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## Psychology of Meditation

Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,  
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue  
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;  
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,  
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.  
Keats, "Ode to Melancholy"

### Introduction

This chapter addresses the emergence of meditation as a practice and as a component of philosophical understandings of selfhood and subjectivity within the religious and philosophical discourses of early Hinduism and Buddhism and Jainism. What I present here will by constraint offer only piecemeal contours of these traditions, a dim outline of what is altogether far more rich a reality than can be stitched together for this general work aiming to reach a wide audience. I hope to use as my linking thread for these multivalent, complex traditions an attention to psychology, thus to patch the inevitable gaps of this weave with what is the basic premise for this volume's focus: a psychology of meditation.

The psychology of meditation in these early contexts is fundamentally a phenomenology. This phenomenology aims to map and make sense of the inner experiences that arise from these early forays into self-introspection, as they become formulated, reflected-upon and then sifted through contextualizing philosophical schemata. There is also, of course, no way we can talk about a psychology of meditation without situating it within conceptions of selfhood. Self-reflection and introspection, hallmarks of meditation practice, necessarily come to bear on that most proximate object of one's reflection: the sense of self. This chapter will chart the evolution of an idea of a self through these early Indian traditions of meditation, particularly noting historical development of a notion of self as transcendent, abstracted ideal of self, separated from materiality. The formulation of a transcendent self also undergoes various permutations in this history, with, for instance, a Buddhist rejection of ideas of a self, and with tantric attempts to reconnect the transcendent self to the body.

I will begin with an overview of the major moments in these early religious traditions, then offer a survey analysis of several important classificatory rubrics for these Indian traditions historically, specifically as they relate to ideas of selfhood. I will address these in roughly chronological order, beginning from the early period, called the Vedic period, through the rise of Jainism and Buddhism. Following this, I address the evolutionary trajectory that meditation practices and, with this, the formulation of subjectivity undergo with the advent of new forms of religiosity, namely devotional movements and Tantra. One interesting

observation that this comparative analysis reveals is that while many of the same meditation techniques, specifically for instance, visualization, use of verbal formulas called *mantra*, body awareness, and so on, are employed across different religious traditions, nevertheless, the *interpretations* of the effects and meanings of meditation take on very different valences across different traditions. We may understand this as the historical overcoding that philosophy and doctrine exert on the formulation of conceptions of self in meditation. No doubt, there is also a mutual influence at work, with philosophy and doctrine shaping the results of meditation practice and at the same time, with insights from meditation reflecting back upon philosophical formulations of self. The final section of the chapter addresses a particular formulation of subjectivity within a tantric meditative context, the sense of wonder, that is somewhat akin to the experience I relate in the sidebar.

By way of my own self-disclosure, I feel it incumbent to outline my own personal sensibility, with my own particular biases, even as I acknowledge no real sturdy foundation for holding them: namely, my own sense that forms and formulations of meditative experience, at least regarding the psychological components of these, evolve as cultures evolve. Adhering more to a Darwinian conception of meandering, rather than a Hegelian notion of *aufheben*, my own predilection stands not quite in line with a transcendental model of a divine spirit, omniscient omnipotent deity. This no doubt works against traditional Western notions of God, and works also against many Indian notions of both deity and ideas of a kind of untouched absolute, the *satcidānanda* of the Advaita Vedanta tradition of India, for instance. It could perhaps be argued that this sort of model of an emerging self through meditative practice might be amenable to a model of that pan-India pervasive concept of causality, *karma*. It might also be made to at least resonate with some forms of Indian philosophy such as Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta's 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century ruminations on a dynamic emergence of divinity. In any case, my own, not necessarily correct, preference for a model of evolving meditative experience, will no doubt influence the portrait I present, and I wish the reader to be cognizant of these influences, to filter past my biases.

## 1. Overview

It is probably fair to say that some of the very first systematizations of meditation in history—systematizations that are still utilized today—derive from the early writings of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism dating back to the middle of the first millennium BCE. The early writings of the Ṛg Veda in the centuries prior to this attest to what looks like meditation, with the *vipra*, the sage who would quake with insights and knowledge derived from perhaps the ritual, perhaps the soma, perhaps his encounter with gods like Indra, the thunder-wielding ruler, or Viṣṇu of the wide-step, or perhaps through his own transformative insight. Moreover, beginning as early as approximately the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Sanskrit writings in the *Upaniṣads* draw from meditation practices to theorize conceptions of cosmos and self. Early Buddhist writings in texts like the *Dīghnikāya* add to these early Indian reflections on the nature of the self and conceptions of subjectivity. Particularly, Buddhist writings reflect what was claimed as the Buddha's seminal meditative insight: that the postulation of a self is a motivated fiction, that meditation allows us to let go of this

primordial fiction. We find with these writings both phenomenological descriptions of meditative experiences and philosophical formulations of their implications for ideas of the self. Later developments in religious expression, such as the *bhakti*, devotional traditions, beginning in the first millennium CE, and Tantra, a complex religio-ritual system, beginning also in the first millennium CE, expanded upon the phenomenology of meditation developed earlier. These later movements incorporate an integration of aesthetic elements and, in the case of Tantra, a reformulation of the relationship between the body and altered states of awareness. Both the *bhakti* movements and Tantra present pan-India evolutions of meditation practices. Both these later movements transcend religious and sectarian boundaries. One other formative distinction ought to be mentioned: the relationship between the use of meditation practices for the goal of shifts in awareness, directed inwardly, and the use of meditation practices for the attainment of a capacity to affect the physical world through non-mechanical interventions, known as *siddhis*, or powers derived from meditation practices. The development of *siddhis* through meditation practices operates as a fundamental selling point influencing the historical acceptance of meditative praxis within wider social arenas, as Tantric practitioners from across the spectrum of Indian religious traditions use the seeming magical powers derived from their practices to influence kings and polity. At the end of this chapter, I focus especially on a particular Tantric “easy” practice, the Pratyabhijñā, or “Recognition” school, which offered an integrative attempt to bring ideas of transcendent divinity into the mundane.

## 2. Vedic Period

The writings left from the early nomadic inhabitants of India in the middle of the second millennium BCE, termed the Vedic period, mark the beginnings of what we can track linguistically of early Indian practices. The primary religious practice of this period focused on rather elaborate rituals for fire accompanied by oral recitations of hymns and offerings made into the fire. For instance, the *jyotiṣṭoma* sacrifices, a class of seven different sacrifices involving offerings of a sacred plant, the *soma*, could last for one day in the case of the *agniṣṭoma* or for many days, with as many as sixteen priests participating for the *agniṣṭoma*. The sacrifices were made to a variety of gods, most notably Indra, the god of thunder and lightning, and Agni, the god of fire, who served to carry human offerings to the gods in heaven via the smoke of the fire. Frequently fire sacrifices followed a model of shorter rituals embedded in longer rituals, requiring offerings of plant foods, milk and animal sacrifices. These early Vedic practices set the parameters for subsequent religiosity, which tended towards either aligning with the earlier Vedic traditions as in the case of Brahmanism and what eventually later becomes lumped under the rubric of Hinduism, or conversely, against Vedic practices as in the case of Buddhism and Jainism. Early Vedic practices rely on an implicit polytheism and call on various deities to intervene on behalf of human requests.

Certainly, the early Vedic rites invoked a potent psychology for the practitioner, as for instance where the sacrificer wears a black deer skin symbolizing the placenta to effect a

ritual rebirth in the *Aitareya Brahmaṇa*.<sup>1</sup> However, should we understand the pervasive ritual practice of the Vedic period as a form of meditation? Does meditation require a silence and inwardness that we might suspect to be absent in a ritual space? Is it possible to be outwardly engaged in verbal recitation and making offerings into a blazing flame, invoking the formulas of ritual and at the same time still achieve a state of meditation? Whatever the case-- which may ultimately turn upon a semantic understanding, that is, how we go about defining meditation—the hymns of the Ṛg Veda do offer us images of what looks something like a transformed consciousness akin to the results of what we think of as meditation. We see, for instance, the wild-haired *keśin*, the meditative figure who is called “the light of stars, seen in the heaven, in all space, girdled with the wind, who goes where the gods have gone,”<sup>2</sup>—even if we must wait for Buddhism and the Upaniṣads to extract a notion of meditation divorced from idea of anthropic deity.

### 3. Vedānta

The final section of the Vedic corpus in terms of chronology brings us the Upaniṣads, also called Vedānta, beginning around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. These texts usher in a novel approach to ritual practice, emphasizing introspection. In brief, they reformulate the relationships between humans and deities via ritual practice, articulating what has come to be considered some of the earliest practices of meditation. We might even say that the Upaniṣads discover meditation proper. The texts of the Upaniṣads have historically been understood as secret teachings. The power of these secret teachings lies in a particular notion, the concept of *bandhu*, the idea that a person contains within him or herself the totality of the cosmos. If one knows the secret inner expression, then one is able to control external phenomenon, the wind, fire, as expressions of that internal presence. So Yajñavalkya tells his interlocutor Gautama in the *Great Forest Secret Text (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad)*:

that self of yours who is present within but is different from the fire, whom the fire does not know, whose body is the fire, and who controls the fire from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.<sup>3</sup>

By meditating on the internal presence, the inner controller (*antaryāmin*), one could sidestep the onerous process of external ritual and achieve simultaneously a similar, if not better, efficacious result without external ritual. Here the idea of knowledge becomes paramount; knowledge becomes a shortcut. The secret teachings of the Upaniṣads propose that the operative principle bringing about the effects of the ritual really derive from an

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Haug. *Aitareya Brahmaṇam of the Rigveda, Translation with Notes*. Vol. 2. (Bombay: Government Central Depot, 1863) p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ṛg Veda 10. 136: 01c keśī viśvaṃ svar dṛṣe keśidaṃ jyotir ucyate || 02 munayo vātaraśanāḥ... yanti yad devāso avikṣata | From GRETEL, Gottingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages: [http://gretel.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretel/1\\_sanskrit/1\\_veda/1\\_sam/1\\_rv/rv\\_hn10u.htm](http://gretel.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretel/1_sanskrit/1_veda/1_sam/1_rv/rv_hn10u.htm) . Translation modified from Griffith, Ralph T. H. 1889-92. *The Hymns of the Rig-Veda translated with a popular commentary*. Benares: E. J. Lazarus and Co.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Olivelle, *Upaniṣads: translated from the Original Sanskrit* (New York: Oxford 1996), *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.7.5; p.42.

inner knowledge. How does one acquire this knowledge? In a word: meditation. Meditation is the favored technique, if not the sole means.

We might understand this type of meditation on the inner controller as entailing a psychological shift in awareness. Rather than a focus on objects in their externality, the shift in awareness towards an inner subjectivity that resides within and controls from within points to a pervasive, if elusive, sense of subjectivity as the basis of knowledge. This foundation as a kind of self-knowledge can really only be approached through an inner introspection, through the self-reflection of meditation. I say elusive because it becomes a trope within these texts and the tradition as a whole that the self, known as the *ātman*, which often translates as self<sup>4</sup> and the inner controller, *antaryāmin*, is the seer which can nevertheless itself not ever be seen. We see for instance Yajñavalkya explaining to his wife Maitreyī the secret of immortality in the self:

This self, you see, is imperishable; it has an indestructible nature. For when there is a duality of some kind, then the one can see the other, the one can smell the other, the one can taste the other, the one can greet the other, the one can hear the other, the one can think of the other, the one can touch the other, and the one can perceive the other. When, however, the Whole has become one's very self (*ātman*), then who is there for one to see and by what means?... Who is there for one to perceive and by what means?

By what means can one perceive him by means of whom one perceives this whole world?

About this self (*ātman*), one can only say “not---, not---”.<sup>5</sup>

This famous apophysis of Yajñavalkya's, where he tells Maitreyī that the self is “not---, not---” (*neti, neti*), becomes one of the signature “great statements” (*mahāvākya*) of Hindu tradition, signaling a presence that can be felt, known—through meditation—but not discursively, objectively pinned down. However one might try to point to the sense of self to contain it within an objective picture, one fails. The self is the driver of the engine of perception, but cannot itself be seen. Here we see especially the idea that meditation offers a window into a psychology of self that cannot be accessed via ratiocination.

Yajñavalkya also hints at another component of subjectivity that plays a large role in later tradition, namely, a collapse of the subject-object polarity into an essential monism. This insight of Yajñavalkya's, that the immortal, indestructible self sees nothing that is not its own self becomes a guiding principle for some schools of nondualism that develop in India, most famously Advaita Vedanta. For our purposes here, it represents another element of the psychology of meditation; it refocuses attention to subvert our pervasive mental perception of duality. And at the same time that we find that the idea of self cannot be boxed into a definitive object, we also see that discovery of self leads one to recognize its omnipresence. In another early Upaniṣad, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, we see Śvetaketu learning from his father about the nature of the self. Here, rather than telling his son not to

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<sup>4</sup> But note that Patrick Olivelle in his translation provocatively goes against later Hinduism's assertion of *ātman* as transcendental self by on some occasions translation *ātman* as “body.”

<sup>5</sup> Olivelle, *Upaniṣads, Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.14-15; p.71.

try to point to it, instead Āruṇi tells him that it pervades throughout. Giving his son an embodied teaching, he says,

‘Put this chunk of salt in a container of water and come back tomorrow.’ The son did as he was told, and the father said to him: ‘The hunk of salt you put in the water last evening—bring it here.’ He groped for it but could not find it, as it had dissolved completely.

‘Now, take a sip from this corner,’ said the father. ‘How does it taste?’ ‘Salty.’ ‘Take a sip from the centre.—How does it taste?’ ‘Salty.’ ‘Take a sip from that corner. —How does it taste?’ ‘Salty.’ ‘Throw it out and come back later.’ He did as he was told and found that the salt was always there. The father told him: ‘You, of course, did not see it there, son; yet it was always right there. “The finest essence here—that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (ātman). And that’s how you are, Śvetaketu.”<sup>6</sup>

The self is omnipresent, if seemingly invisible. Here the teaching is passed on from a father to his son. For the tradition that follows, the crucial insights transmitted through these secret texts attest to a shift in understanding the nature of self. Moreover, this shift does not primarily come about through logic and reasoning, but rather is facilitated by a psychology of self-attention—accessed through meditation. Whether this is an insight that can be reached by training the mind, or whether the training of the mind that meditation involves simply frees it to stumble upon this crucial insight into the nature of self is debated within the tradition. Yet, the expression of a meditative experience, the realization of oneness in particular, becomes one key litmus test for onlookers to ascertain whether or not a meditating sage has accessed the desired goal of enlightenment. In terms of a psychology of self, this particular strand of the Indian meditation traditions promotes a sense of expanded selfhood, both through a *via negativa*, as a self that cannot be pointed out as Yajñavalkya tells his wife Maitreyī and as a self that is a non-obvious substratum of all that we encounter as Āruṇi tells his son Śvetaketu.

So these early thinkers articulated a conception of subjectivity that imputed a pervasive, if non-visible sense of self divorced from an idea of anthropic deity. Self-reflection and meditation become the tools to gain this shift in perspective. Thus the chronologically latter part of the Vedic corpus, the secret forest texts of the Upaniṣads, emphasize a move away from the elaborate rituals for gods enjoined in the Vedas in favor of meditative practices, often reenacting ritual principles internally for the meditator. This functions on the one hand to relocate the essence and efficacy of external deity to the self within. On the other hand, it steers away from a simple formulation of human as worshipper and god(s) as worshipped in a dualistic and fundamentally hierarchic relation. The implication of this for a psychology of meditation is that we discover in these early thinkers a sophisticated use of meditation as a means for reformulating, even, we might say, appropriating an idea of deity as primarily a subjective experience within a psychology of self.

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<sup>6</sup> Olivelle, *Upaniṣads, Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.13.1-3; p.154-5.

We might also understand this early venture into meditation as a psychological practice that enables a transcendental self to emerge as foundation in contrast to the multiplicity we see here in the world. This becomes a *sine qua non* of much classical Indian exploration of meditation and a primary focus of debate, especially with the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*, “no-self,” seeking to unravel this foundational postulation of self. The notion of self, *ātman*, operates as a psychology of subjectivity writ large through the sustained reflection of self in meditation.

#### 4. Jainism

Another strand of Indian meditation practice that begins to take form not so long after the Upaniṣads can be found in Jainism. As a religious tradition, Jainism boasts an extensive literary history and a heightened attention to asceticism. Jain doctrine, like Buddhism, rejects the extensive sacrificial ritual of Vedism, in this case especially because Jainism’s central tenet of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) opposes the harm towards other life required in ritual sacrifice. This rejection of harm is taken to its logical conclusion in the Jain adoption of extreme austerity in food practices. One could argue that the quintessential Jain practice is asceticism, fasting, in particular, yet, this asceticism is usually coupled with meditation practices. Meditation (*dhyāna, sāmāyika*) is considered one of the six internal austerities that a Jain undergoes; practices around limiting food constitute several of the external austerities. One of the most important figures for Jainism, the twenty-fourth and last great sage, the *tīrthāṅkara*, “bridge-maker” Mahāvīra, who lived in approximately the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, practiced meditation in conjunction with austerities for thirteen years in order to reach the goal of Jain practice, *kaivalya*, a supreme state of “aloneness.” Sitting in a squatting position, fully exposed to sun and weather, he persisted in meditation, concentrating the mind (*ekāgramanaḥsanniveśana*) until he reached his goal. Jain meditation seeks as its hopeful result of this practice the lessening of the dross of karma, which holds the soul and the body down. Not monist, like the Advaita Vedānta interpretation of the Upaniṣads, Jainism, nevertheless, like Brahmanism and other forms of Hinduism hangs on to an idea of soul or self. In the case of Jainism, all beings have separate souls and each has a very material form, as does the negative karma which sullies it and weighs it down. For Jainism doctrinally, the current world age is too dark a period for any person living now to achieve the final goal, *kaivalya*, “aloneness”, however the twenty-fourth and last great sage, the *tīrthāṅkara* Mahāvīra, who achieved this in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE also acquired with this state, for one strand of Jainism, a diamond body impervious to suffering and hunger, as a result of his practice of asceticism and meditation. Jainism certainly stresses meditation as a practice historically, even if asceticism takes pride of place. Jain meditation is less concerned with watching the breath or concentrating on it, which is a key component of Upaniṣadic speculation on ideas of self and which becomes an important fulcrum for later yoga practices such as we see in forms of Buddhism and in elements of Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*. Meditation for Jainism does in some cases involve some visualization, in a classic Jain meditation, the *piṇḍasthā dhyāna*, focusing on the elements, earth, fire, water and air, situated in a cosmic ocean. Jain meditation, often a forty-eight minute period in the morning, aims to “isolate the mind from all earthly desires and

suffering and to put it in a state of quietude.”<sup>7</sup> Jainism like Brahmanism, and varied forms of later Hinduism, as well as Buddhism, relies on repeated recitation of scriptural texts in addition to study of the tradition.

With regard to notions of subjectivity, ideas of the body and materiality are deeply wrapped up in Jain conceptions of selfhood, even as Jainism offers a picture of subjectivity that seeks to leave behind the materiality of the body or at least to use a combination of meditation and asceticism to free the physical body from weakness. Harkening to its early Sāṃkhya philosophical roots, Jain efforts in meditation strive towards an extrication of subjectivity out of materiality, with a dualist conception of self in opposition to the materiality of body. So, for instance entrance into the fourteenth stage of meditation brings about *vyuparatakriyā nivṛtti*, a state of “cessation of even the slightest amount of activity.” The ideal of a complete cessation of physical activity signals the separation of self from matter, with the notion of activity historically connected with the body. So this advanced stage of meditation points to a psychology of extrication of the subject, its isolation from the change and decay necessarily entailed in all matter. The meditation goal of Jainism, *kaivalya*, “aloneness,” is thus an articulation of a transcendent self, isolated from interaction with others. This is graphically represented in the Digambara Jain image of Mahāvīra, with his impenetrable, diamond hard body, not eating, that is not taking anything in, not speaking, as his body simply emits a vibrational hum that is translated for his followers by his close attendants. The enlightened sage presents a self that is above and closed off to interaction with worldly intercourse. It may thus be helpful here to point out that we see again a reiteration of the theme that meditation practices leads to a discovery of notion of a transcendent self, that part of the impetus behind a meditation praxis is precisely access to a transcendent self. We should also remember that Jain meditative and ascetic practices are fundamentally intertwined, in an asymptotic effort, at least for our current age, to rise above the limitations of embodiment, precisely as an expression of a transcendent self.

## 5. Buddhism

Buddhism aligns with Jainism as both are early traditions which reject the authority of the Vedas as scripture and reject Vedic sacrificial practices.<sup>8</sup> Still, in contrast to Jainism, Buddhism proposes a path rejecting the extreme austerities enjoined in Jainism. The tradition links the Buddhist rejection of asceticism to the well-known story of the Buddha’s attempts to reach enlightenment through fasting, which becomes a favored subject of Buddhist iconographic statuary centuries later. Frustrated with the lack of progress from fasting, the Buddha rejects austerities in favor of the “middle way,” which becomes the signature descriptor of Buddhist practice. The “middle way” emphasizes the Buddha’s discovery that meditation itself—not the austerities of Jainism’s little sleep, fasting, bodily

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<sup>7</sup> Helmut von Glasenapp, *Jainism, An Indian Religion of Salvation*, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1999), p.413.

<sup>8</sup> This typology which classes together traditions rejecting the authority of the Vedas is recognized early in the exegetical literature, with those rejecting Vedic authority called “nāstikas”, literally, the “the ones who advocate there is not.”



mortifications—leads one to awakening, enlightenment. Indeed, from the Abhidharma texts of the early tradition through the Mahāyāna and the tantric practices of Tibet, Buddhism presents an extraordinary complexity of praxis centered especially around the core experience of meditation.

If Jainism promises a path of meditation and austerity that will lead to an extrication of subjectivity out of the messy world of matter, Buddhism, in contrast, reformulates the problem. Rather than using meditation to discover a transcendent subjectivity that can rise above material concerns, Buddhism calls into question the motives for postulating a transcendent self in the first place. In a profound psychological insight, the Buddha's famous "no-self" doctrine (*anātman, anattā*) asserts that any notion of a self is driven by our *desire* to posit a stable sense of self persisting through time. This desire presents as human mental clinging to a notion that has no basis in phenomenological experience. Meditation as a practice allows one to gain insight into the fundamentally "empty" (*śūnyatā*) character of all postulation of a self. That is, all phenomena arise interdependently; there is no foundational self that exists as a permanent refuge from suffering and impermanence. In specific practice, the aspirant uses the fundamental insights of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths of universal suffering and impermanence, as a referential frame for transforming our psychologically driven and incorrect conceptions of self, through meditation on these truths.

Lest one worry that positing an idea of "emptiness" as the interdependence of all phenomena might lead to a slippery ungrounded ontology that lacks a capacity to underwrite a behavioral ethics, the tradition uses the Buddha's initial insights themselves as foundation. These insights that disclose the essential impermanence of all phenomena do not open up to a wholesale relativism in this case. The Four Noble Truths themselves anchor the process of meditation.<sup>9</sup> With this, meditation on the Four Noble Truths reveals the contingent nature of what appears—erroneously—so blatantly self-obvious: the postulation of a self. The practitioner seeking to realize in him or herself the Four Noble Truths in the Mahāyāna tradition following Dharmakīrti for instance, cultivates deep concentration (*samādhi*) on these truths by contemplating them with attention (*sādara*), without interruption (*nairantarya*) over an extended length of time (*dirghakāla*).<sup>10</sup> This results in a three-step process including first intensification, then termination, and then with the final result of direct meditative vision (*yogipratyakṣa*) into these truths.<sup>11</sup> The process involves both a constructive activity, the contemplation of aspects of the Four Noble Truths, and a deconstructive component, a loosening and rejection of the layers of unwarranted mental postulations of an abiding self and its persistence through time.

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<sup>9</sup> As Jeson Woo notes regarding the Four Noble Truths, "[s]uch aspects are considered true since they are subject to neither destruction nor alteration over time." Jeson Woo, "Gradual and Sudden Enlightenment: The Attainment of Yogipratyakṣa in the Later Indian Yogācāra School" *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, (2009) 37:179–188, p.182.

<sup>10</sup> Woo, p.182.

<sup>11</sup> Woo, p. 182.

The psychology employed in this meditative exercise certainly employs a cognitive element, both in the constructive contemplation of Buddhist truths and in the agile contemplative efforts to free the mind from the cultural overwriting (*vikalpa*) that traps one into believing in incorrect ideas that ultimately lead to suffering. It would be too much to try to outline here the transformations that the Buddha's "no-self" doctrine undergoes as the tradition grapples with numerous ideas—explanations of reincarnation, how to reconcile a doctrine of momentariness with the experience of memory, ideas of an essence-like Buddha-nature that eventually takes a prominent position in later Buddhist exegesis. In terms of a psychology, the Buddhist exploration of meditation, from its early formulations in Abhidharma that put forth different practices for different psychological types (*upāya*), as one person might be instructed to meditate in a small cave, while another might be instructed to meditate under the open sky, to Tibetan practices of visualizing oneself as deity—all through, Buddhist praxis underwrites a keen appreciation of human psychology. As a tradition which locates meditation praxis as part of its founding mythos in the story of the Buddha's enlightenment, Buddhism takes quite seriously the phenomenology of a psychological self that becomes a primary object of self-reflection; the practice of meditation unfolds and helps to formulate this psychology of subjectivity, even as it discounts the notion of permanent self (*ātman*).

## 6. Advaita Vedānta, Later Hinduism

We can also see the impact of Buddhist ideas of the "no-self" doctrine on later forms of Hinduism. The eighth century philosopher Śaṅkara borrows extensively from Buddhist rejections of self, as he synthesizes from earlier sources a particularly prominent school of Indian philosophy, Advaita Vedānta, popular today. Through his commentaries on the Upaniṣads, he espouses an idea of subjectivity as a cosmic and depersonalized self-awareness, proposing a notion of self as transcendent subjectivity, a bare, stripped-down subjectivity, *sacīdānanda*, "being, consciousness and bliss." Śaṅkara's phenomenology of a self as a pure subjectivity, abstracted out from the material trappings of personality was by no means universally accepted, as he was accused by later Hindu commentators of being a crypto-Buddhist (*pracchanna buddha*).<sup>12</sup> The decoupling of self from notions of personality were, no doubt, formulated at least in part in response to Buddhist doctrinal articulations of "no-self."

Particularly influential was the Vijñānavāda, the Buddhist school dubbed "mind-only," that is, the idea that all reality is internal to the mind. These later understandings of a universal, abstract self, the *ātman* of Advaita Vedānta, assert the necessity for a concept of self, even as they refine the idea of self away from any particular or personal formulation of self. Moreover, the schools of Hinduism that offer a universal and abstract conception of self tend also to emphasize meditation as key in the process of enlightenment. One sees with this also the notion that the awareness of a transcendent self presents as a discovery arising out of meditation practice. Here we see a process similar to what we find in Buddhism, which offers both a constructive component as a basic truth, which the aspirant

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<sup>12</sup> Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣya* II.II.27, in Natalie Isayeva, *Śaṅkara and Indian Philosophy*, (New York: State University of New York Press 1992), p.14.

then also discovers *through* meditation. In tandem with this is also a deconstructive mental component of meditation where, as with Buddhism, meditation practice affords insight also through filtering away the obscuring mental conceptualizations (*vikalpa*).

So philosophical conceptions of self and subjectivity influence how meditation and especially the goal of meditation is framed within particular traditions in India. India offers a rich history of philosophical perspectives on the idea of selfhood, which is expressed in the writings of different philosophical schools, such as, for instance Nyāya, the school of logic and Sāṃkhya, an early philosophical school that offered a basic cosmology of matter and spirit as bifurcated. Indeed, a great deal of philosophical discourse hovers around conceptions of self (*ātman*) or its rejection, and its relationship to the world and to divinity, which, one might argue, derives from the parameters set by the Buddhist doctrine of “no-self.” Also, much subsequent debate focuses on epistemology, which, at least in part, grounds itself on the correspondence of meditation insights with canonical texts. At a minimum, the phenomenology of self that one encounters in the process of meditative self-reflection is shaped by and shapes philosophical conceptions of self.

So, we can see a plethora of different perspectives on what it is precisely that one discovers in the process of meditation. The ontological framework varies, yet oddly, the practices employed across these traditions are generally quite similar (with perhaps the exception of a greater intensity of asceticism found in Jainism). Generally, we find techniques involving visualizations, both of self and external figures, such as deities, recitation of canonical texts, recitation of short formulas called *mantras*, techniques associated with awareness of self and body as persistent practices, including in this last category *vipassana*, or insight and *śamatā*, calming practices that have made their way from Buddhism to the West. In addition, Hindu particularly, but also some forms of Buddhist and Jain traditions incorporate ritual as a component of meditation practices. These rituals frequently present as rituals of hospitality (*pūjā*), making offerings such as food, incense, water and so on. We also see some use of fire rituals (*homam*), particularly for Hindu traditions.

## 7. Bhakti

*Bhakti*, or devotion, also begins to play a large role in the Indian subcontinent in the early medieval period and devotional meditation practices are absorbed within nearly all religious traditions in India as an adjunct to meditation practices proper. These devotional practices entail cultivation of love for a deity or religious figure as a method for enhancing practice. Certainly, practices of devotion and love incorporate a potent psychology in relation to goals of spiritual transformation. In terms of method, expressions of devotion often utilize devotional singing and ritual offerings (*pūjā*). Moreover, we see devotional practices across the board, in Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism. Even where we find purist expressions of meditation, for instance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century figure of Ramana Maharshi, who represents perhaps one of the strictest examples of an enlightened figure practicing and advocating meditation, still, we find the incorporation of *bhakti*, devotion. Ramana Maharshi, for instance, also composed poems of devotion to Arunachala, the deity of the mountain where he lived as a form of the god Śiva. In his case, he spent years in silent meditation and advocated a path of self-inquiry, posing the question, “who am I?” and

following the awareness of the “I” back to its source. He is classed as a “*jñānī*,” someone who follows the path of knowledge, as opposed to paths of devotion or ritual performance. He was not trained in classical Indian philosophy, though one might imagine that living in South India, even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, he was exposed to general philosophical conceptions, especially the quite popular nondual Advaita Vedanta that his teaching resembles.

For our purposes here, we might note two points. First, his teaching of meditation centers on a self-reflection that explores the phenomenology of subjectivity; the guiding, repeated focus of attention is “who am I?”. It is probably important to point out that again we see meditation as coupled with working out ideas of selfhood, subjectivity. Secondly, he also eventually incorporates a devotional component to his practice. Even though he is by no one considered an example of *bhakti*, devotion—even this exemplary icon of meditation also incorporates a component of devotion. This leads to another consideration; might it make sense to posit that the relationality of *bhakti*, devotion, which necessarily entails a sense of the “other,” helps to balance the emphasis on self that arises in meditation’s necessary self-focus? We might even go so far as to say that a psychology of meditation requires these two balancing elements. The self-reflection and exploration of the phenomenology of the self that meditation frequently engenders needs its counterpart in the relationality to an “other” that *bhakti* adds to the mix. As a side-note, we may observe that as Indian meditation practices become imported more and more into contemporary Western settings, the subtraction of devotion as not relevant to our contemporary Western context may be missing something crucial in the dynamics of meditation.

## 8. Yoga

Like *bhakti*, it is probably fair to say that yoga practice has historically been connected with most, though perhaps not all, philosophical schools and religious traditions in India. Also, as we see with early Buddhist texts, yoga offers a psychology of meditation par excellence. In its earliest textually available forms, the school of yoga is first and foremost a path of meditation. Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*, a text dating to roughly the fifth century CE, offers one of the early formulations of the path of yoga and most contemporary readers are surprised to find that the text spends most of its time describing techniques for engaging the mind in meditation, not outlining the various physical postures we associate with yoga classes today in the West. In fact, Patañjali devotes only three lines to yoga postures, telling us that for the practice of yoga, the posture, *āsana*, should be just easy (*sukha*) and steady (*sthira*).<sup>13</sup> The commentary on the verses, the *Yoga Sūtra Bhāṣya*, adds the specificity of

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<sup>13</sup> Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra*, 2.46. Patañjali: Yogasutra with Bhasya(=Pātañjalayogaśāstra) Based on the edition by Kāśinātha Śāstrī Āgāśe:

Vācaspatimiśraviracitaṭīkāsaṃvalitavyāsbhāṣyasametāni Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi, tathā bhojadevaviracitarājamārtaṇḍābhīdhavrṭtisametāni pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi. sūtrapāṭhasūtravarṇānukramasūcībhyāṃ ca sanāthīkṛtāni ...

Pune : Ānandāśramamudraṇālaye 1904 (Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series, 47). Input into GRETIL, Gottingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages, by Philip Maas.

traditional postures, pointing to several well-known postures, including the lotus posture (*padmāsana*).<sup>14</sup>

The *Yoga Sūtra* functions in general as a kind of nuts and bolts handbook for dealing with the mind in meditation as the text describes step-by-step processes involved in disciplining the mind for the practice of meditation. Presenting a sophisticated psychology, we see, on the one hand, the *Yoga Sūtra* offers descriptions of how the mind works and how thought works. Thus, there are five modalities of mental activity, including valid judgment, error, conceptualization, sleep and memory.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the *Yoga Sūtra* also gives prescriptive teachings, for instance, instructing the reader on how to prevent distractions from meditation by focusing on a single principle,<sup>16</sup> or how one can make the mind tranquil by a measured exhalation and retention of the breath,<sup>17</sup> or by cultivating positive thoughts in order to counter the influence of a mind racing with negative thoughts.<sup>18</sup> Even as the *Yoga Sūtra* offers a variety of psychological techniques for working with the mind, its primary understanding of yoga is defined by stopping the flow of thoughts.<sup>19</sup> The techniques and practices for meditation that yoga outlines are similar to what we see in Buddhism. Both, and Jainism as well, include preliminary steps involving avoiding negative behaviors like stealing and lying and violence, along with cultivating positive qualities like cleanliness and contentment.

The *Yoga Sūtra* also discusses what look like magical powers that result from the practice of yoga. By meditation on specific places in the body, one acquires different abilities. For instance, meditation, the text tells us, “on the throat affords control over hunger and thirst.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, meditation on the vital breath rising in the body affords the ability to walk on water,<sup>21</sup> a feat we see popularized across continents in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew in Christianity. The *Yoga Sūtra* ultimately discounts these magical powers as a distraction from the real goal of meditation.<sup>22</sup> Following the cosmology of Sāṃkhya with its dualistic separation of matter and spirit, with which the school of yoga is classically connected, the *Yoga Sūtra*’s philosophical legacy from Sāṃkhya tends to undercut the importance of powers over matter and the body. So despite likely teasing curious readers with an entire chapter devoted to the powers attainable by yoga, or perhaps, precisely to

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<sup>14</sup> Traditionally understood to be authored by Vyāsa, the same fabled prolific author of the epic *Mahābhārata*, however, it may be that the Bhāṣya commentary is an auto-commentary, as Philip Maas argues by the great sage of yoga, Patañjali himself. Philip Maas. *Samādhipāda: das erste Kapitel des Pātañjalayogaśāstra zum ersten Mal kritisch ediert.* (Aachen: Shaker 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra* 1.6.

<sup>16</sup> Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra* 1.32.

<sup>17</sup> Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra* 1.34.

<sup>18</sup> Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra* 2.33.

<sup>19</sup> Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra* 1.2: cittavṛtti nirodhaḥ.

<sup>20</sup> Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra* 3.30: kaṅṭhakūpe kṣutpipāsānivṛttiḥ.

<sup>21</sup> Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra* 3.39.

<sup>22</sup> Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra* 3.37 and 3.50.

let would-be practitioners in on the worldly practical, if not spiritually desirable benefits of yoga, the *Yoga Sūtra* ultimately discards the powers it promises.

Rather, yoga proposes using meditation to attain a freedom of spirit detached from material constraints. Indeed, the ultimate, desired state resulting from meditation in yoga is signified by the term “*kaivalya*,” the “aloneness,” we saw earlier in Jainism, which was also deeply influenced by the dualistic cosmology of Sāṃkhya. Thus, the concluding verse of the *Yoga Sūtra* tells us: “final aloneness occurs when the evolutionary flowing forth of nature’s qualities is curbed, as they lack purpose for the spirit. With this the energy of consciousness rests in its own true nature.”<sup>23</sup> Apart from the apparent irony in that the path of yoga, literally: “union,” leads to “aloneness,” we see again that classical meditation focuses fundamentally on a phenomenology of subjectivity, of the self. A person commits to the hours of self-reflection that yoga advises in order to ascertain “one’s own true nature” (*svarūpa*) as separate from the messy psychology of mind, body and materiality entangled within conceptions of self. So, again we see that meditation fundamentally invokes an examination of the nature of the self and this subjectivity is thickly intertwined with a psychology. Moreover, a primary impetus of yoga techniques focus on isolating the sense of subjectivity from components of self that connect to mind or body.

## 9. Tantra

Tantra presents a watershed moment in one key regard; it pushes back against the pervasive tendency that opposes the self to the materiality of body and world. Like yoga and *bhakti*, tantric practices also find their way into much of Indian philosophy and meditation, including the varied forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and even, if only to a small degree, Jainism as well. Indeed, the influence of Tantra on later forms of Buddhism, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, for instance, leaves in its wake a Buddhism almost unrecognizable by the criteria of early forms of Buddhism connected with the Pali tradition. Medieval expressions of Tantra, of course, vary from religion to religion and sect to sect. However, we see a point of convergence across various traditions in the inner logic of Tantra’s resistance to the abstracted, transcendent self set against ideas of body and matter. We find an incorporation of the body within tantric meditation practices and philosophy, for instance encoded in the *yabyum* of Tibetan Buddhism, and in the elevation of goddesses in Bengali Tantra (and elsewhere). We see it again, for instance, in the incorporation of a plethora of physical postures in the *haṭha* yoga so popular today as a tantric infusion into yoga, in the idea of the serpent power of *kuṇḍalinī* as a bodily experience leading to enlightenment. We also see it in the use of the body as receptacle when a meditator ritually inserts various deities in his or her arms and torso in the practice of *nyāsa*, “installing deity”. For this final section, I want to focus on one particular ancillary element of the tantric incorporation of matter into its conception of self, its use of wonder.

For this I draw from the tradition called *Pratyabhijñā*, or “Recognition” school, a subset of 9<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> century Kashmiri nondual Śaiva Tantra, which offered a philosophically

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<sup>23</sup> Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra*, 4.34: *puruṣārthaśūnyānāṃ guṇānāṃ pratiprasavaḥ kaivalyam svarūpapratiṣṭhā vā citiśaktir iti*. Taken from GRETIL.

sophisticated articulation of Tantra's incorporation of materiality into its conception of the absolute. I am choosing this concept of wonder because I feel it reflects in some measure the personal experience I describe in the sidebar. Also I suspect that the experience of wonder may be accessible to a contemporary Western sensibility in a way that most ritual practices taken from India are not. Moreover, it offers a not-so-well known component of Indian meditation practices, which serves as counterpart to the already widely popular promulgation of practices of mindfulness.

Nondual Kashmiri Śaiva Tantra presents a philosophical high point for Indian thought, generating an efflorescence of literary and ritual culture that migrated throughout most of India in the succeeding centuries. Masterfully articulated by 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century Kashmiri thinkers, including particularly, Abhinavagupta, his teacher's teacher, Utpaladeva and his disciple, Kṣemarāja, among others, the philosophy that comes out of this period offered a profound challenge to Buddhist and Advaita Vedantin formulations of mind and the world. Particularly we might point to the *Pratyabhijñā*, a panentheistic doctrine that suggests the highest absolute reality is one we can always instantly access, simply by "recognizing" its immanent presence in our own selves, in all of our material surroundings.

The novel signature component of this nondual Kashmiri Tantra is an assertion of an always already inherent consciousness within matter. This has the added effect of affording a new reverence for the body and the material world. They are not separate from our own sentient self-comprehension. This philosophy also lends itself to a reconceptualization of the very nature of the divine, by inserting a dynamism into it. Thus, consciousness, which is the nature of the absolute, is not static or transcendent. Rather, it unfolds itself through its evolutionary articulation as matter, in this case as divine *Māyā* with a double movement of veiling over the innate consciousness of everything here and unfolding into the multiplicity (*vicitra*) of the world.

We can see right away the profound psychological implications that the idea of an evolving consciousness has for a practice of meditation. To begin, connecting the absolute state to the idea of consciousness (*cit*) makes it in some sense accessible to awareness, linking it to mind and psychology, something we see also in earlier forms of Buddhism and Vedanta, for instance. In this case, attaining a transcendent, unchanging state above the ever-changing flow of mind and the unstoppable decay of matter is a long standing and traditional goal of many Indian meditation practices—for this perspective, however, it is no longer an ideal. Instead, we encounter an embrace of the flow and change within subjectivity as an inherent power that consciousness possesses. This is the power of *Māyā*, no longer in this Kashmiri Tantra tradition demonized as a beguiler. Instead *Māyā* represents an essential creativity of consciousness. This energy of *Māyā* is what generates an initial sense of subject and object. The *Pratyabhijñā* allows one to recognize the game of hide and seek which the self plays with itself. This also hints towards a revisioning of selfhood that leaves space for an evolutionary component, an element that offers a resonance with our own current world conceptions of a changing human psyche. At the same time, this dynamism also leaves space for the expression of magical powers, *siddhis*, which likely is one of the reasons that

Tantra became so popular, especially with rulers.<sup>24</sup> Along with this, tantric practices across the board do not simply promise enlightenment or liberation; rather, Tantra explicitly promises both: in a pithy memorable rhyme, “*bhukti-mukti*,” worldly enjoyment with power *and* liberation.

In any case, the incorporation of dynamism and change into the idea of the absolute substratum is something that earlier traditions, like Advaita Vedanta, for instance, take pains to avoid. They do this precisely in order to maintain a pristine sense of transcendent self, unblemished by the change and impermanence that functioned as the source of suffering for the ancient world. We should keep in mind that “impermanence” might be read as a code word for the idea of inevitable death of all things that time reveals. It will take us too far afield here to pursue the incorporation of time into ideas of divinity,<sup>25</sup> however we may note that this bold step is akin to philosophically taking the tiger by the tail. Rather than refining ideas of selfhood away from change and the body, instead, embracing these elements shifts the formulation of selfhood in just as dramatic a way as did the Buddha’s early rejection of an idea of self altogether. For one, it answers the dilemma of impermanence, which, indeed, may have been one of the primary drivers for an idea of a transcendent abstracted sense of selfhood in the first place. The answer this tantric shift gives, to embrace the body with all its impermanence, does not render the question null and void as does the Buddha’s early rejection of self, however, it does propose an astute psychological understanding of the underlying psychological motivation that leads to an abstracted and transcendent sense of self.

## 10. Wonder

The answer this nondual Kashmiri Śaiva Tantra gives is essentially panentheistic, so it does not discard the idea of transcendent self, but rather rewrites it. For this, the idea of wonder acts as a bridge between the numinosity of transcendence and the mundane materiality here. Wonder serves to act as a bridge between a transcendent sense of self and an embodied materiality. What, then, is wonder? Wonder calls forth awe and a transcendence of our mundane mental processes. For a Western context, wonder references two poles, on the one hand, an opening, the beginnings of philosophy, as for Plato and Socrates.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand it also points for Aristotle to a degenerate sense of curiosity, a puzzle that must be solved and hence must ultimately spell its own demise.<sup>27</sup> I focus here on the Sanskrit term *camatkāra*, which does not have the dual meaning inherited from the Greek

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<sup>24</sup> Alexis Sanderson has discussed this in his masterful historical surveys of Tantra. See especially his, “Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions” in *The World's Religions*, edited by S. Sutherland, et. al. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1988), pp. 660-704.

<sup>25</sup> I discuss this at greater length in “Panentheism and Hindu Tantra: Abhinavagupta’s Grammatical Cosmology” in *God’s Body: Panentheism Across the World’s Religious Traditions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 161-176.

<sup>26</sup> Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe*, (New York: Columbia University Press 2008), p.11.

<sup>27</sup> Bynum, Carol Walker “Presidential Address: Wonder” in *American Historical Review*, (Feb) 1997, p.4.



genealogy. Here, Plato's idea of wonder resonates more closely to the term *camatkāra*; *camatkāra* does not evoke the sense of curiosity, but rather a kind of suspension of ordinary mental engagement. So, for our context, we may leave aside Aristotle's conception of wonder in favor of Plato's.

It may be fair to say that for both us today and our medieval Kashmiris, wonder is, above all, a bodily experience, even if the experience of wonder often feels as though it is taking us out of our bodies. Wonder causes our ordinary mental rambling (*vikalpa*) to stop. The awe of wonder connects us to a kind of rapture that seems at least in part other-worldly. For these Kashmiri authors, the other-worldly feeling of wonder is not so much that it belongs to another world, but rather that it reminds us of an innate subjectivity that transcends our habitual subject-object distinctions. Wonder arises when one accesses the sense of self in its fullness. That is, wonder expands the sense of self beyond its ordinary limitations to connect it to the world in a juxtaposition that stops the ordinary operation of the mind. In his "Fifteen Verses on Awakening" Abhinavagupta tells us,

Knowledge of the principle of pure consciousness that manifests as one's own freedom—this is the highest state, which cannot be surpassed. It arises when wonder (*camatkāra*) blossoms through the feeling of the complete fullness of the "I" as the whole universe (*viśva*). That, in fact, is liberation, enlightenment (*mokṣa*).<sup>28</sup>

This medieval Kashmiri, deeply schooled in meditation practices, proffers a psychological coding of wonder. Wonder is the link between the sense of self as subject and the multiplicity of the world. Wonder is certainly a state of mind, in this case a psychological awareness that transcends the human propensity towards mental classification of the world. The mind seems to stop, but it is not that the mind ceases, nor that objects merge into the self, but rather wonder suspends the mind's capacity to dichotomize. In the experience of wonder, the two poles, world and self, mapped to object and subject, form a dizzy unity that does not collapse either pole. So wonder breaks our habitual pattern of dichotomous thinking with self in opposition to the world. In this capacity, it also works against a conception of self as transcendent and abstracted.

Indeed, the highest awareness for this tantric philosophy understands the self as wrapped in the fullness of the world. We see this spelled out explicitly in the commentary that Kṣemarāja, Abhinavagupta's disciple, gives for the *Vijñāna Bhairava*. He tells us that one's true nature, which is Bhairava, "consists of the wonder of the fullness of the world, which contains the whole, in a nondual apprehension with nothing left out."<sup>29</sup> Here again we see

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<sup>28</sup> "yadanuttarasamvittattvasya parijñānaṃ viśvaparipūrṇāhaṃbhāvacamatkārōllāsenā svasvātantryābhivyaktiḥ sa eva mokṣaḥ" in Abhinavagupta, *Bodhapañcadaśikā with commentary by Harabhaṭṭaśāstrī*, Zadoo Jagaddhar, ed. Kashmir Series of Texts and Studies vol. 76 (Srinagar: Research Department of Jammu and Kashmir State 1947), p.16. line 673. Downloaded from Muktabodha Indological Research Institute, [www.muktabodha.org](http://www.muktabodha.org)

<sup>29</sup> "bharito'śeṣaviśvābheda camatkāramaya ākāraḥ svarūpaṃ" in Anonymous, *Vijñānabhairava with commentary by Kṣemarāja and Śivopādhyāya*,

the idea of wonder coupled with the apprehension of the world. Wonder works its magic precisely through not collapsing the self and world into a unity, precisely by not allowing the flight of the self up and out, away from the messy plurality of the world, isolated into a perfect and impenetrable solitude of self.

The root text here that Kṣemarāja comments upon in the 11<sup>th</sup> century is the *Vijñāna Bhairava*, a key scriptural text for this tantric tradition, likely composed in the 7<sup>th</sup> or early 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. The author of the *Vijñāna Bhairava* is unknown and the text is considered scriptural revelation. The text outlines a series of one hundred and twelve different techniques for tapping into this space of wonder, nearly all of them in relation to some sense of the external world. These include techniques like: savoring and meditating on the joy that arises from the pleasure of eating and drinking, which brings about a divine bliss,<sup>30</sup> and another: that if the practitioner imagines that the entire world is being burnt by the fire of the destruction of time and does not allow his or her mind to think of anything else, then such a person attains the highest state of humans<sup>31</sup> and one more: by meditating on one's state at the beginning or end of a sneeze, or in a state of terror, or sorrow, or in flight from a battlefield, or in a state of keen curiosity or when very hungry or just feeling sated from food, then a person attains a divine meditative awareness.<sup>32</sup> The *Vijñāna Bhairava* itself does not develop this theology of wonder; it takes the later exegesis of the tradition's scholar-mystics, like Abhinavagupta, Utpala and Kṣemarāja to spell out the logic of wonder as numinous container of self and world in a rapture of awareness that leaves behind the mind's tendency to dichotomize into self and others.

To wrap up this discussion I will offer one other quote from Kṣemarāja's commentary on this text, which takes us back to the epigraph from Keats at the beginning of this chapter. This also speaks to a pressing question—how might one cultivate wonder as a meditative practice? The *Vijñāna Bhairava* gestures in various places to adopting an introspective awareness while in the middle of engagement with the world. We also see in the *Vijñāna Bhairava* the power of aesthetic appreciation to generate wonder. Commenting on verse 73, which instructs the yogī to meditate on a beautiful song, to be absorbed in it, Kṣemarāja tells us that

through the function of the sense of hearing, one grasps the words of a song with the wonder generated in that. In this way, by seeing this exceedingly beautiful form, wonder arises. From that, one tastes and relishes, (*carvaṇa*, literally chewing) the sap of that sweetness and so on.<sup>33</sup>

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Kashmir Series of Texts and Studies vol. 8 (Bombay: Research Department of Jammu and Kashmir State 1918), p.12, line 268. Downloaded from Muktabodha Indological Research Institute, www.muktabodha.org.

<sup>30</sup> *Vijñānabhairava with commentary by Kṣemarāja and Śivopādhyāya*, verse 72, p.60-61.

<sup>31</sup> *Vijñānabhairava with commentary by Kṣemarāja and Śivopādhyāya*, verse 53, pp.44-45.

<sup>32</sup> *Vijñānabhairava with commentary by Kṣemarāja and Śivopādhyāya*, verse 118, p. 102.

<sup>33</sup> *Vijñānabhairava with commentary by Kṣemarāja and Śivopādhyāya*, verse 73, p. 62:

śravaṇendriyavṛtṭyā gītaśabdagrahaṇaṁ taccamatkaraṇaṁ, evam  
atisundararūpavaddarśanacamatkāraḥ, tathā madhurādirasacarvaṇāsvādaḥ,

Poetry and song, wrapped in a sensuous encounter that readily transcends the mental capacity to dichotomize are especially potent in generating a sense of wonder. Beauty has a power to shift us out of our normal sense of subject and object. By bringing to bear an aesthetic concentration, a kind of metaphorical immersion in the sap of beauty, we tap into wonder, a wonder which intrinsically arises out of the materiality of the world.

In this sense, Keats' reflection on melancholy points to a similar transformation of self that occurs even in dark moments of introspection. Joy has as its core a melancholy that overwhelms and transforms the soul. "None save him whose strenuous tongue/ Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine..." In this context our Kashmiri mystics tell something similar: at the core of sensuous experience we find a portal into wonder, a wonder that transforms the self beyond its ordinary sense of limitation into a sense of the fullness of the "I" (*pūrṇāhambhāva*). The wonder that the aesthetic experience enables expresses itself as a melting and expansion of the heart. Abhinavagupta tells us,

"When the *rasa*, or flavor comes into one's purview, then it is enjoyed. This enjoyment is differentiated from what is encountered through memory or direct experience. It is characterized by melting, expansion and opening [of the heart].<sup>34</sup>

The aesthetic experience then, is especially productive of wonder; it is an enjoyment unlike ordinary experience, unlike memory or experience, *anubhāva*, in general. It involves a melting and an opening of the heart and it is comparable to the state of the highest bliss, the supreme Brahman. In this context, we reach a conception of selfhood that does not isolate itself in a transcendent abstraction beyond the world, but rather one that embraces the world.

### **Sidebar: My Experience**

My experience relates to an early experience I had at the very beginning of my decades long journey into meditation. I was in my last year at college at the end of the semester, unconsciously struggling, no doubt, with anxiety about my future and displacing this anxiety into a host of other distant and tragic disaster scenarios as unwelcome futures for planet earth and its inhabitants. I remember this part of my life and recognize in it the fascination of others today, some friends, some not, online-trollers following with a rabid and frozen compulsion the latest unfolding of ebola, the spread of Fukushima radiation to the California coast, zombie apocalypse movies, my conspiracy-theorist friends' worries of gmo's taking over our food supply, chemtrails, our water fracked away, and an impending global climate change looming ominously, desperately grappling in the midst of this with the darkness of human nature... And projecting this anxiety onto the vast and distant reaches of the globe with a grandiosity and drama that only a young adult in his or her early twenties can pull off. So, beset with a deep sense of suffering in the world, I looked inward (it's hard not to think of that A.E. Housman poem, "when I was one and twenty..." and makes one wonder, are we all inherently Buddhists in our early twenties?) At the time I was also reading a great deal of romantic poetry, Keats, Shelly and Wordsworth, as well as the metaphysical poetry of Donne, Herbert and Marvell. Certainly the mood of these poetic

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<sup>34</sup> Abhinavagupta, *DhvanyālokaLocana* 2.4; p. 83.

strands and certainly the combination of the memento-moribund metaphysicals with the emotionally high flying romantics fueled an emotional tempest as I turned twenty-one. Feeling a sense of despondency I decided that if depression was emotional ground zero then, in stoic fashion I would acclimate myself to this baseline and not swerve from depression. I memorized Keats' "Ode to Melancholy," reciting it over and over many times every day, determined to stay steadfast at least with an emotional low. So, I lived on canned tuna fish and carrots, easy food to keep for a stretch of time and cheap to boot, not leaving my room for weeks, and living the kind of resolve that only a twenty-one year old can accomplish with a straight face, I embraced my depression. After about three weeks, though, something odd happened. Partly perhaps from the sonorousness of Keats dancing around my brain, and partly perhaps from the necessary stillness needed to maintain a mood of sadness, one morning I oddly woke up happy, ebullient and, try as I might, unable to shift into despondency over my plight and the world's. From this I understood a sort of reverse of Keats' notion of melancholy at the heart of the essence of joy, rather joy, as the inner throb, the life at the heart of everything, even sadness. Some years later I came upon this idea in the writings of Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, the idea of *cidānandaghana*, a "dense mass of consciousness entangled with joy" as the underlying substratum of experience. In any case, the indelible etching of joy as the soul of even depression, set me on a new course.