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The image of woman in philosophy



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**Can ‘Ardhanarishvara’ resolve the Ontological
Dualism of Prakṛti and Puruṣa?**
*A Study in Non-Binary Ontology and fluid
identity in Indian metaphysics*

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Abstract

In classical Indian metaphysics, particularly in the Samkhya tradition, the ontological bifurcation of Prakṛti and Puruṣa is very prevalent. This bifurcation, though crucial to Indian ontology and soteriology to explain existential queries, gives rise to persisting philosophical questions regarding the nature of the interrelation of the two. The relation between the two seems intertwined and distinct at the same time. In this context, this paper examines whether the concept of ‘Ardhanarishvara’ can be an ontological solution to this dualism, i.e., ‘*Can Ardhanarishvara resolve the Ontological Dualism of Prakṛti and Puruṣa?*’ ‘Ardhanarishvara’ -the composite deity uniting both Shiva and Shakti-defies the austere bifurcation of material and conscious aspects by illustrating the coexistence of opposites. Rather than seeing this figure as a mere piece of theological iconography, the question

turns to Ardhanarishvara as an embodiment of symbolic metaphysics. This paper is intended to provide ‘Ardhanarishvara’ as new windows to a non-binary ontology and fluid identity of understanding that remaps identity, embodiment, consciousness, and salvation.

Keywords: *Prakṛti, Puruṣa, Ardhanarishvara, Indian Metaphysics, Samkhya, Non-duality, Gender Philosophy, Tantric Hermeneutics*¹

I

The ancient Indian philosophical traditions are marked by sophisticated logical and metaphysical systems trying to explain the nature of the universe, reality, existence, and consciousness. One of the most prominent among these is the Samkhya system, considered to be the oldest school of thought in Indian traditions, which is marked by strict dualism and holds that there exist two fundamental and eternal principles, i.e., Puruṣa, translated as pure consciousness, and Prakṛti, as original or primordial matter underlying every existence. This dualism has profoundly influenced later Indian philosophical and theological thinking. Many times, this dualism is also symbolized and understood as the matrix of ‘Man’ and ‘Woman’ in nature. This research work is carried out in the context of understanding the nuances of masculinity and feminism in Indian philosophical traditions, with special reference to the symbol and concept of ‘Ardhanarishvara’. The research also intends to provide a solution to many metaphysical questions associated with ‘dualism’ through the lens of the concept of ‘Ardhanarishvara’. To grasp the radical potential of Ardhanarishvara as a response to ontological duality, one must first confront the metaphysical assumptions embedded in the Samkhya conception of *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*.

The methods used for this research are mainly qualitative, hermeneutic, and comparative, examining dualism and the figure of ‘Ardhanarishvara’ from scriptural, philosophical, and

¹ The methods and approaches used to interpret and understand tantric texts and practices.

symbolic perspectives of Indian and Western thoughts. In a move to make available the linkages of early Indian texts and contemporary philosophical frameworks, the present research aims to demystify the dense meaning behind ‘Ardhanarishvara’ and how it has relevance in contemporary concerns about identity, gender, and ontology today.

Prakṛti, Puruṣa and and Ardhanarishvara Prakṛti and Puruṣa

In classical Indian metaphysics, Prakṛti and Puruṣa appear as the basic metaphysical categories, especially in Samkhya philosophy propounded by Sage Kapila. Prakṛti, the original, unconscious and active source of all material existence, also referred to as *jada padārtha* (matter), is defined by its dynamic interplay of the three guṇas (qualities) -sattva (balance/equilibrium), rajas (activity), and tamas (inertia) - whose constant transformations create the world of manifestation. The following verse from Samkhya Karika says it all:

Sanskrit Shloka (verse):

**प्रकृत्यः सुविमर्शः सत्त्वरजस्तमांसि च।²
उपादानं निमित्तं च समन्वयः कारणं च ते॥**

Transliteration:

*‘Prakṛtyaḥ suvimarsaḥ sattva-rajas-tamāṃsi ca /
Upādānaṃ nimittaṃ ca samanvayaḥ kāraṇaṃ ca te ॥’*

English Translation: Prakṛti is what produces tangible effects; it comprises Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. It is the material cause (upadana) and instrumental cause (nimitta); it is the unifier and the original cause.

Puruṣa, on the other hand, is the pure witness (*Sakshi*), a passive, unchanging consciousness untouched by the fluctuations of Prakṛti. Samkhya liberation (kaivalya) is gained when Puruṣa realizes its complete difference from Prakṛti and dis-

² Īśvarakṛṣṇa, Sāṃkhya Kārikā 3.

identifies with her modifications, i.e, *citta-vriti-nirodha*. The following Verses from Samkhya Karika say it all:

Samkhya Karika (Verse 17)³
 पुरुषास्तु केवलाः साक्षिणो निरपेक्षाः
 शुद्धाप्यकर्तारः
 भवन्ति बुद्धेर्धर्मान् प्रतिपश्यन्ति तद्भावान्॥

Samkhya Karika Verse 17 (trans.): The Puruṣas (selves) are many, which are untainted, being purely passive witnesses (sakṣin) free from activity. Though they are inherently pure, they transform (functions) of the intellect (buddhi) through thought, causing the illusion of engagement.

The following verse explains the connection or interplay between Prakṛti.

Samkhya Karika (Verse 18)⁴
 संयोगः कारणं पुंसोमुक्तेः सैव सत्त्वानां
 तन्निवृत्तिः कैवल्यं प्रकृतेः पुरुषस्य च॥

Samkhya Karika Verse 18 (trans.): The union (ostensible) of Puruṣa and Prakṛti is the cause of the experience for the individual soul and its bondage. However, when it is fully understood, it is the cause for liberation (mukti). Breaking such union is generally called ‘Kai-valya’, i.e., final liberation of both Prakṛiti and Puruṣa.

Some key points to understand from these verses are that Puruṣa is eternally pure, inactive, and only a witness (*sākṣī*), while the evolution of the entire universe is the result of Prakṛiti’s activity. These two realities are posited as eternally distinct and independent. The *Samkhya Kārikā* of Īśvarakṛṣṇa describes *Prakṛti* as the primal cause (*mulaPrakṛti*) and all evolutes (*vikāras*) - from *mahat* (intellect) down to the physical

³ Īśvarakṛṣṇa, Sāṃkhya Kārikā 17.

⁴ Īśvarakṛṣṇa, Sāṃkhya Kārikā 18.

elements - as her manifestations. In contrast, *Puruṣa* is the “witness” (*sākṣī*) who, through its mere proximity (*sannidhāna*), triggers the evolution of *Prakṛti* without engaging in it. Misidentification or misunderstanding of the relationship between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* is the cause of the soul’s bondage and release. The full understanding of *Puruṣa*’s separation from *Prakṛti* is known as *Kaivalya* (Liberation). Thus, *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* are fundamentally different: *Puruṣa* is a non-doer, pure consciousness (*akarta*). The dynamic principle that generates the material universe is known as *Prakṛti*, or the doer. A famous metaphor from the *Samkhya Karika*⁵ describes this relationship: the lame man (*Puruṣa*) and the blind man (*Prakṛti*) collaborate to gain motion, though they are essentially different. This famous metaphor from the *Samkhya Karika* uses the image of a lame man and a blind man to show the connection between *Puruṣa* (pure consciousness) and *Prakṛti* (primordial matter). Despite his immobility, the lame man symbolizes *Puruṣa*, who is awake but passive. Though he is unaware, the blind man, who stands in for *Prakṛti*, can act. When they work together, the blind man bears the lame man on his shoulders, signifying *Prakṛti*’s behavior under *Puruṣa*’s direction. Their natures are eternally different, even though their experiences seem to be similar. A similar picture for understanding this metaphor is as follows:



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⁵ Īśvarakṛṣṇa, *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*.

⁶ "The Friendship Between the Blind and the Lame", Osho News, 2021.

Ardhanarishvara:

The concept of Ardhanarishvara, a composite deity encompassing both male and female characteristics, represents a powerful critique of this dualism and gestures towards an integrated and holistic view of life.

According to classical texts:

ततो ब्रह्मा हरं देवं सर्वलोकपितामहम्।⁷
अर्धनारीश्वरं देवं ध्यात्वा सृष्टिमचिन्तयत्॥

English translation: “Then Brahma meditated upon Hara, the Lord of all worlds and the grandsire of beings, in his form as Ardhanarishvara (the Lord who is half woman), and contemplated creation.”

अर्धं नारी सदार्धं च शिवस्य परमात्मनः।⁸
तस्मात्तस्योपरी व्याप्ता शक्तिरित्यभिधीयते॥
शक्त्याविष्टस्तदा देवः ससर्ज जगतीं प्रभुः॥

English translation: “The woman is the ‘eternal half of Shiva’, the ultimate Self.

Therefore, it is said that Shakti pervades his upper part. The universe was thus created by the Lord, who was filled with Shakti.”

Semantically, Ardhanarishvara is ‘Ardha’ + ‘Nari’ + ‘Ishvara’. Ardha means ‘half’, Nari means ‘woman’, and Ishvara means ‘God or supreme’. Translating as “the Lord who is half woman,” Ardhanarishvara offers a singular portrayal of the synthesis of opposites, i.e. unity of ‘man and woman’. Ardhanarishvara symbolizes the inseparability and interdependence of the masculine and feminine energies; iconistically shown as a deity split vertically, with one half representing Shiva (the male principle) and the other Parvati (the female principle). This form challenges strict binaries and supports a

⁷ Shiva Purāṇa, Rudra-saṁhitā, Sṛṣṭi-khaṇḍa 17.

⁸ Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī-khaṇḍa, 35:10–11.

more complex ontology, pointing towards ‘fluid identities’.⁹ So it acts as a great metaphysical statement about the nature of reality, and not just a theological or artistic or aesthetic figure. The following picture can be referred to as ‘Ardhanarishvara’.



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The etymology and significance of ‘Ardhanarishvara’ have their roots deeply embedded in a variety of scriptural, Puranic, and philosophical texts. The *Shiva Purana* and *Linga Purana* present accounts of the origin and meaning of the conjoined form. The *Shiva Purana* accounts for it to be said that Shiva, realizing the pivotal role played by the feminine principle in the act of creation, takes the form of Ardhanarishvara, representing the crucial role played by Shakti (the feminine power) in the cosmic order. The *Linga Purana* goes a step further by envisioning Ardhanarishvara as the primordial source from which the entire creation develops, thereby furthering the synthesis of dual principles inherent in existence. The following shlok (verse) can be referred to for better clarity:

⁹ The idea that an individual’s sense of self is not fixed or static, but rather changes and evolves. This can encompass various aspects of identity, including gender identity, social roles, and personal beliefs.

¹⁰ "Ardhanarishvara Image", Pinterest.

Sanskrit (original):

अर्धनारीश्वरं देवं प्रणिपत्य महासुराः।¹¹
ततो विश्वस्य सर्गाय प्रचक्रुः स महाद्युतिः॥

Transliteration:

“*ardhanārisvaram devaṃ praṇipatya mahāsuraḥ
tato visvasya sargāya pracakruḥ sa mahādyutiḥ*”

English Translation: “Having bowed to the Lord Ardhanarishvara by the Asuras (Devils), the great beings initiated the creation of the universe with great splendour.”

This Verse clearly shows that Ardhanarishvara is acknowledged as the *primal deity* who stands at the threshold of creation, symbolizing the unity and mutual interdependence of dual principles. Only after recognizing and calling upon this duality-in-unity is creation possible. In terms of philosophy, the Pratyabhijna school¹² of Kashmir Shaivism, in particular, resonates with the image of ‘Ardhanarishvara’. This school, which was developed by theorists such as Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, maintains that the ultimate reality is the undivided, all-encompassing consciousness of Shiva, which creates the universe based on its own free will (svatantrya). According to this theory, the world’s apparent dualities and multiplicities are branches of the non-dual divine consciousness. The fundamental idea of the Pratyabhijna philosophy is the process of recognition, or pratyabhijna, or realizing that one is not different from Shiva. In other words, all creation is non-dual from Shiva (*Sat-chit-Anand, Truth-Consciousness-Bliss*) at the ultimate level. The awareness removes the apparent dualities, which is also consistent with Ardhanarishvara’s symbolic meaning, which holds that the male and female are not two distinct entities but rather a part of a single reality combined within them.

¹¹ Liṅga Purāṇa, I, 88.3.

¹² The Pratyabhijna school of Kashmir Shaivism emphasizes "recognition" or "direct knowledge of oneself." The realization of one’s own actual nature as the divine consciousness, Shiva, is emphasized in this non-dualistic philosophy.

Indian philosophical tradition enriched by logic has some differences or investigations in Samkhya philosophy, despite its significance, because of its dualistic structure. The rigid Puruṣa-Prakṛti dichotomy raises questions about the nature of their relationship regarding consciousness and physicality. In particular, one might question how passive matter (Prakṛti) can generate action without Puruṣa's action and how passive consciousness (Puruṣa) can perceive the world without actively interacting with Prakṛti. These problems have led to a wide range of interpretations and critiques in the field of Indian philosophy. Some metaphors, like the moon's (Puruṣa) reflections in river water, make the Puruṣa believe that water is the real moon. Though metaphors don't exactly work in philosophy, and again, questions arise about how an entity that is pure consciousness can make such a mistake or blunder. To explain the dualism of Samkhya, Ardhanarishvara presents a different viewpoint, which proposes a theory that matter and consciousness are both sides of the same reality rather than opposites, as provided by Ardhanarishvara's embodiment of synthesis. The ontological frameworks of Kashmir Shaivism lend support to this integrative process. By offering a more sophisticated model of reality that consists of 36 tattvas (principles) that unite both the material and transcendent aspects, the Pratyabhijñā school explains the ontology of Samkhya. By connecting the absolute and the relative, this model explains how individual consciousness emerges from the complex universe. According to this model, Ardhanarishvara represents the union of opposites and the dynamic interplay between the static and dynamic aspects of reality, pointing to 'fluid identities'.

In contemporary philosophical thought, particularly within post-structuralist and feminist frameworks, there is a critical examination of 'binary oppositions' and 'fixed identities'. The idea that gender is a fixed or necessary identity is contested by Judith Butler's concept of 'performative gender'. According to Judith Butler,

“Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal

*over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being”.*¹³

This statement emphasizes Butler’s main argument that gender is a collection of socially controlled and culturally reinforced behaviors that, taken as a whole, give the appearance of a cohesive gendered self rather than a stable identity or characteristic. Also, she contends in ‘Gender Trouble’ that gender is a result of recurrent social performances- stylized behaviors, gestures, and conversations that gradually give the appearance of a stable identity. Accordingly, gender is something that one does and is constantly enacted within cultural norms rather than something that one is. By Butler’s own words, one can understand the above context, i.e.,

*“There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”*¹⁴

A contemporary contextual example from the legal domain can be referred to here for more clarity:

“Recent socio-legal changes in India are strongly reflected in this theoretical understanding. The Supreme Court of India’s 2014 landmark ruling in *NALSA vs Union of India* (2014) upheld transgender people’s constitutional rights and confirmed that gender identity is not limited to the male/female binary. The judgment emphasized the right to self-determined identity, aligning with Butler’s view that gender is a performative and socially regulated enactment rather than a fixed essence. The judgment says:

*“Recognition of transgenders as a third gender is not a social or medical issue but a human right issue.”*¹⁵

By this judgement, the Indian judiciary promoted flexible and self-identified gender realities and brought a legally recognized non-binary category into the public perception. Consequently, this choice is consistent with Ardhanarishvara’s

¹³ Butler, 1990: 33.

¹⁴ Butler, 1990: 25.

¹⁵ National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, AIR 2014 SC 1863.

ontology, which rejects rigid gender dualisms and affirms the simultaneity and coexistence of opposites within a single entity. The legal system has started to acknowledge that gender is a lived spectrum that is performed and embodied differently by each individual, just as Ardhanarishvara unites Puruṣa and Prakṛti. The Shaiva metaphysical position that liberation arises from unity rather than separation is reflected in the Supreme Court's emphasis on dignity, identity, and nondiscrimination and points towards fluid identity." The philosophical claim that fluid identity is ontologically sound and not just politically required is reflected in and reinforced by this legal development. Thus, the symbol can be used as a metaphysical archetype for new forms of inclusivity and gender justice.

Also, another thinker and deconstructionist, Gilles Deleuze, contends that the prevalence of binary oppositions, such as self/other, identity/difference, and male/female, has profoundly influenced Western metaphysics and constrained our understanding of being and becoming. Deleuze criticizes this propensity to value identity over difference in his book 'Difference and Repetition', contending that conventional wisdom minimizes difference to a secondary or derivative idea. Deleuze promotes a philosophy of becoming, where difference is fundamental, creative, and constitutive of reality, as opposed to arguing for stability in polarities. By advocating for a non-binary, fluid ontology that connects with symbolic figures like Ardhanarishvara, who embody unity without erasing difference, he challenges the idea that identities are fixed or oppositional. In his own words –

*"Difference is not what distinguishes one thing from another but what allows one thing to be generated about another."*¹⁶

Thus, Ardhanarishvara represents a 'fluid, integrated being' that is united in co-creative balance rather than split between roles or hierarchies. It affirms the mutual interdependence and ontological unity of masculinity and femininity rather than opposing them. In this way, the representation of Ardhanarishvara foreshadows and expands upon current

¹⁶ Deleuze, 1994: 41.

criticisms of gender essentialism by providing a ‘*non-binary metaphysical model*’ in which duality is complementarity rather than contradiction. A contemporary contextual example can be referred to make the above clearer:

Through the Deep Ecology philosophy, modern ecological thinkers like Arne Naess advocate for a change in perspective from one that is anthropocentric to one that is ecocentric. In his words,

“The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves... independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.”¹⁷

This is consistent with the symbolic meaning of Ardhanarishvara, which holds that nature (Prakṛti) is sacred and co-eternal with consciousness (Puruṣa), rather than being less important. As a counterbalance to the extractive logic based on binary thinking, Deep Ecology’s recognition of interdependence reflects the ontological synthesis personified by Ardhanarishvara.”

Beyond philosophical discussions, Ardhanarishvara is still relevant in today’s social and cultural contexts. The symbolism of Ardhanarishvara provides a potent framework for comprehending the interdependence and unity of disparate elements in a time when consciousness of gender fluidity, non-binary identities, and ecological interconnectedness is growing. It promotes a more inclusive and holistic worldview by challenging the dichotomous thinking that frequently underlies social and environmental issues. Additionally, a major theme in this discourse is the idea of *sahabhava*, or simultaneous becoming. It captures the idea that dual principles are dynamically interwoven, constantly influencing and being influenced by one another, rather than just coexisting. This idea, which emphasizes the relational and processual nature of reality, is consistent with the philosophical insights of both Indian traditions and modern thought.

¹⁷ Naess, 1973: 95-100.

Also, according to the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Puruṣa dividing himself into male and female parts is what causes this androgynous form. All life is created when these two halves copulate. Exactly – *“He was as large as a man and a woman closely embracing. He divided this self into two; hence, it came to be that husband and wife were born. Therefore, as Yājñavalkya said, this body is one half of oneself, the other half is the wife.”*¹⁸

This passage from the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* describes the primordial androgynous being (Puruṣa) who divides into male and female, and from this division, sexual union and all creation emerge. It forms an early and profound metaphysical statement on the origin of duality and the necessity of union.

The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* also discusses Rudra, the precursor of the Puranic Shiva, the creator of everything and the source of Puruṣa (the male principle) and Prakṛiti (the female principle).

*“He is the cause, the lord of the organs. He has no progenitor or controller. He is the one God, hidden in all beings, all-pervading, the inner self of all; He presides over all actions, and dwells in all beings; He is the witness, the knower, the only one, without a second.”*¹⁹

This passage portrays Rudra as the ultimate source of all creation, encompassing both the male principle (Puruṣa) and the female principle (Prakṛiti), thus aligning philosophically with the non-dual union later symbolized in Ardhanarishvara.

In the Shaiva Tantric tradition, this metaphysical dualism is profoundly reconfigured in the symbolic form of Ardhanarishvara. Ardhanarishvara represents the radical notion that the masculine and feminine, consciousness and energy, are not two incompatible principles but are permanently merged into a single, indivisible reality, in contrast to Samkhya’s rigid division. A truth that transcends binary classifications is graphically communicated by the image of Shiva and Parvati sharing one body, with Shiva occupying the right side

¹⁸ Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad 1.4.3.

¹⁹ Shvetāśvatara Upanishad 6.11.

and Parvati the left: life is a dance of inseparable polarities rather than a battlefield of opposites.

Hence, Ardhanarishvara performs a philosophical intervention into inflexible dualisms in addition to his theological role, providing a vision in which liberation is found in the profound understanding of nature rather than in retreating from it. It is noteworthy that in Shaiva metaphysics, Shiva without Shakti is inert (*shava*), emphasizing that pure consciousness is non-functional without the dynamic energy of manifestation.²⁰ Ardhanarishvara, therefore, becomes an emblem of non-binary ontology, where the real is not split into mutually exclusive substances but is understood as the co-arising of consciousness and manifestation, masculine and feminine, transcendence and immanence. The Ardhanarishvara represents a constructive and generative power. Ardhanarishvara symbolizes male and female principles cannot be separated. It conveys the unity of opposites in the universe. The male half stands for Puruṣa, and the female half is Prakṛiti. Ardhanarishvara harmonizes the two conflicting ways of life: The spiritual way of the ascetic, as represented by Shiva, and the materialistic way of the householder, symbolized by Parvati. It conveys that Shiva and Shakti are the same. A human being is not a pure unisexual organism. Each human organism bears the potentiality of both male and female sex. Neurohormonal mechanisms greatly influence sexual behavior. The modern world has come to understand the concept of “Ardhanarishwara” as it aspires to resolve the paradox of opposites into a unity, not by negation, but through positive experiences of life. The matching of opposites produces the true rhythm of life.

Seen from this lens, Ardhanarishvara transcends its religious iconography to function as a profound metaphysical symbol: a challenge to any system that absolutizes separation, and a call toward a holistic vision of being where differences do not imply division, and unity does not erase plurality. Yet this metaphysical clarity gives rise to philosophical tensions. If *Puruṣa* is entirely passive, how does it encounter *Prakṛiti*? Why does it not remain forever aloof? The metaphor of a lame man (*Puruṣa*) riding on the shoulders of a blind man (*Prakṛiti*) is often

²⁰ Kūrma Purāṇa I.24.43.

invoked, but it merely gestures toward interaction without resolving the paradox. Moreover, if liberation (*kaivalya*) is the realization of the ontological distinctness of *Puruṣa*, then what is the existential status of their entanglement in the first place? This brings into question the very viability of dualism as an absolute ontological stance. One may argue, as many Vedantins did, that Sāṃkhya's dualism ultimately collapses under the weight of its metaphysical commitments. *Yet what if the goal is not to collapse the dualism but to reconceive it? What if the tension between Prakṛti and Puruṣa is not a metaphysical error to be corrected, but a dynamic polarity to be symbolically and ontologically integrated?* Again, the solution can be found in the concept of Ardhanarishvara.

The figure of Ardhanarishvara emerges not as a theological supplement but as a philosophical intervention. Unlike Sāṃkhya, the *Śaiva* tradition, particularly in the *Tantric*²¹ and *Kashmir Śaiva* branches, does not maintain a strict separation between consciousness and matter. Instead, *Shiva* (aligned with consciousness) and *Shakti* (as dynamic power) are seen as co-constitutive. The *Tantras*, especially those in the *Trika* school, articulate a *non-dual* ontology where *Shiva* is not separate from *Shakti* but manifests through her. The universe is thus neither illusion (*māya*) nor inert materiality but the pulsation (*spanda*) of divine consciousness. According to Spanda Karika:

“*Na hi śaktiḥ śivāt pṛthak.*”
“*Śakti is not different from Śiva.*”²²

In this context, Ardhanarishvara ceases to be a mere anthropomorphic deity. It becomes a visual metaphysics - an icon whose very form expresses the simultaneity and mutual dependence of polarities. The male and female halves are not to be seen as static binaries but as fluid modalities or fluid

²¹ In the Śaiva Tantric tradition, Ardhanarishvarais not merely a theological symbol but a profound philosophical assertion of the non-duality of existence, where Shiva (consciousness) and Shakti (energy) are seen as inseparable and co-constitutive, challenging strict dualisms such as those found in classical Sāṃkhya metaphysics.

²² Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* I.41-45.

identities. Ardhanarishvara is not half-and-half in a numerical sense; rather, it represents a simultaneity of being-a non-binary ontology or *being-becoming ontology* that disrupts the dualistic grammar of Samkhya. Shiva is not merely the silent witness; he is manifest only through Shakti, just as Shakti has no form without Shiva. Their division is conceptual; their unity is ontological.

One finds similar echoes in the *Pratyabhijna* philosophy.²³ Of Kashmir, especially in the works of Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta. According to Abhinavagupta, the supreme reality (*Param-Shiva*) is not an inert absolute but a self-luminous consciousness (*citi*) that wills, manifests, conceals, and reabsorbs the universe through its divine play (*līlā*). The dichotomy between observer and observed, knower and known, can be overcome not by reducing one to the other but by recognizing their shared origin in conscious power. In this schema, *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* are not separate substances but aspects of the same divine unfolding.

What Ardhanarishvara does, then, is to dramatize this ontological insight in visual and symbolic form. The left and right, the soft and the severe, the receptive and the projective, the adorned and the ascetic - all coexist in a figure that is not schizophrenic but integrated. The unity is not imposed; instead, it is inherent. In other words, it is not a fusion of opposites but the recognition that opposition itself is a limited perspective. Moreover, the *symbolism* of Ardhanarishvara allows for a critique of rigid gender binaries. While the figure is traditionally depicted as a combination of male and female bodies, its philosophical force lies in its non-duality. Gender here becomes a modality of expression; it is not a fixed and rigid identity. This resonates with Judith Butler's argument that gender is performative, not essential. Ardhanarishvara anticipates such a view by embodying the performative simultaneity

²³ It emphasizes the recognition of one's true divine nature, which is ultimately Shiva. It proposes that liberation (moksha) is achieved through self-recognition, not by becoming something new, but by removing the veils that obscure our inherent divine potential.

of gendered expressions. The figure does not oscillate between man and woman; it is both, and neither, and more. It is:

चम्पेयगौरार्धशरीरकायै कर्पूरगौरार्धशरीरकाय।
धम्मिल्लकायै च जटाधराय नमः शिवायै च नमः शिवाय॥

English translation: “Salutations to Her whose half-body is of the color of champaka flowers (golden-yellow), and to Him whose half-body is as fair as camphor.

Salutations to Her with well-arranged hair (in a braid), and to Him who bears matted locks.

Salutations to Sivā (the goddess) and salutations to Siva (the god).’²⁴

The two halves of Ardhanarishvara are described in this verse in a poetical and devotional manner: The left side, which is usually connected to Pārvatī, is described as having braided hair and a champaka color, which is golden. The camphor-white right side (usually Siva) has matted hair (jaṭā).

In Indian philosophical aesthetics (*rasa* theory), this simultaneity also reflects the principle of *Sringara* (mother of all other *rasas*), the erotic as the unity of opposites - a *rasa* that includes both union and longing. Abhinavagupta, in his *Locana* and *Tantrāloka*, emphasizes the aesthetic experience (*rasa*) as a path to recognizing one’s identity with supreme consciousness. Just as in art, the viewer transcends the duality of subject and object, in *Ardhanarishvara*, the metaphysical viewer is invited to transcend the binaries of self and other, consciousness and matter. At a metaphysical level, therefore, *Ardhanarishvara* is not a compromise between *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* but a reimagining of their relation. It represents what one might call a *differentiated unity*, not a homogenization but a co-penetration. In this vision, *Puruṣa* is not liberated from *Prakṛiti* by isolating itself but by recognizing *Prakṛiti* as its dynamic expression. This is not the Samkhya goal of detachment but the *Shaiva* ideal of *samāvesa* - immersion, re-integration, re-cognition (*pratyabhijña*). Such a metaphysics also offers an

²⁴ Ardhanārīśvara Stotra, verse 2

ecological insight. The strict separation of spirit and matter, self and world, has often led to the instrumentalization of nature. Contrarily, Ardhanarishvara ontology views nature as divine manifestation rather than as dead matter, and as self rather than as other. Because of its unity, Prakṛti is revered. With its proposal for a relational, respectful, and participatory way of living in the world, this viewpoint has important ecological implications. In an era where binary thinking is increasingly being questioned in the fields of gender and identity, as well as epistemology, ethics, and political theory, Ardhanarishvara is a premodern yet remarkably contemporary figure.

II

Philosophical reflections on duality across world traditions and Ardhanarishvara

The imagery of Ardhanarishvara signifies not just theological completeness but an ontological structure: all phenomena arise through the interaction of complementary forces. Shiva alone is inert without Shakti; Shakti without Shiva lacks direction and consciousness. Together, they constitute being itself. This symbolic duality necessitates comparison with related philosophical ideas from various philosophical traditions. This section of the paper is dedicated to the comparison. An analysis of this kind identifies important similarities and differences that highlight the unique depth of the Ardhanarishvara doctrine.

- 1) The ancient Chinese philosophy of **Yin and Yang**, foundational to Daoist metaphysics, is perhaps the most immediate cross-cultural analogue. The *Dao De Jing* explains that:

*“The Dao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced all things. All things carry the Yin and embrace the Yang.”*²⁵

In this context, the masculine (Yang) and feminine (Yin) are dynamic, interdependent forces rather than moral opposites.

²⁵ Laozi, *Dao De Jing* §42.

Each creates, defines, and constrains the other; neither is possible without the other. The universe's many forms are created by the interaction of Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang are regarded as co-eternal and co-creative, much like Shiva and Shakti. The subtlety, however, is in the structural contrast: the Shaiva conception sees Shiva as an ultimate, immutable consciousness with Shakti as its inseparable dynamism, whereas Daoism stresses the fluid, ever-shifting balance of forces without a fixed ontological anchor. As a result, Ardhanarishvara proposes a unifying consciousness at the root of opposites, providing a deeper metaphysical basis than Daoism's more processual dualism.

2) Through Love (Philia) and Strife (Neikos), **Empedocles** introduced the concept of cosmic dualism to Greek philosophy. All change in the universe is explained by these two forces, which alternately bring the four elements—earth, water, air, and fire—together and drive them apart. According to him,

“First of all, there was Love among the elements, and Strife as well; and these have never ceased their motion among them.”²⁶

Empedocles' 'Love' and 'Strife' are not co-existent within a single being, even though they roughly represent the idea of basic dualistic principles. Rather, they have an external effect on matter. In contrast, Ardhanarishvara internalizes both concepts into a single, cohesive subjectivity; this is a more personal and ontological duality as opposed to a merely cosmological one.

3) The **Platonic tradition**, too, offers a relevant comparison. In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes recounts the idea that originally human beings were spherical creatures, each comprising two beings, who were split apart by the gods. Ever since, human beings have sought to reunite with their lost halves.

²⁶ Empedocles, DK B17. Cf. Kaluđerović, 2023.

“Each of us, then, is a ‘matching half’ of a human whole... and each of us is always seeking the half that matches him.”²⁷

While this idea emphasizes longing and incompleteness, Ardhanarishvara posits completeness within the being itself. Unlike the Platonic myth of separation and yearning, Ardhanarishvara embodies a primordial, unbroken unity.

The wholeness of hybrid embodiment is being affirmed more and more in contemporary ethical discourse, whereas Platonic dualism highlights the yearning for lost halves. The UN and other international human rights organizations have defended the dignity of intersex people and fought against medical procedures that are not consented to. In the UN’s own words,

“Intersex children are often subjected to irreversible and harmful medical practices in an attempt to ‘normalize’ them. Such practices can cause permanent physical and psychological harm.”²⁸

A binary metaphysics that is unable to accept ontological ambiguity is reflected in this worry. In contrast, the picture of Ardhanarishvara celebrates the union of the spiritual and biological polarities as wholeness rather than illness. The deity argues that embodied difference can lead to unity, providing a metaphysical counterargument to medical essentialism.

4) Turning to **Christian theology**, one finds less conceptual room for the integration of male and female principles within God. Nevertheless, in Gnostic traditions, there are intriguing parallels. The Gnostic text *Pistis Sophia* describes Sophia (Wisdom) as a feminine emanation from the divine. Some Valentinian Gnostics envisioned the Pleroma (the divine fullness) as composed of paired male-female aeons, such as Christ and Sophia, whose union reflects a divine harmony. One Gnostic source states:

²⁷ Plato, *Symposium* 191d.

²⁸ United Nations Human Rights Office, 2015.

“From the union of the male and the female aeons there came forth the Fullness, the Pleroma.”²⁹

Though ultimately rejected by orthodox Christianity, this vision mirrors, to some extent, the necessity of both masculine and feminine energies in the divine realm, echoing ideas found in the conception of Ardhanarishvara. However, again, the distinction remains: Gnostic dualism often treats the material (associated with the feminine) as inferior to the spiritual (masculine), while Ardhanarishvara asserts no such hierarchy. Shakti is not the degraded material world but the living owner of consciousness itself.

5) In **Persian philosophy**, particularly within Zoroastrianism, dualism appears in the form of Ahura Mazda, the god of light and order, versus Angra Mainyu (Ahri-man), the destructive spirit of chaos. This is a dualism of good and evil, sharply opposed and cosmically antagonistic. As the *Avesta* states:

“Truly, there are two primal Spirits, twins, renowned to be in conflict. In thoughts and words and deeds, one is the better and the other the bad.”³⁰

In contrast, Ardhanarishvara’s duality is not ethical or oppositional but existential and creative. It expresses a vision where Shiva and Shakti are coessential, mutually sustaining, and unified in a harmonious whole, rather than being in conflict. Their duality signifies integration, not division.

Thus, in comparing Ardhanarishvara to world philosophies, several conclusions emerge. First, while many traditions recognize duality—whether cosmic, ethical, or metaphysical—few internalize it as radically and harmoniously as Ardhanarishvara does. Second, Ardhanarishvara transcends mere opposition by depicting duality as an inseparable, positive unity rather than a tension or conflict. Finally, compared to Samkhya’s rigid dualism, Ardhanarishvara presents a more dynamic and relational ontology, in which the two principles are eternally conjoined in a creative interplay. This vision ultimately

²⁹ “Valentinian Exposition”, in Robinson, 1990: 589-593. Cf. Griva-Dendrinos, 2023.

³⁰ Yasna 28-34 (Insler, 1975: 31).

suggests a metaphysics of intimacy and balance—a world where opposites do not destroy but complement one another, and where the deepest truth of being lies not in isolation but in union.

III

To investigate the philosophical potential of Ardhanarishvara as a metaphysical resolution to the dualism of *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*, a plural methodology is required - one that honors the symbolic density of the image while maintaining philosophical rigor. The challenge lies in approaching Ardhanarishvara not as a mythic relic or religious icon but as an ontological proposition - an embodied metaphor that performs philosophy. This necessitates an interdisciplinary approach: part hermeneutic, part phenomenological, part comparative, and part historically grounded in Indian metaphysics. A hermeneutic reading allows us to situate Ardhanarishvara within its textual and iconographic context, notably in the *Shiva Purana*, *Linga Purana*, and *Skanda Purana*, where the emergence of the deity is narrated as the union of *Shiva* and *Pārvatī*, signifying the non-duality of *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. But beyond these mythic narrations, we also find philosophical extrapolations in *Āgamic* texts and later Tantric literature, which articulate the *non-separability* of these principles in cosmology and soteriology. Phenomenologically, the icon of Ardhanarishvara may be seen as a *phenomenon* that exceeds its form. It demands not merely to be looked at but to be *beheld*, to be internalized. The *darsana* of Ardhanarishvara is not only visual but existential. The viewer is implicated in its dual unity; one is not outside it but within its polarity. This is evident in the liturgical practices and devotional meditations where the aspirant does not worship the male or female aspect separately, but as a simultaneous recognition of both. Here, we see an enactment of *advaita* not as an abstract metaphysical claim, but as a lived non-binary consciousness. At a comparative level, the metaphor of androgyny or gender duality is not unique to Indian thought. One finds it in Plato's *Symposium*, in Aristophanes' myth of the

original double-beings, as well as in the alchemical *coniunctio oppositorum* of the Western esoteric tradition. Carl Jung interpreted such symbols as archetypes of the integrated psyche - the *anima* and *animus* in union. Yet what makes Ardhanarishvara philosophically unique is its refusal to psychologize this union. It is not merely inner balance or psychological harmony. It is ontological simultaneity - an assertion that Being itself is not binary but intermodal, co-creative. The methodological emphasis, therefore, must fall on the symbolic itself, not as ornament or embellishment, but as a site of epistemic legitimacy. In Indian aesthetic theory, *dhvani* (resonance or suggestion) is regarded as more powerful than *vācya* (denotative meaning). The symbol of Ardhanarishvara operates through *dhvani*. It does not say; it suggests. It does not argue; it embodies. The challenge for the philosopher, then, is not to decode it into propositional logic, but to let it *displace* the need for such logic in certain modes of knowing.

In this sense, the method employed here is also an *epistemic decolonization*. Much of contemporary ontology remains steeped in categories inherited from Western metaphysics - substance, essence, form, matter, dualism, monism. But the Indian metaphysical imagination offers other categories - *tattva*, *bhāva*, *Shakti*, *liṅga*, *spanda*, *maya* - each carrying layers of implication that challenge Cartesian bifurcations. The symbol of *Ardhanarishvara*, rooted in these indigenous categories, proposes an alternate metaphysical grammar. One where duality is not necessarily contradiction; where unity is not sameness; where the One is not an erasure of the Many. The significance of this symbolic-philosophical approach is manifold.

First, it provides a way to think beyond binary oppositions, not just in metaphysics, but in ethics, identity, and epistemology. The modern world is marked by dualisms: mind and body, reason and emotion, man and woman, self and other, nature and culture. The impulse to resolve these oppositions has often led to the dominance of one pole - reason over emotion, man over woman, culture over nature. Ardhanarishvara suggests another possibility: the co-arising of difference and unity, not as dialectical resolution, but as ontological intimacy. Second, this approach recuperates the philosophical value of

image and myth. Too often, philosophy has privileged the conceptual over the symbolic, the rational over the intuitive. But in traditions such as Tantra, image and form are not distractions from truth but disclosures of it. The body of Ardhanarishvara is a metaphysical text, a *sarira vakhyam* (bodily commentary), revealing that *prakasa* (illumination) and *vimarsa* (reflective awareness) are not separate but co-originating. This has implications for pedagogy, for philosophy as a lived practice, and for the role of aesthetic experience in philosophical knowing. Third, and most crucially, this symbolic resolution has consequences for how we understand *mokṣa* or liberation. In Samkhya, liberation is the cessation of contact between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. In Advaita, it is the realization of the non-dual *Brahman*. But in *Ardhanarishvara*, liberation is not escape from the world but recognition of its divine polarity. This is closer to the Tantric ideal of *jīvanmukti*, where one attains liberation while still embodied, not by denying the world, but by divinizing it. *Prakṛti* is not to be overcome, but embraced as *Shakti*. *Puruṣa* is not to detach, but to immerse in recognition.

Thus, the results of this investigation imply that Ardhanarishvara offers more than just a theological symbol; it offers a conceptual revolution—a symbolic metaphysics that undermines ontological dualism through form rather than argument. It is a graphic thesis about how polarity is interdependent. Ardhanarishvara sees an embrace where Samkhya sees resistance. Symbols imply simultaneity where logic requires separation. This is a philosophical strength rather than a weakness; it is a gateway to a metaphysics of intimacy, inclusion, and interbeing.

Such a vision is desperately needed in a time of metaphysical, political, and gendered polarization. Philosophers are not only called to criticize binary thinking, but also to unveil what is beyond binary terms. Ardhanarishvara does not provide us with a blueprint; it also offers a mirror that allows us to see not half.

Fluid Identity in Indian Thought: Beyond Essentialism

Essentialist metaphysical categories have long been criticized in Indian philosophy, especially in the non-dual Shaiva and Shakti traditions. According to the Kashmir Shaiva thinkers, particularly Abhinavagupta, reality is a dynamic unfolding of consciousness (spanda) that is constantly moving and never static. Shiva and Shakti, the knower and the known, are ultimately separated by a conceptual abstraction rather than an ontological split. Similarly, despite coming from a Buddhist background, Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka³¹ Philosophy offers notable similarities. By arguing that all phenomena are empty (sunya) of self-nature, Nāgārjuna challenges the concept of svabhava (intrinsic essence). Existence is relational, dependent on other existents, and thus fundamentally fluid. The Ardhanarishvara icon can be seen as a Shaiva-symbolic corollary to this insight: neither masculine nor feminine exists in isolation; each finds identity through relational integration. Thus, fluid identity is not a modern invention but is deeply embedded in Indian metaphysical imagination.

Post-Structuralism and the Challenge to Binaries

In Western philosophical developments, thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler dismantled binary logics that had long structured Western metaphysics. Deleuze's critique of the "arborescent" (tree-like) model of thought in favor of a "rhizomatic" model emphasizes multiplicity, non-linearity, and interconnectedness. Butler's notion of gender performativity denies any stable, pre-discursive essence to gendered identity. These critiques resonate with the figure of Ardhanarishvara. The half-male, half-female form is not a compromise between two fixed identities; it is a destabilization of the very notion of fixed identity. It performs gender, not by choosing sides, but by collapsing the frame within which such

²⁹Meaning "Middle Path" in Sanskrit, is a Mahayana Buddhist school of philosophy founded by Nagarjuna. It emphasizes the concept of śūnyatā, or emptiness, which signifies that all phenomena, including concepts and

sides are constructed. Moreover, in Deleuzian terms, Ardhanarishvara could be seen as a “becoming,” a continuous movement between polarities rather than a static being. In the figure’s body, masculine and feminine cease to be categories of essence and become modalities of expression within a singular field of being.

Ardhanarishvara as Performative Ontology

Beyond simply embodying the fluid integration of Prakṛti and Puruṣa, Ardhanarishvara can be interpreted as enacting a performative ontology. This is an ontology where being is not a fixed substrate but an ongoing performance, an emergent relationality. The very split in the figure - the visual contrast of Shiva and Shakti - is not an ontological assertion of difference but a dramatization of relationality. As Butler suggests regarding gender, repetition and performance are the means through which identity materializes. This view is also upheld by Alok Vaid-Menon, a gender non-conforming artist and activist, who describes identity as a performance rather than an essence:

“I am a work of art, not biology... I am not a man or woman—I am an experience.”³²

The non-binary ontology of becoming that Deleuze articulated and that the Ardhanarishvara iconography foreshadowed is embodied in their performances. Alok’s expression defies categorization, confirming what Ardhanarishvara portrays: identity as simultaneity, not subtraction; as co-presence, not opposition. This is similar to Shiva and Shakti sharing one body without dissolution. Such activism is not far from the image of Ardhanarishvara, which provides the metaphysical foundation for lived opposition to essentialism. Similarly, Ardhanarishvara performs the eternal becoming of existence, where the polarity of principles is neither eradicated nor ossified but constantly enacted. The metaphysical implication is profound: the world is not a static assembly of self-contained essences but a dance (līlā) of mutually constitutive forces.

³² Vaid-Menon, 2020: 15-27.

Toward a Non-Binary Indian Ontology

The classical Indian systems, particularly Advaita Vedanta³³ and Kashmir Saivism already resists binary divisions at the deepest level. Brahman is beyond all dualities; Shiva is both transcendent and immanent; Shakti is both form and formlessness. Ardhanarishvara symbolizes this non-binary ontology visually and symbolically. It challenges the Samkhya rigidity without abandoning the insight that relationality is constitutive of existence. Prakṛti and Puruṣa are not eliminated but re-understood as mutually informing modalities of a single ontological continuum. In this vision, binary distinctions - male and female, spirit and matter, self and other - are provisional, functional, and relational, but not absolute. Reality is a tapestry of becoming, a co-arising (sahabhava) forces that never stand still.

This insight has immediate consequences for how we think about liberation (mokṣa). Mokṣa is not the flight from Prakṛti into Puruṣa (as Samkhya might propose) but the recognition that Prakṛti and Puruṣa are interwoven manifestations of the same divine play.

The Power of the Image

Ardhanarishvara operates at the level of dhvani (suggestive meaning) rather than vācya (literal meaning). The image invites intuitive, participatory knowledge rather than purely discursive analysis. This is congruent with Abhinavagupta's understanding of aesthetics (rasa) as a mode of non-dual realization. In the aesthetic experience, the distinction between subject and object dissolves; similarly, in the darsana (vision) of Ardhanarishvara, the viewer participates in the dissolution of ontological binaries. The epistemological implication is striking: symbolic imagery can carry metaphysical knowledge as profoundly as rational discourse. Seeing becomes knowing; participating becomes being. Consequences for Modern Philosophy Ardhanarishvara's metaphysics offers an approach to thinking that acknowledges diversity while avoiding

polarization. It is a vision of embodied transcendence, dynamic unity, and relational multiplicity. The symbolic-metaphysical insights of Ardhanarishvara provide a desperately needed alternative in a time of identity politics, ecological crises, and divisive discourses. They suggest a way of being in which fluidity is not instability but vitality, unity is not sameness, and difference is not division. Thus, Ardhanarishvara is more than just a mythological artifact; he is a living philosophical idea that stimulates, enlightens, and challenges modern thinking.

Conclusion: Toward an Ontology of Relational Being

A radically integrative view of life is suggested by the philosophical study of Ardhanarishvara as a solution to the ontological dualism present in Prakṛti and Puruṣa. Unlike the conventional systems, like Samkhya, which maintain an eternally rooted division between matter and consciousness, Ardhanarishvara proposes a system in which opposing forces are dynamically and eternally interconnected rather than antagonistic. This syncretism is a basic ontological claim that being is relational, fluid, and co-constituted; it has more than just a theological appeal. The metaphysical assumption that transcendence of embodiment or withdrawal from the world is the path to liberation is defied by Ardhanarishvara. Rather, it implies that authentic liberation (*Kaivalya*) is through the acknowledgment of the sacred interplay between the poles of being. Shiva and Shakti are not two; they are not one; they are the co-unfolding of unity in difference, or we can say difference in unity and unity in difference, i.e., *Bheda-Abheda*.³⁴ The image of Ardhanarishvara, its smooth fusion of the masculine and feminine, the transcendent and immanent, is the ontological intimacy, presenting an image where duality's very tension is the site of its overcoming.

By bridging Indian metaphysical understanding with post-structuralist conceptions of identity and relationality, this

³⁴ In a metaphysical sense, the reality is both unity and difference within itself. Here, this word is not taken exactly in the sense of the Vedantic tradition.

research positions Ardhanarishvara as a symbol that strongly resonates with modern discourse. In an intellectual environment that is more attuned to the limitations of binary thinking within gender, politics, epistemology, and ecology-Ardhanarishvara offers a model of thinking beyond oppositional structures. Its thinking does not facilitate homogenization or the erasure of differences, but instead facilitates the acknowledgment of difference as a type of relational unity, a sacred dance, and not an opposition.

The philosophical importance of aesthetic and symbolic modes of knowledge is also reaffirmed in this analysis. Ardhanarishvara's mythological and visual power transcends simple decoration and engages in metaphysical inquiry; it is a unique form of metaphysical epiphany. By interacting with Ardhanarishvara, one actively participates in an existential recognition of reality's non-duality rather than merely reflecting on a religious icon. The divine vision appears here as an ontological and epistemological phenomenon.

Ardhanarishvara invokes a metaphysical transition: from fixed being to fluid becoming, from identity to co-arising, and from substance to relation. It invites us to view the world through a lens of greater unity rather than distinction, where Shiva is Shakti and Shakti is Shiva-not in union, but in a vibrant, imaginative dialogue. Therefore, the representation of Ardhanarishvara in Indian philosophy not only resolves an old philosophical conundrum but also offers a profound outlook for the future: a metaphysical understanding of relational being, an acceptance of unity in diversity, and an exhortation to live in a way that promotes our understanding, liberation, and way of living within the sacred fabric of existence itself. Men as women's complements and women as the complement of men at the utmost level. One needs to understand that the two are the faces of the same coin. Hence, Ardhanarishvara can be seen as the solution to find a way between the dual metaphysical philosophies. The image below says it all:



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