

The Unuttered Mantra: The Role of Ajapā within Haṭhayoga

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Topics: Haṭhayoga, Textual Studies, Yoga History, Mantra

Unlike its Tantric and Āgamic scriptural predecessors, where mantra plays an elevated role within the doctrinal systems of Mantramārga praxis, in most medieval Yogaśāstras that feature Haṭhayoga, teachings on mantra are largely absent or assume a lesser status. The *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* states that Mantrayoga can be “mastered by anyone” and that the “weak are entitled” to practice it. Likewise, *mantrasādhana* is listed as one of the obstacles to yoga practice. In the *Śivayogapradīpikā*, mantra is reframed more positively, however, is interiorized within a *prāṇāyāma* environment, specifically in the form of the *ajapā*, the “unuttered” mantra—that is, the natural sound of the inhalation and exhalation. This type of interiorized yogic mantra thus holds a more positive soteriological value within the context of *prāṇāyāma* than does traditional mantra japa on its own. As has been argued, this *ajapā* can also be seen as a yogic appropriation of the principal Vedic Gāyatrī mantra (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 134). This paper will introduce and analyze the *Śivayogapradīpikā*’s unique teachings on the *ajapā* within the context of its Haṭhayoga. The paper argues that the unuttered mantra of the breath, comprised of the disyllabic *hamsa*, is first reversed to *so’ham*, and then in turn is fashioned into the monosyllabic *om*. Through the success of yogic praxis, the all-important Vedic Gāyatrī mantra is thus re-interiorized within the yogic body in the form of *om*—ultimately leading the yogin to the highest *prāṇāyāmic* state of *kevalakumbhaka*.

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Dr. Seth Powell is a scholar of Indian religions, Sanskrit, and yoga traditions, who earned his PhD in South Asian Religions at Harvard University. His dissertation comprised a critical edition, translation, and detailed study of a 15th-century Sanskrit yoga text from south India known as the *Śivayogapradīpikā*—which uniquely combines yoga, ritual, and devotion. He also works on the visual and material culture of yoga in premodern India, uncovering yoga’s past through temple sculptures. Seth is the founder and director of the online educational platform, *Yogic Studies*, which provides extensive courses and training in Yoga and South Asian Studies to students worldwide.

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