

The Dance of the Lord

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The most famous images of Lord Shiva are those as Nataraja, or the King of Dance. The figure of Nataraja gives concrete expression to the Hindu idea of endless motion and change in the physical world. This has captivated the imagination of people from many cultures for generations.

We perceive motion and change only through time and space; in other words we know time only by observing motion and change in space. Dance is motion and change through time, and as such it captures the essence of life. Shiva *Mahakala* (Eternal Time) depicted as Nataraja, the King of the Dance, represents the energy behind the endless, continuous, and uninterrupted change in the cosmos. His dance sets matter in motion and sustains its changes.

Although myths and symbolism can be derived from the *Puranas*, the formal aspects of Shiva's dance can be traced to the Bharata's *Natyasastra*. According to Shaiva-agamas there are 108 modes of Shiva's dance, which tally with the 108 *karanas* given in the fourth chapter (*Tandava-lakshana*) in the *Natyashastra*.

The dance of Shiva in the Chidambaram temple is the focus of the famous South Indian bronze images of Nataraja. The images vary only in minor details but all express the same fundamental ideas: They show a dancing Shiva standing on his right foot, with his left leg delicately lifted off the floor. He has four arms, and has braided and jeweled hair, with the lower locks whirling. The topknot holds the life sustaining River Ganga. The crescent moon on his head symbolizes the creation and recreation like the waning and waxing of the moon. In his right ear he wears a man's earring and a woman's in the left (God is both male and female). He is adorned with snakes (power of kundalini), necklaces, anklets, bracelets, rings on fingers and toes, jeweled belt, etc.

In his upper right hand he holds the drum (symbolizing life, and sound at the dawn of creation) providing the rhythm for his dance. The rear left hand holds a ball of fire, a symbol of destruction/change. Life and creation (drum) exist side by side with death and destruction (flame) in Shiva, as in Nature where all opposites are reconciled. His front right hand displays the "Fear-Not" gesture assuring protection. His left hand points downward to his uplifted left foot, a symbol of release, or a promise of the ultimate union with the Absolute. His right leg presses down on the body of a prostrated Apasmara, who represents human ignorance/forgetfulness. From the lotus base springs an encircling glory fringed with flame and touched by the hands holding the drum and fire.

This image is derived from the concept of Shiva in scriptures and literature. The cosmic activity of God is the central theme here. The dance in fact represents the five activities of the God, namely, *shirsti* (creation/evolution), *Sthiti* (preservation), *Tirobhava* (veiling, illusion), *Samhara* (destruction), *anugraha* (release and grace).

Shiva's dance takes place in the heart of his devotees. What does he destroy? Not merely the heavens and earth at the end of the world cycle, but the shackles that bind each soul. Ego is destroyed and illusion burnt away. "He dances in the soul... for removing our sins. He scatters the darkness of illusion (maya), burns the thread of causality (karma), stamps down ignorance (avidya), showers grace, and lovingly plunges the soul in the ocean of bliss (ananda). Those who behold this dance never see rebirths." So says *Unmai Vilakkam*, a Tamil classic.

Devotees understand the significance of Shiva's dance on many levels. The imagery of dancing Shiva emerging from the Upanishads coordinates the navel of the body with the center of the world, head with the sky, the limbs represent the sixteen spokes (*sodasa kala*) or time segments of the wheel. The navel is the center and all energies converge into and emerge from it. The movement is from the inner to the outer.

On an artistic level, the sculpture is exquisite. When the body is viewed as abstract design, the linear, vertical and horizontal flow of lines articulate the power. The flowing Ganga, the flying locks and the snakes coiling and uncoiling provide the softer lines. All contained in the encircling glory and flames adds to the universal visual appeal.

The other popular image in Indian mythology is that of the dancing divine cowherd Krishna. He plays with other forms of his creation, gets entangled in them and creates illusion of multiplicity. He does not shed his human characteristics, and his play (*lila*) is human in its endless variety. All descriptions of the dance (*rasa lila*) of Krishna require two components: It is always him and the other, or him and the many. Dance emerges through the relationship between the two.

None of this is in Shiva's dance. The human component is nonexistent. No milkmaids accompany the King of Dancers and no circular dances are performed to the tunes of sweet flutes and the tinkle of ankle bells. He dances essentially alone, solitary without a separate Shakti since Shakti (Parvati) is always part of him. Occasionally when he dances with Parvati, it is the counter balance of the primeval forces of matter and energy – of Shiva-Shakti, the static and the dynamic, or to use scientific terms, potential and kinetic.

Shiva is not the divine in human form like Krishna, nor does he have many forms. "He is *the* cosmos in the Dance. He is *the* Dance — cosmic, eternal and timeless, moving in space and beyond space".

A.K. Coomaraswamy describes this beautifully: "***In the night of the Brahma, Nature is inert, and cannot dance till Shiva wills it: He rises from his rapture, and dancing sends through inert matter probing waves of awakening sound. And lo! Matter also dances appearing as a glory about Him. Dancing, He sustains its manifold phenomena. In the fullness of time, still dancing, he destroys all forms and names by fire and gives new Rest. This is poetry, but nonetheless science.***"



The fiery ring surrounding Shiva, prahabhamandala, represents the universe with all its illusion, suffering and pain. The outer edge is fire the inner edge the waters of the oceans. Many Nataraja statues have multiple levels of fire and water.

In the back right hand Shiva often holds an hour glass shaped drum or damaru. The drum represents the rhythmic sound to which Nataraja dances and ceaselessly recreates the universe. The front right hand is in the abhaya-mudra (the "fear not" gesture, made by holding the palm outward with fingers pointing up).



Excerpt from **The Tao of Physics** by Fritjof Capra [third edition] pages 241-245.

The Eastern mystics have a dynamic view of the universe similar to that of modern physics, and consequently it is not surprising that they, too, have used the image of the dance to convey their intuition of nature. A beautiful example of such an image of rhythm and dance is given by Alexandra David-Neel in her **Tibetan Journey**, where she describes how she met a Lama who referred to himself as a 'master of sound' and gave her the following account of his view of matter:

All things.....are aggregations of atoms that dance and by their movement produce sounds. When the rhythm of the dance changes, the sound it produces also changes....Each atom perpetually sings its song, and the sound, at every moment, creates dense and subtle forms.

The similarity of this view to that of modern physics becomes particularly striking when we remember that sound is a wave with a certain frequency which changes when the sound does, and that particles, the modern equivalent of the old concept of atoms, are also waves with frequencies proportional to their energies. According to the field theory, each particle does indeed 'perpetually sing its song', producing rhythmic patterns of energy (the virtual particles) in 'dense and subtle forms'.

The metaphor of the cosmic dance has found its most profound and beautiful expression in Hinduism in the image of the dancing god Shiva. Among his many incarnations, Shiva, one of the oldest and most popular Indian Gods, appears as the King of Dancers. According to Hindu belief, all life is part of a great rhythmic process of creation and destruction, of death and rebirth, and Shiva's dance symbolizes this eternal life-death rhythm which goes on in endless cycles.

The dance of Shiva symbolizes not only the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, but also the daily rhythm of birth and death which is seen in Indian mysticism as the basis of all existence. At the same time, Shiva reminds us that the manifold forms in the world are maya---not fundamental, but illusory and ever-changing---as he keeps creating and dissolving them in the ceaseless flow of his dance. As Heinrich Zimmer has put it:

His gestures wild and full of grace, precipitate the cosmic illusion; his flying arms and legs and the swaying of his torso produces---indeed, they are---the continuous creation-destruction of the universe, death exactly balancing birth, annihilation the end of every coming-forth.

Shiva's dance ---in the words of [Ananda] Coomaraswamy --- is 'the clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of'. As the god is a personification of Brahman, his activity is that of Brahman's myriad manifestations in the world. The dance of Shiva is the dancing universe; the ceaseless flow of energy going through an infinite variety of patterns that melt into one another.

Modern physics has shown that the rhythm of creation and destruction is not only manifest in the turn of the seasons and in the birth and death of all living creatures, but is also the essence of inorganic matter. According to quantum field theory, all interactions between the constituents of matter take place through the emission and absorption of virtual particles. More than that, the dance of creation and destruction is the basis of the very existence of matter, since all material particles 'self-interact' by emitting and reabsorbing virtual particles. Modern physics has thus revealed that every subatomic particle not only performs an energy dance, but also *is* the energy dance; a pulsing process of creation and destruction.

For the modern physicist, then, Shiva's dance is the dance of subatomic matter. As in Hindu mythology, it is the continual dance of creation and destruction involving the whole cosmos; the basis of all existence and of all natural phenomena. Hundreds of years ago, Indian artists created visual images of dancing Shivas in a beautiful series of bronzes. In our time, physicists have used the most advanced technology to portray the patterns of the cosmic dance. The bubble-chamber photographs of interacting particles, which bear testimony to the continual rhythm of creation and destruction in the universe, are visual images of the dance of Shiva equaling those of the Indian artists in beauty and profound significance. The metaphor of the cosmic dance thus unifies ancient mythology, religious art, and modern physics. It is indeed. As Coomaraswamy has said. 'poetry, but none the less science'.

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