Lila, Nataraja, and Dancing as Play

Sam Gill

According to the Rig Veda, an ancient Sanskrit text, Lord Brahma, the cosmic self, is a unity, that is, it is undifferentiated and undivided and unreflective, yet Brahma is described as breathing or pulsating by itself without breath. Then, at some moment Brahma began the process of differentiating itself with the rise of creation, agency, and cosmic processes including destruction. Importantly in this act of self-differentiating the cosmic self which can only be a unity simultaneously became one thing and another, that is self and other. It is perhaps best not to think of this in a temporal and sequential way, but rather in structural terms. Not first there was unity and then there was differentiation into multiplicity, but rather that there is self that is also always other and that such a perspective isn't possible in any static sense, but only in movement. It is a being that is always also a becoming. The movement in itself is the stability, if one should need it, in the (or rather embracing) the cosmic order.

Now the ancient Hindus described this self-othering (my term) in terms of the concept of *lila*, a Sanskrit term that means play or sport in the sense of diversion, amusement, fun. *Lila* also connotes effortless, rapid movement. The 3rd century text the *Vedanta Sutra* states that the creative activity of the gods is *lila* in the same sense as play in ordinary life.[1] Or as relevant to Brahma, Thibault writes, lila "the process of inhalation and exhalation is going on without reference to any extraneous purpose, merely following the law of its own nature. Analogously, the activity of the Lord also may be supposed to be mere sport, proceeding from his own nature, without reference to any purpose."[2] Thus for the Hindus, *lila* or play refers to that paradoxical structurality in which the cosmos is whole yet divided, the divine is one and completely whole and necessarily inclusive, yet differentiated and othered in such distinctions as self and other. Play (*lila*) then is what allows us to grasp the very ideas of creation and cosmos and gods without dismissing them as simply impossible or incredulous. Play points to a self-referential paradox on the order, as Handelman suggests, of Epimenides' paradox, put one way as "all Cretans are liars; I am a Cretan." This reminds us as well of Zeno's Paradox which I discussed in another lecture. The non-resolving resolution to such paradoxes is to embrace the movement that is fueled by the paradox. We can embrace the paradox as opening us to the forced acceptance of something like perpetual motion, or movement in itself. And, of course, since we may embrace the primacy of movement we can embrace the paradox as offering insight into more than cosmic processes, but the conditions that seemingly impossibly provide context for cosmic processes.

Now Hinduism has a good many ways of articulating or, perhaps better, embodying this idea of *lila*. Don Handelman has developed a couple of these. While the Hindu concept *maya*, appears to have no linguistic connection with *lila*, Handelman finds it related in important ways. The word, by itself, means craft or skill, yet Handelman finds that when connected with deities it connotes their mysterious management or manipulation of the forces of nature. Maya is thus connected with the force of continuing change and becomes associated with the power of illusion, which may not have such a

[1] Handelman, "Passages to Play: Paradox and Process" *Play & Culture* 1992 5, 8.
[2] Ibid

negative connotation as it is often given in western interpretation. Maya then is, Handelman writes, "full of the powers that move the phenomenal cosmos and keep it in motion, in accordance with its own nature; that nature is of 'something constantly being made' (O'Flaherty). Maya, one may say, is the management of motion."[3]

Handelman, along with co-author David Shulman, studies in some depth play as a fundamental Hindu concept in their 1997 book, *God Inside Out: Siva's Game of Dice*, which focuses on, as the subtitle indicates, the Hindu deities engaging in games of chance. As a quick, but relevant, aside, this may remind us that choreographer Merce Cunningham often used chance, including the throw of dice, to determine the movement of his dancers. This surely was to point us to the realization that creativity and movement are in themselves without intent purpose or meaning. Cunningham was then getting at not some message or meaning to convey to an audience, but to sheer movement or creativity in itself. Years ago I had post-modern dancer Michelle Ellsworth teach a studio in my "Religion and Dance" class. There were 90 of us in a huge studio space. She set forth principles of movement based on the digits in our telephone numbers; I don't recall specifically, but something like odd number means move to your right and the value of the digit indicating the number of steps to take, or something on that order. Then all 90 of us, spread throughout this space, moved together with evolving patterns.

Or perhaps an example of the Hindu embodied *lila* might be the story where Krishna as a child holds the whole universe in his mouth. Such common imagery grasps in some measures this inside-outside reversibility ideas of play and self-othering. In the self-othering of playing the gods turn themselves inside out and outside in. We are familiar with such notions in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "ontology of flesh" based on touch and on movement. And interestingly, often when I talk excitedly of such modern, indeed post-modern, ideas to my colleagues who study East Asian traditions, they often look at me with the expression that reads, "Duh! Where have you been?" They have a point.

Even in the broadest terms the paths or ways of live articulated in Hinduism reflect the same *lila* structurality. *Dharma*, which is often associated with the word "duty," is the most common lifeway intent upon following the law, doing one's duty, accepting one's place in the rise and fall of repeating cycles of existence, *samsara* and *karma*, so that the great wheel of existence will continue on forever. Yet, there is no salvation in such an approach, only the evolution and devolution of forms through the endless cycles of life. Even the gods are subject to this cycle. Thus, the alternative to *dharma*, yet only possible if earned through repeated existences in *dharma*, is moksha or release. *Moksha* is to assimilate into being which is the still center of the wheel of becoming or understood differently to be one with becoming, or we might say movement, itself. There is play (*lila*) in the interdependent ways of dharma and *moksha*. They are antithetical, they other one another, yet they are inseparable and interdependent. They are reversible and this reversibility might best be understood in terms of play. Much of Hindu literature, I think of the Bhagavad gita in particular, spins out the tensions and interconnections, these structuralities, that constitute the dynamic in which Hinduism gains its many identities.

[3] Ibid., p. 9.

Now it is little wonder that there is an ancient tradition in Hinduism of pointing in the direction of *lila* through reference to dancing as in the figure of Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of Dancing. I have introduced and described Nataraja in another lecture, so I needn't repeat that here. What I now turn to is the interconnection of the perspectives on play that I have developed in earlier lectures based on the works of Schiller, Gadamer, and Derrida with the Hindu concept of play or *lila* along with related concepts especially as exemplified or embodied in the figure Nataraja, so that I might construct an understanding of dancing as play.

Now while Handelman did not do more than mention Nataraja in either his book *God Inside Out* or his article "Passages to Play," he does discuss the Hindu concept play (*lila*) in the context of western theories of play, particularly based in the work of Gregory Bateson, and paradox, based particularly on the studies of Colie. While I presented a number of ideas of play in earlier lectures, I did not include Bateson's although it is certainly among the most cited and influential works on play during the last half century.[4] Bateson's essay, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" was published in 1955. A key principle of play was developed by Bateson upon his reflections on the experience of watching playing monkeys in a zoo. He understood that their playing was premised on their understanding that the actions they were seemingly performing, such as biting, were not what those actions appeared to be, that is biting, but rather they were "playful nips" or play bites. He then held that there was a meta-message communicated in the context and actions, and that message is "this is play." And so he held for all play, that is, that play includes the message "this is play." Handelman focuses heavily on this insight of Bateson in his discussion of *lila*. He believes that the distinction between "this is play" and "this is not play" is key and thus his article title "Passages to Play." In the movement from not play to play, Handelman dwelled on the boundary between them and conceived this itself as a place, thus in this passage there is in his terms a "way station … inside the boundary itself."

Once in the boundary, Handelman holds that three things happen: a frame is created, a paradox of the frame is created, and the paradox is overridden opening the way into play. Handelman then charts the passage from not play to play with attention to how fascinating is that non-space in the boundary between play and not-play. Yet, at least from my perspective, completing the passage into play, into Bateson's domain distinguished by the meta-message "this is play," seems to me to lose much because it resolves the paradox, which in some respects is to stop the play.

As we learned from Schiller, Gadamer, and Derrida, play is more akin to the ceaseless structurality of the self-referential paradox that resides, according to Handelman, in the boundary, the passage place. For Schiller play is a "third thing" or "drive" that arises when two drives that are in a relationship in which each enables and controls the other interact in "concert." This "third thing," play, is thus more accurately the oscillatory interactive reversible interdependent connection that holds the two together while assuring that neither ever overwhelms the other or that they dissolve their differences into a unity. Play is the way of acknowledging this kind of structurality, this perpetual movement, this magical interrelationship, this vitalizing connectivity that, as Schiller moved us to see, is Beauty.

[4] Handelman also mentions Huizinga's Homo Ludens, which I think is not a very useful or insightful book, yet it remains broadly influential it would seem.

Gadamer we must remember understood play as fundamental to understanding the "being" or ontology of a work of art. He held that play is a "to and fro of constantly repeated movement [and] . . . what characterizes this movement back and forth is that neither pole of the movement represents the goal in which it would come to rest. … a certain leeway clearly belongs to such a movement. … This freedom is such that it must have the form of self-movement." For Gadamer, play is relevant to understanding art's being because play is played for no other purpose than self-presentation and has no purpose or goal; that is, it is self-representation. Now certainly while we may say that specific works of art, like specific dances, may have purpose or meaning or intent, Gadamer is attempting to get at what is the "art" aspect of something that we identify as art, much as we are persistently trying to articulate the "dancing" aspect of something that we identify as dance. Of course dance may be understood as a form of art to fit directly in Gadamer's analysis. Further, we can see that Gadamer offers critique of Handelman in that play, as Gadamer understands it, is not something that resides in a polar position, but rather is the self-movement generated by the back and forth movement of self-presentation, that is, movement for the sake of moving. Gadamer touched on a profound insight, most important for us, by acknowledging that the original meaning of the word *spiel* (play) is dance. Gadamer's understanding of play then serves us well in recognizing the depth of wisdom of the Hindu figure of Nataraja whose dancing is identified as *lila*, as play.

Derrida, in particular, focused on how the two strategies of interpretation, one to play and the other to stop play, seem most directly relevant to a critique of Handelman's interpretation of *lila* as emerging from a passage. You will recall that Derrida explicitly rejected this notion of passage that attempts to embrace play only and he did so in order to defend and preserve the very movement vital character of play itself. Handelman runs into this issue when the paradox encountered in the boundary non-space is more playful than is the play to which he understands it providing a passage into. The play not-play distinction must not, if I read Derrida correctly, be resolved by a choice or a passage from one to the other, because this would be a special case of actually stopping play. Play is then always already there as the vitalizing perpetually moving interactivity that gives energy and potential to all things.

Returning to the Hindu concept or notion of *lila*, play, we can see that this ancient Indian wisdom corresponds closely with the wisdom that Schiller, Gadamer, Derrida, and others sought to articulate in terms of a discourse on the term "play." It is notable that Schiller wrote a poem on "Dancing," yet he did not connect it with play, and Gadamer acknowledged that there is an etymological link between "play" and "dancing," yet he did not include dancing in his discussion of play, and while the Hindus articulate *lila* so eloquently in the figure of Nataraja, Handelman did little more than mention Nataraja; all these suggest an important connection between dancing and play, understood in it fullest profundity.

For my purposes here I want to acknowledge the profundity of the Hindu understanding of play and the identity of dancing with play in the figure of Nataraja, as well as the sophisticated western philosophical analyses of play that identify it as inseparable from the vitalizing energizing forces that underlie all interrelationships, all differentiation, all connections. I want to note that in all of these analyses we can see that play is inseparable from movement and further that as we have progressively analyzed and explored dancing, it is utterly appropriate, indeed, it offers expanding insights, to see dancing as play.