

Article

# *Kuṇḍalinī* Rising and Liberation in the *Yogavāsishtha*: The Story of Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja

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**Abstract:** Various Śaiva Tantric elements have been identified in the *Yogavāsishtha*, but little has been written about the role of *kuṇḍalinī* rising in relation to this text's notion of living liberation (*jīvanmukti*). The story of Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja is relevant to examine in Tantric studies not only because it includes one of the few descriptions within Sanskrit literature of a *kuṇḍalinī* experience as explicitly pertaining to a woman, but also because it offers key elements of comparison between experiences of enlightenment: one including *kuṇḍalinī* rising (Cūḍālā) and another one without it (Śikhidhvaja). This paper compares Cūḍālā's experience of enlightenment with that of Śikhidhvaja's in order to understand what role *kuṇḍalinī* rising plays in the pursuit for liberation.

**Keywords:** Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja; *haṭhayoga*; *kuṇḍalinī*; liberation; Tantra; yoga; *Yogavāsishtha*

## 1. Living/Bodiless/Embodied Liberation

The *Yogavāsishtha* (YV) in its longer version is called the *Mahārāmāyāna*,<sup>1</sup> which was known for expounding the idea of the *jīvanmukta*, or a being who attains emancipation while still living. This text narrates the sage Vasiṣṭha's philosophical advice and instructions to become enlightened to the young and dejected prince Rāma through a series of interconnected stories (*ākhyāna*). By the time that Vidyāraṇya (14th century) quotes the YV as the main source for the idea of living liberation, Advaita Vedāntic overtones are emphasized in its reading (Dasgupta 1952, pp. 251–52; Slaje 1998, p. 116). Both the YV and Advaita Vedānta philosophies such as those of Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara, and Maṇḍanamiśra understand living liberation as a state free from sorrow and delusion, only attainable through knowledge (*jñāna*) of the self as the only reality. Both agree that the state of ultimate freedom from bondage is not gained by almsgiving, performing austerities, strenuous yoga practices, or rituals, although some of these may assist in attaining knowledge. When it comes to details on how knowledge brings about living liberation, the YV builds upon the essential elements of detachment

<sup>1</sup> I will not be addressing the older version known as *Mokṣopāya* (MU) or the shorter version called *Laghuyogavāsishtha* (LYV). The section concerning the passages I will be using for this paper (Book VI called *Nirvāṇa-prakaraṇa*) has not been critically edited yet. (See Slaje 2005). This essay offers a first approach to the topic of *kuṇḍalinī* in the *Yogavāsishtha* (YV) and consists mainly on a hermeneutical and philosophical analysis of the relevant passages in the recent and most prevailing recension of the YV—which is a modified version that presupposes the MU and the LYV and is available in the third edition of the text, first published by V. L. Sharma Pansikar in 1918. (See Pansikar 2008). For details on the relation between the MU, the LYV, and the YV see (Hanneder 2006). A philological comparison between the MU and the YV would be desirable in order to detect any relevant changes from the earlier Shaiva strata of this text and that of the later redaction which seems to have received a strong influence from Advaita Vedānta. Peter Thomi mentions that there are about 30 instances where readings of the Cūḍālā episode differ between versions. (See Thomi 1980; 1983, p. 109). This project, however, is beyond the purpose of this essay.

and discrimination to include the practices of becoming aware of one's breath (*prāṇacintā*)<sup>2</sup>, inner calmness (*antahśītalatā*)<sup>3</sup>, and destruction of the mind (*manonāśa*)<sup>4</sup>.

Andrew Fort (2015, p. 248) calls this model of living liberation “Yogic Advaita”<sup>5</sup> and points out that an important distinction is made here between living liberation (*jīvanmukti*) and bodiless liberation (*videhamukti*). Such a distinction is accounted for in the orthodox Indian philosophical tradition by appealing to the idea that, after enlightenment, the body continues its existence due to the residual imprint of the activity of past actions. Once those traces of past actions are exhausted, final, bodiless liberation is attained. The only reason living liberation is possible seems to be that the physical body cannot vanish at the same time that the mind does. Since final liberation can only really happen after death, living liberation seems to be taken as an inevitable step in the process towards final release rather than as an essential component of it.

The tension between liberation within the body and bodiless liberation is clearly illustrated in the story of Queen Cūḍālā and King Śikhidhvaja in the *YV*. The narrative of this story develops along 34 chapters (*YV* VIa.77–110) in the first (*pūrvārdha*) section of Book VI called *Nirvāṇaprakaraṇa* and offers a detailed description of the process by which each member of this royal couple attains liberation. Most treatments on the topic of embodied liberation focus solely on the characteristics of the liberated being while still alive (see Fort 1991). Yet, if the focus is shifted to the process by which a person attains the state of living liberation, as can be done by analyzing the story of Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja, we see that while *ātmajñāna* or knowledge of the self may constitute the essential element in the path by which one becomes enlightened in this life, it is not necessarily the means by which one can remain freely embodied.

The story of Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja offers key elements of comparison between experiences of enlightenment: one including *kuṇḍalinī* rising—that of the female, Cūḍālā—and another one without *kuṇḍalinī* rising—that of the male, Śikhidhvaja. However, it will be shown that Śikhidhvaja's experience of enlightenment only seems to lack *kuṇḍalinī* arising. His process of attaining embodied liberation is made possible by Cūḍālā's intervention, which, I argue, plays the role of Śikhidhvaja's *kuṇḍalinī* herself. It is relevant to review this story and to examine it in Tantric studies because it includes one of the few descriptions in the Sanskrit literature of a *kuṇḍalinī* experience as explicitly pertaining to a woman. Some *bhakti* elements have been identified in the liberating process undergone by Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja based on their relationship as friends, lovers, and partners in a marriage. I suggest, however, that the liberating process narrated here should, first of all, be read through a Śaiva Tantric lens.<sup>6</sup> There is not only a strong Śakta component in the story, as represented by the role of Cūḍālā in Śikhidhvaja's liberation, but also an important criticism to the idea that *jñāna yoga* alone teaches us how to live freely in this world; raising the *kuṇḍalinī* is also required. This paper analyzes what the “raising” of the *kuṇḍalinī* consists of and the role that *kuṇḍalinī* plays in the experience of liberation as presented in the *YV*.

<sup>2</sup> See Bhuṣuṇḍa's story (*bhuṣuṇḍopākhyāna*) in *YV* VI.24.8: *ātmacintāvasyānām madhyādekatmā mayā sarvaduḥkhakṣayakartī sarvasaubhāgyavardhanī kāraṇam jīvitasyeha prāṇacintā samāśritā*.

<sup>3</sup> See Inquiry into Meditation (*dhyānavicāra*), *YV* V.56.7: *imam guṇasamāhāramanātmatvoena paśyataḥ antahśītalatā yāsau samādhiriti kathyate*.

<sup>4</sup> See the story of the Deer-like Mind (*manoharaṇīkōpākhyānam*), *YV* VIIb.45.63: *jāgratsvapnasuṣuptānām svabhāvamiva turyagaḥ vāsanaiva manaḥ svavicāreṇa naśyati*.

<sup>5</sup> Slaje disagrees with Fort subsuming the *YV* to “Yogic Advaita” on the grounds that the *YV* does not advocate renouncement (*saṃnyāsa*) as Advaita Vedānta philosophers usually do and that the notion of *samādhi* in the *YV* is very different from the way it is defined in the Aṣṭāṅga yoga of Patañjali (See Slaje 2000, pp. 179–80). Although it is true that the *YV* dismisses certain yogic practices such as breathing techniques and other effortful and painful methods to attain knowledge and liberation, it is not less true that the *YV* offers its own unique yogic way of guiding the seeker towards the state of enlightenment. It is under a broader notion of “yoga” that it is acceptable to talk about a “Yogic Advaita” in the *YV* (See Chapple 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Bhattacharyya (1951) has shown some specific Śaiva elements present in the *YV* and the importance of reading its stories with such a background in mind. Hanneder (1988) demonstrates that a Śaiva background is needed to understand a passage about the story of the crow Bhuṣuṇḍa in the *YV* *Nirvāṇaprakaraṇa*.

## 2. Introduction to the Story

Śikhidhvaja, a very handsome and virtuous prince, assumed the rule of the kingdom at the age of 16 years old when his father died (YV VIa.77). Despite his young age, he was able to govern with courage, compassion, and fairness. One day, while walking through the beautiful gardens of the palace, he imagined what it would be like to someday share them with a beloved one. Soon after that, his ministers introduced Śikhidhvaja to a perfect match for him: a woman named Cūḍālā. From the moment that Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja met, they connected deeply. Cūḍālā was well-versed in the arts of dancing and playing musical instruments. They enjoyed each other's company while wandering through the forests, playing in the gardens, and learning arts and sciences. Their love for each other grew so much that their "hearts were only meant to be for one another" (VIa.77.45 *anyonya-hṛdaya-sthatvādiva*).

Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja were delighted with each other's company for many years until their bodies began to slow with age. Realizing the evanescence of life, they went in search of what could give them happiness in all stages of existence. They started learning the philosophy of knowing the self (*ātmañāna*) and practicing meditation with many sages until they became detached from their bodies.

Detachment (*vairāgya*) is one of the two essential elements on the path of knowledge (*jñāna*). The story tells us that both Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja attained it at the same time. However, it was Cūḍālā who first experienced the awakening (*prabodha*) to the true self within (78.52). Her experience of enlightenment is described as a state of contentment and equanimity. Resting in a state of perfect bliss without passion or affliction, the queen became so radiant, youthful, and graceful that the king inquired about the cause of her almost supernatural beauty (79.1–11). She attempted to explain to Śikhidhvaja the nature of this change by describing the state of mind that had led her there, but he ridiculed her. It was impossible for him to understand what she meant when talking about her insight and meditations, having not experienced the same feelings of contentment and equanimity himself. The queen thus continued with the practice of silent contemplation on the self as she also maintained her usual daily activities and responsibilities (80.12). Although she was always content and free from desire, playfully, Cūḍālā found herself wishing to fly.<sup>7</sup>

How is it possible to entertain a wish in one's awakened mind when one of the main characteristics of this state is to be free from desire? Traditionally, this is explained by the theory of residual karma (*prārabdha*), which holds that the effects of a past action must necessarily bear fruit. So even while it is true that the queen had attained knowledge of the self, the *Tātparyaprakāśa* commentary interprets the arousal of her desire to fly as being due to the "strength of the residual karma" acting upon her.<sup>8</sup> Vidyāraṇya, in his Advaita Vedāntic interpretation of the text, considers the liberated in life (*jīvanmukta*) to not be affected by the seeming appearance of passions and attachments for the simple reason that, once firmly established in the truth, the *jīvanmukta* knows them as mere illusory appearances (*ābhāsa*).<sup>9</sup> Although Advaita Vedāntic readings offer a non-dualist interpretation of living liberation, they are unable to grasp the nature of Cūḍālā's embodied experience, which would seem to be more appropriately understood from the perspective of the Trika system of Kashmir Śaivism, as Bhattacharyya (1951) once suggested. It is within this Tantric philosophy that one can understand that being liberated within life, and therefore having transcended one's own desires, does not imply that one lacks volition. The main difference between having a desire (*kāma*) and having a volition (*icchā*)

<sup>7</sup> YV VIa.80.13: *ekadā nityatṛptāyā nīricchāyā api svayam | cūḍālāyā babhūvecchā līlayā khagamāgame.*

<sup>8</sup> See *Tātparyaprakāśa* commentary to 80.13: *khe gamāgamo devavatsamcārastadvīṣaye icchā babhūva tāḍṣapṛārabdhaśeṣabalāditi bhāvāḥ.*

<sup>9</sup> See (Dasgupta 1952, p. 252).

is that desire appears conditioned by an outcome<sup>10</sup>, whereas volition is self-determined (*svātantrya*) or “playfully” willed, imitating Śiva’s will (*icchāśakti*) to create or to dissolve the world.

In order to acquire the power to fly (*khagamāgama-siddhi*), Cūḍālā retreated from her mundane activities into a secluded place and devoted herself alone for a long time to the practice of remaining still and bringing the flow of the breath upwards to a point in between the eyebrows.<sup>11</sup>

As if allowing Cūḍālā to be by herself while she did her yogic practice, the narration is interrupted by a dialogue between Vasiṣṭha and Rāma (80.16). Rāma asks about the possibility of producing a bodily movement upward while at the same time immobilizing the vibrating forces (*spanda*) that cause the upward action of the limbs. Three chapters are then dedicated to responding to Rāma’s question. Not only does Vasiṣṭha share techniques for how to fly, but also a detailed description of the *kuṇḍalinī*, including where it is located and how it rises; how it relates to the vital breath, to health, to longevity and to other supernatural yogic powers such as becoming small, big, light, or heavy; and how it offers the power to enter into other bodies.

### 3. Describing *Kuṇḍalinī*

The technique of how to fly described by Vasiṣṭha in the *YV* is very different from the ones described in the *haṭhayoga* manuals.<sup>12</sup> The *YV* rejects practices involving herbs, knives, gems, drugs, and mantras (80.27–29). Instead, the practice that Cūḍālā was engaged with involved the “practice of restraining the breath-flow” (*prāṇāyama-ghana-abhyāsa*), as well as renouncing the tendencies towards anger, greed, attachment, aversion, and other negative emotions (80.33). It is while relating to Rāma the practice of holding or restraining the breath that Vasiṣṭha offers a detailed and vivid description of *kuṇḍalinī* (80.37–48).<sup>13</sup>

*parimaṇḍalitākārā marmasthānaṃ samāśritā |*  
*āntraveṣṭanikā nāma nāḍī nāḍīśatāśritā || 36 ||*

There is a circularly shaped (*parimaṇḍalitākārā*) tubular vein (*nāḍī*) called ‘intestine twining’ (*āntraveṣṭanikā nāma*) that rests (*samāśritā*) in a secret vital place (*marmasthānaṃ*) [within the body]<sup>14</sup> amidst hundreds of tubular veins (*nāḍīśatāśritā*).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Some popular translations of the short version of the *YV* (*Laghuyogavāsiṣṭha*) add to the story the idea that Cūḍālā wanted to learn how to fly so that her husband could see that she had achieved self-knowledge. See Aiyer (1896, p. 276) and Gherwal (1930). This sense is, however, absent in the original Sanskrit version of the Pansikar edition used here. A thorough philological discussion on this point would require a comparison of this section with the *Mokṣopāya*, which is unfortunately not yet published.

<sup>11</sup> *YV* 80.15 *ekaivaikāntaniratā svāsanāvasthatāṅgikā | ūrdhvagaprāṇapavanacirābhyāsam cakāra ha ||*

<sup>12</sup> The technique by which one develops the power of “dwelling in the sky” was called *kecharīmudrā* in the *Bhairavāgama*. Although not always associated with the ability to fly (Mallinson 2008, pp. 183–84, n. 113), *kecharīmudrā* is still associated with flying by folk yogic traditions and yoga practitioners in India (Mallinson 2008, p. 32, n. 153), perhaps because its practice can create a sense of bodily lightness. *Kecharīmudrā* was incorporated into the schools of *haṭhayoga* due to its association with methods of conquering death that involved the drinking of a bodily fluid called *amṛta*, considered to be capable of freeing us from old age and disease. *Haṭhayoga* manuals describe the practice as involving the lengthening of the tongue (sometimes by carefully cutting the frenum) to free it so that it can be inserted above the palate and block the passage through which the elixir of immortality is believed to flow down to the digestive fire, where it gets burnt and wasted (*Haṭhapradīpikā* 3.32–42 in (Digambaraji and Kokaje 1998)). The story of Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja in the *YV* plays both with the literal and metaphorical sense of flying through the sky, for it is through the literal power of flying that Cūḍālā is able to transmit to Śikhidhvaja the knowledge of how to dwell within the metaphorical “sky” of liberated consciousness.

<sup>13</sup> The translation of all the following verses is original. I want to thank the Sanskrit reading group at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles where we read and discussed this section during the spring semester of 2016. I am grateful to the editors of this journal, who insisted on my refining the first version of the translation. A special acknowledgment is due to Jesse Knutson for correcting the previous translation and guiding me towards a better understanding of the Sanskrit in these passages.

<sup>14</sup> According to *haṭhayoga* texts, that secret place is in the *mūlādhāra*, the “root-base,” usually located at the bottom of the spine between the anus and the perineum. The *nāḍī* mentioned here must be the central channel of the subtle body anatomy, known as *suṣumnā*. See the commentary: *mūlādhāre sārādhatriṇalayaṣeṣṭānāntaḥsuptakuṇḍalinīśaktigarbhāṃ suṣumnānāḍī varṇayati ||*

<sup>15</sup> Tubes, veins spreading throughout the whole body. There are 72,000 veins that branch out of a main one according to the yogic map of subtle anatomy. See commentary: *sarvadehaprasṛtadvāsapatisahasraśākhapradhānanāḍīśatāśritām ||*

*vīṇāgrāvartasadr̥śī salilāvartasannibhā |*

*lipyārdhomkārāsamsthānā kuṇḍalāvartasamsthitā || 37 ||*

It is curled like the uppermost part of the Indian lute (*vīṇāgrāvartasadr̥śī*); it swirls like the eddy of a whirlpool (*salilāvartasannibhā*); it is shaped like half of the written form of the syllable “om” (*lipyārdhomkārāsamsthānā*); it is arranged like the coil of an earring (*kuṇḍalāvartasamsthitā*).

*devāsurasmanuṣyeṣu mṛganakrakahagādiṣu |*

*kīṭādiṣvabjānteṣu sarveṣu prāṇiṣūditā || 38 ||*

It is present in all living beings (*sarveṣu prāṇiṣūditā*): in gods, demons, and humans (*devāsurasmanuṣyeṣu*); in terrestrial, aquatic, and aerial animals (*mṛganakrakahagādiṣu*); in beings born in the water such as insects, worms, etc. (*kīṭādiṣvabjānteṣu*).

*śītārtasuptabhogīndrabhogavadbaddhamaṇḍalā |*

*sitā kalpāgnivigaladīnduvadbaddhakūṇḍalī || 39 ||*

It is coiled in tight circles (*baddhamaṇḍalā*) like the sleeping cosmic serpent Ananta when suffering from cold (*śītārtasuptabhogīndrabhogavad*). It is bright (*sitā*) and tightly coiled (*baddhakūṇḍalī*) like the moon falling down into the cosmic fire [of dissolution] (*kalpāgnivigaladīnduvad*).<sup>16</sup>

*ūrorbhrūmadhyarandhrāṇi spr̥śanti vṛttacañcalā |*

*anāratam ca saspandā pavamānena tiṣṭhati || 40 ||*

It is fluctuating in its movement (*vṛttacañcalā*) as it touches (*spr̥śanti*) the inner cavities (*randhrāṇi*) from the anus to the middle of the eyebrows (*ūrorbhrūmadhya*) and remains (*tiṣṭhati*) pulsating continuously (*anāratam ca saspandā*) along with the flow of the breath (*pavamānena*).<sup>17</sup>

*tasyāstvabhyantare tasminkadalīkośakomale |*

*yā parā śaktiḥ sphurati vīṇāvegalasadgatiḥ || 41 ||*

In its interior (*tasyāstvabhyantare*), which is tender like a plantain sheath (*tasminkadalīkośakomale*), that which is the supreme creative power (*yā parā śaktiḥ*) vibrates (*sphurati*) lightning-fast like the strings of a well-played Indian lute (*vīṇāvegalasadgatiḥ*).

*sā cōktā kuṇḍalīnāmnā kuṇḍalākāravāhinī |*

*prāṇinām paramā śaktiḥ sarvaśaktijavapradā || 42 ||*

<sup>16</sup> The image alluded here is that of the serpent Ananta or Śeṣa, who remains lying down, coiled up in the original waters of creation after each cycle of cosmic destruction caused by fire at the end of a cosmic era (*kalpa*). It is said that Ananta uncoils into straight white lines at the time of creation. See commentary: *śītenārtah śītārtinivāraṇāya dṛḍhabaddhamaṇḍala iti yāvāt | tathāvidhasya suptasya bhogīndrasya bhogaḥ kāyastadvadbaddham maṇḍalam yayā | sitā śubhrā | kalpāgninā vigalata antarvalayākārarekhāsphūṭitenendunā |* Another way to translate *kalpāgni* is as “digestive fire”. See commentary: *tulyam baddhā kuṇḍalīvalayākr̥tiriyayā | athavā kalpate jaraṇasamartho bhavatīti kalpo’agnirjāthārāgnistena vigalan yo mūrdhni yogaśāstraprasiddhaścandraḥ sa eva vīṇā mūlādāre prasṛto ghanibhūya tatra baddhakūṇḍalākṛtistadvatsthitetyutprekṣā |* The moon-drop refers to an esoteric substance believed to be stored in the center of the head called *amṛta* or “nectar of immortality,” which is seen as constantly flowing down from the root of the palate into the digestive fire, where it gets burnt and “cooked,” later to be transformed and wasted in the semen (Gorakṣaśataka 3.29 in Mallinson 2012, Hathapradīpikā 3.100 in Digambaraji and Kokaje 1998). The *haṭhayoga* tradition considers that by keeping the substance without falling into that fire and without being ejected through the penis, it would prevent the aging process and guarantee long life (Hathapradīpikā 3.42, 3.87–90, 4.28).

<sup>17</sup> The flow of breath refers to the five *prāṇas* or bodily winds that are considered to flow throughout the bodily organs. See commentary: *pavamānena prāṇādīnā saspandā |*

And she is called (*sā caktā*) Kuṇḍalinī (*kuṇḍalīnāmnā*), since she flows in a spiraling shape (*kuṇḍalākāravāhinī*). She is the supreme power of living beings (*prāṇinām paramā śaktiḥ*), providing the energy for all their capacities (*sarvasaktijavapradā*).

*aniśam niḥśvasadrūpā ruṣiteva bhujāṅgamī |*  
*saṁsthitordhvīkṛtamukhī spandanāhetutām gatā || 43 ||*

Breathing in and out (*niḥśvasadrūpā*) incessantly (*aniśam*) like a furious female snake (*ruṣiteva bhujāṅgamī*) which is positioned facing upward (*saṁsthitordhvīkṛtamukhī*), she is the cause of all vibration [in the body] (*spandanāhetutām gatā*).

*yadā prāṇānilo yāti hr̥di kuṇḍalinīpadam |*  
*tadā saṁvidudetyantarbhūtatanmātrabījabhūḥ || 44 ||*

When the wind of the vital breath (*yadā prāṇānilo*) in the heart (*hr̥di*) goes (*yāti*) to the place of the *kuṇḍalinī* (*kuṇḍalinīpadam*), then (*tadā*) an awareness arises (*saṁvidudeti*), the seed of all as yet undifferentiated gross and subtle elements (*antarbhūtatanmātrabījabhūḥ*).<sup>18</sup>

*yathā kuṇḍalinī dehe sphuratyabja ivālinī |*  
*tathā saṁvidudetyantarmṛdusparśavaśodayā || 45 ||*

As (*yathā*) *kuṇḍalinī* vibrates in the body (*kuṇḍalinī dehe sphurati*) like a female bee inside a lotus (*abja ivālinī*), consciousness arises within (*tathā saṁvidudeti antar*) as the emerging desire (*vaśodayā*) [for those things—the sense objects] whose touch is tender (*mṛdusparśa*).

*sparśanaṁ mṛdunānyonyāliṅgikā tatra yantrayoh |*  
*yathā saṁvidudetyuccaistathā kuṇḍalinī javāt || 46 ||*

Contact arises tenderly (*sparśanaṁ mṛdunā*), as there is (*tatra*) the mutual embrace (*anyonyāliṅgikā*) of both mechanisms (*yantrayoh*) [of awareness (*saṁvid*) and *kuṇḍalinī*]. When the awareness [of an object] arises intensely (*yathā saṁvidudetyuccais*), *kuṇḍalinī* also rises up swiftly (*kuṇḍalinī javāt*).

*tasyām samasthā sambaddhā nāḍyo hr̥dayakośagāḥ |*  
*utpadyante vilīyante mahārṇava ivāpagāḥ || 47 ||*

All the tubular channels are connected together in *kuṇḍalinī* (*tasyām samasthā sambaddhā nāḍyo*) and run to the heart (*hr̥dayakośagāḥ*). They flow outward and converge back together again (*utpadyante vilīyante*) like rivers on their way to the ocean (*mahārṇava ivāpagāḥ*).

*nityam pātotsukatayā praveśonmukhayā tayā |*  
*sā sarvasaṁvidām bījam hyekā sāmānyudāhṛtā || 48 ||*

She constantly (*nityam*) descends and exists as the *āpana* (*pātotsukatayā*) and enters as the *prāṇa* (*praveśonmukhayā tayā*). She is the seed of all awareness (*sarvasaṁvidām bījam*), indeed she is called ‘the universal one’ (*hyekā sāmānyudāhṛtā*).

*Kuṇḍalinī* is characterized by Vasiṣṭha as the most powerful vital force that, with its touch, produces awareness or consciousness in the form of sensations and thoughts. But how could something

<sup>18</sup> The gross elements are the five natural elements: space, air, water, fire, and earth (*bhūta-s*). The subtle elements are the five qualitative elements: sound, touch, taste, form, and smell (*tanmātra-s*). The passage refers to an initial awareness that arises even before the natural elements are divided into five, that is, even before the world of multiplicity appears. See commentary: *yadā hr̥di sthitāḥ prāṇaḥ kuṇḍalinīyā ākr̥ṣṭāḥ san apānavṛtīyā kuṇḍalinīpadam yāti tadā bhūtatanmātrānyapañcikṛtabhūtānyeva bījamupādānam yasya tathāvidhe antaḥkaraṇe bhavātīti bhūjīrvasaṁvit smṛtisamkalpādhyavasāyābhimānarāgādivṛttibhedairantarudeti yarthāḥ ||*

produce consciousness if it is not already conscious itself? And if consciousness itself (*citsaṃvit*) is infinite, how then can it be confined within the body? In other words, how could the infinite become less infinite? Rāma's questions (49) are answered by Vasiṣṭha with a non-dualist cosmology. The sage explains that consciousness (*cinmātra*) inhabits the five elemental particles of space, air, water, fire, and earth (*bhūtatānāmātra-s*) and that through their combination (56)—a very complicated and repeated process of quintuplication—they form our bodies and everything else reflecting various degrees of awareness (52–53). The combination of the five elements (*pañcaka*) provides the material for embodiment, but it is the living principle within or *jīva* and its wind-like vibration (*anilaspanda*) that sets the bodies in motion (63) according to their volition (*saṅkalpa*) (57).

To be alive is thus to embody a certain volition (*saṅkalpa*). The natural directionalities of inner psychosomatic movements are the place from which our various desires (*vāsanā-s*) are produced. They dispose our body and its sensory–motor faculties to act in certain ways (good or bad) according to the use of one's intelligence (*prajñā*) in order to enjoy the fruits of one's actions (66–68). It is the *vāsanā-s*<sup>19</sup> (our determinate affections, tendencies, and desires) that the wise can guide, harness, or suppress (65–66) while living, not our volition or *saṅkalpa* (our will to act in one way or another). A tree can remain healthy, firm, and alive with the branches and fruits cut, but it would not be possible for it to continue to live without the roots. In the same way, a liberated person can cut the flowering desires, and their fruits, but it would stop being a living liberated being were that person to cut the inward movements and principles of action that keep the body alive. It is one thing to let the elements of one's body perish on their own (79), but it is another thing entirely to induce their extinction through the willful denial of the capacity to produce activity. The YV acknowledges the possibility of self-extinction or yogic suicide (*utkrānti*) as a possible outcome of one's enlightened experience—thus the distinction between living and bodiless liberation—but it criticizes taking it as a necessary and more valuable procedure for the ultimate consummation of one's self-knowledge. As a non-dualist yogic philosophy, it holds that it would not be reasonable to reject the body since it is, ultimately, consciousness itself.<sup>20</sup>

*etatpañcakabijam tu kuṇḍalinyām tadantare |*  
*prāṇamarutarūpeṇa tasyām sphurati sarvadā || 81.1 ||*

The seed of the five-fold elements<sup>21</sup> (*etatpañcakabijam*) is in the *kuṇḍalinī* (*tu kuṇḍalinyām tadantare*) who palpitates constantly (*sphurati sarvadā*) as the wind-like form of *prāṇa*, the life force (*prāṇamarutarūpeṇa*).

*sāntaḥkuṇḍalinīspandasparśasaṃvitkalāmālā |*  
*kaloktā kalanenāśu kathitā cetanena cit || 2 ||*

From contact with *kuṇḍalinī's* vibration (*sāntaḥ kuṇḍalinīspandasparśa*) there is the pure part (*kalāmālā*) that is consciousness (*saṃvit*). It is said to be small (*kaloktā*) because of its instant and quick activity (*kalanenāśu*). Because of its thinking nature (*cetanena*) it is said (*kathitā*) to be awareness (*cit*).

*jīvanājjīvatām yātā mananācca manaḥsthitā |*  
*saṅkalpāccaiva saṅkalpā bodhādbudhiriti smṛtā || 3 ||*

She is thought of (*smṛtā*) as giving life because of her being the life force (*jīvanājjīvatām yātā*); and (*ca*) she is thought of as abiding in the mind (*manaḥsthitā*) because of her being thought

<sup>19</sup> Dasgupta translates *vāsanā* in the context of the YV as “instinctive root desires” (Dasgupta 1952, p. 252); Walter Slaje translates: “latent psychic impressions” (Slaje 2000, p. 178).

<sup>20</sup> The story of Prahlāda in the YV (V.39.25 and V.40.12) narrates how Viṣṇu prevents him from leaving the body during his deep meditation and scolds him for not enjoying his body.

<sup>21</sup> This verse picks up the idea from 44 above. *Pañcaka* is the “set of the five” natural elements (both gross and subtle) that constitute the body.

itself (*mananāt*). Indeed (*eva*), she is the creative volition (*saṅkalpā*)<sup>22</sup> that comes from the will (*saṅkalpāt*) and (*ca*) also the intelligence that comes from awakened consciousness (*bodhādbudhiriti*).

*ahaṅkāratmatām yātā saiṣā puryaṣṭakābhidhā |*  
*sthitā kuṇḍalinī dehe jīvaśaktiranuttamā || 4 ||*

She becomes the ego (*ahaṅkāratmatām yātā*) as well as the “Citadel of Eight” (*saiṣā puryaṣṭakābhidhā*).<sup>23</sup> The *kuṇḍalinī* remains in this body (*sthitā kuṇḍalinī dehe*) as the supreme power of life (*jīvaśaktiranuttamā*).

In contrast to the more popular view that depicts *kuṇḍalinī* only as a dormant energy localized in the bottom of the spine spiraling up to the top of the head when it is awakened, we find that in Vasiṣṭha’s account she is primarily characterized as an intelligent flow of life that continuously runs through all spaces in our body, acquiring different names according to the direction in which it naturally flows. *Kuṇḍalinī* is also understood here as the life force (*prāṇa*) that is contained within the balanced play of the movements made by our bowels, feelings, thoughts, sensations, intentions, and efforts.

*apānatāmupagatya satatam pravahatyadhah |*  
*samānā nābhimadhyasthā udānākhyopari sthitā || 5 ||*

As *apāna* the life-force constantly (*apānatāmupagatya satatam*) flows to the lower region (*pravahatyadhah*); as *samāna* it remains in the middle area between the heart and the navel (*samānā nābhimadhyasthā*); as *udāna* it directs itself upwards (*udānākhyopari sthitā*) [from the chest to the top of the head].

*adhastvapānarūpaiva madhye saumyaiva sarvadā |*  
*puṣṭāpyudānarūpaiva puṁsaḥ svasthaiva tiṣṭhati || 6 ||*

Indeed, in the lower area (*adhastv*) its form is that of *apāna* (*apānarūpaiva*); in the middle (*madhye*), it is always the pleasant digestive fire (*saumyaiva sarvadā*). Although powerful (*puṣṭāpy*), in its form as *udāna* (*udānarūpaiva*) it maintains a person healthy (*puṁsaḥ svasthaiva tiṣṭhati*).

*sarvayatnamadho yāti yadi yatnānna dhāryate |*  
*tatpumānṛtimāyāti tayā nirgatayā balāt || 7 ||*

If the lower flow is not restrained through effort (*yadi yatnānna dhāryate*), then all effort goes to the lower region (*sarvayatnamadho yāti*), then the person dies (*tatpumānṛtimāyāti*) due to the *kuṇḍalinī* exiting [the body] forcefully (*tayā nirgatayā balāt*).

*samastāvordhvamāyāti yadi yuktyā na dhāryate |*  
*tatpumānṛtimāyāti tayā nirgatayā balāt || 8 ||*

If the upper flow is not restrained efficiently (*yadi yuktyā na dhāryate*), it all flows upward (*samastāvordhvamāyāti*); then the person dies (*tatpumānṛtimāyāti*) due to the *kuṇḍalinī* exiting [the body] forcefully (*tayā nirgatayā balāt*).

<sup>22</sup> Shulman (2012, p. 112), in his magnificent discussion on imagination in Indian literature, *More Than Real*, comments that *saṅkalpa*, especially in the context of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, means “a thought heavy with intention or resolution or determination” and “commonly serves in this text for an imaginative act”, a “thought crystallizing into active and vivid images”. I have translated it here as “creative volition” because *saṅkalpa*, as Shulman explains, carries with it a certain force and because the imaginative production of consciousness does not happen without it willing its own act.

<sup>23</sup> The “Citadel of Eight” refers to the eight elements that compose the subtle body: five subtle elements (*tanmātra-s*), the ego (*ahaṅkāra*), the capacity for thought (*manas*), and the intellect (*buddhi*).

*sarvathātmani tiṣṭheccettyaktvordhvādhogamāgamau |  
tājantorhīyate vyādhirantarmārutarodhataḥ | | 9 | |*

If it stays still in every way within the body (*sarvathātmani tiṣṭheccettyaktvā*), avoiding upward and downward movements (*urdhvādhogamāgamau*), then a person avoids disease (*tājantorhīyate vyādhiḥ*) from restraining the internal wind (*antarmārutarodhataḥ*).<sup>24</sup>

*sāmānyanāḍīvaidhuryātsāmānyavyādhisaṃbhavaḥ |  
pradhānanāḍīvaidhuryātpadhānavyādhisaṃbhavaḥ | | 10 | |*

The appearance (*saṃbhavaḥ*) of ordinary diseases (*sāmānyavyādhi*) is due to the disturbance (*vaidhuryāt*) of the secondary *nāḍīs* (*sāmānyanāḍī*). The appearance (*saṃbhavaḥ*) of major diseases (*pradhānavyādhi*) is due to the agitation in the principal *nāḍīs*.<sup>25</sup>

What follows from this characterization in Vasiṣṭha's discourse is a philosophy of health, a physiological metaphysics where disease is related to the imbalanced flow of the upward and downward, heating and cooling, forces within the body, and the uncontrolled agitation of subtle channels through which the life force runs. Since *prāṇa* moves according to one's inner volition and the inner tendencies to act are of the nature of a mental intention (*saṅkalpa*), then it is the agitation within one's mind (*citta*) that causes disturbances in the rhythm of the inner movements flowing through the tubular channels (81.30), thus bringing disorder to the organs and weakening their functions.

The description of the technique on how to fly is not given until after a long discourse on how the vital breath or *prāṇa* moves throughout the body, producing health or disease. Thus, it seems that in order to learn how to fly or acquire any other yogic power (*siddhi*), one must know the ways in which the life force flows within one's own body, and how it is affected by the intentions or creative volitions that arise in that seed-consciousness that directly touches the body with its vibration.

This intermediary dialogue between Vasiṣṭha and Rāma serves as the philosophical background to understanding Cūḍālā's experience of enlightenment and the paradoxical state of wanting to do something even though one is supposed to be desireless. In contrast to the well-known dilemma in the *Bhagavad Gītā* where desireless action (*niṣkāmakarma*) is framed within the discourse of duty and *dharma*, here in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* enlightened action is reconstructed as an expression of the natural spontaneity of being alive. Thus, Cūḍālā's impulse of wanting to learn how to fly should not be read in the light of a "desire to do or accomplish" something, but as a natural, embodied process of the inner, enlightened state that "rises above" all desires.

#### 4. On Learning How to Fly

The technique to acquire the power to fly is described thus:

*yadā pūrakapūrṇāntarāyataprāṇamārutam |  
nīyate saṃvidevordhvam soḍhum dharmaklamam śramam | | 46 | |*

When (*yadā*) the wind of *prāṇa* (*prāṇamārutam*) is fully extended through the internal body by the practice of 'filling up' (*pūrakapūrṇāntarāyata*),<sup>26</sup> consciousness itself is drawn upwards (*nīyate saṃvidevordhvam*) and made able to endure the exhaustion of overheating [from intense yoga] (*soḍhum dharmaklamam śramam*).

<sup>24</sup> See commentary: *sarvāṅge samānavṛttiyetaravṛttijaye sarvavyādhikṣayamṛtyujayasiddhirityāha | ātmani dehe | |* Diseases are considered to be the manifestation of the disequilibrium of the wind-flows within the body (*prāṇa*, *apāna*, *samāna*, *udāna*, *vyāna*). By stopping the normal downward and upward wind-flows and by making them mix in the center where *samāna* is, internal balance is thought to be achieved, diseases expelled, and the right wind-flow retained.

<sup>25</sup> According to the commentary, there are 101 principal *nāḍīs*: *ekaśatam pradhānanāḍyāstacchākhāstu*.

<sup>26</sup> The practice of *pūraka* involves the retention of the breath, which generates warmth throughout the body.

*sarpīva tvaritavordhvam yāti danḍopamām gatā |*  
*nāḍīḥ sarvāḥ samādāya dehabaddhā latopamāḥ | | 47 | |*

Like a female serpent (*sarpīva*), *kuṇḍalinī* goes up swiftly (*tvaritavordhvam yāti*) and looks like a stick (*danḍopamām gatā*) collecting (*samādāya*) all the bodily channels together (*nāḍīḥ sarvāḥ*), like vines (*latopamāḥ*) attached to the body (*dehabaddhā*).

*tadā samastamevedamutplāvayati dehakam |*  
*nīrandhram pavanāpūrṇam bhastrevāmbu tatāntaram | | 48 | |*

Then (*tadā*) it lifts (*utplāvayati*) the entire body (*samastamevedam dehakam*) which, filled up with air (*pavanāpūrṇam*) and without any openings (*nīrandhram*) from within (*tatāntaram*), resembles a leather wineskin (*bhastrevāmbu*) [lifting water from a well when it is fully filled].<sup>27</sup>

*ityabhyāsavilāsena yogena vyomagāminā |*  
*yoginaḥ prāpnuvantyuccairdīnā indradaśāmiva | | 49 | |*

It is said (*iti*) that by the delightful practice of yoga (*abhyāsavilāsena yogena*), the yogins (*yoginaḥ*) attain (*prāpnuvanti*) [the power of] roaming through space (*vyomagāminā*), flying upwards like a birth (*uccairdīnā*); they resemble Indra, the lord of the skies (*indradaśāmiva*).

*brahmanāḍīpravāheṇa śaktiḥ kuṇḍalinī yadā |*  
*bahirūrdhvam kapāṭasya dvadaśāṅgulamūrdhani | | 50 | |*  
*recakena prayogeṇa nāḍyantaranirodhinā |*  
*muhūrtam sthitimāpnoti tadā vyomagadarśanam | | 51 | |*

When (*yadā*) the *kuṇḍalinī* power (*śaktiḥ kuṇḍalinī*) goes by the course of (*pravāheṇa*) the *brahmanāḍī*<sup>28</sup> up through the gate between the eyebrows (*bahirūrdhvam kapāṭasya*) to twelve inches above the head (*dvadaśāṅgulamūrdhani*), then (*tadā*) by the practice of “emptying” (*recakena prayogeṇa*), while suspending the prāṇic flow within the nāḍis (*nāḍyantaranirodhinā*),<sup>29</sup> for a moment (*muhūrtam sthitim*)<sup>30</sup> the yogi attains (*apnoti*) [a state by which] *siddhas* and other beings who fly through the air can be seen (*vyomagadarśanam*).

No more instructions are given. A still body, regulation of the inner and outer breath-flows, and a conscious effort directing inner movements executed by the *kuṇḍalinī* are all that is needed to attain yogic powers, including those of modifying one’s bodily dimensions, entering into other bodies, and changing gender appearance. Vasiṣṭha asserts to Rāma that these powers are also attainable by means of knowledge alone, or through *jñāna sādhana* (VIa.82.14), for once the yoga practitioner has knowledge of the intelligent force (*cinmātra*) confined within their body, they understand that the body is nothing but the individual shape assumed by consciousness itself through the power of its own intention or will (*cidsvasaṅkalpa*) (16). Vasiṣṭha offers here a path of liberating knowledge, a *jñāna sādhana*, that finds in the vision of the self a deep knowledge of the mechanisms of the body, for those mechanisms are ultimately the movements that infinite consciousness exerts in the confined form that it assumes as a living being.

<sup>27</sup> The commentary makes clear that *bhāstra* is some kind of leather bag for bringing water up from a well.

<sup>28</sup> The *brahmanāḍī* is the same as the central tubular channel that runs along the spine called *suśūmnā*.

<sup>29</sup> In the *haṭhayoga* tradition, suspension with *recaka* is practiced by holding the breath out after an exhalation, allowing the lungs to empty of all air and suspending the breath outside. This technique is thought to reverse the flow of *apāna* by sending it upwards through the *suśūmnā*. Suspension with *pūraka*, on the contrary, is the practice of suspending the air within after an inhalation, and it is thought to reverse the flow of *prāṇa* by sending it down to the navel to meet with *apāna* and create equilibrium with the help of *samāna*.

<sup>30</sup> According to the commentary, a *muhūrta* is equivalent to 16 units of time ( . . . *ṣoḍaśāntākhye muhūrtam . . .* ).

After Cūḍālā learned how to fly, she traveled from city to city, from mountains to oceans, meeting aerial and ethereal beings along her path while also utilizing her power of flight to continue with her responsibilities at the palace. In the meantime, her husband Śikhidhvaja, who was unable to see the transformation in his wife and continued seeing her as his young mistress, could not find inner peace or a true vision of his self.

## 5. Śikhidhvaja's Path to Liberation

One day Śikhidhvaja decided to renounce his activities in the kingdom and pursue self-knowledge through retiring to the forest, performing austerities, and living in solitude while meditating. Cūḍālā felt pity and sorrow, observing how confused her husband was, yet let him go and followed him with her power of flying without being noticed by him. With her yogic vision, she realized that it was not a good time to approach or visit him, so she went back to the kingdom and assumed the tasks related to its government. More than 18 years went by with Śikhidhvaja practicing his austerities in the forest, when one day Cūḍālā decided to visit him. She was worried that her husband would be drying out all his desires (*vāsanā-s*) and thus would never come back to her.

Cūḍālā's decision to rescue her husband from extreme asceticism was born out of her desire to be with him romantically again and to enjoy her beloved one like she had seen other yoginīs enjoying their partners in her aerial travels (VIa.85.26). She found her self-deluded husband in a deplorable condition, thin, dry, and dirty, and tried to bring him from his deluded meditation back to the understanding of a truth that can be enjoyed in this life. But she knew he was not going to listen to her if she appeared in his cave as his wife. Thus, with her yogic powers, she decided to take the form of a handsome young brahman boy.

### 5.1. First Set of Teachings: Kumbha's Birth

The plan was successful. Śikhidhvaja showed surprise and excitement at the visit of such a charming devotee, whom he took to be sent by the gods. When inquired about his background, the young brahman narrated the story of his birth which, if read carefully, seems to refer to the symbolic account of Cūḍālā's Tantric yogic practices to raise the *kuṇḍalinī*. The young brahman's name was Kumbha (which literally means "a pot") because he was born from his father's semen, gathered in a crystal pot filled with milk. His father was the sage Nārada, who had lost his semen after being aroused at the sight of two naked ladies playing in the stream. As a first lesson to Śikhidhvaja on living liberation, the story depicts a sage who seems to have succumbed to his passions, but who in reality is free from them. The wise ones allow their intentions to be expressed spontaneously without letting their effects bind the experiencer. The elements of the story (the pot, semen, and milk), however, remind us of the haṭhayogic<sup>31</sup> process, where heat and warmth are gathered within the digestive center by keeping the rising and fiery breath (*prāṇa*) stabilized within the body through breath retention (*kumbhaka*), locks (*bandhas*), and body seals (*mudrās*). This is done with the intention of reversing the downward flowing wind (*apāna*) and preventing the nectar of immortality stored in the head (*amṛtabindu*) from falling into the digestive fire. This technique turns the body into a "pot" where the warmth of the breath meets the cooling air (*apāna*), creating a sort of inner balance that makes *kuṇḍalinī's* arousal possible.<sup>32</sup> Vāsiṣṭha describes this process in the section called "Reflection on the Moon and Fire," or *agnīṣoma vicāranam* (VIa.81) and, in contrast to haṭhayoga, he describes it without referring to the physical practices of applying locks or bodily poses.

<sup>31</sup> A separate analysis considering the textual history of the YV would be able to shed light on the *haṭhayogic* elements within this chapter, whether they are present in the ancient recension (*Mokṣopāya*) or whether they have been added by the late Advaitavedānta tradition. This is, however, a question that lies beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>32</sup> See *Goraṅgāśataka* (Mallinson 2012), *Sivasamhitā* 2.6–11, 4.61–67 (Mallinson 2007), 5.141–165, *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* 3.52, 3.66–68, 3.72 (Digambaraji and Kokaje 1998).

The result of this mixture—the heat of semen and the coolness of milk—gives rise to the birth of life itself, the conjunction (*saṅkrānti*) and play of opposite principles: consciousness and matter, light and darkness, day and night, sun and moon. Nārada, the father of this boy, represents the path of knowledge, which is always learned from a teacher. Kumbha (who is, in reality, Cūḍālā) seems to stand for the spontaneous, alchemical creation of life where infinite knowledge is confined and embodied, as air within a “pot.”<sup>33</sup>

Śikhidhvaja introduced himself after hearing Kumbha’s birth story, recalling the kingdom, his queen, and how unsatisfied he was with his daily activities. He recalled having renounced that life to escape from the continuous cycle of fickle happiness and pain but now, even though he had performed his rites and austerities diligently, he continued to experience sorrow (VIa.87.14). Cūḍālā, under Kumbha’s disguise, took this moment as an opportunity to enlighten her husband on the inappropriateness of austerities and renouncement to pursue liberation. Seeing in this young brahman boy a divine wisdom, Śikhidhvaja broke into tears and begged for his teachings. What follows is a long attempt of Cūḍālā to bring her husband back to his senses.

First, she narrates two stories,<sup>34</sup> the lesson of both being that the pursuit of liberation requires knowledge of the truth that is only attainable by listening to the wise, for they help us to recognize the signs that liberate us. The two stories also teach that renouncing the world is of no avail, and that austerities are useless because that which one needs to cultivate—that is, renouncing one’s thoughts and desires—can be done while being involved in one’s daily activities.<sup>35</sup> Disgust at the world may help with recognizing one’s own ignorance and mental attachments, but these do not go away unless they are absolutely vanquished, rather than avoided. In telling these two stories, Kumbha’s purpose was to show Śikhidhvaja how blind he had been in not recognizing the teachings that his wife had offered to him while still in the palace.

However, after this first set of teachings was given, Śikhidhvaja could not understand what else he had to renounce, for he was resolved to leave the forest, his meditation hut, and utensils, even his own body, falling down a mountain if necessary, to show that he was willing to renounce even himself. But Kumbha stopped him from those actions with a second set of teachings, this time regarding the body.

### 5.2. Second Set of Teachings: Forest/Palace Non-Duality

Although it would seem that the YV has a negative perspective on the body—it is taken as dull (*jaḍa*), a big piece of lump (*mahāvata*), miserable (*varāka*), and bad-smelling (*mūkātma*)—it is also clearly stated that there is no need to renounce a body that is dispassionate (*nirāga*) and free from guilt (*aparādhi*) (VIa.93.19-22). It is the mind, *citta*, that is the seed of desires and attachments, and we are not liberated just by abandoning it (*tyāga*) but by destroying it (*nāśa*). A long lesson on the paradoxical body–mind distinction within a non-dual yoga follows, continued by a discussion on the non-origination of the world, the non-existence of a creator god, the omnipresence of self as consciousness, and the desiring nature of the mind (*vāsanāmātra*).

Kumbha’s discourse awakened Śikhidhvaja’s mind and made him sit in silent repose and deep meditation, feeling bliss and delight such as he had never experienced before (VIa.101.1). However, Śikhidhvaja did not understand how it was possible to live in the world having gotten rid of the mind. How could there be motion and play of forces when all that remains is immobility and rest? The possibility of living liberation or “engaged emancipation,” as a recent book on the YV has called it,<sup>36</sup> is founded on this: that there is absolutely no difference between the divine stillness of the self

<sup>33</sup> Compare this reading of Kumbha’s birth to that offered by Doniger (1999, pp. 289–90).

<sup>34</sup> The Story of the Crystal Gem (YV VIa.88) and The Parable of the Elephant (YV VIa.89).

<sup>35</sup> A distinguishing mark of living liberation (*jīvanmukti*) in the YV and in the MU is precisely the importance given to the maintenance of the householder’s activities in the pursuit of detachment and spiritual knowledge, as Slaje points out in (Slaje 2000, p. 180).

<sup>36</sup> See (Chapple and Chakrabarti 2015) “Engaged Emancipation. Mind, Morals and Make Believe in the Mokṣopāya (Yogavāsiṣṭha).

(*śiva*) and its conscious vibration (*cetaspanda*) (VIa.102.57). This is because, for one who has true knowledge, there is no movement in life that is not, in and of itself, consciousness alone.

After having explained the non-dual nature of the world to Śikhidhvaja, the brahman boy departed, saying he had to go back to his “heavenly abode.” The reality was that Cūḍālā had to return to the palace and resume her governing duties. This meta-identification between “heaven” and “earth” in the narrative gives another distinctive tantric tone to its non-dual framework. In this sense, one of the main teachings Śikhidhvaja had to understand was the illusory nature of the distinction between being bound (*bandha*) and being liberated (*mokṣa*). Yet, Cūḍālā’s journey of flying back and forth from forest to kingdom alludes to the continuous—but challenging—path of the *kuṇḍalinī* upwards from her earthly seat at the base of the spine—the *mūlādhāra*—to the heavenly site between the eyebrows, where the meeting with her male counterpart (Śiva) is considered to occur.

Śikhidhvaja remained in a tranquil and quiet state despite missing Kumbha terribly, as Kumbha had become his only friend and spiritual teacher. Śikhidhvaja remained absorbed in the self-meditating for three days, after which Cūḍālā appeared to him again in the forest. When she arrived, he was so deep in meditation that she feared he would leave his body at any moment. She thought he needed to receive more instruction on the knowledge of the self. She tried to bring him back from his deep contemplative state by shouting, shaking him, moving him, and throwing him to the ground, but nothing helped. Then she thought that it was better not to wake him up but rather to get rid of her human form to reach the same supreme beatitude he was in, which she also aspired to. As she was about to abandon her own body, her greater intelligence (*mahāmāti*) prevented her from doing it (VIa.103.16). She then tried to instill in her husband’s mind a slight vibration of consciousness by making her intellect enter his mental space, where she chanted some Vedic mantras.

The sound of Cūḍālā’s voice awoke Śikhidhvaja who immediately felt happy to see Kumbha again. Telling him how much he had missed him, Śikhidhvaja invited the young boy to stay with him in the forest. Then a third stage in Śikhidhvaja’s instruction on living liberation began.

### 5.3. Third Set of Teachings: Equanimity (*Sāmadṛṣṭi*)

Kumbha stayed with Śikhidhvaja for several days, talking about more spiritual matters and traveling together from land to land, villages, towns, and so forth. Their friendship and love for each other grew and Śikhidhvaja’s mind began to be transformed as he assimilated Kumbha’s teachings. Cūḍālā, aware of this transformation and noticing how delightful, handsome, and noble-minded her husband was, felt the curse of not being able to physically approach him, so she created a new plan. Kumbha told Śikhidhvaja that it was time for him to leave again due to some festivities at home, but that Kumbha would be back again later that day. Cūḍālā’s plan was to make Śikhidhvaja believe that, while away, the young brahman had angered a sage with an inappropriate comment, and the sage had cursed Kumbha with the unfortunate fate of becoming an amorous woman every night. That very night, Kumbha returned with a very sad face and told this to Śikhidhvaja.

Although awakened to the reality of the self and to the non-dual understanding of reality, Śikhidhvaja was still too attached to his idea of renouncement and asceticism to understand how it could be possible that an enlightened being, such as Kumbha, could be moved by emotions such as grief or joy. What follows is a set of teachings directed to shift Śikhidhvaja’s perspective in relation to experiences of life that are inevitably felt in the body and mind. The lesson is imparted through several tests to show him that those who know the truth but evade or suppress bodily affects and mental anxieties are cheaters (VIa.104.40). It should be noted that Cūḍālā imparts these teachings via Kumbha by using the mastery over her body and represents in this way a “philosophy of the body” in the YV that holds that, as long as we have a body, we must enjoy it and never force its natural actions to stop.

That day, as Kumbha awaited the first transformation at night, he expressed his “worries” about the situation. It was a common belief at the time that being a woman was pitiable because, among other disadvantages, it entailed the risk of turning into men’s prey. Śikhidhvaja agrees with the sorrowful fate of having to transform into a woman. It is interesting to note the fake nature of Cūḍālā’s worry.

The illusory nature of this situation may imply that she does not necessarily believe that these worries about the status of women are valid, especially since, in her experience, women can become powerful yoginīs like her.<sup>37</sup> The purpose of this transformation is, however, not to make her husband question those assumptions, but to have him undergo such a fate with patience and wisdom. Śikhidhvaja shows equanimity before the situation and agrees to live with his friend Kumbha during the day, and with the lady—Madanikā—at night.

A second test comes when the nocturnal virgin maid begins to feel the desire to join lovingly with Śikhidhvaja. One night she expressed her desire to taste the pleasure of conjugal union. She reasoned that, given their love for each other and its being a natural tendency of the body, it would yield no guilt. Śikhidhvaja then agreed to marry her, feeling neither disgust nor delight. They prepared the wedding together in the forest, after which they spent several nights consummating their conjugal love. They continued to reside together for many months as friends during the day and wedded couple by night, until Cūḍālā thought of a third test.

Trying to instill in her husband the desire for external objects, she created with her powers the image of Indra in the sky traveling with celestial nymphs. One day Indra invited Śikhidhvaja to fly with him to heaven, promising that the nymphs would love to spend time with him. But the king rejected the offer, stating his contentment and present state of delight. Indra tempted him again by arguing that it was not right for someone to refuse an enjoyment offered by destiny, but Śikhidhvaja maintained his tranquility and decided not to go. Cūḍālā was pleased with her husband's firmness and level of detachment, but then tried a different test to see if he was still subject to anger and other feelings. She then simulated with her yogic powers the sight of Madanikā being embraced and kissed by another man at night. Śikhidhvaja felt no change in his disposition and was pleased to see the couple enjoying themselves. He continued with his meditation. When Cūḍālā, in the form of Madanikā, approached him as if ashamed of her act, he spoke to her in a sweet voice and showed no anger for the affair. He understood it as being part of her curse, fate, and destiny—women were by nature (or fate) considered to be 10 times more passionate than men—so there was no reason for him to be angry. Although he forgave her, he rejected her as a spouse and suggested that it was better to simply remain friends.

Śikhidhvaja's behavior in these three tests—(1) the amorous woman, (2) Indra's temptation, and (3) the unfaithful wife—shows a state of desirelessness and equanimity in the face of that which is enjoyed, of that which could be enjoyed, and in the loss of that which was enjoyed. Only then did Śikhidhvaja prove himself to be ready to (1) accept emotions and desires (*vāsanā*) as they were presented without being affected by them; (2) allow his intentions and volitions (*saṅkalpa*) to be expressed while not falling into vain temptations; and (3) receive the tragedy of fate free from anger, but assuming proper decisions according to the situation and always in view of remaining detached and self-aware. In Cūḍālā's view, Śikhidhvaja demonstrated that he had attained a living embodied liberation and decided to reveal herself.

## 6. Śikhidhvaja's Embrace and Cūḍālā's Role in His Liberation

Cūḍālā's disclosing of her identity to Śikhidhvaja is a key moment within the story for understanding the role of *kuṇḍalinī* in the pursuit for liberation. We first see that Śikhidhvaja has been awakened (*prabodha*) by his own wife in the form of a young boy, Kumbha, by following the path of knowledge—that is, by listening to the teachings of the wise and realizing his true self. But once awakened, he had to develop a proper—non-dual—understanding of the body and the mind. Śikhidhvaja's path to liberation then assumes devotional tones, with the cultivation of emotions and human relations such as friendship and conjugal love, without which Śikhidhvaja would have remained in his deep ascetic meditations, attempting to forgo his physical body. Up until this point,

<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of gender in Cūḍālā's story, see (Doniger 1999, pp. 287–92).

we see in Śikhidhvaja's liberation no signs of the rising of *kuṇḍalinī*, but instead a process towards the recognition and exaltation of his disguised wife as the true teacher. However, if Cūḍālā's journeys from the palace to the forest are read as the movement of the *kuṇḍalinī* upward, we could see in Śikhidhvaja's interaction with Cūḍālā a metaphorical process of his *kuṇḍalinī* awakening as well.

When Cūḍālā revealed her true identity to him, he remembered everything that he had done in his life. He felt immense joy, and embraced her. This gesture reminds us of the liberating moment in the Kashmir Śaiva text, the *Vijñānabhairava* 161–163 (Singh 2006), where Śakti embraces Śiva after he has given her all the techniques for gaining liberation. The narrative of Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja's story is unique in that it is the male who embraces the female, recognizing her as the possessor of liberating knowledge.

Śikhidhvaja's mind proved to be devoid of desire and effort, but that was not enough to allow him to continue living in a liberated state. He needed Cūḍālā. The queen convinced him to return to the kingdom and reign with her, so they prepared a ceremony to leave his ascetic state. Through her yogic powers they gathered a whole army of horses, elephants, chariots, and soldiers with whom they returned, passing through the highest mountains back to the city and royal palace, where they ruled together in equanimity (*sāmadṛṣṭi*) for 1000 years more.

## 7. Conclusions

While Śikhidhvaja's process of liberation does not explicitly mention the rising of the *kuṇḍalinī*, one could see in Cūḍālā's journeys from the kingdom to the mountain forest where he is meditating a symbol of his own *kuṇḍalinī* rising, "flying out" to meet the top of the cool head. Awakening to the knowledge of oneself establishes the continuous practice of detachment and discernment, but this is not necessarily enough to remain awakened in the midst of the worldly, bodily life. The path of *jñāna yoga* involves a "knowing that" I am That [absolute consciousness] and not myself (*sohameva anaham eva*, VIa.99.13), but the path of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* involves a "knowing how": the knowledge of how to enjoy the movements of life while remaining inwardly still and detached. In other words, embodied (*deha*) liberation takes living (*jīvan*) liberation as an end in itself rather than as an unavoidable means towards the ultimate, bodiless (*videha*) stage. Embodied liberation presupposes living liberation as the state where the mind is conquered—or destroyed—and all desires (*vāsanā-s*) are mastered and self-regulated, while embracing with equanimity the expression of one's volitions (*saṅkalpa-s*). Moreover, an embodied living being remains in the knowledge that liberation is always "bodiless," for consciousness is all that there is. The living liberated one remains in life while the body and its past tendencies last. In contrast, the *embodied* liberated one chooses to embrace life, while playfully entertaining the desires and emotions that naturally come with the condition of being human.

While Cūḍālā's liberation is marked by the aerial journey of her rising *kuṇḍalinī*, Śikhidhvaja's enlightenment is culminated by the returning to the city—in other words, returning "down to earth." This shows that the story is not really talking about two types of liberation, but the different stages in which embodied liberation is attained and challenges are met along the way. To be awakened (*prabodha*) is not the same as being liberated (*mukti*), and to be liberated in this life involves more than detaching from one's desires and affectivity; it also requires their embrace. An embrace implies the cultivation of an affective—albeit not attached—relation with an "other," and it is this enlightening intersubjective relationship that makes liberation embodied.

A typical Śakta element in this kind of liberation is not so much the rising of the *kuṇḍalinī*, for that is also found in non-Śakta schools, but the returning of the life force back to the body, described in some *haṭhayoga* texts as the flooding of the body with the immortal juices gathered in the head. It is Cūḍālā who instills in Śikhidhvaja the warmth of life—the possibility of destroying the desiring mind while enjoying the manifested existence despite certain tendencies or latent psychic impressions stirred up by fate. Śikhidhvaja's role is that of the cooling intellect that brings equanimity to the flow of emotions, tendencies, and feelings that are inevitable in life. Their embrace is the *kumbhaka*, that is, the suspended breath where sun and moon, intellect and emotion, embrace and detachment,

meet to create a balanced play of opposites. The story of Cūḍālā and Śikhidhvaja is an embedded net of narrativity, where *kuṇḍalinī* forms the core from which the culminating process of one (Cūḍālā's liberation) is the beginning process of another (Śikhidhvaja's liberation). By the end, the story has illustrated a schema of a process that is not linear, but a circular, waving, spiraling path of liberation that embraces life in all its wisdom, and wisdom with one's entire body.

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