



Samādhi

The Numinous
and Cessative
in Indo-Tibetan Yoga

Stuart Ray Sarbacker

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SUNY series in Religious Studies

Harold Coward, editor

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State University of New York Press

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, address State University of New York Press,
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production by Michael Haggett
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sarbacker, Stuart Ray, 1969–

Samādhi : the numinous and cessative in Indo-Tibetan yoga / Stuart Ray Sarbacker.
p. cm. — (SUNY series in religious studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-6553-5 (alk. paper)

1. Meditation—Hinduism. 2. Meditation—Buddhism. 3. Yoga. I. Series.

BL2015.M4S25 2005
294.5'436—dc22

2004062626

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Sara, my *ḍākinī*

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Acknowledgments

This work is, in part, the fruit of many academic connections and correspondences over a number of years. I believe it is a positive reflection of the collegiality of the academic community involved in the study of the religions of South Asia. Indira Junghare and Robert Tapp at the University of Minnesota provided a wealth of advice and encouragement that continues to inspire and inform my work. Professor Junghare's guidance, support, and friendship have been an invaluable part of my academic career, and I am profoundly grateful for her generosity. David Knipe, my mentor at the University of Wisconsin, initiated me into the History of Religions as a living tradition of scholarship, and I am indebted to him for his sage advice, patience, and friendship. Also at the University of Wisconsin, I received significant support from John Dunne, Charles Hallisey, Joseph Elder, Usha Nilsson, and Ven. Geshe Lhundub Sopa. John Dunne played a critical role in the development of many of the ideas in the manuscript and inspired within me the confidence to work more deeply and closely with primary texts. Charles Hallisey helped greatly to bring focus, discipline, and closure to my writing. Joseph Elder has served in many respects as a model for my development as a scholar and researcher throughout my academic career. Usha Nilsson helped fill my imagination with a panorama of religious imagery found in Indian literature as a necessary counterpoint to the analytic and philosophical dimensions of my study. Lastly, I am grateful for the many insights into the Gelukpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism given to me by Ven. Geshe Lhundub Sopa.

In the early stages of this project, I had the fortunate opportunity to discuss many of my ideas with Winston King of Vanderbilt University. He provided helpful comments on my early work and numerous insights into his own work on the relationship between yoga and Buddhism. Professor King passed away before this manuscript was completed, but I am comforted by the fact that my work bears his imprint and influence in many significant ways. Two other scholars who greatly encouraged me in the early stages of the project were Edward Crangle of the University of Sydney and Alan Wallace of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Both provided valuable suggestions and encouragement during the early and formative stages of this project.

A great number of scholars on the topic of yoga provided significant interest, support, and encouragement during various stages of research and writing, including Ian Whicher of the University of Manitoba, Christopher Key Chapple of Loyola Marymount University, David Carpenter of St. Joseph's University, and Lloyd Pflueger of Truman State University. Professor Whicher in particular went out of his way on numerous occasions to provide guidance, encouraging me to engage myself fully in both traditional and contemporary issues in the study of yoga. Likewise, I have benefited greatly from the examination of the scholarly work of and from personal communications with Johannes Bronkhorst and Gerald Larson, whose correspondence at important points during the development of this manuscript proved profoundly fruitful for my work. All of these scholars provided both academic and moral support during the various stages of this project, and their influence can be clearly seen in the finished product.

The academic environment in Chicago has proven to be an outstanding one in which to pursue this project, and I have greatly benefited from my numerous discussions and interactions with many colleagues and friends. George Bond of Northwestern University spent a considerable amount of time discussing a number of key points of intersection between his research and my project. He provided countless suggestions that ended up shaping the text in profound ways, and I am particularly grateful for his support and encouragement. Sarah Taylor Rountree, also of Northwestern University, has been an outstanding supporter of my academic work and is deserving of much gratitude for her kindness. Tracy Pintchman at Loyola University Chicago provided innumerable insights into the writing and editing process that have helped considerably in completing the project. Conversations with David Gitomer at DePaul University provided a range of insights on the topic of yoga that brought much light to the ideas that I have endeavored to develop in the text.

The work as a whole is an expanded and revised version of my doctoral dissertation from the University of Wisconsin, entitled "The Concept of *Samādhī*: Method and the Study of Meditation in South Asian Religion," completed in December 2001. This work was greatly facilitated by the support and assistance of Harold Coward of the University of Victoria, the editor of the series in *Religious Studies*, and Nancy Ellegate and Allison Lee of the State University of New York Press.

I also would like to thank the copyright holders of two journals, who have given me permission to reproduce significant parts of two of my previously published articles—Enrica Garzilli, for granting me permission to reproduce material from my article "Traditions in Transition: Meditative Concepts in the Development of Tantric *Sādhana*," *International Journal of Tantric Studies* 6:1 (2002), which appears in revision as chapter 5, and David Chidester, for

granting me permission to reproduce material from my article “*Enstasis and Ecstasis: A Critical Appraisal of Eliade on Yoga and Shamanism*,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 15:1 (2002), which is further developed in chapter 3.

I am most of all grateful to my wife, Sara, who has been my greatest supporter throughout this project. Her ability to bring out the best in my work and life is truly extraordinary, and I am truly thankful for her encouragement and inspiration.

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INTRODUCTION

Method and the Study of Meditation

MEDITATION AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

The primary goal of this work is to develop a new methodological approach to the study of yoga and meditation in the religions of South Asia, most notably in the context of Hinduism and Buddhism. This methodology attempts to establish a balance between psychological and sociological approaches to the study of religion by integrating them into a larger phenomenological model for interpreting religious experience. The foundation of this approach is the examination of the dynamic relationship of what can be termed *numinous* and *cessative* dimensions of yoga and meditative practice in the Hindu and Buddhist context. The notion of the *numinous* represents the manner in which a practitioner of yoga embodies the world-surmounting power of divinity, while the *cessative* dimension emphasizes the attainment of freedom through separation from phenomenal existence. This relationship between *numinous* and *cessative* orientations in yoga and meditation relates to philosophical and psychological understandings of the nature of meditative states and to the connection between meditative concepts and the religious and cultural contexts in which they have developed. The usefulness of this approach to the study of yoga and meditation will be demonstrated through its application in the context of the comparison of Classical Yoga and Indian Buddhism and in the development of conceptions of tantric *sādhana* found in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. It will be shown that a significantly more sophisticated understanding of the relationship of Classical Yoga and Buddhism emerges through an analysis of the concept of meditative absorption or contemplation, *samādhi*, in light of this methodological orientation. This

approach also will help illuminate a number of issues regarding the scholastic and ritual functioning of meditative concepts and texts and their relationship to broader historical and cultural contexts. Through application of this theory to the development of tantric practice, *sādhana*, it will be demonstrated how *sādhana* represents an extension of pre-tantric conceptions of meditation, presupposing the integration of numinous and cessative qualities and posing a challenge to mainstream religious ideals in both the Hindu and Buddhist contexts. This methodology and its subsequent application will thus provide insight into a number of crucially important issues in the study of yoga and meditation in the Hindu and Buddhist religious contexts.

MEDITATION IN CONTEXT

In the schools of Indian Buddhism, *dhyāna*, typically translated as “meditation,” is often considered an indispensable part of the path toward liberation. It is a key aspect of the eightfold path, *aṣṭāṅgikamārga*, the conception of the threefold training, *triśikṣā*, and the six perfections, or *pāramitās*. The importance of *dhyāna* in the contexts of the Classical Yoga and *Sāṃkhya* traditions, in Jainism and Vedānta, and in Indian *bhakti*, in both contemporary and pre-modern contexts, demonstrates its continuing vitality within these other manifestations of the Indian religious heritage as well. It would, however, be overly simplistic to state that meditation is an *essential* element of the range of religious practices and traditions falling under the great variety of religious phenomena constituting the Indian religions. In the context of yoga and meditation, this is exemplified by the fact that even those textual and oral traditions that appear to emphasize the meditative dimension of religious life may be scholastic or second-order traditions that are as much characterized by doctrine and ritual as by contemplation or meditation.

In the context of the study of religion, the emergence of critical theory has helped clarify the problems of essentializing traditions with one type of religious practice and the danger of reifying words such as “religion,” “mysticism,” and so on.¹ However, beyond generalizations about these traditions, it is clear that in both scholastic inquiry and in ascetic discipline, conceptions regarding *dhyāna* or the closely related term *bhāvanā* have played important roles in much of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism and in the numerous ascetic disciplines that are referred to as “yoga” in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina contexts. Ideas regarding meditation have developed in a plurality of contexts, often taking shape in both dialogue and tension between different sects and schools, reflecting a process of mutual exchange and interdependence. The multivalence of the term *dhyāna* in these contexts demonstrates the manner in which religious practices extend across traditional boundaries and are often

redefined in terms of divergent soteriological ends. In much of Theravāda meditation theory, in the Pātañjala Classical Yoga system, in Indian Mahāyāna philosophy, and in Advaita Vedānta, the role of meditation in the development of ethics and soteriology is viewed as an extremely important one. Where these practices do not see application in a primary pragmatic sense, they often serve as a basis for scholastic contemplation and analysis and the establishment of scriptural authority. As a subject of intense scrutiny and technical elaboration, meditation as an object of intellectual reflection can be said to establish another realm of practice, one in which alternative methodologies or strategies for liberation are put to the test of rigorous logical examination and debate. This extended use of the meditation text is further demonstrated by the common ritual use of religious texts as a basis for making merit through recitation and for the embodiment of text through the faculty of memory. In many cases, the boundary between the application of meditative concepts in the primary and secondary senses is a fluid or dynamic one. As we will discuss at length, meditation plays many roles within Hindu and Buddhist communities and demonstrates the tension between adaptation and innovation in the religious thought and practice of these traditions.

MEDITATION AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

The proliferation in recent years of Hindu and Buddhist religious organizations throughout the world has been fueled in part by popular interest in empirical or experiential forms of religion or spirituality that contrast with perceptions of mainstream religion as dogmatic and ritualistic. The core concepts of the enlightenment tradition have, in part, led to the development of an attitude of quasi-empiricism that is a foundation for much of this contemporary attraction for meditation as an “experiential” enterprise. The other side of the picture is that the ideals of empiricism and faith in science have led many to a crisis of meaning and a search for religious “answers” outside of their own cultural and religious traditions. As Mircea Eliade has argued at length, a common perception in the contemporary American and European context is that the cosmos has been desacralized, that our cultures have lost touch with those realities that informed and instilled meaning into everyday life for premodern or *archaic* man.² Searching for a sense of meaning or mystery that will fend off the encroaching and suffocating feelings of emptiness, meaninglessness, and loss may lead people toward sublimated forms of religious expression and alternative forms of spirituality and religion.³ This might take the form of engagement with what Robert Ellwood has called “*excursus religion*,” meaning a religious “flight,” a concept that might be applied to many of the contexts in which meditation is practiced.⁴ From both the perspective of searching for religious

expression in line with contemporary scientific thought and from one that stands in opposition, meditation is often seen as an alternative to both the secular and religious dimensions of mainstream culture in Europe and America.

On the empirical level, the idea that there are methods for conditioning the body and mind that provide a foundation for ethical and spiritual development is a matter of great interest from both philosophical and humanistic standpoints. Having few “superstructures,” to borrow a term used by Frits Staal, practices such as yoga and meditation are often presented as experiential, personal, and individualistic—not grounded in the same presuppositions of faith and obedience as would be found in mainstream religion, particularly with Judaism and Christianity.⁵ Following from the lack of superstructure is the conception that one may not need to change one’s worldview or become Buddhist or Hindu to meditate or practice yoga. This conception, that practice and theory can be separated from one another, is arguably another key conception at the foundation of much contemporary fascination with these disciplines. It can be argued that this space or opening in which people can participate in the practices without significant ideological or faith commitment operates like a doorway or an antechamber to greater commitment, an opportunity to test the waters.⁶ It is interesting to note the fact that *praxis*, here referring to meditative practices, is understood in this mode of thinking as an expression of independence and empiricism—a first-person, experiential phenomenon, one that seems to fit into the empirical paradigm. However, as post-modernism brings to our attention, it should be recognized that even this “experimentation” is a concrete manifestation of beliefs, attitudes, and inclinations, presupposing some degree of commitment to a particular worldview. Informal instruction in yoga and meditation and the availability of a range of popular literature on meditation provide an entryway into deeper involvement in the cultural aspects of religious practice. The process of becoming part of a social and religious community can be seen to operate on a number of levels and through a series of stages of progression, from that of informal participation to deliberate and formal declarations of faith.

Another facet of contemporary interest in meditation can be described as the search for profound experiences and a sense of enjoyment in life contrasted with the mundane or rote reality of secularized life. In this context, Erica Bourguignon has argued that Hindu and Buddhist cults, such as those that grew exponentially in the American countercultural movement, promise a degree of instant gratification characteristic of consumerist culture, supporting an “ease” or “a pleasure-centered” religious attitude.⁷ This would be complemented by the attraction that such traditions have for individuals who have used psychogenic and other types of substances to deliberately cultivate ecstatic states and who pursue religious interests as an extension of that dimension of their cultural or spiritual life. This connection between meditation and the

ecstatic is developed in a different manner by Gananath Obeyesekere, who argues that yogic methodologies can be qualified on the psychoanalytic level on the basis of the degree to which they aim at putting life in accordance with the so-called pleasure principle.⁸ Obeyesekere thus sees yogic practices, such as shamanic forms, as being forms of psychological adaptation that may bring transformation to the personality in profound ways, and not simply as a form of escapism. The sense of dissatisfaction with life in its mundane manifestations plays into a desire to transform day-to-day living and into the search for profound experiences of an ecstatic character. Meditation also may represent an attempt to establish a degree of mental and emotional strength or stability that will provide for coping with the inevitability of the painful realities of life and the psychological strength to pursue meaningful avenues of change. The development of many models of meditation that view it as therapeutic exemplifies how such practices are being adapted to address the realities of social and emotional life outside of the religious context. The steady integration of meditative models into the domains of psychology and psychiatry has furthered interest in this domain and provided further rationale for focusing upon yoga and meditation as a legitimate subject of academic and scientific study.

A study of the historical, linguistic, and cultural elements that compose and contextualize meditation practice is valuable for a number of reasons. The study of meditation is an important point of intersection between cultures, a place of coming together that has a vitality and an immediacy of relevance to our society and the development of its cultural and religious horizons. An important relationship can be developed between scholars and practitioners of yoga and meditative traditions that may help further develop dialogue and, by extension, mutual understanding on this subject. Practitioners may be in a position to offer the academic study of religion insight into the concrete manifestations of meditation practice and provide anthropological opportunities for the scholar that allow for a deeper understanding of the practical and cultural realities of meditation. This is particularly important to the degree that yoga and other contemplative disciplines are said to be rooted in experiences that provide key insights for interpretation and explanation presumably not available to the uninitiated. In the academic context, approaching the subject with a critical lens can provide historical and cultural insights that complement the philosophical perspectives that are developed within the traditions themselves. In turn, the advancement of such a methodology will be valuable in light of the splintering and polarization in contemporary scholarship between empathetic and critical approaches toward the study of religion.⁹ Scholarly perspectives on meditation often have been fractured, breaking into different views, such as academic and critical methodologies, medical and therapeutic applications, and popular discussions of yoga and meditation as alternative forms of spirituality. This is further complicated by the influences

that scholarship has had upon its objects of study, an issue that becomes of paramount importance for some scholars in understanding the self-representations of the cultures they study.¹⁰ This has led to a rift within the academic community and between the academic and nonacademic communities in the study of religion that is unnecessary and even to some degree harmful to the integrity of religious studies and the culture it exists within.¹¹ The current study aims to overcome these problems through the development of an integrative and interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion, and thus meditation, that values a range of perspectives and approaches.

Our hope is that this study also may, by extension, provide a theoretical foundation for the development of contemplative studies as a subdiscipline of the History of Religions methodology. There is great potential for the development of mutual understanding and cultural renewal in the study of contemplation and *praxis* in the academic context. This may occur through conversations with representatives of a range of religious backgrounds and through investigation of traditional and academic sources on contemplative technique in the historical and contemporary contexts. Perhaps in time practical training in meditative technique might be offered as part of a philosophy or religious studies curriculum, one that is developed and explored in the academic setting. On this level, the study of religion can play a significant role in the development of progressive social ideals and the validation of cultural diversity. It also may provide alternative perspectives on contemporary culture that demonstrate the meaningfulness of endeavors that are not currently validated by market-driven culture.¹² The pursuit of the study of meditation and other contemplative methods may be an avenue for exploring the psychological, social, and ethical ramifications of alternative approaches to living and may bolster the ability of religious studies to act as a medium for social and cultural renewal. The application of such methods in the academic context must be limited by the fact that they are rooted in a plurality of worldviews diverging from one another in critical ways. However, a great amount of common ground exists within contemplative traditions that make them particularly suitable for comparison and dialogue in the academic context.

POSTSTRUCTURAL, POSTMODERN, AND POSTCOLONIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Poststructural, postmodern, and postcolonial thought has led to greater contextuality in the study of religion through the development of new approaches to text and to ethnographic and anthropological research.¹³ However, it may be argued that the emphasis on the knowledge-power relationship that thoroughly infuses postmodern and postcolonial thought at times comes danger-

ously close to being the sort of “master narrative” that it claims to eschew. J. J. Clarke has noted that postmodernism may be thought of as more an extension of, or an attempt to come to terms with, a number of the central problems of modernism than as an outright rejection of the modernist enterprise.¹⁴ Along these lines, George Kalamaras has recently argued that one of the problems with postmodern theory is that it forms a basic dichotomy between itself and other forms of discourse and in effect propagates the very type of binary thinking that it attempts to avoid.¹⁵ Kalamaras argues that poststructuralist rhetoric leaves no space for the possibility of phenomena outside the realm of language, pushing all appeals to realities beyond language into the realm of the primitive or the oppressive.¹⁶ Due to this, the liberating potential of questioning the relationship of language and power can be at odds with knowledge claims based in appeals to nonlinguistic forms of experience and understanding, such as silence and paradox.¹⁷ Though presenting a somewhat simplistic image of Indian forms of yoga, Kalamaras rightly notes the importance of *praxis* and the generative nature of opposition in the yogic context.¹⁸ The play of paradox, the coincidence of opposites, and the transcendent aspects of religious thought and practice are issues where scholarship on religion walks a tightrope. Appeals to nonlinguistic phenomena and the characterization of cultural traditions as respectively rational versus irrational, or scientific versus mystical, are often said to be the foundation of orientalist thought.¹⁹ While ruling out appeals to any nonlinguistic forms of knowledge a priori would be equivalent to undercutting the truth claims of many of the different Indian philosophical and religious traditions, the idea that Indian traditions do not value discursive thought or scholasticism is plainly false, as much as the assertion that Indian religions are exclusively mystical.²⁰ Kalamaras’s presentation of the role and nature of *samādhi*, for example, clearly gives the impression that *samādhi* has traditionally been the central practice or goal of Vedānta, an assertion that is problematic at best.²¹ He is correct, however, in asserting that transcendence is often the primary object of meditative practice, posing a problem for interpretations that situate it purely in a social or cultural field of relationships.

While being a challenge to comparativism in its emphasis on rootedness and contextuality, poststructural and postmodern thought also brings to light the reality that knowledge and understanding are themselves the result of comparative processes. Gadamer’s idea of the “fusion of horizons,” which emphasizes the rootedness of all human discourse in tradition and culture and the interaction of such contextual views, is demonstrated well by the progression toward more sophisticated and complex models of Indian religion and culture.²² This process is at work both within as well as among cultures, including the religious traditions that are the object of our study and the academic orientations that inform our scholarly work. In Gadamer’s thought, it

does not make sense to talk about rescuing the original intentions of the author, but rather one should speak of the negotiation of meaning between text and interpreter.²³ We might compare this to Eliade's conception of "creative hermeneutics," a methodology in which a scholar attempts to enter into the religious world of a text and emerge changed by that text and in a position to fruitfully communicate the content of such an encounter. Though Eliade's theory may well presuppose a degree of recovery of intention in myth, rite, and symbol that recent scholarship would consider unwarranted, the strong sense of encounter between worlds or worldviews resembles Gadamer's considerations about traditions and texts.²⁴ Furthermore, Eliade appears to have been suspicious of the ways in which scholars would try to explain their object of study in light of popular theories in philosophy, sociology, and so on, and the degree to which doing so obscured rather than made clear the ideas and experiences of other cultures.²⁵ As an extension of this understanding, the current methodological study is oriented towards an awareness of the intimate relationship between context and comparison in the study of meditation and the degree to which each is dependent upon the other. It aims to provide for an awareness of the broader context of underlying social and cultural relationships underlying these practices and for the pursuit of comparative insight and investigation into the lived experience of them. This study is thus based on this conscious recognition of the reflexive relationship between the method of study and the object of study, integrating them together in such a way as to create interpretive parity.

OVERVIEW

We will begin, in chapter 1, with an examination of key terminology and definitions in the context of meditation, developing a basic textual and contextual background in which to place our study of meditation. We will study the development of the paradigmatic concepts of *dhyāna* and *samādhi* in two representative Hindu and Buddhist texts, the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali (YS) and the *Bhāvanākrama* of Kamalaśīla (BK). Having established the core concepts of meditation and their contexts, we will then provide a brief overview of scholarship on the broad development of the practices of yoga and of meditation in the Indian context. Through this process, we will provide an overarching framework for the study of meditation and a foundation of terminology upon which our approach to the study of meditation and yoga will be built. We will suggest that meditation is an area of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions that offers great insights into the soteriological visions and social structure of both ancient and contemporary practice, even if they are not considered "essential" to these traditions. We will suggest how meditation provides an exceptionally