

# Buddhist Doctrines in the Tamil Epic Manimekalai

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**Abstract**—The Tamil Buddhist epic Manimekalai, composed by the poet Sīthalai Sāthanar, is one of the Five Great Epics of classical Tamil literature. As a continuation of Silappathikaram, it narrates the life of Manimekalai, the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi, who renounces worldly pleasures to embrace Buddhism. The text is both a literary masterpiece and a didactic document that propagates Buddhist philosophy in the Tamil region. This article explores three core Buddhist doctrines as represented in the epic: (i) the doctrine of Karma (Vinaikkodpaddu), (ii) the doctrine of Impermanence (Nilaiamaai/Anicca), and (iii) the doctrine of Dharma and Ethical Conduct (Araneri). Using select verses from Manimekalai in Tamil alongside English translations, the paper demonstrates about Buddhist thought is poetically embedded in the narrative. Further, it analyzes the role of these doctrines in shaping Tamil Buddhist consciousness and their continuing relevance.

**Index Terms**—Manimekalai, Karma, Impermanence, Dharma, Buddhist Philosophy, Ethics.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Tamil classical literature is a rich reservoir of ethical and philosophical thought. Among the Aimperumkappiyangal (Five Great Epics), Manimekalai holds a special place for its explicit articulation of Buddhist doctrines in Tamil poetic tradition. Composed by the Buddhist monk-poet Sīthalai Sāthanar around the fifth–sixth century CE, the epic continues the narrative of Silappathikaram, yet it diverges in purpose and message. While Silappathikaram centers around themes of chastity (karpu), justice, and retribution, Manimekalai

functions primarily as a didactic text that integrates Buddhist ethics with a narrative of renunciation.

The heroine, Manimekalai, is the daughter of Kovalan and the courtesan Madhavi. Unlike her mother, Manimekalai refuses a life of sensuality and wealth, choosing instead the Buddhist path of monastic discipline. Her journey from attachment to renunciation is symbolic of the transition from worldly bondage (saṃsāra) to spiritual liberation (nirvāṇa).

This paper investigates how three principal Buddhist doctrines are represented in the text:

1. The doctrine of Karma (vinaikkodpaddu), which emphasizes the causal law of deeds and their consequences.
2. The doctrine of Impermanence (nilaiaamai/anicca), which underscores the transitory nature of life and existence.
3. The doctrine of Dharma/Ethical Conduct (araneri), which stresses moral discipline through the Five Precepts and compassion.

By examining these doctrines with textual support in Tamil and translation, the study aims to highlight about that Manimekalai made Buddhism comprehensible to Tamil audiences, transforming philosophical abstractions into narrative experiences.

## Doctrines of Buddhism in Manimekalai

Viewing the Buddhist doctrines in Manimekalai under three heads are here:

1. Doctrine of Karma (Vinai-k-kōtpāṭu),
2. Doctrine of Impermanence (Nilaiyāmai-k-kōtpāṭu),
3. Doctrine of Moral Discipline (Araṇeri-k-kōtpāṭu).

### Doctrine of Karma (Vinai-k-kōtpātu)

All Indian religions uphold the doctrine of karma; Buddhism is no exception.

#### Types of Karma

Karma is twofold: good (nalvinai) and evil (tīvinai).

#### Evil karma:

- Bodily evils—killing, stealing, lust;
- Verbal evils—falsehood, slander, harsh speech, idle chatter;
- Mental evils—greed, anger, delusion.

Understanding its nature, the wise do not incline their minds to evil; those who do are reborn among animals, ghosts, or in hell and suffer across births. (“Āpūththiran Nādu Adaindha Kāthai” 123–134).

#### Good Karma:

Abstaining from the above ten evils, following moral discipline, and living by generosity lead to births among devas, humans, or Brahmās and to the enjoyment of virtuous fruits.

#### Definition of Birth

The world is threefold upper, lower, and middle; beings are six humans, devas, Brahmās, hell-beings, animals, and ghosts. By the fruits of good and evil deeds, beings take the births that are their due and experience pleasure or pain when their deeds ripen. (Canto 24:116–122).

#### Belief in rebirth

Buddhism firmly believes that beings are reborn according to their deeds. Manimekalai illustrates this through past-life links among Udhayakumaran, Manimekalai, Madhavi, and Sudhamathi.

Those who were Manimekalai’s sisters before are now her mother Madhavi and friend Sudhamathi (Cantos 9–10).

The woman Lakshmi is reborn as Manimekalai; her former husband Raghulan is reborn as Udhayakumaran, who pursues her.

Because Lakshmi once fed the sage Sādusakkara, she is reborn as the ascetic-rich Manimekalai, blessed with Amudhasurabhi, the bowl that ends hunger.

Āpūththiran, who first received the bowl, is reborn as Punniyarasan for his merit in feeding the poor.

#### Events shaped by Karma

When Udhayakumaran chases with Manimekalai, she hides in the crystal chamber. The deity Manimekala (who once saved Kovalan’s ancestor from shipwreck)

appears in the guise of a Pūhar woman during the Indra festival and carries Manimekalai away to Manipallava island so no harm befalls her the ripening of Manimekalai’s good karma.

Manimekalai narrates to Aravaṇa Aḍigaḷ and she realized her past life and received Amudhasurabhi. The monk, after worshipping the Buddha’s footprints on Pāthapankaya hill, explains the former births of Madhavi and Sudhamati as Vīrai and Tārāi, and consoles the grieving husband Tucchayan: “These things occur by each one’s karmic fruit.”

Disguised as Kāyaśaṇḍikai, Manimekalai feeds with Amudhasurabhi; Kāñchanan, mistaking her for his wife, later slays Udhayakumaran from ambush. The village deity Kanthirpāvai declares that his death by Kāñchanan’s sword was due to the fruit of fate (ūlvina).

The queen Rāsamādevī, blaming Manimekalai, tortures her; protected by mantras from the deity, Manimekalai remains unharmed. She reveals their past-life ties and gently teaches: everyone must taste the fruit of their karma; therefore, turn now to good deeds. She adds: if you love the “life” (soul), since we cannot know where it will enter by the channel of action, show compassion to all beings.

Quoted verse (transliteration) — “Cīraivitu Kāthai: 71–79”

➤ Yāngu irundu aḷuḍaṇai iḷaṅkō taṇakku?  
Pūṅkoṭi nallāy! Poruṇḍātu ceyḍaṇai  
Uṭarkku aḷuḍaṇaiyō? Uyirkku aḷuḍaṇaiyō?  
Uṭarkku aḷuḍaṇaiyēl uṇ makaṇ taṇnai  
Eḍuttup puṇaṅkāṭṭu iṭṭaṇar yārē?  
Uyirkku aḷuḍaṇaiyēl uyirpukum pukkil  
Seyappāṭṭu vinaiyāl terindu uṇarvu ariyatu  
Avvuyirkku aṇṇiṇai āyin āyṭoṭi  
Evvuyirkku āyiṇum iraṅkal vēṇṭum.

Sense:

- “From where do you weep for your son, O fair creeper-like lady?

Do you weep for the body, or for the life?

If for the body who took and laid it in the burning ground?

If for the life it enters some body by the channel of karma;

We cannot know where. Therefore, if you love that life,

Show compassion to every being, in whatever body it resides.”

Doctrine of Impermanence (Nilaiyāmai-k-kōtpātu)

All Indian religions accept impermanence; Jainism and Buddhism especially insist upon it. Sāttanār underscores impermanence whenever he teaches Buddhist ethics.

Sudhamati on the body's impermanence

When Udhayakumaran pursues Manimekalai into the crystal chamber, Sudhamathi instructs him on the body's transient, impure nature.

Quoted verse (transliteration) — “Palikkarai Pukka Kāthai: 112–121”

➤ Vinai viḷaṅgu taṭakkai viḷalōy kēṭṭi  
Vinaiyiṅ vantatu vinaikku viḷaiyāyatu  
Puṅaivaṅ nīṅgil pulālpurāt tiṭuvatu  
Mūppuvili uṭaiyatu tippini irukkai  
Parrin parritaṅ kurraḱ koḷkalam  
Purraṭaṅ karaviṅ cerraḱ cēkkai  
Avalak kavalai kaiyāraḷuṅkal  
Tavalā uḷḷam taṅpāl uṭaiyatu  
Makkaḷ yākkai ituveṅa uṅarndu...

Sense (line-by-line):

- The body is fashioned by deeds listen, strong one; It comes from action and serves as the field for action; Remove adornments and it reveals the stench of flesh; It has old age and death; it houses dire disease; It's the seat of attachment; a vessel of faults; Like a snake in its hole, anger has its lair here; It holds sorrow, anxiety, fainting, and tears; The mind, unceasing, clings to it; Such indeed is the human body—know this.

Cycle of death seen everywhere

Even seeing ascetics, the rich, new mothers, ignorant children, elders and youths alike carried off by Death in the cremation ground, people fail to grasp impermanence—thus laments the deity Manimekala to Sudhamathi.

Manimekalai instructs Udhayakumaran

Provoked by Chitrapati, Udhayakumaran approaches Manimekalai boldly. She teaches: birth, aging, sickness, and death define the body; it is a storehouse of suffering. Realizing this, she embraced the ascetic path.

Quoted verse (transliteration) — “Udhayakumaran Ambalam Pukka Kāthai: 136–139”

➤ Piṛattalum mūttalum piṅipaṭṭu iraṅkalam  
Iṛattalum uṭaiyatu iṭumpai-koḷkalam

Makkaḷ yākkai ituveṅa uṅarndu

Mikka nall-aṅam virumputal purindēṅ.

Sense:

- Birth, aging, sickness, lamentation, And death—this body is a vessel of affliction. Knowing human embodiment to be thus, I chose the pursuit of highest virtue.

Quoted verse (transliteration) — “Ciṛaisey Kāthai: 135–138”

➤ Iḷamaiyum nillādu yākkaiyum nillādu  
Vaḷaviya vāṅ-peruṅ celvamum nillādu  
Puttēḷ ulagam putalvarum tāṛar  
Mikka aṅamē viḷuttuṅaiyāvatu.

Sense:

- Youth does not last, nor the body; Even heaven's vast wealth does not endure; Neither gods, sons, nor wives abide forever; Only righteousness is the steadfast companion. Buddhism does not deny life by pressing impermanence; it warns us to refine life through virtue, for births continue as long as karma does. Doctrine of Moral Discipline (Aṅaṅeri-k-kōtpātu)

The Four Noble Truths (Nāṅku Vāymai)

Hearing of Kovalan's death at Madurai, Madhavi renounces dance and song and laments at the feet of Aravaṅa Aḱiḱaḷ. The monk teaches the Four Noble Truths suffering, cause, cessation, path—and detachment from clinging.

Quoted verse (transliteration) — “Ūr-alar Uraitha Kāthai: 64–67”

➤ Piṛantōr uṅuvatu perugiya tuṅpam  
Piṛavār uṅuvatu perum pēriṅpam  
Parrin varuvatu muṅṅatu piṅṅatu  
Aṅṅōr uṅuvatu aṅika.

Sense:

- The born meet growing sorrow; The unborn (freed from birth) meet supreme bliss; Clinging binds to past and future; Know that the un-attached attain release.

The Five Precepts (Aindu Cīlam)

1. Non-killing (kollaamai)
2. Non-stealing (kaḷḷāmai)
3. Avoiding sexual misconduct (piṅṅamaṅai virumpāmai)
4. Truthfulness (poyyāmai)
5. Abstaining from intoxicants (kaḷuṅṅāmai)

Non-killing and compassion

Expanding love becomes compassion care for all beings, not only one's kin. The Buddha lived this ideal. Sāttanār dramatizes it through Āpuththiran:

A deserted infant is suckled for seven days by a cow and later adopted by a Brahmin as Āpuththiran.

Seeing a cow tied for sacrifice, Āpuththiran secretly frees it and is beaten by priests. He rebukes them: the cow that grazes the grass of the common earth and gives sweet milk from birth—what anger have you against her? Buddhism's rejection of animal sacrifice shines here.

Abstaining from liquor and flesh

Sādhuvan, husband of Āthirai, is shipwrecked and captured by Nāgas. The Nāga chief offers him a maiden, liquor, and meat. Sādhuvan refuses and teaches:

Quoted verse (transliteration) — “Āthirai Piccaiṟṟa Kāthai: 84–90”

➤ Mayakkum kaḷḷum maṇṇuyir kōḷalum

Kayakkaru mākaḷ kaḍindanar kēḷāy

Piṟantavar cāṭalum iṟantavar piṟattalum

Uṟaṅkalum viḷittalum pōṅratu uṇmaiṟiṇ

Nall-aṟam ceyvōr nall-ulakaṭaiṭalum

All-aṟam ceyvōr aru-nara-kaṭaiṭalum

Uṇṇeṇa uṇarttalīṇ uravōr kaḷaintanar.

Sense:

- Hear this: the wise reject intoxicating liquor and the slaughter of living beings.

Birth and death follow each other like sleeping and waking.

Doers of virtue reach blessed realms;

Doers of evil descend to grievous hells.

Knowing this, the discerning abandon them (vice and cruelty).

## II. DISCUSSION

The three doctrines Karma, Impermanence, and Dharma are not presented as abstract philosophy but as lived experiences within the narrative of Manimekalai. The heroine's life becomes a canvas upon which Buddhist principles are painted.

Through Karma, the epic teaches accountability and the inevitability of consequences.

Through Impermanence, it educates readers about the futility of clinging to transient things.

Through Dharma, it prescribes a practical ethical code that fosters compassion and social welfare.

The integration of Buddhist thought into Tamil literature also reflects the cultural syncretism of the period. While Sanskrit Buddhist texts often remained philosophical treatises, Manimekalai localized these ideas in narrative poetry. This not only spread Buddhism in Tamil Nadu but also left a literary legacy that still inspires scholars today.

## III. CONCLUSION

Manimekalai is more than an epic; it is a moral and philosophical guide that transforms Buddhist doctrines into poetic narrative. By weaving the doctrines of Karma, Impermanence, and Dharma into the story of Manimekalai, Sīthalai Sāthanar ensured that Buddhist philosophy reached the Tamil populace in an accessible form. The epic demonstrates how literature can serve as a vehicle for ethical instruction, blending art with philosophy. In doing so, Manimekalai contributed significantly to the shaping of Tamil Buddhist identity and continues to stand as a testimony to the universal relevance of Buddhist thought.

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