

Stela 1, Tikal Museum, Guatemala

## **Mayan yoga: Chakras and Energy in Ancient Middle America**

By Lee van Laer and Richard Lloyd

### **Introduction**

One of the more astonishing facts regarding ancient civilizations is how their religious symbology and architecture seem to imply a synchronistic source of higher inspiration. Without modern electricity and technologies, the ancients lived in intimate proximity to a natural world which seemed saturated with various underlying laws. Religion, government, and philosophy were not separate entities, but a single interpretive syllogism. Connections between architectural styles, symbolic lexicons, and myths of the creation

abound, crossing geographic territories in such a way as to imply widespread connections between even very ancient peoples.

In the New World, satellite imagery has shown that in the jungles of the Yucatán and between North and South America, there are hundreds of yet unexcavated buildings, sacred and otherwise, hidden within the overgrown jungles.

These cultures supposedly evolved in complete separation from the old world, yet in introspection into the structure of the human organism, the Mesoamerican cultures and the Hindu, Tibetan, and Chinese yogas and medical systems appear, to the trained eye, to find an unexpected common ground.

One such Mayan stela is the object of this paper. This artifact bears a close resemblance to pictograms or ideograms such as one finds in Yogic or Chinese medicinal representations of the inner bodies, which are purported to reveal an almost unbelievable potential in man.

Although the genealogy of the Mayan people is not completely clear, some scholarly thinking speculates on the possibility of the arrival of some Mesoamerican peoples to long sea voyages from Polynesia, China, Japan and India proper. If this theorem is correct, then the precursors to Mayan civilization may have brought with them a far eastern cultural heritage regarding the inner structure of man.

The stela in question decidedly points to a medical point of view in alignment with Eastern schools of medical thought; those medical concepts which are shared throughout India, China, Korea, Japan and Hawaii, as in Yoga, Laya, Tantra, Hatha and Huna.

One of the signature facts of ancient civilizations is that they consistently used religious imagery in their public buildings. A great deal of the material one finds in ancient cultures relates to religious practice of one kind or another, yet it might be said that archaeologists on the whole have little practical experience and no great expertise in *esoteric* religious practice, which is consistently depicted in the iconography of many ancient cultures. A lack of expertise in esoteric religious and medical practices of the far east have caused archaeologists to for the most part overlook these soterological (salvation-related) emblems and symbols.

This deficiency may also cause them to fail to recognize the significance of certain images which were meant to be spiritual teaching diagrams, or what Gurdjieff would have called *legominisms*—records of important truths.

Because the ancient Mesoamericans were separated from old world cultures by two vast stretches of ocean, it's presumed that their religious practices and cosmologies evolved independent of old world understanding. Some scant evidence of contacts between new and old world cultures has emerged over the past 20 years or so, notably the discovery of cocaine in the hair of Egyptian mummies, and some very distinctive central American papermaking techniques whose only other known parallel is found in Polynesia, but for

the large part we assume these cultures were separated and that their ideas were unique and independent.

The Mayans, however, developed—whether on their own or under some as yet unidentified old world influence—a set of “mythological” beliefs remarkably similar, in some ways, to other cultures in the old world. The widespread use of the serpent God Quetzalcoatl, for example, is mirrored in the extensive use of serpent imagery at Angkor Wat, and most especially in Kundalini Yoga proper. We propose that the similarity is not coincidental.

Hence a brief outline of Kundalini yogic practices may be in order.

The serpent is, in mythology, considered as the most intelligence of the creatures of the creation. In Hindu myth, a serpent is used to churn the waters of life and separate the “milk” from the “bad”, a poison which is then rendered harmless by being swallowed by the God Shiva, which turns his throat blue.

In the Greek tradition, a firmly Western tradition, two intertwined serpents are used to represent the medical caste in the caduceus. These two serpents are, in esoteric tradition, said to represent the three main Nadis of yogic thought: the staff representing the Spinal column, which is the *Sussumna* and the right and left crossing at the Chakras (wheels-centers) as the *Pingala* (active Yang, sunlight, male etc...) and *Ida* ( Yin, right brain imagery, feminine, passive, relaxing and calming.) At the top are two wings which represent the "Command center" or *Ajna* Charkra.

In the middle of the spine are said to be three “wrappings”, together called the *Sushumna*, representing balance, light, and containing an opening at the bottom which is blocked by the nose of the snake called the Kundalini, who is wrapped 3½ times around the base of the Sushumna and sleeps. Her dreams are referred to as the actual phenomenological world which we mis-identify with.

The Kundalini Scriptures state:

*For he who knows, Kundalini is a blessing; for he who doth not know, She is a curse.*

The esoteric object of Hatha Yoga is liberation from Kundalini, as opposed to a set of exercises to limber and relax the human body. Hatha, which means *violent* or *forced against the Will*, is designed to suffocate or shock or otherwise strike the sleeping Kundalini into wakefulness, whereupon She is said to straighten up as a cobra might, and surge up the *Citrini* (the smallest central opening in the Sushumna), causing each chakra to cease in its spinning, pierce the three *Granthi* (knots of mis-identification) and join her Husband/Lover Lord Shiva in realms of never-ending untold bliss.

This is the end result sought after by true Yogis world over, even if they don't know it. It is said to be an extremely dangerous practice, easily leading with one mistake to death or insanity. The traditions report that inhabitations by demonic possessions may also occur

if even one step is wrongly misguided. The very complex world of Mayan gods, many with demonic aspects, and fraught with dangers, seems to mirror these traditions, and finds parallels in traditional Tibetan and Hindu iconography, both of which have all of their roots in Tantric disciplines.

This encoded form of knowledge was likely secretive and for the few who could read the Stela.

In the West we are told about a seventh Chakra called the *Sahasara*— a Sanskrit word which simply means *one thousand*, and is shown as a paricap of Lotus flowers hanging over the head. This center is actually not “in the body”, but above it, which is why the translation of the “Six Chakra Tantra” in *The Serpent Power* by Sir John Windroff is properly translated as a six, and not seven, centered tantra.

The Meso-American cultures used the symbol of the serpent in the same way that the ancient Hindu and Buddhist cultures did—to depict and describe the movement of yogic energy, or spinal energy, through the human body. Much of their iconography, properly understood, suggests this; Mayan stelae and artworks embody esoteric principles that students of Tantric diagrams and the chakras will find very familiar.

By Tantric, we mean doctrines and principles involving mantras, meditation, yoga, ritual, and most particularly what is referred to in the old world as kundalini yoga. The symbologies and understandings of the chakra system and kundalini yoga embody a uniquely identifiable set of principles.

The similarities between old and New World cultures on this point of esoteric practice suggests that esoteric practice has consistent understandings and has made consistent discoveries in vastly different and widely separated cultural contexts. We suggest that in both sets of cultures, old and new world, such esoteric practice was considered both religious and scientific, understood to be law conformable, and followed the same patterns of the understanding of inner energy and its flow through various organic structures and strictures in the human body.

### **Stela 1, Tikal**

A striking and unusual example of the Tantric symbolism found in Mayan art is seen in Stela 1, currently exhibited in the Tikal Museum. This particular stela is perhaps unique in Tantric diagrams in that it is three-dimensional, with a wraparound design, which shows lateral views of the human body with the movement of Tantric energy in considerable colorful detail. This detail is consonant with the diagrams concerning the dispersion of energies in the body by means of invisible vessels called "Nadis", a word that simply means vessel of transportation, so that blood vessels and the Chinese Meridian structures are very well aligned.

This particular stela does not have any carved dates, but the style suggests

it was made around 400 A.D. On it, we see the figure of a priest bearing a number of unique features that may be inexplicable until one understands their relationship to Tantric inner work.



The specific feature that immediately draws the viewer's attention is the prominent presence of the spinal column in the front center of the figure. This is what struck me about the stela when I first saw it in Tikal in 2007; it's a highly unusual representation. The image indicates that we are looking at what one might call an "x-ray view" of the human body; and that all of the subsidiary, auxiliary, and accompanying graphic elements are depictions of various organs and their relationships.

It should be mentioned here that these concepts of the internal organs are not to be considered in any way identical to the actual dissected organs of a dead person. Where the West and its medical arts are concerned with the organs and their functionalities, in esoteric and Eastern medical philosophies the organs may be likened to railway stations. Western medicine tends to focus on structure and function of these organs and their relationship to health; esoteric and Eastern models of medicine consider these discrete "housings"

of the organs as secondary to the energy flows which occur between them.

Unless a visual image is specifically related to death in one way or another, it's unusual to see a spine depicted in the middle of a figure, so we know the artist had a special reason for presenting us with this information. We can reasonably infer that the rest of the elements in the sculpture indicate other internal "organs." We can furthermore infer that the organs being depicted are energy centers, since they don't bear any naturalistic relationship to the actual appearance or location of specific human organs, which the Mayans were well familiar with. (Let's not forget how many people they cut open in ritual sacrifice.) Instead, symbolic and abstracted representations of the nature and action of various energy centers were depicted by the use of animal symbolism and other ingenious pictorial devices. Actual physical relationships were also revised and abstracted in order to illustrate certain principles of Tantric energy work.

For example, in this particular case, the spine curves forward towards the front of the body, which is unusual, but probably relates to the bellows-like structures seen on the left and right side of the figure at about the level where the spine curves.

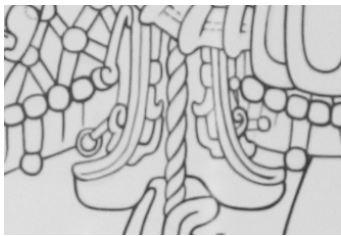


Because of the density of the imagery and the difficulties of laying all the centers out in clear relationships, the artist took liberties with the location of some chakras. Here we see the sex center in the form of a penis and scrotum, rendered (to the uninitiated) as part of a decorative tassel on a belt. The fact that we are seeing an x-ray, or inside view, of the figure belies the

interpretation of this as a garment accessory. The knot around the penis indicates the traditional Tantric practice of restricting the flow of sex energy through intentional abstinence from orgasm.

This is part of the Hatha and Tantric exercise which falls under the title of *Viparipa Karani*. The phrase implies "reverse flow;" there are exercises connected with it usually left out of English translations due to their explicit and graphic nature.

The Hindu term for the center connected with the sexual function is called *Svanisthana*—*Sva* being Sanskrit for Self, from which we have derived the word "self" in modern English.



The root chakra is depicted as a forked structure directly above the testicles. This mildly unconventional representation depicts the flow of energy down the left and right leg, which is clearly referred to in the complex structure found at the feet, which we'll get to later. This refers to what is known, in Eastern practices, as the Large Macrocosmic Orbit, which as opposed to the Small Microcosmic Orbit, exits the body through the two limbs.



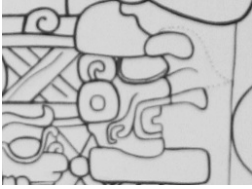
Here we have a view of the entire lower and abdominal chakra complexes. The artist has shown the dense relationship of various energy centers in the solar plexus, which is not a single chakra location but actually a location with a number of different auxiliary energy centers not just in the center, but also to the left and right side of complex. The dense network of nerves or nadis located in this area is shown in the net like structure in the background of the image.

These auxiliary energy centers, or meridians, are considered as enormously powerful in Chinese alchemical medicine, which, like this diagram, recognizes multiple

nodes.



Two small figures at the left and right side above the bellows-like structures represent distinctive energy locations on the left and right channel of the body. The artist has repeatedly used imagery related to either human beings or other living creatures to indicate the animated nature of the energy. These energetic locations are much like the "Ley lines in the Earth", particular places where access to various energies are hidden.



Here we have the other small figure on what is the left side of the priest. It's notable that both of these figures are located right at the “gate” of the abdominal chakra complex, which is the location of one of the major “blockages” in Tantric discipline. Taken together, they represent specific auxiliary chakras that operate by storing and releasing divine in the abdominal area.

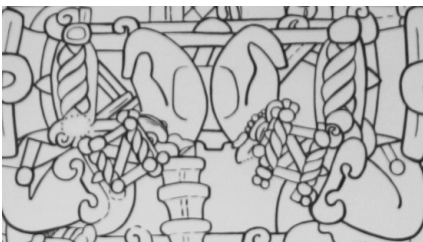


The blockage takes the distinctive visual form of an architectural detail such as a piece of masonry, indicating a gateway through which energy must pass. These blockages are referred to as “granthis,” or knots, in yoga terminology, but a gated or architectural obstacle is an equally valid interpretation. In this Mayan pictorial there are, as in Kundalini Yoga, three Granthis, each representing a particular type of identification; in an ascending order they represent identification with the body, the emotions, and the intellect. As in Yoga, these three identifications must be “pierced” one after the other in order to attain to spiritual freedom.



The peculiar bladders, or bellows- like structures, that lie to the left and right side of the abdominal complex appear to be referenced to breathing and the action of air in the infusing of Tantric energy. The curve of the spine towards the bellows on the right side of the diagram (left side of the priest, of course) is meant to be an indication of how energy flows down the body and into the abdominal chakra. Tantric disciplines—as well as other esoteric practices, including Zen—placed great emphasis on this region of the body, referred to in Zen as the hara, and the connection of breathing to the energy center. In Chinese Alchemical thinking this place is the “yellow court” or “place of the alchemical elixir” and Lower Heaven. In Yogic imagery this is the alchemical vessel and the repository of what Gurdjieff called the “large accumulator.”

The artist who drew this diagram was fairly specific in including this major practice as a prominent feature in the machinery of the body, using a remarkably creative vehicle (the bellows) to express a well-known esoteric understanding.



In an interesting development, unusual in Tantric imagery, the heart chakra is carefully concealed in this image. It lies behind two hands in a position of prayer. We see a ghostly outline of in the rectangle behind the two hands. Perhaps this was meant to indicate the sacred and secret nature of work with the heart. In Sanskrit this center, or Chakra is known as *Anahata*—the place of the unstruck sound. In Hindu tradition, this has as its symbol the six- pointed Star of David.

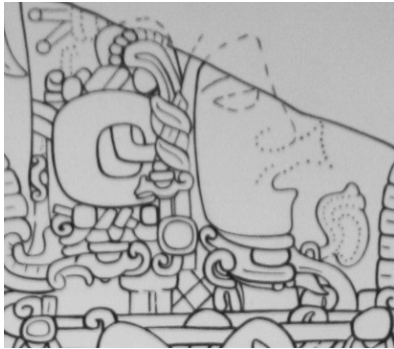


Hidden behind the hands, but still visible, we see indications of another gateway, or blockage, at the

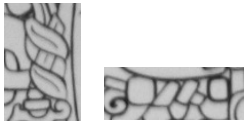


heart level, consistent with yoga teachings of the old world. This would represent, in Yogic thinking, identification with the feelings, or negative emotions which beset man as a demonic enemy.

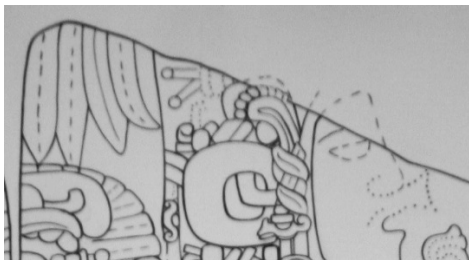
The Chakra of the Heart, or *Anahata*, is actually a trinity of Chakras, because below and to each side of Anahata are two chakras which are said to be forbidden to be meditated on. They are (left side), the *Vrkshakalpachakra* and the (right lower chest) The *Sokavyathachakra*. The columnar structures on either side of the hands represent these secret chakras. The left is called the “Wish-Granting-Tree” under which one's personal deity resides; upon the altar is placed the fondest wish of the heart. The right is her brother, and if she is disturbed, the brother visits an unutterable anguish upon the defiler. His name means sorrow, anguish, and regret.



The throat chakra in this particular image correctly encompasses both the throat area of the priest, as well as the lower area of the brain stem located at the top of the spine. It's a very complex area, with a number of different esoteric energies attached to it, and also contains several elements indicating the “knot,” or energy blockage, at the top of the spine. This third Granthi or knot, is identification with categorization, thought, words, and concepts that interfere with the flow from above; in its stead are built up the attitudes that one imitates and the beliefs that are stuffed into the child until it becomes an automaton.



These small details from the above image depict additional energy fields in the neck—one in the brain stem itself—which are quite familiar to Kundalini yoga practitioners.

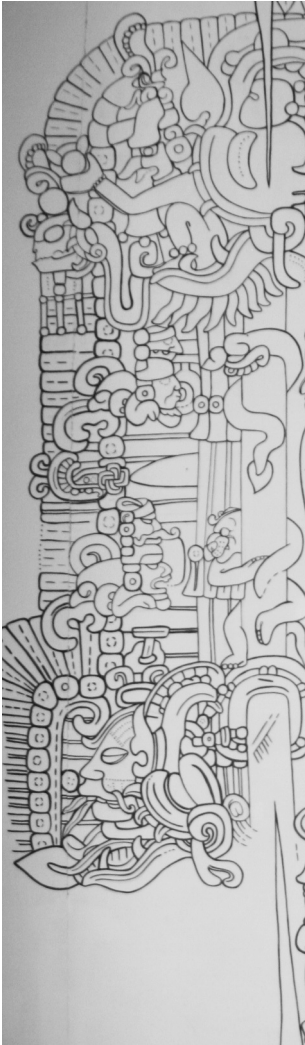


The top portion of the stela is missing, so we can't see critical areas that would have indicated the positions of the 3rd eye in the top of the head. The elaborate headgear seen on other Mayan images may give us an idea of what these areas looked like:





## The Lateral Views



The lateral views on this stela are without a doubt one of the most exciting, imaginative, and interesting features that the artist incorporated, since they show an essentially unprecedented side “x-ray” view of the priest’s body, with the spine at the back and a complementary vertical energy channel at the front.

The spine is clearly indicated by the stacked vertebrae on the left; the energy channel at the right side is at the front of the body—a pole with what appears to be a monkey and a serpent climbing it—and lacks vertebrae, indicating that the energy takes a different path traveling up the front of the body than when it travels down the spine at the back. It might be interesting to note that in eastern esoteric lore that snake is a sign of wisdom and the monkey, a sign of idiocy and mockery. Whatever the inferences the artist wanted us to draw, the choice of animals here cannot have been decorative or casual.

The circulation of energy down the spine and up the front of the body shown here is a traditional Tantric exercise. In both Indian and Chinese esoteric arts these are called “micro-cosmic- orbits”, and they can be utilized in both directions, one known as the “Fire” and the other as the “Water” paths. The Water path follows the route of the meridians of acupuncture, down the back (Yang), and up the front (Yin) and is called *Analoma* in Sanskrit (with the grain), while the “Fire” path is the reverse, and in Sanskrit is called *Viloma*, or "against the grain.

We can see that the “water path” circulation of the energy has been indicated in this manner in the diagram, since the monkey and the snake on the right-hand side of the diagram (representing the front of the priest) both have their heads moving upwards. The choice of the serpent and the monkey to represent the living quality of the energy manages to convey and intimacy, dynamism, and connection to the natural world lacking in most Tantric diagrams. As in most Yogic art, there are various poorly understood aspects and minute qualities of subtle and even sublime elements that can only be understood by the practitioner as he follows the wisdom of his teacher.

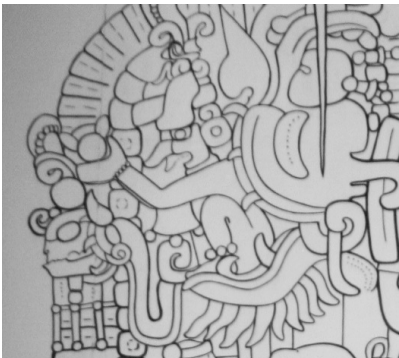
At the top of the spinal column, we see an angelic or embryonic figure with an offering in his hands, representing energy that is about to travel down the spine. At both the top and bottom locations in the spine, we see serpents whose mouths are giving birth to other entities. This striking imagery is strongly reminiscent of imagery seen in Hindu artwork at Banteay Srei in Cambodia. At the center of the diagram, we see a central figure representing the heart chakra.



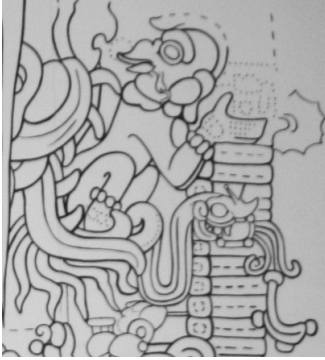
Detail From Temple, Banteay Srei, Cambodia. One amply dentured lion/serpent figure giving birth to another toothy lion/serpent figure out of its mouth, with a spinal column being emitted from the mouth of the second figure.



A strikingly similar image of a toothed serpent at the base of the spine in Stela 1, with both a subsidiary being and a spinal column being emitted from it. The iconographic elements in this particular piece of art work, which go well beyond casual geometric relationships, are similar enough to argue for contact of some kind between these two cultures. If they were found in any kind of geographic proximity on the same continent, they would be understood to come from the same symbolic tradition.



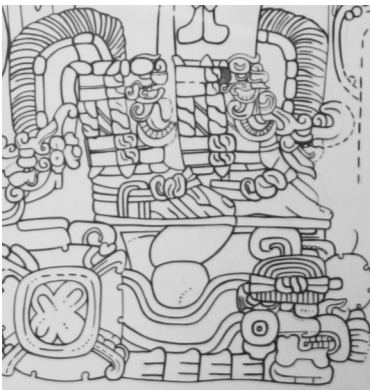
The toothy mouth of the upper serpent, emitting a serpent from its mouth (lower part of the jaw) which connects to the top of the spinal column. In addition to the serpent, an embryo, or perhaps demigod, bestows what appears to be fruit—most likely representing energy—at the top of the spine, from where it will descend.



Serpent head at the top of the spine, right side of Stela (left side of priest) with a near-identical motif. In this case, the smaller serpent emerging from the jaws of the larger one shows fountains of energy coming out of its mouth, flowing downward through the spine. On both sides of the diagram, the elaborate iconography indicates an entire world or universe both above and below the spine, showing that the transmission of energy takes place between levels, another common esoteric understanding in Tantric practice.



A view of the figure seen at the center of the spine, left side. This particular figure represents the heart chakra, or center of the spine.



At the bottom of the image, we encounter a complex series of images. The symbolism represents the transmission of esoteric energy through the human body down into the planet, symbolized by the figure which is apparently underground, beneath the priest's feet.

## **Tantric practices**

The Mayans had well established traditions in intentional suffering through mortification of the flesh, as evidenced by their practice of ritual bloodletting through physical austerities such as pulling threads with thorns on them through the foreskin of the penis, etc. It's presumed they consumed hallucinogenic drugs during religious ceremonies.

The evidence from Stela 1 strongly suggests that they also engaged in the practice of kundalini yoga, as it is known in the old world. The pictorial description of these practices in public monuments suggests that they were widespread and well known.

## **In conclusion**

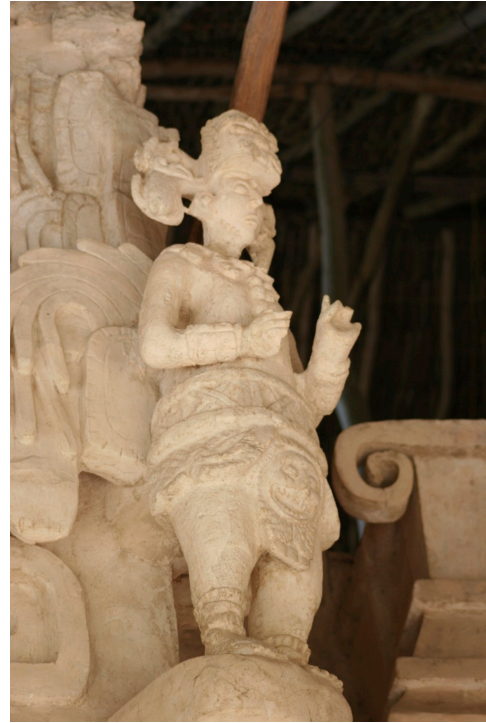
This particular stela encodes detailed information about a heretofore unknown Tantric practice among the priesthood of Mesoamerican cultures. The practice bears striking relationships to practices from the old world.

The premise that there may have been esoteric contact between these cultures is intriguing. Because the vast majority of the stucco on Mayan temples has been destroyed over the centuries, our understanding of exactly how they decorated the exterior of these buildings is accurate in the overall, but very limited in the particular. It's been noted before that the figures at Ek Balam in Mexico seem to bear a strange resemblance to angels and figures in meditative poses seen at Angkor Wat and other places.



Seated figures at Ek Balam in meditative poses





Angelic figures at Ek Balam in what appear to be yogic poses

The old world temples at Angkor Wat depict a well-established and centuries-long tradition of displaying esoteric practices on public monuments. This tradition appears to have been directly paralleled in Mesoamerican cultures.

Because Tantric chakra practices are unusually specific and elaborate, the encoded information seen on Stela 1 appears to argue for an origin in the old world, possibly because of contact from an itinerant yoga master similar to Bodhidharma, who spread Buddhism from India into China.

If, on the other hand, the practice arose independently in both the old and new worlds, it's equally intriguing to note the detailed similarities between the two practices. What we can surmise after analyzing the symbolism in Stela 1 is that the Mayan priesthood had a well-established Tantric practice very similar to those of the old world yoga schools, giving us unusual new insights into the nature of their esoteric religious understandings, and providing fertile ground for further study..