

Śiva Sūtra Praveśana

An Introduction
For Practitioners of Yoga

by

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Reading the *Śiva-Sūtras*: Methods of Interpreting Tantric Scripture

A *sūtra* is an aphoristic compression of meaning into a usually fairly short and pithy Sanskrit compound, phrase, or sentence. Each of the great traditional systems of Indian philosophy, the great *darśanas* of “viewpoints” on reality, are founded on a *sūtra* text. Such a text is thought to contain and hold all of the meanings of the system in the compass of series of usually very short and compressed Sanskrit statements. These *sūtras* were understood to facilitate the transmission of a system by making it easier for students to memorize and thus to hold the entirety of the system in memory and awareness in this form. Naturally, the sometimes extreme pithiness of *sūtras* demanded clarification, amplification, commentary, and explanation. In this way, there evolved a tree of knowledge which springs from the fundamental or root text of the system, and then grows in various branches as explanatory and interpretive commentaries were composed. It was quite usual for additional sub-commentaries and further explanatory glosses to be written in order to further clarify the primary commentaries. So a multi-tiered elaboration of the system arose in this way as additional explanatory expansions on those second order and third order comments were also created.

The term “*sūtra*” is often rendered as “thread.” That is to say, a *sūtra* is an essential string or line of meaning by means of which the fundamental arguments, principles, themes, and teachings of the system were most essentially held. Another way to envision this is that it is out of these fundamental threads of meaning that the “cloth” of the philosophical system was woven.

While the study of the traditional commentaries written on any particular set of *sūtras* is certainly very important, so too is the articulation of one’s own penetrating insight into the deep meanings contained in any particular *sūtra*. In the context of traditional scriptural study, a *sūtra* was meant to be placed deep into the heated and vibrant awareness of the student, there to melt and release unexpected currents of deep insightful knowledge. A particularly fruitful way to think about a *sūtra* is that it is like a deeply compressed or even frozen crystal of very deep meaning. Like water frozen into ice, the crystal holds in place a deep structure of meaning which must be melted and liquefied in the warmed and spiritually awakened awareness of the student. We will return to this image later when we consider the notion of contemplation of a *sūtra* as a process of placing it in the “fire” of the deep Heart of Consciousness where, as it gradually melts, it releases streams of insight, wisdom, and elaborated teaching.

Another important understanding is the following: seen only at the surface through the lens of rational or intellectual mind, *sūtras* often do not make so much sense. They appear to present an opaque surface of technical or esoteric expression that does not immediately yield insight, understanding, or meaning. Therefore, it is usually only when a *sūtra* is properly worked with, when it is contemplated in depth, when it is taken into the sphere of the deeper and subtler spaces of consciousness, that it will gradually begin to release its deeper meanings and its most closely held secrets. This process of working with a scriptural *sūtra* text is still not so widely understood. It is a form of what the practice we have already alluded to as “*bhāvanā*”, the contemplative eliciting of insight in Tantric practice. This leads us to another important set of principles that govern Tantric scriptural interpretation and study: *jñāna* and *vijñāna*.

The Tantric Synergy of Knowledge and Experience: *Jñāna* -- *Vijñāna*

One of the central insights of Śaiva *sādhana*, or forms of spiritual practice, has to do with the powerfully synergistic relationship between experience and understanding on the spiritual path. Neither experience nor understanding alone truly suffice for the growth of true wisdom on the spiritual path.

It is a common understanding in life that experience grants a deepening of knowledge. For example, if one has never tasted a mango, even if one is a great expert in its botanical, nutritional, and scientific analysis, these forms of knowledge and understanding of the science of the mango tree and mango fruit will remain completely abstract and disembodied. One may be a world’s expert in the science of mango trees, and yet if one has never tasted the delight of a ripe mango, there is really no denying the fact that some crucial element of one’s understanding is still missing! Just so, as experience on the spiritual path deepens, it refines and illuminates the prior intellectual understanding one might have had of spiritual teachings, revealing a greater degree of clarity.

Conversely, it is also true that one may be given a taste of the delights of a mango fruit by someone else. That very taste will actually usually set in motion a desire to know more about the experience one has just had. What is the name of this beautiful fruit? Where does it grow? Where can I buy more of it? And so on. Without having to go so far as becoming a scientific expert in the botany and nutritional chemistry of mangoes, the desire for *some* basic knowledge about mangoes arises almost as a spontaneous consequence of its first tasting.

This simple fact is all the more true with regard to spiritual experiences which can remain truly unassimilated in any practical way if one does not really have access to some fundamental and foundational understandings about their nature. More than this, as deeper understanding, knowledge, insight, and study of the central teachings of any particular system mature, these create an inner vessel or receptacle for a greater access and penetration into the experience of what is being taught. This deeper grounding in the understanding of the system serves as the authentic and strong foundation for further flights of practice, for deepened access to experience, and for the proper contextualization and valuing of what is then experienced in the domains of practice.

This powerful mutual support that arises as both of these dimensions of *sādhana* grow is what is often conveyed in a shorthand manner as the synergistic relationship of *jñāna* and *vijñāna*. Here *jñāna* points to the intellectual study and rational conceptualization of a tradition, and *vijñāna* points to the deep experiential entry into the pulsating domains of practice, and of its transformative results.

Put most simply, it may be said that study not accompanied by practice, intellectual contemplation not leavened with experience will tend to remain barren and, to a large degree, superficial. Alternatively, when practice and experience are not properly supported by the study, comprehension, and connection to authentic texts, foundational teachings, and central concepts, they too will remain largely unrooted and superficial. Thus, it is only in the living interaction and active connection between these two domains that the spiritual path is set on its most proper foundation and its most illuminating context. We are then most capable of giving value to and deeply integrating into life what arises in the domains of spiritual experience.

To read the *Śiva-sūtras* with real spiritual benefit and for the advancement of one's yogic path is to engage with the text quite differently than if one were simply approaching the text as an exercise in detached or distanced academic study, or for the mere and pedantic accumulation of esoteric "facts", information, and data about it. It is important to note this difference between a "distanced" kind of study as that happens in an academic or purely intellectual context, and the kind of "immersed" study that is traditionally thought to bring with it the substantial and truly transformative benefits of what is outlined, alluded to and taught in the substance of the text. To study a text in a distanced and merely intellectual fashion is an exercise of the ego, and it preserves the immunity of the separate and self-protected ego from truly graceful spiritual transformation.

Conversely, the kind of “immersed” study that is here being presented presupposes a living connection to the text, a willingness to take the text seriously, to work with it, to allow its wisdom to saturate into consciousness, to take time to confront the opaque and difficult surface of the text, and over time allow that opacity and density to melt into life-transforming wisdom and fiery deep experience. Thus, what we are here calling the “immersed” study of the text is a kind of study that is done in an integrated relationship to yogic practice, where deep meditation assists one in bringing the advanced and profound teachings of the text into a living context of sequential experiential unfolding. In this way, we penetrate to the true core and depth of the Reality of what is taught in the text. This is a kind of study in which practice and deep experience begin to illuminate and clarify one’s understanding of the text. Moreover, in this kind of study, the text is permitted to serve as a window into practice, a window that helps us to organize, refine, and integrate our understandings about the spiritual path, about what it means to be a Yogin, about spiritual attainment, and about the real meanings of living Tantric practice.

The Progressive Refinement of Conceptualization: *Vikalpa-Saṃskāra*

To imagine that one can simply “learn” subtle spiritual teachings, as if they were some kind of data, or fact, or mere information, by means of a single exposure, or even after a single period of study and contemplation, is precisely the misunderstanding about scriptural study that the Tantric teaching of *vikalpa-saṃskāra* seeks to dispel. This further and profound methodology of Śaivite *sādhana* teaches us that it is only through repeated inquiry, prolonged contemplation, and a continuous process of returning to themes, concepts and understandings over time that we truly refine, advance, and penetrate into the deep marrow of what is conveyed in a revelatory text such as the *Śiva-sūtras*.

The notion of *vikalpa-saṃskāra*, the progressive refinement of understanding, is presented by the great Mahā Siddha Abhinavagupta in the *Tantrāloka*. In this compound Sanskrit term, the notion of *saṃskāra* alludes to a process of the systematic working, refinement or purification. It is related to similar uses of this term that occur in the texts of Indian alchemy or medicine where a substance is gradually and systematically refined and “worked” until, by means of a sequence of processes applied to it, there emerges an extraordinarily refined and purified end-product.

What is to be “worked” in this way is precisely our *vikalpa*, which here means something like our understanding, our knowledge, our presuppositions, assumptions, and indeed the entirety of our world of limited knowledge within which we are thought by the Tantric tradition to be constrained and bounded.

The method of *vikalpa-saṃskāra* begins by alerting us to the fact that our initial take on a *sūtra*, indeed our initial understanding of any concept, idea, teaching, or intellectual construction of any sort whatsoever, is always at first going to be unclear and full of distortion and limitation. With regard to scriptural study it might be said then that our initial take on a *sūtra* thus occurs at a very superficial level with respect to the great depth of teaching and profundity of wisdom that is meant to be conveyed by a *sūtra*.

The sequence that Abhinavagupta then describes moves from those states of mind or awareness that are *asphuṭa*: contracted and unclear; to the *sphuṭatābhāvī*: a state of awareness or thought that is about to become clear; to the *prasphuṭa*: to a yet clearer state; to the *sphuṭita*: one that has expanded into clarity. It continues then with the *sphuṭatara*: the yet clearer state of awareness; and finally, the *sphuṭatama*: the clearest state of awareness. Here thought has expanded. It has been refined and clarified and unfolded, and the mind stands in a state of expansion.

Abhinavagupta further explains that there are numerous intermediate phases in between each of these many states of the progressive clarification and refinement of awareness. It is from here that the movement both to an illuminated and completely clarified state of awareness in which the mind somehow holds and reflects and contains the light of Consciousness, as well as a movement entirely out of the domain of *vikalpa* can take place and the mysterious traverse into the transcendence of the *avikalpa* occurs.

Thus, the description of *vikalpa-saṃskāra* reveals the sequence of liberative attainments, of penetrations into the meaning of anything whatsoever. Beginning with contracted, unclear, and limited states of awareness and thought (*asphuṭa*), it leads progressively and systematically toward the liberative attainment of both the most clear, expanded, and refined level of thought. Finally, from that threshold it leads into the transcendence of any form of *vikalpa*-constructed state of awareness in the attainment of the *avikalpa*.

Though there are many other dimensions to the Śaiva practices of meditative realization (*bhāvanā*), this remarkable teaching describes the great traverse of awareness as the very foundation of any and all such specific liberative practices. Beginning from whatever state and stage of awareness in which the practitioner finds himself, the movement is clear: awareness must be refined, clarified, expanded, made subtle and profound. And this process is a systematic one in which each such state gives rise to the next and the next until the very summit of awareness is both discovered and entered into.

To apply this method or principle of *vikalpa-saṃskāra* -- of the progressive, systematic process of refining our understanding of a *sūtra* -- requires time and practice. This is *the* practice of study. Such a practice does not involve simply gaining a mastery of a great breadth of different kinds of informational data and the accumulation of pieces of knowledge. While such breadth is always useful as a backdrop or prerequisite, what is truly at stake in the Tantric study of a *sūtra* is rather the systematic deepening, the almost alchemical transmutation of understanding that takes place over time. By means of the sympathetic resonance granted to and enlivened within awareness through many forms of spiritual practice, this vibratory resonance and subtlety itself must be repeatedly brought to bear on the text itself. Over time, the acuity and subtlety of our perception, the repeated contemplation of the text, its teachings, and its many related contexts, the ascending evolutionary growth of our consciousness, all of these combine to yield a startling and often very blissful set or sequence of insights, teachings, deepened perceptions which are seen as always emanating from the single *sūtra*, or from the entirety of the *sūtra* text.

These do not emerge necessarily as new teachings, but rather as a deepening of our capacity to understand, see, and perceive what has been always already present in the text or *sūtra* itself all along, and which only by means of the systematic refinement of our understanding in this form of study now becomes apparent and available to us. Thus, scriptural study involves a process of penetrating to subtle insights, to delicate but powerful understandings, and to increasingly wholistically interconnected perceptions of these teachings.

There is, in truth, no limit to this process. The basic principle regarding the method of such scriptural study must be understood and accepted: just as we would not be content to practice an *āsana* once or only for a short period of time and then assume that we had somehow mastered the totality of what it had to offer, so too with the study of