

The Glory of Srī Thondaradippodi Āzhwār

ஸ்ரீ தொண்டரடிப்பொடி ஆழ்வார் வைபவம்

He was born in திருமண்டங்குடி (*Thirumandangudi*), as the *amsa* (incarnation) of the Lord's Ornament *Vaijayanthi* on the auspicious கேட்டை (*Kéttai Nakshatram*) day in the month of மார்கழி (*Mārgazhi*). He was called *Vipra Nārāyana*.

All his life, he served the Lord of Srīrangam making flower garlands and maintaining a *nandavanam* (flower garden) on the banks of Cauvery River. Srī Thirumangai Āzhwār who was the youngest of all the Āzhwārs and who built the temple wall for Srīrangam took great care not to destroy or damage the flower garden maintained by this Āzhwār. Even today one can see and visit this garden on the banks of Cauvery River in Srīrangam, which is named after the Āzhwār. Both his works are on the Lord of Srīrangam. One is திருப்பள்ளியெழுச்சி (*Thiruppalli Yezhucchi*) which is to wake the Lord like in *Suprabhātam* and the other is a beautiful sweet garland of 45 verses called திருமாலை (*Thirumālai*).

His story depicts the human condition vividly and shows how the transformation comes only due to the unconditional grace (*Nirhētuka Kripa*) of the Lord, which frees one from the grips of human frailties. It used to be said that in *Thiruppalli Yezhucchi*, Āzhwār wakes up the Lord and in *Thirumālai* the Lord awakens the Āzhwār. Āzhwār refers to this in his *Thirumālai*

சூதனாய்க் கள்வனாகித் தூர்த்தரோடிசைந்த காலம்
மாதரார் கயற்கணென்னும் வலையுட்பட்டமுந்துவேனை
போதரே என்று சொல்லிப் புந்தியுட்புகுந்து தன் பால்
ஆதரம் பெருக வைத்த அழகனூர் அரங்கமன்றே.

16. *Thirumālai*

"The residence of the beautiful Lord, who "beckoned me towards Him", me, who was used to gambling and stealing other's possessions considering them as mine as well as indulging in physical pleasures caught in the net of the sensuous women with fish shaped eyes – drawing me out and helping to grow my love of Him, is indeed Arangam".

He renamed himself as "தொண்டரடிப்பொடி" which literally means, "dust at the feet of the devotees of the Lord." The single invocatory verse தனியன் on this Āzhwār, glorifies this as follows,

கோத³ண்டே ஜ்யேஷ்டநக்ஷத்ரே மண்டங்கு³டி³ புரோத³ப⁴வம்
சோளோர்வ்யாம் வந்மாலாம்ஶம் ப⁴க்தபத்³ரேணுமாஸ்ரயே

"I seek Srī Thondaradippodi who was the incarnate of the *vanamāla* of Srīman Nārāyana, born in the *Dhanur* month, on *Jyéshta nakshatram* in *Thirumandangudi* in the *Chōzha désa*"

The reawakened Āzhwār's steadfastness of purpose is revealed by the prayer that he makes to the Lord in *Thiruppalli Yezhucci* in the last verse.

தொடையொத்த துளவமும் கூடையும் பொலிந்து
 தோன்றிய தோள் தொண்டரடிப்பொடி யென்னும்
 அடியனை*அளியனென்றருளி உன்னடியார்க்கு
 ஆட்படுத்தாய்! பள்ளியெழுந்தருளாயே

10. *Thiruppalli Yezucchi*

Āzhwār gives up everything except his flower basket. Waking up the Lord of Srīrangam, who is in *Yoga nidra* (meditative sleep) gently with beautiful melodious verses, he submits his only request saying that if He considers this Thondaradippodi as somebody with true love and one who is fit to be protected (அளியன் - means காக்கப்படத்தக்கவன்), make him a devotee of the *Bhāgavatās*. Āzhwār does not ask for *Moksham* (liberation), and not even *Bhagavat kainkaryam* (service to the Lord) but only *Bhāgavatha Kainkaryam* (service to the devotees of the Lord), similar to Srī Nammāzhwār தொண்டர் தொண்டர் தொண்டர் தொண்டன் சட்கோபன் (Thiruvāimozhi 7-1-11). Even in his other work *Thirumālai*, Āzhwār's *Bhāgavatha kainkarya Nishtai* is clearly evident from his words "the leftover food of a devotee of the Lord becomes a highly purifying *prasādam*" ("போனகம் செய்த சேடம் தருவரேல் புனிதமன்றே") (41. *Thirumālai*), as well as when he defines himself in the last verse, as one who is engaged in the service of making flower garlands of *Tulasi* for the Lord and who remained innately steadfast in the service of the devotees of the Lord ("துளவத் தொண்டாய தொல் சீர் தொண்டரடிப்பொடி") (45. *Thirumālai*)

To read, listen, recite or sing the verses of his famous *Thirumālai* will move one to tears and enrich the love of the Lord. Āzhwār sings the glories of Srī Bhagavān's nāmās (the Lord's names) in *Thirumālai*. The content of the 45 verses of this *prabandham* can be considered as follows. Āzhwār describes the blessings that he obtained from the Lord (தாம் பெற்ற பேற்றை பேசுகிறார்) in the first three verses. From the 4th to the 14th verse, Āzhwār gives upadēsham (advice) to others. In the next 10 verses (from the 15th to the 24th), Āzhwār describes the good that the Lord had bestowed on him unconditionally (நிர்வேஷதுகமாக விளைத்த நன்மைகள்). In the next 10 verses (from the 25th to the 34th), Āzhwār declares to the Lord his akinchanyatvam (absolute want or inability, கைமுதல் இல்லாமை). Verses 35th to the 37th describe Āzhwār's earnest thirst for the Lord's grace. 38th verse is the Charamaslōkam (the essential message) for this *prabandham*. Verses 39th to the 44th describe the greatness of the true devotees of the Lord who had surrendered to Him. In the last 45th verse, Āzhwār describes how the Lord got rid of all the obstacles from him and declares clearly that the Lord's joy is the ultimate goal for him.

Srī Periyavācchān Pillai's Vyākhyānam (commentary) of this work is indeed superb and unique and brings out the deep beautiful gems and pearls of meaning that this *prabandham* has. Srī Periyavācchān Pillai in his introduction to his commentary on *Thirumālai* makes several interesting observations. The evidence for the greatness of Thiru nāmasamkeerthanam (reciting the holy names of the Lord) is seen in Srī Sahasranāmam. The latter begins with one of the questions in its introduction.

கிம் ஜபந் முச்யதே ஜந்துர் ஜன்ம ஸம்ஸார ப³ந்த⁴நாத்

(Srī Sahasranāmam –3)

"By reciting and repeating what, the sentient being gets liberated from the knots of the worldly life?"

In the *Phalasruti* section, which comes at the end, it states

வாஸாதே³வாஸ்ரயோ மர்த்யோ வாஸாதே³வபராயண:
ஸர்வபாபவிஶாத்³தா⁴த்மா யாதி ப்ரஹ்ம ஸநாதநம்

(Srī Sahasranāmam –117)

"The human being who seeks Vāsudēva and considers Him alone as the goal and the means, gets freed from all unrighteous *karmās* and attains the ancient and eternal Brahman"

In between these two statements, comes the actual Sahasranāmam (the thousand names of the Lord) indicating its greatness. Āzhwār however indulges in Thiru nāmasamkeerthanam for its own sake (*swayam prayōjanam*).

The beautiful *Thirumālai* starts with these two verses.

காவலிற் புலனை வைத்துக் கலிதன்னைக் கடக்கப் பாய்ந்து
நாவலிட்டுழிதருகின்றோம் நமன்தமர் தலைகள் மீதே
மூவுல குண்டுமிழ்ந்த முதல்வ! நின் நாமம் கற்ற*
ஆவலிப்புடைமை கண்டாய் அரங்கமா நகருளானே!

1. *Thirumālai*

"O the Primal Lord! The ancient cause! Who swallowed and protected all the worlds from extinction during the Pralaya (deluge and destruction) and brought them out again during creation and who resides in the hallowed city of Srīrangam! Take a look, because of our pride of learning your Thiru nāmās (names), despite the uncontrolled senses, going beyond the grips of the hosts of sins, we are walking over the heads of Yama and his attendants, shouting slogans of victory."

பச்சைமாமலைபோல் மேனி பவளவாய் கமலச்செங்கண்
அச்சுதா அமரரேரே ஆயர்தம் கொழுந்தே! என்னும்
இச்சுவைத் தவிர யான்போய் இந்திரலோகம் ஆஞும்
அச்சுவைப் பெறினும் வேண்டேன் அரங்கமா நகருளானே!

2 *Thirumālai*

"O the Lord of holy Srīrangam. I prefer the delight of uttering your holy name, calling you -- "O Achyutā, with the form resembling the great green mountain, with lotus eyes and coral like lips;

Lord of the eternal attendants and the gem of the cowherds. " to all the pleasures of the eternal world even if they were conferred upon me".

Āzhwār in the first verse indicates that the Lord's names are purifying in nature (*pāvanam*). In the second verse, Āzhwār points to the sweetness of the Lord's names and how that becomes the end in itself. The reason for this sequence is that unless one gets rid of the fear from Yama, one cannot enjoy the sweetness of the nāmās. Āzhwār describes the sweetness of the Lord's names in many of the verses in this *prabandham*.

Srī Periyavācchān Pillai refers to *Srī Vishnu Dharmam* – an ancient text as the source for Āzhwār's interest in singing the Lord's names (*Thiru nāmasamkeerthanam*). In this text, a descendent of the Pāndavas by the name of Shatānīkan learns from the sage Srī Saunaka the greatness of Srī Sahasranāmam.

வேதா^३ந்தகோ^३ ப^३ராஹ்மண ஸ்யாத் சூத்ரியோ விஜயீ ப^४வேத
வைச்யோத^४நஸம்ருத^३த^४ ஸ்யாத் ஶாத^३ரஸ் ஸாக^२மவாப்நுயாத்

(Srī Sahasranāmam - 110)

"The spiritual seeker who listens to or reads this Sahasranāmam will see the inner meaning of the Vēdās; the chivalrous leader will become victorious, the trader will attain wealth, the unskilled labourer will attain happiness".

Although Āzhwār may have followed Srī Vishnu Dharmam, Thirumālai has several other distinctions as pointed out by the āchārya. The author sage Saunaka was interested in the *Upāya* or the means. The author Āzhwār's *nishtai* is however that of a *prapanna* (one who has surrendered his self to the Lord) like all the other Āzhwārs. He takes the Lord as the means; therefore he needs no other means. Nāma Samkeerthanam will bestow whatever the seeker wishes. Different beings will use them each according to their desires. Āchārya draws a parallel here to the way different people will use priceless pearls. "செழுமுத்து வெண்ணெற்கெனச்சென்று முன்றில் வளைக்கை நுளைப்பாவையர் மாறு நாங்கூர்" (Periya Thirumozhi 3-8-7). People living in the shores of pearl diving, will sell the pearls to buy common articles like rice and fruit. Those who use Thirunāmams to obtain ordinary material benefits are similar to these people. The merchants who know the precious worth of the pearls will however trade them accordingly to make money. Those who practice various Sādhanas to attain liberation (*mōksham*) are similar to these merchants. When the same precious pearls get into the hands of the Royals, they will wear them as ornaments and enjoy them. Āzhwārs are in this category. For them the Lord Himself is the means and therefore for these *prapannas*, "உண்ணும் சோறு பருகும் நீர் திண்ணும் வெற்றிலை எல்லாம் கண்ணன்" namely தா^४ரக போஷக போ^४க^३யங்கள் (all means of sustenance, nurture and enjoyment) are all the same Lord. They in general will enjoy the sweetness of Bhagavan nāmās. பிழைப்பில் பெரும் பெயரே பேசி (Irandām Thiruvandhādhi –50).

In addition, the Lord's names will protect thousand times more than the Lord. "ஓராயிரமாய் உலகேழுளிக்கும் பேர்" (Thiruvāimozhi - 9-3-1). Āchārya draws parallels to the Lord and His names, the former is like a gold bar (கட்டிப் பொன்) and the latter is like the gold in the ornaments (பணிப்பொன்).

Other interesting points that the Āchārya makes in his commentary are the following. Srī Vishnu Dharmam was addressed to and heard by the king Shatānīkan. Thirumālai was however addressed to and heard by the Lord of Srīrangam Himself.

ஆவலிப்புடைமை கண்டாய் அரங்கமா நகருளானே !

Thirumālai is neither too long like *Mahā Bhāratham* nor too short like *Pranavam*. Since it contains only 45 verses, it is of the right size. Āchārya further says although the sea is very deep all over, in some areas because of the clarity of the water even the sea bed may become visible. Although *Thirumālai* has great deep meanings, its simplistic and easy style allows one to appreciate the great depth of its meanings.

Just as Srī Bhagavat Gīta is the essence of *Mahā Bhāratham*, the last verse in Srī Gīta (Charama Slōkam) is the essence of Srī Krishna's teachings.

" Sarva dharmān parityajya māmēkam saranam vraja
Aham tvām sarvapāpēbhyō mōkshayishyami mā sucha:"

ஸர்வ தர்மாந் பரித்யஜ்ய மாமேகம் ஶரணம் வரஜ
அஹம் த்வாம் ஸர்வ பாபேப்யோ: மோக்ஷயிஞ்யாமி மாஸாச:

“Discarding all other means take me as your sole refuge and
I shall liberate you from all sins and do not grieve”

The following verse in *Thirumālai* is considered to be the Charama slōkam for this beautiful *prabandham*. Srī Periyavācchān Pillai describes beautifully the in depth meaning of this verse in his commentary.

This verse is the 38th verse in this *prabandham*.

மேம்போருள் போகவிட்டு மெய்ம்மையை மிகுணர்ந்து
ஆம்பரிசு அறிந்து கொண்டு ஜம்புலன் அகத்திடக்கிக்
காம்பறத் தலைசிரைத்து உன் கடைத்தலை இருந்து வாழும்
சோம்பரை உகத்தி போலும் சூழ்புனல் அரங்கத்தானே

38. *Thirumālai*

" O' the Lord of Srīrangam, surrounded by the waters of Cauvery! You seem to be delighted by those devotees who live at your sacred doors, who are lazy with regards to their worldly activities, understanding the real nature of their own selves, the goals in tune with them,

controlling the five senses, free of all attachments towards all other means and giving up also completely all their head loads."

Srī Periyavācchān Pillai declares in his vyākhyānam, "இப்பாட்டுஅவதரிக்கைக்காகவாய்த்து இப்ரபந்தம் அவதரித்தது". The purpose for the origin of this work *Thirumālai* itself can be said to convey the message contained in this one verse. In other words, the essence of the message of the Āzhwār's *Thirumālai* is in this one verse alone.

According to the Āchārya, this verse gives not only the meaning of the Charama slōkam of Srī Gīta, but also indicates the meaning of *Dvaya Mahāmantram* which is the ஸரணாக³தி மந்த்ரம் "The Surrender Mantra".

ஸ்ரீமந் நாராயண சரணை ஸரணம் ப்ரபத்³யே
ஸ்ரீமதே நாராயணாய நமः
"Srīman Nārāyana charanau Saranam Prapadyé
Srīmaté Nārāyanāya Namah"

This *mantra* is to be found in "*Kata-Valli*" and the "*Agamas*" (*prasna Samhita*). This *mantra* is called "*Dvaya*" since it expounds the two truths namely the means (*Upāya*) and the goal (*Upēya*). The initiation and instruction of this *mantra* is to be learnt by a spiritual seeker from a proper Āchārya. Srī Rāmānuja has explained the deep meanings of this *mantra* in his *Sharanāgathi gadyam*. Srī Vēdānta Dēsika has expounded this further in great detail in his magnum opus "*Srīmad Rahasya Traya sāram*"

லக்ஷ்மியா ஸஹ ஹ்ருஷீகோ: தே³வ்யா காருண்யஞபயா
ரக்ஷக: ஸர்வளித்³தா⁴ந்தே வேதா³ந்தேவோ ச கீ³யதே
(Lakshmi tantra 28-14)

"In all siddhāntas like mantra, and others and in Vēdānta, the Lord with Srī MahāLakshmi who is the personification of compassion, is declared as the protector".

ஆகாரினைஸ்து விஞாநம் ஆகாரஞாநபூர்வகம்
தேநாகாரம் ஸ்ரீயம் ஞாத்வா ஞாதவ்யோ ப⁴க³வாந் ஹரி:

"The knowledge of a qualified object is possible only through the attribute. So knowing first the "Srī" who is an "*Ākāra*" or a "*visēshana*", the "*Ākāri*" or "*visēshya*" - the Lord is to be known".

(Dvayādhikāra –28 – Srīmad Rahasya traya sāram)

Srī eliminates the *karmās* (obstacles) of the spiritual seeker, blesses them with *kainkarya* or service to the Lord. The root "மதுப்" "matup" in "Srī mat" (ஸ்ரீமத்), indicates "Nitya -Yōga" or eternal association. Thus the word "Srī man" implies the inseparable union of Srī with the Lord and therefore indicates only the *Divya Dampathi* (the divine couple). In the first part (*pūrvakāhānda*) of this *mantra*, the seeker surrenders completely one's self ("*ātma-samarpanam*") to Srī man Nārāyana. In the latter part (*uttara-kāhānda*) of this *mantra*, the object of attainment

(*purushārtha*) is mentioned. The dative case ("for or to") in the term "Nārāyana" signifies "kainkarya" or divine service with the realization of eternal subservience to the Lord for the eternal nature of the self is "Séshatva".

"அடியேன் உள்ளான் உடலுள்ளான்" (Thiruvāimozhi 8-8-2) "அடியேன் நான் ஆள்" as declared by Srī Thirumazhisai Pirān, (Nānmukan Thiruvandhādhi- 59). The desired object is first prayed (*Ishta Prāpti*) and then for the fulfillment of the same by the term "namah" the destruction of all undesirables (*anishta nivritti*) is prayed.

The word "Namah" needs to be taken with a verb "syam" which is also implied here. The derivation is thus '*Na Mama Syām*' '*Na Mama Kinchit Syat*'. I do not belong to me and Nothing is mine. It also indicates destruction of all doership and enjoyership for one's own benefit. It also means that the burden of protection is with the Lord and the Lord only. The enjoyership is also the Lord's and for the sake of the Lord alone.

Āchārya further points out that the *Dvaya mantram* is in the mode of Anushtānam or practice. Accordingly, it speaks of the means to be adopted (ஸாதாம்) first and then only the results to be obtained (ஸாத்யம்). Srī Nammāzhwār describes the meaning of the *pūrva khānda* of the *Dvaya mantram* in his *pāsuram* "அகலகில்லேன்" (Thiruvāimozhi 6-10-10) and the meaning of the *uttara khānda* of the *Dvaya mantram* is given by Srī Āndāl in the 29th *pāsuram* of her Thiruppāvai (சிற்றம் சிறுகாலே). Srī Thondaradippodi āzhwār is the only Āzhwār who describes both parts of the *Dvaya mantram* in one verse. The only difference is that in this verse, Āzhwār deals with the *upéyam* (goal) in the first two lines and the *upāya* (means) in the second two lines. The reason according to the Āchārya is that Āzhwār here describes the *Dvaya mantram* in the mode of வ்யுத்பத்தி meaning the stage of understanding or obtaining knowledge about what needs to be attained and what becomes the means for that goal to be attained.

Āchārya further describes the connection between this verse and the previous verse (37 – *Thirumālai*). In that verse, Āzhwār finishes with a deep sorrowful statement "அளியன் நம் பையல் என்னார் அம்மவோ கொடியவாறே". Finding Āzhwār's deep love of the Lord and his desire to obtain only service to the Lord, and his entire dependence for this only on the Lord, and on top of it being sorrowful because of the delay of fulfillment of his desire, the Lord becomes so delighted that He has attained a true *mahātma* in the form of the Āzhwār as His devotee. He reveals this delight on His face to the Āzhwār. This then leads to this verse in which Āzhwār questions the Lord of Srīranagm whether this is how He gets delighted with the *prapannās* (those devotees who had absolutely surrendered) who live at His doors depending only on Him, giving up all efforts towards their own protection. The actual words of the Āchārya are worth noting here. "சரமஸ்லோகம் ப்ரபத்தியை விதி⁴க்கிறதாயிருக்கும்; அதில் ருசியுடையாருடைய அநுஸந்தா⁴னமாயிருக்கும் த்³வயம்; த்³வயநிட்டர் பக்கல் ஈஸ்வரனுக்குண்டான் உகப்பை சொல்லுகிறது இப்பாட்டு" The Āchārya concludes that Srī Gīta Charama slōkam is in the form of the command of the Lord for "*prapatti*" as means and His assurance towards such *prapannās*. "*Dvayam*" becomes the *mantram* for those who have developed a steadfastness of purpose towards the *prapatti mārgam* (the path of surrender)" and this verse describes the delight that the Lord feels regarding those devotees who are steadfast

prapannās like the Āzhwārs and those who are engrossed in the deep meaning of the *Dvaya mantram*.

There is a special glory for Srī Thondaradippodi Āzhwār, which goes beyond the *Srutis*, the sages and even the other Āzhwārs. True meaning of *Sruti* is hard to fathom unless learnt through proper Āchāryas. Most Sages were attracted to the *Vibhava avatārams* (incarnations) of the Lord like Srī Rāma (like the sage Vālmīki), Srī Krishna (like the sage Parāsara). Even among the various Āzhwārs, the MudalĀzhwārs and Thirumazhisai Pirān were attracted to the transcendental nature (*Paratvam*) of the Lord, the *Saulabhyam* and accessibility of the Lord of Thirumālai (the holy hills) and a few other holy shrines. Srī Nammāzhwār was attracted to Srī Krishna like Srī Peri Āzhwār. Srī Thirumangai Āzhwār was interested in all the *Arca avatāra sthalams* (the holy shrines of the Lord). But Srī Thondaradippodi Āzhwār unlike all others was solely attracted only to Periya Perumāl, the Lord of Srīrangam, considered to be the foremost among all the *Arca Avatāra Mūrthies*.

This *prabandham* *Thirumālai* ends with the words "எம்பிராற்கினியவாகே" "pleasing to our Lord indeed". "இரக்கம் உபாயம் இனிமை உபேயம்" ("compassion is the means and sweetness is the goal") are the words of Srī Nanjeer. The Āchārya concludes his commentary saying that just as the Lord was pleased with the Āzhwār, He will also be pleased with everyone who learns with interest the meanings of this sweet *prabandham*. Srī Periyavācchān Pillai quotes here the following verse from *Srīmad Rāmāyanam*

ராமாயணம் இதும் கருதஸ்நம் ஸ்ருண்வத: படதஸ் ஸதா³
ப்ரீயதே ஸததம் ராம: ஸ ஹி விஷ்ணு ஸநாதந:
(Srīmad Rāmāyanam Yuddha Khāndam 131-118)

"Srī Lord Rama is pleased with whoever listens to or reads completely this Rāmāyanam. That Lord Rama is indeed the ancient Srī Vishnu".

For all these reasons, Srī Thondaradippodi Āzhwār is very fondly regarded among the various Āzhwārs and this great work *Thirumālai* of the Āzhwār will always remain the favorite of all true devotees of the Lord.

ஸ்ரீ தொண்டரடிப்பொடி ஆழ்வார் திருவடிகளே சரணம்
ஸ்ரீ பெரியவாச்சான் பிள்ளை திருவடிகளே சரணம்

I seek refuge at the holy feet of Srī Thondaradippodi Āzhwār
I seek refuge at the holy feet of Srī Periya Vācchān Pillai

Wish to express adiyén's sincere thanks and deep sense of gratitude to Putthūr Swami Srīmān Krishnaswami Iyengar, the famous author and publisher of the vyākhyānam of Thirumālai by the

most compassionate āchārya Srī Periyavācchān Pillai for his most valuable explanatory notes for the commentary of the āchārya.

adiyén ranganathan
July 2009. Updated Dec, 26_2016.