



Ardhanarishvara - the Symbolic Unity  
of Nature and Knowledge

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*"Champeya Gaurardha Shareerakayai Karpoora Gaurardha Shareerakaya  
Dhammillakayai Cha Jataadharaya Namah Shivayai Cha Namah Shivaya"*

This is the very first quatrain of the 9-quatrain Ardhanari Nateshwara Stotra. The meaning of this verse is as follows:

*"Salutations to Shiva, who has a jasmine-colored, fair half-form and who has long and beautiful curly locks  
Salutations to Shiva, who has camphor colored half-form and who has matted tresses"*

Ardhanarishvara is one of the 64 manifestations of Parashiva, the aspect of Lord Shiva, who is Absolute, beyond all human comprehension and is hence considered the Nirguna Brahman (the Supreme One, who is beyond attributes).



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ARDHANARISHVARA

Ardhanarishvara is a composite androgynous form of Shiva and his consort Parvati. This form is shown as a fusion of half-male and half-female forms, split down in the center. The right half is depicted as Shiva, while the left half shows the female form of Parvati.

The very name Ardhanarishvara implies "the Lord who is half-woman". This form of Shiva is also referred to as Ardhanarisha, Ardhanarinateshwara, Ardhayuvateeshwara, Ardhagaureeshwara, Gaureeshwara, Naranaari, Parangada and Ammiappan.

Since Ardhanarishvara represents the perfect synthesis of male and female forms, it also embodies the Prakriti and the Purusha, the feminine and masculine energies of the cosmos and also illustrates how Shakti, the Sacred Feminine, is inseparable from Shiva, the male principle of God. This form also symbolizes the all-pervasive, all-enduring nature of Lord Shiva.

## Origin of Ardhanarishvara

The origin of the concept of Ardhanarishvara can be traced back to hermaphrodite figures in both the ancient Hindu and Greek cultures. The earliest images of Ardhanarishvara date back to the Kushan era, records of which exist from the first century CE.

It is believed that the iconography of Ardhanarishvara developed and evolved during the Gupta period. The concept of Ardhanarishvara continues to be a popular iconographic form and can be found in most Shiva temples throughout India. But strangely, there are very few temples in this country that are actually dedicated to this deity.

It is believed that the early iconography of Ardhnareeshwara could have been inspired by the Vedic literature's composite figure of Yama-Yami, the combination of the primordial Creator Vishvarupa or Prajapati and Agni, the Fire God. This figure appears as a bull, who is also a cow. Interestingly, the androgynous forms of Hermaphroditus and Agdistis are famous in Greek mythology as well.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says that this androgynous form occurs as a result of Purusha splitting himself into two parts, male and female. These two halves copulate, thereby producing all life. The Shwetashwatara Upanishad also talks about Rudra, the antecedent of the Puranic Shiva, the maker of all and the root of Purusha and Prakriti (the female principle), adhering to Samkhya philosophy.



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**ARDHANARISHVARA  
TEMPLE MURAL**

## Earliest Images of Ardhanarishvara

The earliest images of Ardhanarishvara show the male half as ithyphallic with an urdhvalinga and the female left having a rounded breast and holding a mirror. This is the commonest representation of Ardhanarishvara, which is also universally recognized.

The right side which shows the male half has matted hair with a skull and crescent moon, while the left female side has well-combed hair decorated with pearls and flowers and wears a patra-kundala (earring). The face of Ardhanarishvara has one common third eye as well.

The earliest Kushan images showed Lord Ardhanarishvara in a simple two-armed form, but later texts and sculptures depict a more complex iconography of the deity. One can also find the deity with three, sometimes even eight, arms. In the case of three arms, Parvati "owns" only one of them, thereby showing her submissive, less dominant, nature.



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**ARDHANARISHVARA  
RARE DEPICTION, SHOWING SHIVA ON  
THE LEFT OF THE DEVI**

In actuality, the principle of Ardhanarishvara seeks to unify the two sects of Shaivism and Shaktism, dedicated to Shiva and the Devi respectively. Very rarely, in some schools of Shaktism, one can also see the female half to the right side of the Ardhanarishvara image and the male half to the left side.

## The Male Half of the Ardhanarishvara

The male half dons a jata or piled, matted hair twisted on top of his head, adorned with a crescent moon. Sometimes this jata is also ornamented with snakes and the Ganga (Ganges), flowing in a stream through the hair. In the right ear is a nakra-kundala or sarpa-kundala (serpent-earring). In some pictures, the male eye is depicted as smaller than the female one (this is also mentioned in one other verse of the Ardhanarishwarastotra) and a half-moustache is also seen.

While most portraits show both half-forms sharing the trinetra or the third eye, sometimes, a half third eye is shown on the male side of the forehead and Parvati's side of the forehead is adorned with a half bindi or round dot.



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ARDHANARISHVARA - DETAILED PROFILE

In the two-armed form, one right hand holds a skull cap or kapala and the other shows the varada mudra (gesture of succour).

In the four-armed version of Ardhanarishvara, one of the right hands holds a parashu or axe and another one gestures an abhaya mudra. Sometimes, one of the right arms is slightly bent and rests on the head of Nandi (Shiva's mount, the Bull), while the other holds the abhaya mudra. In yet another pose, the right hands hold the Trishula or Trident and an akshamala or rosary another makes an abhaya or varada hasta. Sometimes, the four-armed version shows the deity playing a Veena or lute, using a left and a right arm. The other male arm holds a parashu and the female one, a lotus.

The male half of the body has a flat masculine chest, broader shoulder, wider waist and muscular thigh. He also wears a yagnopavita or sacred thread across the chest. This sacred thread may sometimes divide the torso into its male and female halves.

In some images from North India, the male half may be depicted shorn of any clothing. In South India though, the male side is usually covered in a dhoti (flowing garment tied at the waist) made of cotton or silk, tiger-skin or a sarpa-mekhala or serpent girdle of sorts. The right side usually rests on a Padma-Pitha or lotus pedestal. The entire right half is also usually covered with ashes.

## The Female Half of the Ardhanarishvara

The female half of the deity is shown having a karanda-mukuta or basket-shaped crown. The well-combed hair is neatly held in place. The left ear wears a valika-kundala. A bindu or tilaka adorns her forehead. While the male half of the neck is shown ornamented with a hooded serpent, the female neck has a blue lotus.

In the case of two-armed icons, the left hand rests on Nandi's head, hangs loose or holds a flower, a mirror or a parrot. Sometimes, the parrot is perched on Parvati's wrist. In the three-armed portrait, the left hand holds a flower, a mirror or a parrot. The four-armed female form shows one of the left arms resting on Nandi's head, while the other is bent, holding a nilotpala or blue lotus. Sometimes, this hand also hangs loosely to her side. Her hands are usually adorned with ornaments like a keyura (bracelet) or kankana (bangles).

The female half of the deity has a well-rounded, full bosom and a narrow feminine waist embellished with various haras or waistbands. She is also adorned with other ornaments, made of diamonds and other gems. She is shown having a fuller thigh and a curvier body and hip than the male part of the icon. The torso, hip and pelvis of the female are exaggerated so as to emphasize the anatomical differences between the halves.

The female part of the body is always fully clothed. She wears a multi-coloured or white silken garment or sari down to her ankle and one or three girdles around her waist. The left half wears an anklet and her foot is painted red with Alta or Henna.

The left leg usually rests on a Padma-Pitha. The Parvati half is smeared with saffron and is shown to be calm and gentle and is usually parrot-green or dark in colour.

## The Tribhanga Posture



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ARDHANARISHVARA  
TRIBHANGA POSTURE

The Ardhanarishvara is often shown in the Tribhanga posture, that is, bent at three areas of the body: head (leaning to the left), torso (to the right) and right leg or in the sthanamudra position. If the deity is shown standing on a lotus pedestal, it is referred to as the samapada. Very rarely is the Ardhanarishvara shown in a sitting position.

Generally, the Nandi is shown as the vahana or vehicle of the Ardhanarishvara. But sometimes, portraits may depict the Nandi standing or sitting near the Shiva half and a lion near the Devi's half.



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ARDHANARISHVARA  
WITH VAHANAS -  
NANDI AND LION

## Legend of the Ardhanarishvara



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SHIVA PARVATI

There is a popular Tamil legend relating to the emergence of the Ardhanarishvara. Once, the Gods and the Rishis (sages) gathered at Shiva's abode and paid their respects to Shiva and Parvati. However, one particular Rishi, Bhringi, had vowed to worship only Shiva as the supreme deity. He therefore ignored Parvati and continued his worship of Shiva, offering circumambulations to him. A furious Parvati cursed Bhringi that he would lose all his flesh and blood, and thereby reduced him to a mere skeleton. Bhringi could not stand erect in this form, and so the compassionate Shiva blessed him with a third leg for support.

Deeply hurt, Parvati decided to punish herself by undertaking severe austerities, which pleased Shiva. He granted her the boon of uniting with him forever, thereby compelling Bhringi to worship her as well as himself in the form of Ardhanarishvara. However, the sage assumed the form of a beetle, circumambulating only the male half, drilling a hole in the naval area of the deity, which separated the male half from the female half. Though not entirely pleased, Parvati was amazed by his devotion to her Lord, reconciled with Bhringi and blessed him.

## Other Legends

As is the case with Hindu mythology, there are several legends related to the emergence of the Ardhanarishvara concept. The earliest legends originated in the Puranic canons. This half male-half female form also finds mention in the Mahabharata epic.

According to the Skanda Purana, Goddess Parvati asks Shiva to permit her to stay with him forever, embracing him "limb-to-limb". Ardhanarishvara was thus formed.

The Matsya Purana relates that Brahma, pleased with Parvati by her penance to him, rewards her with a flawless golden complexion. This makes her many times more attractive to Shiva, who fuses into her to form the Ardhanarishvara.

There is also another story relating to this form. It is said that the demon Andhaka wanted to make Parvati his wife. Vishnu rescued Parvati and brought her to his own abode. But the demon refused to relent and followed her there as well. Parvati then revealed her Ardhanarishvara form to him, seeing which the demon lost interest in her and left. The interesting thing about this story is that Lord Vishnu was amazed to see this form as well and also saw himself in the female part of the form.

In the Kalika Purana, Parvati suspects Shiva of infidelity, when she sees her own reflection in Shiva's breast. An argument ensues between them, which is also resolved as quickly. Thereafter, Parvati wishes to stay eternally with Shiva, fusing with him as one single body.

Yet another lore talks about Parvati's jealousy when she sees Ganga perched on Shiva's head. Though Shiva tries to appease her by placing her on his lap, Parvati continues to be upset. This is when Shiva unites with the Goddess in the form of Ardhanarishvara.

According to the Shiva Purana, Brahma or Prajapati, the creator of all male beings, was once faced with a steep decline in the pace of creation. A flustered Brahma approached Shiva for help. Shiva appeared before him in the form of Ardhanarishvara and Brahma prayed to the female half of Shiva to help him create females in order to continue the process of creation. The goddess then created various female powers from her body, thus speeding up the process of creation.

According to a popular Tamil legend, Goddess Uma (another aspect of Parvati) once playfully closed the eyes of Shiva, thus plunging the entire world into darkness. All living beings on earth suffered due to this eternal darkness. Uma, realizing her folly, was forced to leave Kailas and started to worship the Linga in order to absolve herself of her sin and to reunite with her Lord. Lord Vishnu then appeared before her and gave her instructions on the austerities she needed to perform in order to attain her Lord once more. Uma commenced her penance accordingly. At this time, the evil demon, Mahishasura, came to the fore and started disturbing those of earth. This is when Uma takes the form of Devi Durga and engages in a long battle with him, finally slaying him. Lord Shiva then manifests as the Fire on top of the hill. He then merges into the Devi and gives darshan as the Ardhanarishvara, with the Devi as his left half. This is celebrated by devotees as the Deepavali day and the Lord Ardhanarishvaramoorthy blesses his devotees in his Jyoti Swaroopa (form of Light).



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**DEVI DURGA SLAYS THE DEMON  
MAHISHASURA**

According to various other Puranas such as the Vishnu Purana, Vayu Purana, Linga Purana, Kurma Purana, Skanda Purana and Markandeya Purana, Rudra, an aspect of Shiva, emerges from Brahma's forehead. So hot is Rudra that he burns Brahma in the process. Brahma asks him to divide himself and the latter agrees to do so, thus giving rise to several hundreds of beings, including the 11 Rudras and many, many female Shaktis. The Goddess then reunites with Shiva and promises him that she will be reborn on Earth as Sati and would wed him in human form as well. The Ardhanarishvara form then enjoys his own other half by the "Path of Yoga" and creates both Brahma and Vishnu from her body. It is believed that at the start of each new Yuga or epoch, the Ardhanarishvara is ordained to reappear and continue ahead on the path of bringing forth new creation on this Earth.

The common belief is that Shiva, being the Supreme Lord, split himself into two halves, male and female. Only some schools of Shaktism believe that Shakti split her body into male and female halves.

## Symbolism of the Ardhanarishvara

The concept of Ardhanarishvara has a profound inner meaning. The deity symbolizes the optimal balance of the male and female energies in this world and also indicates that they are essentially inseparable forces, which are complimentary to each other and must work together to maintain equilibrium. It shows the unity in the opposites of Purusha and Prakriti.



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SHIVA LINGA

Purusha is the passive force of the universe, while Prakriti is the active, dynamic force. Both these forces must embrace and fuse with each other to generate and sustain the universe. This idea is also brought forth by the union of Linga of Shiva and the Yoni of the Devi, thus giving rise to the birth of the entire cosmos. The concept of Ardhanarishvara is also suggestive of Kama or lust, which gives rise to procreation.

## The Spiritual Symbolism

The concept of Ardhanarishvara indicates that "totality lies beyond duality" and the essentially equal nature of both the masculine and feminine energies. It talks of both being part of the Supreme Being, being two equal parts, making the whole.

Shiva's half part holding a rosary indicates asceticism, while Parvati's half holding the mirror is an embodiment of the highly material and illusory world. The fusing of these two opposites indicates that both the material and spiritual spheres have to coexist in one's life, for it to be complete. Shiva and Shakti are inseparable and interdependent. This indicates that both these opposing forces are one and the same and cannot be regarded as two individual identities.

Many cultures of the world also believe that hermaphrodite icons such as the Ardhanarishvara also symbolize fertility and limitless growth. Shiva embracing Parvati is associated with the boundless reproductive ability of Mother Nature herself. The supposedly opposing forces then become so non-dual, that it would finally become impossible to locate the masculine in the feminine and vice-versa.

Usually, the Shakti half is located to the left of the Ardhanarishvara and Shiva is shown on the right side. Traditionally too, the wife is seated to the left of the husband and hence, she is known as "Vamangi". The right side is often associated with masculine traits and cerebral functioning such as logic, direction, systematic thought and so on, as also with valour and related traits. The left side is related to the heart, therefore is also associated with typical feminine characteristics such as creativity, intuition and so on.

The Vamabhaga or the left side is also indicative of being the "inferior" side, embodying dependence in a relationship, while the right is considered to be the more dominant side, being "superior" in bhoga or material indulgence, which is usually symbolized by the female form. Shiva is regarded as the dominant half. That is probably why Nandi, Shiva's

vahana is almost always shown as the vahana for the Ardhanarishvara as well and not the Devi's lion.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, some Shakta schools consider the Devi the more dominant half and that is why, she is also portrayed as being on the right side of the male half-form of Shiva

## Worship of Ardhanarishvara

Ardhanarishvara, which is a popular aspect of Shiva, is found in some Shiva shrines in India and in South-east Asia as well. In fact, evidence even suggests that there may have been an Ardhanarishvara cult in existence at some point of time in India. However, this never went on to become an established sect.

Followers sometimes worship Ardhanarishvara in order to attain salvation from this material world. Here, the Linga is considered the Paramatma and the devotee, the Jeevatma, which tries to reach the Supreme One. In fact, the 9th Century Nayanar saint Manikkavachakar has compared Parvati to the devotee yearning for the grace of the Lord.

The Nayanar saints of Tamil Nadu gave the deity an exalted status in their culture. The Ardhanarineshwara stotra is very popular as well. To date, one can hear this hymn or watch it being performed in music and dance recitals. The renowned poet Kalidasa states that Shiva and Shakti are both interdependent and inseparable.

Many sects of Tantra Shastra consider the hermaphrodite form of the Ardhanarishvara as their tutelary deity, as it shows the divine union between the Prakriti and the Purusha.

## Ardhanarishvara Likened to Yin-Yang

The concept of Ardhanarishvara is very similar to the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang. The Yin Yang symbol describes how seemingly polar forces are actually intertwined with and interdependent on each other and how they are actually complimentary to each other.

Like in India, Chinese philosophy also believes that opposites exist not in actuality, but only in relation to each other. This philosophy reflects in everything they do and is actually a way of life with them. It essentially forms the vital principle of many forms of traditional Chinese Medicine, Chinese Martial Arts and so on. They think of the stark opposites of female and male; high and low; dark and light and so on as different manifestations of Yin and Yang respectively.

Yin and Yang, much like the Parvati and Shiva forces of the Ardhanarishvara, are "complimentary opposites" and are equal halves of a greater whole. They are responsible for creating and sustaining the universe and are part and parcel of the dynamic system of the universe as we know it.



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**YIN-YANG SYMBOL PAINTED  
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Yin is considered to be the feminine power, symbolizing softness, gentleness and passivity. It is hence often associated with water, the earth, the moon and night-time. Yang, on the other hand, embodies masculinity and is hence fast, aggressive, focused and sharp. It is usually associated with powerful forces such as the sky, the sun, fire and daytime.

There may come a time when one of the halves may appear to become stronger than the other and more forceful. But on closer examination, one would see that this process would show ebb and flow over a long period of time and in the end, result in a perfect balance in the universe. When a certain process in this universe reaches its peak, the tide begins to ebb, until it stops altogether, only to create a new wave of activity.

The concept of Yin and Yang is usually symbolized by the Taijitu symbol, by which it is popularly identified across cultures of the world.

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This article was written by **Priya Viswanathan**, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>).

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