

To cite this article: Sanita Tabassum (2025). THE ROLE OF THE BODY IN BUDDHIST MYSTICISM AND BAUL SONG: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH, International Journal of Education and Social Science Research (IJESSR) 8 (5): 417-421 Article No. 1159, Sub Id 1720

THE ROLE OF THE BODY IN BUDDHIST MYSTICISM AND BAUL SONG: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37500/IJESSR.2025.8529>

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how embodied experience mediates spiritual realization within two distinct mystical traditions: Buddhist meditation and the Baul tradition of Bengal. Drawing on phenomenological theory—particularly the foundational contributions of Edmund Husserl (1983/1913) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962)—the study stresses the bodily dimension of spirituality. In Buddhism, the body functions as a disciplined locus of mindfulness, anchoring and supporting the development of insight (Shusterman, 2008). In contrast, Baul practitioners engage the body as the primary medium for the realization of the divine, esoterically articulating profound truths through dance and song (Capwell, 1986; McDaniel, 1989). This somatic orientation aligns with Csordas's (1994) concept of a "somatic mode of attention," in which the body is both the instrument and expression of spiritual experience. Despite differing metaphysical frameworks, both traditions reject Cartesian dualism and offer a phenomenological perspective in which spiritual insight arises through embodied perception, echoing Merleau-Ponty's (1962) assertion that "perception is always corporeal, and the body is a precondition for any experience of the world." This comparative analysis advocates that embodiment is foundational to mystical realization. The findings contribute to discussions in social sciences and religious studies on how religious identities are shaped and expressed through physical experiences, sensory interactions, and ritual practices (Levin, 1985; Kourie, 2009).

KEYWORDS: Spirituality; Phenomenology; Embodiment; Buddhist Mysticism; Baul Song; Tantric Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

In many mystical traditions, the body is often perceived as a hindrance to spiritual awakening, with the mind or soul occupying center stage in the pursuit of transcendence. This dualistic view can obscure the role of physicality, implying that spiritual advancement requires detachment from the body. However, this perspective neglects traditions that regard the body as central to encountering the sacred. This article investigates the role of the body in Buddhist mysticism and the Baul song tradition using

a phenomenological approach that prioritizes lived, embodied experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Husserl, 1983/1913). In these traditions, the body is not a mechanical vessel but a dynamic medium through which spiritual awareness unfolds.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

In Buddhist mysticism, particularly within Tantric and meditative practices, techniques such as posture, breath control, and deity visualization serve transformative purposes beyond physical discipline (McDaniel, 1989; Ray, 2001). These methods reshape perception and diminish ego-centric awareness. Similarly, Baul practitioners view the body as a living temple. Through musical expression, symbols, and performance, they celebrate the body as a personal and immediate gateway to the divine (Openshaw, 2002; Guenther, 1972).

Historically, dualistic paradigms—ranging from Platonic idealism to Cartesian mind–body separation—have depicted the body as inferior or obstructive to spiritual elevation (Eliade, 1959). However, recent interdisciplinary efforts, particularly in phenomenology and anthropology, have challenged this disembodied bias. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) concept of the "lived body" asserts that bodily experience is central to consciousness. Husserl's (1983/1913) phenomenology supports this shift by emphasizing intentionality and the embodiment of perception. Csordas (1994) advances this with his notion of embodiment as a methodological orientation in religious anthropology.

In Buddhist traditions, especially Tantric Buddhism, the body is a sacred microcosm containing *nāḍīs* (channels), *prāṇa* (energies), and *cakras* (centers), activated through mantra, breath, and visualization (Ray, 2001). In Theravāda Buddhism, bodily mindfulness (*kāyānupassanā*) is crucial to *vipassanā* meditation, fostering present-moment awareness and self-transcendence (Thera, 1962).

The Baul tradition, a syncretic movement blending Vaishnavism, Tantra, and Sufism, holds that divinity resides within the body (Openshaw, 2002). Their practices—singing, breathing, dancing, symbolic poetry—revolve around accessing this inner divinity. Baul verses celebrate the body as the abode of the *Moner Manush* (inner self or divine presence) (Capwell, 1986). These practices promote spiritual transformation through embodied aesthetics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This qualitative study adopts a phenomenological methodology to analyze the role of the body in Buddhist and Baul mystical traditions. The method includes:

- Analyzing primary texts: Buddhist scriptures, tantric manuals, Baul lyrics
- Applying Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to experiential themes of embodiment
- Conducting comparative textual and interpretative analysis of rituals, practices, and metaphors

The research is grounded in secondary sources and aims to reconstruct the lived experience of embodiment through textual and ethnographic data rather than direct fieldwork.

The Embodied Path in Buddhist Mysticism:

In Theravāda Buddhism, mindfulness of the body is emphasized through the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Practitioners cultivate non-attached observation of bodily sensations, recognizing impermanence and reducing ego identification (Thera, 1962). In Vajrayāna Buddhism, tantric practices involve visualization of deities, activation of chakras, and energy manipulation. These rituals dissolve dualistic thinking and enable direct access to enlightened states (Ray, 2001). Phenomenologically, these practices transform the body into a perceptual field of awakening.

Baul Mysticism:

The Divine Body in Song the Bauls view the body not as a burden but as the vessel of liberation. The philosophy of dehotattva (“truth of the body”) underscores the body as the site of divine presence. Baul songs express this insight:

“Deho ta shonar ghor
Shoja bhitore rakh re tor mon
Manush bhitar-i ache re
Toke bujhte hobe mon”

"The body is a golden home—place your mind deep inside.

The Divine dwells within—realize it through the heart."

Here, “shonar ghor” (golden home) metaphorically portrays the body as sacred. From a phenomenological perspective, such verses invite practitioners to recognize spirituality within breath, voice, and sensation. Another verse highlights the embodied path:

“Gole male milon hobe
Deher majhe dhyan dhore
Shunle moner bāṇi
Mūl pābi nijer ghore”

"Union lies in the body’s clasp, hold meditation within.

Hear the message of the heart—you’ll find the source at home."

The Baul experience is grounded in embodied ritual—singing becomes meditation, breath becomes prayer, and movement becomes revelation. Their spirituality blurs the boundaries between the sensual and the sacred (Openshaw, 2002).

Comparative Analysis:

Embodied Liberation in Two Traditions Even though they come from different cultural and doctrinal roots, Buddhist mysticism and Baul spirituality share a profound understanding: the body plays a crucial role in achieving spiritual liberation.

Aspect	Buddhism	Baul Tradition
View of the Body	Focuses on the idea of impermanence and letting go of bodily attachments	Celebrates the body as a sacred, divine vessel
Approach to the Body	Encourages mindfulness and awareness of the body	Engages through ecstatic song and dance
Energy Systems	Utilizes subtle energy systems for personal transformation	Uses breath and sexuality as spiritual symbols
Goal	Aims for liberation by transcending attachment to the body	Seeks union and divine realization within the body

Despite doctrinal differences, both traditions challenge dualism and promote embodied transformation as the path to enlightenment.

CONCLUSION:

This study illuminates the central role of embodiment in the mystical traditions of Buddhism and Baul song. Using a phenomenological framework, it demonstrates that both traditions treat the body not as a limitation but as a medium of spiritual revelation. The practices of mindfulness, chanting, song, and movement foster a sacred re-engagement with the body. These findings offer a corrective to disembodied spiritual paradigms and affirm that true mysticism is not about escaping the body, but about dwelling fully within it.

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Footnotes:

"Moner Manush" means "the man of the heart," a term used by Bauls to refer to the inner divine presence.

Dehotattva is a Baul philosophy emphasizing the sanctity and spiritual potential of the human body.