

David Gordon WHITE (1996): *The Alchemical Body. Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*, University of Chicago Press

This remarkable work of scholarship and insight has seemingly sprung from the void of American academia to illuminate a living tradition that was briefly eclipsed by so-called Enlightenment 'rationalism'. David White has done his share of ground-work on his travels through India and in his discussions with those who continue to keep alive the ancient project of Oriental alchemy.

White has tirelessly scoured many texted sources and generated a notable work that will remain of interest for a long time to both aspirants and the merely curious. For the initiated, this work provides some unexpected details and historical meanderings that serve to confirm the essential intention of the alchemical project.

***The Alchemical Body** is heavy going at times, but perseverance leads to a progressive and deepening insight into the unstated dimensions of the alchemical quest. White also offers his own view of some of the differences between Hindu and Buddhist understandings in these matters.*

Although this study focuses mainly on the northern Siddha tradition, White continually returns to the commonality of intention and understanding between the geographically separate northern Nathas and southern Rasa Siddhas. White draws out a number of tantalising parallels between the Rasa Siddhas and the Taoist alchemists. His study also suggests that the more monk-like Rasa Siddhas of the south and the Benedictine monastic alchemists in medieval Europe shared a similar method and intent.

White's scholarship in regard to Oriental alchemy is unimpeachable, but he appears to have over-looked a long-standing Mediterranean interest in these and similar matters. White offers the curious suggestion that European alchemy sprang from Chinese and Indian sources.

There is little mention of the Hermetic tradition developed through the Middle and New Kingdoms in Egypt, or of the work undertaken with such minerals as antimony in the European tradition. But such omissions do not mar the essential integrity of the work.

White's most significant contribution, from a Westerner's perspective, is his demonstration of the integral nature of the alchemical project. The task does not center exclusively upon the production of empowering mineral elixirs. It also entails the development of a refined interiority through contemplative practices and breath control, and the cultivation of a somaticised consciousness through such methods as hatha yoga practice and dietary regulation.

White is himself clearly fascinated by the erotico-mystical side of tantrism and at times loses himself in the more sexually oriented interpretations of the nature of mercury and sulphur that are offered in certain tantric texts.

David White clearly recognises that the alchemical work itself is essentially concerned with the creation and intensification of an adamantine "body of light" while one remains yet in the phenomenal world. This project by far took precedence over gold-making in the practices of Siddha alchemists.

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Preface

The present work is a history-of-religions study of the medieval Siddha traditions of Hindu alchemy and *hatha yoga*, which formed two important fields of theory and practice within the vast current of Indian mysticism known as tantra. It is the religious and, more specifically, tantric features of these interpenetrating traditions that I will be treating in these pages, from both a historical and a phenomenological perspective. In the main, this will be a study of the *language* of mystic experience and expression, and it will be from the standpoint of language that I will chart out the theoretical, symbolic, and analogical parameters of the alchemical and hatha-yogic disciplines within their broader tantric and Hindu contexts. p ix

My interpretations of the language of the Hindu alchemical, hatha-yogic, and tantric traditions bear no stamp of approval from any Indian guru of any sect whatsoever. This is a textual study, one that is based, in any case, on a number of texts for which the all-important chain of transmission of oral tradition from teacher to disciple has long since been broken. In the absence of a teacher from the tradition itself, I have taken the difficult road of letting the texts speak for themselves and even communicate among themselves as the exemplars and followers of the medieval Siddha traditions under study here would have done. I hope they speak to the reader of this work as well. . . .

The twelve years' preparation this book has required of me corresponds to the standard period of preparation of a yogin in the traditions under study here. . . .

Many are the people to whom I owe thanks for their help in the preparation of this book. A great number of these persons' names will be found in the text of this book itself or in the endnotes, under the rubric of "personal communication." This group includes several of the countless Nath Siddhas who offered to share their *chillums* and knowledge with me (usually in that order) as well as fellow academics from both India and the west. p xii

1. Indian Paths to Immortality

This book explores the uniquely Indian foundation of tantrism. More specifically, this book is an inquiry into those Hindu sectarian groups that have come to be known as the *Siddhas*, which, appropriating traditions that were more ancient than those of tantrism itself, did not in fact fully flower until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As

a loosely structured religious community identified with a particular body of practice, the Siddhas have had greater staying power than the tantrikas and continue to form a visible part of the Indian religious landscape. p 2

On the one hand, the Yogis are defined (like the tantrikas of an earlier time) by their nonconformity to and exclusion from orthodox categories: they are that troubling aggregate of sectarian groups and individuals whose language and behavior subvert the canons of Vedic, devotional, and "high" tantric religion. On the other hand, they are defined by certain features of their sectarian affiliations and practices: heirs to the heterodox Pasupatas and Kapalikas of an earlier age, they are devotees of terrible forms of Siva (usually Bhairava) who besmear themselves with ashes, leave their hair uncut, and continue to adhere to the practices of "primitive" tantrism. pp 8-9

The Siddhas, the Yogis, of medieval India were both alchemists (Rasa Siddhas) and pioneers of *hatha yoga* (Nath Siddhas). Yoga and alchemy were complementary, interpenetrating disciplines for the medieval Siddhas. The Rasa Siddhas and Nath Siddhas, if they were not one and the same people, were at least closely linked in their practice. The balance of this book is devoted to proving this thesis. pp 9-10

It is in the *Atharva Veda* in particular that we find the most important foundations for the later medical and alchemical traditions, which sought to extend (indefinitely) the life span of human beings. Indeed, it is in this text that one finds the greatest preponderance of healing hymns involving the use of charms and herbal remedies to restore the ailing patient to health. At the center of this practice stood the healer (*bhisaj*) who was also a possessed "shaker" (*vipra*) and an inspired master of incantation (*kavi*). Part physician, part shaman, part sorcerer, the *atharvan* priest was viewed as both powerful and dangerous by Vedic society. For this very reason, perhaps, his heir, the itinerant Ayurvedic physician (*carana-vaidya*) was also regarded with suspicion by "good" brahmanic society. p 13

2. Categories of Indian Thought. The Universe by Numbers

Two practical disciplines that grew out of the Vedic matrix to interact with Hindu and Buddhist philosophical and mystic traditions well before the beginnings of the tantric age were Ayurveda and the body of physical and meditative techniques known as yoga. Both traditions have their origins in the Vedas, both emerge as systems of thought and practice in or around the sixth century B.C., and both continue to share common methods and goals down to the present day. p 19

This deconstruction of a perceived unity called "self" was a central concern of Buddhism, for which the reality of this world was nothing more or less than an ever-changing configuration of five "heaps" or "aggregates" (*khandhas*). Rather than there being bodies inhabited by individual souls thirsting for reintegration into a universal soul, as the Upanishads taught, the Buddha showed existence to be nothing other than a series of evanescent recombinations of appearances, sensations, conceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. The extinction (*nirvana*) of suffering consisted in dissociating the five aggregates from any notion of "self," for this was what trapped one in existence. . . .

Buddhism denied the reality of self in order to emphasize an ethical attitude towards an impermanent world characterized by suffering born of ignorance. Samkhya affirmed the existence of a plurality of selves and the reality of the world for so long as spirit (*purusa*) remained confused with nature or original materiality (*prakrti*). Vedanta asserted the identity of the individual soul (*atman, jivatman*) with the universal soul (*brahman, paramatman*) while denying the reality of the phenomenal world. Yet underlying these divergent philosophies, there remained a common ground that no subtlety of argumentation could efface. This was the concrete experience of the human body - and, as we shall see, most particularly the very concrete yogic experience of the body - in its relation to the external world. p 33

Already in Asvaghosa's (A.D. 80) theory of "suchness" (*tathata*), the unbridgeable gap that the Buddha taught between existence (*samsara*) and its cessation (*nirvana*) was beginning to yield to the irresistible force of yogic experience. A few centuries later, it would collapse completely with the Mahayana notion that the Dharmakaya - the "Buddha body" composed of the body of the Buddha's teachings - was an absolute or universal soul, a Buddhist equivalent of the Vedantin's *brahman*, with which the practitioner entered into mystic union. Once the inviolate gap between *samsara* and *nirvana* had been breached, the familiar corresponding hierarchies of the Indian cosmos came rushing in through the back door, as it were. p 35

3. The Prehistory of Tantric Alchemy

The goals of the Ayurvedic "mercurial science" (*rasa sastra*) - i.e., mineral-based pharmacy - are essentially therapeutic (*rogavada*), whereas the hallmark of religious alchemy is its dual emphasis on transmutational (*lohavada*) alchemy and elixir (*dehavada*) alchemy, on the bodily transformation of the living practitioner into a perfected immortal, a Siddha, Vidyadhara, or a "second Siva." The Ayurvedic physician's goal is to heal the man and not to create a superman. p 52

What truly sets tantric alchemy apart from magical alchemy is the rigor of its method and the remarkable breadth of the botanical, mineralogical, chemical, geographical, religious, and technical knowledge it mobilizes in the pursuit of its ambitious ends. Seemingly out of nowhere, the alchemical science burst upon the Indian scene in the tenth century with a laboratory full of specialized equipment and mineral and botanical raw materials in its theoretical inventory which magical alchemy had in no way anticipated. p 54

The roots of the revolution that was tantric alchemy may be traced back to the powerful impact of tantrism on Indian mystic and metaphysical speculation on the one hand and to developments within the medical schools on the other. In this latter context, a gradual phasing out of the practice of surgery (*salyatantra*) - a development some attribute to the pervasive influence of the Buddhist ideal of non-injury (*ahimsa*) - seems to have been counterbalanced by discoveries and innovations in the field of mercurial and mineral-based medicines. p 55

The fourth evolution of tantric alchemy was the tradition I will call *Siddha alchemy*, which is most readily identified by its emphasis on the combined use of mercurial preparations with techniques of *hatha yoga* for the attainment of immortality and a mode of being on a par with that of the divine Siddhas and Vidyadharas. In this, it bears certain similarities with the physiological alchemy (*nei-tan*) of Taoist traditions.

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The south Indian *ciugi* alchemists were, in the words of Marco Polo, an "order of monks," while those whom Bernier chronicles in the north were a itinerant order "almost constantly travelling hither and thither." Now, while there were many monastic orders and even many orders of itinerant monks circulating in medieval India, there was only one such order whose highly mobile members enjoyed a reputation as alchemists in this period, and these were the Nath Siddhas, also known as Nath Yogis. The Siddha alchemists were, by and large, Nath Siddhas; and because the Nath Siddhas were itinerant, they made Siddha alchemy a pan-Indian phenomenon.

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In Buddhist and Hindu traditions alike, the Siddhas shared the interface between earth and sky - mountaintops and the atmospheric region - with a horde (*gana*) of semi-divine beings. In the words of the fifth-century *Amarakosa*, "The Wizards (*Vidyadharas*), Nymphs, Dryads, Protectors, Celestial Musicians, Centaurs, Ghouls, Hidden Ones, Perfecti (*Siddhas*), and Beings: these constitute the class of the demigods." Gradually, however, the notion arose that the world or level of the Siddhas and Vidyadharas was one to which humans too could accede, and so it was that throughout the Indian middle ages, a growing pool of such Siddhas came to be shared, together with an expanding body of legend on their subject, by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains alike.

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It is a figure from Tamil Nadu, some distance to the south of the Andhra country, who first talks about the Siddhas in an informed way. This is the seventh-century Tirumular who, while he is generally held to be the first of the eighteen Sittars (i.e., the Siddhas of Tamil tradition) and the founder of the Sittar school, speaks of the Siddhas - although it is unclear whether he means the semi-divine or the human variety - as if they were already an established institution. In his *Tirumantiram*, Tirumular defines the Siddhas as those "who have experienced divine light and divine energy [*sakti*] from within and through yogic integration [*samadhi*]." Sittar tradition maintains that Tirumular was the disciple of the alchemist Nandi(kesvara). pp 60-61

Prior even to Nandi, according to Sittar tradition, was the alchemist Bogar (or Pokar or Bhoga), whose links with China are also remarkable. The Sittar Bogar, who is said to have lived in the third to fifth centuries A.D., is today worshipped at that site in the Palani Hills of Tamil Nadu where he is said to have practiced and taught alchemy. Traditions concerning Bogar cast him either as a Chinese philosopher who came to India for the study of medicine, traveling first to Patna and Bodhgaya before taking up residence in Madras; or as a south Indian Sittar, who traveled to China and taught alchemy to a ruler named Kong (his disciple Konganar, according to Sittar tradition) before returning to south India.

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While the Chinese have no record of having been visited by an Indian alchemist named Nandi, they do mention an Indian scholar named Narayanasvamin, who was captured and held in the Chinese court in about A.D. 649 because he knew of an elixir of life; later, in 664, an Indian physician named Lokaditya would be summoned there to serve as an alchemist-in-residence. Slightly earlier, in about A.D. 646, the Chinese offered a Sanskrit translation of the *Tao te ching* to the king of Kamarupa (Assam), purportedly in exchange for information concerning transmutational and elixir alchemy. p 62

The picture that emerges from this period is one of an ongoing exchange between India and China regarding matters alchemical, matters in which China, even if it appears always to have been ahead of India in innovations throughout this period, nonetheless looked to India for inspiration. Such is perhaps understandable, given the incredible impact Indian Buddhism was having on China. p 63

Tibet's source of mercury has long been Yunnan, in southeastern China, which shares a border with Annam (Vietnam), of which Hanoi was the major port for maritime commerce with India and southeast Asia. That the back country of Annam was rich in mercurial ores is demonstrated by a historical anecdote from China: the great mercurial alchemist Ko Hung (ca. A.D. 300) requested and received a transfer to that province, into an administrative position unworthy of his rank in the imperial bureaucracy, in order that he might have ready access to the cinnabar (red mercuric sulfide) he needed to conduct his experiments. p 64

The origins of Indian alchemy are closely linked to the figure of Nagarjuna, who, whenever one attempts to pin him down as a historical personage, proves to be quite as protean and mercurial as quicksilver itself. One has the feeling that if it were only possible to extract Nagarjuna the alchemist out of the welter of the Nagarjunas who dot the mythology and history of Indian religions and medicine, one would be well on the way to generating a coherent history of Indian alchemy. . . .

These include Nargarjuna the Madhyamika philosopher, Nagarjuna the tantric Buddhist author and commentator, Nagarjuna the Hindu tantric sorcerer, Nagarjuna the Nath Siddha, Nagarjuna the north Indian medical author, Nagarjuna the south Indian medical author, Nagarjuna the Buddhist alchemist, Nagarjuna the Jain alchemist, Nagarjuna the northern Hindu alchemist, Nagarjuna the southern Hindu alchemist, Nagarjuna the eye doctor, Nagarjuna the sexologist, Nagarjuna the *parfumeur* - so many Nagarjunas, so little time! Whereas Albert Grunwedel called him the "Faust of Buddhism," Max Walleser, the western scholar who probably toiled the longest at attempting to identify the historical Nagarjuna, concluded that no Nagarjuna ever existed! Tibetan historians have had it both ways, simply allowing that a single figure named Nagarjuna alchemically prolonged his life for 529 to 1000 years, during which he found the time to dabble in or master all of the fields mentioned above.

The most baroque concatenations of these data are the work of the Tibetans, whose "prophecies" concerning Nagarjuna maintain that he was born in Saurashtra (Gujarat) 400 years after the Buddha's *parinirvana* and lived for over 500 years, passing the first 200 years of his life at Nalanda, the second 200 "in south India," and the final

129 or 171 years at Sriparvata, where he voluntarily gave up his life at the request of Satavahana's son. In nearly none of these prophecies - neither those of the Tibetans nor the Indian or Chinese sources upon which they drew - is Nagarjuna ever referred to as a Siddha; on the other hand, the name of this figure alternates between Nagarjuna, Nagabodhi, Nagahbodhi, Nagahvaya, and Nagaraja. His amazing longevity is a tenable proposition only if one is prepared to accept the notion, as the Tibetans did, that Nagarjuna's alchemy served to dilate his life span. pp 69-70

The tenth-century twilight of magical alchemy is also the dawning of no fewer than three distinct forms of tantric practice from within and beyond the borders of India. On the one hand, we observe the emergence of tantric alchemy, which combines an "external" transmutational and elixir alchemy with the "internal," but nonetheless concrete (and explicitly hydraulic) practices of *hatha yoga* and tantric sexual techniques. Its goal is the production of an immortal yet concrete *diamond body* that transcends the laws of nature. Second, there is the Tibetan Buddhist internalization of alchemy into a meditative and ritualized form of yoga, whose goal is the acquisition of a spiritualized *body of light*. Third, there is the Hindu Trika Kaula, which sublimates the same concrete hatha-yogic and sexual techniques into a meditational and ritual system whose goal is the acquisition of a divinized *body of sound*. p 72

4. Sources for the History of Tantric Alchemy in India

A comparative overview will offer insights into what the medieval mystics of India - Buddhists, Hindus, Jains (and later Muslims), yogins and alchemists alike, from Tibet to south India - considered to be their heritage. In the words of Giuseppe Tucci, the "Siddhas are the most eminent personalities of medieval India's esotericism and represent the ideal link between Sivaism and Vajrayana, indeed the expression of the same religious and mystical endeavor, translated through analogous symbols." These figures were always first and foremost Siddhas, and it would be erroneous to maintain that the inclusion of a figure's name in a Buddhist Siddha list made him a Buddhist, or that a name figuring in a Rasa Siddha list necessarily made that person an alchemist. The Siddhas, a pool of wizards and demigods, supermen and wonder-workers that all south Asians (and Tibetans) could draw on to slake the thirst of their religious imagination, were the most syncretistic landmarks on the religious landscape of medieval India. p 80

In the final analysis, the myriad Siddha lists of eleventh-to-fifteenth-century India provide us with a pool of names, mystic disciplines, and sectarian orientations that would come to funnel themselves into the Nath order, confederated in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century by the western Indian reformer Gorakhnath. This order, which inherited the techniques of tantric alchemy from the Rasa Siddhas, would transform that discipline into what we have termed Siddha alchemy, the melding of external alchemy with internal hatha-yogic practice, as such was taught by the tenth-century Matsyendra and systematized by the twelfth-to-thirteenth-century Gorakh. It is in this sense that all manner of medieval Indian traditions have been quite correct in their *retrospective* identifications of the Nath Siddhas with the tantric alchemists, the semi-divine revealers or transmitters of Saiva and Sakta traditions, as well as with the

seventh-to twelfth-century founders of tantric Buddhism, known as the Mahasiddhas or Siddhacaryas. pp 100-101

The Mahesvara Siddhas were, generally, alchemists who did not seek bodily immortality (*jivanmukti*) as the final goal of their practice, but rather aspired to another sort of liberation (*paramukti*). Rather than a perfected (*siddhadeha*) or adamantine (*vajradeha*) physical body, the Mahesvara Siddhas' goal was a divine body (*divyadeha*) of a more ethereal, even incorporated nature. p 102

5. Tantric and Siddha Alchemical Literature

Many south Indian alchemical works cite alchemical sources of which north Indian traditions ignore the existence. Another possibility is that these were individuals whose teachings were oral, rather than written; or that these were people who were living exemplars of the alchemical arts. Such persons may be living, even today in bodies immortalized through the use of mercurial preparations. Or, like the Zawgyi alchemists of Burma, they may have lived fast, died young, and left good-looking corpses (for mercury does indeed tend to "pickle" one's epidermis, in life and after a premature death), prior to realizing a certain modicum of immortality in the Rasa Siddha lists. p 124

Herein lies the "Siddha distinction." Whereas the tantric synthesis generally ignores alchemy and relegates *hatha yoga* to a secondary role in its hierarchy of practice while placing a very high premium on worship through the use of real or sublimated sexual fluids, the Siddha traditions privilege all three forms of complementary practice. The guiding principle here remains one of controlling a universe that is understood to be a *body*, the body of the divine consort of Siva, the body of one's own consort, and the feminine in one's own body. In the Siddha play of analogies between microcosm and macrocosm, and the corresponding hierarchies of the interpenetrating realms of universal being, this body is at once a divine, human, and alchemical body, to be perfected through yogic, alchemical, and erotico-mystical practice. p 139

The tantric universe is a *pulsating, vibratory* universe, in which matter, souls, and sound are the stuff of the outpourings of godhead into manifestation, with godhead generally identified with Siva and his self-manifestation or self-reflection taking the form of the Goddess. It is a *bipolar, sexualized* universe, in which all change and transformation are viewed as so many instances of an interpenetration of male and female principles, with metaphysical categories, animals, plants, and minerals all being possessed of a gender marking. It is a vertically *hierarchized* universe, in which that which is higher, closer to the source of all manifestation, is subtler and capable of encompassing, penetrating into, and reabsorbing into itself that which is lower on the great chain of being. It is a *radiating* universe, with the source of the manifest world being located at the center of a vast network of metaphysical categories, divinities, phonemes, etc., all of which are interconnected through a complex interplay of correspondences. And, ultimately, the tantric universe is an *emancipating* universe, a universe that is primordially and virtually free: born of the boundless playing out of divine consciousness, its every constituent part, including the human body and spirit, as well as brute matter are intrinsically free. Tantrism therefore places a high premium

on experience - bodily, practical, concrete experience - which, in conjunction with knowledge, is liberating. pp 143-144

Most sources list eight primary (*maharasas*) and eight secondary (*uparasas*) minerals, nine gemstones (*ratnas*), anywhere from six to twelve metals (*lohas*, *dhatas*), and eighteen principal alchemical operations (*samskaras*). Following this, most alchemical works launch into an extended discussion of these operations, by means of which mercury and other minerals and metals are prepared and combined prior to transmutations, followed by a discussion of applications of said preparations to the human body of the alchemist, by which he is rendered immortal. Later works also contain sections on the preparations of various elixirs and aphrodisiacs, to therapeutic ends: this is *rogavada*, the appropriation of tantric alchemy into Ayurvedic mercury-based pharmacy (*rasa sastra*). p 145

Somadeva states, on a number of occasions, that he is one of the greatest alchemists on the face of the earth, and that certain techniques are known to none save Siva, Nandikesvara, and himself. In spite of his self-assurance, Somadeva, like many before and after him, copies or paraphrases large portions of earlier works. . . .

Somadeva is, nonetheless, original on a number of counts. His is the earliest work to contain the origin myth of mercury, as well as the description of a fantastic procedure for the extraction of mercury from its subterranean "wells". He is the first alchemical author to identify the nine gemstones with the nine heavenly bodies (*grahas*), and the first to describe five types of alchemical transmutations, which correspond to the five elements. Curiously, he devotes very little attention to the ninth through sixteenth *samskaras*, preferring to concentrate on the ultimate operations of transmutation (*vedha*) and transubstantiation, which he terms *sevana*. Apart from the anonymous author of the *Rasarnava*, Somadeva is the most stylish of the alchemical authors. His work bears the stamp of a powerful personality. pp 158-159

Nityanatha Siddha makes a number of statements that are more or less unique to this alchemical source. He mentions both the necessity of belonging to an order (*sampradaya*), and states that his work is a blend of his guru's teachings and his own practical experience. Elsewhere, he states that the alchemical teachings were received directly, by the Siddhas, from Siva's mouth; this mystical technique has been kept hidden in the writings of their order, which he has himself surveyed. Then follows an oft-repeated aphorism, of which Nityanatha appears to be the original source: "Neither sequence (oral teachings) without written sources nor written sources without sequence [are acceptable]. Knowing the written sources to be conjoined with sequence (oral teachings), the person who then practices [alchemy] partakes of the *siddhis*." p 161

The *Matrkabheda Tantra (MBhT)* is, on at least two counts, a singular work in the annals of tantric alchemy. On the one hand it is, in the fullest sense of the term, a Siddha alchemical work, combining the standard theoretical, yogic, ritual, and behavioral components of practice with alchemy. On the other, it is the sole Hindu work containing significant alchemical data to be a clearly eastern Indian product. p 162

The *Anandakanda* (AK) (The Root of Bliss), the most encyclopedic work of the entire Hindu alchemical canon, is a massive text, over six thousand verses in length. In its colophons, it calls itself the work of Bhairava; the apparent referent here is the tantric god, given that the entirety of the text is cast as a dialogue between Bhairava and Bhairavi. The AK is divided into two sections, curiously called "recreations" or "places of repose" (*visrantis*), which are subdivided into a total of thirty-six chapters and an appendix. The second section, entitled "work" (*kriya*) is essentially devoted to the chemistry of metals and gemstones. The first section, entitled "nectar making" (*amrtikarana*), may be termed a Siddha alchemical text, containing as it does chapters on both alchemical and hatha-yogic (chapters 20 and 21) techniques for the realization of bodily immortality, a chapter (12) on the alchemical wonders of Srisailam, discussions of initiation, etc. As already noted, it is in this work that the sole attempt is made to fuse the Nath Siddhas together with the Rasa Siddhas: this is, from a history of religions standpoint, the AK's greatest innovation.

In spite of its dual emphasis on alchemy and *hatha yoga*, the AK is, properly speaking, less a work on Siddha alchemy than an *encyclopedic* work, which incorporates and synthesizes (i.e., copies and paraphrases) all that falls within its fourteenth-century purview. So it is that the AK's anonymous author also incorporates extended discussions of Ayurvedic elixir therapy, seasonal dietary regimens, and a number of other ancillary topics into his work. pp 167-168

6. Tantra in the *Rasarnava*

The tantric alchemist tempers his tantrism and sublimates certain Kaula erotico-mystical practices with hatha-yogic and laboratory techniques (even if many of these are called *kapalika* techniques). This sublimation, of the male and female sexual essences so vital to the *yogini* cults, of the Vidya Pitha, into mineral essences to be manipulated by the alchemist, is clearly stated by Siva: "You, O Goddess, are the mother of all beings, and I am the eternal father, and that which was generated from the great sexual union of us two, that is *rasa*." p 172

The concrete emphasis of the alchemical quest is emphasized repeatedly: *Liberation [arises] from gnosis (jnana), gnosis [arises] from the maintenance of the vital breaths. Therefore, where there is stability, mercury is empowered and the body is stabilized. Through the use of mercury one rapidly obtains a body that is unaging and immortal, and concentration of the mind. He who eats calcinated mercury (mrtasutaka) truly obtains both transcendent and mundane knowledge, and his mantras are effective.*

Supernatural powers and bodily immortality, the goals of the tantric practitioner, cannot, however, be realized through alchemy alone. The absolute, Siva, too plays an active role in alchemical transformation: "So long, however, as Siva does not descend to block the impurity that impedes the soul's liberation, and so long as one's fetters to this world remain uncut, there is no way that true discrimination can arise through the use of calcinated mercury." Divine grace implies its human complement of devotion (*bhakti*), which is also present in the alchemical synthesis, even if such is unusual to

tantrism, which places a greater emphasis on ritualized forms of worship (*puja*, *upasana*) than it does upon devotionalism. p 174

7. Corresponding Hierarchies: The Substance of the Alchemical Body

Rasayana (the "way of *rasa*"), the seventh branch (*anga*) of Indian medicine, is the most holistic and prestigious of all Ayurvedic systems of healing, taking the body to be an integrated whole, the microcosmic reflection of the universal macrocosm. Its prestige also lies in the results it promises: *rasayana* is rejuvenation therapy which, combining clinical practice with the internal use of elixirs, affords long life, whence the classical statement of the *Caraka Samhita* (6.1.7-8): "Long life, heightened memory and intelligence, freedom from disease, a healthy glow, good complexion, a deep, powerful voice, great bodily and sensory powers, the capacity to see one's pronouncements realized, respectability, beauty - all these does one obtain from *rasayana*. It is called *rasayana* because it is a means to replenishing the *rasa* and other *dhatu*s of the body." p 186

The internal application of mercury and other mineral and metallic *rasas* would come to constitute a subdivision of Ayurvedic *rasayana*. It is in this subordinate form, as Ayurvedic pharmacy, that tantric alchemy - which gave up nearly all pretension, by the fourteenth century, to being a path to immortality - has persisted over the centuries and continues to thrive down to the present day throughout India. Siddha alchemy, with its persistent emphasis on bodily transformation and immortality through the combined disciplines of yoga and alchemy, has remained more faithful to the original spirit and goals of tantric alchemy than has *rasa sastra*. p 188

As Joseph Needham has demonstrated, China stands, according to the best evidence, as the primal source the world's transmutational and elixir alchemy. According to Needham's historical reconstruction, the first-century A.D. Chinese technique of *kim* or *chin*, "aurifaction," would have been carried west to the Mediterranean world in perhaps the third century A.D. This Chinese term would then have been transliterated, by Pseudo-Zosimus, as *chymeia* or *chemeia*, later arabicized into *al-chymeia*, and introduced into European traditions as *alchymia*, alchemy. If Needham is correct, then Syria, which received its alchemy from China in the third century A.D., would have "exported" its legendary extraction technique back to the east, via our thirteenth-century Indian sources, to China in the seventeenth century. p 204

8. Homologous Structures of the Alchemical Body

The *kundalini* in the body of the yogin is an incarnation of the feminine in this tradition and thereby incarnates all the perils and joys that women can represent for men. She is divine energy (*sakti*) and female materiality (*prakrti*), but she is also a tigress who can drain a man of all his energy and seed. She is twofold, and it is in this perspective that yogic sources speak of this internal female serpent by another name: she is *bhogavati*, a term that at once bespeaks her enjoyment (*bhoga*, from *bhuj*, "partake, enjoy"), her coiled form (*bhoga* from *bhuj*, "coil, curl"), and her female sex (-*vati* is a feminine ending). As *bhogavati*, she is the serpentine female principle with the subtle body. pp 218-219

When she slumbers, "as if stupefied by a poison," in a man's abdomen, the *kundalini* is identified with human mortality, with death-laden existence, and the bondage of the ignorant, which is figured by the incessant drain of semen that she, as woman, effects in man. In this role, the sleeping *kundalini* is identified with the fire of time (*kalagni*) because the mortal who allows her to drain away his semen is doomed to be consumed by the fire of time and die. Such is the fate of a number of yogins of Nath legend. Most famous among these is Matsyendranath, who, having had his yogic energy and life force drained away by years of debauchery in a Kingdom of Women, is fated to die within three days if Gorakhnath cannot reawaken him, i.e., awaken his sleeping *kundalini*. p 219

How does the yogin awaken the slumbering *kundalini* to reverse the order of nature on a microcosmic level? By assuming a number of postures (*asanas*), by breath control (*pranayama*), and by means of a number of internal blocks (*bandhas*) and seals (*mudras*) that fan the fire of yoga (*yogagni*), the fire that consumes the fire of time (whence its synonyms *kalagnirudra* and *yamantaka*). p 220

Mercury, Siva's semen, is a poison for the uninitiated who would presume to partake of it without the proper preparations; for the initiated alchemist, however, it is the nectar of immortality. This coincidence of opposites is divinized in the Tibetan Buddhist homologue of Yamantaka - that is, of Siva as "the Death of Death." This is the Tibetan divinity named "Quicksilver" (i.e., mercury) who, although he is a "black poison-faced divinity is also the "black master of life." pp 221-222

That which is poison for mere mortals is, for the yogin who has realized, through his practice, a divine "identity in difference" view of reality, identical to nectar, *amrta*. Numerous Nath Siddhas are known for their ability to control (and charm) serpents, yet another metaphor for their mastery of the female *kundalini*, and for their ability to treat poisons as elixirs. Likewise, mercury, which is a poison for the uninitiated, becomes an elixir of immortality for the alchemist who knows its secrets. p. 222

It is a leitmotif of Nath legend that Matsyendra, the teacher of Gorakh, is much more susceptible to the lures of the fair sex, to the world of appearances (*maya*), than is his pupil, who must constantly awaken him to the reality behind appearances. To be sure, the erotic rituals of the Yogini Kaula sect of which Matsyendra was the purported founder lie behind much of this mythic imagery. So it is that the yoginis of Kamarupa, from which Matsyendra received his tantric revelation, become the "Plantain Forest" women who ensnare him, in an important myth cycle of Gorakh and Matsyendra. p 223

This weakness of Matsyendra for the fair sex is the subject of a body of legend set in the land of kamarupa, which is itself identified, precisely, with the center of the *adhovaktra*, the lower mouth or vulva of the *yogini*, but also with the same region as the *kundalini*. Once again, the locus of these myths is not only a geographical site - the region is identified with Assam, in which the temple of the goddess Kamakhya is found - but also a locus within the subtle body. Here, the geographic symbolism plays itself out on a double register: Kamarupa is both that region of eastern India from which the Saktism identified with the Yogini Kaula is said to have originated, and a portion of the body, subtle or concrete, identified with feminine sexuality. The mythic perils of Matsyendranath are very likely a reflection of a cleavage within the tantric

tradition. While a number of sects, including the Matsyendra's Yogini Kaula, incorporated sexual intercourse into their practice, others, including the Nath Siddhas whose main doctrinal exponent was Gorakh, were overly misogynous, treating sexuality (epitomized by the vulva) as a trap into which the yogin could fall and thereby lose all the benefits of his prior efforts (in the form of his precious semen).
p 235

A woman's thighs can lead to the death of a yogin, but they can also constitute a "boat to immortality." Just as the *kundalini* can both drain a yogin of his semen (in a process called "eating poison" in one source) and transmute that essence into the draft of immortality, so too the space between a woman's thighs - the Kamarupa in the midst of her *yoni* - can harbor a fountain of life for the tantric practitioner who knows his way around.

The tantric hero (*vira*) of the Kaula traditions was precisely that exceptional individual who was capable of experiencing, to its very limit, the life of the body in ways that would utterly destroy the beastlike noninitiate (*pasu*) for whom every venture into the prohibited world of feminine sexuality was a deadly enterprise. Whereas the latter, bound like a sacrificial victim (*pasu*) to religious and social convention, could only come to know pain and death through the mystico-erotic practices of the tantric sects, the former could use the same to transcend the human condition and experience the bliss of Sivahood.
pp 239-240

The medieval alchemists in fact knew of three types of sublimating apparatus (*yantras*) for the extraction (*akrsti*) of mercury from cinnabar, i.e., the naturally occurring mercuric sulfide (*darada*) in which it is most commonly found: these are the apparatus of upward sublimation (*urddhvapatana*), downward sublimation (*adhopatana*) and transverse sublimation (*tiryakpatana*). In all three apparatus, mercury is made to sublime and thereby leave behind its residual impurities in the ores in which it naturally occurs (or with which it is amalgamated), and thereafter to recondense through the interposition of cold water.

The upward-sublimation apparatus is composed of two superimposed vessels, whose mouths are sealed together with several layers of mud - smeared cloth stretched across their interface. A slow fire beneath the lower vessel heats a mixture of herbs and powdered mercury ore, mercuric sulfide, most often in the form of cinnabar. The mercury that evaporates upwards condenses on the inner surface of the down-turned base of the upper chamber, which is cooled from above by a cloth soaked in cold water (or by a superimposed cold-water recipient). The mercury that has condensed on this down-turned inner surface has a smoky lustre to it: when rubbed with a cloth, it immediately takes on the properties of fluidity, lustre, etc. one associates with pure quicksilver. In the bottom of the lower vessel there remains the dross of this reaction: free sulphur together with other mineral and plant matter, oxidized and devoid of its original mercury content.
pp 247-248

This body of Hindu practices, which incorporates alchemical and hatha-yogic techniques, bears striking similarities to an earlier Taoist tradition, which constitutes a still more graphic projection of alchemical imagery upon the subtle body. This is the practice termed "feeding the vital principle." This technique, described in a fourth-century Chinese source, the *Taishang suling dayou miaojing*, represents the human

body as a set of three "cinnabar fields," of which the uppermost, located in the head, contains an ordered hierarchy of nine "palaces." The third and innermost of these palaces, the Palace of the Cinnabar Field, is the culminating point of breath absorption, the Taoist precursor of the Indian *pranayama*. Immediately behind this is the fourth palace, called the "Palace of Moving Beads," i.e., of quicksilver, fluid mercury. Once again, the question of whether these striking parallels - between this feature of the archaic Taoist body and the "alchemical body" of Hinduism - are reflective of cultural and scientific exchanges between China and India in this period, a period following the export of Indian Buddhism into China, must remain outside the scope of the present study. p 250

9. The Dynamics of Transformation in Siddha Alchemy

The absolute emanates into the manifest universe and human bodies as a means to enjoying its boundless potential. The return, however, to unity and wholeness is, for those human manifestations of this emanatory dynamic, anything but natural, requiring as it does a forceful (*hatha*) reversal (*ulata*) of what are, in mortal creatures, irreversible tendencies (entropy, aging, disease, death). Thus, while it is the case that the process of return is, from a divine or absolute perspective, internal to the process of emanation, it is nevertheless an arduous task for the individual who would attempt to realize such through his own subtle body. p 263

The quest of the alchemist and that of the yogin are one and the same. This is the credo of Siddha alchemy. p 264

The *samskaras* are those operations that render mercury fit for transformation, for the production of new qualities in the mineral world. From another perspective, the alchemical *samskaras* may be seen as the exalted "rites of passage" of those humans who, applying the element mercury - first "generated" in the form of the "raw" semen of the god Siva - to metals and thence to their own bodies, transform themselves into equals of the gods (who, out of jealousy, asked Siva to adulterate mercury with impurities). As in the case of the human rites of passage, the principal aim of the alchemical *samskaras* is to purify a (mercurial) body that has been tainted through the process of birth, of coming into existence. p 264

In yoga in general, and *hatha yoga* in particular, the *sadhanas* ("realizations") are so many homologues of the alchemical *samskaras*. As outlined in the introductory chapter, the term *sadhana* is derived, like *siddhi* ("realization," "supernatural power") and *siddha* ("realized individual," "superman") from the verb *sadh*, to "realise, accomplish, perfect." At least one hatha-yogic source lists seven *sadhanas* together with their results. These are purification (*sodhana*) through the six practices (*satkarmani*); solidity (*drdhata*) through the postures (*asanas*); immobility (*sthairya*) through the yogic seals (*mudras*); composure (*dhairya*) through the retraction of the senses (*pratyahara*); lightness (*laghava*) through breath control (*pranayama*); direct perception (*pratyaksa*) through meditation (*dhyana*); and immaculateness (*nirlipta*) and release (*mukti*) through total yogic integration (*samadhi*). p 265

Ksetrikarana, "making (oneself master of) the field," is the purification of the human body, through special diets, emetics, etc., such that it becomes capable of absorbing mercurial preparations. Although the ingestion of such preparations constitutes the

eighteenth and final *samskara*, the preparation of the body, analogous in certain ways to the preliminary purification of mercury, must be undertaken well in advance of its ingestion.

p 266

If life is, as the Buddha said, to be regarded as a disease or a wound, then it is appropriate to liken mercury to a *healing virus* (from *vir*, the Indo-European root denoting masculinity - as in *semen virile* and, by extension, *virility*) which takes over the body into which it enters, transforming human tissue into alchemical diamond or gold - gold which, in the immortal words of the Brahmanas, "is immortality."

pp 268-269

It is in the medical tradition that the theories and techniques pertaining to the preparation of the body as field are most fully developed. In its rejuvenation therapy, the term *ksetri karana* refers to the preparation of the body for the medicines that will be absorbed in the treatment per se. This class of treatments - called *samsodhana cikitsa*, "purificatory medicine" or *pancakaramani*, "the five treatments" - combines such clinical treatments as emetics, purgatives, sudation, etc. as means to purifying the body by voiding it of the elements responsible for its humoral imbalance. At the end of these five sequences - each a fortnight in duration and interspersed with five-day rest periods - the rejuvenation therapy proper may begin.

pp 270-271

Simultaneous to his preparation of the mercury he will eventually ingest, the alchemist must also prime his body, in order that it be capable of absorbing that potent elixir. Here, *ksetri karana* means observing, over a fifteen-day period, a strict purificatory diet which effects, through the same five treatments as those employed in rejuvenation therapy, the evacuation of every bodily impurity with which the mercury might abreact. As a result of this operation, the body becomes a field in which a mercurial seed (*rasa-bija*), when ingested, will germinate. The fruit this seed will produce is an immortal, alchemical body.

p 271

The alchemist whose corporeal field has been properly prepared gives birth to a new, immortal self, out of the old, through the mercurial seed he has planted there. Even if the body so produced is most often called a golden, adamantine, or realized body (*svarna-deha*, *vajra-deha*, *sidha-deha*), it is in fact a mercurial body, an alchemical body.

p 271

The hatha-yogic texts recommend a combination of postures, together with a number of respiratory and "hydraulic" techniques, for the immobilization of the breaths and the diaphragmatic retention that trigger the rise of the *kundalini* and all that follows. This body of hydraulic techniques is generally subdivided into "hermetic seals" (*mudras* such as the *vajroli* and *khecari*) and contractions or "locks" (*bandhas*). These sources describe three principal locks which, effected at the levels of the abdomen, thorax, and head, work hydraulically to effect internal changes in pressure, such that breath and seed become immobilized or begin to be drawn upward. These are the: (1) *mula bandha*, ("root lock"), an inner contraction of the anus which draws the downward-tending *apana* breath upward through the medial channel; (2) *uddiyana bandha* ("the lock of the upward-flying [bird]"), a contraction of the abdomen which, by emptying the lungs, drives them and the diaphragm up into the upper thorax and causes the *prana* to "fly up" through the medial channel into the cranial vault, and (3) *jalandhara bandha* ("the lock of the net bearer"), a contraction of the throat by means of which the yogin seals off his head from his torso and constricts the network (*jala*)

of subtle channels and supports, thereby arresting the downward flow of nectar that has accumulated in the cranial vault. The conjoined aim of the three *bandhas* is to gradually restrict the field in which the volatile breath, seed, and mind may move. First forcing them up out of the abdomen, they "lock" them into the torso; they next "contract" them inside the neck and head; and lastly, they "bind" them there.

pp 276-277

In this, the tantric perspective, the phenomenal world, rather than being a straitjacket to the soul, becomes a field of play for the realized (*siddha*) individual. By extension, it is no longer *moksa* or release from conditioned existence that is the Siddha's goal, but rather liberation in the body (*jivanmukti*), in which the individual experiences the world, for himself, in the same way as does the divine absolute. Once one enters into the universe of the Siddhas, the veil of *maya* becomes as if turned in on itself. How does one escape the trammels of existence? By binding the bondsman, cutting the cords, burning the burner - and even consuming Death, the great Eater. Once bound, normally volatile mercury and breath afford normally earthbound humans the power of flight. The medial channel, when opened, becomes "the eater of Death," and the upward surge of energy that courses through it cuts through the three knots (called *granthis*) which are the sole remaining obstacles to the yogin's immortality and freedom.

p 279

Jarana, it will be recalled, consists of the stadal consumption or digestion of ever-increasing quantities of mica or sulfur by mercury, until said mercury becomes bound (*baddha*) or killed (*mrta*). This is a progressive operation, in which mercury, by taking increasingly large mouthfuls (*grasa*) of mica, in six successive operations, becomes calcinated. At each stage in this process, the mercury in question becomes physically altered: in the first stage, in which it consumes one sixty-fourth of its mass of mica, mercury becomes rodlike (*danda[vat]*). It next takes on the consistency of a leech, then that of crow droppings, whey, and butter. With its sixth and final "mouthful," in which mercury swallows one-half its mass of mica, it becomes a spherical solid.

This six-step process, by which mercury is bound, is followed by another six-step process, in which the proportions of mica or sulfur swallowed by mercury greatly increase. It is this latter process that constitutes *jarana* proper. After praying to Lord Siva that he "swallow my mouthful," the alchemist causes mercury to absorb a mass of mica equal to its own. Next, mercury is made to swallow twice its mass of mica, and so on until the proportions ultimately reach 1:6, with mercury absorbing six times its mass of mica. In this final and optimal phase mercury, said to be "six-times killed," is possessed of fantastic powers of transmutation. More superior yet is a sequence called *khecari jarana*, in which mercury is made to absorb vast quantities of powdered gemstones, the densest substances known to man. At the conclusion of this process, mercury takes the shape of a *linga*. The alchemist who ingests said mercury is immediately transported to the realms of the gods, Siddhas, and Vidyadharas.

p 292

So it is that the element earth, predominant in the lowest *cakra*, the *muladhara*, becomes absorbed into the element water at the level of the second *cakra*, the *svadhisthana*. Water is absorbed back into fire at the third *cakra*, the *manipura*; the fire into air at the fourth, or *anahata cakra*; and air into ether at the fifth *cakra*, the

visuddhi. All are telescoped, swallowed back, into the mind (*manas*) which, identified with the sixth *cakra*, the *ajna*, will, in the final phases of this process, itself be absorbed into its source and essence, the pure Siva-consciousness located in the thousand-petalled *cakra* of the cranial vault. p 293

According to legend, countless Nath Siddhas have closed themselves into wells or caves for twelve-year period to emerge with transformed bodies; six months of yogic or alchemical austerities are said, in guides to hatha-yogic practice, to produce the same result. pp 294-295

10. Penetration, Perfection, and Immortality

Whereas Indian medical tradition defines *rasayana* as the regeneration or reconstitution of the body, through the restoration of the vital bodily fluids (*rasas*), to a youthful state of health and virility, the alchemical usage of the term is a more ambitious one. In alchemy, the *rasa* in question is mercury, which substitutes itself for human bodily fluids and thereby transforms a body of flesh and blood into a golden (*svarna*), adamantine (*vajra*), or perfected body (*siddha*) body p 303

More specific to these Siddha traditions is the goal of becoming a *kavi*, a wizard. As indicated in the opening chapter of this book, the sense of the term, as it is employed here and in alchemical works, differs from the more broadly accepted usage of "poet." The Vedic *kavis*, of which the Asura chaplain Kavya Usanas was the paragon, were not only wordsmiths (poets) but also death-defying, wonder-working wizards. It is this sense of the term that is intended here and in a number of Siddha works that evoke the *kavi*. Here, it should also be recalled that the "old" supernatural power of *rasa-rasayana* was one that was to be wrested from the subterranean Asuras. pp 323-324

The *Rasarnava* compares the purity of the perfected Siddha to that of Brhaspati, the chaplain of the gods and divine counterpart of kavya Usanas, a comparison that leads us from the "subterranean" or "nocturnal" powers of the *kavi* to those more closely identified with the light-filled worlds of the gods and demigods. It is here that the notion of bodily transubstantiation, from human practitioner to *divine* Siddha or Vidyadhara, comes to the fore. Here, the intermingling, in the Siddha lists reviewed in chapter four, of gods, demigods, and perfected humans, is reflective of the essential transformation realized by the Siddha alchemist. By becoming an immortal, invincible "second Siva," he literally enters the ranks of the semidivine Siddhas and Vidyadharas, if not of the gods themselves. p 324

The human practitioners of the Siddha disciplines of alchemy, *hatha yoga*, and erotico-mystical ritual considered themselves to be divine or semidivine Siddhas *in potentia* and that beyond the supernatural powers and bodily immortality that were their immediate goals lay the higher end of apotheosis to the loftier realms of the Siddhas and Vidyadharas. p 330

As in the Taoist case, the Mobius universe of the Siddhas is so constructed as to permit its practitioners at once to identify cosmic mountains with their own subtle bodies and to enter into those mountains to realize the final end of their practice, the transformation into the semidivine denizens of those peaks. p 333-334

EPILOGUE

The Siddha Legacy in Modern India

The hermits have withdrawn deeper into the mountains or have disappeared altogether from the sight of men. Their departure has left a void in the modern Indian soul, perhaps not unlike that which has marked the American soul since the disappearance of the frontier some one hundred years ago. Something fundamentally real, something whose mere existence has been a millenarian source of spiritual solace, has been lost or is in the process of being lost. p 336

Even if authentic alchemists have become a scarce commodity in twentieth-century India, the Hindu alchemical tradition seems to have left its mark on the Indian psyche in a number of often-unexpected ways. One of these is a tendency to attribute a certain order of *consciousness* to metals. Such a tendency ought perhaps not to surprise us, if we understand tantric thought in the same way as does Sanjukta Gupta when she states that: *Ultimately the conscious bits of the universe, like stones, are also God and hence consciousness, but a consciousness that has decided to conceal itself (atmasamkoca). Here we come to the double concealment which God decides on; firstly, He conceals the fact that His true form is identical with the individual soul; and secondly He conceals His true nature as consciousness to manifest Himself as unconscious phenomena. The world of the Tantric, then, is ultimately all God, but it contains a vast range of things, from things as gross as stones to things as subtle as God.* p 337

The goals of the tantric practitioner were and remain immortality and unalloyed power in the world. Once possessed of this power, the practitioner may use it to blast or bless, to raise untested boys to the throne (Bhagavantnath and Prthivinarayan Sah) or to curse entire cities to destruction (as Dharamnath did to Pattan). The men in saffron have not forgotten these goals. p 348