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ISSUE 20 SPRING 2015

JASON BIRCH	4	THE YOGATĀRĀVALĪ <i>And the Hidden History of Yoga</i>
DR. ROBERT E. SVOBODA	14	EXCERPT FROM AGHORA II: KUNDALINI
	20	KUNDALINI: INTERVIEW WITH DR. SVOBODA <i>Conducted by Rick Archer of Buddha at The Gas Pump</i>
ROXANNE GUPTA PH.D.	42	BEHIND THE OCHRE ROBE <i>The extraordinary life and death of Agehananda Bharati</i>
ROBERT SCHNEIDER & BENJAMIN PHELAN	50	ENCOUNTER WITH THE INFINITE <i>The story of the mathematical genius Srinivasan Ramanujan</i>
NAOMI WORTH	60	DREAMING IN EARLY ADVAITA VEDĀNTA <i>A main component of Śaṅkaracarya's view of Reality</i>
JAIDEV DASGUPTA	70	IN SEARCH OF IMMORTALITY <i>An Introduction into Indic Worldviews About the book by the author</i>
ROBERT & SATYA MOSES	74	DEVOTION AT LORD JAGANNATH RATH YATRA <i>Photo essay of the annual Chariot Festival of Lord Jagannath in Puri, Odisha, July 2104</i>
SATYA MOSES		COVER <i>Surya Bhagavan</i>

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diacritical marks,  
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the transliteration of  
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Many of the articles  
do contain these  
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authors have elected  
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romanized form.

अ	आ	इ	ई	उ	ऊ
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū
ए	ऐ	ओ	औ		
e	ai	o	au		
ऋ	ॠ	ऌ	ॡ	अं	अः
r̥	r̄	l̥	l̄	am̐	aḥ
क	ख	ग	घ	ङ	
ka	kha	ga	gha	ṅa	
च	छ	ज	झ	ञ	
ca	cha	ja	jha	ña	
ट	ठ	ड	ढ	ण	
ṭa	ṭha	ḍa	ḍha	ṇa	
त	थ	द	ध	न	
ta	tha	da	dha	na	
प	फ	ब	भ	म	
pa	pha	ba	bha	ma	
य	र	ल	व		
ya	ra	la	va		
श	ष	स	ह		
śa	ṣa	sa	ha		
क्ष	त्र	ज्ञ			
kṣa	tra	ñā			

Lord Jagannath prasad being delivered.  
Puri July 2014 ©Robert Moses





# THE YOGATĀRĀVALĪ AND THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF YOGA<sup>1</sup>

JASON BIRCH

*Kṛṣṇamācārya performing the three locks in Padmāsana.*

THOSE WHO HAVE ATTENDED AN Aṣṭāṅgayoga class in the tradition of Pattabhi Jois are probably familiar with at least one verse of the *Yogatārāvalī*, whether they know the name of the text or not. Pattabhi Jois would chant the first verse of the *Yogatārāvalī* at the beginning of a morning class, and many of his students continue to do this before their yoga practice:

*vande gurūṇāṃ caraṇāravinde  
sandarśitasvātmasukhāvabodhe |  
niḥśreyase jāṅgalikāyamāne  
saṃsārahālāhalamohaśāntyai ||1||*

"I pay homage to the gurus' lotus feet, which have revealed the knowledge of the bliss of one's own self. Unsurpassed, [these lotus-feet] act like toxicologists<sup>2</sup> for curing the delusion that is the poison [known as] transmigration."

The name *Yogatārāvalī* can be understood as: 'A String of Stars on Yoga.' Each verse of this short text is likened to a shining star, which illuminates the topic of yoga. Its first verse acknowledges the importance of the teacher, who transmits to the student the liberating knowledge that extinguishes the suffering of worldly life.

In the *Yogatārāvalī*, the means to liberation is the practice of Haṭha and Rājayoga. Its Haṭhayoga consists of physical techniques; in particular, the three locks (*mūla*, *uddiyana*<sup>3</sup> and *jālandhara*). These locks are applied during breath retentions (*kumbhaka*) and, as a result of this practice, the Haṭhayogin is able to immerse the mind in an internal resonance (*nādānusandhāna*).

In contrast to this, Rājayoga is simply the practice of *samādhi*, a profound state of meditation in which there is

no mental activity, no breathing and no positional consciousness. That is to say, Rājayoga is something beyond the common experience of "I" and "mine". The *Yogatārāvalī* puts it this way:

*ahaṃmamatvādi vibhāya sarvaṃ  
śrīrājayoge sthīramānasānām |  
na draṣṭṛtā nāsti ca drśyabhāvaḥ  
sā jṛmbhate kevalasaṃvid eva ||16||*

"Having left behind everything beginning with the states of 'I' and 'mine', those whose minds are steady in the sacred [state of] Rājayoga are neither observers nor objects of observation. Only an isolated awareness prevails."

The main difference between Haṭha and Rājayoga is that the latter is beyond all techniques. In other words, once the Rājayogin has achieved *samādhi*, other



*Sri. K. Pattabhi Jois and Sri R. Sharath Jois chanting the first verse of the Yogatārāvalī before class at the Puck Building, New York ©Jesse Gordon*

yoga practices such as concentration and meditation become redundant.

*na dr̥ṣṭilakṣyāṇi na cittabandho  
na deśakālau na ca vāyurodhaḥ |  
na dhāraṇādhyānapariśramo vā  
samedhamāne sati rājayoge ||14||*

"There are no gazing points, no fixing of the mind [on a meditation object], no time or place, no [deliberate] stopping of the breath, nor the effort of concentration (*dhāraṇā*) and meditation (*dhyāna*), when Rājayoga is flourishing."

It is likely that Haṭha and Rājayoga began as separate traditions. Much of the *Yogatārāvalī*'s teachings on Rājayoga appear to derive from those of the earliest extant Rājayoga text called the *Amanaska*, which can be dated to the twelfth century. The *Amanaska* teaches

a system of yoga called Rājayoga, which it says is 'the king (*rāja*) of all yogas.' It omits the first seven auxiliaries of aṣṭāṅgayoga. In fact, the author considers these auxiliaries and the techniques of Haṭhayoga to be not just ineffectual practices, but hindrances on the path to attaining *samādhi*.

In effect, the *Amanaska* says that there is little point in trying to master difficult postures, breathing exercises and meditation techniques when the goal of these techniques, *samādhi*, otherwise known as the no-mind state (*amanaska*), can be achieved easily by Śāmbhavī Mudrā.

The yogin who is practising this Mudrā is described as gazing outwards (*bahirdṛṣṭi*) with eyes half open, half closed, while directing the mind inwards to an internal focal point (*antarlakṣya*).

The *Yogatārāvalī* teaches this technique and calls it *Amanaskamudrā*. This



name and other technical vocabulary common to both texts suggest that the *Amanaska* influenced the author of the *Yogatārāvalī*.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the *Yogatārāvalī* was probably composed sometime after the twelfth century.

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Eddie Stern for encouraging me to write this article and for his valuable comments on it. Thanks also to Jacqueline Hargreaves, James Mallinson, Mark Singleton and Elizabeth De Michelis for their many helpful comments on early drafts of this article. The illustration of Śāmbhavī Mudrā and figures 1 and 2 are by Jacqueline Hargreaves. Figures 1 and 2 contain images by Febrian Anugrah.

<sup>2</sup>The term *jāṅgalika* is usually spelt *jāṅgulika* in Sanskrit texts and it is often translated as 'snake doctor.' For example, in Sures Chandra Banerji's "A Companion to Sanskrit Literature" (1989, p. 427), *jāṅgulika* is defined as a "snake doctor; dealer in antidotes of poison." Also, Monier-Williams dictionary defines *jāṅgulika* as a "snake charmer." However, in the *Yogatārāvalī*'s first verse, *jāṅgalika* is being used metaphorically to describe gurus who can cure a poison called Hālāhala. Rather than a snake poison, Hālāhala probably refers to either the mythological poison produced at the churning of the ocean and swallowed by Śiva (thereby causing the blueness of his neck) or some plant-based poison. Therefore, it appears that the guru is being likened to a doctor who specializes in the general treatment of poisons (i.e., a toxicologist) rather than a snake doctor or charmer. This is somewhat supported by a Sanskrit commentary on the *Yogatārāvalī* called the *Yogabhāvaṇaprakāśikā*, which glosses *jāṅgalika* as a *viśavaidya* (i.e., 'a poison specialist' or 'toxicologist'), and so does the *Amarakośa* (1.8.510).

<sup>3</sup>There are two different spellings of this *bandha* in the *Yogatārāvalī*: *uddiyana* and *udiyāna*. The difference is due to the metre of the verses. In manuscripts of the *Haṭhapradīpikā* and *Dattātreyayogasāstra*, this *bandha* is usually spelt *uddiyāna* or *uddiyāna*.

<sup>4</sup>Other similarities between the *Yogatārāvalī*'s and the *Amanaska*'s Rājayoga include descriptions of *samādhi* as devoid of waking, sleep, life and death; the mention of the eyes becoming still, the breath stopping and the mind being free from both intentional (*saṅkalpa*) and discursive (*vikalpa*) thought in the no-mind state; the use of the simile of a 'lamp in a windless place' in regard to the yogin in the no-mind state; the reference to detachment (*udāsīnatā*); and the use of the compounds *sahajāmanaska* and *yoganidrā* as synonyms for *samādhi*.



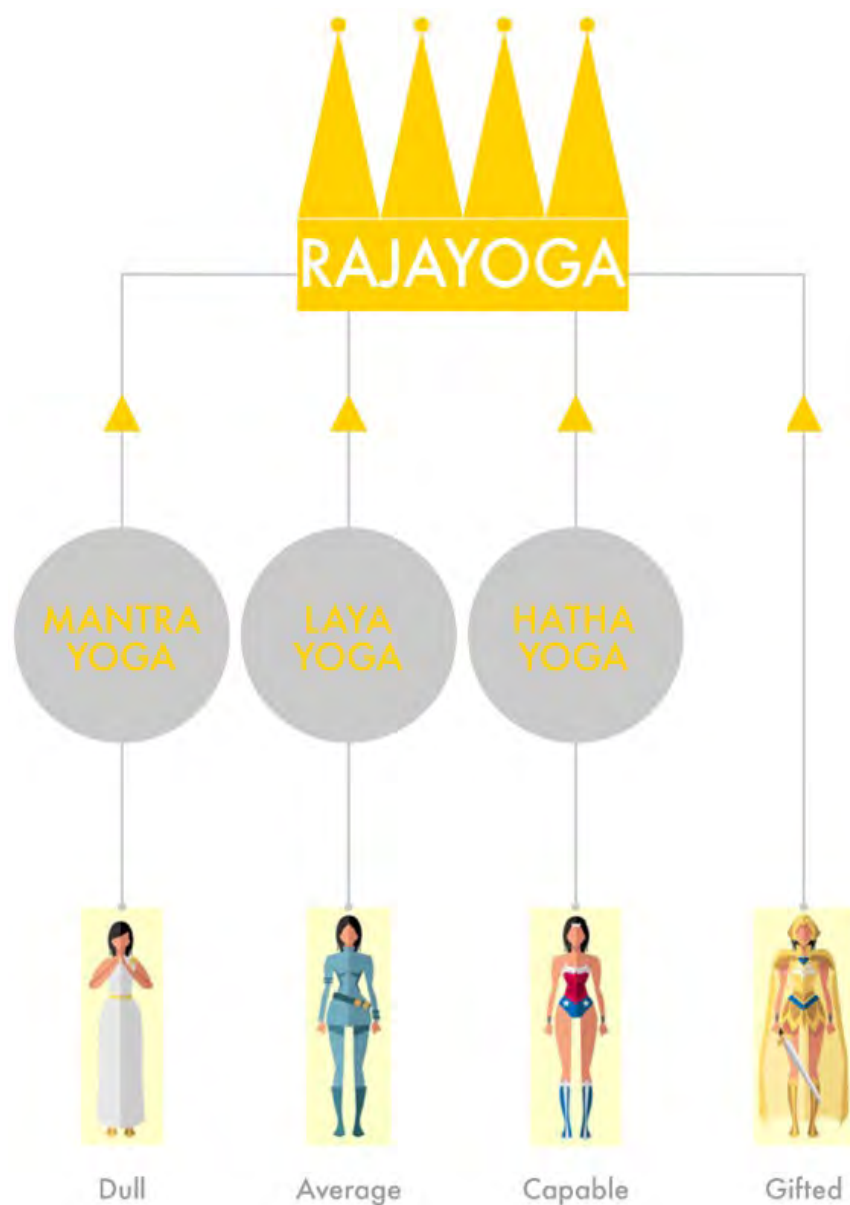


Figure 1: The fourfold system of yoga in the Dattatreya yogaśāstra and the Amaraughaprabodha.

Haṭha and Rājayoga were combined in other medieval yoga texts that were probably written only one or two centuries after the *Amanaska*. Examples of such texts include the *Dattatreya yogaśāstra* (12-13<sup>th</sup> c.) and the *Amaraughaprabodha* (14<sup>th</sup> c.). These texts combined Haṭha and Rājayoga in a hierarchical relationship, along with Mantra and Layayoga. The idea behind

this fourfold scheme was that the dumbest students were taught Mantrayoga, the most gifted, Rājayoga, and those in between, Laya and Haṭhayoga. In this system, Mantra, Laya and Haṭhayoga were auxiliary practices aimed solely at the achievement of *samādhi* (i.e., Rājayoga). However, presumably, one could dispense with Haṭhayoga altogether and achieve *samādhi* by

practising Mantra or Layayoga. Furthermore, it appears that neither Mantra, Laya nor Haṭhayoga were of any use to those gifted students who could readily achieve *samādhi*. This fourfold system is depicted in figure 1.

The *Yogatārāvalī* changed this fourfold hierarchical relationship in a subtle yet very significant way. It omitted Mantrayoga and integrated Layayoga with Haṭha, thereby creating a system in which Haṭhayoga was the sole means to Rājayoga for all practitioners, regardless of their capabilities. In doing so, the physical practices of Haṭhayoga became indispensable for achieving *samādhi* in this system. This new relationship is seen in figure 2.

The fifteenth-century *Haṭhapradīpikā* adopted a scheme similar to the twofold system.<sup>5</sup> The author of this text stated explicitly the mutual dependence of Haṭha and Rājayoga as follows:

*haṭhaṃ vinā rājayogo  
rājayogaṃ vinā haṭhaḥ |  
na sidhyati tato yugmam  
ā niṣpatteḥ samabhyaset ||2.76||*

"Without Haṭhayoga, Rāja is not accomplished, and without Rājayoga, nor is Haṭha. Therefore, the yogin should practice both until the final stage [of yoga is attained]."

The *Yogatārāvalī* describes a process whereby the three locks (*bandha*) are practised during deliberate breath retentions (*kumbhaka*) to bring about a special type of breath retention called *Kevala Kumbhaka*. Unlike deliberate breath retentions that are performed by holding the breath according to one's capacity (*yathāśakti*), *Kevala Kumbhaka* is a spontaneous cessation of the flow of the breath, along with all sensory and mental activity. In the *Yogatārāvalī*, *Kevala Kumbhaka* is the central mechanism that connects



Figure 2: The twofold system of yoga in the Yogatārāvalī

Haṭha and Rājayoga. This explains why nearly one fifth of its verses are devoted to describing this special type of breath retention.

The similarities between the *Yogatārāvalī* and the *Haṭhapradīpikā* seem extensive enough to suggest that one influenced the other. In fact, both texts share a verse on immersing the mind in the internal resonance (*nāḍānusandhāna*):

*sadāśivoktāni sapādalakṣa-  
layāvadhānāni vasanti loke |  
nāḍānusandhānasamādhim ekaṃ  
manyāmahe mānyatamaṃ layānām  
||2||<sup>6</sup>*

"One hundred and twenty-five thousand concentration [techniques<sup>7</sup>] of meditative absorption (*laya*), which were taught by Śiva [still] remain in the world. We think

the *samādhi* that is brought about by immersing [the mind] in the internal resonance (*nāḍa*) is the principal and most venerable of [all the techniques of] meditative absorption."

Seeing that the author of the *Haṭhapradīpikā* compiled his work from earlier yoga texts, it is likely that he borrowed and slightly modified the above verse from the *Yogatārāvalī*. If this is the case, the *Yogatārāvalī* must have been written before the fifteenth century. The *Haṭhapradīpikā*'s borrowing from the *Yogatārāvalī* is further suggested by the similar teachings of these two texts on Kevala Kumbhaka, immersing the mind in the internal resonance (*nāḍānusandhāna*) and Śāmbhavi Mudrā.

Reading the *Yogatārāvalī* in conjunction with yoga texts of the same era sheds much light on its terminology and content. Apart from what I have mentioned above, another striking example is the usage of various words for *samādhi* in the *Yogatārāvalī*. The terms *manonmanī*, *unmanī*, *sahajāmanaska*, *turiya* and *yoganidra* appear to have the same meaning as *rājayoga* and *samādhi*. This is also the case in the *Amanaska* and the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, the latter of which explicitly states that these terms are to be understood as synonyms (*ekavācaka*):

*rājayogaḥ samādhis ca  
unmanī ca manonmanī |  
amaratvaṃ layas tattvaṃ  
śūnyāśūnyaṃ paraṃ padam ||  
amanaskaṃ tathādvaitaṃ  
nirālambaṃ nirañjanam |  
jīvanmuktis ca sahajā  
turyā cety ekavācakāḥ ||4.3-4||*

"Rājayoga, *samādhi*, *unmanī*, *manonmanī*, *amaratva*, *laya*, *tattva*, *śūnyāśūnya*, *para-pada*, *amanaska*, *advaita*, *nirālamba*, *nirañjana*, *jīvanmukti*, *sahajā* and *turyā* [all] say the same thing."

<sup>5</sup> The difference between the twofold system of the *Yogatārāvalī* and the *Haṭhapradīpikā* is that the latter integrated Layayoga with both Haṭha and Rājayoga. For example, the Layayoga technique of lying on the ground like a corpse until the mind dissolves (*cittalaya*) becomes a Haṭhayogic posture called Śavāsana in the *Haṭhapradīpikā*'s first chapter, whereas the Layayoga practice of Nāḍānusandhāna is described in the *Haṭhapradīpikā*'s fourth chapter, which is on Rājayoga.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Haṭhapradīpikā* 4.66 (*śrīādināthena sapādaḥkoṭīlayaparakārāḥ kathitā jayanti | nāḍānusandhānakam ekaṃ eva manyāmahe mukhyatamaṃ layānām*).

<sup>7</sup> The meaning of *avadhānāni* as literally 'concentrations' can be found in Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka* (2.12). Jayaratha's commentary glosses *avadhāna* as, "one-pointedness on a particular object of attention" (*pratiniyatāvadheyaviśayanīṣṭham ekāgryam*).



Medieval discourse on Rājayoga does not mention different levels of *samādhi* as seen in Buddhism and Patañjali's *Yogaśāstra*. Rājayoga texts consistently described *samādhi* as the stone-like state of complete inactivity; mental, respiratory and physical. Like meditating ascetics in the *Mahābhārata*, the Rājayogin in *samādhi* is sometimes said to be lifeless like a piece of wood or, according to the *Yogatārāvalī*, as still as a lamp's flame in a windless place:

*cittendriyāṇāṃ ciranigrabeṇa  
śvāsapracāre śamite yamīndrāḥ |  
nīvātadīpā iva nīścalāṅgā  
manonmanīmaghnadhiyo bhavanti*  
||18||

"When the movement of the breath has stopped because of the prolonged restraint of the mind and senses, the bodies of the best yogins become unmoving, like the flames [of lamps] in a windless place, and their minds immersed in the no-mind [state] of mind."

As I have mentioned above, the connections between the *Yogatārāvalī*, the *Amanaska* and the *Haṭhpradīpikā* indicate that the *Yogatārāvalī* was probably written between the twelfth and fifteen centuries. However, the colophon<sup>8</sup> of at least one manuscript and several printed editions attribute the *Yogatārāvalī*'s authorship to the great Advaitavedāntin philosopher, Śaṅkarācārya, who is generally believed to have lived in the eighth century. Colophons are not a certain indication of authorship, for they may be composed and modified after the text was written. In this case, a sectarian claim to the *Yogatārāvalī*

could have prompted someone to compose colophons that attributed the text to Śaṅkarācārya. Terminology such as *ātma*, *turiya*, etc., which is reasonably common in Tantras and medieval yoga texts of this time but also prominent in Advaitavedāntin texts, could have been used to justify the attribution. It is also possible that the author was a yogin by the name of Śaṅkara and, at some more recent time, a scribe embellished his name in the colophon with the honorific titles reserved for the famous Śaṅkarācārya. In my opinion, the *Yogatārāvalī* was not composed before the twelfth century because its technical terminology, such as Rāja and Haṭhayoga, is absent in Sanskrit works written before this time, including the famous commentaries and works widely attributed to the great Advaitavedāntin philosopher.

THE TWELFTH TO THE FIFTEENTH century was a remarkable time in the history of yoga. It saw the emergence and advance of physical yoga techniques and the supremacy of the practice of *samādhi* as the means to liberation in yoga traditions. Early Haṭha and Rājayoga traditions created simple soteriological systems, which were based solely on the practice of yoga (rather than ritual, gnosis or devotion). In doing so, they omitted the doctrinal and ritualistic complexity of earlier tantric and philosophical traditions.

These yoga traditions incorporated some of the techniques and terminology found in earlier Tantras. However, it is misleading to refer to medieval Haṭha and Rājayoga as types of tantric yoga because, not only did their early texts omit tantric ritual and doctrine, but

they also fashioned new systems of yoga out of simpler methods of meditation and more physical techniques than are found in older traditions of Tantra. Generally speaking, tantric yoga is usually characterised by complex meditative practices that integrate elaborate metaphysics and doctrine with visualisation.<sup>9</sup> The complexity of tantric yoga contrasts sharply with the simple meditation techniques of early Haṭha and Rājayoga texts, such as Śāmbhavī Mudrā and nādānusandhāna.

The shift towards physical practice, doctrinal simplicity and stone-like *samādhi* (as opposed to gnostic meditation techniques<sup>10</sup>) suggest that Haṭha and Rājayoga were influenced by older ascetic traditions. Indeed, the emphasis on retaining semen (*bindudhāraṇa*) and the physical techniques peculiar to Haṭhayoga, such as the three locks (*bandha*) and inversions (*viparītakaraṇī*), is absent in earlier Tantras.

Nonetheless, the label 'ascetic' does not capture the ingenuity of early Haṭha and Rājayoga systems, which omitted extreme ascetic practices such as sitting amid five fires, standing on one leg for twelve years, lying on a bed of nails or holding the arms up until they wither away. Some of their texts denounce afflicting the body (*kāyakleśa*), and those who would practise headstand are advised against fasting, which is a moderate form of asceticism that has been acceptable to most orthodox Hindus.

Haṭhayoga, the yoga of force (*haṭha*), was a yoga that could force certain changes to occur. For example, it could force downward moving vitality (i.e., *apānavāyu*) to rise.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the difficulty of its techniques was probably a matter of one's perspective.



*An Ascetic in Bound Lotus Sitting in a Circle of Smouldering Fires.*

*Some physically demanding postures probably derive from ancient ascetic traditions. For example, Bound Lotus pose (baddhapadmāsana) is described in some of the earliest Haṭha texts (e.g., Vivekamārtaṇḍa 8, Gorakṣaśataka 59-60, Haṭhpradīpikā 1.46) as well as more recent ones. However, extreme acts of asceticism such as sitting amid smouldering cow dung fires are not included among the practices of medieval Haṭha texts. Photo: James Mallinson, Haridvar, 2010*

<sup>8</sup> A colophon is a brief statement about the text's author, name and, sometimes, its date. Colophons are usually placed at the end of each chapter and the end of the text itself.

<sup>9</sup> I am aware of two earlier tantric works which are exceptions to this. They are known as the *Vijñānabhairavatantra* and the *Svabodhodayamañjarī*. They teach simple contemplative practices without much doctrine and metaphysics. Their emphasis on dissolving the mind (*cittalaya*) suggests they may have inspired later Layayoga traditions.

<sup>10</sup> On the differences between ascetic and gnostic meditative practices, see Johannes Bronkhorst, *Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> See *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* 144, *Śārṅgadharapaddhati* 4416 and *Yogabījā* 116: "Having pressed the anus with the heel, the [yogin] should forcibly contract *apānavāyu*, so that [this] *vāyu* goes upwards repeatedly." (*gudaṃ pārṣṇyā tu sampīḍya vāyum ākuñcayed balāt | vāraṇi vāraṇi yathā cordhvaṇi samāyāti samīraṇaḥ*).



On the one hand, Jain ascetics and many wandering renunciants must have seen Haṭhayoga as child’s play or, perhaps, they thought it was asceticism watered down for the masses. On the other hand, the physical practices of Haṭhayoga would have seemed strenuous and difficult for gnostics who believed that liberation could be attained through listening to the Upaniṣads, contemplative techniques and the like.

In order to appeal to a wide audience, early Haṭha and Rājayoga traditions combined tantric and ascetic techniques within a radically simplified doctrinal framework. As an early Haṭha text made clear:

*brāhmaṇaḥ śramaṇo vāpi  
bauddho vāpy ārhatō ’thavā |  
kāpāliko vā cārvākaḥ  
śraddhayā sahitaḥ sudhīḥ ||  
yogābhyāsarato nityaṃ  
sarvasiddhim avāpnuyāt* <sup>12</sup>

“Whether a Brahmin, ascetic, Buddhist, Jain, skull-bearer (*kāpālika*) or materialist; one who is wise, has confidence [in the teachings of Haṭha and Rājayoga] and is devoted to the practice of yoga, will always obtain success in all things.”

The strategy of attracting a wide audience was stated explicitly by a more recent Haṭha text called the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*, which was probably composed in the eighteenth century. The opening line of this text claims that its teachings are for anyone who is afflicted by the pain of transmigration (*saṃsāra*), much like the *Yogatārāvalī*’s first verse.

However, the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* also mentions specifically that its

teachings are for women, as well as those people who are completely attached to sense objects, those fallen from caste and those who do extremely reckless actions.<sup>13</sup> The explicit inclusion of women here has much to do with the fact that they were excluded from certain religious activities in orthodox Hinduism. For example, women were generally prohibited from learning the *Vedas*, using vedic mantras, renouncing society to become ascetics and so on.

Some other yoga texts such as the *Śivasamhitā* and *Yogayājñavalkya* reveal that householders, women and members of the lowest orthodox caste (*śūdra*) were among their audience. Though most texts do not identify the people for which their teachings were intended, explicit prohibitions against teaching a particular group of people are absent.

The inclusivity of these yoga traditions is further indicated by the marginal role of theism in their texts. Though the teachings are presented within either a Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava framework, the theistic elements are very much in the background, so much so that a text’s orientation may not always be clear to the reader. The *Yogatārāvalī* is a good example of such minimal theism. In one verse, Śiva is mentioned as the first teacher of the many methods of absorption (*laya*) and, in two other verses, *samādhi* is referred to as the state of Viṣṇu (*viṣṇupada*). Nothing further is said of these deities, nor their pantheons, myths, mantras and the devotional practices associated with them.

On the whole, the texts of early Haṭha and Rājayoga traditions reveal varying degrees of universalism. In other words, they reduced the religious and philosophical elements that may

have excluded people of different creeds. They offered a minimalist system of yoga for attaining liberation. The only essential requirement was that one practised the methods of these yogas, having learnt them from a guru. The *Yogatārāvalī*’s emphasis on practice and its omission of complex metaphysics, doctrine, ritual and extreme asceticism is in keeping with this.

The emphasis on practice (*abhyāsa*) is at the heart of Haṭha and Rājayoga texts, which frequently reiterate the importance of practice for attaining the goals of yoga. For example,

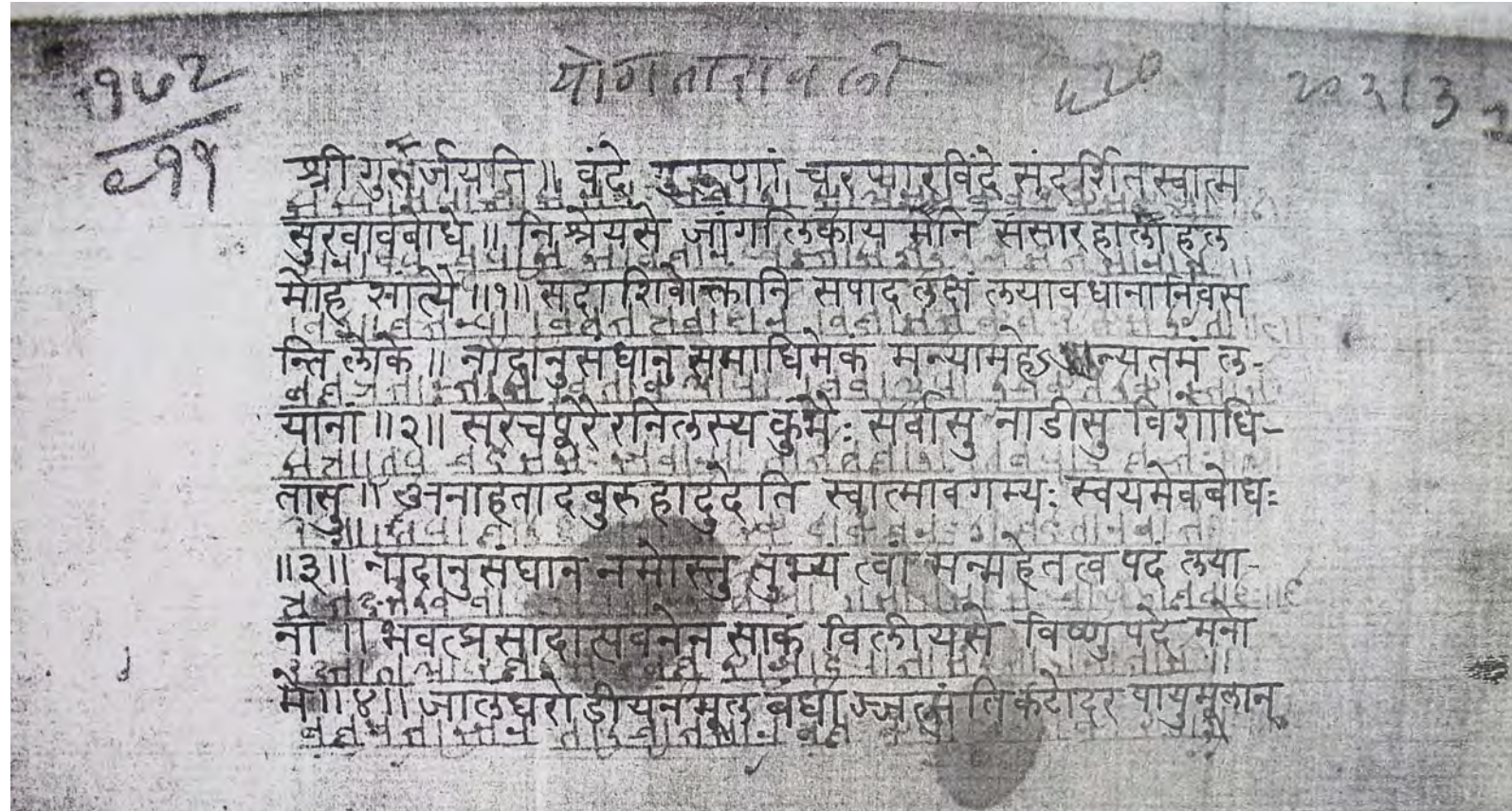
*avismṛtya guror vākyaṃ  
abhyaset tad aharniśam ||  
evaṃ bhaved ghaṭāvasthā  
satatābhyāsayogataḥ |  
anabhyāseṇa yogasya vrthā  
goṣṭhyā na sidhyati ||  
tasmāt sarvaprayatnena  
yogam eva samabhyaset* <sup>14</sup>

“Having remembered the teachings of the guru, one should practise [yoga] night and day. In this way, the [second] stage [of yoga called] ‘the pot’ arises through constant practice. Without the practice of yoga, all is in vain. It is not accomplished by socialising. Therefore, with every effort, one should practise only yoga.”

And in the *Yogatārāvalī*:

*vicchinnaśaṃkalpavikalpamūle  
niḥśeṣanirmūlitakarmajāle |  
nirantarābhyāsanitāntabhadrā  
sā jṛmbhate yogini yoganidrā ||25||*

“The yogic sleep [of *Samādhi*,<sup>15</sup>] in which extraordinary happiness arises from ceaseless practice, blossoms in the yogin whose roots of intentional



First Folio of a Manuscript of the Yogatārāvalī at the Prājña Pāṭhaśālā Maṇḍal, Wai.

and unintentional thought have been cut away and whose network of karma has been completely uprooted.”

#### SCHOLARSHIP ON HAṬHA AND RĀJAYOGA IS IN ITS INFANCY

MUCH OF THE HISTORY OF YOGA remains undiscovered. In particular, a detailed and comprehensive history of Rāja and Haṭhayoga has not been written. Indeed, such a history cannot be written until more evidence has been made available. If one looks at the textual sources in most historical accounts of yoga that have been published in the last thirty years, very few new sources have been brought to light.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, new observations and theories have been advanced in regard to yoga’s history, but attempts to construct the history of Haṭhayoga with only a few widely known texts such as the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, *Śivasamhitā* and

*Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* are failing to advance our knowledge in any significant way. The omission of texts such as the *Yogatārāvalī* in secondary sources is proof of the premature attempts at writing the history of Haṭhayoga. Various other yoga texts remain in Indian libraries, unedited, unstudied and unknown to scholars and practitioners.

A good example of the rudimentary state of scholarship on yoga is the fact that scholars are still wondering why there are so few postures (*āsana*) in medieval yoga sources compared with the large number known at the beginning of the twentieth century. The *Haṭhapradīpikā* has fifteen *āsana* and the *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā*, thirty-two, but Kṛṣṇamācārya taught more than two hundred. Part of the answer to this quandary can be found in some Haṭhayoga texts written between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. In the aggregate, these texts list and

describe hundreds of *āsana*. When this textual evidence is edited, translated and published, only then will more complete histories of yoga be written.

The other part of the answer consists of the influence of European physical culture and Indian traditions such wrestling (*mallavidyā*) and martial arts, as well as the innovative genius of twentieth-century yoga gurus such as Kṛṣṇamācārya and Pattabhi Jois. Though some late medieval Haṭhayoga traditions practised numerous *āsana*, their texts do not mention special sequences of *āsana*, the movements called *vinyāsa*, nor the sun salutations known as *sūryanamaskāra*. In fact, the two types of sūryanamaskāra taught by Pattabhi Jois are based on Kṛṣṇamācārya’s vinyāsa format.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, it is likely that sūryanamaskāra in one form or another is an ancient practice. Brahmānanda, the nineteenth-century commentator on the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, knew of a rather

<sup>12</sup> *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* 41–42ab. This text can be dated to the 12–13th c. and is one of the earliest extant texts to teach Haṭha-yoga (see the article on ‘Haṭhayoga’ by James Mallinson at <https://soas.academia.edu/JamesMallinson>).

<sup>13</sup> The opening lines of the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* state: “For those afflicted by the pain of Saṃsāra; those completely attached to sense objects; women; those fallen from their caste and those who do extremely reckless actions; for their sake, this *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*, composed by Kapālakuraṇṭaka, was written [...]” (*saṃsāratāpataptānām || atyantaviṣayasaktānām || straiṇānām jātibhraṣṭānām || atisāhasakarmakartṛnām || tatkr̥te || iyaṃ kapālakuraṇṭakakṛtahāṭhābhyāsapaddhatir [...] likhyate*).

<sup>14</sup> *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* 105cd–107ab. Also see *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* 41–42ab. (footnote 12).

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the use of the term *yoganidrā* as a synonym for *samādhi*, see: <http://theluminescent.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/yoganidra.html>

<sup>16</sup> The main exceptions to this are the publications of the Kaivalyadhama Yoga Institute and the Lonavla Yoga Institute.

<sup>17</sup> I wish to thank Eddie Stern for pointing this out to me (p.c. 28.10.2014).



strenuous practice of sun salutations, which he believed to be inappropriate for Haṭhayoga.<sup>18</sup> His comments were prompted by the *Haṭhapradīpikā*'s caveat against afflicting the body (*kāyakleśa*).<sup>19</sup>

#### THE NEED FOR CRITICAL EDITIONS

THE LACK OF CRITICAL EDITIONS is impeding progress in scholarship on yoga. Of the dozens of medieval Haṭha and Rājayoga texts that are still extant, only a few have been critically edited according to modern academic standards. It is very difficult to study carefully a yoga text if the text itself has scribal errors and omissions. Unfortunately, medieval yoga texts have not been well preserved. Their manuscripts tend to be roughly copied. Therefore, rarely can one rely on a single manuscript to read and understand a text. It is more a matter of using several manuscripts of the same text in order to piece together a complete and reasonably coherent version.

I would like to have included a translation of the *Yogatārāvalī* in this edition of *Nāmarūpa*, but I am unable to do so because there are many unresolved differences between its printed editions. As far as I am aware, no one has looked at all the available manuscripts of the *Yogatārāvalī* in order to resolve these differences. Some editions and manuscripts have twenty-eight verses, others twenty-nine or thirty. And there are many textual variations. The *Yogatārāvalī*'s first verse is a good example of this, for a manuscript at a library in Pune and three printed editions have the following reading:

*vande gurūṇāṃ caranāravinde  
sandaśitasvātmasukhāvabodhe |  
janasya ye jāṅgalikāyamāne  
saṃsārahālāhalamohaśāntyai ||*

“I pay homage to the gurus’ lotus feet [...] which act like toxicologists for people in order to cure their delusion, which is the poison [known as] worldly life.”

The first line is the same, but the second begins with *janasya ye* instead of *niḥśreyase*, which is found in a manuscript of the *Yogatārāvalī* at a library in Wai. Which reading did the author intend? Though an editor might speculate that the word *niḥśreyase* (“unsurpassed”) has greater poetic value than *janasya ye* (“which for people”) and is more comparable with the *Yogatārāvalī*'s register of Sanskrit, such an editor could not make an informed decision on this without examining the available manuscripts and their relationship to one another. Indeed, someone may have changed *janasya ye* to *niḥśreyase* at a relatively recent time because that person believed the text could be improved this way. Moreover, regardless of whether an editor decides to read *janasya ye* or *niḥśreyase*, a good critical edition will provide readers with the available textual evidence so that they can judge for themselves.

Owing to problems such as *janasya ye* in the first verse, all my above translations of the *Yogatārāvalī*'s verses in this article are provisional. Academic funding for five years has been offered to James Mallinson (the principal investigator), Mark Singleton and myself to critically edit and translate ten Haṭhayoga texts, including the *Yogatārāvalī*. We intend to consult all of the *Yogatārāvalī*'s available manuscripts, of which there are at least twenty. If all goes according to plan, the new edition should be completed by 2018.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HISTORY OF YOGA

WITH OVER TWO THOUSAND YEARS of tradition behind the word ‘yoga’, there is much to learn from its history. When modern yoga is criticized for teaching a physical practice without a sophisticated intellectual philosophy, one might cite the early Haṭha and Rājayoga traditions as a precedent for the effectiveness of this approach. Indeed, I suspect the author of the *Yogatārāvalī* would have agreed with Pattabhi Jois’ statement that yoga is ninety-nine percent practice and one percent theory. Medieval yoga traditions were a great inspiration to Kṛṣṇamācārya and his students, and there’s no reason why it will not be so for future yoga practitioners.

The history of yoga might also inform us of the fate of minimalist yoga traditions. After the sixteenth century, Haṭha and Rājayoga were absorbed by more orthodox Brahmanical traditions, which integrated the teachings of earlier Haṭha and Rājayoga texts with more sophisticated philosophical and metaphysical doctrines. This gave rise to many of the so-called Yoga Upaniṣads and other large yoga compilations such as the *Yogacintāmaṇi*. As yoga becomes a contemporary mainstream practice, history is repeating itself. Those who believe they are advancing Haṭha yoga by combining it with some other therapy, science, philosophy or religion are travelling down a well-worn path. 🙏

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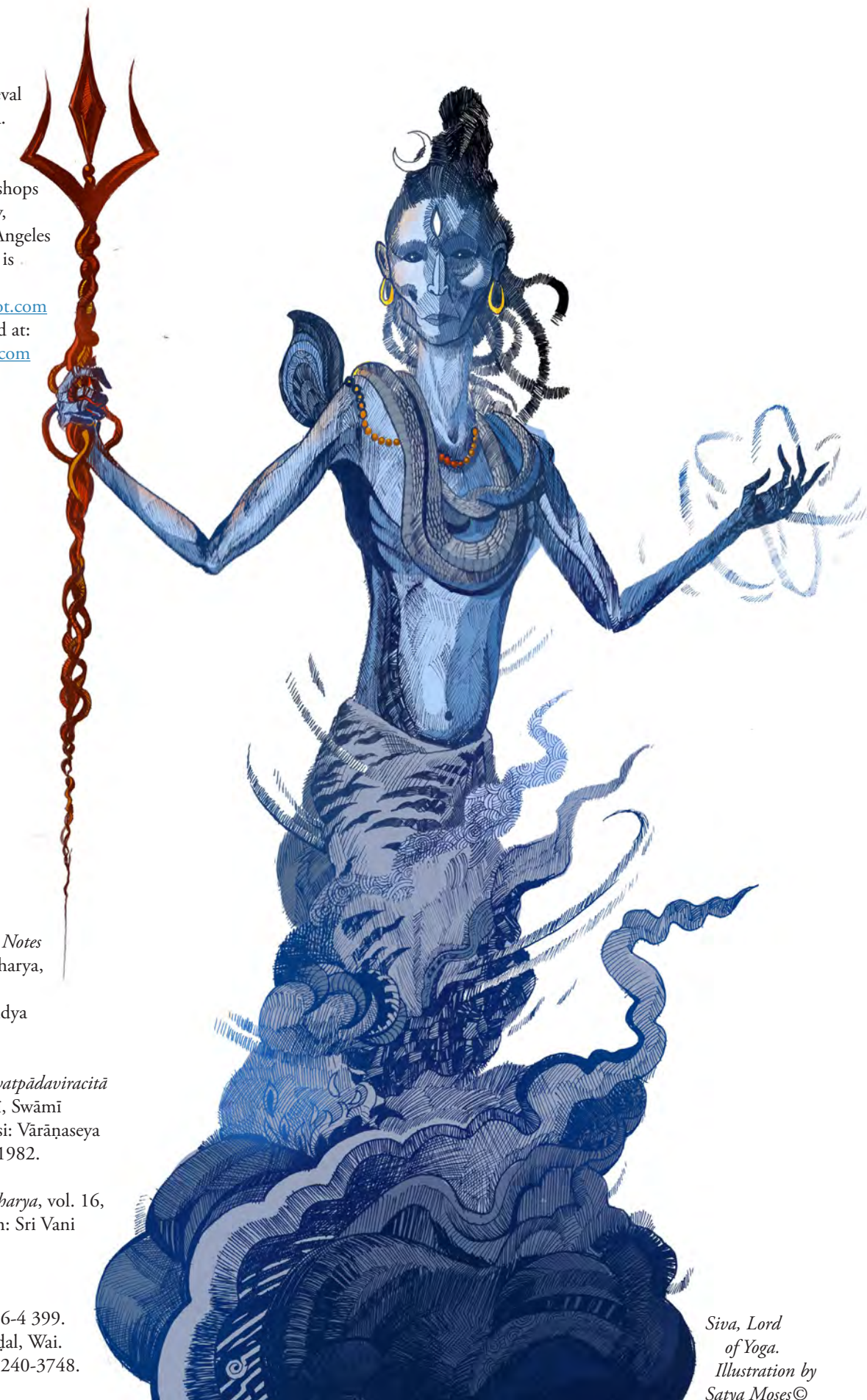
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Siva, Lord of Yoga.  
Illustration by Satya Moses©

<sup>18</sup> A translation of Brahmānanda’s comment on *sūryanamaskāra* can be found in my published article on the ‘Meaning of haṭha in Early Haṭhayoga’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, issue 131.4 (2011), page 536, footnote 35. This article can be downloaded at: [https://www.academia.edu/1539699/Meaning\\_of\\_ha%E1%B9%ADha\\_in\\_Early\\_Ha%E1%B9%ADhayoga](https://www.academia.edu/1539699/Meaning_of_ha%E1%B9%ADha_in_Early_Ha%E1%B9%ADhayoga)

<sup>19</sup> Caveats against afflicting the body (*kāyakleśa*), occur in various Haṭha texts. See *Amaraughaprabodha* 15, *Haṭhapradīpikā* 1.64, *Haṭharatnāvalī* 1.73 and *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* 5.31. In an auto-commentary on his *Yogaśāstra*, the twelfth-century Jain scholar Hemacandra gave the following examples of ways of afflicting the body: “There are many methods for afflicting the body. For example, standing [for a long time], Virāsana, Utkatukāsana, lying down outstretched like a stick on one side, ascetic heating [practices], remaining uncovered and so on. Thus it is taught in the commentary on the *Tattvārthasūtra*” (*kāyakleśo ’nekavidhaḥ | tadyathā - sthānavīrasanotkatukāsanaikapārśvadaṇḍāyataśayanātāpanāprāvṛtādini || iti tattvārthabhāṣye*).



# KUNDALINI

EXCERPT FROM THE PREFACE OF *AGHORI II: KUNDALINI*

BY DR. ROBERT E. SVOBODA

IN EARLIER TIMES, WHEN ESOTERIC knowledge was under jealous guard, a spiritual aspirant usually had to endure years of patient waiting before being taught. Now that information has become an article of commerce, all manner of secrets would seem to have become available to anyone who has the price of a book or tape; however, simply because secret doctrines can now be purchased and thus easily possessed does not mean they can be easily comprehended. Though words can be bought and sold, that living wisdom which cannot be confined within words must still be earned.

Among the long-hidden arcana now being packaged for sale is the lore of Kundalini, the root from which all spiritual experiences sprout, and most of the writers who have tried to present to the world this living knowledge which is the source of all knowledge produce only dead words. Carl Jung, who many decades ago delivered a series of lectures on Kundalini, explains why:

“Therefore the Yoga way or the Yoga philosophy has always been a secret, but not because people have kept it secret. For as soon as you keep a secret it is already an open secret: you know about it and other people know about it, and then it is no longer a secret. The real secrets are secrets because no one understands them. One cannot even talk about them, and of such a kind are the experiences of Kundalini Yoga. That tendency to keep things secret is merely a natural consequence when the experience is of such a peculiar kind that you had better not talk about it, for you would expose yourself to the greatest misunderstanding and misinterpretation.” (*The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1932 by C.G. Jung* Ed. Sonu Shamdasani)

The experiences of Kundalini Yoga are peculiar because Kundalini is the source of all your experiences. Kundalini is that indwelling energy which by self-identifying with your opinions and character traits accretes and preserves your identity.

So long as the urge toward individuation is mainly directed toward benefitting your own limited temporary individual self, it is called, in Sanskrit, ahamkara, or egoism, the force which makes it possible for you to unquestioningly accept the world as it is on the surface. This same force is called Kundalini when it turns away from the mundane and toward the spiritual, the permanent and eternal. After Kundalini awakes it becomes impossible to continue believing that external reality is the sole reality. Ahamkara makes you who you are now; Kundalini makes you into what you will become.

Kundalini has remained secret for so long because, as Jung notes, it cannot be understood; it can only be experienced. The process of spiritual evolution cannot be objectified and separated from the subject who evolves, for Kundalini functions simultaneously as descriptive consciousness, as the thing described, and as its description. Since, however, human language is made up of subjects and objects, descriptions of Kundalini tend to be skewed, either toward objective comment on the experience, which devitalizes it, or toward description of the raw subjective experience itself, which is usually distorted by the experimenter’s mental imbalances, stresses, and fantasies.

An awakening into the reality of the non-physical in a person who lacks adequate prior preparation usually precipitates a personal crisis; such people may seem crazy, are often thought to be crazy, and sometimes believe themselves

to be going crazy, all because they can no longer unquestioningly accept our ‘standard’ reality. Most of those who lose touch with everyday reality are actually insane, of course, but in a sizable number of cases the cause is a spiritual crisis.

Such an awakening alters forever the way in which an individual experiences the world, for after the initial crisis abates one discovers that there is no way to return to one’s previously comfortable mindset. Once aroused and unboxed, Kundalini is not ‘derousable’; the genie will not fit back into the bottle. “After the awakening, the devotee lives always at the mercy of Kundalini,” says Pandit Gopi Krishna, who experienced several crises during which the speed, insouciance, and authority of the power he had unleashed terrified him. That power which caused his terror, which he had to face without the help of any guide, can terrify or incapacitate anyone who awakens Kundalini without proper guidance.

So long as Kundalini remains within the realm of psychology, our relative objectivity can shield us from the influence of symbolic existence. Once we enter subjective reality, however, that realm in which symbols ‘cling,’ we are at their mercy unless we have been taught how to deal with them. Those who ride Kundalini without knowing their destination may lose their way. The result may be ‘ego inflation,’ which occurs when one’s limited personality survives the crisis intact and the individual then “claims the lustre of the archetypal world for his or her own person,” or ‘ego deflation,’ if the awakening thoroughly disrupts one’s self-integration and garbles one’s self-image.

The savants of India have for thousands of years worked to perfect user-friendly methods of spiritual advancement that, when properly implemented,

prepare individuals for and guide them through the process of individuation without terrorizing them. Each of these methods arouses the evolutionary power inherent in every individual, but this power appears as Kundalini in one system alone: the Tantric tradition. Anyone who wants to understand Kundalini as Kundalini must first come to grips with Tantra.

Though it has for centuries been maligned by the orthodox and puritanical among Indians, Tantra is not a religion of sensory indulgence which teaches the instant gratification of one’s cravings. A good Tantric believes in truth and reality, and in the facing of facts, the first of which is the fact that all of us are part of the manifested universe, subject to its laws until we develop the power to redefine ourselves in other terms. A Tantric aims to become sva-tantra (‘self-functioning’), to be free of all limitations, including especially the limitations of his or her own personality.

Tantra is not a subject one can learn in school, nor are Tantric texts ‘how-to’ books, because Tantra is not bookish knowledge; it is living wisdom which must be obtained directly from an experienced practitioner. A good guide, a guru who has already followed the path and knows all its pitfalls, is absolutely essential if one hopes follow the Tantric path and arouse Kundalini without calamity; a powerless or ignorant guru is far worse than none at all.

Since human consciousness requires objects, this book speaks of Kundalini as if She can be considered in isolation from the individual in whom She exists. Kundalini cannot be objectified but, until She is awakened in an individual, She exists for him or her only as a concept, and so She can be relatively objectified. As She awakens, this relative objectification is progressively converted into relative subjectification, until, when Kundalini has been completely aroused, one moves wholly into subjective consciousness, and descriptions lose their utility.

The ancient Law of Microcosm and Macrocosm tells us there is no real difference between the vast external universe and the limited internal universe

of the human body, except that the individual believes itself to be different. A human being is a living microcosm of the universe, and the universe is a living macrocosm of a human being. Each cosmos affects the other; the universe affects us, moment to moment, and each one of us by our actions influences the entire cosmos, for good or ill. The cosmos is the body of the Absolute, the vessel through which the Absolute expresses Itself. Every created thing in the universe contains at least a spark of the universal consciousness which is the Absolute, but most things cannot adequately express this consciousness.

My mentor, the Aghori Vimalananda, explains:

Chit Shakti (the power of consciousness or subjectivity) identifies with the Unmanifested Absolute, and Maya Shakti (the power of unconsciousness or objectivity) identifies with the world, the manifestation of the Absolute. These two Shaktis cannot exist without one another. Even in the grossest matter there is a spark of consciousness—this is why I say that even rocks are alive—and even in the highest states of consciousness there is a particle of Maya, as long as there is even the least sense of individuality. Once you learn the truth of the universe, you forget your own individuality, and remember your true nature; only then, when you no longer exist, does Maya no longer exist for you.

The One exists in the All, and the All defines the One; unity and duality both exist simultaneously. Wherever Chit Shakti is displayed there is intelligence and sensation; otherwise there is ignorance and insensibility. The human body is a vessel into which consciousness pours, according to individual capacity, filling the body via the nervous system. The spine and spinal cord extend consciousness from the brain, the pole of greatest awareness which is called Shiva, to the coccyx, the pole of greatest density. Each bodily cell expresses its own sort of consciousness according to its own capacity.

At the base of the subtle spinal cord in the subtle body lies the residual shakti of individuation, an energy which remains unavailable to the individual so

long as his or her consciousness remains firmly entrenched in the mundane. This energy is our personal fragment of the cosmic power of self-identification; thanks solely to this sense of I-ness called ahamkara (literally ‘the I-causer’), we exist as individuals. When Vimalananda spoke of the ego it was ahamkara that he meant, not the Freudian ego.

Just as discrimination is the chief characteristic of the intellect, ahamkara’s chief characteristic is possessiveness, that proprietary overlordship of the organism which remembers your self-definition and allows you to hold your own in the world. Ahamkara self-identifies with every cell of your body from conception until death; you instantly die as soon as She ceases to self-identify with you. The more you identify with your individuality, your microcosm, the more She functions as your own personal Maya and the less She reflects the macrocosm; as you identify less with your individuality, She is freed to reflect more of the macrocosm, to increase her awareness of the One. Ahamkara and Kundalini are two names for the same power manifested in two different directions; ahamkara connotes Maya Shakti and Kundalini, Chit Shakti.

Maya Shakti keeps you awake to the world, and asleep to the Absolute, while Chit Shakti awakens you to Reality and puts you to sleep with regard to worldly matters. Since the consciousness of a living being is conditioned by the matter in which it resides, the greatest Maya that we experience is the Maya of the matter which makes up our bodies. So long as we live the embodied life each one of us participates in the play of Nature, binding ourselves to the world by the ‘things’ we accrete in our personalities. No incarnate being can be either wholly worldly or wholly spiritual; no matter how filled with light you may become, you never quite transcend your dark side fully so long as you remain embodied.

The expression of shakti in the physical body is prana, the life force, the power which keeps body, mind, and spirit functioning together as a living unit. All parts of one’s being require prana. Physical life, health, and longevity require



that ahamkara self-identify strongly with the individual organism so that sufficient prana will enliven the body, while spiritual health requires ahamkara to relinquish most of this attachment. Just as every plant requires just the proper amount of both sunshine and rain to flourish, so does a human being require just the right amounts of the sunlight of spiritual awareness and of the cloud cover of ego-attachment in order to thrive. Too much spirit burns the world out of you and makes it impossible for you to retain your body; too much attachment drowns your consciousness in worldliness.

In the ordinary human, the ego is fully identified with the body and the limited personality, and all actions are centered around this temporary ‘self.’ Each microcosmic reality is influenced by every other; all of us are caught in each other’s projections and are defined in large part by them. Our conscious personalities that we like to think of as stable and constant are in fact merely aggregates of ideas with which we temporarily self-identify. The conscious personality is a sort of museum whose curator, ahamkara, selects objects for display to others from the museum’s warehouse, the subconscious. These objects are assembled into exhibits, the personality fragments which each act as if it were ‘the’ personality while it operates. Popular exhibits enjoy a longer run, while less-patronized exhibits are changed more quickly. Eventually the museum goes out of business, at the moment of death when the ego completely forsakes the limited, limiting personality which it has supported for so many years.

Most people never notice the fluctuations of the ceaseless creation and destruction of their personalities any more than they notice the individual frames of film in a motion picture, because this perpetual shifting of self-identification among all these personality pieces consumes tremendous amounts of energy and keeps ahamkara quite preoccupied. Only when some life-changing event forces the issue do you begin to wake from the sleep of contentment with Maya, like the Prodigal Son woke to find himself dining from the pig trough,

and to take the first few toddling steps toward the light of Chit.

Kundalini will eventually awaken in every being in the universe. If you prefer to enjoy the vicissitudes of karma you can wait for that awakening to dawn; otherwise you can actively try to find your way to that state. Vimalananda outlined the choices:

Whatever you desire will eventually come to you; this is the magnanimity of Nature. She will always eventually give you what you ask for; it is only a question of time. If your desire is the product of a controlled, coherent mind, you will achieve it quickly. This is how the Rishi Vishwamitra created an entire parallel universe: the force of his austerities was so powerful that when he set his mind to it, it took shape immediately.

If you desire God you will eventually get to God; about this there is not one iota of doubt. How long it takes you to get to God, how much of a gap there is between your desire and its achievement, depends on how much you want God. Once you become really anxious to locate God and your mind becomes focused on this desire, you can achieve without much delay.

Lord Krishna says, “Bahunam janmanam ante”: only after millions of births does an individual soul get the desire to return to God. Only after many, many rounds of physical existence does the soul finally say, “Now I’m tired, Lord, tired of all this birth and death. Please take me away from all this.” As the soul becomes more and more desperate, interiority develops, and if he keeps to it, eventually he achieves.

The first sutra of the Brahma Sutras is “Atha ato brahma jijnasa,” which means, “Now there is a sincere desire for knowledge of the Ultimate.” The Brahma Sutras have already existed for thousands of years, and will probably continue to exist for thousands more. The use of the word atha (‘now’) here indicates that there is no limitation of time when it comes to spiritual advancement. Whether it is today or ten thousand years into the past or one million years into the future, “atha” means “whenever there is a sincere desire for spiritual knowledge.” ‘Now’ is thus dif-

ferent for everyone. Right now is the ‘now’ of the Brahma Sutras for all those of us who are trying to grope our way back to God in spite of the terrific Maya which assails us.

The Maya which assails us is our own, of course, and that of our friends, neighbors, and other co-conspirators who share a consensus reality. Most people do not want to rock the boat, much less go overboard, and many do not take kindly to the defection of their fellows. Vimalananda used to say, “Human beings are nothing but sheep. I used to be in the flock of sheep, but I ran away, so it’s no surprise that everyone else, all the so-called normal people, thinks I’m insane or, at the least, abnormal. And I think the same about them. Only one of us can be right.”

Only those brave enough to disturb the somnolence of the world around them and shout that the Emperor is nude possess the strength to withstand the censure of the remaining sheep. Those who shout, “Beware of Maya!” malign Maya, for Ma always and only gives us that which we ask for. When we call on the Goddess to ask Her for mundane boons, which bind us to limited forms, She appears to us as Maya; when we pray to Her power and energy, She manifests as Shakti; and, to those few who relate to Her maternally, she reveals Herself as Ma, God the Mother. Those who remain stuck in Maya do so because they do not try to redirect their urge to individuation from Maya to Chit; they allow themselves to be carried along by the current of their lives, and of their neighbors’ lives.

Ahamkara uses the body as ballast for the mind, that it may not drift away and be lost like a runaway balloon on a breezy day. When Kundalini awakens before death, She will try to return to and unite with Her opposite pole, the pole of greatest awareness which is Shiva, by reversing the outward projection of energy which led to incarnation. While She slumbers, She supports the body; once She is aroused and throws back the covers which bind Her down, the body-mind-spirit complex starts to unravel as the life force is released from its bondage to the organism.

If your awakening Kundalini unites totally with Her Shiva, you will cease to exist, since nothing will remain to identify with your body. If She awakens slowly enough that you can ‘digest’ the tremendous energies which are released as She lets go of everything that has been holding Her down, you will become a man or woman of God. If, however, She awakens too quickly to be controlled, and too slowly to kill you outright, you will be catapulted into the maelstrom of a ‘spiritual emergency,’ a Kundalini crisis.

Some modern writers inaccurately blame all human illness on such spiritual crises. While it is true that all disease is due, directly or indirectly, to ahamkara, to one’s sense of ego and identity, all neuroses are not signs of incipient Kundalini arousal; and while a Kundalini crisis may produce a nervous breakdown, every nervous breakdown is not a spiritual emergency. Most of those who maintain that the awakening of Kundalini is the root cause of all their imbalances are merely experiencing the consequences of Her first stirrings from sleep; this is more a crisis of ahamkara than of Kundalini.

The ‘physio-Kundalini process,’ touted by some as a form of ‘natural stress release,’ is merely the preliminary purification of the ethereal nerves in which Kundalini will eventually move. The awakening of Kundalini is a ‘stress release’ only in the sense that, as the bonds of body and personality that hold Kundalini down are undone, the energy that had been used to self-identify with these ‘stresses’ is released for the organism to otherwise allocate. The awakening of Kundalini releases all stresses, not merely those which produce neuroses; relief of neurosis is not regeneration of identity.

If Kundalini is triggered up suddenly in an unprepared nervous system, the shock produced resembles that delivered to an unsuspecting toddler who grasps a live wire. When an unreconstructed personality tries to resist Kundalini, consciously or unconsciously, She may fry nerves and blow out endocrine fuses, shorting out the nervous system at its weakest point and blowing a hole

in the victim’s aura. Since the aura’s job is to insulate us psychically from one another and from disembodied influences, holes in the aura permit all sorts of chaotic, negative mental vibrations, including even ethereal parasites, to enter the individual’s field as they like and spread ruin.

If the individual remains functional, Kundalini may inflate and empower his or her limitations. That person into whose genitals Kundalini is diverted full force, for example, will begin to live, eat, and breathe sex, and may misidentify as spiritual experiences the colossal lusts which arise. Or, should Kundalini become lodged in the digestive organs, insatiable hunger may supervene.

Even if overt calamity is avoided, worse dangers await, for the ensuing catharsis can actually reinforce the limitations of the personality instead of releasing them. Those half-baked spiritual aspirants (called ardhha dagdha, literally ‘half-burned’ in Sanskrit) who permit the power to swell their heads, like gas inflating a balloon, may believe themselves to have achieved exalted states. Because the power of Kundalini that buoys them confers an aura of seeming truth to their words, they may shoot up to the heights of self-confidence as pseudo-gurus, commanding others with confident persuasiveness to follow them until one day the pressure of temptation becomes too great and there is a cataclysmic fall.

Such self-inflation may proceed insidiously; as Gopi Krishna observes, “... the desire for power, the yearning for mental conquest...often accompanies the activity of Kundalini in the intellectual centre, causing a slight intoxicated condition of the brain too subtle to be noticed by the subject himself or by his uninformed companions, however erudite and intelligent they may be.” (Gopi Krishna, *Kundalini—The Evolutionary Energy in Man*). A spiritual aspirant may not intend to go wrong, but the power of even a half-awakened Kundalini often proves too hot to handle.

Which illustrates the great danger in the notion that all one’s problems will be solved if one can just awaken Kundalini; problems are solved if and only

if Kundalini awakens in a slow, controlled way. When She does awaken in a controlled way, She awakens slowly and reveals Herself gradually; only very rarely, as with Vimalananda, does She shine forth in nearly fully developed form almost from the start. What many people believe to be the culmination of their spiritual practices is thus really only the beginning, only a brief, tantalizing disengagement of Kundalini from Her normal self-identification with the mundane, which must be followed up methodically, as Kundalini progressively unties every knot that binds the personality together, with measures to guide and channel Her.

Because Vimalananda was concerned to remove the idea of quick achievement from my mind, he never sat me down and said, “This is what Kundalini is all about.” Instead he provided me little bites of information from time to time, encouraging me to digest each morsel thoroughly and assimilate it efficiently. As he liked to say, “Never be in a hurry; start with a sip and end with the bottle.”

HERE ARE A FEW SUCH BITES:

“Indiscriminate awakening of the Kundalini is very dangerous. Everyone is doomed to die, of course, but dying disoriented in pain and fear will ruin your chances for a good rebirth. If your nervous system is strong, it can endure a great deal of shakti before disintegrating, which is why penance is required. I’m sorry, but if you think you can dare to awaken Kundalini and survive while living in a body that has been weakened by dissipation you are living in a fool’s paradise. How do you think Moses was able to withstand his experience with God? Only because of his long penances. Moses described a burning bush which burned but was not consumed. That bush was his own brain and nervous system, ignited by God.

“Kundalini has been described as vidyut lata, the ‘lightning creeper.’ Think of how a creeping vine clings to a tree; and then think of that vine as a lightning stroke, a bolt of billions of volts of energy which would splinter or incinerate any ordinary tree, or bush.



But Moses was destined for greatness, and his nerves, though severely strained, were able to take the sudden flash of pure consciousness that God graced him with. How few are able to do this!

“If you could just for a moment experience the power of a fully awakened Kundalini Shakti, you would know what bull is being put out by these phony Yogis who say that the Kundalini can be felt as a creepy feeling in the spine, or as a cool breeze in the palm. Creepy feeling, my foot! And to control Kundalini, do you think it is some sort of joke? Never! For an ordinary human to control Kundalini is impossible, or nearly so. Only immortals can properly control Her.

“No, raising Kundalini in an uncontrolled way is not the answer. You don’t become enlightened or become a yogi just because your Kundalini is aroused. There is a great potential for abuse of this power. As long as it goes up it’s fine, but when it falls, it falls like a thunderbolt.”

“While Kundalini sleeps in the Muladhara Chakra at the base of the spine you are awake to the world and asleep to reality. When She awakes to unite with Her Shiva in your brain, then you wake up to reality; you ‘fall asleep’ to the world. An ignorant person believes that he is in the world; his Kundalini self-identifies with the poison of Maya. A jnani, one who knows, says rather, ‘The world is in me,’ because his Kundalini self-identifies with Shiva.

“We say that Kundalini is ‘sleeping’ because She, the ego, is self-identifying with the individual’s limited personality. Because of this self-identification She accepts its limits as Her limits. In Her pure form, the ego is the purest of shaktis, but as long as She self-identifies with the body, She lies under three coverings which prevent Her from remembering who She is and where She belongs. These three coverings are the Three Gunas (Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas), the Six Tastes (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent or spicy, and astringent), and the Five Great Elements (Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Ether).

“The Gunas control our minds, the

Elements shape our bodies and the world around us, and the Tastes control our internal chemistry, which links our minds and bodies together. Together with the ten senses, the five we all know plus the tongue, hands, feet, anus, and genitals, there are twenty-four limitations which distort the human consciousness.

“Externally the Universal Self is covered by Maha Maya (the Great Maya); internally Maya appears as these twenty-four limitations. The first step in Tantric spirituality is to work on the individual scale to uncover the ego and make Her reunite with Shiva, the true Self.

“In Kundalini Yoga, we usually begin with Bhuta Shuddhi, the purification of the Five Elements, to allow Kundalini to travel upwards through the chakras. Bhuta Shuddhi is really the essence of Tantra. The force of Her motion, if it is unimpeded, lifts the other coverings and eventually produces simple or ordinary spiritual wisdom: jnana.”

“After the three coverings are removed from Kundalini your perception becomes quite different. It is the difference between capital ‘I’ and e-y-e ‘eye.’ The eye is symbolic of the world of sense objects. As long as the ego is covered, it knows nothing but the senses and their objects, and is contented with them. But they are external, and therefore impermanent. The ego must be made to realize the capital ‘I,’ the Self, which lies within, and therefore, the first thing to be cultivated is interiority, withdrawal of the mind from external objects. Love, including orgasm, is internal. If you look for love externally, as most Westerners do, you will either become bored and perverted, or frustrated and desperate. Only interiority can give you bliss.

“Once you develop interiority, your mind will gradually become quiet and perception will develop. Eventually you will realize that effect, instrument, and action are all one. You will see yourself in the goat being slaughtered, in the act of slaughtering, and in he who slaughters. When you can see yourself in the butchered, the butchering, and the butcher, you will see that all are mere

manifestations of the Self. All is His play, capital ‘H.’ When you see yourself everywhere, where is there any possibility of pity? This is jnana, ordinary spiritual knowledge.

“To go beyond this to vijnana, you must go beyond the body, and to do that you must first understand the relationship between the body and the ego. The nerves of the body are the probes, the feelers of the ego. This is what Krishna meant when he talks in the *Bhagavad Gita* about the tree whose roots are above and whose branches are below: the roots of the nerves are in the brain, and the nerves themselves branch out to cover the whole body.

“The ego or ahamkara does not actually reside in the physical body, because the ego is not at all physical. It resides in the subtle body, and moves in the nadis, the ethereal nerves. The body’s 72,000 nadis act as conduits for prana, which is closely related to the ego. Numerologically, 72,000 means  $7 + 2 = 9$ : the Nine Doors through which prana can enter or leave the body. Most of the nadis begin or terminate at these Doors, which are the sense organs: the two eyes, the two nostrils, the two ears, the mouth, the anus, and the genital organ. Prana, moving with the breaths, enkindles the body’s fire, just as a bellows is used to ignite and inflame the fire in a forge, and the mind is carried out through these Doors by prana so that it can experience the world. Control of the nadis enables you to control the ego, the mind, and the senses.

“Of these thousands of nadis, three are most important: the Surya Nadi (‘sun channel’), the Chandra Nadi (‘moon channel’), and Sushumna (the ‘fire channel’). The right nostril is related to the Surya Nadi, and the left nostril to the Chandra Nadi. Sushumna is closely associated with the spine and spinal cord. The sun heats things up, while the moon causes them to cool down. When your right nostril, also known as Ganga (the Ganges River), works more efficiently than does your left nostril your appetites for food and other enjoyments will increase. When your left nostril, also called Yamuna (the Ganga’s main tributary), works more efficiently than

your right nostril the opposite effect is produced: your body cools and relaxes, and your appetites decrease. Observe your own body and you’ll find that each nostril works for about an hour and a half at a time.

“Continuously throughout the day and night your body fluctuates from excitation to relaxation and back. Yogis control this fluctuation by performing pranayama. They make the left nostril work when they want to be submissive, when they worship God for example, and they make the right nostril work when they want to command. They also strive to create a balance between the left and right nostrils, because only when the Surya and Chandra Nadis work with equal force can prana be forced into the Sushumna Nadi to move Kundalini upward.”

“Pandit Gopi Krishna suffered for weeks from an intensely overheated system when the tornado of prana unleashed by his awakening Kundalini moved exclusively in his Surya Nadi; only when his Chandra Nadi finally opened and calmed him down again did he get relief.

“The nadis meet and connect with one another at ethereal plexuses called chakras. The chakras exist only in the subtle body and are perceptible only to the enlightened mind, but nowadays everyone who reads a few books writes about the chakras, parroting the Tantric descriptions without understanding the inner significance. Very few people have any idea at all of what they are writing. They talk about the chakras’ shapes and colors and speak knowingly about the Sanskrit letters which are present at each chakra, when in fact the only letters which exist at any chakra are the ones you create yourself.

“I can tell you this, though; if you start meditating on your chakras directly you run a great risk of exciting the nerves and nadis in the area where you have been told the chakra is. For example, suppose some guru tells you, ‘My boy, meditate on the Muladhara Chakra, which is at the perineum.’ If you have not been thoroughly taught about the Muladhara Chakra, if you

have not been told what to expect when you get there, most probably you will never locate the chakra; you will merely inflame the nerves in the perineum and intensify the force of Apana (the downward-moving form of prana). This will probably turn you into a sex maniac, or some other sort of maniac.

“This is why a good guru is so important. When Kundalini begins to awaken, a tremendous rush of energy is released. Unless the guru is strong enough to control it, the disciple will be overwhelmed with desires and will become strongly attached to worldly things, precisely because his chakras are still blocked.”

“A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. The chakras exist in the subtle body, and their connection to the physical body is very subtle. It is true that both the physical and subtle plexuses may become blocked, but in most people the Kundalini is fast asleep in the Muladhara Chakra, and their chakras are absolutely closed and play no part in their day-to-day life. It is because everyone’s chakras are blocked that Kundalini Yoga is so necessary. As long as you are full of attachments to life, your consciousness will never be able to get close enough to any chakra even to smell its fragrance, much less experience it.

“But in a way what these people say is true: if you try to take on too much shakti before removing these knots, the shakti will get blocked along the way, and then either your nervous system will overload and collapse, or all the energy will be ‘vomited out’ into your system and you will go berserk. Shakti magnifies and expands everything, including especially attachments. You need good guidance at every step of the way or down you will go, divebombing back into the samsara.”

“I have always said that life is a memory. There are actually two types of memory: conscious and unconscious. The conscious memory is very fickle and inconstant; it is directed outwards towards mundane objects, which are temporary and transitory but seem eternal to the ignorant mind. The unconscious memory is permanent; it has been col-

lecting all your karmas from tens of millions of births without any lapse or distortion. So the unconscious memory is actually conscious, since it perfectly records everything that happens to you, and the conscious memory is actually unconscious. People say, ‘I did it because of the force of circumstance,’ when what they mean is that they were not conscious enough to remember not to yield to the pressure of all the karmas encouraging them to do it.

“The result of the above is Maya. Through sadhana you can make the conscious memory truly conscious, and you can return the unconscious memory to unconsciousness. When these two merge, the result is the superconscious memory—the consciousness of reality—and in that state you exist in the causal body. Then you must go even further, from vijnana to ananda, the unlimited bliss of pure existence. When the last shred of ego is dissolved, only awareness is left: Nirvikalpa Samadhi.”

“But you cannot exist in Nirvikalpa Samadhi for very long and still expect to be able to remain in this world. The function of Tantra and Aghora is to put the government of mind, senses, and body into the proper order to avoid misery. Life minus misery for a prolonged period produces satisfaction, which yields happiness; and when happiness is increased beyond all conceivable limits and is sustained it becomes bliss, what the Vedas call ananda. Sadhana is a means to this end. When Kundalini awakens, if body, mind, and spirit are in good working order, bliss is certain.

“Bliss is not something you have to create, or accumulate; it arises spontaneously. Just let God decide what is best for you, and God will provide it accordingly. So even at those times when your will power is weak, and your mental control is poor, there is still nothing to worry about. Always, always remember that the supreme method of mind control, the supreme intoxication, is the perpetual repetition of the sweet name of God. Never forget God, and God will never forget you. And one day you will succeed.”▲



# KUNDALINI: INTERVIEW WITH DR. SVOBODA

CONDUCTED BY RICK ARCHER OF BUDDHA AT THE GAS PUMP

CONDENSED AND EDITED

WELCOME TO *BUDDHA AT THE GAS PUMP*. My name is Rick Archer and my guest today is Robert Svoboda. Robert is the first white member of Kenya's Pokot tribe, and the first non-Indian ever to graduate from a college of Ayurveda and be licensed to practice Ayurveda in India, where he lived for more than a decade. During and after his formal Ayurvedic training, he was tutored in Ayurveda, Yoga, Jyotish, Tantra, and other forms of classical Indian lore by his mentor, the Aghori Vimalananda. For a decade he was involved with thoroughbred horses as Vimalananda's Authorized Racing Agent. The author of more than a dozen books, since 1985 he divides his time between India and other lands. I'll be listing his books on my website.

**RA** Welcome, Robert. Thanks.

**RS** Good morning.

**RA** Good morning. Robert is out in LA and just experienced an earthquake last night, so his world got rocked a bit. We are going to be talking mostly about *kundalini* today, but there are a couple of points in my introduction here that people might have questions about. Firstly, the point about racehorses. What was that all about?

**RS** Well, Vimalananda, my mentor, was a native of Bombay—Mumbai—and his family had been there for fifteen generations. They were quite prominent until the generation immediately previous to him. He was a very versatile man; he had studied many things, Eastern and Western alike, and he was very familiar with animals as well as plants and minerals and so on. He was very fond of horses. He enjoyed betting on his horses but even more than that he enjoyed looking at the possibilities in a colt or a filly and seeing how he could, with appropriate training, bring

out those possibilities. He was not a trainer himself, he had to work with other trainers but he exerted a strong influence on how they worked with a horse. We would use Ayurvedic or homeopathic medicines to assist getting the horses into shape so they could do what they're supposed to do at the racetrack, which is run and win.

I value that time tremendously—not because I made a lot of money. I never bet. I have never bet on a horse race. Even when I am in Las Vegas, I will put a single dollar into a slot machine, just symbolically.

But in learning about horses, I learned a tremendous amount about life. I love horses, and have fortunately been around them a lot, and still periodically get chances to ride; I was out on a horse in Costa Rica just last month. But beyond that, the race course was—for me at least and for him as well, I think—a microcosm of the entire gamut of human culture: you have the virtuous people and the non-virtuous people; the people who are not only interested in horses for winning but are also interested in horses as horses and so want to treat them properly, and the ones who didn't care about that at all and treated their animals with great cruelty. You have the ones who made money and could hold onto it—almost nobody—and the ones who make money and then lose it—a sizable number—and the ones who lose only. Losers are most numerous, of course. It was a valuable part of my education.

**RA** My wife's father was a gambler and she spent a lot of time at the racetrack when she was young and also loves horses.

You mentioned in one of your YouTube videos I listened to that your mentor was a connoisseur of whiskey, he enjoyed drinking whiskey. As the son of an alcoholic and someone who's been on the spiritual path for 45 years, it's a little hard for me to wrap my head around that. I don't reject it, but it's hard

for me to understand why someone who is quote-unquote "enlightened" or in a higher state would find that whiskey could in any way enhance his experience. I should think it would almost invariably dull the mind. It's considered tamasic and so on, so maybe you could riff on that just a little bit before we get into kundalini.

**RS** Well—I'm speaking here about his opinion—his opinion was that many of the things that are written in the Vedas are true but they are not necessarily true in exactly the way that they are written there. Because, of course, trying to use ordinary human language to describe something that is not directly part of the physical world is not an easy thing to do. When, for example, the Vedas would talk about *soma*, and the uplifting effect of soma and how it could take you into the astral world and how it could put you into a place where you would be able to commune with reality much more directly, Vimalananda was very much of the opinion that the soma that the Vedic rishis were taking was something that we will never be able to replicate ourselves, at least not that specific soma substance. But he maintained that soma's effects can be replicated, provided that you, as an individual, understand how your organism works, how your own physiology works, and you identify that substance that works for you like soma—the thing that uplifts you, that sends you into the astral world, that permits you to communicate more easily not only with gods and goddesses but with the supreme reality as well.

**RA** And whiskey did that for him?

**RS** Whiskey did that for him. It doesn't do that for me; other things work better for me. But for him it worked very well. On dozens of occasions, I would be sitting there pouring him whiskey—not a lot at a time, just a little bit—and he





would be sipping it. As he sipped, his awareness would become more open, his communication would become more refined and more sophisticated and the breadth and depth of his vision would become perceptibly augmented. Of course, one of the reasons why he and many people might choose to employ a substance for facilitating this is—suppose you were living, as he did, in Bombay?

I know that nowadays people call it Mumbai but I was there when, in Hindi and English, it was always Bombay, and in Marathi and Gujarati, it was always Mumbai. My Marathi and Gujarati are no good, but if I tried to speak them, I would always say Mumbai because that’s how it fit in those languages; in Hindi I would always say Bombay. My Hindi is much better than my Marathi or Gujarati.

Bombay is a very difficult place to live in. Now it’s a city of about 20 million people. But even before, Vimalananda used to call it *moha mayi nagari*—the city that is completely filled with delusions, which is something that you can really feel if you spend any time there.

A big part of his philosophy is explained by the concept of *rnanubandhana*, a big Sanskrit word which means ‘the bondage of karmic debt,’ the things that you owe to yourself and to other humans and to animals and to places and families and teachers and what-have-you. *Bandha* means a thing that binds you down. You’re bound down by karmic obligations, karmic accounts that have to be settled. Of course, things can only be settled at certain moments, and sometimes one must bide quite a bit of time waiting for the opportunity to settle a particular debt. While you’re biding your time, if you are stuck in any kind of big modern city that’s full of human beings—well, Vimalananda had to interact with people in Bombay and he had to interact with them in a meaningful way. Bombay is such a complicated place. It was very useful for him to be able to interact with the city, which would inevitably involve taking the substance of the city into his tissues, and then to employ a substance that could permit

him to return promptly back to the place where he normally existed and where he preferred to exist and that allowed him to obtain the perspective that he required in order to be able to continue living in a place where he felt like he needed to live in order to deal with those karmic obligations.

**RA** In a piece that you sent me about kundalini, which we’ll be talking about in some detail, you talked about the tendency to individuate—for *ahamkara* to become more calcified egoism—and you referred to that as *maya shakti*. Then you said that the flip side of that is *chit sakti*, where the force turns towards the spiritual. I wonder if possibly the appeal of alcohol is that it relaxes the rigidity of the ego and in some cases allows people to taste a more ego-free, unrestricted space. Obviously, in the long run, it is counterproductive for most people because it damages the brain and results in greater and greater bondage, but maybe that explains why people find it alluring and maybe in more homeopathic doses it has that effect without deleterious influence.

**RS** Yes, I certainly think that’s part of it. In his case, another reason why he employed alcohol is because he was a long-time worshiper of Tara, who is one of the ten *mahavidyas*, one of the ten great embodiments of wisdom shaktis from which the universe is generated and by which the universe remains and into which the universe is resolved. Smashan Tara—the Tara of the cremation ground—is very similar to Kali, both iconographically and in the sense that she is fond of blood and of alcohol. So by drinking, Vimalananda, in addition to drinking in the context of his own personality, was making an offering directly to that goddess.

My friend Dr. Fred Smith is the author of a 700-page book called *The Self-Possessed*, which is all about the fact that, even though in India and nowadays in other countries, people believe Indian religion—I’m deliberately not using the word “Hinduism” because, as Vimalananda pointed out, the word Hindu is a Persian word. The ancient

Persians language, Avestan, used *S* for many of the words that are similar in Sanskrit but use *H*; for example, the Sanskrit word *soma* appears in Avestan as *haoma*. The word *Hindu* is thus the Avestan version of the word *Sindhu*, and Sindhu is the Sanskrit name for the river the British called the Indus. The word ‘India’ is derived from the word ‘Indus.’ The Persians called that river the ‘Hindu,’ and the area bounded by that river on the west they called ‘Hindustan’, and all the inhabitants of that area they called Hindus, whether they follow the Sanatana Dharma or not. Sanatana Dharma, which means something like “The Eternal Ordinance,” is the original name of what is now popularly called Hinduism.

A large part of Indian religion has always involved being possessed, which means permitting personalities other than your own to enter you and take you over, usually temporarily. As Dr. Smith discovered during the extensive research he did for his book, you can find mentions of possession everywhere in ancient Indian texts, including even the Vedas. Possession is not the sort of thing that the Victorian Establishment approved of; there is something very non-Victorian about being taken over by a disembodied intelligence amidst loud music and wild dancing. The possession aspect of the Sanatana Dharma was therefore deliberately downplayed back when the British had a very strong influence on Indian thought. For the most part, the Brits of the nineteenth century thought of Hinduism in general as being debased, debauched, corrupted, and polluted, and possession states as being exceptionally degraded.

Vimalananda would often permit himself to be taken over by a deity or a dead saint or a force of nature, and while he was thus possessed he would be able to make direct offerings via his own body to that personality that had taken him over.

You can find similar rituals all over India. In the Himalaya, for example, you will find oracles. When you need advice about something you go to your local temple and request that deity’s oracle for advice; it will be delivered by

the deity via a human into whom the deity enters. In Kerala a practice termed *theyyam* exists, in which low-caste people get possessed, often at the behest of high-caste people. For the time that they’re possessed, though, the low-caste people are worshiped as embodied gods and goddesses by the high-caste people.

In any state of India you can find this sort of possession ritual and worship. It is something that is very much part of, I can’t say the majority, but a large plurality of the population, a part of what a large plurality of the population normally does, well within their standard belief systems. But we don’t hear much about it nowadays because possession is not very ‘vedantic.’

**RA** What you’ve just said in the last few minutes raises a number of interesting points and it’s fun to kind of explore a few of these things that are just coming up spontaneously. This probably all relates to kundalini anyway.

**RS** It all does indeed relate to kundalini.

**RA** Great. Well, a couple of questions arose in my mind as you were speaking. One was, I have heard of instances—and you are probably much more familiar with this than I am—of people using this argument of consuming various substances and doing various things in the name of Tantra which kind of bastardizes the whole thing, cheapens it. It becomes a form of hedonism without any real spiritual significance.

And to bring up the other point—about possession. Obviously this is something which existed in most ancient cultures and even modern—we have all kinds of channelers these days and there was Edgar Cayce and there are the *ayahuasca* people. There are all sorts of instances where people are connecting with and perhaps allowing some entity of some sort to come through them and provide wisdom. Of course, there’s the dark side of that, too, where many times you don’t know who you’re inviting. Just because you’re dead doesn’t mean you’re smart and there’s been all kinds of devil worship and all kinds of strange stuff that muddies the reputation of this sort of thing.

**RS** Absolutely. Many people in India claim to be wonderful *sadhus* and *sadhakas*, and many of these smoke chillums all day long. As Vimalananda pointed out, give somebody a chillum or a bottle of whiskey and within a few minutes you will find out exactly what is really going on with him or her, what is underneath the facade.

Twenty years ago, or more, I visited Tarapith in West Bengal, which is the chief center of Tara worship in India. Though there is a temple there, the main place of worship at Tarapith is its *smashan*, its cremation ground. More than a century ago a famous saint named Bamakhepa lived in that smashan. Born a year later than Ramakrishna Paramahansa, he lived many years longer. While at Tarapith he built a hut into whose walls dozens of skulls were implanted. That hut, the *khopadi ki jhopadi*, still exists; when I visited it still had quite a nice vibe to it, as did the cremation ground itself. What disturbed the vibe for me were the four or five so-called tantrics who busied themselves with drinking cheap alcohol and doing what people normally do when they drink alcohol: talking loudly, arguing, thinking about getting into a fight, becoming really effusive, then finally lying down and trying to sleep it all off. That was disappointing, but I got used to being disappointed in India a long time ago, because there are so many charlatans there, many of whom I’ve met, or at least seen. At least the cremation ground was not disappointing, and I thanked my lucky stars that I had for that night a fine place in which to sit and spend some time ruminating over the fact that at any moment the possibility exists that an earthquake (one just happened here last night), a tornado, a lightning bolt, an eagle carrying a turtle, something might easily be the end of you. I like to remind myself often each day that in our world mortality is everywhere, and death can take you away at any moment.

**RA** Yeah.

**RS** And these drunken sadhus at Tarapith probably started off reminding

themselves of that fact as well. But somehow they lost the plot; they meditated a little and convinced themselves that they were powerful *tantrikas*, then reinforced that pattern repeatedly with alcohol. It is very easy to fall into such a rut. There’s a good reason why alcohol used to be called spirits. When you drink alcohol and let the alcohol take you over, you attract to yourself disembodied beings that feed on alcohol, and unless you are very careful it won’t be long before those things take you over. Pretty soon your own personality will begin to dissolve, and eventually so much of it will disappear that it will no longer be able to function independently; at that point your personality has become dependent on alcohol, and on the beings you have conjured up, in order to function at all.

**RA** It’s interesting. In the thing I read that you sent me, you were talking about spiritual crisis being mistaken for insanity. You were saying that sudden kundalini awakening can shut out the nervous system and blow a hole in the person’s aura. And that the aura’s job is to insulate us psychically from one another and from disembodied influences. I think that might be something that would be useful for people to understand more clearly. You know, you hear about auras all the time; people want to see them and some people say that they do see them. But what their actual function is—this whole notion of disembodied entities might seem esoteric to some people and fanciful or mythological or whatever, but in my opinion these entities very much do exist. I had a few little experiences of them myself but there needs to be some sort of protective shield. Perhaps many people who are mentally disturbed or even criminally insane have lost that shield and are just tools of some darker forces.

**RS** That happens quite often and of course sometimes it’s even more complicated than that. Sometimes people become tools of forces that are not so dark while at the same time serving as tools of forces that are indeed dark. Some people who can at times channel positive



and beneficial entities may sometimes also channel something very negative that is pretending to be positive.

**RA** Like the good angel, bad angel thing, on the shoulders.

**RS** Exactly. There's no reason why, simply because you're open to the one, that you're not going to be open to the other. You are going to be open to both of them, at least initially.

When people think about possession, usually they're imagining disembodied human beings or demons or Lucifer sitting somewhere, laughing maniacally and sending out all sorts of bizarrely caparisoned Hieronymus Bosch ghouls. But there are many other ways to become possessed. You can get possessed by anger, lust, greed, or any other powerful emotion. Certain disease 'beings' can take you over, as can influences conjured up by black magicians. Many get possessed by ancestors. You don't have to think of your ancestors as still existing to know that, because you've received your genes from your ancestors, they can affect you. And not just the genes; epigenetics tells us that the patterns of which genes are going to turn on and turn off can also be passed down, sometimes three or four generations. So, if you have someone who, let's say, is an alcoholic—we know that there is a type of alcoholism that is often passed down from father to son. People in the past, maybe they were thinking we can find a gene or even a few genes that would be responsible. But it's not so much the genes themselves as it is the pattern of which genes are turned on and which genes are turned off, and the circumstances under which a gene might be turned on or off in the context of this bigger pattern. And this is but one way in which your ancestors can affect you.

And then come mind viruses—fascism, communism, capitalism—all infections of the psyche that took over the minds of hundreds of millions of humans, with catastrophic results. Some of the mind viruses are most curious. My sister and I both enjoy watching sports; the two boys at this house where I am now both play basketball. All of us have been watching some of the

NCAA tournament games. St. Louis University played a game. St. Louis University is a Jesuit university; their mascot is the billiken. When I Googled "billiken," I discovered that the billiken was an image that came in a dream to a woman in 1908 in the United States, one that must not be confused with the kewpi doll which appeared the next year, which the billiken resembles. You will find the billiken on Google—a little big-bellied baby-like presence with carefully composed ears and feet. As fate would have it, later that year a temple in Yokahama installed an image of this billiken in its sanctum. The billiken went from being an American woman's dream to a Japanese deity within just a few months, and it remains the mascot—or totemic animal—of a Jesuit university in the United States.

**RA** Funny. It's interesting what you are saying about forces taking over collective mentality, collective consciousness: consumerism, fascism, Nazism—all those different things. There's something in the bible about the sins of the father visited upon the son or some such thing—

**RS** —up to the seventh generation, like at the racecourse. While I was in India studying Ayurveda, I spend a lot of time reading the Thoroughbred Stud Book. All thoroughbred racehorses are derived from three foundation sires: the Darley Arabian, the Byerly Turk, and the Godolphin Arabian, and 90% of all racehorses today are descended from the horse Eclipse, who was foaled during an eclipse and never lost a race.

When you mate a thoroughbred stallion with a non-thoroughbred mare, you have to continue crossing the progeny with thoroughbreds for seven generations before you can call the progeny of the eighth generation thoroughbred. Why? Because by the eighth generation less than 1% of the blood of the original non-thoroughbred mare remains. It takes seven generations to completely dilute a genetic influence.

**RA** And we think of genetic material, of course, as being physical, but perhaps

you and I would agree that the genetics are just a physical representation of an even subtler realm.

**RS** Absolutely.

**RA** For instance, in terms of reincarnation, if you reincarnate and you bring in certain qualities from a previous life, obviously there's no way that, physically, your DNA could be carried from one life to the next, but there's some subtler vehicle which carries along and then manifests a physical structure and physical DNA appropriate to its tendencies and the tendencies you have to live out.

**RS** Or, as appropriate to its tendencies as can be the case in the context of the genetic material of the father and mother, which is one place where complications can start for human beings. You have these tendencies that are part of you, that want to continue to express themselves through you in your next lifetime. The tendencies have developed momentum, for music or whatever, and those tendencies will have to align with a womb that can provide an appropriate milieu through which that pattern can continue to express itself.

**RA** They say you can't choose your parents—but you do choose your parents.

**RS** You do choose your parents. The usual case, however, is that just because you choose your parents in the context of one thing that is essential for your current incarnation doesn't mean that the fit will be perfect. Sometimes the fit is perfect: the parents and the children create a unit that's completely and utterly harmonious with no seeming effort. They move ahead as if they had been born to do that, which they were. And sometimes—in my case, I never felt that I fit in, in Texas, Oklahoma, or Louisiana, and I was drawn elsewhere as soon as I could travel. My family never understood why I was there and I never understood why I was there. We found a way to relate to one another in a healthy, loving way, but living rather different lives. On the other hand, although when

first I arrived in India I hated the place, it didn't take too long until it was all so familiar to me that I started wondering why I hadn't been born there.

**RA** Maybe the climate in the places where you grew up got you prepared for living in India.

**RS** Oh, absolutely.

**RA** Wouldn't you say that if we zoom back enough and realize that we're swimming in an ocean of intelligence—it's kind of a cliché to say that everything happens for a reason, everything's perfect as it is, but I ascribe to that. If you look at it deeply enough, how could there be accidents in an ocean of infinite intelligence?

**RS** I agree entirely. And I do not believe that this was an accident at all. It's just that human beings get to where they are sometimes as a result of influences that promote their efforts, and at other times in spite of influences that tried very hard to dissuade them from achievement.

I think of there being three main channels of inheritance that everybody grows up with: the inheritance that you bring with you from your previous incarnations, what you bring with you genetically from your mother and father and their parents and those gone before, as well as the effect of the culture in which you develop. My father's parents were from Moravia, Czech Republic, and my mother was not. Had his parents remained there and had my mother's parents somehow ended up in Moravia, and had I been born there, even from the same parents, I would have grown up very differently than I did growing up in Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma.

For one thing, I would have grown up with different languages, and language is extremely important. My father was born in Texas in 1920; until he was six, he only knew two words of English—*aunt* and *uncle*. Otherwise he spoke Czech, because his parents and siblings spoke Czech. My grandfather's hired hands were Mexican and spoke Mexican. Though my father retained his fluency in Czech and Spanish throughout his life, he felt embarrassed

speaking either, because of having no education in language.

It is difficult for me to envision culture without language. Human language is to me an absolutely required foundational element for culture of all kinds. Each language has its own flavor, its own history, its own attitudes. As Vimalananda used to say, English is very good for commercial things, for minutely describing very specific things in the external world; it's not very good for bringing all of those things together. Sanskrit is much better for bringing all of those things together. Charles V was reported to have stated, "I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse." So many beautiful songs to God have been written in Spanish because it has that kind of flavor to it; French is an excellent court language. Italian is a wonderful language—I love Italian. It's especially good for wine, women, and song.

**RA** Inuit is a good one for talking about snow probably.

**RS** Inuit, I'm sure, is excellent for snow.

**RA** We were talking about tendencies and collective consciousness. We can think of political parties or cultural phenomena or the battle over global warming—I always think in terms of a sort of vertical strata of creation and how the surface expression of things we see on the news is representative of much deeper layers of reality.

You kind of alluded to this when we were talking about blowing a hole in the aura and being overtaken by subtle influences. It seems to me that there is a sort of an epic battle taking place on subtle levels between various forces, positive and negative. Of course, you know that kind of thing is depicted mythologically and in the Vedic literature, in the Puranas, the gods and the demons are always battling it out. Maybe it's always been intense, but there seems to be a greater contrast these days, as if positive and negative forces are both increasing in their strength and distinctness. Those puppeteers

are polarizing humanity in a variety of ways. Do you have any comments on that line of thinking?

**RS** Well, if we do nothing but recognize that nothing would exist without duality and if we look at duality—we use the terms "positive" and "negative" and they have certain associations; the word "negative" has a pejorative association to it. The main message is that they are polarizing.

A positive charge is attracted to a negative charge, but under certain conditions they will repel one another, and the more they repel one another the greater the polarization of charge until the point where a spark crosses the gap, or a lightning bolt strikes, or the polarization is resolved in some other way. I agree with you in thinking that currently there is quite a bit of polarization in human society and that it is quite possible that this polarization will keep intensifying until some dramatic event causes it to resolve again.

We've seen this happen throughout history. Intense polarization took place during World War II, with democracies confronting totalitarian societies, and two different types of totalitarian society, fascist and communist, hating one another even more than the freer societies hated the totalitarians because hate was so much a part of the way that the totalitarians defined themselves.

It does seem to me that polarization is increasing, and that something in the environment is facilitating that increase. The Bush-Gore election brought into clear focus the fact that the USA is currently divided into two camps more or less equal in size with very different visions of reality, which is why it is now so difficult for our government to get anything done. People get very invested in their concepts of how things ought to be, and are often willing to defend these concepts to the death.

I am reminded of something that Ouspensky wrote in his book *In Search of the Miraculous* about his studies with Gurdjieff back in Russia in and around the time of the Russian Revolution and World War I. At one point Gurdjieff observed that it was exceedingly fortunate



that his group was able to meet during that time of great social turbulence because that great crisis was causing the consensus reality of the inhabitants of Russia to fray. ‘Consensus reality’ is that field of ordinary accepted parameters of reality shared by the members of a group. It can be quite difficult to spread radical knowledge at a time when a society and its consensus reality are relatively intact, because the pressure of thought of all the people who buy into a particular vision of reality is usually strong enough to make it very difficult for any alternative vision to compete. But a century ago in Russia the shared awareness of the populace had been so damaged by the war and the revolution that the suppressing pressure of the consensus reality was reduced and became more tenuous, which allowed those like Gurdjieff—who tried to see things more clearly, more genuinely, more uniquely—to do so with greater ease.

Nowadays the US is divided into Red and Blue visions of reality, each with its own increasingly polarized consensus reality that promotes further polarization. And to complicate the situation further, we have, in the form of the internet, a method of interacting that is generating its own consensus reality. Don’t get me wrong—I use the internet every day—but the fact is that the internet is an externalized consensus reality whose momentum is now sufficiently strong that is dragging almost everybody into it, creating what I think has the potential to be an extremely pathological and bizarre set of results. You’ve heard of the technological singularity, I’m sure. We have people who sincerely believe that at some point it will be possible to upload our personalities onto servers somewhere. They don’t explain—or I haven’t heard anybody explain yet—what’s going to happen when the power to the server gets cut or when a virus gets into the program. I don’t spend much time thinking about that because by the very fact of proposing something that is utterly impossible, it is obvious that their thinking is quite muddled.

Those people who have invested heavily in this concept are overlooking the fact that human beings are utterly dependent for their sanity on getting

regular inputs from the external environment. Continual interaction with the outside world is what keeps us able to function. Whether or not we’re aware of it, we’re always hearing subliminal sounds, always receiving micro-movements of air via our touch receptors, always seeing one thing or another. All of these sensory inputs reassure us, remind us that we are part of our surroundings, that a ‘to and fro’ exists between us.

I have a young friend who works developing software for complicated imaging applications, some involving radar. He was invited one day into a room where they test radars and similar devices, a room in which, because of the way it’s constructed, there is no reflection of sound and no reflection of light. If you shine a beam of light directly at someone they can see the beam of light but as soon as you turn the beam so that it is not directed at them, no light will be visible to them. If I talk directly at you, your ears will detect the vibrations from my mouth and you will hear me, but if I turn even slightly no sound will reach you. This friend said that after twenty minutes he felt so weird that he had to leave, and he discovered that even the guys who work in there everyday have to limit themselves to one hour at a time.

**RA** Wow. Because they need the normal stimulation.

**RS** They need that normal stimulation. So an hour and a half after John Doe ends up in the giant server in the sky, then what?

**RA** Also, you know that the whole notion that our personality can be uploaded to a computer—I mean a single cell, a single neuron, is far more complex than the most sophisticated computer we’ve ever designed. You wouldn’t have much of a personality if you only had a single neuron; you need trillions of them and they need to all be interconnected in ways that are—you know, there are more connections between our neurons than there are stars in the galaxy, so I think it’s going to be a long time before we design a computer that could store a personality.

**RS** And those connections are continuously running the so-called default mode network which takes up something like 80% of the brain’s energy and is running all the time and you’re never aware of it. It’s running in the background and it’s just continuously creating the foundation of this thing that we call the personality, so no—

**RA** Yeah, it’s a nice sci-fi notion but—

**RA** Well, this might be a good segue into talking more explicitly about kundalini. Why don’t you start by just defining it. Most people understand kundalini as some kind of energy that resides in the base of the spine and can be awakened; it rises up the spine and when it rises up you get enlightenment. I mean that’s probably, in a nutshell, what most people understand, but I think there’s probably a lot more to it, so let’s go for that.

**RS** I’m going to start out by saying that, first of all, language is a very powerful thing. The more that people use the word *kundalini*, the more they apply their own concepts as to what the word means. Their concepts will adhere to the surface of whatever it is that kundalini really is. As time goes on, those who look at kundalini will see less of her in her real form, and more of the various concepts adhering to her, concepts that people have projected in her direction.

**RA** And you’ll please explain why you’re using the word *her* as you go along here?

**RS** Yes, I use the word *her* not because she has any permanent affinity with some embodied female, human or otherwise, but because in our universe we employ the concept of her-ness and femininity to represent that energy and that protoplasm and those hormones and that organization of a living being that can reproduce, that can actually—especially in the context of vertebrates and mammals—give rise to an individual that belongs to the same species as the individual that is reproducing.

**RA** But not only that. Whenever I have

heard anything about kundalini, it’s not presented as merely some sort of abstract energy, but as being intelligent and having a marvelously intricate way of transforming us in various ways. If it’s intelligent, then we could certainly imagine it being a her or a him, having some kind of personification in some way, could we not?

**RS** We can, definitely. And, of course, wherever there’s a him there will always be a her; where there’s a her there will always be a him. We’re living in a world of duality. Fundamentally, from our perspective in the dual world, there is great benefit in looking at things with two eyes, at least to begin with, and trying to understand who we are and where we’ve come from and where we’re going. There is a lot of use in looking at it from the perspective of Shakti and of Shakti’s partner, call him Shaktiman or Siva or whatever—from the perspective of one principle of intelligence that maintains relative stability of intent, position, and awareness, and another principle that is more dynamic. It’s just like what we see in the atomic world: you have the nucleus (protons and neutrons) and you have electrons. The electrons are always moving; that’s their job. Relative to the electrons, the protons and neutrons are sitting in a state of relative inaction, letting the electrons move around them; that’s their job.

**RA** And the protons have a positive charge and electrons have a negative charge and it keeps the whole show going.

**RS** And everything goes around. It just so happens that we applied the words ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ to these particles; we could instead have described them as ‘have’ and ‘have-not’ or something similar, some other pair of dualities. Or, protons might have been assigned a negative charge and electrons a positive charge; in fact, in the anti-matter world, a positron is an electron that carries a positive charge. The facts remain that the nucleus of an atom carries one electrical charge and that atom’s electrons carry another charge, and that these charges are opposite, and repel one another even while being

attracted to each other. The nucleus is relatively stationary, but is also moving.

In the universe, so far as we know, nothing is stationary: the sun orbits the center of the Milky Way at more than one hundred fifty miles a second, and our galaxy is being dragged towards the Great Attractor at nearly four hundred miles per second, and God only knows what the Great Attractor is being attracted by; but every thing is moving. Relatively speaking, the nucleus is not moving and the electrons are moving around it. Relatively speaking, energy—let’s call it Shakti—is moving and Shakti’s opposite—let’s call it Siva—is, relatively speaking, unmoving. This dynamic has been around since the days of the Big Bang, which was billions of years ago, and you and I exist within this very dynamic. This dynamic is the kundalini dynamic, the kundalini shakti.

Earlier you referred to the ahamkara shakti. Ahamkara is a nice Sanskrit word. *Aham* means *I*. ‘A’ is the first letter in the Sanskrit alphabet ‘HA’ is the last one—so aham is the alpha and the omega, the origin and termination, of all manifestation. Everything that you personally can identify with as being part of you is aham. Ahamkara is the force that creates aham. If we visualize kundalini as coming from the bottom and going up to the top, we should think of ahamkara proceeding from the top to the bottom. Ahamkara starts out as shakti that is utterly unidentified with anything, limited by nothing other than itself, but that progressively becomes increasingly limited as it descends into individuation—in our case, into the human being. The reason why the texts talk about kundalini being asleep is that in the average person, the vast majority of the shakti in the body is being employed to keep the organism functioning in the context in which that organism has evolved. We’ve evolved over many, many millions of years for the purpose, in my opinion, of being able to act as an environment in which consciousness can manifest itself.

**RA** Beautiful.

**RS** And it has taken billions of years for

us to get here, going through various stages to get to a point where we can, in fact, have awareness of things that we can be aware of, like the fact that there is something other than our organism. I think it’s very useful to remember that the human organism—we like to think of ourselves as human—the human organism is made up of, more or less, roughly 100 trillion cells, only 10% percent of which are actually human.

**RA** Just so people understand what you’re saying: 90% of those cells are various bacteria and other microscopic organisms that are completely non-human, but on whom our lives depend.

**RS** On whom our lives depend. And they also have awareness, though theirs is not the same sort of awareness that we enjoy. In a way that’s good, because we don’t have to be talking to them all day long, negotiating: “Ok, do you agree that we should go to the movies?” But we do have to negotiate with them in the context of what we eat and how and when we eat it, and if they’re working well, we think more clearly, and if they’re not working well, we definitely do not think clearly. They’re an integral part of us, even though we like to claim that they are separate from us.

This whole situation is extremely complicated. What are now human cells were originally single-cell bacteria as well, until they began to take in other bacteria. Our mitochondria were independent at one point, until they thought, “These animal cells are the going thing. This is where our future lies!” and decided to move in. As part of the bargain they have retained their own genetic material, separate from our genetic material; they are part of us, and also separate from us.

**RA** We’d die without them.

**RS** We would die very quickly without them, and without our other allies. When we try to negotiate who we are, we must remember them. How do we define ourselves?

We humans like to think of ourselves as individuals, but really we are more



“dividual,” because parts of us are separate and other parts are shared. So many components make up a person, but the most ‘personal’ part of a person is the personality. And here also we are ‘dividual.’ To paraphrase E.J. Gold, the most noteworthy characteristic of our species is that each one of us possesses a set of often unrelated personalities, with no particular ability to determine which personality will operate at any one moment.

**RA** But if reincarnation is true, then it again goes beyond the physical level. There’s something which carries a package of information from one vehicle to the next when the first vehicle no longer functions and we need a new one. Perhaps the *jiva* is the core of what we are as an individual. Yes? No?

**RS** Yes, except for the fact that we can’t even think of a *jiva* necessarily as being individual, because sometimes you will end up having one *jiva* manifesting itself in more than one human being and sometimes you’ll have more than one *jiva* manifesting—occasionally at the same time—in the same human being. Few believers in reincarnation want to hear this, because almost everyone likes to think “I am an individual.” The job of ahamkara is to identify things that I believe are mine: this is mine; here’s my shirt; here are my glasses; here is my knowledge; here is my spouse; here is my house. It’s just the nature of ahamkara.

The nature of any shakti is that it is attracted to something. The nature of the electron is that it is attracted to the nucleus; it can never quite reach the nucleus, but it moves about the nucleus ceaselessly, trying to reach it. The nucleus is attracted to the electron but it remains relatively immobile, serving as a center around which the electron can move. The kundalini shakti craves to reunite with the unity from which it arose, and so it searches for the supreme reality. But, once the kundalini shakti has entered the human body, it searches within that body, and does not find. While the *jiva* is in the womb, kundalini is busy acting in its role as ahamkara, creating and identifying the body’s various limbs, generating

the plethora of connections that link different cells. As its attention becomes monopolized by all this multiplicity in manifestation, this shakti becomes progressively less kundalini and more ahamkara. The greater its familiarity with the five elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space—the less it can recall what it was like to be aware of consciousness without limitations. That’s why people suggest that the kundalini is sleeping—not because she’s forgotten that reality, but because she’s retained only slight awareness of that reality thanks to having become aware of the many other realities that require attention if we are to exist.

**RA** As I understand it, the word ahamkara means I-maker right? Could we sort of zoom out and say that there are, simplistically speaking, two fundamental forces in the universe: one is the I-maker force which is responsible for individuation since the time of the Big Bang and individuates with greater and greater and greater sophistication to the point where a second fundamental force can begin to function in a conscious way, which begins to reverse the whole process? In other words, it takes a sophisticated nervous system to begin to wake up to the notion that, ultimately, I am unbounded, I am universal consciousness, and to begin to seek the experience of that until it’s established. There’s a sort of feedback loop or cycle from I to I, from source, through course, back to source.

**RS** In one sense there are these two fundamental forces that you mention, but ultimately they are but aspects of a single force. Of the approximately eighteen years in total that I’ve spent in India, I spent six studying Ayurveda in Pune. Not far from Pune is the small town of Alandi, which boasts the samadhi of Maharashtra’s most famous saint, Jnaneshvar Maharaj, who wrote my favorite commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*; officially titled the *Bhavarthadipika*, everyone knows it as the *Jnaneshvari* (literally, Jnaneshvar’s Book).

Aside from *Jnaneshvari*, Jnaneshvar’s most famous work is the *Amritanubhava*,

which can be translated either as “The Ambrosia of Experience” or “The Experience of Ambrosia.” In this remarkable book, Jnaneshvar states that, though the supreme reality desired to perceive itself, it could not do so because nothing external to that reality existed, including space, time, and causation, via which it could experience itself. The will of the supreme reality therefore caused the universe to emerge, to act as a mirror in which reality could perceive itself. According to this theory, which I too espouse, in order to perceive itself, the universe had to create within itself a part of itself that believed it was different from itself. The moment of that creation of a sense of difference was the moment of the Big Bang. A trillionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a second later the energy thus generated so repelled itself that the cosmos went from an infinitesimal size to being trillions of times larger—an indescribable speed and violence that we can’t even begin to conceptualize. As a result of that sudden expansion, there was immediately afterward, since karma is equal and opposite, an immediate and opposite return of awareness directed toward attempting to achieve that unity again.

Now that portion of awareness that believes itself to be separate is attempting to find the unity in the context of the existence of this giant field of what appears to be separation. Ever since this beginning, the entire universe has been trying to return to that state of unity but cannot do so because of the various forces that were generated at that moment of separation so that the mirror could be created. The human being serves as a microcosm of the big cosmos, the macrocosm, and within the context of this tiny replica of the giant cosmos—that replica being the human being—one can, under certain conditions and for a certain period of time, act as mirror for that consciousness, and have one’s awareness be completely freed, at least temporarily, from all of those limitations that have been added in the ensuing billions of years. The supreme in the external and the supreme in the internal can thus recognize their ultimate identity.

**RA** It seems to me that what you end up with is something more than the original unity, because you have a situation in which unity can be a living reality. It’s not like the universe is striving just to go back to the un-manifest with nothing going on; it’s that the universe seems to be forming a more and more sophisticated instrument through which it can know itself, human beings being one. The human instrument can be fine-tuned to the extent that the fundamental unity can be known and perceived while yet living within the boundaries of human life. Those boundaries become universal in their nature with the proper sort of fine-tuning.

**RS** When I was in college in Oklahoma, I became very fond of the works of Alfred Jarry, a French surrealist and dadaist writer. Jarry once defined god as the tangential point between zero and infinity, and this formula of his has stuck with me ever since I read it. I do believe that the cosmos is trying to employ us to facilitate an awareness of the fact that the creativity that is inherent in the universe can best display itself when unity and diversity meet at that boundary where both display themselves but neither is in fact present. That’s where the real creativity is, and that is very much what the kundalini, in my opinion, is attempting to do. For some people, the proper path is to sit down, do their *sadhana*, awaken kundalini, send it out the top of their head, and return to wherever it is they came from. But for other people, the right direction to follow is to direct kundalini to identify progressively less with their individuality and progressively more with the unity. In such circumstance, a dynamic interplay between those two forms of identification will develop, which will foster creativity in the context of the world in which that individual lives, with the people and places and things, and the dogs and trees, and all of those things that we can bring more awareness and more love and more reality to.

**RA** You said an interesting thing in our correspondence. You were talking about

integrating physical and spiritual life, and that health and longevity require that ahamkara identifies strongly with the organism so that sufficient *prana* will enliven the body while spiritual life requires that ahamkara relinquish most of that identification. No incarnate being can be either wholly worldly or wholly spiritual; too much spirit burns the world out of you and makes it impossible to retain your body, too much attachment drowns your consciousness in worldliness. There’s a term you’re probably familiar with, *leshavidya*, which is the faint remains of ignorance. You need to have that little greasy surface on the palm after casting off the butter ball, you need to have the faint remains of ignorance in order for unity to be a living reality.

**RS** Absolutely. This is one of the things that is not generally comprehended about spirituality in general and kundalini in particular: if you want to stay in the world, there will always be some grease on the palm, always some blind spot, however tiny. As my Jyotisha guru, a very eccentric Punjabi gentleman, likes to say, a real guru makes only one mistake every ten thousand years; that is, however, still one mistake. All of the deities and rishis made mistakes; the story of the great rishi Viswamitra documents his several mistakes, one every ten thousand years or so. A mistake is still a mistake, still a limitation. Jesus Christ on the cross asked why he had been forsaken. He was otherwise utterly aware that he had not been forsaken, but for that tiny moment he lost that awareness. And that was Jesus Christ—that’s not you and me.

Everybody has some limitation, and there’s no use in pretending otherwise. There is in my opinion no use to announce that we’ve come to the end of history, or the end of the Vedas, or the end of anything else; and there is certainly no use to declare that you’ve become enlightened. As soon as you say that you’re enlightened—well, I don’t even think there’s a word for enlightenment in Sanskrit, in the sense that the word has taken on in the modern world.

**RA** Don’t you have *moksha* and words like that?

**RS** Indeed, but does moksha really mean enlightenment? Moksha literally means emancipation or liberation; it means that you’ve been freed. As my mentor liked to say, “*moham kshayati iti mokshah*”: the destruction of delusion is moksha. Vimalananda liked to say that what enlightenment really means is thanks to the grace of your gurus and benefactors, and your own hard work, the weight of your karmas has diminished, which lightens you. Once you are lighter you can see more clearly, your energy moves more clearly, and you can connect more readily to clarity itself. Moksha doesn’t mean that you’ve become supreme in the universe; it means that you have gained the ability to function within the universe as you are meant to function.

**RA** So you would probably agree that there is no ultimate state beyond which there is no possibility of further refinement or clarification, but there’s always a next horizon no matter how many horizons you’ve reached.

**RS** As far as I have been taught, and as far as I have myself seen, every experience that can be had can also be transcended somehow. I see no more end to horizons than I can see an end to universes, and the way it looks now, to modern physics, big bangs are happening all the time, even as we speak.

**RA** Some physicists say it’s like bubbles in ginger ale; there are just infinite universes all bubbling around. A few minutes ago you rattled off a description of what some people might like to do, which is sit down, awaken their kundalini, have it rise up, go out the top of the head, and they’re out of here. Anyone who could do it so easily and smoothly and quickly is one in a billion. For most people, it’s a delicate, long drawn out, perhaps arduous, perhaps extremely intense, process, full of all sorts of potential pitfalls and sidetracks and difficulties. Let’s have a discussion about the realistic experience as most people are going to



experience it, if they do, of what happens when kundalini begins to awaken and the various stages of progress that one has to undergo in order for its awakening to reach its full blossoming or maturity.

**RS** I think the best thing that can be said about kundalini awakening is that it is truly individual, absolutely different for everyone who experiences it. I think it is unfortunate, though understandable, that people try to talk about a standard kundalini experience, as if there were such a thing. In fact, merely knowing the word ‘kundalini’ and having some idea about the *chakras* offers your awareness—offers your ahamkara and kundalini—something to identify with, and can in some cases distort your experience. Maybe, possibly, you have awakened kundalini without bothering to awaken any of the chakras or maybe you’ve only awakened one chakra but you read that there are six chakras that all have to be awakened and then you start to pay attention to all of those six chakras when you may not need to, since ultimately you don’t need to pay any attention to anything other than the supreme reality. What is important, for kundalini awakening, is that your prana needs to enter the innermost sheath of the central channel—the *sushumna*.

**RA** OK, so you’re saying that kundalini can awaken without you really knowing anything about kundalini, all the various chakras can become enlivened and awakened without you really knowing anything about chakras, that you can sort of shoot for the highest first—the supreme reality. You know, seek ye first the kingdom of heaven and all else shall be added unto thee—that kind of thing. Is that what you’re saying?

**RS** Yes, that may work for some people and may not work for others. The chakras are definitely very useful, when they actually exist. The word chakra has taken on its own constellation of connotations that have now become implicit to it, connotations that work on us without us necessarily being aware of how they’re working. The chakras are centers of energy, and certainly

centers of energy exists at the throat and the heart and so on. Many of the texts in which the chakras appear do not identify six; some texts talk about nine, some mention only one. But the chakras are energy centers that do not exist in ordinary human organisms, that have to be created within us by shakti that penetrates to the subtlest levels of those locations in order to enliven the potential chakra that exists in the subtle body at that location.

**RA** So you’re saying that for the average person who hasn’t enlivened any of the chakras, they’re there in the subtle body but they’re in a sort of latent or dormant form—

**RS** —a seed form that is not yet sprouted.

**RA** So they don’t really serve any kind of function whatsoever? There’s no sort of digestive area chakra, heart chakra, intellect chakra—they’re just sort of non-functional potentials that don’t actually do anything until they get enlivened?

**RS** Well just suppose for a moment that here is a seed at the heart chakra and this seed is in the subtle part of the subtle body. Being a seed, it has a strong energy and that energy, even though the seed itself is not yet displaying everything that it can do, still radiates in all directions. That radiation is picked up by the rest of the subtle body, which transmits it into the pranic body, and creates strong pranic centers—

**RA** Just let me ask, is the pranic body more manifest or less manifest than the subtle body?

**RS** It’s more manifest.

**RA** More manifest, OK.

**RS** Right. We have the physical body—the physical body is, in Sanskrit, the *annamaya kosha*. *Anna* means *food*: the physical body is made out of food, nourished by food, made sick by food and made well by food. The pranic

body, or *pranamaya kosha*, is made out of prana; it is made sick by prana and made well by prana. The subtle body is the *manomaya kosha*. *Mano* means *mind*—literally, “the thing that measures”. The mind is made out of thoughts, emotions, concepts, memories, and all sorts of similar matter; it is made sick by those things and made well by them. The mind is the field in which we represent the five elements in non-physical form; the body is the field in which we represent the five elements in physical form. Prana communicates between the two. Now prana, of course, is an expression of the supreme reality, which makes prana extremely intelligent, in a limited way—

**RA** —individuated.

**RS** From the perspective of the body—especially our commensal bacteria but also our human cells—prana *is* god, because it provides all of our cells with life and vitality. The amount of manifested awareness in a bacterium is, to be sure, not large, but the amount of awareness manifested in prana itself is indeed vast. Prana possesses consciousness; not precisely the sort of consciousness that we humans think of when we think about consciousness, but rather the consciousness of life itself. Prana was born at the moment that protoplasmic life appeared on Earth, and has evolved its own awareness, the awareness of the life force itself, via the life experience of all protoplasm ever since.

During the more than three billion years of life on Earth, this awareness has incarnated in bacteria and trees and dogs and every other living being, by virtue of which it has gained immense experience, immense awareness about how awareness and matter interact and can cooperate with one another. Prana has driven evolution on our planet, as it seeks always to create the best possible protoplasmic platform through which to radiate awareness. It would appear that the human being is the best-evolved organism (thus far) for this purpose, though prana basically has to recapitulate evolution each time a new human being appears, first in the womb, then outside it.

When conception occurs, awareness has first to build a body, growing it during pregnancy and then infancy and childhood; this is a full-time job. It is only after puberty begins that individuation really starts, because of the agenda of our species. Everything in the universe has its own agenda; the agenda of nature is that all existing species should evolve, which require all species to reproduce. Individuals are born, grow, age, and die, and new individuals must emerge, so that the species-pattern that has been established in living protoplasm can continue and eventually create new species. Tremendous energy has been working tirelessly via the various species of humans for millions of years for the purpose of moving us in the direction of increasing openness to the supreme reality, and the energy of nature has been simultaneously moving us equally ceaselessly in the direction of continuing to evolve the various species of human. Both these agendas require reproduction, which can only happen when one sperm and one egg meet, which can only happen when the producers and bearers of sperm and ova come together. In plants pollen must get to flowers, via the wind and bees and what-have-you; in animals you have mating seasons and displays and the like. Modern humans have rock concerts—

**RA** bars—

**RS** and bars—

**RA** Match.com, Christian Mingle—

**RS** There are now so many methods, but they all serve the same purpose. Puberty is a crucial phase of individuation; it’s nature telling the organism, “Congratulations! You have survived long enough to truly individuate! But there is no free barbecue for you,” as we say in Texas. “You have been given this organism and it is your task, now that you are able to reproduce, to do so, to produce more of your kind or at the very least to provide meaningful assistance to your relatives and friends who are producing more of your kind.” If you’re not going to have kids yourself you will do well to do something nice

for somebody else’s kids, so that you can pay off the RNA, the debt that you owe to the *yoni*, to the species in which you were born. That debt has to be paid, one way or another.

I personally have no children, but I spend and have spent a lot of time in and around families that do have children, including this very family in whose home I am now sitting. I’ve known the lady of the house for forty years thus far; I met her husband a quarter-century back, and the two boys when they were born—they are now 24 and 19. I’ve met them regularly every year since their births, and now I often do things with them as adults, including traveling together.

**RA** Some people probably don’t do either.

**RS** Many people do not do either. Perhaps they’re helping out in some other way; I hope so. In any event, nature obliges all individuals of all species to reproduce, and reproduction in humans happens solely as the result of the union of one female human and one male human. Now we’re talking real individuality. Nature furthers its agenda by promoting individuality, and this is why adolescence provides us an opportunity to introduce adolescents to the kundalini shakti. Only an opportunity, for often such an introduction is not feasible; today especially, kids get so easily taken over by Facebook and Twitter and other similar forms of addictive social media that they spread their awareness so far into the “fake” archetypal world that they never become acquainted with the world of genuine archetypes.

Even when it is feasible to introduce awareness of kundalini it may not be easy, though it is often easier for girls than for boys, because girls enjoy a natural “initiation into adulthood” in the form of menarche. As soon as a girl starts to bleed, a wise mother will take advantage of that radical shift from childhood into fertility by presenting to her to the basics of female spirituality. In the past this used to be done for boys also, and it is more necessary for boys

because a boy’s physical transformation is less dramatic than a girl’s. Boys would be taken out by the elders of the tribe and beaten up a little bit and subjected to privations and forced to do something really difficult, to force them to understand that there was something more to life than just indulgence. In some societies, the really sensible ones, the boys would also be shown how the transformation happening within them provides an opportunity for them to learn what their goals in life really are, in particular their ultimate goal, which is to reconnect to the supreme reality.

**RA** You’re saying that ideally, in a culture, when the hormones start to kick in and sexual desires begin to become strong in adolescence, one is at the same time introduced to the idea that there is a higher purpose to this energy aside from just procreation, that you have to counterbalance the procreative drive with the desire for spirituality.

**RS** Exactly. We humans are microcosms, so even if all you did was to introduce children to the concept that they are small units of the big universe, but reflecting everything that goes on in that universe, that would be really useful.

**RA** I think what you’re implying here is that—and, of course, most people who’ve read about this stuff have come across this idea—that the sexual energy is the very same energy that one uses to awaken the chakras and rise to higher levels of spirituality and it should be used responsibly and not just squandered, in order to facilitate that awakening. It has its purpose for sexuality but that has to be put in proper proportion, as does everything in life. Food has its purpose but you can become a glutton.

**RS** Yes. Sleep has its purpose but you can lie around in the hammock doing nothing all day. Because sex is such a primal drive, central to the continuation of life on earth, nature goes out of her way to make this desire so strong. On the one hand, yes, it’s a specific desire, but desire is desire. You can take a specific desire and, if you alter its direction, you may end up



in a very different place than you would have had you simply followed that desire to where it was leading you, directed by your personal karmas, the karmas of your parents, and the karmas of your culture. That's of course where we hope that your guru, mentor, or benefactor guides you, gives you an idea about potential creative uses for this energy, uses other than simple procreation, uses other than what everybody else is telling you to do with it, and what you may be imagining about it. Interesting transformational possibilities do exist, subject to practical limitations.

In my case, I never wanted to become a professional dancer, but had I had that desire, I would not have been able to fulfill it, because I was never coordinated enough to become a dancer, even when I was young and vital and enthusiastic. I could've tried, but I would have failed miserably. You have to know your limitations. But, in the context of those limitations, there are still many, many things that you can do that will move you in the direction where you really need to go, which is the direction of being as transparent as possible to the supreme reality while at the same time being a functional human being.

**RA** We could talk about priestly celibacy, which probably arose in the Catholic church from this principle we're discussing here, but it's not for everyone and if it becomes something that's mandated for everyone, at least for a whole class of people, then there are problems.

**RS** And we see what the problems are. If celibacy is something that's natural and spontaneous, then that's great. If you realize to yourself, wait, this is not really what I want to do, I don't really want to be part of the world as it is, I want to spend my time more in that other world even though I'm going to be partly in this world—that's a wonderful thing. But not everybody can do this, and especially not in the context of an institution. When things start to get organized—you know the old saying: God said "Look, here's awareness!" and the devil said, "Great, I'll organize it!" When spiritual things get organized—

not just in the Christian church, in any organization—problems will arise. Consider India's sadhus. Though some are really genuine, fine human beings, and a few are most amazing, probably 90 or 95% are just ordinary individuals who should not have taken sadhu vows. A few of them are actually malign. Many wander around saying, "Yes, I'm celibate," meaning "celibate" in a very particular sense. As they say in India, "*Mile to mari, nahi to sada brahmachari*," which translated loosely means "If I find her I will enjoy sex with her" (actually a stronger word is used), "otherwise I'm always a brahmachari." So, "I'm a brahmachari—whenever I'm not having sex."

**RA** Yeah—so a lot of hypocrites and phonies out there.

**RS** All of us, at some time or another, me especially, have acted hypocritically, but there is great value in being able at least to admit to yourself what you are doing, and to find a way to stop doing it. Unfortunately, once you develop in yourself a really strong pattern, it can become so strong that it can take you over. As Vimalananda would very frequently say when I was pouring out whiskey for him, "Whenever you drink, remember one thing: either the drink is going to drink you or you are going to drink it." What he meant was that whiskey will change your internal chemistry, which will change your awareness, and either you will use that altered awareness to become more open to the supreme reality, or you will use it to reinforce all the limitations of your awareness, which will drive you to repeat your usual mistakes. In this context your biggest mistake will be to drink even more, since that is alcohol's chief agenda. Alcohol wants you to drink it, so that people will brew and distill more of it, so that more people will drink it. Michael Pollan—his name is so appropriate, since he writes about botany—wrote a book entitled *The Botany of Desire*, a book about how four popular species—the apple, the tulip, cannabis, and the potato—have learned how to induce humans to serve them.

The cultivation of carpet grass is another good example of how plants can induce us to assist them in their spread. Think about it: otherwise rational humans, mostly men, spend hundreds of hours of their valuable free time each year doing nothing but tending to smallish patches of green in front of and behind their houses which they have to regularly cut. In this way a handful of grass species have colonized millions of acres all over this country and others. We could argue, in fact, that the grass has taken over those humans that care for it, and is driving them around telling them what to do. It has been suggested, and I personally endorse this view, that almost every species out there very much wants to get humans to work for them. Other species are aware that humans are the world's paramount species, and that humans can make big changes in the world. Look at our pets: dogs control us, cats control us. They have found strategies that work well for them. These strategies work because humans are willing to identify these other species as members of the extended human family; for some people, their pets are their family. Our species does things like this because of ahamkara, the ability to identify as self things other than our selves.

When you start to release ahamkara from your normal self-definition, you start to ask, "Who am I? Now I know that I'm not only the body, and if I am not just the body, then who exactly am I?" Just asking the question "Who am I?" was sufficient for Ramana Maharshi. Unfortunately, it's not sufficient for everybody, because everybody doesn't have that supreme ability to see things as clearly as he did. My mentor used to say that although people give discourses on the *Bhagavad Gita* all the time, they don't realize that the *Bhagavad Gita* was delivered by Krishna, an *avatara* of a Vishnu, to Arjuna, who was nearly a rishi himself. We only have the record of the words they used; unless you're at a similar level of awareness, how will you be able to perceive the actual prana that was being conveyed between them, the emotions that were being conveyed? You won't, and because you won't you will only be able to see the words, and you will try to interpret

the words without the shakti that they transmitted. Maybe you'll come up with some novel interpretation, and you'll find some people who will go along with those interpretations, and they will build you a temple and ashram, and you will sit there amid your interpretations, creating more complications instead of disconnecting yourself from your already-existing complications.

**RA** You brought up some interesting points there. The one about the plants, if I were to summarize that, I would say that there's an evolutionary force that permeates and ultimately motivates all creation and that you can see it functioning in various plant and animal species in that they conduct themselves in such a way as to have other species, namely us, the most influential one, serve them. There's sort of a higher intelligence that can be discerned in these so-called more lowly intelligent species. That seemed to be the key point.

**RS** And the more that we think of ourselves as being the higher species, the easier it is for these other so-called lower species to manipulate us.

**RA** And then the point about the *Bhagavad Gita* and the temples and all that. You're basically saying that people can speak or write, and do naturally speak or write, from their level of consciousness but that's usually not the level of consciousness from which people hear or read what they've said or written and so there's a communication gap. And knowledge crumbles on the hard rocks of ignorance. Things can be completely garbled and misinterpreted and misunderstood and watered down. People on a spiritual path find that they can read a book like the *Bhagavad Gita* every five years for fifty years and that every time they read it, they get a new level of meaning out of it. Their level of consciousness has inched its—

**RS** It's evolved.

**RA** It's come closer to the level at which it was expressed.

**RS** Exactly. In certain Indian contexts, that's what the guru would do. The guru would find a text or a practice—let's use a text as an example—and he would tell the student to go study the text. The idea was that the text provides a framework into which you can take the experiences that you have—both your internal experiences and the experiences you have externally—and you can try to use them to understand how you as an individual interact with the idealized world of the text. The text conveys something mythic, something that's out of normal time. The text is in mythic time and you are in normal time, and the creative dynamic between those two time streams facilitates even more evolution, both in you and in the myth itself.

**RA** Interesting. Let me bring it back to kundalini again. I've seen all sorts of things over the years. I've been on long meditation courses. In one particular case there was a whole group of people who were actually asked to sit on the stage who were going through *kriyas*—just kind of flying, thrashing around. I've seen people almost literally bouncing off the walls. I have a friend whose body was cooking so much that he could sit with the windows open in the wintertime with hardly any clothes on and he was still hot. I have another friend who really went through hell with kundalini and was unable to sleep and was burning up lying on the bathroom floor at three in the morning with this sort of intense energy frying her. Eventually she passed through that and it all settled down. I just told her I was going to be interviewing you and she read something you wrote about kundalini. She said "It sounds very scholarly. I'd like to know if this is coming from his own direct experience." So that's one question for you. How much have you experienced all this yourself—going through the whole kundalini awakening process? And she added that, "It's interesting you should send this now because I've had the deep insight recently that the whole kundalini experience is illusion, just more maya, just another belief system. I'm saying that as someone

who has been thoroughly convinced of this reality of the energetic journey for thirty three years." I didn't respond to her, but if I were to respond, I would probably say you can write off anything as illusion. Gravity is an illusion but it's still a phenomenon in relative creation that you have to deal with and respect. In any case, the key question here is the intensity of your own kundalini experience, on what foundation you speak and write about it. Also, perhaps, what advice and even cautionary notes you might give for those who want to get more involved in it and think it would be cool to awaken their kundalini—what they might actually be getting themselves into unknowingly.

**RS** Well, let me start off with my advice to people who think it would be neat to awaken kundalini. My advice is: Don't. You absolutely do not have any clue as to what you might unlock in yourself, what you might unleash, and you have no clue as to whether you'll be able to put a leash on it.

**RA** Once awakened, kundalini cannot be put back to sleep.

**RS** Exactly. In my personal case, I had no idea at all about kundalini when, just a few weeks after I turned 16, I took LSD for the first time. All of a sudden, without knowing anything about India's spirituality—OK, I had read the *Bhagavad Gita* maybe, without understanding anything or thinking it was particularly interesting—that was of course the Edgerton translation which was a bit—

**RA** Pretty dry—

**RS** Dry, yes. All of a sudden—I had never heard the word "prana" before but all of a sudden I KNEW what prana was, I felt it moving, I understood how it was moving, and I also understood that if I permitted myself to do so, I could easily depart from my body. I also understood without knowing how I understood it that if I did exit my body at that moment—having never had any thoughts of this sort of thing before—I



still somehow understood that if I exited right then that I would be unlikely to be able to return. There was a strong pull to leave, and a strong sense of needing to stay; I spent quite a number of hours in that in-between state. Those hours during which I hovered between leaving and not leaving created some tensions in my pranic body that took many, many years to work out.

That was the first time I took LSD; I took LSD—I don't know—another 100, 150 times, even though it didn't benefit me by providing me further clarity about how to proceed. However, LSD and the other entheogens I later experimented with were, at that time in the 60s in Oklahoma, the only things that I knew of that I could use to expose myself to an immaterial reality that I knew I had to get more of.

Once I realized that I had to find another path to follow, I knew I had to go abroad to try to find it. When in the mood I can be methodical, so I figured out a way to graduate from college after two years, and then I went to Africa, which was, at the time, the most exotic location that I could think of. I crossed Africa overland from the west coast to the east coast. In Kenya I got an opportunity to participate in an ethnographic expedition during which, for a variety of reasons, I was invited to join the tribe. I did so; I am the first white man ever to become a member of Kenya's Pokot tribe.

Joining the tribe was quite an experience, and, though I had to proceed to Europe shortly afterward, I intended to return and spend a longer time there—something that never happened. Even though I've never been back there, and even though the main reason that I was invited to join was so that the initiation could be filmed and otherwise documented by the ethnographers (to preserve something of the tribe's traditions, many of which have, sadly, already disappeared), something real happened during that initiation, sufficiently real that I can still feel the earth of Africa deep in my own organism. Africa is a place of great reality of a certain variety, and this experience was the culmination of

several other unusual experiences I had had while crossing the continent. I was, for example, cured of a severe disease by a “witch doctor” in Ivory Coast, and while I was recuperating there, I read *Autobiography of a Yogi*. After finishing it, I knew I needed to check yoga out.

I flew from Kenya to England, crossed overland to India, got robbed there, hated the place, went to Nepal, loved the place. After three months in Nepal I heard the Dalai Lama was going to give some teachings in Bodhgaya in India. Though I had heard of the Dalai Lama and Buddhism they then meant nothing to me, but everybody else was going so I thought I'd go too. In January 1974, I and 500,000 Tibetans and a bunch of other people landed in Bodhgaya for only the fourth Kalachakra initiation that the Dalai Lama had ever performed. The Kalachakra really blew my mind; the whole thing, and His Holiness, for sure, but most significantly, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. There was something about him—even physically, he was a very large man—but there was something else about him that I could sense but not name. I saw him and thought, “I don't know what he's got and I don't know how he got it but I gotta have some of that myself.” My whole organism aligned with that experience, and I intuitively knew that I had to go in this direction. That meant that I needed to stay in India for an extended period, which meant I needed a long-term visa. The easiest way to get such a visa back then was to become a student; but I had no idea of how to go about getting a student visa.

In the event, I procured one within a week: after the Kalachakra ended I took the train from Gaya to Bombay, where a few days later I met a couple and their son outside a restaurant who introduced me to other people through whom I met India's then most eminent Ayurvedic physician, who immediately arranged for me to be accepted into the Tilak Ayurvedic College in Pune. I began my studies there in May 1974; sixteen months later, in Pune, I met Vimalananda.

After I was introduced to kundalini I had no idea of where I was going to go or how I was going to get there, but I knew that whatever this energy was

in me, I had to work with it, to try to do something good and to try to hold together while I was doing it. Of course, I had no real idea of what I was doing, and so I made mistakes; happily, none of them were fatal. Several accidents befell me, and I was jailed twice, once for four hours and once overnight. Each time the energy dragged me back into the right direction, often in spite of myself. Back at that time, no, it didn't manifest in me as a bunch of kriyas or heat or whatever; it manifested in a different way. It was completely transformative, but in an often harsh way until I finally started to comprehend how to refine the experience, which took some years. Was all that an illusion? It was, in the sense that I was experiencing something that I could not have explained or communicated to anybody else; ordinarily I wouldn't have believed that what I was doing was “spiritual”, but this energy had taken over and was moving me in the direction of where I clearly needed to end up, without knowing how I was going to get there.

**RA** You're saying that perhaps your LSD use actually awakened kundalini and that once awakened that energy began to direct the course of your life in ways that probably your peers back in Oklahoma couldn't have imagined and you could never have imagined would happen. One thing just kept leading to the next. But you're kind of crediting awakened kundalini with this orchestration of your destiny—this intelligence woke up within you which began to direct the course of events in mysterious and ultimately beneficial ways.

**RS** I think it's important at this point to draw a distinction between the physical kundalini, the pranic kundalini, and the mental kundalini, because self-definition happens at all these different levels.

**RA** As we have our existence at all those levels, would you say that kundalini has its kind of manifestation and functioning at every different level?

**RS** Absolutely. If you are existing at any

level, the only reason you're existing at that level is because there's a part of you identifying as being at that level—that which we call ahamkara. Ahamkara and kundalini are the same thing—the only difference is one is directed towards greater manifestation in the externalized multiplicity of the duality of the physical world and the other is directed in the opposite direction. The *prauritti marga* is the life path that extends outwards in all directions, and the *nivritti marga* is the path back inwards. Expansion and contraction, externalization and internalization, this duality is continuous at every level.

**RA** Kundalini then is responsible both for accreting and preserving our individual identity and at the same time for dissolving it. But as we discussed earlier, its dissolution is not its destruction; it dissolves the binding influence so that we grow to realize that we are not only that but we are both the universal and the individual and can live the two in an integrated way. Is that what you're saying?

**RS** Exactly. I would propose that anytime that your awareness becomes disconnected from your individuality and becomes connected to the cosmic or the ultimate or whatever you want to call it, to the extent that your awareness is able to connect to that reality, to that extent it is kundalini that is connected to that reality. At this stage it would probably be good not to call it kundalini all the time, because that word has now accumulated additional associations, even in India, but especially outside India. Even though I was born in the West, in the United States, I was fortunate to be born to parents who were Christians in the real sense of that term. I have had a personal connection to Jesus Christ since I was very young—not just an intellectual and not just an emotional connection, but gut level connection as well. As that developed, and to the extent that it had developed by the time I took LSD, I had already established a connection to the non-physical world in a positive way, which was incalculably valuable for me.

Many get connected to the non-physical in a negative way; some for example when very young are taken over by a disembodied human or some other astral being with a not-particularly-spiritual agenda, and that being becomes part of their reality from a very young age, and directs much of what they do thereafter. Thank God that didn't happen to me. Thank God. Instead I was able to experience, to a very small degree no doubt, the reality of Jesus Christ; and it was in that inner environment, however distorted it might have been by my mental & emotional impurities, that the awakening of the prana kundalini occurred. The prana kundalini seeks to enter the central channel and move in it without obstruction.

As my mentor used to say, there are two basic routes to spiritual development: the right nostril and the left nostril. The right nostril is the sun, the left nostril is the moon; the right nostril is jnana, the left nostril is bhakti. Eventually you need both jnana and bhakti, because the only way to get kundalini into the central channel is to get your nostrils, and the channels in the pranic body that are associated with them, into balance. But that's not so easy.

Once you grab hold of the tiger, and the tiger starts to sprint, it will be a roller coaster ride, and you will have to hold on, somehow. Your body will do whatever it can do to try to compensate. If the energy floods the right nostril you'll start to burn up; if it takes over the left nostril you'll get cold, constricted, frightened. If you feel sufficiently terrorized you will grab hold of some concept and use it as a post on which to tether your sanity. It's understandable; your body can't have all of its cells suddenly waking up to the supreme reality; you would explode. Your body has to find a way to hold onto some of that prana, somehow; later, if you are fortunate, you'll learn how to let it go. Or maybe you'll never let it go; I've seen many people who've had partial kundalini awakenings who freaked out and got stuck, and never let go. They can still make progress, but that progress will be limited so long as

they continue to cling to whatever belief or idea or image it was that kept them from completely flying to pieces when they were going through that initial awakening.

Of course, your situation will be far worse if prana is unable to move freely because your pranic channels are obstructed. Anything that you consume but do not digest—including food, prana, thoughts, emotions and ideas—will behave within your body like toxins, which will make your adaptation to the energy all the more challenging. If I had it all to do over, I would have started doing yoga at age one month, and I would have continued doing yoga as I grew so that I developed a foundation of good control over my prana. Then, when the awakening dawned, I would have been able to circulate the prana, insuring that I had sufficient downward-moving *apana* to keep myself stable and using the rest to connect to other realities.

**RA** You probably would have skipped the LSD altogether—

**RS** Yeah, there would have been—

**RA** no need—

**RS** no particular use for that.

**RA** Right. What you've just been saying points to several things in the notes I took. One is that you mentioned that, ideally, kundalini must awaken in a slow and controlled way. With practice and preparation you have to build a foundation. As you said, you would've started yoga at one month and you would've built a strong physiological foundation for its awakening. Maybe we can also refer to something else you wrote, that kundalini without, perhaps, that necessary preparation, can awaken in such a way that it inflates and empowers limitations, so one may end up with an insatiable hunger for sex or food, or a huge ego inflation or deflation. You wrote of half-baked aspirants, inflated with the power and charisma of kundalini, becoming gurus.



**RS** Well, let’s suppose that the kundalini is awakening, the prana is moving now, trying to get into those very, very, very subtle spaces where it can activate the seeds of those chakras—

**RA** Are you referring to the sushumna here?

**RS** Sushumna.

**RA** OK.

**RS** Getting your prana to move into sushumna is doable, with some effort. But prana moving in sushumna means nothing more than prana moving in sushumna. Prana has to become much more subtle before it can attain to the level of sushumna where the chakras are, which is the level where the five elements exist, the five elements that make up the fabric of our external reality. When you start to be able to directly connect to those five elements it is critically important that you be calm and stable, otherwise you can do real damage to yourself. That’s why the chakras are buried so deep in the pranic body: so that you will have to willfully apply abundant attention and subtlety of awareness if you want to reach them.

But, of course, sometimes kundalini starts to move before your awareness has been thoroughly clarified. She is moving upwards, trying to find her way to the supreme reality, but her awareness as ahamkara can still be reactivated. Suppose you have an inordinate fondness for food. Your regular expression of desire for food directs much of your attention, and therefore much of your prana, to the fire element, which is in charge of appetite and digestion. The fire element in its subtlest form appears within the most rarefied portion of sushumna, and in its less subtle forms appears in less subtle regions of the pranic body, as well as in the gut, the solar plexus, in your physical body. These locations are all centers of fire energy; they are not chakras in the ultimate sense of what a chakra is supposed to be, but they are energy centers nonetheless.

Any energy that flows into these

less subtle centers will, if you allow it, encourage more energy to project itself preferentially into those less subtle centers. If kundalini flows into these less subtle centers, your pranic and physical bodies will be delivered tremendous amounts of prana which will create within you a strong desire to activate those regions of your organism. Since this happens before the process of transformation has progressed very far, your personality will still retain substantial limitations, making it unable to see things from a wider perspective. You will then think, “I’m so hungry that I simply have to eat,” and you will eat, and then eat some more. The more you eat, the more you will be hungry for, and you can easily find yourself spiraling into a food addiction.

This can happen in any part of your organism, and it can happen to anyone, anywhere. How many so-called gurus have we seen, in this country and others, who have achieved perception of a certain quality and degree of absolute reality, but then fail to recall that such perception must be continuously re-refined, and all detectable personality limitations continuously re-dissolved, if one is not to reinforce one’s blind spots? Your organism will make use of whatever personality structures you may possess for the purpose of maintaining a sense of stability to permit it to continue to exist while kundalini is trying to dissolve it; and the personality structures that are most likely to be available to be self-identified with are those very blind spots.

**RA** That is a real interesting point you just made. It’s insidious. There’s this sort of subtle tricky tendency which usually flies totally beneath our radar to reinforce, as you just said, to buttress structures of the individuality of the ego and to prevent its dissolution, to prevent the takeover of unbounded awareness. It’s so tricky. That’s what they say maya is. There are so many interesting stories in the Vedic literature about maya tripping people up.

**RS** Yes, like the story of Narada, the celestial musician who wanders from

universe to universe as a devotee of Lord Vishnu—

**RA** Oh, is this the story about the water?

**RS** Indeed. Narada asked Vishnu, “Please show me your Maya,” and Vishnu said, “OK. Go meditate over there.” Narada sat by the river, meditating on Vishnu. Before long a beautiful woman showed up, and suddenly Narada was overtaken by love for her, and forgot Vishnu entirely. Narada and the woman married and had children, and were living happily until one day a terrible flood came that washed away Narada’s home and family. This made Narada miserable, and as he sobbed uncontrollably over his loss Vishnu suddenly reappeared and said, “Now have you seen Maya?”

If Maya can do this to a being like Narada, what might Maya do to you or me? What about Moses? Moses was no an ordinary person; he had directly communicated with God, he had extracted the Israelites from Egypt and guided them through decades in the wilderness, and just at the moment when he and they were about to enter the Promised Land God said to Moses, “Speak to the rock over there and it will give you water.” Maybe because of the influence of Saturn, or of his ahamkara, or because God really wanted it that way, or for some other reason, Moses didn’t speak to the rock; instead he hit it with his staff. Water came out, no doubt, and everyone drank; but then God said, “Oh my goodness, Moses, what have you done? Now, as a result of this, you can’t go to the Promised Land which you’ve been trying to reach for the past umpteen years. Everybody else will go, but you are going to have to stay behind here.” Oops! If confusion can happen to someone like Moses, it can happen to you or to me at any time. It has often happened to me, many times; it’s depressing to think about it. But there’s no escape; you have to keep refining, keep refining, keep realizing every morning as you get out of bed that some degree of abject ignorance is the price that you pay for being able to exist as a human being. You simply have to continue to refine.

**RA** And you’re not going to keep refining if you think that there’s nothing more to refine, if you think—

**RS** You’re not going to keep refining if you think you’re already refined.

**RA** If you think you’re done. That’s actually a key element in these interviews. Usually, toward the end, I ask the person, “What’s the next horizon for you now? Where do you see it going from here?” Most people have some sense that there’s going to continue to be refinement but some people think it’s a dumb question. “How could there be anything more? All there is is this.” And the whole notion of further—in fact there are some fairly predominant spiritual circles these days which regard the whole notion of progress and levels of development and all that as utter BS. They feel that it’s just a concession to duality and that it’s just going to hang you up; you’re forever following the carrot and not sort of realizing that you are that now.

**RS** Just as you were saying that, there was another earthquake.

**RA** There’s no real earthquake; of course, there’s no earth.

**RS** There’s no earth and it’s all ultimately an illusion. If that’s the case, I will gladly watch while you sit in the middle of the Swarovski store and pieces of crystal fall on top of your head and you maintain your calm awareness of untroubled non-duality. And yes, I agree, gutter water is absolutely the same as clean water, and if you can live on dog shit, go right ahead. But I need to see you doing that in order to be convinced, because otherwise I’m not convinced. This I think is something that probably was, at least to some degree, accelerated by the Victorians when they were in India—the concept of *Vedanta*. Now Vedanta is a very noble concept but nobody seems to pay attention to the fact that it is *veda + anta*. *Anta* means *end*; veda + anta = the end of the Vedic process. Most people today who talk about Vedanta appear to be unaware that the process of Vedic study was oral. The

Veda was not written down until very recently; for thousands of years, its study was exclusively oral—which means in practice that a student of the Vedas had to sit for three hours a day for twelve years reciting his portion of the Veda.

At the end of twelve years of Vedic recitation you can be sure that you would have perfected both asana and pranayama; you simply cannot sit reciting for three hours without aligning your prana. I’ve done it; I know. But recitation alone will not offer you access into the Vedic world; if it were sufficient, many thousands of priests and their parrots would have been enlightened by it. No, to enter into the Vedic reality you have to activate the mantras you recite so that they introduce you to various ethereal beings, with whom you will need to establish equitable relationships. Only at the end of this complex process will you be in a position to assert that you are ready for Vedanta, for only then will you be able to see that there is something beyond both the physical and the astral reality that cannot be imagined, much less spoken of.

Just the other day I was re-reading the *Isha Upanishad*, which plainly states that, while those who follow *tamas* go into a very dark place, even that place is not so dark as the place that is attained by those who follow the path of knowledge.

**RA** I remember that verse.

**RS** Vimalananda used to say that the worst ahamkara, the worst egoism of all, is the egoism of knowledge, the state that exists when you have a little knowledge and think you have vast knowledge.

**RA** A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

**RS** A little knowledge is a terrifically dangerous thing.

**RA** So what you’re saying is, there’s nothing inherently wrong with knowledge but—there’s a Tibetan proverb which I often quote, “Don’t mistake understanding for realization and don’t mistake realization for

liberation.” I get the sense—I harp on this too much probably—that there are a lot of people who become aware of this whole *Advaita* thing and non-duality and so on, and it resonates with them deeply and intuitively. They then mistake that knowledge that begins to dawn for the actual experience to which these sages and scriptures refer but as you said in the thing that you wrote, what many consider the culmination of their practices may be just be the beginning. There are a lot of people who seem to think they’re finished who are probably just starting out, in the big picture of things.

**RS** And in no way do I suggest that their experience is not real. But it’s one thing to have that experience and be in that space, and another thing to integrate reality into your daily life. Otherwise instead of alcohol, it’s the experience that takes you over—if you’re drinking in the experience, that’s one thing; that can be useful, because the experience is an interface between you, a manifested being, and the unmanifest. It’s a snapshot of where you are in your process of transformation, but it is only a snapshot; the process is, or should be, ongoing. If you grab hold of the experience and cling tenaciously to it, you interrupt the process, and get stuck there. You must digest your experiences, and understand that they are nothing more than indications of how your relationship with the unmanifest is developing. Everything in life is a relationship. Recently I read something that suggests that, from a mathematical point of view, the entire universe is nothing but relationship. Forget the particles, the waves, and everything else. Relationships alone exist. In India, we say that these relationships are with various forms of awareness interacting with themselves—

**RA**—consciousness interacting with itself

**RS**—in different ways. And interaction with the unmanifest is verily blissful. But as an individual human being, you possess certain constraints, constraints that mean that you will not be able to



experience the reality of the supreme 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, without dissolving. You must have some greasiness on you palm, or your nose, or somewhere else, there must be some interface that will permit you to connect to your limited being. Even if you are able to drive your organism from way up in the sky, you will still need to somehow connect the blissful you and your not-always-blissful organism. Whatever is your connection will be your Achilles’ heel.

**RA** Yeah, and to a great extent it’s a matter of integration and stabilization. I think there are people who—I think I know some—for whom the experience of whatever phrase you just used—the ultimate, the supreme—is largely predominant 24/7 but it’s like a zoom lens which, if they’re in traffic, it’s gonna reside in the background a little bit because they have to deal with the situation at hand. But it doesn’t take long for it to zoom forth again once it’s practical for it to do so. You mentioned Christ earlier and getting crucified and kinda losing it on the cross for a bit. I always wonder about people who say they’re awakened or enlightened, “How well would this hold up under crucifixion?” I mean it sounds a little morbid, it sounds a little gruesome, but you know to what degree is this enlightenment actually stabilized under the most severe possible conditions?

**RS** I have traveled to Italy on many occasions, and have often visited Assisi. Several times I have also been to La Verna, the sanctuary where St. Francis received the stigmata. St. Francis went out of his way to make his life difficult and miserable, especially in La Verna. And at La Verna, in the locations that he frequented, a quality exists that you can’t help but feel, a flavor of how, despite all of the difficulty he went through, how connected he was to that reality. I believe that the awareness of St. Francis—which you can still sense in La Verna, and at his tomb in Assisi—would be able to hold up under crucifixion. But how many humans have ever attained to the state that St. Francis did?

And there’s Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth guru of the Sikhs. The story is that the Mughal Emperor Jahangir was misled by Guru Arjan Dev’s own brother, sadly, who testified to the emperor that his brother was a traitor. Jahangir, who was an overuser of wine and opium and so had a tendency to act before thinking, sentenced Guru Arjan Dev to be baked to death in hot sand in the city of Lahore. His disciples were forced to watch, and those disciples were of course very miserable, because their beloved guru was suffering so. Finally one disciple could no longer stand it, and blurted out, “Guruji, just say the word and I will use all of my shakti to burn down the entire city of Lahore.” At that Guru Arjan Dev, despite his intense misery, had to smile, and replied, “My dear, you are my disciple. Do you think that if you could burn down Lahore, that I could not do the same thing myself? Do you think that I could not have escaped somehow, had I wished to? No—I submitted myself to this torture because this is the will of God, and the will of God is extraordinarily sweet. I couldn’t turn away from the will of the Supreme, no matter what the cost to me.”

**RA** Interesting.

**RS** Yes. I thank God daily that I don’t have to do go through something like this. I have my own difficulties—everyone does—but at least they’re difficulties that I can personally weather. I don’t mind difficulties; my prayer is, “Let me please survive them.”

**RA** Well they say god never gives you more than you can handle.

**RS** And I think that’s probably true as long as you’re willing to handle what you are given, and as long as you’re aware that you have to handle it. I fear that this is what goes on with some people who think they have reached. There is a natural desire on the part of your organism—body, mind and spirit—to be stable. Should you reach a state of awareness in which you are able to connect to the supreme reality on a regular basis, and you find yourself

feeling really stable in that state, it will be very easy for you to come to the conclusion that this—

**RA**—right, that you’re done—

**RS**—that you’re done.

**RA** In a couple weeks I’m going to interview a woman who had sort of come to that conclusion. She’d been on this spiritual path and she was very easily absorbed in samadhi and in a real nice place all the time and then she gave birth to premature twins, both of whom were blind and severely brain damaged and handicapped. Her life tuned into this incredible challenge which brought her to the brink of suicide. But then she somehow managed to digest all this and incorporate it and learn the spiritual lessons from it and kind of integrate it. And now she wouldn’t actually trade it for anything because it was something that god gave her which she could barely handle but managed to handle, and turned out to be an evolutionary opportunity.

**RS** Wow. I salute her.

**RA** Yeah. We talked about yogis falling. We didn’t use that terminology, but people getting egos, getting inflated, and people feeling they’re done and becoming half-baked gurus and all that. What would be the safeguard against that? Having a guru oneself who can tell you you’re not done, that would be one I suppose or—

**RS** That is the best way.

**RA** And having a good measure of humility even if you don’t have a guru so as to keep yourself in check, or is that perhaps like trying to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps? And you really do need an external guide who can keep you going?

**RS** My personal opinion and the opinion of my mentor was that it is very desirable to have an external guide. You know the old saying, The doctor who treats himself has a fool for a patient.

You don’t have appropriate perspective. For the same reason a good doctor will rarely want, in a crisis, to treat his—

**RA** —his daughter or something.

**RS** Yes. If you can find a human guru, this is a great thing, but maybe this doesn’t happen. Lord Siva is a handy guru, Jesus is a good guru. There are gurus out there.

**RA** But that can just be your imagination. There are people who would say—they wouldn’t use the word guru—but they would say that Jesus is their guru and they’re handling rattlesnakes to prove it. You can delude yourself.

**RS** You can delude yourself even if you have a good guru.

**RA** True.

**RS** It’s happened on many occasions. And if you don’t have a guru, there’s the famous example of Dattatreya. He’s not called Dattatreya in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*; in that text he is known as “the *avadhuta*,” but Dattatreya is well known as the original and ultimate avadhuta. Dattatreya explains that he had 24 gurus, none of them was ever aware that they were acting as gurus to him. He witnessed what was going on in their lives, learned from it, and transformed himself. Of course, he was Dattatreya. So far there’s been only one Dattatreya.

**RA** There was that story in the *Mahabharata* where Arjuna’s rival for supremacy in archery was rejected by their guru because the guru had promised Arjuna that he would make him the best archer. So the guy went off into the forest and built a little statue of the guru, worshiped that statue, and became the best archer, until the guru caught on to it. He made him cut his thumb off but—

**RS** His name was Ekalavya.

**RA** Right.

**RS** I get two main lessons from that story.

Number one is, if you are truly focused, as Ekalavya was, and not cheating your awareness, you may be able to project that quality of guru-ness onto something and have that thing guide you. But it is so easy to cheat your awareness: “Oh yes guruji, are you suggesting that I have lasagna today? OK, I will” or, “The guru has revealed to me that you will become my consort.” Provided that you can restrain yourself, you can use such a ‘guru-projection’ as a guru.

The other lesson relates to Dronacharya, Ekalavya’s weapons guru. If you are a guru and someone has gone through that ‘guru-projection’ process and has succeeded so spectacularly that he actually became a better archer than any of your own personal students, then you need to accept that face that you were in fact his guru, though you were never such in person. Making such a student chop off his thumb, which ruined him as an archer, is a terrific insult to the process of teaching itself; you perfect a student and then destroy him. What a karma! You will have to pay a heavy price for that karma, so it happened with Dronacharya: When during the war he (wrongly) believed that his son Ashwattama had been killed, he became so despondent that he permitted himself to be killed.

**RA** Interesting. I forgot that that was the resolution of the story. It always bothered me that he made Ekalavya cut his thumb off, I thought, wow, what a creep.

**RS** India has two epics. The *Ramayana* is all about Rama, who believed that he had a good idea of his personal dharma, and tried his best to follow it. In the *Mahabharata* everyone has some unsolvable question of what dharma to follow and how to follow it. The *Bhagavad Gita*, which forms part of the *Mahabharata*, distills this dilemma for Arjuna. His obligation to his immediate family and his allies and to Krishna Himself is one aspect of his dharma, and his obligation to his cousins and grandfather and guru is another. Arjuna is naturally taken aback when Krishna tells him that he

must boldly go forth and murder his guru, grandfather, and cousins, for it is a central principle of classical Indian society, clearly delineated in the dharma texts, that no karma is worse than murdering your guru—who happened to be Dronacharya. How can Arjuna even come to grips with this? Krishna had to show him his universal form before Arjuna could actually realize that the only answer is for him to keep both those dharmic realities in his awareness simultaneously, acknowledging both, no matter how difficult that might be. Eventually one has to do the same thing with kundalini: to keep both the reality of the infinite and the reality of zero aligned with one another at all times, without permitting cognitive dissonance to take over.

**RA** And that is probably the key. If you get established in yoga, in being in the absolute and universal consciousness, then perform action, you will automatically reconcile all these polarities and paradoxes and irreconcilable dharmic conflicts that the human intellect simply can’t figure out, cause karma is unfathomable.

**RS** Exactly. That’s what yoga really is. It’s joining together two things that are in the ultimate sense fundamentally identical but, in the current environment in which we live, are polar opposites. Instead of allowing them to polarize and be apart from one another, one must bring them to a place where, at the very least, they’re joined at a point. It’s like a placenta. Half of it is created from the mother, half of it is created from the fetus—the two halves of the placenta arise from two different organisms but blood and nutrients can shift between the two.

**RA** Yeah. We started out this conversation talking about polarities. There are political polarities and then there’s the pro-gun and the anti-gun, the pro-abortion and the anti-abortion. There are so many polarities—they’re kind of tearing our society apart—which seem irreconcilable. There’s very little common ground or communication going on. But the way I see it, and I think



you alluded to this, with an infusion of divine consciousness from the most subtle level into society I think perhaps we'll see that, mysteriously, solutions are found which manage to reconcile and harmonize these polarities. We'll be able to progress and survive as a society.

**RS** That is certainly my hope. That's the way we've survived so far. Somehow or another, some sort of compromise has always been reached. During the Civil War an extreme level of conflict was required before that compromise could be reached, and the compromise that was reached was quite imperfect: first there was Reconstruction, then Jim Crow and re-segregation. Ironically it was Woodrow Wilson, the man who tried to get rid of war by promoting the League of Nations, who re-segregated the federal government—a good example of how two very different polarities can exist in one person. Frankly, it seems to me that compromise should be possible for at least some of the polarities facing our country now. For example, I don't want to see abortion available on every street corner, and I also don't want to have women going into back alleys and dying miserable deaths as a result as a result of botched procedures.

**RA** Right.

**RS** And I certainly am fine with hunters (including many of my relatives) going out and shooting deer and feral pigs for food, but am not fine with people being able to take guns into churches and colleges and airports and—

**RA** Yeah. If we infuse a more enlightened consciousness into the equation, into the situation, then I think that tendency to polarize diminishes, the tendency to rigidly adhere to one end of the spectrum without appreciation for the other. You're an example of someone can see both sides and they don't have to be mutually exclusive. They can both be incorporated into a larger perspective. Enlightenment has practical applications for the mundane issues that preoccupy our society

and offers solutions to a lot of these destructive conflicts. For instance, take the environment: is global warming real, is it not real? Both camps are divided—of course the scientists are on the side of it being real. But a solution which is holistic is, let's not worry about whether it's real or not. Let's progress and come up with technologies which would be beneficial regardless of whether global warming is manmade or not. There can be an economic advantage; it won't cost us jobs, it will create jobs. You know, that kind of thing.

**RS** We know that there is more CO2 than has been in the atmosphere for what? Hundreds of thousands of years?

**RA** Millions.

**RS** Whether or not this is going to cause global warming or global cooling, it's not normal, and cannot have a good effect. We may not know what the effect is, but we can be very sure that any time—this is basic science—any time you take a system at equilibrium and suddenly add something to it in massive amount, that system will going out of equilibrium. Moreover, there are way too many humans now, more than the effective carrying capacity of our planet if we desire health for our many terrestrial ecosystems. It's our responsibility as the apex species to be all the more attentive to minimizing as best we can our footprint, our impact, on all levels of our existence.

**RA** The point I keep coming back to in my own thinking is that the best way for us to do that is for higher consciousness, enlightenment—whatever terms we want to use—to become more prevalent in the world. This is part of my motivation for doing this show. As Einstein said, you don't solve a problem at the same level of consciousness at which it was created. You have to go to a new level of consciousness. This is the principle of second element—you don't get rid of the darkness in the room by investigating it or analyzing it or arguing over it; you get rid of it by bringing in a second element, light. Then darkness

is found to just disappear. I think that second element—and this ties back to the whole kundalini discussion—is the sustenance, the essence, the energy which animates everything, is that divine energy. Perhaps all the difficulties we see in the world are due to insufficient flow of it, insufficient supply of it, and if it can be enlivened in the world, it will enrich the world and help all these problems to dissipate, just as a dullness and deadness of individual life is dissipated by an enlivenment of it within the individual.

**RS** I agree entirely and, sadly, I think a big reason why there is an impediment to progress in this direction is the fact that so many scientists are such dedicated materialists.

**RA** Yeah.

**RS** This is for me the basic difference between Indian science and modern science: modern science believes that everything is based in matter and that consciousness arose by some process of *deus ex machina*, while Indian science believes that consciousness is in fact the base of all existence and that matter emerged from consciousness as consciousness became progressively more opaque to itself. In no way do I deny the reality of matter, but I'm often amazed when I read or hear well-trained scientists becoming ridiculously vehement about the impossibility of consciousness existing outside of protoplasm. How can they possibly know? That insistence is so utterly unscientific.

**RA** I know, and that's a topic for a whole other discussion. Some of the people I interview, we have gone into that to some extent. In fact you might enjoy the science of non-duality conference out in California. It's a whole bunch of spiritual people and a whole bunch of scientists getting together and discussing issues such as that. Probably better wrap it up. It seems like you and I could go on all day just taking little seed thoughts and expanding upon them. This has been great. I really enjoyed this conversation. Is there anything that is in your mind

or that you'd like to throw out before we finish? Anything we haven't covered?

**RS** One thing more, which I would like to address to people who like your friend went through a kundalini experience and who are now asking themselves whether that experience was nothing but delusion. To these people, and frankly to anyone who is going through any kind of kundalini experience, I would like to say this: in my opinion, the most important thing in life is to stay calm. You can if you like freak out when no crisis is occurring, but when a crisis does occur, like last night's earthquake when we had to wonder whether a wall might actually collapse on top of us, you have to be calm. Maintaining calm is your path to survival. Whatever the crisis, you have to know where to position yourself, when to run and hide and when to do something else. You will only be able to function effectively in a crisis if you can maintain sufficient awareness of what's going on in the world outside, and an understanding about how you might act effectively in that situation.

A calm attitude is even more essential when your organism is experiencing the earthquake of redefinition, so please don't jump to conclusions, don't assume anything. When your transformational energy gets activated anything you imagine has a much greater potential than usual to actually manifest in some way, to become concrete. Please keep coming back to whatever it is that you have faith in. As a friend of mine in India is fond of saying, your real guru is the last face that you would see in your mind's eye as you were drowning. Whatever is most dear to you will come to mind as you go down for that third time; whatever that may be, grab hold of it tenaciously and never let go, because that's the thing that will have the power to keep all your prana and your organism and your energy and all the rest of you focused in more or less the same direction as you proceed through this transformational experience.

**RA** Well, they say that the last thought at the time of death determines the next birth.

**RS** That's the same thing here. Because this is a kind of a death and rebirth experience, that thought that you have as you're dying to your previous self is going to determine substantially how you're reborn to your new self, even though it happens to be in the same physical body.

**RS** Although the last thought at the time of death isn't necessarily edifying. So wouldn't you say that the real anchor that we need to take refuge in is the self, the absolute. That's why Krishna was able to smile on the battlefield, because he was that ultimate reality and therefore the drama unfolding before him couldn't overthrow, him couldn't overshadow him.

**RS** It's true, but of course he was Krishna and he was always, or almost always, swimming comfortably in that ultimate reality. My mentor therefore used to say that, until you get to a state of similar elevation, you are better off having a form and a name to focus on, whether of Krishna or Jesus or a giant cosmic mulberry. Kundalini has been “put to sleep” by evolution in general and your time in the womb in particular; she sleeps when she identifies with the five elements that make up your physical body—earth, water, fire, air, and space and the five elements from which the subtle body is fashioned—smell, taste, touch, form, and sound. For as long as she is habituated, conditioned to exist within these sensory walls, kundalini will continue to search via your senses for items composed of those gross and subtle elements. Until your perception becomes subtle enough to have “awakened” from the need for name and form, it's often most useful to have a tool that is connected to at least one of them, a name or a form.

**RA** Like a mantra or something.

**RS** A mantra or a visualization. The face of god. Something that you can grab hold onto until your awareness is sufficiently stabilized in the expansive way that you can just focus on that expansiveness.

**RA** Right. And then it won't be a matter of willful focusing. It will just be that you are that and nothing can shake it.

**RS** Exactly.

**RA** Are you aware of this kundalini care institute in Tennessee? Joan Harrigan? A number of my friends have gone there and say that they've had great results in terms of kundalini that was blocked or misdirected being unblocked or redirected.

**RS** I have. In fact a friend of mine went there—it must be 15 , 20 years ago—and also reported very good results. I haven't been there myself so it's only hearsay but I heard good things back then, and you can report good things now.

**RA** Yeah. I haven't been there myself but half dozen friends have gone and said good things about it. So I'm just throwing that out in case there's anybody listening to this who is having kundalini problems. They might want to look that up.

You've written about a dozen books, including Aghora, books I, II, and III, and *The Greatness of Saturn*...quite a renaissance man.

**RS** Well, the more that I learn, the more that I realize just how ignorant I really am, which is a great blessing.

**RA** That is a good thing yeah.

**RS** Good to know your limitations.

**RA** Thanks again, Robert.

**RS** Thank you.

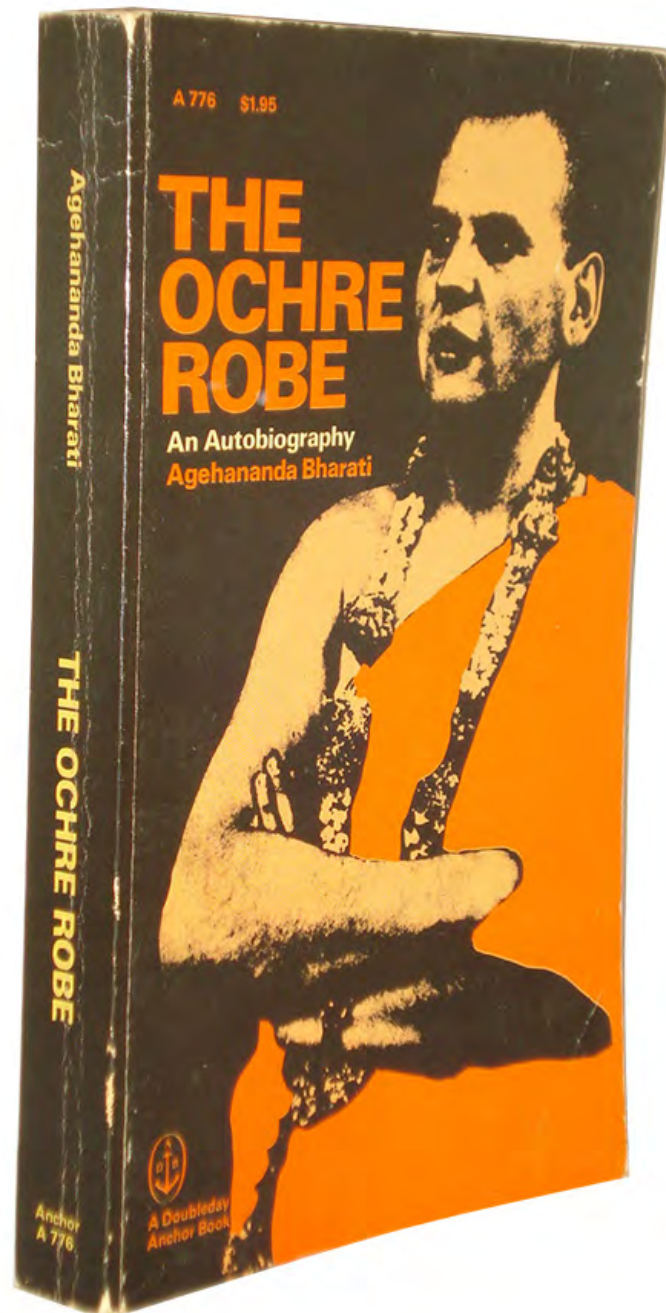
**RA** I've been speaking with Robert Svoboda and this interview is part of an ongoing series. There are about 225 of them in the can so far. I do a new one each week. They can all be found at [www.batgap.com](http://www.batgap.com) ♣



# BEHIND THE OCHRE ROBE

THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE AND DEATH OF AGEHANANDA BHARATI

ROXANNE KAMAYANI GUPTA, Ph.D.



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, JANUARY 1991: I bounded up the stairs to the Department of Anthropology. I had just returned to campus from Banaras, India, where I had spent a year and a half researching a radical tantric sect. I could not wait to once again meet my Ph.D. advisor, my mentor and beloved friend of 20 years, Agehananda Bharati, one of the world's leading authorities on Tantra, Indian Philosophy and culture who was credited with opening up a new field within the academy with his now classic treatise, *The Tantric Tradition*.

Known as "Swami" to those closest to him, Agehananda Bharati, Austrian by birth, was the first Westerner on record to take sannyas (formal renunciation) in the famed Hindu Sankaracharya order, a ritual he described in detail in his autobiography, *The Ochre Robe*. He was a towering figure: Brilliant, outspokenly irreverent, and eccentric. He stood 6'7" tall and, for most of his life, weighed close to 300 lbs. Fluent in Sanskrit and several European and Indian languages, his colorful history and personality was the stuff of legends in academic circles on three continents.

I excitedly burst into my professor's office. One look and my heart sank. One half of his face was fallen and expressionless, a sure sign of a stroke. Within hours, we were at Upstate Medical for tests and by evening I was the only person standing by his bed when the head surgeon starkly announced: "Professor, you have advanced stage brain cancer." Unflinching, Bharati asked "How long do I have?" The reply: "Four to six months."

So began the last chapter in the extraordinary life of an intellectual

giant, a cross-cultural pioneer, and a profoundly private mystic. Born in 1923 as Leopold Fischer in the luxury of his family's country estate in Czechoslovakia complete with private zoo, formal gardens, and a bevy of servants, he was raised in Vienna by nannies while his mother pursued her social life and his father traveled the continent playing polo. With only one younger brother, Leo was afforded great independence from an early age. He spent his youth and early teens playing tennis, attending the opera, and rummaging in city bookstores. A brilliant student in the classics, by the age of 12 he discovered his true passion: India. He once told me the story of how he discovered an old and expensive Sanskrit grammar in an antique bookstore and persuaded his bemused father to purchase it for him. The owner of the shop commented, "This is a rare and precious book. Your son is going to grow up to be a very learned man."

By the age of 14 Leopold could read Sanskrit, and, having arranged private lessons for himself, began conversing in Hindi and Bengali without ever having stepped foot on Indian soil. On his 16th birthday he pledged his loyalty to India, converted to Hinduism and adopted the spiritual name Ramachandra. A few years later, in 1942, he was summoned to Berlin where he was secretly introduced to the enigmatic revolutionary Subhas Chander Bose, legendary founder of the Indian National Army who disappeared a few years later, attaining something of a cult status in India. Soon after, Leopold was drafted into Hitler's army where he managed a transfer to the Indian Legion and served in the signals corps. Already nauseated by the Fuhrer and despite avoiding open combat, what he experienced before, during and after the war, including three years as a POW, forged in him a lifelong aversion to violence, all forms of political authoritarianism and religious dogmatism.

After the war, in 1949, Leopold embarked for India. His first stop was the Ramakrishna Mission headquarters in Calcutta, but in less than three years as an acolyte, he was dismissed for

questioning his superiors one time too many. Determined to take sannyas, he left for Banaras, the holy city on the Ganges. There, on Nirvani Ghat, he met with his *diksa* guru (initiator), a Mahant in the prestigious Sankaracharya order who, after questioning him for several days, agreed to perform the ritual. The Dasnami or "Ten Named" branches established by Sankara, the 8th century proponent of Advaita Vedanta, unified myriad Hindu sects under one central organization and has ever since functioned as the major arbiter of Hindu orthodoxy. His guru gave him the name Agehananda meaning "the bliss of homelessness" and the title Bharati, indicative of membership in the lineage of Sringeri Math of the South.

In *The Ochre Robe*, Bharati offers a rare and critical insider's glimpse into the rites, customs, and experiences of a Hindu sannyasi. Despite the rich and varied experiences that were yet to unfold, his initiation into sannyas remained the central organizing principle in his life and psyche, and key to the contradictions he embodied. If Bharati had so chosen, he could have retreated then and there into a life of meditation in a monastic cell, with all of his needs taken care of. He might have risen to a high status within the institutional structure, or become a renowned teacher on the ghats. But instead, he chose to throw his *danda* (ritual staff indicative of his status within the order) into the Ganges and sought out the real India, the real world, and the real self.

Bharati spent the next eighteen months walking India barefoot, staying in towns and villages, and, in fulfillment of his vows, begging for his meals. It was this extensive period of intimate contact with the Indian soil that planted the seed of his later career as an Indologist and anthropologist, not to mention his inordinate fondness for the many varieties of Indian home cooking. While we in the West love to rehash the eastern escapades of poets, dropouts and hippies like Alan Ginsberg and Baba Ram Dass, Bharati's enculturation provides a much deeper and complex narrative of East-West encounter, for he had firsthand

contact with Indians from every region, social status and background from the earliest years of his life until his death. His unique experience not only transformed his personal identity, but Western scholarship as well.

Even as a monk Bharati could not hide his erudition and as his reputation spread, his company was sought out by some of the most educated, distinguished and wealthy Hindus of the independence period. He was soon accepting teaching positions at Delhi and Banaras Hindu Universities as well as at Nalanda University. But his antinomian lifestyle, added to his outspoken criticism of post-colonial Indian cultural developments, eventually got him into trouble. Ironically, his critiques of modernity that many Indians found so offensive were from a more conservative classicist perspective. He was, in many ways, more Hindu than many caste Indians of his generation.

Swami was fond of recounting the story of the straw that broke the camel's back, the incident that ostensibly played a major role in his leaving India. Today there are a few surviving elderly professors in Benaras who recall the incident, now with nostalgic humor. 1950's Benaras was another world, a microcosm of Hindu India, dominated by conservative orthodox values, and then as now, collectively self-conscious of the city's image as "Hindu Central." Bharati burst on the scene, the great white anomaly. Administrators at the University disapproved of Bharati's easy fraternization with his students, but he had been invited to teach by B.H.U.'s founder, Sri Madan Mohan Malviya. Bharati loved to take groups of his students on boating trips and field excursions to nearby sweet shops, temples and pilgrimage sites. Years after Swami's death, Pandit Siva Kumar Sastry, the grandson of Malviya, shared with me his fond memories of those outings, Bharati's generosity in picking up the tab, and his outrageous sense of humor. What he appreciated most about him, he told me, was his lack of hypocrisy. For Bharati, philosophy was neither a solemn affair nor a subject to be confined to the classroom.



With his towering height and spreading notoriety, he could not hide much. Things finally came to a head when he arranged a love tryst with a girlfriend, a young coed, in a dorm room. Legend has it that the vice chancellor and other authorities were literally peeking through the keyhole when they were caught. Of course he was immediately expelled.

Rather than showing the slightest regret, Bharati used to repeat this tale, wearing it like a badge of honor. As a monk, Bharati took seriously the fact that sannnyasins were not bound by the normative rules of society. In 1960's America, consensual sex between professors and students was nothing to write home about and such openness was the norm. I can still see him now, laughing at his exploits and recounting for the umpteenth time his definition of a puritan: "A person who is worried that somewhere, someone might be having fun." The quest for freedom in his eyes was not confined to the spiritual realm.

Throughout his life Bharati relished the company of beautiful women, provided they were as intelligent as they were attractive. Yet, there was nothing lecherous about him. While he shared his repertoire of "Count Bobby" European off-color jokes at a variety of social venues, I never heard him recount anything nasty or misogynist—the punch line of his jokes was usually at the expense of the male whose lust turns him into a fool. Despite his penchant for the open discussion of sexuality, humorous or serious, for him, no less than for his colleague Wendy Doniger, a scholar and friend for whom he had great admiration, there was no question of any opposition between sexuality and what was then referred to as "women's liberation." Both these scholars, infinitely more familiar with the classical tradition than the vast majority of their puritanical critics, understood that *kama* could not be separated from *dharma*, *artha* or *moksa*. The erotic plays a central role in Hindu myths, rites and worldview, which for Bharati clearly gave the tradition an aesthetic as well as theological edge over the Judeo-Christian traditions of

his upbringing. But his adoption of the tradition did not stop him from critiquing the oppressive treatment of minorities including women. Bharati was a lifelong outspoken proponent of the political and social equality of women across cultures.

His respect for the feminine went even deeper. Although he kept it extremely private, at the center of his altar was a Sri Yantra, symbol of the esoteric worship of the divine feminine, the tantric "secret" that lies at the heart of India's most orthodox, conservative, and in some areas, outwardly misogynist religious institutions. The only major world religion to boast an uninterrupted tradition of Goddess worship also includes the famous Manusmriti dictum that in youth a female should be under the control of her father, after marriage under the control of her husband, and as a widow, under the control of her son. When Sati, the arcane custom of widow self-emulation flared up as an issue in India in the 1980's, the Sankaracharya of Puri, the head of the Eastern headquarters of the order to which Bharati belonged, defended the practice, but Bharati found as much scriptural evidence within the same tradition to condemn it.

The many contradictions of Indian culture were not lost on Bharati who did not hesitate to point out the human rights violations, hypocrisies, or simply aesthetic ignominies of East or West. In India, the chaotic dialectic between the Absolute One and its myriad forms, between the theoretical ideal and actual practice, between social hierarchies and mystical non-dual states is woven into the very "warp and woof" (to use an Upanisadic image) of the human experience. The linguistic negotiation of Indo-complexity was Bharati's specialty, which is why he always had so much to say, in his teaching, his private conversations, and his writings.

Yet after he published his autobiography, Bharati was deemed *persona non grata* by the Indian government for a number of years. Exiled from his spiritual home, his interviews and articles continued to be published in India as well as the West,

and his friends and supporters in high places eventually got his visa reinstated. Later in his life he spent every winter university break in India, traveling and lecturing.

In the late 1950's Bharati left India for a teaching stint in Japan. He then visited America for the first time, securing a teaching post at the University of Seattle and, soon after, at Syracuse where he served as Chair of the Department of Anthropology for over twenty years. Over his career he published eleven books and more than 500 articles and monographs in English, German, and Hindi. Major Indian newspapers regularly carried his interviews and guest editorials. His publications often transcended the merely academic to become popular, especially his autobiography and a later philosophic exploration, *The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext of Mysticism*. He also inspired a character in Arthur Koestler's *The Lotus and the Robot*.

As an anthropologist Bharati was well-known for coining the term "pizza effect" which refers to the re-importation of cultural ideas and practices once they have become popular abroad. He used this concept to refer to the popular rediscovery of yoga in India which began in earnest in the 1960's. He also wrote extensively on the "emic" (insider) versus "etic" (outsider) distinction in anthropological method.

Bharati managed his own complex East/West, practitioner/scholar identity by segmentation—becoming acutely aware that the anthropologist in him might take one position on a topic, the monk another, and by a clarification of intellectual values as distinct from his mystical practice, a process he explains in *The Light at the Center*. However, when it came to his own mysticism, his spiritual practice, he remained largely tight-lipped. As the first Hindu chaplain at Syracuse University's Hendricks Chapel, he would expound upon Sanskrit verses and their traditional commentators for hours on end, explicating the hairsplitting differences between various schools of Hindu philosophy. But if anyone ever asked him which interpretation he favored, he

did not hesitate to shoot back "None of your business!"

I vividly recall my first class with Bharati, "Magic and Religion," during the fall semester of 1971, my sophomore year. It was enough to give you culture shock: Over 200 students packed into the law school auditorium, Bharati on stage rattling rapid fire into a microphone—terms, jokes, jabs and stories flying a mile a minute. After trying in vain to take notes, I humorously tossed my pen into the air. Joints were occasionally being passed from aisle to aisle, while a small circle of hippies in the back row were engaged in a low level chant. Bharati stopped in mid sentence to inquire whether the coven in the corner expected extra credit. Two dogs chased each other around the room and attempted to copulate on the stage. Bharati's comment was inaudible above the crowd's laughter. No wonder he developed something of a cult following among the alternative types!

It was a year later, during my junior year in South India where I was conducting an independent study of classical dance, that we connected. I wrote to him, sharing some of my experiences, and towards the end of the year, invited him to be the chief guest at my *arangetram*, (first public dance performance) at Ravindra Bharathi in Hyderabad. Of course he couldn't attend, but he wrote me encouraging letters and I still cherish the telegram blessing I received the afternoon of the program.

I returned to America the following fall with my Indian husband, Jayant Gupta, the grandson of the Sanskritist Dr. Raghuvira, and nephew of Buddhist Scholar Dr. Lokesh Chandra, with both of whose scholarship Bharati was very familiar. At a time when both my husband and I were experiencing culture shock, "Swami," became one of our closest friends and supports. But like so many sadhus, he could be hot tempered and harsh with those who wanted to draw close. The first time he came to our small apartment for dinner, I nervously dried out the rotis in the oven. Not only did Swami, on the spot, shout at me for serving him "elephant

ears," it took years and mounds of soft roti with ghee to live the episode down. On another occasion he ridiculed some naïve viewpoint of mine at a party and reduced me to tears. I had to consciously decide whether our relationship was worth the ego injury. But India had already taught me that to learn from gurus, you have to close your mouth and swallow your pride. I hung in.

When, after graduation, I took an eight-year break from academia to raise my son and pursue dance, our friendship remained my main connection to academia and the intellectual life. My husband and I opened a small vegetarian restaurant and Bharati drove over an hour to attend the grand opening. The following summer I arranged to pick him up for a dinner out in Syracuse. To fool him into thinking our business was a great success, I borrowed my cousin's white Lincoln Continental complete with stereo sound system and an automatic convertible top. Dining at a tiny French restaurant, at three adjoining tables sat three different couples, each conversing in a different language. Now it was his turn to show off—much to the delight of everyone present, he carried on a simultaneous conversation with every couple, each in their own language!

In the 80's, upon Swami's recommendation, I returned to Syracuse for graduate studies and, almost up until the time I earned my Ph.D., I became a permanent fixture in his life, regularly stopping by his office to discuss an academic or personal issue, and inviting him to my dance performances which he always attended. Bharati officiated at my son's *Upanayana* (sacred thread ceremony) with the help of a Brahmin; as a sannnyasin he could not make offerings into the ritual fire. As the Hindu Chaplain at Hendricks Chapel, Swami offered weekly talks attended by local and campus Hindus, mostly Indian graduate students in science and engineering, with scattered members of the Religious Studies department thrown in. I used to sit in the front row.

For me, his talks were a metaphysical treat, as he would remove his anthropologist's hat and symbolically

don the Ochre Robe. Following traditional format, he would go through a text, usually one of the Upanisads, by reading a verse in Sanskrit, translating it into English, and then do the same with a traditional commentary on the text, usually Sankara's, then an additional commentary upon the commentary either in Sanskrit or one of the vernacular languages. Finally he would offer his own comments highlighting the issues at stake, and open the floor for questions.

These were some of the highest moments of my life. Week after week, I would wait for others to ask their questions and then jump in. The volley would begin, back and forth, over the "net of Indra." The more questions I served, the more brilliant images would he throw back to me, drawing me deeper into my own reflexive awareness. Drawing upon my meditational and psychotropic experiences, the teachings of my guru and latent past life memories, I would leap frog over concepts to plunge into the depths of intuitive understanding. Just as in the tantras and *agamas* where teachings are framed in the dialogue between Siva and Sakti, this interchange was the boon of a lifetime, an unequalled pleasure, an interaction of supreme grace and energy that I wondered what I had ever done to deserve.

Yet despite our mutual respect and affection, Swami and I used to argue on one issue in particular. While Swami resonated with the 60's quest for freedom, he rejected the "new age" popularization of Hindu thought. He vociferously and unrelentingly critiqued the spread of Indian yogic traditions in the West, right from Swami Vivekenanda who addressed the World Parliament of Religions in 1895, up to "Maharaj Ji," the 14-year old Guru who in the late 60's initiated thousands in the Houston Astrodome. In *ASIA* magazine Bharati wrote:

"I state categorically that I regard all but two or three small Hindu organizations in this country as essentially fraudulent...The kind of Hinduism that sells well in the West is a phony Hinduism, which I call



“neo-Hinduism” or “swami-Hinduism” since Indian swamis acting as gurus to Western disciples are its harbingers. It relates to genuine Hinduism the way pulp novels relate to literature, and would not even be recognized in the villages of India.” (*ASIA*, November, December 1979)

In agreement with my diksa guru, Swami Ganeshanand Saraswati, (aka Ganesh Baba) a dasnami Mahant with credentials Swami could not question, I defended the incursion of Indian gurus to the West as an evolutionary global movement worth taking seriously. But Bharati judged authenticity solely according to the standards set by the textual traditions. A true classicist, he especially detested the Theosophists and Hindu reformists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, who had laid the foundations of the current new age trends. Perhaps because he could see how endangered the Indian traditions were in the face of modernity, he stood squarely opposed to much of what Ganesh Baba and I celebrated—innovation, the translation, importation, and popularization of Eastern yogic practices in the West, and the synthesis of Western science and Eastern spirituality. Yet arguing with him never felt like an exercise in futility. He would easily concede points and modify the discussion in light of new information. Unlike many academics, he was never hesitant to change his opinion or admit that he was wrong.

I sometimes wonder what Swami would have had to say if he had lived to see the current state of Hindu affairs, including the recent attacks on the scholarship of such distinguished scholars as his colleague Wendy Doniger. However much they might have once disagreed, I am sure that if either were alive today, both Bharati and my guru Ganesh Baba would have been outraged at any right wing attempt to enforce a “party line” on the world’s most diverse and tolerant religious tradition.

In retrospect, I realize that while Swami was defending an endangered tradition, I was defending my very identity. Perhaps it was my commitment to the discipline of Indian classical dance, the legitimacy of my guru

*sampradayas*, that allowed Swami to admit me into his inner circle. Perhaps it was that as Westerners we had both “gone native” and in different ways had paid for it. Or perhaps it was because we both loved to argue and then go for a cup of tea.

As a dancer and mother of a young son with diverse interests, I certainly never felt I could live up to the high standards of scholarship he theoretically demanded. Yet he read my devotion to both him and the tradition, and delivered invaluable teachings to me in ways I could grasp. In return, I grew close enough to him to be able to give him honest feedback. One night after a talk he gave, I said to him “Swami, you have no idea how harshly you come across sometimes. You simply cannot continue to lambaste people so. It’s embarrassing!” In reply he uttered a long drawn out “hmmmmmm,” a sign he was thinking about it. I knew that at heart he was an extremely generous and compassionate man, and that his rough exterior had been consciously cultivated to keep the masses at bay.

Soon enough, Bharati underwent a radical transformation: In the mid 1980’s, his doctors informed him that if he didn’t lose weight he would not survive another ten years. Immediately, with the help of his devoted companion Rita, he severely restricted his food intake and began exercising. With customary discipline, he stationed a cycle in his office and rode daily for precisely thirty minutes each morning and afternoon. Weather permitting, he also took up jogging. The results were dramatic. In a year he lost over a hundred pounds and, in the process, much of his hot temper. Like his outdated, hand tailored European suits, his arrogance and impatience no longer fit him.

That brings to mind a humorous episode we shared in the late 80’s. I was dancing for a plenary session of the Annual Conference of the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco and Swami was invited as a respondent. We arranged to meet at the cocktail reception opening the conference. I wanted to surprise him by dressing in

full Indian regalia, and donned a red silk sari. I soon spotted him, head above the crowd, in a baggy raincoat, coming toward me in a flustered state.

“You need to come to my room immediately!”

“Why Swami?”

“Don’t ask questions!”

Up we went in the elevator. Entering his room he opened his coat and there in the front of his pants was a large conspicuous hole.

“These are the only pants I brought! You need to help me!”

Swami had neglected his wardrobe for years nor was his a pant size you could find in department stores. Needless to say, we missed the reception. With hotel sewing kit in hand, I sat on his bed dressed like an Indian princess mending his pants while he stood there fuming in suit jacket and baggy boxer underwear. I lectured him on the need for a new wardrobe befitting his new size and reputation. Thankfully, on his next trip to India he had a series of raw silk suits tailored and I never saw him in shabby dress again.

In the fall of 1988, in his honor, I volunteered to host and coordinate the semi-annual Conference of the Society for Tantric Studies at Syracuse. The program was organized as a tribute to Bharati and his Buddhist counterpart, Alex Wayman, as founding pioneers of the field. Held over Halloween weekend at a rustic Christian retreat center amongst fallen leaves, I threw Indian bedspreads over the beaten down furniture, burned incense and carved a tantric jack-o-lantern to welcome participants, some of today’s most illustrious scholar/practitioners: David White, Paul Muller Ortega, Thomas Coburn, Douglas Brooks, June McDaniel, Miranda Shaw, and Daniel Gold, among others. Papers were presented with Bharati and Wayman as first respondents. In the evening I had scholars chopping vegetables and making curries, and I suspect some passed the peace pipe behind closed doors. Two separate dormitories provided the sleeping accommodations. Swami enjoyed the company and scholarship of his academic offspring immensely and,

in good form, humorously quipped that ours was likely the only tantric gathering in the world where men and women were housed separately.

The following fall I left for my doctoral research in Banaras. As my advisor, Bharati had turned me on to the topic of the Aghoris of Banaras, and was as excited as I was about it. During my year and a half in the holy city, 1989-91 BI (before internet) we corresponded regularly. One letter, unfortunately lost now, stands out as particularly memorable. I was describing all the accounts of supernatural miracles being narrated by my informants, the followers of Avadhut Bhagwan Ram, the head of the sect I was studying. I wrote, “Please don’t expect me to attempt some meta-explanation for these experiences, as if I know better what is really going on. As far as I am concerned, if these miracles are real to them, they are real, period!” He wrote back that while perhaps he would have once objected, in case I hadn’t noticed, he had changed considerably in the last several years and wholeheartedly agreed with my decision to go with an “emic” (insider’s) narrative. My heart leapt to receive that letter, and the acknowledgment that he self-consciously embraced the changes he had gone through in recent years. He even pointed out that he had himself experienced his share of inexplicable events in India. “So,” I thought, “after all these years, we are not so far apart.”

While losing weight had mellowed Bharati’s personality, it was during his final months that the real transformation took place. What was most remarkable to me was that, from the time he received the diagnosis of brain cancer, Swami totally abandoned his academic identity and psychologically donned the Ochre Robe for his remaining days. With so many half-finished articles, a final autobiography in the planning, and several student projects pending, including my own dissertation, he turned his back on the intellect and entered fully into the heart. He never opened another book nor lifted his pen. If I tried to sneak in some question or comment related to my dissertation, he changed the subject. This created a

conflict within me, as I could not share with my advisor any of the information, stories and experiences I had stored up during my year and a half in Banaras. I could not take his help nor benefit from his incredible storehouse of knowledge. Although I thought I understood what was happening, I had to struggle with a selfish desire to hold onto the teacher I had known. Later, I realized that what he was teaching me was an invaluable lesson about the limits of academia, and, ironically enough for someone who had identified so heavily with the intellect throughout his life, the inadequacy of the mind to exhaust the full significance of an incarnation.

For the final months of his life, Agehananda Bharati shifted his residence to Rochester where he was tenderly cared for by Rita and a dedicated staff of health professionals. There he received a steady stream of visitors, friends and colleagues, and many former students who wanted to pay tribute to his influence. Those who could not come called or wrote letters, many of them voluminous.

As someone who observed my professor’s departure over a four-month period, I can report that in Swami’s case, Elizabeth Kubler Ross’s stages of dying fail to do justice to the grace with which he underwent his final renunciation. Perhaps it was partly due to the excellent care which ensured that he never faced intense physical pain, but I never saw any signs of shock, denial, or anger.

Yet one Thursday, (I spent every Thursday with him those months) about six weeks into his ordeal, I found him in an entirely different mood, silent and withdrawn. Looking into his eyes, I was startled to read an expression of abject terror. Perhaps it was finally hitting him. I asked, “Swami, What do you see?” Quietly he replied “Nothing. When I close my eyes I am staring into a void.” I took his hand and swallowed hard. Did I dare say what immediately came into my mind? If not me, who? I seized the opportunity. “That is exactly where you have to enter in. This is the moment that all of your meditations have led to. You must draw upon those experiences now.”

I have no idea if my words had anything to do with it, but I never saw him in that state again. Slowly, as weeks turned into months, a palpable aura of peace grew around him. It was as if his heart was somehow playing catch up with his mind. He was visibly moved by the outpouring of concern and gratitude as many of his former students, now associated with various spiritual communities around the world, called for special prayers and rituals. In addition to the Sri Rajarajeshwari Temple of Rochester and the Sri Venkateshwara Temple of Pittsburg, these communities ranged from the Sakhya Buddhist Community of Bonn, Germany to a Columbus, Ohio, Christian prayer group. A Puerto Rican Shaman was in regular attendance along with Rita herself who seemed the very embodiment of compassion. As part of his soul’s education, the very forms of spirituality he had once critiqued now conspired to sustain his spirit.

Everyone who visited spoke of the incredibly peaceful vibrations in the house. Perhaps this was what acceptance brings, but to those of us present, it felt like pure love. The more Swami withdrew into the silence of his inner world, the more the feeling deepened, permeating the atmosphere until it was those closest to him who went into a kind of denial, as if we could take care of him forever and continue basking in the bliss, the Ananda of Ageha.

Agehananda Bharati’s final gesture was as dramatic as the life he had led. After a series of seizures had left him drained, he could no longer move his left arm. Yet ever the tantric and secret devotee of the Divine feminine, he somehow lifted his arm, reached over and placed his left hand on Rita’s head, then took his last breath. His body was burnt in Rochester, NY and the ashes were scattered in his beloved cities of Rishikesh and Banaras.

At the memorial ceremony held at Hendricks Chapel, I offered a dance to Lord Siva and my words included the following:

It may be interesting to some of you who don’t know this, that at the time of Swami’s departure from the body,



according to the rules of his monastic order, there was no religious injunction for any ritual to be performed. This is because the initiation of a Hindu sannyasi is one in which the adept consciously and systematically undergoes a ritual death and performs his own funerary rites...For seven nights after his initiation in 1950, Agehananda Bharati meditated on the cremation fires that burn at Manikarnika. Between the new moon night of his ritual death and the new moon day of his physical liberation, a little over forty years passed in which his life burned with the brilliance of those supreme offerings of the cremation ground. The fire has now consumed itself but the light at the Center burns forever... ❖

QUOTES FROM SWAMI'S WRITINGS:

On the *Bhagavad Gita*:  
“...My graver misgivings about this poem derive from its inane eclecticism, and its blatant moral contradictions. It preaches violent Junkerism in one place, and extols complete withdrawal from worldly affairs in another; it propounds a half-hearted absolutism, avoiding offence to the monistic teachers who seem to have dominated the theological academies of its times, and then it disports a naïve theological with a strong sectarian flavor as its doctrinal consummation...This is the main difficulty: the text lends itself to any ideological slant. “(The Ochre Robe pp. 31-32)

On the basic axioms that define the Hindu scholastic tradition (emphasis mine—I wonder if he would still make this statement today):  
“{The Hindu tradition] insists on a few axioms: that the Veda is sruti, that there is rebirth, and that there is an absolute spirit that is both immanent and transcendent. Each of these dicta can be interpreted in innumerable ways—there has never been such a thing as a standard interpretation, or a compulsory commentary; new interpretations are always welcome, even interpretations so radical that they seem to undermine the

very axiom. Only the axioms themselves must not be impugned.” (OR: p. 135)

On Hindu monks and the values of “humanistic individualism”:  
“In Hindu India, the monk is free to think and to teach as he pleases; the layman is bound by social taboos at every step. Compared to the latter’s strictures, the monastic discipline of the Order appears trifling. Monks are not really required to conform to any social norm—hundreds of hymns and panegyrics on the monastic life revel in the description of the monk’s unbounded freedom. Maybe it is this that makes the executives of modern secular India so suspicious of the ochre robe: under the uniform garb, there is hidden a congeries of unpredictable non-conformities.” (OR p. 159)

On India as the Divine Mother:  
“...During roughly 100,000 miles of rail travel in pursuit of my monastic and scholastic tasks, the scene never lost its sweet charm for me...this soil is the most tangible aspect of the *magna mater*; for me, as a votary of Sakti, she is both mother and ever-beautiful, divine, beloved princess. The green pastures and the fallow fields, the cattle and the people and the peacocks—they are her garb; this is why, so I think, the weavers and dyers of India so often decorate with flora and fauna the more elaborate saris which they create in gold and color.” (OR: 173)

On becoming a monk:  
“I had become a monk, not because the world is full of grief, but because it is full of joy; not because of a surfeit of sensuous enjoyment either...but because of a desire for more enjoyment, such as the senses alone cannot offer.” (OR 173)

On his own ego identity:  
“I have been trying to be whatever I am, with no racial allegiance: A Hindu, yes, but not an Indian; a philosopher, but not a British nor an Austrian, neither a European nor an Indian philosopher; a humanist, but not a European humanist; a man mildly fond of comfort, but not

dependent on American standards of plumbing.” (OR p. 206)

On the Siva Linga:  
“...The linga stands for Siva, who is the god of asceticism, of renunciation, the tutelary god of all monks. The linga is not priapic; its erect shape indicates complete control, retention, not emission. Every mental control, every state of yogic concentration is a replica of the linga. Desirelessness is supreme beatitude. Nirvana is desireless, hence again the symbolism of the linga.” (OR p. 245)

All quotes are from *The Ochre Robe* (Doubleday & Co, Inc. Garden City, New York 1970). *The Light at the Center* is very technical and so is *The Tantric Tradition*.

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*Bhagirati River (Ganga River) at Harsil  
en route to Gomukh, Uttarakhand,  
Himalayas, July 2014 © Robert Moses*





# ENCOUNTER WITH THE INFINITE

HOW DID THE MINIMALLY TRAINED, ISOLATED SRINIVASA RAMANUJAN, WITH LITTLE MORE THAN AN OUT-OF-DATE ELEMENTARY TEXTBOOK, ANTICIPATE SOME OF THE DEEPEST THEORETICAL PROBLEMS OF MATHEMATICS—INCLUDING CONCEPTS DISCOVERED ONLY AFTER HIS DEATH?

ROBERT SCHNEIDER WITH BENJAMIN PHELAN

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Ramanujan commemorative postage stamp issued in India in 1962

THERE IS A FORM OF BUDDHISM SO potent, adherents say, that to hear its name spoken is to receive a promise of premature enlightenment, of early freedom from the wheel of incarnations. Something similar is true of Srinivasa Ramanujan, the super-genius who was born into deep poverty in an obscure part of southern India, who taught himself mathematics from a standard textbook, and in total isolation became a mathematician of such power that a hundred years after his death, at the age of thirty-two, the meaning of much of his work is still a mystery. In the middle of what I thought would be my life's work, writing and producing music, I heard his story; now I find myself in graduate school studying number theory.

The story of Ramanujan is a variation on the same mythopoeic tale related in Star Wars and the New Testament, of a special boy born into adversity. A mother cannot conceive. The Goddess appears in a dream, promising a son through whom the God will speak to his creation. While pregnant, the mother travels to her ancestral home. During the winter solstice, the boy is born, under signs in the heavens that portend great events: his horoscope, cast

by his mother, predicts that he will be a genius beset by great suffering. “Svasti Sri,” it reads, “when the moon was near the star Uttirattadi, when Mithuna was in the ascendant, on this auspicious day” Ramanujan is born. And indeed, his will be a short life, full of triumph and disaster. Growing up, he is gentle and quiet. “Weightless” is the word one of his childhood acquaintances uses in Robert Kanigel’s *The Man Who Knew Infinity: A Life of the Genius Ramanujan*. Beginning in his teenage years, Kanigel writes, Ramanujan “would abruptly vanish[...]Little subsequently became known” about these disappearances. Around this time, Ramanujan acquires a hoary old text (G. S. Carr’s *Synopsis of Elementary Results in Pure Mathematics*) that initiates him into the arcana. The Goddess begins to appear to Ramanujan in his dreams, showing him scrolls covered in strange formulae. “Nākkil ezhutināl,” he later said, “She wrote on my tongue.”

With such minimal training, Ramanujan rediscovers the mathematics of the preceding millennia. As he begins to make deep discoveries of his own, he writes to the learned men of the world, but his claims seem too extraordinary to be the product of a sane mind, so they

ignore him. One of these letters happens to reach G. H. Hardy, a famous number theorist at Cambridge University and one of the only mathematicians in the world with the right mix of training and temperament to see Ramanujan clearly. Confronted with Ramanujan’s mathematical locutions, such as this one, which uses an infinite “continued fraction” to relate  $e$ ,  $\pi$ , and the golden ratio<sup>1</sup> to one another,

$$\frac{1}{1 + \frac{e^{-3\pi}}{1 + \frac{e^{-4\pi}}{1 + \frac{e^{-5\pi}}{1 + \dots}}}} = \left( \sqrt{5} - \phi \right) e^{2\pi i},$$

Hardy realizes that Ramanujan’s formulae, so weird yet elegant, supercharged with meaning yet concise, “must be true because, if they were not true, no one would have the imagination to invent them.” So disturbed is Hardy by the genius evident in Ramanujan’s letter that he sends an emissary to the edge of the empire, to India, to bring Ramanujan back to the imperial capital.

At Cambridge, Ramanujan is friendly and funny, easy company, but weird mathematics gushes out of him. He can’t explain the reasoning that leads to his formulae, nor their significance.

He seems otherworldly to Hardy, as easy and dexterous with infinite quantities as with a knife and fork. With his intellect finally being fed by a university, Ramanujan’s genius erupts into something never before seen. And then he begins to die. Tuberculosis is suspected and so, in line with the treatment of the day, his doctors force him to live in an open room fully exposed to the English winter. The food the doctors bring him, Ramanujan writes, is inedible: botched curries “as hard as uncooked rice.” His body wastes away until he is little more than a walking skeleton. Then he returns to India, expecting to die. As his last act, he produces the strangest work of his career: a series of mathematical formulae only recently understood. We now know that they grant the bearer passage to the infinite.

If I had heard any of this when I was growing up, in Ruston, Louisiana, in the 1980s, I might not have become a musician at all. As it happened, I instead heard the story of Brian Wilson, another special boy who burned up his mind searching for the infinite. My friends and I who started the Elephant 6 music collective wanted to be like Wilson and our other psychedelic idols, and to see through their eyes. What would the genius do? I’d ask myself, and then study old studio photographs to see what they had actually done. I taught myself to record by trying to re-create my idols’ sessions. Imagining myself in conversation with them gave me material. What was the idol trying to tell me?

One night, my band, The Apples in Stereo, were hours into a recording session when the tape machine’s motor exploded with a bang. The rest of the Apples went home. Alone in my studio’s control room, I ripped out all the burned-up diodes and cleared a space on the floor. I opened an electronics manual and, for the first time, read Ohm’s Law,  $V = I \times R$ , the fundamental equation of electronics, which weaves together the three basic properties of an electrical circuit: voltage (V), current flow (I), and resistance (R). The text presented Ohm’s Law as a tool, a

measuring device I could use to figure out what was happening inside the tape machine: a string of symbols in service to physical reality.

But this seemed backward. What was in service to what? If the formula was a tool for measuring the physical world, that implied that the physical world was the deeper reality, of which the equation provided only an approximation. If that was the case—if mathematics was subservient to reality—the equation would have failed, not the machine. I would have been sitting on the floor searching for a better formula, not installing fresh diodes. What in fact had happened was that the moment the physical world contradicted the equation, the diodes burned up and the electrons stopped flowing. The physical world gave way and the equation persisted. The equation, not the machine, was the fundamental entity. The machine was only a shadow.

Basically, I got my mind blown by a broken tape machine. The challenge of the psychedelic experience, as the Beatles pointed out, comes after it is over. You have to find meaning in it, otherwise it was just an indulgence of the id. So, once again following my idols, I looked for the meaning. And it was this: electric guitars, stereophonic sound, magnetic tape, analog synthesizers, and the supreme joy of my life, making music with my friends, all existed because of a simple equation. What flowed through the circuits of the tape machine, through our headphones and our brains, what made us feel loved and allowed us to express our love wasn’t music, or even electricity, but numbers. Music, Brian Wilson said, was the voice of God; His language, said Galileo, was mathematics.

While on tour with the Apples, I started exploring mathematics, experimenting with formulae in dressing rooms and reading classic works by Euler, Einstein, and Riemann in the tour van. Then I heard the story of Ramanujan. Within a few years, I had upended my life, put the band on hold, and moved my family to Georgia to study with Ken Ono, a Ramanujan expert at Emory University.

A couple of years ago, with Ramanujan’s 125th birthday approaching, Ken decided to prove “something special”—he’s the kind of person who can just make a decision like that—so he took on the final mystery in Ramanujan’s writings: the objects described in his deathbed letter, which Ramanujan called “mock-theta functions.” Their purpose had been a mystery for a hundred years.

“Wanna see something cool?” Ken asked me one day. He took me into his office and sketched out a proof.

Some mathematical functions spit out numbers of such enormity and in such a torrent that the apparatus of mathematics breaks down; the pile of numbers becomes a hill too steep to climb. Such functions are said to “blow up” to infinity. The purpose of the mock-theta functions, Ken realized, was to clear the path. Using the mock-theta functions, Ramanujan had found a way to carry himself over the infinitely steep hill, all the way to the gates of infinity itself, and then, miraculously, to disappear through a keyhole and come out on the other side. The path through was head-splittingly implausible, but Ken had shown me that it lay where Ramanujan had said it did.

Ken finished the proof just in time for Ramanujan’s birthday, and for inclusion in the lecture series being held all across India to mark it. We bought plane tickets. We had good news to share: in 1920, on a bed in Madras, as Ramanujan was contemplating his coming encounter with the infinite, he found a way through.

But I wondered, could I find a way to imagine myself into some kind of conversation with Ramanujan, as I had with my other heroes when I was a kid in Ruston?

Maybe not. With Ramanujan, there was no book of studio photographs, no paper trail to insert me into his headspace. Paper had been too expensive to buy, so Ramanujan did almost all of his work on a small slate, writing down his highly compressed formulae onto a scrap of paper only after many hours of work, erasing the slate every few seconds. A typical page in one of his



three “notebooks”—really just piles of scrap, bound after the fact—contains no words of explanation, just equations, symbols, and strings of digits. Only four photographs of Ramanujan exist, and two of them are nearly identical. He had no children. His family, including his widow, are all dead. There was nothing to grab onto. I would have to rely on other, less direct, ways of knowing.

2 AT MYSORE, 12 DEGREES NORTH OF the equator, we boarded a sleeper car on the Mayiladuturai Express, a rusty train that would take us even farther south, to the two-thousand-year-old city of Kumbakonam. The city was only 250 miles away, but the trip would take fourteen hours.

The scenery along the tracks was bewildering in its contrasts, as though Eden were occupying the same space-time as a post-nuclear Florida. A goatherd in a vermilion loincloth squatted among smashed-in computer monitors and broken circuit boards—an image of Paleolithic man zapped forward to the end-time. A field of sugarcane and mango trees gave way to an industrial junkyard, where long-horned zebu moved among rusted machine-heaps, looking for garbage to eat.

I opened my notebook and started playing with a way to take Big O of the coefficients of divergent infinite series and create a metric space—a kind of nonsense, an attempt to measure immeasurable quantities, then arrange them in terms of how immeasurable they were. What would the genius do? Ramanujan might start by posing a crazy question that didn’t seem worth wasting a moment on, such as this one. Then he’d take a few angelic leaps of pure intuition and arrive at an unexpected new truth. I was like a cat trying to extricate itself from a five-dimensional paper bag.

The sight of me writing must have given Ken hope that my homework, now weeks late, might finally be done.

“Robert,” he called out, “let me see that notebook.”

I passed the notebook back to Wadim Zudilin, a Russian number theorist

whose push-broom mustache and black-framed glasses made him look like he was always in disguise. Wadim passed it to Ken.

Ken scanned the page and frowned. This was obviously not homework.

Then he laughed, seeing how closely I was imitating the master. “Robert! You should be doing your homework! You can’t have dessert before dinner.”

As the sun set, it grew harder to fight off half a planet’s worth of jet lag, but I had homework to do, so I tried to stay awake. Wadim and I talked about music. When I told him that the last Apples record had been influenced by Electric Light Orchestra, he arched an eyebrow at a high Slavic angle and looked me solemnly in the eye.

“I love the Electric Light Orchestra,” he said. “I have all of their records.”

Soon everyone was asleep, stretched out on folding cots. The moment the car was dark, as though a bell had been rung, cockroaches flooded out to scour the floor and walls. I took my notebook to a semi-enclosed space between the train cars, in search of a light bulb to do my homework by. A metal gate, ajar and clanging in the wind, opened onto the countryside. A little dog trotted alongside the train, hopping over railroad ties and easily keeping pace.

All along the tracks lay burst bags of garbage. We were in the middle of nowhere. Where did all this trash come from? An answer appeared as the door opened and a flashy corporate type with a ring on his finger came outside, carrying a plastic bag full of garbage. He said something to me in Tamil, then crouched down and shoved the bag into the gap between the floor and the flimsy fabric wall, where it lodged. He stood up and pushed it through with the toe of his dress shoe. It was immediately shredded by the wheels of the train. Before returning inside, he bobbed his head and made a show of dusting off his hands: a job well done!

The train slowed as it approached Erode, Ramanujan’s mother’s ancestral home, where she had come to give birth. I hustled back into the dark sleeper car.

“Ken,” I whispered, “we’re stopping at Erode. We should get off the train!”

“We’ll only be stopped for, like, three minutes,” he murmured.

“But this is where Ramanujan was born,” I said. “This is awesome. We have to experience it.”

Dick Askey, a number theorist who graduated from Harvard in the 1950s, briefly woke up.

“It is not awesome,” he said. “It is merely good. You are softening the language. It is a bad habit, and you’ve got to break it.”

In the predawn darkness, a few commuters were out on the platform, reading the newspaper, nodding off on benches. We dawdled and took pictures. Through a hedge of flowers, I could see the lights of Erode.

To the left and the right, the train tracks vanished in the distance. Imagine the number line. In the middle is zero, the origin. To the right lie the positive numbers; to the left, the negative numbers. They go on forever in both directions, with an infinity at each end. Between them, as though between the terminals of a battery, the numbers leap into existence. As a boy, Ramanujan discovered that if he skipped along the number line, gathering and adding numbers according to simple patterns, when he arrived at infinity the sum could be a single, sensible number, like one or one hundred, or even  $\pi$ , a number with infinitely many digits that, like the avatars of the Infinite God, Vishnu, can never be fully written down. He discovered the series that yielded the basic trigonometric functions sine and cosine, and realized that the infinite series was the deeper definition not only of these but of all numbers. (In fact, Leonhard Euler had made the same discovery about sine and cosine in the eighteenth century. When Ramanujan found out that he’d been scooped by the great Euler, he was not elated, but ashamed—mortified, even, and hid his work in the roof of his house.)

The European mathematician who most famously grappled with the infinite, though in the rigid logic of nineteenth-century German science, was the brilliant, tragic Georg Cantor. Cantor saw infinity not as a blessing, but as a problem to be attacked and broken

into pieces, the number line a road to be plotted and rigorously mapped. The number line was “a path which never breaks off.” It had to “remain passable wherever the journey may lead,” even as functions blew up and spat out impassable oceans of numbers. Cantor’s mania for mapping this flooded terrain led to greatness after death but disgrace in life.

Prior to Cantor, infinity was a streak of insanity in the Western collective consciousness. The pre-Homeric Greeks, Aristotle, and contemporary Europe had rejected mathematical infinity outright. Yet, paradoxically, Christianity required infinity, for God was infinite. And since He was infinite, Cantor argued, His mind must contain all numbers. In which case numbers were not only infinite but also completed—an endless array that nevertheless had an end, and could therefore be held in the mind as a single object, then classified and studied.

Over fifteen years, Cantor proposed a brain-breaking taxonomy of greater and lesser infinities. Cantor’s colleagues rejected his work as, at best, wrong-headed, but Cantor saw no conflict between Christianity and mathematics, nor much of a difference. “A more powerful energy,” he said, had communicated the theory to him; the theory had come to him from God, “the first infallible cause of all created things,” and it proved His existence. For the primary characters in his syllabary of the transfinite, Cantor used not  $x$  and  $y$  but the Greek letters alpha and omega, the biblical symbols for God’s infinite nature.

By considering the idea of infinity seriously instead of as an inert article of theology, Cantor found himself in a territory so flaky that he was accused of being a pantheist. It was maddening—Cantor intended his mathematics to be used to complete Christian theology, yet here he was being accused of paganism. The mathematical establishment abominated Cantor. His own doctoral adviser, the great, grumpy Leopold Kronecker, sabotaged Cantor’s career and called him a “corrupter of youth.” The identical charge had driven Socrates

to suicide some thousands of years ago; Cantor would be in and out of nerve clinics for the rest of his life. He died in a sanatorium in 1918.

Askey appeared in the door of the train, fussing that it was about to start moving. Ken thought we might be able to race the train on foot.

No one dates back to the days of Ramanujan anymore, but Dick Askey comes close. He knew one of the mathematicians who worked with Ramanujan during his time at Cambridge, a “jovial, short, plump” number theorist named John Littlewood.

“We have no idea how Ramanujan did the marvelous things he did,” Askey says, though it had taken him a while to see the depths in Ramanujan’s seductive, flashy formulae. “I’d heard about him, of course, and somewhere along the line bought his collected papers. But I didn’t look at them seriously.”

At first, Askey had found Ramanujan’s math odd and opaque, too eccentric to be of much use. Anyway, it was unrelated to Askey’s main interest, a class of special functions called orthogonal polynomials. They were proving difficult to crack. His research was leading him further and further afield, into an abstruse new area of mathematics, called coding theory, that seemed related to orthogonal polynomials, though he couldn’t discern the point of connection. There was no one in Askey’s math department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, with the right expertise, and so, in perplexity, Askey reached out to George Andrews, the hero-mathematician who had just discovered Ramanujan’s final “lost” notebook in a library, in the belongings of another professor, long dead.

The discovery of the lost notebook was the final miracle in the Ramanujan story. “I have a hundred-page, unknown manuscript of Ramanujan in my briefcase,” Andrews told Askey when he arrived in Madison. “You can have a look at it for a nickel.”

Soon, all became clear: Ramanujan had foreseen the problems Askey was facing. Reading from Ramanujan’s spell book, and with Andrews as

the medium, Askey compelled the orthogonal polynomials to yield their secrets. But there was weirdness afoot, of a prototypically Ramanujanian variety.

“Ramanujan knew nothing about orthogonal polynomials,” Askey says. And he certainly knew nothing about coding theory, a subject that had come into being years after his death. Yet he seemed to have anticipated that these subjects would one day exist, that they would be interesting to someone, and that there would be problems associated with them that would need to be solved.

The simplest explanation is that Ramanujan was a time traveler from the future.

“It’s completely perplexing,” says Askey. “Since the orthogonal polynomials, I’ve spent much of my time working in Ramanujan’s garden.”

Around 1980, Askey read an interview in *The Hindu* magazine with Ramanujan’s widow, Janaki Ammal, that had gotten under his skin. When Ramanujan died, his jealous mother rejected Janaki, throwing her out of the house poor and unskilled. Janaki was still a girl, uneducated, and after her husband’s death she lived a hard life, even by the standards of southern India. By the time Askey read the interview, she was near the end of her life, half-blind and living on a pittance. The government had promised her at least a statue of her husband, whom they recognized as an Indian national hero, but they’d never delivered.

“Nothing matters now,” Janaki told the interviewer in the Hindu. “When I needed help, no one was around. Now it’s too late.”

“In this interview in the Hindu,” Askey says, “she lamented, ‘Where is the statue?’ I wasn’t smart enough to think immediately that something ought to be done. But within a few weeks, I realized that if we waited for the government to build a statue, Janaki would be dead before it happened. I thought we ought to give her something to show her how much the mathematics community cared.”

Askey commissioned a statue himself, and provided a sculptor with a second-generation photocopy of the only



clear photograph of Ramanujan in existence. He could have quickly raised all the money he needed with a few phone calls. Instead, he sent letters to a hundred colleagues around the world, asking for twenty-five-dollar donations. He wanted Janaki to feel the weight of the love the mathematics world bore her and her husband.

Before Ramanujan left Kumbakonam, Janaki said, he'd been fat and cheerful. After five years in England, he was hollowed out by malnutrition and misery, perhaps carrying a parasite, perhaps infected with tuberculosis, and in a frighteningly deep depression. He'd heard nothing from his wife the entire time he'd been abroad; his mother had been intercepting Janaki's letters and destroying them.

"If only you had come with me to England," Ramanujan told Janaki, "perhaps I would not have fallen ill."

There's a theorem, Askey says, that states that no finite number of images can be used to reconstruct a three-dimensional object, such as a face, exactly. Nevertheless, when Askey delivered the bust to Janaki, depicting a chubby, youthful Ramanujan, "she said it was as if his spirit had returned. She garlanded it every day."

Janaki was ninety years old by then, but wrote a letter of thanks to every mathematician who'd made a contribution.

Eleven busts were commissioned and sold to mathematical eminences around the world. One stands in George Andrews's house. But mathematical mega-stardom is one of the more anonymous forms of celebrity, and a few years ago one of the busts ended up in an estate sale, in the custody of an auctioneer who knew nothing about Ramanujan. A mathematics professor bought it.

"It's not where it belongs," Askey says. "Ken should have it."

**3**KEN ONO HAS SPENT MOST OF his career working a particularly fertile patch of Ramanujan's wild garden, discovering the subterranean connections and root systems that connect it to the forest of world mathematics.

"It's not unusual for experts to totally miss the point of Ramanujan's formulae," Ono says. "That happens over and over again. Everyone has four or five favorite examples when they'll say, 'I thought I understood this formula. I wrote papers on it, only to discover, five years later, that I'd missed the point.'"

Ono, now forty-six and slender as a greyhound, was all but indifferent to mathematics when he was growing up in Baltimore. He was good at it, but he got good grades in everything without having to study or try very hard. ("I was that kind of kid," he says, "You know the kind.") His immigrant father, Takashi Ono, was a number theorist at Johns Hopkins who worked from home, so Ono saw the work of mathematics every day. It wasn't appealing to him. The elder Ono didn't seem to do much more than sit around the house, presumably thinking deep thoughts, and occasionally write something down. Like other Japanese men of his generation, Ken says, he rarely showed much emotion, and gave no outward signs of the exaltation that mathematics could bring. Math seemed to be just another dreary ritual of adult life, like polite conversation or public radio.

Ono was an athletic kid with ambition and talent, and raced bicycles on a national circuit. (For the past few years, he's been a triathlete on Team USA, and trains continually, even while abroad on math junkets.) As a teenager, he was promising enough to earn sponsorships from Bianchi and Avocet. He was not interested in sitting still or thinking about numbers. His father was not interested in racing.

"He thought it was kind of silly," Ono says. "He let me do it, but I always had to get people to pick me up and drive me. I think he watched me race only once."

Ono dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade and spent his free time on his bike. One day in the spring, preoccupied with the National Capital Open, in Washington, DC, he rode back home from a long morning of training in the countryside, stopping at the mailbox to check for college

acceptance letters. He pulled out a yellowed envelope, obviously foreign, that was addressed to his father. He wrangled his Trek inside and handed his father the letter.

At the sight of the return address, his father staggered to the couch. He read the short letter, typewritten on rice paper, in silence.

Dear Sir,

I understand from Mr. Richard Askey, Wisconsin, U. S. A., that you have contributed for the sculpture in memory of my late husband Mr. Srinivasa Ramanujan. I am happy over this event.

I thank you very much for your good gesture and wish you success in all your endeavours.

Yours faithfully,  
S. Janaki Ammal

Ken's father, normally so impassive, covered his face with his hand, seemed to crumple, and wept.

"That was the first time I heard the story of Ramanujan," says Ono. "It made all the difference in my life."

At the University of Chicago, Ono switched majors, from premed to math. He was drawn to Ramanujan's whiz-bang formulae, but after giving them a once-over, it seemed to him, as it had to Askey, that they weren't all that deep. They were just "crazy tricks that did something weird."

Ono's personal opinion was irrelevant. Ramanujan's mathematics wasn't widely taught anymore; no one outside of a few specialists studied him seriously. Though he'd had a brief vogue shortly after his death, and a resurgence in the 1960s, Ramanujan was unfashionable. His body of work consisted of notebooks filled with short formulae, so there was no overarching theory to study, and formula writing had been out of style in serious mathematics for more than a century.<sup>2</sup> The formulists had had their time. They were the sorcerers of math's prehistory who had discovered the deep connections among the key concepts and encoded them in mathematical haiku. Modern mathematicians-in-

training studied modern theorists, technicians who labored over proofs of narrowly defined conjectures, mastered this or that technique, and polished the gleaming apparatus free of fingerprints.

When Ono began to dig a little more deeply into Ramanujan's formulae, he was surprised at the tangle of roots he encountered below the surface. Ramanujan's crazy tricks linked up with some of the deepest concepts in math. They could not exist unless they concealed massive theoretical edifices.

Take the tau function, an oddity that Ramanujan discovered and studied during his five years at Cambridge. A function is a mathematical expression that, when fed with a number, produces another number. It's a machine that takes some raw material and then stretches, compresses, reshapes, or transforms it into something else. Functions embody the relationships between numbers; they are central objects of study in number theory. Ramanujan found the tau function important enough to spend upward of thirty pages in his notebook exploring it, but it was hard for other mathematicians to see why he'd been so interested. On its face, there was nothing special about the tau function. Hardy, Ramanujan's chief collaborator at Cambridge, worried that the tau function's homeliness might lead future mathematicians to see it as a mathematical "backwater." For decades after Ramanujan's death, it was treated as one.

Then, in the 1960s, a French mathematician named Jean-Pierre Serre realized that the tau function was an unassuming front for a powerful force. Its existence could be explained only if there was a brand-new theory of functions encoded in it. Serre called this theory, suspected but not proven, the Galois representations. Not long after, the Belgian researcher Pierre Deligne proved that the Galois representations actually existed, and in the process clarified that the tau function was deeply connected to algebraic geometry and algebraic number theory. For proving the Galois representations, Deligne won a Fields Medal, the *ne plus ultra* of mathematical achievement, awarded

every four years to a mathematician under the age of forty. In 1995, the Galois representations appeared as the key component of Andrew Wiles's epochal proof of Fermat's Last Theorem, the largest, most notorious open problem in mathematics, which had gone unproved for over three hundred years and was suspected of being unprovable. Wiles, forty-one when he published the final version of his proof, was ineligible for a Fields, which only seems unjust: no prize, not even a Fields medal, could be adequate to the mastery in his proof. When the International Mathematical Union convened to hand out Fields Medals that year, it created a special award for Wiles and, for the ceremony, built two stages: one for the Fields Medalists and one above it, where Wiles stood alone.

"All that, from Serre to the Fields medal to Wiles, is from only about ten or fifteen pages from Ramanujan's notebooks, out of the hundreds that he wrote," Ono says. "Which is typical! And in fact, studying the tau function, the British mathematician Louis Mordell proved some properties that were later developed into Hecke algebras and the Langlands program, among the two or three most important developments in twentieth-century math. And that's from a different five pages of Ramanujan's work on tau that have no intersection with the previous fifteen. In fact, it might be as short as a page. One page from Ramanujan's work may have given birth to all that."

There's a subtlety here that needs to be made explicit. It's not remarkable that Ramanujan's work on the tau function led to interesting new mathematics. That kind of thing happens all the time; it's how the subject advances.

With Ramanujan there is a seeming reversal of cause and effect. No one can write down a formula with deep, hidden properties unless they first know what the deep properties are that they are trying to encode. This is the way mathematicians understand math to work; it is the only way they—we—know to approach the subject. But the significance of the tau function—the reason to write it down—wasn't

discovered until Ramanujan had been dead for sixty years.

"There's no way Ramanujan knew all these intermediate things," says Ono. "The concepts [encoded in the tau function] didn't exist when he was alive. That's the mind-boggling part: Ramanujan anticipated the work of people who would live long after him. He had visions that said there were going to be some theories in the future. Somehow. He didn't need any intermediate steps for him to anticipate that there would be all these subjects, and that they would go on to be the prototypes that we desperately needed to build our subjects. Whether he's in fashion or out of fashion has more to do with us, with where we are in coming to grips with him."

When Ono started looking into the mock-theta functions, there were a few hints as to what they might mean. They seemed to help describe the spread of cancer tumors, and physicists had begun to find them useful in understanding how black holes unravel space and time and how string theory knits them together. This was peculiar, since the concept of string theory didn't exist in 1920, when Ramanujan wrote his letter, and black holes were brand-new objects of speculation among a handful of physicists. But still—when modern astrophysicists peer inside their black-hole models, they find they are looking at mock-theta functions.

Despite a few research applications, the mathematical understanding of mock-theta functions was in a bizarre state. Dozens of papers had been written on them, but no one could explain in the most basic sense what a mock-theta function was. When Ramanujan died, there were no clues anywhere in the mathematical literature to explain why he found the mock-theta functions interesting. It's probably not going too far to say that, in fact, they weren't interesting. All they did, Ramanujan wrote, was imitate a class of functions called the theta functions, which had been around for a century or so. In that time, the theta functions had been working perfectly on their own.



No one had needed to imitate them. Ramanujan had produced a solution to a nonexistent problem. "Who cares?" would not have been an unreasonable response.

In the summer of 2012, Ono found that the only way he could understand the mock-theta functions was via Serre, Deligne, and others' work on the tau function. This made no sense. It meant that it was not Ramanujan's own work on tau that had led Ramanujan from tau to the mock thetas, but the work of others, of Serre and Deligne, that would not be carried out until he'd been dead for decades.

Ono had the sensation of Ramanujan walking in his footsteps, but from the wrong direction in time.

"Whatever Ramanujan was thinking about between the tau function and the deathbed letter somehow must have been parallel to what I was doing, without him knowing I was doing it, ninety years later," he says.

With Ramanujan looking over his shoulder like a "chubby guardian angel," Ono found that, as the numbers being spit out by the theta functions started to grow at an unimaginable speed, approaching and then far exceeding the number of atoms in the universe, the mock-theta functions began to imitate them with eerie precision. In the lower reaches of the number line, the behavior of the function and its doppelgänger was unlovely and chaotic. But out here, in the immense realms that had driven Cantor insane and enraged the European mathematics establishment, their relationship became clear. You could take the ludicrous, unmanageable output of a theta function, then subtract the ludicrous, unmanageable output of a mock-theta function, and the answer was shocking in its simplicity. The answer was 4.

With pencil and paper and pages of calculations in front of you, to see these titanic quantities consume each other so precisely bends the mind.

"It doesn't take any imagination," says Ono, "to recognize that four is a beautiful number."

As Ramanujan lies dying, racing toward infinity, a dot of light appears in

the great wall. The gleaming apparatus is about to crash, but the mock theta function does its crazy trick, and the infinite dissolves, just a little. A portal the size of an atom appears. The apparatus threads the hole. And then it keeps going, and going, and going...

**4** THE TRAIN PULLED INTO KUMBakonam station at six in the morning. The sun glowed just below the horizon. The air was dark and moist and hot, like the inside of a monster's mouth. The anti-malaria drug I was taking was starting to go a little psychedelic on me, casting a greasy iridescence over my qualia. Mosquitoes whined in my ears like winged synthesizers. Up and down the platform, the bodies of sleeping commuters with overnight connections lay on woven mats, occupying every horizontal surface available, like felled stalks of wheat. I was nauseated and precarious, as though with a belly full of stomach acid and psilocybin.

From the other side of the platform, a deputation of professors from SASTRA University (the Shanmugha Arts, Science, Technology and Research Academy) shouted over to Ken and started making their way over, waving copies of the Hindu. Ken's glorious work on the mock-theta functions, they said, was being praised in all the papers. They led us outside, toward a bus waiting to take us to our bungalow, in a little villa just outside of town. In the street, a group of schoolboys in matching polo shirts and shorts caught sight of Ken and started whispering to one another, stealing glances at him as we walked by. One of them stepped away from the group and pointed straight at the famous mathematician.

"Jackie Chan," he said. "Jackie Chan!" The rest of the boys joined in, yelling, "Jackie Chan!" as they rushed over and mobbed Ken. "Jack-ie Chan! Jack-ie Chan! Jack-ie Chan!"

Ken patted them on their heads, saying, "Hello, hello, how are you? So nice to see you," and so forth, then posed for a picture, holding his hands jauntily out to the side, in the hang-ten surfer mudra.

"This happens every time I come here," Ken said.

From inside the van, Kumbakonam manifested as a blur of low buildings along a dusty, curbless street. Piled up higgledy-piggledy were the huts of the poor, the ragged condos of the upper-middle class, and chaoses of splintered wood, dirt, and junk. Relics from antiquity seized the eye. A stocky stone avatar of the Infinite God, standing with the nonchalance of a fire hydrant, was surrounded by a spillage of brick and shredded roof-thatching from a house that had collapsed into the street. Behind a wall made of fresh brick, tarp, and rusted metal barrels rose a temple's entrance-tower, the gopuram, minutely carved and painted in all the pastels of the Indian palette, erected centuries ago. Somewhere back there, in the interior of the two-thousand-year-old city, was the temple itself.

The khaki exterior of SASTRA University was smooth and modern. SASTRA opened in 1984, and acts as a conservator of Ramanujan's legacy. Though Ramanujan flunked out of college twice—spectacularly, earning grades as low as 10 percent in some subjects—he dazzled his math instructors, who couldn't tell if he was a charming genius or a holy lunatic. They tried to help him, but how could they? They didn't understand the first thing about him.

As Ramanujan entered adulthood, he was a soul going to waste. Unless he could get out of Kumbakonam, he would be subsumed by it, his discoveries lost forever. But when Hardy's emissary appeared in Kumbakonam, offering Ramanujan a position at Cambridge, Ramanujan said he couldn't go. The Infinite God had appeared in a dream, telling him that the time had not yet come for him to share his gift with the world.

In any case, foreign travel was impossible. Kumbakonam was a place where culture and religion were completely intertwined. Ramanujan was a Brahmin, the caste of priests and intellectuals; a Vaishnavite, who regarded Vishnu as god over all and who worshiped his local avatar, Narasimha;

and an Iyengar who kept to a complex diet that prohibited all meat, but also cheese, onions, salt, rice on some days, food of any kind on others, and governed who was allowed to prepare his food, and in what state of ceremonial purity, and with whom he was allowed to eat. To live abroad would be to abandon this web of identity. It would be an act of self-destruction, a form of suicide, really.

Hardy's emissary persisted. Ramanujan went to Namakkal, a nearby temple-town, and slept on the temple grounds for three days, until the goddess, Namagiri, avatar of Lakshmi and wife of Narasimha, appeared, granting him permission to leave.

While he was in England, Ramanujan woke up in the morning and did puja, prepared his food in a state of ritual purity, painted the namam on his forehead and then erased it—but on the day he sailed for England, he wept as he cut his kutumi, a braid that would have set him apart as an alien. If he left, he told his English escort, it would break the web that bound him to the world, and it would never hold him again. His place would be destroyed forever. If he ever returned, he would no longer make sense as a being. To the people around him, he would not exist. He would haunt his own life as a ghost, ignored. But Namagiri had given him permission, so he left.

During Ken's lecture on the mock-theta functions, an Indian professor collapsed in the heat. "Stay with me, Krishna!" his wife cried.

The effects of the anti-malaria pill crept back up on me. I felt suddenly ill and hurried to the bathroom to splash water on my face. Through the open window drifted all the smells of Kumbakonam: clouds of roasting spices and fresh fruits mingled with manure and rotting garbage and the reek of the Cauvery River. In one of the stalls, a Western mathematician was on his knees, vomiting. "The smells are just too strong," he said, "much too strong."

Outside, the streets were a pandemonium. It was at least 100 degrees. An icy prickle raced back and forth across my scalp. My head swam

and my ears rang. A high-low honking was getting close, quickly, but I didn't see the car until a chrome fender stopped an inch from my kneecap. The driver's face behind the glass was expressionless. A thought appeared in my head, in words: This is not safe.

Then I was in the narrow jumble of Sarangapani Street. Ramanujan's small house, preserved as a museum, stood next to a hardware store. Its door and single window were painted powder blue. Four blue posts held up a low roof, thatched with palm leaves in Ramanujan's time, now covered in red tiles. When it grew too hot inside, especially during the summer, Ramanujan would bring his slate out here to lie on a cot, sometimes all night and into the next day, to do his research. To preserve his bubble of concentration, his mother quietly pressed curd rice into his hand while he worked.

A hallway led from the front door to a second, inner door. Beyond it was a small common room the width of a hallway, a galley kitchen, and a shrine for doing puja. It was dark inside the house, with a little light coming in through the murra, an interior courtyard that was open to the sky and the rain. I sat on Ramanujan's bed. I was as close to him as I would ever be. A slate, similar to the one he had used, lay across it—scene dressing provided by SASTRA. I held it on my lap and closed my eyes, rising and falling on waves of nausea.

All mathematicians—the great, the good, and the average—have a mentor and arise via a pedigree. Hecke was taught by Hilbert, Hilbert by von Lindemann, von Lindemann by Klein. Cantor was taught by his future antagonist, Kronecker (and by Frobenius and Weierstrass), Kronecker by Dirichlet, Dirichlet by Poisson (and Fourier). Noether had Gordan, Gordan had Jacobi. Dedekind, Riemann, and Möbius all studied under Gauss. Fourier had Lagrange, Lagrange had Euler, Euler had Bernoulli fils, Bernoulli fils had Bernoulli père. The chain is how the discipline is communicated down the centuries, stored in the collective mind of a culture rather than in individual minds, which are too small to contain it.

Ramanujan had had an out-of-date elementary math textbook and whatever was in the air. For five years after he flunked out of college, this room was where he worked, looking out his window, becoming who he became. How did he do it?

A sign in Tamil and English hung on the wall: RAMANUJAN USED TO SIT HERE FOR HOURS LOOKING THROUGH THE WINDOW. Southern India is an ancient and unchanging place. The Kumbakonam of today is the Kumbakonam of a hundred years ago, despite trinkets like cell phones and automobiles. Walk out Ramanujan's front door and you see what he saw. You see through his eyes.

What was the genius trying to tell me?

I walked out his front door. Virtually next door, the gopuram of Sarangapani Temple rose into the sky, a massive and intricate piling-up of what seemed like the entire Hindu cosmos in a pyramid of entwined limbs, naked bodies, animals, celestial entities, and the Infinite God in his infinite incarnations. The infinity of creation, in a sacred, teeming heap, was the first thing Ramanujan saw when he stepped outside. It cast the neighborhood in shadow.

**5** THE GOPURAM WAS THE ONLY PART of the temple visible from the outside. The rest was concealed, an organ within the body of the city.

Taking off my shoes and passing through the gate, I left Kumbakonam and entered the city-within-the-city, an orthogonal space, larger on the inside than it appeared from the outside, that rambled down long corridors, ran up and down flights of stairs, opened onto stone-floored piazzas, and sprouted fractal sub-temples within itself. Carnatic music came from distant reaches of the city-within, in loud blasts and soft, continual trickles. Old men in little more than rags, retired from the city-without and seeking enlightenment, walked and chanted, collecting coins from passersby, while young parents, strolling through the city-within after dinner in the city-without, hustled around, chasing down



screaming children, in a state of mind that was far from holy. It was a sacred place and a mundane one, which would be a paradox, except that Hinduism is so vast, it doesn't recognize paradoxes. In Ramanujan's time, and even now, there was no boundary between the spiritual and the material. The infinite dwelled in the temple and flowed out into the city. You received visions of the Infinite God; you saw your auntie in the street.

I followed the music. It led me to the shrine at the heart of the temple, a stone chariot drawn by elephants. A sound of ringing bells and droning voices began to grow. A loose band of worshipers turned a corner and approached. One of them gestured toward a staircase that led into another interior space. I climbed the stairs and, inside the sub-temple, came face-to-face with an old man who touched my forehead with a silver bowl and pushed a bouquet of flowers into my hands.

I sat on the stone floor and closed my eyes. The antimalarial delirium was fading again, leaving behind a drowsy calm. Phosphenes pulsed on the insides of my eyelids.

We're told that Ramanujan was here at the temple almost as much as he was at home, doing mathematics and holding forth on his own private religion, an idiosyncrasy of Vaishnavism, which is itself an idiosyncrasy of the vast literature and culture that has come to be called Hinduism. He preached to the adults. He interpreted dreams. He recited Hindu scriptures, whose cosmologies contained enormous, unchristian numbers: no six thousand years of creation, but a history unfolding in cycles of time numbering in the millions and billions of years. No twelve tribes of Israel, but heroes like Rama, who commanded armies of 100,001,000,010,000,000,100,010,000,010,001,000,001,000,100,000,100,010,000,000,005 men. No One God above the angels and humanity, but Vishnu the sustainer, who embodied everything, including its opposite, including nothing. He was physically present in every atom of creation, yet entirely outside it. His body was the universe, yet the universe could not contain him. He was an immaterial

being who resided in the Milky Way. He was a turtle, a fish, a boar, a dwarf, and the half-lion, half-man Narasimha.

Eight hundred years ago, the South Indian mathematician Bhaskaracharya wrote that dividing by zero yielded a number "as infinite as the God Vishnu," a mathematical sacrilege that would have sent poor Cantor back to the laughing academy. Here in the temple, Ramanujan had spoken of something similar. The act of multiplying zero by infinity, he said when he was young, yielded all numbers simultaneously—the body of Ishvara, or God in its totality. Each number was a single act of creation among the infinitude that created and sustained the universe from moment to moment. Whenever there is injustice, says the literature, Vishnu enters the world as Krishna, Rama, Balarama, Parashurama, Narasimha. His forms are innumerable; they exhaust numbers. He was not infinite in size, like the indivisible YHWH of Cantor's religion, but of infinite forms. His infinity signaled not madness but life and its continuous, momentary re-creation.

"My Lord, you easily assume any form you desire," his worshipers chanted, "Your body includes all the worlds."

I fell asleep leaning against the temple wall. I dreamed I was back on the train, traveling along the mock-theta function as it gathered speed in the far reaches of the number line. Somewhere else in time, Ramanujan was dying. Dick Askey sat across from me. His soft eyes were turned toward the night. The yellow lights of empty platforms strobed past.

Askey gestured outside.

"They are the singularities," he said, the points where the mock-theta function shot off into infinity.

The train picked up speed, pressing me against the cabin wall. Straining against inertia, I turned to the window. The singularities streamed by as a river of light.

The train stopped.

"This is the nth root of unity. We are near Ramanujan's home."

I opened my eyes.

In the heart of the temple are the

arcāvatāra, special avatars of the Infinite God made of stone and metal. For festivals and ceremonies, worshipers hoist one of them, the utsava murti, and carry it through the temple grounds. The murti is fully God. It becomes the infinite in its totality.

Cantor had said that we must understand mathematical infinity the same way we understand the infinity of YHWH. But YHWH's qualities could not be known. "You cannot see my face," the Almighty told Moses on Mount Sinai, "No one may see me and live." The paradox ruined Cantor's mind. The infinite was an alias for death.

But the infinity that Ramanujan knew was just a stone. His friends carried it past him as he sat here, his back against the wall and a slate across his lap. Ramanujan could see the infinite with his eyes open.

What is the idol trying to tell me?

That to watch the Infinite God approach was not a catastrophic death trip but a drawing near to a place of comfort. That even as he approached the infinite, Ramanujan found a wormhole through, and beyond. Even on his deathbed, mathematics was an act of worship. Worship of a single infinity, in infinite forms, all of them knowable. ♪

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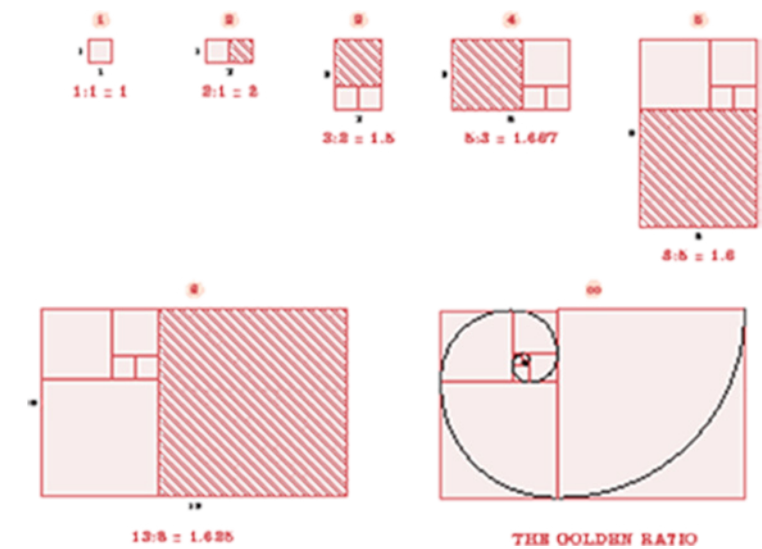
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<sup>1</sup> The golden ratio is also known as phi ( $\phi$ ), and is equal to 1.618034... Phi possesses a host of surprising qualities, but it can be generated simply, by drawing a series of squares.

## BUILDING PHI

$\phi = 1.61803398874989484820458634365638117720...$

The irrational number phi ( $\phi$ ), which has a host of strange properties, has long been an object of fascination for number theorists. Visual artists since the time of the ancient Greeks have found its graphical representation so pleasing that it has become known as the Golden Ratio. The digits of phi go on forever, and can be generated by mathematical expressions as intricate as you like. A classical expression uses only the number 1 in an eternally descending continued fraction. But you can also generate  $\phi$  simply, by drawing a series of squares, then measuring the resulting rectangles and comparing the lengths of their sides. As you draw more squares, the ratio draws closer to  $\phi$ , circling it in a tightening spiral: 1, 2, 1.5, 1.667, 1.6, 1.625... until, at the  $\infty$ th rectangle, you get  $\phi$  exactly.



<sup>2</sup> A similar shift occurred in the English departments of the 1990s. One no longer roamed the inside of a poem to discover where its lines of influence lay, but studied the lingo-heavy theory that exposed the poor poet's limitations.



# DREAMING IN EARLY ADVAITA VEDĀNTA:

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF ŚAṆKARACARYA

NAOMI WORTH

### INTRODUCTION

Q: What is the cause of the urge to roam about?  
A: There is no cause. You merely dream that you roam about. In a few years your stay in India will appear as a dream to you. You will dream some other dream at that time. Do realize that it is not you who moves from dream to dream, but the dreams flow before you and you are the immutable witness. No happening affects your real being—that is the absolute truth.<sup>1</sup>  
Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

ŚAṆKARACARYA WAS AN EIGHTH CENTURY Indian philosopher who famously took on two powerful interlocutors of his time, the Mīmāṃsakas and the Buddhists, revolutionizing the popular theory and practice of religion in India so effectively that he is still widely revered today, and the philosophy and practice he introduced mostly extant. Philosophically, he worked to reinterpret the Vedas, and the meaning of *karma*, so that his system maintained reliance upon the widely accepted authority of the Vedas, and yet changed the prescription for world-view and the subsequent execution of Vedic injunctions. Additionally, during Śaṅkara’s time, Buddhism was

widely practiced in India, so he often debated the Buddhists; his debates were recorded in his own writings, where he directly addressed his opposition to their theories and philosophy.<sup>2</sup> While Śaṅkara is often accused of being a crypto-Buddhist, it may be the case that he was simply influenced by the popularity of Buddhist philosophy which was so prevalent during his life. Even though Śaṅkara shares much with the Buddhists, the fundamental basis of his theory, a monism with Brahman at its center, is diametrically opposed to the emptiness that lies at the heart of Buddhism.

Śaṅkara emphasized four states of being: waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and a supernatural, transcendent state that most closely approximates a human manifestation of union with God (*turiya*). For Śaṅkara, the state of dreaming, which may seem the least significant from the standpoint of “reality,” is critical. It is a state which later came to take on even greater significance in the “Six Yogas of Naropa,” a seminal practice in the transmission of yoga from India to Tibet. However, dreaming is not developed into a practice in Śaṅkara’s system, but is rather embedded into a system of four psychological “states of being” that humans experience. The first reference to these four states of

being is found in the Upaniṣads dating from around 700 BCE.<sup>3</sup>

Of these four states, dreaming is the quintessential metaphor of Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta. An in-depth look at the way he talks about dreaming provides insight into the realities of perception itself. Specifically, the fundamental premise of Advaita Vedānta is that everything is an illusion; since most people agree with the presupposition that dreams are illusions of the mind, it is an apt starting point from which to describe Śaṅkara’s views of reality, which expand the dream metaphor beyond the dreaming state and apply it to waking life.

### BONDAGE AND TRANSMIGRATION

BONDAGE IS THE FUNDAMENTAL problem that Śaṅkara, and almost all Indian philosophers, set out to solve. To what are we bound? Transmigratory existence (*saṃsāra*), the self-perpetuating and continual cycle of suffering, which carries on from life to life in a stream of different situations and embodied forms that accompany an individual or ātman, all colored by karmic tendencies. Karmic tendencies are quite literally the spice of life, the ink in the printer, the projector of the movie, existing as residual impressions of past actions whose function is to fill in the colors, shapes and sensations of

life.<sup>4</sup> Ignorance is the fundamental condition that causes these karmas to be accrued in the mind of a person.

The distinction between the body and mind itself is what allows for transmigration to occur, and a new physical form to become associated with a person. Bodies are cast aside and new ones taken up while the mind continues in an unbroken stream.<sup>5</sup> If we were to take an inventory of an individual’s true possessions at the time of death, they would be:

- A gross body made up of material substances;
- Sense organs and their corresponding actions, such as speech, movement, thinking, grasping, sex, and excretion;<sup>6</sup>
- An intellectual sense organ (*manas*);
- A sense of ego that makes one feel individual and unique,<sup>7</sup> and also makes distinctions among objects of attention<sup>8</sup> (*ahaṅkāra*);
- An internal organ (*buddhi* or *antaḥkaraṇa*) whose function is to point the attention faculty towards an object with intention and the subsequent activities associated with these intentions;
- Traces of karma, or impressions from past actions, accumulated from both the current and past lives, whose effects have yet to be realized.

In their fruition, karmic traces effect the internal organ (*buddhi*) and force it to long for certain experiences and results; people are constantly subject to the effects of their past actions, which force them into a state of desire. In the Indian system, desire pertains to both liking and disliking, as disliking is simply the desire to get away from an object. Karmas in their more ripened form are termed *vāsanās*, and it is the *vāsanās* that create the link between one life and the next.

In contrast to these fluctuating,

dependent, and usually afflicted states, is the ātman, the essence of the individual that is permanent and most closely related to the concept of a soul. The ātman’s role in the manifestation of life is as an unchanging observer of this process, and also as a sort of satellite of Brahman, the everlasting and radiant God.

At the time of death there is a process in which the senses sequentially reduce into one another, starting with the speech and intellect, and are absorbed into the mental organ (*manas*), which is in turn absorbed into energy (*prāṇa*), then finally into the individual self (*jiva*), a collection of both awareness and karmic residues, including those that have already ripened into their manifest state as inclinations (*vāsanās*). The *jiva* then combines with the subtle elements (*tanmātras*), five different kinds of minute particles that are the seeds for the gross manifestations of the five gross elements, i.e. earth, water, air, fire, and ether. The *tanmātras*, or subtle elements, comprise the subtle body that will receive much attention both in Śaṅkara’s system of practice, as well as in later examples of spiritual practices that aim to manipulate the subtle energies of the body.

In the process of death within the perpetuation of transmigratory existence (*saṃsāra*), even as the organs cease functioning, the body remains in the location where the *jiva* resides. After the dissolution of the senses, the *jiva* takes up temporary residence at the center of the heart. By some unknown process, some particular karma ripens into a *vāsanā*, or tendency, which forces the *jiva* to take a particular direction of exit from the body via one of the subtle channels; the direction taken determines the destiny and quality of the rebirth taken.

That moment when the *jiva* has been directed by the ripening of karma to send energy into a particular subtle energetic pathway is the real moment of death, because the *jiva* has left the region of the heart and goes out of the body. It enters an in-between state, taking what are referred to as either the Northern or Southern path; which path one takes is dictated by one’s relationship with God and how one fulfilled his or her ritual obligations. Those who did not take up ritual are immediately reborn as animals, insects or plants.

This in-between state has been likened to a dream because there is a certain consciousness present.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in Śaṅkara’s only non-commentarial monograph, the *Upadeśasāhasrī* (*A Thousand Teachings*), which might be a source of his unqualified philosophical position by nature of its being an independent work, he posits that transmigratory existence (*saṃsāra*) can be described either via the cycle in which one takes up and then casts aside different bodies with their associated functions, *or* via the cycle of dreaming and waking, qualified by agency and experience. This type of transmigratory existence is experienced at every moment of life, and is used to incite the follower to pursue liberation, or *mokṣa*.

To Śaṅkara, the cycle of waking and dreaming is important because actions (*karma*) ripen both in waking and dreaming states. The embodied system is summarized by Śaṅkara as follows:

*Karmas (as the results of actions, good or bad, in the past existence) produce association with a body. When there is association with a body, pleasant and unpleasant things are inevitable. From these result passion and aversion (and) from them actions (kriyā). (Upadeśasāhasrī I, 1.3)*

<sup>1</sup> Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, *I Am That* (Mumbai: Sundaram Art Printing Press, 1973), 318.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from an interview with M.A. Narasimhan in Mysore, India, on December 29, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Doniger, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Potter, *The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings: The Upadeśasāhasrī of Śaṅkara* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 69.

<sup>6</sup> This list is particular to the Advaita system; other philosophical schools enumerate and include different aspects of action in this list as sense functions.

<sup>7</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> This addition was taken from an interview with Sri Narasimhan, M.A., an Indian philosopher/philologist, in the city of Mysore, Karnataka, in December 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 24-5.



(From actions) merit (dharma) and demerit (adharma) result and from merit and demerit there results an ignorant man's association with a body in the same manner again. Thus this transmigratory existence rolls onward powerfully forever, like a wheel. (Upadeśasāhasrī I, 1.4)<sup>10</sup>

Returning to the consideration of the in-between state, if one is fortunate enough to take the Northern or Southern path, one is guided by deities through the process of transmigration on to the next life. Those who, due to bad karma, take a lower rebirth into the realm of Yama, the god of death, are immediately reborn as an animal, a plant, or even a piece of grain—their subtle bodies being encapsulated in their new “body,” experiencing the pains of their existence as if they are in a dream. Eventually they become food for humans, and, once ingested, combine with the blood or semen of the person who is eating, and, along normal lines of reproduction, become born. This may be the source of the importance of food in Indian culture, because the karma of purer beings will end up in purer foodstuffs, so eating pure foods is advantageous for having children with superior karma.

The food eaten by the mother during gestation becomes the body of the new person, colored by their own karmic tendencies (vāsanās), and also assuming a genetic inheritance from the parents, which is why children look like their parents.

Thus the child is born. The description of karma gets elaborated on at this point, for the child is endowed with three different kinds of karmas. One type dictates the duration of life barring accidental death, while the others dictate the types of experiences to be undergone.<sup>11</sup>

An alternative presentation of transmigratory existence, one more reminiscent of Buddhism, is also given by Śāṅkara. In this brief presentation,

karmas are the results of past actions that cause one to be connected with a body. The body is the source of all experiences of pleasure and pain, and from those states, desire and aversion arise. Based on desire and aversion, actions are undertaken, which result in the accumulation of merit and demerit (karma), which then lead back to the start of the cycle again.

#### ĀTMAN AND BRAHMAN

THIS PROCESS OF TRANSMIGRATION provides a glimpse of the various components that make up the individual, as well as the process of reincarnation from life to life. It is now essential to embed the view of the self within the duo of ātman and Brahman, which are ontologically the only real, non-illusory aspects of Śāṅkara's system. Ignorance (*āvidyā*) and the play of illusion (*māyā*) are the cause for the creation of the un-real world that is based on ātman/ Brahman.

There could not possibly be any positive language that could describe Brahman, for Brahman is only apparent when all obscurations have been removed. Brahman has no name or form and, likewise, does not possess any human qualities. There is a higher and a lower aspect of Brahman, and when one has knowledge in the form of a direct perception of higher Brahman (*nirguṇa*, without qualities), that itself is liberation (mokṣa).

Brahman is the singular and ultimate cause of the universe, and is also ātman, equal to the individual self or soul, which acts as the passive perceiver of all the states that are subsequently caused after ignorance. As the cause of the universe, Brahman is responsible for the trinity of creation, subsistence, and destruction, the three main functions that later are personified as the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Śiva. This higher Brahman is different from the material world.

Brahman also has a lower form with positive qualities (*saguṇa*), which is God, and it is possible to know this God even through ignorant states (*āvidyā*).<sup>12</sup> Lower Brahman has the three qualities of Sat, Cit and Ānanda, respectively translated as Being, Consciousness, and Bliss.<sup>13</sup> Sat, or being, is passive, non-composite, not subject to origination or destruction, and unchanging. Cit, or consciousness, is a much more informative and dynamic concept, which is the aspect of awareness and witness of all of creation. Cit is the radiant illuminator that shines a light onto all other objects. It has no form unto itself, so it also does not possess an aspect of subjectivity, nor can it become an object of awareness. However, a certain amount of direct access is afforded to Cit, because it is said to be perceivable in the third state of the four psychological states of a person, that of deep sleep. However, the objects that normally appear to the Cit are all the products of ignorance (*āvidyā*).

Ānanda, the third aspect of lower Brahman, is a special type of bliss, which is completely different from the mundane, temporary pleasure known by ordinary people. In a rather surprising assertion, Śāṅkara suggests that even the liberated being does not experience the Bliss of Brahman. However, it still lies at the center of our very being, and later writers suggest that the fleeting experience of pleasure is a taste of this joy that is our very nature.<sup>14</sup>

When Brahman creates the universe, it is essentially a process of self-creation or transformation (*pariṇāma*), because Brahman is both the creator, and is also everything that it creates. Therefore, an important distinction between different Hindu philosophical schools lies in the differences between creator and what is created, because whether creator and creation are different or the same qualifies the system as monist or dualist. In Śāṅkara's system, the creator and created are identical, even though

their appearances are different. Hence, because of the non-difference between all aspects of creator and creation, this system qualifies as monist simply because it ultimately only has one constituent.<sup>15</sup>

While higher Brahman remains untouched, it is lower Brahman, or God (*Īśvara*) that is the source of the diversity of life, precisely because it is conditioned by ignorance. This aspect presents some problems, because, while lower Brahman/God is indeed omniscient and omnipotent, lower Brahman also seems to be the effect of ignorance, which presents some logical inconsistencies. How is it possible for ignorance to be more powerful than that which is omnipotent, and to force it to manifest in a certain way? The only explanation has to be that it is God's will for there to be ignorance, but then the problem arises of why God would create so much suffering in the world. It seems that Śāṅkara did not have all the answers to these questions. Later thinkers within his tradition dealt with them extensively.<sup>16</sup>

Śāṅkara's attempt at a solution to this problem was to claim that all objects exist in relation to the consciousness that apprehends them, which is lower, or saguṇa, Brahman. Saguṇa is translated as “with qualities,” and the qualities attributed to God/Īśvara are the entire universe, which is the body of God. God is therefore infinite, omniscient, and omnipotent in its will, and the changes that occur are orderly in that they are aligned with God's will. The higher Brahman comes into the picture as the witness of everything, and is termed nirguṇa, or “without qualities” because its only role is the knowledge or witnessing of reality. Because God is constantly witnessing reality, the existence of the world does not depend on the perception of individuals for its existence. God is the witness that

validates the continuity and real-ness of objects outside of the perception of any individual, and God is involved with every aspect of creation. If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, it does make a sound, because God is the one who hears it.

Śāṅkara's innovation was to introduce the aspect of nirguṇa Brahman that runs parallel to all the manifest reality, which is the perfect manifestation of saguṇa Brahman that creates, maintains, and destroys. All this is not to say that Śāṅkara's explanation fell short, but much attention was given to this issue by later thinkers in this tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Another issue is that of God's reason to create anything at all. There is no specific reason for being that is addressed by God's creation; he has neither desires to satisfy, nor any interests to fulfill. He merely creates out of a sense of playfulness (*līlā*). He simply cannot help himself. Even though God is presented in such an impersonal and unmotivated fashion, he still conjures up a great deal of devotion from Śāṅkara and his followers.

#### IGNORANCE AND ILLUSION

IT IS NOT CLEAR WHERE THE FIRST appearances of ignorance (*āvidyā*) and illusion (*māyā*) are found, nor the equating of the two concepts that Śāṅkara concretized in his writings, although some have pointed to rather infrequent references in the Ṛg Veda or some of the older Upaniṣads.<sup>18</sup> Gauḍapada, Śāṅkara's guru's guru, makes sixteen references to the two separate concepts, but does not associate them in the way Śāṅkara did.<sup>19</sup>

Māyā/illusion is the basis of error inherent to all human perception and judgment. That illusion is also the substance out of which Brahman creates the world. The fact that māyā is the creative power of Brahman means

that the word “illusion” may fall short as a translation for the creative power of God. Māyā itself, in actuality, is an aspect of the Lord/Īśvara in the same way that heat is an aspect of fire. The power of māyā is to veil reality, just as a small cloud can veil the rays of the sun, which would otherwise cover great expanses of the earth with its rays. The cloud itself is only visible, however, because of the power of the rays of the sun itself. In the same way, māyā gives rise to *avidyā*, ignorance.<sup>20</sup>

In order to explain how ignorance and illusion manifest of out Brahman, Śāṅkara introduced a new concept into Hindu philosophy that he borrowed from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* called “Unevolved Name and Form” (*avyākṛte nāmarūpe*). It refers to a primary material that is the source of the evolution of the world, essentially acting as a seed for manifold existence. This concept seems to have been designed to take the place of the Sāṃkhya system's *prakṛti*, which provides an easy, although dualist, solution for the problem of a diverse world and an unchanging basis (*puruṣa*). For the Sāṃkhyas, the diversity of the world all evolves directly out of one of the two components of that dualistic system, namely from prakṛti. Śāṅkara tried to appropriate the dualist explanation, which makes a lot of sense to people, but to retrofit it into his monist presentation by including *diversity as an aspect of Brahman*. In order to do so, he organized the physical elements into a progressive system of manifestation and evolution—air evolving from ether; then fire; then water; and then finally earth. From earth's combination with the other elements, all material things are produced, such as grains and plants. When those things are eaten, they create the bodies of men and women, who come together and make new people through reproduction. This is an important key to Śāṅkara's system,

<sup>10</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 24-5.

<sup>11</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 74.

<sup>13</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 75-6.

<sup>15</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 76-8.

<sup>17</sup> V. Keshava Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1976), 50-3.

<sup>18</sup> For more on this see Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 78.

<sup>19</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 78-80.

<sup>20</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya*



because it explains how unevolved name and form develops into evolved name and form, and goes on to comprise materiality and experience. In a reversal of that process, there is always the possibility of reducing objects back to name and form: everything is merely name and form. In that way, things are not real. The illusion of name and form is what people see, and it is a manifestation of Brahman. None of the manifestation is real in an ultimate sense, although it is relatively real from a common sense perspective.

Here Śaṅkara came dangerously close to approximating a dualist Sāṃkhya view of reality, nearly abandoning his main assertion, that of monism—everything is Brahman. In doing so, he also contradicted some of the Vedas that claim that material elements cannot possibly evolve directly from higher Brahman, which itself is Pure Consciousness and is not capable of creation. In explaining the unity of Brahman and Unevolved Name and Form, Śaṅkara used the analogy of clear water and dirty foam floating upon the clear water. The foam could not possibly exist without the water, its source; so while the foam is not identical with the water, neither is it completely different from it, since it cannot possibly exist without the water. We all know that dirty foam is different from pure water. Water is clear and pure like ātman, while foam corresponds to name and form.

Since God is the one with the power to create illusion in the Advaita philosophy, the accusation is made that ignorance belongs to God and not to individuals, which is a point of contention in Śaṅkara’s system. However, Śaṅkara retorts that this does not mean that Brahman is ignorant, because ignorance (āvidyā) is unreal, and has no effect on Brahman. God gets all the credit for the creation of the world, and none is given to the individual self, which is a defining feature of Advaita. Individuals are responsible for their own misconstrual of reality. The error of humans is in thinking that the world

is real and not an illusion of God’s making. The illusion exists independent of our thoughts, and will not go away because of any action undertaken by an individual. However, it is not a figment of our imagination: it exists as God’s play.<sup>21</sup> God is unaffected by his own creation.

#### LIBERATION

IT WOULD BE ESSENTIALLY USELESS to point out the problem of transmigratory existence without proposing a functional solution, and like most Indian philosophical systems, mokṣa, or liberation, is the goal here. What constitutes liberation to the Advaitin? “Being, knowing, and experiencing one’s true Self.”<sup>22</sup> When one is no longer forced to experience birth, aging, death, and rebirth, and experiences one’s own true Self, then liberation has been achieved. The experience of the true Self is essentially the key to the majority of teachings on Advaita Vedānta.

As we have already seen, the process of transmigration is caused by our ignorance (avidyā), but that ignorance is simply obscuring the true Self which is already there, fully developed, radiant and perfect. Therefore, liberation does not require any kind of positive transformation or development, but rather it must be revealed. In that vein, liberation has no beginning or end, because it has always been there. It exists nowhere else but right here, so there is neither heaven nor hell to go to.

Because liberation cannot be achieved through action, there is also no possibility for falling from grace down into hells because of negative actions that take place. Because of this, Śaṅkara has been accused of being amoral because there is no punishment system in place for bad deeds. In actuality, Śaṅkara includes moral injunctions throughout his writings for those at the earlier stages of spiritual development. Instead of being bound to perform particular actions—which is the crux

of pre-Advaita Vedantic thought, especially of the teachings of Pūrva Mīmāṃsa—according to Śaṅkara’s methods, to achieve liberation one must abandon action altogether, for both pure and impure deeds result in bondage. However, the *Bhagavad Gītā* warns against not taking any action at all, which would mean not performing one’s duties, and assures us that that too is an action, the action of failing to fulfill one’s dharma.

Śaṅkara takes avidyā as his opponent. As long as ignorance is operating, desire, and the activation of mental impressions, ripen into inclinations (vāsanās), which are acted upon, thereby planting new karmic seeds that provide fuel for the cycle of transmigration. Avidyā cannot be destroyed by any action whatsoever. It is destroyed by the perfection of its opposite, knowledge (*vidyā*). To Śaṅkara, knowledge itself is not an act at all, and therefore its possession does not incur the accumulation of karma. In fact, we already have it, and we simply need to call our attention to it by creating the appropriate circumstances.

Getting to the state of liberation is like what happens to the space in a pot when the pot breaks, which is in reality nothing at all. When a pot breaks, nothing happens to the space inside of it; in the same way, upon liberation, the mokṣa that was already our core remains the same. Gauḍapada even went so far as to say that there is no liberation at all.

When ignorance is removed, actions (*karma*) cannot become activated. They are not able to fulfill their potential, and, like a burnt seed, are no longer able to sprout. Furthermore, the actions that still must be undertaken in the lifetime of a person no longer subject to avidyā—one who possesses perfect knowledge—do not leave behind any karmic residues.

If a person were to take up some action as an antidote, it would be as useless as the checkout clerk at Whole Foods saying, “I am the owner of this grocery chain.” Just to say, “I am Brahman” is equally useless, because it will get you

nowhere. One is only the owner of the store when they possess all the qualities of ownership, such as the title, bank account, and knowledge of how to run the store. You can work to get those qualities, but there is no injunction that can be done that will coerce them into one’s possession. The qualities will appear when they do. Īśvara is the mediator between the unconditioned Brahman and the conditioned jiva that functions until the conditioning has been removed.

Some action is required in the process of removing the obscurations to Brahman and achieving liberation, because the state of ignorance has to be comprehended in order to transcend it. Therefore, adherents must contemplate unreality in juxtaposition to the reality of Brahman, and in order to do that, Īśvara itself is the ideal object.<sup>23</sup>

#### ANOTHER LOOK AT THE PROBLEMS OF ADVAITA VEDĀNTA

WE HAVE TO SOLVE YET ANOTHER big problem: how does diversity arise from a single entity (nirguṇa Brahman), and how do individuals (jiva) arise from the one Self (ātman)? Furthermore, how does the appearance of the world relate to God, and how do our personal experiences relate to God? Later Advaita authors contributed much to these subjects, but Śaṅkara did as well, again mostly through the use of analogy.

To address how the self (jiva) constructs objects through its own illusion, the metaphor of a rope and a snake is used. If, at dusk, one happens upon a snake, and then realizes that it is not a snake, but actually a rope, the mechanism by which the snake is imputed onto the common shape is the *memory*. The mind superimposes an available memory onto an unknown entity. The rope represents the positive quality of Brahman that remains upon realization that the snake does not exist and was an illusion. Another way of

seeing the rope/snake duo is that the snake is simply an aspect of the rope.

The rope/snake analogy is also applied to the process of transmigration. Higher Brahman cannot transmigrate because it does not change; however, the individual self also cannot transmigrate because it is not real. Therefore, in the same way that the snake is not real, transmigration itself is also not real.

Another prominent metaphor that demonstrates certain philosophical points is that of a pot and the space inside, which is used to explain how an individual, non-dual object is able to produce duality without being modified itself. Just as space can be partitioned with the use of a pot without itself being affected, so too can Brahman be divided into individual selves (jiva) without undergoing any real change. Moreover, when the pot is destroyed, the space inside it effortlessly merges with the surrounding space, just as upon liberation, a jiva simply and effortlessly re-merges with the Divine.<sup>24</sup>

#### DREAMING AS A METAPHOR FOR REALITY IN ADVAITA VEDĀNTA

MANY ANALOGIES ARE USED TO show how the one God-Self develops into the various and diverse forms that constitute reality. However, none of the analogies are without problem, because they all rest on a basis of two things, namely a perceiver and an obstruction to perception, and the duality inherent in the metaphor falls short in a monist system. Since it is fundamental to the Advaita view that all such obstructions to perception are essentially unreal, the metaphors are fundamentally flawed in their ability to clearly relate the system.

There is another analogy that might succeed because it does not depend on a subject-object duality, and it is that of dreaming. Everyone agrees simply by common sense that dreams are not produced from the perception of an external reality, but are rather

productions of the mind of a perceiver. As a metaphor, this suggests that objects experienced in waking life are just as unreal as those in a dream, and that in the same way that we can wake up from a dream, we can also “wake up” to the reality of our situation, which lies in stark contrast to how we normally perceive it.

The four states of the Self—sleeping, dreaming, deep sleep, and turīya—can be distinguished among the mental and physical life of a person as all the possible states of mind in the realm of experience. They are the different ways that the ātman manifests, even though in actuality it is only one singular entity. When the filter of ignorance is applied, this pattern of distortion occurs, just as a translucent gem appears differently when certain colors are placed behind it.

Until now we have mostly concerned ourselves with the first state, the waking state, which is comprised of the mental and psychological experiences undergone on a day-to-day basis. The ego is confined to the waking state, and the jiva only comes into contact with phenomena on this level of consciousness. When the ātman is in the waking state the five sense organs are active, the internal sense organs are functional, and there is consciousness of external objects.<sup>25</sup>

In the dream state only the internal organs function, so consciousness is aware of internal objects, i.e. the contents of dreams. In actuality, for Śaṅkara, the dreaming objects of awareness are vāsanās, or ripened karmic tendencies that are the byproducts of grasping and attachment in the waking state, which then get stored in the memory. In dreams, the ātman is freed from the limitations of both embodiment and perception that encumber it during waking life, and is in a state that is more pure unto itself. Dreams are as real as waking reality upon a finite investigation and regression of what lies beneath. For example, the ultimate analysis of a material object such as

<sup>21</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya*, 53-55.

<sup>24</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 78-85.

<sup>25</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 43-5.



a chair shows that it is made mostly of empty space, and that its actual material substance is more of a lack than anything else. Dreams are just as real as waking reality in that, while their basis of reality is minutely small, so too is that of waking reality. However, one does not dream while awake, and the possibilities for visual imagery differ significantly—one does not typically fly in waking life, for example, while this is a distinct possibility in a dream. Dreams do not have a special status in this system, but are rather another mode of being in reality and illusion, powered by ignorance. Their relative truth is just as relevant as that of waking life. Waking life also lacks utter realness in the same way that dreams do.

The differences between the waking and dreaming states illuminate several aspects of this philosophical system. The fact that self-consciousness is maintained and does not vary from the waking state while a person is dreaming is given as proof that the ātman is the witnessing consciousness of the self, which does not depend on a certain embodied form, but maintains continuity throughout the various experiences of reality. Further, the world of dreams cannot be shared with others in the same way that the realities of waking life are clearly shared among different people, proof that we are not all of one consciousness. If different realities did not exist, then the liberation of the first person would have been the liberation for everyone, which is not the case.<sup>26</sup>

In the third state, deep sleep, no objects are encountered whatsoever, and even the internal organs cease to function. Even though nothing is perceived in the state of deep sleep, the Pure Consciousness of Brahman continues to be present and the jiva merges into it. There is no object of perception, but the fundamental basis of the ātman remains. In this state, the ātman is free from the pain and

suffering experienced in waking and dreaming states. It is a more pure form, but it is not in an ultimately pure state. This state acts as a kind of home base for waking and dreaming to keep coming back to, and is a seed for those two. It is precisely this seed that gets burnt by the attainment of knowledge upon liberation.<sup>27</sup> Śaṅkara explains deep sleep as a state that occurs when the organs are tired, including the internal (sense) organs, and become temporarily absorbed into the breath, so that they cease functioning and no objects are perceived. There is no sense of subjectivity in the state of deep sleep, whereas in the dream state a sense of embodiment occurs.<sup>28</sup> However, a thin veil of māyā remains even in the state of deep sleep, so it is not a state of liberation.

The three previous states are as impermanent as any other material object such as clothes or wealth, and have their basis in ignorance. The fourth state, turiya, transcends all the other states, and is the state of liberation.<sup>29</sup> It cannot be expressed by words because it is Brahman, and it is the same in everyone. It is non-dual in nature, but concealed by ignorance. Śaṅkara puts it like this:

The dream state becomes unreal in the waking state, nor does the waking state exist in dream and sleep; both dream and waking state are absent in the deep sleep state; sleep, too, is absent in waking and in dreams. Because of their mutual contradictions the three states are unreal; but the Self is the Eternal Witness of the three states and is thus beyond them. It is the One which is the nature of pure consciousness.”<sup>30</sup>

#### ŚAṅKARA ON DREAMING

ŚAṅKARA DID NOT USE THE DREAM metaphor to deny the reality of waking life, because, as we have already seen, the reality of waking life is God

itself, or rather can be seen as “the body of God.” However, dreams metaphorically convey the illusion or concealment of the reality of Brahman. Everyone accepts that the objects in dreams are not real. While they are created, sustained, and then go out of existence over a brief period of time, they never seem to be real in the way that waking life does from the perspective of being awake. Accepting their unreality is easy, and yet the reality of waking life does seem real—we do not regularly wake up from waking life and see it as an illusion in our own ordinary experience. However, according to Śaṅkara, objects of both waking life and of dreams originate in the same source, and are equally unreal. Śaṅkara’s own writings on dreaming say the following:

From the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, 3rd Chapter, 2nd Section:

The world of our dreams is not real, it is merely māyā, since things happen in dreams that cannot happen in reality (that is, in the waking world). For example, there isn’t room for dreamt-of chariots in the actual body; the sleeper cannot go to points far away in a single moment; the sleeper’s body cannot remain visible to others on a couch while it is far away experiencing things in quite another place; he dreams it is day when it is night, and it can’t be both at once. Nevertheless these illusory dreams may be prophetic. The waking world—“real” by comparison with the dream world— is still not absolutely real, as we have seen earlier; the dream world is sublated each morning when we awake, whereas the waking world remains until ultimate realization of Brahman’s identity with the Self. As long as the Self is blinded by ignorance it cannot produce for its experience anything real, even though it is ultimately non-different from

God; thus whereas God can create the waking world, which is relatively real, the self bound by ignorance can only produce unreal dream objects, its true powers concealed by ignorance. 111.2.1-6 <sup>31</sup>

The first striking point that Śaṅkara makes about dreaming is that dreams are not real because there is no room for the objects of dreaming within the body of the dreamer. If one dreams of a car, the car could not possibly exist within the confines of the body as it lays in the state of sleeping and dreaming. Nonetheless, the dreams are not totally useless, because they can function as signs or prophesies of some higher truth. Furthermore, just as when we wake up in the morning, the experiences that have been incurred while dreaming integrate into our personhood or being, in the same way when we wake up to our true nature’s equivalence with Brahman, our waking life will appear to us just as unreal as a dream does now.

Śaṅkara also says:

#### From the *Upadeśasāhasrī*, Chapter 14 on Dream and Memory

1. Since the form-and-color of a jar, etc., is seen appearing in dream and memory, it is certainly to be inferred that the intellect has previously been seen in that form.
2. Just as one oneself is not the body which is seen wandering about begging alms in the dreaming state, so is he different from the body which is seen in the waking state, since he is the seer (of the body).
3. Just as molten copper appears in the form of the mold into which it was poured, so it is certainly experienced that the mind, when pervading the external objects such as form-color, appears in their forms.
4. Or, just as light, the illuminator, assumes the forms of what it illuminates, so the intellect is seen to have the forms of its objects, since it is

the illuminator of all the objects. 5. And the intellect in the form of certain objects must have been seen by the dreaming man before also. If not, how could he see these forms in the dreaming state? Again, when a form is being recalled, whence would it come to him?<sup>32</sup>

How are the objects of dreaming projected? Śaṅkara tells us here that it is through the mechanism of memory that forms take their shapes, and again we are reminded that past experiences dictate present ones. Nothing is outside of the system whereby the imprints of past actions take the shape of mental impressions. They are stored in jiva, the individual that is associated with a particular ātman. It is interesting that, even though according to Śaṅkara’s philosophy all of creation is the will of God, the role of the individual seems to fill in the names and forms of reality. The only way to resolve the discrepancy is to posit a lack of free will to the individual, and attribute all individuals’ actions to the will of God.

Persons are in the middle of a chain of cause and effect that makes up the world. The individual is most certainly under the effect of his or her previous actions, but seems to be free to create new events in the future through the choices made in the present moment. This is a widely accepted view of the laws of karma in Indian philosophy, where there is a strong sense of agency in the theory on karma, insofar as the agent decides whether or not to take up an act. However, if the availability of the current choices of actions depends solely on past actions, the logical conclusion would be an *infinite regress of repetitive actions*—always more of the same. Further, in this system, there are infinite previous lives and no first life which is the beginning of the process—life is infinite and beginningless. The only way to get out of the conundrum of being stuck within a repetitive cycle of actions that repeat themselves, according to Advaitin philosophy, is to not take the

world too seriously, to see it as simply an illusion that will become unimportant upon the realization that this is all a dream, realizing that Brahman is the one true ultimate reality.

Śaṅkara’s two main interlocutors—the Mīmāṃsakas and the Buddhists—help demonstrate his philosophy on the issue of agency in conventional, conditioned reality. When Śaṅkara takes on his Vedantic counterparts, the Mīmāṃsakas, he appears to reject karma altogether because he rejects their notion of agent, action, and effect. He does not allow for the dogmatic, marketplace approach where actions buy good results if prescribed by Vedic injunction. On the other hand, when engaging the Buddhists in debate, he must defend a foundational consciousness that acts as a storehouse of karma, which is the origin of the chain of actions and results.

Śaṅkara places himself in the middle between these two. When discussing ultimate reality, he says that Brahman is devoid of an agent with a will because he must uphold the non-dual nature of Brahman. However, conventional reality approximates the dependent origination of Buddhism, which is mildly deterministic due to the power of past actions to create present reality, combined with the free will to make decisions within the confines of what is presented.<sup>33</sup>

#### WAS ŚAṅKARA A CRYPTO-BUDDHIST?

ŚAṅKARA HAS BEEN ACCUSED OF BEING a crypto-Buddhist even though he explicitly disagreed with the Buddhists in many places in his writing and philosophy. He did not accept the Buddhist philosophical view that there is no real self, but rather only a succession of mental states. To Śaṅkara, the commonplace reality of the world as we see it is as real as possible given the circumstances. Objects are real, and even unreal objects such as the rope mistaken to be a snake has a reality of its own. To Śaṅkara, commonplace reality is only unreal compared to what is real.

<sup>26</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya*, 76-77.

<sup>27</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 43-5.

<sup>28</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 43-5.

<sup>30</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya*, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya*, 81.

<sup>32</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 136.

Therefore, when he states that Brahman is the sole reality, he is implying a relative truth to the phenomenal world.<sup>34</sup>

At first glance, Śaṅkara's system appears to have much in common with Buddhism, including the dependent nature of relative truth, the goal of liberation (mokṣa) from the beginningless cycle of transmigratory existence (saṃsara), the system of karma, what happens at death, and finally, the cause for all of creation, i.e. ignorance (avidyā). However, the shared components are only the same upon a superficial glance. First of all, the early Buddhist view is restricted mostly to the waking state, and gives much less significance to the state of dreaming. Both Advaita Vedānta and the Buddhists say that the world is an illusion and completely unreal. However, Śaṅkara posits a caveat where the illusion only extends to being bound up in transmigratory existence conditioned by the state of ignorance.

For Buddhism, ignorance is also the cause of all the diverse appearances of existence. However, Śaṅkara has something which is ultimately real, and that is Brahman. When looked at from the ultimate point of view, the reality of Śaṅkara's system is very real, and the Buddhists simply do not have a reality to rely on—their system ultimately rests on a lack.

For the Advaitins, life is not a collection of concepts. For example, ideas of dogs do not bark, real dogs do. While Buddhism gives no fixed reality to objects, they do allow for a certain amount of realness as well in the system of dependent origination, or relative truth. Therefore, for both systems, all objects in relative truth are as real as possible considering the circumstances.

Regarding consciousness, the early Indian Buddhism that Śaṅkara likely knew said that consciousness is a stream of momentary concepts that arise and

disappear moment-by-moment, and that nothing persists between any two occasions. For the Advaitins, even though consciousness is an illusion, at its heart lies the manifestation of the pure consciousness of Brahman. This pure source of consciousness is something that does not exist in Buddhism. Memory is what ties the past and the present together, and the Advaitins dispute Buddhist philosophy by saying that a lack of a witness consciousness makes their system of karma lack a proper foundation upon which to function.

Furthermore, while in Buddhism the ego is something that should just be annihilated, something that exists simply as a byproduct of delusion and ignorance, Śaṅkara considers it to be the seed of the witness consciousness that represents the pure consciousness of Brahman.

For the Buddhists, ignorance is caused by the belief in an essential nature to things, and this results in desire and aversion and incites the process of karma and rebirth. Śaṅkara agrees that ignorance is the cause of all suffering, but he says that another consequence of ignorance is that it causes us to miss out on the reality of Brahman which pervades everything, a point that, according to Śaṅkara, is lost on even the Buddha himself.

Finally, the Buddhists posit that upon the removal of ignorance, desire and aversion are uprooted, suffering ends, and nirvana is reached, even though there is no one there to “be” in nirvana. For Śaṅkara, the removal of ignorance (avidyā) does not lead to nirvana, but rather to vidyā, or pure knowing of the truth of the Self/Brahman. At the second state for both systems, truth and reality become one and the same. Vidyā however reveals that the Self actually is Brahman, the highest reality.<sup>35</sup>

## ŚAṅKARA IN PRACTICE

ON THE BASIS OF THE FOUR STATES of being, embedded within the surrounding philosophy of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, it is clear that while there are superficial similarities with Buddhism, the Advaita system is truly unique unto itself. That being said, the fact that Śaṅkara brought dreaming to the forefront of an Indian philosophical system may have been enough to plant the seed for the use of dreaming as a tool in the manipulation of karma, as the Tibetans later did. The elements of ignorance, transmigratory existence, karma, and so forth, in conjunction with an importance of dreaming, all set the stage for the appropriation of the dreaming state in contemplative practice in later spiritual practices.

We spend a third of our life sleeping, and no matter what we do during the day, we always end in the same way. Śaṅkara did not place a great emphasis on the manipulation of action into dharmic and adharmic deeds, e.g. virtuous or non-virtuous actions, in order to manipulate the ripening of their results. His system has always remained somewhat out of reach of the common man because it seems difficult to practice. The attainment of vidyā through a simple act of knowing the true reality of Brahman seems almost unattainable, so that it is easy to see why the Tibetans, and also later interpreters of the Vedas, went on to try to control their manifest reality through action, as the Mīmāṃsakas had previously done with their use of ritual injunctions.

Śaṅkara truly did lie in the middle between his interlocutors—Mīmāṃsakas and Buddhists. He rejected action where they both took it up, but in different ways. The Mīmāṃsakas used action, or karma, to force the Gods to give them what they wanted, while the Buddhists used action

to manipulate the results of their deeds with hopes of similar results. Śaṅkara views transcended the manipulation of circumstances through action. His system, which prescribes knowledge and non-action as the antidote to suffering, is accessible for those who may be talented and already tapped into higher knowledge to some extent, but beginners and the common man have found it somewhat difficult to practice.

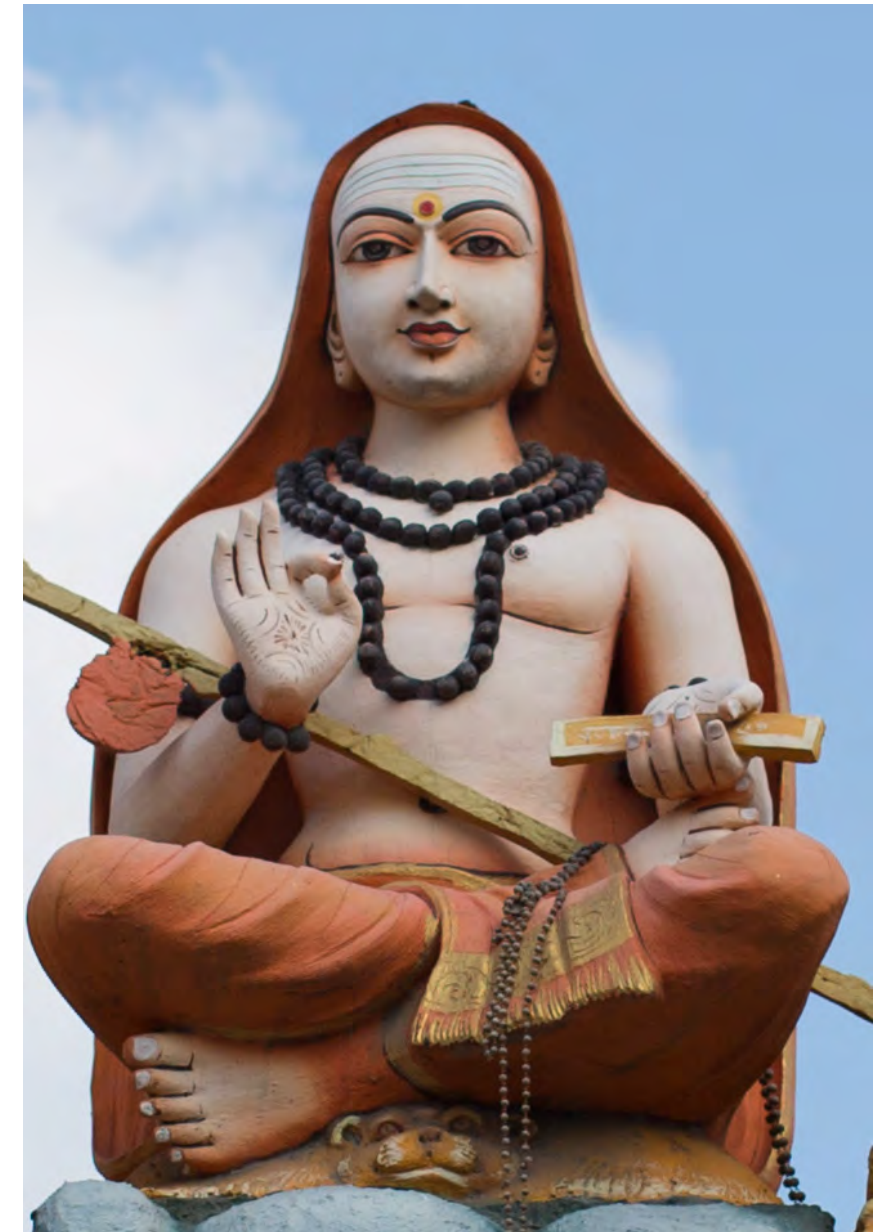
When we dream, an entire world manifests and we have an experience. During the dream, we identify ourselves with the subject, and there are other beings in our dreams, as well as a material world, which all seem real. Upon waking we realize that the dream was not real, that it was merely a projection of our own mind. The radiance of Brahman at the center of Śaṅkara's philosophy may be the seed for tantric deity yoga practices that associate the individual self (jiva) with the greater Self (ātman), so that one can ultimately see that he or she is God (Brahman). ❧

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Adi Guru Śaṅkaracarya  
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<sup>33</sup> Sthaneshwar Timalsina, “Self, Causation and Agency in the Advaita of Sankara,” in *Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Indian Philosophy*, ed. Matthew Dasti and Edwin Bryant, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 186-88.

<sup>34</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya*, 50.

<sup>35</sup> K.A. Krishnaswamy Iyer, *Collected Works of K.A. Krishnaswamy Iyer* (Holenarsipur: The Adhyantama Prakasha Press, 1969), 169-176.



## SELECTIONS FROM

# IN SEARCH OF IMMORTALITY

## AN INTRODUCTION TO INDIC WORLD-VIEWS

BY JAIDEV DASGUPTA

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WHERE DID THE WORLD COME from?, Who created it?, What happens to a person after death?

Thoughts on such questions are found in the Rig Veda, the oldest extant Indo-European text, dating back to circa 1500 BCE. It provides insights into the world-view of the Aryans who migrated and settled in India approximately 4,000 years ago. Many of the concepts and ideas that comprise present-day Indian world-views descend from the Vedas and the Upanishads.

However, couched in mythological and religious forms, these concepts are prone to give a lopsided impression that Indian philosophy is theistic in nature. But teasing them out from such literature leads to a loss of the context within which they developed and evolved over time. *In Search of Immortality* seeks to recontextualize Indian world-views by tracing them from their origin in the Rig Vedic hymns to their evolution into various orthodox and heterodox philosophical systems, and illuminates the cluster of quintessential ideas that have molded the Indian psyche over several millennia.

THE INTRINSIC CURIOSITY OF HUMANS to know about the world and build a world-view could be instinctive. There may be a knowledge instinct built into human nature, which is driven by the imperative to survive. It is well known that the pressure to survive has been working not only on humans but also on their ancestral animals for millions of years. With this evolutionary past, it is not hard to assume that this pressure structured and programmed the human mind to view the world in a self-oriented manner; and created a pre-disposition for understanding the world in a fashion that would improve human survival...

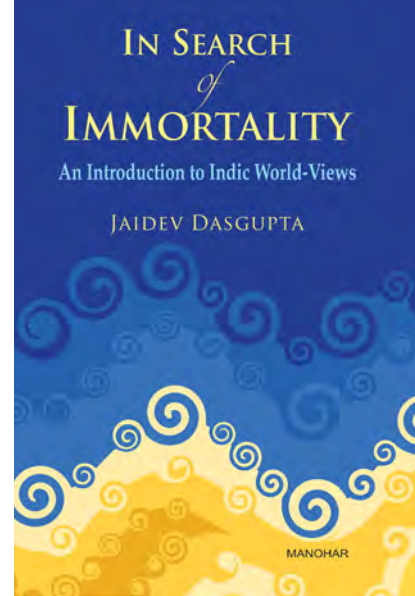
Man sees the world as some-thing other than himself, and is instinctively driven to learn more about it, organize, control, and master it as much as possible. Thus the most basic drives for food, sex, shelter, and safety force humans to organize experiences in a way to make some sense of themselves and their world, learn important lessons, and derive rules for living a purposeful life.

As the regularities and patterns in nature become increasingly obvious, the world becomes more comprehensible and predictable, letting people think in a more systematic and logical manner. Thus mythical thinking is only an early phase in the development of a world picture. As the picture becomes more mature with time, it reaches a stage when it allows philosophical and critical thinking and scientific probing of ideas that were held dearly, and paves the way for either supporting or refuting them, with a possibility of altering the world-view.

### WHERE DID THE WORLD COME FROM?

THERE ARE VARIED SPECULATIONS IN the Rig Veda on how the world was possibly created. This is because the Veda is a collection of visions and thoughts of many sages and seers. Perhaps each had his own opinion. According to one such opinion, multiple gods created the world by sacrificing the Primal Being called Purusha, the original Man and the divinity, with a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, and a thousand feet. This story assumes the pre-existence of an immortal Primal Being as well as gods who sacrificed him to create the world. There are also hymns that present individual gods as the creators of this world.

If the universe comes in and out of this imperishable ground, then what is the



difference between the two? In answer to this, the Maitri Upanishad says that the Brahman has two forms—the formed and the formless, i.e. the manifested and the un-manifested. The world manifests out of the un-manifested Brahman. The latter is real, while the former is unreal. This naturally begs the question: Why is the un-manifested real, whereas the manifested world that can be seen, touched, smelled, felt, and experienced is unreal? The reason is that ‘the real’ is defined as that which lasts forever, is permanent and unchanging. The manifested world, on the other hand, is constantly changing, elusive, and impermanent. So the world is unreal, but the everlasting Brahman is real. Therefore, what is real exists, but what exists may not be real!

In the Shakta philosophy, Devi or Shakti creates, preserves, and destroys this universe. The Shakti myth is considered to have a pre-Vedic origin in the cult of Mother Goddess—apparently the primitive form of Tantrism—in which people performed fertility rites and worshipped linga and yoni (male and female organs) that represent Shiva and Devi. Based on archaeological findings of terracotta figurines of Mother Goddess and carved specimens of linga and yoni, the cult is believed to be as old as the Harappan culture of the Indus Valley or may be even older. It has been argued that the beliefs and practices of this pre-Vedic cult, which suggests a female-dominated society, were later on absorbed in the Vedic texts that had their origins in a patriarchal system.

The idea of creating opposite sexes by splitting the original Person in the Rig Veda lasted through the Upanishads and the Puranas. The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad says that the Self shed half of itself to produce a female. The androgynous God Shiva is another example with both male and female principles in one. And, likewise, Vishnu has his own feminine aspect. Thus the perpetuation of creation through the union of opposite polarities depends upon the original sacrifice or division of the first Being.

Although the Nasadiya Sukta clearly questions the role of gods in creation, it is quite tempting to assume that the Indic world-view believes in the theistic creation of the world. The strongest arguments against the idea of creation by God come from the Vedic school of Purva Mimamsa...The heterodox sects of Jains and Buddhists also refuted the idea of divine creation.

### HOW DOES IT WORK?

EVEN WHEN WE HEAR A STORY THAT a god separated the earth from the sky and created the space between the two, it usually doesn't compel us to ask: Where was the god standing before the space was created? This apparent paradox —If the space was created with the creation of cosmos, then where was the creation taking place—is not a problem with the Rig Veda. It is a problem arising from our habit of seeing things with boundaries lying in space, such that we view even the universe as an object located somewhere, some place outside of it. The modern scientific picture of creation—the Big Bang—runs into the same problem. We visualize the early universe exploding somewhere.

In the Vedas, epics, and Puranas, Time, or Kala, is often seen as a god, an absolute being, standing outside of everything and controlling everything, from the events of a human life to the creation and age of the universe. These views on time led to speculation about the role of time in practical matters that have a bearing on human life and fate. Does time decide human fate? Or, does man create his own destiny with his efforts?

Each philosophical system has its own perspective of the world, builds its own model of how it is composed, and how it works. Based on that, it arrives at its own conclusions. Together, they cover a wide range of possibilities about the nature of time—as real or imaginary, absolute or relative, continuous or discrete. Space is conceived either as a continuous or granular absolute substance or as an abstraction derived from the events happening in nature. Causation has its own share of variations: either a permanent being or substance is driving the world phenomena, or the events are happening one after another due to the inter-relationship between the constituents comprising the reality. The effects produced from these changes are either distinct from the cause, pre-exist in it, or the same as the cause.

### WHO AM I?

THE VEDAS DO NOT SEEM TO SAY much about who or what man is. However, there are hymns in the Rig Veda that speak of the continuation of happy life even after death, suggesting a belief in an element of human being that lasts beyond his or her physical death. And it is this element that experiences life in this world as well as in the other world. Thus the Vedas assume imperishability of life.

The Upanishads' challenge is: How to find immortality? Life's happiness depends on it. Man's immortality has to be established on a firm ground. Just because the Vedas say that man has an afterlife isn't enough. There must be a reason to believe in it. So to find the firm ground for immortality, the Upanishads turn to the unknown reality mentioned in the Rig Veda—‘By its inherent force the One breathed windless: No other thing than that beyond existed.’—and call it Brahman, which originally meant holy power, a magic spell, or a reality that grows, breathes or swells. However, this ultimate reality is paradoxical in nature and hard to understand.

The philosophy diametrically opposed to the view in the Upanishads is that of Indic materialism, also called the Lokayata philosophy. For this

school, matter is the only reality. Body and mind are different forms of matter. Consciousness is just a configuration of matter. With the dissolution of body, consciousness is also lost forever. Soul has no meaning for the materialists.

In response to the question, "If there is no permanent self, who experiences life and is able to recall past experiences?", the Buddhists say that the five nama-rupa (name and form) skandhas—form, feelings, perception, volition, and consciousness—characterize a person. These skandhas (bundles or aggregates) are changing every moment from birth until death. Hence, they are different at different stages of life. But through an unbroken series of cause and effect the skandhas at any stage are caused by those of the previous stage and, in turn, cause skandhas of the next stage...When the present skandhas identify with the past skandhas, they serve as the basis for recollection and give a person a sense of continuity.

While the Sankhya scheme, with its two ultimate realities, is much simpler in comparison to the Nyaya-Vaisesika system, according to which the world is made of nine different building blocks, Sankhya has its own problems. How do matter and consciousness—substances of entirely different natures—interact with each other? Although, unlike the Nyaya-Vaisesika, the Sankhya at least attempts to show an interaction between soul and matter, it is not clear how just the proximity of soul could induce matter to evolve. Furthermore, is soul conscious of itself, or does intellect infer it? How does it realize that it is bound to matter and would like to be released from the bondage?

The first person to propose the theory of Advaita Vedanta is considered to be Shankar's predecessor, Gaudapada. In his Karika of the Mandukya Upanishad, Gaudapada proposes that life is like a waking dream. The so-called objective world including body, mind, senses, and sense organs are mere illusions. The only reality is the eternal or unchanging Atman or Brahman, the only observer or witness. Through its own power, or maya, Atman imagines itself to be an

individual being, or jiva, which, in turn, imagines the rest of the subjective and objective entities in the world.

Pierre Baldi argues in his book, *The Shattered Self*, that the problem with the way we perceive ourselves is our conventional self-centric view of the world, and, with the realization of possibilities offered by the technological advances, "the boundary between the self and the other, the self and the world, the inside and the outside has begun to blur, and ultimately may evaporate entirely."

It would be hard to say that the Indic systems have reached a definitive answer as to whether determinism or free will governs life. The lack of clarity could be partly due to the fact that in some of the Indic systems, a person or a self is viewed as an illusion. Assumption of free will allowing a person to act upon the surrounding world would entail subject-object dichotomy. But this dichotomy is the illusion, which is to be removed in order to be liberated; to gain freedom, personal will has to be suspended. Moreover, free will of an unreal person is in itself an illusion.

Thus the verdict of modern science on free will seems to fall on the side of the hard version of the Karma theory. But then, there are those who think that although the brain works like a machine, man is still responsible for his actions, It is assumed that despite the deterministic functioning of brain, a person has the ability to control his or her behavior. The same assumption underlies the soft version of the Karma theory.

#### How Do I Act?

PERHAPS THE BROADEST DEFINITION of dharma is provided in the Mahanarayan Upanishad: *Dharmo vishvasya jagatah pratistha...dharma sarvam pratisthitam*, i.e. 'The world is supported by dharma...everything is established in dharma'. In this sense dharma is related to the word *dhaaran*, which means holding, supporting, protecting, etc. To understand how the world is established in dharma, we have to go back to the story of creation, when the world came into existence.

It seems Manu wants to emphasize

the importance of the order that was placed in the world during creation. This order must be preserved to sustain the creation and prevent it from being destroyed. Being a book of law, the Manusmriti is concerned with the social order and the rules comprising dharma, the moral order, for maintaining the social structure. These rules of dharma determine the right and wrong course of human action. The smriti says that in order to sustain and protect the world, the creator conceived four occupations for humans belonging to four different classes: Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Shudra.

Despite resentment and criticism, the caste system and its practices persisted until the later centuries, when saint-cum-social-reformers such as Kabir, Raidas, and Nanak in the fifteenth century spoke against the system. By this time, Islam was already in India, causing another division in the society between Hindus and Muslims. These saints taught human fraternity above all divides based on caste or creed.

Dharma is not an absolutely rigid code for all times and places. It is malleable and life supporting. However, its flexibility due to the openness to interpretation of scriptures, following local customs, and acting according to one's own conscience, is what makes dharma difficult to decide. It creates a conflict.

In the third century BCE, Ashoka, the third and the last important king of the Mauryan Empire, propagated his version of Dhamma (the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit term Dharma). According to the historians of ancient India, there were immense social, cultural, religious, ecological, and economic variations in the vast empire encompassing almost the entire Indian subcontinent. In order to assimilate the diversity and govern a complex society, a policy was needed that would harmonize people at an ideological level and allow administering the large empire with a minimum use of force. Hence, Ashoka enunciated the Dhamma principles.

The epic *Mahabharata* praises and upholds non-violence as the highest form of dharma—*ahimsa paramo dharma*. But practicing non-violence

requires a tremendous amount of conviction, courage, and self-control. In a world where aggression and violence are driven by the desire to protect one's own self-interest and point of view, stepping beyond the sphere of personal interests is extremely challenging. Only with great knowledge, experience, and understanding, may one reach a stage where he or she may choose to exercise self-control and be able to break the cycle of tit-for-tat behavior to practice ahimsa. However, the *Mahabharata* does not take an absolute position on ahimsa. Despite its insistence on the importance of non-violence, the epic admits the limits to ahimsa and forgiveness.

The elaborate laws of conduct in the Manusmriti do not mean that an individual is subordinate to the society. A person has the freedom of choice. He or she is advised to make choices in life based on the interpretation of scriptures, local customs, and one's own conscience. However, the appeal is to choose and act for the good of others, which does not mean suspending one's self-interest. Society's gain does not imply the individual's loss. The case of Ashokan Dhamma clearly shows how the king was able to strike a balance between the personal and the collective interests.

Modern scientific research indicates that, over the long course of evolution, nature has selected human behavior that promotes survival through sharing, cooperation, and group formation. At the same time, these very instincts also lead to the formation of mutually exclusionary groups, promoting the attitude of 'us' vs. 'them', and engaging in group wars and genocides. Thus, on the one hand, society provides protection to its members allowing them to meet their needs, on the other hand, the groupish or clannish nature of the society can also wreak havoc on the lives of people, if individuals fail to make right decisions.

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF LIFE?

WHILE MOKSHA GAVE THE OVERALL meaning to life, dharma, artha, and kama laid the foundation in the material world required for one's

spiritual upliftment. Material life gave the experience and knowledge needed for the psychological growth and release from the worldly life to attain emancipation. The book of law, Manusmriti, clearly conveys that only after meeting one's obligations to gods, ancestors, and men, and having finished worldly duties, should one focus on achieving liberation in the last stage of life.

A mechanized life regulated by rigid codes of conduct and traditions might have felt stifled and bereft of any spontaneous spiritual experience. It is likely that the lack of resonance between external rituals and internal spiritual experiences led to the need for rethinking the purpose of these actions. We find the sages of the Upanishads questioning the ritualized life prescribed in the Vedic texts, and thinking differently about sacrifice and salvation. The sacrificial rituals were now considered inferior. The Mundaka Upanishad says: 'These deluded men, regarding sacrifices and works of merits as most important, do not know any other good. Having enjoyed the high place of heaven won by good deeds, they enter again this world or a still lower one'. The prospect of reaping the rewards of good actions in this life and winning a place in heaven was not appealing anymore. Life in heaven as envisioned in the Vedas was no longer considered sufficient. Man was now seeking escape or release, nishkriti, from the perpetual cycle of coming and going.

Going beyond good and evil does not mean the liberated person acts unethically. Ethical behavior is a pre-requisite for reaching the state of liberation. Only through experiential knowledge, truth, self-control, patience, and performing one's duties selflessly, can one be emancipated. The liberated person adheres to dharma without any expectations of gain. But, in this adherence, he is not chained to rules as an unliberated person is. Free from the conflict of opposites and devoid of attachment, dharma flows out of his being. Dharma is the way of life for such a person.

As the idea of attaining liberation in one's lifetime gained momentum after

it was introduced in the Upanishads, the obvious question was whether one had to leave the world for moksha or could one stay in it and achieve freedom. This was when the idea of vairagya, which was earlier understood as leaving the worldly life behind, received a different meaning. In so far as one performed one's duties and rites, met life's obligations with equanimity to pains and pleasures arising out of these actions, and developed self-control to deal with fear, anger, lust, and desire, one was considered to have renounced the world and thus was free. Such a person, called jivanmukta (free in life), was believed to perform his part dispassionately without any attachment to the fruits of his actions.

Faith cannot be broken down into something else and further analyzed for a better understanding of it. It is either there or not there. Perhaps it is similar to the primitive feeling or belief in the indestructibility of life. It may be considered as an instinct that compels us to trust people, systems, and institutions in the world, believing and hoping that we can rely on them. This instinctual faith does not assume the existence of any supernatural reality. A child, with no knowledge of God or any higher doctrines, instinctively places its trust in its mother. Facing any stressful situation, it automatically runs to its mother for protection. This instinctive faith seems to have an evolutionary advantage. Without it, one can hardly imagine the survival of human beings against all odds during our long evolutionary past. The ability to face and overcome all man-made and natural disasters in human history bears witness to this faith.

There are widely divergent views among the orthodox schools on soul, its nature and relationship with God, and on liberation. Even the Vedantists differ a great deal among themselves, depending on how they interpret the Brahma Sutra. Some believe the soul is an illusion while others believe it to be real. Then again, the soul is either the same as Brahman or is different from Brahman, with different degrees of relationship with the ultimate reality.

But among these schools and sects, one idea is predominantly common: happiness and moksha are attained with the removal of ignorance in life through knowledge, good actions, and devotion. For these schools, this is the purpose of life. This is what gives life a meaning.

Man is constantly pulled between the conflicting dichotomy of pleasures and pains. He tries to maximize pleasures while minimizing pains to suit the needs of his ego. Thus the ego that helps a person steer through life also brings misery. Different systems consider the sense of 'I' as ignorance. They either try to lower the heightened sense of ego or completely eliminate it. The two interesting solutions in this regard are those of non-duality by Shankar and of no-self by Buddha. The Advaita says that there is no individual 'I' or personal self. It is an illusion, merely a reflection of Brahman. Buddhism goes a step beyond. It drops the idea of a permanent soul or Brahman and, through its reductionist approach, systematically demonstrates that there is no person. It is only a fiction. There is no real owner of experiences that cause suffering. And finally, the later schools of Buddhism argue that the world with all its objects and experiences is empty, is only a mental impression, a mind game. There is no ignorance, no suffering, no release from suffering.

#### ENDURING ELEMENTS OF INDIAN THOUGHT

IT IS HARD TO POINT OUT WHAT I really inspired the search for freedom and immortality. Were there multiple reasons or one specific cause responsible for this switch? Based on the available information, one may speculate that the overall social environment in that period could have prompted the change. Part of the problem could have been the mechanized lifestyle under the varna-ashram dharma, filled with rites and rituals. But other socio-political factors might also have contributed to the dissatisfaction with life. For example, social stratification under caste system led to serious social inequality. Numerous inter-tribal fights amongst



Aryans and battles with non-Aryan local inhabitants for cattle, land, and political dominion could have added a further cause of destabilization in the society, breeding much anxiety and uncertainty.

In this new environment, the pressure from the rising popularity of the heterodox sects led Brahmanism to respond by adapting to the local tribal religions and sects. The old Vedic deities—Indra, Agni, Soma, Yama, and Varuna—lost their high places and a fresh breed of new gods and goddesses arrived, such as Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Durga, Ram, Krishna, Vasudeva, Jagannatha, Ganesh, and so on. This was the fertile ground on which Hinduism was born as a result of the transformation of Brahmanism through its interaction with the tribal religious sects and assimilation of their deities, rites, and rituals.

The old pre-Aryan practices and beliefs of the land survived through the Vedic period as parallel traditions and resurfaced in the future through the major world-views of the subcontinent. By blending, transforming, apposing, reusing, and reinterpreting the ideas from the old and the new—the pre-Aryan and the Aryan concepts—these world-views have enriched and energized the intellectual landscape of India throughout the last 3,500 years. They have given rise to multiple systems of thought, all of which aspired to the same end goal of life, using many of the same constitutive elements. Despite having subtle or major differences in their world-views, these systems are glued together by a set of core concepts: karma, dharma, rebirth, ignorance, renunciation, enlightenment, and moksha. These form the kernel of Indic thought. ❖

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## DEVOTION AT LORD JAGANNATH RATH YATRA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT MOSES

TEXT BY SATYA MOSES







*Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu worshipping Lord Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra and their sister Subhadra in Puri, Odisha.*

WIDE-EYED, WIDE-SMILING LORD Jagannath resides with his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra in the city of Puri, Odisha. They make their home in a vast temple complex whose red walls and massive tower overshadow the Grand Road which cuts straight from the Jagannath temple's yawning Lion Gate, through four kilometers of dust and marketplace babble, to the Gundicha Temple, God's summer house. Every year Jagannath and his siblings come out of their temple and journey to Gundicha in chariots pulled by thousands of devotees. This festival, this concentration of ecstatic devotion, is called Rath Yatra.

The festival proper begins in June when Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are given a ritual bath. Afterward it is said that the deities become chilled and fall sick. They then spend fifteen days in isolation, tended to by designated priests. Finally the day of the Yatra arrives and over a million devo-

tees of all castes, colors and countries gather on the Grand Road to witness the happy lord's pilgrimage. The heavy wooden forms of Jagannath and his siblings are carried out through the Lion Gate and placed on three tall chariots. These chariots are the spectacle of Rath Yatra, built new every year and adorned with paint and cloth. Jagannath's chariot, Nandigosha, has sixteen wheels and stands 13.5 meters high; Balabhadra's chariot, Taladhwa, has 14 wheels and is 13.2 meters tall; Subhadra's vehicle, Dwarpadalana, the "Trampler of Pride," has 12 wheels and is 12.9 meters tall. These massive cars of god are pulled down the Grand Road to Gundicha using sacred coconut husk ropes to the sound of drums and clattering brass, shouts of devotion and the sputter of hoses as the Puri fire department sprays down the sweltering crowd.

The deities, in all their finery of cloth and gold, are transfixing. Their forms, compared to the totality of In-

dian murthis, are strikingly simple. The wooden bodies have no legs and only the suggestion of arms; the facial features of all three are uniform and arresting: mouths curved in open toothless smiles, huge eyes, round and staring. The eyes of Jagannath and his siblings penetrate deep into buried cultural memory, into an older time, a world of symbols which, passed from the rough hands of tribal ancestors through long lines of lineage, hide beneath our modern world like the deep foundation of a glass high-rise. No surprise, then, that Jagannath worship in Odisha is considered to be one of the oldest devotional cults in all of India, a land where religion manifests everywhere as an ancient and palpable force.

The origins of the deities and ceremonies which take their modern form in the worship of Jagannath, an ecstatic form of Krishna, are shrouded in legend. References to a sacred floating log in the Rig Veda (c. 1500-1100 BCE)

have lead some scholars to draw a connection to the wooden deities of Puri. One legend of the murthis' origin tells of an ancient Odishan king, Indradyumna, who heard of a secret tribal deity named Nila-madhava. Nila-madhava came to Indradyumna in a dream-vision and asked that the king build a temple in Puri and worship him in the form of Jagannath, along with his brother and sister. The deity arrived, floating on river water, in the form of a log, adorned with sacred symbols. A divine architect took the task of carving the log into the forms of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra, but insisted on working in total isolation. After fourteen days, Indradyumna became anxious and impatient. He entered the inner sanctum where he saw the deities in incomplete form, without hands or legs. The king feared the lord's anger, but laughing, Nila-madhava told him that he meant to appear in such a form.

This tale is only one of many which explain the birth of these strange gods with their unfathomable, happy faces. On the days of Rath Yatra, it does not matter what you believe: you are caught instantly in the smell and sound, the torrent of humans rushing to praise a channel of energy which runs back to the time of the Vedas and perhaps further still. You are lost in the loud crowd, the pounding sun, and Jagannath's wide, inscrutable eyes. ▲

*The sacred flags are raised above the sanctum of Lord Jagannath's temple in Puri, signifying the start of the annual Rath Yatra.*







*A devotee touches the feet of Lord Krishna as Govardhan, one of the guardian deities surrounding Lord Jagannath's chariot.*



*A sacred cow naps in the circumambulatory road outside the temple on the evening before the Rath Yatra.*





*The eastern gate of the temple, known as the Lion Gate or Simhadwara is brightly lit and surrounded by worshipers.*






*Throngs crowd the Grand Road, with the chariots under construction, two evenings prior to the Rath Yatra.*



*The completed chariots lined up outside the Lion Gate in the early morning, awaiting the deities*







*Hanuman entertains the worshipful crowd as they wait for the gods. Hundreds of thousands of devotees gather in the street before sunrise. The chariots only begin their journey in the early afternoon.*



Several people create a lavish painting of colored powder which will be driven over by Lord Balabhadra's chariot.







Lord Balabhadra is lifted onto his chariot amid shouts and cheers.





The Odisha Fire Service cools down the crowd. Temperatures can reach over 40 degrees Celsius by mid-morning. Many devotees faint in crush of the crowd and must be carried away on stretchers.





“କରୁଣା  
ଡେଡିଗା ପୋଲିସ୍ ଏକ ମକ  
ଅଭିଡା ତୋରାଣା  
ଆନ୍ଦୋଜକ: ଡେଡିଗା ପୋଲିସ୍ ହାବିଲଦାର, କନେସ

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KEEP THE MOBILE, CAMERA, RUPEES & ANY VALUABLE THINGS WITH YOU AT ALL TIMES. DO NOT LEAVE THEM UNATTENDED. IF YOU LOSE ANY OF THESE ITEMS, REPORT IT TO THE POLICE IMMEDIATELY.

Lord Jagannath mounts his chariot. Only priests from the temple may stand on the chariot.





Once all three deities are in place the King of Odisha (in white turban) pays a visit to sweep the chariot platforms. This ceremony demonstrates that even royalty are servants of the Divine.





Each chariot is drawn by four virile horses. Lord Balabhadra's are black, Lady Subhadra's are brown and Lord Jagannath's are white.

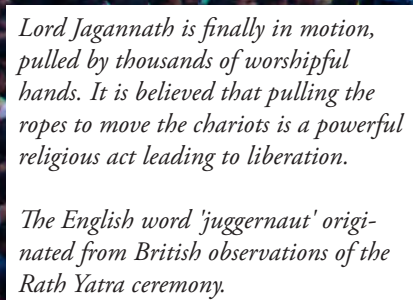






*Anticipation builds as the charioteers ready themselves for the journey.*





*The English word 'juggernaut' originated from British observations of the Rath Yatra ceremony.*





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