

Sri Ramanuja (ஸ்ரீ இராமானுஜர்):

Sri Ramanuja was born in ஸ்ரீபெரும்புதூர் (*Sri Perumbudur*) near Chennai on திருவாதிரை (*Thiruvaadirai Nakshatram*) in the month of சித்திரை (*Chitthirai*) to a Vedic Brahmana by name *Aasuri Kaesava* and his wife *Kantimati* by the blessings of the Lord Sri Parthasarathi of *Thiruvallikaeni* in answer to their sincere devotional prayers. Sri Ramanuja lived a long life of 120 years between 1017 to 1137 A.D, according to traditional accounts. Although he took early Vedic teachings under the guidance of one Yadavaprakaasa, he had his differences with the latter's philosophy. The teacher felt threatened by the deep intellect of the astute student and plotted to kill him during a pilgrimage to the North. Sri Ramanuja was alerted to this when they were half way up the journey. He managed to escape undetected. On the way back while he was lost in the woods in the dark night he was aided by a hunter couple who showed him the way and personally escorted him back to *Kanchipuram*. The next dawn he found himself in the outskirts of *Kanchipuram* near *Sri Varadaraja's* temple and the strange couple that helped him through the dark night were no longer to be seen. When his teacher returned from his pilgrimage, he was surprised to find Sri Ramanuja again attending his classes.

After a while, Sri Ramanuja sought the advice of one Thirukkacchi Nambi also known as Kanchi Purna, whom Sri Ramanuja admired and respected for his deep devotion to the Lord. On the latter's advise, Sri Ramanuja began doing service to *Sri Varadaraja* by drawing water from the well and bringing it up for the Lord's *Thirumanjanam*. Yamunaacharya, also known as Sri Alavandar of *Srirangam*, the grandson of Sri Nathamuni (the editor of the *Prabhandam*) came to hear about the intellect and deep devotion of Sri Ramanuja and sought Sri Ramanuja out to take on the leadership role of the Sri Vaishnavas after him in *Srirangam*. However, Sri Alavandar passed away before this would materialize.

The spiritual earning of Sri Ramanuja was growing more intensely at this time and he was paying less attention to worldly matters. He wanted Kanchi Purna to become his spiritual acharya. Kanchi Purna declined to accede to his request in all his humility saying that he was born of a lower class unlike Sri Ramanuja. Sri Ramanuja was however above all petty differences based on caste and for him what counted was devotion to the Lord. But through Thirukkacchi Nambi who had direct abilities to communicate with Lord *Sri Varadaraja* because of his *bhakti*, he learnt that the Lord wanted him to be

initiated by Sri Periya Nambi also known as Maha Purna, another disciple of Sri Yamunaacharya.

While Sri Ramanuja was on his way to meet Periya Nambi, the latter was also on his way from *Srirangam* to meet Sri Ramanuja to try and convince him to take on the leadership of his devotees there. They both met at *Madhurantakam* where Sri Ramanuja got initiated into the Sri Vaishnava's fold by Sri Periya Nambi. He came to learn all about the Azhwars' works through Sri Periya Nambi. However this period was abruptly ended since the wife of Sri Ramanuja who had high caste mentality, verbally abused Sri Periya Nambi's wife on a petty matter. She also blamed Sri Ramanuja for her lot in life, whereby having wedded to him she had lost all "her high caste dignity and customs". Sri Ramanuja felt distressed having caused insult to his guru and his wife, who both left Kanchipuram quite abruptly. He resolved to leave the life of a householder. When his wife had returned to her parents' home, he took to *Sannyaasa* with Lord *Varadaraja* as guru through Kanchi Purna. The Lord gave him the name *Yatiraja*.

For a while Sri Ramanuja set up a small monastery in *Kanchipuram* and lived there teaching Vedanta. It was at this time strangely enough that his old teacher Yadava, disenchanted and regretting his own old ways, became a disciple of Sri Ramanuja. Subsequently, at the earnest request of the devotees in *Srirangam*, Sri Ramanuja returned to *Srirangam*. After learning many Sri Vaishnava texts, he sought to learn the true import of the ரஹஸ்யத்ரய (*Rahasyatraya* or three secrets) from Sri Thirukkotiyyur Nambi who was the exponent at the time and who was also a former disciple of Yamunaacharya. Apparently Sri Ramanuja had to visit him eighteen times before the latter would instruct him about the true import of the three "*mantras*". Despite the fact that his acharya had placed an injunction against him from revealing the secret meaning to others, the very first act of the broad minded Ramanuja, was to get on top of the temple tower there and announce to everyone about the *mantras* and their secret meaning. When reprimanded by his acharya, Ramanuja told him that he would be more than happy to suffer all the consequences of his action since all others would derive benefit and reach the Lord.

Sri Ramanuja became particularly inspired by Sri NammAzhwar's *Thiruvaimozhi*. The philosophic truths expressed by the Azhwars in their *paasurams* became the basis of the philosophy of Visishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism) advanced by Sri Ramanuja. His *Bhashya* (commentary) of the

Vedanta Sutras of Sage Vyaasa came to be known as ஸ்ரீ பாஷ்யம் (*Sri_Bhashya*). Sri Ramanuja popularized the poetic verses of the Azhwars amongst his followers.. He himself was very fond of *Thiruppavai* and was called *Thiruppavai jeer*. He encouraged his disciples to write commentaries on *Thiruvaimozhi*. He also instituted the recitation of *Divya Prabandham* in the temples during regular daily worship as well as during *Utsava* times. In addition special, *Adhyayana Utsavams* were held on yearly basis for recitation of the *Prabandhams* and the Vedas giving both an equal status. Thus in Sri Vaishnava tradition, all teachers came to take the divine works (*Divya Sookties*) of the Azhwars as *pramaanam* (means of valid knowledge) like the Vedas and the Upanishads.

When Sri Ramnuja came to settle in *Srirangam*, Periya Koil Nambi was in charge of *Srirangam* temple. Eventually he handed over the temple to Sri Ramanuja's hands and became an ardent devotee of Sri Ramanuja himself. He was given a special name by Sri Ramanuja and was called *Amudanar* because of the sweet way in which he used to recite the *Prabandham*. He wrote a hundred and eight verses in praise of Sri Ramanuja and the Azhwars. This is called இராமானுச நூற்றந்தாதி (*Ramananuja Nootrandadhi*). These verses have also been made as part of the *Divya Prabandham* bringing the total verses to four thousand by the Acharyas that came after Sri Ramanuja.

To honour Sri Ramanuja, the benedictory verse on the Azhwars usually chanted before recitation of the *Prabandham* includes Sri Ramanuja (Yateendra) along with all the Azhwars.

பூதம் ஸரச்ச மஹதாஹ்வய- பட்டநாத
ஸ்ரீ பக்திஸார- குலசேகர-யோஹிவாஹாந்
பக்தாங்க்ரிரேணு-பரகால-யதீந்த்ர மிஸ்ராந்
ஸ்ரீமத் பராங்குச முநிம் ப்ரணதோஸ்மி நித்யம்

“I bow daily to the holy feet of Bhuta (Bhudat Azhwar), Saras (Poikai Piraan), Mahadavya (Pey Azhwar), Bhattanada (Peri Azhwar), Sri Bhaktisaara (Thirumazhisai Piraan), Kulashaekara (Kulashaekara Azhwar), one who rode on the shoulders of Muni (ThiruppaanAzhwar), Bhaktaangrirenu (Thondaradippodi Azhwar), Parakaala (Thirumangai Azhwar), Yateendra (Sri Ramanuja) and Srimad Parankusa Muni (Madhurakavi Azhwar and Sri NammAzhwar)”.

Sri Ramanuja is known and respected for his philosophical work even among the Western scholars. Karl Potter who is the chief editor of the massive *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* project writes as follows about Sri Ramanuja and the Visishtadvaita philosophy.

Ramanuja, we have seen, elevates God to the supreme position in his ontology and elevates *bhakti* to the supreme position among the paths. In the last analysis, it is God's grace alone that can obtain freedom for us. Then what is the function of philosophy? Apparently Ramanuja takes philosophy to be not the resolver of doubts, but rather the path of knowledge itself. This implies that doubts are to be encouraged, as they lead one to embark upon the path of knowledge.... Visishtadvaita grows into a fervently devotional religion, and in Srivaisnavism of the present day, an exceedingly influential sect in parts of the South, Ramanuja's personality and organization of ritual comes to be seen as more important than his philosophical writings. With its emphasis on *bhakti* and *prapatti*, this development of Ramanuja's tradition can be said to represent one of the main arteries through which philosophy reached down to the masses, and it may be that Visishtadvaita is today the most powerful philosophy in India in terms of numbers of adherents, whether they know themselves by that label or not. Visishtadvaita is not, however, the philosophy which the West associates with India, nor is it the avowed position of the large proportion of nineteenth-and twentieth-century professional philosophers in Indian universities. (Potter, Karl, 1963: *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*. Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice Hall, pp.252–253).