

I AM ONE

CHARYA - DANCE AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE



Swayambhu Temple – The Self-Manifested – at night, Kathmandu, Nepal

Mahamudra

Luminous Clarity – Emptiness

Mind's abiding reality

Buddha Nature itself

Spontaneously present

Not produced by causes

Self-arisen and self-free

Clarity – Emptiness

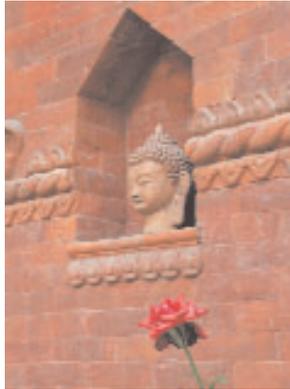
Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche

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PREFACE



*May the hand be in service to intuition,
With every step may there be peace.*

In mystical traditions the cosmos is understood as a Divine Being which may be experienced with all the human senses. In this view life dances an eternal round dance, and from there it receives its glow.

Traditional dances with their rhythms and songs, having received their form in the course of millennia are in this context, symbolic images of the ‘gods’.

The essence of the art of dancing is to make visible the moment ‘Now’ in the perfect presence of one breath. The art of movement, activating the joints of both hands and feet, may in this way create, flame-like, the most perfect motion which allows the dancer to grow beyond the restrictions of form and enables him or her to develop beyond their own limitations.

The energetic focal point above the head of the dancer, where the central energy channel runs down along the spine to the vital centre – to the ‘realm of the creative feminine’ – has the power to break up rigid structures and to infuse them with new life.

In *Charya* this power is symbolized by the presence above the dancer’s head as *Padmanateshvara*, the Divine Dancer-God. With devotion and creative participation, the dancer in encountering the gods, returns energy to the cosmos, uniting thereby both the visible and invisible worlds.

With the dancer connecting spirit and matter, all creative processes may be experienced to be particles of unending cycles of life, a continuous being-born-into them and again a being-born-from them, while the soul is nourished by coming face to face with the Divine in the present moment.

This realization takes place in the dancer’s heart as the focal point for the creation of all movement.

Maria-Gabriele Wosien



Meeting Prajwal Vajracharya, Kathmandu, Autumn 2012

- *“Understand the human-divine journey through meditation.*
- *The masters say that your life should consist of meditation and visualization.*
- *Connect with everything, until you embody all the divine qualities, and you will change.*
- *Take outer conflicts into your body and transform them.*
- *Life is suffering – go beyond it. Change poison into nectar.*
- *To transform the problems of life is possible by entering deeply into the divine qualities.*
- *In this tradition, you need to manifest transformation – a teacher will make you understand.*
- *The mudras are an established code, created by the masters – this you cannot change.*
- *Be that mudra, seek to become it and it will transform your body.*
- *The Buddha nature is within, we all have it – it is everywhere.*
- *We have something unique: teaching the Buddha dharma through dance.*
- *Dance is when the energies of the deities enter the body and you become the dance.*
- *Deity-dance is a symbolic form of dance. It is about the energy which was given form by great enlightened masters of the past. Through this energy in dance it is possible to learn how to deal with humanity.*
- *To dance means to move with complete awareness, with constant global awareness.*
- *Not to be fixed on any detail is a gift from the deities.*
- *The light travelling through your body in meditation will turn into the deity invoked, until you realize someone has come to dance with you...*
- *Multiply the lineage. Give everything to whoever wants!”*

(Prajwal Vajracharya)

I. INTRODUCTION



1. ABOUT BUDDHISM AND CHARYA IN NEPAL

Through its teachings and practices Buddhism seeks to transmit a state of being, beyond dualism. All the different schools offer training programmes for freeing the spirit from the many forms of ignorance and desires, showing possibilities of becoming independent of being held in bondage to them.

The world of phenomena is considered of relative value, only being like water, in constant flux, so that whenever one remains prisoner of one's own judgment and values, one is bound by the illusion of separation.

The meditation practices that have evolved during the millennia suggest the possibility of overcoming the causes of such bondage by calming body sensations, by stilling the mind and by learning to face life without attachments. Buddhist teaching uses the metaphor of the 'boat' taking the practitioner across all of life's turbulences to a safe shore, by acquiring the means to come in touch with an innate wisdom potential.



The Buddha turning the Wheel of *Dharma*,
Muang Boran, Samut Prakan, Thailand



Dharmachakra – the Wheel of Dharma

Symbol of the Buddha's teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path to enlightenment.
In *Vajrayana* Buddhist meditation the wheel has its seat, and is activated,
in the region of the heart

Vajrayana Buddhism, the third turning of the Buddha's *Dharmachakra* – after the *Hinayana* and *Mahayana* Buddhist teachings – is considered to contain the most direct method for orientating the practitioner towards supreme reality. It favours refined meditation techniques and the training of sensitive perception. Deep meditation constitutes the central practice in continuity with earlier Buddhism with its aim to experience ultimate reality by transcending the ego stage.

Indian Buddhism began to wane in Northern India with the Muslim invasion until, by the 14th century, it had lost most of its material foundation and the Kathmandu Valley became a secure haven for the continued practice of Sanskrit-based Buddhism.

Up to this time its protagonists had been heterodox mystics, monks and ascetics – *siddhas* or masters – venerated as beings of perfect spiritual realization. They taught the path of becoming one with the pure 'diamond' spirit as the essence of all phenomena which, in their world-view of an ever expanding universe, allows for the possibility of evoking here and now images of transcendent reality, while the student's experiences are considered basically to be of pure *vajra*-nature.

The practice of *Vajrayana* meditation and tantric rituals was the preserve of the collective memory of the *Vajracharyas* – the *Newar* Buddhist priest caste. They had transmitted its complex traditions, including the *Charya* dance, in the Kathmandu Valley since the 6th - 7th centuries.

The *Newars* are the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. Their history and highly developed culture, in the spheres of art and architecture is about 2,000 years old. Following both the Hindu and Buddhist religions, their language is of Tibetan-Burmese origin, containing a high per-centage of Sanskrit vocabulary. In the latter part of the 18th century the *Newars* lost their political autonomy in the Kathmandu Valley with the conquest of Prithvi Narayan Shah who established his capital in the Valley.

Characteristic of *Newar* Buddhism is the complex synthesis with prevalent beliefs and rituals of Hinduism, the practice of extensive, detailed rituals, and a rich artistic heritage. *Newar* Buddhism integrated the teachings of *Mahayana* Buddhism – the teaching of the Great Path of Compassion in Action – with older oral and scriptural traditions.

Unique to this tradition is that the ‘masters of the diamond path’ – the priest caste of the *vajracharyas* – as the representatives of the highest Buddhist ideals, form a non-celibate community. In this way *Newar* Buddhism became associated with a hierarchical lineage, when celibate monks adopted marriage and thereby became hereditary priests – *vajracharyas* – with the monasteries, the *viharas*, becoming family dwellings.

The basic attraction of *Vajrayana* Buddhism – the diamond path – as it is practiced by the *Newar* ethnic community, is the belief that through rituals, aided by the *Charya* songs and dances, the initiate can aspire to become a Buddha, in a single lifetime, rather than through repeated cycles of rebirth, as envisaged by mainstream Buddhism, while all spiritual benefits which may be derived are pursued for the benefit of all humankind (1).

Until today, *Newar* Buddhist priests, having absorbed *Charya* into the ritual practice, perform *Charya* songs and dance as an essential part of their rituals, with the priests becoming the receptacles of the deity invoked. In the *Charya* tradition this also applies to the dancer, who for the duration of the dance ‘becomes the deity’.

During the late 20th century, a revival phase marked the beginning of opening the tradition to the broader public with performances, accepting students from all classes and walks of life. Since the conquest of Tibet by China in 1959, Buddhism spread throughout the world, creating a new awareness for the need of making those traditions accessible, which up till then had been kept secluded.

This revolutionary political, social and religious situation created a challenge also for the *Charya* dance tradition which, since its recorded beginnings in the early Middle-Ages, had been practiced and protected in Nepal exclusively by the lineage-holders of the priestly caste of the *vajracharyas*.

The sudden turn in history opened up new possibilities of sharing ritual traditions which until then had been kept secret. The Buddha himself did not set up boundaries for passing on his teachings, receiving initiation through his own practice of *sadhana*. The time had come when the principle of open learning possibilities received a new focus. In the so-called ‘revival phase’ since the 1990’s, *Charya* has been embraced as a Nepalese classical dance, presented publicly to audiences, also to foreigners in theatres and on hotel stages (2).

“Whoever wants to learn - let them come!”

At the beginning of the 1990’s the scholar-priest Pandit Ratnakaji Vajracharya advocated in Nepal that the *Charya* tradition should no longer be confined to the priestly lineage alone, but that it should be taken out into the world. He wrote articles, a great number of books, published *mantras* and started an open discussion in his own circles and beyond about the merits of the dissemination of a traditionally protected heritage. Wider recognition for this revolutionary approach came only after his demise in 1999.

The new privilege of participation led to the discovery of many of the ‘jewels’ of a time-honoured tradition internationally by scholars and interested students alike.

Meanwhile, his son Prajwal has taken on the responsibility for upholding the heritage and for taking it around the world. On invitation, he founded a temple and *Charya*-school in Portland, Oregon, North America, while continuing to teach in Nepal and other countries as well as performing together with his students (www.dancemandal.com).

2. ALL IN ONE – ONE IN ALL: THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY



*“When I tried to measure the human energy-field,
I discovered that it fills the whole universe”. (3)*

The ‘Flower Ornament Scripture’ – the *Avatamsaka Sutra* – compiled in stages around the beginning of the Christian era, refers to the basic concept of *Mahayana Buddhism* – the interdependence of all phenomena:

“In their wisdom the *Buddhas* recognize
that the whole cosmos of beings without exception
is like the great net in the palace of *Indra*,
whereby all beings are like jewels at the intersecting knots of *Indra’s* net,
that is, they are infinitely and continuously reflecting their images
and the images of images...” (Book 28)

This all-encompassing vision of unity illustrates the principle of ‘*all in one, and one in all*’ in a universe of infinite mutual relationships.

The *sutra* relates that from the beginning of time, there extended over *Mt. Meru*, the cosmic world axis, a web of glittering strands with a diamond jewel tied to each knot. This web of light was fashioned of an infinite array of strands and jewels, spreading out from its centre in all directions, with each of the jewels again reflecting myriads of other diamonds in a process of reflections of reflections without end.

In this view, the whole of existence, as well as every created being, are envisaged as a jewel in this cosmic net, symbolizing each a universe where infinitely repeated mutual relationships exist between all its co-created manifestations, where nothing exists in isolation since it is contained in other existing entities which are interpenetrating and mirroring each other.



Spider-web with dew diamonds, illustrating the creation metaphor of a universal luminous net of inter-connected energy strands

In relation to this concept, every one of the dances presented in this project will be shown to be a jewel in this infinite cosmic web of transparent jewels, reflecting in their own specific way aspects of transcendent light and wisdom, and making their reverberations felt in the soul of the dancer. In this context, every dance represents a world of its own, of cosmic and equally microcosmic dimensions.

Mundane time-cycles and cosmic time are bound together through rhythm and sound. Musical meter and sound patterns are cyclically connected, with the individual and the universe undergoing repeated processes of destruction and recreation.

Likewise, space is articulated and ritually celebrated in a cyclic manner by the circumambulations of holy shrines and by the circular dance journeys as part of the *Charya* choreographic pattern, marking the deity's progression in time and space.

Focal points in the Kathmandu Valley of divine energy for contact with the realm of the gods are the *Svayambhu* and *Boudha Stupas* which are exceptional places of power manifesting the essential aspects of divinity through their archetypal, symbolic architecture. The tradition of the *stupa* as a sacred universal symbol is said to go back to the erection of eight tumuli (Skr. *stupa*) over the Buddha's body remains a custom which itself goes back as far as neolithic times.

Within a single architectural structure a *stupa* embodies all knowledge while bearing witness to a time when matter was still regarded as a motherly element, as *mater*, and as embodying the spiritual forces of the universe:

The *stupa* is the symbol of the awakened soul which horizontally looks into all four directions of space, while being guided and sustained in this vision of time without end by the vertical inner invisible spinal pillar upholding the whole construction. In terms of the *Charya* dance tradition, the pillar is the synonym for the spinal column of the dancer.



Swayambhu Stupa at sunset, Kathmandu

The vastness of space in its different dimensions was believed to be inhabited by divinities, by *devas* and other spiritual beings, with every site having its own spiritual protector.

Eons before the Buddha *Shakyamuni* was born in Lumbini, the Buddha *Vipasvi* at the time of the *satya-yuga*, the Age of Truth, wished to establish in the valley a centre of worship.

According to the mythological reference, found in the 15th century *Swayambhu Purana* – the *Newar Buddhist* basic mythological reference text about the origin and development of the Kathmandu Valley – the Valley in prehistoric times was a lake and the abode of the *naga* water spirits who also guarded the treasures of the earth. Rivers, lakes and springs were their realm and natural habitat. It was into the waters of this *Nagadaha* Lake that the *Adi Buddha Vipasvi* dropped a lotus seed.



Nagakanya, Nepalese Bronze, Kathmandu

Miraculously, there manifested a crystal light above a thousand-petal lotus, containing all the qualities of enlightenment and bearing the five transcendental qualities of buddhahood. The light on the lotus, called the *Svayambhu Dharmadhatu* – the Self-Manifested Bearer of Divine Law – illuminated the entire valley, with the flame of the primal *Buddha Vajradhara*, the carrier of the divine diamond thunderbolt, burning at its centre.

As further recorded in the *Svayambhu Purana*, it was prince *Shantikaracharya* who built a *chaitya* – a temple – to protect both lotus and flame. As the first tantric initiate of the Kathmandu Valley, he was the initiator of the line of the diamond masters, the *vajracharyas*.

This then was the birth of the primordial *Svayambhu Stupa* with the Tree of Life as its axis. The central pole came also to be identified with the symbol of the original Buddha *Vajradhara*, the focal energy source of *Vajrayana* Buddhism as well as of the *Charya* dance.

The advent of the bodhisattva *Manjushri* from China, who drained the lake by cutting a gorge into the surrounding hills, marks the beginning of historic times. The lake became an inhabitable place, where people settled to worship the self-risen divinity *Svayambhu*. *Manjushri* in particular, but also *Vajrayogini*, a deity of initiation, are considered the spiritual protectors of the Kathmandu Valley (4).

In order to support the thousand – petal lotus and its flame, after the lake had been drained, a great pillar of wood ‘seven fathoms in circumference and forty-two fathoms in height’ was erected, fortified by a high mound of earth and stone. This feat, according to legend, was accomplished ‘by forty-two *arhats*’ – mythological liberated spiritual beings – who came down from their abode on Vulture Peak to assist in the construction of the sacred building. (5).

The historic edifice, which has been restored many times, may be dated as being about two-thousand years old.

The white, circular dome – as the ‘self-manifested’ power of the divine and visible base of the *Svayambhu Stupa* – is a symbol of sacred space, representing the element of air. On its surface the round dome is decorated with sandalwood coloured lotus petals, suggesting that the whole edifice is afloat in space.

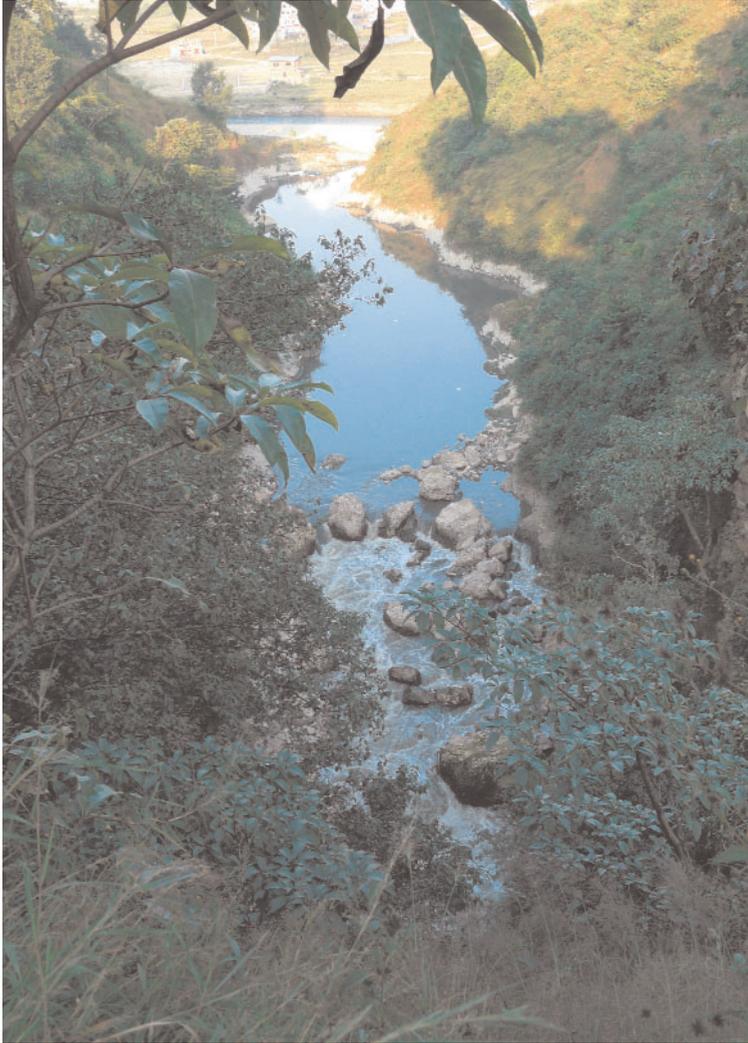
Within the void of the dome dwells unseen the triangular *garva*, or womb, symbolic for the element of fire.

The big cube resting on the dome with its four visionary faces denotes the solid earth, where humanity lives, with a view of the promise of salvation.

The thirteen-leveled, round pinnacle tower, as the symbolic ladder to perfection and enlightenment, stands for the element of water (6).

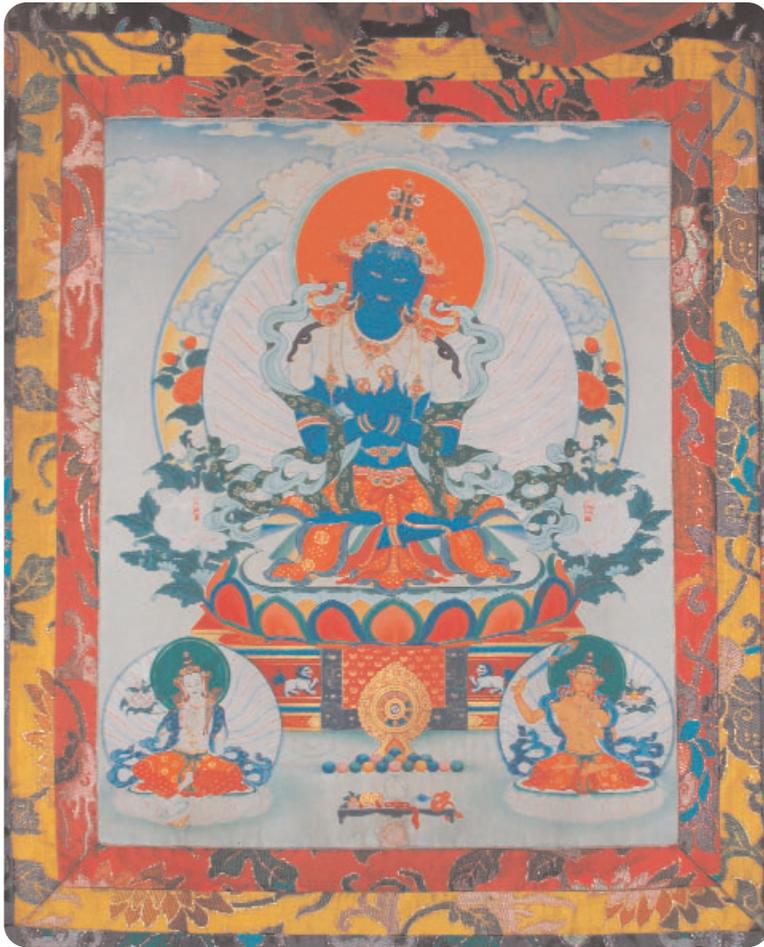


Bodhisattva *Manjushri*, Statue from Nepal



The historical site of the '*Manjushri Gorge*'
in the Kathmandu Valley, near the capital Kathmandu

Vajradhara, the primordial Buddha, represents the quintessence of buddhahood and the perfect union of opposites: He is often shown with a blue-coloured body as the symbol of infinite space in which he appears as an emanation of transcendent light. His arms are crossed before his chest – his right hand holds the *vajra*, his left the bell – *ghanta*. In this position they demonstrate the union of opposites, the existence of an ultimate wisdom and the possibility of its implementation through practical means.

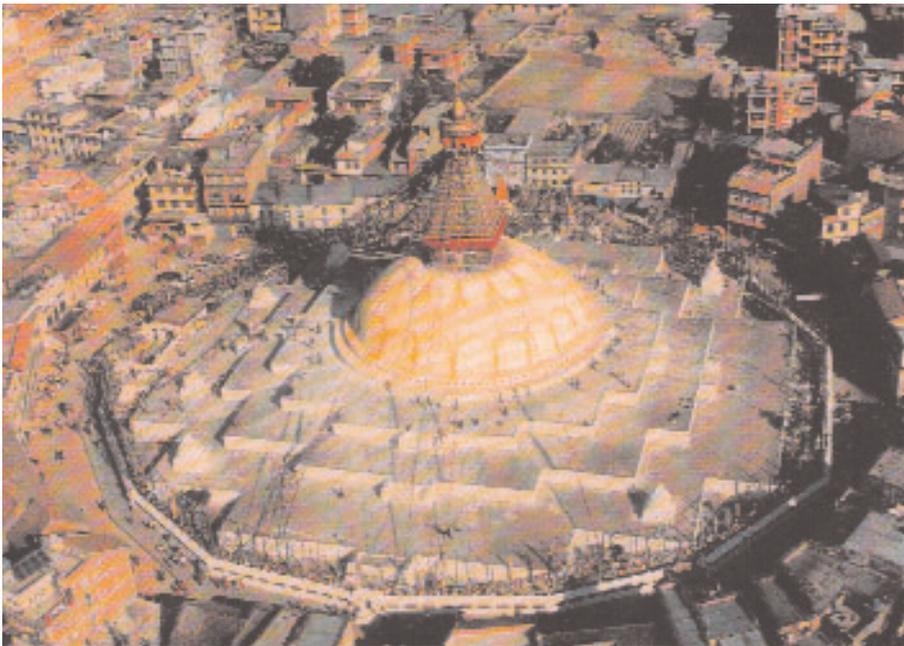


Vajradhara, holding the *vajra* (diamond thunderbolt) in the right and the *ghanta* (diamond bell) in the left hand crossed before his chest, *thangka* from Tibet

The light of *Vajradhara* was reflected in the colours of the rainbow and in the directions of space: From these rainbow colours there manifested five transcendental Buddhas as the emanations of the *Adi Buddha's* original consciousness, which unite the inner and outer worlds of experience.

The five Buddhas represent the *vishva vajra* – the symbol of universal transcendent light, the directions of space with its centre, the elements and senses. The symbol of the *vajra* as *mandala* may be mapped out onto any space – on a *stupa* or *thangka*, on the human body, or even on profane space, thereby becoming a model for the sacred.

While each of the five Buddhas embodies a particular aspect of buddhahood, together they collectively symbolize *Vajrayana* Buddhism as one body of teaching (see *Pancha Buddha* ritual, page 113).



The *Boudha Stupa*, the second most important temple structure, was built between 6th - 8th centuries as a massive *mandala*

II. DEITY-DANCE



“Deity-dance is a symbolic form of dance.

*It is about the energy which was given form by great enlightened masters in the past...
Through this energy in dance it is possible to learn how to deal with humanity”.* (P.V.)

1. NATARAJA – THE COSMIC DANCER



Shiva Nataraja, Tamil Nadu, India, 950-1200 C.E.

The historical Hindu antecedent of *Padmanateshvara*, patron of the *Charya* student, is *Shiva Nataraja*, the Lord of Dance (7).

With the metaphor of ‘dancing matter’ in the image of *Nataraja*, religious art of the Indian subcontinent presents us with a dynamic interpretation of the cosmos and its creative divinity: *jagat* (Skr.), the word for ‘universe’, is ‘that which moves’.

Sound and light consolidate, develop material aspects while at the same time they are part of a continuous process of dissolution and dematerialization. Behind all events in the cosmos, it is *Shiva Nataraja*, the ‘unmoved mover’ who by dancing continues to send pulsating waves of awakening sound through matter to seduce it from lethargy to life.

The image of the cosmic dancer is based on the concept of a universal centre in constant circular motion, radiating out in every direction, so as to form the symbol of the circle as a moving *mandala*. Into this turning circle the image of the dancer is projected: The navel of the deity is the centre of the world, his arms indicate the directions of space, his head meets the sky, his feet touch the earth.

The divine dancer is the power around which everything must turn, simply because he embodies peace: and all matter dances, appearing around him as an aureole of fiery emanations. By dancing he creates and sustains the manifold phenomena, by dancing he destroys all forms and names and renders tranquillity anew.

Because his movements and gestures embody all beings and all worlds, there comes out of the interminable flow of his divine energy, an ever new outpouring of rhythmic dance patterns, endlessly repeated and forever creative, as they encompass both movement and perfect immobility.

Nataraja dances within an aureole of fire, emanating from a lotus, the five-fold dance of creation, of veiling, preservation, destruction and release, with the prostrate *asura*, the demon of ignorance, tamed underfoot. The divine dancer performs his dance both at the centre of the universe and within the burning-ground of the worshipper’s heart – who by his grace, is released from bondage.

The cosmic dancer is the solitary witness, who transcends the period of cosmic night into which he sacrifices the universe with all its worlds through the consuming fire of his own light. Long after the moon has vanished into the waters, the mountains have disintegrated, the sunlight has become extinct, humankind has perished, the stars have plummeted, and the earth has disappeared beneath the waves of a gigantic ocean, *Shiva* alone remains dancing the *pralaya tandava*, the dance of the dissolution of all worlds.