

Shiva Nataraja: A Study in Myth, Iconography, and the Meaning of a Sacred Symbol

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*O you the creator, you the destroyer, you who sustain and make an end,
Who in sunlight dance among the birds and the children at play,
Who at midnight dance among the corpses in the burning grounds,
You, Shiva, you dark and terrible Bhairava,
You Suchness and Illusion, the Void and All Things,
You are the lord of life, and therefore I have brought you flowers;
You are the lord of death, and therefore I have brought you my heart—
This heart that is now your burning ground.
Ignorance there and self shall be consumed with fire.
That you may dance, Bhairava, among the ashes.
That you may dance, Lord Shiva, in a place of flowers,
And I dance with you.
(Huxley, 167)*

The image of the Hindu divinity Shiva dancing within a giant ring of fire is among the most beloved and awe-inspiring symbols of the Hindu conception of the nature of the cosmos. Indeed, at the heart of this powerful sacred image, we find a symbolic distillation of the essence of Hindu spiritual consciousness. In the introduction to his massive text on contemporary Hinduism, entitled *Dancing with Siva*, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami observes that “the Cosmic Dance describes the Hindu view of existence,” and that for Hindus “Dancing with Siva is everything we do, everything we think and say and feel, from our seeming birth to our so-called death. It is God and man forever engaged in sacred movement” (xviii). As the above-quoted invocation to Shiva also beautifully teaches us, Shiva’s Dance also serves as a compelling and powerful metaphor for the energy at the heart of the process of spiritual transformation.

Writing on the enormous popularity of this image, David Smith observed in his recent study of the Dancing Shiva that this icon is not only “the best known form of the Hindu god Siva in the West,” but “indeed seems to be the most popular visual representation of Hinduism for the modern world” (1). In her study of the ritual significance of Hindu classical dance, Anne-Marie Gaston universalizes this view, commenting that the complex symbolism embodied in the Dancing Shiva “constitutes one of the world’s most beautiful iconic images” (47). During the course of this essay, I will explore aspects of that rich symbolism from the perspectives of both Hindu mythology and iconography and to conclude with some personal reflections on the significance of the Dance of Shiva.

Before delving further into the symbolism of the Dancing Shiva, it is important to make certain distinctions with regard to the origin of this image and about the specific form in which it most frequently is portrayed. As a devotional image, it is clear that the Siva has been represented as a dancing deity for much of Hindu history and has been portrayed in wide variety of dance postures and stances. Subramuniyaswami states that “the vast complexity of Siva’s Cosmic Dance is traditionally represented by 108 poses” (xix) and Smith notes that these variations date back to at least the fifth century C.E. (1). It seems clear from all accounts reviewed during the researching of this paper that the particular form of this image which has become so familiar to us is a specific variation which became more or less set as a canonical form in about the tenth century as a series of bronze sculptures created during the latter portion of the Cola period. It was this version of the image of the Dancing Shiva which was first brought to the attention of Western scholars by Ananda Coomaraswamy in his famous and widely-read essay, “The Dance of Siva.” Unknown in the

West until this essay was first published outside of India in 1912, Coomaraswamy later became world-famous as a noted art historian and is credited with having popularized this particular image of the Dancing Shiva on a worldwide basis.

This most famous version of the image of Shiva engaged in the act of dancing is referred to in the Hindu tradition by the Sanskrit appellation *Nataraja* (or *Nataraj*), which is translated variously as “King of Dancers” and “Lord of the Dance.” In this form of the image, Shiva is portrayed as a four-armed figure dancing within an arch or ring of fire, with his right leg raised and gently crossing in front of the body and his left foot firmly placed on the prostrate body of an imp or dwarflike figure. Each of the two upper hands hold a particular sacred symbol, while the each of the two lower ones are engaged in a particular symbolic hand gesture.

It should be noted as an aside that there is at least some difference of opinion among scholars as to which images of the Dancing Shiva may be said to reflect Shiva’s role as Nataraja. Smith concludes that only the four-armed version with the right leg crossing in front of the image represent Shiva Nataraja, while Gaston treats all images of Shiva Dancing as Nataraja. During the course of this essay, I will refer to Shiva Nataraja only when describing the famous four-armed version of the Dancing Shiva, both because this is the most widely-recognized image of the Dancing Shiva and because it is the single version of the image of Shiva unquestionably recognized as Nataraja by all scholars.

Interestingly, while Shiva Nataraja is certainly the image of the Dancing Shiva most familiar to Westerners and to world art historians, Gaston notes that “it is not in fact the most widespread, being more or less confined to south India” and that even in south India images of Shiva can be found engaged in a wide variety of dance poses. (47). Nevertheless, while pointing out that the worship of Shiva Nataraja is today largely confined to the south of India, she is also careful to note that the concept of the Dancing Shiva is as “essentially a south Indian deity is clearly unfounded, since images of Siva in dancing poses come from all parts of the Indian subcontinent, including Kashmir and the Himalaya” (56). Smith confirms this view by noting that even though the only Shiva temple dedicated solely to Shiva Nataraja is located in Chidambaram in Tamilnadu, “all other Siva temples have a Nataraja shrine, or at least a Nataraja image, beside the main linga shrine” (1).

As with the question of which poses of the Dancing Shiva are reflective of Shiva as Nataraja, there is also some dispute among scholars as to the nature of the particular dance in which Shiva is engaged as Nataraja. Most often, he is said to be engaged in a particular dance associated with him known by the Sanskrit name *Ananda Tandava*, typically translated as “Dance of Bliss.” Smith notes that since “*tandava*” means “the fierce dance” and “*ananda*” means “bliss,” the two words together actually imply the idea of a paradoxical dance which begins in fierceness and is then transformed into one of bliss (240).

This interpretation of the meaning of the name of Nataraja’s dance helps explain Smith’s assertion that the Nataraja image incorporates aspects of two opposing roles played by Shiva in the Hindu tradition, those of Bhiksatana and Bhairava. (186) Bhiksatana refers to Shiva’s role as the handsome wandering beggar who seduces the wives of evil *rishis*, while Bhairava refers to Shiva in his guise as the terrifying destroyer and lord of the burning ground. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, in her study, *Shiva: The Erotic Ascetic*, agrees with this view of Nataraja, observing that Nataraja’s dance incorporates the dual—and seemingly mutually-exclusive—qualities of “*kama*” (or erotic love) and “*tapas*” (or severe asceticism). (17) It should be noted that this view is not one shared by Coomaraswamy, who ascribes neither the Tandava dance nor Shiva’s role as Bhairava to Shiva as Nataraja.(57) As if in response to Coomaraswamy’s rejection of the destructive and terrifying aspects of Nataraja, however, Gaston concludes in her detailed analysis of Hindu classical dance that the *Ananda Tandava* is essentially “implicit in all the other instances of his dance, though the myths themselves, and their depictions in iconography, do not always express this” (4).

Beyond the specific historical, geographical, mythological and iconographic details associated with Shiva Nataraja, of course, any contemplation of the Dancing Shiva also brings with it a wealth of more general associations relating to dance as spiritual metaphor. “More than any other deity,” notes Gaston, “dance is associated with the mythology of Siva, forming in its most exalted aspect a metaphor for the cosmic cycle of creation and destruction and the individual cycle of birth and re-birth” (4). The degree to which dance is

integral to the image of Nataraja is highlighted in Subramuniaswami's observation that "one cannot separate the dancer from dancing, just as one cannot separate God from the world or from ourselves" (xviv).

Delving further into the notion of dance as spiritual metaphor, one finds that the ideas of rhythm and movement take on symbolic importance, with rhythm reflecting the pattern of the primal energy of the cosmos and movement reflecting the effect of that patterned energy on all of the matter of the cosmos. Coomarswamy speaks of the relationship of rhythm to sacred dances when he writes that "the root idea behind all of these dances is more or less one and the same, the manifestation of primal rhythmic energy" (56). Similarly, Subramuniaswami highlights the relationship of movement to sacred dancing with his observation that "esoterically, movement is the most primal act of existence. Without this simple thing, there would be no universe [. . .]. Light is movement. Thought is movement. Atoms are movement. Life is movement" (xviv).

Apart from the long tradition within Hindu culture of associating the act of dancing with spiritual evolution, there are numerous other instances of dance playing an intrinsic role in spiritual practices ranging from the whirling dances of the Sufi dervishes to the communal dancing of the Shakers. Looking back to the origins of dance as a sacred activity, Zimmer observes that "dancing is an ancient form of magic." He goes on to explain the power at the root of sacred dance, noting that through the motion of dance, the participant "becomes amplified into a being endowed with supra-normal powers. His personality is transformed. Like yoga, the dance induces trance, ecstasy, the experience of the divine, the realization of one's own spiritual nature, and, finally, mergence into the divine essence" (151).

In exploring the universal meaning of Shiva Nataraja as an image which has captured the imagination of people all over the world, one first needs to grasp the principal details of the iconography of this image as it is understood by Hindus. The complex symbolism of this highly ornamented image, in turn, invokes a wealth of connections with the rich mythology of Shiva, prompting Gaston to observe that Shiva Nataraja "is a veritable encyclopedia of mythological references" (4). In particular, to appreciate the image of Nataraja, one needs to know the particular Hindu myth which explains how Shiva first came to dance the *Ananda Tandava* and assume his role as Lord of the Dance. Smith notes that this myth, which also explains how Shiva Nataraja came to be associated with Chidambaram, was originally related in its complete form in the twelfth-century, first in a Sanskrit text called the *Cidambara Mahatyma* and shortly thereafter in the Tamil version of this work, called the *Koyil Puranam*. (9) The following retelling of this myth is based on sections of the *Cidambara Mahatyma*, as quoted by Smith, and on two modern retellings of this myth, one by D.M. Dooling and the other by James A. Kirk.

The myth begins with the great god Vishnu—Shiva's "other-self," writes Dooling—reclining in deep sleep on the great serpent Sesa, floating on "the waters of undifferentiated matter during the period between the destruction and creation of the universe" (Dooling 66; Smith 32). Lost in the bliss of dreaming about Shiva, Vishnu then awakens from his reverie and relates the remainder of the story to Sesa. On the previous cosmic day, Vishnu tells Sesa, when he went to pay his daily respects to Shiva, the latter told him of a band of ten thousand self-righteous *rishis*, or Hindu holy men, living in the Daruka Forest in Tillai near Chidambaram. These *rishis* were so sure of their own holiness that they began to believe that their great wisdom was the result of their own sanctity rather than being a gift from the gods. As a result, Shiva decided that he and Vishnu should pay a visit to these false teachers and demonstrate the error of their ways. He instructs Vishnu to take on the form of Mohini, a beautiful enchantress, while he assumes the disguise of Bhiksatana, a handsome and charming wandering yogi. "I instantly became a woman," says Vishnu, "such that the great sages would think me neither chaste nor a courtesan, and beside me stood the Great Lord who was gently laughing" (Smith 175). As soon as the two gods arrive in Tillai, the formerly ascetic *rishis* become instantly enamored of Mohini, while their previously chaste wives became, as Dooling writes, "immediately enraptured with the seeming yogi" (66). Of course, the *rishis* were particularly disturbed by this latter turn of events, as well as by the general chaos that suddenly seemed to be enveloping their peaceful and well-ordered world.

When the *rishis* saw what was happening to their community, writes Dooling, "they began to doubt their own eyes and to feel that they were the victims of an illusion." Of course, having eliminated the gods as

causal factors, these *rishis* received this supernatural event “with the violent reactions of men who face a fact that doesn’t fit their orthodoxies,” after which they discovered that “neither disbelief nor disbelief in a louder voice augmented by curses” could eliminate the reality of Shiva’s presence (Kirk 106). When these maledictions failed to have any effect on the handsome yogi and his wife, the *rishis* prepared a magical fire and unleashed from it a ferocious tiger. Believing that the yogi would be utterly destroyed (or at least fatally frightened) by the tiger, they were horrified to see that, as Dooling comments, “Shiva lifted the tiger with one hand and with the little finger of the other he tore off the skin,” joyfully slipping the tiger pelt around his magnificently narrow waist (66). “With their power countered and graciously transformed to modesty,” comments Kirk, the now-furious *rishis* conjured a giant serpent out of the fire and directed the venomous fangs of the reptile at the still-tranquil yogi. They watched in horror as “Shiva bent down and gently stroked the outstretched hood [. . .] as he cast the snake around his neck as an ornament for his mighty chest” (106). Failing again, the *rishis* then made their most desperate ploy conjuring out of the fire a hideous dwarf, “a fierce goblin, black in color and armed with a club,” writes Dooling, which rushed upon the beaming yogi, only to be broken and subjugated beneath the foot of the increasingly resplendent figure of the god (66).

“Somewhere within the soul of that great god, a faint strumming of uncertain sound began to stir,” writes Kirk, and with a drum held in one of his hands, Shiva began to beat out a rhythm “in the slow and even cadence of a pulsing heart” (106). Then, while balancing still on the malevolent little dwarf with one foot, Lord Shiva began to dance his great dance of creation and destruction. “No longer the wandering yogi,” observes Dooling, “he showed himself now the shining god,” his seemingly many arms and legs “flashing in speed and splendor like the rays of the whirling sun” (66). At the sight of this cosmic spectacle, the *rishis* were finally overcome in their willful ignorance and pride and fell to their knees in worship before this vision of divinity as, Dooling tells us, “the heavens opened up and the gods themselves came to watch the glorious dance.” As the rhythm of the drumbeat quickened and the motion of the arms and legs became more vigorous, Kirk observes, “All that was not Shiva began to fall apart, disintegrate, evaporate into the thin vapors of apparent nothingness,” until “at the climax of the nothingness [. . .] only the audience of gods remained” (107). Then Shiva paused for a cosmic moment and, beginning again with a slow and stately rhythm, “as had danced the worlds out, now he danced them in again, flinging stars into their heavens, evoking life upon the earth, a kinesthesia of overflowing grace and love.”

In the *Cidambara Mahatmya*, it is written that at the conclusion of his dancing the *Ananda Tandava* for the first time, Shiva disappeared in the heavens as the rest of the gods “bowed joyously in the direction in which he had gone and returned whence they had come, deeply satisfied with having seen Siva.” Then this text tells us that Vishnu, once more in his own abode, speaks to the cosmic serpent of the splendor of Shiva’s dance: “O Sesha, with my mind fixed on it, I have continuous and measureless bliss. Now I think on that alone and am indifferent to my Yoga-sleep” (Smith 184-5).

Distraught at the thought of never seeing this sublime vision for himself, Sesha begs Vishnu to be allowed to reincarnate in human form to become a devotee of Shiva. Reborn as the sage Patanjali, Sesha takes up the life of an ascetic follower of Shiva and after many years is met by Shiva himself and offered the joys of heaven as a reward for his deep devotion and his many austerities. Instead, Patanjali asks to be allowed to witness the *Ananda Tandava* for himself, to which request Shiva exceeds. Shiva then tells Patanjali to wait for him in Cidambaram where, he promises the sage, he will return to earth and dance the *Ananda Tandava* again for the salvation of all humankind.

All images of Shiva Nataraji, and most particularly the central bronze image of Nataraja in the main temple at Chidambaram, are meant to be graphic representations of the central figure of this myth: Shiva as Lord of the Dance, offering salvation to the worshipful observer as he dances the creation and destruction of the cosmos through the *Ananda Tandava*. While there are many iconographic details included in the sculptures of Nataraja, several of them are particularly important for understanding the spiritual significance of this image. These details relate to the position or contents of the four arms, the position of the two legs, the dwarf upon which Shiva stands, and the ring of fire surrounding the figure of Shiva.

Beginning with the last of these and perhaps the single most recognizable aspect of the image of the Dancing Shiva, the ring of fire in the midst of which Nataraja dances the *Ananda Tandava* symbolizes the

energy which fuel's both the god's dance and the cosmic repercussions emanating from it. As Zimmer observes, it represents "the vital processes of the universe and its creatures, nature's dance as moved by the dancing god within" and "the energy of Wisdom [. . .] dancing forth from the personification of the All" (153-4). In her observations on the difference between the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, O'Flaherty observes that Buddhism seeks a Middle Path between asceticism and sensuality and an extinguishing of the flame through the attainment of Nirvana, whereas Hinduism is typified by the conception that "Siva embodied the flame and danced within it" (82).

The contents of the upper two of Nataraja's outstretched hands are meant to demonstrate the eternal balance between the forces of creation and those of destruction. In the upper right hand, Shiva holds the sacred *damaru*, a drum in the shape of an hourglass, with which Shiva beats out the rhythm of his dance and with it the ceaseless creation of the universe and all of its infinite forms. This drum, writes Joseph Campbell, "is the drum of time, the tick of time which shuts out the knowledge of eternity," as a result of which "we are enclosed in time" (*Power* 224). Moreover, it is said to signify the primordial sound from which all things emanate, connoting in Heinrich Zimmer's words "Sound, the vehicle of speech, the conveyer of revelation, tradition, incantation, magic, and divine truth" (152). Opposed to this force of creation as represented by the drum is the flame of extinction held in Shiva's upper right hand. That flame symbolizes all of Shiva's awesome powers of destruction, the terrible but necessary burning away of all things existing in time and space, the fire which, Campbell writes, "burns away the veil of time and opens our minds to eternity."

While the lower right hand is held in a palm-outward gesture said to signify the reassurance of the god that those approaching this image should "fear not," the lower left hand is gracefully pointed downward in the classical dance position is known as "elephant hand," signifying the concept of spiritual teaching. "Where an elephant has gone through the jungles," observes Campbell, "all animals can follow, and where a teacher leads the way disciples follow" (*Mythic* 359). Zimmer also points out that this hand gesture is also meant to remind us of the god Ganesha, Shiva's son who is called the "Remover of Obstacles" (153).

Shiva's left foot is firmly planted on the back of the terrible dwarf-like monster called Apasmara Purusha in Sanskrit and Muyalaka in Tamil. Zimmer tells us that this figure's name means demon of forgetfulness or heedlessness and that "it is symbolical of life's blindness, man's ignorance" (153). I particularly appreciate Subramuniaswami's compassionate observation that the monster Apasmara/Muyalaka actually represents the "soul temporarily earth-bound by its own sloth, confusion and forgetfulness" (41). Shiva's left foot, therefore, signifies the conquest of that pervasive heedlessness which keeps us from attaining true wisdom and maintains our state of bondage to the illusions of the world.

As important as the symbolism of the planted foot is for those contemplating Nataraja, it is Shiva's upraised right foot which—combined with the "elephant hand" gesture of the hand pointing to that upraised foot—is of most critical importance to the spiritual significance of this entire sacred image. Ultimately, what the iconography of Shiva Nataraja is pointing at, much as the hand is pointing to the gently and gracefully uplifted foot, is the concept of spiritual release, for as Huxley observes, "that lifted foot, that dancing defiance of the force of gravity—it's the symbol of release, of *moksha*, of liberation" (172).

That quotation of Huxley's was taken, along with the invocation to Shiva quoted at the start of this paper, from his last novel, *Island*. This work, his last attempt to fuse the spiritual consciousness of the East with the modernist philosophy of the West, centers around an island in the southeastern corner of Asia which has been divided into two states, one secular and capitalist and the other still deeply steeped in Hindu and Buddhist consciousness. The hereditary ruler of the spiritually-oriented state has been guided by several generations of a family of Unitarian-style Christian ministers, the first of which got accidentally shipwrecked on the island more than a century before and fell in love with the culture and spiritual awareness he found there.

In one pivotal scene in the novel, though, while explaining to a group of European visitors the significance of a young people's initiation ritual focused on Shiva Nataraja, the current minister reveals his tremendous ambivalence toward this image of divinity:

What we would really like is a God who never destroys what he has created. Or if there must be pain and death, let them be meted out by a God of righteousness, who will punish the wicked and reward the good with everlasting happiness. But in fact, the good get hurt, the innocent suffer. Then let there be a god who sympathizes and brings comfort. But Nataraja only dances. His play is a play impartially of death and of life, of all evils as well as of all goods [. . .]. He dances this way—what happiness! Dances that way—and oh, the pain, the hideous fear, the desolation! Then hop, skip, and jump. Hop into perfect health. Skip into cancer and senility. Jump out of the fullness of life into nothingness, out of nothingness again into life. For Nataraja it's all play and the play is end in itself, everlastingly purposeless. He dances because he dances, and the dance is his maha-sukha, his infinite and eternal bliss. Eternal bliss,” Dr. Robert repeated and again, but questioningly, “Eternal Bliss?” He shook his head. “For us there's no bliss, only the oscillation between happiness and terror and a sense of outrage at the thought that our pains are as integral a part of Nataraja's dance as our pleasures, our dying as our living. (172-3)

In contemplating the issue which so disturbs the minister in Huxley's novel, O'Flaherty writes “How can one fully savour the joys of the most trivial moments—a child's laugh, the first snowfall, the scent of flowers at dusk—while remaining aware of cosmic and metaphysical dimensions—the distance of stars, the randomness of death—which threaten to reduce such moments to insignificance?” She goes on to observe that this essential question is “implicit throughout Hindu mythology” and is most directly confronted in the nature of Shiva. (316) In addressing this seeming dilemma, Zimmer writes that Shiva Nataraja teaches us about “the paradoxical identity of the personality, carried away by experiences and emotions, with the quiet, all-knowing Self.” He notes that within these great bronze images, “the contrast of the blissfully dreaming, silent countenance with the passionate agility of the limbs represents, to those ready to understand, the Absolute and its Maya as a single trans-dual form” (156).

Like the character in Huxley's novel, I also have experienced the painful and finally unsolvable dilemma of trying to mesh the Judeo-Christian vision of an all-powerful and infinitely good God with the undeniable existence of what appears to be pointless suffering and senseless violence. Unlike Huxley's minister, however, I find enormous liberation in an image of the divine that takes into account the necessity of the destructive dimension of the cosmic cycle and the realization that all human experience—whether painful or pleasurable—is illusory. For me, the sense of release represented symbolically by Nataraja's raised foot is the knowledge that all things come into existence and pass away as part of a cosmic dance in which I, too, can consciously participate.

A site on the World Wide Web entitled *Understanding Hinduism* and dedicated to the teachings of Hinduism observes: “The Biodance, the constant renewal of the body from the world outside, stands in playful contrast to our ordinary idea of death. We do not wait on death, for we are constantly returning to the earth while alive. Every living moment a portion of the billions of atoms in our body return to the world outside.” Recent radioisotope studies have demonstrated that 98 percent of the human body is replaced at least once a year, leading Deepak Chopra to conclude that every time he flies to Los Angeles, he brings pretty much the same suitcase but a different Deepak. In a similar fashion, during the past eighteen months since enrolling at Pacifica, I have become a totally different person—both metaphorically and physically—than I was before I began my monthly flights to Los Angeles. In short, I am as much engaged in Shiva's cosmic dance as Shiva himself and in that way we are one.

In the image of Shiva Nataraja, I find a deeply moving symbol of the ultimately mysterious and paradoxical nature of the divine. Creation and destruction, order and chaos, asceticism and sensuality, immanence and transcendence, life and death, being and non-being all coexist, balance, and, indeed, dance with each other in Shiva's divine choreography. Most wonderful of all, Nataraja shows us that these eternal oppositions and dualities can never be reconciled into some neutral third or middle position. Perhaps as we meditate on the image of Shiva as Lord of the Dance, we may finally come to understand that the essential power of the divine mystery, the very nature of our experience of the numinous, resides precisely in the inherently irresolvable, irreducible nature of all the eternal paradoxes so magnificently manifested and celebrated in Nataraja's cosmic ballet.

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