The Divine Dancer

An excerpt from *The Snake and the Rope:*

A Jungian View of Hinduism

George R. Elder

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Among all the extraordinary images of Shiva, the most famous is that of Nataraja, "King of Dancers."

Figure 1 *Shiva Nataraja. Sculpture: bronze. India (Tamil Nadu). Chola dynasty, 11th century. Musée Guimet, Paris.*

We see here an example from the Chola dynasty of South India (900-1300 CE) which patronized Shaivite religion and was responsible not only for great new temples with their stone sculptures but also for portable metal images like this bronze. It would have been carried in procession for *darshan* or "seeing" of the Sacred. It is also likely that a bit of tiger skin draped the image (deities are often ritually clothed for worship) while the God does wear a metallic snake around his shoulders. He stands on the *yaksha* dwarf Apasmara, the demi-god of "Forgetfulness," whom we met at Gudimullam. Together, these elements allude to a myth of the God's vanquishing the "three miseries" of *maya* ("illusion," a tiger), *karma* ("transmigration," the snake), and *avidya* ("ignorance," symbolized by the dwarf). It was then that the Lord danced a dance of victory.[1]

But we already watched him dance untamed lust in the Pine Forest; and in courtship he danced before Parvati on the mountain. At the junctures of the great cycles of existence, he is known to dance Destruction and Creation.[2] In fact, the Lord himself declares in the *Kurma Purana*: "I, the Yogin, dance on forever" (2.4.33).[3] Shiva, therefore, is not only archetypal Pillar, Phallus, and Androgyne—he is also the archetypal Dancer.

The Pillar is not missing here. In an otherwise very active image, we sense the Standing One in the central axis: established by the right leg holding the God's pillar-like body and extending through a serene face and tall headdress. Indeed, it must be so as we read in T. S. Eliot:

> Except for the point, the still point
> There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.[4]

That Still Point is the Self archetype—the Center, the Unmoved Mover, Vishnu Sleeping—around which all else turns.

And how it turns! The left leg of Shiva is raised to provide the thrust of a powerful swing to the left, arms reaching out to assist in the expression of great energy. Usually held tight in a yogin's topknot, the hair is flying loose as the deity whirls. At the same time, a ring of Fire—of "ascetic" Destruction *and* "phallic" Creativity—spins around the Dancer to complete the image of a sort of divine gyroscope, balanced perfectly by its opposing forces.

Since Jung tells us that "a phallic symbol does not denote the sexual organ, but the libido," it is perhaps easier to see here that a dancing god is not essentially about dancing but denotes the Energy to which we all have access. Indeed, we—at its furthest extent from the Center—are its conscious manifestation.[5]

Someone has called Hindu images "visible theology," and we must agree. As "King of Dancers," Shiva as the paradoxical God is made visible. He is essentially naked as the renouncer of the body's comfort yet dancing naked as the body's affirmer. He holds in one of his four hands a flame associated with the world's Destruction at the end of a cycle (for us, the destruction of projections that have lured us into life but have outlived their purpose). In the opposite hand, he holds a little drum that beats out the rhythm of his creative dance, i.e., Creation of the very cycles he periodically destroys (those fascinations without which life would be dull). Jung writes of this rhythm:

> The idea of the complete life is the enormous swing from high to low, from low to high; from extraversion to introversion and vice versa. If life does

> not contain the pairs of opposites, it is just a straight line. It is just as if you did not breathe, it is just as though you did not live. When life is lived as rhythm, disastole and systole, then it is a whole, it is approaching completion.[6]

A third hand is held upward with its palm toward the worshipper in the standard hand gesture or *mudra* that means "fear not"—fear not that one is caught in the karmic fires of desire, for "Release" by the fire of knowledge is possible.

And there it is, signaled by the fourth hand, at the end of a long graceful arm called the "elephant trunk" arm. The Lord points to his raised foot, symbol of refuge, promise that one does not have to stand here forever in "Forgetfulness."

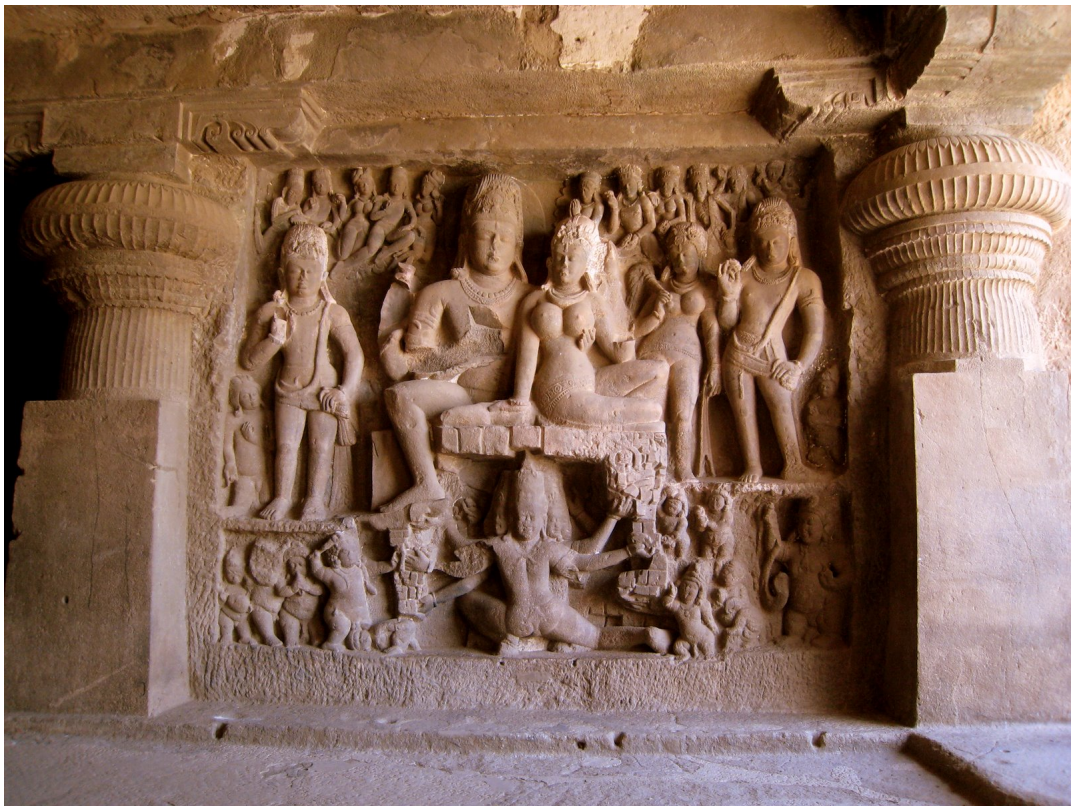

Figure 2 *Shiva Sitting with Parvati on Mount Kailasa. Stone panel: deep relief. India, Ellora, Cave 29. 7th century.*

We might ask where in this image of the Divine Dancer is Shiva's beloved consort, Parvati, and all that she means to him? She is present as the Dance itself—the energetic manifestation of the One—present also as a sliver of the changeable Moon in the God's headdress. She is hidden in the form of his other consort Ganga, the divine Ganges River, caught in the Lord's tresses. Mythologically, Shiva's hair softened the River's fall from heaven to spare India her sudden impact. In other words, he acted as do all religious symbols to soften the impact of archetypal energy streaming toward an ego not quite ready for numinous experience. He is the Standing One who helps us "stand" Him.

And we might find Parvati in the gradual rise and transformation of energy: from the stylized lotus pedestal here that is merely vegetal; to the little human dwarf; to the full-sized human form of Shiva who dances—not in cathartic abandon—but with complete control of a movement that would take much time to perfect.

He dances with "masculine" power but also with unmistakable "feminine" grace. And he dances with Joy. Every dance or *tandava* of Shiva includes the opposites, but some emphasize the apocalyptic while others the creative. This particular variation—with the left leg raised—is called *ananda tandava* or "Dance of Bliss" which must be one reason why it was so frequently rendered in ancient India. It may even be why its reproduction can be found today in modern living rooms or in miniature on a writer's desk.

Our own God-images are supposed to be "joyous," and they have no doubt been so for countless souls. We know that David danced before the Ark of the Covenant, and Sufis dance their love of Allah, while Jesus is said to have danced

the Round Dance. But it is difficult to imagine their heavenly "Father" starting the dance or dancing with them or just slapping his thighs as he sits there upon his throne.

Figure 3 *Dancing Sufi ("Whirling Dervish"). Photograph: color. Turkey. 21st century.*

The difficulty seems to be that this traditional Western deity is "wounded in the thigh"—like the Fisher King of the "Grail Legend" who is unable to ride to the hunt or combat (much less dance). He merely sits in his boat fishing for the meaning of what has happened to him.[7] Since the "thigh" is a euphemism for the phallus and even for the womb (Dionysus was born from his father's thigh), its wounding speaks of a weakness in the realm of Eros—that symbolic realm of

Feminine life that is asking us to explore the unconscious, trust our spontaneous feelings, and love our bodies.

Joan Blackmer, a Jungian analyst who once danced professionally, calls our attention to the fact that there is one art form in particular "in which the opposites of body and spirit have not been completely severed—dance."[8] In dance, therefore, we find expressions of our longing to be whole, a wholeness that includes the ascetic work to achieve it:

> through discipline and a kind of asceticism, with sweat and perseverance, dancers shape their bodies, bending them at least for a time, to the ego's will. On a personal plane, through fashioning their bodies dancers transform themselves physically and spiritually. Once rooted consciously in the nature of their bodies, dancers become vessels to catch, contain and transform the energies of the unconscious. In their movements they make manifest the images of the transpersonal psyche, bridging the opposites of nature and spirit, earth and sky, everyday life and the infinite.[9]

Blackmer acknowledges that Shiva's dancing on Apasmara is "an image of the effort to move consciousness above the animal level" akin to the Christian effort. But, then, "Shiva dances close to the earth, in the crucifixion Christ is lifted off the ground."[10] Indeed, visually, our Nataraja presses down on the back of the dwarf for stability as much as he pushes upward to spin—so that the *homunculus* functions "creatively" as the *prima materia* or what we have to work with in the first place. We are reminded of Vishnu as the Tortoise, upon whose back the cosmic Mountain churned, this way and that.

Although Western classical ballet is beautiful—with its females *en pointe*, its aerial work and leaps defying gravity—modern dance with its floor work, bare feet, and "earthy" emotional themes expresses better what the "Fisher King" needs. And unless this God-image is healed, we will not be healed sufficiently to join wholeheartedly in "Shiva's dance." It was not Jung but the American pioneer in modern dance, Martha Graham, who said: "There is a vitality, a life-force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist. . . . The world will not have it."[11]

Figure 4 *Martha Graham in "Lamentation,"1930. Photograph: black and white. Library of Congress, No. 3. 20th century.*

Jung did say:

> So you must inquire what experiment the Self wants to make. Everything that disturbs that experiment must be avoided, and everything that helps must be lived, and you will see the consequences on the spot. If you do something which disturbs the experiment you will be punished, much more severely than in a police court. And if you do something which rather serves your experiment, you will have the blessing of heaven and the angels will come to dance with you.[12]

[1] George R. Elder, *The Snake and the Rope: A Jungian View of Hinduism* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2012), 279-283.
[2] Susan L. Huntington, *Art of Ancient India* (New York: Weatherhill, 1985), 534-536 and 654-655, note 29.
[3] Ganesh Vasudeo Tagare, trans., *Kurma Purana*, vol. 21 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1981), 353.
[4] T. S. Eliot," Four Quartets: Burnt Norton," in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 191.
[5] C. G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, *CW* 5, par. 329; and *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, *CW* 16, par. 340, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953-1979).
[6] C. G. Jung, *Dream Analysis: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1928-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 101.
[7] Emma Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend* (Boston: Sigo Press, 1986), 173.
[8] Joan Dexter Blackmer, *Acrobats of the Gods: Dance and Transformation* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1989), 15.
[9] Ibid., 19.
[10] Ibid., 88.
[11] Ibid.. 7.
[12] C. G. Jung, *Nietzsche's "Zarathustra": Notes of the Seminar Given in 1934-1939*, edited by James L. Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 403.