

The Heart of the Secret: A Personal and Scholarly Encounter with Shakta Tantrism in Siddha Yoga

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ABSTRACT: This article suggests two apparently contradictory theses: namely that Swami Muktananda (1908-1982) was an enlightened teacher and practitioner of an esoteric form of Tantric sexual yoga, and that he also engaged in actions that were not ethical, legal, or liberatory with many disciples. These two theses are brought into creative tension through a developing Tantric hermeneutic. In discussing secrecy and power, the article addresses critical cultural, feminist, and psychological issues about sexual abuse and the importation of Asian religious traditions into contemporary American society, and argues that what has happened in the recent history of Siddha Yoga arises directly out of Tantra's long history of dissimulation and secrecy. I suggest that a hybrid scholarly sensibility might emerge out of the secret heart of the Tantric teachings, itself offering a way forward in the study of such traditions.

This is an essay about secrecy and revelation, about the powers and dangers of that dialectic, and about ethical dilemmas that surface when we probe the official versions of an institutional religious practice that aims to transform human consciousness. It is about my own traversing of that razor's edge path over the last twenty years, and some of the questions and a few lessons that have arisen from that journey. It is about the uses and meanings of sexuality in a religious context, about dimensions of power, and about the developing practice of what I call a *Tantric hermeneutic*, a way of seeing and knowing that unearths darkness and sheds light. Finally, this paper is about the chimera of objective knowledge, and the pulsating heart of experience, and how these two may speak to one another.¹

This article has a triadic heart, a phrase intentionally borrowed from Paul Muller-Ortega's beautiful book, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva*, which treats in detail the Kaula Tantric tradition of Abhinavagupta.² It is to this tradition that I will look for partial interpretation of the late Swami

Muktananda's teachings and ritual practices. The first section is a subjective, autobiographical account of certain incidents in the history of Siddha Yoga that have been omitted from the official history presented by that organization in its publications; the second portion attempts a reinterpretation of these incidents in the light of Swami Muktananda's lesser-known Tantric affiliations and origins; and the third part initiates a discussion of the questions of ethics and abuse that arise out of the first two. My essay suggests two apparently contradictory theses: namely, that Swami Muktananda (1908-1982) was an enlightened teacher and practitioner of an esoteric form of Tantric sexual yoga, and that he also engaged in actions that were not ethical, legal, or liberatory with many disciples. Neither the Tantric thesis nor the abuse thesis is definitively proven or even systematically investigated in this essay; rather, both approaches are raised for further discussion. The purposely unresolved juxtaposition of these two perspectives creates a crucial tension that is considered further at the end of the essay.

In discussing secrecy and power, I raise critical cultural, feminist, and psychological issues that are often omitted in purely theological or historical accounts of Tantric traditions. I consider cross-cultural ethical issues raised by the importation of this unique Indian religious tradition into contemporary United States culture. I argue that what has happened in the recent history of Siddha Yoga arises directly out of Tantra's long history of dissimulation and secrecy. I attempt to ask hard questions about sexual abuse, relate these problems to other, similar cases in contemporary Asian-inspired religious life in America, and probe some of their psychological dimensions. Finally, I suggest that a hybrid scholarly sensibility might emerge out of the secret heart of the Tantric teachings, itself offering a way forward in the study of such traditions.

The style and method of this article is reflexive, organic, and "Tantric" (a claim that will become clearer as the argument progresses). Its goal is the understanding of a complex set of practices through the lens of my own experience as a practitioner and scholar. It is thus an experiment in reflexivity that I hope will shed some light on the "insider-outsider" hermeneutical dilemma that has preoccupied scholars of religion in recent years, and is meant as an example of this type of scholarship.³ This is neither an objective nor a definitive account, and represents only one of many possible perspectives on the issues raised. As a committed practitioner of the Siddha Yoga that I learned from Swami Muktananda, as well as a committed academic scholar of Tantra and Hinduism, I am inviting a dialogue with other practitioners, scholars, and interested observers to this tradition and others like it. Since 1982 I have continued my practice as a disciple of Swami Nityananda, a teacher who figures prominently in the events discussed herein. This personal commitment certainly colors my feelings about the events I am discussing here, and I acknowledge this openly at the outset. This being said, it is

also essential to state that all versions of this essay were written entirely on my own initiative and without external guidance or directive, and represent no other viewpoint than my own.⁴ My purpose in writing this essay in the way that I have is as a first step toward a healing dialogue on a topic that has been a source of confusion and pain for many over the last twenty years. I sincerely invite all interested parties to this discussion to raise their voices and join that dialogue.

PART ONE: THE SECRET HEART OF THE TEACHINGS

In the sultry heat of a July afternoon in northern Maharashtra State, India, an elderly coffee-skinned man with a short graying beard and flowing orange silks wafting sensuously against his flanks bowed before a blue velvet chair in a cool marble hall, Guru Chowk. His back to the small crowd of assembled guests, Swami Muktananda (or Baba—"Father"—as he was affectionately known to his devotees) traced a sinuous shape with his right index finger in the nap of the soft velvet seat before him. Smiling secretively, almost mischievously to himself, Baba turned and flounced casually onto the seat, crossing his slender legs. As he bobbed his right leather-sandaled foot up and down a few times, Baba removed his dark sunglasses and held them up to the light as if to check for dust, but suddenly darted his piercing eyes toward a man approaching from the ashram courtyard. "Oh ho," he said in Marathi, "You have brought it." Delighted, Baba grabbed a thick, red-spined book from the hands of his attendant and began to leaf enthusiastically through its pages. Calling out to several of the orange-clad monks at his feet, Baba held the frontispiece of the book open for all to see: "You see, here is the great Abhinavagupta, meeting his devotees in his ashram. You all should get a copy of this book. You should read it very carefully."

Two weeks later, my package arrived from Bombay. I tore impatiently at the paper wrappings and unveiled the treasure inside—K. C. Pandey's tome, *Abhinavagupta: An Historical and Philosophical Study*.⁵ I pored over the illustration that Baba had pointed to that afternoon, looking for clues. The painting, a contemporary rendering of a "pen-picture" by Abhinavagupta's student, Madhuraja Yogin, commemorates a ceremonial recognition of Abhinavagupta "as the spiritual head of all the Āiava sects by the contemporary spiritualists, both male and female."⁶ (See Fig. 1.) The detailed description of the scene in the translated "pen-picture" was very striking:

His eyes are rolling with spiritual bliss. The centre of his forehead is clearly marked with three lines, made with ashes. His ears look beautiful with *Rudrāk, a*.... His beard is long. His body is rosy. His neck...besmeared with paste of camphor, musk, sandal, saffron, etc., looks splendid.... He is dressed in silk-cloth...and is sitting in the Yogic pos-

ture,

called

v/ra,



Fig. 1. Painting of Abhinavagupta as a celebrated Tantric guru, based on a contemporary tenth-century eyewitness description. (Reproduced from the frontispiece of K. C. Pandey, *Abhinavagupta: An Historical and Philosophical Study*, courtesy of Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series.)

on a soft cushion over a throne of gold with a canopy, decked with strings of pearls, in an open hall—full of crystals, beautified with paintings, smelling extremely sweet on account of garlands of flowers, incense and lamps, perfumed with sandal, etc., constantly resonant with vocal and instrumental music and dance and crowded with female ascetics and saints of recognised spiritual power—in the centre of a garden of grapes. He is attended by all his pupils...who are sitting, with their minds concentrated, at his feet and are writing down all that he says, and by two female messengers (D^ṛtis), who are standing at the sides.... His right hand, wearing the rosary of Rudrāk^a, is resting on the thigh, and his fingers are in the position indicative of the grasp of the Ultimate Reality. And he is playing upon the v/na, which is capable of producing original musical sound...with the tip of the nail of his lotus-like left hand.⁷

Pandey explains the “religio-philosophical significance” of the picture:



Fig. 2. Swami Muktananda giving *darshan* (spiritual audience) in the early 1970s. (Photo courtesy of D. R. Gadekar.)

...it presents him as a typical follower of the Kula system.... [T]he characteristic feature of...Kaulism is that it denies antagonism between sensuous joy and spiritual bliss (*Ānanda*); recognises the former to be a means to the latter; and emphatically asserts that it is meant for the few, who are highly proficient in the *Rāja-Yoga* as distinct from the *Hatha-Yoga*, who have such control over the mind that they can withdraw it from the stimulating object even at a time when it is being enjoyed most....⁸

What struck me immediately was that this could have been an eyewitness account of Baba's daily *darshans*, public afternoon audiences with

devotees and guests. The afternoon when Baba had drawn the attention of the assembled crowd to this picture of Abhinavagupta, he himself had been sitting in just such a magnificent open marble hall, on just such a soft cushion, wearing just such flowing silks, attended by two beautiful young women who flanked his left side. Saffron-robed ascetics, both male and female, sat at his feet, listening intently and writing down whatever he said. Sometimes videographers recorded these *darshans* for posterity. On festive occasions, Baba was known to play the *ektar* (a one-stringed lute), leading the crowd to enthusiastic heights of devotional song. *Rudraksha* beads (a necklace of seeds sacred to Lord Shiva), sandal paste, musk perfume, and three lines of white ashes smeared horizontally across his brow as a sign of devotion to Lord Shiva, were his trademark dress. It was immediately obvious to me that Baba was directly *identifying himself* with the subject of this medieval portrait of the greatest guru of the Kaula Shaiva lineage (see Fig. 2).

But what was Muktananda saying by identifying himself with Abhinavagupta? What was the urgency at this particular time in his life? During the five years I had been living in his ashram between 1978 and 1982, Baba had carefully trained us in a number of Hindu philosophical traditions, including Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism. We had studied the writings of the eighth-century saint Shankara and memorized such Kashmir Shaiva classics as the *Pratyabhijnahridayam* and the *Vijnanabhairava*. I knew the *Shiva Sutras* by heart. But I had never seen Baba refer to Abhinavagupta in the context of Kaula Tantrism; in fact, I had no idea at the time that such a tradition existed. It would be many years before I unraveled completely the mystery of this event.

Other strange developments had been taking place that year (1982) as well. In May, Muktananda had appointed two successors, young siblings Subhash (1962-) and Malti Shetty (1954-) (renamed Swami Nityananda and Swami Chidvilasananda after taking renunciant vows) in an elaborate Vedic ceremony, the *Pattabhisheka* (see Fig. 3). Baba had circulated a cryptic published message to all the ashramites about his upcoming “retirement” and hinted at troubles that would arise in the future:

I am giving my final advice.... This is my appeal to you.... My dear friends, I want to say only this...whatever exists or does not exist now, and whatever will take place in the future are all nothing other than the sport of Nityananda [Baba's guru, whom he revered as God].... I appeal to all of you to start examining, testing, investigating and observing yourselves in order to recognize your own worth. Stop examining others. This is my advice to all mankind.⁹

For one month prior to the *Pattabhisheka* and a fortnight of other ceremonies in May 1982, Baba had observed complete silence, in



Fig. 3. Swami Muktananda with his successors, Swami Chidvilasananda and Swami Nityananda, Ganeshpuri, India, May 1982. (Photo courtesy of D. R. Gadekar.)

stark contrast to the nightly regime of 90-minute lectures and interactive audiences I had attended in his ashram during the previous five years. Clearly, something momentous was happening, but I didn't understand quite what. In fact, Baba was preparing to die, or "take *mahasamadhi*," as it was called in more devotional terms, a tradition of conscious death in which fully enlightened yogis are said to leave their bodies willingly at the time appointed by their karmic inheritance. Although no one imagined it at the time, Baba would live only four months longer. There was an urgency, an abandon in his manner, that signaled something momentous, although none of us could see what was at its root.

Even more intriguing to me at the time was the circulation of rumors that Baba had begun to perform chants to the Devi (Goddess) in his bedroom every evening at 6:00 with a circle of specially invited chanters. Devotional chanting in Sanskrit and Hindi had been a major part of the daily practice in Muktananda's ashram, taking up approximately five hours of a highly structured ashram regime. Under Baba's strict tutelage, I had learned to recite an assortment of some fifty Sanskrit texts and devotional songs with the correct meter and accent. We sang to Shiva and Vishnu, to Krishna, and Lakshmi. But never had I heard anything about Devi chants. As an avid (one might say compulsive) ashramite, who had given up everything in my previous life to be a devotee of my guru, I felt shocked, hurt, and deeply intrigued to hear that there was some knowledge, some practice, some energy that Baba was bestowing on an inner circle, of which I was not a member. I became obsessed with the elusive Devi chants. At 6:00 each evening, as I and other non-initiates filed dutifully into the temple to Baba's guru, Bhagawan Nityananda, to sing the evening *arati* prayer after a long day of *guruseva* (work to maintain the ashram), several dozen people quietly and purposefully headed in the direction of Baba's residence, shawls in hand. Although the chants were never spoken of publicly, it was apparent that something special and secret was taking place. In desperation, I found the spot in the garden that was below Baba's bedroom window, and planted myself there each evening at 6:00, straining to catch the faint, mysterious melodies emerging from the room.

But the most disturbing events of 1981 and 1982, to those of us not in Baba's inner circle, were the increasing accusations in the outside press by long-time devotees, whom I had known intimately and admired greatly, alleging that Baba had been having numerous and frequent illicit, secret sexual encounters with young girls and women in the ashram.¹⁰ I remember the day in December 1980 that Michael and Chandra Dinga, major figures in Lis Harris' 1994 *New Yorker* article on the controversy, fled the ashram in Santa Monica, California.¹¹ Harris reports that the Dingas, trustees of the SYDA Foundation (Siddha Yoga Dham of America), had been threatened with physical violence for their dissatisfaction with and questioning of Baba's private life. I was standing right next to ex-boxer Stan Trout (then Swami Abhayananda) when ex-Green Beret David Lynn attacked him and provoked a serious fistfight at Baba's South Fallsburg, New York, ashram in the summer of 1980. I remember looking up at Baba's bedroom window and seeing him watching the fight through the parted curtains, then drawing them again when he caught my gaze. I remember the night in July 1981 when Baba suddenly emerged from the curtains shielding the entry to his house in the South Fallsburg ashram, wearing nothing but his pajamas and a cap, his false teeth in a jar somewhere, his eyes no longer hidden by the customary dark glasses, staring at me predatorily as I mounted the stairs to my

bedroom. These and other disturbing incidents of ashram life that lurked in my memory were uncomfortably reawakened when I read the first-person accounts of sexual encounters with Baba by young girls who had left the ashram, or read Stan Trout's diatribe, posted on the world-wide web.¹² I had earlier discounted these disturbing accusations and accounts, willing to deny and bury them, or account for them as the dissatisfied ravings of disgruntled ex-devotees whose complaints about Baba were doubtless due to circumstances I couldn't judge. Somehow they didn't seem real or relevant to me. I didn't want them to interrupt the blissful, perfect, ordered life of utter dependency and spiritual bliss I was leading. When a female devotee approached me one afternoon that summer of 1982 to talk about her distress over hearing these rumors, I soothingly denied them and convinced her that, even if they were somehow true (which I knew they weren't), maybe it didn't really matter, since Baba was so great and divine, and beyond our understanding.

But as I started to read further in the thick red volume about Abhinavagupta and the Kaula practices, I was taken aback. Sitting in my dorm room in the Ganeshpuri ashram in India, in the hour of sultry afternoon stillness between morning and afternoon work sessions chopping vegetables in the kitchen, I eagerly fingered page after page describing in detail the secret sexual rites of the Kaula Tantra, the drinking of wine, eating of meat, and sexual intercourse. Since joining the ashram tour in 1978 in Oakland, California, at the ripe age of 21, I had completely and enthusiastically abandoned such pleasures, as Baba had instructed us to do. Baba's book, *Ashram Dharma*, which was distributed to every newcomer to the Ganeshpuri ashram, clearly described what was proscribed: sex, drugs, meat, liquor, gossip. I had been celibate for five years, living in separate quarters from my husband in the ashram, a major factor in the eventual dissolution of my marriage (performed by Baba in 1979 in South Fallsburg). In my understanding and Baba's unequivocal teaching, sex had no place whatsoever in spiritual life. What then was this mystico-erotic ritual, in which the genitals of a girl were worshipped, touched, and honored, her menstrual fluids ingested, along with wine, fish, grain, and meat? I was utterly confounded.

One passage that especially caught my eye was Abhinavagupta's description of the perfect Dutī (literally, "Messenger"), the ideal sexual partner for the Tantric rites:

A Dutī, necessary in the performance of the secret ritual, is to be a woman who can personify Çakti; has the eyes, rolling with intoxication; lips red like the ripe fruit of Bimba; beautiful teeth; face with well knit eyebrows; eyes, beautiful like those of a fawn in fear; charming smile; hair, dark like a multitude of glittering black bees; eye-brows, bent like the bow of cupid; complexion similar to that of melted gold; ears, decked with ear-ornaments, beautifully engraved....¹³

The passage went on to enumerate the beauty of such a Duti's neck, rising breasts, arms, fingers, thighs, abdomen, hips, ankles, voice, and face, in the "head to foot" praise genre found in such poems as the *Saundaryalahari* (*Ocean of Beauty*, a hymn of praise to the goddess Tripurasundari). However, I had at that time never heard of such a genre, nor had I ever read anything quite like this erotic wish-list. The passage went on to mention that the mind of such a partner should be fully enlightened, "continually experiencing the pure bliss of identification with [God]." While her physical attributes are desirable, the "exponents of Kaulism had realised that such a woman is extremely difficult to find,"¹⁴ and thus had placed their emphasis on the woman's mental qualities and capacities for enlightenment by means of the secret Kaula ritual.

In those relaxed, sparsely attended afternoon audiences with Baba in August 1982, I had noticed a young Indian girl who came to *darshan* every day like a doe, shy as if meeting her lover. She was the most exquisite girl I had ever seen. It struck me that this young woman precisely fit the description I had read of the Duti. She seemed nervous and aroused when she came to sit at Baba's side, shyly looking at him and then averting her eyes. One afternoon I noticed her being particularly coy, as she fingered a pearl and emerald necklace around her lovely neck. Knowing that Baba had a habit of giving expensive jewelry to his favorite young female devotees (and never having received one from him, it was something of a sore spot for me, naturally), I surmised that the necklace had been a gift from Baba. I started to wonder if she was in fact his lover, and if my 73-year-old guru was indeed a secret practitioner of the Kaula rituals. He seemed to be dropping hints at every turn.

As the rumors increased in intensity over the summer, private discussions of Baba's purported indiscretions abounded in the ashram. The Dingas' accusations had hit the American press, along with other testimonies. Indignant talk and hushed, excited whispers were everywhere. Yet no open debate about this seemed permissible. Baba had spoken so often about celibacy and the need for perfect conformity to impeccable standards of ashram behavior by both guru and disciple, that to accuse him of secret sexual encounters with his devotees seemed tantamount to blasphemy. In his book, *The Perfect Relationship*, Baba had stated unequivocally: "The Guru should possess every virtue.... He cannot be a true Guru if he engages in business, in different material pursuits or therapies...or if he indulges in sense pleasures. A disciple who discovers such behavior in a guru can only benefit by considering him a worm of bad conduct and rejecting him."¹⁵ It seemed one either had to take a stance of loyalty and denial, or leave the ashram. Baba himself never directly addressed the accusations against him.

Then, one afternoon, a trustee of the ashram, Mr. Pratap Yande, who had been Baba's devotee for twenty years, gave a remarkable talk at

Baba's request, as Baba sat listening with a bemused smile on his face. Mr. Yande told us that Baba had given him a great teaching about our tendency to find fault everywhere: "And today Baba said to us, 'All of you live with that duality in your eyes. You have the tendency of fault-finding, and then when you go to great saints you start finding faults in them also.' You start seeing your own faults in them." I sat dumbfounded as Mr. Yande began to relate a story about a great guru, Ranganath Swami, who took a beautiful dancing girl as his companion. (In medieval times, dancing girls were often courtesans or Tantric yoginis who served in the sexual rituals of the Kaulas.)

It is impossible to understand a Siddha [perfected Master] by your gross sense of perception. You can understand him only if he reveals himself, and that is exactly what happened to Shivaji Maharaj the first time he went for Ranganath's darshan.

The story goes that Ranganath Swami had just had his lunch and was chewing a little betelnut. He was lying on a beautifully decorated bed, and two very beautiful girls were massaging his feet with complete devotion. As he lay there relaxing, eating *pan*, Shivaji Maharaj entered.... When Shivaji saw Ranganath, a little doubt about his saintliness, about his renunciation, about his greatness, entered his mind. Siddhas, of course, are wonderful mind readers. Reading minds is child's play for them. So Ranganath Swami asked those two ladies to leave, and called for a silver bucket. Then he closed the door, and in the presence of the king he ejaculated his seminal fluid into the bucket, filling it to the brim. Then he took a drop of the fluid with a small stick and put it onto Shivaji's palm. A blister immediately appeared on his hand. Shivaji cried, "Ah, it's burning!"

Ranganath replied, "Yes, Raja don't you know? This is *brahmavirya*, the power of Brahman.... It cannot be borne by anybody.... Now do you understand? From the outside we look like everybody else, but inside we are totally different. Only because you had a doubt in your mind did I show you this miracle. I wouldn't show it to everyone...."

Then, by the power of his yoga, he reabsorbed all of the semen within himself and went back to sleep. The girls came back in and again began to massage his feet.

This reminds us of what Baba says again and again. Unless you are thoroughly anchored in your own inner bliss, you are lost. It is impossible to understand a Siddha. It is better to bow to him from a distance instead of going near him.¹⁶

I had never heard anyone speak openly about sexual matters in the ashram before and certainly not in a public talk. Baba seemed very pleased, smiling and looking pointedly at all of us as Mr. Yande, rather embarrassedly, it seemed to me, delivered his sermon. A footnote to the published talk, which appeared in the October 1982 issue of the ashram publication, the *Siddha Path*, (along with the eerie announcement that Baba had "taken *mahasamadhi*," i.e., died, on 2 October), informs us that "[t]his is known in the scriptures as *mahavajroli mudra*—an esoteric

yoga technique by which an accomplished yogi reabsorbs his seminal fluid, after emission.”¹⁷ I had already learned about *vajroli mudra* from consulting my book on Abhinavagupta. Amazed, I had read about the details of the practice of withholding semen by the male practitioner of the Kaula sexual rite. Mr. Yande’s talk, delivered less than two months before Baba’s death, seemed a thinly veiled admission, a challenge. Baba seemed to have thrown caution to the winds, to be urging us to see things differently than we ever had before, and was laughing all the time. The sense of secrecy, mystery, and evanescent inner circles of which I could never quite be a part, utterly captivated and maddened me. I wanted to know.

No doubt one reason for the complexity of my response to these events was my own troubled sexual background. Just prior to joining the ashram, I had suffered serious psychological distress due to a series of abusive incestuous contacts with male family members that had culminated in my leaving Yale University suddenly in my sophomore year. In the ashram, with its perfectly predictable, regulated routines, puritanical codes of behavior, and celibate safety, I could concentrate my intense emotions into the love of a remote, brilliant, elderly guru, and the icy, inaccessible mystico-erotic deity, Shiva, for whom I developed a perfect passion. After five years of celibacy in my early twenties, I found that my erotic imagination was beginning to get the best of me. With guru *bhakti* (intense devotion) held up as a model for my inner life, combined with the practice of self-discipline and physical restraint, sex did indeed seem to hold some extraordinary taboo power. My background of sexual abuse, which I certainly could not have recognized or named at that time, added dimensions of fear, mistrust, and denial to the heady mix. The discovery of the “left-handed” sexual practices of Kaula Tantrism through the Abhinavagupta volume held out a new path from any I had yet seen. The sublime passages describing the ecstatic, brilliant bliss of realization that were the real goal of such rituals seemed to redeem sex as I had known it. The promise of transforming this ugliness into something liberating and transcendent was too enticing. I was hooked on Shakta Tantra.

Before my fantasies of participating in the secret rituals could go too far, however, I happened upon an important passage which outlined the qualifications necessary for its performance:

Only those great souls—who have grasped the Ultimate...who have attained such a perfection in the Rājayoga...that they can detach their minds, at any stage, from the most stimulating sensuous situation and can, by sheer force of will...be at one with the Highest Subject—are recognised to be qualified for the performance of the secret Kaula ritual....¹⁸

The text clearly delineates three different *sadhanas* (spiritual paths) for different seekers, suitable to their natures and spiritual maturity, and proscribes the esoteric Kaula rituals to all but heroic masters of yoga. The three paths that are delineated, each matching the innate spiritual personalities of different types of seekers, seemed to me to correspond to three distinct periods of Baba's teaching. First, in the early to mid-1970s Baba had emphasized a Vedantic *sadhana*, identified by Abhinavagupta as suitable for those of *tamasic*, or impure, nature and dull mind. This included the routines of self-discipline, celibacy, vegetarianism, daily chanting, hard physical labor, service, and meditation, that characterized the ashram schedule. In the late 1970s to 1980, Baba introduced Kashmir Shaivism as his major teaching, encouraging his serious disciples to study such scriptures as the *Shiva Sutras*, *Vijnanabhairava*, and *Pratyabhinahridayam*, and including these in ashram teacher training courses. This was the *sadhana* identified by Abhinavagupta as suitable to those of elevated mind and pure, *sattvic* nature. The large numbers of renunciants (given the title *swami*, lord) whom Baba initiated into the Saraswati order of *sannyasa* were the ostensible leaders of this group, lecturing on different Kashmir Shaiva scriptures in courses and public programs. But now, in his final months, Baba seemed to be pulling off the veil and revealing an inner core of pure Shaktism. Abhinavagupta identified this form of practice as suitable only for *viras*, hero-warriors who had complete mastery of their senses and bodies.

A fourth category, the Paramahansa Siddha, the perfected master, was said to have risen above the other three categories. He was therefore free to engage in any form of practice he chose, since none of them could have any effect on his completely liberated consciousness.¹⁹ On reading this passage, I assumed that Baba was in the latter category, but that due to karmic impressions of former lives, he was attracted to the *viras* practice of the Shakta rituals. After all, he had always liked strong, heroic, passionate people, and seemed to relish working with violent, difficult devotees. At times, Baba claimed he had been a warrior and a king in his past lives, and that this explained the regal splendor in which he now lived as a guru. It was said that he advised his closest devotees to study Kautilya's *Artha Shastra* to learn the proper way to manage people. He kept rottweilers and pit bulls as guard dogs, trained to attack by the more aggressive male devotees in the ashram. (I very narrowly escaped injury by Baba's rottweiler one day while doing some gardening in his backyard.) He said he had karma with such people and animals; they needed to be very close to him to stay under control. Pictures of Baba and stories from his earlier days portrayed the guru with a heavy stick in his hand, which he readily used to correct the errors of ashramites. At the core, Baba was not a gentle guru. My picture of Muktananda as a Tantric hero was rounding out.

A few months after Baba's death, I finally obtained an audiotape of the mantras he sang in his bedroom every night in those final months of his life, along with transcripts of the texts.²⁰ I was warned never to try to repeat one of the chants, as they were dangerous for the uninitiated. Getting hold of this precious secret cargo was thrilling for me and only intensified my sense that the Devi mantras and inner circle represented an inaccessible core of power and knowledge just beyond my grasp. On listening to the tapes, I was struck by the utter ecstasy of Baba's voice as he chanted these mantras. He seemed drawn away to some unspeakably ecstatic place in which the body could not enter. The voices of the devotees sustained him like so many wings. It was extraordinary.

This combination of tantalizing glimpses into an inaccessible inner circle, which I somehow came to know about but could not actually enter, drove me to search hard for the secrets. I think now that if I had actually participated in the sessions, they could not have held more power over my imagination than they did as an ever-receding grail. In part I liked having them remain secrets.

One of the other secrets I learned that summer was that Bhagawan Nityananda (Baba's guru, who died in 1961) had spent his very early years in the south Indian ashram of Swami Sivananda, a guru infamous for his Tantric practices, including sexual rites (see Fig. 4). This suggested that Baba's guru had likely been initiated into a Tantric lineage involved with Shakta practices, although there is no evidence to suggest that Bhagawan Nityananda pursued such practices during his time at Ganeshpuri. Rumors were circulating among some of the swamis that Baba was not born to a high-caste, wealthy family as his autobiography suggested, but that he had come from much humbler origins. Although I had no way of verifying either of these tidbits of information at the time, simply hearing them began to sow seeds of doubt in my mind about the official hagiographies put forth by the ashram in its publications.²¹

If all of Baba's teachings about celibacy and ashram *dharma* (duty) were in fact simply covers for a diametrically opposed inner life, suddenly anything seemed possible. It occurred to me that Baba's carefully constructed persona, teachings, organization, programs, his account of Bhagawan's life, and even his own autobiography, might be largely fictions—useful fictions at that, dramas that achieved his purpose: to draw thousands of people into meditation, to encourage them to practice his teachings, to instigate the “meditation revolution” that was his aim. Perhaps the ends were more important than the means, and as long as he could keep on meeting thousands of people, giving *shaktipat* (initiation into spontaneous *kundalini yoga* through direct transmission of energy) week after week, he would use any means at his disposal to empower himself and keep going.²²



Fig. 4. Bhagawan Nityananda as a young man with South Indian Tantric guru, Swami Sivananda. (Photo courtesy of D. R. Gadekar.)

Muktananda had suffered a serious heart attack a few years earlier, and often spoke of how his guru, Bhagawan Nityananda, appeared to him as he lay dying in the hospital and ordered him to return to the world to keep serving humanity a little longer. Perhaps Baba had begun his sexual practices as a means of revivifying himself. This is the interpretation, at any rate, of at least one devotee who attended another extraordinary ritual during the summer of 1982 in Ganeshpuri: the nighttime *shaktipat* performed by Baba in the small meditation hall adjoining his house. As Karen Schaefer, who had been initiated by Baba as a swami, recalls:

[Baba] was also almost obsessed with giving *shaktipat* every evening to the people (mostly women) who gathered in the meditation room. He was dallying with the young girls during those sessions. I went in there once, and felt it was not appropriate for me to be there, as Baba had given me so much during my years with him, it seemed indecent to want

anything more from him. The longing for *shaktipat*—liberation, *mumukshutva*, was palpable in the room, and I believe that was what Baba was responding to. I always saw that he wanted to give *shaktipat* to as many people as possible, to liberate them from their suffering, and the compulsion to draw the energy from the young girls to sustain that activity came from that motivation. The energy of the girls was the means he could use to fulfill his *dharma*, to those people who were asking for initiation.²³

Such a theory complements the aims of Kaula sexual rites, in which males empower themselves through absorption of divine power located in the sexual fluids of human females: “In Kaulism, it was via this flow of the ‘clan fluid’ (*kuladravya*) through the wombs of *Yogin/s* that the male practitioner was empowered to return to and identify himself with the godhead.”²⁴ The means for absorbing this magical fluid was through drinking the emissions via the mouth or absorbing them back through the head of the penis in *vajroli mudra*, urethral suction, as described by Mr. Yande. We believed that Baba had already attained *jivanmukta*, a fully enlightened state of consciousness. Was this act for pleasure? From the published descriptions of these encounters, which described rather matter-of-fact penetration of supine girls without erection or ejaculation, it certainly did not sound that way.²⁵ It was for extracting power from these young women so that he could live. He was living off their energy, sucking them dry.

Although I never attended these nighttime ecstatic meditations and was unaware of the goings-on during them, I recently interviewed one of the women who did participate (I will call her Shraddha, a pseudonym, at her request). Shraddha described in detail to me the feeling of utterly overwhelming and ecstatic love she experienced during those sessions, which did translate into physical expression between herself and Baba. He frequently took her into his house during the sessions to engage in lovemaking, which she experienced as “completely beyond the body” and having “absolutely nothing to do with sex” as we understand it. Baba also tried to explain to Shraddha the Tantric meaning of their activities, animatedly pulling books off the shelves of his library, but she could not understand his broken English.²⁶

Not all the young women involved in secret sexual encounters with Muktananda report such ecstatic experiences. A few years ago, I spoke with one of the girls closest to Baba, who was initiated into his sexual rituals as a virgin at the age of 16. She described it as not very exciting or interesting, and as being very strange. He had no erection. His eyes turned up in his head during the act, in seeming ecstasy, but with little passion. What was he doing? He claimed to be bestowing Tantric initiation, although he did not explain any further what that consisted of, only rewarded her with gifts and trinkets and swore her to secrecy. She

didn't seem to get much out of it, nor did it disturb her greatly. But she shared that many of the other girls involved in Baba's nightly sexual practices seemed to have been deeply addicted to the attention and excitement of being singled out; others were horrified by what seemed to them to be cold, clinical sexual encounters devoid of emotional or spiritual meaning; and some, as reported by Rodarmor, were deeply and permanently traumatized by their experiences. Despite their diversity, these accounts bear little resemblance to the ecstatic Kaula rituals described by Abhinavagupta in his *Tantraloka*, and lack their most essential component, a fully aware, consenting female partner or yogini. Whatever Baba was doing, claiming it to be a form of Tantric initiation, seemed rather to retain only the bodily shell of a Tantric practice that once held out the promise of profound enlightenment experience for both the man and woman.

PART TWO: THE SECRET HEART CONCEALED AND REVEALED

My thesis is that Baba was an initiated Kaula practitioner, that he aspired to model himself after Abhinavagupta, and that he revered the secret teachings of the Kula path as the innermost core of his power. Furthermore, like Abhinavagupta, Baba was an astute politician and knew his audiences. Baba in 1980s America knew that open admission of practice of arcane sexual rites with girls and young women would not be acceptable to the uninitiated, or to the parents who had entrusted their daughters to his care.²⁷ Scholars of medieval Kaula Tantra have noted its "layered" structure, requiring a secret, inner core of practice that is denied and opposed by a more acceptable public self.²⁸ David White has characterized Abhinavagupta's own theological reformulation of medieval Tantric practice (of which the sexual rites played an important part) as a similar kind of "dissembling strategy" that was fueled in part by socioreligious agendas, in particular a need to present a socially acceptable face in competition for the "hearts and minds of the general Kashmiri populace."²⁹

This dissembling strategy is summed up in an aphorism, encountered in a wide variety of sources, that states: "Outwardly Vedic, a *çai*va at home, secretly a *çâkṭa*" which is tantamount to saying that the tantric practitioner has, since the tenth century, practiced his religion of devotion to the goddess in secret while living the life of an orthodox ritualist in the public sphere and an equally orthodox *çai*va in the domestic sphere.³⁰

Nothing could be closer to depicting Baba Muktananda. As I have described, his prescription for ashramites varied, depending on the degree of closeness to his inner circle. For newcomers, Vedic *sadhana*, for longer-term ashramites, the sublime philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism,

and for the intimate, committed few, initiation into the mysteries of Shakta devotion to the Goddess. Like Abhinavagupta, Baba aspired to a grand synthesis of these three paths, with Shakta devotionalism at its heart. And also like Abhinavagupta, Baba maintained a secret practice that he partially revealed, in an odd strategy of simultaneous concealment and revelation that we will consider further below.

In a recent publication sponsored by the SYDA Foundation (under the auspices of the Muktabodha Indological Institute, located at the ashram's New York headquarters), the Siddha Yoga tradition has been presented formally to the public as a coherent whole for the first time. *Meditation Revolution* presents itself as a "history and theology" of Siddha Yoga, the meditation tradition (and multimillion dollar corporation) created by Swami Muktananda Paramahansa, and now headed by his successor, Swami Chidvilasananda.³¹ The six co-authors are all devotees of Swami Chidvilasananda (or Gurumayi, as she is affectionately known); five are also prominent academic scholars of religion, whose prestigious doctoral degrees (from Harvard, Columbia, University of Chicago, University of California, Santa Barbara) are prominently detailed on the first page of the volume, opposite the title page. In a review essay, Jeffrey Kripal provides a deeply empathetic but clear-eyed critique of four contemporary books on Hindu and Buddhist gurus in the West, including *Meditation Revolution*. Kripal, enthusiastic at the outset about the promise of such an "insider-outsider" project, expresses his dismay at the book's complete lack of "open, interpretive discussion about the rather obvious psychological, physical, cultural, and social dimensions" of Siddha Yoga's Tantric substratum. Specifically, Kripal faults the authors of *Meditation Revolution* for not addressing the "very convincing evidence that Muktananda engaged in numerous 'left-handed' (that is, actual) sexual encounters with a number of female devotees, many of them quite young, toward the end of his life...in a tantric attempt to reinvigorate a waning *çakti* [spiritual force]."³² The lack of discussion about this well-publicized episode in Siddha Yoga's history is the more striking as two of the book's authors, Douglas Brooks and Paul Muller-Ortega, are preeminent published experts in Tantric traditions, well-versed in both the esoteric and exoteric meanings of Tantra's sexual symbolism. What follows is an examination of some of the controversial material that was omitted from the official version presented by *Meditation Revolution*, and a discussion of the dynamics of that process of veiling.

The texts that we read in the ashram, the "canon" of Siddha Yoga, as Brooks calls it in his chapter in *Meditation Revolution*, also evolved over the years. In the summer before Baba's death, we began to chant regularly the Sanskrit text, *Kundalini Stavah* (*Praise of Kundalini*), each night. This text, which Baba states is taken from the elusive *Rudra Yamala Tantra*, is an esoteric description of the greatness of the goddess Kundalini, the coiled serpentine energy of the cosmos located at the base of the human

spine, and which is the source of spiritual awakening and the means to ultimate realization. *Kundalini* awakening was always at the core of Siddha Yoga, and Baba's ability to bestow this awakening as well as to control it was the sure sign of his unique power. In the early years of my involvement with Baba, the *Kundalini Stavah* was sung only at the Intensive programs, carefully orchestrated weekend retreats in which Baba formally gave *shaktipat* to paying seekers. In the Intensives, this song was sung immediately prior to Baba's entrance into the darkened, perfumed meditation hall, as an invocation to the Goddess within each participant to awaken at his touch. It was always pervaded with an aura of extraordinary secrecy and power, and had the quality of an initiation. But in the summer of 1982, we sang the *Kundalini Stavah* every night, following another lengthy chant of praise to Lord Shiva (the *Shiva Mahimna Stotra*), while Baba was giving unscheduled sessions of *shaktipat* in the meditation cave.

The *Rudra Yamala Tantra*, from which Baba claims the *Kundalini Stavah* derives, is one of the central texts of the Kaula tradition.³³ Throughout the text, the Kundalini is referred to as "Kula Kundalini," and verse three asserts that a seeker after perfection "reaches the city of liberation" through the Kula path shown by the Kundalini.³⁴ Although certainly one can take the term "Kula" in a variety of ways, from the broadest sense of a group or family of spiritual practitioners to a specific lineage of "left-handed" Shakta Tantrics, it indisputably is associated in this text with the latter meaning. Little did I realize, as I chanted this text night after night, that I was pledging my allegiance to the Kula path.³⁵

Significantly, the elaborate five-day fire ceremony performed in honor of Baba's birthday in 1982, during which he publicly passed the power of his lineage to his successors, was dedicated to the fierce form of the Hindu goddess Chandi. The pavilion in which the ceremony was held was decorated with numerous *yantras*, esoteric symbolic diagrams encapsulating the Devi's power, as well as Tantric seed-mantras, syllables embodying her power in the form of sound. When Baba really needed to draw on the most powerful source he could find, to transmit the essence of his lineage power, it was to the Goddess that he turned. In fact, his Shaktism was the real core of power behind all of the Shaiva, Vedantic, and *bhakti* practices we otherwise learned and rehearsed so laboriously. This path was a direct shortcut for those who were ready. But so many were not ready, as we were to find out. Few were able to go where Baba had gone.

After Baba's death, chaos reigned in the ashram. Sexual scandals broke out everywhere. All discipline broke down. George Afif, a close devotee of Baba, and an intimate of Swami Chidvilasananda in the years following Muktananda's death, was accused of raping a 16-year-old girl; Swami Nityananda, one of Baba's two successors, was deposed in 1986

due to charges of sexual misconduct.³⁶ Swamis (including some of my close friends) were leaving right and left to marry their girlfriends. Others, feeling that they were following Baba's lead, experimented openly with sex while living in the ashram. Passion had swept everyone away. Baba had unleashed a tide and was no longer there to control it. It was a dark time.

Swami Chidvilasananda responded to this indiscipline with a heavy hand. In November 1985, Gurumayi's younger brother, Swami Nityananda, left the ashram and his guruhood in disgrace. According to the official SYDA version of history (as lightly chronicled by Swami Durgananda in *Meditation Revolution*), Nityananda was an affable but incompetent fellow with no real spiritual knack who got confused and begged to be let off the hook of leadership. His loving sister merely facilitated the transition as painlessly as possible. But in January and March of 1986, a pair of detailed articles was published by the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, chronicling a story of intimidation, violence, and abuse directed at Nityananda by Gurumayi and her devotees, including George Afif.³⁷ SYDA later pressured *Illustrated Weekly* into a full retraction of all charges with the clout of their powerful lawyers.³⁸ The facts of this episode remain a mystery. However, in March 1986, Gurumayi herself sent out a mailing to all the devotees with official statements from "the Swamis," "the Trustees," and Gurumayi. Included in the packet was the second of the slanderous articles from *Illustrated Weekly* (based on an interview with Nityananda), refuted by Gurumayi in her own account of events.

I do not wish to revisit the quagmire surrounding this rather ugly episode in Siddha Yoga's unwritten history in too much detail here. However, the following quote from Gurumayi's own epistle is worthy of some examination:

In the meantime, he [Nityananda] did not stop seeing women. When the different women with whom he had had physical relationships began to compare notes, they became angry. Finally, on the night of November 24, two weeks after he retired, I picked up what Baba used to call his "Chota Guru." It is a small walking stick he used to slap people who would otherwise not wake up from the delusion torturing them. In my presence, he received a few slaps with it from the women he abused. He offered no resistance because he knew this was not a punishment; but was rather to wake him up from his fantasy world. Nevertheless, it was obvious that none of it really entered him; even a few slaps from me did not make him budge. In fact, he himself said that nothing was making a dent in him. It was quite disappointing. One of the swamis became frustrated and had to be restrained by George Afif.³⁹

Not surprisingly, this episode in Siddha Yoga's history is completely erased in Swami Durgananda's telling in *Meditation Revolution*.

Gurumayi's account is disturbing in a number of ways. First, her use of corporal punishment directed toward her younger brother (who was 24 years old at the time of the beating, seven years her junior), and her encouragement of a group of other women to participate in the same, contrasts starkly with the compassionate, enlightened, loving being portrayed by Durgananda (who was certainly aware of all of these events, if not in fact present at this particular time). One of the women who was present at that event told me that Gurumayi had the women who supposedly had been seduced by Nityananda stand around him in a circle, taking turns hitting him with the bamboo cane. When this young woman was exhorted to join in, she refused. According to her account, Nityananda was beaten black and blue, and could hardly move afterwards, his body covered with welts. Despite this, and his very substantial size and physical power, he never lifted a hand in retaliation or said a word in his own defense. Gurumayi interprets this passivity as a tacit admission of guilt and a masochistic desire for punishment. However, Nityananda's response might well have other, more positive interpretations, such as nonviolent resistance, or respect for his elder sister, whom he idolized.

In any case, such a scene was a bizarre reversal of the circular "dancing *saptahs*" which Baba had organized in 1981 and 1982. These dancing chants were performed periodically in the evenings. Nityananda had sat, on the floor of the Guru Chowk hall, drumming while scores of women, young and old, danced and sang in circles around him. It was well known around the ashram that many women were madly in love with the handsome and affable 19-year-old guru-to-be; as they swayed and clapped in dancing circles, the women cast seductive, longing glances at him as he poured out his heart on the skins of the *mridangam* (drum). Now, when that love had reached its natural end (not necessarily its righteous or correct resolution, but its predictable one), he was punished. This scene orchestrated by Gurumayi also perversely mocks the mystico-erotic Yogini Chakra of the Kaulas—as Gurumayi led the circle of disgruntled women, ex-lovers, in beating a single male who had seduced them. It was the *raslila* (Krishna's mythological erotic circular dance with multiple lovers) gone wild, with Krishna scorned and reviled. No matter how we look at this scene, it is odd and abusive in the extreme. What could have motivated Gurumayi to such behavior?

We can never know the answer to this question completely, but a few things are clear. First, that Gurumayi appeared to be motivated by anger; and second, that she was acting as and in place of Baba, the male father figure whom she adored and with whom she had become completely identified. Her actions were motivated, in her own account, by parental concern, her feeling of responsibility, and the felt need to restore justice by the only means necessary. Certainly, many religious traditions have explained the need for teachers and spiritual leaders to

act harshly in the face of corruption and evil. However, troubling questions remain. Gurumayi's childhood experiences and relationship with her guru were certainly atypical of Indian girls, and examination of them might provide a more human and complex backdrop against which to interpret this event. By her own account, the young Malti (Gurumayi's birth name before she was given the renunciant name of Swami Chidvilasananda in 1982), whose parents were devotees of both Baba and Bhagawan Nityananda, was an angry, moody, egocentric little girl.⁴⁰ She had received *shaktipat* at the age of thirteen, and at fifteen joined Baba's world tour, soon becoming his official translator and constant companion. Through her many writings, Gurumayi's intense love for Baba is openly celebrated, but the precise nature of their relationship has been the subject of some speculation. We do know that throughout her teens and young womanhood, Malti was kept apart from her family, school, and the world outside the ashram, and closely guarded in an intense, closed, secretive relationship with a man fifty years her senior whom she revered and adored. Throughout her time in the ashram with Baba, Malti/Gurumayi lived in Baba's house or in rooms adjacent to his. Even if by some miracle Gurumayi was exempted from Baba's sexual exploits, she most certainly would have known about them. In any case, as his closest disciple, the only one to whom he expressed regret about dying the night of his departure from this world, it is hard to see Gurumayi as unaffected by the highly abnormal emotional environment in which she spent her formative years.⁴¹

Although full analysis of Gurumayi's life experiences, character, and motivations is outside the scope of the present essay, it seems appropriate to note the rather extraordinary contrast between her apparent tolerance and protection of Swami Muktananda's image at all costs, denying his sexual activities and refusing to discuss them, with her violent actions toward her brother for his youthful moral indiscretions. Gurumayi's troubling "backstage" behavior, accompanied by total public silence about the repeated allegations of Muktananda's sexual behavior, suggests unresolved conflicts about issues of sexuality and power. At the very least, such studied public suppression of the topic over some two decades has kept the problem unresolved for her thousands of devotees, many of whom continue to struggle with these issues. For some, the cognitive dissonance has become so great that they have felt compelled to abandon their spiritual practice entirely and to take up a campaign against Siddha Yoga that seems to occupy nearly equivalent amounts of energy.⁴² Painful as it may be, open reexamination of this episode and its repercussions seems warranted and useful for the healing process that must begin.

In any case, Gurumayi continued as the sole head of Siddha Yoga's vast and powerful empire, which she rebuilt and expanded even beyond Baba's dreams. Remaining highly private and inaccessible, Swami

Chidvilasananda's personal life is a mystery to her devotees. Brilliant and powerful, spiritually gifted and a natural leader, Gurumayi's achievements are certainly to her credit. Outwardly loving and supportive, as Swami Durgananda's hagiography attests, she has, however, totally rejected her parents and family, whom she refuses to see or meet. On a visit to the Bombay home of Devaki Amma, Gurumayi's mother, in October 1991, I watched as she brokenheartedly showed me photos of Gurumayi as a girl, crying and aching for her lost daughter. Harassment and legal suits against Gurumayi's brother, Swami Nityananda, who has resumed his spiritual practice and leadership of his own organization in recent years in a modest form, continued for many years following his abdication of co-leadership of the organization founded by Muktananda. All attempts at reconciliation with Gurumayi by Nityananda (and there have been several) have been met with stony silence.⁴³ Durgananda's account in *Meditation Revolution* tells us nothing of such events. Even if, as her devotees attest, she is a "fully realized master," Gurumayi's inner life must be deeply affected by the past. Great beings are not exempt from living out the fruits of their own past actions. If Baba practiced Tantric *sadhana* in secret, Gurumayi would have known about it. Has she left such practices behind? What is the core of her intense hypnotic power? Why has her unremitting anger against her brother continued for fifteen years since his removal from the guru's seat? It is unlikely that we will come to know the answers, as Gurumayi is well protected by her devotees, well hidden from view. In recent years she has retired more and more into a private world, seldom giving public programs. Nonetheless, the more remote she becomes, the greater her power seems to grow.

The part of this story that is the most fascinating, perhaps, is the extent of the denial and the effort at erasing the past evidenced by Siddha Yoga. After Swami Nityananda left the ashram, Gurumayi ordered the methodical destruction of all evidence of his having been guru. At the Oakland ashram, paintings and photographs of Nityananda with his sister or alone were not only removed but burned. A friend of mine was given the *guruseva* (service to the guru; a term to describe volunteer work done for the ashram as a form of spiritual discipline) of cutting all of Nityananda's pictures out of old issues of the ashram publication, the *Siddha Path*. Beating and routing him from power were insufficient; Gurumayi's outrage at Nityananda's failures seemed to require total eradication of his memory. SYDA Foundation representatives followed and harassed Nityananda for years; at one event in the late 1980s in Ann Arbor, Michigan, devotees of Gurumayi physically attacked members of a *satsang* (spiritual gathering) where Nityananda was present.⁴⁴ The version of these events presented in *Meditation Revolution* is so mild and evasive, completely omitting almost all of them, that it can barely be called a history. The rewriting of the past in *Meditation Revolution*,

however, is not surprising, since it builds on the tradition of earlier Siddha Yoga hagiographies, written by and produced for Swami Muktananda and his devotees.

Such lack of historical accuracy and critical vision is not surprising, of course, when the history is a hagiography. For example, Christopher Isherwood's *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (1959), like countless other "histories" of contemporary religious movements, carefully bowdlerizes texts and knowingly eliminates troubling material, as Jeffrey Kripal has shown.⁴⁵ What is disturbing and unexpected, perhaps, in the case of *Meditation Revolution*, is that the authors present their work as an example of critical historical scholarship at the same time that they are building (and legitimizing) a Siddha Yoga theology. While Gerald Larson's introduction to *Meditation Revolution* praised the effort as "a rich feast of historical and theological reflection that is sympathetic to the Siddha Yoga of Gurumayi but at the same time is fully faithful to the canons of critical inquiry characteristic of serious history of religions work,"⁴⁶ the complete reliance of the authors on the archives of SYDA Foundation, without recourse to external sources or interviews from those critical of Siddha Yoga, can hardly be said to conform to such standards. In a panel reviewing *Meditation Revolution*, held at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 1999, public discussion of these issues revealed that an earlier draft of the chapter on Siddha Yoga's history had been edited significantly by the time of publication (due to space considerations, according to the editors of *Meditation Revolution*). According to Dr. Larson, who had read the earlier version, the original chapter penned by Swami Durgananda had in fact included a discussion of the scandals around Muktananda's alleged sexual behavior, as well as further details about the difficulties surrounding the departure of Swami Nityananda from the organization in 1985. It was specifically these more controversial aspects of Siddha Yoga's history that were excised in the final version.⁴⁷

The writing and then concealing of fact in Durgananda's "history" chapter for *Meditation Revolution* perfectly exemplifies the problem of public relations that Tantric traditions face. Quintessentially antinomian, Tantric traditions radically eschew ordinary forms of morality for soteriological aims. However, when such religious traditions aim to incorporate and publicize themselves, they are forced to develop a carefully guarded secret core and a somewhat false, publicly acceptable outer identity.⁴⁸ This has been a problem for all Indian spiritual traditions that have been transplanted to the West, ever since Swami Vivekananda's first astute reconfiguration of Ramakrishna's wild, Tantric brilliance as Advaita Vedanta at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. When Christopher Isherwood wrote his classic, *Ramakrishna and his Disciples*, the sexual (and specifically, the homosexual) elements were knowingly, deliberately, and under direction from the Ramakrishna Order,

censored out. Isherwood's scholarship was compromised for public relations purposes, as his book was "an official project of the Ramakrishna Order."⁴⁹ When controversial issues arose in the construction of the Siddha Yoga history, it was once again the *sexual* elements that were excised (while discussion of the succession drama, however distorted, was retained). In both cases, theology and hagiography were constrained by a desire to win approval of the intended audience, rather than arising directly out of the religious ground of the tradition in question.

Even if, as *Meditation Revolution's* authors would have it, the Kaula Tantric substratum has been fully erased from Siddha Yoga under Gurumayi's leadership, our knowledge of Muktananda's (and by association, Gurumayi's) past makes a full and open interrogation of this aspect of Siddha Yoga imperative, both for scholars and for *theologians of the tradition*.⁵⁰ By such conscious acts of dissimulation, the heart of the secret is not revealed. The Tantric core of so many of the last century's imported Hindu traditions has successfully been painted over with a more acceptable Shaiva or Vedantic veneer. The storehouse of power that is the Devi, the tortured fantasies of Ramakrishna's dreams, and the erotic generatrix of the universe that Baba sought in the bodies of real women, the coiled Kundalini Shakti herself, is not unleashed, not acknowledged, not known. This denial fuels an unhealthy form of hypocrisy. Baba, at least in those final months as he was facing his imminent death, was raucously joyous about it, seemed eager to reveal it, to release the secrets to the world, teasing, hinting, playing with the whole thing. He enjoyed watching us all squirm. We were not ready for his message. We were not ready for Tantra.

Such "Tantric dissembling" by groups such as the Ramakrishna Order and Siddha Yoga is, then, part of a hoary tradition. Abhinavagupta himself was the pivotal figure in the shift from medieval Kaula practices, openly celebrated by kings and courtesans, to a disguised, encoded, secret practice hidden within an outer, more socially acceptable form. Such dissembling set a precedent that has lasted well into the present day. White describes the Abbé Dubois' vivid eighteenth-century account of "left-handed" practices in India as another example of poorly maintained secrets; of public hypocrisy, or more politely, "dissimulation" by those engaging privately in practices they publicly abhor:

Persons from every walk of life and every part of the social spectrum are participating in a nocturnal rite. What happens on the following day? Everyone dissembles, going about their day-to-day life as if nothing had happened the night before. Yet everyone knows where they were the night before, and...everyone in the village, town, or neighborhood would also have been privy to the fact that something was going on in the cremation ground or forest grove out on the edge of town on the last new moon night, or some other temporal conjuncture. So in the end there

is very little secret about these secret nocturnal tantric rites: it's as if half the town were Freemasons, with the other half knowing the former had a lodge and regular meetings, and pretty much everyone knowing who was who and what was what, but saying they were not telling.⁵¹

This is precisely the scene in the summer of 1982 in Baba's ashram in Ganeshpuri, as a discreet inner circle (not so very small and impossible to disguise in such an intimate setting) marched serenely to covert Devi chants every evening. It is also precisely what Durgananda and Kripananda, two female swamis close to Gurumayi, have done in their public interviews with Harris and others. Harris chronicles the total denial by both of these women of any knowledge of Baba's sexual exploits; a denial that Durgananda maintained even when confronted with comments she had made to a third party admitting the allegations to be true, albeit misguided. According to the therapists to whom Durgananda had spoken privately of Baba's sexual dalliances, "the swamis had never talked about it, because they thought it would be more appropriate to be 'discreet.'"⁵² Such "dissembling" to protect a public image is, as it turns out, part and parcel of the Tantric package: "dissimulation has, since the time of Abhinavagupta, lain at the heart of much of Tantric practice, even of Tantric identity."⁵³ The denial or suppression of information regarding Muktananda's sexual behavior in *Meditation Revolution* replicates this process of dissimulation in order to protect the public image of Swami Chidvilasananda, who clearly does not wish this information to be disclosed. *Meditation Revolution's* claim to negotiate successfully an "insider" and an "outsider" perspective has been compromised, with the insider position ultimately winning out, wearing an "outsider" disguise. The scholarly tone of *Meditation Revolution*, purposely omitting any mention of the authors' own personal spiritual experiences, belies their obvious insider position and gives a false veneer of objectivity. Such posturing codifies the theology and hagiography of Siddha Yoga under Gurumayi, but does little to move us forward in the study of the deeper issues raised by this tradition.

PART THREE: HIDDEN WOUNDS OF THE SECRET HEART

The events of Siddha Yoga's unwritten history thus replicate a pattern of poorly kept secrecy and multiple religious identities that can be traced back to the tenth century. The more formal parallels to Abhinavagupta and his Tantric inheritance are also striking: Baba saw himself as a harbinger of a "meditation revolution," a prophet who would bring esoteric *kundalini yoga*, non-dual Kashmir Shaiva philosophy, and self-realization to the masses, bringing about a transformation in human spiritual history. He wanted to be remembered as a great historical figure, predicting in 1980 that in ten years everyone in the world

would be walking around with a copy of *Reflections of the Self* (a collection of Baba's poems on spiritual life) in their back pockets.⁵⁴ Perhaps most significantly, however, Baba saw himself as the Paramahansa, the enlightened master who was able to move effortlessly among all forms of Tantric *sadhana*, picking from regimes of austere discipline, ecstatic devotion, formless direct perception of the absolute, and sexual intercourse with young women in his ashram, like so many items at a banquet. Like Abhinavagupta, Baba saw himself as a Shakta Tantric on the inside, a Shaiva to his close disciples, and an orthodox Vedantic guru to the outside world. His pointing to Abhinavagupta that summer day was a gesture of revelation for his devotees who could grasp it. But Baba did not live long enough to provide guidance to those devotees, many of whom saw in his behavior a license to indulge their long-repressed sexual desires once he was gone. The complex balancing act of multiple Tantric identities was not easy for his followers to emulate.

The seeds Baba planted have not withered away, however. Today, nearly twenty years after his death, a number of talented scholars have emerged into the field of Hindu studies who are former devotees of Swami Muktananda, initiates into Siddha Yoga. Feeling the need to protect their identities, these scholars have not revealed their initiatory pasts, but are nonetheless fueled by the extraordinary power of their experiences of Baba's Siddha Yoga.⁵⁵ Many are only now beginning to piece together the complexities of their own feelings about the controversies that still swirl around Baba's name. A whole new generation of brilliant scholars, including the editors and authors of *Meditation Revolution*, have come lately to Siddha Yoga, as devotees of the charismatic Gurumayi. Their history is only what she has told them, what remains in the pillaged archives, what can be read and known after all dissenting voices have been purged. This is a disturbing history, and a false one. I, too, have kept silent about my innermost spiritual longings and strivings over the past twenty-one years, revealing the most painful personal struggles (incest, divorce, domestic violence) in my published work,⁵⁶ but somehow never feeling safe to tell the heart of the secret: that my guru was Swami Muktananda, that I gave him my whole heart and soul, that he taught me everything of ultimate value that I know, that I can never express the depth of the love and insight I gained in his presence. Since his death everything else is a pale shadow, even now. The intensity of those years with him will never fade; somehow every moment seems so intensely lived, so fraught with significance.

My own scholarly career followed directly from this experience, and its loss. After floundering for three years after Baba's death, I decided to reenter school in South Asian studies, somehow hoping to regain contact with that world I had so tragically lost. I maintained infrequent contact with Swami Nityananda, and still regard him with respect and love as the vehicle through which the guru's grace comes to me. Yet

that heady world of sublimated eroticism, glamour, power, and suffering that was life with Swami Muktananda was gone forever.⁵⁷ The world I found in graduate school was of course nothing like the ashram, but I grew up and found what I could there, which was a great deal. I found my abilities to concentrate and study extraordinarily honed, winning numerous academic awards. My studies eventually led me to south India in 1991, exactly a decade after I had first boarded a plane to Bombay to be with Baba. My studies of the Goddess led me down a dark path to face the hardest, most painful places I had hidden away. I truly had to come to the heart of the secret, the place beyond which one could not sink any further, in my own dark night of the soul. With no hand to lift me up, I had to find that strength within myself. I had to find *kula kundalini* in my own body and mind.

Part of that painful process of self-discovery involved the aspects of those last months of Baba's life that I had not integrated with my own past. Specifically, Baba's sexual encounters with young women in a context of totally unequal power, especially with no apparent explanation to the women of the meaning or purpose of the practices, had definite abusive aspects that I had not fully faced. At first denying the truth value of the stories, then, slowly imagining their validity through the veil of Baba's odd hints about Shakta Tantra, I left the ashram with a muddled sense of erotic mystery and unknown, unspoken, secret powers. It took many more years for this heady mix to percolate with my own buried experiences of incestuous sexual abuse, which finally forced themselves into the light of day. Through intensive psychotherapy, I was able to think through the odd conjunctions of Tantric symbolism, buried pain, and ecstatic devotion, attempting to sort out and synthesize these diverse currents. When I learned through personal testimony of friends that Baba had in fact performed these strange actions, I was disgusted and repelled. I no longer could regard him as my guru, no longer could see anything positive in the experiences I had during those long years.

June Campbell, an academic who faced similar, though more severe problems in her own life as a long-time intimate devotee of the late Tibetan guru Kalu Rinpoche, has written in depth about the psychological and moral issues raised by Tantric practices of Asian gurus in Western contexts.⁵⁸ Campbell speaks candidly about her secret sexual affair with her guru in an interview published by *Tricycle* magazine.⁵⁹ Campbell's comments make clear that the unequal, compulsory, and secret qualities of the relationship were not beneficial to her spiritual progress, nor did they fulfill the ideals of left-handed Tantric practice.

I was not an equal in our relationship. As I understand it, the ideals of tantra are that two people come together in ritualistic exchange of equally valued and distinct energies. Ideally, the relationship should be reciprocal, mutual.... My relationship with Kalu Rinpoche was not a partnership

of equals. When it started, I was in my late twenties. He was almost seventy. He controlled the relationship. I was sworn to secrecy. What I am saying is that it was not a formal ritualistic relationship, nor was it the “tantric” relationship that people might like to imagine.⁶⁰

The complexities of cross-cultural guru-disciple relationships are also considered with insight by Katy Butler, who reviews a number of Hindu and Buddhist cases of teacher abuse of students, and the codependent relationships of denial and enabling that often develop. The problem, Butler suggests, is that “communities import Asian devotional traditions without importing corresponding Asian social controls.” These controls involve strict codes of behavior and reciprocal obligation which obviate sexual and other moral excesses in the intimate settings of Asian social life. The importation of the Asian tradition of “obedience, devotion and blind acceptance” without corresponding “critical intelligence” on the part of the devotee often has disastrous effects.⁶¹ Furthermore, significant numbers of Americans from dysfunctional, abusive, and alcoholic families who are attracted to such guru traditions find themselves reenacting old patterns of codependency rather than correcting them. The problem here seems to arise from a serious difference between Asian and Euro-American forms of social organization and assumptions about the integrity of the ego-self, as well as from the strong tendency in Asian-based traditions to protect transgressors in favor of in-group loyalty and maintaining “face.”⁶²

Because this problem has become so rampant in American Buddhism, old Asian ideals of the unassailable master have begun to give way to new guidelines more suitable to the autonomous, individualistic, and egalitarian West. The Dalai Lama himself is quoted by Butler as suggesting that it is up to the student to maintain a critical perspective on the guru:

“I recommend never adopting the attitude toward one’s spiritual teacher of seeing his or her every action as divine or noble. This may seem a little bit bold, but if one has a teacher who is not qualified, who is engaging in unsuitable or wrong behavior, then it is appropriate for the student to criticize that behavior.”⁶³

Such advice also suggests that it is indeed possible to maintain both an “insider” stance of devotion and the “outsider” awareness of imperfection without too much cognitive dissonance. It is this dual awareness for which scholar-devotees should strive.⁶⁴

Such a dual stance presents significant problems, however, when it comes to ethical judgments. Although the Dalai Lama rightly insists that the devotee maintain astute critical faculties at all times, most spiritual traditions arising out of Asia insist upon a complete, unquestioning

obedience to the master that would preclude any such critical faculty. In part this injunction to obedience arises from the extremely hierarchical structure of Asian societies, which could conceivably be rejected or adjusted when Asian religious traditions are transplanted to Western, egalitarian societies. However, a deeper conundrum arises directly out of the intrinsic claims of monistic mystical traditions. The radical claims of such traditions to transcend all dualities and distinctions make them deeply problematic sources for social ethics.⁶⁵ The transcendental stance of most Hindu philosophy, even with its concern for *dharma* or righteous action, ultimately cannot generate universal socially relevant moral codes, only relative, context-specific ones. It also makes Tantric dissimulation morally unproblematic for its practitioners. From within a mystical tradition like Tantrism, furthermore, even relative forms of morality are turned upside down, and ordinary constraints on behavior have no meaning. Any critique of the enlightened Tantric master must reflect wrong understanding and is therefore groundless, and any act the enlightened master engages in is by definition perfect. There is no external standard of perfection apart from the enlightened master's own consciousness, as countless stories like the one told by Mr. Yande attest. Since he sees no duality, and no other, the master can do no wrong; moreover, there is no "wrong" to do from the perspective of enlightenment. In fact, the only ethical prescription in the Kashmir Shaiva Tantric tradition is total obedience to one's guru. Under such circumstances, the only form of critique would be the recognition that one's master is not who he or she claims to be (i.e., is not really enlightened). This has been the solution many disillusioned Western devotees of Eastern spiritual traditions have adopted, calling their former gurus charlatans and their spiritual traditions "cults." While this labeling allows those who feel they have been victimized to focus their anger in a viable way, it also has the negative consequence of denying to those seekers the value in all of their positive spiritual experiences. The baby must be thrown out with the bathwater. This can be a deeply disillusioning and threatening realization.

Campbell's response to her experience is a good example. She suggests that her relationship with her guru ensued under the guise of Tantric *sadhana*, but failed to meet that mark, resulting only in a tawdry affair that left her bitter and disillusioned. Most of the postings on the Leaving Siddha Yoga (LSY) website and discussion list are in this vein as well. The listmaster of LSY, Pendragon, states unequivocally that anything less than total rejection of Swami Muktananda and anything connected with him is tantamount to sanctioning abuse. There are some critics who would assert that guru-disciple sexual relations are always abusive and destructive, and thus ultimately without soteriological potential. The moral price such relationships extract is, in the view of these critics, unacceptable, no matter the spiritual gains. Tantric ritual,

too, may be seen to be nothing but abuse of females for the benefit of male spiritual aspirants. But the work of Muller-Ortega, Shaw, and White suggests that a more positive, egalitarian potential exists, at least in theory, within Tantric practice.⁶⁶ What is the nature of this potentiality?

The Kaula Tantric tradition is perhaps unique in world religions in its recognition of the essential divinity of the human female body. For Kaula *tantrikas* (who are normally defined as men), liberation could only be attained through the vehicle of sexual intercourse with the divinized feminine form. This unique feature of Shakta Tantrism seems at first to elevate women. However, as Campbell points out, the Duti (or Dakini, as she is known in the Tibetan Buddhist Tantric tradition), while indispensable, is merely the messenger for divine power, which actually inheres beyond her, in the subjectivity of an inaccessible male deity. In the Hindu context, too, the Yogini is believed to be the power (*shakti*) of Shiva, her male lord. Through imbibing her fluid essence, the male practitioner participates in the substance of God. White suggests that in the body of the Yogini/Duti/Dakini, “the medium itself was the message that, once internalized, transformed the very being of the practitioner”; that is to say, her sexual body and particularly her sexual fluids themselves contain the gnosis that is sought by the male aspirant.⁶⁷ The sexual act is actually a form of drinking, whereby the male (by means of the aforementioned urethral suction or *vajroli mudra*), actually takes into his body the fluids of the female, rather than giving up his own seminal fluid to her; and the vulva is conceptualized in Kaula Tantra as the woman’s “lower mouth.” This practice, part of the earliest Siddha phase of Tantrism, seems compatible with what Swami Muktananda was doing. He clearly understood his actions with young women to be beneficial to his health and longevity, and by all accounts he never attained an erection or ejaculation. In fact, Muktananda’s sexual behaviors most closely resemble the Chinese alchemical traditions designed to prolong the life of the aged by drawing on the energies of the young.⁶⁸ The Nath Siddha tradition White chronicles is clearly the source for such practices by Muktananda, despite the denial of his reliance on this tradition in *Meditation Revolution*.⁶⁹

Either the female adept in the Tantric ritual is the holder of knowledge, the virtual form of the cosmos, the embodied gnosis of ultimate reality (a view held by Shaw); or she is a mute messenger, who speaks only through her vulva and *not* through her mind or mouth, an object, a tool, a door through which the male aspirant steps to reach his goal (cf. White). Few Tantric texts speak of listening to the words of a female teacher, sitting at her feet or attending her person (although Shaw claims to have found whatever such texts there are for the Tibetan tradition). Campbell suggests that the Tantric female adept in these male-dominated Tantric contexts is alienated from her own subjectivity through the very secrecy the ritual requires. By becoming the essential, hidden,

secret core of a public, male religious institution which outwardly denies her existence, she can never fully own her personal power except as a sexual servant:

The imposition of secrecy therefore...when it occurred solely as a means to protect status, and where it was reinforced by threats, was a powerful weapon in keeping women from achieving any kind of integrity in themselves, for it seems clear that the fundamental and ancient principles of Tantric sex—the meeting together of two autonomous individuals as partners for sexual relations to promote spirituality—was tainted by the power wielded by one partner over the other.⁷⁰

It was the institution of male lineages of enlightened masters, lineages into which females could never be inserted as teachers, masters, or spiritual guides, that Campbell feels corrupted an original, more egalitarian Tantric ethos.

Was there in fact ever such an egalitarian form of Tantrism? Swami Lakshman Joo, the late renowned Kashmir Shaiva guru, claims that female teachers and initiates were a significant part of Tantrism, particularly in the Krama school.⁷¹ But if this was the case, there are no texts to attest to it, as it was an entirely oral tradition. Douglas Brooks has recently researched the role of female initiates and gurus in Tantrism, finding significant evidence that this was a major part of the tradition.⁷² If these authors are correct, and female lineage gurus and initiates took part in the Shakta Tantric traditions, their knowledge and spiritual experiences must have been profound.

White's research into the Kaulism of the seventh to tenth centuries in India leads him to conclude that in its early forms the system was basically egalitarian: "the purpose of the Kaula practice [was] initiation into the flow chart of the clan lineage, mutual gratification, and the *shared* power of flight enjoyed by Siddha and Yogin/ alike. The circular Yogin/ temples, open to sky, were landing fields and launching pads for Yogin/s and their male consorts."⁷³ If an adept in this early period of exoteric Yogini worship was identified as having an affinity with one of the divine mothers, he had to seek out a girl from her lineage family (*kula*) and worship her to "attain supernatural powers and occult knowledge."⁷⁴ In the Kaula period that followed, "the ritual of copulation [was] aestheticised." Whereas earlier, the sexual fluids were required to feed hungry deities, in the Kaula reformation of the yogini cults, sexual fluids were consumed by adepts to obtain *siddhis* (magical powers). Orgasm was no longer just a means of production of the fluids; it became "a privileged means of access to a blissful expansion of consciousness in which the deities of the Kula permeate and obliterate the ego of the worshipper."⁷⁵ Abhinavagupta described the state of the participants, both male and female: "all the participants reflect one another (in

harmonious union). The flow of their activated organs is reflected in the consciousness of each participant as if in so many mirrors; and the organs, all aflame, attain without effort to universal unfoldment...their consciousness overflowing in joy reaches oneness...and delights in universal bliss."⁷⁶ The open circles of female adepts surrounding the aspiring male Siddha at their center, merging together under the gaze of stars and sky, and Abhinavagupta's pairs of ecstatic *tantrikas* lost in the merged inner space of bliss, seem to contrast sharply with the covert nocturnal shufflings of pubescent girls, sworn to secrecy and shamed into silence, to the bedroom of their aging guru. It is difficult, if not impossible, to see those young women as entering freely into conscious, informed, contractual relations directed at their own enlightenment. Yet Tantra in at least some of its manifestations holds out the potential for both of these possibilities.

What, then, of the sexual relationships engaged in by Swami Muktananda? Are we to condemn them out of hand as undeniably and irredeemably abusive in all cases? Certainly the circumstances of these relationships—total power inequality, vast age differences, secrecy, claims of infallibility on the part of the guru, physical, emotional, and economic dependency of the females upon the male, and many more such factors—seem to make such a conclusion unavoidable. Yet the reports that are available from the girls and women who took part in the activities are varied. The secondhand reports in Rodarmor (via Michael and Chandra Dinga), Anthony et al., and Harris stress the traumatic, abusive nature of the contacts. Yet other secondhand reports suggest a different story. A female swami who had lived with Baba for twelve years wrote the following about his sexual activities:

I cannot dismiss him as a pedophile or abuser of children because I observed for years the benefit he brought into people's lives.... I have discussed with many of the girls who were Baba's companions and they found their interactions with him to be joyful, loving and filled with the same grace that others felt in the meditation rooms with the peacock feathers.⁷⁷ I don't deny that there were others who did not feel that way, but I have not had the opportunity to talk with them.... Several of his female students that I spoke to found the interactions with him of the same nature as shaktipat initiation. Their lives and their sexual experiences in relationship have been refined and purified as a result.⁷⁸

In my repeated personal conversations with one woman, now in her thirties, who was one of Baba's favorite consorts, I have similarly detected absolutely no bitterness, regret, or anger. She clearly stated to me in the summer of 1999: "I have thought about it a lot but I really can't say that I felt there was anything abusive about it." This woman described the experience of being worshipped by the guru as a form of the *shakti* to be intoxicating, transformative, and not like any ordinary human interchange.

The only published firsthand written report is an extraordinary account by Janaki Vunderink.⁷⁹ Janaki's life experience is a tale of abuse by an Indian guru. There is nothing in Janaki's account to suggest that it has been elaborated or that it is designed to incriminate anyone; its directness and frankness is clearly the result of many years of coming to terms with the pain the account chronicles. Janaki's experience is worth recounting here as it startlingly suggests that sexual experiences with Muktananda profoundly healed the effects of *earlier sexual abuse by another guru*, releasing Janaki from a traumatic past.

Janaki was first taken to India as a young girl, accompanying her mother, who was studying yoga in an ashram. She describes the slow process of her socialization in the ashram, eventually leading, in her young teens, to the guru's introducing her to his sexual practices. At first these seemed innocent enough, cuddling and lying beside the guru with another girl. But after some months the guru's sexual depravities began to show, as he forced the girls into nightly sexual relations with himself and eventually with young boys, whom he said he could control through their sexual slavery. He would watch through a keyhole while the orgies were conducted. He asked if she loved him and if she would do anything for him. When she answered she would, he then asked her, "Would you have sex with a dog?" There was no way she could go back on her word and felt she would rather die than displease him. Once she took rat poison because she felt her guru hadn't been paying enough attention to her. When he found out he became extremely angry and beat her severely, shouting that if she were to die it would destroy his mission. Janaki began to see that the guru she had loved and idolized through her teen years was focused entirely on sex and power. Yet this same guru was widely revered, sought out as a master of hatha yoga and meditation, and treated with great respect in India. His depraved personal life seemed to bear no relation to his public status. Janaki finally escaped the ashram with some difficulty, and after some years was invited by a friend to meet Swami Muktananda. Due to the experiences she had as a girl, she wanted no part of any Indian guru. However she eventually did join Muktananda's tour and became his close personal secretary when she was in her early thirties.

Janaki describes how tender, considerate, and respectful Muktananda was with her, seeming to know her mind. She eventually divulged her youthful pain at the hands of the earlier swami, and Muktananda "cried softly and was full of compassion." He told her these experiences were the result of a curse in a former life, but that he had "cleansed it all." Baba suggested that Janaki live without men for a while, saying that she had "had enough sex." Sometimes when she felt lonely she would tell Baba, who responded that he understood, but that "only within that loneliness can you grow in strength." One night, he asked her to come to his room and spoke soothingly to her of Kundalini. Janaki's account of her

subsequent sexual relations with Baba is presented by Harris and need not be quoted at length here. Janaki emphasizes, however, that she was “in a state of total ecstasy, and whatever happened had nothing to do with sex” as she had known it.⁸⁰ The experience with Baba was all about sweetness. There was no sexual excitement whatsoever. It was innocent and playful. At one point he said, “If I were to lose one drop of semen, you would become pregnant, and you would have a golden child. But it is not possible for me to lose semen.” Baba also said to her, “Don’t go over this again and again in your mind because it cannot be understood.”⁸¹ This took place in 1981, about a year before Muktananda’s death. The next sentence in Janaki’s published account, omitted from Harris’ article, is the most fascinating of all to me: “A while ago I experienced for the first time that I had fully forgiven Swamiji [the guru who abused her in her youth]. My anger towards him was gone. I thought it might be nice to see him again.” The implication of Janaki’s description of her abuse and her later experience with Baba is that he somehow cured her of the trauma of her earlier experiences. Janaki sees no similarity between the abuse of her early years and what she considers to be the transcendent, non-sexual “Tantric ritual of transmitting energy” she engaged in with Muktananda. Although some might say she is in “denial,” simply repeating past behaviors, it seems to me that a mature woman with such a life history would have enough self-awareness to discriminate between these two sets of experiences, and that we ought to listen to her voice.

TOWARD A TANTRIC HERMENEUTIC

These fragments—the early medieval Yogini cults, the Kalikrama branch of Trika Shaivism, Abhinavagupta’s reformed Kaulism, the positive accounts by women who experienced sexual intimacy with Swami Muktananda—suggest that Tantra cannot easily be characterized as either wholly abusive or liberating for women, and that Tantra contains intrinsic potential for profound, transformative, egalitarian, female-positive spiritual experience. The realization that sexuality has the potential to transform and enlighten, as well as to hurt and abuse, is a profound one. But such realizations are not won cheaply, and merely engaging in sexual contact with a spiritual master does not qualify as Tantra. Swami Muktananda clearly drew upon a Kaula Tantric heritage in his private practice, a fact that he seems to have tried, however obliquely, to reveal in the last few months of his life. That his judgment was wrong, the practice misguided and abusive for at least some women, I cannot deny. I am grateful that it did not happen to me. Yet at the same time, the long journey of discovery and growth that was initiated by my encounter with Baba’s odd experiments with Kaulism is a precious legacy that has led me far beyond the narrow confines of the world I knew in the ashram.

For devotees of a Siddha guru, the question of his having made a “mistake” in any way cannot arise. By definition a Siddha guru is perfect, and any action he or she performs is always for the ultimate betterment of disciples, even if they do not know or experience it at the time. But this attitude of total surrender, while necessary for the destruction of the ego, can be limiting if taken to extremes. Developing tolerance of extreme ambiguity through the deliberate contemplation of absolutely irreconcilable dualities is characteristic of many forms of mature spirituality, and an essential feature of Tantrism. The dual, unresolved nature of the argument presented in this article is thus exemplary of a kind of new scholarly spiritual practice, a *Tantric hermeneutic*.

Each reader must make of the picture presented here what s/he will. For myself, I am *not* convinced that every single sexual encounter Swami Muktananda had benefited his partner, or that we can know that to be the case and therefore should allow gurus in the United States to do whatever they like. On the one hand, I accept the idea of “crazy wisdom,” an enlightened state beyond ordinary morality and convention, and I truly believe that all of us are on a path to our greater development and unfoldment, inevitably, in this life or another. On the other hand, as a victim of abuse myself who has suffered so terribly from the debilitating mental and physical effects of the misdeeds of others, and seen so much of the same kind of suffering, I feel it necessary to speak out in the face of this wrongdoing and voice my anger about it. I accept that ultimately it was my own karma that led to the difficult experiences of my youth. But does that mean that I should not act to prevent similar suffering for my own daughter?

I am not ready to say that all the harm we know can accrue to a young child abused by an older, trusted authority figure, at least on this material plane of reality in which we all dwell, is irrelevant and forgiven by greater spiritual concerns. The movement of Asian forms of religious practice into America and Europe provides a unique historical opportunity for revisioning those original forms, and raises a whole series of new moral, ethical, and legal questions. Social forms that tolerate secrecy, hierarchy, and corruption can and should, I contend, be eradicated as the tradition moves to the West. I know from my field studies in Kerala that women in India suffer, and that their suffering increases when they cannot voice it or express it through meaningful spiritual outlets. There is something in the way that left-handed Tantra evolved that stinks of such oppression to me. Yet, at the same time, within it is a pearl of great truth and wisdom, which has potential for reformulation in our contemporary world. I personally have found it extremely powerful and liberating to contemplate the uncomfortable dichotomy presented by the actions of the Siddha Yoga gurus. It is precisely in that moment of cognitive dissonance and emotional discomfort that the key to greater understanding can be found.

Facing fear in the service of enlightenment is the very core of Kaula Tantric practice. Menstrual fluids, meat, and blood swallowed by the heroic *tantrika* were no cinnamon candy; they were the most repulsive things one could ingest. Sitting on rotting corpses (a practice of the Kapalika school of Tantrism) is not a picnic. The radical nature of such Tantric practice, and the experience of its mental counterpart, is a kind of torture, a deep and excruciating pain, a fire-walking, tongue-piercing kind of pain, that requires exposing and staying in the fire of all one's own limitations and *samskaras* (karmic tendencies). Perhaps staying in the pain of ugliness of seeing Baba as an abuser or a dirty old man is similarly useful. Why can't we maintain both this image and the liberating image of the Kaula Siddha simultaneously? If the Goddess is all this, how can she not be both of these? To wipe away the ugly, this-worldly side and insist only on the stainless image of a moral exemplar is to betray her method.

In my own path this has been the way, slowly, painfully, crawling right through the darkness, right through the horror, and then such light, such beauty, such ecstasy. The two are intimately linked. That is the mystery. Both perspectives must remain—for some time at least—in a dialectic of extreme tension. In that tension something adamantite will be generated. It is not simply a one-way street, all enlightenment, all goodness, all liberation. There is a lot of muck on the way.

Tantric practice thus forces us into intense existential confrontation with precisely what most limits us—desire, hatred, and fear—and through guided techniques, transforms those emotions, dissolving limited vision. If scholarship in its highest sense is a search for truth, or anything approaching it, this lesson would be one well learned. We must not turn away from a subject, deny, dissimulate, or repress information because it is painful, risky, unpopular, or frightening, if we feel direct confrontation with it will lead through to higher ground. Just as the psychological treatment of trauma can only be to go through the experience again and map it to a cognitive level of understanding, Tantra reorients our deepest emotions to pave the way for the light of recognition. The attitude of Tantra eschews self-deception and seeks out radical forms of knowledge that will not leave us in the same place we began.

The dust will eventually settle around Siddha Yoga's stormy past. We may learn some valuable lessons from this drama as it continues to unfold. Ultimately, I believe that engaging these troubling issues head-on is the key to the "heart of the secret," a synthetic place where scholarship and experience may coalesce and melt away. The sublime heart of the Tantric teachings given to us by such great beings as Abhinavagupta in fact offers a way out of the hypocrisy and dissembling that has become second nature to Tantric practice and its study. The Kula path "teaches the

primary importance of the body as the essential tool of *sādhana*.” Its theology is entirely embodied, experiential, made real in the flesh. Its goal is the attainment of “a condition of conscious heart-felt realization” of one’s true nature, “consciously taking possession of one’s true status” as a totally free being.⁸² A Tantric hermeneutic suggests that we can indeed both *be* and *see*, providing the dual vision that is the goal of the new insider-outsider scholarship. I firmly believe that both critical understanding and the deep, ecstatic empathy that is the “heart” of Tantra can come together in the body and mind of the Tantric scholar. Seeing truly, through openness, compassion, free debate, and deep insight, has the potential to liberate both spiritual practitioners and academics.

ENDNOTES

¹ An earlier draft of this essay was written for an invited conference on scholarship and practice of mysticism at New York University in April 1999. A version of this article appears in Elliot Wolfson and Jeffrey J. Kripal, eds., *The Unknown, Remembered Gate: Religious Experience and Hermeneutical Reflection* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, forthcoming).

The present essay has benefited greatly from critical readings by Jeffrey Kripal, Jeffrey Lidke, Paul Muller-Ortega, Sarah Pike, Karen Schaefer, David White, and three anonymous reviewers for *Nova Religio*. Conversations and correspondence with ten other scholars, ex-swamis, and therapists who identified themselves to me privately as former Siddha Yoga devotees and affiliates added immense depth to my understanding of this material as well. Each of these ten individuals requested anonymity, and I therefore can only thank them as a group here. All opinions expressed in this article are entirely my own, as well as all errors and possible misrepresentations.

Sanskrit terms, excepting those in original citations, have been rendered without diacritical marks for ease of reading.

² Paul Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta in the Non-Dual Shaivism of Kashmir* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

³ See, e.g., Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell Academic, 1999). I have discussed and used this method at length in my book, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence, and Worship of the Goddess Kālī* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴ Therefore, this essay in no way represents the perspective of Swami Nityananda or of his organization, Shanti Mandir.

⁵ K. C. Pandey, *Abhinavagupta: An Historical and Philosophical Study*, 2d ed., rev. and enl. (Varanasi, India: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1963).

⁶ Pandey, *Abhinavagupta*, vii.

⁷ Pandey, *Abhinavagupta*, 21-22.

⁸ Pandey, *Abhinavagupta*, vii.

⁹ Swami Muktananda, “Message from Baba,” *Siddha Path* (May 1982), supplement.

¹⁰ William Rodarmor, “The Secret Life of Swami Muktananda,” *CoEvolution Quarterly* (Winter 1983): 104-11.

¹¹ Lis Harris, “O Guru, Guru, Guru,” *New Yorker* (14 November 1994): 99.

- ¹² Stan Trout, "An Open Letter of Resignation from Swami Abhayananda to Muktananda," <<http://www.cyberpass.net/truth/abhayananda.htm>>. Downloaded 25 May 2000.
- ¹³ Pandey, *Abhinavagupta*, 616-17.
- ¹⁴ Pandey, *Abhinavagupta*, 617.
- ¹⁵ Swami Muktananda, *The Perfect Relationship* (Ganeshpuri, India: SYDA Foundation, 1980), 10.
- ¹⁶ Pratap Yande, "Never Go Too Close to a Saint," *Siddha Path* (October 1982): 10.
- ¹⁷ Yande, "Never Go Too Close to a Saint," 10.
- ¹⁸ Pandey, *Abhinavagupta*, 612-13.
- ¹⁹ For a detailed treatment of Abhinavagupta's fourfold model, see Gavin D. Flood, *Body and Cosmology in Kashmir Āivism* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), and Jeffrey S. Lidke, "When the Inside Becomes the Outside," M.A. thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2001.
- ²⁰ These were given to me by Brother Charles, formerly Swami Vivekananda, who was a member of the inner circle participating in the chants in Ganeshpuri. The chants consist of a number of Sanskrit invocations, the "Saraswati Stotram," a hymn to the goddess Saraswati, and two chants in the Kannada language, one to Shiva and one to the Devi.
- ²¹ Subsequent recent interviews that I have conducted, which will form part of a longer published treatment of this subject, have substantiated and filled in details on these matters.
- ²² *Shaktipat* is the transmission of *shakti* (the divine power of consciousness, which is feminine) to the devotee by the guru, thus awakening the devotee's *kundalini*, dormant *shakti* coiled like a serpent at the base of the spine. The *kundalini* is believed to rise along the spine activating *chakras* (centers of consciousness) until it reaches the top of the head, activating the crown *chakra* of enlightenment. Siddha Yoga is a religious path that teaches that salvation comes through the grace (*kripa*) of the *siddha* ("one who is perfected") and that the devotee should surrender totally to the guru, who is equivalent to God, the Ultimate. *Shaktipat* is believed to be transmitted by the guru in a variety of ways, including touch, look, or thought.
- ²³ Karen Schaefer, personal email, 5 March 2001.
- ²⁴ David White, "Tantric Sects and Tantric Sex: The Flow of Secret Tantric Gnosis," in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), 264.
- ²⁵ For one such account, see Harris, "O Guru," 97. In this account the sexual encounter sounds more like a blood transfusion than a mystico-erotic Kaula rite. Rodarmor in "The Secret Life of Swami Muktananda" quotes a number of other firsthand accounts, many of them rather negative in tone.
- ²⁶ Interview, 14 August 2001.
- ²⁷ Such an admission would have been looked on no more favorably in India, although discreet practice might well be tolerated, as historical evidence suggests.
- ²⁸ See Douglas Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom: The Text and Traditions of Ār/vidyā Āakta Tantrism in South India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 149-88; and Alexis Sanderson, "Purity and Power among the Brahmins of Kashmir," in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 191-216.
- ²⁹ White, "Tantric Sects," 255.
- ³⁰ White, "Tantric Sects," 256.

³¹ Douglas Renfrew Brooks, Swami Durgananda, Paul E. Muller-Ortega, William Mahoney, Constantina Rhodes-Bailly, and S. P. Sabharathnam, *Meditation Revolution: A History and Theology of the Siddha Yoga Lineage* (South Fallsburg, NY: Agama Press, 1997).

³² Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Inside-Out, Outside-In," *Religious Studies Review* 25, no. 3 (1999): 237.

³³ Mark S. G. Dyczkowski, *The Canon of the Śaivāgama and the Kubjikā Tantras of the Western Kaula Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva*. In the version of the *Kundalini Stavah* that was published by the ashram, the only information given regarding the provenance of the text is Muktananda's statement that it "occurs in the *Rudra Yamala Tantra*." See Swami Muktananda, *Kundalini Stavah* (Ganeshpuri, India: SYDA Foundation, 1980), 6. In the mimeographed handout of the chant that I obtained and sang from daily in the Ganeshpuri ashram in 1982, the text is attributed to "Rudra Yamala, Ch. VI." Although the original text of the *Rudra Yamala Tantra* is apparently lost, it is universally cited as an extremely important source in the Kaula Tantric tradition. A version of a text with the same name, but "almost certainly, from internal evidence, not the original text" was published "in a Sanskrit edition by the Vacasampati Press, Calcutta." According to the digest provided on the *Rudrayamala Uttarakhanda* website, in Chapter 6 of this later Sanskrit text, "Devi gives a hymn to Kundalini bestowing siddhi, and called the Kundalikomala Stava." See *Rudrayamala Uttarakhanda*, <<http://www.hubcom.com/tantric/rudrayam.htm>>. Although I have not seen the Calcutta text, this digest provided by Mike McGee clearly identifies the source of the hymn sung in Muktananda's ashram in 1982 as this later, published version of the *Rudra Yamala Tantra*. Whether or not the text actually derives from an original, lost version of *Rudra Yamala Tantra* (and there is little reason to believe that it does), Baba's use of the hymn from this source in the contexts I have identified still strongly links the practice of *shaktipat diksha* (awakening of the dormant *kundalini* through *shaktipat*) to the Kaula textual tradition.

³⁴ Muktananda, *Kundalini Stavah*, 20.

³⁵ See Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom*, 19, and Georg Feuerstein, *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy* (Boston: Shambala, 1998), 136-38, for discussions of the shades of meaning associated with the term "kula." Although Brooks and Rhodes-Bailly refer to the *Kundalini Stavah* in their discussion of Kundalini in Siddha Yoga in *Meditation Revolution*, they neither cite nor mention these frequent references to the Kula path. The central position of this text in the particular time period I am chronicling directly contradicts Brooks' assertion in *Meditation Revolution* that Siddha Yoga is an entirely "Right-Current Path" (290).

³⁶ For various accounts of these events, see Harris, "O Guru"; Pendragon, "The History of Siddha Yoga or What They Don't Want You to Know" (September 1997) on the Leaving Siddha Yoga website, <<http://www.cyberpass.net/truth/>>; Sailesh Kottary, "A Stormy Succession," *Illustrated Weekly of India* (19 January 1986): 6-15; Sailesh Kottary, "I Was Abducted," *Illustrated Weekly of India* (16 March 1986): 6-13; Gene Thursby, "Siddha Yoga: Swami Muktananda and the Seat of Power," in *When Prophets Die: The Postcharismatic Fate of New Religious Movements*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 165-81. Afif pled "no contest" to charges of statutory rape in 1983. The case was filed in the Santa Clara, California, county court.

³⁷ Kottary, "A Stormy Succession" and "I Was Abducted."

³⁸ *Illustrated Weekly of India* published the retraction in the 20-26 September 1987 issue. SYDA Foundation placed a full-page statement outlining the ashram's legal actions in response to the article under the headline "Ganeshpuri Ashram Vindicated" in *India-West* (6 November 1987): 36. Lis Harris also experienced the intense pressure put upon the *New Yorker* by SYDA's lawyers during the preparation of her report published in 1994. She states that SYDA threatened the *New Yorker* several times with lawsuits, and that she sat in over thirty hours of meetings between SYDA Foundation and *New Yorker* representatives

hashing out their threats. Since Harris had all of her material backed up with written permissions and sworn statements, the *New Yorker* refused to buckle to the SYDA threats. However, after the article was published, Harris left her job at the *New Yorker* due to the fallout from this experience. Personal communication, Lis Harris, January 2000.

³⁹ Swami Chidvilasananda, "A Message From Gurumayi to All the Devotees of Siddha Yoga," circular distributed to Siddha Yoga ashrams, 23 March 1986, 13.

⁴⁰ Malti, "Growing up with Baba," *Siddha Path* (February 1982): 12-14.

⁴¹ See Swami Durgananda, "Mahasamadhi," *Siddha Path* (Dec.-Jan. 1983): 9, for Gurumayi's almost romantic account of Baba's last words to her: "And then he said, 'I was watching the video and I saw you translating [Malti was Muktananda's translator in public talks during this period] and all of a sudden I realized what hard work that was for you, and then I remembered that you were upstairs suffering from [back] pain. My heart couldn't take it, so I came to see you.'" According to this account, Muktananda told Malti, "I just wanted to see more of you. I would never want to leave you."

⁴² See Leaving Siddha Yoga website, <<http://www.cyberpass.net/truth/>>.

⁴³ On 8 August 1989, three days after attacks in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Swami Nityananda wrote a letter to Gurumayi asking her to desist "using fearful tactics that intimidate people by not allowing them the freedom of choice," and requested some kind of reconciliation. Despite the letter and repeated telephone calls, he never received any reply and harassment continued. George Afif filed a defamation suit in India against the Shetty family after the *Illustrated Weekly* article appeared, and the legal challenges continued for several years until 1994, when Afif suddenly left Siddha Yoga under mysterious circumstances that were never explained. The case was eventually dropped. (Personal communication, Shetty family.)

⁴⁴ According to the report in the *Ann Arbor News*, 4 and 5 August 1989, several devotees of Gurumayi "kicked in a door to enter the residence [where Nityananda was conducting a private program], assaulted the swami and another follower, and threw bottles of skunk scent against the walls."

⁴⁵ Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Pale Plausibilities: A Preface for the Second Edition," in *Kālī's Child: The Mystical and Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xi-xxiv.

⁴⁶ Brooks et al., *Meditation Revolution*, xiv.

⁴⁷ Audiotape of session A227 of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Boston, November 1999. In the interest of fuller disclosure of the facts, Dr. Larson subsequently sent me a copy of the original version of Swami Durgananda's essay, which he had retained in his files. The original essay is indeed significantly longer and more detailed than the published version in its treatment of the events surrounding the succession, and does acknowledge the controversy and accusations surrounding Muktananda's sexual activities in a six-paragraph section entitled "Challenge of Faith." After briefly reviewing the accusations by Stan Trout, the Dingas and others regarding Muktananda's improper sexual relations with young female devotees, Durgananda carefully assembles a series of responses to these accusations. Close scrutiny of this segment of Durgananda's essay reveals that while the statements by both Muktananda and a variety of devotees "in the know" are clearly intended to refute the accusations, there is in fact no actual denial of the allegations. That is, there is no statement presented that Baba never engaged in such activities, or that the accusations are totally unfounded. Rather, oblique comments are proffered about the persecution of sages by the ignorant, inability of those unfamiliar with Muktananda's personal life to comprehend it, denials that a being like Muktananda could ever have experienced physical desire, dismissals of the charges as absurd, and statements by those who lived in close proximity to his house that his behavior never compromised his spiritual obligations to his devotees. Acknowledging that some students did leave Siddha Yoga due to this controversy, Durgananda ends by suggesting that for most people

the issue simply did not affect their commitment to the movement. This entire section as well as about a third of the remainder of the essay (including more sordid details of the Nityananda succession scandal) were dropped in the published article. At the end of the 1999 AAR session, the authors of *Meditation Revolution* publicly acknowledged that the decision not to include discussion of the accusations against Muktananda was a mistake in judgment that would be corrected in any later editions of the volume.

⁴⁸ Brooks in *Meditation Revolution* notes the tendency of the high-caste *smarta* Srividya commentarial tradition to “overlook discrepancies between word and deed, and read selectively to suit themselves,” remaining silent about “potential indiscretions of others” in order to protect the status of the community (179); ironically, Brooks replicates the same phenomenon in *Meditation Revolution*.

⁴⁹ Kripal, “Pale Plausibilities,” xiii-xiv.

⁵⁰ In his chapter on the Siddha Yoga canon in *Meditation Revolution*, Brooks delicately negotiates Siddha Yoga’s debt to the Kaula tradition, stating that both Muktananda and Gurumayi cite from Kaula scriptures “frequently *but selectively*” (334, emphasis in the original), eliminating scriptural passages that do not meet the Siddha Yoga gurus’ standards of ethical conduct. In endnote 113, Brooks claims that Muktananda explicitly rejected the antinomian practices condoned by such scriptures, presumably including ritual sex.

⁵¹ White, “Tantric Sects,” 252-53.

⁵² Harris, “O Guru,” 99.

⁵³ White, “Tantric Sects,” 255.

⁵⁴ This is my recollection from a public talk given by Swami Muktananda in South Fallsburg, New York.

⁵⁵ In the weeks following the American Academy of Religion meeting in November 1999, I was contacted by at least six such scholars, all of whom shared their personal recollections and insights with me, but all of whom insisted upon remaining anonymous in any account I might give.

⁵⁶ See Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*.

⁵⁷ It should be noted that devotees who remained with or came to Gurumayi after this time describe the ashram under her guidance as, if anything, a more complex and emotionally heightened social world than that of Muktananda.

⁵⁸ June Campbell, *Traveller in Space: In Search of Female Identity in Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: George Braziller, 1996).

⁵⁹ “The Emperor’s Tantric Robes,” *Tricycle* 6, no. 2 (1996): 38-46.

⁶⁰ “Emperor’s Tantric Robes,” 42.

⁶¹ Katy Butler, “Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America,” *Common Boundary* (May/June 1990): 18-19.

⁶² Dick Anthony, Bruce Ecker, and Ken Wilber, *Spiritual Choices: The Problem of Recognizing Authentic Paths to Inner Transformation* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987); Butler, “Encountering the Shadow”; Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad, *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (Berkeley: Frog, Limited, 1989). Sandy Boucher, *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism* (New York: Beacon Press, 1993), and Jack Kornfield, chapter 10 entitled “The Dirty Laundry,” in *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path* (New York: Bantam Books, 2000), both address the need to avoid covering up abuse in Buddhist communities.

⁶³ Butler, “Encountering the Shadow,” 19.

⁶⁴ Kripal in “Inside-out, Outside-in” suggests that Stephen Butterfield, *The Double Mirror: A Skeptical Journey into Buddhist Tantra* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1994), is successful at maintaining the tension of this dual stance.

- ⁶⁵ See Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Debating the Mystical as Ethical: An Indological Map," in *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, ed. G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001), 15-69; Kramer and Alstad, *The Guru Papers*, 195, 348-54.
- ⁶⁶ Muller-Ortega, *Triadic Heart of Çiva*; Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and David White, "Transformations in the Art of Love," *History of Religions* 38, no. 2 (1998): 172-98.
- ⁶⁷ White, "Tantric Sects," 267.
- ⁶⁸ Douglas Wile, *Art of the Bedchamber: The Chinese Sexual Yoga Classics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
- ⁶⁹ Brooks et al., *Meditation Revolution*, 466.
- ⁷⁰ Campbell, *Traveller in Space*, 103.
- ⁷¹ Swami Lakshman Jee [sic], *Kashmir Shaivism: The Secret Supreme* (Albany: Universal Shaiva Trust, 1988), 92-93, 135-36; see also Lillian Silburn, *Kundalini: Energy of the Depths*, trans. Jacques Gontier (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 158-90, passim.
- ⁷² Douglas Brooks, "Women Preceptors in Çr/vidyâ Çākta Tantra: Weaving Identities and Complex Fabrics," paper presented to the Conference on Tantric Studies, American Academy of Religion annual meeting, San Francisco, November 1997.
- ⁷³ David White, "Transformations," 198, emphasis in the original.
- ⁷⁴ Alexis Sanderson, "Çaivism and the Tantric Traditions," in *The World's Religions*, ed. Stewart Sutherland et al (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), 660-704.
- ⁷⁵ Sanderson, "Çaivism," 680.
- ⁷⁶ Silburn, *Kundalini*, 166.
- ⁷⁷ Muktananda's preferred method of bestowing *kundalini* awakening or *shaktipat* was with a brush of his wand of peacock feathers, a dramatic touch that clearly demarcated the event as a ritual initiation.
- ⁷⁸ "Conversations with Ex-Siddha Yoga Swami X," 3 September 1997, on the Leaving Siddha Yoga website, <<http://www.cyberpass.net/truth/>>.
- ⁷⁹ She was known to members of the ashram community as "Janaki from Holland." See Janaki's account published using only her Dutch first name, Machteld, "Opgroein in een Ashram als je 14 bent" ("Growing Up in an Indian Ashram at Age 14") *The Willem de Ridder Papers* (August 1993): 33-37. The English text of this article in my possession was translated by Janaki Vunderink.
- ⁸⁰ Harris, "O Guru," 97.
- ⁸¹ Telephone interview with Janaki Vunderink, 17 August 2001.
- ⁸² Muller-Ortega, "Triadic Heart of Çiva," 59.