

## Thirumoolar and Tao: Tamil and Chinese Ideas About Life

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### Abstract

This paper aims at studying how Classical Tamil and Chinese poetics have focused on mental health and attempts to understand how a balanced approach to life can be retained by constructing ideas about life. Human mind has to poise its need to win with the reality of a brief life. Discussing death does not refer to depression or pain; instead, it reminds us of the briefness of life, and how it can be handled with ease and happiness. People spend a lot of energy in trying to control the people around them and this mental work leads to lots of stress and unhappiness. Poets and thinkers recommend freedom of the spirit and happiness.

**Keywords:** mental health, Thirumoolar, Tao Te Ching, Periyar

This paper attempts to understand how Thirumoolar from Tamil Nadu, India, and Tao Te Ching from China have interpreted human experiences and have arrived at philosophies to approach life. Their suggestions appear to be ethical principles, but beneath the ethics one can notice the embedded ideology of living with good mental health.

*Thirumanthiram* is a collection of three thousand quatrains (usually defined as “a stanza or poem of four lines, usually with alternate rhymes” [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)) written by Thirumoolar, who is supposed to have lived two thousand years ago. Historical details are not available, and the existing written legends say that he studied along with rishis in Kailash. The details are lost in myths and religious stories and we lose track about the real person.

Thirumoolar was a mystic and has written how he saw the dance of Shiva. Scholars have interpreted this as a scene in Kailash and popular narratives argue that after witnessing the dance of Shiva, Thirumoolar began his journey to the South. It is said that *Thirumanthiram* was composed in Thiruvavadu Thurai, a famous temple in Tamil Nadu. The temple in Chidambaram has a special place for him as he died here. Tamil Nadu celebrates him as a God and there are

temples for him. The temples in Sathanoor and Thirunaraiyoor are famous. One of the legends in Tamil Nadu is that Thirumoolar entered the body of a cowherd called Moolan, and he had the power of coming out of his body and entering another body who was dead. Sekizhar, who wrote his epic of Saivite saints, devotes twenty-eight verses in his *Periya Puranam* to describe the story of *Thirumoolar* who is hailed as a Saiva saint. (*Aananda Vikatan*)

“Yakkai Nilaiyamai,” (The mortal nature of human body) a collection of 25 verses by Thirumoolar. These verses argue that this life on earth is too brief to be taken very seriously. The first verse says that the earthenware is of two kinds: one is the burnt one that withholds the water; the other is the unburnt one that breaks in heavy downpour and becomes part of earth once again; like the latter, human body dies and becomes part of this earth (Thirumoolar, verse 1).

Mannontru kandeer iru vagai pathiram  
Thinnentru irunthathu theevinai saernthathu  
Vinnintru neer vizhin meendu man anarpol  
Ennintru manthar irakintra varae (Thirumoolar verse 1)

The verse can be translated like this:

Have you seen the earthenware of two kinds?  
The one that was burnt remained hard,  
Like the unburnt earthen ware when immersed in water  
The human body dissolves back in nature. (Thirumoolar, verse 1)

Another verse goes like this:

Pandam pei koorai pazhaki vizhuntha kaal  
Unda appendirum makalum pin sellar  
Konda virathamum janamum allathu  
Mandi avarudan vazhi nadavathae. (Thirumoolar verse 2)

If we translate it, it means: The body collapses like a house which has been accommodating various types of products; the products are enjoyed by his family members, but they cannot follow him after his death; his self-disciplining measures and wisdom go with him (Thirumoolar, verse 2).

Thirumoolar compares human body to a house:

Kaalum irandu mukatala kontrula  
Paalul parungali muppathi randula  
Maelula koorai piriya pirinthaalmun  
Pooluyir meela pukaari yaathae. (Thirumoolar, verse 3)

The meaning of the verse goes like this: The legs support the body like pillars and the backbone with 32 ribs strengthen the body, which is constructed like a house, and is built with the roof of skin; all these disintegrate once the life breath leaves its house; it does not come back (Thirumoolar verse 3).

“Ma'aseh Tuviyah” a Hebrew medical treatise, portrays the body as a house. In medieval medical treatises man is defined as a “little world” or microcosm, and the universe that he reflects as a “great world” or macrocosm (Lepicard). The Bible also considers the body as “the house in which our spirit lives here on earth” (Corinthians 5. New Testament). It could be that the metaphor of a house to describe a body is universal as the similarities are obvious.

Thirumoolar continues to analyse human relationships and their limitations, and reminds us for the need to train our minds to look beyond this mortal life: People talk in a sweet manner and get into relationships but soon lose interest in each other, and later when one leaves the world, the other person cries, and after burning the body, the dead partner is worshipped as god (Thirumoolar, verse 8); the soul leaves the body leaving behind the family and other related things (Thirumoolar, verse 9); the nine holes in the body are closed forever, and the loved ones cry and then leave (Thirumoolar, verse 10); the hero of this land is taken in a chariot for the last time followed by people of the country (Thirumoolar verse 11); when the dead body is taken to the cremation ground, all the relatives leave to live their lives (Thirumoolar, verse 13); the body is burnt and the people take bath and forget the whole thing, and the relatives and women and others stop following the dead man, and they don't follow the body beyond the end point of the village, and later they take bath and forget the dead man ungratefully (Thirumoolar, verse 15); the potter makes pots and if they break, he leaves them as broken pieces that are used for other purposes, but the body is thrown away after the life-breath leaves and cannot be used again (Thirumoolar, verse 16). People leaving after the cremation of the body is a constant reference in these poems and emerges as a symbol of the futility of life and the limitations of human bondage and relationships.

Tantric Siddha movement that flourished in India has many renowned spiritual scientists and Thirumoolar is one among them. He emphasized on the bodily based spiritual transformation and thus asanas flourished as an instrument of spiritual practice. In *Thirumanthiram*, Thirumoolar says “when the body perishes, the life force departs, concentration on preserving the body, cherishes the life force.” ... *Thirumanthiram* consists of 3047 poetic verses that explain the essences of Siddha yogam. In *Thirumanthiram*, Thirumoolar emphasises a new type of yoga called Siva Yogam. Siva yogam deals with the individual soul with

the removal of ignorance, once the wisdom dawns. It is also a method by which athma identifies itself with Siva. (Kanakavalli, et al. 19)

Removal of ignorance is achieved by realizing that the human body is mortal, and the emotional bondage created in relationships and family system disappears in a brief time as life continues for others in the same manner as before. The death of a body does not disturb the rhythm of life. A mind has to understand this thin relationship between one and another to detach one's self from emotional bondages and to build a steady relationship with the soul of the universe. It does not involve myths or a religion and insists on the freedom of the individual soul to structure its existence. A person who lives disassociated with the materialism of practical life can be referred to as a wise one or 'Siddhar'.

Yoga may be associated with religion *per se*, but it is distinctly distinguishable from religion and religious practices. Religions deals with God realization; Yoga emphasizes on self realization. Tamil Siddhars insisted on the vital importance of Gnanam in attaining realization. They are against the fundamentalist attitude of religion. The Siddhars are against any institutionalised religion, which produces habits, customs and ritualistic practices which prevent one from being spiritually alert and fully conscious. (Kanakavalli, *et al.* 20)

The Tao Te Ching was written in China 2,500 years ago and is probably the most influential Chinese book of all times. Its 81 chapters have been translated into English more times than any other Chinese document. It provides the basis for the philosophical school of Taoism that teaches that there is one undivided truth at the root of all things. It means "the way" to get "strength/virtue" using the method of "scripture." (McCarroll, Knierim et al).

Not much is known about Lao Tzu, at least nothing that is certain. Some even doubt whether he is the author of the Tao Te Ching. However, his name became legendary with this writing, which also happens to be his only work. Lao Tzu (his name is sometimes written Lao Tse or Lao Zi, and he is also known as Li Er and Lao Dan) was supposedly born in Honan on the 24th of March in the year 604 BC. His name means "old-young" and he has been called the "Old Master". Lao Tzu was very old, when he rode on a water buffalo to retire in the mountains to a province in the western frontiers. There he was approached by a border official named Guan Yin Zi, who urged the master to write down his teachings so that they might be passed on. Lao Tzu then retreated into the solitude of the mountain pass, wrote the Tao Te Ching, whereupon he went westward and was never seen again. (McCarroll, Knierim, et al.)

Tao Te Ching says that “the True Person governs by emptying the heart of desire... If the people are simple and free from desire, then the clever ones never dare to interfere. Practise action without striving and all will be in order” (Tao Te Ching, poem 3). Desire is the cause for stress and mental depression, and therefore the poet says:

Blunt the sharpness.  
Untie the knot.  
Soften the glare.  
Settle with the dust. (Tao Te Ching, poem 4)

Like Thirumoolar, Ching argues that life is a brief affair, and hence human ambition and sharp cleverness do not take individuals to success and happiness. Leading a simple life with humility gives us mental health and silence is required to live with peace:

Many words lead to exhaustion.  
Better to hold fast to your centre. (Tao Te Ching, poem 5)

The *centre* is the quiet self that is calm and self-dependent, and it renews itself. The self has to free itself from ‘itself’ and that is the best way to liberate from worry and mental ill-health:

Heaven and earth last forever.  
The reason why heaven and earth last forever  
is that they do not live for themselves.  
Hence, they last forever.  
Therefore, the True Person leaves self behind  
and thus is found in front,  
is not guarded and thus is preserved,  
is self-free and thus is able to find fulfillment (Tao Te Ching, poem 7)

At an initial level, it looks as if Thirumoolar is negative, as he keeps depicting death and the briefness of life on earth. If we read the poems along with the Chinese masterpiece Tao Te Ching, we realize both talk about living without conflicts as life on earth is indeed a mortal affair. The body is like an earthenware, says Thirumoolar; only heaven and earth last forever, says Ching. The body is mortal and hence, we can take life at a slower pace, both the ancient poets seem to argue in their writings.

These poems of Thirumoolar and Tao Te Ching are secular in nature and do not recommend a particular way or method. One is reminded of the twentieth century social reformer and thinker **Periyar** who questioned the materialistic desires and greed of the religious minded people in his famous essay in the magazine *Kudiyarasu* written on January 25, 1949:

Let us think. If we study the activities of people, we understand that they want to go to heaven however difficult it is, however others are oppressed by them; people want to become landlords; they should always remain wealthy; they should be immortal; they should be rulers. This is what is taught in codes. Hence, greedy people follow these social codes and plan for this earthly life and life after death. (Periyar, 223)

Ancient Tamil and Chinese wisdom argue in favour of a life that is not greedy, as life on earth will always be mortal, and efforts to make human life immortal and permanent on earth would only lead to mental stress and unhappiness.

Periyar takes the issue of codes to a higher level arguing that social and cultural codes have been created to make people more materialistic. This in turn, can create social unrest, stress in human minds, and might lead to inequalities in a gradual manner in cultural and economic levels. Religion has to teach people to detach themselves from aggressive materialism, and help them acquire peace, is his argument. Thirumoolar and Tao Te Ching argue in favour of empowering the core spirit of human mind realizing the limitations of human body's existence on earth.

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