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# The Tenderness of Shiva

Existential experiences of the Tamil divine singer

Manikkavasagar

according to the collection of his holy songs

Tiruvvasagam<sup>1</sup>

By

Edmund Weber

In the *Tiruvvasagam*<sup>2</sup>, which are his songs in honour of Shiva, the Tamil singer Manikkavasagar (born about 800 A.D.) praises the miracle of his completely undeserved salvation from karmic illusion which he owes to his divine Father and Lord Shiva, the kind, friend and blessing-bringer.<sup>3</sup>

*I am low I have nothing good about me and  
YOU grant me grace.  
Me miserable with the wrong sense,  
without virtue and enthusiastic, soft, and melted heart.  
YOU filled me with love.  
YOU came to the earth out of grace and showed Your mighty feet.  
YOU gave me who was shabbier than a dog the basic grace  
that is more precious than motherly love –  
YOU faithful!*<sup>4</sup>

When he was still following the karmic abused law<sup>5</sup> and therefore believing his deeds would decide his existential fate, Manikkavasagar was braided on the karmic wheel of retaliation. Not only that: since he could not show any good deeds and had no enthusiastic, soft, and melted heart, he became aware of his next rebirth where he had to suffer appropriate punishments imposed by the karmic abused law.

His error that his deeds or constructions would constitute his true existence, this his karmic illusion, plunged him into abysmal desperation.

However, Shiva arose, came down to earth, completely withdrew Manikkavasagar's consciousness from karmic illusion. Out of pure grace Shiva tenderly filled his heart with divine love. In doing so Shiva disregarded his deeds and, in this way, disrespecting the karmic abused law. The karmic illusion has abused the law to issue its verdict on the respective deeds as a constitutional, i.e. final judgment on the worthiness or unworthiness of existence at all:

*My Father and Lord!  
YOU made me Yours. If it is not given to me to shed my shackles and to enter the  
golden city which has an entrance but no exit, and to melt in love before your  
feet if it is not given to me to taste the nectar, milk, and honey every day what  
should I do with my effective deeds?*<sup>6</sup>

The divine singer experienced the complete insignificance of all his deeds, when it came to the right relationship with Shiva, the kind God, whose grace was the true constitution of existence.

Recognizing that the divine grace is necessary to realize true existence, Manikkavasagar saw that even his most effective deeds would be completely useless for the right relationship with Shiva, the gracious God. If his true existence had nothing to do with his own deeds, then even a self-staged conversion could throw off the shackles to the karmic abused law. To attain the true existence, i.e. to enter

the golden city, to melt in love before Shiva's feet, to taste the nectar, milk, and honey every day, Manikkavasagar realized that there was only one way to get rid of his karmic shackles and to make him taste the nectar of Shiva's goodness every day. According to that way true existence depends solely on Shiva's free grace. But the experience of that grace is not at all manageable; it falls only within the management of his benevolent friend and blessing-bringer.

If the constitution of true existence did not depend on Manikkavasagar's karmas, i.e. his works and constructions of life, then these deeds were completely irrelevant in this concern.

As a Father Shiva takes care of his son.

A son must not take care of his existence and must not finally judge the same, i.e. he must not constitute his existence. Therefore, Manikkavasagar did not need to worry about how to constitute his existence. Constituting existence was therefore irreversibly removed from the rule of karmic abused law and thus from Manikkavasagar's competence as well. Consequently, the divine singer became irrevocably free from karmic pressure to self-constituting his existence. He became aware not only of the uselessness of deeds for the existential constitution but at the same time frustrated he confessed to be still bound to karmic abused law. In a desperate lament, he asked Shiva when He would finally let him leave his karmic bondage:

*With all Your saints, who love You and who received Your grace,  
You appeared there in Your red form but left me here.  
Is that just, Sir? Is there no end of my deeds for me worthless?<sup>7</sup>*

The end of the deeds, i.e. the end of Manikkavasagar's inner delivery to karmic abused law, could not be brought about by his own construction of life, by karmic abused work. For then Manikkavasagar would once again fall within the karmic deception to constitute his existence by himself. However, the liberation from the madness of karmic self-constitution could not be accomplished by karmic abused work but only Shiva's gracious tenderness. Manikkavasagar's liberation from the vicious cycle of karmic illusion could only happen because it broke up as an unavailable event in his soul.

However, that was such an event that Manikkavasagar himself could not manage. For the end of karmic deeds as determining factors for true existence - although Manikkavasagar so longed for this end - was precisely beyond his capacity. Only Shiva's free grace was that power. Therefore, it was completely pointless to try to satisfy the kind friend and blessing-bringer with even the most moral good works. But it made no sense to accuse Shiva of injustice if He appeared only to the saints in red form but not to Manikkavasagar. For then the kind friend and blessing bringer would indirectly be made a slave to karmic justice. But Shiva's power is this free and almighty grace which is above the karmic righteousness. Shiva is the Lord, and the law, especially if it is karmic abused, is only a servant.

Otherwise, one could force the Father and Lord and dictate to what He had to do and what to leave. He had to fulfil the karmic desires. Shiva, however, is sovereign and not subject to his creature i.e. the karmic law of retaliation. That's why Manikkavasagar criticized karmic religions, especially Buddhism:

*Confused and insecure in their respective knowledge of belief  
the Buddhists and many other foreign and false religions.<sup>8</sup>*

Manikkavasagar had experienced as the truth of existence:

*Only He gives the soul the highest redemption  
that makes all deeds divine!<sup>9</sup>*

Shiva, the good man, the friend, and blessing-giver alone, and no act of any soul redeems man from the illusion that the karmic abused law would be omnipotent and decide the final fate of existence.

But when man realizes this in the depth of his consciousness, all his constructions are suddenly revealed in their original divine nature. They are divine because they are free from karmic abuse and do not produce so-called karmic fruits; they are no more misused as a means for an illusionary constitution of existence. Life's activity is no longer perverted into a mere technical tool to a self-made final purpose of life and afterlife. In other words: Life becomes free from its karmic alienation. Manikkavasagar thus does not denounce works as such; on the contrary, he reveals their divine dignity. The reason is, Shiva does not behave like a shop-keeper according to the rule *do ut des*, because He is a kind father and a protective master. His tenderness to His creatures does not demand ascetic and other hard works as conditions for salvation because He treats His creatures like a tender mother, He is even more tender.

Tenderly turning to karmic abused creatures and graciously liberating life from its karmic enslavement, Shiva disempowers the most aggressive karmic abused law.

Only when someone understands this by Shiva's enlightening grace, then he also understands that these life constructing products are not suitable for the constitution of his own worthiness or worthlessness, but rather that true existence unabatedly shines again in its original beauty. That happens when Shiva grants mercy. Then existence is constituted how Martin Luther taught '*extra nos*' i.e. outside one's own work and it is nevertheless '*iuste*' (just). Even dirty works are nothing in the eyes of tender Shiva. Therefore, Manikkavasagar enthusiastically sings:

*We are dirtier than dogs,  
but He considered us worthy of His respect.<sup>10</sup>*

This experience of freed existence, which celebrates its liberation from karmic slavery, is portrayed by the singer in images of a responsible father and lord: although Manikkavasagar once denied that the value of his existence was based on the grace of the benevolent, friend and blessing-giver, thinking that he first had to acquire it with good deeds, otherwise he could lose it because of evil works. In this way he denied himself as Shiva's already completed and unconditionally beloved creation.

According to the karmic illusion however such an idea would be completely absurd and unjustified. From the viewpoint of karmic position, it is indeed paradoxical when Shiva declares men to be god-righteous regardless their attitude and design.

However, as far as the constitution of existence is concerned, Shiva is not a venging or rewarding judge and hangman of the karmic abused law, but an unwaveringly faithful sovereign - full of tenderness to his beloved creatures.

But a son, as everyone, should know, that he is only subject to the will of his father and master, and therefore fundamentally deprived of the power and rule of the rewarding or punishing karmic abused law. Thus, man cannot acquire the status of true existence by good, beautiful, and heroic offerings.

For Shiva's faithful grace is above the karmic abused works even if He would be extremely offended by them. But Shiva meets His creatures with tenderness. and without any harsh scathing of moral criticism, he gives his free grace. This His limitless tenderness Manikkavasagar enthusiastically praises:

*Your tender mercy knows no bounds.*<sup>11</sup>

The benevolent and kind Shiva cannot be demoted to the loveless and merciless hangman of the karmic abused law and cannot be forced to evaluate His beloved creature according to the performance of its life. The power of His goodness, kindness, and blessing is infinite, and nothing can stop it. Manikkavasagar uses a very emotional image for this: Shiva, the benevolent, the friend and blessing-giver, is even more tender to His work-obsessed son than a mother to her child.

*The Lord was of greater tenderness than a mother.*<sup>12</sup>

Shiva's love does not pay any attention to man's good or evil deeds and their fruits, but it triggers in him the most tender feelings towards His disobedient and self-obsessed son, a son who feels 'dirtier than a dog'. That poignant image of Shiva's love proves that He dissolve all karmic illusions, all karmic demand for fair retaliation for all deeds as condition for a true existence.

For, even if a man - biased in karmic illusions - thinks that he gets his value, attractiveness, and love for Shiva only by hard working, Shiva dissolves that illusion. He does the same dissolution for a man who cannot reach it at all, therefore considering himself as worthless and rejected, and thinking that the benevolent, friend, and blessing-bringer does not grant him His grace. But Shiva tenderly turns

to both, even if in the perspective of karmic abused law men are ‘dirtier than a dog’.

Shiva, on the other hand, was not afraid to kiss Manikkavasagar -although ‘dirtier than a dog’ - tenderly in public because He was completely captivated by his beloved son’s charm i.e. his true nature. Overwhelmed by the beauty of the one who was ‘dirtier than a dog’ Shiva let the divine singer enthusiastically cheer:

*Amid the crowd of His saints,  
He caressed me although  
I was like a dog and subdued me.*<sup>13</sup>

Shiva’s tender kiss freed Manikkavasagar’s consciousness from its karmic bondage and obsession:

*He cut off the deceptive birth and made us His own.*<sup>14</sup>

Shiva, the kind, ended the illusion of existence constituting working by liberating Manikkavasagar from the vicious cycle of deeds and their megalomaniac self-overestimation. He took him up in His kingdom of tender grace, i.e. in the consciousness of existential freedom from all karmic illusions.

Karmic abused working had lost the power over Manikkavasagar’s consciousness, a truth which was beyond man’s constructions of self-understanding. In face of Shiva’s unconditional goodness consciousness realizes that final worthiness and final unworthiness of life do not belong to its true constitution. The truth of existence is free from and independent of all final definitions. Therefore, this basic freedom from all final definitions, which is Shiva’s grace, made Manikkavasagar aware that he did not need any final determination, and therefore he was not subdued to any final purpose.

But if there is no work like final meaning, final definition, and final purpose of existence, then men are indeed constitutionally free; or in other words they are full of Shiva’s tenderly given grace.

Manikkavasagar’s, song of Shiva's tenderness towards that one who is ‘dirtier than a dog’, which goes far beyond any natural motherly love, silences the worldly noise of karmic obsession for self-determination and lets Manikkavasagar break out in boundless joy, enthusiastically singing about the end of karmic slavery:

*For the old deeds<sup>15</sup> which enslaved us and hurt us  
He erased and destroyed them.*<sup>16</sup>

***His grandness let us sing and pick the lilies!***<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tiruvasagam von Manikkavasagar. Deutsch von Albrecht Frenz und P. Nagarajan, Karai-kudi 1977 (= Tiruvasagam). New edition: Er ist der mit der glückseligen Freude. Das Tiruvasagan des Manikkavasagar. Heidelberg 2011. Cf. G. Pope's r English translation, Oxford 1900: <https://shaivam.org/scripture/English-Script/1234/thiruvacakam-part-1-by-gu-pope>

<sup>2</sup> Tiru Vasagam, Tamil: holy expression

<sup>3</sup> Shiva, Sanskrit: gracious, kind, friendly

<sup>4</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 1.56, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> The divine law serves the cosmic order. But it became abused by the karmic illusion that the constitution of existence would depend on one's own deeds or constructions, and therefore the law was abused to act as a yardstick to assess the deeds and the effect on a rebirth. According to the Tiruvasagam only Shivas free grace is the true constitution of existence.

<sup>6</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 5. 36, p. 45

<sup>7</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 5.83, p. 61

<sup>8</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 15.5, p. 181

<sup>9</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 15.6, p. 130

<sup>10</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 13.3, p. 120

<sup>11</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 5.94, p. 61

<sup>12</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 13.3, p. 120

<sup>13</sup> Tiruvasagam, hymn 15.6, p. 135

<sup>14</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 13.2, p. 120

<sup>15</sup> i.e. the karmic abused bad and good deeds including their corresponding fruits.

<sup>16</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 13.6, p. 121

<sup>17</sup> Tiruvasagam, Hymn 13.7, p. 121. 'Pick the lilies' stands for 'chose the purity' i.e. throw off the karmic impurity of illusion.