

Green Knight Multimedia Project



Episode 1:

Mudrās as symbols of the universe –The spiritual import of Hindu dance (Form and Essence in Frithjof Schuon’s writings, and its direct analogy and application to the sacred gestures of Hindu dance and dramatic art.)

Outline of Presentation:

- Read selected passages from: Chapter 4: Concerning Forms in Art, *The Transcendent Unity of Religion*, pg. 61 Edition Quest Books, Chennai, India 2005
- I propose to illustrate the main ideas of the text with the help of the dramatic art of ancient India, bringing into evidence the relationship between form and intellection in the sacred gestures of Hindu dance.
- Present a brief introduction of some concepts of Traditional Hindu dance and retrace the origin of these gestures coming from the ancient Vedic rituals. Elucidate the distinction between *Mudrās* in Yoga Tradition and *Hasta* in dance tradition
- Comment and illustrate the text with the *Viniyogas* which are the meanings given to the various symbolic gestures, the-*Hastas*- I have chosen significant *Viniyogas* which elaborate metaphysical principles and religious offerings. I will perform them along with the recitation of the *śloka*, explaining its meaning.



I- Introduction

Indian classical dance — a visual expression of Hindu thought

Art in India is deeply connected with its philosophy, the rich heritage of Hindu tradition. Hindu dance, issued from the Ancient Indian drama, is a visual expression of Hindu thought expressed through visual form. It directly conveys metaphysics and the religious aspect of life through the science of gestures, the *mudrās*. These sacred gestures provide an immediate understanding of the religious ethos of India.

Modern Society lacks epitomes and normative models to uplift mankind. The technological invasion with its impact of an abnormal mentality divorced from the sense of the sacred influences mankind leading man to destructive behavior on earth.

Sanskrit theater as the total art-form uniting heaven and earth

Ancient Drama in India was meant to provide models and prototypes to society. Indian theater is thus a mirror of the life of good people, those who live in excellence. In India, drama is known as Nāṭyaveda or The Fifth Veda conceived by Lord Brahma, the creator, to teach righteousness (*dharma*) to society. On earth, sage Bharata claimed to have received the knowledge of theater by integrating speech from the Ṛgveda, music from the Sāmaveda, acting from the Yajurveda, and emotion from the Atharvaveda. As the Vedas were strictly reserved to the Brahmins, a fifth Veda was created to convey the Vedic teachings to one and all in a simple way, through the science of gestures



recreating thus, good behavior with an aesthetic-ethical significance. Drama was accepted as the ‘total art form’ that united acting, dance, poetry, music, fine arts, human values, and practically all other concerns of life in order to sustain and nourish a heavenly world, (*alaulika*) through the aesthetic experience, *rasa*.

Mudrās in the Hindu holy worship

In the religious domain, the execution of the paradigmatic Vedic sacrifice may itself be interpreted as a hieratic form of theater. In the same order, Bharata’s theater claimed to be modeled on the ‘originary’ unifying principle of the solemn Vedic sacrifice. The symbolic gestures in dance tradition are known as coming directly from the ancient Vedic rituals when dance was an integral part of the holy worship in temples. The Vedic hymns and mantras or mystical syllables form the foundation of the Hindu holy worship. Traditionally, the recitation of hymns and mantras are sometimes accompanied by specific hand gestures which are called “*mudrās*”. *Mudrā* is a mystic gesture of the hands symbolizing the power of action. The word “*mudrā*” denotes a seal. It puts a finishing touch revealing a specific meaning connected to the mantra. Here, there is an affinity between sacred gesture and sacred sound, creating a link between body and mind.



The *Hastas* in the tradition of Hindu dance

In dance tradition, *mudrās* are called *hastas*. According to the ancient scripture “*Abhinaya Darpaṇa* ” authored by Nandikeśvara, 28 single hand gestures are called ***Asaṃyukta Hastah*** and 23 united or combined hands gestures are called ***Samyukta Hasta***.

Show the meanings with gestures

These combination of hand gestures may denote the Gods and Goddesses (Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Saraswatī, Lakṣmī, Pārvatī etc.), the four different castes (Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, etc.), the planets (sun, moon, etc.), the rivers (Gaṅgā, Yamunā, etc.), animals (the peacock, the serpent, the deer) and so on. The various meanings of these gestures will be explored through the *Viniyogas* at the end of this presentation.

What is *Viniyoga*?

Viniyoga as thought in “*Abhinaya Darpana* ” provides the meanings that translate the poetic universe of mythology as well as philosophical thoughts into symbolic hand gestures. Some of these gestures are intrinsically connected with ritualistic action found in *pūjās* (the sacred offerings) revealing the religious backgrounds of Hinduism. Others describe the wonders of creation, the beauty of nature and the universal emotions experienced by human beings. The relationship between Form and Essence or (body action and intellection), reveals the power of these sacred gestures, as a means for



propitiating intellectual contemplation. These symbolic gestures and postures may represent particular states of consciousness (*bhāvas*) which are directly conveyed through visual and auditory means actualizing these states of higher consciousness in the minds of the devotees, stimulating religious worship and providing a support for spiritual contemplation.

To elucidate the relationship of Form and Essence in Schuon's writing in connection with the sacred gestures of Hindu dance, I have chosen the chapter:

Chapter 4: Concerning Forms in Art – The Transcendent Unity of Religion
pg. 61

If the importance of forms is to be understood it is necessary to appreciate the fact that it is the sensible form that, symbolically, corresponds most directly to the Intellect, by reason of the inverse analogy connecting the Principe and manifested orders. "Art," said St. Thomas Aquinas, "is associated with knowledge."

In consequence of this analogy, the highest realities are most clearly manifested in their remotest reflections, namely, in the sensible or material order and herein lies the deepest meaning of the proverb "Extremes meet"~ to which one might add that it is for this same reason that Revelation descended not only into the souls of the Prophets, but also into their bodies, which presupposed their physical perfection. {Rene Guenon ("Les deux nuits.." *Etudes traditionnelles*, April and May 1939) in speaking of the *lay/at a/-qadr*. night of the "descent" (*tanzil*) of the Koran, points out that this night, according to



Muhyi 'd-Din ibn 'Arabi's commentary, is identified with the actual body of the Prophet. What is particularly important to note is the fact that the "revelation" is received not in the mind but in the body of the being who is commissioned to express the Principle. "And the Word was made flesh." says the Gospel ("flesh. and not "mind") and this is but another way of expressing under the form proper to the Christian Tradition, the reality that is represented by the *lay/at al-qadr* in the Islamic Tradition. }

(So here, the human body assumes the Revelation of the Logos. In the Islamic tradition, the night of descent or the "Revelation" is identified with the body of the Prophet; he is the incarnation of divine Perfection whereas in the Cristian tradition, the logos become flash in the person of Jesus Christ. In Hindu tradition, we have the iconographic gods and goddesses which are the various expressions of Para Brahma, (the nirguna aspect of reality). Their bodies (the saguna aspect) represent several divine attributes. Each deity reveals a particular aspect of the divinity by means of specific sacred gestures.

I resume the text:

Sensible forms therefore correspond with exactness to intellections, and it is for this reason that traditional art has rules that apply the cosmic laws and universal principles to the domain of forms, and that, beneath their more general outward aspect, reveal the style of the civilization under consideration; this style in its turn rendering explicit the form of intellectuality of that civilization.

(One of the aspects of the formal intellectuality in Hinduism can be well represented through the concept of Naṭarāja, the Cosmic dancer who creates the universe while



dancing. The various gestures of creation are thus symbols of metaphysical prototypes which recreate life ritualistically, through the science of dramatic art.)

“All works of art on earth are an imitation of the art of the Devas”
(Aitareya Brāhmaṇa)

Let’s see how we apply “Form and Essence” in the symbolic gestures of Hindu Dance

This same principle: “Extreme meets' 'is found in the ritualistic gestures of devotion which brings to the body, intellection of prototypes made form in a specific gestural language identifying the idea with what it signifies. I quote Schuon: “Forms, intellections: the whole of traditional art is founded upon this correspondence”, on Aesthetics and symbolism in art and nature. And “The reflection of the supraformal in the formal is not the formless but on the contrary strict form. The supraformal is incarnated in a form that is at once “logical” and “generous”, hence in beauty” (Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts.)

Springing from metaphysics, these gestures are symbolical while being descriptive of an ontological reality. Metaphysical knowledge being in its essence supra-individual and universal proceeds from pure Intelligence which is direct and not discursive. Language is not perfectly apt to convey Essences, which are supra-formal. However, the human body being a direct vehicle for the Spirit, ontologically participates in supra-formal



realities through the sacred geometry of the body, manifesting formal attitudes that are powerful means to convey in a direct and not discursive manner, the very essences of archetypes, man being the *Logos*. I quote in French: “Les extremes se touchent — Le Supra sensible se matérialisant dans une forme particulière pour exprimer l’essence supra sensible de la forme”. “Extremes meet”



Now, to illustrate these ideas in a direct and not discursive manner, I will recite and perform some Viniyogas to illustrate visually the relationship of Form and Essence.

Recite and perform Añjali Viniyoga with its meaning.

The first hasta exposed in this ancient text and which precedes the ritualistic dance is called Añjali, both hands held together in front of the heart. While worshipping God, it creates a temple in the human body, with the hands above the head, as a “Śikhara” or “Vimāna, the summit of the Hindu temples. The body becomes the sacred space for the performance of this art form

- **Añjali Viniyoga: — Salutation**

Deavatā-Guru-Viparāṇām namaskāreṣvanukramāt

Kāryaḥ śiromukhorastho viniyoge’ñjalirbudaiḥ

देवतागुरुविप्राणां नमस्कारेष्वनुक्रमात् ।

कार्यः शिरोमुखोरस्थो विनियोगेऽञ्जलिर्बुधैः ॥

The meaning given in Abhinaya Darpaṇa is:

(Used for the salutation to God, to the Guru and to the learned ones. We hold Añjali hasta above the head for the gods, in front of the face for the Guru and in front of the chest for the learned ones.)



Comment:

Through these sacred gestures the practitioner becomes the form of the formless realizing the identity between the knower and the known in the unity of his being. Identifying the knower with what he knows, the human body becomes an instrument for self-knowledge. The performance of these gestures may lead to higher states of consciousness that they symbolize, as the human body here is a channel connecting the intellectual idea to the manifested form it assumes in a process of bodily-intellectual alchemy. The body assumes diagrams which reveal the very essence of archetypes, translating them in a theological approach related to the revealed tradition. Metaphysical knowledge becomes theological knowledge revealing the esoteric nature of religion manifested through a religious symbolism.

I quote Schuon: “Forms allow a direct and “plastic” assimilation of the truths—or realities—of the spirit. The geometry of the symbol is steeped in beauty, which in turn and in its own way is also a symbol. The perfect form is that in which truth is incarnate in the rigor of the symbolic formulation and in the purity and intelligence of the style”.
(Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts)



Recite and perform: ---

- ***Kapota Hasta Viniyoga. --- Religious Respect***

Praṇāme gurusambhāṣe vinayāṅgīkṛteṣvayam

प्रणामे गुरुसम्भाषे विनयाङ्गीकृतेष्वयम् ।

(The form of this mudrā is analogous to the form of the heart and this is held in the center of the chest where the noblest inner attitudes should manifest in hierarchic relationships.)

(To offer praṇāmas, respectful salutation to the guru as a mark of acceptance; to show politeness and respect while talking to elder people; to show modesty while being praised.)

Making use of rational modes related to aspects of devotion, respect and worship in social relationships, the *mudrās* become symbols to describe and convey knowledge of a greater degree, such as universal concepts which must be properly assimilated, into knowledge of a sensible order. In this alchemy, the relationship of Form and Essence in the performance of the *mudrās* translates in a visual expression, the spiritual ethos of Hinduism.



Recite and perform: ---

- ***Puṣpapuṭa-hast-viniyoga. Offering***

(All the meanings of this hasta are related to worship and ritual)

Nīrañjanāvidhau vāriphalādigrahaṇe' pi ca

Samjñāyām arghyadāne ca, mantrapuṣpe ca yujyate

निराञ्जनाविधौ वारिफलादिग्रहणेऽपि च ।

संज्ञायाम् अर्घ्यदाने च मन्त्रपुष्पे च युज्यते ॥

(Small lamp on a plate for worship, to hold, to receive a coconut which is a symbol of auspiciousness and a divine offering; ritual to be offered in the morning and in the evening; to take water for the ocean and to offer again to the ocean —whatever you get or learn from the guru you must add to it give back to its source; offering of mantras)

Whereas metaphysic proceeds from intellectual intuition, religion proceeds from Revelation. The sacred gesture extracts the essence of metaphysics and reveals its beauty through the revelation of a religious form. Thus, these sacred gestures are a direct and active participation in divine Knowledge with the whole body as a unity of physical body, mind and soul. The human body being the microcosm is a reflection of the macrocosm in its way of operation. Thus, the sacred gesture awakens a knowledge which is inscribed in the innermost essence of man and comes up to life through mimesis of a real ritual. The performance of these holy gestures acts as a way of



extinction. A way of liberating oneself from the cosmic *Maya* through the cosmic *Maya*, the body itself, in this case.

Recite:

- **Uttsaṅga Hasta Viniyoga - Respect in the social domain**

(Now we come to a more secular aspect of life. These *Viniyogas* explicit social action and attitudes in daily life related to self-respect.)

Āliṅgane ca lajjāyāmaṅgadādipradarśane

Bālānām śikṣaṇe cāyamuttsaṅgo yujyate karaḥ

आलिङ्गने च लज्जायामङ्गदादिप्रदर्शने ।

बालानां शिक्षणे चायमुत्सङ्गो युज्यते करः ॥

(Embracing; shyness; to show the ornaments in the upper part of the arms; teaching children to be poised)

In the domain of social life, the *mudrās* are signs for recognition of ethical values. The sacred gesture enshrines a specific form that corresponds to an idea in the realm beyond form. Reasons explain discursively through language. The Intellect knows intuitively. In this sense, the *mudrā* is a seal or a symbol of an idea - an intellection translated into body substance.



- ***Śivaliṅga***

Viniyogastu tasyaiva śivaliṅgasya darśane

विनियोगस्तु तस्यैव शिवलिङ्गस्य दर्शने ।

(Refers to the Supreme Principle)

To show Śivaliṅga as two Principles. Puruṣa and Prakṛti

Sacred gestures reveal forms proper to actualize the spiritual content of a particular religion, as they are transmitter of intellectual intuitions. In this way, esoterism manifests on exoterism by the medium of sensible forms. Thanks to their symbolism translated into an immediate and universal language; these forms are channels for conveying a religious doctrine. In this way, esoterism infuses an intellectual quality into the devotional domain of the tradition.



- **Śakaṭam**

Rākṣasābhinaye prāyaḥ śakaṭo viniyuḷyate

राक्षसाभिनये प्रायः शकटो विनियुज्यते ।

(To show demons)

(To show evil and immediately this is followed by the attributes of the protector and preserver: Lord Vishnu.)

- **Śaṅkha-hasta-viniyoga**

Śaṅkhādiṣu prayojyo'yamityāhurbharatādayaḥ

शङ्खादिषु प्रयोज्योऽयमित्याहुर्भरतादयः ॥

(To show the Conch of Lord Viṣṇu) The sound of the śaṅkha refers to the sacred Om sound, thus it symbolizes eternal creation. The Conch of Lord Viṣṇu also signifies knowledge which dispels the darkness of ignorance.

- **Cakra-hasta-viniyoga**

Cakrahastāḥ sa vijñeyaścakrārthe viniyuḷyate

चक्रहस्तः स विज्ञेयश्चक्रार्थे विनियुज्यते ।

(To show the Cakra of Lord Viṣṇu) The weapon to destroy demons.



The relation between form and essence becomes intellectually evident and is communicated to the spiritual community by symbolic means designed to awaken in them the latent knowledge about essences that they eternally bear within themselves. Through dramatic art pervaded by the ray of Revelation, which is none other than the ray of the Intellect revealed through sacred symbols, it exposes the doctrine of goodness and leads the community back to higher values established in society.

Conclusion:

The intrinsic relationship between Form and Essence allows metaphysical and universal truths to be translated into a dogmatic language of symbols providing an immediate understanding of the core of a particular religion. A symbol is not merely a form but a means of conveying a reality and a deep truth of a transcendental nature. They are thus charged with a power that awakens our conscience. By contemplating them, we establish an immediate connection with what they convey. Thus, symbols when understood in its profound meaning allow us to leave the rational plane and to reach the universal. It enables us to leave the realm of particularity, provoking a liberating state of Oneness. Almost like a magical instant, symbols awaken in the depths of our souls, that which is inscribed in our hearts since eternity, the very essence of archetypes. The power of symbols is such that we could consider them as immaterial talismans. In this sense, they are efficient transmitters of an everlasting heritage of ancient knowledge. An example of this, can be seen in Hindu dance, which is an expression of a higher religious intuition, bringing to the body substance, the intuition of Essences. In a sense, this art is a kind of “Song of the Essences” materialized in the human body.



To conclude I will perform a śloka to show how these gestures are used in a devotional verse of praise. Perform and then explain:

Through the symbolism of the three powers of life: creation, preservation and destruction, represented by Lord Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, the guru is seen as the whole universe incarnated; but in reality Guru is *Parabrahma* itself. In this *śloka*, the concept of guru is equated to the possibility of transcending oneself in the cycles of existence (creation, preservation and destruction) and realizing *Parabrahma* which is the sole Reality.

Śloka for honoring the Guru

Gururbrahmā gururviṣṇuḥ gururdevo maheśvaraḥ

Guruḥsakṣāt parabrahma tasmai śrīgurave namaḥ

गुरुर्ब्रह्मा गुरुर्विष्णुः गुरुर्देवो महेश्वरः ।

गुरुःसाक्षात् परब्रह्म तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः ॥

Thank you for this opportunity of sharing this noble art of ancient India

