



Tantra Re-Envisioned: The Two River Theory on the Origin of Yoga

By Ramesh Bjonnes

TANTRA HAS RECEIVED increasing interest among scholars and the public in recent years. Its historical origins and practices, however, are not so well understood. Sometimes misinterpreted or misrepresented, traditional Tantra is often veiled in a mist of popular myths. In the Indian imagination, Tantra is generally considered a dark art of magic, while in the West it is popularized as an expression of sacred sex. However, these simplifications and misconceptions are beginning to change.

Christopher Wallis, a contemporary practitioner and scholar of Kashmir Tantra, asks: Why would Tantra be of interest to modern people, Westerners in particular? "Millions of Westerners are today practicing something called yoga," he writes, "a practice which, though much altered in form and context, can in fact be traced back to the Tantrik tradition."¹ Then he explains in more detail how the yoga we practice today originated in Kashmir Tantra as well as in the Hatha Yoga tradition of the Middle Ages. In this essay, we will look at another possibility, that the Tantric tradition is

considerably older than 1000 years, and that both yoga and Tantra have emerged from the same spiritual roots, formed a similar philosophical trunk, and sprouted many important branches of embodied spirituality.

In 2011, when Georg Feuerstein revised his monumental book *The Encyclopedia of Yoga*, he decided to give the new edition an expanded focus. "My extensive coverage of material on Tantra," he wrote in the new introduction, "which is nowadays wildly popular but also wildly misunderstood, warranted a new book title: *The Encyclopedia of Yoga and Tantra*." In this revised version, he included those contemporary teachers who, according to him, have significantly contributed to contemporary yoga and Tantra practice. These teachers include Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, Paul Brunton, T.K.V. Desikachar, B.K.S. Iyengar, Swami Satyananda, and other teachers that are well known in the West—except perhaps for Anandamurti.

Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (aka Shrii Shrii Anandamurti) was a social reformer, philosopher, poet, composer, economist, and Tantric guru. In the 1950s and 60s, he became well known as a spiritual teacher and activist speaking out against many economic and social ills, including the

¹ Christopher Wallis, *Tantra Illuminated: The Philosophy, History, And Practice of a Timeless Tradition*, Mattamayura Press, 2013

caste system. Following Tantric tradition, where caste is not recognized, and arguing that all people are part of one human family, Anandamurti advocated marriage across caste divisions and an increase in women's independence. He supported a post-capitalist economy he termed PROUT (The Progressive Utilization Theory), which is based on ecology, cooperatives, bioregional development, and on neohumanism—the love for and inherent rights of all beings. His unusual blend of Tantric spirituality and progressive socio-economic ideas attracted the intellectuals and the middle class of his time.

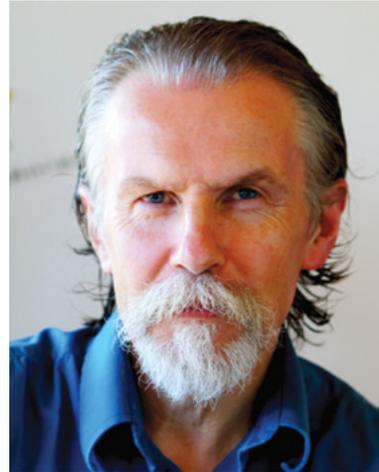
However, like many revolutionary and unorthodox thinkers, Anandamurti was persecuted and finally jailed during Indira Gandhi's near-absolute control of the Indian government in the 1970s. This period culminated with her authoritarian state of emergency from 1975-1977.¹ After eight years in confinement, during which he miraculously fasted for five years in protest, he was, in 1978, "found innocent on all counts and released. He wrote over 5000 songs and more than 250 books."² Anandamurti also authored *Ananda Sutram*, a philosophical masterpiece on Tantric cosmology, philosophy, and practice. Hailed by some as perhaps "the fullest synthesis" of any book on Tantra, the text follows in the footsteps of other Tantric gems, such as Kshemaraja's *Pratyabhijnahridayam* and Abinavagupta's *Tantraloka*.

Tantric History Re-Envisioned

One of the most compelling Western academic cases for Tantra starting at the dawn of human civilization, as Anandamurti and a few other Indian sources maintain, has been made by art historian Thomas McEvelley. His essay "An Archeology of Yoga" represent one of the most formidable writings on the connection between Tantra and shamanism, before and during the Indus Valley Civilization (4500-2000 B.C.E.). The archeological evidence is revealed in the various excavated seals depicting a yogi seated in an advanced yoga asana posture on an elevated

¹ Vimala Schneider, *The Politics of Prejudice*, Ananda Marga Publications, 1983

² Georg Feuerstein, *The Encyclopedia of Yoga and Tantra*, Shambala, 2018, page 28



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platform—the famous and much-debated Pashupatinath seal.¹

McEvelley writes that the purpose of his essay is to answer the question: Was yoga practiced in the Indus Valley 5000 plus years ago? His well-documented and affirmative answer: Yes, it was. However, the current academic view is that yoga evolved in the Magadha region among ascetic yogis in the sramana movement on the fringes of Vedic society at the time of the Buddha about 500 years before Christ.² Other Indologists and historians supporting McEvelley's view are authors on Tantra, such as Alain Danielou, Prasad Lalan Singh, N. N. Bhattacharya, M.R. Sakhare, and R. P. Chanda, all pointing to ancient Tantric Shaivism as the source of yoga, independent of the Vedic tradition. As more archeological evidence, R. P. Chanda draws our attention to another figure found in the Indus Valley indicating an ancient non-Vedic origin of Tantric yoga. The statuette is a bust of someone

¹ Thomas McEvelley, "An Archeology of Yoga", essay in *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, University of Chicago Press, 1981

² James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, Penguin Classics, 2017, page xiv

"in the posture of a Yogin or one engaged in practicing concentration."¹

From within the tradition itself, from various untranslated Tantric scriptures, from the Puranas, as well as from Anandamurti, who presents Shivology, a revisionary history, we are introduced to the "historical Sadashiva." In these writings, he claims that Shiva introduced yogic metaphysics and meditative practices in the Himalayan and North Indian regions about 5000 BCE. According to Anandamurti, Shiva also introduced Ayurvedic medicine, asanas, meditation practices, and his wife Parvati helped formulate Tantric philosophy and the mudras used in dance and hand gestures. Together, this illustrious and much-celebrated couple introduced the Tantric teachings in Agama and Nigama Tantra's oral tradition. Thousands of years later, this culture would influence India's many sacred texts, such as the four Vedas, the Upanishads, the Samkhya, and Patanjali's Yoga sutras. Their Agama and Nigama Tantra then reemerge in various Tantric texts during the early common era, including the now popular Vijana Bhairava Tantra text.²

According to Puranic sources and the writings of Anandamurti, the first Vedic Aryans migrated into India at the time of Shiva. From the commingling of these cultures evolved the many references to ascetics, mantra rituals, and Rudra as Shiva in the early Vedic scriptures. The claim of a historical Shiva is still open for scrutiny. But the assertion of an Aryan migration has been proven by recent genetic research supporting the Out of Africa Theory. This research places the Aryan arrival in India between 5000-2000 B.C.E. Modern genetic science has, despite contrary claims by Hindu nationalists in the Hindutva movement, compellingly evidenced a long Aryan migration route into India rather than a sudden violent invasion as previously held by Indologists.^{3 4}

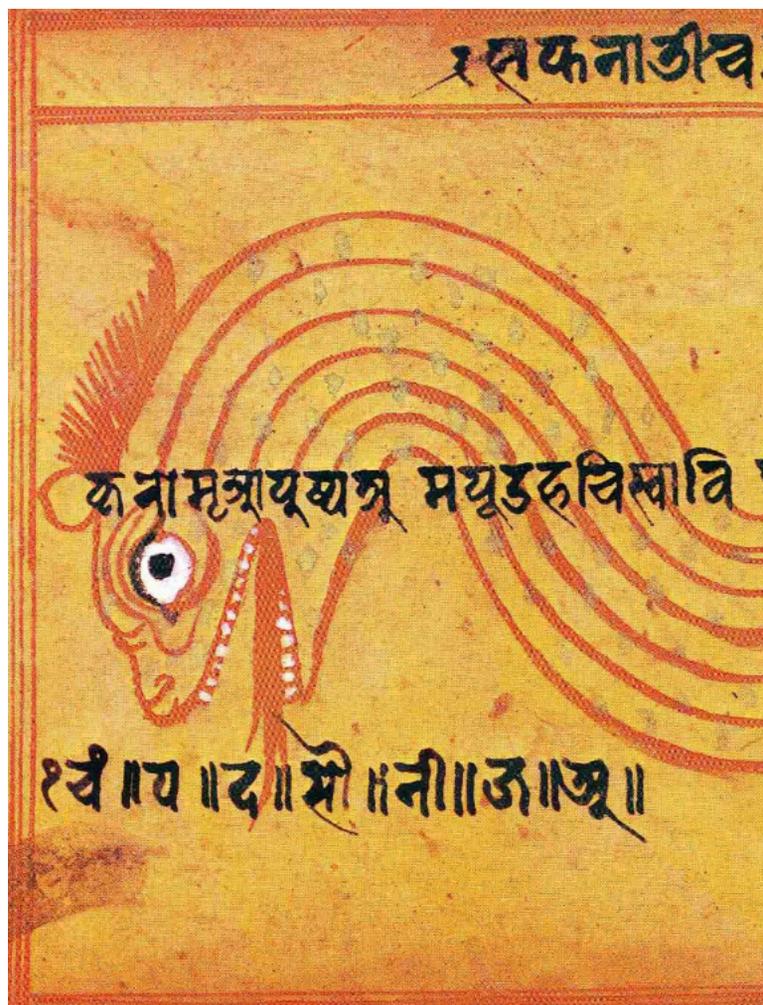
In the words of Indologist Justin M. Hewitson:

¹ Quote from N. N. Bhattacharya, *The History of the Tantric Religion*, Manohar Publishers, 1999

² Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, *Namah Shivaya Shantaya*, Ananda Marga Publications, Calcutta, 1985

³ Spencer Wells, *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey*, Princeton University Press, 2003

⁴ Tony Joseph, *Early Indians: The Story of Our Ancestors and Where We Came From*, Juggernaut Publications, 2018

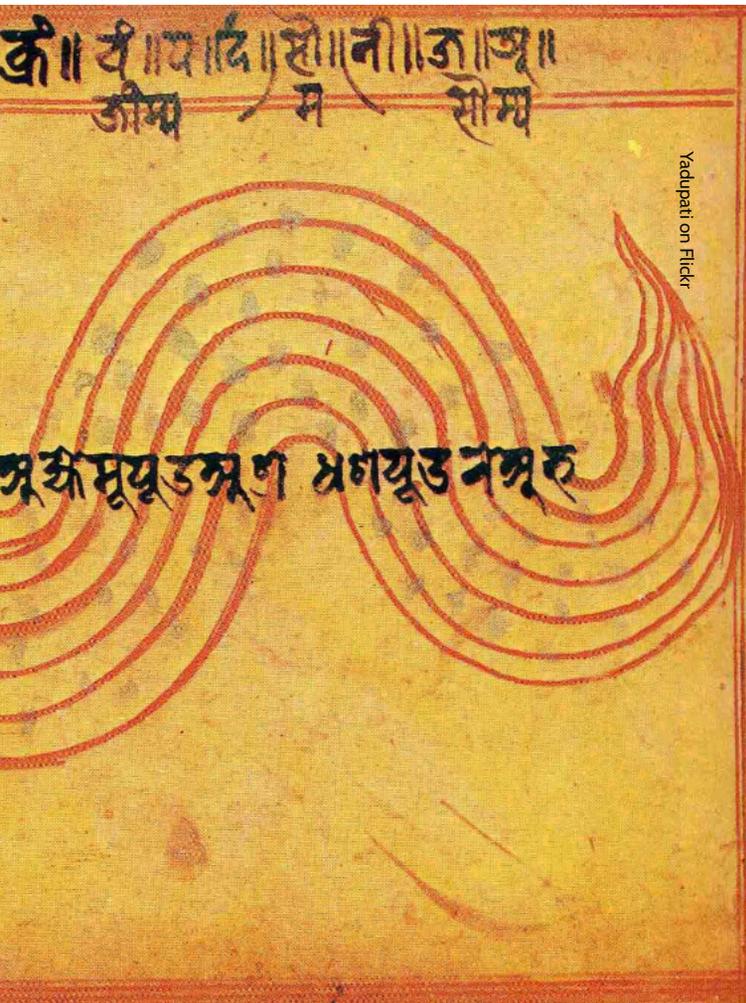


Tantra diagram showing seed-sounds for control of the flow of forces in the subtle veins.

"Shiva's tantric philosophy of universal monism united some of India's warring Aryan and indigenous clans under a common spiritual ideology. Tantra's left-hand, avidya, and right-hand vidya approaches to liberation and power rerouted their primitive desires toward universal consciousness. Sarkar [aka Anandamurti] explains Tantra's overtly transgressive and subtle sadhana as are encapsulated in the Sanskrit advaitadvaitadvaita, translated as "nondualistic cum dualistic monism."¹

Hewitson further writes that "Western Indologists like Hugh B. Urban and Christopher Wallis have questioned whether non-initiates can or should analyze the emphatically esoteric

¹ Justin M. Hewitson, "Siva Tantra Rediscovered: Transforming the Etic Routes and Emic Roots of Indian Spirituality", essay in *Roots, Routes and a New Awakening*, Springer Nature, 2021



discipline" of Tantra. Given these concerns, this essay's approach is to consider the views of both the history and practice of Tantra through the lens of contemporary guru and renaissance man, Shrii Shrii Anandamurti. Sohail Inayatullah, the UNESCO Chair of Future Studies, considers Anandamurti to be a "macro-historian" in the tradition of Arnold Toynbee and Ibn Khaldun. Inayatullah, who has written extensively on Anandamurti's work, sees Shiva as an "extra-historical" teacher who "existed empirically" yet went on to play "a grand and mythological role in righting the balance of the world."¹ Hewitson writes that Inayatullah further argues that Anandamurti "changes our epistemic maps by inaugurating new emic categories of knowledge

¹ Sohail Inayatullah, *Understanding Sarkar: Macrohistory and the Indian Episteme*, Brill, 2002

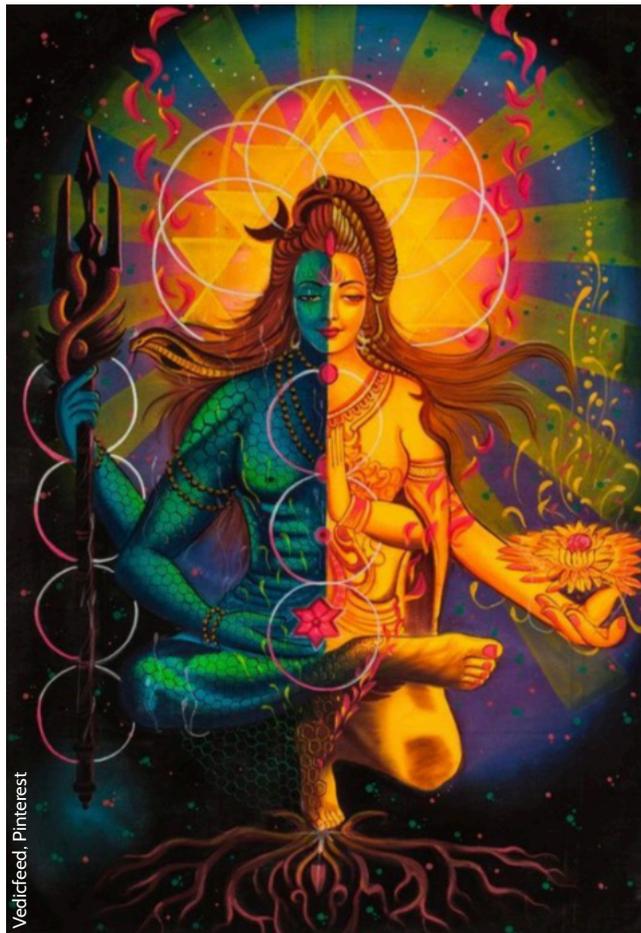
that are not easily grasped by contemporary paradigms."¹

India's spiritual paths are largely soteriological, and, for Anandamurti, Tantra represents a universal mysticism that originated as humanity's first systematic impulse for spiritual liberation. Similarly, and agreeing with Thomas McEvilley, the French Indologist and Tantric initiate Alain Danielou, and Tantric guru Swami Satyananda, all see Tantra as universal and indigenous to humanity's mystic search. Tantra, then, likely emerged within shamanism as proto-Tantra, an interior pursuit beyond the fear of the Gods in heaven (as expressed in the early Vedic texts) to seek spiritual liberation through the inner and outer alchemy of meditation and physical yoga practices. The early Vedic tradition may thus be viewed as largely exoteric, and the shamanic/Tantric tradition as largely esoteric. The goal of Tantra, which is based on the sadhana (spiritual effort) of controlling nature's powers and in purifying the body and mind, is to experience inner trance states and ultimate freedom in nondual consciousness (mukti and moksa). The practices in the ancient Vedic tradition are mainly concerned with rituals and sacrifices through fire offerings and recitation of hymns to the Gods and Goddesses in heaven. The Tantric and yogic traditions are focused on "internal sacrifices and rituals" performed through mantra, pranayama, and cakra meditations. As yoga scholar Georg Feuerstein writes, we have two distinct Indian sacred traditions: "Except for the most orthodox pundits, who view Tantra as an abomination, educated traditional Hindus... distinguish between Vedic and Tantric—vaidika and tantrika—currents of Hindu spirituality."² Hence my Two River Theory—that the philosophy, practice, and history of yoga came about not only through the evolution of the Vedas, but from the influence of both the Vedic and Shaiva Tantric streams.

Many Vedic scholars and Indologists maintain that yoga's historical roots can be traced back to the early Vedas, most notably the oldest of these texts, the Rigveda. I term this The One River Theory. One of the most active

¹ Quote by James Hewitson in the essay *Siva Tantra Rediscovered*.

² Georg Feuerstein, *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy*, Shambhala, 1998



The “half man, half woman”, the union of he and she, a popular way of portraying the Tantric merger of the created being with infinite consciousness

proponents of this theory today is American Hindu writer and scholar David Frawley. A follower of Hindutva, a fundamentalist Hindu ideology, he maintains that yoga is primarily a Vedic practice. Other Western scholars, such as Edwin Bryant, adhere to what I term The Two River Theory of yoga’s origins. Bryant writes that yoga evolved outside the early Vedas among ascetics who consequently influenced the Vedas over time. “Yoga”, he writes, “evolves on the periphery of Vedic religiosity and beyond the parameters of Vedic orthopraxy. Yoga is clearly in tension with Vedic ritualism.... and its goals are in stark and explicit opposition to it.”¹ In this

group of scholars, there are two main opinions: some who believe yoga can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilization and earlier (4000-2000 BCE) and those, including SOAS university scholar James Mallinson, who maintain that yoga largely developed outside the Vedic tradition from about 700 BCE onward. These scholars hold skeptical views about the Pashupatinath seal from 2500 BCE representing a seated yogi figure, for example.

From the perspective of the Two River Theory, however, the Vedic and Shaiva Tantra cultures merged over time. An amalgam of philosophical and cultural expressions advanced in the form of various philosophies and yogic traditions, first as oral traditions, later as texts.

¹ Edwin Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, North Point Press, 2001, page xx

Divinity is everywhere and all humans can realize sacredness anywhere. This holistic cosmology of Tantra holds that this world and all its living beings are created from the union of Shiva with Shakti.



These include the Agamas, the Puranas, the philosophy of Samkhya, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Yoga Sutras, etc., as well as in the various Tantric and yogic practices in numerous sects, including the Kapalikas, Shaivas, Kalamukhas, Shaktas, and many others. Then, in the Middle Ages, from 500 CE to about 1500 CE, Tantra reemerged in a more literate form and produced the period and texts most scholars today associate with Tantra and the Tantric period. But from the perspective of the Two River Theory, Samkhya (also called Kapilasya Tantra) is a Tantric philosophy, and great teachers, such as Kapila, Krishna, Astavakra, Gosala, Patanjali, and others from the culturally and spiritually rich period before the common era were practitioners and teachers of various forms of Tantra.

Tantra as the Essence of Yoga

According to Anandamurti, Tantra is the essence of yogic transformation, irrespective of style. The word itself has had many but inter-related meanings in various texts, from the Vedas to the Tantras: loom, essence, system, practice, or science. The spiritual meaning of the word, according to Anandamurti, is:

"The scriptural definition of Tantra is tam jadyat tarayet yastu sah tantrah parakirtitah [Tantra is that which liberates a person from the bondage of staticity]. Tam is the acoustic root of staticity. Tantra has another meaning as well. The Sanskrit root verb tan means to expand. So, the practical process that leads to one's expansion and consequent emancipation is called Tantra. Thus sadhana [spiritual practice] and Tantra are inseparable."¹

The worldly goal of Tantra is to lead a dynamic and balanced life of service (seva) and

to struggle against oppression and injustice in society. Anandamurti's definition of a Tantric practitioner is both broad and specific: any "person who, irrespective of caste, creed or religion, aspires for spiritual expansion...". From this perspective, Tantra is "neither a religion nor an ism" but rather a "fundamental spiritual science." When diligently practiced Tantra ultimately reveals the goal of all yoga, of all mysticism: the universal realization of divine union.¹ At the same time, Tantra also refers to the distinct tradition initiated by Shiva, the tradition which later became known as Shaivism and which in the Middle Ages blossomed through various Tantric texts and teachers in Kashmir, Bengal, South India, China, Indonesia, and elsewhere.

Alain Danielou points out how the ancient oral teachings of Shiva in the Agamas influenced Indian culture, in general, and yoga in particular when they eventually were written down:

"The most important of these texts are called the Agamas (traditions) and Tantras (rules and rites). To these must be added the Puranas (ancient chronicles), which deal with mythology and history, and philosophical and technical works about cosmology (Samkhya), yoga, linguistics (Vyakarana), astronomy (Jyotisha), medicine (Ayurveda), mathematics (Ganita), and so on—a vast literature, which despite having been transcribed in a relatively recent era, nevertheless has sources in distant antiquity."²

The philosophies and spiritual practices of yoga and Tantra, Danielou writes, in addition to the texts and the commentaries of the Vedas, the Brahma Sutras, and the Upanishads, as well as those of Buddhism and Jainism, were "only

¹Ibid.

²Alain Danielou, *While the Gods Play: Shaiva Oracles and Predictions on the Cycles of History and the Destiny of Mankind*, Inner Traditions, 1987.

¹Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, *Discourses on Tantra, Volume 1*, Ananda Marga Publications, 1993



Meditation mat for tantric practice, Tibet

transcribed during the great age of liberalism and civilization which characterizes the Shaiva revival."¹ This idea that certain parts of the great spiritual texts of India are a renewal and elaboration upon teachings originating in ancient Shaivism, represents an alternative view from current scholarship in the West.

While Christopher Wallis and other Tantric scholars have noted few, if any, Tantric elements in the Yoga Sutras, or in earlier yoga texts, Alan Finger, of ISHTA Yoga, writes in the introduction to his book *Tantra of the Yoga Sutras*: "Between my own practice, the instructions from my teachers, and my learning about the Sutras, I developed the view that Patanjali was a Tantra Yoga practitioner writing about the way yoga actually works from a scientific point of view."² For Anandamurti, the word Tantra is used much the same way the word yoga is used today—to signify all the "scientific" practices combining meditation and postures originating in ancient India. Despite multiple modifications and additions over time, since these practices began with Shiva and the Shaiva Tantric tradition, they are, from this perspective, in essence, all Tantric. Swami Satyananda, the founder of the Bihar School of Yoga, echoes this view by writing that "yoga is part of the more

encompassing system of Tantra. Yoga as it is widely known and practiced, the yoga that has been practiced in India for thousands of years, comes directly from Tantra."¹

Tantric Meditation Practice

The historical and practical context of the teachings expressed above were not yet known to me when I began practicing yoga in Norway in 1972, a couple of decades before the proliferation of yoga studios and the slip-resistant yoga mat. As a young hippie studying agronomy and completing my practicum on a dairy farm in the mountains, I had just finished reading Ram Dass' legendary book *Be Here Now*. So, I started learning posture yoga from a book written by an Indian Swami who had been living in neighboring Denmark for several years. I practiced on a woolen blanket, and in my imagination, I transported myself to mystical India. A year later, a friend of mine and a disciple of Anandamurti taught me a simple mantra meditation technique. He called the practice Tantra. Little did I know then how important that singular word would become to me and the world of modern yoga. The timing was right for a deeper plunge into Tantric spirituality.

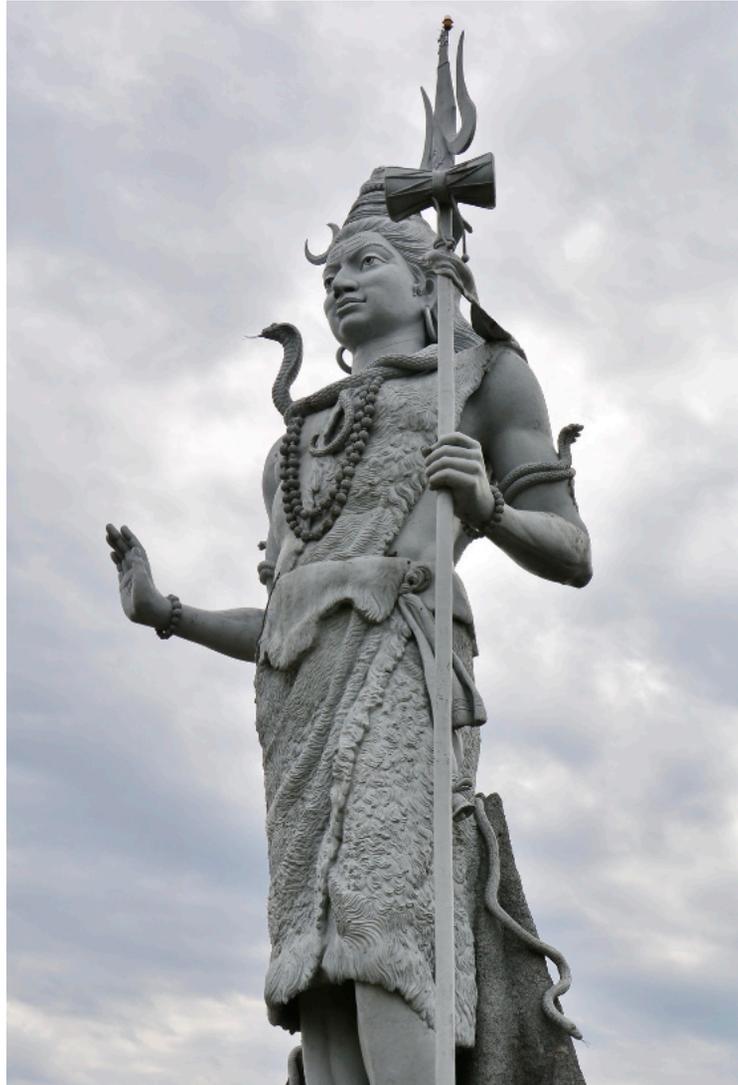
Unlike today, however, when most people learn yoga as a form of physical postures, at that time, the main entryway into the world of yoga was through meditation. That is also the traditional way. The goal of spiritual yoga, and thus Tantra, is not just a healthier, slimmer, more flexible body but inner freedom, liberation, peace, and ultimately divine union, *mukti* or *moksa*. These spiritual goals were confirmed in a recent anthropological study among modern Indian ascetics or sadhus conducted by scholar Daniela Bevilacqua. When asked why they were practicing postures, the majority invariably answered: to prepare the body for meditation. Not surprisingly, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, an essential textbook on yoga from the 15th century, begins with this statement: "Salutations to the primeval Lord, who taught the Hathayoga-vidya, which is as a stairway for those who wish to attain the lofty Raja Yoga."²

¹ Swami Satyananda Saraswati, *A Systematic Course in the Ancient Tantric Techniques of Yoga and Kriya*, Yoga Publications Trust, 1981

² Daniela Bevilacqua, *Let the Sadhus Talk: Ascetic Understanding of Hatha Yoga and Yogasanas*, research paper, SOAS University, 2019

¹ Ibid.

² Alan Finger and Wendy Newton, *Tantra of the Yoga Sutras*, Shambhala, 2018



Manfred Sommer, Flickr

Benevolent Shiva, father of Tantra, adored throughout the ages as the greatest of gods in India and beyond

The primeval Lord refers to Shiva, while Raja Yoga refers to various Tantric meditation techniques as described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. Records in the Puranas, which are texts based on the ancient oral tradition, state that Shiva was the King of Yoga, the originator of Tantric practices, even yogic medicine. From other sources, such as from Anandamurti, we learn that Shiva was the inventor of Raja Yoga, the yoga of meditation exercises, including pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (sense withdrawal), dharana (concentration), and dhyana (flow meditation),

thousands of years before Patanjali consolidated these teachings in the Yoga Sutras.

In the words of Indologist Justin M. Hewitson: "While Siva Tantra's origin is obscured by the complex religious transformations that preceded its founder's advent seven thousand years ago, Siva's pervasive imprint remains visible in India's surviving oral tradition and in Vedic and Buddhist sects."¹

Tantric mantra meditation—which is

¹Quote from Justin M. Hewitson's essay Siva Tantra Rediscovered, 2021

signified by a complex set of visualization-, sense-withdrawal-, breathing-, concentration-, and ideation-techniques—suited my introverted nature. As a young writer who loved to be alone in the Norwegian nature's peaceful, ferocious, and awe-inspiring splendor, meditation became a natural pastime. I had started practicing a year earlier when a mantra just popped into my head while meditating with a group of friends practicing Maharishi Mahesh's Transcendental Meditation, more popularly known as T.M.

A few months after my friend taught me, I was introduced to more of Tantra's inner mysteries when I received diksha, or initiation, one of the unique characteristics of Tantric yoga. Another characteristic is that the process of meditation is to be kept secret to preserve the authenticity of the teachings, which is another reason why textual study conveys an incomplete picture of Tantric practices. To my great surprise, the mantra I received during diksha from a charismatic, orange-clad kapalika, a wandering monk from the Ananda Marga order, was nearly identical to the mantra that had "popped into my head" a couple of years earlier. I learned that Anandamurti had spiritually energized the sacred mantra since he was a Mahakaula, someone who could impart the power of shakti in a mantra and thus help raise the kundalini of other yogis. When I asked the kapalika how all this was possible, he at first shrugged it off and replied: "Tantra is a mysterious path." When I challenged him further, he said that the "intuitional science" of Tantra is very complex and sophisticated, and that I would learn it through practice, not from books. I gradually became accustomed to the new mantra the kapalika taught me, and I practiced twice a day as instructed.

In the late 70s, I lived in an Ananda Marga ashram in Denmark where I learned an elaborate system of six Tantric meditation techniques incorporating practices described, but not elaborated upon or taught, by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. These techniques incorporate mindfulness, the most common form of meditation practiced today, while adding more complex elements involving cakra-visualizations, physical and mental concentration points, and alternate nostril breathing combined with cakra-concentration and mantra recitation. Anandamurti termed these specific practices Sahaj yoga, but he referred to the overall path as

Tantra. These lessons are also described as Shiva Yoga by Indologist Alain Danielou. They have been taught in initiation ceremonies since the time of Shiva and have been practiced in various forms by ascetic yogis from multiple sects. These meditation techniques are described by many names depending on teacher or lineage—including Kundalini Yoga, Laya Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga, Raja Yoga, etc.—and they are not for slacker yogis. They require time and dedication to practice. When we add the historical perspective of an entire yogic subculture dedicated to these embodied techniques for thousands of years, it is fair to say that yogis in the West are just starting to embark upon the sophisticated path of spiritual introspection the Tantric way.

Most Western yogis are familiar with mindfulness meditation, the practice of watching the breath, thoughts, and feelings without attachment. Robert Wright, bestselling author of *Why Buddhism is True*, a book about mindfulness meditation, explains that there is also another form of meditation, namely concentration meditation. "Sometimes, if sustained long enough," he writes, "it can bring powerful feelings of bliss and ecstasy. And I mean powerful feelings of bliss or ecstasy."¹ Mindfulness and concentration (dharana) are both central to Tantric meditation practice. Mindfulness is practiced at all levels of Tantric meditation, from the time you begin, and the mind is still somewhat restless, until you have a feeling of concentrated flow, and further until you have a deep and sustained bliss experience. Why? Because, without mindfulness, the detached, witnessing, inner observer part of the mind can quickly be overshadowed by the ego's sense of pride and judgment. And before you know it, the deep focus and bliss are gone. However, lingering feelings of clarity and bliss may remain after such meditations, sometimes for days. If there is near-perfect mindfulness coupled with a stillness of the mind, the observer recedes. Without mental interpretation (ego), a flow of ecstasy ensues, culminating with samadhi—union with Divine Consciousness (Shiva), in the Tantric language, or a deep stillness beyond the fluctuations of the mind, according to Patanjali. Tantra also claims it is possible to attain liberation (mukti) while

¹Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*, Simon and Schuster, 2017

alive. The term *jivanmukta* is accredited to such a living saint or liberated being.

In this context, Alan Finger can rightly claim that Patanjali prescribed Tantra Yoga, Anandamurti can affirm that Tantra and yoga are "basically the same," and that both the so-called Hindu and Buddhist Tantra traditions originated from the same ancient roots in Shaivism. Similarly, Shyam Sundar Goswami may write that in both "Waidika yoga and Tantrika yoga the eight stages of [Patanjali's] practice have been accepted."¹ However, while Patanjali explains that yoga is to "still the fluctuations of the mind" so that the "seer (the Divine Self, or Purusha) is revealed", the Tantric way of yoga is through devotion and union with that Divine Source, often described as Shiva, or Cosmic Consciousness. Within the tradition, for thousands of years, the minute features of these teachings have been secretly taught during oral transmissions, during face-to-face initiation ceremonies, by an accomplished teacher or guru. That ancient tradition is still ongoing, but it has yet to manifest itself in the modern yoga studio culture for lack of qualified teachers.

Tantra as Philosophy and Worldview

From within the tradition itself, it is said that the practice of Shiva worship, Tantric meditation, and yoga is one of the world's oldest and most influential wisdom traditions. "This oral route," writes Tantric scholar Justin M. Hewitson, "was mostly ignored by etic colonial scholars who preserved their 'objectivity' by elevating textual studies over ethnographic data."² Despite the availability of Tantric texts and the proliferation of Zoom accounts, traditional Tantric meditation and asana

¹ Shyam Sundar Goswami, *Layayoga: The Definitive Guide to the Chakras and Kundalini*, Inner Traditions, 1991

² Quote from Justin M. Hewitson's essay *Siva Tantra Rediscovered*.



Yadu on Flickr

A pair of snakes portraying the subtle ida and piungala psychics nerves coiling along the human spine.

practices are still transmuted orally today—person to person, from teacher to student.

Despite the many forms of Tantra—from the pious, idol-worshipping Vaishnav Tantra to the transgressive practices of Aghora Tantra—there is underneath it all a universal Tantra, a theistic, nondualistic, and dharm-centered philosophy and practice that originated with Shiva. In Hindu culture and the historical narrative of the Puranas, Shiva is considered the *Adi Yogi*, the first yogi, even sometimes referred to as the inventor of Ayurvedic medicine. David Crow, a well-known Ayurvedic teacher, writes that his Nepalese mentor referred to Shiva as "The Father of Ayurvedic medicine."¹ From this perspective, what emerged in the

¹ David Crow, *In Search of the Medicine Buddha: A Himalayan Journey*, Tarcher, 2000

Middle Ages as the textual and thus now the accepted academic evidence of the origin of Tantra, is a continuation of a much older oral tradition that began in ancient times with Shiva, the archetype of yogic self-transformation. It is this prehistoric Tantric tradition Anandamurti has systematized, reignited, and reinvented for modernity.

From the Two River Theory's perspective, every contemporary yogi, whether meditating or not, practice a form of Tantra. It is also important to note, however, that many, if not most, postures of the Hatha Yoga practiced in yoga studios today are hardly more than 100 years old. Some are only a few years or decades old. They were first introduced by Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, the so-called father of modern posture yoga, to his legendary disciples B. K. S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, and his son T. K. V. Desikachar.¹ They in turn developed their own styles and trained yet other teachers who again created new types of posture yoga, such as well-known American teachers Sean Corn, John Friend, Judith Lasater, Rodney Yee, and many others. Meditation, a fundamental practice of traditional Tantra, and emphasized and still practiced in conjunction with traditional Hatha Yoga by contemporary sadhus, is not central to modern posture yoga. But within the tradition that Anandamurti represents, the Tantric meditation and posture yoga techniques practiced 2000 plus years ago are essentially the same today. Traditional Tantra, which values spiritual quality and purpose over physical therapy and flair of style, has not undergone the same radical changes as the yoga practiced in the modern posture yoga movement.²

Philosophically, the nondualistic Tantra is different from the two other primary schools of Indian yoga, the Classical Yoga of Patanjali (also known as Ashtanga Yoga) and the Advaita Vedanta of Shankaracharya. As a so-called dualist, Patanjali believed that the spiritual realm was separate from our worldly existence. On the other hand, both nondualistic Tantra and Vedanta subscribe to the Oneness of existence. However, where the Tantrics see the world as Divine, the Vedantists see it as an illusion.³

¹ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Yoga*, Oxford University Press, 2010

² Ramesh Bjonnes, *A Brief History of Yoga: From Its Tantric Roots to the Modern Yoga Studio*, Innerworld, 2018

³ Ramesh Bjonnes, *Sacred Body, Sacred Spirit: A Personal*

So, what is the essence of the nondualistic Tantric worldview from Shiva to Abinavagupta and Kshemaraja in the Middle Ages to the contemporary Anandamurti? That worldview states unequivocally that Divinity is everywhere and that all humans can realize sacredness anywhere. This holistic cosmology of Tantra holds that this world and all its living beings are created from the union of Shiva (Cosmic Consciousness) with Shakti (Cosmic Energy/Matter), and that this union dissolves in nondual Brahma. (Cit or Samvit in Kashmir Tantra). Anandamurti explains this fundamental cosmological insight in his Ananda Sutram text with the following sutra: Shivashaktyátmakam Brahma, which simply means that Shiva and Shakti are inherent fusions within the cosmic essence of nondual Brahma. It is this cosmic ontology and the practical teachings of Tantra which makes the tradition so appealing to contemporary spiritual seekers.¹ Indeed, several prominent yoga teachers quoted in *Yoga Journal* over a decade ago predicted that Tantra would be the "next step in [our] spiritual evolution."²

These teachers have indeed been prophetic. A sincere inquiry into the philosophy and practices of Tantra has been steadily increasing in the worldwide yoga community since Isaacs' article was published. With the growing interest in this ancient spiritual tradition, many of the misconceptions have steadily decreased. One of these misconceptions is that Tantra is only about 1000 years old and that it has very little to do with the much older yogic tradition. From the alternative perspective presented here, however, we have learned that Tantra may be the root source of all the yogic paths and philosophies that evolved from a rich oral tradition outside Vedic society at the dawn of Indian civilization. We have also learned that the practices Patanjali only alludes to in the *Yoga Sutras* are inherently Tantric and have been imparted outside the text in oral initiation (diksha) ceremonies. Thus, Tantra may not only be the source of all yoga, as Anandamurti maintains, Tantra is yoga and yoga is Tantra.

Guide to the Practice and Philosophy of Yoga and Tantra, Innerworld, 2012

¹ Anandamitra Avadhutika, *The Spiritual Philosophy of Shrii Shrii Anandamurti: A Commentary on Ananda Sutram*, Ananda Marga Publications, 2002

² Nora Isaacs, "Tantra Rising", *Yoga Journal*, August, 2007