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Imagining the body in tantric contemplative practice

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Abstract

This paper addresses imagination, focusing on two words, *bhāvana* and *vikalpa*, both frequently translated as "imagination," and addresses the connections imagination has with the body, specifically within the context of contemplative practices. Drawing primarily from the 10th and 11th century philosophical school of the Pratyabhijñā of Abhinavagupta and Utpaladeva, this paper proposes a more complex understanding of imagination as consisting of different forms, some connected with the body, others not. This paper suggests that the medieval Indian understanding of imagination as linked to the body allows this term for imagination to side-step much of our current philosophical difficulty within contemporary cognitive science regarding the mind-body problem.

Keywords: Imagination, Meditation, Contemplative practice, Abhinavagupta, Body, Cognitive Science, Philosophy of mind

"Once imagined, objects exist."

David Shulman, *More than Real*

"sa naisargika evāsti vikalpe svairacāriṇi |

yathābhīmata saṁsthānābhāsanād buddhigocare || 10 ||"

"In the imagination, which moves according to its own will, the [object] arises naturally, appearing in the intellect in just the particular way it is conceived."

Utpaladeva, 1.6.10 IPK

Introduction

Imagination, the problem

This paper addresses imagination as a component of Tantric contemplative practice. I will start by pointing out that imagination is foundational for contemplative practice, inescapable particularly in Tantric practice, but also for Hinduism more generally and for Buddhism as well. In these traditions, the use of the imagination shows up everywhere as it is employed in visualizations of the deity, of the *cakras* (the subtle energy centers in the body), in *bhakti* or devotion, which conjures the form of the deity to be near (not just visually, but emotionally as well), in mantra repetition, and in *pūjā* in its many formulations of ritualized offerings. I would be remiss however, if I did not point out the shadow side of imagination, an ambivalence that renders imagination suspect. That is, for Indian traditions generally, imagination can be a tricky business, capable of sending us to divine realms or leaving us trapped in hellish worlds of mental construction. How does one navigate the difference, and

what relevance does such a distinction bear for our contemporary times? I suggest a working distinction, parsed out by terminology, and thus this paper focuses on two words, *bhāvana* and *vikalpa*, both frequently translated as "imagination." As we will see, *bhāvana* is considered helpful for generating mental states conducive to the soteriological goals of meditation practices in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. *Vikalpa*, on the other hand, tends to be disparaged as a form of mental ideation disconnected from what actually exists. This has to do with the ways that *vikalpa* generates imaginative scenarios that lead us into mentally constructed worlds, multiplied upon each other in a non-ending fabrication. We see these ascriptions to *vikalpa* early in the yoga tradition. Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* (2016) 1.9 defines *vikalpa* as a use of language that lacks a real object; it is "*vastuśūnyo*" "devoid of a real object" (Patañjali *Yoga Sūtra* 1.9). Vyāsa's commentary on this *sūtra* adds that *vikalpa* offers knowledge which is neither correct (*sa na pramāṇopārohī*); nor is it incorrect (*na viparyayopārohī ca*). Rather, it functions as a conventional and ordinary use of language (*vyavahāra*), which has no world referent, even as it conveys meaning (PYS 1.9) *Vikalpa*, then, expressly takes on the connotation we find in uses of the word "imagination" in English when, for instance, one says, "it's only imaginary." I suggest that a big part of the problem with *vikalpa* as imagination is that it is not connected to our embodied experience. Drawing primarily from the 10th and 11th century philosophical school of the Pratyabhijñā of Abhinavagupta and Utpaladeva, I propose that the distinction we see supporting imagination as *bhāvana*, but not *vikalpa*, has to do with the links *bhāvana* has to the body. I suggest that *bhāvana*'s links to the body are precisely what allows this term for imagination to side-step much of our current philosophical angst regarding the mind-body problem.¹

Bhāvana references the imagination in a way that relies upon being embodied, using the sensory capacities available to bodies. Rather than transcending the body, *bhāvana* uses the body in meditation practices and extends the body through its stereotyped physicality into a conception of body as a subtle body (*puryaṣṭaka*, *sūkṣma śarīrā*, *liṅga śarīra*). Moreover, this extension is not merely imaginary. The imagination, when it is connected to meditation praxis, has also a generative capacity to make real objects. As Sthaneshwar Timalsina observes in his superb study on imagination in Tantra, the use of imagination in visualization practices is not simply a rote mental practice; rather it engenders a new, external engagement, with "gods seen laughing, crying, singing, dancing, exploding, sweating, opening and closing their eyelids, and walking" (Timalsina 2015a, 2015b, 22–25).² Similarly, as David Shulman points out with respect to the larger Indian literary tradition, "Once imagined, objects exist" (Shulman 2012: 112). *Bhāvana* is thus a potent component of Indian religiosity. On the other hand, the term *vikalpa* points to the kind of imagination that generates objects through breaking things down into their parts and rearranging. This type of imagination relies on a multiplication of binaries that sees the world in opposing categories. *Vikalpa* works against the soteriological aims of meditative practice, and in this regard, Abhinavagupta points out:

"in *vikalpa* conceptualization the Self shines as "this", not I, whereas when the root awareness is only in "I-ness" then the Self rests in the unity of subject on the highest level"

bhavati ātmā vikalpajñāna idam iti prakāśamāno mūla-parāmarśe > hantātmani eva pramātrtaikaparamārthe viśrāmyati" (IPVV v.3, 295).

In what follows below, I first discuss Utpaladeva's assessment of imagination as *vikalpa*; I then address differences between *vikalpa* and *bhāvana*. Following this I note the links between *vikalpa* and contemporary understandings of information as comprising consciousness, particularly in relation to the mind-body problem. I also note that some contemporary proposals to resolving the mind-body problem wind up with similar conceptual understandings of consciousness as foundational and intimately embedded in matter as we see in Utpaladeva in the 10th century and his 11th century commentator Abhinavagupta. Following this, I discuss *bhāvana*, how it works, and its connections to the body and especially to the subtle body as an intermediary point between mind and matter. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts on contemporary practices of yoga and meditation in relation to both embodiment and transcendence.

Vikalpa and Bhāvana

Utpaladeva's quote above describing the operation of imagination comes from his 10th century philosophical treatise on how to recognize God, or more precisely how to recognize that one's own self is really just only the divine extended into form, not different from God (Utpaladeva 1994). The context is a discussion where Utpala reflects on the difference between *vikalpa* as disembodied imagination and another capacity, *vimarśa*, or self-reflective awareness, which is the key to what makes us sentient beings. Particularly, he notes that *vikalpa* as imagination in this case is very much like memory, but has also a special quality. It is capable of generating new things that one has never seen before, like a white elephant with two trunks and a hundred tusks. This imaginative capacity, signaled by the word *vikalpa* here, stands in contrast to the kind of insight that *vimarśa*, the inward self-reflection, delivers.

This is, Utpaladeva tells us, because this kind of imagination ultimately relies on a kind of negation and contrast, knowing things by chopping up the world into various opposing conceptions, even if one then puts them back together in novel ways (Torella 2002: 129). He then gives us a prescription which is designed to undercut his Buddhist philosophical opponents' ideas of no-self, the Buddhist idea of identity as a product of difference, *apoha*.³ Namely, Utpaladeva tells us that Recognition, in contrast, does not need the violence of exclusion, does not need that kind of thought predicated on chopping up the world, because instead it relies on the awareness of the ever-present reality of consciousness, a consciousness that undergirds the unifying sense of self. So we see imagination (by the way, along with memory) as a secondary operation enacted by a self hopelessly mired in a duality. This chopping up the world to fashion new things does not actually help, in Utpala's estimation, on a path towards really recognizing one's own real self.

On the other hand, however, the word *bhāvana* indicates a use of imagination in line with the goals of self-recognition, the goal of Utpala's *Pratyabhijñā* teaching. Abhinavagupta, who writes commentaries on Utpaladeva's seminal text on how to recognize God, i.e., the Self, the *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā* (Abhinavagupta 1985), includes this imagination as a component of advanced spiritual practice. For instance in describing the benefits of Utpaladeva's teaching on action in the *Īśvara Pratyabhijñā Vivṛti Vimarśinī*, where Utpala tells us that the divine is not the action-free spirit (*puruṣa*) that *Sāṃkhya* presumes, Abhinava notes: "With this teaching, which is useful for meditation/imagination (*bhāvana*)..." (IPVV vol.3 p. 257). Here Abhinavagupta uses the word *bhāvana*

synonymously with meditation. He understands it as a privileged form of spiritual practice; one might venture a kind of meditative imagination.⁴

So what is the difference between *vikalpa* and *bhāvana*? I propose that the usefulness of *bhāvana* as imagination has to do with its connection to the body. Unlike *vikalpa* which operates through mentally-oriented processes, reducing the components of the mind's awareness to manipulable objects, the "*idam*," "this," we saw in the quote from Abhinavagupta above, *bhāvana* instead eschews the mind's capacity to cut things apart and rearrange them. *Bhāvana* points to an embodiment that embraces the body's affects and emotions as a holistic habitus.⁵ For Tantra particularly, this attention to the body is a fundamental part of its pushback against the world-denying asceticism of traditions like Advaita Vedānta, and to some extent, forms of Buddhism, which advocate transcendence at the expense of the body. In a passage offering a rationale for engaging the world, for not simply opting for an exclusionary transcendence, Abhinavagupta employs this same stem word, *bhāva*, as a way of linking the body and world to the self as knower. He says:

Now, it would not be correct to say that for our present topic – i.e., to convey the recognition of the Lord– it is not necessary to establish the knowability of everything, [since all we really need to be concerned with is the highest, the recognition of the Lord. However this is not correct, because] only to the extent that one makes the world into an object, to the extent that it is known, can one then transcend the level of object, of thing to be known and allow the true sense of the knower (*pūrṇa bhāvā satya pramātrtā*) to take root in the heart, its fullness being grasped by the inner organ [mind, intellect and ego] as beyond the realm of the knowable.

[*Na ca viśva prameyatā pādanam na upayogi prakṛtāyām Īśvara pratyabhijñāpanāyām. Viśva prameyikaraṇe hi tāvat prameya padottīrṇā tāvad antaḥkaraṇa pratilabdha pūrṇa bhāvā satya pramātrtā hṛdayaṅgamikṛtā bhavet.* (IPVV v.3: 255)]

Even as the goal of this Tantric path is still a transcendence into a pure subjectivity, still, there is no direct path that can afford to bypass the world. The world must be known and embraced fully (*pūrṇa bhāvā*) within. This is not a simple mental or intellectual knowing, but rather a fullness of being as a vital step in this process of transcendence. Thus *bhāva*, from the root *bhū*, "to be" understands this being as located within the world, within a body. The fullness of being (*pūrṇa bhāvā*) with its invocation of the world supplies the link between the materiality of the world and its transmutation,⁶ its absorption within the heart as the subjectivity of the self. It is not an accident that we see this use of the body elsewhere in Tantra, such as in its use of transgressive ritual, which, for instance, precisely incorporates impure bodily substances, since the use of impure bodily substances highlights this theme of corporeality (Sanderson 1988: 671). We also find this use of the body in Tantra's assertion of a subtle body counterpart to the physical body, as well as in Utpala's and Abhinavagupta's frequent formulations of the divine as the "body" of consciousness, or "body" of the world. Indeed the very opening of the teachings on Recognition begin with "*Oṃ namaḥ saṃvidvapuṣe śivāya*," "honor to Śiva, who is the *body* of consciousness."⁷

Shulman, discussing the understanding of *bhāvana* in 17th century poetics, notes,

“*bhāvana* has a marked personal and individual quality: each of us imagines his or her own world into being, not *ex nihilo*, of course, but on the basis of a particular subjective experience” (Shulman 2012: 103).

Here he gestures toward embodiment as a component of imagination, even if he does not explicitly take this direction as he theorizes the imagination. For our own purposes, I suggest it may make sense to keep in mind cognitive science linguists George Lakoff’s and Mark Johnson’s proposals that metaphors, both primary and complicated secondary metaphors, and in Lakoff and Johnson’s view, even complex philosophical systems, all derive from embodiment. The way we see the world arises out of our bodies’ location in space, the way our arms and legs move, the kinds of neuronal connections the brain’s synapses take. Metaphor, that perennial tool of the imagination, the force that lifts thought into its spectacular flights of creativity, the poet’s best friend, these cognitive scientists tell us, is intimately connected to being in a body. With this, it should come as no surprise to find imagination within the context of meditation for these thoughtful medieval Indian thinkers as also deriving from our lived engagement with the body, our personal and subjective experiences, even if as a culture today we tend to think of meditation popularly as bringing us to transcendent, bodiless spaces (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999).

Information and *Vikalpa*

Those interested in contemporary cognitive science may have also noted that two features of *vikalpa* turn out to be fairly important features for cognitive science studies of the mind and brain. These two features, generating new objects and the capacity to address memory, are used to quantitatively assess and classify other species’ levels of consciousness. As Merlin Donald points out, we can catalogue these operational capacities along a variety of scales and these two capacities tend to put various species, chimpanzees for instance, solidly in the camp of what he dubs the “consciousness-club” (Donald 2002: 123–5). In other words, for contemporary cognitive science, species that display a capacity for generating new objects and the capacity to employ memory in cognitive processes rank more highly on a quantitative scale that hierarchically classifies species on a gradient of more or less conscious. When a given species demonstrates a capacity for generating new objects and employing memory in cognitive tasks beyond a particular threshold, that species is classified under the rubric of possessing consciousness. This is a way of admitting the possibility of consciousness for a dog or a chimpanzee, while denying it to other life forms, such as amoebas or bacteria. This particular criteria, a capacity to generate new objects and the capacity to employ memory in cognitive processes is also what some technologically-forward-looking-proponents of artificial intelligence, such as Ray Kurzweil, propose will demonstrate the eventual incursion of computers as conscious or sentient beings on a level comparable to humans. Yet, Utpala and Abhinavagupta do not think these capacities (i.e., imagination in the sense of *vikalpa* as a capacity to generate new objects and memory) to be germane to what consciousness is. Rather, as we saw above, Utpaladeva points to *vimarśa*, a self-reflective awareness as the defining element in consciousness. The imaginative generative capacity of *vikalpa*, in contrast, is rejected since, as Abhinavagupta points out, it relies on objectification, making things “this” “*idam*” instead of I. In this respect, *vikalpa*’s propensity to make things *idam*, “this,” tends to lead away from what is primary for consciousness, namely, subjectivity (*ahantā*),

which is consciousness in essence. Abhinavagupta at one point even glosses consciousness (*cit*) as subjectivity, literally “I-ness” (*ahantā*), telling us, “the word ‘consciousness’ refers to subjectivity, I-ness” (IPVV v.3: 273 “*citāv iti ahantā*”). Moreover, as we saw with the *Yoga Sūtra* 1.9 commentary, this capacity to generate new objects remains fundamentally disembodied, untethered to the world because *vikalpa* is fundamentally *vastuśūnyo*, lacking a real-world referent and not connected with any real object. Instead, *bhāvana*, with its links to an embodied being as meditation practice is more useful than *vikalpa*’s imaginative capacity to put together new things.

So what do we make of this disjunction between what our medieval Tantric philosophers understand as the driver for consciousness, *vimarśa* rather than *vikalpa*, and what so many contemporary western thinkers—from futurist Ray Kurzweil to roboticist Hans Moravec to neuroscientist David Eagleman—think, in terms of the presence of a capacity to generate new objects as a way of measuring levels of consciousness? Who is right? Is the defining feature of consciousness a capacity to generate new objects, the free-floating and unruly *vikalpa* that Utpaladeva rejects? —even as it functions as a decisive signal for a contemporary promise of immortality in a disposable and manufactured silicon-metal body?

Certainly, even among the choir of futurists and epiphenomenalist materialists, there has been a healthy skepticism and pushback against this mechanistic hopefulness, perhaps best exemplified in Daniel Dennett’s humorous “brain in a vat” thought experiment (Dennett 1981: 310–324). The larger question is: how did we get here? In a seminal work, N. Katherine Hayles maps our modern transformation of the body into its new algorithm-centered conception as information patterns (Hayles 1999). This view of bodies as arrangerable codes winds its way into a world that can imagine the body as so many bits for Scotty to beam up; the information code is key and its materialization and de-materialization is simply a matter of a few more centuries of technology to help us along. This imaginative transformation of consciousness into writable and erasable code is what Hayles characterizes as “how information lost its body” (Hayles 1999: 5).

In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Hayles traces the previously described understanding of consciousness to post-World War II explorations into cybernetics, with the 1940s Macy conferences in particular playing a decisive role in forging a new paradigm for thinking about communication (Hayles 1999: 7). A consequence of the expanding role of “information”—information as an essentially atomistic conception of knowledge: chopped up and counted, as “bits” that can be quantified and rearranged—is that it sparked the successful use of computers as calculating machines. The power of a metaphor shows up here as the adoption of computer models of bits of information as a schematic for *biological* systems, namely, us. The computer with its binary code becomes a model for how consciousness works in the human brain. In this model, information is just information, bits of data that exist independently of the medium of communication. Transferring a song’s data from a phonograph to a cd to your hard disk to the “cloud” does not change the song. Like James T. Kirk, the song can materialize and dematerialize from the “cloud” of nowhere.

The discovery of DNA reinforces this model of information as a replicable and, significantly, a quantifiable code. One might perhaps even wonder if DNA’s discovery is not in part predicated on assuming a model that quantifies information. In any case, what the notion of information does is to take an already widely embraced mechanistic

understanding of matter—matter as object *and* of the body as matter to be manipulated—and to extend this mechanistic conception of the body beyond its traditional provenance of flesh and bones into new, untrod territory - into the realm of thought and mind. The 20th century conception of information allows a new niche for calculation. The mechanistic view of the body that generates knowledge by chopping it up and calculating can now be applied to consciousness as well. Descartes' neat bifurcation of the world into *res cogitans* and *res extensa* collapses and the previously sacrosanct realm of mind slides into the *res extensa*, into the category of what can be quantified.

This understanding of consciousness as “information” has substantially influenced how much of contemporary cognitive science thinks in relation to the mind-body connection and this model has become a dominant, if not the primary, model for scientific consensus on how consciousness functions. As Hayles has pointed out (1999: 5–24), its historical contingency tends to be neglected, even with philosophers and scientists who push back against a facile mechanistic view of how consciousness operates. In any case, a number of contemporary cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind are beginning to advocate for a changed model.

Along these lines, David Chalmers' articulation of the problems with our current dominant mechanistic model of the mind has been particularly influential. In his explanation of the “hard problem” of how it is that we are conscious at all, Chalmers has suggested that a better model might be a kind of panpsychism, which proposes an incipient consciousness to even the barest, smallest forms of matter (Chalmers 1996). Similarly, Thomas Nagel's provocative clarion call against materialism, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, opts also in its final constructive moments for a kind of panpsychism, which understands consciousness as a fundamental feature of matter (Nagel 2012). The problem for both Nagel and Chalmers is the difficulty in quantifying *qualia*—the “what's it like to be a bat” (Nagel 1974).

What these rejections of our current mechanistic model of mind and brain have in common is that they both point out that our current mechanistic model is flawed because it has no real way of taking into account a subjective perspective. The idea of *qualia*—what it's like to be a person or a bat—is not derivable from any external observation. The “what's it like to be x” ultimately devolves on a phenomenologically centered experience and as such is fundamentally derived from a subjective perspective. Our contemporary model of information, on the other hand, is embedded in third-person objectivity—this is how it brings in the scientific capacity for quantification.⁸ In any case, for our purposes here, these models pointing to the importance of *qualia* share with Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta an emphasis on subjectivity. We can recall here Abhinavagupta's linkage of consciousness (*cit*) with “I-ness” (*ahantā*), an essential subjectivity.

Moreover, these panpsychist proposals also share with the Tantric cosmologies that Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta settle on for their body-embracing Tantra an incipient attention to the pervasiveness of consciousness in matter. Like these contemporary panpsychisms, Utpala's and Abhinavagupta's panentheism suggest that matter is nowhere bereft of consciousness; consciousness pervades all through matter. For instance, quoting from a scriptural text to reinforce his point, Abhinavagupta tells us that

everything in the cosmos has the nature of consciousness, even that which appears unconscious. He says:

We read in the *Nareśvara Vivekaḥ*⁹:

Bound souls are both conscious and unconscious in form. Because of the quality of consciousness the great Lord is only one. With this there can't be anything at all which is lacking consciousness.

(*Yat nareśvaravivekaḥ*

"aṇavaścidacidrūpāścittvād eko maheśvaraḥ |

tena kecid acittvāt tu katham ākṣepabhūmayah ||" iti

(IPVV v.3: 260)

For our purposes, leaving aside the theological implications of deity with this medieval text's "great Lord" (*maheśvara*), Abhinavagupta underwrites his non-dualism with a pervasive consciousness that forms the substrata of all that is. Like Nagel and Chalmers who stumble towards a panpsychism with consciousness everywhere, so also Abhinavagupta's Tantra uses a pervasive consciousness as the glue that holds together a complex external world in relation to a mind that cognizes it. In one sense, this philosophical system operates by assuming a position quite far, if not nearly diametrically opposite, from our currently dominant mechanistic scientific model, which, as Hayles has pointed out (1999: 9–12), understands information as atomistic "bits" of knowledge that can be chopped up and counted and divorced from the embodied experience of a subject experiencing the world in a body. The practice of dividing into binaries and opposing bits for our medieval thinkers is the operation of *vikalpa*. As such, it is understood as a habit of mind imposed upon us by a fathomless, if creative, ignorance—*Māyā*. Meditation frees us from this unconscious compulsion and restores the deeper holistic awareness of pervading consciousness.

This deeper holistic awareness is for us mostly counter-intuitive. Without relaxing into a practice of subjectivity, we will tend to miss it. Abhinavagupta explains the operative mechanism of *Māyā* in a typology of mis-seeing, fundamentally caused by our mental habits. He tells us, "and here, even though in reality pure consciousness alone exists, when it appears as some external object, then it is said to be the first type of misapprehension caused by *Māyā*" [*Atra ca cinmātratāparamārthe 'pi yat vedyatābhāsanam, etad ādyaṃ viparyāsaṃ māyīyam* (IPVV: 280)]. We should keep in mind also that for Abhinavagupta and Utpaladeva, *Māyā* is not, as so often depicted, the maligned mirage that leads us astray, but rather a fundamentally creative power of divinity. Abhinavagupta tells us, "The Archetype of *Māyā*, is not accepted merely as the material cause in the body and as separate [from the Lord], but rather is considered as the inseparable Energy (*śakti*) of the Supreme Lord" (IPVV: 270).¹⁰

What trips us up as we lapse into mis-seeing is our propensity to ignore our subjective and unmediated awareness in favor of a third person objectification of the world, which ultimately limits us. A kind of self-alienation arises from chopping up and counting our thoughts, and by extension, the world. This particular propensity to mis-see, *Māyā*'s power over us, as one might guess, operates specifically through the imagination as *vikalpa*, chopping up the world to make an expanding multiplication of external objects.¹¹

Abhinavagupta and Utpala thus steer us away from *vikalpa's* imaginative dissection of the world by shifting away from an objective appraisal of the world; instead they begin from a position of subjectivity. Rather than locating truth, i.e., an accurate assessment of the world, in objectivity, in a model that divides up the world into objects and bits, instead this medieval philosophical system prioritizes the perspective of subjectivity as foundational and more closely capable of determining what really is. In its own historical context, a key novel philosophical corrective of this Tantric school is to connect this foundational subjectivity to materiality—to link it to bodies.

In a sense, one might read Abhinavagupta and Utpala in relation to Nagel and Chalmers as starting at opposite ends, and moving to similar middle points. Nagel and Chalmers both begin from a premise of matter as foundational and within an objective, third-person centered system; from this position, they both move to recognize a need to intimately link matter to a subjective mind-centered perspective. Nagel points out the incommensurability of *qualia* within an objectively oriented system (Nagel 1974: 437–42; Nagel 2012: 44). Chalmers focuses particularly on isolating the element of subjectivity that cannot be reduced to an objective perspective, what he calls the phenomenal concept of mind in contrast to the psychological (Chalmers 1996: 11–18). Abhinavagupta and Utpala, on the other hand, start from a mind-centered idealism found also in the Vijñānavāda Buddhism and Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, and then, in a Tantric move, recognize the need to encompass the materiality of the body.

Curiously, we might suggest that a conceptual understanding of information as not connected to the body, as Hayles puts it, “how information lost its body,” oddly looks like the kinds of transcendence we find in Indian religious theories of soul that have the soul disconnected from the body, with the body functioning as just mere vessel. For instance, when the *Bhagavad Gītā* tells us that the soul (*dehin*¹²) casts off worn out bodies and takes on new ones the way we throw away old clothes (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.22), its picture of the mind-body relationship sounds strangely not so far off from Kurzweil's proposal for downloading his consciousness into robot bodies, which can be easily tossed aside and replaced as they wear out.

Abhinavagupta's conception of the mind-body relation works against this model. Rather than a multiplication of disposable bodies, which in the *Gītā's Sāṃkhyan* view sees all these body replacements as insentient matter (*prakṛti*), the physical body here in Abhinavagupta's model is instead an outflow of a deeper subtle body (*puryaṣṭaka, sūkṣma śarīrā*), which is simply consciousness, allowing itself to condense into physical matter. As Abhinavagupta tells us, “In fact the categories of earth and so on are only just forms of the Energy of the supreme Lord.”¹³ So pure consciousness, which is deity, the supreme Lord, goes through a process of becoming increasingly dense, more distinctly outlined. An intermediary stage in the process is the subtle body, which is what reincarnates. This subtle body carries the template that ultimately condenses into the physical body. The movement is from subjectivity to objectivity, so the physical body arises as consciousness moves from understanding itself as “I” into understanding itself as the “it” of the object, the materiality of the body. The subtle body, and by extension the physical body that arises out of it, are never bereft of the underlying, pervasive panentheist consciousness (*cit, samvid*) that contracts itself in becoming a physical and a subtle body.¹⁴ Abhinavagupta's view is panentheist rather than panpsychic, since that element of divine transcendent awareness never quite abandons even the most dense

expressions of physicality. Philosophically, this allows Abhinavagupta and Utpaladeva to avoid the ‘two kinds of stuff’, the intractable dualism that plagues any easy resolution of the mind-body problem. This problem of dualism is what both Nagel and Chalmers try to get around by proposing their respective panpsychisms.

One might also venture that a key Tantric divergence from the transcendence-focused models of the ascetic traditions like Advaita Vedanta has to do precisely with the use of a kind of embodied imagination, *bhāvana* to generate a quasi-hybrid spirit body, the subtle body, to keep one foot, pun intended, still in the world of matter here. In this sense, imagination as *bhāvana* is key to meditative practice in part because it opens into this quasi-materiality. It affords a capacity to navigate into realms of spirit that are partially still material and at the same time of a rarefied non-corporeal materiality. While it sounds like an oxymoron to have a non-corporeal materiality, it precisely describes the subtle and spirit realms so prevalent across religious folk traditions (and contemporary Western pop culture), but absent¹⁵ in current theorizing of the mind-body relationship. The subtle body is still a body, still composed of a kind of materiality, even if this materiality is not perceptible by our normal sensory capacities. Philosophically it also functions to link the realm of mind with the realm of matter and body. It is an Indian Tantric response to the mind-body problem.

Bhāvana

If *bhāvana* functions to generate the subtle body, how does it work? The word *bhāvana* comes from the root *bhū* which means “to exist, to be, or to become.” *Bhāvana* typically entails an emotion-laden affect practice involving the mind and the body and the spirit. The English language does not really have a comparable word to match this idea. It is not quite the same thing as emotion, since it points to a much more deeply felt, in-depth experience than emotion. Specifically, *bhāvana*’s links to embodiment afford a lived and subjectively enriched imaginative process.

As I mentioned above, in meditative practice, *bhāvana* especially is invoked as a way of interfacing between a material, physically present reality and a non-corporeal spirit-based reality. *Bhāvana* draws from our familiar solidity of physicality, familiar images and objects as a springboard for an imaginative entrance into a kind of space that houses intentionalities and entities lacking the kinds of bodies we are used to. The *bhāvana* one carries, an emotion-laden affect, can push in one direction or another the shape and quality of the subtle body, which then eventually shows up in the comport of the physical body. The idea here is that the subtle body carries with it the signatures, the traces of our various life experiences. The body is not just a physical object unconnected to the mind or to one’s memories. Rather the body, especially the second, subtle body, carries with it a history of the person’s experiences, emotional and physical. The *bhāva* is the mood or affect this embodied condensation of a life-history generates. A place can also have a particular mood or affect, a *bhāva*. And this also becomes an important term for art; a *bhāva* can describe the mood of a scene in a play.

Bhāvana, the verbal noun indicating an action for this root word, is then a kind of imaginative practice to generate this affective field for the body. The Pratyabhijñā system proposes to use the imagination employed in *bhāvana* to steer this multiply

oriented body towards an expansive sense of subjectivity. As a practice it also tends to be connected across Indian traditions with *bhakti*, devotion, since one imagines the deity or teacher/guru as present through a bodily, sensory imagination. For instance, cultivating an affect, a particular *bhāva*, is key for the success of meditative practice more broadly in Tantric contexts, as we see, for instance, in a 16th-century text, the *Great Blue Tantra (Bṛhannīlatantra)* 1984:

“Even if one does 100 complete rituals and 10 million recitations of the mantra, there will be no attainment (*siddhi*) if one doesn't have *bhāva*.” *kalpakotījapenāpi pūjāyāḥ śatakena ca | na siddhirjāyate subhru yadi bhāvo na jāyate (Bṛhannīla Tantra: 4.113)*

And also:

One can do a lot of mantra recitation, perform many fire sacrifices and engage in difficult and painful austerities for the body. But without *bhāva*, the mantras don't give fruit. And then why do such difficult practices?

bahujāpāt tathā homāt kāyakleśādivistaraiḥ | na bhāvena binā devi mantravidyā phalaprādā (Bṛhannīla Tantra: 21.24)

So this imaginative meditative practice involves something more than a mere rote exercise of ritual performance; it requires also an emotional, devotional (*bhakti*) component as well.

Bhāvana also references a difference in practice than what we find in classical yoga. Abhinavagupta links *bhāvana* to the classical three elements of meditation in the yogic tradition, *dhāraṇa* (concentration), *dhyāna* (meditation) and *samādhi* (deep meditative trance). In this case *bhāvana* is a separate practice added to these three well-known elements of Patañjali's yoga, and it entails a kind of imaginative feeling into a state of being, which incorporates the physical, emotional, and subtle body. Abhinavagupta says:

And from the force of imagining (*bhāvana*) and appropriating within one's self the innate nature of the *puruṣa* (spirit, person) who is Alone, who is stated in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2016) to be one who is free of the bondage of having to do works, and from the force of concentration (*dhāraṇa*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and *samādhi*, which is the culmination of that pathway, he obtains that [state of *vijñānakevala*¹⁶] and experiences its special benefits.

[gītādy uktakārmabandhavandhyakevalapuruṣasvarūpabhāvanābalāt tadantādhvadhāraṇādhyānasamādhibalāt ca labhyate iti (IPVV v.3: 322)].

So the creative imagination of *bhāvana* is used in conjunction with meditative practices prescribed by earlier yogic traditions and complements them. With *bhāvana* one appropriates into one's sense of self a kind of feeling-being state that imagines what it's like to be free of bondage. In some sense this recalls Nagel's "what it's like to be a bat", but in this case, rather than bat or wasp, one uses this embodied imagination to tap into what it's like to be a liberated *puruṣa*, someone free of karma. This feeling into "what it's like to be x" also entails that this imaginative practice, carries a capacity to mold and transform the body, first the subtle body and then following on this, the

physical body. In this respect this is more than mere empathy, feeling what it's like to be another, bat or person. It entails also an embodied habitus, a whole identity as being in the world which *bhāvana* addresses and attempts to transform and direct. Just as Nagel's formulation entails an assumed embodiment, so also does *bhāvana*, and *bhāvana* in this case proposes the possibility of transforming this embodiment.

The easy path

I opened with Utpaladeva's discussion of the distinction between imagination as *vikalpa* and *bhāvana*. In the final verse to this text Utpala describes this path of Recognition as the easy path (*sulabho*).¹⁷ What makes it easy? Our medieval thinkers lean on the familiarity of everyday embodiment. It puts to good use our already well-trod habits of being in our bodies, in our ordinary worlds. The path delineated here is meant as a kind of everyday, ordinary sort of *sādhana*, something universally available to everyone, not just to the monk meditating in a cave.

Moreover, Abhinavagupta tells us that the result of this particular path, which focuses on one's already, always near sense of "I" is able to remove delusion (*mohāpasāraṇa phalaṃ*). So, Abhinava says, he "points out this teaching as a demonstration of everyday *sādhana*, everyday practice (*vyavahārasādhana*)."¹⁸ The easy practice that anyone can do any time is simply to pay attention to what is already always present, one's own natural subjectivity. The word used here, as I note, is "*vyavahārasādhana*," hinting towards a kind of practice that involves worldly transactions. To appreciate the radical gesture here we should keep in mind that the idea of *vyavahāra*, daily life, gets short shrift elsewhere in Indian prescriptions for *mokṣa*, enlightenment. For instance, in the Buddhist Nāgārjuna's verses on the middle way (Garfield 1995), and also with Śāṅkara's adoption of this Buddhist conceptual schema of two realities, *vyavahāra* signifies the lower, unavoidable entanglements of worldly life. In other words, it points to embodiment. It references the necessity for falling in line with the world in a practical way, adopting the dualities of good and bad, pain and pleasure, just to get by with our bodies. It insinuates a kind of fall from grace out of the highest understanding of reality, into the unfortunate messy reality of stuff here. All tinged with a sort of commercialism.

Now, despite the authors' assurances of its ease as a spiritual practice, we should note, this practice of Recognition has not so far been so readily adopted by 21st century Westerners, despite the stereotype of commercialization and ease attached to contemporary new-age spiritual pursuits. Rather, the trends we see in terms of meditation practices in the US related to Hinduism derive in large part from the very popular network of yoga studios, devoted to *haṭha* yoga, a number of which are now incorporating attention to meditation practices as well. No doubt there have been numerous voices of complaint regarding the commercialization of yoga, the tendency to make it a little too easy and this-worldly (Jain 2014).

In this respect, however, one could also make a cogent case arguing that the commercialism thrives at least in part precisely because of a dualist dialectic that yoga in the West espouses. It may be no accident our culture can sustain both a futurist's promise of downloading consciousness into a mechanical robot-computer body *and* a yoga that speaks about consciousness that, following the *Gītā*, takes birth in new bodies like so

many clothes. Of course the irony of this not lost in a consumerist culture with a proliferation of pricey designer clothes designed especially for attaining transcendent states in yoga class.¹⁹

The purveyors of yoga in the West have leaned on a model of yoga as transcendence instead of this “easy path” of embodiment that Utpaladeva gives, perhaps precisely because of a still embedded incommensurable split between mind and body in the contemporary West. The transcendent, bodiless spaces of meditation conceived in our current popular imagination are of a piece with our current conceptualization of consciousness as information—dissectable, atomized and ready to beam us up.

Endnotes

¹I want to thank Chris Miller for suggesting this explicit link between the mind-body problem and the differences between bhāvana and vikalpa. I also want to thank the anonymous reviewer for their thoughtful comments.

²See also Sthaneshwar Timalsina, *Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

³This representation, strikingly similar to some of Derrida’s conceptualizations of difference is one that the Pratyabhijñā writers focus on extensively in the formulation of a unifying self that persists independently of memory.

⁴IPVV vol.3 p. 257: “bhāvanādy upayogitayā upadeśena...” Bhāvana has this meaning again at IPVV vol.3 p. 273 (Ahmed 2010).

⁵Here, by “habitus” I suggest the kind of inarticulate, affectively embraced mode of being that we find, for instance, in Sara Ahmed’s discussion of happiness as a kind of affective being in the world, in her “Happy Objects.”

⁶Note the cvi compound in hṛdayaṅgamikṛtā.

⁷IPVimarśinī p.1.Also, IPVV p.vol 3, p.257: “Consciousness, which has a form possessing attributes, with a body made of the energy of knowledge” “jñānaśaktivapuṣā dharmirūpaḥ.” Elsewhere, just by way of a few more instances, but not thorough, see IPVV vol. 1, p.7, the opening verse of the IPVV Kriyādhikāra, vol. 3, p.1, to mention just a few. I argue as well, but not in the short space of this paper, that a key component of Utpala’s and Abhinava’s philosophy, freedom, “svātantrya” fundamentally hinges upon inclusion of the body through the incorporation of kriyā, action as a component of knowledge, jñāna.

⁸Or, one might see this as merely a veneer of objectivity.

⁹This lost text should not be confused with the dualist-oriented āgama, Nareśvara Parīkṣā.

¹⁰IPVV: 270: “Māyātattvaṃ dehe na upādānakāraṇamātratvena pṛthaktvena saṃmatam, api tu parameśvaraśaktitayā.”

¹¹Abhinavagupta describes the process in relation to memory in Ipvv vol. 3, p. 348. He says: “For the sake of addressing the idea that dualistic thinking in this way precedes remembering, he now will say, ‘remembering occurs within dualistic thinking’. And in dualistic thinking the Self also falls to the level of intellect. Consequently, the object becomes a separate creation [from the Self] and the same thing occurs in relation to happiness, etc. So, because dualistic thinking occurs first, [the object] is remembered as separate, just as it was initially experienced, [as a separate object].”—“smaraṇasya abhidhātum adhunā eva vakṣyati “vikalpyamāne smaryamāṇa” iti. Vikalpane ca ātmā api buddhibhūmipatitaḥ pṛthak sṛṣṭa eva vedyas tādr̥śam eva ca sukhādi, iti pṛthagasya

smaraṇaṃ vikalpanapūrvatvāt yathānubhavam eveti.” Note here that the word Abhinavagupta uses for what I translate as “dualistic thinking” is the same “vikalpa” discussed earlier as an imagination that chops up the world.

¹²Dehin is, literally, the one who possesses a body.

¹³IPVV p.270: Tathā hi mṛdādiḥ padārthaḥ parameśvaraśaktirūpa eva.”

¹⁴Abhinavagupta concludes the previous quote with, “Hence in this way all beings have Śiva as their inherent nature,” IPVV 270: “Ata eva sarvabhāvānāṃ śivaḥ svabhāvas,” pointing back to the supreme Lord, Śiva who is pure consciousness as always present.

¹⁵Repressed? Jeff Kripal (2016) suggests with Whitley Strieber in *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York: Tarcher Penguin 2016) that our current conceptions of the mind-body relationship ignores an overwhelming accumulation of evidence suggesting other forms of non-corporeal materiality.

¹⁶Vijñānakevala is a particular state, also referencing a level of self-awareness that some entities have—but not most of us humans who are embodied here. In this state, the entity or person who reaches this state demonstrates a species of enlightenment that the *Gītā* encourages, where the person has no sense of duality and no sense of a distinction between self and other. For Abhinavagupta’s system this particular state does not have a capacity to effect things in the world, which makes it not less desirable.

¹⁷IP vṛtti 4.18: “āyatna siddhir,” “attainment without effort,” and Utpala adds in his auto commentary, “sulabho,” “easy.”

¹⁸IPVV vol.1 p.20: śāstrakāraḥ iti, parapatipādanopāyarūpaṃmohāpasāraṇaphalaṃ svasaṃvitsiddhe svaprakāśe’pi pramāṇtattve maheśvare smāryate sa paraṃ paro dṛṣṭasād-harmyāt |iti nyāyena vyavahārasādhanam pramāṇam śāstrarūpaṃ ya upadiśati. See also Torella discussing this p. 173 IPv and this phrasing as well on IPVV vol.1, p.39.

¹⁹Not to mention the irony of designer clothes designed to wear out quickly to fuel the market for more clothes.

Competing interests

The author declares that he/she has no competing interests.

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