

**Religion and the Arts**  
*A Journal from Boston College*

**Volume 12 (2008)**



**BRILL**

LEIDEN • BOSTON

#### Instructions for Authors

Manuscripts should follow the *MLA Style Manual*, and be sent in triplicate. If you wish the manuscripts returned, enclose a self-addressed envelope. Articles, normally 5,000 to 10,000 words, are refereed and should be designed for a diverse audience. We invite scholars to develop essays on the religious frontiers of their fields; creative artists to formulate the issues which influence their work; specialists in religion and the arts to develop the principles of their approaches, especially where these illuminate works of art in some detail. We also welcome proposals for review essays and other ways of assessing the field of religion and the arts. If the article is accepted, a disk will be requested. Also needed will be an abstract of 150–200 words and 2–6 keywords. Authors are responsible for supplying illustrations, obtaining all necessary permissions, and for paying reproduction/permission fees. The journal may occasionally help with such fees. Photocopies of all illustrations should be submitted with the article; the original photographs will be requested after the manuscript has been accepted for publication. Documents granting permission should be kept by the author. Illustrations (photographs, slides, transparencies, color prints) should be of good quality, and if possible marked on the reverse side with the author's name and the figure number. If there is a question about the top of the illustration, "top" should be written at the appropriate edge. Marking should be done on a separable label, or by means of a felt-tip pen or lightly used pencil. Images will be returned to authors after publication.

BRILL  
LEIDEN • BOSTON

© 2008 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands  
Koninklijke Brill NV incorporates the imprints BRILL, Hotei Publishing,  
IDC Publishers, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers and VSP.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use is granted by the publisher provided that the appropriate fees are paid directly to Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Suite 910, Danvers MA 01923, USA. Fees are subject to change.

Printed in the Netherlands (on acid-free paper).



BRILL

*Religion and the Arts* 12 (2008) 266–276

RELIGION  
and the ARTS

www.brill.nl/art

## Pranayama: Breathing from the Heart

Richard Kearney

*Boston College*

---

### Abstract

This essay is a testimonial account of the author's apprenticeship with a yoga teacher in the Hindu pilgrimage town of Rishikesh, Northern India. It explores the meeting of Western and Eastern attitudes to spirituality, desire, the body, study, and breathing. In particular, it seeks to register the encounter with the Vedantin and yogic notions of the "cave of the heart" as privileged space for prayer, peace, and meditation.

### Keywords

*Advaita*, breath, cave, desire, Guha, Guru, heart, yoga

During a recent visit to India I discovered the Hindu notion of the "cave of the heart" (or *guha* in Sanskrit). On a visit to the pilgrimage town of Rishikesh, overlooking the Ganges in the foothills of the Himalayas, I took classes with a wise teacher: a Hatha yogi called Ashish Das. Before sharing his vast learning on the Vedic heart, Ashish proposed I take lessons in Pranayama or yoga breathing. I agreed.

There was, from the outset, something slightly daunting about Ashish. It was hard to identify what exactly. His intensity was fierce and calm at once. When he spoke or moved he never looked about him. His eyes gazed but never flickered or dimmed, as though he was guided by a spirit not his own, some subtle power beyond or within him. He seemed to address my whole being, without reserve or gap, though he hardly knew me. In the face of that intensity, a part of me withdrew a little, without my wishing it, perhaps out of fear or caution, as if to yield too quickly might spell the end of the kind of life I'd known up until then. Despite my initial hesitations, I submitted to his instruction.

\*

My first class on the Vedas began with special breathing exercises of concentration and restraint. “You cannot read until you learn to breathe.” These were Ashish’s first words to me. He cautioned me with a quote from the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*: “As lions and tigers are tamed very slowly so should *prana* be brought under control very slowly in gradation measured according to one’s capacity and limitations. Otherwise it may kill the practitioner!” I raised my arms in mock alarm, but Ashish proceeded unperturbed. “Since breath is the first aspect of the body to be affected by feeling,” he explained, “this is where one must begin.” *Pranayama* exercises should only be taught in specific conditions by special teachers. Never on one’s own. The aim of *pranayama* is to help us transcend the fluctuations and addictions of our given situation by putting the body into a pattern of breathing that most people never observe. It is, in other words, a refusal to breathe like the majority of mankind, inducing one to descend from shallow chest-breathing to deep abdominal-breathing.

Ashish taught me to inhale and exhale in such a way that the spine balanced the movement of the diaphragm, the lower vertebrae drawing down with each exhalation and allowing for the release of the whole back of the body through the sacrum and lower abdomen. “It is the key to grounding,” he said. Each inhalation, by contrast, is a drawing up of the “bird of *prana*” from the interiority of one’s being, a way of allowing the energy of one’s self and of the universe (for *prana* refers to both) to infuse one’s being. The proper balancing of inhalation and exhalation enables us to reach the rhythm and depth of sleep without renouncing lucid awareness. And as an aid for this balancing, Ashish taught me to imagine small wavelets lapping against the shore as I breathed, visualizing the ebb and flow of water on sand. He also taught me to imagine my breathing as a swarm of bees entering and exiting a hive, each expiration emitting a buzzing sound with vibrating closed lips and internalizing this sound until one felt reverberations deep inside the breast bone. This technique is known as *Bramari*. The reason for practicing *pranayama* like this before studying was, Ashish explained, to “appease the fluctuations of the mind.” By carefully retaining and expelling breath, consciousness can become calm and centered. No reading without breathing. Ashish repeated this time and again, glancing across at the volume of Upanhisads awaiting us on the table. First inhale, then listen. In-spire to be inspired.

The hardest thing for me in all this was to try not to try. For the more I tried the more the breath eluded me. Yet Ashish kept reminding me that one can only change one's breath by watching it, listening to it, by *not trying to change it*.

After the first three exercises of *pranayama*—deep breathing, cleansing breathing, restrained breathing—I sat with Ashish in the cloistered Academy garden, flowering with blazing red bougainvillea. Here he instructed me in some basic Sanskrit lessons on the *guha*, or “cave of the heart.” The passages he selected were chiefly located in the sacred Vedanta scriptures, most especially the Upanishads. Ashish brought along the Sanskrit originals with commentaries by Swami Chinmayananda.

The first passage we looked at together was from the opening chapter of the Kaivalya Upanishad: *parena nakam nhitam guhayam vibhrajadetadyat-ayo visanti*. Rendered into English this reads, “Higher than heaven, seated in the cave of the heart [*guhayam*], it shines, which the seeker attains” (1:3). What struck me most, I told Ashish, was that the shining truth which the seeker desires is larger and higher than the heavens themselves but is to be discovered at the very bottom of the innermost vault of the heart. Delighted by my getting this paradox, Ashish quickly turned to chapter 18:61 of the Bhagavad Gita where Krishna reveals to the warrior, Arjuna, that “God dwells in the heart of all beings [*brddese*] . . . which turn and spin through the wonder of His illusive power.” Here again, explained Ashish pointing to his chest, we encounter the image of the highest divinity residing within the most intimate core of our being—the innermost space where the source of power invisibly resides.

But it was really only when we opened the pages of the Katha Upanishad that the Vedantin imagery of the heart, gravitating around the ancient Sanskrit tropes of *guha* and *hyrd*, leapt from the page. Sitting beside me with the old leather-bound edition spread wide on his knees, Ashish chose six particular verses that, he confided, had deeply inspired the souls of countless siddhus and swamis throughout the ages.

He cast a slightly grave look as he spoke. Was he simply being respectful of the Vedantin codes of esoteric discretion? I wondered. Or was he looking deep inside me and recognizing a conflict between pilgrim and spectator? The genuine searcher of the heart, stripped bare of my western academic books and computer files, versus the predatory researcher of exotic Oriental verities? Which was more important, Ashish seemed to be saying, pilgrimage or plot?

I could not tell and dared not ask such questions of a teacher I scarcely knew. I waited in silence, braving his steady regard, until he eventually raised his head. Lifting the book up from his knees, Ashish read these verses aloud:

1. “The wise sage, who by means of meditation on his Self, recognizes the Ancient, Who is difficult to be seen, Who is hidden in the cave of the heart [*guha hitam*], who dwells in the abyss... he renounces joy and sorrow” (KU 1,2,12).
2. “The Atman subtler than the subtle, greater than the great, is seated in the cavity of the heart [*guhayam*] of each living being. He who is free from the willing and wishing with his mind and the senses composed, beholds the majesty of the Self and becomes free from sorrow” (KU 1,2, 20).
3. “The two who enjoy the fruits of their good works being seated in the cavity of the heart [*guha*], the Seat of the Supreme, the knowers of Brahman call them shadow and light...” (KU 1,3,1).
4. “Who beholds him seated within the five elements, him who is born of tapas of Brahma, who was created before the waters, who entered the Cave of the Heart [*guhāṃ pravīṣya tiṣṭhantam*], and dwells there, he verily sees Brahman. This is verily that [*Brahman*] which thou has asked for” (KU 2,4,6).
5. “Him, the enjoyer, who is born along with Prana in the form of all deities, who entering into the cave of the heart, abides therein, and who was born with the elements. He who knows Him verily knows Brahman. This is indeed that [*etad vai tat*]” (KU 2,4,7).
6. “The *purusha* of the size of a thumb, the Inner Self, is always seated in the heart [*hridaye*] of all living beings; one should draw Him out from one’s own body with steadiness, as one draws the pith from a reed; one should know him as Pure and Immortal” (KU 2,5, 17).

\*

Ashish almost chanted the six verses, raising up the Kathopanishad in both hands as though it were a votive offering. And as he sang aloud the breath of his living person was like a medium in temporary possession by some other, some third, some departed person or thing, some timeless spirit writing and reading and speaking itself through him. Ashish seemed lost in the

incantations to the point of self-forgetting. The white parallel stripes on his forehead—marking his allegiance to the Shivaite faith—suddenly shone like arrows sprung from a bow which preceded this moment and sailed towards some distant target situated well beyond our sight as we sat there in the walled garden. But as I imagined such things I checked myself of a sudden, wondering if I was not mysticizing this simple ordinary man standing here before me. Oriental fantasies of a Western voyeur? Despite such doubts, I went with the flow of his special presence.

“I can help you get to the bottom of this,” Ashish promised me, as soon as he’d finished reciting. “But you must be ready to reach into the hidden abyss which the Upanishads reveal in these verses.” Then, after a pause he added: “I will accompany you this part of the way. No one can do it alone.”

As he spoke these last words, it seemed that Ashish too had overcome some initial scruple or suspicion and was now ready to trust me. He raised his lids and stole a kindly glance before placing the seasoned edition of the Upanishad on a marble-topped table in front of our bench. Then leaning forward over the opened pages he started to interpret each verse for me in turn. His words were guided by Swami Chinmayananda’s commentaries, appended to his edition of the Upanishads; but I suspected from the fire in his sallow eyes that many of the insights were his own.

The first mention of the *guha*, explained Ashish earnestly, occurs in a stanza where the Kathopanishad broaches the question of self-discovery. Beyond and beneath all the fine theories of Eternal Truth and Total Mind, it suggests, resides a more intimate personal experience of the ultimate in the form of an utterly simple realization, “This I am” (*Ayam Aham Asmi*). This ultimate reality points to a deathless or “ancient” inner Self beyond the ego-self (*Ahamkar*) where our conscious surface life normally operates. This is *Atman*. But it is, the first verse tells us, “hard to see.” To our ordinary perception it remains illusive. Just as the eye, being an instrument, can only see objects external to itself but never itself. The *guha* is like the blind spot of the eye, that which enables us to perceive all things but which cannot itself be perceived. The truth of *Atman* is lodged, as the stanza says, “in the inmost recess” of our being; it is the subtlest principle in all of us, deeper than Mind, Body, or Breath. It is the Bliss Sheath where the source of life, the spark of the divine, the steam at the core of water lies. It is that truth “hidden in the cave of the heart.”

Ashish’s voice reached a mini-crescendo with the last sentence, then subsided gently, like soft rain onto earth. He sat back against the whitewashed

garden wall for a few moments before opening the Chinmayananda commentary at another particular passage which he also read to me:

It is an ancient Vedantin concept, sanctioned by the Vedas and acceptable even today, that in the cave of the heart is the seat of True Intelligence. To a modern microscope-gazer, whose philosophy rises no higher than the principle of “see to believe,” this statement may read as absurd, for to him intelligence is lodged in the brain. But if we walk from the laboratory to the library and listen to the opinion of great authors of what true intelligence is we shall, even today, hear a quite different story. The immortal Shakespeare himself has caricatured more than one of his unforgettable characters to show that sheer intelligence divorced from the softness of emotions amounts to brutality and villainy. All poets and men of letters, philosophers and thinkers, in short, all but the matter-of-fact scientists, roar in unison, that enduring thoughts can bubble up only when an intellect is sweetened by the syrup of the heart. In spiritual Self-discovery also, an intellect tempered by the qualities of the heart alone can be of service. And this truth is pointed out by the general acceptance in the Vedas that intelligence resides in the cave of the heart and Self-realization is gained through a controlled application of a happy synthesis of both head and heart.

I could not help imagining that Ashish chose this passage as a lesson for me, assuming I shared the Western tendency to value abstract reason above intuition and experience. I felt a little targeted and responded somewhat defensively. “Isn’t that a *dualist* way of thinking?” I frowned, interrupting his reading. “Isn’t it suggesting that the hard head and soft heart are two *separate* entities that then need to be brought together in some happy synthesis—after the event? And what kind of ‘heart’ are we talking about anyway? Literal? Imaginary? An organ? A figure of speech? A trope of Spirit?”

“Ah, two or not two. It all depends,” replied Ashish, relishing the challenge. He shrugged exaggeratedly, hunching his shoulders as high as his ears and opening his palms flat as if expecting something to land in them. The intensity of expression assumed during his recitation gave way to mirth. He seemed chuffed to be interrogated like this, as though it invited him to pick even more minutely through the intricate thickets of sense which garlanded each verse. “It all depends,” he elaborated,



“*who* is doing the thinking! If it is the ego-self then everything appears as fundamentally divided, separate, split. But that is only in *appearance*. It is but an illusion conjured up by the jugglery of our projecting minds. *Maya*. If, however, we consider the matter from the heart of the Atman or True Self, there is no division at all.” That is why we are told that the intelligence dwells *within* the heart. Not above it or beyond it, but *at its very core*.

“This becomes even clearer in the second verse. Look!” Ashish purred with enthusiasm. “Here we see that the old oppositions of higher and lower, external and internal, small and great, dissolve altogether when we reach the *Guba*. Atman—as the goal of all seekers—is described as the smallest of the small and the greatest of the great. The cave of the heart contains a tiny inner space—the ‘size of a thumb’ the final verse tells us—which is also larger than the universes whirling around in outer space! *Akasa*, the ancients called it. Even the minutest space conceivable, the smallest gap between the joints of your bones, even such infinitesimal chinks are pervaded by the All-Pervading-Essence. The smallest pause between the systole and diastole of your heart, between the inhalation and exhalation of your breath, that is where God resides.” Ashish paused, placed a finger on the line, and looked intently at me. “This is the opposite of dualism, no?”

After this last question, Ashish cocked an eyelid and beamed. I was beginning to realize there was quite an imp inside this yogi! As a follower of *Advaita* wisdom, Ashish was, I could see, firmly committed to the principle of One-without-a-second, the radical vision that “All is One.” Our afternoon chat in the Academy garden was proving a perfect occasion to demonstrate his belief to me, his single captive audience. He had me cornered. He was not about to let his quarry escape! But the earnestness of his mission was not without a hint of humor. There was a childlike sense of folly which I’d witnessed in some of the wise mystical people I’d come across on previous travels: the Passionist French philosopher, Stanislas Breton, who at the age of ninety would get down on all fours and play cat-and-mouse with my children; the Buddhist sage, Thich Nhat Hahn, perched on a cushion like a small Koala bear balancing on a bamboo shoot; the hoary-headed yoga master, BKS Iyengar, bellowing like a mischievous water buffalo as he flung flowers back at his devoted followers; the Dalai Lama, yawning and scratching himself like a badly behaved baboon; or the minute Lama Choquinyma, squat and wide-eyed as a tortoise in the Schechen Monastery of Kathmandu, bestowing one visitor’s gift on the other with a gentle chuckle. The heaven of Brahaloka is a place of wise

animals and birds, and the Kingdom is a place for little children where these joyful mentors will be at home.

In all my asana practices with Ashish I was struck by how he seemed to take on the shape of each creaturely pose he performed—dog, turtle, lion, cobra, pigeon, locust, crane. As if yoga was a way of taking us back to nature through the renunciation of nature. Enabling us to return to the flow of the natural universe by unnatural ways of breathing, sitting, and bending. As though we had to stand on our heads to see things right side up!

But at the time the playfulness was not enough. I was not quite done with my objections. What, I still wanted to know, about the references in the second mantra to “freeing oneself from willing and wishing”? (The humanist in me still wrestled with the mystic). Wasn’t that still clinging to dualist notions of desire as *bad* and desirelessness as *good*? And if that were so, then what *kind* of heart were we talking about? A heart *without* will or desire? A completely impassive heart? But is that not a contradiction in terms? Who could imagine such a thing?

For an instant Ashish seemed surprised by the robustness of my question. But he quickly recovered and, splicing two palms in an apex, continued in a baser voice. Again, he said, it is a question of interpretation. “It all comes down to how you see it. There are some, it is true, who take this verse’s reference to non-wishing [*Akrathus*] to mean a state of morbid inaction and impotency. It is true that certain Hindus have followed this view. But they are mistaken. For as the great Hindu sage Sankara explained, this verse refers only to those desires so taken up with external distractions that they dissipate the energies of the seeker and make it impossible for one to enter the cave of the heart. They upset the calm of meditation. But careful! [He held the palm of his hand up before me.] Even our spiritual hankering for *God* may itself become an addiction, an attachment, an obstacle to the inner repose in which the Self rests in the Supreme, in which Atman meets Brahman. To free ourselves from willing and desiring is to free ourselves from pain. Like the last line of the verse says. It is all about letting go of one’s will. The courage to abandon cravings of body and mind. For as Atman I am neither body nor mind. I am the quick of both. I am where both converge in the seat of the heart.”

Ashish concluded this last peroration with a quiet flourish, folding both hands, one on top of the other, over his breast bone.

This was surely Ashish’s way of saying the session was over. But I had one last question. It was a little rude of me to continue, but I felt I might not get another shot at this with someone as wise. “Why,” I asked, “did the third verse speak of ‘two’ beings seated in the *guba* of the Supreme? Why

did it say that knowers of Brahman will call them ‘shadow and light’? Is that not another division of the world into opposites? And just when it seemed like we had reached that insight about One-Without-A-Second [*advaita*] in the cave of the heart?”

“It may *seem* like that,” consented Ashish with a bow. “But it is not so.” He paused then, as though sensing of a sudden that my last question was bordering on idle curiosity, over-zealous inquisitiveness. He seemed to want to slow our conversation down, let things settle a bit. After some moments of studied silence, he shifted from Lotus to a version of Cobbler’s pose, turning his feet up with his hands as though reading something on the skin of his soles. He continued then in an even, measured tone. “You are still reading these words with your brain not your heart,” he said. “But you must understand this passage to mean that while the I-ego [*Jiva*] of the mind sees these two as separate, the I-Self [*Atma*] which lies beneath it, sees through the falsehood of duality. And this is true of all opposites. True Self realizes that one is but a shadow replica of the other, a copy, a counterfeit. Like a reflection of oneself seen on the surface of a mirror. If the ego is the reflection, *Atma* is the original. And since the reflection is a mere illusion, it is nothing but shadow. It does not exist. And if the shadow does not exist, then we are left with only one Self, the divine *Param-atman*, True Self of Light and Fire that dwells in the depth of the heart and illumines all things.”

\*

Ashish almost warbled as he pronounced the last sentences, so chuffed was he to have had occasion to deliver this sequence of logical propositions about what must be one of the most illogical phenomena of Vedantin spirituality. After a pause, during which Ashish poured two cups of tea from a pottery jug which one of the Academy assistants had brought and placed on the table (scarcely noticed by us), I pursued this final point. My tone was less excited now, less confrontational, more complicit. I took a sip of hot tea and, pointing to the opening sentence of the fourth verse, asked Ashish what was meant then by the Mantra 2:4, 6—the suggestion that the True Self dwelling in the *Guha* “sees Brahman” because it was created “*before* the waters,” that is, *before* the everyday universe we inhabit? Does that not betray some kind of *prejudice*, I wanted to know, against the reality of our material universe? I gestured to the things around us there in the

garden. The tea pot and cups, the table and chairs, the flowers and shrubs, the walls and trees, and our very own bodies of flesh and blood. Is this Vedantin verse not still caught up in a two-tier system where the Spirit is good and Matter bad?

“That,” Ashish calmly conceded, “is a common misconception. A matter of some dispute. No two Upanishads agree on how Creation took place. And each account is best understood as a myth-explanation of a myth-world. For each community, even each individual, comes with different cultural or personal viewpoints. But again, we must realize that deep down, these are no more than dreams and delusions. Like the famous story of the snake-in-the-rope. As long as you see only through half-light the rope will appear like a snake. But as soon as you see through this error and shed true light on your perception, as soon as your projections and conditionings drop off, you realize that the macrocosm is but a reflection of the microcosm. You discover that even this distinction dissolves. The rope becomes a rope again. *It is what it is*. In the cave of the heart we see that seemingly different worlds are identical with the transcendental Brahman. We understand that All is One again. That ‘*this is verily that*.’” Hatha yoga is one of the most ancient paths towards this oneness, Ashish explained, combining as it does the twin principles of *HA* and *THA*, sun and moon, male and female, earth and sky. It is all about awakening to the truth that *all is one*. Everything is connected.

Taking a last taste of tea—he did everything so delicately—Ashish returned his cup to the table and pointed his index finger to the fifth mantra in the volume, clearly prompted by some afterthought. “Remember, look,” he said. “See right here where it describes the *guhā*, the dweller of the *guha* as ‘enjoyer.’ The Sanskrit word, *aditi*, literally means ‘eater.’ We eat the divine! And *prāna*, don’t forget, is the most vital of elements! It is our life-force. It goes all the way down to the pit of the self so that the real self can rise up again. Only the heart dweller can enjoy the whole universe, the full cosmic breath, the food of life. For all joys of the world are joys lived in Brahman—in the blissful discovery that we partake of all things, each this, each that, for all is one. But the drawing out of this inner self into oneness with the universe is not obvious. It is not easy. We have to journey to the center of the center, the core of cores, the *guha* of *guhās*, before we can distinguish true from false. That’s why the final verse describes this work as distillation—‘*drawing out the pith from the reed*.’” “Reeds,” he repeated the word, gesturing to the flower bed near our feet, “just like these daffodil

stems in front of us, are fragile plants. The extraction of its life-force, its pure essence [*Chit*], requires discipline and delicacy. A very special kind of practice, measured and careful. Huge patience. It's hard work."

"You mean yoga?" I said. "You mean the *pranayama* exercises we did just now?" Ashish gave a complicit smile and tucked his chin back into his neck. Then closing the Sanskrit volume on his lap, he replied that this was one way, yes. But the most important thing was to descend into the *guha* yourself. What we'd been discussing in the garden for over an hour were words. Only *words*. But there comes a time to put down the book and enter the heart directly, for yourself.

"I will take you to visit Saint Vasistha's *Guha* one of these days," he said. "Vasistha was the divine Rama's famous teacher and he lived in a cave by the Ganges thousands of years ago. It is just twenty miles north of here, a few hours journey upriver. But now, it is time for you to rest."

Then rising with a namaste bow from the garden bench, Ashish placed the Kathopanishad back in its copper case and walked towards the Academy hall. His light cotton jupa flapped about him in the breeze that was beginning to gust as light faded. He strutted like a peacock, feathers aflutter. But he seemed oblivious to the creatureliness of his pose. He did not look back. I followed him as far as the gate of the Academy, where our paths parted.