

Asian Religious Traditions I (MS 503)

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Cheers! To April 17, 2000.

I would like to begin this paper discussing the *Maya* concept. Then, I would like to point some of its connections with Shiva. In all those references I will be following, mainly, the thoughts of Heinrich Zimmer in his book *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*. Finally, I will include my personal experience when I was in India.

I open this paper with the Jung's words in his book *Psychology and Religion: East*: "In dealing with a sacred text, therefore, the psychologist ought at least to be aware that his subject represents an inestimable religious and philosophical value which should not be desecrated by profane hands" (788). Since we are studying Hindu mythology, we have permission to put our profane hands on the Hindu's teachings and to bring our own interpretation. I will try my best.

Maya. *Maya* is a difficult concept to understand. My background is in arts and that's why I bring this subject here. *Maya* means art, illusion and magic, but also fraud, hoax or witchcraft.

It also conveys the idea of the unreal and deception of the senses. For Heinrich Zimmer, this phenomenon occurs when we are with "the dubious figment of a too restricted, ego-centered consciousness" (24). This happens because true comprehension was

not achieved. In *Maya*, we develop to later dissolve. Only by looking profoundly can we perceive that previous reality was nothing but illusory veils woven by our own projections.

As we create according to our comprehension, we bring the dubious with us. We don't know how to differentiate between good and evil. In Hindu philosophy this ambivalence is an extremely important characteristic and essential to the concept of divinity. India carries an ancient culture, multifaceted, and diverse -- and as Zimmer says, a sensibility that is "atemporal, anonymous and multiple." It is a country unique from the rest of the world, with vast particularity as well as universalism. In India, we experience profoundly the confusion of the opposites, incompatible and contradictory, and even so, brilliantly alive.

As Zimmer explains:

The secret of *Maya* is this identity of opposites. *Maya* is simultaneous-and-successive manifestation of energies that are at variance with each other, processes contradicting and annihilating each other: creation *and* destruction, evolution *and* dissolution, the dream-idyll of the inward vision of the god *and* the desolate nought, the terror of the void, the dread infinite. *Maya* is the whole cycle of the year, generating everything and taking it away. This "and", uniting incompatibles, express the fundamental character of the Highest Being who is the Lord and Wielder of *Maya*. Opposites are fundamentally of the one essence, two aspects of the one Vishnu. That is the wisdom which this myth undertakes to disclose to the Hindu devotee. (46)

Yes, as incredible as it may seem, *Maya* is the manifestation of Brahman. *Maya* is Brahman's disguise. *Maya* and Brahman coexist. In India the "and" is everything. Everything has life, even the object that seems not to have any soul is full of a vital force, being part of the world and ourselves. It is an exuberance of meanings. We are turning inside, such contradictions!

Jung raises a series of questions:

Why should the One appear as the Many, when ultimate reality is All-One? What is the cause of pluralism, or of the illusion of pluralism? If the One is pleased with

itself, why should it mirror itself in the Many? Which after all is the more real, the one that mirrors itself, or the mirror it uses? Probably we should not ask such questions, seeing that there is no answer to them. (798)

Let's make an effort, even for an instant, not to decipher or understand *Maya* as something static. To conceive of *Maya* as static is completely erroneous and impossible since everything in *Maya* is transitory and in flux. Once again, with the help of Zimmer:

The notion that there is nothing static, nothing abiding, but only the flow of a relentless process, with everything originating, growing, decaying, vanishing -- this wholly dynamic view of life, of the individual and of the universe, is one of the fundamental conceptions of the later Hinduism [...] It is of the essence of the conception of *Maya*. (131)

The power of visualization is extremely important in the Hindu culture. It is in this way that they can experience time and space. It is also in this way that they can achieve transcendence. Perhaps, transcendence is the highest aspect, the main goal for the Hindu people.

Let's consider Brahman and the Hindu view of creation. Brahman is the undivided and absolute reality and is beyond description. This reality, however, may be described in terms of a trinity that consists of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma personifies on the creative aspect of Brahman whereas Vishnu and Shiva also entail terrible and destructive aspects. Zimmer tells us that, according to the Hindu mythology, Brahma and Vishnu were discussing which one would be the first progenitor of all beings. Meanwhile one was saying that (Brahma) was the first because he originated from himself, the other one (Vishnu) was disagreeing saying he was the creator and also the destroyer, and so, Vishnu created Brahma and destroyed Brahma already many times. Now appears Shiva. Shiva proclaimed himself as the origin of the other two gods. "The role of the destroyer now is only one of

his three principal manifestations. Side by side with Brahma the Creator and Vishnu the Maintainer, Shiva the Destroyer co-exists in Shiva the Supreme" (130).

In Shiva we find multiple aspects that we could discuss, though my main focus in this paper will be his aspect as "The King of Dancers." Known as the "Great Lord," Shiva has colours of death and destruction. As Zimmer puts it, "Shiva's stern asceticism casts a blight over the fields of rebirth" (125). Also, he has Shakti as his consort, the goddess known as beautiful as the moon. But how can the dance be accompanied by death, destruction and so much negativity? Is not the dance so beautiful, considered the most direct form of that so expected transcendence?

Dance is magic, and in this way connects to *Maya*. Many times dance can take us in to trance, to ecstasy. Dance in religious aspects can incorporate supernatural forces, thus revealing the divine. This is a cosmogonic function. Shiva through his dance personifies the cosmic illusion. In dance, we expand ourselves, our breathing is transformed, the pupils are dilated, we are swept, our pores are opened, arms, hands, spine and all the body win new dimensions.

For Zimmer:

The dance, like life itself, is a mixture of the terrific and the auspicious, a juxtaposition and unification of destruction, death, and vital triumph, the volcanic bursting-forth of the lavas of life. Here is a blending familiar to the Hindu mind, everywhere documented in Hindu art. It is understood as expressive of the Divine, which in its totality comprises all the goods and evils, beauties and horrors, joys and agonies, of our phenomenal life. (174)

I had the opportunity to go to India to learn dance in 1995. At that time, I was studying theatre arts and I was feeling very enthusiastic about the teachings of Grotowski and Eugenio Barba. I couldn't wait to experience, firsthand, the ancient manifestations of the theatre-dance still alive in the East.

After being in Japan, I was shocked to be in India. I enrolled in the traditional school (Kerala Kalamandalam) of Kathakali, in the State of Kerala. Kathakali is a mixture of dance and pantomime and as well put by Zimmer, "Pantomimic dance is intended to transmute the dancer into whatever demon, god or earthly existence he impersonates" (151). In my experience in India I can say, without exaggeration, I saw this happening right before my eyes. What I saw were not actors, but the personification of the deities. A lot of fear and uneasiness followed me constantly while I was there and, I must say, for a long time afterwards also.

I will not discuss here the technical aspects used in Kerala Kalamandalam. My most important intention is to make the link of the concepts of *Maya* and Shiva with my *extraordinary* experience in India. As we said, *Maya* is illusion, mirages and deception of the senses. Before that, only for an instant, I would like to discuss a bit about the initiation process, since we are dealing with a dance that involves religious aspects.

For Mircea Eliade, in traditional initiations there is a "dismemberment of the body, death and resurrection, generation and new birth, obtaining a new, supernatural body"(108). All the initiation processes seem to bring an identification of the Self with God. So, I add this commentary because I believe I became involved in an initiation process before the practical classes started.

I will try to explain in detail: I went alone after a certain knowledge with all my expectations that, I believed, it would be there. In India I would be able to experience the dance directly through the body and evoke bodily associations in a rhythmic and harmonic order. In this way, I would learn to bring dance to theatre and to leave the artifice and vulgarity of today's commercial theatre, completely dissociated from the ritual and sacred.

When I arrived at the school, classes had not yet started; they would start tomorrow. And “tomorrow” I was there on time. Then someone announced to me, “no, it is tomorrow.” After some days of “tomorrow” I realized I was in another time. Our traditional calendar and watch did not apply. In this period, I went through many adaptations. Cheruthuruthy is a small village that practically survives because of Kerala Kalamandalam. Electrical power is only available until 7pm. Water must be pumped from the well for showers. Water can only be drunk after boiling (to improve the taste I used to drink tea. Lots of teas!) There are seats for women in the bus only if it is not already completely occupied by men. It is like a community of “ants,” where the communication passes from one to another in an extraordinary velocity. There is no train station. There is one public telephone for the whole village.

Yes, we already know that India is a world apart. And I already knew my experience in India would be thunderous and because of that, before my embarking to the East, I studied the history of India and I lived for one month in a Hindu family’s house in Brasilia. I thought in that way, I would be more prepared for the so discussed “cultural shock.” Illusion. India pulls out the rug from under you in any circumstance. You cannot leave India unpunished.

There I was by myself in front of such diverse culture – it is impossible to perceive only one reality when it comes to India. Even though I was alone and without means of communications (newspaper, TV, computer etc) I felt connected with the world. It was as if my soul knew what was going on in the world. I will give two examples that were very important to me:

Example 1: As I was making my bed, I saw a small scar on my arm, like an insect bite. Instantaneously, three words fired me with terror: blood, wound and my aunt Taina.

Desperate, I ran through the streets in my pijamas and bare feet, looking for the public telephone. I called to my aunt in Brasil. Someone was on the phone explaining that my aunt could not come to the phone because she was in the hospital. She said: “don’t worry, she is well, everything is under control. She discovered that she has a serious disease of wounds in her legs, and now she is getting a blood transfusion. Everything will be OK”.

Example 2: Another day, I was observing a palm tree. It was windy and an electrical wire was nearby. Other three words came to me: electricity, accident, dad. Crying and in absolute desperation, I ran to the public telephone. I called to my father in Brasil. Sebastiana, our housemaid was on the phone and said that my father was at the farm, my mother was not at home and my brother was traveling. She was alone. I asked her to call Fernando, a good family friend and to ask him to go quickly to the farm and find my father because he was risking his life. I also asked her to tell to Fernando there was something very dangerous with electrical shock, and “for the love of God”, to warn my dad. I repeated: "I am serious and it is urgent, it is urgent!" I called again after 10 minutes to make sure she tried to make the contact with Fernando. Yes, Fernando agreed to go to the farm. But something didn’t make sense. If my father was on the farm and there is no electricity there, where would be the danger? Well, after more or less one hour I called again. To my complete relief, my father was on the phone. He said: “everything is well here, my daughter, I just miss you very much. You need to come home soon because I just installed electricity on the farm and it is really beautiful now, you should see.”

I cried or laughed at the same time.

Many other feelings, voices and visions were experienced. I hope these two examples can help you to see the connections I am trying to bring with *Maya*’s philosophy and Shiva.

In the beginning, the answer I gave to myself for my visions was that because of being in such a powerful country, I was probably opening some of my chakras. I felt fear, but I was conscious. When later the visions continued, I could not distinguish what was real or illusion. I felt extremely confused. Was I dreaming? Or more so, was it a nightmare? Was I living a Hitchcock movie? Since all my visions were connected with death and diseases, was I in some kind of spell? What was real? Was I going crazy?

I felt fear. I remember I was offered a dinner one day before the real “tomorrow,” one day before the classes started. The dinner, with all the exotic food and drinks, was offered by a French woman who lives and studies in the same school and by the oldest actor from the Kathakali theatre company. During the dinner, the actor started to talk about my life – who I was, from where I came. He was telling me, that I was a very good person with great values and asked me to make a wish. I was very impressed and at the end I went for a walk. I cannot remember what happened during my walk, I just remember my bare feet in the mud. The dinner started around 8pm and I started to walk around 10pm. I walked during the whole night, only at the sunrise I returned to the house. At the entrance, without any word, but with an approved head sign, there were the French woman and the actor waiting for me. I came in and they went out. I slept.

On the next day, whatever day it was!, because I have no idea how long I slept, I went to the school. Finally, they said: “Come to dance with us”.

I said: "No."

All I know is in that exact moment, all my feelings, my heart had only one voice: it was telling me if I started those classes, which I would probably find wonderful, I would be incapable of going back to my home in Brasil. It was the only thought in my mind and even with all my love for the dance, I wished to go back to my land.

That was my decision. I was really afraid. With regret, though decided, I started to find a way to leave India. I was feeling as if I was in the uterus of the world with all the antennas up, and I needed to breath otherwise or I would die. It was really difficult to leave. I had to go to a neighboring town to arrange a train to go to a larger city that had an airport. But every time I tried to buy the train ticket at the neighbor town, the salesman used to say: “Kerala Kalamandalam? No tickets.” When I looked, there was one of the Kerala Kalamandalam’s students carrying my bags returning to Cheruthuruthy. How did that student appear there? I started to feel fear of ants, I felt persued and in a prison. Without success after to trying to buy a train ticket for so many days, I was completed exhausted. I asked the student: “Is this a test?” “Is it a initiation process? “Yes”, he answered. “So, please, stop it. I do not want to study Kathakali anymore and I have the freedom to change my mind! I am sorry, I made a mistake in coming here, and I do not want anymore tests.” I was still not able to buy a ticket.

At that point, I had already chosen one of the professors to be my Master. I went to his home and I said that I did not want to take the Kathakali course anymore. I explained to him I was trying to buy a train ticket without success. I asked him for his help. He asked me why I made this decision. I could not explain. Then he asked me if Cheruthuruthy reminded me of my city. Yes, the Cheruthuruthy’s architecture is very close to my home town. He asked what was similar. The first thing I saw before my eyes was a tree with *hibiscus* flowers. I said: *hibiscus*. He got up, seemed to be worried, thought for a moment and brought a book, *A Guide of Kathakali*. He gave me the book, saying it was a shame, but he would help me to leave India.

Finally, after two weeks, I got a flight to Singapore. I spent three days sleeping in a hotel room. In the fourth day, I went to the swimming pool and swam all day. On the fifth

day, I called to my mother to say I was returning to Brasil. She couldn't understand, since I had plans to go to Bali. She reminded me about my dreams to visit Bali, she reminded me I was enrolled in a school there and a flight from Singapore to Bali is only 30 minutes. She asked me many times what had happened in an attempt to understand the situation, but I could not explain since I had not understood it myself. In this way, giving me one more chance, I filled myself with enthusiasm and went to Bali. This is another long journey to be discussed in another paper.

Returning to Brasil, I became aware I had more questions without answers. I continued not believing in the commercial theatre, but also I was not able to learn Kathakali. I was completely disillusioned about my work and studies in theatre. Yes, I got depressed and finally, after two years, I had enough courage to return to theatre. However, always, there were many doubts that continued through my being. What really happened in India? I would remember that dinner and my intuition showed me there was something wrong. That is when I decided to take a course in Hindu culinary in Brasilia.

The cook was a Hindu Professor of the Chemistry Department of the University of Brasilia. At the end of the culinary course, I told him a bit of my story in India. Very seriously, he replied that in India, especially in Kerala, the dancers and the Shiva's devotees take a powerful drug. Today, even though some people still use it, it is completely prohibited, even in temples. He was sure that I had been given the drug and suggested that I call Interpol.

I thought that even if all my hallucinations were the effects of a drug, they would still be a projection of myself, my veils of *Maya*. And if I am understanding it well, all that was part of an initiatory process, very serious, secret and religious.

I decided so, and placed this subject inside a box, closed it and left it on a book shelf. The questions of why my visions were very connected to illness and death always accompanied me. From time to time, I would remember and face the subject, I move and re-moved, and I could not find answers. I would close the box again and leave it there. Five years went by and the conclusions that I had reached were: I learned and I continue to learn a lot from that experience. The “no” I said was the most brave “no” in all my life. If I didn’t have sufficient courage to say “no,” I don’t know whether my being could have supported such inundations of my unconscious.

Studying Hindu mythology, on the first day of the classes, I asked Professor Patrick Mahaffey if he knew anything about drugs used in dance rituals in India. He said he didn’t know and I, in my total ignorance about drugs, said: "I know there is a drug used by Shiva that is called *Bhang*." He said: "Ah, *Bhang*? *Bhang* is *marijuana*."

Totally disappointed, I went back home. It was clear *marijuana* was not the cause of all those thunderous effects. Even if it was not *Bhang*, I thought it had a funny sound, since it was a “bhang-bhang” in my being. That was when I became more intent on discovering which drug was really used. I wrote to a specialized drug shop in Holland. I wrote them a brief message telling a bit of what I felt when I was in India and asked their opinion. To my surprise, they replied. They said that it was definitely not *Bhang*. But they could not tell which drug it was. I wrote again insisting. They replied that it could be *datura*. It is a drug used by the devotees of Shiva.

A new word to my vocabulary. I started to make a research. What is *datura*?

On the internet I found:

Datura has been variously known as thorn, prickly-burr, Jimsonweed, devil’s weed or toloache. It is a sprawling herbaceous shrub with fragrant, trumpet-shaped flowers which stand erect, and (usually) spiny seedpods. There are at least fifteen

distinct species with many varieties as *Daturas* have been cultivated for centuries for their showy flowers and medicinal properties. Most originated in the New World, with the two notable exceptions of *Datura Metel* and *Datura Ferox* which originated in Eurasia. *Daturas* are members of the family *Solanaceae* which contains other ethnobotanicals such as tobacco and mandrake, and other common vegetables like eggplants, tomatoes and peppers.”

In Brasil, *Datura* is known as “figueira-brava.”

From the typical effects they described, to my surprise, I had felt them all:

Stimulation and/or anxiety; extreme nausea; dilated pupils; blurred or fixed-focus vision; rapid heartbeat; extreme disorientation; loss of memory; loss of time; delirium; profound sensitivity to light and noise; seamless crossover into a variety of realistic dream states; extreme uncoordination; loss of body control; vertigo; extreme audio, visual and tactile hallucinations; apparent astral travel to familiar places; interaction with friends, relatives and other random people who are not physically present; extreme drying and irritation of the mouth, throat, eyes, urinary tract and other mucous membranes; potential for uncontrollably emotional or violent activity; inability to recall anything – even that you are under the effects of a drug – for quite some time; exhaustion. The effects of the plant are for 12 to 24 hours if not longer. Residual effects have been known to last from three days to weeks. These preparations lay the candidate wide open for a trip to hell or worse; lasting effects of mental derangement and paranoia can follow the experience.

From all those effects, the only one that is not very correct for me was the “extreme drying and irritation of the mouth, throat, eyes, urinary tract.” However, my arms were extremely dry, so much that I had to see a dermatologist when I returned to my home town. I also do not recall having had “rapidheart beat,” but how could I remember if all my being was in an over-rapid everything?

Interesting that I also found that:

“In India, *Datura metel* seeds are added to the *Cannabis bhang* drink or smoked with *Cannabis* for added intoxication and to stimulate the union of Shiva, the male (*datura*) principle, and Shakti, the female (*Cannabis*) principle[...] *D. metel* has been known as a hallucinogen in the Old World since early Chinese and Sanskrit herbals[...] In both hemispheres, *Daturas* were regarded as sacred and especially valued for their power to induce visionary dreams, to see the future and reveal the causes of disease and misfortune [...]the Hindu’s believe it is the “tuft of Shiva” and as such is often depicted on statues of Shiva in his headdress.”

Even with all those information, I was still asking myself: could I trust in information from the internet? Only today, April 17, I could finally read the Zimmer words, confirming all my intuitive journey that I was researching. When he is describing the Shiva's symbolic figures, he says that one of them is "flowers of the datura (from which an intoxicating drink is prepared)."

Carlos Castaneda in his book *The Teachings of Don Juan: a Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, Don Juan says he didn't like the devil's weed because "She (*datura*) distorts men. She gives them a taste of power too soon without fortifying their hearts and makes them domineering and unpredictable. She makes them weak in the middle of their great power" (48).

Today, I am sure I had *datura*. What is my understanding about all of this? First: I cannot, in any way, reduce the extraordinary Kathakali dance to the use of *datura*. Even though I don't know about the whole process that it is developed since I refused to continue my stay in India. Second: I cannot reduce my experience described here as an experience of everybody who adventures in searching how to learn Kathakali at Kerala Kalamandalam – this was my personal experience. Yet, I understand that *Maya* is everywhere -- it is Existence. We can spend a lifetime to unveil it. I never believed in drugs and I still don't believe in them. I believe it is not necessary to use a drug to experience *Maya*, Shiva or Dance. Third: there are many ways to attain dance or transcendency. Devil's weed is one of the paths. However, a path is a path and if we do not feel our heart wants to follow that path, the best we can do is stop. I am glad I could hear my heart and run away from India.

In my view there is something very wrong with my experience in India. First, I was not told anything about the use of drugs. This is an extremely dangerous adventure. More than my pain (doubts, depression, two years without my theatre work, etc) other serious

fatalities could have happened. I also feel it is a mistake that theatre directors, who studied at Kerala Kalamandalam, don't discuss subjects like that in a more clear and mature way in their books.

Of course, all dancers want to be powerful, I also want!, but it is not that power I am looking for, and I believe the true forces come from a clean body, deeply immersed in ourselves and not under the artifices of psychedelic drugs. I would be very grateful if my experience could help young actors who are in some way, searching the dance from the outside. It is not outside, it is everywhere (the trees dance, the clouds dance, even the stones dance!), and, believe me: it is inside of you.

It is here, right in my womb and on the bottom of my spine. Together with my heart. Feet on the Earth, head on the Sky. Pulsating. Beyond that, I am finding beauty and the humour of all this.

I am moving. Today I completely agree with Enrique Pardo who works with archetypal theatre:

...more humor than religion! And rather than Grotowski's gregorian catholic peasant shamans[...] Salt comes through as a rather bitter-tasting intelligence, as a grounding sense of presence that does not sublimate easily into religious affect or ethnological fervour – or the 'shamanic' mixture of both.

*In this paper I would like to give my special thanks to myself!! (to my innocence, to my consciousness, to my angels) and to my family who supported me without judgment, specially to Tio Joaquim and Tio Bertinho who helped later in Bali.

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