



The History of Yoga

Comprehensive, Contemporary, Curious

February-April 2026

Session 1: Roots of Yoga

- Establish a commonly accepted definition of yoga.
- Explore the origins of yoga from a geographic, philosophical and contextual perspective.
- Examine some of the most commonly cited source material from the early period and learn to work with them from a nuanced and critical perspective.

How do we define yoga?

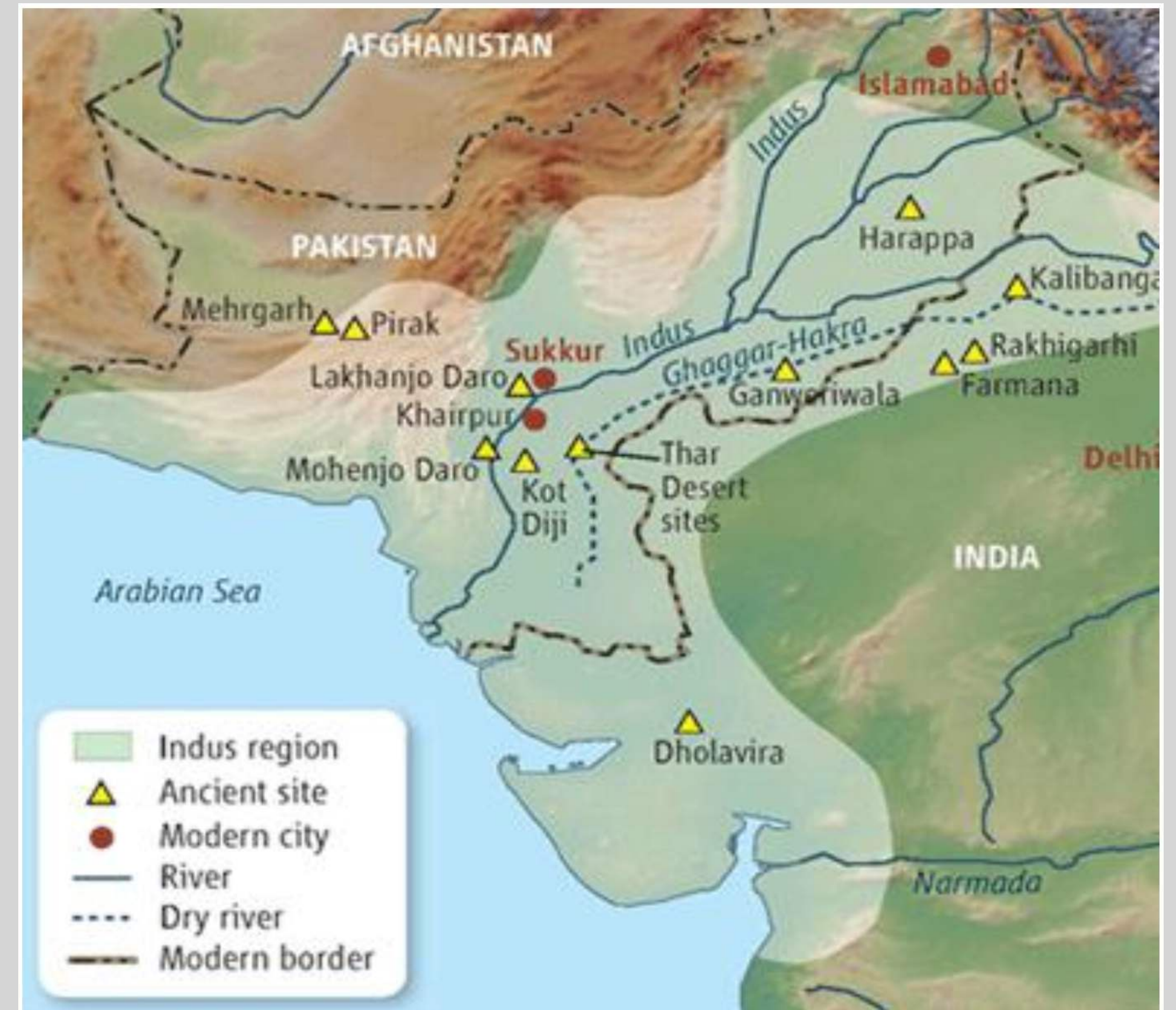
The practice of Yoga is designed to transform illusion into reality by transcending ignorance and training the embodied mind to experience Truth. The experience of Truth is samadhi, which can be translated as a transcendent condition of ecstatic union of subject and object.

- Joseph Alter, 2004.

How do we define yoga?

One of the main tasks of the academic study of yoga is to look beyond the presentations of the yoga traditions coloured by contemporary Western systems of physical training, health and healing and the Neo-Vedāntic environment and instead evaluate yoga as a historical and pluralistic phenomenon flourishing in a variety of religious and philosophical contexts.

Geography



Timelines

3 BCE - 2 BCE

2 BCE - 0

500 BCE - 500 CE

Indus Valley Civilisation

Vedic Period

Classical Period

Types of Texts

There are two clear distinctions:

Śruthi - texts that have been revealed to the Rṣis.

Smṛti - texts which have human authors and are therefore remembered.

- As sourced in VEDIC HINDUISM by S. W. Jamison and M. Witzel (1992)

The Vedas

Four books: Rg Veda, Sāma Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda each containing a similar structure.

Each veda is composed of:

- *Samhitā* (collection of hymns/mantras)
- *Brāhmaṇa* (theological or ritual commentary; speculation)
- *Āraṇyaka* (wilderness/forest text; esoteric, speculative)
- *Upaniṣad* (secret/esoteric teachings; philosophical discussions)

The Vedas

The Rg Veda is a collection of hymns, to be recited during ritual (we will look more at ritual in session 2). This was composed by a small number of families over a period of several hundred years.

The most commonly cited edition is Max Muller's 1849-1874 version.

The Sāma Veda is a collection of chants which are referred to as melodies or sāmans.

Different verses can be sung to each melody and all the verses are extracted from the Rg Veda.

Only 75 verses from this text are not found in the Rg Veda and there is not a great emphasis on translating it.

A commonly used translation is the 1848 of the Kauthuma recension.

The Yajur Veda mixed mantras and prose commentary and it divided into two branches: black and white.

The white YV contains only mantras.

The black YV exists in three versions known as Samhitas (collections): the Taittirīya Samhitā (TS), the Maitrāyani Sanhitā (MS), and the Kathaka Samhita - the latter two versions are largely agreement.

The Atharva Veda is slightly different to the others and contains healing spells, speculative hymns and and concerns itself with domestic matters such as marriage and death.

Vedic Hymns



There is a cosmology of Gods in this system,
linked to elements:

- Uṣas – dawn (most prominent goddess)
- Sūrya – sun
- Dyaus – heaven/sky
- Pṛthivī – earth
- Āpas – flowing waters
- Vāyu/Vāta – wind
- Parjanya – thunder

R̥g Veda 2.11 Indra

- **5 Through your manly power, O hero, you slew the serpent, the secretive one, hidden in secret, secreted away amid the waters, the guileful one, dwelling under cover, and blocking the waters and the (light of) heaven.**
- **7c-d The rich ground was spread out. Even the mountain, which was about to run, became quiet.**
- **13 We would be those, Indra, who (are accompanied) by your help, (who) seeking your help, increase your strength. Grant us wealth (which) consists of heroic sons and is the first to bring power, (that wealth) in which we take pleasure, o god.**
-
- **14 Grant us a dwelling. Grant us peace. Grant us Marut-like force, O Indra, along with (those) who delight (in these offerings). The winds drink the first offering.**
-
- **15 Now let those [Maruts], among whom (you) become exhilarated, attend. Drink the soma to your satisfaction and for your strength, o Indra. (Help) us in battles, o triumphant one. You increased heaven through lofty hymns.**
-
- (trans. Brereton 1990)

Vedic Hymns

R̥g Veda 10.129 Creation Hymn (Nāsadīya)

- 1 There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?
- 2 There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.
- 3 Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness; that one arose through the power of heat.
- 4 Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.
- 5 Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.
- 6 Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?
- 7 Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know. (Trans. Doniger-O’Flaherty 1981: 25-26)

Analysis

Some extracts from the paper:

For a hymn that is generally classified as a cosmogony, RV 10.129 is remarkably contrary.⁶ In a sense, it is really an antic cosmogony, for the hymn itself rules out the possibility of constructing a final description of the origins of the world. That is, after having presumably described these origins, the last two verses ask whether anyone truly does know how the world arose. The gods don't—they originated after the creation of the world (according to vs. 6)—and according to vs. 7, even the world's "overseer in the highest heaven" might not know. It is this character of the hymn that subverts many of the previous attempts to understand it, for interpreters have tried to do what the hymn explicitly says cannot be done. In one way or another, they have attempted to make it into a cosmogony, despite the hymn's direct denial that the origin can be described.

The narrative begins "at that time" when none of the divisions that characterize the world existed.

This introduction of desire and thought in 4 appears abrupt. Before, the poem offered the "One" followed by "heat"; now, suddenly, it presents thought followed by desire. A listener's natural strategy would be to look for some kind of connection between the two sets of terms. One such connection is close at hand: there is an obvious link between the second terms of each set, namely, heat and desire.

From the very beginning, the poem has made its audience reflect and has drawn attention to their own evolving reflection. In vs. 4, the hymn's audience finally discover the reason the poem has done so: the reflection that the hymn forces on them is itself a reflex of the foundational principle.

The discovery that thought is the first creative activity is confirmed in the remainder of vs. 4. There the hymn says that it was through "inspired thinking"⁴⁰ that poets understood the bond between non-existent and existent

RV 10.129 belongs to the late Rgveda, and therefore the social and cultural shifts that mark the middle and late Vedic periods may have already begun.⁶⁹ Some of these like the rise of population centers, may have produced significant dislocations and attenuations of previous social bonds. Also, an evolving social stratification may have resulted in an increasing alienation of social groups from one another

This hymn may be an early response to such circumstances and thus may represent an attempt to recover a sense of life as an ordered whole.

The Upanisads

- A group of texts understood to have been composed at the end of the Vedic period, whose number is disputed. There are collections of 10, 52, 108 and 188 and over 200.
- Upanisads are the final teachings and secrets a student received from their teacher.
- Represent some of the earliest philosophical thought in the Indian subcontinent.
- The Upanisads are concerned with linking the human condition to the cosmos and as such, discuss the human condition, including the soul and the self, the afterlife and the identity of humans as brāhman, written in dialogue or parable form.
- There is are also some female scholars mentioned in the Upanisads, including Gargi - who enters into a debate with Yajnavalka.

The Upanisads

ṚGVEDA	YAJURVEDA		SĀMAVEDA	ATHARVAVEDA	
	Black (Kṛṣṇa)	White (Śukla)			
Ṛgveda Saṃhitā	Taittirīya Saṃhitā	Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā	Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā	Sāmaveda Saṃhitā	Atharvaveda Saṃhitā (Śaunaka)
Aitareya Brāhmaṇa	Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa		Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa	Talavakāra (Jaiminīya) Brāhmaṇa	Gopātha Brāhmaṇa
Kauṣītaki/Śāṅkhāyana Brāhmaṇa	Rg Veda: oldest part, the hymns, Upanisads from here could be concerned with mantras and hymns Brahmana: speculation				Chāndogya Brāhmaṇa
Aitareya Āraṇyaka	Taittirīya Āraṇyaka				
Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka					
Aitareya Upaniṣad	Taittirīya Upaniṣad		Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad	Chāndogya Upaniṣad	Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad	Śvetāśvatara Up.	Kāṭha Upaniṣad	Īśa Upaniṣad	Jaiminīya-Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa	Praśna Upaniṣad
				Kena Upaniṣad	Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad

NB This chart is not comprehensive, and there are other vedic branches and texts, which are not included because they do not have extant Upaniṣads. The chart is intended only to indicate the position within the broader vedic corpus of the Upaniṣads translated or referred to in this book.

Fig. 1. The Upaniṣads within the Vedic Corpus

Example of an Upanisadic teaching

This is taken from the Chandogya
Upanishad 6.12.

12 'Bring a banyan fruit.'
'Here it is, sir.'

'Cut it up.'

'I've cut it up, sir.'

'What do you see there?'

'These quite tiny seeds, sir.'

'Now, take one of them and cut it up.'

'I've cut one up, sir.'

'What do you see there?'

'Nothing, sir.'

² Then he told him: 'This finest essence here, son, that you can't even see—look how on account of that finest essence this huge banyan tree stands here.'

'Believe, my son: ³ the finest essence here—that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*ātman*). And that's how you are, Śvetaketu.'

'Sir, teach me more.'

'Very well, son.'

In this story, a father Uddālaka is trying to teach his son that the essence of thing is often too subtle to be recognised. The most powerful example is about the fruit from a banyan tree and ends with the words:

"That's how you are"

Tat Tvam Asi. (As translated by
Olivelle)

It continues with an example of dissolving salt into water and tasting it. The salt cannot be seen but the water still tastes salty.

References to Yoga in the Upanisads

Kaṭha Upaniṣad 3.3-4:

Know the self (*ātman*) as a rider in a chariot,
and the body, as simply the chariot.

Know the intellect as the charioteer,
and the mind, as simply the reins.

The senses, they say, are the horse,
and the sense objects are the paths around them;
He who is linked to the body (*ātman*), senses, and mind,
the wise proclaim as the one who enjoys.

References to Yoga in the Upanisads

Kaṭha Up 5.12-13:

The self as inner controller

The one controller, the self within every being,
who makes manifold his single appearance;
the wise who perceive him as abiding within themselves,
they alone, not others, enjoy eternal happiness.

The changeless, among the changing,
the intelligent, among intelligent beings,
the one, who dispenses desires among the many;
The wise who perceive him within themselves;
they alone, not others, enjoy unending bliss.

References to Yoga in the Upanisads

Kaṭha Up 6.10-11:

When the five perceptions are stilled,
together with the mind,
And not even reason bestirs itself;
they call it the highest state.

When senses are firmly reined in,
that is Yoga, so people think.
From distractions a man is then free,
for Yoga is the coming-into-being,
as well as the ceasing-to-be.

The Sutras

Post Vedic texts which are composed by people - remembered and not revealed knowledge.

There are three early groups of Sutras we will look at.

Śrauta Sutras deal with solemn ritual and describe them step by step complete with variations. This includes the exact mantras and sequencing of the rituals.

The Dharma Sutras deal with customs, rites and beliefs concerning men of the three highest classes. They also deal with matters of law.

The Grhya Sūtra deals with matters belonging to the house such as birth and death practices, rites of passage such as marriage rituals.

The Yoga Sutras

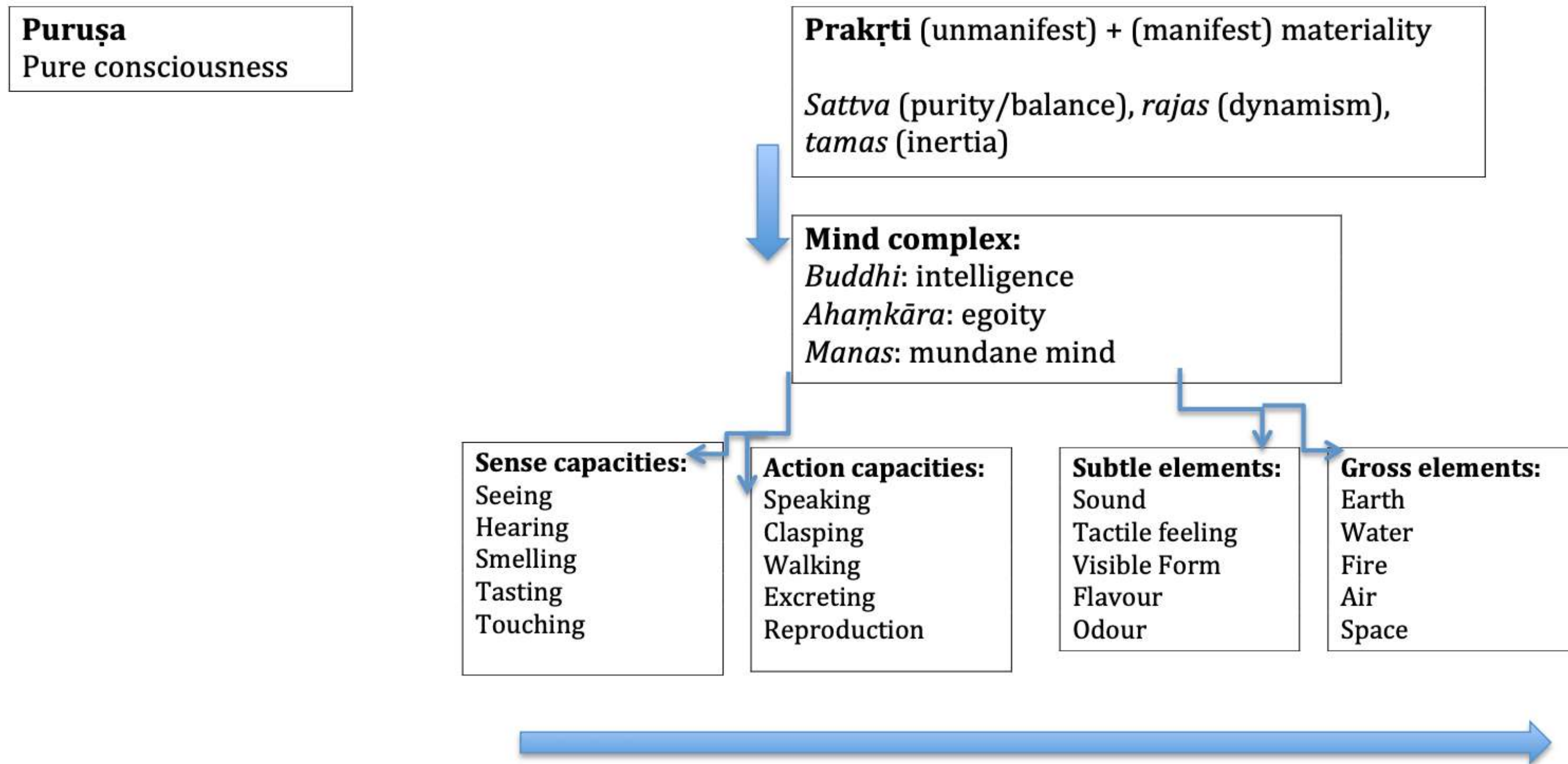
A later text believed to have been composed between the 1st and 4th centuries CE.

The text is divided into four chapters, with chapter headings likely a later addition.

Chapter 1: Samadhi Pada Deals with pure concentration through: Practice and Dispassion.	Chapter 2: Sadhana Pada Discuss paths of yoga including: Kriya - tapas, recitation and devotion First five external limbs of Ashtanga Yoga	Chapter 3: Vibhuti Pada The three inner limbs of ashtanga yoga Talks about special powers	Chapter 4: Kaivalya Pada Talks about the technical separation between Purusa and Prakrti.
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The metaphysics of the Yoga Sutras come from the Samkhya School of Indian philosophy, a companion field of thinking to yoga but not exactly the same thing. It is essentially an atheist philosophy with no deities (however Isvara is mentioned in the Yoga Sutras which is a conundrum, and divides understanding between two things: Purusa and Prakrti).

Purusa and Prakṛti



The BG and yoga

The text describes various ideas of yoga as doctrine and practice.

“In many instances throughout the text, yoga practice is depicted as a fight, struggle, or conquest of one's own nature that is, the agency of one's physical and mental apparatus.

“Yoga is all about taming and gaining control over oneself: over the ongoing mental, emotional, and physical activities that dominate much of one's corporeal existence. Practice thus consists of all the efforts a yogin undertakes to bring these many "natural" activities under control.

(Malinar, 2012: 59)

The Self: BG 2:20

The self is not born
nor does it ever die.

Once it has been, this self will
never cease to be again.

Unborn, eternal,
continuing from the old,
the self is not killed
when the body is killed

Dharma: BG 2:33 & 3:35

If you will not
Engage this fight
For the sake
Of *dharma*,
You will have shunned
Your own *dharma*
And good name,
And shall cause harm.

Better one's own *dharma*,
even if ineffective,
than the *dharma*
of another, practised well!
Better death
in one's own *dharma!*
The dharma of another
only brings fear

Establishing a hierarchy of yogas

BG 12:12

Wisdom is better
than practice
and focused mind
is better than wisdom.

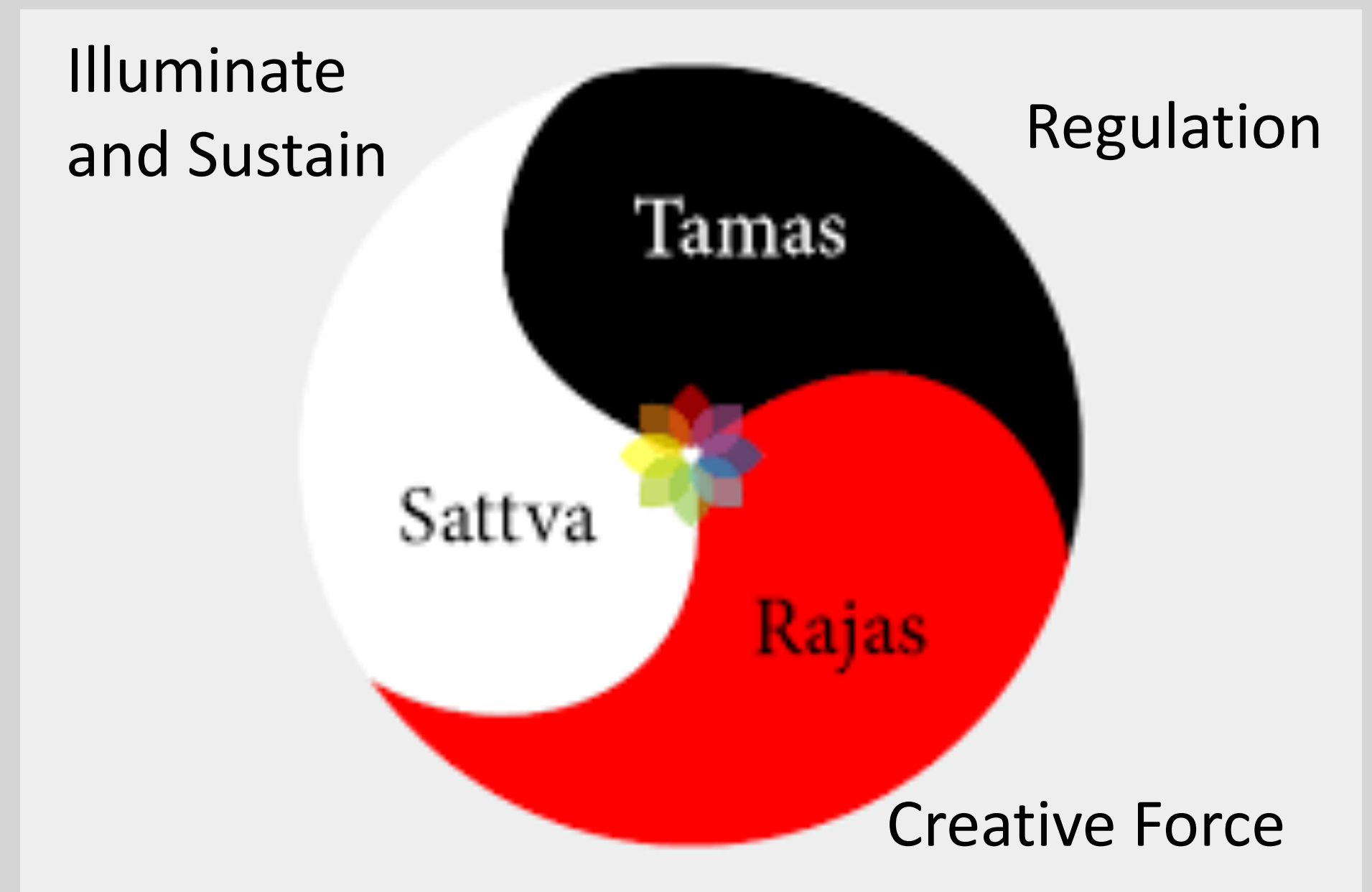
Letting go of
the fruit of action
is better than focused mind.

From letting go peace soon comes

Chapter 18

The last, longest and most complex discourse of the Gītā which explains:

- The differences between sanyās (renunciation of action) and tyāgī (renunciation of desires)
- The guṇas in relation to action
- Qualities or Dispositions of each *Varna*
- Devotion – Bhakti



Renunciation v Letting Go

BG 18:2

The poets know that the leaving aside
Of action based on desire
is renunciation;
and the clear-sighted see
that the giving up
of all fruit of such action
is called letting go

BG 18:5-6

Acts of heated discipline,
giving and sacrifice
are not to be let go,
but rather, carried out;
for heated discipline, giving and sacrifice of clinging
are purifiers
of the wise.

But, Son of Pritha,
these very actions
are to be carried out
after one has let go
to the fruits;
this is without doubt
my highest thought.

How the guṇas manifest in action

Tamasic: Abandoning action out of delusion. (BG 18:7) Not taking action because of laziness or lethargy.

Rajasic: Letting go of an action because of difficulty or fear of bodily pain (BG 18:8). Not taking action as an indulgence or luxury.

Sattvic: When prescribed action is done because it has to be done and one has let go of clinging to the fruit of this action. (BG 18:9)

In other words, when an individual performs action in line with his dharma and lets go of any personal reward then they are taking the right action with pure motivations.

An important corollary

Ian Whicher provides a succinct and up-to-date overview of this literature, pointing out that “with some exceptions, the secondary literature on classical Yoga can tend to be dry and repetitive, which underlines the notion that Yoga, in its authentic context, has always been an esoteric discipline taught mainly through oral tradition” (1998: 320–22).

- From Alter (2004)



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Session 2: Key Ancient Practices

- Examine early practice associated with the self and liberation of the soul, including:
 - Fire Sacrifice
 - Recitation
 - Fasting
 - Contemplative Practice
 - Vratya - Oath taking
 - Early understandings of Pranayama
- Look at early Theism

Yajna

A key feature of the Vedic religion was the sacrificial fire ritual which was performed by men from the three highest classes.

The men had to be married, householders in order to take part in the ritual because Vedic culture puts the household at the centre of its customs. Women played no direct role but were required to be present.

The ritual is conducted by a priest (*r̥ṣi*) and involved making a sacrifice into the fire initially a horse.

The R̥ṣi is a central figure in the ritual and is seen to link the human and the divine.



Textual Explanations

The sacrificer, being the sole and unchallenged master of his sacrifice, performs his karman in sovereign independence from the mortal world. This karma is his self. The sacrificial fire, established through his own karman, is equivalent with his inner self. Independent from the mortal world it cannot but be immortal and inalienable.

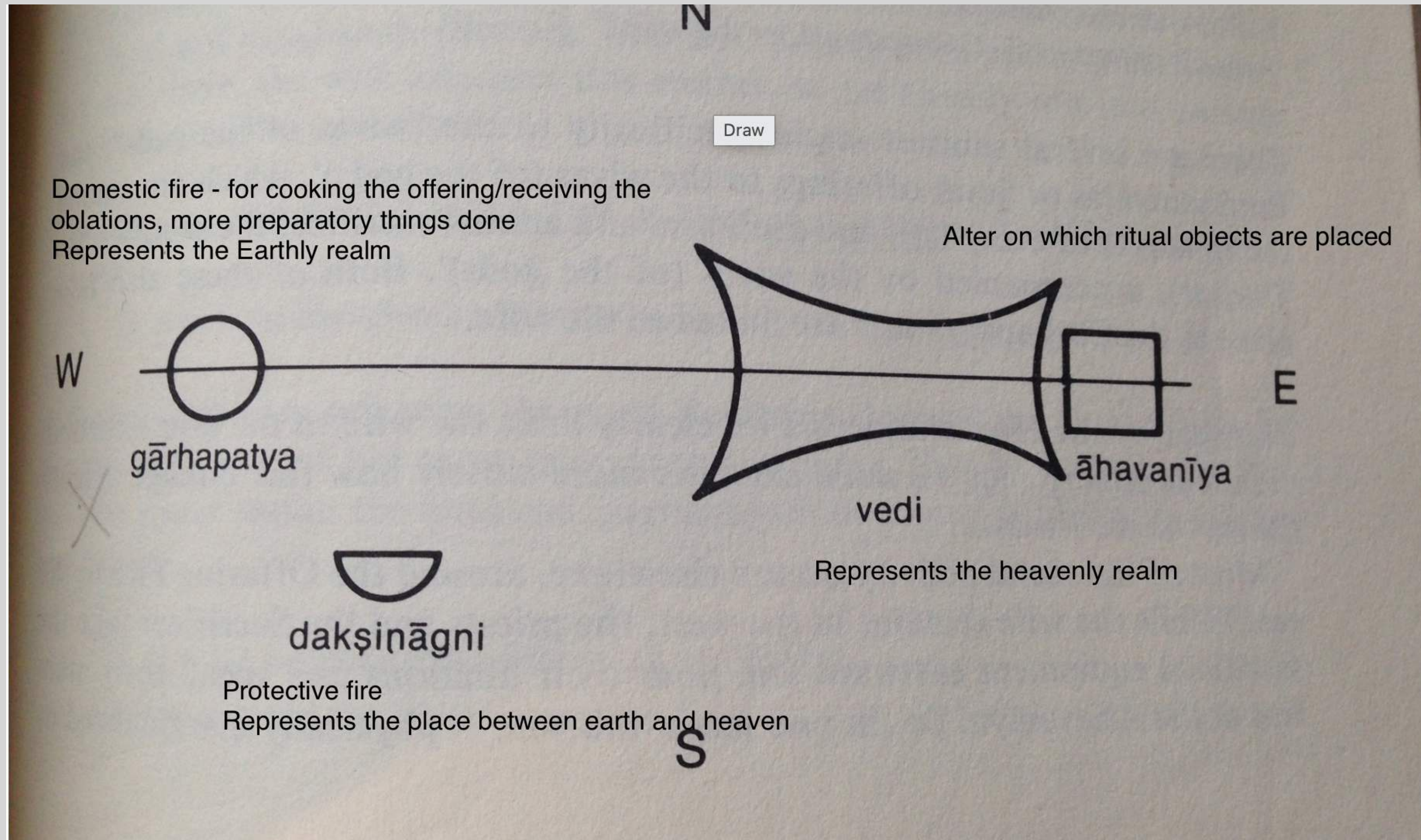
Hence, the inextricable junction of fire, self and immortality.'

(Heesterman 'Vedism and Hinduism' 1997: 58

in Studies in Hinduism: Vedism and Hinduism ed.

Oberhammer, G

Three Sacred Fires



Timings of fire offerings

- Agnihotra (the fire offering) At sunrise and sunset
- Agnicayana (the piling of the fire altar) Complex ritual - 12 days, day and night
- Darśanapūrṇamāsa (full and new moon)
- Agniṣṭoma (soma sacrifices) Also complex and high status and would take in the region of a day
- Pravargya (to the Aświn twins)
offering of hot milk to Vedic gods



Purpose and Perceived Outcomes of the Ritual

Purpose of ritual

- To maintain order: the ritual order helps to preserve the cosmic order, *ṛta* might be seen as a precursor for Karma
 - To nourish and propitiate the gods
 - To mediate between the 'two halves' of the world two halves: earthly realm and heavenly realm
 - To perpetuate the cosmic cycle of life
 - To grant benefits
- Participants:
- Gods
 - Humans (the sponsor and his wife; the priests)

Key material outcomes

Outcomes were related to harvest, family, conceiving of sons

- divine inspiration released to the present-day poets to compose a *bráhmaṇ* (formulation) or hymn
- rain – cycle of life
- longevity, health
- material reciprocity for the priest and the poet
- yajamāna is the sponsor of the ritual (one sponsoring on his own behalf)

Relevance Today?



Photo taken: Ahmedabad
February 14, 2025

Role of women in *Yajña*



Excluded from direct participation in the public ritual but their presence was required in order for their husbands to sponsor the ritual.

Were in charge of domestic ritual which included a home shrine, teaching children the ritual, and taking households vows including fasting with the aim of benefitting the whole family.

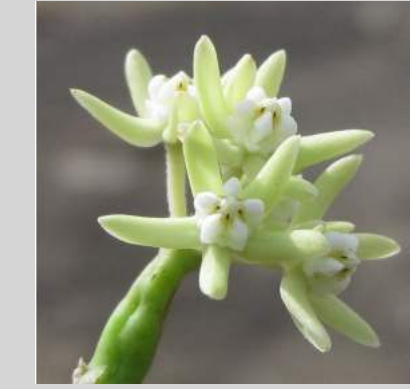
“Reappropriation” of Sanskrit into this realm.

Vedic Recitation

- Special forms of recitation (phonetics, metre, accent, melody; in whole/part; with/without euphonic combination)
- Embodied techniques of memorisation
- Svādhyāya: the systematic review of one's Vedic recitation daily and in private
- Rules of pronunciation and performance
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPcasmn0cRU>



Soma



Somayajña -The Vedic Soma Sacrifice

By Rekha Rao

The juice extract of the soma plant Soma rasa and its offering to deity Indra was the most important part of somayajñas in Vedic period. To understand how and why the soma was extracted and offered as oblation to deity Indra during the performance of soma yajñas, it is essential to know the significance of soma yajnas. It spans across many aspects like mythological, process of making, its application during rituals and ultimately, its consumption. Appeasing gods to bring rains for the wellbeing of humans and the eco systems that support their lives was central to the existence of humanity. The Rigvedic description of Soma therefore cover action and ideology, the process of offerings soma to gods through Agni the messenger in yajnas. The literary source for understanding somayajñas is RigVeda and the archaeological proofs are seen in the various seals and figurines of Indus /Harappan civilization. This research article focusing on the comprehensive understanding of the domain of Soma yajna is discussed in four chapters.

Soma is the non-leafy creeper, a stimulant plant called Somakalpa / Somalata, identified with the botanical name – ‘Sarcostemma acidum’ and ‘Ephedra’ as Latin name. Soma was linked with moon calling it moon plant because the plant was gathered by moon light on mountain regions and carried to the place of sacrifice. The sticks were soaked in water initially and crushed by priests sprinkling water. Crushing of sticks was repeated three times to get even the weakest juice of last thrashing. The copious fresh juice was mixed with milk or curds as it was slightly acidic and then offered to Indra. It was neither boiled nor fermented and hence was nonalcoholic in nature. The original plant soma was extinct in vedic times and replaced by Putika, a plant of same species. In the current period some plants of the same species are now identified as nearest comparison to Soma. Ephedra Gerardiana (Fig. 1.A) is the present-day plant identified with the general term Somalata is found in Himalayan mountains from Afghanistan to Bhutan.

Why soma yajña became popular during the Vedic times

The study of soma related yajñas in Vedic civilization depends on an essential understanding Vedic literature and Vedic rituals that are interlinked. The Vedic literature and rituals are like two sides of the coin. It becomes the study of the ancient society which is no longer relevant now but some of the rituals are still in practice by the Hindus in India as a continuum which is unique to this land. The objects that were used in rituals as depicted in seals are even to this day similar and are according to what has been prescribed in Vedas. Not much attention has been given to the study of soma related Vedic rituals in the social background but are studied more as the religious practices. The correlation of Indus seals to Vedic rituals begins with the understanding of what is Vedic. Who are the people of Vedic civilization, their thoughts, their social life, their ritual offerings to Gods for timely rains and prosperity becomes the clue to understand the theme of Ṛgveda. Vedas are also revered as the chief source of dharma.

The reference of over 450 types of yajña in the Rig and Yajur vedas makes one think why yajñas were performed as order of the day in Vedic period which prevailed approximately 3500 years back. They were performed with multiple intentions like noble acts, to attain godly status, increase the store of goods, remove poverty, acquire land, propagate knowledge and joy in domestic life. However, Soma yajna was at a big scale for the benefit of community, instrumental in pleasing rain god Indra for procuring timely rains and gain victory over enemies or establish supremacy. Though all rivers and the tributaries of main rivers are mentioned in Ṛgveda, People depended totally on rains for irrigation. The long spell of dry period made people to send repeated requests to gods by performing yajñas and offered oblations to appease deities for showering of rains. The mythological narration in Ṛgveda says about how the demon Vritra had hoarded all the clouds and that reflected on lack of rains on earth. Indra was prayed and pampered with soma juice so that he becomes strong and courageous to fight against the demon Vritra and release the hoarded waters.

The Vrata

Derived from the verbal root “vr” (to will, rule, restrain, conduct, choose, select), the word *vrata* is found over two hundred times in the Rigveda (Monier-Williams 1992/1899) in the Vedas, the oldest scriptures composed in Sanskrit in what came to be known as the Hindu tradition. It is difficult to find the historical origins of the oral traditions of vratas, but we may say that they have come to be a major ritual for women in villages and rural areas. Over time, the public focus of vratas shifted from priestly (brahmanical) ritual to local ritual, with older women teaching vratas to young girls, and fewer priests (brahmins) teaching them to boys. In some areas of South Asia, vratas have become an entirely female tradition. It is an ascetic practice for female householders.

Vrata means “the taking of a vow,” and it involves undergoing certain practices in order to achieve a desired aim. A vrata is a vow or promise, usually to a deity, associated with a ritual practice. It is generally performed in order to gain some goal—a happy family with many children, wealth, a job, or recovery from disease or disaster. While religious elements of austerity and purity often appear, its goal is not to detach the performer from the physical world, but rather to gain blessings and a desired worldly outcome. There are folk vratas handed down by oral tradition and performed in rural areas, and there are more formal vratas, which are based on classical Indian religious literature. While folk vratas are generally performed by girls and women, more brahmanical vratas may be performed by both men and women (Sen Gupta 1976: Appendix, Table 4.3).

“Today, a vrata usually involves fasting, following the moral and ritual lessons of a story (*katha*), creating artistic diagrams [Image at right] (*alpana*) on the ground, reciting special verses or mantras, and offering worship (*puja*) to an image, often an image made by the woman herself from simple materials commonly available in an Indian village home.”



Upāsanā

Worship/Contemplation

- One of the central practices of spiritual tradition - from ancient to modern times.
- The early idea was about yoking ones mind or self to cosmic mind/self. In other words to something formless

- Think of it as harnessing the mind.

The mind is like a horse and has to be reined in.

Pastoralist mindset of application and rest

- A forerunner to the concept of Dhyana.

Dhī

Imaginative, Poetic or Visionary Insight

Significance of Dhi

[Glossary](#)

[Sanskrit](#) ▾

[Concepts](#)

Navigation: [All concepts](#) ... [Starts with D](#) ... [Dh](#)

Dhi is defined in two key contexts. Firstly, in a scientific framework, it represents the intellect, which is essential for preserving knowledge, rational thinking, and making decisions. Secondly, in Ayurveda, Dhi is described as a mental faculty that is instrumental for intellect and knowledge. This dual emphasis on the intellect underscores its significance in both contemporary science and traditional Ayurvedic philosophy.¹



The below excerpts are indicative and do not represent direct quotations or translations. It is your responsibility to fact-check each reference.

Hindu concept of 'Dhi'

[Hinduism](#)

[Books](#)

Dhi in Hinduism symbolizes understanding and intellect, influenced by various factors like Prana Vata. It relates to mental faculties, wisdom, and can be affected by imbalances or disorders, highlighting its significance in cognitive functions.

Early History of *Prāṇāyama*

We are going to start by looking at the role of *Prāṇāyāma* in Indian society across many centuries, not always in a yogic context, to understand it's pervasiveness in philosophical thinking.

Some examples:

As an ascetic practice

Prāṇāyāma is the best asceticism

Manu Smṛti 2.83 a

One whose breath is held should three times the Gayatri, along with the names of the seven worlds, om and the Śiras chant. This is called Prāṇāyāma

Viṣṇusmṛti 55.9

Three Prāṇāyāmas performed with the names of the seven worlds and om should be done by a Brahmin as prescribed. It should be known as the best tapas.

- ManuSmṛti 6.70

As a purification technique:

Furthermore it has been said that there is no better tapas than prāṇāyāma. Because of it, impurities are removed and the light of knowledge arises.

PYS 2.52

As penance

And in regard to killing boneless creatures, one is purified by prāṇāyāma

Manu Smṛti 11.141

As a means to knowledge of the self

Having united with the self, he is fit for immortality. If, even for the wink of an eye, he restrains the self in the self, he reaches the unchanging attainment of the wise through tranquility of the self. Then, having restrained his breaths with ten or twelve prāṇāyāmas , again and again, he whose self is tranquil obtains in this way what is beyond the twenty-fourth principle and then whatever he desires.

Mb 14.48.2

As medicinal treatment

If the eye is sunken, pressing the throat, vomiting, coughing, sneezing or prāṇāyāma should be done, as well as a treatment similar for injured eyes.

Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasūtra, Uttaratanttra 26.19

There are also references to *Prāṇāyāma* in fortune-telling, martial arts and initiation rituals

Atharva-Veda Samhita Book XI Hymn 4

Verses 1-7

Homage to breath, in whose control is this All, who hath been lord of all, in whom all stands firm.

Homage, O breath, to thy roaring, homage to thy thunder; homage, O breath, to thy lightning, homage to thee raining, O breath.

When breath with thunder roars at the herbs, they are impregnated, they receive embryos, then they are born many.

When, the season having come, breath roars at the herbs, then all is delighted, whatever is upon the earth.

When breath hath rained with rain upon the great earth, then the cattle are delighted: "verily there will be greatness for us."

The herbs, being rained on, have talked with breath: "verily thou hast extended our life-time; thou hast made us all fragrant."

Homage be to thee coming, homage be to [thee] going away; homage to thee, O breath, standing; to thee sitting also [be] homage.

Breath clothes human beings as a father a dear son; breath is lord of all, both what breathes and what does not.

Breath is death, breath takmán; breath the gods worship; breath may set the truth-speaker in the highest world.

Breath is virā́j, breath the directress; breath all worship; breath is the sun, the moon; breath they call Prajāpati.

Breath-and-expiration are rice-and-barley; breath is called the draft-ox; breath is set in barley; expiration is called rice.

Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.2

Just as a bird tied by a string flies off in all directions and, on not reaching any other place to stay, return to where it is tied, in the very same way, dear boy, the mind flies off in all directions and, on not reaching any other place to stay, returns to the breath. For the mind, dear boy, is tied to the breath.

Theism

- The worshipping of gods straddles the period between the Vedic and Tantric eras and is a departure from the focus on the self which dominates the Sramana movement.
- Wandering ascetics focused on non-deity based practices - such as the contemplative ones we discussed above - aimed at withdrawal from society.
- Deity based practices are undertaken by householders, who are active participants in society.
- They evolve from the Vedic traditions to include aspects of withdrawal (though very few) and then culminate in a dominance to a kind of theism underlined in the Bhagavadgita.

Vaisnavism

- Gradual merging of Vāsudeva, Kṛṣṇa and Nārāyaṇa
- Independent cults: Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl and Nārāyaṇa
- Common features:
 - puruṣottama as the supreme puruṣa (personal) –
 - emphasis on qualities: saḡuṇa
 - god as creator, maintainer and destroyer

The Alvars



- A group of 12
- Worshipers of Vishnu
- Temple wanderers
- Rejection of caste, Buddhism and Jainism
- Included one woman: Andal, the daughter of a Brahman.

The Nayanmars



- A group of 63
- Devotees of Shiva
- From various caste backgrounds including Brahmins and Dalits

TEN AVATARS (INCARNATIONS) OF VISHNU

1. Matsya (fish)
2. Kurma (tortoise)
3. Varaha (boar)
4. Narasimha (man-lion)
5. Vamana (dwarf)
6. Parashurama (warrior)
7. Rama
8. Krishna
9. Buddha
10. Kalki (final incarnation)



The *Bhagavad Gita*

The title of this text translated to: Song of God

Dates back to between the 2BCE-2CE

Basic Plot: A discourse between the god Krishna and the Warrior Arjuna which takes place on the battlefield as a war between two families is about to start.

Arjuna has a crisis of conscience and requires counsel.

Krishna advises him by introducing the three forms of Yoga:

Renunciation

Action

Devotion



Krishna



BG 12:12

Wisdom is better
than practice
and focused mind
is better than wisdom.

Letting go of
the fruit of action
is better than focused mind.

From letting go peace soon comes

Explaining Devotion

BG 4: 9 - 11

So Arjuna,
when one truly knows
my divine
birth and action
leaves the body,
that person does not
go to birth again
But goes to me

Thinking of me,
resorting to me,
many have reached
my being, purified
through the heated discipline
of wisdom,
their greed and fear and anger
fully gone

Son of Pritha
I devote myself
to those
who resort to me;
in just the same way,
people follow
my path
in all places

Signatures of Bhakti

- Disregard for a system of hierarchy
- Acts of Service
- Worship Rituals which can include
 - Recitation
 - Pilgrimage
 - Prayer

Saguna and Nirguna Bhakti

The Saguna bhakti insists on worshiping as a personal god. The worshipers believe in the reincarnation of their loving god and they worship them in the form of human being like Lord Krishna and Lord Rama.

Mirabai is the example of Sagun form of Bhakti who worshiped lord Krishna and sings devotional songs in the praise of his lord. Poets like Tulsidas and Surdas who wrote and sang song in the praise of Lord Rama. These devotees believed in devoting everything for their god whom they love the most

Nirguna Bhakti is believed to be a search of the inner self. It's more philosophical rather than doing rituals and ceremonies. In this concept, god is regarded as an abstract thing. The followers believe that god is present in every bit of thing or humans. So one should not find god in temples or religious places made by human being. That god is present in our heart and we just need to look into the good part of it. So humans must do good services and help others, arrange food for poor people who could not buy it. However, whatever path we humans choose, we must follow the god's steps and follow its preaching



Kaav International Journal of English, Literature and Linguistics

(A Refereed Blind Peer Review Bi-Annual Journal)

Bhakti Movement: Amalgamation of Nirguna and Saguna

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Received: Jan 16, 2019 Revised: Feb 23, 2019; Accepted: Mar 21, 2019



The History of Yoga

Comprehensive, Contemporary, Curious

February-April 2026

Session 3: Body Metaphors and Maps

- Brief introduction to Classical Indian Tantra.
- Subtle Body practices.
- Look at Kashmir Saivism and the body as cosmos.
- Explore chakras system and understand the modern one.
- Examine Sufi models of understanding the body.
- How does western thought understand the body in scholarship?

What Is a Body Map?

- Cosmic principles mapped onto anatomy.
- Often Used in ritual, meditation or theology.
- Common in mysticism.
- Also part of modern thinking - academic and therapeutic.

Definition of Tantra

Tantra emerged as the path that contravenes regular codes determining what is 'religious' and 'ethical' and embraces marginal paths, practices, rituals and philosophies, and worships violent and ecstatic forms. This disregard for norms shatters the hegemony of the elite by sidelining what is considered pure and benevolent, and brings into the stream that which is 'outside' of the norm: the outcaste, the horrific and fearsome, the hidden and neglected.

Sthaneshwar Timalsina
Professor of Religious Studies
San Diego State University

The Pāśupata Sect

- Formed in Gujurat and then extended to Orissa in the East and Tamil Nadu in the South.
- Lakulīśa is believed to be an incarnate of Śiva.
- Followers of this movement were ascetics and Bhakti devotees.
- Their practices included:
 - - Studies under a guru
 - - Smearing the body with ash three times daily
 - - Unpleasant behaviour in public aimed at the transference of negative karma
 - - Seclusion and Intense Meditation
 - - Dwelling in Cremation Grounds



The Pāñcarātra Sect

- Formed around the ideas of the sage Nārāyaṇa, an avatar of Viṣṇu.
- Directly translates to Five Nights referring to a ritual sacrifice
- Their practices included:
 - - Purification of one's microcosmic body through ritual bathing
 - - Nyāsa (consecration) installing the deity of the mantra in one's body
 - - Mental worship (offerings and fire sacrifice)
 - - Physical worship
 - - Japa – fixed no. of repetitions (with or without beads) and visualise the mūrti (body or image) of one's chosen deity

Features of these practices

- Acceptance of polarities: purity/pollution; dharma and adharma; merit and demerit; mokṣa and saṃśāra
- Mastery over material existence – desire (kāma) exists and does not need to be sacrificed but used the service of liberation

Sidenote: the kamasutra is a text on desire NOT finding liberation

Mantra

A ritual formula transmitted from guru to student in order to invoke the presence of a deity.

Language is used as a incarnation and speech is made tangible.

Sound is a force of construction and creation through which the universe can be manifested



Mudra

- Seals which confirm or support utterances or actions.
- They are also used as forms of expression for action and reinforce the presence of a deity.



Nyasa

- Ritual placing or depositing of a Mantra or Mudrā on the body based on the idea that touching allowed for a supernatural power to be transmitted.
- It includes placing a manta or mudrā on the body, uttering it or mentally evoking an image in order to divinise oneself.



Maṇḍala

- Symbolises the cosmos and is laid out in a fixed plan for eg triangles facing up and down to represent the god and goddess.
- In this way, everything represented in the Mandala is representative of the world.
- Matrix for controlling energy flow
- Tool for visualization



Kashmir Saivism Overview

- Non-dual Śaiva philosophy and ritual tradition
- Develops around the 8th to 12th centuries CE
- Teaches Śiva as the ultimate reality - pure, self-reflexive consciousness know as cit
- And the universe as a dynamic manifestation (ābhāsa) of that consciousness.
- Liberation (mokṣa) is achieved not by withdrawal from the world but by recognition (pratyabhijñā) that one's own embodied awareness is identical with Śiva



The Metaphysical Body

- Kashmir Śaivism provides with one of the most sophisticated microcosm–macrocosm principle, where the human body mirrors the entire structure of reality.
- The physical body is seen as a metaphor of the cosmos.
- This becomes central to other tantric and later yogic body maps.
- This is a departure from what we have seen so far as it does treat the body or mind as obstacles.
- Instead, embodied experience is itself the site of liberation.

The Tattvas

- Literal definition is “that-ness” or principle.
- In Kashmir Śaivism, each Tattva is a level of the manifestation of consciousness.
- The Tattvas are grouped into three broad categories:
 1. Pure - highest levels
 2. Pure - Impure - where limitations occur due to illusion and constriction
 3. Impure - individual subjectivity, mind, senses and material elements

The 36 Tattvas or Levels of Reality.

The first five are inseparable aspects of the Supreme. Then, through the cloaking process, Spirit becomes earth and ascends upward toward unity consciousness.

Perfect Union ~ Parama Shiva

One being who is everywhere and nowhere

Shiva 1

Universal "I"
Supreme Consciousness

Shakti 2

Omnipresent Supreme
Creative Power

Absolute Will 3

Limitlessness
Realization that I am this whole universe

Absolute Knowledge 4

Omniscience
Realization that the universe is my own expansion

Absolute Capacity to Act 5

Omnipotence
Realization of own nature
Universe pulses into differentiated form

The Veil of Concealment (Maya) 6

Ignorance of true nature
The path from unification consciousness to differentiated awareness

5 Cloaks That Hide True Nature (the kanchukas)

Entangling and Binding the Differentiated Self To The Forces of Nature

- Limited Capacity to Act 7 ~ Creates Illusion of individuality
- Limited Omniscience 8 ~ Creates limited knowledge
- Limited Attachment 9 ~ Creates desire and a sense of lacking, of not being complete or full
- Limitation of Time 10 ~ Creates the limit of being in only one place within a particular period
- Limitation of Place 11 ~ Creates limitation of not being in all places at once

Individual Consciousness (Purusha) 12

Identity which responds to Nature ~ Masculine Principle

Primordial Nature (Prakriti) 13

The web of creative force ~ Feminine Principle

Intelligence 14

Discernment of right action

3 Internal Organs

Ego 15

Creates the limitations of "I" consciousness

Mind 16

Mental functions by which you create thoughts

5 Organs of Cognition

Eye 19

seeing, creates form

Skin 18

feeling, creates touch

Ear 17

hearing, creates sound

Nose 21
smelling, creates odors

Tongue 20
taste, creates flavors

5 Organs of Action

Feet 24

locomotion

Hands 23

take and give

Mouth 22

speech

Odor 21
abode of smell

Flavor 20
impression of taste

5 Subtle Elements

Appearance 29

Abode of form

Tactility 28
sensation of touch

Sound 27
abode of sound

5 Gross Elements

Fire 34

combustion and transformation

Air 33

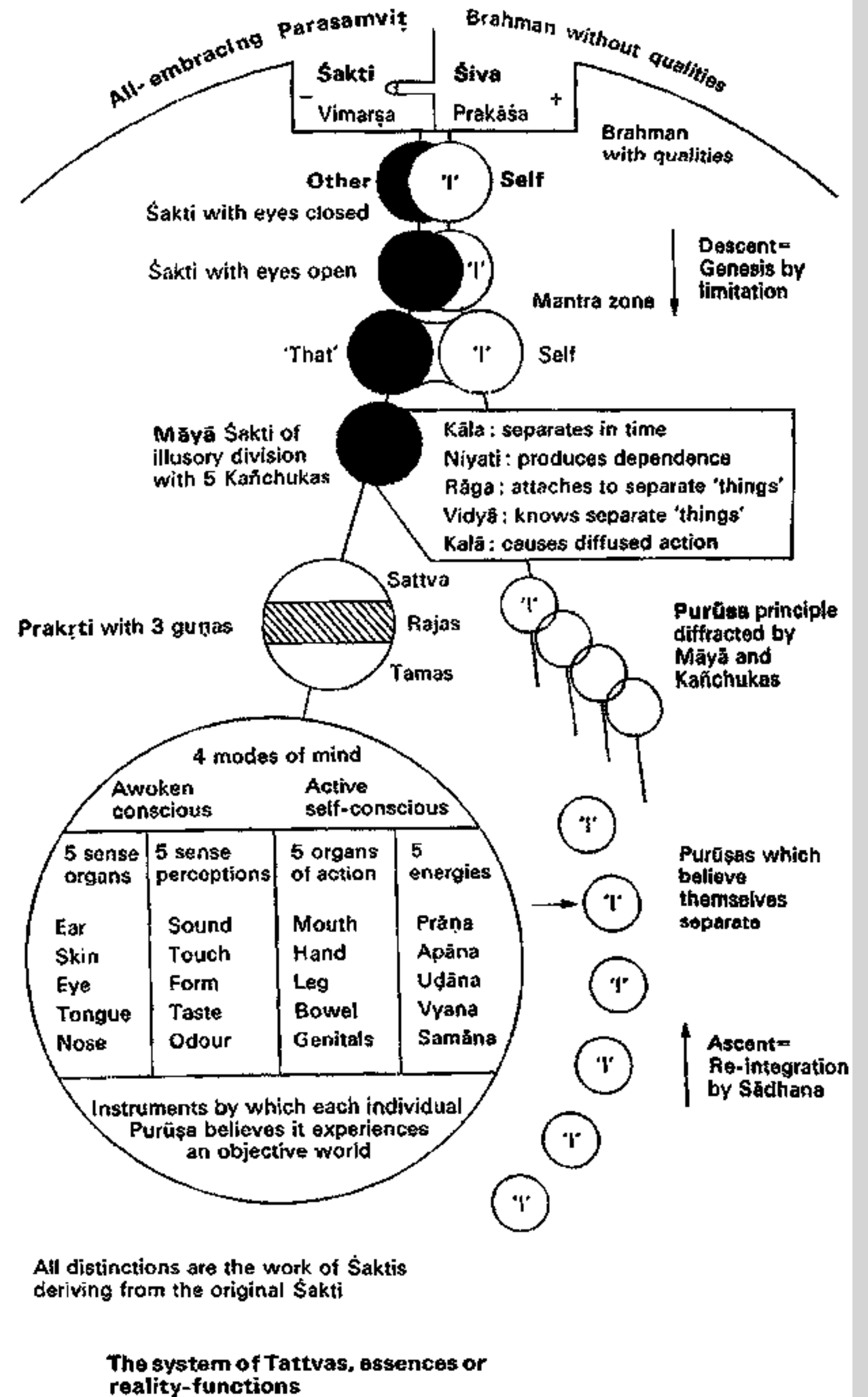
mobility

Space 32

container of the elements

Earth 36
completeness

Water 35
liquidity



How does this system work

- The Tattvas are a map that shows how consciousness can become limited or contracted and then how it unlimits itself.
- The contractions occur at the level of Maya and the five limitations.

The task is to reverse the contraction:

- Move from identification with body (mahābhūtas)
- Through mind and subtle faculties
- Beyond Māyā
- Into direct recognition of oneself as Śiva - infinite consciousness not finite characteristics.
- Therefore this system represents a shift in awareness.

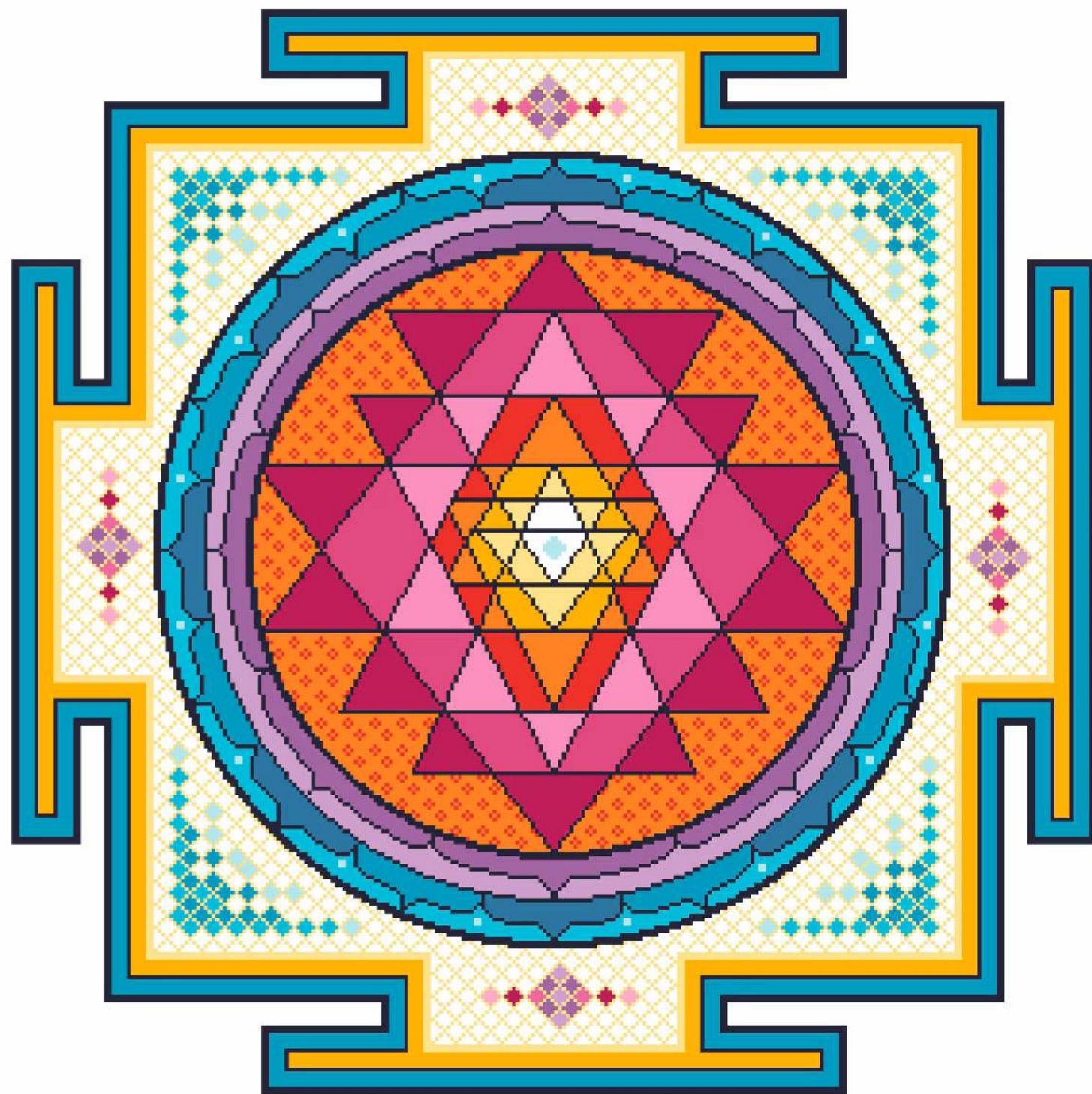
Śiva and Śakti

Two aspects of ultimate reality:

- Śiva is absolute, unbounded awareness
- Śakti is creative expression

The two have to function together. Śakti gives Śiva energy, Śiva grounds Śakti.

Śrī Yantra Structure



Nine interlocking triangles

Bindu as source point

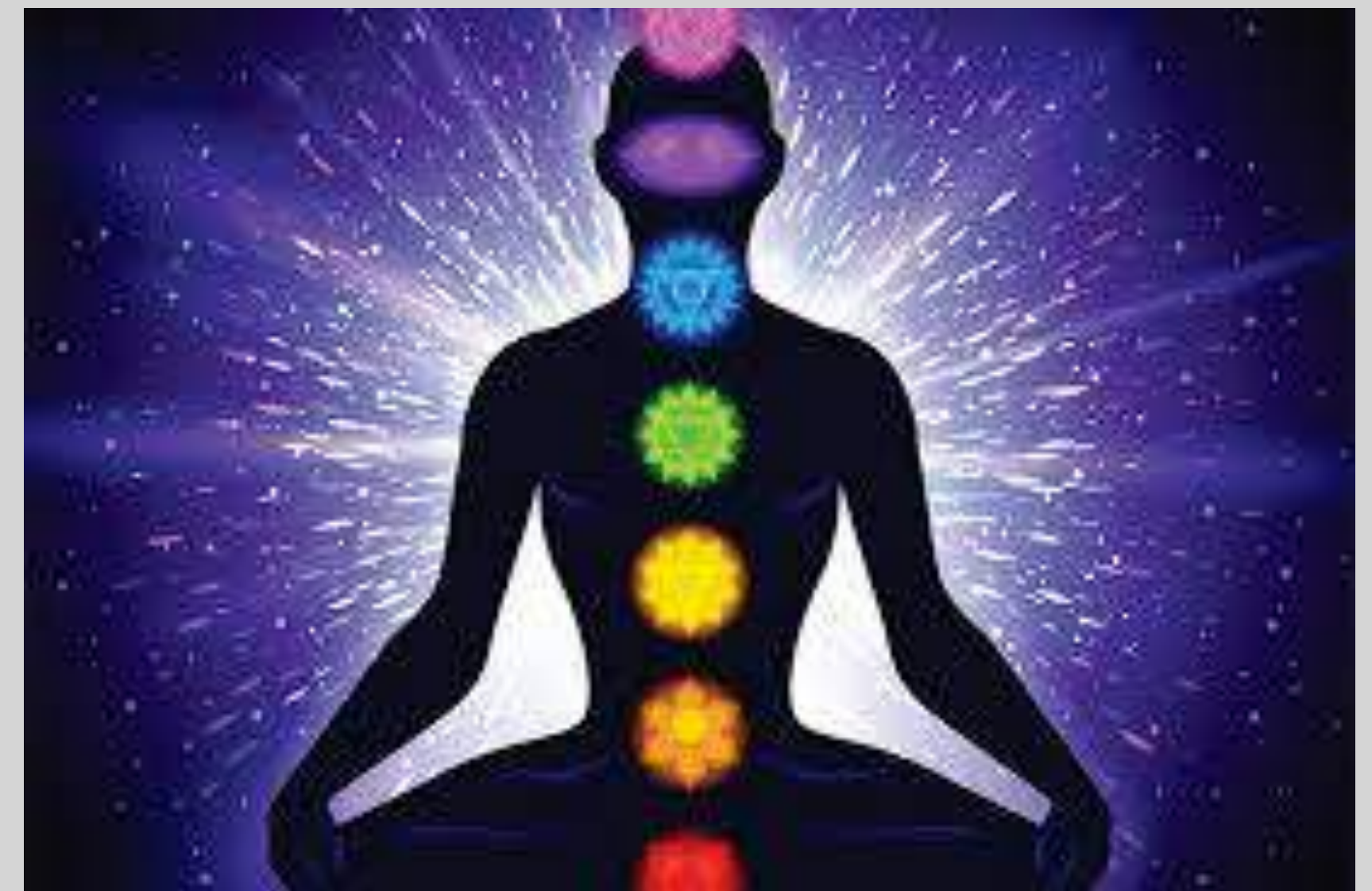
Union of Śiva and Śakti

Practitioner visualizes
body as yantra

- Meditation collapses
cosmos into self
- Body becomes sacred
geometry

Chakra Systems (Classical)

- There is no ONE singular Chakra System in Tantric literature but several, and they vary according to sect.
- The number of Chakras and their location depends on the system being followed.
- There is textual evidence of systems which ranges from five to 28 chakras.
- Of course this means there are not really and not only 7 chakras.



What's the purpose of a Chakra?



Chakras provide a focal point for meditation

And so... they did not necessarily need to be part of the body but can even be outside it.

Consider that perhaps the physical location of the Chakra is not that important.

Example of a system

Kubjikamata Tantra



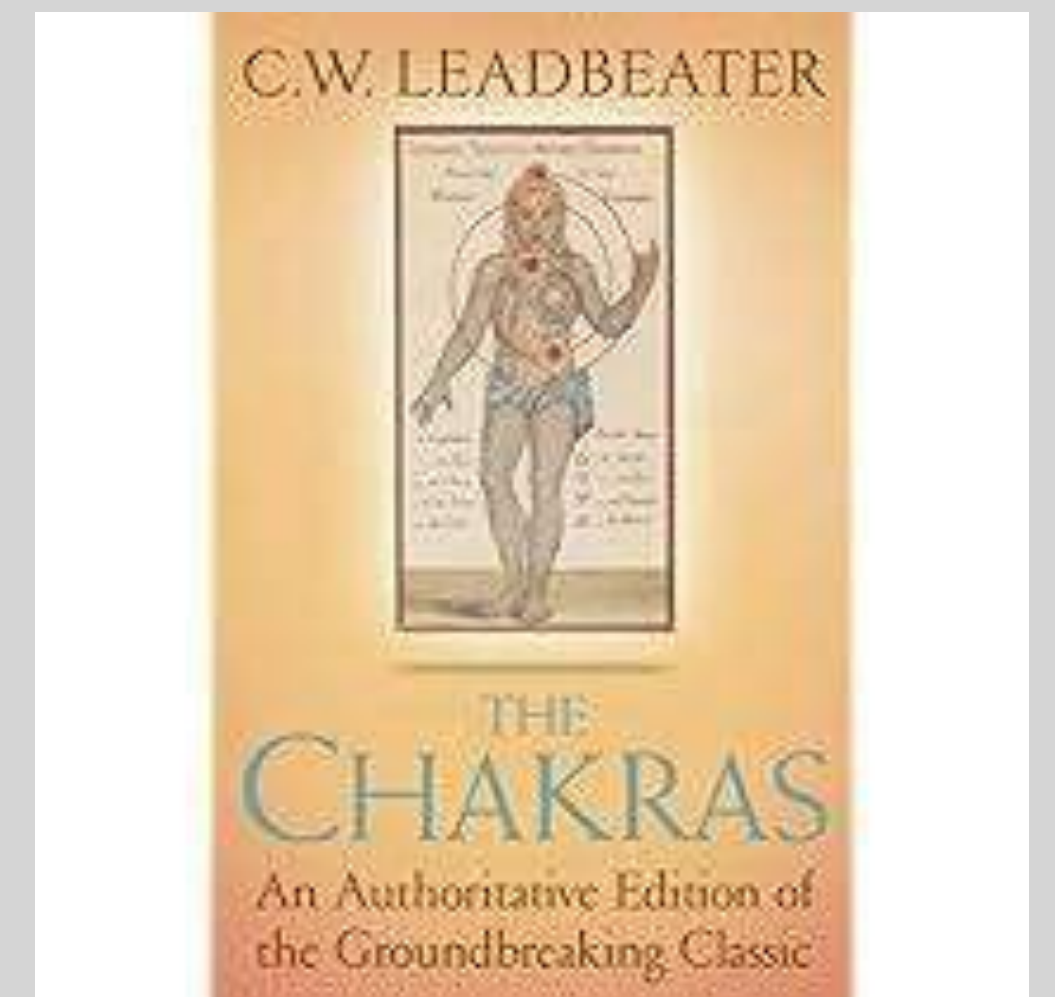
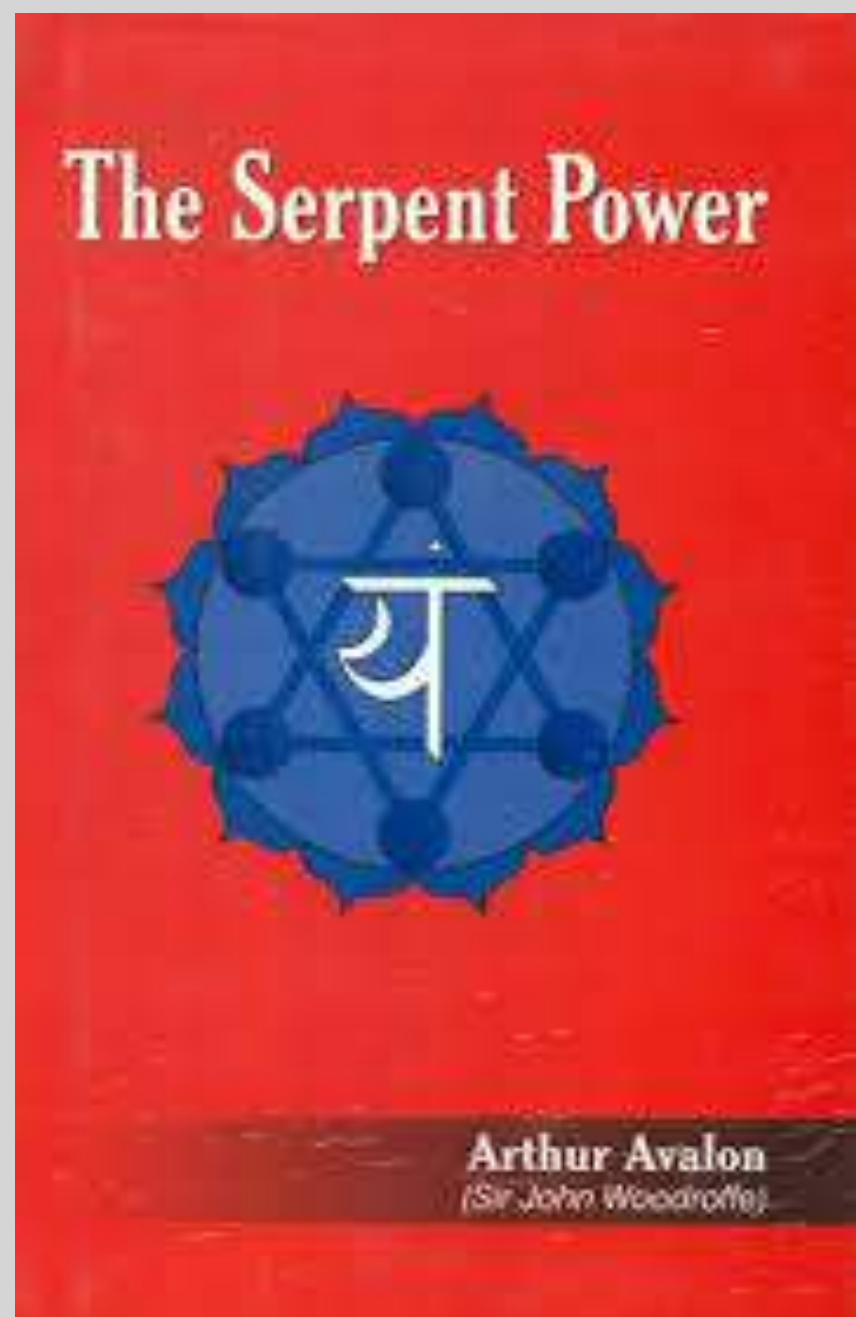
- A 10th century text which details worship of Kubjika - meaning the crooked one - and followed by the Newar people of Nepal.
- This system details five chakras

The Five Chakras of Kubjikāmatatantra

- **Devicakra (Below the navel):** Associated with Earth, this center represents the creation of physical and metaphysical principles, governed by groups of Devis.
- **Duticakra (Above the navel):** Associated with Water, this chakra describes the process of creation, overseen by nine Bhairavas and their eighty-one Dutis (female messengers).
- **Matrcakra (Heart):** Associated with Fire, this center involves the "mothers" (Matrkas).
- **Yoginicakra (Throat):** Associated with Wind/Air, this chakra is linked to the yoginis.
- **Khecaricakra (Head/Crown):** Associated with Space, this is the highest chakra. www.manidvipa.in

What happened from here?

- John Woodroffe, a British judge, came across a translation text on charkas written in 1577 by an author called Pūrṇānanda which detailed six chakras.
- Woodroffe's translation is often called "confusing."
- The theosophist and clairvoyant C.W. Leadbeater then wrote a book called The Chakras, with seven chakras and illustrations.



How did the Seven Chakra System become so popular?



Ken Dychtwald

Published the 1977 article:

“Bodymind and the Evolution to Cosmic Consciousness,” was published in the July-August 1977 issue of *Yoga Journal*

Followed by the book:

Bodymind: A Synthesis of Eastern and Western Approaches to Self-Awareness, Health, and Personal Growth

Which brought together the rainbow colours from colour healing and endocrine glands and human potential movement’s list of chakra qualities.

“According to ancient Hindu literature, each chakra is concerned with very specific aspect of human behaviour and development.

“There are many people who feel that each ascending chakra, with its corresponding qualities of human behaviour, must be unblocked and developed...

“Each chakra corresponds to a particular colour vibration with the lowest chakra projecting the colour red and the next ascending chakra projecting the next colour of the rainbow.”

Anodea Judith

Published *Wheels of Life* in 1987.



which consolidated and hegemonised the Chakra System as we know it today.

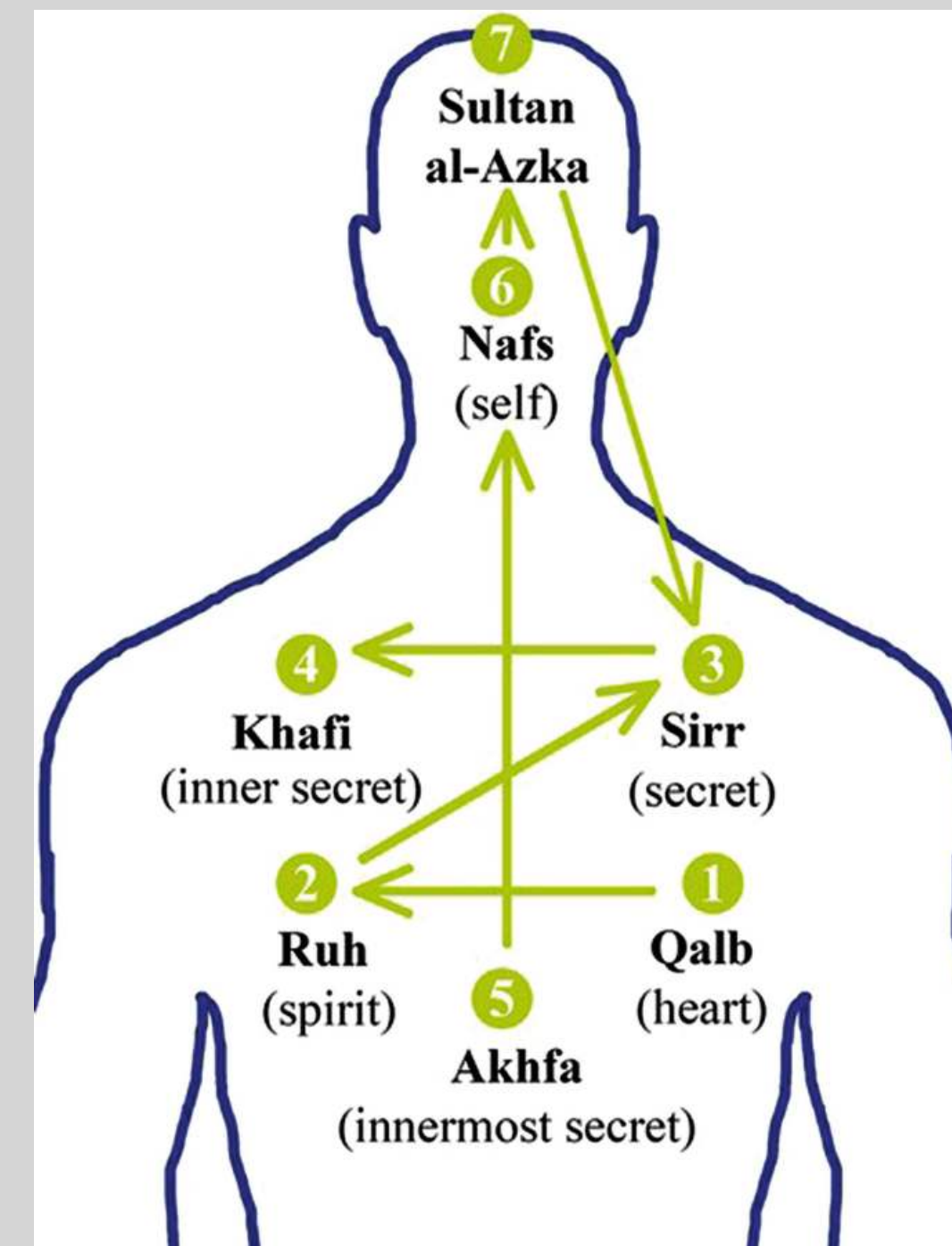
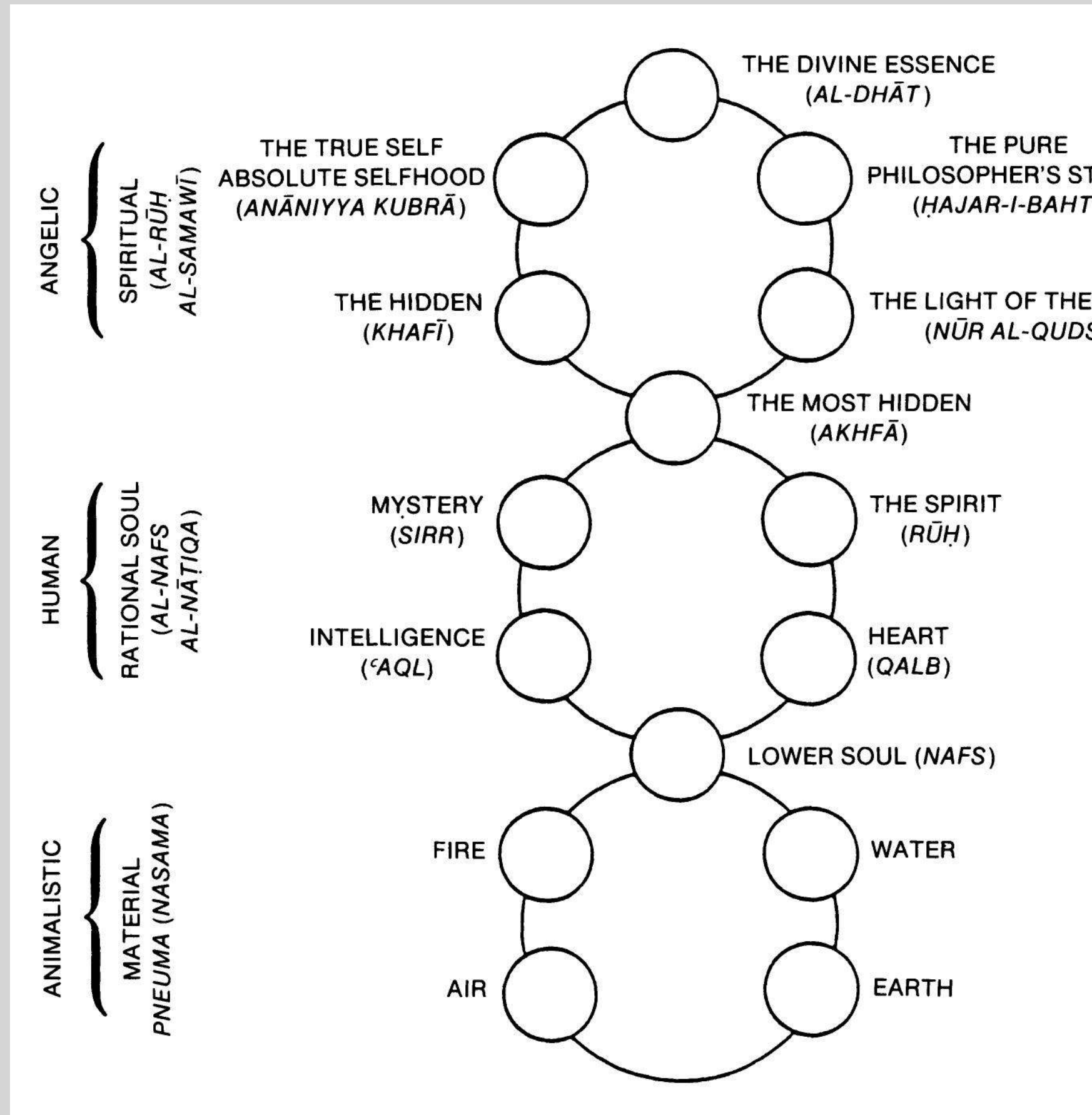
Judith holds a PhD from the Columbia Pacific University, an unaccredited school which was ordered to be shut down in the year 2000.

According to Kurt Leland, a lecturer for the Theosophical Society, what followed in the 1990s, was when the Chakra system went from being an “esoteric yoga teaching to an aspect of popular culture.”

Sufi Subtle Centers (Lata'if)

Although systems vary, a common five-centre model includes:

1. **Qalb (Heart)** – seat of moral and emotional awareness
2. **Rūḥ (Spirit)** – higher spiritual consciousness
3. **Sirr (Secret)** – inward, intuitive knowing
4. **Khafī (Hidden)** – deeper subtle awareness
5. **Akhfā (Most Hidden)** – the most interior divine mystery



Haṭha Yoga



The “force” in Haṭha yoga refers to:

“forcing what normally moves down (i.e. *apāna*, *bindu*, *rajas*) and what is usually dormant (*kuṇḍalinī*) to move upwards”.

Jason Birch, 2011

Terminology

Bindu – semen

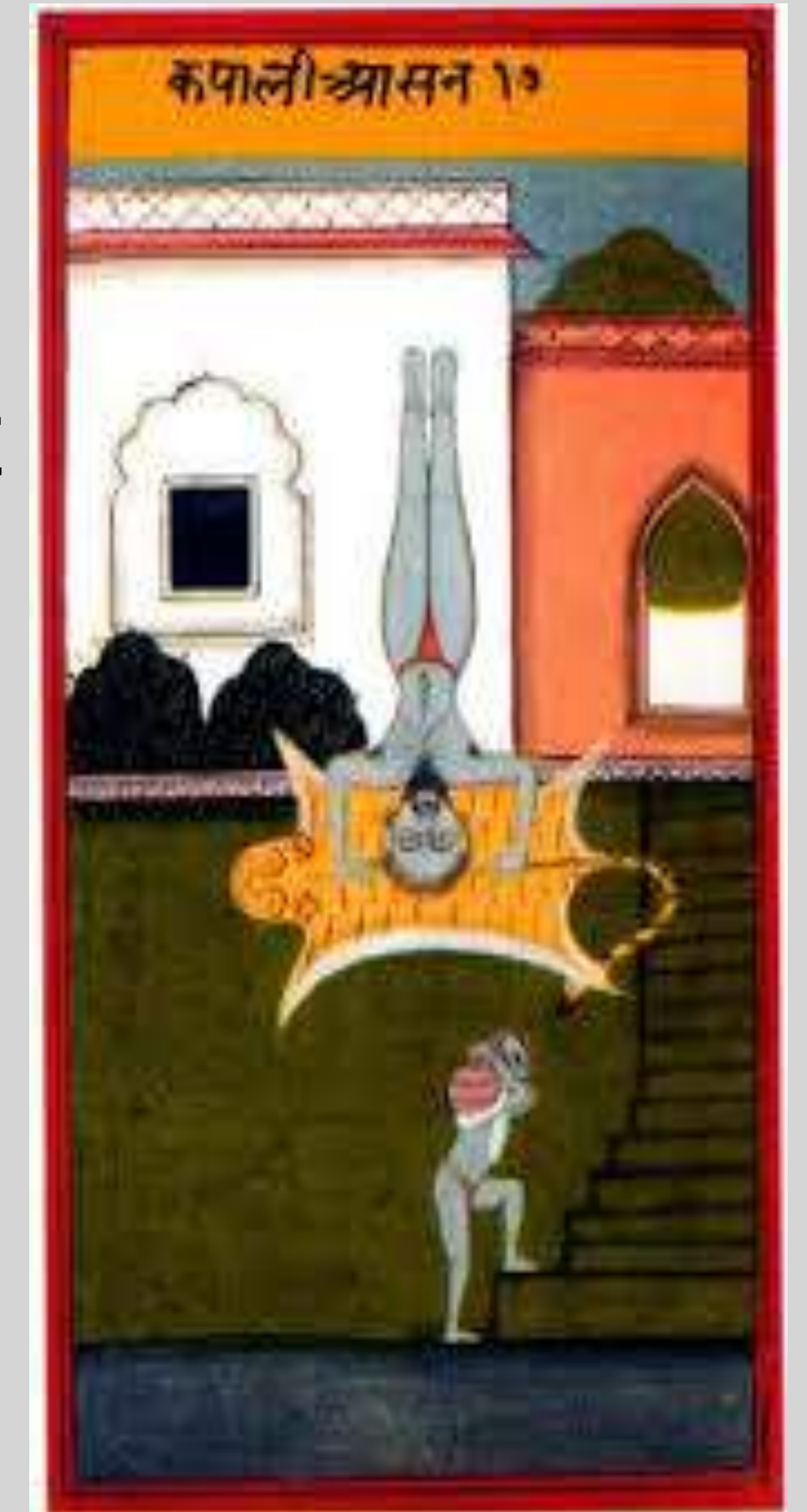
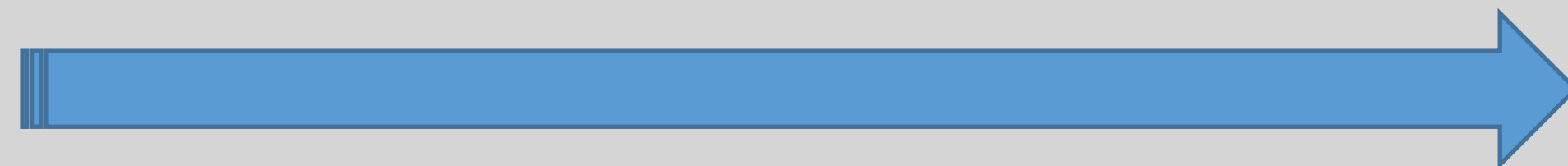
Rajas – the female equivalent of semen, first thought to be menstrual blood but now widely referred to only by Sanskrit word

Why are we talking about these things in *yoga*?

Goals of *Hatha* Yoga

- ❖ To preserve life force
- ❖ To force energy upwards and therefore attain enlightenment
- ❖ To achieve liberation while living - *Jīvanmukti*

How?



Western Academic Embodiment: Maurice Merleau-Ponty



- A French philosopher widely regarded as the father of embodiment studies.
- Sees the body not as an object but as the way in which we experience the world and thus at the centre of knowing.
- Discusses through examples like the Blind Man's Cane (as an extension of the body) or the Phantom Limb (which shows how a body is structured to move in the world).
- Particularly powerful work on the soldier with a brain injury who could perform habitual actions but not actions on instruction, showing what he called 'situated intentionality.'

Western Academic Embodiment: Michel Foucault



- Also a French historian and philosopher.
- Conceptualised the idea of technologies of the self.

*Techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their bodies, thoughts, conduct, and way of being —
in order to transform themselves and attain a particular state (happiness, purity, wisdom, salvation, truth).*

In other words:

- A structured, repeatable method
- That a person used to make oneself into a particular kind of self.

Some examples include:

- Confession
- Stoic Self-Examination (Seneca)
- Sufi Dhikr
- Meditation?

Western (?) Academic Embodiment: Franz Fanon



- A French West Indian philosopher and anti and decolonial thinker.
- Focused on the experience of black people and their embodied experience in the world in *Black Skin, White Masks*.
- Argues that the black body is not simply lived but a product of a racist gaze.
- Examples include being identified by a child as other.



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