

STARTING BEFORE THE BEGINNING

"... *uta tvah paśyan na dadarśa vācam uta tvah srnvan na srnoty enam.*" *And many a one who sees has not seen speech and many a one who hears does not hear it.* — Rigveda 10,71,4

"*If you cannot picture God in a way that strengthens you, you need to read more of my poems.*"
— Mirabai (c. 1498—c. 1546)

"*All the three worlds would become engulfed in blinding darkness if the light called 'word' did not shine throughout creation.*"
— Dandin, *Kāvyādarśa* (Pariccheda 1.4) (earliest known text on Sanskrit poetics)

To startle is to start. To be struck. Shaken. To stir. To word. To touch upon. To hurt. To treat. To entreat. And each word is startling, in that it *is*, and in that it apparently makes sense. And making sense starts and starts again ... and so sense suffers, as it becomes over and over and over again, as it can't ever get itself over with.

The original startling event is, of course, existence itself. Perhaps cosmologists would be the first to attest that the observable world could not have come from absolutely nothing. There were prefatory conditions, were there not? Such conjectural conditions are considered undemonstrable and typically lie outside of conventional scientific inquiry (as does unconventional prosody.)

I've been writing about prosody for decades. At one point, well into my story of prosody, I felt that I needed to stop, go back, and start from the beginning. I quickly realized that prosody itself doesn't start from the beginning. It starts before the beginning ... even in the unbegun. What is most startling about prosody is its originative role in the scheme of things. It is constitutive of its own initial conditions, and these conditions and cosmogenesis are one and the same process. More specifically, as prosody can only be known experientially, this writing will present a practicing of prosody — as distinct from (though inclusive of) an understanding and history of prosody.

And this startling, creational nature of prosody can indeed be practiced.

How to credibly start the story before the beginning, in prosody's cosmogonic role? I began to write a *tantra* for the practice of listening back before observable phenomena, to prosody's constitutive role in creation's initial conditions. Although "tantra" is a troubled term, it is its equivocal and controversial nature itself that I find accommodating. Tantra is a syncretic, exegetical form of theory, theology, soteriology, ascetic instruction and bodily practices rolled into one; it struck me as the *only* sort of writing that could accept the experience I needed to

undergo. I was also well aware that many of the texts I'd turn to in order to tell this beginningless story would be tantric, and that I would be formally influenced —even liberated — accordingly.

Through tantra it can be asked: is there a sacrifice poets are no longer performing that is crucial for maintaining the intricate web of being, and the wellbeing of the interrelationship between being and not-being?

SELF-OCCURRING WORDS

The impossibility of arriving at a starting point for a writing that must start before our beginning was solved when I recently discovered that not only prosodic patterning (proleptic phoneme-potencies, seed-sounds, meters, incantatory cadence-templates, mantras, unmanifest speech) but poets themselves were indeed the "non-existence" that preceded creation — even more startling! The 6th book of the *Satapatha Brahmana* (an Iron Age Vedic commentary) opens with this seemingly implausible claim:

"... in the beginning there was here the non-existent. As to this they say, 'What was that non-existent?' The poets (rishis), assuredly, it is they that were the non-existent. As to this they say, 'Who were those poets?' The poets, doubtless, were the breaths: inasmuch as before this universe, they, desiring it, wore themselves out with toil and austerity (tapas: hardships, devotions, meditations, mortifications, acts of compassion; to heat up, to incubate, to burn away impurities), therefore they are called poets."

Who can fully fathom what a poet is? Perhaps there is a particular fundament per poet. Perhaps the whole point is that poets are those who exist without inferences. How do words arise? With what do we understand? These aren't rhetorical questions, just as this writing is not punditry but support for practice — a practice of hearing-before-the-beginning — and an exacting empirical introspection into that which introspects and the concomitant terms for understanding the introspective process. The *Satapatha Brahmana* underscores the word *tapas*. Just as poetic *tapas* were prerequisite for creation itself, they are requisite for realizing our individualized creativities in their constitutive relationships with phenomena.

And, taking the Vedas as root texts and portal to prehistory and the primordial, it's crucial to understand the way in which the Vedic poets were not "original." The Vedas as a whole (the *Samhitas*, *Upanishads*, *Brahmanas* and *Aranyakas*) are defined as *śruti* 'that which is heard.' The Vedic poets, through their rigorous ascetics and aesthetics, wore themselves away in order to open their cognitive hearts and *hear*. Moreover, these poets (the *rsis* and *kavis* 'seers') were synesthetic, seeing (root: *drs*) what is real (*rta*) though their hearts' (*hrd*) inspired thought (*manisa*).

Language is revealed, not learned or built-in. We learn how to bring forth what is bestowed. Insight into the process of revelation might indeed prove to be the missing link to our understanding of the elusive origin of language and the nature of cognition in relation to the arising of words. In the *rsis'* vibratory and luminescent *phonophany*, revelations of world and

word are not only indivisible, they're *identical*. Vedic verses are referred to as *apauruṣeyā* 'unauthored'; an omniscience tapped into, a ceaseless stream of revelation tuned into — instances of grace, with any "constructedness" on the part of the poet being consistent with the immediate recognition. Poets are elementally what the world is. There's nothing paranormal about this equation. Rather, it's a matter of right practice, of remaining startled, unhabituated, not caught up in cause and effect and, paradoxically, seeing what is evident as the hidden, the hidden as evident, and above all, attesting to the play of the veil between the two.

Prosody didn't begin with the primordial substance (*prakṛti*). It was, and remains, an expression of the consciousness that brought forth the phenomenal universe. The Vedic mantras are considered the sound correlates of form. Recitation of the sound impulses contained in the mantras (the hymns the Vedic poets heard ambiently) brought forth the world of form. This early sound-form nondifference set a major precedent for subsequent poetic and religious movements on the subcontinent (Upaniṣadic Pranava, Mīmāṃsā philosophy, Bhakti *nama-kirtana*, etc.) Of course the context in which names and objects are non-different is not the same context in which names are conventionally assigned and nonduality is disdained as esoteric. Only in a mundane mono-dimensionality are all levels of existence not experienced as one.

"In the beginning Brahmā formed, from the words of the Vedas alone, the names, forms and functions of the gods and other beings." — Vishnu Purana I.5.62 (like all Puranas, premised on the Vedas, and impossible to date)

FROM VAK TO VEDIC RITUAL TO UPANIṢADIC SOUND SOTERIOLOGY AND BACK

What, exactly, were the *rsis* hearing? — the transmutative relaying of the cosmogonic language which conventional language is derived from. In Puranic cosmogonies the Creator is typically depicted as being composed of the Vedas. With each new creation cycle (or *kalpa*, which the *Bhagavata Purana* defines as 4.32 billion years, or one day in the life of Brahmā) recitation of the originative mantras manifests the manifold forms anew. The Creator (whether identified as Brahmā, Śakti, Vishnu, Īśvara, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, Devī, etc.) is, in effect, this recitation, while the *rsis*' reception of *apaureya* (authorless language) is the direct audition of creation. Integral to this cosmogonic recitation is the *natural* language of Sanskrit, distinguishable as the non-difference of word/name/sound/meaning/form/function — a non-difference initiated by mantra, thereby defining the nature of mantra.

In support of the self-authorization of the Vedas, the *Mīmāṃsā Sutra* (ca. 300-200 BCE) refers to the uncreated, inherent bond between word and meaning as the doctrine of *autpattika sambandha* 'eternal correlation' (I.1.5). The thoroughly inter-correlated world of *autpattika sambandha* is at least as plausible — and far more potentiating — an understanding of the origination of language and language as origination as our confused contemporary conflict of linguistic indigeneity versus input and imposition (or innate versus acquire, nature/nurture, if you will.)

Creation itself is the vast *avatāra*; with each word — natural or conventional — as the sound and meaning embodiment of divine presence (perhaps our speech is even more miraculous if oblivious to this.) Moreover, the cosmogonic interdependence between word and meaning corresponds to the uncreated mantras pulsing primordially, as phenomena's unobservable initial conditions. In this light, the mantras are either before the beginning or beginningless ... and there is a traditional practice for experiencing precisely this fluctuation.

Although the four oldest books of the Vedas are a form of mantra (as defined above), we don't ordinarily associate mantra — typically known for its brevity — with text, hymn, scripture, instruction, philosophy or even poetry per se. It was the Upaniṣadic sages (c 800 BCE—200 CE) who re-purposed mantra, demoting and paring down the elaborately ritualistic Vedic sacrifice and recitation to direct meditative knowledge realized through root mantras, seed-syllables and lone phonemes, ultimately abbreviating and encapsulating the entirety of Vedic wisdom in the potency of *Om*. On one level this writing is a tracing of this shift from word primacy (*Vak* and *Sabdabrahman*) to sound primacy (*Nadayoga*), and its concurrent impact on the prosodic practices I'm developing in circling back to the "word."

The impulse to speak, the uncoiling of each word, from wherever, from nowhere, from Narayana, nonexistence or the Unstruck, is the Beloved, is the Name, Energy, Kundalini, Tatvamasi, Sarasvatī, Śakti. The impulse to speak is the root of the Pranava, is love of Vāk, love from Vāk; it is what is omniscience — the only sufficient word for which is ... *word*, though unheard, like a language of vibration-in-waiting; in order that we might go on expressing ourselves ad infinitum, ad nauseam, so that "anything can appear"; in order that there be potential owing its own being to our acts and accidents. The impulse to speak and to conceive — our hearing, our phonics, spoken, unspoken and unspeakable — is perhaps the only possible analogy for the act of Creation, i.e., for itself, as that act. It is its own analogy. What this means is that awareness is unrestricted, at this point, at this *bindu*. Each word is a dissolution of the speaker, both terrifying and joyous — that's what it takes to utter a word, to blackout to be able to break the air, to send forth what is happening to us by means of speaking. Vedicly, it's called the *cosmogonic udder*. Burning butter, cream of cremation. We're offered up, word by word. We're no more owners of our own coherence than, say, bottled water corporations — Nestlé, Televisión Azteca, Comcast, PepsiCo — own the water pumped from common aquifers. It's an impression, a scar. Just as one's words may also harm others. (Language is *samsara's* weapon of choice.)

Speech is one body, across species, throughout the insentient — name it what you wish. Our illimitable words are unable to be created or destroyed, while language's limited speakers suffer every loss.

Secrecy is out of the (body) bag. Each word is a sacrifice. Speech can only be purifying, even when it putrefies. We can't damage language. It's pure energy. We can, on the other hand, hurt ourselves. Stillness is the greatest reverberation. It's gruesome to drain our lives away in divisions, like inscrutable/apparent, doubtful/devout, extraordinary/ordinary, featured/featureless. It's all so phenomenal. We're materialized by murder mystery. The air in one's lungs is part of all of space. The water in one's cochlea is inseparable from water of life or the mythic watery chaos. One's metabolism is an infinitesimal center of infinite energy (and vice versa.) The sound waves

we produce accord with those fluctuations that formed the observable universe. We're here, and then we're not. Nothing could possibly be more esoteric than the exoteric!

Of course, all sorts of views fall outside one's limited vision — we don't agree — and this is necessary for filling out the picture, the phenomenal portion of the space of all possibilities. And the living corpse, the reactant, readily seeks and accedes to limitation and division ... while prosody is the openness and fluency between any two.

UNSTRUCK AND UNHURT

... and this startling, inceptive nature of prosody can indeed be practiced, moment to moment, unbeknownst, or knowingly madly in love with Mother Language, conversationally or as pointedly poetic. But, because I'm intent on beginning the story of prosody before the beginning (as I beg my unbegun mind to bear down on this bewildering matter) I'll begin with a traditional practice of attuning to sound-origination.

In hearing before the beginning — what is heard — is named *anahata-nada*, literally 'unstruck sound.' *Anahata-nada* is a South Asian soteriological sound meditation dating back at least to the later *Upaniśads*. Unstruck sound is sound without a cause — one "thing" is not struck against another. There's no contact, no conflict, concept, conditions, friction, confrontation or contradictory forces. It's self-arising, bearing the potential for all sound and consequent differentiation of form.

Anahata also means 'uninjured' — less in the sense of "healing" and more significantly "that which can't be hurt" (though the two states are obviously interrelated.) *Anahata* is the name of the tantric heart center (*cakra*), as well. *Anahata* is thus a hearing heart, an inhering sound that can't be put to work, pick up a cause, comply with conditions or transport a force: *inhearing*. As such, it's associated with equanimity and non-reactivity and the ability to make decisions outside the realm of cause and effect, un-coerced by our fatalistic tendencies — an open, spontaneous "listening with the ear of your heart" (as Bhaktas, Benedictines or Buddhists would say).

Stemming from — and searching for — the pulsatile nature of consciousness, a 3-week-old embryo's heart-tube spontaneously begins to bulge and beat for a lifetime. Nonetheless, this heart center in tantric practice has been named *anahata* "without beat." And traditionally, in most texts, the unstruck sound is described as that which is heard in the heart — a paradox that overrides its very functionality as that which beats ... attesting to its deeper nature as the organ of expansive listening and equanimity.

Anahata is the heart-tremoring of the basic energy underlying all phenomena, the ground that gives forth all formative rhythms, the same ground into which our lives ultimately dissolve. The ground is Nature inclusive of cosmos, held in the heart. The energy is a pulsating, living light. The luminosity repeatedly attributed to the unstruck is a metonym for consciousness itself. Cosmogenically considered, the unstruck sound was produced when consciousness initially turned toward itself. In part, unstruck practice is an awareness of words as awareness-as-words.

Here, one can only speak from experience ... or perhaps imploringly *for* the experience one seeks. How do we know? Clearly, we're being called forth. Words for enlightenment confuse and suffuse each other across our various faculties and traditions, while words from wisdom-as-what-is act as creational translucencies that pass into each other in a space in which everything is made possible (including within this writing.)

Because the unstruck doesn't exist as anything whatsoever, absolutely anything can come from it. If the unstruck were differentiated, it would be unable to host what appears. Without the host, nothing forms. If the unstruck itself were to change into all that arises, nothing more could arise; we'd be used up, unrenewable; like a mirror that accumulates all its reflections, blotting itself out, a soundscape in which frequencies never die out. Thus the unstruck is that pulsation in which everything that is possible *is* possible. The sage, aesthetician, musician, Abhinavagupta (924-1020 CE) referred to the unstruck sound as the highest form of consciousness; we need only follow the reverberation home, until it dies down in omniscience ... while we're yet alive, if at all possible.

Broadly defined, *anahata-nada* is a discernible meditation practice that has been transmitted with remarkable fidelity on the Indian subcontinent for at least a few millennia — from the isolation of phonemes in the *Samaveda* through the principal and later *Upaniśads*, Patanjali's *Sutras*, Kashmiri Śaivism, the medieval *Nāth* and *Hatha* Yogas, the Sant Mat movement, Sikhism, right up to Sri Aurobindo, the Surat Shabd Science of Kirpal Singh and the present.

Although unstruck meditation is, on one hand, a strictly traditional practice, it is at once elemental, introspective and adaptive. It's an intimation of the nature of phenomena that ultimately must accord with one's own reality. (In my case, *anahata-nada* parallels prosody's cosmogenic role.) This propitious mix of strict instruction and free introspection is why the practice persists. Depending on the background of the practitioner, *anahata* can be heard as revelation, entheogen, theophany, mystery, mercy, om, omniscience, Tara, Ísvara, Maka-akan, Izanami, Alaha, Abba, Immah, Ayaba, reality, ambrosial immortality, Anuttara, Mut, Nut, Nothing, Nada Brahmana, Bhairava, Pranava, Moksha, Mokosh, Kischelemukong, El Eloah, Sat, Aham, Asat, I Am That I Am, or, for that matter, I Am That or just Am or vast I.

All in all, this text will be a touchstone for a practice of, not only the unstruck sound, but the unstruck *word* as well— the sounds for the word, the words for the sound, the uncreated and self-arising word — a tantra or tutorial bringing together basic, traditional, insights and instructions for an approach to liberation through language revelation (*śabda-mukti*), God-willing.

Finally, in general, out of respect for the diversity of soteriological sound traditions, I will also substantivize *anahata*, in order to form a more heuristic practice in terms of 'the unstruck.'

ANAHATA ŚABD OR WORD TANTRA

At one point, far into the writing this tantra — which is itself a meditation practice, a revealing of language to itself — I realized that I had been mistakenly writing 'unstruck word' (*anahata-śabda*) in place of the traditional 'unstruck sound' (*anahata-nada*.) In terms of traditional practices, *nada-yoga* is quite well known, while I had never come across the term *śabda-yoga*. My first impulse was to go back and correct this glaring error. But upon reflection, it struck me that this changeover actually made perfect sense, in fact inevitably so ... and that an explicitly *word-yoga* lineage would turn up in the vast and resounding Hindu universe, if I were to look and listen accordingly.

In Sanskrit, "in the beginning" (and perhaps earlier) was *Vāk*, the Word, the Goddess who gives life to all. In the Vedas she speaks in her own voice only once, in the *Devīsūkta*. She speaks in the poetic form of *ātmastuti*, "self-praise." She asserts her primacy and then addresses the poet — her conduit — directly. Paraphrasing from *Rigveda* 10.125:

"I am Sovereign, the provider of wealth...foremost among those deserving sacrifice...The gods have distributed me in many places—so that I have many forms and cause many things to enter me...Whoever eats, whoever sees, whoever breathes, whoever hears what is spoken, does so through me. Though unaware of it, they live from me. I'll tell you only what is deserving of belief. Listen, o you who are listened to...Whom I love, I make awesome, a sage, a seer...I spread out to all creatures...Like the wind I blow forth embracing all worlds—I've come into being of such size and greatness."

She is not only the vibratory precursor of all lifeforms. She is all permutations of the hypostatized Word, as well. Chronologically, by the time of the *Yoga-Upaniśads*, *Vāk* had been recast as *Śabda-Brahman* (Word-God). Tantric and Yogic texts further recast *Śabda-Brahman* as *Nāda-Brahman* and *AUM*, emphasizing sound over word and name per se. As I was tracking the course of *Vāk* forward in time, the Hindu cosmos was turning more generally sonic than specifically vocal. As a poet, this was a somewhat disturbing turn of events, an impasse or loss of orientation. I paused. During this same period of word-tantra research, I was also reading the Medieval poet-seers (*sants*), and it was this concomitant reading of their poetry that brought me back to the "word within" as the *arché*, as the beginningless point (*bindu*) I was bound for. From the 15th century *bhakta julaha* Kabir Das: "*Apply yourself, O friend, to the practice of Śabd. The Śabd from which even the creator came into being.*" And the 16th century *yogini* Mirabai: "*One night as I sat in quiet, I seemed on the verge of entering a world inside so vast I know it is the source of all of us.*" Thus the unstruck word once again began to resonate more fully for me, as distinct from the *Upaniśadic* and *Yogic* trend toward *Om* and *Nada* wherein the soundbite *Aum* is given primacy as the originative, liberatory vibration, as it is identified as exact sound-form of the unstruck, and as Vedic verses and the rituals of the *Brāmanas* become concentrated into salvific syllabic bits as meditation-aids for puncturing ignorance in an instant.

"There are two Creators to be meditated upon: sound and non-sound. Non-sound is revealed only by sound. In this case the sound-Brahma is Om. Ascending to it, one comes to an end in the non-sound ... This is immortality." (Maitri Upaniśad 6.22.)

Moreover, *Vāk* is also translatable, simply, as 'speech.' It is perhaps most revealing to remove the stuff of the unstruck from the realm of the absolute: i.e., not *Śabda-Brahman*, The Word,

Logos, Epiphany, Prophetic Dictation, but simply *speech*, and speech as we know it, in any event, the commonplace gift of our inscrutable ability to speak as de facto dialectical omniscience — allowing divine causality to indistinguishably mix with our conventional speech, like milk and water (or ambrosia and soda) with the impact of each word (as thought, speech or action) as a stirring of all the energy in the universe. We're graced with speech. Once we cease believing that we're self-made language supremacists, there is no "gap in the evidence," so to speak, and "*we're moved to believe the words...insofar as the reward of eternal life is promised to us if we have believed.*" (Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 1). The phenomenal fact that words *are*, just as phenomenally as *we* are, out of all possibilities, that the world exists as precisely "this" ... is the startling basis of unstruck practice.

The unstruck is a tracing of the factuality of the phenomenal to the faintest sounding of the words, back to the unfabricated source of all sounds in the infinitely dense dimensionlessness indistinguishable from the unmanifest and the unbegun. Language-as-path, as sound and meaning, cognition and speech, tacit and explicit, material and immaterial, activated only by prosody (or it is as straw) is perfectly situated to signal our liberation.

SPEECH

The nature of language is pristine and limitless. Use is another matter. Language is the ground from which language arises. Words are not innate, they are the innate.

Word-choice correlates with the ground of all possible arisings, i.e. the ground, not the arisings. Words that fall short and words that fulfill both come from one source. Just as everyone is divine and all phenomena are innate, all words are non-different from their beginningless ground.

Speech is for revealing infinite expressibility, whether speakable or unspeakable. Speech is for overcoming our fixation on what can and can't be said by expressing the nondual. Speech is for union with the luminous body of language, whose sound-embodiment is Vāk. The intrinsic is the paradox of our Unborn Mother. Speech is not your words but words', while "owning one's own words" is appears to be responsible, respectable.

Continually appearing phenomena is language. Language is the refuge and the fruition.

What you would say is innate. There are no parts to add to body, speech and mind. Clinging to what one would say is asphyxiation. Neither infinity nor finitude exist.

Self-occurring words arise not gratuitously but bound to the benefit of all arisings, which are produced by the same self-occurrence. This is the paradox of freedom of speech. It's the impulse to speak that originates language as the ground of being from which words arise. Try to point a finger at the place from which words arise, language will swallow you alive.

We don't import or input words but opinions.

All words are within Vāk. Our whereabouts are not. Outward speech accomplishes affliction. Unrisen words speak what would be true.

Realization has no words other than these. As a process, clarity needs the inconceivable to be unconstrained.

Stabilize the beginninglessness behind the words. Mean what says you. Say "I see." Energy never stops speaking.

Anyone could say this without confusion. By means of confusion ... that's the great accomplishment! Dawning just as it is. Play, display for us. Even pleasure can't obstruct us.

Speaking is our non-difference from the ground of being. Neurology is a switchboard.

SYNTAX AND TEXT AS *AVATĀRA*

And what is everyday speech? The forming of sentences? Communication? Syntax is, at bottom, alchemical: word-joinery and fluidity in interchange, transmuting the *prima materia* of words into awareness and awareness of words as awareness. Is there such a state as syntactic soteriology? Would it depend on elitist content, or would it be a natural right? Fifth century CE linguist Bhartrhari refers to grammar as *dvaram apavargasya* 'the door to salvation' (*Vākyapadīya*, I.14) and "the best of all the austerities, the one that is nearest to Brahman" (*Vākyapadīya* I.11). Clearly the early science of grammar was not separate from Yogic practices for raising consciousness to the subtlest stage of language, a stage sometimes referred to as *Para-Vāk*. Bhartrhari also used the term *śabda-pūrva yoga*, roughly translatable as "union with the word in its undifferentiated primordially." (This grammatical yoga resonates with the word-yoga (*vāg-yoga*) of Patanjali.) Bhartrhari referred to this salvific process as *sphoṭavāda*. *Sphota* means 'burst' or 'flash.' *Sphoṭavāda* is thus the doctrine of sudden, superseding insight, as a summation or consummation of the sentence. It's in fact the *sphota* that communicates, by means of the words, not the words per se! Meaning is thus an interiorized bursting forth in which syntactic sequence of syllables and sounds is incinerated as the "flash" unites with the initial, also undifferentiated, impulse to speak, in a state referred to as *Paśyanti*, or the *Śabda-Brahman* itself. Grammar in this regard is a series of steps for breaking down the double-door of ignorance and ego until the series culminates. It's patent that the limitations of language are a condition of the speaker, not the words themselves. What must grammar be, inherently, to be salvation? The patterning of creation? Omnipresencing? The fact that we have freedom of speech hardly alters the fact that each arising word is being gifted to us from the very energy that constitutes and connects all forms. Words are revelation, upon reflection; reflection on reflection. They're *uncreated*, denotative of themselves.

Bhartrhari revised the rival, language-oriented school that preceded him (*Mīmāṃsā*) just as the subsequent school of Śankara's Advaita-Vedanta controverted Bhartrhari's claims. When Śankara stated that everything is illusory and that reality could only be known from itself, he was

taking direct aim at language as prime instrument of ignorance (however necessary for being led along the path of knowledge.) The Mīmāṃsakas, on the other hand, sought to establish the authority of Vedas as absolute dharma, incontrovertible Divine Law. Here the self-existence of the text is exteriorized, phoneme by phoneme, as the ultimate reality. And text as *avatāra*, built up from the unstruck to vibration, sound, syllable, om, word and then the sentence, to establish a tradition of the "book itself" as salvation and god-sameness, is certainly at the core of the Abrahamic religions. The text as guru or god (*grantha-avatāra*) can also be found in Sikhism's *Guru Granth Sahib* (completed 1604) and Vaishnavism's *Bhāgavata Purāna* (c. 800-1000 CE). The recited narratives of the *Bhāgavata Purāna* serve as speech-incarnations of Kṛṣṇa, with the ontological premise of Vedic *apauruṣeyā* as venerable precedent and paradigm. In the Tibetan Tertön tradition texts and teachings (*termas*) are transmitted through time to be discovered at the auspicious moment.

(The world is then woven together, and torn apart, by continual scriptural citation and salvational assurances.)

NAME, TO TALK ABOUT YOU IS TO TALK TO YOU

Is the unstruck word "silence"? Silence doesn't exist. We hear our own biosystems, if nothing else. There is quiet. Is quiet the most commonly practiced *sādhana* on earth? Is this quiet silence the word of God? Is this quiet silence that is the word of God simply the presence of God? More so than noise? Is it all we'll ever know ... all we'll ever know about origin and cognition? Does it depend? It can't depend on anything other than itself and still be self-arising. Is silence self-arising? Would it depend on our hearing? If so, is prayer then this interdependence? Yes, except when our awareness that this presence of the quiet silence exists only because of us turns into interference that destroys the prayer. Would there be silence itself without us? Our imagining of silence itself is the nearly unstruck. Unstruck is what's behind unstruck. Is the unstruck but the decoy for silence ... the silence opening to our nonexistence, our experiencing of our nonexistence? Is this nonexistence experienced as blissful? Why wouldn't it be? Why should it be? ... as written in scriptures, not as a promise but as a constituent of itself constitutive of all else. Should we now know better than to have a ground? Is that the world-engendering adage known as wisdom? What is it to not be here? To be without here? What here's all about.

Writing is my *sādhana*. I write without speaking. My mind mouths the words. I write the words that come without a sound and conceive me. They're self-occurring. These are the words I've been waiting for, working towards. I can't make them come. I can ask. Tantra calls it grace. I will be graced or not. I hear the words being read, in silence, as silence, not by me. My audience is infinite. My audience is the infinite. My experiencing of the words as I write is that which you read. There has been no sound. The act of reading writing unrecited is unstruck. I couldn't receive the writing without the existence of this unstruck recitation, not in mind, but in being as boundless, which is would-be bliss. If bliss can exist, why wouldn't it? Why wouldn't it exist like a basic income guarantee? We weren't thrown out of the garden, we just stopped gardening. Put it in words. Which is to say, self-occurring words would be congruent with bliss which is the basic self-occurrence. It's the same as the basis, this unstruck bliss. It's the opposite of ours-for-

the-taking. It's there even if we're numb to it. A tasteless nectar. It has taste, *we* can't taste. It's too much to taste for those who could taste it. For the rest, it's simply tasteless. Its taste takes away attaining. Everything other than all we'd live for falls away.

This is what not-only-I mean. Not-only-I is meaning. No one can live without others. The origination of language is wrapped up in this fact, hidden and illumined in its act.

This is a tough nut to crack ... which sentence would come next? Clichéd as it is to say, there's no harder work than effortlessness. It's an unmistakable set up for stepping aside, for being unscripted. To have exhausted my skills building an empty stage, to then remove the stage, and then the emptiness. A visible (staged, paged), unstruck emptiness so that all things can come and go on their own. I write until the writing is the only writing that it can be, not whatever it can be, but self-occurring, as if my own, then offered up as grace given.

I wanted to end, or culminate, this introduction to the Practice of the Unstruck Word with the "Name" — given that the *devotional* Name is the most practiced prayer on earth (not only in South Asia.) It seemed simple enough ... to write another section in this word-tantra sequence distinguishing Name from Word and *Nāda*. But then the self-occurring struck ... jammed the channels with demands; there was too much information to sift through and sort out. The self-occurring is deadly or deadening in its intensity of requisites. Self-occurring purifies with our anguish. At the slightest hint of duplicity or ease — in place of grace — it scorches the ground.

The impossibility of proceeding is its embracing of the process.

I especially wanted to end this word-tantra with the *Name* (as incarnation) because of a specific congruence — i.e., the need that gave rise to name-devotion as the preeminent *sāadhanā* in South Asia *concurring with our current global crises*. A host of traditions — Epic, Puranic, Bhakti, Sikh, Sant and Gaudīya Vaishnava — all stress the primacy of recitation of the Name as the most direct and effective religious practice in the age of *Kali Yuga*, which, according to Hindu eschatology, is the final and most degenerate of the four ages, followed by a new epochal cycle (*kalpa*) of the four ages (at which time recitation of the Vedic mantras will once again reconstitute the cosmos.)

"Now, the Dark Age of Kali Yuga has come. Plant the Naam, the Name of the One Lord. It is not the season to plant other seeds. Do not wander lost in doubt and delusion." — Guru Granth Sahib (1185).

"In the Kali age, the avatāra of Kṛṣṇa is in the form of the name; from the name there is salvation of the whole world." — Kṛṣṇadāsa, Caitanya Caritāmṛta 1.17.19 (c. 1557).

There are countless references such as this, about the Name as the only force that can cut through confused desecration. This rings true, but is it true? This tantra is about nothing other than the relationship between finding a way through this writing and whether we will find ways to survive as a species at this point in time. Would it be such a bad thing? Are we fated or free? Railroaded or running the show?

Ultimately, it's not possible to speak of the Name without presenting its devotional context, i.e., the *bhakti* movement that transitioned the Indian subcontinent from brahmanical to Hindu culture. It's impossible to proceed to an embodied practice of the Name without fleshing out the agency of *nama-avatarā*. And moreover, relative to this writing, it's impossible to proceed without placing the Name within the context of prosody as performance of the devotional.

The unstruck sound, like prosody, is a devotional practice, an unconditional listening, a love of being embodied and embraced by creation. *Anahata-bhakti* is a perfect union. We're vibration incarnate.

Bhakti is a flavor or perfume of the unstruck, if you will.

It's a way of living.

A NOTE IN THE NAME OF PROSODY

"I recite some small part of the glory of the Name (nām pratāp). May the light of my heart make these words pure, so that the glory of the Name be described." — Agradās (a Rām-rasik bhakta, flourished in the second half of the sixteenth century), *Nām-Pratāp*, invocation.

"The Name is a witness between the nirguṇa (formless, without qualities) and saguṇa (with qualities) realms; it is a clever translator through which both realms become illuminating." — Tulsīdās, (1532-1623, a Ramanandi Vaishnava saint-poet and rebirth of Valmiki) *Rāmcaritmānas* 1.21.4b.

Name is both form and formless. The phonic form of an uncreated creator non-different from the observable world. The Name as that without which we can't call upon or cry out. Or, God as a grapheme not to be pronounced, without which we're clueless. Whether grapheme or phoneme, the Name is unsurpassed for presencing the sacred in the most immediate and intimate terms available. For any one of us, which specific phoneme sequence is the one? Which name can credibly invoke and incarnate — accord with — that which — whom — without whom, addressable or not, by name or innately, could cause existence to exist, and cause, as part of the process of creation, our inexorable incomprehension? Our most elemental interrelationship is with the ungraspable, whether named or named "nameless"; whether attended to or left tacit or unarticulated.

How can the heart whose nature is to hear creation and to, like space with which it is coeval, contain everything, still be capable of closing? Who I name. "Who" is a verb. I who name. The living are call and response, with or without calling or responding. The body is a bowing down, with or without consent or conceit.

Or perhaps the Name is just a glorified trope that should be exposed, not exalted. Can we extend our apologies to the divine? Divine is generic, not nameless. Nameless is an almighty name during our dissolute days.

Perhaps the most confused dialectics in the history of sacred sound bears on the question whether "truth" is the Name (*nama-avatarā*), meaning (words, *śabd*, *artha*), sound itself (*nāda*, vibration, the current), syllable (phoneme, imperishable Aum, Omkara, Pranava, mantra), the Word (Vāk, Logos, Divine revelation), the Book (revelation, *granthē-apauruṣeya*), or silence (unstruck, beyond words, ineffable, *avācya*, *Para-Brahman*).

I do write from the perspective of prosody because prosody, in my experience, underlyingly, unvyingly, encompasses and resolves the contentions among the above terms. Moreover, the nature of prosody, as the sound of the words, the meaning of the sounds, the power of the implied and paused, the arranging and dramatizing of expression, the tone of interchange and formative templates of the phenomenal all rolled into one, is intercessory. Intonation alone, radiating from an open heart, can instantly ("magically") countervail, suspend or upend ill will. Prosody can, impartially, disarm belief-biases as it is constitutive and appreciative of all manifestations of expression. And, what Tulsīdās said of the Name (above) as enactive illuminating witness between form and formlessness, can be said of prosody with regard to its intermediary role among the very elements of composition: meaning, sound, phoneme, grapheme, syllable, word, name, book, silence and so on.

Congruent with my experience of prosody as integrative, the sciences of cognition and language evolution have proposed prosody as protolanguage. In the emotional and interactional prosody (EIP) of Pierra Filippi prosodic chorusing is the precursor of language emergence. Positing prosody as precursor of both music and language, Steven Brown coined the term "musilanguage." Prosody may be our original, universal Motherese. (Our everyday, turn-taking conversations continue to be resonantly coeval with the origin of language.)

Voice, however inconspicuously, will be the vanguard of the next, non-invasive, interoceptive, so-called *subtle*, vibrational medicine. Poets have called this *invocation*. Saints have said *intercession*. Humanity, at this point in time, is a plea to continue to exist. Paradise is, elsewhere, nonexistent.

(Last week alone, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that compound weather extremes and carbon-emission feedback loops could boil our planet by the end of the century; the Taliban seized control of Kabul after a US-equipped 300,000 strong Afghan army collapsed in eleven days; a month's worth of rain fell in 30 minutes flooding the Texas State Capital as lawmakers inside were passing initiatives to boost the fossil fuel industry; a new variant of the coronavirus tore through a lax and quarreling America; July became the hottest month in recorded history; the governor of NY resigned over sexual assault charges while his other crimes of legalized bribery, corporate immunity, ethics wavers and so on, remain normalized; rain fell in the Arctic; wildfires and a 117 degree heatwave are torching Greece; China, Russia and Iran are befriending the Taliban...)

But prosody is not primarily about ecology or wellbeing or a well-tuned corpse-in-progress or anything else we could *lose*. I've been emphasizing, in particular, that prosody is *soteriological*. I choose this word because of its stiffness — its *rigor mortis* — the word that will "work," that can deliver the requisite corpse for the conditions that must be faced in order to find succor in Kali-yuga. I also like the savor/savior/savoir pseudo-synonymic sweetness (*rasa*, if you will, the

precious endogenous nectar of devotional practice.) *Bhakti*, for example, perfectly blends sweetness, poetry, liberation and love (a far cry from the *dolce stil nuovo* of thirteenth century Europe in which a besotted Dante would raise the praising of Beatrice to beatitude, her very greeting (*saluto*) his salvation (*salute*) through the sweetness it would release in his heart.)

In South Asian religion, liberation and *samsāra* are indissociable; that is, *samsāra* is invariably that which a *sādhaka* seeks liberation from. How shall we practiceably say "liberation" in our most dire, dour hour of the need to *desecrate no more*? The words have to take effect. Especially in my case, having translated Sanskrit *mukti* and *moksha* as "prosody" — the ability to break from the bonds of conditioned life and freely create compassion in the ultra-resonant space of interbeing; *prosodic-bhakti*, if you will.

Tantra is the realizing of its meaning. In this way, it can be said to be self-arising in its own primordial space. It can also be said that its meaning is the self-arising. Tantric liberation uproots the causes of suffering, which are constructions of our own mind ... which is the mind's constructive tendency, its tendency to see something other than itself as the obstacle. Tantric prosody is a tonal carrier wave. The wave, taken alone, in tantric terms, is being-consciousness-bliss ... then the messaging manifests in the world in myriad intonations. Tantric prosody is meditative conversation. It mends and amends the messaging mix-up. It's that which is set to music. It's freedom from suffering by means of suffering freely through fully conscious speech. Every word is the path.

Proverbially, tone of voice connected to *origin* plus *circumstance* equals liberation into the embrace of being. Origin? Origin for a *bhakta* (or for Bahá'u'lláh or Jesus) is unequivocally *love*. Self-occurring words can't obstruct us. There's nothing to fabricate. Prosody can't fool anyone, because its nature (as the reverberatory revelatory) is contrary to concealing. Any attainable state of health or harmony is incidental to the practice of our origin in tone and openness to the unstruck. Conscious prosody is a set of cosmogonic *sādhanas* that regulate material, social and spiritual beings. Technique in accord.

NAME ALONE

"... So stricken with longing for Kannan it rivalled the ocean's depths and she sent out the black kuyil-bird to deliver her message begging him to be with her, to wear her garland of verses that if we centuries later recite, would reveal to us the true name of Narayana (the omnipotent)."

I can only touch upon the trajectory of *bhakti*, not in an attempt to give a complete picture of the devotional path that overspread India, but to provide a context for inspiring and deepening devotion in our respective practices. I'll form a triangle, roughly corresponding to the boundaries of India, from Tamil Nadu to Rajasthan to West Bengal, bringing forward a few key terms and texts.

Bhakti as liberation-through-divine-love is glossed in the Bhagavad Gita (c. 300 CE) and mandated in the *Bhagavata Purana* (latter half of the first millennium CE). But the vernacular *bhakti* "movement" that would ultimately radiate throughout India began in earnest in the sixth to ninth centuries CE in Tamil Nadu with the Vaishnavite Alvar and Śaivite Nayanmar poet-saints. It's believed that Tamil-*bhakti* was inaugurated by devoted-wife turned cremation-ground-ascetic Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, the "Mother from Kāraikkāl (also self-described as Kāraikkāl Pēy, the "Demoness.") Kāraikkāl set the intimate tone of devotional poetry by referring to herself in both first person and third person voices:

"...if I cannot serve you by seeing you, and worshipping you by saying "Our Father," even if I get the whole world, I do not want it." (*Arputat Tiruvantāti*, Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder, 72, trans. Elaine Craddock).

"Those who say the words of this garland of these verses uttered by Kāraikkāl Pēy, melting with love, and worship with everlasting devotion will reach the Lord and praise him with unceasing love." (*Arputat Tiruvantāti*, Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder, 101).

"For those who dance and sing these ten verses by Kāraikkāl Pēy who has sharp teeth and a fiery mouth, by abundant grace of Śiva-Natarāja who wears a swaying snake around his waist, and who wears the moon on his matted hair, and spins in his divine dance — their sins will be destroyed." (*Tiruvālankāttu Mūtta Tiruppatikan*, First Sacred Verses on Tiruvālankātu, 2.11, trans. Elaine Craddock).

The Alvars and Nayanmars would not have considered themselves *bhaktas*. Nor would they have felt that their work was discontinuous with the prior lyric, lovelorn and animistic Cankam culture. The difficulty of definitively defining *bhakti* overlaps the difficulty of determining whether any given *bhakta* practiced "pure" *bhakti* or was partially brahmanic, t̄antric, jogic, Sikh or siddha. It's not uncommon for a *bhakta* to both appropriate and oppose rival religions. The early Tamil poet-saints allied themselves with the brahmanic orthodoxy in order to expel the invasive Jains and Buddhists from their land. *Gaudīya bhakti* employs meditation techniques straight out of *astānga-yoga* textbooks. Even the *Bhagavadgita*, the great *bhakti* sourcebook, presented *bhakti-marga* (the path of devotion) as but one among a few other "preeminent" (*uttamam pavitram*) paths of liberation: *jana-marga* (the path of knowledge and investigative introspection), *karma-marga* (the path of virtuous action) and *raja-marga* (the path of meditation) (BG.12.6-7.) The very type of *bhakti*, typically determined by the Name of the God that is worshiped (whether Krishna, Śiva, Śakti, etc.) can be mixed. Tulsīdās, the great Rām-*bhakta*, dedicated an entire text to Krishna (*Krishna-Gītāvalī*.)

What is sure is that the distinction of *bhakti* (from the verb *bhaj* "to share with" "to participate in") — if not the path itself — is integral to the inquiry of any path taken. Because this writing is my path, my experiencing of *bhakti*, I'm compelled to sort through and — hopefully-deftly — cut through the discursive and scholarly body of research and go straight to the words of the *bhaktas* (where translation and interpretation present difficulty enough to deal with.) For *bhaktas* as well, the poems are their devotion ... and the devotions are multifarious — even within a specific era or region or, for that matter, within an individual poet. *Bhakti* is what a *bhakta* sings, in any given case. And this pure *bhakti* is what can support us — while the scholarly, on the

other hand, can all too easily present *bhakti* as *less* than devotion, or as devotion *alone* bereft of other practices (both of which are patently false) ... or as something other than the *experiencing* of *bhakti*.

The quote at the head of this section is from the eighth century *bhakta*-saint Andal. She was among the first *bhakti* poets, and the only woman among the twelve Vaishnavite Alvars. The quote is drawn from her final work, the *Nachiyar Tirumalai* (The Sacred Songs of the Goddess), a dauntless, divinely-directed eroticism. As her hagiographers recount: she began her songs when she was thirteen years old; at sixteen she married — merged with — her god during her wedding ceremony at his temple in Srirangam, the moment of her death. *Bhakti* is intimacy (in contradistinction to the non-personal Brahman of the *Upanisads*). In the Cankam poetics preceding *bhakti*, there are two types of expression: *akam* (subjective, intimate, erotic) and *puram* (public, political, heroic). *Akam* is the "voice" of *bhakti*. Emotion is the paradigm for the relationship between devotee and deity. To name the divinity allows direct address and access. Preeminence of the recitation of the Name, as a personal or communal practice, has been vital for *bhakti* from its inception. The Name is, of course, that of the creator; the name that *is* creator; the name that creates; the intimately cosmogenic Name which the *bhakta* merges with; an unfabricated participation in creation *through* utterly refined verse. Any attempt to separate the Name from the act of devotion would be futile, as the Name is the embodiment, the physical (phonic, resonant) presence — *avatāra* — of the deity. Moreover, with the potency of the Name as the encapsulation of the Vedas and all the poems composed in the vernacular languages, the early *bhakti* poems, to a considerable extent, were able to fulfill their egalitarian (*saualabhyam*) purpose. Here is an instance of Andal's divine devotion *in the flesh*:

"I will pluck out my fruitless koṅkai at the root. And casting them on his mārṅvu, I will quench my fire! If I cannot succeed in this birth, in my impure services to Govinda, and in quenching the affliction of my round mulai, why even do penance? One day, join me to that beautiful sacred mārṅvu. (Nācciyār Tirumoli 13.8-9).

The earliest collection of Śaivite Nayanmar works (the *Thirumurai*) opens with a poem spontaneously sung by the seventh century prodigy Sambandar when he was only three years old. Sambandar, an unrivaled Vedic scholar by the age of seven, declared that the name of Śiva is the essence of the Vedas, i.e., the full realization of Vedic knowledge as divine presence (13.) (The formal act of calling upon the Name as the embodiment of Śiva "while love's tears outpour" is known as the *panchakshara*, the 5-syllable mantra: *na-mah-śi-vā-ya*). Appar, the next poet in the *Thirumurai* (and a contemporary of Sambandar) asks "why bother reciting the Vedas, pilgrimaging, fasting, purifying, practicing austerities or being penitent when liberation only comes by calling upon the Name?" He warns "those who don't call out the 5-syllable Name have been born so that foul plagues might torture them to death, then death bring rebirths endlessly forlorn." (63, translation F. Kingsbury, G.E. Philips.) As essential for practicing the *bhakti* path, Appar also repeatedly calls out to Umā ("Word" ... Śiva's consort, Vedic Vāk) to reveal her glory.

(Coincidentally, the advent of *bhakti* in the Muslim world is attributed to Kāraikkāl and Andal's contemporary and distant counterpart, the legendary ascetic, proto-sufi and martyr-to-divine-love Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (714-801). It's said that she initiated *ishq-e-haqeeqi*, the path of passionate,

absolute devotion to God — the "ishq" that is ubiquitous in Sufi poetry. *"Consume with fire, O God, a presumptuous heart that loves you." "The one who tastes, knows; the one who explains, lies. How can you describe the true form of something in whose presence you are annihilated, and in whose being you still exist?"*)

Name-devotion (*nāma-bhakti*) has been a constant in the South Asian evolution of *bhakti-marga*. In the latter half of the sixteenth century in North Indian Rajasthan, eight hundred years after the inception of *bhakti* in Tamil Nadu, the founder of Rām-rasik *bhakti*, the poet-saint Agradās, wrote:

"The Name of Rām is the crown jewel of all accomplishments. Where there is no country, time, family, or daily rites, there I have abandoned both the proscriptions and restrictions of religion. The Vedas, Purāṇas, smṛti and śāstras, having considered them all, I have embraced Rām-Nām. On a highway with gold in both my hands, I walk fearlessly day and night, well-adorned with the Name. Having mulled over all knowledge, scholars have revealed this essence, thus Agra endlessly recites the Name of his own Lord-husband."

"For the one who follows the Name of Rām, proscriptions and restrictions are not obstacles; the three karmas fall away from his body. One who sits on a stone boat loaded with countless pieces of iron, with the Rām-Nām even he crosses the ocean of existence."

Seeking union with the divine, Agradās preferred a female identity. This gender-fluidity and "espousal mysticism" is also a constant in *bhakti*, traceable all the way back to the rapturous interior voice of the "soul-heroine" (*talaivi*) of Cankam *akam*. The two quotes above are drawn from a work titled *Nām-Pratāp*, a long poem dedicated to the saving grace of the Name. *"Without the Name, all spiritual practices are worthless."* (Agradās' principal book, the *Dhyān Mañjarī*, is a mediation manual, drawing on tantric and yogic interiority and visualization techniques; exemplifying how readily *bhakti-marga* subsumes other "exclusive" paths ... a multi-preminent practice, if you will.)

Shaikh Farīd, twelfth century Punjabi Muslim and the lone Sufi poet included in the *Adi Granth*: *"Those who forget the Naam, are a burden on the earth."*

And of course Kabir Das (1398-1448 CE): *"O brother, listen: Without the name of Ram, none ever achieved salvation."*

ŚAKTA BHAKTI

Shifting from Rajasthan to West Bengal ... as the saying goes: *"In Kolkata, throw a stone and hit a poet."* Perhaps as explanation for this poet-density, it's also said that devotees worship Kali in order to be inspired to write poetry. Kolkata and Kali are nearly synonymous, while West Bengal at large is the epicenter of the Śaktism known as *Śakta bhakti* ... devotion to the divine feminine, *the potentiality for all appearances*, "Mother of all worlds." And consonant with Name-glorification as the preminent practice for surviving our dissolute age, Kali is known as the *Kali-yuga devi*: goddess of the apocalypse, having appeared to preside over the current

catastrophic *yuga*. In Śakta *bhakti*, as in all *bhakti*, the heart is the scripture; the path is experiential, direct, intimate relationship ... while theology and rituals, on the other hand, are mere "religion." This is not a mundane love, but love of an unknown beloved by means of our familiar emotions: eros, amour, altruism, familial bond, friendship, passion, jealousy, lust, unconditional love ... are all worldly attributes of one beauty, one Goddess dancing, one energy, her energy, directed to her, in reciprocity. There's nothing we feel that is not hers. All we feel is the recitation of her presence, provided to us for the perfecting of love offered to her. A single sigh of separation from her is more instructive than any teaching, greater than any faith. Her name is Śakti. Her name is Mahadevi as Durga, Uma, Pārvaṭī, Devi, Kālī, Rādhā, Tārā, Sītā, Laksmī, Sarasvatī, Gāyatrī, Mother, Ma, or even Śakti in the male form of Vishnu, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva or Rāma. The poet-saint Ramprasad (c. 1718 – 1775) began the Bengali Kali-*bhakti* tradition by addressing Kali in two, distinct, intimate modes: in a parent-child relationship with Kali as his Mother, and Kali as a young girl cared for by parents:

"Be utterly dedicated to her reality. Cry aloud Ma Kali, Ma Kali. Know that she can clarify the inconceivable maze of relativity...This intricate play of transparent energy is initiated, sustained, and dissolved by Kali, who is the dream power of Absolute Reality. At this very moment, you are resting on the vast lap of Mother's cosmic dream that you misperceive as the narrow prison of suffering. Why abandon the kingdom of awareness to obsession with self and disdain for others, to hollow passion and abject clinging? You are creating a disease without a remedy. The brief day of your earthly life is almost over... Meditate now on beautiful Black Tara. This poet sings drunkenly: "Tara! Tara! Tara! Your name is ambrosia. May all beings enter the secret sanctuary through this name, tasting your unique sweetness, self-luminous awareness." (From Mother of the Universe, translator Lex Hixon.)

Śakti is the name of the beginningless. As omnipotence, as well as being incarnate, she also has an aspect that is unmanifest — *saguna* and *nirguna* states, with and without form or attributes. In her these two states are absolutely non-contradictory, the opposite of contradictory. She appears as indifferently different in a practice of devotion deeply open to her on her own terms, spontaneously. (Just as sound is both struck and unstruck, in practice there is fluidity between form and formlessness.) We basically live and die in utero, in the unborn Mother. Our longings to beget and to be embraced have been born of her. Our conventional language is a listening in ... a listening to its beginnings in the unborn. Again, from Ramprasad:

"Where is this brilliant lady, this black light beyond luminosity? Though I have never seen her, simply hearing her name, the mind becomes absorbed completely in her astonishing reality."

"O Ma Kali, wearing a garland of skulls ... You taught me how to call you, and at the moment I chanted "Ma" You drove me to ecstasy! Ma Tara, please tell me the source of your sweetness — where did you get this name full of nectar?"

Ramprasad's poems are commonly sold as a booklet, *Ramprasadi Sangit*, at Śakta temples in West Bengal.

The two primary texts of Śaktism that honor the goddess as cosmogonic divinity are the *Devi Mahatmya* and *Devi-Bhagavata Purana*.

SO, WHAT'S IN A NAME?

"When one is actually advanced and takes pleasure in chanting the Name ... one also laughs, cries, becomes agitated and chants just like a lunatic, not caring for outsiders. Love of God increases and is manifested as affection, counterlove, love, attachment, sub-attachment, ecstasy and sublime ecstasy. This development is compared to sugarcane seeds, sugarcane plants, sugarcane juice, molasses, crude sugar, refined sugar, sugar candy and rock candy."— Caitanya Caritāmṛta 2.23.41-43.

"My dear Lord, when will my eyes be beautified by filling with tears that constantly glide down as I chant your holy name? When will My voice falter and all the hairs on my body stand erect in ecstatic love as I chant Your holy name?" — Caitanya Caritāmṛta 3.20.36.

"We don't have the wiring for love that isn't subject-object based. A love that's not transactional. But this can be rewired through repeating the names. This creates new pathways for love to flow through." — Krishna Das (Twitter posting, 6/20/21).

Bhakti was already a climax. It had shattered the traditional *puruṣārthas* — the four primary goals of life: *dharma* (living virtuously), *artha* (prosperity, living meaningfully), *kama* (enjoyment) and *moksha* (liberation) — by adding a fifth, foremost goal, *devotion*. The utmost *puruṣārtha*, for the most part, had been *moksha*. Bengali Krishna-*bhakti* then brought in a further affection, an acme of *bhakti* known as *prema-rasa*.

But it must first be asked: what exactly did *bhakti* surpass? What is *moksha* such that it would be disparaged by *prema-bhaktas*. As mentioned above, liberation can't be known separably from that from which one is released. And once freed, freed to do or be what? Freed from the usual suspects, *dukkha*, *saṃsāra*, *avidya*, presumably. Freed from being muddled by the mind or mired in materiality; freed from chronic causing of harm and overcasting spurious superpositions on pure consciousness, supposedly. And in the case of *bhakti*, freed to be in salvific devotional service to a named God, with or without features, certainly.

At least with Krishna-*bhakti*, there is no cosmogonic ambiguity. The Big Bang is a Being: the expression of ecstatic love, with which we're constitutively consonant by means of our sensory experience. There are two "ravishing" deities involved: the cause and then the energy of the cause that generates or offers forth the effect — Krishna and Rādhā — with *rasa* as our sentience, as it is our sentiments that are the fulfilling of deities' desire to experience their own love. And with experience comes intrigue and exploits. So, let the stories begin and be told, the play (*līlā*) of the gods!

Among the paths to God-consciousness, *bhakti* is the surest (some say *easiest*). Granted. But which approach within *bhakti* is the most direct, and within that approach, which mode is most immediately needed in our dissolute age?

The encyclopedic *Bhagavata Purana* is the consummate source-text for Krishna devotion in northern India. It's a *grantha-avatāra* (book of incarnations of the Name that is itself a divine incarnation). It's an Upaniṣadic/devotional amalgam, a sanskritization of Krishna-*bhakti* intended

to supplant the Vedas — "the ripened fruit of the wish-fulfilling tree of Vedic knowledge." "*One recitation of Krishna's name is worth more than ten million asveamedha (Vedic horse sacrifices.)*" The *Bhagavata Purana* (7.5.23-24) lists 9 types of *bhakti*: *nama-kīrtanam* (reciting, singing the Name), *śravaṇam* (hearing the Name), *smaraṇam* (contemplative recollection of the deity's narrative), *pāda-sevanam* (serving the feet of the divine), *arcanam* (ritual offerings, veneration of the icons and *mūrtis* as localized instantiations of God in temples and shrines), *vandanam* (offering prayers), *dāsyam* (becoming God's servant), *sakhyam* (becoming the friend of God), and *ātma-nivedanam* (the surrendering of all possessions).

In the *Bhagavata Purana*, as in other devotional texts I've been citing, primacy of place is given to the practice of *nāma-bhakti* as the most appropriate practice in response to the confused age of *Kali-yuga*. *Nama-bhakti* can be further broken down into: *nāma-kīrtana* (singing the Name), *nāma-śravaṇa* (hearing the name), *nāma-smarana* (contemplative recollection of the Name), *mantra-dhyāna* (silent repetition of the Name), *pathana* (recitation of the scriptures and hymns), *nāmāksara* (inscribing the body with the letters of the Name), *līlā-kīrtana* (recounting the exploits of the gods), *rāsa-līlā* (dramatic dance performances in which the performers are revered as living forms — *svarūpas* — of the deity) and, finally, *nāma-samkīrtana* (the communal call-and-response singing that has become the essential expression of *bhakti* for merging with the phonic embodiment of the deity whose absolute body consists of *sat-cit-ānanda*, being-consciousness-bliss).

But, what constitutes the Name? What are the components of its potency, particularly in its capacity as God-embodiment? Perhaps it's heretical to raise the question. Yet, to bow down and say that sound is vibration and vibration is the cause of All whose name is the Name, or resort to an ontologized astrophysics or transcendent vantage point would only sidestep the real matter at hand, the need to practice love, named or unnamed; to be enloved.

Bhakti has always been a radical path — a consummate, nectarous practice of the Name. This sweetness came to an eloquent apogee in the *prema-rasa bhakti* of the Gaudīya Vaisnava tradition founded by the Bengali saint Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486-1533 CE), a gender-fluid *avatara* of Radha and Kṛṣṇa. Caitanya left behind only an 8-verse poem, the *Śikṣāstaka*. The entirety of Gaudīya Vaisnavism emanates from the wisdom of the *Śikṣāstaka*, as extensively elucidated by his immediate followers and biographers. Verse six of the poem states: "*With eyes flowing tear-streams, voice faltering, words choked, with ecstatic feelings in body, when shall I be able to chant your divine name?*" At the end of the poem Caitanya introduces the term *prema-rasa bhakti* (i.e. perfected or fully-blossomed love). In just a handful of verses Caitanya is mapping the path of an embodied devotion that leads to ecstatic love. Through the lens of *prema-rasa* we can ask further: can the nature of the Name be known through the exterior and interior effects of its recitation? I don't want to get bogged down in an exhaustive list of signs, symptoms and sensations consequent to name-glorification and god-embodiment. Rather, I would like to offer an impression of the Gaudīya devotional body in progress, as a reference for fleshing out one's own daily, devotional participation in the incomprehensible fact of existence.

In 1616, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī completed a 17-volume biography of Caitanya's life and teachings titled *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*. Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja left no doubt that Caitanya's primary teaching was the mantric efficacy of the repetition of the divine name, the full

embodiment of the Vedas in the vibration of "K-r-i-s-h-n-a." By reciting the divine name even once, from just a hint of the Name: the eyes fill with tears and hairs stand on end (3.20.33); undesirable habits are destroyed (3.20.11); the devotee becomes lower than the grass on the ground (3.20.22); *moksha* is easily attained (2.25.154); the devotee is equally disposed toward every living creature (2.23.155); the mirror of the heart is cleansed, miseries of material existence come to an end and one is allowed to fully taste the nectar of the Name at every step (3.20.12); the lesser signs of ecstatic emotion (*anubhāva*) appear in one's behavior as forgiveness, detachment, absence of false prestige, hope, eagerness, the urge to never waste time, and of course a deepening taste for chanting the holy name of the Lord (2.23.18-19). Kṛṣṇadāsa attested that when Caitanya spoke the name of God "... *his body trembled, and his voice faltered. He perspired, turned pale and wept a constant flow of tears, which wet all the people standing there. Eruptions on his body appeared like kadamba flowers.*" (2.25.68.)

It's the Name that manifests *bhakti* and *bhakti* is the source of *prema*, which is itself a progression through itself, a series of stages toward sweet ecstasy (*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 1.8.22-23.) Liberation doesn't liberate. It's the Name that has the power to liberate by destroying the causes of suffering and sin in conditioned existence. Because it uproots *samsāra* — the scarring of *samskaras* (impressions and impacts of all past actions and the sharpness of learning curves cut into our living corpses) — it liberates, irrespective of gender, age, social class, race, stage of life or language group. Devotional service is specifically *not* a path of speculative knowledge, beneficial actions, meditative disciplines and austerities; not jnana-karma-dharma yoga, but *nāma-prema-rasa bhakti* (*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 1.17.75).

"The fifth end of man is the sea of the nectar of the joy of prema; and the joys of moksha and the rest are less than a single drop of it. (*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 1.17.82).

In *prema-bhakti* (utmost *bhakti*) sense gratification is extremely low-hanging fruit ... perhaps already fallen to the ground and rotting — ask for that, and it shall be given ... to your own detriment. Liberation is incidental to devotion. Freedom the fantasy that *jivan-mukti* (individual liberation in this life) is foolproof, durable or desirable. The dissolution of afflictive emotions, biases, karmic scarring, vicious cycles, self-inflicted anguish (*aṁhaḥ*) are byproducts of the recitation of the Name, while the intended result is *prema-upajaya* (awakening of intensely emotional ecstatic love).

"Mukti is the insignificant result derived from a glimpse of awakening of offenseless chanting of the holy name." (*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 3.3. 185-186)

PARA-BHAKTI AND SUCCULENT LIGHT

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* states that practicing *jnana* (speculative knowledge, gnosis) without *bhakti* is like beating an empty husk of rice. There's no nourishment. There's no liberation without affection — a direct experiential loving relationship with the divine. There's no devotion without devotee. No devotee who is impersonal. The impersonal *samādhi* impersonates *bhakti* at best. So, liberation is in *belonging* in *bhakti*. The devotee even transcends the object of devotion

because devotional service is God's desire. *Prema-bhakti* is not a morbid identification with the body (or a renunciation of the body or its immolation in the divine (*sayujya-mukti*)); rather, it is the realization that our living identity is that of a fully sentient servant of the Named, the realization of our *svarupa* (inherent form, our living divine bodies.) To luxuriate in never-ending longing is the beginningless glory that is merely reflected in our mundane accomplishments and relationships. One's nature — or fundamental frequency — is not bliss but the service that engenders it by settling into one's elemental affection. If God wants to be pleased, *bhakti* is how one would be pleasing (and by rejecting the deep sleep of any form of liberation.) “*My devotees do not accept salokya, sarsti, sarupya, samipya, or oneness with me (sayujya)—even if I offer these freedoms—in preference to serving me.*” (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.29.13). In the words of Caitanya: *mama janmani janamanisvare bhavatad bhaktir ahaituki tvayi:*

“Let me be born again and again as long as I can engage in *Bhagavad-bhakti*.”

The *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is the bliss-bestowing feminine counterpart to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, venerating *Devī* and other feminine *avataras* as primordial Mother of all (with our devotional recitations as engaged motherese.) The two texts were coevally collated and share strikingly similar *bhakti* methodology, with somewhat differing terminology. In the *Devī Bhāgavata* the total softening of the heart and utmost emotional state is *mahabhava* (although Caitanya also used this term, in Shaktism *mahabhava* merges the devotee with the Goddess.) The *Devī Bhāgavata* lays out a progression of four qualities (*gunas*) of *bhakti*: *tamas*, *rajas*, *sattva* and utmost *para-bhakti*. In *tamasic-bhakti* the devotee is filled with anger and practices *bhakti* in order to harm others; *rajasic-bhakti* is practiced for personal opportunism and power; the *sattvic-bhakta* worships for no rewards, wants no liberation, knows nothing greater than serving *Devī* and is situated to reach the supreme state of *para-bhakti*.

"Now hear attentively about the Parā Bhakti that I am now describing to you. Whoever hears always My Glories and recites My Name and whose minds dwell always, like the incessant flow of oil, in Me ... With hearts filled with love and hairs standing on their ends, all should glorify me with tears of love flowing from their eyes and voices choked with emotion and with dancing, music and singing with their whole bodies filled with joy." (Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa 11-20.)

Prema-rasa perfectly links us back to the beginning of *bhakti* in Andal's bodily "succulent light." *"Withering I wait in vain in Maliruncolai's splendid grove where pollen bursts, nectar drips, fragrances waft, fruits swell. I'm ready... I wait like a garland unworn."*

BHAKTI AND BODHICITTA

We are a human form of that of which God consists, and this is *relationship*, not to be given up by merging with the divine or shunning the corporeal. Just as one has a civic duty, one has a devotional service to fulfill. The experiencer is responsible for the experience of the experienced. One term Gaudīya-Vaishnavism uses to express — or finesse — this play of devotional intra-distinction is *acintya bheda abheda* (inconceivable difference-in-nondifference). This is somewhat akin to *atiyoga* (utmost yoga) wherein *samsara* and *nirvana* are the same phenomenon

naturally arising from primordial wisdom ... with no elsewhere to be liberated into or away from. While the goal of *bhakti* is ecstatic service in the name of God, *atiyoga* evokes the practice of an engaged humility for the benefit of all sentient beings, aka the realization of *bodhicitta* "enlightened heart" in which compassion, wisdom and emptiness are selfsame. Both *bhakti* and *bodhicitta* are "utmost" paths that ultimately meet at a single word "*amṛta*" which can be translated as "nectar" or "ambrosia" or, less equivocally, "immortality," an inner alchemical process of having transformed the basic poisons of life into the vibration of pure love. (*Bhakti* as *ambrosial prosody* is matter for a further, fairly unfathomable tantric essay ... or to be simply left to its enactive expression.) Of course, *bhakti* arose in sixth century Tamil Nadu by booting the Buddhists out of the land, to be supplanted by intimate, ecstatic, love-struck, possessive relationships with the local Lords, Śiva and Vishnu. The enlightened heart of a *bodhisattva* and the nectar-filled heart of a *bhakta* are distinctly different devotional abodes. A bodhisattva can exhaust *samsāra*, expose the projective mind as the basis of confusion, never weary of impartially serving others, perceive all demons as loving parents, unfailingly honor every vow of *bodhicitta*, bestow countless blessings on all sentient beings ... and all this may still be altogether without meaning or purpose, void of *rasa*, for a *bhakta sādḥaka*.

Buddhist devotion to the bodhisattvas of compassion (Avalokiteśvara and Tara) notwithstanding, I think it's fair to say, provisionally, that the heart of *bodhicitta* is omniscience, and the heart of *bhakti* is omnipresence. Although, in the end, it's not necessary to draw any distinction.

A short definition of *prema-rasa* might be the *fully matured, all-consuming love for the divine*. (Then, what is "the divine"? Or "God"? At least Krishna has a narrative, then again, all gods do.) Because "*prema-rasa*" is in fact untranslatable, un-etymologizable, context-sensitive and can only be known experientially, I'll offer a more ponderous, heuristic interpretation: *prema-rasa* is the nectar of divine love induced through devotional service and poured into an unriddled heart (neither perplexed nor punctured by greed hatred and ignorance) of a devotee who, as humble as a blade of grass, seeing God in all things, recites the holy name, not as a string of letters or shadow of the name but the whole name, a pure phonic entheogen, which is non-different from the consciousness of the divinity that is adored. Divinity and devotee are embodied by the Name as bliss-being, tasted as complete sweetness.

Specifically, the Name (Īśvara or Krishna for Gaudīyas) is the same as the deity because it is self-manifesting and imbued with the deity's *svarūpa-śakti* (essential, inherent energy, or *vibration*), as distinct from the material (*prākṛta*) illusory energy of *māya-śakti*, and because being-consciousness-bliss is the form of which it (the Name) consists. (A vastly integrative imagination is required to even approach this insight.) This name-soteriology is why the recitation of the name is most efficacious in our dissolute age: it provides a transcendent vibration that manifests as a *nāma-avatāra* to save the world from ignorance through the vehicle of the human voice. It can't be said that we are the source of our vocalizations, not when *prema-rasa* bursts forth, nor when we speak through the emotional, interactional impetus of *prosodic-bhakti*. (An evolutionary science of the co-emergence of language and devotion in the offing?)

"The name Krishna is a wish-granting gem, has a body (vigraha) consisting of consciousness (caitanya) and nectar (rasa), and is completely full, pure and eternally free (nitya-mukta) due to

the nondifference (abhinnatva) between the name and the possessor of the name." (Caitanya Caritāmṛta 2.17.126-1280).

Name/Deity nondifference is a practice reaching back into prehistory. Breaking down a few of the critical terms from *prema-rasa bhakti* can help us realize this practice.

(First, to clear the air: in the above paragraph, I used the term "transcendent vibration." Startling, in that I've never before written or referred to the word "transcendent." Why am I allowing it at this point? Why is it suddenly congruent? In my experience, what is conventionally meant by "transcendent" is so ... immediate and evident (as that without which nothing could exist) that I live a sort of inverted reality. The world, phenomenally precious as it is, is an evanescence heavily reinforced by our perceptions. I can't extract God from what is. It would be just as absurd to assume the power to place God in our midst. Transcendence is contradictory; an artifice that completely disappears when I open or close my eyes. It appears as a conventional schism that has obviously proven useful and served certain interests throughout our theological history. Startling, my use, serving to liberate my bias against the word.)

Taking apart *svarūpa and śakti*, we have the energy the intrinsic, without which nothing could manifest. *Svarūpa*, taken alone (before it bonds to manifesting energy as the Name which embodies deity) is simply *innateness*. What this innateness is to phenomena, unstruck sound is to the struck. Thus, the unstruck is that transcendent vibration that forms every phenomenal vibration; it has countless *avatāras*, if you will, countless tones and connotations, as one resonantly embodies one's words according to the inherent *rasik* nature of one's intimacy with the divine, whether in the mode of servant, friend, parent/child or lover — *dāyasa-rasa, sakhya-rasa, vātsalya-rasa, mādhyura-rasa*, respectively.

Within the context of *rasa-bhakti*, another way of approaching the mock schism of transcendent/immanent is through the kindred term *alaukika*. *Alaukika* is an aesthetics-laden word that can be plainly translated as "extraordinary sense perception," as against the usual desires of *kama*. *Laukika* is literal sense perception, emotion without insight. For example, it's ordinary to know that you will die, extraordinary to actually do it. An act of kindness is ordinary; *bodhicitta* extraordinary. Hurt turning into hate, is ordinary; justified moral outrage is ordinary; undercutting the basis of bias is *not*. In *bhakti*, *alaukika* is the selfless emotion of the devotee — the power of evocation to realize a name's nondifference from deity (*prosodic-bhakti* would say "any name.") The mere suggestion of a name as a body of bliss-consciousness is an overwhelmingly ample cause, especially given the tools of *sādhana, sangha, samkirtana*, word yoga and poetic fervor (always, every time, unbegun.)