



## **RASA:**

### Aesthetic Cultivation as Salvation Practice<sup>i</sup>

The Sanskrit term for a deep feeling of basic aesthetic ideal is *rasa*. From the classical era onwards, and as definitively expounded by its chief articulator, the eleventh century Kashmiri scholar Abhinavagupta, Indian aesthetics has focused on the articulation of and evocation of the different *rasas* to shape forms of artistic expression and to guide appreciation for them. The various medieval Sanskrit treatises highlight 10 *rasa*-s: erotic love (*sringāra*); heroism (*vīra*), disgust (*bībhatsa*), anger/fury (*raudra*), mirth (*hāsya*), terror (*bhayānaka*), compassion (*karuna*), wonder (*adbhuta*), peace (*shanti*), and paternal fondness (*vātsalya*).

The Sanskrit artist working in the classical tradition wrote for an audience of highly refined and cultured individuals. These were “humans of heart and taste” called *sahṛdaya* in Sanskrit terminology. In Indic aesthetic philosophy, great attention is paid to explaining the refined attitude of the “*rasikas*,” those who enjoy immersing themselves fully in a particular artistic experience. For them, treatises (*shastras*) were composed describing in great detail the means to cultivating masterful aesthetic expressions in music, drama, architecture, dance, poetry. In them, it is stated that an artist's challenge is to blend local material and history with skillful, refined composition to “flavor” artistic expressions. **The goal of the master artist is to reach the heights of resonant expression, to craft a work of art that deeply, even transcendently, moves the audience.** In other words, *both* poet and *rasika* must understand and appreciate the principles laid down in these classics. The best works of poetry, dance, and other fine arts draw the audience into a deep consideration of one or more of the particular aesthetic senses (*rasa*); the ambition of an epic poet, painter, musician, or dancer is to attain the ability to evoke all the classical ideals.

The master Indic artist, no matter whether he is using stone, lost wax, wood, brush, body, voice or words, seeks to evoke *rasa* with subtlety yet with unmistakable authenticity. The audience members who are *rasikas*, by losing their own egos, have their minds opened to receive new insights, truths, realizations, and a sense of bliss not unlike that of enlightenment. In this sense, Indian fine arts promote the individual’s quest for liberation (*moksha*).

---

<sup>i</sup> Excerpt from Todd Lewis, “Introduction” in *Sugata Saurabha: A Poem on the Life of the Buddha* by Chittadhar Hridaya of Nepal. Cambridge: Harvard Oriental Series 67, 2008.