

# HATHA YOGA

## Hatha Yoga: An Appreciation of the Body as the Means

*Where Vedanta and Tantra represented a revolution and reformation in philosophical thinking after Patanjali, Hatha Yoga represented a revolution and reformation in practice.*

*During a decline in Buddhist as well as 'Classical' yogic thought and practice, and an increase in the use of a wide variety of tantric practices, the founders of hatha yoga undertook a reassessment and reformation of the practice of yoga.*

- *The hatha yogis began with a recognition that most seekers are not prepared for the kind of meditation that Patanjali described. They were far more aware of the **obstacles** to meditation not addressed by the classical school, and of the need for **preparation of the body** for higher states of meditation*
- *The hatha yogis held the body in much higher regard than the classical yogis, and even believed in the possibility of transforming the physical body into a 'divine' body – the Siddha*

*The school of hatha yogis that arose in North India were known as the Natha Siddhas. Matsyendra & Goraksha were the principle founders*

- *The Natha Siddhas held that it is possible to enjoy **both** bhukti (worldly enjoyment) and mukti (liberation) while in the body*
- *The Natha Siddhas became great healers, with a close connection to Ayurveda. They treated the body as part of a larger whole: physical well-being depends upon spiritual health, both as individuals and as part of a community and world*

*The Hatha Yogis Revised Patanjali's Eightfold Path of the 'Limbs' of Yoga'*

- *Principle Change introduced into Patanjali's Eightfold Path: they eliminated the role of the yamas and niyamas that were primary for the Buddhist, Jain and Patanjali's system. Qualities of ethical purity will come naturally as the body and mind are purified through the practices. If ethical standards are put first, they create mental conflict when the body is undisciplined.*
- *Purify the body first, bringing it to a more sattvic state: then the mind will be in a more sattvic and receptive state, happy with the practice of yoga rather than defiant.*
- *Their emphasis shifted **from** the classical focus on directly stilling the mind **toward** a more dynamic stillness (the balance of Shiva and Shakti, stillness and movement) through directing the processes of the prana/breath. This means direct involvement in the movement of the breath energy, using mudra and bandha, and awareness of the role of the chakras and the 'awakened' kundalini.*

## The Seven 'Limbs' in the Gheranda Samhita:

1. Purification is accomplished by the six acts [cleansing techniques or shat-karman]
2. Strength through postures (asana)
3. Stability through the seals (mudra)
4. Calmness through sense-withdrawal (pratyahara)
5. Lightness from breath control (pranayama)
6. Perception of the Self from meditation (dhyana)
7. The Untainted [state] from ecstasy (samadhi); liberation

## Nondualism: Body and Soul / Spirit and World

*Basic principle: the body is of the same energy (Shakti) as the Self (Shiva); not utterly different like Prakrti and Purusha*

- *While the body is a grosser form of Shakti, it can be transformed into subtler form, until that energy reunites with its source, Shiva*
- *So we are not disassociating from the body, but rather transforming it — through an 'involution' of the evolutionary energy of the Prana through the processes of the Kundalini*

## Obstacles in Our Path: the Granthis

*The Granthis or 'Knots': 3-forms-of-stuckness*

1. *Brahma Granthi – the feeling of separateness, attachment to one's own desires and ego, without regard for others — centered in the physical body (and Muladhara Chakra), the 'covering' of the Annandamaya Kosha*
  - *A person at this level sees only diversity, causing the obstacles of restless, desire and fear.*
2. *Vishnu Granthi – attachment to doing good — centered in the body of prana (and Anahata Chakra, the heart), the 'covering' of the Pranamaya Kosha*
  - *A person at this level sees the unity in diversity, seeing the good in others, but gets caught up in diversity — attachment to the cosmic good and the desire to help humanity, attachment to traditions and idealism*
3. *Rudra Granthi – attachment to knowing — centered in the mental bodies of knowledge or jnana (and Ajna Chakra), the 'coverings' of the Monomaya and Vijnanamaya Koshas*
  - *A person at this level goes beyond diversity to perceive unity; but the obstacle is attachment to I-consciousness; keeping one's awareness of self as a drop, holding back from the ocean*

*When the three knots are untied with the help of the Kundalini, the yogi perceives reality as pervaded by divine energy, and becomes established in the Body of Bliss (Anandamaya Kosha), and is able to move even beyond that. This happens as Kundalini pierces the Chakras.*

### *The Chakras:*

- *These are energy distribution centers at the level of the subtle (pranic) body — formed by criss-crossing of ida and pingala. They are the outward manifestation of the energy of each of the 'elements' out of which the body was created through the 'descent' of the Shakti, the power of creation*
- *Each chakra distributes prana 'outward' to the physical body through the nadis, and according to its element, carries certain vrittis or types of mental fluctuation*
- *By the process of 'piercing' the chakras, the awakened Kundalini reabsorbs the outwardly-directed energy of the chakras, turning that energy inward upon itself ('involution') and transforms one's awareness in the direction of unity-consciousness as the Kundalini rises through the chakras, 'burning up' impressions of duality and 'cutting' the fundamental knots or 'granthis.'*
- *The Kundalini does descend once again, restoring normal consciousness and the functioning of the chakras, but the 'vrittis' of duality are attenuated or gone, so one experiences the stillness of seeing unity in diversity. This state is 'jivanmukti,' the state of liberation while living in the body, and the fulfillment of Patanjali's definition of yoga as the 'stilling of the thought-waves (vrittis) of the mind.'*

### *Hatha Yoga Practice:*

- *Pranayama is essential to hatha yoga. It balances the energies of ida and pingala, so they merge at base of spine and enter sushumna as a single energy, the Kundalini, which was otherwise 'dormant' — i.e. supporting ordinary functions as we live in duality-consciousness.*
- **Hatha Yoga** *completes its role when Kundalini reaches the **Ajna Chakra**, where Kundalini reunites with ida and pingala, completing the circuit: this is the 'passport station,' a transition point that requires grace far more than effort to move further.*
- **Yoga** *takes us beyond the practices of Hatha Yoga: it completes our path when Kundalini reaches the Sahasrara, where Shakti reunites with her source, Shiva. This is the path of Laya Yoga, a path of grace.*

# Hatha Yoga and The Technology of Tantra

From Vedanta we turn to hatha yoga in the larger context of ‘Tantra.’ In one respect, ‘Tantra’ is an ancient term, dealing with specific practices and techniques for human spiritual evolution, and includes many ancient systems of thought and practice. In another respect, ‘Tantra’ represents a shift in thinking that is so radical as to be considered something very new. Likewise, hatha yoga can be considered at least to draw on ‘something old,’ and yet in its attitude and approach is indeed something very ‘new.’

First, the term ‘tantra.’ We can set forth two general aspects or characterizations of what the term tantra involves:

1. Particularly in the context of hatha yoga, ‘tantra’ involves specific practices and techniques. Hatha yoga as a tantric practice encompasses practices by which to awaken the psychic centers or ‘chakras’ that exist within each individual. The basic method in kundalini yoga of awakening these centers is deep concentration on the centers and willing their arousal and the ascent of the kundalini energy. All of the *practices* of yoga — asana, pranayama, mudra, bandha and mantra repetition — are consciously directed toward the awakening of the chakras.
2. As a way of thought or ‘world view,’ Tantra represents a revolution in thought and philosophical understanding rooted in an appreciation and reverence for the ‘Shakti.’ This revolution found its highest expression in the relatively recent philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism. This philosophical system is distinct from the approach and understanding from the schools of practice usually associated with ‘tantra’ or tantric practice, particularly hatha yoga. But as schools of tantra, they are mutually supportive. We’ll be turning to Kashmir Shaivism after completing our discussion of hatha yoga.

## Hatha Yoga and Tantric Practice

Hatha yoga as a tantric practice is based on the principle that one can attain higher states of consciousness associated with the various chakras by manipulating the various forces and systems within the physical and (via the prana) subtle body.

On the physical level (and by way of a rather simplistic explanation) contemporary teachers often explain this in terms of achieving a balance between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, both through the effects of the various asanas and through pranayama – asserting there is a connection between the dominance of the two nostrils in breathing and the predominance of one or the other aspects of the nervous system.

On a subtler level, traditional practitioners emphasize the stimulation of the two pranic pathways of the ida and pingala nadis which run from the base of the spine (muladhara chakra) to the space between the eyebrows (ajna chakra). Between these two subtle pathways for the prana – which crisscross along the central axis of the body, forming and penetrating other intermediate chakras – is a third passageway, the sushumna nadi. When the energies of the breath are balanced between ida and pingala, they merge and enter this passageway at the base of the spine and rise as the kundalini, penetrating and awakening the chakras while raising the yogi to higher states of awareness.

Hatha yoga as a tantric practice involving both asana and pranayama is directly concerned with the two nadis – ida and pingala – and aims at balancing the flow of prana in each nadi so as to activate the kundalini. As the kundalini rises, the chakras are stimulated, and progressively higher states of meditation take place spontaneously.

Many hatha yoga practices also attempt to stimulate the chakras directly, understanding that the chakras are the intermediaries between the various subtle states of awareness – and that the lower chakras are associated with the states of various physical organs of the body. The various physical practices of hatha yoga – and of asana in particular – work to stimulate, cleanse and improve the health of these organs so that the chakras can more easily awaken, and the pranic pathways are strengthened, cleansed and ‘opened’ for the balancing of the pranas and the rise of the kundalini.

Some contemporary teachers of hatha yoga have tried to argue that in one way or another the practice of asana in hatha yoga is complete in itself – a practice that is itself meditation, which fully and sufficiently includes all aspects of yoga, concentration and devotion. There is nothing in the tradition of the sages and texts of yoga to support this. Instead, it’s clear from the tradition that hatha yoga does not by itself necessarily lead to or usher one into high states of meditation; rather, hatha yoga is traditionally understood to be used to prepare one – in body, breath, mind and heart – for higher stages of meditation attained through further and more refined practices. If it comes to pass in our time that hatha yoga does finally produce fully realized sages, then there will be reason to change this view. But on the authority of sages no less than Jnaneshwar and Vasishtha, we have little reason to expect this to come to happen, and they do not mince words when calling the idea that hatha yoga can by itself grant enlightenment a delusion.

In summary, Tantra is an ancient system and ‘technology’ of practice that is closely affiliated with yoga, and there is a strong case to be made that ‘yoga’ as it emerged in the Upanishads was initially an offshoot of tantra. Forms of yogic practices such as asana, pranayama, trataka (concentration), yoga nidra (yogic ‘sleep’ or deep absorption) and kriya yoga (cleansing techniques) can be found in ancient tantras that predate the Upanishads and Yoga Sutras by many centuries. On that basis, it’s fair to say that the sages of hatha yoga – Goraknath and Matsyendranath in the period to which we now turn – simply integrated the monistic philosophy of the Upanishads with the practices of the tantras to create the system we now know as yoga.<sup>7</sup>

Yet ‘yoga’ has many shades of meaning and ways of approach even within the purview of Tantra, from the emphasis on techniques of direct manipulation through practices and concentration under the umbrella of ‘tantric yoga’ to the highly refined path of enlightenment and wisdom known as Kashmir Shaivism. These two are by no means exclusive: rather, Kashmir Shaivism can be understood as the highest and most inclusive system, one that provides the full context for understanding the practices urged in tantric yoga as well as incorporating the best insights of the entire tradition of yogic philosophy. It’s very helpful, however, to be aware of the distinction.

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7 Meditations from the Tantras, Swami Satyananda Saraswati p. 95

# The Hatha Yogis

## The Body: An Appreciation

Hatha yoga as we know it flourished in the Postclassical Period, thanks in large part to a change in the climate of thought of the times. One of the distinctive elements of the Postclassical Period is that the sages set forth a new and increasingly dynamic view of the universe, and because of the new attitude toward the human body that came with this view, hatha yoga burst forth at the forefront of this period.

In the Classical as well as the Preclassical Periods the body had been roundly reviled as an enemy of the spirit, a source of spiritual confusion and defilement. A good example of this attitude comes from a passage in the *Maitrayaniya-Upanishad*:

“In this ill-smelling, unsubstantial body, a conglomerate of bone, skin, sinew, muscle, marrow, flesh, semen, blood, mucus, tears, rheum, feces, urine, wind, bile, and phlegm – what good is the enjoyment of desires? In this body, which is afflicted with desire, anger, greed, delusion, fear, despondency, envy, separation from the desirable, union with the undesirable, hunger, thirst, senility, death, disease, sorrow and the like – what good is the enjoyment of desires?”<sup>8</sup>

In sharp contrast to this, with the Postclassical Period came the realization that the human body is unique and indispensable to the spiritual quest. The *Kularnava Tantra* responds:

Without the body, how can the [highest] human goal be realized? Therefore, having acquired a bodily abode, one should perform meritorious (punya) actions. (1.18)

Among the 840,000 types of embodied beings, the knowledge of Reality cannot be acquired except through a human body. (1.14)<sup>9</sup>

Another Tantrika named Bhogar, a seventeenth century adept, wrote the following:

Time was when I despised the body;  
But then I saw the God within.  
The body, I realized, is the Lord's temple;  
And so I began preserving it with care infinite.<sup>10</sup>

Notice that these sages did not dismiss the pitfalls of desire, nor did they deny the weaknesses and inescapable foulness of the fleshy and emission-prone body. Rather they emphasized the more important positive value of the body as the means of realization. The sages of Hatha Yoga went so far as to hold forth the possibility of transforming – even transubstantiating – the body into one which they called “adamantine” (*vajra*) and “divine” (*daiva*), a body that was *not* made of frail flesh and bone, but of immortal Light.

These masters honored the embodied state, but in their own experience did not think of the body as merely the mortal physical organism through which they lived and spoke for a time. Their experience of the body – like their experience of the Self – was much greater. Just as through yoga the individual spirit transcends the limited sense of self to recognize its true nature as the Self, this realization also transforms the body, since the body is nothing other than the expression of Spirit. As he experiences it, the realized Master's body is

8 The Yoga Tradition by Georg Feuerstein, p. 382

9 Ibid., p. 382

10 Ibid., p. 384

really the Body of All, and so he is free to assume any form at all, and to influence the processes of nature according to his will as easily as he moves his own body.

Because they saw no radical dichotomy between Self and Body, their understanding of the body was as organic as their view of Spirit. We are all within this one divine reality, this divine body – not as separate, divided, dismembered and discrete beings (as in the original legend of *Prajapati*), but as organic members or interpenetrating cells of a single cosmic body more deeply interfused with Spirit. The universe, which is nothing but the Lord, is not a fragmented and disjointed collection of objects, but a genuine uni-verse, a One that is Many, a single network of life or ‘body’ in which each member participates in the life of the Whole.

With this view came an expanded and very profoundly effective view of healing that matured into the science of Ayurveda. The sages known as the Nathas were famous healers, attuned to curing the whole person in their approach to disease. They understood that an illness cannot be cured as a separate entity, it must be treated in a larger framework, as part of a complete being. Part of the revolution specific to the Natha Masters was the appreciation of how profoundly our physical well being depends on our spiritual health – both as individuals and as a community and a World. Thus we find a greater stress on the *kula* or community in the quest for enlightenment, rather than on realization as a solitary quest, a departure from community and company.

The Tantric Masters who pursued the ideal of the adamantine body, or transfigured body of Light, came to be known as the *Siddhas* – the “accomplished” or “perfected” Masters. They flourished between the eighth and twelfth centuries, and played a pivotal role in synthesizing the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The ‘Siddhas’ figure as prominently in the Tibetan Buddhism of the Far East as in the Hindu schools of India, and so the movement spanned cultures and religious beliefs.

## The Natha Siddhas of Hatha Yoga

The most important schools of the Siddha movement were those of the Nathas (who had their home in the north of India, particularly Bengal) and the Maheshvaras (from the South). The Hatha Yoga tradition is credited to the **Natha Siddhas** of the north – Goraksha Natha and his teacher Matsyendra Natha, both of whom were born in Bengal. ‘Natha’ means ‘lord’ or ‘master,’ and refers to one who enjoys both liberation (*mukti*) and worldly enjoyments (*bhukti* – albeit transformed through their yogic discipline and understanding), as well as paranormal powers or *siddhis*. Hence ‘Natha’ or ‘nath’ is often added to the name of sages affiliated with this movement.

**Matsyendra** was a chief representative of the Nathas, and quite possibly the originator of Nathism. He is specifically associated with the Kaula sect of the Siddha movement, and, while he is also said to have founded other tantric clans, is largely regarded as a reformer who transformed the older (more cultish) Kula tradition into a ‘reformed’ Kaulism. Matsyendra described himself as an adherent of the sectarian Siddha Kaula, the founder of the Yogini Kaula and revealer of the original hatha-yogic doctrine of ‘Matsyodara.’ His work was a watershed for the tantric and Siddha traditions, and was the precursor of the hatha yoga of later Natha Siddhas who claimed Matsyendra as their founder and inspiration. The great sage Abhinavagupta singles out Matsyendra for praise in the opening lines of his *Tantraloka*, and incorporates the practices of Matsyendra’s Yogini Kaula into the practices of the Kula System of his Trika philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

Matsyendra’s school of Nathas shared a central emphasis on the *kula*, which in its greatest sense is the emphasis upon reverence for the dynamic or feminine aspect of Reality or the *Shakti*. This concerned specifically

11 The Alchemical Body by David Gordon White, p. 88-89

and especially *Shakti* in the form of the *Kundalini Shakti*, the transformative aspect of the divine creative power – the power of grace that is at the heart of their discipline. *Kula* also meant “home” or “family,” which suggests that the initiates into this order enjoyed a special and protected status set apart from everyone else. More expansive interpretations of *kula* – as we have seen – are possible and even merited, but *kula* in the context of the Natha yogis did carry this more exclusive (and rather ‘clubby’) meaning.

Matsyendra’s chief disciple was **Goraksha**, who lived in the late tenth and early eleventh century, and is remembered as a miracle worker second to none. Though he apparently came from a lower – if not the lowest – caste, he was a charismatic teacher who wielded a great deal of social influence as he traveled throughout India, and his fame far exceeded that of his teacher Matsyendra. The poet-saint Kabir, who generally had little good to say of the yogis of his day, praised Goraksha as well as his later successors Bhartrihari and Gopicandra as masters who had found union with the Divine. He also acknowledged his debt to them for their teachings on the chakras and the Yoga of sound, having to do with mantra.

Goraksha is often given sole credit for the invention of hatha yoga, though many of the teachings and practices had been in existence from long before his time. Goraksha founded the Kanphata (‘Split-ear’) order of the Nathas, whose members are also known as ‘*jogis*.’ They are to this day recognized by their practice of splitting their earlobes to insert large rings for purposes related to their practices.<sup>12</sup>

## The Texts of Hatha Yoga

In yogic literature there are a number of reliable texts on hatha yoga. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* by Yogi Swatmarama is the first that is always cited. Gorakhnath himself is credited with the *Goraksha Samhita*. A third text is *Gheranda Samhita* by the sage Gherand. Besides these there is a fourth major text known as *Hatharatnavali* which was written later by Srinivasabhata Mahayogindra. All these texts are considered to have been written between the 6th and 15th centuries A.D.

As we noted earlier, the ‘tantric’ practices of hatha yoga do go further back than these texts; there are minor references to hatha yoga in the ancient Upanishads and Puranas, as well as references to the practices in tantric texts that predate those Upanishads. However, the systematic form of hatha yoga began to emerge in India some time in the 6th century A.D.

## The Influence of Buddhism, and the Hatha Yogis’ Response

The Buddha was born in India in the 6th century B.C., as well as Mahavir, the founder of the Jain sect. Both of them performed severe austerities and both also preached non-violence. The Buddha formulated his teachings in the form of the ‘Four Noble Truths’. The Buddha laid a basic foundation for practice called the ‘Eightfold Path’, which was a system of ethics more or less like the *yama* and *niyama* of raja yoga. Two systems of Buddhism followed, one of which is known as *vipassana* and the other is *anapanasati*, ‘contemplation’.

As a result of Buddha’s popularity, meditation became the main form of spiritual practice on the entire subcontinent. At the same time, preparatory practices relating to the body were ignored, and ethics and morality were emphasized – and to the minds of some, very much overemphasized. Over time the sages of India began to reassess Buddha’s system, agreeing that meditation is indeed the highest path, but questioning the idea that one can start meditation immediately. Instead they came to believe that a good deal of preparation is involved – and the practices of yoga were just such a preparation.

Five hundred years after Buddha, and one hundred years before Christ, in India, at Nalanda in Bihar, a university was established in the Buddhist tradition, devoted to the Hinayana system. *Hinayana* means the

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12 *The Yoga Tradition* by Georg Feuerstein, p. 386

‘narrow path’, i.e. the orthodox Buddhist system. Many thousands of students from all over the known world came to study there.

However, there was another group amongst the Buddhists who did not agree with the orthodox interpretation of the teachings, arguing that it was not what Buddha himself had preached. So they established another university called Vikram Shila in Bihar, which became the teaching center of the Mahayana tradition. *Mahayana* means ‘great path’. They were not orthodox Buddhists, but more ‘liberal’ Buddhists. In that Mahayana tradition they also began to include tantra. This was not something that the Buddha had explicitly taught, so the orthodox Buddhists did not believe in it. It didn’t help matters that from the Vikram Shila a sect arose known as *Sahajayana*, the ‘spontaneous way’, and *Vajrayana*, which includes the sexual practices between men and women.

After about five hundred years or so, the popularity and influence of Buddhism declined and so did these tantric sects and their practices. Then in the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries A.D., after the period of Buddhist decadence in India, some yogis set out to reform the tantric system and restore it to its original purity.

Matsyendranath, Gorakhnath and a few other yogis in the tradition found that certain crucial practices in the tradition were being ignored by some and wrongly taught by others. So they separated the ‘hatha yoga’ and the ‘raja yoga’ practices of tantra from the rest and left out the rituals of tantra altogether, not even mentioning them.

When they culled the practices, they picked up the useful, practical and noble practices of yoga from the tantric system. It was at this time that Matsyendranath founded the ‘Nath’ cult, which held the belief that, before taking to the practices of meditation, you must purify the body and its elements. This became the overall theme of hatha yoga.

Of the many authorities on hatha yoga, one outstanding personality is Swatmarama who compiled the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. The term *Pradipika* means ‘self-illuminating’ or ‘that which illumines’. It is a text that illumines a number of physical, mental and spiritual problems confronting aspirants.

Gorakhnath, the chief disciple of Matsyendranath, had earlier written books, poems and prose on the hatha yoga system in the local dialect, but Swatmarama compiled the entire wisdom of hatha yoga in Sanskrit. In common with the other texts, he has expounded techniques such as asana, pranayama and shatkarma.

## The Primacy of Ethics Reconsidered

What is **most striking** about the texts of the hatha yogis is that, in the process of revisiting the practices of yoga, Swatmarama completely eliminated the yama (moral codes) and niyama (self-restraints) which were the starting points in the Buddhist and Jain systems, as well as in Patanjali’s yoga!

The similarities between Patanjali’s eightfold path or *ashtanga yoga* and the Buddhist’s teachings have long been noted, and it is entirely reasonable to think that Patanjali was deeply influenced by the Buddhists. Indian thought during the period of Classical Yoga as a whole was very much in dialogue with and response to the Buddhists. Particularly the analytical slant that Samkhya Yoga took on so strongly in the Classical Period is widely recognized as a response to the intellectual challenge posed by Buddhist dialectics.

Patanjali was a contemporary of Buddha and it’s fair to say that his system of yoga was influenced by the Buddhist philosophy of yama and niyama. Patanjali’s contention is that you have to first perfect yama and niyama, otherwise asana and pranayama may fail to lead us to samadhi, the goal of yoga as he saw it. This is entirely in keeping with Buddhist thought, which saw the path to spirituality as beginning necessarily with high ethical ideals.

In the Postclassical Period, the sages of Hatha Yoga began to seriously reconsider this view. They saw that the attempt to practice self-control and discipline according to the high ideals and strict rule of the yamas and niyamas can create an inner conflict and disharmony within one's own personality.

In short, a system that *begins* with ideals of spiritual perfection sets up a duality from the start, because these ideals set forth a goal that divides us against ourselves. For instance, there are yoga teachers who, on this model, argue that you cannot consistently or genuinely practice yoga or 'be' a yogi without being nonviolent, which they interpret to mean that one *must* be a vegetarian.<sup>13</sup> For many who practice yoga, this presents a conflict from the start that leads them either to seek a compromise that they can live with, or ignore the point with a sense of guilt.

Overall, yoga is often full of people 'trying' to be spiritual – and the *trying* indicates a dualism and conflict that one may never quite overcome. As long as we are *trying* to be spiritual, we are painfully aware that we *are not* spiritual – the goal is always just beyond our reach. This is not to suggest that we just give up on morality because it is just too hard; rather, the very dualistic nature of a philosophy that begins with strict and often unreachable moral ideals can only lead to disharmony and inner conflicts of conscience rather than wholeness.

The Tantrikas, on the other hand, would rather we begin with the understanding that we *are inherently* spiritual, and we have but to fully unfold the Spirit that we are; there are no pre-requisites for being what we already *are*. In this way they began from a more nondualistic standpoint in setting aside ideal precepts that define precisely what we are not, and instead beginning with purification at its most fundamental, in order to allow what we are to shine forth.

In the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* the first thing we see is that Swatmarama does not worry about self-control and self-discipline in the form of yama and niyama. He orders the approach to practice very differently, beginning by saying that you should first purify the whole body - the stomach, intestines, nervous system and other systems. Thus, shatkarma comes first, i.e. neti, dhauti, basti, kapalbhathi, trataka and nauli – with the recognition that the use of these practices is relative to one's physical condition. Not everyone is equally 'impure' physically, and so not everyone has to start with the cleansing practices of swallowing a cloth and so on. For many, the practice of the asanas is enough.

After shatkarma comes asana and pranayama. Again, the point is eminently practical: self-control and self-discipline start with the body, largely because that is much easier. To remain steady in an asana or in a pranayama practice is a great self-discipline, and we can imagine Swatmarama wondering aloud why we would start our yoga by fighting with the mind first – the most difficult of battles, and largely misguided, since it only leads to antagonism and animosity towards oneself.

So the masters of hatha yoga began with the discipline of the body, and explained what they meant by the body. Far beyond just the physical body of muscle and bone, the subtle elements (tattwas) the energy channels (nadis) are to be purified through the practices of asana and pranayama, so that the behavior of the prana or vital force, the entire nervous system and the organic or chemical balance in the body could be properly maintained and harmonized. After this there followed the practices of mudra that made it possible to deepen meditation through inducing pratyahara, which leads into dharana, dhyana and samadhi.

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13 I myself am, by the way, a vegetarian.

## The 'Limbs' of Yoga Revisited

And so in the *Gheranda Samhita* as well, we find that Gheranda treats hatha yoga as having seven rather than eight limbs:

Purification, strengthening, stabilizing, calmness, lightness, perception [of the Self], and the untainted [i.e. liberation] are the seven means of [the Yoga of] the pot [i.e. the body].  
1.9

1. **Purification** is accomplished by the six acts [cleansing techniques or *shat-karman*];
2. **Strength** through postures (*asana*);
3. **Stability** through the seals (*mudra*);
4. **Calmness** through sense-withdrawal (*pratyahara*);
5. **Lightness** from breath control (*pranayama*);
6. **Perception of the Self** from meditation (*dhyana*);
7. The **Untainted** [state] from ecstasy (*samadhi*); [this last state is] undoubtedly liberation. 1.10-11<sup>14</sup>

The purificatory practices cleanse the digestive system as well as the passages for the breath for the very practical reason that one cannot engage in breathing practices or concentrate effectively if either of these systems is out of order. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (2.21) suggests that only those who are flabby and phlegmatic need to resort to these practices.

Overall the sages recognized that if the mind is to be purified, it is necessary for the body as a whole to undergo a process of purification – and hatha yoga identifies six types of purification. When you clear the body of these impurities, the nadis function and the energy blocks are released, and one is in a position to meditate with clarity and without so much inner conflict. This is not to say that ethical ideals or principles are irrelevant to the path of spiritual growth; instead, this expresses a faith that as the most fundamental and restrictive impurities are gradually removed, these qualities naturally unfold and shine forth as natural expressions of our own unfolding awareness.<sup>15</sup>

Thus in these seven 'limbs' Gheranda echoes Patanjali, while at the same time setting aside ethical codes for mental purification as the initial focus. His central emphasis shifts towards physical purification as well as specific techniques of *mudra* ('seal') and *bandha* ('lock') as they are related to *asana* and *pranayama*. These are specific actions are ultimately designed to direct the life force within the body, stimulating it and directing it in ways that bring us into higher states of awareness as the prana enters the *sushumna*.

*Dhyana* or meditation is characteristically treated in the tantras as visualization. The *Gheranda Samhita* speaks of three kinds of *dhyana*: 1) visualization with a 'coarse' object, such as a visualized deity; 2) visualization with a 'subtle' object – which in Tantra is described as the *bindu* or transcendental point of light that is the origin of the universe, and 3) contemplation of the Absolute as light. Throughout this process, attention is turned inward upon the inner Self, which the sage Gheranda describes in terms of the awakened kundalini. The end of this process is the abiding state of *samadhi* or ecstatic unity.

The main objective of hatha yoga is to create an absolute balance of the interacting and intertwined energies of our being. When this balance is created, the impulses generated awaken a spiritual potential that was previously dormant under the weight of one's preoccupations with mind and body.

<sup>14</sup> *The Yoga Tradition* by Georg Feuerstein, p. 391

<sup>15</sup> Ethical codes are enforced as law when some people are determined to break them for their own self-interest, harming others. It's fair to say that if someone embarks on the path of yoga, he or she already has an inherent appreciation for or respect of these principles, even if we all at times suffer lapses. We all fall, pick ourselves up and learn from our lapses. In the course of learning, this emphasis on purification addresses the subtler influences that led us to do act badly, even when we intended the good.

## The 'Force' and Esoteric Teachings of Hatha Yoga

Despite the more practical and accessible beginnings of the practice laid out by the hatha yogis, it would be a mistake to think that hatha yoga, as it was classically practiced, was easy-going. To the contrary, it was a hard discipline, but one directed toward the body rather than the impossible whirlwind of the mind. Hatha yoga was known as the “method of violent exertion;” one of the meanings of *hatha* is force, and it was a forceful practice, though perhaps unnecessarily so.

Moreover, the practices as they evolved were highly esoteric, operating according to ideas that are quite unfamiliar to us, and until only recently have been kept in strictest secrecy. Hatha Yoga had as its centerpiece the system of the six chakras or ‘wheels of transformation,’ and transformation was the essence of the discipline involving the chakras. The Siddhas were spiritual alchemists concerned with literal transmutation of the body-mind into pure ‘gold,’ the immortal spiritual essence of the embodied self.

The *means* for this alchemy took different forms: the Natha Siddhas had as their counterparts the Rasa Siddhas, who worked alchemically with physical substances such as mica and sulfur for the same end, and their work is at the root of the medical science of Ayurveda.

The Natha Siddhas worked directly with the body, believing in essence that the *siddhis* or paranormal powers, and ultimately *jivanmukti* or liberation, result from the internal combination and transformation of energies that take the physical form of sexual fluids. These are combined into *amrita*, the divine nectar of immortality, through hatha yogic processes involving the chakras and the breath. In this concern for imbibing the inner nectar of *amrita*, the Natha Siddhas hearken back to the earliest notions of sacrifice and reintegration, but now on a very practical rather than mythical level. The body itself is the offering, and the heat or *tapas* of the practice of yoga is the sacrificial fire that reintegrates what has been broken through physical existence.

This vision also brings the original explorations of yoga back to the most concrete, addressing our mental/spiritual energy in terms of the energy behind our most fundamental drives. The mundane experience of the body, the Nathas would agree, is of dispersion and dissolution of life into the whirlwind of worldly concerns. This dissipation through extroversion – *pravritti* – is paralleled by the dispersion of our sexual energy. The spiritual path is concerned with retrieving our essential nature, with reintegration of the very energy of our self-awareness or consciousness that is normally dispersed in mundane existence and is tangibly expressed as sexual energy as well as related drives. This reintegration of our outward-going energies amounts to the introversion – *nivritti* – of our awareness. This vision does not hate *Māyā* or the cycle of worldly existence, but recognizes that Life has its own very strong currents, and one has the freedom to live wisely and to honor the wealth of life by economizing on how it is spent, all for the sake of a higher experience of Life.

The most obvious manifestation of the dissipation of Life that comes with the dissipation of our energies is the process of aging and death, which is entirely in keeping with the natural course of things. The cool, moonlike nectar of youth is progressively burnt up in the hot, solar fire of extroverted life. Yoga, and especially hatha yoga, involved forcefully controlling and even reversing the body’s natural tendency toward aging through the combined techniques of breath control, asana and meditation. The methods for doing this are variously called *ulata sadhana* (regressive practice), *kaya kalpa* (bodily reintegration), and *pravritti* (retroversion). In essence, our life energy (which they express in terms of the sexual fluids of the body) – the refined manifestation of the ‘lunar’ energy of life – is progressively consolidated through practice and redirected upward through the central channel of the body, until it fills and replenishes the ‘moon’ in the

head. As it rises, it is gradually transformed into *amrita*, the nectar of immortality.

While this talk of sexual fluids and energies can be somewhat off-putting, the essence of the energies they are describing lies in their treatment of the Prana, which is the truest and subtlest manifestation of these energies. The driving force of the practice of hatha yoga is the breath or *prana*, and without an understanding of this, much of the point of hatha yoga as a practice is lost.

Hatha Yoga in its original conception is the forceful channeling and control of the vital breaths (*pranas*) and of the heat (*tapas* or fire of yoga) of the subtle body. Yogic transformation begins when the yogi concentrates all of his vital breaths at the opening to the medial channel or *sushumna* at the base of the spine through practice of the *mudras* (seals) and *bandhas* (locks) in the course of asana and pranayama. It is through this forceful direction and concentration of the energies of the breath that the ‘mouth’ of the medial channel is opened (whereas previously it had remained closed). With the opening of the *sushumna* to the ascent of one’s vital energy, the process of yogic reversal begins. Through heroic efforts of mental concentration and physical effort, the yogi begins a controlled raising of his vital lunar energy (‘seed’), the solar heat of his yogic fire, and his breath or *prana*, the vehicle of his awareness. The form that this unified energy takes is known as the *kundalini Shakti*, the energy of the *Prana* in the form of the power or *Shakti* of *Kundalini*.

## The Obstacles in Our Path: the Granthis or ‘Knots’

The ‘Granthis’ are psychic ‘knots’ that limit our thinking and experience. They represent three forms of ‘stuckness’ or obstacles presented by our way of thinking and seeing. Each is associated with one or more of the ‘Koshas’ or ‘coverings,’ which are levels of the subtler experiences of being ‘in’ the body, from the gross or physical, to the subtler experience of the breath, to the even subtler realms of the mind and consciousness, and ultimately to the level of bliss that transcends both mental and physical experience.

As we move deeper in meditation and spiritual awareness, there are key points or forms of awareness at which we can get ‘stuck’ through identification with those forms of awareness. These are directly related to the *vrittis* or impressions vibrating within key chakras along the way.

1. Brahma Granthi – the feeling of separateness, which is centered in the experience of the physical body, the ‘covering’ of the Annamaya Kosha, the ‘body [made] of food.’

— This knot is located in the Muladhara Chakra, and the obstacle it presents is our concern for our own security. A person at this level sees only diversity and is restless with desire and fear.

— The basis of this ‘knot’ is our perception of this physical world as the one true reality. As a result, the Kundalini — the foundation of our awareness, both spiritual and mundane — is stuck supporting that awareness, and our potential for nondual awareness is ‘dormant’ or ‘asleep,’ while our mental energy is involved entirely in desire and ambition. As long as energy is knotted in this way, it is hard to meditate well because of our restlessness, fear and inability to become one-pointed.

— The appropriate practice for overcoming these obstacles: purification through the physical practice, bringing health and security to the body, steadiness to the mind, and control and greater control and discipline over the senses and emotions.

2. Vishnu Granthi – attachment to doing good, which comes when awareness is centered in the heart — the body of prana or Pranamaya Kosha. Here we are centered in the experience of faith, love & compassion, which brings with it an attachment to the cosmic good and the desire to help humanity, attachment to traditions and idealism.

— This knot is located in the Anahata Chakra (heart), the seat of the prana, which controls the mind and emotions

— The heart chakra is the seat of faith, love & compassion, which can present obstacles so far as compassion forms attachments – not to desires or sense objects, but to the good, and to a desire to help humanity. One adopts the vow of the bodhisattva to relieve the world from suffering; but by doing so the bodhisattva gets caught up in the sense of doership and actually impedes his progress.

— A person at this level sees the unity in diversity, but gets caught up in diversity; though disciplined and one-pointed, he is still restless with the desire to do something.

— The practice at this level is pranayama – for loosening the sense of doership through surrender to the breath.

3. Rudra Granthi – attachment to knowing, which comes when awareness is centered in the mental bodies of knowledge or jnana: Monomaya (mind) and Vijnanamaya (intellect) Kosha: these forms of knowing, while ‘pure’ in their perception of unity, still retain attachment to I-consciousness or ego

— This knot is located in the Ajna Chakra (between the eyebrows), the seat of knowledge and the ‘passport station’ for passage to higher forms of awareness.

— The obstacle is attachment to I-consciousness; keeping one’s awareness of self as a drop, holding back from the ocean

— This is a high level of achievement, going beyond diversity to perceive unity; but with that comes powers and attainments, which can reinforce a still egoistic sense that ‘I’ have attained this. The fear of death also remains as a strong obstacle.

When the three knots are untied with the help of the Kundalini, the yogi perceives reality as pervaded by divine energy, and becomes established in the **Body of Bliss (Anandamaya Kosha)**, and is able to move even beyond that.

This happens as Kundalini pierces the chakras. But these are two key terms that require some unpacking if we are to make any real sense out of the hatha yoga system. It all begins with a closer look at the central player in the Postclassical systems: the Shakti.

## The Meaning of ‘Shakti’ — the Key to the Meaning of Tantra

To understand the emerging role of the Kundalini in the hatha yoga system, we have to take a step back and look at the foundation of tantric systems in general, which is their emphasis upon and veneration of the feminine aspect of Divine Consciousness: ‘Shakti.’

The meaning of ‘Shakti’ is at the heart of our understanding of tantra. What is striking is the elusive nature of the definition of both ‘Shakti’ and of ‘Tantra’ as terms and as ideas. Both have a wide variety of meanings, and both terms actually have a presence in Vedic literature and the Upanishads, and onward through the history of yoga. ‘Shakti’ is used in a variety of ways “ranging from its use as a way of expressing the ultimate creative power of Being itself, all the way to its use as a way of expressing the capacity of words to convey meaning. (artha)”<sup>16</sup> The range of meanings of Shakti is broad, with many senses in between.

The fundamental meaning derives from its original root: the verb ‘Shak,’ which means ‘to be able.’ The word Shakti basically suggests “the power to produce an effect, capability, efficiency or potency.”<sup>17</sup> Yet this hardly does the word justice as far as how the word is later used. In its highest philosophical form, Shakti is essentially the power that makes the world manifest or appear and evolve. This is the case even in Shankaracharya’s Advaita Vedanta (indeed, when you look at the role of Shakti, Vedanta and Tantra are really not so far apart). ‘Shiva’ is the ‘Shaktiman,’ the ‘holder’ of the power of Shakti; Shakti is the actualization of what Shiva holds in potential — they are not actually ‘two,’ though the genders of the words may lead us to think so. ‘Shiva’ and ‘Shakti’ are essential to expressing the nondual philosophies of the Postclassical era, even while the notions themselves seem dualistic.

However varied the meaning and use given to Shakti, in the end we find that She is the common denominator, the shared basis of practice and belief, between the Tantra of Hinduism, Buddhism and even Jainism. And true to her sublime feminine nature, She retains something of Her own independence even from Tantra. Tantrism and Shaktism are not identical: rather, they are “two intersecting but not coinciding circles.”<sup>18</sup> That power and freedom of Shakti to reveal and conceal the manifest universe is one half of the question; the meaning of Tantra as a philosophy and vast (and mixed) set of practices is the other, which always hinges upon the meaning of ‘Shakti.’

### *The Origin and Meaning of Tantra*

The very meaning of the word ‘tantra’ — what it signifies in terms of actual schools, practices or ways of thinking — is actually much harder to pin down than I may have led you to believe so far. The word, like the word ‘Shakti,’ covers a lot of ground, and it is only somewhere around the era of the emergence of hatha yoga as well as the mature philosophical systems including Kashmir Shaivism that we can even begin to sort out what ‘tantra’ at least comes to mean.

What is Tantra? Even today there is a good deal of murkiness and confusion surrounding the word, and for good reason. When the word was first introduced to western thinking at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had shocking connotations. ‘Tantra’ was believed to be “a conglomeration of bizarre and unconventional religious disciplines consisting of sorcery, exorcism and orgiastic practices.”<sup>19</sup> This was not without solid historical and linguistic foundation. In contemporary Indian languages — Hindi, Tamil, Marathi and Bengali, to name a few — ‘Tantra’ connotes “black magic, spiritual or religious practices involving sex, and manipulation of

16 Sakti: The Power in Tantra, Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, p. 5

17 Ibid., p. 5

18 Ibid., p. 28

19 Ibid., p. 19

psychic powers or evil spirits to seduce women, defeat or injure opponents, or mesmerize others.”<sup>20</sup>

This was the initial ‘picture’ of Tantra in scholarship at the beginning of the 20th century. But it was not a complete picture. The truth was more complex, and further study through the last century has shown that ‘Tantra’ is not confined to such a marginal group of people associated with eroticism, alchemy and magic. It is actually a common element in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism — as we likewise noted is true of ‘Shakti.’

This is where the history of yogic thought can itself get confusing, since so far we have suggested that it can be neatly divided into ‘eras,’ in which ‘tantra’ is distinctive of ‘Postclassical’ thought that follows after the ‘Classical’ era. But the truth about tantra is more complicated. In one form or another, it is a consistent undercurrent in the history of yoga philosophy. The Postclassical era is when it truly comes into its own.

The problem becomes clear as soon as we turn to what should be a very simple question: how do we determine which texts are ‘Tantric,’ and by what definition of Tantra?

Pandit Rajmani Tigunait points out that “we have no standard criteria for defining exactly which texts can be called purely Tantric and which [are] non-Tantric within a given division or subdivision of Hinduism. Tantric ideas are scattered throughout non-Tantric sources. For example, traces of the philosophical ideas and ritual practices found in Saiva Tantric texts can be seen in the Vedas, the Brahmanas, and the Upanishads... at least for the past millennia, there have been authors and practitioners who claimed that their works or practices are Tantric, although in most cases without making a sharp distinction between themselves and their non-Tantric counterparts...[Yet] in spite of these ambiguities, there still seems to be a general, though unspoken, consensus regarding what constitutes Tantra.”<sup>21</sup> The consensus is implicit, not explicit. If there is indeed a clear basis for distinction, ‘they’ certainly don’t let us in on it!

One would think that we might solve the question of the identifying characteristics of ‘Tantra’ by looking to its historical origins. But as might be expected, there is no agreement here either. Andre Padoux sums it up by saying “all definite assertions must be avoided...Tantric Hinduism would have emerged progressively through a process of ongoing evolution over an extended period of time, granted...that we do not know how and when it started.”<sup>22</sup>

We have something of a Catch-22 situation at work, since in order to establish the historical beginnings of Tantra on the basis of when texts first appeared, we would have to have a clear basis for deciding *which* texts are tantric based on a definition of tantra — which as we saw, is not so easy to do, without a clear sense of *when* in history tantric texts began to appear!

While the question of the earliest origins of tantra may be unanswerable, we can at least trace tantric literature back to the 5th century AD based on a couple of key texts,<sup>23</sup> which is the same time that Buddhist tantric texts began to appear, but this still does not give a sufficient chronology or a clear conceptual basis for *defining* Tantra. We just know it started to surface then, and at best we can say that **Hindu, Jaina and Buddhist Tantrism could not have developed separately.** The progress of Tantra in these religions strongly suggests that all of these had some common source from which they derived and adapted the tantric elements that fit their religious orientation.

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20 Ibid., p. 21

21 Ibid., p. 24

22 Ibid., p. 25

23 Ibid., p. 26

But what was that source, and when did it first appear? We don't really know.

We do know that things started to get clearer around the time of the rise of the hatha yogis. Douglas Brooks comments that Tantric texts gained their independent status around the 9th century AD, though their concepts and practices “had their antecedents in ancient wisdom traditions, shamanism, yoga, alchemy and other folk practices, whose adherents may have involved themselves in religious rituals containing elements of asceticism, eroticism, and goddess worship.”<sup>24</sup> The ‘founders’ of hatha yoga, as we saw earlier, set themselves to sorting out which of these practices they wanted to retain as part of their system, and which they wanted to discard, or at least wanted to set at a distance from themselves.

By the 11th century, Tantric practices and concepts had gone mainstream in Hinduism, judging from how frequently the concepts and practices of Tantric Yoga appear in the writings of non-Tantric authors -- plus the fact that people from all levels of society were involved in a broad range of Tantric practices. The goals of these practices in general still ranged from “the acquisition of supernatural powers, sexual prowess, material goods, and physical immortality to the attainment of liberation while still in the physical body and an experiential realization of God.”<sup>25</sup> In one form or another, these goals were typical of the hatha yogis, though the practices may have been reformed.

### *Some Conclusions*

Historically speaking, Tantrism was not itself considered to be a religion, nor is it specifically and/or exclusively allied with any of the prevalent religions, nor was it thought to compromise adherence to any particular religious beliefs. Sanjukta Gupta points out that “adherents of Tantrism neither claim to follow Tantrism as an independent religion, nor renounce the religion in which they were born and raised.”<sup>26</sup> Elements of ritual worship (puja) and meditation (yoga) — largely considered ‘Standard Tantric Sadhana’ — appear in all of the existing religions in India today.

We do have to be clear that Tantra and Tantric literature is not a homogenous body of literature or teachings. While Tantric texts often emphasize *practices*, such as those related to yantras, mandalas and mantras, they also include contemplation on a range of topics from the nature of absolute reality; the process of evolution-maintenance-dissolution of the universe; the evolution of sound or word at the four levels of speech; the different centers of consciousness in the human body known as chakras; methods for awakening spiritual self-awareness in the form of the Kundalini Shakti. This latter philosophical aspect of Tantra provides the ground of commonality by which we might come to grips with the essential meaning of Tantra.

Thus if we are to make any sense of what we mean when we talk about ‘tantra,’ we have to talk about it in the context of these latter philosophical ideas and especially the meaning and role of the Kundalini Shakti. Without a clear sense of Her role in the cosmic scheme of things, any talk of ‘tantra’ or ‘tantric philosophy’ is completely vague and amorphous. Thus *our* definition of ‘tantra’ has to turn upon the emerging role of the Shakti, and especially the Kundalini Shakti.

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24 Ibid., p. 26

25 Ibid., p. 27

26 Ibid., p. 22

## 'Who' Is the Kundalini?

*Kundalini* is another word for *Cit* or Consciousness, who is, as we suggested earlier, the creative aspect of the Divine as Power – Shakti.

Shakti is the actively unfolding power of Absolute Consciousness to create the universe. She Herself takes the form of the world by Her own power or ability, 'out of' nothing other than Herself. 'Shakti' is the power by which the world is brought into being, both by 'veiling' (Avarana) the One (the unity of Divine Consciousness) and projecting (Viksepa) the Many (the multiplicity of 'I' consciousnesses we call individuals).

This is how She 'creates:' She veils Her own unlimited, perfect Consciousness out of Her own free will and produces the limited, imperfect consciousness of individuals. She as Consciousness casts a veil over — or limits — Her own awareness of Herself in order to experience a world, like an actor taking on a part.

In the process of this Self-limitation, She Herself as the Creative Shakti comes finally to rest within the individual's body as the Kundalini. She has not only taken the form of the world by Her self-veiling; She has also become *you*, the very being and foundation of your own consciousness as an individual.

*How – in what way – does She exist in us?*

She is the steady support of all our activity, whether inward-looking or outward-looking. In becoming the individual, She came finally to rest in the Muladhara Chakra in a state of 'sleep.' She is 'asleep' so far as She is the steady support of all activity looking outward (Bahirmukhi), and we are aware of ourselves only as individuals, not as universal creative Consciousness. Because of her, we can perform all outer actions in the world, and are engrossed in the world through the senses, which She empowers. But we are unaware of Her presence and power, dwelling *within* us, *as* us, *for* us. Such is our own 'unawakened' state of ordinary awareness.

Thus, when we think the world to be different from ourselves and from God or Brahman, it is through the influence of the Kundalini. Her 'sleep' is the bondage of the ignorant; when She is asleep, we are 'awake' only to our own individuality.

But when *She* awakens, we fall 'asleep' to our ordinary experience as individuals. What does Her 'awakening' mean? When She 'awakes' and reveals the Truth, She wakes us up to our true nature as Shiva – i.e. returns us to the experience of Oneness which She Herself had veiled. Her 'awakening' is the withdrawal of Her own activity that produced the world. She absorbs into Herself all of the Tattvas or levels of Being that she created, and returning individual consciousness to universal consciousness. And when She returns us to 'ordinary' consciousness, She then recreates the world within the individual with this new 'enlightened' awareness.

The paradox of the language is that She is never truly 'asleep.' When She is 'asleep' in one respect, She is yet 'awake' in another. A truly 'awakened' or realized being is 'awake' in *both* respects. The process of this awakening is expressed through the teachings on the chakras.

## What Are the Chakras?

The ‘chakras’ or ‘wheels of energy’ that actively distribute the flow of prana through the ‘nadis.’ The passageways by which the prana moves through the body, empowering its physical and mental functions, are known as ‘nadis’ or ‘rivers.’ These are analogous to the physical nerves, but operate on a subtler energetic level and even extend beyond the physical boundaries of the body. There are said to be 72,000 nadis, of which three are ultimately the most important.

Two of these nadis, the ida and pingala, are associated directly with a corresponding nostril (left and right, respectively) and its energy, and they crisscross along the central core of the body from the space between the eyebrows to the base of the spine. The place where these two ‘rivers’ meet at the base of the spine is also the entryway to the third and most important nadi, the Sushumna nadi. This central passageway extends beyond the joining of the ida and pingala at the space between the eyebrows, and extends to the crown of the head and beyond. The ultimate goal of pranayama practice is to direct the flow of prana into this central passageway, where the true work of yoga is done.



The two principle nadis which surround the Sushumna, the ida and pingala nadis, are like positive and negative currents of pranic energy that, by their intertwining, generate the energy of the swirling chakras or ‘wheels’ of energy. These chakras are energy distribution centers, sending out prana to the body at all levels from gross (physical flesh and bones) to subtle (the realms of thought). Each level of distribution corresponds to the energy of each of the five elements (earth, water, fire, air and the akasha or space). Each chakra likewise harbors certain typical vrittis or types of mental fluctuation according to its governing element. Thus the way we as individuals think and react tends to reflect the vrittis of the chakra(s) from which we are most accustomed to functioning in our interactions with the world.

The ordinary functioning of the chakras depends upon and is affected by the balance of the flow of breath in the two nostrils, and thus the flow of prana in the ida and pingala nadis. The relative dominance and flow of the breath in the two nostrils — which regularly changes during the day — directly influences the nervous and subtler pranic system, and thus strongly influences our inner and outer experience through the mind and senses. The yogis learned how to master and regulate the flow of these currents in order to function at their peak mentally and physically. This art by itself offers a host of very practical applications.

Their mastery *also* included bringing the two currents into *balance*, which brought about the desired spiritual effect of ‘awakening’ the prana as the Kundalini in the third channel, the Sushumna. When prana flows in both ida and pingala equally, with neither dominant, then the pure, unified stream of prana can be directed through intention, bandha and mudra into the Sushumna nadi, and one is drawn into a deep state of meditation as the rising prana, the Kundalini, ‘pierces’ and the chakras. With this ‘piercing,’ the chakra turns in upon itself, gathering its otherwise outward and downward flowing energy and directing it inward and upward ultimately lifting one into higher and higher states of meditation. As this takes place, the ‘seeds’

of latent impressions or *samskaras* are ‘burnt up,’ reducing the *vrittis* that otherwise govern our minds.

Thus, while the body/mind of the individual is the end result of the emanation and ‘evolution’ of the Prana from the subtle to the gross, the process of this manifestation can be reversed through the rise of the Kundalini within the Sushumna. In this way, we follow the conscious energy of our own being back to its source. This process of ‘involution’ transforms one’s ordinary ego-centered awareness into greater and more expansive unity consciousness as the Kundalini rises through the chakras, ‘burning up’ impressions of duality and ‘cutting’ the fundamental knots or ‘*granthis*’ which are the evolutionary basis for duality consciousness.

This is not a one-time event. The Kundalini does repeatedly descend again and again, restoring normal consciousness and the functioning of the chakras. But with each descent and ‘recreation’ of our ego-awareness, the ‘*vrittis*’ of duality fade, so one experiences the stillness of seeing unity in diversity. As this state becomes firmly established through the repetition of practice, it is described as ‘*jivanmukti*,’ the state of liberation while living in the body. This is the tantric fulfillment of Patanjali’s definition of yoga as the ‘stilling of the thought-waves (*vrittis*) of the mind’ — through the processes of the Prana as it does its work in the form of the Kundalini.

## Stages in the Ascent of the Kundalini

There are extensive descriptions of this process as it takes place in stages. David Gordon White describes quite succinctly, albeit clinically, the essence of this process:

The prodigious heat generated with the piercing of each chakra, coupled with the fact that upward movement is here equated with absorption, allows for a homologization of each circle of transformation (chakra) with a cremation ground, the place of final sacrifice, and a *pralaya*, a cosmic dissolution. This heat, concentrated within the infinitesimal space of the medial channel, effects the gradual transformation of “raw” semen into “cooked” and even perfected nectar, *amrita*; it is this nectar that gradually fills out the moon in the cranial vault such that, at the conclusion of this process, the lunar orb, (is) now brimming with nectar... The brimming downturned moon in the cranial vault is also identified as a thousand-petaled lotus: this is the so-called “seventh” chakra, the *sahasrara*. This transformation of semen into nectar wholly transforms the body, rendering it immortal.<sup>27</sup>

This, in rather technical and physiological terms, is the essential intent of the process. Jnaneshwar Maharaj gave a much more *experiential* description, putting it more in the descriptive language of the Kundalini used by the Natha Siddhas, the tradition to which he himself belonged. The following is a very abridged version of his more lengthy account:

The heat produced by the practice of posture awakens the force called Kundalini... So lies the Kundalini, very small and coiled three and a half times, like a female serpent with her head turned downwards. It is like a ring of lightning, folds of flaming fire, or a bar of pure gold... when compressed by the *vajra* posture, it is awakened. Then, like a star shooting through space, or like a point of light bursting forth like a sprouting seed, it breaks its bonds, grips the body, and appears in the region of the navel... The fire arising from it spreads upward and downward and begins to consume the flesh.

...Slowly from above, the lake of moon-nectar turns downward on one side and pours into the mouth of Kundalini. The nectar fills the *nadis*, circulates throughout the whole body, and is absorbed into it along with the *prana*. Just as when molten metal is poured into a heated mold, the melted wax pours out and only metal remains, taking the form of the mold, similarly, beauty incarnates in the form of the body, covered by a veil of skin... As if the lovely hues of the evening sky were transferred to the body, or as if an image were fashioned

27 *The Alchemical Body* by David Gordon White, p. 41

from an inner radiance of the spirit...It seems to be the very incarnation of peace...This is how the yogi's body appears when Kundalini has drunk of the nectar. Old age vanishes, the knot of youth is loosened, and the lost bloom of childhood reappears.

...Listen! Although the body has the appearance of gold, it has the lightness of air, for no particles of earth or water remain in it. The yogi can see beyond all oceans, hear the thoughts of the heavens, and read the mind of the ant. He rides the horses of the winds and walks on the surface of water, though his feet do not touch it. In such a way he acquires many superhuman powers.

Grasping the *prana* by the hand, ascending the stairway of the ether, Kundalini enters the heart by the steps of the *sushumna nadi*...There exists here another great space in the form of a lotus, where Consciousness appears. In the innermost cavity of the heart, the divine Kundalini lays out before Consciousness the feast of Her own luster...Her brilliance then vanishes and is transformed into the *prana*...Upon entering the cave of the heart, it loses its separateness and is merged into the power dwelling within it.

...”One body devours another.” This is the secret teaching of the Natha sect.<sup>28</sup>

One important difference is worth noting between these two accounts. The first account by David Gordon White more closely reflects the more specific and technical language of most of the hatha yoga texts, as well as the practical and almost mechanical processes involved in working with this energy. Jnaneshwar's account is far more devotional, recognizing the divine power of grace at play at the heart of the yogi's efforts. In the more physically oriented approach to hatha yoga, the 'force' at play in hatha yoga appears more to be the yogi's will, by which he swims upstream against the course of nature. In Jnaneshwar's devotional account, the 'force' is clearly the Kundalini Shakti who, though 'awakened' through the efforts and spiritual yearning of the yogi, clearly transcends the will and desire of the yogi – and thus can bring about a complete transfiguration.<sup>29</sup>

There is of course far more to be said about the whole tradition and experience of the Kundalini — and hatha yoga **is** the yoga of the Kundalini (though this is not to be confused with the contemporary style named 'Kundalini Yoga,' which is but one expression of this). And there are many warnings as to the dangers of forcefully trying to direct the Kundalini through physical practices. This was in fact the central pitfall of hatha yoga: its forceful and physicalistic approach. Jnaneshwar was in fact offering his own account as a corrective for that.

## Pitfalls of Hatha Yoga

Jnaneshwar is quite concerned to remind us of what might otherwise be lost in the focus on the techniques of hatha yoga. Jnaneshwar Maharaj or 'Jnanadeva' – is both a stellar representative and a sharp critic of the hatha yogis of his time; for Jnaneshwar had his thumb on the challenge that remains at the heart of the practice of hatha yoga to this day.

Jnaneshwar was initiated into the Natha order of the hatha yogins by his elder brother Nivritti Natha, who was said to have been a disciple of Goraksha Natha himself who, as we saw, along with his teacher Matsyendra Natha, are heralded as the creators of hatha yoga.<sup>30</sup> Thus Jnaneshwar speaks with a great deal

28 Jnaneshwari VI 226-291, p. 75-77 in Jnaneshwar's Gita rendered by Swami Kripananda, SUNY Press

29 It's also worth noting that the account given of the chakras bears little resemblance to the way the chakras are discussed and handled in present times. Much has been imported into this system, particularly by its westernization in contemporary culture, and we lose much if we lose sight of the original purpose and inspiration of the system of the chakras elucidated by the Natha Yogis.

30 The time line associated with these connections is typically slippery: Matsyendra is said by some to have lived in the seventh century; Goraksha lived in the late tenth and early eleventh century; Jnanadeva and his brother Nivritti Natha lived in the thirteenth century.

of authority.

In his masterpiece, the *Jnaneshwari*, Jnaneshwar faults the hatha yogis for their preoccupation with their practices and accomplishments and lack of the kind of devotion that would spare them a downfall through egoism:

“By the path of yogic postures, you may rise from the lower levels of sense restraint and climb upwards by the steep ascent of *pranayama*. Then you can reach the cliff of *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses), which is slippery even for the feet of reason, and from which hatha yogis, in spite of their boasting, are hurled down.”<sup>31</sup>

Throughout his work, Jnaneshwar speaks quite clearly from his own experience of the stages of enlightenment, and – though critical – his comments are not really a repudiation of the path of the hatha yogis. Instead, he intends to set the hatha yogis (and all seekers) on firmer ground. His *Jnaneshwari* is a profound effort to unite the teachings of the hatha yogis and of the philosophies of the yoga tradition with the way of the heart taught by Krishna from the time of the Bhagavad-Gita. It’s a compelling and singularly successful in presenting a unified yogic vision that addresses every practical challenge and subtlety of the spiritual path. His work was, in a word, a return to the heart, filled with wisdom and compassion.

The problem is essentially this: the hatha yogis had presented a technology of practice so complete and engrossing, so keenly oriented toward forcefully mastery, that it becomes almost inevitable that a practitioner might lose the original spirit of self-transcendence that is the essence of yoga. Jnaneshwar wished to redress the balance between practice and devotion, between effort and grace, between mastery and surrender.

This is not to say that the original tradition lacked an appreciation of devotion. The Natha Siddhas were contemptuous of the mechanical spirituality of religious ritual; instead, the Natha Siddhas themselves emphasized devotion. But this often got lost along the way. Over time their refinement of technique and the wealth of achievements available to the determined yogi apparently led many to fall short of the goal. Hatha yoga was often, as it is often now, quite physicalistic in its expression, and the process of awakening and directing the Kundalini was often described in almost mechanical terms.

## The Contribution of the Hatha Yogis

The end of the process of unfolding of the Kundalini is the abiding state of samadhi or ecstatic unity. Their description of the state of *samadhi* itself is not essentially different from its description through the course of Indian philosophy. Thus the end result seems to be the same. Yet tantric yoga includes a new feature: a dynamic process, the unfolding of the potential dormant within the body – the Kundalini – as the medium of spirit. And so in the tantric view, realization is ultimately not treated as an event that is outside of life in the physical world, but rather includes and incorporates the processes of life even as we ‘transcend’ it.

In this respect, ‘tantric’ realization is more complete than the classic notion, because it *includes* the body in the processes of realization. In fact, the difference between the body and the divine Shakti disappears, leading to an abiding respect for the divinity of the body and the physical world. As Sir John Woodroffe, the original Western pioneer of Tantric studies put it,

He [the yogin] realizes in the pulsing beat of his heart the rhythm which throbs through, and is the sign of, the universal life. To neglect or to deny the needs of the body, to think of it as something not divine, is to neglect and deny that greater life of which it is a part, and to falsify the great doctrine of the unity of all and

31 Jnaneshwari VI.3.55-56

of the ultimate identity of Matter and Spirit...Even the lowliest physical needs take on a cosmic significance. The body is Shakti. Its needs are Shakti's needs; when man enjoys, it is Shakti who enjoys through him. In all he sees and does it is the Mother who looks and acts. His eyes and hands are Hers...To fully realize Her as such is to perfect this particular manifestation of Hers which is [the yogi] himself.<sup>32</sup>

The yogi who reaches this realization has transcended his body and ego without denying either. Instead, respect, love and responsibility govern his attitudes and actions as he sees nothing but the divine Shakti both within himself and all around, and he acts with greater skill, wisdom and insight in the world than the ordinary human is capable of. All of this is thanks to the complete unfolding of the *Shakti* in the form of the *kundalini* energy, the inner form of our own individual spiritual potential.

## The Unique Ambitions of the Natha Siddhas

The Natha yogis shared this Tantric vision of realization in its reverence for the manifest world as 'Shakti' or the creative energy of Consciousness. At the same time, the Natha yogis were rather unique in their emphasis on the forcefulness of the practice, and the degree of will involved, even while they recognized the need for guidance and initiation into the practice by a teacher. But more than anything else, they placed a value and emphasis on the body that went far beyond any of the other sages in the yoga tradition.

The hatha yoga of the Natha yogis has an ineradicable 'do-it-yourself' attitude that tends toward what amounts to willful manipulation of the *Kundalini* (and so, given the true power of the Kundalini as the force behind the universe, rightly has a reputation for being difficult and even dangerous), as well as what can only strike one as an excessive obsession with physical longevity, if not immortality.

To quote directly from Paul Muller-Ortega's book, *The Triadic Heart of Shiva*:

The Nath cult seems to represent a particular phase of the Siddha cult of India.

This Siddha cult is a very old religious cult with its main emphasis on a psychochemical process of yoga, known as the *kaya-sadhana* or the culture of the body with a view to making it perfect and immutable and thereby attaining immortal spiritual life. **To escape death ... was the central point** round which grew the details of the Siddha cult, and the Siddhas in general hold "that death may either be put off *ab libitum* by a special course of restrengthening and revitalizing the body so as to put it permanently *en rapport* with the world of sense, or to be ended definitively by dematerializing and spiritualizing the body, according to prescription, so that it disappears in time in a celestial form from the world of sense, and finds its permanent abode in the transcendental glory of God." This Siddha school seems to be closely associated with the Indian school of Rasayana and it is sometimes held that the Siddha school was originally based on the theories and practices of the Rasayana school.

The aim of the Natha Siddhas was certainly to achieve the condition known its *jivanmukti*, or liberation while still alive. This condition of freedom then led to the further goal of *paramukti*, in which the liberated one: is 'immortalized' in a perfected body that, in some respects, makes him an embodied Shiva. Here, union with Siva comes to mean truly embodying Shiva, with full possession of all of his powers and abilities. **The goal is not a resolution or release of a finite soul into an ultimate source or essence. Rather, what is sought is much more daring and ambitious. The siddha wishes to stem the current that usually leads to death, by means of the regressive process.** Says Dasgupta:

"The yoga practices of the Nath Siddhas is *Ultā* or regressive, firstly in the sense that it involves yogic processes which give a regressive or upward motion to the whole biological as well as psychological systems which in their ordinary nature possess a downward tendency; and in the sense that such yogic practices lead the Siddha

32 The Yoga Tradition by Georg Feuerstein, p. 399

to his original ultimate nature as the immortal Being in his perfect or divine body.”<sup>33</sup>(emphasis mine)

The rather strange obsession with preserving and ‘raising’ the sexual fluid — the ‘bindu’ — that is so evident in texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika has everything to do with this ambition toward some form of physical immortality or ‘perfection of the body.’

## The Meaning And Significance Of ‘Semen’ or ‘Sexual Fluid’

The emphasis upon “raising” the sexual fluid, found especially in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, as well as in other principal hatha yoga texts, does bear some explanation, especially since the word “semen” suggests that only men are capable of this. The process really has to do with the progressive control of Mind (Manas), Vitality (Prana), and Power (Virya — as in ‘Virility’ — here most often interpreted as “semen”). To control the mind or ‘Manas’ it is to control all three — Prana (Vayu) and Virya. By the same token, to control Prana is to control both Manas and Virya.

Now, what if Virya is controlled? The effect of control over Virya in the form of sexual desire will be exercised upon the substance out of which sexual fluid is made. What we are really talking about is the subtler elemental substance described by Ayurveda, Sukra, which is refined from our food. Its essential nature is ‘Ojas,’ the aspect or power of Prana which is the ‘glue’ that holds body and soul together. When Virya is controlled, as Sir John Woodroffe explains it, this substance (Sukra), which otherwise develops into the gross seed or sexual fluid is made to flow upwards.<sup>34</sup> The result is the control of both Manas and Prana. This control of Virya is largely achieved through Pranayama. With Pranayama, the *product* of Sukra, namely the sexual fluid, ‘dries up.’ That elemental force instead ascends and becomes the nectar of union (Amrita).

“According to Hindu ideas semen (Sukra) exists in a subtle form throughout the whole body. Under the influence of the sexual will it is withdrawn and elaborated into a gross form in the sexual organs. To be *urdhvaretas* is not merely to prevent the emissions of gross semen already formed but to prevent its formation as gross seed, and its absorption in the general system. The body of a man who is truly urdhvaretas has the scent of a lotus. But chaste man where gross semen has formed may, on the other hand, smell like a buck goat.”<sup>35</sup>

To my mind, nothing precludes this from being true of women no less than of men. In both cases, the meaning of “sexual fluid” as Sukra, the essential form of Ojas, is essentially the same.

## The Question of Immortality

Sir John Woodroffe adds to this a note about the significance of Pranayama specifically in the Hatha Yoga tradition:

“Pranayama it is recognized as one of the “limbs” of all the forms (Ashtanga) of yoga. But whereas it is used in Mantra, Laya and Raja Yoga as an auxiliary, the Hatha Yogi as such regards this regulation and Yoga of the breath as the chief means productive of that result (Moksa), which is the common end of all schools of Yoga.”<sup>36</sup>

33 The Triadic Heart of Shiva, Paul Muller-Ortega, p. 37

34 The Serpent Power, Sir John Woodroffe, p. 199

35 Ibid., p. 199

36 Ibid., p. 200

Yet because of its historical association with the alchemical tradition, there is a consistent reference in the hatha yoga texts to “immortality” as the state of the Siddha. This kind of emphasis sets the hatha yoga tradition strangely apart from the other yoga traditions. This kind of accomplishment — the immortal and semi-divine state of the Siddha — is *not* so clearly related to the kind of spiritual realization that the sages of the other traditions were interested in, and so you don’t hear so much about this outside of the Natha Siddha tradition. Nor is this practice necessarily the same thing as raising the Kundalini.

Thus we hatha yogis of today who do not equate spiritual realization with the kind of immortalized body sought after by many of the Natha Siddhas may be relieved to know that we do not have to concern ourselves with these matters, which have more to do with physical self-preservation, and turn instead toward grace and devotion, and realization of one’s genuine spiritual Self.<sup>37</sup>

An example of one such Siddha who followed the tradition of hatha yoga with regard to these practices, is Changdev. This Natha Yogi came to be one of Jnaneshwar’s most famous disciples, once Jnaneshwar freed Changdev from his pride in this kind of Siddhahood. Changdev had famously demonstrated supernatural powers derived from his yoga, and was even reputed to have cheated death for hundreds of years. Changdev was immensely proud of his achievements and of his multitude of followers. At the same time, he was painfully aware that he was spiritually dry. In truth, he knew he was merely extending his life by virtue of these practices until he could find a Teacher who could bring him to full realization.

For us, Changdev represents many sages of the Natha tradition who had perfected their yogic technique but were still wandering, not having completed the journey. When he finally he met his teacher in Jnaneshwar, Changdev nevertheless had some difficulty with the idea of surrendering to him, particularly because Jnaneshwar was so young (as yet only 13 years old or so). In his embarrassment at not knowing how to address Jnaneshwar, Changdev ended up sending only a blank sheet of paper as his ‘introduction.’ To this, Jnaneshwar wrote a response, and his poem is preserved for us as the *Changdev Pasashti*,<sup>38</sup> which initiates Changdev into the Tantric spiritual vision of nonduality. Changdev was humbled by the letter as well as by a number of experiences of Jnaneshwar that followed, all of which showed the true value of Jnaneshwar’s spiritual accomplishment. Once Changdev let go of his infatuation with his own Siddhahood, he became Jnaneshwar’s greatest disciple and a truly realized being in his own right.

Jnaneshwar, by the way, took samadhi (died) at age 26 of his own free will, showing little concern for physical immortality or for extending his life for hundreds of years.

In this letter as well as in his monumental work, the *Jnaneshwari*, Jnaneshwar is at pains to bring us to a deeper appreciation of and reverence for the power of grace and of the heart that will take us beyond the self-will of the ‘forceful’ hatha yogins (not to mention the jnana-yogis with their emphasis on knowledge). Jnaneshwar was very much a part of the Natha tradition, and yet his works are full of admonishments to ‘hatha yogis’ that they not lose their way because of their pride of body.

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37 It is often pointed out (including Paul Muller-Ortega’s book) that there is an unresolved contradiction between the emphasis on absolute celibacy and preservation of the sexual fluid in these tantric texts on the one hand, and tantric sexual practices designed to extend the life and youthfulness (of one of the practitioners) on the other. The whole matter raises issues, not just of consistency but of ethics, and does not sit well with the fundamental spiritual values of yoga, especially so far as it places personal self-preservation above all other values, including self-transcendence.

38 Quoted later in this book – see the section, ‘The Heart of the Yogi.’

## The Natha Yogis and Kashmir Shaivism

In this regard, Jnaneshwar is closer to the Trika philosophy of Abhinavagupta, to which we will turn next. The Trika system of Kashmir Shaivism does not reject the insights of the Natha Yogis into the system of the chakras and the unfolding of the prana as Kundalini, but rather completely re-envisioned the approach of yoga toward the spiritual evolution.

Philosophically the Natha yogis are very much ‘part of the family’ in the Tantric philosophy of the Trika System, but as we have seen, they have their own agenda as well, particularly their emphasis on forging an immortal body in the crucible of practice. Apart from their ‘alchemical’ concerns with this end, what the hatha yogis *share* with the other Tantrikas of the Trika system is an emphasis upon arousing the Kundalini energy, the form of prana concealed within us that is the latent potential for our spiritual evolution.

The **difference** between the tantric yoga of the hatha yogis from the tantra of Kashmir Shaivism lies in the **means** used. The Tantrikas of Kashmir Shaivism did not place their central emphasis on the chakras themselves; nor is yoga meant to carry the attitude of a ‘forceful’ or ‘violent’ practice. Spiritual evolution takes place through ‘stepping into the natural flow’ of the Shakti and fully *participating in* (rather than trying to precipitate) the unfolding of grace. Spiritual evolution takes place through the meeting of the yearning of the yogi with the graceful will of the Shakti, which is something that can be encouraged but never (safely) forced.

In this context, they had little use for the hatha yogis’ emphasis on sustained self-effort centered upon the practice of the bandhas and mudra, the strong exertion of forceful will-power, the sudden arresting of the breath, or the preservation and raising of the ‘bindu.’ The Kashmiri Shaivas exercised a different kind of will — one that seeks to align itself with the Divine will, through whose grace the Kundalini Shakti unfolds as we attend to our ordinary experience. Their emphasis was upon recognizing and being carried by Her power as it flashes forth, both within and all around us.