

HATHAYOGA SADHANA AND THE PARADOX OF SELF-CULTIVATION

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1. Introduction

It moves – yet it does not move!
It's far away – yet near at hand!
It is within this whole world – yet
It's also outside this whole world.
*Isa Upanishad*¹

Since I have looked in some detail at the process of *hathayoga* in two recent studies (2001, 2002), my interest here is motivated primarily by an apparent paradox that I see positioned at the very heart of the *sadhana* or self-cultivation process itself. As Kalamaras says, “the meditative traditions of India have always relied upon paradox as a central method of exploration, as well as a means of describing an experience of ‘higher consciousness’ itself.”² More specifically, I am concerned with paradox as it permeates the actual practice (*sadhana*) of *hathayoga*, rather than with the idea of paradox as a heuristic or centralizing feature of *yoga* philosophy. Although we do see a number of parallels with other Eastern meditative traditions, most notably *Zen koans*, the *hathayoga* material presents a level of embodied discourse that is not found to the same degree in other traditions and, for this reason, it presents a unique case study.

Other than practice, one way to learn about the expedient path³ of

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¹*Isa Upanisad* 1:5, cited in Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upanisads: Annotated Text and Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 407.

²George Kalamaras, *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension: Symbolic Form in the Rhetoric of Silence*, Albany: State University of New York, 1994, 7

³For example, throughout his study of Sahajiyā, Hugh B. Urban refers to the human

hathayoga sadhana is through the textual or scriptural material available.⁴ This, alongside the oral (i.e., living, interpretive and commentarial) tradition, presents the most comprehensive approach. For this reason, the reader should not be surprised to find that I refer not only to the teachings on practice deriving from the *hathayoga* textual tradition, but also to the oral and written commentaries received from the monastic lineage of Swami Kṛpalvananda,⁵ a recognized master (*acarya*, *guru*) in this tradition.

In his writings, Kṛpalvananda draws not only upon his own experiences, but also on a rich oral and written legacy of Indian spirituality. The texts that are most authoritative for his lineage and his teachings are the various works on *yoga*, in particular the *Hathayoga Pradipika* of Svattmarama (HYP). His own commentary on this text (HYPR),⁶ subtitled *Rahasyabodhini (The Secrets of Knowledge)*, was written as a manual specifically to help clarify and illuminate the path of renunciation (*nivṛtti marga*) of *prana yogasadhana* or *pranopasana* for his initiated disciples (through *saktipata*⁷ and *sannyasadikṣa*), and it offers

body as the central and most “expedient” path of liberation (*Songs of Ecstasy: Tantric and Devotional Songs from Colonial Bengal*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 34-35, 64).

⁴The heritage of *yoga* scriptures in India is vast. However, medieval *hathayoga* or *kriyayoga* scriptures, such as the *Hathayogapradipika* (HYP), *Gheranda Samhita* (GS), *Siva Samhita* (SS), *Goraksa Samhita* (GS), *Hatharatnavali* (HR), etc., represent a genre of aphoristic, Sanskrit literature that concentrates mainly on a regimen of corporeal practices that facilitate a programmatic path leading to the highest state of *samadhi* and *samarasya* (union of Siva and Sakti). The technical term ‘*hatha*’ was first used by Goraksa of the Nathayogi *sampradaya* in the *Hathadipika* (HD). Svattmarama (also known as Atmarama) makes reference to this in his HYP. See Venkata M. Reddy, *Hatharatnavali of Srinivasabhata Mahayogindra* (Sanskrit and English), Arthamuru: Ramakrishna Reddy, 1982 for more details on two unpublished manuscripts of the HD in Darbar Library, Nepal, and Government Manuscript Library Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁵For the hagiographic details of the life of Swami Kṛpalvananda see Ellen Goldberg, “The *Hathayoga Pradipika* of Svattmarama and the *Rahasyabodhini* of Kṛpalvananda,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy and Religion* 6, 10 (2001), 1-37.

⁶*Hathayoga Pradipika* (Sanskrit and Hindi text and commentary by Swami Kṛpalvananda), Swami Vinit Muni and Ellen Goldberg, trans. (Unpublished Manuscript), 1995.

⁷For an interesting article on *saktipata*, see Paul E. Muller-Ortega, “On the Seal of Sambhu: A Poem by Abhinavagupta,” in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White, pages 573-587, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. I would argue, however, that Swami

empirical testimony of the living reality of *yoga* in contemporary India. Quite often the teachings of the textual tradition are intentionally ambiguous, and this is especially the case in the area of practice. Indeed, *hathayoga* sources are not always self-explanatory. Consequently, direct transmission and commentary by a competent teacher or *guru* is considered more authoritative than even the printed word or written manuscript among recognized adepts (HYP 3:79, 4:8-9; SS 3:11; HR 2:68, 75; HYPR 2:4-6). Alongside the textual sources, the recorded and oral traditions of interpretation and explanation offer a necessary contribution to our scholarly endeavours.

2. Hathayoga Tradition

There is a fundamental belief inherent in the *hathayoga* tradition that by performing the practices prescribed a more expedient and direct way to liberation is attainable. The intensive *hathayoga* practices that navigate the practitioner through the intricacies of self-cultivation are rooted in a cultural understanding of the universe as ordered and governed by discernable causal laws and patterns. Furthermore, these laws are homologous with the individual's own attempts to harness, refine and, subsequently, sublimate the energy (*pranasakti*) that emanates within the entire universe through the means of ritual identification or *sadhana* (GS 7:2; 7: 12-13; HYP 4: 77).

Broadly stated, the *hathayoga* tradition embraces a how-to or self-help approach, teaching experiential, first-hand techniques for systematically developing, enhancing and perfecting the *yogin/i*'s spiritual awareness. Meaning and clarification are found in the actual performative response to the ascetic and meditative practices and are clearly oriented toward individual mystical accomplishment. The emphasis in this tradition is on cultivating a thorough and coherent program of practical techniques that depends upon a corresponding, culturally constructed, cosmological system emphasizing an internalized, psychic landscape that works according to its own internal logic. The practice of techniques, such as *asana*, *satkarma*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *mudra*, *mantra*, *nadanusandhana*, *dharana*, and *dhyana*, guide or navigate the practitioner systematically through the constitution of the individual human body and the psyche to a direct experience of reality conceived in terms of its own particular cultural orientation as Siva-Sakti, a primordial unity that includes within itself the

Muktananda is not the "only" teacher who bestowed *saktipata*.

conjoined masculine and feminine principles (GS 1:10-11; GS 3:41-42; 7:12-13; also referred to as *bindu-rajās* HYP3:101). Thus, in this profoundly embodied practice in which the entire body/mind is looked upon as an essential vehicle for the realization of *Sivatva* (or Sivahood), we see the linking together of the social, the philosophical, the metaphysical, and the scientific or practical teachings which essentially work in tandem to occlude physical and mental obscurities, reduce and impede disease by prolonging or extending life, and illuminate and refine the instrument of the mind (*buddhi*) for insight in the higher stages of meditation (HYP 2:16, 20, 47; 3:3, 7; 30, 75; GS 3: 63, 76; 5: 77; HR 2:1, 10, 116).

3. Ultimate Goal of *Hathayoga*: *Nirbija Samadhi*

Essentially, *hathayoga* offers a practical regimen of disciplines for developing and training the individual's direct spiritual recognition of the self (*atman*), that is to say, the cultivation of one's original, natural, and spontaneous state (*sahaja*, HYP 4:11). It also is a tradition devoted primarily to meditation and the necessary ascetic preparations for the attainment of *samadhi*. As such, it is neither known for its particular contributions to Indian systematic philosophy, nor as a distinctly intellectual tradition.⁸ This, in my view, probably accounts for the obvious lack of scholarly attention given to this particular school, for our own ethnocentrism, at least in the Western academic field of religious studies, tends at times to elevate the philosophical and textual traditions over and above the experiential techniques associated explicitly with the culture of the body (*kriya* or *kaya sadhana*).⁹

⁸A. K. Banerjea, *Philosophy of Goraknath*. Gorakpur: Gorakpur University, 1961, xix.

⁹For example, Turner refers to a "theoretical prudery with respect to human corporeality which constitutes an analytical gap at the core of sociological enquiry" (Brian Turner, *The Body and Society*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984, 30). It can be argued that this Hellenized-Christian "prudery," or, at least, latent historical strands of it, situated alongside the traditional, Cartesian dichotomy between desire (body) and reason (mind), inform our Western notions of the human body. Moreover, notions of the human body as "a limiting point of human experience and consciousness" as well as the theological symbolism of Christian "sinfulness" express ideas deeply sedimented in Western intellectual history. Turner sees Foucault's writings as a response to Western social sciences' "negligence" and "neglect" (34, 227) of the body as an attempt to recover it as a site of human discourse and knowledge. I would argue that while these specific assumptions are not present in the Indian *hathayoga* worldview, which is grounded in non-duality and reciprocity (not to mention paradox), it is nonetheless a system mediated by its own ideological models of biology,

However, we see even in the classical tradition of Patañjali's *rajayoga* (*Yogasutras* [YS] 2: 28-55¹⁰), and in the orthodox compositions of Vedanta (e.g., *Pranna Upanisad* [PU] 1:10; 3:6, *Svetasvatara Upanisad* [SU] 2:8-5, *Katha Upanisad* [KU] 6:16) a rudimentary outline of *kriyayoga sadhana*, *pranopasana* or *hathayoga sadhana*¹¹ that is considered not only a substantive and an initiatory

psychology, history, metaphysics, sociology, religion, and saturated with symbolic significance.

¹⁰These *sutras* refer specifically to the extrovert practices which weaken the *klesas* or five hindrances (*avidya*, *asmita*, *raga*, *dvesa*, and *abhinivesa*) and, thus, bring about the cessation of *vrutti*. Krpalvananda essentially agrees with Patañjali insofar as there are two stages of *yoga*, extrovert (*bahiranga*, indirect) and introvert (*antaranga*, direct); however, he refers specifically to the *bahiranga* stage of *rajayoga* as *hatha* or *kriya yoga* since it typically addresses the restraint of the five senses. This, in turn, promotes the *antaranga* phase, leading to the complete restraint of the *citta* or *rajayoga* (HYPR 1:10). For Krpalvananda, the word *raja* is a metaphorical reference to the crown of the head or the location of the *sahasrara cakra*. Both the internal and the external aspects are clearly addressed in the *hañhayoga* manuals, just as both aspects are addressed in Patañjali. For Krpalvananda, the difference is primarily one of emphasis.

¹¹For example, the *Prasna Upanisad* tells the story of six men who journey to see the Venerable Pippalada in search of *parabrahman* (PU 1.1). Pippalada explains that there are two paths in the body, the southern (*daksina*) path and the northern (*uttara*) path. The latter, which is the path of *pranana* or *prana* is regarded as the higher of the two since it alone delivers cessation or *nirodha* (PU 1.1-10). Similar to many texts of this type, the *Praana Upanisad* discloses the extraordinary techniques and subtle body physiology of *prana marga nivrutti sadhana* through a dialogue between preceptor and pupil by using symbolic phrases that hide explicit details from the uninitiated. However, behind this somewhat codified and concealed language lies internal agreement and implicit references to the same remarkable subtle physiology that we find outlined in the later medieval *hathayoga* manuals. What we see is a genetic or family similarity in which *yoga*-identified *upanisad* tell us that *prana* pervades the vital forces of the entire operating mind/body, and that it can be contacted via various biological and psychological functions, such as breathing, movement, visualization, repetition of *mantra*, etc. Since *prana* derives directly from the self or *Atman*, it is through the path of *prana* that the process of *nirodha* unfolds, leading eventually to absolute identification with *parabrahman*. In *hathayoga* this goal is recast in decidedly theistic terms as Siva-Sakti. Consequently, the cessation of the circulation of *prana*, that is to say, Sakti, in the mind/body of the adept practitioner essentially establishes the state of Sivahood (or *Sivatva*, *nirodha*, *samadhi*).

part of the entire system, but also essential to its very fulfilment. The subtle teachings treated in several *Yoga Upanisads*, such as *Ksurika*, *Amrtabindu*, *Yogasika*, *Hamsa*, and *Dhyanabindu*, are also intriguingly reminiscent of later *hathayoga* manuals and are considered authoritative within the *hathayoga sampradaya*. In the pan-Indian literature one finds on *yoga* that self-cultivation exercises are, without a doubt, central to the acquisition of knowledge and the higher attainments of *rajayoga* (HYP 1:2; 2: 76-77; 4:102; GS 1:2), *kaivalya* (aloneness, YS 4:24-34; HYP 6:62) and *moksa*, contribute what I refer to as the “active” voice (*karma*) of the tradition. Nonetheless, it is a voice that must inevitably be silenced via the very self-cultivation techniques that once mediated the practitioner’s own transformation (HYP 4: 11; YS 4:1-13).

The paradox that characterizes this internal pattern is marked in the human body (*pinda*, *sarira*) by an intricate, though identifiable, design that is forged from the confluence of macrocosmic and microcosmic energies that are intimately and eternally bound together (HYPR 1:10; *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* 2.3.1-6; *Chandogya Upanisad* 6.1-16). Typically, in non-dualist Saiva traditions such as *hathayoga*, the individual human body (i.e., matter, *prakrti*) is considered to be the absolute presence of energy (*Sakti*, *prana*¹²) concentrated in a particular configuration or *nama-rupa* (name and form). It is ultimately indistinguishable and inseparable from Siva (GS 7:12-13; SS 1:34, 46, 52; HYP 4: 102, 4; 77). However, before this identification emerges, the biological body must be purged or purified of its tendencies toward diffidence (e.g., *samkalpas*, HYP 4:7), which essentially obscure and tenuate the dialogue between the integral energies of the microcosm and the macrocosm.¹³ To accomplish this process of dynamic evolution, *hathayoga* tradition has identified and documented an intensive, exploratory program of sophisticated, psycho-physiological procedures, based on fundamental, pan-Indian, yogic principles

¹²Throughout Kripalvananda’s commentary the word ‘*prana*’ is used synonymously with ‘*Sakti*’ and ‘*brahman*’ (HYPR 2:2; see also *Kausitaki Upanisad* 2:1).

¹³For a useful discussion of this idea in Vedic thought, see Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Also, bear in mind that the macro-level constitutes the theoretical canopy for understanding the human body.

that work toward perfecting the receptivity of the human body for a subjective, first-person understanding of precisely what the terms self cultivation and transcendence mean. But, true to its paradoxical nature, in most instances this experience is said to lie beyond description, for it implies an innate inability to express or convey the experience through language (HYP 4:32, 58) since the very process of *hathayoga* itself leads not only to an experience beyond textuality but, more importantly, to the absorption or complete cessation of all bodily and mental states (e.g., *nirbija samadhi*, HYP 4:101, 108; see also YS 1:2).

4. Practical Goal: Self-Cultivation

In this principle of *nirbija samadhi* lies another inherent paradox. According to Kṛpalvananda, the techniques of *hathayoga* engage the totality of mind and body and awaken the adept to the unconditional recognition of the unity of all existence, that is, the particular and the universal are not only One, they also present a unified flow of energy that embraces both rest *and* activity. Sakti (i.e., dormant Siva) is embodied in the particular, or the self-manifesting world of form and appearance (e.g., *samsara, namarupa*). That is “her” domain (HYP 4:101), and it is this very location in the realm of cause and effect that empowers the adept practitioner to create the conditions for wholeness by undertaking and training in the arduous strategies of self cultivation. Indeed, it is the *karma*, will or agency of Sakti as the immanent and dynamic power of reality that makes the conscious cultivation of self (*Atman*) possible (GS 7:12-13). Paradoxically, they also cause “her” arrest in the subsequent attainment of cessation or *nirodha* (i.e., dormant Sakti, HYP 3:107-108; SS 3:61, 5:157-9).

Therefore, we see that Sakti does not lie enclosed in a veil of ignorance according to *hathayoga* tradition, nor does she stand outside or beyond the world of appearances as a model of transcendence closed upon itself. Rather, the significance of Siva-Sakti as an absolute, coextensive and non-dual blueprint of reality lies in how they function in precise relation to the world and, most importantly, in relation to the human body wherein their conscious meeting takes place. This divine realization, which is a precondition of *yoga* attainment, suggests an endless expansion through various homologous and symbolic relations, including, somewhat paradoxically, the simultaneous and seemingly

contradictory experience of action (Sakti) and inaction (Siva).¹⁴ Indeed, this is the very meaning of the word ‘paradox’ as defined by Kalamaras, that is to say, “two apparently contradictory things at once.”¹⁵

Specifically, the SS and the HYP explain that the spiritual goals of *hathayoga* or, for that matter, any *yoga*-identified tradition based on *advaita* principles, are to unveil or directly disclose this seemingly paradoxical reality which lies beyond our ordinary, perceptual frontiers. When and if this is attained, the adept emerges from the root constraint of ignorance and thereby extinguishes the ego-identified, psycho-physiological constitution¹⁶ premised on an afflictive, polarized, or subject-object view of reality (SS 1:46; HYP 4:77). Consequently, from the perspective of the *hathayoga* textual tradition, cause and effect (e.g., subject and object, moon and moonlight, tree and shadow, etc.¹⁷) are not separate, unity between Siva and Sakti is always present, and this liberating knowledge which is clarified through the *hathayoga* path is believed to be available to anyone who earnestly “practices” (HYP 1:64-66; GS 1:5). The path is portrayed as leading to a goal that is realizable, insofar as the exercises constitute the “gateway” or “ladder” by which one advances to higher states of unmediated or pure consciousness (HYP 1:1, 2:76; GS 1:1; HR 1:2, 16¹⁸). In this sense, self-cultivation techniques also provide a unique lens into an aspect of performative and ritualistic orthopraxy, which, in its own unique way, is now becoming a somewhat conventional (albeit popularized) part of contemporary

¹⁴Here we could include a long list of complimentary pairs such as full and empty, left and right, positive and negative, hot and cold, sun and moon, consonant and vowel, and so on.

¹⁵Kalamaras, *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension*, 14.

¹⁶We also see this in Christian mysticism. For example, Meister Eckart refers to the renunciation of ego or “own-ness” as *eigenschaft* (Sölle, “The Language of Mysticism,” 163).

¹⁷Goraknath also describes this non-duality as *dipasikha* and *dipaloka*. For more details, see Banerjea, *Philosophy of Goraknath*, 63. The SSP (1:4) says: “*Sivasya abhyantare Saktih Sakter abhyantare Sivah/Antaram naiva janiyat candra-candrikayor iva.*”

¹⁸In the HR, Srinivasabhata contradicts himself at points by suggesting that *rajayoga* precedes *hathayoga*. Compare HR 1:8 and HR 1:16. However, in HR 1:18 he clarifies that they are, in fact, interdependent. In other words, the practice of one ensures success in the practice of the other.

social and spiritual life. What is, I think, more significant is that this performative discourse is inextricably yoked to Indian traditions' own culturally identified conception and understanding of ultimacy. As such, it provides a rich and vital resource of regulatory and purificatory practices that not only are regarded by the tradition as essential to the understanding of higher states of consciousness, but they also offer us a remarkable opportunity to examine the various embodied forms that these states of consciousness assume in a human person.¹⁹

Hence, a primary contribution of Indian *yoga*-identified traditions in general, and *hathayoga*-identified traditions in particular, is not so much their philosophical wisdom (*jñana*), which according to tradition cannot really be described (*anakhya*), but rather the radical presuppositions underlying the psycho-physical procedures they propose, such as *khecari*, *vajroli*, *amaroli mudra*, and so forth. *Hathayoga* techniques are intended as a coherent body of corporeal practices that guarantee to gradually manoeuvre the *yogin/i* through his/her individual, psycho-somatic universe toward a direct experience and an intuitive understanding that the primary goal of *yoga* is not so much concerned with belief, philosophy or language (Staals 1989, 399-400), but, rather, with a pragmatic and thoroughly functional ritual paradigm that ensures incremental progress and the direct discovery of culturally constructed principles and laws (*dharma*) which are inextricably linked though not limited to matter, i.e., *prakati* or *pradhana* (SS 3:66, 77-83). The preliminary and preparatory nature of the praxis-oriented thrust of the tradition works through its various skilful and therapeutic means to produce or precipitate in unconditional terms the philosophy-oriented experience since, in a manner of speaking, wisdom and

¹⁹I am referring here to a sophisticated network of culturally identified correspondences that establishes links between the vital centres in the body (e.g., heart, throat, navel, abdomen, etc.) and particular colours, sounds (e.g., drums, bells, conches, bees, flute, etc.), elements, geometrical shapes (e.g., lotus, triangle, square, etc.), sacred sites (e.g., rivers, mountains), indwelling deities, physical postures which often resemble zoomorphic forms, and the nervous system with its web of 72,000 meridians and seven primary nerve plexuses that correspond to organs and other somatic areas. Also, in Indian tradition the *guru* is able to discern the progress of the disciple through their physical strength and endurance, the slimness and lustre of their body, their health and steadiness of mind, the control of their sexual passion, the purification of the *nadis*, the retention of breath, and the completion of *khecari mudra*, to name just a few examples (HYP 2:19, 78).

means (or theory and practice) do not represent a *sui generis* but rather the perfect cultivation of culturally constructed metaphysical representations. It is in this sense that no radical epistemological difference ultimately exists between them. The paradox lies in the systematic and complex cultivation of what is already believed to be innately present, but not yet explicitly recognized. The preparatory path of *hathayoga* self-cultivation merges or develops beyond all limitation into the integral path of *rajayoga* wherein all dualities dissolve into indivisible nothingness or *Sunyata*. Thus, it seems quite clear that the relationship between praxis and theory not only conveys a complex, symbolic organization, and the cultural expression of cognitive beliefs about the potency of self cultivation, but also an immensely rich tradition generating an internal language replete with paradox.

Hence, one significant function of the fourfold *upaya* or methodology proposed in the HYP and the SS, as I mentioned, is its intrinsic ability to subvert and undermine spiritual ignorance, afflictive emotions, and entrenched notions of a separate ego or self-identity (SS 1:35-46). According to the HYP and the SS, once properly developed, the mature and skilful performance of *yoga* praxis penetrates the individual's psycho-physiological constitution only to unveil a metaphysical clarity that can oftentimes expose some of our most deeply held assumptions about the nature of reality, such as duality (HYP 4:60; HYPR 4:60; see also KU 4:11), individuality (SS 1:68), the inevitability of death (HYP 4:103), the conditioned nature of mind (HYP 4:58-61), the epistemological limitations of language, and so on. Ideally, the seemingly radical distinction between practice and theory dissolves in proportion to the degree of mastery of the exercises. However, once again, herein lies the paradox. Having mastered the various embodied techniques, and having had faith and confidence in their efficacy, their usefulness is now emptied of purpose and motivation (i.e., *karma*). The cumulative effects of self-cultivation curiously foreclose on the necessity of formal disciplines and render them empty *Sunyata, akarma*, (HYP 4:57). Yet, it is virtually impossible to disengage the two since this inevitable outcome is already foreshadowed in the ideology of self-cultivation how-to manuals. Indeed, it is inherent in the very fabric of their thinking, and in their promise and assurance of direct experience through a life dedicated to *sadhana*. Hence, the practices prescribed in the *hathayoga* tradition not only valorise experience, they actually claim to produce it (SS 5: 209). Paradoxically, they also cause their own

extinction. The explanation for this resides not only in the theological, philosophical and metaphysical belief in the radical identitary logic of absolute non-duality but, more importantly, in the individual practitioner's complex relationship with transcendent reality which is constituted by culture, and is validated experientially in and through every fibre of human body.

5. Importance of Private Practical Instruction

This kind of practical and applied knowledge on which the *hathayoga* tradition is founded forms a distinct type of *jñana* or *vidya* that is acquired in *sadhana* through experience resulting from persistent effort and skilful means. Each adept has to accomplish this task by himself/herself, and there are no intermediaries. As the particular procedures outlined in distinct *hathayoga* manuals suggest, the crucial metaphor in this tradition is *marga* or path. This is not intended to dismiss or deny the fundamental role and function of philosophy in Indian *hathayoga* tradition. Rather, merely to emphasize and underscore the oversight of Western scholarly attention to the various practical means of *hathayoga* which not only are highly praised in Indian tradition, but without them transcendence seems all but unattainable. The power and insight of philosophical knowledge is cultivated in the initiated disciple primarily through the acquisition of what recent cognitive scientists have called the “embodied-enactive”²⁰ approach. To understand *hathayoga* through its own cultural terminology, however, we need to recognize the distinct *gnosis* that emerges from the penetrating activity of *sadhana* or spiritual exercise.

One could also argue, as we compare the aphoristic, extremely confusing and ambiguous instructions put forth by various accounts, that language plays a secondary and paradoxical role in the *hathayoga* textual tradition. Indeed, we see repeatedly in the exposition of the textual and oral accounts of this tradition that language (and, by extension, reason) ultimately fails to capture, convey and transmit spiritual experience. Hence, ritual techniques are typically transmitted by demonstration rather than by language (Staals 1989, 372). We also observe an

²⁰As Snellegrave declares, “it is not the philosopher who gives life to a religion, but the man who succeeds in practising it, and in India the practitioner *par excellence* has always been the *yogin*.” Also, see the recent work of Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993.

expressed belief in secrecy (GS 5:168, 185; HYP 1:11; SS 5:206-207; see also KU 2:23; MU 3:3), and a preference for direct transmission (e.g., *Saktipata*) through the *guru-sisya* lineage (HYP 1:14; 2:1; 4:8; SS 5:192, 196) which reinforces the idea of private, rather than public, instruction.²¹ The reason for this, once again, lies in the central notion of paradox, for only by direct experience can the *coincidentia oppositorum* (or the conjunction of opposites), as Carl Jung calls it, be understood.

To further illustrate this point of ambiguity and paradox, verbal instructions in the HYP (3:32-37) describing the practice of *khecari mudra* appear to intentionally distort the intended primary experience of collecting, retaining and drinking *amrta*. For example, the GS (1:25) suggests “peculiar iron instruments” and a cutting duration of “three years.” This differs from the HR and the HYP which refer to a sharp weapon made of milkhedge leaf to cut the frenal (HR 2:121, 127; HYP 2: 34) and, according to the HYP, the procedure takes up to six months to complete. The SS refrains from providing any specific instructions whatsoever as to how this *mudra* might actually be accomplished (4:31-37).

Krpalvananda’s commentary, based on his own experiential claims, clarifies for the adept that this process occurs spontaneously (*sahaja*), therefore, no special implements whatsoever are required. He agrees that the frenal gland has to be cut, and the uvula prepared (*rudra granthi*), but Krpalvananda contends that *khecari mudra* occurs through the force (*hatha*) and natural (*sahaja*) activity of intense *prana sadhana*, rather than by an imposed act of wilful cutting which various *hathayoga* texts imply. He explains that voluntary or wilful cutting of the frenal gland actually defeats the very purpose of *khecari mudra*, which is to cultivate and enable the spontaneous drinking of *amrta* (SS 4:32; HYPR 3:43). One clarification he provides is that the sense organ associated with the *svadhithana cakra* is the tongue (*rasana*), hence, when the *sadhak/a* raises *apana*, and purifies this *cakra* completely, *khecari mudra* will manifest automatically (HYPR 3:43).

Using the instructions for *khecari* as an example, it is virtually impossible, as far as I can see, to comprehend the advanced *mudras* catalogued in the HYP, GS, SS, and so on, chiefly on the basis of the scanty instructions provided.

²¹The idea of private rather than public practice is also reinforced in the HYP, GS, and SS’s descriptions of the place (*matha*) where the *yogin* should live (SS 3:3; GS 5: 5-7; HYP 1:12-14) and the directive to practice in seclusion (HYP 1:16; SS 5:5:184).

Consequently, the sources that appear to provide detailed instructions are, paradoxically, the very same sources that intentionally mislead. It also is abundantly clear from Kṛpalvananda's commentary, situated alongside other texts in the tradition, that the self-cultivated body/mind generates its own internal knowledge of a distinct and orderly inner landscape that is governed by specific and discernible causal laws that can be grasped only by those who have learned, experienced, and mastered its highly specialized and symbolic vocabulary through repetitive practice and contemplative refinement. By understanding the intricate and systematic interdependence between spontaneous manifestations arising in the body during *yogasadhana* and their corresponding stages of self cultivation, perhaps we can begin to create a conceptual framework for our research that reflects the *hathayoga* tradition's intent as an embodied path relying on paradox in the pursuit of spiritual awakening.

In *hathayoga* tradition, the individual body of the *yogin/i* is believed to be the epitome of the cosmic body of Siva-Sakti (GS 7:2, 7:12-13), and practice appears to be the ritual instrument that renders a subjective experience of this higher reality possible. Consequently, the *yogin/i* must be thoroughly acquainted with the constitution of the human body. In his commentary, Kṛpalvananda explains this interdependence according to the principle of the five *vayus*. For example, when the *sadhaka* spontaneously experiences *vajroli*, *yoni*, and/or *Sakticalana mudra*, it is an indication that *apana vayu* is moving upwards through the body and is working in the *svadhistana* region. Similarly, when the belly fills with air and then is forcefully drawn against the back of the spine and up towards the thorax (referred to as *plavini kumbhaka* with *uddiyana bandha*), this is evidence that *samana vayu* has reached the *manipura cakra* (navel). When the chest area expands spontaneously through various spontaneously arising *asanas*, such as *khanjanadi*, the *sadhaka* experiences *prana* moving in the *anahata cakra*. As the *prana* rises with the assistance of *sarvangasana* (shoulder stand) or *halasana* (plough posture) accompanied by *tribandha* (three locks), it is a sign that the *prana* has reached the *visuddha cakra* (HYPR 2:4-6). Continuing in this way, *prana* penetrates all of the energy centres in the body to clear stored afflictive emotions and imbalances. However, Kṛpalvananda cautions the reader that this method is not wilful. Rather, he maintains that it is based on the underlying premise of Sakti as *sahaja*, that is to say, the “natural” and the “spontaneous” provide the most direct and expedient means to

realization. It is in this sense that the *yogin/i*'s body, like the symbol of a self-arising *yantra*,²² becomes a somatic vehicle of spiritual realization wherein the individual human form unveils the inscribed metaphysical map of *yoga* teachings using so-called action oriented procedures. However, the paradox that is implied by Kripalvananda's commentary is that wilful action alone cannot ultimately liberate the *yogin/i*, it can only create the physical and hygienic conditions that are requisite for further mental training. In this sense, *hathayoga* is simply a means and not an end.

6. Heuristic Techniques and Culture of Human Body

We see a rich proliferation of heuristic techniques (*upaya*) and approaches prescribed by the diverse schools of Indian *yoga*, but the *hathayoga* textual tradition as we know it typically addresses the culture of the human body (*kayasadhana*) first. This ensures the removal of any obvious physical or emotional obstacles that could potentially arise when attempting to sit in meditation for extended periods of time. Stated in general terms, once the initial practices have prepared the body and expanded the practitioner's basic mode of cognition, sensing, awareness, etc., s/he can proceed to more subtle and spontaneous practices which awaken and, subsequently, control and sublimate the life-force (*prana* or Sakti). Hence, the central issue is *sadhana* of self cultivation which embraces an instrumental and ultimately holistic strategy intended to navigate the professional practitioner gradually through the fundamental principles of meaning and metaphysical insight (*atmavidya*, *yogavidya*, or *prajñā*). In the process, the primary pair Siva-Sakti become the paradigmatic, theological model for the construction of numerous homologues which consistently derive meaning not only from their ultimate union, but also from their simultaneous and eternal unfolding in time and space, e.g., the human body (GS 1:37-42). This seemingly gendered discourse, which on the surface appears to signal duality, is progressively deconstructed through the *sadhana* or self-cultivation process itself. That is, we encounter the paradox of self cultivation through the scriptural and oral accounts (*Agamas*) which, on the one hand, promote rigorous practice and activity while leading, on the other hand, to

²²For an excellent study of the human body as *yantra* see Madhu Khanna, *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*, 1979, Reprint, Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2003.

their complete renunciation (*vairagya*), cessation (*nirodha*) and silence (*mauna*) in the final stages of the self cultivation process, signified in the literature by such terms as *rajayoga*, *nirvana*, *mahapralaya*, *sunya*, *unmani*, *jivanmukti*, *samadhi*, and so on (HYP 4:3). These critical markers paradoxically foreclose on the assumption that division or duality is eternal and, consequently, that ultimate meaning can ever be disclosed or revealed through words since, by its very nature, language is a “system of differences.”²³ Instead, the goal and intent of these embodied exercises are to be released eventually from practical means (*karma* or “consequential activity”) once the physical and mental obscurations and afflictions (*klesa*) are eradicated and the potential of human understanding is perfectly recognized by the *yogin/i*. However, when that level of human understanding is firmly established, inasmuch as the mind is fully integrated toward itself (HYP 4:7) and is completely free of discursive thought or conceptualization (HYP 4:55, 56, 61, 104), then the basic categories and the necessity of *hathayoga* practice become greatly attenuated.

In the context of practice, sexuality also is a crucial and paradoxical component of *hathayoga* and is often a vastly misunderstood and enigmatic subject. Certain *yogic* exercises, such as *sakticalana*, *vajroli*, *sambhavi*, and *sahajoli mudra*, appear to be explicitly preoccupied with sexuality; yet, *hathayoga* advocates a monastic and renunciant lifestyle (HYP 1:57) that strictly forbids the company of women (HYP 1:62; SS 3:33). The underlying rationale for celibacy (*brahmacarya*, *urdhvareta*) is derived from the basic and fundamental understanding of Sakti. Three factors, namely, the stimulation of sexual energy, the ability to internalize the so-called sexual act, and the apparent ability to reverse the flow of sexual energy (e.g., *vajroli mudra*) are intimately linked to attainment inasmuch as it is thought that these practices propel the self cultivation process. Moreover, according to Krpalvananda, the techniques themselves are imbued with considerable symbolic significance (HYPR 1:10) that was at one time available only to the initiated and highly deserving *yogin/is*. The sexual theories described in various interpretations of the internal, subtle physiology of the human body maintain that the stimulation of yogic fire (*yogagni*) and *apana vayu*, and the retention and the reversal of sexual energy and fluids in *sadhana*, are of utmost value to the overall aims of the self cultivation

²³Saussure cited in Steven W. Leacock, *The Mind as Mirror*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1944, 43.

process, such as health, longevity, bliss, etc. (HYPR 1:10).

The reason why sexuality plays such a conspicuous and consequential role is that, once again, at the root of Indian *hathayoga* tradition lies the fundamental belief in the union of Siva and Sakti. Consequently, the *mudras* and other embodied practices also presuppose this ontological union. The perceived sexual impetus is, therefore, contingent upon a deeper understanding of their subtle and, at times, not so subtle, relationship within the human body of the *yogin/i* through such experiences as *Sakticalana mudra*. These techniques of embodied practice that offer more advanced and expedient means, also work to internalize the energy to a greater degree and, subsequently, create potential conditions, which are subject to misuse and misinterpretation precisely because of the powerful, yet subtle, psychological and physiological experiences generated at various stages of the self cultivation process. However, the efficacy of these embodied strategies lies in the adept practitioner's ability not only to harness, but also to refine, that is to say, to purify and pacify the energy that is stimulated and absorbed in the process. Herein lies the secretive and the initiatory component of the *guru-sisya* relationship insofar as it prevails as a necessary and vital instrument of explication and clarification. Thus, the very energy or force (*hatha*) that fuels the entire process paradoxically stimulates sensual experience especially in the preliminary or *vamamarga* stages of *hathayoga*, whereas it is subject to spontaneous internal renunciation or *vairagya* in the higher stages (HYPR 1:10). We also see that the terminology of *advaita* is framed in increasingly equalitarian terms of reference once the purification of duality (*dvaita*) is complete (e.g., *Ardhanarisvara*).

7. Mind-Body Union

In this paper, we need not, nor can we, mention everything. It is necessary to look at only a few outstanding principles and practices so that we might come to understand how they proceed in a strict and formal sense. Based on the underlying theological premise of a radical identitary logic, the mind and body (Sakti) can be understood not only as the living or dynamic presence of primordial Siva (*nama-rupa*) but, more importantly for our study, as *pratima* (or likeness). In other words, the body of the *yogin/i* conforms to some extent with the doctrine of correspondences and their counterparts developed earlier in the Vedic repertoire and, thus, partakes of the presence of Siva through the theistic

reinterpretation of the concept of *pratima*. The various energy systems (*cakras*) in the body and the mind simply parallel this coextensive causal relationship. If such philosophical and metaphysical presuppositions provide a genuine and authentic substructure, enframing and engaging the approach to *hathayoga* practice, then, there also must be utter inseparability and interpenetrability between them at every level of experience.²⁴ The notion that the adept performs ritual identification practice, in this case the programmatic strategies of *hathayoga*, in order to participate in and become more fully aware of the cosmic plan, is a concept well developed in Indian religion. The ritual processes through which the adept must go have to be carefully composed and adhered to. From preliminary physical and mental acts of purification, to the cultivation of more subtle states of consciousness, the four-fold *upaya* is generally uniform in most *hathayoga* manuals and, although there can be slight variations, the underlying premise is a deeply embedded doctrine of resemblance and ritual identification. Since Western religious models typically do not endorse such holistic positions and, at times, are even patently contradictory, the justification for dismissing the culture of the body and its fundamental epistemological role in the acquisition of knowledge seems obvious in the field of religious studies.²⁵

Still, we admit that the empirical evidence produced by *yogins* and *yoginis* is ultimately doomed, not by Western, phenomenological or historical investigation, but rather by the innate paradox inherent within the heart of the practice itself. The interdependence between practice and wisdom itself necessitates the annihilation of formal *sadhana*. However, this is a peril that is

²⁴Douglas suggests that there is a “strong tendency to replicate the social situation in symbolic form by drawing richly on bodily symbols in every possible dimension” (Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1970, vii). In *hatha* and *tantra yoga*, theology and cosmology provide complex symbolic references for the systematic classification of the human body. These symbolic references are used to codify the yogic body, and indicate the broader categories through which the human body is known. In this sense, the physical and subtle bodies delineated in the *hathayoga* textual tradition express social meanings that are specific to this context. Therefore, these are learned categories, rather than “natural” ones and, therefore, they reflect the broader social world and its symbolic meanings, hierarchies, behaviours, and so on.

²⁵For an interesting collection of articles on contemporary Western perspectives on the body, see Sarah Coakley, ed. *Religion and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

certainly not unwelcome by the adept practitioner as it effectively signals the awakening of *nirbija samadhi* and insight into the non-dual nature of reality. The real magic of self-cultivation, whatever configuration it assumes, is simply to enable this inevitable end.

In this sense, the pairing together of practice and wisdom, as the tradition itself does, encourages fluidity and vital engagement through the role and function of the self-cultivation process. Since reality is identified as both immanent and transcendent (i.e., Siva-Sakti, HYP 4:101), the flow of energy in the human body toward emanation and resorption is seen to be of divine origination working continuously in union with the underlying substrate of the conscious universe. As White states, “hypostasized forms of the divine energy” appear in the *yogic* body as “a set of concentric circles (*cakras*)” and are arranged more or less in a pattern of hierarchical ascent. The notion of a hierarchical ascent is well known in Indian tradition and it provides an appropriate metaphor to depict the upward motion or pilgrimage of the primordial life-force (*kundalini-Sakti* or *prana*) inasmuch as it rises upright through the subtle body of the adept practitioner from the root *cakra* (or *muladhara*) toward its goal in the crown *cakra* (*sahasrara*) once it is fully awakened and purified by the techniques of *hathayoga*. However, when Sakti reaches this final destination in the *sahasrara cakra*, “she” loses all power of activity (*karma*) and becomes dormant (i.e., Siva, *akarma*, *niskala*). In this sense, Siva represents the inactive, passive and void nature (*akarma*, *avakasa*, *Sunyata*) of totality, which transcends all distinctions, is devoid of *vāsana* and dwells in the absence of origination and cessation. Whereas Sakti expresses the plenum or the active and full (*karma*, *purnata*) nature of totality (SSP 1:32; HYP 4:101; HYPR), together they are one, and it is precisely the simultaneous juxtaposition of fullness and emptiness that appears most paradoxical.²⁶

²⁶In the following passage, Mark Dyczkowski points to a similar paradox in Kashmir Saivism with regard to the role of the adept. He writes: “When Siva and Sakti unite, the universe, formerly experienced as a reality set apart from consciousness, ceases to exist. When they separate, it is once more created. The eternal rhythm of cosmic creation and destruction is consonant with the pulse of their union and separation. The yogi who witnesses this union experiences the birth of a higher level of consciousness within himself. He recognizes the all-powerful pulsation of his consciousness as it moves between Sankara’s transcendent bliss and the radiant emission of His immanent power within Himself. One fixed and the other moving, these two poles are like fire-sticks that, rubbing together, generate

To understand this state of supreme consciousness, the adept's insights are invaluable, though they are frequently hidden in highly symbolic terms. *Hathayoga* is specifically concerned with promoting self-cultivation through the power of action (Sakti) and, paradoxically, this is considered successful when it leads the *yogin/i* to levels of attainment, such as *laya*, that go beyond the reach of practice. The goal also is to purify attachment to discursive actions such as the formulation of thought constructs (or *citta-sakti*). Once these necessary goals are attained, and there is no remainder or seed (*bija*) whatsoever, the vehicle of practice becomes essentially unnecessary. The self-cultivation process through disciplined means and embodied strategies (i.e., the agency of Sakti) reaches its culmination at the beginning of the *sabija samadhi* or the end of *hathayoga*. Here, the purification of the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, and space) corresponding to the five *pranas* (*apana* or *naga*, *vyana*, *udana*, *samana*, *prana*) and the five senses (smell, taste, sight, sound, touch) is complete, rendering the body a fit (i.e., pure and receptive) vessel for the conscious presence of non-dual awareness. Mediated entirely by Sakti, the process utilizes various pathways and vital breaths, etc., located in the human body in order to eventually dissolve the diversity of "her" sensory, mental and physical energies in the crown *cakra*. Sakti is the reality through which consciousness (Siva) knows itself, therefore, up to the edge of self knowledge the process of self-cultivation is an action-oriented path (*kriya-Sakti*). Beyond this point, action (Sakti) paradoxically dissolves into Siva (i.e., *laya*) and, subsequently, the stage of "no means" (*anupaya*) begins. One could say that this is actually the beginning of *yoga* (union), and that until this point the self-cultivation process was simply its means (*upaya*). Herein lies the ultimate paradox inasmuch as the basis of cause (path, *samsara*) and effect (goal, *nirvana*) is non-dual.

8. The Feminine Divine in *Hathayoga*

In closing, it is important to say something about the role of the feminine divine in *hathayoga* because it too is somewhat of a paradox. The ideological aspects of *hathayoga* traditions have on the whole been much more inclusive of the "feminine" in their teachings. In a recent study (2002) I draw attention to this,

within Sankara His pure *Spanda* energy" (Mark S. G. Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism*, 1987, Reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989, 100).

although I also point out the pervasive privileging of the “masculine” role. Here, it is important to mention the possibility of revision in the interpretation of the feminine with respect to the way “she” operates not only at the level of practice, but also in terms of “her” primacy and pervasiveness as a metaphysical voice within the tradition. The question as to whether this promotes gender equality at the level of “real” women is still an important and paradoxical one. While many women have been permitted access to the lived tradition, overall the textual tradition is still associated with and dominated primarily by male adepts. There is no doubt that the system of *hathayoga* as articulated in its theoretical and practical teachings, at times, reproduces relations of male privileging by reducing the status of the feminine/female through less privileged associations, for example, left, negative, *samsara*, temptress, locus of fear, etc. Paradoxically, there also is ample evidence to show that women have become accomplished practitioners, *gurus* and creators of discourse, and that the divine feminine as Sakti has been celebrated. Through engaged methods of historical analysis that involve description, redescription, and the rectification of gendered categories we begin to see that the metaphysical union of male and female in the *hathayoga* tradition can be revisited and in so doing must address the concerns of “real” women. There is no doubt that within the tradition itself there is a marked ambivalence; yet, we also see that the most essential act of direct, oral transmission of the sacred teachings proceeds in the form of a dialogue from Siva to Parvati. In this exchange it seems plausible and possible to reconstruct a crucial evidential precedent for female agency and participation, and argue that women along with men have equal access and status in this tradition.

9. Conclusion

I have tried to show throughout this paper that the *hathayoga* tradition elevates the spiritual path of self-cultivation through the human body. In its applied understanding of bodily technologies we see an extraordinary richness that, in my view, has enabled the West to see more clearly the enormous scope and depth of the human psycho-spiritual matrix. I also have shown that the only means of perceiving this embodied insight lies in the efficacy of paradox. In other words, to become completely absorbed in the state of *nirbija samadhi* is, paradoxically, to become psychically undifferentiated from the dualities of the phenomenal world, or, returning to where I began at the outset of this paper, to experience directly the

meaning of the *Isa Upanisad*.