
Breath, Voice, and Embodiment in Hindu Tradition

Gabe C. Alfieri

Human vocalization plays an important and specifically productive role in many Hindu devotional practices, from the *udgitha* of ancient Vedic sacrificial rites to the mantras of various yogic practices popular throughout the world today. The chanting of sacred syllables joins the chanter with the divine in varying degrees of “sympathetic vibration,” ultimately leading to that specific form of Hindu salvation which is perfect unison with the cosmic. Breath and voice are frequently conceived, either metaphorically or actually, as making manifest in the physical world via the body aspects of the divine or cosmological. Hinduism involves an integral sound component with particular cosmogonical and soteriological significance: for the Hindu believer, the universe *is* sound, and that sound is god (Nāda-Brahman = Sound-God).

Antonio de Nicolas writes, “In the beginning was tone, and tone became chant and chant grew into human flesh through the sacrifice.”¹ Tone, chant, sacrifice, flesh. Such a conception of

¹ Antonio de Nicolás, *Four-Dimensional Man: Meditations Through the Rg Veda* (Stony Brook, NY: Nicolas Hays Ltd., 1976), 49.

original or cosmogonical sound out of which substance was manifest in the physical world constitutes “the general theme of the R̥g Veda.” Chanting and sacrifice are the activities upon which such manifestation, or embodiment, depends. Chanting, of course, has direct connection in Hindu tradition to the all-important practices of yoga and mantra, whereby body, breath, and voice are employed as tools of salvation (*moksa*); and ancient Vedic sacrifice is closely associated with the proper pronunciation of Sanskrit incantations by which the power of deity was invoked, and even enabled, to act upon the physical world.

The goal of the present essay is to seek deeper insight into those most fundamental of human functions, breathing and vocalization, via the most ancient of living sacred traditions, Hinduism. Beyond that, certain concepts of embodiment as found in Hindu tradition may be usefully applied to Western performance traditions such as music, drama, and dance, that rely heavily upon the use of the body and the breath and often involving the voice. For example, the singer trained in Western classical vocal technique will find in Hindu conceptions of embodiment a potentially meaningful link between the physical act of voice production and the metaphysical or spiritual aspects of the human body as musical instrument.

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The aim of most yogic practice is balance—balance of opposite forces within the body (heat/coolness, masculine/feminine, positive/negative energies, passion/transcendence), balance of the yogi with the cosmos (through postures, resonances, awareness, etc.)—and flow—the salvific flow of energy, breath, and sound through the body, physical and metaphysical. Thus, the yogic body is both vessel and conduit for breath, energy, sound, and various manifestations of divinity. Central to this conception is the system of *nadis* (channels) similar to the nervous system but existing at least partially in the realm of the metaphysical; and *chakras* (wheels),

energy centers in the body, often depicted or imagined as flowers and located along the body's central vertical axis, serving to regulate and conduct energy or life-force. This life-force is the divine energy of the cosmos, known as *prāna*, delivered into the body via the breath.

Prāna is identified in Hindu scripture as one of the five common breath types, emanations of deity, by which inanimate creation was originally given life.² The *Mahabharata* describes *prāna* and its functions:

The breath called *prāna*, residing within the head, and the heat that is there, causes all kinds of exertion. That *prāna* is the living creature, the universal soul, the eternal Being, and the Mind, Intellect and Consciousness of all living creatures, as also all the objects of the senses. Thus the living creature is, in every respect, caused by *prāna* to move about and exert.”³

Like so much associated with ideas of breath and voice in Hindu tradition, the concept of *prāna* can be traced back to the Ṛg Veda, believed to be the most ancient of the Vedas.⁴ There, *prāna* is associated with fire (i.164.30, i.66.1, x.32.8, x.90.13,); as wind, it is the breath of Primal or Cosmic Man (x.90.13); it is one of the functions (along with sight and hearing) whereby the goddess of speech, Vāk, is manifest in the physical world (x.125.4); it is equated with life itself (i.48.10, i.66.1); and its departure accompanies death (iii.53.21).

Oddly, perhaps, given its life-force association, *prāna* is most frequently conceptualized as exhalation, whereas *apāna* is more closely equated with inhalation, though Arthur Ewing, in his detailed survey of breath in Hindu scripture, argues for a conception of *apāna* as the downward sensation of breath-pressure in the body that results from the downward engagement

² Arthur Ewing, “The Hindu Conception of the Function of Breath: A Study in Early Hindu Psycho-Physics,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 22 (1901): 254. Ewing calls these terms “the Prāna Series,” noting, in passing, a sixth type, *avāna*, mentioned only once in the ancient Hindu literature (*Talavakāra Upaniṣad-Brahmaṇa*, ii.5).

³ *Mahabharata* CLXXXIV, Sri Kisari Mohan Ganguli, trans., <http://www.hinduism.co.za/prana-vy.htm>.

⁴ Ewing, 250-54. Ewing also includes discussion of certain subtle distinctions of usage based upon grammatical form and function. All Ṛg Veda verse references that follow are Ewing's.

of the diaphragm coupled with a tightening of various lower-body muscle groups.⁵ The remaining three breath-types are *vyāna*, “by which [*prāna* and *apāna*] are supported”; *samāna*, “which carries unto the *apāna* breath grosser elements of food and distributes the subtle elements in each limb;” and *udāna*, “which brings up or carries down what has been drunk and eaten.”⁶

The *Amṛtabindu Upaniṣad* locates the five breath-types within the body: “*Prāna* has its location in the heart. *Apāna* is located in the lower bowel. *Samāna* is located in the navel-region. *Udāna* abides in (or has recourse to) the throat. *Vyāna*, divided up [. . .] abides always in all the members.”⁷ And the *Mahabharata* similarly localizes or functionalizes the breath-types within the body:

Through the breath called *prāna*, a living creature is enabled to move. Through that called *vyāna*, they put forth strength of action. That called *apāna* moves downwards. That called *samāna* resides within the heart. Through that called *udāna*, one eructates and is enabled to speak in consequence of its piercing through (the lungs, the throat, and the mouth) [. . .] These are the five kinds of wind that cause an embodied creature to live and move.⁸

⁵ Of the term as it appears in the *Maitri Upaniṣad*, ii. 6, Ewing writes: “*apāna* refers to that movement of breath which takes place in the evacuation both of excrement, and urine and semen. Careful observation of one's own sensations, in connection with these bodily functions, especially when effort is required or experimentally used, will reveal the impression of a downward movement of the air which has been inhaled. This sensation is doubtless the empiric basis of the above definition. The use of the word *apāna* [. . .] to describe the place where the grossest parts of food go, renders the explanation of *apāna*, which has just been given, entirely certain.” Ewing, 262. This bears striking resemblance to certain downward sensations of breath-pressure advocated in Western classical vocal techniques.

⁶ *Maitri Upaniṣad*, ii.6, in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, ed. and trans., *The Principal Upaniṣads* (1953; reprint, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992), 802-4. Ewing explains these five terms grammatically as forms of the root verb, *ān*, to breathe, with various adverbial prefixes added. All five types together may be referred to by the plural, *prānas*. He goes on to address “the question of the relation between the psychical *prānas* and the cosmic-divine concepts, Agni, Vāyu, etc.—thus involving the whole question of psycho-physical correlations” and “the various meanings of *prāna* in the singular [. . .] raising the problem of the relationship between *prāna* and the psychical and metaphysical concept, Atman [living organism].” Ewing, 249-50.

⁷ *Amṛtabindu Upaniṣad* 34-35, as quoted in Ewing, 265.

⁸ The *Mahabharata* provides further elaboration on the subject of breath: “Then in consequence of the other breath called SAMANA, every one of the senses is made to act as it does. The breath called APANA, having recourse to the heat that is in the urethra and the abdominal intestines, moves, engaged in carrying out urine and faeces. That single breath which operates in these three, is called UDANA by those that are conversant with science. That breath which operates, residing in all the joints of men's bodies, is called VYANA. There is heat in the bodies of living creatures which is circulated all over the system by the breath called SAMANA.

“That which here is called breath is elsewhere conceived as currents flowing through matter such as the human body. pointing up the extreme complexity and difficulty inherent in attempting to extract exact definitions of ancient Sanskrit terms from so long and vastly ramified a network of both original texts and commentaries upon those texts.” *Mahabharata*, <http://www.hinduism.co.za/prana-vy.htm>.

The five breaths are examined in the third *praśna* of the *Praśna Upaniṣad*. Through a dialogue between the sage, Pippalāda, and one of his disciples,⁹ the scripture reveals that *prāna* (as the life-force or Soul) is born of the self¹⁰ and allots the other vital breaths to their respective locations and functions in the body: *apāna* to the anus and genitals, *vyāna* to the heart and circulatory system, and *samāna* to the middle areas of the body.¹¹ *Prāna* itself centers on the head and the organs of sense, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. The location and function allotted by *prāna* to *udāna* is more obscure: “Now rising upward [. . .] the up-breath leads, in consequence of good (works) to the good world, in consequence of evil to the evil world, and in consequence of both to the world of men.”¹² Ewing suggests a complex association of *udāna* with the vein in the body known as *suṣumṇā*, which was believed to extend from the heart to the crown of the head, by which the Soul could ascend to the crown or a point between the eyebrows; this is the same conduit by which the Soul passes out of the body at death.¹³ Each of the five breaths is provided with a “cosmic correlate” (correspondence with the bodily locations mentioned above are suggested in parentheses): *prāna* with the sun (eye); *apāna* with the earth (anus and genitals); *vyāna* with air (heart/circulation?); *samāna* with the space between sun and earth (middle body); and *udāna* with fire (perhaps an upward motion associated with *Suṣumṇā*).

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Over the millennia since the first Hindu sacred texts were given voice in ancient Sanskrit,

⁹ Ewing, 266.

¹⁰ In his notes for this passage, Radhakrishnan explains this as the result of a person’s activities in a former life. *The Principal Upaniṣads*, 659.

¹¹ “In the middle is the equalizing breath. It is this that equalizes whatever is offered as food. From this arise the seven flames.” *The Principal Upaniṣads*, 659. This might suggest the digestive system.

¹² Ewing, 269.

¹³ *Ibid.* Ewing explains the connection further: “If any one of the five breaths is to be conceived of as functioning in the *Suṣumṇā*, the prefix *ud* of *udāna* would be sufficient to determine that the choice should fall upon it. We already have *udāna* extending as far as the neck, and further Hindu fancy did not find it difficult to take another step and completely identify *udāna* and *Suṣumṇā*.”

a complex system of Sanskrit linguistics arose around the interpretation of Hindu scriptures and philosophy. Guy Beck, in his seminal *Sonic Theology*, writes: “The function of oral language as an agent of transformation from the human realm to the divine has been a perennial concern of Indian theological speculation.”¹⁴ One of the earliest theo-linguistic concepts, associated especially with the Ṛg Veda, is the notion of *vāk*, a term that has been interpreted to indicate sound in general and, specifically, the sound of speech. Eventually, speech was personified as “a productive principle of energy” in the form of the goddess *Vāk*.¹⁵ The Vedas themselves are *Daivī Vāk* (Divine Word) “not composed by the intellect but heard [. . .] vibrating out of the Infinite to the inner audience of the man who had previously made himself fit [through yoga] for the impersonal knowledge.”¹⁶ This Divine Word is considered to be “inherently present within the consciousness of all,” though only those who have made themselves receptive, such as the ancient *rishis* or seers who originally gave linguistic form to the Vedas, are able to embody and then speak forth that Divine Word in human language.¹⁷

Indian musicologist M. R. Gautam traces a four-phased process of sound manifestation that is both cosmogonical and soteriological, derived from Yoga and Tantra traditions, through which *parāvāk* or “highest thought vibration” becomes *paśyanti*, “a vision of the configuration of *nāda*,” which, in turn, leads to *madhyamā*, a state of “thought-feeling” prior to verbal expression, ending in *vaikharī* or the state where physical experience leads to verbalization.¹⁸ In reverse, this system may be seen to correspond to the Hindu path of ultimate salvation, or release, known as *mokṣa*. In such a hierarchy, elemental sound comes to be embodied as speech,

¹⁴ Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 23.

¹⁵ Harold Coward, *Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 106.

¹⁶ Aurobindo Gose, *The Secret of the Veda* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1971), 8; in *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Coward, 106.

¹⁸ Madyrau Ramaswamy Gautam, *Evolution of Rāga and Tāla in Indian Music* (New Delhi: Munshirma Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1989), 13.

and speech itself becomes the path of transcendence, through mantra, back into Elemental Sound.

Russill Paul calls Sanskrit, “a language of prayer, yoga, and ritual.”¹⁹ When chanted in the form of mantras, its complex vibratory patterns are believed to stimulate energies in the body, especially via the hard and soft palates and the vagus nerve, and to open the third eye or *ājñā chakra* between the eyebrows.²⁰ Simply put, a mantra is “a sacred word or phrase used in worship or prayer”;²¹ Paul writes that mantras “form dynamic energy relationships between our soul and the rest of the universe”;²² David Frawley calls mantra “the essential vibrations of the Divine Word”;²³ and Jan Gonda believes “a mantra possesses the same kind of creative force which was present at the creation of the universe.”²⁴ In his essay, “The Indian Mantra,” Gonda provides an etymologically formulated definition of mantra as

word(s) believed to be of 'superhuman origin', received, fashioned and spoken by the 'inspired' seers, poets and reciters in order to evoke divine power(s) and especially conceived as means of creating, conveying, concentrating and realizing intentional and efficient thought, and of coming into touch or identifying oneself with the essence of the divinity which is present in the mantra.²⁵

Different forms of yoga emphasize different mantras with different aims, as well as different approaches to their chanting. For example, Shabda Yoga is said to emphasize the power of the word and speech, especially the correct pronunciation of the ancient poetry of the Vedas.²⁶

In this tradition, word sounds are identical with their meaning, and their specific combinations

¹⁹ Russill Paul, *The Yoga of Sound: Tapping the Hidden Power of Music and Chant* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2006), 48.

²⁰ Ibid, 49.

²¹ Beck, 248.

²² Paul, 22.

²³ David Frawley, *The Creative Vision of the Early Upanishads: Udgitha Adityasya and the Exalted Song of the Sun* (Madras: David Frawley & Rajsri Printers, 1982), 136.

²⁴ Jan Gonda, “The Indian Mantra,” *Oriens* 16 (1963): 260. This is the most comprehensive work located in the course of the research for the present paper on the history, nature, and use of mantra.

²⁵ Ibid., 255

²⁶ Paul, 66-69.

produce specific spiritual results. The word, it is believed, contains the essential energy of the thing it signifies; its manifestation in speech can make that energy present in the body of the speaker.²⁷ The Tantric discipline of Shakti Yoga uses mantra to channel the dynamic energy of the cosmos, or *shakti*, into the body of the yogi,²⁸ and is specifically aimed at regulating the flow of energy in the body, through the system of *nadis* and *chakras*, employing deep breathing techniques, the use of simple and highly repetitive mantras, *mudras* (ritual gestures), and sacred symbols or visual aids known as *yantras*.²⁹ In Svava Yoga, the energies within the body of the yogi are attuned to planetary cycles, especially solar and lunar, via breath through the nostrils, each of which regulates a different sides of the brain, the physical body, and the “subtle” metaphysical body of the *sūṣumṇā*, *nadis*, and *chakras*.³⁰

Nāda Yoga seeks to embody Nāda-Brahman, or Primal Sound, conceived as a supreme deific force, through yogic practice, including non-linguistic sounds, such as those of Indian classical music. In this tradition, the single sacred syllable, AUM, has a central place as the representation and manifestation of Nāda-Brahman. AUM is said to “summarize all mantric knowledge.”³¹ Through its use as mantra, the entire cosmic cycle of creation, duration, and destruction is said to be embodied in sound. Nāda Yoga is also concerned with the process of listening—to the sounds within the body (especially as they are perceived in the right ear), the sounds of the natural world, and the “sound” of silence—the “unstruck sound” of cosmic vibration, whether conceptualized as *musica universalis*, *musica mundana*, or Nāda-Brahman.³²

Musical performance can be considered a kind of Nāda Yoga, so that music making in

²⁷ Ibid, 69.

²⁸ *Shakti* is considered to be the energy of the goddess-concept in Hinduism, especially in Tantric traditions, which emphasize masculine-feminine duality, and the feminine as the active power of the universe. Ibid., 81-101.

²⁹ Ibid., 89.

³⁰ As we have seen, *svava* is also the term for a musical pitch. Peter Marchand, “Swava Yoga,” The Sanatan Society, http://www.sanatansociety.org/yoga_and_meditation/swava_yoga.htm.

³¹ Paul, 118-9.

³² Ibid., 122-3.

Indian culture is often considered a sacred act, even in the absence of any overtly religious text or context. Beck suggests that, “The tradition of Indian classical music and dance [. . .] is fundamentally rooted in the sonic and musical dimensions of the Vedas [. . .] Upanishads, and the Agamas, such that Indian music has been nearly always religious in character.”³³ The religious qualities of Indian music are examined by Donna Wulff in her article, “Practicing Religiously: Music as Sacred in India.” She quotes famed Indian musician Ravi Shankar saying, “The highest aim of our music is to reveal the essence of the universe it reflects, [. . . it is] among the means by which this essence can be apprehended. Thus, through music, one can reach God.”³⁴

The Indian musical system involves seven named pitches in both their “diatonic” and “chromatically altered” forms, each identified with a *chakra*, an animal, and a deity (see Table 1).³⁵ Thus, pitch not only touches or motivates specific energies within the body, depending upon the *chakra* within which it resonates, but it is considered to embody in some respect both attributes from the natural world and the realm of the divine. Likewise, *rāgas* reinforce certain characteristics of these associations based upon the *svaras* emphasized within them.

Indian *rāgas* are essentially archetypes that provide the melodic material for musical composition/improvisation. Much more than a scale or collection of pitches, each *raga* includes characteristic melodic gestures, emphases upon particular *svaras*, characteristic ornamentation, and more. *Rāgas* are often considered to be divine manifestations, discovered or revealed rather than created by human agency. In some early traditions, they were attributed or dedicated to specific deities. In fact, *rāgas* are said to “exist in the form of deities or spirits, or to have

³³ Beck, 107; see also Donna Maria Wulff, “On Practicing Religiously: Music as Sacred in India,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religious Studies* 50/1 (1983): 149.

³⁴ Ravi Shankar, *Raga Mala* (Guildford, England: Surrey Genesis Publishing, 1997); as quoted in Wulff, 153.

³⁵ Madyrau Ramaswamy Gautam, *The Musical Heritage of India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2001), 88.

magical or therapeutic properties.”³⁶ Certain *rāgas* have specific associations with a color, element,³⁷ mood, time of day, and season. They were originally gendered and sometimes

<i>Svara</i>	Scale Degree	<i>Sargam</i> (Syllable Name) ³⁸	Associated <i>Chakra</i> ³⁹	Body Location	Associated Deity	Associated Animal
niṣāda	7	ni	sahasrāra	crown of head	Tumburu	elephant
dhaivata	6	dha	ājñā	third eye/forehead	Tumburu	horse
pañcama	5	pa	viśuddha	throat	Nārada	cuckoo
madhyama	4	ma	anāhata	heart	Viṣṇu	heron
gāndhāra	3	ga	maṇipūra	solar plexus/naval	Soma (moon)	goat
rṣabha	2	ri/re	svādhiṣṭhāna	genitals	Brahma	bull/cow
ṣaḍja	1	sa	mūlādhāra	base of spine	Agni (fire)	peacock

Table 1—*Svara* (Pitch) Associations

associated with particular varieties of erotic “love-play.”⁴⁰ Thus, the most fundamental material of Indian music itself was perceived to embody the extra-musical metaphysical in a variety of ways.

Music, especially through its rhythmic component, may be conceptualized as a manifestation in the sensory world of that most abstract of abstractions, time. But it is through the perception of motion that both time and music are realized. Musical rhythm, in some cases

³⁶ Richard Widdess, "Rāga," Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/48150> (accessed December 17, 2011).

³⁷ Ancient ragas were even believed to confer upon the devout musician control over the elements of nature, producing, fire, rain, and such; see Gautam, *The Musical Heritage of India*, 19.

³⁸ Paul also designates these as mantric syllables and assigns them mantric power, even when merely spoken, especially in connection with the corresponding *chakras*. Paul, 268-71.

³⁹ It should be noted that different traditions associate *chakras* either with absolute pitch or with scale degree. Especially with regard to the practice of singing, the system is much more imaginable and useful when the pitch-*chakra* association is based upon the actual resonances within the body of the singer (which would differ from singer to singer), rather than fixed pitches. In Indian solmization practices, moveable *sa* is said to be more prevalent than fixed *sa*, and *ragas* are not dependent upon absolute pitch level. See S. A. K. Durga, *Voice Culture: With Special Reference to South Indian Music* (Mumbai: Indian Musicological Society, 1978), 73-80; and Bonnie C. Wade, *Music in India: The Classical Traditions* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1987), 29.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 19-20

articulated by meter, is the physical and audible manifestation of time as motion. Through the action of the performing musician, this manifestation becomes, in essence, the embodiment of time. Perhaps the most characteristic rhythmic element of Indian music is the *tāla*, a fixed (repeated) metric grouping of rhythmic components. Gautam stresses, however, that an understanding of *tāla* must include its related concepts of *laya*, *ghana*, *kalā*, *pāta*, and *kāla*. *Laya* is a conception of tempo as it is perceived in relation to the subdivision of the *mātrā* or basic pulse of the music; *ghana* is the name given to the non-pitched percussion instruments that produce or “manifest” the *tāla*, the two, *ghana* and *tāla*, being closely linked in some theories of India music; *kalā* and *pāta* are, respectively, silent action (generally a hand gesture similar to the yogic *mudra*) and sounding action (often the striking of a metal idiophone) that meters the *mātrā*.⁴¹ Like *rāgas*, *tālas* at one time had associations with specific deities.⁴²

In fact, *kāla* is the Sanskrit word for time. Gautman suggests that Hindu thought perceives times in two distinct ways: as eternal and indivisible, and as transitory thus divisible. This casts action in relation to time in two corresponding lights: action that moves *through or across* time, and action that moves *with* time. Hindu music theorists have conceptualized musical rhythm in both ways: as measuring Time itself, or as measuring the musical act within Time.⁴³ In its function of defining or delimiting the act of making music, *tāla* is sometimes equated with *kāla*, thus returning to the notion that performed musical rhythm is the very embodiment of time.⁴⁴

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⁴¹ Madyrau Ramaswamy Gautam, *Evolution of Rāga and Tāla in Indian Music* (New Delhi: Munshirma Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1989), 222-237. Originally, the *ghana* was the clapping of hands; later, various membranophones and idiophones came into use.

⁴² Gautam, *The Musical Heritage of India*, 30.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

Hindu concepts of embodiment can offer useful tools to performing artists in Western traditions. For example, yogic concepts of balance in the body can profitably inform Western singing techniques that seek similar states of balance: muscular balance within the body, balance of tone colors, balance of art (control) and emotion (release). Certain yogic breathing techniques resemble aspects of breath conceptualization used in some Western singing techniques and may serve as a means to greater consciousness and facility of breath management, toward the goal of ever more meaningful artistic expression via the breath. The *chakra* system of energy focus and flow might be used as a tool for imagining, and then physicalizing, emotion or motivation or even actual sound resonances (vibrations) within the body. Yogic concepts of the human body as a conduit both *for* and *to* the cosmic or divine offer a beautiful metaphor for inspired performance in any tradition.

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