

## Overcoming Desire Through the Third Eye



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### Opinion

In my short yet compressed article, I wish to suggest an explanation of a yogic technique to resist sensual temptations such as desire/lust (kāma). By reading into the mythical moment of Śiva's encounter with Kāmadeva, I will interpret the way in which a yogin gains knowledge in "operating" his own autonomic nervous system; through such yogic powers, it might be possible to manipulate one's own bodily functions. I will claim that such an ability is perfected through the esoteric technique of Śambhavī mudrā; Furthermore, my reading implies that a yogin who is well trained in this technique can pacify sexual arousal in a matter of minutes, or perhaps even seconds.

I wish to begin with the famous myth of Śiva and Kāmadeva: The gods, being much distressed by the demon Tāraka, were advised that he could be defeated only by a son of Śiva. Unfortunately, Śiva at this time was deep in a trance of yoga from which no normal means would rouse him. Kāma shot at Śiva an arrow, the immediate consequences of which were disastrous, for the fire of tapas flashed from Śiva's third eye, utterly consuming the god of love, who has since been known as the bodiless one [1]. Kāmadeva, the god of sensual desire (kāma), manages to disturb the meditative penance (tapasyā) of Śiva. When reading that even the archetypal yogin is disturbed by desire, one wonders: How did Kāmadeva manage to do it? Isn't the most powerful yogin immune to such sensations? Haven't all earthly temptations been burnt by his most divine penance? According to Wendy Doniger: Tapas (asceticism) and Kāma (desire) are not diametrically opposed like black and white, or heat and cold, where the extreme presence of one automatically implies the absence of the other. They are in fact two forms of heat, tapas being the potentially destructive or creative fire that the ascetic generates within himself, kāma the heat of desire. Thus they are closely related in human terms, opposed in the sense that love and hate are opposed, but not mutually exclusive [2].

These two fires are two sets of psycho-physical modes, which although not mutually exclusive, they still affect each other's functionality through alternation, much like the Sympathetic

and Parasympathetic nervous systems. The fire of tapas, which creates a deep state of relaxation, is exactly what allows Śiva to be momentarily affected by kāma, since the fire of arousal rises from the fire of the relaxing parasympathetic system. Simply by being relaxed, kāma might suddenly rise. After his temporary arousal, Śiva quickly rekindles the fire of tapas and burns Kāmadeva by opening his third eye. By being burnt, Kāmadeva evaporates and becomes a bodiless kāma; In other words, he has been transmuted into abstract lust, which can be spread all over the world. Since Śiva is the first yogin, all other yogins after him must burn their internal kāma through their third eye; they always need to fight the fire of kāma with the fire of their tapasyā. A novice yogin might wonder how should he be able to burn kāma when all he sees in the mirror are merely two eyes, not three. A useful hint appears in the version of this myth which is found in the Matsya Purāṇa; before Kāmadeva shoots Śiva the arrow of lust, he sees Śiva with "His lotus-like eyes half open and intently gazing on the tip of his straight nose" [3]. Such a description reminds a practice called Śambhavī mudrā, which is mentioned in the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā (HYP); it says that this hidden mudrā of the Vedic śāstras is performed by gazing outside without blinking, while concentrating on the inside, until the outside objects disappear [4].

In other sources, Śambhavī mudrā also includes concentrating on the middle of the eyebrows, which allows the yogin "to rarefy the mind into higher subtler planes of stillness with a simultaneous inversion of optical vision, giving the outer eyes an expression of blankness and cessation of breath" [5], much like the expression of Śiva in the Matsya Purāṇa.

A cessation of breath is not mentioned in this purāṇa, but the HYP describes a clear relation between deep concentration and the cessation of breath:

A) Mental activity is created by two factors, psycho-physical impressions/habits/tendencies (vāsanā) and breathing [6].

B) With the control of breath, comes the control of the mind, and vice versa [7].

C) When the mind has been dissolved, breath dissolves, and vice versa [8].

The cessation of breath clearly affects the condition of sexual arousal; “When the inhaling of outside energy with the oxygen is stopped, and exhaling of carbonic acid gas is prevented, the venosity of the blood is increased and this increased venosity of the blood has a powerful effect the longer the breath is retained, the more powerful is the effect” [9]. The rising venosity of the blood causes retardation in the circulation of the blood towards the yogin’s pelvic area, which might explain a quick diffusion of sexual arousal. Yet, the part of the third eye in this technique remains to be explained.

When discussing the Third Eye, three obvious questions come to mind: What is the third “eye”? Where is it? How did Śiva use it in order to overcome kāma? I will start by explaining what makes the third eye an eye. Two of the Sanskrit names of the third eye, *jñāna-netra* and *ājñā*, contain the same root, *jñā*. This root means “to know”, so these names may be roughly translated as “The eye of knowledge”. Although, in this context, *jñā*, despite its etymological relation to the verb “to know”, does not describe the type of knowledge which one might obtain by reading books or articles; *jñāna* is a direct intuitive knowledge, and in that sense, it is through *jñāna* that the yogin learns his own subtle (*sūkṣma*) anatomy and gains control of it. As the eyes grant us with the knowledge of the objective world around us, the third eye is responsible for the knowledge of the subjective world which is both within and without.

In that sense, Śiva already knew how to burn kāma even before Kāmadeva approached him. This knowledge came from meditating on his third eye, which gave him the ability to control his body and mind, including the autonomic nervous system. Another thing which makes the third eye “an eye” is its location in the middle point between the eyebrows. The HYP hints that Śiva is concentrating on this point, by suggesting that the seat of Śiva is between the eyebrows (*bhrūmadhya*), where the mind dissolves [10]. *Bhrūmadhya* literally means “the middle of the eyebrows”, which is the point of concentration where Śiva is fixed (*sthāna*). Another name, *dvidala kamala*, points us to a more accurate location; *dvidala kamala* means “the two-petalled lotus”, an image similar to the shape of the anterior and posterior lobes of the pituitary gland, located near the middle of the eyebrows. Vasant G Rele [11] describes its physical location as “the Naso-ciliary extension of the cavernous plexus of the sympathetic through the ophthalmic division of the fifth cranial nerve, ending in the ciliary muscles of the iris and at the root of the nose, through the supra-orbital foramen. It has two petals or branches and is situated between the eyebrows” [11].

This means that Śiva’s concentration is not on the outer surface of the skin, but on a more internal sensation, close to

the root of the nose; it appears so also by yet another name, *bhrumūla*, the root of the eyebrows. In the *Saubhāgyalakṣmī Upaniṣad*, the description of *Ājñā Chakra* consists of three parts: 1) the innermost part of the roof of the mouth, 2) the root of the nose, and 3) the middle of the eyebrows; which are located at the same levels of: 1) the fourth ventricle and pituitary gland, 2) aqueduct of the midbrain, and 3) third ventricle and pineal gland [12]. Thus, yogic knowledge and powers do not come by merely squinting, but by absorbing the mind and breath, without forcing any eye movement, in the inner area between the roof of the mouth and upwards towards the middle of the eyebrows; roughly where the pituitary gland is located.

Still, the last question remains: How did Śiva use his third eye to overcome kāma? For a trained yogin, concentrating on the third eye causes “the convergence of the eye-balls to a near point in the body [until it] stretches the lateral rectus muscles of the eye-balls, and stimulates the ciliary ganglia which are in close connection with them in the orbit. The current, generated by this stimulus, is carried along the various fibres of the Vagus through the superior cervical ganglion of the sympathetic chain” [13]. By activating the sympathetic nervous system, the conditions for sexual arousal are no longer met, and the yogin gently shifts towards a mental mode of “fight or flight”; yet, the yogin does not fight nor fly, but remains seated in meditation. The yogin’s *tapasyā* creates an auto-suggestion which enables him to alter between the two fires, that of *tapas* and of *kāma*, through manipulating his autonomic nervous system; when *kāma* grows strong, he activates the sympathetic nervous system, and then switches back to activating the parasympathetic system. This dance of balance allows him to return to his relaxed trance. In conclusion, I have suggested that an experienced yogin is able to control his autonomic nervous system, to the extent that he can diffuse and dissolve sexual arousal (which is caused by *kāma*). Through the encounter of Śiva and Kāmadeva, I pointed out that the technique for such an ability is possibly the *Śambhavī mudrā*;

It consists of:

- 1) Concentration on the area between the eyebrows and the root of the nose.
- 2) A cessation of breath and
- 3) An auto-suggestion to remain in trance during the activation of the sympathetic nervous system.

I wish to add that there cannot be complete correspondence between the third eye and the pituitary gland; The third eye is part of the yogic subtle body (*sūkṣma śarīra*), while the anatomical parts of the nervous system are in the domain of the physical body (*sthūla śarīra*). My motivation in such a reading is to dissolve the clear-cut discursive boundary between the symbolical and the physiological; this boundary, as I see it, results from designating the theoretical aspects of yoga to the field of “Spirituality”, a distinctly modernist discourse, which mystifies the yogic experience to the extent that the theory of the

sthūla is often left unexamined. By decoding and combining the ancient corpus of yogic theory and practice with contemporary knowledge, it is not only that we can better understand how yogic techniques work, but we can also adapt better these ancient methods to our contemporary social and cultural context; whether it be for the sake of therapy, self-development or scientific research.

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6. Hetu-dvayaṃ tu chittasya vāsanā cha samīraṇaḥ | tayorvinaṣṭa ekasmintau dvāvapi vinaśyataḥ (HYP 4.22).
7. Pavano badhyate yena manastenaiva badhyate | manaścha badhyate yena pavanastena badhyate (HYP 4.21).
8. Mano yatra vilīyeta pavanastatra līyate | pavano līyate yatra manastatra vilīyate (HYP 4.23).
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