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Visionary Metamorphosis in the *Yogavāsishtha*:
A Transpersonal Approach to the Existential Crisis

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an unconventional approach to the existential crisis according to the transpersonal psychology of the eleventh century text, *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. An existential crisis is a general term used to signify a subjective experience of emotional distress as it relates to certain objective realities of human existence. This paper builds off key concepts (“givens”) from the field of existential psychotherapy, including death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness, provided by psychoanalyst Irvin D. Yalom, illuminating how the crisis is addressed in contemporary psychotherapeutic settings. Brief attention is given to the Western academic roots of existential psychotherapy, including areas of continental philosophy and humanistic psychology; this reveals a stark implication regarding general Western approaches: alleviation of the existential crisis requires a humanistic intervention, the individualist pursuit toward self-identity. Although this addresses the significance of human will and agency, it fails to take into consideration existence as a complex whole, suggesting a dualistic understanding of what it means to *be* in the world—the self in contrast to other living beings, the universe, the cosmos. This thesis proposes to expand the humanistic approach, responding to the existential crisis through the transpersonal Yoga of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, whose captivating mythological-like stories illustrate overcoming crises of human existence through a nondual, mind-only philosophy, emphasizing the importance of cultivating nonattachment, effort, and creativity to live a life of selfless action. Four narratives are explicated as well as the transpersonal techniques used to overcome the internal conflict perpetuated by Yalom’s “givens” of existence. By working with dreams, inquiring into reincarnation, contemplating on the five great elements, and expressing narrative, realization of Self-identity (with a capital ‘S’) removes the veil of ignorance overshadowing perception of an existential crisis, thus elucidating a visionary metamorphosis.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Personal

The early hours of the sunny, chilly February morning have stuck with me for nearly a decade. I was eighteen at the time, sitting at a coffee shop off campus from my community college, spending time before for my next class, physical anthropology, to commence. I can still remember how the sweet aromatic spices of my chai tea latte and the melancholic melody of *Bon Iver* had seemingly perpetuated a dark realization to flood my being. Perhaps it was the sensual pleasure of these mundane events that triggered the realization; although I suspect that it was their monotony, rather than the events themselves, that froze my inner world as I sat there amid the busyness of college students getting their daily dose of caffeine.

I couldn't understand why I was there—obviously, I was there to waste some time before my next class, but I couldn't comprehend the weight of my existence sitting amongst dozens of other young college students doing more-or-less the same as myself. It didn't matter whether I recognized their faces or that we attended the same college, striving towards academic success that would secure us a future life with the necessities to thrive. Our individual backgrounds, aspirations, desires, fears, and everything else that composed our individuality, had dissipated. The weariness of simply existing in *that* moment at *that* coffee shop on *that* specific February morning, rendered no logical meaning for me. Questions flooded my psyche: 'Was it solely because of chance? Was I free to even make the decision to be here?' As far as I was concerned, the reason any of us were there was to no will of our own, despite the previous chain of events leading us to believe that that was the case. 'Why, then, on a larger scale, am I here, breathing the stress and joy of college?' I could very well be at home still breathing the stress and joy of being home, but that wouldn't wash away the core of these realities. It was existence itself, the

mere fact that I was alive, that filled me with absolute dread and anxiety. Now, don't get me wrong, dread and anxiety were not new internal responses for me, and oftentimes I was familiar with them because I could pinpoint and identify the source of their arousal, i.e., lying outside of my being. What made this dread and anxiety different was the fact that I could not find the location of its origin outside of myself—it was coming from deep within. I was bound to carry it everywhere I went, with whoever I was with.

The realizations of that fateful February morning shifted my outlook on life. There was no meaning to be found in the dull routines of school, part-time work, and how I spent “free” time. It didn't matter what “path” I chose because I fundamentally believed that all were set within a deterministic framework that was to no will of my own, much like sheep bred in the hands of a shepherd. To believe that my existence, just one out of nearly eight billion, truly mattered, was absurd. The chances that I would make any difference in the world was slim to none; whatever role I played throughout life will very well be filled by another, just as I had filled the role of those before me. The thought of continuing life to endure the inevitable suffering gnawed the core of my being.

What I have just described is a personal reflection of my first realized existential crisis. I had no label for this experience at the time, nor did I understand the gravity of its implications on my physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing in the years to come. It was not until I became profoundly interested in world philosophies that I realized that my experience, though unique to my being, was far from unique to the human species.

1.2 The Crisis of Existence

On the one hand, the existential crisis seems to be a sincere, confounding universal phenomenon that tends to manifest organically—often without identifiable reason—within the

average individual, but on the other, its idiosyncratic subjectivity makes the phenomenon less of an objective problem than an experiential one, thereby highlighting the complexity of the crisis in relation to quantifiable solutions. Despite the general simplicity of basic existential concepts—they are, after all, inherent to us all—the crisis is rather difficult to define in one definition.

According to contemporary American psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom, the existential crisis is identified as “a conflict that flows from the individual’s confrontation with the *givens of existence*... [that is,] certain ultimate concerns, certain intrinsic properties that are a part, and an inescapable part of the human being’s existence in the world.”¹ The “givens” of existence, continues Yalom, are death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness. These four realities are presupposed as inevitable facts of all human existence—all individual experience stems from and is determined to such fates. Hence, the crisis is essentially a conflict of one’s subjective awareness coming face-to-face with the four givens—not as a realization of the fact, but as an internalized awareness of one’s own mortality—resulting in emotional turmoil (e.g., dread, anxiety, despair) which oftentimes leads to physical, mental, and spiritual debilitation. Put simply, existential theologian Paul Tillich says that “anxiety is a state in which being is aware of its possible nonbeing,” that “anxiety is the existential awareness of nonbeing.”²

The inevitability of death strikes one as both obvious and intangible. Death is always a looming possibility at any moment, and most will endure its presence upon others before it comes for ourselves. And yet, we live without ever truly preparing ourselves for the end. Indeed, we tend to live so much to the fullest in these bodies that the mere thought of it one day coming to an end floods our psyche with fear and despair. If we are all destined to die at some point—at any point, really—then what is the point of existing at all? Nothing lasts forever, yet we continue

¹ Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (United States: Basic Books, 1980), 5.

² Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, intro. Peter J. Gomes, second ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 35.

to roam the earth selfishly imploring our value and worth in worldly bodies only to be consistently let down when their time has run out. The continual cycles of pleasures and sufferings are predictable and full of meaningless void. The existential conflict arising from becoming consciously aware of death's imminence naturally generates a tension with our unconscious desire to continue living.

Existential isolation is a fundamental isolation of existence. It digs deeper than the loneliness experienced from lack of interpersonal contact and intrapersonal connection. It is, according to Yalom, the “final, unbridgeable gap”³ that plagues the personal. We are born alone into the world, and we leave the world alone. It seems that no matter how many others we surround ourselves with, no matter the strong relationships we make, there remains a fundamental separateness of being that instantiates a deep longing for comfort and connection. The existential conflict arising from becoming consciously aware of such absolute isolation is at odds with our unconscious desire to be connected and engaged with a larger whole.

Freedom in its existential conception is more obscure than the others. The fact that modern and contemporary times promote the idea that the individual is fully responsible for the structure and design of their own life, choices, and actions—'freedom'—implies an “absence of external structure.”⁴ As humans we yearn for some form of consistency and routine in our lives, the underpinnings of which must be grounded, rooted, or established in *something*. However, freedom in its existential conception undermines an establishment; there is no inherent order in a chaotic universe, our responsibility to shape our lives reveals the emptiness of existence itself. Hence, how can we build a thing out of no-thing? The existential conflict thus arises from our

³ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 9.

⁴ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 8.

unconscious yearning for inherent structure in the world and confronting the utter chaos of emptiness itself.

The search for life's meaning is a timeless wonder that has, no doubt, provoked the minds of some of the greatest pieces of literature, art, and religious and spiritual endeavors of human history. Unfortunately, the absurd nature of existence provided by the confrontation with death, isolation, and freedom reveal an even deeper existential conflict: meaninglessness. What is the point of existence when all is destined to come to an end, when one is destined to suffer alone, and when one is fully responsible for the constitution of inherent chaos and emptiness? Modern existentialist philosophers claim that there is no intrinsic meaning to life. This is a necessary consequence of the former three realities. Albert Camus famously poses in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) that the most urgent of questions is the meaning of life, for it is the inability to cope with life's absurdity that evokes an appeal toward suicide, "the one truly serious philosophical problem."⁵ If one agrees that there lies no overarching meaning to existence upon confronting the absurdity of death, isolation, and freedom, then would that not mean one is left to discover their own meaning? Of course, this is to assume that the search for meaning is part of the human condition. Hence, the existential conflict arises from the tension between recognizing the absence of overarching meaning and our unconscious desire for a life filled with meaning.

1.3 Existential Psychotherapy: a solution?

Existential psychotherapy—that is, a psychotherapeutic approach to psychological disorders or distress—arose in response to alleviating debilitating feelings of dread, despair, or anxiety when confronted with, what Yalom calls, the "givens" of existence. The basic idea behind this approach is the belief that some psychological disorders and distress are not caused

⁵ See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 3.

by chemical imbalances in the brain but by the individual's inability to reconcile with certain realities of human existence; while a chemical imbalance is present, it is a mere symptom of the existential crisis, not the cause.

Existential psychotherapy is a form of psychodynamic therapy; originally introduced by Sigmund Freud, psychodynamic therapies are concerned with the conscious and unconscious conflicting forces within the individual's psyche. These conflicting forces oftentimes continue without notice, thereby resulting in various mental and physical defense mechanisms. When an existential crisis overcomes an individual, awareness of the ultimate concerns gnaws the individual from the inside out, instantiating feelings of dread, anxiety, or despair, due to which certain defense mechanisms, such as thought patterns, emotional responses, and behavioral outputs, are likely to arise.⁶

According to the manual of *Brief Interventions and Brief Therapies for Substance Abuse*, existential psychotherapy “assumes the belief that people's problems come from not exercising choice or judgment enough—or well enough—to forge meaning in their lives,” and that the individual is responsible for instantiating such meaning.⁷

1.3.1 Roots of Existential Psychotherapy

Existential psychotherapy has its roots in three major disciplines: phenomenology, humanistic psychology, and existentialism. Within phenomenology, scholars are primarily concerned with the immediate experience of the individual and their personal understanding of reality. In Europe, the use of a continental philosophical *Weltanschauung* (“worldview”) style of writing accentuated the limitations and tragedy of human existence, especially as it manifested in

⁶ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 10.

⁷ See Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, “Brief Humanistic and Existential Therapies,” in *Brief Interventions and Brief Therapies for Substance Abuse*, Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series 34 (Rockville: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1999), 105.

personal experience.⁸ Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966), Swiss psychiatrist and early proponent of existential psychology, is known for applying Martin Heidegger's term "Dasein" to psychoanalysis (*Daseinsanalysis*). This essentially views the individual's experience as a "consciousness who participates in the construction in their own reality."⁹ Binswanger's emphasis on the individual's experience became a fundamental and indisposable approach to psychoanalysis. Given Europe's long history with war, disease, and civil uncertainty, the emphasis on the importance of individual human experience—be it through psychoanalysis, personal narrative, or literature—perhaps reveals why substantial attention is given to human tragedy.

Where the Europeans largely focused on human limitations and inevitable tragedy, over in the United States, Americans instead focused on the ideal characteristics of humanity, i.e., the positive qualities of humanness. Mainly as a response to positivistic behaviorism and Freudianism, psychoanalysts such as Carl Rogers, Rollo May, and Abraham Maslow organized humanistic psychology, the "Third Force," which strongly emphasized actualizing human potentials as well as uplifting individual experience. Generally it's proclaimed that all individuals need only expand their horizons to discover their authentic self; that all have the capacity to actualize ideals such as freedom to choose, self-responsibility, "peak experiences," and "self-actualization".¹⁰ There are a few notable humanistic psychoanalysts who contributed to existential thought, including Otto Rank who posed the importance of human will in the

⁸ See, for example, Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959) where Frankl chronicled his experience as a concentration camp prisoner during World War II and how this shaped his psychotherapeutic model of logotherapy and identifying purpose in life.

⁹ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 17.

¹⁰ According to Abraham Maslow, the individual will experience in their life what he calls "peak experiences"—ecstatic moments of bliss whereby insights, illuminations, or revelations emerge. Maslow developed a "Hierarchy of Needs" where "self-actualization"—the top of the pyramid—represents that individual who achieves their fullest potential and creative abilities. It means "experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption...wholly and fully human." See *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 175 and 45, respectively.

alleviation of death anxiety;¹¹ Karen Horney who argued humans are motivated by future anticipations rather than past events;¹² Erich Fromm who articulated the role of freedom in behavior;¹³ and Hellmuth Kaiser who connected self-responsibility to isolation.¹⁴

Existential psychotherapy arguably would not have developed at the time it did had it not been for the profound influence of Western continental philosophy, specifically the movement of existentialism. The dramatic societal shifts of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries would produce a new wave of thought across Western academia. Existentialism is a continental approach to certain conditions of human existence, including, among others, death, suffering, human will, and meaninglessness. Put simply, existentialists are concerned with the personal experience of the human being cast against the chaotic backdrop of worldly existence. Widely considered the father of existentialism, Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard (b. 1813) is known for criticizing institutionalized Christianity and upholding personal responsibility to maintain faith. He alludes to the crisis of existence as the “sickness unto death,” whereby despair and accompanying feelings of anxiety are, above all else, indicative of the sickness of the spirit:

Just as a physician might say that there very likely is not one single living human being who is completely healthy, so anyone who really knows mankind might say that there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little, who does not secretly harbor an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony...an anxiety about some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself, so that, just as the physician speaks of going around with an illness in the body, he walks around with a sickness, carries around a sickness of the spirit that signals its presence at rare intervals in and through an anxiety he cannot explain.¹⁵

¹¹ See Otto Rank, *Will Therapy: An Analysis of the Therapeutic Process in Terms of Relationship*, trans. Jessie Taft (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936).

¹² See Karen Horney, *Neuroses and Human Growth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950).

¹³ See Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Bantam Books, 1956).

¹⁴ See Hellmuth Kaiser, *Effective Psychotherapy: The Contribution of Hellmuth Kaiser*, ed. L. Fierman (New York: Free Press, 1965).

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed/trans. by Edward Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 22. Original Publication 1849.

The above quote from Kierkegaard further supports the ideas that the existential crisis is one of subjective torment as it relates to objective realities of worldly existence, as well as a psychodynamic interchange between conscious (existential realities) and unconscious (fears, anxieties) forces within the psyche.

A frequent consequence of an existential crisis proposed by Western philosophical thinkers is the idea that the human individual has an inherent capability and responsibility to create a life of meaning on one's own terms. For example, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre famously encapsulates the core of existential thought by arguing that human nature is not a matter of God's will thrust upon humankind, but rather that human will, following one's birth into the world, manifests reality. Better known as "existence precedes essence," Sartre describes:

It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself...not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence.¹⁶

Existentialist thought is overwhelmingly individualistic such that meaning or purpose of life, as it relates to death, isolation, and freedom, can only be discovered upon an individual's birth into, and trajectory through, the world. With exception to Kierkegaard, atheism became widely endorsed by existentialist thinkers, especially following the turn of the twentieth century. This meant, amongst many others, that the individual is not only responsible for their current state, but also for defining themselves according to their personal, self-defined essences.

1.4 The Concern: a problem of self-identity?

Confrontations with the four realities are often too difficult, too heavy, too depressing to give any prior attention to before their weight becomes too palpable to bear. As the world continues to advance according to the laws of science, becoming ever the more adamant about

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existence," *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1967), 15.

religious and spiritual communities, beliefs, practices, and world-explanations, the “hard” questions of existence become more foreign and more disconnected to an increasing number of individuals. Furthermore, the turn of the twentieth century exposed the abuse of religious fascism and its horrifying effects on humanity at large, undoubtedly instigating a massive distrust not only toward institutionalized religious and spiritual organizations, but to any system that resembled a religious cult. That is not to say that one can no longer find tranquility in a religious faith today—most of the U.S. population remains religiously affiliated¹⁷—but it *is* to say that the secularized development of society has veered individuals to instead put faith in the objectivity of science rather than the intersubjectivity of being. Without guidance principles, faith, or trust of oneself and others, individuals are becoming increasingly secluded from the interconnectedness that radiates within and around all life on earth. This has, undoubtedly, left many feeling empty, alone, and confused when navigating the unpredictable turbulence of the world.

Provided the influence of phenomenology, humanistic psychology, and existentialism, the development of existential psychotherapy in alleviating an existential crisis has surely prioritized the individual’s experience above all else, and rightfully so. Addressing the individual’s experience is necessary for any alleviation within a psychotherapeutic setting (phenomenology’s contribution); discussion of the individual’s experience as it pertains to both adversity and possibility helps one understand the larger picture of human existence (humanistic psychology’s contribution); emphasizing the importance of human will and responsibility is necessary to evince change in oneself and one’s purpose in the world (existentialism’s

¹⁷ According to the 2021 National Public Opinion Reference Survey (NPORS) conducted by Pew Research Center, 40 percent of adults affiliate with Protestant Christianity, 29 percent as religiously unaffiliated, 21 percent with Catholicism, 8 percent with another faith, and 2 percent refused to answer. Christians outnumber the religiously unaffiliated by a ratio of slightly more than two-to-one, whereas compared to the 2007 NPORS, Christians outnumbered the religiously unaffiliated by nearly five-to-one. See Gregory A. Smith, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” *Pew Research Center*, 14 Dec. 2021.

contribution). The general “Western” approach to the existential crisis embraces a humanism: the individual is uplifted through a discovery of self-identity and responsibility to better exercise choice and judgment. While this does address the significance of human will, I believe it does so at the expense of the larger scope of all existence; that is to say, the individual is presupposed as a separate entity, one that can and shall persist existentially on account of will alone without further regard for other human and non-human beings. The personal self is in stark contrast to the world, the universe, the cosmos. This is, as I would characterize it, a dualistic understanding of what it means to *be* in the world. Egocentrism and the pursuit to satisfy personal desire are, without question, consequences of this dual understanding. Accordingly, the existential crisis, though a subjective conflict concerning objective happenings of *all* existence, is consistently seen as a problem of self-identity; that the onset of a crisis is due to the individual having an unstable sense-of-self, improperly expressing will, choice, and judgment. Its alleviation is therefore to be found in actualizing self-identity, which, at first glance, is empowering to the personal ego, but when emphasized solely for this purpose can undermine the cardinal reality of an existential crisis. Moreover, the need for self-identity may also be a mere symptom of a deeper problem: a lack of knowledge of the universal Self/Being. By pivoting its occurrence and alleviation on the individual self rather than a sure phenomenon of existence, the crisis remains a subjective “me” problem, bypassing the interconnectedness of the complex whole in which we all take part of.

1.5 A Transpersonal Proposal & Methodology

The term ‘transpersonal’ refers to experiences where consciousness expands beyond the personal or individual, but they are experiences that nonetheless permeate through the individual. A transpersonal psychology, then, is a psychological approach fundamentally concerned with

such experiences as they exist in their own right; that there are stages of human development (concerning consciousness) beyond the ego. The experiences we have as an individual self are necessary to the extent that they bring us to an experiential reality beyond that of the self. A transpersonal approach is not in stark contrast to the previously mentioned humanistic and existential approaches, but rather is an extension of them. I propose that we expand the self-identity approach to the existential crisis beyond a dualistic, ego-centered understanding, and beyond an individualist pursuit that disregards the complex whole of existence with other human and non-human beings: a transpersonal approach.

This paper will respond to the existential crisis through the transpersonal psychology embedded within the eleventh century text, *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. With over 29,000 verses, *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is a several volume corpora filled with Indian lore and mythological-like narratives infused with captivating metaphorical imagery and a synthesis of philosophical-spiritual wisdom from numerous traditions. Its underlying philosophy is a form of nondualism rooted in Advaita Vedānta and a *citta-matra* (“mind-only”) doctrine. The text has a primary discourse between Rāma, the main protagonist in the chronologically later *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, who, in this text, is a prince and warrior on the brink of adulthood, and his mentor, the sage Vasiṣṭha. Over numerous poetic stories, Vasiṣṭha teaches Rāma a complex and diverse philosophical-spiritual doctrine, known as Vasiṣṭha’s sevenfold Yoga, the adoption of which alleviates the suffering associated with confronting Yalom’s existential “givens.” Ultimately Rāma’s liberation will depend on changing one’s perception of the world and one’s place in it. As will be later discussed, Vasiṣṭha’s Yoga is “anthropocosmic,” a process of identifying the macrocosmic universe (*Brahman*) within the microcosmic being.¹⁸

¹⁸ See Christopher Key Chapple’s quotation of Mircea Eliade in *Living Landscapes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 58.

Where current therapeutic responses focus on uplifting the individual ego via self-identity, I argue that the transpersonal psychology of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* uplifts human agency through a paradigm of phenomenological transformation, ontological emptiness, and dissolution of the ego-self that expands one's being-in-the-world in a spiritually meaningful way. By emphasizing the existential crisis as a lack of knowledge of the universal Self (*Brahman*, *Ātman*, *puruṣa*) the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s transpersonal psychology is not subjected to the implications associated with the previously established humanistic approach. In an ever-increasing secular society hyper-focused on rugged individualism, life-purpose and meaning become lost in the accumulation of external wealth and dualistic tendencies. With the construction of this thesis, my hope is to reinstate the transpersonal and poetic wisdom the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* has long offered to those facing the harsh realities of the existential crisis.

The following sections explicate four narratives from the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, including a brief overview of its origins and philosophical lineages. The first narrative orchestrates context and setting as our main protagonist Rāma struggles to oversee his dispassion toward the world due to his untimely confrontations with death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness. Thereafter is discussed the crux of Vasiṣṭha's doctrine, the need to cultivate *yatna* and *pauruṣa*, transforming the workings of the mind so that one may continue their worldly duties without falling victim to the throes of sufferings. This is followed by the second narrative of king Lavaṇa, whose story illustrates a confrontation with isolation and how working with dreams help expand one's sense of self from a place of isolated individuality to a space of empathic being. The third narrative, Puṇya and Pāvana, illustrates a confrontation with death that is overcome by inquiring into the nature of rebirth and the interconnectedness amongst all life forms. The final narrative is one of Vasiṣṭha's own as he discovers freedom in lieu of meditations on the five great elements, *panca*

mahābhūta dhāraṇā. These four narratives present the reader with transpersonal techniques that not only overcome existential sufferings, but also transcend their mundane nature by fully embracing their mundaneness. By pursuing worldly actions that improve the lives of others and the natural world, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* empowers the individual to take ownership of their *dharma* while simultaneously liberating them from the bondages of their own *avidyā*, metamorphosing one’s visionary experience in the world.

2 *Yogavāsiṣṭha*

2.1 Philosophy: Advaita Vedānta & *citta-mātra*

According to scholar Christopher Key Chapple, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is a “Hindu text par excellence”¹⁹ known for its intelligent weavings of differing, and sometimes contradictory, Indian traditions into its prominent nondual philosophy. The text is widely attributed to the Advaita school of Vedānta—one of the six Hindu *darśanas*—which depicts the attainment of *mokṣa/nirvāṇa/samādhi* (liberation) as the blissful state that arises from the cultivation of a particular kind of *prajñā/jñāna* (knowledge); that is, the nature of reality as inherently nondual. The Vedānta tradition (“end of the *Vedas*”) signifies the teachings found in the *Upaniṣads*; Vedānta has many schools differing in their understanding about the relation between the unmanifested ultimate reality, *Brahman*, and the soul in manifested beings, *Ātman*. In Sanskrit, the term *advaita* is a negation of *dvaita* (duality) meaning ‘non-dualism,’ but what does nondual apply to? In one sense we can say that the differentiation between subject and object, or perceiver and perceived, dissipates. In a more subtle sense, the difference between the unmanifested ultimate reality and the soul in manifested beings dissipates. In either sense there

¹⁹ See Chapple’s introduction in *The Concise Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, trans. Swami Venkatesenanda (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984),

arises a realization that true reality is simply pure consciousness—untainted, omniscient, and omnipresent.

In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.12.1-3), one of the four Mahāvākyas (great utterances), *tat tvam asi*, encapsulates nondual thought in dialogue between Uddalaka and his son Śvetaketu:

‘Bring hither a fig from there.’

‘Here it is, Sir.’

‘Divide it.’

‘It is divided, Sir.’

‘What do you see there?’

‘These rather (*iva*) fine seeds, Sir.’

‘Of these, please (*aṅga*), divide one.’

‘It is divided, Sir.’

‘What do you see there?’

‘Nothing at all, Sir.’

Then he said to him: ‘Verily, my dear, that finest essence which you do not perceive—verily, my dear, from that finest essence this great Nyagrodha (sacred fig) tree thus arises.

Believe me, my dear,’ said he, ‘that which is the finest essence—this whole world has that as its soul. That is Reality. That is Atman (Soul). That art thou (*tat tvam asi*) Śvetaketu.’²⁰

The nondualism of Advaita Vedānta represents more than mere argumentative speculation. It alludes to the primary experience of the individual; embodied consciousness as that important attribute of Brahman—bliss. In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.1.1) it is said,

He who knows Brahma as the real (*satya*), as knowledge (*jñāna*), as the infinite (*ānanda*), set down in the secret place, and in the highest heaven (*parame vyoman*), He obtains all desires, together with the intelligent (*vipaścit*) Brahma.²¹

The above verse, *satyam jñānamānandam brahma*, stands as an early marker for Advaita Vedānta’s key epithet *satchidānanda* (*sat-chit-ānanda*), a compounded term representing the experience of the nondual reality of *Brahman* (being-consciousness-bliss). Moreover, these verses indicate the primary significance of the nondual philosophy in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. Put simply, one cannot discuss any underlying meaning of the text’s stories—and hence, any existential realities—without referencing the omnipresent, omniscient oneness of being.

²⁰ Robert Ernest Hume, trans., *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), 247.

²¹ Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, 283.

What makes the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* scripture remarkable is that fact that the nondual philosophy of Advaita Vedānta is intricately woven with threads of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Jainism, Sāṃkhya, Patañjala Yoga, and Śaiva Siddhānta. More than anything I believe this is telling of the historical acceptance of richly diverse teachings and traditions within and surrounding India. The *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is a living text that effortlessly speaks to both the intellect and imagination, echoing seemingly opposing traditions in such a way that reconciles the sheer complexity of the human psyche.²²

Although the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s nondualism emerges from the Advaita tradition, it diverges slightly with respect to the “mind-only” doctrine, paralleling the *Yogācāra citta-mātra* (mind-only) school of Mahāyāna Buddhism,²³ influencing the later establishment of the Emergence through Perception (*dr̥ṣṭi-sr̥ṣṭi*) school of Advaita Vedānta. Throughout the corpus, *manas* (mind) is continuously expounded as the sole origin of reality. We interpret the world through the mind's perception; without the mind there would be no reality, no place of action, no place of creativity. Perception itself is not limited to waking moments—every night upon falling asleep one enters a realm of perceptual existence through dreaming, where dream consciousness mirrors a distorted waking consciousness, as well as a realm of deep sleep, where the mind's movements still, much like the meditation state. Moreover, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* advances spiritual instruction for the attainment of living liberation, the state of *jīvanmukta*, but *jīvanmukta* can only be attained by cultivating knowledge of the mind's true nature, along with the appropriate means of

²² For the purposes of this thesis, I use two English translations of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, one from Vihari Lal Mitra, the first complete English rendition (c. 1891) and more recent translations from Swami Venkatesananda (1984/1993), direct disciple of Swami Sivananda. The majority of verses I've pulled are from the former translation, with some toward the end by the latter's—Venkatesananda's translation is sourced in the footnotes where applicable.

²³ The *Yogācāra* tradition of Buddhism promotes a form of idealism, that consciousness colors our perception of the world. *Yogācāra* teaches that we interpret external appearances through the tainted cognition of the mind—rooted in ignorance—and therefore mistake our flawed perceptions as base reality. Accordingly, enlightenment requires purification of the mind—its tendencies (*vāsanā*) and habits (*saṃskāra*)—by means of meditation, as found in the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* and the *Yogācārabhūmi-Śāstra*.

its purification. Paradoxically, one must use the mind to get out of its entanglements, and it is only by means of the mind that one either hinders from or facilitates toward living liberation. Knowledge of the mind's governing power cleanses the doors of perception so that pure consciousness may be reflected—the true reality of existence.

The metamorphosis of the mind happens according to a sevenfold yogic path, also known as Vasiṣṭha's Yoga. The mind undergoes a seven-step progression: negation or restraint of indulgence (*nivṛtti*) where there accidentally arises an awareness of disinterest; state of reflection (*vicāraṇa*) where one enquires into the nature of their life; fostering nonattachment (*asaṃsaṅga*) to worldly possessions; seeing the world-as-dream (*suṣupta*) where the lines between waking and dream reality vanish; world-as-deep sleep (*advaita suṣupta*) where nonduality resides; living liberation (*jīvanmukta*) where one embodies nondual consciousness in the present birth; liberation after death (*videhamukta*) where death of the physical body enables the self to merge in pure consciousness.

2.2 Narrative 1: The Story of Rāma's Dispassion

The main narrative of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is spiritual instruction given to prince Rāma by the sage Vasiṣṭha. In the first book, *Vairāgya Prakaraṇa* (“On Dispassion”), the reader is introduced to Rāma, a young prince and warrior who, upon completing a pilgrimage, is struck with despondency and cynicism toward the world, unable to find any will of his own to continue his worldly duties. Disgusted with the attachments humans mindlessly develop toward meaningless delusions, Rāma faces the painful truth of what it means to live embodied. Feeling helpless in their efforts, the royal court turns to a wise sage known as Vasiṣṭha. The remainder of this first book consists of Rāma conveying his dispassionate discourse to Vasiṣṭha, lamenting:

My mind was employed in the discrimination of the nature of things which led me gradually to discard all thoughts of sensual enjoyments.

What are these worldly pleasures good for, (thought I), and what means the multiplication (of our species) on earth? Men are born to die, and they die to be born again.

There is no stability in the tendencies of beings whether movable or immovable. They all tend to vice, decay and danger; and all our possessions are the grounds of our penury.²⁴

Rāma's words signify that no lasting pleasures can be found in that which the mind perceives because appearances are nothing more than permanent modes of instability and impermanence.

So long as we remain ignorant to the mind's deceitfulness, indulging in the false pleasures of appearances, we are never safe from its deceptions:

All objects (of sense) are detached from each other as iron rods or needless from one another; it is our imagination alone which attaches them to our minds.

It is the mind that pictures the existence of the world as a reality, but the deceptiveness of the mind (being known) we are safe from such deception.

If the world is an unreality, it is pity that ignorant men should be allured by it, like the deer tempted by a distant mirage (appearing) as water.²⁵

We are easily deceived into believing that an external reality exists outside of our perception of things. Our senses consistently fool us. We lavish in the transience of pleasures only later to wonder why we suffer upon their deterioration:

We are sold by none (to any one) and yet we remain as if enslaved to the world; and knowing this well, we are spell-bound to riches, as it were by the magic wand of Śambara.²⁶

We are slaves to our senses. We believe we are free, but this is mere illusion. The attachments we develop under the spell of our senses enslave us to a false reality of never-ending pleasures and sufferings.

Rāma's exposition on his disdain for the world clearly resembles an existential crisis. He is unable to comprehend the value of life in virtue of death's imminence. He feels himself utterly

²⁴ *YV* I: 12.6-8. Trans. from Vihari Lal Mitra, *Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha of Vāmiki*: Sanskrit Text and English Translation, ed. Ravi Prakash Arya (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 1998).

²⁵ *YV* I: 12.9-11.

²⁶ *YV* I: 12.12.

isolated from the workings of his own mind; on the one hand he understands that his mind's faculties govern perception and hence reality, but on the other he realizes that he is not immune from the mind's ignorant tendencies. Knowing this lack of immunity he lacks freedom—the mind's faulty perceptions have him enslaved, thereby rendering his inability to act in fear of his own ignorance. The fleeting presence, instability, and every-changing complexion of appearances hold no substantial meaning for Rāma; their impermanence only signifies the source of suffering: attachment. These confrontations ultimately leave Rāma with a dilemma: free oneself from the delusions of the mind, or fast unto death.

Rāma's dispassion deeply resonates with what philosopher William James calls "morbid-mindedness," or the "sick-souled." In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James explicates the crucial dichotomy between "healthy-minded" individuals from the "morbid-minded," the latter who cannot so easily dispel the presence of the world's consciousness of evil—they are "congenitally fated to suffer from its presence." We can easily understand that those afflicted from the four givens of existence are those who James calls the morbid minded. There exists an endless number of individuals of whom, like Rāma, the "evils" of existence are "...a wrongness of vice in his essential character, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy."²⁷ This is further characterized as those suffering from anhedonia, a pathological inability to feel pleasure, which, according to James, extends far beyond a simple lack of pleasure-sensing. For some, such melancholy manifests as an "active anguish," a kind of "psychical neuralgia" whereby symptoms of self-despair, loathing, irritation, anxiety, or fear permeate one's being in the world. Rāma, for example, is one who in spite of himself and his luxurious circumstances is forced to oversee the beauty, the colorful radiance, the warm breath of life on account of his intellectual disposition

²⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Philosophical Library/Open Road, 2015), 190.

tormented by the mind’s mysterious nature. In the words of James, Rāma’s “sun has left his heaven.”²⁸

How, then, can Rāma navigate the turbulences of death, isolation, freedom, and meaning, or as James would put it: “How can the moribund old man reason back to himself the romance, the mystery, the imminence of great things with which our old earth tingled for him in the days when he was young and well?”²⁹ Over numerous stories, Vasiṣṭha teaches Rāma how to attain the state of living liberation, *jīvanmukta*. To reach the state of *jīvanmukta* is to remain active within the world without being attached to said actions nor their fruits. Rāma’s dispassionate discourse reveals the significance of the mind and its power of creation and emergence. The diverse appearances of waking, dream, and deep sleep realities are no more than products of the mind’s perception. Their impermanent and transient nature stipulate them as illusory. Neither pleasures nor sufferings—that is, the mind’s desires—are to be sought after for both equally lead to bondage and attachment, the root of all suffering. If therefore all that one perceives is the false product of the mind’s faculties, then what is real cannot be *perceived* by the mind but can only be *realized* by virtue of the mind’s power of creation. The next section discusses Vasiṣṭha’s initial response to Rāma’s existential discourse. This is the spiritual framework, if you will, of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, through which the forthcoming three narratives arise. Despite the false appearances of bodily and material existence, Vasiṣṭha maintains that our behavior and actions (*karma*) still matter—the possibility of ever liberating from the bondages and sufferings of existential realities hinges on our effort (*vatna*) and need to engage from a place of creativity (*pauruṣa*) with the world.

²⁸ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 207.

²⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 209.

2.3 Calling to Act: *yatna*, *pauruṣa*, *karma*, *dhāraṇā*

In this section I address how the nondual worldview of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* uplifts human will and action (*karma*) through the adoption of *yatna* (effort) and *pauruṣa* (creativity). The significance of *karma* and selfless action in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* stem back to the second book, *Mumukṣuprakaraṇa* (“On the Behavior of the Seeker”), where Vasiṣṭha, after pledging his mentorship to Rāma, explains the need for *yatna* and *pauruṣa* in spiritual practice.³⁰ Here, the sage explains the efficacy of activity, that seeds are planted with every movement produced by human effort. *Karma* is derived from the verbal root *kṛ*, meaning to do, make, perform, and is the nominative case of *karman*, which is an act, action, or performance. Quite literally, *karma* is action itself—any further details on the nature of the act rest outside the initial definition and thus accord to specific tradition. Actions performed in previous births affect the choices one makes in the present, but actions of the present can override those of the past when performed diligently (II:4.27). Accordingly, one’s actions can serve for either auspicious or inauspicious ends. Thus, one’s exertion in the present is to be implemented toward that which is auspicious, while the failure to exert at all consequently results in suffering and delusion.

It is the will or inclination that is the prime instrument of all actions done even according to the rules of law and *Śāstras*,³¹ as it is the reflection of light that gives various hues to things.³²

When one finds himself to be led astray by the demerit of his acts of a former state of existence, he must attempt to subdue the same by greater energy of his present state.

The evils of bad fortune are undoubtedly removal by the meritorious acts of the present life, as the bad consequence of an act of yesterday is averted by its remedy of today.

Know that tranquility is not to be found by the effortlessness of dull ass-like men; it is the lawful energy of men which is said to secure his welfare in both worlds.³³

³⁰ Vasiṣṭha’s lesson originates from one of his own given to him by Brahmā in the *Mahābhārata* XIII: 6; however, where Vasiṣṭha emphasizes *pauruṣa* or creativity, Brahmā refers to as *puruṣakāra* or human effort. Sourced from Christopher Chapple’s translation in “Appendix 1” of *Karma and Creativity*, 95-101.

³¹ The term *śāstra* in Indian tradition typically refers to any religious or scientific doctrine of authority discussing either the ethical norms of society or wisdom, e.g., the *Dharmaśāstras*.

³² *YV* II: 5.1.

Furthermore, the amount of energy one exerts in pursuing auspiciousness is inversely proportional to the belief one has in fate or destiny (*daiva*); that is, the more effort one puts into the betterment of their actions, the less one understands the results of those actions as predetermined fates.³⁴ Becoming present is crucial for this. One whose mind is stuck in the past is running in fear of their own ability to act in the present:

He who has no reliance on present objects, but depends upon suppositions of the past, is as a man flying for fear of his own hands supposing them as snakes.

It is a pleasure to men of perverted understandings to think themselves guided by their fortunes (*daiva*), prosperity flies away far off from such men who depend on their fortunes.³⁵

Thus, become present and take careful consideration of your actions. Actions whose results may seem to be due to unexplainable forces or predestined by the gods (*daiva*) are in fact due to preexisting seeds of the past, but through mindful effort one can alter their growth. One who abandons active effort for the inaction of past karmic seeds—allowing fate to take the reigns—is “an enemy to [their] own soul, and sacrifices all [their] virtues, riches, and hopes.”³⁶ As human beings, one does not get to choose which karmic seeds have already planted from past lives, but one certainly has control of how to cultivate them. But one must keep in mind the limitations of human abilities—effort does not immediately bring results; it is a slow and steady process that requires patience, diligence, and austerity.

It’s also worth noting that Vasiṣṭha understands the human condition as one that naturally tends toward indolence; though an unfavorable trait, without it no human could manifest those

³³ *YV* II: 5.10, 12, 14.

³⁴ Discussion of fate and destiny also originate from dialogue in the *Mahābhārata*. Brahmā explains: XIII:6.47. *Fate leads one astray. There is no power in fate...Human effort, frequently practiced by the action of desire, leads one to a noble, unimpeded fate in each case.*
49. *Through action initiated by the power of fate, and through action in accordance with precept, the path of heaven is obtained.*

Translation from Chapple, *Karma and Creativity*, 63 and 101.

³⁵ *YV* II: 5.19-20.

³⁶ *YV* II: 7.3.

traits that are favorable, nor would liberation ever be attainable: “Had there not been the folly of idleness in this world, what man would fail to either be rich or learned?”³⁷ Hence, human folly shall be understood as valuable due to its necessity to begin spiritual practice.

But what is *yatna* without *pauruṣa*? The Sanskrit term *pauruṣa* is the *vrddhi* (strengthened form) of the Sāṃkhyan term *puruṣa*, also known as the unchanging witness consciousness, where all experience unfolds. Where *puruṣa* literally translates as “man collectively or individually, human being,” *pauruṣa* translates as “belonging or relating to a man or man in general, or to *puruṣa*.”³⁸ In the 96th chapter of the third book Vasiṣṭha enquires about the nature of the mind, explicating that

As a spider lets out its thread from itself, it is in the same manner that the inert has sprung from the intellect, and matter has come into existence from the ever active spirit of Brahmā.³⁹

The above verse signifies that matter, or the unconscious, arises from consciousness, “the ever active spirit of Brahmā,” which directly contrasts with the process of creation in the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* where *puruṣa* neither creates nor is created. The use of *pauruṣa* in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* seems to be less concerned with the gender of whom the term is attributed to and more so with that attribute of creation closest in purity to the witness consciousness. So, what is this attribute? According to scholar Christopher Chapple, this attribute is *creativity*,⁴⁰ for creativity is perhaps that term that captures the purest essence of being human. *Pauruṣa* thus suggests the cultivation of similarly important characteristics, such as will, energy, and firm motivation. As I soon discuss, *yatna* and *pauruṣa*, in the context of the transpersonal psychology of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, are fundamental to not only advance along the spiritual path, but also to

³⁷ *YV* II: 5.30.

³⁸ According to M. Monier-Williams, *A Dictionary, English and Sanscrit* (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1851).

³⁹ *YV* III: 96.71.

⁴⁰ *Karma and Creativity*, 67.

embody selfless action, a crucial characteristic to alleviate the personal suffering of an existential crisis.

In the seventh chapter of the *Mumukṣuprakaraṇa*, Vasiṣṭha explains to Rāma the benefits of someone who embodies effort and creativity. Unsurprisingly, it's not the extreme renunciate. Like Siddhartha Gautama had realized only when his body became too weak to no longer support his meditation practices, it is the one who continues to engage in daily, worldly activities, especially of health and nourishment:

He that eats becomes satiate and not who starves: so he who walks is said to proceed and not one who rests: and in like manner who so speaks is called a speaker and not the silent man: thus action makes the man (*pauruṣa*).⁴¹

It is only by means of effort that one's actions can liberate one from the sufferings of worldly bondage. If one chooses to retreat internally without ever returning to worldly duties, then one is no better than another who blindly chooses to rest in indolence:

Whosoever acts in any manner, gets his reward accordingly; but the restive man has nothing to expect anywhere.⁴²

One's application to the diligence and actions for the attainment of an object, is known by the term exertion by the wise, whereby all things are accomplished, (and which is no destiny).⁴³

One could also remember the cliché proverb: you reap what you sow. If one chooses to either not sow at all or to perform selfishly, suffering is sure to follow. The opposite, on the other hand, will lead to results conducive to alleviate suffering and progress along the spiritual path. Thus, everyone has direct influence over their current situation by the nature of their actions and effort. *Daiva* or fate is but an explanation embraced by those who refuse to manifest *yatna* and *pauruṣa*.

It is only through willful activity *in the present* that an individual can advance spiritually; however, such willfulness must be pure, meaning further practices are needed with respect to

⁴¹ *YV* II: 7.17.

⁴² *YV* II: 7.19.

⁴³ *YV* II: 7.24.

yatna and *pauruṣa*. First regards following ethical behavior, commonly referred to as the “*śāstras*” in text. Vasiṣṭha says,

An effort when directed according to the counsel (*sādhu*) and conduct of the good in the exercise of the action of the body and mind, it is attended with success, otherwise it is as vain as the freak of a madman.⁴⁴

The exertions of a man proceeding from his good efforts (*pauruṣa*) and countenanced by the law (*śāstra*), lead to his success, or else they either go for nothing or turn to his disadvantage.⁴⁵

However, the emphasis on *yatna* and *pauruṣa* mean that following ethical scripture or qualified teachers shall not be the quintessential practice dictating one’s actions. No teacher or scripture can liberate another. Instead, they should serve as ethical guides leading one to discover for themselves the value of ethical practice as an embodied being. Ultimately, it boils down to the autonomous individual to make the final whole-hearted decision—whatever that may be.

But probably the most important method to purify the mind is meditation. As is the case in most Indian traditions dating back to the *Upaniṣads*, purification is essential in order to gain true knowledge of the Self, and the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* continues this necessity. So, what aspects of the mind need to be cleansed? When we go back and reflect on reincarnation and how *karma* from past lives affect the situations of today, we can see that something within the mind—not a material substance like the brain, but something subtle that latches onto the soul or spirit—is left with an imprint that carries on after bodily death. Think of, perhaps, a malleable lump of clay. With every movement the clay is shaped and left with an impression from the hands. This impression is known as *vāsanā* in Sanskrit. Advaita Vedānta, Buddhism, and Patañjali’s Yoga all emphasize the role *vāsanās* play in bodily existence as well as the need for their cessation. *Vāsanās* are those habit-forming imprints left on the mind and subtle body due to the movement (or lack thereof) the body, just like a pair of hands whose movement shapes and molds a

⁴⁴ *YV* II: 4.11.

⁴⁵ *YV* II: 4.19.

malleable lump of clay. Most of our *vāsanās* rest in the unconscious psyche and dictate our every-day behaviors and thought-patterns, making them notoriously difficult to halt let alone identify. In book four (*Kaivalya Pāda*) of the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*,⁴⁶ it is stated that one's current actions perform according to the impurity of *vāsanās* from past lives, and in book two (*Sādhana Pāda*)⁴⁷ Patañjali explicates the nature of such impurity, that *kleśas* (afflictions or impediments to *samādhi*) are of five types: *avidyā* (ignorance), *asmitā* (egoism), *rāga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), and *abhiniveśa* (desire to live). These bind the individual to worldly matters, keeping them on the swing of pleasures and sufferings while perpetuating illusory selfhood. Vasiṣṭha stresses that it is these habit patterns that must be purified:

O sinless Rāma, your desires are at present lying dormant (*vāsanā*) in your mind, and require some practice to be employed only to the doing of good (*śubha*).

If you will not exert yourself at present to improve your dormant desires (*vāsanā*) by constant practice, you can never expect to be happy.⁴⁸

The constant purification of *vāsanās* enable the seeker to no longer be influenced by the poor nature of past actions and therefore redirect them to pursue auspiciousness without the possibility of building attachment to present acts.

The crux of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s spiritual instruction is the necessity to embrace selfless action; to remain active in the world whilst remaining unattached. This depends on two essential characteristics: self-effort (*yatna*) and creativity (*pauruṣa*). Having cultivated these, the seeker is ready to perfect three practices: remain present, ethical behavior, and purify the mind through meditation. Ultimately, the attainment of living liberation or *jīvanmukta* hinges on the cultivation of *yatna* and *pauruṣa*. Effort is needed to both recognize one's current position spiritually as well

⁴⁶ *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* IV.8: *tatas tad-vipākānugūṇānām evābhivṛtyaktir vāsanānām* || Hence, the manifestation of habit patterns thus corresponds to the fruition of that [karma]. Translation from Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 205.

⁴⁷ *YS* II.3: *avidyāsmitā rāga dveṣābhiniveśāḥ kleśāḥ* || Ignorance, I-am-ness, attraction, aversion, and desire for continuity are the afflictions. Trans. Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 163.

⁴⁸ *YV* II: 9.36-37.

as to maintain a life of selfless action. Creativity is the force of creation arising from awareness of the omnipresent witness consciousness, a force of endless possibility prior to actual manifestation. Creation emerges from the mind, and it is only with the mind that one can be free from the mind's delusions and embody a life of liberation. The following two sections expound on two stories that illustrate in mythological narrative confrontations with isolation and death, as well as the power of the mind determining one's perception of reality and the karmic implications suggested from the mind's purification. Thereafter will be discussed Vasiṣṭha's own narrative having attained living liberation, and the elemental meditations that brought him there. This narrative illustrates the final existential given: freedom.

2.4 Narrative 2: The Story of Lavaṇa

In the third book, *Utpatti Prakaraṇa* ("On Creation"), Vasiṣṭha teaches Rāma the creative power of the mind. The story of king Lavaṇa navigates the existential theme of isolation—the central focus uses dream consciousness to inspire a change of action in waking reality, thus expanding one's sense of self.

In the forest-filled country of Northern Pāndava,⁴⁹ there resided a virtuous Lavaṇa living a beautiful life of comfort and luxury aside his royal court. One day, a magician (*indrajalīkaḥ*) alongside a chieftain, visited the king and his court. With the wave of the magician's peacock feathers, Lavaṇa was presented with a gift of creation, a remarkable horse "produced from the milky ocean and flies with the swiftness of the mind," and who is "a personification of the wind in the swiftness of his flight."⁵⁰ The magician requested:

⁴⁹ According to the English translation by Vihari Lal Mitra, Northern Pāndava is called so because it is the land that the Pāndava brothers were famously exiled to in the Mahābhārata. The scripture is notorious for weaving together references from a multitude of earlier Indian philosophical pieces. See Vihari Lal Mitra, *Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha of Vāmīki: Sanskrit Text and English Translation*, ed. Ravi Prakash Arya (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 1998), 531. Also, III:104.2.

⁵⁰ *YV* III: 104.35 and 104.36.

Do you my lord ride upon this horse, and wander at your pleasure with the full lustre on earth; as the sun shines forth in splendour by his revolving round the heaven.⁵¹

Bedazzled by its beauty, Lavaṇa accepted. He then mounted the horse, but upon doing so, fell into a deep slumber for hours. He could not be woken by any of the sages or ministers of his court. After a few hours, Lavaṇa awakens in a deranged frenzy. Questioned by members of his court Lavaṇa then recounts the experience of his sleep.

In his dream Lavaṇa finds himself alone with the horse roaming a barren desert without food or water, and with no recollection of his kingly life. He eventually comes across a *caṇḍāla*⁵² woman, whom he agrees to marry in exchange for food and water. She takes him back to her tribe where they bear four children, enduring sixty years of pain and anguish from the hardships of supporting a family with very little. Lavaṇa recounts the sinful actions he was forced to commit, the inability to feel kindness or compassion in his heart, and the tumultuous waves of desire infiltrating his mind:

I raved sometimes in my rage, and wept at others in my bitter grief; I fared on coarse meals, and dwelt, alas! in the abodes of vulgar Caṇḍālas. Thus I passed so many years of my misery at that place, as one fastened to the fetters of his insatiable desires, is doomed to toil and moil for naught until his death.⁵³

He explains how his poor actions, fueled by the wrath of desire, fated him to constantly swing between false pleasures and sufferings:

My days glided away in alternate joy and grief, brought on by my fate and acts; just as a river flows on with the green and dried leaves, which the winds scatter over it.

My foolish mind kept fluttering like a bird, in the maze of my wishes and fancies; and my heart was perturbed by passions, like the sea by its raging waves.

My soul was revolving on the vehicle of my wandering thoughts; and I was borne away by them like a floating straw, to the whirlpool of the eventful ocean of time.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *YV* III: 104.39.

⁵² *Caṇḍāla* refers to the lower castes of Indian society, also referred to as “untouchables.”

⁵³ *YV* III: 107.48.

⁵⁴ *YV* III: 108.2, 108.4-5.

As time passes, food and water grow increasingly scarce amongst the tribe, and desperation soon turns many to unthinkable acts: consuming rotten foods, killing fellow tribesmen, and cannibalism. Lavaṇa and his family finally decide to migrate to a different land, leaving the bloodshed of those who fell victim to the famine behind. Taking a break under the cool shade of a tree, the youngest of Lavaṇa's children desperately begs his father for food. Feeling utterly hopeless from his shame and attachment, Lavaṇa builds a funeral-pyre and decides to sacrifice himself to provide cooked flesh for his family. At this moment, Lavaṇa suddenly awakens to the sight of his royal court.

Upon awakening, Lavaṇa is hysteric to realize that what had felt like a lifetime was only a couple hours in waking reality. At this point, Vasiṣṭha clarifies to Rāma (III:109.31) that Lavaṇa underwent the intensely vivid experience due to the powerful nature of the mind. Vasiṣṭha explicates that the waking and dreaming states are merely two sides of the same coin of consciousness, much like waves of the sea are mere transformations (*vikāra*) of a singular ocean, an acorn who carries its telos of an oak tree, and a lump of gold retaining its essence even in future manifestations:

As the waters of the sea display themselves in huge surges, billows and waves, so the mind which is in the body, displays itself in the various sights exhibited in our dreams.

As the leaves and branches, flowers and fruits are the products of the shooting seed; so everything that is seen in our waking dreams, is the creations of the mind.

As the golden image is no other than the very gold, so the creatures of our living dreams, are not otherwise than the creations of our fanciful mind.⁵⁵

Hence, what is perceived in the wakeful, dream, and sleep states is nothing more than alterations of the same mind, the same consciousness, being fully responsible for creation itself:

The mind alone makes the whole world, to the utmost end of the spheres; the mind is the vacuum, and it is the air and the earth in its greatness.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ YV III: 110.45-47.

⁵⁶ YV III: 110.15.

However, the mind is by nature restless. Thoughts, desires, and attachments drive the mind to pursue that which it likes and avert from that which it dislikes:

The mind is restless of its own nature, with all its vain thoughts and desires within itself; but the man is carried abroad as by its current; over hills and deserts and across rivers and seas, to far remote cities and countries in search of gain.⁵⁷

But the mind's restless movement is exactly how we know our minds to be of the same nature as the force of Brahman:

We have never seen the motionless quiet of the mind; fleetness is the nature of the mind, as heat is that of fire.

This vacillating power of motion, which is implanted in the mind, is known to be of the same nature as that of the self-motive force of the Divine mind; which is the cause of the momentum and motion of these worlds.

As the essence of air is imperceptible without its vibration, so we can have no notion of the momentum of our minds, apart from the idea of their oscillation.⁵⁸

Having fallen victim to the spell of ignorance (*avidyā*)—that is, the chase to satisfy desire—the mind manifests the false reality of subject and object, duality, and diversity. Vasiṣṭha stresses to Rāma that the mind's fluctuations must be tamed and controlled if one is to avoid *avidyā*'s disastrous tendencies; therefore, remain in a state of equanimity—mental stillness—under all conditions, in every place and situation:

Let your mind cut the net of the mind, which is ensnared in this world; and extricate your soul, by this wise policy, which is the only means of your liberation.

Shun your desire for earthly enjoyments and forsake your knowledge of dualism; then get rid of your impressions of entity and non-entity, and be happy with the knowledge of one unity.⁵⁹

Moved by how realistic the dream felt, Lavaṇa becomes compelled to find the places of his dream. The following day he sets out, and, to his surprise, encounters the very settings and tribal people of his dream. Amongst them is his dreamt mother-in-law. She laments in agony that

⁵⁷ *YV* III: 110.28.

⁵⁸ *YV* III: 112.5-7.

⁵⁹ *YV* III: 112.21, 112.23.

his disappearance had also caused her daughter and their children to pass. As the King now knows the life of destitution, he overflows with compassion and understanding for these people, giving them wealth to keep them living comfortably (III:121.6). He knows that he cannot undo the horrific events that transpired across the tribe but seeing as though he had once lived amongst them, his level of understanding grew to internalize their experience, prompting a change in his governing.

In Lavaṇa's story the necessity to perform selfless actions permeates three main ideas. First, to understand the nature of the mind and its fluctuating movements as well as the movement's cessation. Second, to remain vigilant toward dreams as they can reveal otherwise hidden parts of oneself, one's community or interpersonal relations, and prospects for change. And thirdly, to broaden one's social sphere beyond personal and societal constructs. Note, however, that if one fails to still the mind's fluctuations the remaining actions inevitably become unattainable.

Lavaṇa's story is encrypted with the existential reality of isolation. Living a life of royalty, food security, and comfort will often isolate one from the harsh realities of less fortunate peoples; Lavaṇa had no awareness of the people outside his royal court—the people whom he is obligated to protect. But the existential frenzy he found himself in after awakening from the realistic dream prompted him to seek its meaning, and such meaning was discovered when he encountered the tribal people of his dream. Their existence confirmed the dream's harsh realities. Instead of turning a blind eye, Lavaṇa knew the necessary actions that had to be taken, his duty to them as their king. Kudos to Indra, the mysterious juggler in disguise, Lavaṇa finally understood the life of severe poverty, opening his heart to the singularity of all existence. A marginalized tribe on the brink of extinction was saved by a powerful man whose unexpected

dream shattered the line between waking and dream realities, thus transforming his values, his responsibility in the world, and the relationship with his people. The dream was another reality where he shared very real struggles of real people; people who were, to no fault of their own, unfortunate enough to be born in horrendous circumstances. And as a result, Lavaṇa’s sense-of-self *expanded* to include those on the edges of society whose lives would’ve otherwise gone by unnoticed. His existential crisis eased by his sense-of-self expanding due to the necessity to act—not for personal satisfaction but for the maintenance of a previously existing unity: the infinite consciousness, *Brahman*.

2.5 Narrative 3: The Story of Puṇya and Pāvana

In the penultimate book, the *Upaśama Prakaraṇa* (“On Dissolution”), Vasiṣṭha teaches Rāma that an enlightened awareness is crucial to navigating the turbulent, changing nature of the world. The story of two brothers, Puṇya and Pāvana, illustrates spiritual navigation through the existential theme of death—the central method uses self-inquiry (*vicāra*) to understand the nature of the Self (*Ātman*) in relation to bodily existence: the process of reincarnation. The story begins when the two brothers experience the deaths of their father (Dīrghatapā) and mother, both of whom attained *videhamukta*, the ultimate state of *nirvāṇa* following the death of the physical body, ending the cycle of *samsāra*. Following the deaths of their parents, the two brothers responded differently, reflecting the states of their yogic paths. The older brother Puṇya had attained the state of *jīvanmukta* and responded to the deaths with an unwavering performance of funeral rites. Pāvana, on the other hand, was considered “half awakened, like a lotus at twilight.”⁶⁰ Deeply overcome with intense grief and sorrow at the passing of his parents Pāvana

⁶⁰ See Christopher Key Chapple’s translation of “The Story of Puṇya and Pāvana in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*” in *Living Landscapes* (2020), 138.

ventured out into the woods, wailing inconsolably. Puṇya, as the wise older brother, finished the funeral ceremonies and went after his distressed brother to begin the dialogue of self-inquiry:

Why my boy, is your soul overcast by the clouds of your grief; and why do you shed the tears from your lotus-eyes, as profusely as the showers of the rain, only to render you blind.

Know my intelligent boy, that both your father and mother, have gone to their ultimate blissful state in the Supreme Spirit, called the state of salvation or liberation.

That is the last resort of all living beings, and that is the blessed state of all self subdued souls; why then mourn for them, that have returned to and are reunited with their own proper nature.

You do in vain indulge yourself in your false and fruitless grief, and mourn for what is not to be mourned at all.⁶¹

I wish to highlight two main points in the above verses: that death of the physical body is not a loss of being but a *return* to whence being originates—much like drops of rain fall to the ocean, evaporate, and condense to form yet another water cycle; and that one’s grief and sorrow indicates one’s attachment to materialistic reality. What follows in Puṇya’s argument is a comforting flow of poetic persuasion describing the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The process of reincarnation is a fundamental idea throughout the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, revealing the significance of one’s actions whilst embodied, the cessation of attachment, as well as the interconnection between all life forms. By shedding light on the myriad of beings of Pāvana’s past births, as well as his parents and Puṇya’s own, Puṇya widens his brother’s narrow perspective on the true nature of the Self, thus liberating Pāvana from the depths of attachment and sorrow.

There is a clear emphasis on the illusory nature of the world in Puṇya’s dialogue. What is experienced as birth and death is but an illusion created by the ignorance of the mind, fueled by false conceptions and desires:

⁶¹ *YV* V: 19.26-29.

Consider these phenomena in their true light, and you will find my boy, that none of these nor ourselves nor any one of us, are to last forever: shun therefore your error of the passing world from your mind forever.

That these are dead and gone, and these are existent before us, are but errors of our minds, and creatures of our false notions and fond desires, and without any reality in them.

Our notions and desires, paint and present these various changes before our sight; as the solar rays represent the water in the mirage. So our fancies working in the field of our ignorance, produce the erroneous conceptions, which roll on like currents in the eventful ocean of the world, with the waves of favorable and unfavorable events to us.⁶²

The impermanence of the world merely indicates that all subscribed notions, feelings, and self-identifications are themselves variable extensions of the mind. Hence, being rooted in one's bodily existence, forgetting the omnipresent *Brahman*, will only produce suffering, separation, and intolerance for differences.

Puṇya reminds his brother (V.20.8) that he is a *liṅga śarīra*, a “spiritual substance”⁶³ who has transmigrated many births with an endless number of mothers, fathers, friends, and relatives—if Pāvana must lament over the passing of Dīrghatapā and his wife, then why not lament for his former families and companions from past births? Pāvana was once a myriad of beings ranging from deer to lions, to trees, to insects, among several royal bodies and

Brāhmaṇas:

In this manner my boy, were you born in many other shapes, and had to wander all about the Jambu-dvīpa, for myriad of years: And now you are my younger brother.

Thus I see the post states of your existence, caused by the antecedent desires of your soul; I see all this by my nice discernment, and my clear and all-viewing sight.⁶⁴

⁶² *YV* V: 19.39-41.

⁶³ According to the Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary (1899), *liṅga śarīra* is a neuter noun indicating “the subtle body which accompanies the individual spirit or soul in all its transmigrations and is not destroyed by death...also called *sūkṣma śarīra*, and since it is the sign and accompaniment of individuality it can never perish until the individualized soul is finally merged in the Universal.” See Monier-Williams, M. A dictionary, English and Sanscrit. (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1851).

⁶⁴ *YV* V: 20.22-23.

Above all, the process of reincarnation signifies the interconnection between all life forms. Since all human beings were once animals, plants, and insects, all have the innate capacity to hold empathy and compassion for all species of life.

Puṇya was certainly not exempt from the circularity of reincarnation. He consoles Pāvana that it is the natural course of their bodily existence to undergo various rebirths in numerous beings (V.20.32), but it is only with self-effort (*yatna*) and human creativity (*pauruṣa*) that one can free oneself from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. As Puṇya explains, one who knows their true nature as the singular consciousness is one who acts for the sake of the act itself, remaining the observer of such actions:

The knowers of God do their acts, without thinking themselves their actors; just as the lamps of night witness the objects around, without their consciousness of the same.

The wise witness the objects as they are reflected in the mirror of their minds, just as the looking glass and gems receive the images of things.

Now my boy, rub out all your wishes and the vestiges of your remembrance from your mind, and view the image of the serene spirit of God in your inmost soul. Learn to live like the great sages with the sight of your spiritual light, and by effacing all false impressions from your mind.⁶⁵

Thus ends Pāvana's bondage to this worldly existence. The words of his wise older brother had prompted Pāvana to inquire about the nature of bodily existence in relation to *Brahman*, the ultimate consciousness. Special emphasis is given to the interconnectedness of all life forms, as well as the importance of cultivating empathy and compassion while remaining unattached. The two brothers would spend the rest of their embodied days wandering as *jīvanmukta* between the trees of the forest until the time came to return to their original disembodied state as *videhamukta*.

Let us now reflect on this story within the context of Vasiṣṭha's spiritual instruction to Rāma. Vasiṣṭha reinforces that the root of Pāvana's suffering was not from the mere passing of

⁶⁵ *YV* V: 20.41-43.

his parents, but from his attachment to them and this worldly existence. Our attachments manifest due to the mind's natural pull towards that which it desires, and against that which it dislikes. It is, therefore, due to the advancement of desires that one remains bonded to the world, stuck in the throes of the false dichotomy of pleasures and sufferings. Thus, to halt the advancement of desires one must cultivate its opposite: suppression of desire. Vasiṣṭha speaks:

Thinking is the power of the mind, and the thoughts dwell upon the objects of desire; abandon therefore your thoughts and their objects, and be happy with your thoughtlessness of everything.

Anything that depends on any faculty, is lost also upon inaction of that faculty; therefore it is by suppression of your thinking (or thoughts), that you can put down your desires, and thereby have rest and peace of your mind.

Be free minded, O Rāma! by tearing off all its worldly ties, and become a great soul by suppressing your mean desires of earthly frailties: for who is there that is not set free, by being loosened from the fetters of desire, that bind his mind to this earth.⁶⁶

As previously stated, the main existential reality present in Puṇya and Pāvana's story is death. One could hardly blame Pāvana's initial reaction—there is no tougher realization one must confront than the mortality of human existence. And despite the fact that death is a *sine qua non* to life, it seems that our current society still struggles to understand the larger meaning of its happening, or whether there is one to begin with. The passing of a loved one is not typically celebrated in the sense Puṇya aims for, but rather seen as an individual tragedy—one that bears tremendous weight on the survivors, instantiating resistance and fear to the public. But as Puṇya explains, birth and death are mere illusory conceptions of certain happenings of this world—they do not represent the true nature of the singular consciousness. Of course, one may celebrate the birth of a child, or mourn upon the death of a loved one, but the transitory nature of existence unveils the necessity to relinquish our attachment to such happenings because, just like the puffy white clouds in the sky, worldly happenings pass on in the blink of an eye.

⁶⁶ *YV* V: 21.28-30.

2.6 Narrative 4: The Story of Vasiṣṭha’s Liberation

2.6.1 Elemental beginnings in the *Ṛg Veda*

Vasiṣṭha’s own story of liberation is told in the second volume of the final book *Nirvāṇa Prakaraṇa* (“On Liberation”), where Rāma finally experiences the bliss of *jīvanmukta*. The significance of Vasiṣṭha’s liberation with respect to the current existential project is the attainment of freedom by means of *mahābhūta dhāraṇā*, meditation on the great elements. These elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space (sometimes called void or ether)—are consistently regarded as the fundamental building blocks of material existence in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist faiths. Moreso, descriptions of the elements’ evocative manifestations bring attention to the world-at-large, including natural environments and their changing landscapes as well as the external (body) and internal (mind) human experience. Traditionally, meditation or contemplation on the great elements is key to expanding one’s sense-of-self to not only understand the interconnectedness of all beings, but also to *live* according to such knowledge. As I soon discuss, with the help of goddess Kalī, contemplating the elements enables the sage to break through the boundaries of typical meditational experience.

In the *Ṛg Veda*, the oldest of Indian scriptures (c. 1500 BCE), the five elements are praised through their respective gods and goddesses: earth with the goddess Pṛthivī, water with Varuṇa, fire with Agni, wind with Vāyu, and space with Dyaus. In addition to maintaining cosmic and dharmic order through sacrificial rites, the significance of Vedic hymns reveals the microcosm of the human body as a metaphor for the macrocosm of the universe. One such chant, the *Puruṣa Sūkta* (“The Hymn of Man”) describes the full creation of the world arising from the sacrificial offering of the human being. Although not explicit, the five elements are understood as necessarily inseparable from both the body’s physical composition and the body’s role in

navigating the expansion of consciousness. Everything from the seasons, skies, directions, animals, and different caste categories can be found within the human body:

When with Man as their offering,
The Gods performed the sacrifice,
Spring was the oil they took
Autumn the offering and summer the fuel.

...
From that cosmic sacrifice,
Drops of oil were collected,
Beasts of the wing were born,
And animals wild and tame.

From that original sacrifice,
The hymns and the chants were born,
The meters were born from it,
And from it prose was born.⁶⁷

...
The Brāhman was his mouth;
The Rājanya (Princes) became his arms;
His thighs produced the Vaiśya (professionals and merchants);
His feet gave birth to the Śūdra (laborer).

The moon was born from his mind;
His eyes gave birth to the sun;
Indra and Agni came from his mouth;
And Vāyu (the wind) from his breath was born.

From his navel the midair rose;
The sky arose from his head;
From feet, the earth; from ears, the directions.
Thus they formed the worlds.⁶⁸

The *Puruṣa Sūkta* calls forth the pre-existing connection between humankind and cosmic order. Humans are powerful for their capability to maintain such order through the performance of sacrificial rites, thus insinuating the need for human effort (*yajña*) as well as that creative characteristic that makes Vedic chanting possible: transient movements and vibrations that bring forth a space of existence (*Sat*) from a space of non-existence or chaos (*Asat*). The above verses

⁶⁷ *RV* 10: 90.6, 90.8-9. Translations selected from *RV* are by Antonio T. de Nicolás, “Appendix III: Selected Chants from the Rg Veda,” *Meditations through the Rg Veda: Four Dimensional Man* (New York: Authors Choice Press, 2003), 225.

⁶⁸ *RV* 10: 90.12-14.

use the human being as a metaphor for the entirety of universal existence; the elements indirectly used as the bridge to knowledge of the universal Self.

That the human body is a metaphor for the universe is an indisposible feature for many yogic and tantric traditions from Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist faiths.⁶⁹ Vasiṣṭha's experience with *mahābhūta dhāraṇā* and the attainment of living liberation upholds this evocative metaphor and, as I later discuss, is essential for approaching the existential crisis through the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s transpersonal yoga.

2.6.2 The World within the Stone

Vasiṣṭha's narrative begins in chapter 81 of the *Nirvāṇa Prakaraṇa* where he wanders into a dark cave and finds a meditative Śiva (Rudra)⁷⁰ in firm contemplation. As he approaches the god he notices a large, dark shadow emanating from Śiva's still body. With no source of light in the cave Vasiṣṭha finds himself intrigued by this shadow, who, as he gets closer, reveals itself to be dancing an ethereal movement. In the form of a female body, the shadow is large and thin with goddess-like characteristics of three eyes, a mouth of fire, numerous body parts appearing and vanishing with each movement, and wearing a garland of skulls and earrings of snakes. Vasiṣṭha concluded that this figure was indeed the goddess Kālī (Kālarātri), the “Night of Death.”⁷¹

With each dancing movement Kālī playfully strung out physical manifestations of the world. Mountains, rivers, trees, oceans, forests, deserts, cities and towns, as well as days, nights, months, seasons, and the three worlds motioned from her transient body. Swami Venkatesananda

⁶⁹ For an extensive exposition on the micro/macrocosm metaphor found in the main yoga traditions, see Christopher Key Chapple's *Living Landscapes: Meditations on the Five Elements in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Yogas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).

⁷⁰ Śiva and Rudra are used synonymously throughout Hindu scripture referring to the world characteristic of destruction.

⁷¹ Kālī is the embodiment of the feminine divine power of *śakti*, that active force of the godhead's ability to create and manifest the world. She is known as the goddess of time, death, and destruction.

describes, “The entire universe was in constant motion because she was dancing: from another point of view, of course, they were firmly established (in her).”⁷² The universe in its entirety emerged and dissolved with Kālī’s movements; she was, as it were, both the force of creation and destruction. Smells, tastes, forms, touch, and sound danced through space, appearing from, existing as, and returning to, the singular source of consciousness. She was everything and nothing all at once, existence and non-existence, substance and non-substance. She was both *dharma* and *adharma*, truth and falsehood, knowledge and ignorance, liberation and bondage embodied as the feminine power of movement. In fact, she was the very energy of lord Śiva. His firm meditation is symbolic for the singular pure consciousness, emanating in and through all existence, and pure consciousness has but one “characteristic”: movement, or *vikāra*. This is Kālī. She gives movement, motion, change, *life* to Śiva; without her, pure consciousness cannot exist. Consciousness cannot be without movement—they are inseparable, thus any distinction between them is to be understood only in the context of the singular consciousness.

If, therefore, all that exists is the singular consciousness, then what are we to make of the physical manifestations of our bodies and the world around us? Are they themselves less real than *Brahman*? According to Vasiṣṭha, the answer is a resounding no:

O Rāma, all these are indeed real, for they have all been brought about by the operation of this dynamic consciousness, and they are all experienced by consciousness. Just as the mirror reflects a real object that exists outside, this consciousness reflects within itself that which is within itself—hence, it is real...whether it is regarded as a reflection or a dream-object or a fancy, because it is based on the truth which is the self...⁷³

But if there’s one thing an existentially suffering individual feels about existence, it’s likely that it’s meaningless. What would be the point of continuing engagement with this body, these

⁷² *YV* VI.2: 81. Venkatesananda, trans., *Vasiṣṭha’s Yoga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 569.

⁷³ *YV* VI.2: 84. Venkatesananda, *Vasiṣṭha’s Yoga*, 574.

people, this physical world, if I find no use or purpose to it? Well, Vasiṣṭha has an answer to that too:

...consider of what use are they who have gone to a distant country. They are of use to the inhabitants of the village to which they have gone. Even so with everything.⁷⁴

All that exists within the energy field of consciousness—wakeful, dream, and deep sleep—all that we *perceive* in the past, present, and future, matter simply because they *are* the singular consciousness in motion. It is necessary for the human being to perceive it as such so that they may embark on the spiritual path and no longer be internally bothered by its fluctuations yet continue to engage for the wellbeing of others.

To remain engaged in the world while unattached only supports the dialectic of restorative justice present throughout the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. The spiritual path is often overly conflated with asceticism, which, of course, is a spiritual lifestyle but accounts for only a fraction of seekers in today's societies. The vast majority of us will continue to engage in worldly things, have families, and live a life pursuing some sort of hedonism. For these peoples, myself included, it's crucial to not let such engagement continue without cultivating awareness. The lives we pursue both directly and indirectly affect other beings; paying due diligence to the nature of one's actions and how these transfer into the world thus becomes a necessary characteristic of the lay(wo)man's spiritual path.

It's at this point where Vasiṣṭha begins describing lord Śiva and Kālī casting away their physical body to merge in *Brahman*, as nothing but pure consciousness. The cave (or stone or rock) in which the sage found himself in became both the creator and creating process. Every direction he looks a cycle of creation, sustenance, and dissolution of the entire universe unfolds. His perception is unmistakable—he observes with the divine eye a kaleidoscopic vision until he

⁷⁴ *YV* VI.2: 84. Venkatesananda, *Vasiṣṭha's Yoga*, 574.

realizes that this cycle resides within himself, his own body, just like an oak tree is present within the acorn.

As I was thus observing creation, I had become atomic. I realized myself as a ray of light. Contemplating that alone, I had become gross. In this grossness there were the potentialities of sense-experiences...I began to see. The organs through which I saw became the eyes, that which I saw became the scene, the fruit of this experience was sight, 'when' I saw all this became time, the manner in which I saw became the method or order, 'wherever' I saw became space. By conviction these became the order of creation.⁷⁵

2.6.3 *pañca mahābhūta dhāraṇā*

Experiencing the process of creation awakened within Vasiṣṭha what Kālī had been depicting during her transient dance: *pañca mahābhūta dhāraṇā*, meditations on the five great elements. Towards the end of chapter 87, the sage describes his contemplation on earth (*pṛthivī dhāraṇā*) as it's connected with the sense of smell and nose. He understands both earth's magnificent beauty as well as the illusory appearances of its manifestations. Having tasted the experience of space (see verse above), Vasiṣṭha realizes that all perceptions are full of void (*śunya*), even the grossest of elements:

Thus the world being produced, within this mind of mine; I turned to look minutely into it, and found there was nothing in reality, except an empty void.⁷⁶

Physical manifestations of earth are just as real (or unreal, depending on your perception) as a city within a dream state. He now understands his physical body as not only a manifestation of earth, but also the creator:

Then thinking myself as the master of the earth, I became amalgamated with the earth as if it were one with myself; and having forsaken my vacuous intellectual body, I thought myself as the sovereign of the whole.

Believing myself as the support and container of this earth, I penetrated deep into its bowels; and thought all its hidden mines were parts of myself, so I took whatever it contained both below and above it to be self-same with me.

⁷⁵ YV VI.2: 87.18-25. Venkatesananda, *Vasiṣṭha's Yoga*, 577.

⁷⁶ YV VI.2: 87.45.

Being thus warped in the form of the earth, I became changed to all its forests and woods, which grew hairs on its body. My bowels were full of jewels and gems, and my back was decorated by many a city and town.

I was full of villages and valleys, of hills and dales, and of infernal regions and caverns; I thought I was the great mountain chain, and connected the seas and their islands on either side.⁷⁷

Swami Venkatesananda elaborates on how this realization dissolves the notion of duality; subject-object relationships are no longer experienced when one understands the universe as inherently empty. When one realizes the empty nature of all things material and mental, one sees with the divine eye the utter completeness of their being:

Just as a crystal reflects colors without intending to do so, the infinite consciousness reflects in it the entire universe. Hence the world is neither mental or material. It is pure consciousness alone that appears as this earth. It is the false notion entertained by countless beings in the three worlds that has attained relative or existential reality known as the earth. 'I am all this and all that is within all this.' With this realization I saw everything.⁷⁸

Vasiṣṭha subsequently describes his contemplation on water (*jal dhāraṇā*), which merged with his experience of earth. He describes the embodiment of this graceful element both as it manifests in the physical world and within his body, connected with the sense of taste and the organ of tongue:

The currents of waters were gliding, with the leaves and fruits of trees in their mouths; while the floating creepers and branches, described the encircling necklaces about them.

Again the drinkable water being taken by the mouth, goes into the hearts of living beings; and produces different effects on the humors of animal bodies, according to their properties at different seasons.

Again it is this water which descends in the form of dews, sleeps on leafy beds in the shape of icicles, and shines under the moon-beams on all sides, all the time and without interruption.⁷⁹

I saw the water rising from the earth in the form of vapor on high, and then mixing with the blue oceans of the azure sky, or appearing as blue sapphires among the twinkling stars of heaven.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ YV VI.2: 87.58-61.

⁷⁸ YV VI.2: 89.20-24. Venkatesananda, *Vasiṣṭha's Yoga*, 579.

⁷⁹ YV VI.2: 90.13-15.

⁸⁰ YV VI.2: 90.19.

Like the earth element, Vasiṣṭha became water in all its infinite forms. Solid, liquid, and vapor, he endures the cyclical span of water as it manifests the world around us. He experienced within other beings the water element and its varied tastes. Contemplation on water only helps Vasiṣṭha further understand the vast emptiness of existence—though empty, it is complete through pure consciousness.

Next is contemplation on the fire element (*teja dhāraṇā*). Fire (*agni*) is associated with light, heat, destruction, renewal, and illumination, gifting the sensual experience of sight and form through the organs of the eyes. Vasiṣṭha describes,

I became the good color in gold, etc., I became vitality and valor in men, in jewels I sparkled as their fire, in rainclouds I became the light of the lightning, in passionate women I became the twinkle in their eyes, I became the strength of the lion...I became the vital essence of all beings. I experienced being the sun, the moon, the stars, precious stones, fires (including the fire of cosmic destruction), lightning, lamp. When I became fire, the burning cinders became my teeth, the smoke my hair and fuel was my food.⁸¹

Fire represents the energy of life; it is, as Vasiṣṭha says, “the vital essence of all beings.” He experiences fire in its myriad forms, as well as the illuminating and destructive nature of its being. Fire reminds us that form itself is ever-changing, never fixed. It dispels darkness, provides warmth, security, and nourishment to all, and, like the soul, is found within all beings. This, too, solidifies the permanent impermanence of existence.

As Vasiṣṭha moves through the elements they progressively become more subtle, but he becomes more expansive. Fourth is air, *vāyu dhāraṇā*. Air is invisible. It takes no shape or form, and we only know of its presence by the movement of wind. It sways constantly in and around all of us. It becomes the force of playful connection between earth, water, fire, and space. Accordingly, air is associated with the sense of touch and the organ of skin. It is the force of wind carrying germinating seeds, directing the flow of waters, feeding the erratic movement of

⁸¹ *YV* VI.2: 91.15-43. Venkatesananda, *Vasiṣṭha's Yoga*, 581.

fire, and transmitting the flow of sound. And it is also the winds of life that enable us to breathe in the five directions (*prana, apana, samana, udana, vyana*). Vasiṣṭha speaks,

I taught the grass, leaves, creepers and straw the art of dancing. Wafting cool breeze, I became the dear friend of young ladies. At the same time I was dreaded for my heat wave, hurricane and tornadoes. In pleasure gardens, I carried sweet scent; in hell I carried sparks of fire...I flowed with the waters of the holy Gaṅgā and it would have been tiresome but I was happy that we were able to relieve the tiresomeness and fatigue of others. I assisted space by carrying sound-waves; and there I came to be known as the dear friend of space...I was operating the body-machine of all embodied beings by being their life-breath. Hence, I became their friend and their enemy at the same time.⁸²

Having embodied the powers of earth, water, fire, and wind, Vasiṣṭha circles back to the voidness of space:

Though the netherworlds were my feet, the earth my abdomen and the heavens my head, even then I did not abandon my subatomic nature. I was spread in all directions everywhere at all times and I did everything. I was the self of all. I was all. Yet I was pure void. I experienced being something and being nothing, the formless state as also form, while retaining awareness of all this as well as being unaware of these. There are countless such universes as the one that I experienced. Just as a man dreams that he dreams countless objects, I experienced universes within every atom and universes within the atoms of those universes. I myself became all these universes; and though I was self of all and I pervaded all these, I did not so envelope all these.⁸³

Vasiṣṭha's description of *ākāśa dhāraṇā* immerses the reader into a divine-like state. He reveals that earth, water, fire, and air give the perceiver an illusion of their perception; that because we can perceive their existence, they are the truth, the reality. But one who has awakened the divine eye sees that they are nothing more than pure space, pure void. We only know their existence through the workings of the mind; the mind creates our experiences of them. It is only through the mind that we can sense, feel, think, and break free of anything at all. The mind thus becomes the doorway that either prevents or enables liberation in the world; it is the connection between materiality and the space of consciousness, *cidākāśa*.

All mental thoughts and all sensual perceptions arise from and return to the *cidākāśa*. The impermanent nature of all things supports this idea. We know that nothing lasts forever. We

⁸² *YV* VI.2: 92.2-18. Venkatesananda, *Vasiṣṭha's Yoga*, 582.

⁸³ *YV* VI.2: 92.50-64. Venkatesananda, *Vasiṣṭha's Yoga*, 582-3.

know that death is fated upon all life, that we traverse the world fundamentally alone, and that we are enslaved to dictating our own lives, but should any of this mean that our existence is inherently meaningless? On the contrary, these presuppositions should indicate that our existence is *full* of meaning. The fundamental fact that impermanence plagues existence reveals just how precious life is. Keeping this in mind is perhaps one of the most daunting instructions one could give to the existentialist sufferer, but it's also the doorway to absolute freedom. This is precisely why Vasiṣṭha shares his story to Rāma—meditations on the five elements unveil the *cidākāśa*, the *śūnyatā* of the world, once believed to be chaos, now metamorphosing the visionary experience to a creative space of freedom.

3 A Transpersonal Approach to the Existential Crisis

Let us run through what we've thus far established. The introduction set up the historical and contemporary understanding of an existential crisis from a humanistic perspective. By characterizing the crisis according to psychoanalyst Irvin D. Yalom's four "givens of existence," we've understood that contemporary psychotherapy approaches an existentially suffering individual by addressing the psychodynamic conflict that arises from confronting the four givens of existence: that death is inevitable; isolation is fundamental; freedom implies a grand structure of eternal emptiness; and given the former three establishments, life is inherently and foundationally meaningless. Thereafter was discussed existential psychotherapy's roots within Western academia and how philosophers and contemporary psychoanalysts have addressed the crisis by emphasizing the will and responsibility of the individual. Because the crisis is an unquantifiable phenomenon that happens to, and negatively affects, the subjective wellbeing of an individual, the individual alone is made responsible for its onset and alleviation without further regard for what it means to *be* in the world alongside other forms of being. In other

words, the phenomenon is understood as a subjective “me” problem, rather than a problem regarding a lack of knowledge of the totality of being. While I agree that human will is a necessary element to overcome an existential crisis, I disagree with the dualistic individualist undertones used to motivate one’s triumph, that the interconnectedness of the world—and existence itself—need not be a substantive matter in the individual’s pursuit.

In response to the humanistic concern, this thesis is primarily focused on presenting a transpersonal response through the lens of the eleventh century text, *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. I presented four narratives: the first revolves around a young prince who realizes the absurd nature of existence that leaves him ready to fast to death; the second is about an isolated king who neglects his own people; the third involves two brothers who’ve recently lost their parents; the fourth is about a sage who experiences the bliss of living liberation for the first time. Each of the stories exemplifies at least one of the four existential realities: all four with Rāma, isolation with Lavaṇa, death with Puṇya and Pāvana, and freedom, as well as meaning by consequence, with Vasiṣṭha’s liberation. This section will expound more on the transpersonal techniques used to alleviate the existential conflicts our protagonists encountered.

3.1 Dreams

Beginning with the story of Lavaṇa, dreams are used to help the king understand the illusory nature of waking, dream, and deep sleep realities, which simultaneously bring attention to the need to act despite the falsity of materiality. Dreamwork is quite common not only in transpersonal psychotherapeutic techniques, but also in the multitude of historical yogic traditions. For example, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (8.7-12) tells the dialectic between Prajāpati and Indra, who, by spending 101 years in meditation, attains the state of *turīya*, comparable to the fifth element of space. Throughout this story is expressed four progressive states of

consciousness: waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and beyond deep sleep (*turīya*). It's expounded that seeing the world as dream is an essential, though not sufficient, stage toward *samādhi*. In Vajrayāna Buddhism, dream yoga is prescribed only to those initiated into Tantra, emphasized as a supremely advanced practice to internalize and externalize the *maṇḍala*.⁸⁴ Dreams also characterize one of the three main bardo (“intermediate”) states in Vajrayāna Buddhism.⁸⁵

In today's psychotherapeutic setting, dreams are still used as a method to integrate unconscious elements to the conscious psyche. One of the lead proponents to this method is Carl G. Jung, the “father” of analytical (depth) psychology whose practice emerged in the early twentieth century diverging from Freudian psychoanalysis. Jungian thought focuses on elements and potentialities of the psyche, such as the collective unconscious, archetypes and symbols, transcendent functions, the Self, and individuation. Of significant importance to the current discussion is the collective unconscious, a shared part of the human psyche that is “detached from anything personal and is entirely universal,”⁸⁶ thus alluding to its transpersonal nature, the collective emotion of humankind, if you will. Jung believed that dreams were a bridge to, and a product of, the collective unconscious. He posited that the manifestation of dream content was to send new information from the unconscious to conscious minds for integration; this is done through encrypted-like messages of symbols and archetypes. If one therefore sought to discover the meanings of their dreams, then symbols and archetypes are to be analyzed, interpreted, and understood in terms of either personal experience or as general ideas.

There are striking parallels between Jung's theory of dreams and collective unconscious with Lavaṇa's dream experience. In Jungian terms, Lavaṇa's dream is a message from his

⁸⁴ Discussion of dream yoga can be found in *anuttarayoga tantra*, the “Supreme Meditation” tantric scripture.

⁸⁵ See *bardo-thodol/The Great Book of Natural Liberation through Understanding in the Between*, also known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to Westerners. Translation used: Robert A. F. Thurman (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1994).

⁸⁶ See June Singer, *Boundaries of the Soul: The Practice of Jung's Psychology* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 103.

collective unconscious indicating the severity of a real problem threatening his people. Consciousness, as described in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and reaffirmed by Jung, is one and the same across the whole of human race. Every individual is an embodied form of the singular consciousness seen as the ego-personality; living in opposition to one another, as humans typically do, clouds an even larger aspect of oneself that resides within all. Jung says,

The ego-conscious personality is only a part of the whole man, and its life does not yet represent his total life. The more he is merely 'I,' the more he splits himself off from the collective man, of whom he is also a part, and may even find himself in opposition to him. But since everything living strives for wholeness, the inevitable one-sidedness of our conscious life is continually being corrected and compensated by the universal human being in us, whose goal is the ultimate integration of conscious and unconscious, or better, the assimilation of the ego to a wider personality.⁸⁷

For Jung, dreams are a mode of communication from the unconscious to the conscious mind, portrayed in the universal language of symbols and archetypes. The meaning of a dream is peculiar per individual with respect to embodying a more wholesome self. This means that encrypted messages may allude to the proper course of action to ensure a life of wholeness that stretches beyond the confines of the ego-personality. Lavaṇa received the messages from his dream to find the tribe, and upon doing so, take further action to elevate the quality of their lives. Lavaṇa's sense of self thus expands far beyond the parameters of his royal court to include marginalized and long-neglected beings.

3.2 Rebirth through Self-Inquiry

The story of the two brothers emphasizes self-inquiry to realize the interconnectedness of all life forms, that this interconnection runs through the singularity of consciousness. Thus, any notion about birth and death are just mere conceptualizations used to describe certain fluctuations of pure consciousness—they do not represent the truth of *Brahman*. Like the significance of dreams, self-inquiry as it relates to doctrines of rebirth or reincarnation are

⁸⁷ Carl G. Jung, "On the Nature of Dreams," *Selected Writings* (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1997), 490.

paramount to traditional yogic traditions. The cornerstone of such doctrines is *karma*. As discussed in section 2.3 the nature of *karma* calls for certain ethical, psychological, and meditative practices that aim at lessening the bondages brought about from past actions. Long before the compilation of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* one could find the intricacy of karmic theories in Sāṃkhya, Jainism, and Buddhism. Sāṃkhya, for instance, stresses the need to attain *jñāna* by utilizing human effort to change the nature of one's actions in mind, body, and speech. In Buddhism, the teaching of dependent co-origination asserts that the causation of all existence is necessarily dependent on the existence of another, thus implying *karma*, one's actions in body, mind, and speech, need be purified. And in Jainism, *karma* is referred to as a physical sticky-like substance that obstructs the true nature of *jīva* (soul). Though a natural part of material existence, Jainism teaches that all karmic bondages must be released for one to attain liberation, hence the need for human effort, *tapas*, and adherence to the vows (*aṇu/mahāvratas*).

Although not explicit, self-inquiry is essential for all karmic doctrines. Self-inquiry is first and foremost a state of deep reflection. In fact, self-inquiry (*vicāraṇa*) is the second limb of Vasiṣṭha's sevenfold Yoga. Along with abstaining from indulgence (*nivṛtti*) and lessening attachments (*asaṃsaṅga*), self-inquiry is utilized as one of the waking states necessary to diminish the lines between waking and dream realities, as we saw it happen with Lavaṇa and Pāvana. Recognition of one's actions in body, speech, and mind is both a pre-requisite and an ongoing practice in the spiritual path. As a transpersonal technique, self-inquiry is necessary throughout one's psychotherapeutic journey. Cultivating a state of reflection helps the individual make sense of their past, present, and future, especially as it relates to personal narrative. It is necessary for understanding one's *karma*, one's current incarnation, and how to approach existential realities. When self-inquiry about the nature of oneself in relation to millions of other

beings is employed, one is likely to discover just how connected everything is. One's actions both directly and indirectly affect others. When we approach the suffering associated with death with the transpersonal technique of self-inquiry, we understand that death is more than just another aspect to life—death reveals a path to Self-realization, a path where the opportunity to better the lives of existing others become apparent, as the singularity of existence is realized.

3.3 Elemental Meditations

We learned in Vasiṣṭha's story that living liberation can be attained via contemplation on the five elements—living liberation, or *jīvanmukta*, is freedom in the most radical sense of the term. When an existential crisis arises regarding freedom, the individual suffers from confronting the chaotic underpinnings of universal structure. There arises a deep unease about the fact that we are the authors of our own lives; the responsibility to dictate every thought, word, and action every second of every hour of every day becomes too overwhelming to bear; there is no 'divine plan' as Judeo-Christians would have. The notion that we suddenly have the responsibility to fill in what would be the role of a divine figure would, understandably, feel like an enormous task. But through Kālī's immersive dance of creation, sustenance, and dissolution we are shown this divine power being no different from the power of our own minds—we need only realize our selves as the vessel, if you will, through which the divine power can shine through. In other words, we realize ourselves as the non-doer, the witness-consciousness merely observing the transience of existence. The *pañca mahābhūta dhāraṇā* enable Vasiṣṭha to come to this realization. Furthermore, the concern that an existentialist sufferer may have regarding the chaos (or emptiness, depending on one's perspective) of the universe is not dismissed with this technique. Vasiṣṭha even confirms that the entirety of the manifest world is inherently empty—

all experiences that one collectively enjoys and endures arise from and dissolve into the space of consciousness.

Various meditation practices are commonly used within contemporary transpersonal and integrative therapies. Meditation practices, in general, increase self-awareness while decreasing negative emotions. One gets out of their practice what they put in—so long as the practice is consistent the benefits will continue to unfold. However, what makes *pañca mahābhūta dhāraṇā* distinct from other forms of meditation is the inward-outward expansion through elemental modalities. Contemplating on the elements in their various manifestations as they exist around the world and within each of us builds a bridge linking the personal with the impersonal. Rather than focusing on the fundamental separateness between beings, the elements teach us the beauty of having embodied different forms while arising from a space of singularity. Our uniqueness implies a source of homogeneity. Oddly enough, where recognition of the underlying emptiness of existence was once the perpetrator of an existential crisis is now the key to absolute freedom.

3.4 Narrative & Mythos

Narrative as a transpersonal technique is not spoken of quite nearly as often as the latter three methods. The significance of narrative pervades both the personal and impersonal realms of existence. Personal narrative, as the name implies, could be thought of as a story of one's life typically told in first-person. Impersonal narrative, on the other hand, is a story told about other's life; it could be told in third-person or as an omniscient voice, an all-knowing voice. The *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is profound for having a spectrum of different narratives told in first, second, and third person, while also including objective and omniscient voices. Narrative is how we communicate to others: it's how we make sense of the world around us. More importantly, narrative constructs meaning. To discover a life of meaning is to not to experience a moment of

happiness; on the contrary, it is to cultivate thought that “[understands] one’s life beyond the here and now, integrating future and past.”⁸⁸ Meaning helps us navigate the turbulences of existential realities. Our personal narrative thus enables us to comprehend and sustain our sense-of-self and situations, to manifest a life of meaning through coherency and contentment. But narrative can also be fragmented, debilitating, and incoherent, and so fall short of meaning. “Meaninglessness,” according to Carl Jung in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, “inhibits fullness of life and is therefore equivalent to illness.”⁸⁹ Understandably, the less meaning one finds in their narrative, the more one is bound to suffer.

As the full compilation of the *Yogavāsishtha* is narrative in its personal and impersonal forms, there is much meaning to be discovered. But the *Yogavāsishtha* is more than mere storytelling; it is Hindu mythos depicting the human predicament, the nature of the world as it is filtered through the human psyche, and how Vasiṣṭha’s Yoga is expounded to alleviate the suffering associated with existential realities. Mythos, or simply myths, are generally disregarded as fictional stories in the modern day. Many believe that myths are a premodern way of persuading groups of people to adhere to certain moral rules or religious ideologies, or simply a mode of entertainment, literary works of the past. The modern age has instead adopted logos—science, reason, logic—as the only credible source of truth in the world, hence the notable decline in religious identifications in developed countries. But as Carl Jung writes,

No science will ever replace myth, and a myth can never be made out of any science. For it is not that “God” is a myth, but that myth is a revelation of the divine life in man. It is not we who invent myth, rather it speaks to us as a Word of God. The Word of God comes to us, and we have no way of distinguishing whether and to what extent it is different from God. There is nothing

⁸⁸ Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen D. Vohs, Jennifer L. Aaker, Emily N. Garbinsky, “Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology: Dedicating to furthering research and promoting good practice* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

⁸⁹ Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffe, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 340.

about this Word that could not be considered known and human, except for the manner in which it confronts us spontaneously and places obligations upon us.⁹⁰

That is not to say that logos holds no value to humankind; mythos and logos are two sides of the same coin of truth, but the truths they reveal are different in nature. Science, for example, can give us a cure to physical illnesses and ailments, while myths can teach us how to meaningfully navigate the hardships associated with such illnesses. Logos is the reason humankind has exponentially progressed in technology and civilized societies. Though necessary, logos cannot provide the answers to the “hard” questions of existence. Logos fails to encapsulate the essence of humankind, reducing our complexity to the laws of science. For this reason, mythos—religious mythos—has, time and again, become our source for meaning.

The purpose of the narrative style is to illustrate the human predicament in both its beauty and tragedy—something that all can relate to on some level, but what is the point of a teaching if not for its practical application? The myth provides exactly this: trials and turbulences coping with our mortality in symbolic and archetypal language. Myth is not supposed to adhere to scientific law; much like the realm of dreams, mythos speaks to the deep unconscious of our psyche. It is the collective unconscious where we discover bridges upon bridges linking ourselves to beings immemorial; hence, comprehending the myth through the conscious intellect is of little importance. Modern society is now accustomed to receiving quick and easy answers with a search engine constantly at our fingertips, so the fact that myths and dreams are encrypted with symbols and archetypes that no Google search can decipher often renders them incomprehensible and meaningless. But just by simply reading myths (and experiencing dreams) the vast realm of the unconscious is tapped into, where its value and truth wait to be discovered.

⁹⁰ Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 340.

As also the case with dreams, we are to integrate and practice what we learn from myths in our daily lives. But given the nature of its symbolic language, one must caution imitation from inspiration. In discussing the stories of Christ and Buddha, Jung explains that both figures have prompted a mass following of imitation, completely countering what both fundamentally stood and died for:

...Buddha became, as it were, the image of the development of the self; he became a model for men to imitate, whereas actually he had preached that by overcoming the Nidana-chain every human being could become an illuminate, a buddha. Similarly, in Christianity, Christ is an exemplar who dwells in every Christian as his integral personality. But historical trends led to the *imitatio Christi*, whereby the individual does not pursue his own destined road to wholeness, but attempts to imitate the way taken by Christ.⁹¹

This is a crucial point to remember whilst reading myths and interpreting dreams. We are quick to interpret at face value, bypassing any omniscient voice or unable to see past the nonsensical words or frames. Key religious figures such as Christ, Buddha, and even our very own Rāma and Vasiṣṭha, rest in mythos exemplifying their narratives toward self-realization; when one seeks to imitate such figures rather than understand them as symbols guiding us along our own heroic journey to wholeness, their encrypted messages and meanings become obstructed by our need to emulate their lives. Unsurprisingly, this imitation only leads to disappointment, guilt, shame, and suffering.

Throughout the course of 4 volumes, that is, 6 books and somewhere over 29,000 verses, Vasiṣṭha uses narrative and mythos to guide Rāma along his path to *jīvanmukta*. During his dispassionate discourse, the reader learns of Rāma's confrontations with the four existential realities. Rāma sees no value in living whilst death is bound to happen; he is isolated from the workings of his own mind; knowing his lack of immunity to *avidyā*, he lacks freedom. Given these confrontations, Rāma finds the ever-changing complexions of the world to be meaningless

⁹¹ Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 280.

and is therefore on the verge of fasting unto death. Vasiṣṭha's initial response, however, is to ease Rāma's angst by telling him that his existential crisis is normal and indicative of the need to pursue yogic practice. He continues explicating the importance of remaining active in the world, that is, continuing one's *dharma*, while remaining unattached to one's duties and their outcomes. Thereafter Vasiṣṭha uses the power of narrative and mythos to illustrate the illusory nature of materiality as well as the mind's power of creation, sustenance, and dissolution. Thanks to Vasiṣṭha's words of instruction, Rāma progresses through the sevenfold Yoga, halting at the sixth limb where *jīvanmukta* is finally attained. Here he finally understands the nature of suffering, the nature of Brahman or pure consciousness, and how to live with knowledge of both:

I have nothing to do for myself at present, nor is there any left undone or remaining to be done by me. I am as I am and have ever been, and always without any craving for me.⁹²

I have no foe to annoy me nor a friend to give any joy to me; I have no field to work in, nor an enemy to fear nor a good soul to rely in. It is our misunderstanding that makes this world appear so troublesome to ourselves, while our good sense makes it all agreeable to us.⁹³

We have seen the highest pitch of all prosperity, and the best of all that is to be seen; we have known the end of all learning, and the last extremity of adversity; we have seen many countries and heard many speeches; but never have we heard, nor seen nor known anything better than the discourse on the beauty of the soul, which the sage has shown us today.⁹⁴

Rāma is now ready to fulfill his *dharma* as king and warrior. With the knowledge of pure consciousness, Rāma undergoes a complete psychological transformation. No longer plagued by the transient movements of time, he rests in the present moment. Established in truth, he no longer indulges in sensual pleasure. Having relinquished the pursuit of impure desire, his karmic imprints are purified, and he is free from the binds of attachment. He is beyond all notions of duality and diversity, liberated while living. Because of the transpersonal technique of narrative, Rāma understands the meaning of his existence by implementing Vasiṣṭha's practices to his

⁹² *YV* VI.2: 214.17.

⁹³ *YV* VI.2: 214.19.

⁹⁴ *YV* VI.2: 214.24.

personal self. Self-inquiry and rebirth help him overcome the imminence of death, dreams help him expand his sense-of-self beyond wakeful consciousness, and the elemental meditations reveal ultimate freedom in the manifest world.

4 Concluding Remarks

An important statement I made during the introduction refers to the existential crisis as both a subjective confrontation and an objective phenomenon not limited to time nor space. Humans are, fundamentally, social beings, yearning for connection, belonging, and a sense of stability amongst the unpredictable turbulence of the world. Insofar as our primal instincts yearn for a life of meaning, the existential crisis will continue its organic manifestation for generations to come. This is unavoidable, and, quite frankly, necessary for both personal psychological growth and for meaningful societal changes, as crises of existence tend to underscore broader issues of ‘being’ within a society. Take, for example, the more recent COVID-19 pandemic. There were, undeniably, widely felt feelings of fear and uncertainty as severe illness and death counts rose, individuals were increasingly isolated from one another, and prerogatives frozen. It is therefore permissible to say that the widely felt confrontations are indicative of perpetuating existential crises for many individuals, myself included. The abrupt halt to our fast-paced, sociable lives due to the worldwide spread of a highly contagious pathogenic viral infection emphasized for many just how interconnected and interdependent we all are, and not just with one another, but with the entirety of the cosmos.

We are, as Vasiṣṭha’s story exhibits, a microcosm of the macrocosm universe. If the pandemic has but one lesson to teach, it’s the necessity to act diligently with respect to nature. Our existence is nature itself, but when *ahaṃkāra* (ego) is constantly fueled with satisfaction of personal desire, *manas* (mind) becomes clouded with *avidyā*, unable to discern properly the

impermanence of this material existence. But this is no excuse to renounce interacting with the world; on the contrary, Vasiṣṭha reminds us that we still have a duty (*dharma*) to carry on with our worldly responsibilities—only this time the mind perceives from a place of unified consciousness, unattached to things of the past and no longer anticipating that which has yet to come. It is from this place of purified awareness where we can act creatively (*pauruṣa*). No matter how small, our actions of the present have a lasting vibrational effect on the world around us. Actions of a former present moment—whatever those were—triggered the spread of an incurable deadly virus that cost the lives of millions, the effects of which continue to radiate to the present day.

The many stories of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* serve a young Rāma several spiritual instructions. First, all perception of the manifest world depends on the mind; nothing exists independently of the mind. Second, the nature of the world is impermanence; nothing is fixed nor inert—all is in constant flux. Third, to alleviate existential suffering, one's *karma* must be addressed to embrace selfless action. This requires the cultivation of *yatna* and *pauruṣa*, with further purificatory practices of ethical observances, meditation, and remaining present. Fourth, pay attention to dreams. The fluctuations of consciousness imply a singularity: just like colors of the rainbow cannot be known without the singularity of light. Fifth, inquire about past lives. We learn more about ourselves the more we learn of other species. Sixth, meditate. The elemental meditations reveal that freedom is possible through worldly existence—appreciation for their changing nature liberates one from attachment to their false permanence. And seventh, a life of meaning hinges on a visionary metamorphosis: understanding the creation, sustenance, and dissolution of the manifest world as taking place within the mind. Integration of past, present, and future can happen when diligence is given to personal and impersonal narrative.

Approaching the existential crisis through a transpersonal psychology like the one found in the *Yogavāsishtha* can effectively transform one's being-in-the-world. I've stated before that the humanistic and existential approaches generally used in Western philosophy and psychology to be effective in uplifting human will and personal responsibility; in general, these approaches, though nuanced, emphasize the crisis of existence as a problem of self-identity. Here, the fulfilling of self-identity is made the viable solution. But existential psychotherapies typically fall short of a developed set of techniques, as the peculiar nature of the individual's circumstances makes difficult to instantiate a primary theoretical framework. More importantly, the work is finished upon reaching a fulfilling self-identity. No concern is granted for experiential realities beyond that of the ego-self, let alone realities for other human and non-human beings. When one has chronic back pain, a doctor may prescribe pharmaceuticals to alleviate the pain. Certain lifestyle decisions and behaviors may be questioned and acknowledged, but many people will prefer medications due to their ease-of-use, quick-fix, and little effort, among many others. However, such medications are short-term solutions that isolate one part of the body—the part with pain—effectively doing nothing to address the body as a whole, interdependent organism. The same could be said about the existential crisis when approached through the previously discussed humanistic or existential perspectives. Alleviating the crisis by fulfilling personal identity as an individual self does nothing to address the universality of being and becoming. We would not give someone with chronic back pain pharmaceuticals for the rest of their life to cope with their suffering, so why would we prescribe existentially suffering individuals the need to fulfill their authentic selves without addressing what it means to *be* in this world alongside other forms of being? To approach an existential crisis is to approach the “hard” questions of existence—questions that have been proven time and

again unsatisfactorily answered (if at all) by conventional scientific frameworks. For this reason, I've argued that the transpersonal Yoga of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* tackles the existential crisis by fulfilling Self-identity (emphasis on the capital 'S'), that is, the knowledge of pure consciousness: *Brahman, Ātman, puruṣa*.

The transpersonal techniques I've delineated in this thesis are expressed through sub-narratives, apart from Vasiṣṭha's own. In Lavaṇa's story we learn that our dreams can unveil aspects of ourselves that otherwise persist without awareness in the unconscious psyche. We also learn that waking state, dream state, and deep-sleep state are mere waves of a singular ocean of consciousness. Hence, remaining diligent toward dreams and its language of symbols and archetypes serve as a transpersonal technique with the potential to expand one's sense-of-self, thus alleviating an existential crisis perpetuated by isolation. In Puṇya and Pāvana's story we learn the power of inquiring into past lives and the deep sense of empathy cultivated from recognizing our interconnection with a myriad of beings, thus alleviating an existential crisis perpetuated by confronting death's inevitability. We also learn the impermanence of the manifest world and how our attachment to worldly things only sustains saṃsāric suffering. In Vasiṣṭha's story we learn the power of creation and dissolution of the elemental meditations, the adoption of which unveils such power as resting within ourselves. We also learn from Kālī the divine power of the feminine, the *śakti* or energy of pure consciousness that is the driving force of the manifest world's creation, longevity, and dissolution. Furthermore, progression through the elements ultimately reveal the *śūnyatā* (emptiness) of all existence; rather than this being a fatalistic realization, Vasiṣṭha reminds us that it becomes the template for creative action, the recipe for freedom whilst embodied. Finally, Rāma's story from start to finish reveals the power of narrative and mythos in alleviating existential crises of meaninglessness. It is by studying and

practicing the wisdom of religious mythos that we can begin to make sense of personal narrative as it relates to others.

Vasiṣṭha's transpersonal Yoga both encapsulates and expands the humanistic/existential approach to the crisis. It encapsulates the latter by upholding the necessity for self-effort, human will, and responsibility. However, it expands this approach by relinquishing the ego-personality only upon its fulfillment. This release of self-identity makes room for Self-identity, knowledge of pure consciousness. At this point, the seeker can integrate knowledge of *Brahman* with the knowledge of the inherent suffering of the world, "returning" to pursue the duties of life without getting wrapped up in their illusory natures.

One may rightfully be concerned that a transpersonal approach may avoid fundamental aspects of the personal in favor for the transpersonal. That is to say, a transpersonal approach risks overlooking those aspects of human existence that may or may not have brought one to a state of crisis to begin with. There's also the concern that many individuals who develop an existential crisis have no interest in religious or spiritual domains, and so may be turned off from any guidance of the same nature. First, I'd like to address the concern regarding avoidance of the personal for the transpersonal: as expressed in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, the personal experience is the only way we can even make sense of the transpersonal. We are, after all, human beings. The experience of real human emotions, especially that of turmoil, is essential to begin any spiritual path—and what living human being has not suffered at least once from the givens of existence? The personal is a gateway to the transpersonal, but the transpersonal, once known, is to be integrated into the life of the personal—the wisdom that arises from knowing the transpersonal realm enables a better mode of existence in the personal.

Regarding the concern of religious or spiritually disinterested individuals, a transpersonal approach may sound off alarms that such techniques involve the need to identify with a religious or spiritual cult, or that the label is purely incompatible with any psychotherapy rooted in a scientific framework. This is a completely valid concern, and one that should not be easily brushed off in the field of psychotherapy. Of course, any therapeutic approach must consider the patient receiving such help—no two patients have the same experience, so it's likely that different patients will require different methods. However, I've mentioned that the traditional humanistic/existential approach does not have a primary theoretical framework in quite the same way a transpersonal approach does. This mainly involves the therapeutic techniques used in a session. I've expounded in this paper four transpersonal techniques that could be used in a professional setting, notwithstanding the many others that are emphasized in the *Yogavāsishtha* or those used by Jungian psychoanalysts, for example. Transpersonal techniques need not be associated with a particular religious or spiritual order; it is frequently thought because religious mythos contains the original truths of the human predicament and ritual practices transforming the psyche. In other words, such practices have a religious origin, but as we observe with the development of, for instance, the C. G. Jung Institute and Esalen Institute, both of which focus on transpersonal techniques but do not identify with any religious sect, psychotherapy, especially as it relates to the existential crisis, is compatible with transpersonal methods.

One last concern that deserves mention is one of spiritual bypassing. Spiritual bypassing is a term used to denote a way of masking behind spirituality in order to avoid acknowledging unresolved issues as it relates to oneself or others. This could look like an avoidance of reality and world occurrences, thinking that just by meditating one can change external reality, a denial of any emotion that counters “good vibes,” and many, many others. Within any spiritual tradition

of the modern age that separates itself from religious origins, there is always the concern for spiritual bypassing. Not to mention that oftentimes the first spiritual “high” (by whatever method one chooses) can be addicting, so anyone unfamiliar with the ups-and-downs of the spiritual path can be deeply disturbed by that initial comedown, thus avoiding any interaction with that which does not reflect the spiritual. However, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* makes it profoundly clear how important it is to re-engage with the world and continue one’s duties after that first liberating experience. The real work begins after coming down. Upon receiving knowledge of the transpersonal, how can one then integrate such wisdom to their daily life? Vasiṣṭha reminds us that our re-engagement with the world stems from a space of creativity and selfless action—there is no room for bypassing in his Yoga.

In this paper, I’ve presented an alternative approach to alleviating the existential crisis according to the transpersonal psychology of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. Having had some prior education in continental philosophy, I felt compelled to respond to the widely embraced humanism of Western academia with a discipline expands the human beyond that of the personal self. Through the many captivating stories, I’ve shown that transpersonal techniques of dreams, rebirth through self-inquiry, meditations on the elements, and expression of narrative all serve to alleviate crises of existence as it relates to isolation, death, freedom, and meaninglessness, respectively. My hope is to have shown the valuable wisdom of the early-medieval text as not an entertaining source of fiction, but as a highly developed spiritual practice that is just as worthy for attention from the realm of contemporary psychotherapy as methods and techniques rooted in scientific frameworks. As our world continues to change, it is vital that we remember its nature of impermanence. Perhaps take a short walk on the beach, feeling the wet sand mesh between the toes and the cool ocean breeze against the skin. Perhaps close the eyes and breathe the

singularity of movement. Listen to the rhythm of the waves crashing against the shore and notice how that same movement arises within your own chest, permeating the outward expansion of your being. As simple of a task this may be, it is monumental for a visionary metamorphosis.

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