Robert Butler and his Tamil Translations

I first met Robert Butler around 1980 when I was looking after the Ramanasramam library during the era when it was still located in two places: a room by the ashram cowshed, and the New Hall where Bhagavan lived and gave darshan in the late 1940s. He helped me with cataloguing, and when the library moved across the road to the Morvi Compound in 1981, he helped to run the library until the mid-1980s.

Elsewhere on this site I have written about all the book projects I have been involved in over several decades in Tiruvannamalai. This is what I wrote about my collaboration with Robert and the various projects we did together:

In the early 1980s he had come to Ramanasramam where he helped me to run the ashram library.
This is a write-up from *The Mountain Path*, October 1981. I am in the centre, while Robert is in the centre of the top row. The woman to his right (now called Sujata, not Ghislaine) looks after my book business when I am out of India.

I soon discovered that he had a natural flair for languages. About two weeks after he had announced that he was going to learn Tamil, I spotted him reading a Tamil newspaper in one of our local tea shops. It only took a few more weeks before he was immersing himself in the intricacies of literary Tamil. He was making his first tentative translations of Tamil poems about six months after he started his studies.

He returned to the UK in 1983 and continued his Tamil studies there. About a year later, while he was working as a night guard in a factory, he managed to translate a medieval biography of Manikkavachagar in between patrols of the factory grounds. In the 1990s, while he was working as a computer expert for the government of his local area, the Ramana Maharshi Centre for Learning in Bangalore invited him to make a translation of a
book of Muruganar’s devotional poetry. Though he struggled with some of the verses and sought aid from various experts in India, he still managed to produce a publishable translation of the text. Many years later, when his translation skills and his knowledge of Muruganar’s style had massively increased, he revised and expanded the text and republished it himself.

When Venkatasubramanian suggested that I invite him to help [with our project to translate Padamalai], Robert had not been in India for many years. I realised that it was also many years since I had communicated with him. I found his phone number by trawling through ‘directory enquirers’ in his home town and called him from a public phone box opposite the Ramanasramam gates. This was before mobile phones had gained a foothold in India. When he discovered where I was, he asked me to open the door so he could listen for a minute or so to the raucous sounds of India that swirled around the ashram gates. He was clearly missing India, and Tamil Nadu in particular. It didn’t take me long to persuade him to join our project. In fact, he was delighted to be able to find a tough challenge that would improve his already considerable knowledge of literary Tamil.

Robert had always had a flair for languages. He knew several European languages and had eventually ended up studying French for four years at Oxford University in England and the Sorbonne in Paris. He once told me that one of his final exams in medieval French had been marked as the best in the university that year. At the end of his final year, for no reason he can remember, he found himself in Blackwell’s, the Oxford University bookstore, buying a Sanskrit dictionary, a Sanskrit grammar book and a teach-yourself-Sanskrit book. He had never been to India or felt any attraction to go, but he said something made him pick up these books, buy them, take them home and study them.

He sat down at a table, opened the books and attempted to go through the first few lessons. For no reason he could think of, he couldn’t concentrate on them. Every time he sat down, he felt physically uncomfortable and spent more time fidgeting than actually reading the books. This was the first language that he had not been able to focus on and learn quickly. Eventually, after a few days of what appeared to be a half-hearted attempt to pick up the basics, he gave up, deciding that this was one language he was not destined to learn. A couple of weeks later, while he was sitting cross-legged on the floor, he decided to have another go. This time the learning was effortless, and he picked up Sanskrit as easily
as he had all his other languages. He used to joke that his Sanskrit samskaras (habits and
tendencies from his past lives) were stored in his knees, and that once he assumed the right
position, the language he had learned before flowed effortlessly back into him. He was,
most definitely, an Indian pandit in exile. During the 1980s I used to send him dhotis by
post from India. He hated wearing trousers but had to put up with them during his day job
with the government. In the evening, though, he would put on a dhoti, sit cross-legged on
the floor and study Tamil poetry.

Robert (back left) on stage at a concert in Tiruvannamalai around 1980

Over the years he developed a passion for Sangam poetry, a mysterious era of Tamil
literature from about 2,000 years ago. He learned the intricacies of its style, symbolism and
grammar and was eventually good enough to publish a translation of Kuruntogai, one of
the major collections of love poetry from this neglected period of Tamil history.

As I mentioned in the excerpt, in the early 2000s I was working with Dr T. V.
Venkatasubramanian on several projects. The one that he invited Robert to join was our attempt
to translate Padamalai, a lengthy poem by Muruganar in which he recorded teaching statements
made by Bhagavan and to a lesser extent experiences he had had through Sri Ramana’s grace and
power. This was the first of four book-length projects that Venkatasubramanian, Robert and I
collaborated on: Padamalai, Guru Vachaka Kovai, Sorupa Saram and Ramana Puranam. All
four books are available on this site, and at the links just given, excerpts from each book can be
read.
Concurrently with these projects we also combined to translate poetry composed by Tamil saints whom Bhagavan had spoken about and cited in an approving way. These were eventually incorporated into long articles that I wrote. The saints included Manikkavachagar, Thayumanavar, Guhai and Guru Namasivaya, Umapati Sivam, Tattuvaraya, Allama Prabhu and Kumaradeva. All of these articles are featured on the site in the Tamil Saints section.

Robert has also translated texts independently. Some he has published himself, and some have been published by Sri Ramanasramam. I want to highlight five which are now available at Ramanasramam and on this site for people who live outside India.

**Sri Guru Ramana Prasadam**

This is the expanded and retranslated edition of the book that previously appeared as *Non-Dual Consciousness, The Flood Tide of Bliss*. The original English version was published in the 1990s by the Ramana Maharshi Centre for Learning, Bangalore. This new edition contains over 1,000 verses by Muruganar, originally published in Tamil under the title *Sri Ramana Anubhuti*, most of which describe his experience of the Self and the gratitude he feels towards Ramana Maharshi for revealing this state to him. The book also contains a number of teaching verses in which Muruganar summarises key aspects of Ramana Maharshi’s teachings.

After Robert had completed his translation, I arranged for the book to be printed in Pondicherry. I then took a copy to the president of Ramanasramam, Sri V. S. Ramanan, and asked if he wanted to sell it in the Ramanasramam Book Depot. He was delighted to see the book and, sight unseen, ordered almost the entire print run. Unfortunately, it sold few copies there and spent several years in a neglected corner of the book shop where slow-moving titles were offered at a discount. One reason I am featuring this title on the site is that I firmly believe it is one of the undiscovered gems of Ramana literature, and that given some exposure it will find a wider audience among devotees who value authentic records of Bhagavan’s teachings and the liberating experiences that devotees had with him.

The book can be ordered here. Here is an excerpt:

**The Nature of the Guru**

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Even as I grieved, thinking thoughts I should not think, he became my Lord, spreading his radiance within my heart so that I tasted the sweet nectar of his bliss. He is the ambrosial one who delights my eyes with his form that is pure consciousness. He is Mount Annamalai’s exalted Guru Ramana.
He is the Ancient One who prospers in his powerful natural state of *mauna*, untroubled by questions of ‘where’ and ‘when’. He is the Wondrous One who, established in the glorious radiance of the supreme reality, banishes the mental creations that manifest as space and time.

Muruganar (foreground) sitting with Bhagavan in the late 1940s.

He who dispelled my dullness of mind with the powerful rays of his radiant grace is none other than the Self’s bright Sun, infinite and supreme, who reduced to ashes the impediment of my threefold body.

Heart, he neither separates from nor merges with you. He is the lofty one, the reality that is *Brahman*. Great and small, unaffected by the threefold divisions [knower, known and knowledge, God, the soul and the world etc.], he is eternally liberated and all-transcending. He is the witness, the supreme source of consciousness’ light. He is pure space. He is your husband and protector.
Muruganar (left) sitting with Bhagavan in the 1920s.

The Glory of the Guru’s Feet

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Manifesting as the vast all-transcending supreme reality that reveals the truth, so that the false dream of the deluded senses is destroyed, they are the holy feet of Lord Siva, which for those desirous of salvation are the path that leads to final liberation.

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Through the path of his grace that even the gods cannot know, he came as a Teacher, in a form knowable to the senses and easily accessible to the hearts of men, setting upon the earth those holy feet that shine like bright jewels set in wisdom’s dawn.
The world that is perceived through the five senses is like a fiction played out in space and time. For the perplexed souls of men the only salvation is to follow the feet of the Slayer of Death, he whose nature is pure and limitless intelligence.

He is the fair husband, the virtuous one. He shines with *jnana*, the light of the Self, the core of the real. He is pure space. He is the holy bridegroom. He is the Lord whose holy feet are placed upon the heads of the *Vedas* themselves. And it is those same feet that dwell within my heart as the ultimate reality!

If you ask what it was that, as pure consciousness, took the soul of this devotee as its dwelling place, granting me that realisation which never fails – it was the feet of Sri Ramana who reigns as the divine king in the consummate state of final absorption in *Brahman*.

As soon as I had I obtained the blessing of approaching, as a devoted servant, those golden feet which shimmer like perfect, whole gems, the abundant sufferings caused by the ties of kinship and family ceased and took their leave, never to return again.

The moment he placed upon my head those compassionate feet that allay the suffering of his devoted servants – so that the mark of destiny is wiped from their brows – the seeds of defilement withered and died within me and the torment within my heart was fully assuaged.

The great excellence of his holy feet, which illuminate the hearts of those who have attained equanimity, is that they have brought me to the verdant mountain shore of liberation, and through their grace I have escaped the waves of the ocean of rebirth.

The direct experience of the one Self engulfed me in its radiance, banishing the misery of birth that cloaked my soul in darkness. There then remained in my consciousness no landmark whatsoever other than my teacher’s feet – the infinite sky of his grace – subjecting me to their gracious rule and dispelling my fears.
The lotus flowers of his feet sprang up within my heart and shone there as the witness, so that I retained no connection whatsoever with anything else. Now I can perceive nothing other than those feet that are the Self whose nature is the highest knowledge.

The Majesty of the Guru

He is the wisest of sages, the Primal Being who imparts clear understanding so that the sense of doership is removed from our actions. He is the unique Master who through his gracious bearing afforded me his blissful compassion so that I suffered no more.

The great and noble Ramana, flower of the Saivite faith, in whom the powerful light of jnana, the diamond of truth, shines forth, is the Mountain Teacher, who in grace entirely destroyed the antics of false Kama.

He is the Lord, the immaculate reality, suffusing the inner stillness where thoughts no longer arise with the pure light of his grace. Dwelling as the Self in the form of the shining Guru, he shattered the darkness that enveloped this world.

Ozhivil Odukkam

Ozhivil Odukkam, which can be translated as 'Subsiding into the Self through the elimination of obstacles', or 'Ceaseless abidance in the Self', is a 15th century Tamil text that was regularly cited with approval by Ramana Maharshi. Though it is widely held to be a Saiva Siddhanta text, primarily because an early commentary interprets it that way, an examination of the original verses indicates that its primary aim is to point out the truth of the Self that lies beyond all religious and sectarian divides.

Because of the high esteem Sri Ramana held the work in, there have been many previous attempts by devotees to bring out commentaries or translations. Bhagavan himself asked Muruganar to write a commentary that brought out its advaitic import, but he never (it seems) got beyond writing two introductory verses. Munagala Venkataramaiah, the compiler of Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, made a preliminary English translation, but it was never published.
Bhagavan noted once that he had read or listened to many scriptural works and that his mind automatically retained a few important portions or images that he would later give out to his own devotees to illustrate his own teachings. Several of the *Ozhivil Odukkam* verses fall into this category, even when Sri Ramana did not mention the text explicitly.

For example, Bhagavan’s often repeated analogy that the Guru is like the appearance of a lion in the dream of the elephant originally appears in verse two of this work:

What course of study might the mature disciple adopt to achieve the loss of his personal self if the *sadguru* does not cast his glance [of grace upon him]? He is like an elephant in musth, who becomes quite still, without the slightest tremor, when in his dream the enduring great lion that is the *sadguru* appears before him on his path.

Robert Butler has translated all the verses of *Ozhivil Odukkam* and added explanatory notes that are occasionally derived from an early commentary on the work. Here is Robert’s commentary on this portion of the text:

The verse states that the destruction of ego cannot be achieved by the aspirant unless by the grace of the guru. We are presented with the image on an elephant dreaming it is in musth, charging wildly through the forest, as we may imagine, until a powerful lion, its traditional nemesis, appears on its path, and it comes to a sudden halt and stands completely motionless, transfixed by the lion’s gaze. In the same way, the personal self, the *jiva*, rushes about wildly in the dreamlike world of the mind and senses until it is brought to stillness by the glance of the guru and comes to rest in its true nature as the Self, the state of *kevalam* in which the triad of knower, known and knowledge is entirely transcended.

However long and arduous the *sadhana*, the *sadhaka* must abandon all his efforts and surrender himself to the guru, who is the embodiment of divine grace. It should be noted, however, that Kannudaiya Vallalar [the author of the text], like Ramana himself, did not, as far as we know, follow any living guru, but attributed his realisation entirely to Jnanasamabandhar who lived several centuries before his time.

Without specifically citing the original verse, Bhagavan commented approvingly on this idea in a reply he gave which appears in *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam* (18th May, 1947) in a section entitled ‘Seeing a Lion in a Dream’. Part of his reply to a questioner reads:

‘...they [devotees] may some day get a lion’s dream called *Guru Kataksham* [grace of the Guru] in an intense manner. They get startled and obtain *jnana*. Then there will be no more dreams and they will not only be wakeful at all times but will not give room for any dreams of life but will remain alert until that true and real knowledge is obtained. These lion’s dreams are unavoidable and must be experienced,’ said Bhagavan.
The previous day (17th May 1947) Suri Nagamma recorded another instance of Bhagavan referencing a striking image that appears in verse 132 of *Ozhivil Odukkam*:

Who has attained liberation by studying and learning the holy texts, which themselves are insufficient to contain all the religious systems with their commentaries and interpretations? To do so is like going to the lengths of covering the sky with a canopy and the earth with leather when setting out on a journey, instead of simply wearing sandals and taking an umbrella.

Again, the original source is not cited. I think it likely that Suri Nagamma, the recorder of *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, was not familiar enough with the imagery to realise that Bhagavan was citing an ancient Tamil text when he spoke in this way. Her native language was Telugu, and *Ozhivil Odukkam* was an obscure Tamil text that she was unlikely to have come across.

One intriguing idea that Bhagavan did directly note came from *Ozhivil Odukkam* can be found in verse 123 which reads:

Having exhausted themselves by activities, aspirants come to the Guru seeking *jnana*. He alone is the true *jnana*-bestowing Guru who, possessing the wealth of bliss, produces the crop of bliss in them so that they wander without volition and without doing anything. But the Guru who occasions the least rising of their ego through his instructions is both Brahma, he who possesses the ability to create the world, and Yama too, the god of death.

Since Brahma is the god of birth and Yama the god of death, the verse is implying that gurus who get their disciples involved in unnecessary activities, physical or mental, instead of directing them towards *jnana*, will be responsible for them being reborn.

Muruganar must have heard Bhagavan cite the text or explain the implications of this verse. This is his rendering of it in *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, verse 127:

The Guru who instructs the disciple, who has taken complete refuge in him, by giving one more prescription for action, instead of directing him towards *jnana*, and who leads him into activities, saying ‘These should be done,’ is for the disciple [equivalent to] the coming of cruel Yama and Brahma. Only he who consummates them [the disciples], transforming them into those who have done all that needs to be done, enabling them to attain the true benefit of this birth, is the grace-bestowing, divine Guru.

Bhagavan referenced this verse in a reply he gave to a visitor who asked for instructions on what to do:
**Question:** Our grasp is only intellectual. If Sri Bhagavan be pleased to direct us with a few instructions we shall be highly benefited.

**Bhagavan:** He who instructs an ardent seeker to do this or that is not a true master. The seeker is already afflicted by his activities and wants peace and rest. In other words, he wants cessation of his activities. Instead of that he is told to do something in addition to, or in place of, his other activities. Can that be a help to the seeker? Activity is creation; activity is the destruction of one’s inherent happiness. If activity be advocated the adviser is not a master but the killer. Either the Creator (Brahma) or Death (Yama) may be said to have come in the guise of such a master. He cannot liberate the aspirant but strengthens his fetters. *(Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, talk no. 601)*

The same idea appears in *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 27th March 1946, afternoon. On that occasion Bhagavan did give the textual source of the idea:

> The truth is, all karma of whatever kind will lead to fresh bondage. That is why it is said in *Ozhivil Odukkam* that the Guru who prescribes fresh karma or action of any sort, i.e., rituals or sacrifices to one who after trying various karmas comes to him for peace, is both Brahma and Yama to the disciple i.e., he only creates fresh births and deaths.’…

Who is the author of *Ozhivil Odukkam*, and what is known of him? Major Chadwick, while writing an introduction to the translation by Munagala Venkataramaiah that was never published, summarised two of the hagiographical tales that have come down to us:

One version of his life has it that Kannudaiya Vallalar [the author of *Ozhivil Odukkam*] was the son of Meykanda Sivachariar, an acharya of the Saiva Siddanta School. The son, through divine grace, became enlightened, and wrote *Ozhivil Odukkam*, which saw no use for traditional Saiva concepts such as charya, kriya, and yoga padas. At every step of his work Kannudaiya Vallalar affirmed direct realisation, aparokshanubhuti, not traditional practices. This was, of course, a rude shock to his father, but it could not be helped. Perhaps the father was very happy that his own son was able to destroy the feeble foundations of the house he had built apparently for others. Another version of Kannudaiya Vallalar’s biography is that Vallalar was born in a rich family in Sirkazhi in Tanjavur District, the birthplace of Thiru JnanaSambandhar Swamigal. Merely hearing about the glowing light of Sri Thiru Jnana Sambandhar Swamigal along with the thought that he was blessed to be born in that sacred place made Kannudaiya Vallalar love Sri Thiru JnanaSambandhar as his Guru, deeming him to be identical with
God. This love of the Lord in the form of Guru led him to *samadhi*, illumined him and later gave him Self-knowledge.

Every day Vallalar went into the temple for quiet abidance and then returned home to sing one verse that set forth the nature of the natural state, *sahaja bhava*. He used to be escorted home by his torchbearer, Kandan. On the day that the 253rd [and final] verse [of *Ozhivil Odhukkam*] was completed, Kandan had stayed at home due to thunder and rain. When Vallalar had finished his meditation and called ‘Kanda’, Lord Subrahmania himself took the form of the servant Kanda and escorted him home, torch in hand. After he had reached his house, the real servant stepped forward to beg his master’s pardon. Then Kannudaiya Vallalar knew that the earlier manifestation was the gracious play of Skanda. That night he completed the work and presented it to the ripe and discerning souls in the neighbourhood. The following morning he threw away all his possessions and became an *avadhuta*. There are also other versions of his life, but there is no space in this small preface to go into further details.

This new translation by Robert Butler is an outstanding addition to the series of Tamil philosophical texts that Sri Ramanasramam has been publishing from time to time. It is available in India from the Sri Ramanasramam Book Depot, and outside India [from this site](http://www.sriramanasramam.net/bookdepot/).

Here is one final verse that illustrates the teachings that comprise the original text, along with Robert’s illuminating commentary on them:

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That Sivam (the Self) is not known unto itself\(^1\) nor does it know anything that is other than itself.\(^2\) If it possessed thought then there would be for it the absence of thought, forgetfulness. [Therefore it does not possess thought]. There is for it no birth or death. The five divine operations unfold in its mere presence.\(^3\) The blissful voice of the Vedas and Agamas gives only the merest hint of its nature.

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1. *tani ariydu* – *[That Śivam] does not know itself*. That whose very nature is pure knowingness, consciousnes, cannot, by definition, know itself. It can only be itself. As Sri Ramana points out in v. 33 of *Ulladu Narpadu*, the very question as to whether the supreme reality, the substratum of the individual consciousness, can know itself is an occasion for ridicule:

    *eṇṇai ariyēn [n]ān eṇṇai aṅindēn [n]ān*
    *eṇṇal nagaippukku [u] idān āgum – eṇṇai?*
    *tani vidayam ākka iru tān ūndō onṟay*
    *aṅivar aṅubūdi ūṇmaiyāl.*
To say ‘I do not know myself’ or ‘I have known myself’ is an occasion for ridicule. Why so? Can there be two selves, with one making the other its object, when it is the experience of everyone that they are one?

2. vēru uṇḍāy tāy ariyādu – It does not know [anything] as existing separate[ly from itself]. By the same token, because Śivam contains and transcends all that is or ever could be, there cannot be anything separate from itself, which it knows or which knows it. Again Śri Ramana makes a similar point in v. 12 of Ulladu Narpadu:


Since it shines without anything other which it knows, or which makes it known, the Self is [true] knowledge.

3. kannidikkē añcu toḻil ām – Through its mere presence, the five [divine] operations take place. The five operations of the deity are creation, preservation, destruction, veiling and granting of grace. In presiding over the creation, preservation and destruction of all the worlds through the agency of māyā, the deity is comparable to the sun, which, by virtue of its mere presence, gives rise to all worldly activities whilst remaining uninvolved in them.

**Tiruvadavur Adigal Puranam**

This is a biography of the Tamil saint Manikkavachagar whose devotional hymns, collected in the *Tiruvachagam*, are a classic of Tamil devotional literature. There are two principal sources for biographical information: four chapters in the *Tiruvilaiyadal Puranam* (a work that chronicles the divine acts of Siva in Chidambaram) and the *Tirvadavur Adigal Puranam*, a much later work that expands on the original text. In this new translation, which includes the full text of *Tiruvadavur Adigal Puranam*, Robert Butler utilises all the available sources to reconstruct Manikkavachagar’s life, his beliefs and his world view. The book also contains key translations from the *Tiruvachagam*.

This is how I introduced Manikkavachagar in a long article that was jointly written and translated by T. V. Venkatassubramanian, Robert Butler and myself:

In the seventh to ninth centuries AD there appeared in South India an upsurge of devotional fervour that completely transformed the religious inclinations and practices of the region. Vaishnava and Saiva *bhaktas* became infused with a religious spirit that emphasised ecstatic devotion to a personal deity rather than the more sober rites and rituals of vedic Brahmanism. It was both a populist Hindu revolt, since it expressed the people’s dissatisfaction with the hierarchies of caste, and a demonstration of contempt for the alien philosophies of Jainism and Buddhism, which had by then permeated large areas of South India.
The movement’s leaders were the various saints who toured the countryside singing songs in praise of their personal God. The language of these songs was deliberately simple, for they were intended to be sung by ordinary devotees, either alone or in groups. While it is true that the deities addressed were ones such as Vishnu and Siva, who were prominent components of the North Indian pantheon, the mode of expression and the philosophical content of the poems were unique, being an expression of the indigenous Tamil spirit and culture. This was the first of the great bhakti movements that were to invigorate the Hindu tradition throughout India in the succeeding centuries. It was so successful in transforming the hearts and minds of the South Indian population, one commentator has gone so far as to say that these poet-saints ‘sang Buddhism and Jainism out of South India’. (Hymns to the Dancing Siva, by Glen Yocum, 1982 ed., p. 40)

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

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

Bhagavan was a huge admirer of Manikkavachagar’s devotional poetry and cited it frequently when he was responding to questions. All of the poetry he cited and commented on has been translated in the article I referenced earlier.

I mentioned in the Ozhivil Odukkam section that Suri Nagamma, the recorder of Letters from Sri Ramanasramam, was a Telugu lady who was not familiar with ancient Tamil texts and saints. When she once professed to Sri Ramana that she was unfamiliar with Manikkavachagar’s biography, Bhagavan gave her this summary of the significant early incidents:

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

Once the Pandya king ordered the minister to purchase some good horses and bring them to him. As he was already in search of a Guru, Manikkavachagar felt that it was a good opportunity and started with his retinue carrying with him the required amount of gold. As his mind was intensely seeking a Guru, he visited all the temples on the way. While doing so he reached a village called Tirupperundurai. Having realised the maturity of the mind of Manikkavachagar, Parameswara [Siva, had] assumed the form of a schoolteacher and for about a year before that had been teaching poor children in the village seated on a street pial near the temple. He was taking his meal in the house of his pupils every day by turn. He ate only cooked green vegetables. He was anxiously awaiting the arrival of Manikkavachagar. By the time Manikkavachagar actually came, Iswara assumed the shape of a *Siddha Purusha* [realised soul] with many *sannyasis* around him and was seated under a kurundai tree within the compound of the temple. Vaadavur came to the temple, had *darshan* of the Lord in it, and while going round the temple by way of *pradakshina*, saw the *Siddha Purusha*. He was thrilled at the sight, tears welled up in his eyes and his heart jumped with joy. Spontaneously his hands went up in salutation and he fell down at the feet of the Guru like an uprooted tree. Then he got up and prayed that he, a humble being, may also be accepted as a disciple. Having come down solely to bestow grace on him, Iswara, by his look, immediately gave him *jnana upadesa* [initiation into true knowledge]. That *upadesa* took deep roots in his heart and gave him indescribable happiness. With folded hands and with joyful tears, he went round the Guru by way of *pradakshina*, offered salutations, stripped himself of all his official dress and ornaments, placed them near the Guru and stood before him with only a *kaupina* on. As he felt like singing in praise of the Guru, he sang some devotional songs, which were like gems. Iswara was pleased, and addressing him as ‘Manikkavachagar’ [meaning ‘one whose speech is gems’] ordered him to remain there itself worshipping him. Then he vanished. (*Letters from and Recollections of Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, pp. 5-7)

There were many more astonishing and occasionally miraculous incidents, far too many to even summarise here. I will therefore fast-forward the narrative to a point after his liberation when Siva ordered him to tour the Tamil-speaking regions, singing songs in praise of him. One of the places he visited on this grand tour was Tiruvannamalai, which even in the 9th century was a major Saiva pilgrimage centre. Here is Robert’s translation of the portion of the *Tiruvadavur Adigal Puranam* (‘Tiruvambala Sarukkam’, vv. 376-384) that covers his visit to Tiruvannamalai.

> After worshipping at that shrine [Tiru-Venney-Nallur],
> with love in his heart he departed,
> following the righteous path,
> passing through the middle lands,
> traversing tall forests and mountains,
> where lions and fearsome elephants dwelt,
> until he drew near to enduring Arunai’s city.
The ‘middle lands’ are the territories between the Chola and Tondai lands. ‘Arunai’s city’ is Tiruvannamalai. Arunai is an old name that can either refer to the town of Tiruvannamalai or the mountain of Arunachala.

When he saw the palaces and gopurams, the strong walls, decorated with jewels and pearls, the great gateways festooned with banners, towering up in the midst of a cool densely wooded grove, in a forest of tall areca trees, he joyfully made obeisance, experiencing great bliss.

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

Leaving behind the groves, the city walls, the streets decorated with many beautiful banners, and the various shrines of the gods, and taking the path which led to the holy presence, he bowed down before the temple of the One who wears in His locks a kondrai garland, datura flowers, the moon and the snake, and then did he perceive the form of Him who on that day had enslaved him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The month of Margazhi runs from mid-December to mid-January in the western calendar. In the Hindu calendar there is a cycle of twenty-seven days each month. Each day is named after a particular star. Ardra is one of these star days.

On observing their noble qualities
he sang the immortal hymn ‘Tiruvembavai’
which is composed as if sung by the maidens themselves.
Later, seeing them dance and sing
as they played the pretty game ‘Ammanai’,
he composed the song ‘Ammanai’ in the same manner.

As the final verse in this sequence indicates, Manikkavachagar composed two of the *Tiruvachakam* poems, ‘Tiruvembavai’ and ‘Ammanai’, on his visit to Tiruvannamalai. There is a tradition in Tiruvannamalai that both poems were composed while Manikkavachagar was doing pradakshina.
of Arunachala. A small temple on the pradakshina road in the village of Adi-annamalai is supposed to mark the spot where the two poems were composed and sung. Bhagavan confirmed the validity of this tradition when he told Suri Nagamma: ‘He [Manikkavachagar] then stood at that particular place and addressing Arunagiri [Arunachala] sang the songs “Tiruvembavai” and “Ammanai”.’ (Letters from and Recollections of Sri Ramanasramam, by Suri Nagamma, 1992 ed., p. 2)

An old photo (maybe early 1940s) of Adi-annamalai and its temple. The place where Manikkavachagar sang his two songs is quite close to where this photo was taken.

Robert’s translation and commentary on the ‘Tiruvembavai’ poem can be found here, page 75.

The climax to Manikkavachagar’s life came when Siva visited him in Chidambaram, in disguise, and asked him to dictate all his devotional poetry. Up till then, none of it had been written down. Siva then took the manuscripts and left them in the inner shrine of the Chidambaram Temple at a time when the temple was locked. Manikkavachagar’s name was listed as the author. The priest who found them recognised that a divine miracle of some sort had taken place. Along with a deputation of fellow priests he visited Manikkavachagar and asked him to explain what had happened. Manikkavachagar, realising that Siva had been the visitor who had asked him to dictate all his works, said he would explain what had happened in the temple itself.

This is Robert’s translation of what transpired inside the temple:
With the people of Chidambaram, whose renown is ever unfailing, crowding closely about him, filled with devotion, he reached the Hall of pure gold, wherein God’s grace abides. Saying, ‘He it is who is the meaning of this worthy Tamil garland,’ he went swiftly into the Hall, and there, even as they all looked on, he disappeared from view.

Pointing with his hand, even as his body vanished, and saying, ‘He is the Reality, the one who dwells in Tillai [Chidambaram], girt by rice fields and groves of areca trees,’ Vadavurar [Manikkavachagar] disappeared from view. Thus it was that the Lord who wears as an ornament a great serpent with its expanded hood, showed his true love for his devotee, and took him to himself, even as water mixes with milk.

Manikkavachagar physically vanished, becoming one with Lord Siva inside the inner shrine. This final chapter of Robert’s translation of the *Tiruvadavur Adigal Puranam* (verses 510-544) is given as an excerpt in the book section of this site.

Left: the Temple at Chidambaram. Right: the Golden Hall inside the temple precincts.

**Arunachala Puranam**

The divine stories associated with Arunachala have been chronicled in some detail in the *Arunachala Mahatmyam (The Greatness of Arunachala)*, A Sanskrit text that appear in the *Skanda Purana*. However, it is not the only source for the legends and traditions that are associated with the mountain of Arunachala. A few hundred years later the Tamil poet Saiva Ellappa Navalar composed the *Arunachala Puranam*, a text that includes the principle events that are detailed in the *Arunachala Mahatmayam* as well as adding new stories that are not to be found in the original Sanskrit work. There is, for example, a chapter about King Valallan of Tiruvannamalai, a medieval emperor whose love for Siva compelled Siva to appear before him and grant him the boon of getting a son.
The *Arunachala Puranam* belongs to a category of texts that are collectively known as ‘*Sthala puranams*’. All the major pilgrimage centres of Tamil Nadu have them, and it is thought that they came into existence as early guide books which encouraged pilgrims to visit by extolling all the miraculous events that had taken place there.

Robert Butler has translated the entire text and annotated it with informative linguistic and cultural notes. It is available from the Sri Ramanasramam Book Depot, and also [on this site](#).

Here is an excerpt that gives a flavour of the original poem. It is taken from chapter two. The subject is the famous dispute between Brahman and Vishnu which was resolved when Siva appeared, manifested as a column of fire or light, and invited the two quarreling gods to prove who was the greater by finding either the top or the bottom of the column. The chapter is called ‘The Holy Mountain’ and all the notes are by Robert.

79 & 80

‘My Father! Most gracious Nandi! You who are easily accessible to your devotees! My mind is overcome with joy on hearing of Arunai’s glory. Pray tell us now, O you who possess the great wealth which is to serve Kailash’s king, who is clad in the skin of a rutting elephant with its warring trunk, how in that great city Lord Siva manifested in the form of fire, how later that fire became a mountain, and how Mal [Vishnu] and Ayan [Brahma] suffered, seeking in vain, one the foot, the other the head of that mountain of fire, until the Lord afforded them his grace!’ To which Nandi replied:

*Arunai is an ancient name of the town of Tiruvannamalai. It is also used to denote the mountain of Arunachala.*

81

‘Were a man to entertain in his mind the thought of going to that holy place to commit the five heinous sins, the thought of that place would prevail and the succour of final liberation would be his. Such is the pronouncement of the holy Vedas. For those who sweetly sing its praises, what reward might be too hard to win?’

82

‘In telling this there is profit, not only for you who listen but for myself also. Now I shall tell as best I may how he who uproots sorrow and joy equally [Siva] became, for the good of Mal and Ayan, a vast flame, growing upward till it pierced the very heavens, and then, how he took the form of the *Bhoga Lingam* [Enjoyment Lingam]….'
‘[Brahma] The Lord of the Vedas, seated upon a lotus blossom, surveyed his work, and became consumed with pride, thinking, “All this world is my own creation”. Rising in fury, he confronted Hari [Vishnu] in his own city, intent on war with the one who wears a fair garland of tulsi leaves about which clouds of bees sweetly hum. Reviling him, he began to speak:

“It is I who made the seven upper and lower worlds, the seven clouds, seven oceans and seven principal mountains. Then, in order to create all living things according to their species, I brought forth out of my mind sons, the first of which was great Marichi.

At the time of the creation of the universe, Brahma first created ten sons, called Prajapatis, to help him with the work of creation, the first of whom was Marichi.

“The children of these sons of mine are the gods themselves with their priests, the Moon and Sun, the Sons of Danu, the Gandharvas, Kimpurusas, and Siddhas, the Chiefs of Siva’s Hosts, and with Indra at their head, the Guardians of the Eight Directions.

“Forget your claim that you are the Supreme Being in whom nothing is lacking, and that I am your ‘lotus-born’ son. Had I not created the world with my own hands, how might you then have been able to preserve it? How could a picture exist unless there were sound walls to paint it on?

“If you do not abandon in your heart your arrogant claim to be the guardian of all things, I will call into existence another to take on this work of preservation. Therefore submerge yourself in the chilly ocean and hide yourself there, before the hordes of my divine progeny come to dispatch you!

“Through incurring the displeasure of the wise sage Bhrigu, you entered upon a series of ten incarnations. Do you not comprehend? Just look how my hands have been defiled in the creation of those very forms!

“Do not insult me by saying that I am the one who was born from the lotus blossom in your navel! Formerly, you sprang into being from a pillar. Are we to say that that pillar was your
father? Or that it was your mother? Speak! When a bright red flame is kindled, it can consume the bamboo stem that gave it life, can you not see?’”

102

‘These words of Brahma entered his ears, burning into him like a well-honed weapon, heated upon the fire. Smoke issued from the mouth of Vishnu as he smiled bitterly, paused briefly in thought, then rebutted him in the following manner:

103

‘“You quite forget the manner in which you came to be. You overlook the fact that my navel is your own mother! Perhaps you spoke these words like a small child who believes that his father will be indulgent towards his misdeeds. However, this lack of respect is something I will not tolerate.

104

‘“When they held me in contempt, I slew both the raging Madhu and the elephant-like Kaitabha, even though they were my own children. After committing such a heinous sin, can a son remain a son? For who would hesitate to cut out the canker in his own body?

*Madhu and Kaitabha were two asuras born from the ear wax of Lord Vishnu, and eventually slain by him on account of their arrogance.*

105

‘“When the divine madman, Lord Siva, tore off one of your heads and cast it aside, were you not powerless to restore it, and make it your own again? What kind of Supreme Being are you? Is this the kind of power that will enable you to call into being this world which rests upon the hooded serpent Adisheshan’s head?

106

‘“Incarnating in the form of a fish, I recovered the entire corpus of the Vedas. Those wily sons of Danu, I defeated and put to death. Even so, I am loath to slay you, just as one who has planted a tree [that turns out to be] poisonous might be loath to cut it down. However, it would be no great task for me to do so.”

107

‘So many angry words flew back and forth from one to the other, as they angrily smacked each other’s shoulders with the flat of their hands. Rising up, they leapt down into the world of men, shrinking themselves down, then rising up tall again, shooting dense streams of fire and sparks from their narrowed eyes.
Mountains were ground into dust. The cosmic shell exploded into fragments. Many, many suns with their hot rays, and suns with their cool beams were blotted out. Even the serpent Adisheshan writhed in pain, unable to bear the weight upon his head. The [unblinking] gods themselves blinked, thinking that the end of a world age must be at hand.

The stars in their constellations and the massed clouds fell from the sky like falling leaves, as the dust rose up and the tormented world fell into total disorder. Bhagirathi and all the lesser rivers ran dry and the Elephants of the Eight Directions bellowed in terror.

Now they tossed each other up in the air and fell down again, only to charge at each other once more, bending towards one another to exchange their barbed retorts. Now they traded blows and grabbed at each others’ clothing, whirling hither and thither like a thousand tornadoes. It was as if ruddy evening and black night were spinning round, one alternating with the other.

Brahma’s body colour is red, like the evening, and Vishnu’s, black, like night.

All creatures that crawled, hopped or walked took to the air and flew. Anything that stood was toppled. Trees of all the manifold species were snapped off and destroyed. Thick blackness enveloped everything. Mount Meru itself trembled, as the seven oceans turned to mud.

At the height of all this destruction, the gods went in fear to Indra, but before they could explain what had happened, Indra himself recounted to them all the troubles he had himself endured, after which he asked them the reason for their visit, to which they replied in detail:

“Brahma and Vishnu together are waging a mighty battle upon the earth. For our salvation we have no other recourse; we must go and pay homage to Lord Siva, the creator of us all.”

On receiving the assent of their king, the hosts of heaven went to pay homage at the pure lotus-like feet of the Supreme Lord, saying, “You who share your form with the Maiden Divine! We beg you to end the suffering being wrought by the trickster Mal and Ayan. For who is there to help young children upon this earth, if not their own mother?
“To escape the darkness of birth and death, which follow one upon the other on this earth like a rolling cartwheel, we have sought refuge in you, so that we may realise the final truth, and seeking the shelter of your feet, may bathe in the boundless sea of your grace.

“You who bestow the grace of true knowledge to dispel the defiling ignorance of those unable to bear the burden of their maggot-ridden physical forms! To dispel this base impurity, which could not be removed even were we to bathe each day in an entire ocean of water, we have sought refuge in you.

“You are our only hope; show us your compassion.” Even as the gods told their story to him who bears a third eye upon his forehead, the Lord already knew what had happened. Indeed, how could he fail to know, he who permeates all life forms as oil permeates a sesame seed?

‘To dispel the fear of all the trembling gods and rishis, to put an end to the conflict between holy Mal, who has a serpent for a sleeping couch, and Ayan, whose throne is a lotus blossom, and to ensure that all the worlds in their established order were preserved, avoiding destruction, he bent his divine will upon compassion, and, taking the form of an invincible mountain of fire, set off to restrain the two of them.

‘In the lowest of the subterranean realms the serpents who dwell there trailed about it like hanging tendrils, whilst its thick roots plunged down far below. Growing upwards through the earth, it expanded through all the realms of the gods, bursting through the lofty vault of lotus-born Brahma’s sphere. Going out beyond the universe’s enclosing shell, it traversed the furthest limit of the vast ethereal region, looking for all the world like a Mount Meru of pure fire.

‘Rushing out beyond all the worlds, far beyond the reach of those seven horses who draw the sun’s chariot as he spreads the rays of the dawn, dispelling the enveloping sapphire-like darkness, it shone out like a bright beacon set on high, so that all the oceans glowed blood red, as if the immeasurable submarine fire at the world’s end had spread abroad; the seven great mountains resembled naught so much as tiny sparks, which had showered down from its summit.
‘Seeing this fire extending to the limit of the heavens, lotus-born Brahma and flute-playing Krishna stood back in fear, unable to see its limit. For lest they possess the eye of true knowledge, could it be easy for those having only the flawed and defective physical eye to perceive our Lord?

‘Seeing that bright effulgence, beyond the eye’s power to measure, they were both much troubled. Both agreed that he who could reach the head or foot of this measureless apparition would be the greater of the two. “I shall know the foot of this mountain,” cried the great one who sleeps upon a hooded serpent, transforming himself into a boar. “And I shall traverse the heavens to find its summit,” cried Ayan, adopting the form of a swan and flying swiftly heavenward.

‘Swiftly taking flight, Ayan traversed a thousand leagues in a mere fraction of a second whilst in an instant Vishnu tunnelled down a thousand leagues into the earth which rests upon the serpent Adisheshan’s spotted hood. To comprehend what occurred, imagine the long bar of an irrigation machine, made of pure gold and studded with gems, with small pots attached at either end, one set with bright pearls, and the other with dark sapphires.

What is being described here may be an irrigation machine, consisting of a long beam, pivoting on top of a tall pillar, and known in English as a piccottah. These structures were quite imposing, as one can see from the following description of their use in North Arcot district in the early 20th century: ‘In the comparative treelessness of the landscape the picottahs stood out conspicuously, with two or three men plodding patiently on the swinging beam that works this primitive pump, alternately towards and away from the wooden pillar, some 15 or 20 feet high, on which it hinges, but always, in either direction, climbing upwards, for the picottah combines the characteristic features of the see-saw and tread-mill.’

‘Burrowing down beyond the earth, Hari entered the nether worlds, traversing each in turn. Passing through the city of Bhogavati, watched over by the demon Mahabali, he forged on, paying homage with hand and head to Hatakesvara, whose supreme effulgence the gods adore. In former times he had measured the three worlds, yet now, though he fathomed all seven lower worlds, he could not find its foot.

Mahabali was the asura tricked by Vishnu, in his incarnation as Vamana, a brahmin dwarf, out of his dominion over heaven and earth, and banished to dwell in the nether worlds. Hatakesvara is Siva’s form as Lord of the nether worlds. Another reference to Vishnu’s Vamana incarnation, in which he tricked Mahabali by growing so great that he covered heaven, earth and the lower worlds in two steps.
‘Those long pointed tusks, like the waxing moon, soon began became blunted, like the moon on the wane, and even as his enthusiasm for the task faltered, his hooves and finely-honed fangs grew ever thinner and weaker. After a thousand years of unimaginable suffering he turned to the Lord in praise, and setting aside his fatigue and exhaustion, returned through the seven nether worlds, emerging at last from an ocean of woes.

‘Seeking out that holy place where the First One had risen up in the form of a column of flame to put an end to their struggle, he realised with absolute certainty that lotus-born Brahma too could never reach its upper limit, and remained there paying homage over and over to Lord Siva, he who is far away and impossible to reach for those who have no faith, and about whose neck garlands of fresh flowers are draped, along with his very own eye.

*The final line refers to the incident in which Vishnu, being short of a single flower to complete his worship of Siva, used one of his own eyes as the final offering.*

‘Whilst all this was happening, he who had just now flown up in the form of a swan to seek that fiery mountain’s head, traversed full one thousand leagues in the twinkling of an eye.

‘Piercing even the universe’s outer shell and leaving it far below, he rose on upward, travelling for a thousand years. And though he traversed ten millions of leagues on his search, still there was no end to that column of fire.

‘His feathers fell away and his impetus began to fail. Overwhelmed with suffering his sighs grew long, and as his woes increased and his sense of isolation grew, the *Vedas*’ Lord began to mull over certain things in his mind:

“Will great Mal reach the foot, and then return? Or will he give up his quest midway and come back, unable to reach it?” Thus did his anguished mood swing back and forth, as his thoughts ran away with him, like wax over a flame.
“I did not realise that this could only be Lord Siva himself,” he reflected. “By confronting Hari I have forfeited his friendship also. Ever since I have been drowning in this ocean of sorrows. Is this due to my own stupidity? Or perhaps it is the fruit of former misdeeds?

“Thus far have I travelled, still unable to discover its upper limit. If I were to lie about it, there would be no other verbal evidence to support me,” he sobbed sorrowfully. Just then he noticed a screwpine flower falling towards him.

‘He hardly had time to think where it could have come from before it reached him, and he caught it in his hand. “Let me go at once,” it said with a heartfelt sigh, since it was a faded flower which had fallen from the crown of our sovereign Lord.

“Fair screwpine flower,” said Brahma, “whence have you come, and on what errand?” “I have slipped and fallen from the flower-wreathed head of the Primal Lord, whose measure neither the Veda’s Lord nor Narayana can know,” said the flower.

“Since slipping from that head, which is graced by a bright garland of kondrai flowers, I have been falling for forty thousand years. Agree to my request, and let me go.” However Brahma, dismissing any hope of seeing our Father, began to speak:

“Screwpine flower, dear companion! Be my friend and help me escape the torment of any further wandering. Other than you, there is no one whom I can trust with my life. I am no stranger, nor am I really a swan.

“My name is Brahma. I and Vishnu set our minds on revealing the extent of this wondrous object. Off he went burrowing into the earth, whilst I, for my sins, sought and failed to reach its holy summit.

“Well, that’s the top and bottom of it, so to speak. Why dwell any further upon the matter? Due to your auspicious arrival, what I was thinking about has come to pass. You must speak to him
who measured the earth in three strides and tell him that I, Brahma, adopting the form a swan, reached Lord Siva’s head.

Vamana (Vishnu) tricked Mahabali by requesting three steps of land on which to live. The request was granted. Vamana covered the whole of the earth, the heavens and the underworld in his first two steps. Seeing that there was nowhere else to place the foot for the third step, Mahabali offered his own head as a stepping place, thus gaining immortality and dominion over the nether regions.

The story is also referred to in verse 124.

139

“Do not call this deceit and despise me. It is permissible to tell the greatest falsehoods in order to save the lives of those who suffer. These are not unworthy words which one should fear to speak. Those who prize their friends will agree even to drink poison for their sake.

The idea in the last sentence is taken from Tirukural, verse 550.

140

“Screwpine flower, you who live upon the head of him whose forehead bears a third eye! There is no need to give this any further thought,” he said, and the screwpine flower assented and went along with him. Dropping swiftly down from the heavens, he came into the presence of Lord Vishnu, his strides measured the earth.

141

“Bearer of Lakshmi, hear the exploits which brought me here! Travelling a hundred thousand leagues in a mere instant, I perceived the head of the Primal Lord, and returned,” he claimed, and the screwpine flower attested that it was so.

142

‘At that precise moment, the mountain of fire exploded. The gods and rakshasas fainted away at the sound of the detonation. The elephants of the eight directions vomited blood, believing that the sun itself had melted. Then in the midst of that scene, eclipsing the ruddy glow in the sky, making even the beautiful flower of the murukku tree look soiled, the Three-Eyed One rose up, his radiant red form all covered in white ash, with a smile on his lips like the one he wore when he burned up the three cites of the asuras.

143

“Lotus-born Brahma, you have spoken out of sheer arrogance. A fine thing indeed!” said the Lord, and began to laugh, whereupon this world and all the worlds beyond trembled and grew dim. The radiance of all the heavenly bodies faded. Clouds disappeared from the sky. All that
was fair and beautiful perished, and all that was worthless flourished and grew. The eight
directions were twisted from their stations, and vast forests of trees were blackened, scorched
and burned.

144

‘The gods were fearful, thinking, “Ayan has been destroyed!” and poured down a vast rain of
flowers, as if the earth had been dug hollow. But joy blossomed in the heart of tall Mal as the
black stain of arrogance departed from lotus-borne Brahma.

145

‘Realisation dawned upon fair-eyed Mal. He sang and offered up prayers. He danced in a
transport of joy, running hither and thither. Becoming a worthy devotee of the immeasurable
First One, he wondered to himself what boon he might ask of Lord Siva.

146

‘Seeing how the heart of Hari melted with devotion for him, the Lord graciously granted him
many a boon. Then, turning to Brahma, he commanded, “You who dwell upon a fragrant lotus-
blossom, all your temples and all worship of you will vanish from this earth”.

147

“Screwpine flower, for joining Brahma in this deception, I shall never touch you again.” Thus
did he decree. Brahma himself, distraught on observing the depths of the Lord’s fury, fell at his
feet, prostrating his body upon the ground and offering praises.

148

“You whose form is like fire, smeared with white ashes! Since my soul has been foully
shrouded by the loathsome cloak of anava malam, I wander helpless here. How am I, a mean
wretch, of any significance? Fair One! Heaven’s infinite sphere! You who are the four Vedas,
and more than that, the Vedas’ ultimate import! Peerless First One! Let your anger against me
cease! Let it cease!

Anava malam is the principle of egoity inherent in the unenlightened soul or jiva, which prevents
it from recognising that God alone is the source of all its actions.

149

“If the seven oceans, into which all the earth’s waters flow, were mixed together and heated up,
would there be any other water to cool them down? And if your anger remains at such a pitch,
how will life here be able to survive? You who in former times drank the poison from the Milk
Ocean! Let your anger against me cease! Let it cease!
“Crescent moon! Moon at the full! You who appear in female form! And again, as a man! Honeyed one! Fragrant blossom! Great mountain! Divine grace! Munificent cloud! Melodious sound! These are among the myriad forms in which you manifest yourself. Is this just? Over and over again I beg you, let your anger cease! Let your anger cease!

“I am not the hunter Kama with his bow and flowery arrows which sting! I am not that raging elephant with curving tusks, its temples streaming with the juices of the rut! I am not that red-hot fire, nor death-dealing Yama! Nor am I the three cities of the asuras! Do not consider me to be of sufficient importance to merit your anger!

“The moment I conceived the idea of reaching your unknowable summit, I assumed the form of a bird. Must I go on suffering further? Show your compassion to one who has been disgraced!” These words he spoke, and the Lord, who is like a warm fire to those who suffer in the cold, joyfully replied:

“Lotus-born Brahma, be no longer afraid! That puja performed by brahmins upon the earth will henceforth be your puja. And you may continue to ordain the seven worlds which are supported upon golden Mount Meru.” Such was the decree of that gracious Ocean of Compassion, who swallowed the poison from the conch-strewn sea.

“Since I have granted you both such boons in this holy place, may it flourish, to a distance of three yojanas [about 30 km] all around, as the pure and sacred dwelling place of divine knowledge. This great column of flame, assuming a lesser form, shall become a mountain with the power to grant boons. That mountain, which unfailingly confers the bliss of glorious final liberation, shall be known as Arunaipuri.

“I ended the suffering of Indra and the other gods the moment that, in their affliction, they turned their thoughts to me. Therefore I shall abolish the suffering of birth and death for those who fix their thoughts on this holy place. This mountain and this sthala shall possess the quality of being indestructible, even at the universe’s ending, and the winds from it shall blow in all directions bringing final liberation to all beings, animate or inanimate.
“Desiring to confer sweet salvation upon those of the earth who have performed arduous penance, we shall grant them the boon of birth in this fair and holy city. Here a single offering will be increased in worth a thousand fold. Wickedness and sin will not prosper here. For those who doubt, there will be no salvation. For such is my command.”

‘When the Lord had finished speaking, that pillar of fire shrank and became a mountain. When holy Mal and Ayan saw how it shone out spreading its beautiful rays far and wide, they made obeisance to the Lord and said, “It is not possible for the gods and ourselves to approach and gaze upon its brilliance. Let it be a simple mountain, concealing within itself all those countless fiery rays.”

“Immaculate Lord, conceal this beauteous light and make of it a mountain like all others,” cried He whose vehicle is a swan, and He whose vehicle is Garuda. Whereupon the Lord made of it a mountain like all others. And when those two devotees said, “May you gracefully grant that each day a bright light be seen upon its summit,” the Lord in his compassion spoke these words:

“In the month of Karttikai when the moon is in the constellation of Kritika I shall mount a bright beacon upon the summit of that mountain. They who see that most excellent light will endure and prosper upon the earth, free of disease and hunger. The obstacles confronting kings and great ascetics will be removed. We shall grant the boon of liberation to the kin of those who have praised or gazed up it down to the twenty first generation.

“This mountain shall have the power to cure the affliction of birth and death. Therefore one of its names shall be ‘Medicine Mountain’. Since it is red in colour, ‘Red Mountain’ will also be one of its names. For those upon the earth who recite its name but once, it will be as if they had pronounced the five holy syllables, [Namasiyaya], thirty million times.” On hearing the pronouncement of the Lord whose throat is black with poison, Brahma and Vishnu were filled with joy. Bowing down to him, they began to speak:

“Red Mountain Lord, except for the rains that fall from the sky, who will be able to approach you and bathe you with water? Who, apart from the starry constellations, will be able to place about your holy neck a garland of pearls? You whose throat poison adorns, who will there be to show a bright lamp before you, other than the Sun with his rays? Accordingly, we beseech you to
manifest yourself in the form of a lingam at the foot of that mountain, that we may make obeisance and perform puja to you.”

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“Then such shall I become. May you worship according to the precepts of the Kamika Agama,” said the Lord, withdrawing into the mountain. And so a Siva lingam manifested there, whose praises are sung in every land. Seeing this, they bowed down in worship, pouring down a dense rain of flowers, and dancing for joy in transports of bliss. Then they summoned Mayan who saw to the construction of gopurams, halls, and great walls, without equal anywhere.

Mayan is one of the Danavas, who served the devas and asuras as their architect and builder.

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‘He built a rich and deathless city, with three hundred and sixty holy tanks, and made it beautiful. In its wells flowed the heavenly river whose waters never fail, and in its groves grew the celestial trees of Svarga. Gods and rishis in unending succession took birth there, and the courtesans of heaven incarnated there as dancing girls with eyes as black as the poison halahala.

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‘Rising in the morning and bathing, Brahma and Vishnu put on clothing of bark, matted their reddened hair, covered their bodies in holy ash, put on necklaces of rudraksha beads and performed Siva puja, with ritual bathing, much sandalwood paste and garlands of flowers. Then they performed pradakshina of Annamalai, devotedly praising him until fourteen thousand years had passed, whereupon they assumed their divine forms once more.

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‘Once its construction was complete, holy Arunai’s city became so desirable that even the Lord’s affection for Mount Kailash faded away. Since here was a mountain of pure gold, of what value was a mountain of silver only? The seven holy sites with Kasi at their head, whose glory is widely praised, and the golden realm of the gods all lost their allure, just as the stars lose their radiance as the pure rays of the Sun appear.

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‘Though it is hard indeed to tell of the qualities of a mountain whose measure even Brahma and Vishnu could not know, I have tried in a small way to describe it insofar as my knowledge permits. Is there anything further I might need to speak of?’ said Nandi. At that, the rishi Markandeya, feeling greatly honoured, bowed down in worship and said, ‘May you show us your grace and recount to us the tale of how Uma appeared from the [Himalaya] mountain and merged with the left side of Lord Siva as his consort’. Whereupon Nandi began to speak…
Arunachala Aksharamanamalai

Arunachala Aksharamanamalai is the 108-verse poem in praise of Arunachala that Bhagavan composed while he was living in Virupaksha Cave. It belongs to the bridal mysticism genre, expressing the yearning of a devotee for union with the divine. Parts of it are autobiographical, but most of it contains exhortations to Arunachala to take the jiva of the person chanting it and absorb it in himself. Bhagavan noted years later that it was primarily written from the standpoint of a devotee, not from the perspective of the jnani.

Kunju Swami has narrated the circumstances that led to its composition.

… when devotees started staying with Sri Bhagavan in Virupaksha Cave, the food obtained from the sadhu's choultry was found to be insufficient for everyone. The devotees then decided that they would get their food by begging in town. Each day they would go to town in the late afternoon to beg for and collect food.

Begging for food in this way is called ‘going for bhiksha’. Bhiksha is the food that is offered. Kunju Swami continues:

Later that day, they dined on the bhiksha food back at Virupaksha Cave and any leftovers were used the next morning. Instead of waiting in front of each house and asking for food, which is the traditional way that religious mendicants beg in India, the devotees would walk along each street singing Akshara Malai Vigraha Amasadeeswara, a hymn composed by Adi-Sankara. It was only necessary to beg in the evenings because the food eaten at midday was brought by Echammal, Mudaliar Patti, Kannakamal and others.

When the householders in town heard this Sankara song being sung, they would know that the group was Sri Bhagavan’s devotees. They would then come out of their houses and offer clean, fresh food. However, some local sadhus from the town came to hear about this routine. They started singing the same song and began collecting the ashram’s food before Sri Bhagavan’s devotees had even got to town. Only when Sri Bhagavan’s devotees came singing for bhiksha did the householders realise that they had been deceived by the other sadhus.
Palaniswami, Perumal Swami and some others went and told Sri Bhagavan that if he composed some other songs for their use while going for bhiksha, it would put an end to the problem caused by the other sadhus. They also told him that such songs would help those who offered bhiksha to identify the group. Acting on their suggestion and request, Sri Bhagavan composed Aksharamanamalai, a Tamil poem of 108 verses in praise of Arunachala. The devotees then began to sing it regularly when they went into town for bhiksha. *(The Power of the Presence, 2nd edition, pp. 25-27)*

Bhagavan would occasionally joke that ‘Aksharamanamalai fed us for many years’. See *Day by Day with Bhagavan* (9.12.45) for Bhagavan’s own description of how the devotees begged while singing this song.

Here are some excerpts from the book. They begin with some of Muruganar’s explanatory introductory verses, and are followed by his analysis of the meaning of the first three verses.

**Prefatory Verse**

*(Composed by Muruganar, the author of the commentary)*

```
taruṇā ruṇamaṇi kiranā valinikā
taruma kṣaramana makiṃmālai
teruṇā tiyatiru vaṭiyār terumaral
teliyap paruvatal porulākak
karuṇā karamuṇi ramanā riyānuva
kaiyĩṅṟ coliyatu katiyāka
varuṇā calameṇa vakamē yaṅivoṭu
māḷvār civaṇula kāḷvārē.
```

**Paraphrase**

The meaning of ‘Akshara Manamalai,’ is the praise and worship of Lord Arunachala. (Out of the joy which arose in him on their behalf), our master Ramana wrote it to dispel the mental confusion of true devotees who steadfastly sought true realisation (to which that mental confusion was an impediment). Those who trust in it as their salvation, (thinking) ‘Arunachala’ (in their minds) and subside into the Heart with full awareness, will, through divine grace, come to rule in the realm of Sivam.

**Greatness of this work**

Behold, the Bridegroom,  
bedecked with blessed marriage garland!  
Behold, the Husband,  
whom the eighteen hosts of heaven hail with upraised hands!  
Behold, the Celestial Lord,  
who rises up from earth to span the heavens!
Behold such a one! Arunachala, the embodiment of grace!

To guide those who recite it onto the path of salvation, Sri Maharshi, melting with love and bathed in tears, sang this *Marriage Garland* in the manner of a devotional work, embellished with both explicit and subtly implied erotic themes, and couched in terms of the deep and burning love of the jiva, as the bride-heroine, for Siva as the bridegroom-hero. Overall it is in its own way simpler and clearer than the *Ciṟṟampala-kōvai* of Manikkavacakagar, and as such will bring to those who read it, according to their spiritual maturity, twofold bliss [both worldly and spiritual].

**Benefit of this work**

The feet of guru Arunachala are the intangible supreme effulgence of true knowledge. Taking on another form He sang this *Akshara Manamalai* about Himself, and through it those holy feet will banish the dense darkness of ignorance From the hearts of devotees who, melting inwardly, ever recite it with deep wonder. Causing them to shine in the true state of transcendental turiya, pure being-consciousness, those feet will grant them his grace then and there, so that they are flooded with the unsurpassed bliss of the experience of the Self.

**Arunachala Akshara Manamalai**

**Explanation of the title of this work**

*Akshara Manamalai* [is] a garland exuding a sweet and auspicious fragrance, woven with the letters of the alphabet as its flowers, and fitting to be worn by Lord Arunachala; further, it is a garland which will unite the devotees who sing it, fully comprehending its import, in wedlock with the eternal Reality, Arunachala. (*akṣara porul* [means] *Reality, absolute, imperishable Reality.*) That this second meaning is acceptable to the author, Bhagavan, is made clear in a later verse, which says, ‘Arunachala, bestow upon me through your grace union with the supreme Brahman, so that my mind, which carries the scent of the world, may take on the scent of that Brahman,’ [*ibid* v. 69].

**Verse 1**

arunā calameṇa vakamē niṇaippava rakattaiṉē raṟuppā yaruṇācalā.
aruṇācalā – Arunachala! vēr aṟuppāy – You will tear out by the roots, akattai – the ego, akamē ninaippavar – of those who meditate in their hearts, aruṇācalam ena – saying, ‘Arunachala’.

Paraphrase

Arunachala! You will tear out by the roots the egos of those devotees who consider themselves to be not different from yourself, thinking in their minds ‘I am Arunachala.’

Commentary

[It is necessary] for Arunachala to tear out by the roots the egos of his devotees because that ego is the obstacle to the final state of liberation, which devotees seek from Him through such forms of meditation as this, and with which He in turn desires to unite them through his divine will. (This final state of liberation is the direct experience of Arunachala Siva, the Self; it is the state of supreme devotion, whose essential nature is to remain through the power of contemplation in the state of pure being beyond thought.) It is also necessary because the ego is the seed of all the manifold suffering of birth, which arises from the world of diversity, which in turn evolves due to veiling by ignorance, a process described by Tayumanavar as follows, ‘In everyone the ego arises as “I” and afflicts them. Manifesting as the manifold world of maya, it pursues them relentlessly. Who might possess the power to describe the magnitude of the ocean of sorrows that arises from this?’ [Hymn 14, v. 15, l. 1-2]. The first instance of the word akam can be interpreted either as ‘mind’ or as ‘I’, so that the use of the word in both meanings is implied [i.e. ‘thinking in their minds (akam), I (akam) am Arunachala.’]. The particle ‘ē’, separated [from the work akam] and appended [to the word aruṇācalā], indicates both distinction and certainty.

The main sense is that the five bodily sheaths, which are unreal and inert, are not ‘I’, and that only Arunachala, the Self, pure being-consciousness, is ‘I’. ‘The highest of all forms of meditation, superior to that which regards God as other than oneself, is that in which one contemplates God as not different from oneself, having the conviction I am He!’, Upadesha Unthiyar, [v. 8]. The meaning of Arunachalam is simply the Supreme Self, Atma Swarupa. ‘Arunagiri the supreme Self,’ Aruṇāchala Paṅcaratnam, [v. 1]. Additionally, the words ‘akattai vēraṟuppāy’ [can mean] ‘you will tear out sin by the roots.’

Verse 2

āḻakucun tarampō lakamum nīyumur ṛapiṇṇamā yiruppō maruṇācalā.

aruṇācalā – Arunachala! āḻaku cuntaram pōl – Like Āḻaku and Sundaram, akamum nīyum – I and You, murṟ(um) apiṇṇamāy irippōm – will remain entirely as one.

Paraphrase

Arunachala! Although ‘Āḻaku’ and ‘Sundaram’ are two different words, they are one in terms of their meaning. Similarly, although I and You are different in terms of the limiting attributes which condition awareness, we will remain as one in our true nature.
Commentary

‘In the nature of their being, God and individual souls are one and the same. They differ only because their [respective] knowledge is conditioned by their attributes’, Upadesha Unthiyar, [v. 24]. ‘Aḻaku’ and ‘Sundaram’, are two words, [the first Tamil, the second Sanskrit], which have the same meaning, [beauty], and thus may be taken as **partial metaphors – oru cār utāraṇam** to represent respectively the Tamil and the Sanskrit languages, in the sense that they have co-existed harmoniously without any discord between them. Irrespective of the nature of their mutual relationship, it is abundantly clear, is it not, that these two languages, each possessing different characteristics, both of a general and a specific nature, have developed in unison without any form of animosity between them, from the earliest times, over many centuries, right up to the present time. In the previous verse, the author, Bhagavan, spoke of Arunachala as the mother and father of the soul. In this verse he gives a simile illustrating the nature of the union brought about with Arunachala through his grace. In making this comparison Bhagavan is referring implicitly to his own fond recollection of the Aḻaku and Sundaram who were mother and father to his own physical body, and to the harmony that he observed in their married life, as mentioned in the following quotation from Navananimālai, [v. 9], ‘bearing me, and tending me upon this earth in the form of my father and mother.’ Aḻaku and Sundaram stand respectively for the **jiva** and Siva.

Verse 3

akampukun tīrttu ṇakakukai cīraitā
yamarvittatēṅko laraṇācalā.

arunācalā – Arunachala! enṅ kol – What [a wonder is], unṅ aka kukai amarvittatu – your causing [me] to dwell in the cave of your Heart, cīraiyyā – as a prison, akam pukuntu īrttu – having entered [my] home [and] dragged [me from it].

Paraphrase

Arunachala! What a wonder of your grace is this, that you entered the home of my mind, dragged me from it by force, and imprisoned me permanently in the abode of your Heart, without any possibility of escape.

Commentary

*Cave* [means] *heart*. The mind and the Heart are the abodes, respectively, of the **jiva** and Siva. The meaning given is the spiritual one. The straightforward meaning is obvious. The heroine, [bride], is confronting and addressing the hero, [husband, lover], who entered her home, abducted her by force and imprisoned her in his own home. It should be mentioned here that, even in his physical existence, from the moment of his arrival onwards, Bhagavan never left Arunachala, the Heart of the world. Here he expresses his wonder at the causeless grace of the Lord, which brought him under its sway.
Other works by Robert Butler

The five books I have just featured and given excerpts from are all available from the Sri Ramanasramam Book Depot and from this site. However, there are several other titles that Robert has translated and published himself which are all available from Lulu, a print-on-demand service that prints and delivers copies of books when customers order them. The Lulu books are available both as hard copies and also as epubs. Robert has a page on Lulu where his translations are featured: http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/hansens. Here are four of the titles that are featured there.

Ulladu Narpadu: The purpose of this book is to enable those with little or no knowledge of Tamil to read one of Sri Ramana Maharshi’s original verse compositions, Ulladu Narpadu, in the original. No prior knowledge of Tamil is required. Grammatical explanations are given in a variety of formats and there is a full Lexicon and Concordance and an Index of Grammar, arranged by subject.

Unthiyar: A prose and verse translation of Upadesha Unthiyar, Bhagavan’s thirty-verse poem that is better own under its Sanskrit title Upadesa Saram. There is a commentary that includes comparisons with other Unthiyar texts composed by Manikkavachagar and Santhalinga Swami.

Kurunthogai: This is a collection of 401 Classical Tamil love poems which date from around 2,000 years ago. They have a freshness and universality which is rare in 'ancient' classical literature and this translation attempts to reflect that quality. Rather than simply translating them, it endeavours to recreate them in modern, idiomatic English.

Moments of Bliss Revisited: A linguistic analysis of a Tamil interview given by Padma Venkataraman, a Tamil-speaking devotee of Bhagavan who talked about her time with Bhagavan in the 1940s in an interview that appears on Youtube.

Robert has also helped with the French translations of Padamalai and The Fire of Freedom.

Sonasaila Malai

There is one other title by Robert that is available from Lulu: Sonasaila Malai, a Tamil poem about Arunachala that was composed by Sivaprakasha Swamigal, an accomplished Virasaiva poet and scholar who lived in the 17th century, while he was doing a pradakshina of the mountain.

Sivaprakasha Swamigal possessed a vivid and daring poetic imagination that earned him, even during his lifetime, the honorary title of ‘Treasure House of the Imagination’. His evocative imagery can be seen throughout the poem. There are two parts to each of its verses. The first half contains pleas for Siva’s grace, even though the author stresses his unworthiness; the second part contains a visual image in which the nature and attributes of Lord Siva are compared and contrasted with those of
the mountain that is Lord Siva’s earthly-manifested form. Sivaparakasha Swamigal places great emphasis on the fact that, unlike the Siva who appears in temples, the mountain of Arunachala is available to everyone, without restrictions of any kind. Each verse concludes with the refrain ‘Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord!’ Sonasailam is Arunachala, the embodied form of Siva, while Kailash is the mountain where Siva traditionally dwells. The implication of the refrain is that Arunachala and Siva are eternally one and the same.

Sri Ramana Maharshi appreciated the poem and occasionally cited portions of it. The following passage appears in My Recollections of Bhagavan by Devaraja Mudaliar:

One day Bhagavan quoted the following verse to me from the book called Sona Saila Malai. ‘Arunachala, Lord of Kailas! When Manikkavachakar and others like him sang that they were wanting in Love for you and prayed for the same it was only their modesty and not the truth. But it is the base truth when I say I have no love for you. Pray therefore grant me the same.’

The next day I wanted to copy down this stanza since Bhagavan had quoted it, and nothing he did was without significance. I was going to the library to fetch the book when Bhagavan said to me: ‘You need not go and fetch it. Come here. I know the stanza.’

So saying, he was pleased to take a sheet of paper and write out the stanza for me. It was not unusual for Bhagavan to do such things for some of his close followers. About a score of people may have such writings of Bhagavan in their possession.

It has often been surmised that Ramana Maharshi must have had an eidetic memory, given his ability to memorise extensive passages from works in a number of languages with no apparent effort. Even so the fact that he was able to reproduce this verse from memory in its entirety is a testament to the high regard in which he held it.

Here is Robert’s translation of the verse that Bhagavan had memorized:

6

The sage of Vadavur, whose hymns are rare,
and others too,
they said, ‘We have no love for you!’
but all their weeping and beseeching was a lie.
But when I say ‘I have no love, for you,’
my words are true.
Reveal to me your grace!
The black clouds that the ocean drink
and about you thickly cluster
recall the garment that you made,
from the hide of the elephant you flayed,
its temples oozing, wet
with dark juices of the must,
its trunk like a palmyra [ridged and black].
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord!

The ‘sage of Vadavur’ was Manikkavachagar, the poet who composed songs of the
_Tiruvachakam_. His home town was Vadavur.

In addition to translating the verses and explaining all the colourful imagery and references that
the verses contain, Robert has given a word-for-word translation along with copious linguistic
notes. The original Tamil text is also included.

Here is a sample of some of the verses, with Robert’s explanatory notes.

2

In Arur to be born is to gain knowledge
that lies beyond this worldly thrall;
the end of all suffering is to reach
and gaze on Tillai’s holy Hall.
In holy Kasi men joyfully abiding,
await death’s call.
But to the mere thought of your own city
can such as these compare at all?
For those who journey on birth’s ocean
bound for final liberation’s fair shore,
you rise on high
to guide for them the ship of _tapas_
ending their confusion with a glance.
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord!

Tillai is the Golden Hall of Chidambaram where Lord Siva, as Nataraja, performs his cosmic
dance. Kasi is Benares, nowadays known as Varanasi. Though Kasi is famous for its power to
grant liberation to those who die there, the _Arunachala Puranam_ (verse 543) states that is greatness
is eclipsed by that of Arunachala.

Even if food were given to ten million great _tapasvins_ in one of the most eminent
_sthalas_ [holy places], it would not equal a single grain of boiled rice given in immortal
Kasi. [Similarly] if food was given in Kasi to countless crores of great _tapasvins_, it
could not compare to a single grain of boiled rice given in the land of Arunai,
[embodiment of] the real.

The first part of this verse echoes a sentiment which has its source in the following _sloka_ which
is reputed to be from the _Arunachala Mahatmyam_, which is itself a section of the _Maheshwara
Kantam_ of the _Skanda Mahapuraṇam_. An identical sentiment occurs in verse 68 of the Tamil
_Arunachala Puranam:_

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41
Liberation [will be assured] in Abhrasadasi [Chidambaram] through seeing [it], in Kamalalaya [Tiru Arur] through birth [there], in Kasi through death [there] [and] at Arunachala through remembrance [of it].

9

Before the Lord of Death, a flower garland draped across his mighty chest, destroys my body’s outward form, will there be, for wretched me, a day that your grace comes to wipe away the ego self that lies within so that, with every hindrance gone, I and shining jnana’s form supreme are one?

With an elephant’s tusk for a crescent moon, and bright creepers, spreading in profusion like untied tresses upon your slopes, you shine, Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord!

Before enlightenment the inner body, consisting of the faculties of mind, intellect, will and egoity takes the outward, physical body and its perceptions to be real. It is thus condemned to live out its life in body after body, undergoing innumerable births due to its inability to apprehend its true nature. Once the ego is destroyed there is no longer any obstacle to its uniting with the Lord, its natural state. However, since the mind, however much it desires to be free, is in fact the very obstacle that is preventing that union in the first place, the devotee must surrender to the Lord and make himself a fitting subject for his grace. Jnana, is simply the pure consciousness, the substratum of all being, which is revealed when that which obscures it is removed, that is, when the identification with the body-mind complex is abandoned.

The commentators explain that the bright creeper is a creeping plant that, whilst appearing green by daylight, has a glowing radiance at night. Biologically, it is the climbing staff tree (Celestrus Paniculatus) a climbing shrub found throughout India. The moonlight, catching an elephant’s tusk, and the shining creepers, resembling unloosed braids of hair, offers to the imagination a striking image of Lord Siva with the crescent moon in his untied locks.

11

Upon the broad earth that the ocean’s fair gown girds about, quite fittingly you grant your grace to those who deem the body false. But to me, who take the body to be true,
will you not deign to grant it too?
Not wishing to dwell within a shrine,
hid from view, and visited
with proper observance of time,
you grant your presence abundantly,
standing fast, for all the world to see,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord!

The word *mey* in Tamil means ‘truth’ and also ‘body’, which gives an ironic twist to the phrase ‘deem the body false’. Those who think that *mey* (body) is *poy* (false) are right, and I who think that *mey* (body) is *mey* (true) am wrong. To those lacking in discrimination, there is nothing more true or real than the body. Only the wise know it to be, in the absolute sense, false. The author, whilst admitting that he does not possess the attainment of the great ones who possess this realisation, makes the point that, as one who labours under this delusion, he is just as much, or more, in need of Siva’s grace in order to dispel it. In the second half of the verse he reinforces his argument by pointing out that Sonasailan, unlike other gods that remain hidden in temples and shrines, is accessible to all without restriction.

Will there ever come a day
when you grant your grace,
sO that I, poor wretch,
sloughing off the senses’ woes,
and setting up within the fair temple
of my mind your holy feet,
with ankle-rings adorned,
may join the great assembly
of those holy ones who virtue seek?
Men in *pradakshina* walk around
with cries that like the ocean’s roar
resound, as in their midst
like holy Mandara you stand and shine
the *tapas* of the world made manifest,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord!

In another powerful image the author compares Arunachala to Mount Mandara, which was used as the churning-stick to churn the Milk Ocean, and the press of fervent devotees performing *pradakshina* around it to the serpent Vasuki, who was employed as the churning rope. The idea is that just as the Puranic churning of the Milk Ocean brought forth the ambrosia which conferred immortality, the throng of devotees performing circuits of Arunachala, calls forth the ambrosia of liberation from birth and death.
On the inner *pradakshina* path with Robert and his wife Jan about fifteen years ago. After a heavy rain, part of the route was underwater.

This mortal frame, that’s bound to die
like bubbles that through water fly,
is truly real, thus did I think.
Whirled through births,
in bliss’ enduring ocean
I knew not how to sink.
Will there ever salvation be
for one so ignorant as me?
With their tusks, the wild pigs root
upon your mountain slopes,
as if the Boar of former times
digging down, still strove today
to reach your beauteous foot,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord!

When Lord Siva appeared before Brahma and Vishnu as an immeasurable column of fire, Vishnu, as the legend goes, burrowed down in the form of a boar in order to reach its feet and thus prove his superiority over Brahma, who flew up in the form of a swan in order to find its head. The poet imagines that a wild pig that he sees rooting on the slopes of Arunachala is none other than Vishnu himself, still trying to complete his challenge.
Will there ever come a day
that, freed from body,
mental faculties and senses five,
with the veil of anavam’s [ego’s]
dark illusion rent,
I see you without seeing,
within myself,
I, a flower, and you the scent?
Flayer of elephant and lion
you came [from Kailash’s Mount],
and now upon your slopes
great herds of these you raise
too numerous to count,
their burning hatred to assuage,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord!

Robert sitting on my veranda about twelve years ago.
Siva wears a tiger skin which belonged to the tiger that the *rishis* in the Daruka forest conjured up to destroy him, and also a blanket of elephant skin which belonged to the *asura* Gajasura who attacked him in the form of an elephant. Seeing him come from Kailash dressed in this way, the tigers and elephants of Arunachala would understandably be somewhat aggrieved, and equally understandably, would need to be placated by Siva protecting and nurturing their respective species.

18

For me who languish in the heat of delusive charms of pretty girls whose heavy braids are decked with flower wreaths where swarms of humming insects feast, will there ever come a day that you draw me in, me safe to keep in the cool shade of your holy feet? Just as his shining locks do hide the holy Ganga’s silvery tide that flows down from his jewelled crown, white torrents roaring, tumble down your glittering sides, Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord!