



The Five Sacred Actions

Introduction

by Lise Vail

*Everywhere is Shiva's blessed dance made manifest,
These five-segment dances are in time and in eternity.*

*The fivefold dances are His five actions. . . .
Our Lord dances with water, fire, wind and ether.*

— A South Indian Shaiva scripture

In the view of Indian culture, the processes that made the world we live in — the forces of Creation — did not simply occur at one time in the hoary past, but represent an ongoing dance or sport of the supreme God. After all, what in our world

stays the same? It is being created anew at each individual moment as new ideas, actions, and objects, and is dissolving as things end or die. Many endings are, however, followed by new life: spring comes after a long winter, new children are born,

the sun rises to encourage us once again. Cycles of creation, sustenance, and destruction — these are three related divine actions, sacred actions that Indian philosophers have perceived as constantly dancing in our world. This dance has formed us, they say; and continually reforms the universe's own structure.

For millennia, the idea of three cosmic actions has been an inherent part of the Indian perception of God's endeavors. The earliest references to divine three-part acts are to be found in late Vedic hymns, which describe several "sets" of three gods, for instance, Vivasvat (rising sun), Surya (sustaining sun), and Savitri (inspirer of higher wisdom as the sun sets on the world). In the following era of classical Hinduism, the three great actions came to be known in most schools of thought as creation (*sr̥ṣṭi*), sustenance (*sthiti*), and dissolution (*samhāra*), with each function being associated with a particular great god. These gods were collectively called the *trimūrti* (three divine forms): Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), and Shiva (the Destroyer). Brahma created the world, and he is still considered the god of new beginnings and important undertakings. Vishnu, portrayed as a divine king, is the god who preserves that created world, sustaining it and protecting it from evil from age to age. He incarnates in animal or human form whenever that world sustenance is threatened by demonic beings and lack of righteousness. Shiva, who is characterized as an ascetic, is responsible for destroying or dissolving the forces of

human egotism and selfishness that threaten all creatures, and it is said to be he who absorbs the universe back into himself when it has reached such a point of corruption that it cannot be repaired. Brahma then re-creates it once more. Each "cycle" of these divine actions is known as a *kalpa*, or 4,320 million years! Yet from the highest philosophical point of view, these three gods are not considered to be independent deities at all; they are instead aspects of the one supreme God, often called Brahman, or the Highest Shiva, or the Great Vishnu — the one God who performs all three types of actions eternally and at each moment of time.

In the medieval era, two additional divine actions that affect human life came powerfully into prominence in Indian philosophy. Creation, sustenance, and destruction were joined by the fourth and fifth divine actions: concealment and grace. These actions explained the fundamental nature of human bondage and the path to liberation. Through His powers God conceals Himself, or His own true nature, within the world, so that it looks like a world! God's nature hides as the human soul, or Self, and as the myriad, multicolored objects of our universe. This is called His *vilaya*, or "concealment" function. We do not realize that all this is God, so God is both "hidden" in us and concealed from us. However, when the time is right for each person, according to God's mysterious plan, He again reveals Himself *as us* (and as the world) by bestowing grace (*anugraha*), the fifth divine action. Grace is always considered the greatest of the five acts, for here God reveals His tremendous love, unveiling to each person the truth that He alone dwells in each one's heart. He alone is the master Doer of the

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five acts, whether on a cosmic scale or in individual human moments of time and experience.

One of the most erudite explications of the five divine actions comes to us through the tenth-century Kashmiri Shaiva philosopher Kshemaraja, who was a well-reputed disciple of the great master Abhinavagupta. One of Kshemaraja's most important works, called *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, the "Heart of Self-Recognition," is a foundational text of the "Self-recognition scriptures," which together form one of three main branches of Kashmiri Shaiva spiritual literature (the other two being the Agama and Spanda scriptures). In the *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, Kshemaraja details how the supreme God, whom he calls Shiva or Highest Shiva, is the true Doer of all our actions and our deepest Self (*Ātman*). Just as He creates, sustains, destroys, conceals, and bestows grace in the universe, following a natural rhythm of His vibrant, conscious Self, so do we. Our manifest selves also follow that same rhythm; we are a contracted, or micro-cosmic, form of God's infinite majesty. For example, we create by our thoughts and feelings, by using our artistry to make art, music, dance, crafts, machines, and so on. Then we keep our creations sustained, by protecting them or perhaps displaying them for as long as seems appropriate, or as long as we can. This is followed by our reabsorbing the thought or feeling into the mind, moving through subtle or material loss on to the next phase of renewed creative endeavor.

Kshemaraja proclaims that understanding the final two functions — concealment and grace — is especially crucial to our lives. When we are faced with this splendid world, it's not surprising that we might be confused by all this multiplicity

and not see the divine nature within its folds. But we too, he says, play in this concealment game. We hide our divine nature from ourselves by disbelieving it, ignoring it, or neglecting to do spiritual practice which would draw the grace of understanding its immensity. We also practice concealment positively when we censor our hurtful thoughts or keep silent to contemplate God.

Grace. The fifth action is the most precious of the five. Kshemaraja notes that grace is the domain for the actions of a true Guru, a Sadguru, who bears the sacred duty of distributing God's grace on earth; that is why he or she dwells in our midst. When we open up to receive the blessings of a master like Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, we allow ourselves to receive God's grace in all its fullness. Our lives will naturally lead us to perform the fifth act as well, that is, we can "bestow grace" by assisting someone in need or helping ourselves and others to know God.

Kshemaraja emphasizes both how important it is to receive grace from a Sadguru, and how necessary it is for us to recognize just *who* is acting within us. He says in Sutras 4 and 10: "The individual experiencer, in whom divine Consciousness exists in contracted form, has the universe as the contracted form (of his own body). . . . Even in this (contracted) condition, he performs the five actions, like Him (Shiva)." It is true that our powers to perform the five acts may be somewhat limited, or "contracted," now, but knowing that they are God's own abilities assists us very powerfully in extricating ourselves from this counterfeit smallness.

Kshemaraja explains in his commentary on Sutra 10 that recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) of our divine essence and contemplating our coparticipation in God's five sacred

actions will have startling results. The effect will be our complete and vitalizing return to unification with God, that is, we will attain the unbounding joy of spiritual liberation. He says in this regard:

Thus this authorship of the fivefold act occurring within one's own personal experience, if pursued steadily with firm understanding, reveals the Lord's greatness to the devotee. Therefore, those who ponder over this

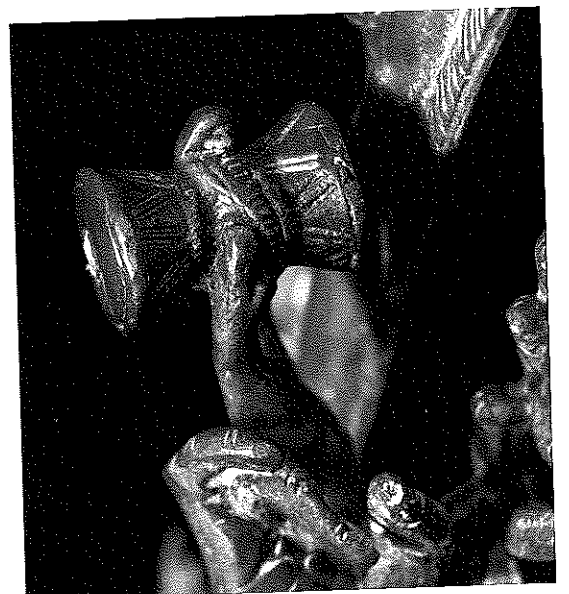
(fivefold act of the Lord), knowing the universe as an unfoldment of the essential nature (of consciousness), become liberated in this very life. That is what the (sacred) tradition maintains.

The following five essays, contributed by the editors of *Darshan* magazine, will explore the nature of God's — and our own — five sacred actions. May you attain the understanding and blessings which pervade all five!

सृष्टि Creation

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This expression is so familiar that everyone knows its meaning: we each perceive beauty according to our individual preferences, our individual tastes and inclinations. While I was photographing from atop a mountain in the Tansa Valley in India during the hot season, the surrounding vista with the early-morning purplish haze enveloping the crisp brown mountains in the distance and the parched barren rice paddies outstretched below evoked a silent, haunting beauty unlike any I'd ever seen before. To someone else, this view might have been drab and lifeless. Same scene, different perceptions. This is the key to creation: we create our world based on how we perceive it.

Creation — or *sṛṣṭi* in Sanskrit — is the act of bringing something into existence. This first of the five sacred acts occurs on a cosmic level when Shiva draws the entire universe forth from the very essence of his being, from the primordial *spanda*,



Shiva's Drum symbolizes creation

or vibration, of his Consciousness. Thus, every particle of the universe, all the diverse forms and substances of the world, every sound vibration traveling through space, is imbued with Shiva's own energy. Shiva revels in delight at the splendor of his

magnificent creation — which includes our ability to perform his sacred fivefold act.

We too experience Shiva's creative glory on a limited scale: in the cathedrals we build, the sonnets we write, the gardens we plant, the feasts we cook. Shiva's fundamental act of creation constantly pulses through us — and we can recognize it even through the veil of our human perception.

I've always been drawn to the Shiva Nataraj, the dancing Shiva, at the front entrance of the main building, Anugraha, at Shree Muktananda Ashram. Every time I bowed before him, I understood, at least intellectually, that I was honoring Shiva as God, the supreme Consciousness, the all-pervading force of the universe, the God within me. But it wasn't until I read a story of how the Shiva Nataraj dances in ecstasy as he celebrates the cosmic fivefold play of creation, maintenance, dissolution, concealment, and grace, that I felt the five *krtyas*, the five acts, existing in the core of my being as well. I saw that they continually manifest in every second of my life. As I read this story, I intuitively understood that Shiva enthusiastically creates his drama through me, in me, for me, and as me in an endless cycle, and that through my perception and understanding of the unfolding acts within me, I am the creative codirector of this awe-inspiring play. With this new awareness, now I sometimes pause to contemplate how each of the *krtyas* is manifesting in me in a particular moment.

When we contemplate creation in our individual *sādhana*s, we experience it as our perception of the world around us. We look at different forms at different times in different spaces, and they exist in our awareness. When we look elsewhere, this set of objects is supplanted by a new set. If we consider the innumerable objects that we create in our consciousness in this

way from the time we open our eyes after sleep to the time we close them before sleep, our acts of creation seem mind-boggling! Let's add to these physical forms all the intangible ones: the myriad inspirations, memories, and thoughts that arise as we go about our day; the fleeting visions we see during meditation; and the array of images that appear in our dreams after we've closed our eyes. And there's even more — we respond subjectively to these external objects, as well as to our thoughts and memories, with a multitude of emotions. Whew! We've just created our entire universe. This is what Baba Muktananda has told us again and again. He said,

The world is as you see it. The two terms are *dṛṣṭi* and *sṛishti*. *Dṛishti* means all that exists; *sṛishti* means your own eyes, your own perception. Whether you suffer loss or gain, happiness or sorrow, whether your heart leaps or goes dead, it is all your own creation; nobody else is responsible.

Once I realized that creating is my own responsibility, I saw where the choices I make, the attitudes I take, the thoughts I think, lead me: they create my destiny, they determine how the rest of my life's drama will play itself out. If I create and maintain an attitude of negativity, fear, and hopelessness, I will perceive my life as a battlefield, seeing constant bombardments in whatever befalls me. I'll continue living as my limited self, and my true nature will be veiled by concealment. If I create and maintain an attitude of hope, love, respect, and joy, I will see whatever comes my way as happening for the best, as helping to free me from my limiting self-concepts: this brings me closer to knowing my inherent divine nature.

Knowing that liberation lies within me, that it is within my grasp, and

understanding that my perceptions are vital to finding it, slowly I'm creating a new destiny for myself. I'm learning to take responsibility for my negative thoughts: I'm trying to nip them in the bud, so to speak, before they set seed and create a whole new generation of noxious weeds. For example, I've noticed I have a tendency to take on other people's bad attitudes, curt words, and what my family would call "ugly moods." If someone frowns at me as I wave a friendly hello, previously my mind would quickly draw the worst conclusions. I'd think, "She's mad at me," or "What did I do to offend him?" or "He doesn't like me." I'd walk away feeling contracted and put out, and then I'd rerun the exchange repeatedly in my mind. Now I'm more likely to catch myself as these thoughts come up and tell myself, "That person's mood is not mine," or "I have nothing to do with her state," and then I visually usher out of my body the negative energy that I've taken on. Now that I see myself as the director of my own play, I can redirect and re-create God's energy in me into a more beneficial form, and I can remain in my natural state of peace as the witness. Baba has said, "Change your eyes, make them divine, and you will see the world as it really is."

There are times though when it seems as if my process of creation is stagnant, or even that I'm regressing in my *sadhana*. When this happens, I try to remember to refocus my attention so that I am more aware of when the Truth is clouded by my own perceptions. I try to let go of the concepts that I have created and to maintain the Shakti within me through the Siddha Yoga practices. Then I can better see how I'm helping to create a destiny that leads to the ultimate creation — Self-realization.

But we can't get to Self-realization without Shiva's most uplifting act: grace.

There is a story about the creation of the universe in which Brahma, the divine Creator, tries to bring the world into existence by his sheer will. He tries repeatedly to manifest it by calling it forth from his being, declaring, "I will create the universe." When he fails again and again, he pauses in puzzlement. At this point he brings his outward gaze inside and begins to meditate. In meditation he hears the wondrous primordial sound of the mantra *Om*. He aligns himself with the vibrations of *Om* and then projects the impulse of his will outward, proclaiming, "The universe shall be created." With that, each form of the universe unfolds from within Brahma. Only when Brahma released himself into the grace-filled mantra could the world's creation take place. We too need the help of grace, of the Guru, as we, with both eyes directed toward liberation, create our lives.

I've also discovered that when, like Brahma, I let go of my need to do or to create according to my own willful notions and limited concepts, I often can touch God's divine potential in me. It occurs when the spark of creation spontaneously emerges as I go about my daily activities — in the creative intuitions, the flashes of recognition, the "aha's" from insights. These perceptions all spring from God's creative power, which is always available and accessible to me. It's amazing how many times during the course of a day this can happen. For instance, an idea that is "right on" pops into my mind during a discussion in a meeting; a great solution to a mundane problem like fixing plumbing in the kitchen sink appears to come out of nowhere; I envision a quilt in completion, and yet I haven't even started it; and even when I "catch" myself in the act of thinking lowly of myself and then change my focus to the highest. These are all external expressions of God's creative

power in me. And this can happen at any moment. For just an instant, my eyes turn within and I perceive my divinity — as expressed in a creative impulse.

With *śaktipāt*, the descent of grace, we truly do perceive and create ourselves and

our world much differently. Maybe we can adapt that old familiar expression in terms of Siddha Yoga meditation now: Sadhana is in the eye of the beholder. And what a beautiful sight that is to see!

— Jane Wilcox

स्थिति Maintenance

Everything that exists — *everything*: the galaxies and infinite space; rain forests and deserts; every giant radiant star and minuscule blade of grass and the wind that blows it; the mayfly with a single day of life; and you and I with seventy-five years or so — the entire manifest universe exists because the divine creative power maintains its being. The second cosmic “act,” the function of maintenance, is known in Indian philosophy as *sthiti*, a Sanskrit word whose root indicates the activity of “staying, remaining, abiding, sojourning in.” The etymology of *sthiti* is richly suggestive to the traveler on the spiritual path, carrying such related connotations as: “constancy, perseverance, continuance or steadfastness in the path of duty, virtuous conduct, firm persuasion, conviction.” Clearly, the ongoing acts of maintaining and sustaining insights and new states of expanded awareness are central to spiritual endeavor.

Sthiti comes, among the trinity of deities responsible for the cosmic acts, under the aegis of Lord Vishnu, who is sometimes known as the Preserver. Vishnu sustains the creation lovingly, protecting it with care and compassion. Universal dharma, the underlying order and action that sustains the creation justly and harmoniously, is an



Gesture of fearlessness represents maintenance

essential aspect of Vishnu’s ever-active cosmic function of *sthiti*. It is interesting to note, too, that the best-known and best-beloved avatars of Vishnu are Krishna and Rama, figures that are enduring exemplars of unconditional love, perfect dharmic action, and benevolent protection. Love, dharma, and protection — the three forces that interweave seamlessly to comprise the continuous maintenance of the created universe: *sthiti*.

While the ongoing cycle of creation, maintenance, and dissolution is one of the cornerstones of Indian cosmology, it is the unique insight of the philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism that each of us, thousands of times a day, in our limited state

as contracted universal energy (Shakti), performs the *pañcakṛtya*, the fivefold act. The tenth sutra of the *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam* makes absolutely clear the individual’s continual reenactment of the five acts.

Even in this condition [of the empirical self], he [the individual] does the five *kṛtyas* [deeds] like Him [Shiva].

What, then, are the implications of this second cosmic act on the individual level, and what is its relevance to our spiritual growth? Just as Vishnu preserves, sustains, and protects the creation, we too maintain our creations, especially those creations fashioned in the invisible realm of the mind: thoughts, emotions, sense perceptions, desires, fantasies — the realm of mental activity known in Shaivism as *vikalpa*. Shaivism parallels divine maintenance with our holding on to — for good or bad — the creations of our minds. These creations can be great scientific discoveries that change our understanding of the structure of things or heal a previously incurable disease; or can be loving thoughts of others. They can also be the petty thoughts of jealousy, competition, or judgment that make up our sense of separation and duality and so often rule our lives — in short, the thoughts that are the contents of suffering. We hold on to the mind’s thoughts, uplifting or contracting; we maintain them. In so doing we give life, validity, and reality to the mental constructs, the *vikalpa*, that generate our sense of self-worth and awareness that we are divine, that we perform the divine acts, and that God is dwelling within us and within our actions and thoughts. And, alas, we maintain too the *vikalpas* that generate our sense of littleness and incompleteness. Clearly, truly grasping our individual performance of *sthiti* has major implications for our sadhana.

I once received from Baba Muktananda an unforgettable teaching about the consequences of what we choose to maintain in our minds. Yes, *choose* — hard as that fact may be to accept. I was going through one of those periods in the ups and downs of spiritual life when my mind was spinning wildly, and it was driving me a little crazy. I was fairly young to sadhana then and didn’t know it was a bumpy road of ups and downs — I naively believed that it had to be patently up all the way. It was a time of lots of anguish and distress and feeling stuck. I was also plagued by fears that this was how it really was and maybe always would be. After some weeks of floundering around in this state despite daily practice (remember: one of the meanings of *sthiti* is “staying or remaining in any state or condition”), a glimmer of light broke through, and I recalled the old adage “You can’t lift yourself up by your own bootstraps.” So I went to Baba to ask his help with this decidedly unwelcome state I was maintaining. I bowed to Baba, handed him a book I had brought on Kashmir Shaivism, and blurted out, “Oh, Baba, I’ve got so many problems.” Baba said, “Hmmm,” and began to leaf through the book. Then he started to sing some of the verses in the book. His voice seemed to come from the same deep place where those great truths were originally perceived by the sages. There was so much sheer bliss and love in his chanting. I was transported in a split second deep within myself, far beyond all my problems and concerns and anxieties — ah! there is indeed a state far different from the mind’s churning turmoil. That’s the state we should put our energies into discovering and maintaining.

Time disappeared as I was lost in Baba’s voice and the beauty of that special moment. After a while, Baba stopped

singing, and sat quietly for a few seconds, and then asked me, "So, why have you come to see Baba?" During Baba's chanting and the stillness afterward, I had literally forgotten why. But the mind soon kicked into "normal" mode, and I said, again, "Oh, Baba, I have so many problems right now. I have a lot of attachments, and I'm really upset, and . . ." Baba interrupted this nervous stream of babbling with a question, "Are you studying Shaivism?"

"Yes, Baba."

"Do you know what Shaivism means by *vikalpa*?"

"Yes, Baba — all the thoughts and mental activity of the mind."

"Ah," Baba said, "Yes. And all your problems are just — *dead vikalpa*!"

At these words, I felt a thrill of pure knowing — I knew deep within me exactly what Baba meant.

Baba went on, "Yes. All your problems are just dead vikalpa. Every time you think of your problems, the thought lasts a while, then stops. When the thought stops, there are no problems. Then you have another thought about your problems. Each time you think of your problems you are bringing dead vikalpa back to life. All your problems are dead vikalpa you keep bringing back to life."

I was stunned. Baba's words penetrated to the core of my heart. I was being given the boon of a magnificent teaching, an awareness that had the power to change my whole vision of life, nothing less than a new understanding of the origin of suffering. I suffered because I maintained — brought back to life — habitual thoughts that ceased to exist several times a minute, yet I continued to resurrect them. And I saw that I had a *choice* — I could resuscitate and hold on to these painful thoughts, or I could bury them in that state of absolute

stillness between thoughts, could just let them go, since they *were* gone.

Baba went on, "You're a teacher. So whenever people come to you and tell you they have problems, explain to them that it's dead vikalpa." Needless to say, Baba's words of nearly twenty years ago continue to resound within me and often come back when I'm coping with the vagaries of the mind to remind me I am maintaining thoughts and feelings that I don't have to keep alive, and I am often able at that moment to drop and move beyond them. We perform the second act, of maintaining that which causes us suffering; we can also perform the third act, of dissolution, which Baba had shown me was allowing the natural dissolution of painful thoughts to take place. Shaivism's key insight, that we "do the five deeds like Shiva," had been indelibly brought home to me by Baba.

Interestingly, Shaivism calls the individual act of maintenance, of sustaining our perceptions and the mental creations of contracted consciousness, *relishing*. We "relish" our unhappiness — a revolutionary idea, but oh, so true — and keep giving renewed life to it. But I had learned from Baba that the awakened soul has choice — two kinds of choices — to let go, or to select what we wish to maintain. This awareness is one of the most significant attainments of sadhana: that in time spiritual effort and grace transform habit and compulsion into the potential for choice, for choosing to focus on the highest.

The Upanishads teach us that the goal of yoga is to end all human suffering. The purpose of sadhana is to help us break the habitual ways we perpetuate suffering, the negative modes of "relishing," of maintaining contracted awareness, so we can maintain a state filled with expanded true thoughts, like "God dwells within me as

me," and "God dwells within everyone and everything."

We have choice. We can continually sustain anger, anxiety, blame, guilt — all the sorry progeny of suffering; or we can remember that these are "dead vikalpa" and sustain the loving offspring of the heart, like respect, detachment, playfulness, kindness.

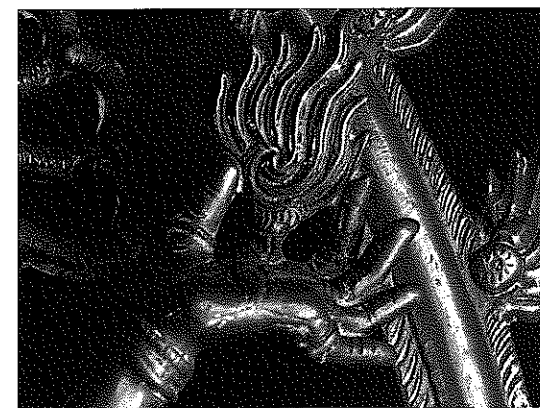
It is interesting that in the icon of the dancing Shiva, the Shiva Nataraj, which symbolizes the Lord's performance of the fivefold act, sthiti is represented by one of Shiva's hands in *abhaya mudra*, the gesture of fearlessness. With courage,

unyielding to discouragement, we can commit ourselves to uprooting dead vikalpas. It's not easy or quick, for we have long mastered maintaining negative states. But through contemplation (including repeated contemplation of how we individually perform the fivefold act), and through maintaining devotion to spiritual discipline — for another crucial meaning of *maintenance* is honoring, protecting, and caring for the alive Shakti within — we learn to sustain the awakened divine energy that fills us with the grace to rest in the living joy of the Self.

— Harold Ferrar

संहार Dissolution

KA-BOOM! What is it about knocking things down? One minute it's there, then it's gone — somehow a very satisfying feeling, which is rivaled only by the opposite: seeing something emerge where there was nothing before. When my kids were little, there was a game that used to come out at many family gatherings in which the children, and often grownups too, would take turns adding a block to build a tower, one at a time, the tower becoming more and more teetery, until finally it fell with a resounding crash. No matter what child had been fussy or irritable, the warm rattle of the wooden blocks coming down put everyone in a good humor. There was a feeling of freedom, I think, that came with the disappearance of the tower. There was no more tension of building a specific thing with a shape



Flame symbolizes dissolution

already set; the slate was clean, and there could be a new beginning.

Personally, I love the process of getting rid of things. Whether it's cleaning out the filing cabinet near my desk, going around the garden with clippers and trowel in hand, or drastically "editing" a painting with a

large brushful of white gesso, getting rid of the redundant, the past-its-prime, the no-longer-useful, is a great feeling. I think that just for its own sake the very act of letting go of things is satisfying — just as creating something, or taking care of it, is satisfying — because these are powers that we share with the Absolute.

Baba Muktananda wrote:

Paramashiva, the Self of all, exists as the universe in its infinite forms. . . . He continually performs the five actions: creation, sustenance, dissolution, concealment, and bestowal of grace. . . . Dissolution is the absorption of the creation into Himself.

We don't have to become filmmakers with special effects at our command to dissolve creation and absorb it into ourselves. We do this all the time. Sitting here at my computer, looking out the window, I see pools of shade under trees, telephone poles, a street with an occasional car passing, low stone walls, a white fence, about three houses, and some overgrown lawn. When I close my eyes, it all disappears: like Shiva, I absorb it into myself, and then re-create it when I open my eyes again. I don't even have to close my eyes: when I turn my attention to the computer screen, the scene outside the window temporarily vanishes for me — I have dissolved it, though it probably exists, from a different perspective, for the jogger going by with her dog (unless she's thinking about what she's going to do later this evening, or having an imaginary conversation with the person she was just irritable with on the telephone).

The act of dissolution is called *sarīhāra* in Sanskrit, and is symbolized in the figure of the Shiva Nataraj, the dancing Shiva, as a flame. Very often we think of fire as the quintessence of the destroying force, reducing buildings, possessions, forests,

and life itself to ash, a seemingly dead substance. Yet in yoga, fire has another meaning: that which purifies, that which burns away everything unneeded, leaving only what is imperishable. Verse 61 of the *Guru Gītā* says:

O dear one, (having been thoroughly tested) by the intellect, which shines like a flame, I consider this, the greatest of the mantras (the *Guru Gītā*) to have been purified in the same way that gold is purified in fire.

Even though I often instinctively shy away from thinking about destruction — I have images of battlefields, lava flows, and tidal waves, which while perhaps purifying are undoubtedly painful — as I continue to do sadhana I have found that what dissolves in the flame held by the dancing Shiva, what the *Guru Gītā* calls the flame of the intellect, are my limiting concepts: what I think I need, what I think I am capable of, what I gravitate to, or what I try to avoid.

Sometimes the dissolution takes place imperceptibly, without much effort at all on my part. Where, for instance, did the sense of sadness and isolation go that I used to feel was a realistic view of the world, even in the midst of friendship and outer activity? What happened to my tendency to feel personally responsible for solving another person's problems? Through grace and sadhana, over a period of time they just faded away, like the Cheshire Cat's gradually fading grin in *Alice in Wonderland*. Other times, dissolution of unwanted baggage takes contemplation: holding it up to "the intellect, which shines like a flame."

The other day I had one such contemplation of what happens when we're confronted with laziness, greed, or some of the other qualities we'd like to dissolve. I was reading about an early African explorer

who described the state of dreamy well-being that came over him when he was mauled by a lion, blunting his pain and fear and robbing him of the will to escape. This physiological reaction, our body's way of preventing us from suffering, has been well-documented in other places. All at once this process seemed familiar to me as I began to contemplate: though I've never been attacked by a lion, my ego is constantly nibbling away at my resolution and discipline on a very subtle level, in situations where not my life but my will to do sadhana is threatened. When I am tempted to stay in bed an extra hour in the morning rather than get up and meditate, a comfortable lassitude comes over me, saying in so many words, "Don't worry, it will be fine, you deserve to sleep this morning." In a restaurant with friends, I find myself ordering a delicious-sounding dish from the menu that I know my body will have trouble digesting, but there's that comforting voice telling me, "No problem. It will taste so good, and you can handle it!" It's then that the flame of the intellect needs to get into action, dissolving the false sense of well-being and saying, "No, you're being attacked by a lion! This

is not a comfortable place!" And then I must summon the will to dissolve those desires, to create instead, in that minute, the world that I know is best for me.

Interestingly, far from being bereft when unwanted desires, opinions, and mental self-images dissolve, I get a sense of expanded potential, an awareness that the world is even richer and more varied and rewarding than I had imagined. When we are open to letting things dissolve, more can be created: we can play more roles, be comfortable in more places, love and appreciate more people.

On a cosmic level, when Shiva absorbs the universe he created back into his own being, one cycle ends and another begins. As individuals, we — as Shiva — are constantly dissolving and creating our worlds every time we have a new thought, every time we open and close our eyes. At the same time, Shiva as the *kundalinī śakti*, as the process of sadhana, is slowly dissolving all our internal obstacles to attaining freedom. Slowly, one or two at a time, the wooden blocks of the tower of constraint and limitation are tumbling down.

— Susan Baker

विलय Concealment

Salutations to the Lord of all,
Who is concealed within this visible universe. . . .
When He is revealed, the universe disappears;
When He is concealed, the universe shines forth.

— Jnaneshwar Maharaj

Each day begins with an act of revelation: as the sun rises, objects slowly emerge from the obscurity of night: house, tree, hedge — all gilded into distinction by the clarifying light of dawn.

Each day begins as well with an act of concealment, for it's precisely in the emergence of discrete, separable objects that Shaivism locates the veiling of supreme Consciousness by the universe it creates.

"Concealment of [the world's] true nature," Baba Muktananda has written, "comes about when undifferentiated Consciousness differentiates itself into manifold forms." Perhaps we receive a deeper intimation of the nature of the Real from nighttime, which submerges those manifold forms in the single element of darkness.

Light as concealment; darkness as revelation: this paradoxical counterpoint hints at the complex play of the fivefold act in our lives. We exist by virtue of a divine dialectic, the terms of which are wisdom and ignorance, light and darkness; it gives rise to both delight and suffering. We've all tasted the delight that arises from concealment, in phenomena as various as puzzles and riddles, Halloween masks, hide-and-seek, detective stories, and the teasing out of "the figure in the carpet" from complex aesthetic forms. Such delight in concealment always hinges on a subsequent act of revelation; we play "hide-and-seek," not "hide." What is hidden must be sought and found; God, immanent within creation, must be realized as the transcendent reality behind it. Without concealment, nothing *could* be revealed as it would be perpetually and transparently Self-evident.

When, however, concealment is estranged from revelation, suffering arises. Human beings seem to have this prerogative — to play "hide" without seeking or even desiring to find. For Shiva, all the five acts happen simultaneously and continually; they are all implicated in each other; their intricate mutuality is simply God's nature; he can *only* do all of them. But the embodied soul performs the acts, as Baba notes, "in a limited way with limited power." We act through the thickening medium of time; the acts appear to be sequential and exclusive, rather than simultaneous and related. In a sense,



The dwarf underfoot represents concealment

sadhana is about the restoration of our experience of the acts' uncontracted mutuality, so that grace flows freely through all our perceptions and actions. "Grace is nothing but seeing objects as one with Self-luminous Chiti, even though they may appear to be different," Baba wrote, and I like his "even though." It implies we can see "tree" and "house" as discrete objects at the same time that we see them as one "stuff" — Chiti. The simultaneity of this perception is the state of *sahaja samādhi*, the seamless integration of the highest state of unity awareness with the practical performance of one's daily duties; it is effected by the fully expanded workings of the fivefold act within us.

So how does veiling (cf. *vilaya* — Sanskrit for "concealment") play out in our lives? Initially, and primarily, it is there in our feelings of imperfection, lack, separation, smallness; our lack of awareness of our own divinity, our lack of knowledge that, as Baba declared, God dwells within us, as us. It takes a revolution — the turning point of *śaktipāt* — to put that knowledge, in its full potency, back into our awareness.

Where do all these contracted feelings come from? They are all refractions, on an individual level, of the inaugural act of concealment Shiva must perform in order

to create. This act is called *anāśrita-śiva*, and it has a type of ontological priority over the other four acts, for this reason: Shiva, described in Shaivite scriptures as *cidānandaghana* — a mass of Consciousness and bliss — is absolutely full, replete within himself, *pūrṇa*. This is not a material repletion — Shiva does not "fill" space the way water fills a bucket. His fullness consists of his own awareness, within which there is no sense of "other," no platform on which an "other" could stand. So in order to make room for the appearance of an "other," Shiva willingly negates his own fullness, withdraws a portion of his own consciousness-and-bliss, rather as if the water in a bucket decided to preemptively displace a portion of itself in anticipation of the arrival of some prospective object. As one philosopher put it: "There exists a 'deifugal' force. Otherwise all would be God." Anashrita-shiva, the first act of vilaya, is that deifugal force.

That foundational act reverberates on every level of our being. We recapitulate Shiva's gesture of withdrawal and negation within our own minds: the psychology of our time is largely about concealment — the unconscious and its contents are concealed, by definition, and repression and denial are the active agents of concealment. It extends as well to our life in community, the great playing field of social intercourse. Our acquaintanceship with others is a curious compound of Shiva's five acts writ small. Consider a very mundane instance, a common event within the social sphere: you are crossing paths with someone you know, and as you look their way to exchange greetings, you are met with a gaze so blank it appears to be contemplating a vacancy in the very space your

body occupies. You're being "cut," as the expressive idiom has it, subjected to a *withdrawal* of recognition, a *negation* of acknowledgment. If this happens deliberately and repeatedly, you might respond by extending a retaliatory act of nonrecognition to the other party. As cut begets cut, the social bond of respect, goodwill, and trust slowly sinks in the sea of ignorance which yawns between you; as the waters close, the seal is set on this act of concealment by the assumption of normality about the situation: "Yes, this is the way it's always been . . . this is the way it will always be . . ."

This scenario, by virtue of its very commonness, is representative of the way concealment, severed from the other acts, weaves through our experience. With every lapse of respect, refusal to listen, infliction of pain, relegation of others to the category: "of no account," we compound concealment and collude in our own bondage.

When vilaya arises as a mere ripple within the social current — a "cut" or a bruise — we might not register its significance. But when vilaya swells and gains momentum on a vast scale, when recognition is withdrawn not just from one individual but from an entire class or race or portion of humanity, it leads to grievous atrocities. Instead of "seeing God in each other" we see only — "other." And the "other" is irremediably apart from us, defined by difference, fearsome. "The sense of other is the root of fear," Baba has said. Concealment gives rise to this sense of "otherness." What was originally a creative act, as performed by Shiva, becomes, in our contracted enactment of it, often a destructive one. At times the "other" is so fiercely demonized that his or her status as a human being is revoked. Our era has not

been lacking in examples of the logic of this trajectory.

This is vilaya when it is severed from the other acts in our field of awareness. Shaivism recontextualizes this situation when it invites us to contemplate the inter-relatedness of the acts, how they are marbled together to compose the texture of our reality, how concealment can be the flip side of grace. We can choose, Shaivism says, to view every act of concealment as an opportunity to *find*, for though Shiva veils himself, he also insures that enough light filters through Creation to make possible the tracing of our way back to our source. This residual light is grace. He has strewn the world with clues to his presence, one of the strongest of which is our yearning for repletion, for wholeness. When this yearning grows clear and strong enough, the balance of our lives tilts from hiding to seeking; spiritual teachings begin to speak to us in a new, personally compelling way and, perhaps at this point, we begin to look for a teacher who will illumine their significance. Shaktipat awakens and quickens this yearning. That was my experience — the force of longing I experienced at the moment of shaktipat was sufficient to effect a radical reorientation of my priorities, my goals, my life.

Yearning is a huge rent in the veil of concealment. Grace continually streams through such rents like light through massing clouds. Shaivism invites us to identify those rents and turn them to our spiritual advantage. The *Vijñāna Bhairava* offers many creative ways to do this, to contemplate oneness within diversity:

The same Self characterized by consciousness is present in all bodies; there is no difference in it anywhere. Therefore, a person realizing that

everything is the same (consciousness) triumphantly rises above transmigratory existence.

It's an awesome thought: the same light is looking out through all the pairs of eyes in the world, even as the faces in which they are embedded seem so unique and individual. Like the house and the tree illumined by the rising sun, we are distinct, yet identical; we are immanent and transcendent — at the same time! These paired terms violate the law of contradiction, but so does any approach toward the heart of the teachings of yoga; it lands us in the realm Kabir called *akatha kathā* — the untellable story. Language can take us only so far . . .

Nowhere can the interwoven qualities of concealment and revelation be more graphically seen than in language itself. Even the most explicit and lucid exposition of spiritual truths demonstrates an unavoidable concealment as it pushes up against the borders of the tellable. Consider the very core of the Indian spiritual tradition: *Tat Tvam Asi* — “Thou art That.” What could be a balder statement of the highest Truth? It is absolutely transparent — yet how absolutely opaque at the same time! What does it actually mean, and how do we recognize such a truth? Its pronouns collide like matter and antimatter, and in their encounter generate the light of illumined awareness. Such words convey states more than ideas, and ineffable states at that. It is this ultimately ineffable referent which leads language that seeks to convey spiritual truths along the lanes of paradox, poetry, parable, koan, riddle, and the *sandhyābhāṣā* — twilight, or secretive, language — of the poet-saints. Such words require a leap in the level of one's consciousness; they're meant to shift us toward a more inclusive

state of awareness, in which contradictions or opposites are subsumed into a higher unity, beyond words.

Allama Prabhu, a Virashaiva poet-saint of the twelfth century, wrote a poem that aptly captures this quality of our language and our world, where revelation comes in the guise of concealment and concealment harbors revelation. He writes to Shiva, addressing him as Guheshwara, Lord of Caves:

Looking for your light,
I went out:

it was like the sudden dawn
of a million million suns,

a ganglion of lightnings
for my wonder.

O Lord of Caves,
if you are light,
there can be no metaphor.

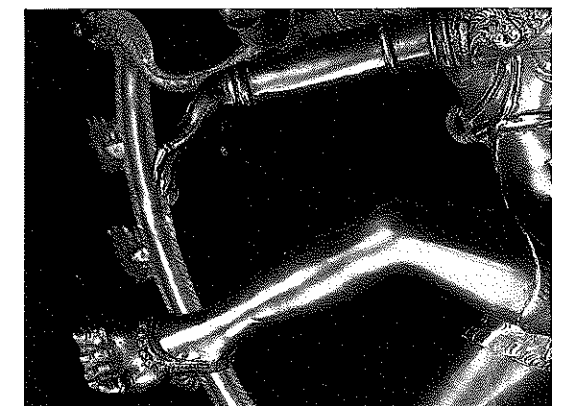
Speaking beautifully about the impossibility of speech; finding metaphors for the impossibility of metaphor: language here stands as an emblem of the way concealment weaves through our lives as both *veil to* and *vehicle for* grace.

— Jonathan Shimkin

अनुग्रह Grace

After hiding, the Lord reveals himself. And he does so through *anugraha*, through the bestowal of grace. The word *anugraha*, although usually translated as simply “grace,” contains the connotations of revelation and of being a gift, a blessing from one to another. Anugraha, the act that completes the cycle of five, is one of pure love and compassion. It is the gift of anugraha that gives us full understanding, that allows us to grasp that our life is a manifestation of God's joy and love for us, every detail having its purpose. Without anugraha God's creation would remain a mystery. We would always feel lost in someone else's universe. Our yearning for understanding could never be fulfilled.

The greatest example of anugraha is shaktipat, the destined initiation that begins and guarantees the process of liberation, the process that replaces



Hand pointing to the Lord's foot, symbol of grace

ignorance with knowledge. And in order for shaktipat to take place, God gives us the most priceless treasure, a Sadguru, a human being so transformed as to be able to transfer that divine spark from her own heart to ours. The Guru and the act of shaktipat do not exist separately; they are one and the same — anugraha in its most

elevated, extraordinary form. Verses 48 and 56 of the *Guru Gītā* both speak of anugraha to describe the unique significance of the Guru and the Guru's role: "By his grace a mortal being is liberated from the diversified world," and, "Receiving his grace, one gives up great ignorance."

Some people receive dramatically identifiable experiences of shaktipat. For others, it takes more searching to pinpoint that moment. I remember sitting alone on a summertime verandah more than ten years ago as the sun was going down. I was not yet aware that I had received shaktipat, although I had begun to chant, meditate, and read Baba's books. I had not yet physically met the Guru or begun my sadhana in earnest. The last years had been so unusually full of difficulty that it never occurred to me that I might be making any headway on the spiritual path. But as I sat there musing, and as I looked more closely, I saw that my perspective on life had undergone some deep, unique, and irrevocable change. The certainty came as a shock. The change that I saw and instantly valued was not tangible or obvious. It was subtle, as inner growth usually is. If I had had to describe it in that moment, I might have said that it felt as though I were now living from the inside looking out, instead of the other way around. I was learning to recognize and value my deepest perceptions, to honor my experience instead of trying to deny or alter it to match some external standard. From the perspective of almost fifteen years later, I can define that moment on the verandah as my first recognition of shaktipat, through the clarity of its effect.

Nothing can compare with the unique power of shaktipat. Still, experiences of revelation, of becoming aware of blessings,

can form the framework of any day. A few days ago a friend, who was in the middle of making a far-reaching change in her life, said to me, with wonder in her eyes, "There's so much grace." I think many of us have felt this: at the crucial moments in our lives, we become aware of how much support we are receiving, how it would be impossible to accomplish what we are accomplishing without divine assistance. It seems that in moments of difficulty, grace comes rushing in like a tidal wave. Truly speaking, though, grace does not come and go. It is not stronger here and weaker there. Although it may take different forms, its essence is consistent. Sometimes, though, when we are jolted out of our routines, it is easier to notice. Sometimes events provide the jolt. Sometimes all that is needed is to remember to see what we already know is there.

We often chant or pray to "invoke grace," to bring grace into our lives. What are we really doing? How can we ask for *more* grace when there is nothing else *but* grace? Isn't it that our chant is really to encourage our own eyes to open so that we can see the grace in which we are bathed? Isn't it that our prayer is simply to entice our hearts to open up and receive?

Last week was a tough one for me. Nothing seemed to offer comfort except large quantities of dark chocolate, and after a few days of such consolation, my digestive system began fighting back. It didn't seem to matter if I did the practices or not. The Guru felt very far away. And I didn't want to talk to anyone. Toward the end of the week I had the thought that although I had not budgeted for it, it might be good to buy the tape of the Siddha Yoga message for 1998. I wanted to hear the Guru speaking to me. Still, I hesitated. Could I afford it, and would it really make a difference?

The impulse, it turned out, was stronger than the resistance; buying the tape felt like a healthy reaching out, a small act of willingness and hope. Although I listened the next morning to only a few minutes of Gurumayi's message, I found words that felt as if they were spoken just for me. That was all it took. They were like a bridge leading me back to my spiritual path. Restlessness and dissatisfaction were replaced with contentment, and within hours I was hard at work on a project I had been putting off all week. I looked back. What had made the difference? Not the chocolate. The momentum had been broken at the moment of consciously reaching for the Guru's guidance. Such a small gesture had been enough to draw me out of the shadow. Every time I search for anugraha I see that it does not come at random moments. It comes when we say we are ready.

Any time a person remembers grace — that divine ever-present element without which nothing could take place, nothing could be felt, nothing could be loved — they are experiencing anugraha, receiving the Lord's gift. Even though we are not used to always noticing it, every moment brims with anugraha. Sometimes, in the most ordinary moments, I'll ask myself, "Okay, where's the grace?" And the answers flood in: that I am healthy, that there is air to breathe, that I am on this earth, that I have good friends, that there is food in the fridge, that I have a Guru, that I can repeat the mantra. When I look for grace, I see that I am swimming

in it, whether it manifests as a blast of understanding, or simply as the gentle breeze that quietly keeps everything in my life alive.

But does anugraha only exist in that which feels good? Let's up the ante: if the fivefold act is forever taking place, and if anugraha is ever-present — never less, never more — then it is just as compassionately present in inconveniences, disasters, and tragedies, in all those moments when it is hard to discern. I can say that every difficult time in my sadhana has brought breakthrough of one kind or another. I don't believe that difficulties and trials ever go to waste. As the fivefold act implies, if there is concealment, there will naturally be light; sooner or later each of the five acts will be experienced. Every winter contains the certainty of spring.

Isn't it interesting that the Lord's fivefold act "ends" with anugraha, with the bestowal of grace, with love in its most obvious form? It seems that the purpose of the five acts — the churning of life — is to experience God's love, to receive the gift of revelation that He is just waiting to bestow. Not only is this love the purpose, it is the substance of and *inevitable* conclusion to every divine gesture. This we can be sure of. As human beings, we too are products of the fivefold act, inseparable from it. Understanding the fivefold act, and our place in it, leads us yet again to the conclusion that our natural purpose, our very reason for existence, is to experience this love, this grace, this blessing.

— Marta Szabo



All the Creative Power of God's Universe Is within You



C O N T E N T S

<p>The Seeds of Creation by Swami Sushilananda 4</p> <p>It Feels Like God From a Conversation with Isabelle Anderson 8</p> <p>Paradigms: "Changing the Prescription of Your Glasses" by Jonathan Star 13</p> <p>Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Baba A Poem by Stephen Mullennix 17</p> <p> THIS IS HER WONDERFUL PLAY FROM <i>NOTHING EXISTS THAT IS NOT SIVA</i> BY SWAMI MUKTANANDA 18</p> <p> RECOGNIZE THE DIVINE PULSATION SELECTIONS FROM A TALK BY SWAMI CHIDVILASANANDA 24</p>	<p>The Five Sacred Actions 32 Introduction by Lise Vail Creation by Jane Wilcox Maintenance by Harold Ferrar Dissolution by Susan Baker Concealment by Jonathan Shimkin Grace by Marta Szabo</p> <p>Telegrams from the Inner Self An Experience 50</p> <p>Young Visions An Interview with Veronica Ortiz 52</p> <p>Reflections on the Siddha Yoga Message for 1998 55</p> <p>The Artist As Yogi, the Yogi As Artist 56 by William K. Mahony</p>
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