

Mantras

Mantras are at the center of religious experience in India: they are found in all modes of ritual and practices, and they accompany all life events from birth to death. While *mantras* ground meditative practice and the many paths to liberation, they are also applied for magical power, alchemical transformation and medicinal purposes, and for prosperity in various phases of life. Found in the earliest Vedic literature, *mantras* transcend Hindu culture and are also found in Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh traditions. Even within Hindu culture, *mantras* defy a single interpretation. The understanding of *mantra* found in the → Vedas, → Tantras, and folk traditions often overlap and shift. Subsequent traditions utilize some of the earlier *mantras*, shifting their meaning, ritual, and visualization. In the classical sense, the term *mantra* is derived from two different verbal roots: the first is the root *matri* + *ac* or *ghañ*, which means “speaking secretly” (Śāyaṇa), and the second is the root *man-* + *tran*, meaning “to contemplate” (Yāska). Tantras often derive this term from two other verbal roots, root *man* (to contemplate) plus root *trai-* (to protect; *KuT.* 17.54). Stemming from different verbal roots and referring to distinct concepts, different uses of *mantra* can be considered as wholly discrete terms. Among the prominent meanings of the Vedic or tantric *mantras*, including secret counseling and the elevated self-awareness (*pramātr*) identified in the Trika system (→ Kashmir Śaivism) as “*mantra*,” this essay focuses the first meaning of the term.

Classical Definitions

Vedic

- *Mantra* is something “pronounced by seers” (*kaviśastā*; *ṚV.* 1.152.2; 6.50.14; 10.14.4; Findly, 1991, 15–47).
- *Mantras* serve to bring to light the subsidiary parts of the sacrifice as it is being performed (*MSBh.* 1.2.32; Taber, 1991, 149).
- *Mantra* is what activates an indication of ritual element (*abhidhānasya codaka*; *MSBh.* 2.1.32).

Tantric

- “The mantra is so-called because it is in the nature of thought and deliverance. It is indeed all-knowing thought and release from transmigration” (*RaTr.* 266; Padoux, 1990, 374).
- “a thought which is omniscience, a liberation which is grace bestowed upon the transmigratory soul...” (*TĀVi.* 3.225; Padoux, 1990, 374).
- “All mantras consist of phonemes and their nature is that of energy, O dear One. Know, however, that this energy is the *mātrkā*, whose nature is that of Śiva” (*Tantrasadbhāva*; Padoux, 1990, 374).
- “[M]antra is the awareness [of reality]” (*ŚiS.* 2.1).
- “Mantras are the Venerable [energy] of the phonemes. They are in the nature of the world as well as of the supreme Lord, and so forth. They are thought and liberation. They consist of discursive thought as much as of pure consciousness” (→ Abhinavagupta’s *PaTrV.*, 243; Padoux, 1990, 376).
- “The mantra is so-called because it is of the nature of the contemplation of the divine of unbound light [and] because it protects from all fears” (*KuT.* 17.54).
- “The meaning of the term mantra is some awareness that encapsulates [lit. gulps] the entire mental constructions which is of the character of thinking in its expansion and of the character of protecting from fear in its retraction” (*MaMañ.* 49).
- “[M]antra is not comprised of letters. Neither is it of the body having ten arms or five faces. Mantra should be [understood] as the rise of sound in the early point of determination” (cited in *Parimala*, *MaMañ.* 49).

Contemporary Definitions

Jan Gonda

- Vedic: “[A] general name for the formulas, verses or sequences of words in prose which contain praise... are believed to have magical, religious, or spiritual efficiency, are recited, muttered or sung in the Vedic ritual and which are collected in the methodically arranged corpora of Vedic texts” (Gonda, vol. IV, 1975, 251).

- Tantric: “a power (*śakti*) in the form of formulated and expressed thought” (Gonda, vol. IV, 1975, 271).

Agehananda Bharati

“A mantra is a quasi-morpheme or a series of quasi-morphemes, or a series of mixed genuine and quasi-morphemes arranged in conventional patterns, based on codified esoteric traditions, and passed on from one preceptor to one disciple in the course of a prescribed initiation” (Bharati, 1965, 111).

André Padoux

- Tantric: “A mantra is a formula or a sound with a fixed and prescribed form, to be used according to certain rules and in prescribed circumstances, and empowered with a general or a specific efficacy acknowledged by the tradition wherein it is used” (Padoux, 1990, 379).

- Second (philosophical) definition: “A mantra is an aspect of the cosmic energy, and thereby it lies at a certain level of consciousness” (Padoux, 1990, 379).

General Characteristics

The above definitions make explicit that the concept of *mantra* cannot be reduced to a single interpretation. It is nonetheless possible to highlight some characteristics in order to identify *mantras*. In general, specific lineages assume traditional authority in transmitting specific *mantras* with a focus on the oral instruction. Receiving a *mantra*, thus, becomes identical to receiving ritual initiation (*dīkṣā*). *Mantras* are considered to be divine revelation, and the authorities – the → *ṛṣis* in the Vedic tradition and *siddhas* in the folk pantheons – are considered capable of “hearing” the cosmic resonance. The power of *mantra* is believed to transcend its linguistic ability to signify something and they often defy the rules of spoken language – and thus their efficacy relies less on grammatical correctness than on its precise articulation. Distanced from common language, a *mantra* can be an acronym of the names of deities or of various *mantras*.

Mantras are often identified with distinct deities and just as the images of the deities receive rituals of life-installation and worship, so also do *mantras*. In this depiction, *mantras* assume their own personalities. When *mantras* are applied in

specific rituals, their very nature shifts according to the ritual application. *Mantras*, then, are often flexible; they can be used for different and sometimes contrasting purposes, and the treatment of *mantras* follows the ritual paradigm. This application of *mantras* often relates to the construction or visualization of various geometric designs (→ *maṇḍalas*). Although the incorporation of geometric designs for rituals that require chanting *mantras* is found in both Vedic and tantric rituals, the interrelationship between *mantra* and *maṇḍala* becomes prominent in the latter. In the tantric depiction, just as peripheral deities are considered to be emanations of the central deity, the *mantras* of the deities in the circle are considered to be limbs of the core *mantra*. Tantras often reverse the Vedic ritual paradigm by placing a *mantra* at the center of the ritual, and in many cases, the recitation of *mantra* replaces the ritual itself. In this changed paradigm, the *mantra* is regarded as the foundation for reflection, and the mental resonance of *mantra* is considered to be more powerful than its vocalic articulation.

The Vedic Mantras

The composers of the Vedic *mantras* are called “seers” (*ṛṣis*). The Vedic citations identified as *ṛc* are metrical and are loudly pronounced, whereas the *yajus* sections contain prose to be uttered slowly in various ritual contexts. Vedic tradition stresses exact articulation, and variation in chanting gives rise to different branches of the Vedas (Carpenter, 1994, 19–34). As *ṛcs* are associated with deities, *mantras* identified as *yajus* are linked with rituals. The *sāman* is metrical and chanted with musical effect. The *mantras* in the *Atharvaveda* are often linked to magical effects (see also → Vedas).

Due to the stature of the Vedas in Indian society, vernacular traditions occasionally link themselves to the Vedas. The authority in the Vedic paradigm concerns the power of speech, limited to that embodied by the *ṛṣis* through their penance. Myths often highlight the seer’s power to transform reality through speech. As this is not simply linguistic signification, authoritativeness is crucial to mantric identity.

The concept of speech (*vāc*) as divine is at the center of *mantra*. In the Vedic world, speech is considered to be the teacher of gods (*RV.* 8.100.10; 10.125.3), immortal (*RV.* 1.139.8), and of the nature of light (*RV.* 9.73.5). They are the mothers

(*mātr̥s*; *RV*. 8.6.20), and are indestructible (*akṣarā*; *RV*. 1.80.1). This divination of speech manifests in Indian philosophical traditions on the one hand in the concept that the signifying power (→ *śakti*) of language is divine, and on the other, in the magical power of speech with its ability to transform reality. Vedic tradition relates correct understanding and articulation of *mantras* to magical results. A narrative suggests that the demons lost the war by failing to pronounce the *mantras* correctly (*MaBh.* 1.1.). In the Hindu paradigm, all rituals require *mantra*. It is arguable that rituals and *mantras* exist independently and are superimposed upon each other for magical effect. In the later traditions, the efficacy of *mantras* supersedes the ritual paradigm.

The repetition of *mantras* comes to prominence in the later Vedic period, with soft recitation in the morning and louder articulation later in the day. This stylistic shift in chanting evolves in the form of three recitations: low (*mandra*), inaudible (*upāmsu*), and mental (*mānasa*; Patton, 2005, 29). This structure of chanting unfolds with the divine *vāc* being not merely speech having power, but *Vāc* as the goddess of wisdom and the procreative force associated with Prajāpati, the god of creation (Holdrege, 1996, 89–93, 105–112).

Importing Mantras: Vedic Mantras in the Tantric Context

The vast gap between the Vedas and the Tantras is bridged through the concept of *mantra*. The deities invoked in the Vedas, the *mantras* associated with the deities, and the rituals differ greatly when compared to tantric deities, *mantras*, and ritual application of those *mantras*. Vedic *mantras* are poetic in nature, a characteristic that diminishes in the subsequent *mantra* literature. Vedic *mantras* are replete with simile and metaphor, and record history through poetic vision, which is not the case for tantric *mantras*. Despite differences, the *mantra* that embodies the concept of the power of speech, is at the core of both Vedic and tantric traditions. Most Tantras attribute *mantras* to one or the other Vedic seers, suggesting that their authority in Indian society had remained undiminished despite the changed ritual context.

Tantras frequently draw upon the Vedic *mantras*. An exploration of the *gāyatrīmantra*, which is both the most popular Vedic *mantra* recited today as well as a tantric *mantra*, demonstrates the nuances added in transporting *mantras* from

one to another context. *Gāyatrītantra*, a medieval tantric text, delineates the detailed ritual, visualization, and application of this *mantra*. While the name *gāyatrī* comes from the verbal root *gā-* or *gai-*, meaning “to sing,” the *mantra* is no longer sung, but is quietly articulated or repeated mentally. The deity of the *mantra* is no longer Savitṛ (the sun), but Sāvitrī, a goddess with benign anthropomorphic form. The *mantra* is no longer read once in the ritual context, but is repeated many times. The associated deity, Gāyatrī, is meditated upon in different forms: in the form of Gāyatrī in red garb for the early morning, as Sāvitrī in white garb during the day, and as → Sarasvatī in smoky garb at sunset. She is visualized as having five faces and ten arms during late-night meditation. The full *mantra* practice requires the installation of the *mantra* in the body (*nyāsa*), the demonstration of various gestures (→ *mudrā*), and visualization of both the corporeal form of the deity and each and every letter of the *mantra*. Furthermore, each letter is focused upon as having a specific color, and is associated with a specific *ṛṣi* and meter (*GāT.* ch. 1). Each letter of the *mantra* links with distinct principles found in → Sāṃkhya cosmology, and certain perfections are associated with certain letters of the *mantra*. The practice includes *maṇḍala* construction and worship, wherein various deities are invoked as emanation of the goddess Gāyatrī (*PST.* ch. 30).

Duplicating the Vedic *gāyatrīmantra*, Tantras produce multiple versions, with each of the deities having its own *gāyatrīmantra*. In the changed context, this *mantra* transforms to a “class” referring to a particular type of *mantra* associated with various deities. Adopting this structure, sometimes even peripheral deities in the *maṇḍala* have their own *gāyatrīmantra*.

Another example of this process of adaptation and transformation can be found in the Śaiva → Āgamas, which often utilize five Vedic *mantras* in ritual visualization of the five faces of → Śiva. These *mantras* are at the center of the → Pāśupata vows and practices. The *Svacchandatantra* describes the *aghoramantra* (→ Aghoris and Kāpālikas), associating it with Svachchanda → Bhairava. Parallel to the tantric practice of *gāyatrī*, these Śaiva *mantras* move to a new ritual paradigm with a shift, not only in visualization and preparatory rituals, but also in the meaning of the *mantra*. They now correspond to various Śiva or Bhairava forms, and the practice includes the installation

of *mantras* in the body, construction and visualization of a *maṇḍala*, demonstration of various gestures, and a high number of *mantra* repetitions. Various perfections and magical powers are associated with repetition of these *mantras*. These examples demonstrate the fluidity of the Hindu traditions and illustrate the shift of the ritual paradigm with the *mantras* remaining unchanged.

Mantra in Tantric Literature

Tantric *mantras* dominate the popular Hindu perception of the power of speech. These *mantras* may be in Sanskrit, in a hybrid language, or in the vernacular. Although *mantras* in the tantric world vastly differ from their Vedic counterparts, Tantras often assign the Vedic seer and the meter for their *mantras*. In the shifted paradigm, Tantras stress the powers of the letters (*mātrkā*) that collectively constitute the power of *mantras*. Letters, the substance of *mantras*, are considered here to be the blueprint of creation.

Mantra and Mātrkā

Each of the Sanskrit letters, generally counted as 50 is considered *mātrkā*, giving rise to words and in turn to the world. Following *Śivasūtra*, *mātrkā*s constitute the very foundation of cognition (*ŚiS.* 1.4). Tantric texts arrange letters in various orders, attributing special significance to each variation. The *śabdarāśi* order, wherein the letters are read in the sequence of *a* to *kṣ*, highlights the prominence of Bhairava. In the *mālinī* sequence, the letters are arranged from *n* to *ph*. Tantras give a unique visualization for each of the letters and also assign a specific number of rays (*raśmi*).

These rays, referring to the powers of the five elements (→ *mahābhūtas*) from earth to sky, are organized differently in different letters corresponding to the transmissions (*āmnāyas*), the different sources of the emanation of the deities (*VAT.* ch. 20). Furthermore, the letters *a* to *kṣ* are segmented into seven or eight groups and are related to their corresponding deities, invoked as *mātrkā*s. In other words, the powers of Bhairava and *mātrkā* manifest through the articulation of vowels and consonants that collectively constitute the *mantra*. As the word *aham* is an acronym of both vowels and consonants, this is considered to be the seminal form of Bhairava and *mātrkā*. The term means I-sense. The world is considered the manifestation of *aham* in both the cosmologi-

cal sense with the categories emerging from the letters, and the cognitive sense with self-awareness being the foundation of concepts, and that in turn of the perceived world. These two letters also depict the seminal drop (*bindu*) and sound (*nāda*), suggesting the capacity of *mantras* to be “seen” and “heard.” The cosmic resonance encapsulated in letters and found in deeper levels of pronunciation establishes the parallel between the individual body where the serpentine force called *kuṇḍalinī* resides in the subtle and physical forms of sound, and the cosmos that is the manifestation of sound in material form (*LakṣT.* chs. 18–23).

Mantra as Person

According to Tantras, *mantras* not only distill the cosmic forces and empower its holder, they are often treated as living persons. As each *mantra* presents its own order of letters, it depicts a unique macrocosm, with *mantra* being the conscious subject, the axis upon which all energies revolve. The divine nature of speech, found in anthropomorphic form in the Tantras, parallels the concept that the proper order of letters unfolds the hidden forces of the cosmos in the form of *mantras*. Select instances to describe the subjective domain of *mantras* include:

- *Mantras* embody awareness (*KuT.* 15.61).
- *Mantras* are considered engendered by *mātrkā*s, the mothers (*ŚTT.* 2.57).
- Most of the monosyllabic *mantras* are considered to be “seminal” (*bīja*), from which longer *mantras* emerge.
- *Mantras* are masculine, feminine, or neuter. The *mantras* that end with *vaṣaṭ* or *phaṭ* are considered to be masculine, while those ending with *vauṣaṭ* or *svāhā* are feminine, and those ending with *huṃ* or *namaḥ* are neuter (*MMU.* 24.92–94). Other Tantras consider the *mantras* ending with *huṃ* as masculine, and the *mantras* ending with *ṭhaṭha* as feminine (*ŚTT.* 2.58).
- *Mantras* can have impurities (*sūtaka*) related to birth or death (*KuT.* 15.57).
- *Mantras* receive the rituals of birth and are awakened (*KuT.* 15.71–72; *ŚTT.* 2.112–123).
- *Mantras* can be perplexed or angry; they can be young, adolescent, or old; they can be proud, insensible, intoxicated, deceitful, or slow; they can turn their face away; they can be deaf, blind, inanimate, servile, hungry, immobilized, tormented, without affection, lifeless, asleep, cruel, dull, hostile,

indifferent, ashamed, or deluded (*KuT.* 15.65–70; *ŚTT.* 2.64–110; Bühnemann, 1992, 79).

- A *mantra* can be a friend or an enemy (*KuT.* 15.84; *ŚTT.* 2.126).

These attributes of *mantra* are possible only when *mantras* are treated as persons and not merely as words or instruments for acquiring magical results.

The Power of Mantras

The Vedic understanding, that rituals constitute and transform reality, embodies the notion of the power of *mantras*, as there are no rituals without *mantras*. The later Vedic concept that *praṇava* (→ *om*) is the source of the three planes of the cosmos typifies tantric exegesis, and the early Indian notion of penance (→ *tapas*) is reversed in later Indian culture, with *mantras* replacing rituals and penances. In the Vedic paradigm, one aspires to “see” *mantras* and be a *ṛṣi*, whereas in the tantric context, *mantras* are divine revelations and one aspires to achieve *siddhis* through the *mantra* practice.

Mantras are often compared to weapons. *Mantras* that grant protection – identified as *sudarśanamāntra* (the disc *mantra* related to Viṣṇu), *aḥorāmāntra* (Śiva’s weapon), *pāsupatāmāntra* (Śiva’s weapon), *nṛsimhāmāntra* (the *mantra* to invoke the man-lion incarnation of Viṣṇu), and so on – and *mantras* given the mythological names for weapons, both highlight the paradigm of warfare. If practiced differently, *mantras* generate the opposite effect: the *mantra* for granting long life, when recited in reverse order, is applied as a *mantra* for killing. Read from back to front, the *Devīmāhātmya* grants supernormal powers, and the *gāyatrīmantra* carries out magical effects. Although the etymological and syntactic meaning of a *mantra* does not apply in these reversals, the concept of *mātrkā* generating power in the *mantra* is not challenged even in the changed sequence.

Patañjali (→ Pātañjala Yoga) identifies certain perfections that are achieved through *mantras* (*YS.* 4.1). These supernormal powers are clearly distinguished from those attained through *tapas* and absorption. In his commentary, Vyāsa identifies perfections such as having multiple bodies through birth, agelessness and deathlessness through the application of elixir, the powers such as manipulating the size of the body through

mantras, and the ability of shape-shifting through *tapas* (*VyāBh.* 4.1). This categorization is not applicable to both Vedic and tantric understandings, as they unequivocally proclaim the unparalleled powers of *mantras*.

In tantric practice, the power of *mantras* is discovered through acquisition of a specific state of mind. The gesture called *khecarī*, for instance, depicts the state of mind beyond thoughts, identifying it as the supreme state and origin (*yoni*) of all deities and *mantras* (*NeT.* 7.35–41). *Mantras* are considered more powerful in their seminal (*bīja*) form. *Aham* is one of these seed *mantras* that stands as acronym for all the letters and also for selfawareness (Padoux, 1991, 386–389). *Mantras*, along these lines, are the specific arrangements of the powers found in letters (*mātrkā*), which are the “unrecognized mothers” for bound individuals and are divine forces for the realized ones (*ŚiS.* 1.4). The rise of the powers that underlie these letters determines perfections, and when all the forces of these letters are concealed, one is bound and compared to a beast (*SpK.* 45). The realization of the divine aspect of the I-sense through the complete recognition of *aham* is therefore considered to be the essence of all the *mantras*.

The vigor (*vīrya*) of *mantra* is considered to be experienced through the immersion in pure consciousness (*ŚiS.* & *ŚiSV.* 1.22). Tantras are in agreement that the letters pronounced are not *mantras* if they are repeated without awareness. An aspirant merges his self-awareness with a *mantra* through ritual installation of *mantras* and through visualization, wherein the focus lies on the integration and dissemination of *mantra* and letters. The vigor of *mantras* is felt through the expansion of the self-awareness that embodies the cosmos (*ŚiS.* 2.3).

Essentially, the power of *mantras* is “felt,” explained as follows:

[O]nce entered that state which (the yogi) takes as his support and firmly resolves that: “I will surely do whatever he says,” both the sun and moon set, following the ascending way, into the channel of *suṣumnā*, once abandoned the sphere of the universe. Then in that great sky, when the sun and moon dissolve away, the dull minded (yogi is cast down) into a state like that of deep sleep. The awakened however remains lucid. Seizing that strength (*bala*), *mantras*, endowed with the power of omniscience, perform their functions, as do the senses of the embodied. (*SpK.* 23–26; Dyczkowski, 1994, 102–104)

The power of *mantras* parallels the power of *kuṇḍalinī*. As *mantra* stands as both its phonetic resonance and the awareness embedded in it, so does *kuṇḍalinī* with its relationship to life force (*prāṇa*) and awareness. Tantric texts such as *Śāktavijñāna* discuss the physical effects of the rise of *kuṇḍalinī*. The manifestation of mantric powers coincides with the waking of *kuṇḍalinī*. There are physical symptoms associated with the rise of this serpentine power, some of which are wearisome (*ŚāV.* 19–22). This depiction tallies with the folk belief that *mantras* can be “dangerous” and are not to be practiced without a proper guide.

Tantras highlight the schema that audible *mantra* recitation (*śābda*) is less powerful in comparison to inner vocalization (*upāṃśu*), which in turn is subordinate to mental reflection (*mānasa*). The inner recitation of a *mantra* is considered to be a hundred times more powerful than vocalic recitation, and the mental counting is considered a thousand times more efficient. Some Tantras relate vocalic recitation to inferior accomplishments such as killing or hypnotizing, inner utterance (*upāṃśu*) to achieving perfections such as distance sight or hearing, and mental recitation as the means to liberation (*LakṣT.* 39.35). Tantras apply their own set of rules and regulations to the course of recitation for discovering the power of *mantras*.

Following Tantras, the course of *mantra* practice starts with finding a proper *mantra* that fits the nature of the aspirant and culminates with the “waking” of *mantras*. As *mantras* are considered to have their own personalities, particular *mantras* are appropriate for particular persons. This selection of *mantras* and initiation is accompanied by contemplation upon the meaning of the *mantras* given, followed by the enlivenment of the *mantras* (*mantracaitanya*). Both the cognitive and resonant aspects of the word are actively engaged in this phase of making the *mantras* alive. Through the perception that *mantras* are powerful, and are the divine vehicles for achieving perfection and liberation, one builds faith in *mantras*. This conviction in the power of *mantras* is an important stage in *mantra* practice. In this course, the aspirant visualizes all the letters of the *mantra* in the heart, connects it to the *kuṇḍalinī*, and visualizes them united in the thousand petalled → lotus. The repetition of the *mantra* with *saṃpuṭa*, or the insertion of the seed syllables such as *hrīṃ* at the beginning and ending of the

mantra recitations, is taught as the means for the rise of *mantras*.

Some seed *mantras* such as *hrīṃ* are also identified as *kullukā*. Visualization of the specific deity along with her *kullukā*, prior to counting the *mantra*, is considered a necessary step in *mantra* recitation. These syllables are also identified as the bridge (*setu*) between the practitioner and the *mantra*, and are supposed to be recited before chanting the *mantra*. Each of the *mantras* is supposed to have emanated from a seed *mantra* and the recitation of that seed *mantra*, such as *śrīṃ* for Lakṣmī (→ Śrī Lakṣmī), is supposed to purify speech and empower the *mantra* recitation.

The *mantras* received can have various faults. A practitioner revealing his practice, for example, is considered to be a fault. The power of *mantras* is believed to manifest when these faults are removed. Tantras describe the following rituals as necessary in order to purify *mantras*:

- Birth (*janana*). In this ritual, a geometric design associated with birth (*jananayantra*; → *maṇḍalas* and *yantras*) is made, in which the letters are written and a specific *mantra* is revealed.
- Illumination (*dīpana*). This ritual recitation of the *mantra* begins with *haṃsa* and ends with *so'ham*.
- Awakening (*bodhana*). This refers to the recitation of the *mantra* with *hrūṃ* at both of its ends.
- Beating (*tāḍana*). To recite the *mantra* with *phaṭ* at both ends is considered “beating.”
- Consecration (*abhiṣeka*). In this ritual, the main *mantra* is consecrated with the *mantra aiṃ haṃsaḥ oṃ*.
- Purification (*vimalīkaraṇa*). In this ritual, the main *mantra* is recited with *oṃ troṃ vaṣaṭ* at both ends.
- Enlivenment (*jīvana*). To recite the *mantra* with *svadhā vaṣaṭ* in both ends is considered enlivenment.
- Libation (*tarpaṇa*). This is the ritual offering of milk, honey, or water one hundred times while reciting the main *mantra*.
- Concealing (*gopana*). This is the ritual of reciting the main *mantra* with *hrīṃ* at both ends.
- Satiation (*āpyāyana*). Recitation of the *mantra* with *hsauḥ* in both ends is the ritual “satiation” (*MMU.* 24.98–108).

The Meaning of *Mantras*

The cognitive and phonic aspects are inseparable from each other in *mantras*. Just as the sound of the *mantra*, its correct articulation, and the number of repetitions are equally important, both the Vedic and the tantric literature likewise stress that understanding the meaning of *mantras* is an integral part of *mantra* practice. Later → Mīmāṃsā treatises state that “*mantras* call to memory things associated with some performance,” suggesting that *mantras* used in rituals are meaningful in the ritual context, whereas others have “unseen” (*adr̥ṣṭa*) meaning. *Mantras* are deciphered in different ways, accepting different perspectives to be valid. Exploration of several prominent exegetes and the traditions that endeavor to discuss the meaning of *mantras* follows.

Yāska

Yāska, the earliest known commentator upon the Vedic literature, strongly propounds meaning in *mantras*. He criticizes Kautsa who considers *mantras* to be devoid of meaning (*Nir.* 1.15) and proposes that Vedic words are identical to the spoken language (*Nir.* 1.16). In rejection of the position that *mantras* are obscure, Yāska says that it is not the fault of the poet if a blind person does not see it: it is the fault of the man himself (*Nir.* 1.16). He cites passages describing the person as a blockhead who, having read the *mantras*, does not understand their meaning (*Nir.* 1.18).

His exegetical approach is to first extract the meaning of ritual language from its common usage, and then to explore the etymological basis for multiple meanings. Yāska’s exegesis culminates in the section called *Daivata*, where he categorizes *mantras* as (a) indirectly addressed, (b) directly addressed, and (c) self-invocations with a first-person subject. He understands the deity of the *mantra* as the one whom the seer invokes with a particular request (*Nir.* 7.1). This understanding of *mantra* limits its scope to invocations, and does not take into account the *uktha*, *bīja*, and *kūṭa* type of *mantras*. Utilizing a sophisticated process, Yāska decipheres the meaning of *mantras* on two different planes, one corresponding to the deity (*adhidaiva*), and the other to the self (*adhyātma*). This tendency to derive multiple meanings of *mantras* becomes prominent in the later traditions.

The Mīmāṃsā Exegetical Tradition

The nature, role, and meaning of *mantras* are crucial to Mīmāṃsā texts. Thinkers of this Vedic tradition such as Śabara, Kumārila, and Prabhākara have an unmistakable imprint on other exegetical traditions. Central to the Mīmāṃsā tradition are the concepts that *mantras* are not of human origin (*apauruṣeya*), and that *mantra* recitation creates power that did not exist before (*apūrva*). Mīmāṃsakas first perceived *mantras* as eternal and in saying so, they primarily meant the permanence of phonemes (*varṇa*).

Śabara contends that “word” (*śabda*) embodies properties that are both seen (*dr̥ṣṭa*) and unseen (*adr̥ṣṭa*). The comprehension of word-meaning can be considered the visible aspect, whereas the “power” believed integral to the articulated word can be identified as the second. The next concept of Śabara’s, that the meaning of word is image (*ākṛti*), allows later linguists to conceive of “meaning” as mental. For Śabara, “word” is not confined within time nor is it comprised of parts (Gächter, 1983, 38–69). This concept parallels the Sanskrit grammarians’ view of the *śabdabrahman* (see below).

Kumārila posits that *mantras* have “intrinsic validity” (*svataḥprāmāṇya*). While defending that the Vedas are not of human or divine origin, Kumārila argues that the content of the Vedas, *dharma* in general, is not found by any external means of knowledge. This concept is at the foundation of later epistemologists, who argue that the means of knowledge does not depend on further means for its validity (Taber 1992, 204–221). Adopting this position, the magical effect of rituals, some of which come to fruition in subsequent lives, cannot be confirmed through any other means of knowledge.

The meaning of a sentence emerges here in the context of analyzing *mantras*. The theory that the meaning of a word is understood in relation to the meaning of other words in a sentence, or “related designation” (*anvitābhidhāna*), is attributed to Prabhākara. Following this argument, linguistic understanding relies on unitary comprehension of meaning. As the movement of a wagon cannot be reduced to specific functions of its parts, the singular awareness derived from a sentence, following this understanding, cannot be attributed to separate words (Siderits, 1985, 253–297). Following the theory of designated

relation (*abhihitānvaya*) of Kumārila, the meaning of a sentence is gleaned from the meaning of its words, and knowing the meaning of one word does not depend upon comprehension of other words in a sentence. Exegetes have utilized both of these methods for explaining *mantras*.

Bhartṛhari

Although the scope of Bhartṛhari's → philosophy of language is not only directed to *mantras*, it nonetheless provides deep insight into the classical understanding of the nature of "word" (*śabda*) identified with *brahman*. His concept of "word" as the absolute, the concept of *sphoṭa* in which meaning is a unitary whole, and the analysis of speech at the esoteric levels of *paśyantī*, *madhyamā*, and *vaikharī*, are foundational to *mantra* exegesis in tantric literature (Iyer, 1992, 98–180). The concept of *pratibhā*, or the intuitive linguistic power, becomes the cosmic procreative force in the Trika Śaiva doctrine, allowing the interpretation of speech at four levels, placing *pratibhā* (or *parā*) at the heart of the evolution of speech.

In Bhartṛhari's paradigm, there is no distinction between word and its powers that materialize reality. Because of this intimate relationship between the absolute and the word principle, one who is aware of the reality of the word principle is said to realize the absolute (Sastri, 1991, 1–33). In the absence of this concept that bridges the absolute and the word, the realization of the self and attaining liberation through *mantra* would not be possible.

Sphoṭa encapsulates both word and meaning: its sonic aspect is found in pronouncing the word, and its cognitive aspect is revealed through knowing its meaning. Both sound and awareness manifest, or "burst forth" (*sphuṭ*), out of this "word principle." This concept fits with the later Vedic notion that the threefold world is the manifestation of the three letters of *om*. Bhartṛhari analyzes this relationship in terms of *sphoṭa* and *dhvani* (sound), in which the internal aspect is identified as the cause of the real meaning, while the external form is revealed through articulation. *Dhvanis* are

all-pervasive and imperceptible particles which, when amassed by the movement of the articulatory organs, becomes gross and perceptible sounds and are then called *nāda*. (Coward, 1980, 74)

Tantras give sophisticated structure to *nāda* and derive the meaning of *mantras*, not only by segmenting it according to its letters, but also by analyzing subtle resonances found in the course of reciting the *mantra* (Padoux, 1990, 86–165).

The tantric understanding of *mantra* substantially depends upon the concept that there are various levels of speech. Following this principle, audible speech is merely the external form of the word principle that manifests first in its self-revealing stage identified as *paśyantī* and is experienced in the mediating ground (*madhyamā*) before it becomes articulated. Addressed briefly by Bhartṛhari, the concept of the levels of speech dominates the exegesis of *mantra* in Trika Śaiva and other tantric traditions. Tantras add the category of the "supreme" (*parā*) form of speech, describing it as consciousness itself, pulsating eternally, giving rise to both linguistic and material manifestation. This word principle is recognized as the non-dual awareness being aware of itself. In this self-awareness of speech, all that is to be cognized is cognized, and this is the foundation for the rise and collapse of names and forms (Padoux, 1990, 172–204).

The self-seeing (*paśyan*) word principle, the *śabdabrahman*, appears as the first pulsation and orientation toward creation. Tantras identify it as subsequent to supreme speech, awareness itself. *Mantras* manifest on this foundation that makes up the forces of the word principle, where subject and object are not distinguished. The dialogue of the primordial couple Śiva and Śakti (→ Mahādevī; → Pārvatī) is related to this level of speech in Tantras. This self-seeing (*payantī*) speech is correlated with the power of will (*icchā*), which is found in consolidated form in the manifestation of the power of knowledge (*jñāna*) in *madhyamā* speech, and in the power of action (*kriyā*) in *vaikharī* speech. The duality found in terms of both subject and object, and word and meaning, appear (*ā* + root *bhās*) in the *madhyamā* level of speech. The letters found in the form of *aham* are manifest in this intermediate stage of speech, giving rise to vowels and consonants. Although not articulated audibly, this is the ground where word and meaning assume difference, and language manifests in the mind. The last stage, *vaikharī*, is the external and audible form of language (Padoux, 1990, 204–216). The first throb of *mantra* found in *paśyantī* is of the character of vision, and can be compared to the visionary power of the seers in their ability to see the *mantras*. In

other words, “knowing” *mantra* is a singular audio-visual perception. This hierarchy of speech allows Tantras to develop their esoteric interpretation of *mantras*, where the subtle sound is more powerful, and sound and cognition become one in self-awareness.

Mantra is the ground of speculation for both Mīmāṃsā exegesis and Bhartṛhari’s philosophy of language. These ideas predate most of tantric literature and are the bedrock in the development of the tantric interpretation of *mantras*. Furthermore, both Bhartṛhari and Trika Śaivas similarly embrace the doctrine of *ābhāsa*, adopting the concept that the absolute appears in manifoldness without really being polluted or without falsely projecting non-existing entities. In other words, utilizing both Mīmāṃsā and the philosophy of Sanskrit grammar for speculation on *mantra* is crucial to understanding classical *mantra* exegesis.

Deciphering *Mantras*

The tantric exposition of *mantras* can be clearly presented with case studies of select *mantras*. With an example of *om*, it is easy to identify both the inclusive layering of meanings and the exclusive and singular meaning of the same *mantra* found in different traditions. With *saum*, the tantric treatment of a seed *mantra* can be described. The *tripurāmantra* in the Śākta tradition exemplifies the sophisticated meanings of *mantras*.

Praṇava

The letter *om*, identified as *praṇava*, is the most widely circulated *mantra*. By analyzing this single syllable, the later Vedic, Smārta, and tantric approaches to interpret *mantras* can be demonstrated. In order to describe the plasticity of *mantras* and their meanings, it is important to know how the same *mantras* are understood or visualized differently in different traditions. *Praṇava* makes a strong case for that as well.

In the later Vedic tradition, *om* is visualized as the seed *mantra* that gives rise to *bhū* (earth), *bhuva* (the middle ground), and *sva* (heaven). This is also identified with the three sections of the *gāyatrīmantra*, with each section considered to be the manifest form of *a+u+m*. *Māṇḍukyopaniṣad* outlines that these three letters successively refer to the waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states of the self at both cosmic and individual levels. The fourth state, awareness itself

that transcends both the letters and triadic manifestation, is identified as the true nature of the self.

The Yoga system of Patañjali considers *om* as the signifier of → Īśvara, the particular → *puruṣa* who is never stained by the limiting factors such as *kleśa* (affliction), *karmavipāka* (the fruition of actions), or *āśaya* (the deposit of *karman*). Īśvara is never bound by ignorance, the conditioned I-sense, passion, aversion, or death, and is eternally omniscient. Patañjali maintains that the repetition of *om* is the contemplation of its meaning, which is Īśvara. To contemplate the meaning of Īśvara is to contemplate his attributes.

Tantras describe nine subtler layers in addition to the three letters of *om*. Identified as *bindu*, *ardhacandra*, *nirodhikā*, *nāda*, *nādānta*, *śakti*, *vyāpini*, *samanā*, and *unmanā*, these stages refer to very subtle moments of time, all of which are to be visualized while pronouncing the *mantra*. Their location within the body, their visualization and correlation with specific deities are all considered part of the meaning of *om*. Tantras also specify the seer, the meter, and the deity of *om* for meditation (*PST*. 19.3).

Following another description, the deity of *om* is Lord → Viṣṇu, visualized sitting atop a lotus and having four arms, one carrying a lotus, mace, disc, and conch shell (*PST*. 19.4). Confirming Vaiṣṇava cosmogony, four aspects of *om* are associated with Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha (*PST*. 19.8; → Pāñcarātra).

In light of these descriptions, the meaning of *om* appears to be the prescribed visualization that varies with each tradition. In other words, whatever is supposed to be brought forth in the mind when *om* is recited is the meaning of *om*. Patañjali refers to positive attributes such as omniscience as the subject matter for contemplation, whereas Tantras build a hierarchy of subtle grounds and describe this as the meaning. Deities to be visualized in each of the Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, or Śākta traditions differ, and this visualization is identified as the meaning. Explicitly, the meaning of *om* cannot be separated from the context of recitation.

Parāmantra

The syllable *sauḥ*, identified as the *mantra* of the goddess Parā (“The Supreme”), demonstrates how Tantras build up visualization and consider that to be the meaning of the *mantra*. Following *Parātrīśikā*, the seed *mantrasauḥ* is the heart of the godhead, Bhairava (*PaTr*. 9). Just as a seed contains the tree in its seminal form, following

the text, so does the seed *mantra*, as it is the heart of all the *mantras* (*PaTr.* 24). Of the three letters of the mantra, *s + au + ḥ*, the first is described as referring to *sat*, or being, and to the god of emanation, → *Brahmā*. The second letter identifies the trident and that in turn, the triadic powers of the godhead. The last letter, identified as *visarga* (emission), describes the successive rise of awareness emerging from the procreative aspect with the powers of impulse, cognition, and action, the three energies springing from the consciousness of *Bhairava* (Padoux, 1990, 416–422). In two different processes of visualization, the world is considered to be emanating from and returning to this seed *mantra* that describes the process of cosmic pulsation. Self-awareness is at the core of both emission and retraction, as it is the heart or the foundation of both the cognitive process and physical world. The meaning of the *mantra* includes the visualization of both *kuṇḍalinī* and a trident inside the channels of the flow of *prāṇa*. Essentially, recognizing self-awareness as the foundation of cosmic pulsation giving rise to the world is the meaning of the *mantra*.

Tripurāmantra

Tripurā is one of the most widely worshipped deities among Tantric practitioners. There are two main *mantras* in this practice, also identified as → *Śrī Vidyā*:

Kādi (the *mantra* with the initial *ka*): *ka-e-ī-la-hrīm-ha-sa-ka-ha-la-hrīm-sa-ka-la-hrīm*

Hādi (the *mantra* with the initial *ha*): *ha-sa-ka-la-hrīm-ha-sa-ka-ha-la-hrīm-sa-ka-la-hrīm*

Yoginīhr̥daya gives preliminary visualizations for reciting the *mantra*, including the visualization of *cakras* or various centers within the body, and the equinoxes (*viṣuva*) that indicate the vitality of the *prāṇa* (life force), the mind, and the *mantra* itself. The first *viṣuva*, identified as *prāṇa*, refers to the visualization of the flow of *prāṇa*. The second, identified as *mantra*, refers to the middle ground in which mind dissolves into the sound rising from the base *cakra*. The practitioner focuses on one sound that envelops all letters of the *mantra*, visualizing all the letters merging into and emanating from the single sound. The third, identified as *nāḍī*, is the identification of the channels within the body that manifest the sound. In visualizing the *viṣuva* called *praśānta*, the mind rests in the *śakti* state that is beyond sound and its foundation. The next

one, *kāla* refers to the visualization of sound transcending time. In the final *tattvaviṣuva*, one visualizes the essential nature of the self (Timalsina, 2005, 221–224).

Following *Yoginīhr̥daya*, the *mantra* possesses six layers of meaning. The first, identified as “essential meaning” (*bhāvārtha*), refers to the constellation of deities corresponding to the limbs of the *mantra*. As the *mantra* in totality refers to the goddess *Tripurasundarī*, its limbs are correlated with specific divinities, and the “essential meaning” refers to the awareness of this relationship. The integral step of visualizing the five gross elements such as earth, and the five subtle elements such as smell, constitutes a part of *mantra*’s meaning. The embodiment of 15 deities that correspond to the lunar cycle layers further meaning upon the *mantra*. Finally, the I-sense (*aham*) is the essence of the *mantra*, with “*a*” referring to light (*prakāśa*), and “*ha*” referring to awareness (*vimarśa*).

The second, the “lineage meaning” (*sampradāya*), is shared within the community and imparted by teacher to disciple. To visualize this, *Yoginīhr̥daya* describes the successive correspondence of the letters *h*, *k*, *r*, *s*, and *l* to sky, air, fire, water, and earth, respectively. From these letters manifest the subtle elements such as smell or touch, numbering 15 in total, each with a different arrangement of the proportions of the five elements. The powers dormant in these elements are the manifestations of *Śakti* and are signified by the letter *h*, and the entities themselves are identified as *Śiva* and signified by the letter *a*. Once again, *a + h*, referring to I-awareness, is the essence of all that exists, and is also the essence of the meaning imparted within the lineage. This awareness is felt by establishing correspondence between the letters of the *mantra* with the 36 categories accepted in *Śaiva* traditions. Besides referring to all the principles, the letters of the *mantra* also indicate the evolving states of self-awareness. Self-experience endowed with limited will, knowledge, and action is identified as the *sakala* stage. Above this are the *vijñānākala* and *pralayākala* stages, where the aspects of action and knowledge are sequentially unbound. The stages, *mantra*, *mantrēśvara*, and *mantramahēśvara* refer to the higher stages of awareness where, through realization of oneself as the *mantra* and the deity of the *mantra*, one recognizes the self as the supreme divinity. Adopting this interpretation, *mantra* is no longer words or sentences but the very self-awareness of the practitioner. The rising awareness that transcends

sound and mind is also considered to be an integral part of the meaning of the *mantra*.

The third meaning, *nigarbha* (embryonic), refers to the awareness that the deity of the *mantra*, instructor, and aspirant are all essentially identical. Explicitly, all of the above meanings stress the identity of the *mantra* and the deity, the aspirant and the *mantra*, and the mentor and the deity. In both first and second meanings, *mantra* is equated to self-awareness identical to the cosmic awareness, and the divine union of Śiva and Śakti. The third meaning further highlights the same oneness, confirming that the meaning of *mantra* is not isolated from the self-awareness of the practitioner. Essentially, elevation of self-experience to the higher planes that allows the aspirant to feel his presence in all that exists is the meaning of the *mantra*.

The fourth meaning, *kaulika*, is shared among the initiates. Added to the sequence of above visualizations, this meaning confirms the identity of the self with the *maṇḍala*, its deity, the *mantra*, and the master. Here, the body is visualized as the constellation of all 36 categories. The identity of the *mantra* and *maṇḍala* is found through visualization of the select letters of the *mantra* as distinct parts of the *maṇḍala*. For instance, the letter *h* refers to two sets of ten triangles and the outer layer of 14 triangles of the *śricakra* (→ *maṇḍalas*). The deities associated with the letters, and the planets and lunar mansions installed in the body are considered integral parts of *kaulika* meaning.

The “esoteric” (*rahasya*) meaning, in the same sequence reveals the awareness that *mantra* and *kuṇḍalinī* are identical. The visualization of the cosmic force dormant within the practitioner’s body thus becomes an integral part of the meaning of the *mantra*.

Finally, the “supreme meaning” (*mahārtha*), is the recognition that the aspirant and the cosmic force that permeates all that exists are one and the same. With this realization, the aspirant, while living in the body, finds his or her self-awareness identical to the divinity, and his bodily experience permeating all that exists (Timalsina, 2005, 224–232).

Some observations can be made based on the above discussion of meaning. As highlighted already, “meaning” here is mental rather than its correspondence to external objects, and knowing meaning is transformative rather than informative. It is the self, not objects, that is visualized and confirmed as the meaning of the *mantra*.

Knowing the meaning here is not simply knowing the way things are, but changing their previously cognized condition. As *mantra* is envisioned, so is its meaning. Understanding a *mantra*, following this, is a purely cognitive process that does not depend upon external reality for identifying the relationship between signifier and signified.

Contemporary Approaches

Mantras Are Meaningless

F. Staal analyzes the Vedic rituals in great detail and makes the observation concerning ritual and *mantra* that these are essentially meaningless. The core of his arguments is that the Vedic ritual context provides mantric identity. As *mantras* can be broken into pieces and applied in various ritual contexts, they do not have inherent meaning. He further argues that *mantras* are like music or the chirrup of birds. He cites the *stobha* (cluster of letters used in *samān* chants) and *bijamantras*, wherein a plain linguistic meaning is hard to imagine. In the context of *mantras* with visible meaning, he argues that it is not the content that constitutes it as *mantra*, because the translation of *mantras* are, after all, not applied in rituals.

This understanding of meaning is a part of his theory that

ritual is pure activity, without meaning or goal...

To say that ritual is for its own sake is to say that it is meaningless, without function, aim, or goal, or also that it constitutes its own aim or goal. It does not follow that it has no value: but whatever value it has is intrinsic value. (Staal, 1996, 131–132)

He considers ritual as “a mere activity performed by animals in accordance with rules” (Staal, 1996, 137), and argues that finding the meaning of ritual is human rationalization. As *mantras* are considered to be rules within the context of rituals, he comes to the conclusion that *mantras* are devoid of meaning. He contrasts the nature of *mantra* with that of language that is in flux, as *mantras* are supposed to be handed down without any change.

Scholars have criticized this position primarily by demonstrating the presence of meaning in many *mantras*. Traditionally, all *mantras* have meaning, whether visible or invisible. It is explicit that there are two tendencies, first, to read *mantras* linguistically, and second, that highlights the alinguistic aspect of *mantras*. There is a flaw in

Staal's assumption that *mantras* in their earliest stage are *bijamantras*, and in their intermediate stage are two dimensional arrangements such as *hā bu hā bu*, and in the final stage are the *mantras* that are subject to semantic, further syntactic and different syntactic constraints (Staal, 1996, 266). The *mantras* classified as "final" appear first in the Vedic texts, and the *bijamantras* appear historically in the last phase in tantric literature. Even among *mantras* found in the → Āgamas, the *bijamantras* are relatively earlier than the *kūṭamantras*.

What is missing in this discussion is that meaning is always internally constructed. To determine whether something has meaning or not, it is necessary to know whether its user meant something by it or not. The *mantra* tradition overwhelmingly indicates that *mantras* have meaning.

It is true that *mantras* are used in fragments and are often removed from their original context. But it is also true that the whole body of the *mantra* text is considered to be an unbroken *mantra*. For example, *Devīmāhātmya* is used in segments in the ritual context. However, the entire story of the Goddess (→ Durgā) found in *Devīmāhātmya* is also considered as a single *mantra*. In this case, the myth of the victory of the goddess becomes the essential meaning of the *mantra*. Furthermore, *mantras* are found in flux in vernacular and indigenous traditions with *dhāmīs*, *jhākrīs*, and other shamans often arbitrarily manipulating the *mantras*. → Healers are also found telling stories that do not require exact repetition of words. Arguably, even the Vedic *mantra* tradition may not necessarily be a rigid system in its fluid stage of origination.

Tantric texts often elaborate upon *mantras*. One example in this context is how the *kūṭamantras* are treated. Assigned successively for the five elements, earth, water, fire, air, and sky, the *kūṭamantra* "la-va-ra-ya-haṃ" collectively refers to the five principal elements. Although there is no syntactic meaning to the *kūṭa*, it functions as an indicator of something else, the five elements. In the same way, the *kūṭamantra* "ḍa-ra-la-ka-saha" refers to six → *yoginīs* visualized in the six *cakras*. Again, this *kūṭa* functions as an acronym and by repeating the *mantra*, one is collectively invoking all the *yoginīs*.

Mantras are frequently encoded in the Āgama texts, and to read them, it is always necessary that they be "extracted" (*uddhāra*). This process of decipherment identifies the two-way, reciprocal

process of *mantras*: first, *mantras* are derived by segmenting letters from words, and then their meaning is conceived of as hidden within the letters. This dual process of deciphering *mantras* and arriving at their meaning depends upon contemplation itself as an integral part of the meaning of *mantras*.

Moreover, the concept that ritual context gives *mantra* its identity contradicts the Vedic understanding that "*mantra* is pronounced by seers." The Vedic verses have apparently obtained their identity as *mantras* even prior to their application in rituals. This also contradicts the context wherein *mantra* itself is the ritual and when there is no other ceremony or ritual except for repeating the *mantra*.

Mantras Are Speech Acts

W.T. Wheelock and H.P. Alper propose that *mantras* are "speech acts," taking for granted that *mantra* is a form of language (Wheelock, 1991, 96–122; Alper, 1991, 249–294). Following the theory of J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle that linguistic expression not only reveals thought but necessarily involves accomplishing some purposeful act, religious language transforms the objects involved in the ritual. The meaning of *mantra* here rests on ritual function. Accepting that *mantras* are applied in order to generate thought instead of common language, where language is used to express thought, the meaning of *mantra* is found in its ability to transform the cognitive paradigm of the agents involved in performing rituals.

In plain words, speech act is a theory of the communicative aspect of language that requires linguistic utterance. The underlying principle is that the minimal unit of human communication is a performance of certain acts and not a sentence or other expression. It is through communication that statements are made, questions asked, orders given, or things described. We apologize, explain, thank, or congratulate in communication, and these are the acts carried out through utterance. In essence, we do something by saying something. Speech act is always dialogical and intersubjective, and it avoids the solipsistic character of speculative or psychological analysis.

W.T. Wheelock argues that mantric utterance involves accomplishing some purposeful act. He distinguishes ritual language from common language by pointing out that language used in the former can hardly be the communication of

information (Wheelock, 1991, 99). He then says that “mantra is a good case of this general point about liturgical utterances” (Wheelock, 1991, 100). He highlights the transformative aspect of ritual performance and demonstrates that invocation, praise, and petition are the acts carried out by mantric utterance (Wheelock, 1991, 101–117). The essence of the acts carried out in uttering *mantras*, in his opinion, is “to pay homage to the gods” (Wheelock, 1991, 121).

Problems with Speech Act Theory

Although the application of speech act theory addresses the cognitive dimension of *mantras*, it does not incorporate the aspect of sound highlighted by F. Staal. Neither does it address the inherent meaning of *mantras* built within the traditions. The act of summoning or invocation can be conducted without comprehending intrinsic meaning. For instance, summoning a pet dog named “Tiger” does not depend upon knowing the conventional meaning of the term.

The concept of speech act depends on the dualistic model of reality and a dialogical nature of mantric utterance. Most tantric doctrines are monistic, highlighting identity between the agent articulating *mantra*, the deity, and the *mantra* itself. Although Tantras present the revelation of *mantras* in the dialogical sphere of *paśyantī*, demonstrating the intersubjective aspect of mantric utterance, dialogue in *paśyantī* is internal, subjective, and not between two human agents.

Furthermore, *mantras* are not always “uttered.” Although following classical Indian linguistic philosophy, the *parā*, *paśyantī*, or *madhyamā* are considered to be the subtle layers of linguistic expression, this is not what J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle have in mind when they propose the theory of speech act. The communicative domain is either silent or subjective in the context of mantric utterance. *Mantras* are said to be more and more powerful as they are internalized. This cannot be the case of communicative language.

The concept of “*mantra*” presupposes the concept of “*śakti*,” that certain speech has certain power. Tantras, while describing this power, do not highlight the meaning embodied in the words but dissolve the *mantra* into letters, claiming that the power of the *mantra* is the constellation of the powers of the “mothers” (*mātrkā*), or letters. The concept of “force” found in the discussion of J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle is completely differ-

ent from the Mīmāṃsā or tantric understanding of *śakti*.

There are additional problems in reading *mantras* as speech acts within the paradigm of Advaita → Vedānta. “Speech act does not describe or report anything at all” (Findly, 1991, 27). Upanishadic *mantras*, such as “Brahman [*brahman*] is of the character of truth, knowledge, and endlessness,” on the other hand, describe attributes of the *brahman* that are to be contemplated for self-realization. Furthermore, within the paradigm of speech act, “uttering of a sentence is a part of action” (Findly, 1991, 27). Following the Advaita doctrine, realization of the meaning of the upanishadic sentences that explain the nature of the self is not an “act”: the self knowing itself is not an action, as the distinction between subject and object is a requirement in actions, whereas when the self knows itself, there are not two entities, one knowing the other.

Mantras as Signs

Another theory to analyze *mantras* is that these are the signs through which the divine is comprehended. D.R. Brooks considers *mantras* as an indication of the dispositional powers of the divine, and argues that the indexical function of particular signs follows the assertion of the real presence of divinity (Brooks, 1992, 84–85). Following C.S. Peirce thesis that the sign stands for something, D.R. Brooks interprets that the body of the goddess and the *mantra* correspond to the corporeal and subtle bodies of the divine (Brooks, 1992, 82). This argument can be further advanced following J. Derrida’s understanding of signs that

the sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never *end*. (Derrida, 1994, 14)

In defense of this argument, one can add that Tantras often utilize terminology such as “indication” (*śaṅketa*) while discussing *mantras*, address symbolism of iconic forms, and describe *mantras* as representing divinity.

Although applicable when analyzing the *mantra* literature from a distance, there are crucial problems even in imposing this idea to read *mantras*. The fundamental problem lies in the difference between sign and what it stands for. As has been demonstrated, the exegetes interpreting *mantras* repeatedly establish identity between *man-*

tra and the divinity. One of the identified meanings of Śrī Vidyā is that the aspirant, the *mantra*, and the goddess are identical. Although perfectly feasible in a dualistic paradigm, the monistic worldview of tantric philosophers and the inherent difference between sign and sign-holder pose contradictions. To argue that *mantras* are signs and to establish identity would be something similar to establishing that the driver, the highway signs, and the highway are identical.

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