

Chapter 1

THE YAKṢA AND THE WATERS

Introduction

Iconography and method

Ananda Coomaraswamy's investigations into the art, history, and culture of South Asia were in the forefront of a scholarly movement that began to look at some of the more popular aspects of Indian tradition and, in so doing, to open up a diversity of forms and issues to the kind of scrutiny that had previously been reserved for the massive intellectual domains of Indian philosophy and linguistics.

It is fitting that as a South Asian scholar Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) should have been an initiator of the movement toward an appreciation of the so-called popular culture of India, for the shift in scholarship that began around the end of the nineteenth century was accompanied by or, perhaps, engendered by the physical encounter of Western scholars with the geography, peoples, and art of the East. Indian scholarship in the West had been a purely textual tradition, such that many Sanskritists had never traveled to India at all. The legitimacy of this approach has never been completely discredited, and the extent to which the two domains of learned and popular traditions overlap and implicate one another will never be easily determined. At any rate, there is plenty of room to move in either domain with only casual reference to the other.

The physical encounter with Indian culture led to an awareness of the extent to which the use of sculptural forms and images has played an integral part in the religious life of the people. These images, consisting of the central cast of Indian religious characters, Śiva, Viṣṇu and his *avatāras*, the Goddess, and the Buddha, are an essential part of the great monuments of Indian art and architecture. The sculptures are displayed iconically either as the foci of worship or meditation or in the midst of a narrative scheme, illustrating important events

in the life or mythology of the divine character. In addition to the major gods and goddesses, one is aware of the prevalence and importance of the minor, supporting cast of characters, like "extras" or shield bearers, anonymous forms, without whom the narrative fabric and visual continuity of the temple ornamentation would not flow. Within this visual stream of mythological characters and supernatural presences of all kinds, a familiar *dramatis personae* emerges that has a life of its own and that seems simultaneously to engage, on the one hand, our appreciation of the whimsical and playful and, on the other hand, the most serious of aesthetic and religious sensibilities. Heinrich Zimmer has commented on this paradoxical experience.

The luxuriant display of religious sculpture so characteristic of the great temples of pilgrimage is therefore a readily legible pictorial script that conveys, through an elaborate, yet generally understood symbolism, not only the legends of popular cult, but simultaneously the profoundest teachings of Indian metaphysics.¹

Certain images and motifs drawn from an iconography that precedes the explicit development of classical Hindu mythology are appropriated because of their suitability as easily reproduced and decorative forms. These forms, however, exceed their purely decorative function by acquiring and generating a symbolism that is capable of standing on its own, both aesthetically and theologically. This evolution of a symbol is facilitated by a decorative phenomenon that F. D. K. Bosch calls "morphological resemblance,"² in which visually similar elements of entirely different species or modes of being are translated into one another over time in a subtle process of perceiving and elaborating relationships between certain prevalent forms endemic to the self-expression of the culture.

The purpose of this chapter will be to trace the manifold connections and transformations that pertain to the iconography and mythology of the yakṣa. Lest it seem that the net that gathers these associated forms has been cast too widely, let me offer two assertions in defense of its inclusiveness. On the one hand, all of the iconographical elements that we will discuss are aspects of the mythology of water and cannot be understood on any level except in relation to that encompassing and profound medium and to one another. On the other hand, the visual transformation of images, inspired by "morphological resemblance," may be seen as a metaphor for the ethical and theological transformations that will be the special subject of this study.

Bosch focuses on the development of the motif of the *makara*, a crocodilelike aquatic creature whose use as a sculptural form spread throughout most of Asia.³ The *makara* is one of a great variety of mythological hybrids and elaborations who have made their way into the vocabulary of Indian art and literature. Among these hybrids are to be found primordial and powerful symbols whose origins within the culture are steeped in mystery and yet whose popularity and usefulness within the art and culture are obvious. The yakṣa is one of these powerful figures, an image that has undergone change and reversal in three related discourses: the historical evolution of Indian religion and society, the morphological associations depicted in Indian art, and the development of literary stylization.

Yakṣa beginnings in Buddhism and Jainism

Yakṣas and yakṣīs fill the early Buddhist monuments of Sāñcī and Bhārhut, and the former serve as prototypes for the first iconic representations of the Buddha. Despite certain apparent conceptual contradictions between, on the one hand, the ascetic ideals and metaphors associated with the world-renouncing Buddha and his contemporary, Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism, and, on the other hand, the life-supporting, sensual yakṣa, the use of such nature deities in Buddhist art represents a grounding of new religious ideas in current popular symbolism.

At first sight these figures [trees and dryads] seem to be singularly out of place if regarded with the eyes of the Buddhist or Jaina monk. But by the time that a necessity had arisen for the erection of these great monuments, with their illustration of Buddhist legends and other material constituting a veritable *Biblia Pauperum*, Buddhism and Jainism had passed beyond the circle of monasticism and become popular religions with a cult. These figures of fertility spirits are present here because the people are here. Women, accustomed to invoke the blessings of a tree spirit, would approach the railing pillar images with similar expectations; these images like those of Nagas and Yaksas often set up on Buddhist and Jaina sites, may be compared to the altars of patron saints which a pious Catholic visits with prayers for material blessings.⁴

Yakṣas and their attendant iconography were employed in the aniconic stage of Buddhist art, in which certain symbols drawn from the life of the Buddha stood as shorthand stylizations representing the

actual person of the Buddha, whose anthropomorphic depiction was forsworn. Early depictions of the yakṣa, such as the freestanding sculptures from Parkham (figure 1) and Mahārāshṭra (figure 2), saw him as a massive, full-bodied *devatā*, who would have borne the turban and umbrella of a royal prince or hero. These ancient, usually

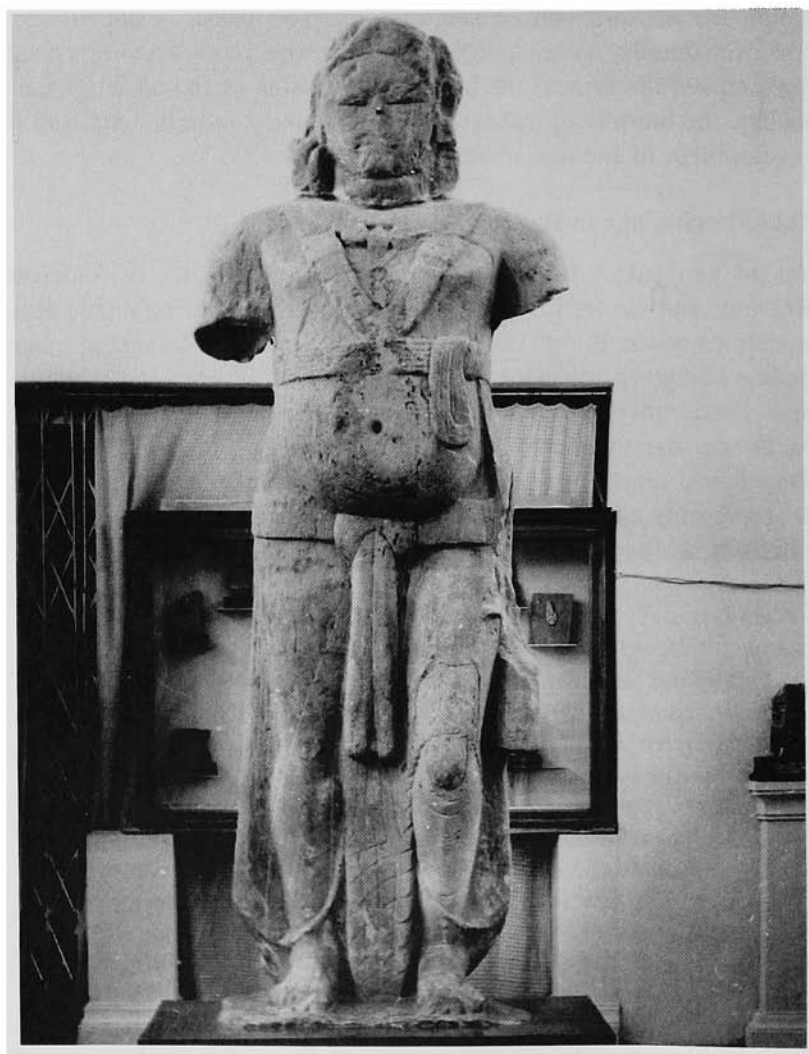


Figure 1. Parkham Yakṣa



Figure 2. Yakṣa from Mahārāṣṭra

damaged statues have been discovered standing in fields. Life size, they display maximum emphasis on the front side of the sculpture, with little or no attention to realistic modeling and detailing of all sides. Among the earliest sculptures of this type are two yakṣas from Patna, a yakṣī from Besnagar (figure 3), and the *caurī* or fly-whisk bearer (who may or may not be a yakṣī) from Didarganj (figure 4).

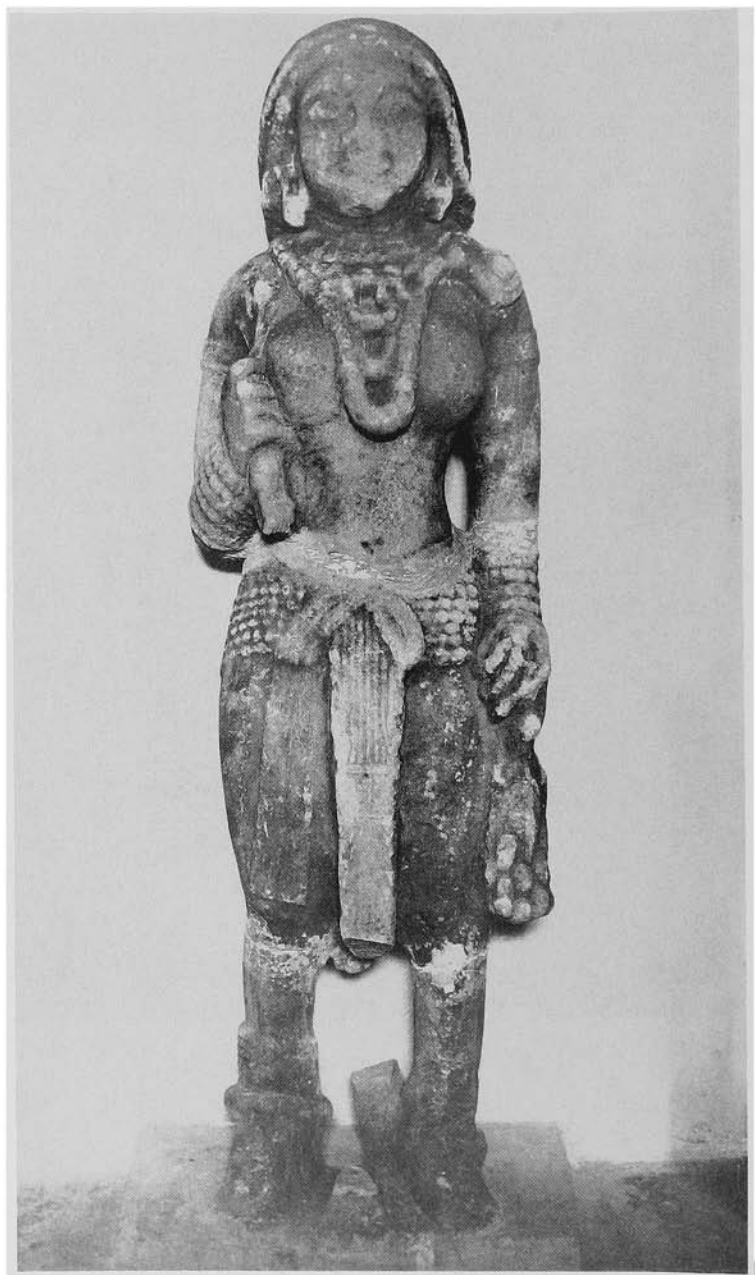


Figure 3. Yakṣī from Besnagar

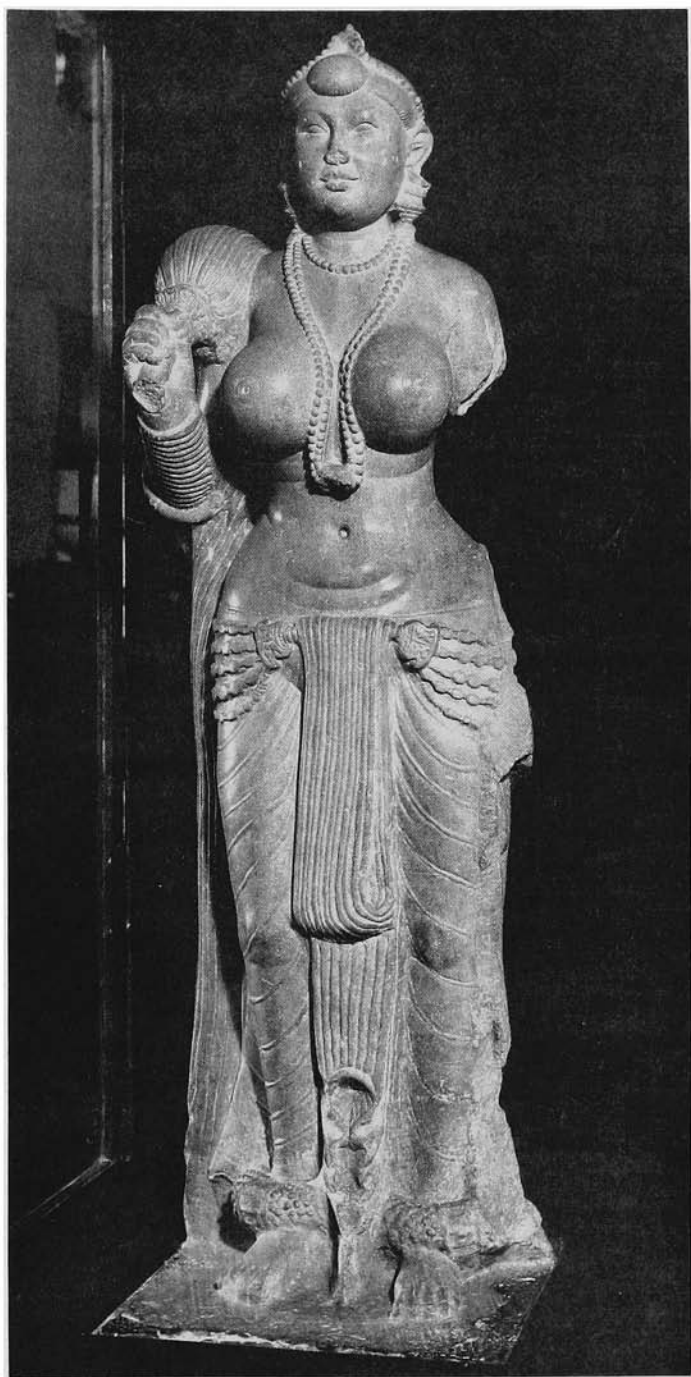


Figure 4. *Caurī* Bearer from Didarganj

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Because of the characteristic use of highly polished Chunar sandstone in the Patna and Didarganj sculptures, they are thought to have been carved during the Mauryan period (322–183 B.C.). These sculptures all exhibit, in addition to their massive physical extension, a “monumental” stiffness. This archaic quality of immobility persists in other, post-Mauryan (first century B.C.) freestanding statues as well, such as another yakṣī from the Besnagar area (figure 5). In this later period, the standing sculptures acquire a rounder, softer fleshiness, a foreshortening and thickening of the limbs, a greater prominence of belly (a characteristic that was to become intimately associated with the yakṣa iconography), and an element of more articulation in the rendering of draped garments. The compelling physical proportions and provocative nudity, signifying overt fecundity, of the Didarganj *caurī* bearer prefigure other voluptuous yakṣī sculptures, in particular the railing pillars from Bhuteśar in Mathurā (early second century A.D.), where similarly proportioned yakṣīs stand upon grotesque, dwarfish *vāhanas* (mounts), completely nude but for decorative girdles around their ample hips, necklaces, and anklets (figure 6).

It is the combination of the earthy and the regal in these early yakṣa images that, seemingly, provided a model for the religious ruler and reformer, Siddhārtha Gautama, whose own regnancy incorporated the realms of nature, society, and cosmos. Other symbols that stand in for the Buddha in notable depictions of his life include the parasol (to signify kingship), the empty throne (to signify his first meditation), the riderless horse (to signify his departure from his father's palace), the tree (to signify of course the *bodhi* tree under which he achieved enlightenment), and the footstool upon which the *buddhapāda* or footprint of the Buddha is visible. The use of this shorthand lexicon of images entailed a freedom of thematic association that permitted ever-widening circles of conceptual relationship, in which pre-Buddhist mythological figures such as the yakṣa became vital elements in the redrawn map of Buddhist mythology and narrative. Dietrich Seckel refers to an analogous process of symbolic dislocation and reassociation in his observations on the development of the Buddha image.

Figure 5. Yakṣī from Besnagar





Thus a symbol that had its origin and proper place in one of the biographical scenes may acquire a broader significance and, isolated from the original narrative context, may be used anachronistically—or rather trans-historically—in contexts where it seems to be out of place; e.g., in a scene involving the new-born Sakyamuni where he is represented as the Enlightened One by the empty throne with the umbrella above and the footprints before it. Even in the early iconography with its overriding concern for “biographical” narration, a tendency is noticeable to liberate from the bond of time and space the Buddha and the symbols representing him and his actions; so the symbols become freely available and applicable in various contexts for new religious purposes.⁵

Because of the early reluctance to depict the human form of the Buddha, related, according to Seckel, to the “philosophically radical doctrine concerning his true Nirvāṇa essence, inconceivable, invisual form and human shape,”⁶ a variety of related forms was permitted to adhere to the absent Buddha image. These forms were the first iconic figures to be fashioned in the development of Indian art and were created as subordinate figures in the retinue of the Buddha, surrounding some aniconic symbol of the Master himself. These figures included the “men, gods, demigods, and genii”⁷ that supplemented the growing cast of characters in the depiction and embellishment of Buddhist legend. This cast is drawn from a pre-Buddhist compendium of popular images that includes an array of kindred demons and deities.

Certain elements of Buddhist and yakṣa-related iconography come to be linked in sculptural representations. For instance, on top of the north *torāṇa* at Sāñcī, one can see a triad consisting of the central symbol of the *dharmacakra* (“the wheel of *dharma*,” symbolizing the Buddha’s first sermon at Benares) flanked by two (although one is now missing) yakṣas, carrying *caurīs*. Both flowers and *caurīs* are iconographic emblems associated with the yakṣa. The flower links the yakṣa with the domain of nature and fertility; the *caurī* is a symbol drawn from a vocabulary of social referents and has meaning particularly within the context of a political, courtly setting, in which a king is being attended by his servants. By implication, the use of these *caurī*-bearing yakṣas casts the Buddha in the role of a worldly monarch. The

Figure 6. Yakṣī from Mathurā

visual affinity among flower, *caurī*, and *dharmacakra* implies a symbolic relationship of the realms of nature, polity, and religion. When you add to these associations the iconographic reference of the *dharmacakra* to the solar *cakra* or disk of the sun, we can perceive the power of these symbols to enrich a religious tradition by constellating the myriad visual connections that have preceded it.

The wheel (*cakra*) which later on becomes the mark of the Cakravartin, the discus of Viṣṇu, and the Buddhist Wheel of the Law, originally represented the Sun. The disk of gold placed behind the fire-altar to represent the Sun may well be the origin of the later *prabhāmaṇḍala* or *śīras-cakra* (nimbus). Radiance is predicated of almost all the Devas, is indeed one of the root meanings of the word, and most of them are connected in their origins with Sun and Fire. Just as the tree behind the empty altar or throne, representing the Buddha in the early art, remains in the later art when the throne is occupied, so the sun-disk behind the fire-altar may well have remained there when the deity was first made visible.⁸

In this way, imagery can facilitate the growth and transformation of concepts. Behind the use of this imagery, of course, is a historical context in which the ideas and movements that these visual images represent are in dialogical contact with one another.

Particularly interesting is the tendency of symbols to compress meaning, cutting radically across time and context through minute and subtle changes in the appearance of a formal element. In the case of Buddhist symbols, the *dharmacakra* comes to signify the teaching itself as well as the specific event of the setting in motion of that teaching. The Buddhist *stūpa* or stylized burial mound erected over, supposedly, some portion of the remains of the Buddha is, because of its association with his deceased body, a symbol of *samsāra* or the impermanence of life, while simultaneously the *stūpa* more strikingly symbolizes the immutable truth of the Buddha's teachings and the triumph of the Buddha over *samsāra*. The multivalency of this symbol might be compared to the Cross within Christianity, employed as a metaphor for both the crucifixion as well as the resurrection of Christ. Once a cultural metaphor has been empowered to move this freely between poles of meaning and varieties of experience, it has truly become liberated from its moorings in the historical context of its inception.⁹

Iconography and metaphor

It seems that religious metaphors acquire their fluency and multivalency because of the centrality of stark opposition and contrast in the formulation of sacred texts and artifacts (in contrasts between life and death, god and man, spirit and nature, etc.). The anthropologist Mary Douglas, however, in her criticism of Edmund Leach, suggests that the role of “mediation” is an inherent element of any mode of expression, whether it is a painting, a secular narrative, or a myth.

Leach suggests that contrast, mediation, and resolution of opposites are characteristic of sacred texts. But this process, which he calls the encoding of religious mysteries, is essential in secular stories too. Composition of any kind starts with distinctive elements; it develops confusions and ambiguities, travesties and misperceptions, and goes on to sort out and recombine the initial possibilities.¹⁰

If we acknowledge that a symbol can paradoxically stand forth from the very substance of its creation, invigorated with a life and will that are unique to its formal limitations, then perhaps we can be allowed to speak of the life cycle of a symbol, like the life cycle of a star, another “individual” that we take for granted until it has gone out of existence. Because of its richness of meaning and breadth of application, I believe that the yakṣa is a fitting candidate for such a study of the life cycle of a symbol. It is possible to observe the process by which a fleeting, sketchy image acquires mass and distinction, becomes, in its prime, very important, then over time loses its vividness and individuality and, like a star, ultimately burns out, leaving an image that, nevertheless, remains visible (as an apparition) for succeeding eons. Even within this apparitional phase in the development of the metaphor, creative employment may be operative, often within the oeuvre of a particular writer or artist, in the same way that poets of our own century have utilized classical myths or sacred concepts to express and expand their own vocabulary of primary artistic metaphors (Rilke with the Angel, Yeats with Leda and the Swan, Cocteau with Orpheus). Later in the book, we will look more closely at the artist’s utilization of yakṣa mythology in India in Kālidāsa’s poem, the *Meghadūta*.

Even when a symbol may have passed out of currency in the theological mainstream of a tradition, its “apparition” may be so rein-

fused with life through the media of poetic and artistic creation or celebration and devotion that it cannot be considered to be dead or inactive in any sense. Though we may cite numerous examples of this passing on from hand to hand of a symbol in the Western artistic context, it is in India that this practice acquires an importance and vitality unequalled in any other culture. In the varieties of Indian religious practice, we can see a relentless recycling of myths and images. Each new version produces its own root structure, which, like the shoots of a banyan tree, grow toward a new and welcoming plot of soil, growing from the outside in, in the way that artistic forms and images pursue a direction that is prescribed by the trajectory of their own formal capacities.¹¹

In this chapter, I will examine in detail the network of symbols and relationships that comprises the mythological reaches and extent of the yakṣa's sway and meaning. This enterprise will have two basic facets: (1) an analysis of the symbols, metaphors, and iconography connected with the waters and (2) an inquiry into the relationships and similarities that the yakṣa sustains with other demons and demigods of the Indian pantheon, including the king of the yakṣas, Kubera. This is a project that has been done in the art-historical context by Coomaraswamy and, more recently, by Ram Nath Misra. Coomaraswamy truly paved the way for this kind of study, both with the extent of his research and linguistic competency and with his passion for speculative philosophy and cross-traditional comparisons. I am utterly indebted to his study of the yakṣa, as a means of opening to inquiry a vast amount of data and a trove of ideas that had been, prior to his scholarship, undisclosed. In my study, I will summarize much of what these two scholars have discovered and analyzed and use their insights to map out my own approach to the elucidation of the phenomenology of the yakṣa.

Mythological Background

Nature cosmology

In the earliest references, the sacrality of the yakṣa is expressed in terms of images drawn from nature. This ancient yakṣa may be seen to embody a nexus of natural principles and abstract metaphysical concepts, in other words, a nexus of the cosmic and acosmic. The mystery and fascination of this deity are rooted in its unique propensity to bridge the two religious dimensions and stand poised at a moment in

the development of the philosophy and religion of India, which is perhaps analogous to a pre-Socratic Greece, when the philosophical inquiry into the nature of being incorporated both metaphysical and scientific explorations.

The yakṣa as a being that contains both cosmic and acosmic facets is featured in an important verse from the *Atharva Veda*.

The Great Yakṣa, steeped in concentration on the surface of the water in the middle of the world, on him the various gods are fixed like branches around the trunk of a tree.¹²

This conjunction of the transcendent or acosmic waters of pure being with their manifestation in nature in the cosmic symbol of the tree is important for our investigation of the moral ambivalence and eventual demonism of the yakṣa. For it is precisely this spanning of, at one extreme, the highest and most abstract theism and, at the other extreme, telluric fertility worship, that both expands the yakṣa's symbolic valency and also vitiates its normative potential. We will adduce texts that equate the yakṣa with the impersonal (and asexual) absolute as well as texts that clearly define him as a genius loci, by turns ribald, lascivious, impudent, violent, and wholly of the earth. Like the cosmic waters with which he is connected, the yakṣa's iconography is intricately associated with a multiplicity of natural phenomena. To begin our analysis of this mysterious deity, we must place it in the medium in which all of these associations find their significance and coherence—in the potent, sacred waters. It is here that the yakṣa acquires its affinity with other symbols of fertility and creativity, such as trees, *nāgas*, and aquatic creatures such as the *makara*.

The Essence of the waters

Within the waters is a volatile, quickening agent or essence (*rasa*) that is to be found in the vegetal world in the form of the sap contained in trees and plants and in the animal world in the form of such substances as the venom secreted by the serpentine deities, the *nāgas*. This poison, which they harbor and control, is an aspect of the watery spectrum that encompasses the extremes of *amṛta* (the elixir of immortality) or *soma*, on the one hand, and venom, on the other hand. Venom may be seen to be a by-product, in fact, of the agitation of the vital essences contained in the generative waters during the mythic episode in which

the gods and the demons churn the ocean for the *amṛta*.¹³ In the course of their churning, the *kālakūṭa* poison is produced, after the milk, butter, wine, and various life-supporting and cosmological phenomena are engendered.¹⁴ Coomaraswamy sums up the passage of procreative energy through the flow and circulation of the cosmic waters.

. . . from the primeval waters arose the Plants, from Plants all other beings, in particular the gods, men, and cattle. *Rasa*, as an essence of the Waters, or as a sap in trees, is variously identified with *soma*, *amṛta*, semen, milk, rain, honey, mead (*madhu*) and liquor (*sura*); there is a cycle in which the vital energy passes from heaven through the waters, plants, cattle and other typically virile or productive animals, and man, thence ultimately returning to the waters. The clouds rain milk or *soma*; they are sometimes called cows, as is also Aditi, the goddess of abundance who is also a personification of the honey-whip of the Asvins, which may be the lightning. The myth of actual creation takes the form of origination of a tree from the navel of a Primal Male, who rests upon the Waters, and from whose navel the tree rises up; he is called a Yakṣa and was originally Varuṇa.¹⁵

Over and above the capacity of the waters to confer blessings, fertility, and abundance lies their propensity for containing sheer transformative energy. Water is a metamorphic medium that quickens life into being from latency, or compels living beings toward their demise. Apropos of this potential for both creation and destruction, Heinrich Zimmer speaks of the waters of illusion or *māyā*, citing in particular two myths about the holy seer, Nārada. In both myths, the seduction of *māyā* involves the unsuspecting seer in a complex series of dreamlike illusions about himself and his life that seem indubitably real and inescapably painful. In this sense, the waters contain the secrets of being and of *karma*, the inscrutable law of causality.

When Nārada, the human disciple, asked to be taught this secret, the god did not disclose the answer by any verbal instruction or formula. Instead, he simply pointed to water, as the element of initiation.¹⁶

The creativeness and destructiveness of the primal waters may be seen as well in the fact that in the great conflagration or *pralaya* the god Viṣṇu, having withdrawn all of the moisture from all of the living things of the earth, thus causing a fire to spark from the friction of the dried up trees, puts out that fire with a continuous downpour of rain

that drowns all beings, leaving only the endless expanse of undifferentiated water upon which he sleeps for thousands of *yugas* as the unmanifest (*avyakta*) lord and creator.¹⁷ The water and Viṣṇu are one life-producing substance; the waters of life are a concomitant to his creativity. The taming of the waters is essential for the creation of the world, and it is through the unleashing of the waters that god's creation is destroyed during the deluge. The taming and manipulation of the waters as a means of gaining power and mastery is a motif that is well-known in folk literature and world mythology. We will see its importance in the popular Buddhist literature where the power and sovereignty of the king is determined by his symbolic and actual mastery over the elements, particularly water in the form of rain.

The Demiurge in the waters

At some early stage of reflection on the nature of reality and being, the term "yakṣa" appears to represent a transitional description of the absolute, a phenomenon that would later be termed *brahman*. While the fully developed concept of *brahman* referred to pure being or the absolute that preceded the cosmic manifestation of life, the yakṣa encompassed both aspects of being, although moving steadily toward the cosmic.

The Vedic Yaksha does not necessarily imply a personality to start with, and is more of a word-concept which was subsequently converted into a fully developed personage, invested with the attributes of spirit, form, nature and power.¹⁸

In many of the Hindu creation myths, the creator or demiurge is associated so closely with the new life that is being created that he is thought to be the fundamental germ or seed of life, out of which the array of created beings emerges. In one rendering of the *hiranyagarbha* ("golden egg") cosmology, the process of creation discloses sexual components when a primal male in the form of Prajāpati, Agni, or Brahmā breaks out of the golden egg that floats on the fecund potential of the feminine waters. The coming into existence of the egg is seen to be the result of the friction of the waves as they collide together. The egg arises from "the heat produced by the waters as they wanted to propagate themselves."¹⁹

That egg floated about for a year and in that time a man, Prajāpati, the god of the primordial undivided world, came into being. He then broke the egg open but it had no foundation, and he floated about on that egg for another year after which he created the earth, the atmosphere, and the sky.²⁰

Bosch speculates that the creation of the *hiranyagarbha* is the result of the commingling of the deities, Agni, the masculine golden god of fire, and Soma, the *rasa*-essence of the waters, providing, in this case, the feminine component of the creation odyssey.²¹

Another cycle of *hiranyagarbha* myths gives rise to a different conception of this primal creative act, in which there is no sexual element present.

The waters are here identified with a sexless primeval being from whose navel, considered to be the germ of life *Hiranyagarbha*, rises the trunk of the cosmic tree, this trunk being both the axis of the universe and the prop of the firmament.²²

It is this latter mode of cosmic creation that seems to relate more clearly to the problem of the yakṣa. As we have already seen, the yakṣa has been compared with a primeval cosmic tree in AV 10. 7. 38. In the implicit equation of the yakṣa with the impersonal absolute, *brahman*, the potency and latent fertility of the latter is emphasized at the expense of abstract connotations.

Those acquainted with Brahman know that living being (*yakṣam ātmanvat*) which resides in this golden receptacle.²³

This impersonality and lack of the creaturely, demonic aspect that came ultimately to be associated with the yakṣa is a prevalent aspect of the Vedic references.

Trees, water, and fertility

Among the important applications of tree symbolism in world mythology,²⁴ several classifications are particularly relevant to our discussion of the yakṣa, especially in the context of the previously cited AV quotation.²⁵ As a kind of "microcosm," trees may shelter stone altars dedicated to village fertility deities (often yakṣas); they may be utilized as an image or metaphor for the entire cosmos; or they may symbolize

the absolute center of the world and support of the cosmos. The latter image is embodied in the Vedic ritual symbology in which the sacrificial post (*yūpa* or *stambha*) is an emblem of the tree as the axis of the universe. In another Vedic image of the god as a tree,

Indra himself is said to be the *stambha* which holds apart the worlds. The gods live at the top of the pillar, while man and the ancestors abide at the lower regions. Communication takes place along this post or tree, for the sacrificial offering is tied to a pillar and thereby delivered upward to the gods, while the *yūpa* acts as a fecundator bringing the celestial waters to the earth.²⁶

The equation of the potent, life-giving god with the fertile, phallic tree is most explicit in the symbolism of the Śiva *lingam* and in the rebirth as a tree of the god of love, Kāma, after he was burned up by Śiva.²⁷

Just as the god Kāma serves as a metaphor for the stored fecundity of the tree, the iconographical image of the wishing tree (*kalpa vṛkṣa*) that is capable of fulfilling all human desires is a metaphor for the benefit of that fertility for human society. The wish-fulfilling capability of certain trees is seen particularly in regard to their fulfillment of desires for progeny. Coomaraswamy draws an example of this from the *Kadambari* of Bāṇa, where "Queen Vilasvatī, desiring a child, performs a variety of ceremonies, amongst which 'with sunwise turns, she worshipped the pippala and other trees to which honour was wont to be shown.'"²⁸

In its latency, the creative power of the waters is conceptualized as a feminine element, holding within it the potential for life. When the waters, however, are embodied within a living thing, whether in animals, human semen, or the sap of plants and trees, very often that potency is conceived of as male. In regard to this, "an amulet of *udumbara* wood is called virile (*vṛṣan*)"²⁹ and "the virtue of the forest tree (*vanaspati*) *jaṅgiḍa* is called its virility (*vīrya*)."³⁰ The sexual ambiguity of the fluid element is best seen in the analogous ambiguity of *soma*, the Vedic plant and deity whose functional potency encompasses the dualities of male and female, as well as of fire and water.

Soma as offering is female to the male Agni but—"So far as Soma himself is concerned, a liquid of the colour of gold as he is, constituting a drink which warms up and sets a flame in the heart, he is a male element like fire, with which he offers so many common features that we may call him liquid fire."³¹

It is also in the highly potent liquid, semen, that the dual nature of all liquids may be perceived and, ultimately, resolved into a single principle that, paradoxically, is its opposite, fire.³²

This same fire or energy of procreation is thought to exist in both the animal and vegetal spheres. Preeminently vigorous and "male" in its profligacy is the Indian fig tree (*aśvattha*), which displays, in addition to the more female root system that serves to contain the productive essence of the tree, secondary roots that spread downward from the branches, becoming additional stems and trunks. This surplus of vigor may have something to do with the depiction of the tree in an ancient Indus Valley seal—as sprouting horns from its trunk.

Trees in Buddhist tradition

In many of the early Buddhist legends, drawn from such sources as the *Jātakas*, the *Dhammapādatthakathā*, the *Mahāvastu*, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, the *Divyāvadāna*, the *Aśokāvadāna*, and so forth, an important dialectic is set up between the morally and spiritually perfected Buddha and various nonhuman deities such as yakṣas (Pāli, yakkhas) and the serpent deities, the *nāgas*. On the one hand, the Buddha incorporates and presides over a pre-existent mythology of nature. In so doing, the new religion of Buddhism is able more readily to meet the needs of an unlettered laity. In reaching out to the populace, the symbolism, iconography, and appeal of Buddhism became ever more potent. On the other hand, the figure of the Buddha is posited as a transcendent hero, opposing the nonrational and pre-Buddhist realms of both the natural and the supernatural, which include such figures as yakṣas, *rākṣasas*, *nāgas*, and the ghoulish *piśācas*. In these instances, he meets the demigods and minor deities on their own ground and outwits them at their own game of chicanery and mischief.

The tree has become a powerful iconographical symbol in Buddhist art, literature, and legend. Arboreal imagery plays a part in various stages of the Buddha's career. His birth is to have taken place in the Lumbini grove of *śāla* trees between the two towns of Kapilavatthu and Devadaha. His mother, Queen Māyā, pregnant with the *bodhisatta* (future Buddha), stops with her retinue to refresh herself in the beautiful grove, and feeling an urge to grasp the branch of a particularly auspicious-looking tree, she is quickly overcome by the onset of labor and is delivered there of the *bodhisatta*. The Buddha's