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CONTEMPORARY JAIN YOGA IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore contemporary yoga in the United States, with a particular focus on the yogic teachings in the Jain diaspora. Recent decades have seen increased academic interest in Jain religious traditions, including Jain yogic practices, contributing essential findings to the already widely researched areas of Buddhist and Hindu yoga. Much of the work on Jain yoga has been done in textual studies, tracing the historical development of yogic doctrines and practices. Research on contemporary Jain yogic systems, such as Preksha meditation, has centered primarily on India. However, there is scarce research on Jain yoga in diasporic communities despite a growing number of studies on Jain communities outside India. This research project aims to fill this gap by exploring contemporary Jain yogic teachings in the U.S. Jain diaspora. Combining textual and archival methodologies, it will specifically examine the system of yoga that was developed by Sushil Kumar (1926–1994), a unique Jain leader who traveled to the United States in 1975 and established a religious center in New Jersey in 1983.

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Introduction

This research project explores yogic practices in the Jain religious tradition. While lagging far behind Hindu and Buddhist Studies, Jain Studies is a fast-growing field. Recent scholarship has produced important work on Jain yoga, but most of it has focused either on the history of Jain yoga or contemporary forms of Jain yoga in India. Despite the growth of ethnographic studies on the Jain communities outside of India, there is a lack of research on Jain yogic practices in the Jain diaspora. This research project aims to fill this gap by exploring Jain yogic practices in the United States. It examines a specific type of Jain yoga known as “Arhum Yoga,” developed and popularized by the Jain mendicant Sushil Kumar (1926–1994), who was born in India but took up residency in the United States. The research paper describes the theoretical foundations and practices that form Arhum Yoga, highlighting the ways in which this yogic system draws from the Jain tradition, reinterprets its teachings for the modern audience, or integrates non-Jain elements. Existing scholarship on Sushil Kumar is very scarce. Thus, the research paper primarily draws on Sushil Kumar’s own work. Especially relevant to the topic of the research paper is his book, *Song of the Soul: An Introduction to the Namokar Mantra and the Science of Sound*, a practice manual for Arhum Yoga.

Jainism is a religious tradition whose last great teacher, Mahāvīra, lived in the 6th century B.C.E., according to most traditional datings. The Jain tradition considers Mahāvīra to be the 24th in a series of teachers in our time and place, called Jinas (lit. victor) or Tīrthāṅkaras (lit. fordmaker), who attained omniscience (*kevalajñāna*), taught the Jain doctrine, built a community of followers, and eventually attained liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Lives of the Jinas or Tīrthāṅkaras represent an ideal model of conduct for Jains to strive toward. The teachings of Jainism are rooted in a soteriological framework that understands current life as one in a beginningless and potentially endless series of rebirth in which a soul (*jīva* or *ātman*) embodies a wide variety of life forms. These range from humans (*manuṣya*), animals (*tiryāṅc*), deities (*deva*), and hell-beings (*nāraka*) to plant- (*vanaspatikāyika*), earth- (*prthvīkāyika*), water- (*āpokāyika*), fire- (*tejokāyika*), and air-bodied beings (*vāyukāyika*). Particular life forms are decided by karma, a subtle material substance that a living being attracts and binds whenever it performs bodily, verbal, or mental activities informed by anger (*krodha*), pride (*māna*),

deceitfulness (*māyā*), or greed (*lobha*). In order to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth, one must eliminate all previously bound karma and prevent the influx of new karma by committing to a life of rigorous asceticism (*tapas*) and observing the great vows (*mahāvratā*) of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), nonpossession (*aparigraha*), truthfulness (*satya*), nonstealing (*asteya*), and sexual restraint (*brahmacarya*). Jain mendicancy is centered on these strict practical guidelines. Jain laypeople observe them to a lesser extent and are commonly more this-worldly oriented, striving for a good rebirth instead of liberation.

Jain yoga, which comprises a wide range of physical and meditative practices, is aimed at advancing one on the spiritual path. Before I focus on the particular type of yoga that was developed by Sushil Kumar in the 20th century, I want to offer a summary of the foundations and developments of premodern and modern Jain yoga.

In “Jain Meditative and Contemplative Practices,” Giles Hooper (2020) provides an overview of traditional Jain yogic practices. He emphasizes that already the earliest extant Jain literature “reveals that equanimity and meditation are crucial to progress on the path to liberation (*mokṣamārga*)” (2020). He focuses on four types of practices: (1) attainment of equanimity (*sāmāyika*); (2) abandonment of the body (*kāyotsarga*); (3) the twelve reflections (*dvādaśānuprekṣā* or *dvādaśabhāvanā*); and (4) meditation (*dhyāna*). First, equanimity generally refers to a state that emulates the Jinās in refraining from violence. It also forms a meditative practice in which meditators acknowledge their past violence and vow to refrain from causing harm in the future. This practice can be performed by both mendicants and laypeople, and the vow is life-long for the former and lasts 48 minutes for the latter. Second, abandonment of the body is a physical posture that represents the casting away of attachments to the body. It reflects the Jain vow of nonpossession and affirms the metaphysical difference of the self from the body it inhabits. There are no strict rules on how the posture should be performed, and some Jain authors maintain that it can be practiced while standing, sitting, or lying down. However, as Hooper notes, “it is most commonly done standing in *jinamudrā*, the iconic posture in which the Jina is shown standing, legs slightly apart, arms by the side but slightly away from the body with the palms turned in, and the fingers pointing straight towards the ground” (2020). The practice commonly integrates the recitation of the *pañcanamaskāra* mantra, which I will describe in more detail below, and/or the praise of the Jinās. Third, the twelve reflections refer to the practice of

contemplating various topics as preparation for or as an element of meditation. In the *Tattvārthasūtra*, the first systematic representation of the Jain doctrine in Sanskrit, Umāsvāti (c. 350 C.E) lists twelve topics of this practice: (1) impermanence (*anitya*); (2) helplessness (*aśaraṇa*); (3) the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*); (4) solitariness (*ekatva*); (5) the otherness of the body and the *jīva* (*anyatva*); (6) the impurity of the body (*aśuci*); (7) the karmic influx (*āsrava*); (8) preventing the karmic influx (*saṃvara*); (9) eradicating karma (*nirjarā*); (10) the nature of the cosmos (*loka*); (11) the difficulty of obtaining enlightenment (*bodhidurlabha*); and (12) the absolute truth of the (Jina's) teachings (*dharmasvākhyātatva*) (*Tattvārthasūtra* 9.2; Jaini 2001/1979, 248). These are supposed to prevent karmic influx and encourage one to turn away from this-worldly desires toward the goal of liberation.

Finally, meditation generally refers to the practice of concentrating the mind, which likely existed since the early developments of Jainism. It is commonly listed as one of the internal austerities or ascetic practices (*tapas*) that practitioners can perform to eliminate karma that has already been bound. Jain texts enumerate various kinds of meditation, some conducive to spiritual progress and others leading away from it. Anguished (*ārtadhyāna*) and angry meditation (*raudradhyāna*) prevent progress on the path to liberation. Hooper explains that anguished meditation means thinking about (1) dissociating oneself from what is undesirable; (2) the continued association with what is desirable; (3) ridding oneself of disease; and (4) the continued association with the enjoyment of desirable pleasures. Characteristics of this type of meditation are crying, grief, weeping, and lamentation (2020). Hooper describes angry meditation as associated with (1) violence; (2) falsehood; (3) theft; and (4) protecting possessions. It is marked by hatred. On the other hand, virtuous (*dharmadhyāna*) and pure meditation (*śukladhyāna*) are beneficial for spiritual progress (*Ibid.*). According to Hooper, virtuous meditation consists of four types: (1) examination of the instructions of the Jina; (2) examination of suffering; (3) examination of the results of actions; and (4) examination of the form of the universe. Its characteristics are the liking for the instructions of the Jina, the natural state, the scriptures, and extensive study of the scriptures (*Ibid.*). Finally, pure meditation is also divided into four types, which Hooper describes as follows: (1) movement of thinking on several objects; (2) no movement of thinking on one object; (3) subtle activity (of the body, etc.) with no return; and (4) cessation of all activity with no falling back (*Ibid.*). The narrowing down of the object of meditation is followed by the stopping of gross bodily, verbal, and mental activities.

The final type represents the state of omniscient beings (*kevalin*) right before the attainment of liberation when all bodily, verbal, and mental activity ceases. Hooper notes that pure meditation is characterized by the absence of agitation and delusion as well as discrimination and renunciation (*Ibid.*). He also points out that some Jain texts deviate from this general model and, as an example, mentions the works of Kundakunda, which explain meditation on the pure self as the path to liberation (*Ibid.*).

Haribhadra, a Śvetāmbara Jain author, developed an alternative model of yoga that perhaps only in certain aspects intersects with the four-fold model of yoga mentioned above with pure meditation as its culminating point. As explained by Hooper, *Haribhadra in the Yogabindu describes yoga as consisting of the following steps: (1) pertaining to the self (adhyātma); (2) reflection (bhāvanā); (3) meditation (dhyāna); (4) equanimity (samatā); and (5) complete destruction of activities (vṛttisaṃkṣaya)*, and he defines meditation as “the unwavering concentration of the mind on an auspicious object” (2020). In the *Yogaḍṛṣṭisamuccaya*, Haribhadra divides yoga into (1) the yoga of intention (*icchāyoga*); (2) the yoga of scriptures (*śāstrayoga*); and (3) the yoga of self-exertion (*sāmarthyayoga*), which can be described with respect to eight viewpoints: (1) friendly (*mitrā*); (2) protector (*tārā*); (3) power (*balā*); (4) shining (*dīprā*); (5) firm (*sthirā*); (5) pleasing (*kāntā*); (7) radiant (*prabhā*); and (8) highest (*parā*). Scholars have drawn parallels between this list and the eight-limbed yoga in Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*, which belongs to the Hindu tradition and consists of (1) restraints (*yama*); (2) observances (*niyama*); (3) posture (*āsana*); (4) breath regulation (*prāṇāyāma*); (5) sense withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*); (6) concentration (*dhāraṇā*); (7) meditation (*dhyāna*); and (8) absorption (*samādhi*) (Hooper, 2020).¹ Jain authors such as Rāmasena and Śubhacandra also mention the visualization of sacred utterances (*mantra*) as part of yogic practice, with a particular relation to the *pañcanamaskaramantra* in the case of Śubhacandra (*Ibid.*). I will discuss this *mantra* in the context of Sushil Kumar’s system of yoga below.

Jain yoga has also undergone modern developments that often build on the traditional Jain foundations but also add new interpretations or integrate new elements that are sometimes influenced by or borrowed from non-Jain traditions. Modern Jain figures who established their own models of yoga commonly responded to the changing social and scientific circumstances, often opening their teachings to Jains and non-Jains alike, including outside of India, in the spirit

¹ For detailed studies of Haribhadra’s texts on yoga, see the work of Christopher Key Chapple.

of universalism or emphasizing scientific aspects of the practices they were promoting. They commonly also highlighted the health benefits of their practices, despite Jainism's emphasis on asceticism and the importance of transcending the body as the ultimate goal of the religious path. Apart from Sushil Kumar, whom I will focus on in the rest of the paper, two leading figures in the development of modern Jain yoga were Chitrabhanu (Citrabhānu; 1922–2019) and Ācārya Mahāprajña (1920–2010).

Chitrabhanu, who became a monk (Candraprabhasāgara) in the Śvetāmbara Mūrtipūjaka Tapā Gaccha in 1942, gave up his mendicancy in order to travel to an interfaith conference in Switzerland in 1971 since fully ordained Jain mendicants are not allowed to travel by transportation. He then traveled in Africa and Europe and eventually moved to the United States. He also married one of his lay followers. In 1973, he established the Jain Meditation International Center in New York City. His meditation teachings are based on the Jain doctrinal and practical foundations, which he, as Samani Pratibha Pragma notes, reshaped for a modern audience (2016, p. 261). He additionally adopted terminology and techniques from non-Jain traditions, particularly Hinduism (*Ibid.*, p. 262). His practices are grounded in the Jain metaphysical distinction between the material, non-living nature of the body and the immaterial, living nature of the soul. Pragma describes one of his central meditation techniques as consisting of three steps that lead to the recognition of this distinction: (1) who am I?; (2) I am not that; and (3) I am that (*Ibid.*). Recognizing that I am not any of the non-living entities, including the body, brings about the realization that I am the soul. Chitrabhanu also included the twelve reflections, described above in the context of traditional forms of Jain yoga, in his meditative practice. However, he gave them a modern twist and as Pragma observes, modified them into a “positive expression.” For example, in translation, impermanence becomes “the changeless beneath the changes,” helplessness becomes “our protection in an unprotected world,” the impurity of the body becomes “the flame in the candle,” and so on (*Ibid.*, p. 263). This modification, which takes some of the edge off the usual interpretation of the reflections in rigorous ascetic terms, focused on the individual's turning away from the world on a solitary journey toward liberation, might have been intentional to make this practice more appealing to the broader audiences. Chitrabhanu's meditation practice also includes various *mantras*, and he relates it to the system of *cakras*, or energy/psychic centers, the attunement with which he suggested to have healing effects (*Ibid.*, p. 266).

Ācārya Mahāprajña was the tenth leader of the Śvetāmbara Terāpanthīs and was ordained as a Jain monk at the age of eleven. He developed a system of practice called *prekṣādhyāna*, commonly translated as “insight meditation and yoga.” As Kristi L. Wiley notes, this form of meditation “involves engaging the mind in the perception of the subtle, internal, innate phenomena of consciousness in order to purify the mind from emotions and the contamination of passions (*kaṣāyas*)” (2009, p. 172). While *prekṣādhyāna* is ultimately aimed at the attainment of liberation, it also serves a range of secondary goals, including health and wellbeing. It is rooted in the Jain doctrine, and it adopts several central traditional Jain yogic practices, such as the abandonment of the body and the twelve reflections. It also includes *mantra* recitation, perception of the colors of the soul (*leśya*), and dietary restrictions, and it integrates a variety of different elements from non-Jain yogic practices, such as postural yoga and breathing techniques from the Hindu tradition (*āsana*) and *vipassanā* meditation from the Buddhist tradition. In line with many other modern Jain teachers, Ācārya Mahāprajña often presented the practice in scientific language (Cort 2020; Jain 2020; Wiley 2009, pp. 131–132).²

Sushil Kumar

Sushil Kumar (Suśīlkumār), fondly referred to as Guruji by his followers, was born into a Hindu Brahmin family in the village of Shikopur in the Indian state of Haryana.³ Already at the age of seven, he decided to leave home to become a student of Choṭelāl, a Jain monk in the Śvetāmbara Sthānakavāsī tradition. He was formally initiated as a mendicant in this same tradition when he was fifteen in 1941. The “About the Author” section in Sushil Kumar’s *Song of the Soul: An Introduction to Namokar Mantra and the Science of Sound* explains his decision for a spiritual life at such a young age with an extraordinary event:

When Guruji was still a young boy, Shri Roop Chandji Maharaj appeared to him in spirit and told him to become a monk. (Maharaj was a great yogi and enlightened master in the

² For a detailed study of *prekṣādhyāna*, see Pragma (2016).

³ The village in which Sushil Kumar was born was later named Sushilgarh to honor him (Sushil Kumar, 1987, 13).

family of monks to which Guruji belongs. He left his body 100 years ago. Roop Chandji Maharaj is Guruji's spiritual guru) (Sushil Kumar, 1987, p. 13).

This explanation places Sushil Kumar, as a Hindu, into a lineage of Sthānakavāsī Jain mendicants.

Similarly to Chitrabhanu, Sushil Kumar made a decision to travel by air to the United States in 1975, and for the purposes of immigration in Honolulu had to put on a pair of rubber sandals (Briggs 1975, p. 37), going against the prohibition for fully ordained Jain mendicants to travel by means of mechanized transportation and wear shoes. His case was even more controversial to Chitrabhanu's since, unlike the former, he did not renounce his mendicant status. As Pragya notes, however, his code of conduct retained several relaxations. Apart from transportation, these included the acceptance of food that was prepared specifically for him, which is otherwise also prohibited for Jain mendicants (2016, p. 268). Andrea R. Jain explains that neither Chitrabhanu nor Sushil Kumar considered these actions illegitimate and saw them as correct responses to the social context of the time (2020). The decision to travel outside India allowed them not only to serve the Jain community in the diaspora, but also to attract non-Jain followers and thus modernize Jainism towards a global audience, which many Hindu and Buddhist traditions had already done. Jain explains that the popularity of Chitrabhanu and Sushil Kumar was the highest in the 1980s and 1990s, and that they were "attracting large groups of students from Euro-American backgrounds and often serving as honorary guests at Jain and interreligious events in the United States" (2020). Since then, a few other Jain mendicants, such as the Bandhu Triputi ("Three Brothers") from the Śvetāmbara Mūrtipūjaka tradition, have transgressed the rule of not using mechanized transportation in order to expand their community service (Cort, 2020).

In 1983, Sushil Kumar established the Siddhachalam, a religious center (*āśrama*), in Blairstown, New Jersey, on land his followers had purchased. The center's website explains its name as a "mountain [in homage] to the *siddhas* [i.e., liberated beings]" (*Siddhachalam*). Siddhachalam is managed by the International Mahavir Jain Mission, founded in 1978 to spread the Jain teachings, especially as promoted by Sushil Kumar (*Ibid.*). Today, Siddhachalam spreads over 120 acres of land. The center has three temples with images in the style of both

Śvetāmbara and Digambara traditions in accordance with the nonsectarian attitude of Sushil Kumar. It also has a temple dedicated to the teacher, or *guru* (Guru Mandir), which houses a life-size image of Sushil Kumar. It also has a residence for visiting monks and nuns, cabins for worshippers, a congregation hall, eleven nature and meditation trails that extend over three miles, playgrounds, a lake, and ponds, and it serves as a sanctuary for many different animals. Additionally, Siddhachalam has a library of books on various topics, including religion, nonviolence, peace, vegetarianism, health, and the environment. Its community dining hall provides solely vegetarian food following the Jain principle of nonviolence. Most importantly for this paper, Siddhachalam is the place where Sushil Kumar practiced and taught his system of yoga, called Arhum Yoga. In fact, Siddhachalam is the first Jain pilgrimage site (*tīrtha*) in North America, the status of which it attained, as the center's website explains, because Sushil Kumar purified it "through his austerities, study and meditation" (*Siddhachalam*).

The center is also the headquarters for the World Fellowship of Religions, founded in 1953. In 1975, Kenneth A. Briggs reported on Sushil Kumar's travel in *The New York Times*, stating that he was in the U.S. "to visit the growing Jain community in New York and to promote the World Fellowship of Religion[s], an organization dedicated to creating harmony among major world faiths in the spirit of nonviolence" (1975, p. 37) Briggs emphasizes that for Sushil Kumar the urgency of the mission outweighed the concern about breaking mendicant rules (*Ibid.*). In line with the aim of the World Fellowship of Religion[s] to encourage mutual understanding and unity among religions, Briggs describes Sushil Kumar as follows:

As president of the World Fellowship of Religion[s], he has mingled with followers of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, and has studied their holy books. No one person or religion has the truth, he believes. "Anyone who says he is the only one telling the truth," he said rhetorically, "is not telling the truth" (*Ibid.*).

Briggs also comments on a Jain pamphlet which stated that Sushil Kumar "has no use for 'any new-fangled cults or religious bodies' nor plans to change the major faiths, but to bring out the best in each of them (*Ibid.*). He adds that Sushil Kumar is "most critical of religious leaders who

he thinks have made religion into ‘hidebound’ ritual. Speaking in Hindi through an interpreter, he said holy men ‘should be servants, not salesmen.’” (*Ibid.*) Sushil Kumar remained dedicated to promoting nonviolent conflict resolution throughout his life, and he also engaged himself in addressing environmental issues and animal welfare (Wiley 2009, p. 207).

Arhum Yoga

The “About the Author” section in the *Song of the Soul* describes Arhum Yoga as “an ancient system for the mastery of the inner self through watchfulness and direct perception. Arhum Yoga encompasses all aspects of philosophy and yogic practice in the Arihant spiritual tradition” (Sushil Kumar, 1987, p. 14).⁴ The term “Arihant” or “Arhat” literally means “one who is worthy of worship” and is mostly used to represent a Jina or a Tirthankara. It sometimes also refers to an omniscient being (*kevalin*) (Wiley, 2009, p. 39). The definition in the *Song of the Soul* places Arhum Yoga within the Jain tradition, embracing its philosophy and practice. The emphasis on direct perception builds on the Jain epistemological teachings, according to which spiritually advanced practitioners can experience reality in an unmediated manner, directly with their soul, instead of relying on the senses and the mind which all belong to the material, non-essential aspects of their embodied existence. In line with this, *Song of the Soul* explains the aim of Jain philosophy as the evolution of practitioners to “Godhood when matter no longer has any power over the soul” (Sushil Kumar, 1987, p. 14). Following the Jain tradition, the goal of the spiritual path is presented as the liberation of the soul from matter, and here “Godhood” seems to stand for the attainment of the state of liberation or becoming a liberated being (*siddha*). As will be seen below, Sushil Kumar uses the term “God” to refer to all the liberated beings as a collective.

Sushil Kumar is also said to have obtained his knowledge of yoga through direct experience and “the grace of past lives,” not having studied yoga with any teacher (*Ibid.*, p. 13). In line with his views on the unity of religions, Arhum Yoga, while Jain in its essential nature, also contains elements, practices, and terminology from non-Jain yogic traditions. In one of his lectures, Sushil Kumar affirmed the basic unity among yogic systems as follows: “When

⁴ For a general introduction to Jain philosophy as taught by Sushil Kumar, see Jain (2019).

someone is sleeping, how can you decide that this is Hindu sleep; or Christian sleep or Jain sleep; [t]here is no difference. *Yoga is yoga. Yoga is the state of the mind. There is no real difference amongst yoga systems*” (Sushil Kumar, 1995, p. 22). This approach of letting go of one’s worldly identity, which he understood as “conditioning,” also translated into the practice he taught. He understood these kinds of identities as barriers to the practice of meditation. In one of his lectures, he said:

People are trying. If you are trying, you cannot meditate. Trying means your mind is working.

Most people are saying, “I am trying very hard, my best, but I cannot get success.” You can try for anything else; you cannot try to meditate. Trying is the opposite of meditation.

Relax completely and dissolve all thoughts; that is the real technique. Get rid of all conditioning; you are conditioned to think: I am this, I am that; I am a man; I am a woman; politically, I am this; spiritually, I am this; religiously; I am this. We get conditioned in lots of ways. The conditioning is the source of our ignorance. In the real sense what we are, we do not know. Yet we adopt something as an identity. But whatever we adopt is insufficient (*Ibid.*, 23).

One of the central practices of Arhum yoga is the recitation of the *ṇamokār mantra* (*namaskāra mantra*), a Jain sacred utterance in Prakrit, mentioned above in the context of traditional forms of Jain yoga. It is the most commonly recited ritual formula in the Jain tradition, and it is believed to be beginningless, transmitted by Tīrthaṅkaras to their students (Wiley, 2009, p. 153). The *mantra* is dedicated to five supreme beings (*parameṣṭhin*): (1) enlightened teachers (*arhat*); (2) liberated beings (*siddha*); (3) mendicant leaders (*ācārya*); (4) preceptors (*upādhyāya*); and (5) mendicants (*sādhu*). Sushil Kumar translates the *mantra* as follows:

I bow to the *Arihantas*, the perfected human beings, Godmen.

I bow to the *Siddhas*, liberated bodiless souls, God.

I bow to the *Acharyas*, the masters and heads of congregations.

I bow to the *Upadhyayas*, the spiritual teachers.

I bow to the spiritual practitioners in the universe, *Sadhus*.

The five-fold obeisance *mantra*,

Destroys all sins and obstacles,

And of all auspicious repetitions,

Is the first and foremost (Sushil Kumar, 1987, p. 21).⁵

Sushil Kumar states that the recitation of the *mantra* awakens the qualities of five supreme beings mentioned in the *mantra*, because by expressing respect, love, and devotion to them, the humility of the act leads to the giving away of the ego and one's merging with these figures. As he says: "When you visualize them completely, all obstacles are removed, the 'inner enemies' [i.e., inner passions] are conquered and all divine powers are awakened" (*Ibid.*, p. 16). In this way, as he explains, the repetition of the *mantra* leads to the attainment of the three essential components of the Jain path to liberation, that is, right view, right knowledge, and right conduct, as well as the attainment of the full potential of the soul, such as infinite energy (*Ibid.*). In line with this, he also describes the five supreme beings as "symbolic of noble qualities, or states of consciousness, which we are striving to attain" (*Ibid.*, p. 28). Instead of representing distinct paths toward liberation, he understands them as "various stages in the evolution of the soul" (*Ibid.*).

Perhaps as a way of appealing to modern audiences, Sushil Kumar often describes his teachings in "scientific" language. For example, he explains the purification of the "darkness of

⁵ The text in Prakrit is: *ṇamo arihaṃtāṇaṃ, ṇamo siddhāṇaṃ, ṇamo āyariyāṇaṃ, ṇamo uvajjhāyāṇaṃ, ṇamo loe savva-sāhūṇaṃ, eso paṃca ṇamokkāro savva-pāvappaṇāsaṇo, maṃgalāṇaṃ ca savvesiṃ paḍhamāṃ havai maṃgalam*. Wiley's translation is: "Homage to the enlightened teachers (Arhats), homage to the liberated ones (*siddhas*), homage to the mendicant leaders (*ācāryas*), homage to the preceptors (*upādhyāyas*), homage to all mendicants in the world (*sādhus*). This is the fivefold homage that destroys all evil. And among all that is auspicious, it is the preeminent auspicious [statement] (2009, p. 153).

sin” [i.e., karma] through the sound of the *mantra* with an analogy of the operation of an electric current:

When sound and mind meet each other and merge, an electric current is produced. This current gives light. The first function of light is to destroy darkness. Then it radiates its brightness. It is the same with using *mantra* – the divine sound creates positive particles which first destroy the darkness of sin, and then grant gifts of “light,” worldly attainments and spiritual achievements (*Ibid.*, p. 27)

He often repeats the idea that the *mantra* produces light in adept practitioners, stating that it results in “a feeling of purity, lightness, and peace” much like the effects of a fast, a traditional Jain religious practice aimed at removing bound karma (*Ibid.*, p. 31). Possibly building on the Jain doctrine of the colors of the soul (*leśya*), which indicate one’s spiritual level, he also explains the power of the *mantra* in the language of auras:

Its powers awaken within the practitioner who then experiences oneness with the Arihant and, subsequently, is filled with white light. The personality becomes very attractive and powerful. The divine sounds and pure colors fill the aura. One’s aura will naturally affect anyone coming in contact with it. Just as we can feel repulsion, fear or tension when coming in contact with one individual’s aura, so can we feel attraction, happiness and purity in another’s aura. The *Namokar Mantra* purifies the aura colors (*Ibid.*, p. 30).

Also according to the Jain doctrine of the colors of the soul, white indicates the highest spiritual levels. Wiley explains the six colors in the traditional Jain doctrine as follows:

Black, blue, and gray are indicative of lower stages of spiritual purity (*guṇasthāna*) associated with strong degrees of passions (*kaṣāyas*) and harmful actions. Yellow, lotus

pink, and white are indicative of higher stages of spiritual purity associated with mild passions and actions that minimize harm. White is characteristic of those in the highest stages of the spiritual purity (2009, p. 128).

Sushil Kumar states that the *ṇamokār mantra* represents the following colors: white, red, yellow or orange, green or blue, and black. He connects each one with a line of the *mantra* dedicated to one of the five supreme beings: (1) white indicates purity, is associated with the *arhats*, and is supposed to be visualized at the anterior fontanel; (2) red is energizing, is associated with the *siddhas*, and is supposed to be visualized at the forehead; (3) yellow and orange represent wisdom, discipline, and organized power, are associated with *ācāryas*, and are supposed to be visualized at the right ear and the right side of the head; (4) green and blue represent balance, truth, and the power of speech, are associated with the *upādhyāyas*, and are supposed to be visualized at the throat; and (5) black as the absence of color is “receptive and consumes negativities,”⁶ is associated with the *sādhus*, and is supposed to be visualized at the left ear and the left side of the head (Sushil Kumar, 1987, pp. 32–33). Sushil Kumar also connects the other parts of the body to these five colors: “The right hand and arm as well as the right side of the torso are white. The left hand and arm as well as the left side of the torso are red. The left foot and leg are yellow or orange, and the right foot and leg are blue or green” (*Ibid.*, p. 33). He provides detailed instructions on how color visualizations should be practiced and notes that they should be performed five times every morning (*Ibid.*). He notes that visualization enhances the effects of the recitation (*Ibid.*, p. 34). He also provides alternative systems of linking the *mantra* with the body, for example, by linking (1) from the list above to the protection of the head; (2) to the protection of the face; (3) to the protection of the heart; (4) to the protection of the navel; and (5) to the protection of the feet (*Ibid.*, pp. 33–34).

Sushil Kumar likens the soul’s potential to the “many sleeping powers of the subconscious mind” and compares the recitation of the *mantra* to the “modern methods of

⁶ He later explains this in the following way: “Black absorbs negativities and provides a ‘black hole’ into which the practitioner can focus, merge and dissolve the self and reach the transcendental state. This ‘black hole’ can be created by visualizing a mass of small black dots in space into which all negativities, from the big toe to the top of the head, can be absorbed” (Sushil Kumar, 1987, p. 37).

autosuggestion” (*Ibid.*, p. 16). He describes the *ṇamokār mantra* as “a great positive affirmation” (*Ibid.*, p. 28) and emphasizes the importance of articulating thoughts in a positive way.

When autosuggesting, we are affirming only the positive. Do not think, “I am not bad.” (Using the word “not” will lessen the effect of our positive affirmation.) Rather think, “I am good. The Arihant is my goal, my true state. His qualities are mine.” If our faith is perfect, and we repeat the *mantra* over and over again, while affirming our goodness, then we can reach the highest state of consciousness (*Ibid.*, p. 29).

However, Sushil Kumar also emphasizes the limitation of “the power of positive thinking” (*Ibid.*, p. 31). As he says, “[t]he language of thoughts may be positive, but the corresponding letters and sounds may not be as useful” (*Ibid.*). He links the ability to awaken the latent powers and the ability to think positively all the time to particular syllables of the *ṇamokār mantra*, stating that it is “a composition of divine sounds, a perfect arrangement of letters, the ultimate positive affirmation passed down to us from the highest souls” (*Ibid.*). He calls the knowledge of the syllables of the *mantra* “the science of letters.” I will return to this at the end of the paper when I discuss specific meditation techniques of Arhum Yoga.

Even though *ṇamokār mantra* has a Jain origin, Sushil Kumar did not want to label it as such and insisted that anyone could recite it and benefit from its recitation. In line with his universalist approach, he says:

We cannot limit the divine eternal sound of *mantra* by labelling it Jain, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu or Muslim. We should not label the *Namokar Mantra* under any classification just as we should not label ourselves. The *Namokar Mantra* is for everyone. It is a song of the soul and used to attain realization of the perfection of the soul (*Ibid.*, p. 16).

Here, Sushil Kumar builds on the Jain idea that beyond the bodily aspects of our existence and their effects on our souls, living beings are – in view of their immaterial souls – essentially the same. In that respect, labels, which are external to the soul, are irrelevant and should be discarded.⁷ He links the *ṇamokār mantra* to the soul, defining it as the soul’s song. Since the soul is eternal, according to the Jain tradition, that makes the *mantra* as its song eternal as well. By reciting the song of the soul, the soul itself is purified towards perfection. In another place he says that “the true Self and the *mantra* are one” (*Ibid.*, p. 23) and explains that the *mantra* is the “divine body” of the Tīrthankara with which the practitioner can merge:

When the Tirthankar is ready to discard the physical body and attain *Nirvana* and Siddhahood, in his love and mercy, he leaves behind for the universe his true eternal true body ... his *mantra* body. When the power of the *Namokar Mantra* is completely awakened within us, then we can merge with the Lord (*Ibid.*).

Once the soul has attained its true potential through the recitation of the *mantra*, explains Sushil Kumar, one merges with the eternal divine soul or “God.”⁸ This idea seems to be a novel interpretation of the Jain doctrine, perhaps influenced by the Buddhist doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha. According to the traditional Jain teachings, Jinas or Tīrthankaras impart the Jain doctrine to their followers, aiding them on their path to liberation, even as they remain completely separated from the worldly dealings after their release from the cycle of rebirth. Sushil Kumar presents an idea that leaving behind their spiritual body is an act of love and mercy to benefit the whole universe (*Ibid.*, p. 24). He also states that Tīrthankaras can be “contacted by anyone, at any time, by meditation and devotion” (*Ibid.*, p. 25).

⁷ Similarly, he says in one of his lectures: “You are a child. You are young. You are old. You are mature. You are dead. You are born. All these, very useful in the practical world, not relevant in the spiritual world!” (Sushil Kumar 1995, p. 11).

⁸ In one of his lectures, he explains the concept of God in the following way: “When somebody asks, do you believe in God? People say, ‘yes;’ or people say, ‘no.’ The inexperienced would say: yes, literally, He is. The experienced would say, ‘God is not a question of belief, God is a question of realisation. Divine light you may find – that is God!’ Anywhere, you may see consciousness, that is God. Anywhere you see sparkle of life, that is God, Beauty is God, Truth is God, Love is God!” (*Ibid.*, p. 10).

The spiritual progress towards perfection occurs in steps, which he sometimes explains through the classical eight-limbed yoga system of Patañjali, mentioned above, equating self-realization (of the soul) with *samādhi* (*Ibid.*). He also explains the effects of the recitation of the *ṇamokār mantra* in terms of Hindu yogic terminology as the awakening of the *kuṇḍalinī* and its conception of the subtle body that consists of various channels (*ṇāḍī*), energy/psychic centers (*cakra*), and life force (*prāṇa*).⁹ He explains that consciousness, which is the source of knowledge, is associated with the *cakras* above the throat; subconsciousness, which is the source of perception and faith [i.e., view], is associated with the *cakras* below the throat to the navel; and unconsciousness, which is the source of conduct and energy, is associated with the *cakras* from the navel to the base of the spine. He connects the operation of the subtle body to the process of karmic purification:

Karmic particles are stored at the base of the spine, preventing the awakening of the *kundalini*. When the powers of the unconscious are awakened then the karmic obstruction is removed and we can realize our perfection. This brings us to the state of superconsciousness or *samadhi* (*Ibid.*, p. 29).

Wiley explains that the *ṇamokār mantra* is in the Jain tradition “believed to have special powers of protection, to give worldly success, to destroy karma, and to cure illness” (*Ibid.*). In line with this, Sushil Kumar maintains the recitation of the *mantra* also to have protecting powers, healing effects, apart from leading to the ultimate goal of liberation (Sushil Kumar, 1987, pp. 16–17). The *mantra* can additionally result in extraordinary powers (*Ibid.*, p. 26). In fact, Sushil Kumar understands the very term *mantra* to indicate its two-fold effects, this- and other-worldly:

Etymologically, the word *man* means mind and *tra* means protection. This implies that a *mantra* can fulfill any wish of the mind, that it can create a happy and healthy mind. On a

⁹ For details on how each syllable of the *ṇamokār mantra* connects with the system of *cakras*, see Sushil Kumar, 1987, p. 56.

deeper level, a *mantra* is a composition of divine sounds. The word *mantra* means call, invitation, discussion. Through a *mantra*, we can contact the divine and awaken our own sleeping powers (*Ibid.*, p. 21).

Specifically, beginning the *mantra* with the sacred utterances of *om* or *hrīm* has worldly benefits, since they connect the practitioners to “cosmic energy” and allow them to control the five elements [i.e., earth, water, fire, air, and space] as well as influence their mental abilities. In a novel interpretation of the relationship between the soul and matter, Sushil Kumar explains that this is “basically a matter of calling on the subtle powers of nature to ‘create’ the desired objective – a matter of the subtle elements manifesting form for us” (*Ibid.*, p. 26). This is in line with his understanding of *om/aum* as representing three forces in nature: creation (A), preservation (U), and destruction (M). He explains that the first letters of the names of the five supreme beings together form *om/aum* (A, A,¹⁰ A, U, M¹¹) and he states that “[w]hen chanting *Om*, we are also chanting the *Namokar Mantra*” (*Ibid.*, p. 45). Connected with *om*, *ṇamokār mantra* can also influence creation, preservation, and destruction, and he adds that *om* may be employed as a shorter way of reciting the *ṇamokār mantra*.

The other two sacred utterances that form an important part of Arhum Yoga are *arhum*¹² and *hrīm*. Sushil Kumar explains the relationship between the three *mantras* and the *ṇamokār mantra* as follows:

These three interrelated sounds symbolize the techniques and the aim of Arhum Yoga. They symbolize knowledge of the external, the internal and the Supreme. They are Right Knowledge (*Arhum*), Right Faith [i.e., View] (*Om*) and Right Conduct (*Hreem*).

Visualize the picture of *Hreem*, *Om*, *Arhum*. First on the outside is *Hreem*; this is the universe, nature and the five elements. Embedded in this lies *Om* whose positive energy moves in one direction to the Supreme, completely and wholeheartedly. In the center

¹⁰ *Siddha* is substituted by *aśarīrin*.

¹¹ *Sādhu* is substituted by *muni*.

¹² For a study on this *mantra*, see Gough (2020).

there is an unmoving flame of fire burning brightly. This is *Arhum*, the power of the soul. It is the Arihant, the soul in its perfected state.

The meaning is that you are the universe or *Hreem*. Your entire energy is *Om*, and your soul realizes its highest state of perfection, *Arhum*. By this system you can know the world, you can see how energy moves and you can see your Self, how all powers awaken. Watch and awake yourself. [. . .]

Having spent most of my life experimenting with sound, I have found three sounds to be very powerful – *Om*, *Hreem* and *Arhum*. *Om*, *Hreem* and *Arhum* are the essence of the *Namokar Mantra* and manifestations of the *Arihant*; they should be repeated daily. The *Namokar Mantra* is an elaboration of *Om*, *Hreem* and *Arhum* (*Ibid.*, pp. 46–47).¹³

In line with his teachings on the latent powers of the soul, Sushil Kumar also states that everyone has the power to heal themselves and others, but this ability is inhibited by certain kinds of food, system imbalances, karma, and accidents. He defines illness as “a blockage of energy” and recommends the recitation of the *ṇamokār mantra* as a way of dissolving such blockages (*Ibid.*, p. 34). He states that each color of the *mantra* has specific healing powers,¹⁴ and states that the *mantra* as a whole keeps the color in the body in balance, with imbalance representing illness (*Ibid.*, p. 36). He again relates these processes to the yogic subtle body and its notion of *prāṇa* as the body’s life force that can be influenced by the *mantra*, besides the breathing practices (*prāṇāyāma*). As he says: “The power of the *Namokar Mantra* helps to awaken the energy stored at the base of the spine. Subtle breath or *prana* is constantly being produced at this center, and with the help of the *mantra* its quantity and force can be increased” (*Ibid.*, p. 36).

Another self-healing technique that Sushil Kumar recommends is the so-called “color-breathing,” which connects breathing, bodily postures, and visualization. He suggests that it is best performed outside while facing the sun. The practitioner is required to imagine inhaling a

¹³ For details on these three *mantras* are connected with the subtle yogic body, see Sushil Kumar, 1987, pp. 47–49.

¹⁴ See Sushil Kumar (1987, pp. 36–37) for details.

specific color, either filling the whole body with it or directing it to a specific *cakra*.¹⁵ One can also imagine a rainbow of colors entering the body to balance all the colors (*Ibid.*, pp. 39–40).

The power of the *mantra* can also be utilized for healing others. Sushil Kumar emphasizes that in order to be able to heal, one must let go of the idea of being a healer and instead convert the body into the *ṇamokār mantra* and let the *mantra* heal, serving merely as its medium. This can be achieved, he says, by repeating the *mantra* 108 times per day (*Ibid.*, p. 38).¹⁶ The healing process also uses the color system as Sushil Kumar’s instructions for healing indicate:

Apply the *mantra* three times visualizing colors on the patient’s body. Feel the energy and vibration while focusing the energy from your right hand to the affected area of the patient’s body. Using the specific part of the *Namokar Mantra* and its related color, localize the healing energy and apply it to the affected part. Visualize and feel that the problem is going away. Contact the cell groups and “cell-mind” of the affected part and send the suggestion, “You are *Arihant*. You are *Siddha*. You are Divine. Remove all imbalances and work properly. The disease will be removed (*Ibid.*).

In order for *ṇamokār mantra* to be effective, Sushil Kumar emphasizes that it must be pronounced properly. Certain external conditions may also influence its power. It is ideal to recite the *mantra* while standing or being seated on a clean seat, where the recommended seat colors are white, yellow, orange, or red (*Ibid.*, p. 68 and p. 74). The practitioner’s body should be clean and peaceful, and the mind should be purified of desires, thoughts, and negativities (*Ibid.*, p. 74). He further notes that the *mantra* will not be successful without adhering to the principle of nonviolence and following a vegetarian diet. Violence, he says, can disturb the practitioner’s life force (*Ibid.*, p. 64). One’s general disposition should be love, devotion, and oneness (*Ibid.*,

¹⁵ For details on which colors nourish particular *cakras* and which colors should be visualized for specific health issues, see *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

¹⁶ Such lengthy recitations can be aided with the use of *mālās*, or strings of beads. Sushil Kumar refers to them with a Christian term as “rosaries” and he provides details on the effects of using different types of them. However, one can also use alternative techniques of visualization or counting with the fingers (*Ibid.*, pp. 65–67).

74). He also mentions particular times that can enhance the *mantra*'s efficacy, such as sunrise, noon, sunset, and midnight, and some auspicious occasions, such as religious festivals (*Ibid.*, p. 63).

According to Sushil Kumar, *ṇamokār mantra* can be awakened by visualizing it, and one can combine the recitation with the above-mentioned color application. He states that the different forms of recitation result in different effects: (1) mental recitation brings “the power to predict the future and develop the power of speech;” (2) mental recitation with visualization removes “inner negativities, bring[s] spiritual progress and self-realization;” (3) soft vocal recitation brings “worldly achievements;” and (4) loud vocal recitation improves “the atmosphere of the environment, attract[s] angels and divine powers, [and] will destroy poverty” (*Ibid.*, p. 75).

In the final part of the *Song of the Soul*, Sushil Kumar also describes four meditation practices. The first is called “Meditation of *Arhum*,” and it is aimed at awakening all the powers of this *mantra*, removing sadness, and providing stable happiness. It begins by visualizing and concentrating on the *mantra* in gold in the eight-petalled lotus of the navel *cakra*. Once the *mantra* is activated, Sushil Kumar notes that it will move out of the body, where the practitioner should continue to visualize it as pure and shining. Next, he says, the *mantra* will reenter the body through the mouth, “cross the third eye center, forehead, fontanel and palate, showering nectar and emanating white light throughout the *chakras* and the body” (*Ibid.*, p. 87).

The second meditation practice is called “Meditation on Letters to Remove the Three Knots.” It begins by visualizing the *mantra* in white in the eight-petalled lotus of the navel. The center is encircled by the *mantra hrīm* (eight times), which is in turn encircled by the Sanskrit vowels. One of the petals beyond that holds the Sanskrit vowels, and the others the consonants and the semi-vowels.¹⁷ This meditation practice is aimed at breaking the blockages that prevent the flow of *prāṇa* through the central channel and thus the rise of *kuṇḍalinī*. Sushil Kumar explains:

¹⁷ For details on the powers of each Sanskrit letter, see *Ibid.*, pp. 94–99.

The powers of the vowels (governed by the moon) will pierce the knot at the root center and awaken knowledge; the powers of the consonants (governed by the sun) will pierce the knot at the heart center and awaken our powers; and the powers of the semi-vowels (governed by fire) will pierce the knot at the third-eye center and awaken perception. Ultimately, the self merges into *Arhum*; the individual “I” merges into the principal “I” (*Ibid.*, p. 89).

This loss of individuality may indicate the loss of the secondary characteristics of the self, related to its embodied existence, and attaining the state of what Sushil Kumar previously referred to as the collective “God.”

The third meditation practice is called “Meditation on A, Si, Ā, U, Sa, aimed at spiritual improvement and complete liberation. It is a visualization of the first letters of the five supreme beings in the *ṇamokār mantra* and is supposed to awaken their qualities in the practitioner. According to the instructions, each letter should be visualized in the *cakra* it is associated with: (1) A in the navel; (2) Si at the top of the head; (3) Ā in the mouth; (4) U in the heart; and (5) Sa in the throat. The letters can be visualized individually or collectively.

The fourth meditation practice is called “Meditation on *Om Namō Arihantanam*.” Here, the practitioner is instructed to first visualize the figure of the *Arhat* as beautiful, shining, and white. Then, the eight-petalled lotus should be visualized in the navel or any of the other *cakras*, depending on the desired effect. One should visualize the mantra *om* in the center of the lotus, and then the following in each of the eight petals: *om, ṇa, mo, a, ri, han, tā, ṇam*. The parts of the *ṇamokār mantra* that relate to the other four supreme beings can also be used in a similar manner, adjusting the number of petals to the number of syllables. Sushil Kumar states that this practice can awaken the following powers of the *arhats*: (1) knowledge; (2) sound and the spoken word; (3) honor and respect; and (4) power to remove obstacles (*Ibid.*, p. 93).

Sushil Kumar concludes the *Song of the Soul* by emphasizing the importance of direct experience instead of merely ritualistic prayer, with *ṇamokār mantra* being the key to knowledge and transformation. He says: “As light is to darkness, the *Namokar Mantra* illuminates and awakens the divine qualities of the soul” (*Ibid.*, p. 102).

Conclusion

This paper explored the yogic system of Sushil Kumar, a modern Jain mendicant teacher who moved to the United States, where he established a religious center. His teachings on yoga represent a synthesis of traditional Jain doctrines and non-Jain elements, stemming mostly from other South Asian religious traditions. He modernizes and otherwise refashions the Jain and other South Asian religious teachings for broader audiences. Specifically, he commonly presents his teachings in “scientific” terminology and is, in this approach, a representative of a common trend in modern Jainism. Since he was primarily addressing non-renunciant followers, he also discusses yogic benefits for both attaining liberation and this-worldly goals. His system of yoga is centered on a single *mantra*, called the *ṇamokār mantra*, which he describes as being essentially one with the soul. He develops numerous techniques aimed at “awakening” the *mantra* and, with it, producing various this-worldly benefits and perfecting the soul toward liberation.

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