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The God Who Is Visible to All: Healing and Sun Worship in Śrīvidyā Tantra

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss sun worship and healing practices in Samayācāra Śrīvidyā, a Hindu tantric tradition. Thus, I use anthropological and philological perspectives to show how the contemporary Samayācāra Śrīvidyā guru of Śrī Lalitāmbikā and his disciples redefine healing and use sun-related meditations to energize and rejuvenate the human body. This paper shows how contemporary Tantric religiosity is multidimensional in nature and promises protection from disease and an overall better quality of life. Conversely, I endeavor to show how the Śrī Lalitāmbikā temple combines solar healing with tantric practices that lead to a reconnection with the divine and offer the ultimate dimension of healing, i.e., spiritual immortality.

Keywords: Tantra; healing; Śrīvidyā; Hinduism; goddess; sun worship

1. Introduction

Although Tantra is often shrouded in mystery and difficult for scholars to define (Urban 2003, p. 5), many agree that Tantric traditions have had a profound and far-reaching influence on Asian culture.¹

Kripal (2007, p. 13) defines Tantra as a broad comparative category that scholars have developed over the last century to describe a pan-Asian “deep worldview” or “super tradition” that weaves together indigenous traditions of goddess worship, esoteric Hindu and Buddhist traditions, and large parts of Daoism. Lorea and Singh (2023, p. 9), on the other hand, see Tantra through an ethnographic lens as “an ever-changing and complex array of things people do: actions, practices and disciplines (*sādhana*) rather than any static or essentialized category”. In line with Lorea and Singh, in this paper, I focus on the dynamic nature of living tantric traditions to reveal a more complex picture of esoteric practices that include therapeutic rituals and healing.

In the nondual tantric traditions, an adept strives for the realization of a divine consciousness and the attainment of mystical powers.² These goals can be achieved through strict spiritual discipline (*sādhana*), which requires the use of powerful monosyllabic mantras (*bīja*), creative meditation on mystical diagrams (*yantra* and *maṇḍala*), and the visualization (*dhyāna*) of selected deities. While many of the tantric systems offer spiritual practices and mantras that are supposed to bring wisdom, worldly pleasures, and liberation, some local tantrics are also known as healers and exorcists.³ Similarly, Sax (2023, p. 82) notes that rituals in contemporary Tantric communities in the Western Himalayas are performed mainly to “solve people’s problems with respect to love, enmity, health, success and other fundamental aspects of life”.

This study is based on participant observation of tantric practices and healing performed by the Śrīvidyā practitioners of the Śrī Lalitāmbikā temple in Coimbatore, India. Śrīvidyā is a Śākta Tantric tradition of the goddess Tripurasundarī (“The beautiful one of the three cities”). The tradition belongs to so-called southern transmission (*Dakṣiṇāmṇāya*) of the Kaula system (Sanderson 2015, p. 30). While the roots and early history of Śrīvidyā are still to be reconstructed, the early ritual treatises contain a plethora of rites for wish fulfilment, especially for the attraction of love (A. Golovkova 2018). Over time, the Tripurā



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cult became an important aspect of Southern Brahmanism and the monastic orders in Śringeri and Kanchipuram, the places associated with the teachings of Śaṅkarācārya. There, the Śrīvidyā infiltrated the Śaiva Smārta tradition, and its philosophy was adapted to the orthodox view of the followers of Śaṅkarācārya's Vedānta⁴. Kachroo (2016) notes that, in modern South India, many tantric gurus point to a “scientific worldview” as a prominent feature of Śrīvidyā. According to the gurus, Śrīvidyā is a kind of science due to its systematic and thorough analysis of material and psychic realities.

Śrīvidyā practitioners who follow the Samaya path of conduct (*Samayācāra*) forgo the transgressive offerings and complex ritualism and concentrate on *antaryāga*, the inner ritualism consisting of visualization and meditation⁵. As I have previously explained (Karasinski-Sroka 2021), the tradition of the Lalitāmbikā temple is centered on healing practices derived from tantric ritualism.⁶ An analysis of the structure of modern Śrīvidyā healing rituals reveals beliefs about the nature of humans and their relationship to the universe, including their connection to visible and invisible forces. Interestingly, the followers of the Lalitāmbikā tradition consider Samayācāra Śrīvidyā to be not only a tantric spiritual practice aimed at liberation but also a holistic healing system.

The basic assumption of the holistic health system is the nondualistic nature of the cosmos. Proponents of holistic healing believe that, behind the apparent diversity of reality lies an “organic whole, and matter and consciousness are merely two expressions of one reality.”⁷ The mind-body-spirit of every human being is completely interrelated and together with all other organisms forms part of a fundamental dynamic and interdependent system” (Steyn 1996, p. 44). In some cases, the cause of an illness is recognized as the effect of certain energy blockages in the body or of past deeds (*karma*) from previous lives. Therefore, spiritual healing in Samayācāra Śrīvidyā is mostly focused on removing these blockages and effects of *karma*. Nevertheless, *karma* is not the only factor, and disease is also often a case of misrecognition of reality—the personal imposition of a dualist view (i.e., the difference between “self” and the world) on nondual reality.

It can be said that Śrīvidyā is a tantric path that leads the practitioner to recognition of the world's ultimate monism. Nevertheless, it also offers a considerable corpus of healing techniques, within which, sun healing is a recent addition.⁸ In what follows, I will show why modern Śrīvidyā practices involve an elaborate series of meditations centered on the sun. As I will argue throughout the paper, the sun becomes a visible sign of invisible divine powers and a source of healing energy. While solar energy is used to heal disease, the sun is also a symbol that connects the Vedic and Tantric traditions in a modern context.⁹ To further illustrate how healing became the central aspect of the practice, I dedicate a section of the paper to the Śrīvidyā mantras and *Śrīcakra*, the most important yantra of the tradition, which connects various aspects of the spiritual practice of Śrīvidyā through its sacred geometry.

2. Lalitāmbikā: A Short History of the Temple

The Lalitāmbikā Organization was founded in 1997 by Swami Jagadatmananda Saraswati, also known as Jagannatha Swami.¹⁰ The Swami, a tantric guru and astrologer, envisioned the temple as a center that could spiritually help people from all walks of life. The Swami was initiated into the tantric tradition in 1992 by Śrī Balasubrahmanya Sivacarya, a Śrīvidyā master from the lineage of Bhāskaraṛāya.¹¹ As Barker et al. (2013, p. 1) observed, “We live in a world populated not just by individuals but by figures—people who loom larger than life because they alternately express and challenge conventional understandings of social types. Such figures are important because they serve as anchors for local, national, and transnational discourses about contemporary social life and its futures”. Jagannatha Swami is, for his disciples and devotees, one such figure. Many see him as a Vedāntic scholar and tantric mystic who received messages from ancient sages, gurus of the tradition who live in spiritual realms. They advised him to simplify the complex rituals of Śrīvidyā for people in modern times who expect quick remedies¹² and also to popularize tantric practices (*kriyā*) for healing.¹³ Indeed, many contemporary gurus emerging from the

Indian Hindu traditions are highly adaptable religious leaders who tailor their messages to specific times, circumstances, and populations (Lucia 2014). Given this diversity, there is the question of whether the modern Tantric traditions should be categorized as new religious movements or, as I try to show in this paper, as nodes within the multilayered tradition of Hinduism.¹⁴ In his *Jinnealogy*, Taneja (2020, p. 266) states that, in certain cases, a sacred “tradition is not only bound to family and community but is an ethical *inheritance* that is open to members of all religious groups, regardless of religious *identity*” (italics in original). It can be said that the Lalitāmbikā Temple propagates Śrīvidyā as a spiritual path and healing system but also as an ethical inheritance that is accessible to spiritual seekers from different walks of life, communities, and cultures.

Although there have been many studies on the importance of gurus in tantric traditions, their authority in transmitting secret knowledge, and their god-like status, I argue that there is a need for broader research on cultures of authority and personalized forms of power to shed more light on how models of authority change in the kinship, religious, economic, and political spheres. In the case of Samayācāra Śrīvidyā, the spiritual visions and life experiences of the founder of the Lalitāmbikā temple (Figure 1) shaped his teachings and position within the South Indian communities. Before becoming a tantric guru, he lived a life as an astrologer and a wandering yogi. Later in life, he also pursued academic studies and graduated with a doctorate in philosophy. Thus, he began to introduce himself to the general public as Dr. Jaganathan Swami, incorporating the titles of both Doctor and Swami.



Figure 1. The Lalitāmbikā temple.

In 1995, inspired by divine visions, the Swami decided to build a temple for Lalitāmbikā, the goddess of Śrīvidyā in her form as Mother of the World, that would be open to all.¹⁵ According to the official history of the temple, the Swami received a vision from the goddess instructing him to build a sacred place, and soon after, he received a donation of land. The land was examined by astrologers who recognized that it was blessed with the presence of the spirits of yogis and other spiritual beings (Figure 2) (Karasinski-Sroka 2021).

As R.P.B. Singh (2010, p. 7) states, according to Hindu belief, “the ‘land’ [(*kṣetra*)] is lived by its vibration, healing quality, aesthetical values, sense of wilderness, and also maintaining the continuity of cultural performances that have evolved in the ancient past” (italics in original). These performances, i.e., rituals, establish a connection between people, nature, and the divine. In the case of the Lalitāmbikā temple, the connection with the land is expressed through the daily worship of places where devotees or priests have perceived a spiritual presence (e.g., old snakes appearing on the site are seen as incarnations of ancient masters and as reminding the priests to bow to them) and through rituals to the gods of the nearby mountains.



Figure 2. Gaṇapati, the god who removes obstacles. Statue on the outer wall of the temple.

Initially, the temple offered daily *pūjās* and healing meditations. Soon, it was formalized as a nongovernmental organization, the Lalitāmbikā Trust, which supports the underprivileged by providing food, education (free vocational courses), and medical help in the nearby villages in Coimbatore District. In cooperation with local hospitals, the trust organizes annual medical camps for diabetics and the local elderly population. These activities are in line with the trust's orientation towards healing. Providing food, for instance, represents more than just a good deed and charity to help those in need. Food itself, as explained by the Swami, is seen as medicine in the Vedic literature,¹⁶ but to benefit from it fully, it needs to be cherished, prepared, and shared with love.¹⁷ Thus, vegetarian food is prepared and served by the members of the trust on various occasions in connection with temple activities.

The Lalitāmbikā temple complex was recently expanded to include the Dayalaya Organization, an educational institute that teaches yoga, Advaita Vedānta, Tamil, and Sanskrit. The foundation stone for the Dayalaya was laid by Pujya Sri Dayananda Saraswati Swamiji, with whom Lalitāmbikā collaborates in its Vedānta-oriented courses. The Dayalaya center, which includes a meditation hall, is located near the temple in the Anuvavi foothills, a serene setting in the picturesque Western Ghats. At the temple, the Swami regularly gives lessons in Vedic astrology (*jyotiṣa*) and courses in tantric (Śrīvidyā) spirituality. I have been visiting the temple and participating in its activities since 2012, when I first stayed there during the *Navarātri* celebrations. Over subsequent visits, I conducted unstructured interviews with devotees of Lalitāmbikā and with the Swami himself. I have participated in meditations and courses organized by the temple. Over the years, I have compiled notes from my visits to the temple, as well as “headnotes”, to use Simon Ottenberg's (1990) term, and these form the basis of this study¹⁸.

In this paper, I aim to show how sun meditation and healing are incorporated into the tantric praxis of Lalitāmbikā and how healing itself is defined and perceived by the followers and adepts of this path within the Śrīvidyā tradition. The Swami and his followers believe that spiritual practices and energy healing derived from tantric sources can be successfully combined with medical treatment provided by physicians and a “Vedic lifestyle”, understood as a peaceful life inspired by precepts from the *Upaniṣads*.

In one of his essays, Tambiah (1985) examines healing practices in Bangkok, where he came across a cult that preached that illnesses both physical and mental could be cured by practicing healing meditation derived from Buddhism. Tambiah interprets the cult as lying along two axes, the cosmological and the performative. According to Tambiah, “the cosmological perspective implies that ritual acts cannot be understood except as part of a

larger frame of cultural presuppositions and beliefs which provide the phenomenological and subjective basis for engaging in ritual in question” (1985, p. 97). Consequently, ritual can be “seen as a translation of a cosmology, and the signs, symbols and other components of the ritual act as vehicles for expressing cosmological meanings” (1985, p. 97). Similarly, in this paper, I show how sun-related healing rituals in the Lalitāmbikā temple can be seen as “translations” of Śrīvidyā cosmology and how meditation on the sun and its symbols serves to transform the practitioner’s body and mind.

3. Śrīvidyā Cosmology: Śrīcakra, Mantra, and Solar Powers

3.1. The Goddess and Her Representations

In a popular hymn of praise for the goddess, “Śrī Lalitā Sahasranāma”, chanted often at the temple, she is wearing the sun and moon as earrings (*tāṭaṅka-yugalī-bhūta-tapanoḍupa-maṇḍalā* verse 22). This verse is interpreted by the priests and the Swami to mean that she embodies the power behind the universe and is as indispensable to life on Earth as the sun and the moon. Thus, she is the active force in the world but also the observer looking at the universe with the moon and the sun. Similarly, in its most secret form, the mantra of the goddess has 16 syllables and is divided into three sections (*kūṭa*), which are attributed to Agni (fire), Sūrya (sun), and Candra (moon).¹⁹ Also, the worshippers of Lalitāmbikā often refer to the goddess as a mother who shines with her glory like thousands of suns, and the solar metaphors are indeed omnipresent in the Śrīvidyā treatises.²⁰

The name of the tradition, Śrīvidyā, derives from the main mantra (*vidyā*) of the goddess. As the name of the goddess indicates, her nature is threefold, and she is also worshipped in three forms.²¹ The first is her coarse (*sthūla*) form—that is, her iconographic representation. Tripurā’s second, subtle (*sūkṣma*) form is that of the *śrīcakra*, a ritualistic tool, a yantra where her powers are to be accessed. The nine interlocking triangles of the yantra and the central point (*bindu*) visually represent the forces inherent in the world that are responsible for its manifestation and destruction at the end of time. The *śrīcakra* is therefore seen as an esoteric instrument that enables reality to be reinvented and the powers of the universe to be transferred to the practitioner’s body. In the Samayācāra Śrīvidyā of Lalitāmbikā, *śrīcakra* is used in three variants: *śrīyantra* (a yantra drawn on paper or engraved on metal plates), *Maha meru* (a three-dimensional *śrīyantra* made of *pañcaloha*)²² (Figure 3), and a healing wand.



Figure 3. Śrīcakra (<https://www.facebook.com/srilalithambikatemple/photos/>, accessed on 15 May 2024).

The śrī yantra healing wand is a new tool recently developed by the Swami and is used specifically for healing others. The wand has a miniature *Maha meru* made of pure crystal at its tip. The practitioner recites a mantra and points the wand at the *cakra* to be healed and visualizes the energy flowing from the wand.²³

3.2. Śrīcakra, the Sacred Correspondences, and How to Understand the Root of Disease

Many of the lectures given by the Swami at Lalitāmbikā temple pointed to the complex symbolism of the *śrīcakra*. It is believed that the nine sections of the *śrīcakra* correspond to the energy centers of the human subtle body.²⁴ However, practitioners are encouraged to look for more detailed correspondences when analyzing the inner sacred geometry of the yantra.²⁵

In the most common yogic model of the subtle body, found in many tantric texts, there are three main channels in the body's microcosm.²⁶ The central channel (*suṣūmṇā*)²⁷ of the subtle body runs through the center of the body, along the spine. Two other channels, *idā* (lunar) and *piṅgala* (solar), spiral around it and meet at a series of wheel-like nexuses. These are the *cakras*, the constantly vibrating energetic wheel-like centers. Numerous other channels emanate from the *cakras* and are generally believed to permeate the entire body. The energy channels meet and form knots (*granthi*) that block the free flow of inner energy and thus prevent the consciousness from reaching higher levels of realization. One aim of tantric yoga is to untangle these knots so that free flow through the channels can take place (Samuel 2014). By regulating these channels, the yogi controls and distributes energy to heal and strengthen their body (Khanna 2003).

Furthermore, Śrīvidyā practitioners share the Āyurvedic notion that the human body has numerous vital points (*marma*) that can be used for healing but also need to be protected, as they can be influenced by hostile forces or even physically attacked by those who know their significance (Wujastyk 2003, p. 241). On the *śrīcakra*, the *marmas* are represented by the meeting of three intersecting lines.

As already mentioned, the *śrīcakra* is a complex diagram consisting of various geometric figures: triangles, circles, petal-like enclosures, and squares. Samayācāra Śrīvidyā practitioners perceive the inner space of the *śrīcakra* as a parallel universe or a representation of the universe with its multiple dimensions.²⁸ Spiritual training in Lalitāmbikā therefore requires adepts to meditate on the *śrīcakra* and manipulate its forces with visualizations and mantras. The *śrīcakra* also serves as a mirror image of the body, and those who learn to channel its energies can use them in healing. In fact, the *śrīcakra* is also a mirror that shows a hidden vision of a world in which goddesses play an active role.²⁹ The *cakra* is meditated upon; visualized; and worshipped with flower offerings and edibles (sweet dishes, milk, and fruit).³⁰

The adepts are first asked to focus on the outer enclosure of the *śrīcakra*, the *trailokya-mohana*. It corresponds to the lower extremities, and its healing energy is said to cure joint pain and rheumatism while strengthening the nervous system.

The second enclosure, known as the *sarvāśā-paripūraka cakra*, corresponds to the energetic center of the region below the navel, and thus, energy produced from this *cakra* affects the reproductive system. The third enclosure, which has eight petals and is called *sarvasamkṣobhaṇa*, affects the navel region. The name of this *cakra* literally translates as "the one that agitates everything". The agitation refers to an act of getting rid of or shaking off all attachments and obsessions that distract from the true understanding of the spiritual goal, which is to recognize oneself as the divinity. Those devotees who suffer from anxiety are instructed by Lalitāmbikā priests to meditate on this enclosure to release mental tension. Many devotees believe that people with untreated trauma try to gloss over their painful experiences and mask their pain with false optimism. Contemplating the *cakra* energies allows them to uncover the hard truths hidden beneath the toxic positivity that people may embrace in their daily lives.³¹ On the other hand, an advanced practitioner learns how to channel the healing energy of the *cakra* to heal digestive disorders, diseases traditionally considered to be caused by stress and mental tension. The fourth *cakra*

(*sarvasaubhāgyadāyaka*), according to the Swami's interpretation, represents the energies related to previous and future lives, and the healing energy produced from this *cakra* heals heart disease by balancing blood pressure. *Cakras* number five (*sarvārthasādhakacakra*) and six (*sarvarakṣākaracakra*) are said to generate healing energy specifically for lung diseases and mental disorders. Interestingly, the seventh enclosure, which consists of eight triangles, is known as the remover of all diseases (*sarvarogaharacakra*) and is often used separately in healing sessions. A Tantric master or an advanced healer can visualize this part of the *cakra* on a patient's body to heal chronic diseases, said to be caused by the karma of previous births (Jagannatha Swami n.d.).³²

The eighth enclosure of the *śrīcakra* (*sarvasidhipradha*) is said to have the power to cleanse and purify the whole body. It is used in healing sessions to remove the negativity of a patient's intrusive thoughts. As the Swami explains, negative thought patterns create a limited worldview that people mistakenly believe to be the ultimate reality. Parental admonishments, gossip, the hum of modern media, and social networks are recorded in the subconscious mind and manifest as distracting thoughts and phobias. In one meditation session at Lalitāmbikā, the discussion was centered around fears and insecurities. At one point, one of the students tried to contradict the illusory nature of fear by saying that her fear was based on a real predicament—her daughter had not yet gotten married. The Swami did not hesitate to interrupt her mid-sentence: "This is a *laukika* [wordly] problem that arises because we do not understand that our children are other souls. In ordinary reality, we have to allow others to live their own lives. They are not us. The other way to eliminate fear is to understand that ultimately there is only one reality, that many souls are one. Then what should you be afraid of?"³³

This ultimate unity of the world is represented in the ninth enclosure: the *bindu* (dot) of the *śrīcakra*, known as the enclosure of the state of bliss, the *sarvānandamaya cakra*. The *bindu* represents the state before the creation of the world and all the potentiality of universal consciousness. Meditation on this point is an experience of unity with the divine that leads to empowerment and peace or a "state in which all distinctions between subject and object have been transcended, a direct experience of the fundamental unity of a human being with the infinite" (Kakar 1980, p. 16).³⁴

The above analysis of how the Lalitāmbikā temple community understands the components of *Śrīcakra* shows that healing in this system begins with learning the correspondences between the body and the inner dimension of the *cakra*, which practitioners sometimes jokingly refer to as the "remote control". In one of his lectures, the Swami suggested that the *Śrīcakra* was not created by humans and is an instrument of the divine or non-human world. It was supposedly given to the ancient sages by more evolved spiritual beings. As such, it is not only a healing agent but also a means of communication, similar to an antenna that connects the individual spirit to the divine world, and a tool that helps manifest blessings in life.

While practitioners are initiated with mantras³⁵ at the beginning of their practice and gradually start tuning into the vibration of the *Śrīcakra*, it is also believed that each person has an individual "inner *Śrīcakra*"—a subtle energy field in their body that is usually distorted by accumulated karma. The Swami explained the concept in the following way:

"When we act spontaneously and in perfect alignment with the Divine, that action resonates with the *Śrīcakra*. However, through actions that arise from a dualistic viewpoint (e.g., greed, revenge, irascibility), our own *Śrīcakra* becomes damaged and takes on more distortions and negative influences, decreasing the clarity of our connection with the core of universal light and making subsequent actions even more rooted in dualism. This in turn leads to various types of physical and mental illness".

The oneness with the Divine and the holistic approach to life that the Lalitāmbikā temple proposes also has implications for ethics. The guru and his disciple do not often discuss moral or immoral actions, and one does not find many discourses on morality in the talks organized by the temple. When I inquired about the reason for this, I was told that realizing one's identity with the Divine Mother naturally leads to acting "motherly"

and caring for the world.³⁶ The Divine Mother can also be seen as the embodiment of the ever-present healing, reconciling, and caring energy that enables and empowers human beings to care for the world. Several practitioners told me that, after their initiation, they felt the need to cry over injustice and people's suffering in the world. In this framework, actions are not performed for the sake of the law or social norms but out of a need to express divine care. In other words, as [Mariano \(2001\)](#) states, holistic ethics "is a system for decision making that's not imposed from without but, rather, emerges from one's character and perceived relationship to the universe".

3.3. Solar Healing and Lunar Energies

While the above-mentioned yantra and mantra are the main tools used by Śrīvidyā adepts in their meditations for healing and enlightenment, sun healing is an interesting addition to the traditional practices. As I noted above, in the interpretations of mantras and yantras, references can be found to astrological concepts and solar and lunar energies. In tantric scriptures, the Śrīvidyā goddess's complexion is found compared to the radiance of hundreds of newly risen suns ([A.A. Golovkova 2021](#)). The *Vāmakeśvarīmata* tantra explains that the radiance of the sun causes the *Sūryakānta* gemstone (sunstone) to emit sparkling rays. Similarly, the text continues, the one who masters the Śrīvidyā mantra attains the power (*siddhi*) and splendor of the sun and moon ([Finn 1986](#), p. 121).³⁷

One day, during my stay at Lalitāmbikā temple, the Swami left to give a talk to devotees in Coimbatore. His disciples who stayed at the temple gathered outside the main shrine. Somehow, the Swami's absence prompted the mostly inexperienced adepts of Śrīvidyā to speak freely about their experiences. Many wished for healing; others spoke of their need to be close to the Goddess, as she protects from the evils of the mundane world.³⁸

When I asked the Swami's disciples what they understood by the realization of oneness with God, some of them pointed to the sun. For them, the sun is the divine light that triumphs over evil (darkness) and a constant reminder of the divine grace that the Mother Goddess showers on her children. Many of the adepts were from South India, mainly from Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala. These spiritual seekers varied in age—college students in their 20s, businesspeople in their 30s or 40s, and older couples who were retired or had established careers, some of them accompanied by their teenage children. Their motivations varied, but you could see a general eagerness to experience the mystical visions and what many described as "spiritual elevation". They spoke of being led to this place by their visions of the divine. I remember a middle-aged couple talking about their plan to incorporate meditation into their hectic daily lives. The husband listened intently to his wife and nodded as she talked about adjusting their schedules. He smiled, turned to the others, and said, "My wife is my guru. The Goddess speaks through her. That's why I'm here". His comment was met with murmurs of approval. But not everyone was led to Lalitāmbikā temple in the same way. A young pharmaceutical sales representative from Visakapatnam believed that the goddess manifested herself in spontaneous events in his life: "When I came home after graduation, I had no plan for my life. As soon as I walked into the house, my father said, 'Son, get ready: tomorrow is your wedding.' I met my wife at our wedding the next day. We're still together, although I spend most of the year driving around the country selling drugs. If I didn't believe that the goddess is in everything, I couldn't live a happy life".

Our discussion was overheard by one of the temple priests, who was leading the temple's cow to the nearby pasture. The cows are the property of the temple and are honored with special blessings, and in return, they bless the temple with milk for the offerings. A small crowd of devotees from the neighboring villages had already gathered next to the cow. They cheered, smiled at the cow, and bowed to her before heading up to the temple for their daily prayers. The priest stopped, hugged and stroked the cow's head, and joined in our discussion by quoting a Hindu scripture:

"*Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*³⁹ says, 'If there is nothing else except me, where is the question of fear?' The cause of fear is the existence of a second person. The existence of

second person is felt only out of ignorance. In fact, there is no second in this universe. Like there is only one sun”.

3.4. To See and Experience the Sun God: Gāyatrī and Solar Healing according to Samayācāra Śrīvidyā

Sun mantras are of the utmost significance in Śrīvidyā. These formulas are derived from the Vedic tradition and are only occasionally explained with reference to Tantric sources. Thus, while the goddess mantras are considered tantric (they were revealed by tantric ascetics who received visions from goddesses), the main source of the sun mantras is the Vedic scriptures.

During my first visit and subsequent spiritual training at Lalitāmbikā temple, I was surprised at the importance of the tradition attached to sun worship. While the adepts were initiated into the tradition of Tripurasundarī, the sun was worshipped in the morning, and great attention was paid to chanting the *gāyatrī* mantra.⁴⁰ The *gāyatrī* is perhaps the best-known Vedic mantra, originally mentioned in *Rg Veda* 3.62.10. The mantra is also used, albeit in different variations, in many tantric rituals⁴¹. Traditionally, this mantra is taught to twice-born (*dvijāti*) boys during their sacred thread ceremony (upanayana) and recited by orthodox Brahmins every morning at sunrise (Flood 1996, p. 222). As Brooks (1992, p. 93) notes, the South Indian Śrīvidyā proponents wrote complex philosophical treatises in which they attempted to prove the identity of the Śrīvidyā with the Vedic *gāyatrī* mantra. Bhāskaraṛāya, for example, preached in his *Varivasyarahasya* that the *gāyatrī* has two forms, one Vedic, which is explicit (*spṛṣṭam*) and can be chanted openly, and the other deeply secret (*gopaniyataram*), which is the tantric Śrīvidyā-mantra (Bhāskaraṛāya 1976, p. 7). According to Bhāskaraṛāya, the Tantra adept who understands the secret, incredibly complex network of correspondences between the Śrīvidyā mantra and the *gāyatrī* can recite the Vedic *gāyatrī* and receive all the benefits of the tantric formula. In other words, the Śrīvidyā is the secret essence of the *gāyatrī* and the Vedas. Some modern interpretations point to *gāyatrī* mantra’s power to heal and release the blockages caused by past karmas (Prattis 2002). This division of the *gāyatrī* manta into explicit and hidden variants can, in turn, be read in relation to the sun itself, which, while visible to all, only reveals its spiritual powers and meaning to the initiated.⁴²

3.5. Sun Gazing: The Healing Practices at Lalitāmbikā

Sun meditation is one of the first daily practices learned by adepts at the Lalitāmbikā temple. During my first stay at the temple, we had to learn the sun meditation directly from the Swami. The first part of the meditation is simple exposure to the sun. After the morning ablutions, we gathered around 6 a.m. in front of the temple on a meditation ground. While tantric meditations are rich in visualizations and often require the recollection of praises and invocations, the morning sun meditation began with *prāṇāyāma* and contemplation of the rising sun. Then the Swami asked us to close our eyes and observe the flow of energy in and out of our bodies. It was an awareness exercise where we could observe the subtle waves of energy in the body. In the Swami’s teaching, the influence of the sun on people was compared to the ocean’s waves that constantly come into contact with and shape the shore. Unlike the coastal beach, however, people have the power to recognize and use the healing power of the sun.

Indeed, Tantric traditions generally emphasize a physical, participatory form of religious experience. In her study of Śrīvidyā in the tantric center of Śaktipur (India), Hirmer (2022, p. 128) suggests that the rays of the sun and moon permeate practitioners to such an extent that they become their material expression. Indeed, the sun is perceived in outer and inner visions—it is a god that appears in the sky every day and is therefore called the “eye of heaven” by practitioners.⁴³

The Swami formally began the second phase of the morning sun meditation by announcing “It was sage (*ṛṣi*)⁴⁴ Jamadagni who gave the world the path of sun worship (*upāsana mārga*).⁴⁵ So let us bow to him when we do this meditation”. With these words, he

urged everyone to propitiate the sage by prostrating before the rising sun, also known as Atmakaraka, the symbol of the soul's goal. According to Vedic astrology, a soul is reborn because it has desires that remained unfulfilled in previous lives, and the new life gives it another opportunity to fulfil them. Astrologers therefore recognize that certain planets and cosmic bodies have the power to influence and guide the soul. The sun is one of them. It serves as a guiding star that illuminates each person's unique essence and provides valuable insight into their life journey (Rallapalli and Mirdoddi 2024, p. 48). According to the beliefs, Atmakaraka decides which profession a person will take up. The Swami thus pointed out that those who are unemployed or looking for a better job should worship the sun, as should those who suffer from bone diseases and calcium deficiency. It is also to be noted that the Samayācāra tradition establishes its connection with Vedic revelation by referring to the Vedic sages like Jamadagni and Jaimini. As can be seen from the statements quoted above, the mantras, along with the visualizations, were meant to protect the adepts and help in the removal of diseases, but apparently, they also had a positive influence on their social and professional life. Meditation on the sun was literally meant to dispel the darkness caused by material problems.

The morning sun meditation continued. We were asked to sit in the lotus position (padmāsana) focusing our attention on the rising sun and feeling the energy of the sun. However, the Swami assured the new adepts that the Śrīvidyā meditation on the sun god is useful even for those who cannot practice yoga āsanās. In fact, many new practitioners came to the temple in search of healing, and their physical condition did not allow them to perform advanced yogic techniques. I witnessed how, in some activities at the temple, those with physical disabilities were assisted and seated on chairs, while the others sat cross-legged on the floor. They participated in the prayer chants and were also escorted outside to greet the sun. Thus, certain changes were introduced to accommodate the different adepts. Most of the time, however, there were strict rules that had to be followed. At one of the gatherings after the afternoon *pūjā*, the Swami enumerated the essential elements of daily practice: sun meditation, *agni hotra* (fire offering), Śrīvidyā mantra practice, and Śricakra *pūjā*. Taken together, they offer therapeutic and diagnostic tools that can bridge the socially constructed gap between the body and the mind and between the self and the other. One of the senior disciples asked if *agni hotra* could be replaced by mere meditation on fire. This was met with a reprimand from the Swami. Hence, while the tradition was adapted for modern times and focused on healing in the broadest sense, there were certain rigors that the adept had to accept in order to benefit from the practices.⁴⁶

The subsequent part of the sun meditation was performed with eyes closed. We visualized a series of Sanskrit mantras related to the sun, starting with the first seed syllable (*hram*). We then recited these monosyllabic mantras continuously for several minutes, visualizing them flowing and shining over our heads in a yantra divided into petals (Figure 4). We were warned to be careful while visualizing—the syllables should shine and be bright, and with time, we should actually feel their power, i.e., the power of the sun. Therefore, they should only be invoked above the head, as placing them in the body or on the head can cause spiritual and physical problems.

Satisfied with our efforts, the Swami concluded:

Later, when you leave the temple to carry on with your lives, when doing the meditation in the morning sit facing east and in the evening facing west. Do it every day, or if that's not possible, at least on Sunday morning at sunrise. When you go for a stroll on a day with a nice weather give thanks to the sun for the warmth and good mood, for it is through the sun that God's mercy is manifested. You can give praise to the sun in your mind—just say om mitrāya namaḥ.⁴⁷

It seems important to note that, according to the teachings, the sun mantras should be visualized in the *Sahasrāra* (thousand-petaled lotus) above the head, the unique cakra that belongs to the spiritual realm but is in close proximity to the physical body. The Swami explained that the sun is said to have a purifying effect but that its power should first be felt outside the physical body. When the sun mantras hover in a circle above the head,

they create an energetic aura that revitalizes the body. In this way, the sun and its energy are perceived physically, but at the same time, its spiritual aspects are internalized. The meditation ended with a minute sitting in silence with eyes closed.



Figure 4. The method of visualization of the twelve syllables of the Sun's mantra.

3.6. The Sun, Time, and Timelessness

One day, after the meditation and the chanting of sun mantras, I enquired further about the importance of sun adoration. "The sun is a god who is visible to all. All living beings can experience *darśan* of the sun", said the Swami, pointing out the importance of *darśan* practice in Hinduism. The Hindu act of *darśan* is the search for "auspicious sight" of the divine in the sacred images (Eck 1998, p. 4). In Hindu practices, the emphasis is on the interaction between the deity and the devotees through the senses: seeing (*darśan*), hearing (chanting, mantras), touching (e.g., touching divine images and performing mudras), smelling (offering perfumes and fragrances to the deity), and tasting (eating blessed food). During *darśan*, the faithful aspire to see and be seen by the deities. Similarly, the followers of Śrīvidyā are convinced that the sun is a manifestation of the divine. Indeed, the *Upaniṣads* hint at the idea that the luminous disc of the sun can be the (metaphorical) gateway to the heavenly world (Olivelle 1998, p. 525).

A tantric practitioner and Śrīvidyā adept from a neighboring state, Kerala, with whom I spoke after my visit to Lalitāmbikā temple, pointed to the idea of the threshold, the in-between state that practitioners enter through meditation. In it, they are not overwhelmed by the outside world and get a taste of what lies beyond our sensory perception. Similarly,

according to this adept, the chanting of the sun mantra is most beneficial in the transitional hours before sunrise⁴⁸: “[It is] the time when the night is over but the day has not yet begun. In these moments, between darkness and light, the mind also enters into an altered state of consciousness. The moments belong neither to the previous nor the next state”.⁴⁹ At Lalitāmbikā temple, the sun meditation is performed mostly in the early morning. Nevertheless, the Brahmins and members of other upper castes (Pandian 2002, p. 1735) also pay reverence to the sun as part of their *sandhyāvandanam*.⁵⁰

Also, as mentioned by the Lalitāmbikā devotees, meditation on the sun is a contemplation of the visible and invisible realms and the many visions of time, change, and eternity. The Swami himself indicated in one of our conversations that an adept who practices Śrīvidyā meditation moves beyond ordinary time:

“In the mundane world, the rising and setting of the sun is what determines the longevity of any living beings. This is called *kālamṛtyu* (time and death).⁵¹ According to the good and bad deeds we commit in the life the *prāṇa śakti* [inner energy],⁵² our body loses its heat and strength, and this results in untimely death. Śrīvidyā meditation on the sun helps to conquer untimely death”.

The concept of *kālamṛtyu* presents time as an oppressive force. Śrīvidyā therefore offers ways to control it or even use it to one’s advantage. One of the tantric practitioners I met at Lalitāmbikā shared his experience with an old master yogi of the tradition. In his story, the two men were chatting in the ashram when the practitioner suddenly remembered that they were expected at another temple in a few hours. The temple in question was indeed a considerable distance away, and no transportation was available. The old yogi reassured the adept: “Don’t worry, we will get there in time. I know a shortcut”. As they walked, the old yogi touched the practitioner’s hand. “It was a long way, but I do not remember how we managed to get there in time. When my master touched my hand, I felt as if we had gone beyond time”.

Kālamṛtyu was also mentioned in several conversations I had with practitioners gathered at the temple during seminars and workshops. Many of the temple’s brochures contained statements suggesting that spiritual practice can lead to “immortality” or the “elimination of disease”. When asked about these concepts, the advanced practitioners referred to *kālamṛtyu*. Stevenson (2009, p. 64) notes that the idea of “denying death” in the modern world serves to reinforce a certain self-image “that extends confidently and indefinitely into the future”. But the Śrīvidyā practitioners at Lalitāmbikā temple did not dismiss the threat of death by creating optimistic visions of the future. They generally understood immortality not as eternal life but as a state in which one is not disturbed by external circumstances. The practitioners believed that, even if an illness occurs, constant contemplation of the divine makes the pain bearable. When one realizes the all-encompassing nature of the Goddess, illnesses are seen as just another aspect of her power. Nevertheless, the mantras given to the initiates in the temple are meant to protect against influences that can shorten the natural lifespan.

3.7. With the Sun as My Witness: Glimpses of the Life of the Goddess Devotees

The daily schedule of temple rituals varies, but usually, the temple is opened after the morning meditations, and worshippers can ask for *pūjās* and fire offerings. The *śrīcakra pūjās* are performed in the afternoon in the main temple, and afterwards, devotees usually gather to listen to the Swami’s spiritual talks or participate in special events organized by the Trust.

On one of my visits, I spent the afternoon with the adepts, who were particularly interested in sun meditation. In the backyard of the temple, a harsh afternoon wind blew from the nearby mountains, but the place exuded peace and camaraderie. After a long meditation, a group of disciples were resting on a staircase leading to the guru’s office. A dense stand of trees sheltered the group, and the snake shrines nearby still smelled of milk from the morning offerings. I joined them, and soon, Amma, the Swami’s wife, brought us cups of chai. The group joked that the sun was following them and watching all

their activities.⁵³ Some playfully discussed how to meditate on the guru's feet—a common practice in the tantric tradition that is said to bring blessings. As I sat with them, I thought about my own experiences with sun healing and what Clifford Geertz (1998) called “deep hanging out”: supposedly purposeless and banal forms of leisure and pastime through which the ethnographer comes to understand something deeper about a community or field site.

The back door of the temple was ajar, and we could glimpse the images of the goddesses shimmering faintly in the light of an oil lamp. As we sipped chai, I caught sight of a young priest in the temple bowing to the images and praying silently, waving incense sticks before the motionless faces of the goddesses. He then sank to his knees in front of the *Śrīcakra* and then squeezed through the back door to join us for a refreshing drink.

The priest had received his education in Haridwar and eventually found his way to Lalitāmbikā temple. He liked the picturesque surroundings with the hills in all shades of green and the misty mornings. He gulped his chai and pointed at the clouds—the sun was just setting, the light was beginning to fade, and the rays were streaming through the gaps in the clouds. “Here it is—see this, just below the cloud”. He pointed with his finger as if to nudge the cloud. “A shadow?” I asked. He shook his head impatiently. “The little wrinkles there”, he said, again poking his finger at the sun. “That's *prāṇa*”. He went on to explain that after the creation of the world, *prāṇa* remained in all living beings in the form of internal energy, but that *prāṇa* is everywhere in the world. “You just cannot see it most of the time. We need the sun, to feel it, to see it, and to strengthen it in our bodies”.

The priests and followers at Lalitāmbikā share a belief that the primordial energy of the universe, the *prāṇa śakti*, flows undetected through everything, from the tiniest grain of sand on the Earth to the radiant sun in the sky, animating the world at both the micro and macro levels.

Later that day, after the afternoon *pūjās*, I accompanied another of the Swami's disciples, Akash, on his daily walk to a tobacco store near the sacred hills. We walked up the road that leads to the hill temples, which, according to legend, are still a meeting place for the siddhas, spiritual masters who left their physical bodies in the long-forgotten past. On the way, Akash admitted that he had come to the temple to offer himself to the goddess in the hope that, through her grace, he would become a better person.

He bought himself a pack of cigarettes and, in no time, was happily smoking and gazing at the sacred hills, the tobacco smoke mingling with the delicate mist enveloping the hills. Savoring the moment gazing at the hills, he turned and began coughing violently. Noting his difficulty in overcoming his cough, I asked him about his health. He smiled and complained about his bad habits and getting older. “But when I started practicing *Śrīvidyā*, my perception of the body changed. When I say I am sick, I think of my body, and when I say I am tired, I think of my mind. But we are more than body and mind. To understand this, this is healing”.

On our way back, I had time to reflect on other aspects of healing-oriented practices at Lalitāmbikā. The morning sun meditation and contemplation of the sunset, along with the morning fire offerings and evening *pūjās*, defined the day around the *Śrīvidyā* practice. The temple can be seen as a place of healing, where practitioners focus entirely on the spiritual world and leave their worries and even bad habits, such as Akash's addiction to smoking, behind. The sun was seen as a source of power, an observable god that determines the right time for any activity and activates the inner energy. Its bright glow recalled the power of the divine. There was also a curious aspect of asceticism whereby certain forms of renunciation were implicitly encouraged in the temple speeches.⁵⁴ Celibacy was not required, but the ascetic life was more often praised than the life of householders. Like in case of the Buddhist healing cult in Tambiah's (1985) ethnographic study, the followers of the Lalitāmbikā tradition model their lifestyle to a certain extent on the monastic life and draw pride and strength from small acts of renunciation (e.g., fasting) and the regularity of their practices (e.g., daily meditations and morning sun worship). The goddess Lalitāmbikā manifests in various forms in the lives of devotees to heal and transform them. She needs

śrīcakra as a solid form that can be contemplated and mantra to connect on the sonic level with those who invoke her. The sun is her visible form by which she observes the daily goings-on in the temple and graces the devotees with her energy.

4. Concluding Remarks

K. Singh (2017, p. 54) begins her article on modern Indian solar energy projects with reflections on an imposing Sūrya statue erected at Delhi International Airport. According to Singh, the Hindu sun god embodies the modern belief that solar energy will help India in the global technology race. Lalitāmbikā temple does not have such a monumental image of the sun. In fact, it has no representation of the sun at all. But as I pack my backpack on the last day of my visit, I see the colorful depictions of goddesses standing on the gopura (ornate tower) of the temple, bathed in the reddish sunrise. This image again reminds me of the morning sun meditations and the way we were instructed to let the meditation happen such that the energy of the sun can purify and strengthen our bodies.⁵⁵ Akash accompanied me to the bus stand. Nowadays, a bus runs from the temple to nearby towns, but a few years ago, the temple was an isolated enclave in the middle of fields and pastures. In those days, you had to walk a few miles to the nearest junction and wait for a bus to Coimbatore.

As we walked on, the sun rose gently, leaving a rosy hue in the sky. When it was time to say goodbye, Akash presented me with a gift, a tiny, locally published book on the *gāyatrī* mantra, extolling the importance of the mantra and referring to the experiences of people who have dedicated their lives to chanting it. As I boarded the bus, he wished me a safe journey and pointed to the book. “Hundreds and hundreds of repetitions and miracles can happen”, he whispered, shaking his head meaningfully.

As Urban (2003, p. 3) notes, despite the diversity of practices and paths within Tantric traditions, the popular, as well as the scholarly, view of Tantras often focuses on the extremity of esoteric practice and the notion that Tantra is “transgressive” and involves practices that are forbidden in mainstream Hinduism. This notion persists despite studies that have appeared in recent decades suggesting the opposite—that Tantra can very well be mainstream and that, as we have seen in the case of the Lalitāmbikā temple, such Tantric practices are not meant for ascetics living on the margins of society but, rather, are designed to heal and improve the lives of modern practitioners from different walks of life. In other words, this is the kind of Tantra that operates not on the periphery but in broad daylight. Similarly, Björkman and Burchett (2021) give examples of modern gurus from North India who present Tantra as a “universal and practical technology” for modern times, attracting both spiritual seekers from various religious backgrounds and people interested in remedies for their business concerns and health problems.

Hutch (2013) observes that the interplay between religion and medicine is currently undergoing a transformation, with spiritual considerations receiving more attention, as modern scientific medical practice and its allopathic approach to treatment—that is, treating disease as “other” or “outsider”—is often questioned. Samayācāra Śrīvidyā sees an illness not as an enemy but as another aspect of the grace of the goddess. At Lalitāmbikā, the Śrīvidyā goddess conveys not so much the idea of physical motherhood but a worldview in which the creative power of femininity takes center stage; the goddess mediates between life and death and holds within herself the possibility of regeneration (Ganesh 1990). Conversely, the sun is both a symbol of healing and a source of the healing power of Śrīvidyā.

At Lalitāmbikā temple, the goddess herself is visualized as the divine mother (Figure 5) and praised as the invisible force that animates the universe (Pechilis 2006). She is often compared to the moon or described as the healing light of thousands of suns.⁵⁶ As I explain in this study, the adepts of Śrīvidyā *sādhana* taught in the Lalitāmbikā temple aim to realize their union with the divine. By reciting Śrīvidyā mantras, they gradually free their minds from notions of duality and become receptacles for the mystical powers of the Lalitā goddess, who leads them to liberation. Conversely, meditations related to the sun are said to heal and transform adepts with the help of the divine light, which, unlike other spiritual forces, can be seen and experienced by everyone.



Figure 5. The main altar of the goddess of Śrī Lalitāmbikā temple.

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Notes

- ¹ See, for example, Lidke (2017, p. 17) on Tantra as a “dominant social and cultural force” that has shaped the entire Nepalese culture.
- ² The tantric nondual traditions appeal to all genders to unite spiritually with the divine, which is represented on the one hand by the maternal goddess but is ultimately an all-encompassing consciousness, iconographically represented by the image of the union of Śiva and Śakti. Similarly, Kakar (1982, p. 163) suggests that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Tantra promises the male “adept that he can retain his masculinity and yet recapture the *ānanda* [bliss] of his early femininity”.
- ³ P. Sauthoff (2023) notes that the famous mystic, philosopher, and tantra expert Abhinavagupta does not mention the role of tantric medical treatment in his major work, *Tantrāloka*. However, the earlier treatises *Bhūta*, *Bāla*, and *Gāruḍa Tantras*, written mainly in the sixth century, prescribe various tantric treatments using mantras and alchemical potions. Slouber (2016, pp. 8–9) explains that the Bhūtatantras focused on exorcisms, the Bālatantras prescribed cures for childhood diseases, and in the Gāruḍatantras, we find the treatment of snake bites and antidotes for various poisons.
- ⁴ See also E. Fisher (2012) on how Śrīvidyā changed cultural norms and integrated the South Indian Smārta Brahmin communities.
- ⁵ E.M. Fisher (2017, p. 78) notes that the term “samaya” is used in the works of Lolla Lakṣmīdhara (e.g., in his commentary on *Saundaryalaharī*) as an antithesis to *kaula*. In this context, the Śrīvidyā of the Kaula path accepts the ritual use of antinomian substances such as the infamous *pañcamakāras* (5M), while the Samaya Śrīvidyā focuses on internal ritualism and the purity of ritual observances in accordance with the ritual observances in accordance with the norms of orthodox Vaidika views.

- 6 Similarly, Kachroo (2016, p. 4) shows how contemporary Śrīvidyā “gurus and their *maṇḍalīs* (ritual groups or communities) in South India have re-evaluated the meaning and exposure of their sacred texts, associations, and practices in order to [...] promote Śrīvidyā as a form of what [she] call[s] public esotericism”.
- 7 As Linder (2019, p. 248) explains, “The Goddess Tripurā is conceived as ultimate Reality both metaphysically and soteriologically. She personifies the Energy permeating the supreme Consciousness (*cicchakti*), an energy consisting in an illuminating, manifesting power (*prakāśātmikā*), endowed with a free, playful will (*svatantrā cidvilāsinī*). With respect to Śiva, who is luminous Consciousness, or conscious Light, the Goddess represents the active, reflective awareness of the self, i.e., the *vimarśa*”.
- 8 A parallel could be drawn with *Sūryanamaskāra* (the ‘sun salutation’), which forms a fundamental part of modern yoga practices. *Sūryanamaskāra* was not considered part of traditional yoga and is a more recent addition from the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it has been studied and researched for its health benefits (Venkatesh and Vandhana 2022).
- 9 Readers interested in the place of sun worship in the early tantric traditions may refer to Acharya (2020), a study of *Saurasamhitā*, a tantric ritual compendium that identifies the Sun god with Śiva.
- 10 Swami Jagadatmananda Saraswati has given his consent to the information conveyed in this article. However, throughout the text, I have changed the names of other Tantric practitioners to ensure their privacy.
- 11 Bhāskararāya (1690–1785), a tantric master from Maharashtra, has remained one of the most important figures among scholars and practitioners of both the tantric and Vedic traditions. In fact, Śrīvidyā adepts worship guru lineages (*guru-maṇḍala*, *paramparā*, or *pañkti*) and, in particular, three categories of gurus: guru (the adept’s own teacher who initiated them), *parama* guru (guru’s guru), and *parameṣṭhi* guru (*parama* guru’s guru). During rituals, meditations, and mantra practice, all these gurus are worshipped (visualized in the *Śrīcakra* or on the head). As a nondual tradition, Śrīvidyā teaches that gurus are indeed divine, and there is no ontological difference between a guru and the goddess. She is therefore called *guru-maṇḍala-rūpiṇī*, the embodiment of the guru lineage.
- 12 In his study of Hanuman, Lutgendorf (2007, p. 388) observes that the appeal of many modern Tantric cults in India “is rooted in the modern middle class desire for a ‘quick fix’ for worldly problems”.
- 13 In fact, many contemporary Śrīvidyā traditions share the origin stories of a particular *paramparā* (guru lineage), which often emphasize that the present teacher had been in contact with other realms (i.e., that he received dreams or visions from deities or deceased masters that led him to adopt a particular practice or modify the existing ritualism). See, e.g., Karasinski (2023) and Bowden (2017).
- 14 Altglas (2014, p. 15) observes that, in the global New Age movements, “popularized Hindu-based (...) teachings are de-linked from their original religious and cultural frameworks to reach a non-Hindu (...) audience”. On the other hand, Frøystad (2019, p. 141) suggests that Hinduism should be seen as “one of the mothers of the New Age movement”. However, she also notes that, due to globalization and transnational migration, among other things, “Western New Age impulses increasingly began to find their way back to India, where they encountered a society in rapid transition”.
- 15 The tradition remains open to everyone while, at the same time, retaining the tantric initiation system that requires adepts to go through the stages of practice supervised by the guru. The mantras can only be given by the guru, and the details of the practice should not be disclosed without his permission. Swami admitted that he received threats from some tantric practitioners when he decided to teach the tradition to all interested seekers. According to him, the threats were not empty. After a visit from an angry tantric master, the Swami was bedridden and diagnosed as cursed by astrologers. It was only after many fire sacrifices that he finally recovered.
- 16 Olivelle (2011, p. 75) also indicates that food in ancient India “is not only the central element of creation; it is also said to be the source of immortality. In the dining ritual, for example, food is called *amṛta* (the immortal or ambrosia)”.
- 17 I was also told that the English word “love”, featuring prominently in the temple pamphlets, is used in this context as a synonym of *bhakti*, otherwise translated as devotion. Tantric texts such as the *Nityāṣoḍaśikāraṇava* (pp. 4–5) divide *bhakti* into lower and higher forms. The first type is characterized by the performance of rituals and meditations on various forms of God (*saguna*); the second, Supreme Devotion, is characterized by a special kind of love (*anurāga*) that arises from this practice and goes beyond a single form of God, as it is a love of person who realizes the omnipresence of the Divine. As Swami explained: “Even the worship of God (Īśvara) varies as there are many forms of the Divine, such as Sūrya Gaṇeśa, Viṣṇu, Rudra, Paraśiva, and Śakti. The divine energy (Śakti) also manifests in infinite forms such as Chhāyā, Vallabhā, Lakṣmī, and others. Therefore, there are many stages of devotion, and after countless births one experiences the devotion (*gaunābhakti*) towards Tripurasundarī. Those who are firmly established in the worship of Tripurasundarī are caught up by the supreme devotion (*parābhakti*)”.
- 18 I am also grateful to Swami for sharing with me his unpublished notes on rituals and goddesses and drafts of his conference papers on the philosophy and practice of Śrīvidyā.
- 19 As Beck (1995, p. 138) explains, “The moon’s parallelism with the 15 vowels taken collectively is derived from the fact that the moon has 15 phases (*tithi*) during each fortnight, the 16th phase being transcendental and unchanging’. The mantra has also been made to accord with the words of the Vedic Gāyatrī-Mantra in *Tripurā-tāpani-Upaniṣad*”.

- 20 mūlādhāre mūlavidyāṃ vidyutkoṭīsamaprabhām | sūryakoṭipratīkāśām candrakoṭidravām priye || 3-1 || In a section on internal ritual (*antaryāgavidhi*), the *Jñānārṇavatāntram* (2007) asks an adept to contemplate the main mantra in his *mūlādhāra cakra*. It is shining like thousands of lightning bolts, having the light of thousands of suns and splendor of thousands of moons (All translations from Sanskrit are mine, unless explicitly stated otherwise).
- 21 In the Setubandha commentary to verse 125 of the *Nityāṣoḍaśikārṇavatāntra* (1946), Bhāskararāya explains that the name Tripurā also refers to the power of the mantra of the goddess, explaining “This mantra (*vidyā*), when contemplated or chanted, allows one to control the three worlds. Since control over the three worlds is [usually] attributed to Paraśiva, [it can be said that] chanting this *vidyā* leads to the state of Paraśiva”.
- 22 Many sacred images in India were made of a five-metal alloy called *pañcaloha*. Ślaczka et al. (2019, p. 20) indicate that some texts mention gold, silver, copper, and brass as components of *pañcaloha*, adding that there also “appears to be no textual basis for ritual addition of small amounts of precious metals, although this is a documented practice in modern-day workshops producing temple bronzes: small amounts of gold and silver are added to the main alloy of copper, brass and lead to make a *pañcaloha*”.
- 23 It should also be remembered that Śrīvidyā texts proclaim the ontological identity of *śrīcakra* and the main mantra of the goddess, indicating that the different parts of the *cakra* are in fact created out of the potent phonemes of the mantra (*vidyā*) (Padoux 2013, pp. 82–83).
- 24 In the Tantric traditions, the subtle body generally occupies an important place in understanding and working with the connections between the physical plane and the plane of mind or consciousness. The term “subtle body” is used to refer to the human energy matrix that functions within the gross physical body. Biernacki (2023, p. 71) observes that the subtle body as described in Tantric texts of medieval India “is not particularly consonant with popular new-age versions of the subtle body, with their color-coded cakras pointing the way to spiritual enlightenment”. In fact it “also operates as a mechanism for the kinds of magical powers, *siddhis*, that populate Indian religious traditions and are entailed in this religiously shared Indian cosmology”.
- 25 In fact, the consecrated yantras in the Śrīvidyā tradition are also prescribed in some texts for the healing of humans and animals. *Kamalānāmnī tripurasundarīpaddhati* (n.d.) (verse 41a) points out that yantras are prepared for a particular patient indicating their birthday and the astrological conditions of that day and then are consecrated through chanting mantras and rituals (*pūjā*), so it can act as a healing instrument. Interestingly, such a yantra pacifies all disease (*sarvarogaśāntiḥ*), removes interference from spirits and other spiritual beings (*bhūtādyupadravaparīhāro*), and even eliminates disease from animals such as elephants or horses (*gajāśvādiroga*).
- 26 As White (2006, p. 3) notes, “Here [in the *Caraka Saṃhitā*], the links between the human body and the universe, between microcosm and macrocosm (or ecocosm), operate on the level of homology: the sun in the heavens is like the sun within the yogic body”.
- 27 In his *Saubhāgyabhāskara* commentary on *Lalitāsahasranāma* (1935: 110, verse 140), Bhāskararāya quotes Reṇukāpurāṇa, where the goddess of Śrīvidyā is described as the protector of *suṣuṃṇā*:īḍaikāśya mahākālī mahālakṣmīstu piṅgalā / ekavīrā suṣuṃṇeyamevaṃ sandhyātrayātmikā / / (*Lalitāsahasranāma*).
- 28 Meditation on *śrīcakra* can be seen as a contemplation and journey into a labyrinth. Ripinsky-Naxon (1993, p. 35), in his study of shamanism, mentions shamanic practices involving spiritual journeys with the help of mandalas aimed at reconstructing the missing part of the labyrinth. In the shamanic culture of the Melanesian Island of Malekula, in particular, “the secret of the labyrinth holds the secret to perpetual cosmic existence, and the female spirit is a surviving manifestation of the Mother-Goddess of birth, death, and rebirth” (1993, p. 35). As Timalisina (2012, p. 32) notes, on an ethnographic level, the Tantric perspective establishes a link between the “Shamanic paradigm of the living cosmos populated by spirits and the exegetical systems of South Asia, while on an epistemic and phenomenological level, it helps us understand self-experience in light of the lived-body”.
- 29 According to Śrīvidyā practitioners, the ultimate nondualism implies that we can only see ourselves and not a multitude of beings. However, due to ignorance, we are more willing to accept the idea of the “other”. Fear, anger, and other sufferings arise from the idea of the “other” (Saraswati 2013, p. 14).
- 30 The ritual worship of *śrīcakra* in Śrīvidyā differs in detail according to the lineage of the particular teacher, but it generally involves the preparation of the *sāmānyārghya* (ordinary offering) and *viśeṣārghya* (special offering) through the invocation of various deities and *kalās* (digits of the fire, sun, and moon). The two *arghyas* are the most important offerings in the *śrīcakra* rite. The specific divine *śaktis*, sages, and *siddhis* (powers) are invoked and worshipped in the *śrīcakra* and honored with *tarpaṇa* (oblations).
- 31 During my stay at Lalitāmbikā for one of the tantric training programs, I shared a room with two of the Swami’s other disciples, Rakesh and Akash. As the days were filled with learning ritual practices and studying texts, we usually ended the day sitting and chatting on the floor of the dormitory, where our sleeping bags were. The daily spiritual practices and experiences were our usual topic of conversation. Rakesh was a young goddess devotee from North India who also worked as a handyman and driver in various organizations associated with the temple. One evening, as we were talking near the end of the day, Rakesh complained of his chronic back pain. Akash, a loquacious Tamil in his forties who had studied with Swami for years, pointed to the Divine as the source of healing. “The Mother is the Truth, and when we approach the Truth, we are in the process of healing”, he said, referring to Swami’s speech from the previous day. Rakesh listened for a moment and then admitted that he had a drinking problem. What hurt him even more than his alcohol-affected liver was the fact that he hid his addiction from others. “That [this secret] is the heavy stone that weighs on me”, he finally said with a sigh, as we turned out the lights. He admitted that he felt a sense of relief when he told us about his problem and that the back pain no longer plagued him as much.

- 32 Yoginīhṛdaya's *Dīpikā* commentary (1.86) (Yoginīhṛdaya 2024) explains that the goddess is the liberator from all diseases that have their origin in thoughts (*vikalparūparoga*) and misunderstanding about the nature of reality. Therefore, meditation on the *sarvarogahara* cakra brings healing through the realization of nonduality (*abhedapratītihetutvāt*).
- 33 This recalls Kakar's (1991) observation about the role of modern gurus in Indian society, who are increasingly becoming healers "of emotional suffering and its somatic manifestations. This psychotherapeutic function, insufficiently acknowledged, is clearly visible in well-known modern gurus whose fame depends on their reported healing capabilities, rather than deriving from any mastery of traditional scriptures, philosophical knowledge, of even great spiritual attainments" (p. 45).
- 34 *Tripurasu mṛdarīśahasranāmastotram* (2024) (verse 17ba) praises the goddess as the healer of various diseases; she is the one who drives away (*roga-ghrī*) and alleviates (*roga-samanī*) disease but also removes the suffering caused by serious illness (*mahāroga-svarāpahā*).
- 35 Śrīvidyā practitioners believe that healing requires concentration of the mind and visionary meditation, and while the Śrīcakra is one of the tools that help in meditative practices, another indispensable tool is the mantra. In my conversation with the Swami, he quoted from Vedāntic philosophy to explain the importance of mantras: "The verse *anāvṛttiḥ śabdāt* means "liberation by sound" [*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 3.26.32]. The entire material manifestation began from sound, and sound can also end material entanglement, if it has a particular potency. The special sound capable of doing this is the transcendental vibration of the Śrīvidyā mantra, which is the unified combination of cosmic sounds based on the three major seed letters *aiṃ*, *hrīṃ*, *śrīṃ*. *aiṃ* is the sound of auspicious wisdom, which is eternal; *hrīṃ* is the healing energy; and *śrīṃ* is the [blessing of the] material world".
- 36 The tradition preaches the ultimate spiritual identity of the goddess and guru. Similarly, Kakar (2009) quotes a yogi mystic, Swami Muktananda, who taught his disciples that the mind that always contemplates on the guru eventually becomes the guru. In other words, meditation on the divine form of one's guru immerses one in the state of the guru (*gurutva*). Kakar discusses the quote in the context of healing: when a disciple (patient) ingests blessed food (*prasada*) that the guru (healer) has tasted or uses the water used by the guru for their ablutions, it dissolves their self-boundaries and accelerates the process of merging with the guru for the purpose of healing and transformation.
- 37 Padma (2013, pp. 61–62) mentions the use of auspicious signs, symbols of the sun and moon, as representations of the goddess in local art forms in India. It may be added that, although Śrīvidyā is a nondualistic system, multiple gods and goddesses are mentioned in the texts of the traditions. They are regarded as manifestations of the one divine consciousness—the goddess Tripurasundarī.
- 38 In her study of Catholic saints, Mayblin (2014, p. S279) notes that saints are venerated because they are "people like us" but also "not like us". Like us, they die, but unlike us, their bodies do not decay. Like us, saints can be anatomically male or female, but unlike the average person, they remain gender-neutral or gender-ambivalent in many hagiographic stories. They are neither strictly male nor strictly female, neither too close nor too far from us—and that is why saints endure. Similarly, tantric adepts and mystics in modern India espouse the concept of the nonduality of the world but, in many ways, maintain a balance between closeness to and distance from ordinary people. Many emphasize in their biographies that they led successful lives before their spiritual awakening and stress their understanding of life in its many shades. At the same time, they claim the special status of gurus, healers, and mystics who receive insights from the divine in times of challenge and are guided by spiritual direction. Healers are able to heal others, but their bodies are not immune to disease. Nevertheless, they find comfort in the closeness of the divine or in the loving connection with the world they perceive.
- 39 He was apparently referring to stanza I.iv.2; see Olivelle (1998, pp. 46–47).
- 40 "Om bhur, bhuva, sva, / tat saviturvarenyam / bhargo devasya dhlmahī / dhiyo yo nah pracodayat". This can be loosely translated as "Om, earth, atmosphere, and sky. May we contemplate the desirable radiance of the god Savitr [Sun]; may he impel our thoughts" Flood (1996, p. 222).
- 41 On the popularity of the *gāyatrī* and its modern interpretations, see Hatcher (2019).
- 42 The goddess Tripurasundarī is praised in a popular eulogy, *Lalitā trīṣatī* (*nāma* 177), as Hāhā Hūhū mukha stutyā, the one who is worshipped by the divine musicians (Gandharva) called Hāhā and Hūhū, who praise the sun with their songs.
- 43 This calls to mind the Indo-European people's belief in Father Sky, the most powerful deity in the pantheon, who watches over all that humans do, using his "eye of the sun" by day and the stars by night (Oberlies 2023, p. 35). Sick (2004, p. 436) also notes, "The Sun also acts as informant of the gods in the Vedas. The sun god Sūrya is called the eye of Mitra, whose function seems to be related to the enforcement of contracts, truths, and right action, although many of these functions have been usurped by his dvandva partner Varuṇa. Thus, Mitra-Varuṇa use Sūrya's powers of perception in their disciplining of contract breakers".
- 44 "In Yāska's *Nirukta*, a treatise on the semantic exegesis of a collection of Vedic words including hundreds para-etymologies, the word *ṛṣi* is derived from the root *ṛṣ-* 'to see' (II.11 *ṛṣir darśanāt*), and thus, traditionally, this word denotes 'a seer'. It is, however, better to derive the word *ṛṣi* from the root *ṛṣ-*, 'to rush', and thus, it may be taken in the sense of 'the one who rushes forward', i.e., 'a leader', or 'an intellectual leader'" (Thite 2024, p. 3).
- 45 Bhāskaraśāstra's commentary on verse 175 of Laxman (1935, p. 162) includes the following verse: "Through the sun's path, by traveling along the path of light and similar routes, one reaches the realm of truth where that supreme being (consciousness), Brahma, exists" (*sūryadvāreṇetyasya sūryopalakṣite'rcirādīmārgeṇa gatvā yatra satyaloke sa puruṣo brahma vartate tatra yāntītyarthāt*).

- ⁴⁶ In fact, some tantric scriptures teach that, when nondual awareness is acknowledged as fire, the oblation into fire can be performed mentally (Timalsina 2007, p. 158).
- ⁴⁷ Mitra refers to one of the names for the sun in Hinduism. In the Vedas, the sun is referred to as “Mitra’s eye”, and this Mitra is described as “thousand-eared, ten-thousand-eyed”, the constant watcher (Oberlies 2023, p. 55).
- ⁴⁸ It is tempting to compare this statement with Thomas Berry’s observation that, with the gradual destruction of the natural world, people have lost touch with the natural order of things and have consequently forgotten “the great spiritual import of these moments of transition”. “The dawn [for instance] is mystical, a very special moment for the human to experience the wonder and depth of fulfillment in the sacred” (Jensen 2008, p. 43).
- ⁴⁹ A reference to the middle ground can be found in the instructions for meditation in the tantric scriptures. The *Vijñāna-bhairava* teaches that a seeker of ultimate reality should focus neither on pleasure nor on pain but on the middle ground between the two (Joo 2007, p. 132).
- ⁵⁰ Traditional *sandhyāvandanam* of the upper castes consists of the ritual recitation of the Vedas. These rituals are performed three times a day: in the morning (*prātassamdhya*), at noon (*mādhyāhnikā*), and in the evening (*sāyaṃsamdhya*). In reference to the Brahmins in Kerala, Pati (2014, p. 207) states that they traditionally perform *sandhyāvandanam* “three times a day—morning during brahma muhūrtam, the ambrosial hour before sunrise, at noon and dusk; but nowadays, due to changing lifestyle, they perform twice a day—at dawn and dusk”.
- ⁵¹ The term is usually translated as premature death. The *Svacchanda Tantra* devotes a chapter to *kālamṛtyujaya*, the victory over death and time, and Kashmiri Śaiva philosopher Kṣemarāja defines *kālamṛtyu* as a kind of state that a yogi can attain: a state of union with the divine (P.J.P. Sauthoff 2019). Similarly, a Śrīvidyā text, *Śrīvidyārṇavatāntra* (1947), explains that the one who makes offerings to the goddess in the form of curd, honey, and milk is never afflicted by disease and untimely death: *atha dadhimadhuḥṣīramiśrāṃllājān maheśvari / hutvā na bādhyate rogaiḥ kālamṛtyuyamādibhiḥ // 33 //*, chapter 5
- ⁵² *prāṇāyāmena yuktena sarvarogakṣayo bhavet | ayuktābhyāsayogena sarvarogasamudbhavaḥ || 6–3 || śrīvidyārṇavatāntram* If one combines [rituals] with breath control, they will be protected from all diseases; if one separates the practice [from breath control], the diseases will accumulate.
- ⁵³ Interestingly, in the Vedas, the sun is the observer but also the prize to be won by the gods. To “win the sun”—a recurring topos in the Rgveda hymns—also means to breathe fresh “vitality” (*vājā*) into the cosmos as the new year commences (Oberlies 2023, p. 15).
- ⁵⁴ As Gough (2021, p. 46) noted, a tantric initiation is generally considered to be different from an ascetic initiation. The vow of celibacy is not required, and mantra practices, not asceticism, are the main tools for destroying karma and attaining liberation.
- ⁵⁵ This is reminiscent of Catherine Bell’s (1997, p. 82) description of ritual agents who “do not see how they have created the environment that is impressing itself on them but assume, simply in how things are done, that forces beyond the immediate situation are shaping the environment and its activities in fundamental ways”.
- ⁵⁶ Chinnaiyan (2022) points out that the *Kāmakalā Vilāsa*, an important Śrīvidyā text composed by Śrī Punyānanda Nātha, uses the image of the sun to demonstrate the power of the fusion of Śiva-Śakti. According to the text, the sun is indeed the face of the devī, and the fire and the moon are her breasts.

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