

Radical Transformation in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*

A Phenomenological Interpretation

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After thus contemplating the infinite consciousness for some time I suddenly realized that all this creation was within myself, my own body, just as the tree is in the seed.

—*Yogavāsiṣṭha*

My body is made of the same flesh as the world . . . [T]his flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world. They are in a relationship of transgression or of overlapping.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

The *Yogavāsiṣṭha* (YV) is a text that, primarily through narrative, conveys a transformative philosophy. By transformative philosophy I mean, following John Taber, a system that is both philosophical and soteriological, the proper reception of which is meant to effect “a total transformation of consciousness, the basic relationship between knower and the things he knows.”¹

There are four criteria of a transformative philosophy: (1) experience—a higher level of consciousness which is a precondition for the intelligibility of the system; (2) praxis—a method for cultivating this

higher consciousness; (3) knowledge—a body of the doctrine which constitutes the main topic of the system and articulates the experiential component; and finally (4) transformation—a dramatic and thorough rebirth resulting from this insight.²

The present study will take up the relations among these aspects of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha's* transformative philosophy, particularly focusing on the relation between experience and practice.

Specifically, this chapter has three related objectives. First, I will show that the YV aims to evoke a radical transformation of, not just the prepared receiver's worldview or philosophical outlook, but her concrete lived experience, her existential orientation in and to the world. Second, I will introduce the phenomenological notion of the "horizon of interiority" in order to interpret certain yogic practices described in the text. I will call the experiences these practices evoke "expansion experiences" and outline four marks of such experiences. Third, I will show how, within the context of the YV, the expansion experience provides the ontological framework for the liberated reengagement with samsara.

Rāma's Dispassion

The overarching narrative structure of the YV is a dialogue between young prince Rāma and the great sage Vasiṣṭha, in which the latter provides liberating spiritual instruction to the former. Within this structure a dizzying array of stories, characters, and dialogues interweave and fold in on themselves; Rāma hears of worlds within worlds, dreamers dreamt, and paradoxes upon paradoxes—all the while being instructed in the right path for the attainment of liberation. However, for my purposes, it is not the mind-bending, paradoxical tales of the YV that are of primary interest, but the purpose of the instruction, namely, to bring about Rāma's liberation from samsara and his reengagement with the world. And to understand these, we must look to Rāma's condition at the beginning of the tale.

One first encounters Rāma in a state of extreme dispassion and despair, bordering on nihilism. Having recently returned from a pilgrimage, Rāma has lost his taste for the riches of the palace and for his duties as prince. As the chamberlain reports:

Even when offered charming and pleasing objects, he looks at them with sad eyes, uninterested. He spurns the palace dancers, regarding them as tormentors! He goes through

the motions of eating, walking, resting, bathing, and sitting like an automaton, like one who is deaf and dumb. Often he mutters to himself . . . 'What is the use of adversity?' All this is unreal. (YV I:10.8)³

Rāma is paralyzed by his newfound belief in the illusory nature of the world. Upon realizing that what most find to be of greatest value (i.e., wealth, power, even life itself) can only lead to suffering and ignorance upon ignorance, Rāma can no longer find the will to participate in the seemingly useless charade. And why should he? It seems that nothing is of any real, eternal value. Thus, Rāma rejects the world in disgust.

Yet despite his existential crisis, Rāma has been called upon by his father and by the great sage Viśvāmitra to defeat a hoard of demons harassing the sage in his forest retreat. But upon being called to court to be ordered to defeat the demons, Rāma instead pours forth a long discourse on the illusory nature of the world and the endless cycle of suffering. At the end of the monologue, Rāma asks, "Who are those heroes who have freed themselves from delusion? And what methods did they adopt to free themselves? If you consider that I am neither fit nor capable of understanding this, I shall fast unto death" (YV I:31). Rāma, it seems, is quite serious.

It is at this point that the first aspect of transformative philosophy must be recalled: the higher level of consciousness that is a precondition for the intelligibility of the system. Rāma's pilgrimage has led him to deep insights into the nature of reality, and these insights provide the precondition for his embarking on the path to liberation. Moreover, it is not just Rāma's philosophical insights, but his existential condition that is to be addressed by the great sage Vasiṣṭha. The change to be effected must be of Rāma's concrete lived experience, his engagement with the world.

After Rāma's eloquent if despairing monologue, the entire court, including the great sages and celestial beings, is awed by the depth of his insight. The sages immediately recognize both his insight and the particular existential situation from which it is presented. Vālmīki remarks, "Surely no one but Rāma, who was full of dispassion, could have uttered the words he gave expression to, not even the preceptor of the gods could" (YV I:32, 33). And with regards to his insight, Viśvāmitra lauds, "O Rāma, you are indeed foremost among the wise, and there is really nothing further for you to know" (YV II:1). We see, then, that Rāma's insight is identified as the truth by his great teachers, even at the beginning of his journey toward liberation. Hence, the

truth of Rāma's worldview, his philosophical outlook, is not enough. The young prince's worldview must be, as Viśvāmitra says, "confirmed," and he must be taught the path to "the peace that passeth understanding" (YV II:1).

Thus the next five chapters of the YV confirm and strengthen Rāma's insights, while also teaching him to dissolve the ego, attain liberation, and reengage the world in order to fulfill his duties as prince and warrior. In order to complete his teaching, and in order that he may reengage the world, the teachings of Vasiṣṭha must effect a radical transformation of Rāma's whole being, his entire orientation in and to the world. The transformative philosophy of the YV must, therefore, go beyond the abstract, philosophical level and reach down to the core of Rāma's concrete lived experience.

We find here a mutuality between the teachings and the student in the YV. The stories and dialogues of the YV cannot themselves effect a radical transformation of the hearer (or reader). The system presented requires the receiver to be prepared—both intellectually and existentially—to receive the teachings. Indeed, Rāma himself, as part of the YV, can be viewed as the system's model receiver. Further, through presenting the model receiver, one who meets the preconditions for further instruction leading to liberation, the YV becomes more intelligible to the less than model receiver. One may trace the starting point of the student through the praxis and to the final goal, thereby coming to understand the purpose and particular character of the philosophy. However, it must be pointed out that, as a transformative philosophy, the intellectual and existential state of the model receiver is a precondition for the process of radical transformation. Again, while the YV incorporates abstract philosophical reflection and reasoning, it moves beyond that level and reaches down to radically alter the concrete experience of the prepared receiver. Hence, it is to the nature of this transformation and its effect on concrete experience that I will turn in the next section.

Concrete Lived Experience

In the first section it was argued that the teachings of the YV should be viewed as a transformative philosophy that aims to lead the prepared receiver to a radical alteration of her concrete lived experience. In this section I will articulate what is meant by concrete experience, as well as introduce the notion of the "horizon of interiority."

By lived experience I mean experience within the context of the interactions of an embodied subject with other subjects and with and in a world. Hence, this quite broad notion includes both abstract, discursive practices (such as writing philosophy) and more fundamental aspects of our being, such as sensory interaction, eating, moving, and so forth. Lived experience, then, to borrow terms from phenomenology, is just our being in and vis-à-vis the life-world. For my purposes, I shall focus attention on the concrete end of the abstract-concrete continuum, the further exploration of which will follow.

The notion of lived experience used here is not intended to presuppose a particular metaphysical status for the subject or the subject's world. The phenomenological description of lived experience and of the life-world at this level cannot tell us about the ultimate existence of the self or the world. This is important because, as we have seen, the YV presents the view that the world and the particular self are ultimately unreal. Yet, like Śaṅkara's version of the Advaita Vedānta, the YV allows for the description and elucidation of the structures of illusory, samsaric experience. Thus, in the context of the YV, the notion of lived experience retains its value but must always be understood as samsaric experience. In the YV view, we are not only engaged with the world, but those who are not liberated are also entangled in and deluded by the (illusory) world. Indeed, our ignorance is not merely conceptual or philosophical—that is, simply having the false belief that the world is real—but reaches down and constitutes even the most prereflective, concrete aspects of our being-in-the-world. Therefore, it is due to the depths of ignorance elucidated by the YV system that we must examine concrete experience and its radical transformation in attaining *mokṣa*.

What, then, are the aspects of the concrete lived experience with which we are concerned? As mentioned above, the concrete end of our lived experience includes the prereflective, the nondiscursive, the sensory, and the bodily. One's perceptual horizon, for example, in part constitutes one's concrete lived experience. The perceptual horizon includes one's present visual field and also involves the range of possible perception. That humans are only able to perceive certain parts of the spectrum, or can only hear a certain range of sounds, is part of the deep structure of lived experience.

In addition, as embodied subjects our motility structures our being in the world—even if, as the YV contends, we are in truth radically separate from our bodies. Our bodily interactions with the world are integral to our ability to individuate and understand the objects

with which we are presented in the world; the kinesthetic horizon, along with the perceptual horizon, allows us to create a topology of the life-world. Furthermore, it is in great part through our bodies that we come to understand, in a very concrete way, the otherness of the world. The experience of weight, resistance, and solidity, the very hardness of the world, is first and foremost experienced through the body. Indeed, the resistance, the hardness of the world to us, provides the ground for the experience of the world existing over and above (or over and against) the subject.

Next, the notion of concrete lived experience includes the body-subject, that is, the experience of being a subject interacting with the world in and through a body. We do not simply have bodies like we have cups and books and the like; our bodies are, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it, "the vehicle of our being in the world."⁴ Further, the notion of the body-subject includes the notion of the felt-body, which is what our bodies feel like, as it were, from the inside. But more than that, having a body is, for a living creature, "to be intervolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and to be continually committed to them."⁵

At the level of concrete experience we are, through the fact of our embodiment and the projects with which we identify, always already caught up in the world. Moreover, the kinds of projects to which the subject is committed are extremely varied. The notion of a project involves purposive actions like walking across the room, reaching for an object, and so on, as well as more refined and learned behavior like driving or typing. As subject-bodies, then, we are intervolved with the environment or life-world at multiple levels of being, from the most basic physical projects to the most abstract.

Finally, the phenomenological structure of our experience can be described in terms of the subject-object, inner-outer distinctions. The relations between these phenomenological structures are varied and complex. However, in this context I will only treat them in broad outline. We may say that the subjective pole of experience is the locus of that experience; it is the point of view around which our experience of the life-world is centered. The subject pole is the site of our perceptions, thoughts, and desires. Here we also find that the subject is fundamentally tied to the "inner." By the "inner" I mean the experience of our own private thoughts and sensations, including the felt-body. (As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "I am always on the same side of my body."⁶) In contrast, the object pole of our experience is the world with which we are confronted with tables, chairs, and so forth. The object pole is that which is external to us, the outer. The

outer, then, is the objective order in which we act and on which we have a point of view. We have now the general view of the subject with its interiority confronting or being intervolved with a world of objects (and other subjects) that are experienced as exterior or outer. This is, of course, an extremely simplistic sketch of a complex set of phenomenological structures, but it provides sufficient background for the elucidation of the notion of the horizon of interiority.

As has been shown in our brief sketch of certain features of concrete lived experience, the subject, at the level of appearances at least, is embedded in and involved with the world on several levels simultaneously. Further, the outer world, the objective order, is both what we act in and what we act on in the various projects to which we are committed. It is this relation between subject and world, in part through the body, which Merleau-Ponty meant by our being "intervolved" with the world. Moreover, it is in exploring this notion of intervolvement that the horizon of interiority becomes important. For, while we have asserted that the inner-outer distinction is a phenomenological structure of our experience, the relation between poles cannot be understood in terms of a radical break. Although the inner is the realm of one's private thoughts and feelings as well as the felt-body, the notion of the interior can be expanded even to include other objects. In other words, we may push the inner along its line of continuum toward the outer, and it is this intermediate range that I term the horizon of interiority.

Three notions help us to understand the expansion of interiority: habituation, intimacy, and control. Through our various projects in the world we come into contact with a wide range of objects experienced as other than us; the objects transcend our subjectivity and are certainly not interior to us. However, through the course of being intervolved with certain objects and environments, we become habituated to them. In the case of basic objects, we may think of the painter's brush, the gardener's spade, or the blind person's cane. We become habituated to the use and manipulation of these tools, and, in virtue of their application in our projects, they become extensions of our subjectivity. "The blind man's stick," Merleau-Ponty observes, "has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight."⁷

In the case of environments, we become habituated to the interaction with and navigation through them; one need look no further than one's home or neighborhood for an example of this level of habituation. Through habituation one builds a sense of rapport with

the outer, to the point that its otherness becomes less apparent. In other words, the otherness of the world is mediated through habituation. This habituation to certain parts or features of the world, in turn, leads to the development of intimacy.

Our rapport with objects and our habituation to their use (or look, feel, etc.) brings them "closer to us." If we may exploit this ordinary expression, the objects with which we are intimately familiar are closer to us in a field of interiority, with its accompanying horizon. The spatial metaphor reflects the level of intimacy, the depth of association with our own subjectivity. As a rather mundane example of such an intimately familiar object, which our horizon of interiority has expanded to include, take a trusty pair of eyeglasses. This object can be understood phenomenologically as an extension of one's bodily perceptual being in the world. The intimacy of one's eyeglasses arises, then, from the fact that they are involved directly or indirectly in a great number of our projects and because they extend something so fundamental to our concrete being in the world.

Further, it is important to recognize the personalized character of objects within our horizon of interiority. The glasses are my glasses, and not just because I bought them and they have the proper prescription. I invest them with a significance, perhaps through aesthetic considerations, and others associate them with me. The frames of my glasses might have been my father's, or might, within my cultural milieu, represent education or sophistication. And with regard to places, the layers of significance may increase greatly. Furthermore, objects and places within my horizon of interiority are invested with significance on a variety of levels. One's childhood home, for instance, may be almost disconcertingly intimate. Indeed, the process of habituation leading to intimacy lays bare how the notion of the horizon of interiority is associated with rootedness, place, and being at home in the world.

Last, the notion of control has a complex relation to the horizon of interiority. At a fundamental level the ability to control parts of the environment, to some extent, undergirds the process of habituation and the development of intimacy. To be able to control a tool is a precondition for the possibility of it coming within one's horizon of interiority as a tool. More generally, one's involvement with the world rests on one's ability to cope with and to some extent control the environment through one's projects. Moreover, on the level of significance, the horizon of interiority in its connection to the sense of at-homeness is in turn connected to safety, predictability, and control.

The intrusion into the life-world of forces beyond one's expectation or control can reinstate the otherness of the world beyond the immediate, inward subjectivity. Yet, these intrusions occur with great frequency, making any simple association of interiority with control somewhat problematic.

Let me, then, sum up the notion of the horizon of interiority. The horizon of interiority demarcates a space within the larger phenomenological field in which our projects are carried out. Through becoming habituated to parts or features of our life-world (from objects to places to other subjects) we associate them closely with our own subjectivity; that is, we become intimate with them. This may occur on several levels, for instance, kinesthetic, emotional, or symbolic. Parts of the life-world, one could say, become to some degree parts of us. The horizon of interiority then mediates the otherness of the world (its resistance, its hardness and intractability) by bringing certain features or parts of the world closer to subjectivity by way of interinvolvement and the bestowal of meaning.

All well and good, but, one might ask, what does any of this have to do with young prince Rāma? Recall that we are out to understand how the teachings of the YV are able to radically transform Rāma. I am claiming that Rāma is transformed down to the level of his concrete lived experience, his most basic experience of the world. Thus, Rāma comes, not just to know, but to experience the world as an illusion. And as I will discuss in detail below, it is through certain forms of yogic practice that one is able to change one's most basic experience of the world. Furthermore, I am proposing the notion of the horizon of interiority as a tool for understanding the connection between these yogic practices and concrete lived experience. Hence, with the notions of concrete lived experience and the horizon of interiority in place, we may again return to the YV and the path of Rāma's liberation.

The Transformation

So far I have argued that one can interpret the YV as the presentation of a transformative philosophy, a philosophy that radically alters not only one's worldview, but also one's concrete experience. I have turned to Western phenomenology in order to spell out certain features of concrete lived experience, the most important of which in this context is the notion of the horizon of interiority. In this section

I shall attempt to put the insights from the first two sections to work in order to give a phenomenological interpretation of what I term “expansion experiences.” These experiences are evoked through yogic practices and are fundamental to Rāma’s liberation and reengagement with the world. They constitute the praxis through which the radical transformation of Rāma’s being is affected.

Such a radical transformation of one’s existential orientation to the world requires that even the deepest ontic structures are to be altered or, rather, revealed to be false. Not just our view of the world, but our very being in the world must be transformed. Hence, the system presented in the YV must work on several levels of being concurrently, allowing the student an experience of reality that destroys old structures. On the one hand, at the more abstract level, the teachings of the YV must attack our usual metaphysical presuppositions. On the other hand, the teachings of the YV must allow the student to experience reality in a way that explodes her most fundamental ontic structures.

At the abstract, philosophical level, as Wendy Doniger points out, the YV wreaks havoc on some of our most deeply held philosophical distinctions.⁸ The tales of the YV continually undercut our assumptions about the nature of reality, turning our usual sense of the real inside out. Indeed, fundamental to Doniger’s reading of the text is that it is an attack on hard distinctions. The text problematizes the lines between dreaming and waking, the real and the unreal, the dreamer and the dream, the self and the other. In the tales of the YV, all of our supposedly hard distinctions are undercut, softened until they eventually disappear. Vasiṣṭha teaches Rāma: “Birth, death, *Māyā*, delusion, . . . bondage, liberation, good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, embodied and disembodied states, . . . you and I and the other, truth and falsehood, . . . all these are pure consciousness” (YV II:18). The result, particularly for the uninitiated, is a kind of metaphysical vertigo in which all sense of reality is lost. Yet, there is a method to the madness. As Vasiṣṭha remarks to Rāma, “Such illustrations have been used in this scripture with a definite purpose and a limited intention. They are not to be taken literally, nor is their significance to be stretched beyond the intention . . . Parables have only one purpose: to enable the listener to arrive at the truth” (YV II:18–19). What is the truth to be conveyed through the stories? First, the world is an illusion. Second, the Self (atman) and Reality (Brahman) are one. And yet, as we have seen, truth here is to be understood as direct experience of the truth. The student must not

only have her intellectual distinctions softened, but also experience the world as an illusion, without the hard lines between self and other, inner and outer. The reality of the world must be experienced as soft and pliable.

Yet, as has been pointed out, Rāma already knows that the world is illusory, and this insight has given rise to a deep, paralyzing dispassion. What then reaches down to bring about the direct, concrete experience of the truth leading to reengagement with the world? What is it that explodes the ontic structure of ignorance? It is the realization of the unity of the Self and Reality while remaining in samsara that allows Rāma to reengage the world. Moreover this realization affects every level of his being, from the spiritual to the most concrete, prereflective structures of his being in the world. At the ultimate level, Rāma realizes that the existence of his true Self just *is* the existence of Brahman. Creation, from the ultimate point of view, is merely a division in consciousness. And while he also knows that this has been true all along, the experience of unity is of a merging of existences—Rāma's being merges with the absolute.

At the phenomenological level, that of his concrete lived experience, Rāma experiences an existential opening to the world. The world is no longer the other which stands over against his subjectivity. The realization of the ultimate unity of Self and Reality, then, allows the expansion of Rāma's horizon of interiority to include the entire world. His being has opened to the world, and he experiences the world as not fundamentally separate from himself. We thus have a picture of transformation in which realization at the ultimate level of being grounds a radical transformation of another, more limited level of being.

I still have not answered how the YV evokes this radical transformation in Rāma's being. The direct experience of the unity of Self and Brahman is accomplished through the yogic practices described in the text. Through concentration on the inner reaches of the self, and through the manipulation of *prāṇa* (life-force), the practitioner is able to go beyond the ontic structures that limit his samsaric being in the world. In particular, through practice, one may radically transcend the inner-outer distinction, which divides the self from the world. Through the cultivation of these yogic practices, then, Rāma can achieve the kind of expansion of interiority required for his liberated reengagement with samsara. Here an examination of two accounts of experiences arising from yogic practice will help to flesh out the notion of the expansion of interiority.

The World within the Rock

In this section Vasiṣṭha recounts to Rāma two expansion experiences (YV V:2.59–92). First, we encounter Rudra, who stood observing the division in consciousness known as the creation: “In a moment he swallowed the division as it were. Then Rudra stood alone, one with the space as if he himself were space. In a few minutes, he became as light as a cloud and his size was fast shrinking. I saw . . . that he had become smaller than an atom. In a moment he had become invisible. He had become supreme peace. He had become one with the absolute *Brahman*” (YV V:2.86). Here we find three important elements. First, Rudra, while contemplating the nature of the world in relation to consciousness, is able to transgress the inner-outer limit. We may look at the expression “swallowed the division” in at least two ways. On one hand, creation just is the division. Hence Rudra swallows the entire universe during his contemplation. The universe is encompassed by Rudra’s consciousness, the swallowing being, on my reading, a metaphor for the realization that the existence of the phenomenal world is not different from the existence of the self. On the other hand, the division that is creation is a (false) division of consciousness. The illusion of the universe arises from the subject-object distinction. The YV, in several places, teaches that, through a process of objectification of aspects of consciousness, the world becomes falsely divided into subject and object. Thus, we may also see swallowing of the division as the radical dissolution or transgression of the inner-outer, subject-object structure of samsaric being. These two readings, we will see, complement one another.

The second important element of this account arises from the second line. Having swallowed or internalized the universe, Rudra actually experienced what it was like to be the creation. He became one with space as if he himself were space. Rudra’s expansion experience is more than the realization that the universe is an illusory projection of pure consciousness. The interiorizing of the creation allowed Rudra to experience the creation as if he himself were space. The subject is no longer merely presented with the world, illusory or not. Now the subject pervades the world to such an extent that the structures of the creation, like space, are also the structures of the subject’s being. So just as one experiences one’s body from the inside (the felt-body), Rudra is able to experience the creation from the inside (the felt-universe).

The third important element to be gleaned from this passage is the interrelation between the ultimate, metaphysical level and the

phenomenological level. The contemplation of creation by Rudra leads him to the realization that ultimately both the individual self and the world are merely divisions in Brahman. Thus, the swallowing of the world is the realization of the ultimate falsity of the division. Yet, at the level of Rudra's individual being, the experience described allows him to break out of the ontic structures which falsely limit him and to experience the world from the world's point of view. Hence, the ultimate need not negate the phenomenological level, but may only restructure it. The expansion experience, then, operates on more than one level simultaneously. It should also be pointed out, however, that in the case of Rudra, the phenomenological level is eventually negated, and he becomes one with the absolute Brahman.

The second expansion experience recounted to Rāma is Vasiṣṭha's own. Through the cultivation of a yogic practice connected to the elements of the universe (earth, air, water, wind, etc.), Vasiṣṭha is able to expand his horizon of interiority to include the world. Yet, unlike Rudra, Vasiṣṭha's yogic exercise allows him to become one with each element in turn, experiencing the creation through that element. His practice begins with the contemplation of consciousness leading to the expansion of interiority. As Vasiṣṭha recounts to Rāma:

After thus contemplating the infinite consciousness for some time I suddenly realized that all this creation was within myself, my own body, just as the tree is in the seed. When one closes his eyes to sleep, he enters into an inner world created by his inner vision; when sleep comes to an end, one wakes up and his vision enters the world of one's waking state. In the same way creation is experienced by one's entering into it with his own heart. (YV V:2.87)

Once the sage has entered into the creation, he experiences it from the perspective of space.

When I experienced space, I knew what earth was. I became earth. In that earth I experienced the existence of countless universes, without ever abandoning the awareness that I am the infinite consciousness. I saw the most amazing earthly phenomena and events within that earth (within me). In fact, I experienced even the farmer ploughing me (the earth), and I experienced the burning heat of the sun and the cool flow of rainwater. I became the fearful space in which the Lokāloka Mountains (the boundaries of the

world) exist, and I explored the actions and movements of countless beings . . . I experienced the weeping and wailing of those who had lost their dear and near ones, here I experienced the joy of dancing girls; there were cries of the hungry, the joy of the affluent, drought and earthquake, war and destruction, beautiful birds and lakes, suffering worms, flourishing forests, meditating sages. O Rāma, in this earth-body of mine all these took place. (YV V:2.87, 88)

In this rich account of Vasiṣṭha's experience we find four important aspects. First, as with Rudra, the creation is internalized by Vasiṣṭha through contemplation. Vasiṣṭha's horizon of interiority is coextensive with the entire creation. His consciousness pervades the world, and it is only a part of him. Second, while he merges with creation, Vasiṣṭha does not simply become further immersed in the illusion of samsara. Indeed, in the second sentence we find that he merges with the world "without ever abandoning the awareness that [he is] the infinite consciousness." Hence, as with Rudra's experience, the expansion of interiority at the phenomenological level is grounded in the realization of ultimate unity. The ultimate unity grounds the phenomenological expansion. The third aspect found in this account is the vicarious knowledge gained through the expansion experience. Vasiṣṭha not only realizes that he is not different from the earth, but he also learns what it is to be earth. Just as Rudra felt as if he were space, so Vasiṣṭha, through yogic practice, learns what it is to be creation from the point of view of each of its elements. Yet, Vasiṣṭha's experience exceeds Rudra's in an important respect. Vasiṣṭha's vicarious knowledge leads him to experience not just the structures of the world like space, but also to experience the joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains of the earth and its creatures. Hence, the fourth aspect of this experience, which is not present in Rudra's expansion, is empathy. The existential opening achieved by Vasiṣṭha through his yoga allows him to truly empathize with the joy and suffering of the entire creation, while remaining always rooted in the awareness of its illusory nature. Moreover, it is this fourth aspect that is of utmost importance for Rāma's reengagement.

However, before turning to the subject of liberated engagement with samsara, we should examine an interesting question asked by Rāma. Upon hearing the incredible account of Vasiṣṭha's various expansion experiences, Rāma asks, "When you were engaged in the contemplation of the earth (*parthiva-dhāraṇā*), was the earth real or only mental?" (YV V:2.88).

The question cuts to the heart of the matter. In the expansion experience, what is it that is really experienced? Does the yogic practitioner simply imagine that she is the world and can empathize with it? Has the inner-outer distinction been dissolved at the level of one's fundamental being, or is the expansion experience just phenomenological delusion? To Rāma's question Vasiṣṭha responds: "Truly, this was mental and I had myself become the earth; equally truly, this was not mental nor did I actually become the earth. Apart from the mind, there is no earth. Whether you consider something as real or unreal it is but mental action. I am but pure infinite consciousness; . . . [I]t is the earth, it is the world, it is the creator; this world appears in space . . . just as a fancied city exists in the sky" (YV V:2.88, 89). Vasiṣṭha's answer, then, is both and neither. While Rāma's puzzlement seems perfectly reasonable to us, it is in this context the wrong question. For, in the YV system, the world is nothing more than an emanation from pure consciousness. Hence, ultimately, there can be no distinction between what is real and what is "only" mental. Yet, this metaphysical unity is at a deeper level than that of the samsaric ego. Hence, Vasiṣṭha did in fact experience the world, the only world to be experienced at all. In the YV, the expansion experience is neither a mere trick of imagination which leaves the fundamental structures of one's being intact, nor an escape from the realm of consciousness into a separate world. The "only mental" is more real than the "real earth." This doubt of Rāma's having been dispelled, we can now turn to the subject of reengagement.

The Reengagement

In the last section I identified four aspects of the expansion of interiority: (1) the world is brought within the horizon of interiority; (2) the existential opening is grounded in the ultimate unity of Self and Reality; (3) the experience leads to vicarious knowledge of creation; and (4) the vicarious knowledge leads to a deep empathy with all of creation. In this section I will examine how the expansion of interiority allows Rāma to overcome his paralyzing dispassion and reengage with the world.

As we have seen, the horizon of interiority mediates the otherness of the world, providing the subject with a certain feeling of intimacy and control over her environment. The life-world (the samsaric plane in the YV) is imbued with meaning and so is less radically other. The subject achieves a certain rootedness and is more or

less at home in the world. And yet, the division between subject and object remains. Hence, in the YV view, the subject is still ignorant and entangled in the cycle of birth and death. Indeed, the mediation of the otherness of the world that imbues it with meaning actually contributes to the maintenance of ignorance, of *samsara*. First, by imbuing the world with meaning and by associating it with oneself, the ignorant person takes the world to be real. Second, the limited self, the ego, believes that it can possess a certain amount of this real world.

However, if, like Rāma, one realizes the illusory, changing nature of the world, then the experience of creation is radically altered. What once seemed meaningful and real becomes delusion and suffering. Moreover, the world that one had become at home in is once again set over and against the subject, this time as a terrible delusion. As we see in the case of Rāma, the initial reaction is an utter rejection of *samsara* as false, evil, and other. At this stage, there can be no motivation to be engaged with the world. The best course, it seems, is to simply wither and die.

Yet, through the practice of yoga on the path to liberation, one's orientation toward the creation again changes. Rāma's attitude of rejection is realized to be incomplete. For, if the world is mere illusion, what is to be rejected?

To view *samsara* as the enemy is still to objectify it, to give it undue reality. If one remains identified with the limited ego, but rejects the world, the division of subject and object only increases. Hence, the expansion experience serves to dissolve even this division. Grounded in the realization that ultimately the world and the ego are unreal, the false boundaries of the ego are dissolved and a merging with creation occurs. The practitioner's concrete lived experience expands to include creation, yet all the while she realizes its ultimate unreality.

The expansion experience radically transforms the subject and her existence in and toward the world. The creation is neither rejected nor reified. Instead the transformed person is existentially open to creation while understanding its illusoriness. She is engaged, but not bound. The world becomes radically her world, but in a double sense of the genitive. First, at the existential level, the process of interiorizing and empathizing with all of creation explodes the ontic structures that close off the subject from the creation. Once a person has transgressed the limits of the ego and felt the joys and sorrows of the earth, even the worms, she can no longer feel the world as radically other. Intimacy is expanded until one is truly at home in creation. The world that was once hard and alien has softened and become pliable.

However, the experience of the world as her world cannot be the feeling of possessing it, for possession is a function of the limited ego, which desires to possess and control that which is other. But for the liberated person, there is nothing to possess and no one to possess it. This is the balance of dispassion and intimacy that allows the living liberated (*jīvanmukta*) to engage with the world without being ensnared or entangled by it. Further, this balance, in the YV system, is only possible through the understanding of the second sense of the genitive. At the ultimate level, the world is her world because the Self and Brahman are one. Hence, she is both creator and creation. The metaphysical underpinning allows the liberated person to continue to exist in the world, never forgetting its illusory nature.

Rāma, then, through his practice of yoga and his eventual liberation, is able to overcome his paralyzing rejection of the world and accept his role in it. The world and the duties of state are to be embraced without the assumption that they are ultimately real. As Vasīṣṭha says of the liberated:

They were free from psychological predisposition and hence they did not seek nor reject either life or death. They remained unshaken in their direct experience . . . Yet, they roamed the forests, islands and cities . . . They conquered their enemies and they ruled as emperors. They engaged themselves in diverse activities in accordance with scriptural injunctions as they realized that such was appropriate conduct . . . They even engaged themselves in great wars. They retained their equanimity . . . [They were] utterly free from delusion, from egoistic notion (I do this) and from desire for achievement or the rewards of their actions. They did not indulge in vain exultation when they defeated their enemies nor did they give way to despair and grief when they were defeated. They were engaged in natural activities, allowing all actions to proceed from them non-volitionally. (YV VIa:12–13)

Moreover, the actions of the *jīvanmukta* are repeatedly described as free and spontaneous—the source of the action is not the ego, with its cravings and aversions, but pure consciousness. Hence, according to the text, one who rests in the self, that is acts from beyond the ego, does not accrue karma. The expansion of interiority to include the world, then, allows the *jīvanmukta* to act unfettered by the constraints of egotistical drives and the false separation of self and world,

inner and outer. The existential opening to creation, grounded in the realization of the ultimate unity of atman and Brahman, provides the ontological framework for Rāma's liberated reengagement.

Conclusion

By a somewhat indirect route through phenomenology, we seem to have gained some insight into Rāma's liberation and reengagement. Rāma begins the YV with an insight into the nature of samsara. He finds that the world is an illusion, that what is often valued in the world leads only to suffering, and he wants no part of it. But his rejection of the world is an incomplete response. He understands, on an abstract level, the idea that the world is illusory. However, his experience of the world, his existential orientation, is still limited. The structure of his being-in-the-world, from which he interprets and acts in the world, is still one of subject and object. In order for Rāma to be truly free, he can neither reify nor reject (itself a reification) the world. He must embrace it, but from a radically different existential orientation. That orientation is one in which the world is neither seen nor experienced as other. Instead, based on the realization of the ultimate unity of atman and Brahman, Rāma must embrace the world and his dharma. This is achieved in part through yogic practices that lead to expansion experiences—the expansion of the horizon of interiority leading to empathic union with creation. Further, this union restructures Rāma's being-in-the-world by dissolving the illusory division between subject and object, leaving him free of the divisive ego that closes him off from creation. And it is within this radical new mode of being that Rāma can become an enlightened hero and ruler.

Notes

1. John Taber, *Transformative Philosophy: A Study of Śankara, Fichte, and Heidegger* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 2.

2. *Ibid.*, 95.

3. All quotations are taken from Swami Venkatesananda, *The Concise Yogavāsiṣṭha* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge Press, 1962), 151.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 148.
7. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 143.
8. Wendy Doniger-O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusions, and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3–13.