

## THE TEMPLE AS A METAPHOR FOR THE JOURNEY WITHIN

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**Abstract.** This paper will explore the relationship between the tangible and intangible as it is expressed in the South Indian Hindu temple, and identify those aspects which embody and support this relationship. This will assist and inform future conservation and management.

The Hindu temple is a three dimensional diagram of the subtle levels of existence, which takes us from the mundane world to the divinity embodied in a particular image or icon in the sanctum. It is a metaphor for the journey of the worshipper from this manifest world to the divinity within; a point of stillness beyond space and time, and beyond place.

The place itself may be the physical locus for a particular aspect of the Absolute, but the realisation of that Absolute within oneself, is the ultimate aim of the temple. This is expressed in architecture, iconography, ritual and individual participation. Thus the temple in time and space (and therefore place) has its ultimate meaning beyond these limitations.

Sacred places in every tradition provide a focus towards the spiritual dimension, a place where this tangible world may be transcended and a glimpse of the intangible experienced. They act as gateways for the community between this tangible world and the intangible spiritual realm and provide a focus for those who seek to understand and experience this realm.

Each tradition has developed a rich language of iconography, ritual and architecture to guide and support the seeker on their path, but in recent times the meaning of these languages have begun to be misunderstood or lost and they are now increasingly discarded as meaning-less or valued only for their aesthetic and historic qualities.

While the Hindu tradition is still very strong and vital, there are signs that the forces of disintegration are building. It is therefore important to counter these forces with explanation and discussion of some of the subtleties of the tradition so they may be better understood, and thus valued.

This tradition, with its many sects and philosophies, is based on an ancient Indian teaching and understanding that the Ultimate Reality (God as we generally refer to it in the west), is inseparable from all that is created – that all creation emanated from this reality and remains non-separate from it.

This teaching, known as Advaita Vedanta (Non-Duality), is regarded in the Hindu tradition as the ultimate goal of knowledge of the Divine.

In this tradition, the ultimate God, known in Sanskrit as Brahman (literally that which is immense and from which everything else has come out), is beyond all name and form, beyond all change and decay, beyond all limitations of time and space. It is what I will refer to here as the Absolute.

This Absolute is conscious, in fact it is consciousness itself and it saturates all that exists. It is this consciousness which gives order to every atom, every form, and while in its unmanifest state it is perfectly still, it is the source of all energy and action. It is the still point at the centre, the hub of the moving wheel, where all movement ceases and from where all movement emanates.

*Verily, all this is the immortal Brahman! He is everywhere – above, below, in front, at the back, upon the right, upon the left! All this world is indeed Brahman! (Mundaka Upanishad; verse 2.2.11)*

*The same Deity (God) who is one only, remains hidden in all beings, is all-pervasive and the indwelling Self of all beings. He presides over all actions, lives in all beings, (He is) the witness, the Pure Consciousness free from the three Gunas (qualities) of Nature. (Svetasvatara Upanishad; verse 6.11)*

We can observe that the world we experience and interact with is subject to change and decay – it is impermanent. We can also observe that permeating our own experience of it, observing all this change, is our own constant awareness of our selves. Even when we think we have ‘lost’ this awareness or consciousness as in a deep sleep or coma, it is not lost or destroyed, it has merely become absolutely still and withdrawn, re-awakened when we ‘regain’ consciousness. It is only by the light or activity of that consciousness that we know or experience anything. It is said in this tradition, that the most refined, most pure form of this consciousness or Self, resides in a small cave or chamber deep inside the heart. This is known as the Atman or soul.

*Vast, self-effulgent, divine, beyond all imagination, shines the truth of Brahman. It is subtler than the subtlest, farther than the farthest. It is here within this body, and the sages realise it verily in this life as seated in the heart. (Mundaka Upanishad; verse 3.1.7)*

The Upanishads tell us that this individual consciousness or Atman, is the same as that of the Absolute. Not only is it the same, it is not separate from it. This is the ultimate teaching of Advaita Vedanta (non-duality) and is epitomised in the great words quoted below, ‘Tattwamasi’, ‘Thou art That’, and is repeated in a number of the upanishads.

*That which is the subtlest of all is the Self of all this. It is the Truth. It is the Self. Thou art That, O Svetaketu. (Chandogya Upanishad; verse 6.8.7)*

To find this for ourselves, the upanishads tell us we must stop looking outwards, and begin the journey inwards, to that still point of pure awareness in the core of the heart. A well known path to achieve this is via meditation.

According to the Indian tradition, our bodies are made up of five sheaths – known in Sanskrit as koshas. These koshas can be likened to the layered skins in an onion, but in this case they progress from the outer tangible layer to the innermost intangible core. The outer physical layer - annamaya kosha is the food sheath. Our physical bodies are sustained by food. Then comes pranamaya kosha, the vital breath; next is manomaya kosha, the thinking mind; then vijnanamaya kosha, knowledge/ego/I-ness; and finally anandamaya kosha, the bliss sheath, that inner core of sublime happiness experienced when we know who we really are. At the centre of this bliss sheath is the tiny cave or chamber in the core of our being, the heart, holding the Atman. This is our still point of consciousness.

This same structure can be found in the Hindu temple. Refer to Koshas diagram in figure 1 below. While every temple is different and houses a different form or aspect of the Divine, this principle of the journey from the outside world to the central chamber housing the Divine, the sanctum, is common to all temples. This is a fundamental principle and in this paper I will refer to Shiva temples of South India to demonstrate it.

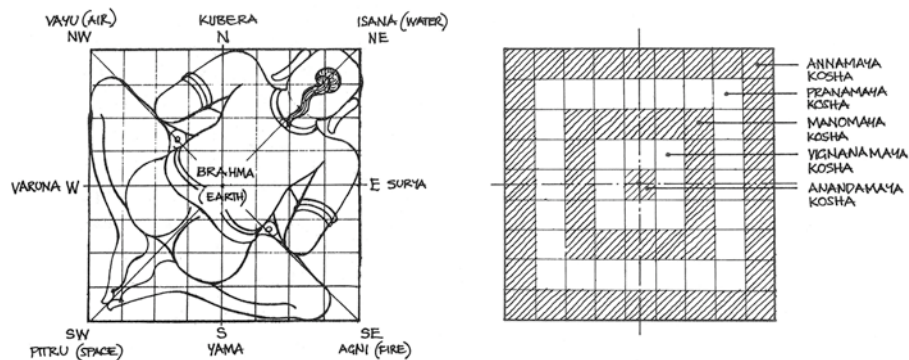


Figure 1. Vaastu Purusha diagram (left) and Koshas diagram (right)

The Hindu temple is set out according to the ancient rules and teachings of the Vaastu Shastra with the Vaastu Purusha Mandala as its controlling layout, a centred square diagram of either 8 x 8 or 9 x 9 squares. It is said that in ancient times, a demon called Vaastu was creating chaos in the whole universe and as a result, was forced down to earth by Lord Indra. Landing face down, the Lord instructed that he be held down by the Devas of each of the directions to create order. Refer to figure 1 showing an 8 x 8 diagram

above. To explain this Vaastu Purusha Mandala is beyond the scope of this paper and readers are referred to the Reference list, particularly those works by V. Ganapati Sthapati and S. Ananth. Suffice it to say that in implementing this Vaastu Purusha diagram in accordance with the tradition, order replaces chaos, space is made sacred, all directions of space are protected, and all forces and energies of the site are balanced and ordered. At the centre of this diagram is the point where all energies are focussed and have their source, where the deity in the sanctum is located. The sanctum represents the cave in the heart and the deity at its centre, an aspect of the Divine, the Absolute.

There are three principal deities in the Hindu tradition; Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver/sustainer, and Shiva the destroyer, all of whom are represented as masculine. These represent the three principal aspects of the Absolute and contain within them the ability to act. This ability or energy is considered as feminine. Thus each has a consort and these are usually represented as separate images. Brahma has Saraswati – goddess of speech music and learning; Vishnu has Lakshmi – goddess of beauty, abundance and wealth; and Shiva has Parvati – a goddess represented in many diverse forms from Uma – the nurturing mother, to Durga – the destroyer of demons and evil, to Kali – destroyer of ignorance.

Each of these Lords and Goddesses take on specific forms according to their location and its associated energies, hence their exists within the tradition multitudinous aspects of the Divine which can be worshipped according to ones own personality and understanding. At its traditional core, each follower would acknowledge that every form of the Divine is but one of many aspects or faces of the same Absolute, beyond duality.

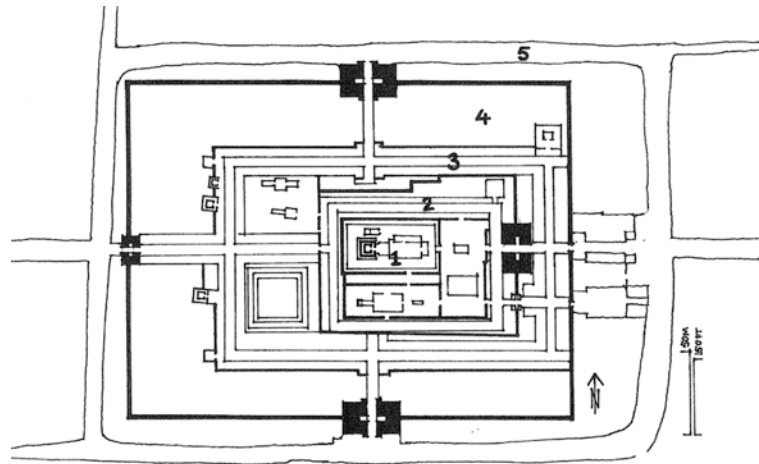
*The truth (Ultimate Reality) is One, Sages call it by different names.*  
(Rig Veda; 1, 164.46)

While many individuals may follow established family allegiances to particular deities, it is commonly accepted that each chooses or finds that form of the Divine which most resonates with them personally. Thus when a worshipper visits a temple housing their chosen deity, they are coming face to face with that aspect of the Absolute which most closely resonates with their own inner being, their own Atman.

There are many layers of meaning embodied in the Hindu temple but in this paper I will only discuss those which relate to the principles of Advaita.

If we look at the arrangement of the temple, it is set out in a series of concentric courtyards (prakaras), with a gateway at the entrance to each. These gateways are generally in line with the cardinal directions, the main ones marked by large towers (gopurams). The sanctum is in the innermost courtyard like the seed in the centre of a fruit. This arrangement closely correlates to the concept of the five koshas and is clearly evident in traditional South Indian temples. In the large Shiva temples of this region,

there are generally four concentric courtyards, each corresponding to the four inner koshas with the outer one, annamaya kosha, corresponding to the encircling processional street around the outside of the temple walls. Refer to figures 2 and 3 below.



*Figure 2.* Plan of Ramalingeswara Temple at Rameswaram  
The courtyards plus street (koshas) are numbered beginning at the centre.

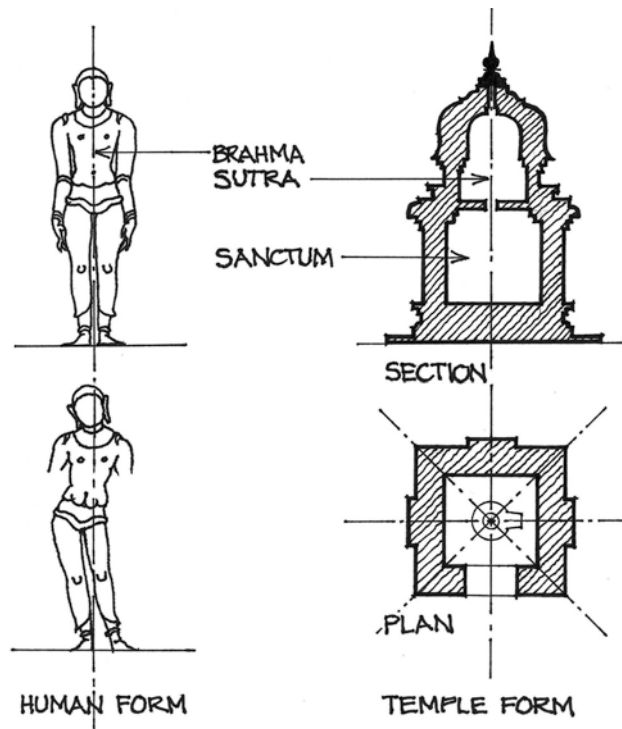


*Figure 3.* Arunachaleswara Temple at Tiruvannamalai

Along this street are the houses, eating and work places of the town. This is the physical, visible, transactional world we all know, and as we enter the

gateway, we leave it behind and proceed towards the centre, each courtyard bringing us closer to the most subtle, most sacred part of the temple. We are following a clockwise path from the gross world to the subtle, and while we may be doing this on a spatial, physical level, we are in fact mirroring an internal process, a journey, a pilgrimage, to that cave in the centre of our own heart wherein the Divine dwells as our Atman.

The temple sanctum is square in plan, almost cubic in volume, and is traditionally dark. Iconographically in this tradition, the still point at the centre of creation is represented by a square or a cube, the most stable and inert of all shapes or solids, while the circle represents this manifest, changing world. The central axis of this sanctum is the still thread of consciousness, and is referred to as the Brahma Sutra (thread/axis of Brahma). It corresponds with this same axis in the human form, effectively the centre of balance and equilibrium. Refer to figure 4 below.



*Figure 4.* Human form and Temple form, the latter being a diagram of the former.

(adapted by the author from diagrams in V Ganapati Sthapati, 1997, page 108)

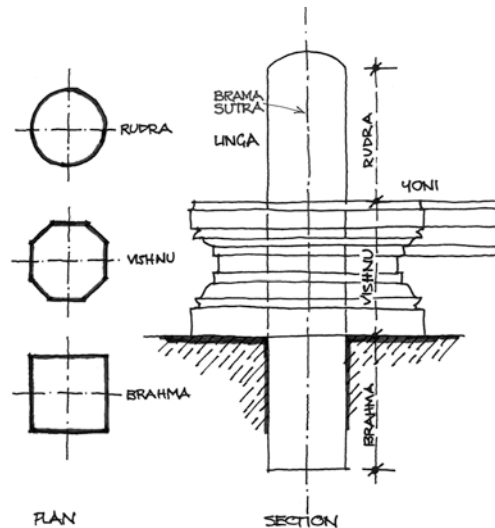
If we consider a square of paper or card and spin it on its central axis, it will, with enough speed, appear circular, but really it is just a square. In this analogy the square and the circle appear to be different, but are really only a

square, one absolutely still with no action/energy, and the other with action/energy. In some temples, particularly in Kerala, the outside of the sanctum may be circular in plan but the space inside it is square, reinforcing the teaching that what we see in this world is subject to change and decay and that which is unseen within it as its source, is stillness, beyond change and decay. In South India, the worshipper cannot enter the sanctum, but when the priest performs the ritual known as ‘aarati’, waving a sacred camphor lamp in front of the image, both the space and the image within are glimpsed – the sacred stillness of the Absolute is revealed. But it does not end there.

The pre-eminent image in a Shiva temple is the Shiva lingam. This is a vertical shaft of stone (masculine), generally circular in plan, in the centre of a raised platform or yoni (feminine). This image is often referred to as ‘the form of the formless’ and is an extraordinarily clear and powerful image of the fundamental forces and qualities in the cosmos. It ultimately embodies and resolves all opposites, evolution and involution, movement and stillness, male and female, form and formless. This is an abstract image of the Absolute which transcends all forms and qualities.

‘Shiva’ means ‘auspiciousness - the auspicious one’, and ‘lingam’ means ‘sign’. Just as smoke is a sign or ‘lingam’ of its true source fire, so the Shiva Lingam is a sign or marker of its source, the auspicious one – Shiva.

This is what we see, but what we do not see is the section of this shaft which is within the yoni, and still another section below it buried within the floor of the sanctum. Refer figure 5 below.



## Figure 5. The Shiva Lingam

(adapted by the author from diagrams in V. Ganapati Sthapati, 2002, page 36)

The square planned section hidden in the floor represents Brahma, the creator, that which is unmanifest, the unseen motionless consciousness. The octagonal middle section concealed by the yoni is Vishnu, the preserver, that which is moving with order and control, maintaining and sustaining creation. In this octagonal section, the central axis of consciousness is vibrating to produce the manifest world; just as the filament in a light globe vibrates when energised to produce light and heat. The visible circular planned section, rotating at high speed around this eternally still central axis is Rudra, the ancient name for Shiva the destroyer. This is the full flowering of existence but it is also potentially self-destructive. What we see in this upper section is really the energy or power of Shiva, that of his consort Shakti. To quote the Great South Indian Sage, Adi Shankara:

*When Shiva is enjoined with Shakti, he is empowered to create.  
If the lord is not thus, he is indeed unable to even move.*  
(Saundarya Lahari: verse 1)

This still point cannot be seen with the eyes but it can be understood to some degree by the intellect as the single vertical axis of consciousness, the Axis Mundi, the still point at the centre of this movement, connecting all three parts like beads on a thread. This consciousness is at the heart of everything, every atom, as its source and continuing support.

So once again, the iconography reinforces the fact that this Absolute cannot be seen or perceived by the senses, but only by deep contemplation on that form of the Divine in the centre of the cave of the heart.

Other images of Lord Shiva, such as the well known image of Lord Nataraja, the dancing form of Shiva within the circle of flame, reveals these same principles in a different but no less profound manner. The dance creates, sustains and then destroys the universe, but it also represents the process of conquering and destroying our own ignorance as to who we really are. Only when we understand and achieve this do we receive the Divine Grace of liberation offered by His lifted foot.

At another level of meaning, this manifest world is nothing other than a dance performed by the Lord Himself (or more correctly His Shakti) and has no real existence of its own, it is only an appearance caused by the vibration of the central core axis of the universe. When the dance or the vibration ceases, the world is no more.

The doorway in the temple symbolises the same principle. Each is really a representation of a single undifferentiated column shaft, sliced or split down the centre and then when the two halves part we can see what is revealed within. That which is non-dual, divides itself to produce duality



and within the framework provided by this duality, a face or aspect of the Absolute is revealed. Refer to figure 6 below. In each of the niches around the outside of the sanctum or on the outside of the gopuram, images of the Divine are revealed to us within the frame of one of these doorways. The outside face of these structures is the manifest world, faces or projections of the unmanifest within the sanctum.



*Figure 6.* Lord Shiva as the naked beggar, eastern gopuram, Tiruvannamalai

In visiting any of these temples, the worshipper's journey is structured and given meaning by its architectural and iconographic arrangement. The various rituals, chants and offerings performed at particular points along this journey, reinforce this process and the worshipper can understand the meaning of these according to their own knowledge and devotion.

At festival times, particularly when the deity comes out of the temple and is taken on procession, the sense of the Divine participating in the worshipper's worldly life becomes more tangible. This helps the worshipper to integrate what is understood in the sanctum with their everyday life and to infuse it with spiritual principles. In this manner the manifest world, the world of transaction and interaction, can, with devotion and understanding, become saturated with this Divine presence.



*Figure 7.* Lord Arunachaleswara and His consort on procession in the streets of Tiruvannamalai

Once this principle of the transcendent Divine, the Absolute, saturating the universe is understood, integrated and experienced, the journey is complete and the temple itself and its iconography are transcended. The experience of the Absolute, beyond all space and time, form and place is achieved. Nonetheless the temple remains as the point of entry to this great secret, the symbol on the path, the doorway in the apparently impenetrable wall which surrounds this cave in the centre of the heart.

### **Acknowledgements**

All photographs by the author

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