

PRAKĀŚA AND VIMARŚA

The Luminous Polarity of Kashmir Shaivism and the Supernal Structure of the Tree

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Abstract

The non-dual Trika tradition of Kashmir Shaivism, as systematized by Abhinavagupta and Kshemaraja, presents a cosmology that parallels the supernal structure of the Tree at several precise points. Its supreme principle, Paramaśiva, is one consciousness bearing two inseparable aspects: Prakāśa, the light by which consciousness shines and reveals, and Vimarśa, the reflexive self-awareness by which consciousness knows itself as shining. These are figured as Śiva and Śakti — the static and the dynamic, the illumination and its luminosity — two that are in reality one. From this luminous polarity the thirty-six tattvas descend in a graded series from the pure principles through the pure-impure to the gross elements, an emanation of consciousness into matter. This paper draws three parallels with the Catharturgy Corpus, marks one striking convergence, and bounds the comparison honestly. The parallels are structural: the active-and-reflexive polarity at the summit answering to the supernal poles; the graded pure-to-gross descent answering to the supernal-and-lower structure; and the doctrine that sound is the very body of Śakti, a tonal mysticism answering to the tonal layer of the Cathartes Scale and the letters of the CEQ. The convergence is more particular and more remarkable: a Kashmiri rendering of the first emanative move as the projection of Śiva from a dimensionless point to a line — from zero to one — which is almost exactly the zero-and-one, Wuji-and-Taiji structure the Corpus places at the center of the Kether glyph. The bound is that Kashmir Shaivism is a non-dual cosmology of consciousness, in which the ultimate is awareness itself, and this sits differently from the kenotic and personal-trinitarian theism of the Corpus. The parallel is offered as a witness to the structure, not as a shared metaphysic.

I. Prakāśa and Vimarśa: The Luminous Polarity

At the summit of the Kashmiri system stands Paramaśiva, the supreme consciousness, which is not a bare unity but a unity bearing two aspects inseparably. The first is Prakāśa — illumination, the light by which consciousness shines and by which all things are revealed; consciousness as the self-luminous ground of all appearing. The second is Vimarśa — reflexivity, the self-awareness by which consciousness knows itself as shining, the turning of the light upon itself so that it is not

merely light but light aware of being light. Prakāśa without Vimarśa would be an illumination that revealed everything but knew nothing of itself; the two together are consciousness fully alive, shining and knowing that it shines.

These two aspects are figured as Śiva and Śakti. Śiva is Prakāśa, the light; Śakti is Vimarśa, the luminosity, the awareness, the dynamic power. The tradition is emphatic that they are inseparable: Śiva without Śakti is said to be a lifeless corpse, for it is Śakti that is the very life and dynamism of consciousness; and yet, though they may sound like two, they are in reality one — one consciousness under its luminous and its self-aware aspects. Śiva is static and Śakti is dynamic; Śiva is the light and Śakti is its shining; and their union, named Aham, the primordial 'I', is the fullness of consciousness from which the universe is freely manifested through Svatantrya, the absolute sovereign freedom of consciousness to express itself as the many while remaining one.

The parallel with the supernal structure of the Tree is immediate. The Corpus places at the summit a luminous polarity — the active and the receptive, the expressive and the comprehending, figured in the oscillation of light from which the supernal glyph is drawn. Prakāśa and Vimarśa answer to this: an active, outflowing, illuminating principle and a reflexive, self-aware principle, the two inseparable and in reality one, standing together at the head of the emanation. The Kashmiri Śiva-Śakti polarity is not identical to the supernal poles of the Tree — the traditions differ in what they take the ultimate to be — but the structural shape is the same: a single source bearing a twofold luminous character, active and reflexive, from which all that follows proceeds.

II. The Point and the Line: Zero Becoming One

Among the Kashmiri renderings of the first emanative move there is one that converges so closely with a structure the Corpus has independently developed that it deserves to be set out on its own. In this rendering, Śiva — the first tattva, pure Prakāśa — is represented as a dot, a point of zero dimension. The zero-dimensional point is described as nothing and as infinity at once: a singularity of infinite potential from which everything is to emerge, but which, being dimensionless, cannot yet be realized or seen. For it to be realized, it must project itself — from zero dimension to one, from a point to a line. And in that projection Śakti comes into being: the one end of the line is Śiva, the other end is Śakti, and the line between them is the first determination, the first stretching-forth of the dimensionless point into something that can be known.

This is, almost exactly, the structure the Corpus places at the center of the Kether glyph. There the limitless ground is the zero — the Wuji, the unbounded, the no-thing that is also infinite potential — and the first point is the one, the Taiji, the first determination arising within the limitless. The Kashmiri figure says the same in the idiom of dimension: the dimensionless point that is nothing-and-infinity projects itself into the line, zero into one, and the polarity of Śiva and Śakti is the two ends of that first stretching-forth. That two traditions with no historical contact — the Wuji-Taiji cosmology behind the Kether glyph and the Śiva-Śakti cosmology of Kashmir — should both

render the first emanative move as the passage from a dimensionless point of infinite potential to a first determination, from zero to one, is a convergence of a precise and unusual kind. It is not a borrowing; it is two independent arrivals at the same first move. And it lends weight to the Corpus's placement of the zero-and-one at the very center of its supreme glyph, as the hinge between the limitless and all that is determined.

III. The Thirty-Six Tattvas: The Graded Descent

From the luminous polarity the Kashmiri cosmology descends through thirty-six tattvas, the graded principles of manifestation, in a series the tradition divides into three broad stages. At the summit are the five pure tattvas, the Śuddha tattvas — Śiva, Śakti, Sadāśiva, Īśvara, and Śuddhavidyā — embodying pure consciousness and its first internal articulations, where the unity of consciousness still governs and the distinction of subject and object has not yet hardened. Below these are the pure-impure tattvas, the Śuddhāśuddha, which introduce Māyā and her five sheaths, the kañcukas, and Kāla, time — the principles that veil the infinite consciousness and bring forth the limited subject, the puruṣa, with its sense of 'I' and 'mine' set against the world. Below these again are the impure or gross tattvas, descending through mind, the senses, and the subtle elements to the five gross elements — earth, water, fire, air, and ether — in which consciousness has descended fully into matter.

The grading parallels the structure the Corpus renders in the Tree. The pure tattvas, where the unity of consciousness still governs and subject and object are not yet divided, answer to the supernal triad above the Abyss, where the polarity has not yet broken into the manifold of the lower world. The pure-impure tattvas, where Māyā and time introduce limitation and the divided self, answer to the descent across the Abyss into the conditions of finite selfhood. And the gross tattvas, descending into the elements and the body, answer to the lower spheres and the embodied ground where the emanation comes to rest in matter. In both systems the descent is graded rather than abrupt — a passage by degrees from an undivided luminous source, through the introduction of limitation and selfhood, into the differentiated and embodied world — and in both the lowest reach is the gross elements and the body, the furthest extension of the source into form.

IV. Sound as the Body of Śakti: The Tonal Dimension

There is a further parallel that bears specifically on the Cathartes Scale and the Christian English Qabalah, for the Kashmiri system is, like the Corpus, a cosmology in which sound and letter are woven into the structure of manifestation rather than added to it afterward. The tradition holds that mantra is Śakti-svarūpa, the very body of Śakti: sound is not a mere sign pointing to the infinite but a bridge from finite cognition to the infinite ground, Śakti herself in audible form. This is systematized in the doctrine of the sad-adhvan, the sixfold path of manifestation, which presents two interlocking triads — a phonematic path of letters, mantras, and words, and an objective path of cosmic time-energies, the tattvas, and the worlds — so that consciousness articulates itself simultaneously as word and as world. In this scheme the vowels are aligned with Śiva and the consonants with Śakti, and the whole of manifestation is held to be implicit in the

alphabet, the māṭṛkā, the ‘little mother’ of sound from which the worlds and the tattvas unfold.

The Corpus develops its own tonal mysticism in the Cathartes Scale, where each sphere is at once a color and a musical note, and in the Christian English Qabalah, where the letters of the English alphabet are the paths of the Tree and the names of the spheres are read for their structure. The Kashmiri doctrine that sound is the body of Śakti, that the alphabet is the matrix of manifestation, and that the phonematic and the objective unfold together as word and world, is a close structural cousin to this: in both, the cosmos is not only seen as a structure of light and color but heard as a structure of sound, and the letters are not arbitrary but are the very articulations of the source. The Kashmiri system grounds this in Śakti and the Sanskrit māṭṛkā; the Corpus grounds it in the Cathartes Scale and the English letters; but the conviction that word and world are one articulation, sounded as well as seen, is shared.

V. The Bound of the Parallel

The honesty of the comparison requires marking where it ends. Kashmir Shaivism is a non-dual cosmology of consciousness: its ultimate, Paramaśiva, is awareness itself, and the universe is the real but non-different display of that one consciousness, like a city reflected in a mirror that appears without altering or limiting the mirror. Prakāśa and Vimarśa are aspects of consciousness; Śiva and Śakti are consciousness in its static and dynamic modes; the descent of the tattvas is the descent of consciousness into the appearance of matter, from which the goal is recognition, pratyabhijñā, the consciousness recognizing itself. This is a metaphysic of consciousness as the absolute, and it differs from the metaphysic of the Catharturgy Corpus, whose ultimate is the personal and trinitarian God of kenotic self-limitation, whose supernal poles are the Persons of a Trinity rather than the static and dynamic aspects of an impersonal awareness, and whose descent is an emanation grounded in a free divine self-giving rather than the self-display of consciousness. The two cosmologies are not the same teaching, and the parallel must not be pressed into an identity of doctrine.

What remains, within that bound, is a genuine structural parallel and one precise convergence. The luminous polarity of Prakāśa and Vimarśa answers to the supernal poles; the graded descent of the thirty-six tattvas answers to the supernal-and-lower structure; the doctrine of sound as the body of Śakti answers to the tonal layer of the Scale and the letters of the CEQ; and the projection of Śiva from the dimensionless point to the line, zero to one, converges almost exactly with the Wuji-and-Taiji at the center of the Kether glyph. These are offered as they stand — as the witness of an independent and sophisticated non-dual tradition to the emanative structure the Corpus takes as fundamental, bounded by the real difference in what each tradition holds the ultimate to be.

VI. Conclusion

Kashmir Shaivism renders, in the idiom of consciousness and its self-luminous power, a structure that the Catharturgy Corpus renders in the idiom of the Tree and the kenotic God. At the summit,

one consciousness bearing the inseparable aspects of light and self-awareness, Śiva and Śakti, Prakāśa and Vimarśa — a luminous polarity answering to the supernal poles. Below, the graded descent of the thirty-six tattvas from the pure through the pure-impure to the gross, answering to the supernal-and-lower structure. Throughout, sound as the very body of Śakti, the alphabet as the matrix of manifestation, answering to the tonal and lettered architecture of the Scale and the CEQ. And at the first move, the projection of the dimensionless point into the line, zero into one, converging with remarkable precision upon the Wuji-and-Taiji the Corpus places at the heart of the Kether glyph. Bounded honestly by the difference between a non-dual cosmology of consciousness and a kenotic trinitarian theism, the parallel stands as a witness — one more independent tradition arriving, by its own path, at the emanative structure the Corpus takes as fundamental.

References

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On the phonematic cosmology: mantra as Śakti-svarūpa; the mātṛkā; vowels as Śiva and consonants as Śakti.

On the point-to-line figure: Śiva as the zero-dimensional point of infinite potential projecting to the line, with Śiva and Śakti as its two ends.

Etter, Christopher E. ‘Wuji, Taiji, and the Limitless Ground,’ ‘The Cathartes Scale,’ and ‘The Christian English Qabalah.’ *Catharturgy Corpus*, 2026.