Performing Knowledge:
“Knowledge is more than something you have, it is something you do”
Kashmir Shaivism, Michael Polanyi, and Karen Barad

In this paper, I’m bringing religious ideas from 9th century Kashmir Shaivism into conversation with Michael Polanyi and Karen Barad around their ideas of knowledge and performativity.¹ By way of introduction, Kashmir Shaivism is a non-Western tradition: one formed and influenced by interactions between Abrahamic religions (i.e., Islam, Syriac, Eastern Christianity) and East Asian theologies (i.e., Hinduism and Mongolian Shamanism). They believe that you cannot have an intellectual understanding of texts alone, you must experience the teachings in your body in order to truly know. Karen Barad is a theoretical particle physicist who is currently the Professor of Feminist Studies, History of Consciousness and Philosophy at UC Santa Cruz. Although she does not cite Polanyi in any of her writing, her idea of agential realism articulates co-constitutive ecologies of knowing that arise from intra-actions between material bodies. Kashmir Shaivism, Polanyi, and Barad propose views about knowledge that depart from the method of sensory uptake that the western scientific method suggests. Contemporary cognitive scientists posit an idea of a world or environment with extrinsic features that are recovered through processes of representation. In other words, information acts as the input to a cognitive system. In contrast, Kashmir Shaivism, Polanyi, and Barad propose that true knowledge has an experiential performative aspect—what I am calling “the performance of knowledge.” Instead of representing an independent world, this performative aspect encompasses the relations and exchanges (i.e., information, communication, intelligence) between bodies, objects, environments: an ongoing embodiment that emerges from our various capacities. Performing knowledge is an enactment of a world that is inseparable from the performing body. This performance restructures our very self-

¹ With full recognition of the inadequacy of using this term, I am using “Kashmir Shaivism” imprecisely, as there is not a single “Kashmir Shaivism” that encompasses all of their various philosophical schools, practices, or beliefs.

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experience changing our body, our chemistry, our muscles, the patterns of our neural connections—just as this performance changes the world through our participation in it. Thus, knowledge is more than something that you have, it’s something that you do – the performance of knowledge.\(^2\)

I first learned about Michael Polanyi when I read Marjorie Grene’s obituary in the *New York Times*.\(^3\) Sufficiently intrigued by her phenomenological commitments, she inspired me to turn to Polanyi’s *The Tacit Dimension*.\(^4\) A few months later, I was introduced to Kashmir Shaivism, a non-dualistic philosophy. Polanyi’s explanation of “indwelling” sounded similar to the way that the doctrine of recognition in Kashmir Shaivism described their way of knowing reality. Thus, it seemed that both the twentieth-century Hungarian-German scientist and the ninth-century Kashmiri were proposing very similar methods of knowing the unseen. I suggest that they may also share a particular epistemological and ontological framework wherein interactions between so-called subject and object or mind and matter or culture and nature is “intra-active” or “trans-active”: that which is seen as ontologically separate is not actually separate at all, only the ontology makes it so. “Intra-active” a neologism proposed by Karen Barad, iterates the co-constitutive entanglement of phenomena, further nuancing Polanyi’s idea of indwelling. Barad proposes a synthetic epistemological-ontology that describes a matrix of intradependent activity—a sensory ecology in which the observer is in process with the observed. One comes to know the world through one’s participation in the world—through performing

\(^2\) There are many ways that this paper could have been framed: within phenomenological concepts; performance theories, embodiment studies, process theology, or dynamic field theories of consciousness: there are resonances with many of these theories and others as well. Kashmir Shaivism, Polanyi, and Barad are situated within particular discourses and historical contexts that influenced the development of their ideas and methods that I will not be able to address today.


knowledge.\textsuperscript{5} In biology we see cells giving rise to organisms, and we know that the cells are intrinsic to the vitality of the organism, just as the life of the organism sustains the vitality of its constitutive cells. Regardless of how far down we go into smaller and smaller parts, we never reach a place where matter is truly inert.\textsuperscript{6} Barad insists that the ‘matter’ of our biological self is co-constitutive with social and ecological material dynamics: “All bodies, not merely ‘human’ bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity—its performativity.”\textsuperscript{7} Her idea of performativity and dynamic intra-action is very much in accord with Kashmir Shaivism as well as Polanyi.

Kashmir Shaivism has an origin narrative in which creation was a performance: it was danced into being. The idea of vibration (“the sacred tremor”) is seen as foundational and permeates all of creation. The textual origins of Kashmir Shaivism began when the god Siva inscribed a series of aphorisms on a rock—the Siva Sutras—that were then revealed to ninth-century sage Vasagupta in a dream. One of Vasagupta’s disciples founded a philosophy of recognition that was later systematized by polymath Abhinavagupta and others in a complex abstruse philosophy articulated in massive treatises. The philosophy of recognition is at the heart of their ideas about knowing. Ksemaraja, a student of Abhinavagupta, synthesized this philosophy into 20 succinct verses (plus auto-commentary) for those who wanted to achieve a level of mastery without decades of committed preparation and study. They emphasized that the only way to understand what doctrines and texts mean— to have knowledge— one

\textsuperscript{5} She reconfigures the meaning of matter to include the process that manifests matter: matter as ‘mattering.’ These interpretations of matter help collapse the dichotomies between body and mind, flesh and spirit, subject and object, the natural and the cultural. Matter is recognized as an intradynamic process, not just a static state of ‘thingness’ that is inert and passive—something which is acted upon and lacks intrinsic agency. See Karen Michelle Barad, \textit{Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Karen Barad, "Agential Realism: Feminist Interventions in Understanding Scientific Practices" in \textit{The Science Studies Reader}, ed. Mario Biagioli (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1-11.; Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of how Matter Comes to Matter," \textit{Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society} 28, no. 3 (2003), 801-831.

\textsuperscript{6} The question of agency or purposefulness at the level of matter is not resolved. Some scientists argue that proto-purposefulness can be found all the way down represented by feedback responses. Others argue that purpose or agency are higher order developments. Regardless of whether matter ‘all the way down’ is able to exert purposeful agency, all agree that matter acts in dynamic response with its environment.

\textsuperscript{7} ibid., 823.
has to submit to an embodied participation in practices of knowing. Commentator Paul Mueller-Ortega explains, “Recognition arises out of an internal knowing, which precedes and anticipates a perceptual re-matching....in the spiritual process of recognition, because what we recognize is our Self, we re-cognize, re-member, what we have always known.” In other words, to re-cognize the divine in oneself is a performance of knowledge—the iteration of self enacted in and through a cosmic context. To illustrate, I spent part of the summer 2010 immersed in reading various Kashmiri texts (in translation) with other Sanskrit scholars, including nearly two weeks with one of the foremost scholar-practitioners: Mark Dyczkowski. Oxford educated, he had spent the last 40 odd years of his postgraduate life in Banaras, India engaged in recovering, preserving, translating, interpreting and commenting on the sacred texts of Kashmir Shaivism. He taught me the esoteric practice of installing Kashmir Shaivism’s cosmology into my body. What is like to experience such a body? While knowledge is first approached externally; the idea of installing the cosmology in the body is to prepare it as a vehicle that can contain the revelation and recognition. One has a sense of being taught from within, awareness arising from the molecules and cells and breath concretizing into sensations, feelings, and thoughts. While the idea of “installing a cosmology” may seem ritualistically constrained, in practice there seemed to be an attunement of different levels of awareness—an oscillation or vibration between modes or levels that “harmonized” into knowledge. Muller-Ortega writes: “It is a synthetic activity of consciousness which creates a new and liberating gestalt of wholeness.” While Polanyi acknowledged the role of indwelling in the realm of scientific discovery, Kashmir Shaivism used their articulation of indwelling as a way of re-cognizing


ultimate reality. The respective realms of the unseen were not so different – Polanyi also saw the movement toward discovery as a movement toward ultimate reality.

Polanyi’s epistemology of knowledge, which he called “personal knowledge,” proposed a method of discovery in which the integration or synthesis that constitutes our knowing is not a process of perception through impressions on the retina or brain, but an act of “walking between worlds.” Polanyi explains:

Active consciousness achieves coherence by integrating clues to the things on which they bear or integrating parts to the wholes they form. This brings forth the two levels of awareness: the lower one for the clues, the parts or other subsidiary elements and the higher one for the focally apprehended comprehensive entity to which these elements point.¹⁰

These two levels of awareness are mutually exclusive. Focusing on a clue deprives it of its meaning as a relational part of a greater whole, while seeing only the whole effaces the constitutive particulars. These two levels of awareness—these two alternative kinds of knowing—are different, yet inseparable processes of comprehension. There is an oscillation between the two levels of awareness that moves toward discovery, toward knowledge. As Polanyi noted, the act of scientific discovery was “a passionate pursuit of hidden meaning, guided by intensely personal intimations of this yet unexposed reality.”¹¹ The entire body was involved – sense organs, nerves, brain, muscles, and memories –“intimating” or communicating indirectly or indwelling with the artifacts of our experience (eg., behaviors or demeanors). As Polanyi explains: “To this extent knowing is an indwelling...any particular indwelling is a particular form of mental existence...it involves a change in our way of being.” He adds, “All thought is incarnate, it lives by the body.”¹²

Similarly, Abhinavagupta wrote, "The body receives sensory input at every turn, and is filled with diverse forms of temporal and spatial information. The body conceals the divine within it." This concealment of what Kashmir Shaivism called the divine is equivalent to Polanyi’s tacit dimension: unspeakable and indirectly accessed through indwelling.\(^{13}\) For Kashmir Shaivism, Polanyi, and Barad, their performance of knowledge is active, participatory, and embodied. “You dwell in it as you dwell in your own body,” Polanyi asserted.\(^{14}\)

Performing knowledge is not just about knowing, but it includes questions of authority. How do we know what we know is true? And who gets to decide? In the modern West, the claim that science rules the realm of knowledge—and thus “what is true”—is neither unfamiliar (nor uncontested). This normative view of scientific knowledge entails a method of inquiry in which evidence is observable, measurable, verifiable, repeatable, and objective. Science depends on the senses, but then dictates what to think about what we sense. Governed by logic, the knowledge from science has been deemed to be more true and universal than non-scientific knowledge.\(^{15}\) Academics so trained were the

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\(^{13}\) The divine is hidden in the body for a reason: as protection against the power of sensory overload. We see an example of this when in the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna implores Lord Krisha to reveal Himself and the vision of his divine universal form nearly blew his mind.

\(^{14}\) Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 37. Within the cultural studies of science, analyses of the embodied dimensions of scientific practices (that is, bodily disciplines, skills) as how they entail what is known and how it is known have broadened and transformed the field of intelligible possibilities within the cultures of science. J. Rouse, "Cultural Studies of Science" In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Pergamon, 2001), 3125-3127.


\(^{15}\) Holton noted that during the early- to mid-twentieth century, "a main model for philosophy of science for the scientific university came from the writings of logical positivists or logical empiricists, who in their most extreme writings seemed to say that science is based only on sense data and that all questions that cannot be subjected to tests in the laboratory are meaningless." [Gerald Holton, "Michael Polanyi and the History of Science," *Tradition & Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 19, no. 1 (1992-93), 16.]

Since the 1960’s and 70’s, groups of sociologists, philosophers, historians, and other social scientists—often within the fields of the sociology of scientific knowledge or the cultural studies of science—began studies and programs that would ask new questions about social and cultural influences on the acquisition and authorization
knowledge makers: only scientific theories were verifiable, while moral, religious, and ethical principles were not only unprovable but merely personal preferences. Apropos of Polanyi’s era, Bertrand Russell may have iterated the more dominant view of scientific knowledge by asserting (in so many words) that what is knowledge is science and what is not science is not knowledge.\textsuperscript{16} Polanyi would have disagreed. As Harry Prosch writes in his biographical notes, Polanyi believed that the verifiability of science itself “rested upon freely held beliefs in ideals and principles that not only could not be proved, but could not even be made wholly explicit . . . the unprovability of these beliefs did not render them intellectually unrespectable or unworthy of being held.”\textsuperscript{17} As Polanyi asserted: “All explicit forms of reasoning, whether deductive or inductive, are impotent in themselves; they can operate only as the intellectual tools of man’s tacit powers reaching toward the hidden meaning of things.”\textsuperscript{18} He meant that our explicit, conscious forms and expressions are the revelations of our body intra-active with the unseen—and what is revealed should be authorized as true knowledge (similarly understood within Kashmir Shaivism and as proposed by Barad).

Perhaps the search for knowledge is logically absurd as suggested by Plato in Meno’s paradox. Either knowledge is already known, and no search is needed; or one does not know what one is looking for, in which case knowledge cannot be found. Polanyi argued that the task of solving a problem may seem self-contradictory unless we recognize that we have intimations of that which seems unknown. “This is what Plato’s argument proves, namely, that every advance in understanding is moved and

\textsuperscript{16}[Bertrand Russell, \textit{Mysticism and Logic, and Other Essays} (New York: Longmans, Green and co., 1919), 16, http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.FIG:004650938.]
\textsuperscript{18}[Polanyi, \textit{Faith and Reason}, 243]
guided by our power for seeing the presence of some hidden incomprehensible clues pointing increasingly toward this yet unknown entity.”¹⁹ To indwell is to seek and find scientific knowledge or the knowledge of an approaching discovery or to re-cognize the unseen: these are acts of commitment: a conviction that there is something to be discovered—a hidden truth—an aspect or revelation, perhaps of ultimate reality.