

# Nataraja, Lord of Dance

By Aparna Balasubramaniam

Shiva is the most complex of all Hindu deities. He is frequently portrayed as the ultimate symbol of fertility, the *lingam*, but neither of his two sons was conceived in the conventional way. As Omkara, he is the originator of the primordial symbol *Om*, which signifies creation. As Kala Bhairava, he is the destroyer of the universe, paving the way for a new cycle. But above all, Shiva's best-known form is Nataraja, the God of Dance.

How did this dance begin? Deep in the forest of Tarakam, lived a group of sages who were not believers in Shiva, so he decided to confront them. He went to the forest disguised as a beggar, accompanied by Vishnu as Mohini (his female form) and Adi Sesha, the serpent. Very angry upon seeing Shiva, the sages began praying in front of a fire. From the fire a fierce tiger emerged to attack Shiva who smiled and stripped the tiger's skin off with the nail of his little finger. He then tied the skin around his waist. Next, a snake appeared, but Shiva used it as a belt or garland and began to dance. He danced the *Ananda Tandava*, or the Dance of Bliss. However, the sages were not done; a dwarf demon emerged. Shiva pressed down on the demon with one foot and continued to dance. The sages finally realised they were no match for Shiva and bowed before him. He stopped dancing and blessed them. Then Adi Sesha begged Shiva to continue dancing, so Shiva promised to appear in Thillai, the Centre of the Universe, and dance again for his devotees. This is the site of the most famous Nataraja Temple, Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu.

Nataraja first appeared in stone sculptures around the fifth century, but it was in the bronzes from the Chola dynasty from the 10<sup>th</sup> CE onwards that images of the Nataraja became immortalised. In these images, Nataraja typically wears a headdress of *kondrai* (cassia) leaves, with the crescent moon, a skull and a cobra on his head. He carries a drum in his upper right hand and this not only supplies the beat for his dance, but is also the first sound of creation. Conversely, in his upper left hand, he holds *Agni*, or fire, a force that can destroy the universe. The lower left



11<sup>th</sup> century Chola Bronze, courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of R H Ellsworth Ltd in honour of Susan Dillon, 1987

hand points towards the raised foot. This gesture offers shelter for the soul. The lower right hand is in the *abhayamudra* or 'do not fear' gesture. The raised leg offers salvation or release from this world. The foot on the ground tramples the dwarf demon, who signifies ignorance.

The dance is very vigorous and the energetic movements make Shiva's clothes and hair fly. The arch surrounding him is a ring of fire, which both creates and destroys. The circle represents the cyclical nature of time, the constant motion of the earth and the boundaries of the universe. Nataraja dances within its confined space, touching it with his head, hands and feet. The dance itself represents the *Panchakritya* or five activities of Shiva – Creation, Preservation, Destruction, Refuge and Salvation. Ananda

Coomaraswamy said, "It is the clearest image of the activity of God that any religion can boast of."

Nataraja doesn't just mean 'God of Dance', it also means 'King of the Stage'. Shiva's theatre is the entire universe. It is the movement of the sun and the moon, of the earth and the wind and the skies. Modern physicists have drawn parallels between the cosmic dance of Nataraja and the movement of particles. In fact, a two-metre-tall bronze statue of Nataraja is on display outside the European Centre for Research in Particle Physics in Geneva. Fritjof Capra, an eminent physicist said "The rhythm of life and death is the essence of all matter. Shiva's dance is the dance of subatomic matter. The metaphor of the cosmic dance thus unifies ancient mythology, religious art and modern physics."

To his devotee, Nataraja's dance has three meanings – the dance itself is the source of all movement within the universe, it helps release souls that are chained by fear, illusion or ignorance and Chidambaram, the centre of the universe where the dance takes place, is within our hearts.

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