

The Structural Secrets of *Saundarya Lahari*

By the time Nataraja Guru undertook the *Saundarya Lahari* commentary, he had already spent a lifetime refining and elaborating his profound reassessment of philosophy. The work is directed especially to his disciples, who were already well versed in what he called the Science of the Absolute. Because of this, the explanation of some of the key ideas found here would have been redundant to his intense intellect, which was always eagerly straining at the leash to explore new fields of wisdom and abstraction. Therefore, without the explication of at least the most crucial and essential structural lines of thought implied in this commentary, the reader who has not been exposed to Nataraja Guru's highly original style would be very quickly at a loss. Therefore it is important to mention a few of the secrets used as building blocks in the Guru's analysis. For a complete initiation, the reader is directed to all the previous works of Nataraja Guru, especially *An Integrated Science of the Absolute*, *Dialectical Methodology* and *The Search for a Norm in Western Thought*, (now included in *Unitive Philosophy*).

The Guru himself was fully aware of the importance of a structural analysis of *Saundarya Lahari*, as he points out in his preliminary comments:

Each verse leaps into meaning only when the underlying structural features are revealed and brought into view, otherwise the hundred verses remain as they have remained through the thousand years or more of their history, a mere challenge to vain pedantry or punditry. In other words, structuralism is the key that can make this work an open book, a scientifically valid work, with a fresh appeal to all advanced thinking modern men of the East or the West. It will be our task within the scope of the work itself to introduce the reader, as occasion permits, to further implications and intricacies of this structural approach, which

perhaps is the one feature on which the value and success of this work would have to rest. (p. 24)

First and foremost, Nataraja Guru thought dialectically. While dialectics has many definitions, the kind he employed is similar to a type that occurs in the West from Plato to Hegel, where polar opposites—a thesis and antithesis—are combined to effect a synthesis. The actual source for the Guru was the yoga of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, but he found it explicitly or implicitly present in Western philosophy also. Yoga is another name for the process by which opposite poles are viewed synthetically, to be united in a common scheme of understanding.

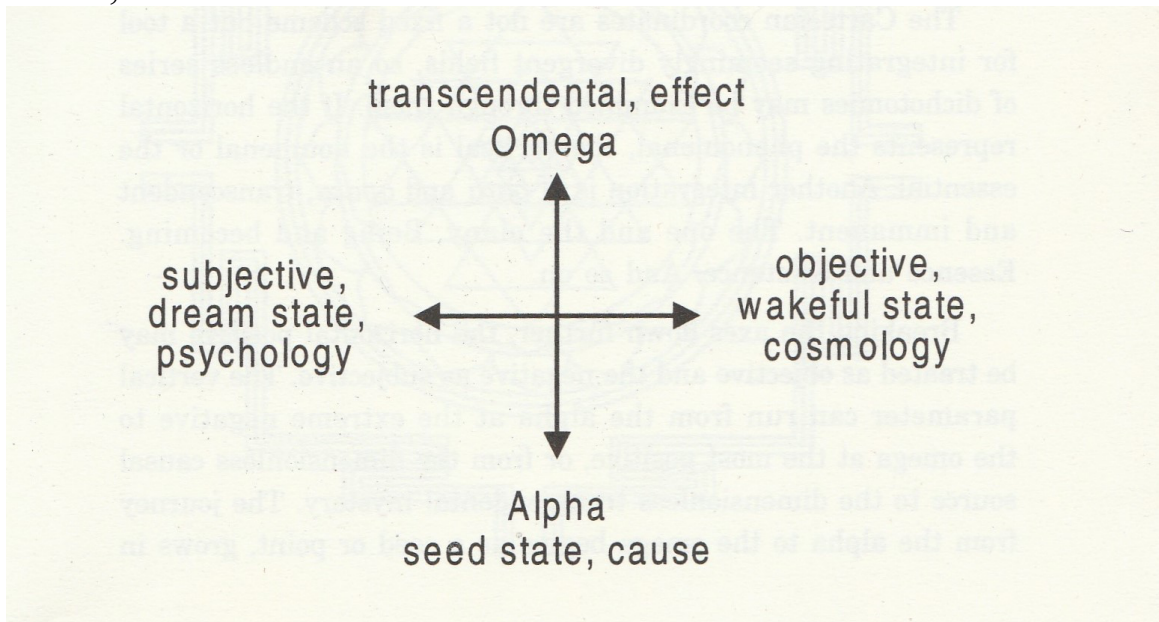
To Nataraja Guru, dialectics springs out of the notions of complementarity, reciprocity, compensation and cancellation. In logical terms, *a* immediately implies *not a*. When they are taken together, there is a balance, which in a sense produces a virtual zero that embraces the entire picture. The formula is simply: $a + (-a) = 0$. This zero factor is another name for the Absolute. By the use of dialectics to balance life elements, the Absolute is brought in as a unifying factor in each and every situation. Therefore, the task of the yogi is to constantly seek out the element *not a* or *not this* to add to whatever situation presents itself, and in so doing restore a state of harmonious balance. “The verity that is thus neutral and central between two terms of reciprocal propositions may be said to represent the Absolute norm of that context...” is how the Guru puts it in *Dialectical Methodology* (p. 7).

Because dialectic thought is dynamic, it tends to move upwards towards more sublime and uplifting insights, or downwards into more static and constraining states. Nataraja Guru’s use of the terms ascending and descending dialectics refers to these movements.

Where linear thinking follows a one dimensional line of thought, dialectical thinking expands into two and three dimensions through the triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. These imply a triangular shape, which rotated becomes a cone.

At the core of Nataraja Guru's philosophy are the Cartesian coordinate axes, consisting of a horizontal and a vertical parameter represented by straight lines that intersect at right angles to form a cross. The point of intersection is arbitrarily called zero, with increasingly large numbers representing expanding negativity and positivity leading away from the zero point. The left side of the horizontal line is called negative, and the right side positive. On the vertical parameter, above the zero point is positive and below it is negative.

Of these two lines, the vertical one is understood as being made up of unitive values, representing the urge for inclusive transcendence, while the horizontal axis stands for the multiplicity of ever-proliferating transactional variety. The horizontal and the vertical actually intersect each other at any and all points, giving rise to a stable ground of participation between the outside and the inside, existence and essence.



Though they have been used in various forms throughout much of the history of thought, the adoption of Cartesian coordinates to the philosophy of the structure of the universe was a stroke of genius of the Guru. Nataraja Guru's coordinate axes combine the three perceivable spatial dimensions into the

horizontal, while conceptual ideas and time make up the vertical axis. The implications of this are profound.

Descartes himself set the initial parameters that Nataraja Guru developed into his Science of the Absolute, although due to certain unshakable prejudices he was unable to develop the system to as advanced a point as the Guru. To him *res cogitans*, or thinking substance, was the vertical factor, and *res extensa*, or the extended, proliferated substance comprised the horizontal. In Nataraja Guru's interpretation of this, the horizontal is the physical universe (in its broadest sense) and the vertical is the metaphysical. Where the horizontal is vast, the vertical is an almost infinitely fine line or backbone, which knits the universe together in the same way that a fine thread holds together a string of pearls.

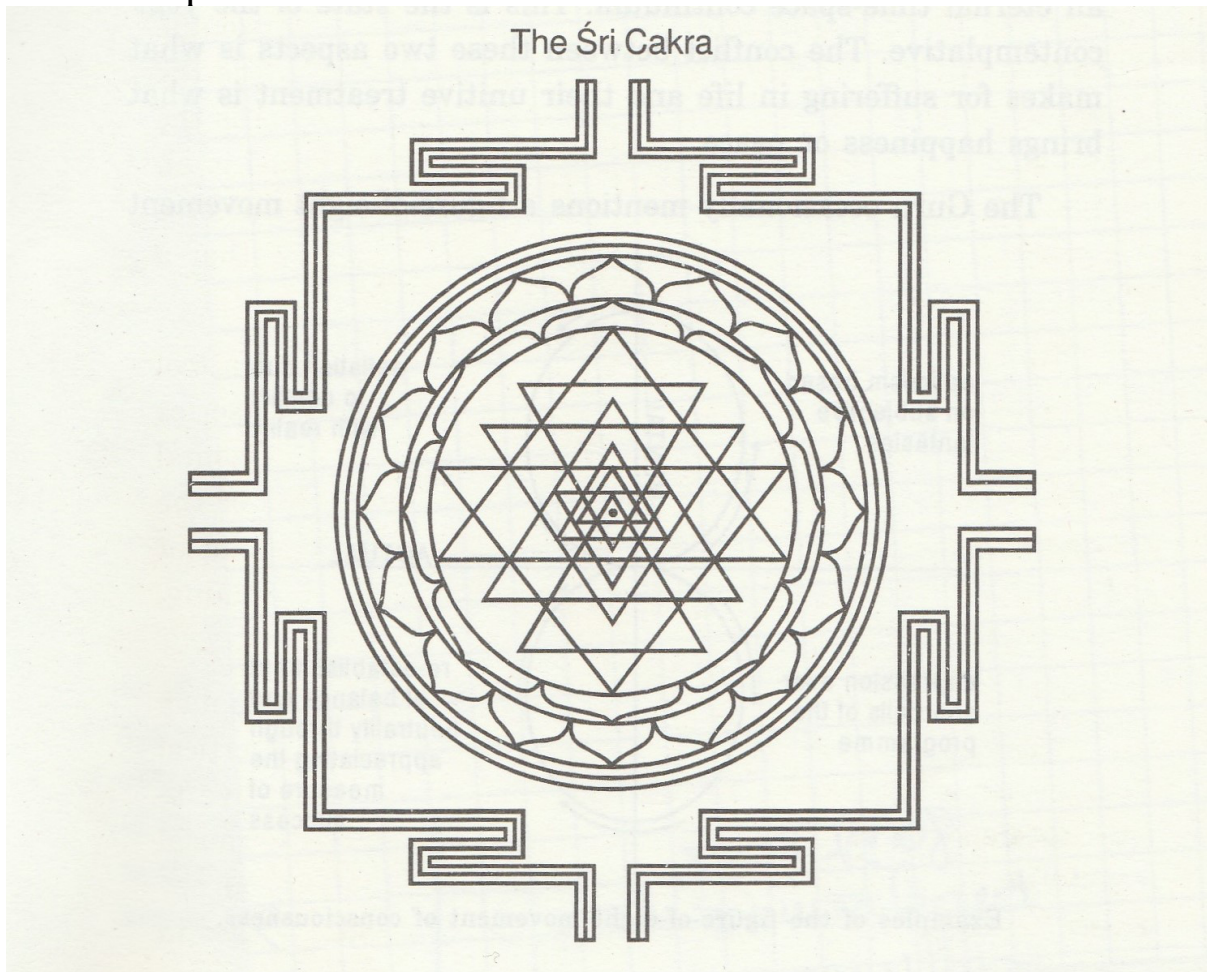
The Cartesian coordinates are not a fixed scheme but a tool for integrating seemingly divergent fields, so an endless series of dichotomies may be examined through them. If the horizontal represents the phenomenal, the vertical is the noumenal or the essential. Another integration is of para and apara, transcendent and immanent. The One and the many. Being and becoming. Essence and existence. And so on.

Breaking the axes down further, the horizontal positive may be treated as objective and the negative as subjective. The vertical parameter can run from the alpha at the extreme negative to the omega at the most positive, or from the dimensionless causal source to the dimensionless transcendental mystery. The journey from the alpha to the omega begins as a seed or point, grows in space until it is maximally horizontalized in the prime of life, and thereafter refocuses to the omega point at the termination of existence.

The horizontal positive is associated with the waking state, the horizontal negative with the dream state, the vertical negative with the deep sleep or seed state, and the vertical positive with turiya or the transcendental state. Using this scheme it is possible to graph all states of consciousness on the coordinate axes, as well

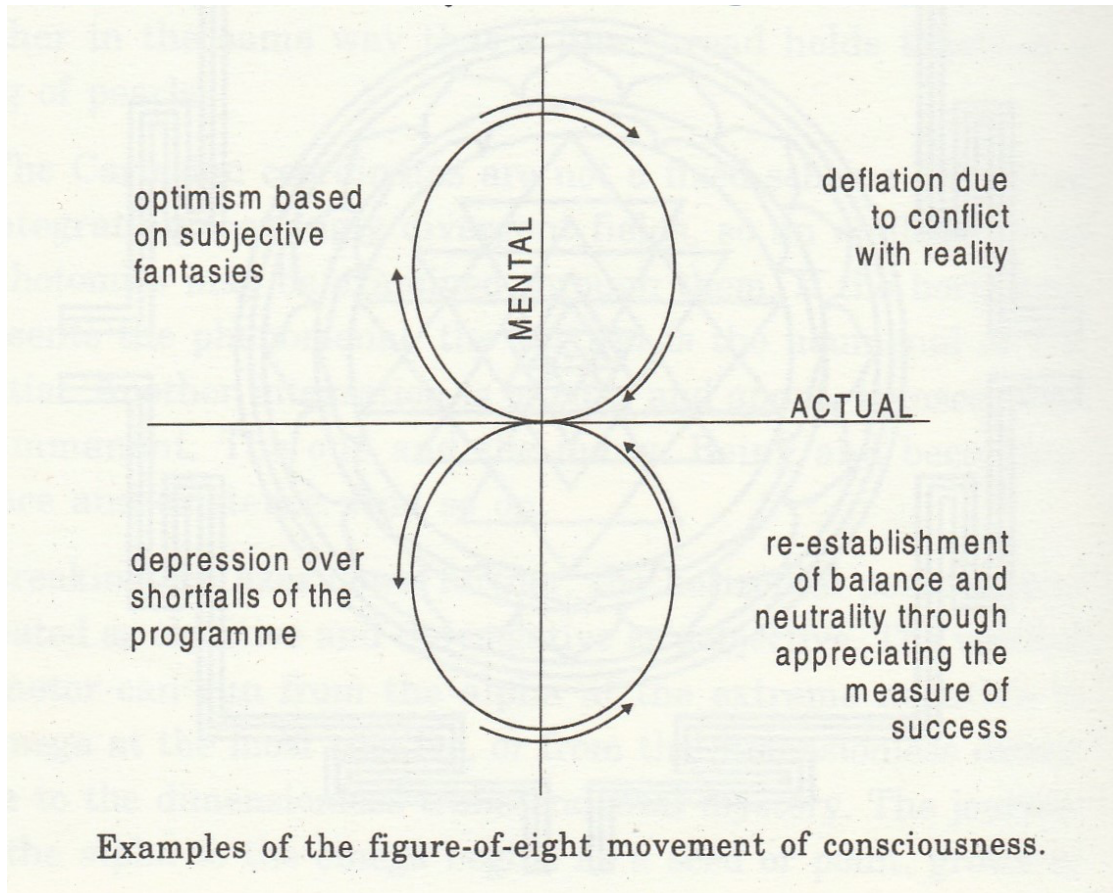
as to monitor the progressive development of any aspect of creation.

Viewing this process in four dimensions produces an image of two cones placed base to base, with their bases conjoined at the horizontal axis. Viewed in cross section they appear as equilateral triangles base to base. Since they are complementary, the triangles implicitly share elements of each other, which draws them to overlap to a degree. This is seen in the Sri Chakra, which forms a central motif in the present work. The series of overlapping triangles that make up this pictorial (protolinguistic) device produce a virtual horizontal parameter at the intersection points between the overlapping bases, and a virtual vertical parameter running through the series of apexes. A glance at any Sri Chakra will quickly reveal these virtual lines, as well as a number of virtual shapes.

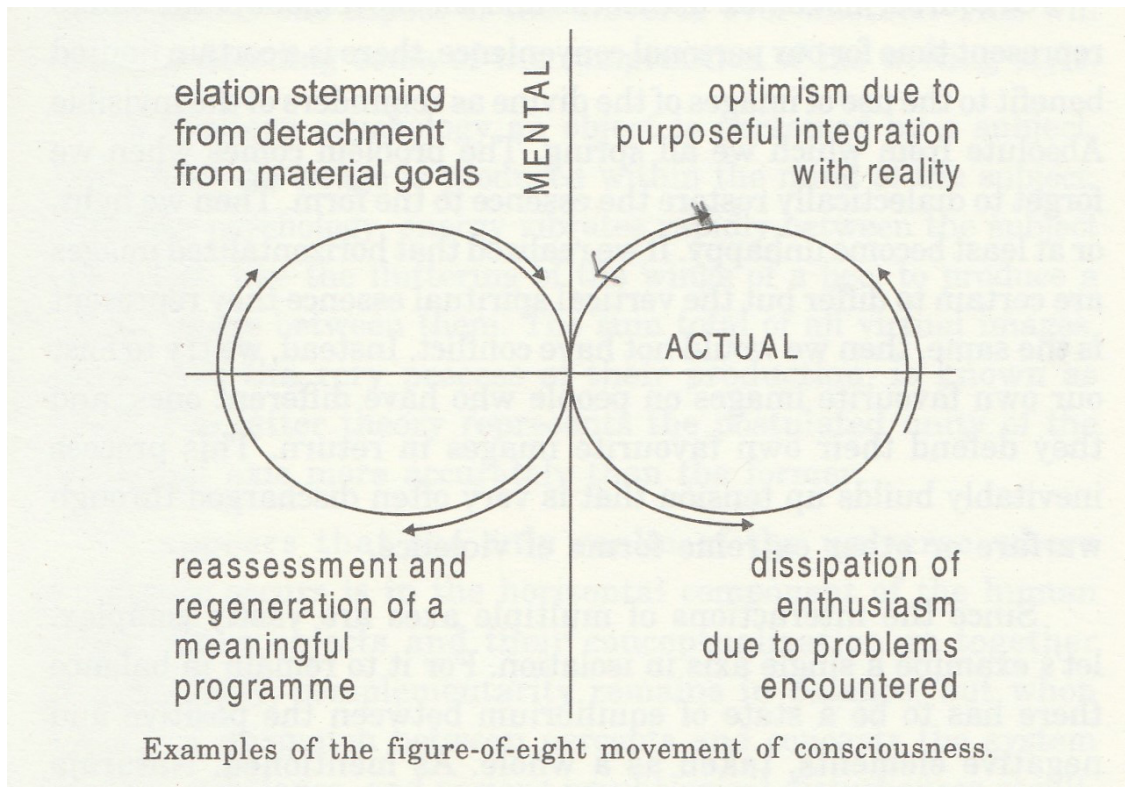


Indian wisdom traditions reduce all possible philosophical questions to two basic ones: “who am I?” and “whence this world?” Of these, the “I” refers to the vertical aspect while “this” refers to the horizontal. The point where they intersect remains neutral as the core where the experience of both together takes place in an eternal time-space continuum. This is the state of the yogi/contemplative. The conflict between these two aspects is what makes for suffering in life and their unitive treatment is what brings happiness or peace.

The Guru occasionally mentions a figure-eight movement of consciousness. When mental states are graphed on the Cartesian coordinates, the result is this type of figure. Picture the upper right quadrant as positive actually (horizontal) and positive mentally (vertical). The lower right quadrant is positive actually but mentally negative. The upper left quadrant is positive mentally but negative in actuality, while the lower left is negative both mentally and actually. As the psyche passes through these various stages, crossing from one to the next by passing through the zero point, a figure-eight pattern emerges.



It is possible to examine this oscillation either vertically or horizontally. Various exaggerations or minimizations can alter the size and shape of the figures:



If the horizontal expresses the physical, the vertical pertains to the metaphysical, or the realm of ideas. Take time for an example. Time is a metaphysical notion. It can't be seen or otherwise perceived by the senses in any way, yet we are certain of its existence. But through habitual acceptance, we have come to think of time in terms of clocks. A clock is a physical item, an actual representation or image of the metaphysical truth of time. In using the clock we have unconsciously substituted an idolatrous, graven image for the original. And we have not just done this with time, but with nearly everything. Even in matters of spirituality—call it essential thought if you prefer—we have made this fatal error. Where the Absolute essence simultaneously transcends and includes both the vertical and horizontal, once conceptualized it becomes a vertical notion. When spirituality is further exteriorized into perceptual forms, it becomes the subject of religion, where it can be physically represented on the horizontal plane. In other words, religions use graven images in various guises to symbolize

the transcendental, which has already been limited by being represented in thought patterns. Paradoxically, religions even worship graven images that prohibit idolatry!

Of course, just as we use clocks and the movement of the sun to represent time for our personal convenience, there is a certain limited benefit to the use of images of the divine as reminders of the invisible Absolute from which we all spring. The problem comes when we forget to dialectically restore the essence to the form. Then we fight, or at least become unhappy. If we realized that horizontalized images are certain to differ but the vertical spiritual essence they represent is the same, then we would not have conflict. Instead, we try to foist our own favorite images on people who have different ones, and they defend their own favorite images in return. This process inevitably builds up tension that is very often discharged through warfare or another extreme form of violence.

Since the interactions of multiple axes are vastly complex, let's examine a single axis in isolation. For it to remain in balance there has to be a state of equilibrium between the positive and negative elements, taken as a whole. As mentioned, Nataraja Guru often speaks of complementarity, reciprocity, compensation and cancellation, to include the various ways that the system remains in balance. If you have a plus two on the right and a minus three on the left of the horizontal, for instance, there would be an imbalance towards the subjective side, violating the four above-mentioned principles. Only a plus three will cancel a minus three. If an imbalance occurs, the system rapidly compensates to restore the balance; in fact, it can never really get out of balance, as an "equal and opposite reaction" is instantaneous and eternal. The plus and minus elements are reciprocal, in that there is an implied relationship between them and together they add up to unity. Moreover, they are complementary because you cannot have one side without the other; in a sense the existence of one leg automatically produces or at least implies the other.

One helpful idea to keep in mind while reading *Saundarya Lahari* is that the Guru spoke and wrote the way he thought, scrupulously observing reciprocity and complementarity in his sentence structure. Moreover, he was extremely careful not to favor one aspect of the universe over another. This will assist in decoding some of the complexities of his writing style.

In Western psychology an object is perceived by a subject, after which an image is produced within the mind of the subject. In Indian psychology, energy vibrates rapidly between the subject and object, like the fluttering of the wings of a bee, to produce a virtual image between them. The sum total of all virtual images, along with the very process of their production, is known as *maya*. The latter theory represents the postulated unity of the horizontal axis more accurately than the former.

It appears that the only realm of the universe where imbalance even *can* occur is in the horizontal component of the human mind. When objects and their conceptualization go together harmoniously, complementarity remains in balance, but when there is a mismatch between percepts and concepts the system goes out of balance, and various psychological disturbances result. The quest of the yogi is to intelligently reattain the state of perfect mental equipoise through acceptance of valid relations and rejection of false ones.

The fact of reciprocity further implies an inner connection between apparently disparate elements, which has puzzled philosophers down through the ages. It is immediately clear to everyone that up has no meaning without down, bad has no meaning without good, and so on. These factors are therefore *relative* to each other. The idea resembles a teeter-totter, which requires the ends being connected on a single pole, and also to have an independently fixed fulcrum for the system to operate on.

Logically, then, some connection must be present between opposite poles, but where is it to be found? Nataraja Guru, squarely in the nondual Indian tradition, understands this inner coherence to be provided by the Absolute as a universal ground or

fulcrum. This approach is rejected by rationalist philosophers because of a tendency to insist on the visible proof of horizontal factors, while an absolute ground must necessarily be outside the limits of sensory experience. Historically, the great Indian Gurus have had no such false modesty. They realized that if there is no inherent connection between polar factors, any assertion of their relative merit is arbitrary and thus false. But by postulating the Absolute as that which unites opposites in the equation, values immediately become possible.

In the present work Sankara focuses on the blissful experience of Beauty as the emergent value-form of the Absolute most intriguing to human beings. In his preliminary comments to *Saundarya Lahari*, Nataraja Guru makes reference to this matter:

Cancellation of counterparts is therefore one of the main features of this work. It is neither a god nor a goddess that is given a unilateral importance here. It is an absolute neutral or normative Value emerging from the cancellation or neutralization of two factors, named Siva and Sakti respectively, that is noticeable consistently throughout this composition. If Siva is the vertical *reference*, Sakti is the horizontal *referent*. Understood in the light of each other, the non-dual in the form of Beauty becomes experienced. Next to the principle of the quaternion...there are two parameters of reference, the vertical and the horizontal, which have to be clearly distinguished within the structure of the Absolute, which latter would be otherwise merely conceptual or empty of content. The phenomenal and the noumenal have to verify each other for the Absolute value to emerge into view. It is the absolutist character of the value of Beauty as understood here that justifies Sankara's use of the term *lahari*. (pp. 28, 29)

When ambivalent factors are brought into harmonious balance, the experience is of an upsurge of bliss. Sankara treats the

experience here as one of Beauty, and assigns it the color aruna (magenta), Homer's "rosy fingers of dawn." This is the essential experience of nondual union with the Absolute, in which "night" and "day" are in perfect equipoise, at dawn or dusk. Since Beauty is necessarily an actual experience, it must embody all attributes, even to the degree of having its own color. The color of the Creation-Goddess is, not surprisingly, the one resulting from mixing equal parts of infrared and ultraviolet light, the two poles of the visible spectrum. The expansive beauty of the full spectrum is thus epitomized in a single breathtaking color-experience.

Relative factors taken dialectically reveal the Absolute ground between them. If sunrise is a thesis, sunset would be the antithesis. Combining them intelligently and rising to a scientifically higher vantage point, one can look down on the earth from space and see the sun shining constantly, while the rotation of the planet produces the seeming pluses and minuses of relative amounts of daylight. The constant of sunlight is the absolute ground on which the varying relative factors are played out on a rotating world.

Underlying all of Nataraja Guru's philosophy is the Absolute. Defining the Absolute is an impossibility, but it is revealed to the seeker as the emergent factor resulting from the dialectical equalization of polarized elements. Unlike many philosophers who spend endless hours fine-tuning word meanings, with Nataraja Guru's terminology precise definitions are not only unhelpful but certain to leave much of importance outside their boundaries. His notions, like the Absolute to the yogi, arise as grand virtual images that are the sum total of a number of different, dialectically balanced perspectives. It is little wonder that Sankara's great mystical poem, in which Absolute Beauty arises from yogic equanimity, would find the ideal appreciator in the Guru.

The modern day, scientific thinker may stumble over the names of deities in *Saundarya Lahari*. It is a simple matter to update these fanciful terms to the straightforward style of the

present, and Sankara would likely permit us do so. But we must take care not to undermine the poetic beauty of the work by so doing. Certainly, Beethoven's philosophic ideas for one of his symphonies could be summarized in a short essay, but we would have lost everything. It is the very beauty of the presentation that moves us; the power of that beauty converts dull and academic word images into a form that conveys the immense and transformative impact of their meanings. Such is Sankara's leap with *Saundarya Lahari*. After a lifetime of verbal arguments and cerebral interpretations, this was his Ninth Symphony, his ecstatic poem of divine experience. The philosophic structure is only the skeleton on which the glory of the Goddess is supported.

Everything begins with the Absolute, simultaneously all and nothing. Mathematically, it is the meaning of zero, in all its possible ramifications. The ancient rishis, having much more poetic imaginations than modern rishis, used the name Siva instead of the Absolute. Siva has multiple roles in the drama. Alone he is the Absolute, standing for the mysterious ground of existence. Then, in order for the universe to spring into existence with its big bang, Siva splits into two: energy and matter, or creator and created, called by the ancients Siva and Sakti. Creation is known by many other names. She is Devi, Siva's wife Parvati, Aruna, Uma, or simply the Goddess or the Mother. And there are a number of others. The relationship of Siva and Sakti is exactly the same as matter and energy, which are merely transformations of each other into different states.

A mathematical point has no dimension, and is therefore a pure abstraction. Creation becomes an accomplished fact when a point moves along a single dimension, creating a line. Such movement implies a time factor, which while being called the fourth dimension, has to be present from the instant the movement begins. A second line intersecting the first produces a second dimension and generates a plane. As lines multiply, they form a three dimensional solid structure, which along with the time factor give us the substratum of our familiar four-dimensional universe.

The primary focus in this work—as in any work of science—is on the created world, here known as the Goddess. Anything created undergoes three stages of existence: generation, a period of manifestation, and final dissolution. These stages are traditionally named Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. One can see the secret development of the numbers 0, 1, 2, 3, in this process. Four emerges from the quaternion structure of creation itself, symbolized by the equal-armed cross or the Cartesian coordinates. Further specification of the Absolute into the five basic elements produces the next number. And so on. Nataraja Guru himself is much more a mathematician than a religious thinker, and his commentary is aimed primarily at a modern mentality. Further elaborations are well explained and comprehensible as soon as one catches on to his old-fashioned style of writing.

A pair of terms that occur frequently in Nataraja Guru's work and are almost certain to be unfamiliar to the lay reader are hypostatic and hierophantic. The former refers to the heaven worlds, peopled with gods and goddesses and the essences of things, and the latter refers to the world of priests, ritual worship, and prayer. Ritualists reach up, as it were, towards the heavens, while their corresponding divinities bestow boons from on high down to their supplicants below. Such high/low interaction necessarily takes place along the vertical axis, with hypostatic elements imagined at the vertical positive and hierophantic elements at the vertical negative pole.

From the point of view of Tantra, as in most religions, the duality between a god or gods and their supplicants is justified as laying the groundwork for a pathway to salvation in the heavens. Advaita (nondual) Vedanta, however, does not countenance duality. Herein lies the crux of one of Nataraja Guru's arguments for Sankara's authorship of *Saundarya Lahari*. In the very first verse there is the claim that no amount of merit or number of divine boons is sufficient to enable the worshipper to bridge the gap with the Absolute in the form of the Goddess. She is beyond all such considerations. It is clearly an Advaita Vedanta position

that nonduality can never be attained by dualistic means. In contrast, the dualistic or religious commentaries on *Saundarya Lahari* universally misinterpret this verse to claim that only one with exceptional amounts of heaped-up merit would be able to properly worship the Goddess. This is not an idea that either Sankara or Nataraja Guru would entertain for a moment. Anyone claiming such a notion as true is by definition a dualist, and their comments can be treated as merely derailing this ineffable work of philosophy into the backwaters of religious thought. To the Guru this “implies a gap that is in the minds of the critics rather than in the work itself.” (p. 217). Nataraja Guru touches on this distinction in his verse 9 commentary:

In the Patanjali system, which is based on the dualistic Samkhya philosophy, the dynamism of yoga is in terms of a gradual process of spiritual progress, in eight grades of discipline, ascending to what is marked by the word *kaivalya* (aloneness) at the culminating point. This kind of gradual process of spiritual progress between two points, representing ends and means, is repugnant to the more dynamic unitive view proper to Advaita Vedanta, where no vestige of duality could be tolerated, whether in ends or in means. Ends and means have to be treated together. This is the correct Advaitic approach of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

Nataraja Guru often speaks of numerator and denominator elements in a nontraditional way. As part of his mathematical approach to the Science of the Absolute, he expressed certain relationships as fractions. As in ordinary mathematics, the denominator represents totality, and the numerator the fraction of the total that is under consideration. Where the denominator represents unity or the whole, the numerator stands for plurality or the part. Again, the denominator is the cause and the numerator the effect. Occasionally, the Guru uses numerator to simply mean above the horizontal median, and denominator to mean below it.

When the numerator and denominator are of equal value, they cancel each other out in unity, symbolic of the Absolute. Perfection in Advaita Vedanta therefore is one. On the other hand, the denominator of Buddhism, “there is no Self,” is zero, and anything divided by zero is an indeterminate form of zero. While both one and zero can symbolize the Absolute, the difference between them may be said to be the essence of the distinction between Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism.

While there are a seemingly infinite number of excellent points to be made regarding the Science of the Absolute, we will now bow out and leave what remains to the greatest expositor of them all, the Guru himself. Aum—

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