

# SUSPENSION OF BELIEF



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[This article is excerpted from Paul's lecture *Suspension of Belief: A 21st Century Adaptation of a Venerable Spiritual Practice*, and was selected by the California Community College Honors Symposium to be presented at Stanford University, 2011.]

For a millennium, the Tamil Hindus have maintained the sacred act of perforating their skin with metal hooks to suspend their bodies (called *chadak puja*). During the 1990s, the practice of suspension diffused into non-Tamil cultures. This presentation demonstrates the socio-religious significance of the *chadak puja* and traces its historical adaptation into the emerging international counterculture of "suspension practitioners." For both groups, the physiological stresses of suspension trigger transcendent states of dissociation and generate both secular and social benefits of in-group catharsis and cohesion.

This analysis stems from historical sources and qualitative research accumulated through both direct observation of the Sri Lankan Vel festival and participant observation in the Oslo Suspension Convention.

This article narrowly focuses and defines the act of flesh hook suspension to the insertion of metal (usually steel) hooks. These hooks range from approximately 2mm (for the Tamil) to 4 or even 5mm (for Westerners). As a general rule, increased hook thickness gives greater strength and integrity for the hook shape while displacing more skin tissue over a greater surface area. The Tamil use sharpened hooks to pierce into the hypodermis, the subcutaneous, and the superficial fascia layers of the skin. Westerners innovated a procedure of piercing with special, sterile, single-use hypodermic needles, which the hooks are inserted into either before or after the piercing. Factors that contribute to the physical and mechanical safety of flesh hook suspension include:

- Hook size, material, and construction;
- Placement of the hook(s) on the body (for various skin areas are known to be less or more capable of withstanding the stresses of suspension);
- Amount of tissue within the hook to diffuse skin surface pressure at hook site; and
- Number of hooks proportionally sharing the body's weight, and the overall weight of the individual participant.

The hooks are fastened to ropes. The Tamil then tie these ropes to a freshly cut, flexible, and strong tree or a constructed frame. For the rigging, Westerners incorporate physics with the existing knowledge and apparatus of rock climbing.

It must be mentioned that this text narrowly defines suspension and only looks at two cultures' application of suspension. Accounts of suspension manifest in many forms throughout human culture and time including: the Oh Kee Pa ceremony of the Mandan Native Americans; the Sundance Ritual of the Lakota; the pole-fliers of the Nahua, Haustec, and Otomi peoples of Mexico; the "land divers" (known as *Naghol*) of Pentecost Island in Vanuatu (noteworthy, this is the forerunner of Bungee jumping); the suspension with piercing from a tree of the Norse god Odin; and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Time constraints prohibit—for this article—exploring the details of the variations, the questions about more generalized suspension practices, and the effects and implications of independent origination versus cultural diffusion. However, it is important to acknowledge this macro-perspective exists and needs further study. Most importantly, the analogous forms of suspension introduced here are intended to dissuade the audience from exoticizing what is a universal practice.

## THE TAMIL

The Republic of India was formed in 1947, comprising more than an estimated 2,000 ethnic groups. The Tamil are considered one of the main ethnic populations within the major Dravidian linguistic group. The ethnic Tamil homeland is Tamil Nadu, a state in the southeast region. This region had some of the earliest human habitation outside of Africa. Archeological remains, DNA genealogy testing, and written and oral history all substantiate the Tamil having one of the earliest cultures and one of the oldest continuous religions. This supports the Tamil claim that the origins for the ritual suspension practice predate written history. Though variations of the tradition still survive in parts of India, the practice of suspension in the Tamil Nadu region has greatly diminished. The tradition, referred to by the British as "hook swinging," was banned in India in the mid-to-late 19th century by British officials with the support of Hindu reformists, members of upper castes, and non-Tamil ethnic groups.

From their earliest dynasties, the Tamil have been seafarers and traders, spreading both their material and non-material culture throughout the region. In the 19th century, the British empire exploited the Tamil as a form of cheap labor, forcing a diaspora of Tamil communities throughout its colonies to such places as Fiji, South Africa, the Caribbean, Burma, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka (the island nation where the Vel festival of this presentation takes place). It is the diasporic Tamil communities that have best preserved the hook swinging tradition.

## CHADAK PUJA

In 1874 a cholera epidemic in southern Sri Lanka caused the colonial government to ban pilgrimages to the sacred city of Katirkamam. In response, the wealthy South Indian business community in Colombo decided to celebrate locally and created its own event and the Vel festival, which stands independent of the Kataragama festival. Vel is held in Jaffna,

the Tamil capital in the north, and Colombo, the national capital. The festival honors the God of War Murugan—also known by other names including Murukan, Skanda, and Kataragama—whose gilded chariot, complete with his Vel (lance), is ceremonially hauled from the Old and New Kathiresan Kovils or Temples usually starting on Sea Street, in the neighborhood of Pettah, to Temples around Galle Road, in the neighborhood Bambalapitiya. The procession of six miles takes approximately four hours of sustained penance to travel. The Vel festival is usually held in July or August.

In general, when the Tamil are asked why participants pierce themselves, they explain that they are fulfilling a vow made when asking help of Lord Murugan—a serious illness, for instance, or difficulty in an examination, a job, or with arranging a love marriage or conceiving a child (particularly a boy). The researcher Elizabeth Fuller Collins notes that “most devotees interviewed do not state enlightenment as their goal but rather had made a vow to Murugan asking [for] help in their everyday lives” (10). Collins goes on to say, “Vow fulfillment has been described by some scholars as penance. However the popular belief is that Murugan has answered prayers and the devotees are upholding their end of the bargain” (52).

Particularly for disenfranchised peoples, one cannot overemphasize the importance of the mutually derived pride, identity, and support which results from maintaining strong cultural signifiers such as suspension. However, an in-depth analysis of the socio-political complexities and consequences for the Tamil minority within the Sinhalese majority’s state system, though significant, are beyond the scope of this presentation.

The Pujari, the term for lay, non-Brahmin priest, facilitates the piercing and monitors the participant’s trance state. External markers of altered states of consciousness, such as glazing of the eyes, speaking in altered tones or languages, dancing and/or moving uncontrollably, though common and expected, are neither universal nor mandatory.

## NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Sporadically, since 1913, (1931, 1966),

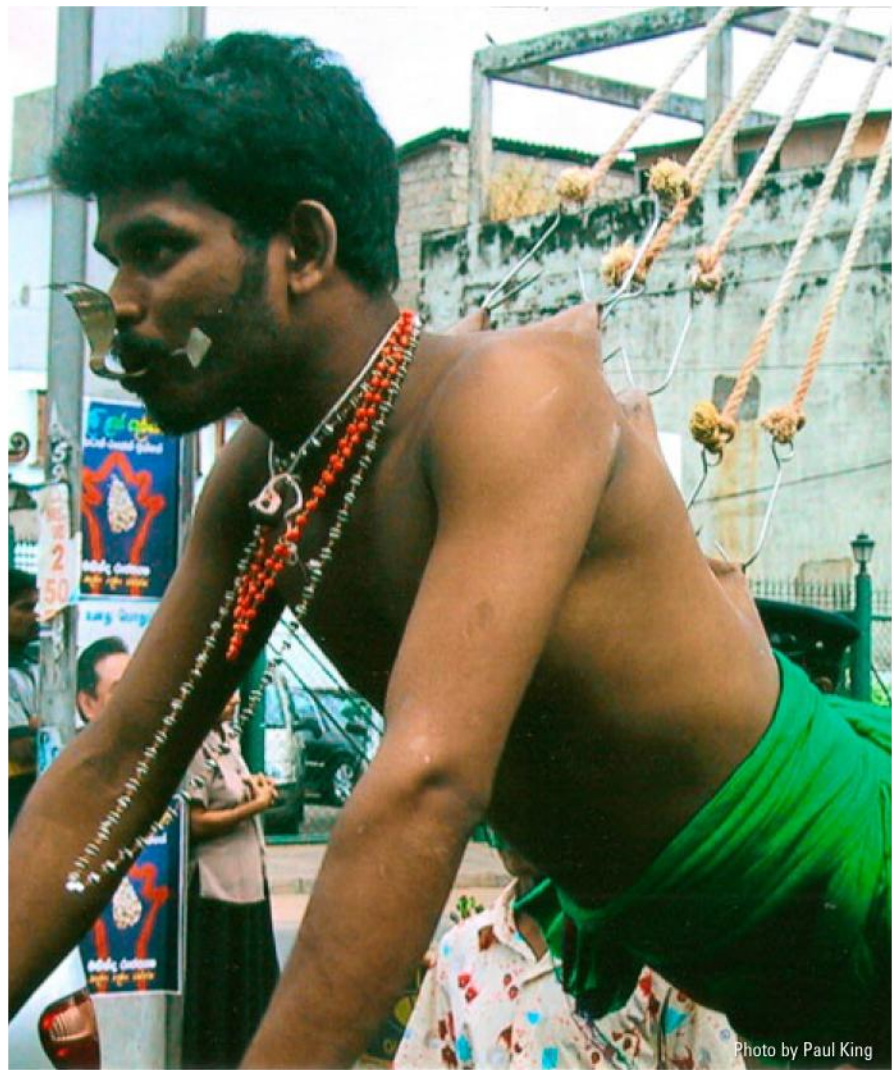


Photo by Paul King

National Geographic has published accounts of Tamil festivals with photos of suspension practices. The vast majority of reader responses would be interest, curiosity, or repulsion; however, for a select few, these articles inspired personal exploration and experimentation.

## STELARC

Stelarc is a conceptual performance artist. In the 1970s, using flesh hook suspension as a device, his work shared with audiences the idea that the human body was not equipped to evolve at the accelerating pace of knowledge and technology advancement, and thus was obsolete.

## FAKIR MUSAFAR

Fakir Musafar is the founder and one of the most influential forces behind the Western Suspension communities. As an adolescent photographer inspired by National

Geographic magazine and later by Stelarc, he began a lifetime endeavor of chronicling his explorations of various traditional spiritual practices involving bodily stresses and modifications. In 1967, Fakir performed his first suspension vertically by two piercings (like the Mandan Native Americans) and then, in 1984, horizontally by multiple piercings (like the Tamil) (9). In 1993, starting in San Francisco, others began to follow Fakir’s example. During the mid-to-late 1990s, Fakir inspired, mentored, and trained many of today’s most experienced leaders within what has grown to a greater *communitas* numbering in the several thousands.

## OSLO SUSCON

Suspensions are practiced alone, in small groups, or at large gatherings. One such gathering is the Oslo SusCon. From July 18-20, 2008, I attended the 7th annual Oslo



SusCon. The age of participants ranged from 18 to approximately 50, with 35 women and 44 men from 14 countries. The Oslo SusCon was formed in 2002 by the nonprofit organization Wings of Desire. The founders are performance artist Håvve Fjell and body piercer Christiane Lofblad. Wings of Desire's mission statement ([wingsofdesire.org](http://wingsofdesire.org)) conveys the most common values shared by many of the individuals, performance troupes, and alliances which form the global network of suspension practitioners:

*“Wings of Desire promote[s] body suspension in a safe and relax[ed] ambien[ce] to those who feel the urge to fly, regardless of how and why people want to suspend... we are proud to be able to guide anyone with the desire through the wonderful experience of body suspension, first timers and veterans alike. We believe all motivations for suspending are equally valid, it is not our place to dictate your reasons or choices.*

*Oslo SusCon has since the... first year been an international gathering with two main purposes; first and foremost [as] an opportunity to get suspended, secondly [as] a meeting place to share knowledge amongst practitioners on all levels. The convention is also a social arena for making friends and networking in our community. Every year we invite guest crew from other suspension teams to work alongside our local team, this is a good way to show other[s] how we work and to get feedback and learn from our guests as well. At the Oslo SusCon we cover most bases by having introduction to the weekend and suspension varieties by Håvve, guest speakers who talk about body suspension and other related activities, videos and photos from past events and live performance [enculturation]. As of the past few years the after-party has become a traditional conclusion of the SusCon.*

*We have chosen to open the doors for outsiders for several reasons. Participants who want to suspend in front of their friends and family can invite them in the open hours [only designated times are open], people with an itch for books gets an opportunity to have a closer look at how it all goes down, and the curious citizens can come and have peek into our colorful world of body mod and suspension.”*

## PERSONAL ACCOUNT BY MISTY FORSBERG

So many people in my life have asked me to explain what body suspension is, and more importantly, why I do it. It is as difficult for some of the people I love the most to understand this part of my life as it is for total strangers. I hope this helps a little. Body suspension is, on a very basic level, the act of piercing the skin and hanging from those piercings—but even typing that short description annoys me. It's like reading the definition of love: the words are all there, but they do nothing to encompass what it really is.

Body suspension is one of the most amazing things in my life. From the moment my toes left the ground for the first time, I knew that this was it for me, that I had found my passion. I am always going 100 miles an hour, trying to be better, to do more, to learn more, to live up to all the expectations of everyone around me, to never refuse anything that is asked of me, and to never stumble while I do it all. When I suspend it's a moment of silence in my otherwise chaotic mind. I am at peace and I am completely happy. It reminds me of how strong I am, and of all the things I am capable of doing. It is something most people see as impossible, yet I do it with a smile on my face.

Does it hurt? I don't really know how to answer that. For a lot of people I think the answer is definitely yes. I am fortunate in that I love every aspect of suspension. I love the feeling I get when the piercings are done, the moments as the hooks begin to pull, and the second that I leave the ground. At worst, I would say there is some discomfort involved, but nothing that I would label as actually painful. It is intense emotion and sensation, but all of that can be positive if you can get past the preconception that it is going to hurt.

More than anything, I do this because of the people in this community. I see, in so many of them, the qualities I want to improve in myself. Being involved in suspension has brought some of the strongest, hardest working, most incredible people into my life. I find myself saying “I love you” every day to these people when we talk, and I mean it with all of my heart each time. I have seen my friends come together and give everything they can to help other members of the suspension community that are complete strangers simply because they are so selfless. I have learned more about generosity, friendship, and dedication from those around me than I ever thought I could, and I am a far better person for having their influence in my life. The members of this community inspire and motivate me to be a better person every day, and I know very few people who can say that about the people they surround themselves with.

I don't know if this explanation helps at all, but I hope it does. I think the simplest thing to understand is that this beautiful art has brought more happiness and joy in my life than I can describe. I am a part of an incredible group of people who bring nothing but positive things into my life. For those that love me, that should be all the explanation necessary.

## PHYSIOLOGY OF TRANCE

In “Neurobiology of Ritual Trance”, researcher Barbara Lux notes the emotional and social effects of altered states of consciousness:

Rituals properly executed promote a feeling of well being and relief, not only because prolonged or intense stresses are alleviated but also because the driving techniques employed in rituals are designed to sensitize or “tune” the nervous system and thereby lessen inhibition of the right hemisphere and permit temporary right hemisphere dominance... (144).

What is being “tuned” is the autonomic nervous system (ANS, also known as the visceral nervous system), the part of the peripheral nervous system that acts as a control system, maintaining homeostasis in the body.

These activities are generally performed without conscious control. The ANS affects heart rate, digestion, respiration rate, salivation, perspiration, diameter of the pupils, urination, and sexual arousal. Whereas most of its actions are involuntary, some, such as breathing, work in tandem with the conscious mind. Research by Eugene d'Aquili and Charles Laughlin Jr. shows that usually one system predominates, but during prolonged rhythmic stimuli, strong discharges from both autonomic systems create a state of stimulation of the median forebrain bundle. This generates not only pleasurable sensation, but under the proper conditions, it coordinates limbic discharges and creates a sense of union and oneness with the participating group (155-6). This physiological process shares

similarities with the more widely experienced phenomenon of sexual orgasm. Later studies of altered states of consciousness by Michael Winkelman and Philip M. Peek reveal:

The production of slow-wave brain discharges in the serotonergic connections between the limbic system and brain stem regions... integrate information...from preverbal brain structures into language-mediated activities of the frontal cortex provid[ing] intuition, understanding, enlightenment, a sense of unity, and personal integration (184).

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