

Erotic Asceticism: The Knife’s Edge Observance (*asidhārāvrata*) and the Early History of Tantric Coital Ritual¹

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Abstract

This essay examines shifting representations of the “sword’s edge observance” (*asidhārāvrata*) across a range of Sanskrit literary and religious texts. Originally a Brahmanical ascetic discipline, an observance (*vrata*) by this name is the earliest ritual involving sexual contact documented in the corpus of Śaiva *tantras*. In its tantric adaptation, an orthodox practice for the cultivation of sensory restraint was transformed into a means for supernatural attainment (*siddhi*). Diachronic study of the observance in three early Śaiva texts—the *Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā*, *Mataṅgapārameśvara*, and *Brahmayāmala*—reveals changes in ritual emphases, women’s roles, and the nature of engagement in eroticism. Analysis of the *asidhārāvrata* thus sheds light on the early history of tantric sexual rituals, which by the end of the first millennium had become highly diverse. It is argued that the observance became increasingly obsolete with the rise of Śaiva sexual practices more magical, ecstatic, or gnostic in orientation.

Keywords: tantric ritual, religion and sexuality, asceticism, Śaivism, *vrata*

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The transnational reinvention of Tantra as “sacred sexuality” in contemporary popular culture has engendered a somewhat anemic response in scholarship. While Indologists undoubtedly recognize how little New-Age “tantric sex” has to do with the tantric traditions practiced historically in Asia,² we have provided inadequate corrective in the form of detailed studies on sexuality in traditional tantric practice systems.³ The present article represents a small contribution in this direction, analysing the history and practice of a coital ritual known as “the sword’s edge observance” (*asidhārāvrata*).

By the early second millennium in India, tantric sexual practices had developed considerable variety. Without aspiring to be comprehensive, this may be illustrated by the following examples drawn from tantric literature:

1. First must be mentioned “love magic:” ritual technologies for winning the affection, or at least the submission, of a sexual partner. This is one of the major aims of rites for *ākaraṣaṇa* (“attraction”) and *vaśīkaraṇa* (“subjugation”). What makes these tantric are the techniques for acquiring a lover: the sexual acts themselves may or may not be ritualised. Love magic is ancient, and certainly predates the *tantras*.⁴ It is a key theme in the Śaiva cult of Tripurasundarī, as illustrated by the *Vāmakeśvarīmata*, one of its early scriptural sources.
2. The targets of love magic may include non-human and supernatural beings. In the Śaiva *tantra* corpus, one of the earlier and more colourful examples is a rite in the *Guhyasūtra* of the *Niśvāsātattvasaṃhitā* by which one magically transforms a female goat or sheep (*ajā*) into a woman who “fulfils all of one’s desires.”⁵ A more typical example is that of *yakṣiṇīsādhana*, rites for mastering dryads (*yakṣiṇī*), who may provide erotic and other kinds of pleasure. *Yakṣiṇīsādhana* presumably has pre-

² By “tantric traditions,” I refer to cults of a variety of deities in which texts known as *tantras* form the principal scriptural authorities. For the early-medieval period in India, these comprised mainly the Buddhist Mantranaya (“Mantra Method”) or Vajrayāna, the Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra, and Śaiva Mantramārga (“Path of Mantras”) and its offshoots; I refer to the later with the expression “Tantric Śaivism.”

³ Exceptions include the monographs of Miranda SHAW (1994), David WHITE (2003), and Loriliai BIERNACKI (2007). Among older works, Edward DIMOCK’s (1966) is particularly noteworthy.

⁴ On *ākaraṣaṇa* and *vaśīkaraṇa*, and the history of Indian magic more generally, see Teun GOUDRIAAN (1978).

⁵ *Guhyasūtra* 14.153: “Next, on either of the dark [nights], after fasting three nights, one takes hold of a ewe and smears its right ear with fresh butter. One should incant [the mantra] eight-thousand times before the southern image [i.e. face] of the deity. She becomes a beautiful woman and fulfills all of one’s desires” (*atha kṛṣṇayor ekatamena trrātroṣito ajām grhya dakṣiṇakarṇṇan navanītenābhyajya devasya dakṣiṇāyām mūrtau aṣṭasahasraṃ japet | rūpavatī strī bhavati sā ca sarvakāmāṃ dadāti ||*).

tantric roots, and is described in a range of early Buddhist and Śaiva tantric texts, such as the *Mañjuśrīyamūlakalpa*, *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, and *Brahmayāmala*.⁶

3. A third, contrasting kind of tantric sexuality involves ritualised, orgasmic coitus wherein sexual fluids are given ritual function and meaning. This is exemplified by the *Brahmayāmala*'s rites for the male practitioner known as the *tālaka*, and his female partner, the *dūtī* (“consort”) or *śakti* (“power”).⁷ Unlike the previous examples, these practices are highly choreographed and incorporated into a demanding disciplinary regimen. Though described from the male perspective, they are performed by a couple, both of whom have received tantric initiation.⁸ Oriented towards the attainment of supernatural power, their coital rituals are virtuoso performances spanning long periods sequestered in a shrine or earthen chamber; in some cases these involve groups of women.⁹ The gathered sexual fluids are both consumed and used as offerings to the deities. Although coitus is to be performed in a state of meditative concentration, gnosis and ecstasy are not otherwise emphasised.
4. Highly regulated coitus may form an element of the secret assembly or ‘tantric feast’ (*gaṇamaṇḍala*, *gaṇacakra*, etc.), as intimated in a number of Buddhist *Yoginītantras*, such as chapter eight of the *Samvarodaya*.¹⁰ A Śaiva example is provided by the nocturnal “gathering of heroes” (*vīramelāpa*) described in the *Jayadrathayāmala*. While the gathering is in some respects tightly choreographed, the erotic acts are not: the heroes

⁶ *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, *Guhyasūtra* 10.81–84. This procedure, called *yakṣiṇīvidhi* (*yakṣiṇyā eṣa vidhiḥ*), involves worship of an image that comes to life when the rite is complete: “When mastered, she [says], ‘what shall I do?’ ‘Be my wife’. He enjoys himself with her for the duration of the moon and stars” (*siddhā sā kiṃ karomīti bhāryā me bhavasveti | tayā saha ramate yāvad ācandratāarakam*). The subsequent verse (10.84) provides means for making a wife of a snake goddess (*nāginī*). Cf. *Guhyasūtra* 14.83, which describes rites for subjugating female spirits—the *yakṣiṇī*, *piśācinī*, and *bhūtī*. For a study of *yakṣiṇīsādhana* in the *Mañjuśrīyamūlakalpa*, see Miranda SHAW (2009); for a study of *yakṣiṇīsādhana* in the *Kakṣapuṭatantra*, see Chieko YAMANO (2013). *Yakṣiṇīsādhana* is the topic of chapter 65 of the *Brahmayāmala*.

⁷ The sexual practices of the *sādhaka* are examined in admirable detail by Csaba KISS (*forthcoming*). These rites are expounded primarily in chapters 22, 24 and 45 of the *Brahmayāmala*.

⁸ Thus it is that the female practitioner is required to be knowledgeable in trance (*samādhi*), meditation (yoga), and scriptural doctrine (*jñāna*), and to be firm in her observances (45.188cd: *samādhijñātha yogajñā jñānajñā saṃśitavratā*).

⁹ See *Brahmayāmala* 45.574–636 for a description of elaborate, protracted rituals performed by the male *sādhaka* and groups of seven or eight initiated women.

¹⁰ A useful list of primary and secondary sources on the *gaṇacakra* is provided by Péter-Dániel SZÁNTÓ (2014).

(*vīra*) and *yoginīs* behave as impelled by the cosmic *śakti*. Some dance, laugh, leap, give voice to mantras or to poetry, or perform *mudrās*; others copulate, consuming the products thereof.¹¹ This unscripted sexuality takes on an ecstatic quality.

5. In another mode of tantric sexuality, coitus is integral to the ceremony of initiation. Within Śaiva traditions, this is exemplified by the *dūtīyāga* Abhinavagupta delineates in chapter twenty-nine of the *Tantrāloka*, wherein coitus is highly ritualized and has an ecstatic, gnostic emphasis.¹² Combining as it does the guru's performance of coitus with an esoteric Kaula initiation, this invites comparison to the higher Vajrayāna consecrations: the *guhyaḅhiṣeka* and *prajñājñānāḅhiṣeka* integral to initiation in most systems based on the *Yoginītantras*.¹³
6. Another variety of tantric coital ritual is represented by the sexual yogas of the completion stage (*utpannakrama*) in Vajrayāna *sādhana*, such as taught in chapter six of the *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇatantra*, or in the Yoga of Six Limbs (*ṣaḍaṅgayoga*) of the Kālacakra system.¹⁴ While the *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇatantra*'s completion stage involves copious, variegated coitus, in the latter, emphasis lies on interiority, gnosis, and the sublimation of bliss. Sexual union may be actual or performed through meditative visualisation. (One might also mention visualisations of the deities involving erotic imagery as a distinct dimension of tantric sexual practice.)
7. Some sexual practices associated with the tantric traditions are markedly corporeal. A comparatively well-known, though misunderstood example is that of the haṭhayogic practice called *vajrolīmudrā*, recently studied by James MALLINSON (*forthcoming*). Attested from the twelfth or thirteenth century, this is a technique, he argues, by which the male practitioner learns to draw up liquids through the urethra with a tube, thereby attaining control over ejaculation; one may also, at least in theory, learn to draw sexual fluids back up into the body. *Vajrolīmudrā* thus facilitates sex without seminal loss. Haṭhayogic texts suggest that women too may practice this technique, the feasibility of which is unclear (*ibid.*).

¹¹ *Jayadrathayāmala*, *ṣaṭka IV*, *vīratāṇḍavavidhikramapaṭala* vv. 5–30b (SANDERSON 2007, pp. 284–87).

¹² For an annotated translation of this chapter, see DUPUCHE (2003).

¹³ An erudite historical study of the higher consecrations is provided by ISAACSON (2010), whose principle focus is the enigmatic “fourth empowerment” (*caturthāḅhiṣeka*).

¹⁴ On the Kālacakra system's *ṣaḍaṅgayoga*, see for instance SFERRA (2000) and WALLACE (2012).

These examples, which could be multiplied, intimate much of the range of erotic practice found in the tantric traditions, differing in procedure, aim, and premise, and emerging from multiple sectarian and historical contexts. “Tantric sex” is thus not a singular phenomenon, and clearer understanding of the history of tantric sexual practices requires detailed case studies. A final example forms the focus of the present essay: a distinctive coital ritual known as “the sword’s edge observance”—*asidhārāvrata*, *āsīdhāraṃ vratam*, *khadḡadhārāvrata*, or, in the less polished Sanskrit of the *Brahmayāmala* and some other sources, *asidhārāvratam*. In brief, this is a practice in which the male practitioner exposes himself to various degrees of sexual temptation without fully consummating the act, maintaining sensory restraint. It seems to me that much can be learned concerning the early development of so-called “tantric sex” through historical examination of this practice, for, uniquely, its development can be traced through a range of orthodox Vedic, literary, Śaiva, and other texts. My study of the *asidhārāvrata* ensues directly from my effort to edit and contextualise chapter forty of the *Brahmayāmala*—“The Chapter of the Sword’s Edge Observance” (*asidhārāvratapaṭala*). This is a voluminous and relatively archaic Śaiva scripture (*circa* seventh–eighth centuries C.E.) also known by the title *Picumata*.¹⁵

It has been proposed that “tantric sex” was, in its original form, principally a means for producing sexual fluids utilized as sacramental offerings to the goddesses.¹⁶ Sexual fluids do figure prominently among the impure or “nondual” substances (*advaitadravya*) offered to goddesses and/or consumed in ritual, as described in Śaiva *tantras* of the Vidyāpīṭha,¹⁷ especially the *Brahmayāmala*. Nonetheless, such an instrumental view of the role of sexuality in early tantric ritual systems seems unhelpful, given the variety and complexity of the rites attested. Moreover, coital practices in which sexual fluids were collected or consumed are unlikely to have historical precedence, for a sexual ritual significantly different in nature finds earlier attestation in Tantric Śaivism. This is

¹⁵ On the *Brahmayāmala* or *Picumata*, see especially SANDERSON (1988, pp. 670–72); HATLEY (2007); KISS (*forthcoming*); and HATLEY (*forthcoming*). The latter three publications include editions of some of the text’s 104 chapters. An annotated critical edition and translation of the *Brahmayāmala*’s *asidhārāvratapaṭala* will be published in HATLEY (*forthcoming*).

¹⁶ David WHITE (2003), pp. 73–79. Venturing into considerably more speculative territory, WHITE, citing Dominique-Sila KHAN (1994), posits subaltern roots for such practices—and indeed Tantra itself, which he opines “originated among a subaltern stratum of the Indian population that, lacking the means to procure the *dravyams* of orthodox worship rites, made use of readily available human sexual fluids in its practice” (p. 67). As discussed in this essay, the case of the *asidhārāvrata* instead suggests a degree of continuity between early Brāhmanical and tantric practices.

¹⁷ For an overview of the Śaiva scriptural canon and discussion of the “Wisdom Mantra Corpus” (Vidyāpīṭha), a division of the “Tantras of Bhairava” (*Bhairavatantras*), see SANDERSON (1988).

the *asidhārāvratā*. Besides being the subject of chapter forty of the *Brahmayāmala*, this ritual is taught in the archaic *Nisvāsātattvasaṃhitā* (*Guhyasūtra* 3.38c–43b) and in another early *Siddhāntatantra*, the *Mataṅgapārameśvara* (*kriyāpāda* 11.41–53), as well as the *Jayadrathayāmala* (*ṣaṭka* I, 21) of the Vidyāpīṭha, as identified and discussed briefly by Alexis SANDERSON (1985, p. 565).

The *asidhārāvratā* attested in tantric literature appears likely to be an inflection of a Brāhmaṇical observance of the same name: a male ascetic discipline distinguished by maintenance of chastity while lying together with a sexually available woman. A number of references to the *vratā* in Sanskrit literary sources were noted in a brief article by Adolf STENZLER (1886). In the *History of Dharmasāstra*, vol. V.1, P. V. KANE (1974, p. 266) summarises the discipline as follows (with abbreviations expanded):

... one has to sleep on bare ground, to bathe outside [the] house, eat food only in the night, to remain celibate even though sleeping in [the] wife’s embrace, curb anger and be devoted to *japa* and *homa* to Hari. Different rewards according to length of time, the greatest being that after twelve years of this *vratā* the observer may secure the rulership of the world and on death become one with Janārdana. Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa III.218.1–25 quoted by Hemādri, *Vratā* section, II.825–827. The word means the *vratā* is as sharp or difficult as treading on the edge of a sword.

In its Brāhmaṇical variety, the *asidhārāvratā* is not hence a “sexual ritual” per se, but an ascetic discipline for men characterised by cultivation of dispassion in the presence of considerable temptation—perhaps not dissimilar to practices of a variety Mahatma Gandhi famously experimented with (LAL 2000), which have continued cultural resonance.¹⁸

The meaning of the observance’s name and its relation to the practice are somewhat obscure. Remarking on *Raghuvamśa* 13.67, a verse mentioning the *asidhārāvratā*, Kālidāsa’s commentator Dinakara states that it involves placing an actual sword (*asi*) in the bed of the chaste couple (presumably as a deterrent).¹⁹ This idea is repeated by Bhavabhaṭṭa in his commentary on the *Laghucakrasaṃvara*.²⁰ Adducing parallels from European folklore, STENZLER

¹⁸ In Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* (1996), for instance, the character Ashok observes such a practice with his wife as a test of his celibacy.

¹⁹ “When a woman and man sleep on a single bed, observing celibacy, after placing a sword in the middle, this is the *asidhārāvratā*” (*ekasyām eva śayyāyām madhye khaḍgam nidhāya strīpumsau yatra brahmacaryeṇa śayāte tad asidhārāvratam*). Quoted by STENZLER (1886, p. 524).

²⁰ Commenting on 27.2cd (*dūtayo asidhāraṃ ca pavitraṃ puṇyavardhanam*; cf.

(1886, p. 525) suggests that there existed an ancient Indo-European custom in which a sword was placed between a couple observing chastity. While an intriguing possibility, it is difficult to assess its plausibility in the absence of early Indian evidence for the use of an actual sword. Mallinātha's interpretation of the name (also ad *Raghuvamśa* 13.67) is more in line with literary allusions to the *vrata* and descriptions of its procedure in most Sanskrit sources: "and this is called the 'edge of the sword observance' because of being comparable to walking along the edge of a sword" (*idaṃ cāsidhārācamkramaṇatulyatvād asidhārāvratam ity uktam*). The image conveys extreme difficulty as well as danger, both of which find echo in depictions of the observance: according to the *Brahmayāmala*, it is difficult even for the gods,²¹ while the *Niśvāsātattvasaṃhitā* warns that, in its course, "one who becomes overpowered by lust goes to hell, assuredly."²² In Sanskrit literature, the *asidhārāvrata* becomes metaphoric for a task of exceptional difficulty or precariousness. Both literally and figuratively, the image bears affinity to the expressions "[on] the razor's edge" and "[on] a knife's edge," and I hence take the liberty of translating *asidhārāvrata* as "the knife's edge observance." The collocation may echo a well-known metaphor of the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad*, which likens the difficulty of the path of spiritual knowledge to crossing a razor's sharp edge.²³

It is unclear how old the *asidhārāvrata* is: KANE's summary is based on the description in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, which one thoughtful, if somewhat speculative interpretation would place in early eighth-century Kashmir (INDEN 2000, pp. 81–84). A comparatively early reference, without elaboration, occurs in the *Vaikhānasagrhyasūtra* in a description of the discipline of the *ghorācārika* householder,²⁴ KANE (1968, p. 260) places this text around the fourth century C.E.

Brahmayāmala 86.10cd), Bhavabhaṭṭa remarks, *dvayor madhye navaniśitam khaḍgaṃ sthāpayitvā kamaṇīyakāminīśayyāśayanam asidhārāvratam* ("asidhārāvrata refers to a desirable man and passionate women laying on a bed after a newly whetted sword is placed between the two"). I am grateful to Christian WEDEMEYER for drawing my attention to this passage (personal communication).

²¹ *Brahmayāmala* 40.33ab: *etac ca asidhāraṃ tu duścaraṃ tridaśair api*.

²² *Guhyasūtra* 3.40cd; see below.

²³ *Kaṭhōpaniṣad* I, 3.14: "Arise! Awake! Pay attention, when you've obtained your wishes! A razor's sharp edge is hard to cross—that, poets say, is the difficulty of the path" (translation of OLIVELLE 1996, p. 240) (*uttiṣṭhata jāgrata prāpya varān nibodhata | kṣurasya dhārā niśitā duratyayā durgam pathas tat kavayo vadanti ||*).

²⁴ *Vaikhānasagrhyasūtra*, Praśna 8, *khaṇḍa* 5 (translation of CALAND 1929, p. 187): "The Ghorācārika householder, observing his daily duties, sacrifices for himself but not for others, studies the Veda but does not teach it, bestows gifts but does not accept them; he lives by gleaning grains and, being solely absorbed in Nārāyaṇa, observes, performing at evening and morning the *agnihotra*, in the months of Mārgaśīrṣa and Jyaiṣṭha, the vow of the sword edge, and attends to his fires with fruits of the wild" (*ghorācāriko niyamair yukto yajate na yājayaty adhīte nādhyāpayati dadāti na pratigṛhṇāty uñchavṛttim*

Another early reference—potentially the earliest—occurs in the Buddhist *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, which likens the difficulty of developing non-attachment to sensory objects to the *asidhārāvratā*.²⁵ As mentioned, the *circa* fifth-century *Raghuvamśa* of Kālidāsa also refers to the observance, to which is likened Bharata’s refusal to indulge in royal splendor—the “lady royal fortune” (*Śrī*)—in deference to his absent elder brother, Rāma.²⁶ The image of a king’s abstention from royal splendour/goddess Lakṣmī (*rājalakṣmī*) as an *asidhārāvratā* finds echo in the *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇa (early seventh century),²⁷ while a tale of the *Pañcatantra* compares the difficulty of dwelling with an enemy to the observance.²⁸ These references suggest that the *asidhārāvratā* was well-known by the fifth century C.E., though somewhat or significantly older than this, hence most probably predating most or all extant works of Tantric Śaiva literature.

In addition, the *asidhārāvratā* seems to be the first tantric ritual attested which involves sexual contact. The earliest surviving account of a tantric *asidhārāvratā* belongs in all likelihood to the archaic *Niśvāsattvasaṃhitā* (hereafter *Niśvāsa*), perhaps the most ancient extant Śaiva *tantra*; while its older portions could date to as early as the mid-fifth century C.E., the *Guhyasūtra*, in which occurs the *asidhārāvratā* (3.38c–43b), probably does not belong to this stratum of the text (GOODALL and ISAACSON 2007).²⁹ In the *asidhārāvratā* of the *Niśvāsa*, as well as

upajīvati nārāyaṇaparāyaṇaḥ sāyamprātar agnihotraṃ hutvā mārgaśīrṣajyeṣṭhamāsayor asidhārāvratam vanausadhibhir agniparicaraanam karoti).

²⁵ *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* 10.775: “Sense objects are not the cause of bondage; bondage to the sense objects is the cause. The afflictions (*kleśa*) must be destroyed by knowledge. This truly is a knife’s edge observance” (*na bandhahetur viṣayā hetur viṣayabandhanam | jñānavadhyāni kleśāni asidhārāvratato hy ayam ||*).

²⁶ *Raghuvamśa* 13.67: “[Bharata is one] who, though a young man, out of deference to me [Rāma] does not partake of the Lady Fortune (*śrī*) who sits on his lap, handed over by father. It is as though he were, for all these years, practicing the severe *asidhārāvratā* with her” (*pitṛā viṣṭāṃ madapekṣayā yaḥ śrīyam yuvāpy aṅkagatām abhoktā | iyanti varṣāni tayā sahogram abhyasyatīva vratam āsidhāram ||*).

²⁷ *Harṣacarita* 2 (p. 111), in a description of the emperor Harṣavardhana: “though he was pledged to chastity, he was embraced by [the goddess] royal fortune; though sworn to the vow of clinging to the edge of a sword, he was a royal sage who did not break his pledge” (*grhītabrahmacaryam āliṅgitaṃ rājalakṣmyā, pratipannāsidhārādhāraṇavratam avisamvādinam rājarṣim*).

²⁸ *Pañcatantra* III, 11 (the tale of the lion *kharanakhara*), prose following vv. 206 and 211.

²⁹ The *Mukhāgama* of the *Niśvāsa*, in a chapter describing lay religion (*laukikadharmā*) and in a section mainly concerned with fasting, also mentions an observance akin to the non-tantric *asidhārāvratā*, though not named as such (3.57c–58b): “One who, together with his wife, practices the arduous celibacy observance would attain perfection in this world and the next; he will attain the ultimate destiny” (*brahmacaryavratam kaṣṭam yaś caret śtrīsamānvitah ||57|| ihāmutra ca siddhyeta gatim yāsyati cottamām |*).

the *Matāṅgapārameśvara* (hereafter *Matāṅga*), we find an ascetic observance for the cultivation of sensory restraint transformed into a Mantramārga technology for supernatural attainment (*siddhi*). In the tantric observance, a key premise remains, viz. maintaining sexual restraint in the face of temptation, but this is incorporated within a framework of mantra-practice and meditation. The *asidhārāvratā* of the *Niśvāsa* is as follows:³⁰

ratisambhogakuśalāṃ rūpayauvanaśālinīm || 38||
īdrśīm striyam āsādya niruddhendriyagocarah |
cumbanāliṅganam kuryāl liṅgam sthāpya bhagopari || 39||
japadhyānaparo bhūtvā asidhārāvratam caret |
yadi kāmaśam gacchet patate narake dhruvam || 40||
navātmakam japel lakṣa ----- siddhaye |
abdam ṣaṇmāsamātram vā yaś cared vratam uttamam || 41||
tasya siddhiḥ prajāyeta adhamā madhyamottamā |
vratasthaḥ pañcalakṣāṇi punar japtvā tu sidhyate || 42||
sarve mantrās ca siddhyante īpsitam ca phalam bhavet |

40cd °*vaśam gacchet patate*] conj. (Goodall); °*vaśam cche patate* Cod. 41b *siddhaye*] conj. (Goodall); - (*ddh/dv*)*aye* Cod. 42b °*ottamā*] em. (Goodall); °*ottamāḥ* Cod. 42c *vratasthaḥ*] corr. (Goodall); *vratastha* Cod.

“Skilled in the enjoyment of love, full of beauty and youth—after obtaining (*āsādya*) a woman like this, he should kiss and embrace her with his senses restrained. Placing the *liṅga* upon the vagina, and becoming focused on mantra-recitation and meditation (*dhyāna*), he should practice the knife’s edge observance. Should he be overpowered by lust, he assuredly falls into hell. He should recite the Navātman-mantra one hundred-thousand times ... for the sake of *siddhi*. One who would practice the preeminent observance for one year, or merely six months, obtains *siddhi* of the lowest, middling, or highest variety. Abiding in the observance, he attains *siddhi* after again reciting the mantra five-hundred thousand times. All mantras become perfected [for him], and the desired result would come about.”

Occurring in the *Guhyasūtra* alongside rites harnessing such potent and impure materials as skulls, flesh, and menstrual fluid, the *asidhārāvratā* belongs to a corpus of ritual directed toward non-soteriological aims that presages the

³⁰ I cite the text of *Guhyasūtra* of the *Niśvāsa* from the draft edition of GOODALL et al. (see bibliography).

visionary ritual world of the *Bhairavatantras*. The *asidhārāvrata* of the *Matāṅga* too belongs to the ritual repertoire of the power-seeking *sādhaka* (SANDERSON 1985, p. 565), whose practices become the overriding concern in the *Brahmayāmala* and related sources.

With the tantric *asidhārāvrata*, the edge of the sword grew sharper. Descriptions of the observance in the *Niśvāsa*, *Matāṅga*, and *Brahmayāmala* all emphasize the erotic appeal required of the woman: she should be young, beautiful, and seductive. Moreover, the degree of physical intimacy goes beyond that envisioned in non-tantric versions of the rite. According to the *Niśvāsa*, the practitioner of the *vrata* does not merely lie in close proximity to the woman, but must place his *liṅga* upon her genitals, though apparently without penetration (*liṅgaṃ sthāpya bhagopari*, 39d). The *Matāṅga* instructs that the *sādhaka* should adorn himself and behave seductively, though with a mind purified by yoga (11.42–43b).³¹ He propositions a young woman who possesses the marks of auspiciousness, has not given birth, is skilled in the erotic arts, obedient, and so forth (vv. 43c–45). Without mentioning genital contact, it is said that the *sādhaka* should meditate on the mantras while in the woman’s embrace, without ejaculation (vv. 46c–51).³² The *Brahmayāmala* too enjoins kissing and embracing, but departs by explicitly enjoining penetration (*liṅgaṃ tatra*

³¹ The *asidhārāvrata* is described in *Matāṅga*, *kriyāpāda* 11.42–51:
bhrūbhaṅgasahitoktyā tu sālankāraḥ sucarcitaḥ |
puṣpāyudhavikārais tu ceṣṭamāno ’jugupsitaḥ || 42||
mohayan bāhyavṛttena yogaśuddhena cetasā |
āhūyāvayavair bhadrair lakṣṇaiḥ suśubhair yutām || 43||
subhagāṃ yauvanoddāmagarveṇa paramanṭharām |
sadācārakulotpannām lālasām priyavādinīm || 44||
aprasūtām sadā kāntām bhartuḥ śāsanataparām |
śūklāambaradharām sādhvīm kāmāśāstrasupeśalām || 45||
vidyāṅgakṛtarakṣām tu śṛṅgārakṛtabhūṣanām |
sarvaśuklopacāreṇa yaṣṭvā devaṃ trilocanam | 46||
carubhuk sādhakendras tu tasyās tejaḥpadaṃ hr̥di |
sādhyamantram samuccārya mantram evānucintayet || 47||
nyastamantraḥ striyaṃ vidvān āśliṣyāṅgāni saṃsmaret |
svamantram karṇikāsaṃsthaṃ yo ’yaṃ so ’ham iti sphuṭam || 48||
evamabhyasyatas tasya niścitasya kṛtātmanaḥ |
māsārdhena bhavet siddhir iti śāstre prabhāṣitam || 49||
abhīṣṭam āpnuyān mantrī phalaṃ mantrabaleraṇāt |
kṛtakṛtyena mokṭavyā yadi tasyā na rocate || 50||
rocate cet tataḥ siddhas tayā sārdhaṃ narottamaḥ |
kṛḍate suciraṃ kālam aprakṣīṇabalaḥ sadā || 51||

In 51a, I follow MS. ‘Ca’ in reading *siddhas* rather than *siddhis*, the reading adopted by the editor.

³² Following SANDERSON’s (1985, p. 565) interpretation of *aprakṣīṇabalaḥ*, 11.51d.

vinikṣipet, 10d), though without orgasm (*kṣobha*). Absorbed in meditation (*dhyānaparāyaṇaḥ*, °*tatparaḥ*), he nonetheless goes through the motions of passionate lovemaking. While all three sources enjoin meditation in intimate contact with the woman, only the *Brahmayāmala*'s version unambiguously involves actual, though non-orgasmic coitus. Failure to control ejaculation is a ritual fault that requires arduous expiation, prior to re-commencing the observance (vv. 23–26).

In addition to inflecting the observance by enjoining genital penetration, the *Brahmayāmala* provides an elaborate (if not always clear) description of the discipline, detailing how the coital rite is incorporated into a practitioner's demanding routine. It is possible that the redactors drew directly from the description of the *asidhārāvrata* in the *Niśvāsa*.³³ The actual sexual practices of the *Brahmayāmala*'s *asidhārāvrata* chapter are described primarily in verses 40.8c–14b and 20–23. These follow a description of the qualities desired of the female partner, and precede a statement on the fruits of successful practice. I quote the passage in full:³⁴

vāmapārśve sthitāyām tu bahi'nyāsaṃ tu kārayet ||8||
śarīre hastayor varjyaṃ svayāgotthaṃ vidhānavit |
hr̥dyāgapūrvakaṃ nyāsaṃ tathātmani vikalpayet ||9||
cumbanālīṅganaṃ kṛtvā bahirnyāsaṃ tu kārayet |
śaktipīṭhe nyāsaṃ kṛtvā āsane sthāpayet tu tām |
cumbanālīṅganaṃ kṛtvā līṅgaṃ tatra vinikṣipet ||10||
nityanaimittikaṃ kāmyaṃ japaṃ kuryād avagrahe |
nirācārapadāvastho vyomārṇavanisevakaḥ ||11||
pramādād yadi kṣobho syāt svayam eva akāritah |
japed daśasahasrāṇi tattvayuktas tu sādhaḥ ||12||
cumbanālīṅganaiś caiva śītkāraiḥ savilāsakaiḥ |
paratattvāvalokī ca kṣobhaṃ naiva samācaret ||13||
āhnikānā'ntarālaṃ tu kriyāyāḥ prerayed budhaḥ |
 ...
maunī dhyānaparo mantrī śaktivarjaṃ samācaret |
tayā saha svapen mantrī ekatraivāśrito bhuvī ||20||

³³ In particular, there are loose parallels between *Brahmayāmala* 40.10cd and *Guhyasūtra* 3.39cd, *Brahmayāmala* 40.12 and *Guhyasūtra* 3.40c–41a, and *Brahmayāmala* 40.27c–29b (not here quoted) and *Guhyasūtra* 41c–42b. That a direct relationship is possible is confirmed by the fact that at least one other passage in the *Brahmayāmala* derives from the *Niśvāsa* (HATLEY 2007, pp. 219–220). Chapter 40 of the *Brahmayāmala* also appears to draw upon chapter four of the *Dīkṣottara* section of the *Niśvāsakārikā*, a supplement to the *Niśvāsa* (HATLEY, *forthcoming*).

³⁴ Text as constituted in HATLEY (*forthcoming*), where may be found detailed discussions of the numerous problems of text and interpretation.

anyonyāliṅganair nityaṃ vilāsādibhi' ceṣṭitaiḥ |
tāmbūlaṃ bhakṣayen nityaṃ anyonyādānam ācaret ||21||
saṃmukhau tu svapen nityaṃ na kadācit parāṇmukhau |
kṣobhaṃ tu rakṣayen nityaṃ nirācārapade sthitaḥ ||22||
svayaṃ druto japaṃ kuryād daśasāhasrakam budhaḥ |
kāmato kṣobham āyāti prāyaścittaṃ samācaret ||23||

Knowing the procedure, he should perform the external mantra-
 installation on her, placed at his left side, based on his own mantra-
 deity pantheon (*yāga*), on the body, excluding the hands. Likewise,
 he should accomplish the mantra-installation on himself, preceded
 by inner worship (*hr̥dyāga*). [8c–9] After kissing and embracing,
 he should effect the external mantra-installation, [and] after
 mantra-installation on the consort's vulva, he should place her on a
 mat (*āsana*). After kissing and embracing, he should insert the
liṅga there. [10] He should perform the mantra-recitation (*japa*) of
 the regular daily rites (*nitya*), the occasional ones (*naimittika*), [or]
 the rites with special aims (*kāmya*) in [a state of sexual] restraint
 (*avagraha*),³⁵ abiding in the state beyond regulated conduct
 (*nirācārapada*), absorbed in the ocean of the void. [11] If by
 mistake orgasm (*kṣobha*) should occur just spontaneously, without
 making it happen, the *sādhaka* should recite the mantra ten-
 thousand times, contemplating the true reality. [12] Gazing on the
 supreme reality, accompanied by kisses and embraces and lusty
 hisses, he should not engage in orgasm. [13] He should prompt
 (*prerayed*) an interruption of the ritual process for the daily
 worship (*āhnikā*). [14b]

...

Keeping silent, intent on meditation, the *mantrin* should observe
 separation from the consort. [Afterwards,] the *mantrin* should sleep
 together with her on the ground, always embracing each other,
 with amorous movements and so forth. [20–21b] They should
 always eat betel; they should engage in feeding it to each other.
 They should always sleep facing each other, never facing away. He
 should always prevent orgasm, remaining in the state beyond
 regulated conduct (*nirācāra*). [21c–22] [If the fluid] is spilled by
 itself, a wise one should do ten-thousand mantra-recitations. [If] he
 reaches orgasm intentionally, he should perform expiation ritual
 (*prāyaścitta*). [23]

³⁵ On the technical term *avagraha*, see Kiss (*forthcoming*, pp. 50–52).

Unlike the cases of the *Niśvāsa* and *Mataṅga*, coitus forms an integral rather than marginal element of the *Brahmayāmala*'s ritual system, although its practice is restricted primarily to the highest of three grades of *sādhaka*—the *tālaka*. Besides the chapter on the *asidhārāvrata*, the *Brahmayāmala*'s most detailed treatments of coital ritual occur in chapters twenty-two and twenty-four (both entitled *guhyāmṛtapaṭala*, “chapter of the secret nectar”), as well as chapter forty-five (the *sādhakādhikārapaṭala*), which delineates the disciplines of *sādhakas* in considerable detail. In these accounts, ritual coitus is orgasmic, while the conjoined male-female sexual fluids—the “secret nectar” (*guhyāmṛta*)—are among the most important substances utilized in ritual. In the context of the *Brahmayāmala*, the *asidhārāvrata*'s focus upon ascetic mastery of sexual arousal and abjuration of orgasm are hence anomalous. This might explain why even the *sādhaka* known as the *carubhojin* (“consumer of the oblation gruel”) may practice the *asidhārāvrata*, though his discipline otherwise excludes coitus.³⁶ Within the *Brahmayāmala*, the *asidhārāvrata* appears somewhat marginal, and the observance finds meager attestation in subsequent Tantric Śaiva systems. Abhinavagupta, for instance, makes reference to the *asidhārāvrata* (or *khadgadhārāvrata*) only in passing, and apparently viewed it as a form of penance (*tapas*) not specifically tantric in character.³⁷ It perhaps became obsolete with the development of coital ritual of the varieties emphasised elsewhere in the *Brahmayāmala*, as well as subsequent Kaula practices more ecstatic and gnostic in orientation. Nonetheless, given its historical priority, this observance may have had a profoundly important role in the development of “tantric sex,” and has continuity with a range of later practices emphasising seminal retention.³⁸ It is evident also that, despite the paucity of depictions of the observance in post-eleventh century tantric sources, the practice is not unknown in contemporary times.³⁹

As should be apparent, the *asidhārāvrata* is depicted as a practice performed by a man, *with* a woman; he is the ritual agent, and the rite primarily or exclusively benefits him. She is represented more or less as a ritual object. According to the *Niśvāsa* and *Mataṅga*, the woman is selected on the basis of her erotic appeal, and

³⁶ *Brahmayāmala* 40.31. My understanding of the text's threefold typology of *sādhakas* has been improved considerably by Csaba KISS's forthcoming work on this subject.

³⁷ *Tantrāloka* 8.302ab (on which see below) and 15.541 (quoting the *Traīśirasa*).

³⁸ Notably, MALLINSON (*forthcoming*) sees the *asidhārāvrata* as a practice belonging to the “same yogic paradigm” as the *vajrolīmudrā*.

³⁹ It is noteworthy that several former devotees of Swami Muktananda, the late guru of Siddha Yoga, have disclosed troubling first-hand accounts of their experiences with the Swami practicing what appears to be a version of the tantric *asidhārāvrata*. See especially HARRIS 1994; and http://www.leavingsiddhayoga.net/Radha_story.htm (accessed Sept. 2010).

there is no indication that she receives any kind of initiation. While the *sādhaka* purportedly aims for and may attain occult mastery, she is portrayed as desiring nothing more than coitus. In the words of the *Matāṅga*, “His aim accomplished, he should let her go, if she does not like [the practice]. Should she like [it], then that excellent man, who has attained *siddhi*, sports with her for a long time, without ever losing his seed.”⁴⁰ The position of the woman in the *Brahmayāmala*’s *asidhārāvratā* is more complex. Generally, the text envisions both participants in coital rituals as initiated practitioners, and provides evidence for the involvement of women in a variety of ritual capacities.⁴¹ Women participating in sexual ritual are designated by the terms *śakti* (“power”) and *dūtī* (“consort”), though only the former occurs in the *asidhārāvratapaṭala*. In many ways the role of the woman in the *Brahmayāmala*’s *asidhārāvratā* is similar to that of the *Niśvāsa* and *Matāṅga*. The description of her desired qualities heavily emphasises erotic appeal, and there are no statements indicating that she benefits from the ritual. Her lack of ritual agency is illustrated by the exclusion of her hands from mantra-installation (*nyāsa*; v. 9ab), while her body and her vulva—objects of ritual action—do receive *nyāsa*. However, after the evening meal, they perform ritual together (the *nityāvratā*, 18cd), an indication that here, as elsewhere in the text, both practitioners must be initiates.

While the record is fragmentary, it seems that the coital rituals of early Vidyāpīṭha *Bhairavatantras*, such as the *Brahmayāmala*, may have developed directly out of a tradition of ritual experimentation with sexuality represented by the *asidhārāvratā* of early *Siddhāntatantras*—the *Niśvāsa* and the *Matāṅga*. A Kashmirian author, Takṣakavarta, in fact reports the existence of a Saiddhāntika lineage having this *vratā* as its characteristic practice, intimating the kind of context in which ritual experimentation with eroticism might have taken place.⁴² Should this hypothesis prove correct, it suggests that the knife’s edge proved sharp indeed, the *asidhārāvratā* leading to the development of coital practices more “magical” or ecstatic in orientation than ascetic.

In closing, I would like to propose an additional possibility: that the early Mantramārga or tantric *asidhārāvratā* represents the adaptation of the observance as it was practiced within the Śaiva Atimārga—Pāśupata and related, more radical Brāhmaṇical Śaiva ascetic orders that SANDERSON (2006a) has demonstrated were formative to the development of Tantric Śaivism. One indication of this possibility lies in a list of seven *caryāvratas* (“disciplinary observances”) for

⁴⁰ *kriyāpāda* 11.50c–51b (quoted above in note 30).

⁴¹ The *Brahmayāmala*’s representations of women and their ritual roles are beyond the scope of the present article, though I am preparing an essay on the subject.

⁴² SANDERSON (1985, p. 565) remarks that “The Kashmirian Takṣakavarta quotes Saiddhāntika scripture to the effect that this *asidhārāvratā* is the characteristic practice of the *kuṭīkāḥ*, the ‘brahmacārins’ of the Śikhāgocara,” citing the *Nityādisaṃgrahapaddhati* (Bodleian Library, MS Stein Or. d. 47, f. 119r–119v).

celibate neophytes (*brahmacārins*) found in the *Svacchandatantra* and a handful of other sources.⁴³ While occurring in the context of a description of orthodox Vaidika disciplines, the list betrays a Śaiva, and probably Atimārga, orientation. One of the observances, the *unmattakavrata* (“madman observance”), is a characteristic discipline of the Lākula sect of the Atimārga (SANDERSON 2006a, p. 209), while the names of four others identify them as Śaiva: *bhauteśa* (“of [Śiva as] lord of spirits”), *pāśupatiya* (“of Paśupati,” or perhaps “of the Pāśupatas”), *gāṇa* (“of [Śiva’s] *gaṇas*”), and *gāṇeśvara* (“of [Śiva’s] *gaṇa*-lords). What remain are the “lord of ghee [i.e. Agni] observance” (*ghṛteśavrata*) and the *asidhāravrata*, the context suggesting by association that these too were practices of Śaiva brahmin ascetics. That similar Atimārga ascetic observances (*vratacaryā*) found their way into the Mantramārga or Tantric Śaivism has been demonstrated in the case of the *rudravrata* taught in *Mataṅga, caryāpāda* 9 (SANDERSON 2006a, 202–208).

Further indication of Atimārga engagement in the *asidhārāvratā* is found in a passage of Abhinavagupta’s *Tantrāloka* (8.300b–302) and the commentary of Jayaratha. These cite the lost *Śivatānuśāstra* of Bṛhaspati, a Saiddhāntika exegete who wrote between approximately 650 and 750 C.E.⁴⁴ Abhinavagupta attributes to the *Śivatānu* the view that practitioners of modes of ascetic discipline which include the skullbearer observance (*kapālavrata*) and knife’s edge observance (*khaḍgadhārāvratā*) ascend thereby to a hierarchy of heavenly realms at the level of *māyātattva*, over which Ananta presides.⁴⁵ In elaborating, the commentator Jayaratha adduces a passage in *ārya*-metre from the *Śivatānu* describing *vratas* of Atimārga Śaiva ascetics devoted to Vāmadeva and an unusual series of *rudras*. Of the fifth group is said the following: “They make themselves attractive with garlands, [fine] clothing, and ornaments, and are devoted to performing the knife’s edge observance; meditating, they attain to the state of [the *rudra*]

⁴³ *Svacchandatantra* 10.391–92b: *bhauteśam pāśupatiyam ca gāṇam gāṇeśvaram tathā | unmattakāsīdhāram ca ghṛteśam saptamaṁ viduḥ || 391 || saptaitāni tu dṛṣṭāni vratāni brahmacāriṇām |*. Cf. *Tantrasadbhāva* 10.426c–428. Nārāyaṇakaṇṭha quotes a similar passage ad *Mrgendrāgama, kriyāpāda* 8.161, attributing it to the *Pārameśvaratantra*.

⁴⁴ On Bṛhaspati and citations of the *Śivatānu* preserved in the *Tantrāloka* and its commentary, see SANDERSON (2006b); see also ACRI (2011).

⁴⁵ *Tantrāloka* 8.300b–302: “The series Vāmadeva, etc., taught in the *Śrīmālinīvijayottara* as being at [the levels of] *puruṣa*, etc., are in fact said in the *Śivatānu* to be at the *māyātattva*, up to Ananta. [Those who] practice the skullbearer observance, make oblations of their own limbs, practice severe *tapas*, are entirely without fear, [or who] follow the sword’s edge observance: knowing their respective cosmological spheres, they attain, in due sequence, to that cosmological sphere [within Māyā] where it is said Ananta is lord” (*vāmādyāḥ puruṣāḍau ye proktāḥ śrīpūrvaśāsane ||300|| te māyātattva evoktās tanau śaivyām anantataḥ | kapālavratinaḥ svāṅgahotārah kaṣṭatāpasāḥ ||301|| sarvābhayāḥ khaḍgadhārāvratās tattattvavedīnaḥ | kramāt tat tattvam āyānti yatreṣo ’nanta ucyate || 302||*).

Pūrva.”⁴⁶ Headed as the list is by votaries of the Atimārga *kapālavrata*, and linked as the practitioners are to attainment of a ‘lesser’ liberation at the cosmological level of *māyātattva*, the passage seems intended to describe Atimārga practices.⁴⁷ While inconclusive, this provides further indication that the *asidhārāvratā* was practiced by Śaivas brahmins of the Atimārga. From this mid-first millennium context, the observance may have been adapted within the Mantramārga at the level of the early *Siddhāntatantras*, represented by the *Niśvāsa* and *Mataṅga*, and thence into the *Bhairavatantras*, thereafter becoming increasingly obsolete with the rise of sexual practices more magical, ecstatic, or gnostic in orientation.

⁴⁶ The passage from the *Śivatanu* quoted in *Tantrālokaviveka* ad *Tantrāloka* 8.301c–2b is as follows:

tattattvavedinaḥ iti vāmādisāyujyabhājah ityarthah | tad uktam:
jñātajñeyā viprāḥ kāpālavratabhṛto vigatasāṅgāḥ |
bhāsmopalepaniṣṭhā vrajanti vāmasya sāyujyam ||
upalabdhaveḍanīyā atibhīmapadepsavo nijaśirobhiḥ |
svayamullīnair iṣṭvā bhāimam gacchanti tad dhāma ||
vihitograyogavidhayo ye dhīrā duṣkare tapasy ugre |
dhyāyanty ugram ajasram te 'pi labhante guṇān augrān ||
vijñāya bhavam devam bhītānām abhayadānasamsiddhāḥ |
bhavapadam ārohante [em.; ārohanto Ed.] dhyānāhitacetaso viprāḥ ||
sragvastrālaṅkārair abhirāmaṃ rūpam ātmanaḥ kṛtvā |
asidhārāvrataniṣṭhāḥ pūrvapadam dhyāyino yānti || iti ||

“*Tattattvavedinaḥ* means, ‘those fit to attain proximity to Vāmadeva, etc.’

This is stated [in the *Śivatanuśāstra*]:

‘Brahmins who know what is to be known, carrying out the skullbearer observance, devoid of attachment, devoted to smearing themselves with ash, attain proximity to Vāmadeva. Those who have realized what is to be experienced, desiring the state of the very terrible one, offer sacrifice of their own heads, which they cut off themselves, and attain to that abode of [the *rudra*] Bhīma. [Others,] who have performed the procedures for union with Ugra, steadfast in difficult, severe *tapas*, perpetually meditating upon Ugra, also obtain the qualities of Ugra. Those brahmins who have understood the god Bhava, perfected in granting protection to the fearful, with their minds immersed in meditation, ascend to the state of Bhava. [Others] make themselves attractive with garlands, [fine] clothing, and ornaments, and are devoted to performing the knife’s edge observance; meditating, they attain to the state of Pūrva.’”

Pūrva appears synonymous with Śarva, for the latter name appears in the corresponding position of another verse adduced by Jayaratha, presumably from the *Śivatanu*, ad *Tantrāloka* 8.300.

⁴⁷ Cf. representations of Atimārga liberation in texts of the Mantramārga, and of the worlds and deities of the *māyātattva*, as analyzed by SANDERSON (2006a, pp. 169–78).

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