

Foreword: The Purpose of this Book

This book is intended to be a useful introduction to and resource for navigating the great ocean of yogic philosophy, one which will help your appreciation of its offering to humanity. I'm particularly interested in casting light upon tantric philosophy — which envisions the world as an expression of divine consciousness. In this vision we are meant to participate fully in this life, while freeing ourselves from the ignorance that is the root of the very real suffering that we both cause and experience in this world.

Contemporary presentations of tantric philosophy emphasize the essential goodness of the world inherent in this tantric vision. While this emphasis is uplifting and inspiring, it is not enough simply to believe or think it; nor is the truth of this statement immediately evident to everyone. And so it's very helpful to understand how and why the yogic philosophers of tantra come to hold this view, as well as why it would be reasonable and wise to acknowledge its truth and explore this inner world of spiritual awareness inhabited by these sages. Moreover, the practical question that is the main concern of the yogic sages is, what can we do — what practice — will give me this experience? It is practice that transforms a Believer in the Truth into a Knower of the Truth.

This book is not simply a review and comparison of various philosophical views; it is going somewhere. At the pinnacle of the yogic philosophical tradition stands the philosophical vision that has come to be known as Kashmir Shaivism, which incorporates the best of all that preceded it into a comprehensive vision of a yogic experience that is not just thought but lived through practice. This system involves three elements.

The first is **personal self-inquiry** by which we come to a **recognition** (*pratyabhijñā*) of the Truth, a Truth which the yogis would say is indeed 'hidden in plain sight.'

The second element is the **community** (*kula*) that supports us as we seek to realize this vision of one Truth expressed in its magnificent diversity.

The third is the **practice** (*sadhana*) that can be pursued along various paths (*upayas*) that are uniquely suited to our individual nature and state of awareness. In 'seeking' the Truth, Kashmir Shaivism directs us to look for the moments and experiences in which the Truth flashes forth unveiled, and calls these flashes of the Divine Nature '*spanda*.' The understanding and awareness of *spanda*, as well as of the nature of consciousness itself, is what gives focus to our practice.

The system of Kashmir Shaivism gives us a worthy framework for understanding the efforts and contribution of the systems that preceded it. There is a '*sutra*' or aphorism in the *Pratyabhijñā-hrdayam* or 'The Heart of Recognition' that reads, *tad-bhūmikāḥ sarva-darśana-sthitayah*: 'The positions of all philosophical systems are stages of That (Consciousness).' The word interpreted as 'philosophical systems' here is *darśana*, which means more literally a 'vision' or 'seeing,' a way of seeing or contemplating.

What the *sutra* suggests is that the various philosophical systems are stages or phases in the unfolding of Consciousness — both as knowing and as self-knowing. That is to say, each of the philosophical systems is in its own way true, and part of a progression toward greater and greater awareness of the nature of supreme Reality. The differences between the different systems and schools depends upon the aspects of consciousness in our experience with which we most identify; for instance, some of us tend to identify with the physical as the real, while others identify with various levels of inner experience — whether of the mind, intellect and so on. According to our own understanding and experience, we form our own understanding of what would be the highest spiritual experience.

In the course of this evolution of these philosophies, new positions were often stated in opposition to the ideas that came before, and philosophical discourses often took the form of polemical debates. For instance, Vedanta in particular was a direct reaction to and criticism of Samkhya yoga. But underlying the debates there was a strong thread of common understanding which moved yogic understanding as a whole forward, refining and clarifying ideas that were at first rather rough and even simplistic. The end result was a deeper and more satisfying understanding of the yogic experience, and the measure of a good philosophy — at least in retrospect — is how comprehensive and inclusive it is of all realms of experience.

By this measure, as I've suggested, the non-dual system of Kashmir Shaivism — with its tantric Trika philosophy (which we will come to towards the end of our study, and of which the *Pratyabhijna-hridayam* is one of the main texts) — in particular stands as the 'crème de la crème' of yogic philosophy. The Trika system offers a philosophical world that incorporated the best of all that came before it, and resolved many of the philosophical impasses that had long seemed insurmountable.

It follows that each phase in the thought of the Indian philosophers *contributed* to the thought of the next by challenging its successors to a higher, more refined experience of self and reality. Each system formed and re-formed the way in which the key questions were contemplated, enriching the tradition as a whole with greater depth, clarity, subtlety and practical meaning at each step. The one question at the heart of the philosophical venture is unfailingly the simple and very compelling question, 'Who am I?' Knowing the 'I,' the pure experience of *aham* or 'I am' is always the key to knowing God, the Self, the true nature of Reality by whatever name one wishes to describe it.

Regardless of the school that you personally most agree or identify with, the *question* we pose to ourselves is always foremost. Philosophy as a process of inquiry that leads to a lived experience of the Truth lies not so much in the answers at which we arrive at any point in time as it does in the questions at the root of human experience. The moment we *do* arrive at an answer and appreciate how we have come to a new understanding, it is time to ask the question *again*, never settling for a mere concept or philosophy — as satisfying as it may be — but always yearning for the experience. The questions open us to grace and to experience; philosophy taken as a set of answers closes that lived communion, until the question is asked again out of a deep yearning to be closer to God.

Those of us who are teachers run the risk of replacing or supplanting the experience with the discourse. We do risk becoming like dessert spoons — always ladling out the ideas like sweets to others saying 'taste this, this is the best!' but forgetting to taste these truths for ourselves more and more deeply. Even as philosophy inspires us, we should not cease to genuinely explore. We should not be so much concerned with giving 'the answer' as communicating the questions, the yearning that draws us close to God, posing the practice as an *invocation* of God as the Divine Presence, as a question that invites God to answer by shining forth silently but powerfully within our own hearts. As yogis we have but to revel in that Presence, however it may show itself, and nothing more need be said or expressed. Yoga truly begins where talk ceases.

But since this is a book, I must at least say *something*, if only as an invitation to explore your own experience. Along those lines, in the second half of this book I offer some essays of contemplation as invocation, both in the form of contemplations on the 'qualities of the heart' that play a role in yoga practice, as well as more extended essays on specific yogic concepts and practices, asked as questions in the context of yogic practice and teaching. For sometimes more can be said and ideas can be contemplated more deeply and meaningfully in the process of telling stories and relating experiences rather than through straight exposition and discussion. So in this book I offer both, striving to connect through thought and feeling with you, the reader, with the heart of the yogi that beats with a single pulsation in countless beings.