Three Minutes

Life is short.
Pray to Him hard.

mincinn nilai ila
man uyir AkkaigaL
ennumiDattu iRai
unnumin nIrE
(nammAzhvAr, tiruvAimozhi 1-2-2)

svAmi nammAzhvAr is called vEdam
tamizh seyda mARan (mARan who
did the veda-s in tamizh) because he
gave the four vast and complex
veda-s in four short and sweet
tamizh prabandham-s. Among them
the final hymn (carama prabandham)
is tiruvAimozhi which is regarded as
the essence of sAma veda. In this
particular verse, nammAzhvAr is
preaching (upadesham) to take the
refuge at the Lord's lotus feet
immediately. He makes it lucid by
giving a comparison of lightning
(minnal) to the lives of all sentient
(cetana).

VisiShTa advaitam (qualified non-
dualism), the shrIvaiShNava school
of philosophy as propagated by
svAmi rAmAnuja, is based on three
distinct realities: (tattva trayam) -
sentient (cetana or jIvAtmA), non
sentient or matter (acetana or
prakR^iti), and Lord (Ishvara or
paramAtmA). First, we must
understand that the individual souls
are different from the temporary
body where they reside in. The body
is a matter like a piece of wood. The
soul (AtmA) enters the body at birth
and leaves at death, yet it remains
unchanged before and after it enters
the body.

Lord KR^iShNa, in bhagavat gltA,
says that a soul never dies, but the
body does. The soul wears bodies
like a person wears clothes, getting
into a new dress and discarding the
old ones. The dress that the soul
wears next depends on the
wardrobe, which in turn, depends on
what is already bought and stored
based on the soul's affordability and
taste.

The law of accumulated reaction to
activities (karma) dictates the path of
the souls. The type of body and the
quality of life is determined on the
accumulated pious deeds (puNya)
and sinful actions (pApa). That is the
generalization of the perpetual
birth/death cycle (samsAra). For
bacteria, the life is in terms of
minutes, for human beings, it is
around 100 years. One can't even
imagine the number of lives one might have had since the dawn of the universe, let alone the universe itself being created and destroyed infinitely.

Karma is generated only in human life and so, humans need to lead life responsibly. They should be able to distinguish between temporary items (anitya vastu) and permanent values (nitya vastu). Due to this illusion (mAyA, bhramai), the soul becomes deeply attached to the body and mistakenely identifies itself as the body. Because of this erroneous identity (sarIra Atma bhramam), the soul is clouded with the body's pleasures. In that process, the soul gets entangled with various vices causing it to commit more sins and thus, entraps itself into further bondage.

Here, AzhvAr hints that our life is just a speck in the total time spectrum. Lightning is so bright, powerful, and jolting. But, how long is its life? Our life span is also similarly tiny. As Kulashekhara AzhvAr put it, our mere presence in this earth is sufficient proof that in the last birth (janma) we didn't recite Lord's name (Bhagavat nAmA). Think for a moment, that you are reading this now because of your wardrobe (karma) and taste (spiritual interest).

nammAzhvAr says, while you still have that conscious mind, make use of your current human life! Meditate deeply and take refuge at the lotus feet of shrIman nArAyaNa. In the case of lightning, you know its life span, but no one knows about the length of our stay on this earth.

In summary,

1. **Body and soul are different.** Body is engaged with sensuous pleasures, while the soul craves for the service to the Lord.

2. **Life is too short** to be wasted on useless things. Hold on to the Lord's feet, immediately.

3. **Cultivate the spiritual mindset.** One may try to postpone the meditation on the Lord, but there is no guarantee of life or mindset afterwards.

4. **Discriminative knowledge** on permanent and temporary pleasures is essential (nitya anitya vastu vivekam). Concentrate on eternal happiness (mukti) rather than temporary pleasure (bhukti).

Catch, then, oh catch the transient hour; Improve each moment as it flies; Life's a short summer, man a flower; He dies - alas how soon he dies.  
(Samuel Johnson)