

Offering: Transformation Through Sacrifice

A wind rose up out of the valley and wrestled with the tips of the trees. The forest was a city of tangled wood, its entrance a jungle of creaking banyan and cashew trees, their leaves sighing in the wind. A sadhu entered the forest, the hot, moist air draped about him like a thick moss, like a deep and heavy sleep. As legend tells it, he entered seeking Shiva, the dark form of the Lord he had sought through countless pilgrimages to the temples of men. Now, in this temple of silent eyes, teak leaves crackled like parchment underfoot as he ventured forth in search of his God.

And, as legend tells it, Shiva was in the forest, watching. Yet each time the sadhu's eyes turned toward him, Shiva would playfully turn his back, revealing the splendor of Parvati, the feminine, creative side of his nature. This is his play of concealment, for Shiva – the inward, meditative aspect of God – and Parvati – his outward, creative power – are one. Parvati is but the other face, the other side of Shiva.

The sadhu was intent upon finding his austere Lord Shiva, yet did not see Him standing there. He saw only delicate mosses, white jasmine, and knotted trees; he was oblivious to the dark tresses of Shiva draped about him in the forest creepers. Shiva circled again and again, turning each time to reveal some new wonder. The sadhu remained clueless.

This is a mythical tale with a simple lesson: the story of Shiva and the hapless sadhu plays upon the mystery of the spiritual quest, that God is both seen and unseen, concealed from our eyes by the limitations of our own understanding. This image of Lord Shiva hiding himself in plain sight is honored in the tradition of hatha yoga by naming its rotated, or twisting, poses 'Parivrtta,' after the goddess Parvati, recalling the image of Shiva's turning.

In rotated poses, the yogi turns, bringing his back to the fore, reversing the pose. Such poses are more 'feminine,' with a soft, curvaceous quality to them. More than that, the pose is turned inside out, bringing forward the unknown, the unrecognized side of the self. Hatha yogis are celebrants of such mysteries, known for turning things - even themselves – inside out and upside down. Their tradition seeks the "unseen" experience of the divine within the "seen" – within the body itself. Through their practices they venture into the last place one would think to look and find there the presence of God, hidden in plain sight, the Self concealed within the self.

This openness to knowing God as He is, rather than as we conceive of Him, involves a sacrifice. In the traditions of yoga in particular, spirituality involves sacrifice - but not sacrifice in the sense of a painful relinquishment or penance. It is letting go of all that, while cherished and comfortable, ultimately holds us back.

The limitations of our understanding – that which the yoga scriptures call 'ignorance' – are bound up with our experience of the body. And so the offering is this spiritual ignorance; and in this offering, the body is the altar as well as the sacrifice. And, simply put, the sacrament of offering is **work**. Practice is work, but work that is also a celebration, a worship that produces nectar.

The ancient Vedas embellish this point, going so far as to say that both fulfillment of life in this world and eternal life in the 'next' are founded upon sacrifice. The Vedas recognize that we ultimately long for immortality and submit that what we truly aspire to is the deathlessness of the divine Self, of God. In Vedic lore the story of our longing is told as the legendary quest for amrita, a word that means both "nondeath"

(a-mrta) and “nectar, or ambrosia.” In legend, the gods win and maintain eternal life by offering soma, the herb of immortality, as an oblation that is transformed by the sacrifice into amrita.

Soma is the name of the herb that is sacrificed. It’s worth noting that this very word soma has found its way into the English language as a root word signifying the body (as in ‘somatic’ – making the legend all the more suggestive for a hatha yogi). The metaphor of the legend suggests that it is not enough simply to *possess* soma (the body) to benefit from it. As the Vedas tell it, the gods were the first to discover that only by *offering* or surrendering soma to another does the giver enjoy its benefits. The asuras, the “antigods,” or demons, failed to understand just that. In the legend, asuras who managed to steal the soma from the gods took it into their own mouths and by that selfish act failed to win the immortality they sought.

The Vedic moral is clear: the secret of a full life is sacrifice. And so in those times rituals were performed to offer foods such as rice and ghee (which represent soma) to the gods. These oblations rose up to sustain the gods, while the remains of the sacrifice granted to its human participants a portion of immortality and abundance in return. Those who sacrificed received not only the honored features of a full life health, wealth, and good and faithful companionship - but also a life span of one hundred years, which at that time was prized as a kind of immortality.

Yet the Vedas looked beyond the promise of benefits or reward to a deeper understanding of the body and of the life we enjoy through it. Sacrifice was not simply business, though it often came to be treated as such. The ritual of sacrifice was not to be thought of as a process of bartering with the gods for more time on this earth; it carried a sense of responsibility that recognized that life is a gift.

According to the Vedic view, the body we each inhabit is really on loan from the gods - in particular, from Yama, the lord of death. Sacrifice is our payment on the loan; a failure to sacrifice results, quite simply, in repossession of the body (i.e. death). And so our life really carries a mortgage (an English term that means “dead pledge”); our life, our body, is our property, yet we must pay down the debt or suffer the loss of it. And the means of payment, of offering, is the body and mind, and the fruits of our work.

The Vedas offer a reason why this debt is thought to exist. Ancient wisdom has it that the universe is the product of God’s own sacrifice. The early Vedas describe the universe as coming about through the self-sacrifice of the cosmic god-man Prajapati. In one of many Vedic accounts, a passage from the *Satapatha Brahmana*, it is said:

“Verily, Prajapati alone was here in the beginning. He desired ‘May I exist, may I reproduce myself.’ He toiled, he heated himself with inner heat. From his exhausted and overheated body the waters flowed forth...” and from those waters came all of the elements of creation.

This myth describes the nature of our world – a world that emerges from goodness and a creative desire for experience. God expresses the richness of His own perfection in its infinite variety by descending from his perfect oneness and dispersing into manyness. This takes *work*, an outpouring of energy that is dramatized in the story as God exhausting and even dismembering Himself to produce all of creation.

We are the product of God’s work and sacrifice, and that very act by which we were given life calls us to give of ourselves in return. The Vedic *response* through rituals of sacrifice is to *restore* the body of Prajapati to wholeness by offering back a part of what we have received through our labor. The process of sacrifice is called *agnicayana*, the “piling of [the] Fire [altar],” and a feature of this ritual was the installation of a golden image of a man, of Prajapati, the cosmic person. The statue is golden because gold is the purest element to

arise from Prajapati's self-sacrifice. Gold symbolizes the pure offering produced by the offerings into the sacrificial fire. The purity of gold is the product of great heat, of intense work. Its brilliance symbolizes the light of wisdom generated by the fire, making Prajapati whole again through our offerings.

This emphasis upon wisdom developed slowly over time. Sacrifice began with an offering of the outer fruits of labor; yet slowly there emerged in Indian thought the insight that we must also *internalize* this sacrifice. It isn't enough simply to perform the ritual on the outside, for the outer world is only a sign of the inner. True sacrifice involves an inner labor and an inner offering of self. This subtler insight was inspired by the nondualist teachings of the Upanishads. It was already understood that sacrifice becomes fruitful by our offering to another, but the Upanishads carried the matter further by asking, Who is this other? To whom do we truly offer our sacrifice? The Upanishads answered by saying, 'Thou art That,' a teaching that effectively *erased* the dividing line between human and divine in a single flourish. Our sacrifice is this; we must turn within to find the God to whom we offer ourselves, if the intention of our sacrifice is to bear fruit. In offering this inner work, we offer the limited understanding by which we, in our own ignorance, hold ourselves back from God.

The inner work involved in this sacrifice took a particular and very practice-oriented historical form in the tradition of hatha yoga, which turned attention to the inner workings of the body. The hatha yogis practiced their yoga as an inner sacrifice, a *yajna* meant to perfect the spirit by an inner fire. The *body* is the offering, the *soma*, which is transformed through the processes of hatha yoga into *amrita*, the nectar of immortality. By drinking the nectar produced within ourselves by these processes, we attain to our true immortality. What begins as a physical practice transforms both understanding and experience, and ultimately transforms the body itself as well, so that it becomes an organ of spiritual – rather than merely physical – perception.

Just as the offering, *soma*, is the body, other elements of the sacrificial fire are represented in hatha yoga as well. The inner heat of austerity arising from the practice is the fire. The breath is the wind, which fans the flame and carries the sacrifice upward to the Divine, located not in some distant heaven but in the *Sahasrara* in the crown of the head. Sacrifice, the yogis argued, is not only an exchange between two different worlds, between men and the gods; inward sacrifice initiates a process of self-transformation in which man realizes his own divinity.

My own experience of this process as I practiced hatha yoga in the heat of the summer during my time in India gave me a small taste of this process. My practice intensified the heat, adding a greater heat from within through the practice. I went through phases in which I sweated profusely, and the sweat was bitter and acrid, the sign of an inner purging. These phases passed as quickly and unexpectedly as they came, and each time my body was left much lighter, in the sense of being less dense. The only analogy I could think of was the process of clarifying butter: as butter is cooked with a slow and steady heat, the solids within it rise to the surface and are skimmed off. This leaves a light, transparent oil that is able to take even greater heat without burning up. Like that, my body was being clarified in the heat of the practice. The muscles were stronger yet less tight, and energy seemed to flow through them more freely. At the same time, emotions came up during my practice that seemed strangely exaggerated. They too passed, leaving me with a greater inner clarity.

The hardest thing for me to understand in the midst of all this was how such physical processes could have anything to do with spiritual awareness. Yet the two really do go hand in hand, and this phenomenon is what the hatha yogis set out to study. They were the first to map out and systematically explain the inner landscape of the chakras, the energy wheels or circles of transformation that exist within the subtle body. They understood how the flow of subtle energies converging upon these chakras influences our emotional

and spiritual awareness. Our body is much like a container for energy; our energies can be dispensed in outer pursuits, or they can be contemplated and invested in inner growth. This second option becomes apparent to us only as we begin to clarify our energies - our thoughts and feelings, wishes and intentions - and so begin to become aware of our true inner Self.

Each of us is Prajapati. Like Prajapati, we spend our energies in our pursuits, but as the offspring of Prajapati, we must also re-collect, contain, and refine our energies, and offer them back to Him through spiritual practice, with the burning desire to know our true Self. Hatha yoga is such a practice in which this offering takes place. Like the golden statue of Prajapati installed to complete the sacrifice in ancient ritual, the sacrificial body of the yogi, illuminated by the self-awareness of his or her own divine Self, is Prajapati made whole. Our auspicious debt is to restore *ourselves* to wholeness through yoga, reversing the process of our own dissolution and death. This dissolution is the dispersion of our spiritual potency and focus as we scatter our energies into the world, losing ourselves bit by bit. The smelting process of yoga is a divine alchemy, which brings us back to our original Self.

When we understand that hatha yoga is a means to this transformation, we can understand it as something broader in scope and significance than just a system of exercises and stretches designed to keep the body fit. Hatha yoga originally included the whole process of transformation, both the physical practice and the grace that brings it about spontaneously. It was a tradition begun by the Siddhas who were the first hatha yogis. They discovered the outer postures and inner processes of hatha yoga through their own experiences in meditation, and they incorporated those discoveries into spiritual practice.

The teachings of the hatha yoga tradition first appeared in systematic form in the tenth century through the work of a master named Matsyendranath. From his teachings there emerged the Natha tradition. *Nath* means “Lord” and is derived from the name of Shiva. The spiritual heir of Matsyendranath was Gorakshanath, who systematically put the tradition forth in writing, featuring the first detailed accounts of hatha yoga poses and techniques of pranayama, or breath control, as well as of the physical and spiritual benefits of the practice.

The Natha masters were not interested in abstract or speculative philosophy; they were convinced that the way to the Truth was through practice and direct experience. And while they recognized that the Self has an aspect that is beyond time, change, and the reach of the senses, they also argued that the Self has a dynamic aspect that manifests itself in and through the physical world. It is through the experience of this dynamic aspect of the Self, they said, that we reach the transcendent. Our story of the sadhu in search of Shiva captures the attitude of the Natha tradition. The yogi is called to step beyond the simplicity of rituals of sacrifice and worship in temples and venture into the forest of the world - for Shiva – the Self – is also *there*, though we may not recognize him at first.

One of the most revolutionary contributions of the Natha philosophy is its understanding of the body in relation to spiritual reality. The body is a microcosm of the much greater reality of God. The world should be understood as the body of the Lord,¹ and our own body is an inseparable part of that organic whole. An enduring part of the Natha revolution was the understanding that followed from this – that our spiritual well-being is closely related to our own health and relationship with the rest of the world. Spiritual and physical health are both manifestations of the *kundalini shakti*, the spiritual power of the universe. Our simplest acts to maintain our health are really sacrificial acts of worship honoring the divinity that both gives us life and brings us to full spiritual awareness.

¹ This is not a pantheistic statement – God is not the sum total of the parts of the world, but instead is both immanent and transcendent. Instead, this idea is *panentheistic*, the idea that all is contained within God, without limiting God.

In this context, health means far more than simply freedom from sickness. It is the capacity - the steadiness or hardness of the body - to sustain the process of transformation that takes place through spiritual awakening and practice.

Jnaneshwar Maharaj, who was initiated in the Natha tradition of Matsyendranath and Goraksanath, best described this process of transformation in his greatest work, the *Jnaneshwari*. In a passage of the *Jnaneshwari*, he details the process by which “one body” - a new spiritual body - “devours another” - the gross physical body. “This,” he says, “is the secret teaching of the Natha sect:”

just as when molten metal is poured into a heated mold, . . . fit takes] the form of the mold, Similarly, beauty incarnates in the form of the body, covered by a veil of skin.

As if the lovely hues of the evening sky were transferred to the body, or as if an image were fashioned from an inner radiance of the spirit, ... it seems to be the very incarnation of peace.

This is how the yogi's body appears when Kundalini has drunk of the nectar. Even the god of death is afraid to look at it. Old age vanishes, the knot of youth is loosened, and the lost bloom of childhood reappears. Whatever his age, the term youth should be interpreted as strength. Such is his incomparable fortitude.

Listen! Although the body has the appearance of gold, it has the lightness of air, for no particles of earth or water remain in it.

Though Jnaneshwar speaks with a poet's voice, he is describing quite accurately the transformation that takes place through the practices of yoga by the grace of the Kundalini Shakti. The Kundalini is the fire, while the offering is not just the actions we perform with the body but the understanding behind our efforts, which he calls a wisdom sacrifice. Ultimately, the offering is this: in all acts and practices, to see God in oneself and others and to act without expectation or selfish motive.

In particular, Jnaneshwar describes how the yogic practices of posture and breathing, or pranayama, offered with right understanding, bring about our transformation by the fire of the Kundalini Shakti. The process itself is mysterious, defies explanation, and is very real. Its outcome is that the body becomes filled with nectar and takes a new and radically different birth. This new body is strong, made of light and lightness itself. One who does these practices with devotion, he says, is rewarded with experiences of pure and perfect knowledge the nectar of the sacrifice. For such a one, there remains only the essential Self in which there is no longer any difference between the fire, sacrificer and the One to whom the sacrifice is offered.

I remember the power that Jnaneshwar's words had for me as I read them during my time in Gurudev Siddha Peeth, the Siddha Yoga ashram in India. I studied his meticulous descriptions of the sitting postures, *bandhas* (locks), and forms of breath control of hatha yoga that feed the fire of the Kundalini. This was even before I had undertaken a complete practice of hatha yoga, and as it turned out, his words provided the inspiration for me to begin. During the monsoon I read his words and practiced them before going out to work in the gardens. One morning as I practiced the *vajra*, or thunderbolt, posture as he described it, all of the elements of posture and breathing came together strongly and spontaneously. My breath, which had become balanced through the pranayama, suddenly drew into me very strongly. It was locked into my body through the posture and drawn upward. From somewhere inside, a pinpoint of light leapt up and exploded in a shiver of white light that permeated my body from the crown of my head. My breath was somehow suspended within. It had disappeared into subtle passages within me like water into sand, and it seemed as if there was no longer any need to breathe. At the same time, my awareness shifted and expanded to include everything around me; there was no longer any separation between myself and my surroundings.

Within a few moments my body released the breath and returned to its normal way of functioning. But even as I went about my duties, this awareness of having merged with my surroundings remained with me. I remember crossing the great field surrounded by trees next to the ashram, and being acutely aware of the clouds above and everything around as not being “things” apart from me. I felt that I was looking down through the clouds at the same time as I looked out upon the field through my eyes. I felt a single force of awareness running through my body, moving blood and breath, as well as pulsing through the trees, in the sunlight, and in the wind.

I experienced this state as something very refined and intimately connected with my breath. As long as I remained centered in the breath, watching it as it flowed in a perfect balance between inbreath and out-breath, the experience remained. Yet as I became occupied with my duties, my breath became more uneven, and this state began to fade. It’s difficult to be a universe and an individual at the same time, even if it is a lived experience of the Truth. The experience is powerful and expansive, yet delicate. As the experience faded it was clear to me that it takes a lot of practice, strength and subtlety of awareness and understanding to hold it.

It was not long after this experience that I first began a full practice of hatha yoga, because the experience had taught me how vital this practice is to receiving and holding this state. I was fortunate to begin with at least a germinal understanding of the true nature of the practice. *Hatha* is traditionally translated as “force,” yet I understood that the experience we seek is far too powerful to be forced; it has to unfold naturally through grace, or else it is overwhelming. Though hatha yoga is a strong practice, it is not to be practiced aggressively to “make” yoga happen. Grace, the power of the Kundalini Shakti, is the force that works through us when we do the practice. The practice of hatha yoga gently urged upon us by the Siddhas is part and parcel of the process of its unfolding.

The tradition of hatha yoga is an integral part of the tradition of the Siddhas. This practice enlivened by grace reveals much that we do not ordinarily recognize about ourselves, about our bodies, about true health, strength, and sacrifice, and about the presence of God within us. The legacy of the Natha lineage is the understanding that through the body we complete the circle of creation, offering back to God what He has granted us: a body and a life made golden by His grace.