



Līlā

The late Sanskrit word *līlā*, as is well known, describes any kind of playing, and may be compared in meaning to Gr. παιδιά. Here we shall be chiefly concerned with the reference of *līlā* to the divine manifestation and activity thought of as a "sport," "playing," or "dalliance."

In such a conception there is nothing strange or uniquely Indian. Meister Eckhart, for example, says: "There has always been this play going on in the Father-nature . . . from the Father's embrace of his own nature there comes this eternal playing of the Son.<sup>1</sup> This play was played eternally before all creatures. . . . The playing of the twain is the Holy Ghost in whom they both disport themselves and he disports himself in both. Sport and players are the same" (Evans ed., p. 148); Boehme adds "not that this joy first began with the creation, no, for it was from eternity. . . . The creation is the same sport out of himself" (*Signatura rerum* xvi.2-3).

That Plato thought of the divine activity as a game is shown by his calling us God's "toys"—"and as regards the best in us, that is what we really are";<sup>2</sup> whence he goes on to say that we ought to dance accordingly,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. BU iv.1.6, where the beatitude (*ānanda*) of Brahma is explained by the fact that "by means of his Intellect (*manas*) he consorts with the Woman," i.e., Vāc. The divine beatitude is occasioned, so to say, by the eternal reunion of essence and nature *in divinis*; "that same mystery of the eternal generation, in which there has been an eternal perfection" (Jacob Boehme, *Signatura rerum* xvi.1).

<sup>2</sup> We are the "pieces" that the Draughts-player moves, not arbitrarily, but in accordance with our own deserts; "a wondrous easy task" because, although He is the author of our being, we ourselves are responsible for being *what* we are, and all that the game requires is to move each piece into a better or worse position in accordance with its own character (*Laws* 904, cf. Heraclitus, fr. 79). This is essentially an enunciation of the law of *karma* and the doctrine that "Fate lies in the created causes themselves." [On God's game of chess, cf. Rūmī, *Divān*, Ode x, "How happy the king that is mated to thy rook," and *Mahnavī* 1600, 11.2645, 3213, iv.1555, on the ball in the polo-field, which only moves as it ought "when it is made to dance by the King's hand."

D. B. Macdonald, on the basis of Prov. 8:30, 31, remarks that the Hebrews "came to think of man as part of an animated toy spread before the eyes of Jehovah and

obeying only that one golden cord of the Law by which the puppet is suspended from above,<sup>3</sup> and so pass through life not taking human affairs to heart but "playing at the finest games"; not as those playboys play whose lives are devoted to sports, but being "otherwise minded" than those whose acts are motivated by their own interest or pleasure (*Laws*

giving Him joy" (*The Hebrew Philosophical Genius*, Princeton, 1936, pp. 50, 134, 136).]

<sup>3</sup> Cf. BU 11.7.1, where (to combine the text and Sāyana's commentary): "Do you know that Thread by which, and that Inner Controller by which and by whom, this world and the other and all beings are strung together and controlled within, so that they move like a puppet, performing their respective functions?" That Plato knew of a "thread-spirit" (*sūtrātman*) doctrine is implied in the passage cited from the *Laws* and confirmed by the fact that in *Theaetetus* 153 he connects the golden cord of *Iliad* viii.18 ff. with the Sun, to whom all things are bound by it, just as in SB vi.7.1.17; cf. AV x.8.39 and BG vii.7. [We cannot treat the doctrine of the "golden cord" at full length here, but may point out that the thought of *Iliad* viii.23 ἐνόσασμι (bearing in mind that in this verb, notably in middle and passive forms, the sense of "draw" can hardly be separated from that of "rescue") underlies John 12:32 πάντας ἐλκύσω πρὸς ἑμαυτόν, *Hermes, Lib.* xvi.5 εἰς αὐτόν τὰ πάντα ἔλκων and xvi.7 ἀναδύσας εἰς ἑαυτόν, and Dante, *Paradiso* 1117, "Questi la terra in sé stringe ed aduna."]

The two notable Buddhist references to the human puppet (S 1.134, *Theṛigāthā* 11.390 ff.) ignore the Puppeteer, their only purpose being to show that the puppet is a composite and evanescent product of causal concatenation, not to be regarded as one's Self. Rūmī apostrophises, "O ridiculous puppet, that leapest out of thy hole (box), as if to say 'I am the lord of the land,' how long wilt thou leap? Abuse thyself, or they will bend thee, like a bow" (Rūmī, *Divān*, Ode xxxvi); ridiculous, because "Whoso hath not escaped from (self-)will, no will hath he" (*ibid.*, Ode xiii). Here "they" refers to the contrary pulls of the affections, instincts, likes, and dislikes by which the animal man, by no means self-moving, "is dragged this way or that," to good or evil as the case may be (Plato, *Laws* 644b, echoed in *Hermes, Lib.* xvi.14). Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* 11.10 (433a), "Appetite produces unaccountable (περὰ τὸν λογισμόν) movement: for ἐπιθυμία is a kind of appetite, and reason (νοῦς) is never wrong."

We, in fact, resent the mechanistic interpretation of our individuality only because we identify our being with the "little self" of the puppet, and not with that of the Great Self of the Puppeteer, Man, *Per sua diffalla . . . ed in affanno cambiò onesto riso e dolce gioco* (Dante, *Purgatorio* xxviii.95, 96). What is really meant to be God's toy and dance accordingly is to have made His will our own; to play with him on the stage rather than for ourselves; and at the same time to share his point of view who looks on from above, or from the stalls, or from the sidelines (according to the metaphor); to have become no longer the victims, but the spectators of our own fate.

[D. B. Macdonald, *Hebrew Philosophical Genius*, p. 135, observes that "the puppets are self-conscious and have a certain choice as to which cord they will allow to draw them." The choice lies between the life of instinct and the "reasonable" (κατὰ λόγον) life; but in saying this we must remember that when Plato says "guided by Reason" he means "doing the will of God" and not a merely common sense or pragmatic "behavior"; we mean by "reason" what he calls "opinion."]

642, 803, 804). Plato's otherwise-minded "philosopher" who, having made the ascent and seen the light, returns to the Cave to take part in the life of the world (*Republic* VII) is really an *avatāra* ("one who has gone down again"), one who could say with Krishna: "There is naught in the Three Worlds I have need to do, nor anything I have not gotten that I might get, yet I participate in action. . . . Just as the ignorant, being attached to actions, act, even so should the Comprehensor, being unattached, also act, with a view to the maintenance of order in the world" (BG III.22-25).<sup>4</sup> It is in the same connection of ideas that the word *līlā* appears for the first time in the *Brahma Sūtra*, II.1.32, 33, *na prayojanavāt, loṣavat tu līlākavaiṣyam*, "Brahma's creative activity is not undertaken by way of any need on his part, but simply by way of sport, in the common sense of the word."<sup>5</sup>

The emphasis is, we realize, always upon the idea of a "pure" activity that can properly be described as "playful" because the game is played, not as "work" is ordinarily performed, with a view to secure some end essential to the worker's well-being, but exuberantly; the worker works for what he needs, the player plays because of what he is. The work is

<sup>4</sup> To complete the parallel, it should be borne in mind that "one's own norm, the work appointed by one's own nature" (*svadharmā . . . svabhāvanīyamaṁ karma*, BG XVIII.47) corresponds exactly to that "doing of what it is by nature one's own to do (τὸ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν, κατὰ φύσιν)" that Plato makes his type of "justice," and also terms "sanity" (*Republic* 433, *Charmides* 161, etc.).

<sup>5</sup> Whereas Plutarch (*Moralia* 353EF) was rather shocked by the notion of God's playfulness implied in *Iliad* XV.355-366, where Phoebus Apollo bridges a moat and casts down a wall, and we are told that this was child's play for him to do. He thinks irreverent to say that "the God indulges in this game (παιδιά) constantly, molding (ἠλάττων) the world that does not (yet) exist and undoing (ἀπολύων) it again when it has come into being. For on the contrary, insofar as he is in some way present in the world, by this his presence does he bind together (συνδέει) its substance and prevail over its corporal weakness, which tends towards corruption." Plutarch did not see that these works of creation, preservation, and destruction are of the very essence of the divine operation; the life of any one creature, and finally of the world itself, lasting only for so long as He remains with it and until "the Spirit returns to God who gave it."

[In this citation from Plutarch *συνδέει* refers to the *σύνδεσμος* by which all things are strung together within themselves and also connected with the Sun, as the limbs of a puppet are strung together and attached to the manipulator's hand. We cannot deal here with this aspect of the thread-spirit doctrine, except to refer to the "straight line like a pillar extended from above throughout Heaven and Earth," of which Plato says that this was the "fastening of Heaven" (*σύνδεσμον τοῦ οὐρανοῦ*, *Republic* 616C), and to point out that this shaft of "light" that "comprises-and-controls the whole revolving circuit" (cf. Rūmī, *Mulhūawī* v.2345) is the traditional Axis Mundi (Skr. *śkambha*), properly described as a shaft of light.]

laborious, the playing hard; the work exhausting, but the game a recreation. The best and most God-like way of living is to "play the game." And before we relinquish these general considerations, it should be realized that in traditional societies all those actual games and performances that we now regard as merely secular "sports" and "shows" are, strictly speaking, rites, to be participated in only by initiates; and that under these conditions proficiency (*kauśalam*) is never a merely physical skill, but also a "wisdom" (*σοφία*, of which the basic sense is precisely "expertise"). And so extremes meet, work becoming play, and play work; to live accordingly is to have seen "action in inaction, and inaction in action" (BG IV.18), to have risen above the battle, and so to remain unaffected by the consequences of action (BU IV.4.23, Īśā. Up. 5; BG V.7, etc.), the actions being no longer "mine" but the Lord's (JUB I.5.2, BG III.15, etc.), to whom they "do not cling" (KU V.11, MU III.2, BG IV.14, etc.).

The notion of a divine "playing" occurs repeatedly in the *R̥g Veda*. Out of twenty-eight occurrences of *krīṣi*, to "play" (in various senses), and related adjectives, we cite IX.20.7 *krīḍur mahīvo nu munhayuh*, "disporting, like a liberal chief, thou goest, Soma," IX.86.44 where "Soma, even as Ahi, creeping forward from his inveterated skin, flows like a prancing (*krīlan*) steed,"<sup>6</sup> X.3.5, where Agni's flames are the "playful ones" (*krīṣumat*), and X.79.6 where, with respect to his dual operation, *ab intra* and *ab extra*, unmanifested and evident, Agni is described as "not playing, and playing" (*akrīlan krīlan*). It is obvious that Agni is thought of as "playful" inasmuch as he "flares up and dies down" (*uc ca hr̥ṣyati ni ca hr̥ṣyati*, AB III. 4), and that the designation of his tongues as the "flickerers" (*lelāyamānāḥ*) in Muṇḍ. Up. I.2.4 corresponds to their designation as the "playful ones" in RV X.3.5. At the same time Agni is constantly spoken of as "licking" (*rih, lih*) whatever he loves or devours; for example, "Agni licks at (*pari . . . rihan*) his mother's mantle (of forest trees) and . . . is ever licking (*rerihat sadā*, RV I.140.9)," and "as with his tongue he loves, he continually licks (*rerihyate*) his mother" (X.4.4).

The idea of a divine play or dalliance is fully represented in the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but the word *līlā* does not occur, and *krīḍ* appears only in CU VIII.12, where the incorporeal Spirit (*āsarīra ātman*) is thought of as "laughing, playing (*krīḍan*) and taking its pleasure," and MU V.1, where "the Universal Spirit (*viśvātman*), Universal Creator,

<sup>6</sup> Agni's flames are compared to mettled horses in RV IV.5.5.

Universal Enjoyer, Universal Life" is also "the Universal Lord of sport and pleasure" (*viśvakṛīḍāratiprabhuḥ*)<sup>7</sup> in which he participates without being moved, being at peace with himself (*śāntātman*).

It is clear from what has been cited above that we might as legitimately speak of a Soma-*krīḍā* or Agni-*krīḍā* or Ātma-*krīḍā* or Brahma-*līlā* as we do of a Buddha-*līlā* or Kṛṣṇa-*līlā*. The expression Buddha-*līlā* occurs in the Jātakas,<sup>8</sup> e.g., 154, where it is said by the gods that "it will be given to us to behold the Bodhisatta's (Gautama Buddha's) infinite Buddha-*līlā* and to hear his word." The rendering of *līlā* here and in the PTS Dictionary by "grace" is far too weak; the grace of the Buddha's virtuosity (*kuśalam*) is certainly implied, but the direct reference is to his "wonderful works"; the Buddha's *līlā* is, like Brahma's *līlā*, the manifestation of himself in act. Elsewhere in the Jātakas we find the word *līlā*, in the expression *līlā-vilāsa* (J v.5 and 157); *līlā-aravinda* occurs in *Vimānavatthu Atthakatha* 43 [E. R. Goonratne, ed., London, 1886 (PTS)]. If, now, we had only the word *līlā* to consider, the derivation from *līh* (*rih*) to "lick"<sup>9</sup> would suffice to confirm our view that it was the "playing" of Agni's flames that from the beginning afforded a natural support for the notion of a divine "playing." But while we have not the slightest doubt as regards the connection of ideas, it would be impossible to derive the equivalent *līlā* from the same root. *Līlā* must be connected with *lēlay*, "to flare" or "flicker" or "flame," a stem that is like *līlā* itself post-Vedic; and this can hardly be anything but a reduplicated form of *lī*, to "cling." A semantic development from "cling" to "play" would not be inconceivable if we stress the erotic senses of the Sanskrit words. On the other hand, as the St. Petersburg Dictionary says, *līlā* has often been regarded as a corruption of *krīḍā*. We shall only suggest that the root is actually *lī*, but that the form of the word *līlā* may have been assimilated to that of the equivalent *krīḍā*.

This brief discussion will leave us free to consider the very interesting uses of the verb *lēlay*. We have already cited *lēlayamānāḥ* qualifying Agni's "tongues." In Muṇḍ. Up. 1.2.2, *yada lēlayate hy arcīḥ* is "as soon as the point of flame burns upward." A natural development is found in

<sup>7</sup> This is virtually identical with BU 1v.3.13, where we are also reminded that "men behold his pleasuring (*ārāman*), but see not Him."

<sup>8</sup> I cannot trace the DhA references given by the PTS Dictionary.

<sup>9</sup> The PTS Dictionary makes *līh* mean "polish," but this is at the most a derivative sense; the primary meanings are to "lick," and in this sense "kiss."

Svet. Up. 11.18, *hamso lēlayate bahih*, "outwardly hovers the Gander," i.e., the Lord (*prabhuḥ*), the Person, Spirit (*ātman*), Brahma as Sun-bird; this "hovering" being evidently another way of referring to the Gander's "enjoyments" described in BU 1v.3.12-14. In the same context (BU 1v.3.7), this Spirit, Person, and Intellectual Light of the Heart, as he moves to and from that world and this, remaining himself ever the same, is said to seem now to contemplate, and now to hover or visibly shimmer or burn (*dhyāyati 'va lēlayati 'va*), to be "asleep" or to be "awake." It is, then, of the motion and effects of Fire, Light, and Spirit that *lēlay* can be predicated.

We must deal next with a series of texts in which the Sun, or solar Indra, or Sāman, or Uṛgītha identified with the Sun or Fire, is said to flame aloft or overhead. In JUB 1.45.1-6, the solar Indra "born here again as a Rṣi, a maker of incantations (*mantrakṛt*), for the keeping (*gūptiyāi*) of the Vedas,"<sup>10</sup> when he comes as the Uḍgītha "ascends from here to the world of heavenly light (*ita evordhvas svar udeu*) and burns overhead (*upari mūrḍhvo lēlayati*); and one should know that 'Indra hath come.'<sup>11</sup> In the same way in JUB 1.51.3, the Sāman, having been expressed (*sṛṣṭam*) as the Son of Sky and Earth, "came forward there and stood flaming" (*lēlayad atīṣṭhat*). Again, in JUB 1.55, where the Sun ("He who burns yonder") has been born of Being and Nonbeing, Sāman and R̥c, etc., it is said that "He burns aloft (*upariṣṭāt — upari mūrāhnas*), the Sāman set above." But at first "he was unstable, it seemed (*adhruva iva*), he did not flame, it seemed (*alēlayad iva*), he did not burn aloft" (*nordhvo 'tapāt*).<sup>12</sup> Only when made firm by the gods did he burn upwards, hitherward and crosswise (i.e., shine from the center in the six directions, being himself the "seventh and best ray"). What is said in JUB 1.45.4-6, cited above, is repeated with reference to the "Breath" (*prāṇa*), identified with the solar Herdsman of RV 1.164.31, cf. AĀ

<sup>10</sup> It will be understood that Agni and Indra are just as much "resonances" as "lights," and that the "licking" of Agni's flames is also their "crackling" or "singing." The Sun himself "sings" as much as he "shines," and this finds expression in the verb *arc*, meaning either to "sing" or to "shine," or perhaps rather both in one (*verbum et lux convertuntur*); cf. Coomaraswamy, "The Sun-Kiss," 1940, n. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Āgamana* is literally "advent": cf. "Tathāgatha."

<sup>12</sup> *Alēlayat* I take to be an example of the negative verb, which the sense requires in the present context. [Otherwise, "only flickered, and did not glow"; cf. TS v.6.4.2 and vi.1.3.10.4, "did not shine."] With *na . . . atapat*, cf. ŚB 1v.6.6.5, where also "at first the Sun did not shine" (*na ha vā eso'gre tatāpa*).

11.1.6; the Breath, accordingly, *upari mūrdhno lelayati* (JUB 11.37.7). In JUB 11.4.1, this same "Breath" is called the controlling flame-pointed Udgītha" (*vaśī dīptāgra udgītho yat prāṇah*), and 11.4.3, "Verily, 'flame-pointed' becomes his renown who is a Comprehensor thereof."<sup>13</sup>

Now it appears that while *in divinis (adhivēvatam)* "overhead" will mean "in the sky," with reference to a given person here below (*adhy-ātmanam*) it will mean *just* overhead. We find accordingly in the *Lalitū Vistara* (I, p. 3) that when the Buddha is in *samādhi* "a Ray, called the 'Ornament of the Light of Gnosis' (*jñānālokaṅkaṅkaram nāma raśmih*), proceeding from the opening in the cranial protuberance (*uśnīṣuvivaraṅtarāt*),<sup>14</sup> plays above his head" (*upariṣṭān mūrdhnaḥ . . . cacāra*). This is manifestly the iconographic prescription underlying the representation of a flame that is made to rise from the top of the head in so many of the later Buddha figures. The *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka* [tr. II. Kern, Oxford, 1884] (text p. 457) asks: "By reason of what gnosis (*jñāna*) is it that the Tathāgatha's cranial protuberance (*mūrdhnyuśnīṣa*) shines (*vibhāti*)?" The answer to this is given partly above, and more generally in BG XIV.11: "When there is gnosis, light shines forth (*prakāśa upajāyate jñānam yadā*) from the orifices of the body, then he it known that 'Being has matured'" (*vrddham sattvam*), i.e., that the man has "become what he is" [cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, "Bodily refulgence is *natural* in a glorified body . . . but miraculous in a natural body," *Sum. Theol.* III.25.2c]. Before going on to the last step we must make allusion to another well-known context in which a flame appears "overhead." Dīpak Rāga is famed as a melody that is literally an illumination and that may consume the singer in its flame; in the Hindī text it is said that "Dīpak disports (*khēli karata = khīḍati*), Dīpak is a king, who displays the fullness of beauty, and upon whose head there shines a flickering flame (*bigala bijolī mustakū ujyūrī*)."<sup>15</sup> Now, bearing in mind that the Sanctus Spiritus is the "intellectual light," Meister Eckhart's "fünkelfin

der sēle," and that Fire is the principle of Speech,<sup>16</sup> a remarkable parallel to some of the foregoing contexts can be cited from Acts 2:3-4, where the Spirit appears to the Apostles in the form of "cloven tongues of fire and it sat upon each of them. And they . . . began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

We have been able to trace, accordingly, not only the continuity and universality of the notion of the divine activity thought of as a kind of game and dalliance, but also to recognize in the "play" of a flickering flame or vibrant light the adequate symbol of this epiphany of the Spirit.

<sup>16</sup> ["Fire, becoming speech, occupied the mouth" (*agnir vāg bhutvā mukham praviśat*, AĀ 11.4.2), "abiding in beings as Speech in the speaker" (AV 11.1.4). It is true that all the powers of the soul (*prāṇah*) are "measures of fire," nevertheless, whenever the correspondences are particularized, Speech corresponds to Fire, Vision to the Sun, etc. (e.g. ŚB X.3.3.8).]

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 197A, where those whom Love inspires are "beacon lights."

<sup>14</sup> It is unnecessary to discuss here whether *uśnīṣa* already means (as we have assumed) "cranial protuberance," or still means "turban." In either case it is from the top of the head that the light proceeds. A close parallel to the wording in J VI.37c, where the deity of the royal umbrella emerges from an opening in its finial (*chattapindīkavivarato nikkhamitvā*). We have already pointed out that *pindīka* corresponds to *uśnīṣa* as "cranial protuberance" (cf. Coomaraswamy, "Some Pāli Words," s.v. *Pindaka* [in this volume—ED.]).

<sup>15</sup> See Coomaraswamy, "Dīpak Rāga," 1924-1925, p. 29. In some representations of this Rāga the singer stands in a pool of water for greater safety. For Dīpak Rāga see also Sheikh Chilli, *Folk-songs of Hindustan* (Allahabad, 1913), pp. 118, 125.