

# The Trans-Sectarian Genesis of Yogic and Tantric Traditions: A Philological and Physiological Reconstruction of Buddhist Derivation from Hindu Paradigms

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## The Historiographical Deconstruction of South Asian Esotericism

The historical emergence of advanced yogic and tantric disciplines represents one of the most profound, complex, and deeply contested evolutionary transformations in South Asian religious history. For decades, the dominant historiographical narrative, heavily influenced by early colonial Indology and characterized by a pervasive "Buddhist bias," posited that Buddhist esoteric traditions evolved in a largely independent, parallel vacuum, or that they represented the pristine pinnacle of indigenous ascetic methodologies. Scholars such as Alexander Cunningham frequently privileged Chinese Buddhist accounts while dismissing the vast repositories of Sanskrit Hindu literature as mythological, degenerate, or historically unreliable. This colonial gaze effectively stripped the plural religious history of South Asia of its foundational Hindu layers, projecting a false autonomy onto Buddhist developments.

However, contemporary philological, ethnographic, and textual analyses reveal a radically different genealogy. The esoteric practices of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the complex visualization methodologies of the *Hevajra Tantra*, and the somatic codifications found in the earliest Haṭhayoga manuals, such as the *Amṛtasiddhi*, are demonstrably and deeply derivative of older, dominant Hindu Śaiva and Śākta models. The central argument of this essay is that Buddhist forms of yoga and Tantra did not emerge *sui generis* from an isolated doctrinal core. Rather, they

represent a sophisticated, systematic appropriation and adaptation of Hindu metaphysical paradigms, ritual architecture, and physiological mapping.

This trans-sectarian genesis is characterized primarily by the "somatization" of tantric ritual, wherein macrocosmic powers, previously invoked through ritual grace or divine possession (*āveśa* / आवेश) in Śaiva-Śākta cults, were internalized as physical mastery over the body's vital fluids. Furthermore, this analysis will demonstrate that modern reductionist psychological frameworks—most notably Johannes Bronkhorst's theory of "absorption"—fail entirely to account for the integrated, trans-sectarian reality of South Asian meditation, artificially divorcing physiological asceticism from cognitive insight. By examining the foundational Vedic-Upaniṣadic texts, the epistemological battles between Hindu and Buddhist logicians like Dharmakīrti and Nāgārjuna, the socio-political dynamics of the "Śaiva Age," and the pioneering philological work of James Mallinson, Péter-Dániel Szántó, and Hugh B. Urban, this blog-post will comprehensively reconstruct the Hindu roots of Buddhist yogic expression.

### **The Chronological and Theoretical Substrate of South Asian Yoga**

To understand the derivation of Buddhist yogic mechanics, it is necessary to map the earliest textual codifications of meditation in the South Asian milieu, which are indisputably rooted in the Vedic-Upaniṣadic tradition. The table below traces this trans-sectarian progression from early Vedic visionary rites to the medieval somatization of the subtle body.

Period	Source Text	Theoretical Focus	Core Practice
Vedic (1500–800 BCE)	<i>Rg Veda, Atharva Veda</i>	Visionary hymns, Vratya (व्रात्य) austerities	Ritual, vision-seeking
Early Upaniṣadic (c. 3rd c. BCE)	<i>Kaṭha Upaniṣad</i>	Sensory restraint, Chariot metaphor (आत्मानं रथितं विद्धि शरीरं रथमेव तु)	Meditation, self-control
Classical (c. 325–425 CE)	<i>Pātañjalayogaśāstra</i>	Sāṃkhya dualism, Vṛtti (वृत्ति) cessation	Eight-limb (aṣṭāṅga / अष्टाङ्ग) schema
Medieval (c. 600–1200 CE)	Early Śaiva and Buddhist Tantras	Microcosmic mapping, Mantra (मन्त्र), Mudrā (मुद्रा)	Deity visualization, Breath manipulation

## The Vedic-Upaniṣadic Bedrock and the Absolute Failure of Bronkhorst's 'Absorption'

The earliest psychophysical techniques, initially developed by heterodox Śramaṇa groups around 500 BCE, focused predominantly on the eradication of karmic residue through intensive meditation and somatic austerity. These techniques were swiftly absorbed and codified by the orthodox Vedic tradition. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (c. 3rd century BCE) provides one of the earliest and most enduring definitions of yoga, framing it as the rigorous restraint of the sensory apparatus. The text employs the famous chariot metaphor to elucidate the hierarchy of human consciousness and the absolute necessity of somatic and mental control for spiritual liberation.

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* states:

आत्मानं रथितं विद्धि शरीरं रथमेव तु । बुद्धिं तु सारथिं विद्धि मनः प्रग्रहमेव च ॥ (1.3.3)

*ātmānaṃ rathitaṃ viddhi śarīraṃ rathameva tu / buddhiṃ tu sārathiṃ viddhi manaḥ  
pragrahameva ca //*

This translates conceptually to: "Know the Self (*Ātman* / आत्मन्) as the rider of the chariot and the body as the chariot itself; know the intellect (*buddhi* / बुद्धि) as the charioteer and the mind (*manas* / मनस्) as the reins". The text further defines the sensory organs (*indriyas* / इन्द्रिय) as the horses, culminating in the explicit, foundational definition of yoga:

तां योगमिति मन्यन्ते स्थिरामिन्द्रियधारणाम् । अप्रमत्तस्तदा भवति योगो हि प्रभवाप्ययौ ॥

(2.3.11)

*tāṃ yogamiti manyante sthīrāmindriyadhāraṇām / apramattastadā bhavati yogo hi  
prabhavāpyayau //*

"They regard that as yoga—the steady, firm holding-back of the senses".

This early Vedic (canonical) framework establishes a profound precedent: liberation requires an active, forceful subjugation of the physical and cognitive apparatus under the dominion of a higher, eternal principle (*Ātman*).

In modern scholarship, the psychological mechanics of these early meditative states have been deeply contested, leading to erroneous and highly reductive divisions between Hindu asceticism and Buddhist insight. Johannes Bronkhorst, in his work *Absorption: Human Nature and Buddhist Liberation*, attempts to construct a psychological theory that completely re-evaluates the role of meditative absorption (*dhyāna* / ध्यान or *samādhi* / समाधि). Bronkhorst posits a "Two Traditions" hypothesis, asserting a sharp dichotomy between "Mainstream Meditation" (characterized by severe, Jain-like asceticism involving the painful cessation of breath and mental activity) and authentic "Buddhist Meditation" (characterized by joyful, cognitive absorption). Bronkhorst argues that the extreme forms of "empty" or "contentless" absorption—the so-called formless attainments (*arūpa samāpatti* / अरूप समापत्ति)—were essentially non-Buddhist, pre-existing ascetic practices that the Buddha initially rejected. According to his framework, absorption is merely a natural biological "shutdown" state—a temporary suppression of the executive function that utterly fails to eradicate the underlying psychological dispositions (*anuśaya*) that bind sentient beings to suffering.

Bronkhorst's thesis is entirely wrong within the economy of the South Asian esoteric continuum. His theory relies on an artificial "scissors-and-paste" methodology, aggressively and subjectively pruning early texts of elements that do not fit his rigid dualism between calm (*śamatha* / शमथ) and insight (*vipaśyanā* / विपश्यना). The fatal flaw in Bronkhorst's argument is that he over-

intellectualizes the transition between meditative states—such as the cessation of thought and examination (*vitakka-vicāra*)—and ignores the empirical reality that in the earliest layers of the Indian tradition, somatic absorption *itself* was understood as the very vehicle of insight.

By reducing absorption to a mere sociological tug-of-war between competing sects or a biological "flow" state, Bronkhorst strips the profound psychological depth from the Indian meditative matrix. As the subsequent evolution of both Hindu and Buddhist Tantra demonstrates, extreme somatic asceticism—such as breath retention (*prāṇāyāma* / प्राणायाम) and physical seals (*mudrās* / मुद्रा)—was never divorced from the pursuit of ultimate cognitive liberation. Rather, the body was the indispensable crucible for it. Bronkhorst's attempt to sever "ascetic shutdown" from "liberating insight" collapses precisely because it ignores the foundational Upaniṣadic and later Tantric continuum where physiological mastery and metaphysical realization are entirely synonymous.

### **Ontological Warfare: Patañjali, Nāgārjuna, and Dharmakīrti**

The codification of meditative technology reached a critical theological juncture with the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* (c. 325–425 CE), which sought to standardize disparate Śramaṇa techniques within an orthodox Vedic-Upaniṣadic framework. Patañjali famously defines yoga as the cessation of mental fluctuations: योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः (*yogaś cittavṛttinirodhaḥ*). However, while the text absorbs pervasive influences from Buddhist Yogācāra philosophy, it fundamentally weaponizes these methodologies to mount a radical critique of Buddhist doctrine.

A central axis of this critique is found in *Yoga Sūtra* 1.25:

तत्र निरतिशयं सर्वज्ञबीजम् ॥ <sup>4</sup> *tatra niratiśayaṃ sarvajñabījam* "Therein, in *Īśvara*, is the unsurpassed seed of omniscience".<sup>4</sup>

The traditional *bhāṣya* (commentary) elaborates that while ordinary sages and seekers possess limited, partial knowledge, the supreme deity (*Īśvara* / ईश्वर) possesses boundless, intrinsic, and unlearned wisdom. By emphasizing *īśvarapraṇidhāna* (devotion and surrender to God / ईश्वरप्रणिधान) as a direct and supreme path to *samādhi*, Patañjali deliberately subverts the Buddhist concept of the *Tathāgatagarbha* (the innate Buddha-nature or seed of enlightenment within beings). For Patañjali, the seed of omniscience resides eternally and perfectly in *Īśvara*, a distinct, untouched *puruṣa* free from karma and affliction. This establishes a profound ontological divide: Hindu yoga is unequivocally "God-centered" (*Īśvara*-centric), whereas Buddhist yoga, rooted in the doctrines of *Anātman* (no-self / अनात्मन) and *Śūnyatā* (emptiness / शून्यता), is inherently "nothing-centered".

This theological fault line provoked fierce epistemological warfare, deeply rooted in the philosophical anti-realism established by Nāgārjuna (c. 2nd century CE). Nāgārjuna's systematic deconstruction of phenomena created a profound practical vacuum for practitioners seeking rapid, efficacious paths to liberation. To defend the Buddhist intellectual edifice against the formidable realism of Hindu *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* thought, the 7th-century Buddhist logician Dharmakīrti spearheaded a rigorous epistemological defense. Operating within the Buddhist *pramāṇavāda* (logico-epistemological tradition), Dharmakīrti recognized the existential threat posed by the Hindu assertion of a permanent, omniscient creator God. In his *magnum opus*, the *Pramāṇavārttika* (प्रमाणवार्तिक), specifically within the *Pramāṇasiddhi* chapter, Dharmakīrti launches a systematic, devastating critique of the Hindu conception of *Īśvara*. He deconstructs the classic theistic syllogisms by utilizing rigorous Buddhist logic to demonstrate that a permanent, unconditioned, and unchanging entity cannot possess causal efficacy (*arthakriyā* /

अर्थक्रिया) in a transient, ever-changing world.

Dharmakīrti's refutation of *Īśvara* was a soteriological necessity. For the Buddhist framework to hold, liberation must be a product of individual effort, not a descent of grace from a static absolute. Yet, this created a profound paradox. While the Buddhist philosophical superstructure rigorously defended *śūnyatā*, the practical, lived reality of later Vajrayāna practitioners required tangible, efficacious methodologies to achieve enlightenment. To bridge this gap, Buddhist Tantra was forced to appropriate the highly realist, power-oriented, and affirmative somatic technologies of Hindu Śaiva-Śākta Tantrism.

<b>Philosophical/Ontological Vector</b>	<b>Hindu Tantric / Yogic Models</b>	<b>Buddhist Vajrayāna Models</b>
<b>Foundational Metaphysics</b>	Affirmative Non-Dualism ( <i>Prakāśa-Vimarśa</i> ); universe is a real manifestation of Divine power.	<i>Śūnyatā</i> (Emptiness) and <i>Anātman</i> (No-Self); phenomena lack inherent existence.
<b>Soteriological Mechanism</b>	Grace ( <i>śaktipāta</i> / शक्तिपात), devotion ( <i>īśvarapraṇidhāna</i> ), and somatic realization of	Realization of the illusory nature of existence through borrowed somatic mechanics

	innate divinity.	paired with <i>Karuṇā</i> (Compassion).
<b>View of the Absolute</b>	<i>Īśvara</i> / Śiva-Śakti union.	The void nature of phenomena ( <i>Dharmakāya</i> / धर्मकाय).
<b>Epistemological Validation</b>	Objective reality of universal principles and causal efficacy of God.	Pragmatic truth based on "successful activity" ( <i>arthakriyā</i> ); denial of a permanent creator.

### **The Śaiva Age and the Mechanisms of Buddhist Appropriation**

The historical period spanning roughly from the 5th to the 13th century CE is accurately characterized by Alexis Sanderson as the "Śaiva Age". During this era, Śaiva and Śākta religious systems achieved unprecedented cultural, political, and socio-religious hegemony across the Indian subcontinent. The dominance of the Śaiva paradigm was so absolute that rival traditions, particularly Buddhism, found themselves fighting for survival and relevance in a rapidly changing landscape defined by vassal feudalism and what Ronald M. Davidson terms the "Imperial Metaphor". Davidson meticulously outlines how Esoteric Buddhism (Mantrayāna/Vajrayāna) survived by adopting the metaphors of the *Rājādhirāja* (King of Kings)

and sacralizing *samanta* (vassal) feudalism into its ritual architecture.

To remain competitive and to offer their patrons the same supernatural perfections (*siddhis* / सिद्धि)—such as rain control and the subjugation of enemies—that the Śaiva priests promised, Buddhists systematically equipped themselves with deity sets, ceremonies, and physiological maps modeled directly on Śaiva originals. This was a calculated campaign of "mimicry" and "bricolage." Buddhist redactors engaged in textual montage, literally sandwiching fragments of Śaiva scriptures between Buddhist verses to lend a recognizable, authoritative, yet distinctly "buddhist" flavor to their compilations.

The philological evidence for this appropriation is undeniable. Sanderson's forensic analysis of texts like the *Laghusaṃvara* reveals glaring anomalies that expose the Buddhist borrowing. For example, in Buddhist initiation manuals describing the entry into the *maṇḍala*, disciples undergoing initiation are referred to as *putrakāḥ* (पुत्रकाः).<sup>6</sup> The term *putrakāḥ* (literally "sons") is a highly specific, standard technical term within Śaiva initiation (*dīkṣā*) literature, denoting a specific class of initiates; it appears nowhere else in the vast corpus of Buddhist Tantric literature except in these obviously plagiarized passages.

The *Hevajra Tantra*, a paramount text of the Anuttarayoga Tantra class, serves as a prime example of this complex synthesis. The text details the subtle body (*nāḍīs* / नाडी and *cakras* / चक्र) while maintaining a Buddhist teleology. Yet, the physiological mapping is deeply derivative of Śaiva tantric models. The *Hevajra Tantra* explicitly maps out the inner yogic heat and the vital channels:

चण्डाली ज्वलते नाभौ दहति पञ्चतथागतान् । दहति च लोचनादीर् दग्धे हं स्रवते शशी ॥

(1.1.30)

*caṇḍālī jvalate nābhau dahati pañcatathāgatān / dahati ca locanādīr dagdhe haṃ  
sravate śaśī //*

"Caṇḍālī blazes at the navel, burning the five tathāgatas, as well as Locanā and the others. Once burned, *haṃ* streams as the moon."

This iconographic and physiological subjugation—where internal cosmic forces map onto a network of physical centers—was a dual-purpose strategy: it asserted Buddhist supremacy over the dominant Hindu pantheon while simultaneously co-opting the transgressive somatic power that Śaiva traditions had already perfected.

### **The *Amṛtasiddhi* and the Somatization of Ritual**

The culmination of this trans-sectarian cross-pollination is found in the genesis of Haṭhayoga, representing a profound shift in the mechanics of liberation. This evolution is defined by the "somatization" of tantric ritual. In earlier Tantric epochs, spiritual power was derived externally through complex public rituals and fire sacrifices. Haṭhayoga internalized this entire macrocosmic architecture, locating the sacrificial fire and the cosmos entirely within the human physiology.

The vital missing link in this evolutionary chain is the *Amṛtasiddhi* (c. 1160 CE), widely recognized by scholars as the earliest substantial manual of physical yoga. The groundbreaking philological work of James Mallinson and Péter-Dániel Szántó in their 2021 critical edition has illuminated the true nature of this text. Surviving in a rare 12th-century bilingual manuscript (Sanskrit and Tibetan, identified as "Witness C"), the text comprises over 300 verses divided into 35 chapters (*vivekas*). Mallinson and Szántó's collaborative analysis revealed a stunning historical reality: the *Amṛtasiddhi*, the foundational blueprint for Hindu Haṭhayoga, was actually

composed in a Vajrayāna Buddhist milieu.

The Buddhist pedigree of the *Amṛtasiddhi* is signalled by its homage to the Mahāsiddha Virūpa and its pervasive use of Vajrayāna terminology like the "three vajras". However, the text functions masterfully as a trans-sectarian bridge. While its framework is undeniably Buddhist, its mechanics rely on a pan-Indic, fundamentally Hindu alchemical and physiological substrate.

The true innovation of the *Amṛtasiddhi* lies in its radical physiological paradigm, which came to define all subsequent Haṭhayoga. It introduced the model of the subtle body wherein a "moon" situated in the cranial vault constantly drips the nectar of immortality (*amṛta* / अमृत or *bindu* / बिन्दु). This life-giving fluid falls into the "sun" (the gastric fire, *jaṭharāgni* / जठराग्नि) located in the abdomen, where it is consumed, resulting in physical decay. The primary objective of the yoga taught in the *Amṛtasiddhi*—specifically the triad of physical seals: *mahāmudrā*, *mahābandha*, and *mahāvedha*—is to arrest this downward flow of nectar. By employing alchemical metaphors, treating the body as a *ghaṭa* (crucible) for transmuting mortal fluids into divine nectar, the *Amṛtasiddhi* established the physiological mechanics that later Hindu texts, such as the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, would adopt and fully integrate into Vedāntic and Śaiva frameworks.

### **The Discursive Strategy of Secrecy, Power, and Transgression**

The derivation of Buddhist esoteric forms from Hindu paradigms cannot be fully understood without examining the socio-political utility of Tantra, specifically the mechanisms of secrecy, power, and transgression. The work of Hugh B. Urban provides vital context for how Tantric traditions operated to cultivate both spiritual authority and socio-economic leverage. In his extensive analyses, Urban argues that Tantra is fundamentally concerned with harnessing the

divine power of the goddess that flows alike through the cosmos, the human body, and political society. For Urban, religious secrecy is not merely the withholding of a metaphysical mystery; it is a deliberate "discursive strategy" used to generate symbolic capital, protect marginalized communities, and construct unassailable religious authority.

This strategic use of power is equally vital to understanding the Buddhist appropriation of Śaiva forms. Christian K. Wedemeyer argues persuasively that the "aberrant" or transgressive elements of Tantra—such as meditating in charnel grounds or partaking in restricted substances—should not be read as literal, primitive survivals. Instead, these transgressive acts were highly sophisticated, coded rituals designed to shatter the dualistic, purity-obsessed consciousness of orthodox Brahmanism.

By adopting the terrifying, impure imagery of the Śaiva Kāpālikas (the skull-bearing ascetics), Vajrayāna Buddhists were deliberately deploying a semiotics of power and pollution to short-circuit conventional conceptual thought (*vikalpa* / विकल्प). The utilization of bone ornaments and the visualization of horrific deities like Vajravārāhī were not signs of Buddhist degeneration, but rather the calculated deployment of a pre-existing Hindu technology of transgression. Vajrayāna absorbed this technology wholesale, substituting the ultimate goal of union with Śiva for the realization of *Śūnyatā*, but leaving the underlying mechanics of power, secrecy, and somatic shock entirely intact.

## **Conclusion**

The historiographical partition separating Buddhist Vajrayāna and Hindu Śaiva-Śākta Tantra is an artificial construct, largely a legacy of colonial Indology that failed to comprehend the deeply porous and fiercely competitive religious landscape of early medieval India. The evidence

dictates a profound reassessment: Buddhist forms of esoteric yoga and Tantra are historically derivative of Hindu paradigms. Driven by the socio-political pressures of the "Śaiva Age," Buddhist redactors employed sophisticated bricolage to appropriate the initiation rituals, deity schemas, and transgressive semiotics of Śaivism, culminating in complex synthetic texts like the *Hevajra Tantra*.

Furthermore, the evolution of physical yoga, marked by the pivotal critical edition of the *Amṛtasiddhi* by Mallinson and Szántó, illustrates the trans-sectarian "somatization" of ritual. The internalization of the cosmos into the subtle body of *nāḍīs*, *cakras*, and life-giving *amṛta* was a shared technology, bridging the ontological divide between Hindu realism and Buddhist anti-realism. Attempts by scholars like Johannes Bronkhorst to arbitrarily segregate natural cognitive "absorption" from ascetic somatic mastery fundamentally misread this history. In the South Asian esoteric matrix, physiological control, transgressive ritual, and cognitive insight were never isolated phenomena; they were the inherently unified, trans-sectarian engine of liberation.

**Author's Note:** These blog posts here and at *Indian Catholic Matters* and earlier in *The Herald* and before that in *Prabuddha Bharata* are penned with the intention of being published in suitable books, greatly expanded and of course, with copious footnotes and annotated citations. Everywhere other than in self-made (not published) e-books, it seems now impossible to have the scholarly rigour one wishes to have. I remain in the debt of hundreds of scholars, many of them anonymous, writing online in forums like Reddit which I use these days for reference. Because of the paucity of time due to a huge load of scripts to be scored, I do not have the luxury to reread what I write, so I accept there may be errors galore. Whatever is of any good in this

essay, I attribute to Mr. Sanjeev Nayyar who is the editor of *ESanskriti*.

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