

INSIGHT

The Weaver

Two thousand years ago Saint Tiruvalluvar, a weaver and poet, scribed on palm leaves an ethical treatise to guide humanity



There is no greater dignity than that of the man who declares, "I will never cease in laboring to advance my family."

Chapter 103, Verse 1021



THE *TIRUKURAL*, "HOLY COUPLETS," IS A TREASURY OF HINDU ETHICAL INSIGHT AND A LITERARY masterpiece of the Tamil language, written by Saiva Saint Tiruvalluvar (ca 200 BCE) near present-day Chennai in South India. This sagely compendium of practical advice is so pithy, so profound and so sacred that it is sworn upon today in South Indian courts. The text focuses primarily on the first three goals of life—*artha* (wealth), *dharma* (conduct) and *kama* (desire)—but also includes thirteen chapters on renunciate dharma, relating to life's fourth goal, *moksha* (liberation). In an extraordinarily compact verse form of fourteen syllables, the poet presents 133 subjects of ten verses each on relationships, human strengths and foibles, statecraft and more—1,330 verses in all. One of the world's earliest ethical texts, the *Tirukural* has been called "a bible on virtue for the human race."

Although it has been translated into English by many scholars, the *Holy Kural* has remained virtually unknown in the Western world. There is a similar work, written in modern times by the mystic Kahil Gibran, called the *Prophet*, which has been widely distributed. Everyone knows and loves this great work. The *Holy Kural* parallels the *Prophet* in many ways. Both books speak in profound yet useful terms of love and friendship, of health and death, of joy and sorrow.

Details of Tiruvalluvar's life are meager. It is known that he was a weaver and that his wife, Vasuki, was the perfect example of devotion and obedience to her husband. Several stories are told depicting the exemplary harmony in their marriage. The *Tirukural* was his only work, and though it is relatively short, it was sufficient to bring renown to the humble weaver, making him a venerated sage and lawgiver.

The *Holy Kural* is most useful in everyday life when its verses are committed to memory and meditated upon, quoted freely as one's very own. One of its greatest benefits is to guide our actions and our thoughts, to direct our purpose in life and refine our interactions with our fellow man. Business, family and personal problems can be resolved in the light of the saint's wisdom. If something is going along wrong in your life, bring the forces of life back into harmony by studying the *Holy Kural* and applying its knowledge. That is per-

haps its main function—to perfect and protect our lives in the everyday world by preventing mistakes which can cause an unhappy karma, by preventing erroneous attitudes which can bring unnecessary sorrow into our experience. There is nothing in the *Kural* that has to be obeyed. Each of the couplets contains such insight, however, that we are drawn to it and want to comply with its discernments.

Teach these gems to the children. This advice and admonition, coming from the Sanatana Dharma, the world's most ancient faith and culture, will enrich every child's understanding of goodness, right conduct and right thought. It is essential that the values which are the substance of the *Holy Kural*—the do's as well as the don'ts—be carried over into the next generation with courage, persistence and fortitude so that our descendants are benefited by these age-old insights into universal laws, humanitarian laws and plain common sense.

The *Kural* does not contain a single ethical concept or expression that would offend another faith, and thus it is a fine introduction to the scriptures of the East. The *Holy Kural* is a liberal meeting ground for all religions. It could well be called a Common Creed for the modern world. The selected verses which follow were rendered into modern "American English" by two *acharyas* of the Saiva Siddhanta Yoga Order at the request of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami.

Translation's Dubious Art

How uneasily the *Kural's* cryptic verses yield

IN THE TAMIL LANGUAGE, *TIRU* means "holy" or sacred, and *kural* means anything that is brief or short.

In this case it describes the difficult and disciplined *kural-venpa* meter in which the verses were written. Each two-line verse is short, containing just four feet in the first line and three in the second—14 syllables in all. As a rule, the last foot of the first line, or the first foot of the second line, rhymes with the first foot of the first line. In many ways these couplets are similar to such Sanskrit verses as the *Brahma Sutras*. With subjects or predicates often only implied, the reader is left to intuit the meaning, and the result is an array of legitimate interpretations. Showing the range of style and meaning, here is verse 805 rendered by eight of the *Tirukural's* 150 known English translators:

Rev. W.H. Drew (1840): If friends should perform what is painful, understand that it is owing not only to ignorance, but also

to the strong claims of intimacy.

G.U. Pope (1886): Not folly merely, but familiar carelessness, esteem it, when your friends cause you distress.

A. Ranganatha Mudaliar (1949): Deem the sting caused by friends to be born of not folly merely, but of easy familiarity.

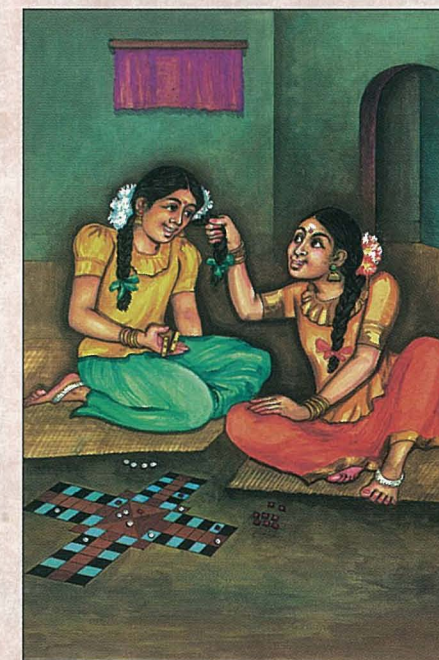
K.M. Balasubramaniam, (1962): When thine own friends perchance did something thou dost hate indeed, do treat it as their folly or as friendship's privilege-deed.

Shuddhananda Bharati (1971): Offense of friends feel it easy as folly or close intimacy.

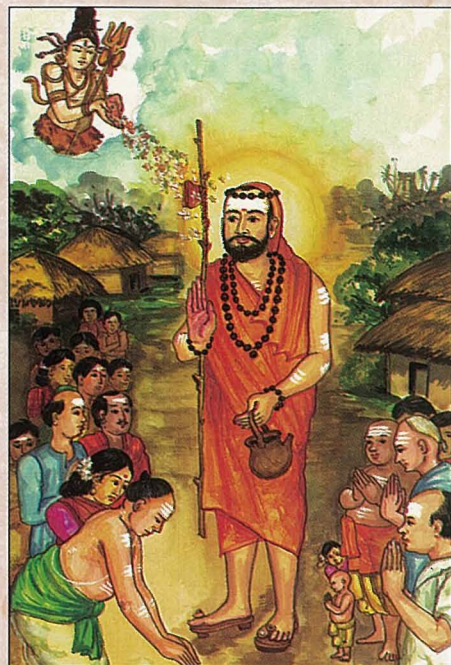
G. Vanmikanathan (1984): If intimate friends do some painful thing, take it either as a piece of foolishness or privilege of friendship.

P.S. Sundaram (1989): If friends hurt, put it down to ignorance or familiarity.

Saiva Siddhanta Yoga Order (1993): When friends do things that hurt you, attribute it to unawareness or to the privileges of friendship.



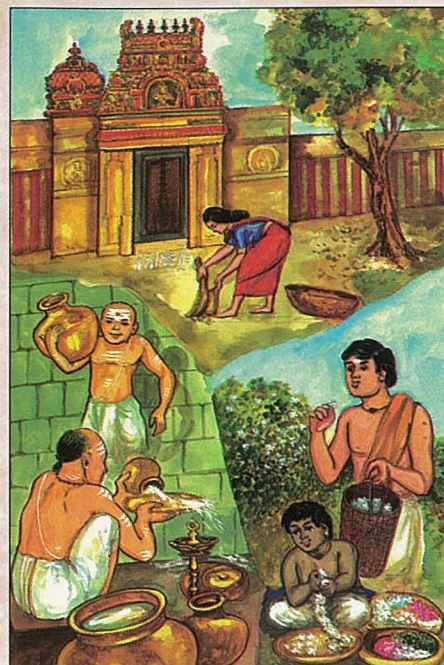
பேதமை ஒன்றோ
பெருங்கிழமை என்றுணர்க
நோதக்க நட்பார் செயின்.



Greatness of Renunciates

Behold those who have weighed the dual nature of things and followed the renunciate's way. Their greatness illumines the world.

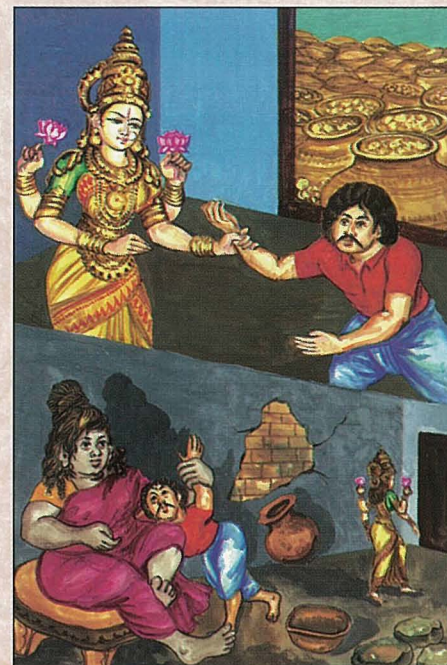
CHAPTER 3, VERSE 23



Asserting Virtue's Power

Be unremitting in the doing of good deeds. Do them with all your might and by every possible means.

CHAPTER 4, VERSE 33



Avoidance of Envy

Fortune's Goddess, intolerant of men who cannot tolerate other's success, Introduces them to her sister Misfortune and goes away.

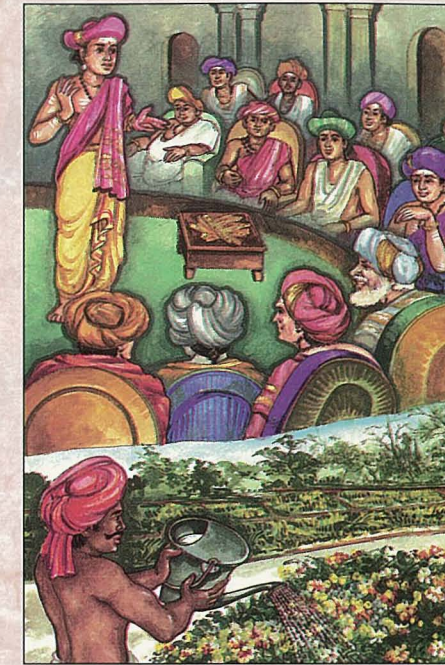
CHAPTER 17, VERSE 167



Resoluteness of Action

Do not disparage men who appear small, for there are those, seemingly insignificant, who are like the linchpin of a mighty chariot.

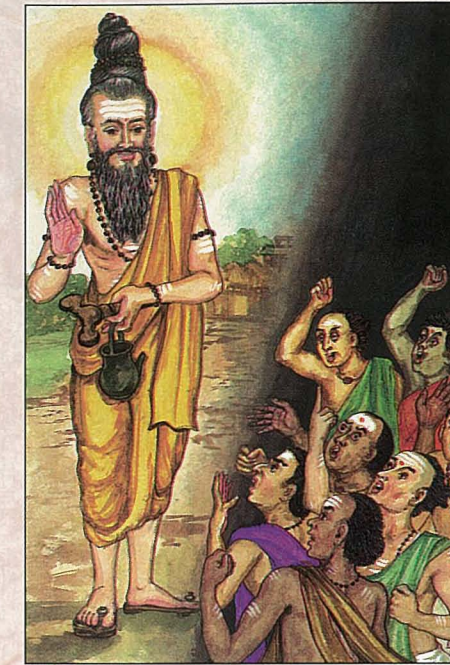
CHAPTER 67, VERSE 667



Judging the Audience

Speaking to an audience of thinking men is like watering a bed of growing plants

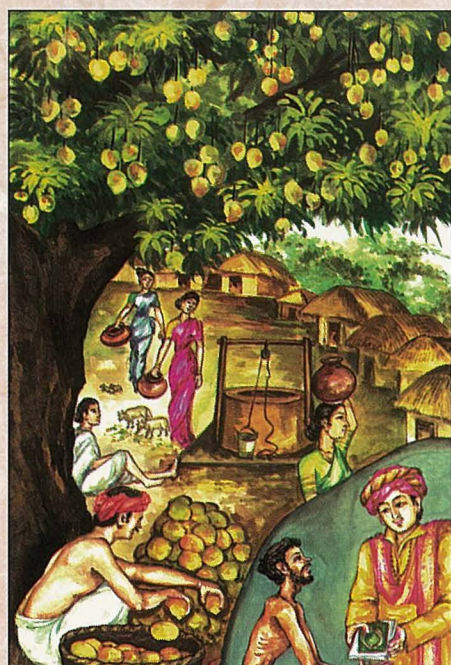
CHAPTER 72, VERSE 718



Hatred

Though men plot disunity and deliberately harm you, the highest path plans no hateful retribution.

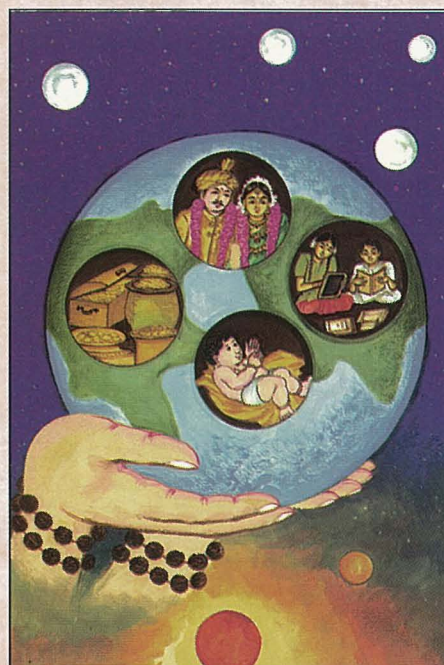
CHAPTER 86, VERSE 852



One's Duty to Give

Riches retained by big-hearted men Resemble a fruit tree ripening in the heart of a village.

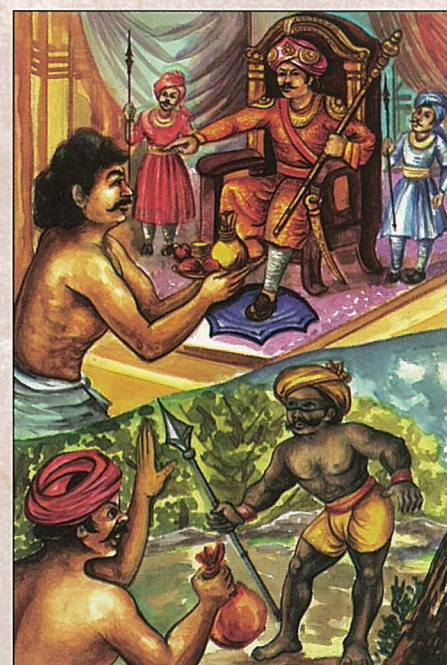
CHAPTER 22, VERSE 216



Destiny

A man may amass millions, but its enjoyment will never exceed that portion allotted to him.

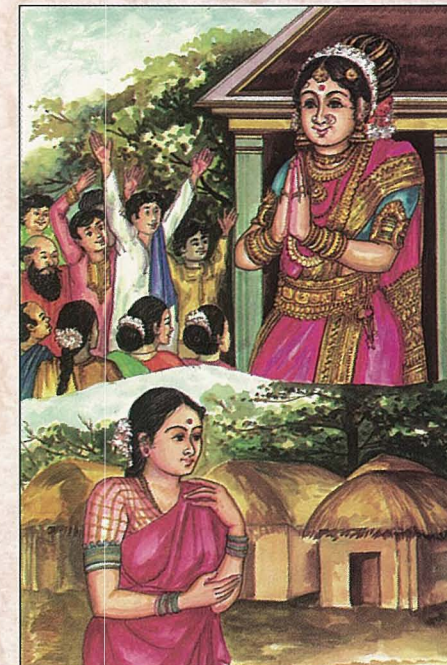
CHAPTER 38, VERSE 377



Unjust Reign

A scepter-wielding king requesting a gift is like a lance-bearing robber demanding, "Give me all you have."

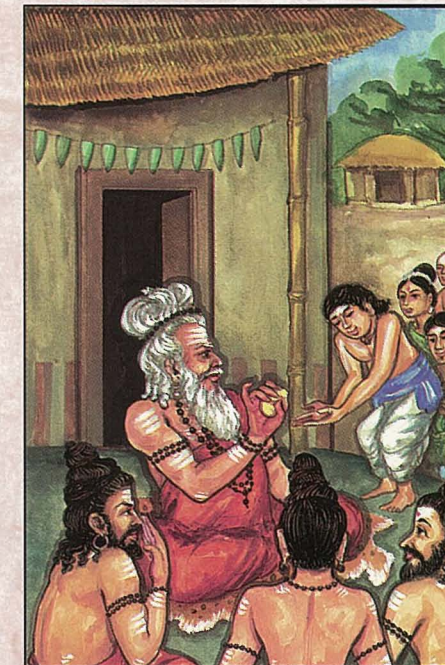
CHAPTER 56, VERSE 552



Honor

Cultivate modesty in the midst of good fortune, but in times of adversity preserve your dignity.

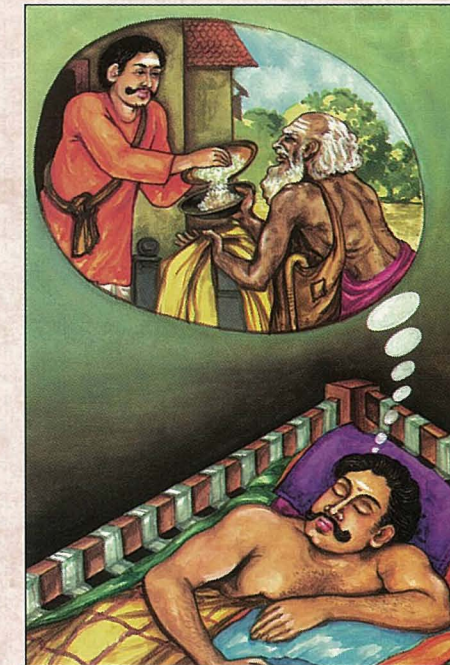
CHAPTER 97, VERSE 963



Possession of Courtesy

If a man is easy of access to all, then the virtue of courtesy will be easily accessible to him.

CHAPTER 100, VERSE 992



Begging

There are men who never deny a request, even in a dream. Begging from such men is as good as giving.

CHAPTER 106, VERSE 1054