

**The Yoga of the Mahāyogin:
Reflections on Madeleine Biardeau's "Cosmogonies Purāṇiques"**

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In the fall of 1978, Madeleine Biardeau and Charles Malamoud graciously admitted me into their seminars at the V^e Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, which I attended for three years: 1978-1980 and 1985-1986. Their teaching, guidance, and support have continued to nurture my own scholarship over the decades, a fact reflected in my frequent citations of their publications in my writing. Among all of Madeleine's numerous insightful scholarly productions, the one I have had the most frequent recourse to in both my teaching and writing has been her remarkable work on Puranic cosmogony. Here, I am speaking of a monograph-length study that appeared in three issues of the *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* between 1968 and 1971 under the title of "Études de mythologie hindoue: Cosmogonies Purāṇiques." The same findings also appear in a highly abridged form in her *Hindouisme: Anthropologie d'une Civilisation* as well as in the *Dictionnaire des mythologies*, published by Flammarion in 1981. This publication was, in fact, my earliest exposure to Madeleine's masterful exposé: while a student at the University of Chicago, I translated her "Cosmogonie Purāṇique" article for the English-language translation of the *Dictionnaire*, which was published under the direction of my advisor there, Wendy Doniger. I must qualify this statement however, because in reviewing my notes from Madeleine's "Mahabharata" seminars of the late 1970s in my preparation of this paper, I came across the lecture she gave on December 12, 1978—my second day of class in her seminars—in which the topic was a close reading of a set of verses from the *Praśna Upaniṣad*, to which Madeleine juxtaposed the cosmogonic account of the *Vāyu Purāṇa*. In other words, that introductory lecture was a demonstration of her groundbreaking theory, which I now summarize here.

What Madeleine discovered—and demonstrated so brilliantly—is that in the cosmogonies of such Purāṇas as the *Vāyu* and *Viṣṇu*, both the temporal cycles of the

kalpas and *mahākalpas* and the spatial structure of the cosmic egg are patterned after the stages of meditative ascent undergone by the practitioner of yoga as described in the *Praśna* and *Kaṭha Upanishad* (KU) in particular. This latter Upanishad is significant inasmuch as it contains an early adumbration of the Samkhyan *tattvas*, which are presented as a hierarchy:

The mind (*manas*) is higher than the senses, and *sattva* is higher than *manas*. Above *sattva* is the *mahān ātmā*, higher than [this] is the unmanifest (*avyakta*). Transcending the unmanifest is the *puruṣa*, all pervading and without attributes. Knowing that [*puruṣa*], a being is released and reaches immortality.ⁱ

The same set of verses is found in two places in the KU, with the second leading directly into a discussion of “yoga,” likely the earliest mention of the term in the Upanishadic corpus:

When the five [sensory] cognitions cease together with the mind, and the *buddhi* does not stir, they call that the highest station (*param padam*). This steadfast control of the senses is known as *yoga* . . . *yoga* is appearance and disappearance.”ⁱⁱ

I will discuss the meaning of the term *mahān ātmā* later in this paper. Here, however, I first wish to complete Madeleine’s exposé of the Upanishadic origins of Puranic cosmogony (and cosmology). Briefly stated, the supreme *puruṣa* of the KU becomes transformed into a “great yogin” (*mahāyogin*), who, in the earliest Puranic accounts of this cosmogonic process, is further identified with Viṣṇu. In the “primary creation” that generates the cosmic egg at the beginning of a *mahākalpa*, it is through yogic practice (as opposed to sacrifice, in the Vedic cosmogonic paradigm) that god, who is both the supreme person (*puruṣottama*) and a great yogin, generates the universe through the emission (*sṛṣṭi*) of the *tattvas*, which serially devolve into the cosmic egg, our universe. At the end of a *mahākalpa*, the same great yogin reabsorbs the universe, via the hierarchy

of the *tattvas* back into himself, such that throughout the cosmic night that follows the cosmic dissolution (*pralaya*), nothing remains but the *mahāyogin* himself. In Madeleine's own words,

Le Puruṣa lui-même est un yogin cosmique, un *mahāyogin*, qui, comme le yogin terrestre, laisse se déployer l'univers autour de lui en tournant ses sens vers l'extérieur. Ce mouvement d'émission de l'univers—au terme duquel on retrouve le Puruṣa à l'intérieur de l'oeuf cosmique, c'est-à-dire enfoui au point le plus profond et le plus inaccessible aux sens—appelle le mouvement de résorption analogue à celui par lequel le yogin retire ses sens du monde extérieur et se recueille ainsi en lui-même, jusqu'à son centre véritable, où toute « individualité » a disparu : les Purāṇa en effet présentent un *prakṛtapralaya* qui est exactement symétrique du *prakṛtasarga*, et le double processus se répète sans fin, si bien que le Puruṣa . . . est *prabhavāpyaya*, « origine et disparition (de l'univers) » . . . tout comme le yoga de la KU est dit *prabhavāpyayau* [« apparition à l'existence et disparition »].

This is Madeleine's analysis of the “primary creation” of the Purāṇas, reduced to its fundamentals. Deceptive in its economy and elegance, it stands to my mind as a major breakthrough inasmuch as it offers a window onto Hindu category formation, aligning philosophical concepts from the Upaniṣads with the temporal and spatial parameters of the Puranic universe. Madeleine's wide-ranging survey nonetheless gives rise to several new questions, many of which she poses to herself and her readers in the 144 pages of her densely written study. Prominent among these is the identity of the “great yogin” who generates the cosmic cycles through his yoga.

The earliest attestation of the term *mahāyogin* is found in the *Mahābhārata*, the massive epic that was the primary focus of so much of Madeleine's writing and research and, in terms of chronology, a work whose compilation falls between the period of middle Upaniṣads like the *Kaṭha* and that of such early Purāṇas as the *Vāyu*. The term is employed perhaps a dozen times in the *Mahābhārata* itself, with the sole mythic narrative involving a *mahāyogin* (actually, two *mahāyogins*) appearing in the late Mokṣadharmaparvan of the epic's twelfth book. In this account, the *mahāyogins* who are

pitted against one another are Kāvya Uśanas, the *purohita* of the Daityas, and the god Śiva. After Kāvya Uśanas has forcefully entered the body of Kubera and plundered his wealth, the disconsolate god appeals to Śiva, saying “Now that I have been besieged by the yogic self (*yogātmakena*) of Uśanas, my wealth is gone, and that great ascetic has slipped away on a path of his own yogic making.”ⁱⁱⁱ Śiva eventually spears his rival *mahāyogin* on his pike (*śula*), and tosses him into his mouth. Then, “the mighty Uśanas entered [into] Maheśvara’s stomach, and . . . moved around there.”^{iv} By virtue of his own great yogic power, he is able to survive the fiery energy of Śiva’s *tapas*, but, feeling the heat, he implores the god to release him. This Śiva does, ejaculating him as a drop of semen, whence Kāvya Uśanas’s well-known sobriquet of Śukra, a term that means “semen,” but which is also the name of the planet Venus, for which this myth is an etymological explanation.

This epic account of two great yogins brings us up short, because it is clear that neither of the two is practicing yoga in the sense of sensory introversion or meditative ascent through the Samkhyan *tattvas*. In the case of Kāvya Uśanas at least, yoga appears to have more to do with injecting himself into another creature’s body, a strategy that works with Kubera (a non-yogin) but that fails with Śiva (another *mahāyogin*). In fact, every one of the four mythic accounts of individuals identified as yogins in the *Mahābharata* describes their yoga in the same terms as that of the *mahāyogin* Kāvya Uśanas: that is, as the (usually) forceful penetration of another creature’s body.^v This is also the defining feature of the yoga practiced by the countless yogins of later myth from the medieval, pre-colonial, and colonial periods, ranging from the *Bhagavadajjukīya*, a seventh-century south Indian farce to the mid-twentieth-century chapbook story of *Bhairavānand Yogī*. The same scenario is also found in the *Maitri Upaniṣad*—a work that was likely coeval with the books of the *Mahābharata* in which stories of yogins are found—in which a sage named Śākāyanya penetrates the body of a king to initiate him into the secrets of yoga from within the latter’s heart.^{vi}

Undoubtedly, the best-known divine yogin of epic mythology is the *puruṣottama* Kṛṣṇa himself, who, at the conclusion of his teachings to Arjuna on “yoga” in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, demonstrates his “masterful yoga” (*yogam aiśvaram*) by revealing his

universal form (*viśvarūpa*) as he shows his to be a body which, coterminus with the entire cosmos, both contains and is simultaneously present in—or as—every creature in the universe.^{vii} Throughout this chapter, Arjuna refers to the god not as a *mahāyogin* but rather as a *yogeśvara*, a “master of yoga,” but in it we see Kṛṣṇa doing the same things that yogins and *mahāyogins* do in other epic narratives: swallowing and injecting himself into the bodies of creatures. Indeed, in another passage from the epic’s sixth book, the fact that the *yogeśvara* Kṛṣṇa’s “masterful yoga” is based on a human prototype is stated explicitly: “People who are of an ignorant, deluded nature confuse Vāsudeva with a self-magnifying yogin who has penetrated a human body.”^{viii}

An epic source that Madeleine does *not* reference in her exhaustive study is the 289th chapter of the Śānti Parvan. Entitled “An Understanding of the Yogi,” this chapter comprises an analytical description of the “masterful yoga” of master (*īśvara*) yogins:

Yogins who are without restraints [and] endowed with the power of yoga (*yogabalānvitāḥ*) are [so many] masters (*īśvarāḥ*), who enter into [the bodies of] the Prajāpatis, the sages, the gods, and the great beings. Yama, raging Antaka, and death of terrible prowess: none of these masters the yogin who is possessed of immeasurable splendor . . . A yogin can lay hold of several thousand selves, and having obtained [their] power, he can walk the earth with all of them. He can obtain [for himself] the [realms of the] sense objects. Otherwise, he can undertake terrible austerities, or, again, he can draw those [sense objects] back together [into himself], like the sun [does] its rays of light.^{ix}

Entering into other bodies in order to control them, or drawing the powers of those bodies into himself to increase his own powers: these are the hallmarks of the epic yogin’s yoga. In the light of these data, then, the question that must be posed is: what is the nature of the yoga of the Puranic *mahāyogin*? The final verses of this same epic chapter portray the culmination of the yogin’s practice, which is at once an ascent through the *tattvas* to the highest path, a penetration into every entity in the universe, and an identification with Nārāyaṇa:

When his self-magnifying self (*mahān ātmā*) and the magni-ficent (*mahān*) [universe] have fused into one another, a yogin may enter [into] women, men and the assemblies of Gandharvas, the quarters of the sky, the hosts of Yakṣas, the mountains and the serpents, and the clouds together with the forests and all the rivers, and the terrible oceans and all the mountain peaks, and the ancestors and serpents and all the divinities, [and] verily the immaculate overlord of men together with the stars, . . . [the elements of earth, fire and water], and supreme Nature (*prakṛti*) [together with the three *guṇas*] and the six high-minded sons of Brahmā and the six-faced [Skanda-Kārttikeya] and Dharma and Bhava and the boon-granting Viṣṇu, Brahmā the master and . . . indeed *That*, the magni-ficent highest *brahman*. He is liberated shortly thereafter . . . Surpassing all mortal yogins, [the yogin]—whose body is the magni-ficent [universe] and whose self is Nārāyaṇa—acts.^x

This rise through the Indian chain of being that is simultaneously a realization of one's identity with the whole of Being revisits an conundrum introduced in the Upaniṣads, which proposed the same two incompatible models of transcendence. That conundrum may be phrased as follows: how can a virtually liberated being rise up out of himself all the while knowing that there is nothing outside of himself?^{xi} While the Upaniṣads do not offer a solution, passages like this one do, in no small part through the use of the term *mahān ātmā*, which I have translated here as “(self)-magnifying self.” As the nominative singular of the present active participle of *MAH, a verb root which from the epic period forward carried the sense of “magnify,” *mahān* may be literally translated as “magnifying.” It is the cognate of the Greek *megas*, the Latin *magnus*, and the English *much*. Combined with *ātman*, *mahān* must be read in this context as the “(self)-magnifying self,” in other words, a self whose attribute of expansiveness empowers it to become coterminus with the entire magnified or magni-ficent universe (*mahān*, or the neuter form *mahat*).^{xii} *Mahān ātmā* is, of course, the term for the third Samhkyan *tattva* as enumerated in *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 3.10-11 and 6.7-8. It is also, I would argue, the source of the name of *maharloka*, the fourth of the seven worlds of Puranic cosmology, a world whose ambiguity—an entirely appropriate term in this context—Madeleine notes and

dwells upon for several pages in her study,^{xiii} noting that “le Viṣṇu [Purāṇa] explique le *pralaya* comme l'effet du désir de Viṣṇu de recueillir en lui toutes les créatures et conclut son récit en montrant que Vāsudeva est devenu *mahān ātmā*.”^{xiv} If, as is clearly shown to be the case in the epic passage just cited, the goal of human yogins was to realize a universal body like that of the supreme person, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, then the world to which such beings ascend at the end of a *kalpa* would have to be one that encompasses the triple world below it, yet which is also situated spatially below the fifth world of rebirth (*janarloka*) and the two worlds of release from rebirth and absorption into the absolute godhead through renunciation (*tapoloka* and *brahmaloka*).

In my opinion, it is only because she equated “yoga” with “renunciation” that Madeleine failed to grasp this distinction and solve for herself the significance of the name and location of this fourth world. In fact, there exists a wealth of data, from both philosophical and mythological sources, that further support my hypothesis. Here, I am thinking in particular of the *prakṛtilayas*, a term found in Yoga philosophy to denote those practitioners who choose, at the culmination of their practice, to remain absorbed in *prakṛti* in a state “like liberation,” as opposed to the superior state of disembodied (*videha*) liberation. This vision, of a “two-tiered cosmography of salvation” which locates embodied yogins below realized disembodied *mumukṣus*, is one that recurs throughout later Hindu soteriologies, both Puranic and Tantric.^{xv} Its philosophical foundations are the subject of a recent masterful study by Angelika Malinar.^{xvi}

There remains a problem with my analysis, however, and that is the depiction in the Purāṇas which Madeleine uses to demonstrate her theory, of the *mahāyogin* Viṣṇu as falling into a “yogic sleep” (*yoganidrā*) when he reabsorbs the worlds at the end of a *kalpa* or *mahākalpa*. Of course this is what Puranic mythology and medieval iconography depicts when it portrays the god lying on his serpent couch in the midst of the ocean of cosmic dissolution. The relationship between Viṣṇu’s yoga as meditative ascent and the state of sleep is clear enough here: already in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the state of deep sleep (*susupti*) is one in which the “the person made of knowledge (*vijñānamayaḥ puruṣa*) moves along the seventy-two thousand channels called *hitā*, and through them

reaches . . . the citadel of the heart.”^{xvii} However, as Madeleine herself notes, while the meditative trance of the Puranic *mahāyogin* may be a type of sleep, it cannot be qualified as a state of total or “unsupported” *samādhi*.^{xviii}

It is only in certain Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas, however, that the *mahāyogin* is depicted as entering into a state of yogic sleep to reabsorb the same universe that he had emitted at the beginning of a *mahākālpa*. Furthermore, in the Śaiva Purāṇas, the *yogeśvara* Śiva achieves the same result through dance rather than sleep. One may therefore conclude that a *mahāyogin*'s practice of yoga at the end of time need not entail “sleep.” But what of the compound *yoganidrā* itself, which appears in a number of Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas to denote Viṣṇu's practice? As Madeleine argues, this is a mythologization of the state of *savikalpasamādhi*, in which a divine yogin retains certain mental formations because, in her words, “il ne faut pas perdre toute trace du monde différencié pendant le sommeil.”^{xix}

A 1999 article by André Couture, which takes up the question of the name of Yoganidrā, the goddess who figures so prominently in the *Harivaṃśa* account of the birth of Kṛṣṇa, discusses this compound in a new light by setting it against the backdrop of Indian Realpolitik.^{xx} Couture's conclusion is that the term does not refer to yogic practice, but rather to “fake” or feigned sleep as a ruse to overcome one's adversary.^{xxi} Without entering into the details of Couture's argument, it may suffice to say here that it turns on the frequent use of the term yoga to mean “stragem” or “subterfuge.” This is clearly the case in a passage from the *Mahābhārata*'s twelfth book, which evokes Kṛṣṇa's use of sleep as a stragem (*yoga*) for spreading his *māyā*.^{xxii} Here, it is worth noting that the earliest attestations of this compound transpose its two members to *nidrāyoga*—“the stragem of sleep”—rather than *yoganidrā*.^{xxiii} This is a stragem especially recommended to kings, who are to “sleep wakefully” (*śayanam yoganidrayā*), both because his enemies may attack him at any moment, and because he may use their sleep against them to launch a sneak attack on them.^{xxiv} In both the Śāntiparvan and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Mahābhārata* further extends this stragem of sleep to yogins and hermits.^{xxv} Furthermore, as Kangle and others have noted with reference to the

Arthaśāstra, “yoga refers to the secret methods used to do away with undesirables, particularly the use of weapons, poisons, etc.” For example, the term *yoga-puruṣa* in this source signifies a spy who uses the guise of a yogin as his cover.^{xxvi} In this light, the *yoganidrā* of the *mahāyogin* may be closer to the various subterfuges employed by “sinister yogins” for their own self-aggrandizement than to any sort of meditative trance. The divine *mahāyogin* tricks the world and all its creatures into being swallowed by him.

But one need not see this as an either/or proposition. I would rather suggest that the Puranic compilers were referring not only to the yoga of meditation introduced in the Upaniṣads and Yoga philosophy, but also to the widely known activities of the beings called yogins whose yoga had nothing to do with meditation. Just as it they were able to “recycle” the old Vedic paradigm of creation through sacrifice into their account of the “secondary cosmogony” regulated by the god Brahmā, so too, they found a way to retain the multiple senses of the term yoga/yogin that were in vogue at the time. As such, my reflections in no way undermine Madeleine’s groundbreaking discoveries: rather, they complement them. The phases of Puranic cosmogony are still governed by the practice of a divine *mahāyogin*; however, his practice is not limited to meditative “appearance and disappearance.” Rather, they are also informed by epic and Puranic understandings of yoga practice—or perhaps more properly speaking, of “yogin practice”—which comprised not only mystic ascent, but also the physical penetration of every body in the universe, and ultimately of the entire universe itself.

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- ⁱ Kaṭha Upaniṣad 6.7-8.
- ⁱⁱ Kaṭha Upaniṣad 6.10-11.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Mahābhārata 12.278.12.
- ^{iv} Mahābhārata 12.278.18-20.
- ^v White, David Gordon. 2009. *Sinister Yogis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 141-51.
- ^{vi} Maitri Upaniṣad 6.29-30.
- ^{vii} Bhagavad Gītā 11.5-8. Cf. Malinar, Angelika. 2007. *The Bhagavadgītā. Doctrines and Contexts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 146-48, 156-63.
- ^{viii} Mahābhārata 6.62.20, quoted in Malinar 2007 *op. cit.*, p. 151, n. 148. I have slightly altered her translation.
- ^{ix} Mahābhārata 12.289.24-27.
- ^x Mahābhārata 12.289.58-61, 62b.
- ^{xi} Madeleine Biarreau discusses these two paradigms of transcendence in CP II (1969), pp. 69-70.
- ^{xii} James Fitzgerald (2008. The Sāṃkhya-Yoga “Manifesto” at MBh 12.289-290, John Brockington (ed.), *Battles, Bards, Brahmans. Papers from the Epics Section of the 13th World Sanskrit Conference. Edinburgh, 10th-14th July 2006*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p.199, n. 39) argues for a similar reading of the term here. The same would apply to the term *mahātman* when it is applied to a yogin in these contexts.
- ^{xiii} CP III (1971), pp. 38-44.
- ^{xiv} Vāyu Purāṇa 6.3.16, cited in CP III (1971), p. 41.
- ^{xv} White 2009 *op. cit.*, pp. 99-114.
- ^{xvi} Malinar, Angelika. 2010. Something Like Liberation: *prakṛtilaya* (Absorption in the Cause/s of Creation) in Yoga and Sāṃkhya, in Andreas Bigger et al. eds., *Release from*

Life – Release in Life: Indian Perspectives on Individual Liberation, Bern: Peer Lang, pp. 129-56.

^{xvii} Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.1.19.

^{xviii} CP II (1969), p. 74.

^{xix} CP II (1969), p. 75.

^{xx} Couture, André. 1999. The Problem of the Meaning of Yoganidrā's Name, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 27, pp. 35-47.

^{xxi} *Ibid.* p. 35.

^{xxii} *Ibid.* p. 37-38, citing MBh 12.47.30/76*, 47, 48.

^{xxiii} Noted in Biardeau, CP II (1969): 75 and Couture 1999 *op.cit.*, p.38-39.

^{xxiv} *Hitopadeśa* 3.75 cited in Couture 1999 *op. cit.*, p.42.

^{xxv} Mahābhārata 12.47.35; Bhagavad Gītā 2.69.

^{xxvi} R. P. Kangle, R. P. 1986. *The Kautilyan Arthaśāstra*, 2 vols., Bombay: University of Bombay, vol. 2, p. 39, cited in Couture 1999 *op. cit.*, p. 45, n. 18.