

Play - 1: Nataraja: Hindu Lord of Dancing

Sam Gill

Replicas of the figurines of Shiva as Nataraja “Lord of Dancing” dating from 13th century bronze image are popular today. I see them everywhere. I rather imagine that most who have these statues don’t know all that much about them other than that they are Indian and interesting and exotic. Yet, I believe that the popularity of this particular figure has something to do with the dance, frozen in a moment. Maybe this figure in the eyes of the westerner hints of the religious importance of dancing ignored, if not actually opposed, in the west.

In this Hindu figurine Nataraja is depicted as dancing while holding in his hands symbols representing the five cosmic processes: creation, preservation, destruction, embodiment, and release. His dancing is not a part of these cosmic processes, but rather the primordial grounding, which of course is no thing, upon which all these cosmic processes become possible. His dancing is understood as *lila* or play and, as such, it is not done for any reason, but simply because it is his own nature to do so, to dance. I suggest that dancing is selected as the playful actions of Nataraja because the ancient Hindus comprehended the fundamental paradox of self-othering that distinguishes dancing; that they sensed what I will discuss in other lectures as “seduction;” and that they understood something very profound about play in identifying this dancing action of Shiva as *lila*. In their wisdom, they understood that dancing precedes and grounds ontology. We need understand this figure more fully and then engage in a fuller exploration of play as it has been understood in western philosophy in order to appreciate how we might enhance and enrich our understanding of dancing by considering it as play.

This figurine of Nataraja depicts his Nadanta dance which is done in the golden hall of Chidambaram, the south Indian temple considered the center of the universe. The image is associated with a story. A number of heretical rishis lived in the forest of Taragam. Shiva went there to subdue these rishis accompanied by Vishnu disguised as a beautiful woman. The rishis turned on Shiva attempting to destroy him with spells. A fierce tiger was created in sacrificial fires. Shiva easily subdued the tiger and removed its skin with one of his fingernails and wrapped the skin about himself. Next the rishis sent a snake against Shiva, yet he simply seized it and wrapped it about his neck as a garland. Finally, the rishis set an evil dwarf against Shiva and he simply pressed his foot on the dwarf breaking its back. Vishnu, as the beautiful woman Ati-Sheshan, witnessing all this, worshipped Shiva and asked to see the mystic Nadanta dance promising Shiva that he should dance in Chidambaram. Many elements of this story are represented in the popular figurine of Nataraja. Yet, this story has little to say about the significance of the dance itself.

Other aspects of the image are important to note. The dancing Shiva has four arms, braided and jeweled hair with the lower locks whirling in the dancing. The hair may contain a wreathing cobra, a skull, and the mermaid figure of the river Ganga. A crescent moon rests upon the head which is crowned with a wreath of Cassia leaves. Shiva wears a man’s earring in his right ear and a woman’s in his left. Necklaces and armlets, a jeweled belt, anklets, bracelets, finger and toe rings adorn his body. Shiva wears tight pants and a fluttering scarf. He also wears a sacred thread. One right hand holds a

drum the other is lifted in a sign meaning “do not fear.” One left hand holds fire and the other points to the subdued dwarf on whom Shiva stands. His left foot is raised. All is supported on a lotus pedestal and Shiva is surrounded by an encircling glory (*tiru-vasi*) fringed with flame.¹

At this point it is important to understand that in its imagery the dancing figure represents all five cosmic activities, that all of them occur within the dancing of Nataraja. It is not that Shiva’s dance is a creative force in the universe, that the universe proceeds from his dancing. Rather, and much more importantly, creation and destruction both occur within the context of the dancing Shiva. If we can grasp this we can begin to understand the importance of the sense that Shiva is dancing to accomplish nothing. It is not that he wants to create or destroy or enable or have any effect whatever. He dances only and simply because it is his nature to do so. It is play (*lila*); something done for the sake of just doing it, with no other intent or motive. We’ll need to take this very seriously because I believe that there is a close connection between play and dancing and that to develop our appreciation of this connection is to enhance our understanding of both. In the following several lectures I will examine a number of important perspectives on play and then return to Nataraja for a fuller consideration.

One other thing important at this point is to think a bit about the motionless aspect of the figurines that present Nataraja. The representation of the contextualizing story to Shiva’s dancing Nadanta in Chidambaram and of the cosmic activities it encompasses tends to set a boundary or an including perimeter to the entirety of cosmic space and time. Yet, the figurine depicts Nataraja, while clearly dancing, in a fixed moment in the dance. What is important is actually what the image suggests and implies, yet does not depict; and that is the dancing movement in itself. The figure bears a sense of the incipience, the potential, the about to be released force that is fundamental to dancing ... and to playing. So it is not this figure itself that is key, but what the figure points to that cannot be caught or depicted in any way possible, but that can be known. This sense is caught in the text which reads, “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

And, in the distinctive Hindu perspective of seeing the whole of the cosmos in the heart of the human, Coomaraswami writes that the deepest significance of the dance is “felt when it is realized that it takes place within the heart and the self. Everywhere is God: that Everywhere is the heart.” And he continues by citing a Hindu text:

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.³

1 Coomaraswami, Ananda “The Dance of Shiva” pp. 69-70.

² Ibid., p. 70. The text is Kadavul Mamunivar’s *Tiruvataavurar Puranam*.

³ Ibid., 72.

Thus, Nataraja's dancing is the vitality of the cosmos and the human being at once, one and the same. It seems that the fullest realization of this depends on seeing beyond the frozen image of Nataraja to glimpse a sense of his dancing, his moving, his playing.

The dancing is described as spontaneous, indicating primarily that it is not motivated or planned or done toward any goal or end. The playful aspect of Nataraja's dancing is suggested in Skryabin's *Poem of Ecstasy* which includes this passage.

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 his play (*lila*)
Free, divine, in his love struggle
In the marvelous 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 the unceasing change (*samsara, nitya bhava*), in this flight, aimless (*nishkama*), divine
The Spirit comprehends Himself,
In the power of will, alone (*kevala*) free (*mukta*),
Every-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

⁴ Coomaraswami, pp. 74-75.

Hold these beautiful images now while we turn for several lectures to consider play in broad philosophical perspectives; then we will return to deal with Nataraja and *lila* with greater care and more depth.