



Where the Hand [Is]...

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“Where the Hand [Is] . . .”

Phillip B. Zarrilli

I was recently rereading that great, always cited, and now oft-clichéd truth about classical Indian performance taken from Nandikesvara’s *Abhinayadarpaṇam* (usually dated between the tenth and thirteenth centuries A.D.). This is the passage (*śloka* 36) which has been immortalized in Coomaraswamy’s translation, *The Mirror of Gesture*, as follows:

For wherever the hand moves, there the glances follow; where the glances go, the mind follows; where the mind goes, the mood follows; where the mood goes, there is the flavour (1977, 17).

Manomohan Ghosh provided a similar translation:

Where the hand goes eyes also should go there. Whither the mind goes Psychological State (*bhāva*) should turn thither; and where there is the Psychological State, there the Sentiment (*rasa*) arises (Ghosh 1975, 42).

This passage is often cited, yet seldom has it received commentary which discloses the pregnancy of its full meaning in terms of the state-of-being of the classical Indian performer.

As Kapila Vatsyayan has indicated, the critical texts on Indian aesthetics are primarily of two quite distinct types: on the one hand are discussions of the nature of the aesthetic experience itself pursued by various schools of philosophical thought; on the other are manuals which focus on form and technique (1968, 7). While Nandikesvara’s *Abhinaya-*

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darpaṇam is of the second type—primarily a technical manual for the performer—this passage is important because it links the technical treatise with the underlying philosophical assumptions which inform performance itself. My purpose here is to provide an alternative, more literal translation of the passage and an accompanying exegesis. My rereading of the passage is from the viewpoint of a scholar of performance/performer rather than as a Sanskrit expert.

I began by asking you to join me in rereading both the Coomaraswamy and Ghosh translations presented above. The general impression given in both translations is that of sequential movement—going from here to there. Implied is a stimulus (wherever) and a response (follow). The primary verb chosen in the two translations is the active “to go.” While it is certainly possible to read “goes”—and the succeeding verb “follows”—as simultaneous rather than sequential, the directional indicators “wherever,” “there,” “where,” “whither,” and “thither” certainly imply sequentiality.

But a literal word-by-word translation of this passage would be:

where hand there eye
 (*yato hasta tato dṛishṭīr*)
 where eye there mind
 (*yato dṛishṭīstato manah*)
 where mind there *bhāva*¹
 (*yato mana tato bhāvo*)
 where *bhāva* there *rasa*²
 (*yato bhāvastato rasah*) [*śloka* 36]

The Coomaraswamy and Ghosh translations describe a process seen by outsiders. I wish to consider the description from the inside—from the point of view of the performer. I argue that the fundamental psychosomatic process of the performer and the assumed ideal of simultaneous aesthetic realization in the moment of traditional Indian performance fit the literal meaning.

It seems to me that one of the major reasons why the *śloka* is so important is that it makes use of the state-of-being verb (*tato*) and is therefore a summary of what in Indian theatre is considered an optimal, nonconditional state-of-being-in-performance—the *bhāva* of the actor and the *rasa* of the audience are both nonconditional states-of-being. I contend there is no suggestion of sequentiality or conditionality in the original, and to introduce even a hint of movement or conditionality is to skew the meaning. Coomaraswamy does introduce “is” in the final clause; however, the clear impression is that the *rasa* (flavor or sentiment) is “there” as the

result of a sequential process of movement. Certainly Ghosh's use of "to be" coupled with "arises" in the final two clauses of his translation is an improvement over Coomaraswamy, however slight, since again a conditional state is suggested by "arises." In sum, the passage might simply and literally be translated as:

Where the hand [is], there [is] the eye;
 where the eye [is], there [is] the mind;
 where the mind [is], there [is] the *bhāva*;
 where the *bhāva* [is], there [is] the *rasa*.

Is the choice of the English verb in translation of this passage important? It is. From the performer's point of view, the nonconditional state-of-being is possible only for a master, while the conditional is typical of the neophyte. An example from training will illustrate the difference.

In the earliest stages of training in highly formalized and stylized Indian dance and dance-drama forms, the teacher supplies an initial stimulus. In *kathakali* or *kūṭiyāṭṭam* training the student, sitting in front of the teacher, is instructed to focus his eyes on the teacher's finger and follow the pattern it traces. Next he learns to focus his eyes where the hand moves, at first self-consciously tracking the movements of his hands. The eyes follow in response to the initial stimulus of directional hand movement. The beginner must also self-consciously trigger the mind to follow where the eyes have gone. The neophyte is easily distracted and must be deliberately reminded to keep his mind on what he is doing.

Similarly in *kathakali* and *kūṭiyāṭṭam* the student must master his facial musculature so that it can serve as a conduit for the embodiment of the emotional state or condition (*bhāva*) demanded by the dramatic context. At first, he is only able by sequential, conditional repetition and reminders from his teacher to bring even a hint of *bhāva* into his performance.³ In summary, then, sequentiality and conditionality are the conditions of the neophyte's earliest attempts at performance. Even when at the technical level the eyes are going where the hands are moving, seldom is the student's mind yet "there" nor has *bhāva* filled out the forms.

My objection to the use of an active rather than state-of-being verb in translating this passage is that it implies the performance of neophyte rather than master. And clearly the *Abhinayadarpaṇam* is describing the optimal condition of a master. The *śloka* summarizes that state in which there is no sequential intentionality or conditionality. Only as the student moves toward mastery is he able to actualize that state. The master and his technique are one—he is what he does at each moment. The state-of-being verb establishes this condition as one in which four elements (hand, eye, mind, *bhāva*) are simultaneously present within the performer. This de-



FIGURE 10



FIGURE 11



FIGURES 10, 11, 12. M. P. Sankaran Namboodiri demonstrates three of the nine basic positions in which the eyes are exercised. These eye exercises render the *kathakali* performer's eyes capable of moving in any direction. (Photo: Phillip B. Zarrilli.)

scribes the performer's accomplished state (*siddhi*) of being and mastery. (The fifth element, *rasa*, applies to the audience and is simultaneously present.)

To conclude, let me return to the literal translation and provide commentary on some of the performative assumptions informing the four lines of the *śloka*.

Where the hand [is], there [is] the eye . . .

The hands are important in all Indian performance, especially *kathakali* and *kūṭiyāttam* where *mudrā* (symbolic hand gestures) are used for decorative effect and as a complete grammar. When learning *mudrā* the student moves from mimicry of externals to a state where he is psychosomatically "connected" to each *mudrā* from the region of his navel (*nābhi*). This connection is provided by the interior coursing of his internal *prāṇa-vāyu* (breath, wind, "life force"), which is understood to move from the navel region out through his hands, thus enlivening the techniques (PLATE 6).⁴

While in performance it is literally true that where the hands are there the eyes are, the eyes suggest much more than external focus. The



FIGURE 13



FIGURE 14



FIGURES 13, 14, 15. A sequence of photographs showing how the eyes are where the hand is. The performer, M. P. Sankaran Namboodiri, is signing the plural ending of the Malayalam words for “beautiful ladies.” He embodies the erotic sentiment in this love scene. (Photo: Phillip B. Zarrilli.)

eyes are a predominant medium for gaining “knowledge” or affecting something or someone (Eck 1981, 6–7). When a devotee takes even a momentary glimpse (*darsán*) of a divine image, there is contact and an exchange, not a simple “looking.” The eyes are the window to one’s internal condition. They are a conduit and zone of modulation between forces of good or evil from outside in (the evil eye) or inside out (using one’s mental power, *manasákti*). In possession the ritual performer’s eyes manifest the deity’s power (*sákti*) and presence. In aesthetic performance like *kathakalī* the eyes reveal emotional states through stylized forms. Behind the stylized form for embodying “fury” is the performer’s subtle psychosomatic control of the internal *prāṇa-vāyu*. When “fury” is displayed externally in the facial muscles by contracting the lower lids, raising the upper lids and eyebrows, the *vāyu* (air/wind/breath/life force) is “pushed” into the eyes from the navel, providing an internal psychosomatic realization of that emotional state for the performer. He might be said to be “seeing” (furiously) from within—from the navel. “Where the eye [is]” is where there is simultaneously outer *and* inner seeing.



FIGURE 16. Bima and Draupadi in a scene from the *kathakali* play *Kalyana Saugandhikam*. When delivering gestures while speaking with the hands, the eyes are found where the hand is, and the actor's internal state embodies the *bhāva* of the line delivered. (Photo: Phillip B. Zarrilli.)

... where the eye [is], there [is] the mind ...

Implied in inner vision is engagement of the performer's entire being. Movement of the master performer's hands or eyes is not simply physical movement separate from mental engagement. The inner psychosomatic coursing of the *prāṇa-vāyu* assumes mental engagement. Sanskrit *mana* includes all mental powers. It suggests much more than what Westerners usually identify as mental processes like intellect, understanding, and perception. It also includes spirit or the vital breath (*prāṇa-vāyu*) and life itself (*jīvaṇ*). No post-Cartesian, mind/body split is assumed. "Where the *mana* [is]" implies the engagement of the performer's entire being in a state of psychosomatic connectedness and concentration.

... where the mind [is], there [is] the *bhāva* ...

The dramatic context determines the external stylistic forms which shape and channel the performer's mind and life force. *Bhāva* is optimally the enlivened and energized inner expressiveness (*sāttvika abhinaya*) which fills



FIGURE 17. Young students learning a two character scene which requires the eyes to follow the hand. Notice that while the external point of focus is correct, the young students have not yet allowed the internalization of *bhāva* to fill out the expression in the eyes/face. (Photo: Phillip B. Zarrilli.)

out those exterior forms through the inner psychosomatic process described above. The actor completely enters an embodied emotional state.⁵

... where the *bhāva* [is], there [is] the *rasa* . . .

Assuming an audience educated and prepared to “taste,” the performer’s embodied psychosomatic state-of-being (*bhāva*) simultaneously establishes the presence of *rasa*—there is a “tasting.” In that tasting there is a further resonance—a glimpse, touching, and knowing of the state of bliss itself (*ānanda*).

NOTES

1. *Bhāva* may be defined as the embodied emotional state of the actor demanded by the dramatic context of a performance.

2. *Rasa*, literally “flavor” or “taste,” may be defined as the act of communing, joining, especially “tasting” arising in the audience but created between

audience and performer. Optimally, in that moment all distinction drops away from the act of “tasting.”

3. For a detailed account of *kathakaḷi* training see Zarrilli (1984).

4. For a complete account of this psychosomatic process see Zarrilli (1987).

5. It is important to mention that *bhāva* as an embodied emotional state is achieved in the extended training process which is understood to distance, objectify, and distill the emotion. The engagement of the performer in enacting these emotional states is quite different from what is assumed in American method acting in particular. Elsewhere I have discussed how the training and performance process itself objectifies the process of enactment (Zarrilli 1984, 207–211). Vatsyayan has noted that “the representation of the emotions of the hero is to be entirely independent of the actor’s or dancer’s own feelings. Hence he or she can enjoy the transcendental flavour, the *rasa*, in the same impersonal way as the audience” (1968, 9).

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