

Convergence of Frameworks

Tantric texts are opaque, and visualizations are bizarre. The esoteric philosophy that supports these practices is perplexing. Initiates are secretive about their practice. In every account, the tantric world is saturated through and through with misconceptions. My approach in this chapter is to utilize a cognitive theory of body schema, engage some body-centric visualization practices, and explore the ways to interpret the mechanisms and teleology behind tantric visualization. In so doing, I am re-tracing the footsteps of Tantric philosopher Maheśvarānanda because his text *Mahārthamañjarī* (MM), composed around the 13th Century, is very concise, making it possible to address central tenets of tantric embodiment in a single chapter by solely relying on this text.

This chapter focusses on the body, mostly the imagined body, which is the body generated through the processes of imagination; and the ways fantasized imagery interacts in transforming somatosensory responses. At this nexus, I find the esoteric world comfortably communicating with cognitive science and phenomenology. My contention here is that remapping the conceptual parameters in framing tantric philosophy in a new light allows us to bring the body in to discourse. And this body is not the gendered body, not the body confined within the epidermis, but the placeholder of subjectivity, the bodily subject. In this account, I find relevance in establishing communication between Maheśvarānanda and the phenomenologists.

Before entering into the topic, I need to clarify some categories. By body image, I mean the beliefs regarding one's own body. On the other hand, body schema are sensory-motor capacities that regulate somatosensory functions. Body schema provide an organized model of ourselves, allowing us to use tools to function in our given

environment. For the purposes of this discussion, this understanding suffices, that both body schema and body image are subject to change but are not biological processes: they are rather our cognitive and sensory negotiations of ourselves with the surroundings. For both mapping our movements in space and localizing stimulation in our body, we are constantly using the schema, even though alterations to the schema remain an unconscious process. It is a mental framework, a way of organizing knowledge, a map for us to evaluate the situation and develop a response. Following Piaget, schemata is 'a cohesive, repeatable action sequence possessing component actions that are tightly interconnected and governed by a core meaning.' Following George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, I introduce 'image schema' as a category for the structure of our cognitive process that helps us establish patterns of understanding and reasoning.

Broadly, image schema are prelinguistic structures of experience that guide the process of mapping over domains in forming conceptual metaphors. We can have schema for everything, for our own subjective states, for the roles that we play at different times and in different places, for events or functions, for a specific individual or even for collective actions. This framework, following the cognitive scientists, is pre-linguistic and at the basis of human cognitive behavior. Mapping reality inside and out, far and near, tall and short, and extending the metaphors borrowed from up-and-down, based on our bodily mapping, are all guided by the schema at the background.

Consciousness, for Maheśvarānanda, functions in degree and not in kind. In his paradigm, every entity has the potential to express its embodied nature of consciousness. This thesis contradicts the schema theory, as the premise for the latter is that even the schema, not just the body, fall under the category that lacks consciousness. For Maheśvarānanda, there is some form of language even in the atomic structure, or in today's language, the genetic structure, as his monistic philosophy rests on the assumption that there is no dichotomy between the corporeal and the mental. Jerry Fodor, in the *Language of*

Thought Hypothesis, for instance, maintains that we have a distinctive mental language with which we organize our thoughts and even the basis of thinking. The proponents of this theory have identified propositional attitudes in belief, hope, desire etc., and maintain that there is something represented in each and every propositional attitude. This mental representation is a basis for behavioral attitudes that include verbal exchange. Like sentences, token mental representations have syntactic and semantic structure. In other words, these representations are complex symbols that in themselves demand semantic analysis.

Combining this theory with schema theory, we can argue that there is a passive process involved in framing and reframing the schema which are not unconscious, albeit not actively conscious. This modification allows us to engage graphic visualization processes that aim to interact in human cognitive and behavioral attitudes with the intent to bring about change, not merely altering the subject's beliefs or his subjective assessment, but also his corporeality. Body, in this account, is an extended mind, just as the mind is an extension of the body. This gives a greater fluidity for the interaction between body and mind, and gives subjects greater freedom in formulating each individual's response to stimuli. One of the fundamental premises of tantric practice is that our bodily experience is elastic and alterable: the way we experience certain things or events is determined in our engagement with the environment or in negotiation with our *samskāras*, the habit patterns guided by our past actions. By means of deconstructing and reconstructing these patterns, we can reprogram our habit tendencies as well as our cognitive assessment of the environment. This reprogramming relies heavily on the bodily schema, and the subject's projection of body image aims toward altering the schema for the desired response.

Tantric strategies of remapping the body first problematize common language while endorsing the semantics for mapping the altered body image. By language, I mean here the transformed imagery that stands for or substitutes the objectified body and becomes a template for a negotiated interface between the body and the mind. This transformed bodily vision, I argue, allows the subject to reconfigure

reality. The enactive approach championed by Francesco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, which maintains that cognition arises through a dynamic interaction between organism and environment, can assist here, as what it maintains is that our organisms are not mere receptors of the world out there, but rather, the environment and organism interact in constructive ways, and what results is not merely an informational but rather transformational interaction.

Body image and body schema can be cognitively engineered, resulting in the breakdown of distinction between the body and what constitutes the mind. Tantric models of what the west has called the body-mind problem, emphasize a mutual and reciprocal creation of body-mind articulation and structure. Yogic practices, particularly visualization focused on altering sensory and motor functions, demonstrate a process wherein the subject can alter his own bodily self. This makes the breach between the body and the flesh, as Merleau-Ponty would have it, possible. Just as the lived body is not identical with the flesh, the visualized body is not the lived body, although it does transform the subject's bodily awareness, paving the path for altering somatosensory experiences. Although tantric visualization practices are focused on esoteric and liberating experiences, there is no reason this transformation cannot function as a way to generate assertive roles for subjects who feel trapped within their own epidermis.

For Maheśvarānanda, visualization practices are for altering the subject's body image and body schema, thus effecting their transformation. Grounded on his Śākta philosophy nourished by the developments in Trika, Spanda, and other Kashmiri monistic traditions, Maheśvarānanda's project of transforming embodied experience while encapsulating the totality within the lived body is oriented towards cultivating mystical experiences. These mechanisms have the potential to address the plasticity of bodily schema and body image, allowing subjects to address their own somatic experiences. Maheśvarānanda's project is itself therapeutic, given that he views subjects as trapped within their own subjective

horizons, localizing their experiences as confined within the body, giving the subjects a sense of entrapment. For him, visualizations, particularly those focused on altered bodily forms and multiple body-imagery, alter the subject's identification with the body, renegotiate the horizon of consciousness bound within the body, and amplify bodily consciousness to incorporate the totality to eventually transform the subject's assessment about himself and his being in the world. His proposal, if translated into today's language, is that tantric practice can facilitate a twofold transformation, i) an overall subversion of the existing body schema and body image, which also include self-image and self-schema, and ii) the imposition of a new map to reconfigure bodily response with an intent to redirect somatic interactions and cognitive processes to accommodate a new projected body image and body schema. This process, vividly portrayed in his visualization practices, rests on remapping the reality and altering both the somatic and cognitive self-experiences.

When this thesis is applied to the tantric philosophy of embodiment, particularly the image body, it becomes clear that Tantras recognize the basic bodily mapping of reality, and practitioners use this premise to advance the argument that we can reprogram our bodily awareness and map our environment with this new body schema, thereby enhancing our ability to experience freedom and bliss. In order to extract this thesis from an esoteric text, the *Mahārthamañjarī*, we not only need to demystify the language and scope of the text, we also need to shift the parameters in which the text is traditionally read. And one may find this a hermeneutical breach. This, to me, is inevitable, as any attempt to read classical texts involves bridging the temporal gap between the author and the reader, and renegotiating the grounds in which the texts were written and are being read. This, however, does not involve a subversion of the textual thrust which could impose a new sense that we cannot extract by reductively translating the texts the way they are.

Maheśvarānanda does not say his is a project of reconfiguring reality. However, his is a project that stems from the understanding that the given bodily consciousness

is extremely narrow and needs to be altered in order to acquire a liberating experience. The deconstruction of the bodily consciousness is not a thesis for him, as this rather is the premise that underlies the transformation of the bodily sense to enclose the totality, to find one's self-presence in the reality extended beyond one's corporeality. Clearly he uses certain concepts as deconstructive in the sense that they interact with the existing schema and nullify their foundation, and as a consequence, he explores the possibility of liberating from the existing framework and replace it with a new structure, with an intent to cultivate a new body image that envelops all that exists, and a self-image in which there is no inside or outside between the self and the other. I analyse this plasticity of the body and the self, as portrayed by Maheśvarānanda.

Remapping Maheśvarānanda's Body Schema

Body, for Maheśvarānanda, is suffused with unsurmountable power. The reason why subjects are not capable of accessing this power is because of *saṃskāras*, the habit patterns that control our access to the potential of the body. In other words, if we were to reprogram the schema by means of altering our body image, we could tap into the forces that constitute the body. Freedom, for Maheśvarānanda, has an inherent embodied character. Maheśvarānanda proclaims:

If [you] observe, there is so much power in the body of an insect with the size of a sesame seed. How much power would there be of someone with the totality as his body, with him having a self-regulated body. To whatever extent is there the expansion of the Lord in his mode of expressing the world, the same extension is there in the embryonic stage when the world is absorbed within.

Maheśvarānanda has identified three distinctive bodies in the above passage. The first is the insect body, the body as a metaphor for triviality. The second is the cosmic body, the totality as the body. And the third is the embryonic body. Insect body is a metaphor that also describes the embryonic body, identical with the body experienced by human subjects. His central argument here is that whether or not the latent energies are expressed, or whether the world is felt outside of the body or encapsulated within, this does not change the fact that bodily experience is elastic and retains even in its most embryonic form the capacity to

express itself as the totality. The body-image that Maheśvarānanda advocates is the all-encompassing cosmic body. By establishing identity in a hierarchical order where the individual subject equals the supreme divinity, individual body equals the totality, and the psychosomatic energies equal the totality of the physical forces, Maheśvarānanda explores the possibility of a total awakening, arguing for the surge of awareness wherein bodily sense encapsulates the totality.

By repeatedly identifying that the world is the body-image of the subject, which is the central premise of *bhāvanā* or visualization in his philosophy, Maheśvarānanda aims to alter the subject's self-evaluation, including the body schema, in order to transform his convictions regarding his own body. The body, in this altered paradigm, is the divine abode, *deva-grha*, with the energies expressed in the body being equated with the cosmic forces. He cites the following passage from the *Parātrīśikā* to further his argument:

Just as the great tree [is] within the seed of a banyan in the form of latency, this world comprised of both sentient and non-sentient entities is within the heart as if the seed.

The heart, in the above metaphor, stands both for the corporeal as well as psychological center: just as the body is an expression of the heart, so also is the world the expression of consciousness. This is the metaphoric embryonic body that the yogin finds himself within as he begins his practice, and the course of visualization evolves with him finding the totality as his own expression or expansion (*prasara*). Further noteworthy is the terminology for discovering oneself identical with the cosmos, as Maheśvarānanda identifies this as *prasara*, derived of *pra*+*√srñ* + *ac*, with the prefix confirming progression, giving a positive sense to finding materiality. This, therefore, is not an emancipation from matter, as the way the subjective experience is given is already bereft of matter; it is already expunged from the objective realm. On the contrary, this is the rediscovery of the self in its expressions of both subject and object. This is the autopoiesis or self-generation that explains the concept. The metaphor he uses in the commentary for describing this embryonic phase is *śikhaṇḍyaṇḍa* or a peacock-egg. Just as myriads of colors are latent in the yolk, albeit not expressed or visible in any

form, the peacocks could not display colors that did not already exist as potential in the egg.

Maheśvarānanda describes the unsurmountable power underlying the body with an example of an insect body that is endowed with both autonomous cognitive (*parisphurana*) and behavioral powers (*pari-bhramaṇa*). The first, *sphurana*, explains the expansive expression of the self or consciousness, while the second relates to bodily fluidity. Human bodily awareness is yet another corporeality, although with greater freedom of self-expression and corporeal mobility than lower life forms. Grounding his thesis on the *Śiva Sūtra* (III.30), ‘the entire world is the constellation of his inherent powers’ (*svaśaktipracayo’sya viśvam*), Maheśvarānanda argues that all that is manifest in the totality as an expression of the cosmic powers is an inherent potency of the subject expressed as if outside.

By borrowing the concept from the *Spandakārikā* I.1, Maheśvarānanda argues in MM 30 that the ‘manifestation’ or expression, (*unmeṣa*) of the self implies withdrawal or closing (*nimeṣa*) of the world and vice versa. This amounts to maintaining that commonsense experience of the self and the world relies on mutual abnegation. On the other hand, the yogic consciousness presupposes recognizing or rediscovering oneself as the totality, dissolving the difference that underlies the cognitive modalities of subject and object. In this re-mapping of somatic experience, Maheśvarānanda develops a semantics to reconfigure horizon of embodiment, where the body expands outwards from its epidermis and interacts as an open system, encapsulating the totality within the seeker’s bodily awareness. With these new somatic schemata, a tantric subject interacts while dwelling in the world and also experiences the world as his own body. The other in this dialogical transaction is not located ‘out there’ where the bodily horizon reaches its physical limits. On the contrary, the other is mirrored within oneself in this newly mapped bodily image. Further buttressing his argument from the *Triśirobhairava*, “*sarvatattvamayaḥ kāyaḥ*” that the body is comprised of all the elements,” Maheśvarānanda confirms: “there lies identity between the body and the cosmos”

(*aṅdapīṇḍayor aikyam* | Parimala in MM 34).

The expansion of bodily consciousness is one of the recurring themes of *Mahārthamañjarī*. According to Maheśvarānanda, our response to the environment during bondage is controlled by our habit patterns shaped in reaction to the world, with the world as “this,” an entity outside of the self, bereft of consciousness. His philosophy rests on the assumption that greater empathy is possible by means of reversing this habit pattern and he proposes the course of visualization towards achieving this goal. His conviction is that subjects can mirror the world and vice versa, and the self-discovery in his paradigm rests on reaffirmation of the totality as the self, and not in expunging self-consciousness further from the body and the world. An insect, according to Maheśvarānanda, surpasses its expression of powers in relation to its body. The body in this depiction is recognized by means of its demonstration of power, bodily force compared with mechanical power and the powers of the sensory faculties compared with the powers of the luminous divinities.

We know today that a single strand of neuron or a single virus is observed to be capable of conducting complex functions, and the amount of information squeezed within the genome is mind-boggling. Following Maheśvarānanda’s hypothesis, every cell within our body is capable of the same expression. He considers the body as a hub, a constellation of all the karmic predispositions and personal volitions, and for this, he refers to the body using the Sanskrit term *kāya* that derives from *√ciñ*, to accrete. Even in a biological sense, the body is merely a system with each cellular structure having a certain degree of individuality. The consciousness I have of my body is subject to change, with bodily awareness shifting in different modes. This fluidity of bodily consciousness provides the platform for addressing Maheśvarānanda’s thesis that our bodily consciousness is not fixed and can be expanded to incorporate the totality. Visualization practices are directed towards allowing subjects to acknowledge this bodily elasticity. To further support his argument, he cites the *Virūpākṣapañcāśikā*:

All of this [that I see] is my body, with me having the

character of consciousness.

Maheśvarānanda gives a mirror-test example to demonstrate the present self-experience encased within the body. Recognizing oneself in the mirror has been considered a hallmark of self-awareness. The application here of the same example is for a different purpose: 1) to demonstrate that one can project one's bodily subjectivity outside, and 2) to make an argument that an awakened yogin, while finding his bodily presence enveloping the totality, can still recognize his corporeality within his body. In the words of Maheśvarānanda:

While experiencing a dullness of being in the embryonic state corresponding to the expansion that has the form of one's own power with the character of descending [and becoming] the entities of cognition, the subject that has transcended the world [retains] reflexive consciousness (*vimarśa*) [that has] the character of autonomous pulsation. Following the precepts such as "just as an elephant [recognizes] oneself as big as a mansion and also oneself [reflected] within a mirror, the absolute subject relishes both the entire expansion of the world and also the body," the recognition [at this state] is similar to a sexually aroused elephant recognizing [himself] in the mirror.

For Maheśvarānanda, the body is merely a composite. What is it composed of? The body, accordingly, is a aggregate of previous modes of consciousness, retained in the form of *saṃskāra*. The body accumulates what we undergo, both physically and psychically. There is not even a categorical difference between these, as what is physical is merely mental. And all that is the body is what our past modes of consciousness have experienced. Our bodily directionality implies our being in the world, with our interactions in various corporeal and mental modes. It is not the self-governing capacity alone that puzzles Maheśvarānanda; it is also the capacity to self-express. And this self-expression is not an expression of bodily being in time and space, but rather this is the self-expression of the cosmic being, being itself, the self that experiences itself in terms of the totality. Bodily schema are what our *saṃskāras* form, and visualization is what forces us to re-organize these formations. Just as the subject's expression of being short or tall is merely mapped in his bodily presentation, Maheśvarānanda's self as the totality is a remapping of the subject in light of immanence and in terms of cosmic awareness. The bodily image that the practitioner imposes during the course of visualization is that of the cosmos as the body. For Maheśvarānanda, this becomes the yardstick to measure self-realization.

Ritualizing the Body Image

Vivid in the above description, Maheśvarānanda's project sought to impose a new body image and he created a manual to guide the aspirants to repeatedly observe themselves within the framework of the new body image. The first, the cosmic body image, follows his philosophy, while the second, the manual, emerges from his Śākta ritual experience, in which the aspirant is guided towards recognizing cosmic forces and bodily energies as integral to Kālī. By all accounts, when Maheśvarānanda uses terms to refer to body, what he really means is the lived body. Moreover, his lived body is constantly interacting with his visualized world, the cosmic planes and psycho-physical centers projected within the body. The body here is both the imagined body as well as the body image that is used as a template for the recognition of oneself as both the absolute subject and the one having no boundaries caused by the epidermis. For Maheśvarānanda, there are no limits to the body and whatever the limitations are, they are merely self-imposed. By actively creating an alternative body image, Maheśvarānanda seeks to establish an altered body-schema, changing the subject's self-assessment as well as his interaction in the world. His ritualized body image needs to be read in this light.

What grounds both subject and object is experience (*anubhava*). It is in the immediate mode of experience wherein the subjective meets the objective: what constitutes as subject and object is determined within the very flash of consciousness. The project of visualization, then, is to shift experience from being temporal and finite to being infinite, from being located within the body to locating the body within experience, by liberating experience from all the frameworks.

The liberated experience, accordingly, is a consequence of freeing experience from the chains of habit patterns or *samskāras* that condition and constrain the experiences to be the way they are felt. Beyond what the Language of Thought and cognitive theories have proposed – that our cognitive and verbal exchange rely on a deeper structure,

our experiences per se – there is a deep ecological domain where the body and the environment are in a fluid exchange, mutually reshaping each other. Accordingly, in the basic sensation that reveals the world to us or the moment in which we are exposed to the world, there already is a ‘mapping,’ a reconfiguration, or schematization in process. By ritually articulating an alternative body image, Maheśvarānanda explores the ways to reshape human experience and with it, both the subject and the way he interacts in his environment.

The flesh or the clinical body can be as if bracketed, as in paralysis, in dream, or in deep sleep states. We are able to repress some basic sensations or to postpone them when encountering other urgent concerns. Embodied experiences are constantly changed in relation with the environment, suggesting that there is a ground for negotiation. While this exchange is mostly an unconscious process, Maheśvarānanda explores the ways to consciously engage by means of visualization. Telos, after all, is not pre-determined, as what amounts to a higher telos for one subject may not mean the same for another. Maheśvarānanda explores the ways to reconstitute the higher telos by giving a philosophy of cosmic oneness, with the bodily energies being harmonized with the cosmic forces that govern the physical world. Even clinically speaking, phantom limb experience suggests that bodily sensation can be extended beyond the epidermis, and the habit tendencies preserve the bodily sense beyond the existing corporeal boundaries. This is all the more vivid in the examples of pregnancy or in the case of conjoined twins.

Body, for Maheśvarānanda, is an expression of energies, with these being indistinct from consciousness or the self. He constitutes a hierarchy on which the self ascends from its materiality or descends towards inertia, both being the play of consciousness or the self. For him, this is the *svātantrya-śakti* or the capacity of freedom, that bestows upon the individual the possibility of self-concealment and self-illumination, with the first referring to materiality and the second to self-recognition. In the *Mahārthamañjarī* (verse 30), Maheśvarānanda introduces the terminology of

the state wherein the world manifests (*viśvonmeṣadaśā*) with its counterpart term, “the retrieval or closing of the world” (*viśvanimeṣa*). Having bodily consciousness that is circumscribed by the epidermis, in Maheśvarānanda’s opinion, is an embryonic phase, with the subject possessing the potential of experiencing himself as the totality.

With a holographic imagery of the body, Maheśvarānanda maintains that whatever lies in the cosmos exists in the body, albeit in unmanifest forms. Similar to what the gestalt theories would propose, what we actually experience is something in alignment with our predeterminations, predispositions, and our need to see something in terms of units as wholes. The embodied self has both its natural state with the expansion of the totality and its conditioned state with the body finding its limits within the epidermis. The body image of Maheśvarānanda is thus not merely a projection of new imagery but a meticulous negation of the existing and limited body image with a thorough deconstruction of what amounts to the body prior to replacing the bodily vision, and this sequence articulates his philosophy and mediates his ritual paradigm. Maheśvarānanda, while doing so, separates himself from other non-dual philosophers, as the enlightened subject in his depiction is not disembodied but rather super-embodied, wherein bodily consciousness expands to capture the totality.

The metaphor of the peacock egg (*śikhandyaṇḍa*) explains this phenomenon: even while in bondage and separated from the rest of the world, the embodied subject retains his dormant capacities to eventually have the all-encompassing embodiment expressed. Liberation in his depiction is one such mode of consciousness that confirms total bodily consciousness that not only gives full access to the body at its cellular level but also to the entire cosmos as one’s own body. Accordingly, the confinement within the epidermis is a condition and not a natural state for the self, and awakening is not a negation of the embodied self but rather an embrace of its ultimate expression in terms of totality.

The ritual visualization in this regard is a mechanism utilized to transform the gaze that allows the subject to

articulate their body image and identify with the projected image. *Mahārthamañjarī* can be broadly identified as a text that guides the aspirant towards implanting this altered vision. *Darśana*, philosophy, in this light, is not some speculation but rather a vision and having a correct vision requires dismantling false convictions. Above all, one needs to rely on transformed insights in order to correct existing visions. This strategy of Maheśvarānanda is particularly vivid in the verses 34-46 where he provides the theoretical framework to alter bodily consciousness in order to transform it to encapsulate the totality within. Rather than going to the detail of how he aims to achieve this schematic transformation, it is enough to give a quick summary of the salient features of this manual. What underscores this conversation is the statement that:

The energies characterized by the sensory faculties which are also equated with the cosmic energies [of the limbs corresponding to the absolute subject] (*karaṇadevī*) shine forth in what has been the altar.

One of the recurring themes in this course of visualization is that the body is an altar, that deities are to be worshipped within one's own heart, that one's self-experience is identical to the experience of the absolute subject, that the way the individual subject experiences his body is identical with how the absolute subject experiences his embodiment within the totality. And this is what we encounter in the course of visualization practices. For instance:

The highest divinity (*parameśvara*) in the form of the individual subject is the deity presiding at the center that is differentiated as external and internal deities within the circles. The placeholders for the deities in the enclosures are the powers of the sensory faculties. It is only within the body which is the major altar that their worship is possible.

Along these lines, an unliberated subject only has a vague idea about himself, with his consciousness drifting in the temporal flux. Awakening in this regard is a full affirmation of the body, wherein the body extends to and embraces the cosmos. The very self immediately given in the experiential modes becomes the divinity or the absolute subject to be recognized by means of visualization. Maheśvarānanda adds further:

The highest divinity whose essential nature is confirmed by means of the Vedas and Āgamas is to be worshipped upon the sacred altar of the form of the body.

A general understanding of worship as an activity that is directed outwards needs a correction here, as in this internalized gaze, worship is nothing distinct from the

acknowledgement of the roles that the sensory faculties play in the flow of consciousness outward and their retrieval from the external realm after having encountered the objective world. What visualization implies then is an observation of consciousness in its dynamic mode of being engaged with the world. Maheśvarānanda states:

The essence is that the very *effulgent modes of consciousness manifest in the form of objects* [lit. nectar] (*vedyāmṛta*) that are the substances for the Kula ritual (*kuladravya*) are the very objects (*tāni*) that are the instruments for worship. These objects (*tāni*) are to be offered, with them being skillfully contained in the [metaphoric] cup of one's own mind. [emphasis mine]

In an external ritual, there is a deity and a worshipper, while both become identical when the ritual is internalized. In an external ritual, there are ritual objects and instruments such as cups to hold those objects, while in the internal ritual, the mind becomes the cup and the engagement of consciousness through the sensory modalities becomes the ritual objects. The very will of the subject to enter into the collective consciousness and erase the sense of a separated individuality becomes the mechanism of conducting the ritual. Self-realization is the anticipated outcome of such a ritual. Maheśvarānanda confirms this concept in the following statement:

First, one should worship the body as the altar. [After that,] one should seek in the center of the heart the supreme divinity of the character of absolute luminosity that is identical to the self. One should [thereafter] visualize the potencies in the form of the sensory faculties encircling the [metaphoric center,] the self. Thereafter, one should fill the mind, which is the collective form of all the inner faculties, with the libation objects which are characterized by the expression of the objects of cognition. One should then purify these objects (*tad*) with the power of *mantra* that is comprised of the reflexive consciousness of the supreme divinity. This deity [or the self] encircled by divinities [or the sensory faculties] is to be worshipped with this very *kula* nectar (*kulāmṛta*) [of experiencing bliss].

Reaffirmation of oneself as the divinity, or the subject with absolute freedom, is at the core of Maheśvarānanda's visualization. The fundamental problem he observes for human suffering is the sense of lacking freedom. This sense of lack extends not only in subjective limitation, it also results in conditioning the sensory and corporeal functions to be limited. Subjects enter into the inertia of dullness simply by giving up their inherent nature that possesses absolute freedom. Maheśvarānanda initiates the course of visualization by first deconstructing what constitutes subjectivity, that an individual subject is not what the

subject considers himself to be, nor is his body what he understands it to be. This shift in the subjective horizon targets a transformation in the objective horizon, opening the possibility of experiencing the other as the very self, extended in space and time. Other bodies and other subjects in this philosophy are different clusters woven like prayer beads or like different cells constituting a single body. With this underlying premise, Maheśvarānanda argues:

This has been said and will be reiterated that the deity [to be worshipped] is the absolute subject (*parameśvara*) that is of the character of the pulsation of one's own heart. *Bala*, or the force, refers to the reflexive consciousness that has the character of enduring the perturbation in the form of the world that has entered within the self, being identical with it. The very observation of this [force] is what constitutes worship. This [capacity to maintain the inner gaze] is what is described as the force [*bala*].

Tantric vocabulary is replete with terms for force, power, and strength. The rituals are often prescribed to be carried out by a hero (*vīra*), and even the states of realization are invoked with the terminology of *sāhasa*, referring to force. For Maheśvarānanda as well as for other tantrics, it is a matter of strength to explore the possibility beyond an individual's immediately given subjectivity, and it takes stamina to expand the self-experience beyond the epidermis.

Transforming Bodily Awareness

The mirror test, for whatever reason Maheśvarānanda cites, suggests his understanding of a projected body. Mirror body is the projected body 'out there,' and this is not the immediately felt body. With the totality as the body of a yogin, Maheśvarānanda argues that the bodily sense is retained objectively, just as the elephant is able to recognize its reflection. This example as well as the mirror metaphor invokes a much wider discussion in tantric philosophy of reflection (*pratibimba*). For this paper, it suffices to say that bodily consciousness is elastic and can be extended beyond the epidermis, just as in the case of recognizing the mirror image as one's own body. Yogic awakening for Maheśvarānanda is the immediate experience of oneself as the collective, and this is dependent upon liberation from the fragmented self-image. For him, this fragmented image is not actually fragmented but rather in its early evolutionary phase or in the embryonic stage. There are certain stages understood in this leap to the absolute:

I. A yogin begins his journey with the epidermis as the

extended horizon of the body.

II. He distills the information processed through the sensory faculties by capturing them in the mind and allowing the images to merge into the self, making them dissolve their forms.

III. He breaches the sense of the external and the internal with the sensory capacities both roaming inside and out by means of engaging them in the world and at the same time saturating them with pure consciousness. Sensory organs are considered here as breaching the realms of the subject and object, negotiating their boundaries within both horizons. These are the energies that constitute the inside and outside, the self and the other. The total extension of these energies relates to the awakening of the individual subject by means of affirming absolute subjectivity.

IV. In the awakened state, the yogin reverses his experience of the body, with the totality being his body and the flesh being a mere mirror image.

In Maheśvarānanda's philosophy, there are two stages of mirroring. In the everyday state of consciousness, there is a mirroring of the world, where the self is merely cognizing mirror images. In the liberated state, both the body and the individual self appear as if the mirror image. Here, the outside becomes the inside and the inside morphs into the outside. The totality becomes the source, and the body, the target. How does Maheśvarānanda envision such a possibility? The response rests on his epistemology and cosmology. He understands consciousness in terms of energy. Sensory faculties are further extensions of this very energy and the self is the core or a unified field of consciousness. In his epistemology, sensory faculties are the energies of the self, and a *maṇḍala* with center and periphery describes his image of the self and the sensory capacities. Even when these energies are scattered in the world, these are the very aspects of the self, the sparks of consciousness often equated with fire (*cidagni, citivahni*). In passively or naturally engaging with the world, the self is fragmented into pieces as sparks of consciousness.

A yogin, according to Maheśvarānanda, allows the flow of energies through the sensory faculties but retains their information in the mind metaphorically described as a cup, and rather than allowing it to constitute *saṃskāras* or retain their individual traits, the yogin absorbs these images within the self. What arises in the form of images, accordingly, is the very self that is manifest as the object-image which therefore has the potential to be reabsorbed into its pristine form. Whatever exhilarates the self, food, drink, and of course sex, are the means to worship the self that is divine, and in its contentment lies the possibility of self-realization. With this underlying premise, Maheśvarānanda also displaces the body-negating theology, supplanting it with a world-affirming vision in which the body is the beginning for further expression of the self and not an impediment.

For Maheśvarānanda, body-image and body-schema are flexible; we can morph our body image into something new, and meticulous visualization can constitute the new synoptic structures and habit patterns to alter our body schema. Is the imagery that he provides absolutely real? In his own metaphysics, both the internal and external acts of worship as well as meticulous visualizations are merely for the alteration of the subject's horizon of consciousness. In this regard, one can argue that the images that he provides are merely for rearticulating the body schema. Visualization, in this paradigm, is merely for transforming the way we are accustomed to experience the world. Regulated breathing or *prāṇāyāma*, along with the mental exercises that constitute the corpus of his yogic practice, affirm this very notion of subjective transformation.

Ultimately, the acts of allowing the flow of consciousness through the sensory faculties and restraining it from its external engagement, observing the flow of consciousness through different conduits in grasping the world, and transcending these processes, all result in regulating consciousness, making it possible to experience beyond the body as if it were touched. Reality and encountering the reality both become visceral, as awakening is measured in terms of having a corporeal or tactile sensation in the interaction with the world. Sensory faculties are not

deprived in this process. On the contrary, they are engaged and are enlivened, being further empowered to the extent of their potentialities. By means of acknowledging the pristine nature of consciousness that is shared among the sense organs, the yoga here is as if recollecting the pieces of consciousness fragmented into a myriad of forms as the sensory faculties. The limitation of the senses in this depiction can be compared with slumber, where a subject is unable to perform the tasks that he can accomplish while awakened.

Yogic liberation is repeatedly identified as the real awakening, with bondage being compared with slumber. The self is thus literally engaged when actualizing itself by means of the effulgence of the sensory modalities. Knowing the world and knowing the self become one and the same, as the very modes of consciousness can be compared to ripples, with the oceanic consciousness remaining one and the same. The spiritual awakening in the philosophy of Maheśvarānanda is orgasmic and the language he uses to describe it is visceral. The affirmation of the body in the absolute sense allows the subjects to have their attitude transformed while living their everyday lives and still enjoying the bliss of absolute freedom.