

The Soteriology of Sound Revisited: Meditation on OM at Death in the Pāśupata Sūtra

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As recent work on Pāśupata asceticism by Jonker has shown (2021), liberating “union”(yoga) with Śiva was to be achieved through the practitioner’s self-induced death, by the method known to later yogic traditions as “climbing up”(utkrānti), whereby the soul leaves the body and ascends. In this paper, I explore this idea from another direction, through a granular examination of Pāśupata mantra meditation in relation to some earlier texts of Brahmanical yoga. Various Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gīta offer ample evidence that Pāśupata meditation at OM at death is indebted to the paradigm that I have elsewhere called the “soteriology of sound” (Gerety 2021): meditation on the sacred syllable at death to achieve immortality or liberation. Through a close reading of the Pāśupata Sūtra (5.24-29, 34) in light of these older sources, I place Pāśupata OM meditation in the genealogy of Hiraṇyagarbha’s yoga (Harimoto 2020)—and by extension, I make arguments for 1) the centrality of OM in early Brahmanical yoga and 2) the broad influence of Hiraṇyagarbha’s system in the early centuries of the Common Era.

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