

The Thirty-Six Tattvas: An Ontological Framework for Non-Dual Reality

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Abstract

Every philosophy that insists reality is fundamentally one eventually has to answer a question: why, then, does the world look so insistently like many things? Kashmir Shaivism, developed in its classical philosophical form by Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, gives one of the more ambitious answers to that question. Rather than dissolving the world into illusion, as Advaita Vedānta does, or splitting reality into two irreducible kinds of being, as classical Sāṃkhya does, the tradition builds a detailed map of exactly how an undivided consciousness comes to experience itself as bound, embodied, and surrounded by objects — without ever actually ceasing to be that same undivided consciousness. This map is the doctrine of the thirty-six tattvas. This paper follows that doctrine from its historical origins in ninth-century Kashmir, through its threefold architecture, to the philosophical concepts — freedom (svātantrya), self-luminosity (prakāśa-vimarśa), and real manifestation (ābhāsavāda) — that let the tradition claim, against its two chief rivals, that oneness and multiplicity need not be traded off against each other.

Keywords: Kashmir Shaivism, Pratyabhijñā, Tattva, Spanda, Abhinavagupta, Utpaladeva, Non-Dualism

The Problem of Unity and Multiplicity



Abhinavdhara

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Say reality is one, and you immediately owe an explanation of why it doesn't feel that way. This is not a minor housekeeping issue for a philosophical system; it is close to the central test any monism has to pass. Indian philosophy has produced two influential ways of passing it, and they turn out to be almost exact opposites of one another. Advaita Vedānta, as Śaṅkara presents it, keeps reality strictly one by demoting the world of everyday experience to something less than fully real — useful, workable, but ultimately a kind of superimposition that correct knowledge dissolves. Classical Sāṃkhya takes the opposite route: it keeps the world entirely real, but only by refusing to make reality one thing in the first place. Puruṣa, pure witnessing consciousness, and prakṛti, the active principle behind mind and matter, are held apart as two eternally distinct kinds of being. The world's reality is bought, in other words, at the price of reality's unity.

Kashmir Shaivism, and the Pratyabhijñā school in particular, tries for something more difficult than either move: to keep both commitments intact at once. Reality, on this view, really is one, and that one reality is consciousness — so far, this agrees with Advaita. But the tradition flatly refuses to treat the manifest world as a mistake awaiting correction. Instead it argues that the whole differentiated universe, right down to its most concrete and physical details, is a genuine act of self-expression by that one consciousness — an exercise of what the tradition calls svāntarya, its own absolute freedom to appear as many while remaining, in its essential nature, one. Working out precisely how this happens, in careful, non-arbitrary stages, is the job the thirty-six tattvas are built to do.

It's worth saying plainly that popular accounts of this scheme tend to flatten it into a list — thirty-six labelled rungs on a ladder, memorized rather than understood. That misses the point of the exercise. Read with any care, the tattva sequence is an argument: a graduated account of self-limitation (saṅkoca), in which each tattva marks a further degree of contraction that consciousness undergoes while never, even at its grossest and most material extreme, ceasing to be what it always was. What follows traces that argument from its historical roots to its philosophical payoff.

Historical Background



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It helps to start with the twenty-five categories, the Kashmir Shaiva philosophers inherited before they added anything of their own. Classical Sāṃkhya, systematized in Īśvarakṛṣṇa's *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, explains experience through prakṛti's unfolding into intellect, ego-sense, mind, the five subtle elements, the five gross elements, and the ten organs of sense and action. Standing entirely outside this unfolding sits puruṣa — inactive, uninvolved, simply present as witness. Īśvarakṛṣṇa's own image for the relationship has stuck for two thousand years: prakṛti behaves like a dancing girl who performs before an audience and then withdraws once she has been seen, purely for the sake of the one who watched her. It's a vivid picture, but it creates a real philosophical headache. If puruṣa truly never acts and prakṛti is truly without consciousness, it becomes hard to say what bondage or liberation could possibly mean to puruṣa — on Sāṃkhya's own strict terms, nobody is ever really bound and nobody is ever really freed; only nature transmigrates, is bound, and is released, never the self.

The Śaiva Āgamas — the Tantric scriptural corpus Kashmir inherited and helped shape — had already been working with Sāṃkhya's twenty-five categories for centuries by the time the distinctively Kashmiri schools emerged, but they treated that scheme as covering only the lower, "impure" layer of reality. What was missing was any account of what stands above puruṣa and prakṛti altogether: the nature of Śiva as ultimate reality, and the specific process by which that reality narrows itself down into the bound individual soul Sāṃkhya simply takes for granted as its starting point. This is the gap the eleven additional tattvas were built to close.

The distinctly Kashmiri part of the story runs through two schools traceable to named authors rather than anonymous scripture. According to Kṣemarāja, the Doctrine of Vibration, or Spanda, begins with an ascetic named Vasugupta, who in the early ninth century dreamed that an important teaching lay hidden on a mountain near Kashmir; going to the spot, he is said to have found the *Śiva Sūtra* inscribed on rock. Whatever one makes of the story, the *Śiva Sūtra* really is the earliest datable text of what we now call Kashmir Shaivism, followed soon after by the *Spanda-kārikā*, traditionally linked to Vasugupta's disciple Kallāṭa, which introduces the idea that ultimate reality is not a static, changeless ground but a living pulsation — the throb (spanda) of consciousness continually recognizing and reflecting on itself.

Running alongside Spanda, and eventually folded into it, is the Pratyabhijñā school proper, founded by Somānanda toward the end of the ninth century in his *Śivadṛṣṭi* and given its



rigorous philosophical shape by his student Utpaladeva in the *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā*. Utpaladeva's central claim, from which the school takes its name, is that liberation is nothing but recognition (pratyabhijñā) — a decisive, irreversible seeing-through of one's authentic identity as Śiva, currently hidden by ignorance and the accumulated weight of past action. He illustrates this with an image that has stayed in the tradition ever since: a young woman, promised in marriage to a man she has never met, comes to love him simply from hearing of his qualities; when the two finally meet, she does not fall in love for the first time, she recognizes, in the stranger before her, the man she already loved. On this reading, liberation adds nothing new to the soul. It is only the collapse of a mistaken sense that Śiva was ever a stranger.

It fell to Abhinavagupta, writing across the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, to draw together the ritual inheritance of the Trika Āgamas, the practical yogic teachings of the Spanda school, and Pratyabhijñā's philosophical rigor into one comprehensive system, most fully in his sprawling *Tantrāloka*. It is in this synthesis, and in the shorter manual his disciple Kṣemarāja later wrote, the *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, that the thirty-six-tattva scheme reaches its classical, most systematic form, functioning as the shared metaphysical backbone beneath both traditions' otherwise distinct emphases.

The number thirty-six, and the names of the eleven added tattvas, were not the exclusive property of the non-dual schools. The dualist Śaiva Siddhānta, also well established in Kashmir before its centre of gravity shifted south, worked with essentially the same list but read it inside a framework that kept Śiva (pati), the bound soul (paśu), and the bonds themselves (pāśa) permanently distinct, never finally collapsing into one even at the moment of release. The lesson here is worth holding onto: the bare list of thirty-six names settles nothing by itself. Everything depends on what account is given of how the higher tattvas relate to the lower ones — an identity that is simply recognized, on Abhinavagupta's reading, or a closeness between beings that remain, however intimately joined, genuinely other, on the Siddhāntin's.

The Structure of the Thirty-Six Tattvas



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The tattvas fall into three tiers, distinguished by degree of purity (śuddhi) — a technical term here, not a matter of ritual cleanliness, but of how clearly the underlying unity of "I" and "this" still shows through at each stage of experience.

The Five Pure Tattvas: Śiva, Śakti, Sadāśiva, Īśvara, Śuddhavidyā

Śiva tattva names the Absolute simply as light (prakāśa) — the bare fact of awareness, before any object, any content, any qualification whatsoever has entered the picture. Śakti tattva names that very same reality considered as reflective self-awareness (vimarśa), its own capacity to know itself as itself. The tradition insists these are not two separate things standing in any relation of dependency; Kṣemarāja's own formulation, as Jaideva Singh says it, is that Śiva-Śakti tattva is not, strictly speaking, an emanation (ābhāsa) at all, but the very seed from which every later emanation unfolds. Light and its own self-luminosity are simply two names for a single fact.

From this undivided ground come three further tattvas, marking the first stirrings of what will eventually become the subject-object split, though the underlying sense of identity has not yet been lost. In Sadāśiva tattva — also called Sadākhya, "the affirmation of being," since the experience here is essentially "I am" — will (icchā) predominates. The cognition can be phrased as "I am this," but as Jaideva Singh puts it, the "this" here remains only a hazy, indistinct experience; the weight falls almost entirely on the "I." In Īśvara tattva the balance shifts: this-consciousness (idaṃvimarśa) becomes noticeably clearer and more defined, though it is still felt as continuous with the "I" rather than opposed to it. Śuddhavidyā tattva, the fifth, is where "I" and "this" finally sit in equilibrium — both recognized with equal clarity, and both recognized as pointing to the same underlying reality. This is the last point in the whole sequence where unity-in-difference is directly experienced as such. Everything after this describes a further narrowing of that recognition.

The Seven Middle Tattvas: Māyā, the Five Kañcukas, and Puruṣa

The sixth tattva, Māyā, is the real hinge of the system, and it's worth being precise about what the word does and doesn't mean here. Advaita's māyā functions as a principle whose products are ultimately unreal — Somānanda himself, in fact, already classes Advaita among the "bhrāntivādins," those who take the world to be illusion, and argues against them directly.



Māyā in the Kashmir Shaiva scheme means something different: a real power belonging to consciousness itself, the specific capacity by which an undivided reality presents itself as though divided. It doesn't conjure anything out of nothing. It differentiates what remains, at bottom, undivided.

Out of Māyā unfold five further contractions, the *kañcukas* or "cloaks" — the tradition's own image is of a king dressing down in ordinary clothes to pass, for a while, as a commoner. *Kālā* narrows the Absolute's universal creative power into a merely finite capacity to act. *Vidyā* narrows omniscience into partial, patchy knowledge. *Rāga* narrows the Absolute's inherent completeness into desire — the felt sense that something, somewhere, is missing. *Kāla* narrows eternity into sequential time. *Niyati* narrows unrestricted causal freedom into determination by particular circumstance, place, and cause. The twelfth *tattva*, *Puruṣa*, names what results from this whole sequence of contractions: consciousness that has now, for all practical purposes, become an individual subject — the very *puruṣa Sāṃkhya* philosophy takes as its unquestioned starting point.

This middle tier earns the label "pure-impure" precisely because it's transitional. Something of the higher unity survives, since it is still one consciousness undergoing these limitations rather than being replaced by something foreign to it — and yet every specific mark of finitude that will define ordinary embodied life gets introduced here for the first time.

The Twenty-Four Lower Tattvas Inherited from Sāṃkhya

The remaining *tattvas*, thirteen through thirty-six, track the *Sāṃkhya* school closely, now reframed as the field of experience available to the already-contracted *Puruṣa*. *Prakṛti* unfolds into *Buddhi*, *Ahaṃkāra*, and *Manas*; the five organs of sensory cognition and the five organs of action follow; then the five subtle elements; and finally the five gross elements — earth, water, fire, air, and space — where manifestation reaches its most concrete, most externalized point.

What changes here isn't the content of this lower field but its status. *Sāṃkhya* treats *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* as two permanently distinct kinds of being; the Kashmir Shaiva reading insists the entire lower field, subject and object alike, is a single, continuous unfolding of the very same consciousness that was, at the level of the pure *tattvas*, entirely undivided. Even the grossest



element, earth, is on this account no less an expression of Śiva than Śiva tattva itself — it is simply consciousness appearing at the furthest possible extreme of its own self-contraction.

The Philosophical Argument

All of this rests, philosophically, on one carefully worked-out idea: *svātantrya*, absolute freedom. For Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, consciousness is defined above all by this freedom — not the mere absence of external constraint, but a positive, creative capacity to appear however it chooses, including in forms that experience themselves, from the inside, as bound, partial, and cut off from consciousness altogether. On this account, the descent through the *tattvas* isn't a fall and certainly isn't a corruption. It's *svātantrya* doing exactly what makes it what it is. A reality incapable of limiting itself, able only ever to appear as itself and nothing else, would be for this tradition the lesser reality, not the greater — because it would lack precisely the autonomous power that makes something divine in the first place.

This is the work the term *ābhāsavāda*, the doctrine of manifestation, does. Every finite object and every finite subject, the *Pratyabhijñā* philosophers hold, is a genuine *ābhāsa* — a real shining-forth — of the one consciousness. The distinction from Advaita here is easy to blur, so it's worth being exact about it. For Advaita, manifestation is an appearing-to-be standing in for genuine being: the underlying unity seems to be a multiplicity, and those who don't see through the seeming mistake it for the whole of reality. For the *Pratyabhijñā*, manifestation isn't a semblance masking something more authentic behind it — it is the very form the absolute takes in becoming manifest. The everyday world isn't a screen of appearances set against an absolute that only stays authentic by remaining forever unmanifest. Kṣemarāja himself, describing the Vedāntin's opposing position with evident distance from it, sums it up as treating Brahman as essentially whatever the world happens not to be — a formula the *Pratyabhijñā* rejects outright, since on their account nothing that shines forth, however humble, ever stands genuinely apart from the light that makes it visible in the first place.

This has a real consequence for what liberation is supposed to mean. If the world were a mistake, liberation would have to mean correcting the mistake, seeing past the world to whatever lies behind it. But if the world is a real self-disclosure of consciousness, liberation can only be recognition — *pratyabhijñā*, in exactly Utpaladeva's sense — not the erasure of



"this," but the collapse of the false sense that "this" was ever separate from "I." Nothing in the tattva sequence needs to be undone for liberation to happen. What changes is only whether the sequence is finally recognized for what it always was.

Against Sāṃkhya the argument runs a little differently. As already noted, Sāṃkhya's dualism struggles to explain what bondage or liberation could mean to an inactive, isolated puruṣa. By treating the whole Sāṃkhya universe of puruṣa and prakṛti as itself internal to a single self-limiting consciousness, the Shaiva scheme sidesteps the need to explain how two independent principles ever got into relationship with each other in the first place — there was never more than one reality to begin with. The apparent duality of subject and object doesn't disappear, but it gets relocated: no longer a duality between two kinds of being, but a duality internal to the activity of a single being. Measured purely by economy of assumptions, that's a lighter metaphysical commitment than Sāṃkhya's.

What this paper has tried to show is that it's entirely coherent to hold that reality is one and that the differentiated world is fully, not just provisionally, real — provided one has a workable account, which the Pratyabhijñā philosophers believed they had, of how oneness can express itself as multiplicity without actually dividing.

If consciousness is genuinely free and unconditioned, it's fair to ask why it should limit itself at all, and why the specific graduated sequence of contractions should take exactly the form thirty-six tattvas describe rather than some other number or order. Abhinavagupta's answer — that self-limitation simply is an expression of freedom and needs no further justification — is coherent as far as it goes, but it doesn't, by itself, explain the particular count and ordering of the categories, which owes at least as much to the inherited Sāṃkhya framework and centuries of prior Āgamic classification as to any strict derivation from first principles. This isn't a fatal problem, and the tradition itself kept the philosophical argument for self-limitation separate from the historical contingency of the received list — but it's worth flagging as the point where the tattva scheme works more as a systematized description organized around a genuine insight than as a piece of strict logical deduction.

Conclusion



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The thirty-six tattvas amount to one of Indian philosophy's more sustained attempts to hold unity and plurality together without asking either one to give way. Tracing a graduated path from the undifferentiated light of Śiva tattva down to the density of the five gross elements, the Pratyabhijñā philosophers offer an answer to the problem of the one and the many that neither Advaita's world-negating strategy nor Sāṃkhya's substance dualism quite manages: multiplicity is real, they argue, but it is nowhere other than consciousness exercising its own freedom to appear as itself under conditions of increasing self-limitation. What began, historically, as a synthesis of Āgamic ritual categories, Spanda's doctrine of vibration, and Utpaladeva's philosophy of recognition became, in Abhinavagupta's hands, a comprehensive answer to a problem that has never really gone out of date: how the one becomes, without ever ceasing to be one, the many.

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