



शिव नतराज

Śiva Natarāja, Chola Dynasty, c. A.D. 1000

THE DANCE OF SHIVA

by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

“The Lord of Tillai’s Court a mystic dance performs; what’s that, my dear?”—*Tiruvaçagam*, XII, 14.

Amongst the greatest of the names of Shiva is Nataraja, Lord of Dancers, or King of Actors. The Cosmos is His theatre, there are many different steps in His repertory, He Himself is actor and audience—

*When the Actor beateth the drum,
Everybody cometh to see the show;
When the Actor collecteth the stage properties
He abideth alone in His happiness.*

How many various dances of Shiva are known to His worshippers I cannot say. No doubt the root idea behind all of these dances is more or less one and the same, the manifestation of primal rhythmic energy. Shiva is the Eros Protogonos of Lucian, when he wrote:

“It would seem that dancing came into being at the beginning of all things, and was brought to light together with Eros, that ancient one, for we see this primeval dancing clearly set forth in the choral dance of the constellations, and in the planets and fixed stars, their interweaving and interchange and orderly harmony.”

I do not mean to say that the most profound interpretation of Shiva’s dance was present in the minds of those who first danced in frantic, and perhaps intoxicated energy, in honor of the pre-Aryan hill-god, afterwards merged in Shiva. A great motif in religion or art, any great symbol becomes all things to all men; age after age it yields to men such treasure as they find in their own hearts. Whatever the origins of Shiva’s dance, it became in time the clearest image of the *activity* of God which any art or religion can

boast of. Of the various dances of Shiva I shall only speak of three, one of them alone forming the main subject of interpretation. The first is an evening dance in the Himalayas, with a divine chorus, described as follows in the *Shiva Pradosha Stotra*:

“Placing the Mother of the Three Worlds upon a golden throne, studded with precious gems, Shulapani dances on the heights of Kailasa, and all the gods gather round Him:

“Sarasvati plays on the *vina*, Indra on the flute, Brahma holds the time-marking cymbals Lakshmi begins a song, Vishnu plays on a drum, and all the gods stand round about:

“Gandharvas, Yakshas, Patagas, Uragas, Suddhas, Sadhyas, Vidyadharas, Amaras, Apsarases and all the beings dwelling in the three worlds assemble there to witness the celestial dance and hear the music of the divine choir at the hour of twilight.”

This evening dance is also referred to in the invocation preceding the *Katha Sarit Sagara*.

In the pictures of this dance, Shiva is two-handed, and the cooperation of the gods is clearly indicated in their position of chorus. There is no prostrate Asura trampled under Shiva's feet. So far as I know, no special interpretations of this dance occur in Shaiva literature.

The second well known dance of Shiva is called the *Tandava*, and belongs to His *tamasic* aspect as Bhairava or Vira-bhadra. It is performed in cemeteries and burning grounds, where Shiva, usually in ten-armed form, dances wildly with Devi, accompanied by troops of capering imps. Representations of this dance are common amongst ancient sculptures, as at Elura, Elephanta, and also Bhuvaneshvara. The *tandava* dance is in origin that of a pre-Aryan divinity, half-god, half-demon, who holds his midnight revels in the burning ground. In later times, this dance in the cremation ground, sometimes of Shiva, sometimes of Devi, is interpreted in Shaiva and Shakta literature in a most touching and profound sense.

Thirdly, we have the Nadanta dance of Nataraja before the assembly (*sabha*) in the golden hail of Chidambaram or Tillai, the centre of the Universe, first revealed to gods and rishis after the submission of the latter in the forest of Taragam, as related to the *Koyil Puranam*. The legend, which has after all, no very close connection with the real meaning of the dance, may be summarised as follows:

In the forest of Taragam dwelt multitudes of heretical rishis, following of the Mimamsa. Thither proceeded Shiva to confute them, accompanied by Vishnu disguised as a beautiful woman, and Ati-Sheshan. The rishis were at first led to violent dispute amongst themselves, but their anger was soon directed against Shiva, and they endeavored to destroy Him by means of incantations. A fierce tiger was created in sacrificial fires, and rushed upon Him; but smiling gently, He seized it and, with the nail of His little finger, stripped off its skin, and wrapped it about Himself like a silken cloth.¹ Undiscouraged by failure, the sages renewed their offerings, and produced a monstrous serpent, which however, Shiva seized and wreathed about His neck like a garland. Then He began to dance; but there rushed upon Him a last monster in the shape of a malignant dwarf, Muyalaka. Upon him the God pressed the tip of His foot, and broke the creature's back, so that it writhed upon the ground; and so, His last foe prostrate Shiva resumed the dance, witnessed by gods and rishis.

Then Ati-Sheshan worshipped Shiva, and prayed above all things for the boon, once more to behold this mystic dance; Shiva promised that he should behold the dance again in sacred Tillai, the centre of the Universe.

This dance of Shiva in Chidambaram or Tillai forms the motif of the South Indian copper images of Shri Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance. These images vary amongst themselves in minor details, but all express one fundamental conception. Before proceeding to enquire what these may be, it will be necessary to describe the image of Shri Nataraja as typically represented. The images, then, represent Shiva dancing, having four hands, with braided and jewelled hair of which the lower locks are whirling in the dance. In His hair may be seen a wreathing cobra, a skull, and the mermaid figure of Ganga; upon it rests the crescent moon, and it is crowned with a wreath of Cassia leaves. In His right ear He wears a man's earring, a woman's in the left; He is adorned with necklaces and armlets, a jewelled belt, anklets, bracelets, finger and toe-rings. The chief part of His dress consists of tightly fitting breeches, and He wears also a fluttering scarf and a sacred thread. One right hand holds a drum, the other is uplifted in the

sign of do not fear: one left hand holds fire, the other points down upon the demon Muyalaka, a dwarf holding a cobra; the left foot is raised. There is a lotus pedestal from which springs an encircling glory (*tiruvasi*), fringed with flame, and touched within by the hands holding drum and fire. The images are of all sizes, rarely if ever exceeding four feet in total height.

Even without reliance upon literary references, the interpretation of this dance would not be difficult. Fortunately, however, we have the assistance of a copious contemporary literature, which enables us to fully explain not only the general significance of the dance, but equally, the details of its concrete symbolism. Some of the peculiarities of the Nataraja images, of course, belong to the conception of Shiva generally, and not to the dance in particular. Such are the braided locks, as of a yogi: the Cassia garland: the skull of Brahma: the figure of Ganga, (*the Ganges fallen from heaven and lost in Shiva's hair*): the cobras: the different earrings, betokening the dual nature of Mahadev, 'whose half is Uma': and the four arms. The drum also is a general attribute of Shiva, belonging to his character of Yogi, though in the dance, it has further a special significance. What then is the meaning of Shiva's Nadanta dance, as understood by Shaivas? Its essential significance is given in texts such as the following:

"Our Lord is the Dancer, who, like the heat latent in firewood, diffuses His power in mind and matter, and makes them dance in their turn."²

The dance, in fact, represents His five activities (*Pancakritya*), viz.: *Shrishti* (overlooking, creation, evolution), *Sthiti* (preservation, support), *Samhara* (destruction, evolution), *Tirobhava* (veiling, embodiment, illusion, and also, giving rest), *Anugraha* (release, salvation, grace). These, separately considered, are the activities of the deities Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Maheshvara and Sadashiva.

This cosmic activity is the central motif of the dance. Further quotations will illustrate and explain the more detailed symbolisms. *Unmai Vilakkam*, verse 36, tells us:

"Creation arises from the drum: protection proceeds from the hand of hope: from fire proceeds destruction: the foot held aloft gives release." It will be observed that the fourth hand points to this lifted foot, the refuge of the soul.

We have also the following from *Chidambara Mummani Kovai*:

"O my Lord, Thy hand holding the sacred drum has made and ordered the heavens and earth and other worlds and innumerable souls. Thy lifted hand protects both the conscious and unconscious order of thy creation. All these worlds are transformed by Thy hand bearing fire. Thy sacred foot, planted on the ground, gives an abode to the tired soul struggling in the toils of causality. It is Thy lifted foot that grants eternal bliss to those that approach Thee. These Five-Actions are indeed Thy Handiwork."

The following verses from the *Tirukuttu Darshana* (Vision of the Sacred Dance), forming the ninth tantra of Tirumular's *Tirumantram*, expand the central motif further:

"His form is everywhere: all-pervading in His Shiva-Shakti
Chidambaram is everywhere, everywhere His dance:
As Shiva is all and omnipresent,
Everywhere is Shiva's gracious dance made manifest.
His five-fold dances are temporal and timeless.
His five-fold dances are His Five Activities.
By His Grace He performs the five acts,
This is the sacred dance of Uma-Sahaya.
He dances with Water, Fire, Wind and Ether,
Thus our Lord dances ever in the court.

Visible to those who pass over Maya and Mahamaya (illusion and super-illusion):

Our Lord dances His eternal dance.
The form of the Shakti is all delight—
This united delight is Uma's body:

This form of Shakti arising in time
And uniting the twain is the dance”
His body is Akash, the dark cloud therein is Muyalaka,
The eight quarters are His eight arms,
The three lights are His three eyes,
Thus becoming, He dances in our body as the congregation.”

This is His dance. Its deepest significance is felt when it is realized that it takes place within the heart and the self. Everywhere is God: that Everywhere is the heart. Thus also we find another verse:

“The dancing foot, the sound of the tinkling bells,
The songs that are sung and the varying steps,
The form assumed by our Dancing Gurupara—
Find out these within yourself, then shall your fetters fall away.”

To this end, all else but the thought of God must be cast out of the heart, that He alone may abide and dance therein. In *Unmai Vilakkam*, we find:

“The silent sages destroying the threefold bond are established where their selves are destroyed. There they behold the sacred and are filled with bliss. This is the dance of the Lord of the assembly, ‘whose very form is Grace’.”

With this reference to the ‘silent sages’ compare the beautiful words of Tirumular:

“When resting there they (the yogis who attain the highest place of peace) lose themselves and become idle. . . . Where the idlers dwell is the pure Space. Where the idlers sport is the Light. What the idlers know is Vedanta. What the idlers find is the deep sleep therein.”

Shiva is a destroyer and loves the burning ground. But what does He destroy? Not merely the heavens and earth at the close of a world-cycle, but the fetters that bind each separate soul.³ Where and what is the burning ground? It is not the place where our earthly bodies are cremated, but the hearts of His lovers, laid waste and desolate. The place where the ego is destroyed signifies the state where illusion and deeds are burnt away: that is the crematorium, the burning-ground where Shri Nataraja dances, and whence He is named Sudalaiyadi, Dancer of the burning-ground. In this simile, we recognize the historical connection between Shiva’s gracious dance as Nataraja, and His wild dance as the demon of the cemetery.

This conception of the dance is current also amongst Shaktas, especially in Bengal, where the Mother rather than the Father-aspect of Shiva is adored. Kali is here the dancer, for whose entrance the heart must be purified by fire, made empty by renunciation. A Bengali Hymn to Kali voices this prayer:

*“Because Thou lovest the Burning-ground,
I have made a Burning-ground of my heart—
That Thou, Dark One, haunter of the Burning-ground,
Mayest dance Thy eternal dance.
Nought else is within my heart, O Mother:
Day and night blazes the funeral pyre:
The ashes of the dead, strewn all about,
I have preserved against Thy coming,
With death-conquering Mahakala neath Thy feet
Do Thou enter in, dancing Thy rhythmic dance,
That I may behold Thee with closed eyes.”*

Returning to the South, we find that in other Tamil texts the purpose of Shiva’s dance is explained. In *Shivajnana Siddhiyar*, Supaksha, Sutra V, 5, we find,

“For the purpose of securing both kinds of fruit to the countless souls, our Lord, with actions five, dances His dance.” Both kinds of fruit, that is *Iham*, reward in this world, and *Param*, bliss in Mukti.

Again, *Unmai Vilakkam*, v. 32, 37, 9 inform us:

“The Supreme Intelligence dances in the soul . . . for the purpose of removing our sins. By these means, our Father scatters the darkness of illusion (*maya*), burns the thread of causality (*karma*), stamps down evil (*mala, anava, avidya*), showers Grace, and lovingly plunges the soul in the ocean of Bliss (*ananda*). They never see rebirths, who behold this mystic dance.”

The conception of the world process as the Lord’s pastime or amusement (*lila*) is also prominent in the Shaiva scriptures. Thus Tirumular writes, “The perpetual dance is His play.” This spontaneity of Shiva’s dance is so clearly expressed in Skryabin’s *Poem of Ecstasy* that the extracts following will serve to explain it better than any more formal exposition—what Skryabin wrote is precisely what the Hindu imager moulded:

*“The Spirit (purusha) playing,
The Spirit longing,
The Spirit with fancy (yoga-maya) creating all,
Surrenders himself to the bliss (ananda) of love
Amid the flowers of His creation (prakriti), He lingers in a kiss.
Blinded by their beauty, He rushes, He frolics, He dances, He whirls.
He is all rapture, all bliss, in this play (lila)
Free, divine, in this love struggle
In the marvellous grandeur of sheer aimlessness,
And in the union of counter-aspirations (dvandva)
in consciousness alone, in love alone,
The Spirit learns the nature (svabhava) of His divine being.
'O, my world, my life, my blossoming, my ecstasy!
Your every moment I create
By negation of all forms previously lived through:
I am eternal negation (neti, neti). . .
Enjoying this dance, choking in this whirlwind,
Into the domain of ecstasy, He takes swift flight.
In this unceasing change (samsara, nitya bhava), in this flight, aimless (nishkama), divine
The Spirit comprehends Himself,
In the power of will, alone (kevala) free (mukta),
Ever-creating, all-irradiating, all vivifying,
Divinely playing in the multiplicity of forms (prapancha), He comprehends Himself. . . .
'I already dwell in thee, O, my world,
Thy dream of me—'twas I coming into existence. . . .
And thou art all—one wave of freedom and bliss'
By a general conflagration (maha-pralaya) the universe (samsara) is embraced
The Spirit is at the height of being, and He feels the tide unending
Of the divine power (shakti) of free will. He is all-daring:
What menaced, now is excitement,
What terrified, is now delight.
And the universe resounds with the joyful cry I am.”⁴*

This aspect of Shiva’s immanence appears to have given rise to the objection that he dances as do those who seek to please the eyes of mortals: but it is answered that in fact He dances to maintain the life of the cosmos and to give release to those who seek Him. Moreover, if we understand even the dances of human dancers rightly, we shall see that they too lead to freedom. But it is nearer the truth to answer that the reason of His dance lies in His own nature, all his gestures are own-nature-born (*svabhava-jah*), spontaneous, and purposeless—for His being is beyond the realm of purposes.

In a much more arbitrary way the dance of Shiva is identified with the *Pancakshara*, or five syllables of the prayer *Shi-va-ya-na-ma*, 'Hail to Shiva.' In *Unmai Vilakkam* we are told: "If this beautiful Five-Letters be meditated upon, the soul will reach the land where there is neither light nor darkness, and there Shakti will make it One with Shivam."⁵

Another verse of *Unmai Vilakkam* explains the fiery arch (*tiruvasi*): The Panchakshara and the Dance are identified with the mystic syllable 'Om,' the arch being the *kombu* or hook of the ideograph of the written symbol:

"The arch over Shri Nataraja is Omkara; and the akshara which is never separate from the Omkara is the contained splendor. This is the Dance of the Lord of Chidambaram."

The *Tiru-Arul-Payan* however (Ch. ix.) explains the *tiruvasi* more naturally as representing the dance of Nature, contrasted with Shiva's dance of wisdom.

"The dance of nature proceeds on one side: the dance of enlightenment on the other. Fix your mind in the centre of the latter."

I am indebted to Mr. Nallasvami Pillai for a commentary on this:

The first dance is the action of matter—material and individual energy. This is the arch, *tiruvasi*, Omkara, the dance of Kali. The other is the Dance of Shiva—the akshara inseparable from the Omkara—called *ardhamatra* or the fourth letter of the Pranava—Chaturtam and Turiyam. The first dance is not possible unless Shiva wills it and dances Himself.

The general result of this interpretation of the arch is, then, that it represents matter, nature, Prakriti; the contained splendor, Shiva dancing within and touching the arch with head, hands and feet, is the universal omnipresent Spirit (*Purusha*). Between these stands the individual soul, as *ya* is between *Shi-va* and *na-ma*.

Now to summarize the whole interpretation we find that *The Essential Significance of Shiva's Dance is threefold: First, it is the image of his Rhythmic Play as the Source of all Movement within the Cosmos, which is Represented by the Arch: Secondly, the Purpose of his Dance is to Release the Countless souls of men from the Snare of Illusion: Thirdly the Place of the Dance, Chidambaram, the Centre of the Universe, is within the Heart.*

So far I have refrained from all aesthetic criticism and have endeavored only to translate the central thought of the conception of Shiva's dance from plastic to verbal expression, without reference to the beauty or imperfection of individual works. But it may not be out of place to call attention to the grandeur of this conception itself as a synthesis of science, religion and art. How amazing the range of thought and sympathy of those rishi-artists who first conceived such a type as this, affording an image of reality, a key to the complex tissue of life, a theory of nature, not merely satisfactory to a single clique or race, nor acceptable to the thinkers of one century only, but universal in its appeal to the philosopher, the lover, and the artist of all ages and all countries. How supremely great in power and grace this dancing image must appear to all those who have striven in plastic forms to give expression to their intuition of Life!

In these days of specialization we are not accustomed to such a synthesis of thought; but for those who 'saw' such images as this, there could have been no division of life and thought into water-tight compartments. Nor do we always realize, when we criticize the merits of individual works, the full extent of the creative power which, to borrow a musical analogy, could discover a mode so expressive of fundamental rhythms and so profoundly significant and inevitable.

Every part of such an image as this is directly expressive, not of any mere superstition or dogma, but of evident facts. No artist of today, however great, could more exactly or more wisely create an image of that Energy which science must postulate behind all phenomena. If we would reconcile Time with Eternity, we can scarcely do so otherwise than by the conception of alternations of phase extending over vast regions of space and great tracts of time. Especially significant, then, is the phase alternation implied by the drum, and the fire which 'changes,' not destroys. These are but visual symbols of the theory of the day and night of Brahma.

In the night of Brahma, Nature is inert, and cannot dance till Shiva wills it: He rises from His rapture, and dancing sends through inert matter pulsing waves of awakening sound, and lo! matter also dances appearing as a glory round about Him. Dancing, He sustains its manifold phenomena. In the fulness of time, still dancing, he destroys all forms and names by fire and gives new rest. This is poetry; but none the less, science.

It is not strange that the figure of Nataraja has commanded the adoration of so many generations past: familiar with all scepticisms, expert in tracing all beliefs to primitive superstitions, explorers of the infinitely great and infinitely small, we are worshippers of Nataraja still.

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Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*, Revised Ed., New York: The Noonday Press, 1957.

Notes

1. A similar story is elsewhere related about an elephant; and these legends account for the elephant or tiger skin, which Shiva wears.

2. Kadavul Mamunivar's *Tiruvatavarar Puranam*, Puttaraivatil, Venracarukkam, stanza 75, translated by Nallasvami Pillai, *Shivajnanabodham*, p. 74. This could also be rendered:

*Like heat latent in firewood, he fills all bodies:
Our Father dances, moving all souls into action, know ye!*

Comapare Eckhart, "Just as the fire infuses the essence and clearness into the dry wood, so has God done with man."

3. Cf. Marcel Schwob. *Le Livre de Monelle*. "This is the teaching: Destroy, destroy, destroy. Destroy within yourself, destroy all around you. Make room for your soul and for other souls. Destroy, because creation proceeds from destruction. . . . For all building up is done with debris, and nothing in the world is new but shapes. But the shapes must be perpetually destroyed . . . Break every cup from which you drink."

4. From the translation by Lydia L. Pimenoff Noble, published in the *Boston Symphony Orchestra Programme*, October 29, 1917.

5. See Nandikeshvara, *The Mirror of Gesture*, translated by Coomaraswamy and Duggirala, p. 11.