

Article

Modern Transformations of *sādhanā* as Art, Study, and Awareness: Religious Experience and Hindu Tantric Practice

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Abstract: “My first raising of the *kuṇḍalinī* was hearing Ma [her teacher] speak about art.” The experience of the awakening of śakti within practitioners in contemporary cultures occurs both in traditional religious settings and within novel circumstances. Traditional situations include direct transmission from a guru (śaktipāta), self-awakening through the practice of *kuṇḍalinī-yoga* or *hāṭhayoga*, and direct acts of grace (*anugraha*) from the goddess or god. There are also novel expressions in hybrid religious-cultural experiences wherein artists, dancers, and musicians describe their arts explicitly in terms of faith/devotion (*śraddhā*, *bhakti*, etc.) and practice (*sādhanā*). They also describe direct experience of grace from the goddess or describe their ostensibly secular teachers as gurus. In contemporary experience, art becomes *sādhanā* and *sādhanā* becomes art. Creativity and artistic expression work as modern transformations of traditional religious experience. This development, while moving away from traditional ritual and practice, does have recognizable grounding within many tantric traditions, especially among the high tantra of the Kashmiri Śaiva exegetes.

Keywords: religious experience; creativity; modern Hinduism; śākta tantra; tantric *sādhanā*; yoga; *kuṇḍalinī*; śakti; arts & religions; Tantric Studies; Śrī Vidyā

1. Introduction

A contemporary artist from Karnataka states, “My first raising of the *kuṇḍalinī* was hearing Ma speak about art.”¹ She is not alone in establishing direct interpretive links between religious experience, aesthetic experience, and the creative arts. Among contemporary tantric practitioners, there is a blurring of boundaries between “religious” experience and aesthetic experiences (including flow, peak, and creative experiences). This blurring is self-consciously consistent with the non-dual Śaiva-Śākta philosophy, and it provides an instructive example of how religious insiders might have some particularly sophisticated—although in some ways secularized or modernized—perspectives on their own experiences. Phrased differently, for these tantric practitioners, religious experience broadens to include a greater range of other “experiences” while simultaneously retaining aspects of its “religious” character. These new articulations typically work with the conceptual building blocks of the older cultural systems. Tantra allows for a wide variety of possible experiences, which are not limited to traditional ritual practices. In this essay, I will argue that art, music, contemporary *yoga*,

¹ Personal communication, Sanchi, India, 17 December 2018; woman from Karnataka, student of Art History and working artist. The “Ma” she was talking about was her art history professor. It is worth noting that “Ma” (“Mother”) is an honorific, with divine overtones both in terms of calling a teacher by this name (spiritual mother) and the devout but also commonly used term for the Goddess (in this case, Lalitā of Śrī Vidyā).

love, and self-reflection can be understood within the paradigm of traditional tantric metaphysics and related traditions of aesthetics. This is important because from an historical perspective, tantric traditions are disappearing in the face of competition with globalizing forces and standardized forms of Hinduism: a kind of *vedānta* and conventional *bhakti* monopoly on what can *count* as Hindu. This is not the end of the story. Tantric self-reflection and creativity may be hiding in plain sight. While it loses much of its ritual and traditionally religious context, it may be reemerging in another form in arts and broadly shared sensibilities about embodied experience of life and living.

Where religious experience has often been relegated to pathology in Western social sciences, contemporary tantric practitioners (Hindus and Hindu-Buddhist inspired Western practitioners of *yoga* and meditation) are not burdened by either the conceptual history of or biases of Western religions or the Western Academy. Scholars of tantric traditions have been analyzing and interpreting the specifically religious and textual side of this issue in recent years.²

Practitioners' understandings of the experiences of Śakti and Śiva within their own lives occurs in traditional religious settings and within novel circumstances. Traditional situations include Śaiva or Śākta devotion (*bhakti*), through being given by one's guru via direct transmission (*śaktipāta*), through the *kuṇḍalinī* raising practices of *haṭhayoga* or similar practices, through *mantras* and *yantras*, or through spontaneous and direct acts of grace (*anugraha*, *prasād*) from the goddess or god. It also takes on novel expressions in hybrid of religious-cultural experiences where artists, dancers, and musicians describe their arts explicitly in terms of faith/devotion (*śraddhā*, *bhakti*, etc.) and practice (*sādhanā*). They also describe direct experience of grace from the goddess or describe their ostensibly secular teachers as gurus. In contemporary experience, art becomes *sādhanā* and *sādhanā* becomes art. Creativity and artistic expression work as modern transformations of traditional religious experience.

These modern embodied forms of tantric religious experience connect in predictable and unusual ways with the past. In the tantric medieval milieu (flourishing between 600–1200 CE, with roots that are older and branches reaching to the present), ascetic inspired liberation *from* the body shifts and transforms into liberation *through* the body, and this was always part of the common paradigm for Tantrism or for the *Mantramārga* and *Mantrayāna*, and especially for the earlier *Kulamārga* that gave them many of their inspirations (the historical or traditional expressions to which we refer with our modern categories of *tantra*, Tantrism, and tantric studies). The *bhuktimukti* equation of liberation through the enjoyment of the senses, or the embodied liberation of the *jīvanmukta*, or other expressions normative to the collected traditions that we call *tantra* provide a coherent basis for both the conventional, unconventional, and unexpected expressions of tantric religious experience in the modern world.

William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James [1902] 1958) argues that human beings—when confronted with a “sense that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand” (p. 383)—seek for a solution (broadly, “liberation” or “salvation” however construed). This search, for James, is the essence of a religious life, and the solution might arise suddenly, gradually, or be enjoyed consistently throughout a life. (ibid.) James summarizes religious experience as the experience of coming to recognize one's true self as a kind of “germinal higher part of himself [or herself]” by becoming

Conscious that his higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.
(p. 384)

² Tantric Studies is emerging as one of the areas in the modern Academy that is moving forward in its critique and reexamination of some older ways of thinking as well as its engagement with contemporary Cognitive Sciences and Neurosciences. For examination of ecstasy, religious experience and mysticism, see McDaniel (2018) and her sources; for Cognitive Sciences and the study of *yoga* and *tantra*, see Hayes (2011); Timalsina (2015); and Hayes and Timalsina's *Religions* Special Issue (Hayes and Timalsina 2017), and the contributors to that volume.

Despite the disciplinary and methodological disagreements and debates (ongoing since the original publication of James' work) among social scientists, philosophers, and scholars of religions as to its limits and critical usefulness, one can recognize a familiar heuristic usefulness in this kind of broad characterization. For James, the human mind was the place this "MORE" connects with the life as lived (what he called the *hither* side of this MORE). He called the *farther* side of this MORE God or the divine and this has a variety of explicit and subtle connections to Tantrism's own self-reflections and articulations, especially in the high *tantra* synthesis of Abhinavagupta and the other Kashmiri Śaiva exegetes.³ We will return to this theme in the conclusion.

1.1. Tantric Aesthetics: Artistic Experience and Religious Experience

A comprehensive exploration of Abhinavagupta's aesthetics is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are certain concepts he develops that apply directly to the kinds of religious and aesthetic experience described by the modern practitioners.⁴ Timalsina (2007) introduces these concepts in the following way:

Classical Indian aesthetics emerge from the interpretation of dance and drama performed primarily in ritual settings. In addition to analysis of the metaphoric and literal dimensions of language, this aesthetic model relies on an understanding of psychological moods that are identified as *rasa*. Select Indian philosophers advance this theory by propounding the doctrine of *dhvani*, by which the highest aesthetic bliss is experienced through suggestion. (p. 135)⁵

Rasa means tasty liquid, flavor, concoction; Indian alchemy, or the mercury used in alchemy; and, in aesthetics it relates to invoking emotions, moods, aesthetic experience, and (what the Western world has also called) having good taste (poetically, aesthetically). According to Lee Siegel, "the taste of an object, the capacity of the taster to taste the taste and enjoy it, the enjoyment, the tasting of the taste. The psychophysiological experience of tasting provided a basis for a theory of aesthetic experience which in turn provided a basis for a systemization of a religious experience." (Siegel 1991, p. 43). In this articulation of aesthetics, the ability of a poet, artist, dancer, or musician to stimulate or evoke emotions (in themselves) and in a sensitive and attentive audience, becomes a direct analogy to the religious awareness (*cid*), or a flash of insight (*pratibhā*), and bliss (*ānanda*) that arise when a perfected mystic expresses (suggests, *dhvani*) the ultimate truth to others. The mystic can through self-awareness (which is an expression of ultimate truth) evoke or point to the inexpressible and inspire an awareness of it in others through various means (*upāya*).

For Abhinavagupta, the true nature of reality (The Supreme Lord, Parameśvara) is the ultimate source of everything, and is imminent as "everything." Acts of profound self-awareness by the perfected religious seeker are ultimately a reflection of that ultimate. (Larson 1976; Timalsina 2007; Lidke 2011, 2016) Profound self-awareness is proof of and a direct expression of Supreme Consciousness knowing itself through itself, as itself. Larson, in his seminal article (Larson 1976) on aesthetic enjoyment (*Rasāsvāda*) and religious realization (*Brahmāsvāda*) expresses the essence of the teaching. He suggests that Abhinavagupta's non-dualism (*advaya*), while different from the non-dualism of *Advaita Vedānta*, ultimately maintains the distinction between the aesthetic enjoyment of embodied

³ Arguably, James' general familiarity with *Advaita Vedānta*, directly and through the American Transcendentalists, (and to a lesser extent, Buddhism) explains in part, the general ease with which this kind of *response to what is conceived as greater-than-human* can accommodate existential problems traditional to India, such delusion (*moha*), ignorance (*avidyā*), uneasiness/affliction (*duḥkha*), etc.; and, resonate with their solutions: *vidyā*, *jñāna*, *mokṣa*, etc.

⁴ For concise introduction to Indian aesthetics in the context of religion, see Schwartz (2004). For Indian aesthetics in general and relative to Abhinavagupta, see Kavi (1934); Masson et al. (1969); Larson (1976); Katz and Sharma (1977); Gnoli (1985); Lidke (2011, 2015, 2016); Timalsina (2007, 2016); Wulff (1984).

⁵ See also Lidke (2015) for more exploration of these concepts.

experience and the ultimate spiritual realization of the disembodied absolute on logical and linguistic grounds. However, he also recognizes the paradox inherent in the distinction:

For Abhinavagupta the ultimate or *parama-śiva* is in its deepest essence totally transcendent—that is to say, *viśottīrṇa* and *anuttara*. It is finally an unfathomable mystery. Yet this mysterious ultimate shines in its clarity and in that shining is the presupposition or ground for all manifestation. Hence the totally transcendent (*viśottīrṇa*) is also the totally immanent (*viśvāmaya*) as universal consciousness (*saṃvid*, *cit*), as universal joy (*ānanda*), and as *prakāśavimarśamaya*—that is to say, made up of “pure undifferentiated light and clarity” (*prakāśa*) and “pure unhindered awareness” (*vimarśa*). (Larson 1976, pp. 379–80)

It is a paradox that the ultimate is totally and completely transcendent *and* totally immanent: these concepts are mutually exclusive in terms of plain logic, but they are *suggestive*. The properly prepared mystic can express these irreconcilable truths so clearly and powerfully that such speech can evoke or kindle religious insight in others. While the concepts may be irreconcilable or incommensurable to ordinary thinking or in literal speech, the activity of various forms of *śakti* (even if in highly aesthetic and grammatical forms) mediate and resolve the paradox for Abhinavagupta such that in the lived world, the *jīvanmukta* abides in this ultimate realization. (ibid.)⁶ In the manifest world, and in reflective experience, the paradox simply fails to matter. The paradox dissolves in the experiences of beings awakened by liberating knowledge.⁷

1.2. Ecstasy and Embodied Forms of Tantric Religious Experience

There is also a less philosophical aspect of Tantrism that comes into play within the contemporary communities. Ecstasy, possession, and yogic trance are pervasive features of tantric religious experience.⁸ In some cases, this ecstatic rapture grabs people directly (or is evoked or enacted through rituals and practices). The varieties of tantric approaches to religious experiences are often called *upāyas* (means, approaches, methods, etc.) that may be thought of as sequential or as alternative methods. There is also a “non-method” (*anupāya*) of direct intuition of the divine consciousness that is sometimes attributed to the most developed religious seekers. It is not my contention that today’s practitioners meet the rarified expertise that Abhinavagupta was talking about, but rather that his aesthetics and his theology opens a social space for the kinds of expressions we find today.

In the sections that follow, the experiences of being Śiva-Śakti are examined from the words and accounts of contemporary practitioners to provide examples of religious experience in modern *śāktatantra* settings. The statements of artists, dancers, musicians are also described, where the act of creativity and other specifically aesthetic experiences are understood as direct experience of the living goddess.⁹

Some technical vocabulary was common to the selected informants surveyed here. Generally, *svādhyāya* was considered a required part of their practice. Sources interpreted this to mean study, especially of scriptures, but there were a variety of additional interpretations. For the more cosmopolitan practitioners, *svādhyāya* meant study and contemplation that was intended to penetrate all aspects of their lives. It was described as a kind of reflection on and awareness of all aspects

⁶ See Larson (1976) note 58.

⁷ For a detailed but accessible expression of the Abhinava’s fluent mixing of the aesthetic and the religious (tantric) in his own poetry, see Muller-Ortega (2000).

⁸ Possession and ecstasy (*āveśa*, *samāveśa*, and in some of its uses, *mudrā*) as well as “powers” (*siddhi*) have a long association with tantric text, cult, and practices. See (Sanderson 1986, p. 169; 1988), throughout; Smith (2006), throughout, especially Part IV; Biernacki (2006); Wallis (2008).

⁹ Field interpreters, informants, and consultants: classical Indian musicians and dancers, artists and painters, an Art Historian, *hathayoga* and meditation practitioners, and Hindu *Śrīvidyā* initiates. This collection of contemporary practitioners includes Hindus of South Asian origin (both in South Asia and the Western world and Western practitioners of Hindu and Hindu-Buddhist fusion traditions. Fieldwork interviews in India & Nepal, 2000, 2001, 2008, 2018. Fieldwork with South Asian and Western practitioners in the USA: ongoing, interviews 1985, 1990–1994; 1996–1999; 2002–2009; 2015–present.

of life as expressions of the divine, and thus worthy of study and contemplation (see Sections 2.2 and 2.3). Alternatively, students in universities and informants living in traditional settings (such as their guru's ashrams) described *svādhyāya* as study of their subject matters or arts, and as study of the scriptures respectively. For practitioners whose study focused on the scriptures, *svādhyāya* was at times described as *japa* (reciting the names of the goddess or chanting aloud or silently the goddess' *mantra*). One informant suggested that repetition of the scriptures was to gain worldly benefits and to prepare a person for a deeper understanding. She also suggested the contemplation and study were habits that developed over time after one's repetition was stable and consistent.

Mantra recitation was typically described as accompanying the ritual worship of the *śrīcakra*. Two practitioners surveyed here suggested that the ritual and meditation should be practiced with *nyāsa* where the sounds are installed or visualized within the human body of the practitioner (Section 2.3). Most practitioners surveyed said that it was only necessary to recite the *śrīvidyā mantra* aloud or silently during worship or contemplation of the deity's *yantra*. Practitioners who were not Śrīvidyā devotees generally described mantra recitation as chanting *bīja* mantras and the *gāyatrī mantra*. Some devotees defined the *śrīvidyā mantra* as the true or superior form of the *gāyatrī mantra*.

Informants widely referred to their practices as *yoga* and *sādhana*. Many employed the term *yoga* to refer to devotion and discipline in general (as used in the *Bhagavad Gītā*). In cases where devotees described their practices as Tantric yoga or kuṇḍalinī yoga, their descriptions included both conventional *haṭha yoga* and *mantra yoga*. One practitioner described himself as first learning kuṇḍalinī yoga in the United States under a teacher trained by Yogi Bhajan (Harbhajan Singh Khalsa). The Rishikesh trained practitioners differed as to their yoga schools and personal gurus, but commonly recommended the study of Saraswati's (1981) book. *Sādhana* was used by informants to refer generally to all their practices. This could refer to their total religious life, or more specifically to their mantra and meditation practices.

Practitioners used the word *ānanda* or the English word "bliss" when describing their experiences of the divine. One practitioner (Section 2.4) used the term *sukha* (bliss) as a synonym for *ānanda* but this connection was unique among those surveyed. This experience of bliss was associated with practices in general and specifically to the cultivation of an awareness of the goddess (or for some the unity of Śiva and Śakti) as pervading all aspects of life and existence.

The conclusions of this essay explore some reflections on the continuity (and diversity) within and across modern practitioners who broadly identify themselves as tantric and who actively seek intense religious experiences via either aesthetic or yogic expressions of the embodied traditions of their practices.

2. Modern Practices and the Adaptability of Tantra

In some cases, practitioners assert that it was their academic or artistic mentors who inspired more specifically and directly "religious experience" than their devotional gurus. They often credit their devotional gurus for teaching them moral purity and good habits (through ritual, *japa*, or *yoga*, etc.), and that this was the foundation of their *sādhana*. Many of these same practical *gurus* tended to express the meaning of what they were doing in the stereotypes of contemporary *advaita vedānta* and through Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. The artists and university students often stated that it was their art and music teachers, and the university professors who truly inspired them.¹⁰ Some of them went so far as to describe this inspiration as devotional bliss.

One university student says:

¹⁰ Interviews: Music students in Varanasi (October 2000; August 2001); Delhi University students (September through December 2001); musicians and *yoga* students in Delhi (August 2008); university students, art students and *yoga* students in Sanchi University, Sanchi (December 2018).

“I do believe that my *guru-śiṣya*, student-teacher [i.e., with my professor of Indian philosophy] relationship and meditative, thought-provoking discussions [about art, *tantra*, *yoga*, philosophy] most certainly qualify as religious experiences. After a ‘session’ with my professor-mentor, I feel as though I am walking on clouds, that if a bus were to hit me, I wouldn’t even feel it. Journeying back to ‘normal life’ is so much easier and relaxed after 4, 5, 6-h discussion.” (Correspondence, August 2017; edited by informant, 15 January 2019)

This characterization has some practical resemblance with Abhinavagupta’s aesthetics, where the artist, teacher, or writer (like the mystic) through channeling the divine consciousness can transfer it to others or evoke it in others through suggestion. Another informant explains:

I got my *mantra* from my family guru, but the grace of the goddess descends and fills me when I am working with my music teacher. He is my true *guruji*. Our family temple’s *guru* is the power of the goddess on earth; he heals the sick. But he never really awakened any profound feelings in me. He is *guruji*. I shouldn’t say this, but it has something to do with my feelings. I feel the goddess moving in the music. I feel a great respect and reverence for my tradition at the temple. I think they are both my experience of the goddess, but the driving passion is in the music. I burn with that fire. It is the *śakti*. (Interview: Geeta, student of music in Delhi, 2008)

Music, art, and dance traditions are part of the broader Hindu religious landscape where their traditions are—even in the modern world—*guru-śiṣya-paramparā* traditions, even if carried out in academies, universities or other modern educational institutions. This characterization needs measured consideration, since such relationships might or might not have any formal initiation or include *gurudakṣiṇā* (gifts or tokens of gratitude) or certain other traditional patterns and expectations.

There is one noticeable distinction. Many of the students or practitioners have directly received *mantras* and initiation from their religious *gurus*. In this context, their practice of repeating *mantras* occurs explicitly in the context of established religious institutions and traditions. Some report that ecstatic or religious bliss (for some) or meditative peace (for others) does arise in them relative to *mantra-japa*. Among modern practitioners, their contemporary *yoga gurus* do give *mantras*, but their arts and sciences teachers typically do not.¹¹

2.1. Normative Constructions of Religious Experience

The developments and stereotypes of contemporary tantric religious experiences have a great variety but have been overwhelmingly influenced by normative concepts (broadly modern, Hindu, and somewhat tantric). One of these is the non-sectarian (*haṭhayoga*) set of modern practices and concepts broadly expressed as *kuṇḍalinī yoga*. Essentially, this is the *yoga* of the fifteen-century *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* (*The Illumination of the Forceful Discipline*) in which postures and other techniques (*āsana*, *mudrā*, *bandha*), breathing exercises (*prāṇāyāma*), and visualization exercises awaken *kuṇḍalinī śakti* that normally sits dormant at the base of the spine or floor of the pelvis. When this *śakti* force is awakened, it rises through the body as heat or energy along the central subtle pathway (*suṣumnā nāḍī*), piercing or enlivening subtle body nexuses or centers (*cakra*, *padma*) until it rests in the heart, head, or exiting the cranial suture and sitting above the head in union with Śiva (*pitḥā*).¹² This modern *kuṇḍalinī yoga* is typically described with interpretive connections of two sorts. This *kuṇḍalinī yoga* is embedded in

¹¹ There were some exceptions of a secular teacher giving *mantras* or recommending *mantra* practice and directing them to religious professionals in their community (such as the nearby temple). I think this suggests avenues for future research. In many of these interviews, I was not guiding the conversations beyond general questions about practice and devotion; and more often, I was asking them questions about *yoga*. It was only later that I saw some of these pseudo-secular patterns reflected in separate informants. I more detailed study of whether ostensibly secular or arts teacher give *mantras* would be a worthwhile project.

¹² Breathing and meditation exercises have an ancient history in India. The modern *yoga* techniques have older roots in *tantra* and were systematized into what became the model of their modern forms by the *gurus* of the Nāth Siddha lineages.

some modern vernacular understandings of the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali, synthesized with modern “serpent power” interpretations of *kuṇḍalinī śakti*. These are in some cases drawn directly from the works of Sir John G. Woodroffe/ Arthur Avalon (1865–1936) and some nineteenth to early twentieth century Indian gurus, but often via their local Indian gurus. In other cases, practitioners reference the World Wide Web as their source for *kuṇḍalinī yoga* and *yantra* practices. Whatever the sources, the *kuṇḍalinī* concepts and generalizations are consistently modern and often using the language of empirical science. Śrī Vidyā and Siddhayoga practitioners differ somewhat from this trend, but not significantly.¹³ Some informants were aware of the field of contemporary Tantric Studies; among them the normative stereotyping was less pronounced, but the empirical science frameworks were generally stable and consistently represented. Some were quick to differentiate what they did from what they called Neo-Tantra or Western *Tantra* with New Age sensibilities, although they did not explicitly enumerate the differences.

The practitioners represented in this study all received their *yoga* training in India or Nepal: some in the competitive markets in and around Rishikesh, but others in various locations from Varanasi to Madurai (to locations all over India and Nepal). Even though their personal *gurus* emphasized a variety of practices from laughing, to hugging, devotional singing and recitations, to repeating *mantras*, their representations of *kuṇḍalinī* and *Śaktipāt(a)* were generally of the conventional, widely publicized and shared type. Many described a variety of mystical and visionary experiences. Western converts described these as mild, dreamlike, and generally pleasant: “It was like a dream, but I was awake,” but often accompanied by deep, existential feelings and meaning. Traditional Hindus described both visions and dreams as often having oracular power: they could predict the future or provide a sign to them about various decisions they needed to make.

There was a strong and stereotypical *bhakti* devotionism common to almost all informants. This *bhakti* sometimes crossed sectarian lines. For example, one informant identified her most important teachers as Girināth and Śivānandaji (Śaivas) and she had spent significant pilgrimage travel and retreats in the Himalayan foothills but described the central teaching of all her teachers as emphasizing love of Lord Kṛṣṇa, while also requiring (the expected) Śiva or Durga Pūjā at specific times or seasons. (Shanta, a Pilgrim, personal communication, Rishikesh, 18 July 2008).

2.2. Artists, Musicians, Dancers, Writers and Their Aestheticized Expressions of Religious Experience

Despite normative Hindu expressions of practice and devotion, several practitioners specifically linked their artistic practices and performance to various forms of blissful experience that they called *kuṇḍalinī* experience. Unlike the broadly shared modern configurations of *yoga* (*cakras*, ascent of the power, etc.), they tended to express this power as the descent of the grace of goddess more than the rise of *kuṇḍalinī*. This was pronounced among musicians and dancers, where they reported “ecstasy,” “being filled up,” “losing my sense of time and self” or other forms of significant blissful experience that they call *kuṇḍalinī śakti*.

Several performers repeated similar characterizations. One of them expressed this as: “when I perform, the goddess descends and pierces my *cakras* and enters my heart, where I am filled with

See White (1996, p. 218ff, and throughout); Mallinson (2011, pp. 14–15); Mallinson and Singleton (2017, throughout, especially, p. 171ff); Hatley (2016).

¹³ These practitioners did refer to the *Yoginīhr̥daya* and the *Vāmakesvaratantra* (which combines the *Yoginīhr̥daya* and the *Nityāśoḍaśīkārnava*) and described their practices as illuminated in the *Tantrāloka* and other texts by Abhinavagupta and his interpreters. However, in general conversation, their descriptions of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* tend to follow the more contemporary and generic forms widely held in India and abroad. It is in their discussions of *mantra yoga* and their meditations on Lalitā in the form of her *yantra*, the *Śrīcakra*, that that these practitioners most distinguished themselves (not in terms of their descriptions of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*). Other practitioners and informants suggested a wide range of texts as the object of study, contemplation, or repetition. Several texts were indicated: *Lalitopākhyāna*, *Lalitātriśati*, *Lalitāsahasranāma*. The more cosmopolitan informants also listed the *Tripurā Upaniṣad*, Bhāskararāya’s commentaries on the Lalitā texts, a variety of Classical *Upaniṣads*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. For the contexts and uses of these texts in Śrī Vidyā, see Brooks (1992) and Lidke (2017).

bliss.” These experiences were sometimes described as trance or flow experiences. More than one practitioner was quick to differentiate this flow of the goddess into them as not the same as—what they considered “lower class” or “village”—the loss of consciousness common to possession-trance or mediums. Many of these characterizations were pejorative and dismissive of traditions that they thought of as lesser or inferior to their aesthetic-creative expressions. Although the connection was unknown to the informants, these kinds of accounts bear striking similarities to the trance and direct experience of the divine in Medieval Kashmir, but of the more *tantra* of the Right for the Trika (although typically non-dualistic) in contrast to the *Kaula*, where the “possession” by the god/goddess was required but generally tame. (Sanderson 1986, p. 169) It does not have to include loss of awareness, cataleptic feint, or radical altered states of consciousness. Like the Trika adepts, there is ecstasy and possession by Śiva-Śakti in performance, music, art, dance, and it exhibited an intensity that they described specifically as blissful and extraordinary but framed and expressed in the disciplines of their arts. Despite the mixture of these interpretations with various other modern symbols and models and a common reliance on devotional and *vedānta* modes of expression, these accounts have a strikingly tantric character. This is sometimes expressed as self-consciously tantric and in terms of traditional aesthetic categories wherein the flow of emotion is articulated as *rasa*. (See Lidke 2015).

One professional *yoga* teacher and writer from Los Angeles articulated this creative modern (but aware of tradition) re-envisioning of the traditional practice:

Getting lost, or perhaps found, in meditative experience is commonly found among those who practice and immerse themselves in creation. This creation is found in the arts (i.e., painting, sculpting, playing an instrument, writing), in athleticism (i.e., yoga, rock climbing, serious athletes), in sex and birth, and in *svādhyāya* which can encompass all of these things and more (i.e., school and lecture halls, one-on-one interactions with teachers or mentors, formal meditation practices, reading). Through creation one literally acts as and therefore becomes God: “Haṃsa” (I am), “I am Śiva”, “I am Śakti”. In these acts of creation, one exchanges oneself (their time, energy, knowledge, creativity, and even emotional stability) for an expansion of themselves. This expansion can derive from the growth that comes from baring oneself emotionally to create a piece of art, from disciplining one’s body to levels of extremity to reach that next peak or to break a record, from letting go of emotional and physical barriers to engage in passionate and meaningful sex, and from opening the mind to allow new information to flow in. While these are not traditional religious experiences, this does not take away from their importance in our modern-day world where more and more people are straying away from religion and finding expansion and growth in their own unique spiritual practices. Tantra stemmed from this same concept, straying away from the orthodox Brahmanical Vedantic practices and beliefs to create their own spiritual path which consisted of, at the time, highly unorthodox and profane practices. While these expressions of art, physical feats, and self-knowledge may not usually (though sometimes) have the same unorthodox connotations as tantra has had, they do stray far from the typical archetypes of religious practice and experience. Rather than search for an external answer or God, these processes of creation assert the concept that God is not without but within. (Original interviews, April 2017; Revised by the informant, personal communication, 28 January 2019)

Here we see a very modern set of sensibilities, but another self-conscious connection of her experience to a tantric paradigm. This is also consistent with the non-dual Trika in its awareness of self-knowledge is a path to God-knowledge. She connects traditional *yoga*, activities that are more mundane, art, and study to all result in awareness the Śiva and Śakti are found within oneself. This reflects both James classic definition and the sentiments of Abhinavagupta.

2.3. Signs of the Goddess and a New Kind of Secrecy

Two life-long practitioners of Śrī Vidyā expressed a deeply informed (but I think essentially modern) style of practice. Both report significant ecstatic experiences over the many years of their practices.

One who performed a complex set of regular rituals, *yoga* and meditations stated:

[What] is most important is that you find a teacher with whom you can regularly talk and even practice meditation or *yoga* if that is possible. It is most important that a bond, a genuine love and devotion develop between you and the teacher you work with. That is more important than whatever the *mantra* might be. It is in that intensity of the connection between you and your teacher(s) that the grace of the goddess will descend. *Mantras* invite the goddess to descend, but a bond with a teacher is part of what makes it “real” for you.

(informant asked for anonymity, 2018)

Another (who was also a musician) related a relaxing of his practice after many years of consistent and highly disciplined work:

I don't have a consistent practice. I did for years, but then comes a time when you leave all the details behind. You understand. Then it just being aware of your I-consciousness. Your Śiva-nature. It is almost like the Buddhist insight or mindfulness practices. Your awareness of ‘I am Śiva. I am Śiva. I am Śiva’ becomes stable and fixed. It never leaves you. Then when you do anything with that awareness, then you are filled with calmness and clarity. Good things can be enjoyed. Bad things can be endured. Because good and bad, it is just the unfolding dance of Śiva-Śakti. (edited compilation of interviews 2016–2018; informant edited statements and asked for anonymity, 2018)

Both these informants were steeped in the intricacies of traditional, living tantric traditions. For them the practices and the theology were normal, even ordinary. In both cases, the contemplation of Abhinavagupta and other traditional Sanskrit philosophical texts or scriptures, family devotional practices, and a living embodied reflective Śiva-awareness were the main and consistent pattern of their experiences. It was not fully expressed, but the pattern suggested that the more ecstatic experiences were a kind of pedagogy or training that would provide the stable basis for a deeply embodied awareness. With that stable foundation established after years of more rigorous disciplines, no specific practices or expressions of experiences were better than any other (and this is despite the context of their lives being full of normal ritual obligations and regular experiences of religious practice and community). Neither claimed to be saints or *siddhas*, but their deeply reflective attitudes did resonate with both the need for practices (*upāya*) and a stage of awareness in which the practices become unnecessary (*anupāya*).¹⁴ Both men desired privacy. And, although they were not completely secretive about their practices, they were humble and had a strong desire that their friends and neighbors not come looking for advice or to treat them as *gurus*.

These accounts resonated with practitioners interviewed in Rishikesh in 2008. On several occasions, unrelated practitioners in Rishikesh suggested Saraswati's (1981) book on Tantric Yoga. Many also recommended various works of South Asian and Western scholarship. They repeated the need for secrecy, despite describing many of the secrets as included in books about *tantra*. The general theme was that experiencing the grace of the Śiva-Śakti could be readily accessed through reading, devotion, *yoga*, or powerful direct transmissions of grace through love. It was paradoxical: one needed to do serious work to experience the bliss of the divine, or just let it arise naturally through a kind of reflected awareness. This corresponds to James and Abhinavagupta in that *tantra* for them most centrally involved a kind of mystical reflection and awareness. Practices were fundamentally important, but the direct personal awareness of the divine was the true core of the practice.

¹⁴ See also Lidke (2005).

2.4. Unconventional Expressions of Religious Experience

A few experiences in the accounts stand out as having some idiosyncratic elements. One goddess devotee¹⁵ described a variety of traditional ritual practices, Śrī Vidyā initiation, and he was a well read and well-travelled middle-aged devotee. He described spontaneous religious experience in the following way:

In meditation I experienced the curious sensation of a sapling emerging from and growing through the top of my head like a plant bursting through soil. The experience was profound and unusual. I experienced such a strong physical sensation that I felt the need to break my posture and meditation and to touch the top of my head occasionally to feel if the stem were there. I'm not sure I would describe it as a vision—I suppose it was—but at the time it felt more like a dream and a feeling. I did not see it as a vision or hallucination. It felt as if the sapling grew into a tree. I thought the tree had blue buds or possibly leaves. I've dreamt the experience occasionally afterwards, and I think that those dreams have affected my memory of the original event. The dreams and subsequent memories or visualizations—just thinking about it in a focused way, and not necessarily while meditating—the feeling of tingling and hollowness return. It was accompanied by of calm, joy, and awareness. When I think of it afterward and get that feeling it works as a prompt or reminder to be aware and mindful of my breathing, emotional states, and a deep thankfulness to the goddess for working within me and my life. (Personal communication, Delhi, 2001)

This same practitioner generally identified strong trance experiences in systematic *yoga* and visualization meditation practice. He described his practice as *mantra yoga* and *yantra pūjā*. He described several direct experiences of the goddess but added that they were not from systematic *yoga-cakra* practices. Instead he reported experiences relative to his heart, throat, forehead and top of his head/above his head with visionary components or feelings. He commented as an aside that he was having difficulties with his throat and was focusing his practice and devotion to remedy that.

He additionally reported meditation states that included both profound heaviness or sinking, as well as—relative to different practices—lightness or flying. He described all these as uncanny and generally unexplainable beyond gifts of the goddess: he did not consider them essential to his practice but instead “signs” of progress and deepening awareness. He generally characterized the experiences as therapeutic, but also included that they were experiences toward which he consciously cultivated non-attachment. “You cannot *do* anything with such experiences; they do not have a purpose. They are like dreams that come true: there is no way to tell the difference between them and meaningless dreams. They are the expressions of the unfolding of one's practice, they do not have a use. As, I said before, they are signs of progress. I do not ignore them or trivialize them, but I do not obsess over them either.” (Interview, Delhi, 2001).

The light and heavy states associated with yogic practices were reported by other practitioners as well. One woman stated:

During the practice I felt my upper body (from the ribcage up) begin to descend downward, I felt so very heavy, but my lower body (from solar plexus down) felt like it was flying, so very airy. This seems counterintuitive (because the grounding chakras are the lower ones and the uplifting ones are the higher ones). It's likely I am thinking too much into it. I found the whole thing puzzling. (Correspondence, 2016)

¹⁵ This practitioner lived in Delhi during 2001 when I first interviewed him. He was an engineer, and originally from Kerala. My interviews did not capture a full biography, but it was clear from his accounts that he had made pilgrimages to Varanasi and made repeated pilgrimage to the Char Dhams and multiple Khumb Melas. This practitioner did not elaborate on the full range of his practices, but he did recite and read Sanskrit, and his flat included images or *yantras* of The Ten Mahāvidyās, Sarasvatī, Gaṇeśa, Lakṣmī, and multiple forms of Śiva.

Another practitioner expressed spontaneous *kuṇḍalinī* experiences as blissful, but not like what she had read about or heard others describe.

Bliss. I sought out other teachers, both pandits and practitioners. Some older, more experienced, or more knowledgeable than my teacher. None of them provoked the intensity and presence of the goddess in the same way. Our practice, meditations, and even talking about *yoga dharm* or *tantra-mantra-yantra* were emotionally intense. These experiences gave a direct bliss. It's hard to explain. It is like being in love, but not quite like that. It certainly was an awakening in my sacral center that moved back and forth up and down my spine. It was vague, and I never learned any practices to cultivate it. (Suneela, speaking about when she was a university student; Correspondence 2018, based on interviews in Delhi, 2008)

In these accounts *kuṇḍalinī śakti* moves when true and meaningful connections are established: with the divine, with the self, or with a teacher. Coming to recognize themselves in their visionary experiences or in meaningful intense emotional connections with others is essential for these practitioners.

2.5. Traumatic Yogic Experiences

One informant reported disagreeable experiences from *yoga* practices. He reported gradual, direct *kuṇḍalinī* experiences, of ascent and descent through nine cakras. Initially he declined to report them as a matter of private experience. He did say that it caused him great suffering that was later replaced by joy. He reported seeking help from his Indian guru and from a Western *kuṇḍalinī* support group. He additionally reported that these were partly produced by him continuing to do practices that his *guru* had told him to discontinue. He said that he had gone to other *yoga* teachers and failed, then succeeded, and then suffered and ultimately returned to his original *guru*. He strongly insisted that his *guru* gives him the same ecstatic experience through *śaktipāt*, and that people should get *kuṇḍalinī* from their teachers because that is the only safe way to do it. In a later set of interviews, he described some of his experiences, and these followed the conventional descriptions of *kuṇḍalinī* gone wrong that can be found in Gopi Krishna or more recent *kuṇḍalinī* trauma literature.¹⁶ He described *kuṇḍalinī* practice as likely to produce dissociative states and trauma. He explicitly wished that he had never tried the practices.

This contrasts with the unusual and unsystematic rising of bliss in the previous accounts. In this case, the practitioner was trying to provoke a mystical experience through embodied practice. Although he had experiences, he felt they were destructive. His return to peacefulness was through devotion to his *guru*. This corresponds to the non-systematic accounts in as much as it involves love and coming to recognize himself and his needs more clearly.

2.6. The Two Poles of Practice: Scientific Descriptions and Ascetic Accounts

Field interviews with some practitioners who identified themselves as experts (in this group, these informants often did identify themselves as *yogis* but generally avoided the term *guru*) provided a noticeable control group. For practitioners who explained their practice primarily in Western Psychological terms or scientific terms, there were only rare references to devotion, theism, or supernatural

¹⁶ Over the several decades, I have recorded accounts of traumatic *kuṇḍalinī* experiences among South Asian Hindus and Western Hindu and Buddhist converts. These accounts are beyond the scope of this argument, but they demonstrate a general pattern of widespread and broadly inconsistent levels of training and oversight among *kuṇḍalinī* training and practice. Alternatively, the more ritualistic (*mantra-yantra*) orientations to these practices render fewer accounts of this sort, while the *guru* driven and international *yoga* movements include higher amounts. This may be a false impression, since arguably there may be many more people participating in these practices among the latter groups than the former. Additionally, these accounts are balanced by both conventional and idiosyncratic accounts of the activations of the bodily Śakti(s) that are reported as wholesome or empowering. For a broader perspective of this and related topics, see Tomas Rocha's article (Rocha 2014) on Willoughby Britton's Dark Night project, and related topics included in the Britton lab's "Meditation Safety Toolbox" (Britton Lab 2019) for the "First, Do No Harm" Meditation Safety Training. In addition to Britton, for discussions of trauma directly linked to *kuṇḍalinī*, see White (1990) and Sannella (1987).

agency. There were exceptions to this pattern. A practitioner specifically trained in medicine, psychology, holistic medicine, traditional *Āyurveda* explained tantric experiences as:

Meditation and the various states of consciousness affect muscles, bones, glandular secretions, the gross bodily functions. Thoughts and feelings must be attuned to the inner realm of the subtle body. The subtle body is a cosmic pattern that was worked out by the ancient Vedic tradition. This pattern can be mapped by modern neuroscience. Anatomy and subtle body are connected like a network. [He went on to describe extensive body *yoga* and breathing exercises] . . . We go through the flesh to the subtle body. The longer we practice, the subtler our practice becomes. It opens like a vast space. The ascension of *kuṇḍalinī*—the breath or life force—moves in any direction. It is not physical. Consciousness is bound to our body, but there is a greater cosmic consciousness that is beyond. The Rishis of the Vedas knew these truths. (Rishikesh 2008)

The modern expressions of *haṭhayoga* did have the striking characteristic of having several agnostic or non-theistic accounts. These accounts heavily emphasized the embodied nature of religious experiences, often in scientific or psychological terms. Despite ecstatic, paranormal, and visionary experiences, the explanations of their experiences are expressed in scientific or medical terms. However, in the context of participant-observer dialogue, if I were to express this sentiment these same practitioners could (while returning to scientific terms consistently and often quickly) can translate those models into *advaita vedānta* terms, via Trika concepts, or even through interpreting the *Bhagavad Gītā*. For this reason, I would be hesitant about too strongly emphasizing that accounts of highly educated and heavily Westernized Hindus as being exclusively body focused (and agnostic or non-theistic) or as needing no philosophical or theological grounding or underpinning. In some cases, these accounts seemed very cosmopolitan and like the discourses of internationalized movements of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Nevertheless, they seem to be on the pole farthest away from the traditional theological landscape.

Alternatively, on the opposite pole are ascetics and the Aghoris. Through historical and cultural developments their practices seem to be straightforwardly connected via Nāths, and other *Kāpālika*-inspired traditions (Hindu or Buddhist), back to the very *kula/kaula* roots of the shared traditions on the other pole. Where their theology and expression—although often couched in the “practice as a kind of knowledge” (*jñāna*) pattern of the high tantric synthesis—represent an opposite pole as a kind of recognizable modern expression of medieval tantric values and meanings, life and practice (with understandable developments and shifts).¹⁷ The Aghoris also engaged in conventional *bhakti* descriptions and sang devotional songs.

The two “pole” groups (the scientists and the Aghoris) are mostly not the focus of the explorations in this essay. This is because they did not really speak about their experiences in terms of “religious experience”; instead, they used medical, psychological or scientific paradigms. They tended predominantly to speak of a great depth and commitment to practice, but their explanations of experiences tended to deemphasize ecstatic bliss and god-consciousness (or similar phenomena). Their practices more closely resembled descriptions from the mindfulness movement and New Age *yoga* rather than tantric practice (and what some have called Neo-Tantra). The Aghoris were overwhelmingly tantric and relatively straightforward. Since these ascetics have been explored elsewhere, this essay has primarily focused on the middle ground between radically modernized-scientific responses and traditional ascetic expressions of tantric practice and experience.

¹⁷ For selected scholarship that explores the concepts related to knowledge (*jñāna*) becoming the focus of all forms of practice, and how concepts and practices developed or changed over time, see Sanderson, especially (Sanderson 1995) but also throughout his many works (Sanderson 1985, 1986, 1988, 2009), White, especially (White 1998), but also (White 1996, 2000, 2003), Padoux (1990, 2017).

The main subjects for this essay are all the people in the middle. For them, the recognition of “I am Śiva” is expressed in both their conventional tantric, urban, educated practices, and in alternative approaches. In modern South Asia, non-dualism extends so far as to include their university and artistic mentors as guides, and their aesthetic practices as a direct access to the descending grace of the goddess.

3. Conclusions

Religious experience for these modern practitioners who identify themselves as *tāntrikas* shows considerable variety. In some cases, experience of the divine is tied to property and good fortune (material success). In others, there is a strong emphasis on knowledge and insight (awareness and reflection), that was deemed existentially meaningful and ultimately freeing. In others still, it is creativity, artistic expression, and experiential bliss that moves them: a kind of living in the flowing power of the goddess. The scientists and medical professions described therapeutic models, and tied their practices to wellness, longevity, and happiness. Returning to James’ definition of religion, the knowledge-insight seekers would match most closely with his concepts, but that would do a disservice to many of the other practitioners. There was an earnestness and focus to many of these practitioners and a genuine joy that suggests that Abhinavagupta’s concepts (or his interpreters’) match better than James, although the differences are subtle in some cases.

Consider the standard *advaita vedānta* analogy of the snake and the rope, where appearance or illusion (*māyā*) of manifest reality (the snake) disappears in the clear light of day (understanding). One sees that the illusion (snake) is not real (it is only a rope). The only true reality is the ultimate void beyond all qualities or forms (*brahman*, or *nirguṇa brahman*). Despite its non-dual theology, the analogy does not work for the modern practitioners or for medieval high *tantra*. All the paths (Right, Left, ritual, *mantra*, *yoga*, aesthetic, etc.) ultimately lead to the same place within the consciousness of the practitioner: conscious recognition and embodiment of ultimate consciousness, often phrased as “I am Śiva.” For most forms of tantra, embodiment is real (not illusion).¹⁸ All of these practices have emancipatory power. For Abhinavagupta (and generally for non-dual Śaiva-Śākta high *tantra*) the Right and the Left paths were equally valid and provided powerful access to ultimate truth and direct embodied experience of the absolute source and expression of all realities.¹⁹ The snake and the rope (if the simile works at all in this context) are both, ultimately, expressions of Śakti and Śiva in their eternal dance of expansion and contraction.

In this non-dualism of Abhinavagupta or its modern expressions in Śrī Vidyā (or the like) reality has many appearances. These are not illusions, they are both those many things (embodied experiences) and they are their source (Śiva, Lalitā, Tripura Sundarī, Devī, etc.). The more appropriate simile for modern practitioners and for non-dualistic Śaivism would need to focus on the varieties of experiences, whether they are more expanded and complex or more compressed, sublimated or refined. Ultimately speaking and in relatively straightforward ways all experiences have the same value, *if* they lead to the ultimate I-awareness of the highest Śiva or the highest Śakti.

There are problems with this characterization, but not at the theological level. Feeling aesthetic experience as religious experience, or practicing traditional worship with a *yantra* or *mantra*, or doing either traditional *yoga* or learning *yoga* from the world wide web, or even playing music or making art are all theologically acceptable if the practitioners attains reflective self-awareness of ultimate Śiva awareness.

¹⁸ I am aware that one can parse this simile in ways that match the Trika (and other ways) and make finer philosophical distinctions than I am making here. However, in the context of these ethnographic accounts, I think the line of reasoning I am pursuing holds, even if not universally.

¹⁹ There is a long history of qualifications to this recognition. Arguably, Abhinava taught that very few people could succeed at many of these practices, and that many of them were sequenced (where preliminary practices built slowly toward advance practices), and that there were a complex requirements and qualifications. Foremost of these, was practicing in a community under the careful guidance of a fully realized teacher.

According to some of these practitioners, many different experiences can provoke the unfolding of the liberating reflection or knowledge. When this kind of knowledge-connection is formed, then the practitioner can see everything experienced (transcendental, aesthetic, or other) as in the end “I am Siva.” The identity is the key that unlocks any form of practice or experience becoming a form of ultimate consciousness. Therefore, one of the things that appears in the contemporary patterns of religious experience and expression, is that secularized student-teacher interactions or among art students learning from other artists, these relationships become sacralized as an experience of the absolute that is not conceptually alien to the non-dualistic Śaiva *tantra* or aesthetics (despite it being a kind of ritual/*mantra*-free reinterpretation).

It is easy to appreciate *that* the high *tantra* synthesis of post-eleventh century Kashmiri *Mantramārga*—especially through the multidisciplinary articulation of Abhinavagupta—includes and compresses all of *tantra* within its non-dual resolution of the simultaneity of the total absolute, the embodied subject, and the enjoyment of aesthetic experience. Ordinary urban, modernized, or cosmopolitan practitioners of contemporary Hindu *yoga* and *tantra* show a wide variety of awareness (from deeply studied to virtually unaware) of the philosophical foundations or conceptual structures of their practices and theologies. Many articulate their practice in stereotypical (modern) expressions of Śaṅkara’s *advaita* or other contemporary discourses of Hinduism and the Hindu diaspora. From the philosopher’s or even scholar’s perspective, these expressions might be more accurately expressed if they were to rely more specifically (in an historically or philosophically grounded fashion) on the Kashmiri Śaiva aesthetic and religious sources that created the symbolic and conceptual world in which their diversity of practice and experience flourishes. In the lived experience of modern (cosmopolitan, syncretistic and scientific) practitioners, this fine distinction does not often matter. At least in some, very deeply embedded cultural, ways, the urban-educated-internationalized *Śaivas*, *Śāktas*, artists, intellectuals, and *yogis* are living out their embodied traditions in very tantric ways. These ethnographic accounts do not represent a single population of practitioners. The unifying themes of their accounts consists in their shared emphasis on experience of the divine within their daily lives and in their common vocabulary (such as their uses of *yoga* and *sādhanā*) and the way that they identify their practices and concepts as broadly tantric (using such terms as *mantra-tantra*, *tantra-vidyā*, and *śākta*).

The “on-the-ground” equating of aesthetic enjoyment as explicitly religious-bliss-generating-enjoyment of the dance of Śiva and Śakti, or modernistic expressions of the meaning of *yoga*, or ties to their gurus might sometimes have very little theological sophistication or awareness. In the cases that these people have awareness of the texts of non-dual Śaivism, then it is not even complicated. Their scientific materialism and neuroscience; or Hindu-Buddhist mindfulness synthesis; or their arts and music as their “true” religion are all expressions of the ultimate non-duality even without Śiva and Śakti modes of expression (although this is often present in some forms).

When one finds circumstances where there is a more demonstrable tantric awareness, then it becomes a linear and straightforward expression of the varieties of explanation present in the Kashmiri exegetes (regardless of the extent of their knowledge of the Kashmiri texts). The extent of their textual knowledge does not alter their assertions that their study is *jñāna* and acts are tantric *sādhanā*. They understand their dance, art, painting, music as aesthetic-religious experience that leads directly to the ultimate identification with Śiva through the descending grace of Śakti. Even with the pervasive and assimilating power of contemporary Hindu culture (in its universalizing, orthodox, or scientific forms), the patterns and theological structures and the expressions of religious experience, here are profoundly Śaiva-Śākta, in their various experiential expressions.

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