

## NA MA SI VA YA

### Siva Lingam Worship – Facts, Fallacies, and Philosophy

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#### A Timeless Universal Symbol

Archeologists concur that *Siva Lingam* worship goes very far back in human history given that such stone structures dating back many millennia BC have been discovered trans-continentially, clearly pointing to the fact that this worship is very ancient and was universally widespread at one time.

According to scholars, traces of Siva Lingam worship have been found in the ancient Mayan, Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Indus Valley civilizations. Famous historian and Indologist, Professor Arthur Llewellyn Basham, confirmed that Siva Lingam stones have been found in the Harappan remains and commented thus:

*"... Shiva was and still is chiefly worshipped in the form of the linga, usually a short cylindrical pillar with rounded top, which is the survival of a cult older than Indian civilization itself.... The cult of the linga, at all times followed by some of the non-Aryan peoples, was incorporated into Hinduism around the beginning of the Christian era..."*



*5,000 years old Siva Lingam as it was being excavated from the Harappa site in the ancient Indus Valley*

In 1925, OA Well said: 'In the Zhob Valley (modern day Baluchistan, Pakistan), where small farming groups existed before

3000 BC, a carved stone linga was found'. The ancient civilizations of Asia, South America, and Europe have evidence of Siva Lingam worship.



*1,500 years old Siva Lingam in Myson, Vietnam*



*Cylindrical Siva Lingam stone at the centre of the Stone Altar at Feaghna, Ireland, at least 2,000 years old*

Early Man, who worshipped God as fire, is likely to have created vertical stone representations of it, given that he could not ritually adore fire as it were. Over time, a base was probably added for stability and utility.



*A Vedic sacrificial ritual shows the fire rising up like the pillar of a Siva Lingam and the firepit akin to its pedestal, explaining why the fire ritual is really Siva Lingam worship*

In the ancient *Saiva* religion (or *Adhi Saivam*) of India, one that long predates the advent of present day Hinduism, God Almighty is known as *Eesan* ('The Lord') or *Sivan* ('The Red or Auspicious or Compassionate One'). In Saiva theology, God exists in 3 states: formless (*Sivan*); in forms (*Mahesan*); and formless-form or shapeless shape (*Sadha Sivan* or *Siva Lingam*) respectively. The formless-form or Siva Lingam is the primary object of ritualistic worship in this ageless tradition and is symbolic of the one God of the Universe.

In this connection, it is Interesting to note that the Siva Lingam is depicted in Saiva religious symbolic expression as a right-handed thumb-up, seated on the palm of the left hand. One can possibly fathom how this religious expression, signifying a compassionate and auspiciousness God, evolved over time to become the now universally accepted thumbs-up hand gesture that refers to all things good.



*Siva Lingam is a symbol of auspiciousness*

The great Sage Vyasara mentions that those who worship the lingam become perfect with both the direct and indirect knowledge of the Unity - of Divine Will and Supreme Energy. Thus, the Siva Lingam demonstrates the union of Life and Light or Efficient Cause (like a potter) and Instrumental Cause (like a potter's wheel) and not the union of opposite sexes as misinterpreted by some.

The common misconception is that the Siva Lingam represents a phallic emblem of the generative power in nature. According to Swami *Sivananda*, this is not only a serious mistake, but also a grave blunder. He refers to the Siva Lingam as really an outward symbol of the formless Lord Siva, pointing to an inference that reminds us of the Omnipotent God seated in the chambers of each of our hearts as its silent indweller and constant witness.

In his divine treatise in Tamil called *Thirumanthiram*, Saint *Thirumular* mentions that 'lingam' refers to six different things: Universe, human body, Siva and *Sakthi*, the formless Almighty, and the formless form itself. It is evident, then, that the word 'lingam' means 'symbol' or 'icon'. So, the lingam is a symbol, much like a Cross is the symbol of Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this article is to shed much needed light on the deeper meaning of the Siva Lingam and its worship as well as to **debunk the** fallacies beneath the incorrect interpretations of this lofty symbol of the Saiva religion.

## Typology

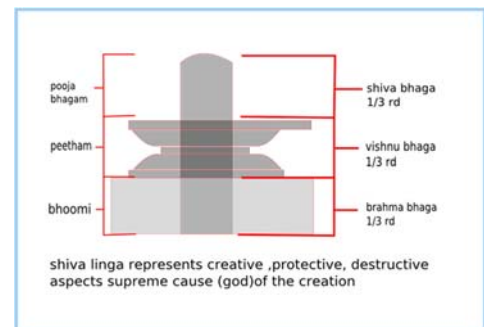
According to Saiva texts, there are broadly five types of lingam (*pancha* lingam) - said to have appeared from each of Lord Siva's five faces in His Sadasiva form. The last of these, known as *kanma sadhaakiam*, is the type that usually consists of a pillar and a pedestal. Some *puranic* (ancient mythological) sources state that there are five kinds of kanma sadhaakia lingams: *thaan thondri* or *svayambhu* (lingam that appear naturally), *bindu* (lingam which is as one contemplates it), *prathista* or *sthira* (lingam which is ritually installed at one place through mantras), *chara* (lingam that which is movable from one place to another), and *guru* (lingam that includes an image of Siva in human form). Again, Siva Lingams can be classified into some 14 sub-types based on how they appeared - ranging from lingams which self-emerged by Siva's grace to lingams installed by human beings (*maanuda* or *manushya* lingam). Maanuda lingam are further classified into *agni* lingam (where the upper portion is pillar-like) and *jala* lingam (upper part is a relatively small and smooth elliptical stone). Lingams are made from six main types of materials - precious stones (*ratnajam*), stone or rock (*shailajam*), metals (*lokajam* or *dhatujam*), wood (*darujam*), clay (*mritikam*), and those made on the spot for temporary usage with any material (*shanikam*).

## Geometry

The Siva Lingam's geometric structure also holds a key to dispelling misinterpretations. The upper portion is typically a naturally occurring or sculpted stone pillar (agni lingam) or a naturally occurring elliptical stone (jala lingam) that has a natural polish and smoothness and is typically obtained from such holy rivers as the Ganges, Yamuna, Narmada, and Sindhu or from places like Nepal and Kedarnath. This upper portion is mostly supported by a base pedestal (*peedam*). Unlike what some commentaries have

suggested, upon closer examination, neither the pillar nor the pedestal resemble human organs:

1. In the agni lingam, the upper portion is geometrically shaped and is usually rounded and conical at the top but can also be MULTI-ANGLED and FLAT surfaced. The bottom portion of the pillar, concealed underground, is always square shaped (shown below).



2. This agni lingam's pillar slots through an opening from UNDER the pedestal, with the length of the visible portion of the pillar typically being one third the length of the entire pillar with one third concealed within the pedestal and one third in the ground below the pedestal.



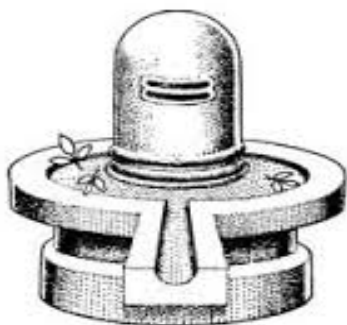
*The mammoth 8 feet high 9<sup>th</sup> century agni Lingam, Matangeswarar Temple, Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, India*

3. In the case of the jala lingam, the upper portion (*baanam*) is a perfectly smooth elliptical stone that sits vertically onto the top of the pedestal below but only down to about a fraction of the stone's overall length, just enough for it to be held securely upright



*1,000 years old Siva Lingam exhibited in Gregorian Etruscan Museum at Vatican City, Italy*

4. The shape of the pedestal in both types of lingam, on the other hand, is either perfectly rounded or quadrangular (usually square)
5. The flat upper surface of the pedestal is grooved and ends as an open spout on one side of the pillar or baanam (illustration below) – serving to drain off ceremonially anointed substances (water, milk etc.). This draining off of the anointed substances from the spout symbolizes Siva's bestowal of His grace to the countless souls that worship Him.



## Etymology

The pillar and pedestal of Siva Lingam are known respectively as *thiru udaiyaar-aa udaiyaar* in Tamil and as *linga-yoni* or *nada-bindu* in Sanskrit. Etymology provides yet another critical set of clues to unlock the real meaning beneath the symbolism of Lingam:

1. In Tamil, '*thiru*' refers to 'salvation' and '*udaiyaar*' to 'He who has'. 'Has' here refers to the ability to own something and to bestow it. So, '*thiru udaiyaar*' means 'He who bestows salvation'. 'Aa' refers collectively to 'souls' and, therefore, '*aa udaiyaar*' means 'He who bestows souls'. Therefore, Siva Lingam referred to as '*thiru udaiyaar-aa udaiyaar*' means, 'He who bestows salvation to souls'
2. On the other hand, '*nada*' points to God the 'primordial sound source (of Creation)' and '*bindu*' to the 'focal point (of Creation)'. So, Siva Lingam referred to as '*nada-bindu*' means, the 'Primordial source and focal point of Creation'. The ancient scriptures called *Vathula Agamam* as well as *Vidyaswara Samhita* in the *Vedas* talk about the Siva Lingam as *nada-bindu*.
3. The word '*lingam*' refers to 'symbol' or 'depiction' in Tamil and Sanskrit. It is derived from the combination of the two root words '*layitthal*' and '*gambitthal*' in Tamil or '*layam*' and '*kamba*' in Sanskrit. The first set of words in both languages refer to 'dissolution' while the second literally means 'shaken' - referring to the cosmic movements during creation/evolution. Taken together, these words provide



the meaning – the ‘occurrence of dissolution and evolution’.

There is yet another root word ‘*lika*’ in Sanskrit that means ‘to sculpt’ and this gives the meaning that the Siva Lingam refers to Siva as the Grand Sculptor who sculpts (or creates) the Universe. ‘*Yoni*’, on the other hand, means ‘source’ or ‘place’ in Sanskrit and refers to the place where souls originally emerge from and eventually immerse into. So, much to the contrary of perverse Western commentaries, ‘*yon*i’ does NOT refer to the female genital. Siva Lingam referred to as ‘*linga-yoni*’ means, the ‘place wherefrom dissolution and evolution occur’.

### Philosophy

The philosophy of the formless-form state of God sheds even more light on the true meaning of Siva Lingam worship.

1. In the Siva Lingam state, God is called *Sadha Sivan* (‘The Perpetual Lord’). Out of mercy, Siva assumes a cosmic formless-form – from which the Universe evolves and into which it eventually dissolves. This cycle of Creation and Dissolution continues endlessly by His Will and Grace. He is the Sculptor of the Universe and the primordial germ of cosmic appearance. The Siva Lingam is the physical representation of the formless God - referred to as *nirguna Brahman* (‘Cosmic Principle devoid of qualities’)
2. As a vertical pillar, the Siva Lingam is depicted as an endless column of cosmic fire associated with Creation. So, the Siva Lingam is the solidified representation of this Flame of Creation

and is the principle of Divine Support, like a cosmic umbilical cord.



*The Siva Lingam is like a cosmic umbilical cord nourishing and sustaining the Universe*

3. As a vertically seated oval stone, the Siva Lingam depicts the shape of the macrocosm (*Brahmanda* or the Universe) as well as the microcosm (atomic structure of all matter and the primordial egg of all living things).



*Siva Lingam depicts the shape of everything from the Universe to nuclear structure of atoms*

4. According to the monotheistic Saiva religion, due to *Pati's* (or *Lord's*) immense mercy towards *pasu* (or souls), God assumes the form of a cosmic Siva Lingam during Creation by merging His Will (to create the Universe) and His Grace (of creating it). Philosophically, God's Will represents the masculine element while His Grace represents the feminine. And thus came about the theological concept of

Siva and Sakthi (God's Will and God's Grace) creating the Universe

5. So, Saiva philosophy depicts the Siva Lingam as an embodiment of the Cosmic Consciousness (God's Will) and Cosmic Energy (God's Grace) that precedes Creation (the Universe).

### Legends

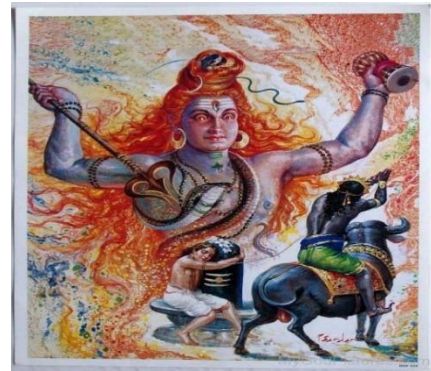
The Saiva tradition's mythologies too impart important lessons in understanding the true meaning of Siva Lingam:

1. When the young girl *Thaadakai*, a staunch Siva devotee, bent forward to garland the Siva Lingam at the temple of *Thiru Thaadakaiyecharam* in *Thiru Pananthaal*, the upper portion of her sari slip. Not wanting to lose her modesty in the Lord's sanctum and without wanting to drop the garland meant for Him, she held on to her sari in one hand and the garland for Siva in the other. Siva lovingly resolved her predicament by leaning forward the pillar of the Lingam in order for her to place the garland around Him. So, the pillar of the Siva Lingam represents the Lord's head (see illustration below).

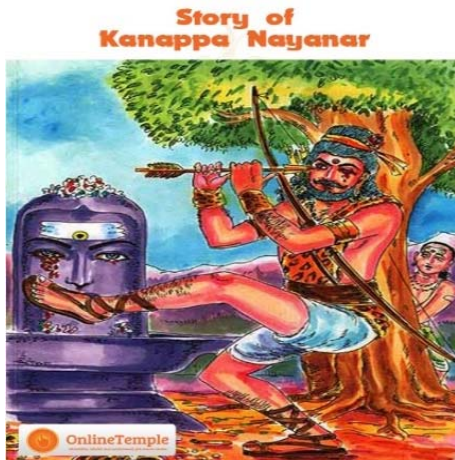


2. When the boy sage *Markandeya* (son of sage *Mrikandu*) was confronted by the swirling noose of the angel of death (*Yaman*), he sought Siva's protection

and sat on the pedestal of the Siva Lingam at the ancient temple of *Thiru Kadaiyur*, clasping his arms around the Siva Lingam's pillar with unshakeable faith, like a child would sit on the lap, hugging the shoulders of his protective and loving father. Siva appeared from the pillar and, in a single kick, silenced *Yaman*. Hence, Siva's names *Kaala Kaalan* (Death Destroyer) and *Mritunjayan* (Death Conquerer). Again, the pillar of the Lingam is the torso of Siva's Maheswara form (see below).



3. When *Thinnan* (the blessed devotee later named as *Kannappa* by Lord Siva Himself), a hunter prince went on his hunting expedition at mount *Thiru Kaalathi*, he had a first glimpse of the ancient Siva Lingam called *Kudumi Thevar* – a unique Lingam indeed as it bore a pair of eyes on the pillar's upper portion. He fell in inseparable love with the Lord and used his spear to gorge out one of his eyes to place on the Lingam's eye that had suddenly began to bleed. He was about to repeat his ultimate sacrifice upon seeing the second eye of the Lingam bleed. Siva appeared from the Lingam and stopped him, restored his vision and blessed *Kannappa* with eternal bliss. Here, the Lingam's pillar symbolises Siva's head.



4. When the *devas Brahma* and *Vishnu* fought over their supremacy, Almighty Siva appeared before them as an endless column of fire and challenged them to locate the extremities of this flaming continuum. After millennia of futile effort, their hearts shed the darkness of their egos and they humbly accepted their inferiority.

Siva then appeared in the midst of this fire pillar, enlightening them that the twosome and *Rudra* were really born out of Him and that it was He who had assigned them their cosmic duties of creation, sustenance, and dissolution. Siva then explained how He merged Himself with Rudra to perform the role of dissolution while personally assuming the two other roles of concealment and enlightenment. This *Annamalaiyaar* or *Lingothbhava* legend signifies that the Siva Lingam is really a solidified miniature representation of the Great Flame that is God Himself.



*Annamalaiyaar or Lingothbhava statue shows Siva appearing to Vishnu and Brahma inside of the endless pillar of flame*

5. In the epic *Ramayanam*, Rama (one of the Vishnu's incarnations) and his wife Seetha install a Lingam and worship Lord Siva in order to rid themselves of the sin of having caused the death of *Raavana* (the demon king of Sri Lanka who was great Siva devotee). This Lingam is worshipped till today as *Ramalingeswarar* in the seaport of *Rameswaram* in Tamil Nadu.



It is clearly apparent then that the Siva Lingam is a symbol of the auspicious (sin-purging) and benevolent (forgiving) God of the Universe.

### Scriptures

Finally, the Saiva scriptures – the Sanskrit *Vedas*, *Agamas*, as well as the 12 Tamil *Thirumurai* and the *Puranams* – assert with authority that the Siva Lingam symbolizes the Supreme Being which stands for God Himself and that it is the seed and seat of the endless cosmic process of evolution and dissolution.

1. 4 *Vedas* ('Knowledge Sources') – an Atharva Veda *samhita* ('collection of hymns') praises the lingam as *Yupa-Stambha* ('sacrificial pillar'), which it describes as the solidified formless form of the resplendent sacrificial fire representative of the Almighty. In that hymn a description is found of the beginningless and endless Stambha that is said to be put in place of the eternal Almighty. The Yupa-Stambha is believed to have given place in time to the Siva Lingam as we know it today. The Stambha (or Skambha) is believed to be a cosmic column or scaffold that functions as a bond which joins heaven and earth.



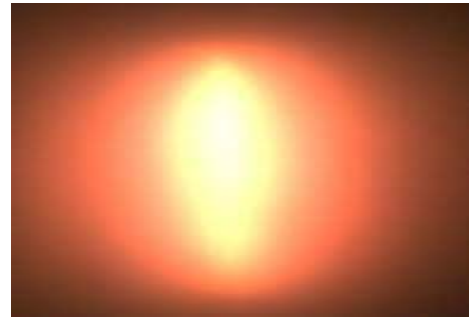
*A pair of Stambha at a sacrificial fire ritual site in Dholavira, at the ancient Indus Valley Harappan Civilization, Gujarat, India*

In response to questions from the German scholar Gustav Oppert at the Congress of the History of Religions held in Paris in 1900, Swami Vivekananda cites this Vedic reference to debunk, as a thoughtless imaginary invention, the flawed Western view of Siva Lingam as a phallic symbol.

The *Linga Sooktham* hails the Lingam variously as *oordhva-lingam* ('upward climbing fire pillar'), *hiranya-lingam* ('molten gold pillar'), *suvarna-lingam* ('shining pillar'), *divya-lingam* ('Emblem of Divinity'), *jwala lingam* ('sparkling

pillar'), *atma lingam* ('seat of souls'), and as *Siva lingam* ('Siva's Emblem').

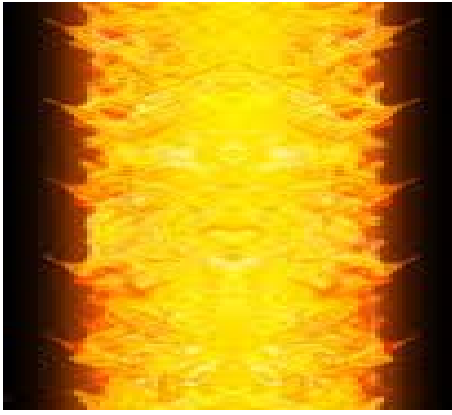
The great Sage *Vasishta* refers to Siva as '*Jothi Rupa*' or 'Flame Shaped', stating that from that 'Flame of immeasurable effulgence', everything in this Universe developed 34 billion years ago (modern science's believes the Universe to be 13.77 billion years old).



*See the resemblance between the shape of a flame and the pillar of a Siva Lingam*

2. 28 *Siva Agamas* ('Doctrines from Saiva Tradition') – *Vayu Samhita* describes Brahma and Vishnu's fight: "To put down their pride and to enlighten them, a Maha Lingam ('Great Pillar') arose amidst them, a wonderful lingam symbolising *Isvara* ('Supreme Lord'), shining with thousands of fiery beams, an immeasurable, and unrivalled form void of decay and growth, as well as beginning, middle and end. Brahma and Vishnu were stunned by the multitudes of fiery-beams"





*Maha Lingam is an endless pillar of fiery beams*

Siva Agamas refer to seven kinds of Lingams - *Gopuram*, *Sikaram*, *Dvaram*, *Prakaram*, *Balipectakam*, *Archakam*, and *Mulalingam* – i.e. a Siva Temple's tower, dome, gateway, courtyard, sacrificial pedestal, sanctum, and main Siva Lingam. Collectively called 'lingam', they all represent God.



*Stunning side view of the magnificent Peruvudaiyaar (Bragatheswarar) or 'Big' Temple, Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India. Note the mammoth temple tower resembling a Siva Lingam*

3. 18 *Puranas* ('Ancient Legends') - the sublime meaning of Siva Lingam is expounded in the *Kurma*, *Vayu*, *Linga*, and *Siva Puranas*. The Siva Purana says that the Siva Lingam is a symbol given to the Shapeless Supreme so as to shed light on the nature of this Being. It asserts that the owner of the Lingam is the '*Lingi*' (Eternal Siva) and that the Lingam serves to lead souls to the *Lingi*.

The *Vidyeshvara Samhita* of the Siva Purana mentions that Isvara says: "*Aham stambha roopena Avirasam*" or "I appeared in the form of a pillar" and that "First as a pillar and then as a figure did I appear". This beginningless and endless pillar of the macrocosm dwindles into everything in the microcosm (even an atom) so that the world may gaze at and worship it. The samhita asserts that the Siva Lingam is both *Pranavam* ('Primordial Sound of Creation') sculpted and symbolized (*yanthram* or symbol). According to the Linga Purana, the word 'linga' is used to refer to a visible symbol while '*alinga*' ('that which has no visible symbol') is used to refer to Siva's unmanifested state, one beyond visible forms.

4. 12 *Thirumurai* ('Guide to Divine Grace') - soul-stirring devotional Tamil hymns composed by 27 Saiva authors between 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. A *Thevaram* ('Lord's Garland') by *Thirunavukkarasar* called *Linga Puranam* ('Ancient Legend of Lingam'): 'Red-eyed Vishnu and Brahma between them searched everywhere but found not Siva; "Am here" He said, revealing Himself in the Lingam, the bright red matted hair Lord of Merits.' (5.80.11)

*Manikkavasakar's Thiruvashagam* ('Words of Divine Grace'): "As the twosome known as *Braman* and *Ari* ignorantly asserted, 'Supreme, I am the Supreme', *Aran* assumed the form of a Limitless Pillar of Flame and stood Supreme before them; let's sing and dance to reminisce that Lord!" (8.15.12)

*Thirumular's Thirumanthiram* ('Mantras of Divine Grace'): "*Ayan who appeared, Maal, Rudran, Mahesan, strength-*

*conferring Five-Faced Sadasivan, lofty Bindu and Nadam, the grace-conferring Sakthi and Sivan; for all these forms, the Lingam is the common symbol. So, one should realize and worship the Formless Siva as well in this formless form".* (10.7.7.4)

*Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam ('Great Ancient Legend'): "For the unseen formlessness and the seen form, the symbol and source is Siva Lingam, which indeed is the Lord adorned with a long snake, He, in all grace, manifested in their midst as a fire pillar piercing the upper and nether worlds." (12.3463)*

### **Why the Misinterpretations**

It is amply obvious from the foregoing analysis that, in the entire breadth and depth of Saiva religious literature, there is not an iota of reference to the lingam as a fertility symbol (unlike in the case of the Greek religion where Priapus was overtly depicted and worshipped as a phallic deity). So, why then the gross misinterpretations? Here are some reasons.

While the word 'lingam' originally referred specifically to the symbol of the formless-form of God, with the passage of time it became materially detached from this meaning and began referring symbols (or *kuRi* in Tamil) in general. The word came to refer to any distinguishing mark – human body (*piNda lingam*), Universe (*aNda lingam*), male and female genitals (*aaN kuRi* and *peN kuRi*), exclamation and question marks (*aachariya kuRi* and *keLvi kuRi*). So, somewhere during the evolution of the word 'lingam', it took on a reference to 'genital' due to the confusion between 'Siva Lingam' (symbol of God) and 'lingam' (any symbol) as well as between the meanings of the words 'symbol' and 'genital'.

This common law of degeneration of words was compounded by the influx into India of Muslim conquerors, colonial powers as well as Christian missionaries - leading to the advent of a hitherto non-existent nexus between the Greek phallic worship and that of the Siva Lingam. Ignorance apart, ill-intent aimed at discrediting native religious practices would also have played a part in driving the misinterpretations.

Ironically, when such inflammatory interpretations became the subject of so-called Western 'scholarly' work from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it struck a chord with some indigenous people enamoured by the perverse Greco-Western view of the Siva Lingam as an icon of fertility.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

For those wise enough to cast aside these meaningless misinterpretations, the **Siva Lingam** is verily a set of cosmic principles:

1. **Sacred principle – the most ancient and widespread Object of Worship**



*An amazing 6,000 year old granite Siva Lingam found in Sudwara Cave, South Africa*

2. **Symbolic principle – a universal Emblem of the One Formless Supreme**



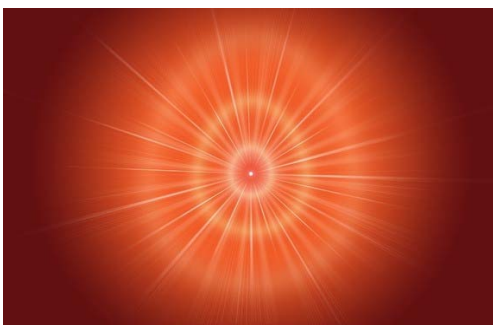
*Ancient Siva Lingam known as Lia Fáil (Stone of Destiny) on Tara Hill, County Meath, Ireland*

3. **Scientific principle – the Seed & Seat of the Universe's Evolution & Dissolution**



*The Pillar of Siva Lingam is efficient cause and pedestal is instrumental cause of the Universe*

4. **Subtle principle – a solidified miniature representation of the Divine Flame of Cosmic Creation**



*Siva Lingam is a flame-shaped Symbol of Creation*

5. **Spiritual principle – the philosophy linking souls, Universe, and God.**



*Devotees (signifying the soul) prostrating at the majestic sight of Mount Kailash or Kailash (signifying God), Lord Siva's mysterious snow-draped abode in the Himalayan mountain range (signifying the Universe). Notice how Mount Kailash looks exactly like a Siva Lingam smeared in holy ash, and with even a Nandhi-like natural formation just in front of it!*

In conclusion, in spite of the numerous blasphemous interpretations found in modern day literature, there is absolutely no reference to human genitals or to fertility worship in the entire spectrum of the typology, geometry, etymology, philosophy, legends, and scriptures pertaining to the Siva Lingam. So, to suggest that the central element of the Saiva religion is based on sexual iconography is not only highly offensive but totally misguided. Saiva people the world over do know that the fundamental belief system of the Saiva religion is that, in the karmic cycle, human life represents a precious opportunity for souls to eternally redeem themselves from the vicious cycle of birth and death. And this can only be achieved by progressively shifting one's attachment away from material and bodily pleasures towards spirituality and total surrender to God.

This principle is symbolised in Siva Temples - where the *pali peetam* (sacrificial pedestal)

outside of the main sanctum represents the discarding of the soul's bondage to ego, karma, illusion; the *Nandhi* (sacred bull) that sits ahead of the pali peetam signifies the soul that seeks God; and the *Siva Lingam* (formless form) in the sanctum sanctorum represents God Almighty. It is easy to discern the complete disconnect between such a pristine belief system and something as base as phallic worship.

It is critical for Saiva devotees, then, to endeavour to understand the true philosophy of

Siva Lingam and its worship and then to actively take the lead to impart the correct views to fellow believers and others. Only then can the much deserving sanctity of this timeless and supreme religious symbol be duly restored and upheld as "nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity" (Martin Luther King Jr).

May Almighty Lord Siva guide us all onto the right path!

## **SIVAYANAMA**

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