



The Pulsating Heart and Its Divine Sense Energies: Body and Touch in Abhinavagupta's Trika Śaivism

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Abstract

This paper is a study of the significance of body and touch in the embodied thinking and lifeworld of the Hindu Tantric visionary Abhinavagupta (c. 975–1025 c.e.). I elucidate Abhinavagupta's embodied phenomenology of Śiva-Who-Is-Being, focusing on his multivocal metaphor of the pulsating heart and its divine sense-energies. I show that Abhinavagupta understood the central act of salvation, the recollection (*vimarsā*) of Being, or ultimate consciousness, as being a bodily felt process. Abhinavagupta drew on an earlier body of discourse and practice, the Kaula Trika substratum, whose pivotal ritual was that of sexual union. Thus, Abhinavagupta recovered the body and senses for consciousness in a sensuous and erotic phenomenology, so that *vimarsā* was understood precisely as the “body's recollection of Being,” the bodily felt awareness of the Pulsating Heart.

Keywords

body and touch in religion, sense-energies, Abhinavagupta, embodied phenomenology, tactile awareness, sensuous ritual, self-transformation

... it is through the understanding and development of our various capacities in perception, gesture, and motility that we must work out first, and work out last, our potential for Selfhood in relation to Being as a whole. (David Michael Levin, *The Body's Recollection of Being*)¹

Hey You, Moon-Peak ...
at the sudden surprise of your Touch ...

¹ Levin 1985:8.

my consciousness . . .
 melts and melts away.
 (Abhinavagupta, *Dhvanyālokalocana*)²

This article focuses on the significance of body and touch in the worldview and lifeworld of Abhinavagupta, the Hindu Tantric sage of Kashmir (c. 975–1025 C.E.), as articulated in his encyclopedic synthesis of Trika Śaivite discourse and practice, the *Tantrāloka* (*TĀ*; “The Illumination of the Tantra”), and other related works. I elucidate Abhinavagupta’s embodied phenomenology of Śiva-Who-Is-Being by focusing on his multivocal metaphor of the pulsating heart and its divine sense-energies. Thus, in part, I am responding to a call by Lawrence Sullivan (e.g. Sullivan 1990) to redress an imbalance in History of Religions scholarship that devalues the body and the senses. I show that Abhinavagupta understood the body to be the primary locus for the central salvational act of awareness, the recollection (*vimarśa*; most literally, “touching”) of Being (*sattā*),³ or the highest reality, depicted in various ways by Abhinavagupta, including as Śiva, Śiva-Śakti, Bhairava, Consciousness (*cit, samvid*), and Mantra-Consciousness.⁴ Such awareness, described as “touching the fullness” (*pūrṇatā-sparśa*) of reality, refers to the bodily felt awareness of Being, and was most provocatively evoked by Abhinavagupta with his many-layered mytheme of the pulsating heart. In a hermeneutics of retrieval, Abhinavagupta drew on an earlier body of discourse and practice, the Kaula Trika substratum, whose pivotal ritual performance was one of sexual union. Abhinavagupta’s purpose was to recover the body and senses for consciousness in a sensuous and erotic phenomenology. Thus, the central act of salvation for Abhinavagupta was understood precisely as the “body’s recollection of

² Abhinavagupta, *Dhvanyālokalocana* 3.30: *tvāṃ candracūḍaṃ sahasā spṛśantī prāṇeśvaram gādḥaviyogaptā / sā candrakāntākr̥tiputrikeva samvidvilitīyāpi vilitīyate me ||*. The Sanskrit is taken from Isayeva 1995:179, n.56.

³ The term “Being” (*sattā*) is used throughout a classic and foundational work by Abhinavagupta’s paramaguru Utpaladeva, the *Īśvarapratyabhijñānārikā* (“Stanzas on the Recollection of the Lord”); see Torella 1994. Torella discusses this term on p. 121, n. 29.

⁴ I will use all of these terms throughout this article, following Abhinavagupta’s own lead in employing different terms to emphasize different aspects of Being.

Being,”⁵ the touching or bodily felt awareness of the Pulsating Heart. I explicate Abhinavagupta’s phenomenology by tracing his evocation of the Pulsating Heart in three phases, focusing on (1) the divine sense-energies of the Pulsating Heart, (2) the intertwining of self and other, and the fusion of the senses, and (3) the vitality of the Pulsating Heart.

I. The Divine Sense-Energies of the Pulsating Heart

In this first section, I focus on the energies of the body in order to elucidate Abhinavagupta’s notion of awareness; these energies are referred to by Abhinavagupta as divine sense energies (*devatā, śakti*) of the Pulsating (*sphur-*) Heart (*hr̥daya*). Awareness (*vimarśa*) is precisely the bodily felt awareness of Śiva. Awareness may not be separated from the body and its energies; awareness takes place in, through, and as energies of the body. I will show that Abhinavagupta refers to touching (*spṛś-*) and related tactile sensations, in describing *vimarśa* as a process of the body recollecting and recovering contact with Śiva; *vimarśa* then is a process of becoming aware of, transacting in, and transforming the divine sense-energies of the Heart, a practice of embodied ecstasy.

Abhinavagupta’s model of *vimarśa* is rooted in the earlier Kaula ecstatic vision, an embodied process of attracting the sky-going *yoginīs* and becoming their new Lord or Master. Alexis Sanderson has described the evolution that took place between earlier ecstatic practices and the later internalized practices that reached their culmination in Abhinavagupta and his tradition:

The Kāpālika . . . sought the convergence of the Yoginīs and his fusion with them (*yoginīmelaka, -melāpa*) through a process of visionary invocation in which he would attract them out of the sky, gratify them with an offering of blood drawn from his own body, and ascend with them into the sky as the leader of their band.

⁵ I take this phrase from Levin 1985. In my use of this phrase and in my general approach to Abhinavagupta’s lifeworld, I am methodologically influenced by Levin, who borrows the term “Being” most directly from Martin Heidegger, but distinguishes himself from the latter by continually reminding us that awareness of Being is always embodied. What I want to show in this article is that such an embodied phenomenology is relevant to the study of Abhinavagupta and to the History of Religions; my purpose is not to make any facile comparisons between Abhinavagupta’s Being and Heidegger’s Being.

The Kaulas translated this visionary fantasy into the aesthetic terms of mystical experience. The Yoginīs became the deities of his senses (*karāṇeśvarīs*), revelling in his sensations. In intense pleasure this revelling completely clouds his internal awareness: he becomes their plaything or victim (*paśu*). However, when in the same pleasure the desiring ego is suspended, then the outer sources of sensation lose their gross otherness. They shine *within* cognition as its aesthetic form. The Yoginīs of the senses relish this offering of “nectar” and gratified thereby they converge and fuse with the *kaula*’s inner transcendental identity as the Kuleśvara, the Bhairava in the radiant “sky” of enlightened consciousness (*cidvyomabhairava*). (Sanderson 1988:680)

Thus, Sanderson points toward the *yoginīs* becoming the divine sense-energies, and the master of the energies becoming the Heart, the Center of these energies. Now what I will focus on in this article is how Abhinavagupta’s interpretation of the Kaula tradition is an embodied phenomenology of consciousness. In other words, I am not interested here in how one set of ideas was superimposed over an earlier set of ideas (for that, we may turn to Sanderson’s various writings),⁶ but, rather, in how Abhinavagupta’s interpretation was meant to describe bodily perceptions and experiences. Abhinavagupta understood that any transformation of consciousness must be a transformation of the body and its senses. Thus, recovering the body for consciousness in his embodied phenomenology, Abhinavagupta infused the power and energy of the Kaula ecstatic vision into his own vision, into his own model of recollection, maintaining a continuity between the process of awareness in his tradition and the previous tradition. He does this not merely to take over previous metaphysical systems with his new metaphysics, but to continue the Kaula process of practicing an embodied ecstasy, the process of transacting in energies, attracting all energies, the sky-going *yoginīs*, and gathering them back to the Heart, as a process of liberating and, thus, re-empowering the body and senses.

Awareness as Touching

I want to first argue that in recovering the body for consciousness, Abhinavagupta retrieves the intimate link between touching and awareness.⁷

⁶ In addition to Sanderson 1988, see Sanderson 1985, 1986a, 1995.

⁷ On “touching” and its relation to awareness, from the perspective of philosophy, see Merleau-Ponty 1962 and 1968; Levin 1985; Wu 1998, especially 294 ff. (section

Indeed, the sense of touching is ranked highest of all perceptions in Abhinavagupta's blueprint of the categories of reality (*tattva*) (*TĀ* 11.29a–34a), and becomes equated with the highest level of Śakti. Further, the highest process of awareness, *vimarśa*, from the root *mṛś-* “to touch,” is in fact grounded in this primordial sense. Now why is that so significant? Previously, the notion of *vimarśa* has been described as a type of disembodied cognition. For example, in Alexis Sanderson's earliest work, *vimarśa* is translated simply as “self-cognition” (Sanderson 1988:695). There is an implication that *vimarśa* is a purely cognitive process, leaving out the body. In Sanderson's later works and in the context of his theory of “overcoding” (the idea that one metaphysical system encompasses a previous one), he changes his translation of *vimarśa* to “representation” (Sanderson 1992, esp. 288, n.32). The new translation still reflects a metaphysical bias that favors conceptual systems and *concepts of the body* over the bodily processes of awareness and *perceptions by the body*.⁸ For Sanderson, “representation” refers to the way a practitioner conceptually represents reality to himself, the way he thinks — without a body — about reality. Of course I recognize the great value of Sanderson's work in understanding Abhinavagupta's ideas, including *vimarśa*, in the context of the conceptual systems that

on “Inner Touch”); most recently, Chrétien 2004:83–131 (section entitled “Body and Touch”), provides a phenomenological reading of Aristotle's writings on touch, and argues that both vision and hearing are grounded in the human capacity to touch. From the perspective of psychology and anthropology, see Montagu 1971, which discusses the “mind of the skin,” or how touching affects behavior. On the aesthetics and anthropology of the senses, including the sense of touch, see works by David Howes and Constance Classen, especially Howes 1991 and Classen 1993. From the perspective of religious studies, see Holler 2002; Chidester 2000; and Glucklich 1994. For a neuroscientific account on how limited awareness ordinarily blocks out the deep and complex tactile dimension that may be recovered by subtler forms of awareness, see Austin 1998:399–402 (his chapter “The Feel of Two Hands”). Finally, on touch and its relation to robotic consciousness, see Anne Foerst 1994.

⁸ I am following a distinction made by Ariel Glucklich (1994). Glucklich has also argued that the notion of “encompassment,” used in Vedic Studies, reflects a metaphysical favoring of conceptual systems. I am arguing that the notion of “overcoding,” used in Tantric Studies, particularly by Alexis Sanderson, similar to the notion of “encompassment,” also reflects this metaphysical bent toward cognition without the body. On “overcoding” and its relation to “encompassment,” see Lawrence 1999:36–37.

Abhinavagupta had to contend with. Nonetheless, consciousness for Abhinavagupta can never be reduced to pure thinking (Gupta 1988:35). Now *vimarśa* may be said to be a type of “knowing,” but this is not a pure disembodied cognition or purely metaphysical representation. Even as a type of “knowing” it must be one that includes the body; in other words, *vimarśa* is a process of bodily knowing. Thus, my examples below are meant to show that Abhinavagupta understood awareness as a type of touching precisely for the purpose of recovering the body in his understanding of consciousness.

To redress the imbalance that favors mind over body, and to finally get at the bodily dimension of the term *vimarśa*, I translate this term as “the body’s recollection of Śiva” or even “the body’s recollection of Being.”⁹ For Abhinavagupta, although the recollection is bodily, the term “Śiva” in the phrase points to Abhinavagupta’s insistence that ordinary forms of awareness, i.e., the dualistic awareness of things, ordinarily turn one away from awareness of Śiva. I will also be translating the term *vimarśa* as “reflexive awareness” or “guardian awareness.” “Reflexive awareness” indicates that the highest awareness is a process of continually turning back toward Śiva or Being, the ultimate reality which for Abhinavagupta is the ground of all awareness. The term “guardian awareness” indicates a “deep” and “full-bodied” awareness that guards or protects Being, or maintains contact with Being.¹⁰ With an “awakened heart” and aware of its ground, a “background of joy,” the Self practices “intense vigilance” of Being, experiencing an “intimate union” between Self and Other, subject and object.¹¹ For Abhinavagupta,

⁹ My phrase purposely refers to Levin 1985, a work which has deeply inspired and influenced me in this article. This is an analysis of the connection between awareness and the body, in the deep process of recollecting Being. The work is also especially relevant in understanding the deep gestures that make up part of the tantric *sādhana* (the “*mudric*” processes of the body). Levin 1989 and Levin 1988 are also relevant; the former especially to listening and speaking (“*mantric*” processes of the body), and the latter especially to visualizing and seeing (“*maṇḍalic*” processes of the body).

¹⁰ I am following David Michael Levin’s description of awareness which recovers its etymological links to guarding, maintaining, and protecting Truth and Being. See Levin 1985:270 and 276.

¹¹ Lilian Silburn, commenting on Abhinavagupta, *TĀ* 4.130–146 and Jayaratha’s corresponding commentary, in Silburn 1988:143.

guardian awareness implies that one touches or makes contact with all things, and, at the same time, one touches or makes contact with Being, the highest reality.

The primordial meaning of the term *vimarśa*, “to touch,” is always retained by Abhinavagupta as he unfolds what it means to be aware; to recollect Being is a type of “touching.”¹² Although as we will see this special form of awareness arises in the act of external forms of touching, Abhinavagupta is also referring to internal tactile sensations to describe awareness. Touching then can be “inner touching,” the bodily felt sense of Being.

Abhinavagupta’s linking of the two notions is supported by etymology. *Vimarśa* is derived from the root *mṛś-*, meaning “to touch.” Other primary meanings of the term include “to stroke, to grasp, to take hold” (Monier-Williams 1899; Lanman 1864). In the form *marśana*, it may mean “touching a woman,”¹³ and indeed Abhinavagupta used the term to refer to awareness that occurs in the context of sexual union (Skora 2001, chapter 4).

The association of the notion of “knowing” with notions of “touching a woman,” or “sexual intercourse” is found in other cultural contexts. Thus, in the Hebrew Bible for example we find the term *jada*, meaning both “knowing” and “sexual intercourse.” To hint at the profound significance touching holds for awareness, and why touching, skin, and sexual intercourse are linked with energy, consciousness, and the process of knowing, by both Abhinavagupta and others, I briefly digress to point to the scholarship of Anne Foerst, who has described her work as both a theologian at Harvard Divinity School and robot scientist at MIT’s artificial intelligence laboratory.¹⁴ Foerst has argued

¹² At the same time this is not to say that the other senses were unimportant. In fact, all the senses were important for Abhinavagupta and his tradition. Thus the *Vijñānanabhairava Tantra* recommends that the yogin meditate on the joy derived from all kinds of sensations: touching in sexual intercourse, seeing a friend, eating a delicious meal, and hearing a beautiful song. Further, in discussing the secret ritual, Abhinavagupta continues an essential notion of Tantra: practice is always embodied; one attains identity with Bhairava through the body (*kāya*), speech (*vāc*), and mind (*manas*).

¹³ A possible Slavic parallel to the root *mṛś-* is **mrkati* meaning “to copulate.” Cited in Alper 1987:190–91, n.1.

¹⁴ I am following a summary of Foerst’s research that is found in Kiesling 1999:52–53. See also Foerst 1994.

for a new paradigm in understanding the conditions for making robots more aware, i.e., what it would take for higher forms of consciousness to arise. She and others in her field are discovering that consciousness must be embodied, and thus her work attempts to allow robots to develop a capacity for “touching.” Seeing that consciousness may have its “genesis” in touching and the skin, Foerst is especially influenced by the interpretation by a fourteenth-century rabbi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, of a biblical passage (Genesis 3:21) in which God gives human beings the gift of skin and, thus, the gift of touching. Foerst understands that skin and touching ultimately make human beings aware, allowing both a sense of Self and a sense of Other. Thus, sexual union, the most intense form of touching, becomes the paradigmatic way that we go out of ourselves, and thereby get back into ourselves. Interestingly, a passage by Abhinavagupta on Being’s fullness of consciousness (*TA* 3.100) is similarly interpreted by Don Handelman and David Shulman to mean: “We know ourselves only in a context of not knowing” (Handelman and Shulman 1997:187). In other words, full self-awareness may only be developed in relation to other-awareness. For both Abhinavagupta and Abraham Ibn Ezra, the skin is the interface serving as both boundary and passageway between Self and Other. Sexual union takes place through the skin, the human interface, allowing the Self to be face-to-face with the Other.

Returning to the etymology of *vimarśa*, its meanings of “to know, to consider, to take hold of mentally” are only derivative, arising from the primary meanings of *mṛś-* that link it to touching. One knows an object precisely because one is able to touch it or make contact with it; and even seeing an object is touching it. Thus, Gonda notes that for the Vedic seers, seeing in fact was precisely understood as touching.¹⁵

That Abhinavagupta himself held the sense of touch to be of primary importance in the development of self-awareness is seen in Abhinavagupta’s unusual and emphatic response to a verse in the *Spandakārikā*

¹⁵ Gonda 1969:19. Diana L. Eck also notes the connection between seeing and touching in her classic work, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Eck 1998:9). Eck does not incorporate this insight into her account of temple worship and the use of images, both of which include an important tactile dimension. For a critique of this text from the perspective of “anthropology of the senses,” and how both “tasting” and “touching” complement “seeing” in particular contexts of Hindu worship, see Pinard 1991.

(*SpK*; “The Stanzas on Vibration”). The verse describes the experiences of a yogin experiencing subtle forms of awareness, and Abhinavagupta’s response clearly highlights the significance of touch. Abhinavagupta’s response is unique as other commentators on the same verse essentially ignore the fact that the verse mentions only four of the senses, excluding the sense of touch (Dyczkowski 1992:251). However, Abhinavagupta writes:

Smell, Taste, and Form, becoming more and more subtle, dwell respectively within the Earth, up to the end of the level of qualities, and up to the end of *Māyā*. However, abiding [at even a higher level of reality] at the end of the principle of Energy, being most subtle indeed, is a certain Touch, which yogins always long for. And at the limit of this Touch, [there arises] recollection, whose form is the pure sky of consciousness. One who mounts this moves toward the supreme whose nature lights up by itself.¹⁶

For Abhinavagupta the *SpK* verse means that touch is the most important of the senses in that unlike the other senses which can hinder one’s ascent toward the highest consciousness, touch in fact is an aid to liberation and higher forms of awareness.¹⁷

Abhinavagupta also refers back to the *Svacchandatantra* (*SvT*; “The Tantra of Unbound Bhairava”), which describes three stages of experience that the tantric practitioner traverses on his way to touching the highest reality (here and in the rest of this paragraph, I am following and summarizing Dyczkowski 1992:255). Significantly, whereas the first two stages are marked by visual and aural sensations, the final and highest stage is marked by a subtle “tactile sensation,” compared to the feeling of “an ant crawling along the body.” In this stage the tantric practitioner becomes “the cause of the universe” as the “power of [his] consciousness” blissfully and fully touches at once both the external world and the Reality known as Śiva.

¹⁶ *TĀ* 11.29a–31b (in Dwivedi and Rastogi 1987): *dharāyām guṇatattvānte māyānte kramaśaḥ sthītāḥ / gandho raso rūpamantaḥ sūkṣmabhāvakrameṇa tu // iti sthite naye śaktitattvānte pyasti sauṣṭmyabhāk / sparsāḥ ko’pi sadā yasmai yoginaḥ sprhayālavah // tatsparsānte tu saṃvittih śuddhadivyomarūpiṇī / yasyām rūḍhaḥ samabhyeti svaprakāśāt-mikām parām //*

¹⁷ See *TĀ* 11.32a–34a. On touch as a vehicle to the awareness of God, in the writings of the medieval Christian mystic St. John of the Cross, see Chrétien 2004:130–31.

Abhinavagupta's commentator, Jayaratha, substantiates that this touching sensation is an "inner touching," or something felt within the body, describing it as a kind of "tingling" sensation (*pipīlikā*),¹⁸ relying on the same term found in the *SvT* (4.382). Such inner touching may be understood as the "tingling" or "chill down one's spine" felt in the flash of awareness. Hindu sacred narratives have much to contribute here, from Rāma's attainment of a new awareness, not merely cognitive but "transformative" and "generative,"¹⁹ and hence I would argue bodily, to Arjuna's initial transformation, reflected in his body by the tingling of his flesh, as well as the narrator Sañjaya's own recollection of that transformation and subsequent sublimation of the flesh. Lilian Silburn appropriately refers to this touching, a gift that leads one to higher bodily felt senses, as the "touch of grace" (Silburn 1988:139). Finally, the *Vijñānanabhairava Tantra* (*VBhT*; "The Tantra of Bhairava-Who-Is-Awareness") also describes an inner tactile sensation (*sparsā*) associated with religious experience as a kind of "tingling":

By holding back the entire stream [of external sensory activities],²⁰ through the gradual upward movement of the energy of breath, at the time of the tingling touching sensation, the highest joy unfolds [throughout the body].²¹

That Abhinavagupta's emphasis on touch was to be taken as significant is substantiated further by looking at his main disciple Kṣemarāja's writings on touching. Kṣemarāja praises this sense in his commentary on the *SpK*, in which touch is explicitly mentioned in verse 8:

Indeed the individual does not set in motion the driving force of pre-cognitive impulse, but from touching the inherent power of the self, he becomes equal to it.²²

¹⁸ Jayaratha, *TĀV*, commenting on *TĀ* 11.29a–31b, p. 2120.

¹⁹ This was suggested by David Shulman in an e-mail to me dated March 17, 1998.

²⁰ Silburn 1976:108–9.

²¹ *VBhT* verse 67 (in Sastri 1918): *sarvasrotonibandhena prāṇasaktiyordhvayā śanaiḥ / pipīlasparsāvelāyām prathate paramam sukham //*.

²² *SpK* verse 8 (Kaul 1925): *na hīcchānodanasyāyam prerakatvena vartate / api tvātma-balasparśātpurusastatsamo bhavet //*.

Kṣemarāja explains that such touching refers to the power of Consciousness, whose nature is Vibration, entering him, or to becoming immersed in such power. Also distinguishing himself from other commentators who pass over this phrase, Kṣemarāja pauses to emphasize its significance, following Abhinavagupta and saying that it is precisely the sense of touch that predominates in the stage of Śakti (see Singh 1992:58–60).

Abhinavagupta is consistent in his interpretation. Elsewhere, in Abhinavagupta's description of the Kaula ritual of sexual union, Abhinavagupta makes it clear that ritual is to be interpreted not only through the registers of light and sound but also through that of touch. Thus, at *TĀ* 29.158b–160a, the eightfold Bhairava is said to be composed of light, resonance, and touch.²³ Similarly, during the rising of *kundalinī* to a higher level (*unmanā*) during sexual union, the ascent is correlated with light, sound, and touch, with touch again being at the highest level.

Abhinavagupta also understands that one may touch the highest reality through his use of various other terms such as those derived from *ādā-* and *labh-*. For example, at *TĀ* 29.164a–166a, Abhinavagupta employs the term *ādiyate*, derived from *ādā-*, which most literally means “to grasp or to seize,” to describe the Primordial Sacrifice as that “through which the essence is taken hold of.”²⁴ Again there is a connection between the highest awareness and touching. The highest ritual act, in which the highest awareness is attained, is described as the grasping or seizing of the essence (in turn described by Abhinavagupta as the nectar which is the pure consciousness). That knowing is feeling or touching is indicated also by Abhinavagupta's use of terms based on *labh-*. To utter the mantra *SAUḤ* correctly is to attain it or to set it in motion.²⁵ Additionally, at the beginning of the *Parātrīśikāvivarāṇa* (*PTV*; “The Long Commentary on the Ultimate Triadic Queen”),

²³ *TĀ* 29:158b–160a: *kucamadhyahṛdayadeśādoṣṭhāntaṃ kaṇṭhagaṃ yadavyaktam // taccakradvayamadhyagamākārya kṣobhavigamasamaye yat / nīrvānti tatra caivaṃ yo 'ṣṭavidho nādashairavaḥ paramaḥ // jyotirbhvanisamirakṛtaḥ sā māntrī vyāptirucyate paramā /*

²⁴ *TĀ* 29.164. Grasping is a metaphor for sensory perception in the Upaniṣads also. See, e.g., *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.1–9; Olivelle 1996:36–37.

²⁵ See also Alper 1983 (this is, in part, a summary of Alper 1989:277); Rastogi 1990. In addition to the term *upalabdhī*, Rastogi also refers to use of the bodily-based term *anugraha*, i.e., “grasping” or “comprehending.”

Abhinavagupta employs a *labh*-term to describe the liberating process of awareness as “attaining the satisfaction of bliss” (Singh 1989:62–63). In light of the above examples, I suggest that Abhinavagupta’s language is more than “mere metaphor.” Attaining the highest reality is a process that begins in one’s body; thus, attaining the highest reality is to set it in motion, to feel it moving, or to touch it with one’s body, and thereby to experience liberation in one’s very own body.²⁶

In Abhinavagupta’s fifth chapter of the *TĀ*, on “the individual means to enlightenment,” Abhinavagupta describes the highest experiences of the tantric practitioner, including trembling, revolving, whirling, flying, and being stable; Abhinavagupta recognizes these experiences as tactile, and states that all of them are the result of touching the fullness (*pūrṇatāsparsā*) of Reality.²⁷ This is connected to an enumeration in the *Mālinīvijayottaratanta* (*MVT*; “The Tantra of Victory of the Garlanded Goddess”) of five yogic signs associated with bodily centers: bliss, jump, trembling, sleep, and whirling.²⁸ Touching fullness affects the various centers of the body, and the body is understood as making contact with fullness.²⁹ Thus, Abhinavagupta recognizes that knowing or “touching” Reality is a bodily experience, rooted in the very primordial sense of touching and its related kinaesthetic forms.

In the 29th chapter of the *TĀ*, where Abhinavagupta describes the *kulayāga*, a ritual of sexual union, Abhinavagupta uses the notion of touching to refer to both the act of sexual union and to the experience of touching the highest reality. He uses terms indicating tactile sensation: either the phrase “touching of penetration” (*praveśasamsparsā*) or the individual terms such as “penetration” or “immersion” (*praveśa*, *samāveśa*), to refer to the male partner penetrating the female partner, while at

²⁶ Indological scholars in general have often shied away from describing liberating awareness or any kind of knowing in terms of feeling. Robert E. Goodwin is the first scholar, I am aware of, to explicitly describe knowing in Abhinavagupta’s tradition as a type of feeling. See Goodwin 1995, esp. 54 and 77, n.12. My scholarship here takes the next step, i.e., I am making the point that for Abhinavagupta feeling is sensuously felt in the body.

²⁷ *TĀ* 5.101 ff.: discussed in Silburn 1988:71 ff.

²⁸ *MVT* 11.35: Silburn 1988:71.

²⁹ Silburn 1988:72.

³⁰ See, e.g., *TĀ* 29.114a–115b and 117b–119a; and Gavin Flood’s discussion in Flood 1993:289.

the same time referring to immersion in the highest consciousness.³⁰ Abhinavagupta also uses the term *vimarśa* in this context; coupled with his use of touching terms, we see that he grounds the notion of awareness in the body. *Vimarśa* is the experience that arises through the touching of penetration, the ultimate touching back towards supreme consciousness understood as the bodily recollection of Śiva Itself. Abhinavagupta writes:

In that couple, there arises an intense trembling from the mutual touching of penetration into the Highest Dwelling; even though they [that couple] excite the secondary wheels [the wheels of the lower senses], the secondary wheels are made up of that [the union, the Highest Dwelling, the primary wheel] and are not separate.³¹

Sexual touching here corresponds with touching or penetrating into the Supreme Consciousness. Such penetration again is bodily felt, not only externally but also internally. Touching of the highest reality tangibly manifests in the body of the couple as they tremble and as their senses are excited. For Abhinavagupta the notion of “sexual touching” simultaneously refers to external forms of touching and internal bodily felt awareness.

In the fourth chapter of the *TĀ*, verses 130–146, Abhinavagupta elucidates what it means for a subject to touch an object, or for the Self to touch the Other. Inspired by Jayaratha’s commentary on this passage, Lilian Silburn provides us with a provocative analysis, demonstrating in particular how Abhinavagupta uses the notion of “sexual touching” to refer to nondual awareness.³² Abhinavagupta’s and Jayaratha’s descriptions refer to both external touching and inner bodily experience.³³ Thus, Abhinavagupta cites a passage from the *Yogasamcāra*, evoking the notion of sexual contact or union (*mithuna*) as a way of understanding any kind of intimate union between the senses and their objects, the Self and Other. Silburn writes:

³¹ *TĀ* 29.114b–115a: *tadyugalamūrdhavadhāmapraveśasamsparsājātasankṣobham // kṣubhnātyanucakrāṇyapi tāni tadā tanmayāni na pṛthaktu /*.

³² In this paragraph, I am following and summarizing Silburn 1988:143 ff.

³³ There is a profound similarity between Abhinavagupta’s evocations and that of Merleau-Ponty, who also uses notions of “touching” to describe nondual awareness.

But rather than a mere contact, this is intimate union (*mithuna*) with a background of joy, in one with an awakened heart. The repeated friction between subject and object quickens the interchange and ends in fusion. Without such a friction the object remains limited and the subject does not gain access to the universal nectar. But through this friction, which induces the intensification of joy and energy, the delineations of the object dissolve and the subject/object duality ceases. (Silburn 1988:143).

Silburn describes the yogin as a transformer, interpenetrating with the world, as both world and his own body become transfigured. His Self plays in the field of the senses and experiences itself as the Heart, or creative matrix of the universe, in which subject and object intertwine in balance, and all its divine sense-energies are gathered together again in the Heart.³⁴ Abhinavagupta is evoking a bodily synaesthetic experience which I will say more about below.

Finally, in his *Dhvanyālokalocana* (*DhĀL*; “Eye on the Resonating Light”), a commentary on Ānandavardhana’s aesthetics, Abhinavagupta presents his own prayer as an example that evokes at once both the peaceful and erotic *rasas*. Most interesting is that the prayer highlights the tactile experiences of recollection, referring to the bodily felt sense of being touched by Śiva and the consequent melting of consciousness;³⁵ thus, again, he freely demonstrates the fluid relationship between body and consciousness and, in particular, the relationship between touching and consciousness. Abhinavagupta writes:

Hey You, Moon-Peak, Lord of my breath,
at the sudden surprise of your Touch,
having been frozen in deep despair of separation,
my consciousness,
like a moonstone-carved doll,
now melts and melts away.

(Abhinavagupta, *DhĀL* 3.30)

³⁴ Again, I am following and summarizing Silburn 1988:143 ff.

³⁵ Albert A. Johnstone (1992:34) relates the feeling of melting to another state of consciousness, that of compassion; the implication is that compassion too is a bodily felt sense: “Compassion . . . involves a specific complex of feelings in the tactile-kinesthetic body, in particular something on the order of a warm melting feeling in chest and throat, without which complex an action would not qualify as done from compassion.”

That Abhinavagupta is quite aware that his evocation of a recollective experience reveals recollection's underlying tactile dimension is clearly suggested by Abhinavagupta's introduction of this prayer, where he employs the turn of phrase "a touch . . . of the erotic."³⁶

Worship as Sensual Enjoyment

The significance of the body and its divine sense-energies is also seen in Abhinavagupta's interpreting worship as sensual acts that blissfully awaken one's consciousness, that allow one's awareness to be penetrated by bliss. At *TĀ* 3.208b–210b, Abhinavagupta writes:

The emissional energy of Śambhu thus abides everywhere. Out of it [arises] the ensemble of motions of the liquid bliss of joy. So indeed, when a sweet [song] is sung, when [there is] touching, or when [there is the smelling of] sandalwood and so on, when the state of standing in the middle [the state of indifference] ceases, [there arises] the state of vibrating in the heart, which is called precisely "the energy of bliss," because of which a human being is with-heart.³⁷

Abhinavagupta is describing an aspect of *Śiva-Śakti* known as *visarga-śakti*, the resurrectional energy of Being, continually surging back and forth. The state of awareness Abhinavagupta describes is an emulation of this divine energy of *Śiva-Śakti* and, at the same time, a means toward this divine level. Abhinavagupta states that such energy manifests on the human plane as motions, and by that he is emphasizing "e-motions."³⁸ Thus, joy or bliss is a type of motion, movement, or agitation (*vibhrama*), pointing towards awareness's rootedness in touching. Abhinavagupta understands joy as an inner type of touching, moving one human being outward towards other beings, and allowing that same being to move inward. Abhinavagupta recognizes that conscious-

³⁶ Abhinavagupta, *DhĀL* 3.30: translated by Ingalls, Masson, Patwardhan 1990:532.

³⁷ *TĀ* 3.208b–210b: *visargaśaktiryā śambhoḥ settham sarvatra vartate // tata eva samasto 'yamānandaravasivibhramah / tathāhi madhure gīte sparśe vā candanādīke // mādhyasthyavigame yāsau hr̥daye spandamānatā / ānandaśaktiḥ saivoktā yataḥ saḥṛdayo janah //*

³⁸ See Glen Mazis's discussion of "e-motions" in Mazis 1993.

ness is embodied, that feeling is experienced as a type of motion or movement within the body.

Abhinavagupta draws from the field of sensory awareness to elucidate being moved in the heart: hearing a sweet melody, or touching, or smelling sandalwood. Abhinavagupta's example of touching draws on the *VBhT*, which equates touching with sexual union. These motions or "e-motions" are described as precisely the tasting (*rasa*) of bliss (*ānanda*). This tasting is connected to the Heart as one who experiences bliss is said to be sensitive, literally, "one-with-heart". This refers to both aesthetic sensitivity as well as religious sensitivity, the capacity to be moved, as the proper states for both aesthetic and religious performance. The opposite is not "getting it," not attaining any meaningful experience; in the religious context that means not being aware of Being, tantamount to being dead. Having heart, or being sensitive or sense-awakened, is being fully alive, able to move, to be moved, to enjoy oneself sensually.

At *TĀ* 3.262a–264b, Abhinavagupta writes:

Into the oblation-eating belly of one's own consciousness, all existing things are hurled violently; they sacrifice their portion of differentiation, consuming it by fire with their own energy. When the fragmentation of existing things is dissolved by [this] violent cooking, the deities of consciousness [the senses] eat the universe that has become the nectar of immortality [the "I"]. These [deities] now satisfied, they lie down with God, no different from [Him] who is Bhairava, the Sky of Consciousness, dwelling in the secret space of the full heart of their selves.³⁹

Abhinavagupta is discussing the deities of consciousness, i.e., the sense-energies, and he is talking about them as being satisfied. Referring to the earlier Kaula tradition, Abhinavagupta describes worship as extracting liquid bliss and satiating the deities of the senses who reunite with the Heart, their Center, their Lord Bhairava. The satisfaction of one's senses, the senses enjoying themselves, is a way of awakening one's awareness. Worship is able to transform awareness precisely because it

³⁹ *TĀ* 3.262a–264b: *nijabodhajaṭṭharahutabhuji bhāvāḥ sarve samarpitā haṭhataḥ / vijahati bhedavibhāgaṃ nijaśaktyā taṃ samindhānāḥ // haṭhapākena bhāvānāṃ rūpe bhinne vilāpīte / aśnantyamṛtasādbhūtaṃ viśvaṃ saṃvittidevatāḥ // tāstṛptāḥ svātmanah pūrṇa hṛdayaikāntaśāyinaṃ / cidvjomabhairavaṃ devamabhedenaḍhiśerate //*

is sensual. This connects to both contemporary forms of *pūjā* and older forms of temple and cave worship, both meant to induce sensual, erotic, and synaesthetic experiences (see below).

Awareness as Surging Forth and Expanding

For Abhinavagupta *vimarśa* is also a process of the Heart, the center of consciousness, continually surging forth (*ucchalana*) and opening and expanding (*vikāsa*) itself once again through sensual enjoyment, so that the Heart gathers together and unites its formerly dispersed sense-energies.

Abhinavagupta again connects the process of awakening to the flowing of bliss and the satisfying of the senses through external objects giving pleasure, such as food, perfumes, garlands, incenses, or by imagining things which give pleasure (see Flood 1993:289–90, 300). The stimulation of the senses is said to effect an opening or expansion (*vikāsa*) of consciousness, and the surging forth or overflowing (*ucchalana*) with bliss.⁴⁰ *Ucchalana* is another term that indicates motion and becomes applied to motion within the body, or “e-motion.” The term is derived from *śal-*, “to leap,” and literally means “to leap out or up.” Applied to the body, it refers to a surging forth of awareness, a great intensity of the emotions, powerful passion or fervor (Ibid.). In the present context, the satisfaction of the senses is leading to sexual union, and such intensity of emotion leads to immersion in the Bhairava state (see Ibid.:289–90). Abhinavagupta writes:

And the sacrifice is a satiating with respect to the outside, and that is known as an opening [of consciousness] (*vikāsa*). Overflowing of consciousness [arises] from what reaches to the inside of the wheel and the secondary wheel, imagined by the Śakti-possessor, reaching to the vital breath; or also from the flowing of bliss, from the taking of food, or from external [sensual objects] such as fragrance, incense, and garlands.⁴¹ In this way through shares of appropriate objects, the satisfying of

⁴⁰ See also Kanti Chandra Pandey’s brief exposition of relevant commentary by Jayaratha in Pandey 1963:621.

⁴¹ *TĀ* 29.107b–109a: *yāgaśca tarpaṇaṃ bāhye vikāstacca kīrtiyate // cakrānucakrāntaragācchaktimatparikalpitāt / prāṇagādapyathānandasyandino’bhyavahārataḥ // gandhadhūpasragādeśca bāhyāducchalanam citaḥ /*

the secondary wheels with one another should be done here, towards [the goal of] effecting oneness with the primary wheel.⁴²

Abhinavagupta also states that reflexive awareness is the expansion of consciousness through enjoyment; such expansion occurs simultaneously with the penetration of the primary wheel by the goddesses of the secondary wheels. Consciousness is described as flowing outwards, and the energy of the secondary wheels are flowing inwards at the same time:

At the time of the intense reflexive awareness of one's own-form (*nijasvarūpaparimarśe*), [which is] an opening [of consciousness] towards each of one's own various enjoyments, one after the other the goddesses of the secondary wheels reach the center wheel of consciousness.⁴³

Abhinavagupta again refers to the earlier Kaula tradition, where one attracts the goddesses out of the sky through offerings such as food, incense, flowers, and so on; the goal was to become the new lord or center of these wheels of *yoginīs*. Again, for Abhinavagupta, the practice has been internalized: the goddesses of the sky become the secondary wheels understood as the senses; the new center becomes the primary wheel understood as the site of the awakening of primary consciousness.⁴⁴ Such awakening is precisely reflexive awareness. Thus reflexive awareness is the experience of the overflowing of bliss that happens precisely at the time of orgasm, where the orgasmic experience itself is interpreted in terms of *yoginī*-related practices.

In contrast to limited forms of awareness, in which there is no connection to the Heart-Center, in which objects are scattered, dispersed, and separate, guardian awareness is a type of gathering, that is, a process of bringing the divine sense-energies back into the Heart. Abhinavagupta simultaneously evokes the dynamism and creativity of the awareness of Being, experienced most fully in the Kaula performance of

⁴² *TĀ* 29.109b–110a: *itthaṃ svocitavastvaṃśairanucakreṣu tarpaṇaṃ // kurvīyātāmi hānyonyāṃ mukhyacakraikatākṛte /*

⁴³ *TĀ* 29.111b–112a: *nijanijabhogābhogapravikāśinijasvarūpaparimarśe // kramaśo 'nucakradevyaḥ saṅwiccakraṃ hi madhyamaṃ yānti /*

⁴⁴ This is the higher Bhairava consciousness, attained through the mouth of the *yoginī* or the vulva. For the best exposition of the relationship between Bhairava consciousness and these real flesh-and-blood *yoginīs*, see White 2003.

sexual union. *Vimarśa* may be understood as “recollecting,” gathering together the parts of one’s self that have been dispersed out into the world of objectivity and that have caused one to forget the self’s connection to Śiva-Bhairava.

II. Intertwining of Self and Other

Vimarśa may also be described as the embodied experience of the intertwining (*yāmala*) of self and other, in a process that involves all the senses, in fusion or harmony (*melana*). By “fusion of the senses,” Abhinavagupta refers not only to fusion of the senses with one another, but also to the integration of the senses with the whole range of one’s body and consciousness, as one becomes fully pervaded by the divine sense-energies.

Both intertwining and fusion of the senses received particular attention by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty attempted to recover the body for consciousness, challenging others before him who were metaphysically biased towards a disembodied consciousness. I want to briefly summarize these two ideas of Merleau-Ponty as they allow us to make sense of Abhinavagupta’s own understanding of the body in relation to awareness. Here I will be following the insights of eco-philosopher David Abram, who has especially focused on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the role of senses in awareness. I first turn to the Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of fusion of the senses. This is often referred to as “synaesthesia.” Although synaesthetic awareness is often understood as a marginal phenomenon, for Merleau-Ponty it is a natural capacity of human beings. Every pre-discursive experience involves fusion of the senses and nondual awareness. It is only after the initial pre-discursive experience, when there is

⁴⁵ See Merleau-Ponty 1968, esp. 130 ff. (on “The Intertwining — The Chiasm”). See also Merleau-Ponty 1962, esp. 227–29, and the discussion of this work in Abram 1997. The following are also insightful discussions relevant to Merleau-Ponty’s work, especially concerning notions of touching, fusion, or intertwining: Levin 1985; Mazis 2002; Vasseleu 1998.

a turn to discursive cognition, that the senses and corresponding sense experiences become separated from one another. Abram writes:

... if I attend closely to my nonverbal experience of the shifting landscape that surrounds me, I must acknowledge that the so-called separate senses are thoroughly blended with one another, and it is only after the fact that I am able to step back and isolate the specific contributions of my eyes, my ears, and my skin. As soon as I attempt to distinguish the share of any one sense from that of the others, I inevitably sever the full participation of my sensing body with the sensuous terrain. (Abram 1997:59–60)

When ... I perceive the wind surging through the branches of an aspen tree, I am unable, at first, to distinguish the sight of those trembling leaves from their delicate whispering. My muscles, too, feel the torsion as those branches bend, ever so slightly, in the surge, and this imbues the encounter with a certain tactile tension. The encounter is influenced, as well, by the fresh smell of the autumn wind, and even by the taste of an apple that still lingers on my tongue. (Ibid. 60)

Abram thus describes how synaesthetic experience or the “blending of the senses” naturally inheres in pre-cognitive perception.

For Merleau-Ponty, the fusion of the senses is also related to intertwining of self and other, often referred to as nondual awareness of self and other. As we have already seen above, intertwining is “the full participation of my sensing body with the sensuous terrain.” Like fusion of the senses, intertwining may be said to be our primordial natural capacity in that preverbal experience is always suffused by the intertwining experience of body and its environment, and in particular, of one body and another. Thus, pre-cognitive experience involves both fusion of the senses and the intertwining of self and other. For Merleau-Ponty in fact fusion and intertwining mutually implicate one another. Again, Abram summarizes:

My senses connect up with each other in the things I perceive, or rather each perceived thing gathers my senses together in a coherent way, and it is this that enables me to experience the thing itself as a center of forces, as another nexus of experience, as an Other. ... Hence, just as we have described perception as a dynamic participation between my body and things, so we now discern, within the act of perception, a participation between the various sensory systems of the body itself. Indeed, these events are not separable, for the intertwining of my body with the things it perceives is effected only through the interweaving of my senses, and vice versa. (Ibid. 62)

For Merleau-Ponty, then, fusion of the senses and intertwining are two interdependent aspects of prediscursive experience.

To bring this home and to remind us that such experience is not only common, but also especially important when trying to understand Abhinavagupta's understanding of awareness, especially those forms of awareness expressed through or attained in ritual, I note here that synaesthesia has recently been the focus of recent research in ritual and performance studies, in the works for example of both Richard Schechner and Lawrence Sullivan.⁴⁶ Important for us is that Schechner's theories are inspired by the Sanskrit drama, especially as interpreted by Abhinavagupta. Further, influenced by Richard Lannoy's interpretations of the Indian arts in *The Speaking Tree* (1971),⁴⁷ Schechner highlights an important connection between, on one hand, the temples of Khajurāho and Māmallapuram, or the "theatre caves" of Ajañṭā, and, on the other hand, the Sanskrit drama, especially as interpreted by Abhinavagupta. The paintings and sculptures of the temples and caves may be seen as the natural predecessors of the Sanskrit drama; all were meant to induce a sensuous and synaesthetic experience (what Abhinavagupta refers to in various ways, sometimes as the tasting of "liquid bliss" [*rasa*]). I would add that just as the Indian play is connected to worship in the temples or caves, so is the *kulayāga*, the ritual of sexual union, connected to the Indian play. The connection is one Abhinavagupta himself makes; however the implications of such a connec-

⁴⁶ Schechner 1977 and 2001; Sullivan 1986. Both highlight synaesthetic experience, as first noted by Bell 1998:209. See also Goodwin 1995:50–86; Goodwin's discussion of Sanskrit poetry and drama at several places points to its synaesthetic dimensions. The experience of "flow" is also connected with the fusion of the senses; see Czikszentmihalyi 1986. See also, on the "intensity of 'flow'" in the context of ritual, Schechner and Appel 1990, as first noted by Bell 1998:208. See also Sullivan 2000:226, where Sullivan notes that the play is "co-involved" with existence. I take the implication to be significant: the bodily experience within the play or ritual may become indistinguishable from the bodily experience of "reality itself." Thus, we would do well to begin interpreting ritual phenomenologically rather than metaphysically. As I will point out below, Alexis Sanderson fails to appreciate the bodily significance of ritual in Abhinavagupta's interpretation precisely because of his metaphysical bent.

⁴⁷ On both touching and synaesthesia in this work, in addition to Schechner's references, see also pp. 53 and 190 ff.

tion have not been fully appreciated. I would suggest that fusion of the senses is a key to understanding both the *kulayāga*, and in turn, *vimarśa*, the full-bodied sensuous and synaesthetic awareness.

For Abhinavagupta, *melana*, or fusion, and *yāmala*, or intertwining, were understood as interdependent dimensions of *vimarśa*, the very precognitive awareness expressed in and attained through the ritual of sexual union. Abhinavagupta implicates the divine sense-energies (*śakti*) in the nondual intertwining experience when he describes deep awareness: the “I” and the “other” no longer exist; it is only as energies (*śakti*) that the “I” exists (*TĀ* 29.64). The “I” exists as sense energies, and such existence as sense-energies is recollected precisely in the intertwining experience.

Jayaratha also connects *vimarśa* to intertwining and fusion, stating that through this deep bodily awareness one becomes a Sky-Goer and fuses with the *yoginīs* (*TĀV*, commentary on *TĀ* 29.64, p. 3335). Fusion with the *yoginīs* is to experience existence as sense-energies.

Jayaratha conflates here external fusion with the *yoginīs* and internal fusion. Neither Abhinavagupta nor Jayaratha are trying to get away with simply superimposing one metaphysical system over a previous one; their statements should be read as phenomenological statements. There are two possible ways of making contact with the *yoginī* (Flood 1993:300). One may meditate on the *yoginīs* and reap the same transformative fruit. This makes sense only when it is recognized that imagination must not occur in a disembodied mind; meditation on the *yoginīs* is also a bodily phenomenon. To experience the intertwining of “I” and “other” is for Abhinavagupta a bodily experience, interdependent with the fusion of the senses. That the body is transformed is supported most fully by Abhinavagupta’s description of the Sky-Goer Gesture (*khecarī-mudrā*) as the experience of the intertwining of one’s body and another self, of another body and one’s self, as the self moves in other bodies, and other bodies move in the self (*TĀ* 32.30–31).

For Abhinavagupta these yogic gestures refer to profound ways of holding one’s body, of experiencing one’s body. André Padoux, who has studied Abhinavagupta’s 32nd chapter in the *TĀ*, in which such yogic gestures, perceptions, and states of awareness (*mudrā*) are described, makes it clear that the highest experience in Abhinavagupta’s tradition, identification with Śiva, is, above all, a bodily experience, something

felt in the body. Here Padoux summarizes and comments on Abhinavagupta's description of the Sky-Goer *mudrā* at *TĀ* 32.12–31 according to the *Yogasamcāra*:

These Khecari-*mudrās* are very complex and even bizarre yogic practices, combining body and hand gestures, strange facial expressions and the utterance of such sounds as *hā-hā*, together with mental concentration and visualizations. The total effect is that the adept feels that the *trisūlamanḍala* of the deity penetrates and pervades him completely, whilst he feels that his senses, his mind and his emotions are all fused with the deity and pervaded by the divine energies. He is not himself anymore; he is one with Śiva... in whom reside all the deities and who illuminates the whole universe... But, however “mystical” this experience may be, it is felt within the body and it occurs because of the bodily postures, etc., of which the *mudrā* consists. The role of the body is paramount. (Padoux 1990b:71)

The experience of union is felt in the body. Even the *manḍala* is felt in the body. Much confusion is cleared away when we make a distinction between metaphysical statements and phenomenological statements Abhinavagupta makes about the body's deeply felt sense, its recollection of Being. The deepest level of awareness for Abhinavagupta is pre-cognitive. Abhinavagupta's language arises out of the body; his descriptions of various *mudrās* and other bodily modes make explicit what is known or felt bodily.

III. The Vitality of the Pulsating Heart of Mantra-Consciousness

The Pulsating Heart is also used by Abhinavagupta to evoke Mantra-Consciousness. In this evocation, the Pulsating Heart, the source of all mantras, and all mantras that remain in touch with their source are said to contain vitality (*vīrya*). What does that mean? How is it possible for mantras to contain vitality? Now certainly, some mantras, such as the *SAUḤ* mantra, evoke the Kaula ritual of sexual union and correspondingly the vitality of the *SAUḤ* mantra evokes the vital sexual fluids, also termed *vīrya*, the transaction of which was essential for the efficacy of the Kaula ritual.⁴⁸ The vitality of the mantra refers to the

⁴⁸ For more details, see the third chapter in Skora 2001. In this article, I am shifting our attention to the deep connection between mantra and bodily perception.

efficacy of the mantra while evoking the vital sexual fluids. The mantra works in dependence on its vitality, just as the Kaula ritual works in dependence on the vitality of the sexual fluids.

Although such interpretation connects Abhinavagupta's tradition to its earlier context, it does not fully answer our questions above, leaving us with the suggestion that the vitality of the mantra is simply symbolic. However, Abhinavagupta would certainly never say he was being merely metaphorical. Is there a different approach then in trying to answer this question? Is there some phenomenological validity to this notion that mantras contain vitality? Does vitality of mantra point to some experience? . . . to some experience in the body? Earlier I suggested that liberation for Abhinavagupta means re-empowering the body and the senses. I would suggest now that this is precisely what the mantra effects.

Now Frits Staal, who has tended to the notion of the mantra's efficacy, has urged scholars to pay more attention to mantra's pre-linguistic aspects. Staal notes that mantras are able to revitalize and liberate the very senses that have been previously deadened in their enslavement to the brahmanical law of purity; he surmises that mantras are efficacious precisely because they are pre-linguistic:

Nyāsa is a Tantric not a Vedic rite and, therefore, belongs to a different era. It is tempting to speculate that, by the time we arrive at the Tantric period, mantras are called upon to take away the guilt that centuries of moral disapprobation have attached to parts of the body and to bodily functions. No Hindu can engage in the "five Ms" without experiencing a feeling of guilt. To actually enjoy such activities is possible only if these feelings are overcome. Mantras can effect this because they are natural, like music, dance, and song. They exert a hypnotic influence that signals a breaking away from the tyranny of language and a return to the biological domain of the body. This is manifest in the extraordinary close relationship that exists in Tantrism between the limbs (*aṅga*) of mantras and those of the divine body. . . . (Staal 1989:84)

Mantra, through its pre-linguistic nature, works on the body directly, and hence is able to effect transformation. Transformation of awareness takes place precisely because the mantra acts on the body.

The notions of *vīrya* and *mantra* refer directly to bodily experience, and must ultimately be understood in terms of the body and senses. This is first indicated by the semantic field of the term *mantra* and related

terms *manas* and *muni*. Jan Gonda has provided us with the most rigorous analysis, which points to the deep connection between mantra and bodily perception. First, Gonda notes that *manas* refers to “mind *in the widest sense*” (Gonda 1963:250; the italics are my own), including not only “mental powers” but also “physical [bodily] powers”; not just rarified “spirit” and “thought,” but also creativity, “imagination,” inspiration, “desire,” emotion, feeling, and “mood” (ibid.). I would add here that what is being described is again bodily felt sense. Similarly a *muni* is someone who is “inspired” and “ecstatic,” who feels and is “moved” by a deep, “inward impulse” (ibid.). These impulses I contend are naturally felt in the body and through the body. The root *men-* includes meanings of being “moved” and inspired, and “experiencing [deep] impulses in heart and mind” (ibid.). Finally, Gonda describes *mantra* as “coming into touch or identifying oneself with the essence of the divinity which is present in the mantra” (Gonda 1963:255). Synthesizing Gonda’s analysis and emphasizing the bodily dimension, we can say that *mantra* means “coming in touch with Reality through being moved in the heart, i.e., being deeply bodily-moved.”

To say that mantras have vitality implies that the practitioner of mantra sensually experiences the vitality, i.e., the vitality of mantra awakens the senses of the practitioner, to ultimately recollect Being in the body. Thus, Jayaratha relates the bodily felt gesture that we have previously discussed to vitality:

At the time of immersion in *khecarī mudrā*, characterized by the six-fold *mudrā*, when there is kissing, enjoying, and so on, between one and the other, the Energy and the Energy-Possessor, [then] that experiencing awareness, whose nature is [bodily felt] awareness, arises; such is the vitality of mantra, whose own nature is [bodily felt] awareness of the supreme resonance divided into eight kinds, the unmanifest and so on.⁴⁹

Thus, Jayaratha connects vitality with awareness, an awareness that must be bodily felt in various ways. It is experienced in and as the ultimate bodily gesture, the *khecarī mudrā*, the *mudrā* of sexual union. It is

⁴⁹ Jayaratha, *TĀV*, commentary following *TĀ* 29.156a: *etasyāṃ ṣaḍaramudrālakṣaṇāyāṃ khecarī mudrāyāmāveśe śaktiśaktimatoranyonyasya pānopabhogādau yo vimarsātmā anubhavaḥ samudiyāt, tadavyaktādyāṣṭabhedabhinna paranādāmarśasvabhāvaṃ māntraṃ vīryaṃ syāt //*.

also the experience of eight levels of resonance or vibration by the yogin recollecting a bodily felt sense of Being, again with touch being the most subtle of these experiences.

As further examples of vitality being experienced in the body, I note that the ultimate goal of mantric practice is to awaken energy, as always involving the moving, stilling, and/or presencing of vital energy.⁵⁰ In the ritual of initiation or sprinkling such mantric vitality overflows through the pores of the skin of the guru into the disciple.⁵¹ In the *PTV*, the notion of vitality is again associated with the highest level of awareness, described as *kauliki-śakti*, which on one plane is the vital energy of all the goddesses, on another the heart of the senses, and on a third plane the female and male sexual organs (Singh 1989:61–62). Describing *kauliki*, Abhinavagupta quotes the *SpK*, describing divinization of the body as touching the power of the Authentic Self. He also cites another verse from the *SpK* which describes both the divinities and the senses as being effective through the power of vibration.

Understanding vitality as being experienced bodily helps us understand Abhinavagupta's notion of vitality: mantras are vital precisely because they effect a transformation of the body. Mantras embody Śakti and allow the body to feel Śakti (Gonda 1963:274, 284; Alper 1989:283). Mantra is never simply disembodied cognition. Mantric performance is a pre-cognitive, pre-linguistic, pre-discursive performance by the body, in all its deep ambiguity, involving touching, sensing, moving, and feeling.⁵² Mantras become bodies of power themselves that

⁵⁰ See Padoux 1990a:386 ff. (on *mantravīrya*).

⁵¹ See *TĀ* 23.33a-36b: translated in Muller-Ortega 1997:417. On initiation, see also Kvaerne 1975:90 ff.; and Davidson 2002:122–31 and 197–200.

⁵² Other scholars support the distinction I am making between mere cognition and pre-cognitive mantric performance with the observation that ritual performance moves beyond mere speech. Sullivan (2000:226) writes: “performance is ephemeral; it takes place only while a particular spectacle is going on. The spectacle is co-involved with existence itself. There are ontological implications: the play is the thing; the performance is only while it lasts. . . . we are closer to the *ex opere operato* efficacy of sacrament. . . . Performance is a setting quite different from the literalness of well-formed sentences that ground linguistic analysis. . . .” William Schweiker (1992:289, n.22) writes: “In saying that interpretation is a form of enactment I am not however restricting the concept of ‘performative’ to speech acts. . . . I am using it in an anthropological and sociological sense to denote those communal dramatic and ritual activities through which something (a myth, human action, a god) is presented in and for community.”

have the capacity to transform the body of the practitioner, dissolving discursive forms of awareness into deeper bodily felt states of awareness. Practicing mantra is a process of divinizing the body, becoming possessed by the mantra and hence by the deity who is the mantra.⁵³

Mantric performance gives rise to bodily transformation, a new way of being in the body and comporting oneself in the body, “disclosing a new [dimension of] reality” previously unnoticed (Alper 1989:276). Such reality is in fact always already there; such reality is the gift of our body waiting to be revealed. Thus Abhinavagupta tells us that the authentic gesture (*mudrā*) gives the gift of the Authentic Self in/through/as the body (*TĀ* 32.3).

IV. Concluding Remarks and Reflections

Throughout this article, I have been maintaining that awareness is connected to bodily felt sense, and that ultimate awareness is a recollection of Being that takes place in the body. I have taken Abhinavagupta at “face” value, assuming that his statements have to be understood as ultimately arising out of bodily experiences, that his understanding of consciousness is best approached as embodied phenomenology. In these final remarks, I want to describe this approach and its significance more rigorously.

The significance of an embodied approach may be highlighted by distinguishing it from a “conceptual” or “symbolic” approach. To get at this distinction, I first turn to Vedic Studies, where we can clearly see this approach playing itself out. Thus, Charles Malamoud, in approaching the issue of self and self-transformation in the context of Vedic ritual, favors, quite self-consciously, a “symbolic” approach over a “psycho-physiological” approach, describing both in the following introduction to one of his recent articles:

How does the sacrifice affect the sacrificer? What happens to the sacrificer, to his self, during the sacrificial process? In what respect, and to what extent, is he modified by it?

⁵³ See *Spandavivṛti*, commentary on *SpK* stanzas 26 and 27: Dyckzowski 1992:105; Sanderson 1986a:175 and 175, n.2 (in reference to both *TĀ* and *SpK*); and Padoux 1990a:393.

Let it be clear that I am not looking for psycho-physiological answers to these questions. I am not trying to trace the measurable transformations to which a human organism is submitted when exposed to the material conditions and to the mental stress involved in the sacrificial process. I am trying to find not what happens “really” but what is supposed to happen. I wish to understand what is taught by the dogmatic texts of the Veda in a language we can very well call metaphorical. . . . (Malamoud 2002:19)

A legitimate response to Malamoud is: well why not try to find out what “really” happens? Why not assume that the language being examined is not merely metaphorical, not simply symbolic? Why assume a split between what is supposed to happen and what really happens? Why wouldn’t reports of self-transformation go back to real bodily experiences? Interestingly, the same Vedic material has been illumined by Ariel Glucklich (1994), precisely by taking the approach that is rejected by Malamoud, which Glucklich describes as follows:

... every conscious experience has a physical-perceptual component that plays a key role in the way the world and the self are fashioned. The Hindu bather who goes into the river at daybreak does not leave his body in bed. . . . What happens to the body in the water, and in what sense is the body purified? Similarly, the bride who undergoes passage by means of an elaborate ritual is not just being intellectually indoctrinated into a new status. The new identity she acquires is contingent on the conscious perceptual and physical manipulations that take place during the rite. (Glucklich 1994:7; the italics are my own)

Glucklich, then, tends to images that are perceptions “by the body” rather than symbols that are conceptualizations (sometimes simply “of the body”). Glucklich applies his perceptual approach to various details of the Vedic ritual, while Malamoud applies his symbolic approach, sometimes to the very same details. For example, the same antelope skins receive quite different interpretations by Malamoud and Glucklich. For Malamoud, black and white antelope skins become symbolic of Vedic texts, with black hair symbolizing verses and white hair symbolizing chants (Malamoud 2002:21–22); on the other hand, Glucklich is interested in the skin as “the primary relational organ of the body,” which “defines relations in the world in terms of subjective perceptions” (Glucklich 1994:110). Glucklich then shows how perceptions by the body resonate with conceptual symbols, how symbols make sense in terms of bodily perceptions.

To see how this distinction applies to Tantric Studies, I will focus on two scholars, Alexis Sanderson and André Padoux; together their writings have formed much of the foundation of “Abhinavagupta Studies.” I would contend that Sanderson in his scholarship has focused on the notion of conceptual transformation without tending to changes in bodily perceptions; thus, we are left with states of consciousness that have seemingly become disembodied. To give a general indication of this emphasis, I have provided here a few classic examples of Sanderson’s approach from his important work, “Maṇḍala and Āgamic Identity in the Trika of Kashmir” (1986a):

His subsequent life of ritual and meditation is designed to transform this initial empowerment manifest in his membership of the sect into a state of permanent, controlled identification, to draw it forth as the substance of his conscious mind. Daily recreating the maṇḍala in mental worship he summons from within his consciousness the deities it enthrone, projecting them on to a smooth mirror-like surface to contemplate them there as the reflection of his internal, Āgamic identity. He aspires to know himself only as this nexus of deities, constituting for himself an invisible identity concealed within his worldly perception and activity, a heterodox, visionary Self of Power behind the public appearance of Purity sustained by conformity to orthodox society.

With Abhinavagupta... we see the metaphysical translation of this Āgamic deity-self... The maṇḍala is enabled to define and transmit this omnipotent “I”... In worshipping them [the goddesses] the initiate is to rehearse the liberating intuition that his true self is the undifferentiated deity-ground... Through the internal monologue of his ritual he is to think away the “I” of his identity in the world of mutually exclusive subjects and objects... His ritual and his meditation serve to create a mental domain in which the boundaries which hem in his lower, public self are absent...

Thinking of his lower, social subjectivity ‘from within’ as the contraction of the infinite power of his true, Āgamic self, he ritually internalizes a metaphysical ontology... (Sanderson 1986a:169–72)

In general then Sanderson discusses transformation purely in terms of the “conscious mind”; one may re-think reality, thinking away an old self, and thinking up the new Self. Sanderson draws a boundary between mind and body, showing a metaphysical preference for disembodied cognition. This is revealed most fully in the following statement in which Sanderson is most self-conscious about his method:

They are, of course, supposed to be a hierarchy of subtle levels in the final resonance of the *mantroccārah*, realized in yogic practice. But I have stressed here their mantric nature in ritual, the manner in which they are realized through discursive *mantraprayogaḥ* + *sthānānusamdhānam*, etc. In this sense the attainment of a certain level of mantra-resonance (*nādakalā*) or tattva is a verbal act, not some hypothetical experience of a level definitively beyond the reach of discrimination. . . . I see ritual as obviating the problem of experiencing that whose experience could not be confirmed in the mind since by definition such experience would be outside the parameters (the *kañcukāni*, etc.) of referential cognition. Ritual makes the impossible possible. It stages in the mind a transcendental, Āgamic identity and is empowered to this end by the belief that it is this transcendental structure which manifests itself as the worshipper and his worship, at a lower level of its own existence. (Sanderson 1986b:210)

Sanderson seems to be saying the following: (1) Yogic experiences are “mantrically” realized in ritual. (2) Therefore yogic experiences are realized only discursively, only verbally. (3) All experiences must be confirmed in the mind. (4) There are no experiences beyond the reach of discrimination, outside the parameters of referential cognition; such experiences are only hypothetical, indeed they are impossible. (5) Ritual is a world of play, it pretends, by fantasizing in the mind that what is impossible is not impossible; ritual derives its power from make-believing.

Sanderson’s assumptions are similar to Malamoud’s. Sanderson is interested in what is supposed to happen; he says however that what is supposed to happen does not really happen. He is led to that conclusion only because he has left out the body and thus the possibility for real transformation taking place in the body. What he leaves us with is a disembodied consciousness, and, therefore, a rationalization of ritual that fails to provide any compelling scheme for transformation. What takes place in ritual is only a matter for the mind. Not only is there no bodily transformation, there is in fact no body. If we are to believe the practitioner is transformed in Sanderson’s perspective, we must judge that the transformation is merely the superimposition of a fantasy worldview.

There are alternatives however that are more compelling. Here I turn now to Padoux’s speculations, speculations that have not been fully developed yet, either by Padoux or by Tantric Studies scholars, although the material I have presented in this article is a beginning, I believe,

toward fully developing these ideas. Padoux's speculations have profound implications for our field and hence it is valuable to review in detail a few noteworthy examples. Interestingly, we find Padoux making similar provocative remarks about each of the three primordial modes of performance, each of which concerns different aspects of the body: *maṇḍala* (visualizing, seeing), *mantra* (speaking, listening, pulsating and vibrating), and *mudrā* (gesturing, touching, carrying and holding oneself).

About *maṇḍala*, Padoux says the following:

To perform this Yogic practice of the maṇḍala is thus to experience the identity of the self and of the absolute. All the fantasmagory visualized in this way leads the Yogin to feel dissolved into the transcendental void of the absolute whilst being also inhabited in his body by the cosmos and its presiding deities. It is an interesting, but strange, process. If we consider that this Yogic, visionary trance-like state of bodily consciousness is to be experienced every day by the Śaiva adept, we may well wonder what psychological condition is thus induced in him, what kind of perception of the world he lives with. Can one feel fused with the absolute after having filled one's mind with such a fantastic scenery and still behave 'normally'? Of course, these ritual practices may have been performed merely in imagination without any real inner participation of the Yogin. They may even have been limited to the mere recitation of the mantras evoking the *tattvas* of the deities (*mantra-prayoga*). But what if they were really experienced? What if the Kaula adept, practising the ritual at least once every day, carried always in him this scenery? This is an interesting question—but one not to be answered here. (Padoux 2003:235)

Now what Padoux has done is the following: (1) He has rigorously articulated the way in which Abhinavagupta's writings lend themselves to two very different interpretations (each one with its own set of ontological commitments). On the one hand, as some interpretations have it, practice takes place "merely in the imagination"; or practice might be "mere recitation." (2) At the same time his language implies that if the latter is not the case then what is taking place is massive delusion: what is visualized is "phantasmagory" in a "strange process" that is far from normal. (3) In spite of Padoux's reservations however, even when trying to describe the experience with an emphasis on what is imagined, he gives us hints as to how to begin making sense of the process: this is something that the yogin "feels" and his body is affected as his body becomes inhabited by a new set of reality. In other words, Padoux opens

up the possibility that transformation takes place in the body. (4) And when he purposely contrasts this new way of interpretation with previous ways, his language offers even more clues: consciousness is bodily consciousness; we need to consider the physical and psychological condition of the yogin; we need to talk about perceptions (not just conceptions); instead of imagination we need to consider participation, the possibility that the practitioner really experiences, or embodies, carries in his body, a new reality.

Now about mantra, Padoux says the following:

Psychological or psychophysiological research methods could be applied to *mantrayoga*, where mantras, visualized as being in the subtle body whose image is superimposed by *bhāvanā* on that of the physical body, are usually considered as acting and moving together with *kuṇḍalinī*, which itself is a very particular internalized mental construction. Such mental and physical practices result in a particular image of the body, fashioned with the help of mantras, which abide in it and animate it. One could try to find, in this respect, how *nyāsas* act on the psychological plane. How, we may ask ourselves, does a yogin experience his body as he “lives” it when it is entirely imbued with mantras, supposedly divinized or cosmicized by them? The experience is sure to be of an unusual sort, which it would be interesting to know. (Padoux 1989:314)

Though at times Padoux again reveals a certain bias in his thinking (for example, he says that *kuṇḍalinī* is a mental construction, whereas for Abhinavagupta it is clearly a bodily reality), at the same time he again opens up the possibility of interpreting Abhinavagupta in a new way. Such a new interpretation considers the physical and psychological condition of the practitioner, how the yogin experiences the lived body (“the body one experiences or feels psychologically” as opposed to the physical body, i.e., the body as object) (Padoux 1989:318, n.25), and takes seriously the possibility that transformation takes place in the body.

Finally, about *mudrā*, Padoux has this to say:

...how is the bodily action [in ritual] experienced by the actor? How far is he involved in what he does?... *Mudrās* are always gestures which accomplish something. But how much does one really achieve with gestures? How much does the actor believe he achieves?

...1) In most ritual works, notably the Śaivāgamas and śaiva paddhatis, the mere display of the prescribed *mudrā*, or even a mere statement of what is being

done, generally seems to be held sufficient [for ritual to be effective].⁵⁴ 2) In the Bhairavāgamas and other works of the bhairavic or kāpālika tradition, ancient conceptions about the *āveśa* of the adept by the deity still seem to prevail, and *mudrās* are seen chiefly as bodily attitudes implying a mystical participation or experience on the part of the performer, or even in certain cases as purely mystical attitudes. (Padoux 1990b:74)

Padoux is aware of the possibility of a new method, a new way of interpreting in Tantric Studies. Such an interpretation would finally take seriously the perceptions by the body. Padoux refers to participation, bodily attitude, experience, and being possessed by a new reality. Such references are in the context of his question about accomplishing something, i.e., effecting real transformation, with bodily gestures.

I conclude now by showing how tending to the body and the bodily energies would allow us to make more sense of self-transformation. I realize I am painting in broad strokes; I think that nonetheless my reflections here — in combination with the material presented throughout this article — point toward a rigorous way of recovering the body for both Abhinavagupta Studies and the History of Religions.

I want to suggest that the new way of being discussed in Abhinavagupta's works only makes sense in terms of the body. Now what Alexis Sanderson has argued for is that Abhinavagupta's tradition was able to infuse "power" into the tradition of "purity" (and thus have both "power" and "purity"). Sanderson's scholarship (1985) gives us the following picture: the power culture, represented by the various Kaula traditions, arose out of the purity culture, represented by the Brahmanical cultures that were based on codes of purity (most importantly they included rules about what could be touched, and what could not be touched). The purity culture suppressed both the body and the senses; thus the necessity of the power culture derived directly from the suppression of the body (see Sanderson 1985: 192–93; also 198ff.). On one hand, there existed the purity culture, ruled by body neurosis and anxiety, a fear of the "spontaneity of the senses" (ibid. 193), and an attempt to master and control the body. In contrast there arose the power culture, erupting at the margins (ibid. 193, 199ff., 205) of a worldview unable to contain the body and the senses, no longer able to keep the

⁵⁴ Padoux is not explicit here and the parenthetical addition is my own.

body down. The eruption of the power culture was precisely an eruption of the body and its energies (*śakti*). Now from his analysis of these two cultures, Sanderson describes Abhinavagupta's movement itself as the infusion of power into the path of purity. I contend that such infusion of power would only make sense if there were a corresponding transformation of perceptions by the new bodies in this new movement. That is, if the new practitioner continued maintaining his neurotic obedience, if external standards of purity, "[r]ules of touch and touch-me-not" (Lannoy 1971:54) only continued to inhibit the body and its senses, then in fact there was no change, and we can not rightly speak of an infusion of power.

The transformations must be found in the body and the senses themselves. As Staal's reflections on the efficacy of mantra remind us, mantras transform the very senses that need to be transformed. What Abhinavagupta's movement effected was not merely a new way of conceiving the body, but a new way of conceiving *and* perceiving *through* the body. Through the body emerged a new way of being; Abhinavagupta's recollection is a recollection through the body, recovering what the body knew all along, that it always already pulsates in rhythm with Being itself.

Sanderson conceives of the transformation in terms of top-down metaphysics, as if Abhinavagupta overlaid a metaphysical system on top of bodily practices. I am suggesting that we begin thinking with Abhinavagupta through the paradigm of the body, and, in particular, through a paradigm of Touching, in which knowing is a type of Touching, consistent with the path of the Pulsating Heart, where knowing is feeling. One does not simply think away bodily inhibition, inhibition that has been heavily weighing on one's body, holding it down, and sup-pressing and op-pressing it, and ultimately preventing it from any creative gathering, laying down, and re-collecting of Being. Abhinavagupta's recovery of the body and senses demonstrate that one only transforms one's way of being in the body by means of the body. Thus, the Sky-Going gesture is the way the body holds itself in relation to Being. Abhinavagupta's descriptions of body and bodily gestures suggest that, for him and his tradition, there can be no Sky-Going gesture, no new authentic way of being in the world, without the body. Rather than an abstract cognition of Being, recollection is the retrieval of a concrete and deep bodily felt sense of Being, already waiting as the secret Other to be touched and to touch.

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