Transcendence in Sports: How Do We Interpret Mysticism in Sports? Tantra and Cognitive Science Perspectives

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This article proposes that transcendent experiences in sports follow a model of mystical experience aligned with Tantric practices. Using the writings of 20th century scholar Gopinath Kaviraj, the mechanisms for special sports abilities operates in terms of what Kaviraj calls *parakāya praveśa*, entering another body. This article explores these practices in relation to sports and cognitive science.

Keywords: Sports; Tantra; Cognitive Science; Body-Mind; Mysticism

I. Introduction

When we think of mystical experiences we conjure up images of the yogi, or a Theresa of Avila reciting rosaries, or even perhaps an Emersonian forest recluse. However, our current culture looks to transcendence of another sort, in the spectacles of the body transcending its habitual physical limits in sports, in football, basketball, track. Is there something spiritual, mystical in the kinds of phenomenal feats we find in sports? Certainly rather than the mystic as an other-worldly recluse, the transcendence of sports is more akin to a Tantric sensibility, the expression of transcendence through and with the body. To explore the possibility of sports as a medium for transcendence I will draw from Michael Murphy and Rhea White's classic text on transcendent, mystical experiences in sports, *In the Zone: Transcendent Experiences in Sports*, itself a testament to the meme of being 'in the zone' as a way of understanding sports as privy to altered, mystical states. What is important about this landmark study is precisely that many of the experiences that they record appear to be mystical or religious experiences, offering glimpses of an idea of spirit and soul beyond the confines of ordinary human bodies—yet these experiences do not happen in the context of religion. None of the sports players they quote connect their experiences to a specific religious tradition, even if several espouse belief in some higher, transcendent power or capacity, sometimes as a result of their experiences.

So, remarkably, these seeming mystical encounters are all associated with a secular, and apparently cross-cultural experience connected to the fact of being in a human body, not so much connected to theological or philosophical speculations on the

nature of god, cosmos or humanity.[1] At the outset, then, Murphy's and White's study makes a preliminary case for a type of cross-cultural, human capacity for transcendence. Their choice to seek out this experience away from the confines of mysticism or religion attests to the genuineness of the accounts of many of these reluctant experiencers. It also demonstrates how important it is to find ways of understanding the farther reaches of the human condition, particularly those that force us to rethink our current models of human embodiment. They point out that sports itself, with its striving, its integral components of mind and body, offers the kind of space that makes it amenable to experiences mostly associated with mysticism or religion.

My primary focus for this paper is to outline what I suppose to be a fundamental mechanism for many of these sports experiences of transcendence. Namely, as these players describe their experiences, a key, repeated condition appears to be generating a sense of union with something that extends beyond a person's own physical body.

To address this, I will draw from two Indian sources. On the one hand, I think the best fundamental framework for understanding these experiences is a map of the body that we find in medieval Tantra, particular its discussions of employing the subtle body, and the important medieval Indian Tantric conception of *samāveśa*—translated variously as immersion or trance or possession. On the other hand, I draw also from a modern Indian writer, a brillant scholar and practitioner initiated in Tantric practice, Gopinath Kaviraj, who died in the latter part of the 20th century. From Kaviraj I use in particular his discussion of *parakāya praveśa*, the practice of entering another body. I should note to begin that I am presuming that it is even cogent to consider to understanding the experiences of Western athletes in terms of Indian philosophical conceptions of yoga. That is, I take for granted that the types of bodily experiences mapped here can and do survive cross-culturally, even if cultural explanations vary. Indeed, my hope is that bringing the cultural conceptions of Indian philosophy and yoga to bear on the experiences of Western athletes may offer a so-far untracked rubric for understanding physical phenomena that find at least occasional expressions across cultures.

Since this paper represents an attempt to connect different domains to understand the phenomenon of extraordinary sports performance and experiences, I should also note a caveat in how I address this. While Indian philosophical conceptions of a subtle body can map easily onto the types of experiences described, another domain that will ultimately be important for understanding extraordinary sports experience, contemporary neuroscience, is a more difficult fit. Some of Antonio Damasio's work, and perhaps also some of Giulio Tononi's and Christof Koch's panpsychism may be loosely compatible, however our contemporary Western model of the mind and brain routinely discounts any possibility of an extension or separation of subjective awareness outside the physical body. A good portion of these sports experiences describe precisely this. Some of the experiences described will no doubt be benefitted, better understood, by linking particularly some of what a scientist like Damasio says

[1] One is plausibly convinced that these types of experiences are universal, a world-wide phenomena, available across the board even if the data presented by Murphy and White tend to favor the databases available to them as North American researchers. That they look at men and women also reinforces a sense of the universality of the sports' experience.

about neural connectivity between different parts of the brain that bypass the secondary processes of mental articulation. Even with this, however, none of the neuroscientific models come even close to being able to incorporate the kinds of experiences described that involve consciousness and awareness extending beyond normal corporeal spatial and temporal boundaries. Yet these abound in Murphy and White's study. The charts categorising different types of experiences (Murphy and White 1995: 138-148) demonstrates this amply. By way of anecdote, perhaps the most striking are the accounts of leaving the body and viewing it below as we see in the swimmer Robert Beggs, who, from above, watches his body drown (Murphy and White 1995: 64). So, what we are talking about here are phenomena that are routinely discounted by our dominant model as fundamentally 'impossible'.

2. Contemporary Cognitive Science Caveats

Contemporary neuroscience hinges on the idea that everything happens in the body. Consciousness is a product, or by-product, for some thinkers like Dennett, of a physical process: the firing of neurons in the brain. Leaving aside thinkers like Dennett, who suggest that what happens in the brain happens without any kind of 'person' or mind overseeing or driving what happens at all, even the less reductive position, that the mind arises out of the brain and has some interactive influence upon neuronal firing, still stands far from any notion of a separable spirit that either controls or interacts with the body/brain, and further still from a dualist position of an awareness separable from the physical body. Cognitive neuroscience has no room for classical subjects of religion or the idea that a person may have an out-of-body experience. Some, or rather most, discount the possibility altogether (for instance, Dennett, the Churchlands). In the most prevalent theory of consciousness among philosophers of science and among neuroscientists, such phenomena are not thinkable, not possible. So the out of body experiences that Murphy and White describe (63-65) will definitionally be excluded in our current materialist model. If, however we explore the validity of this type of phenomena, divorced as they are from what William James would call an 'overbelief' imported from a religious tradition, we would need to explore different explanatory models for incorporating them within a naturalistic framework.

So if we accept the evidence presented by these sports figures, how can we explain it? Can we explain it with contemporary models from neuroscience and philosophy of mind?

The species of sports phenomena that we outline here fall primarily under the rubric of a species of Out of Body Experiences (OBEs), particularly of the heautoscopic type, where the person has a partial experience of leaving the body, but where awareness also maintains a sense of connection with the physical body. Thomas Metzinger argues for the importance of examining the types of experiences we outline here, in that they offer possibilities for understanding how human selves generate a first person perspective and how embodiment is mediated in these processes (Metzinger 2009, 257). He notes as well the historical religious significance of OBEs, relating them to terms relevant to religious traditions, and specifically to terms that our Indian sources draw upon as '*prana*' and the 'subtle body' (257). Even as he understands these terms as 'mythical' representations, at the same time he cedes the possibility that 'OBE research now makes it an empirically plausible assumption that this subtle body does indeed exist' (257), however, his explanation diverges sharply from the emic

perspective of the tradition which understands the manipulation of matter by means of a person's subtle body entering and transforming that matter. Metzinger instead rejects an idea of 'astral matter,' concluding that the subtle body is the embodied brain's self-model, that it is 'made of pure information flowing in the brain' (257). So this model supposes that the subtle body experience is a function of neuronal firing in a pattern that represents self as out of the body. The key question, which is unfortunately not considered for this neuroscientific perspective, is how this brain pattern can also affect external objects, like a golf ball, or a football, if indeed we take seriously the self-reports of these sports figures. That is, 'information flow' within a particular brain should not have a capacity to affect anything other than that particular brain. The easy way out, of course, is to ascribe these experiences to a type of chance or coincidence and discard them as evidence.

On the other hand, however, much speculation about AI and bodily transformations vis a vis a transference of human consciousness into computers relies precisely upon a conflation of 'information flow' in the brain with a sense of personal identity as a persistent self. For instance, Ray Kurzweil's infamous dream of downloading human consciousness into a computer that might then guarantee a type of immortality rests on precisely Metzinger's stipulation that the embodied brain's self-model is 'made of pure information flowing in the brain' (257). This has generated in turn much fodder for science fiction, especially in the sci-fi movement known as cyber-punk, which explores what happens when consciousness is disconnected from the body. Our current model suggests that information does not have causal physical efficacy as information. However, the notion of information as neuronal patterns slides rather readily into conflating neuron firing with the subjective experience of a human perspective. In this way 'information flow' in the brain becomes a physical object that can be physically instantiated in some other body, the robot body impervious to time and disease.

In another vein, the extensive work on OBEs by Blanke and a number of his co-authors understands the OBE simply as a phenomenon related to improper bodily sensation generated by a dysfunction in the temporo-parietal junction region of the brain, noting as well the paucity of systematic neurological studies of OBEs. In these cases, Blanke and his co-authors suggest that ambiguous input from different sensory systems is a key mechanism for OBE, and specifically link a number of cases to pharmacoresistant epilepsy involving the temporal parietal junction (Blanke et al. 2004, 244). Blanke and others working on OBEs do not address these types of sports experiences, in part no doubt because they do not assimilate to typical clinical presentations of OBEs as causing dysfunction. I should also note here the extensive critique that Greyson, Kelly and Kelly offer to Blanke's et al. postulation that the temporal parietal cortex is involved in OBEs 'caused by paroxysmal cerebral dysfunction of the TPJ in a state of partially and briefly impaired consciousness' (Greyson, Kelly and Kelly 2007, 221, citing Blanke et al. 2004, 243). They note that the brain areas pointed to are not consistent among patients cited, that only 6% of seizure patients report OBEs; and seizure and electrical stimulation will disrupt brain activity, but not demonstrate the coherence of an OBE. They also point to another study by Devinsky et al., pointing to the unresolved problem of 'the paradox of apparent consciousness during the seizure' (Greyson, Kelly and Kelly 2007, 221-223). Given the difficulties surrounding both the interpretation from a subjective viewpoint of the phenomenon of OBEs, as well as where precisely in the brain we should look to find and generate OBEs, that no clear answer exists yet

suggests the phenomenon deserves a deeper look. And indeed, we should keep in mind the 10% figure for OBEs occurring in the healthy population as Blackmore suggests (1982) and Blanke et al.'s circumspect awareness of the paucity of systematic neurological studies.

In any case, I suspect the more likely compatible models will be those of thinkers and scientists like Koch, Nagel, Chalmers, Tononi. Nagel's landmark seminal 1974 paper 'What is it like to be a bat?,' published in *Philosophical Review* opened up initial questions, bringing to light tears at the seams of our current dominant way of understanding the nature of the mind-body relation. His more recent 2012 work, in *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Is Almost Certainly False* extends this argument and gained a wide, if patchy, favorable reading, even as it was vociferously attacked on ideological grounds (Chorost 2013, Coyne 2013, Leiter and Weisberg, 2012). His fundamental turn to a form of panpsychism has been an influential model for reassessing materialism. Koch, formerly a strident reductive materialist, also has made a recent turn away from reductionism to panpsychism, utilising as well the work of Tononi, both of whom open up possibilities for a different apprehension of the mind-body connection. Others like Damasio, insist that these are separate domains and that what we find about neuronal correlations of the brain to subjective mental states will in no way detract from the meaningfulness of human experience that might result from reducing mental experience to corollary brain functions (in line with Gould's attempts to separate out religion from biology and evolution). Others like Patrick McNamara offer some sense of agnosticism, and skirt around issues of meaning. Damasio appears at times to take a position similar to McNamara, and other times to propose that even with a mapping of the brain neural states to emotions and subjective experiences, this will not diminish the human significance of subjective experience and awareness, even if it is entirely determined by bodily, neuronal processes. Damasio's work is particularly fruitful because he focuses on how sensory capacities, sensory awareness links up to mental states. In particular, Damasio's explanation of how sensory perception is tied into mental awareness, the early visual cortices connect by neuronal pathways with emotional centers of the brain, including the ventral medial cortex and the amygdala is helpful.
What is at stake in much of this science is an idea of causality and a science based on materialism and the effective manipulations that such a science has generated in the forms of material progress.

3. Detachable Bodies and Union: A Model for Understanding Extraordinary Sports Experiences

In this section I address the heart of this template for understanding extraordinary sports experiences. Murphy offers an anecdote of a football player in the San Francisco 49er's locker room who after a powerful, apparently mystical experience in the course of a game says to his fellow player in the locker room 'I am you.' The prototype for many of the experiences described follows the model of transcendent unity familiar in classic religious accounts by mystics. Here, however, I think it may be helpful to break this down in terms of a continuum of unity experiences—one can have unity on a cosmic level or simply on a more limited scale. This notion of a continuum is intrinsic especially to Tantric traditions and can also be understood in relation to some of the distinctions between Tantra and classical Pātañjala yoga.

For instance, a question we might ask is: How connected is the experience of the football player in the locker room to the experience Magic Johnson has with dribbling the basketball (Murphy and White 1995:125)? Or to the experience reported of Jack Nicklaus or Arnold Palmer mentally pushing the golf ball into the hole?

The basic model I proffer here is that human body boundaries are not so closed as contemporary science suggests, and that by generating a sense of union, a person can extend her or his mental thought and will beyond the familiar limited muscles and limbs we usually control. When this sense of unity extends further, in particularly cognitive directions, a person has a sense of union with other minds. A culminating experience of cosmic union is what we usually associate with mystical experience, yet it is important to keep in mind the possibility of partial union with specific other persons, specific other objects. This would be the sense of a continuum, greater or smaller spheres of union, in these various cases all extending beyond the normal capacities of a person's proper body.

Classical Pātañjala yoga presupposes that the awareness and consciousness of an individual has a capacity to exist separately from the body; the goal of yoga is primarily to leave the body in favor of an identification with a sense of self as cosmic or transcendent self. This is also a goal in Tantric philosophical schools. For instance, Abhinavagupta talks about a cosmic union with the absolute, *samāveśa* as a unity with the greater self or divine,[2] as an attainment of a deep mystical state which strengthens the self and allows it to overcome various obstacles that beset any profound task (Sanderson 2005: 92). Etymologically, *samāveśa* refers to a 'possession' state; the root for the word is *viś*, meaning 'to enter.' Its function in the tradition for Abhinavagupta is to highlight a complete absorption into a state of self-awareness at a level that transcends limitations of mind. In this respect, it is understood as marker of a state of enlightenment. However, the etymological roots point to a widespread understanding of enlightenment as connected to possession. The basic component of the word, as *āveśa,* refers commonly to the concept of possession more generally as a state of trance where the person in trance becomes possessed by some other disembodied being, a particular deity in possession states.[3]

Here we might wonder, why is enlightenment at least etymologically connected to the idea of possession states?[4] Certainly, we do not see this concept of possession as model for enlightenment in early yoga traditions. The goal is a release from repeated birth and death, into a pristine purity of selfhood. Curiously, however, the terminology for the early tradition, if anything, belies a preoccupation with precisely *not* being possessed. We find that the early tradition of yoga connected with Sāṃkhya favors a state of enlightenment as something quite opposite to possession, with an ideal of enlightenment as *kaivalya*, or 'aloneness.' Even if it is the case that Patañjali recognizes the possibility of possession in the third infamous *Vibhūti* chapter on

[2] For our purposes here, this need not be too strictly defined at the moment.

[3] See Loriliai Biernacki, 'Possession, Absorption and the Transformation of *Samāveśa*' for a discussion of the historical contexts undergirding the shift in meaning of Samāveśa as possession.

[4] Frederick Smith note the polyvalency of meanings and contextual ritualizations for possession in his *Self-Possessed* (Smith 2012, 30), which is easily the best and most comprehensive work on possession in South Asia to date.

magical powers, where he tells us that 'from loosening the cause of binding and from understanding movement, one can enter and possess another's body with one's own mind-stuff,'[5] nevertheless this is not a model for early yoga. This shifts however, especially as yoga comes to be influenced by Tantric praxis. As David White argues, much of what we see of yoga, especially popular literature and later literature of yoga depicts the yogi as especially skilled in entering other bodies, possessing them. In some cases, the yogi enters the body of a king in order to rule a kingdom (White 2009: 23) or in the well-known apocryphal story of the philosopher-ascetic Śaṅkara, he enters the body of a newly dead king in order to properly win a philosophical debate that requires him to discuss love (White 2009: 27), or in the story of an old yogi ascetic, the yogi enters a brahmin corpse in order to regain his youth (White 2009: 29). Oddly, this last instance curiously sounds not so far off from what we saw earlier, Kurzweil's hope to somehow transfer his consciousness to an inert robot body, to stave off death and old age. Similarly, White points to instances where gods, like the sun god, use the power of yoga to reveal themselves to humans and enter into them, as when the sun god enters into the mother of the Paṇḍavas, Kuntī and impregnates her (White 2009: 141). Here again the terminology involves this same root, '*viś*' with the word '*āviveśa'* in this case. Humans also, White points out, can enter other humans through yoga, as the sage Vidura fixes his breaths and limbs with the king Yudhiṣṭhira's breaths and limbs, and enters into and possesses Yudhiṣṭhira (White 2009: 142). In this and many of these cases, though certainly not all, yogic possession is fairly benign and designed to help the person possessed.

Similarly, in Frederick Smith's magisterial study on possession, we find a multitude of cases of possession throughout both classical Sanskrit literature as well as in popular practices. In some cases as Smith points out, the possession is deemed beneficial, as when the sage Vidura possesses the righteous king Yudhiṣṭhira (Smith 2012: 249) or when the sage Vipula possesses the wife of his guru Devaśarma to protect her from the lustful god Indra's sexual predations (Smith 2012: 246). In other cases, instances of possession are decidedly maleficent as when the good king Nala is possessed by the jealous and malevolent demi-god of Strife, Kali (Smith 2012: 242-245).

The mechanism for possession involves using the subtle channels of the body, known as *nāḍi*, as Smith notes, at times connected to the downward breath (*apāna nāḍi*) (Smith 2012: 274, also 276). In addition, Smith notes the necessity for using the three highest limbs of yoga, concentration, meditation and ecstasy (*dhāraṇā, dhyāna* and *samādhi*, respectively) as the mechanism for attaining higher powers (Smith 2012: 275), though as we see with Kaviraj below, the higher meditative states may not be as operational with athletes. Smith also points out the possibilities for limited or partial possession, though his suggestions here do not touch on the kinds sports experiences of transcendence and instead are associated with taking over another person's dream state, for instance (Smith 2012: 275). We find some suggestions of possessing inanimate objects. He tells us, for instance, the 8th century Jain thinker Hemacandra's prescription for a practice which moves breath from the respiratory system up to the top of the head (*brahmarandra*) to then guide it into specified objects, such as fragrant plants, camphor, small birds, larger animate and inanimate objects, and that a yogi

[5] Patañjali, Yoga Sūtra 3.38: bandhakāraṇaśaithilyāt pracārasaṃvedanāc ca cittasya paraśarīrāveśaḥ

can remain in another person's body for up to a day before returning to one's own proper body (Smith 2012: 276). Curiously for our purposes, Smith also notes that the idea of possession has a approximate connection to shape-shifting (Smith 2012:192). Possession is a presumed prefiguration to shape-shifting (Smith 2012: 195), which is in our context, something that we see in a number of the instances of athletes manipulating the elements of their craft in sports, shifting their own bodies often in the process. One important point we can take away from Smith's remarkable study is an emphasis on a kind of intense emotional absorption that *āveśa*, the yogic practice of possession, entering into some person or object calls forth.

The resonances with Murphy and White's explanation of the profound striving involved in sports as connected to the genesis of mystical experience should not be lost here. This sense of union, especially as an expansion of self beyond the mental is also one that abounds in Murphy and White's catalogue, for instance, in judo, where 'you and your opponent will no longer be two bodies separated physically from each other but a single entity, physically, mentally, and spiritually inseparable' (Murphy and White 1995: 32). Similarly, for instance, we see this in the idea of surrender described, as a kind of oneness, where the person becomes 'part of the environment,' not separate from it (Murphy and White 1995: 24). So, the anecdote of the football player in the locker room is a not uncommon description and it appears to represent an experience of awareness transcending self in an expansive and abstract way.

However, the practice in Tantra (and to some degree yoga[6]) that generates this sense of union does not always extend so far as a cosmic union; at times it is limited. And here, Tantra in particular offers more precise possibilities for a sense of limited union. For our purposes here, the sense of limited union has a helpful explanatory power for types of extraordinary sports experiences that involve specific objects, like golf balls, or footballs or the opposing baseball team's pitcher. So the model proposed here connects both the kinds of mystical transcendent experiences of the football player in the locker room who says, 'I am you' as well as the psychokinetic experience of altering the course of the football in the air, as Brodie discusses with Murphy.

How might we understand Tantra's difference from classical Pātañjala yoga in terms of a Western cognitive science point of view? Classical Pātañjala yoga offers eight steps, which offer a trajectory of yogic mastery of various stages, ultimately leading to the final eighth stage of deep meditation, *samādhi*, which itself leads to enlightenment, here as particularly a disengagement from one's particular personal embodiment. In *pratyahara*, the fifth limb of yoga as withdrawing inwardly, the idea is that the mind-stuff withdraws from sensory input. This is a preliminary stage preceding a stage of deep focus. While it is nearly impossible to determine at this very early stage of brain research, the first-person reports of yogis describing a state devoid of sensory elements seems to suggest that the early visual cortices, while they may be activated in visualisations, they may not be activated in the stages of yogic meditation, *dhyāna* and *samādhi*, which involve a separation of awareness from bodily consciousness.

For Tantra, the intensive focus on sensory modalities, visualisations for instance, and auditory focus on a mentally repeated mantra, takes a slightly different path from yoga

[6] we see this particularly in the Vibhūti Pāda, with particular experiences related to specific practices—the attainment of which the text critiques at the end of the chapter.

as cessation of thought and the attempted yogic disembodiment involved in the deep meditative state termed *samādhi,* which by its practice leaves the body behind. So the point here is that while yoga and Tantra share much, the Tantric preoccupation with magical powers tends to keep it moored more readily to the tangible physical world. Thus, as Padoux points out, even as Tantra is inextricable from a particular practice of yoga, nevertheless, its focus on *siddhi,* tangible powers in a worldly context tends to keep it more engaged in a body. While the yoga of the *Yoga Sūtras* (3.37) cautions the reader to ignore the magical powers, the *siddhis* that come with yoga practice, Tantric traditions dally more readily in the stages of yoga still connected to the world, stages which generate tangible yogic effects for the material world, for our purposes aligning more easily with the types of extraordinary sports achievements that these athletes accomplish. And it is this continued engagement with the body and the world that renders Tantric praxis more aligned with limited, partial forms of union with specific objects and persons, rather than a sense of union with the totality of creation. The point of interest here is that the continued sensory capacities exercised in Tantric forms of meditation seem to be linked to the experience of *siddhis*, the magical powers. So the continued focus on sensory parts of awareness and in brain operation, in contradistinction to withdrawal from the senses aligns with limited forms of union, more connected to the body's senses and to the types of extraordinary powers of the athlete in a heightened state.

This might, for instance, apply to the kind of experience that Kathy Switzer reports (Murphy and White 1995: 35) where her senses are more connected and heightened in sports states. In her case there is a limited sensory heightened awareness, even if, unlike other cases of specific union with, say, the golf ball, her experience is generalised.

This idea of union I suggest is a key component for a large variety of extraordinary sports experiences. Specifically, we can point to the kinds of experiences where the player seems to have an effect on inanimate objects, on the football, the golf ball, and so on. Particularly of interest are the special skills that arise where players use a sense of oneness to enact a capacity to deftly, successfully manipulate objects in their sport. These incidents are especially striking primarily because the experience of the player goes beyond a simple subjective experience and appears to also affect objects in the external world. The strength of these incidents lies in their implication for causal effects in the external physical world. Even as this type of evidence is certainly limited by its recalcitrance to any sort of double-blind experimentation, and as such, will tend to be relegated to the bins of 'anecdotal,' nevertheless, the possibilities for demonstrating causal effects in a physical domain, in terms of the parameters demanded in Popper's understanding of what makes science, that is, as falsifiable, does make this phenomenon interesting, worthy of some attention. It also demonstrates something like a universality of the principles involved since the external world is affected; it is not simply confined to internalised mental states. In particular, this is especially important because it bridges the gap between mind and body, demonstrating that the mind can indeed affect more than simply one's subjective experience, even more than one's own physical body.

Examples of this abound, as Murphy and White point out, race car driving, golf, football (Murphy and White 1995: 23). Murphy and White hone in on this in their discussions of psychokinesis. Here golfers like Jack Nicklaus have a capacity to 'will the ball into

the cup' (Murphy and White 1995: 87), and football players like Brodie can seem to control the football so that it jumps right over the hands of the opposing team player who would intercept it (Murphy and White 1995: 89). Similarly, some martial artists like Bruce Lee can send an opponent flying without even actually physically touching the opponent (Murphy and White 1995: 90, 92, 147 in table). It is this sort of limited experience of union, not a cosmic transcendence, but a precise limited connection with objects, that I think Kaviraj is especially helpful for explaining as we see in the next section.

In any case, before moving on to Kaviraj, we can briefly note how the model of union Kaviraj describes applies to a number of other sports experiences that Murphy and White catalogue. We see it again with basketball player Wayne Estes who uses oneness, unity with the ball to control the basketball; baseball player George Shuba also discusses a sense of oneness where the bat is guided by some greater force.

And as noted earlier, Murphy and White discuss a practice in Judo, to become one with opponent to defeat the opponent (Murphy and White 1995: 32). In this case again, the union is not on a cosmic scale, simply a union with the opponent. Jimmy Clark similarly controls the race car by becoming one with it. We can also read examples of ESP, where for instance Lou Brock talks about empathy with the pitcher as a way of knowing when to steal a base as again a kind of unity with another person (Murphy and White 1995: 48-49) or Bill Russell with basketball, forming a deep unifying connection with the other players (Murphy and White 1995: 50), or John Walker's grandmother experiencing a unity with him and predicting his successful win of the 1500 meters at the Montreal Olympics (Murphy and White 1995: 62).

4. Kaviraj

Gopinath Kaviraj was a Bengali scholar and Tantric practitioner who lived from the latter part of the 19th century up through 1976. He became principal of the well-known Sanskrit College in Varanasi, Sampurnanand Sanskrit Visvavidyalaya, however what is especially fascinating about his life is the interest he took in Tantra and Tantric practices, which inform a great deal of his writing. His family name was Bagchi. Kaviraj was a title conferred in honor of his great learning, and he won a number of awards in his life including the highly respected Padma Vibhushan, and even had a stamp issued in his honor by the Government of India after his death. He was a disciple of a well-known Tantric adept, Swami Vishuddananda as well as a disciple of the famous pan-Indian saint and mystic, Anandamayi Ma, who died in 1982, whose ashram he lived in for the last part of his life. In Varanasi, a lore surrounds his life as an adept himself whose practices included the infamous *pañcamuṇḍa āsana*, a meditation practice on a seat of five skulls. His writing displays a deep erudition. I draw particularly here from an untranslated article he wrote in Hindi, titled, 'Yog aur Parakāya Praveś', ('Yoga and Entering Another Body'), in a two volume work, *Bharatīya Saṃskṛti aur Sādhana*, published in 1964. Note here again the use of the root '*viś,'* to 'enter.'

In this article Kaviraj discusses a practice of entering another body. As he describes this practice he notes that it allows a practitioner to enter another person or another thing. When the practitioner accomplishes this union with another body, a steady, strong-minded practitioner then becomes capable of controlling that body. For our purposes, Kaviraj makes it clear that 'body' can refer to both other people or simply to

objects—in our case, objects like basketballs and golf balls.

Here, I suggest that we can draw from Gopinath Kaviraj's understanding of this specific practice of *parakāya praveśa*, literally, 'entering another body' as a way of thinking about how *siddhis* might connect mind to both body and to the wider world beyond one's own body, which is a phenomenon we see described again and again in the extraordinary sports experiences that Murphy and White describe. In this case of entering another body, the sports player taps into an innate human capacity to concentrate mind-awareness (*citta*) to separate off from his own body and enter into the body of the football or golf ball he wishes to direct, beyond the physical, mechanical, manipulation of the ball.

So how does it work? Kaviraj tells us that the practice of entering another body involves mastering what he calls *videha dhāraṇā*. Literally this translates as 'disembodied concentration.' This is concentration happening without the body.

Here, the *citta*, the mind-awareness, located inside the body is sent outside the body to some desired place. The mind then at this other place generates a sense of union with this other object and is able to use it as one would use one's own body. I am reminded here of the explanation that Murphy and White give from some psychologists discussing various psychokinetic phenomena—the psychologists propose that the person controlling the movement of dice, controls the dice just as he controls his own body (Murphy and White 1995: 101).

Kaviraj describes this by way of a literary analogy, one certainly not amenable to a Western scientific sensibility. He says that the mind-awareness (*citta*) leaves the body in the same way that the unified rays of the eye leave the eye and get linked to the external object to be perceived, conform to its form; so rays from the mind also act upon external objects. However, it takes particular practice to allow one's sense of concentration to occur outside the body proper, the *videha dhāraṇā*, which Kaviraj notes is the key step in learning how to enter another object.

Ordinarily, a person's mind–awareness (*citta*) is always linked to one's body proper. It does not leave the body until the time of death. However, the yogi practices leaving the body, and the way the yogi does this is through the multiple mind-bearing channels, *manovāhā nāḍī*. They are inside the body and also fan out to the whole cosmos, *virāṭ viśva*. By this net of channels, *nāḍījal*, every person links to every other thing. This of course, follows the famous Tantric maxim that everything is connected to everything else.

More precisely, in his discussion of yoga, Kaviraj points out that in the development of the self (*ātmavikās*), the practice of leaving the body is a particular stage of development. This, he notes, arises from what is called the inner limbs of yoga, the inner limbs being the final three of Patañjali's 8-limbed system, *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna* and *samādhi*. While the first five limbs are explicitly tied to the body, even into the fifth, *pratyahara*, which entails pulling consciousness away from its bodily sensory inputs, still the idea that this is part of the external limbs of yoga rather than the internal limbs ties this 5th stage to the body's external, sensory modalities.

Kaviraj notes that the 6th stage of Patañjali's yoga, *dhāraṇā* typically entails a bodily

foundation.[7] However, he notes, that a person who has mastered a capacity for concentration (*dhāraṇā*) without a bodily support (*nirādhār dhāraṇā*) is capable of allowing the mind-stuff (*citta*) to leave the body and enter another body. This other body can be another person, as we see in the well-known story mentioned earlier, of the famous 7th century philosopher Śaṅkara who leaves his body and enters into the body of a dead king, in order to understand sexual relations so that he can win a debate with Maṇḍana Miśra.[8] The idea here is that the king's soul has already left his body, so Śaṅkara is entering an inert corpse, though the practice is also associated with types of possession as well.[9] Kaviraj notes that there is a natural barrier preventing the mind-stuff from leaving the body, however a yogi through practice and initiation can learn to allow his mind-awareness (*citta*) to leave one's own body and enter into some other object (*vastu*) that one wishes to enter. He also notes that without mastering the skill of concentration outside the support of the body, a person can never attain the deeper stages of meditation, including *samādhi*.

It is important for the process, as Kaviraj notes, to maintain a sense of separation from the object that is entered, to keep a sense of distinction between his own consciousness (*citta ke svarūpa*) and the object he has entered (Kaviraj 1964: 25). This is important so that the person can find the way back, but is more of a risk in entering a conscious body than in an insentient object (*vastu*). Kaviraj describes the process by analogy with vision, however, again, he uses terms that do not easily resonate with our contemporary Western understandings of how vision works. He says that just as the eye can with its rays touch via vision to be joined with some external object (*dṛsya padārth ke sāth yukt*) and conform to the form of that object, so in the same way, the mind-awareness (*citta*) exits through external channels (*raśmiyāṅ*), which are conduits for the mind (*manovahā nāḍī*), that connect consciousness extending outward to the universe. In this sense, the underlying premise entails a kind of panpsychism, where mind connects to the external universe through its rays, which can occur because the mind is not fundamentally different from the external universe. This is how the mind-awareness can enter another object. This is accomplished through practice in separating the capacity of the mind's ability for concentration away from the body to locate in some external object. He also connects this ability to move concentration outside of one's own proper body to other *siddhis* as well, including having knowledge of external objects.[10]

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[7] Gopinath Kaviraj, *Bharatīya Saṃskṛti aur Sādhana*, vol. 2 (Patna, India: Bihar Raṣṭra Pariṣad 1964), p.25. Kaviraj writes, 'yah jo dhāraṇā kī bāt kahī gayī hai, vah apanī deh ko āśray banākar hī kī jātī hai'

[8] This story is best known perhaps from the 15th century Śaṅkara Digvijaya, by Vidyāraṇya Svāmi.

[9] For a benevolent example of a yogi entering the body of another person, see *Autobiography of a Sadhu: A Journey into Mystic India*, by Baba Rampuri (Merrimac, MA: Destiny Books 2010). In this recent case, the American disciple Rampuri becomes possessed by his Indian Naga Baba guru, who continues to irupt in and control the actions of Baba Rampuri in a somewhat permanent fashion, even after the guru's death. Parakāya praveś, the term for entering another body, is the practice for entering another live body as well, though here Kaviraj talks about it in terms of entering things (vastu) generically: 'yahāṅ dṛśya vastu ke cetanatva yā acetanatva kī koi bāt nahī rahatī' Kaviraj, p. 27. He explains this by noting that in reality, the object in relation to any subject is lacking sentience (acetana).

[10] Kaviraj, p.25 'videh dhāraṇā ke binā bāhya padārth ka aparokṣ jñān nahīṅ ho sakatā'

He also notes that this practice does not generate nonduality (*abheda bhāva*), though it does lead to a transcendent experience (*āloka anubhūti*). Here is where we see that Kaviraj's explanations differ from what we see earlier in texts like the Yoga Sūtra, which presuppose the use of not only concentration, but also meditation and deep sustained meditation, what Smith calls ecstasy (*samādhi*). This practice does not generate nonduality, that is, it does not engender a sense of the unity of everything, nor does it entail a complete liberation from conceptions of subject and object operative in our daily lives; this preserved sense of limitation and duality are conceptually important for the process of entering other objects and maintaining a functional physical efficacy. It is also the case that this practice is not the same as when we use our senses in relation to an object in order to understand the object. The difference in this latter case lies in that when we use our senses to gain knowledge of an object the mind remains separate from the object, whereas when one gains knowledge through disembodied concentration, (*videha dhāraṇā*), the mind-awareness (*citta*) travels through the mind channels to become one with the object. In this situation, the mind-awareness and the object take on a single form. As the mind moves to a transcendent state, the mind is freed, and no longer operates on its typical mental trajectories. However the just previous desire that was held in awareness leaves its imprint in the transcendent state.[11] This is how the practitioner enters a specific object or person. In our case, an Arnold Palmer concentrating so exclusively on the golf ball can allow his mind-awareness to leave his own body, and locate within the golf ball.

Sometimes the person engaging in this extensive deep concentration outside the body also tracks the transcendent components of *videha dhāraṇā*, being outside the body, by slipping into a greater *dhyāna*, meditation, or *samādhi* even. In these cases, the transcendent mystical apprehensions can be part of the experience. However, this is not always the case and not necessary in *videha dhāraṇā* as disembodied concentration in another object which simply causes union with the other object, the golf ball and a capacity to move it psychokinetically.

Again, what facilitates this philosophically is the idea that everything in the universe is connected. The channels that mind-awareness can take are infinite. However, if the yogi can concentrate on and remember a particular channel, that channel cannot facilitate connection with an infinite variety of different external objects (Kaviraj 1964: 26). What happens in these cases is that the yogi then comes to enter into the thing that was just desired. Also we should keep in mind that fundamental for this whole process is that the yogi/practitioner is capable of loosening the link between the body and the mind. Even if, as Kaviraj notes, so long as a person is living, the link between the body and the mind is such that the mind cannot fully ever exit the body. So a practitioner keeps a link to one's own proper body and still can concentrate awareness outside the body. This is also why keeping connected to the particular mind-channel (*manovahā nāḍī*) is important, because it is the path (*mārga*) that links both to the object and back to one's own proper body. This last point is important only for Kaviraj's discussion of entering another living person's body, which can be fraught if the person whose body one enters has a stronger mental presence which can overcome the person entering (and not always necessarily in a benevolent fashion).

[11] Kaviraj, p.27: 'Is āloka kā uday ho jāne par icchā hote hī pūrva-nirdiṣṭa vastu is āloka me prakāśita ho uṭhatī hai'

Another extremely important point Kaviraj makes, especially for our discussion of sports, is that when the mind leaves the body in disembodied concentration, the sense organs also accompany the mind.[12] My conjecture is that it is precisely the retention of a sensory presence, on the level of mind and brain activity, that facilitates abilities to manipulate objects (and people as objects) in the external world. Again, my suggestion here is that when sports players engage in the kinds of activities that Murphy and White describe, we can read these as spontaneous examples of *parakāya praveśa*, the Tantric *siddhi* of detaching one's mental awareness to enter into some other external thing.

We can note also that in this article Kaviraj also uses this mechanism as an explanation for how a yogi can lessen the karma of another person and how the yogi can use his own *tapasya,* austerities to make the entered person shine.[13] This is the essence of *āveśa* and the *samāveśa* I noted earlier in the article in reference to Abhinavagupta.[14] What Kaviraj suggests is not fundamentally comprehensible for our current materialist paradigm. This is not just the case with thinkers like Dennett who confine mind to an epiphenomenon, but also with thinkers like Chalmers, Nagel who, even with panpsychism, suggest that one's own inner subjective reality, 'what it's like to be a bat' is inaccessible to another subjective entity.

5. Alternate Cosmologies: Tantric Models of a Subtle Body

All of this, of course, hinges on a different model of the relation between mind and body—different not only from our current materialist cognitive science model, but also different from our mostly unarticulated, but widely pervasive Western theological models of the soul in relation to the body. The models of the subtle body that we find in yoga and Tantric traditions offer a different model that can incorporate a conception of awareness and consciousness with a capacity to exist separately from the body, even as one is still linked to the body, as Kaviraj's *videha dhāraṇā* proposes. In this sense, the idea of personhood is bolstered by an awareness, which we might clumsily call something like consciousness, however this awareness of self is not strictly tethered to any particular, single body. Moreover, the body itself always offers a more porous ontological status. These Indian models are useful in part because the supposition of a subtle body that exists in tandem with a physical, living body, even while a person is alive, allows for a greater range of mystical phenomena, out-of-body phenomena, than does a mostly Christian theological dualist conception of a soul that leaves the body at death. In Kaviraj's Tantric model, we do not need to entertain conceptions of an eternal soul, separate from the body. Rather, all we need is (indeed, a more naturalistically) oriented capacity for mind to both link and delink with particular bodies as objects, including one's own physical body and golf balls and footballs. This

[12] Kaviraj, p. 29: indriyoṅ bhī man kā anusaraṇa kartī haiṅ.
[13] Kaviraj, p.30.
[14] One more notable point here in terms of possession, is that Kaviraj notes that the lesser mind, being possessed, cannot remember anything laukika –that is, on our worldly, articulate, mental level here, but a trace of the alaukika (transcendent) remains. This indicates that when the experience is transcendent and the practitioner cannot describe it in words, for Kaviraj, this points to a kind of absorption into some higher mental space and explains the idea of why when people go into trance state they don't remember their state of mind. P.30.

certainly entails a currently discredited panpsychism, but not conceptions of a god, or any type of permanent soul. The greater range of possibilities for how the physical body relates to mind, relates to subtle body, relates to spirit has a deeper explanatory capacity for many of the types of experiences that we find in Murphy's and White's work.

6. Conclusion and Further Thoughts

In conclusion, transcendent experiences in sports offer an interesting case for examining the mind-body interface in relation to classical Indian understandings of practices of yoga and Tantra. Yoga and Tantra purport to influence objects outside the body solely through mental, yogic efforts, subverting our general understanding of causality among physical objects as confined to physical causes. Within the context of yoga and Tantra, a primary mechanism for understanding non-physical causality within a physical context relies on a model of moving awareness outside of one's own body to inhabit another object, through a kind of possession, *āveśa*. Kaviraj's Tantric explanations of entering another body in particular offer a precise mechanism by which a skilled yoga practitioner can generate causal physical effects through mental efforts. This model presupposes that minds can be detached from bodies and inhabit foreign bodies and manipulate them, and offers this as a way of thinking about transcendence in sports. With respect to cognitive science paradigms, this type of experience aligns with reports of Out-of-body experiences, however, much of the work on Out-of-body experiences to date is confined to clinical, pathological cases, particularly involving seizures and brain dysfunction.

If we expand the category of Out-of-body experiences to include some striking examples from sports, we may be able to broaden how we think about the operative principles in Out-of-body experiences. Kaviraj's notion of concentration of awareness outside the body (*videha dhāraṇā*) poses a way of thinking about Out-of-body experiences and suggests we take a deeper look at cases of OBEs as likely comprising a wider range of phenomena, and not merely the pathological instances related in particular to seizures and pharmacoresistant epilepsy. Moreover, if we subscribe to materialist reductionist conceptions of OBEs, as Metzinger helpfully supposes that they indicate neuronal configurations which alter the sense of self, the capacity for external causal effects will necessarily help to spur a more complex understanding of the relationship between the mind and the body. Tantric understandings of selfhood, are especially useful, insofar as they keep a sense of self moored to bodily relations and bodily experiences. Finally, all these cases require a shift from reductionism to something more akin to panpsychism, as exhibiting some sort of mechanism by which to connect the material to the mental.

There is more to mine from this study of sports capacities which I will not address here at this time, specifically, to connect Murphy's final chapters that look at methods of mind-body training, decidedly with links to Indian meditation practices in both Tantra and Yoga, to some neuroscientific work, like that of Benjamin Berger's which discusses the power of visualisation in terms of brain function perfecting muscle memory without one's muscles. This is also exemplified in some of the experiences that players report (Murphy and White 1995: 111, for instance). It would also be possible and helpful at some point to link some of what Murphy discusses here on mind-body methods for training to recent analyses of the connection between early

visual cortices, along with Damasio's work on the connections between the early visual cortices and emotional centers of the brain, including the amygdala and the limbic system, particularly as these suggest that mental efforts in visualisation in a sport action helps the execution of that action on the physical plane.[15] Along these lines it would be interesting to pursue some of what we find in teachings on yoga and meditation in close conjunction with Murphy pointing out that many athletes experience a sense of stillness plus a low heart rate while in the 'zone,' in a transcendent sports experience.

[15] Apart from Damasio's work, we can look also at https://academic.oup.com/cercor/article/21/4/949/290367/Grasping-in-the-Dark-Activates-Early-Visual.

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