

MEDITATING MANTRAS: MEANING AND VISUALIZATION IN TANTRIC LITERATURE

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Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between Tantric and Patañjalian Yoga systems, focusing upon the Mantra practice. Exploring the polyvalent nature of meaning in Tantric texts, this essay discusses the meditative aspects of mantra-recitation, demonstrating the complex interplay of reflection with numerous visualizations. Two major aspects of mantra practice, the internalization of prāṇic forces while focusing upon different centers and reciting mantras, and the reflection upon multiple meanings, bring the Tantric concept of Mantra practice to the core of Yogic meditation. This essay centers upon the sixfold meaning of a mantra, recognized within the Śākta tradition as a process of identification of the practitioner with the deities, the *maṇḍala*, and the cosmos.

Inside the Mantras

Yoga practices are seen as instrumental to attaining esoteric experience in various spiritual traditions of classical India. A six-fold yoga system evolved in Tantras, paralleling the eightfold yoga system of Patañjali.¹ While some streams of Tantric tradition hewed to the six-fold system, others, nonetheless, adopted the framework of Patañjali while modifying definitions of the eight limbs.² The Kashmiri Tantric tradition developed a distinct variety of meditation, relying upon 'three means' (*upāya-s*), focusing on aspects of will, knowledge, and

¹ The Śaiva(-Śākta) Āgamas, e.g., *Mālinīvijayottaratantra* (see chapter 2), the Vaiṣṇava Āgamas, e.g., *Viṣṇusamhitā* (see chapter 20, verses 57–58, 61–62, 68–72), the Buddhist Tantras, e.g., *Guhyasamāyatantra* (Chapter 18, verse 140), all highlight the six-fold path of yoga. In this, *yama*, *niyama* and *āsana* are removed, and *tarka* or *anusmṛti* are inserted as limbs of yoga.

² See *Prapañcasāratantra*, chapter 19; *Netratantra*, chapter 8; *Mygendratantra*, *Yogapāda*; *Mahākālasamhitā*, *Guhyakālikhaṇḍa* (pp. 300–325) for the eight limbs of Yoga in Tantric literature.

action.³ All these methods found in Tantric literature include visualization of, and reflections upon the meaning of Mantras as a part of yoga.⁴ In this essay, I will primarily focus upon Mantra-meditation found in the Śākta Tantras.

Mantras play a significant role in both Vedic and Tantric traditions. However, Tāntrikas understand the recitation (*japa*) of mantras somewhat differently from their Vedic counterparts, whose primary concern is the accuracy of audible vocal expression.⁵ Seeing the audible expression of mantra as a less powerful stage of practice, Tāntrikas instead place primary focus on mantra repetition (*japa*) as an inner visualization informed by the semiotic insight revealed by the authoritative texts and teachers of the tradition. This joining of *japa* with meaning is one of the primary Tantric means by which the mind of the initiate attains the goal of yoga: to turn inward, away from the most extroverted form of common speech, and to rest in the true nature of consciousness.

Recitation is considered the highest form of ritual in the *Bhagavadgītā* (BG),⁶ while *Yogasūtra* (YS) considers it to be nothing less than a means for self-realization. Even though the references in BG and YS support that *japa* and reflection coincide,⁷ it is not explicit whether YS originally defines *japa* as a practice that includes reflection upon the meaning of the mantra, or whether *japa* and reflection upon its meaning are two separate acts.⁸ Nevertheless, these two appear

³ Based upon the *Mālinīvijayottara* framework, this threefold division of yogic methods is common to the *Tantrāloka* and *Tantrasāra* of Abhinavagupta, and the *Śivasūtravimarsinī* of Kṣemarāja.

⁴ The practice of mantras is generally considered as a form of yoga in the Śaiva traditions (see Oberhammer 1989, 204–223). Some Tantras explicitly mention *japa* (recitation) as a limb of yoga (see *Jayākhyasamhitā* 33.11; *Mygendrāgama*, *Yogapāda*, verse 3). See Muller-Ortega 1992, 227–245 for the nature of mantra practice in Tantras, and Muller-Ortega 2002, 213–230 for a Kashmiri version of Tantric meditation. For a general introduction to mantras, see Alper 1989, 1–14, 249–294. For discussion of the notion of speech in Tantric tradition, see Padoux 1990 (specifically chapters 1, 3–5, and 7).

⁵ *Śikṣā* texts on Sanskrit phonology deal solely with Vedic texts. The purpose of these texts is to teach the exact pronunciation of mantras, so that the Vedic ritual can culminate in its intended result.

⁶ *Yajñānām japayajño 'smi*, *Bhagavadgītā* (BG) 10.25.

⁷ A line in BG, *om ity ekākṣaram brahma vyāharan mām anusmaran*, (BG 8.13) supports that recitation of *praṇava* and reflection upon the Lord coincide. This is conceptually closer to *tajjapas tadarthabhāvanam*. YS 1.28.

⁸ In YS 1.28, the *Vyāsabhāṣya* interprets mantra practice as having two separate actions, counting and reflecting upon its meaning: *praṇavam japataḥ praṇavārthaṁ ca*

together in the same *sūtra* in YS, sufficiently proximate to support the argument that these acts are performed together. YS interprets this reflection as upon the Lord (*Īśvara*).⁹ It does not categorize *japa*, nor does it consider the multifold meanings of a mantra, and YS is further silent about the visualization of *maṇḍala*-s and various *cakra*-s within the body while chanting mantras. Tantric texts, in contrast, are explicit: *japa* is identical with reflection upon the meaning of the mantra. This understanding results in the practitioner's identification with the deity in multiple iconic forms, the *maṇḍala*, and the world, all recognized as the body of the practitioner. Thus, following Tantric texts, recitation of a mantra is not merely counting beads, but merging into divine consciousness that manifests in the form of the world, in the physical form of the practitioner himself, and in the form of the ritual-altar or *maṇḍala*.

Mantra practice rests upon two essential aspects: a) inward vocalic practice, moving from external utterance to inner feeling, and b) realization of its multiple meanings, requiring more and more complex visualizations. Sanskrit grammarians understand speech to comprise multiple levels, from that which is uttered aloud to its most subtle form, identical with pure-awareness.¹⁰ Tantra elaborates on this concept and constructs a hierarchy of *japa*, with the audible recitation of mantra considered less potent and of a lower order than silently uttering and feeling the mantra inside, which may result in a state of peace or attainment of liberation. The fact that some Tantras relegate audible chanting to the performance of black magic suggests again that audible repetition is considered by Tāntrikas to be a lesser form of mantra practice.

bhāvayataḥ (having counted *praṇava* and having reflected upon the meaning of *praṇava*). Nonetheless, this *sūtra* can also be interpreted as the second part of the *sūtra* elaborating upon the first, that is, recitation as a reflection upon the meaning of the mantra (*praṇava* in this case).

⁹ The term *tat* in YS 1.28 refers to *Īśvara*, which in itself is a technical term referring to a particular *puruṣa* who is eternally free from *kleśa*-s, *karmavipāka*, and *āśaya*.

¹⁰ Bhartṛhari seems to have accepted only three levels of speech: *paśyantī*, *madhyamā*, and *vaikharī*. The concept of *parāpaśyantī*, however, appears to be contemporaneous, as it appears in the *Vṛtti* of *Vākyapaṭīya*. Somānanda argues against this triadic nature of speech, in which *paśyantī* is posited the highest speech, *śabda-brahman*. Later grammarians, such as Nāgeśa, advocate four levels of speech, accepting *parā* as the highest form.

Speech possesses four levels: *parā* (transcendent), *paśyantī* (seeing), *madhyamā* (internal verbalization expressed in the middle ground between outside and inside, and heard by the practitioner but not by others), and *vaikharī* (outer expression).¹¹ The *parā*, or transcendent speech, is pure awareness in itself, and, since within this state the act of reflection or recitation cannot occur, *japa* is performed only in the three other stages. The three stages of recitation are also categorized as *vācika* (uttered out), *upāṃśu* (inner expression), and *mānasa* (mental).¹² Long mantras as well as prayers are recommended for chanting aloud. This audible uttering calms the senses which are fully engaged outside enjoying external objects, and leads the mind to its true nature, consciousness-in-itself.

While both Vedic and Tantric traditions view mantra as secret speech,¹³ Tantras understand mantra as having the nature of expansion and contraction, an experience that encapsulates all forms of imagination.¹⁴ In *vibhava* (expansion), the mantra is in its glory, of the nature of reflection in which all words, all thoughts, all imaginations are enveloped in an awareness that is identified as that experience which permeates all instantaneous cognitions. The person who

¹¹ *Yoginīhr̥daya* (YH), the primary text being considered throughout this study, divides speech into four and equates it with four deities: *Ambikā*, *Vāmā*, *Jyesthā*, and *Raudrī*. YH 1.36–38. *Kāmakalāvīlāsa* (KKV), along with the commentary *Cidvallī* of *Nātanānanda*, elaborate upon this concept in KKV 20–27. Abhinavagupta explains the three stages of speech, *paśyantī*, *madhyamā*, and *vaikharī*, as identical with the three Trika goddesses *Parā*, *Parāparā*, and *Aparā*. *Tantrāloka* 1.271–272.

¹² Internal chanting of mantras during rituals is also prescribed in *Brāhmaṇa* texts. *Upāṃśu*, as a subtle or secret reading of mantras, can be found in the *Śatapatha* and *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*. (Monier-Williams 1899, 212, row 2). The *Vṛtti* in *Vākyapadīya* 2.19 interprets *upāṃśu* as: *tatra prāṇavṛtṭyanugrahe saty eva yatra śabdārūpaṃ parair asaṃvedyaṃ bhavati tad upāṃśu* (While supported with the functioning of *prāṇa*, when the form of sound gets unrecognizable, that [is considered as] *upāṃśu*). The interpretation of *mānasa* in Tantras resembles that of *paramopāṃśu*: *antareṇa tu prāṇavṛtṭyanugrahaṃ yatra kevalam eva buddhau samāviṣṭarūpo buddhyupādāna eva śabdātmā tat paramopāṃśu* (devoid of the support of the functioning of *prāṇa*, when the sound in essence is dissolved in the very intellect (*buddhi*), having intellect as material cause, that word in essence [is considered as] *paramopāṃśu*. *Vṛtti* in *Vākyapadīya* 2.19.

¹³ Mantra as a secret speech can be derived from the verbal root *latrī matrī gupta-bhāṣane*. Maheśvarānanda quotes an anonymous source defining mantra as *manana-trāṇadharmīn*, or that which is of the character of protection if being reflected upon. (*Mahārthamanjari* [MM] 49). Another definition significant in this context is *sankalpā-pūrokoṭau nādollāso bhaven mantrah* (the manifestation of sound at the first step of volition). Quoted from *Rājarājabhāṭṭāraka* in MM 49.

¹⁴ *Mananamayī nijavibhave nijasāṅkoce bhaye trānamayī / kavalitaviśvavikalpā anubhūtiḥ kāpi mantrasabdārthah // MM 49.*

is practicing mantra has, by his own free will, his glory of expansion and contraction as the two states in which what is expanded is the development and blossoming of the complete I-sense which is the mingled form of the world and whatever is beyond, and that is what the Tantras call lordship. In this state of Śivahood, mantras are inseparable from reflective awareness. In the state of contraction (*sankoca*), mantras protect the bound individual who feels incomplete, and who, due to this limitation, possesses fear.

During the course of practice, mantras interact with the subjective awareness of the practitioner. The immediately experienced individuality consists of personal, physical identity; the second level of individuality comprises social awareness in which family members or property, name and fame, all emerge as self-identity, while the third identity is the inner I-sense (*ahaṃkāra*).¹⁵ *Japa* supports the individual consciousness in a shift inwards from its external form, allowing it to dissolve and merge into its essential nature. The awareness-in-itself that emerges when mantra practice is fully resonant is the divine consciousness in which the practitioner experiences himself as the deity being visualized: this experience is what a mantra means. Mantra practice culminates with the aspirant recognizing himself in the form of the mantra. There are further, higher levels of subjective awareness through which a practitioner ascends in the course of his practice before attaining complete I-ness, the Śiva state.¹⁶

According to the Tantras that teach mantra as a part of yogic practice, mantra awareness not only encompasses all instances of cognition, but also permeates the awareness manifesting in various levels of individuality. Like any individual, the mantra is also considered to have a body and consciousness. The phonemes are considered to be the body, the physical appearance of the mantra, while the awareness that has the powers of knowledge and action vibrant in its true form is the inner soul of mantras.¹⁷ The goal of mantra practice is to recognize this pure awareness. In mantra experience,

¹⁵ This categorization of individuality relies upon *Virūpākyaapañcāśikā* (VirP) 1.3, which attributes six levels to the I-sense.

¹⁶ For a brief treatment on the *pramāṭrs*, see *Pratyabhijñāhṛdaya* (PH) 3; *Tattvasaṅgraha* (TS) of Sadyojāta (Verses 29–53) with the commentary of Aghoraśivācārya. Generally, the *pramāṭrs* are *sakala*, *pralayākala*, *vijñānākala*, *mantra*, *mantrēśvara*, and *mantramahēśvara*.

¹⁷ See Kṣemarāja's commentary on *Śivasūtra* (ŚS) 1.22; 2.1; 2.3. *jvālītadyḥkartytvāt tattvam mantrākhyam etad dhi*/TS 32.

the practitioner dwells in this inner state of consciousness while perceiving the outside world. The purpose of *japa* is, in fact, to recollect this awareness.¹⁸ Through *japa*, the practitioner comes to rest upon the divine heart, awareness-in-itself, and then returns to the realm of the mundane.¹⁹ This immersion and return supports the elevation of his mind, allowing all instances of awareness to reside in 'consciousness only'.²⁰ In this way, *japa* is defined by the Tantras as a process in which the practitioner gradually becomes aware of the true nature of mantra itself: mantra loses its objective appearance and manifests as the true heart of the practitioner himself. In this way, mantra is the immanent awareness that encapsulates all categories that lead the practitioner to reside in complete I-ness (*pūrnāhantā*).

Tantra adopts a specific model of categorization in which the world appears in a triad, with the Supreme Reality transcending it. Mantras can be expressed in three levels, the fourth being awareness-in-itself. Speech is likewise categorized into three external manifestations while the fourth, being the true nature of speech, is consciousness-in-itself. Furthermore, in the Trika and Tripurā traditions, the deities are also visualized in a triad. The fourth and supreme deity transcends the triad, which is her own body and which represents the three potencies of action, knowledge, and volition.²¹ While action is the most visible form of divine power, a yogin, while reflecting upon the true nature of mantra, endeavors to dissolve the power of action into the power of knowledge and that, into the power of will. These powers are ritualized as goddesses who are worshipped in a triad that varies according to the central, highest deity.²²

¹⁸ *Kevalam upapādītantrasvarūpaparāmarśo japa ity ucyate / mantrasya ca vaiśvāt-
mānubhūtirūpatvāt sarvo 'pi vāgyavahāras tatparāmarśātmatayāvopapadyate / Parimala on
MM 49.*

¹⁹ *Kathā japaḥ ŚS 3.27.*

*bhūyo bhūyah pare bhāve bhāvanā bhāvya te tu yā /
japaḥ so 'tra svayam nādo mantrātmā japyā idrśah // Vīṅānabhairava 145.*

²⁰ *Spandakārikā (SK) 2.1-2 with Spandanīrnaya of Kṣemarāja.*

²¹ For various interpretations of Tripurā, see KKV 12-14, 18-20, 25; Dwivedi 1984 (see NSA), preface 83-90, text 32-34.

²² The deities identified as the manifestation of will, knowledge, and action are: according to the Trika tradition, Parā, Parāparā and Aparā; according to the Śrīvidyā tradition, Kāmeśvarī, Vajreśvarī and Bhagamālīnī; and according to the Durgā tradition, Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī and Mahāsarasvatī.

The mantras of the Tripurā tradition synthesize the triadic emergence of deities. The fifteen-syllable mantras of Tripurā,²³ segmented into three *kūṭa*-s (each comprised of a seed syllable and several other letters), are projected into three parts of the body, the navel center, the heart region, and the area of the eyebrows, representing the three energies of fire, sun, and moon. These centers also invoke multiple levels of meaning: the triad of subject, cognition and object, the triad in which consciousness manifests outward as objects, and the centers as the three seats of Kuṇḍalinī. As mantras are segmented into three, so also are the *maṇḍala*-s visualized in three physical planes.

Mantra recitation corresponds to the visualization of its syllables in six *cakra*-s in the body of the practitioner. The mantra in its unmanifest form rests in the deeper structures beyond the drop (*bindu*), generally visualized while repeating the seed mantra. The components of the seed syllable *hrīm* are *h* + *r* + *ī* + *m* (considered as *bindu*), and the stages above the drop are *ardhacandra* (half-moon), *nīrodhikā* (stopping power), *nāda* (sound), *nādānta* (the culmination of *nāda*), *śakti* (the state of potency), *vyāpinī* (all-pervading), *samanā* (that which incorporates the mind), and *unmanā* (beyond mind). *Japa* is not merely the repetition of the phonemes, but also the visualization of these deeper layers, located in vertical order above the eyebrow *cakra* (*ājñā*). This visualization serves to transform the practitioner's consciousness into divine awareness.

After visualization of the various *cakra*-s within his body, the practitioner contemplates both the body of the deity and the *maṇḍala*, followed in sequence by concentration upon six voids within the body; five states of consciousness, namely waking, dreaming, deep sleep, transcendent, and that which is beyond it; and seven *viṣvas*.²⁴ With the ever-increasing complexity of these visualizations, mantra recitation emerges as a pure yogic practice of concentration and inwardness of mind, rising from the ground in which it is identified with objects. *Yoginīhr̥daya* (YH) prescribes the visualization of six voids

²³ There are several orders in which fifteen-syllable mantras of the goddess are composed. The most common sets are considered the *Kādi* which begins with *k*-syllable: *k-e-ī-l-hrīm-h-s-k-h-l-hrīm-s-k-l-hrīm*, and *Hādi*, which begins with *h*-syllable: *h-s-k-l-hrīm-h-s-k-h-l-hrīm-s-k-l-hrīm*.

²⁴ *śūnyasaṭkaṃ tathā devī hy avasthāpañcakaṃ punah/
viṣvaṃ sapta-rūpañ ca bhāvayan manasā japet/ / YH 3.176-177.*

in six positions found in twelve stages manifest within the seed mantra, *hrīm*, and located in the positions of *r*, *bindu*, *rodhinī*, *nādānta*, *vyāpikā* (or *vyāpinī*) and *unmanā*. These voids are visualized in succession, like circles in a peacock feather, while the sixth void focused upon is formless. These six voids represent the inner objects of the senses including mind, and dissolution of these voids into the formless state leads the mind to its foundation.²⁵

According to the Tantras, the purpose of mantra practice is to bring *citta* (mind) to rest in its true nature, *cit* (awareness). As Kṣemarāja writes, this very awareness (*citi*) is *citta*, inasmuch as it becomes contracted in conformity with objects of consciousness.²⁶ Self-awareness is immanent, enfolded in the form of the mind, and the practice of mantra unfolds its glorious form of all-pervasive, pure awareness. While in its individuated form, consciousness is experienced in the states of waking, dreaming, and deep-sleep. Even though there is no objective awareness in the fourth, or the transcendent state, the very self-awareness is itself witnessed. This witnessing awareness not only verifies the non-being of other mental modes, it also indirectly proves the middle ground of conceptions.²⁷ Tantra identifies one further state of consciousness, which is identical to self-awareness and is of the nature of bliss. As this state is beyond the transcendental fourth state, it is called *turyātīta*. This non-dual state envelops all other cognitive modes and is considered to be beyond mind and speech.²⁸ Sense organs are active in the waking state, while the mind is active in dreaming.²⁹ There are no objects in dreamless sleep; however, this

²⁵ Visualization of six voids follows the *Vijñānabhairava* (VB) instruction:
*sikhipakṣaiś citrarūpāir maṇḍalair śūnyapañcakam/
dhyāyato 'nuttare śūnye param vyomatanur bhavet//* VB 32.

²⁶ *Citir eva cetanapadād avarūdhā cetyasaṅkocinī cittam* PH 5.

²⁷ See ŚS 1.7–11 for the Trika Śaiva interpretation of the four stages of consciousness.

²⁸ *Mālinīvijyottara* considers *Turyātīta* as the supreme state. (MVT 2.38). Abhinavagupta considers *turyātīta* as the fifth state. (*Tantrāloka* 10.238). He defines this state as: *yat tu pūrṇānavacchinnavapur ānandanirbharam/turyātītam tu tat prāhus tadeva paramam padam //* (*Tantrāloka* 10.278). *Yat tū advaitabharollāsadrāvītūśeṣabhedakam/turyātītam tu tat prāhur ittham sarvatra yojayet* (*Tantrāloka* 10. 297). *Ekatrāpi prabhau pūrṇe cit turyātītam ucyate* (*Tantrāloka* 10.299). YH mentions five states (*avasthāpañcaka* YH 3.176); this is considered the *turyātīta* in both the Dīpikā and Setubandha commentaries. YH 3.282 explicitly mentions this fifth state as *turyātīta*. Vidyānanda explains this state as: *Manovāgātaturyātītasambhunā samarasadaśām . . . Artharatnāvalī* in NṢA, 1.9.

²⁹ The term 'mind' refers to *citta*, which is comprised of *manas*, *buddhi*, and *ahaṅkāra*, whose functions are reflection, cognition, and I-sense.

very absence is what is cognized in this state, and this awareness of absence confirms the existence of deep sleep. This mode of consciousness is visualized as the drop (*bindu*) in a mantra. The two further stages are recognized as inner structures of awareness in which either the self is manifest in its own form, or if the entities are cognized, they are cognized as the very nature of consciousness in reality. With this meditation, the individual endeavors to transcend the individuality residing in the body and mind; this results in his ability to perceive as a witness, to freely roam the different mental states without being engaged.

Visualization of the Viṣuva-s

Viṣuva means an equinox. Here, this refers to 'the middle ground' or 'a union' of the mind with particular aspects of a mantra. Recitation of a mantra corresponds to concentration upon certain middle grounds, along with reflection upon their manifold meanings. YH, a primary text in the Śrividya tradition, enjoins meditation upon seven *viṣuva-s* as a part of mantra recitation:

Prāṇaviṣuva: The visualization of the union of the life-force (*prāṇa*) and mind is the meditation called *prāṇaviṣuva*.³⁰ Yogic texts and Tantras stress the interrelationship between the mind and life-force, and in order to control the mind, the texts prescribe breath control. This visualization upon *prāṇaviṣuva*, however, differs from the conventional notion of controlling breath in the sense that the practice does not emphasize physical control, but instead, a merging of the identity of the life-force and mind. This *viṣuva* is meditated upon with particular focus on the rise of *prāṇa*. Unlike the *haṭha*, or exertive type of yoga, this type of practice is characterized as *sahaja*, or innate. In such a practice the Tantric yogin does not seek to control his

³⁰ YH defines *prāṇaviṣuva* as *yogah prāṇātmamanasām viṣuvam prāṇasarijñitam*/YH 3.182. Amṛtānanda explains this as the union of the life force and mind. Bhāskararāya describes it as the sound that manifests when *Kundalinī* merges with the life force in the base *cakra*. This very sound joins the breath and mind while rising to the navel; upon reaching the heart, it unites with the breath and intellect. This meditation of the sound being united with mind and intellect in three centers is identified as *prāṇaviṣuva*. *Setubandha* in YH 3.182.

breath but rather to be transformed by means of attentive focus on its natural rhythms.

Mantraviṣuwa: This is the visualization of the middle ground in which mind is dissolved into the sound rising from the base *cakra*. Here, *nāda* is the core of the mantra being practiced. Along with visualization upon each syllable of the mantra, the practitioner focuses upon the singular sound that envelops all the letters of the mantra; this process is called conjunction (*samyoga*) and disjunction (*vivyoga*). In the process of conjunction, the practitioner envisions how all the phonemes merge into a singular sound, whereas in the process of disjunction, he observes the syllables of the mantra emerging from that same sound. In this practice, the heart itself is identified as the ultimate source for this cyclic dissolution and re-emergence of divine sound.³¹ The power that undergirds mantras is that which connects all its letters, the *nāda* which in itself is *kuṇḍalinī*. Tantras view mantras as being charged with power by means of their identification with *kuṇḍalinī*.

A yogin visualizes *nāda* while meditating upon the seed syllable into which the mantra dissolves. *Nāda* is metaphorically comparable to the thread upon which all beads are strung, the letters of the mantra being the beads. In this process, the yogin visualizes a dissolution of the first syllables, or *kūṭa*-s, into subsequent syllables, finally culminating in the fundamental, monosyllabic mantra specific to each practice.³² Then the *nāda* into which the individual self (*jīva*) merges is visualized as rising from the heart up to the cranial vault.³³ This

³¹ Amṛtānanda understands the heart *cakra* as being the center where the sound of the mantra is dissolved, while considering *anāhata*, or the heart, as *brahmarandhra*. Bhāskararāya gives his different understanding in which the practice of meditation upon the middle ground of mantras (*mantraviṣuwa*) occurs with the rise of Kuṇḍalinī, having recognized *Kuṇḍalinī* and the mantra as one.

³² Abhinavagupta identifies *Māṭṛsadbhāva* and *Bhairavasadbhāva* as two different seed-syllables in which the mantras of the goddesses and of the Bhairavas are dissolved. The *aim* syllable, having been recognized as *yonī*, is considered to be the fundamental seed-mantra of Kālī-kula in the northern transmission. The Triupurā tradition considers *hṛīm* as the seed-mantra. In the Trika tradition, the Parā-Mantra, *saum* is considered the seed syllable in which the deities of the sect dissolve, and from which the deities emerge. These are considered to be the *praṇava*-s of the specific deities.

³³ The textual support Amṛtānanda relies upon locates visualization of the *nāda* in the region from the heart to the cranial vault: *hṛdayādi bilāntāṅ ca viṣuvaṃ mantrasañjñakam* (Quoted by Amṛtānanda in *Dīpikā*, YH 3.183–85). This resembles

ascent is performed in two ways: a) *kuṇḍalinī*, located in the base *cakra*, is invoked and dissolved in the heart, which in itself is *brahmarandhra*, and b) the visualization is commenced in the heart and culminated in the cranial vault, with *brahmarandhra* then understood as located atop the head.

Nāḍīviṣuwa: The practice of the *nāḍīviṣuwa* is the identification of *nāda* (sound) with *nāḍī*-s (channels). While pronouncing a mantra, the sound that is the foundation of all phonemes is attentively observed. When all the letters merge into the sound of the seed mantra, that *nāda* is visualized within the central channel (*suṣuṃṇā*) as penetrating all twelve knots while transcending the six *cakra*-s. The visualization of *nāḍīviṣuwa* culminates when a yogin feels a touch (*sparsā*) of the quivering sound rising from the base *cakra* through the *suṣuṃṇā*.

Praśāntaviṣuwa: Through the meditation known as *praśāntaviṣuwa*, the stages of *bindu*, *ardhacandra*, *nirodhinī*, *nāda*, and *nāḍānta* are dissolved into the *śakti*-state. Considered *nādayoga* and called *praśānta* (absolutely peaceful), the deeper stages of sound are visualized here, with all mental activities resting upon the *śakti* state.

Śaktiviṣuwa: The *nāda* thus dissolved into *śakti* continues its ascent, crossing the *vyāpīnī* stage and dissolving into *samanā*. This is actually an extension of *praśāntaviṣuwa*.

Kālavīṣuwa: In the next stage of the process, the yogin visualizes *nāda* as transcending time. In preparing the mind for this meditation, subtle units of time are contemplated. Meditation of *Kālavīṣuwa* makes the mind of the yogin skillful in visualizing these minute measurements of time as subtle as the 10,817 time-units called *tuṭī*-s, seen while pronouncing the single seed-mantra, *hrīm*.³⁴ In this *Kālavīṣuwa* meditation, the mind dissolves into *unmanā*, the state in which the mind does not function.

the source Bhāskararāya is quoting: *hrdayād brahmarandhrāntaṃ viṣuwan mantrasaṅgīnakam* (Quoted in Setubandha, YH 3.183–85).

³⁴ The duration of time for one eye-blink is defined as *nimeṣa*. A one-thirtieth part of *nimeṣa* is considered as *tatpara* and a 100th-part of *tatpara* is considered as *tuṭī*.

Tattvaviṣṭva: This meditation upon one's own self after the *nāda* dissolves above *unmanā* reveals the true nature of the self, and visualization of this *viṣṭva*, therefore, results in self-realization. It manifests the highest state transcending all six voids, five mental states, and the seven *viṣṭva*-s. In this, all aspects of bliss found in sensory pleasure are collectively experienced.³⁵ This is the state in which there is no object to visualize while the self is immediately cognized. Thus, to rest upon the true nature of the self is the visualization of *Tattvaviṣṭva*.

In the course of the aforementioned visualization, a yogin experiences degrees of liberation. Only the self as recognized in the *tattvaviṣṭva* state is truly known, the other states being inferior, with impermanent liberation. These gradual experiences are preconditions of liberation, and only the yogin who perseveres in the quest for higher experience can achieve Śiva-hood.³⁶

Six-fold Meaning of a Mantra

Reflection upon the various layers of meanings in a single mantra is as ancient as the Indian mantra tradition itself. Yāska, the first etymologist, endeavored to apprehend multiple meanings in a single mantra. Tantra extends this concept. The significance of meaning in Tantric ritual and practice is fully manifested in the Śrīvidyā tradition, one of the most complex Śākta practices. There are two fundamental sources:

- a) *Yoginīhrdaya* (YH) gives six levels of meaning to the mantra comprising 15 syllables. Two commentators upon the text, Amṛtānanda and Bhāskararāya decipher mantras different from YH.

³⁵ Amṛtānanda defines the bliss experienced in this state as: *sarvaṣṭyānanda-samaṣṭibhūtaḥ paramānando nisargānandaḥ* (*nisargānanda* is the supreme bliss which is the collection of bliss [experienced while enjoying] all objects). YH, *Dīpikā* 3.189.

³⁶ The verse, *pinḍe muktāḥ pade muktā rūpe muktāḥ śadānana/rūpātīte tu ye muktās te muktā nātra saṁśayaḥ//* (quoted as 'statement of an authority' in YH *Dīpikā* 3.137–38), explains that liberation, while possible in the stages of *pinḍa* and so forth, is not the real one. A verse explains the technical terms used in this passage:

pinḍam kuṇḍalinī śaktiḥ padam hamsaḥ prakṛtītaḥ/

rūpam binduḥ samākhyāto rūpātītan tu niskalam// (Quoted in NSA, *Artharatnāvalī*, 1.10; YH *Dīpikā* 1.43; YH *Setubandha* 1.41). Here, the term *pinḍa* refers to *kuṇḍalinī*, the term *pada* refers to the life-breath, *rūpa* refers to the *bindu*, and the term *rūpātīta* refers to that which is beyond *kalā*-s.

- b) Bhāskararāya elaborates on this notion of multiple meanings in his independent text, *Varivasyārahasya*, where he excavates a sixteen-fold meaning within the fifteen-letter-mantra.

Elaboration upon the multivalent meaning of a mantra in this tradition is applicable for understanding other mantras as well. Since YH is considered to be an Āgamic text acceptable to all Śākta traditions, we expand upon the meaning contained within this text. The six layers of meanings within a mantra are *bhāvārtha*, *sampradāyārtha*, *nigarbhārtha*, *kaulikārtha*, *sarvarahasyārtha*, and *mahātattvārtha*.³⁷

Bhāvārtha: The syllables comprising a mantra signify its essential meaning (*bhāvārtha*). All the gods and goddesses of the triad, the deities beyond the triad, and the supreme Śiva and Śakti constitute a mantra, or in other words, these are innate to a mantra.³⁸ These manifold deities are considered to be the limbs of the letters *a* and *h*, which are themselves the deities collectively constituting *aham* (I-ness).³⁹ In the context of the Śrīvidyā tradition, these deities comprise the mantra of 15 syllables which are segmented into three *kūṭa*-s. Tripurasundarī, the supreme deity residing in the center of the mantra, is the collection of all these deities. These deities are, in essence, the meaning of a mantra.⁴⁰

In Śrīvidyā, the three aspects of creation, sustenance, and contraction are represented in the three *kūṭa*-s of the mantra. As the world is manifest from the union of Śiva and Śakti, so are the mantras composed of the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, of which vowels and consonants are respectively considered as Śiva and Śakti. Thus, *bhāvārtha* reveals the relationship between the letters of the mantra and the deities.⁴¹

³⁷ YH 2. 15–16.

³⁸ These deities are called *Yoginī*-s, *Vīra*-s, *Vīrendra*-s, *Śiva* and *Śakti*. By the term *Yoginī* and *Vīra*, the deities of the triad of creation, sustenance, and contraction and their consorts (Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Rudra with Bhārati, Pṛthvī and Rudrāṅgī) are identified. These deities signify the triad of will, knowledge, and action, in turn signifying *Vāmā*, *Jyēsthā*, and *Raudrī*. *Vīrendra*-s are the deities beyond the triad, *Śāntā* and *Ambikā*.

³⁹ For further treatment on *Aham*, see Muller-Ortega 1989, 158–161.

⁴⁰ Bhāskararāya derives the mantra of 15 syllables from the deities counted in this group. He gives an alternative understanding by stating that this group of deities can signify only the first *Kūṭa* of the mantra: *tathā cāyaṃ ślokaḥ prathamakūṭamā-trasyārthapratipādanaparaḥ*. *Setubandha* in YH 2.17.

⁴¹ Bhāskararāya derives three types of *bhāvārtha*: *evam triprakāro bhāvārtho varūtaḥ* (*Setubandha* in YH 2.24–25).

The Śrīvidyā mantra, comprising fifteen syllables, is considered to have nine sound levels (*nāda-s*) that represents the nine-fold cycle within the Śrīcakra. This signifies the five gross elements—earth, water, fire, air, and sky—along with the five subtle elements of smell, taste, form, touch, and sound. The letters of the mantra also represent the fifteen Nityās, deities who, in turn, correspond to the fifteen phases of the moon. Tripurasundarī, the central deity, is considered to be the sixteenth digit, the changeless aspect which is the foundation of all fifteen phases, and into which they merge.

In the highest understanding, awareness-in-itself is the essential meaning of a mantra. With visualization of the deities in the triad and those transcending the triad, what is meditated upon is the very awareness from which the world emerges. Therefore, the very self of the practitioner is the true nature or the heart of the mantras, and thus mantra recitation corresponds to self-realization. Experienced as *aham* (I-sense), this self-awareness is visualized in the letters of the mantra, while the *a* and *h* letters comprising *aham* are *prakāśa* and *vimarśa*, consciousness and self-referentiality. Mantra practice transforms this I-sense from personal identity to unbound Śiva-awareness. Meditation upon the essential meaning of a mantra is to experience the *parāṭīta* state, the state that is beyond the transcendental or fourth state, in which all is one in the single seed mantra of the goddess.

Sampradāyārtha ('the meaning given in a lineage'): *Sampradāya* identifies the community for whom knowledge is imparted in a proper sequence, to the aspirant deemed worthy and sufficiently prepared, and to the lineage-meaning concealed within an adept of the tradition. At this level of meditation, the aspirant relates the mantra to the five elements; for instance, in the case of the Tripurā-Mantra, the five letters, *h*, *k*, *r*, *s*, and *l* align with sky, air, fire, water, and earth. From these letters emerge fifteen qualities, with different proportions of sound, touch, form, taste, and smell. This visualization generates the awareness that the mantra envelops all that exists; recitation occurs with this understanding of its all-pervasiveness. The powers intrinsic to all entities, whether sentient or not, are considered to be aspects of Śakti, corresponding to the letter *h* in the mantra, while the entities themselves are Śiva, latent in the *a* letter; self-awareness does not negate the world, but rather rests in the realization of immanence. For instance, in fire, there is heat; in water, there is taste; in a person, there is consciousness; in the moon, there is a halo: in all

the entities that exist in the world, Śakti is hidden. Recitation of a mantra is the reflection upon the meaning that allows the practitioner to receive knowledge of Śakti, who permeates all that exists. This all-pervasiveness intrinsic to the mantra is meditated upon by linking the 36 categories (*tattva*-s) to the letters of the mantra, while the sound that grounds and transcends all the letters is considered as the 37th category.⁴² Thus the recitation of a mantra is the realization that the mantra being practiced is identical with all the categories.

The mantra, besides signifying the world objectively cognized, also indicates different stages of subjective awareness. The impure awareness (*sakala*) is common to all individuals limited in their will, knowledge, and action, and who are bound in the world perceiving duality. A 'mixed' (*miśra*) subjective awareness characterizes the *pralayākala* level of beings who are unbound by *karma*, having a limitation of knowledge and will. At the *Vijñānākala* level are those beings who have attained true knowledge and are freed from their *karma*, while still having limitation in will. With the visualization of these different degrees of individualities, the yogin endeavors to achieve the Śiva-awareness that envelops all these identities.⁴³ These three levels of awareness are visualized in a mantra (in the context of YH, the 15-letter-Tripurasundarī-Mantra) with the first referring to *prāṇa*, or life force, the second, to *jīva* or soul, while the third, to Śiva-awareness. With this meditation, the common-sense experience at the *prāṇa* level rises to Śiva-awareness, permeating all subjective and objective identities.

⁴² Śaiva traditions, specifically the Trika Śaiva doctrine, favors 36 categories beginning from Śiva, the supreme category. The twenty-five Sāṃkhya categories are identical. Placed above these, the Śaiva tradition adds the limiting factors *māyā*, *avidyā*, *kalā*, *rāga*, *kāla*, *niyatī*, and above that, the pure categories found below Śiva are *Śakti*, *Sadāśiva*, *Īśvara* and *Śuddhavidyā*. The 37th category, recognized in some Tantras as Paramaśiva, is addressed as Sadbhāva or Bhairava, the state of *Viśvottīrṇa-Viśvamayatā*. Abhinavagupta analyzes these categories in Ch. 11 of *Tantrāloka*.

⁴³ Bhāskaraśāstra interprets the *pramāṇy*-s, or cognizing subjects, in two different ways. The first resembles that explained by Amṛtānanda, where three categories of subjective awareness refer to *sakala*, *pralayākala*, and *vijñānākala*. According to the second interpretation, the first level of cognizing subject refers to impure Siddha-s, 118 in number, such as Krodhabhaṭṭāraka. The second level refers to the pure-impure subjects, recognized as *lokapāla*-s, namely Agni, Indra, and so forth. The *vidyeśvara*-s are considered to be the *śuddha-pramāṇy*-s (pure subjective-awareness), the third, or the highest level of cognizing subjects. However, those pure deities whose darkness (*kaḥṣa*) has not ended are recognized as the seventy million mantras.

Mantras are comprised of drop (*bindu*) and sound (*nāda*). While the *bindu* aspect gives rise to the triad of male deities, the triad of goddesses is the manifestation of *nāda*.⁴⁴ In the context of *Śrīvidyā*, these triads are visualized in three *kūṭa*-s. The first of the *nāda* aspects, *śāntī*, is contemplated in the form of unmanifest-sound dissolved in the cranial vault, that has risen from the *Śakti* position in the base cakra to rest in the *Śakti* position atop the thousand-petalled lotus. *Śakti* is identical with *Kundalinī* who rises, piercing three knots in the positions where the aspects of fire, sun, and moon are meditated upon.⁴⁵ This is visualized beyond *roḍhīnī*, the power that hinders the unqualified yogin from higher awareness. *Śambhu* is considered to be the supreme void, the void of consciousness that is beyond name and form, that transcends the identities made of subject and object: this is the true nature of awareness.

The fundamental mantra of the deity that is visualized at the center of the *maṇḍala* permeates all the deities residing in the *maṇḍala*, in the sense that they are her own manifestations. The mantra of the central deity is the origin of all the mantras of the deities around her: all other mantras pertaining to the peripheral deities emanate from the central mantra. The central mantra is the foundation of knowledge, and so with the perfection of this mantra, the practitioner also acquires perfection in the gnosis that flows in the *Kula*. The knowledge that is acquired through the central mantra permeates all other levels of realization that manifest particular aspects of the *Śiva*-nature, granting perfections of a limited nature.

Nigarbhārtha: The most esoteric (*nigarbha*)⁴⁶ meaning is the identification of the deity, the master, and the aspirant as one and the same. The master is considered to be *Śiva* in the sense that he imparts the knowledge revealed by *Śiva* himself and manifest in the form of *Āga-*

⁴⁴ In this particular context, the deities visualized as an aspect of *bindu* are Rudra, *Īśvara* and *Sadāśiva*, and the deities seen as an aspect of *nāda* are *Śāntī*, *Śakti* and *Śambhu*. *Śambhu*, even though not a goddess, is read in the list of *nāda* deities. The wisdom goddesses and gods visualized in the group of *Śambhu* or *Śāmbhavi* are of the *Yāmala* nature. It is explicit in six *Śāmbhava* visualizations, in which 360 rays are installed in six cakra-s pertaining to six *Śambhu* and *Śāmbhavi* deities of which half are male and the rest female.

⁴⁵ These knots or *granthi*-s are identified as *Brahmagranthi*, *Viṣṇugranthi* and *Rudragranthi*.

⁴⁶ *Nitarām garbha eva nigarbho rahasyatama ityarthah Setubandha* in YH 2.48.

mas. In Tantras, the position of the master is very high, as he is the one who connects the self bound in the world to the all-pervasive consciousness.

Kaulikārtha: Found with the *Kula*, the clan of initiates, this meaning is grasped with the realization of the identity of the Maṇḍala, the deity, the mantra, the master who has imparted knowledge, and the individual self practicing the mantra. This, therefore, is an extended form of the *nigarbha* practice. The self-awareness a yogin acquires through mantra practice does not negate his surroundings, but rather reflects the higher realization in which he identifies his surroundings with himself and with the deity meditated upon at the center of the *maṇḍala*. 'Kula' fundamentally refers to the two aspects of body and the world comprised of 36 categories. The meaning channeled within the clan coalesces these two meanings into one, with the body visualized as an aggregate of all 36 categories.

The mantra and *maṇḍala* are identified as equivalent: this is explicit in the case of Śrīvidyā practice. The syllable 'l' signifies a square and three circles, the syllable 's' signifies two circles constructed of the sixteen- and eight-petalled lotuses. Three seed mantras in three *kūṭa*-s comprise the *navayoni cakra*, the central triangle, the eight triangles, and the central drop found in the innermost layers of Śrīcakra. The triad of seed syllables refer to the three aspects of will, knowledge, and action. While chanting the Śrī-mantra, the three triangles facing up and down that constitute three layers of the *maṇḍala*—two layers of ten triangles and one of fourteen triangles—are visualized when articulating the letter 'h'. While meditating upon the *maṇḍala*, the triangles facing up represent the 'fire' aspects while the triangles facing down signify 'water'. This identification of a particular letter with a particular layer of the *maṇḍala* suggests that the visualization of the *maṇḍala* coincides with the chanting of the mantra. The *maṇḍala* is a photic representation of the phonematic mantra. The letters that signify particular layers of the mandala differ with each practice. In the practice of Śrīvidyā, the aspirant articulates the syllable 'k' while meditating upon Sadāśiva, a *preta* reclining atop four other deities representing four aspects of *krama*.⁴⁷ In the drop (*bindu*), Śiva is visualized.

⁴⁷ The *Krama* doctrine analyzes the manifestation of the supreme reality in five

With the visualization of will, knowledge, and action in the weapons a deity holds a noose, a hook, a bow and five arrows—in the context of Śrīvidyā, with visualization of a noose (*pāśa*) as will, a hook (*ankuśa*) as knowledge, and a bow and arrows as action—the deity is identified as an embodiment of all forces manifest in these weapons. While reflecting upon the *kaulika* meaning, in the same way as the mantra and *maṇḍala* are recognized as identical, so are the mantra and the deity. The meaning of a mantra is found in the recognition of correspondence between the anthropomorphic form of the deity with the geometric *maṇḍala*. All the deities that reside in different parts of the *maṇḍala* are emanations of the central deity. Similarly with the *maṇḍala*, all the geometric forms that comprise it concentrate into the very drop at the center, and unfold again into radiant form. The deity that resides within and the *maṇḍala* are meditated upon as identical. Furthermore the different deities residing in different parts of the *maṇḍala* are viewed as the limbs of the central deity. The weapons of the primary deity give rise to the first external layers of the *maṇḍala*. For instance, in the case of Śrīvidyā, the weapons of the goddess Tripurā and lord Kāmeśvara are envisioned as the eight triangles in the external layer of the innermost triangle of the *maṇḍala*.

The deities, planets, and lunar mansions (*nakṣatra-s*) installed in the practitioner's body during the course of six-fold-*nyāsa* are visualized as part of the *kaulika* meaning.⁴⁸ In this meditation, the immanence of the goddess is recognized in her cosmic representation, where the central deity is not only the center of the *maṇḍala*, but also the center of the universe. Six mother-goddesses meditated upon in the center of six *cakra-s* are considered to be the six substances that comprise the body of the goddess, which, in the body of the practitioner, are located in the skin, nerves, flesh, fat, marrow, and semen.⁴⁹ With

successive grades of *sr̥ṣṭi*, *sthiti*, *samhāra*, *anākyā* and *bhāsā*. These primarily resemble the fivefold function of lord Śiva as *sr̥ṣṭi*, *sthiti*, *samhāra*, *nigraha* and *anugraha*.

⁴⁸ *Gaṇeśa*, *Graha*, *Nakṣatra*, *Yoginī*, *Rāśi*, and *Ṛ̥ṭha* are the components of six-fold-*nyāsa*. YH 2.8–44 elaborates upon this *nyāsa*. *Nityāśodasikāṃava* 1.1 praises the goddess, Tripurasundarī, as an embodiment of these six categories.

⁴⁹ These six *Yoginīs* are Ḍākinī, Rākinī, Lākinī, Kākinī, Śākinī, and Hākinī. Amṛtānanda considers *Yākimī* as the seventh *Yoginī*, but identifies only six physical substances (*dhātu-s*) corresponding to these deities. He again interprets the *Yoginī* as eight mothers. With an indication of *aṣṭāstaka*, it appears that he also includes sixty-four *Yoginīs* as a part of visualization. (See *Dīpikā* in YH 2.61). In six-fold *nyāsa*, the Rudra deities that correspond to each of the Sanskrit syllables are suggested by Gaṇeśa. YH, however, embraces all the deities in Śrī-cakra, collectively 111 deities, with the term Gaṇeśa.

nine groups of letters, nine planets are visualized. As a part of *kaulika* meaning, the deities are considered to be parts of practitioner's body as well, a microcosmic form of the supreme. The letters segmented in twenty-seven groups referring to twenty-seven lunar mansions (*nakṣatra-s*) compose the visionary body of a yogin.⁵⁰ The twelve deities of the zodiac refer to the ten life forces (*prāṇa*),⁵¹ the individual self (*jīvātman*), and the supreme self (*paramātman*). With visualization of the fifty Śākta *pīṭha-s*, the practitioner, while chanting the mantra, realizes his immanence. This cosmic representation is visualized in the deity, the *maṇḍala*, and the mantra of the goddess. This meditation gives rise of *pūmāhantā* (complete I-ness). *Japa*, in this sense, is an extension of subjective awareness in the divine form that envelops all entities of existence.

Sarvarahasyārtha: The most esoteric (*sarvarahasya*) meaning of a mantra is its identification with *Kuṇḍalinī*. A mantra is visualized as originating in the base cakra, rising above in the form of *Kuṇḍalinī*, piercing the centers where aspects of fire, sun, and moon are visualized. A triangle, at the base of the lotus identical with this *cakra*, is considered as the collection of all the categories, including fifty Sanskrit syllables. All four levels of speech are contemplated in this triangle, including three aspects of consciousness manifest in the form of subject, object, and cognition. Meditation upon the aspects that manifest as digits of the five mantras and correspond to the five faces of Lord Śiva reflect upon this very triad in which fire is visualized with

⁵⁰ When identifying the body with the cosmos, it is analyzed in twenty-seven parts. These limbs are the ten senses and ten sense-objects, with *manas*, *buddhi*, *citta*, *ahaṃkāra*, *prakṛti*, *guṇa* and *puruṣa*. Among these, the categories *manas* to *puruṣa* appear similar to those of Sāṃkhya (see Larson 1969, 7–14). However, Sāṃkhya does not distinguish *citta* from the triad of *manas*, *buddhi*, and *ahaṃkāra*. Furthermore, this list identifies *guṇa* as a category distinct from *prakṛti*, while according to Sāṃkhya, *prakṛti* is the collective form of the *guṇa-s* in equilibrium (see Larson 1969, 37–39; 162–64). A body is, according to Sāṃkhya and Tantra, comprised of these categories and sense organs. Tantras, in addition, stress that these bodily components correspond to twenty-seven lunar mansions (*nakṣatra-s*). In the Hindu calendar, the zodiac is divided into twenty-seven lunar mansions corresponding to lunar days, of which twelve are identified by the month-names. These mansions actually are clusters of stars. Having stressed the relationship of the limbs of the body with these clusters, Tantras establish the identity of body and cosmos for meditative purposes. Here, mantra is used as a tool to reflect upon this identification of the physical limbs with stars in various clusters.

⁵¹ *prāṇa*, *apāna*, *samāna*, *vyāna*, *udāna*, *nāga*, *kūrma*, *kṛkala*, *devadatta*, and *dhananjaya* are the names of the life-force that functions in different parts of the body.

ten digits, the sun with twelve aspects, and the moon with sixteen phases. This number coincides with the Rudras present in the five mantras representing five faces of Śiva, and permeates the thirty-six Tantric categories and that which is beyond them.

Mahātattvārtha: This is the highest meaning of a mantra, subtly suggested in the texts on *Mahārtha*, grounded on Kālīkula.⁵² Realization of *mahārtha* is the practitioner's identification with divine awareness, recognizing the world as his very own aspects.⁵³ With realization of *mahārtha*, a yogin abiding in this state of transcendent awareness is eternally free from the manifold appearance in the world, yet fully aware of the world as his own nature. Thus, a yogin in this state experiences both liberation and the world, enjoying bliss in its true form and also its objective manifestations, realizing that instances of awareness are merely waves upon the ocean, inseparable from their origin. This reality is not marred by the distinction of dark and light; there is no separation of time and space; in this awareness, the yogin transcends the duality of consciousness and matter.

Conclusion

This discussion reveals that, in Tantra, articulating a mantra is a demanding form of meditation, with an increasingly complex inner visualization and reflection upon meanings. Mantra practice envelops other forms of meditation within it, and adds further categories. An external verbalization of a mantra alone lacks the subtle forms of mantra-recitation that adorn the Tantras. The spiraling, inner visualization and contemplation renders Tantric meditation impenetrable and therefore secret.

⁵² Texts such as *Mahārthamañjarī* and *Mahānayaṅprakāśa*, alongside the texts of *Kālīkula*, primarily *Cīdgaganacandrīkā* of Śrīvatsa or texts such as *Kālīkulakramapañcaśatikā*, are the major texts on *Mahārtha*. *Mahārthamañjarī* is comparatively closer to texts of the Śrīvidyā tradition.

⁵³ Mahēśvarānanda cites YH 2.15–16 to support his understanding of *mahārtha*, and subsequently defines *mahārtha* as: *tattadaśeṣārthattattvavācitrīyasamaṣṭyadhīsthānarūpatayā mahān abhedaprabhedakroḍīkāravīcakṣaṇo, 'rthah prāpyam tattvam*. (*Mahārthamañjarī*, *Parimāla* 70). According to this, *mahārtha* is the non-dual principle that incorporates all the objective *arthas*.

With the term *japa* subsuming within itself all of the visualizations here articulated, the complete set of ritual is one single *japa* in different limbs. The six-fold *nyāsa*, the visualization of the feet of Guru, the *nyāsa* of the *maṇḍala* and deity and mantras installed within the practitioner's body, all are part of the same mantra being practiced, or the very meaning of the mantra itself. Since the meaning of the mantra lies in the totality of practices as well as being fully manifest in each and every component, its meaning cannot be limited to a linear understanding, nor can it be contracted to the singular meaning of a sentence. In other words, mantras are meaningful; however, their derivation of meaning differs from that of ordinary speech. This does not negate the elementary meaning—which can be the *bhāvārtha* of the mantra—but transcends it, signifying the totality, simultaneously referring to all aspects that the totality embraces. Mantra is a language with the signs and their meanings resting upon the conventions of each respective tradition. This can be arbitrary, or even imposed by certain exegetes; nonetheless, the meaning of a sign cannot be separated from the understanding of the sign-holders. Therefore, the meaning of a mantra is all of what is recognized as its meaning. This being the case, articulating a mantra is the realization that this totality lies in one's own heart.

This discussion also reveals that deciphering meaning and practicing mantra in the Tantric tradition embraces the categories of Yāska and Patañjali as its initial steps and develops further, not negating what is expressed but adding multiple understandings of its own. The result of this practice is the same in both Tantric and Yogic traditions: mantra practice culminates in self-awareness and the end of suffering.⁵⁴

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⁵⁴ *Tatah pratyakcetanādhiḡamo 'py antarāyābhāvaś ca* YS 1.29. With the six-fold meaning discussed from a Tantric perspective, self-awareness is the central meaning. Manifestation of Lordship, with all perfections that result from the awareness of immanence, also supports the concept that no hindrances impede a practitioner during the course of his meditation.

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