Abstract: The “inner organ” (antahkaranā) in the Indian philosophical school called Sāṃkhya is applied in two different experiential contexts: in the act of transcendence according to the path of yoga explored in the Yogasūtras of Patañjali (ca. 350 CE) and in the process of identity shift that occurs in possession by a deity in a broader range of Indian cultural practices. The act of transcendence will be better understood if we look at the antahkaranā through an emic lens, which is to say as an actual organ that is activated by experiential shifts, rather than as a concept or explanation that is indicative of a collocation of characteristics of the individuating consciousness or merely by reducing it to nonepistemic objective or subjective factors.

Keywords: antahkaranā; Yogasūtras; saṃyama; possession; Balaji; Ganges; pilgrimage

1. Introduction

In her recent book Lost Ecstasy, June McDaniel addresses critics of the study of commonality in religious experience, specifically ecstasy. Critics argue against its very legitimacy because what is important, they maintain, are differences; nothing else is worth studying because attempts to locate convergences obscure what makes religious experiences unique, namely their differences. McDaniel understands that “[w]hile the study of religion in India lacks the comparative categories of understanding and analysis that we see in Western departments, it has also been free of the Western reduction of religion to political and economic forces” (McDaniel 2018, p. 8). Through a methodological analysis, McDaniel frees herself to study religious experience, regardless of the present intransigence of the community of critics in the West that has positioned itself against such study.

In this essay I align myself with McDaniel, whose understanding is closer to the emic; she does not impose external or etic methods of reinterpreting indigenous understandings of religious experience. Following this lead, I will draw from an array of sources to argue that an “internal or inner organ” is activated and energized at the time one undergoes certain kinds of experience that they regard as religious. Thus, what I am trying to do here is rescue an emic understanding of the subtle physiology of an internal organ. It is this organ or organ system that is awakened from its somnolence and impels or shepherds the interconnected web of cognitive and physiological processes in the direction of specific experiences that closely resemble those described in multiple reliable sources, including texts and ethnographies. The “evidence” for this, if this term is permissible here, will be drawn from Indian text and practice. The texts are from the realm of Sāṃkhya and Yoga, including, notably, the Yogasūtras, and from the “practice” of possession, which is in fact most often performed and nearly as often carefully choreographed, even if textual models from classical or even modern literature are lacking or insufficient. This is not to deny that yoga and the experiences derived from it also manifest through performance, because it surely is, even if it is performed only for oneself.

This essay will be divided into six sections: (1) introduction; (2) a description and interpretation of an inner or internal organ (antahkaranā); (3) examination of the description and function of what Yogasūtras 3.4 invokes as the power or, we might say, the organ that is illuminated when the three
highest stages of Patañjali’s eightfold path combine into a single cognitive unit, namely samyama; (4) the experiential point at which an individual’s personality transitions from one to another during the process of possession (āveśa); (5) discussion and reflections on the three substantive sections; and (6) conclusions that in which we will examine how we might (or might not) put all of this together in order to come more closely into engagement with an “organ” that generates transcendence and motivates it to press forward into other modes of experience and consciousness. We cannot at this point correlate our findings with an ever-deepening understanding of organ systems as understood medically, or of the role of neurotransmitters in this process. The identification and understanding of neurotransmitters are rapidly expanding, and I feel confident that eventually these two areas of understanding and discourse will be brought together.¹

At the moment, however, I would like to see two paths converge, or come asymptotically close at any rate. These are, first, the path of yoga as articulated in the Yogasūtras, and, second, the lived experience of possession as a mode of self-identification and even re-embodiment. A theoretical foundation for this may be seen in the structure of the antahkaraṇa. How then can the antahkaraṇa, drawn largely from Śāṅkhya, samyama from the Yogasūtras, and possession intersect, and how are they relevant to each other? I hope to identify within them a fulcrum of that balances worldly and transcendental experience, an organ that opens the door to ecstasy and yogic realization, one that enables individuals to experience deity or spirit possession. I will take the concept of samyama in YS 3.4 and analyze it as an organ that becomes operational only when samādhi is achieved, one that draws and recasts the energy of samādhi into what are called siddhis or vibhūtīs—“powers of perfection,” in Miller’s (1998) term,² which are only possible as concentrated and subtle experience. I would then like to examine the way in which this organ stands at the fulcrum of personal identity that is evident and transformational in states of possession.

2. The Antahkaraṇa

Let us begin with an attempt to discover what an “internal organ” that regulates experience might look like or how it might be described. The Sanskrit term that presents itself as the primary suspect is antahkaraṇa, regarded as one’s emotional and perceptual center. The antahkaraṇa is classically translated as “heart,” although it must be understood as a secret heart, the locus of deep emotional engagement. This overlaps with the sense of the physical heart (hrd, hrdaya), which also often shares these connotations. Thus, the heart was regarded as a multifaceted organ that went beyond physical, measurable, dissectible qualities. The antahkaraṇa was classically defined as the combination of buddhi, ahamkāra, and manas, or intellect, egoity, and mind (Larson and Bhattacharya 1987). These, taken together, constitute a single functioning organ that comprehends “all objects in all three worlds” (Larson and Bhattacharya 1987, p. 188), and to which the “external organ” of perception and cognition (bahyakaraṇa), the composite of the five sense organs (buddhindriya) and the five organs of action (karmendriya), is subservient (Larson and Bhattacharya 1987, pp. 52, 62, 87). Thus, the “internal organ,” more powerful and consequential than the “external organ,” is conceptualized as the awakened heart, the organ of consciousness and intentionality. The heart is regarded as the center of the system of five prānas or lifebreaths in classical Indian medicine (Ayurveda). It is the locus of the union and separation of the upward moving breath (also called prāna) and the downward moving breath (apāna), as well as the organizing force or vector of all of the lifebreaths. This is because it provides them with both magnitude and direction. It is the container and the locus of both intentionality and the cognitive self. It is, then, a substantial fulcrum that contains within it the intellect, egoity, and mind, as well as the organizer or organizing principle that moves this powerful composite towards it externalized mirror image, the physical world (bahyakaraṇa, “external organ”, or lauikika, “worldly,” realm) as well as to the

¹ For a brief summary, see https://www.tuck.com/neurotransmitters/.
² See her translation of YS 3.37 and 4.1, pp. 68 & 74, respectively.
transcendental (alaukika) realm. As reasonable as this appears to be, however, according to Śaṅkhyā, which lies at the “heart” of Indian philosophical orthodoxy, both the antahkaraṇa and the bāhyakaraṇa irrevocably abide in the relative world, in that field of “primordial materiality” (prakṛti) (Larson and Bhattacharya 1987, p. 24, passim). Even if the various components of the internal organ and the external organ possess different densities, form, and mobility, they are substantialities nonetheless. They are, therefore, forever separate from and untouched by an individual or monadic “catalytic consciousness” (puruṣa), as Elisa Freschi describes it, which is not substantial and is “distinct from intellect and primordial materiality.” The antahkaraṇa is, she states, “the abode of mental events such as thinking, imagining and remembering” (Freschi 2012, p. 371). Even if this is the case, its “presence . . . is essential for the occurrence of the awareness function of intellect and the transformations of primordial materiality” (Larson and Bhattacharya 1987, p. 25). This presentation is essentially adopted by the Yogaśāstra, but this is understandable because it does not tally with the cumulative function of the antahkaraṇa in yoga practice as found in the Yogasūtras.

The antahkaraṇa is more expansively described by the Vaisnava sectarian founder and philosopher Vallabhācārya (1479–1531?) in his brief Antaḥkaraṇaprabodha, “Awakening of the Inner Organ,” the seventh treatise in the Śodaśa-granthāḥ or Sixteen Works. In this text of ten and a half verses, he addresses the antahkaraṇa as if one part of his inner self were speaking to another. It is this brief sense of dialogue that is important here, as if the antahkaraṇa were an intermediary between his will and his actions, between his learned and cultured sense of Krishna as the Supreme Lord and his devotional ecstasy, learned and cultured on the other side of the antahkaraṇa. He does not describe the anatomy of this inner organ, which appears to be a bridge between internal and external awareness. However, the copious commentaries on this text do explain it. It is most easily summed up by Nṛśimhalalijī, who composed an undated Brajbhāṣā commentary on Vallabhācārya’s Śodaśa-granthāḥ between 1775 and 1825. Nṛśimhalalijī says in his commentary on verse 4 of Vallabhācārya’s Nīrodhavāgīśa that if a devotee experiences kīrtana or enlightened discourse in the association of one who has attained proximity to Kṛṣṇa (bhagavāditya), then Kṛṣṇa appears in the antahkaraṇa of the devotee. The antahkaraṇa is defined as consciousness (citta), mind (manas), intellect (buddhi), and ego (ahamkāra) taken together as a single functioning organ. The extra ingredient—consciousness—is added here, thus placing it entirely within the realm of what Śaṅkhyā would regard as prakṛti, with the

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3 This is the case even if Śaṅkhyā metaphysics is entirely different from the other orthodox schools that obtained maximum currency as religious schools, namely the various expressions of Vedānta. Thus, Śaṅkhyā cosmology, minus the nettleSome duality of prakṛti and puruṣa, nature and individual consciousness, was employed as the baseline explanation of the structure of the self in Ayurveda, virtually all sectarian Puruṣāṅgas, and most philosophical schools. Similarly, it is accepted at face value, which is to say in its Śaṅkhyā embodiment, by Abhinavagupta, a term on which he does not speculate. It is absent from the Tāntrikabhāṇakośa, which suggests that the Tantras paid scant attention to it; it was simply a structure designed to uphold the inner constitution. Thanks to Alberta Ferrario for pointing this out to me. It is interesting that the antahkaraṇa barely plays a role in Abhinavagupta’s discourse on sāktipāta (Tantraloka, chapter 13), which brings about the kinds of transitional experience discussed below (Ferrario 2015).

4 Lorilai Biernacki writes: “Known as the antahkāraṇa, the inward sense organs, these include the intellect (mahat-buddhi), the ego (ahamkāra), and the mind (manas). These three, as evolutes of Prakṛti, fundamentally lack sentience. Thus what a contemporary Western scientist might understand as “mind”, “awareness”, or ‘consciousness’, is, to the contrary, from an Indian perspective relegated to the level of mere materiality” (Biernacki 2014, p. 4).

5 The epistemological process here is well-described recently by Walter Menezes: “Knowledge arises when there is a modification (vṛtti) of antahkāraṇa in the form of the object, assisted by the instrumental cause (karana). Thus, the same basic consciousness assumes various forms through different mental modes corresponding to different objects. This clarifies why there is knowledge of varied forms, such as, knowledge of a thing, e.g., tree, house, and horse; knowledge of an attribute, e.g., redness, beauty, and roundness; and knowledge of action, e.g., flowing, flying, and blowing. Like the varied knowledge of external objects, there is also varied knowledge of mental states, such as happiness fear, love, imagination, memory, and so on, of which mind is also the instrumental cause. By taking various forms of diverse objects, antahkāraṇa causes variations in knowledge or consciousness, but does not generate it” (Menezes 2016, p. 157). Note that the term antahkāraṇa also entered the stream of non-philosophical Sanskrit. Kalidāsa used it in Abhijñānaśakti 1.19: asamśaṃ vāsam kṣatrapigarbhakāsām yaḥ evam api asyto ahaṃ abhīlātī me manasah [ satāni hi samadāhakās vassu pramanānah antahkāraṇaprarthavatāś || “Doubtless she is fit to be wed by a warrior, since my heart [manas] desires her so. For in matters of doubt the inclinations of their inner faculties [antahkāraṇa] are authority for the good” (Vasudeva 2017, p. 195).

6 For information on the Śodaśa-granthāḥ, see (Smith 1998; Redington 2000). Redington has translated the Antaḥkaraṇaprabodha along with a few textual notes and more extensive notes from his teacher, Shyam Manohar Goswamy from Mumbai.
Supreme Lord (purusottama) Krishna, with his līlā or divine play replacing puruṣa. Thus it is that antahkaraṇa, the awakened heart as the organ of consciousness and the storehouse of intelligence and personality, can serve as the intermediary between awareness and the Supreme Lord. Elsewhere, Vallabhācārya states in the Sarvanirnayaprakaranā (51–52, unpacked in the commentaries) of his personality, can serve as the intermediary between awareness and the Supreme Lord. Elsewhere, Religions 2019 3. Sam.yama (Maas 2006, 2010), and elsewhere, settles this debate. He also argues, from manuscript sources, that the YS was composed in 3rd or early 4th century CE, which includes the mind (manas) manifesting attentivity, the intellect (buddhi) meaning the capacity for determination and ascertainment, and citta, a storehouse of past impressions and memories. The inner instrument is a crucial aspect of the embodied person that coordinates the functions of the senses and the body while in constant interaction with events within the body and its surroundings. The inner instrument is said to “reach out” to objects in the environment through the senses, and to become transformed into their shapes, so to speak. The inner instrument is constantly undergoing modifications, depending on the objects it reaches out to, and it tries to ‘know’ them by itself being transformed into their shapes.”

This must be distinguished from the Vaiṣṇava reckoning of the inner organ as delineated by Vallabhācārya in that the latter is theistic, in which the inner organ functions within a theistic or sagun context, while the advaita Vedānta that Paranipe describes operates within a nondual or nirguṇa context. Let us now see how this squares with samyama of the Yogasūtras.

3. Śaṁyama

Scholarly and popular exegesis on the Yogasūtras of Patañjali constitute a major area of focus in advocating and assessing the “spirituality” of both India and the West. The 194 sūtras or aphorisms are divided into four pādās or chapters. Since the compilation or composition of the YS in the late 3rd or early 4th century CE, the first two pādās have received nearly all the scholarly and public

7 Vallabhācārya and the commentarial tradition on his work speak of līlāvatāna, a broader extended realm of the Supreme Lord, which includes materiality as his līlā or divine play. In this reckoning the antahkaraṇa would be regarded as part of the whole fabric of līlā, neither external nor internal, but a mere facet of a whole in which its role as connective tissue is devalued. Much has been written on līlā; see, for example, (Sax 1995).

8 Somewhat analogous to this is Elaine Fisher’s quotation of Kumāravāmin, a fifteenth century Śaivaśiddhānta philosopher who has written a commentary on the Tattvapraṇakāśa of Bhoja-deva: “For, unmediated [aparokṣābhūta] knowledge [jñāna], in fact, is the cause of su-preme beatitude [ekteṣā]. And its unmediated quality arises when the traces [samsāra] of ignorance [avidyā] have been concealed through intensive meditation [nididhyāsa]. And intensive meditation becomes possible when the knowledge of Śiva arises through listening to scripture [śravaṇa] and contemplation [nītāṇa]. And those arise because of the purification of the inner organ [antarikṣā]. That [purification] occurs through the practice of daily [nītīya] and occasional [naimittika] ritual observance, with the abandoning of the forbidden volitional [kāmaṇa] rituals” (Fisher 2017, p. 42). Again, the antahkaraṇa serves as a radio; it is a mechanism, a device with varying degrees of clarity or static, which mediates between a remote source and a listener. In a more modern context, note the words of the 20th century yogi Pattabhi Jois: “Sīra [channel systems of the mind, otherwise labeled srotas] are those nīdi [internal channels] that carry messages from the antahkaraṇa, a “message center” located in the region of the heart, throughout the body, and also provide a “vital link in the functioning of the sense organs” (Smith 2008, p. 10, fn. 11).

9 More could be said about this, particularly because the guiding forces of the antahkaraṇa in these two cases would be different. In the case of theistic saguna, it would be Supreme Lord (purusottama), while in the nondual nirguṇa case the antahkaraṇa would be guided more by the interior dimension between the self or ātman and its conscious positioning with the abstract absolute, the brahman. To say more would require a separate essay.

10 (Maas 2006, 2010), and elsewhere, settles this debate. He also argues, from manuscript sources, that the YS was composed in its entirety by Vyāsa, the first commentator on the YS. Many questions can be raised about this assertion, but this is not the place for it. However, this is why efforts such as Chapple’s essay “Reading Patañjali Without Vyāsa” remain valuable (Chapple 2008, pp. 219-35). Other reasons for keeping the debate alive are found in (Aciri 2012; Gokhale 2015).
attention. The reasons for this are because they deal with formal categories of samādhi, the eightfold (aṣṭāṅga) path of yoga (which continues through the first three sūtras, out of fifty-five, of the third pāda), and their discussions of the goals, ethics, and obstacles on the path of yoga. The remainder of the text, nearly the entire third pāda, and the entire fourth pāda (consisting of 34 sūtras), has been all but neglected. The dimensions of the Sanskrit commentaries, the secondary sources, and the weight of the teachings of virtually all yogis and yoga schools in India and the West, bear out this disregard. The reasons are clear enough: the third pāda consists largely of a list of transcendental powers (siddhi, “accomplishment”), or vibhūti, “the power to extend everywhere” (White 2014, p. 31) that are of little interest to the scholarly traditions in both India and the West that have been responsible for perpetuating the yogaśāstra, the system of knowledge of yoga that is transmitted as an intellectual project. This list of siddhis and the means of achieving them is patently esoteric. The siddhis lack an empirical or testable basis, even if they make logical or cosmological sense. Nevertheless, recent scholarship has shown that siddhis, either those mentioned in YS Chapter 3 or elsewhere, were in fact the most commonly sought-after goals of yoga in the first half of the second millennium CE. The fourth pāda presents a different set of problems: it is difficult and often elliptical, as it attempts to tie together various strands from the YS, eluding or exhausting nearly all who have dealt systematically with it. Here our concern is the method of achieving siddhis described in the third chapter, called Vibhūtipāda.

What I suggest here is that if we understand the first several sūtras of the third pāda, especially the fourth sūtra, we will be better able to grasp the experience that the YS offers to its learned audience. The sūtra reads trayaṃ ekatra samyamanaḥ, “Samyama is the three taken together as one.” Samyama means “holding together, restraint, complete control.” The literal meaning, however, is less important than the fact that it serves as a designation for the state in which the three higher limbs of yoga described in YS 3.1–3.3—dhyāna, dhyāna, and samādhi—are held in a delicate stasis. The goal of yoga stated in YS 1.2 is the cessation of the oscillations of the mental processes (yogaś cittariṇiśirodhah). Its fulfillment is articulated here, at the beginning of the third pāda, in the description of the three higher or “inner” limbs (antararoga) of the eightfold path. What it requires is, first, fixing the mind to an object of thought (dhyāna, 3.1). This is then allowed to flow uninterruptedly through time in a settled state of watchfulness (dhyāna or meditation, 3.2). Finally, the true essence of the object shines forth without

11 Namely the caṅgis, waves or mental modifications that must be evened out through the practice of yoga (YS 1.5-1.11), obstacles (antarāyana) to our practice (YS 1.29-1.40), and (3) afflictions (kleśa) with which we must deal (YS 3.3-3.14).

12 Many of the tantric and yoga texts list eight characteristic siddhis: aniṃśa (reducing the size of the body to molecular dimensions), mahāniṃśa (expanding the size of the body to enormous dimensions), garuḍa (beaiveness, increasing the body weight), laghinā (becoming light as a feather), pārāś (ability to translocate), prakāśa (ability to acquire whatever is desired), iṣṭa (lordship), and vaśītā (ability to control nature). These are referred to in YS 3.45, but are not listed. Indeed, this sūtra should serve as the link between the siddhis mentioned in YS and the array of later texts. Many more than these are found in the later texts, although nowhere are they explicitly tethered to the process discussed in the YS. It is not certain that the later yoga texts thought about siddhis as actualized through the same process or explanation discussed in the YS, namely through samādhi as the stable collocation of dharāṇa, dhyāna, and samādhi, but the conceptual link leaves space for this to have been carried forward.

13 See (Mallinson 2012) and elsewhere. This is now acknowledged in the academic study of yoga. See (Vasudeva 2011) for an eighteenth century example of the early goals of yoga as articulated in the YS later on losing their dualist focus as yoga is appropriated into the realm of Vedānta.

14 All translations and editions of the YS (or PYŚ, as it’s commonly called now, for Patañjaliyogaśāstra, (Maas 2006) must perform address the topic of siddhis, but the treatments are usually brief, with almost no learned elucidation. The infrequency of the term outside the YS may be seen in its treatment by Mallinson and Singleton (2017, pp. 286–87, 324) and Larson and Bhattacharya, where it is rarely referred to outside the YS and its commentaries. Larson and Bhattacharya present the commentarial discussions (see their index), even if they are difficult to follow due to the policy of the Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophy to include minimal Sanskrit. Precedents, however, this may be seen in the Bhagavadgītā. Cf. BhG 4.26 śrūtirāddhīśyanti anye samayamāṁsaḥ juhavi—One should offer senses such as hearing and others into the fires of samyama, viz. self-control); 2.61 (tāni sarvāni samyamya yuktā aśīta mātāraḥ—with the senses restrained, he should sit, disciplined focused on me); 3.6 (kāmundrīśyati samyamya ya āste manasaś māraḥ—he sits, restraining his organs of action); 6.14 (manas samyamya maccito yuktā aśīta mātāraḥ—the mind restrained, collected together, etc.), 8.12 (sarvāvārāni samyamya mano hiṇī niruddhy ca—having restrained all the gates [orifices], confining the mind in the heart). These passages present the general semantic horizon for this term prior to the YS.
mediation (samādhi, 3.3). These taken together constitute the singular unified state of samyama. Eleven śūtras follow (3.5–3.15) that describe the nature of the transformation brought about by the process of cessation (nirodhāparināma, 3.9), which invites transformation within the expanded realm of one-pointed unmediated focus (ekāgratāparināma, 3.12).

The list of the siddhis begins at 3.16 and continues with little break through 3.46. They include knowledge of the past, present, and future, the movement of the stars, the interior arrangement of the parts of the body; vision of perfected beings (siddhas); the attainment of the four commonly listed virtues (friendliness, compassion, joyfulness, and equanimity); the ability to fly through the air; and many more. Most of these “powers of perfection” betray a formulaic rhetoric: from samyama on X, Y is achieved. For example, in a complex act, 3.21 reads “from samyama on the form or appearance of the body, one can become invisible by obstructing another’s ability to grasp the body by blocking their eyes from the light.”

Many are much simpler, for example 3.26 reads, “from samyama on the sun, one gains knowledge of the worlds.” Another well-known sūtra, 3.42 reads, “from samyama on the relationship between the body and empty space or ether (ākāśa), and from absorption in a state in which the body becomes as light as cotton, one can move through space.”

These examples are sufficient to show that samyama serves as a valve between the world of ordinary reality and discourse and the realm of transcendental or supernatural accomplishments. It may be viewed as the neck of an hourglass through which awareness must pass and become transformed. The possibility for such accomplishments exists, but it is inert until it is awakened by taking advantage of the higher operations of the path of yoga. One might say it is an organ that is activated or switched on by the singular operation of dāhāranā, dhyāna, and samādhi. Samyama might then be imagined as an organ that reallocates the composite energies of dāhāranā, dhyāna, and samādhi, rendering them useful in attaining exalted and unprecedented knowledge, power, and virtue. It is the heart of cognition and the cognition of the heart. In Patañjali’s manner of speaking, it is the purified antahkarana, because, as described above, it is the organ, the inner organ, through which the laukika and alaukika, the worldly and the transcendent, are mediated and communicated to one another. It is also the moment of dissociation when one identity overtakes another and allows an individual to manifest divinity in a state of invited or controlled possession. This leads to consideration of an inner organ that mediates this moment of dissociation.

4. Possession

Possession falls into two basic categories: voluntary and involuntary. When voluntary, in a large number of cases, it may be labeled positive and oracular. When involuntary, it is nearly always negative and disease producing. The latter constitutes a formal category in classical Ayurveda, āyantuka unmāda, madness (Sanskrit: unmāda) that comes on a person from outside (Sanskrit: āyantūka). This is medicalized at length in the early Ayurveda literature and treated with a broad pharmacological spectrum, with ritual, and through unique psychodynamic practices and processes. It is then picked up and dealt with extravagantly in a large number of tāntrik texts as well in the regional languages of India in which the earlier categories of possessing entities, which fit collectively under the name bhūtavidyā (“science of possessing entities”) are expanded and localized. What we will address here,

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15 The most notable break is the much discussed sūtra 3.37, te samādhāv upasargā vyutthāne siddhayah, which states that if one is not careful these siddhis can become impediments to samādhi, that we can be overtaken by our own success.
16 kāya-rūpa-samāyamāt tat-grāhyāsaktī-stambbe caṣuḥ prakāśasamprayoge ‘ntardānām.
17 bhuvana-jānāmānāḥ tuṣrye-samāyamāt.
18 kāyākāśāyoh sambhandha-samāyamān laghuhtulāsamāpattēs ākāśagamanam.
19 See Sax 2002, 158ff., who speaks of oracular possession in terms of “complex agency.” The notion of assigning agency to non-human actors is controversial in anthropology, but my experience over the years in the Himalayas forces me to concur with Sax’s observations and conclusions.
20 This is described and analyzed at length in Smith (2006, chp. 12).
21 Most of this is also described in (Smith 2006). Some of what appears in the next few paragraphs is drawn from various parts of that publication. See also (Smith 2010).
however, is positive oracular possession, which is, as I argued earlier (Smith 2006, chp. 1), the most frequently sought after state of transcendence in India. It is nearly always induced through ritual, and is therefore virtually always public. It is attractive and enticing, it entreats and impels the individual into an inner zone of safety, power, and authority. To the unknowing outsider or observer, including “official” representatives of priesthoods and orthodox hierarchies, it appears frightening and dangerous. But to the experiencer it is uplifting. In most cases, a gradual crescendo of emotional engagement is visible to observers, whether it is in a religious festival, a healing temple, or a devotional environment in which musical or other activity that may be identified as shamanic, such as drumming, occurs (Rouget 1985). This is distinct from siddhis in yoga, which are, by necessity, private. We are then proceeding in this section from the realm of the theoretical, the antahkaranam, and the private, the cultivation of siddhis, to the public realm, the learned, anticipated, and manifested moment of transcendence into a divinely inspired state.

Two brief ethnographic examples must suffice here. One is from a video titled Kusum (2000), filmed most prominently at and near the Balaji temple in Mehdipur, Rajasthan (Pakaslahti 1998; Dwyer 1999, 2003), a few kilometers off the main road, about halfway between Agra and Jaipur. The other is drawn from a pilgrimage to the headwaters of the Ganga, along the Bhagirathi between Gangotri, the temple town that marks the origin of the Ganga, and Mukhba, 27 km south, where Ganga Devi travels with her retinue for the winter (Smith 2018). The evidence here, ethnography, is of a very different order than the textuality that guides the two previous sections. It is neither Sanskritic nor philosophical. But there is sufficient common experiential or emic ground for the link to be justifiable.

Balaji is a well-known pilgrimage center known for the treatment of possession, which is to say an exorcism center. Many modalities are employed here, because hundreds of healers, largely from villages in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh, come from their native villages every month for perhaps a week, renting out small spaces which they use for their ritual. This is in addition to the exorcistic rites sponsored by the Balaji temple itself. In the last half century, the number of worshippers and individuals who believe themselves to be in need has dramatically expanded, from a trickle of a few hundred per day to no less than seven- or eight-thousand every day. Not everyone who comes feels they are possessed and in need of exorcism. The main reason is because it is exclusively family therapy; if one person is afflicted, then the rest of the family must be, so the narrative among healers goes. Also, afflicted individuals need family around them to withstand the often heavy-handed psychodynamic processes that occur at Balaji.

One of the afflicted was a fourteen year old girl named Kusum. Her treatment (along with many others) was tracked by Pakaslahti, and filmed by a Finnish television crew in 2000 (Aaltonen 2000). Kusum was brought to Balaji, like many if not most others, as a last resort healing center. Biomedical doctors had failed to diagnose her condition and Western psychoanalysis and psychopharmacology were unavailable, as is the case for nearly all Indians, for whom the bare facts of life render such treatment an irrelevant upper class Westernized luxury. Kusum’s father was an autorickshaw driver.

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22 See (Freeman 1993, 1998), on possession as learned behavior.
23 Although the actual beginning is at Gaumukh, 18 km further upriver, where the Bhagirathi emerges as a fully formed river from beneath the receding Gangotri glacier. However, it is only possible to travel there on foot. Thus, the temple, beyond which very few people go (the government imposed limit is 150 trekkers per day), is in the densely built up pilgrimage center of Gangotri.
25 Pakaslahti begins his important 1998 article by pointing to an article then twenty-five years old (Neki 1973), which needs to be updated, that provides an interesting statistic: “80% of the population first consult[s] religious folk healers when they seek outside help for mental health problems” (Pakaslahti 1998, p. 129). This statistic cannot have changed much in the last half century.
in a very poor area in South Delhi, her aunt folded and glued discarded newspaper pages into fragile paper bags for use in the market, and her mother was at home all day every day to prevent the tiny house in the jam-packed slum from being robbed. Without providing more details of the case than are necessary here, suffice it to say that three or four families, each with an afflicted family member, were in attendance in a moderately sized rented room that had been turned into a temple, and that entrancing music blared loudly from a CD player for a couple of hours each morning to the accompaniment of well-known exclamatory chants such as Śrī Rām Jay Rām Jay Rām, Jay Śrī Mā, Jay Bābājī, and so on. At a certain point someone, not necessarily the afflicted individual, will enter a trance state. This can become contagious, but in my experience is limited to members of a single family. In this case it was Kusum’s aunt that fell into a trance state.26

Eventually, after a few days of sitting in the back of the room, more or less staring blankly, appearing pent up and reserved, Kusum developed the comfort and confidence to express herself, and finally entered a state of possession. As is standard for such behavior in India, Kusum first unbound her tightly braided hair.27 This is emblematic of a state of freedom; indeed, this is part of the kinesthetics of possession-based freedom for women in India. Another facet of the bodily expression of possession is rotating quickly counterclockwise with the arms flailing in the air. Kusum did not do this. She remained seated, but her eyes bulged and her tongue lolled down to the tip of her chin as she took on the visage of Kālī (Aaltonen 2000, minute 44:00 and onwards), a familiar goddess who often evokes bouts of possession (Figure 1). In fact, one of the walls of the room featured a common color poster of Kālī (Figure 2). The extent to which Kusum’s tongue lolled downwards is not normal; the mimetic replication of Kālī was unmistakable. Regardless of what one’s theoretical positioning might be, from that moment on Kusum’s healing began to manifest, and continued on an upward swing.28

![Figure 1. Kālī possessing Kusum (Kusum 45:52).](image)

26 It is important to note that the healers who transit through Balaji operate through very different modalities even if nearly all of them advocate family therapy. They are not certified by any outside bureau or board; their procedures are highly idiosyncratic. Among other things this is a reason for more research to be conducted there.

27 See (Obeyesekere 1981; Erndl 1993; Hiltebeitel 1991), although some of this requires modification today.

28 The most promising theory is Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (Latour 1996, 2005), which provides limited and contextual agency to non-human entities and objects; see (Sax 2009), for applying this to possession in the central Himalayas.
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Figure 1. Kālī possessing Kusum (Kusum 45:52).

Figure 2. Kālī, poster art (in the author’s collection).

So, we must ask, what happened here? What process of liberation transpired within Kusum’s mind and body that began to generate her healing? What exactly is this unique, untested, and perhaps untestable healing process? The main actors were pījā, the music, the singing, and the ritual actions of Bhagatji, the healer, a kindly man with a third standard education from the town of Hapur, eighty kilometers east of Delhi, and his assistant, Meena, an intelligent and compassionate woman with a sixth standard education, who had the uncanny ability to temporarily wrest invasive spirits from those in the room who were possessed. The sum of their parts allowed the creation of a small space of safety and community, even if the families did not know each other. 

Bhagatji, dressed casually and standing off to the side, usually smoking a cigarette, confidently in charge, studiously and intently surveyed the room and observed the shifting dynamics. When a family member of an afflicted individual fell deeply into a state of possession, Meena, sitting at the front of the room with her kindly unassuming smile, suddenly entered into a state of possession and unloosened her own hair, her eyeballs disappearing upwards into her head, or so it seemed. In this ostensibly blind and cathartic visage, she nevertheless expertly wrestled the disembodied entity from the person holding it, who was not necessarily the one identified as the afflicted family member. Eventually Meena and the possessed person collapsed, exhausted from the battle, but still fully in their altered states. Bhagatji strode to the front of the room from the side and proceeded to psychoanalyze the spirit, not the individual who was afflicted. Bhagatji called out for the spirit, bhūt or bhūtpret in Hindi, to identify him or herself, ask their reason for being there. Bhagatji would plead to the spirit to cooperate with his intention of transforming the “lives” of invasive bothersome spirits, who destroy the lives of those we regard as the living, and to join the

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28 The most promising theory is Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (Latour 1996, 2005), which provides limited and contextual agency to non-human entities and objects; see (Sax 2009), for applying this to possession in the central Himalayas.

29 One can easily label this a shamanic scenario, and create a list of shamanic features, but the labeling is not important here.
legions of the spirits of the good, which is to say in this case the army (phauj) of Hanumān. In this paradigm, the good spirits were marshalled together as an effective force, the ethereal army of the chief magistrate of this court of law, namely Balaji, as the baby Hanumān is called in this part of Rajasthan. All of this helped generate an unambiguous trigger point that enabled Kusum to unfurl her hair and unburden herself to an extent unprecedented in her short life, in the closed and hardscrabble social space that was the lot of her family. Throughout much of that fateful morning, Bhagatji interrogated, sometimes brutally, the entity held within Meena’s body that she had borrowed from the auntie. At a certain point this achieved a critical mass, following which Kusum let loose, crying desperately at the heart of Kālī, who was none other than herself.30

How, we might ask, is this trigger point different from the extreme concentrated energy that is unloosed in the post-samādhi state of sannyama, at which the antahkaran or internal organ is the fulcrum or balancing point that holds ordinary or laukika reality on one side and the transcendent or alaukika realm of siddhi or manifestation of a deity that heals on the other side? We shall return to this shortly.

The second example is of possession during a Himalayan pilgrimage. The venue was the annual pilgrimage of the Goddess of the Ganges, Gaṅgā Devī, from Mukhba, on the north bank of the Bhagirathi, where she spends the winter resting, to Gangotri, 27 km further east, the nominal source of the Ganges. This pilgrimage occurs on aksayya triyā, the third day of the bright half (suklapakṣa) of the month of Vaśākha, towards the end of April or beginning of May. This is widely considered an auspicious day for embarking on new beginnings. The return journey from Gangotri to Mukhba occurs on Dīpāvalī, the well-known family and community festival that falls on the new moon of the month of Kartika, towards the end of October or beginning of November. The semiannual peregrination features Gaṅgā Devī, accompanied by her associates Sarasvatī and Annapūrṇā in a doli or palanquin (lit. “a swing”), carried by seasoned and strong men, followed by pilgrims, at first perhaps five hundred, but by the end no more than twenty-five or so. The number decreases as the terrain becomes more difficult and the altitude rises, from Mukhba at approximately 8700 feet (2652 m) to Gangotri at 10,300 feet elevation (3139 m), and the cliff from the trail becomes more precipitous.

One of the primary features of this procession and festival, as is the case at festivals and pilgrimages throughout India, is possession.31 The experience here is closer to the norm of “normal” oracular possession that is found across India (if one can, for a moment, accept possession as normal behavior reflecting a normal ontology). Usually it is women who are awakened to the presence of the deity, although it is not uncommon of to find men experiencing such “ecstatic” possession, especially in the Himalayas, where they most often serve as oracles to the deities. Gendered behavior is approximately similar. Certain behavioral manifestations of public possession, such as untying and loosening the hair, then spinning counterclockwise, are usually associated with women, although this is certainly possible for men (disregarding the unloosening of the hair), as noted in the video Kusum. The terms employed for possession in the Himalayas are jhūlānā, “causing (the god) to swing” (Sax 2002, p. 175 n. 39); bhāto ānā, “to bring on a feeling or experience”; khelānā, “to play”; and āveś, “to invite entry.” Āveś discloses the senses of “charge, agitation, intense emotion, frenzy, wrath.”32 The verb nācānā, “to dance,” is also in common use because of the widespread perception that the deity is dancing in the body of the devotee (note the title of Sax’s 2002 book, Dancing the Self). This possession, Sax says, “is brought on in by musicians’ esoteric knowledge, magically powerful spells, and especially their drumming, [which] induce possession and provide the highly charged ambience of a performance. Moreover,

30 Cardeña’s (1994) clear articulation of dissociation is invaluable here.
31 For example, see (Stanley 1977), for the festival at the Khandobā temple at Jejuri, fifty kilometers southeast of Pune the on the somavatī amavasyā or new moon that falls on a Monday; Hiltebeitel 1991 for the Draupadi festival in North Arcot district of Tamilnadu; (Sax 1991) for the pilgrimage to Nandadevi; and much more. See (Smith 2006, chp. 4), for further examples.
32 See (Smith 2006, p. 113) for the richness of the vocabulary of possession in North India.
what I have called “possession” is conventionally understood as dance. They become possessed by the character in question and begin to tremble, roll their eyes, and exhibit whether it is Siva, Bala of Mehndipur, or Ganga Devi. It is this point of transition that we must with what Abhinavagupta and others in Kashmir wrote a thousand years ago in describing savasa walking long distances in a more or less orderly fashion, or at healing centers such as Balaji. Regardless, however, of the mobility or external physical demands on the participants, the behavior during the pilgrimage resonated with that of the Mahabharata characters in the Pándav lila; most if not all Garhwali public performances are related through the flexible and localized Garhwali Mahabharata.

“They become possessed by the character in question and begin to tremble, roll their eyes, and exhibit other conventional signs of possession” (Sax 2002, p. 137).

5. Discussion

We must ask whether and how the experiences of Kusum in her positive or “divine” possession by the Goddess, induced specifically to counter a prior negative disease-producing possession, and that of the participants on Ganga Devi’s pilgrimage are similar, or even related. Do they reflect a sufficiently recognizable underlying psychophysical mapping to enable us to infer that a single internal organ was guiding the process? Is there a moment, a threshold, beyond which transcendence occurs during “divine” possession, when the individual and his or her agency emerges into that of a deity (or spirit)? As noted, among the “conventional signs of possession” are unloosening the hair, trembling, rolling the eyes, and spinning counterclockwise. Some of the other symptoms are resonant with what Abhinavagupta and others in Kashmir wrote a thousand years ago in describing samaveśa or “complete immersion in the sense of ontological identity” (Ferrario 2015, p. 11), including a feeling of intoxicating devotion (“complete immersion in the sense of ontological identity” (Ferrario 2015, p. 11)), convulsions (ghirn, kampa), and loss of consciousness (nidra) (Smith 2006, p. 370). At a certain point, this allows the individual to become fully identified with the deity, whether it is Siva, Balaji of Mehndipur, or Ganga Devi. It is this point of transition that we must address in drawing conclusions.

With this in mind, it is important to note that there is no common word or term in South Asian regional languages to describe or identify the moment of identity transformation in experiences of possession, or that can be equated with the word sanyama in the Yogasūtras. Indeed, in other yoga texts, including those that lie within the Yogaśāstra but outside the immediate realm of the Yogasūtras,

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33 Presently D. R. Purohit, William Sax, and I are working to bring out an edition and translation of one version of the Garhwali Mahabharata, the only one for which the recited text has been written down, hailing from the town of Agastmuni, along the Mandakini River north of Rudraprayag.

34 An outsider sensitive to other modes of thought might diagnose the initial possession as depression or anxiety. These concepts, at least as considered by western academics and the biomedical establishment, are not operable in rural India. The local interpretation, then, must be honored in order to abide by the dictum that the informant is always right. The notion of counter-possession is present not only in India but in Christian practice as well. Thiessen writes “Possession by the Spirit is a form of counter-possession in contrast to demon possession. If demons are dissociative phenomena, then positive possession by the Spirit is also a positive dissociative phenomenon” (Thiessen 2014, p. 183).

35 In June 2018, quite by accident, I attended a village festival at Shri Dhan Singh Devta, Aleru, Tehri Garhwal, south of Chamba, on the road to Rishikesh. It began as a simple chai stop during my taxi ride. I soon heard drums beating up the hill behind the chai shop. I asked man at the chai shop about the commotion. He said simply, nāc, upar se mandir haim, “they’re dancing up at the temple.” I quickly finished my chai and climbed the hill behind the chai shop to discover perhaps 150 people, in mid-morning, dancing, many of them, both men and women, exhibiting the characteristic behavior of possession. Dhan Singh was a resident who had died suddenly from cholera, and was transformed into a rathi devata. The reason is because he was believed to have traveled to the heavenly world in a chariot (ratha). This piqued my interest for a number of reasons. Later, I discovered the videos of a young Garhwali filmmaker who calls himself Ashish Chamoli. in which all of this is explained. It is illuminating to watch the following: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SzrmalBiNgM&t=105s (subtitled in English) Ashish Chamoli’s videography here is a good example of what can now be found scattered across the Youtube universe (and no doubt on social media) that is helpful in gaining access to cultural forms throughout the world. It is just as possible that I would not have seen this than that I did.
the word *samyama* is not employed in the same decisive and programmatic way that it is found in the third *pāda* of the Yogasūtras. Possession is, as I argued earlier, the most highly valued and frequently sought after form of spiritual experience in India.\(^{36}\) Its devaluation by elites within India across the political spectrum that try to define Hinduism to those outside, or even inside, cannot regularize the discourse because its lexical markers differ regionally and often from one venue to another within a small area. This hampers the ability of a comparative project such as this one to achieve a definitiveness that many would seek. It is only possible to say with certainty that the moment of transcendence must remain a mystery no matter how sophisticated an argument or model can be made for lining up and equating related sets of conditions. It’s less comparing apples and oranges than it is comparing varieties of apple.

A proper inquiry now is to ask whether that point or fulcrum of transitional experience is the same in positive and negative possession. Further distinctions may be made within the realm of positive possession, including (a) devotionally induced possession (*āveśa*),\(^ {37}\) which accounts for a preponderance of possession in Indian spiritual and ritual situations; (b) yogic and ritually induced possession, which is to say when a yogi possess another person’s body (*paraśarāveśa*, *paraśakārapraveśa*)\(^ {38}\) or possession as induced in children for divinatory purposes;\(^ {39}\) and (c) Śāiva initiatory possession (*samanveśa*). Another category that should probably be added here, although it possesses characteristics of (a) and (b), is possession that occurs when a singer induces positive possession in an audience. For example, in Garhwal and Kumaon in the central Himalayas, bards hold nocturnal sessions called *jāgar,* “awakening,” in which a locally recognized shaman gains the ability through song and drumming to awaken the deity in others.\(^ {40}\) Taking all of these forms together, it is possible to say that regardless of the specific point along the scale of experience the fulcrum is balanced in these different forms of positive possession, there is no question that the conditions for each one establish the definition and nature of *laukika* and *alaukika* experience for each, and that within the framework of each experiential mode transcendence is a reality. It is their reality, and we must go with this.

It is inadvisable, in my opinion, to deny the individuals within these collocated groupings their own model of transcendence by imposing etic methodologies and standards. Our priority must be to understand the models we study and to see that each has a balancing point, which we are here labeling the *antahkaraṇa*, based on a widely used indigenous model of cosmological analysis and personality structure. It is neither possible nor advisable to search for an absolute point for all these modes at which the *antahkaraṇa* allows the individual experience to shift from the *laukika* to the *alaukika*. The very possibility of transcendence means it must be inferred. Each realm of experience contains sufficient descriptive and theoretical force to allow such an inference to become validated within its own realm. Thus, the “awakened heart” that one feels in devotional possession is qualitatively different from the visionary landscapes of initiatory possession or the moment of cessation (*nīrodhaparājñā*, YS 3.9) that allows the yogi to disappear into voyages of discovery after experiencing *samyama*. Even states of negative possession, in which dissociation may be wild, erratic, uncontrollable, and destructive, are characterized by a balancing point on which the *antahkaraṇa* rests, even if it shifts constantly up and down a dissociative scale.

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\(^{36}\) “As an indigenous category in ancient and classical India, possession is not a single, simple, reducible category that describes a single, simple, reducible experience or practice, but is distinguished by extreme multivocality, involving fundamental issues of emotion, aesthetics, language, and personal identity” (Smith 2006, p. 4).

\(^{37}\) This is covered in (Smith 2006, chp. 4), describing ethnographies (pp. 110–72), and chapter 9 on devotion explicitly articulated (pp. 345–62). Keep in mind that nearly all of South Asian religion is devotional, and any intense experience can lead to possession. This is generally acknowledged.


\(^{39}\) (Smith 2006, pp. 440–48).

\(^{40}\) Such performances are almost always performed by lower caste bards in fairly small rooms with a relatively small audience. See (Alter 2018) for discussion of the music; (Sharma 2006, 2012) for a wealth of local information on *jāgars*; and (Bhatt et al. 2014) for an illuminating depiction of the use of *jāgar* in the Garhwal Himalayas.
6. Conclusions

The antahkaraṇa, we have decided, is the collective energy of the cognitive and conscious self that rests at the balancing point between its disparate parts and their reorganization into a unified higher functioning unit; it is, in other words, as much a faculty or, to materialize it even further, an organ as it is a theory. As such, the consciousness (cit), mind (manas), intellect (buddhi), and [according to some, the] ego (ahamkāra) congeal and radiate more powerfully in a singular concentrated purposefulness. In this way they become a tripartite or quadripartite organ, an internal organ that abides at and as the fulcrum that balances ordinary (laukika) experience with the supraordinary (alaukika) realm. The components of the antahkaraṇa for everyone are therefore the same, but they are arrayed and organized differently for everyone, as well as differently for each person or living being constantly, as the components change from one moment or day to the next, just as other internal organs and mental and psychological processes change as they grow, flourish, and wane. Thus, the antahkaraṇa shifts along a scale of individual identity formation like a chord in a song. The chord cannot be held for too long, its nature is to change until the song is over.

We have examined two modes of transition that demonstrate this. The first is through the practice of yoga and achievement of samyama, the point that separates the developmental stages of yoga, including samādhi, and the higher or alaukika realizations, namely the siddhis. This, as described in the Yogasūtras, can only be practiced by well-schooled and (more likely) initiated practitioners. The list of siddhis and the details of the samyama are unique to this text, and, I suggest, were rarely presented in this systematic a manner in guru–disciple pedagogical exchange. This we can assume from the history of practice, from the division between Yoga as Śāstra and yoga as a disciplinary practice (Yoga with a capital Y and yoga with a lower case y), which appears to have begun soon after the composition of the Yogasūtras, as James Mallinson and others have amply demonstrated.41

The second mode is through deity or oracular possession, which has been a widespread phenomenon in India for a very long period (Smith 2006). In this practice, which is actually a set of related practices, surely numbering in the hundreds, that were localized throughout India, the devotee learned how to come into such close contact with a deity that his or her own identity was at least partially erased as the deity and its power to assert agency came to the fore. The moment of transition from ordinary body awareness to experiencing the initial symptoms of possession to final emergence of the deity is, I am arguing, comparable with the yogin entering into a practice (any practice will do), developing and perfecting his or her powers of concentration, meditation and samādhi, which eventually achieve a critical mass, and finally enters a state in which higher powers can be realized. In both cases, I am proposing, the congealed power of the antahkaraṇa is transformed from habitual directedness towards the laukika world to a retrained focus on the alaukika world. These alaukika realms are envisioned differently in Pātañjala yoga and possession states. The point of transcendence is always found at a junction, balanced as if on a fulcrum. It is an inner, secret, changeable, and highly individual point where light emerges in fullness from shadow or darkness. Furthermore, as this is cultured, its effects redound upon the practitioner’s life, enabling him or her to achieve, on one hand, the final result of yoga as stated in the fourth pāda of the Yogasūtras, namely dharmameghasamādhi (YS 4.29), a state beyond siddhis when one’s samādhi emerges as a cloud of right action. It is also, within the scope of positive possession, a realm of continuous experiential empowerment, which envelopes social empowerment, where the deity without becomes available as the deity within.

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41 See, for example (Mallinson 2011, 2012, 2016), and elsewhere; (White 2014; Vasudeva 2011) and others illustrate the bifurcation of the yoga tradition in which study of the Yogasūtras and its commentaries became limited to the pandita or scholarly community while yoga practice was taken up largely by ascetics with their own very different textuality.
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