

[Journey to Murugan](#)

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EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

Journey to Murugan

A sacred pilgrimage to the Arupadaiveedu, Lord Karttikeya's six renowned temples in the land of Tamil Saivism

Great photos of Murugan's six most revered temples

(Songs for each temple are linked below)

[Tiruppugal_Ganesha_Invocation](#)

The devotee who seeks the darshan of Lord Murugan, the Tamils' most beloved God, no doubt finds Him at all of His temples. But those who really want to get Murugan's attention set out on an unforgettable journey, one both within and without. For those who seek His blessings for the upward climb of kundalini, the aru-pa-dai-vee-du, meaning "six encampments, " is the pilgrimage of choice. The destinations of this journey are first Tirupparankundram, then Tiruchendur, followed by Palani, Swamimalai, Tiruttani and finally Palamuthirsolai. The fact that this sequence is far from geographically convenient is part of the austerity that comes with any true pilgrimage.

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, founder of Hinduism Today, sent a number of his monks on this sacred pilgrimage in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. In December, 2006, his successor, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, continued the tradition, sending three monks from his Hawaii monastery, including one of the magazine's editors, to South India for the pilgrimage. This Educational Insight has been developed from their collective experience. It contains spiritual and practical information on the pilgrimage to serve as inspiration for devotees of Lord Murugan to set out upon it and tips for a successful journey.

Skanda, as Murugan is called in the Vedas, was born of a red spark from Supreme God Siva's third eye. This Deity of the spiritual path is held in highest regard by the Tamil people, who call Him Murugan, meaning "beautiful." Thousands of His temples

dot the landscape of South India and Sri Lanka--and in modern times, everywhere the Tamil people have migrated, including England, Germany, Fiji, Australia, America, Canada, Malaysia and France. Of all the Murugan temples in Tamil Nadu, the six in this pilgrimage are most revered. They were collectively immortalized by Saint Nakkirar in his second-century song Tiru-murug-arru-padaai, hailed as one of the most important works of Tamil Sangam literature. And they were given special renown in the songs of saints Arunagirinathar, Kumaraguruparar and other luminaries.

A lyrical narrative, both philosophical and theological, Tirumurugarrupadai was instrumental in propagating Murugan worship in its time. Well known today, it is often sung by devotees as a hymn of protection. Saint Nakkirar enunciates a concept central to the Saiva Siddhanta theology of South India, that in the act of spiritual liberation, God's initiative is as intense and indispensable as that of the devotee. Nakkirar invokes the grace of Murugan to take the initiative and shower grace upon the seeker who visits His six abodes.

The significance goes beyond Saint Nakkirar's having woven the temples into his enchanting poem in specified order. There is metaphysical meaning, too. Yogis of yore determined that each temple stimulates a specific chakra in the subtle body of man: Tirupparankundram lights a fire in the muladhara chakra governing memory at the base of the spine. Tiruchendur moves the next chakra, svadhishtana, below the navel, governing reason. Palani animates the manipura chakra of willpower at the solar plexus. Swamimalai spins the heart chakra, anahata, the center of direct cognition. Tiruttani opens the vishuddha chakra of divine love at the throat, and Palamuthirsolai electrifies the third eye of divine sight, ajna chakra.

Nowadays, each temple is thronged by thousands, or tens of thousands, of devotees every day, and many more during annual festivals. Multitudes of sincere seekers of every generation since Nakkirar have wended their way through the life-transforming experience of the arupadaiveedu pilgrimage. At the outset of Tirumurugarrupadai, Nakkirar assures us, "With a heart imbued with love and purity, and a will tuned to do His bidding in virtuous acts, if you seek His abodes, then shall be fulfilled all your cherished desires and objects."

Pakthiyal Nan Unnai Ratnagiri
Tirupparankundram

Mount of Beauty

The devotee in search of Lord Murugan's grace begins the fortnight-long six-temple pilgrimage at Madurai, the famous temple city, an ancient capital of the Pandya kings and hub of South Indian art, literature, architecture and sculpture for millennia. This "Athens of the Orient " was the seat of the Tamil Sangams, producing some of the finest philosophical treatises and exquisite, heart-melting devotional poetry during a golden age of Tamil civilization.

We arrive in Madurai via a short flight from Chennai, though it is more common to travel the 460 kilometers by overnight train or bus. Driving north into the city from Madurai's modest airport, the pilgrim is blessed with the sight of Tirupparankundram to the West. This hill, easily seen perched 550 feet above the otherwise flat landscape, is a massive granite rock at which Lord Murugan's first encampment is situated.

Madurai is given life by the famous Meenakshi-Sundareshvara temple, which lies at its center. This vast citadel, rebuilt by the Nayak kings between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, thrives with the constant bustle of hundreds of thousands of worshipers every day. Lodgings of all grades are abundant in the city, most of them located conveniently near the temple.

Traditionally, the devotee visits a Ganesha shrine at the inception of the aru-padai-vedu pilgrimage. Our Gurudeva advised going to the massive, obstacle-removing Ganesha, called Mukkuruni Vinayagar, inside the Meenakshi-Sundareshvara temple itself. So, after getting settled, we depart for the east entrance of Madurai's massive temple complex.

Resolving to follow the strictest protocol on our yatra, we go only to the temple's Ganesha shrine, respectfully resisting the powerful pull to have darshan at the main Siva and Shakti shrines. From this moment on, until the pilgrimage is complete, we will visit no temples or shrines other than the six prescribed Murugan temples. Proceeding to the kodimaram (flagpole) and turning right before the main shrine, we wend our way through the labyrinthine complex and soon stand before the ten-foot-tall murti of Mukkuruni Vinayagar. The priest attending the shrine performs a short arati on our behalf. This is a quiet area, and devotees nearby are meditating

on the Lord of Obstacles. Sitting with eyes closed, we beseech His inner assistance with the sacred trek we are about to undertake to His brother's abodes. Sounds of all kinds overwhelm our ears: priests chanting, bells ringing, votaries singing, children playing and the shuffling feet of countless devotees streaming by as they move from shrine to shrine for darshan.

The first day of our pilgrimage now complete, Lord Murugan's first abode is on our minds' horizon. Arising early the next morning, we drive just seven kilometers southwest to Tirupparankundram, a large hill and favorite resort of Murugan, extolled as a mount of beauty in Saint Nakkirar's poem. In fact, this is where the poet wrote his famous hymn. Ratna Navaratnam tells us in *Karttikeya, The Divine Child*, "The beautiful setting of this hill with its lotus ponds, trailing carpets of flowers and swarms of bees and water fronts are described in *Tirumurugarrupadai*, " which in Tamil means "Holy Guide to Lord Murugan."

The Tirupparankundram Arulmigu Sri Subrahmanya Swami Tirukkoyil lies at the foot of the hill, on the north side. Entering the temple through the tall, ornately carved and colorful gopuram, we ascend steps leading through pillared halls, rich with sculpture and art, a windfall of being near the central hub of Madurai. We chose Markali, the holiest month of the Tamil calendar, for our pilgrimage. This is the same time when Ayyappaswami devotees from across South India perform their annual yatra to Sabarimalai in Kerala. Many of them follow the strict practice of paying their respects at every temple along the way, so this popular temple is brimming with excited, black- and orange-clad followers of Ayyappaswami.

The entire cave-like shrine, including the murtis, is carved right out of the side of the granite hill. The temple precincts grow tighter and tighter as devotees ascend toward the inner sanctum. Squeezing together with hundreds of others, winding their way through a maze of metal railings designed to keep everyone flowing along in an organized fashion, worshipers arrive at the inner sanctum. We experience an odd juxtaposition of nearness and swiftness in this process. Moving single-file past the shrine, we find ourselves a few feet from Lord Murugan--and for a mere moment, we can almost reach out and touch Him.

Murugan is known as Subrahmanya Swami at Tirupparankundram. Our guide, a boy who attends the temple's pathashala, explains that this is the famed site where, according to legend, Murugan married Devayanai after defeating the demon Surapadman. This marriage symbolizes the devotee's uniting with God after

transcending his own lower nature. The rock-cut shrine depicts the story of the procession of Gods, seers, men and animals who came to this mount to witness the mystical wedding. Holding His vel, or lance, Murugan is enshrined with Devayanai at His side, as well as Sage Narada, who performed the wedding. Above are the Sun and Moon; below are goats, cocks, elephants and peacocks. There are shrines on either side for Karpaga Vinayagar, Durga, Sivalingam, Perumal (Vishnu), as well as Saint Nakkirar. We are surprised to find that Durga's shrine is the center-most, intimating that it could have been the original sanctum of the temple.

Our guide informs us that in Murugan's shrine abhi-shekam is not performed to the main rock-hewn murti, but only to His silver vel. In honor of our visit, the head priest takes hold of Murugan's vel and performs a brief but powerful abhishekam to it with milk and vibhuti, or holy ash, and then deftly packages the ash and gives it to us to take away as prasadam. Descending the steps as quickly as we came up, we discover a small, pillared hall off to the side that is a perfect place to sit and meditate a while before leaving.

What was initiated here will grow and blossom through the rest of the pilgrimage. The experience burns deeply into our souls, but little prepares us for what we are to experience at Murugan's seaside abode.

Praise to Lord Murugan of Tiruchendur (1)
Praise to Lord Murugan of Tiruchendur (2)
Tiruchendur

Abode of Fulfillment

Deep in the south of Tamil Nadu lies the famed spiritual center called Tiruchendur. Trains and buses ply their way incessantly from Madurai. We take the early morning train to Tirunelveli, and then a 41-km taxi ride to Tiruchendur, winding through the traditional rural landscape, unchanged for centuries. Driving by rice paddies and groves of palmyra and banana, we feel we are journeying back in time.

Pilgrims approach the Arulmigu Sri Subrahmanya Swami Tirukkoyil via a magnificent, covered, open-air walkway that extends 750 meters from the town's

center. It is flanked by an overwhelming menagerie of stalls selling garlands, fruits and other offerings, religious music, colorful cloth and objects for the home shrine. Approaching slowly, we soon spot the temple's grand, nine-tiered mela gopuram. This white stone tower displaying an enormous blue vel is a striking landmark, visible to sailors from miles away at sea and beckoning devotees from all around. This west entrance, we are told, is only opened during the temple's annual festival.

Catching the smell of sea air, we know we are near. Exiting the corridor, we take in the full view of the seashore, the temple perched on a gentle slope only a few meters to the left. Here the salty waters of the Gulf of Mannar lap against a broad, sandy beach where pilgrims bathe in the sea before entering the temple. The primary entrance to the temple is here, facing south. Called the Shanmuga Vilasa mandapam, it is an ornately carved, 124-pillar hall standing as a testament to the craftsmanship that prevailed in the era when this temple was built. We are told the temple was originally built of sandstone, thus the name Tiruchendur, "Holy Red City." When that eroded away, it was rebuilt in granite. Priests are everywhere. We speak with a few in hopes of making arrangements to have darshan of Murugan at tomorrow's early morning abhishekam.

In the month of Markali, worship begins at Tiruchendur at 3Ēam. We arise before dawn and take the short walk to the temple. The dimly lit sanctuary is already crowded with devotees. At 5:30 we are ushered to the ocean-facing main shrine. We are three of fifteen people paying Rs 200 (us\$5) for tickets allowing us to sit right before the sanctum.

The granite statue is Bala-su-brah-man-ya-swa-mi, the pious young ascetic. Several paintings in the temple describe the legend: Murugan encamped at Tiruchendur before and after defeating the demon Surapadman and his malevolent band. Kneeling by a small Lingam, He worshiped His Father, Siva, seeking forgiveness for his necessary but regrettable act of killing. Devas arrived in multitudes to thank Murugan for saving them from the demons' wrath, and He quickly stood up to bless them. It is this position in which the murti was created, holding flowers in one hand and a mala of rudraksha beads in the other, utterly absorbed in adoration of God Siva.

We sit humbly before the Deity, a striking image coated from head to toe with sandalwood paste. The priest deftly removes the fragrant covering and proceeds to pour oil, panchamritam and liter after liter of milk--so much milk, the ablution

seems to last an eternity. When milk is poured, this glorious murti turns evenly white all over, revealing details in the dark stone and evoking intense devotion among the priests and devotees. The final ablution is with vibhuti, holy ash. The priest carves out a beaming smile for Murugan in the white coating. This evokes a spectrum of emotions among the devotees--from energetic bhakti to delicate smiles and quiet laughter. We find that this deeply devotional rite has connected us to Murugan in a new way. A half-hour after the puja began, it is complete, and we are quickly ejected back out into the crush of devotees streaming by the shrine for a glimpse of Murugan in the day's regal attire.

Not far from the main sanctum, we come upon the south-facing shrine of the utsava murti. This bronze image, which is paraded around the temple during festivals, is so bright it looks as if its composition could be mostly gold. We learn from a fascinating collection of paintings displayed in the third prakaram that Dutch invaders arrived in the 17th century and stole the precious murti. Encountering a massive thunderstorm at sea, the plunderers grew fearful, believing their crime had cursed them, and heaved the booty overboard. The Nayak king who patronized the temple at the time instructed his local representative, Vada-ma-lai-appa Pillai, to have a new murti made. In the meantime, Lord Subrahmanyam appeared to Vada-ma-lai-appa in a dream, indicating the exact spot where the murti lay. Men were sent out in ships to recover it. As foretold in the dream, a lime floating in the water and a kite bird flying directly above marked the Deity's location on the sea floor. Retrieving the murti, they returned it to the temple. But the temple's hereditary priesthood refused the king's order to welcome the desecrated image. The king, adamant that the Deity be restored to its respected position, commissioned a separate family of Adisaiva priests to reinstall it and conduct the daily rites. To this day, that same clan of Adisaivas operates the shrine, completely independent of the other shrines and activities at the temple.

One afternoon we visit Nalikkinaru, the fresh-water well only meters from the shore, where Murugan is said to have cleaned His vel. Fed by an underground spring, it never dries up, even in severe drought. The water is believed to heal ailments of all kinds.

On our third day, we rise just before the Sun. Making our way to the temple, we enjoy the morning fragrances as the town awakes and prepares for its day: fresh dosai, hot sambar, sweet rose milk. The bliss permeating this town is amazing. Every time we stop and stand quietly, all we can feel is this sublimity. All here rings with a happy contentedness, a feeling that everything is all right, right now. Perhaps it's the location at the seaside, the clean air or the presence of the playful child

Murugan that lends a sweetness and mellowness to everyone and everything at Tiruchendur.

Hundreds of Ayyappaswami's pilgrims on their way to Kerala are bathing in the ocean in anticipation of the sun's imminent rising. A peacock, perched royally atop the gopuram of the Shanmuga Vilasam, calls out. Is he the same one we saw there at dusk last night? Kites circle overhead just offshore, bringing to mind the story of the Dutch and the utsava murti. Devotees are gathered out on the rocks, others on the beach, still others in an open-air mandapam abutting the temple. Cows saunter through the dispersed crowd; pilgrims like us touch them for blessings. Goats and dogs, young and old, and one cat, meander among pilgrims as the rising Sun marks the new day's beginning.

After darshan of Lord Murugan in the sanctum, we continue our exploration of this cavernous edifice. Vast halls and corridors have been added over centuries. One of the delights is to roam these passageways as the sea breeze blows through. This is a grand temple, a true work of art and devotion in granite. It gets quieter and quieter as ones goes 'round the second prakaram and further out into the third. There are solitary hideaways for private meditation. On the north side of the third prakaram we encounter a shrine for Vishnu carved out of the rock itself, with a monolithic, larger-than-life, reclining murti.

Continuing our pradakshina, we notice two men working quietly inside a small, granite-walled chamber. They are laboriously grinding sandalwood on a big, wet, granite slab, slightly funnel-shaped toward one end to collect the paste.

The use of sandalwood is famous here at Tiruchendur. According to Sivakamasundari Shanmugasundaram, reporting for Hinduism Today in 2002, the temple spends about \$150,000 per year for this aromatic, yellowish heartwood. While sandalwood is a primary sacrament used abundantly in Hindu worship, doubtless no other temple in India buys as much of it. Huge amounts are ground fresh daily right here as has been done for millennia. Applied to the Deity during puja, the cooling, fragrant paste is then given as prasadam to devotees who lavishly smear it on their face, arms and body, to soothe, to bless, to heal.

For the 30,000 devotees who visit every day, this ocean-side temple of magic

radiates the peace that remains after all desires have been fulfilled. The serenity makes an durable mark in the mind, concealing any hint of the intensity that awaits us at Murugan's next encampment.

Praise to Lord Murugan of Palani - Nathavithugal
Praise to Lord Murugan of Palani - Varadamanini
Praise to Lord Murugan of Palani - Palanimalai