

Consciousness and Freedom according to the Śiva Sūtras

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Abstract

The logic of materialist science fails when observers are considered. How can inanimate matter, governed by fixed laws, lead to mind? To bring in consciousness as a separate category like space, time, and matter, as suggested by many physicists and neuroscientists, leads to further paradox. This very issue was considered with great subtlety in the Vedic tradition of India. Here we consider one of the late classics of this tradition that deals with the question of consciousness, laws, and freedom—the justly famous Śiva Sūtras (c. 800 C.E.). We present a new translation of the Śiva Sūtras along with a commentary.

*rūpaṃrūpaṃ pratirūpo babhūva
tadasya rūpaṃ praticakṣaṇāya*

He became the original form of every form
It is his form that is everywhere to be seen.

-Rigveda 6.47.18

Introduction

Our knowledge of the physical world is based on empirical associations and inductive generalizations. This process of knowledge accumulation has led to the discovery of the laws of the physical world. But how do we study the nature of consciousness, which cognizes the physical world, makes associations between empirical facts, and provides an *a priori* conceptual context for perception? There is no way to observe one's own awareness because we become aware through the associations with the phenomenal world, which includes the ongoing processes in the brain. The Vedas deal precisely with this central question of the nature of knowledge. The consciousness aspect of the Vedas was emphasized most emphatically by Dayānanda (1824-1883) and Aurobindo (1872-1950), and can be seen discussed with even greater directness in the Upanishads.¹

It has been less than a century that the theories of relativity and quantum physics have brought the observer centerstage in physics. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Vedic ideas, with their emphasis on cognition, should have been a source of enduring inspiration for many contemporary scientists. As is well known, the Vedic idea of *brahman* as a representation of all possibilities (as in the statement *prajñānam brahma*), was the inspiration behind the conception of the quantum-mechanical wavefunction defined as the sum of all possibilities.²

Few would deny that modern science has had great success in explaining the nature of the physical world. But these successes have not brought us any closer to the resolution of the mystery of consciousness behind those explanations. In the application of quantum theory to the macroworld and in the neuropsychological explorations of the brain, one can no longer ignore the question of the observer.³ The notion that the mind emerges somehow out of the complexity of the connections inside the brain is too simplistic to be taken seriously. It puts us in the realm of Baron Münchhausen, who pulled himself out of the bog by his own bootstraps! If mind emerges from matter, how does it obtain autonomy? If the world is governed by laws then how do we have free will? If our autonomy (free will) is an epiphenomenon, then are we walking shadows? Should one consider consciousness to be the ground-stuff of reality? If so, then what is the connection between consciousness and the physical world?

These are precisely the questions that we come across repeatedly in the Indian traditions. Is there something to be learnt from their insights.

The *Aphorisms of Śiva*, or *Śiva Sūtras* (*ŚS*), are a late reiteration of the Vedic view of consciousness. According to one legend, Vasugupta (c. 800 C.E., Kashmir) “saw” the aphorisms (sūtras) in a lucid dream. The Śiva Sūtras led to the flowering of the Kashmiri schools of consciousness (Kashmir Śaivism). It is due to its highly lucid exposition of the

issues that Kashmir Śaivism has come to be quite influential in contemporary scholarship.

This paper presents a translation, along with the Sanskrit text, of the 78 aphorisms of the ŚS.⁴The number 78 has a very important significance in the Vedic altar ritual: the earth-altar is assigned the number 21, the atmosphere-altars the number 78, and the sky-altar the number 261.⁵The supreme ritual is building the sky-altar but this is done in a sequence which includes the other altars as well. Indra is an atmospheric god in the Vedas; he is lauded the most because he is the intermediary in the strivings to reach the sky or the heavens. In the ŚS, Śiva has replaced Indra as the intermediary. We know this happened when the nakṣatra Maghā, representing the ādhidavika aspect of Indra, stopped rising at vernal equinox due to the precession of the earth.

In order not to burden the reader with an unfamiliar vocabulary, and to provide a fresh view of the text, the commentary provided in this paper is not based on the commentatorial tradition from within Kashmir Śaivism. I present my translation, as well as my commentary, in as modern terms as possible.

The individual and the universal in the ŚS

The Vedic texts speak of two kinds of knowledge which may be described by the dichotomies individual (*aparā*) and universal (*parā*), ordinary and extraordinary, or lower and higher. According to ŚS ordinary knowledge comes from phenomenal associations. In other words, this knowledge can only be in terms of the associations of the outer world. But the associations in themselves need something to bind them together.⁶The binding energy is called *mātrkā*. It is *mātrkā* that makes it possible for us to understand words or symbols strung together as language. Lacking *mātrkā*, computers cannot understand language or images.

How do we reach universal knowledge starting from ordinary knowledge? Here ŚS begins with a description of universal consciousness, which, as a unity, is called Śiva or Bhairava. Śiva makes it possible for the phenomenal associations of the physical world to have meaning. Nevertheless, the domain of the union of Śiva and the phenomenal world is puzzling and astonishing (1.12). This astonishment becomes most acute as one switches from the consciousness of the “enjoyer” to that of the “observer.” How much of one’s phenomenal self is the “enjoyer” and how much is the “observer”? How can these proportions be changed? And what is the meaning of the transformation when these are changed?

The idea of the two minds is the restatement of a metaphor that goes back to the Rigveda 1.164.20 where the mind is likened to two birds sitting on a tree; one of them eats the sweet fruit while the other looks on without eating. One of the birds represents the universal consciousness while the other signifies the individual consciousness. In reality, there is only one bird; the second bird is just the image of the first energized by the fruit! There is a paradox here which is left unresolved. The resolution of this paradox is within the nature of root consciousness (Śiva, *prakāśa*, *cit*), which is what makes it possible for us to comprehend any meaning. Consciousness can also reflect on itself! In later texts this capacity is called *vimarśa*.

Another metaphor that has been used in the Vedic texts is that of the sun of consciousness illuminating the associations in the mind. This illumination is facilitated by *icchāśakti*, the “power of the will;” Umā represents this śakti. As Umā illuminates specific associations, the

subject becomes the enjoyer with respect to these associations. The subject (Śiva) becomes one with the ground stuff of the associations (Umā). This is the union of Śiva and Śakti that takes place continually, representing a unceasing process.

Innate knowledge is taken to emerge from the mind, which is equated with *mantra*, taken here not as a formula but the inherent capacity to reflect. *Mantra* merges into a “apprehension” (*sākṣātkāra*) of the reality that lies beyond material associations.

Consider sound made meaningful in terms of strings that, as words, have specific associations. But what about the “meaning” of “elementary” sounds? The “elementary” sounds are the ones informed by the *śakti* underlying the senses. This śakti comes into play as one opens the “crack” between the universal and the individual. The individual then enters a state where knowledge is the goal.

A detachment from associations is the key to the knowledge of the Self—the universal being. One is supposed to take oneself (i.e. one’s psyche or mind) as an outsider! By separating the senses from their associations, one is able to reach to the heart of the Self.

The fourth state

The classification of consciousness into the three states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep is an old one. Here it is claimed that the transcending fourth state, where one is *creatively* aware, can be experienced in any of the three states. Such a creative awareness is accompanied by insight and new connections.

The experienced world has a structure but this structure can be comprehended only by the Self.

The mind

ŚS uses a striking image where the mind, embodied by various “energies,” seeks an existence in which knowledge is its food. The mind is the Self, but it must transcend its conditioned manifestation to be *itself*.

But there are other questions. What we perceive as the outer reality is created by the mind. The universe is this dance which comes into form only when there is an observer. Unity engenders a polarity.

The mind is defined as *mantra*. Since it enables the acquisition of knowledge, so it is energized by the breath of the eternal.

On transformation

Individual knowledge, in itself, cannot lead to higher knowledge, although it might be informed by it. The development of individual knowledge does, however, set up a process of self-transformation, which is described in Part 3 of ŚS. This process requires a calm mind and a reaching for the source of the cognitions. In this sense, the search for individual knowledge does facilitate the acquisition of universal knowledge.

This part addresses clearly how one transforms oneself from being the “enjoyer” to the “observer.” But the self that emerges is an actor (3.9). Nevertheless, this does not mean

that the individual's humanity is diminished. In fact, this allows for freedom and creativity (3.10). So the process of creativity is a manifestation of the universal. "When separateness is gone, action can lead to creation" (3.37). It is asserted that the fourth (transcendental) state of consciousness should inform the lower states (such as waking, sleep, and deep sleep). Various wondrous attributes of the *free* person are described.

The mind and the body are coupled in a variety of ways. It is not surprising, therefore, that one can heighten the awareness of the mind through an awareness of the body. One must breathe properly (3.23). Likewise, by meditation on sounds and words one can separate and join perceptions (3.25).

The Śiva Sūtras

1. Universal consciousness

- 1.1 Consciousness is the Self.
- 1.2 (Ordinary) knowledge consists of associations.
- 1.3 Sets of axioms generate structures.
- 1.4 The ground of knowledge is mātṛkā.
- 1.5 The upsurge (of consciousness) is Bhairava.
- 1.6 By union with the energy centers one withdraws from the universe.
- 1.7 Even during waking, sleep, and deep sleep one can experience the fourth state (transcending consciousness).
- 1.8 (Sensory) knowledge is obtained in the waking state.
- 1.9 Dreaming is free ranging of thoughts.
- 1.10 Deep sleep is māyā, the irrational.
- 1.11 The experiencer of the three states is the Self.
- 1.12 The domain of the union is wonder.
- 1.13 The power of the will is the playful Umā.⁷
- 1.14 The observed has a structure.
- 1.15 By fixing the mind on its core one can comprehend the perceivable and emptiness.
- 1.16 Or by contemplating the pure principle one is free of the power that binds (to associations).
- 1.17 Right awareness is the knowledge of the Self.
- 1.18 Blissful sight is the goal of samādhi.
- 1.19 The body emerges when the energies unite.
- 1.20 Elements unite, elements separate, and the universe is gathered.
- 1.21 Pure knowledge leads to a mastery of the wheel (of energies).
- 1.22 The great lake (of space-time, of Self) is experienced through the power of *mantra*.

2. The emergence of innate knowledge

- 2.1 *Mantra* is the mind.
- 2.2 Effort leads to attainment.
- 2.3 The secret of *mantra* is the being in the body of knowledge.
- 2.4 The expansion of the mind in the womb is the forgetting of common knowledge.
- 2.5 When the knowledge of one's Self arises one moves in the sky of consciousness—the Śiva's state.
- 2.6 Guidance is essential (i.e., the guru is the means).
- 2.7 The awakening of the wheel of *mātrkā* (the binding energies).
- 2.8 The body is the oblation.
- 2.9 The food is knowledge.
- 2.10 With the extinction of knowledge emerges the vision of emptiness.

3. The transformations of the individual

- 3.1 The mind is the Self.
- 3.2 (Material) knowledge is bondage (limiting association).
- 3.3 Māyā is the lack of discernment of the principles of transformation.
- 3.4 The transformation is retracted in the body.
- 3.5 By the quieting of the vital channels, the mastery of the elements, the withdrawal from the elements, and the separation of the elements (is achieved).
- 3.6 Perfection is through the veil of delusion.
- 3.7 Overcoming delusion and by boundless extension innate knowledge is achieved.
- 3.8 Waking is the second ray (of consciousness).
- 3.9 The Self is the actor.
- 3.10 The inner Self is the stage.
- 3.11 The senses are the spectators.
- 3.12 The pure state is achieved by the power of the intellect.
- 3.13 Freedom (creativity) is achieved.

- 3.14 As here so elsewhere.
- 3.15 Emission (of consciousness) is the way of nature and so what is not external is seen as external.
- 3.16 Attention to the seed.
- 3.17 Seated (in the highest power) one sinks effortlessly into the lake (of consciousness).
- 3.18 The measure of consciousness fashions the world.
- 3.19 As (limited) knowledge is transcended, birth is transcended.
- 3.20 Māheshvari and other mothers (sources) of beings reside in the sound elements.
- 3.21 The fourth (state of consciousness) should be used to oil the (other) three (states of consciousness).
- 3.22 Absorbed (in one's own nature), one must penetrate (the language) with one's mind.
- 3.23 Balanced breathing leads to balanced vision.
- 3.24 The lower plane arises in the center (of the language).
- 3.25 What was destroyed rises again by the joining of perceptions with the objects of experience.
- 3.26 He becomes like Śiva.
- 3.27 The activity of the body is the vow.
- 3.28 The recitation (of sounds) is the discourse.
- 3.29 Self-knowledge is the boon.
- 3.30 He who is established is the means and knowledge.
- 3.31 For him the universe is the aggregate of his powers.
- 3.32 Persistence and absorption.
- 3.33 Even when (there is) this (maintenance and dissolution) there is no break (in awareness) due to the perceiving subjectivity.
- 3.34 The feeling of pleasure and pain is external.
- 3.35 The one who is free of that is alone (conscious).
- 3.36 (Owing to) a mass of delusion, the mind is subject to activity.
- 3.37 When separateness is gone, action can lead to creation.

- 3.38 The power to create is based on one's own experience (of the Self).
- 3.39 That which precedes the three (states of consciousness) vitalizes them.
- 3.40 The same stability of mind (should permeate) the body, the senses and the external world.
- 3.41 Craving leads to the extroversion of the inner process.
- 3.42 When established in pure awareness, (the craving) is destroyed and the (empirical) individual ceases to exist.
- 3.43 Although cloaked in the elements one is not free, but, like the lord, one is supreme.
- 3.44 The link with the vital breath is natural.
- 3.45 (The breath is stilled by) concentrating on the center at the top (within the nose); of what use (then) are the left and the right channels or suṣumnā?
- 3.46 May (the individual) merge (in the lord) once again!

The Sanskrit text

The First Part: Śāmbhavopāya

- caitanyamātmā [1.1]
jñānaṃ bandhaḥ [1.2]
yonivargaḥ kalāśarīraṃ [1.3]
jñānādhiṣṭhānam mātṛkā [1.4]
udyamo bhairavaḥ [1.5]
śakticakrasandhāne viśvasaṃhāraḥ [1.6]
jāgratsvapnasuṣuptabhede turyābhogasaṃbhavaḥ [1.7]
jñānaṃ jāgrat [1.8]
svapno vikalpāḥ [1.9]
aviveko māyāsaṃsuptam [1.10]
tritayabhoktā vīreśaḥ [1.11]
vismayo yogabhūmikāḥ [1.12]
icchā śaktir umā kumārī [1.13]
dṛśyaṃ śarīraṃ [1.14]
hṛdaye cittasaṃghaṭṭād dṛśyasvāpadarśanam [1.15]
śuddhatattvasandhānād vā apaśuśaktiḥ [1.16]
vitarka ātmajñānam [1.17]
lokānandaḥ samādhisukham [1.18]
śaktisandhāne śarīrotpattiḥ [1.19]
bhūtasandhāna bhūtapṛthaktva viśvasaṃghaṭṭāḥ [1.20]
śuddhavidyodayāccakreśatva siddhiḥ [1.21]
mahāhradānusandhānānmantravīryānubhavaḥ [1.22]

The Second Part: Śāktopāya

- cittaṃ mantraḥ [2.1]
prayatnaḥ sādhaḥ [2.2]
vidyāśarīrasattā mantrarahasyam [2.3]
garbhe cittavikāso 'viśiṣṭa vidyāsvapnaḥ [2.4]
vidyāsamutthāne svābhāvike khecarī śivāvasthā [2.5]
gururupāyaḥ [2.6]
mātṛkācakrasambodhaḥ [2.7]
śarīraṃ haviḥ [2.8]
jñānam annam [2.9]
vidyāsaṃhāre taduttha svapna darśanam [2.10]

The Third Part: Āṇavopāya

- ātmā cittaṃ [3.1]
jñānam bandhaḥ [3.2]
kalādīnaṃ tattvānām aviveko māyā [3.3]

śarīre saṃhāraḥ kalānām [3.4]
 nāḍī saṃhāra bhūtajaya bhūtaikaivalya bhūtapṛthaktvāni [3.5]
 mohāvaraṇāt siddhiḥ [3.6]
 mohajayād anantābhogāt sahajavidyājayaḥ [3.7]
 jāgrad dvitīyakaraḥ [3.8]
 nartaka ātmā [3.9]
 raṅgo'ntarātmā [3.10]
 prekṣakāṅīndriyāṇi [3.11]
 dhīvaśāt sattvasiddhiḥ [3.12]
 siddhaḥ svatantrabhāvaḥ [3.13]
 yathā tatra tathānyatra [3.14]
 visargasvābhavyād abahiḥ sthitestatsthiḥ [3.15]
 bījāvadhānam [3.16]
 āsanasthaḥ sukhaṃ hrade nimajjati [3.17]
 svamātrā nirmāṇam āpādayati [3.18]
 vidyā'vināśe janma vināśaḥ [3.19]
 kavargādiṣu māheśvaryādyāḥ paśumātarāḥ [3.20]
 triṣu caturthaṃ tailavadāsecyam [3.21]
 magnaḥ svacittena praviśet [3.22]
 prāṇa samācāre samadarśanam [3.23]
 madhye'vara prasavaḥ [3.24]
 mātrāsvapratyaya sandhāne naṣṭasya punarutthānam [3.25]
 śivatulyo jāyate [3.26]
 śarīravṛttir vratam [3.27]
 kathā japaḥ [3.28]
 dānam ātmajñānam [3.29]
 yo'vipastho jñāhetuśca [3.30]
 svaśakti pracayo'sya viśvam [3.31]
 stithilayau [3.32]
 tat pravṛttāvapyanirāsaḥ saṃvettrbhāvāt [3.33]
 sukha duḥkhayor bahirmananam [3.34]
 tadvimuktastu kevalī [3.35]
 mohapratisaṃhatastu karmātmā [3.36]
 bheda tiraskāre sargāntara karmatvam [3.37]
 karaṇaśaktiḥ svato'nubhavāt [3.38]
 tripadādyanuprāṇanam [3.39]
 cittasthivat śarīra karaṇa bāhyeṣu [3.40]
 abhilāśādbahirgatiḥ saṃvāhyasya [3.41]
 tadārūḍhapramites tatksayāj jīvasaṃksayaḥ [3.42]
 bhūtaikañcukī tadā vimukto bhūyaḥ patisamaḥ paraḥ [3.43]
 naisargikaḥ prāṇasaṃbandhaḥ [3.44]
 nāsikāntarmadhyā saṃyamāt kimatra savyāpasavya sauṣumneṣu [3.45]
 bhūyaḥ syāt pratimīlanam [3.46]

Concluding Remarks

This brief paper is just an introduction for the layperson or the cognitive scientist to the riches of the Kashmir school of consciousness. The contents of ŚŚ are very cryptic and one may not be convinced that it represents any advance over the ancient Upanishadic tradition. But later texts speak of important details in the process of cognition. The structure of the Kashmir school of consciousness goes beyond the categories of Sāṅkhya. I hope that others will examine other classics in this tradition⁸ and see for themselves whether it has any lessons for contemporary science; further connections between modern science and this tradition are being investigated by several scholars.

Sanskritists who have worked on Indian theories of consciousness have been ignorant of the important insights of modern physics relating to the process of observation. The argument that one need not know contemporary insights since they were unknown when the old texts were written is just plain wrong. This argument is based on the assumption that the sages operated in the milieu of materialist physics, and if they did not, they ought to have! But materialist physics is a relatively modern paradigm that may be traced back to Newton and Leibnitz.

Modern science has helped liberate analysis from the straitjacket of this reductionist logic. So why shouldn't one take advantage of modes of thought which are close to the logic of the visions of the sages of the old?

Schrödinger's use of Vedic insights is testimony to the fact that the metaphors in use by the ancient thinkers were holistic and similar to that of modern physics. But do we need to go beyond even this? Can the process of meditation on the nature of consciousness lead to insights that remain beyond the pale of our current "scientific" understanding of the nature of reality?

Kashmir Śaivism deals with concepts that also have a bearing on other questions: How do the senses emerge in the emergence of the mind? Could there be more senses than we possess? The whole mythology of Śiva⁹ is a retelling of the astonishing insights of the science of consciousness.

But just as matter coalesces into a variety of substances according to laws (*ṛta*), can we find the laws of the manifestation of the Self through the various senses and the mind? Do the Vedic texts and the tantras only describe the various levels of this manifestation, or are these laws to be found too? Will there be a convergence in the languages of myth and science?

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Notes

1. For an overview of the Vedic tradition, see the recent book coauthored by me (Feuerstein et al, 1995); this book summarizes new insights from archaeology and history of science.

2. Moore, 1989; Kak, 1995b.
3. Kak, 1995a-b, 1996a-c.
4. For earlier translations, see Jaideva Singh (1979) and Dyczkowski (1992). Note that Jaideva Singh has 77 sutras whereas Dyczkowski has 79; for the reason why the canonical text is likely to have had 78 sutras, see Kak (1994).
5. Kak, 1994, 1995c.
6. This is the binding problem of neuroscience to which no solution, within the reductionist paradigm, is known; see Kak, 1995a for details.
7. Umā is the dual to Śiva representing vitality and energy.
8. E.g. Abhinavagupta, 1987, 1989; Dyczkowski, 1987.
9. Kramrisch, 1981.

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