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Category : [August 1999](#)

Published by Anonymous on Aug. 02, 1999

PUBLISHER'S DESK

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Presenting a gem from 2,200 years ago: Saint Tiruvalluvar's Tirukural in American English

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Many years ago when I was first in Sri Lanka--that was in 1949--I made a vow to bring together the best of the East and the best of the West. Living with a traditional Saivite family that informally adopted me in those early days, I was introduced to the Tirukural, a 2,200-year-old South Indian Dravidian classic on ethical living written by the weaver saint, Tiruvalluvar. (Tiru means "holy" or "sacred," and kural describes a brief verse or literary couplet.) I recognized this book to be one of the most important scriptures in all of Asia, so enchanting and so very practical. Decades later, I instructed two of my swamis to translate it from classical Tamil into American English and commissioned a renowned artist in South India to illustrate our 108 chapters. Now I am happy to announce that just a few days ago that work was completed and sent off to the printer in Michigan. I have named our edition Weaver's Wisdom, and wanted to share with you a little bit about it so that you can use it to help guide your life as it has guided and uplifted ours. It contains wondrously no-nonsense insights on life, teaching us how to deal with the

various feelings and circumstances that we encounter in our internal life and our interactions with others. In this sense, the Tirukural is the most accessible and relevant sacred text I know, applying to everyday matters and common concerns.

In fact, one of the striking revelations readers have as they go through this text is how little has changed in two millennia. People basically have the same worries, face the same fears and personal challenges, struggle with the same weaknesses and foibles, cherish the same aspirations for goodness and nobility. And, sadly, they have the same propensity for dishonesty and corruption. How much we are today like the people the weaver writes about is a most stunning fact. There is, indeed, not a single verse that seems outmoded or irrelevant to our modern life. That in itself is an amazing fact!

The weaver's poetic masterpiece is one of the most revered scriptures in South India. In Tamil Nadu, I am told, nearly every child learns to recite its verses by heart. Hindus there regard it with the same reverence that Buddhists regard the Buddha's Dhammapada and Christians regard Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." Many are surprised to find that the Tirukural is still sworn upon in the courts of law in South India's state of Tamil Nadu, just as the Christian Bible and Muslim Koran are sworn on elsewhere. Albert Schweitzer, medical missionary and Christian theologian in Africa, considered it one of the grandest achievements of the human mind: "Like the Buddha and the Bhagavad Gita, the Kural desires inner freedom from the world and a mind free from hatred. You find the quintessence of the best gems of thoughts in the Kural, a living ethic of love and liberation." The Father of modern India, Mahatma Gandhi, took to these verses in his own spiritual life, telling his people, "Only

a few of us know the name of Tiruvalluvar. The North Indians do not know the name of the great saint. There is none who has given such a treasure of wisdom like him."

In his work, Tiruvalluvar chose a topic--such as children, friendship or avoidance of anger--and gave us ten different couplets on the one subject, each reflecting the light of his understanding slightly differently, and the richness of his comprehension.

One of the hallmarks of Saint Tiruvalluvar's genius was his ability to deftly define and subtly delineate Sanatana Dharma, the Eternal Spiritual Path, to all men equally, never limiting his audience to a sectarian view. Even when he speaks directly of God, Whom he addresses as Adi Bhagavan, Iraivan and Kadavul--ancient Tamil words for God--the weaver's broad heart praises "God Primordial," "the Incomparable One," "the Gracious One" or "the Compassionate One." In other words, everyone's God.

Having honored the Worshipful One, the weaver praises rain, for without rain's gift of life all the human experience would be impossible. The third chapter speaks of renunciation, sannyasa, for to him the renunciate monk is the most noble exemplar of humanity, the highest of souls, the minister of Sanatana Dharma, nowadays called Hinduism in English, Indu Samayam in Tamil, Hindutva in Sanskrit, Hindouisme in French, Hinduismo in Spanish, Religione HindÃº in Italian, and Hinduismus in German. He exalts renunciation as a way of life as distinct from that of the householder, encouraging ardent souls seeking the realization of their own True Being, to take

up their faith with vigor and to live the detached, selfless life of a renunciate--noninvolvement in the joys and sorrows of the world.

Although it has been translated into English by many scholars, the Tirukural has never been widely known in the Western world. There is a similar work, written in modern times by the Syrian-born American mystic Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), called *The Prophet*, which has become a beloved classic. Everyone knows and loves this masterful work. *The Prophet* parallels the Tirukural in many ways. Both books speak in profound yet understandable terms of love and friendship, of health and death, of joy and sorrow. It is our hope that the Tirukural--Weaver's Wisdom--will find its place beside *The Prophet* and be known by the wider world as the gem that it is, showing how the Tamil Hindus have, to this very day, maintained their heritage, rich culture and religious fervor.

Much of what the weaver writes revolves around the home, which resonates well with today's calls to return to traditional family values. He speaks of the faithful husband and the devoted wife, of the upright children they raise and the joys they experience, of the value of relationship and how to nurture and sustain it. He speaks of age and its merits, of the importance of honoring the elderly, of caring for and not abandoning them.

Nor is the weaver a stranger to difficult issues that still perplex us. He speaks of killing and of the king's duty to execute murderers. He speaks of alcohol addiction, of the debilitating effects of gambling, of adultery and the tragic loss of a life

lived in poverty or lazy indifference. He guides us in matters of education, and warns against the life-sapping effect of lack of knowledge. He speaks of a strong military, of spies and of advisors with personal agendas, of fools and their ways and wastes. He knows of the wiles of real enemies and has much to tell modern man about overcoming opposition, about being wise against antagonists' crafty ways and thus surviving the attacks of foes. He speaks of making money and of how money is squandered and lost. He explores purity, kindness, humility, right thought, right action, friendship and all forms of virtuous living, and he boldly offers stern warning as to the consequence of base, sinful thoughts and actions. With great force, he decries the agonies caused by meat-eating and commends traditional Hindu vegetarianism. All along the way we encounter his humor, which he uses to great effect and which makes us laugh even as it points to our most stubborn flaws and comic foibles.

I would strongly suggest that you teach these gems to the children. The weaver's advice and admonition, coming from the world's most ancient faith and culture, will enrich every child's understanding of goodness, right conduct and right thought. It should be memorized, especially by small children, at least one verse carefully chosen by mother and father, from each of the 108 chapters, as a beginning. This will create a positive conscience for their inner decisions, guiding how they will conduct themselves through life, especially in these times when television stories, plots and scenes present the prevalent dissipated code of living. I encourage all readers to use this scripture to provide guidelines for effective and virtuous action in your life and that of your family. It can be your refuge in times of confusion, a source of inspiration when you feel less than inspired, a vital part of your life as it has been to ours.

Indeed, we have modeled our entire international organization on the weaver's advice, admonitions, and never-ending directives, which has helped us make decisions in uncompromising situations to uncompromise them into solutions.

To order your copy of Weaver's Wisdom, our American English translation of Tirukural, visit www.hindu.org/weaver/.