

Article

Enacting Ontological Pluralism: Informational Dynamics and Embodied Cognition in Śaiva-Śākta Phenomenology

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Abstract

Contemporary cognitive science is predominantly grounded in physicalist assumptions that locate cognition and consciousness in neural and computational processes. While these approaches have yielded significant empirical advances, they often struggle to account for the qualitative and first-person structure of experience. This paper proposes an ethno-phenomenological perspective by engaging non-Western epistemic practices through the lens of embodied cognition and ontological pluralism. Rather than treating non-Western phenomenology as external to scientific inquiry, we analyze how it can inform cognitive dynamism and ontological enactment through sophisticated epistemic practices. Particularly, we analyze how by actively manipulating cognitive and informational structures, Śaiva-Śākta phenomenology may dynamically affect embodied subjectivity. From this perspective, certain methods like visualization and ritual enactment can be understood as systematic interventions that modulate attentional, mnemonic, and perceptual processes, thereby reconfiguring the experiential architecture of the self and world. We further examine how processes such as constructive imagination function as mechanisms of cognitive reorganization, enabling practitioners to inhabit multiple ontological configurations of subject–object relations. Drawing on predictive processing and enactive cognitive science, the paper argues that Śaiva-Śākta sādhanā may operationalize a form of embodied epistemology in which ontology is not merely represented but enacted. This supports a model of ontological pluralism in which divergent experiential worlds correspond to stabilized modes of cognition rather than competing metaphysical hypotheses. Within this framework, sādhanā is considered a methodological method for investigating consciousness beyond reductionist neurophysiological accounts, offering structured access to non-ordinary modes of experience. Conclusively, the paper proposes that certain non-Western traditions may provide not only philosophical insights but also alternative phenomenological pathways for exploring the informational dynamics of embodied cognition, thereby expanding the methodological and ontological horizons of cognitive science and philosophy of mind.



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1. Introduction

The study of ontology, traditionally concerned with the fundamental nature of being¹, has undergone major shifts in contemporary philosophical discourse. With the rise of postmodern thought, classical metaphysical foundations have been widely challenged [3,4]. These philosophical developments, combined with advances in scientific knowledge, have contributed to the growing dominance of physicalist² ontologies. Particularly in fields such

as cognitive science and consciousness studies, there is a marked dominance of a clinically oriented focus, closely tied to contemporary ontologies rooted in psychopathology, psychiatry, and neurophysiology [5,6]. Within this prevailing physicalist paradigm, academic discussions in cognitive science often default to a neurological conception of the mind, ultimately reducing it to a mere epiphenomenon of brain activity. However, some decades have passed by since the ontological turn in anthropology problematized the dominance of Western ethnocentrism and its claims to epistemic authority [7–9]. Accordingly, we consider that to study notions like sentience and cognition with greater depth and nuance, it is essential to adopt approaches that do not rely exclusively on Western and neuroscience-centered narratives. Although the search for neural correlates of cognitive functions represents a significant and valuable domain of research, an overemphasis on neural and physiological substrates risks reinforcing the assumption that the foundations of experience and cognition are fully reducible to specific brain processes. Furthermore, confining our understanding of subjectivity to neurophysiological indicators alone, we risk overlooking the richness of lived experience as it is encountered in first-person terms [10,11], embodied and culturally situated, thereby ignoring dimensions of consciousness that may elude capture by purely physical metrics, and contributing to what Vervaeke describes as a “crisis of meaning” [12], where traditional ontological frameworks are entirely dismissed.

It has been argued that cognitive science may benefit from revisiting non-physicalist ontologies, particularly when such ontologies are situated within a phenomenological investigation of human experience [13,14]. The ontological proposal of dynamic non-dualism and processual animism, as an analytical interpretation of animistic³ and non-dual⁴ paradigms, was exposed in relation to a methodological framework, the ethno-phenomenological praxis [17], proposed as an empirical method for studying consciousness and cognition from a non-physicalist angle. In this paper, we aim to push that discussion further by arguing that certain practices, originally emerging within the Indian subcontinent, and distilled/systematized under the placeholder of *Śaiva-Śākta sādhanā*, provide a useful case study for investigating how embodied contemplative disciplines shape phenomenological and ontological experience. We shall present a preliminary cognitive-phenomenological approach to *Śaiva-Śākta sādhanā*, understood as the integrated set of embodied, ritual, and meditative practices characteristic of certain tantric traditions which emerged and developed primarily in India, inheriting and integrating a rich set of local traditions across the subcontinent. We want to make explicit that this paper does not exhaustively rely on primary sources, generally referred to as *śāstras*, since it constitutes more of a reframing of the topic rather than a more focused analysis around a particular textual corpus or lineage.

Śaiva-Śākta sādhanā offers a set of structured cognitive and embodied practices (involving mantra recitation, ritual performance, complex visualizations, and breathing techniques) intended to catalyze a profound psychological transformation in the practitioner. These methods, systematized in *paddhatis* (manuals of practice) within each lineage, are also rooted in sophisticated philosophical frameworks, aiming at the realization of the fundamental unity between the individual and the boundless ground of consciousness. Tantric visualizations or *dhyānams*, for example, are complex practices that involve different aspects of the cognitive apparatus. Practitioners are intended to mentally cultivate cognitive structures through the generation, sustenance, and dissolution of sophisticated and nested visual metaphors. This reorganization of experience can be understood in terms of *bhāvanā*, the cultivation of certain states of mind, and *kalpanā*, understood as constructive imagination. In that regard, Tantric practices not only enable a further development of cognitive faculties like memory and attention, but also reconfigure subjective experience through embodied symbolism, active imagination, and processes of conceptual blending [18–23].

Building on previous work in ethno-phenomenology [17], we suggest the model of the scholar-practitioner [24] to investigate how alternative ontological frameworks may be phenomenologically enacted through the epistemic methods (*sādhana*) of Tantric traditions, similarly to what has been done in regard to other non-Western practices (applying phenomenological methods alongside ethnobotany and ethnomycology) [17]. We acknowledge that this proposal may be contentious, especially in its suggestion that tantric *sādhana* can be approached as a legitimate source of phenomenological insight rather than solely as a cultural or religious object of analysis. However, the model proposed here should not be conflated with normative and religious commitments, since here the scholar-practitioner is defined by a methodological engagement whose purpose is epistemic rather than confessional. Like participant observation in anthropology, this engagement is temporary, situated, and directed toward acquiring the embodied competencies necessary to investigate diverse forms of experience. The objective is not a metaphysical conversion but a methodological participation in a living knowledge tradition⁵.

Contemporary cognitive science, though grounded in a physicalist paradigm, acknowledges that both individual and consensual models of reality are mental constructs, formed through the selective acquisition and generalization of experiential data, and shaped by the cultural and cognitive frameworks in which they are embedded [26–29]. This view, in which there is not an actual experience of an “objective world” but rather a confluence of individualizing cognitive processes alongside social constructs, is supported by notions such as perceptual binding, which describes how disparate sensory inputs are integrated into a coherent perceptual experience [26], and predictive processing, which posits that perception is fundamentally shaped by top-down predictions informed by prior knowledge and contextual cues [27]. The philosophical tension arises, however, when these mental processes (and the consciousness that experiences them) are reduced to the processual by-products of neural substrates. Such an approach often inherits the implicit dualism of computationalist and functionalist models of mind, which tend to obscure or dismiss the qualitative dimension of experience. This reductionism contributes to unresolved philosophical problems, like the so-called “hard problem of consciousness” [30].

The persistent lack of a convincing consciousness model grounded in neural correlates has led to a gradual resurgence of interest in non-physicalist ontologies. It has been argued that contemporary cognitive science, despite significant advances in modeling information-processing dynamics through paradigms such as cognitivism, connectionism, and embodied cognition, has largely overlooked deeper questions concerning subjectivity and the nature of consciousness [14]. The paper suggests that Indic knowledge systems may provide sophisticated conceptual and phenomenological frameworks for investigating cognition, including attention, identity, and non-ordinary states of consciousness. These systems combine philosophical analysis with empirical first-person methodologies aimed at transforming and transcending ego-bound identity (*ahaṃkāra*). Accordingly, the paper suggests a transcultural engagement in which Indic epistemological and ontological frameworks are considered alongside contemporary cognitive science without reducing their categories to Western neurocognitive or psychometric models.

Contemporary frameworks such as analytical idealism [31] describe finite-bound subjects not as emergent properties of physical systems, but rather as phenomenological dissociations within a broader field of unbounded consciousness⁶. Non-physicalist ontologies, such as Kastrup’s idealism, could be empirically apprehended through a transjective move, phenomenologically dissolving the boundaries between the cognizant node (the subject) and what is cognized (the objects), as seen in certain psychedelic experiences [32]. The full argument, however, implies that this subject–object dichotomy not only can be temporarily suspended (as in the bracketed timeframe of psychedelic-induced ego-dissolution

phenomenologies) but can also be stabilized and integrated alongside other modalities of being, leading to a long-standing transformation. This has led to the consideration of tantric practices as conducive to a deeper understanding, not only of those cognitive-phenomenological modalities, but also their philosophical integration and mapping in ontological terms⁷.

2. The Role of Cognitive Constructs in Tantric Philosophy

The school of *Pratyabhijñā* is considered one of the most sophisticated philosophical systematizations of the Indian subcontinent. It takes its name from the process of re-cognition (*pratyabhijñā*), understood not only as a phenomenological realization of the self, but also the corresponding enactment of a non-dual or transjective ontology. The *Pratyabhijñā* perspective offers a compelling foundation for articulating a non-physicalist account of cognition, sustained by *Śaiva-Śakta* epistemic practices intended to modify (and eventually dissolve) cognitive constructs and experiential configurations. As Utpaladeva states in *Īśvarapratyabhijñā Kārikā*⁸ 1.5.9: “Matter has never been experienced as in any way lying outside one’s perception of it. Therefore its [independent] existence cannot be proved even through inference”.

It is precisely from this non-physicalist starting point that cognitions can be reframed as informational dynamics arising from the foundational substrate of consciousness. We can see in this context the importance of certain epistemic practices as valid interventions into cognitive dynamics, reconfiguring the informational structures and experiential interfaces⁹ in which both subjects and objects co-emerge as *vikalpas* (cognitive constructs) pulsating on the phenomenal field.

Following Balajinnātha Paṇḍita’s commentary on *ĪPK* 2.1-2 and 5.19 [34], we can begin to identify the modalities of cognition that the *Pratyabhijñā* system elaborates in two categories: *nirvikalpa* (a non-conceptual mode of knowing, free from ideation or mental constructs) and *savikalpa* (or conceptual cognition). We can decompose those two modalities into the four stages of *Vāk* (speech): *parā*, *paśyantī*, *madhyamā* and *vaikhari*. The first two stages can be described as *nirvikalpa*, being therefore free of thought constructs. First, we have *parā* as a transcendental or supreme form of speech, completely unmanifest and existing as *nāda*, the subtlest vibration in which pure potential is not yet shaped into form. And secondly, *paśyantī*, when *nāda* becomes *bindu*, an equilibrium where the experiential polarities of subject and object are not yet divided. In other words, with no phenomenological distinction between *I-am-ness* and *this-ness*¹⁰.

In the multiple transmissions of the *Śaiva-Śakta* tantra, we find a variety of conceptual maps to dissect cognitive and phenomenological stages. We generally find a constellation of mechanisms scattering consciousness into the plurality of particulars that constitute the objective modalities of being. Boundless consciousness becomes not only disintegrated but also structured by past impressions (*saṃskāras*) and demarcated through name and form (*nāma-rūpa*). This whole process imposes categorical distinctions and solidifies memory-mediated patterns of information-processing dynamics, which in contemporary terms reminds to the reinforcing mechanisms of Hebbian-like associative networks shaping future perceptions [35]. It is through these informational filters, structuring patterns, and meaning-making modalities that consciousness gives rise both to the phenomenal world of objects and to the finite subject.

Reading Utpaladeva, we see that even this so-called subject, identified conventionally with *deha* (body), *prāṇa* (vital force), or even *śūnya* (emptiness), is itself just another *vikalpa*, a mental or informational construct (*ĪPK* 1.6.4-5). This philosophy offers a meticulous dissection of human experience, describing informational structures such as *ahaṃkāra* (the principle of ego formation or individuation), *vāsanā* (a mental tendency) or *saṃskāra* (a

rooted mental impression); a set of functional constraints that perpetuate and reinforce the bounded experience of the finite self. But for Utpaladeva, subjectivity lies not in any of these representational or constructed structures, but in the consciousness that underlies and supports them all. And this is not merely a philosophical statement, but also a departure point from which a praxis can be articulated. As seen in ĪPK 1.6.1, *vikalpas* are mutually exclusive and therefore inherently dualistic (a thought construct only arises through the exclusion of all others). But as Utpaladeva states in ĪPK 1.5.20, beneath every name and form (beneath even the *idam* or “this-ness” that characterizes objectivity) we find the ground of consciousness that underlies all phenomenal experience. By following certain epistemic methods, we can engage with *vikalpas* that are more conducive to the recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) of this foundational consciousness, the all-pervading subjectivity that produces, sustains and dissolves all phenomena¹¹.

3. An Alternative Praxis for the Study of Cognition

A comprehensive engagement with physicalism and its implications for foundational questions in cognitive science and philosophy of mind lies beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the ontological limitations of physicalism, particularly in relation to concepts such as sentience and volition, have been examined in prior work [13,17]. Earlier arguments have posited that physicalism is underpinned by intersubjective consensus among individuals situated within a normative mode of consciousness (commonly designated as waking consciousness) and embedded within a specific cultural and epistemic framework [17]. From this standpoint, many claims typically regarded as self-evident within physicalist discourse may be more accurately interpreted as contingent upon certain cognitive and perceptual conditions, rather than as expressions of universally applicable truths. Consequently, a “non-ordinary” intersubjectivity could also be legitimately explored by deconstructing these default conditions phenomenologically.

To transcend the filters by which the ordinary mind, as a particular instance of finite-bound consciousness, renders its “default” experiential and cognitive field, it has been suggested (see [13]) the convenience of a phenomenological method or a praxis capable of disclosing the pre-reflective dimensions of perception [36]. Assuming a Husserlian jargon, it was proposed not only to “bracket” our assumptions through a temporal suspension of the “natural attitude” [10], but rather to gradually develop a sustained phenomenological discipline through which different ontological frameworks can be explored. The argument was that a sustained and stabilized phenomenological attitude within the context of cognitive science could lead to a broader exploration of processual and non-dual ontologies, enabling a transjective experience of both reality and the self [12].

We have previously introduced how tantric practices are intended to reorient the practitioner towards the experience of *pratyabhijñā* by enabling a gradual deconstruction of the constrained self-referential structures through which the finite being is informationally constituted in experience. The dissolution and permeability of these informational structures into other domains of experience have been explored by different traditions [17], but also by contemporary philosophy [31], providing compelling arguments that lend serious support to the consideration of non-physicalist ontologies. And while theoretical attempts to justify these positions with well-reasoned arguments can be valuable, our primary focus here is merely on how a radically situated phenomenology may offer first-person access to certain experiences which may (or not) be eventually interpreted within non-physicalist ontological frameworks. But that at least can be tentatively proposed as a potential method to enact an ontological pluralism. To this end, we propose the figure of the scholar-practitioner [24] as the empirical nexus between experiential knowledge

and theoretical elaboration, developing the ideas of the phenomenological praxis as stated previously [17].

4. Tantric Sādhana and Ethno-Phenomenology

We hypothesize that direct engagement with non-ordinary phenomenologies can provide new intersubjective agreements and foster a pluralism of ontological models. The accessibility of non-ordinary states of consciousness and the possibility of implementing phenomenological methodologies to induce, stabilize, and deepen their study have been presented as instrumental, not only for a reevaluation of non-physicalist ontologies within academic discourse, but also for reconnecting contemporary scholarly research with an embodied philosophy of meaning.

Ontological models do more than simply represent or map reality; they actively inform and shape experience itself. Accordingly, phenomenology, as the study of experience, and ontology, as the study of being, mutually influence one another. Borrowing the notion of transjectivity from Vervaeke [12], in which subject and object are coupled, we consider that a deep understanding of being may benefit from a proper attunement between the researcher and their perceived milieu. Accordingly, the continuous calibration of the embodied subject [36,37], situated alongside contemporary perspectives in cognitive science like embodied cognition [29], may provide a strong theoretical and methodological foundation to explore non-physicalist ontologies experientially.

Descola suggests an ontological pluralism in which multiple models of reality are seen as equally legitimate [38]. Like Descola, a growing number of contemporary scholars [9,15,16,39] are embracing what has been termed the “ontological turn¹²”. However, Indic philosophies do more than simply acknowledge ontological plurality from an anthropological perspective. They rather integrate this pluralism in a constant dialogue, with different initially contradictory claims being gradually integrated and distilled into an ontological ground where apparent contradictions dissolve into a deeper coherence. This pluralistic nature is intrinsic to certain tantric schools, in which diverse ontologies are understood as emanations of a singular, unitive reality [13]. In other words, *Śaiva-Śākta* tantra acknowledges an ontological pluralism, incorporating diverse epistemic approaches to enact and support different (often radically opposed) philosophical perspectives.

Navigating this ontological pluralism can be particularly challenging for scholars in fields like cognitive science or consciousness studies. When the ethno-phenomenological praxis was proposed, the idea was to offer a methodological framework that could give experiential access to phenomenological domains generally associated with the heterogeneous domain of non-physicalist ontologies [17], fostering an enactive embodiment of non-ordinary states through a “radical participation” [39]. Accordingly, the praxis proposed the figure of a “radically embodied” scholar-practitioner [24], able to foster and sustain research tasks alongside non-ordinary phenomenologies. Regarding the induction methods for these phenomenologies, the praxis acknowledged both contemplative practices and psychedelic substances [17]. However, it lacked attention to stabilization methods necessary for sustained engagement and integration of these non-ordinary cognitive and experiential states, and their conduciveness to an actual transformation of the practitioner.

Psychedelic-induced sessions alone cannot suffice for a deep exploration of non-physicalist ontologies; rather, long-term contemplative training appears to play an important role in the stabilization of these experiences [40]. We therefore highlight now the epistemological potential of culturally situated non-pharmacological inducers in the phenomenological exploration of non-physicalist ontologies. Contemplative traditions report systematic methods for evoking and stabilizing these states. In that regard, although it has been argued that an ethno-phenomenological praxis may benefit from ethnobotany and

ethnomycology, in this paper, we focus on non-psychedelic practices, particularly those prescribed in the diverse modalities of tantric *sādhana*, as potential methods for a stabilized understanding of non-physicalist ontologies. Tantric traditions provide not only a vast array of phenomenological methodologies but also profound ontological frameworks to contextualize non-ordinary experiences [20–23]. They also offer non-pathological perspectives on alternative modes of experience, cognition, and embodiment that generally are labeled under the category of “transpersonal crises” or “spiritual emergencies” in Western psychology [41]. Such crises may arise when non-ordinary experiences occur outside an appropriate context, lacking adequate support or integration, and are consequently categorized as syndromes or psychopathological symptoms [6].

5. Informational Bodies: A Future Line of Research

Embodiment is one of the fundamental aspects highlighted in contemporary perspectives in cognitive science¹³ and phenomenology [37]. In tantra, embodiment is equally fundamental, with *Śaiva-Śākta* epistemic practices being mainly characterized by cognitive activity mapped in bodily language and somatic experiences [42].

One of the most relevant concepts when addressing embodiment in Tantric phenomenology is the *sūkṣma-śarīra*, often translated as “subtle body”. Although, according to Feuerstein [43], this “experienced body” has been traditionally understood as the intermediary layer of human existence, composed of *manas* (mind), *buddhi* (intellect), *ahaṁkāra* (ego), and *prāṇa* (vital energy), our position here is merely phenomenological. The subtle body can be reframed as an informational structure, a dynamic field that encodes the psychological and functional dimensions of embodied life. In this sense, *prāṇa* flows (*prāṇa-vāyu*), mental patterns (or *vr̥tti*), and so on, could be seen as informational vectors that shape both the inner experience and outward bodily form of the embodied subject [20,21].

This understanding becomes particularly useful from a cognitive and phenomenological perspective. The notion of “subtle body” plays a major role in certain tantric practices, and its visualization and manipulation through active imagination can serve as a cognitive platform for exploring expanded notions of the self, offering a structured yet fluid space where practitioners transcend the constraints of the physical body [44]. Through the active imagination and visualization of different informational configurations in specific parts of this phenomenological body, the practitioner constructs alternative images of the self, allowing for a flexible redefinition of identity. In that regard, the “subtle body” is a dynamic informational template of our embodied self.

Within this framework, *sādhana* is, in that regard, demystified as an experiential framework where intentional mental acts can reorganize the foundational patterns of subjectivity itself. When the self is perceived as more fluid and dynamic than the physical body, its phenomenological alteration paves the way for transjective and non-dual modes of cognition. Within *Śaiva-Śākta* phenomenology, practitioners report no experiential distinction between internal and external *maṇḍalas*, as both are experienced within a shared transjective space, a field where the finite, embodied consciousness enacts its relational unfolding within a non-dual and boundless ground. In this sense, tantric *sādhana* can be interpreted as operationalizing a transjective mode of cognition, where what modern physicalism would distinguish as “internal” (mental) and “external” (material) are integrated within a unified onto-phenomenological field, realized through disciplined practice [19].

By redesigning these intrinsic informational patterns, these practices are intended to transform, and even transcend, personal identity. Some examples can be found in certain tantric rituals (*puja*), in which both external and internal dimensions of experience are rearchitected, with an embedding of meaning into physical space, restructuring the practitioner’s “internal” phenomenology through “external” action. Similarly, the med-

itative placement of mantras within the body (*nyāsa*) consists in locating through active imagination different forms and sounds in precise bodily *loci*, creating a transjective domain between imagination and physicality. Tantric *sādhana*, as we can see, serves as a phenomenological playground to reconfigure the informational models through which reality is experienced.

In a traditional context, this informational perspective would be instead presented in an energy-like lexicon, since the forces that constitute the dynamic manifestation of experience are ontologically acknowledged as pulsations (*spanda*) of consciousness. Sanskrit terms frequently encountered in tantric texts include *prāṇa* (vital life force), *vāyu* (wind or vital current), *śakti* (power or dynamic creative energy), and *kuṇḍalinī* (coiled energy), each denoting distinct dimensions or manifestations of energy. This energy-like understanding of phenomena, in which matter is seen as a dense configuration of the same matrix of pulsations upon consciousness, acknowledges this experienced body as an “energy body” beyond the constraints of mere physicality.

This acknowledgement of an “energy body” in ontological terms may also be relevant for scholar-practitioners, since it offers a non-pathological understanding of non-volitional or spontaneously arising phenomena, such as energy-like experiences and possession states, as completely coherent with the ontological understanding of embodiment in the *Śaiva-Śākta* framework. The phenomenology of Energy-Like Somatic Experiences (ELSEs) has been largely discussed in academic research [45], prompting a reconsideration of how energy-like phenomena are understood within the context of non-ordinary states of consciousness. In the past, spontaneous “energy-like” experiences have often been dismissed or categorized as psychopathological syndromes in the West [6]. However, a non-physicalist perspective may offer a more nuanced understanding of ELSEs beyond the pathologizing discourse.

In Tantric traditions, ELSEs are not pathologized anomalies but rather valuable components of a broader onto-phenomenological process. A particular subset of energy-like phenomena, such as *pranotthana* and *kuṇḍalinī* experiences [46], has long been viewed as gateways to *moksha* or liberation. Furthermore, there is enough evidence that fostering these phenomena could be beneficial in reducing mental distress, moving away from their traditional pathologization. According to Brandão et al. [47], *kuṇḍalinī*-related practices may lead to significant improvement in self-compassion, emotion regulation, and personal and communal well-being, as evaluated in a randomized controlled trial during the COVID-19 pandemic. While some individuals have reported ELSEs as disconcerting, traumatic, or physically uncomfortable, others described them with a markedly positive tone, characterizing them as transformative experiences; some descriptions include terms such as “powerful,” “positive,” “potentially ecstatic,” and “self-transformative” [45–48]. Accordingly, even though Greyson classified these phenomena as symptoms of a syndrome [6], more recent studies have recognized their positive outcomes. In a case study conducted by Edwards and Woollacott [48], which analyzed the psychological changes associated with a specific *kuṇḍalinī*-based yoga tradition, between 91% and 100% of participants reported not only improvements in their mental well-being and “an increased sense of the range of possibilities for human growth,” but also a transformation in their notion of identity, from a limited self, identified with the mind/body complex, to a universal self of infinite extent. These changes followed subjective reports of *kuṇḍalinī*-like experiences.

Both through active imagination or non-volitional phenomena, the fact is that these notions of subtler dimensions of embodiment describe a liminal space between the conditioned persona and an expanded self-concept. No matter if described in energetic or informational terms, through metaphors or visual depictions, the notion of the “subtle body” challenges the identification with the rigid boundaries of selfhood as physicality. De-

contextualized interpretations of these dimensions of embodiment, often encountered when exploring non-ordinary states, can lead to pathologization. Oppositely, the consideration of these experiences within certain non-Western traditions, and specifically in *Śaiva-Śākta* contexts where they were originally described, offers a non-pathological integration of these phenomena within an alternative ontological framework.

Still, the reinterpretation of the *sūkṣma-śarīra* as an informational and phenomenological structure should be understood as a theoretical proposal rather than a settled explanatory model. Future research may further develop this concept by examining practices involving visualization, *nyāsa*, mantra, ritual, and other techniques to trigger both energy-like and non-volitional experiences.

6. Conclusions

This paper has argued that ontological claims in cognitive science can be assumed as contingent on cultural and phenomenological configurations. Contemporary physicalism rests upon a model of mind shaped by assumptions concerning representation, neural causation, and subject–object duality. Such accounts often presuppose the ontological primacy of the physical domain independently of transformations in the structure of lived experience. Enactive and embodied approaches have already complicated this picture by emphasizing structural coupling and participatory sense-making [29]. If ontologies are enacted rather than passively received, then the stabilization of a given experiential world may depend upon historically sedimented patterns of perception, attention, embodiment, and conceptual construction. Extending this insight, *Śaiva-Śākta sādhanā* can be interpreted as a systematic intervention into precisely those structures. Classical formulations of the deconstruction of cognitive structures, the pursuit of non-dual self-recognition, and a large variety of states of consciousness describe disciplined transformations in the organization of subjectivity rather than speculative metaphysical assertions. When such transformations are treated as epistemically relevant, ontological pluralism emerges not as relativism but as phenomenological variability stabilized through training and reproducibility. Physicalist ontologies may correspond to highly stabilized configurations, specifically in the context of ordinary states of consciousness. Similarly, non-physicalist and processual ontologies may be acknowledged as valid if non-ordinary states of consciousness are reproduced through long-term stabilization and intersubjective settings. If that is the case, their consideration in disciplines like cognitive science may be taken seriously. The central claim, therefore, is not that *Śaiva-Śākta* metaphysics refutes the dominant physicalism of contemporary cognitive science, but rather that its phenomenological methods can reorganize experiential priors in ways that expand the ontological horizon available to philosophical reflection. If consciousness studies take the methodological implications of disciplined first-person transformation seriously, then ontology itself must be approached as dynamically enacted within structured modes of cognition.

7. Final Notes

Although we have presented *Śaiva-Śākta* practice as a paradigm that can enrich our understanding of cognition and consciousness, we should highlight that we are not reducing it to a mere tool for ethno-phenomenological analysis. We have already witnessed how the “secularization” of Eastern practices has led to the decontextualization, commodification, and dilution of their original message [22,23]. In that regard, although this paper is framed as a cognitive exploration of *Śaiva-Śākta sādhanā*, we should highlight our contribution just as a contemporary reading of certain aspects of these traditions and not aiming to disrespect the cultural situatedness of the practice, contextualized in its traditional understanding.

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Notes

- ¹ Heidegger defined ontology as the study of “being as such” [1], while Quine described it as the inquiry into “what there is” [2]. Accordingly, we may understand ontology in relation to the fundamental structures that constitute both self and reality.
- ² By physicalist ontologies, we refer to the family of metaphysical positions according to which the physical domain is ontologically fundamental and all phenomena, including consciousness and cognition, are ultimately dependent upon or constituted by physical processes. This encompasses diverse views, ranging from reductive physicalism, which seeks to explain mental phenomena in terms of physical states, to non-reductive forms that acknowledge higher-level properties while maintaining their dependence on the physical.
- ³ For contemporary perspectives on animism, see [9,15,16].
- ⁴ The term non-dualism, as a direct translation of the Sanskrit word *advaita*, originates from *Vedanta*, one of the *āstika-darśanas* or orthodox schools of Indian philosophy. Although mostly associated with two specific Vedantic traditions: Śāṅkara’s *Advaita Vedanta* and Ramanuja’s *Vishishtadvaita*, non-duality is extensively explored in *Śaiva-Śākta* tantra, as well as in certain *nāstika* traditions within Tibetan Buddhism, particularly *Dzogchen* and *Mahamudra*.
- ⁵ The integration within Western academic studies of certain elements of Tantric traditions, such as initiation (*dīkṣā*) and lineage-based transmission, presents significant challenges. Still, this scholar–practitioner approach [24] does not require confessional adherence or exclusive commitment to a religious or cultural identity. Oppositely, it merely involves methodological participation in a living knowledge tradition to acquire the embodied skills and experiential competencies necessary for investigating its claims. Rather than replacing one worldview with another, this approach aligns with the principle of *sarva-darśana*, in which multiple ontological and epistemic perspectives are engaged as complementary modes of inquiry. The objective is not a religious-like affiliation but the systematic investigation of experiential domains that cannot be adequately examined through detached observation alone. In that regard, our proposal would be to acknowledge the role of non-Western modes of knowledge transmission [20,21,25] as a complement, and not a replacement, of scientific methods within Western academic institutions.
- ⁶ In the words of Kastrup [31], “We, as well as all other living organisms, are dissociated ‘alters’ of universal phenomenal consciousness, analogously to how a person with dissociative identity disorder manifests multiple disjoint centers of subjectivity also called ‘alters.’ We, and all other living organisms, are surrounded by the transpersonal phenomenal activity of universal consciousness, which unfolds beyond the dissociative boundary of our respective alter. The inanimate world we perceive around us is the extrinsic appearance, i.e., the phenomenal image imprinted from across our dissociative boundary, of this activity. The living organisms we share the world with are the extrinsic appearances of other alters.”
- ⁷ For example, in *Śaiva-Śākta* practices, we find an acknowledgment of *advaita* (non-dualistic), *dvaita* (dualistic) and *dvaita-advaita* (non-dualistic *cum* dualistic) ontologies, unified within a fully monistic understanding denoted as *parādvaita*. Particularly in the *Trika* system (generally denoted as Kashmiri Shaivism), we find the notion of *krama*, which means sequence or progression, acknowledging a gradually unfolded transformation by which the practitioner transcends the default modalities of cognition and experience while gaining a deeper philosophical understanding of what those phenomenologies ultimately point to [33]. This phenomenological realization is interpreted as a direct recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) of the self.
- ⁸ All references to Utpaladeva’s *Īśvarapratyabhijñā Kārikā* follow the translation by Paṇḍita (see [34]). For ease of reference, cites are abbreviated as *ĪPK*, followed by the book, chapter and *kārikā* number (e.g., *ĪPK* 1.3.5). When necessary, references to the commentary are explicitly indicated.
- ⁹ An experiential interface can be defined as a “temporary, finite-bound configuration (e.g., organism, system, and subprocess) that makes experience, cognition, and action possible by modulating a constrained portion of an otherwise boundless field of consciousness” [13].
- ¹⁰ *Savikalpa* modalities of cognition, in which consciousness is segregated into thought constructs (*vikalpas*), start with *madhyamā*, the middle or mental form of speech, where *bindu* becomes *mātrikā*, the subtle phonemic forms from which all the linguistic

combinatorial space is expressed as conceptualizations and inner verbalizations. Finally, *vaikharī* is described as the gross, externalized speech, fully articulated and objectified (spoken out), where sound becomes an object, perceptible to others in the external world. Accordingly, *vāk* (speech) may be conducive both to *pratyabhijñā* (recognition) when manifested in the form of mantras but also to the identification with the objective world.

- 11 The cultivation and refinement of *vikalpas* is regarded as a crucial discipline within the broader *Trika* system and foundational *āgamas* such as the *Mālinīvijayottara tantra*. Abhinavagupta considered *tarka* (refined or perfected reasoning) as the foremost among the *ṣaḍaṅga yoga* (six-limbs yoga) outlined in his system (which differs from Patañjali's eightfold or *aṣṭāṅga yoga*). For a deeper analysis of this ontological turn, see [9,15,16,39].
- 12
- 13 One of the most influential perspectives in cognitive science is the so-called “embodied cognition”, which expands cognition beyond the central nervous system and neural networks, embracing a holistic understanding that integrates the entire organism and its environment. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch conceptualized this approach by viewing the cognitive subject as an autopoietic system, dynamically coupled and interdependent with its environment, a vision closely aligned with the principles underlying complex adaptive systems [29].

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