a deceiver; he has no compassion. He resides in Pullani by the sea, land of separated lovers—amid cool enchanting rivulets in the tall groves where happy bees swarm and sing. Bow that-a-ways and arise. [PT 9.3.8]²¹

In another song, the anguish of separation increases, as everything reminds the maiden of the Lord:

The spotless crescent Moon, the wave-ridden ocean, the blossom-fragrant breeze, and the shrill cry of Anril birds—all have joined hands to break and wrench my heart. Through mist-filled days, I lie sleepless. Long ago the lotus-hued lord stole my senses and my well being. Alas! He does not pity me considering, 'After all, she is frail maiden.' Carry me now to his abode in Kurungudi. [PT 9.5.1]²²

Like Nammalvar, Tirumāngai also sometimes portrays the maiden's feelings through the eyes of her worried mother. In *Periya Tirumoli* 5.5 the mother unburdens her grief to a friend:

See, her fawn-like sharp eyes
are in tears, her bangles
do not remain.

All night long she talks of
cool nectared Basil and
loses her sleep.

Forester, stealing the
 curds and Ghee from the closed
 houses of maids,
 Nanda's son, how can I
 accept what he did to
 my daughter frail! [PT 5.5.3]²³

And in 10.9 the mother flays the Lord bitterly for
 abandoning her daughter:

O Dark-cloud lord! You came out of hiding and
 destroyed the mighty chest of Hiranya with your sharp
 claws. You stood in hiding and destroyed the mighty
 chest of Vali with your sharp arrows. Is this a sign of
 your high reputation that you do not reveal yourself to
 our bee-humming flower-coiffured large-eyed dear
 daughter? Do you consider her as lightly as the
 proverbial mouthful of water—to be swallowed or
 spitted as you will? [PT 10.9.8]²⁴

→ The *Tiruvelukutrirukkai*, a poem of 47 lines, is one of
 Tirumangai's shorter pieces. Here all the different
 mythologies of Vishnu and his Incarnations are skilfully
 woven together through the use of numbers. This is how it
 begins:

On one big lotus navel, sitting with both legs
 crossed was born the one Brahma; then once, when the
 two orbs feared to pass above three-walled Lanka, you
 bent the two ends of one mighty bow and shot one
 arrow, with two curved teeth spitting hell-fire; asking
 for three strides of four-lands, you came wearing the
 three-twist thread of the twice born ones, at once with
 two steps, you measured the three worlds; the four
 Quarters trembled when you rode the five-feathered
 Garuda, to save the four-legged three-ichored two-eared
 unique elephant Gajendra one day in the two hundred
 cubit deep water.²⁵

The other three works of the Alvar—
Tiruneduntandakam, *Siriya Tirumadal*, and *Periya*

Tirumadal—again express his love for God in the mood of separation from the Beloved. The following is a verse from the first of these:

His face was like a flash of lightning on a dark cloud. Displaying his broad shoulders, his red lips, eyes and hands, and the beautiful fish-earrings hidden by a sweet fragrant Tulasi garland, he stole my thoughts, my well being and my peace, made me a slave and left saying he lives in the fertile Srirangam amid groves of gold-blossoming Serundi trees. [TNT 25]²⁶

God is, in reality, the most attractive thing. And to those who are devoted to Him, He is the soul of their soul, the life of their life. Without God the devotees cannot live. We began with Ramakrishna's instruction that one could attain God if one longed for Him like a person who is deprived of air longs for a breath of air. A similar analogy has been used in the Tamil *Iramavataram* by Kamban. Unlike the Valmiki *Ramayana*, where Rama's status is sometimes ambiguous, Kamban never lets the readers forget that Rama is God. At the same time, Kamban again and again describes Rama as 'the breath of life' (*uyir*, or *prana*), while Sita is 'its containing body' (*kutu*).²⁷

After Rama has killed Ravana in Lanka and Sita approaches and sees him for the first time since her kidnapping, Kamban describes her thus:

As when the false body
that has lost the breath of life
sees it, and reaches out
to steal it back again,
she touched the ground
as she unveiled her face. [*Iramavataram* VI.37.58]²⁸

This is the feeling of separation from God that the Alvars tried to awaken within themselves and convey in their songs, for they knew that this is how God is attained. But, as Ramakrishna says in another place, God is not

indifferent. He also longs for the devotee. Earlier in the Kamban *Ramayana*, we are told, 'When Rama races back to the hut in the forest where Laksmana has so reluctantly left Sita alone and finds it empty—for Ravana has meanwhile abducted her, as the audience well knows—he is compared to "the breath of life that has been separated from its containing body (*kutu*) and has come in search of it, but cannot find it.'" [III.8.158]²⁹

According to David Shulman, in Kamban's *Iramavataram*, 'Most salient is the image of life separated from and rejoining the body. Indeed, this image may be said to condense the entire issue of union and separation, so basic to Kampan's poem (as to all Tamil *bhakti*). . . . This symbiosis is not that of body and soul, inert matter and spiritual substance (and thus the temptation to allegoresis is easily resisted for the *Iramavataram*); indeed, it is not truly dualistic at all. Rather, it reflects the interlocking relationship between two dynamic, equally living and substantial entities that together create a unity of perceived experience.'³⁰

This was the path of the Tamil Alvars, and this was what they expressed so well in their songs. But was the path of the Alvars only an emotional path? One of Tirumangai Alvar's shorter works, the *Tirukuruntandakam*, of 20 verses, is a beautiful celebration of his love for God and for the grace he has received from the Lord. In a single verse of this song he gives an extremely brief but subtle and effective instruction on meditation that says everything:

Seated firmly without fatigue or fidgeting, bring your upper eyelids close to the lower. Subdue the five senses, fill your heart with love for the lord alone. Let thought flow freely on that one alone. There in the effulgence emerging, you will see the lord who is a body of light. Those who do so, do surely see the truth. [TKT 18]³¹

Notes and References

1. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981), p. 497.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 449.
3. 'Yugāyitam nimeshena cakshushā prāvriṣhāyitam; Shunyāyitam jagat sarvam govindavirahena me.' From *Hymns and Prayers To Gods and Goddesses*, compiled by Swami Pavitrananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992), p. 99.
4. A.N. Chatterjee, 'Gaudiya Vaisnavism', in *Vaisnavism: Contemporary Scholars Discuss the Gaudiya Tradition*, ed. by Steven J. Rosen (New York: Folk Books, 1992), p. 17.
5. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991), p. 262 fn. (Swami Saradananda is quoting here a section of the *Bhakti-granthavali* of Sri Chakravarty.)
6. *Ibid.*, p. 272.
7. Though, in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Radha is the ultimate paradigm of ecstatic love for God, in a sense, the plight of Sita in the ashoka grove makes a better paradigm for most people. Just as Sita's suffering and separation from Rama were the result of her being kidnapped by Ravana, so also, the average person is prevented from being united with God by his obstacles, both outer and inner.
8. Translation by Donna Marie Wulff, in Donna Marie Wulff, 'A Sanskrit Portrait: Radha in the Plays of Rupa Gosvami', in *The Divine Consort—Radha and The Goddesses of India*, ed. by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995), p. 29.
9. Alkondavilli Govindacharya, *The Holy Lives of the Azhars or Dravida Saints* (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1982), p. 156 (adapted).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 168. ↗
11. Hardy, Friedhelm, *Viraha-Bhakti—The early history of Kṛṣṇa devotion in South India* (Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 264.
12. See Swami Ramakrishnananda, *Life of Sri Ramanuja* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1992), 34-35; however, the thousand-pillared hall was built by a king who 'was attacked

and defeated by his enemy when the work was in progress. So the mandapam was left unfinished. There are only 936 pillars.'—see R.K. Das, *Temples of Tamilnad* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1991), 117; and the outermost rajagopuram to the south of the main shrine, which is now the tallest gopuram in India, was only completed in 1987. The construction was started in the second half of the sixteenth century by a 'Vijayanagar provincial ruler in Thanjavur' but left unfinished.—see Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), pp. 123 & 124.

13. Hardy, p. 267.
14. S.M.S. Chari, *Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Alvars* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997), pp. 198-99.
15. Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord—The Path of the Tamil Saints* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988), pp. 102-03.
16. *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand—Nalayira Divya Prabandham Rendered in English with Tamil Original*, trans. by Srirama Bharati (Chennai: Sri Sadagopan Tirunarayananaswami Divya Prabandha Pathasala, 2000), pp. 272, 273, 274.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 392.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 397.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 355.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 249-50.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 373, 374.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 376.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 292.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 406.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 718-19.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 433.
27. David Shulman, 'Fire and Flood: The Testing of Sita in Kampan's *Iramavataram*', in *Many Ramayanas—The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. by Paula Richards (Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), p. 97.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand*, p. 425.

the sixth and ninth centuries a group of Alava saints appeared in South India who, through their lives as well as their songs, completely changed the religious life of India. Like the sages of ancient times, whose deep spiritual experiences recorded in the Vedas became the foundation of most of Indian philosophy, the Alvars also revealed their spiritual experiences in their songs and thus inspired a new path towards God—one of ecstatic love. Their love was for Vishnu in all his aspects. He who was the Lord of Vaikuntha was also the Lord in the temple, and again it was He who dwelt in their own hearts. But more than anything else, He was their own Child, or their Playmate, or their Beloved. These saints were possibly the first to establish an intimate human relationship with God and realize Him through intense longing. *The Divine World of the Alvars* presents the lives and songs of these saints, and gives a glimpse into their world of divine love.



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