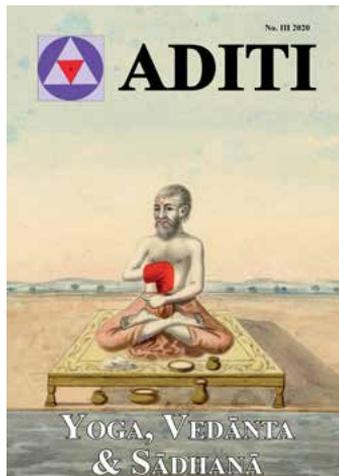


# The Yogic Dance of Maheśvara

Sarah Magalhães

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# The Yogic Dance of Maheśvara

Sarah Magalhães

*Do you know, oh wise one, that the dance of the Lord is a projection here below of the whole ordering of Heavenly things?*

At each single moment, the dancing Lord dances the cosmic creation in the ethereal sphere. Each breath of life, each blink of our eyes, each thought, act of speech or movement is a remote reflection of his *svātantrya*<sup>1</sup>, of his sovereign power and immanent bliss coming forth from his motionless cosmic dance.

Śiva, the great yogi and cosmic dancer is known as *Naṭarāja*, the Lord of dance in Hindu mythology. His dancing image, in the *Tāṇḍava*<sup>2</sup> form, vigorous and transforming is the starting point of all creation. The symbolism of *Naṭarāja* in his dancing pose reflects the equilibrium of the cosmic disorder proper to the phenomenon of creation including destruction, love and bliss, all these complementary principles being merged in the wholeness of the Absolute.

The iconographic image of Lord *Naṭarāja*, a masterpiece achieved under the Chola dynasty in the tenth century AD, depicts the unfolding of the cosmic movement, represented by the art of dance in an immovable, static medium revealing in a symbolic manner, the metaphysical forces that put the world in movement. Contemplating the dancing Lord, one can feel the movement of the limbs of the god conceived as an organic motion of rhythms around a motionless Axis, (Consciousness). In a static medium – in this case, sculpture--, stillness and movement are harmoniously balanced in the icon as a reflection of the symbolism it refers to, the complementary equation stillness-movement of Śiva's Consciousness.

The rhythmic movement of dance seen in the geometrical equi-

1 *Svātantrya* is the concept of Divine Sovereignty in Kashmir Shaivism. It is the operative, dynamic aspect of the Absolute, described as an energy that emanates from the Supreme (*Parama Śiva*), like a wave of motion inside consciousness (*spanda*) that acts as the foundation of the world.

2 According to Shaivism, Śiva's *Tāṇḍava* is described as a vigorous dance that is the source of the cycle of creation, preservation and dissolution. It refers to the manifestation of primal rhythmic energy.

librium of the limbs of the God in the iconographic image has a cosmological significance. In the dancing pose of *Naṭarāja*, each gesture carries a teaching and a metaphysical symbolism. Each limb has a significance and represents a unity of time, bearing one teaching of the *samsārika* journey of the soul. Blessings and tribulations both being integral parts of earthly life, paradise and purgatory are simultaneously and consecutively happening here and now. Understanding this cosmological fact is the initiatic condition for the Path of transformation proper to the *Tāṇḍava* of *Maheśvara*

The frontal palm of the right hand, which is lifted in *abhaya mudrā*, stands for fearlessness indicating spiritual power. Fearlessness being one of the fundamental spiritual virtues, represents the first requirement in the Path of self transformation. Within *sādhana yoga*, *yogis* aspire to conquer the lower self and transcend worldly desires, hindrances and obstacles by harnessing spiritual fearlessness and strength. The left hand, which is thrown across the body with the fingers pointing downwards to the upraised left foot, represents the refuge of the devotees, which is submission to *dharma* and to the *guru*. In this stage, one has come within the framework of the protecting blessings of the tradition, having achieved the first stage of endurance on the Path of Self transformation. Symbolically, the upraised foot suggests the possibility of rising above

the *samsārika* world with the grace bestowed by the Lord. In the Path of self transformation, one has to keep a steady foot on the ground and throw the other one higher to surpass oneself.

In the right upper hand Śiva carries the *ḍamaru*, a small drum representing the creative sound symbolic of time, indicating the beginning of a new cycle. This is the creative aspect of the God. On the other hand he holds fire that shall consume the same cycle of existence. This is the destructive aspect of the Lord, but it also symbolizes light and therefore destruction of ignorance. All these processes are concurrently interconnected, destruction and creation going hand in hand in this transformative process. Under the right foot is a dwarf being crushed by the God, signifying triumph over ignorance, the source of evil, culminating ultimately, in final liberation. Enshrining the dancing Lord, there is a circle of flames in which the entire function of Śiva as the creator, preserver and destroyer is represented in the *samsārika* wheel of destiny. This dance is a metaphor of the cosmic play in which life is essentially a dynamic balancing of good and bad, where interdependent opposites finally are balanced by a deeper intrinsic complementarity. Ultimately Being is One and the ultimate meaning of His cosmic dance is the reabsorption of all opposites in the Essence without any privation but plenitude solely.

The dance of Śiva is the dance

of life. The art of dance manifested in human bodily consciousness becomes a representation of this cosmic fact. This sculpture is not merely a translation of poetry into bronze but a symbol of how the same poetry can be achieved in the heights of Consciousness in another more essential and existential medium, the sacred temple of the body. The Lord dances in our very being. He dances in time and in eternity. In time, his dance is the dance of cosmic evolution of matter that has no beginning, no middle, and no end as matter and spirit are entwined in the law of causation. In eternity, He dwells in the Heart of man.

“Like heat latent in firewood, he fills all bodies,  
Our Father dances, moving all souls into action, know ye!”<sup>3</sup>

The *Tāṇḍava* dance in relation to creation and transformation, represents the full scope of the permanent activity of God in the cosmos as well as in ourselves. This is well symbolized by Lord *Naṭarāja* in the act of dancing in a dynamic yet still

iconography. The Lord’s dance takes place in various degrees of existence. The variety of the *Tāṇḍava* dances described in mythology, disclose the various symbolism of his divine performance taking place consecutively in the Heavens, in the cities of *Māyā* and presently in the temples of daily life. Among his dances, the *Sandhyā Tāṇḍava* is performed at twilight on Mount Kailash, his sacred abode in the heavens, witnessed by his consort, the lovely Parvati and accompanied by all *devatās* playing various instruments. This is a dance of joy and creation. Other *Tāṇḍavas* performed by Śiva are the *Tripura Tāṇḍava*, which takes place after the destruction of the Three Cities<sup>4</sup> and symbolizes the subjugation over inferior *māyā* and its power of concealment. The *Rudra Tāṇḍava* often symbolizes the destruction of the cosmos. Within us, *Rudra Tāṇḍava* annihilates the evil or vices that germinate within, leading to the attainment of salvation and the relief from the cycle of birth and death. Finally the *Ānanda Tāṇḍava*<sup>5</sup>, the Dance of Bliss is performed in the mythical-terrestrial *Sri Chidambaram Naṭarāja* Temple<sup>6</sup>, the oldest

3 *Kadavul Mamunivar’s Tiruvatavarar Puranam, Puttaraivatil, Venracarukkam*, stanza 75, translated by *Nallasvami Pillai, Shivajnanabodham*, p. 74. quoted in *Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. The Dance of Shiva Fourteen Indian Essays*, The Sunwise Turn Inc., New York 1918, p.59

4 The Three cities were constructed by the great *asura* architect *Māyāsura*. They were great cities of prosperity, power and dominance over the world, but due to their impious nature, *Māyā’s* cities were destroyed by the god *Tripurāntaka*, an aspect of Śiva. The three cities were made of iron, silver and gold and were located on earth, in the sky and in heaven, respectively.

5 The *Ānanda Tāṇḍava* is the dance of bliss where the intrinsic nature of Śiva emerges as Śivam where he is in his purest form - *Satcidānanda*. The iconographic *Naṭarāja* Posture is also called *Ānanda Tāṇḍava*.

6 *Chidambaram Naṭarāja* Temple is located in Tamil Nadu. The temple is considered

uninterrupted living temple of India, where the first *lingam*<sup>7</sup> spontaneously emerged, when the sacred site was still a dense forest. From the Heavens to *Chidambaram*, the Lord has never ceased dancing in time and space as well as beyond time and space. All these forms of dance stand for various cosmic phenomena such as creation, preservation, concealment, destruction and liberation that together synthesis the whole cosmic process. They represent the five cosmic activities *pañcakārya*: Śruṣṭi (creation), *Sthiti* (preservation), *Samhāra* (destruction), *Tirobhāva* (illusion), and *Anugraha* (salvation).

The following verses from the *Tirukuttu Darshana* (Vision of the Sacred Dance), forming the ninth tantra of Tirumular's *Tirumantram*, expand the this idea 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.”<sup>8</sup>

*Tāṇḍava* is the vigorous divine dance of Lord Śiva, vigorous because it bestows the power of transformation. Likewise, in the microcosm the *Karaṇas* that are the elements of the *Tāṇḍava* dance are a powerful instrument for self transformation. Just as mantras are the instrument of *vāc*, (speech) in the Vedic rituals, analogously, within the body—a temple to enshrine Consciousness—the *Karaṇas* are the components or “power in action” of the cosmic dance of Lord Śiva.

“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.”<sup>9</sup>

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the center of the universe. It has mythical roots and a Śiva shrine existed at the original site of groves and forests known as Thillai. Chidambaram literally means “atmosphere of wisdom” and symbolizes the connection between the arts and spirituality. The 108 *Karaṇas* are found carved in its main Gopurams. The temple is located at the center point of the world's magnetic Equator and has within it one of the five elemental *lingas* in the Shaivism pilgrimage tradition, being considered the subtlest of all Śiva temples (*Kovil*) in Hinduism.

7 The *Lingam* is an abstract or aniconic representation of Śiva in Shaivism and its roots come from self-manifested natural objects. *Linga* means mark, sign, and refers to the evidence of God. The *Lingam* refers to Śiva as the generative power of existence.

8 Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*, The Sunwise Turn Inc., New York 1918, p.60

9 *Kadavul Mamunivar's Tiruvatavarar Puranam, Puttaraivatil, Venera Carukkam*, stanza 75, translated by Nallasvami Pillai, *Śiva Jnana Bodham*, p. 74. quoted in Coomaraswamy,

In South India, the tradition of dance has been represented through sculptures on the carved walls of ancient temples. The 108 *Karaṇas* are the enigmatic sculptured postures found in most South Indian Temples. Being revealed in the *Nāṭya Veda*, they go back to the *Tretā Yuga*, which indicates their mythological origin. In the realm of time, the first mention of the *Karaṇas* is seen in the literary text, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*<sup>10</sup>, which goes back to sometime between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. The *Karaṇas* are the foundation of Indian classical dance, depicting dance movements, acrobatic postures and yogic poses.

These carved sculptures represent the *Karaṇas*, the 108 postures revealed by Lord Śiva symbolizing the patterns of his cosmic dance, according to mythology. The *Karaṇas* were in this mythological context the instrumental actions of Lord Śiva in the cosmic unfolding, and in the terrestrial order, they are the instruments of bodily consciousness by which human beings can experience

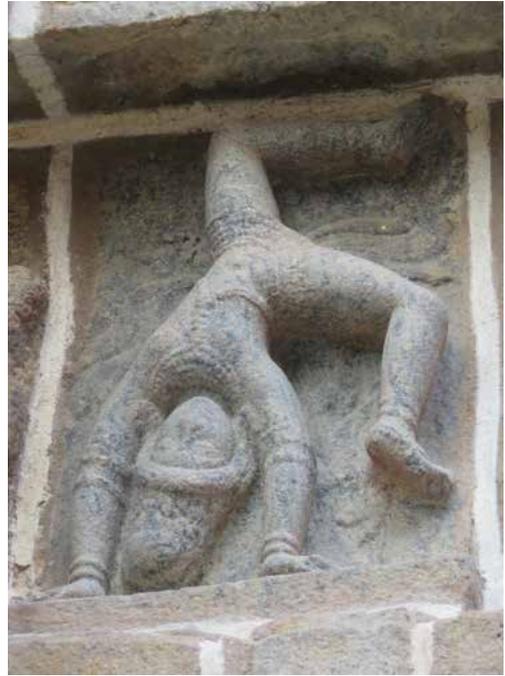
Self awareness. At one level, they illustrate the joy of life, of which dance is a major medium, but they also have an esoteric meaning, as in sacred art, any artistic expression is a symbol which points to metaphysics and to a transcendent Reality.

In the realm of myths, before *Maheśvara* unfolds the *nṛtta* or dance movements in time, he abides in immobility or in *sama stithi*<sup>11</sup>. Metaphysically, all manifested movements arise from an unmoved motor. Similarly, static postures (yoga) stands for the stillness of cosmic consciousness and *Nṛtta*<sup>12</sup> (dance) stands for manifestation of life in time. Both aspects are present in the *Karaṇas*, static being the universal complement of dynamic. Symbolically, dance movements are the expression of the Lord's creation in time. Static postures stand for Consciousness in the ethereal sphere. Before being a dancer, *Maheśvara* is a *Yogi*. Thus, through yoga, the *Karaṇas* are the medium of channeling power either static or in movement, through the

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Ananda K. *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*, The Sunwise Turn Inc., New York 1918, p.59

- 10 The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, attributed to sage Bharata Muni is a Sanskrit treatise on performing arts. It is notable for covering a variety of subjects such as dramatic composition, the nature of the aesthetic experience, the structure of a play and the construction of a stage to host it, genres of acting, body movements, make up and costumes, the role and goals of an art director, the musical scales, musical instruments and the integration of music with art performance. It is a text-reference for dance, music and literary traditions in India.
- 11 In *Yoga, Samasthiti* refers to the concentrating attention. In the body it stands for the steadiness of the Mountain Posture. Etymologically: *sama* = same, equal / *stithi* = to establish, to stand. It translates to establishing an equal and steady stance. Bringing into wholeness, to a single thing, that which contains several different parts. In the deity, it is viewed as the one eternal substance of which the universe is only the ramification or diversified representation.
- 12 *Nṛtta*: Pure dance. The abstract, fast and rhythmic aspect of the dance presented through graceful movement of the body. Thus, purely instrumental actions of unfolding the geometrical lines of the microcosmic body in space.



*Karaṇas* Postures at Śāraṅgapāṇī Swamy Temple at Kumbakoṇam, Tamil Nadu. Sarangapani Swami temple is believed to be of significant antiquity with contributions at different times from Medieval Cholas, Vijayanagar Empire and Madurai Nayaks. The temple is revered in *Divya Prabandham*, the 7th–9th century *Vaiṣṇava* canon.

alignment of the sacred geometry of the body within consciousness.

In ancient times, philosophy and art were two streams of the same quest for Truth. Because of that, we find innumerable inspired poets and philosophers conversing with philosophical truths in the field of arts. Abhinavagupta, the great mystic of the Kashmir Shaivism designated by *Pratyabhijñā* or *Trika Darśana* had great interest in dramaturgy, particularly dealing with the *Karaṇas*.

Endowed with an intellectual vision combined with the experiences of a mystic, he explored the treatise on dramaturgy, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, from a deep level of understanding, unveiling for example, the spiritual dimension of the aesthetic experience, *rasa*. With the analogy between “Divine Art” and human art, *Pratyabhijñā*, the philosophy of Self-Identity or Self-Recognition, gives a possibility to correlate this philosophical stream of thought with Abhinavagupta’s interest in dramaturgy.

The *Karaṇas* are the framework for the “*mārgī*”, the one who follows the *mārgam*, the path of classical dance. However, at an esoteric level, we may also understand *mārgam* as a spiritual path, in which the *Karaṇas* stand for yoga, inwardness, self awareness, revealing the spiritual fragrance of the *Karaṇas*.

One of the definitions of the concept of the *Karaṇa* by Abhinavagupta mentions: “*kriyā karaṇam*”. This formulation implies

action, “that which causes something to happen”. Seeing the enigmatic sculptured postures depicting the *Karaṇas* in ancient temples, one is intrigued to ask what kind of action is the *Karaṇa*? Abhinavagupta as a tantric and mystic, would not refer to the *Karaṇas* only as dance patterns, mere physical actions but rather would point out the relevance of inner action, *Kriyā yoga*, that causes something to happen. Any action has its effect. The *Karaṇas* in the light of *Pratyabhijñā*, would refer to an extraordinary action that causes something to happen... Only a deeper exploration of the *Karaṇas* can make one realize the essential purpose of the Divine dance; the manifestation of Being in the skilful practice of an art, bestowing awareness of the divine Presence. This is the spiritual approach.

The traditional view of art highlights the fact that art is not something separate from the very “being” of the artist but it is its very essence manifesting itself through a skillful practice of an art. Thus, art is an integral part of the being of the artist as the cosmic creation is part integral of God. “There is no sacred art that does not depend on an aspect of metaphysics. The science of metaphysics is itself limitless, given that its object is infinite.”<sup>13</sup>

The word *Karaṇa*, has different meanings according to the specific traditional field of knowledge in which it is employed. *Karaṇa*

<sup>13</sup> William Stoddart, *The Essential Titus Burckhardt on Sacred Arts Faiths and Civilizations* (World Wisdom, Inc, 2005), p.92.



*Karana* Posture at Pātāleśvara Temple , Pune. The Pataleshwar Cave Temple is a rock-cut cave temple, carved out in the 8th century in the Rashtrakuta period by Kannadiga kings.

literally translates as doing, producing, or effecting<sup>14</sup>, and relates to the performance or causing of an action. In the field of philosophy, *Karana* means “instrument”, cause, to make, to cause to make<sup>15</sup>. It also denotes the means of knowledge (*jñāna*) and action (*kriyā*). Derived from the root ‘*kr*’, meaning ‘to do’, the term *Karana* has relevance in several branches of knowledge in ancient India, such as grammar, music, astrology and religion. It may refer to a writer or scribe in grammar; the posture of an ascetic, the means by

which an action is effected; the mind-heart (*antaḥ-karana*), and a particular position of the fingers<sup>16</sup>.

The *Karanas* are also one of the practices of the *Āṇava Upāya*<sup>17</sup>, in Kashmir Shaivism, where the aspirant contemplates the body and the nervous system as a replica of the universe. All these definitions point out to the possibility of the *Karanas* being a yogic discipline, the human body being an instrument for inner and outer knowledge, a sacred field to be explored and known, a medium for Self-awareness.

14 Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1997), p. 254.

15 John Grimes, *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2009), p. 195.

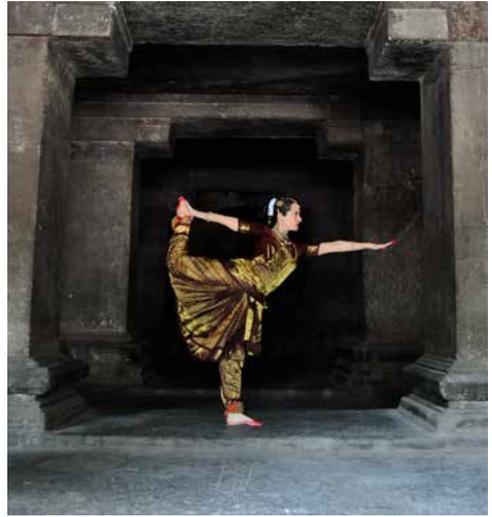
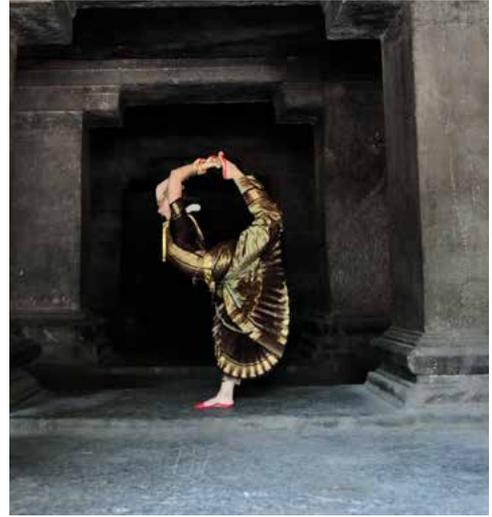
16 Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1997), p. 254.

17 John Grimes, *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2009), p. 195.

Classical Indian Theatre, composed by dance and dramatic expression strives to achieve non-ordinary states of consciousness in both actors and the spectator according to the *Rasa* theory, intended to lead both actors and audience to experience Universal Consciousness through the aesthetic experience. In this process, and with the potentiality of Self-Recognition, the dancing-actor pours his existence into the fire of Self-knowledge through the discipline of dramatic action.

*Pratyabhijñā* conceives the Ultimate Reality as Śiva Consciousness, Paramaśiva, not the Śiva with form, but the non-relational consciousness and the changeless principle of all changing experience. In this system, Consciousness is not simply passive, but active and creative, having within itself infinite powers. Its essential nature is *cit* (consciousness) *prakāśa* (light) and *ānanda* (bliss), expressing itself by means of *icchā* (will), *jñāna* (knowledge) and *kriyā* (action).

In *Vedānta* philosophy, Brahman is considered to be *Sat Cit Ānanda*. Consciousness is understood stressing the aspect of *prakāśa* or *jñāna* (light or knowledge). Creation comes about by the power of *māyā* in the manifestation of the universe. Thus, *Brahman* is seen devoid of any activity. In *Pratyabhijñā*, Conscious-



*Yoga Postures at Pātāleśvara Temple, Pune*

ness is active and creative. This aspect is called *vimarśa*<sup>18</sup> in which pure Consciousness combines knowledge, *jñāna* and action *kriyā*, that brings about the creation of the world. Thus, creation is actively willed into exist-

<sup>18</sup> In Kashmir Shaivism, *Vimarśa* refers to the creative power and its ability to contain a reflection of itself and of the creation. In dramaturgy, *Vimarśa* stands for a change in the successful progress of a dramatic plot, a change in the prosperous course of a love-story caused by some unforeseen reverse or accident. Thus, it reflects the creative power of an action.

tence by the supreme Consciousness (Śiva) by means of his irresistible will-force (*svātantrya*). This is beautifully expressed through the symbolism of Śiva in his aspect of Śiva *Naṭarāja*, the cosmic dancer. Lord Śiva being by excellence the great actor.

Ultimate Reality in this system is symbolised by Śiva, the divinity in its aspect of transformer. Śiva is referred to as *prakāśa-vimarśamaya*. *Prakāśa* is the eternal light of Consciousness without which nothing can appear. “If Ultimate Reality were merely *prakāśa* and not also *vimarśa*, it would be powerless and inert. ‘*Yadi nirvimarśaḥ syāt anisvaro jaḍasca prasajyeta*’ (*Parapraveśikā*, p.2) It is this pure I-consciousness in its creative aspect or *Vimarśa* that is responsible for the manifestation, maintenance and re-absorption of the universe.” *Vimarśa* is that aspect of *prakāśa* by which it knows itself, it is the non-relational immediate awareness of “I” in its power of doership *Kartrtva Śakti*.

In the creative process, the power of creation is Śakti. In *Pratyabhijñā*, the theory of reflection, Śakti polarizes Consciousness into *Aham* and *Idam* (I and This), subject and object. When the dual conscience appears it is covered by the veil of illusion, duality, so the conscience takes the form of the

thirty-five *tattvas*<sup>19</sup>. However, the power of creation is nothing separate from Śiva, (Consciousness) but is Śiva Himself in His creative aspect. *Śiva-Śakti* is that point when consciousness and power are in their full blossom. Śakti thus is Śiva’s I-consciousness, *Aham-vimarśa*, when it intends to create with the powers of *Ichhā* or will, *jñāna* or knowledge, *kriyā* or action. “He (i.e., Siva) Himself full of joy enhanced by the honey of the three corners of his heart, viz., *icchā* or Will, *jñāna* or Knowledge, *kriyā* or Action, raising up His face to gaze at (His own splendour) is called Śakti”.

It is the nature of the ultimate Reality to manifest Itself. The supreme Being is absolute and infinite and thus implies the manifestation of all possibilities. Hence, the manifestation of the universe comes forth from this pure light that contains in potential all that is ever likely to be. At the macrocosmic level, pure Consciousness creates all the diversity of the world as an expression of its original unity of Consciousness. Man, essentially divine, embodies the same powers at the microcosmic level. The dancing-actor embodies within himself the same powers of the Supreme Creator.

As Kṣemarāja, an authority in Kashmir Shaivism states, “Individual consciousness which perceives, is the

19 *Tattvas* in Kashmir Shaivism are the basic concepts to understand the nature of the Absolute, the souls and the universe. They explain the structure and origin of the universe. The pure *tattvas* describe internal aspects of the Absolute; the pure-impure *tattvas* describe the soul and its limitations; while the impure *tattvas* include the universe and living beings that assist the existence of soul.

universe in its contracted form. Absolute consciousness becomes personal conscience, because of this same contraction, caused by the objects of perception. However, individual consciousness is none other than the Absolute consciousness.”

The theory of reflection, *Pratyabhijñā*, that occurs at the macrocosmic level, in drama and dance finds its analogy at the microcosmic level through the artistic process experienced by the artist, man being the microcosmic universe. God is the Supreme Creator and man creates through art. Correlating macrocosm and microcosm as well as the powers that manifest themselves in the cosmos and those manifesting themselves in man, let's reflect on the analogy of *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy in relation to the cosmic dance of Lord *Naṭaraja* happening in the human body. The macrocosm and the microcosm having whole and part relation, as stated in the concept of *Piṇḍa-Brahmāṇḍa*, implies that consciousness in the process of creation, manifests itself at many levels, being one by the principle of unity and different by the principle of diversity.

In *Pratyabhijñā*, *svātantrya* is the first stage of creation. In analogy with *Pratyabhijñā*, where *svātantrya* is like an undifferentiated energy or the force that unifies all the energies before creation, in the artistic process, *svātantrya* corresponds to the inner attitude or pure state of concentration, a wave of motion inside consciousness (*spanda*) before acting. Then,

in the artistic process, first comes the energy of will (*icchā śakti*), followed by the energies of knowledge (*jñāna śakti*), (related to the canonic references to be followed), and finally action (*kriyā śakti*). All these powers together are permeated by the energy of consciousness (*cit śakti*). When this process is held in continuity during the performance, the culminating point diffuses the energy of bliss (*ānanda śakti*), that corresponds to the experience of *rasa*. *Rasa* is the flow energy of life, the very essence of existing.

As pointed out by Abhinavagupta, due to the capacity of the actor to concentrate on his art to the exclusion of everything else, he is like a yogi and his art can become a means for spiritual realization. The integral actor is the one who acts in the wholeness of Being. Acting in a state of detachment allows him to recognize his real nature in its full power combining the absolute freedom of will (*icchā*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and action (*kriyā*), leading to bliss (*ānanda*) and thus reaching the aesthetic experience, the universal blissful consciousness, the delightful state of the gods.

In this analogy, at the macrocosmic level, the world process takes place and at the microcosmic level, referring to the experience of the individual self, Self-knowledge and thus Self-recognition with the Supreme Being takes place in action. “Divine Art” and human art are simultaneously woven together while



Posture of Goddess Saraswatī playing the *Vīṇā* accompanied by her swan at Pātāleśvara temple, Pune.

archetypes or ideas from an invisible world dwelling within the Self are brought forth through *prakāśa*, an illuminating vision and *vimarśa*, the power of manifestation. Through recollection, imitation, participation and expression, man recollects his divine nature and conveys an archetypal symbol. The proper of the traditional view of art as stated by A. Coomaraswamy is to propose a participation into the ideal by the imitation of a Divine model.

“Assuming that a beautiful imitation could never be produced unless

from a beautiful pattern, and that no sensible object (*aisthēton*, “aesthetic surface”) could be faultless unless it were made in the likeness of an archetype visible only to the intellect, God, when He willed to create the visible world, first fully formed the intelligible world, in order that He might have the use of a pattern wholly divine and incorporeal. The will of God beheld that beautiful world and imitated it.”<sup>20</sup>

Knowing and Being are expressed through *vimarśa*<sup>21</sup>. With the imaginative embodiment of an ideal

<sup>20</sup> *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought? The Traditional View of Art: Revised Edition with Previously Unpublished Author’s Notes* © 2007 World Wisdom, Inc. p.117

<sup>21</sup> “Consciousness for Abhinavagupta can never be reduced to pure thinking (Gupta 1988:35). Now *vimarśa* may be said to be a type of “knowing,” but this is not a pure disembodied cognition or purely metaphysical representation. Even as a type of “knowing” it must be one that includes the body; in other words, *vimarśa* is a process of bodily knowing.” Kerry Martin Skora, *The Pulsating Heart and Its Divine Sense Energies Body*



Lord Krishna playing his enchanting flute at Gondeshwar Temple , Nasik, Maharashtra. The Gondeshwar temple, in Bhumija style, was built during the rule of the Seuna (Yadava) dynasty in the 11th or the 12th century.

form, the exemplar pattern (*paradeigma*) is felt and reflected by the dancing-actor. The platonic principle of resemblance and “participation” in the archetype is manifested through conscious reflection (*vimarśa*). Likewise, the spiritual and divine substance that has no likeness and could not otherwise be seen is thus apprehended for an ephemeral moment. The Self shining conscious light (*prakāśa*) in its ability to contain a reflection of itself, the archetype, is manifested through its power of creation (*vimarśa*). Recollecting from eternity a vision within himself,

the actor sacrificer offers the light *prakāśa* of his insight, allowing the audience to perceive the archetype of a particular character. Dramatic dance becomes thus, a visual sacrifice linking heavens with earthly reality. Like the fire sacrifice, the light of knowledge is offered through the eyes, allowing us to see what is beyond this earthly world.

“Kalidasa was probably the first playwright who gave his own definition of dramatic art in the very first act of his play *Mālavikāgnimitram*. He says that drama is ocular sacri-

face, *Kratu Cākṣuṣa*. *Kratu* is *yajña*, a ritual of fire sacrifice performed to appease divine forces that they may grant individual and social benefits. It also means ritual offering, oblation. And *Cakṣu* means eye. Hence *Kratu Cākṣuṣa* means dramatic performance as a pleasing offering to the eyes.”<sup>22</sup>

The eyes being the organ that perceives light are endowed with the fire of knowledge that is felt in the sacrificial offering.

*Vimarśa*, the absolute power of knowing and acting that constitutes the potentiality for creation on the metaphysical level of Reality, transposed to the internal organ of the actor, *antaḥkaraṇa*<sup>23</sup>, is the mobile (*spanda*)<sup>24</sup> or the first spark of intentional will in the performance of the dance-drama. While acting, the psychological I-consciousness of the artist, which is relational, experiences the pure I-consciousness as immediate awareness. In this process, the two extreme states of existence; spirit and matter which generally seem opposed to each other find their completeness under the harmony of body, mind and spirit. These three planes of existence when united express the possibility in human beings of achieving the divine state of Self-consciousness. When the power of

gesture is not merely role-play, but is permeated by divine Consciousness and its powers, it becomes a tool for self-awareness. It reveals the Self experiencing Itself through action. In this alchemy, the objectification of one’s will or the first spark or motion for acting becomes the divine Will itself.

“When the Absolute by His *Svātantrya* or Absolute Will feels like letting go the Universe contained in Him, the first vibration or throb of this Will is known as Śiva.”<sup>25</sup>

To express the universe contained in him, the artist, undisturbed by the external play, plays the Divine Art. The will of such an advanced practitioner becomes more and more efficient as it identifies with the will of Śiva. At this point, his actions are necessarily devoid of egoism and this is an attitude that defines the discipline of *Karma Yoga*. In this context, dramatic art and sacred dance is but *Karma yoga*, *Bhakti Yoga* in its devotional aspect and *Jñāna Yoga* in its way of operation.

Śiva Consciousness in its unbounded freedom binds himself while manifesting the world. Likewise, the artist plays the drama unbound by the character he plays. The analogy of

22 Manohar Laxman Varadpande, *History of Indian Theatre: Classical theatre*, Abhinav Publications, 1987, p.134.

23 *Antaḥkaraṇa* is the “inner organ” constituted by the *citta* made of intellect (*buddhi*), ego (*ahaṅkāra*) and mind (*manas*). It refers to consciousness within the limited *Puruṣa*.

24 *Spanda* according to Kashmir Shaivism is a wave of motion inside consciousness.

25 Jaideva Singh, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam, The Secret of Self Recognition*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2006, p.8

the Self with an actor playing a role in the worldly manifestation is found in many passages of the *Śiva Sūtras*, the *yoga* of the Supreme Identity of the individual self with the Divine, which is considered to be a revealed book. The body is a universe in itself. The inner-self is the dancing-actor and the witness.

“The inner self i.e. the subtle body, constitutes the stage of the actor in the world-drama”<sup>26</sup>. “Divine Art” and human art are simultaneously woven together, Self-knowledge and thus Self-recognition with the supreme Being takes place in action, depicting divine archetypes in a combination of inner stillness and outer dance reflecting thus, the abode of the heavens.

The symbolism of Śiva is permeated with the notion of transformation; He is the all consuming fire of life destroying the ego in cyclical periods of time. He is the absolute power of action, the absolute power of freedom. The Heart of Śiva is not a static or inert absolute. In fact, the non-dual Kashmir Shaivism tradition considers it to be in a state of perpetual movement, a state of vibration (*spanda*) in which it is continuously contracting and expanding (*saṅkoca-vikāsa*), opening and closing (*unmeṣa-nimeṣa*), trembling (*ullasita*), quivering (*sphurita*), throbbing, waving and sparkling (*ucchalata*). The continuous intensity of this movement is the source and maintenance of all creation. This is

the cosmic dance of Lord Śiva revealed through the 108 *Karaṇas*.

Paradoxically the Heart of Śiva is simultaneously a perfect dynamic stillness, and this is His aspect of ānanda beyond creation. The iconographic image of Śiva Naṭarāja, the cosmic dancer, simultaneously portrays the fluidity of this continuous movement of existence along with the stillness of Consciousness. The combination of the inner stillness of the yogic Śiva and the outer dance of Lord Naṭarāja conceals the highest mystery of existence.

Symbols are means for recollection, for unveiling the forgotten universal essences inherent in the hearts of men. As numinous sparks of light, they arise in the course of higher awareness and the development of spirituality in men devoted to their inner Self. In artistic expression, the visible symbols always point toward the images of the great mysteries, providing a vision and a remedy for annihilating the indigence of the soul dwelling in worldliness, weakened by *tāmasika* forces of inertia. *Kriyā Karaṇam*, the mobile force of the *Karaṇas* reverses this natural descendent state by means of an alchemical transformation. Through the objectification of a mythic reality, that of the cosmic dance being performed by Lord Śiva with the help of the *karaṇas*, man understands the message of the Supreme power creating and transforming his own life.

Transformation requires

<sup>26</sup> Jaidev Singh, *Śiva Sutras, The Yoga of Supreme Identity*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Delhi, 2006 p. xiii

strength and also involves destruction. The *Tāṇḍava Nāṭyam*, is a divine dance performed by the Hindu gods. Through the examples of the Hindu scriptures that narrate various occasions when gods have performed the *Tāṇḍava* dance, we can see the aspect of sacrificial action that has the power to transform a given situation. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* talks of Krishna dancing his *Tāṇḍava* on the head of the serpent *Kāliyā*, while killing the poisonous *Nāga*<sup>27</sup> living in the Yamuna river. Another example is when *Sati* (the first wife of Śiva, who was reborn as *Pārvatī*) jumped into the *Agni Kuṇḍa* (sacrificial fire) in *Dakṣa's Yajña* and gave up her life. Śiva is said to have performed the *Rudra Tandava* to express his grief and anger.

*Bharata Muni* describing the 108 *Karaṇas*, mentions: “These one hundred and eight *Karaṇas* enumerated by me may be employed in the course of dance, fight, personal combats and in other movement like strolling”<sup>28</sup>.

In the fourth chapter of *Abhinavabhāratī: Tāṇḍava-Lakṣaṇam*, “The definition of the vigorous dance”, *Abhinavagupta*

comments on the practical use of the *Karaṇas*, giving a few references to its meanings in dramaturgy. *Tāṇḍava Lakṣaṇam*, the vigorous style of dance as seen in the mythological examples, has a combative aspect. Symbolically the *Tāṇḍava* stands for the combative aspect in the spiritual path. It refers to the vigorous act of the soul required in the aspect of combat which is inherent to life. *Tāṇḍava* ultimately leads to *Lāsya*<sup>29</sup>, the gentle and gracious aspect of Divine mercy, performed by the Goddess.

These two forces put the universe in motion, alternating rigour and mercy. These masculine and feminine aspects can be seen in dance by the forceful, vigorous *Tāṇḍava* style and the gentle *Lāsya* style of *Devi* in its graceful aspects of beauty and mercy. Conveying both of these two intrinsic qualities, the *Karaṇas* are intended to enlighten spectators, in contrast to the regional folk or popular dance productions which can only entertain the spectators.

“One who performs well this *Karaṇa* dance created by *Maheśvara* will go free from all sins to the abode of this deity” states the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.<sup>30</sup>

27 *Naga*: semi-divine race, part human, part cobra

28 *Bharata Muni, The Nāṭya Śāstra*, ed. and trans. Manomohan Ghosh, 3rd ed. Vol. I (Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya, 1995), Chapter IV, verse 56, p.36.

29 *Lāsya* in Hindu mythology, describes the delicate dance performed by Goddess *Pārvatī* in response to the male energy of the cosmic dance of *Tāṇḍava* performed by Lord Śiva. It expresses happiness and is filled with enchanting grace and beauty. *Lāsya* expresses emotions on a gentle and delicate level. Legend says that the graceful Goddess *Pārvatī* taught the art of *Lāsya* to the *apsara*, *Usha* (daughter of Sage *Bāṇāsura*) and then *Usha* passed on this art to women on earth.

30 *Bharata Muni, Nāṭyaśāstra*, Tr. - Manomohan Ghosh, (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Press, 2002) p.75.



Lord Śiva in *Tāṇḍava Karāṇa* Posture at Sarangani-Swamy Temple, at Kumbakoṇam, Tamil Nadu. Sarangapani temple is one of the 108 Vishnu temples that are revered in the Vaishnava canon. It is astonishing to find the Karanas postures decorating the external walls of the temple as these *Karāṇas* are found exclusively in temples dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is said that these blocks of sculptured karanas have been taken from an ancient Shiva's temple around Kumbakonam and placed there later on.

The ultimate end of man is the realization of his innate divinity. The conscious action, either forceful or gentle depending on the circumstances of the divine dance in our lives, when offered to the inner Self, has the power to transform and integrate man.

“The Supreme intelligence dances in the soul... for the purpose of removing our sins. By this means our Father scatters the darkness of illusion (*māyā*) burns the thread of

causality (*karmā*), stamps down evil (*mālā*, *āṇavā*, *avidyā*) showers grace and lovingly plunges the soul in the ocean of Bliss (*ānanda*). They never see rebirths, who beholds this mystic dance”<sup>31</sup>

In Self-recognition man realises his transcendent and immanent realities. Likewise, in *Pratyabhijñā*, the artist experiences his true nature as *akṛtrima-aham-vimarśa*, the genuine, innate, pure I-consciousness, both still and throbbing, pulsating

<sup>31</sup> *Unmai Villakam*, v. 32, 37,39 quoted in Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. *The Dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*, The Sunwise Turn Inc., New York 1918, p.62

with its life force. *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy proposes the highest ideal, which is not just liberation from matter as in the *Kaivalya* of Yoga philosophy, nor liberation from *māyā*, *Mokṣa* as in *Vedānta* but *Śiva-vyāpti* in which the fusion and union of *Śiva-Śakti* actualises the full power of Consciousness through action in the unity of the Self. In understanding this all-embracing principle, all the philosophical theories then appear as a myriad of roles staged by the Absolute Consciousness. “*This Śiva-vyāpti*”<sup>32</sup> is the inherent nature of *Parama Śiva* who is simultaneously transcendent and immanent in the universe.”<sup>33</sup>

The concept of *Śiva-vyāpti*, manifesting through *Vimarśa* in the human body resonates with *Kriyā Karaṇam*, mentioned in the concept of the *Karaṇas* as stated by Abhinavagupta. Esoterically, *Kriyā Karaṇan* means “actualising the full power of Consciousness through stillness and action awaking the Higher Self.” In this Consciousness, man realizes his transcendent Self through immanence in the world drama of life.

“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,

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.”<sup>34</sup>

*Bharatanāṭyam*, one of the eight styles of Indian classical dance and *Yoga* are two streams of Divine manifestation in the holy temple of the human body. Both disciplines are tools for the spiritual unfolding of human beings leading to the state of Divine Consciousness. In modern times, both of these elevating spiritual disciplines have been practiced only at a very superficial and mundane level, to such an extent that *Bharatanāṭyam* has been only treated as an entertaining performing art and *Yoga* as a “keep fit” exercise, negating thus the very soul of these disciplines. The depths of the spiritual concepts of these arts need to be revived and restored to the level of their ancient heritage.

In ancient India, each and every action was sanctified by the perpetual celebration of the Divine. The *Karaṇas* are present in sculptures, *Śāstras* and dance traditions corre-

32 *Śiva-vyāpti*: re-absorption into the true Self (*atman*) or re-absorption into the supreme consciousness of Śiva.

33 Singh, Jaideva, *Śiva Sūtra, The Yoga of Supreme Identity* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 2012), p.xiii.

34 Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. *The Dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*, The Sunwise Turn Inc., New York 1918, p.60,61



*Apsaras* performing *Nṛtta* Posture in *Lāsya* style, at Pātāleśvara Temple, Pune. The *apsaras* are the celestial nymphs, to whom the art of dance has been bestowed in heavens. Later on the *apsaras* transmitted this knowledge to women on earth; they were the earliest devadasis who performed in temples of ancient India.

lating different fields of knowledge. The notion that dance sculptures depicting the *Karaṇas* are merely aesthetic decorations, without much meaning is trivializing and no more acceptable. The fact that they are placed in the precincts of temples, suggests a much deeper significance for the *Karaṇas*. Rather than being merely decorations, these sculptures depict visually, the core aspects of Hindu worship, ritual, meditation and transformation.

The Yogic dance of *Maheśvara* finds its expression in time through the *Karaṇas* in the sacred dance performed before the gods in the *Sanctum Sanctorum* of temples in ancient India as well as in dramatic

art performed for the community today. These *Karaṇas* are a medium for displaying the metaphysical wisdom that equates macrocosm and microcosm, becoming an operative science for actualizing the wholeness of the human body, through a formal language of beauty. Such a traditional art has the ability to concretely merge “action” and “contemplation”, unifying several streams of knowledge. The *Karaṇas* were an instrument for the human body to realize its spiritual capacities. They were central to different disciplines, uniting various streams of artistic and spiritual practices. This is perfectly in accord with the holistic notion of spirituality in archaic societies, where everything



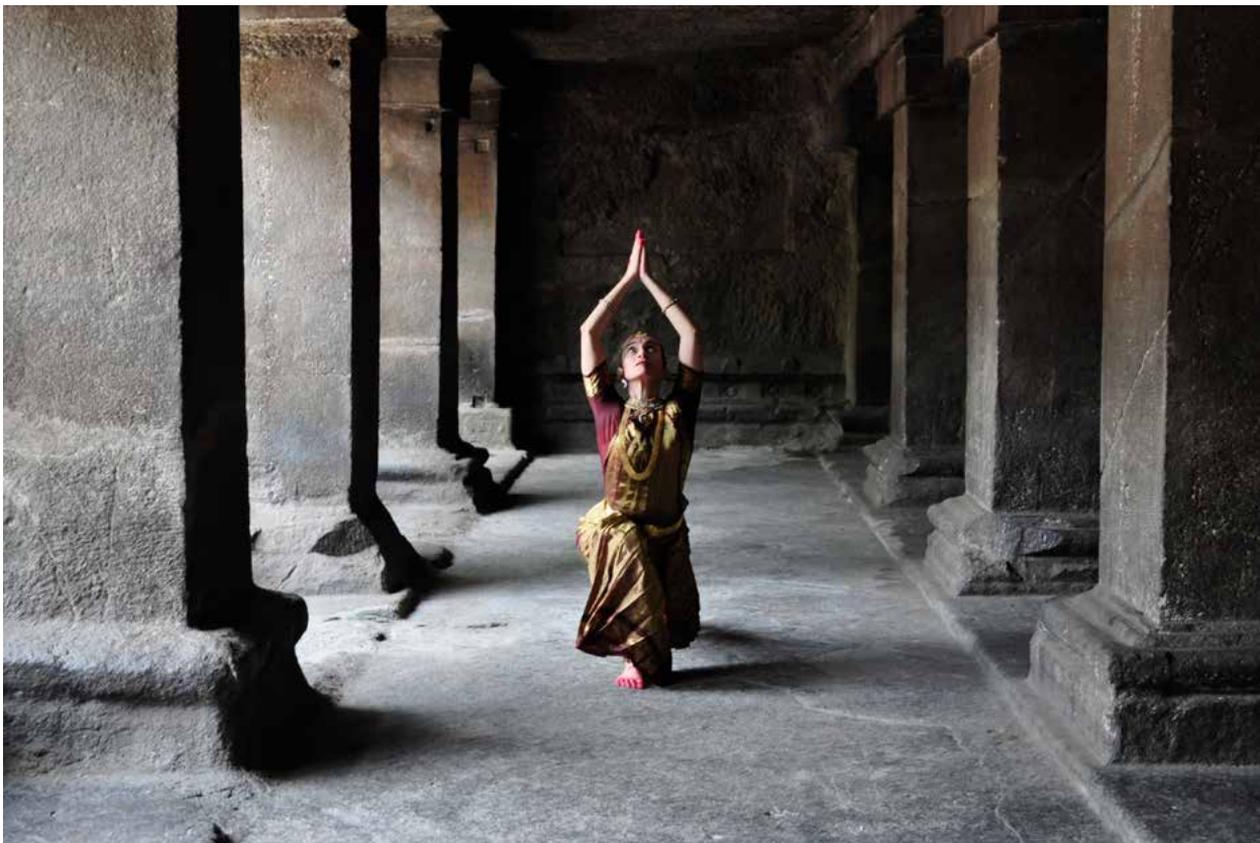
Natarāja Posture at Pātāleśvara Temple, Pune

was ordered and homogeneously organized. In these traditional civilizations, activities of daily life naturally sprang from transcendent principles. Thus, every visual expression in art was the manifestation of a spiritual doctrine.

Śiva means happiness and auspiciousness. The Place of the dance, *Chidambaram*, the center of the universe, is within the Heart. The Cosmic dance of *Maheśvara* seen depicted in the iconographic image of *Natarāja* symbolizes the dance of life itself, just as man – the microcosmic reality – is the center of the natural manifestation of the macrocosm.

As a medium for displaying metaphysical wisdom in the temple of the body, the art of dance becomes an operative science for actualizing the wholeness of Being, because we

must realize God with all that we are: *Ex toto corde tuo et ex tota anima tua*, with all our heart and soul. Like the stilness of the dancing Lord in His cosmic play; in man, Self recognition is the stilness of consciousness (Truth), permeated by the joy of life (Virtue), reverbarating in the eternal movement of life (Path), as an offering to the Divine.



*Namaskāra at the Pātāleśvara temple in Pune*