

Embodiment and Self-realisation: The Interface between Śaṅkara's Transcendentalism and Shamanic and Tantric Experiences

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Abstract: The Advaita of Śaṅkara portrays consciousness as a single reality, with the material world and the body as the product of ignorance. In contrast, the shamanic worldview centres on the body, with various methods to induce altered states of consciousness. A cursory examination reveals a polarity between Śaṅkara's non-dualism and the shamanic practices that use body as the means of experience and cultivate embodied states for transforming subjective experience. This article aims to dismantle this misconstrued polarity, arguing that embodied experience is at the core of both shamanic and non-dual practices. I will examine the status of the body in Śaṅkara's philosophy in order to make this argument.

The issue of the relationship between the body and the self is crucial to philosophical systems of the East and West. While Cartesian, Sāṅkhyān, and other dualistic models place these two as binary opposites, accepting the self as immaterial and the body as material, non-dual models dismantle this polarity. For the materialists, the self is the product of and thus an extension of matter. Trika Śaivas hold that consciousness is the single ontological category, with both the self and physical object as its ramification. In Śaṅkara's Advaita, while consciousness is irreducible, it is also immutable, placing the material world within the realm of illusion. In this paradigm, since the body is the product of ignorance, embodied experiences are considered to be a hindrance to realisation of the transcendent self.¹

In the discourse of religious experience, phenomenological research has, on one hand, brought to prominence the embodied experiences of shamanic healing and other corporeal experiences. On the other hand, various contemporary studies of the Advaita of Śaṅkara align his non-dual awareness with phenomenological reduction. The apparent distinction between the body-oriented practices of shamans and the transcendental experience of pure consciousness is somehow bracketed in

this discourse. The objective of this article is to explore the parameters of embodied experience in Śaṅkara's Advaita and examine the response of the Advaitins to the shamanic worldview, particularly the unitary experience found in possession. In this process, I will explore the possibility of an interface between a shaman and Śaṅkara by examining the centrality of embodiment in the process of refining their altered states of consciousness.

Shamanic embodied experience frequently relies on multiple methods of inducing an altered state: drumming, dancing, spinning, ingestion of psychoactive agents, or smelling incense. This does not always lead to a pleasant experience. The non-dual experience, on the other hand, demands a serious refinement of thought processes and does not utilise the application of corporeal means. The resulting experience is always described as liberating, of the nature of bliss, and a total unitary experience of the self and the absolute. In a cursory reading, there does not seem to be any connection between these two experiences of so-called 'high' and 'low' cultures. However, what is central to Shamanic experience, the embodied awareness, is at the core of non-dual experience as well.² To reach this conclusion, this study analyses the select passages from the writings of Śaṅkara, the foremost Advaitin, while examining the embodied aspect of 'possession' (*āveśa/samāveśa*) experience addressed in non-dual Tantric literature to describe the experience of pure consciousness, observing that it is almost identical to Śaṅkara's conclusion.

It is noteworthy, however, that a mere dependence on embodied experience cannot make the two experiences of a shaman and Śaṅkara identical. Nor is this the objective of this article. This article only points toward the reliance on embodied experience in the transcendental subjective philosophy of Śaṅkara, which opens up the possibility of making some connections between Shamanic and non-dual experiences. The experience cultivated through Tantric practice proves to be a meeting ground between these two modalities. Like the Advaitins, Trika Śaivas aspire to a non-dual experience of pure consciousness that in itself is equated with non-qualified bliss. While accepting a reductionism that culminates with the identity of the individual self with the absolute, Trikas, like the Advaitins, also accept that the self in reality is transcendental (*viśvottīrṇa*) to the phenomena. And, like Shamanic practice, various Tantric practices use the body as a medium for transforming experience through ingestion of select substances for their mind-altering characteristics, an acceptance of their emotional and embodied aspects as a means to alter their state of consciousness, and utilising bodily symptoms such as shaking. Both share the visualisation of images, the use incense, drums, or songs. Both adopt rituals that differ only in the particularities but not in the general structure. And, like in Shamanic practices, some Tantric practices may involve invoking spirits, counseling, and healing through their aid or exorcism. The focus of this article, however, is not to explore a broader commonality among these systems but only to examine the scope of embodiment. A quick identification of any of these systems can be misleading. For instance, Tantras

are broadly focussed on the worship of one or another deity at the centre of their meditative practices, while Śaṅkara rejects the mediation of any corporeal means including *upāsana* in the adoption of a renunciatory approach towards the world.³ The only objective of this article is to examine the scope of embodiment in non-dual experiences and the nature of non-duality in Shamanic experiences of possession that requires a shift of subjective awareness of the subject going through possession.

The centrality of embodied experiences in Shamanic 'possession' (*āveśa*) and Tantric 'immersion' (*samāveśa*)

Accounts of both Shamanic and non-dual experiences report a shift of the subjective awareness of the experiencing self. While a shaman does not describe his experience as encompassing totality or of the form of pure consciousness or being only, he demonstrates traits of a shifted subjective horizon for the duration of his state of possession (*āveśa*). For a moment, the shaman becomes the voice of another subject, whether a spirit or god, and even when he is aware of his surroundings, he still demonstrates a shifted subjective experience. According to his report, he allows the spirits to come and take over his body and they live together. It is just a matter of the degree of possession that determines whether the self-experience of a shaman is completely or partially overpowered by his alter ego, whether a deity, a spirit, or another entity.

Scholars have recently demonstrated interest in the study of possession, which informs an understanding of altered mental states, fundamental for the classical philosophical inquiry of the self identified as the immediately experiencing subject. The shift in personal identity is described in contemplative traditions as a process in which the everyday self elevates his awareness to the higher, and thus divine, self. Possession techniques, on the contrary, are about maintaining multiple personalities, where the subject lives with his own human personality while retaining the ability to alter his self-experience. Nevertheless, corporeality is the key issue addressed in both Trika and possession-based philosophies, where the self and the body are not two separate entities but rather a continuation of one to another.

Alteration of the ego is also at the core of non-dual experience. It is most explicit in Tantric *samāveśa*, with accounts of identity shifted to that of Bhairava or Śiva. The description of the identification of the aspirant's body with the cosmos, underscored in terms such as *piṇḍa-brahmāṇḍa*, or the stanzas claiming oneself as the deity (*bhairavo'ham śivo'ham*), clearly demonstrates a shift of subjective awareness. While the phenomenal content of these two experiences may vary, the means for reaching the exalted experience is identical, with both relying on the shift of self-awareness.

Among Advaita accounts, *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is exemplary in providing accounts of this process. Most subjects in this book of narratives undergo an alteration of their ego,

transforming into a sequence of subjects. The relative and transitory nature of personhood is vivid in the narrative of Cūḍālā who manifests in different bodies and changes her gender in order to instruct her husband, or in the narrative of Līlā, where the protagonist travels to a parallel universe to bring her husband back to the realm of the living. The two personas of Līlā from two different worlds co-exist in a science-fiction-style narrative, demonstrating a fluidity of the concept of subject. In the narrative of Lavaṇa, the protagonist finds himself as a Cāṇḍāla, raising his children among his ‘dog-cooker’ family. While these are not instances of possession, what is striking is the shift of personhood in both the shamanic experience and in these reports where the subject undergoes an alteration of his ego and often returns perplexed as to which one of these shifting identities is ‘real’.

The shift of self-awareness in the process leading to self-realisation is recorded in early accounts of Vāgambhṛṇi who claims to dwell among Rudra, Vasu, and other gods.⁴ In Upaniṣadic discourse, Vāmadeva gives a similar account of himself having had the experience of becoming Manu and other gods.⁵ In one of the pioneering works on possession and similar states, Fred Smith (2006) outlines varied forms of shamanic experiences, while addressing their historical, lexicographical, and epistemic frameworks. Relying on Smith’s analysis and other readings of shamanic experiences in contemporary literature, one explicit divide between shamanic and non-dual experience is that a shaman derives medicinal or other wisdom from his transformed self-experience, while an Advaitin confirms the non-reliability and non-substantiality of these experiences that lead him to the total abandonment of phenomenal personhood and experience of the all-embracing Brahman-self.⁶

Discussion of the phenomenal content of the possession experience poses a challenge to both the materialist and the Advaitin. A materialist needs to account for the shifting personality during events of possession. Anthropologists have studied these phenomena in depth and draw the conclusion that a shaman’s possession experience is not euphoric, randomly articulated and experienced, but is systematically cultivated and maintained.⁷ Various lucid states may be evident in the state of possession, where the subject has control over his psycho-physical conditions while nevertheless allowing the altered conscious states to occur. Even if clairvoyance and similar claims are sidelined, the very cultivation of, and maneuvering by, the altered ego that shamans demonstrate are phenomena that pose a challenge to a dismissive tendency that reads shamanic experience as a variety of schizophrenic experience.

On the other hand, the Advaita position is simply that of the singularity of the self in the liberated state. This is just one step away from Sāṅkhya dualism and not a real non-dualism of the body and the self or of matter and consciousness, and it fails to address the embodied experience. The alteration of ego and a conscious creation of altered self-identity, central to the techniques of possession/immersion (*āveśa/samāveśa*) experiences, are interfaces that allow communication among various systems.

Multiple questions arise: What role does embodiment play in generating these experiences, and what amount of bodily awareness is present at the moment of transformed subjective experiences reported in these varied modes of shamanic or non-dual transformed experiences? While the centrality of embodiment is vivid in the case of shamanic practice, it is not evident in Śaṅkara's Advaita. Due to its focus on the transcendent self and a rejection of embodied experience as conventional or even illusory, Śaṅkara's Advaita does not provide much space for engaging the body.

Śaṅkara considers the Sāṅkhya school as his philosophical counterpart. In contrast to the dualism of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* with their parallels to a dualism of matter and consciousness, his Advaita rests on the singularity of consciousness, although this fails to embrace the monistic position and considers matter within the domain of ignorance (*avidyā*). If the Advaita of Śaṅkara were in fact a counterpart to Sāṅkhya, his philosophy would embrace a polarity of consciousness and matter within the single platform of the Brahman.

The above reading of Advaita, while displacing the binary of various forms, still does not supercede the two polarities of body and mind. Somatic experience and what is phenomenally felt are omitted from the wider discourse of absolute pure consciousness. The argument of this article is that the above reading itself rests only on select passages of Śaṅkara's writings, and does not place different sections of his thought into context. An introduction of the centrality of embodiment in the liberative experience in the philosophy of Śaṅkara provides a platform for making wider connections with other transforming experiences rooted on possession or immersion techniques, whereupon I will analyse his position in the commentary upon *Brahmasūtra* (BS) 1.3.26-33, the section more commonly known as the 'section on deities' (*devatādhikaraṇa*).

Embodiment in Śaṅkara's Advaita: A fresh analysis of the section on deities

While the *āveśa/samāveśa* models found in the shamanic and Tantric descriptions of esoteric experience use the shifting subjective experience as a reliable means to reach to altered and eventually elevated subjective states, Advaitins utilise this model to demonstrate that subjective instances of experiences in total are not to be relied upon, as they are all alterable and therefore insubstantial. The position of the Advaitins is also problematic in reading the phenomenal content of such experiences, as they are reluctant to ascribe any name to it, or to assign any mental event for mapping non-dual experience.

The Advaitin's response to possession-based techniques comes with a clear distinction between the self and the subject. While subjective experiences are not reliable, the self that witnesses the events of self-experience does not change in the modes of altering the ego, and is thus reliable. The question, then, to be posed by the Advaitins to those adopting possession is 'what is the mechanism that maintains the singularity of the self in these shifting identities?' The subject

that experiences itself as a shaman and the subject that experiences itself as a deity or spirit in its altered moment of possession cannot be identical, as the self as the ground of experience is shifted with the alteration of their subjective identity. Advaitins argue that, in absence of the transcendent self, there would be no mechanism to maintain a single identity in the shifting paradigms.

In essence, the alteration of personal identity demonstrates the non-reliability of personalities in Śaṅkara's Advaita. In both Trika and possession-based arguments, the focus is upon affirmation: Since self-identity can be consciously modified in possessed states, altered states of consciousness verify the one underlying principle that manifests in all equally real modes. In a negative proof, the issues intrinsic to embodiment, such as somatic experiences, feelings, and desires, are sidelined in the quest of the individual's identification with Brahman. The *āveśa* terminology common to both Trika and possession experiences, on the other hand, merely confirms embodied experience as a ramification of the singular consciousness. Following the Advaitins, shifting and fleeting self-identities are not reliable and thus illusory. Shamanic healing relies on altered self-identity where a Shaman gains wisdom in his self-identity enmeshed with deities or spirits. If possession and altered states are illusory, shamanic healing does not make sense. The Advaitins reply that an illusory herb for an illusory snakebite is a perfect remedy. The ailing person is not ill in his true nature. While substantially not being real, possession gives healing, as all that the healer has to do is to exorcise the false demons. This is as far as we can get regarding embodiment and possession with the presumed knowledge on Advaita.

These readings problematise embodiment in Śaṅkara's Advaita. Following the aforementioned understanding, an individual's experience of himself as embodied, or to have the liberating experience phenomenally felt, does not even enter into the purview of Śaṅkara's philosophy. What has been overlooked in the early scholarship on Śaṅkara is the centrality of the body in the liberating experience that grants identity of the self with the Brahman. Even the altering personal identities are downplayed in Advaita by maintaining that the self in reality is not what affirms its distinct identities in these fleeting states, but what is common to all these states is the experience-in-itself that remains undefiled while personalities alter. In a broader frame of reference, it is not the absence of the phenomenal self but rather the awareness of the non-reliability of shifting egos that constitutes the experience of enlightenment in Śaṅkara's Advaita. Although the mode of experience is negative, as it emerges in negation of the apparent ego-self, this negation is part of the process leading to the experience of liberation. This reading becomes necessary if we entertain Śaṅkara's position considering the liberation of deities.

The 'section on deities' (*devatādhikaraṇa* BS 1.3.26-33) is therefore crucial to understanding the issues relating to analysis of the content of liberating experience in Advaita. The background of discussion in this section is whether or not the deities can achieve liberation. The issue emerges due to differences regarding the

body of gods. Without understanding the classical philosophical positions of Mīmāṃsā and Advaita, this issue is opaque, and so a brief treatment is necessary.

Jaimini, a strong advocate of rituals, maintains that deities cannot achieve liberation, since they cannot act. Bādarāyaṇa rejects this view. The author of the *Mīmāṃsāsūtras* (MS) is most likely the same Jaimini, as he is the proponent of ritual philosophy for which corporeal actions are essential. The argument of Bādarāyaṇa is that even deities have bodies, if not like ours. Śaṅkara expands the position of Bādarāyaṇa; while maintaining that embodiment is the precondition for liberation, he views the body as the foundation for experience and experience as the only path to liberation. While certain somatic conditionings are not highlighted in Śaṅkara's Advaita, being in the body, whether divine or human, is maintained as the only way to recognise reality.

The prima facie position, supposedly of Jaimini, describes the self as being of the size of a thumb (*Kāṭhaka* 2.6.17). Since this size makes sense only in relation to humans, an expansion of Jaimini's position would be that no other beings are authorised for self-realisation. Śaṅkara makes exactly this argument in BS 1.3.25. He provides four reasons: Humans are authorised; they are capable of action; they are endowed with desires to carry out actions, and are not forbidden from conducting the rituals as mentioned in the Vedas.⁸

Both Bādarāyaṇa and Śaṅkara confirm the authority of *Kāṭhaka* as a valid source of knowledge. Since the discourse on the self relates to those having a thumb-sized self, Jaimini proposes that gods are not eligible for liberation, as they are not even authorised in the study of the Upaniṣads, as they lack the phenomenal self (*vijñānātman*) that relates to the core of the heart of the size of thumb.⁹ In essence, Śaṅkara presents Jaimini's position following which gods cannot liberate since they do not possess a body. The first step towards realisation of the self, in his argument, is *śravaṇa*, the hearing of the Vedic testimony; this requires ears, the physical limb that allows one to hear.

Jaimini is not rejecting deities; he is only rejecting their lack of corporeality. Bādarāyaṇa responds to this position by maintaining that even gods are authorised to realise the self, as they are also capable of knowing the Brahman. Noteworthy to the position of Śaṅkara is that which qualifies the gods for having the liberating self-knowledge is that they also are endowed with a body. He cites the testimonies of *mantra*, *arthavāda*, and the narratives found in historical and Purāṇic accounts.¹⁰ Assuming that embodiment is a precondition for practicing Brahmavidyā, Śaṅkara defends this position by saying that the Vedic testimony describing the self as being the size of the thumb does not contradict even with gods, as it is proportional to their thumb.¹¹ It is important here to read not just what Śaṅkara wrote but also what he did not write. Śaṅkara basically agreed upon the idea that embodiment is a precondition of self-realisation.

Mīmāṃsakas find it problematic that while deities are embodied, they can receive ritual offering in multiple places simultaneously, that is to say, a physical impossibility. On the other hand, if they are conceived of as having a *mantra* body,

they can appear wherever they are invoked. Śaṅkara does not find it problematic, as he maintains that deities have their bodies and they still can manifest in multiple places simultaneously.¹² In support of this line of thinking, Śaṅkara cites one Smṛti that approximates what Patañjali identifies as the ‘constructed mind’ (*nirmāṇacitta*), according to which a yogi can manifest simultaneously in multiple places by reliance on constructed minds.¹³ Śaṅkara adds that one should not ponder as to why they are not then visible, as it is within their powers to remain invisible.

The next problem for the Mīmāṃsakas is that they accept the relation between word and meaning as innate. If deities are embodied, they would also be transitory like human beings, the referent of the Vedic words would then be empty, and the relation between word and meaning would not be eternal. This question shifts the platform from the discussion on the divine body to that of the nature of linguistic comprehension. Śaṅkara responds to this question by saying that it is not the particulars that constitute the meaning, but the universal form (*ākṛti*), and even when particulars are born and collapse, universals do not. Rather than considering Indra as an individual, Śaṅkara compares him with a chieftain: Just like a chieftain will rule even after the death of one, so also will there be Indra. In order to distinguish between the deities and *mantras*, Śaṅkara also cites some passages while commenting upon BS 1.3.28, where the creator first articulates words that in turn give rise to their referents. Śaṅkara likewise does not see a contradiction in the annihilation of the world, although Mīmāṃsakas do not approve of a total annihilation. For Śaṅkara the continuation of the mental properties of deities in the re-creation of the world is similar to that of human beings after waking from the deep sleep.¹⁴

The end of the world, in Śaṅkara’s understanding, is only the end of its material form and the world still resides in its latent form as energies, and comes into being again and again. This ‘energy’ (*śakti*), for him, is identical to ‘ignorance’ (*avidyā*), as he does not favour the energies in infinite forms.¹⁵ Simply put, all visible forms subside into oblivion and return when the season is ready. In this context, Śaṅkara cites a passage that utilises the analogy of the seasons to describe new creation. Just like the signs of new season that indicate its emergence and the end of previous season, at the end of the dissolution of the world, according to this passage, the creator god grants roles to ṛṣis and gods accordingly.¹⁶

The final objection in the series revisits the discourse on linguistic references to the embodiment of the deities. BS 1.3.32 and the *Bhāṣya* thereon expand upon the position that can be summed up in following words: When invoked, Āditya is referred to as the beam of light (*jyotirmaṇḍala*). How can a beam of light have corporeality, such as having a heart, or have consciousness that has object-directedness? In essence, there is no distinction between gods and unconscious entities such as clay.¹⁷ Śaṅkara sums up Jaimini’s position regarding other deities by stating that this is also the case with deities such as fire.¹⁸ In essence, the

application of terms such as *deva* for fire or sun refers to an unconscious mass that lacks heart or body and thus is not qualified for self-realisation.

The response to this objection also concludes the section regarding the authority of deities in the wisdom of the Brahman. Following the commentary of Śaṅkara, terms such as Āditya denoting gods correspond to the individuals endowed with consciousness. As far as the forms of the deities go, they are capable of assuming any form. Śaṅkara cites a *Brāhmaṇa* passage in which Indra killed Medhātithi by assuming the form of a ram.¹⁹ The *Mahābhārata* is filled with the stories of Āditya and other gods inseminating Kuntī and Mādri by assuming human forms. Śaṅkara clarifies that even when the material substance filled with light called the sun is unconscious, the deity presiding over the sun is conscious.²⁰

Mīmāṃsakas, who adhere to the position that the very beam of light is the sun etc. and who are not convinced that terms such as Āditya relate to the individuals presiding over the beam of light, argue that the sentences describing the body of gods are merely *arthavāda* sentences, just like the sentence saying that the 'sacrificial post is the sun'. According to Mīmāṃsakas, *arthavāda* sentences are not independently meaningful as they merely qualify the subjects and are part of other sentences in the context. The above sentence, for instance, merely glorifies the post and so is not to be taken literally.²¹

Śaṅkara responds to this objection, saying that there are three categories of *arthavāda* sentences.²² The first type, 'the sacrificial post is the sun', is glorifying the sun, and so is identified as *guṇavāda*. The sentence, 'Vāyu is the speedy deity', relies on common-sense experience of the speed of the wind, and so is identified as *anuvāda*, or describing something relying on already known properties. The third type, 'Indra has a bolt in his hand', is *bhūtārthavāda*, as it describes the facts, rather than enjoining or prohibiting something. Since this third type of sentence allows one to know something not already known and the knowledge derived through this type of sentence is not rejected, these sentences can be valid means of knowledge.²³

Śaṅkara argues that sentences that enjoin practitioners to make offerings to the deities also confirm that the deities have an image (*svarūpa*). Unless the deities have a form, they cannot be brought to the heart, and without them having been brought to the heart, one cannot make an offering. Śaṅkara cites the following passage to make his case, that 'one should visualize the deity to whom one is making the offerings, pronouncing "vaṣaṭ"' (*Aitareyabrāhmaṇa* 3.8.1).

Śaṅkara also rejects the argument that there is no distinction between word and meaning, saying that the mere word cannot be the meaning, and therefore there is a distinction between word and meaning.²⁴ What Śaṅkara rejects here is the position that words refer to words themselves. Words have their references, and the terms such as Āditya or Agni are referring to the sun or fire that is distinct from their signifier.

Besides other testimonies, Śaṅkara turns to direct perception to argue that deities have a body. He argues that, just because we may not be able to perceive

it, it does not mean that others, the seers such as Vyāsa, did not encounter the deities directly. This occurs in the context where Śaṅkara cites the *Yogasūtra* (2.44) to confirm his position. Following this *sūtra*, one directly encounters one's favoured deity with self-study. According to Śaṅkara, having a body is a requirement for one to be able to encounter the deities. Śaṅkara argues that the yoga literature propounding that gods have supernatural powers such as altering their bodily size etc. cannot be rejected without proper reasoning. He also cites the *Śvetāśvatara* passage that confirms that one who has obtained the body comprised of the fire of yoga, experiences neither disease, nor old age, nor death.²⁵

If we revisit the beginning of the discussion, the context was whether or not gods are eligible for obtaining the liberating wisdom of the Brahman. Most of the discussion, however, has focussed on gods having bodies. It is noteworthy that both Bādarāyaṇa and Śaṅkara consider having a body as a precondition for instruction on the wisdom of the Brahman. Apparently, the four reasons discussed above that are essential for injunction—to be authorised for injunction, to be able to act, to be endowed with desires to carry out actions, and to not be forbidden for conducting the rituals—are contingent upon having a body.

Śaṅkara does not answer what is present in wisdom itself that considers having a body as a precondition. But what he does answer is the question of what makes one qualified to have that wisdom. His response is that having consciousness gives one the necessary qualification, and this consciousness is lived, as he discredits disembodied consciousness by the very token that the passages describing gods such as fire or sun do not refer to an insentient heap of matter because it lacks consciousness and does not have corporeal features such as a heart. Just as the desire to perform an *agniṣṭoma* is a precondition for its occurrence, so it is essential, according to Śaṅkara, to embody the desire for liberation (*mumukṣutva*) as a prerequisite for being authorised for the wisdom of the Brahman. And in his understanding, there are no disembodied desires.

The above discussion identifies the body as a requirement for experiencing transcendence. Somatic ability, essential for conducting rituals, is not diminished in this understanding, as it also expands to the practices that relate to self-realisation. Desire, another essential factor for rituals, is equally required for making an effort to realise Brahman. Śaṅkara acknowledges as a problem the necessity for having a body in order to have experience, accepting that there is no consciousness directed towards objects in the entities that do not share embodied experience. It is noteworthy here that Śaṅkara finds it essential to have object-directedness of consciousness in cultivating self-awareness. He also affirms the *Upaniṣadic* description of the embodied self as the size of the thumb. This position helps us conclude that the experience of the self in Śaṅkara's Advaita engages the phenomenal self that is felt when in the body. The only difference is, unlike common experiences, the referent who experiences its transformation to the Brahman is the very self, or the self found in the flesh, in the heart.

Notes from Jaimini's position

The above presentation relies entirely on Śaṅkara's depiction of Jaimini's position, and it is pertinent to examine Jaimini's position. If we explore MS and Śabara's commentary thereon, what we find is that Śaṅkara is mostly importing ideas that concern the authority on performing rituals, and Śaṅkara appears to be transposing these into the context of self-realisation. In these two sources, we find that Jaimini addresses the issues identified in the above discussion not in a single place, but scattered throughout. Apparently, Śaṅkara has drawn the position of Jaimini not from one single place but from different parts of the text. Two noteworthy references are MS 6.1.4-5²⁶ and MS 9.1.6-10, and these are discussed below.

MS 6.1.4-5 briefly states that only those who can conduct an entire ritual are considered authorised to perform that ritual. Even plants and animals can be incorporated as part of the ritual, but they cannot be the agent that performs it. Likewise, even gods are not authorised to perform rituals, as there are no other gods to be invoked by gods.²⁷ *Pārthasārathi* provides an additional reason why deities are not authorised for liberation by raising the issue of gods not having body.²⁸

MS 9.1.6-10 discusses the embodied nature of gods at great length and eventually refutes such a possibility. To summarise the position of Śabara upon this section, it is not the gods but the substances used in the ritual that are primary in the Vedic sacrifice. The discussion then leads to the embodied nature of gods, following *Smṛti*, complementary statements (*upacāra*), and *arthāpatti*. Śabara describes in his commentary on MS 9.1.6 that people sketch Indra with a bolt, Yama with a stick, and Varuṇa with a rope. Texts mention the limbs of Indra such as hands, neck, belly, shoulder, etc. There are also supportive statements (*upacāra*), such as 'Paśupati is pleased with him, as he has a son', or 'Vaiśravaṇa is pleased with him, as he has obtained wealth', etc. There is also *arthāpatti*, that one pleases the gods by making oblations with sacrificial objects.

The text refutes the position that gods have their bodies (MS 9.1.10) with a single stroke, giving the argument that the sentences propounding the body of gods are merely *arthavāda* sentences. Śabara states that the limbs of Indra mentioned in the texts, if taken literally, contradict the direct perception that, when invoked in rituals, these deities are not perceived in their body. Śabara also rejects the position that oblations provide a feast for the gods, as he contends that gods do not eat. In essence, this discussion relates to what Śaṅkara has presented in the above discussion. The only difference is, while the context in MS is rituals, this is not the case with the commentary of Śaṅkara upon BS.

Conclusion

The embodied nature of shamanic experience is explicit in possession techniques and their observable physical effects. The other self or the other body felt in trance

or in the possessed state is the subject's very body, felt as 'other'. While object-directedness and the separation of the experiencing self from the field of shamanic experience is often vivid in the reports of those experiences, the 'other' that a shaman encounters is his own shadow self wherein the world and the other selves are reflected. In both shamanic and non-dual experience, the body remains the template for transformed and transformative experiences.

Both the shaman and the non-dualist rely on embodied experiences to develop their theologies. While the shamanic worldview is woven around the transformed experience of a shaman in his trance, the Advaitin confirms the illusory nature of the phenomenal world relying on his non-dual experience. The Tantric technique of *samāveśa* provides a transitory platform for the interface between shamanic and transcendental experiences: like shamanic experience, it incorporates bodily mediation and physical substances, and it applies one or more techniques including chanting, spinning, drumming, using substances such as incense or liquor, physical intercourse, etc. that relate to embodied experiences and are mostly similar to shamanic practices. Like the Advaitins, non-dual Tantrics adhere to the doctrine that pure consciousness is the ultimate goal of practice, identifying it with the self or Śiva. As far as the centrality of experience is concerned, it is common to all of these practices.

This centrality of experience in three distinct spiritual traditions in India sums up varied traditions and places experience at the centre. This position contrasts the one maintained by Sharf, that the primacy of experience in Oriental religions is a mere romanticisation.²⁹ At least in the case of Indian traditions, both folk and elite practices demonstrate the same tendency of placing experience and embodiment at the centre. Whether or not the instrumentality of external substances is commonly accepted, the primacy of the body is the precondition of both immanent and transcendent experiences.

Both shamans and Advaitins have the same dilemma regarding reality: What they experience in their altered state is not what is gained through everyday experience. Having observed the shifting nature of experience, Advaitins discredit the reliability of these experiences in general. On the contrary, shamans and Tantrics affirm the content of such experiences in positive terms.

Shamanic and Tantric non-dual experiences demonstrate a difference in degree and not in kind. Not only does their technique of *āveśa/samāveśa* bring them closer, their body-centred practices and ritual observations make distinctions between the practices merely superficial ones. Note that not one single experience or practice is consistently maintained throughout the Tantras. The practices of both traditions can be organised in a graduated sequence ranging from overtly bodily practices that demonstrate external symptoms to those with inner contemplative modes. Along the same lines, the philosophical approach within Tantra can be linked with Advaita and their reliance in pure consciousness as the final mode of esoteric experience. It has already been said that they both maintain this experience as liberating, and identify this experience as the essential nature of the

self and the divine. This should not be read, however, as implying that since there are similarities, therefore they are identical. Based on perennial experiences of bodily sensation, Tantric culture and Advaita philosophers have developed sophisticated contemplative techniques, and the experiences sought and generated in their respective traditions can be considered to be consequences of this contemplative act.

If we follow the old distinction of extroverted and introverted forms of mystical experiences proposed by Stace, then shamanic, Tantric, and Advaita experiences demonstrate a gradual sequence from the extrovert to introvert.³⁰ While Tantric experiences hold the range of these practices within their domain by embracing terms such as simultaneous immanence and transcendence (*viśvottīrṇa-viśvamayatā*), shamanic and Advaita experiences can be placed in two poles of purely extrovert and introvert forms. Moving back to our earlier discussion, what matters in these practices is the very experience itself. It is not the centrality of the body that brings these traditions close, but the reliance on experience for which body is a medium. And this centrality of experience and the instrumentality of the body remains unchallenged even in Advaita.

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Notes

- 1 For an analysis of consciousness in Advaita, see Ram-Prasad (2002, 2007); Timalsina (2006, 2008, 2009); Gupta (1998); and Slaje (2001).
- 2 For a critical analysis of shamanic experience, see Peters and Price-Williams (1980); Peters (1989). For shamanic state of consciousness, see Krippner (2000); Rock and Krippner (2007).
- 3 The similarities and differences between these two systems are yet to be fully analysed. Some cursory readings include Singh (1990) and Isayeva (1995).
- 4 *Ṛgveda* 10.125.
- 5 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 1.4.10.
- 6 For a comparative and critical analysis of shamanic and other relevant experiences, see Walsh (1993).
- 7 For the training of the shamans in order to elevate and maintain their trance states, see Ephirim-Donkor (2008), pp.54–81.
- 8 See the *Bhāṣya* of Śāṅkara on BS 1.3.25:
Śāstram hy aviśeṣapavrṛttam api manuṣyān evādhikaroti, śaktatvād arthitvād aparyudastatvād upanayanādiśāstrāc ceti varṇitam etad adhikāralakṣaṇe |
 For the authority of humans in Vedic injunctions, see Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 6.1.
- 9 *manuṣyānāṃ ca niyataparimāṇaḥ kāyaḥ | aucityena niyataparimāṇam eva caiśāṃ aṅguṭhamātram hṛdayam | ato manuṣyādhikāratvāc chāstrasya manuṣyahṛdayāvasthānāpekṣam aṅguṣṭhamātratvam upapannaṃ paramātmanaḥ |* The Bhāṣya of Śāṅkara upon BS (BSBh) 1.3.25.

- 10 *tathā sāmāthyam api teṣāṃ sambhavati mantrārthavādetihāsapurāṇalokebhyo vighraha-
vatvādy avagamāt* | BSBh 1.3.26.
- 11 *devādyadhikāre 'py aṅguṣṭhamātraśrutih svāṅguṣṭhāpekṣayā na virudhyate* | BSBh 1.3.26.
- 12 *anekapratipatteḥ* | BSBh 1.3.27.
- 13 The passage reads as: *ātmano vai śarīrāṇi bahūni bhāratarṣabha* | *yogī kuryād balaṃ
prāpya taiś ca sarvair mahīm caret* || *prāpnuyād viṣayān kaiścid kaiścid ugraṃ tapas caret* |
saṃkṣīpec ca punas tāni sūryo rāsmiṅaṅān iva || Cited as *smṛti* in the *Bhāṣya* of Śaṅkara
on BS 1.3.27.
This concept is identical to Patañjali's concept of *nirmāṇacitta* discussed in the
Yogasūtra 4.4.
- 14 ... *hiranyagarbhādīnām vartamānakalpādaḥ prādurbhavadatāṃ parameśvarānugrhitānām
suptapratibuddha-vat kalpāntaravyavahārānusamdhānotpattiḥ* | BSBh 1.3.30.
- 15 *pralīyamānam api cedam jagac chaktyavaśeṣam eva pralīyate* | *śaktimūlam eva ca prab-
havati; itarathākasmikatvaprasaṅgāt* | *na cānekākārāḥ śaktayaḥ śakyāḥ kalpayitum* | BSBh
1.3.30.
- 16 *ṛṣiṅām nāmadheyāni yās ca vedeṣu dṛṣṭayaḥ* | *śarbaryante prasūtānām tāny evaibhyo
datāty ajah* | *yathārtuṣv ṛtulingāni nānārūpāni paryaye* | *dṛṣyante tāni tāny eva tathā
bhāvā yugādiṣu* || *Smṛti*, Cited in BSBh 1.3.30.
- 17 *na ca jyotirmaṅḍalasya hṛdayādīnā vighraheṇa cetanatayārthitvādīnā vā yogo'vagantum
śakyate* | *mṛdādivadacetanatvāvagamāt* | BSBh 1.3.32.
- 18 *etenāgnyādayo vyākhyatāḥ* | BSBh 1.3.32.
- 19 BSBh 1.3.33. The passage cited for the narrative of Indra's shape-shifting comes
from *Ṣaḍviṃśabrahmaṇa* 1.1.
- 20 *jyotirādes tu bhūtadhātor ādityādiṣv acetanatvam abhyupagamyate* | *cetanās tv
adhiṣṭhātāro devatātmāno mantrārthavādādivyavahārād ity uktam* | BSBh 1.3.33.
- 21 For *Mīmāṃsā* treatment on *arthavāda*, see *Mīmāṃsākoṣa* 2, pp.631–662.
- 22 A verse frequently cited in *Mīmāṃsā* literature to describe three types of *arthavādas*
runs as:
virodhe guṇavādaḥ syād anuvādo'vadhārite |
bhūtārthavādas taddhānād arthavādas tridhā mataḥ || For discussion on this verse, See
Mīmāṃsākoṣa 2, pp.635–636.
- 23 This position is a consequence of considering the definition of the valid means of
cognition (*pramāṇa*) as: *anadhigatābādhitārthaviṣayatvaṃ pramāṇatvam* |
- 24 *na ca śabdāmātram arthasvarūpaṃ sambhavati, śabdārthayor bhedāt* | BSBh 1.3.33.
- 25 *na tasya rogo na jarā na mṛtyuḥ prāptasya yogāgnimayaṃ śarīram* || *Śvetāśvatara* 2.12.
- 26 While *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* editions of Mimamsaka and Anandasrama publication
(Shastri ed.) identify this section as '*tiryagadhikaraṇa*,' Pārthasārathimīśra identifies
this as '*śaktātānāmadhikāranirākaraṇādhikaraṇa*.' See *Śāstradīpikā* on MS 6.1.4-5.
- 27 *Devatānām devatāntarābhāvāt* | Śābara on MS 6.1.
- 28 *devatānām tv ātmoddeśena tyāgāsambhavād vighrahābhāvāc cāśakter anadhikāraḥ* |
Śāstradīpikā on MS 6.1.4-5.
- 29 For the centrality of experience in studying Indian religions and philosophies, see
Halbfass (1988); Sharf (1998); Gyatso (1999). For a general overview of the construct-
ivist's arguments of religious experience, see Proudfoot (1985).
- 30 For discussion on extrovert and introvert mystical states, see Stace (1960).