

The Descent of Power:
Possession, Mysticism, and Metaphysics
*in the Śaiva Theology of Abhinavagupta*¹

CHRISTOPHER D. WALLIS, M.A., M.PHIL.

INTRODUCTION

IT IS TO BE HOPED that the next ten years of Indological scholarship will demonstrate beyond dispute that Abhinavagupta, the great polymathic scholar and theologian of tenth-century Srinagar, was one of the major figures in the history of Indian philosophy and religion, on par with such personages as Śaṅkara and Nāgārjuna. His importance as an expert in aesthetic philosophy and literary criticism has long been known to Sanskritists in both India and the West, and his contributions to the theories of *rasa* and *dhvani* continue to be studied. His stature as a theologian and metaphysical philosopher is just as great, though less recognized until recently. As the foremost among a number of skilled Kashmiri exegetes of various schools of the Śaiva religion, he did much to elevate Śaivism to a level of sophistication and comprehensive coherence unprecedented to that date, perhaps helping to ensure its continued patronage by royal courts and exegesis by learned scholars for centuries to come. With Muslim incursions beginning late in his

¹ This paper could not have been written without two years of intensive study with Professor Alexis Sanderson of All Souls College, Oxford, whose scholarship has proved essential in advancing my understanding of Shaivism. Also very helpful was Dr. Somadeva Vasudeva, of the Clay Sanskrit Library, whose database and encyclopedic knowledge have been invaluable. The germ of the idea for this article was suggested to me when Professor Paul Muller-Ortega (University of Rochester) first pointed out to me the passage beginning at MVT 2.14.

lifetime and culminating in total Muslim rule within three centuries, Abhinavagupta's religious writings were more influential in the long term not in his homeland, but in other parts of India, especially the deep South, where his doctrinal formulations were considered as authoritative for centuries.² His greatest theological work, *Light on the Tantras* (*Tantrāloka*), a massive encyclopedia of Tantric Śaiva doctrine and practice, must be ranked amongst the greatest works of theological exegesis in Indian history.³

Given all the above, we must ask why Abhinavagupta is not as well-known either in India or the West as the other figures thought to help shape the development of Indian religions. In part this is due to more than two centuries of Western scholarship informed by a colonial discourse that privileged the “golden age” of the Indo-Aryans and their texts, the Vedas and Upaniṣads, as well as Buddhist literature, over and against the “corruption and degradation” of the mediaeval period and its texts, the Tantras and Āgamas, characterized by Sir Monier-Williams (1894) as “superstition of the worst and most silly kind.” Even today, it seems that much of Sanskrit Indology focuses on texts written before the Common Era, and later commentators on those same texts. This is of course also because the “golden age” colonialist discourse was internalized by nineteenth-century educated Indians, religious leaders like Swami Dayānanda, Vivekānanda, Aurobindo, and others who helped to constitute “neo-Hinduism” around fictionalized historical personalities like Śaṅkara, whose monistic and Gnostic theology

² We may see Abhinavagupta's influence on South Indian nondual Śākta texts such as the *Mahārthamañjari* of Maheśvarānanda in the Krama tradition, the *Paramānandatantra* and the *Tripurārahasya* of the Tripurasundarī tradition, and even Śrīkaṇṭha's commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*. His influence may also be seen in Mahārāṣṭra in authors like Bhāskaraṛāya in the Śrīvidyā tradition. Of course his influence did continue for some time in the far north as well, both on the Kubjikā cult of the Paścimāmnāya Kaula tradition that flourished in Nepāl, and on the Krama in Kashmir, as exemplified by the *Mahānāyaparakāśa* in Old Kashmiri with Sanskrit commentary. Several of these references are derived from SANDERSON in personal communication.

³ For more information on Abhinavagupta's life and work, the reader is referred to Muller-Ortega 1998.

was sufficiently abstract to be seen as not entirely incommensurate with aspects of Western monotheism. This Westernized and thus more palatable form of “Hinduism” was then back-fed into the West, where it has been influential both in the scholarly world and in American popular culture, where its relativistic perspective of “many paths – one goal” provides for many a possible solution to the implicit problem of religious pluralism. All this led to a neglect of the equally important literature of the Tantras, for despite their near-total misrepresentation by self-help “gurus” in the West, and their seeming radical “otherness” even compared to modern Indian culture, I would argue that their study is of paramount importance to understanding the nature and function of Indian religion over the last millennium.

The second reason that Abhinavagupta is not yet sufficiently known or studied is the difficulty in understanding his language. When at first a student takes up his work, it seems that Abhinava’s Sanskrit is particularly complex and difficult, and indeed it is, compared to the Epic Sanskrit with which many of us are trained. However, repeated attempts to comprehend Abhinavagupta reveal that the problem is not so much one of grammar as of context and audience. Abhinava wrote his theological texts primarily for other teachers (*ācāryas*) and literate disciples in his tradition, and assumed a body of scriptural knowledge and ritual context not possessed by the modern reader. Finally it dawns on the student that comprehension of a text like the *Tantrāloka* is contingent on an acquaintance with, at a minimum, several dozen other texts, both scripture (*āgama*) and philosophical works (*śāstra*). When he further realizes that many of these texts are represented by corrupted manuscript transmissions, few are published and virtually none exist in proper critical editions, the full overwhelming scope of the daunting task he has

set himself becomes apparent.⁴ Because of these circumstances, present-day work in this area necessarily contains errors that will be corrected by future generations of scholars. Nonetheless, the work must be undertaken if we are to understand the meaning and significance of centuries of development in Indian religion. Perhaps such understanding will also serve to illuminate and rehabilitate the Tantric elements of modern Indian *sampradāyas*, elements that have had to be sublimated, hidden or glossed over by their adherents because of their incompatibility with the approved construction of ‘neo-Hinduism’.

WORKS OF ABHINAVAGUPTA

Between approximately 975 and 1025 CE, Abhinavagupta authored works in many fields of learned discourse, from dance to philosophy, from poetry to theology. In the area of aesthetics, poetry, and rhetoric, his important commentary (*-locana*) on Ānandavardhana’s *Dhvanyāloka* is well known to Sanskritists as the final word on the influential *dhvani* school of poetic analysis. He also composed a commentary on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *Abhinavabhāratī*, which has not yet been satisfactorily critically edited. Abhinava wrote several works in the field of general theology, including a commentary on the Bhagavadgītā (the *Bhagavadgītārtha-saṅgraha*) and the *Paramārthasāra*, loosely based on a text attributed to Patañjali but expounding concepts of Śaiva yoga in a simple style for a general audience. His philosophical works included two extensive commentaries on the *Stanzas on the Recognition of the Lord* by Utpaladeva, an important dialectical work arguing with Buddhist opponents and others on behalf of nondual

⁴ Important publications of critical editions and translations by institutions such as the Institut Français de Pondichéry, including the recent *Yoga of the Mālinīvijayottaratantra* by Somadeva Vasudeva and the *Parāṅkhyatantra* by Dominic Goodall, are just beginning to remedy this situation.

Tantric Śaivism. These commentaries are the *Īśvara-pratyabhijñā-kārikā-vimarśinī* and the huge *–vivṛtivismarśinī*, the latter a commentary on Utpaladeva's auto-commentary, now lost. These are also works intended for a wider audience in cosmopolitan Kashmir, including Śaivas of other schools and possibly even non-Śaivas. This may be seen in their appeal to logical argumentation (*yukti*) as well as commonly held scripture (*sāmānyaśāstra*).

Abhinava's theological writing, intended primarily for nondual Śaivas of the Vidyāpīṭha (see below), but extending sometimes to include all Tantric Śaivas, include some of his lengthiest and most impressive work in terms of the vast bulk and complexity of material organized and more or less coherently explained. It was mainly focused on expounding the original scriptural material of his particular school of Śaivism, the Trika. He wrote several commentaries, in various commentarial styles, on the scripture that he takes as the root-text (*mūlaśāstra*) of the Trika, called the *Latter Triumph of the Phonemic Goddess* (*Mālinīvijayottara-tantra* or MVT). Some of these works, including a traditional prose commentary, apparently no longer survive. Those that do survive include the *Commentary on the Verse of the Mālinī* (*Mālinīśloka-vārttika*), a work that claims to be a comment – in 1,470 verses – on only the first verse of the MVT. Excepting the first verse, it does not quote the original text, though it discusses many themes of the MVT. Even further removed from the *Mālinī*'s text *per se* is the monumental *Tantrāloka* (TĀ) mentioned above, in thirty-seven chapters that total 5,858 verses. This work, incorporating quotations and paraphrases from a wide range of Tantric texts (especially the MVT), has the unstated goal of integrating a variety of sects and schools of thought into the ambit of his school, the Trika, thereby establishing a coherent, systematic, and comprehensive Śaiva theology for the first time. The themes of the TĀ include, in order

of its chapters: the epistemological framework of the religion (1); the various means (*upāya*) to liberation appropriate to different practitioners (2-5); analysis of time, space, the levels of reality (*tattvas*) and divisions of the cosmos (*kalās*) (6-10); the veils (*kañcukas*) by which the Divine takes on finite form (11-12); the Descent of Power (*śaktipāta*) (13); the many forms of initiation (*dīkṣā*) and privileges they bestow (14-23); funerary rites (24-25); daily (*nitya*-) and occasional (*naimittika*-) rites (26-28); the *kulayāga* or sexual ritual and related topics (29); the mantras of the tradition (30); mystic diagrams (*maṇḍala*) and gestures (*mudrā*) (31-32); the nature of liberation (33-34); and the transmission, reconciliation, and significance of the Śaiva canon (35-37). To further emphasize the significance of this work, the nature of Abhinava's style, and the esteem in which he is held by both Western and Indian scholars, I here quote from the description of the TĀ in Teun Goudriaan and Sanjukta Gupta's *Hindu Tantric and Śākta Literature*:

The *Tantrāloka* is outstanding because of the disciplined description of systematic metaphysical and theological thought; of the author's complete familiarity with the subject-matter which he treats scholarly and authoritatively; of the sincere manner in which he pays balanced attention to different traditions embedded in sacred literature. It is only natural that this experienced rhetorician ... shows himself a complete master of Sanskrit composition. Yet ... [t]he specialized jargon and the sometimes mystifying method of presentation adds to the difficulty of the text.... [T]he work assumes the character of a comprehensive survey of the manifold aspects of the tradition; an early and precious digest, but much more sincere and faithful to its sources than other works of its kind.... (Goudriaan 1981:163)

Abhinava later wrote a prose summary of the TĀ, supposed to be more accessible and easier to read, entitled *Essence of the Tantras* (*Tantrasāra* or TS), saying in his introductory verses:

vitatas tantrāloko vigāhitum naiva śakyate sarvaiḥ |

rju-vacana-viracitam idaṃ tu tantrasāraṃ tataḥ śṛṇuta ||

Not everyone is able to plunge into the extensive *Tantrāloka*.

Therefore, let all listen to this *Tantrasāra*, composed in straightforward language.

The *Tantrasāra* is occasionally *more* difficult to read than the *Tantrāloka*, due its terse style and to the fact that Abhinava alludes only vaguely or in coded language to practices or concepts that the reader may not be initiated into, but that the initiate will understand. This is part of his general strategy of concealing and revealing, by which he sometimes clarifies and sometimes obscures, in order to illuminate the reader's understanding on many points, and at the same time tantalize him with secret doctrines that are the source of the Kaula Trika's power and pre-eminence. A complete translation of chapter 11 of *Tantrasāra*, here published in English for the first time, and supplemented with material from the *Tantrāloka*, completes the present essay.

BACKGROUND: SITUATING ABHINAVAGUPTA AND HIS DOCTRINE

Abhinavagupta's vision of reality might be summarized in this way: all that exists and has ever existed is one infinite divine Consciousness, free and blissful, which projects within the field of its awareness a vast multiplicity of apparently differentiated subjects and objects, each object an actualization of a potential inherent in the divine Light of Consciousness (*prakāśa*) and each subject a contracted locus of self-awareness (*vimarśa*). This projection, a divine play (*krīḍā*), is the result of the impulse (*icchā*) within the Divine to express the totality of its self-knowledge (*jñāna*) in action (*kriyā*). When that divine Consciousness contracts into finite loci of awareness, out of its own free will, and those finite subjects then identify with the limited and circumscribed cognitions and circumstances that make up this phase of their existence, instead of with the trans-

individual overarching pulsation (*spanda*) of pure Awareness that is their true nature, they experience what they call suffering. To rectify this, some feel an inner urge to take up the path of spiritual gnosis (*jñāna*) and ritual practice (*kriyā*), the purpose of which is to undermine their misidentification and directly reveal within the immediacy of awareness the fact that the Divine Powers of Consciousness, Bliss, Will, Knowledge and Action comprise the totality of individual experience as well – thereby triggering a recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) of one’s own identity as the Supreme Lord, the All-in-all. This experiential gnosis is repeated and reinforced through various means (*upāyas*) until it becomes the non-conceptual ground of every moment of experience, and one’s sense of contracted individuality is annihilated in the incandescence of the complete expansion into perfect wholeness (*pūrṇatā*). Then one’s perception permanently encompasses the reality of a universe dancing ecstatically in the excitement of its completely perfect divinity.

This vision of reality, here reduced to its bare essentials, dwelt at the core of a complex religious and cultic system that he inherited and explicated in its terms, ingeniously making sense of a bewildering array of ritual practices and doctrinal typologies within the context of his nondual vision, transmitted to him from his Trika Guru, Śambhunātha. To understand Abhinavagupta, then, we must situate him in the cultural and historical context that gave him the intellectual tools with which he expressed that vision.

Though the term Śaiva simply means “a follower of Śiva’s teachings,” it has so far been used in this paper as an adjective denoting Tantric Śaivism, or the followers and traditions of the so-called “Path of Mantras” (*Mantramārga*; see below). This is not a

modern innovation; we see this same narrower, more specific usage of the term in a variety of Sanskrit sources. For example, Rāmānuja in his *Śrībhāṣya* polemically writes of those sects of Paśupati (Śiva) that are false, contradict the Veda and are not to be respected, saying that the followers of this doctrine are of four types: Kāpālas (also known as Kāpālikas or Soma-siddhāntins); Kālāmukhas (a.k.a. Lākulas); Pāśupatas (a.k.a. Pāñcārthikas); and Śaivas (*idānīm paśupatimatasya vedavirodhād āsamanjasyāc ca anādaraṇīyatocyate tanmatānusārīṇaś caturvidhāḥ – kāpālāḥ kālāmukhāḥ pāśupatāḥ śaivaś ceti*).⁵ The first three groups are referred to in Śaiva sources as *Atimārga*, the Transcendent Path, because its ascetic adherents transcend and are exempt from the ordinary observances of caste and life-stage (*varṇāśramadharmā*) and because it leads to salvation. However, this earlier form of Śaivism (which probably became widespread shortly after the beginning of the common era) was itself transcended by the Śaiva Siddhānta and other schools of Tantric Śaivism, collectively referred to as the *Mantramārga*, the surviving texts of which begin roughly in the sixth century CE.⁶

There are many complex ways by which the canon of the *Mantramārga* was analyzed and subdivided by the original authors, but the simplest for our purposes splits it into two major streams. First, the Śaiva Siddhānta on the right hand, non-transgressive, compatible with brāhminical norms (*vaidikadharmā*), worshipping Śiva without his consort (though she is present doctrinally), following twenty-eight revealed scriptures,

⁵ *Śrībhāṣya* ad *Brahmasūtra* 2.2.35. Thanks to Professor Sanderson for this reference, and for clarifying this four-fold division.

⁶ Perhaps the earliest surviving significant text of the Śaiva Siddhānta is the *Niśvāsaśāhita* (possibly meaning “The Hymns Breathed Out (by God)”), unpublished and surviving in a single palm-leaf manuscript in the Nepalese National Archives in Kathmandu and a 1912 apograph at the Wellcome Institute, London. (Note: the entry in Apte’s dictionary is in error in classifying this as a Pāśupata text; the first part merely summarizes Pāśupata doctrines.) The text was the basis for Alexis Sanderson’s Ramalinga Reddy Memorial Lectures at the University of Madras, 1997, recently published in the *Indian Philosophical Annual* by the Radhakrishnan Institute for Advanced Study in Philosophy, Chennai.

and originally dualistic, viewing the Lord (*pati*), the individual soul (*paśu*), and manifested reality (*pāśa*) as eternally separate essences. (Note that this instantiation of the Śaiva Siddhānta, present in Kāśhmīr in Abhinavagupta's time, is doctrinally quite different from the nondual Śaiva Siddhānta seen later in the Tamiḷ South.) Second, on the left hand, the various groups following the 64 *Bhairavatantras*, emphasizing to some degree Goddess- and yoginī-worship, sometimes transgressive in ritual, rejecting more explicitly the authority of the Veda, and often nondualistic, panentheistic, and/or idealistic. The Bhairava-tantras were further subdivided, most significantly into the "Seat of Mantras" (*Mantrapīṭha*) and the 'Seat of Wisdoms' (*Vidyāpīṭha*, where *vidyā* is a feminine word for *mantra*). The former is primarily composed of the cult of "Autonomous Bhairava" (*Svacchandabhairava*), popular and widespread in Kashmir as well as Nepal and the Deccan (Sanderson 1986:182). In the latter we find the goddess-centered, radically nondualist, often transgressive groups, such as that of the "Trinity" (*Trika*), "Family (of Goddesses)" (*Kula*), and "Sequence" (*Krama*).⁷

The main period of scriptural revelation for all these groups was the sixth through tenth centuries CE. Scriptural texts, originating from various locations in north and central India, were authored anonymously, for they purported to be revealed by one or another form of God, and generally contained information on doctrine (*jñāna*), ritual (*kriyā*), mystical practices (*yoga*), and observances (*caryā*). Usually, each expounded a liturgy surrounding a particular aspect of divinity, and sectarian boundaries were generally marked by liturgical rather than doctrinal differences. The ninth through eleventh centuries saw a flourishing exegetical tradition in Kashmir: *gurus* and scholars,

⁷ For more on these classifications, and the specific groups that comprise them, see the two most important studies on the Śaiva canon: Sanderson 1988 and Dyczkowski 1988.

some patronized by the court, expounded the scriptures and helped to establish the dominant schools of thought, which often absorbed other groups, at least doctrinally.

The three main sects that Abhinavagupta makes the basis of his systematic theology, presented in the *Tantrāloka* and elsewhere, are the Trika, Kula, and Krama mentioned above, combined with the sophisticated philosophical school of “Recognition” (*pratyabhijñā*). His precise cultic system might best be termed as Kaula Trika, that is, Trika as influenced by the later esoteric phase of the Kula (as well as by the Krama). Though the doctrine and practice of these groups formed the core of his works, his theology also subsumed the whole of Tantric Śaivism through extensive quotations and paraphrases (indeed, this may constitute fully one quarter of the TĀ’s text) interpreted in light of his own nondual doctrine of the all-pervasive unity of divine Consciousness and its Powers, manifesting through the autonomous conscious agency of every apparent individual. Indeed, he goes even further than mere syncretism: following the *Jayadrathayāmala-tantra*, he envisions a hierarchy of all the Indian religious systems, whereby the “liberation” attained through each one elevates the soul to the highest level of reality envisioned by that system, which nonetheless falls short of the highest possible attainment (*paramam padam*), which is reached only through Tantric Śaivism, whose map of all the levels of reality (*tattvas*) is the only complete one. Thus Abhinava deftly positions his lineage and key text exactly at the centre of expanding spheres of divine revelation, where the distance from the centre proportionally corresponds to respective capacity to perfectly represent and access the nature of ultimate reality in all its completeness (*pūrṇatā*), and then defends this hierarchy on philosophical, scriptural, and experiential grounds.

An important passage in the *Tantrāloka* (37.14-25), when boiled down, claims that the Trika text he makes the basis of his exegesis, the *Mālinīvijayottara*, is the essence of the

highest Āgama (the earlier *Siddhayogeśvarī-mata*, also a Trika text) of the highest division (the *Vidyāpīṭha*) of the highest teachings (the *Bhairava-tantras*) of the Mantramārga. The success of Abhinavagupta's enterprise may be partially seen in the fact that the best-known commentator on the *Tantrāloka*, Jayaratha, who lived two centuries later, himself did not belong to the Trika but was initiated into the Śrīvidyā, and yet took Abhinava's exegesis as authoritative.

THE "DESCENT OF POWER" AND RELATED CONCEPTS

The primary purpose of this essay is to focus in on a specific doctrine articulated in the scriptural texts (*tantras*) and elaborated by Abhinavagupta in the *Tantrasāra* and *Tantrāloka*. This is the theory of *śaktipāta*, "the Descent of Power," or "Descent of Grace," which occupies an important place in Śaiva theology and yet has not so far been treated in any detail by the academic world. It is hoped that the exploration of this and the related concepts of *āveśa* (possession or immersion) and *dīkṣā* (initiation) in this paper will: (1) clarify the usage and relationship of these terms based on the primary sources; (2) partially illuminate the nature of religious experience and the qualifications for religious praxis in Śaivism; (3) give insight into the *Weltanschauung* of the Śaivas; and (4) help to pinpoint a specific and significant issue in the phenomenological study of religion generally.

In order to accomplish these goals, I will briefly survey the use of our key terms over several centuries of textual development, building up a theory as to their range of meanings; focus on Abhinavagupta's usage and understanding of them in as much depth as space permits; provide the reader with translations and the original Sanskrit with

which to draw her own conclusions; and make tentative conclusions of my own as to the meaning and larger significance of the “Descent of Power.”

CONTEXT: THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

In the mediaeval period (by which I mean roughly 300-1300 CE), Śaivism was a flourishing religion of its own, sharing the Indian religious landscape with Buddhism, Jainism, Vaiṣṇavism, and various forms of Vedic religion. In each of these areas we must make a distinction between cultural/civic forms of religion such as might be designated under the term *dharma*, and soteriological forms of religion, that is to say, paths to liberation, salvation, or beatitude of some kind (*mokṣa*, *mukti*, *nirvāṇa*, *apavarga*, etc.). Viewed from this perspective, we see that Vedic religion was dominant in the civic sphere, pervading as it did all of the cultural landscape apart from Buddhism and Jainism, which were arguably on the wane during this period. However, in the realm of soteriology, Vedism had to compete with other paths to liberation, including dozens or even hundreds of interrelated sects organized around a variety of deities, especially but not limited to Śiva, Viṣṇu, Śakti, Sūrya, and Gaṇeśa. Though these five were assimilated into Brāhminism and appear later within its orthopraxy as the deities of the *pañcāyatanapūjā*, this may in fact be considered the influence of Tantrism – for these five deities (in various forms, including originally local or “tribal” forms) are the very ones to which a large body of Tantric literature accrued. In fact, though the Purāṇas associated with most of these deities are better known today, they must have once been easily outnumbered by the array of *Tantras*, *Āgamas*, and *Samhitās* associated with them (and indeed much Tantric material was incorporated within the Purāṇas, such as the *Agni-* and

the *Linga*-). A large but unknown percentage of these texts is now lost, especially those associated with cults that did not survive as long, like those of Sūrya.

Therefore in mediaeval India a kind of diverse religious pluralism existed similar to that of the ancient Hellenistic world or indeed the modern period. What is particularly fascinating in the Indian case is that the distinction between civic and salvific religion is one observed in the original sources. This is seen most conspicuously in the fact that one who enters one soteriological path and then wishes to convert to Śaivism must go through a special ritual (*liṅgoddhāra*) to remove the marks (*liṅga*-) of his previous path before he may be initiated, and even then may never take the office of a *guru* or *ācārya*. (See TĀ 22.42-48) This is true not only for a former Buddhist or Pañcarātrika, but even a Vedic *vānaprastha* or *sannyāsin*, thus demonstrating a distinction in the minds of Śaivas at least between Vaidika observance as a cultural institution and as a more specifically religious practice.

This distinction exists in Śaivism as well, where the structure of the religion in some ways paralleled Buddhism: a small percentage of initiated religious specialists were supported, along with the religion's temples and *maṭhas*, by large numbers of uninitiated laity. There were also major differences as well; in Mantramārgic Śaivism, initiation was extended to householders as well as those wishing to become renunciates, though the number of initiates probably remained relatively small. The laity, usually called Rudrabhaktas, were guided in their spiritual life by an eight-fold observance detailed in the *Śivadharmā* ('Religion of Śiva') and the *Śivadharmottara*, two key texts for understanding Śaivism as a cultural institution in this period, which, unfortunately, remain unpublished. Rudrabhaktas, as participants in the non-soteriological aspect of the religion, were guaranteed not liberation but a period of enjoyment in Śiva's heaven

(*rudraloka*) after death. Some of these lay devotees would seek initiation (*dīkṣā*) into the formal practice of the religion, and thus enter into an intimate relationship with their deity in the form of a specific mantra, supported by an array of ancillary mantras that embodied powers which brought him or her enjoyments and ultimately liberation.⁸

INITIATION (*dīkṣā*) AND QUALIFICATION (*adhikāra*)

Initiation into the esoteric elite of Śaiva practitioners was considered a highly significant event, probably viewed by most initiates as the most important event of their lives. Leaving aside a preliminary and probationary lower initiation (*samayadīkṣā*), the primary form of initiation was *nirvāṇadīkṣā*, which as the name implied, granted guaranteed liberation at the time of death. ('Liberation is bestowed by Śiva's initiation.' *mukṭiś ca śivadīkṣayā*, MVT 4.8, cited by Abhinava at TĀ 15.6) This initially unique (*apūrva*) and striking claim must have been instrumental in the growing popularity of Śaivism. This doctrine had gained sufficient currency already by the early seventh century for Buddhist scholar Dharmakīrti to bother attacking it in his *Pramānavarttika* (*Pramāṇasiddhi* section, 257-67). The guru—thought to be acting as the vehicle of Śiva, who is the true agent—accomplished this initiation through a complex and not inexpensive ritual, lasting two or more days, in which the initiand's latent *karma* on all levels of reality was destroyed (*tattvaśuddhi*), and his soul ritually fused with Śiva (*Śivayojana*). This made the initiate a *Putraka* ("like a son" of the guru), inducting him into the world of Tantric ritual and (if he wished) yoga, as well as making him a part of an initiatory in-group (*kula*), enjoying direct and regular instruction from the guru, and finally qualifying him to read

⁸ Women were also initiated, though this was far more common in the Goddess-centred left-handed schools, in the most extreme of which women could even become Gurus. This article generally uses the pronoun "he," because the majority of initiates and gurus were men; but, as in Sanskrit, the pronoun is inclusive.

the sacred texts of the tradition. He could, if he wished, strive for liberation in life (*jīvanmukti*, a doctrine of the left) or for supernatural powers (*siddhi*), but at any rate his future was assured, for at the fall of the body, he would merge with Śiva or become equal to him, depending on the school of thought.

But what qualified a person to receive such a sacred initiation? In answer to this, we discover another unique doctrine of Śaivism. This is the concept of the Descent of Power or *śaktipāta*, which in essence is the doctrine that one must have undergone an internal, subjective, powerful mystical experience, through the grace of God (*īśaprasādena*)—which inspires one’s heart with devotion for Him and makes one ready to turn toward the spiritual path—as the necessary and sufficient condition for initiation. This doctrine, if enacted successfully, would produce elite communities of initiates for whom religion was not just a cultural institution, serving primarily apotropaic ritual functions in daily life, but rather a lived and deeply felt inner reality. Since initiation bestowed (eventual) liberation, the doctrine of *śaktipāta* further implied that this mystical, experiential dimension is necessary for the attainment of that goal. Of course, the most salient problem with requiring a subjective qualification for initiation is the one of how to determine that this internal event has taken place. As we shall see, the texts devote considerable thought to the various signs (*cihna*, *lakṣaṇa*) by which to verify that *śaktipāta* has occurred.

The above account, like most of the paper thus far, suffers from over-generalization and over-simplification. This was necessary in the discussion of *dīkṣā* and *śaktipāta* above in order to include the many divergent schools of Śaivism in a general outline. As we shall see, things did not always follow this pattern: for example, in the Kaula Trika, the *śaktipāta* experience could take place *within* the context of initiation, and

of course the nature of *śaktipāta* is understood quite differently in the dualist and nondualist camps. The rest of the essay will be devoted to exploring these issues in detail and getting to grips with the accounts in the primary sources.

POSSIBLE ANTECEDENTS IN THE *ATIMĀRGA*

For an early intimation of the doctrine of the Descent of Power, we may look to the earliest documented form of Śaivism, that of the Pāśupata religion, putatively founded by Lakulīśa, perhaps in the first century BCE or CE. The sole surviving text of the tradition is the *Pāśupata-sūtras*, perhaps second century CE, with one major commentary, Kauṇḍinya's *Commentary on the Five Categories* (*Pañcārtha-bhāṣya*), circa fourth century CE. In the latter, Kauṇḍinya describes how Lakulīśa gained his first disciple, saying: "Then the blessed Kuśika, impelled by Rudra, approached the master. Observing signs of a superior state in him, such as complete contentment, and the opposite in himself, he took hold of his feet..." (*ato rudrapracoditaḥ kuśikabhagavān abhyāgatyācārye paripūrṇa-paritrptyādy-utkarṣa-lakṣaṇāni viparītāni cātmani drṣṭvā pādāv upasaṃgrhya...*).⁹ The key phrase here is *rudrapracodita*, "impelled by," or "inspired by Rudra," implying that it was through God's grace that he felt the desire to seek a guru and was successful in finding one.¹⁰ We will see this echoed in the *Mālinīvijayottara* below, which was probably composed around four centuries later.

Another small, but possibly significant, piece of evidence comes from one of several sects within or based on Pāśupatism, that of the Lākulas referred to above. This group stands midway between the earlier Pāñcārthika Pāśupatas and the later Tantric

⁹ Commentary on *Pāśupata-sūtra* 1.1, first word. Thanks to Prof. Sanderson for drawing my attention to this passage.

¹⁰ The usage of the term "God" is justified in strongly monotheistic contexts such as Pāśupatism.

Śaivas in terms of both doctrine and practice.¹¹ The fullest description of the Lākulas is found in the early Śaiva Siddhānta text, the *Niśvāsasaṃhitā* (referred to in footnote 6), or more specifically the introductory portion of that text, the *Niśvāsamukha*. The purpose of this work was to summarize the lower levels of revelation and religious practice in a hierarchy that the (recently developed) Mantramārga crowns. These levels are: first, the ordinary, worldly religion (*laukika dharma*) devoted to Śiva, including *pūjās*, pilgrimages, donations to Śiva temples and so on, in other words the practices of Rudrabhaktas mentioned above. Above that is the Vedic practice (*vaidika dharma*) of forest-dwellers (*vānaprastha*) and renunciators (*sannyāsin*) devoted to Śiva. Third are the Sāṅkhya/Yoga schools (*ādhyātmika dharma*), highest of non-Śaiva disciplines; fourth is the Atimārga, which the text subdivides into the Pāśupatas (*atyāśrama-vrata*) and the Lākulas (those who follow the ‘vow of the skull’ [*kapālavrata*], also called the ‘vow of the greater Pāśupatas’ [*mahāpāśupata-vrata*]). The fifth and highest category then is the Mantramārga.¹² This is perhaps the beginning of the Śaiva inclination for inclusive hierarchies that we see clearly in Abhinavagupta.

It is in the *Niśvāsa*’s discussion of Lākula doctrine that it mentions initiation. After a brief enumeration of the levels of the universe, it goes on to say:

krīḍārthasiddhaye caiva prakriyādhvānam āśritaḥ /
vai prakriyādhvānam atha-śabdena dīkṣayet //
athaśabdanipātena dīkṣitaś cāpaśur bhavet /

¹¹ My knowledge of the Lākulas is entirely indebted to Sanderson and the valuable primary sources he has provided.

¹² Sanderson 2005. Note that the *Kāmikāgama* follows the same classification exactly, further explaining that the Laukika, Vaidika, Ādhyātmika, Atimārga, and Mantramārga texts emanate from Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Rudra, Īśvara, and Sadāśiva respectively (see Dyczkowski 1988:31).

kriyāvāṃś ca durācāro mucyate nātra saṃśayaḥ //

In order to accomplish (the disciple)’s goal of sporting (in all the levels of the universe), following the path of this hierarchy (just described), he [i.e. the guru] should initiate him into the path of the hierarchy with the word “NOW” (*atha*).

Initiated by the descent of the word *atha*, he will not become a bound soul (again).

One who has received this rite, (even) a doer of evil deeds, is liberated. On this point there is no doubt. (*Niśvāsamukha* 116-17)

Here we see an early appearance of the doctrine that initiation liberates, and curiously the guru is said to initiate “with the word *atha*.” Sanderson (2005) has theorized that this referred to an initiation into the teachings of the Pāśupata-sūtras, which begin with the word *atha*, a word which thus, commentator Kauṇḍinya says, signals the end of suffering (*atha athaśabdaḥ...asti sa duḥkhānta iti*). Even more curious, the text characterizes the initiation as being through the *descent* (*nipāta = pāta*) of the word “*atha*,” as if it is a kind of mystical force in itself, embodying the power of the text it inaugurates.¹³ This connotation was certainly seen by the tradition itself in its Mantramārgic instantiation, for Somānanda, in a lost text quoted by Abhinavagupta, claims that the letter “a” signifies Śiva, and “tha” is Śakti (*akāraḥ śiva ity uktas thakāraḥ śaktir ucyate*), thus giving us the phrase “initiated by the descent of Śiva’s Power”.¹⁴ However, we have no way of knowing if Somānanda was indeed thinking of the Lākula usage of “*atha*” or of an entirely different usage. Without further evidence, we can do no more than note this interesting instance of a possible antecedent.

¹³ Compare Śaṅkara’s discussion of the word *atha*, to which he attributes great significance, in his *bhāṣya* on *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.1.

¹⁴ Cited at *Parātrimśikā-vivaraṇa*, K.S.T.S. edition, pp. 99-100.

ANTECEDENTS IN KAULA MATERIALS

One of the earliest traditions that we take as constituting a (perhaps nascent) instantiation of Tantric Śaivism is the proto-Śākta sect called Kula. Although it seems not to have survived long as an independent entity, its texts and practices, especially in their more esoteric “Kaula” phase, fed into and influenced the left-handed groups such as the Trika and Krama. In fact, in looking at Śaivism as a whole in the centuries around Abhinavagupta’s time, the broadest classification that emerges is that of the Sadāśiva-centered Siddhānta on the one hand and the interrelated Goddess-centered (*śākta*) groups on the other. Abhinava quotes liberally from both types of literature, supporting his vision of a Śaivism integrated under the doctrinal reach of the Trika. The Śākta cults prospered in the later mediaeval period and down through the present day, for example in the Kālī cult of Bangla and the Śrīvidyā of Tamiḻ Nāḍu amongst many others. It is not surprising, then, that this powerful stream of the tradition had its roots in antiquity. It seems unlikely to be coincidence that the earliest proliferation of larger-scale Goddess temples and icons in permanent materials and the earliest Kaula texts are from roughly the same period (i.e., around the 5th-7th centuries).

The Kaula texts are written in elliptical Sanskrit liberally sprinkled with non-Pāṇinian forms, archaic styles, and Prākṛt derivations, in the style that in the tradition was called *Aiśa* Sanskrit, because it emanates from *Īśa*, the Lord, enacting his freedom to break the rules of conventional grammar. In fact, they may have been written by non-brāhmins or brāhmins far from the Sanskrit heartland of Āryāvarta. The texts feature obscure and sometimes bizarre ideas and practices, though this may seem so because this

unpublished corpus of texts is understudied, and parallels are not yet well established nor corruptions repaired.

First we look at the Kaula text called *Unlocking the Obscurity (Timirodghāṭana)*, structured like many Tantric texts as a conversation between Śiva in the form of Bhairava and his consort the Goddess.¹⁵ The sixth chapter details some of the signs (*cihna*) of the entry (*āveśa*, *samāveśa*) of Śiva's Power (*śakti*) into the body of the practitioner. This entry occurs at the instigation of a charismatic, puissant Guru, such as is typical in Kaula contexts and marks an important distinction to Śaiva Siddhānta, where the guru may sometimes be a mere officiant. The text begins, then, with the Goddess asking Bhairava,

kā sā saṅkrāmate śaktiḥ kāni cihnāni darśayet 6.1ab

...kena kālena siddhidā

*siddhasya kāni cihnāni kathaitad parameśvara*¹⁶ (6.3bcd)

What is this Power that transfers (into the disciple)? What are the signs by which it is shown?... After how long does She grant attainment? What are the signs of one who has attained [a *Siddha*]? Tell me that, Supreme Lord.

To which Bhairava replies,

sarvvavyāpi tu sā smṛtā sabāhyābhyantare dehe sarvajantuṣu saṁsthitā

sadācāryopadeśena paradehe tu saṅkrame[t] 6.4d-6.5

She is taught to be all-pervasive. She is established in both the subtle and physical bodies of all creatures, (and yet) she may 'pass' into another body at the command of a true master.

*dehaṁ vyāpya adhordhvena*¹⁷ *parāśakti[ṁ] praveśayet*

¹⁵ The text is unpublished. My thanks to Somadeva Vasudeva for making me aware of it, and for the e-text he put up on the Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (GRETIL).

¹⁶ Em. Vasudeva to restore metre: *etat katha parameśvara* MS.

*yasyaitāni tu cihnāni sa guru[r mo]kṣadaḥ smṛtaḥ*¹⁸ 6.8

He (the Guru) will cause the Supreme Power to enter (the disciple), pervading his body up and down; one who has these signs [i.e. capabilities] is taught (in this tradition) to be a Guru who grants liberation.

kṛtvā sarvvopacārāṇi ātmanānyadhanena vā

*grāhyaṃ tat paramaṃ jñānaṃ guruvaktreṣu saṃsthitam*¹⁹ 6.9

Having performed all the offerings of worship, with his own or another's wealth, one ought to obtain the supreme wisdom that abides in the mouth of gurus [i.e. mantras and other teachings].

*kaulopadeśaratnena yogino divyadarśanaṃ*²⁰ 6.10ab

*yoginyāḥ prathamam paśyet chāyāmātraṃ punaḥ punaḥ*²¹

yathā cābhyasate yoga[m] tathārūpaṃ pravarttate 6.11

By means of this jewel of Kaula teachings [i.e. the entry of supreme śakti], the yogin will see a divine vision... First, one will see a yoginī in the form of simply a (colored) light, again and again. The appearance (of the yoginī) proceeds in accordance with his practice of yoga.

----- *paśyati kṛṣṇarūpiṇī[m]*

raudrī vā saumyarūpeṇa nānābharaṇabhūṣitā 6.12bcd

*dr̥ṣṭanaṣṭā*²² *sthitā caiva bahurūpeṇa [dr̥]śyate*

antarikṣasthitā[m] nityam sarvve paśyanti mātaram 6.13

¹⁷ Corr. Sanderson : dehavyāpyam adhordhvena MS.

¹⁸ Em. Vasudeva : sa guru*ḥkṣadā smṛtā MS.

¹⁹ Em. Sanderson : ...ātmanena dhanena vā grāhya tatparasamjñānaṃ guruvaktreṣu saṃsthitam MS.

²⁰ Em. Sanderson. (yogino as nominative with extended Aiśa stem is attested elsewhere) : yoginā divyadarśanaṃ MS.

²¹ Conj. Sanderson : yoginī prathamam chāyāmātra** MS.

²² Em. Sanderson : dr̥ṣṭānaṣṭe MS.

He sees her in a black form, fierce; or with a benevolent appearance, adorned with various jewel ornaments. She remains but for a moment, then vanishes, and is seen in many forms; all those (who succeed in this practice) always see the Mother abiding in the sky (of consciousness).

raudrabhairavarūpeṇa bahuyogiparivṛtām

yogeśvarapurañ caiva ātmānanda[h] sa paśyati 6.14

She is surrounded by many yogins in the form of fierce bhairavas; full of the bliss of his Self, he sees the world of the Lords of Yoga.

saptaviṃśativarṣeṣu kathitā siddhi-khecari

nityābhiyuktayogīśa[h] śīghram eva sa siddhyati 6.18

A lord of yogins who is always engaged in practice succeeds very quickly; in 27 years he attains liberation [lit.: ‘moving in the sky (of consciousness)’].²³

Here we see a charismatic Guru causing the *śakti* to penetrate the disciple, triggering a number of mystical visions and other experiences that culminate eventually in liberation. Chapter four of the same text explains that the guru must himself have been penetrated by that Power of Rudra in order to have the capacity to awaken it in others. (4.3) The evidence (*pratyaya*) for such a penetration, whether in Guru or disciple, comes in the form of direct experience, only sometimes of a nature apparent to others (but allegedly always apparent to a Guru). The text mentions a number of other signs or symptoms of the *śakti* in the body: loss of control over one’s body and involuntary movements (*stobha*, lit. ‘paralysis,’ here a technical term), visions (*darśana*), trembling of the heart (*hṛdayaṃ kampate*), the head spinning (*śirañ ca bhramate*), the whole body whirling (*ghūrmmitā sarvvadeho’yaṃ*), and sexual bliss caused by the Goddess (*ratyānandakari...parā*). One

²³ Note that *siddhikhecari*, a usefully ambiguous expression, may also mean here ‘the supernatural power of flight’, though later exegetes take the expression as synonymous with liberation.

shakes, and is spontaneously moved to sing and dance (*kampanaṃ geyanṛtyan*). The fact that at least some aspirants had spontaneous, uncontrolled, and possibly disturbing experiences of this kind can be seen in the fact that the text feels the need at this point to reassure the practitioner:

teṣu teṣu na bhetavyaṃ krīḍate parameśvarī

*na ca bhūtapiśācābhyāṃ na mohena ca pīḍitaḥ*²⁴ 4.10c-11b

“In all these (signs), do not be afraid—the Supreme Goddess is playing. You are not afflicted by spirits and demons, nor are you going mad.”

POSSESSION

The reader will have already noticed that the character of these experiences has something akin to those of possession, and indeed the characteristic term used here is *āveśa*, precisely the same term used for spirit possession (*bhūtāveśa*), often thought to be the cause of some illnesses in Āyur-vedic medicine (e.g. *Caraka-saṃhitā* 6.3.123, where possession is said to cause tears, trembling, terror, anger, agitation, etc.). Perhaps this is why the *Timirodghāṭana* hastens to assure the practitioner that spirits and demons are not involved here. Rather, this is a kind of beneficial possession. The text culminates its discussion of the signs by saying,

rudraśaktisamāveśaṃ nityāveśaṃ acetanaṃ

divyadevaiś ca saṃyogā[t] paramānandakāraṇaṃ 4.15

Possession [lit., entry] by Rudra’s Power is the eternal inconceivable possession, causing supreme bliss due to union with the divine gods.

bhuktimuktiphalapradā rudraśaktisamāveśaṃ śabdadr̥ṣṭiṣu jāyate 4.16bcd

²⁴ Em. Vasudeva : na ca bhūtapiśācāṃ vā na mohena ca pīḍitā MS.

It gives the fruit of both enjoyment and liberation. Possession by Rudra's Power arises through the glances or words (of the Guru).

jāyate hr̥ṣṭituṣṭiñ ca sadā ānandam eva ca 4.18ab

*kurute malavikāraṃ*²⁵ *bahujanyāsvayaṅkṛtaṃ* 4.19cd

Joy and contentment arise, and certainly permanent bliss....The transformation of impurity creates many instances of spontaneous happiness.

Salutary forms of alleged possession are well documented even in modern India, whereby local deities, usually goddesses, possess a human vehicle in order to advise and help their devotees, though they sometimes also show a capricious nature. (Waghorne 1985 and Dwyer 2003) However, as we shall see further, the *āveśa* described here is of a different character from that documented in modern ethnographic studies. For in the latter, the personality of a deity inhabits its human vehicle, speaking through him or her, giving strongly worded advice to others or (as psychologists would have it) providing catharsis for the subject by allowing her to say what is normally disallowed. By contrast, in the Kaula and Trika texts, the *śakti* that enters appears more as an impersonal force or energy, despite the metaphorical use of language such as in 4.11 above. In many early passages, the term seems to make more sense when translated with something more like 'infusion' or 'pervasion' than 'possession'. This implication of an energetic force at work rather than a discrete agent partially explains why it is possible for Abhinavagupta to later reinterpret *samāveśa* as 'immersion' into the universal Power of Śiva rather than possession by it, an interpretation essential for him as a nondualist. This semantic shift is also enabled by the ambiguity of Sanskrit compounds and the fact that the root *√viś* from which *āveśa* is derived can have an active or a passive sense, 'enter' or 'be entered' (as

²⁵ Em. Vasudeva restores metre : *kurute malavikāreṇa* MS.

noted also by Torella 1994:xxxii). Further exploration of the primary sources is necessary to get a better sense of the meaning of this term in Tantrism.

SAMĀVEŚA IN TWO TRIKA TEXTS

The concept of *samāveśa* appears central to the doctrine of the *Mālinīvijayottara-tantra*, the text of the Trika that Abhinavagupta made the locus classicus (*mūlaśāstra*) of his theology and the purported basis of most of his works. The MVT argues that *samāveśa* is the *sine qua non* for the type of charismatic Guru one should seek out for initiation. In describing such a guru, Śiva says in the MVT:²⁶

*yaḥ punaḥ sarvatattvāni vetty etāni yathārthataḥ
sa gurur matsamaḥ prokto mantravīryaprakāśakaḥ* 2.10

One who knows all the Principles of Reality exactly as they are is said to be a Guru, equal to Me, revealing the potency of (all) mantras.

*dṛṣṭāḥ sambhāsitās tena sprṣṭās ca prītacetasā
narāḥ pāpaiḥ pramucyante saptajanmakṛtair api* 2.11

Those people who he sees, converses with, or touches, pleased with them, are released from (the *karma* of) evil deeds of the past seven births.

*ye punar dikṣitās tena prāninaḥ śivacoditāḥ
te yatheṣṭaṃ phalaṃ prāpya gacchanti paramaṃ padam* 2.12

Greater again are those living beings who, impelled by Śiva, are initiated by him. Having obtained whatever fruit they desire, they then go to the highest state.

*rudraśaktisamāveśas tatra nityaṃ pratiṣṭhitaḥ
sati tasmiṃś ca cihnāni tasyaitāni vilakṣayet* 2.13

²⁶ Quoting from the critical edition of the text found in Vasudeva 2004; my translation.

The state of being infused with Rudra's Power is always established in him [the Guru]. When that (state arises), these are the signs that one should observe.

Here we see signs enumerated that are rather different from those mentioned in the *Timirodghāṭana*. There, the initial entry of the *śakti* in the disciple seemed effective, yet somewhat disorienting, wild, and uncontrolled. Here, in one who is constantly established in the state of *samāveśa*, the signs are rather those of power and control. They exhibit greater constancy, and greater refinement. This may be because these signs refer to the liberated master, rather than one touched by *śakti* for the first time.

tatraitat prathamam cihnam rudre bhaktiḥ suniścalā

dvitīyam mantrasiddhiḥ syāt sadyaḥpratyayakārikā 2.14

This then is the first sign: steady devotion to Rudra. The second is (successful) attainment through mantra, giving immediate evidence (of its efficacy).

sarvasattvavaśitvam ca tṛtīyam lakṣaṇam smṛtam

prārabdhakāryaniṣpattiś cihnam āhuś caturthakam 2.15

And the third mark is taught as mastery over all beings.²⁷ The fourth sign, they say, is the accomplishment of (all) tasks that are begun.

kavitvam pañcamam proktam sālaṅkāram manoharam

sarvaśāstrārthavettṛtvam akasmāc cāsyā jāyate 2.16

The fifth is taught to be (the ability to write) well-ornamented, enchanting poetry, and knowing spontaneously the essential matters taught in all the scriptures.

²⁷ Note that two manuscripts of the MVT read *-tattvavaśitvam*, 'mastery over all principles of reality,' and this is the reading preferred by Abhinavagupta.

In this description, the MVT is drawing on an earlier Trika text, from perhaps the seventh century, the *Doctrine of the Goddess of Perfected Yoga* (*Siddhayogēśvarīmata-tantra* or SYM), sometimes quoted by Abhinavagupta under the name *Siddhāmata* ('the doctrine of the Perfect Goddess'). This archaic text also abounds in non-standard *Aiśa* forms and obscure practices. It also endorses the charismatic Guru, arguing that one should look for the marks of 'divine behavior' or signs of the entry of Rudra's Power before accepting a mantra (i.e., mantra-initiation) from him. It further states that it is specifically because of the pervasion of Rudra's Power in the Guru that it quickly and effectively comes alive in the disciple. I quote here from the critical edition of the existing text prepared by Judit Tórszók (my translation):

tena dīkṣitamātrasya bhaved ātmaparigrahaḥ

tadgrahe mantrasadbhāvaprāptir atra varānane 2.3

"Simply from being initiated by him (i.e. the type of Guru described below), 'grasping of the Self' occurs. In our system, when one grasps it, one attains the essence of the mantra(s), O fair-faced lady."

In this text, (*pari-*)*graha* refers to some kind of liberating mystical experience, here as a result of initiation by the charismatic Guru; an experience which itself yields *mantravīrya*, potency of mantras, a term which appears earlier (in chapter one of the SYM), and indicates that mantras are enlivened and efficacious.

rudraśaktisamāveśād divyācaraṇalakṣaṇam

ācārye lakṣayet tatra tato mantragrahaḥ smṛtaḥ 2.4

Due to infusion by the Power of Rudra, the signs of 'divine behavior' are observed in a master. When they are (observed), then it is taught that one may receive a mantra (from him).

rudraśaktisamāveśād ācāryasya mahātmanaḥ

śaktir utpadyate kṣipraṃ sadyaḥpratyayakārikā 2.5

Because of a great teacher's infusion by the Power of Rudra, that Power arises quickly (in the disciple), producing immediate evidence (of its arousal).

Clearly, here, the activation of *śakti* in a disciple is the result of contact with a master in whom the same Power is active. This is in contrast to the Śaiva Siddhānta materials we will examine below, where rather the Descent of Power is always the *prerequisite* for initiation, never a result of it. Though the word *śaktipāta* does not appear in this passage, we see that *samāveśa* is for Abhinavagupta's Trika equivalent to *śaktipāta* in the context of initiation, e.g. in TA 13 and 29 and MVT 11. Following the above quoted passage, the SYM then lists exactly the same five marks of *samāveśa* as seen above in the MVT, by which one may recognize a master, and goes on to say,

evaṃ lakṣaṇasaṃyukto dīkṣābhijño 'tha tattvavit

guhya maṇḍalasūtrajño lokānugraha kārakaḥ

rudraśaktisamāveśād bhaktānām vāñchitapradaḥ 2.9cd-10

Thus, one who is endowed with these marks, expert in initiation, a knower of the Truth, who knows how to draw the secret maṇḍala, bestows grace on all people. Because of his possession of the Power of Rudra, he grants the wishes of his devotees.

rudraśaktisamāveśo yatrāyaṃ lakṣyate priye

sa gurur matsamaḥ prokto mantravīryaprakāśakaḥ 2.11

O dear one, the one in whom this infusion with the Power of Rudra is seen is said to be a Guru, equal to Me, revealing the power of mantras.

Note that the final line is echoed verbatim at MVT 2.10 cited above. However, we see there the encroachment of the idea that gnosis (*jñāna*) is the defining feature of a Guru, whereas here the attainment of a mystical state holds primacy. Nonetheless, *samāveśa* is clearly central to both texts. MVT 2.17-24 goes on to describe fifty types of *samāveśa*, inflected through three categories to yield 150, and says there are many more: that no matter how brief or extensive the treatment, the total would not be reached (2.24cd). What all these different types refer to is far from clear. Is each a distinct phenomenological category? They are not elaborated in detail in the exegetical literature. What is clear is that these Kaula and Kaula-influenced texts place great value on individual spiritual experience, to the extent that they attempted to classify what must have been very subjective phenomena.

INITIATION (*dīkṣā*)

Exhibiting the doctrinal flexibility that made the MVT such a useful text for Abhinavagupta, and allowed it to be cited by Saiddhāntika authors as well, we see in its first chapter that one may seek a guru for initiation as a *result* of being entered by Śiva's Power, in consonance with the Saiddhāntika view (see below). This demonstrates that there was not a fixed causal sequence in terms of the relationship between the *samāveśa/śaktipāta* experience and initiation; or perhaps we ought to understand the texts to mean that multiple such experiences were possible. One entry of *śakti*, then, compelled the aspirant to seek initiation, and in Kaula contexts, another, often stronger one, occurred as the result of being initiated by a charismatic master. Later initiations (such as *vedhadīkṣā*) could yield further descents of Power, as we will see. The MVT, in its first mention of initiation, gives a brief account of *rudraśaktisamāveśa* in varying degrees. This

is the passage that Abhinava made the basis for his extensive analysis in TĀ 13 and *Tantrasāra* 11.

evam asyātmanaḥ kāle kasmimścid yogyatāvaśāt
śaivī saṃbadhyate śaktiḥ śāntā muktiphalapradā 1.42

Thus, at a particular time, because of a soul's fitness (for union with Śiva), it is connected with Śiva's peaceful/transcendent Power, which grants the fruit of liberation.

tatsaṃbandhāt tataḥ kaścit tatkṣanād apavṛjyate
ajñānena sahaikatvaṃ kasyacid vinivartate 1.43

Due to that connection, some souls are instantly liberated. For others, their oneness with ignorance comes to an end.

rudraśaktisamāviṣṭaḥ sa yiyāsuḥ śivecchayā
bhuktimuktiprasiddhyarthaṃ nīyate sadguruṃ prati 1.44

Possessed by the Power of Rudra, through Śiva's will, one longs to go to a true Guru, for the sake of attaining enjoyment and liberation; (and) he is led to such a master.

tam ārādhya tatas tuṣṭād dīkṣām āsādyā śāṅkarīm
tatkṣanād vopabhogād vā dehapāte śivaṃ vrajet 1.45

Having pleased him, then—because of (the Guru's) satisfaction (with the signs of *samāveśa* the supplicant displays)—he obtains the initiation of Śaṅkara. He will go to Śiva [i.e. become liberated] when the body falls, either immediately or after (a period) of enjoyment (in one of Śiva's paradises).

yogadīkṣām samāsādyā jñātvā yogaṃ samabhyaset
yogasiddhim avāpnoti tadante śāśvataṃ padam 1.46

Having obtained initiation into yoga, and having understood (its practice), he should practice yoga. He attains success in yoga, and after that, the eternal realm.

anena kramayogena samprāptaḥ paramaṃ padam

na bhūyaḥ paśutām eti śuddhe svātmani tiṣṭhati 1.47

By these stages, he attains the supreme state. He will never again become a bound soul; he will remain established in his own pure Self.

This important passage worked well for Abhinava as part of his theological agenda to establish a classification of different levels of Śaiva practitioners and masters, and of the spiritual practices (*sādhana*s) appropriate to each. For it clearly argues that *rudraśaktisamāveśa*, which Abhinava equates to *śaktipāta*, itself may liberate, without any further initiation. It may also grant intuitive knowledge, removing the root of ignorance, and set the recipient on the ‘fast track’ to liberation; this individual does not need initiation either, but rather soon becomes a Guru himself, of the *saṃsiddhika* or self-accomplished variety, and initiates others. It is only the third type of recipient (though presumably by far the most common) that seeks initiation, as a result of which he attains liberation at death. Others take initiation into yoga (*yogadīkṣā*), which here indicates a practice to attain supernatural power (*yogasiddhi*), followed by liberation. This whole schema, then, undermines the dominant Saiddhāntika doctrine, whereby only the ritual of initiation itself may grant liberation. For the MVT, and for Abhinava, ritualistic initiation is only necessary for those with a weaker Descent of Power. This doctrine served to accommodate a broader range of observed social and religious phenomena, such as Gurus who did not have gurus of their own but nonetheless seemed spiritually powerful. This more comprehensive doctrine was thus more compelling and persuasive.

As noted above, in Kaula contexts *samāveśa* could occur within initiation. Therefore it behooves us to look at the Kaula form of the basic initiation ceremony that involved the experience of *samāveśa/śaktipāta*, as taught in the MVT. Here the charismatic Guru brings about a clearly verifiable form of ‘possession’ that the MVT explicitly equates to *śaktipāta*, causing a loosening of the bonds (*pāśa*) of *mala*, *karma*, and *māyā*, thus allowing the Guru to proceed with the liberating initiation. The basic forms of the ordinary Tantric Śaiva initiation ceremony are here, but reconfigured though the activated “Power of Rudra” to indicate a much more powerful and esoteric form of initiation.

*tataḥ śiṣyaṃ samāhūya bahudhā suparīkṣitam
rudraśaktyā tu samprokṣya devāgre viniveśayet* 11.17

Then, accepting a student who has been well examined in various ways, sprinkling him with (water infused with the mantra of) Rudra’s Power, he [the Guru] should bring him into the presence of the deity [i.e. the enlivened *maṇḍala* or *mūrti* of the deity].

*bhujau tasya samālokyā rudraśaktyā pradīpayet
tayaivāpy arpayet puṣpaṃ karayor gandhadigdhayoḥ* 11.18

Focusing attention on the (initiant)’s arms, he should stimulate them with the Power of Rudra. By it, (the initiant) will cast a flower from hands anointed with sandal paste.

Here the extraordinary quality of the Kaula Guru is connoted in the fact that his concentrated gaze, conjoined with the power of his enlivened mantras, is sufficient to cause the *śakti* to come alive in the disciple’s body, casting him into a state of ‘possession’

strong enough that the *śakti* is understood to be in control. Thus the casting of the flower into the eight-segmented *maṇḍala*, under the influence of the *śakti*, infallibly determinates which family of Mother-goddesses (*mātr̥kula*) he belongs to and will worship.

nirālambau tu tau dhyātvā śaktyākṛṣṭau vicintayet

śaktimantritanetreṇa baddhvā netre tu pūrvavat 11.19

Meditating on (the disciple's arms) as 'unsupported' (by him), he should contemplate them as being attracted by the *śakti*, (thereby) binding the eyes with a blindfold consecrated by *śakti* as before.

The disciple's arms are not supported, i.e. controlled, by him, but rather by the *śakti*, and therefore his movements, such as putting on the blindfold, are involuntary. Note that in the normal form of the ritual, such as found in the *Siddhāntasārapaddhati* and *Somaśambhupaddati*, there is no 'possession', and the guru simply applies the blindfold himself.

tataḥ prakṣepayet puṣpaṃ sā śaktis tatkarasthitā

yatra tat patate puṣpaṃ tatkulaṃ tasya lakṣayet 11.20

Then, the *śakti* in (the disciple's) hands will cause (him) to throw the flower.

Wherever the flower falls, that (place) signifies his family.

This is the proper order, and the mention in 11.18 was a foreshadowing. Here the *śakti* as agent is explicitly stated.

mukham udghāṭya taṃ paścāt pādayoḥ pratipātayet

tato'sya mastake cakram hastayoś cārcya yogavit 11.21

Uncovering his face (and seeing the *maṇḍala*), She [the *śakti*] causes him to fall at the (guru's) feet; then that knower of yoga [i.e., the guru] worships the circuit (of goddesses) on (the disciple's) head and two hands.

The implication of the causative verb is clearly that the disciple falls because he is overwhelmed by the *śakti* contained in the initiatory *maṇḍala* into which he has just cast a flower; the falling is considered evidence of the ceremony's efficacy.²⁸

taddhastau prerayec chaktyā yāvan mūrdhāntam āgatau

śivahastavidhiḥ proktaḥ sadyaḥpratyayakāraḥ 11.22

With the *śakti*, he should impel (the disciple)'s two hands to come up to his head.

This is called the ceremony of Śiva's hand, which produces immediate evidence (of its efficacy).

In the ordinary imitation ritual, the guru ritually installs the mantra-deities on his own hand and worships them there before placing it, blazing with energy, on the disciple's head (see standard accounts in *Dikṣottara* 7.110 and *Somaśambhupaddhati* 4.2.123). Here, the initiand's hand becomes the 'Śivahasta' (known in some sources as *śaktihasta* or *devīhasta*), and it spontaneously rising to his head is considered sufficient evidence of the continuing success of the ceremony. Note the preoccupation with 'evidence' (*pratyaya*) in these scriptural Trika and Kaula texts, signifying their concern with verifying that something was actually happening in the subjective experience of the aspirant. Indeed, it is the phrase *sadyaḥ-pratyaya-kāraḥ*, 'producing immediate evidence' that is nearly ubiquitous in Śaiva and Śākta texts, rather than the formal conceptual category of *śaktipāta*. What is of central importance for the thesis of this essay, though, is that evidence of some kind of internal experience was a universal prerequisite for the initiation rite; *śaktipāta* is simply the codification of that requirement. Abhinavagupta's theology further stressed the importance of internal experience matching or transcending external practice, thus resisting the trends towards routinization normal in

²⁸ On falling down as an indication of penetration by the shakti in a slightly later textual tradition as well, see the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* 16.49a-51c and 22.7ab., cited in David WHITE's *Kiss of the Yogini*, 103-4.

the growth of a religion. It is significant that *pratyaya* also means ‘conviction’, and that Abhinava’s commentator Jayaratha equates *āveśa* with *pratyaya*, thus making it explicit that this mystical experience of ‘infusion’ or ‘immersion’ was the key piece of evidence (*Tantrāloka-viveka* ad 29.271).

Then the disciple is given the sacred food of the oblation (*caru*), which the MVT says may be made from dates and so on (*kharjūrādi-phalodbhavam*) but Abhinava takes to be of transgressive character. The disciple, still under the influence of the *śakti*, consumes it. These signs are taken as evidence that a Descent of Power has occurred, thus linking *samāveśa* and *śaktipāta* explicitly, in the MVT’s only usage of the latter term.

eteṣāṃ cālanān mantrī śaktipātaṃ parīkṣayet 11.26

Because of the loosening of these (bonds), the Mantra-master (i.e., Guru) may verify the Descent of Power (that the disciple has received).

mandatīvrādhedena mandatīvrādikād budhaḥ

ity ayaṃ samayī proktaḥ saṃsthitoktena vartmanā 11.27

He is awakened due to (a Descent of Power of) mild, intense, and (medium) (grades), (multiplied) by the sub-divisions of mild, intense, and (medium). Thus he has become an ‘ordinary initiate’ (*samayī*) in the manner described.

This is the first time this specific classification is introduced, elaborated at length by Abhinavagupta (see below). This, then, has been a very brief summary of the basic form of initiation (*samayadīkṣā*) in the Kaula context, or rather the points on which it differs from the normal form of the ritual given in great detail in the ritual manuals (*paddhati*). The MVT then goes on to briefly describe the process of the main form of initiation, the *nirvāṇadīkṣā*, in terms that correspond with known forms of the ritual: the Guru purifies the initiand’s *karma* destined to come to fruition on all the levels of reality, through the

microcosm of the disciple's body, and unites him to Śiva. However, then the MVT adds a specifically Kaula classification of mystical experience that here occurs as a result of the *nirvāṇa-dīkṣā*:

lakṣayec cihnaśaṅghātām ānandādīkam ādarāt

ānanda udbhavaḥ kampo nidrā ghūrṇiś ca pañcamī 11.35

He should carefully note the collection of signs beginning with bliss:

Bliss, Ascent, Trembling, Yogic Sleep, and Whirling as the fifth.

These are evidence that the ritual has been effective, and the more of them that are observed, the stronger the 'entered Power' (*āviṣṭā śakti*) is determined to be. The MVT may here be drawing on the Kaula text entitled *The Kaula Ocean of Waves* (*Ūrmikaulārṇava* or UKA) that contains this classification. The UKA is another early Kaula text, so far unedited and unpublished, which is unfortunate as it is in a highly corrupted state.²⁹ It describes a ceremony called 'transference by penetration (of *śakti*)' or *vedhasaṅkramaṇa*, in which signs similar to those already described, such as "a flower in the hand of the disciple spontaneously (i.e. involuntarily) rising to his head" (*śiṣyahastagataṃ puṣpaṃ svayam āruhya mastake*), indicate that the disciple's metaphysical bonds are loosened and he has attained *āveśa* (*pracalanti mahāpāśā āveśaṃ tasya jāyate*). The same five mystical states (*avasthās*) named at MVT 11.35 are listed, in the same order, and the text asserts that the 'Śākta wisdom' (*śākta vijñāna*) arises in one who has experienced them. A variety of other signs are also enumerated, such as the occurrence of spontaneous laughter and sacred hand gestures (*hāsyamudrodbhavaṃ*), poetry (*kāvyaṃ*), horripilation (*romāñca*), 'paralysis' (*stobha*), convulsion (*vikṣobha*), acting as if drunk (*kṣivanaṃ*), and frequently

²⁹ I am grateful to Prof. SANDERSON for his transliteration of key passages from the original manuscript, and help with my attempts at understanding it. The manuscript is from the National Archives in Nepal, NAK 5.5207, and the quotations here are drawn from ff. 19v3-20r6.

suddenly plunging into contemplative trance (*nānā bhāvanānuplavas*, note unusual usage). The charismatic Guru is also stressed here. In fact, if he is sufficiently powerful, he need not even be present to affect the transference of *śakti* into the disciple.

sa gurur mokṣadaḥ samyak karoti yadi siddhidaṃ

He is a Guru who grants liberation if he correctly gives this attainment.

manodhyānena saṅkrāmyaṃ yojanānāṃ śatair api

It may be transferred through mental concentration even from hundreds of leagues (away).

tīvraśaktinipātena samyaggurvāvalokanāt vedhayen nātra sandehaḥ

By the intense Descent of Power due to the glance of a true Guru,

he may cause the ‘piercing’ (of the disciple by *śakti*) here, without doubt.

In this text, then, the terms *āveśa*, *śaktipāta*, and *vedha* are used more or less interchangeably. The important thing is that Śiva’s Power is activated and manifested within the disciple. As the very etymology of the word *śakti* implies efficacy and capability, it is not surprising that these power-centered Śākta cults were rather more concerned with evidence that their rituals and yoga were actually working than their counterparts in the Śaiva Siddhānta, who did not need or expect any visible signs of the efficacy of their initiation until the time of death.

Abhinavagupta elaborates on the Kaula ritual described in MVT 11 in the 29th chapter of his *Tantrāloka*, immediately after describing the infamous *kulayāga* or Kaula sexual rite. He quotes and paraphrases MVT 11.17-21 (above), then gives the mantra which is to be installed on the disciple’s hand (TĀ 192c-194), then states:

karastobho netrapaṭagrahāt prabhṛti yaḥ kila

danta-kāṣṭha-samādāna-paryantas tatra lakṣayet

tīvra-mandādi-bhedena śaktipātaṃ tathāvidham 29.196-7b

Tradition says the (degree of success in the) ‘paralysis’ of the hand—from grasping the blindfold to taking up the tooth-stick—should be noted as intense, weak, and so on (to determine) the Descent of Power of the corresponding degree.

Here Abhinava makes explicit the link between what were formerly considered rites of possession and the mystical descent of energy which indicates a successful inauguration to the Tantric spiritual path. He uses the word ‘paralysis’ (*stobha*) in the Kaula sense, indicating the giving way of the initiand’s conscious control over his limbs and the entering of divine Power (“his own energy, which is mundane and artificial (compared to the divine *śakti*) has melted away” as Jayaratha describes it here [*vigalita-sāṃsārika-kṛtrima-nija-śaktikatvāt*]). The ‘tooth-stick’ is a part of the ritual not covered above for lack of space; it is simply the final action of the disciple under the influence of the *śakti*. The implication in the above quotation seems to be that if the disciple performs all the requisite actions correctly in due sequence while under the influence of the *śakti*, the Descent is discerned to be strong (*tīvra*), but if only some of them are done in this trance state or done imperfectly, it is medium or weak. He also cites the *Ūrmikaulārṇava* (under the name *Bhogahastaka*) to support the idea that the ‘paralysis of the hand’ (*karastobha*) qualifies the initiand as an ordinary-level initiate (*samayin*) in the Kaula context.

Whereas the MVT then directly goes on to outline the more important *nirvāṇadīkṣā* ceremony, Abhinava pauses to consider what qualifies a person for a *nirvāṇadīkṣā* immediately after the *samayadīkṣā*. The key element, he argues, is the initiand’s capacity to throw off dualistic perception and see anything and everything as a manifestation of Śiva. Therefore, while the sacred food offering or oblation (*caru*) is described in the MVT as non-transgressive (see above), Abhinava—more explicitly and radically nondualist than

that text—describes a transgressive offering. The manner in which the initiand receives it indicates the extent to which he has shaken off the notions of ‘pure and impure’ and therefore his fitness (*yogyatā*) for the main initiation.

carveva vā gurur dadyād vāmāmṛtapariplutam 29.198cd

niḥśaṅkaṃ grahaṇāc chaktigotro māyōjjhito bhavet

sakampas tv ādadānaḥ syāt samayī vācanādiṣu 29.199

The Guru should give (the initiand) that very oblation, submerged in the ‘nectar of the left’ [i.e. wine]. If he takes it without inhibition or hesitation, he becomes a member of a clan of *śakti*, freed from the realm of differentiation (*māyā*). However, if he should tremble while receiving it, he is an ordinary initiate (*samayin*), (and should take up a practice of) reciting and (hearing the scriptures).

Jayaratha clarifies in his commentary that the oblation consists of the ‘Five Jewels’ or trace amounts of urine (*śivāmbu*), semen (*retas*), menstrual fluid (*raktam*), phlegm (*nālājyam*), and faeces (*viśvanirgamah*),³⁰ which explains why the candidate’s hand might tremble. If one takes it unhesitatingly, knowing it to be nothing but a form of his own consciousness, it indicates that he has reached a level of awareness free of the ordinary methods of interpreting the world through discursive, differentiated mental constructs, and instead possesses a consciousness formed solely from the immediacy of direct perception (Jayaratha: *sākṣāt-kṛtāvikalpa-nirupāya-saṃvit-tattvaḥ*). One who cannot yet make that leap does not continue with the ceremony, but undertakes the duties of a *samayin*, foremost among them hearing, reciting, and contemplating the scriptures of the nondual Kaula Trika (as Abhinava would have it). Jayaratha adds that when such a person has received a strong Descent of Power, as demonstrated by his capacity for scrupulously

³⁰ The translation of several of these terms is indebted to Sanderson (see, e.g., 1986:82).

observing the duties and practices of an ordinary initiate as described in various scriptural works (*tat-tac-chāstriya-samaya-paripālana-sūcita-tīvra-śaktipātaḥ*), then may he be initiated as a ‘Son’ (*putraka*, the name for one who has received *nirvāṇadīkṣā*). Here we see that strong devotion and commitment may also be taken as a sign of the Descent of Power, though this clearly needs to be demonstrated over a longer period.

If the candidate has qualified him or herself, he or she may be initiated with the *nirvāṇadīkṣā*. If he did not pass the test, and there is no other sign of a strong infusion of *śakti*, the initiand has one more chance. The Guru may burn away his (mental) impurities by forcefully installing the *Mālinī* mantra in him. The efficacy of such is proven by the disciple’s collapse. However, if even this is ineffective, the disciple “should be abandoned like a stone” (*tam atropalavat tyajet*; TĀ 29.210-11ab), as no Descent has occurred, because the candidate is too ‘dense’ (*nibiḍa, jaḍiman* [Jayaratha ad.loc.]). Here we have an explicit statement that even candidates who have already received the basic initiation and have begun the process of the main initiation are to be denied admittance to the ranks of the fully-fledged Śaivas if they have had no inner experience of Śiva’s grace. This is a distinctly Kaula position, attempting to preserve the ‘spiritual’ status of the elite religion over and against the pressures towards routinization to which it, like all religions, was subject.

Abhinava then quotes and paraphrases MVT 11.28-34, which outlines the *nirvāṇadīkṣā* ceremony, ending with the description of the five mystic states that may result from the Descent of Power triggered by this sacred initiation in its Kaula form.

anayā śodhyamānasya śiśos tīvrādibhedataḥ

śaktipātāc citi-vyoma-prāṇanāntar-bahis-tanūḥ 29.207

āviśantī rudraśaktiḥ kramāt sūte phalaṃ tv idam

ānandam udbhavaṃ kampaṃ nidrāṃ ghūrṇiṃ ca dehagām 29.208

As a result of a Descent of Power in one of its varieties such as intense, the Power of Rudra enters the consciousness, void, vital breath, inner body, or outer body of the disciple being purified by Her, and gives rise to these results respectively:

Bliss, Ascent, Trembling, Yogic Sleep, and Whirling in the body.

Here Abhinava introduces the pentadic classification of the layers of an individual being, drawing on the *Stanzas on the Recognition of the Lord* (*Īśvara-pratyabhijñā-kārikā* or *ĪPK* 3.8, 3.22-28) authored by his teacher's teacher in the Doctrine of Recognition (*pratyabhijñā-śāstra*), Utpaladeva. Thus in Abhinava's unique analysis, which of the five mystic states the initiand exhibits indicates to the Guru on what level of his being the *śakti* was activated, and thus by extension how strong the Descent was. 'Consciousness' here refers to the pure non-discursive awareness of the innermost Self (*sākṣādātman*), the true locus of identity. Its nature is bliss, so activation of the *śakti* on this level triggers bliss (*ānanda*). The 'void' refers to the deepest level of self bar one, the locus of states of total unconsciousness; activation of the *śakti* here creates an inner expansiveness, referred to as 'ascent' (*udbhava*). The vital breath or life-force (*prāṇa*), also called the 'inner sensation' (*antarasparsa*), refers to the internal, breath-governed bodily energies that control many functions of the body on both physical and subtle levels. Because of this, activation of the *śakti* on this level causes physical trembling or trembling in the heart. The 'inner body' is the subtle body consisting of the energies of the senses, the mind, the ego, and most importantly the faculty of discernment and intuition (*buddhi*) which is its core. When *śakti* is activated here, because of a cessation of ordinary discursive and analytical cognition, the initiand enters a sleep-like state. Finally, *śakti* penetrating the physical body causes a giddy sensation of whirling, falling, drifting, or spinning. Such,

then, were the interpretations of the physiological components of the initiand's religious experience. The Guru, noting directly through one or more of these signs that his disciple's initiation has been accomplished, is said to be encouraged and gratified (*evam hi sākṣād asya dikṣā vṛtteti guror āśvāso bhaved*). This statement and much of the foregoing paragraph draws on Jayaratha's commentary on the above verses.

In a masterful stroke that exhibits his general exegetical strategy, Abhinava has here assimilated Kaula symptoms of possession to ontological categories of the refined *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy, two branches of the tradition that (textually at least) are polar opposites in terms of sophistication of articulation and abstract philosophical thought. Further, he assimilates the categories remarkably coherently, implying to his readers the coherence of the entire Śaiva revelation, which merely needs the work of a skilled exegete to explicate the correspondences and interrelated cohesion of meaning that are implicitly already present. It is particularly important to him to integrate the insights of the Recognition school, as the lucidity and sophistication of its reasoning and interpretation of religious categories helped to elevate the Trika into the highest realm of philosophical discourse. Its doctrine was absorbed by the Trika and added an esoteric dimension, making it more compelling for its growing following of householder practitioners. Note, for example, the definition of *samāveśa* offered by the ĪPK:

mukhyatvaṃ kartṛtāyās tu bodhasya ca cidātmanah

śūnyādaṃ tadguṇa jñānaṃ tat samāveśalakṣaṇam 3.23

That gnosis of the primacy of the Conscious Self as the true Knower and Agent, and of (the other layers of individuality,) the 'void' and so on, as mere attributes of it, is called *samāveśa*.

Thus *samāveśa* is here defined as an intuitive insight that the true locus of identity is not the body, mind, vital energy, or void, with consciousness as a mere epiphenomenal adjunct of one of these, but rather that Consciousness itself is the Self, and the other levels of identity are projections of it. This is precisely the meaning Abhinava wants and advocates, and he argues that in fact all forms of religious practice and ritual have this liberating insight as their goal. (See his *-vimarśinī* and *-vivṛtivismarśinī* on this verse.) This might be thought a total reinvention of the term *samāveśa* from what we have seen thus far, but in fact through the dual sense of the root *√viś* ('enter'), the valid meaning given here is that of *immersion*, that is, entry into one's true nature. And of course Abhinava still preserves the discourse around *śakti* by suggesting that this immersion is made possible by the activation of the divine power within the disciple. Despite the renderings of *āveśa* given further above, speaking of *śakti* as 'entering' is of course metaphorical in all but the earliest, virtually undocumented cultic contexts where literal possession was thought to be taking place. Even the dualists took the term 'Descent of Power' to be metaphorical, as we see below.

ŚAKTIPĀTA: THE ŚAIVA SIDDHĀNTA VIEW

The final textual layer to be examined before concluding with a careful examination of Abhinavagupta's own thoughts is that of the Śaiva Siddhānta. This school, originally dualistic, worshipped Sadāśiva non-transgressively and without the Goddess, and believed in the efficacy of ritual over that of knowledge. It was the first of the Tantric sects to produce texts written in (mostly) coherent Sanskrit with some degree of intellectual sophistication. They were highly influential, and many of their doctrines (such as that of the *tattvas* or principles of reality) espoused in key texts such as the

Collection of Aphorisms of the Self-Born One (Svayambhuva-sūtra-saṅgraha) were adopted and adapted by other groups, including the Trika. Because of this textual primacy, Abhinava spends a considerable amount of time in his work refuting those Saiddhāntika views that were incompatible with his theology, most notably that *mala* (the basic impurity which is the cause of individual bondage) is a substance, that only ritual can remove it and thus liberate, and that Śiva and the individual soul (*aṇu*, *paśu*) are eternally separate and distinct.

The Śaiva Siddhānta texts also address the concept of the Descent of Power in the context of initiation. For them, however, the relationship between the two is clearly causal, and in only one direction. That is, *śaktipāta* is a prerequisite for the granting of initiation, because the initiating *guru* must be convinced that he is proceeding in accordance with Śiva's will. Therefore he looks for signs that it has occurred before accepting the supplicant. The signs detailed in the texts occasionally accord with those of the MVT, but show a more exoteric form of the religion. In the *Mṛgendratāntra*, one of the original Saiddhāntika texts, we read in its 'Knowledge Section':

yeṣāṃ śarīriṇāṃ śaktiḥ pataty api nivṛttaye

teṣāṃ talliṅgaṃ autsukyaṃ muktau dveṣo bhavasthitau 5.4

bhaktiś ca śivabhakteṣu śraddhā tacchāsake vidhau 5.5ab

Those embodied souls on whom Power descends, for the cessation (of their bondage), show these signs: eagerness for liberation; aversion to remaining in the world of transmigration; devotion towards the devotees of Śiva; faith in their Teacher and rites.

In other words, simply taking a strong interest in religion is a sufficient sign of *śaktipāta*. The *Mataṅgapārameśvara* adds: "Steady devotion is the clear sign of the Descent (of

Power).” (*Caryāpāda* 4.10cd)³¹ These broader requirements clearly create a stronger base for increasing the sect’s numbers and influence, and also produces a less elitist and esoteric group of initiates than we saw in the Trika. The *Svayambhuva-sūtra-saṅgraha* gives more detail on the process set in motion by the Descent of Power.

tan-nipātāt kṣaraty asya malaṃ saṃsāra-kāraṇam

kṣiṇe tasmin yiyāsā syāt paraṃ niḥśreyasam prati 1.17

sa deśikam anuprāpya dīkṣā-vichinna-bandhanaḥ

prayāti śivasāyujyaṃ nirmalo nirupaplavaḥ 1.18

Because of its descent, it erodes one’s impurity, which is the cause of transmigration. When that has waned, the desire to go to the highest, unsurpassed beatitude (arises). Having obtained a guide (= *guru*), his bonds cut by initiation, he attains equality with Śiva, free from impurity and affliction.³²

Note that this is slightly at variance with the later Saiddhāntika orthodoxy that only ritual can affect impurity (*mala*). Here Śiva’s power (not personified as in the Trika) erodes the impurity sufficiently to give one the discernment to perceive the value of and seek out a Śaiva guru for initiation. Still, it is initiation alone that liberates.

The Saiddhāntika *Kiraṇatantra* seems to have been the first text to address possible philosophical objections to the concept of *śaktipāta*. It also proposed a theory for the problematic question of why *śaktipāta* happens when it does, a theory Abhinava found absurd and refuted in the TĀ and TS. The fact that he thought it important enough to refute, however, shows that it must have gained some currency. The entire fifth chapter

³¹ These citations drawn from SANDERSON 1992;286; translations mine.

³² Reading *nirupaplavaḥ* for the unattested *niranuplavaḥ*.

of the *Kiraṇa* ('Ray of Light') is devoted to the topic of *śaktipāta*. It begins with the *pūrvapakṣin*'s objection:³³

śaktipātād bhaved dīkṣā; nipāto na vibhutvataḥ

śivasya samavetatvāt sarvadaiva sthitā paśau 5.1

Initiation occurs because of a Descent of Power; (but) there can be no 'descent', due to the fact that it is all-pervasive. Because it inheres in Śiva, (and Śiva is all-pervasive, it must be the case that) it is established always in the individual soul.

For perhaps the first time, a technical term that dated from the time of possession rites when doctrines such as *vibhutva* (all-pervasiveness) were not universally established is confronted as philosophically problematic. The raising and subsequent exegetical resolution of new questions and problems that arise due to a gradual shift in doctrines is characteristic of the Tantric literature, especially on the commentarial level.

bhagavān uvāca

upacāreṇa śabdānāṃ pravṛttir iha dṛśyate

yathā pumān vibhur gantā nityo'py ukto vinaśvaraḥ 5.3

pāśacchedo yathā prokto mantrarāḍ bhagavāñ chivaḥ

evaṃ śaktinipāto'pi procyate sopacārataḥ 5.4

The Blessed Lord said:

Here we see an employment of words with a figurative usage. Just as an individual soul is said to move, though it is all-pervasive, and said to be perishable, though it is eternal, just as a 'cutting of bonds' is taught, and Lord Śiva is said to be 'king of mantras', in the same way, though a 'descent' of Power is taught, it is with figurative usage.

³³ Quoting here from the excellent critical edition prepared by Dominic GOODALL (1998) of the IFP; translations mine. Note that this text, like many Tantras, features unusual syntax and grammar.

nipāto bhayado yadvad vastunaḥ sahasā bhavet

tadvac chaktinipāto’pi prokto bhavabhayapradāḥ 5.5

tasmād anyatra yāty eva tathātmā deśikaṃ prati

[‘Why this particular figurative usage?’] Just like the sudden falling of an object can create fear, in the same way the Descent of Power is described as granting fear of mundane worldly existence. Because of it, such a person goes somewhere, to (find) a guide.³⁴

gurur yathāgrataḥ śiṣyān suptān daṇḍena bodhayet 5.6

śivo’pi mohanidrāyāṃ suptān chaktyā prabodhayet

yadā svarūpavijñānaṃ patiteti tadocyate 5.7

Just as a master awakens sleeping disciples in front (of him) with a stick, Śiva too, with his power, awakens those asleep in the sleep of delusion. When one has understanding of one’s true nature, then it is said to have ‘fallen.’

tasmāc chaktinipātaḥ syān nipātaś cihnavācakaḥ

Therefore it is a descent of power. (This) ‘fall’ expresses (certain) signs [see below].

tannipātasya saḥ kālāḥ karmanāṃ tulyataiva ca 5.8

And the time of its descent is the equilibrium of (two) *karmas*.

Here the doctrine of *karmasāmya* is introduced. This theory attempts to account for the seemingly arbitrary way in which *śaktipāta* can occur at different times to different people. It postulates that once in a very great while, two discrete bits of *karma* that are of exactly equal strength and opposing nature come to fruition at precisely the same moment, creating an impasse whereby all experience must cease for the subject. This creates a ‘rent in time’ (*kālacchidram*), the opportunity Śiva has been waiting for and

³⁴ Or one may read: ‘One goes away from it (a falling object); in the same way, the soul (goes) towards a guide.’ Cf. Goodall 1996, p. 331.

which he instantly seizes, releasing his power to unblock the karmas, and further taking advantage of the situation by initiating in the subject the religious experience connoted by *śaktipāta* in order to release that soul from suffering, an event which cannot take place within the normal karmic framework. This theory is unsatisfactory not so much because it is completely unverifiable (a modern objection), but because it did not change the arbitrary character of *śaktipāta*. What it did do, however, was preserve the notion of *śaktipāta* as a kind of divine grace (*anugraha*), as the recipient cannot earn it through the normal set-up of the karmic system. It must be noted here that Rāmakaṇṭha, one of the main voices of the commentarial Siddhānta, and a near-contemporary of Abhinava, did not accept the *karmasāmya* theory but rather advocated the *mala-paripāka* theory, that of the ‘ripening of innate impurity,’ whereby when Śiva sees that the impurity of a given individual has ‘ripened’ and is ready to be removed, he initiates his *śaktipāta*. Ripening takes place through the dedicated practice of exoteric Śaiva religion, virtuous conduct, and so on. This removes the problem of arbitrariness and introduces the problem of partiality and merit. This theory is unknown to the *Kiraṇa*, and thus Rāmakaṇṭha must engage in verbal gymnastics to try to represent it in the text, under the onus of the general cultural idea that doctrine does not change, therefore the point at issue must be hidden somewhere in the scriptural text. Abhinava also deals with the *mala-paripāka* theory below.

evaṃ sūkṣaṃ samānatvaṃ yasmin kāle tadaiva sā 5.9cd

svarūpaṃ dyotayaty āśu bodha-cihna-balena vai 5.10ab

...thus when this imperceptible equality (of actions arises), at that very moment (Śiva’s) power illumines one’s own nature suddenly, (an illumination discernable) through the signs of awakening.

samatve sati yo bhogaḥ kathaṁ tasya prajāyate 5.11ab

When there is an equality [i.e. equal opposition of *karmas*], how can one's experience which (is their fruit) arise?

sa pāta iti mantavyas tasya bhaktir vilakṣaṇā 5.13cd

...that should be understood as (the cause of) a 'descent'. Exceptional devotion arises in one (who has experienced it).

kāla eva sa niṣṇātaḥ śakter ātmaparigrahaḥ

anādi-karma-sambandhāc chivaḥ kālam apekṣate 5.14

That very time is 'proficient', as it is a gracing of the soul by the power (of the Lord). Because (the soul) is connected to beginningless *karma*, Śiva waits for that time.

That is, because *karma* is beginningless, there is no earlier opportunity for Śiva to show his grace. This idea is in direct opposition to Abhinavagupta's theology, for he stresses the absolute freedom and independence (*svātantriya*) of the Lord as one of his inherent qualities, along with those of consciousness and bliss. The Saiddhāntika doctrine, for Abhinava, constitutes a limitation of God, whose very nature is necessarily completely unlimited and boundless.

ŚAKTIPĀTA IN ABHINAVAGUPTA'S THEOLOGY

Of all the Kāshmiri Śaiva exegetes, Abhinava writes most extensively on the topic of *śaktipāta*, for it is key to his theology. With his typology of nine levels of the Descent of Power, drawn from the brief mention in the MVT, he can accommodate and account for a wider range of observed religious experience, as well as privilege his doctrine of liberation through knowledge without the necessity of ritual. Thus he argues that some

attain liberation as a direct result of *śaktipāta*, without the intermediary of the guru or the ritual he supplies, becoming ‘self-revealed’ Gurus in their own right, possessing great power and charisma. Others approach a Guru as a result of their *śaktipāta*, but need only the briefest contact with him to attain the highest state. The Gurus discussed in this context are of the charismatic type we saw in the Kaula materials and the MVT, for the initiation they give may be of a formal, ritual character, or it may be a direct transmission of energy through a mere touch or word. Others receive *śaktipāta* of the type described in the Saiddhāntika materials, that leads them to take initiation and perform spiritual practice (*abhyāsa*), attaining liberation at the time of death. Still others, the lowest category, receive the Descent but still desire worldly enjoyment and powers (indeed, this desire is the reason their *śaktipāta* is weaker), and they become power-seeking *sādhakas*, yet still attain liberation, generally in their next incarnation. Thus we see here another example of Abhinava’s strategy of inclusive hierarchies, which made his theology so compelling originally. Everyone is thus accounted for, different types of experience explained, while simultaneously guiding the reader towards the conclusion that liberating insight is the highest among them.

The inclusive hierarchy also appears in Abhinava’s discussion of other religions and soteriological paths. He holds that each of these grants the goal that it promises, but that these goals fall short of the highest liberation and most complete expansion, reaching as they do to levels of reality (*tattvas*) that, though elevated, are still part of the Śaiva ‘impure universe’ (*asuddhādvān*). Because his is effectively a monotheistic theology, Abhinava must describe the limited forms of grace received by those on lower paths as emanating ultimately from Śiva:

“The various (divine) forms such as Viṣṇu and so on, which exist within God as (aspects) of his own nature, are established within the realm of *māyā* through his magical power of differentiation. Therefore, though a *śaktipāta* exists in connection with these forms, it can only grant experience up to a certain point [maximally, the level on which those deities are established], not the divine state of Śiva.” (TĀ 13.268cd-70ab)

However, he allows that it is entirely possible that these lower-grade *śaktipātas* will successively lead one to higher and higher paths and corresponding states of being, either within a lifetime or over the course of several.

Another fascinating feature of Abhinava’s account here is the unique understanding of *śaktipāta* in the context of radical nondualism. Abhinava eliminates the two logical problems of arbitrariness and partiality, grappled with by the other commentators, by explaining that it is the Lord himself, exercising his powers of either Obscuration (*tirobhāva*) or Grace (*anugraha*), who chooses to either stay contracted in the form of one individual, or expand to the perfect fullness of divine realization in the form of another. It is an independent choice, an expression of his inherent power of absolute freedom (*svātantriya-śakti*), and thus there is no dualistic God with whom to find fault. It is when the Lord in the form of an individual soul is ready to begin the process of expanding into his original state that *śaktipāta* occurs. We saw above that the MVT alluded vaguely to a “particular time” when that took place. Abhinava explains this in his commentary on MVT 1.42 which occurs in *Tantrāloka* chapter 13:

“The ‘particular time’ (*kāla*) which is referred to is that of a particular *activity* (*kalanā*), consisting of awareness, directed toward one’s own nature. The ‘fitness’ or ‘appropriateness’ [*yogyatā*, in MVT 1.42] is in our philosophy said to be the

quality of being worthy for the spiritual process (*yoga*) of identification with Śiva. Thus the question ‘Why (did it happen) only then, why not before?’ is not appropriate. For aside from manifesting in this way, there is no occasion (for the Descent of Power) whatsoever. But when (his Power) does shine forth in this way, due to his freedom, the power of time cannot contradict his expansion, being simply a form of his majesty, arising within Śiva.” 13.204-7b

Only here in Abhinava’s theology does *śaktipāta* appear as a religious experience which the recipient draws to himself, as opposed to something that happens to him. Thus he deftly disposes of the logical problems of the earlier theories.

To make our understanding of Abhinava’s views on *śaktipāta* complete, we present here a complete translation of chapter 11 of the *Tantrasāra*, together with a few select verses from *Tantrāloka* 13 that clarify particular points. Further discussion of the topic appears at appropriate places below. First, a note on the text: the TS is written in a terse prose style that necessitates frequent parenthetical insertions to fill out the grammar of the English. As above, I use parentheses to enclose phrases not directly stated in the Sanskrit, but unambiguously implied by its structure and context. The reader who is not fluent in Sanskrit may simply read through these parentheses as if they were not there. Square brackets, then, are used for my occasional explanatory or editorial comments. My understanding of the chapter was of course assisted by the corresponding chapter in *Tantrāloka*. Also note that the Sanskrit text, drawn from the K.S.T.S. edition, is transcribed as found there, with proper *sandhi* irregularly applied.

TANTRASĀRA: EKĀDAŚAM ĀHNIKAM

*tatra yāvat idam uktam tat sākṣāt kasyacit apavargāptaye yathokta-saṅgraha-nītyā
bhavati, kasyacit vakṣyamāṇa-dīkṣāyām upayoga-gamanāt. iti dīkṣādikaṃ vaktavyam |
tatra kaḥ adhikārī iti nirūpaṇārthaṃ śaktipāto vicāryate |*

Regarding (the teachings on the structure of reality in chapter 10), someone could attain liberation directly through following all that has been taught up to this point. For others, it comes about due to understanding the usefulness regarding initiation, which will be explained below. Thus initiation and what follows it has to be taught. On this point, (we must ask) who is qualified (for initiation)? In order to ascertain the answer to this question, we will investigate (the topic of) the Descent of Power.

*tatra kecit āhuḥ jñānābhāvāt ajñāna-mūlaḥ saṃsāraḥ, tad-apagame jñānodayāt, śaktipāta
iti teṣāṃ samyak-jñānodayaḥ eva kiṃ-kṛta iti vācyam*

On this topic, some say that because of an absence of knowledge, the cycle of worldly suffering, which has ignorance as its root, exists. When that ignorance is removed, due to the arising of spiritual knowledge, it is termed *śaktipāta*. For people who argue thus, (*śaktipāta*) is simply the arising of correct knowledge. We object that what ought to be addressed is, how is that accomplished?

*karma-janyatve karma-phala-vat bhogatva-prasaṅgaḥ,³⁵ bhogini ca śaktipātābhyupagatau
atiprasaṅgaḥ*

³⁵ *bhogatvaprasaṅgaḥ* em VASUDEVA : -*prasaṅge* ed.

[The consideration of various views:] If it [viz. the arising of knowledge] is produced by action [*karma*], like the ordinary result of an action, then we have the unacceptable conclusion of (*śaktipāta* remaining within) the domain of ordinary experience [as opposed to an act of God]. And further, we would have the entirely unwarranted conclusion of accepting that *śaktipāta* is applicable to an ordinary experiencer, [a *bhogin*, caught up in the world sense-experience].

īśvarecchā-nimittatve tu jñānodayasya anyonyāśrayatā vaiyarthyaṃ ca, īśvare rāgādi-prasaṅgaḥ

On the other hand, if the cause (of the arising of spiritual knowledge) is the will of the Lord, then the arising of knowledge is purposeless [because the Lord could just will *śaktipāta* directly] and logically mutually dependent. [That is, the arising of knowledge is dependent on the will of the Lord, and the will of the Lord, in the form of *śaktipāta*, is dependent on the arising of knowledge—a circular argument.] Further, partiality on the part of the Lord is an undesired consequence (of this view).

viruddhayoḥ karmaṇoḥ sama-balayōḥ anyonya-pratibandhe karma-sāmyaṃ tataḥ śaktipāta iti cet, na – kramikatve virodhāyogāt, virodhe'pi anyasya aviruddhasya karmaṇo bhoga-dāna-prasaṅgāt, aviruddha-karmāpravṛttaḥ tadaiva deha-pāta-prasaṅgāt

‘Equality of karmas’ is the theory that two opposing karmas of equal strength are blocking one another, therefore *śaktipāta* occurs. If this (theory is proposed), we deny it. If karmas are successive, (then it is untenable) due to the impossibility of their opposition. Even if such a ‘karmic blockage’ were possible, (it could not be the cause of *śaktipāta*) because of the logical problem that another, unopposed karma could (equally well) grant (the re-commencement of) experience. In the

absence of an unopposed karma to re-initiate (experience), *then* (your theory is unworkable) due to the unacceptable consequence of the falling away of the body [i.e., death, because experience is no longer possible].

*jātyāyus-pradam karma na pratibadhyate bhoga-pradam eva tu pratibadhyate iti cet,
kutaḥ – tat-karma-sadbhāve yadi śaktiḥ patet tarhi sā bhoga-pradāt kiṃ bibhiyāt |*

“Karma as the bestower of type of birth and life-span cannot be blocked (in this way), but only as the bestower of experience can it be blocked”—if this is argued, we say “why?” If Power can descend in spite of the existence of those (types of) karma, then why would She be worried about bestowing experience?

That is, if Śakti can descend in spite of the governing influence of *jati-* and *āyus-karma*, why could she not descend in spite of *bhoga-karma*? And furthermore, why should she be interested in helping to re-activate worldly experience? In the corresponding passage in *Tantrāloka*, Abhinava clarifies this by adding, “When Śiva manifests within a particular individual soul in his true form, he does not thereby depend on impurity (*mala*) or *karma*. How could they, which are part of the nature of the individual soul alone, become causes with regard to him? Thus he brings it about totally independently of *māyā* (and its correlates).” (13.115-6ab)

*atha mala-paripāke śaktipātaḥ so'pi kiṃ-svarūpaḥ? kiṃ ca tasya nimittam? iti, etena
vairāgyaṃ dharma-viśeṣo vivekaḥ sat-sevā sat-prāptiḥ deva-pūjā ity ādi-hetuḥ pratyukta
iti bheda-vādināṃ sarvam asamañjasam |*

Now (we will address the theory of) *śaktipāta* occurring when there is a ‘ripening of impurity’. What is the nature (of that ripening)? And what is its cause? In answer to this, (it is said to occur) through (one or more of) these: renunciation; special religious practices; discrimination; devoted service to holy people; attaining (the

company) of holy people; worship of God; and so on. These are (variously) answered as being the cause—all this is the nonsensical prattle of the dualists.

Here Abhinava gives an amusing dismissal to this theory, but in *Tantrāloka* he argues against it much more carefully: “But surely, [an objector might say,] those who attain the state of mantra-beings and so on, do so through worship (*pūjā*), mantra repetition (*japa*), meditation, zealous service of God (*śaṅkarāsevanā*), and so on. How then can their attainment be independent of actions?’ Not so, (we say). Let us begin first by investigating *why* they (engage) in mantra repetition, meditation on transcendent Śiva, and things of that nature. (All the arguments for) the (theory of the) equality of *karmas*, growing disgusted with the world (*vairāgya*), the ripening of impurity, and so on (as causes) have been found faulty. If you say the cause is the Lord’s will, then the one and only (form of that) cause is the Descent of Power.” (13.259cd-262ab) Thus Abhinava makes the interesting argument that rather than ‘good works’ drawing God’s grace, it is only through grace in the form of *śaktipāta* that one can have any real capacity for, or sustained interest in, such spiritual practices. This accords with his idea that *śaktipāta*, taking place as it does when the Lord decides to reveal his divine nature through the vehicle of an apparent individual, marks the beginning of the committed spiritual path, not some point of merit reached along it. Further, all activities on that path are a expression of divine power, and thus are not part of the karmic set-up, as their purpose is, according to him, to effect a temporary (and eventually permanent) identification with one’s true nature, and not to produce change within the matrix of ordinary reality as actions are generally intended to do. He comments, “Thus mantra repetition and so on are (the Lord’s) Power of Action (*kriyā-śakti*), not *karma*. For ‘karma’ in general usage is that which grants lower forms of experience and obscures the true nature of the

experiencer.” (TĀ 13.262-3c) All the Lord’s Powers, by their very nature of total freedom, operate outside the normal boundaries of the circumscribed realm of differentiated reality. Further, as in all coherent nondual philosophies, Abhinava argues that the state of liberation is accessed through an epistemological shift, not an ontological one. Thus, for him, even ritual is a form of mystical knowing, and can have no other valid purpose but the revelation of the eternally and singularly existent trans-individual Consciousness that has ever been both subject and objects of one’s experience.

Now that he has refuted the opponent’s views, he goes on to state that of his own tradition.

*svatantra-parameśādvaya-vāde tu upapadyate etat, yathāhi – parameśvaraḥ
svarūpācchādana-kriḍayā paśuḥ pudgalo 'ṇuḥ sampannaḥ, na ca tasya deśa-kāla-svarūpa-
bheda-virodhaḥ tad-vat svarūpa-sthagana-vinivṛtṭyā svarūpa-pratyāpattiṃ jhaṭiti vā
krameṇa vā samāśrayan śaktipāta-pātram aṇuḥ ucyate, svātantrya-mātra-sāraś ca asau
parama-śivaḥ śakteḥ pātayitā*

By contrast, in our tradition that teaches the nonduality of the independent Supreme Lord, it occurs in this way. The Supreme Lord, as a play of hiding his true nature, becomes a bound soul, an individual, an individuated entity, and yet there is no contradiction to his true nature (in manifesting) within the (circumscribed) divisions of space, time, and particularity. In the same way [i.e., as an independent play], when bringing to an end the concealment of his true nature, and experiencing a return to that true nature instantly or gradually, He is called an individual soul that is a fit vessel for *śaktipāta*. And he is Supreme Śiva [throughout this process], whose essence is simply his (total) autonomy: the one who causes Power to descend.

In this beautifully written passage, Abhinava argues that ‘the Supreme Lord’ and ‘the contracted individual soul’ are just different names for one Consciousness in two different states or phases. Thus, though *śaktipāta* remains here an act of grace, it is in fact an act of gracing oneself. This is stated in the last phrase, which hinges on the fact that the Sanskrit word *śaktipāta* is grammatically causative (through *vrddhi* derivation from –*pata*) and thus suggests an agent. In nondual ontology, there is of course only one agent, whether in an expanded or contracted phase.

iti nirapekṣa eva śaktipāto yaḥ svarūpa-prathā-phalaḥ, yas tu bhogotsukasya sa karmāpekṣaḥ, lokottara-rūpa-bhogotsukasya tu sa eva śaktipātaḥ parameśvarecchā-prerita-māyā-garbhādhikāriya-rudra-viṣṇu-brahmādi-dvareṇa mantrādi-rūpatvaṃ māyā-puṃ-vivekaṃ puṃs-kalā-vivekaṃ puṃ-prakṛti-vivekaṃ puṃ-buddhi-vivekaṃ anyac ca phalaṃ prasnuvānaḥ tad-adhara-tattva-bhogaṃ pratibadhnāti

Thus the Descent of Power is entirely independent, and results in the manifestation of one’s true nature. But for one who desires worldly experience, its results depend on action [*karma*]. Now, that *śaktipāta* received by one desiring enjoyment in a supernatural form (in another world) takes place through (the agency of other divine powers): Rudra, Viṣṇu, Brahmā, and so on, beings who hold office within the realm of differentiated reality [*māyā*], directed by the will of the Supreme Lord. (Such a ‘lower grade’ *śaktipāta*), granting (various) other fruits—e.g., discrimination between the soul [*puruṣa*] and the faculty of discernment [*buddhi*], between the soul and materiality [*prakṛti*], between the soul and the limited power of action [*kalā*], between *māyā* and the soul, (culminating in) existence in the form of a Mantra-being and (as a Lord of Mantras or Great Lord of Mantras)—binds one to experience in a Level of Reality [*tattva*] below Śiva.

Here Abhinavagupta enumerates the levels of attainment reached by those who want to enjoy existence as a super-powerful entity in a higher dimension of reality. He alludes to the attainment that is the pinnacle for the Sāṅkhya system, *kaivalya* or ‘isolation’, then to the higher states of being called *Pralayākala* and *Vijñānākala*. The former are those free of *karma*, existing in dimensions (*bhuvanas*) above the *kalā-tattva*, but still within *māyā*. The latter are free of both *karma* and *māyā*, and exist just below the Pure Universe, where everything that exists does so as a phase of Śiva’s divine awareness. Mantras are (in their true form) conscious entities that exist in the Pure Universe on the level of Pure Knowledge (*śuddhavidyā*), while *Mantrēśvaras* and *Mantra-maheśvaras* are higher phases that exist respectively on the Īśvara and Sadāśiva levels of the Pure Universe. The latter then are the highest phase of reality other than Śiva/Śakti. Abhinava stresses here that all these levels of divine enjoyment stop short of that ultimate transcendent reality, suggesting to the reader that the latter is the only worthwhile goal. (For more information on these categories, see VASUDEVA 2004; cf. also TĀ 13.271cd-76ab and 9.184-189.)

bhoga-mokṣobhayotsukasya bhoge karmāpekṣo mokṣe tu tan-nirapekṣaḥ, iti sāpekṣa-nirapekṣaḥ |

(The *śaktipāta* which takes place) for one desiring both enjoyment and liberation is dependent on action with reference to the enjoyment (part), but with reference to liberation, it is independent of action. Thus it (*śaktipāta*) is both dependent and independent.

Abhinava adds in the *Tantrāloka*, “The Descent of Power and devotion to God of those who do not desire fruits (of worldly enjoyment) are independent of family, caste, body, actions, age, religious practices, and wealth, while the devotion of those who do desire

fruits depends on actions and so on. Therefore there is a variation in the kinds of fruits attained, but it is not so regarding liberation.” (13.117c-119b)

*na ca vācyaṃ -- kasmāt kasmimścid eva puṃsi śaktipāta iti sa eva parameśvaraḥ tathā
bhāti iti satattve ko'sau pumān nāma yad-uddeśena viśaya-kṛtā codanā iyaṃ |*

Why śaktipāta occurs to some particular person (and not another) need not be discussed. He (the individual who receives it or does not) himself is the Supreme Lord (who) appears like that [in the form of one who is a vessel for śaktipāta and one who is not]. When this is the reality, who indeed is that person with reference to whom this objection is made an issue?

THE NINE TYPES OF ŚAKTIPĀTA

*sa cāyaṃ śaktipāto navadhā -- tīvra-madhya-mandasya utkarṣa-mādhyasthya-nikarṣaiḥ
punas traividhyāt, tatra utkṛṣṭa-tīvrāt tadaiva deha-pāte parameśatā*

Now this śaktipāta is of nine types, because the three types of ‘intense’, ‘medium’, and ‘gentle’ are again (multiplied) by (the three variants of) ‘accelerated,’ ‘middling,’ and ‘reduced’. [1.] First, ‘accelerated intense’ (śaktipāta) immediately causes the falling away of the body, (and the attainment of) the state of the Supreme Lord.

*madhya-tīvrāt śāstrācāryānapekṣiṇaḥ sva-pratyayasya prātibha-jñānodayaḥ yad-udaye
bāhya-saṃskāraṃ vinaiva bhogāpavarga-pradaḥ prātibho gurur ity ucyate*

[2.] ‘Middling intense’ (śaktipāta) causes a spontaneous arising of intuitive knowledge in one whose conviction is thus based (only) on himself, without any need for scriptures or teachers. When this intuitive knowledge arises, he is said to

be—without any external qualification rite—a ‘Self-revealed Guru,’ a giver of both enjoyment and liberation.

The second variety of the Descent either results in living liberation (*jīvanmukti*) or a state very close to it, for the unfailing divine insight (*pratibhā*) guides the recipient from within. He or she needs no evidence (*pratyaya*) for this attainment other than the inner experience it engenders. Such a person clearly would need no formal ritual of initiation, because he already possesses what that would bestow. In TĀ, Abhinava comments, “For one on the path of divine intuition, there is no (necessity) for the procedure of the several initiations, no (formal) consecration (as a guru), no succession to a lineage, and no (ritual) vow of mantras, since he is directed (*adhiṣṭhita*) by the primal sage, the great God. It is for the attainment of such inner power that all the rites are offered; but it is (already) his own nature.” (13.140-1) All the practices referred to here are consecrating rituals generally thought necessary to qualify one to perform certain practices or hold office as a guru. The most obscure among them, the vow of mantras (*vidyāvrata*) is described in the tenth chapter of the *Siddhayogeśvarī-mata* as an ancillary ritual that qualifies one for an elaborate mantra practice, and involves five days of observing silence, doing *japa*, and wearing a white garment with limbs smeared with ashes (TÖRZÖK 1999).

The idea of an authoritative Guru not formally consecrated must have been controversial, and certainly would not have been admitted by many groups. In Indian religious culture generally, rites (*saṃskāra*) were considered necessary to grant the qualification (*adhikāra*) to teach or undertake esoteric practices. Therefore Abhinava argues that this type of recipient of the Descent is in fact initiated, through the goddesses that embody the potencies of his own consciousness rather than through an external intermediary (see below). This esotericizing exegesis does more than validate such a

person; it elevates him beyond the level of those who require formal initiation. (TĀ 4.78-79 and *Niśisañcāra* 4.41 also mention this category of master.) Such persons are reputedly attested also in contemporary Indian religion, where if they attain their exalted state at a young age, they are referred to as *avatārs* or *janmasiddhas*.

*tasya hi na samayyādi-kalpanā kācit, atrāpi tārātamyā-sadbhāvaḥ – icchā-vaicitryāt iti,
saty api prātibhatve śāstrādy-apekṣā saṁvādāya syād api, iti nirbhitti-sabhitty-ādi-bahu-
bhedaṭvam ācaryasya prātibhasyāgameṣu uktam, sarvathā pratibhāṁśo baliyān – tat-
sannidhau anyeṣām anadhikārāt | bheda-darśana iva anādi-śiva-sannidhau mukta-
śivānāṁ sṛṣṭi-layādi-kṛtyeṣu*

Nor does he need any rites whatsoever, such as the basic form of initiation or (higher initiations). Even here, though, there are relative gradations, due to variations in the Will (of the Lord). Though spontaneous intuition is present, there may also be (a necessity for) dependence on scripture and teachers for the sake of corroborating it. Many divisions, such as ‘without support’ and ‘with support’ are described in the scriptures with regard to the Self-revealed master. (Even) a portion of true intuitive insight is stronger in all cases, because, in its presence, no other form of knowledge has authority; just as in dualist philosophy, the ‘Śivas by liberation’ have no authority in the acts of creation, dissolution, and so on, in the presence of the eternal Śiva.

Abhinava writes in *Tantrāloka*, “Therefore such a devotee to the teachings of Śiva is initiated (directly) by the Goddesses. Depending on the steadiness or shakiness (of his intuition) he too should perform self-refinement (*svasaṁskāra*), through austerity, mantra repetition, and so on, in accordance with sacred observance (*vrata*), either by himself or directed by a Guru.” (13.142-3ab)

*manda-tīvrāt śaktipātāt sad-guru-viṣayā yiyāsā bhavati, asad-guru-viṣayāyām tu
tirobhāva eva, asad-gurutas tu sad-guru-gamanam śaktipātād eva |*

[3.] From a ‘reduced intense’ Descent of Power, there arises the desire to approach a true Guru. (The desire to approach) a false guru, on the other hand, is nothing but the Lord’s power of Obscuration. Leaving a false guru and going to a true Guru occurs only because of *śaktipāta*.

*sad-gurus tu samastaitac-chāstra-tattva-jñāna-pūrṇaḥ sākṣāt bhagavad-bhairava-
bhaṭṭāraka eva, yogino’pi svabhyasta-jñānatayaiva mocakatvam tatra yogitvasya³⁶
saubhāgya-lāvaṇyādi-mattvasyevānupayogāt | asad-gurus tu anyaḥ sarva eva |*

A true Guru, perfectly full of the knowledge of the Truth in all these scriptures, is none other than the revered Lord Bhairava incarnate. Even a Yogin liberates others only by means of his well-practiced knowledge; with regard to that capacity of liberating others, his status as a yogin (*per se*), like his other intrinsic qualities, such as fortune, good looks, and so on, is useless. But all others (who do not have such liberating knowledge) are false gurus (despite any attractive qualities they may possess).

He adds succinctly in *Tantrāloka*, “One thing alone marks one a Guru: wisdom that is expertly put into practice.” (13.333ab) And, “The variation in capacity for (true) knowledge (seen in various gurus) is due solely to the strength of their *śaktipāta*.” (13.326cd)

*evaṃ yiyāsuḥ guroḥ jñāna-lakṣaṇām dīkṣām prāpnoti yayā sadya eva mukto bhavati,
jīvaṇn api. atra avalokanāt kathanāt sāstra-sambodhanāt caryā-darśanāt caru-dānāt ity
ādayo bhedaḥ |*

³⁶ Conj. SANDERSON restores sense to the passage: mocakatve tatra yogyatvasya ed.

Thus one who desires to approach (such a true master) obtains the initiation characterized by knowledge from the Guru, by which he is liberated quite quickly, while living (in the body). In this matter, the different ways (the disciple may receive this initiation are): through a look (from the Guru); through (his) discourse; through explaining scripture; through showing his practices; through giving the oblation; and so on.

In the first sentence above, Abhinava may be thinking of the definition of initiation given in the *Niśvāsanaya*, “Initiation through the descent of Śiva’s Power bestows knowledge.” (f. 31v2: *śivaśaktinipātena dīkṣā jñānaṃ prayacchati*) Here and in the corresponding *Tantrāloka* passage, he argues for the validity of non-ritual forms of initiation that happen spontaneously through the agency of a charismatic Guru who has realized his or her oneness with Śiva. From the context, we know that this higher form of initiation applies to those who have experience a *śaktipāta* of the third (intense) degree.

We receive more detail from this interesting passage in the TĀ: “What is the Truth? Who knows that Truth?’ Due to having these thoughts, through intuition or the company of (spiritually-inclined) friends, one conceives a desire to approach a Guru. Thus, because he possesses that desire, he finds a master. And (the master), by the specific gradation (of *śaktipāta* with which he himself is) endowed, is (either) self-perfected or liberated through spiritual practice [lit., ‘refined’].” (13. 222cd-224ab) “These are the varieties of initiation: from (the Guru’s) discourse; from being in company (with him); from a compassionate glance; from a scripture; through a transference (of *śakti*); from him showing the basic religious practice; from the (transgressive) oblation; from the mystic power of mantra or sacred hand gesture (*mudrā*); by one of these or all of them.” (13.227cd-28)

abhyāsavato vā tadānīm sadya eva prāṇa-viyojikām dīkṣām labhate, sā tu maraṇa-kṣaṇa eva kāryā iti vakṣyāma, iti tīvras traidhā

Or (one who has received ‘reduced-intense’ *śaktipāta*) may obtain an initiation, from one practiced in it, of ‘deprivation of the vital force’ that occurs immediately. However, that initiation may be done only at the moment of death. We will discuss this later. This ends the (discussion of the) three kinds of intense (*śaktipāta*).

The category of *sadyo-nirvāṇa-dīkṣā*, which ejects the soul from the body and grants instant liberation, is also taught in the Śaiva Siddhānta. Saiddhāntika commentator Narāyaṇakaṇṭha writes (ad *Mrgendratāntra*, *Kriyāpāda*, 8.145ab):

*yā tu sadyaḥ tat-kṣaṇenaiva nirvāṇa-dā mukti-hetuḥ tad-dīkṣārthaṁ
siddha-mantro guruḥ śiṣya-yogyatām tīvra-śakti-pātāghrātatva-lakṣaṇām
vīkṣya tām dīkṣām kuryāt*

Seeing the fitness of the disciple for his initiation, marked by the fact of his having been touched by an intense Descent of Power, the guru, whose (expertise in) mantra is perfect, should perform the initiation which is the cause of liberation, which grants *nirvāṇa* immediately, at that very moment.

As this topic really belongs under the topic of Initiation, Abhinava takes it up there (chapter 15 of the *Tantrasāra*). Now he turns to the medium grades of *śaktipāta*, which result in liberation at death (the norm for Śaiva Siddhānta) or in one’s next incarnation in a paradisaical realm.

*utkṛṣṭa-madhyāt śaktipātāt kṛta-dīkṣāko’pi svātmanaḥ śivatāyām na tathā dṛḍha-
pratipattiḥ bhavati, pratipatti-paripāka-krameṇa tu dehānte śiva eva*

[4.] When one receives an ‘accelerated medium’ Descent of Power, though he takes initiation, his perception of the divinity of his Self is not firm to the same degree

(as those who receive intense *śaktipātas*). However, through the gradual ripening of his perception, he certainly becomes Śiva when the end of the body comes.

madhya-madhyāt tu śivatotsuko'pi bhoga-prepsuḥ bhavati, iti tathaiva dīkṣāyām jñāna-bhājanam, sa ca yogābhyāsa-labdham anenaiva dehena bhogaṃ bhuktvā dehānte śiva eva
/

[5.] Now, one who receives 'middling medium' (*śaktipāta*), though possessing a desire for divinity, (still) has a desire for enjoyment. Thus he is worthy of (being granted) knowledge, in his initiation, of that very kind [i.e., that leads to enjoyment then liberation]. Having experienced enjoyment obtained through the practice of yoga, in this very body, he certainly becomes Śiva when the end of the body comes.

nikṛṣṭa-madhyāt tu dehāntareṇa bhogaṃ bhuktvā śivatvam eti, iti madhyas tu tridhā

[6.] From 'reduced medium' (*śaktipāta*), having experienced enjoyment in another body, he becomes divine (in that next life). Such are the three varieties of medium (*śaktipāta*).

Clearly, Abhinava is much less interested in discussing the paths of those who desire enjoyments (*bhoga*) and powers (*siddhi*). He repeatedly privileges the longing for liberation (*mumukṣā*) over the desire for enjoyment, though his scriptural texts make no such judgment, regarding *siddhi* as a perfectly acceptable goal. Abhinava argues in the *Tantrāloka* that it is only when a yogin becomes indifferent to the exercise of power over others that he is finally liberated and can then liberate others. (13.185cd)

bhogotsukatā yadā pradhāna-bhūtā tadā mandatvaṃ – pārameśvara-mantra-yogopāyatayā yatas tatra autsukyam, pārameśa-mantra-yogādeś ca yato mokṣa-

*paryantatvam atah śaktipāta-rūpatā | tatrāpi tāratamyāt trai-vidhyam, ity eṣa mukhyaḥ
śaktipātaḥ |*

When desire for enjoyment is predominant, then (*śaktipāta*) is ‘gentle’. Because the desire for it is (fulfilled) by means of the mantras and yoga of the Supreme Lord, and because the mantras, yoga, and (other practices) of the Supreme Lord (necessarily eventually) culminate in liberation, thus it (still) has the nature of a *śaktipāta*. Regarding that (type of *śaktipāta* also), because it has gradations, there are three varieties. Thus the Descent of Power is most important (even for one desiring enjoyments).

*vaiṣṇavādīnāṃ tu rājānugrahavat na mokṣāntatā iti na iha vivecanam |
śivaśaktyadhiṣṭhānaṃ tu sarvatra iti uktam, sā paraṃ jyeṣṭhā na bhavati api tu ghorā
ghorātayā vā*

The (*śaktipāta*) of the Vaiṣṇavas and others, on the other hand, is like the favor of a king, and does not result in liberation. Thus it has not been considered here.

However, the influence of the Power of Śiva is universal, as has been said (in the scriptures); but she does not become the Eldress (*Jyeṣṭhā*) (for the Vaiṣṇavas and others), on the contrary (she is for them only either) Ghorā or Ghoratarā.

Here Abhinava refers to the aspects of *Śakti* that operate to grant different types of beings the destiny they knowingly or unknowingly pursue. *Jyeṣṭhā*, the Eldress, also known as Aghorā, ‘the Not-terrible Goddess,’ is the aspect of *Śakti* who continuously uplifts those on the path of enlightenment. Ghorā, ‘the Terrible Goddess,’ also known as Raudrī, is that Power who keeps those who desire enjoyment on the wheel of transmigration, content with the higher pleasures of existence on Earth or in the higher planes of the impure universe. Ghoratarā, ‘the Most Terrible Goddess,’ also known as Vāmā (because she

‘vomits forth’ *saṃsāra*), is she who drags those who are addicted to the lower pleasures into lower and lower hells. (See TĀ 6.52-57)

*sa eṣa śakti-pāto vicitro'pi tārātamyā-vaicitryāt bhidyate, kaścit vaiṣṇavādi-sthaḥ
samayyādi-krameṇa srotāḥ-pañcake ca prāpta-paripākaḥ sarvottīrṇa-bhagavat-ṣaḍ-
ardha-śāstra-paramādhikāritām eti*

This *śaktipāta*, though varied (in its nature) is (further) divided in accordance with the variety of grades (of aspirants). Someone established in (traditions) such as the Vaiṣṇavas, (who enters our path) through the basic initiation and what follows, and becomes (spiritually) ripe in the five streams (of our scriptures), then becomes supremely qualified through (the study of) the scriptures of the Trika, (authored) by the Blessed Lord and (having the power of) rescuing all.

*anyas tu ullaṅghana-krameṇa ananta-bhedena, ko'pi akramam iti ata eva adharādhara-
śāsana-sthā guravo'pi iha maṇḍala-mātra-darśane'pi anadhikāriṇaḥ*

Another (aspirant may attain this status) by passing over (some of the usual stages) in (any one of) countless ways. Someone (else may attain the highest immediately,) without any stages. For that very reason, those established in one or another of the lower teachings, even if they are gurus, are not qualified even to see our *maṇḍala*.

To see the *maṇḍala* refers to the basic initiation ceremony, where the initiand is shown the secret initiation *maṇḍala* at the appropriate time (for the Trika, this is the *triśūlābja-maṇḍala* or *maṇḍala* of Śiva's trident surmounted by four symbolic lotuses). Abhinava seems to be saying here that each person who comes to the Trika passes through their own unique set of stages of development, under the influence of Śiva's Power, and therefore it is not appropriate to give even the basic initiation to those of other traditions

who are simply curious but not yet ready to leave behind their former practice and move on to the next stage. Speaking in the *Tantrāloka* of this kind of person who slowly realizes the value of higher and yet higher philosophies, he writes, “A gradual Descent of Power (is one where) a person in the Siddhānta school then enters the Vāma school, (then) the Dakṣiṇā, the Mata, Kula, and Kaula, then (reaches) the Trika, the Heart (of Śaivism). Or, by skipping over, (one may reach the Trika) without following (all the steps in) this order or even immediately.” (13.300cd-301)

ūrdhva-śāsana-sthas tu guruḥ adharādhara-śāsanaṃ pratyuta prāṇayati -- pūrṇatvāt iti sarvādhikārī | sa ca daiśiko guruḥ ācāryo dīkṣakaḥ cumbakaḥ, sa cāyaṃ pūrṇa-jñāna eva sarvottamaḥ -- tena vinā dīkṣādy-asampatteḥ |

On the other hand, a guru who is established in the higher teachings breathes life into the lower teachings, due to his perfection. Thus he is qualified with respect to all (the scriptures). He is (called) a guide, a guru, a master, an initiator, a ‘kisser,’ and he is the best of all, as his knowledge is entirely perfect and complete: without it, he could not perform initiations and so on.

A ‘kisser’ (*cumbaka*) is simply a name for a guru, perhaps one that emphasizes oral transmission of knowledge. It seems the designation was in origin a Kaula one, in which oral transmission was often held to be higher than textual transmission.³⁷

yogī tu phalotsukasya yukto yadi upāyopadeśena avyavahitam eva phalaṃ dātuṃ śaktaḥ, upāyopadeśena tu jñāne eva yukto mokṣe'pi abhyupāyāt jñāna-pūrṇatā-kāṅkṣī ca bahūn api gurūn kuryāt |

Now, a yogin is appropriate (as a teacher) for one desiring (worldly or supernatural) fruits only if (the former) is capable, by teaching the (correct)

³⁷ See *Kulasāra* 15 and *Svacchandatantra* 5.46 and commentary.

means, to grant the fruits (of yogic practice) immediately. But he is appropriate with regard to that (specific kind of) knowledge alone, by teaching those means. One who desires (to attain) perfection in his knowledge with regard to liberation as well, through (the appropriate) means, may approach many teachers.

Here a yogin refers to one who has mastered supernatural attainments (*siddhi*) as opposed to a *jñānin*, one who teaches the path of liberating knowledge. Abhinava seems to be rhetorically saying that a yogin is *not* appropriate as a teacher, because he can only teach the means, not grant the fruit. This becomes apparent when considering this passage in the light of *Tantrāloka* 13.340: “In contrast to a yogin, who cannot grant the fruits of practice but only teach the means (to attain them), the superior Guru of knowledge is one who can point out the means and further can liberate one.” Regarding the assertion of the validity of approaching many teachers for knowledge, we know that Abhinava himself did this (“like a bee wandering from flower to flower in search of fragrance” 13.335) and learned much from a variety of gurus, yet he also revered his Guru Śambhunātha, presumably his last, above all others as the one whose knowledge was perfect and complete.

*uttamottamādi-jñānabhedāpekṣayā teṣu tu vartate, sampūrṇa-jñāna-guru-tyāge tu
prāyaścittam eva | nanu so'pi abruvan viparītaṃ vā bruvan kiṃ na tyājyaḥ, naiva iti
brūmaḥ, tasya hi pūrṇa-jñānatvāt eva rāgādy-abhāva iti avacanādikaṃ śiṣya-gatenaiva
kenacit ayogyatvānāśvastatvādinā nimittena syāt iti, tad-upāsane yatanīyaṃ śiṣyeṇa, na
tat-tyāge |*

He may attend on them, with the hope (of attaining) various kinds of higher and higher knowledge. But when one leaves a guru of perfect and complete knowledge, (it is a transgression, for which) a penance is definitely (required). [Objection:]

‘Surely, should not even such a guru be abandoned if he does not speak or speaks contradictions?’ Not at all, we say. For precisely because of his perfect knowledge, he lacks attachment and aversion. His not speaking or (speaking contradictions) may be due to some cause in the *disciple*, such as unfitness (for knowledge), untrustworthiness or unreliability, and so on. The disciple ought to make an effort in his service, not in his abandonment.

*evam anugraha-nimittaṃ śaktipāto nirapekṣa eva – karmādi-niyaty-anapekṣaṇāt*³⁸ |

Thus śaktipāta is caused by grace, and entirely independent, because it does not depend on binding fate, *karma* and so on.

The five independent acts of God (*pañcakṛtya*) in Śaivism are creation (*sṛṣṭi*), maintenance (*sthiti*), dissolution (*saṃhāra*), obscuration (*tirobhāva*), and grace (*anugraha*). All five are performed in microcosm by each individual instantiation of the Lord. The last two are complementary opposites, thus Abhinava briefly treats obscuration here, as it is the inverse of the act of grace that manifests as śaktipāta. Obscuration is the power in operation within one who turns away from the spiritual path, whether through apostasy or through continuing to practice outwardly but despising it within. Even such a person eventually attains liberation, after a period of self-created suffering, as Śiva’s grace cannot go to waste.

tirobhāva iti, tirobhāvo hi karmādy-anapekṣa-gāḍha-duḥkha-moha-bhāgitva-phalaḥ,³⁹

yathāhi prakāśa-svātantryāt prabuddho’pi mūḍhavat ceṣṭate hṛdayena ca mūḍha-ceṣṭām nindati, tathā mūḍho’pi prabuddha-ceṣṭām mantrārādhanaḍikām kuryāt, nindat ca |

(Now to address) the topic of ‘obscuration’. For obscuration (is a power of the Lord that) has as its fruit a share in delusion and intense misery; it is not based on

³⁸ Following the alternate reading given in the edition, *niyatyanapekṣaṇāt* for *niatyapekṣaṇāt*.

³⁹ Following the alternate reading given in the edition, *karmādyanapekṣa* for *karmādyapekṣa*.

karma and (binding fate, [but rather, from the highest perspective, it is the free exercise of one's capacity for contraction]). Just as a person, though an Awakened being, may behave like a fool out of the freedom of the light (of consciousness), yet scorn the foolish behavior in his heart, similarly another person, though a fool, may behave like an awakened one, propitiating his mantra-deity and so on, and (yet) he may scorn (such behavior in his heart).

yathā ca asya mūḍha-ceṣṭā kriyamāṇāpi prabuddhasya dhvaṃsam eti tathā asya prabuddha-ceṣṭā, sā tu nindyamānā – niṣiddhācaraṇa-rūpatvāt svayaṃ ca tayaiva viśaṅkamānatvāt enaṃ duḥkha-moha-paṅke nimajjayati

And just as, though he practices the behavior of a fool, (such action) is destroyed for an awakened one [i.e., it generates no karmic result], similarly the behavior of an awakened one (bears no fruit for a fool). Despising this (enlightened practice), because it has the form of prohibited [i.e. non-Vedic] action, and because he himself doubts it and feels inhibited regarding it, it drags him down into the mud of misery and delusion.

These doubt and inhibitions (*śaṅka*) may arise, especially for a brāhmin, because of brāhminical criticisms of the Śaiva path as non-Vedic and its ritual as transgressing Vedic norms (and because that individual's weak level of *śaktipāta* does not give him sufficient faith to ignore such criticisms). Even the claim that initiation bestows liberation goes strongly against the traditional Vedic grain as represented by bastions of orthodoxy such as Kumārila.

na tu utpanna-śaktipātasya tirobhāvo'sti, atrāpi ca karmādy-apekṣā pūrvavat niṣedhyā, tatrāpi ca icchā-vaicitryāt etad-deha-mātropabhogya-duḥkha-phalatvaṃ vā dīkṣā-

*samaya-caryā-guru-devāgny-ādaḥ sevā-nindanobhaya-prasaktānām iva prāk śiva-
śāsana-sthānām tat-tyāginām iva |*

But (this power of) obscuration does not exist for one in whom the Descent of Power has occurred. In this case as well, dependence on *karma* and (binding fate) is disallowed as before. And even in the case (of those referred to above, initiated but inhibited), due to the variations in the will (of the Lord), the fruition of suffering is to be experienced only in this body; as in the case of those who are simultaneously inclined to reverence and criticism regarding (the central tenets of Śaivism, such as) initiation, the basic prescribed discipline [*samayacaryā*], the guru, the deity, the (sacred) fire, and so on. And similarly for those who were previously established in the teaching of Śiva and then renounced it.

The doctrine that such obscuration is temporary and the soul will eventually attain liberation is expounded also by Śaiva Siddhānta authority Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha, in his commentary on *Kiraṇatantra* 5.26-29. He argues that even one who has fallen from and rejected the path to such an extent that he is born as a flesh-eating demon in a hell realm, after a period of time (the *Pauṣkara* suggests it is a hundred years), the subtle trace (*vāsanā*) of his initiation will bear fruit and he will return to the spiritual path and attain liberation. Thus he defends the doctrine that *śaktipāta* is always a successful act of grace, and the initiation that follows always liberates, with which Abhinava also agreed. However, Abhinava suggests that the soul returns to the spiritual path as a result of a second *śaktipāta*, triggered through a ceremony performed by the guru even after his death.

*tatrāpi icchā-vaicitryāt tirobhūto'pi svayaṃ vā śaktipātena yujyate, mṛto vā bandhu-
gurvādi-kṛpā-mukhena ity*

Even in that case, due (once again) to the variations in the will (of the Lord), though a person has become ‘obscured’, he is endowed with the Descent of Power either by himself, or if he is dead, through the compassion of a guru or a relative (of the deceased who importunes a guru on their behalf).

evaṃ pañca-kṛtya-bhāgitvaṃ svātmani anusandadhat parameśvara eva iti na khaṇḍitam ātmānaṃ pasyet |

Thus, considering in himself his participation in the five divine acts [of creation, maintenance, dissolution, obscuration, and grace], he is nothing other than the Supreme Lord. Thus let him not see himself as broken [i.e. limited and separate from God].

yathā nirargala-svātma-svātantryāt parameśvaraḥ |

ācchādayen nijaṃ dhāma tathā vivṛṇuyād api ||

Just as the Supreme Lord, through the unrestrained freedom of his own Self, may conceal his glory, in the same way he may reveal it as well.

CONCLUSIONS AND MODERN EXAMPLES

The theory of *śaktipāta* is an intriguing account of the role played by mystical experience in the structure of the Śaiva religion of mediaeval India. The attempt to valorize and integrate personal experience within the normative frameworks of religion creates tensions between the subjective phenomenology of the former and the need for standardization in the latter. This integrative attempt on the part of Śaiva theologians such as Abhinavagupta was a remarkable one, for they wished to maintain the sacred character of an individual’s personal communion with God’s Power while at the same time making it a standard requirement for admission into the ranks of the religious elite,

thus preserving the significant distinction they saw between religion as a cultural institution and as a personal, soteriological spiritual path. This tension between the value of individualism and the importance of community is an instantiation of a larger trend in Indian religions, typified by the paradigm of the renunciate yogin versus the temple cult. Though much more research needs to be done on the survivals of Śaivism in Muslim Kāshmir, it seems that in the period after Abhinava, his doctrine of a individual 'initiated by the Goddesses of his own awareness' was used to justify a larger number of householder practitioners without a guru, in addition to the usual small communities of householders gathered around particular gurus. The 'grass-roots' structure of the esoteric nondual left-handed traditions may have helped them integrate more fully into the devotional lives of the majority, in of course a sanitized form, and thus survive longer than the highly institutionalized dualistic right-handed traditions, which like Buddhism were more easily swept away by Muslim invaders. At the same time, on the Śaiva Siddhānta side, it seems that to maintain their ground, the strict requirement for the visible evidence of *śaktipāta* decreased. However, this tactic was unsuccessful, for the Siddhānta continued to decline in Kāshmir. (SANDERSON 1988:709)

The doctrine of *śaktipāta* has continued down to the present day. There have been a number of modern Indian exponents of it, two of the most notable being Svāmī Muktānanda of Gaṇeshpurī (1908-82) and his lineage, and Svāmī Viṣṇu Tīrtha of Rishikesh (d. 1969) and his lineage. Space permits me to examine only the second here. Svāmī Viṣṇu Tīrth authored a work called *Devātma Śakti* in 1948, in which his discussion of the topic demonstrates that by the twentieth century, the concepts of *śaktipāta* and *dīkṣā* had become collapsed. Viṣṇu Tīrth did not initiate his disciples through any formal ritual, but solely through *śaktipāta*, which he thus characterized as '*shaktipāt deekshā*,' where the first

term is used adjectivally. He writes, “Shaktipāt can be affected by sight, touch, *mantra*, or simply by the will power of the master; in the last case it works at long distances as well. Shaktipāt is in a way an injection of *Shakti*. The master injects in the astral body of the initiated a current of psychic power...by the touch of his hands, by casting a look or by speaking out to him some word or words called *mantras*, or any one of God’s holy names, or simply by a mere thought.” (1948:77) Here we see that the Kaula texts’ four-fold typology of spontaneous *śaktipāta* through contact with a charismatic master has survived for a millennium and a half. From a phenomenological perspective, it seems clear that Viṣṇu Tīrth’s curious terminology such as ‘astral body’ is simply an attempt to account for observed phenomena in a theoretical framework. His book attempts some reconciliation with modern science, as charts from Gray’s Anatomy compete for space with maps of the subtle energy centers of the body (*cakras* of the *sūkṣmaśarīra*).

A further factor of interest is that Viṣṇu Tīrth takes *śaktipāta* to be that which awakens the *kuṇḍalinī*, the form of *prāṇaśakti* normally said to dwell dormant at the base of the spine, which upon awakening, rises to the crown of the head, purifying and illuminating the individual in various ways along her path. Immediately after the above quotation, Viṣṇu Tīrth writes, “When the Divine Power is thus transmitted She acts in the favoured in such a way that the dormant power of kundalini is awakened...” Now, *kuṇḍalinī* is present as an explicit doctrine only marginally in Abhinavagupta’s works. As far as I am aware, *kuṇḍalinī* appears in the context of initiation only in the brief passage at TĀ 29.248-52, on the ‘cobra’ style of *vedhadīkṣā*, which is an initiation subsequent to the primary one, only given to those who wish to pursue *bhoga*. Even there the identification of *kuṇḍalinī*, which is not explicitly named, is tenuous. However, it seems unlikely to be a coincidence that Viṣṇu Tīrth comments, “*Shaktipāt Deekshā* is also known as *Vedha*

Deekshā. The term *vedha* literally means piercing through, because the Guru rouses the kundalini and makes Her pierce through the six *chakras*.” (1948:78) Further research is needed to pinpoint when the identification of *śaktipāta* with the rousing of *kuṇḍalinī* came about: perhaps in late Kaula-influenced works and the texts of the Kubjikā tradition, where the doctrine of *kuṇḍalinī* was most fully developed.

Viṣṇu Tīrth also argues that the *kuṇḍalinī* awakening through *śaktipāta* triggers the spontaneous occurrence, by stages, of aspects of *haṭha-yoga*, *mantra-yoga*, *laya-yoga*, and *jñāna-yoga* within the practitioner. Thus he refers to the *yoga* of *kuṇḍalinī* as *Mahāyoga*, the Great Yoga, and as *Siddhayoga*, because it is acquired “only through the favour of a perfect master (Siddha Guru), without any effort on the part of the initiated.” (1948:79-80) Thus we see that these originally esoteric doctrines have survived in some form into the modern period, presumably because their transcendence of ritual makes them accessible outside of their original context. Viṣṇu Tīrth goes on to translate passages from a Hindi book authored by his Guru, one Yogānanda Mahārāj (d. 1959), entitled *Mahāyoga Vijñāna*. These passages detail a large number of ‘signs of an awakened *kuṇḍalinī*’ which accord with many of the signs of *śaktipāta* that we have seen, with rather more emphasis on bodily experiences. It is worth quoting *in extenso* to see the similar language employed to the texts of over a thousand years previous.

“When your body begins trembling, hair stand on roots, you laugh or begin to weep without your wishing, your tongue begins to utter deformed sounds, you are filled with fear or see frightening visions, semen passes out, think that the Kundalini Shakti has become active. ...When with the closing of eyelids your body falls to the ground...the body squatted on the floor crosslegged begins to jump from place to place like a frog...hands may not be lifted even if so desired...know

that *Yogamaya* Kundalini has come into action. When your mind gets influenced spiritually as if some spirit has taken possession of your body and under that influence different postures of yoga are involuntarily performed, without the least pain or fatigue and you feel increasingly buoyant, and simultaneously strange sort of breathing exercises start, think that the Divine Power of Kundalini has come into action. ...your speech begins to utter sounds like those of animals, birds and frogs or of a lion...you feel intoxicated without taking any drug...When you are in meditation, future unfolds its secrets to you or the hidden meaning of scriptures...you acquire an insight into the abstruse meaning of the works on spiritual science even at their first glance...understand then that Kundalini the bestower of *siddhis* has come into action.” (1948:103-5)

Several of the symptoms here are precisely the same as those mentioned in the *Timirodghāṭana*, *Ūrmikaulārṇava*, and *Mālinīvijayottara*. There are many more detailed by the author, such as spontaneous poetry and glossolalia. Unlike Abhinavagupta, Viṣṇu Tīrth asserts that if you have not been able to receive *śaktipāta* from a Guru capable of giving it, you can increase your receptivity through pious deeds and selfless service.

Apparently such ‘symptoms’ occur to Westerners engaged in yoga as well. A website entitled ‘Kundalini Gateway’ details a number of them, many similar to what we have seen (spontaneous laughter, bodily movements, etc.) but even more concerned with bodily symptoms.⁴⁰ Their list has something of the character of disease pathology, to help people ‘diagnose’ their condition, and indeed some of the symptoms sound remarkably unpleasant.

⁴⁰ Kundalini Gateway: Signs and Symptoms of Awakening. <http://www.kundalini-gateway.org/ksigns.html>

As for the significant question of what the psychological, biological, or other bases for these experiences are—and I think we must assume that they did and apparently still do in fact occur—I am not qualified to comment. The investigation of this topic belongs perhaps in the field of comparative religion, psychology of religion, or even cognitive science, for in closing we must also note that these types of experiences are not limited to practitioners associated with Indian religions, but can be observed cross-culturally. Similar phenomena are seen, for example, in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. The Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF), a charismatic sect, has popularized the experience of the ‘Toronto Blessing’, which they characterize as a “transferable anointing. In its most visible form it overcomes worshippers with outbreaks of laughter, weeping, groaning, shaking, falling, ‘drunkenness,’ and even behaviors that have been described as a ‘cross between a jungle and a farmyard.’ Of greater significance, however, are the changed lives.”⁴¹ The remarkable similarity of terminology to what we have seen surely cannot be coincidental. It is perhaps significant that the TACF advocates a contemplative, sometimes trance-inducing exercise they call a ‘soaking prayer’. There is also a key dissimilarity between the context of this Charismatic Christian group and the mediaeval Śaiva context: in the former, such spontaneous experiences nearly always take place in sizeable groups with high levels of emotional energy, whereas the initiations we have been examining are done for one, or at most a handful of people, a setting where one would imagine such experiences are rather less common or more difficult to come by.

This concludes this initial examination of the topic of *śaktipāta*. From early possession rites to elaborate metaphysical doctrines, we have seen a range of

⁴¹ TACF – What is the “toronto blessing”? <http://www.tacf.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=147> See also Toronto blessing. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toronto_blessing

interpretations of the phenomena of religious experience in its some of its more radical instantiations, and a degree of codification and institutionalization of same that is unusual in the study of religion. Such intertextual topical research I believe helps to illumine the complex edifice of Śaiva theology, one portion at a time. It is my hope that such work will continue, drawing more and more scholars to this important but relatively neglected field, so that in co-operation we may increase our understanding of this significant tradition. When we have advanced further toward that goal, the study of Śaivism will I am sure grant fruitful insights into the religious nature of man more generally.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

- Īśvarapratyabhijñāvimarśinī* of Abhinavagupta, ed. Mukund Ram Shastri, 2 vols. KSTS 22, 33. Bombay, 1918, 1921. Also available online at the Muktabodha's Institute's Digital Library Archive: http://www.muktabodha.org/digital_library.htm
- Ūrmikaulārṇava*. National Archives of Nepal, Kathmandu MS 5-5207 (incomplete). Paper; Newari script.
- Kiraṇatantra*. See Goodall 1998.
- Niśvāsattattvasamhitā*. NAK MS 1-277 / NGMPP A 41/14. Palm-leaf; 114 leaves.
- Mālinīvijayottara*, ed. Madhusudan Kaul Shastri. KSTS 37. Srinagar, 1922. Also available online at http://www.muktabodha.org/digital_library.htm
- Tantrāloka* of Abhinavagupta with the commentary (-*viveka*) of Rājānaka Jayaratha, ed. Mukund Ram Shastri. KSTS 23, 28, 30, 35, 29, 41, 47, 59, 52, 57, 58. Bombay and Srinagar, 1918-38. Also available online at the Muktabodha Digital Library.
- Tantrasāra* of Abhinavagupta, ed. Mukund Ram Shastri. KSTS 17. Bombay, 1918. Also available online at the Muktabodha Digital Library.
- Timirodghāṭana*. Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project Reel No. A 35/3. Palm-leaf; late Nepalese 'Licchavi' script. Also available online as an e-text at the Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages: http://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/ebene_1/fiindolo/gretil.htm

Translations and Secondary Sources

- Anonymous. "Toronto blessing." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2005.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toronto_blessing

- Dwyer, Graham. *The Divine and the Demonic*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2003.
- Dyczkowski, Mark. 1988. *The Canon of the Śaivāgama and the Kubjikā Tantras of the Western Kaula Tradition*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Goodall, Dominic, ed. and trans. 1996. *Hindu Scriptures*. London: Phoenix and California University Press.
- , ed. and trans. 1998. *Bhaṭṭarāmakāṇṭhāvīracitā kiraṇavṛttiḥ. Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha's Commentary on the Kiraṇatantra. Vol. 1: chapters 1-6. Critical Edition and Annotated Translation*. Publications du département d'Indologie 86.1. Pondicherry: Institut français de Pondichéry/École française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Goudriaan, Teun, and Sanjukta Gupta. *Hindu Tantric and Śākta Literature*. History of Indian Literature, vol. II, fasc. 2. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981.
- Monier-Williams, Monier. 1894. *Hinduism*. London: London Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
- Muller-Ortega, Paul. s.v. "Abhinavagupta" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward Craig. 1998. Also online at <http://www.rep.routledge.com/>
- Sanderson, Alexis. 1986. Maṇḍala and Āgamic Identity in the Trika of Kashmir. In *Mantras et Diagrammes Rituelles dans l'Hindouisme*. Ed., A. Padoux. Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.
- , 1988. Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions. In *The World's Religions*, ed. S. Sutherland, et. al. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Reprinted in *The World's Religions: The Religions of Asia*, F. Hardy, ed. London: Routledge, 1990.
- , 1992. The Doctrine of the Mālinīvijayottaratantra. In *Ritual and Speculation in Early Tantrism*. Ed., T. Goudriaan. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- , 1995. Meaning in Tantric Ritual. In *Essais sur le Rituel III: Colloque du Centenaire de la Section des Sciences religieuses de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études*. Eds., A.M. Blondeau and K. Schipper. Louvain-Paris: Peeters.
- , 2005. The Lākulas: New Evidence of a System Intermediate Between Pañcārthika Pāśupatism and Āgamic Śaivism. Ramalinga Reddy Memorial Lectures, the University of Madras, 1997. In the *Indian Philosophical Annual*, Radhakrishnan Institute for Advanced Study in Philosophy, Madras. In press.
- Smith, Frederick. *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Torella, Raffaele. 1994. *The Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā of Utpaladeva with the author's Vṛtti. Critical Edition and Annotated Translation*. Serie Orientale Roma 71. Rome: Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.
- Tórzsoők, Judit. 1999. The Doctrine of Magic Female Spirits. Critical edition of select chapters of the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata(tantra)* with annotated translation. Doctoral thesis, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford.
- Vasudeva, Somadeva. 2004. *The Yoga of the Mālinīvijayottaratantra. Chapters 1-4, 7, 12-17. Critical edition, translation and notes*. Pondicherry: Institut français de Pondichéry/École française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Vishnu Tīrtha, Swami. 1948. *Devatma Shakti: (Kundalini) Divine Power*. Rishikesh: Swami Shivom Tīrth.
- Waghorne, Joanne and Norman Cutler, eds. *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.