

Saraha and Sahaja



Roger Jackson

Carleton College (emeritus professor)

Maitripa College (visiting professor)

For Ocean: January 7, 2024

1. Introductory
2. Who was Saraha?
 1. His name(s): Saraha, The Archer, the Great Brahmin, etc.
 2. His biographies
 - i. Three narratives
 1. The radish-girl narrative
 2. The fletcheress narrative
 3. The brahmin brothers narrative
 - ii. Common denominator: brahmin □ monk □ mahāsiddha associated with a yoginī
 3. His works
 - i. Approximately 35–40, including songs, sādhanas, and a tantric commentary

- ii. A handful of Indic-language sources (including the *Dohā Treasury* and four performance songs)
 - iii. A multitude of Tibetan-language sources (including the Dohā Trilogy, the vajra-song trilogy, the *Alphabetical Dohās*, and the *Pith Instruction on Mahāmudrā*)
- 4. His possible context: Pāla-era Buddhist north India, possibly in the 10th century, possibly in Bengal or Odisha
- 5. Qualifications
 - i. We don't know his "real" life-story
 - ii. We don't know his dates
 - iii. We don't know his locale
 - iv. We don't know his native language
 - v. We don't know which works are "his"
- 6. His importance in Tibet
 - i. Forerunner of mahāmudrā lineages (Nāgārjuna □ Śavaripa □ Maitrīpa (+ Nāropa)
 - ii. Teacher of mahāmudrā via his Dohā Trilogy and *Pith Instruction on Mahāmudrā*
 - iii. Inspiring figure encountered in dreams and visions
- 3. What is sahaja?
 - 1. General observations: literal meaning vs. common usages vs. as a term of art
 - 2. Various translations (Sanskrit *saha + ja*; Tibetan *lhan cig + skyas pa*; Hindi *sahaj*)
 - i. Literal meaning: Together-born or co-incident
 - ii. Common usages
 - 1. Sanskrit: brother (rare), congenital, hereditary, innate, inherent, original
 - 2. Hindi: comfortable, natural, uncomplicated, easy

- iii. As a term of art in religious traditions: innate (Shahidullah, Snellgrove, et al.), connate (Jackson, Callahan, Brunnhölzl et al.), coemergent (Guenther, Mathes et al.), simultaneously arisen (Kvaerne), spontaneous (Beyer), natural (Cleary)
- iv. What to do in a Buddhist tantric context? “Connate”? “Coemergent”? Just “sahaja” (cf. “mahāmudrā”)?

4. In India

- 1. Is it the basis of a movement or school?
 - i. Modern Indian scholarly conventions: “Sahajiyās” (Buddhist and Hindu) and the “Sahajayāna” (Buddhist)
 - ii. Problems with this
 - 1. Doesn’t appear in any Indic or Tibetan source
 - 2. It’s influenced by 2nd-millennium Hindu and Sikh traditions
- 2. Sahaja outside Buddhism
 - i. Pre-tantric era
 - 1. Bhagavad Gītā (3rd century BCE?) 18.48: “One should not abandon one’s inborn karma (*sahajakarma*) / even though it be deficient....” □
 - 2. Kālidāsa (5th century CE)
 - a. *Śakuntalā* 6.10: “You can’t give up a lowdown trade / That your ancestors began (*sahaja*); / A butcher butchers things, and yet / He’s the tenderest-hearted man.”
 - b. *Raghuvamśa* 8.43: “Having given up even his natural (*sahaja*) firmness he began to cry in accents choked by tears. Even iron [when] heated becomes soft; what need we (then) say of those possessing bodies?”
 - ii. Tantric and post-tantric era

1. Kashmir Shaivism: *sahaj-vidyā* (awareness of the connate), via
 (a) service to guru and Śiva, (b) purification internal
paraśaktis, (c) transmutation of body and its elements
2. Hindu Nāth traditions: Matsyendranāth (10th century?): “A
 human is born with an instinct for naturalness. He has never
 forgotten the days of his primordial perfection, except
 insomuch as the memory became buried under the artificial
 superstructure of civilization and its artificial
 concepts. *Sahaja* means natural... The tree grows according
 to *Sahaja*, natural and spontaneous in complete conformity
 with the Natural Law of the Universe. Nobody tells it what to
 do or how to grow. It has no *svadharma* or rules, duties and
 obligations incurred by birth. It has only *svabhāva* - its own
 inborn self or essence - to guide it. *Sahaja* is that nature
 which, when established in oneself, brings the state of
 absolute freedom and peace.”
3. Sant traditions
 - a. Kabir (1440–1418):
 “My mind has returned / To its own primal state; / I
 realized the Lord / When I died while living. / Says
 Kabir: I am merged / In the bliss of Sahaj; / I no longer
 know fear, / Nor inspire it in others.”
 - b. Nanak (1469–1539):
Sahaje ko sab ko lochd, jeta sagal sansar: “The whole
 world is desirous of attaining the state of sahaj.” □
sahajayoga in Sikhism
4. Bengali Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā traditions:
 “The mother’s love for her son is natural (*sahaja*) and
 constant in her heart; the hearts of corrupted people need

training. In the same way, the ever-perfect wonderful love for Kṛṣṇa is not apparent to the creature bound in delusion; they gain the state only by cultivating it. But when that state is brought about, their bonds are loosed, and they dance in the joy of Vraja.”

5. Modern takes

- a. Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950): *nirvikalpa* vs. *sahaja samādhī*
- b. Nirmala Vidya Amruta (1923–2011): Sahaja Yoga (= *nirvikalpa samādhī*)

3. Sahaja in Indian Buddhism (5973 mentions in canon [vs., e.g., 7460 for mahāmudrā, 84,465 for empty/emptiness])

i. Pre-tantric usages: “congenital” “natural” (esp. in Yogācāra literature)

- 1. Positive, e.g., bodhisattva’s proclivity toward goodness; buddha-nature and natural mind
- 2. Negative, e.g., “natural” self-grasping

ii. Tantric usages

1. Different classes of tantras and tantric literature

- a. Mahāyoga/Father Tantras (e.g., Guhyasamāja): very few mentions

- b. Yoginī/Mother Tantras: the locus classicus

- i. In Cakrasaṃvara (*Samvarodaya Tantra* [9th century] 31.23):

- 1. “[The yoginī’s] nature is connate joy; she is nondual, and is the supreme female lord.”
 - 2. Sahaja Cakrasaṃvara as embodiment of the connate



ii. In the *Hevajra Tantra* (9th–10th c.) 1.8.25–36:

“(30) ... In the completion stage, the connate is fourfold.... (32) Through joy there is some bliss; through supreme joy, there is more; / through the joy of cessation, there is dispassion; connate joy is the culmination. /... (34) Supreme joy is said to be becoming, cessation to be nirvāṇa, /and mere joy to be the middle, while the connate is free from those. / (35) [The connate] involves neither passion nor dispassion nor a middle; / in awakening to perfect thatness, there is no wisdom nor method. / (36) The connate cannot be explained by another nor obtained from anyone else; / it is known by oneself and [attained] through merit and proper service to the guru.”

iii. In *Kālacakra* [11th century]:

1. As the root of deity-and-consort
2. As the co-incidence of the purity of body, speech, and mind
3. As a buddha-body, *sahajakāya* (= *svabhāvikakāya*)

iv. In the treatises of the mahāsiddhas

1. Indrabhūti/Ḍombī Heruka's (10th century?)

Accomplishment of the Connate:

(1.1) “In order to favor living beings I will explain the perfection of Sahaja which is beyond fire-offerings, oblations and penances and is not to be practiced by beginners. (1.2) The nature of Sahaja is designated as the [stage of] final perfection. Hence it is the perfection of Sahaja; Sahaja is known to be inexpressible.... (1.15) Sahaja can neither be explained by anybody nor can it be received from anybody. It is to be comprehended as a result of serving a teacher possessing merit.... (3.7) Whatever substances there are, whether fixed or moving, creepers, thickets, grass, etc., they should be conceived of as the Ultimate Reality, which is of the nature of one’s own self. (3.8) There is nothing else in them, (only) the great Bliss of self-experiencing. Self-experiencing is the perfection and self-experiencing is the conceiving.”

2. The place of the connate in fourfold schemes: Nāropa (10th–11th century) vs. Maitrīpa (1007–85)

v. In the songs of the mahāśiddhas:

1. Too many to list; Saraha will be our lens
2. Main senses
 - a. Metaphysics: the nondual ultimate
 - b. Epistemology: blissful gnosis

c. Praxis: bodily and contemplative
yoga

d. Social and religious critique and
debates about transgression

2. Kvaerne's summary of Indian tantric Buddhist usages:

Sahaja is: ineffable, blissful, timeless, gnostic, nondual, cosmic,
transcendent, sacred, and luminous

5. Sahaja in Saraha (approximately 60 instances)

1. In the *People Dohās* (16 instances)

i. On the text(s)

ii. Some sahaja verses

1. Verse 23: "Thatness, the connate nature, / is neither a thing nor a nonthing."
2. Verse 32: "Where senses have subsided / and your own essence has been experienced, / that, my friends, is where the connate is: / ask the guru to make it clear."
3. Verse 57: "When cognition fully ceases, / bodily bonds are broken; / when [things] taste the same in the connate, / then there is no low-caste or brahmin."
4. Verse 71: "If you hold tight the guru's precept, and strive in it, / the connate will emerge—there is no doubt."
5. Verse 97: "Within the connate, every scripture is seen, / and the many things you wish for clearly appear."
6. Verse 101: "When body, speech, and cognition are indivisible, / then your connate nature is beautiful."
7. Verse 106: "Mind-itself is the yoginī, who has accomplished thatness: / know her as pledged to the connate."

8. Verse 115: “Friends! The profound and the vast / are not separate, nor do they [have] their own nature; / at the time of the fourth joy, the connate, / you know the primordial experience.”
9. Verse 125: “Cognition purified of stains is the connate: / at that time, no discordant factors can enter in; / it’s like on a limpid lake: / the foam is itself water and into [water] dissolves.”

2. Elsewhere in Saraha

i. *Queen Dohās* (3 instances)

1. On the text
2. Some sahaja verses
 - a. Verse 10: “Earth, water, fire, wind, and space / don’t exist apart from the connate’s single taste. / Not conceiving existence and nirvāṇa as two— / this, it’s explained, is the abiding nature, the reality sphere.”
 - b. Verse 61: “Realizing the natural sameness of wisdom and means / you’ll attain the connate through luminous mind; / It emerges by increasing like a waxing moon, / and it’s enjoyed like rice irradiated by the sun and moon.”

ii. *King Dohā* (2 instances)

1. On the text
2. A sahaja verse

Verse 3: “Though multiple lamps may blaze throughout a house, / the sightless dwell in darkness; just so, / though the connate is all-pervasive / and near, to fools it’s very far away.”

iii. *Alphabetical Dohās* (9 instances)

1. On the text
2. Some sahaja verses

- a. Verse 10: “Hey, yogin: don’t chatter (*ṭalamalana*) about the wrong path: / when you chatter (*ṭalamala*), you don’t realize the connate.”
- b. Verse 13: “When something passes on (*ḍhaliya*), it resolves into a single aspect, / and when mind passes on (*ḍhaliya*), the supreme connate comes to be: / although the five senses may pass on (*ḍhaliya*), the connate remains.”
- c. Verse 25: “When (*yabing*) we speak of the *naḍa* and the drops,/then, through the voice of the *yoginī*, the connate is realized; / just so (*yeseng*), based on abiding in your own joy, / you’ll have no fear of birth or death (*yama*).”
- d. Verse 30: “When there’s enjoyment of the supreme connate (*sahaja*), / then one’s own and others’ (*ṣabara-abara*) karmic tendencies are destroyed.”
- e. Verse 31: “All [*saya*] these entities are alike in being nonentities; / don’t abandon them because of error about emptiness (*sunyu*) and compassion. / Enjoy the connate (*sahaja*) joy continually: / whoever possesses the supreme connate (*sahaja*) cannot be bound.”

iv. *Performance Songs* (2 instances)

- 1. On the text
- 2. Some *sahaja* verses
 - a. Verse 3.3: “The boat goes downstream, and a boatman [guides it] with his pole; / let it go—and by letting it go, you’ll know the other [shore] through the connate.”
 - b. Verse 4.3: “Wondrous! In the confusion of worldly existence / —amazing!—self and other are seen; / but this world, which is like a water bubble, / has the self-nature of connate emptiness.”

v. *Great Seal Pith Instruction* (3 instances)

1. On the text
2. Some sahaja verses
 - a. Verse 5: “[Mind] is designated as the ‘casket of dharma,’ / so there are no wrong dharmas within it; / it is the connate nature from the beginning.”
 - b. Verse 32: “The taste of nondual connate great bliss: / just as water poured into water has a single taste, / so, when [mind] abides within [reality] as it is, / cognition fixated on grasping at referents is completely pacified.”

vi. *Body Treasury* (11 instances)

1. On the text
2. Some sahaja verses
 - a. Verse 23: “Those who practice the yoga of connate great bliss / and emptiness engage [in the practice] beyond thought.”
 - b. Verse 49: “All buddhas, sentient beings, and dharmas / are connate with your own pure mind-itself.”

vii. *Speech Treasury* (5 instances)

1. On the text
2. A sahaja verse

Verse 36: “The five aggregates and so forth become the supreme secret: / the mundane and the transmundane abide connately, / and suchness, which is pointed out through the kindness / of the guru, is attained on its own, without need of proof.”

viii. *Mind Treasury* (4 instances)

1. On the text
2. Some sahaja verses

- a. Verse 1: “Hey! The connate gnosis / is suchness experienced on its own, / suchness illuminating awareness, unawareness, and self-awareness; / [as] a lamp illuminates the dark and [also] illuminates itself by itself, [gnosis] awakens to itself.”
- b. Verse 22: “Gaining the experience intended by yoga, you’ll [become] a complete buddha; /on the unmistakable path, there is just the connate.”

ix. *Cognitive Disengagement from Body Speech, and Mind* (1 instance)

- 1. On the text
- 2. A sahaja verse

Verse 60: “... the pure nature of unchanging great bliss, as well as the connate, / are the true nature of mind and are qualities / of the utterly pure nature of all the tathāgatas.”

x. *Untitled Songs* (3 instances)

- 1. On the texts
- 2. A sahaja verse

Verse 1.1: “Ah! Since the depths of the mind are difficult to know, / when you connect with the connate, [mind] is nonexistent.”

xi. *Summit of Instruction on Suchness* (2 instances)

- 1. On the text
- 2. A sahaja verse

Verse 20: “The blissful taste of the connate / is the uninterrupted self-nature, / like a flowing river or the sky, / abiding forever without change.”

- 3. Synonyms: the ultimate, primordial nature, emptiness, nonduality, essence, that, thatness, suchness, reality, reality sphere, the one, the lord, self, mind,

mind-itself, great bliss, luminosity, gnosis, self-awareness, reality body,
awakening, mahāmudrā

4. Vis à vis mahāmudrā

i. Approximately 60 instances of *mahāmudrā*, most in *Body, Speech, Mind Treasuries* (but also several in *Queen Dohā* and *Mahāmudrā Pith Instruction*)

ii. Meanings of mahāmudrā

1. As a hand-gesture
2. As one of four seals to tantric practice in yoga tantra and unexcelled yoga-tantra
3. As a consort for sexual yoga practice at completion stage of unexcelled yoga-tantra
4. As the nature of reality/mind and its realization □ implicitly synonymous with sahaja, though they are seldom mentioned together

6. Sahaja in Tibetan Buddhism

1. Sakyapa: organizing the downward and upward progression of joys, as in the Hevajra tradition

2. Geluk: Tantric mahāmudrā as gnosis of connate bliss-emptiness (from Panchen Losang Chögyan's [1570–1662] *Lamp So Bright*):

“On a foundation of obtaining the four pure empowerments, guarding your vows and pledges properly, and stabilizing your familiarity with the generation stage, you should penetrate the vital points of the vajra body through skill in various internal and external methods to make the vital winds enter, abide, and dissolve within the central channel. When the gnosis of connate great bliss that arises from that realizes emptiness by way of its mental image, that is semblance luminosity; when such a gnosis realizes emptiness directly, that is actual luminosity.”

3. Kagyü

i. Gampopa's (1079–1153) Connate Union:

“Connate mind itself is the Dharma body, / connate concepts are waves of the Dharma body, / connate appearances are the light of the Dharma body, / appearances and mind are connately inseparable.”

ii. Karma Trinlepa's (1458–1539) explanation of a reference to “the triple connate” in Saraha's *People Dohā*, verse 38:

1. Version 1

- a. Connate bodily appearance and emptiness
- b. Connate expressive speech and emptiness
- c. Connate awareness and emptiness

2. Version 2

- a. Connate appearance and emptiness
- b. Connate emptiness and nonarising
- c. Connate nonarising and beyond-thought

7. Issues raised by discourse on sahaja

- 1. Vajrayāna vs. the “lower” yānas
- 2. Self-emptiness vs. other-emptiness
- 3. Instantaneous vs. gradual paths
- 4. The rejection of philosophy
- 5. The rejection of ritual
- 6. The rejection of ethics
- 7. The rejection of expression

8. A brief meditation

People Dohā 43: “Mind is itself the single seed of everything, / whence existence and nirvāṇa are projected; / to the mind, which like a wish-fulfilling gem / brings about [all] desired results, I prostrate.” □

People Dohā 96a–d: “When mind is pointed out by mind, / then conceptuality abides in motionless stability; / just as salt dissolves in water, / so mind dissolves into its inherent nature.”

Bibliography

- Brunnhölzl, Karl, trans. 2020–2024. *Sounds of Innate Freedom: The Indian Texts of Mahāmudrā*.
Compiled by His Holiness the Seventh Karmapa, Chötra Gyatso. Vols. 2–5. Somerville, MA:
Wisdom Publications.
- Dasgupta, Shashi Bhushan. (1946) 1976. *Obscure Religious Cults*. 2nd ed. Calcutta: Firma KLM.
- Davidson, Ronald M. 2002. “Reframing Sahaja: Genre, Representation, Ritual, and Lineage.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 30 (1): 45–83.
- Dimock, Edward C. 1989. *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava-sahajiyā Cult of Bengal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Guenther, Herbert V. 1993. *Ecstatic Spontaneity: Saraha’s Three Cycles of Dohā*. Nanzan Studies in Asian Religions 4. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press.
- Hess, Linda, and Shukdev Singh, trans. 1983. *The Bījāk of Kabīr*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Jackson, Roger R. 2004. *Tantric Treasures: Three Mystical Texts from Buddhist India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . Forthcoming 2024. *Saraha: Poet of Blissful Awareness*. Lives of the Masters. Boulder: Shambhala Publications.
- Kvaerne, Per. 1975. “On the Concept of Sahaja in Indian Buddhist Tantric Literature.” *Temenos* 11:88–135.
- . 1977. *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs: A Study of the Caryāgīti*. Oslo:
Universitetsforlaget. [Reprint available from Orchid Press, Bangkok, 2010.]
- Loserries, Andrea, ed. 2015. *Sahaja: The Role of Dohā and Caryāgīti in the Indo-Tibetan Interface*. Delhi:
Buddhist World Press.
- Mathes, Klaus-Dieter. 2008. “The Succession of the Four Seals (*Caturmudrānvaya*) together with
Selected Passages from Kāropa’s Commentary.” In *Tantric Studies, vol. 1*, edited by Harunaga
Isaacson, 89–130. Hamburg: Centre for Tantric Studies, University of Hamburg.
- Mathes, Klaus-Dieter, and Péter-Dániel Szántó, eds. and trans. Forthcoming 2024. *Saraha’s Spontaneous Songs*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Shendge, Malathi J. 1967. “Śrīśahajasiddhi.” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 10 (2/3): 126–49.
- McDaniel, June. 1989. *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Shahidullah, Muhammad. 1928. *Les chants mystiques de Kāṇha et de Saraha: Les Dohākoṣa (en apabhraṃsa, avec les versions tibétaines) et les Caryā (en vieux-bengali)*. Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve.
- Snellgrove, David. (1959) 2010. *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*. [2 vols. in one.] Bangkok: Orchid Press.
- Stenzel, Julia. 2015. "The Four Joys in the Teaching of Nāropa and Maitrīpa." *Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 16:193–214.