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A Day in the Life of an Aesthetic Tāntrika: From Synaesthetic Garden to Lucid Dreaming and Spaciousness

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Abstract: This essay addresses the question of the relationship between Aesthetics and Tantra, in the world-view and life-world of Hindu Tantric visionary Abhinavagupta (ca. 975–1025 C.E.) and his tradition. I respond to a classic work on Abhinavagupta’s understanding of aesthetic experience and religious experience by shifting the focus from ultimate experience to the life of a liberated being. I argue that Abhinavagupta’s blending of Aesthetics and Tantra naturally follows from his view of liberation, which re-integrates the body and senses into the religious life, and affirms the reality of the material world in which the liberated being is embedded. I recover the very humanness and boundedness of Abhinavagupta as an additional way of understanding liberation. I draw on hymns of praise, descriptions of ritual, thoughts on hermeneutics of Being, and complex metaphors, from Abhinavagupta’s tradition, and engage with various thinkers, including Performance Theorist Richard Schechner and neurologist James Austin, to flesh out complex metaphors depicting the relationship between consciousness and the world. I conclude by reflecting on similarities between the Trika model of Self, as interpreted by Abhinavagupta’s student Kṣemarāja, and lucid dreaming.

Keywords: Abhinavagupta; Kṣemarāja; Tantra; aesthetics; body; senses; consciousness; synaesthesia; lucid dreaming; lucidity; spaciousness; spirituality; liberation-in-life; authenticity; authentic self

1. After the Ultimate Experience: Tantra and Authentic Life

We are moving closer to being well-balanced when the standing of our being in relation to the presencing of Being is deeply understood through our embodiment

[Our] gait may assume an almost supernatural power . . . feeling the powerful flow of the earth, rising up into our body, when we speak with words that, as we experience them, flower through the mouth.

(David Michael Levin, in (Levin 1985, p. 273).)

Any word arising out of his mouth is the extraordinary *mantra*; any standing of his body [whether] in pleasure or pain is precisely *mudrā*; any natural streaming of the breath is simply the marvelous yoga; having experienced the Supreme Light, what, in the world, would not shine?

(Abhinavagupta, *Anubhavanivedana (Presenting Experience)*, verse 3.)¹

¹ śabdaḥ kaścana yo mukhād udayate mantraḥ sa lokottaraḥ saṁsthānaṁ sukhaduḥkhañjanmavapuṣo yat kāpi mudraiva sā/ prāṇasya svarasena yatpravahaṇaṁ yogaḥ sa evādbhutaḥ dhāma paraṁ mamānubhavataḥ kinnāma na bhrājate/ I have taken the Sanskrit from Silburn, in (Silburn 1970, p. 37). See her translation on p. 38. See also Rastogi’s translation in (Rastogi 1990, p. xv). My translation is inspired in part by the translations and insights of both of these shining scholars.

His body flushed with a rosy healthy glow, [and as Blue-Throat Śiva] his neck a dark color shining with a fragrant ointment, wearing a long and loose sacred thread, his dress made of [smooth] silk, white and dazzling as moonbeams, [Abhinavagupta] rests in the yogic posture of the spiritual vital hero

(Madhurāja, *Dhyānaślokaḥ* (*Verses on Visualization [of Abhinavagupta]*), verse 3b.)²

This essay is a study of the relationship between Tantra and Aesthetics in the world-view and life-world of the Hindu Tantric visionary Abhinavagupta (ca. 975–1025 C.E.), who lived in Kashmir approximately 1000 years ago. My approach is that of a Tantric Studies scholar, drawing on texts that are a part of Abhinavagupta’s Trika Śaiva tradition. My questions are: How does Abhinavagupta bring Aesthetics into his Tantra? And in what ways does Abhinavagupta’s Tantra in all its varied and wonderful dimensions—Tantric ritual, Tantric expression, and, most importantly, the Tantric stance towards life and Reality—become blended seamlessly with Aesthetics? In asking and answering these questions, I intend to provide a more humanistic picture of Abhinavagupta.

My thesis is that Abhinavagupta’s blending of aesthetics with Tantra is a natural corollary of his re-integration of the body and senses into the religious life.

For Abhinavagupta, Consciousness needs the material of life and the world in order to manifest.³ That Consciousness which he writes about so beautifully is a Consciousness that manifests in one’s flesh and bones and in the world. Consciousness is never detached from life and from the world. Thus, after realization, there is still life, and this life is naturally aesthetic. Consciousness continually expresses itself through the Inner Self or Soul (*antarātman*) and through the world. For the individual fully aware, this is experienced in a way that is aesthetic in wonderful and various ways—sensuous, synaesthetic,⁴ exciting, joyous, generous, open, mysterious, spacious, and lucid.

In thinking about these issues, we enter a great conversation initiated over 40 years ago by Gerald James Larson, with the publication of his classic article, “The Aesthetic (*rasāsvāda*) and the Religious (*brahmāsvāda*) in Abhinavagupta’s Kashmir Śaivism.” Larson suggests that although religious experience, i.e., “the enjoyment of spiritual realization” (*brahmāsvāda*), and aesthetic experience, i.e., “the enjoyment of aesthetic tasting” (*rasāsvāda*) are indeed similar, in the end, religious experience cannot be reduced to aesthetic experience. Larson writes:

² raktāṅgo yakṣapaṅkolasadasitagalo lambhamuktaopavītaḥ kṣaumaṃ vāso vasānaḥ śaśikaradhavalam vīrayogāsanashtaḥ// I have taken the Sanskrit from Pandey, in (Pandey 1963, p. 738). The translation was extracted with slight modifications from (Skora 2001, pp. 11–13), which also contains a complete translation of all four of Madhurāja’s verses; my translation was partly inspired by the previous famous translations of Kanti Chandra Pandey, and J. L. Masson and M. V. Patwardhan. See (Pandey 1963, pp. 20–23; Masson and Patwardhan 1969, pp. 38–40). For an interpretation of these verses in terms of embodiment and the significance of “bodily bearing,” see my (Skora 2016, pp. 98–102).

³ For the first time in the body of this essay, I use the complex and elusive term, “Consciousness.” Abhinavagupta himself refers to “Consciousness” in many different ways, and may even evoke the notion with no specific term. Many scholars, including myself, have written about the hermeneutical complexity surrounding Abhinavagupta’s Consciousness. The interested reader may refer to, for example, Alper (1979), who illuminated the creative dialectic between consciousness and an ultimate being; or to Skora (2007a) where I focus on the relationship between consciousness and sexuality; or to Biernacki (2014) for an insightful reminder of the intertwining of consciousness and materiality. In any case, my intention in this essay is not to pin down any one meaning, or any one set of meanings. Abhinavagupta is completely precise when he wants to be and more fluid in other cases. I am purposely turning away from a narrow focus on any one state of consciousness, to open up a more appreciative gaze of living life while immersed in Bhairava-Consciousness. Thus, I will pay attention in various places in his tradition that have been overlooked, such as poems, confessions of uncertainty, or the rich analogical thinking of metaphor. There, Abhinavagupta and Kṣemarāja tell us what they really think: Consciousness is always already manifesting in wondrous ways in this world itself; hence, the value of attaining certain states of Consciousness is found precisely in our very daily lives.

⁴ Throughout this essay, I will use the *Oxford English Dictionary* spellings of the term “synaesthesia” and its related terms, rather than the American spellings, beginning with “synesthesia.” My spellings indicate that I use the notion, not as a temporary fashionable term borrowed from science, but as a deeper humanistic term, one based on the visionary scholarship of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who recovered the notion as a radical phenomenological term referring to a form of pre-discursive, pre-conceptual consciousness. As far as I am aware, this term was first used in Abhinavagupta Studies in my (Skora 2007b). The term is most appropriate in pointing to a key characteristic of the primordial Consciousness evoked by Sanskrit poets and Abhinavagupta himself.

The ultimate experience of the yogin . . . according to classical Yoga traditions of India and according to Abhinavagupta . . . is always *nirvikalpa*; and, hence, the realization of *rasa* is an important yet finally rather pale foretaste of that final “tasting” of *brahman*. One might say that *rasa-dhvani* brings one to the boundary between *savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa* and as such becomes an important discovery or perspective for those attempting to express symbolically the inexpressible. Nevertheless, *rasa-dhvani* clearly operates in a linguistic environment and thus can never be more than a foretaste of that which is *nirvikalpa*. (Larson 1976, p. 378)

This is all true. We do not want to reduce the *nirvikalpa* moment to what must be a *savikalpa* state. Still, the conversation is not ended. There exists a complex relationship in Abhinavagupta’s vision between religion and aesthetics. Yes, there are non-conceptual, non-discursive states of consciousness and these are different from any kind of conceptual, discursive states. When we isolate aesthetic tasting within a strictly aesthetic context, then insofar as aesthetic tasting involves conceptuality, aesthetic tasting must be different from non-conceptual religious states. Yet, as Wulff (1986) has skillfully shown in response to Larson, other ways of being religious or spiritual exist (see Wulff 1986). For Abhinavagupta, precisely in his tantric stance, these ways of being involve integration of the experience of Being with living in the world. Such a spiritual mode of being is what is most important for Abhinavagupta. The emphasis is not on any “ultimate” or “final” one-time experience. Rather, the essence of enlightenment is the well-lived life of the full-bodied and sensuous person maintaining realization while fully immersed in their ever-changing environment, able to experience its depth, texture, and beauty. This is the tantric stance towards life, called *bhairavīmudrā* (“the bodily felt gesture that embodies Bhairava Awareness”), living in the midst of the kaleidoscopic life, while remaining centered in Bhairava Awareness.⁵

What happens, then, when we remember that Abhinavagupta was not only a philosopher and *rasika*, but the full-bodied and sensuous *tāntrika*, something made clear long ago by the great Indian scholar Kanti Chandra Pandey? I want to pick up this thread now and see how it leads us to a more textured unfolding of Abhinavagupta’s web of life.

I would suggest that turning an objective gaze on the ultimate religious experience and the ultimate aesthetic experience and then analyzing the two as separate undercuts in fact the spirit of Abhinavagupta’s Tantra. Although we may still discuss key moments in the Tantric path, Abhinavagupta’s abiding concern was the Tantric stance towards life and reality. What does it mean to move through life—having had insight into one’s Authentic Self and now returning—wholly immersed in life’s “peaks and valleys” or “ups and downs” (*udayalaya*) and yet still fully absorbed in Bhairava? Abhinavagupta highlights this way of life in one of his many hymns, the *Anuttarāṣṭikā* (*Eight Verses on Ultimate Being*):

Desire and hatred, pleasure and pain, ups and downs, pride and depression, and so on, these states come to light, universal wondrous [and diverse] forms; [yet] their true nature is no different [from Consciousness]; so, whenever you behold any of these distinct forms, immediately, with careful regard to the form of Consciousness as identical to each one, why not—filled with this meditative thought—be delighted? (Abhinavagupta, *Anuttarāṣṭikā*, verse 5)⁶

Abhinavagupta’s abiding concern here, and throughout the tradition, is on liberation while alive, which is quite different from the *nirvikalpa* state. Abhinavagupta evokes a nondual form of consciousness

⁵ See Mark Dyczkowski’s exposition of *bhairavīmudrā* in (Dyczkowski 1987, pp. 157–62).

⁶ *sukhāsukhodayalayāhaṅkāradainyādayo ye bhāvāḥ pravibhānti viśvavapuṣo bhinnasvabhāvā na te/ vyaktim paśyasi yasya sahasā tattatadekātmātāsaṃvidrūpam avekṣya kim na ramase tadbhāvanānirbharah//*The Sanskrit is taken from (Silburn 1970, p. 56). See her translation on pp. 57–64. See also Navjivan Rastogi’s translation and comments, in (Rastogi 1990, p. xv). Silburn’s and Rastogi’s translations and interpretations have inspired my own. Rastogi highlights this verse in his essay (Rastogi 1990) that serves as a preface to Swami Chetanananda’s book and highlights the this-worldly stance of both Chetanananda and the Trika Śaiva tradition, ultimately reminding us of the significance and relevance of Abhinavagupta to our complex—and fleshy and messy—contemporary lives.

which integrates the messiness of life with all its complex feelings with Awareness of Unity. One moves through life while being grounded in Reality, never leaving that Awareness behind.

In this essay, then, I turn our gaze away from “ultimate experience.” Abhinavagupta himself continually collapses destructive dichotomies, such as means and end, or ultimate and non-ultimate. Although there are key moments on the path, for Abhinavagupta, emancipation is significant only when it manifests as the well-balanced life. Thus, I am redirecting the conversation to ask: Is there anything after *nirvikalpa*? How could the “impotence of a contentless consciousness” (Sanderson 1986, p. 205) really be the end? Or is the Authentic Self more dynamic, free, and powerful, and, indeed, infinite in surprising ways, manifesting in varied, “vibrant,” and “beautiful” ways? (Sanderson 1986, p. 205 and *passim*).

Accordingly, Abhinavagupta’s life-world reveals itself only when we tend to the Tantric stance towards life and reality, the emancipated way of carrying oneself through life, a way that liberates one’s body and senses, and frees one to live spontaneously immersed in the world, a stance Abhinavagupta and his tradition describe in different ways, such as *bhairavīmudrā*. The emphasis is not on a *nirvikalpa samādhi* of classical Yoga, a complete non-conceptual turning inward with the disappearance of body, senses, and world, but now on *pratimāna samādhi*, the full-bodied integration of *unmīlana* (“eyes and senses opened and turned outward”) and *nīmīlana* (“eyes and senses closed and turned inward”).⁷ In Abhinavagupta’s Tantric Yoga, the self-realized being maintains awareness of both Consciousness and the very material, very sensuous world. What is significant about the Tantric stance is that nondual experience becomes integrated into life in a radically transformative manner, affecting one’s stance or standing, how one carries oneself in life, or in David Michael Levin’s terms, “how one stands in relation to Being.”⁸

2. The Life and Soul of a Liberated Being: A Very Human Abhinavagupta

To understand the soulful and aesthetic nature of his life, it is helpful to always remember that Abhinavagupta had a human face. Being human, in fact, is what allows for the very possibility of liberation. Not recognizing Abhinavagupta as human, as embodying a soul as it were, will lead to distorted notions of liberation.

We do not need to doubt Abhinavagupta’s experiences of liberation to accept Abhinavagupta with all his human limitations. Aesthetics must involve, on one hand, the body and senses, and, on the other hand, an environment for the soul-in-the-body to savor and enjoy. In this section, then, I attempt to recover Abhinavagupta’s human face. In turn, this will allow us to avoid an exclusive emphasis on transcendence.

Liberation for the tantric Abhinavagupta does not mean total transcendence of all boundaries of time and space. What would that mean anyway? Abhinavagupta is never completely out of this world, but always, and very much so, immersed in this world. Here I am inspired by the insights of Stephen Batchelor who has written on the historical Buddha as limited, bounded, constrained, and restricted in all the ways that non-liberated beings might be. These insights are transferable to Abhinavagupta. A Batchelor-ian re-reading of Abhinavagupta would go something like this:

Abhinavagupta himself was still constrained, limited, and bounded by place and time; he was bounded by his particular birth, being born into 11th-century Kashmir, and therefore into a particular worldview and society, as well as into a particular Brahman family with a history of devoted Śaiva learning and support by the royal family. He was bounded by language: he wrote in Sanskrit and probably spoke Kashmiri. He was bounded by knowledge: his knowledge was limited in that he certainly did not master all systems

⁷ Jeffrey Lidke, in “Interpreting Across Mystical Boundaries: Analysis of Samādhi in the Trika-Kaula Tradition,” provides a lucid interpretation of this mode of awareness (Lidke 2005).

⁸ See (Levin 1985, p. 273), which I cite above, in the opening conversation for this section.

of philosophy—certainly not Western philosophy—and had to choose which systems of knowledge to master, such as Trika, Aesthetics, or Embodied Recollection. He was bounded by the skills he possessed and those he did not; he was perhaps a musician, and he does not seem to have been a dancer, or to have had the skills to be a craftsman. He was bounded by “what his society would tolerate” and not tolerate, what it might force on people’s very own bodies and very own organs, and his awareness of all that and his responses. He was bounded by certain “resources and technologies” and opportunities and situations and environments; and because of “geographical and political” boundaries he was destined to live out his life in a small delimited area of Kashmir. Finally, he certainly always had to obey the “laws of nature” and those of his own body, both gendered and male.⁹

We open the chinks in the armor a little more by following the scholarly lead of Daniel Ingalls in his “humanistic” approach. We don’t often see the human face of Abhinavagupta unless we read in the margins or between the lines.¹⁰ By doing that, we may notice a more quirky, more human Abhinavagupta, telling us what he really thinks. Daniel Ingalls is exemplary in his humanistic approach when he uncovers what he refers to as Abhinavagupta’s “kindliness,” commenting that beyond his critical capacities, perhaps his most appealing virtue is, in fact, his kindliness. He is able to uncover this simply by listening well to Abhinavagupta’s commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, especially those places where Abhinavagupta reveals a very human face. For example, Abhinavagupta, according to Ingalls, is willing to go against the grain of numerous other scholarly commentators by affirming that the *Bhagavad Gītā* means what it says when it claims that *mokṣa* is also for *śūdras* and women. Here Ingalls highlights Abhinavagupta’s glossing of *loka-saṅgraha* as *lokānugraha*, “kindness to people.” Abhinavagupta supports his gloss by saying that, yes, it is true that actions must be selfless, but still we must always be kind to others; that, in fact, “kindness to others” is “a proper motive for action,” following directly from “God’s own example” (Ingalls 1983, p. XI).¹¹

I want to add to this humanistic endeavor with two more examples. In the first example, it is as if we catch Abhinavagupta off-guard, happily dwelling in mystery, uncertainty, and “negative capability,”¹² and humbly telling us how he sees things from within his own limited body, in a limited place and time. I would suggest that Abhinavagupta was not as tied to “certainty” and “rationality” as some have thought. Abhinavagupta writes:

One’s own experience has to be questioned, regarding what happens after touching this Ultimate Consciousness. Consciousness is not [fully] measured by such extent [by my own words]; I have shown [just] a portion of the path. Can anyone really say, “It is of this extent,” by analytically-marking-out Bhairava-Consciousness? The Descent of Śakti has expanded in us [only] so much. By means of which [Descent of Śakti], this [explanation] is

⁹ I borrow both the insightful ideas and words of Stephen Batchelor here. The only difference is that I have applied it to Abhinavagupta and put it in context at certain points. For the interested reader, Batchelor’s exact quotation on Buddha is: “The Buddha himself was still constrained by the worldview of his time; his own language, knowledge, and skills; his awareness of what his society would tolerate; the availability of resources and technologies; the geographical and political barriers that restricted him to a limited area of northern India; his physical body, and the laws of nature. Yet the world lay open to him in an unprecedented way” (Batchelor 1997, p. 94).

¹⁰ I am thinking of Jacques Derrida’s *Margins of Philosophy* here (Derrida 1982). Although I am not a follower of Derrida, I believe he keeps us on our toes by being wary of any absolutism. Putting this more positively, Derrida takes seriously all the margins, shadows, shades, and penumbræ working side by side with any discourse, as Abhinavagupta, master of twilight religion and language, knew better than anyone else. See also (Jackson 2009, p. xii).

¹¹ Abhinavagupta, in his Tantric masterpiece, the *Tantrāloka*, also makes it clear that self-realization is only for the benefit of others. See *Tantrāloka* 2.39: translated by Mark Dyczkowski, in (Dyczkowski 1987, p. 8).

¹² This is a phrase used by the Romantic poet John Keats in his critical response to excessive rationalism. My friend and mentor Edie Turner showed the importance of “negative capability” in relation to the liminal state and *communitas*. What they all share is humility in the face of mystery, which is essential to the Tantric stance. For more on “negative capability,” see also Paul Stoller’s response to extreme absolutism and extreme relativism, in (Stoller 1998). Both become dogmatic by relying exclusively only on cognition. His cure is recovering the body and senses. Significantly, extreme absolutism and relativism—each being opposite the Tantric stance, which fully integrates body, senses, and world—are always at risk of becoming solipsistic. I say more on solipsism below.

unfolded through us. To [other] knowers, today and also in other times, Spiritual Reasoning subtler than this is arising, has arisen, and will arise. This [Spiritual Reasoning], of all the lights of the limbs of yoga, is the shining sun, as ascertained in the *Victory of the Garlanded Goddess Tantra*, by which one is both liberated and a liberator [of others]. And this [Spiritual Reasoning] is to be understood and contemplated in all ways by those striving to reach the Supreme—instantly having abandoned jealousy, so inherent to the human condition—who are able to see clearly. After a moment of reflection, by means of resting in one's True Self, spontaneously through the experience of bliss, the [obfuscating] fragments of the cloud are dissolved, [by] the Sun of Consciousness. (Abhinavagupta, *Parātriṣikā-vivaraṇa*)¹³

Abhinavagupta also lets us in on his own world, giving us a glimpse of his own embeddedness in the environment, with the gentle touch of a human being with body and senses fully participating. He reveals an aesthetic appreciation of nature in a short hymn of praise to Kashmir,¹⁴ at the end of the *Tantrāloka* (*The Tantra-Light, or The Reality-Text-Light*), his magnificent tantric encyclopedia. That it is the finale may be taken as a sign for all of us to pay attention to what is most significant for a self-realized being. Notably, in this appreciation for the beauty of his own land, Abhinavagupta takes a stance opposite the transcendental state of the detached yogin, and relishes worldly and sensuous details:

In different places [throughout Kashmir], dwelling sites were made by all inspired beings, where at every step, Moon-Peak Himself abides.

Wine is the Great Bhairava, lighting up with four powers, the lovely ruby-red color of carrots, the pure beauty of the radiant yellow of wheat, the delightful splendor of the bursting-forth golden gooseberry citron, and the dark radiant splendor of the form of the Kerikuntala plant.

Liquified by the blaze of the great wrath of the Three-Eyed-One, the flock of arrows of the God of Pleasure remains here, extended under the semblance of wine. How else could he continually subjugate the world with the afflictions of love, releasing passion, confusion, insanity, and love fever?

That which gives boldness to the affectionate speech of those in love and unobstructedly scatters away fear in the act of sexual union, is this wine of Kashmir in which the circle of deities move, which immediately accomplishes both fruition and liberation.

The land is scattered at every step with the [saffron] flowers¹⁵ of Kashmir—[each flower] with black-red [violet] petals, rising shining shoots opened-up, and made splendorous

¹³ I have taken the Sanskrit from (Gnoli 1958, p. 259). Gnoli's Italian translation is found in (Gnoli 1958, p. 137); Singh translates the same verses in (Singh 1988, p. 196). The pioneering translations of these stellar scholars has inspired and helped me with my own.

enām saṃvidam ālambya yat syāt tat pṛcchayā svavit/
naitāvataiva tulitaṃ mārgāṃśas tu pradarsītaḥ//
iyatīti vyavacchindiyād bhairavīm saṃvidam hi kaḥ/
etāvān chaktipāto 'yam asmāsu pravijṛmbhitaḥ//
yenādhikāritair etad asmābhiḥ prakāṭikṛtam/
asmākam anyamātīṇām adya kālāntare'pi vā//
bhavaty abhūtā bhavitā tarkaḥ sūksmatamo'py atah/
yaḥ sarvayogāvayavaprakāśeṣu gabhastimān//
śrīpūrva śāstre nirṇīto yena muktaś ca mocakaḥ/
etat tu sarvathā grāhyaṃ vimṛśyaṃ ca parepsubhiḥ//
kṣaṇaṃ martyatvasulabhāṃ hitvāsūyāṃ vicakṣaṇaiḥ/
ālocanakṣaṇād ūrdhvaṃ yad bhaved ātmani sthitiḥ/
cidarkābhralavās tena saṃśāmyante svato rasāt//

¹⁴ In his classic article on "Purity and Power," Sanderson refers to the Trika Śaiva "injunction to aestheticize experience," which "contains the view that the relish of the beautiful in nature and in art mirrors the state of release and can be a means thereto" (Sanderson 1986, p. 216, note 32). He then connects this to a variety of Abhinavagupta's writings, including *Tantrāloka* 37.45, which I translate below, along with other verses from that section. See (Sanderson 1986, p. 216, note 32).

¹⁵ Abhinavagupta's detailed description leads Raniero Gnoli to identify the flowers as "saffron flowers," and I am following Gnoli's lead here.

with an interior of red-colored filaments closely pressed together and quivering—[thus] revealing a true garden for the worship of the Three Goddesses.

Moreover, all beings [in Kashmir] are poets, sages, strong, and eloquent; shining like the moon, with a gentle bearing, are the women of the town; and finally, the family of *yoginī*-s [residing here] are like the pure sky, having swallowed the sun and moon, [intertwining together and flying] in the endless pathway for the spirit,¹⁶ blazing up like charcoal, expanded, and without end. (Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 37.40a, 42–46)¹⁷

Abhinavagupta takes his time to share with us in exquisite detail his love for the land and people of Kashmir, providing us with an intense, dramatic, and aesthetic portrait of Kashmir. Significantly, he paints Kashmir as a “synaesthetic garden.”¹⁸ Relevant here is the work of Robert E. Goodwin who brings out the significance of “the synaesthetic allure of the garden world of Sanskrit poetry” (Goodwin 1995, p. 60). Thinking with Goodwin, I would suggest that Sanskrit poetry works in part through synaesthetic language, activating the fusion of the senses which in turn gives rise to aesthetic experience.¹⁹ In Abhinavagupta’s hymn of praise, the colors of fruit, the tastes of wine, the poetic flowering of words, the fragrances of saffron and delicate petals ornamenting the steps of the soft ground, graceful walking, and the subtle bodies of the expansive and shining *yoginī*-s, all come together—under one spacious sky—to touch us synaesthetically just as sensuous images blend together in drama and poetry. This is not insignificant. Abhinavagupta’s Tantric stance involves aesthetic relishing and “love for life.” Consciousness achieves full value only when integrated into life. Coming at the end of his tantric magnum opus, the verses remind us that aesthetic experience flows naturally from liberation.

Additionally, Abhinavagupta’s synaesthetic language itself is simultaneously aesthetic and religious. Harry T. Hunt theorizes that synaesthetic metaphor actually allows human beings to recognize, express, and even activate deep “essential states” or spiritual experiences (Hunt 1995). Abhinavagupta’s language not only reflects and participates in his own consciousness, but precisely because of that participation is energized to evoke similar experiences, simultaneously aesthetic and religious, in the listener-with-heart.²⁰

¹⁶ Gnoli identifies the sun and moon here as referring to the ascending and descending breaths, flowing together in the *suṣūmnā* (central channel) of the subtle body.

¹⁷ sthāne munibhirakhilāścakrīre yannivāsā yaccādhyāste pratipadamidaṃ sa svayaṃ candracūḍaḥ / . . . nāraṅgāruṇakānti pāṇḍuvikacacballāvādātacchavi prodbhinnāmalamātuluṅgakanakacchāyābhirāmaprabham / kerikuntalakandalipratikṛtīśyāmaprabhābhāsvaraṃ yasmiṃśakticatuṣṭayojjvalamalaṃ madyaṃ mahābhairavam / 42 trinayanamahākoṣajvālāvilīna iha sthito madanaviśikhavrāto madyacchalena vijṛmbhate / kathamitarathā rāgaṃ mohaṃ maḍaṃ madanajvaraṃ vidadhadanīsaṃ kāmātānkairvaśīkkurute jagat / 43 yatkāntānāṃ praṇayavacasi prauḍhimānaṃ vidatte yannirvighnaṃ nidhuvanavidhau sādhasvaṃ saṃdhunoti / yasmin viśvāḥ kalitarucayo devatāścakracaryastanmārdvīkaṃ sapadi tanute yatra bhogāpabargau / 44 udyadgaurāṅkuravikasitaiḥ śyāmaraktaiḥ palāśairantargāḍhāruṇarucilasatkesarālivicitraiḥ / kīrṇā bhūḥ pratipadamasau yatra kāśmīrapuṣpaiḥ samyagdevītritayajanodyānamāviṣkaroti / 45 sarvo lokāḥ kaviratha budho yatra śūro’pi vāgmī candroddyotā masṅgatayaḥ pauranāryaśca yatra / yatrāṅgārojjvalavikasitānantasauṣuṃnamārgagrastārkendurgaganavimalo yoginīnāṃ ca vargaḥ / 46 See also (Gnoli 1990, pp. 639–40). Raniero Gnoli’s brilliant Italian translation has aided my own English translation.

¹⁸ My focus in this section is on Abhinavagupta’s hymn of praise, not his tantric writings per se. In this present context, more tantric textual case studies are not necessary. For the interested reader, my own previous work connects synaesthesia to Tantric ritual and experience (see my (Skora 2007b, pp. 438–42)); one might also look at Abhinavagupta’s description of initial subtle body practices in the fifth chapter of his *Tantrāloka* for an additional way of seeing this connection (see my (Skora 2017; Wallis 2013, pp. 395–96)). More generally, Alexis Sanderson has referred to Abhinavagupta’s Tantric stance as one of “aesthetic intensity;” I discuss this below. Finally, another example of Abhinavagupta’s seamless blending of Tantra and Aesthetics is found in the use and expression of bodily gestures in Abhinavagupta’s tradition (see my (Skora 2016)). What is most interesting in the present context is that precisely at the end of his massive encyclopedic synthesis of Tantric discourse and practice Abhinavagupta steps out of a purely descriptive stance to bring Tantra to life, returning to his own home, which he literally calls a “garden” (*udyāna*), and creating a unitive experience for the listener as he mingles together all the sensory modalities. Being the Tāntrika he was, and like other Sanskrit sages and poets, he was intentional. The praise poem itself evokes the very state of consciousness, one that is indeed synaesthetic, at the center of the Tantric life.

¹⁹ On fusion of the senses and synaesthetic experience, again see my (Skora 2007b, pp. 438–42).

²⁰ See (Levin 1988, p. 237; Skora 2007a, p. 73).

Finally, we also discern the Tantric attitude blended seamlessly into his poem. The whole universe is present. Subtle bodies are as present as fleshy ones. Is this a poem about Consciousness? Or is it about matter, and everything that goes along with that, the body and senses, and their immersion in the material world? In the garden and in the wine, we find the Trika Goddesses, and the circles of supporting deities. The Tantric attitude continually mingles and melds the external and internal, material and spiritual, world and Bhairava. Both bondage and liberation make their appearance here, through the drama of Kāma and Bhairava. Wine is seen as spiritually dangerous activating afflictions when appropriated dualistically through pleasure-seeking-ego. Simultaneously, the wine is nothing other than a manifestation of Bhairava and also has the potential to liberate. Thus, Abhinavagupta delivers the essential Tantric-cum-Aesthetic message: those senses that keep us enslaved are the very energies that may liberate us.

3. Abhinavagupta's Aesthetic and Spiritual Belly of Consciousness: Enjoying the World and Intertwining with Bhairava

This tantric stance has been referred to, by Alexis Sanderson, as “aesthetic intensity.” In this section, I extend Sanderson’s notion to liberation-in-life. I first discuss the meaning of this in the context of ritual. I then connect Abhinavagupta’s “oblation-eating belly” to the “aesthetic belly,” applying the insights of Performance Theorist Richard Schechner. This will put us in position to understand a model of consciousness provided by Abhinavagupta’s own disciple, Kṣemarāja, connecting ritual to performance, and both to liberation-in-life.

The relationship between inner consciousness and outer environment is described by Abhinavagupta as aesthetically enjoying the outer world while maintaining one’s connection to Bhairava. The mediators are the body and the senses, called the “divine sense energies.” Sanderson writes:

It is argued that when the objects of the senses are seen as things outside consciousness, to be appropriated and manipulated by the subject, then the senses are no more than the instruments of the state of bondage (*bandhaḥ*); but when the subject abandons this appetitive style of perception he experiences the objects of his senses within consciousness, as the content of the cognitions that perceive them rather than as their cause. This shift from the appetitive to the aesthetic mode of awareness is seen by Abhinavagupta as the divinization of the senses themselves, or rather as the recognition of their divine nature as projections or avenues of the blissful but egoless consciousness which is the underlying identity of all awareness. Gratified by this reintegration of objectivity—where before they were starved by brahminical restraint and fastidiousness—they liberate consciousness into the realization of its all-containing radiance and transparency. (Sanderson 1995, p. 87)

For Abhinavagupta, the body and the senses are integrated into all forms of worship, which are understood as aesthetic acts, or “sensuous acts that blissfully awaken one’s consciousness, that allow one’s awareness to be penetrated by bliss” (Skora 2007a, p. 434).²¹ As an example of “aesthetic intensity,” Sanderson highlights a passage in the third chapter of Abhinavagupta’s *Tantrāloka*, where Abhinavagupta is describing worship. I want to suggest that this is not only a model of ritual but also the template for all immersed-in-life activity while maintaining connection to Consciousness, i.e., a model for liberation-in-life. Abhinavagupta describes an aesthetic act, in which the senses become transubstantiated into the divine sense-energies, simultaneously turned toward Consciousness while aesthetically appreciating the show:

Into the oblation-eating belly of one’s consciousness, all existing things are hurled suddenly; they sacrifice their portion of differentiation, consuming it by fire with their own energy. When the fragmentation of existing things is dissolved ... the divine sense-energies

²¹ This paragraph draws from my own (Skora 2007b, p. 234; 2009, p. 97). See also my (Skora 2001, pp. 114–15).

of consciousness eat [feast on and enjoy] the universe that has become the nectar of immortality. Feeling satisfied, these deities rest, intertwining with Divine Bhairava, the Sky of Consciousness, who dwells in the secret space of the full heart of their selves. (Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 3.262a–264b)²²

Important for us here is the connection to aesthetics. The divine sense-energies feast on and enjoy the universe. And this enjoyment leads to the awakening of awareness. Again, there is no separation between immersion in the world and awareness of Bhairava.

Abhinavagupta is both a master of words and a sage of human nature, and we may suspect that the turn of phrase “belly of consciousness” is significant for him.²³ For Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic tasting of the world, is a bodily felt process, centered in the belly of consciousness that appreciates the surrounding environment. This is far from the contentless experience of *nirvikalpa*. For Abhinavagupta, to be liberated in the world is to be liberated while being able to enjoy the show. Thus, while Abhinavagupta draws on a pervasive Vedic trope that connects the belly to the sacrifice, as always, he is doing something more. In the context of his aestheticization, the metaphor of the belly becomes more textured. He is not concerned with mere mindless eating, but aesthetic satisfaction and the relishing of life.

Performance Theorist Richard Schechner attempts to answer questions we might be having at this point: How can the belly do all that? What precisely does the belly have to do with aesthetics and consciousness? Addressing those questions will keep us from ignorantly dismissing Abhinavagupta’s writing as mere metaphor.²⁴ More specifically, in a remarkable piece of scholarship, Schechner shows how aesthetic experience is a full-bodied process of tasting, involving various organs of the senses, or organs that give us access to our sensuous environments, primarily, nose, mouth, and belly. Schechner writes:

Fundamentally, the attainment of pleasure and satisfaction in a rasic performance is oral—through the snout, by comingling various flavors and tastes; and the satisfaction is visceral, in the belly. How can this be since the Indian theatre, like the Western theatre, is presented visually and sonically? (Schechner 2001, p. 33)

Schechner shows in fact that the belly is a particularly sensuous region of bodily felt sense, perhaps even involving a whole nervous system running parallel to the brain itself.²⁵ Schechner makes three points highlighting the differences between Indian theatre and Western theatre:

(1) Sanskrit performance is grounded in the body, especially the belly, and while including all the senses, it is not primarily visual [and therefore, I would add, not primarily

²² nijabodhajaṭharahutabhuji bhāvāḥ sarve samarpitā haṭhataḥ/
vijahati bhedavibhāgam nijaśaktyā taṃ samindhānāḥ// haṭhapākena bhāvānām rūpe
bhinne vilāpīte/ aśnantyamṛtasādbhūtaṃ viśvaṃ saṃvittidevatāḥ// tāstrptāḥ svātmanaḥ
pūrṇa hṛdayaikāntaśāyīnam/ cidvyomabhairavaṃ devamabhedanādhīserate//
This is my own translation. See Sanderson’s translation and additional interpretation in (Sanderson 1995, p. 88). See also my discussion of “worship as sensual enjoyment” in (Skora 2007b, pp. 434–36).

²³ I recognize that I am being speculative here but I think this may bear some fruit. Abhinavagupta is taking a metaphor with a certain history, tied initially to Vedic sacrifice (and I thank my anonymous reviewer here for reminding us that Abhinavagupta’s metaphor is connected to the use by numerous and various Indian traditions of digestive metaphors). However, most significant is that Abhinavagupta creatively transforms a sacrificial metaphor into a metaphor for consciousness, and, moreover, for a very particular form of aesthetic consciousness. Abhinavagupta himself connects the belly to the senses and to aesthetics, and this is precisely in the context of presenting his vision of liberated consciousness. I would suggest then that he is most aware of consciousness as an embodied process and of the importance of the belly in aesthetic appreciation. This is an essential part of his move to show that consciousness is embodied, and the senses are divinized. It is not too extreme, then, to suggest that Abhinavagupta is aware of the belly as a center of consciousness.

²⁴ I think the insights of Schechner are completely relevant here. Schechner, like Abhinavagupta, brings us back to the body and senses. We only appreciate Abhinavagupta’s tantric aesthetic stance by understanding that liberation in the world involves the body and senses, and a material environment to be enjoyed. I say more about this below, beginning in Section 4.

²⁵ This might help us understand Abhinavagupta’s descriptions of the senses as divine sense-energies—they are able to light up and illuminate, precisely because the sensory system that takes in experience is always suffused with Consciousness. Keep in mind that Schechner is not excluding the other senses. He is only saying that Sanskrit drama is not primarily visual.

cognitive]; (2) Performance has a natural relationship with feasting, as does religion; and “[r]eligion itself has a feasting quality that interweaves performing, worshiping, and eating;” and (3) the Arts were “interfused with intense sexual pleasure,” and incorporated into religious experience. (Schechner 2001, pp. 33–34)

He synthesizes these observations with the following insight: “This blending of theatre, dance, music, food, and religious devotion is to many participants a full, satisfying, and pleasurable experience that cannot be reduced to any single category—religious, aesthetic, personal, or gustatory.” (Schechner 2001, p. 35) Schechner’s analysis is important to us because it breaks down the artificial boundaries between religious experience and aesthetic experience. Feasting, festival, rituals of sexual union were all part of the performing arts, involving the seamless blending of aesthetic and religious qualities.

Important for us is that by turning from a mode of analysis dominated by vision and cognition toward a multisensory and full-bodied aesthetic mode we begin to understand religion’s connection to aesthetic activities. In turn, we begin to understand not only religious performance but also religious life as a process of interacting with the world through the body and senses: tasting, enjoying, eating and being satisfied, and lying down with a full heart, just as one might lie down with a full belly after a feast.²⁶

Trika Śaiva discourse clearly shows that they themselves made these various connections between religion and aesthetics. For the Trika Śiva, the most secret, richest, most complex ritual, the Kaula ritual of sexual union was connected to the aesthetic performing arts and festival. Just as festival, for example, was an arena giving rise to and expressing spontaneity, joy, and play, so too the highest religious-aesthetic performance became an arena in which to manifest similar bodily and sensuous states. Although the performance required the capacity to “master one’s senses” and stay centered on Bhairava/Being within, at the same time the awareness was expressed through full-bodied and sensuous immersion in the world.

The Trika Śaiva tradition recognized the ritual of sexual as an aesthetic event, and even more particularly, an aesthetic performance. Abhinavagupta himself provides the most extensive description of the ritual, in which the highest forms of consciousness are attained through a performance meant to be aestheticized.²⁷ Later, and similarly, Maheśvarānanda of Cidambaram (fl. ca. 1175–1225 C.E.), in his *Mahārthamañjarī* (“Blossoming of Great Meaning”), refers to the ritual of sexual union as the “Great Festival,” describing liberation in terms of joy, sensual vitality (*vīrya*), and religio-aesthetic amazement (*camatkāra*). Lilian Silburn, especially attentive to the melding of the spiritual and sensuous, writes:

Men and women would gather together and surround themselves with beautiful objects: music, flowers, perfumes, incense, and sumptuous clothing. With the aim of extending the bliss of the Self [outward] into the whole universe, they ate meat, drank intoxicating liquors, and united sexually.

By the profusion of sensual pleasures, the organic energies and the breaths fully satisfied, [and] the physical vigor stimulated by the exciting [objects], the yogin enters into an emotive state, opposing his habitual calm: the heart overflowing, submerged by the flux of forces which have converged to form only one of an exceptional intensity, [having] had the sudden revelation of the vibrating Activity at the moment when this force of the simple shimmering of the true Vibration (*spanda*) makes the heart vibrate.

When such a force invades the heart, this force becomes a superabundant energy of bliss (*ānandaśakti*). Wild with joy, amazed, the *siddha* discovers the infinite field of energy,

²⁶ In Abhinavagupta’s “belly of consciousness” passage, he uses the term “adhiśerate” to refer to the fusion/intertwining of the sense-divinities and Bhairava. The term may also be translated as “they lie down upon/with.”

²⁷ Various scholars including Lilian Silburn (see below) and Alexis Sanderson write about this. See also my (Skora 2001, pp. 271–75, 424–26).

the freedom unheard of, of the “I” and its vitality (*mantravīrya*). Parallel to this vitality, its bliss rejoins its cosmic essence, from which there is the inexpressible amazement (*camatkāra*) as a result. (Silburn 1968, pp. 54–57)²⁸

As one final example, I note that Abhinavagupta’s *paramaguru* Utpaladeva also refers to the ritual of sexual union, and other forms of sensuous worship, as a “great festival,” describing it in terms of divine play (*līlā, kṛīḍā*) and dancing. It is this metaphor of play that I now want to turn to.

4. At Play in the Fields of Lord Bhairava: The Authentic Self Playing in the Phenomenal World

The Trika Śaiva life-world is best described with the model that I will refer to as the “Authentic Self Playing in the Phenomenal World.” In this section, I discuss the model as presented in *Śivasūtra* 3.9–11 and Abhinavagupta’s disciple Kṣemarāja’s commentary, the *Śivasūtravimarśinī*.

Here I am again inspired by the work of Robert E. Goodwin who, in interpreting this passage, uses the notion of play derived from these passages not only to unpack Abhinavagupta’s world-view, but also to contrast it with Śaṅkara’s world-view. Goodwin contrasts, on one hand, a “bliss that rests in complete abstraction (*nirvikalpatva*),” associated with “impersonal ‘knowledge’ that does not even include self-consciousness” with, on the other hand, a bliss arising out of an experiential ground, integrating “imagination” and “memory” and a “vibrant sense awareness” (Goodwin 1995, p. 54). Goodwin suggests that the former bliss is modeled on “dreamless sleep” while the latter bliss is modeled on the “conscious dreaming phenomenon” (Goodwin 1995, p. 54).

Goodwin’s article is especially sensitive to the interrelationships in Abhinavagupta’s world-view between mysticism (Tantra), aesthetics, and eroticism. Below I will extend his insights on “conscious dreaming.” First, however, I want to critically respond to his overall position. First, Goodwin seems to agree with Gerald Larson that the ultimate religious experience distinguishes itself from the inferior ultimate aesthetic experience precisely because the former is *nirvikalpa*, while the latter is *savikalpa* (Goodwin 1995, p. 54; p. 78, n. 14). Although I recognize the difference between the specific states, *savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa*, my concern is that this does not do justice to Abhinavagupta’s understanding of the rich aesthetic life of the liberated being immersed in the world.

Further, Goodwin seems to think that Abhinavagupta’s world-view is ultimately solipsistic, even labelling it as “onanistic.” While Goodwin contrasts Śaṅkara’s detached gaze of the witness watching a distant dancer with whom he will never enjoy dancing with Abhinavagupta’s dancing Self, Goodwin does not go far enough, and ends up with a solipsistic-onanistic Self dancing alone, unable to fully enjoy the dance. This is a sad state of affairs. The Self has no True Other to dance with. This must be a misunderstanding of Abhinavagupta’s vision of the full-bodied soul participating whole-heartedly in their world. I would suggest that the beauty of Abhinavagupta’s life-world is the recognition that the dancing Self is only possible because of the dancing Other. Śiva dances in delight in recognition of Śakti. There is no dancing Śiva without Śakti. My conclusion follows from simply incorporating Abhinavagupta’s ultimate tantric stance; this stance overcomes the very mind-body distinction that has haunted analytical interpretations of Abhinavagupta. Only by wrongly superimposing disembodied thinking onto Abhinavagupta’s discourse—assuming Abhinavagupta thinks without a body—could one conclude that Abhinavagupta is solipsistic. Abhinavagupta’s life-world—quite the opposite of being solipsistic—is both necessarily other-inclusive and empathetic, recognizing the primordial interrelationship and interdependence of Self and Other. Close attention to the various writings of Abhinavagupta suggests a Levinas-ian encounter with the Other, a face-to-face meeting with the body of the Other.²⁹ I believe in fact that Abhinavagupta’s recovery of the body and senses,

²⁸ This is an extraction of my translation of Lilian Silburn’s description of the *mahotsava*, based on her reading of the *Mahārthamañjarī* (Silburn 1968, pp. 54–57). See also my (Skora 2001, pp. 323–26).

²⁹ In previous work, I have pointed out various ways of showing this, including how Abhinavagupta recovers the sense of touching in his notion of *vimarśa* (Skora 2007b, pp. 422–38), how he discusses the fullness of Being as related to going out

and the material world, is precisely what prevents solipsism. Only a disembodied thinker is at risk of thinking solipsistically, and the immediate cure is embodiment.³⁰ Here, I want to point to the work of A. H. Almaas. Almaas's model of Being—remarkably similar to that of the Trika Śaiva tradition—is based on his own direct experiences. In Almaas's model, Being nondualistically intertwines with Authentic Self (what he often refers to as “Soul”) and the Cosmos. For Almaas realization involves and emphasizes the recovery of one's own awareness of Being, which means Awareness of Awareness, or Consciousness of Consciousness (see also Skora 2001). For Almaas, as for Abhinavagupta, subjective experience—of both interior and exterior reality—is foundational; thus, the charge of solipsism has been levelled at Almaas also. For Almaas the recovery of subjectivity is not the same as solipsism. Almaas responds to the criticism as follows:

Our life is not what we experience, but the experience of what we experience. It is the vision of the ocean, the sensation of coolness and wetness when I am swimming, the taste of bitter saltiness of the water. All of these are what actually constitutes my life. My life is my experiences of both outer and inner events. This is not a move toward solipsism, for it is clear that the ocean exists in its own right, independent of my individual mind, and enters the lives of many other people, as well as the lives of many other types of sentient beings. What we are trying to point out is that strictly speaking, as a little introspection or contemplation will show us, our life is the flow of our experiences. It is the flow of subjective forms, whether these forms reflect external events or internal ones. My image of the ocean is a picture in my consciousness; my sensation of the wetness of its water is an impression in my consciousness; the salty taste is also an experience in my consciousness. Our life is then, in this strict sense, completely subjective. It is the flow of perceptions and experiences, all occurring in my consciousness, in my soul. (Almaas 2004, p. 114)

5. Kṣemarāja's Model of Self as Actor-Dancer-Performance Artist

The Authentic Self is the Actor. The Individual Soul is the Stage. The Senses are the Aesthetic Enjoyers.

(Śivasūtra (Aphorisms of Śiva) 3.9–11)³¹

Consciousness isn't what we thought it was. Consciousness is somehow fundamental to reality. It's a painter; it's the canvas; and it's the paint, all at once.

(Jeffrey Kripal, in (Kripal 2012))

I now want to return to Goodwin's analysis and extend three of his insights that I think are relevant to Abhinavagupta's tantric stance: (1) the model of liberation-as-play (*līlāmokṣa*), which goes

of Itself (Skora 2007b, pp. 426–27, 438–42), and how the polarity of Śiva and Śakti is fundamental to his whole Tantric cosmology (Skora 2007a, pp. 66–68).

³⁰ Linda Holler, in her brilliant *Erotic Morality: The Role of Touch in Moral Agency*, attacks solipsism in various ways. Following Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, she shows that only a disembodied thinker could be a solipsist. She writes: “Kierkegaard describes the retreat of philosophy from the world and thus from the embodied self as a form of sensual diminishment that leaves us erotically adrift and lost in the midst of existence. Ludwig Wittgenstein referred to this retreat as ‘the philosopher's disease,’ the burden of perpetual doubt and enclosed self-reflection borne by those who privilege mentality over engagement in the processes of living” (Holler 2002, p. 60). See also John Dupuche in his work on the *Parātrīṣṅśikāvivaraṇa* (*The Long Commentary on the Ultimate Triadic Queen*). Dupuche's analysis relies strictly on linguistic and grammatical analysis, and thus his method is different from my own. Nonetheless, significantly he arrives at a similar conclusion: for Abhinavagupta the highest stance is a person-to-person encounter, the self realizes itself simultaneously in its full recognition of the Other. Focusing on a dialogue between Śiva and Śakti, which is a model for dialogue between student and teacher, I and Thou, Self and Other, Dupuche refers to the inseparability of the primordial divine couple, arguing that even at the most transcendental moment there is no I without you (Dupuche 2001).

³¹ See also (Kripal 2014, p. 368).

back at least to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, is a good model to help us think not only with Rāmānuja, but also with Abhinavagupta; (2) “perhaps the most extensive development of this idea” is provided by Kṣemarāja in his commentary on the *Śivasūtra*; and (3) this model suggests that the experience of the world is “like a dream in which one is conscious of dreaming and so is both omniscient artist and spectator of a world in which one also plays the leading part and indeed all the parts”³² (Goodwin 1995, pp. 52–54).

Goodwin is referring to the phenomenon of “lucid dreaming” (although he does not use that term). Below I will bring in contemporary research and reflections on lucid dreaming, and will refer to Kṣemarāja’s model as “lucid dream-play,” in order to emphasize that we are referring to a model of play that is like lucid dreaming, but is achieved in the waking state. This model is paradigmatic in the Trika Śaiva world-view; it is the complex metaphor that was understood as perfectly describing the consciousness of one who is liberated while immersed in life. It is the metaphor which captures aesthetic intensity, and recognizes that it applies not only to performance but to life itself. Kṣemarāja presents the model in his *Śivasūtravimarśinī* (*Commentary on the Aphorisms of Śiva*):³³

(1) The Authentic Self is the Actor [Performer] (*nartaka*).³⁴

[The Self] dances; concealed within and firmly grounded within Its true nature, [is] the manifoldness/expansion of the [great variety of] the Actor’s roles/expressions; precisely through the play of Its primordial vibration, It shows/materializes Itself on Its own screen.³⁵

(2) The Inner Self [Individual Soul] is the Stage [or, as it were, the Field of the Dancing Lord Śiva].

The stage is where the Self delights/expresses/paints itself, by means of the intention of making visible the play of the dance-world; [it is] the place of taking on the great variety of roles/expressions. The inner self is the soul, internal with respect to the body [inside the body]. Its form is the subtle body, whose nature is a contracted appearance/shining forth, whose primary part is either the void or the energy of life. This One [the Self] having feet set there shines forth the world-dance, through the vibration of its own sense organs/dance poses.³⁶

(3) The Senses are the Aesthetic Enjoyers.

The eyes and all the senses of the *yogī* realize/witness directly [with the very senses], while turned inward, the Authentic Nature, overflowing with delight by bringing to

³² Here Goodwin refers to *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.7–38.

³³ It is useful to consider Alexis Sanderson’s comment on this famous passage. Sanderson writes: “The new Śaiva was to see his self as an actor with his individuality as its stage, and his faculties as an audience of aesthetes initiated into the appreciation of the outer world not as a system of external values exacting the extrinsic impotence of a contentless consciousness but as the expression of the self’s infinite inner autonomy, pervaded by a vibrant beauty” (Sanderson 1986, p. 205). In some ways, it might be said, this is the “motto” of the Trika tradition. It encapsulates in a brilliant complex extended metaphor (“mega-metaphor”) the principles of the Trika world-view. See Rastogi’s comments on this also (Rastogi 1992, pp. 265–66). We are also reminded of space traveler Edgar Mitchell’s liberating experience, precisely while engaged in the outer cosmos. The senses were outward, relishing the outside world, while simultaneously Mitchell’s individual self was centered on Being, experiencing Unity, or Unitive Being (Mitchell 2008, pp. 74–75, 169–71).

³⁴ The terms “nartaka” and its cognate “nāṭya” have multiple meanings. In addition to referring to dancing and acting, they refer to mimesis, embodied gesturing, and performing.

³⁵ The Sanskrit is taken from Singh’s text. My translation is partly inspired by Singh’s translation. *nartaka ātmā / nr̥tyati, antarnigūhitasvasvarūpāviṣṭambhamūlaṃ tattajjāgarādīnānābhūmikāprapañcaṃ svaparispandalīlayaiva svabhitau prakāṣayati nartaka ātmā /*

A key term used by Kṣemarāja is *prakāṣayati*. The prefix-stem *pra-kaṣ* is cognate with *prakṛti* (Nature; or the Material World). The relationship between Consciousness and Matter, is that it is precisely Consciousness that Materializes. That is a beautiful idea, turning the classical Sāṃkhya/Yoga view on its head. Consciousness, the Creative Artist, materializes. There is no separation between Consciousness and the Material Universe. This is not just a clever move on the Trika philosopher’s part. It is consistent with Abhinavagupta’s descriptions, and we are led to ask: is this the way Reality really is?

³⁶ *raṅgo’antarātmā / rajyate’smin jagannāṭyākṛīḍāpradarśanāśayenātmanā iti raṅgaḥ, tatattadbhūmikāgrahaṇasthānam; antarātmā, saṃkocāvabhāsaśatattvaḥ sūnyapradhānaḥ prāṇapradhāno vā puryaṣṭakarūpo dehāpekṣayā antaro jīvaḥ / atra hi ayaṃ kṛtapadaḥ svakaraṇaparispandakramaṇa jagannāṭyam ābhāsayati /*

light the dance which is the cycle-of-life. With the blossoming/development of the performance/exhibition [of the dance], the senses bring to fullness/fulfillment the rapture of wondrous delight and liquid bliss [the ecstasy of Being] in which dualistic thinking melts away.³⁷

Kṣemarāja brings out the sensuous, aesthetic, and erotic aspects of the Trika Śaiva life-world. Thus, it is clearly seen that the tantric stance being described here is in fact opposed to the classical *sāṃkhya/yoga* stance culminating in *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Drawing on the material I have presented it is clear that Abhinavagupta's aesthetics, which in turn feeds into his Tantric authentic stance, is quite different from classical Yoga aesthetics, which in turn parallels its view of ultimate experience.³⁸ I would add that the uninvolved spectator of classical Yoga, possessing detached eyes and objective gaze, only witnesses from a distance the dance of Prakṛti. However, in Abhinavagupta's view, the Self deeply wishes to get involved and enjoy the dance, in order to know the Other so as to know the Self.

This detached Self is the opposite of the involved Self. We should now have a clear understanding of what it means to be involved in phenomenal reality: to bring one's body and senses into relationship with the perceived, so that perception becomes embodied participation, a dance of two. In embodied and sensuous participation—what else would it mean for the senses to get involved?—the senses are finally liberated, and with that joy, excitement, wonder and all the thrills of being alive arise.

6. Conclusions: The Spaciousness of Lucid Dream-Play

[We] rarely engage in lucid waking. Consider how seldom we truly grasp our immediate situation, and realize that we are now fully alive and fully awake! (Austin 1998, p. 324)

When we get deeply in touch with our bodily felt sense of *motility*, when we can feel the *depth* of its melodic arc (*archē*), we will find ourselves suddenly *released* into a space of tremendous energy, a space of much greater openness, greater richness, and greater emotional hospitality, than our customary experience, to whose claustrophobia we tend to become habituated, would ever give us reason to believe possible. (Levin 1985, p. 341)

The mind is devoid of thought and images, yet acutely aware and alert. Each cell of the body contributes intense sensations of pleasure and well-being, the sum total providing an enveloping aura of bliss or ecstasy. Although the presence of the Self as the observer is implied, there is no notice of Self during the experience. Awareness is so flooded with the sensations of joy, universal connectedness, security, and well-being that Self goes unnoticed. It dissolves into the experience. (Mitchell 2008, p. 170)

I have switched the conversation from “ultimate experience” to “authentic life,” following the move of the Trika Śaiva spiritual luminaries themselves, in response to the classical yogic emphasis on “ultimate experience,” which for the Trika Śaiva is, finally, too nihilistic, unable to integrate both the reality of the Cosmos and one's immersion into it. Such immersion involves full-bodied aesthetic

³⁷ prekṣakānūndriyāṇi // yogināś caḥśurādīni indriyāṇi hi śaṃsāranāṭyapraḥaṭanapramodanirbharaṃ svasvarūpam antarmukhatayā śākṣāt kurvanti, tatprayogapararūḍhyā vīgālitavibhāgaṃ camatkārarasasampūrṇatām āpādayanti/ This is a sophisticated model of Consciousness, and I believe the full ramifications are yet to be fleshed out. We are reminded of Jeffrey J. Kripal's metaphor for Consciousness (see above; Kripal 2012). Kripal also describes it slightly differently in (Kripal 2014, p. 368): “It is as if the painter, the paint, and the painting were all different aspects of the same creative process.” The Self/ Actor corresponds to the Painter; the Stage/Internal Self—or the Individual/Screen on which the Self/Performance Artist manifests—corresponds to the Painting; and the Involved Participants/Senses—or Divine Sense Energies, taking in the world and bringing it back to Bhairava—corresponds to the Paint.

³⁸ The work of Navjivan Rastogi, drawing on Kṣemarāja's model of Self as Performer, makes this clear. Rastogi contrasts two attitudes toward reality and life, attitudes embodied in “their aesthetic propositions.” Rastogi contrasts the “uninvolved spectator of a dramatic performance” with the involved participant, following in part Kṣemarāja's lucid dream-play model (Rastogi 1992, pp. 265–66).

experience. It is no wonder that Kṣemarāja's model is of the performer enjoying the show, a show that is very real. In turn, he uses the model of dreaming rather than dreamlessness to describe this life. Insofar as Kṣemarāja is clearly referring to a waking state, his metaphor comes alive when we turn our attention to lucid dreaming, to which I now turn in this concluding section.

Kṣemarāja's model of the Self as Performer converges with a contemporary account of lucid dreaming described by neurologist James Austin in his *Zen and the Brain*. That Kṣemarāja's insights would converge with neuro-phenomenological insights of our own era is no accident.³⁹ The Trika Śaiva tradition seems to have simply discovered something true about consciousness and reality. Liberation while immersed in life is a real possibility and exhibits certain characteristics across time and space. Thus, it is not surprising that we find models similar to lucid dream-play in other traditions, such as the Tibetan Buddhist Great Perfection (*rdzogs-pa chen-po*) tradition of Longchenpa (*klong-chen rab-'byams-pa*; 1308–1363 C.E.). Consciousness Studies scholar Harry T. Hunt highlights Longchenpa's insights relevant to lucid dream-play:

At a further level of practice, the attempt is made to regard the here-and-now experience of everyday waking life as itself a dream. This leads to a transformation of our experience akin to that which occurs with lucid dreaming and self-remembering during wakefulness—with the increased sense of clarity, immediacy, and freedom also described by Maslow as part of peak experience

If at this very moment you were to seriously consider your current circumstances as a dream, then . . . you would have to turn to the moment-by-moment here and nowness of your unfolding experience with a specific attentiveness and fascination You would sense the immediacy of all that was welling forth around you with the same wonder that Heidegger locates within the similar “gift” and “mystery” of *isness*. (Hunt 1995, pp. 226–27)

Similarly, neuroscientist James Austin's conversation on lucid dreaming is relevant because Austin himself recognizes the similarity between lucid dreaming and, working in the Zen tradition, *kenshō*, or Zen enlightenment. Additionally, such Zen enlightenment is similar to Abhinavagupta's liberated consciousness in the world, also involving the non-dualistic recognition of an external world: the external world exists, but in a unitive relationship with consciousness (Austin 1998, pp. 542–44).⁴⁰ The following characteristics of a lucid dreamer extracted from Austin's interpretation of lucid dreaming help us to imagine what lucid dream-play would be like:

- (1) “awareness of the present moment, the Now;”
- (2) “fully alive and awake;”
- (3) clarity;
- (4) awareness of Self as creator;
- (5) consciousness as both participating actor and observer;
- (6) “excitement and delight,” accompanied by the “expansion of space”. (Austin 1998, pp. 324–25)

There is much to say here. I note that “excitement and delight” remind us of the *rasa* state as “erotic excitement or captivation” (Goodwin 1995). That consciousness is both participating actor and

³⁹ I do not use the phrase “lucid dreaming” lightly nor as, again, a fashionable term borrowed from science, in order to legitimize my argument. Abhinavagupta and Kṣemarāja, and all the yogic lineages preceding and inspiring them, were well aware of lucid dreaming. And in fact lucid dreaming was integrated into Trika tradition practice. Lucid dreaming is not equivalent to liberated consciousness; however, an important quality of lucid dreaming is perhaps the *sine qua non* of liberated consciousness, the lucid self-awareness of being present in a world, whether that world be one of dreaming or waking. The goal of all practices in the Trika tradition was to bring this self-awareness into all forms of consciousness: dreaming, waking, and dreamlessness (see Mark Dyczkowski's exposition on lucid dreaming both in general and in relation to the Trika tradition (Dyczkowski 1992, pp. 242–43)). To the best of my knowledge, Kṣemarāja does not explicitly connect his mega-metaphor of the “self as actor” to lucid dreaming. This is perhaps to be expected; lucid dreaming is not liberated consciousness. Still, Goodwin is right: enlightenment in Abhinavagupta's tradition is more like lucid dreaming, and nothing like dreamlessness. I am reminded here of Sanderson's characterization of the Vedantins' liberation as both “impotent” and “contentless” (Sanderson 1986, pp. 196–97, 205). This is precisely because of the aesthetic nature of liberated consciousness, a consciousness brimming with and tending toward content.

⁴⁰ To be clear, Austin is not saying that lucid dreaming is the same as *kenshō*. In fact, Austin is very precise about the differences (Austin 1998, p. 326, chart). Austin uses the example of lucid dreaming because it emphasizes that liberated consciousness involves the same deep realization of being fully present and alive (see quotation above at beginning of this section).

observer again points to inward and outward consciousness, i.e., consciousness of what is happening on the inside and on the outside. And, the “Self as creator” reminds of the Tantric actor as an active participant in reality. While I am not able to go into detail in responding to these characteristics, I would like to end by highlighting the multi-dimensional aspect of “excitement and delight.” Austin writes:

[E]ven LaBerge’s most prosaic lucid dreams tend to begin with “an unmistakable sense of excitement and delight.” Space expands as this positive affective tone blends into enhanced perceptions. The intensity of light also increases, and the dream scene takes on a richly beautiful luster. *Lucidity, therefore, can be accompanied by unusual perceptual clarity, visual enrichment, and delight.* (Austin 1998, p. 325)

Austin’s description of dream-play allows us now to see the Trika Śaiva model as referring directly to lived bodily experience, and in particular to a transformation in how space is experienced. The expansion of consciousness in religio-aesthetic awareness is no mere metaphor. The bodily and sensory rituals, described by Abhinavagupta and others in the Trika Śaiva tradition as synaesthetic performances that engage the various organs of sense, give rise to the dissolution of boundaries—often referred to as the “melting” (*vigalita*) of boundaries—or expansion (*vikāsa*) of the person beyond ordinary boundaries, boundaries that ordinarily limit the person to think of his body as confined within the skin and dualistically separate from the Other. The phenomenal self expands, appropriating deeper and more expansive fields of reality (*tattvas*). Expansion of consciousness or the heart for Abhinavagupta is an expansion of lived space.

The lucid dream-play, whether described by Austin or Kṣemarāja, implies that the space in which Self relates to Other becomes expanded, as Self opens itself to Being, and experiences “the richness and luster” of Being’s ecstatic world-play, regathering the energies (*śakti*) and connecting them to the Heart. To experience the intertwining of “I” and “other” is for Abhinavagupta a bodily and sensuous experience of a liberated being. With awareness turned inward and outward simultaneously, such an experience is synaesthetic, lucid, and spacious.

Such a view is far from the pure witness detached from phenomenal reality.

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