

Quaderni di CIVILTÀ E RELIGIONI
Collana diretta da
Nicola Gasbarro, Marino Niola, Paolo Scarpi

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Il corpo in scena

Tecniche,
rappresentazioni,
performance

a cura di
Chiara Cremonesi, Ferdinando Fava e Paolo Scarpi

Quaderni di

Civiltà
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Transcending the Body, Exhibiting the Body: Notes on the Ideology and Practice of Hindu Asceticism

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According to Brāhmaṇical codes the male renouncer (*saṃnyāsīn*) should exercise perfect detachment (*vairāgya*) with respect to his own body (*deha*, *śarīra*) and to women (*strī*), regarded as the two most powerful sources of desire (*kāma*)¹. The body is portrayed as a heap of foul substances, being made up of constituents that are wholly impure. In *Nārada-parivrājaka Upaniṣad* 144, a medieval text on renunciation dating to 1150 CE, the receptacle of the body is compared to a temporary abode said to be intrinsically dirty, prey to all sorts of sufferings, and which the wise man should forsake as soon as possible:

Let him abandon this impermanent dwelling place of the elements. It has beams of bones tied with tendons. It is plastered with flesh and blood and thatched with skin. It is foul-smelling, filled with feces and urine, and infested with old-age and grief. Covered with dust and harassed by pain, it is the abode of disease.

If a man finds joy in the body – a heap of flesh, blood, pus, feces, urine, tendons, marrow, and bones – that fool will find joy even in hell².

1 In the Brāhmaṇical context, renunciation is thought of as a male prerogative. Only the three upper classes (*varṇa*), however, are entitled to renounce, and especially Brahmins. Women are merely viewed as objects of passion and as temptresses, and are not legitimated to renounce the world. Female asceticism, though historically traceable from early times both within and outside the Brāhmaṇical tradition, is an issue which is not addressed in Brāhmaṇical sources. For an introduction to Brāhmaṇical renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*), see Olivelle 1992, pp. 3-112. On female ascetics, see Clémentin-Ojha 2013.

2 *asthi-sthūṇaṃ snāyu-baddhaṃ māṃsa-śoṇita-lepitam | carmāvabaddhaṃ durgandhi*

Moreover, in *Nārada-parivrājaka Upaniṣad* 160 we read:

Those who take delight in this collection of skin, flesh, blood, tendons, marrow, fat, and bones, stinking with feces and urine – what difference is there between them and worms?³

A common refrain is that the body is afflicted with desire, anger, greed, delusion, fear, despondency, envy, separation from what is desirable, union with what is undesirable, hunger, thirst, senility, death, disease, and all sorts of sorrows. The ascetic is therefore instructed to contemplate his body with dispassion, and to analyze its constituent parts one by one. The idea is that by deconstructing the body, he will inevitably come to recognize it as the root-cause of all suffering⁴. No bath (*snāna*) or ritual ablution (*abhiṣeka*) can efficaciously purify what is thought to be the storehouse of all impurity (*aśauca*, *aśuddhi*).

He who aims to adopt the life of a renouncer must relinquish all ritual practices and thus sever his link with fire (*agni*), the emblem of sacrifice. His state is a non-ritual state, i.e. an *an-agni*, “fireless” state. He must also relinquish all social ties, leave home, and consecrate himself to an itinerant, solitary, mendicant existence. Medieval texts on renunciation specify that only healthy and morally sound upper-class males can legitimately renounce, and list a series of physical, social, and ethical disabilities that are said to disqualify a person from taking up *saṃnyāsa*: the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the bald, cripples, eunuchs, outcastes, heretics, and sinners in general are all said to be disqualified⁵.

An ascetic must learn to detach himself from his body, understood to be the house/prison in which the immaculate Self (*ātman*), identical with the

pūrṇaṃ mūtra-purīṣayoḥ || jarā-śoka-samāviṣṭaṃ rogāyatanam āturam | rajasvalam anityaṃ ca bhūtāvāsam imaṃ tyajet || māṃsāsṛk-pūya-viṅ-mūtra-snāyu-majjāsthī-sambatau | dehecet prītimān mūḍho bhavitā narake 'pi saḥ ||; Olivelle 1992, p. 179. See also *Mānavadharma-śāstra* 6.76-77.

3 *tvañ-māṃsa-rudhira-snāyu-majjā-medo'sthī-sambatau | viṅ-mūtra-pūye ramatāṃ krimīṇāṃ kiyad antaram ||*; Olivelle 1992, p. 188.

4 On the deconstruction of the body in Indian asceticism, see Olivelle 2008, pp. 101-25. On the Indian conception of the body, see Bouillier – Tarabout 2003; Michaels 2009; Michaels – Wulf 2011.

5 See *Nārada-parivrājaka Upaniṣad* 136-37; *Bṛhat-saṃnyāsa Upaniṣad* 250-51. On the idea of sin in the Indian milieu, see Piantelli 2013.

Absolute *Brahman*, is hidden/detained: only in this way he will free himself from the oppressive weight of materiality. Indeed, the adept must recognize that his body is the primary source of pollution. From its nine openings – eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, anus and penis – all sorts of foul substances and impurities are said to ooze forth. As the late *Maitreya Upaniṣad* (113-14), possibly dating to the 14th or 15th century CE, puts it:

Made with its mother's and father's filth, this body dies soon after it is born. It is a filthy house of joy and grief. When it is touched a bath is ordained.

Built with humors, it is a great disease. Strewn with countless vicissitudes, it is an unsteady house of sin. When it is touched a bath is ordained.

By its very nature, foul secretions continuously ooze out from its nine openings. It smells foul and it contains awful filth. When it is touched a bath is ordained.

Through its mother the body is impure at birth; in birth-impurity it is born. It is impure also through death. When it is touched a bath is ordained⁶.

The ascetic is invited to look at his body impersonally; it is like a filthy dress which envelops him but which is other than his true Self. In this perspective, a meditative exercise often recommended is to regard one's body as a corpse. As a renouncer is considered to have died to worldly life, in the same way he must contemplate his body as a lifeless heap of impure constituents.

Within the Brāhmaṇical male-dominated worldview, even more poisonous of one's body is the body of women. With words of hatred and fear, women are represented in negative terms as exciting lust: the mere sight of a woman is thought to be intoxicating for the celibate ascetic. To be sure, the ascetic's power is linked to his power of chastity, to the preservation of his sexual energies. By their demonic art of seduction, women

6 *jātaṃ mṛtaṃ idaṃ dehaṃ mātā-pitr-malātmakam | sukha-duḥkhālayāmedhyam spr̥ṣtvā snānaṃ vidhīyate || dhātu-baddhaṃ mahā-rogaṃ pāpa-mandīram adbruvam | vikārākāra-vistīrṇaṃ spr̥ṣtvā snānaṃ vidhīyate || nava-dvāra-mala-srāvaṃ sadā-kāle svabhāva-jaṃ | durgandhaṃ durmalopetaṃ spr̥ṣtvā snānaṃ vidhīyate || mātṛā sūtaka-sambandhaṃ sūtaka sa ha jāyate | mṛta-sūtaka-jaṃ dehaṃ spr̥ṣtvā snānaṃ vidhīyate ||*; Olivelle 1992, pp. 161-62. On the body as a filthy receptacle, see also *Maitri Upaniṣad* 1.3, 3.4; *Mahā-bhārata* 12.316.42-43.

are said to attract the male inducing him to dissipate his powers. The female organ is consequently described with disgust as the quintessence of impurity and filth. To again quote *Nārada-parivrājaka Upaniṣad* 160:

Even though a woman's private parts are not different from a deep and festering ulcer, men generally deceive themselves by imagining them to be different.

I salute those who take delight in a piece of skin split in two scented by the breaking of the wind! What could be more rash?⁷.

The body is the enemy which needs to be subdued, conquered, and transcended since life is regarded as intrinsically evil (*pāpa*). The highest aim is that of achieving liberation (*mokṣa*, *mukti*), i.e. freedom from rebirth by exiting the painful cycle of births and deaths (*saṃsāra*). This ultimate state in which the Self is finally liberated from the chains of matter is also known as disembodied liberation (*videha-mukti*).

This notwithstanding, it should be noted that there exist groups of ascetics for whom the supreme goal is to achieve a body of immortality through the sublimation, i.e. trans-substantiation of one's mortal frame. Already in *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 2.12, a text dating to the last centuries BCE, we read:

When earth, water, fire, air, and ether have arisen together, and the body made up of these five becomes equipped with the attribute of Yoga, that man, obtaining a body tempered by the fire of Yoga, will no longer experience sickness, old age, or suffering⁸.

Moreover, *Yoga-sūtra* 3.46 likens bodily perfection to the hardness of the diamond (*vajra*):

Perfection of body consists in beauty, grace, strength and adamantine hardness⁹.

7 *strīṇām avācya-deśasya klinna-nāḍī-vranasya ca | abhede'pi manobhedājjanah prāyeṇa vañcyate || carma-khaṇḍam dvidhā bhinnam apānodgāra-dhūpitam | ye ramanti namas tebhyaḥ sāhasam kim ataḥ param ||*; Olivelle 1992, p. 188.

8 *prthivyap-tejo'nila-khe samutthite pañcātmake yoga-guṇe pravṛtte | na tasya rogo na jarā na duḥkham prāptasya yogāgni-mayaṃ śarīram ||*; Olivelle 1996, p. 256.

9 *rūpa-lāvaṅya-bala-vajra-saṃghananātvaṇi kāya-saṃpat ||*; Hariharānanda Āraṇya 1983, p. 327.

Medieval esoteric schools of Tantric Yoga, such as those of Siddha and Nātha adepts, taught the possibility of transforming one's impure flesh into an adamant body or armor (*vajra-deha*; *vajra-kavaca*) by means of the science of alchemy (*rasāyana*) and a variety of psycho-physical techniques¹⁰. The redemption of corporeality and nature is operated through a magical, alchemical transformation, which is thought to transmute what is a corruptible receptacle into an incorruptible one. The ordinary body is said to be immature or unbaked (*apakva*), and the purpose of Tantric Yoga practices is that of strengthening it so that it may become ripe (*pakva*), transmuting itself into a divine body (*divya-deha*) through the development of its latent powers.

The belief in the existence of extraordinary *yogins* living as immortals in the Himālayan caves as well as the narratives of divine manifestations (*avatāra*) said to be eternally present in the world – albeit seldom visible to men – are proof of this positive approach to life and matter. Nonetheless, even the achievement of bodily incorruptibility in which one's physical frame is said to become as hard as a diamond (*vajra-kāya*), confirms the ascetic axiom according to which the ordinary body needs to be transcended. In other words, the redemption of one's bodily receptacle requires that it be transmuted from corruptible flesh into an eternal substance, the alchemical transubstantiation being thought as that which subverts the process of inevitable bodily decay and corruption/putrefaction.

The idea of the body's impurity is so pervasive that even the status of the supreme ascetic (*paramahansa*, *avadhūta*) is ambiguous. The ascetic is clearly a liminal figure, being associated at the same time with impurity and purity. He is especially impure as his body is homologized to that of a dead person, to a corpse. On the other hand, having the sight (*darśana*) of a supreme renouncer is thought to be a special grace that instantly purifies the beholder, and the touch (*sparśa*) of an ascetic is believed to grant all sorts of blessings. The sanctity of the ascetic is due to his exceptional condition, he being regarded as that extraordinary individual who has severed his identification with his flesh and has succeeded in realizing his oneness with the inner Self.

An ordinary person should never dare to touch an ascetic or holy man: he or she would certainly incur in his terrible wrath. Contact between

¹⁰ For a general introduction to these topics, see White 1996.

bodies should be avoided or reduced to a minimum, precisely because of the fear of pollution. A devotee (*bhakta*) is nonetheless allowed to ask a holy man the boon of touching his feet (*pāda*). The feet of an ascetic or a *guru* are from time immemorial an object of intense devotion and there exist countless hymns (*stotras*) that praise the holy feet: *śakti* or spiritual potency is believed to be stored in them in abundance. Like a battery, the *pādas* of the saint are thought to be the repository of divine energy. If touched without permission, it is believed that one might suffer something like an electric shock and perhaps even die. The privilege of serving the holy feet (*pāda-sevana*), of kissing, caressing, and massaging them, is one of the blessings most yearned for by all Hindus. The *pādas* of the saint are thought to be the precious storehouse of both his power and grace: throughout the centuries, the pious have resorted and continue resorting to them with full faith, in a spirit of surrender.

It should be emphasized that the Indian idea of the body is inclusive of the mind, i.e. there is no dualism of body and mind. The intellect (*buddhi*), the ego principle (*ahaṃkāra*), and the mind (*manas*) are understood to be the most refined principles (*tattva*) born out of materiality (*prakṛti*). One's thoughts and emotions are therefore reduced to subtle forms of one, indivisible materiality. The *locus classicus* of such idea is found in the old *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (chaps. 2-3), possibly to be assigned to the 5th century BCE, where we come across the formulation of the doctrine of the five sheaths or layers (*kośa*) of man. Like an onion, a human being is said to be endowed with five layers of material stuff, each outer layer acting as a body to the inner layer. Altogether, these layers are thought to envelope the Pure Spirit, the underlying *ātman*. From the grosser, outer layer to the subtler, inner layer, they are the following: the layer constituted of food (*anna-maya-kośa*); the layer constituted of the five vital breaths (*prāṇa-maya-kośa*); the layer constituted of mind together with the five senses (*indriya*) which depend upon it (*mano-maya-kośa*); the layer constituted of knowledge which comprises the intellect and is the domain of awareness (*vijñāna-maya-kośa*); and, finally, the layer constituted of joy (*ānanda-maya-kośa*), the innermost case of the body which includes ignorance (*avidyā*) and the latent impressions of past actions (*karman*).

On this basis, Vedānta theology upholds the doctrine of the three bodies: the gross body (*sthūla-śarīra*), identified with the outer *anna-maya-kośa*; the subtle body (*sūkṣma-śarīra*), made up of the *prāṇa-maya-kośa*, the *mano-maya-kośa*, and the *vijñāna-maya-kośa*; and the causal body (*kāraṇa-śarīra*), identified with the *ānanda-maya-kośa*. The *kāraṇa-*

śarīra is understood to be the cause or original source of both the *sūkṣma-śarīra* and the *sthūla-śarīra*. At the time of death, the *sthūla-śarīra* dissolves itself into the five elements of which it is made of. The *sūkṣma-śarīra*, on the other hand, is thought to survive and thanks to the powerful agency of the *kāraṇa-śarīra* finds its abode in a new embryo, thus keeping the wheel of transmigration constantly spinning.

Opposed to the domain of materiality is the spiritual essence of *ātman* which is thought to abide at the innermost core of one's being, in the cavity of the heart. The *ānanda-maya-kośa* is understood to be the closest to it. From this perspective, the body is even compared to a temple, being the abode of the immortal, incorporeal Self. As stated in one of the oldest Vedic *Upaniṣads*, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.12.1, possibly dating around the 6th century BCE:

This body, Maghavan, is mortal; it is in the grip of death. So, it is the abode of this immortal and non-bodily Self. One who has a body is in the grip of joy and sorrow, and there is no freedom from joy and sorrow for one who has a body. Joy and sorrow, however, do not affect one who has no body¹¹.

The *ātman* or Pure Subject is not to be confused with the five layers which make up the body-mind complex. The reality of *ātman-Brahman* is utterly transcendent, it can never be reduced to a mere object. It is indicated by the expression *anyad eva*, the “Wholly Other” (*Kena Upaniṣad* 1.3), the *ātman-Brahman* being beyond the domain of mind and senses. And yet this Ultimate Principle of both man and the cosmos is also immanent: it is regarded as the invisible cause of the world and of the body-mind's cognitive faculties, the underlying, mysterious power which makes all experience possible. As per the famous definition of *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 3.1:

That from which these beings are born; on which, once born, they live; and into which they pass upon death – seek to perceive That!
That is *Brahman*!¹²

11 *maghavan martyaṃ vā idaṃ śarīram ātmaṃ mṛtyunā | tad asyāmṛtasyāśarīrasyātmano 'dhiṣṭhānam | āto vai saśarīraḥ priyāpriyābhyām | na vai saśarīrasya sataḥ priyāpriyayor apahatir asti | aśarīraṃ vāva santam na priyāpriye spr̥sataḥ ||*; Olivelle 1996, pp. 174-75.

12 *yato vā imāni bhūtāni jāyante | yena jātāni jīvanti | yat-prayanatyabbhisamvīśanti | tad-vijñāśasva tad-brahmeti ||*; *ibid.*, p. 190.

To sum up, mainstream Vedāntic theology views the body-mind complex as the matrix of *saṃsāra*. The highest goal of *mokṣa* is to get rid of it once and for all, to stop being encapsulated into the heavy realm of matter and nature, into the whirlpool of painful transmigration. In order to attain freedom from rebirth (*punar-janman*), the ascetic must reject his pseudo-identity with the body and detach himself thoroughly from it.

The endurance (*tapas*) of extremes and learning to be indifferent to the pairs of opposites (*dvandva*) such as honor and dishonor, pleasure and pain, heat and cold, is a time-honored strategy which aims at weakening the ego and one's attachment to the body. For example, sitting surrounded by fire in the hot season or practicing immersion in cold water in winter, are common practices among ascetics. The adept must exercise discrimination (*viveka*) between the transient and the eternal, the ego and the Self. He must learn to look at his bodily frame as something adventitious and subject to change and decay, no more than a covering dress destined to crumble apart, and realize that the *ātman* alone, lying in his innermost core, is eternal and his true essence.

The idea is that only through detachment and knowledge (*vidyā*, *jñāna*) can one achieve freedom from the coercive force of *karman*, of actions and their consequences. If desires and attachments persist, *karman* persists, and one's transmigration is destined to continue for countless existences. The desire for life as well as the desire for death are both understood to be the fuel of *karman* and *saṃsāra*: this is why even suicide can't be regarded as a solution.

A fundamental axiom from the time of the Vedic *Upaniṣads* onwards (ca. 7th century BCE) is that human life as well as the natural world have no value in and of themselves: they are in fact evil, that which must be shunned and transcended. Life is regarded as the tragic, ever-recurring consequence of one's desires, that is, of one's ignorance concerning the Self.

Human existence is viewed positively as the most precious of all possible rebirths not in and of itself but rather as a means, a tool in order to find a way out of life. The body-mind complex acquires crucial significance only if understood as the decisive instrument to achieve *mokṣa*. The body is compared to a chariot¹³ which, if properly used and directed

13 In *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 3.3 we read: «Know the Self as a rider in a chariot, and the body, as simply the chariot. Know the intellect as the charioteer, and the mind, as simply the reins» (*ātmanam rathinam viddhi śarīraṃ ratham eva tu | buddhiṃ tu sārathim viddhi manaḥ pragraham eva ca ||*; *ibid.*, pp. 238-39).

by the intellect, can be drawn towards liberation. Therefore, human life constitutes a unique opportunity for emancipation and it must not be wasted. As the *Viveka-cūḍā-maṇi* attributed to the non-dual philosopher Śāṅkara (8th century CE) states in its third verse:

Three things are, indeed, hard to attain and due only to divine grace:
the human condition, the desire for liberation, and the association
with an eminent sage¹⁴.

To utilize the body as a tool in order to ultimately transcend it altogether is the aim of all ascetic schools. The very term *yoga*, derived from verbal root *yuj* – to yoke/join, to fasten/harness – literally means the act of yoking/fastening. Yoga is precisely a discipline or method aimed at the control/domestication of the body-mind complex. The following is the very first definition of Yoga as found in *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 6.11, a text dating to the 2nd or 1st century BCE:

When senses are firmly reined in, that is Yoga, so people think. From
distractions a man is then free, for Yoga is the coming-into-being, as
well as the ceasing-to-be¹⁵.

Going against the natural tendency to extrovert oneself through the senses, the adept is instructed to withdraw his sense-organs and retract all his faculties inwardly in order to acquire true knowledge. All Yoga practices are aimed at minimizing *karman* and purify the impure/undisciplined bodily frame. This is why a *yogin* practices bodily immobility, silence, and inner meditation in order to calm/subdue the mind, eventually emptying it of all contents.

In order to achieve a condition of perfect equanimity (*samatva*)¹⁶, the *yogin* must mould his body and mind through the practice of special postures (*āsana*), special gestures (*mudrās*) – thought to protect/seal the body – special locks or bodily contractions (*bandhas*), and special tech-

14 *durlabhaṃ trayam evaitad devānugraha-betukam | manuṣyatvaṃ mumukṣutvaṃ mahā-puruṣa-saṃśrayaḥ* ||; my translation.

15 *tām yogam iti manyante sthirām indriya-dhāraṇām | apramattas tadā bhavati yogo hi prabhavāpyayau* ||; Olivelle 1996, p. 246.

16 As *Bhagavad-gītā* 2.48d solemnly states: «Yoga is equanimity» (*samatvaṃ yoga ucyate* ||).

niques of breath-control (*prāṇāyāma*). Breath-control, characterized by the phases of inhalation (*pūraka*), retention (*kumbhaka*), and exhalation (*recaka*), is particularly important: breath (*prāṇa*) is understood as the invisible *trait d'union* between body and mind. The techniques of patterned breathing are used to control the physiological functions and achieve the progressive purification of the body-mind complex.

The mystical physiology of Haṭha Yoga – the Yoga of violent exertion – offers an elaborate description of man's subtle body characterized by the six *cakras*, psycho-energetic wheels or centers thought as the seat of cosmic, divine energy. The *cakras* are situated along the spine – assimilated to the mythical mount Meru, the *axis mundi* – and are the special abode of Śakti, the divine power. There is also a seventh *cakra*, the *sahasrāra-cakra* (lit. “thousand-spoked wheel”), said to be situated above the head and recognized as the seat of the supreme god Śiva.

The *cakras*, from the lowest to the highest, represent different stages in the ascent of the goddess Kuṇḍalinī (lit. “the coiled one”) which is none other than Śakti. Kuṇḍalinī resides dormant in the *mūlādhāra-cakra* at the basis of the spine, winded up in her three and a half coils as a snake, with the head obstructing the door of Brahmā (*brahma-dvāra*), the opening of the *suṣumnā* central conduit (*nāḍī*). Kuṇḍalinī has both harmful and beneficial aspects: if uncontrolled she may pour out poison representing her latent, profound energy, whereas when properly raised she is believed to be entirely beneficial and to confer bliss.

When the *yogin* succeeds in awakening her through special techniques, Kuṇḍalinī is thought to start moving upwards along the *suṣumnā* channel which runs along the spine: one after the other, she must pierce all the *cakras* finally reaching the highest *sahasrāra-cakra* which represents the Absolute beyond time and space. Here Kuṇḍalinī unites herself with lord Śiva and through such union the *yogin* is believed to reach ultimate, blissful realization. In ascending order, the *cakras* are the following: 1) *mūlādhāra-cakra* (lit. “the root-support center”), situated at the basis of the spine, in the space between the genitals and the anus, and symbolically described as a red four-petal lotus; 2) *svādhīṣṭhāna-cakra* (lit. “own-base center”), situated at the basis of the male genital organ and represented as a vermilion six-petal lotus; 3) *maṇipūra-cakra* (lit. “center of the jeweled city”), situated in the lumbar region at the navel, described as a blue or golden ten-petal lotus; 4) *anāhata-cakra* (lit. “center of the uncaused sound”), located in the region of the heart and thought of as a vermilion twelve-petal lotus; 5) *viśuddha-cakra* (lit. “perfectly pure center”),

situated in the region of the throat and symbolized by a grey or golden sixteen-petal lotus; 6) *ājñā-cakra* (lit. “center of unlimited power or command”), situated between the eye-brows where the mystical third eye is said to abide, described as a white two-petal lotus; 7) *sahasrāra-cakra*, situated above the head and described as a thousand-petal lotus turned upside down and having no color, being beyond the realm of forms and colors.

It should be pointed out that if in classical Yoga and mainstream renunciatory schools the path leading towards enlightenment is characterized by radical detachment and sensory deprivation, in Haṭha Yoga and esoteric Tantric circles the goal of *mokṣa* is aimed at through the utilization of the powerful resources of desire (*kāma*), i.e. through the mobilization of one’s senses and emotions. Herein, a crucial role is played by sexual union (*maithuna*) and a variety of erotico-mystical practices such as the *khecari-mudrā*, the *yoni-mudrā*, and the *vajrolī-mudrā*, thought to be especially important in helping Kuṇḍalinī’s ascent towards the *sahasrāra-cakra*. The aspirant is instructed to preserve his semen (*bindu*) even when practicing sexual intercourse. The sexual fluids are regarded as fuel of yogic transformation, in a spiritual as well as in a material sense. By manipulating and refining these raw fluids, the alchemist-yogin is thought to be able to transmute his impure physical frame into a glorious body of immortality.

As mentioned, the status of *yogīs* and renunciators is a liminal one. The holy man is thought to have already died, and at the time of renunciation he must relinquish all his ritual implements and worldly ties: his name, his family, his caste, all his properties. Remarkably, many *yogīs* and *saṃnyāsins* are honored as *jīvanmuktas*, that is, liberated while still living.

Although ascetics vow to live in solitude and utter detachment, totally indifferent to the world, their exceptional, otherworldly status requires that it be socially recognizable. Paradoxical though it may seem, the subjectivity and corporeality of the ascetic is efficaciously set on display through a variety of ways.

The typical emblems (*mātrās*) of a *saṃnyāsina* are the garment, the loin-cloth, the waistband, the water pot, the begging bowl, and the staff¹⁷. These articles are not all alike but depend upon the renouncer’s sectarian affil-

17 On the emblems of renunciators, see Olivelle 1986-87; Olivelle 1995, pp. 49-59.

iation and his higher or lower level in the hierarchy of *saṃnyāsins*. For instance, the color and also the type of garment vary depending upon the particular sect (*śaiva*, *vaiṣṇava*, *śākta*) to which the renouncer belongs, the staff may be a triple staff or a single staff made of different kinds of wood, etc. The highest a *saṃnyāsīn* is in the hierarchy of renouncers – depending upon his detachment – the less articles he is expected to wear and carry: thus the *paramahansa* relinquishes the staff, and radical ascetics such as *avadhūtas* have no emblems and wander about either clad in rags or stark naked. With reference to bodily insignia, it should be noted that the most significant one for *saṃnyāsins* is to be shave-headed, while forest hermits and extreme, antinomian ascetics may exhibit long nails and long hair.¹⁸

The renouncer's dress, often an ochre robe, is his veritable uniform acting as the concrete symbol which allows an immediate social recognition. No less significant are the "clothes" of forest hermits and other wandering ascetics, which are simply made of bark tree or animal skins. Symbolically, even more powerful than the ascetics' garment is the nakedness of radical adepts. These latter ones are *digambara*, lit. "clad in space", and their nudity is precisely their special "uniform", aiming at signaling their *vairāgya* and transcendence of rationality and of all ethical and social norms.¹⁹ Indeed, these ascetics typically court dishonor, behave like fools, madmen or demons, and imitate the life-style of animals.

Being naked or *jāta-rūpa-dhara*, i.e. bearing the form one had at birth, is a powerful way to highlight one's return to the infant state and to an "animal body", whose abode is in the wilderness and not in the village or any urban context. In the ascetic's rejection of fire – at the time of death his body is eventually buried, never cremated – and in his adoption of an animal lifestyle, we witness an anti-civilization ideology aiming at recovering an utopian, pre-cultural, i.e. natural innocence as a pathway to *mokṣa*. As one reads in *Baudhāyana-dharma-sūtra* 3.2.19, a text dating around the 1st century BCE:

To move around with animals, to dwell with them alone, and to sustain oneself just like them – that is the visible token of heaven²⁰.

18 On the ascetics' hair, see Olivelle 1998.

19 On the garments as well as the nakedness of ascetics as identity markers, see Squarcini 2009.

20 *mrgaiḥ saha pariṣpandaḥ saṃvāsas tebhīr eva ca | tair eva sadṛṣī vṛttīḥ pratyakṣaṃ svarga-lakṣaṇam ||*; Olivelle 1999, p. 213.

The ascetic is said to behave like a bee, a cow, a python or a bird – especially because of the ways in which he begs/eats his food – and he may even indulge in walking on his fours, imitating dogs and other beasts. In literature, he is especially compared with the deer (*mṛga*) and said to roam about like a deer (*mṛga-cārin*). Whereas common Hindus are obsessed with purity and cleanliness, ablutions and baths being mandatory ritual practices, ascetics who have adopted the animal style don't care to bathe or clean themselves. Their bodies are often dirty and loathsome and their sight as well as odor are both fearful and repulsive²¹!

The exhibition of the body is made even more spectacular by emphasizing certain characteristic signs which are thought to be the prerogative of extraordinary beings. The Buddhist tradition lists the thirty-two bodily signs of a great man (*mahā-puruṣa lakṣaṇāni*)²², and in the Hindu tradition we find similar or even identical signs attributed to saintly figures. Among the bodily traits exhibited by *yogīs* and divine incarnations (*avatāras*) we find the following: moles of unusual dimensions and shapes (for instance, cross-shaped, as in the iconography of the god Viṣṇu); having very long arms, to the extent that standing straight one's fingers stretch down to the knees; a luminous, radiant body, that is, a special lustre of the face and limbs; piercing eyes, i.e. a powerful yogic glance (*yoga-drṣṭi*) which may induce ecstasy and to which a transformative force is attributed. These and other bodily signs – far from being perceived as part and parcel of an impure bodily receptacle – function as indicators of the super-human, divine stature of the individual who can exhibit them. The whole persona of the *mahā-puruṣa* – his movements, his touch, his silence as well as his utterances – conveys an immediate experience of the sacred²³.

The representation of the ascetic's otherworldly status is effectively portrayed by a series of postures (*āsanas*) and gestures (*mudrās*) which function as symbolic codes. The Buddha himself is said to have taught to his disciples the four fundamental postures: how one should walk, how one should stand, how one should sit, and how one should lie down²⁴. Particular postures and gestures have been celebrated in countless icono-

21 On the imitation of animals by ascetics, see Olivelle 2008, pp. 91-100.

22 See the classic study of Burnouf 1989 (1852).

23 A modern saint who bore these peculiar bodily signs was Shirdi Sāi Bābā; see Rigopoulos 2012.

24 See *Dīgha Nikāya* 22; *Majjhima Nikāya* 10.

graphic representations throughout the centuries, acting as powerful indicators of transcendence. Sculptured in temples, depicted in paintings, described in the religious literature and enacted by masses of ascetics throughout the subcontinent across space and time, these *āsanas* and *mudrās* present the idealized model of the holy man.

The most popular *āsana* in which the Buddha and countless *yogīs* are represented is the lotus posture (*padmāsana*), i.e. the seated, meditative position. In all the religious traditions of India, this is the emblem of enlightenment, of *nirvāna* or yogic absorbed concentration (*samādhi*, the acme of Yoga). Keeping one's back and neck strait, the adept must place his right foot on the left thigh and his left foot on the right thigh, soles up, with his hands resting on his lap or knees. With regard to the many existing *mudrās*, mention should here be made of at least two of them, which often appear together in both Hindu and Buddhist iconography: the *abhaya* and *varada mudrās*, the gestures bestowing fearlessness and grace respectively. In the *abhaya-mudrā*, inspiring confidence and trust, the open palm of the right hand is placed upwards towards the devotee; in the *varada-mudrā*, promising all sorts of boons, the same open palm is placed downwards, as in the act of giving²⁵.

But perhaps the most significant markers of an ascetic's identity are the aesthetic interventions on the body, what the Italian anthropologist Francesco Remotti has aptly called anthropo-poietic techniques, i.e. peculiar ways of molding/constructing humanity²⁶. I may here recall the following: wrestling (*malla-yuddha*), which is very popular as a means to fortify the body²⁷; fasting (*upavāsa*), which is employed as a form of *tapas* and as a way to purify the body; covering oneself with ashes (*bhasman*) usually made of cow-dung (*go-maya*) or taken from crematory grounds (*śmaśāna*), primarily for the sake of purification (*śuddhi*); pasting on the forehead as well as other parts of one's body a variety of sectarian marks (*tilaka*, *punḍra*) indicating the affiliation to a particular order (indeed, one must always bear in mind the tension and rivalry between competing ascetic groups); tattooing or branding all over one's body special auspicious symbols – such as the *svastika* and the *om* – as well as the name of one's chosen deity (*iṣṭa-devatā*);

25 On *mudrās*, see Saunders 1960.

26 Remotti 2013, pp. 78-150.

27 On asceticism and wrestling, see Alter 1992.

piercing one's ears, nose, lips and tongue in order to insert rings and other objects.

Less common but of course more spectacular – supposedly demonstrating one's devotion as well as one's detachment from the body – are fakiric exploits such as spending long periods inverted, i.e. upside-down or simply standing on two or one leg; holding one's arm up in the air until it becomes stiff and withered and forever after remains in that position; clenching one's fist and holding it tight until one's fingernails grow through the palm of the hand; amputating one or more limbs of the body, such as an arm or a leg²⁸.

The *mise en scène* of the ascetic's identity reaches its climax with the manifestation of his supposed supernatural powers (*siddhis*, *vibhūtis*). It is an uncontested fact that the description and performance of a variety of *siddhis* has a time-honored place in both Indian philosophical literature – the third section (*vibhūti-pāda*) of the classic *Yoga-sūtras* of Patañjali (possibly dating around the 5th century CE) is entirely dedicated to the subject – and Indian popular folklore. The supernatural power is also known as *aiśvarya*, sovereignty, and it refers to one's perfect control over the elements (*bhūta*). If in *Yoga-sūtra* 4.1 it is said that *siddhis* may exceptionally be possessed at birth (in the case of extraordinary individuals) and also achieved through the use of herbs and incantations, it must be emphasized that the royal path leading to the attainment of any power is said to be the application of mental concentration (*saṃyama*) with respect to the gross (*sthūla*) and subtle (*sūkṣma*) forms of the elements, their nature (*sva-rūpa*), their quality (*guṇa*), and their purposefulness (*arthavattva*).

Exercising *saṃyama*²⁹ or perfect concentration is thought to magically assure all kinds of supernatural effects: from reading a person's mind to bilocation, from materializing/dematerializing objects to assuming any form at will, from curing all sorts of illnesses – or transferring the illness upon oneself – to resurrecting from the dead (men as well as animals). The specific power is thought to depend upon the particular object upon which concentration is exercised. The *saṃyama* on an elephant's strength

28 For a general presentation of Hindu ascetic practices, see Bouez 1992; Gross 1992; Lamb 2013.

29 A term which in Patañjali's Yoga indicates the three highest "limbs" (*aṅgas*) of the eightfold path: fixity (*dhāraṇā*), meditation/contemplation (*dhyāna*), and absorbed concentration (*samādhi*).

is said to transfer the animal's quality to the *yogin*, whereas the *saṃyama* on one's *karman* is thought to give access to the knowledge of one's past lives. *Yogīs* are believed to be the masters of their bodies and minds as well as the masters of the forces of nature. People venerate and at the same time fear them: their curses, like their blessings, are thought to determine one's destiny.

Examples of stunning yogic performances are the ones reported in the hagiographies of the popular saint Shirdi Sāi Bābā (d. 1918). We are told that he used to sever his body at will, scattering his limbs all over the place (a practice called *khaṇḍa-yoga*). It is also reported that he used to clean his intestines by bringing them out through the mouth³⁰; he would then wash them and hang them up on a tree to dry³¹. In 1886, Shirdi Sāi Bābā is also credited with temporary death, i.e. to have voluntarily gone into a 72 hours *samādhi*, perhaps in order to rid himself of an acute asthmatic attack. We read:

Baba had [...] told everyone, «For three days from now onwards, I shall go into *samadhi*. Do not try to rouse me». [...] And, as in a sudden fainting fit, his body fell down, motionless. [...] No breathing, no pulse – life seemed to have abandoned the body. To the people, it appeared a terrible state; but to Sai, it was a state of greatest happiness. Thereafter, Mhalsapati³², who was always alert in his mind, kept guard over Baba, day and night, sitting up wide awake, all the time. [...] The whole village gathered there to see Baba in the state of *samadhi* [...] his breathing ceased; all the bodily organs became still, without any trace of activity and the glow of life over it dimmed, too! The period of three days passed. Then, early morning, at three o'clock, they saw signs of life returning. Gradually, consciousness returned; the twisting and turning of the body began; breathing too resumed and the stomach could be seen heaving up and down. The face began to look pleased and happy, the eyes opened. The motionless state had disappeared and signs of life, of waking up, appeared³³.

30 The accustomed way of practicing *dhauti* or cleansing is through a long piece of cloth which is to be swallowed and left for some time in the stomach; see *Haṭha-yoga-pradīpikā* 2.24-25, where *dhauti* is said to cure various ailments among which is asthma.

31 For an analysis of these episodes, see Rigopoulos 2012.

32 The keeper of the local Khaṇḍobā temple and one of the first devotees of the saint. It was he who first called him Sāi.

33 Dabholkar 1999, pp. 727-29.

In Yoga, the eight traditional *siddhis* are the following: the power to reduce one's size to that of an atom (*aṇiman*); the power to make one's body so light that it can levitate (*laghiman*); the power to increase one's size at will (*mahiman*); the power to physically reach/obtain any object in the universe, as for instance touching the moon with one's fingertips (*prāpti*); irresistible will, by which one is able to go through solid earth (*prākāmya*); the control over the elements (*bhūtas*) and their products, never being swayed by anyone or anything (*vāśitva*); the mastery over the entire cosmos, i.e. the power to control the manifestation, preservation, and disappearance of all elements making one similar to the triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva (*īśitṛtva*); the power of resolution, through which the elements can be made to stay as desired (*yatra-kāmāvasāyitva*)³⁴.

Seen with Western, stereotyped eyes, one is immediately reminded of the public exhibitions of jugglers and fakirs described in many Orientalist novels and action adventures – as in the popular books of Emilio Salgari (1862-1911), whose adventures were mandatory reading for generations of Italian youth eager for the exotic –³⁵ as well as in the ethnographic accounts and travel books of the 19th and 20th centuries³⁶. In such portrayals, the Indian ascetic is reduced to a caricature of himself, his appalling feats being presented as something like circus attractions. The images and narratives which come to mind are those of the fakir lying on a bed of nails, walking on burning coals, levitating in mid-air, or allowing himself to be buried alive only to be exhumed several days later in a comatose state.

To be sure, we are faced with a vast repertory of *signa* and *portenta*, of apparently inexplicable marvels (*camatkāra*). It should be noted that the *yogin* – be he a genuine one or not – is also understood to be a trickster, one who plays tricks³⁷. Symptomatically, among the many meanings of

34 See Vyāsa's commentary (*bhāṣya*) to *Yoga-sūtra* 3.45. On Yoga powers, see Jacobsen 2012.

35 See Salgari's following books: *I misteri della Jungla Nera* (1895), *Il capitano della Djumna* (1897), *La montagna di luce* (1902), *Le due Tigri* (1904), *Alla conquista di un impero* (1907), *Il bramino dell'Assam* (1911), *La caduta di un impero* (1911), *La rivincita di Yanez* (1913); on Salgari and India, see Pozzo 2012, pp. 97-101.

36 See for instance the works of Louis Jacolliot (1837-1890) and in particular his *Voyage au pays des fakirs charmeurs* of 1883. See also the travel accounts of Louis Rousselet (1845-1929); Rousselet 1875, chaps. 2, 4, 8, 13.

37 See Siegel 1991.

the term *yoga* one finds “supernatural means”, “charm”, “magical art”, “trick”, “stratagem”, “fraud” and “deceit”³⁸. Distinguishing between a true *siddhi* and a mere trick is not deemed to be a crucial issue. In fact, an ascetic may exhibit both: no need is felt to postulate a clear-and-cut divide between the two. Many Tantric *yogīs* are weird, sinister figures, sometimes thought to be altogether mad, and people accept the idea that in their antinomian freedom they may exhibit both real, extraordinary powers as well as cunning tricks³⁹.

It must be emphasized that in the course of Indian history we witness the emergence of a rich variety of ascetic movements and figures. These differ substantially both from the ideal-type portrayed in Brāhmaṇical sources on renunciation as well as from our stereotyped images on Indian ascetics and holy men, strongly influenced by so-called neo-Hinduism – inspired by such seminal figures as Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) and Svāmin Vivekānanda (1863-1902) – and 19th century European spirituality⁴⁰.

Starting from around the 8th century CE, Brāhmaṇical ascetic groups evolved into monastic institutions (*maṭhas*)⁴¹ led by abbots (*mahants*) with powerful social, economic, and political roles within society at large. Such momentous development is traditionally ascribed to the great South Indian theologian Śāṅkara, who is credited with the founding of the Daśanāmī *saṃnyāsīs*, even today one of the most prestigious orders of renouncers⁴².

By more or less the same time, and especially in the mediaeval period, we witness the formation across the subcontinent of militant ascetic orders, that is, of mercenary, fighting ascetics armed by various guilds to protect trade and commerce. These groups were later to develop into veritable armies at the service of *mahā-rājas* and regional states: the Nāgā and Gosain armies are cases in point. By the late 18th century, we find ascetic brotherhoods directly engaged in banking and trading activities, becoming the dominant money-lenders and property-owners in vast areas of the country and important towns such as Benares, Allahabad, Ujjain,

38 Monier – Williams 1988³ (1899), p. 856.

39 On sinister *yogīs*, see White 2009. On the ascetic’s holy madness, see Feuerstein 1992.

40 On the hermeneutic circle between India and Europe, see Halbfass 1988, pp. 197-246.

41 On Hindu monasteries, see Malinar 2013.

42 On the organization, practices, and history of the Daśanāmī *saṃnyāsīs*, see Clark 2006.

Nagpur, Hyderabad and Pune. In the 19th and 20th centuries, various renouncers came to exercise dominant roles not only in business but also in politics, becoming the ideologues and leaders of Brāhmaṇical, right-winged parties⁴³. And the political involvement of charismatic *gurus* and ascetics, both at regional and national levels, continues to this very day⁴⁴.

In conclusion, no transcending of the body-mind complex is possible without the use/exploitation of the body-mind complex itself: one can aim at separating himself from it only *through* it. Even the achievement of an immortal body and the performance of the most extraordinary feats presupposes that one's impure, carnal body has been fully transmuted/transcended. Miracles and the display of *siddhis* are meant to demonstrate the attainment of a trans-human, divine plane, beyond the limitations of the physical plane. In the *Yoga-sūtras* themselves the striving towards the cessation of the body-mind complex is linked to the exaltation of its potential through one-pointed concentration and the cultivation of *siddhis*. Indeed, the achievement of perfect concentration (*saṃyama*) is understood to be indispensable in order to realize the supreme goal, i.e. the cessation of the modifications/fluctuations of the mind (*citta-vṛtti-nirodha*) as per the definition of Yoga given in *Yoga-sūtra* 1.2⁴⁵.

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43 The case of Svāmin Karpātrī (1905-1980), who in 1948 founded the *Ram Rajya Parishad*, is exemplary in this regard.

44 On these significant characteristics, see Clark 2006, pp. 227-70. On warrior ascetics, see Pinch 2006.

45 Remarkably, Vyāsa in his commentary to *Yoga-sūtra* 1.1 defines Yoga as *saṃādhi*.

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