

It is only in the last generation that scholars have become aware that the spiritual tradition of Śaiva Tantra was not only a refined philosophical system (often but incorrectly called 'Kashmīr Shaivism'), but once possessed a literature of yogic practice at least as extensive and detailed as that of Buddhist Tantra. Having established this, scholars have only begun to scratch the surface of the treasure trove of yogic techniques and teachings found in Śaiva Tantrik literature.

Below you will find a translation-in-progress of a work of the Mahārtha (aka Krama) school of Śaiva Tantra that is intended specifically for those who wish to access its sublime wisdom directly through the embodied practice of its techniques. This text, the *Svabodhodaya-maṇjari*, teaches inner yoga, that is, subtle but powerful techniques of awareness cultivation that effect the unfolding of awakening and thereby give rise to the unconditioned joy of pure Being. As Professor Sanderson eloquently puts it:

The purpose and content of the *Svabodhodaya-maṇjari* is the teaching of a series of purely mental practices to bring about liberation-in-life through the dissolution of contracted awareness (*cittam*) by means of insight into the emptiness of objective and mental phenomena and reversion into the uncontracted inner ground by observing the process of the arising and dying away of cognition, especially where the latter is particularly intense, as in the perception of the beautiful [or] meditation on the sensation of orgasm.

It is our hope that in time, at least one work from each Mahārtha Master may appear in English, that students of yoga and tantra may begin to appreciate the power, beauty, and significance of this lineage—which in many ways the most radical and innovative of all the traditions of Śaiva Tantra.

First, some contextualization of the work you are about to experience. The documented history of the Mahārtha lineage begins with the story of a great yogin, a devoted spiritual practitioner and seeker of the truth, probably from Kashmīr. In the mid-800s this yogin made a pilgrimage to the small kingdom of Uddiyāna, in the far northwest of the Indian cultural region, a site later considered one of the four most important Tantrik centers.[\[1\]](#) (Note that this is also said to be the homeland of Padmasambhava, who brought Tantrik Buddhism to Tibet around this same time—probably not a coincidence!) There he journeyed to a town called Mangalāpura, in the heart of Uddiyāna, where (it is said) nearly everyone was a practicing Tāntrika at that time. Situated next to the town was a sacred power-center (*śakti-pīṭha*), the great cremation ground called Karavīra. This cremation ground was said to be the dwelling place of the Goddess Maṅgalā (“Auspiciousness” or “Felicity”), a local form of Kālī, together with the sixty-four Yognīs or Tantrik goddesses that make up her retinue.

There this pilgrim took up residence, propitiating and meditating on the Goddess until she revealed herself to him in an awesome epiphany, granting him divine insight. Thereafter this *siddha* (“perfected master”), now called Jñānanetra Nātha (“the Lord of the Eye of Wisdom”) became the first human Guru of the Mahārtha lineage and the transmitter of its principal scriptures. An account in Old Kashmīrī says:

The Nātha, after being taught in the sacred site where Om resonates [Uddiyāna], was filled with compassion for living beings, and as the Revealer [he] emitted the internal and external silence of ultimate reality as the scriptural corpus of the Krama [Mahārtha]. [\[ii\]](#)

The tradition records that Jñānanetra was a fully awakened master. A later text called *Hymn to the Five Voids* lauds his greatness; it purports to have been an oral transmission from the Yoginīs of Uddiyāna. The Yoginīs, in a great assembly, are said to have sung the praises of Jñānanetra with the words:

The Lord called Jñānanetra has merged with the level where all experience is one! He is the singular Hero of that beyond essence, in whom all conditioned states have been brought to silence, radiant with the vision of his gnosis, who has realized the ultimate reality, who has attained the bliss of understanding, and who has relished the highest awakening. [\[iii\]](#)

Note in the above passage the strong association made between realization (gnosis-understanding-awakening) on the one hand and energy (radiance-bliss-relishing) on the other. This is typical of the Mahārtha, and conveys the teaching that without the fruit of latter, the former is merely sterile knowledge. The Mahārtha masters sought and taught fully embodied wisdom, the universal sign of which is power, energy, love, juiciness, bliss. Not for this lineage the dry and empty realization of Śiva's spacious openness devoid of Śakti's energy and love.

In fact, the Mahārtha teachings center on the symbol of the Goddess. The scriptures transmitted by Jñānanetra teach the worship of different forms of Kālī as expressions of the phases (*krama*) of awareness—the aspects of consciousness present in each and every experience. Fundamental to the Mahārtha vision of reality is the teaching that the aspects of the Divine normally considered wholly transcendent in fact are intimately interwoven with the tangible world, like the warp and weft on the loom of reality. It is for this reason that in one breath a Mahārtha master can speak of the loftiest, most abstract aspects of the Absolute, and in the next of something seemingly quite ordinary and mundane: for him there is no disjunction between the two.

Jñānanetra began a lineage which successfully preserved the transmission of awakening through at least nine generations, a rare feat in the history of spirituality. We can see the success of the transmission in the consistently high level of insight, intensity, joy, and gratitude in the poems of the Krama masters, which in my view are positively aflame with awakened consciousness.

Jñānanetra directly initiated seventeen disciples. He had three disciples who attained the full fruit of his transmission, all of them women. One of these three became his successor, the lineage-holder *siddhā yoginī* named Keyūravatī, informally yet respectfully known simply as “the Goddess K.” We have no written works credited to Keyūravatī, though some of the oral teachings of the Mahārtha tradition recorded in Old Kashmīrī may be hers. Additionally, it is our view that some of the *dhāraṇās* (centering techniques) taught in the scripture called [Vijñāna-bhairava](#) may derive from Keyūravatī. Reasons for this view will be mentioned below.

Keyūravatī’s successor was the author of our present text, a man named Vīranātha, a.k.a. Vāmanadatta, a.k.a. Hrasvanātha. He was highly placed in Kashmīrī society, being the Minister of War and Peace under King Yaśaskara in mid-tenth century Śrīnagara (then called Pravarapura). He wrote two short works that have come down to us, including the present one, which is titled *The Bouquet of [Methods] for manifesting innate Awareness* (*Svabodhodaya-mañjari*). This exquisite meditation manual in 44 verses teaches a “new and

easier method” (*sukhopāya*, a phrase that repeatedly characterizes the Mahārtha's teachings) for attaining the Joy of Awareness (*bodhānanda*).

The Tantrik techniques taught here are “easy” compared to the type of yoga taught by Patañjali in his *Yoga-sūtra*, which requires a level of renunciation and arduous practice that does not come naturally to those not suited to the monastic life (i.e., the majority). Vīranātha clarifies his project while explicitly setting himself against that earlier yoga of Patañjali, writing:

The nature of the mind is unstable, being inundated by the subliminal impressions arising from false mental constructs; realizing this, one sets out to dissolve it. This dissolution was taught by the ancients as occurring due to the yoga of renunciation and arduous practice.[\[iv\]](#)
Here I will teach a dissolution that is [comparatively] effortless. (v. 11-12)

The focus of Vīranātha's manual is the most perennial and ubiquitous theme in the whole literature of Yoga: how to achieve the dissolution (*nirodha*) of the everyday thinking mind in order to reveal a more essential level of our being, ordinarily obscured by our conditioned mental activity. It is a universal creed of yogic literature that the divine essence that is the source of the unconditioned joy-of-being which we all consciously or unconsciously seek is not something that needs to be obtained, achieved, or constructed. In fact, since it is our already existent real nature (*sadbhāva*), to experience it we need only remove that which veils it—the conditioned thinking mind. When this is done frequently enough, your sense of who you are re-orient to your deeper nature. When that re-orientation is complete, then it no longer matters whether the mind is present or not, since you no longer construct your sense of self on its basis.

Anyone familiar with modern cognitive psychology might object to this usage of the word “mind,” since of course in the broader modern sense of the word, the mind cannot ever disappear. But what Vīranātha and other yogic authors mean by “mind” (*citta* or *manas*) is the conditioned, reactive, inner commentator or narrator that most people cannot turn off at will, however much they may want to. “Mind” in this sense is a stream of discursive thought that articulates personal judgments of self and others on the basis of its programming, absorbed from the surrounding culture from a young age. It manifests not only these habitual thought-patterns that are frequently unnecessary and/or poorly suited to the reality of the present moment, but also their emotional correlates like greed, envy, self-righteousness, craving, and hatred.[\[v\]](#) These charged emotional states seem to reinforce the validity of the mental states that gave rise to them and cloud the clarity of one's perception. There are more dimensions to the yogic understanding of the term “mind,” but this one is key. (It is for this reason that Alexis Sanderson translates *citta* as “contracted awareness” rather than “mind”.)

Vīranātha's particular innovation is this: instead of the older method of cultivating distaste for one's own body (*Yoga-sūtra* 2.40) and the sensual experiences that the mind becomes attached to, his uniquely Tantrik “easy method” was to allow oneself to become totally absorbed in a beautiful sensual object that naturally dissolves or fades away, like the sound of a gong or the taste of a sweet or the smell of a flower (refer again to Sanderson's quote near the top of this post). The more complete one's absorption in the object, the more complete the dissolution of mind that can be achieved. The teacher's two cues here are simple: first, focus even more intently on the sense-object than you usually do; and second, when the sense-object dissolves, instead of immediately looking for another object to engage with, or

thinking about the one that has just dissolved, one must repose in the space of simple open tranquil awareness that immediately follows.

When the mind (or rather, contracted awareness) dissolves or comes to rest in the real Self, we are left in a state of pure Being variously named by Vīranātha. Like all Tantrik authors, he uses many words to describe the experience of the real Self, aka essence-nature; this diversity of terms helps us avoid objectifying it or identifying it with a fixed concept. On the one hand he uses a group of Sanskrit terms that indicate to us that the cessation or dissolution (*nirodha*) of the thinking mind results in a state of extraordinary peace (*mahā-śānti*), stillness (*nistaranga*), and equanimity (*śama*). However, unlike states of stillness that result from sedation, this is a state of being utterly peaceful yet awake and aware (*śānta-bodha*). He also uses a cluster of terms that describe this state in terms of freedom from dependence, attachment, or suffering. *Kaivalya* is a word describing spiritual liberation that was inherited from the earlier pre-tantrik tradition of yoga, where it suggests a state of purity, of standing apart from the causes of suffering, of being free from the “taints” of worldly life. In the more world-embracing ethos of Tantra, *kaivalya* acquires more of a sense of freedom and independence, needing nothing outside oneself (*nirāśraya*) yet open to all phenomena as they arise and pass away.

While the sensual meditations tend to attract our attention, the text is in fact very diverse, including many other methods, from gently intensifying awareness while hovering on the edge of sleep to trying to find the locus of one’s cognition by asking gently and repeatedly “Where is my mind?” For the practitioner who is ready for these methods, they do indeed constitute a far easier path to successful centering in one’s essence-nature. Furthermore, all the *dhāraṇās* (centering techniques) are prefaced in the text by a philosophical deconstruction of socially conditioned mental constructs like “class,” “mind,” and “body” (v. 5-11). This passage, almost startling in its congruence with postmodern philosophy of the late 20th century, deserves the attention of academics and practitioners alike.

We can organize the twenty-six *dhāraṇās* that follow the philosophical verses into five categories:

- Sensual Dhāraṇās (7)
- “Dhāraṇās” of spontaneous dissolution in everyday life (5)
- Precognitive Dhāraṇās (4)
- Dhāraṇās of Inquiry (5)
- Yoga Dhāraṇās (5)

If we determine the degree of Vīranātha’s interest in the topics he covers in terms of number of verses, then it is the sensual *dhāraṇās* and philosophical deconstruction that seems most important to him, each receiving seven verses, slightly more than all the other topics. The other topics are about equally weighted.

A few words about those other topics. The “*dhāraṇās* of inquiry” are those that use faculty of discernment (*buddhi*) to shed conditioned perception and penetrate to a deeper vision of reality. These are profound, but not as difficult to grasp as the very subtle “precognitive” *dhāraṇās*, in which contemplation takes place prior to sense-perception, as a result of which accesses the Void while remaining fully awake. (These *dhāraṇās* are examples of *śāmbhava-upāya*; see *Tantra Illuminated* p. XXX) By contrast, the “*dhāraṇās* of spontaneous dissolution in everyday life” are very straightforward, for they are not techniques in the same

sense as the other *dhāraṇās*. Here our author is simply pointing out moments in everyday life when the thinking mind spontaneously dissolves, implicitly inviting us to dwell in that space a little longer.

Finally, like its predecessor and primary influence, the *Vijñāna-bhairava-tantra*, our text contains some powerful teachings on esoteric yoga that are presented in a veiled form using coded language and therefore require extensive training to interpret correctly.

The influence of the Vijñāna-bhairava-tantra

In verse four of his text, Vīranātha tells us that the Tantrik teachings on the easeful dissolution of the mind (the *sukhopāya*) were, in his view, in danger of being lost, and therefore he is writing this work to clarify and promote them. The only work we know of that presents *dhāraṇās* similar to Vīranātha's is the *Vijñāna-bhairava-tantra*. Vīranātha attributes the *sukhopāya* teachings to "the previous Guru(s)," calling them an *āgama*, which means a scriptural revelation or something received from tradition. Now, the *Vijñāna-bhairava-tantra* is a scripture, and like all scriptures is of anonymous authorship. However, if Vīranātha is referring to his own Guru in verse four (using the honorific plural as is common in Sanskrit), then the logical conclusion is that his Guru Keyūravatī is the true author of the *Vijñāna-bhairava*. Two facts seem to lend weight to this conclusion: that women were not, in the culture of the time, supposed to be scholars or authors, let alone gurus; and the fact that, when Abhinavagupta cites the *Vijñāna-bhairava*, he never calls it a *tantra*, which he does in the case of every other tantra he cites (thanks to Chris Tompkins for this observation). This might make sense if he knew it to have human authorship. Nonetheless, the idea that Keyūravatī wrote the *Vijñāna-bhairava-tantra* is *not* proven by this collocation of evidence, but is simply recorded here as a possibility.^[vii] Another possibility is that Vīranātha refers to earlier work(s) now lost, and that the *Vijñāna-bhairava* came later and was itself influenced by Vīranātha. We regard this as less likely.

We envy you the experience you are about to have: that of encountering for the first time a practice text of a venerated master of the Krama lineage of original Śaiva Tantra. Thanks to the power of the union of the Awakened Mind transmitted through that tradition and the intention to benefit all sentient beings held by its masters, this work has seen the light of day in the modern era, an era that sorely needs its wisdom. May all beings benefit!

NOTES:

[1] Uddiyāna is located in the Swāt valley of the now sadly war-torn Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistān.

[ii] Translated by Sanderson from the Old Kashmīrī *Mahānaya-prakāśa* ("Śaiva Exegesis," p. 265), with minor alterations.

[iii] Sanderson's translation from "Śaiva Exegesis," p. 322, with minor alterations (e.g. I have replaced "enlightenment" with the more literal "awakening" [*bodha*] and "phenomena" with "conditioned states"). Key terms of the *Svabodhodaya-mañjarī* are already found here, such as *niḥsvabhāva* ("beyond essence" or "without independent existence") and *śamita-sakalabhadra* ("in whom all conditioned states have been brought to silence").

[iv] Alluding to Yoga-sūtra 1.12.

[v] These habitual thought-patterns can also manifest the so-called “positive emotions” like pleasure or happiness, which are not generally regarded as problematic, but yogically speaking are in fact equally problematic to the so-called “negative emotions” when they arise from conditioned thought, because in that case they are artificial, in the sense that they are generated by an interpretive framework, a mental construct, rather than by connection to reality. Happiness or pleasure spontaneously arising in someone connected to the reality of the present moment is of course unproblematic, but for that matter so is any “negative” emotion arising in that way.

[vi] Sanderson, “Śaiva Exegesis,” p. 277, emphasis mine. The reader may notice a similarity to Buddhist language here, and indeed the Krama is the most “Buddhistic” of the Śaiva schools, though it is more accurate to say that they both emerged out of the same Himālayan cultural milieu, which fostered an interest in nondualist meditation in this period.

[vii] Against this hypothesis is the fact that the *Vijñāna-bhairava-tantra* is, at least nominally, a text of the Kaula Trika school, while Keyūravatī is a guru of the Krama. The two schools are connected, however, by their mutual Kaula influence, and by the fact that they merged in the synthesis of Abhinavagupta and his successors, if not before.

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TRANSLATION (please note that one verse will be added each week throughout 2018 until we reach the final verse, #44):

*samyag-bodha-vicārena bhāvānām asvabhāvataḥ |
labdha-bodhodayānandaṁ vande samsthānam ātmanāḥ || 1 ||*

1. By [realizing] the essencelessness of [all] entities and states of mind through a thorough investigation of [the nature of] awareness (*bodha*), one attains an awareness (*bodha*) which gives rise to unconditioned joy. That joy is the natural state of the Self, and *that* is the deity I worship.

OR

1. I venerate the natural condition of our innate being, which is the joy that arises from the awakening (*bodha*) attained due to [realizing], through a thorough investigation of awareness (*bodha*), the fact that [all] entities and states of mind (*bhāva*) have no separate or independent existence [apart from Consciousness, which is the Self].

*rūpādi-pañcavargo 'yam viśvam etāvad eva hi |
grhyate pañcabhis tac ca caksur-ādibhir indriyaiḥ || 2 ||*
[translation to be posted 16 March]