

rivalry between meditating “experimentalists” (*jbāyins*) and “speculatives” (*dhammayogas*). In medieval Tantra, the same division obtained, this time between practitioners whose meditative practice led to gnosis and identity with the divine on the one hand, and on the other, practitioners—referred to as yogis or *sādhakas*—whose goal was this-worldly supernatural power in one’s now invulnerable, ageless, and adamant human body. The gulf between yoga practice and yogi practice never ceased to widen over the centuries, such that, by the time of the British Raj, India’s hordes of yogis were considered by India’s elites to be little more than common criminals, with their fraudulent practices—utterly at odds with the “true” science of yoga, which, taught in the YS, was practiced by none—save perhaps for a handful of isolated hermits living high in the Himalayas (Oman 1908: 3–30).

These four sets of concepts and practices form the core and foundational vocabulary of nearly every yoga tradition, school, or system, with all that follow the fourth- to seventh-century watershed—of the YS and various foundational Buddhist and Jain works on meditation and yogi perception—simply variations and expansions on this common core.

Medieval Developments

YOGA IN THE TANTRAS

The Tantras are pivotal works in the history of yoga, inasmuch as they carry forward both the yoga and yogi practices and the gnoseological theory of earlier traditions while introducing important innovations in theory and practice. On the theoretical side, these medieval scriptures and commentarial traditions promulgate a new variation on the preexisting yoga soteriology. No longer is the practitioner’s ultimate goal liberation from suffering existence, but rather self-deification: one *becomes* the deity that has been one’s object of meditation. In a universe that is nothing other than the flow of divine consciousness, raising one’s consciousness to the level of god-consciousness—that is, attaining a god’s-eye view that sees the universe as internal to one’s own transcendent Self—is tantamount to becoming divine. A primary means to this end is the detailed visualization of the deity with which one will ultimately identify: his or her form, face(s), color, attributes, entourage, and so on. So, for example, in the yoga of the Hindu Pāñcarātra sect, a practitioner’s meditation on successive emanations of the god Viṣṇu culminates in his realization of the state of “consisting in god” (Rastelli 2009: 299–317). The Tantric Buddhist cognate to this is “deity yoga” (*devayoga*), whereby the practitioner meditatively assumes the attributes and creates the environment (i.e., the Buddha world) of the Buddha-deity he or she is about to become.

In fact, the term yoga has a wide variety of connotations in the Tantras. It can simply mean “practice” or “discipline” in a very broad sense, covering all of the means at one’s disposal to realize one’s goals. It can also refer to the goal itself: “conjunction,” “union,” or identity with divine consciousness. Indeed, the *Mālinīvijayottara Tantra*, an important ninth-century Śākta-Śaiva Tantra, uses the term yoga to denote its entire soteriological system (Vasudeva 2004). In Buddhist Tantra—whose canonical teachings are divided into the exoteric Yoga Tantras and the increasingly esoteric Higher Yoga Tantras, Supreme Yoga Tantras, Unexcelled (or Unsurpassed) Yoga Tantras, and Yoginī Tantras—yoga has the dual sense of both the means and ends of practice. Yoga can also have the more particular, limited sense of a program of meditation or visualization, as opposed to ritual (*kriyā*) or gnostic (*jñāna*) practice. However, these categories of practice often bleed into one another. Finally, there are specific types of yogic discipline, such as the *Netra Tantra*’s transcendent and subtle yogas, already discussed.

Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Tantra—and with it, Buddhist Tantric Yoga—developed in lockstep with Hindu Tantra, with a hierarchy of revelations ranging from earlier, exoteric systems of practice to the sex- and death-laden imagery of later esoteric pantheons, in which horrific skull-wielding Buddhas were surrounded by the same *yoginīs* as their Hindu counterparts, the Bhairavas of the esoteric Hindu Tantras. In the Buddhist Unexcelled Yoga Tantras, “six-limbed yoga” comprised the visualization practices that facilitated the realization of one’s innate identity with the deity [Wallace]. But rather than simply being a means to an end in these traditions, yoga was also primarily an end in itself: yoga was “union” or identity with the celestial Buddha named Vajrasattva—the “Diamond Essence (of Enlightenment),” that is, one’s Buddha nature. However, the same Tantras of the Diamond Path (Vajrayāna) also implied that the innate nature of that union rendered the conventional practices undertaken for its realization ultimately irrelevant [Dalton].

Here, one can speak of two principal styles of Tantric Yoga, which coincide with their respective metaphysics. The former, which recurs in the earliest Tantric traditions, involves exoteric practices: visualization, generally pure ritual offerings, worship, and the use of mantras. The dualist metaphysics of these traditions maintains that there is an ontological difference between god and creature, which can gradually be overcome through concerted effort and practice. The latter, esoteric, traditions develop out of the former even as they reject much of exoteric theory and practice. In these systems, esoteric practice, involving the real or symbolic consumption of forbidden substances and sexual transactions with forbidden partners, is the fast track to self-deification. However, given the non-dualist metaphysics of esoteric Tantra, which maintains that all creatures are innately divine or enlightened, such practices are

considered ultimately unnecessary. A number of Tantric scriptures and commentaries underscore the complementarity of the exoteric and esoteric approaches, urging that the yogi's central task is to balance the two: this is the position taken, for example, by the Buddhist Mahāsiddha Saraha in his analysis of the doctrines and practices of the Yoginī Tantras [Jackson].

In the exoteric Tantras, visualization, ritual offerings, worship, and the use of *mantras* were the means to the gradual realization of one's identity with the absolute. In later, esoteric traditions, however, the expansion of consciousness to a divine level was instantaneously triggered through the consumption of forbidden substances: semen, menstrual blood, feces, urine, human flesh, and the like. Menstrual or uterine blood, which was considered to be the most powerful among these forbidden substances, could be accessed through sexual relations with female Tantric consorts. Various called *yoginīs*, *ḍākinīs*, or *dūtīs*, these were ideally low-caste human women who were considered to be possessed by, or embodiments of, Tantric goddesses. In the case of the *yoginīs*, these were the same goddesses as those that ate their victims in the practice of "transcendent yoga." Whether by consuming the sexual emissions of these forbidden women or through the bliss of sexual orgasm with them, Tantric yogis could "blow their minds" and realize a breakthrough into transcendent levels of consciousness. Once again, yogic consciousness-raising doubled with the physical rise of the yogi's body through space, in this case in the embrace of the *yoginī* or *ḍākinī* who, as an embodied goddess, was possessed of the power of flight. It was for this reason that the medieval *yoginī* temples were roofless: they were the *yoginīs*' landing fields and launching pads (White 2003: 7–13, 204–18).

In many Tantras, such as the eighth-century CE *Maṭaṅgaṭpārameśvarāgama* of the Hindu Śaivasiddhānta school, this visionary ascent became actualized in the practitioner's rise through the levels of the universe until, arriving at the highest void, the supreme deity Sadāśiva conferred his own divine rank upon him (Sanderson 2006: 205–6). It is in such a context—of a graded hierarchy of stages or states of consciousness, with corresponding deities, mantras, and cosmological levels—that the Tantras innovated the construct known as the "subtle body" or "yogic body." Here, the practitioner's body became identified with the entire universe, such that all of the processes and transformations occurring to his body in the world were now described as occurring to a world inside his body. While the breath channels (*nāḍīs*) of yogic practice had already been discussed in the classical Upaniṣads, it was not until such Tantric works as the eighth-century Buddhist *Hevajra Tantra* and *Caryāgīti* that a hierarchy of inner energy centers—variously called *cakras* ("circles," "wheels"), *padmas* ("lotuses"), or *pīṭhas* ("mounds")—were introduced. These early Bud-

dhist sources only mention four such centers aligned along the spinal column, but in the centuries that follow, Hindu Tantras such as the *Kubjikāmata* and *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* would expand that number to five, six, seven, eight, and more. The so-called classical hierarchy of seven *cakras*—ranging from the *mūlādhāra* at the level of the anus to the *sahasrāra* in the cranial vault, replete with color coding, fixed numbers of petals linked to the names of *yoginīs*, the graphemes and phonemes of the Sanskrit alphabet—was a still later development. So too was the introduction of the *kuṇḍalinī*, the female Serpent Energy coiled at the base of the yogic body, whose awakening and rapid rise effects the practitioner’s inner transformation (White 2003: 220–34).

Given the wide range of applications of the term *yoga* in the Tantras, the semantic field of the term “yogi” is relatively circumscribed. Yogis who forcefully take over the bodies of other creatures are the villains of countless medieval accounts, including the tenth- to eleventh-century Kashmirian *Kathāsaritsāgara* (“Ocean of Rivers of Story,” which contains the famous *Ve-tālapañcaviṃśati*—the “Twenty-five Tales of the Zombie”) and the *Yogavā-siṣṭha*. In the seventh-century farce entitled *Bhagavadajjūkiya*, the “Tale of the Saint Courtesan,” a yogi who briefly occupies the body of a dead prostitute is cast as a comic figure. Well into the twentieth century, the term *yogi* continued to be used nearly exclusively to refer to a Tantric practitioner who opted for this-worldly self-aggrandizement over disembodied liberation. Tantric yogis specialize in esoteric practices, often carried out in cremation grounds, practices that often verge on black magic and sorcery. Once again, this was, overwhelmingly, the primary sense of the term “yogi” in pre-modern Indic traditions: nowhere prior to the seventeenth century do we find it applied to persons seated in fixed postures, regulating their breath or entering into meditative states.

HATHA YOGA

A new regimen of *yoga* called the “*yoga* of forceful exertion” rapidly emerges as a comprehensive system in the tenth to eleventh century, as evidenced in works like the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and the original *Gorakṣa Śataka* (“Hundred Verses of Gorakṣa”) [Mallinson]. While the famous *cakras*, *nāḍīs*, and *kuṇḍalinī* predate its advent, *hatha yoga* is entirely innovative in its depiction of the yogic body as a pneumatic, but also a hydraulic and a thermodynamic system. The practice of breath control becomes particularly refined in the hathayogic texts, with elaborate instructions provided concerning the calibrated regulation of the breaths. In certain sources, the duration of time during which the breath is held is of primary importance, with lengthened periods of breath stoppage

corresponding to expanded levels of supernatural power. This science of the breath had a number of offshoots, including a form of divination based on the movements of the breath within and outside of the body, an esoteric tradition that found its way into medieval Tibetan and Persian [Ernst] sources.

In a novel variation on the theme of consciousness-raising-as-internal-ascent, *haṭha yoga* also represents the yogic body as a sealed hydraulic system within which vital fluids may be channeled upward as they are refined into nectar through the heat of asceticism. Here, the semen of the practitioner, lying inert in the coiled body of the serpentine *kuṇḍalinī* in the lower abdomen, becomes heated through the bellows effect of *prāṇāyāma*, the repeated inflation and deflation of the peripheral breath channels. The awakened *kuṇḍalinī* suddenly straightens and enters into the *susumṇā*, the medial channel that runs the length of the spinal column up to the cranial vault. Propelled by the yogi's heated breaths, the hissing *kuṇḍalinī* serpent shoots upward, piercing each of the *cakras* as she rises. With the penetration of each succeeding *cakra*, vast amounts of heat are released, such that the semen contained in the *kuṇḍalinī*'s body becomes gradually transmuted. This body of theory and practice was quickly adopted in both Jain and Buddhist Tantric works. In the Buddhist case, the cognate of the *kuṇḍalinī* was the fiery *avadhūtī* or *caṇḍālī* ("outcaste woman"), whose union with the male principle in the cranial vault caused the fluid "thought of enlightenment" (*bodhicitta*) to flood the practitioner's body.

The *cakras* of the yogic body are identified in hathayogic sources not only as so many internalized cremation grounds—both the favorite haunts of the medieval Tantric yogis, and those sites on which a burning fire releases the self from the body before hurling it skyward—but also as "circles" of dancing, howling, high-flying *yoginīs* whose flight is fueled, precisely, by their ingestion of male semen. When the *kuṇḍalinī* reaches the end of her rise and bursts into the cranial vault, the semen that she has been carrying has been transformed into the nectar of immortality, which the yogi then drinks internally from the bowl of his own skull. With it, he becomes an immortal, invulnerable, being possessed of supernatural powers, a god on earth.

Without a doubt, *haṭha yoga* both synthesizes and internalizes many of the elements of earlier yoga systems: meditative ascent, upward mobility via the flight of the *yoginī* (now replaced by the *kuṇḍalinī*), and a number of esoteric Tantric practices. It is also probable that the thermodynamic transformations internal to Hindu alchemy, the essential texts of which predate the *haṭha yoga* canon by at least a century, also provided a set of theoretical models for the new system (White 1996).

With respect to modern-day postural yoga, *haṭha yoga*'s greatest legacy is to

be found in the combination of fixed postures (*āsanas*), breath control techniques (*prāṇāyāma*), locks (*bandhas*), and seals (*mudrās*) that comprise its practical side. These are the practices that isolate the inner yogic body from the outside, such that it becomes a hermetically sealed system within which air and fluids can be drawn upward, against their normal downward flow. These techniques are described in increasing detail between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, the period of the flowering of the *haṭha yoga* corpus. In later centuries, a canonical number of eighty-four *āsanas* would be reached (Bühnemann 2007).

Often, the practice system of *haṭha yoga* is referred to as “six-limbed” yoga, as a means of distinguishing it from the “eight-limbed” practice of the YS. What the two systems generally share in common with one another—as well as with the yoga systems of the late classical Upaniṣads, the later *Yoga Upaniṣads*, and every Buddhist yoga system—are posture, breath control, and the three levels of meditative concentration leading to *samādhi*. In the YS, these six practices are preceded by behavioral restraints and purificatory ritual observances (*yama* and *niyama*). The Jain yoga systems of both the eighth-century Haribhadra and the tenth- to thirteenth-century Digambara Jain monk Rāmasena are also eight-limbed [Dundas]. By the time of the fifteenth-century CE *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* (also known as the *Haṭhapradīpikā*) of Svātmarāman, this distinction had become codified under a different set of terms: *haṭha yoga*, which comprised the practices leading to liberation in the body (*jīvanmukti*) was made to be the inferior stepsister of *rāja yoga*, the meditative techniques that culminate in the cessation of suffering through disembodied liberation (*videha mukti*). These categories could, however, be subverted, as a remarkable albeit idiosyncratic eighteenth-century Tantric document makes abundantly clear [Vasudeva].

Here, it should be noted that prior to the end of the first millennium CE, detailed descriptions of *āsanas* were nowhere to be found in the Indian textual record. In the light of this, any claim that sculpted images of cross-legged figures—including those represented on the famous clay seals from third millennium BCE Indus Valley archeological sites—represent yogic postures are speculative at best (White 2009: 48–59).

THE NĀTH YOGĪS

All of the earliest Sanskrit-language works on *haṭha yoga* are attributed to Gorakhnāth, the twelfth- to thirteenth-century founder of the religious order known as the Nāth Yogīs, Nāth Siddhas, or simply, the yogis. The Nāth Yogīs were and remain the sole South Asian order to self-identify as yogis, which

makes perfect sense given their explicit agenda of bodily immortality, invulnerability, and the attainment of supernatural powers. While little is known of the life of this founder and innovator, Gorakhnāth's prestige was such that an important number of seminal *haṭha yoga* works, many of which postdated the historical Gorakhnāth by several centuries, named him as their author in order to lend them a cachet of authenticity. In addition to these Sanskrit-language guides to the practice of *haṭha yoga*, Gorakhnāth and several of his disciples were also the putative authors of a rich treasury of mystic poetry, written in the vernacular language of twelfth- to fourteenth-century northwest India. These poems contain particularly vivid descriptions of the yogic body, identifying its inner landscapes with the principal mountains, river systems, and other landforms of the Indian subcontinent as well as with the imagined worlds of medieval Indic cosmology. This legacy would be carried forward in the later Yoga Upaniṣads as well as in the mystic poetry of the late medieval Tantric revival of the eastern region of Bengal [Hayes]. It also survives in popular traditions of rural north India, where the esoteric teachings of yogi gurus of yore continue to be sung by modern-day yogi bards in all-night village gatherings [Gold and Gold].

Given their reputed supernatural powers, the Tantric yogis of medieval adventure and fantasy literature were often cast as rivals to princes and kings whose thrones and harems they tried to usurp. In the case of the Nāth Yogīs, these relationships were real and documented, with members of their order celebrated in a number of kingdoms across northern and western India for having brought down tyrants and raised untested princes to the throne. These feats are also chronicled in late medieval Nāth Yogī hagiographies and legend cycles, which feature princes who abandon the royal life to take initiation with illustrious gurus, and yogis who use their remarkable supernatural powers for the benefit (or to the detriment) of kings. All of the great Mughal emperors had interactions with the Nāth Yogīs, including Aurangzeb, who appealed to a yogi abbot for an alchemical aphrodisiac; Shāh Alam II, whose fall from power was foretold by a naked yogi; and the illustrious Akbar, whose fascination and political savvy brought him into contact with Nāth Yogīs on several occasions [Pinch].

While it is often difficult to separate fact from fiction in the case of the Nāth Yogīs, there can be no doubt but that they were powerful figures who provoked powerful reactions on the part of the humble and mighty alike. At the height of their power between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, they appeared frequently in the writings of north Indian poet-saints (*sants*) like Kabīr and Guru Nānak, who generally castigated them for their arrogance and obsession with worldly power. The Nāth Yogīs were among the first

religious orders to militarize into fighting units, a practice that became so commonplace that by the eighteenth century the north Indian military labor market was dominated by “yogi” warriors who numbered in the hundreds of thousands (Pinch 2006)! It was not until the late eighteenth century, when the British quashed the so-called Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion in Bengal, that the widespread phenomenon of the yogi warrior began to disappear from the Indian subcontinent.

Like the Sufi *fakirs* with whom they were often associated, the yogis were widely considered by India’s rural peasantry to be superhuman allies who could protect them from the supernatural entities responsible for disease, famine, misfortune, and death. Yet, the same yogis have long been dreaded and feared for the havoc they are capable of wreaking on persons weaker than themselves. Even to the present day in rural India and Nepal, parents will scold naughty children by threatening them that “the yogi will come and take them away.” There may be a historical basis to this threat: well into the modern period, poverty-stricken villagers sold their children into the yogi orders as an acceptable alternative to death by starvation.

THE YOGA UPANIṢADS

The Yoga Upaniṣads [Ruff] are a collection of twenty-one medieval Indian reinterpretations of the so-called classical Upaniṣads, that is, works like the *Kaṭhaka Upaniṣad*, quoted earlier. Their content is devoted to metaphysical correspondences between the universal macrocosm and bodily microcosm, meditation, mantra, and techniques of yogic practice. While it is the case that their content is quite entirely derivative of Tantric and Nāth Yogī traditions, their originality lies in their Vedānta-style non-dualist metaphysics (Bouy 1994). The earliest works of this corpus, devoted to meditation upon *mantras*—especially OM, the acoustic essence of the absolute *brahman*—were compiled in north India some time between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, south Indian brahmins greatly expanded these works—folding into them a wealth of data from the Hindu Tantras as well as the *haṭha yoga* traditions of the Nāth Yogīs, including the *kunḍalinī*, the yogic *āsanas*, and the internal geography of the yogic body. So it is that many of the Yoga Upaniṣads exist both in short “northern” and longer “southern” versions. Far to the north, in Nepal, one finds the same influences and philosophical orientations in the *Vairāgyāṃvara*, a work on yoga composed by the eighteenth-century founder of the Josmanī sect. In some respects, its author Śāśidhara’s political and social activism anticipated the agendas of the nineteenth-century Indian founders of modern yoga [Timilsina].