

Reconstructing the Tantric Body: Elements of the Symbolism of Body in the Monistic Kaula and Trika Tantric Traditions

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Transforming Dualistic Symbolism

Tantric visualizations,¹ similar to various other yogic meditations, are instrumental in facilitating the mind's entry into varied forms of absorption, eventually liberating it from its habit patterns (*saṃskāra*). While the goal of these diverse contemplative practices can be identical in the sense that they all aspire to cultivate the experience of the ultimate reality, their approaches differ. Grounding their arguments on the distinctive nature of meditative practices, some scholars have maintained that the experience derived through these approaches is simply a cultural or linguistic construction.² In this paper, I argue that while these yogic approaches rely on some or other form of construction, they are in fact deconstructing the existing cultural and linguistic frameworks by creating altered experiences and memories that subvert the underlying cultural and linguistic presuppositions. I will demonstrate that Tantric visualizations, which focus on the body, are not simply constructing certain beliefs. On the contrary, these processes allow one to re-map one's mental space by altering what has already been construed. In order to highlight the process that allows the practitioners to reshape their mental states, I will first explore the Kaula and Trika Tantric modifications of the early Sāṅkhya and Smārta categories, and then illustrate five key constituents of Tantric meditation that focus on transforming experiences regarding the body. This focus

on the body will establish that the philosophical underpinning of Sāṅkhya or other forms of dualism are replaced in this process by the Kaula monistic vision or the Trika non-dual experience. The argument is that these methods aim to shift the presuppositions regarding the body and language. The ensuing mystical experience is not just a construction of the meditative practice, but a consequence of the meditative system that allows the practitioner to liberate his mind from existing presuppositions. This deconstructive method is equally effective in reversing biologically given instincts (such as passion or aversion) or cultural constructs (such as gender or negative attitudes towards the body).

Thinking along the lines of the seminal work of Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body* (2006), this paper locates the discourse of the body in classical Tantric traditions. Following a constructive approach to the transformed self-experience which is the goal of Tantric pursuit, the paper explores the ways in which body-symbolism has emerged in the Trika and Kaula systems. In doing so, it also examines early dualistic symbolism and its shift in the emergence of non-dual Tantras. This evolution has given rise to various *maṇḍalas* and images, and the study of the emergence of body imagery allows us to analyze the representation of the body found in various divine forms in Tantric traditions. In order to reach a fuller understanding of the visual culture, this paper relies on *Vāstusūtropaniṣad*, a non-Tantric text that allows us to make a comparative study of various streams of classical Indian thought. As the paper progresses, it will become clear that the constructive approach of visualization is oriented towards diffusing cultural and linguistic constructs, rather than shaping the experience itself. For this, the first shift in Tantra is the transformation of early Sāṅkhya dualistic metaphors.

The Sāṅkhya system vividly describes in dualistic imagery the world order where two central categories of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*³ are metaphorically related to two genders. Deviating from the Sāṅkhya paradigm of liberation where the self isolates itself (*kaivalya*) from Prakṛti, Tantras use this imagery to depict their understanding of liberation in terms of the mingling (*sāmarasya*) of the binaries. The significance of the body becomes relevant in this reading, as the body is not only a consequence of the union of male and female aspects, but also a fusion of two polarities, as displayed in the image of Ardhanārīśvara. This androgynous image has been a center of attention for various scholars of Indian ico-

nography, as seen in several contemporary essays. Ellen Goldberg (2002: 113–53) draws upon this image to make arguments on gender, while Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s (1980) phenomenological study of the image highlights the fusion of two opposites. Goldberg’s Haṭhayogic interpretation of the Ardhanārīśvara motif (2002: 57–90) is not distinct from my own reading of this imagery in light of Tantric philosophy, as the concept of Kuṇḍalinī is at the foundation of both Haṭhayoga and Tantric Yoga and the imagery of the union of the male and female principles is used by both to describe the mystical experience of absorption. While Doniger’s attempt to decipher the imagery follows the Western motif of describing the two poles of reality as contrasting, opposite and always trying to negate each other, Goldberg’s reading highlights the synergetic aspect of the two polarities.

This is not the place to discuss the evolution of Tantric philosophy in detail. Just a few remarks will suffice to demonstrate that Indian visual culture has brought to life archaic concepts scattered throughout the Āgamas. We also need to keep in mind that when categories are systematized in the Āgamas, they rely on early Sāṅkhya. The fundamental shift in Āgamas involves the centrality of the deity, identified as the highest principle (*tattva*), and this emphasis reciprocates the shift in meaning of Sāṅkhyan terms such as *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* to describe the polarity of the divine couple. The basic Sāṅkhya concept of three *guṇas* is expanded in Tantras, with the deified Prakṛti having the cosmic function of these *guṇas* through her triadic emanations. The Trika system adds a different layer of meaning, placing volition (*icchā*), cognition (*jñāna*) and action (*kriyā*) in the central triad, when the deity *maṇḍala* is inverted to describe self-awareness. The Sāṅkhyan *prakṛti* in this altered paradigm becomes the mother-goddess while being described as comprised of three *guṇas*, an appropriation that is not unique to Tantras, as other examples can be found also in Purāṇic literature.⁴ Deviating from the early dualistic model, this Prakṛti is also identified with pure consciousness (*citi*), the description previously limited to the transcendent self, or Puruṣa.

The goddess imagery, particularly images of the divine couple, can be better understood through the lens of Sāṅkhya. While the depiction of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* in masculine and feminine forms is vivid in Sāṅkhya literature itself (see, for instance, *Sāṅkhyakārikā* 59–61), it undergoes further evolution in the androgynous imagery of Ardhanārīśvara.⁵ In this

image, the male half, shown on the right, is depicted holding a mattock and wearing the crescent moon. The armor and gestures vividly depict the binary symbolism. The right arm makes a gesture indicative of fearlessness, and the other holds an axe. In some variants, the right arm is depicted showing the gesture of granting boons and the other holds a spear. In yet other versions, the right arms of the images hold a spade or trident. The sacred thread is an additional male attribute, here shown by a belt of snakes.

The left half representing the goddess is adorned with a crown placed upon neatly styled hair. A *tilaka* mark on the forehead complements the third eye of Śīva. The earrings are ornamental, but with a difference: the one on the male side is shaped like a crocodile or snake, while the earring on the female side is identified as *valikā*. The left arms hold a blue lotus, a mirror, and a parrot. One hand is also depicted either resting at the side or on the seat, which in this case is shaped like a bull. The left side of the body is smeared with saffron and draped in silken clothes. The right half of the figure is depicted standing on a straight leg, while the left leg is often shown in the lotus pose (Yadav 2001: 19–20). We can glean from this visualization the pertinent gestures and weapons that are associated with masculine and feminine aspects of the divinity.

While adopting the Sāṅkhya concept of the transcendence of the self, the triadic depiction of divinity in Purāṇic/Tantric imagery also provides a monistic framework of the immanence of the self. In one Purāṇic depiction, the primordial Mahālakṣmī is comprised of all three *guṇas*.⁶ She herself fills the empty space by assuming the form of Mahākālī. When she takes on this form by the power of mere darkness (*tamas*), this image is identified as Mahāmāyā. In this emanation, she is also addressed by other names such as “Epidemic,” “Hunger,” “Thirst,” “Slumber” and “Craving.” Mahālakṣmī assumes yet another form of pure *sattva*, resulting in Mahāsarasvatī. Among the names given to her, the significant ones are “Great Wisdom,” “Great Speech,” “Speech” and the “Mistress of Wisdom” (*Prādhānikarāhasya* 4–16). Based on the Sāṅkhya notion of three *guṇas*, the three shades red, dark and white are successively and convincingly assigned to *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*. While the Sāṅkhya system assigns colors to *guṇas* by borrowing the concept from the early Upaniṣads—red to fire, white to water, and dark to earth (*Chāndogya* 6.4.6–7)—the Purāṇas and Tantras expand on this and bring these pri-

mordial energies to life. In this process, abstract concepts gain corporeality, allowing graphic representation in a myriad of forms.

The emanation of the triadic deities to form a *maṇḍala* is vivid in the Purāṇic literature.⁷ Mahālakṣmī emanates in the forms of Lakṣmī and Brahmā, Mahākālī gives rise to Rudra and Sarasvatī, and Mahāsarasvatī manifests as Viṣṇu and Caṇḍī. The complexity in the imagery of this second generation is explicit: the first pair parallels the *rajas* property of their mother. The second pair demonstrates a contrast: Rudra primarily embodies *tamas*, while Sarasvatī has the predominance of *sattva*. In the third pair, Viṣṇu aligns with the *sattva* property of his mother, but Caṇḍī in contrast incorporates *tamas* (*Prādhānikarahasya* 17–25). Studying the visualization of these goddesses gives an insight into the imagery of the *guṇas*. Like the Sāṅkhya concept of *prakṛti*, the goddess Mahālakṣmī is an embodiment of all three *guṇas*, and just as the world evolves due to imbalance in *guṇas*, so do these deities.

The assignment of colors to these deities follows its own semiotic system. The dark, red and white hues of three deities in the triadic symbolism of Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī and Mahāsarasvatī describe the three *guṇas*. The blue color assigned to deities such as Kālī or Tārā operates according to a different semiotics. Following the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (21.78b–79a), white, blue, yellow and red are considered to be natural or “self-arisen” (*svabhāvaja*) colors. Apart from white, the rest of the colors are considered to be the “primary colors.”⁸ When the deity is depicted with five faces, as in the case of Kubjikā, Siddhilakṣmī or Gāyatrī, the fifth face is colored green. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* (21.82b) indicates that green is a product of the combination of yellow and blue. The Sāṅkhya concept of a triad of qualities is not lost even in this pentadic depiction, as the added colors describe the combination of different *guṇas*.⁹

Tantras shift meaning while adopting early categories, and add new categories that modify meaning without altering the image. For instance, while adopting the Sāṅkhya assignment of colors, Tantras introduce a new triad of volition (*icchā*), cognition (*jñāna*) and action (*kriyā*) that is central to the decipherment of the imagery of Parā, Parāparā and Aparā.¹⁰ All visualizations of Parā depict her as luminous white. Her ornaments, clothes, and posture display *sattva* and by extension volition: she is sitting on top of a lotus, wearing the crescent moon, holding counting beads or a book. The red Parāparā and dark Aparā relate to the highest

manifestation of *rajas* and *tamas*, as well as representing the cosmic emanation of cognition and action. It is evident that, without displacing early imagery, the Trika system assigns new meaning that fits within their monistic paradigm. In this new depiction of energies, they are not mutually exclusive, but are rather the emanations of the self, identified with pure bliss and awareness (*cidānanda*). While the Tantric triads—such as that of Parā, Parāparā and Aparā or their consorts, Bhairavasadbhāva, Ratiśekhara and Navātman—rely on Trika cosmology and have been deciphered following the monistic worldview, this understanding emerges without discrediting the early Sāṅkhya symbolism of *guṇas*.

If we examine passages in *Śilpaprakāśa*, we can confirm that medieval Indian architecture was a point of convergence for both Sāṅkhya and Tantra perspectives. While describing the Yoginī *yantra* that to some extent replaced Vāstu *maṇḍala*, the earlier blueprint for constructing temples, *Śilpaprakāśa* states:

According to Tantric texts, the installation of yoginīs is paramount. On the ground align three bindus (points) at an equal distance from each other [along a north/south axis, plus two outer points at an equivalent distance, as well. The three interior points are equated, respectively, with the metaphysical qualities (*guṇas*) of sattva, rajas, and tamas, that is spirit, energy, and darkness].

[Two equilateral] triangles [pointing south] should be made to meet at the upper [sattva] bindu. (Let the sattva bindu mark the apex of the upper triangle whose base aligns with the north perimeter point, and the base of the second triangle whose apex extends a double distance to the tamas bindu). The top triangle denotes sattva and the lower one (with twice the elevation, and centered on the rajas bindu) may be considered the rajas triangle.

[Likewise,] the central axis connective the three points is called the rajas line. From its southern [tamas] bindu, a tamas triangle should be drawn (of equal size to the sattva triangle above), facing the opposite direction and with its apex meeting the central rajas triangle at the tamas bindu. [A variant recension of this passage adds the following gloss as verses 92b and 93a: “Triangular fields pointing upward are

considered fire triangles, whereas those facing downward are thought to be water triangles.”] Next, a transversal line should be drawn through the midpoint of the sattva [-guṇa] triangle (*Śilpaprakāśa* 1.91–94; Rabe 2000: 440–41).

The argument here is not that every triangle or square has a Sāṅkhya underpinning or Tantric meaning. Quite the contrary, the argument is that rituals and philosophies adopt earlier structures, and when doing so, they do not simply copy an image but rather appropriate it according to their own worldview. An interface between these two aspects can thus assist in understanding a culture of any given time.

The central theme of this paper identifies the body as the key constituent of the transformative practices of Tantric visualization. By subverting negative perceptions of the body and replacing these with an enhanced and emancipating vision, Tantric visualization practices that aim to ground the experience of the entry to higher states of consciousness (*samāveśa*) endeavor to shift the already constructed consciousness in the opposite direction. This creation of an alternate paradigm aims to nullify habitual mental patterns, and allows the mind to be free not just from previous conditions but also from the conditions created during the meditative practice. The ultimate goal of constructive visualization practices is thus to allow the mind to return to its primordial source, the state of pure consciousness also described in terms of innate bliss. The examination below outlines how the five central constituents function as the steps towards this transformed vision. The first relates to language: while we assume that the purpose of language is to describe things and that language itself is ephemeral, the Tantric application of language considers speech as a living entity and the speech act as an inter-subjective engagement. This understanding of language as *mantra* exploits the performative aspect of language that at the same time elevates language to a higher status than that of a merely descriptive mechanism. The two constituents of this paper, the body as temple and the cosmos, aim to subvert the negative notions that are culturally imposed upon the body (for example, the body as the consequence of negative *karmas* or as an accumulation of disease and a source of suffering). Eventually, by correlating the body with bliss and awareness, the Tantric visualization process directly touches upon experience itself, confronting the association of

suffering with the body. By exploiting constructive techniques, Tantric visualization thus endeavors to alter the meaning of what is fundamentally given in everyday experience. In essence, Tantras accept the constructive nature of everyday experience and thus aspire to alter the preconditioned mind by reprogramming it with new understandings of the body and language.

Elements of the Tantric Body

The above description is the basis of the concept that Tantric images and philosophical systems are inherently interconnected. Visualization is thus not possible without the awareness of this background. Bringing philosophies to life through visual images introduces the body to discourse, and this process culminates with an embodied cosmology. Additionally, although the theme of the imagery may be universal, the depiction may be quite specific. What is an image of compassion or passion? If we were to create an image of wisdom, what would it look like? While these experiences transcend cultural boundaries, it is unlikely that all cultures will come up with Bodhisattva images for depicting compassion; Rati, Kāmadeva or Kāmeśvarī images for passion; or Prajñāpāramita for wisdom. Lacking awareness of the literary culture compromises even the aesthetic experience of these images.

Vedic texts such as *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* establish the link between the ritual sacrifice and the cosmic Puruṣa (for instance, 1.2.5.1). In these depictions, ritual objects parallel the limbs of Puruṣa which are in turn mirrored within the human body and the body is at the center of contemplation. Knowing the ways in which the body has been viewed is thus essential for understanding the meaning of images. Common understandings grounding the conceptual body can be summarized in five essential concepts: (i) The body of the deity is comprised of *mantras*.¹¹ (ii) The deity emanates in the form of the *maṇḍala*. Thus the body of the deity is the *maṇḍala* itself.¹² (iii) The human body is a temple (*deha-devagr̥ha*).¹³ (iv) The human body is identical to the cosmos (*piṇḍa-brahmāṇḍa*).¹⁴ (v) The body is an expression of bliss and awareness (*cidānanda*).¹⁵

The Mantra Body

One of the most ubiquitous concepts found among Tantras is the correla-

tion between the body and *mantras*. Tantras equate the deity with *mantras* and assign specific phonemes as different limbs of the deity. Tantric visualizations depend on the practitioner identifying his body with *mantras* and thus also with the divine body. Expanding on the concept that the world is the materialization of speech, found in seminal form in the Vedic literature, Tantras describe the world as an expression of Māṭṛkās, the term used to denote both the Sanskrit phonemes and the mother deities. In these presentations, deities and their *mantras* become interchangeable and the image becomes the representation of the inner/real body of the deity that is comprised of *mantras*.¹⁶ Furthermore, the term *mūrti* is often used in Tantras to refer to this very sonic body of the deity. This concept is explicit in *Kubjikāmatatantra* passages, such as “the goddess born of the sixteen syllables....She is Mālinī....She is Maheśvarī whose body is made of *mantras*” (17.76cd–84). These “Mothers” are aligned with Sanskrit letters and segmented into eight groups.¹⁷ The most external square in the *maṇḍala* is surrounded by these Māṭṛkās, associated with their Bhairava consorts.

Historically, Māṭṛkās may have evolved in different contexts and been assigned different roles.¹⁸ When these deities are invoked in Tantras, they follow particular structural patterns that rely on Sanskrit phonemes with specific roles. The *Śivasūtra* relates to Māṭṛkās as the foundation of cognition that arises when the self qua consciousness is manifest and confined in objects (see 1.4, 2.3–7).¹⁹ Kṣemarāja’s etymology of Māṭṛkā as the unrecognized mothers/matrices (*ajñātā mātā*) (1.4) relates to the rise of *mantras* in the state when self-awareness is confined. Māṭṛkās and their Bhairava consorts are always visualized and invoked together, and when Māṭṛkās describe the extrovert state of consciousness, Bhairavas relate to the sudden rise of spontaneous self-reflexive awareness (1.5). The same text affirms that the esoteric aspect of *mantra* is the expression of the awareness that the body is comprised of *vidyā* (see 2.3).²⁰ The correlation between deities such as Māheśvarī with groups of phonemes is common in Tantras (see 3.19; see also *Prapañcasāra Tantra* 1.1). This threefold recognition of the identity between *mantras*, deities, and the aspirant’s body is essential to the visualization of images.

The concept that the power in *mantras* is inherent to these Māṭṛkas means that deities and *mantras* are interchangeable. The visualized forms are thus the very *mantras* incarnate. When the *maṇḍala* of a deity is visu-

alized, each of the phonemes of the *mantra* of the central deity emanates as a separate deity. Every deity is therefore the concentration of various deities within. Due to the complex arrangement of these phonemes in *maṇḍalas*, the deity images vary. Even the very order in which the phonemes are laid out makes for a difference in visualization. For instance, the popular order of the phonemes from *a* to *h* is identified as the Māṭṛkā order and the order of phonemes from *n* to *ph* is identified as the Mālinī sequence. Deities corresponding to each of the phonemes are visualized differently in these two groups. Since the phonemes are the blueprint of the *mantras* and the imagery of the central deity relies on the collection of specific letters in particular *mantras*, the visualization of the deity varies according to the structure in which the *mantra* is read.

In the ritual of *nyāsa* (an installation of phonemes and *mantras*), select letters are installed in different limbs of the aspirant's body. This installation supposedly transforms the physical body into the mantric body, allowing the aspirant to tangibly feel the presence of the deity. In addition to installing distinct letters, the ritual culminates with the graphic installation of the words and complete *mantras*. Just as a single body in this depiction is the collection of various *mantras*, so also is the deity. This ritual correlation of the deity to specific syllables, colors and body parts gives rise to complex imagery, and the image of the deity represents various divinities, each comprised of different arrangements of the *mantras*.

Maṇḍala as an Integral System

Both the maṇḍalic representation of deities and the ritual sacrifices taking place on altars that can be considered as *maṇḍalas* are very ancient. The Vedic *Śulvasūtras* and *Samhitās* outline these constructions. Likewise, the early literature demonstrates a detailed focus on the construction of these designs and their greater significance, often correlating the altar with the cosmos, the ritual order, the ritual calendar and the hymns that are used to invoke the deities. With Tantras, these geometric structures for ritual reach their culmination. What both the geometric designs and images share is a meticulous effort to map space and transform it from the mundane to the sacred. Since the ritual act of *yajña* is pivotal to this transformation, the concept of *yajña* underlies the mirroring of the cosmos within the altar. The subsequent rise of deity images replaces the early fire ritual and thus shares the same significance.

The blueprint for constructing the sacrificial altar, a temple, or a house is the Vāstu *maṇḍala*. Examination of this *maṇḍala* can shed light on the complex processes that undergird the conception of visualized space. The vertical and horizontal lines intersecting and making various squares is envisioned in this *maṇḍala* as the abode of deities, and if we read the Vāstu literature, we can glean the meaning assigned to these lines. For instance, *Vāstusūtropaniṣad* (2.9) describes how straight lines depict rays of light. Bettina Bäumer (1995: 116–17) points out that two different lines, one vertical and one horizontal, indicate fire and water. When time is conceived of as occurring in space, it is often imagined in vertical space, placing it within a physical hierarchy through a familiar up-and-down mode of conceptualization.

When analyzing the Vāstu *maṇḍala*, Stella Kramrisch synthesizes its symbolism by stating that “Its square is symbolical of all cyclical time, the day, the month, the year and the wider cycles marked by the recurrence of eclipses” (1976: 35). Michael W. Meister (1979) explores the relationship of this *maṇḍala* with the actual practice of temple construction. The *maṇḍala* dates to at least the sixth century and remains a blueprint for early temple architecture.²¹ Meister also points out that for temples constructed prior to the ninth century, the *maṇḍala* represents not just a template for ritualized use but also an actual plan for temple building.

The complexity of the Vāstu ritual and its ubiquity in Vedic, Smārta, and Tantric literature indicates that it must have remained in practice over a very long period of time.²² Brahmā, hardly worshipped in popular Hinduism, is placed at the center of this *maṇḍala*, although some manuals invoke Vāstu as a deity alongside Brahmā.²³ This ritual culminates with envisioning Vāstu as a person. The concept of Vāstupuruṣa, space imagined as a person, constitutes the heart of sacred architecture and transforms architecture into a living entity. This *maṇḍala* is all-inclusive: gods, demons, snakes, demi-gods, Vasus, and Dikpālas are all invoked within it. In Tantric *maṇḍalas*, while the Dikpālas remain intact, eight Mātṛkās are invoked instead of eight Vasus. Besides the deities commonly invoked in popular Hinduism, various deities in the Vāstu *maṇḍala* come from early Vedic literature, suggesting the antiquity of this ritual.²⁴

In addition to the Vāstu texts detailing the proportion and location of deities in relation to other deities, they also address meaning. *Vāstusūtro-*

paniṣad is exemplary for providing insight into the architectural vision of these constructions. Although aphoristic, some crucial elements found in this text are relevant to our current investigation. The sacrificial post (*yūpa*) is crucial to the Vāstu imagery, and the central drop in the geometric *maṇḍalas* and the navel in an image maintain the same significance. Multiple references from the *Vāstusūtropaniṣad* affirm this relationship: “the sacrificial post is the light” (1.3); “the creation of an image starts from the navel” (2.10); “the drop (*bindu*) is the very Brahman, Brahman is eternal (*dhruva*)” (6.11).

When identifying an “image” (*mūrti*) with the sacrificial post, the text describes its significance: “an image is due to actualization” (4.1); “thus Brahman acquires form in two aspects” (4.3). The text further clarifies the issue by maintaining that “a form arises from the sacrificial post (*yūpa*) and the *yūpa* arises [out] of the form” (4.11). Along the same lines, the text also gives meaning to the measurement of the imagery: “The four parts [of the post] become eight parts in the form of Puruṣa in sequence” (4.14); “Puruṣa is similar to the sacrificial post; the post is the form of sacrifice” (4.17); “As there are ten limbs of the post, Puruṣa consists of ten sacrifices and wisdoms” (4.18). The decisive line, “the masters of art understand the form [as derived from] the sacrificial post” (4.19), helps us to relate the Vedic sacrificial altar to image worship, and the meaning of imagery thus presupposes the Vedic ritual order.

The text further suggests that various types of posts were erected for different magical effects. For instance, the post identified as a bull (*vṛṣa-stambha*) was erected for worship of the fathers and the post identified as “union” (*mithunastambha*) was for the fulfillment of desires (4.22). The measurement of the post in ten digits is consistent with the *daśatāla*, a prominent form of measurement for constructing an image. As this post also stands for the sacrificer and the ten digits refer to ten different sacrifices and ten sensory and motor faculties that replicate the human body, the symbolism of the cosmos, the human body and ritual order are intrinsic to the Vedic sacrificial post itself.

Aiding in the decipherment of the ritual meaning of *maṇḍalas*, *Vāstusūtropaniṣad* elaborates upon the significance of primary symbols such as circles or triangles. For instance, the text states, “In the beginning is a circle. The circle is the world” (2.6); “The circle verily is the plenum” (2.7); “The straight lines are the rays of light” (2.9); “Following Prajāpati,

the circle represents light while the square indicates water” (2.11); “The two diagonals adopt the nature of wind” (2.12); “A triangle is fire...” (2.15); “The inverted triangle is water” (2.16); “The hexagram [stands for] the specific wisdom of attraction” (2.17); “The drop (*bindu*) [at the center] is the life-force of earth” (2.14); “Vertical lines are of the form of fire, [those] going horizontally are of the form of water, [and] the oblique (*tiryag*) lines are of the form of air” (2.22). Since these lines are universal to all the constructions, the meaning derived from these basic forms is applicable to all the imagery.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Tantric imagery concerns the hand gestures of the deities. While Tantras advance their own symbolism, *Vāstusūtropaniṣad* is nonetheless helpful in relating meaning through the perspective of *vāstu*. The text suggests that the hand gestures manifest the mood of the image (6.16), and explicitly correlates the inherent power of the deity with his weapons, saying that “the weapons describe the [specific] force [inherent] to the image” (6.17). The text also associates the vehicles and the attendant deities with the central image by stating that “the vehicle depicts the specific nature of the image” (6.20); “attendant divinities are the counter-images [of the main deity]” (6.21); and that “knowledge of the form [of the central deity] emerges from the attendant deities” (6.22).

Early *Vāstu* literature also gives an indication of the meaning assigned to different weapons and the order in which the deities carry these weapons. Both the *Śilpa* and Tantric texts agree on the abstraction of a deity wherein the central weapon or gesture of a deity stands for the deity itself. Thus a trident represents Śiva, a disk stands for Viṣṇu, the lute identifies Sarasvatī, and the flower-arrows carried by different deities stand for Kāma. While distinct weapons are associated with specific deities expressing particular inner moods, the process of adding the weapons that stand for other deities/specific powers leads to complex visualizations. The diversity of such visualizations follows an established matrix of permutations. A deity with four arms, for instance Viṣṇu, can have twenty-four different visualizations, based on what particular weapon is held in which hand.²⁵ The significance of arrangement in the process of image formation is highlighted by the fact that a deity becomes a different manifestation due to a shift in the order of the attributes shown by each adornment.

The *Brahmasaṃhitā* outlines the meaning of the four attributes of Lord Viṣṇu: the lotus is the emblem of creation, the disc symbolizes protection, the conch shell indicates salvation, and the mace, destruction (Rao 1985: 236). In Śaiva Tantric traditions, the five faces of Śiva describe the five functions of the Lord: creation, sustenance, dissolution, concealment, and grace. In the case of Viṣṇu as described here, the divinity embodies four functions that are depicted by four symbols. In other words, each of the arms depicts a particular role of the deity. Whether these functions are expressed through different heads or different arms becomes subordinate to what is revealed.

In general, Tantras maintain that the many forms visualized in *maṇḍalas* are merely the expression of the powers inherent to the central deity. As the *Yoginīhr̥daya* states: “The *cakra* comes into being when the supreme energy, who assumes universal forms with her own will, sees her own expansion” (1.9cd–10ab).²⁶

Accordingly, the deities in the periphery of the *maṇḍala* are conceived of as limbs of the central deity. This is congruent with the concept discussed earlier that the deity image is comprised of *mantras*. Since *mantras* are composed of different syllables and letters, the peripheral deities are these very syllables materialized.

Even the philosophical categories appear to have been arranged according to maṇḍalic symmetry. The twenty-five (5x5) principles of Sāṅkhya and thirty-six (6x6) of the Śaiva Tantrics, for instance, can be found arranged in the form of a *maṇḍala*. Along the same lines, Sāṅkhya categories are sometimes organized in terms of eight *prakṛtis* and sixteen *vikṛtis* that reflect a *maṇḍala*.²⁷ Tantric deities eight or sixteen arms resonate this framework. A triangle depicts *prakṛti*, the origin, and the triangular form of the *yoni* refers to the same Sāṅkhya concept of *prakṛti* as the balanced state of three qualities. In these representations, the symbolic forms explicitly mirror the philosophical structures.

The maṇḍalic representation of philosophical principles, shown as the abstraction of Sāṅkhya categories, culminates in the Tantric representation of thirty-six categories in a ritual of “self-worship” (*ātma-pūjā*). The *maṇḍala* for this ritual consists of the central drop, a triangle, a pentad, a circle, a lotus with four petals, four successive pentads, and a square. Eight Bhairavas and Mātṛkās are worshipped in the square, and thirty-six Śaiva categories are visualized in the inner circles (*Śrīvidyārṇavatāntra*,

chapter 36). The eight manifest forms of Śiva (*aṣṭamūrti*) represent the same theme that the visualized deity images are the very elements in the body (chapter 31). In this conceptualization, elements such as earth, water, and fire are identified with the emanations of Śiva. The binary and reciprocal process of developing *maṇḍalas* based on Sāṅkhya and Śaiva categories and constituting the structure of categories in maṇḍalic form is foundational to the rise of various deity and geometric *maṇḍalas*.

In a shift from the Sāṅkhya paradigm, Tantras represent a monistic worldview that identifies pure consciousness with Śiva. Tantras also describe the emergence and dissolution of the world in terms of the contraction (*saṅkoca*) and expansion (*vikāsa*) of the self/Śiva. The energies inherent to Śiva maintain the world order: the luminous white deities carry out the expansion of the world, and the dark and ferocious deities retract the externalized world to the self. Red deities depict the balanced state and represent sustaining energies. Although this imagery relies on the basic Sāṅkhya paradigm, Trika Śaivas add new meaning to it by adopting the philosophy of absolute reality as both immanent and transcendent.

Relying on the Krama philosophy that pure consciousness successively materializes in the form of the externals and returns to its primordial form and the identification made between pure consciousness and the central deity (Kālī, in this case), various goddesses in different layers of a *maṇḍala* describe the strata of externalization. Various groupings of deities, for example twelve Kālīs or sixteen Nityās, depict this very process of the emanation and retrieval of consciousness. For instance, the wheel of twelve Kālīs is segmented into three sub-sections that identify the triad of the subject of cognition (*pramātr*), the process of knowing (*pramāṇa*), and the object of cognition (*prameya*).²⁸ The consciousness portrayed in the Krama system is dynamic, self-revealing, and endowed with powers. Since these powers are its inherent nature, it cannot dissociate itself from them. Recognizing the transcendent that is formless is thus to recognize it in its manifoldness. Tantras describe the sense organs as the divinities (*karaṇadevyah*) being engaged with their respective objects. This effulgence of consciousness or the dynamism of energies inherent to it is the essence of Krama visualization.

There are two *kramas*: the sequence of time and the sequence of space. The sequence of time is displayed with particular modes of action, while

the diversity of images portrays the sequence of space (*Īśvarapratya-bhijñākārika* 2.1.5).²⁹ The emanation of deities in a *maṇḍala* follows the same Krama philosophy, where the transcendent, when endowed with form, manifests first at the center and its emanations encircle the *maṇḍala*; the inner layers refer to higher states of awareness and the peripheral circles to the lower states. Krama thus facilitates a systematic gaze upon an otherwise inconceivable variety of images.

Without changing the early triadic structure, the Krama system lays out its symbolism with a reliance on the pentadic system. This system utilizes the early Śaivite depiction of Śiva with five faces: Sadyojāta, Vāmadeva, Aghora, Tatpuruṣa, and Īśāna.³⁰ The symbolism of colors is vivid in this imagery, as these deities are successively visualized in white, red, black and yellow colors, and the final deity, Īśāna, is visualized in colorless form. What the Krama system does is add a new meaning to this sequence by relating it to the five aspects of awareness (*cid*), bliss (*ānanda*), volition (*icchā*), cognition (*jñāna*), and action (*kriyā*).

The Body as a Temple

The iconic representation of the divine underlies the principle that the body is an altar. This act of portraying the body in an elevated state contrasts with negative depictions of it. The language that is used to describe the body and the rituals directed towards shifting cultural pre-suppositions and creating an altered vision both warrant closer scrutiny.

Let us examine a few of the terms that are used to denote the body. The term *tanū* is derived from *√tanū vistāre*, meaning “to expand.” The Vedic hymns refer to Rudra as having auspicious (*śivā*) and terrifying (*aghora*) bodies, and the term used here is *tanū*.³¹ The term *kāya* is derived from *√ciñ cayane*, meaning the locale where the entities are accreted. Etymologically, “body” thus refers to an entity that expands and accumulates. This expression of the expansive and collective nature of the body comes from the Vedas and culminates in Tantric literature,³² which shifts the perspective given by the term *śarīra*, derived from *√śr* as something that breaks up or disintegrates.

Analysis of the term *puruṣa* allows us to understand the ways in which the embodied self is envisioned in classical India. Etymologically, the term refers to “that which fills” (*pūrayate*).³³ Following another understanding, *puruṣa* is “due to being in the beginning” (*Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*

1.23.4).³⁴ Rather than describing the embodied self, these two terms indicate that Puruṣa encompasses both time and space. This pervasiveness of “person” highlights both transcendence and immanence, where the cosmic Puruṣa pervades the earth and extends beyond it (*Rgveda* 10.90.1). In these depictions, the term *puruṣa* refers to both the embodied self and the cosmic being that encompasses the totality. While *puruṣa* is an embodied self, it is also the divine, addressed as Puruṣottama or Tatpuruṣa. The Vedic depiction of the body as “the unassailable city of gods has eight *cakras* and nine gates” (*Atharvaveda* 10.2.31) and the expanded notion of Puruṣa as encompassing the totality are vibrant in Tantric ritual visualizations.

The body as the “field” (*kṣetra*) reflects the same meaning. The *Bṛhad-devetā* (4.40) describes the parallel between the body and *kṣetra* in the most direct terms: the body associated with the senses is called *kṣetra*. The *Bhagavadgītā* also explicitly identifies that “this body is called as *kṣetra*” (13.2). In the same text, *kṣetra* appears as a collective name that refers to consciousness and emotions (13.6). Thus the body and what is felt within the body are both identified by the term *kṣetra*. This is crucial to understanding the esoteric meaning of *kṣetra* as the ritual field visualized in Tantric literature as both geographic planes and bodily centers.³⁵

The body conceived of as a temple affirms the same concept. If we read the terms used to describe a Hindu temple, it becomes clear that the temple is perceived as a body, most often a human body.³⁶ As the visualized body has its foundation in a lotus (*mūlādhāra-cakra*), so also is the temple built on the support of a lotus. The cosmic pillar, most likely made of bamboo in ancient times to depict different sheaths as the name *veṅukośa* suggests, is the spinal cord in the human body, with different *cakras* as the centers where the deities reside. The walls of a temple, identified as “cage” (*pañjara*), are identical to the girth of the body as the cage that confines the embodied self (*jīva*) within. In this metaphoric depiction, the five elements act as tapestries that adorn the temple’s wall-frieze, and the term used to denote this is “thigh” (*janḡhā*). The inner sanctum of the temple, the womb-house (*garbha-grha*), explicitly suggests the embryonic stage (Meister 1995: 123–25).

The *Mahārthamañjarī* describes the relation between the body and the altar in the following terms: “The instrumental deities pulsate in the altar, in one’s own body that is identical to the cosmos. The supreme Śiva, the

ocean of awareness, also pulsates in the midst of them” (34). It explains why the body is equated with an altar: “Sperm is the supreme [essence] originated of the mingling of the expansion of both Śiva and Śakti. The great seat, the very body, is originated of it” (cited in Maheśvarānanda’s commentary, *Parimala*, on *Mahārthamañjarī* 37).³⁷

In an attempt to identify the body with a *maṇḍala*, *Mahārthamañjarī* first relates the sense organs to the “instrumental deities” (*karaṇa devī*), the energies that are necessary to manifest the world. Within this system, the supreme deity Śiva is identical to the self and pure consciousness. Due to this relation, the functioning of the senses in grasping the externals is paralleled with the expression of Śiva’s energies in giving rise to the world. The term *devī* applies to both the self-effulgent deities in the *maṇḍala* and the auto-reflexive nature of consciousness. The ocean metaphor evokes the concept that the senses are like waves touching the shores of their corresponding objects. The text is explicit that “the very body is the primary altar” (*Parimala* on *Mahārthamañjarī* 34),³⁸ and this is congruent with the view that the body is a *maṇḍala*, where the center stands for the self and the surrounding circles describe inner and external senses.

When the body is conceived of as an altar, the somatic functions are identified as ritual worship of the deity:

He is to be worshipped there with the nectar of the sense objects, the drink of the virile ones, [enriched] with the fragrance underlying the flowers of self-awareness [offered] in the cup of the mind (*Mahārthamañjarī* 35).

The embodied emotions are what is felt in this cognitive process. The text is explicit that the nectar, while a singular element, is manifest in the forms of fear, grief, and delight (*Parimala* on *Mahārthamañjarī* 35).³⁹ The supreme deity, or consciousness, is revealed in its engagement with objects through sensory contact, and when in emotional experiences, the self is immediately grasped. Ritual worship in this paradigm is the self-awareness present in the active engagement of consciousness in the world.

When explaining why the body is identified as an altar, Maheśvarānanda elaborates that “the supreme Lord is carried in the very body in five-fold

ways” (*Parimala* on *Mahārthamañjarī* 37).⁴⁰ The five-fold effulgence of the self is described in *Mahārthamañjarī* in terms of the five *cakras* of Vāmeśvarī, Khecarī, Dikcarī, Gocarī, and Bhūcarī. Pure consciousness, with the entire manifestation dormant within it, is identified here with Vāmeśvarī. Among the remaining energies, Khecarī describes the subjective state of awareness that gives rise to ego; Dikcarī, along the same lines, refers to the awareness conditioned in the form of the inner senses; Gocarī relates to the consciousness arising in the external senses; and Bhūcarī corresponds to the consciousness manifesting in the form of the external entities. The five states of consciousness—awareness, bliss, volition, cognition and action—are successively envisioned here as the goddess *maṇḍala* with Kālasaṅkarṣiṇī at the center.

In Kaula practices, contemplation centers upon the body. Since a *maṇḍala* is an emanation of the central deity and the body of the practitioner is equated with that of the divinity, somatic activities are equated with the cosmic play of Śiva in manifesting and retrieving the world. The image of a body encodes these meanings, and visualization activates these understandings.

The identification of the body with a *maṇḍala* exemplifies the etymological meaning of *tanu* (body) as that which expands. In this visualization practice, the central deity in the *maṇḍala* is identified with the self and the peripheral deities, which in turn are considered to be the limbs of the central deity, are equated with the limbs of the practitioner. This identification process is common to all visualization, and select examples suffice to describe the process.

Śrīvidyā texts, such as the *Yoginīhr̥daya* and the *Kāmakalāvīlāsa*, provide a sequential description of the body of Tripurā, the central deity, which parallels the emanation of the *maṇḍala*. In this visualization, the central drop is the abode of Kāmeśvarī. The expansion of the drop into the geometric *maṇḍala* parallels the emanation of the central deity surrounded by her family. The *Kāmakalāvīlāsa* (36) utilizes the term *parīṇatā* (transformed), suggesting the reality of what has been transformed. The model of emanation described in *Kāmakalāvīlāsa* 36 is significant, as the surrounding deities in the *maṇḍala* are considered to be the limbs of the central deity. The first triadic emanation of the deity in the forms of Kāmeśvarī, Vajreśvarī, and Bhagamālinī describes the innermost triangle of Śrīcakra that also signifies the balanced state of

three *guṇas* (39). The eight triangles surrounding the central triangle are considered to be the eight subtle limbs (*puryaṣṭaka*)—five sense faculties, mind (*manas*), buddhi, and I-sense (*ahaṅkāra*)—of the goddess (40). The next circle, comprised of ten triangles, is described as the field of the sense-faculties and their orientation towards objects. The deities residing in the next circle which is also comprised of ten triangles are considered to be emanations of the sense faculties and motor organs of the goddess (42). The deities abiding in the next circle which is comprised of fourteen triangles are considered to be emanations of fourteen faculties—five motor organs, five sense organs, mind (*manas*), cognition (*buddhi*), consciousness (*citta*), and I-sense (*ahaṅkāra*)—of the deity. The circle comprised of eight petals is identified as the emanation of the five *tanmātrās* (form, taste, smell, touch and sound), the unmanifest (*avyakta*) synonymous with *prakṛti*, cognition (*mahat*) and the I-sense (*ahaṅkāra*) (44). The lotus with sixteen petals outside of this circle is considered the emanation of the central goddess in the form of Kāmākarṣiṇī, and so on. Five elements such as earth, along with the ten senses and motor faculties, and the mind, are collectively identified as the sixteen constituents of the goddess, transformed into this circle (45). Various gestures and the deities associated with these gestures are related to the external gates of the *maṇḍala* (46). This visualization not only confirms that the deities surrounding the *maṇḍala* are the limbs of the central deity, but also affirms that the visualized body is the collective mass of the deities.

Identification of the deities with sense faculties, elements, and various psychological states is commonplace in both Hindu and Buddhist Tantras. In order to demonstrate this process, one example of the visualization of Vajravārāhī may suffice. Umāpati teaches the adept how to construct their own body in the form of Vajravārāhī (*Vajravārāhīsādhana* 24d).⁴¹ This identification with the emanation body of the goddess is described as the “enjoyment body” (*sambhogakāya*) of the deity. The visualization of thirty-seven deities found within the body, considering them as the emanation of the central deity Vajravārāhī, culminates with the visualization of the deities of the *maṇḍala* as the limbs of the body, in the form of five deities constituting the heart, eight deities constituting the sphere of the mind, another eight deities constituting the realm of speech and the next eight deities constituting the circle of the body. Each circle can be found in both the *maṇḍala* and the body of the adept. Eight deities in the

most external circle, four of which are affiliated with aspects of Yama while the other four have the face of a crow, owl, dog and pig, constitute in this visualization the external limbs of the body—the mouth, navel, sexual organ, anus, hair, ears, eyes and nose (English 2002: 201). Thus the deities depicting supreme bliss or pure consciousness simultaneously display emotions and cognitive states; for example, Nairātmyā expresses both anger and consciousness at the same time (Shaw 2005: 395).

Following the *maṇḍala* metaphor where the peripheral deities are the emanation of the deity at the center, the body is the material expansion of the self. In a deity *maṇḍala*, the peripheral deities mirror the qualities of the central deity. For instance, the deities in Śrīcakra resemble the central deity, Tripurā. Their red color symbolizes passion. They imitate Tripurā in their garments and gestures, and most hold the same weapons. The same is the case with Vajravārāhī *maṇḍala*. Here, the central deity has the face of a boar, and many deities in the periphery have the faces of animals or birds. Just as the central deity is depicted as young and passionate, so also are the deities in the surrounding circles. In these emanations, the central motif of the deity is constant in all manifestations of the deities in the *maṇḍala*. Particular emotions are materialized in the visualized body, as the deities in iconic forms express various psychological states.

The Body is Identical to the Cosmos

The body as finite and the outer layer as its extension is an experience that has been both shaped by evolution and reframed by culture. This experience of the self as constrained is at the core of human suffering. In order to displace this mental construct, which is behind most of our habit patterns (*saṃskāra*), contemplative practices establish a parallel between the cosmos and the divine body. Tantras extend this concept to the human body. Although the equation of the body with the cosmos is very ancient in India, the ubiquity of this concept in Tantric literature makes it one of its defining characteristics. The relationship between the human body, the divine image, and the sacrificial altar is commonplace in the Vedic literature.⁴² Even the rituals related to the disintegration of the body echo the same concept that the body mirrors the totality (Timalsina 2008a). The Jain depiction of Lokapuruṣa demonstrates that this concept is pan-Indian and not restricted to Vedic or Tantric Hinduism alone.⁴³ It is also reflected in the tradition of Vāstu.⁴⁴

The correlation of the body with the cosmos is one of the threads that tie the Vedic Agnicayana with Tantric *maṇḍalas*. Just as the Vedic altar is constructed in proportion to the sacrificer's body, suggesting that the altar is the extended body of the sacrificer, Tantric visualizations correlate the body with the *maṇḍala*. Vedic rituals link the layers of the main altar with the breath and body parts of Prajāpati (*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 8.7.4.19–21).⁴⁵ This identity is described in the *Chāndogyopaniṣad* (5.18.2) in terms of the relationship between Viśva and Vaiśvānara, or the individual and collective consciousness.

By adding two key concepts, the Tantric perspective on the body expands upon the antecedent literature that posits the body as mirroring the totality. The concept that “the body is the cosmos” (*piṇḍa-brahmāṇḍa*), which is repeated in various terms in both Tantric and Haṭhayoga literature, confirms the body as both the cosmic and ecological center. The next concept, that the phenomenal reality experienced in the felt body is the mirror image of the absolute (*bimba-pratibimba*), describes the monistic Tantric cosmogony.⁴⁶

Mahārthamañjarī reiterates in explicit terms that the body is of the nature of the cosmos.⁴⁷ This is further explained in the Nāth literature.⁴⁸ The deity image is understood as embodying the same concept, clearly described in the depiction of Navātman or Ānandabhairava: “The supreme Lord of the nature of the highest bliss is comprised of nine circles (*vyūha*)” (cited in Lakṣmīdhara's commentary on *Saundaryalaharī* 34).⁴⁹

Bhairava, the supreme Lord of the Tantrics, is invoked as Navātman, or “the one comprised of nine.” These nine *vyūhas* include time (*kāla*), form (*kula*), name (*nāma*), cognition (*jñāna*), mind (*citta*), sound (*nāda*), drop (*bindu*), the limiting digits (*kalā*), and the embodied self (*jīva*) (cited in Lakṣmīdhara, *Saundaryalaharī* 34).⁵⁰ Through identifying the body of Navātman with that of the viewer, the process of visualization uses the image as a template, and what has been visualized is the concept of this cosmic embodiment.

Tantras describe their central concept of the world mirroring the supreme reality in terms of counter-image (*pratibimba*), where every entity mirrors the totality and is an image of the supreme Lord (*Tantrāloka* 3.44).⁵¹ Just as Śiva is an embodiment of bliss and awareness, all that exists has these properties dormant within. This complex mirroring process that culminates with the identity of body, cosmos, and the self is fundamental to the ritual

of visualization (*Vijñānabhairava* 63, 65). Tantras highlight this concept with the use of terms such as completeness (*pūrṇatā*) or “complete I-sense” (*pūrṇāhantā*).⁵²

The Body as an Extension of Bliss and Awareness

What makes Tantric visualizations distinctive is that such practices are designed to re-map mental presuppositions. The body is the platform for these transformative practices, since it is the body upon which cultural experiences are inscribed. In order to dismantle the pre-existing framework, Tantras propose a non-dual paradigm wherein the body is an extension of the self. A frequently cited line in Trika texts, attributed to Kallaṭa, “at first, consciousness transforms into *prāṇa*,”⁵³ depicts the life force as the first emanation of consciousness. Without discrediting the transcendental nature of the self qua consciousness, Tantras portray the self as transformed into an embodied state through the adoption of various *prāṇic* states. The seven levels of subjects (*pramāṭṛ*) are generally shown vertically in Tantric images, with the lower level of subject at the lower realm.⁵⁴ This resembles the Upaniṣadic depiction of the subject experiencing bliss.⁵⁵ In this vertical portrayal, both bliss and awareness, the core constituents of the self, are expressed in relation to the level at which a deity is depicted. The deities sitting above other deities on the lower strata, for this reason, reach a higher level of bliss.⁵⁶ While the deity on top depicts the essential nature of bliss and awareness (*cidānanda*), the subordinate deities (the seats for the higher deities), describe a limited level of bliss due to confined awareness. In this multiple mirroring process, subordinate mirror images are portrayed as lacking completeness.⁵⁷

Borrowed from its earlier application to refer to the “clan,” Tantras use the term *kula* also to denote the “body.”⁵⁸ With the use of the term to also describe the world comprised of thirty-six Kaula categories, Kaulas identify both the body and the cosmos as referents of *kula*. Tantric imagery primarily relies on the Kaula system which maintains that the self is immanent (*Pratyabhijñāhṛdaya* 8)⁵⁹ and the supreme divinity is embodied (*Nityāṣoḍaśikārṇava* 4.5cd).⁶⁰ Rather than transcending the body, Kaulas therefore seek liberation within the body. The liberating experience is described in terms of the surge of the “cosmic bliss” (*jagadānanda*) that permeates all the lower strata of bliss. Bhairava

images, specifically those of Ānandabhairava, represent materialization of this experience. In this understanding, the body is distilled bliss, bondage is the lack of this awareness, and awakening is the gradual surge of bliss that expands the limit of somatic awareness and gives the sense of totality while being within the body.⁶¹

Kaulas do not separate carnal bliss from the exalted experience of self-awareness. In this paradigm, sensory pleasure is the manifest form of the very self that is identical to bliss. The dissolution of the polarity of subjects, felt during sexual union, becomes a metaphor for the Kaulas to describe the liberating experience. The image of Kālī and Bhairava in their sexual union (*yuganaddha*) depicts this oneness of bliss and awareness felt at the moment when the senses are engaged with their objects. The primacy of erotic experience found in the language describing mystical states parallels the images of Caṇḍeśvara and Unmattabhairava.

In the above discussion, the argument that Tantras aim to transform early dualistic symbolism into a non-dual metaphor for describing reality has been made explicit. This process also changes a rather compromised view of being trapped within a body into a positive experience of being the body. By altering the application of language and shifting the mode of experience from outward-looking to inward or by touching the immediate mode of sensation in the pursuit of mystical experience, these visualization techniques aim to enable the practitioner to reach the non-dual state of experience. While this non-dual experience is a consequence of a systematic alteration of some of the early metaphors and the way we are trained to interpret our somatic experiences, the process culminates with deconstructing what is culturally or linguistically given. Since the body is “maimed” through cultural presuppositions, it is evident that Tantric visualization, with its focus on the body, attempts to modify those understandings.

What has been explicitly demonstrated in this paper is that the goal of visualization practices is not to shape experience, but rather to untie the constructs that have shaped our experience. Through the process of deconstructing the way we are accustomed to interpret our experience, particularly somatic experience, Tantric practice seeks to give the individual the ability to reach to the heart of experience. This process requires a double construction, wherein dismantling the first set of constructions functions as a portal to the core of experience. In essence, the very evolu-

tionary process that allows us to shape certain experiences and interpret them in specific ways is altered through the visualization processes that utilize language, specifically *mantra* language, as a mechanism in this process of transformation.

Rather than regarding the body that is immediately given to experience as a figment of the imagination or subordinate to the self, Tantric visualizations center on altered visions of the body. These body-centric meditations do not, however, reduce the self to the body. Rather, in this depiction, what is somatically felt becomes the base from which to reach higher meditative states and ultimately the self itself. Both somatic stimulation and the transformation of bodily sensations aim to replace the limited vision of everyday experience with the experience of embodied totality or the self as Śiva, wherein bodily awareness surpasses the human skin and envelops the cosmos.

Notes

I am grateful to Manohar Shinde and the Uberoi Foundation for the grant that allowed a course release during Spring 2011. I am also grateful to Rebecca Moore for reading the first draft of the manuscript and Ms. Mary Hicks for her editorial support.

1. I use the term “visualization” to describe the transformative ritual practice of bringing an image to mind, enlivening it, and conducting mental rituals in its presence. This ritual visualization (*dhyāna*) displays a process of constructing a Tantric body that interacts with the flesh or physical body in the act of meditation.

2. For discussion of the arguments along those lines, see Gimello (1978: 170–99), Katz (1978, 1992).

3. I have kept the terms *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* in the lower case italic when used as the Sāṅkhya categories, and when personified, they are used in the upper case.

4. *Devīmāhātmya* is one of the most popular texts from the *Mārkaṇḍeya-purāṇa*. This text invokes the goddess as *prakṛti* in various hymns (see *Devīmāhātmya* 1.78, 4.7, 5.9, 11.11).

5. For the study of the iconography of Ardhanārīśvara, see Yadav (2001: particularly Chapter 2), Bhattacharya (1980), Gaston (1982), Rao (1985:

321–32).

6. See the *Prādhānikarahasya*, attributed to the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*, generally printed at the end of the *Devīmāhātmya*.

7. The three texts from Purāṇas that supplement the *Devīmāhātmya*—*Prādhānikarahasya*, *Vaikṛtikarahasya*, and *Mūrttirahasya*—are recited alongside *Devīmāhātmya* and detail this triadic imagery.

8. For discussion, see Kintaert (2005).

9. With three *guṇas* and the new combinations possible when merging *sattva* and *rajas* and *rajas* and *tamas*, the pentadic forms reconfigure the distribution of *guṇas*. This is indicated by five faces of a deity.

10. Early texts such as *Tantrasadbhāva* and the exegetical sources such as *Parātrīśikāvivarāṇa* are essential to understanding the inherent meaning assigned to these deities in Trika literature.

11. For a general study on *mantras*, see Alper (1989), Padoux (1986).

12. For studies on the embodied aspects of *maṇḍala*, see Kasulis (1995), Gray (2006), Beatson (1976), Beck (1976), Eliade (1937), Wayman (1990: 137–224), English (2002). For a general study on *maṇḍala*, see Sanderson (1986), Padoux (2003a, 2003b), Bühnemann (2003). For the alchemical use of *maṇḍalas*, see White (1996: 175–79). For the cosmic aspect of the body in Indian traditions, see Timalisina (2008a,b), Overzee (1992).

13. I have borrowed the phrase “*deha-devagrha*” from Kṣemarāja, used in *Bhairavānukaraṇastava* 8. For a brief treatment of the deities in relation to the body, see *Dehasthadevatāstotra* by Abhinavagupta (Pandey 1963: 952–53). For the symbolism of the body and its relationship with the altar, see Inden (1985), Seidenberg (1983), Staal (1983: Chapter 5), Vedagiri (2004), Vasantha and Reddy (2004). For ritual originations of geometry, see Seidenberg (1962, 1981), Somayajipad, Nambudiri and Staal (1983).

14. For discussion of this concept, see Overzee (1992), Kasulis (1995), Lipner (1984), Lott (1978: 2–35).

15. Rather than describing the absolute reality in terms of *sat-cid-ānanda*, as the Advaita Vedāntins do, Trika texts primarily describe it in terms of *cid-ānanda*. This is also the case with the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*.

16. Deities are thus invoked as *mantramayatānu* or *vidyādeha*. See Dyczkowski (2009: 25).

17. The early Māṭṛkā worship appears to group only seven Mothers, and this is found in texts as late as *Prapañcasāratantra* (1.1), attributed

to Śaṅkarācārya. Mātrkā as matrices, the deities related to measuring the space, fits well with the development of the group of eight divinities guarding eight directions.

18. For discussion of Mātrkās, see White (2003: 27–66), Dehejia (1999), Aryan (1980).

19. See also Kṣemarāja's commentary therein. For discussion of the relation of Mātrkā deities with the phonemes, see Padoux (1986), Avasthi (1966).

20. *Vidyā* is interpreted by Kṣemarāja as *parādvayaprathā*, or the expression of transcendent non-dual awareness. The term *vidyā* generally refers to *mantras* (with a focus on the feminine aspect), and I understand the text here according to this second interpretation.

21. The *Brhatsaṃhitā* of Varāhamihira is one of the earliest references for this *maṇḍala*. For further understanding classical Indian architecture, see *Śilpaprakāśa* (Boner and Śarmā 1966). See also Rao (1988) for the application of *maṇḍala* in temple worship. Rabe (2000) considers Yoginī *yantra* as a substitute for this much earlier *yantra* in Tantric architecture. For the relation of *maṇḍala* and the temple, see Meister (1979, 1990).

22. The *Vāstuvīdhānakalpa* details various Vāstu rituals following different Vedic and Tantric systems. There are numerous *paddhatis* for the Vāstu ritual, as it appears to be one of the most common rituals shared by different Hindu communities. There are some variants in the Vāstu rituals for constructing home and temple.

23. The Vāstu *maṇḍala* of the *Śuklayajurveda* invokes earth (Pṛthvī) alongside Brahmā at the center.

24. Deities, such as Diti, Aditi, Aryaman and Pilipiccha, that are invoked in the Vāstu *maṇḍala* are not frequently found in Tantric or Purāṇic Hinduism.

25. *Rūpamaṇḍana* is one of the primary sources to detail the twenty-four emanations of Viṣṇu. See Rao (1985: 227–44) for discussion. This is also detailed in the *Agnipurāṇa*, chapter 48.

26. *yadā sā paramā śaktiḥ svecchayā viśvarūpiṇī | sphurattām ātmanaḥ paśyēt tadā cakrasya saṃbhavaḥ || Kāmakalāvīlāsa* (20–21) describes the emanation of *maṇḍala* as the expression of speech in manifest forms.

27. For instance, the Śrīcakra has two external circles of eight and sixteen petals. For the evolution of the goddess imagery, see Pintchman (1994, particularly pages 72–88 for the treatment of *prakṛti* in the *Mahābhārata*).

28. For discussion, see *Tantrāloka*, chapter 4.

29. *mūrttivaicitryato deśakramamābhāsayatya asau | kriyāvaicitryanirbhāsāt kālakramam apīśvaraḥ ||*

30. These deities govern specific directions: Īśāna is visualized upward, Tatpuruṣa in the east, Aghora in the south, Vāmadeva in the north, and Sadyojāta in the west. For discussion, see Daniélou (1964: 210–11).

31. For discussion of the application of the term *tanū*, see Srinivasan (1997: 38, 106).

32. There are other terms that describe the body that give a different sense. For instance, *śarīra*, derived from the root $\sqrt{śr}$ = to disintegrate, relates to a sense of limitation by expressing the body's disintegrating process.

33. Following the *Nirukta*, “all this is filled with *puruṣa*” (2.3).

34. *pūrvam evāham āsam iti tat puruṣasya puruṣatvam |*

35. For discussion of *kṣetra*, see Saraswati (1992).

36. Sometimes this parallel suggests the sacrificial animal. Although terms such as “thigh” (*janḡhā*) to describe a temple can be identified with the human body, the term “hoof” (*khura*) to describe other temple elements suggests animal parts, here most likely a horse's flank.

37. *śivaśaktyubhayonmeṣasāmarasyodbhavaṃ mahat | vīryaṃ tasmād deha eva mahāpīṭhaḥ samudgataḥ ||*

38. *svadehasyaiva mukhyatayā pīṭhatvam |*

39. *...sā svabhāvata ekāpi satī bhayaśokaharṣādyavasthāvaicitryād amlatiktamadhurādiprāyāneka-rasaviśeṣopaśleṣiṇī...*

40. *pīṭhaṃ hi nāma svaśarīrabhaṭṭāarakam ity uktam | tatraiva param-eśvarasya pañcadhā vahanāt |*

41. *vārāhikam ātmatanuṃ vidadhyāt |* (cited in English 2002: 240).

42. For the relation of the breath of the sacrificial animal with air, see *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 3.6.1. For cosmic correlates with the limbs of the sacrificial animal, see *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 3.6.4–5.

43. For Jain imagery of Lokapuruṣa, see Pal (1994: 82, 221, 230–32, 235). See also Coomaraswamy (1993).

44. For instance: “The sequence of experiencing the body is this universe (*bhuvanakoṣa*)” (*Vāstusūtropaniṣad* 5.21).

45. For discussion of Agnicayana, see Staal (1983), Srinivasan (1997: 7).

46. See *Tantrāloka*, chapter 3, for detail on this concept.

47. *aṅḍamaye nijapiṅḍe* (*Mahārthamañjarī* 34a); *svaśarīramayo hi piṅḍaḥ...* (*Parimala* on *Mahārthamañjarī* 34).

48. For the primary source on *piṅḍabrahmāṅḍa*, see *Siddhasiddhānta-paddhati*. For discussion, see Timalisina (2008b), Daniélou (1964: 42–59).

49. *navavyūhātmako devaḥ parānandaparātmakeḥ |*

50. *kālavhūhaḥ kulavhūho nānavyūhas tathaiva ca | jñānavyūhas tathā cittavyūhas syāt tadanantaram || nānavyūhas tathā bindavyūhas syāt tadanantaram | kālavvyūhas tathā jīvavyūhas syād iti te nava ||* (cited in Lakṣmīdharā, *Saundaryalaharī* 34).

51. The entire third section of *Tantrāloka* is very useful for understanding the Trika concept of *pratibimba*.

52. For a historical analysis of the concept of *pūrṇāhantā*, see Dyczkowski (1990).

53. *prāk saṃvit prāṇe pariṇatā*. For discussion of this citation, see Singh (1979: 141).

54. The first in this hierarchy are the restrained ones (*sakala*). Since this state has all the restraining energies active, the subject in this state is called an “ensnared one” (*paśu*). The celestial beings and demi-gods are depicted in the higher tiers of *viññānākala* and *pralayākala*, according to their limitation of cognition and volition. The deities depicted as the platform for the Mahāvidyā deities correspond to *mantra*, *mantrēśvara*, and *mantra-maheśvara*. The category of Anāśrita Śiva is depicted by the central deity of the *maṅḍala*.

55. In a discourse in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*, the hierarchy of deities reflects the hierarchy of bliss: a deity in the lower strata signifies the lower levels of bliss. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 4.3.32 asserts that the liberated being abides in the highest bliss and the bliss that living beings experience is merely a portion of that bliss. In this sequence, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 4.3.33 gives a hierarchy of bliss, starting from the bliss felt by humans, to the bliss ultimately felt by the beings in the heaven of Brahmā. See also Olivelle (1997).

56. The most common seated arrangement of Hindu Tantric deities is of five deities being the seat of the supreme divinity. These five deities—Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Rudra, Īśvara and Sadāśiva—are also called the Five Pretas.

57. *Saundaryalaharī*, for instance, describes this relation between the

seat and the seated: *śivākāre mañce paramaśivaparyañkanilayāṃ | bhajanti tvāṃ dhanyāḥ katicana cidānandalaharīm* || (verse 8).

58. For various meanings of *kula*, see Pandey (1963: 594–97). Abhinava presents multiple meanings of *kula* in a single verse: *kulam ca parameśasya śaktiḥ sāmāthyam ūrdhvatā | svātantryam ojo vīryam ca piṇḍaḥ saṃvic charīrakam* || (*Tantrāloka* 29.4). For the application of the term to denote the body, see *kulaṃ śarīraṃ ity uktam...* (cited in Jayaratha's commentary, *Viveka*, on *Tantrāloka* 29.4).

59. *viśvamayam iti kulādyāmnāyaniviṣṭāḥ |*

60. *tasyāṃ pariṇatāyāṃ tu na kaścit para iṣyate |*

61. The Kaula exegesis of bliss identifies seven tiers. Abhinava correlates the surge of bliss occurring in successive order with specific *prāṇas* as follows (*Tantrāloka* 5.43–52): (i) *nijānanda*: This bliss arises in the concentration upon the subjective aspect of the void (*śūnya*). (ii) *nirānanda*: This bliss arises in the experience of the external form of the self, in the process of *pramāṇa*. In this experience, *prāṇa* rises up to *brahmarandhra*. (iii) *parānanda*: In this bliss, the object of experience is felt as the aspect of the self. It occurs when the *prāṇa* descends from *brahmarandhra* to the heart and assumes the form of *apāna*. This bliss embodies the objective content of the self. (iv) *brahmānanda*: In this experience, the objective contents of the self are grasped, not in succession as in the case of *parānanda*, but simultaneously. This experience surges with the collective rise of objective awareness. (v) *mahānanda*: In this pure state of experiencing the self, there are neither subjective nor objective modes of awareness. This experience arises due to the surge of *udāna* that is ascending through the central channel. (vi) *cidānanda*: This is the experience of the self, manifesting itself as subject, object and the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). This experience arises when *udāna* assumes the form of *vyāna* in the central channel. (vii) *jagadānanda*: This is the experience of the self, free from all limitations (Pandey 1963: 645–48).

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