Commenting on jingling sounds and meaningless repetitions in Siamese expressions, Prince Chand cites, as an example, the well-known idiom นุ่ม น้ำทะเล. However, I think there is reason to doubt that the choice of just this example was a lucky one.

Prince Chand does not elaborate on his example, but it seems evident to what he is referring: the incongruity between the first and the second parts of the expression, the obvious meaning of which is: “To wash (oneself) with (or: in the) water, to wash (oneself) in (or: at) the harbour”. Such a meaning is indeed not very satisfying, although evidently there is some connection, because a harbour has much to do with water. Still, the expression makes some sense if one does not think “harbour” in terms of Hamburg or Khlong Toi—why should villagers not have their bath at a place where their boats are moored?

The meaning of นุ่ม is “liquid” in a broad sense; but mostly the word is used in the restricted sense “water”.

If one looks up นุ่ม in some of the major dictionaries, one comes across the following entries:

Palleoix
1. Bank of a river
2. Road for going down to the river
3. นุ่ม to go towards the river, towards the water
4. นุ่ม landing place for boats
5. นุ่ม water of a stream, of a river, of a great river
6. นุ่ม road towards the river

Plang
1. Landing place
2. น้ำชี fresh water
3. นุ่ม landing place

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1) Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University
2) M.C. Chand Chirayu Rajani, A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, “Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 9 and No. 10”, JSS (61.2) 1973 p. 167-182. The expression is referred to on p. 171.
3) D.J.B. Palleoix, Dictionarium linguæ Thai, Paris 1854.
4) ป fractured, หมายหมายใน-ฮั่งกูร, พณณัตร (แพร์ท) พ.ศ. 2502.
A NOTE ON AP NAM AP THA

McFarland
1. A place for boats or ships to approach the land
2. a fording or bathing place for elephants
3. a landing platform provided with steps
4. the lower steps of a pier or ladder leading down from a landing place to the water in front of Siamese houses; a bathing place with steps leading down.

Krom Tamra
1. ผ่าน้ำสาหรับขนล้อ หรือออกเรือ

Phra Phithaya
1. ผ่าน้ำสาหรับขนล้อ หรือออกเรือ
2. ผ่าคอทองในแนวน้ำ เรียกน้ำท่า
3. ท่าน้ำ ร่มน้ำแข็งใช้เป็นทางขาทุก
4. ท่าน้ำ ร่มน้ำแข็งใช้เป็นทางลง

Rachabandit
1. ผ่าน้ำสาหรับขนล้อออกเรือ
2. ท่าน้ำสาหรับขนล้อเป็นทางขาท่า กับขนท่าน้ำ
3. ผ่าน้ำสาหรับขนล้อ เรียกน้ำท่าน้ำ

Similar meanings are found in White Thai, North Vietnam:

1. Fontaine
2. Endroit où on puise de l’eau et où on se baigne

The meaning of ผ่าน้ำ is thus obviously fourfold:
1. (River) landing, also used for bathing; here ผ่าน้ำ seems to include the mooring place of the boats in the water as well as the land along the edge of the river
2. A shallow part in the river bed (ford), used either for crossing the river or for bathing
3. Water

6) กรมศิลปากร กระทรวงวัฒนธรรม, พระนคร พระนคร. พ.ศ. 2470.
7) พจนานุกรมไทย ฉบับราชบริพัธ “พระพิทธา” พระนคร พระนคร. พ.ศ. 2507.
8) พจนานุกรม ฉบับราชบริพัธยุคสมัย พระนคร พระนคร. พ.ศ. 2513.
9) Georges Minot, Dictionnaire Tai Blanc-Français, in : BEFEO (40) 1940,
It is difficult to decide, which of the four meanings of ที่ is the one referred to in ด้วยน้ำ, because all of them make sense:

"To wash (oneself) in the water, at the landing"
"To wash (oneself) on the water, at the ford"
"To wash (oneself) in the water, in the water"
"To wash (oneself) in the water, in the river".

All four meanings are in keeping with the usual construction of Siamese idioms which often make use of repetitions or duplications.

But if one considers two similar expressions, viz. ตกน้ำตกน้ำ and ตกน้ำตกน้ำ, which are commonly understood to mean “to fall into the water” and “to drink water”, then it appears that ตก is either a synonym to ที่ or has a more specific meaning than ที่, i.e. น้ำ that “fresh (not salty) water”, because one does not drink salt water, neither from the ocean nor from a well. ตกน้ำตกน้ำ therefore seems to have the meaning of “to wash (oneself) in (fresh) water”, or “to have a (fresh water) bath”.

It is perhaps possible to go one step further in the interpretation of the expression. In some of the Northern Thai dialects, such as Yuan or Dioi, น้ำ has the meaning of “river” and some of the above mentioned quotations indicate the same meaning. In classical Yuan, น้ำ also has sometimes the meaning “river”. If it is true that these dialects and quotations represent a more ancient state of language, then the expression ตกน้ำตกน้ำ must originally have meant “to wash (oneself) in the water, in (of) the river”, or perhaps “to wash (oneself) in the river, in the river”, i.e. “to take a bath in the river”. — If one takes into account that the countryfolks, having no bathroom, still take their bath in the river—at a shallow place, from where they also carry the water of the river to their houses for consumption, usually not far from their boats that mostly lie half on the sand and half in the water—then these latter interpretations seem even more likely, and the other meanings of ที่ may be secondary derivations.

ตกน้ำตกน้ำ thus contains either a repetition (น้ำ = น้ำ) or first a word with a more general meaning (น้ำ) and then a word with a more specific meaning (น้ำ). Whatever the precise original meaning, at its time and place, the expression does not seem to have been a meaningless repetition.