## PRABUDDHA BHARATA or AWAKENED INDIA



A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

Reflections on Tantra January 2016

Vol. 121, No. 1

₹ 50.00

#### THE ROAD TO WISDOM

# Swami Vivekananda on Reason versus Religion—IX

hat is the effect of accepting such **V** an Impersonal Being, an Impersonal Deity? What shall we gain? Will religion stand as a factor in human life, our consoler. our helper? What becomes of the desire of the human heart to pray for help to some being? That will all remain. The Personal God will remain, but on a better basis. He has been strengthened by the Impersonal. We have seen that without the Impersonal, the Personal cannot remain. If you mean to say there is a Being entirely separate from this universe, who has created this universe just by His will, out of nothing, that cannot be proved. Such a state of things cannot be. But if we understand the idea of the Impersonal, then the idea of the Personal can remain there also. This universe, in its various forms, is but the various readings of the same Impersonal. When we read it with the five senses, we call it the material world. If there be a being with more senses than five, he will read it as something else. If one of us gets the electrical sense, he will see the universe as something else again. There are various forms of that same Oneness, of which all these various ideas of worlds are but various readings, and the Personal God is the highest reading that can be attained to, of that Impersonal, by the human intellect. So that the Personal God is true as much as this chair is true, as much as this world is true. but no more. It is not absolute truth. That is to say, the Personal God is that very Impersonal God and, therefore, it is true,



just as I, as a human being, am true and not true at the same time. I am not the being that you take me to be. You can satisfy your reason as to that, because light, and various vibrations or conditions of the atmosphere. and all sorts of motions inside me have contributed to my being looked upon as what I am, by you. If any one of these conditions change, I am different again. You may satisfy yourself by taking a photograph of the same man under different conditions of light. So I am what I appear in relation to your senses, and yet, in spite of all these facts, there is an unchangeable something of which all these are different states of existence, the impersonal me, of which thousands of me's are different persons. Every day of my life, my body and thoughts are changing, but in spite of all of these changes, the sum-total of them constitutes a mass which is a constant quantity. That is the impersonal me, of which all these manifestations form, as it were, parts.

From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2013), 1.387–8.





#### Vol. 121, No. 1 January 2016

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Printed and Published by Swami Atmalokananda

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**INTERNET EDITION** www.advaitaashrama.org

#### PRABUDDHA BHARATA or AWAKENED INDIA



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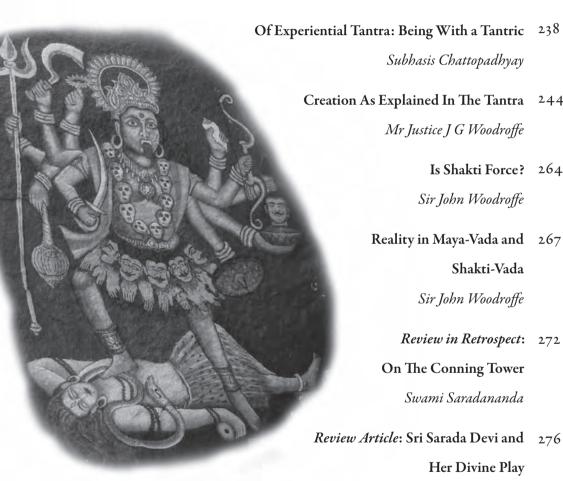


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# TO OUR READERS

ESIRE CREATES DISTRESS. But many consider it to be bleak and distressing to have no desires. This convoluted world view leads to complications that keep one confounded in the world. How to transcend desire or at least its clutches has been the conundrum haunting humanity for ages. Some have found solace in altogether demonising desire and by labelling all things desired as profane. This has led to a dichotomy of divinity and a pursuit of solace in negation. Thousands of years ago, this problem of desire was tackled in a novel approach, the approach of creating a 'dialectics of desire'. Nothing was demonised but everything was divinised. There was no God and Demon but only God and God alone. This retelling of the paradigm of the desired developed into a holistic spiritual path called the tantra. Much like its etymological origins, tantra created the warp and woof of one's life, including within its fold, both the mundane and the divine.

When we are being chased by ephemeral dreams of desire in this burgeoning age of consumerism, we need new tools and the rereading of the old ones, to counteract the flood of unbridled temptations to the senses. Instead of being victims to the fancies of the foes that are the senses, it would only be wise to act maturely and bring sense to the senses by channelising them

and their aims to the achieving of the divine at every moment of our lives. We begin the year of 2016, the 121st year of *Prabuddha Bharata* with *Reflections on Tantra* by erudite monks and scholars from different regions and faith traditions across the world.

With this issue we increase the emphasis on ancient scriptures by translating them into English in an accessible idiom. We also start a new column, *Traditional Tales*, retellings of ancient Sanskrit stories. Every month, you will be treated to newer vistas of ancient wisdom through the pages of this journal.

We thank our subscribers and readers for having supported us for these 120 years. We invite them to send us letters or emails, giving their feedback, and also expressing their views on issues that find place in the pages of this journal. We thank the staff of the journal for ensuring a smooth ride. We are grateful to all the authors, reviewers, photographers, artists, publishers who have sent their books for review, reviewers, proofreaders, copyeditors, advertisers, patrons, donors, web page designers, and well-wishers. Their support and encouragement has ensured that gems of wisdom and insights of depth have reached the minds of countless, month after month, year after year.

#### TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत ।

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

Tripura Upanishad

January 2016 Vol. 121, No. 1

(2)

#### त्रिपुरोपनिषत्

तिस्रः पुरस्त्रिपथा विश्वचर्षणी अत्राकथा अक्षराः सन्निविष्टाः। अधिष्ठायैना अजरा पुराणी महत्तरा महिमा देवतानाम्।। १ ।।

Tisrah purastripatha vishvacharshani atrakatha aksharah sannivishtah.

Adhishtayaina ajara purani mahattara mahima devatanam. (1)

She rules over three cities [or abodes of moksha, which are attained by the Divine Mother's grace by], three paths [or this Sri Chakra, for her] children of the universe. [Hence, she is called Tripura. She has as her forms, the letters starting with] *a, ka,* [and] *tha* [representing twelve vowels and thirty-two consonants—a total of forty-eight letters], [in which she is] fully present. She is present in these letters [as three points, *bindus*, in three groups of letters and that is why she is called Tripura]. She is ageless, birthless, the greatest [among gods and goddesses], [and] she is the glory of all gods [and worshipping her will please all the gods and goddesses].

नवयोनिर्नवचक्राणि दीधिरे नवैव योगा नव योगिनीश्च। नवानां चक्रे अधिनाथाः स्योना नव मुद्रा नव भद्रा महीनाम्।। २।।

Navayonir-nava-chakrani didhire navaiva yoga nava yoginishcha. Navanam chakre adhinathah syona nava mudra nava bhadra mahinam.



[From each of the three points, bindus, come three centres, and], nine yonis created nine centres, [and three centres together form a triangle and there are totally nine lines in these three triangles], nine yogas [or chakras], nine yoginis, the nine rulers of the nine centres [having nine different planes, one on top of the other, forming the meru of Sri Chakra], [and Chakreshvari] the cause of happiness [and misery], nine mudras [the sankshobhini mudra, the vidravani mudra, the akarshini mudra, the vashankari mudra, the sarvonmadini mudra, the mahankusha mudra, the khechari mudra, the bija mudra, and the yoni mudra], nine bhadras [merit, sin, Atman, the indwelling soul, the Paramatma, the all-knowing Self, the knower, the object of knowledge, and knowledge], [and] for each base of the triangles [on the Sri Chakra]. (2)

एका सा आसीत्प्रथमा सा नवासीदासोनविंशदासोनत्रिंशत्। चत्वारिंशदथ तिस्रः समिधा उशतीरिव मातरो मा विशन्तु।। ३।।

Eka sa asitprathama sa navasidasonavimshadasonatrimshat. Chatvarimshadatha tisrah samidha ushatiriva mataro ma vishantu.

(3)

She was alone [in the beginning], the primal [cause of the universe], [she was the indwelling power of and] she became nine [yonis], she became nineteen [nine yonis and ten internal yonis], she became twenty-nine [nine yonis, ten internal yonis, and ten external yonis], then [was born] forty-three [nine yonis, ten internal yonis, ten external yonis, five organs of action, five organs of knowledge, mind, intellect, ego, and chitta]. [She] is glowing intensely, as if desirous. Let the Mothers, [identified with the Sri Chakra] enter me [or my body through mantras and rituals because my body is a form of the Sri Chakra].

#### ऊर्ध्वज्वलज्ज्वलनज्योतिरग्रे तमो वै तिरष्टश्चीनमजरं तद्रजोऽभूत्। आनन्दनं मोदनं ज्योतिरिन्दोरेता उ वै मण्डला मण्डयन्ति।। ४ ।।

Urdhva-jvalaj-jvalana-jyotiragre tamo vai tirashchinamajaram tadrajo'bhut.

Anandanam modanam jyotirindoreta u vai mandala mandayanti. (4)

[There is] a flame rising up [in the chakra to the north of *sthiti*-chakra] the circle of light [called] *jvalana*, indeed having the cloud of tamas on the top. [Then], the horizontal ageless circle of light, was born out of rajas. [Then] the circle of radiating light, [producing] sense enjoyment [was born out of] sattva. Thus, [these three] circles beautify [the Mothers associated with them]. (4)

#### तिस्रश्च रेखाः सदनानि भूमेस्त्रिवष्टपास्त्रिगुणास्त्रिप्रकाशाः। एतत्पुरं पुरकं पुरकाणामत्र प्रथते मदनो मदन्या।। ५ ।।

Tisrashcha rekhah sadanani bhumes-trivishtapas-trigunas-triprakashah.

Etatpuram purakam purakanamatra prathate madano madanya. (5)

On the substratum of the three lines [or spheres of light, are], the three worlds, the three gunas, and the three sources of light—the sun, the moon, and fire. This city [the Sri Chakra, the abode of the Divine Mother along with her attendants, which] is the fulfiller [of the desires, even of gods like Shiva and Vishnu, who fulfil the desires of countless devotees], of Shiva and Parvati, who play their divine sport here.

(5)

#### मदन्तिका मानिनी मङ्गला च सुभगा च सा सुन्दरी शुद्धमत्ता। लज्जा मतिस्तुष्टिरिष्टा च पुष्टा लक्ष्मीरुमा ललिता लालपन्ती।। ६।।

Madantika manini mangala cha subhaga cha sa sundari shuddhamatta.

Lajja matis-tushtir-ishta cha pushta lakshmir-uma lalita lalapanti. (6)

[The Divine Mother] is variously known as Madantika, joyous; Manini, proud [of Kedarnath]; Mangala, auspicious [of Sri Lanka]; and Subhaga, prosperous [of Assam]. And she is Sundari, beautiful [of Trikuta]; Shuddhamatta, pure; Lajja, modest [of Amaravati]; Mati, intelligent; Tushti, satisfied; Ishta, desired [of Srinagar]; Pushta, nourished [of Jageshwar]; Lakshmi, wealthy [of Kolhapur]; Uma, splendorous [of Mithila]; and Lalita, eloquent [of Prayaga].(6)

#### इमां विज्ञाय सुधया मदन्ती परिस्नुता तर्पयन्तः स्वपीठम्। नाकस्य पृष्ठे महतो वसन्ति परन्थाम त्रैपुरं चाविशन्ति।। ७ ।।

Imam vijnaya sudhaya madanti parisruta tarpayantah svapitham.

Nakasya prishte mahato vasanti parandhama traipuram chavishanti. (7)

Knowing [through proper spiritual initiation and instructions from the guru] this [supreme goddess as residing within] one's own seat [the body, which is not different from the Sri Chakra] they [the attendants of the Divine Mother] please [her] by being completely absorbed by [consecrated] nectar-like substances and live in heaven [enjoying the fruits of the first three goals of life—dharma, artha, and kama] and attain the highest abode of moksha. (7)

#### कामो योनिः कमला वज्रपाणिर्गुहा हसा मातिरश्चाऽभ्रमिन्द्रः । पुनर्गुहा सकला मायया च पुरूच्येषा विश्वमाताऽऽदिविद्या । । । ।

Kamo yonih kamala vajrapanir-guha hasa matarishva'bhramindrah.

Punarguha sakala mayaya cha puruchyesha vishvamata'dividya. (8)

[The Sri Vidya mantra is revealed secretly through the words] *kama*, desire [the syllable of the four-faced god Brahma]; *yoni*, womb [indicating the vowel *e*]; *kamala*, lotus [indicating the vowel *i*]; *vajrapanih*, one who holds the thunderbolt [indicating *la*]; *guha*, cave [indicating the *bija*, seed, mantra of Bhuvaneshvari, *hrim*]; [followed by the letters] *ha*, [and] *sa*, *matarishva*, the wind [the syllable of the four-faced god Brahma]; *abhra*, cloud [indicating the letter *ha*]; [and] Indra [indicating *la*]. Again, [the mantra contains the letters denoted by the words] *guha*, cave [indicating the *bija*, seed mantra of Bhuvaneshvari, *hrim*]; [and the letters] *sa*, *ka*, *la*, and maya [indicating the *bija*, seed mantra of Bhuvaneshvari, *hrim*]—this is the primal mantra, original knowledge, the Mother of the universe, the ancient. (8)

षष्ठं सप्तममथ विद्वसारिश्यमस्या मूलित्रकमावेशयन्तः। कथ्यं कविं कल्पकं काममीशं तुष्ट्वांसो अमृतत्वं भजन्ते।। ९ ।।

Shashtam saptamamatha vahnisarathimasya mulatrikamaveshayantah.

Kathyam kavim kalpakam kamamisham tushtuvamso amritattvam bhajante. (9)

Of this [the mantra described in the previous verse], removing the [first] three root syllables, [the letters ha, sa, and ka represented by the words], shashta, six; saptama, seven; and vahni, fire; have to be added [and it will form the Lopamudra mantra]. By praising and praying the Lord—who is described in the Vedas, the substratum of the imagined universe, [and] who is described in the scriptures—they attain immortality.



#### त्रिविष्टपं त्रिमुखं विश्वमातुर्नवरेखाः स्वरमध्यं तदीले। बृहत्तिथीर्दशपञ्चादिनित्या सा षोडशी पुरमध्यं बिभर्ति।। १०।।

Trivishtapam trimukham vishvamatur-navarekhah-svaramadhyam tadile.
Brihattithir-dashapanchadinitya sa shodashi puramadhyam bibhartti. (10)

I praise the Mother of the universe [who resides in] the three worlds, on the three sides [triangles], having nine lines [formed by the nine *yonis*], with *visarga* [ah] in the middle [of the central triangle of Sri Chakra, which is the place of her worship]. She shines in the primal eternal sixteenth in the centre of the city [that is, Sri Chakra, she who is] great [and the cause of] the fifteen *tithis* [or dates, who are the fifteen deities of the fifteen lunar days of a month, beginning with Kameshvari and ending with Chitra].

#### द्वा मण्डला द्वा स्तना बिम्बमेकं मुखं चाधस्त्रीणि गुहा सदनानि। कामीं कलां काम्यरूपां विदित्वा नरो जायते कामरूपश्च काम्यः।। ११।।

Dva mandala dva stana bimbamekam mukham chadhastrini guha sadanani. Kamim kalam kamyarupam viditva naro jayate kamarupashcha kamyah. (11)

[In *Kamalakala* meditation], the two circles [of the *vahni*-mandala, fire circle; and *surya*-mandala, sun circle] are the two breasts, one reflection is the face and half [the letter *ha* is the female organ and also refers to the *bhupura* chakra in the outermost gateways of Sri Chakra]. The three [limbs of human body divided into three sections: from the head to the throat, from the throat to the breasts, and from the heart to the anus] are the secret houses [identified with the outermost three lines of the *bhugriha* chakra within the Sri Chakra]. Meditating upon the desired [and transforming oneself into] the aspect [of the consciousness of Shiva and] that which has a desirable form, a person [the worshipper] is born as the embodiment of desire [who creates a disturbance in the minds of onlookers because of one's beauty].(11)

#### परिस्नुतं झषमाद्यं पलं च भक्तानि योनीः सुपरिष्कृतानि। निवेदयन्देवतायै महत्यै स्वात्मीकृत्य सुकृती सिद्धिमेति।। १२।।

Parisrutam jhashamadyam palam cha bhaktani yonih suparishkritani.
Nivedayandevatayai mahatyai svatmikritya sukriti siddhimeti. (12)

[The ritual offering and consuming of, in the stipulated order], *madya*, wine [or the intoxicating bliss of meditation]; *palam*, meat [or the control of taste]; *jhasha*, fish [or the control of breath]; *bhaktani*, cooked food grains [or meditations on the guru]; and *yonis*, wombs [or attaining the knowledge of the Divine Mother in all her manifestations], have to be done properly. Offering food to the great Goddess, the expert performer [of the external sacrifices] should consume it oneself [and] attain fulfilment [of the sacrifice].

सृण्येव सितया विश्वचर्षणिः पाशेन प्रतिबध्नात्यभीकान्। इषुभिः पञ्चभिर्धनुषा च विध्यत्यादिशक्तिररुणा विश्वजन्या।। १३ ।।

Srinyeva sitaya vishvacharshanih pashena pratibadhnatyabhikan.
Ishubhih panchabhirdhanusha cha vidhyatyadishaktiraruna vishvajanya. (13)

[She] has, as it were, [because in reality she is beyond name and form], a white [elephant]

goad and is the Mother [Tripurasundari] of the universe. [She] binds persons having desires or a passionate nature [by the rope of their own desires]. She strikes down the [desires] with a bow and five arrows [one arrow each for the five senses]. She is red and is the primal power, the Shakti, from whom the entire universe is born.

भगः शक्तिर्भगवान्काम ईश उभा दाताराविह सौभगानाम्। समप्रधानौ समसत्त्वौ समोतयोः समशक्तिरजरा विश्वयोनिः।। १४।।

Bhagah shaktir-bhagavankama isha ubha dataraviha saubhaganam.

Samapradhanau samasattvau samotayoh samashaktirajara vishvayonih. (14)

[The Lord] having the qualities of power, righteousness, fame, prosperity, knowledge, and discernment is the blessed Shakti, who is both the Lord [or Shiva] and desire. [Shiva and Shakti], both are givers of prosperity. Both are of equal importance and are of the same essence, completely identical, and have the same power. [She is] ageless [and] the womb of the universe [or from her the entire universe is born].

परिस्नुता हविषा पावितेन प्रसंकोचे गलिते वै मनस्तः। सर्वः सर्वस्य जगतो विधाता धर्ता हर्ता विश्वरूपत्वमेति।। १५ ।।

Parisruta havisha pavitena prasamkoche galite vai manastah.

Sarvah sarvasya jagato vidhata dharta harta vishvaruptvameti. (15)

Purified [by rituals and mantras], by what remains after offering [in the worship of the Goddess], by drinking [in the bliss of meditation on the Goddess], by [what is] born out of contemplation, [and] the obstacles [to Self-realisation] being dissolved [by inactivity]. [The Self of] all is [called] the creator of the universe, the sustainer, [and] the destroyer [and by practising complete detachment, one] attains the form of the universe [that is the form of the Lord].

इयं महोपनिषत्त्रिपुराया यामक्षरं परमे गीर्भिरीट्टे। एषर्ग्यजुः परमेतच्च सामेवायमथर्वेयमन्या च विद्यो३म्।। १६ ।। ॐ ह्रीं ॐ ह्रीमित्युपनिषत्।।

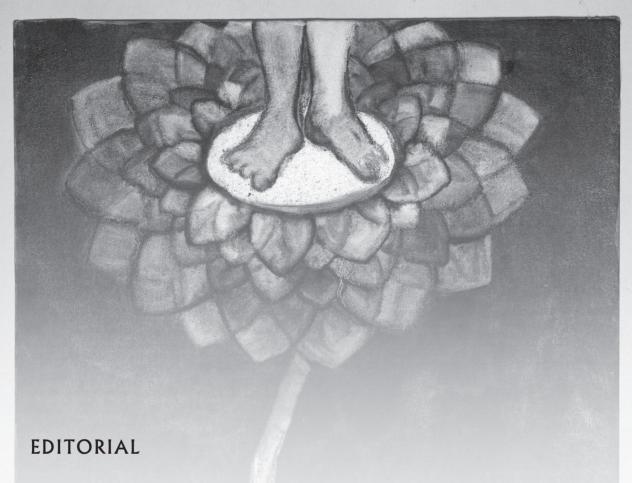
Iyam mahopanishat-tripuraya yamaksharam parame girbhiritte.
Eshargyajuh parametachcha same-vayamatharveyam-anya cha vidyo'm. (15)
Om. Hrim. Om. Hrimityupanishat.

TING: SRI YANTR

This is the great Upanishad [explaining the secret meaning] of Goddess Tripura [through various statements]. The supreme indestructible [Brahman] praises that [Upanishad], which is the highest knowledge, [that] this Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, Atharva Veda, and other sciences [that is, the rest fourteen branches of the total eighteen traditional branches of knowledge, contain]. Om. Om. Hrim. Om. Hrim. Thus ends the Upanishad.

Translated into English by Swami Narasimhananda





#### The Phalaharini Kali

This is a discussion about kali and her relevance in our lives and also the significance of the Phalaharini Kali puja day, which is observed on a new moon day and has gained popularity because it was on this day that Sri Ramakrishna offered all the merits of his spiritual practice at the feet of his consort, Sri Sarada Devi. The word *phalaharini* means 'the female, who takes away the fruits of our actions'. *Phala* means fruit, the fruits of actions. Whenever we do something, it creates a fruit in the form of tendencies in the mind and that fruit leads us to do another action. Suppose one listens to something

good, it leaves a good tendency in the mind and it makes one listen to more good things. This cycle makes you come back over and again to this world, because one has to exhaust one's mental tendencies. *Phalaharini* removes all these tendencies by taking away the fruits of one's actions. *Harini* means a female who takes away. One continues to get the results of one's actions because of the thought: 'I am the doer and I am the enjoyer'. The goal of spiritual life is to remove this thought. This process is hastened by Phalaharini Kali.

All of us are here in this world because each one of our actions produces an impression on our



minds and that impression propels us to do more actions. If I do a good action it leaves a good impression on my mind, which is called samskara it is also called karma or karma-phala—and that would make me do another good action and this goes on and on till I understand that I am not the doer. Till I have the sense of doer-ship this samskara or karma-phala is generated. Kali is called—particularly in the context of Phalaharini Kali puja—phalaharini, because she has the power to destroy all the karmas or samskaras of our lives. She has the power to give you and I liberation from the cycle of repeated births and deaths, repeated coming and going. So it is quite significant that Sri Ramakrishna surrendered all the fruits of his spiritual austerities on the Phalaharini Kali puja day, at the feet of his wife.

This is not only significant but it is unprecedented and unparalleled in spiritual history. Never has any spiritual personality, a prophet, or an avatara given so much importance to his wife, to the extent that he has surrendered all the spiritual austerities to her. This was not a wife with whom he had some kind of supernatural or miraculous connection, but she was a wife very much in flesh and body, whom he was married to; and to this person he surrendered all his spiritual austerities.

In the life of Sri Ramakrishna, we see a strong connection with the Goddess Kali. Later on we see the same connection in the life of Swami Vivekananda, and for many reasons it was very important for Sri Ramakrishna that Swamiji accept the divinity of Kali and that is why when Sri Ramakrishna saw that Swamiji had accepted the divinity of Kali, he was extremely overjoyed: he started clapping his hands and singing songs.

#### The Form of Kali

What is the general form of Kali? Kali is a goddess whose complexion is completely black. There are songs which say that she is blacker than the colour black itself. She is pitch-black. In Sanskrit the word for divinity, deva or devi comes from the root div, which means light. And that is the reason why most of the gods and goddesses are very beautiful. But here is one goddess, who is very black. However good granite or marble you may use to make the image of Kali, it has to be black. The form of women or the form of a deity, particularly a female deity, is conventionally supposed to have what is called the feminine grace. If you take the forms of Lakshmi or Sarasvati, their forms are very graceful, full of femininity and feminine grace. And one thing which is a very important aspect of feminine grace is the dress. That is why we see that in the past, queens gave—and even today, social queens give-much importance to their dress. However, Kali does not wear

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anything. She is absolutely in the nude. She is stark naked. First, she strikes at the conventional sense of beauty by being pitch-black and second, she strikes at the conventional idea of feminine grace or femininity by being completely nude.

According to the conventional norms of womanly grace, it is expected that a woman talks softly. Society associates a woman with a soft sound, a soft gesture, and a gracious gait. But in Kali is a woman who has her tongue put out of her mouth. When do you do that kind of thing? When you want to insult somebody or when you are in a frivolous mood, and you are trying to make fun of someone. Both of these actions are not considered good in society. There are numerous interpretations of why Kali puts out her tongue, but the image of a feminine divine form, which is nude and black, and with the tongue put out, is quite shocking.

But the shock does not stop here. She wears a garland of heads. Another thing which is commonly associated with a woman are ornaments. We find that Sri Sarada Devi was supposed to be given some ornaments at the time of her marriage, but after the marriage these ornaments were removed. And Sri Ramakrishna funnily remarked that now the bride's family could do nothing; the marriage was already over. In the present times that incident would probably not have passed off so simply but that was a remark made in those long gone times. However, later, Sri Ramakrishna got some ornaments made for Sri Sarada Devi because he said that a women love ornaments. Even today women love ornaments, may be the form of the ornaments have changed. Women today may not have that same love for golden ornaments but there are new kinds of ornaments like nail extensions or nail overlays. Nonetheless women always love ornaments. Even men love bodily accessories, only they are not conventionally seen as ornaments by society.



This is the conventional idea of a feminine form and that is why we find goddesses Lakshmi or Sarasvati decked with ornaments like nose rings and earrings. In the temple of the virgin Goddess in Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu, however far away one stands from the main deity, you will see a lamp glowing on the nose of the image of the Goddess. That is not a lamp but a nose ring with a gem so powerful that it emits such a strong light as if it were a great lamp. Legend has it that in the past, when the temple was not covered and the image was in the open, ships used to navigate by seeing the light of the nose ring of the Goddess, which acted as a lighthouse.

So, every female form is associated with some ornaments. And here we have the form of Kali who is wearing a garland of heads as an ornament; not just a garland of heads, but also a garland of fingers. Whatever she is wearing as an ornament cannot be considered one even by the wildest stretch of the imagination. This is a stark contrast to our sense of decorum and aesthetics. Most



people, who are grounded in traditional ideas of feminine beauty and grace—like the Greek or European notions of a goddess or someone coming from parts of the world not familiar with the image of Kali—are greatly shocked when they first see the form of Kali. They are totally shocked because they have never ever imagined a deity like this: a black woman in the nude, protruding her tongue, and having a garland of skulls. Of course, it still does not stop there. To top it all, the icing on the cake is that she is standing on the chest of Shiva. Here you have a feminine form which is standing on a masculine form. It is the greatest shock possible to all conventional ideas of beauty and femininity. All these aspects of Kali have a great ramification and significance. We do not generally see the image of Kali in that light. Most

of us just go in front of her image and say: 'Please protect me.' We just pray in fear.

The iconography and symbology of Kali's image has a great importance. The positioning of the female form over the male form is of particular importance. In the case of Lord Narasimha, we see that Goddess Lakshmi is sitting in his lap. In the case of Lord Vishnu, we see that Goddess Lakshmi is sitting at his feet. We do not see a feminine form other than Kali standing on top of a male deity. And who is that male deity? Shiva, a mendicant. He is a sadhu. Shiva is the deity of all sannyasins. His marriage too is the highest demonstration of renunciation in the world. Because he does not bother about where he stays, he does not bother about what he wears, he does not bother about what he eats, and he is ever-blissful. That is why he is the Lord of the sannyasins. In Sanatana Dharma, everything is deified. Sanatana Dharma does not have any dichotomy of divinity. What is dichotomy of divinity or duality of divinity? It is the belief that there is something divine and that there is something that is not divine. That there is a God and that there is a Devil. Sanatana Dharma does not believe in that. All the traditions of Sanatana Dharma profess that everything that we see is the manifestation of the One divine principle and so there is no problem worshipping Kali, because Sanatana Dharma has deified destruction and death. In some regions of India, Kali worship is prohibited for the householders. However, in some other places in India, Kali is worshipped daily in several homes. Same is the case with the worship of Chinnamasta. Kali is the deification of the terrible. Even the word 'Kali' could denote the terrible. Kali is the terrible or terror incarnate.

#### Kali and Tantra

How did this form of Kali evolve? Most likely, this form evolved just after the early Vedic times.

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It was not there in the early Vedic times. It came after the early Vedic times and this form, for all we know, is not so pronouncedly found in the Vedas. Though a couple, or may be a little more, references to Kali can be found in the Vedas, none of them are from the early Vedic times and even these references are not really clear. However, we do know that Mother Worship or worship of the female divine principle was quite prominent in the Vedas. It is found throughout the Vedas. But, the form of Kali is not so distinct in the Vedas. The form of Kali originated in India and has spread through different parts of the world. This form was also adapted into Buddhism. Kali went into Buddhism and came back in a different form to India, as a Buddhist goddess like the Vajra Devi.

Kali is one of the principal forms or goddesses associated with tantra. There is a lot of confusion regarding tantra. Today tantra is considered a license to indulge in the sensual but tantra is anything but that. Tantra is the channelling of human weaknesses by directing them towards God. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that if you want to cry, cry for God; if you want to desire something, desire God; and if you want to love, love God. Channelise or direct your impulses and instincts towards God. That is tantra. Tantra has various streams, but the goal of all the streams is to channelise all desires towards God. The basic philosophy of tantra is the divinisation of desire—albeit in a different way—not by acceding to desires but by superseding them, by divinising them.

Desire creates problems. You take this desire away and channelise it towards something divine, something godly, something ennobling, and something that will elevate you. That is tantra. But what are people doing now? They are holding on to desire and bringing oneself down to the level of desire, to the level of the body. That is not tantra. Kali has been one of the main



Image of Goddess Kali at Telo Bhelo

deities in tantric practices. Kali has also been the deity of thugs. There is much literature on thugs in India, particularly from the colonial or the British period. Many British historians have written books on Indian thugs. They were considered to be a different class of people, mainly dacoits, who lived in India, and worshipped Kali. Sri Sarada Devi came across a group of dacoits and saw them worshipping Kali.

Kali is seen as the non-Brahminical goddess. She is the goddess of the common person just like Lord Jagannath of Puri is seen as the god of the masses. In most places in India—except some places, particularly the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka—anybody can go into a Shiva temple and even embrace the Shiva linga. That is not the case with the other gods and goddesses. Kali has evolved



Kali Puja at Ramakrishna Math, Vrindaban

as a goddess for the common people, for people who are supposed to be of lower classes and were deprived entry into temples. Even today, in many parts of India, they are deprived access to the worship of gods and goddesses. For them Kali is there, she can be worshipped by anyone.

The form of Kali has also been adapted into different forms. In many parts of India, the form of Kali does not go well with the psyche of the local populace. They are unable to accept a female goddess, a feminine divine form in the nude and so they have covered her up with dress and changed her name. Hence, we find female goddesses similar to Kali in various parts of India, but they are all well dressed up and there are some such other changes in an effort to tame and domesticate the divine feminine!

#### Sri Ramakrishna and Kali

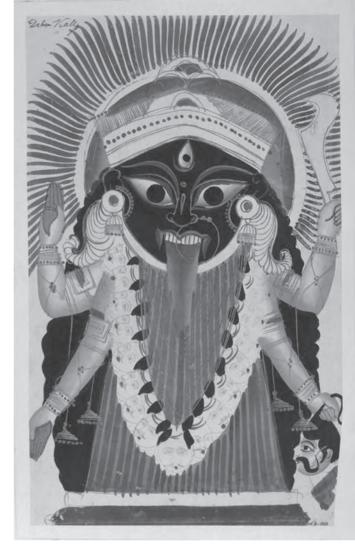
Kali also has pronounced feminist underpinnings of her form and advent. That Sri Ramakrishna chose Kali as his principal deity and that he chose the temple at Dakshineswar as his place of sadhana in this Kali Yuga also have deep import and implications. The Bhavatarini temple at Dakshineswar was built by Rani Rasmani, who was of the caste of fishers, who could not worship the Goddess in the temple. A woman of the fisher caste brought a Brahmin of the highest order, the very incarnation of God, as the pujari of her temple. This was one of the various actions by which Sri Ramakrishna established this age as the age of Mother Worship. Rani Rasmani was a great woman and a great administrator. Even today in Kolkata there are huge properties that belong to the Rani Rasmani Estate. That is a great testimony to the power and skill of Rani Rasmani.

While there could be various theories, guesses, and conjectures as to why Sri Ramakrishna chose the Dakshineswar Kali temple for his sadhanas, we get the answer in a letter written by Swamiji in reply to a complaint that was sent to him by one of his brother-disciples. When Sri Ramakrishna's birth anniversary was celebrated in the Dakshineswar

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Kali temple garden, many people of supposedly lower classes, many public women and many other people of questionable character or morals attended the celebrations. Many 'gentlemen' took offence to the presence of these people and complained to the brother-disciples of Swamiji, who was away in Switzerland. The complaint was that such people who are not the 'gentry' should not be allowed to attend the celebrations. When Swamiji heard of this complaint, he strongly objected through a letter that Sri Ramakrishna did not come for the 'gentry' and that if no members of the 'gentry' attend such celebrations, so be it! Swamiji said that let more and more thieves, robbers, prostitutes, and other such people who are denounced by society attend the celebrations because it is for them that Sri Ramakrishna made his advent. Swamiji said that Sri Ramakrishna came for the downtrodden, the ignorant, and the wicked and if anyone had any problems with such people attending the celebrations, let them not come. In this letter of Swamiji lies the answer as to why Sri Ramakrishna chose Dakshineswar to be the main seat of his spiritual practices.

The great advantage with Sri Ramakrishna is that we have historical documentation of everything, unlike other avataras like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, about whom we do not have such documentation. Sri Ramakrishna practised tantra, Vaishnavism, Vedanta, Islam, and Christianity and realised the ultimate goals of all these disciplines. However, he also practised all the disciplines of tantra. He did that to authenticate the path for Kali Yuga. He said that in the Kali Yuga, our bodies are dependent on food. We are dependent on material comforts, we are dependent on our desires, and it is our desires that propel us in our daily lives. So if we know how to control desires or to channelise them, then and only then, can we go towards our goal in life: Godrealisation. Sri Ramakrishna showed us a path



Goddess Kali

where you can actually channelise desires and that path is tantra. There are numerous in-depth studies in tantra and there is still much yet to be understood. The acknowledgement of human desire and its transformation by various spiritual practices including Kali worship is tantra.

#### **Deification of the Terrible**

Kali is the worship of the terrible. There is a very significant difference between the Eastern and Western psyche regarding the divine principle. In the West, generally, anything terrible is considered unholy, devilish, or ungodly. Generally, a snake is not considered holy in Western faithtraditions, where anything having a terrible form



is considered unholy. Generally in the West, we do not find the deification of death. In the Judeo-Abrahamic and Islamic traditions, usually death signifies something dark and devilish. Kali worship has a deep socio-cultural influence on the regions where such worship is prevalent. In India, Kali worship is prevalent mainly in eastern India and parts of Kerala. And in these places, we see the matriarchal system of society: although in most other places today, the system has changed to the patriarchal. The worship of Kali influenced the position of women in society or it could also be that the supremacy of the feminine brought about a prevalence of Kali worship.

#### The Fulfilment of Sri Ramakrishna's Kali Worship

Sri Ramakrishna actually fulfilled the worship of

Kali by surrendering the fruits of all his spiritual practices to Sri Sarada Devi and establishing her divinity. He also told her that he had done not much in the name of spiritual ministry and that she would have to do much more. That is what happened Sri Sarada Devi gave spiritual wisdom to countless people. Sri Ramakrishna's disciples were only a handful but we do not have even a rough estimate of the number of Sri Sarada Devi's disciples. Sri Ramakrishna thus brought about a revolution in religious history by according a superior spiritual position to his consort.

Swamiji says that many of the abominable practices going under the name of tantra in Hinduism are essentially corrupt forms of Buddhist practices. Sri Ramakrishna says that just like there are different doors to a house, some from the front and some from the back, similarly there

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are different paths to God, and some paths, like some tantric sects, are the backdoor entries to God. He calls them backdoor entries because they give much importance to the body and engage in sensual bodily enjoyments. There are many goddesses in Buddhism, many of them very similar to the goddesses of Hinduism; some of them like Vajrayogini are similar to Kali.

Devotees of Kali like Ramprasad and Kamalakanta had an intimate relationship with the Goddess. The songs they have composed reveal the closeness these devotees had with their chosen ideal. The lyrics of these songs could be considered heresy by many who are believers of God, but are new to the form of Kali. The devotion and the expression of the devotee transcend the boundaries between the serene and the obscene. Graphical descriptions of the Goddess and an intimate interchange through insinuations, allegations, abuse, quarrel, and calling of names, much of which qualify as crass slangs all of these show that even the worship of Kali defies all norms and questions the mainstream by encompassing the marginalised. Most of these songs, which are called 'Kali Kirtan', are set to tune in the Dhrupad system of Hindustani classical music, which system Swamiji was very fond of, and which allows every vowel, note, and beat to grow into you and take you into the same ethos and the fervour that the devotee might have had when the song was originally sung. Even Shiva is taken to task in these songs. This kind of intimacy is a difficult thing to practice. Thus, Kali worship has two important aspects: One worships the terrible knowing her to be the all-in-all of the universe and at the same time has a very intimate relationship with her. She is the Mother of the universe, she is the only Goddess—one may know all these and yet you can scold her, call her mad, drunk, and whatever else one can think of. One can keep on scolding her

and also her husband! That is the privilege the worshipper of Kali has.

#### **Transcending Abhorrence**

There are certain pertinent aspects of the spiritual practices of Sri Ramakrishna that we talk of, but fail to understand their import and therefore fail to emulate them. As part of his spiritual practices, Sri Ramakrishna once went to the toilet of a person and cleaned the toilet with his hair. We need to remember that the toilet in question was not like the modern toilets, spick and span, where one could actually sleep; there is no visible filth anywhere. The toilets during those days, particularly in India, were tremendously filthy places with big containers to hold the filth that were emptied periodically. One could not go anywhere near these places without suffering a terrible stench. Till recently, such toilets were in use in some parts of rural India. It was to such a place that Sri Ramakrishna went and cleaned it with his hair. Many people cannot even clean the blocked sinks of their kitchens and so, many of us cannot understand what Sri Ramakrishna did. When we read of this incident in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, we do not understand its total significance and impact. One had to transcend abhorrence to do what Sri Ramakrishna did. For most people, a lizard is the threshold of their tolerance of abhorrence. Sri Ramakrishna did not just transcend abhorrence; he accepted it and cleaned the toilet.

Kali worship and tantra require us to accept the abhorrent. Sri Ramakrishna had to touch with his lips rotten human flesh, while doing tantric practices. He had to do many such things to remove abhorrence. This is integral to tantric practice because there is no dichotomy in divinity and there is nothing that is not divine. The One divine principle exists in the pleasant as well as in filth. It has no limits in space, time,

or causation. Even filth and the abhorrent is a wrong reading of Brahman. In its essence, it is non-different from Brahman. From this standpoint the worship of Kali is the worship of the One immanent divine principle.

But how do we worship Kali? We offer her incense sticks, adorn her with flowers, decorate her to our heart's content and bring her down to our straitjacketed norms of beauty and femininity. That is not the way to worship Kali. Kali is the embodiment of the terrible. To worship her, we should worship the terrible. She should be worshipped in the forest. She should be worshipped in the cremation grounds. She should be worshipped in the mortuaries. She should be worshipped in the hospitals. These are the places of Kali worship; she is the embodiment of destruction and death. However, we do not remember this when we worship her. Most of us are terribly afraid of death. Even if one were to refer to one's impending death in the passing, in a conversation, people around that person get perturbed

and start denouncing any reference to death. We are inundated with statements about this transitory universe and how death is the only thing certain in our lives. Yet, we seldom act accordingly. Yudhishthira said that the greatest wonder in this world was that while all see people die around them every day, they are quite convinced of their life as though they were immune to death. The very concept, talk, or even a slight mention of death frightens us. With this mindset, can we worship death, can we celebrate death?

Death could be seen as a form of Kali. Death is perceived differently by different societies. Some sections of the so-called lower classes of society make a big celebration of the death of a person and have dances, music, drums, and drinks when someone dies. They have a huge procession of people dancing to drums and drinking around the dead. This is the celebration of death. Some Buddhist monastic sects practice meditation on the cremation of a person. They meditate on various stages of the destruction of the dead



body—its burning, the cracking up of the skull, and so on. In this manner, they strengthen their knowledge of the impermanence of the body. In tantra, there is a practice of doing spiritual practices sitting on a corpse, *shava*. It is called *shava*-sadhana. This is practised by some tantrics, even today.

#### Beauty in the Terrible

Tantra is about seeing goodness or divinity in the terrible. A person becomes bad because of particular circumstances. Swamiji says that everyone is potentially divine. Good or bad qualities are just coverings on one's true nature. One does not become good simply because one has the money to buy a good dress. One may have the karma to be born in a respected family and get a good education. However, that person will become good only by her or his actions. Swamiji says that if one keeps doing good things, good things alone will come to that person. If a person keeps on doing bad things, bad things alone will attract that person. One person becomes good and better, and the other person becomes bad and then worse.

Kali worship is the worship of the terrible. Why should this worship be done only in the temple? True worship of death and the terrible should be the worship of the immanent. If one sees a drunkard, a rogue, or a criminal, should not one worship them? Are they different from the immanent conscious divine principle? But, we do not worship them. Instead we abhor them. People expect others to wear dresses according to their preferences. We have structured notions of beauty and gentleness. In most parts of the world, to be considered beautiful, one has to be fair-complexioned. This insistence on fairness is completely unfair. The worship of Kali should enable us to see beauty everywhere, even in things that are conventionally considered to be fierce, ugly, and repulsive.

We usually associate conventional ideas of ugliness with evil. If a person is not good looking, people question that person's character. If a person is not well-dressed, people are not comfortable approaching that person. The external is always considered a vital key to the internal. But is it true? Even if there is any truth in that belief, an unpleasant exterior cannot be different from God. Also, logic or empirical evidence does not support the belief that a pleasant exterior points to an integral interior. And if the dress of a person, particularly that of a woman, does not conform to conventional norms, that woman is ridiculed and her character is questioned. This is the mental make-up of most people. And that is where the form and worship of Kali becomes all the more significant. The form of Kali robs the physical body of its sensuality and establishes its divinity. That is why Kali is in the nude. She diminishes the importance of clothing. The female physical body, which is commonly associated with the snare of maya, has been robbed of its seductive power by the form of Kali. She transforms the wife in the female body to the mother. Seeing the Divine Mother in every woman is one of the important spiritual practices for a man. Thus, it does not matter if the person is clothed or not. The worshipper of Kali does not see the sensual in the feminine but sees only the divine in all forms.

The worship of Kali is done in images that are made according to the conventional standards of beauty with 'perfect' looks. Instead Kali should be worshipped in the most 'jarring' of images: fat, ugly, and disproportionate. Because, it is the worship of the terrible. Also, there are a lot of gender stereotypes and misogyny around the places of the annual Kali worship where the puja pandals thrive on anti-women consumeristic practices. The female form is insulted, ridiculed, and made a source of consumerism. And



we conveniently ignore the aspect of Kali that stands on Shiva—the supremacy of the feminine over the masculine. Places in India associated with Kali worship are mostly places where women are held in high regard in society. The worship of Kali is not widespread. This form of Kali is the form which we need to worship. She is the epitome of women empowerment and that

is why Sri Ramakrishna offered the fruits of his spiritual austerities at the feet of Sri Sarada Devi on the day of Phalaharini Kali puja. He wanted this women empowerment to be implemented in present-day society with Sri Sarada Devi in the centre. It is in her name that the Sarada Math and the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission has been founded, arguably the first monastic organisation in the world to be completely owned, controlled, and managed by women, by sannyasinis.

Generally, around the world, and across major world religions, monastics are considered to be the highest section of society—even the king has to go and bow down before a monk. Usually, it is the woman who manages a household, gives birth to children, and gives them a good upbringing. Nobody else can do that. That is why the Divine Mother controls the universe and that is why she stands on the chest of Shiva. And whenever we think of Kali, we should think of the terrible, we should think of all such people who have been deprived of proper circumstances, food, clothing, shelter, education, and a decent livelihood. The worship of these people will be the true worship of Kali.

Sri Ramakrishna brought the wonderful concept of serving God in living beings with the knowledge that they are God. It could also mean that one should serve living beings, knowing them to be Kali. Then, one would not run away from the terrible and the unpleasant and would serve the suffering. I recount an incident that happened in a hospital of the Ramakrishna Mission located in a place of pilgrimage. People have a lot of faith in this hospital and whenever someone sees a homeless person suffering on the roads, they bring them and leave them in the caring hands of the hospital staff. Some times, they do not even wait for the hospital authorities to arrive. They simply put the patient in front of the hospital and go away. That is the faith of

people on this hospital. In such manner, one day, someone brought a monk, who was lying by the roadside, to this hospital. This monk had many ailments, but the main one was that he had a gaping hole in his head and the hole had gone considerably deep. The monk had not got any medical attention for days and the hole in his head was infested with maggots. He had been lying in dirt for a long time and his entire body and clothes were emitting an unbearable stench and it was difficult for people to go near about twenty feet of this person. When this monk was brought to this hospital of the Ramakrishna Mission, a nurse took him into the open lawn and made him lie down on a big wooden bench. Herself sitting on a chair, this nurse took surgical instruments and started removing the maggots one by one, apparently oblivious to the terrible stench. She did this for many hours till all the maggots were removed, and then dressed the wound, took the patient inside the hospital, gave him a long and complete bath, put new clothes on him and took him to his hospital bed, as fresh as new. That is true worship of the terrible. If one can do such service, one does worship of Kali. The traditional worship of Kali where one distributes prasad after the puja is much easier to do. We need a different kind of Kali worship today; a worship that can make us assimilate the fact that there is nothing terrible in this world, everything is divine.

We need the abhorrent as much as the pleasant. Often we are put off by the terrible or abhorrent. But just as one watches humorous movies as also horror movies, we need to accept the terrible with the pleasant. It makes us strong. In this context, we need to remember Sister Nivedita's statement half in jest that what we need today is 'Kali and chutney'. Apparently, it is a harmless humorous comment but on reflection, one senses some deep meaning here.

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Kali is the embodiment of all that is abhorrent and terrible and chutney is a spicy condiment. With a little chutney of proper deification and channelisation we can gulp and assimilate the Kali of the unpalatable.

The scriptures of the Sanatana Dharma are replete with references to the Divine Mother, worship of the feminine as divine. But in India, we see unspeakable atrocities being perpetrated on women. A woman who is 'beautiful' in the conventional sense of the term has a tough life to live and the life of a woman who is not so 'beautiful' is also full of pain. It is ironical that people want every woman to be 'beautiful' but a woman's life becomes miserable if she turns out to be 'beautiful'. Hence, our ideas of beauty and grace need to be completely changed. Everything in this universe is beautiful and divine. Even the very concept of obscenity has been engineered from the male perspective. It is the 'male gaze' that decides what is obscene. Only the 'inappropriate' portrayal of the female form is considered obscene, but not such a portrayal of the male form. That which disturbs the male psyche is obscene and that which disturbs the female sensibilities is ignored. Unless we transcend such narrow constructs, we will not be ready to worship Mother Kali.

Much hue and cry is raised about the clothes a woman can wear. If we are truly the worshippers of the Divine Mother, if we are truly the worshippers of Kali, it should not at all matter if a female form is clothed or unclothed. Because a devotee of Kali would see only Kali in all forms, masculine or feminine. It is the height of hypocrisy to worship the divine feminine on the one hand and to denigrate and oppress women on the other. There are no 'proper' or 'improper' clothes; the only cloth creating all misery is the cloth of ignorance and delusion.

As worshippers of Kali, we should worship

the terrible. We should accept the terrible. We should embrace the terrible. We should worship the female form and the female person. It would not do to restrict our worship only with the feminine divine in an image, but we should worship the female person too. We should worship women. Swamiji used to repeatedly tell that a country where women are not held in high regard comes to doom. Finally, we should not only worship women but accept their superiority over men. In society, men and women should go about like the two wheels of a chariot; complementing one another. However, that does not mean that men and women are equals; they are not. Women hold a much greater position and play an important function than men. That is why Kali stands on the chest of Shiva. No man ever gave birth to a child; that is biologically impossible. Nature has entrusted a woman with much more responsibility than a man. If we worship and accept women, as the superior among equals and if we embrace the terrible, we would be worshipping Kali.

Phalaharini Kali takes away all our karma, but we have to be alert and vigilant not to increase her work. We have to be conscious of not adding to the good and bad tendencies that we carry. It is easy to give up the evil but it is very difficult to give up the good. Sri Ramakrishna did that: he gave up all that was good and all that was bad with him. He just kept the Truth with him. He held on to the substratum and gave up all that is projected on it. So, as worshippers of Kali, we need to give up the good and bad results of our actions. Worship of Phalaharini Kali means to concentrate on accepting the terrible, the ugly, death, and destruction. Every time we see Kali, we should remember these things and not try to change the female Goddess Kali into a conventional female goddess conforming to the conventional sense of beauty and grace. C PB

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#### What Is Tantra?

#### **Swami Chetanananda**

In the lotus of my heart do I contemplate the divine intelligence, the Brahman without distinction and difference, who is the object of realisation to even the creator, protector, and destroyer of the universe. Whom the yogis attain through meditation; who destroys the fear of birth and death; and who is existence, intelligence, and the seed of all the worlds; I bow down to that supreme Reality. Om. Peace. Peace. Peace.

Swami Chetanananda is the minister-in-charge of the Vedanta Society of St Louis.

#### The Meaning of 'Tantra'

ANTRA IS AN IMPORTANT, practical, and popular religious path of Hinduism. The word 'tantra' is derived from the Sanskrit root tan, tanyate, meaning 'to spread'. Tantra means the scripture by which the light of knowledge is spread: 'Tanyate vistaryate jnanam anena iti tantram'.' The suffix tra denotes 'trayate', which means 'to save'. Tantra teaches that knowledge, which saves souls from the trap of maya.

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In one standard Tantric text, the Kāmikāgama, Tantra is defined as a class of texts "which promulgates profound matters concerning tattva and mantra (tanoti vipulān arthān tattvamantra-samanvitān). The two words tattva and mantra have a technical sense: tattva means the science of the cosmic principles, while mantra means the science of the mystic sound. Tantra therefore concerns the application of those sciences with a view to the attainment of spiritual ascendancy.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Tantric Scriptures**

The goal of all spiritual paths is to destroy our ignorance and make us happy. The purpose of tantric scriptures is the same. Like the Vedas, Smritis, and Puranas, tantra plays an important role in the Hindu religious tradition. The Vedas have two parts, one concerning ritual and the other philosophy. We generally teach the philosophical part of the Vedas, which is called Vedanta. Tantra, however, originated from the ritualistic part of the Vedas.

According to the Kularnava Tantra, a particular scripture has been predominantly taught and practised in a particular yuga or age. In the Satya Yuga, Golden Age, the ritualistic portion and philosophical aspects of the Vedas were taught. In the Treta Yuga, the main scripture was Smriti, which consists of ethical and moral virtues. The ancient sages taught the moral conduct by setting some rules. In the Dvapara Yuga, the Puranas were emphasised. It taught dharma and duties of human beings. And in the Kali Yuga, the agama or tantra scriptures were taught. Those who cannot understand the Vedas or the Smritis will understand the Puranas, which contain marvellous, colourful stories of the kings and of righteous people, so that people can emulate their lives. Those who have renunciation and purity, they can reach the ultimate reality by the path of discrimination of Vedanta. And those who have not sufficient purity of mind and renunciation, they follow the path of tantra and ultimately reach the goal.

I do not mean to imply that other scriptures are not necessary in this Kali Yuga. However, because people have no longer the capacity, longevity, means, and moral strength required to carry out the Vedic rituals, the tantric scriptures prescribe a spiritual discipline of the soul for the attainment of the common aims of all the scriptures—that is, *abhyudaya* and *nihshreyasa*, prosperity in this world and liberation.

Sri Ramakrishna says: 'In the Kaliyuga the life of a man depends entirely on food.' Human beings now have very little stamina, patience, and time to do sadhana. In ages past, people could fast for days, months, and even years. Now if one does not have breakfast, by noon, one gets dizzy. In addition, our span of life is short in this Kali Yuga. For these reasons, we need an expedient way to attain liberation.

#### Tantra in the Kali Yuga

Sri Ramakrishna says: 'Truthfulness in speech is the tapasya of the Kaliyuga' (749). Truthfulness is austerity in this age. If one practises the truth, that is enough.

Charity is the path of the Kali Yuga. Give in charity, and charity will purify your mind.

In this Kali Yuga, chanting the name of the Lord is very helpful, says the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*: 'In this age of Kali there is no other means, no other means for self-realisation than chanting the holy name, chanting the holy name, chanting the holy name of Lord Hari.' In this Kali Yuga, chanting the Lord's names is the spiritual discipline.

Spiritual practices have changed over the ages. In ancient times we find the rishis immersed in meditation. In the Treta Yuga, we find people practising sacrifices and expecting boons from

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gods and goddesses. In the Dvapara Yuga, we find people practising severe austerities to attain fulfilment. In this Kali Yuga, however, only pure love and devotion are needed. Chanting god's name is the main spiritual discipline.

#### **Origin of Tantric Teachings**

The tantric scriptures are in question-and-answer form so that ordinary people can easily understand them. There are two branches in tantric teachings: agama and nigama. Agama means the great teachings that come from the lips of the teacher. In agama, we find Shiva as the teacher and Parvati, his wife, as the student. She asks questions and Shiva answers them. However, nigama is just the reverse: Parvati, the Divine Mother, is the teacher, and Shiva is the student. According to tradition, the tantra scriptures originated from the fifth face of Lord Shiva. I once saw the image of Shiva in Nepal, Pashupatinath. That deity has five faces, one facing each of the four directions and one on the crown of the head. The five faces of Shiva are named Sadyojata, Vamadeva, Aghora, Tatpurusha, and Ishana. Tradition says that Shiva taught the Vedas through the lower four faces, and from the fifth face, he taught tantra.

#### Three Schools of Tantra

There are three schools of tantra: Vishnukranta, Ashvakranta, and Rathakranta. Vishnukranta is prevalent from the central part of India to the north-eastern part. It is practised from central India, Vindhyachal, to the northeast, Assam and Manipur, including Bengal. Ashvakranta is practised in regions that stretch from Vindhyachal to the great ocean, apparently including the rest of India. Rathakranta is practised from Vindhyachal up to Nepal. Each branch of tantra, each *kranta*, has sixty-four sadhanas or spiritual disciplines—for a total of one hundred

and ninety-two. Tantric sadhanas and spiritual instructions are recorded in these small treatises.

Sri Ramakrishna practised sixty-four sadhanas of Vishnukranta. This is an amazing accomplishment. An ordinary person would spend one's whole life—even life after life—to attain perfection in even one sadhana. Sri Ramakrishna practised all sixty-four sadhanas in two years.

Tantra does not only mean Mother worship, although most people understand that way. There are five schools, each devoted to a different deity: Shaiva tantra is devoted to Shiva, Shakta tantra to the Divine Mother, Vaishnava tantra to Vishnu, Saurya tantra to the Sun-god, and Ganapatya tantra to Ganesha. When we speak of tantra, we think primarily of the sacred books of the Shaktas, worshippers of Shakti, the Divine Mother.

The philosophy of tantra and Vedanta are more or less the same. In Vedanta, we address



Brahman and maya. In tantra, we address Shiva and Shakti. In the Shakta tantra, God is worshipped as Mother.

I quote a sentence from Sir John Woodroffe: 'The Śākta is so called because he is a worshipper of Śakti (Power), that is, God in Mother-form as the Supreme Power which creates, sustains and withdraws the universe.'6

Those who follow the Judeo-Christian and the Islamic traditions do not accept God as Mother. In those traditions, God is a male principle. In Hinduism, however, God can be both father and mother—or even neuter, as Brahman. You can't assign a particular gender to God.

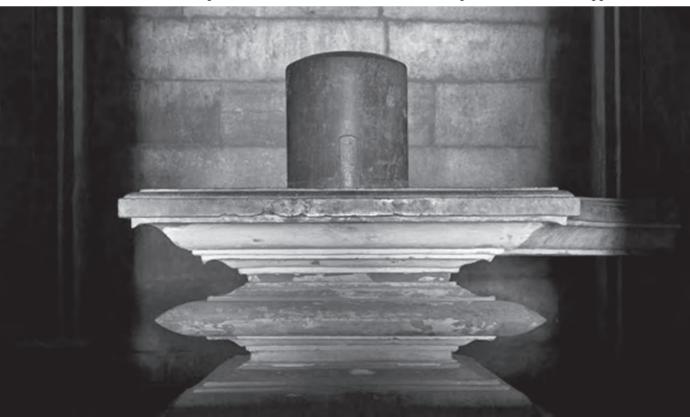
Those who follow tantra have a good reason to say that God is Mother, but this is for worship. God is no more female than male or neuter: God is beyond sex. God is thought of as Mother in the mind and is so felt by the heart of the spiritual practitioner, the sadhaka, who worships her lotus feet, the dust of which can create millions of universes. This divine power—the immanent, active aspect of God—is called

Shakti. At the heart of tantra, the static, transcendent aspect of Mother is Shiva. Shiva is all auspicious. Philosophically speaking, Shiva is unchanging Consciousness and Shakti is its dynamic power appearing as mind and matter. Shiva and Shakti are, therefore, Consciousness and its Power. In the static transcendent aspect, Shiva, the one Brahman, does not change. In the kinetic immanent aspect, Shakti, it does. There is the changelessness in change. The individual soul is one with the transcendent spirit, the Paramatman.

Vedanta is similar in this respect: the individual soul, your soul, my soul; this Atman and Brahman are the same. Individual Consciousness and cosmic Consciousness are same. The roomspace and the cosmic space, both are the same.

In tantra, however, there is a beauty. There is a little difference between tantra and Vedanta. Let me explain what tantrics say.

In the Vedantic tradition, we say that Brahman alone is the reality. This world is illusion, unreal. It is not permanent. It has an apparent



reality, not absolute reality. We say again and again: 'Don't take this world seriously'. It is changing. Every day and every minute, this world is changing. Your body is changing; your mind is changing. But behind this changing reality there is an unchanging reality that is the Atman, which never changes.

Now, in tantra, sadhakas look upon this world as the manifestation of Shakti, the Divine Mother. It is real—not absolutely real, of course. But consider this comparison: Vedanta says, 'Get away from maya, get out!' Tantra says: 'No, no, worship maya. Don't get out; don't throw it away; don't discard it.' This is the beauty of tantra. It doesn't deny the world; it says, 'The world is beautiful; it is true; it is the playground of the Divine Mother, and we are all her playmates.' According to tantra, we have to realise Brahman through this world, not by negating this world. People are often confused by and fearful of the world, but God did not create the world to frighten people. There must be a purpose of this creation. What is the purpose? Play. However, what is play to God is death for us, and we suffer. In Aesop's Fables we read the story of some children who are throwing pebbles at frogs. One of the frogs asks the children, 'What are you doing?' The children say: 'We are playing.' The frog responds: 'What is play to you is death for us; we are dying."

Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences bore witness to the tantric attitude that God is in all. When he went to the shrine to offer food to the Divine Mother, he saw a mewing cat. He said to the cat: 'Mother, do you want to eat food? Come, come, eat.' Instead of offering the food to the deity on the altar, he fed it to the cat. The temple officials were enraged by this heresy. However, Sri Ramakrishna saw the Mother in the cat.<sup>8</sup> Another time, he was coming back to his room from the Panchavati when he saw a dog.



He approached the dog and asked it, 'Mother, do you want to speak something?' He was seeing the Divine Mother in the dog (267). Once when Sri Ramakrishna was in Calcutta, he saw courtesans standing on the street. He remarked: 'Mother are you dressed up and waiting here in this form?' He saw the Divine Mother in everything. That is the beauty of the tantric tradition.

Can you imagine what would happen if you saw God in everything, in every being? (632) You would experience, 'the Kingdom of heaven is within you; the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.'9 You would be floating in bliss.

We see Devil, Satan, in everybody but we do not see God in everything—our outlook must be changed. How? By practising sadhana, spiritual disciplines. When your insides are transformed, your outside is transformed. That is called spiritual life—transformation comes from within. It does not come from outside.

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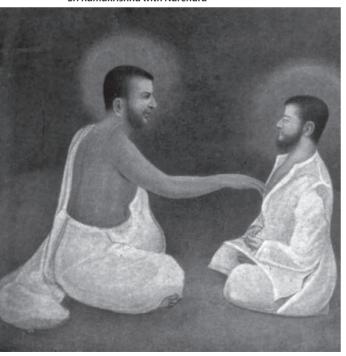
In this Kali Yuga, Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated how to realise God. His first vision came through his yearning, his longing for God. Then came his guru Bhairavi Brahmani, a woman adept in tantra. Under her guidance Sri Ramakrishna practised sixty-four sadhanas of tantra and achieved perfection. Afterwards he practised Vedanta and attained Nirvikalpa Samadhi.

### **Tantric Sadhana and Occult Powers**

When one practises tantric sadhana, one can develop occult powers.

Once Sri Ramakrishna called Narendra into the Panchavati and said: 'Look, as a result of practising austerities, I have long since possessed all the supernatural powers. But what would a person like me do with such powers? I can't even keep a wearing-cloth tied around my own waist! So I'm thinking of asking Mother to transfer them all to you. She has told me that you will have to do much work for Her. So if these powers are transmitted to you, you

Sri Ramakrishna with Narendra



can use them when necessary. What do you say?' Narendra had seen various divine powers in the Master since their first meeting, so he had no reason to doubt him. But his deeply rooted love of God did not allow him to accept those powers without careful consideration. After serious thought, Narendra asked, 'Sir, will they help me to realize God?' The Master replied: 'No, they won't help you to do that. But they might be very useful once you have realized God and have started doing His work.' To this, Narendra said: 'Sir, I don't need them. Let me realize God first: after that, there will be time enough to decide whether I need them. If I get these marvellous powers now, I might forget the whole purpose of my life and use them to gratify worldly desires. Then they would only become my ruin.' We cannot say whether the Master was actually ready to transmit those powers to Narendra or was simply testing him. But we do know that the Master was extremely pleased when Narendra refused his offer (827-8).

Sri Ramakrishna was overjoyed that the future Swami Vivekananda was not tempted by these powers. He could have done anything by means of occult power, but he refused. He is a great soul.

Bhairavi Brahmani had two disciples in addition to Sri Ramakrishna—Chandra and Girija. Each of them had occult powers. Chandra had *gutika* siddhi, meaning that he could take a minute form and fly. Once he flew through the window of a rich man and fell in love with his daughter, and then he was caught and beaten up. Girija could generate a supernatural light. One dark night Sri Ramakrishna and Girija were coming from Shambhunath's garden house to Dakshineswar. They could not see the path, so Girija said, 'Do you want to see the path? I can show you.' He touched his forehead and from there emanated a light that revealed the path up to the temple gate (524–6).

## Tantra Sadhana

In tantra, we find the harmony of dualism and non-dualism. According to tradition, Shiva says that some practise *dvaita* or dualism, and some practise Advaita, non-dualism—but whoever wishes to understand the real tantra must transcend both *dvaita* and Advaita. Our goal is to attain illumination, for that purpose we practise sadhana. The *Mahanirvana Tantra* says that when we attain that illumination, all actions cease to function and all spiritual disciplines are no more needed.

The Mahanirvana Tantra further says: 'The highest worship is to think of oneself as Brahman; the second method of worship is meditation on God; the third method is japa, prayer, and glorification of God; and the last method is external, ritualistic worship.'

Human beings vary in temperaments. Tantra classifies humankind pri-

marily within three dispositions: *divya* bhava, divine; *vira* bhava, heroic; and *pashu* bhava, animal. These dispositions correspond to the divine plane, the mental or intellectual plane, and the physical plane, respectively. The animal person can hardly be expected to see beyond the material aspects of things. In the heroic person, there is an urge to reach the plane beyond matter—the true heroic person is one who is fighting the six enemies, the passions that obstruct the path of one's spiritual advancement. The goal of tantra sadhana is to be established in divine disposition.

Do you know what we really do in spiritual life? We fight. An unseen warfare is constantly going on inside us. We fight against the six enemies who are hidden in our minds: *kama*, lust; *krodha*, anger; *lobha*, greed; *moha*, delusion;



*mada*, egotism; and *matsarya*, jealousy. These are the six enemies hidden in human minds that we want to overcome by practising spiritual disciplines.

The man of divya disposition is, as a result of his practice in previous births, endowed with qualities which make him almost divine. The Kāmākhyā Tantra says that the man of divya disposition is the beloved of all and is sparing in his words, quiet, steady, sagacious, and attentive to all. His all is contented and is devoted to the feet of his guru (teacher). He fears no one, is consistent in what he says, and is experienced in all matters. He never swerves from the path of truth and avoids all that is evil. He is good in every way and is Śiva's very self. The vīra is a man of fearless disposition, inspires fear in the man of paśu disposition, and is pure in

his motive. He is gentle in his speech and is always mindful of the five *tattvas* (principles). He is physically strong, courageous, intelligent, and enterprising. He is humble in his ways and is ever ready to cherish the good. The *paśu* is a man whose inclinations are like those of an animal. He is a slave to his six enemies—lust, anger, greed, pride, illusion, and envy. ... Closely connected with the three *bhāvas* are the seven *ācāras* or rules of conduct.<sup>10</sup>

Achara, means 'conduct'. Your conduct, your behaviour, your style of life are extremely important. If religion cannot bring about transformation, what good is there in it? If you achieve illumination, you will not grow two heads, eight legs, and four hands—your body will remain the same as it is now. Transformation will come within. There are seven rules of conduct described in the Kularnava Tantra: veda, vaishnava, shaiva, dakshina, vama, siddhanta, and kaula. The aspirant rises step by step through these different acharas till she or he reaches the seventh and the highest state, when Brahman becomes an experiential reality.

In the first stage, cleanliness of the body and mind is cultivated. You must be clean physically and mentally. A person who is always suspicious, and is full of doubts and desires, has a soul that is very unclean.

The second stage is that of devotion, bhakti. You must have love and devotion for your teachers, for your disciples, and for God. The third is knowledge. Dakshina is the fourth stage in which the gains of the previous stages are consolidated. This is followed by *vama*, the phase of renunciation. The word *vama* can mean 'women', so some people mistakenly believe that *vamachara* sadhana involves practising tantra with women and wine. I shall later explain *panchamakara*, the five elements of tantric practice. However, the word also means 'left'. Here, *vama* implies that

up to this stage, you have established yourself in the spiritual path: now you have to renounce all worldly things and move towards the Atman, the Self or Brahman, or Shiva or the Mother—whoever is your chosen deity.

If a woman is at all associated in this practice, she is there to help in the path of renunciation and not for animal gratification. A woman as such is an object of great veneration to all schools of Tāntrika sādhakas (seekers). She is considered to be the embodiment of this earth, of the supreme Śakti who pervades the universe. She should therefore be revered as such and even if guilty of hundred wrongs, she is not to be hurt even with a flower. It is a sin to speak disparagingly of any women (60).

The sixth stage is *siddhanta*, 'in which the aspirant comes to the definitive conclusion after deliberate consideration as to the relative merits of the path of enjoyment and that of renunciation' (ibid.). And the last stage is *kaula*, when Brahman becomes a reality to the spiritual aspirant.

### The Five Elements of Tantra Sadhana

Unfortunately, a large number of tantric enthusiasts, in both the West and the East, mistakenly identify tantra as the yoga of sex, black magic, witchcraft, seduction, and so on. Some misguided people use some tantric sadhanas to satisfy their carnal desires. One can find all sorts of wrong information about tantra from the Internet.

Tantra describes five elements, called the pancha-makara, to be used in sadhana: madya, wine; mamsa, meat; matsya, fish; mudra, silver coin; and maithuna, sexual union. These five categories have different meanings for different classes of worshippers—but in all cases it is important to understand that what one is required to offer is the principle or essence, not the article itself. It is impossible to think that Shiva would

have advised people to have all five experiences and assured them illumination. Many people enjoy these things. Are they illumined? People don't need to practise tantric rituals to have sex and enjoy wine. Some people with animal nature want to spiritualise their self-indulgence, and Westerners sometimes portray tantric rituals in this way. Sir John Woodroffe, who was a British judge of the Calcutta High Court, tried to remove this misunderstanding by writing several books on tantra.

The pancha-makara should be understood

from a spiritual perspective. First, madya: do you know what 'wine' means? When you meditate, from the brahmarandhra chakra, a sweet nectar flows—that is called 'wine'. A spiritual seeker thinks of that nectar and is intoxicated. Mamsa means taste that means great taste on your tongue. A true tantric aspirant should have full control over her or his tongue; a real tantric is passive and practises silence. By matsya, 'fish', the tantras refer to the jiva, the individual self. The *ida* and *pingala*—the two nerve channels on either side of the spinal cord—are like the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, and the jiva, like a fish, plays in these channels as the tantric practitioner breathes in and out. The control of this breath and focusing on that power and putting that power through the shushumna channel, is called matsya. Mudra, 'silver coin', refers to meditation on the guru in the sahasrara—the place of Shiva in the seventh chakra—which is compared to melted silver. As for maithuna, 'sexual union', it can be understood in this way: Air represents the male and

space represents the female. When air enters into space—meaning that when we breathe, air enters into the space of our hearts and a yogi attains *kumbhaka*—the mind stops and one attains illumination. This is *maithuna* or union.

## Guru and Disciple in Tantra

In the tantric tradition, one must have a *sad*-guru or *siddha*-guru, that is an enlightened guru. Initiation is extremely important. Before one takes initiation, however, one must determine

Goddess Kali





whether the guru is the right one and the guru must determine whether the disciple is the right one. If the disciple is not attracted to the guru, she or he will not make progress. On the guru's part, she or he must show love and affection towards the disciple. It is a spiritual relationship.

In tantric scriptures we find a long list of the qualifications of a guru and the characteristics of a good disciple. A good teacher is defined to be a person of pure birth and pure disposition who has the senses under control. One who is a guru should know the true meaning of the tantras; always do good to others; and engage in the repetition of God's name, worship, meditation, and the offering of oblations in fire. One should have a peaceful mind and must possess the power of granting boons. One should know the Vedic teachings; be competent in yoga; and

be as charming as a child. It is very difficult to get a guru like that.

There is a funny story in in the Vedantic tradition. A guru told his disciple: 'Go, chop wood, bring water, cook, serve me—that is the duty of the disciple.'

Then, the disciple said: 'Sir, what is the duty of a guru?'

The guru replied: 'Well, the guru will relax and give advice to the disciple.'

Upon hearing this, the disciple asked: 'Sir, why don't you make me a guru first? I'd like to be a guru!' Nowadays nobody wants to be a disciple.

The characteristics of a good disciple are as follows: He should be of good parentage and guileless disposition, and be a seeker of the fourfold aim of human existence. He should be well read in the Vedas and be intelligent. He should

have his animal desires under complete control, always be kind towards all animals, and have faith in the next world. He should not associate with non-believers (nāstikas), but should be assiduous in his duties in general, alert in the discharge of his duties towards his parents in particular, and free from the pride of birth, wealth, and learning in the presence of his teacher. He should always be willing to sacrifice his own interests in the discharge of his duties to the teacher, and be ever ready to serve him in all humility (61).

Water gathers in low land, not on the top of the mountain. If you have a big ego, if you do not know how to be humble, you will never learn anything. Be humble. Initiation is that which gives knowledge of things divine and destroys all that leads to fall. The guru gives initiation. In the *Vishvasara Tantra*, we find a hymn on the guru:

The guru is Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Maheshvara Shiva (the destroyer). The guru is truly Brahman Itself. I bow to the divine guru.

I bow to the divine guru, who by the application of the collyrium of knowledge, opens the eyes of one blinded by the disease of ignorance.

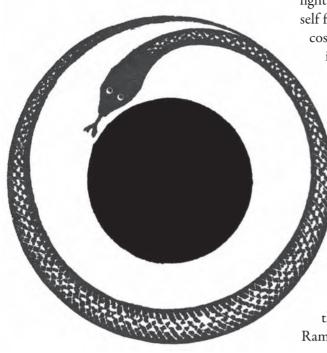
I bow to the divine guru who reveals to one the divine Being that encircles and permeates the moving and the non-moving.<sup>11</sup>

This is the way the guru has been eulogised in tantra. So the real guru is God and his power manifests in illumined human gurus and they transmit that power or *shakti* to the disciples. That power is divine power; the human guru is only a channel or conduit. Electricity comes through a channel of wires to power a light. The human guru is just like that. When you are thirsty do you run to the Mississippi river? No, you go to the kitchen, turn on the faucet and fill a glass, then drink. The guru is just like the faucet in this example and the Mississippi River is God.

If you have a cataract what do you do? You go to the eye surgeon, who will check whether the cataract is ready to operate on and then will do laser surgery and you get clear eyesight. Similarly, the guru uses the sharp sword of knowledge to cut through the thick layer of ignorance so that the disciple can see God everywhere.

Ordinary souls have three kinds of impurities. The first is *anava-mala*, ignorance: each soul is pure, perfect, free, and divine, but one feels that one is bound, limited. The second is *karma-mala*, desire—both good and bad. Because of desire, a person has to go through births and deaths, experiencing happiness and misery. The third kind of impurity is *bahya-mala*, meaning the external world and the sense objects that bring impurities and cover the soul.

Diksha, initiation, helps to clean all impurities. According to tantra: 'Diyate jnanam kshiyate pashuvasana iti diksha; Diksha or initiation imparts knowledge and destroys animal propensities.' It also is of various kinds. In shambhavi diksha a true guru like Sri Ramakrishna, Jesus Christ, or Buddha can change a person's life with one glance, one touch, or one word. These great teachers could give religion. In shakti diksha a guru transmits power to her or his disciples. For example, Sri Ramakrishna transmitted power to Swami Vivekananda before his death. He told him: 'O Naren, today I have given you my all and have become a Fakir, a penniless beggar. By the force of the power transmitted by me, great things will be done by you; only after that will you go where you came from.'12 Swamiji later used to say that he conquered the whole world with his guru's power. In mantra-diksha, the guru gives the disciple a mantra and instructions for practising it to get the result. Although tantra has these various kinds of initiation, the object of initiation is to lead the disciple to God realisation.



Kundalini, The Serpent Power

The chosen ideal is very much necessary for practising sadhana. We must learn the alphabet and grammar before we study literature. If I tell you 'You are That' or 'You are Brahman', you will not understand immediately. One needs tremendous purity of mind to understand this truth. One must have zero body idea to experience 'I am Brahman'. That is why tantra says that the deity of the ritualist is in the fire in which one offers oblation while that of the contemplative is in the heart. The person who is not awakened sees Atman in the image, but the person who knows the Atman sees it everywhere. Beginners need something to focus on, a divine form on which to concentrate. As one progresses, the divine form vanishes and merges into the infinite. Hindus are not idolaters—those divine forms help in practising contemplation. Mantras have power; all mantras are as old as creation.

The individual self is a spark of the infinite

light. The aim of worship is to free the individual self from all that separates her or him from the cosmic Self so that the individual self merges

into the divine. The tantric dictum is: 'Devo bhutva devam yajet; by becoming God, worship God.' But what does it mean to become God? Imbibe these divine qualities so that you will be like God.

How does one perform mantra sadhana so that the power of the divine name is manifest and the divine name can be conscious? The mantra takes the form of the deity. The moment I say 'Jesus', then Jesus's form comes to my mind. If I say 'Sri Ramakrishna', Sri Ramakrishna's form comes to mind. The sound, the name, and the deity are identical. So if you call on Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ramakrishna will appear to you. If you call on Jesus, Jesus will appear before you. However, you must practise that mantra

## Kundalini Shakti in Tantra

Kundalini is a special subject of tantras. Sri Ramakrishna related his experience about the awakening of the six centres of kundalini:

according to your teacher's instructions.

Just before my attaining this state of mind, it had been revealed to me how the Kundalini is aroused, how the lotuses of the different centres blossom forth, and how all this culminates in samadhi. This is a very secret experience. I saw a boy twenty-two or twenty-three years old, exactly resembling me, enter the Sushumna nerve and commune with the lotuses, touching them with his tongue. He began with the centre at the anus and passed through the centres at the sexual organ, navel, and so on. The different lotuses of those centres—four-petalled, sixpetalled, ten-petalled, and so forth—had been drooping. At his touch they stood erect. When he reached the heart—I distinctly remember



it—and communed with the lotus there, touching it with his tongue, the twelve-petalled lotus, which was hanging head down, stood erect and opened its petals. Then he came to the sixteen-petalled lotus in the throat and the two-petalled lotus in the forehead. And last of all, the thousand-petalled lotus in the head blossomed. Since then I have been in this state. <sup>13</sup>

We know that practice leads to perfection. Tantra shows how to practise and attain perfection. It also demonstrates how every action can be transformed into worship. In his hymn to the Divine Mother, Acharya Shankara says: 'O Lady Supreme, may all the functions of my mind be Thy remembrance; may all my words be Thy praise; may all my acts be an obeisance unto Thee.'<sup>14</sup>

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- 11. Guru-stotram, Vishvasara Tantra.
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# Swami Atmarupananda

The 'RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT' and 'tantra' are words one doesn't expect to find in the same sentence, especially conjoined by 'and'. 'Sri Ramakrishna' and 'tantra' together don't seem incongruous, because Sri Ramakrishna practised tantric disciplines; but the incongruity begins, it seems, with the Movement after Sri Ramakrishna's passing. From Swamiji's time forward, the Ramakrishna Movement is identified as a Vedanta movement, largely in the Acharya Shankara tradition, but with its own galaxy of integrated ideas, including a strong bhakti element and an emphasis on service, together with a unique historical perspective and world vision and modern organisational methods. But tantra?

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Yes, there are tantric elements, generally unrecognised, to the tradition. It is the purpose here to highlight those elements.

# Why Tantric Elements Are Not Recognised

There are two main reasons why the tantric influences are not recognised, and it would be helpful to examine them first, before examining actual influences.

The Ramakrishna Movement became identified as a Vedanta movement through the public teachings of Swamiji. When Sri Ramakrishna speaks of Vedanta, he is usually speaking—as most people did in those days—of the path of knowledge according to the Advaita Vedantins, a path in which the world is rejected as a mere dream, work or karma is renounced, and the personal God itself often holds little importance

because it operates only within maya, which is interpreted as ignorance. Brahman alone is real, the world is unreal, and I am that Brahman; God, therefore, can be practically ignored. This is Vedanta as Sri Ramakrishna usually speaks of it, not always positively.

But when Swamiji speaks of Vedanta, he is speaking of the Upanishads—the original meaning of 'Vedanta'. 'I preach only the Upanishads', he said.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, he sees non-dualism, Advaita, as being the heart of Upanishadic teachings, but he sees a richer world of thought in the Upanishads than the strict, traditional, orthodox interpretation of the Advaitins, a world of thought sufficiently vast to provide a new foundation for world civilisation, sufficiently rich to inspire and nourish all fields of human endeavour for the coming Age, including the arts, sciences, religion, social institutions, and everyday life.

There are reasons for this emphasis on Upanishadic Vedanta. That is a subject in itself, but for now, let us state briefly, rather categorically, the following: Starting two thousand five hundred years ago, the tremendous influence of Buddhism swerved Indian civilisation away from its original Vedic trajectory. The Buddhist influence remained dominant in India until the eighth century CE. Then, starting with Shankara, the work of bringing India back to its Vedic trajectory began. Shankara was followed by other teachers and by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, all of whom continued the work of reviving the Vedic roots of Indian civilisation, a work that has now been carried on for more than one thousand two hundred years. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, it seems to some of us, came to continue this work of re-establishing the original trajectory of Indian civilisation. This they did, not by destroying everything else, but rather by embracing the whole of India's past, including its Buddhist and Islamic past, and putting the whole on a Vedic foundation, or, better, finding the Vedic threads woven through the whole cloth of Indian civilisation and history, and strengthening them, emphasising them, making them visible and vital.

Another reason for not emphasising tantra is not a distaste for it, but a recognition that the tantric movement in India—which for perhaps two thousand years swept through Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, through the Shaivas and Shaktas and Vaishnavas—was a vast phenomenon that included everything from demon worship and black magic and the most horrid rites, all the way to the highest, most abstract, non-dualistic truth. Therefore a deliberate emphasis on tantra carries a danger that emphasising the Vedanta does not: opening the door to the dark side of tantra.

Sri Ramakrishna and Bhairavi Brahmani During Tantra Sadhana





Panchamundi Asana of Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar

Swamiji recognised that even in the *vamachara* or left-hand tantra, there were some great truths, and that by such means some had attained to God, but he forbade the members of the Order from ever introducing its practice, in the strongest terms possible. Why forbid what also could be a path? Because ideas have individual consequences and also social consequences. For certain individuals it might lead them higher—though for many more it led to degeneration—but for society the consequences are devastating.

For these and other, lesser reasons, the Ramakrishna Movement has become identified as a movement within the Vedanta tradition, not the tantric. But let us now examine the tantric elements.

### Sri Ramakrishna and Tantra

First, let us mention the obvious and well-known elements.

Sri Ramakrishna himself practised tantric sadhana. Bhairavi Brahmani—an expert in the Vaishnava and Shakta tantras—was his guru who led him through the disciplines. That formed a significant part of his twelve years of sadhana and profoundly influenced his life and later teachings.

Much later, Sri Ramakrishna's disciple Swami Saradananda undertook tantric sadhana, with the blessings of Sri Sarada Devi, long after the passing of Sri Ramakrishna. He wrote a small book in Bengali as a result, entitled *Bharate Shakti Puja*, 'Shakti Worship in India'.

Much less generally known, even within the Order, there were a few among the disciples of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, who formally practised tantric sadhana with the blessings of the direct disciples.

#### **Tantric Rites**

Next, let us mention elements of tantra that are obvious to the religiously well-informed, but not so well known by the general public. The worship done in the Ramakrishna temples—both daily worship and special worship—are tantric. Mantra initiation given to both monastics and lay devotees—mantra *diksha*—is also a tantric rite. Sannyasa is, of course, Vedic, but the *homa* fire in front of which it is performed in the Ramakrishna Order is first worshipped in the tantric way, identifying it with Sri Ramakrishna.

None of this should be surprising. The tantric influence is pervasive in modern Hinduism, including the tradition of Acharya Shankara's Vedanta. Tradition has it that Acharya Shankara was the author of *Saundarya-lahari*, *Ananda-lahari*, and *Shivananda-lahari*, three tantric works. Even if his authorship can be doubted, it can't be doubted that he established tantric worship at his four monasteries at the four corners of diamond-shaped India. The Shankaracharyas—upholders

of the tradition of Acharya Shankara's Vedanta—spend much of their time performing tantric rites such as worship. Some of the Sanskrit hymns attributed to Acharya Shankara also show tantric influence. That there are tantric elements in the Ramakrishna Movement should therefore not come as a shock, nor is it an outrage to the 'purity' of the Vedanta tradition but a natural commingling of traditions typical of the synthetic genius of Hinduism.

## Principles of Tantra and Sri Ramakrishna

Let us now move to the less visible, the harder to recognise, the more difficult to document. To facilitate the discussion, let us first look at an underlying principle of tantra. We are not pretending here to give an exhaustive catalogue: that is beyond the scope of this article and beyond the allowed space. What we are interested in are general principles that we find at work in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and his followers.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that the tantras are not for reading, but for doing. That is, an underlying principle of tantric Hinduism is to reduce principles to tangible practice, so that the principle becomes worked out through the nerves, not just the surface of the mind, so that it transforms habits of thought and speech and action and even perception, and doesn't remain simply a matter for intellectual understanding.

This we see embodied profusely in Sri Ramakrishna. When he wanted to overcome attachment to money, he didn't just think: 'Money cannot buy God realisation; it can only buy material goods and comforts; but God realisation is the only aim of life, and therefore let me give up all attachment to money.' No, he took money in one hand and a clod of earth in the other, told himself that both were equally useless in their ability to further God realisation, and repeating that several times he threw both into the Ganga.

Admittedly, as the story has come down to us, he did this only one time, which certainly would not be enough for us to give up attachment to money. Most of us would throw both away after first making sure that we still had plenty of money left in our bank account. But we must remember the extraordinary strength of his mind which allowed him to do it once, and forever after act on that. The point is that he reduced the idea to a physical practice.

When he wanted to overcome the idea of caste superiority, he washed the latrines of the lowest people of society, using his long hair to scrub the place; he didn't just think: 'I have no pride of birth: all are my superiors.' When he

Acharya Shankara Praying to Goddess Tripurasundari



wanted to impress on himself that all beings are images of God, he took from the leavings of people's abandoned plates as if it were holy sacramental food. When thinking of himself as a handmaid of the Divine Mother, he changed his dress, his mannerisms, everything in order to embody the feminine. So also, when he thought of himself as Hanuman, the servant of Sri Ramachandra. So with his practice of Islam. We could continue with such examples, but this is enough to show that he reduced everything to a tangible practice aimed at changing his thinking, behaving, and perceiving.

And then there are his teachings which show a profound tantric influence, including his constant affirmations about the oneness of the *nitya* and the *lila*, the Absolute and the relative, to which we will return in a moment.

### Vishishtadvaita or Tantra?

Some followers of Sri Ramakrishna have claimed that his teachings are closer to Vishishtadvaita than to Advaita Vedanta, because he doesn't deny the reality of the world and its living beings. And indeed, he does make statements that seem to indicate Vishishtadvaita more than Advaita, such as the following: 'I accept all— Brahman and also maya, the universe, and its living beings. If I accepted less I should not get the full weight [of the fruit]. ... When a man speaks of the essential part of the bel-fruit, he means its flesh only, and not the seeds and shell. But if he wants to speak of the total weight of the fruit, it will not

do for him to weigh only the flesh. He must accept the whole thing: seeds and shell and flesh.'<sup>2</sup> A close examination of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, however, shows that, though he appreciated all paths and spoke highly of Sri Ramanuja, his teachings have a non-dualistic basis.

What Sri Ramakrishna seemed to like about Sri Ramanuja's philosophy is its acceptance of the world: it doesn't deny the reality of the world. As Sri Ramakrishna says, one must take the weight of the whole fruit. At the same time, Sri Ramakrishna never denied the truth of Advaita, which Sri Ramanuja did. And there are other problems with tying Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy to Sri Ramanuja's, but not with tying it to some form of Advaita.

As we've pointed out, a constant theme in Sri Ramakrishna's teachings is the identity of what he called the *nitya* and the *lila*—the transcendental Reality of Brahman and relative reality, often known as Shakti. But for Sri Ramakrishna, the

festation or 'play' of the Absolute. That is, the relative reality is not real in itself, but real because it is the play of Shakti, and Shakti is not different from Brahman. He would use the beautiful illustration of the snake at rest—Brahman—and the snake in movement—Shakti; it is the same snake, in two states. How apt! Relativity is movement, nothing is still, all is changing: but it is the same Reality, the same 'snake', just

lila or relative reality is real as the mani-

is all the more apt because the snake moves in a wave-like pattern and everything in the relative universe

in motion. The illustration

Bronze Image of Ramanuja

at all levels can be reduced to wave-like, vibratory motions. The illustration is similar to Shiva in meditation and Shiva dancing—when Shiva comes out of meditation and begins to dance, the world comes into being—another tantric idea.

There is not space enough to go into a thorough philosophical explanation of why this fits with some form of Advaita and not with Vishishtadvaita, but the point will be obvious to those who know even a little about the two systems. Simply put, Sri Ramakrishna saw all as the non-dual consciousness itself, whether dynamic as the *lila* or transcendent as the *nitya*, whereas Vishishtadvaita sees an eternal distinction between matter, individual conscious beings, and God.<sup>3</sup>

# Tantric Advaita and Acharya Shankara's Advaita

One way in which tantric Advaita differs from Acharya Shankara's Advaita is that the tantras don't deny the reality of the world. But neither do they say that the world is real in itself, as an un-illumined person experiences it. No, it is real because it is the dance of Shiva, who is Reality itself, or because it is the dance of the Divine Mother who is one with Shiva, or because it is the dance of the Divine Mother who herself is both the nitya and the lila. And that, as we've seen, is a constant refrain of Sri Ramakrishna's, expressed in many ways. Speaking of God as the nitya and the lila, he says: 'Water is water whether it is still or in waves. The snake is a snake whether it is coiled up motionless or wriggles along. A man is the same man whether sitting still or engaged in action.'4 Such statements are closer to tantric Advaita than to Vishishtadvaita because they identify the universe with Shakti, which is in turn identified with the Absolute. And they are closer to tantric Advaita than to Shankara Advaita because they speak of the reality of the world as a manifestation of Shakti.

One might point out that none of this necessarily contradicts traditional Advaita. No, it doesn't, and that's important to recognise. The difference we are pointing to is one more of emphasis, not of absolute difference. The Upanishads themselves say: 'All this is verily Brahman.'5 Advaitins also accept that, but tantra makes a special point of it, and says that therefore the world is not unreal. Instead, traditional Advaita Vedanta emphasises that 'Brahman is true, the universe is false,6 based on its definition of truth.7 In confrontation with each other as opposing philosophical schools, they harden their respective positions into absolutes. And thereby the difference is stark. If, however, we soften our philosophical stance, we can see that the difference is more one of emphasis. And that is how the great Acharya Shankara could be both an Advaita Vedantin and a tantric.8

# A Historical Purpose to the Tantric Movement

There is a historical aspect to the tantric movement that is important to discuss, before we speak about Swamiji. Tantra is often seen as non-Vedic, even as a revolt against the Vedas. Part of this is internal to the tantras themselves: certain tantras exult in independence from Vedic tradition, exult in shocking the orthodox, though many others, like the *Mahanirvana Tantra*, see themselves as integral parts of the Vedic tradition. And part of it is external, traceable to Western scholars who excel at analysing, separating, and isolating into impermeable categories.

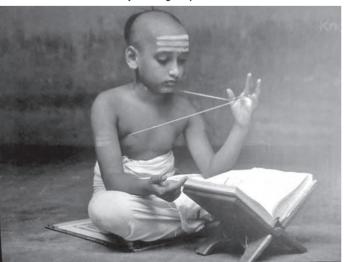
But are the Hindu tantras really anti-Vedic or even non-Vedic? An objective examination shows that they are not at all. There might have been non-Vedic influences, certainly, but the core of tantric thought and practice is clearly traceable to the Vedas. And a very strong case can be made that the Hindu tantras are an important

part of that effort to bring India back to its original Vedic trajectory.

First of all, the Atharva-Veda seems to have been a major source of tantric traditions, and there are links with the other three Vedas as well. Secondly, much of what we see in the tantras is a reinterpretation of Vedic symbolism. This is important.

The symbolism which was alive and vital during the Vedic period was largely lost afterwards. It was probably fading from the Hindu mind even before the birth of Buddha, but after the spread of Buddhism it was dealt an all-but-fatal blow. A new symbolic world was born with the Puranas and Itihasas, starting before the birth of Buddhism and continuing to the present day. But what do we find in the tantras, more than in the Puranas and Itihasas? A reinterpretation of Vedic symbolism. The ritualism of the karmakanda, the section of the Vedas dealing with rituals, whose symbolism was becoming obscure by the time of the Buddha, was replaced by a tantric ritualism where the spiritual symbolism was transparent. The tantric homa fire, ritually identified with the deity being worshipped, replaced the Vedic fire. Yantras replaced the sacred geometry of the altars. Images replaced the Vedic deities worshipped through the medium of Agni, the fire god. The worship was developed as a means for making real and tangible the teaching, 'Thou art That'—a means, in fact,

A Brahmin Boy Reciting Scriptures



for driving that teaching of identity into the very nerves and blood. The different disciplines of the Vedas and Upanishads, whose method of practice was lost, were replaced by various types of tantric worship and meditation. Even the Vedic sandhya-vandana, twilight devotions, was replaced by a tantric version. The Vedic fascination with grammar and the divine power of speech continued in the tantras in various ways. The most sacred and universal of all Vedic symbols—indeed the most universal of all religious symbols anywhere in the world—the sacred Om, became the foundation of the vast science of mantras in the tantric tradition; and it became the basis of nada-yoga, the yoga of sound.

This process of reinterpretation was carried into detail. Every Vedic mantra has a presiding deity, the sage who revealed it, and the poetical metre in which it is expressed. The tantras used this to give a symbolic—as opposed to a literal, historical—interpretation of mantras. For instance, the mantra used in tantric worship for purifying the seat or asana says that Meru-prishthat is the sage who revealed the mantra, sutala is the metre in which it is written, and Kurma is the presiding deity. Well, from a literal standpoint, that's absurd: the sage was not Meru-prishtha, the metre is not sutala, and that makes us doubt whether the presiding deity is indeed Kurma. But symbolically it is deeply meaningful. 'Meruprishtha' means 'he whose back is [steady, unmoving, and strong as Mount Meru, the central axis of the universe. 'Sutala' means 'the foundation of a large building'. And Kurma is the tortoise incarnation of Vishnu who supports the world on his back. So, all three are connected to the idea of a steady, immoveable seat. In this and other ways, the tantras gave a new, spiritually transparent interpretation to a Vedic symbolism which had become obscure and therefore devoid of the power to inspire later Hindu life and culture.

The tantras can thus be seen as an important part of that effort to redirect India to its original path, a vast effort lasting perhaps two thousand years that included the tantras, the great teachers, and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and that culminated in the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.<sup>9</sup>

## Swami Vivekananda, Tantric Advaita, and Advaita Vedanta

Coming to Swamiji in relation to tantra, we find, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, that he emphasised Vedanta, but it was an ample, comprehensive Vedanta, a non-exclusive Vedanta, a Vedanta that provided the new foundation needed for the modern world, a Vedanta that embraced the whole of India's past, including its Buddhist and Islamic past. And if that is so, then it certainly embraced India's tantric past as well, as it did. This is a big subject, and we will only sketch its barest outline here.

The Upanishads taught brahma-vada, the doctrine of Brahman, or atma-vada, the doctrine of the Self, not maya-vada, the doctrine of maya. Though Acharya Shankara developed the idea of maya philosophically, he emphasised Reality, not ignorance or illusion. But some later Advaitins found maya more fascinating than Brahman. After all, what can one do with non-duality? But maya is a different story—neither real nor unreal, it makes the impossible possible, it is neither different from Brahman nor the same, neither within Brahman nor outside of it, it hides that which cannot be hidden, it casts a shadow on luminosity itself; maya, in other words, gives us a lot to play with.

But, like the Upanishads, Swamiji taught the doctrine of Reality. Yes, he spoke of maya and gave some very important lectures on it. But there he says that maya does not mean illusion: 'It is a simple statement of facts—what we are

and what we see around us'10—the facts of the contradictions inherent in all our present experience. Rather than emphasise ignorance or illusion, Swamiji says that Vedanta points to the Reality within the illusion. 'Do not seek for Him [God]', he says in his inimitably forceful way, 'just see Him' (7.29).

And yet Swamiji *did* teach that the world is unreal and that God alone is real. He was an Advaita Vedantin, and held that in the Advaita lay the highest truth. But like Sri Ramakrishna, he emphasised that God is the reality within everything, the purpose behind all actions, the goal of all longing, the perfection sought by all striving, the dissolution of all contradictions, the end of primordial ignorance. And in this his emphasis was in tune with the tantras as well as the Upanishads.

There is a problem with the statement, 'The world is unreal'. Only an illumined soul who has experience of Reality knows what it really means. For the rest of us, it is an intellectual concept and therefore inaccurate, because all such concepts are themselves part of the unreal. Without experience of the Real, we can't know what it really means. However, 'Everything is God, all is Brahman' is also problematic: that also is just a concept, not a realisation: we don't see God or Brahman, just the world, so we can't at present know the true meaning of that statement either. What then are we to do? We seem trapped in contradiction.

Of the two statements, the second statement gives us a handle, whereas the first statement takes away all handles. The world is all that we know at present, and so 'the world is unreal, Brahman alone is real' takes away all that we know and gives us an abstraction of the Absolute in its place. But 'all this is Brahman' leaves us with 'all this', and just asks us to reinterpret it. Yes, our reinterpretation will be conceptual also, but it is taking us in the right direction, because,

as Swamiji said, behind the illusion is the Reality. Even a concept, if properly used, can take us towards the Reality. One of the important differences between Vedanta and Buddhism is that Vedanta sees the Reality *within* everything. Words are not the Reality, yet they are manifestations of Reality, and we can trace them back to Reality. Work is not Reality, but work is a manifestation of Reality. <sup>11</sup> Brahman is beyond form, but it is Brahman itself that appears to take on form. I can go *through* the form to the Reality, I can go *through* action to the action-less Reality, because that is the Reality manifesting as everything.

If I am a wife with a husband, children, and a job, and I am told that the world is unreal, Brahman alone is real, what does that do to me? For some advanced souls it may be good advice: I can accept the world as unreal and just do what I have to do with complete detachment, keeping my mind on the Self. But how many can do that? Very few indeed. But if I know that all is a



manifestation of God, then all that I must do in my daily life can be spiritualised, all relationships can be recast as spiritual relationships with the Divine, all duties can be recast as service to the Divine, my job can be seen as part of the cosmic yajna, cosmic sacrifice, that is this world. 'Everything is unreal' for most people, on the other hand, cuts the ground right out from under their feet, because they have nothing else.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say:

The jnani says: 'I am Brahman; I am not the body. I am beyond hunger and thirst, disease and grief, birth and death, pleasure and pain.' How can you be a jnani if you are conscious of disease, grief, pain, pleasure, and the like? A thorn enters your flesh, blood flows from the wound, and you suffer very badly from the pain; but nevertheless if you are a jnani you must be able to say: 'Why, there is no thorn in my flesh at all. Nothing is the matter with me.'12

So, if a thorn enters our flesh, it won't do to say, 'There is no pain' if it actually hurts. That is denying our direct experience, pretending that it doesn't exist. So simply saying 'the world doesn't exist' is also a denial of our direct experience; unless a person is extremely strong-minded and pure, it leads to hypocrisy. However, we *can* reinterpret our experience: 'I see the pain, but I am the consciousness that sees it as an object.' And so as I see the world, I can reinterpret what I am seeing: 'It is the play of the Divine Mother' or 'It is the dance of Shiva' or 'It is the play of consciousness, floating in my own awareness'—*if* I am able to understand and hold on to that last idea; anyone can take up the first two ideas.

Therefore Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda both emphasised that God has become everything. 'Worship the Virat', cried Swamiji, 13 meaning the visible universe. Again, even more directly he said: 'Do not seek for Him, just see Him'. 14

## **Conclusion**

But what about the unreality of the world? Neither Sri Ramakrishna nor Swami Vivekananda, not even Holy Mother, ever denied that the world is ultimately unreal, and in that they were Advaita Vedantins. But the view—consistent with tantric philosophy—that the world is real as a manifestation of the Divine gives the aspirant ground on which to stand, and therefore they all tended to emphasise that idea.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, when one follows the path of knowledge by rejecting everything as unreal—neti neti; not this, not this—one is, as it were, ascending the stairs one by one, rejecting them all. But when one comes to the roof of the house, 'you need no longer discard what you discarded before. You find that the stairs are made of the same materials—bricks, lime, and brick-dust—as the roof.'15 And so as one rejects the reality of the world, one eventually ascends to the realisation of Brahman, but then one finds that everything that one had previously rejected is also Brahman: there is nothing to be rejected. The world, the twenty-four cosmic principles which make up the world, living beings, matter, all is Brahman. Whether one is absorbed in the Absolute, the *nitya*, or aware of the relative, the *lila*, it is all the same Brahman. That experience is not our experience. And so the 'world' that is seen in that state is a vastly different experience from the world that we see in our ignorance. There, 'the world is real' or 'the world is unreal' loses all meaning. Brahman alone is all, Brahman alone is real. And in that way, the distinction between traditional Advaita Vedanta and tantric Advaita practically dissolves.

But for us, 'the world is unreal' and 'the world is nothing but God' are both only concepts. One concept, however, removes the carpet from under our feet, whereas the other asks us only to reinterpret what we see, and to go on affirming our conviction until the Reality itself blazes forth,

incinerating the concept and leaving the realisation; the Reality itself shines forth, in the midst of action, in the midst of form, in the midst of word, but free from all. Then whether we see the world or don't see the world doesn't matter. Because, all is the non-dual Reality.

### **Notes and References**

- 1. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 8.267.
- 2. M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 652.
- Yes, for Sri Ramanuja, Ishvara or God unites all three, but without removing the eternal and real distinctions.
- 4. Gospel, 343.
- 5. Chhandogya Upanishad, 3.14.1.
- 6. Acharya Shankara, Vivekachudamani, 20.
- 7. Truth is that which is never contradicted. The world is contradicted in dream, sleep, and unconsciousness, and also in samadhi, as well as being contradicted by the changes taking place every moment.
- 8. Assuming, that is, that the tradition in this regard is true. Whether he was or not we can't be absolutely sure, but Western scholars have tended to believe that he couldn't possibly be both. That's because they are used to an 'either/or' logic, not the 'both/and' logic of Indian spirituality.
- 9. Earlier in this article it was stated that the effort to bring Indian civilisation back to its original Vedic trajectory started with Acharya Shankara one thousand two hundred years ago. Here we are saying 'perhaps two thousand years' because we are here including the roots of the tantric tradition also.
- 10. Complete Works, 2.89.
- 11. See Bhagavadgita, 4.24: 'Brahman alone is to be reached by him who has concentration on Brahman as the objective.'
- 12. Gospel, 468.
- 13. This is a paraphrase of 'The first of all worship is the worship of the Virat—of those all around us. Worship It.' (*Complete Works*, 3.301).
- 14. Complete Works, 7.29.
- 15. Gospel, 604.



Swami Atmapriyananda

## The Science and Technology of Religion

streams in any discipline: theory and practice, the theoretical aspect and the applied aspect, the science and the technology. In Vedantic parlance, the first is called *vidya* and the second yoga. Vedanta itself is called *brahma vidya* and its application or practice which may be called applied *vidya*, and applied science is called yoga. These two words, *vidya* and yoga, are very ancient and are found in the Upanishads as well as the Bhagavadgita. For example, the very

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last mantra of the *Katha Upanishad* says: 'This *vidya* or science of Brahman or Atman along with *yoga vidhi*, or the technology of realisation was taught by the god of Death to Nachiketa, who having obtained this knowledge [the science and technology of Brahman realisation] attained Brahman and became absolutely pure and immortal. In the same way, anyone else who pursues the same spiritual discipline will attain the same goal.'

The yoga technology has its basis in the Sankhya science. Sankhya-yoga is thus the science-technology complementing each other. Similarly, Vedanta-tantra is the science-technology complementing each other. To draw a parallel from Western philosophy: Hegel's idealism,

Kierkegaard's existentialism, and Hegel's journey towards his own notion of the Absolute—which he calls the 'concrete reality'—through his dialectical approach of being-nonbeing-becoming triad. In Indian philosophy, the oppositely positioned are *sat*, the Being, in the transcendental realm and Shakti, the becoming, in the immanent realm of the relative. While Vedanta has to do with the realm of the Absolute—Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, and Bliss Absolute—tantra deals with the realm of the relative wherein the Absolute manifests as Shakti, which is identical with Brahman as *brahma-shakti*.

The late Swami Hitananda, who was engaged in ritualistic worship at the temple at Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math for several decades. told the author that the tantra is the practical means by which the Vedantic truth of Oneness or Advaita is realised. The truth behind this statement could be easily understood when we see how, the mystic—to some extent esoteric tradition of spiritual practice coming down over the generations from Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda, and other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna to the present gurus of the Ramakrishna Order, that is based essentially on repetition of the holy name and the meditation on the holy image, is derived from tantra, rooted in Sri Ramakrishna's transcendental and esoteric realisations. Ramakrishna tradition, as it were, places Vedanta at the core of its Movement, but practises the 'Practical Vedanta' enunciated by Swamiji that is based on Sri Ramakrishna's realisation of the state of vijnana wherein the world of relativity is not sublated in the transcendental realisation, but appears as the playful expression of the same Reality that was realised as Absolute in the transcendental state.

Swami Tapasyananda equated this state of *vij-nana* with *bhavamukha*, a state of Being-becoming, in which Sri Ramakrishna was commanded

to stay put, for the good of the world, by the Divine Mother Kali, brahma-shakti. The philosophy or theory of the Ramakrishna Order and Ramakrishna tradition is Vedanta in its Advaitic aspect, as vouched by no less an authority than the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. It would be appropriate to quote here an interesting incident in the history of the Ramakrishna Order. When a dispute arose about Swamiji devoting his Himalayan ashrama at Mayavati exclusively to Advaita and discouraging any dualistic worship there, Sri Sarada Devi emphatically ruled: 'One who is our guru [Sri Ramakrishna], he is Advaita. Since you all are his disciples, you too are Advaitins. I can emphatically say, you are surely Advaitavadins.'2 Despite this, the personal and esoteric practice performed by the monks and other lay devotees of Sri Ramakrishna is meditation on the divine form and repetition of the divine name, the sacred mantra. There is no conflict between these two approaches if we remember and constantly keep in mind Sri Ramakrishna's wonderful harmony and reconciliation in the following words:

Brahman and Sakti are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. ... one cannot think of Brahman without Sakti, or of Sakti without Brahman. One cannot think of the Absolute without the Relative, or of the Relative without the Absolute. ... The Primordial Power is ever at play. She is creating, preserving, and destroying in play, as it were. This Power is called Kali. Kali is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kali.<sup>3</sup>

Every outstanding philosopher-saint in India, upholding and spearheading a great philosophic-religious tradition, has a highly esoteric leaning which he does not reveal or preach to the world at large. For example, Swamiji, a paragon of Vedanta tradition, who was never tired of preaching the universal gospel of Advaita to the world at

large, had an esoteric leaning towards Kali worship. In his own words: 'Kali worship is not a necessary step in any religion. The Upanishads teach us all there is of religion. Kali worship is my special *fad*; you never heard me preach it, or read of my preaching it in India. I only preach what is good for universal humanity. If there is any curious method which applies entirely to me, I keep it a secret and there it ends. I must not explain to you what Kali worship is, as I never taught it to anybody." Interestingly, it is the same Narendranath, Swami Vivekananda's pre-monastic name, who struggled to fight and revolt in vain against his master, Sri Ramakrishna's attempt to make his beloved Narendranath accept Kali and become her chosen instrument to teach humankind. Narendranath had to ultimately surrender helplessly to the *mahashakti*, great power, whom Sri Ramakrishna called Kali as discussed more elaborately later. Narendranath was to confess

later: 'She made a slave of me. Those were the very words: "a slave of you". And Ramakrishna Paramahamsa made

me over to Her' (8.263).

Sri Ramanuja, the great philosopher-saint and the protagonist of Vishishtadvaita, qualified nondualism, philosophy and tradition, had for his spiritual strength Lord Narayana in infinite and unending ananta shayana, reclining posture, with whom he communed day and night. Sri Madhavacharya, the great philosopher-saint and protagonist of Dvaita, dualism, had his esoteric leaning to Sri Krishna of Udipi. Even the extreme shunyavadin, nihilist, Nagarjuna had as his esoteric source of strength, Prajna Paramita, the female Buddhist deity akin to Kali.

Why this female power, why not male? What is the special significance of the female principle in tantra? An inkling of this aspect of tantra could be found in the divine play of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna.

## **Shakti and Divine Incarnations**

Interestingly, most of the prophets and incarnations and the spiritual traditions initiated by them have a female power to provide sustenance to them and their respective traditions. In the case of married prophets and avataras, the holy consort is regarded as their female power or Shakti. In the case of unmarried prophets and avataras, the mother of the respective prophet or avatara is considered as the female power or Shakti. For example, the two great incarnations of Hinduism, Sri Ramachandra and Sri Krishna had respectively their holy consorts, Sita and Radha as the sustaining female powers.

Starting from Buddha down to Sri Ramakrishna, we see the power behind the

> avatara and the tradition he initiated, coming from a sustaining female power. Buddha's tradition had his wife Yashodhara at the head of the women's Order of nuns that he initiated. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, we see Nagarjuna drawing sustenance and power from Prajna Paramita, the female power worshipped in this tradition. The tradition of Jesus the Christ has Mother Mary as the female power or Shakti. Sri Chaitanya had his holy consort Vishnupriya as the female power or Shakti. In the case of

Sri Ramakrishna and the tradition of Ramakrishna Order that he initiated through

Swami Vivekananda, Sri Sarada Devi, the holy consort of Sri Ramakrishna is considered as his Shakti as well as the the mother of the Order. It was Swamiji, who discovered and taught the real significance of the advent of Sri Sarada Devi as the female power, Shakti, behind the Ramakrishna Order, the Ramakrishna tradition, and the Ramakrishna Movement. His powerful words, written to his brother-disciple, Swami Shivananda, are worth quoting here:

You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life—none of you. But gradually you will know. Without Shakti (Power) there is no regeneration for the world. Why is it that our country is the weakest and the most backward of all countries?—Because Shakti is held in dishonour there. Mother has been born to revive that wonderful Shakti in India; and making her the nucleus, once more will Gargis and Maitrevis be born into the world. Dear brother, you understand little now, but by degrees you will come to know it all. ... Without the grace of Shakti nothing is to be accomplished. What do I find in America and Europe?—the worship of Shakti, the worship of Power. Yet they worship Her ignorantly through sense-gratification. Imagine, then, what a lot of good they will achieve who will worship Her with all purity, in a Sattvika spirit, looking upon Her as their mother! I am coming to understand things clearer every day, my insight is opening out more and more. ... To me, Mother's grace is a hundred thousand times more valuable than Father's. Mother's grace, Mother's blessings are all paramount to me. ... Please pardon me. I am a little bigoted there, as regards Mother. If but Mother orders, her demons can work anything. Brother, before proceeding to America I wrote to Mother to bless me. Her blessings came, and at one bound I cleared the ocean. There, you see. In this terrible winter I am lecturing from place to place and fighting against odds, so that funds may be collected for Mother's Math. ... Brother, often

enough, when I am reminded of the Mother, I ejaculate, 'What after all is Rama?' Brother, that is where my fanaticism lies, I tell you. Of Ramakrishna, you may aver, my brother, that he was an Incarnation or whatever else you may like but fie on him who has no devotion for the Mother (7. 484–5).

Shakti is what moves the universe—its origin, sustenance, and final dissolution—all these are the divine play of Shakti. Brahman, the supreme Reality or Being Absolute, is powerless without Shakti. The famous hymn *Saundarya-Lahari* of Acharya Shankara begins with this memorable passage: 'United with Sakti, Siva is endowed with the power to create the universe. Otherwise, He is incapable even of movement. Therefore, who except those endowed with great merits acquired in the past can be fortunate enough to salute or praise Thee, Mother Divine, who art the adored of even Hari, Hara and Virinchi?'

In the Sri Vaishnava tradition of Sri Ramanuja, Vishnupriya



it is emphatically stated that it is only through the intervention of Sri Devi, the Shakti of Lord Narayana that grace descends on the jiva, the individual soul. This concept is very similar to the Catholic Christian tradition wherein Mother Mary is regarded as an inevitable intervener between God and man for God's benign grace to fall on man.

Swamiji calls a divine incarnation, a wave in the ocean of Shakti. In his famous hymn on Sri Ramakrishna—where he does not mention Sri Ramakrishna's name, but just calls him the guru-Shakti—he says: 'I surrender myself to my Guru, the physician for the malady of Samsara (relative existence) who is, as it were, a wave rising in the ocean of Shakti (Power).'6

# Naren, the Rishi of the Absolute Plane, Accepts Kali

All these show one thing: That there is a female power, a female principle guiding and regulating all beings in the phenomenal world that is termed maya in Vedanta, that is the power of Brahman or *brahma-shakti*—which as Sri Ramakrishna points out so emphatically—is identical with Brahman: 'Brahman and Sakti are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is like fire and its power to burn. If you see the fire, you must recognize its power to burn also. You cannot think of fire without its power to burn, nor can you think of the power to burn without fire.'<sup>7</sup>

Brahman and Shakti are identical, inseparable, as fire and its burning power, snake and its wriggling motion, milk and its whiteness. While Brahman is transcendental and beyond spacetime-causation, incomprehensible to thought and speech, unreachable by the senses, *brahmashakti* interpenetrates and envelops all the relative universe of creation, while all the time it is transcendental being identical with Brahman. In this sense, Shakti is transcendental and immanent, absolute and relative, absolute Being

and relative becoming, formless and with form, beyond all and within all! Swami Tapasyananda used to say that Sri Ramakrishna replaced the truth-falsity paradigm of Shankara with the *nitya-lila* paradigm.<sup>8</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna's desperation in trying to persuade his beloved Naren to accept Kali is a landmark in Ramakrishna-Vivekananda relationship as it is an inevitable necessity for Swami Vivekananda to engage himself for the good of the world. For the good of the world, for the emancipation of the individual soul in bondage, Narendra was pulled out of his absorption in samadhi in the transcendental realm, what Sri Ramakrishna called the home of the indivisible, where not even a trace of duality exists. Unless Narendra accepted Kali, the empress of the relative existence called the universe, he would definitely not feel inclined to do good to the world, which his Advaitic absorption in the realm of indivisible Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute would reject as unreal! Hence, the great eagerness of Sri Ramakrishna, bordering on mad desperation, to make his Naren accept Kali as the Shakti of Brahman.

When Naren wanted to be immersed in nirvikalpa samadhi, only coming down now and then for some food, Sri Ramakrishna rebuked him: 'You are a very small-minded person. There is a state higher even that. "All that exists are Thou"—it is you who sing that song." Look at this strange *lila*, the divine play between Sri Ramakrishna and Naren: By Sri Ramakrishna's own admission, he brought Naren down from the transcendental realm of the Infinite and the Absolute, a realm of Pure Being, to the relative world of becoming, of space-time-causation. Having accomplished this next to impossible task of dragging Naren down by the magnetism of his pure and divine love, he was desperately restless to position Naren—the Brahman-intuiting rishi merged in the bliss of nirvikalpa

samadhi in the transcendental realm—in the realm of becoming wherein he would, nonetheless, swim in the same bliss, this time of realising the same transcendent Brahman as immanent in all beings and his divine love would issue out in torrents in the form of selfless service to all beings seen directly as veritable embodiments of the same Brahman realised in the transcendental plane! This mystical play of *nara* and *narayana*, of man and God, of an Arjuna and a Sri Krishna, of a Hanuman and a Sri Ramachandra, of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna, is the divine play of the Divine Mother Kali as *brahma-shakti*.

# The Brahmo Naren Beseeching Lord's Mercy

Although Naren had come down from the transcendental realm unawares by the divine will of Sri Ramakrishna, under the influence of the Brahmo Samaj, he thought of himself as a despicable creature beseeching the mercy of the king of kings, his beloved supreme Lord. Recall one of his earliest songs sung before Sri Ramakrishna: where he sang: 'Thou art the Lord of all the worlds, and I but a beggar here' (508). Where did all his nondual realisation in the transcendental realm of indivisible Existence-Knowledge-Bliss-Absolute vanish? Whatever happened to his Vedantic exhortation of relying upon the Atman and denunciation of all dualistic superstitions? Where did it all go? How did he feel himself as a helpless destitute and a beggar crying to the Lord for mercy? That is the divine play of Sri Ramakrishna who is fond of playing his divine game!

# Naren Turned an Advaitin by Sri Ramakrishna

In spite of resistance from Naren, Sri Ramakrishna tries to put into his head the loftiest ideas of Advaita by persuading him lovingly to read to him the magnum opus of Advaita, the



Swami Tapasyananda (1904-91)

Ashtavakra Samhita. Naren, initially reluctant, read this greatest of Advaita texts in the divine presence of his master till what he read went so deep into him as to transform him into a paragon of Advaitists in modern times, so much so, that later from the world pulpit, this Vedanta kesari, lion of Vedanta roared his immortal Advaitic roar: 'Never forget the glory of human nature. ... Christs and Buddhas are but waves on the boundless ocean which I am.' Saying this, he thumped his chest with great force! This done, Sri Ramakrishna is at his next game of making this Advaitin Naren accept Kali as brahma-shakti and be guided to do her dictates for the rest of his life!

## Naren Accepts Sri Ramakrishna as the Embodiment of Kali, Brahma-Shakti

The next and last of the acts in this divine play,

was to make Naren realise his own master, Sri Ramakrishna, as the incarnation of Kali. This he perhaps could not accomplish during his lifetime, but he had to wait much later, till Naren surrendered to him totally and completely. Swami Vivekananda himself confessed later that Sri Ramakrishna was the incarnation of Kali and that the thing that made him accept Kali would be a secret that would die with him. This part of the divine play between *nara-rishi* Swamiji and narayana Sri Ramakrishna is too profound and too mysterious—perhaps 'mystical' is the word—for human comprehension. Reverential reflection and contemplation of this aspect of the play is very much part of the Reflections on Tantra, the main theme of the present volume.

# Swami Vivekananda's Substantiation of this Divine Play

To substantiate that this version of the *nara-narayana lila* is not entirely the author's imagination or fanciful construction, but has been culled and constructed cogently from the available authentic records scattered throughout the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature, we quote some relevant utterances of Swamiji:

The future, you say, will call Ramakrishna Paramahamsa an Incarnation of Kali? Yes, I think there's no doubt that She worked up the body of Ramakrishna for Her own ends. ...

You see, I cannot but believe that there is somewhere a great Power that thinks of Herself as feminine, and called Kali and Mother. ... And I believe in Brahman too. ... But is it not always like that? Is it not the multitude of cells in the body that make up the personality, the many brain-centres, not the one, that produce consciousness? ... Unity in complexity! Just so! And why should it be different with Brahman? It is Brahman. It is the One. And yet—and yet—it is the gods too! (8.264).

'How I used to hate Kali!' he said, referring to his own days of doubts in accepting the Kali ideal, 'And all Her ways! That was the ground of my six years' fight—that I would not accept Her. But I had to accept Her at last! Ramakrishna Paramahamsa dedicated me to Her. and now I believe that She guides me in everything I do, and does with me what She will. ... Yet I fought so long! I loved him, you see, and that was what held me. I saw his marvellous purity. ... I felt his wonderful love. ... His greatness had not dawned on me then. All that came afterwards when I had given in. At that time I thought him a brain-sick baby, always seeing visions and the rest. I hated it. And then I, too, had to accept Her!

No, the thing that made me do it is a secret that will die with me. I had great misfortunes at the time. ... It was an opportunity. ... She made a slave of me. Those were the very words: "a slave of you". And Ramakrishna Paramahamsa made me over to Her' (8.263).

Swami Vivekananda's experience at Kshir-Bhavani in Kashmir is well known. The Divine Mother spoke to him in a clear voice: 'Do *you* protect Me? Or do *I* protect you?'<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, upon hearing about this incident, the ever-inquisitive disciple, Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, asked Swamiji: "Sir, you used to say that Divine Voices are the echo of our inward thoughts and feelings." Swamiji gravely said, "Whether it be internal or external, if you actually hear with your ears such a disembodied voice, as I have done, can you deny it and call it false? Divine Voices are actually heard, just as you and I are talking." The significance of this experience could be somewhat understood when read in his own words quoted earlier: 'I cannot but believe that there is somewhere a great Power that thinks of Herself as feminine, and called Kali and Mother.'

Now the question worthy of deep reflection: Swami Vivekananda's staunchest commitment

to Advaita which he believed will be the 'future religion of thinking humanity' (8.348) and his equally staunch attitude of surrender to what he called Kali and what his master Sri Ramakrishna revealed to him—are these two contradictory? Was Swami Vivekananda displaying two contradictory traits in him, one universal, Advaita, another personal and esoteric, surrender to Kali? Our aim in stating this is to rouse in the read-

ers of this special issue of Prabuddha Bharata. devoted to the theme. Reflections on Tantra, deep reflection on this question in the light of the divine play between nara and narayana, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna as portrayed earlier. This reflection would reveal and uncover the secrets of the strange and esoteric, the profound and mysterious aspects of tantra itself, as demonstrated and enacted in the present age, before our very ways, the moderns of the twentieth and twenty-first century with our vaunted intellectuality and rationality. the chosen ideal on the lotus of their hearts in a purely tantric fashion! Monks participating in the worship of the Divine Mother, singing devotional songs of the divine glory of the Mother, juxtaposing it with the study of Vedanta scriptures—some of them engrossed in the study of deeply Advaitic texts and commentaries thereon—are common occurrences and no monk feels uneasy with this. Harmonising Vedanta with tentra results

anta with tantra resulting in a highly balanced spiritual sadhana that integrates spiritual life with the so-called worldly life to make all life one continuum of spiritual sadhana is one of the greatest gifts of the Ramakrishna Order coming from the spiritual giants beginning from persons like Sri Sarada Devi. Swami Vivekananda, and Swami Brahmananda and the world is yet to understand the profundity of this contribution. We quote below Sister Nivedita's immortal words in her introduction to Swami



Kshir-Bhavani Temple in Kashmir

# Ramakrishna Order's Tradition of Kali worship vis-à-vis the Divine Play

It is very interesting to note that in the divine tradition of the Ramakrishna Order, Vedanta and tantra run parallel. After receiving the highly Advaitic sannyasa mantras, the monks would be seen quietly doing japa and meditating on Vivekananda's *Complete Works* which has this Vedanta-tantra integration as the philosophical basis although not spelt out explicitly:

No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.

This is the realisation which makes Vivekananda the great preacher of Karma, not as

divorced from, but as expressing Jnana and Bhakti. To him, the workshop, the study, the farmyard, and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple. To him, there is no difference between service of man and worship of God, between manliness and faith, between true righteousness and spirituality. All his words, from one point of view, read as a commentary upon this central conviction. 'Art, science, and religion', he said once, 'are but three different ways of expressing a single truth. But in order to understand this we must have the theory of Advaita' (1.xv-xvi).

The Kali worship tradition in the Ramakrishna Order substantiates our thesis presented in earlier sections. Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math, being the authentic keeper of the Ramakrishna tradition as handed over by the direct disciples including Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda, Swami Shivananda, and all the other saints and gurus up to the present time, the Belur Math tradition is being taken as the model herein.

The whole night worship of Kali or Shakti as dasha-mahavidyas, ten aspects of maha-maya or mahavidya, is the tradition at Belur Math on the birth-tithis of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna respectively. Interestingly, albeit believing that the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi is the veritable embodiment of Kali or Shakti as dasha-mahavidyas, Kali worship is not performed in the night of her birth-tithi. This worship of Kali or Shakti as dasha-mahavidya is performed not before the public as other public programmes are held throughout the day, but it is performed in the night in the presence of monks alone, showing its esotericism and deep mystical significance. More interestingly, the worship of Kali and Shakti as *mahamaya* is held not with a separate image of Kali or other forms of *mahamaya*, but these worships are done in the

image of Sri Ramakrishna himself in the temple, substantiating Swami Vivekananda's statement quoted earlier which bears repetition given its profound mystic significance: 'The future, you say, will call Ramakrishna Paramahamsa an Incarnation of Kali? Yes, I think there's no doubt that She worked up the body of Ramakrishna for Her own ends.'

Before Swami Vivekananda passed away, he expressed a desire to worship Kali at Belur Math. Although this wish could not be actualised during his lifetime, Kali worship was performed at the Math after Swamiji passed away.

Both Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and Sri Ramakrishna used to look upon each other as the embodiment of Kali. This is a strange relationship between a divine husband and his divine consort. 'One day while Sarada was massaging the Master's feet, she asked him, "How do you look upon me?" The Master replied: "The same Mother who is in the temple, the same Mother who gave birth to this body and is now living in the nahabat, that same Mother is now rubbing my feet. Truly, I always see you as a form of the blissful Divine Mother." Again, when Sri Ramakrishna passed away in mahasamadhi, Holy Mother cried out: 'Oh Mother Kali, where have you gone?'14 This perhaps is the key to understanding Swami Vivekananda's unparalleled, incomparable, matchless, amazing devotion to Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, equalling or even surpassing his unflinching devotion for his own guru Sri Ramakrishna.

These mystical traditions that have been handed over from generation to generation right from the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna starting from Swami Vivekananda, give us a clue as to how Divine Mother Kali is the female power, the 'feminine force' that the tantra speaks of, the brahma-shakti, who is the central power, that

energises the Ramakrishna Order, empowers its monks and devotees, regulates, controls, and moves it in the right direction. Hence, Swamiji said, as quoted earlier: 'I cannot but believe that there is somewhere a great Power that thinks of Herself as feminine, and called Kali and Mother.' And again: 'Ramakrishna Paramahamsa dedicated me to Her, and now I believe that She guides me in everything I do, and does with me what She will. ... She made a slave of me. Those were the very words: "a slave of you". And Ramakrishna Paramahamsa made me over to Her.'

That is Swami Vivekananda, the great Vedantin, the Advaitin, and the rationalist speaking! Well it is therefore that tantra carries with it the 'esotericism' tag and because it is esoteric, it is mystical, hence appearing mysterious. It is therefore very profound and powerful. It is well known how the spiritual giants like Swamis Vivekananda and Brahmananda were turned into little children, trembling with emotion, swayed and swept away by ecstatic joy in the presence of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. The significance of this small yet profound incident is that they could actually *see* the Divine Mother Kali, *mahamaya*, appearing before them in human form as Sri Sarada Devi.

This account is a sketchy and highly incomplete description derived by revisiting Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda in the light of tantra—an attempt to reverentially reflect on their lives and teachings, particularly the esoteric and mystical aspects, which are less studied and much less understood by us, the professed devotees and followers of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

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Oil Painting of Sri Sarada Devi Used Earlier For Worship at Jayrambati





Who is this terrible Woman, dark as the sky at midnight? Who is this Woman dancing over the field of battle, Like a blue lotus that floats on a crimson sea of blood? Who is She. clad alone in the Infinite for a garment, Rolling Her three great eyes in frenzy and savage fury? Under the weight of Her tread the earth itself is trembling! Siva, Her mighty Husband, who wields the fearful trident. Lies like a lifeless corpse beneath Her conquering feet.1

HO IS THIS STRANGE GODDESS, and why, of all the gods and goddesses in Hinduism, would Sri Ramakrishna

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# Why Mother Kali?

# Pravrajika Shuddhatmaprana

choose to worship and invoke her as his personal *Ishta*, his chosen deity? Some of you, perhaps, have asked this very question. Many of you have seen various pictures of Kali. And you have probably also seen photos of the very image of Kali that was worshipped by Sri Ramakrishna. Perhaps some of you have even personally seen her in a visit to the Dakshineswar temple, so you know what she looks like.

Perhaps you also know some of the symbolism behind this image: Her dark colour represents the infinite; her three eyes represent knowledge of the past, present, and future. Her red tongue sticking out represents rajas, the quality of activity; while her white teeth, pressed on her tongue, represent sattva, the quality of calmness. Both then represent the quality of activity being controlled by calmness. The garland of fifty skulls represents the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, which also means speech. The sword in her upper left hand cuts our ignorance, or bondage; while the severed head in the lower left hand is said to bestow wisdom. As Kali stands on Shiva, who represents the Absolute aspect of God, so Kali represents the cosmic power, or Shakti, that brings creation into being.

## Why Kali?

So this is, in short, what it all means. But still we have to ask: Why Kali?

Every year at the Vedanta centre in Southern California someone makes a large image of Kali that will be worshipped at the annual Kali Puja festival in Hollywood. A new image is made

every year because each year the one that has been worshipped is immersed in water, according to the traditional custom. One year when one of the nuns in Santa Barbara was making the image, she went to a store that sells Hindu puja items to buy some decorations. The owner of the store was pleased that a Western woman was buying Hindu puja items and asked what image these decorations were for. When the nun told her it was for an image of Kali, the woman's face fell. 'Why Kali?' she asked. 'Why not Lakshmi? Why not Sarasvati? Why Kali?' I don't know what reply the nun gave.

So, why did Sri Ramakrishna choose Kali?

It may seem, from a general reading of Sri Ramakrishna's biography, that he did not have any interest in the worship of the Divine Mother—and especially in the form of Kali—until after his brother Ramkumar came to the Dakshineswar temple to take up the job of priest there. But we learn from the biography of Swami Subodhananda that even before Sri Ramakrishna came to Dakshineswar—that is, when he was living in the Jhamapukur area of Calcutta—he began spending much time at the Siddheshvari Kali temple of Thanthania. Sri Ramakrishna was just a teenager then and was

helping his eldest brother, Ramkumar, run a Sanskrit school. The Siddheshvari Kali temple, which was very close to the school, was owned by Swami Subodhananda's family, and Sri Ramakrishna knew the family very well.

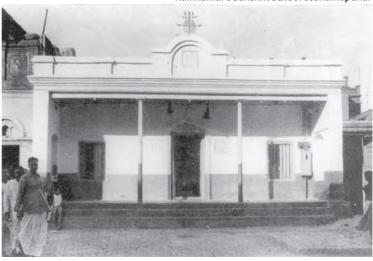
M., the recorder of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, also lived very close to that temple. Once he showed some devotees the place where Ramkumar's Sanskrit school used to be. Later a small Shyamsundar temple

was established there, which is still there. M. told the devotees: 'At that time he [Sri Rama-krishna] performed worship in the house of Raja Digambar Mitra. He would carry the offered rice, fruits, and sweets that he had received from that house and sit in front of the [Siddheshvari] Kali temple. ... People knew that the handsome young man had a good voice, so they would ask him to sing. He would sing to the Mother, then return to his apartment distributing the prasad to the people.'<sup>2</sup>

In another version of the story it is said that the young men of the neighbourhood knew that Sri Ramakrishna was something of a soft touch. They would ask him to sit in front of the temple and sing; meanwhile, they would ransack his offerings, which were tied up in a towel. After singing, Sri Ramakrishna would leave, laughing and shaking out his towel.<sup>3</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna was brought up in a family that had worshipped Raghuvir—that is, Sri Ramachandra—for generations, but his father also worshipped the goddess Sitala in a consecrated pot in Kamarpukur, as also Shiva. After Sri Ramakrishna's sacred thread ceremony was performed, he was then eligible to worship all

Ramkumar's Sanskrit School at Jhamapukur



these deities in the family shrine. According to Swami Saradananda, while performing the worship of these deities, Sri Ramakrishna 'became so absorbed in worship that he experienced *bhava samadhi* or *savikalpa samadhi* and sometimes had various spiritual visions.'<sup>4</sup>

It is also said that Sri Ramakrishna's eldest brother Ramkumar was very devoted to the Divine Mother. According to Swami Saradananda:

As a result of studying the scriptures, he [Ramkumar] had become very drawn to the worship of the Divine Mother; and now [when he was still living in Kamarpukur] he was initiated into a *Shakti* mantra by an adept guru. One day while worshipping the Goddess, his Chosen Deity, Ramkumar had a wonderful vision. With Her finger, the Goddess wrote on his tongue a mantra for the attainment of perfection in astrology. After that, whenever he saw someone who was ill, he could tell whether that person would be cured. Because of that power, whatever he predicted came true and he became a well-known soothsayer (96).

Later, when Ramkumar and Sri Ramakrishna were living at the Dakshineswar temple, Ramkumar asked Sri Ramakrishna to be initiated in a Shakti mantra so that he too could worship the Divine Mother Kali. Sri Ramakrishna decided to take initiation from Kenaram Bhattacharya, who often came to the Dakshineswar temple and was highly regarded as 'a devout spiritual aspirant'. Swami Saradananda writes: 'We have heard that as soon as the Master was initiated he went into ecstasy and that Kenaram was amazed by his extraordinary devotion' (205).

### Who Chose Whom?

So we see that Sri Ramakrishna had a deep connection with the goddess Kali even before he started formally worshipping her. But, here we could ask, did Sri Ramakrishna actually choose Mother Kali, or did Mother Kali choose Sri Ramakrishna? Moreover, why was there this connection between them?

Like our first question, 'Why Kali?', these questions also cannot be answered so easily. This is because Sri Ramakrishna was not an ordinary spiritual aspirant. It is obvious, looking at his life, that he was here on a divinely ordained mission. But, again, was it his mission or hers? Sri Ramakrishna himself would not easily refer to it as 'his' mission. Generally, when he was on a normal plane of consciousness, he considered himself to be a child of the Mother. He often said that he was simply an instrument in the hands of the Mother, and that it was she who blessed the devotees through him, and it was she who laid out the plan for his life such as practising sadhanas of various religious paths. As Swami Saradananda writes: 'The Mother had made him understand clearly that it was She who had put that desire into his mind [to see her in various forms and by different spiritual paths] on many occasions' (647).

But there are other instances when Sri Rama-krishna directly told devotees that they should meditate on him, 5 or give him 'the power of attorney'6—that is, surrender to him. Again, he told many of the devotees, 'He who came as Rama and as Krishna has come now in this body (pointing to himself)' (238). All these indicate that he was very much aware of himself as a divine incarnation with a mission.

This contradiction can be resolved when we understand that Sri Ramakrishna regarded himself and Mother Kali as one. One day at the Cossipore garden house, when Sri Ramakrishna was dying of throat cancer, he said (*placing his hand on his heart*): 'There are two persons in this. One, the Divine Mother ... Yes, one is She. And the other is Her devotee. It is the devotee who broke his arm, and it is the devotee who is now ill. Do you understand?' Again, speaking to M. one

day, he made it very plain when he said: 'Know for certain that I and She (Kali of Dakshineswar) are one, and there is no difference. If you think of Her day and night, that will be thinking of me.'8

Thus, there is actually no such question of one choosing the other. Sri Ramakrishna and the Divine Mother Kali were one and the same Divine Being. But sometimes that Divine Being manifested more as the Divine Mother, sometimes more as Sri Ramakrishna, and sometimes as both of them together. So when Sri Ramakrishna talks about Mother Kali instructing him, or that something he did was the Mother's will, we have to think of it in this sense.

Moreover. Sri Ramakrishna was told on at least three occasions by God, or the Divine Mother, 'to remain in bhavamukha'—that is, to remain in a state in which his mind was on the border between the Absolute and the relative states of consciousness. We can probably consider this to be the key to his state of consciousness. He did not have a limited 'I'-sense, as ordinary people have. Rather, his 'I'-sense was united with the universal or cosmic 'I' of the Divine Mother. So his mission was the Divine Mother's mission.

We could go on and on discussing what this mission was. But I think the whole thing can be very well summed up in something that Swami Vivekananda said: 'In this age the Brahma-kundalini—the Mother who is responsible for the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe—has been awakened by the fervent prayers of Sri Ramakrishna.' Here Swamiji is referring to the cosmic aspect of the kundalini. Regarding Swamiji's statement, Swami Shivananda commented: 'No wonder the individual kundalini will be awakened now! That is why we see symptoms of a great spiritual upsurge everywhere."

In other words, the universal spiritual consciousness has been awakened, so no one,

anywhere, can remain unaffected. Again, the more we make an effort to connect with this consciousness, the more we will gain from it. And this was the mission of the Divine Mother and of Sri Ramakrishna.

## The Significance of Kali Worship

But what did this worship of Kali actually mean to Sri Ramakrishna? Sri Ramakrishna had various terms that he used to describe the philosophy behind the worship of the Divine Mother, and these are the same terms that Vedanta uses: 'Prakriti', 'Shakti', and sometimes 'maya' or 'mahamaya'. The term Shakti is especially used in the sense of power or energy, and in this sense it is also used to refer to the kundalini, the coiled up serpent power that normally lies asleep within each individual. As Sri Ramakrishna said: 'The Primordial Energy [Adya Shakti] resides in





all bodies as the Kundalini. She is like a sleeping snake coiled up.'10 But, as we just saw, she not only resides in individuals; she has a cosmic aspect as well.

The term 'Prakriti' was originally used in the dualistic Sankhya philosophy. Swami Saradananda writes of Sri Ramakrishna's explanation to the devotees of the two cosmic principles in the Sankhya philosophy—Purusha and Prakriti:

[O]ne day we were discussing Sankhya philosophy. Describing the origin of the universe from Purusha and Prakriti, the Master told us: 'According to Sankhya, Purusha is not the doer: It is static. Prakriti does everything; Purusha is a witness to those actions. But Prakriti cannot do anything by herself—she needs the help of Purusha.' The Master's audience included office clerks, accountants, doctors, lawyers, deputy magistrates, and schoolboys and college students—none of them were scholars. When they heard the Master say this, they stared at one another. The Master understood their confusion and said: 'Hello, haven't you seen what happens in the house during a wedding ceremony? After issuing orders, the master sits and smokes tobacco from a hubble-bubble. The mistress runs around the house and supervises all the activities. Her sari is stained with turmeric and she welcomes the ladies. With hand gestures and animated face she reports to her husband from time to time: "This has been done this way, and that, that way. This is to be done, and the other not to be done." While smoking, the master listens and nodding his head, he assents to everything, saying, "Yes, yes." It is just like that.' All laughed after listening to the Master's explanation of the Sankhya philosophy, but they understood it.11

So here, in Sri Ramakrishna's illustration, we can understand that in the Sankhya philosophy there is a dualism between Purusha and Prakriti. They are two separate principles, though Prakriti is dependent on Purusha.

Yet later this same term 'Prakriti' evolved in the non-dualistic philosophy of Advaita Vedanta to mean Shakti. And Sri Ramakrishna sometimes used the word in this sense also. Once he said: 'According to Vedanta, Brahman and Its power—Purusha and Prakriti—are identical, that is, they are not two different entities. The same substance appears sometimes as Purusha and sometimes as Prakriti' (ibid.).

As Swami Saradananda related: 'When he saw that we did not understand this, the Master said: "Do you know how it is? It's like a snake—sometimes it moves, and sometimes it remains motionless. When it's still, it represents the nature of Purusha. Prakriti is then united with Purusha and they have become one. When the snake moves, Prakriti is then working, as it were, separating herself from Purusha" (ibid.).

So in this last example, Sri Ramakrishna used the words 'Purusha' and 'Prakriti' in the same way that he often used the terms 'Brahman' and 'Shakti'. But besides the example of the snake moving and still, he also would give other examples to define these terms—such as, milk and its whiteness, or fire and its power to burn. That is to say, just as you cannot separate milk from its whiteness, or fire from its power to burn, you cannot separate Brahman and Shakti. They are one and the same.

Sri Ramakrishna actually made some very interesting comments to M. about the worship of Shakti that we do not find in the *Gospel*. One day he said to M.:

He who is Brahman, He is Shakti and also the Divine Mother. Without acknowledging Shakti, no one can understand what Brahman is. Brahman can become manifest only through Shakti. What is fire? It is something that has the power to burn. Fire would become useless if it could not burn. As fire and its power to burn are no different, so Brahman and Shakti are the

same. When we describe them, they seem to be two different things, but in reality they are one. The One has become many; that is the manifestation of His power.<sup>12</sup>

Then Sri Ramakrishna said to M.—and this point should especially be noted, as we shall come back to it later: 'How is it possible to realize Brahman without taking refuge in Shakti? The words that are used to call on Him, the sound that is used to worship Him—those are all functions of Shakti. You [speaking to M.] have originated from Shakti, and you move and walk by means of Her power' (98).

As the song says: 'Thou art the Moving Force, and I the mere machine; ... I am the chariot, and Thou the Charioteer; I move alone as Thou, O Mother, movest me.' So, if we move, walk, and speak by means of her power, then why are we in this delusion? Why do we not know this? Because she—this Shakti—is also *mahamaya*, the great enchantress. She deludes everyone. As the poet says, 'When such delusion veils this world through Mahamaya's spell; That Brahma is bereft of sense; And Vishnu loses consciousness; What hope is left for men?' (155).

In the Advaita philosophy, this delusion is produced in two ways. There is the *avarana-shakti*, the power that veils, or hides, the Reality from us, just as a screen hides whatever is behind it. And then there is the *vikshepa-shakti*, the power of projection, which projects this world of name and form and duality. Under this aspect we become enchanted with this world of duality, and we do not seek the Reality that underlies it.

So what hope is left for us if this Shakti, this power that controls the universe, is the very same power that deludes us?

According to Sri Ramakrishna, *mahamaya*, or Shakti, deludes us, yes; but she can also reveal the Truth and grant liberation. Grace also is there. As he says, if we take refuge in her it is

possible to become free from this delusion to realise Brahman and attain supreme Bliss. Why? Because she is also the Mother—the Divine Mother of the universe.

### The Motherhood of God

It's not possible to know exactly when the universal Goddess became worshipped as mother. Probably the recognition of power associated with motherhood came in very ancient times, so this worship of the universal Goddess as an expression of the power of motherhood also is very ancient—even prehistoric. But this is not quite the same as the worship of the Goddess as a mother in a devotional sense, as we see in Ramprasad or Kamalakanta, or in Sri Ramakrishna's life. In the *Devi Mahatmyam*, or *Sri Sri Chandi*, which was probably written around the fifth

or sixth century CE, the Goddess has both benign and terrible aspects, but she is always the powerful Goddess who destroys evil and protects the gods. And though there are a group of these goddesses called Matrikas, or Mothers, who near the end are absorbed into the body of the great Goddess, she herself is only once addressed in the Chandi as Mother.14 Rather, she is invariably addressed as Devi.



PB January 2016

Kali at Thanthania



Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943)

Goddess, or by one of her many names, such as Ambika or Narayani. Her aspect there is too formidable to think of her as a mother.

The portrayal of the Goddess as a mother in a devotional sense seems to have come later. In South India, the Goddess Sri, or

Lakshmi, was regarded very early as the consort of Vishnu and as the giver of all that is *sri*, auspicious. But gradually she also became the mediator between the devotee and the Lord. And as this last point became stressed more, she became thought of more as a mother. In Parashara Bhattar's *Sri Guna Ratnakosha*, he says: 'Having caused Him [the Lord] to forget our sins, you make us your very own children. So you are our mother!'15

Of course, Sri always has a beautiful form and has a totally benign aspect, unlike the Goddess Kali. So it is very easy to regard her as a mother.

But most likely the devotional movement that was started in the sixteenth century by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal—which later spread throughout North India—could not help but affect the Shaktas, the worshippers of the Divine Mother in North India. This movement, with its emphasis on a personal relationship with God, was ready-made for the worship of the Goddess as a mother—including the Goddess Kali. Before this, the Goddess was worshipped by the Shaktas more for power. But after this time we see the rise of poet-saints among the Shaktas, such as Ramprasad, Kamalakanta, and Premik, all of whom worshipped Kali as a mother—albeit a powerful

mother. We should also keep in mind, from what we have just seen, that this evolution of the Goddess as a mother was, as Sri Ramakrishna would say, done by her—at her will.

But how do we conceive of a fierce-looking Goddess like Kali—and one who treads on her consort as well? How do we think of her as a mother? Perhaps these saints could do it, but what about us?

Swami Swahananda had an answer for this. Whenever anyone would voice any doubt about the worship of Mother Kali, he would say: 'Would you rather have a namby-pamby mother? Or do you want someone who will *fight* for you?' Yes, Kali is certainly not namby-pamby. But then we could argue, Durga and Jagaddhatri also carry weapons, yet they do not have such a terrifying aspect.

## The Symbolism of Kali

So why Kali? I think what Heinrich Zimmer says in reference to the symbols and mythology of India can also be applied to the images of the deities in India. They are just not something that we can intellectualise. The mythologies, he says, 'are effective primarily on a subconscious level, touching intuition, feeling, and imagination. Their details impress themselves on the memory, soak down, and shape the deeper stratifications of the psyche. ... The myths and symbols of India resist intellectualization and reduction to fixed significations. Such treatment would only sterilize them of their magic.' Again, he says, the mythology of India 'stirs and feeds the unconscious'. 16

So most likely this is true with regard to the deities as well. Deities like Durga, Kali, Shiva, Sri Ramachandra, and others affect us at another level—an unconscious level. We don't know why we are drawn to them. We just are. Too much intellectualisation does not solve anything. Yet

that does not mean we cannot ask ourselves: 'What is this image of Kali saying to me?'

We gave some of the symbolism of this image at the beginning. But there are a few more points we could add that may have a deeper impact on our understanding of her. First of all, the name Kali refers to her colour, which is black, and represents the infinite. But it also refers to time. That itself gives us a clue to her function, because time, space, and causation are all processes of maya, the great illusion. Time, as we all know, truly is the all-destroyer. Nothing in this world can escape from destruction due to time.

As we have seen, Kali has four arms, representing the dualities of this world. Her two right arms represent the benign aspect. She bestows fearlessness and boons with those. While her two left arms, holding a sword and a severed head, and most of the rest of her, represent the terrible aspect. Here we have her function of causation—creating and destroying, as well as of the dual experience in this world. Everything comes from her and everything dissolves back into her. Again, she is standing on—subduing, you might say—Shiva, the transcendent Absolute aspect of God, the ultimate Reality beyond name and form and all dualities. This, we could say, is her function of the finite—which is within space—veiling the infinite. Thus Kali is herself the maya that we must recognise and worship in order to realise the infinite. Yet—she is also the infinite. Kali and Shiva are two aspects of the same reality—like fire and its power to burn, as Sri Ramakrishna says.

### Kali: The Symbol of Death

So what do we have here with Kali? In spite of the fact that one part of her is offering us fearlessness and boons, the major part of her is terrifying. She is *mahamaya*, the great illusion herself. And she looks like the embodiment of



destruction—like the symbol of death.

Death, as we all know, is terrifying. Yet death is a natural process of life. Why should something that is so perfectly natural terrify us? It terrifies us because we are in complete ignorance of it. *Mahamaya*—made up of time, space, and causation—has deluded us so much that we cannot even be sure of our own existence after the death of our body.

So Kali, as Swami Vivekananda himself says, is the symbol of death. As he says in his poem 'Kali the Mother':

For Terror is Thy name, Death is in Thy breath, And every shaking step Destroys a world for e'er. Thou 'Time', the All-destroyer! Come, O Mother, come!<sup>17</sup>

So Swamiji is asking us to welcome death and let her destroy everything.

Then Swamiji says: 'Who dares misery love; And hug the form of Death; Dance in Destruction's dance; To him the Mother comes' (ibid.). So we have to love misery *and* hug the form of death *and* dance in destruction's dance. All of these are prerequisites—not just one or another. They all have to be there. Who will hug death when they are happy? And who wants to be miserable? Everyone wants to be happy and happy alone.

But hugging the form of death does not mean suicide. We must, at the same time, be able to dance with the Mother in her dance of destruction. And what is being destroyed? What is this death? It is, in reality, the death of the ego. Like our bodies, we identify so much with our ego that it seems to us that there is no existence for us without it. Little do we realise that when the ego dies, there is no more death for us.

uum. So also, as soon as the ego departs, the Lord, the real Self, comes in. Sri Ramakrishna says again and again: 'All troubles come to an end when the ego dies.' This is because, along with the ego, all our desires, likes and dis-Abhaya Mudra likes, attachments and aversions—all our anger, fear, pride, jealousy, and other passions—all these also die. They are all rooted in the ego.

As it is said, nature abhors a vac-

But how is it that Swamiji, of all people, could revel in this terrible aspect of God? This is Swamiji we are speaking of—the ever-free soul who had the heart of a Buddha.

The answer that Swamiji seems to give in his poem is that Kali is worshipped solely for liberation; and for Swamiji, liberation was everything. Durga is often worshipped in households for beauty, fame, progeny, and the like. Lakshmi is worshipped for wealth and everything that is auspicious. Sarasvati is worshipped—especially by children—for knowledge. And, yes, you can say that they are all aspects of the same Divine Mother. It is true.

But Kali herself is not generally worshipped for anything but liberation—at least nowadays, after Sri Ramakrishna. If you want liberation, you must give up everything, even the ego. In fact, liberation is what she represents. Except for her right arms, everything else about Kali is terrifying. Her form makes us think: Must we go through suffering to attain our goal? Yet

is also there. Moreover, her face and her form—what seemingly we must pass through to get beyond form, to the ultimate Reality—are actually beautiful. This gives us assurance that the ultimate Reality does lie beyond her form—and that it truly is our desired goal.

her right arms give us assurance that grace

But, still, who among us would want to hug the form of death? Who wants to love misery, even for the sake of liberation? Isn't there supposed to be a Personal God—God with

all the auspicious qualities—in all this? We expect the Lord to be compassionate, to remove our difficulties and rescue us from sufferings. To us, that is his job, his reason for being. And, on top of it, we can get liberation from him too.

So, alright, if Swamiji loves suffering, fine. We'll go to Sri Ramakrishna about this. But what does Sri Ramakrishna have to say about it? Well, surprisingly, almost nothing. If we go through *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, we never find the Master telling us to pray to the

Lord to be free from suffering. For him, talking about suffering was almost beside the point. Rather, he encouraged the devotees to pray only for pure, motiveless love for God, and for knowledge and discrimination.

What Sri Ramakrishna put stress on was: We are God's very own. This is how we should think of God, and this is how we should relate to her or him in all our actions. Pain and suffering are part of this world of duality. And this is what Kali shows us. We have to accept them, for they are part of her and part of this world. Yet they come and go. They are transitory. But God is our own forever. She or he alone is real.

When it is said that Kali is *mahamaya*, the great illusion, the great enchantress, this does not mean that she is the obstacle to our liberation or anything. She is not the obstacle at all. We are—or rather, our ego, with all its baggage, is. Kali only shows us what we have to face—what the purification process is, and how we must 'dance in destruction's dance' to shed our own obstructions.

Do we really understand what it means to have the Lord come in our lives? Do we understand what it takes for that to happen? It's no small thing. Everything must go. And Kali takes us there. This is where she reveals her grace. She holds up her hand showing the *abhaya* mudra, the gesture of fearlessness, saying: 'Don't be afraid. It may seem difficult, but hold on to me and I shall help you.' Then another hand displays the *varada* mudra, the gesture of bestowing boons, which says: 'I shall give you everything you need to accomplish this.' And where does she take us? To that realm of absolute Love.

Then we understand: it was all along the ego that was separating us from this love. Once that ego—with all its desires and attachments—has been destroyed, then we realise ourselves as the Mother's own child. Then we are liberated and attain supreme bliss.

But, after all this, have we really answered the question: Why Kali? Perhaps the question cannot be answered. For me, however, an answer comes from both Swamiji and Sri Ramakrishna. First, Swamiji once told Sister Nivedita: 'You see, I cannot but believe that there is somewhere a great Power that thinks of Herself as feminine, and called Kali and Mother.' Again, he said: 'These gods are not merely symbols! They are the forms that the Bhaktas have seen!' (ibid.).

So perhaps we could say that Kali wants to be worshipped now, and worshipped as a mother. As we saw before, the evolution of the Goddess as a mother could only have come from her. And Kali is the form she has taken now. At least we might conclude that the time has come to worship Kali as the universal Mother. Remember, Swamiji said: 'In this age the Brahma-kunda*lini*—the Mother who is responsible for the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe—has been awakened by the fervent prayers of Sri Ramakrishna.' So I believe that this is the age of motherhood, and of Divine Motherhood, God as Mother—all of it. Kali. with all her frightening features, wants us to accept her as our very own mother.

But why? For me, the key to the rest of the answer is what Sri Ramakrishna told M.: 'How is it possible to realize Brahman without taking refuge in Shakti? The words that are used to call on Him, the sound that is used to worship Him—those are all functions of Shakti. You have originated from Shakti, and you move and walk by means of Her power.'

As Sri Ramakrishna says, we have originated from Shakti, so we *are* her children. Will a child not acknowledge its own mother? Moreover, as Sri Ramakrishna says, we move and walk by means of her power—like the snake in motion. So we *must* acknowledge that power of our mother. That power is dwelling right within

us. Through this power we function. Again, we can remain in ignorance or we can acknowledge her, realise her, and become free. She is one with Brahman, so it is through her—through her grace—that we realise Brahman. Thus we must worship that mother and take refuge, like a child, in that mother. And that Mother Goddess whom Sri Ramakrishna himself acknowledged was Kali.

Moreover, we can understand from this that she is the Mother of us *all*—the whole universe, no matter what race, religion, nationality, or anything else we might be. We are all her children—all brothers and sisters in her. Nowadays a universal, global consciousness has been awakened—and it has been awakened by her—so likewise we need an awakening of harmony within us—of seeing the whole world as our own, as Sri Sarada Devi says. And for that we must accept all. We must accept everyone as her child.

It seems, in fact, that this is what she wants now. Accept everything—the good, the bad, all of it. *But* see everything as the manifestation of her. It is all her. Accept her and dance the play of this life with her. See her, the Mother, in all things and beings, in the good and in the bad, in everything. Then surrender to her. Take refuge in her.

And after that? Then we find that, hiding behind that terrible mask is a real mother Goddess of pure love. And we find that she has a mysterious kind of magnet—a magnet of pure love that she uses to draw us to her—a love we cannot explain. Ask Ramprasad. Ask Kamalakanta.

Nowadays the Dakshineswar temple is extremely crowded whatever time you go there. But about thirty or thirty-five years ago, if you went there early in the morning when the priests first opened the temple for the day, there were very few people. You could stand and have darshan to your heart's content. And, if you were lucky, you might see an old, thin, toothless man come and stand right in front of the shrine. He

always wore an old plain worn-out dhoti—no shirt. He would just stand there and sing his heart out. He had a crackly voice, but his bhava, mood, would melt a stone. There was no doubt in my mind: Kali really was his mother.

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# The Method and Significance of Tantra

### Swami Kritarthananda

Before we launch into a long discussion on the tantras, it will be quite fitting to acquaint the readership with the influence and sense of high adoration this important branch of study evoked in some of the greatest souls of yesteryears. Such eulogy will free the minds of all from the age-old misconceptions preached by the detractors about the purity and importance of the tantras.

Bamakhyapa and Ramprasad are the two singular names that pop up first in the minds of those who think of the tantric way of spiritual discipline in Bengal. They were two outstanding souls who reached perfection in the path, and are adored by people all over India. The tantric way of practice made a firm footing on the soil of West Bengal besides Kashmir and South India. But it also suffered a setback in the course of time by way of ill-fame born of wrong aspersions cast on some of its methodology. Sri Ramakrishna took birth to dispel this miasma of wrong understanding. Right from assuming the post of assistant priest in Dakshineswar Kali temple his mind was possessed with the idea of realising the Divine Mother Kali whose form was not bound within a lifesize stone image but pervaded everything. The

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The Birth of Ten Mahavidyas with Shiva and Parvati

divinity, which was named mahamaya because of her bewitching and inscrutable power, was adored by Sri Ramakrishna as Kali. And for the first time he embarked upon a search for that inscrutable all-pervading power in a scripturally sanctioned path under the guidance of a Brahmin lady well-versed in all the sixty-four tantric disciplines. His guru in the Advaitic discipline, Totapuri, came only after he had attained perfection in all those sixty-four tantric paths. What is more, Sri Ramakrishna duly took permission of his beloved 'Mother in the temple' for undergoing the non-dual path of knowledge, though he did not pay any heed to his erstwhile tantric guru Bhairavi Brahmani's non-approval in the matter. This shows that the ultimate realisation of Advaita is not possible without the grace of Shakti. Again, when situation demanded the removal of all forms from his mind in the course of meditation on the non-dual plane, he mentally

wielded a sword of 'knowledge' and cut the image of Kali recurrently occurring in his mind due to past habits into two—nama and rupa, name and form—and merged her into the endless ocean of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. In that plane of deepest samadhi he became one with Brahman. And as soon as he came down from that state of existence, he identified himself again with that very mahamaya consisting of the sum total of all name and form constituting the phenomenal universe in a relation of mother and son.

This is the central point worthy of note in this context. The same maya, which is looked upon as insignificant by Advaitic proponents, and indefinable by the aspirants, is the summum bonum of all tantric followers. She is identified with Shiva and is held as the dynamic projection of that supreme Reality. Creation, sustenance, and dissolution are, according to tantra,

Bamakhyapa (1837–1911)



the functions of that Shakti called *mahamaya*. Since the word 'shakti' is in the feminine gender in Sanskrit, this inscrutable power is painted as the female goddess Kali.

There is another point that deserves attention here. The consummation of all tantric disciplines is in realising Shiva or Shakti in every being. Curiously enough, the goal of Advaita philosophy is also this realisation of oneness or non-duality in all beings. It is only after attaining that supreme state that Sri Ramakrishna gave out his message of service of God in living beings as the motto to all spiritual aspirants. Even the Advaita exponent Acharya Shankara took to the worship of Tripurasundari and arranged to install the Sri-yantra in all his monasteries. Buddhism also abounds in tantras. All this show the wide and all-pervading influence of tantras.

### **Etymology and Origin**

The word 'tantra' has been derived from the root 'tan' meaning, to spread. In a special sense it means the scripture by which knowledge is spread. This does not, however, mean that tantra means any branch of knowledge, though in a general way the word signifies any text of a particular system. Tantra is concerned with the application of tattva and mantra, the science of cosmic principles and that of mystic word respectively. In the Kamikagama Tantra, a standard tantric text, the word tantra has been defined as that subject which disseminates tattva, the science of cosmic principles and mantra, the science of mystic word, and also that which shows the way to emancipation.<sup>3</sup>

The Hindu primary scriptures, the Vedas, have shown two paths in life. They are *bhoga*, enjoyment and *apavarga*, emancipation. Those who desire the former path are required to perform certain rituals called yajna. The major portion of the Vedas is covered by various types of such

rituals. They have a twofold effect. In the first place, those rituals purify the minds of the performer, and in the second, they give back by way of a cosmic effect certain results fulfilling the desire of the performer. Such rituals aim at propitiating certain presiding deities, like Indra, Mitra, Varuna, and Kubera. Since the yajnas are associated with certain types of karma or work, the ritualistic part of the Vedas is called Karma Kanda. There is, however, another philosophical part known as Jnana Kanda in the Vedas, covering a very small portion, the conclusive part.

That is meant for a very few eligible and advanced persons who do not care for enjoyments in this life or hereafter. For them has been prescribed the royal path of renunciation. This part is called Vedanta, the conclusive or end part of the Vedas.

The tantric tradition, being synthetic as against the analytic Vedantic tradition, is acceptable to people of all types. In other words, it is inclusive rather than exclusive. It prescribes different types of practice for aspirants of different dispositions. This division of fitness also prevails in some way in the Vedantic tradition in which priority is given to the eligibility of the aspirant.

The tantras fall under five heads: Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnava, Saura, and Ganapatya. These five classes of worshippers are collectively called *panchopasaka*. Each of these classes of worshippers has its own tantras or mode of practice.

#### The Yamalas

The Yamalas constitute a class of tantric literature. They indicate a great development in the tantric sadhana. The principal Yamalas are eight in number and are said to be communicated by the eight Bhairavas. They are: Rudra, Kanda or Skanda, Brahma, Vishnu, Yama, Vayu, Kubera, and Indra. Whereas the Shiva tantras represent the Rudra or Sadashiya tradition, the Yamalas



Bhairava

represent the Bhairava tradition. These Bhairavas seem to have been human teachers who had attained complete spiritual emancipation and had almost become Shiva. The Yamalas try to define the various tantric traditions by introducing a great variety of tantric pantheon. To be more precise, the Brahma Yamala speaks of three currents in the tantric tradition: dakshina, the southern; vama, the left; and madhyama, the central. These represent three powers of Shiva and are characterised by the predominance of sattva, rajas, and tamas respectively. The Yamalas affiliate a large number of local cults, and open up the field of tantric sadhana to people of other castes. Thus they at once preserve the orthodox tradition of tantras of earlier period and assume a heterodox nature themselves.

The supplementary literature of the *Yamala* group indicates a new orientation of the tantric culture. The sadhanas of the *agamas* assume in them a more pronounced character of Shaktism. The tradition of the *agamas* developed through two channels—the exoteric and the esoteric. The former was continued as pure Shaivism with a view to attaining salvation. The latter was continued as Shaktism with greater emphasis on the various Shakti cults, not so much to attain salvation as to gain control over the forces of nature.

### **Practice**

The word 'tantra' also means that which rules or governs. It is the science of living a way of life that leads to the desired goal. So it is characterised by practice combined with esoteric knowledge. But this practice differs from the Vedic practice of yajna in that the tantric practice centres round the psycho-physical make-up of the practitioner, and so it is inward by nature. The tantras lay down different forms of practice for the attainment of the highest aim of human existence by one living the ordinary life of a householder. In this respect they correspond to the worship portion of the Vedas. The proponents of tantra say that when the Vedic rituals became outmoded, Shiva replaced them with tantric rites. This statement seems quite reasonable, for the tantric system, besides synthesising the two distinct paths of enjoyment and renunciation, acts as a conduit between the rituals and philosophy of the Vedas.

Each act in the process of worship in the tantric system has to be performed with some sort of meditation symbolising the unity of individual soul with God. Thus tantra, being both a modification and synthesis of Vedic literature, owes its origin to the Vedas, and is hence called agama, revelation, as against nigama, tradition. According to some, it is said that at the beginning of creation the supreme Lord Shiva revealed from his five faces, pure knowledge in five streams for the enjoyment as well as liberation of all living beings. These are laukika, empirical; vaidika, scriptural; adhyatmika, spiritual; atimarga, transcendental; and mantra, aphoristic. According to some other schools, agama is the advice of Shiva to Parvati, his divine consort. on this subject.

The three letters forming the word 'agama', a, ga, and ma signify that the tantric literature agata, came from, Shiva, and gata, went to, Parvati, and

was mata, approved by Vasudeva. In the nigama, Parvati is the speaker and Shiva the listener. But this distinction between the two terms is not adhered to everywhere in the context of tantric literature. A scholar writes: 'One of the oldest Tantras available in manuscript, *Niśvāsatattva* Samhitā, holds that the Tantra is the culmination of the esoteric science of the Vedanta and the Sāmkhya.'4 It not only accepts the ultimate reality of Brahman or Shiva, but also looks upon the whole phenomenal world as an expression of the dynamic aspect of God. If the Vedantic path be called analytic, the tantric path is said to be synthetic. Sri Ramakrishna's whole life of sadhana was replete with this latter attitude, the positive way of approach. He used to say: 'Suppose you have separated the shell, flesh, and seeds of a belfruit and someone asks you the weight of the fruit. Will you leave aside the shell and the seeds, and weigh only the flesh? Not at all. To know the real weight of the fruit, you must weigh the whole of it—the shell, the flesh, and the seeds. Only then can you tell its real weight.'5 That is why in his school days the method of subtraction had no meaning for Sri Ramakrishna.

The religious attitude in tantric rituals is twofold: the exoteric ritual of the Vedic type, which aims at acquisition of control over the forces of nature, and the esoteric ritual, its aim being the union of the two prime principles— Shiva and Shakti. Even this latter ritual traces its origin in the Vedic Brahmana and Upanishad passages like: 'The head is the chariot of Soma; the mouth, the ahavaniya fire; the crown of the head, the sacrificial post; the belly, the cart-shed; the feet, the two fires; the sacrificial items, the limbs.'6 Similarly in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the limbs of the horse meant for the ashvamedha sacrifice have been equated with certain subtle elements: 'The head of the sacrificial horse is the dawn, its eye the sun, its vital force the

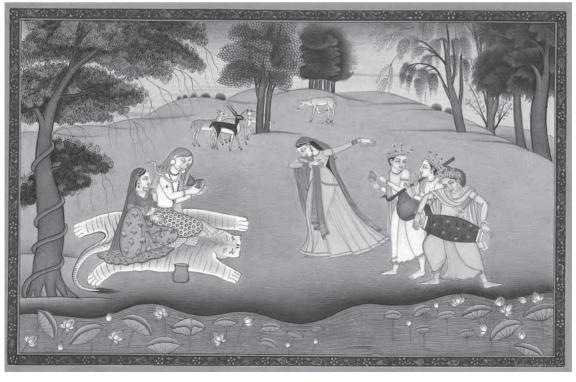
air, its open mouth the fire called Vaishvanara, and the body of the sacrificial horse is the year. Its back is heaven.' Hence it is meet to say that the tantras emerged out of the Vedic religion and were then developed into a type of esoteric knowledge. But they can rather be called a development than grafting from the Vedic religion. Even some of the Vedic sacrifices could be used for both good and bad purposes. In the Vedic texts traces of what is called 'black magic' are also found. The Atharva Veda is commonly believed to be the source of such rites. This explains the occurrence of magical practices in the tantras.

The practice of tantra dominates in three zones in India: Bengal, Kashmir, and Kerala. Kashmir is dominated by the philosophical aspect, and Bengal the practical aspect, while in Kerala there is some philosophical thinking, dualistic in nature, in contrast with the non-dualistic thinking in Kashmir. From ancient times

Bengal is predominantly a tantric zone where we find very little of the Vedic culture and influence. The tantric pattern of Bengal was unique and distinct from those of Kerala and Kashmir. The tradition of tantric Kali worship in Bengal is known as *kaula-dhara*, which has its seat at Kamarupa or Kamakhya temple in Assam. In Kerala is the worship of Lakshmi or Tripura, and in Kashmir both the forms of worship are found to exist.

In the tantras, bhava, disposition, is an important factor in spiritual practice. Humankind is classified under three heads—divya-bhava, one with a divine disposition, vira-bhava, one with a heroic disposition, and pashu-bhava, one with an animal disposition. One with an animal disposition can hardly be expected to see beyond the gross aspect of things. So such a person is guided along the path of strictest control of desires and passions. The one with heroic attitude is fighting with the

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six passions to reach the plane beyond matter. And the one possessed of divine disposition is by nature endowed with qualities of controlling his lower propensities. According to the Kamakhya *Tantra*, such a person is less spoken, quiet, steady, sagacious, truthful, attentive, and endearing to all. Depending on the prevalent disposition of an individual the tantra texts have prescribed seven acharas or codes of conduct in tantric practice. These are given in the *Kularnava Tantra* as *veda*, vaishnava, shaiva, dakshina, vama, siddhanta, and kaula. They represent seven stages of development in the aspirant. In the first stage, cleanliness of the body and the mind is cultivated; the second stage is that of devotion; the third that of knowledge; the fourth stage is one of consolidation of the acquisition in the first three stages; the fifth is the stage of renunciation and not the practice of rites with a woman, as is wrongly held by many; the sixth stage is of definite conclusion regarding the merits of enjoyment and renunciation. By pursuing the path of renunciation, the seventh stage kaula is reached. Of these seven, the first three belong to pashu-bhava, the next two belong to virabhava, and the last two to divya-bhava.

A lot of misunderstanding about the lefthanded path called *vamachara* mentioned above has developed in the course of time. It is partly due to an ignorance of the principle behind that and partly due to its abuse. It is not meant for one with outgoing mental currents, who has not subdued one's base desires, and not cut the three knots of 'shame, hatred, and fear'. Only one endowed with the *vira*-bhava disposition, one who has succeeded in awakening the dormant serpent power, kundalini, is competent to 'play with fire' and burn his bonds with it. For the aspirant with a predominance of the divya-bhava there does not exist any bond in substance; so no question arises as to burning the bonds. The mere semblance of such bonds is dissolved in the 'ocean of nectar'.

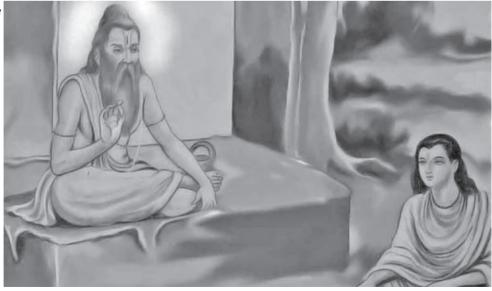
One aspect of tantric discipline is the practice with five m's, namely, madya, wine; mamsa, meat; matsya, fish, mudra, signs, cereal fries, or closure of evil company, and maithuna, ritual sexual union. These five articles have different significance for different classes of aspirants. The point to be borne in mind is that one is required to offer the principle hidden behind these gross articles. The Kularnava Tantra says that the wine which gladdens is the nectar which flows from the union of the coiled power, kundalini, with Shiva sitting on the head, sahasrara. Only one who drinks this nectar is the right person, and not mere drunkards. Likewise all the five m's have their inherent meanings. One who follows the essence attains to the highest stage, kaula; until then one is nothing but a pashu, animal. All such pashus adhering to the gross articles end up in tightening the pasha, noose, around them. The goal of all tantras is to realise oneself as pashupati, the lord of all animals, another name of Shiva, by gaining control over the basic passions. It is worth mention in this context that Sri Ramakrishna meticulously underwent all the methods of sadhana prescribed in the sixty-four tantras, but his mind was tuned to such a high pitch of purity that when wine sanctified by offering to the Divine Mother was brought before him for drinking, he merely touched it with his fingertip and made a mark of it on his forehead as a sign of respect—just this action sent him into deep absorption into the primal cause of this world.8 Again, when he was brought to witness the tantric discipline of ritual sexual union, just the vision of extreme joy of the couple indulging in such act reminded him of the infinitely blissful Divine Mother assuming those human forms, and he lost himself into deep meditation of her supremely blissful aspect expressed even through sexual union.

### Mantra and Diksha

Speaking of tantric practice, at least a brief discussion on mantra becomes indispensable. In the tantric system, mantra plays an important role. It is true that in the Vedic system also mantra has an equally important role. The highest Vedic mantra, Savitri Gayatri, is also an adoration of Shakti. The word 'mantra' in Sanskrit means that, a repeated remembrance of which releases the soul.9 A mantra is composed of bija, a root letter, the name of the chosen ideal, and a word of salutation. Tantric mantras—in sharp contrast with Vedic mantras in the Brahmana portion—are extremely brief, each letter bearing a mystic significance. Besides, they are not to be taken for mere words. The guru or the preceptor adds one's own vital strength into the mantra with intense aspiration by repeating it and meditating on its meaning. In this way the spiritual power of the mantra is transmitted from the guru to the disciple from generation to generation. This process of transmission is technically called diksha. Along with the transfer of such power, the guru becomes the spiritual preceptor of the disciple, and such an occasion is marked as a new birth for the disciple. According to the tantras the real guru is none else than the supreme Lord Shiva, who is not only the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the universe but also holds the twin power of *anugraha*, grace and *nigraha*, punishment. Individual effort without god's grace can never lead to spiritual success. The power of the mantra is transmitted thus from the supreme God and handed down from generation to generation by a traditional line of competent preceptors and disciples.

Diksha or initiation is a must for the performance of any tantric worship. The word 'diksha' literally means a process by which the guru transmits the mantra and attenuates or destroys the sins of the disciple. Diksha has been classified by the teachers of tantra into three types—Shambhavi, shakti, and mantri or anavi—depending on the spiritual status of the disciple. The first of these is done with a mere meet, touch, or conversation with the disciple, as happened in the life of Narendranath, Swami Vivekananda's pre-monastic name, on his second meeting with Sri Ramakrishna. In the shakti type of initiation, the guru forces into the disciple his own spiritual power with his divine wisdom,





thus awakening the spiritual dimension of the disciple. In this process, the bija-mantra is written by the guru on the tongue of the disciple and the latter at once merges into a vision of his chosen ideal. And in the mantri or anavi type the guru whispers the mantra into the disciple's ear. Constant repetition and meditation on its meaning by the disciple bursts out the hard outer crust of the mantra. This phenomenon is known as mantra-chaitanya. It is the awakening of nada, the eternal sound. At this stage words or letters of the mantra melt in the moving stream of an unbroken vibration called akhanda-nada. This vibration of sound leads to illumination and the aspirant becomes blessed with the vision of one's chosen ideal. This process has been mentioned in authentic tantric texts like Rudra-Yamala, Vayaviya Samhita, and Vishvasara Tantra.

There are five parts in tantric worship: snana, ablution; sandhya, worship performed at the three junctures of daybreak, midday, and evening; tarpana, pleasing; puja, worship; and homa, sacrificial ceremony. Of these the first is not merely external ablution but a mystic one the act of diving deep into the heart and bathing in the nectar that flows from the brain-centre of sahasrara. Next in line comes a type of daily prayer, sandhya, for purifying the aspirant from all sins committed during the day and night. The third part, tarpana, is done by rousing the coiled power from the base of spine upward to the brain-centre and bathe it again in the same spring of nectar incessantly flowing therefrom. The fourth, that is, the worship part, signifies the worship of the coiled power with various qualities like amaya, devoid of delusion; anahamkara, free from egoism; and araga, absence of worldly attachment. After propitiating the deity, the worshipper performs the last part of worship, *homa*, in which the entire world is offered in the blazing fire of knowledge.

### Varnamala, Shabda, and Speech

A mantra is composed of some letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, varnamala, which constitute words, shabda. These letters are not looked upon as mere letters. Each of them is endowed with the powers of various aspects of the Divine Mother. In other words, they are presided over by the companions of Shakti. Since innumerable permutations and combinations form the whole gamut of words, all the words uttered in the world are said to be originated from and infilled with that Shakti or power. The Divine Mother is present in the words of benediction as also in vulgar words of abuse. The demonstration of this power of letters is witnessed in tantric worship. During all such ceremonial worships a rite called nyasa is performed by the worshipper. The meaning of the word *nyasa* in this context is 'reinforcement'. In the process each letter of the Sanskrit alphabet in serial order is 'reinforced' into a particular point in the whole body of the worshipper in order to make the gross body scintillate with the divine resplendence of those mystic letters.

According to the tantras, from the supreme Self came out Shakti, the primal energy, and from this Shakti originated the basic vibration or sound, *nada*, which later on compressed itself into a *bindu*, a nucleus of power. This *bindu* again burst into *nada* to create complete focal points termed *bijas*. The process by which these *bijas* are transmitted by the guru to the disciple is known as *diksha* or initiation into the spiritual path, as has already been explained.

The tantric literature makes it imperative for the aspirant desirous of conducting worship of any deity to be initiated by some guru. We have to bring up a brief discussion in this context on the *varnamala*. The eternal union of Shakti with Shiva is indicated by the letter *i* in the word Shiva. Take it away from the word, and it changes into *shava*, lifeless corpse. This

unique philosophy demonstrates that the order of the Sanskrit alphabet like *a*, *i*, *u*, has a definite link with the process of creation. This is why when the great Lord Shiva appeared in his dancing Nataraja form before Panini, who wanted to know the secret of grammar, the first sound that came out of his *damaru*, pellet drum, gave the seeds of the entire creation. The first three letters *a*, *i*, and *u* are said to be the three vertices of the basic triangle of the universe. Of these, the letter '*a*' represents the ultimate reality beyond which nothing exists. But, left to itself, this letter is not capable of creating anything unless desire arises in it. This desire is indicated by the

second letter 'i'. These two letters, when combined, sprout the first sign of creation given by the third vowel 'u'. Now, the first vowel 'a', in order to have the desire for creation, has to split itself into two 'a's, which gives the letter 'a', the symbol of delight. Thus the first of the fourteen *Maheshvara*-sutra expresses the delight of self-expression in creation. Again, as per grammar rules, the Sanskrit letter 'a' joined with 'i' yields the letter 'e', which is the root of all existence. Hence the letter 'e' is looked upon in the tantras as root letter procreating the phenomenal world.

Another notable feature in the *Maheshvara*-sutra is that the starting letter 'a' in the first sutra



Nataraja Shiva

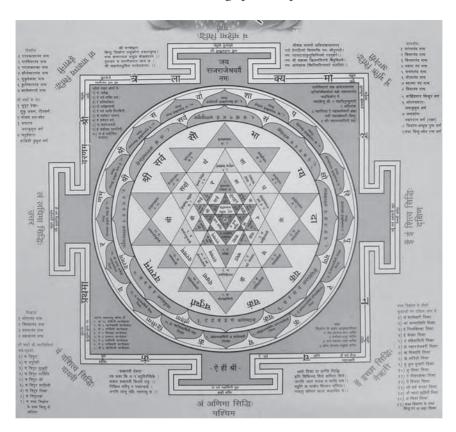
and that in the fourteenth sutra 'ha' together constitute the entire gamut of our existence, as it begins with the first vowel 'a' in the alphabet and ends with the last consonant of the alphabet, 'ha'; and these two poles, when joined by the point represented by 'm', makes it aham, 'I'. In the tantric context the word 'aham' represents the whole world of living beings. Like the cardinal sentence in Vedanta, 'aham brahmasmi; I am Brahman', the two words 'aham' and 'idam' in the tantric context represent the eternal relation between the individual soul and Shiva. It also means the elimination of the difference between the knower and the known, the enjoyer and the enjoyed. Shankara also says in the introduction to his commentary on the Brahma Sutra that the physical world consists of the infinite variety of relationship between the two words 'aham' and 'idam', 'I' and 'this': 'A natural human behaviour based on self-identification in the form of "I am this" or "This is mine".12

The science of words is closely associated with speech. In tantric literature, all words we express through speech are only at the gross level. The words undergo four levels to express themselves in articulate speech. First they remain in a causal, undifferentiated, balanced, dormant, and subtlest state. Technically called para, it is in the spinal cord at the level of the navel, manipura. The next stage is arrived at the middle of the seven chakras called *anahata*-chakra. This is the subtler stage called *pashyanti*, seeing. It lies in the spinal cord behind the heart region. The next level in the spine is behind the throat at the vishuddha-chakra called madhyama. In that stage the words come to the subtle state, more defining than the earlier one, and ready to become manifest. At the next stage the words come up to the mouth, become fully manifest with articulation and audibility; this stage is called vaikhari.

### The Significance of Sri-yantra

We have discussed in the foregoing passages the secret of letters, the science of articulate words, and their significance in tantric sadhana. Something more remains to be said in the context of tantric worship. Like all other dualistic systems of worship, the tantric system of worship also makes use of a special type of symbol called Srichakra or Sri-yantra. The following is an account of the Sri-yantra from the *Bhavanopanishad* belonging to the Kadi tantras, the Kadi school of thought prevalent in Bengal.

The word 'yantra' occurs frequently in all tantric contexts of worship. All dualistic forms of worship need an image, a symbol, or something like that. Since the ordinary aspirants need an object of adoration or worship, a gross form is made after the desired pattern of the worshipper thinking about the form of the worshipped. Thus there may be an innumerable variety of symbols depending on the mental make-up of individuals. Shalagrama and Shiva-linga are some such symbols. The tantric method of Shakti worship is represented by such a yantra called Sri-chakra or Sri-yantra. It is a beautiful piece of geometric figure representing the Divine Mother in her individual as well as universal form. It consists of several fields or planes of existence, two sets of triangles, and two groups of lotus petals. The Sri-chakra is of immense significance in the tantric method of worship. As a whole, it represents the universe—the macrocosm and the microcosm—and its divine cause. At the centre of the chakra there is a point. It represents the coexistence of Lalita and Kameshvara in an undifferentiated union. An inverted triangle encloses this point. This triangle represents the triple dimensions of Shakti known as knowledge, willpower, and action, and also the three qualities of sattva, rajas, and tamas, and their presiding deities. Circumscribing this small triangle there



Sri Yantra

is a group of eight triangles and circumscribing even this group of eight there are two sets of triangles, each containing ten triangles, one surrounding the other. Still outside these two sets of ten triangles, there exists a set of fourteen triangles circumscribing them. Next, circumscribing this set of fourteen triangles stands a circle of eight lotus petals, another concentric circle of sixteen petals. Still outside that region are three concentric circles and three concentric squares outside the three circles. Thus, reversely from outside inward, the nine chakras are: Vrittatraya or bhupura; shodasha-dala, circle with sixteen petals; ashta-dala, circle with eight petals; manvashara, circular area with fourteen triangles; dashara-yugma, two circular areas with two sets of ten triangles each; ashtakona, circular area with eight triangles; inverted triangle; and bindu, point. The order of these nine chakras

starting from the *bindu* outwards is called *srishti-krama*, the order of creation, while the reverse order—starting from the *bhupura* inwards—is known as *laya-krama*, the order of dissolution. The central point, *bindu*, represents Kameshvara and Kameshvari in eternal union. That is contained within the *yoni*—represented by the triangle with vertex down—the source, cause, or womb of the universe. The triangles and petals in every chakra represent various cosmic principles, each having its distinct presiding deity. The ultimate object of worship in the Sri-chakra is, as the *Bhavanopanishad* says, 'the realisation of the unity of the knower, known, and knowledge'.<sup>13</sup>

### Epilogue

The tantric view is that wherever there is Shiva, Shakti is identified with it. Because Shiva is wisdom, and wisdom implies power, so the one

cannot exist without the other. Many people erroneously identify Shakti with a woman or female principle, and Shiva with the male principle. However, they are neither male nor female nor neuter. The aspirant who worships the wisdom aspect of Reality is called a Shaiva, and one who worships the power aspect of the same Reality is called a Shakta. The worshipper of the knowledge aspect will spontaneously be endowed with power. But if one wants to attain perfection in the acquisition of power, one has to stop the wastage of energy by all means. The aspirant has to identify his inner Self with the source of all power, keep the channel of descent of that power clean by purifying himself through an ardent invocation, worship, and selfsurrender with a yearning heart. It is in this way alone that the great power becomes propitiated and gives boon to the worshipper. Endowed with that boon, the aspirant comes to realise the manifestation of the same Divine Mother in all women, and the living presence of Shiva, the source of knowledge, in all beings. It is then that the aspirant truly feels the meaning of the maxim, 'yatra jivastatra shivah; wherever there is jiva, there is Shiva, and proceeds with all conviction to serve God in all beings because, according to tantric injunction, no individual can attain liberation until all others reach that state.

The main idea of the tantras is the deification of the objects of the senses, which lure a person and bind one in the endless chain of birth and death, thus preventing one from realising God. The tantras show the way to the struggling soul to look upon all sense objects as visible representations of God, so that one's inordinate attachment to them may be curbed. In this way the aspirant gradually becomes transformed from the bound state of the jiva to the liberated state of Shiva. The shackles that one created in the course of innumerable births fall off and one

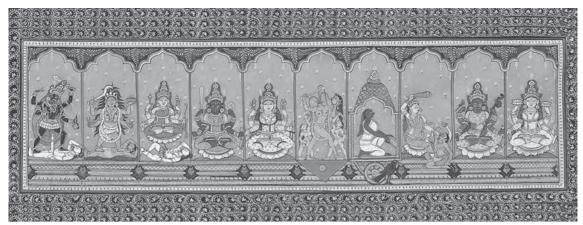
becomes God. Sri Ramakrishna puts this fact in a poetic way: 'When bound by ties one is jiva, and when free from ties one is Siva.'<sup>14</sup>

The tantras are unique in their preaching the idea of the motherhood of God, and simultaneously, glorification of the woman. The Samhita portion of the Vedas gives only rudiments of this idea. There the husband is instructed to look upon the body of his wife as sacred and to worship the gods therein, so that she may be the mother of a worthy child. The tantras sublimate this idea and develop it on new lines, with conspicuous results, for it was found suited to certain temperaments of the age when tantras came into vogue.

### **Notes and References**

- See Vidyaranya Muni, Panchadashi, 6.130: 'Maya is insignificant according to the scriptures, indefinable according to the rationalists, and real according to the materialists.'
- 2. Tanoti vistaryate jnanam anena iti tantram.
- 3. See Kamikagama, Purvabhaga, Tantravatarapatalah, 29: 'Tanoti vipulan arthan tattva-mantra-samashritan. Tranam cha kurute yasmat tantramityabhidhiyate'.
- 4. P C Bagchi, 'Evolution of the Tantras' in *Studies* on the Tantras (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1989), 110.
- 5. M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 328.
- 6. Shatapatha Brahmana, 1.3.2-3.
- 7. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 1.1.1.
- 8. Wine is called *karana* in Sanskrit, which also means 'the cause'.
- 9. Mananat trayate iti mantrah.
- 10. Diyate mantram kshiyate papam iti diksha.
- 11. Fourteen types of sound were created by Nataraja with his damaru. Together these codes are known as Maheshvara-sutra.
- 12. "Ahamidam", "mamedam" iti naisargiko'yam lokavyaharah'; Brahma-Sūtra Bhāṣya of Śaṅkarācārya, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), 1.
- 13. Bhavanopanishad, 10.
- 14. Gospel, 315.

 $78\,$  PB January 2016



Dashamahavidvas

### Shakti, the Supreme: Mother Goddess in Hinduism

### T S Rukmani

TUSE THE WORD 'HINDUISM' in a broad sense to cover all periods of its development right from Vedic times. Though the religion came to acquire the name 'Hinduism' very much later during British times in India, the roots of Hinduism as it evolved through the ages go back to Vedic times; it is therefore appropriate to look for the origins of some of its ideas in Vedic literature.

### Truth Is One

The groundbreaking contribution to religious and spiritual thought in the Rig Veda is the idea that the ultimate Existence or Truth is 'One' and can be described variously by wise people: 'ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti; the truth is one and the sages call it variously.' We take this oft-quoted saying so much for granted that its great significance

has been lost to posterity. Even today when bitter struggles rage over the superiority of one God of a particular religion over another, the Vedic sages were able to express the nature of this ultimate reality in an abstract manner calling it just Existence or Truth. It is not only that the ultimate reality does not have a single name but it is also not defined by any gender; this in my view is an intellectual feat of the highest order in that time and age.

We thus find that the hymns dedicated to female deities like Vak, Ushas, or Ratri were no less important than the ones dedicated to male deities. It is also significant that the *Kena Upanishad* mentions a female goddess Uma Haimavati as the one who instructs Indra about Brahman.<sup>2</sup> All these examples make it clear that in the early Vedic age both female and male deities enjoyed the same status. This attitude was facilitated by the open ended way of looking at religion, which enabled the Vedic sages to view the entire cosmos

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as endowed with divinity. Thus everything in the universe was imbued with the presence of the divine and the question of distinguishing the female from the male or according superiority to one over the other would not fit into the overall scheme of Vedic philosophy. This tendency would later blossom into the concepts of Brahman and Atman in the Upanishads where the outer reality Brahman got to be identified with the inner reality in everything that exists called Atman. It is also echoed in the *Ardhanarishvara* concept where Shiva is viewed as half male and half female emphasising the importance of both male and female in Nature.

The absence of defining the ultimate in terms of gender allowed for a freedom to conceptualise the reality in many ways without a gender bias. For instance the Shvetashvatara Upanishad describes the ultimate reality in the following manner: 'You are the woman, you are the man, you are the boy, (and) you are the girl too. You are the old man tottering with a stick. Taking birth, you have your faces everywhere.'3 It is also significant that in the Bhagavadgita Sri Krishna declares: 'Of this world I am the father, mother, ordainer, (and the) grandfather.'4 It is later in the tantra literature and the many Puranas which are dedicated to Shakti worship that this tradition reaches its culmination. In these works Shakti is the supreme deity responsible for the manifestation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe. Moreover she is not depicted as the consort of one of the male divinities but is independent and is supreme in her own right.

### **Female Deities**

Amongst the major world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism—it is only in Hinduism that one notices a profusion of female deities. As an embodiment of energy, Shakti is always pictured as female and one can say that without this energy the male deities cannot exercise their power. It is also significant that

while in general one worships all deities for blessings, when it comes to achieving certain specific blessings like prosperity and good fortune, knowledge, and power or energy, one prays to Lakshmi, Sarasvati, and Devi respectively.

There are a profusion of mother-deities that dot the Hindu landscape. Thus you have the Ashta-Mahalakshmis, Sapta-Matrikas, Dasha-Mahavidyas, and many more, which are varied aspects of Parvati.<sup>5</sup> One also notices that these female deities are by and large representations of Parvati. (81). While the Vedic heritage does accord respect to female deities it is in the little tradition that we find the great importance that female representations of the divine received in the form of village deities. It is these village deities that protect the villages from pestilence in the form of ailments such as small pox, and measles. The profusion of female deities, all subsumed under the name of 'mother', is a testimony to this fact. It was this phenomenon which helped the heroine of the Mahabharata, Draupadi, acquire an iconic status called Draupadi-amman in the south Indian 'amman' cult, even when the North has ignored Draupadi in its pantheon of female divinities. Moreover, Shakti has come to be recognised as the supreme deity in the Shakta school of worship and is given equal importance as that given to the male deities like Shiva and Vishnu, as already mentioned.

It is not possible to state definitely when this supremacy accorded to Shakti came into being. Depiction of female figurines on seals are available from the Indus Valley civilisation around third and second millennium BCE and later on in the Mauryan period, around the third to second century BCE, which by then had both masculine and feminine divine representations. It is with the age of the Puranas, that one notices written documents which accord this supreme status to Devi. She is celebrated as the one who killed the demon Mahishasura and one can boldly assert

that there can be no region in India which is not familiar with the Mahishasuramardini narrative of the Devi slaying the demon Mahishasura. This is celebrated in one form or the other in almost all the regions in India. This narrative is depicted in great detail in the *Devi Mahatmyam* of the *Markandeya Purana*. It is in this text that we find the identification of the Devi with yoga-*nidra*, yogic sleep, as well as the origin of the all-powerful Shakti who combines within herself all the shaktis of the other male deities as well.

The Devi Mahatmyam, considered to be of sixth century CE, recounts in detail the exploits of the Devi who has been described as Mahamaya, Prakriti, and Shakti. David Kinsley argues that it is in the depiction of Kali, Devi in her ferocious aspect, that each of these terms comes alive.<sup>6</sup> Kali, also known as Durga, is generally associated with the fearsome aspect of Shiva as evidenced in the Shumbha and Nishumbha legend narrated in the Devi Mahatmyam. As Kali, she has a number of temples known as kalibadi, house of Kali, in Bengal and Assam, where she is depicted in a fearsome form during the autumnal worship of Durga in these places. I shall briefly address the significance of the three terms—Mahamaya, Prakriti, and Shakti—before going on to highlight the uniqueness of the Devi, a female divinity, considered as the ultimate reality in the Hindu pantheon. She is also responsible for the creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe as already mentioned and also rewards devotees for their devotion to her, much like what the male gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva do.

*Mahamaya*: The word 'maya', as we all know, goes back to the Rig Veda, associated with magic and the power of delusion. In late Upanishadic philosophy and the later Vedanta schools, maya has the power mainly of ensnaring humans to the mundane world and distracting them from attaining liberation. However in the Puranic



Mahishasuramardini

literature the sense of ego associated with maya gets more importance as emphasised by David Kinsley (82). It is this taking over of the ego in our mundane worldly lives that obstructs the path to moksha and ultimate liberation. In that sense it is appropriate that she be designated as *mahamaya*.

Prakriti: In Sankhya philosophy Prakriti is the material reality responsible for the evolution of the cosmos. If one needs to attain moksha one needs to transcend the world of Prakriti by the practice of discernment which is not an easy proposition. People are bound to the world of Prakriti in general. By the time of popular Hinduism represented by the Puranas, Prakriti is associated more with human behaviour, which invariably drags humans into the vortex of worldly activity. No wonder the Gita says, 'It is Nature that acts' 1

and associates behaviour with the sattvic, rajasic and tamasic qualities, which are the constituents of Prakriti 'born of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*' (17.2). Just as behaviour following the natural inclination of Prakriti is difficult to resist so is Kali, who represents the darker side of Shakti, difficult to control says Kinsley. Perhaps this is the reason behind her being called Kali, the dark one, who is Prakriti or Shakti in her not so benevolent aspect according to Kinsley. While Kinsley associates Kali with the dark colour, another understanding is that Kali is derived from the word 'kala' meaning time. She is therefore the power associated with time.8 Either way what Kali signifies is that humans are not in full control of their lives and evil in many forms impacts their lives at unforeseen moments. This is an acknowledgement of the helplessness of humans in the face of difficulties.

Shakti: While all the deities like Shiva, Vishnu, and others have their *shakti*s who are always represented as female, Shakti also has her own *shakti* which she channelises not only to destroy the demons and asuras but also to bestow 'grace on her devotees'. So while *mahamaya* and Prakriti have emphasis predominantly on the binding nature of Devi, Shakti has a dual function of benevolence and destruction which comes into play at appropriate moments.

In whatever way Devi is worshipped, there is no gainsaying the fact that she has a large number of devotees throughout India. She has attained a paramount status and a festival exclusively devoted to her is the nine-day Navaratri festival and the grand Kali puja in Bengal apart from the many other ways in which she is celebrated throughout India. The entire *Durga Saptashati*, another name for the *Devi Mahatmyam* that has seven-hundred verses like the Gita, is recited during the Navaratri festival. I still remember the voice of Birendra Krishna Bhadra over the All India Radio reciting the verses from this Purana

on Mahalaya day, the first day of the fortnight that contains Navaratri. One of them which has a special meaning for me is: 'Ya devi sarvabhuteshu buddhirupena samsthita namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namah; I bow down repeatedly to that Devi who is the very embodiment of learning? In fact this Purana attributes all that exists in the universe as a representation of Devi Herself. Coming from Indian society, which is patriarchal in so many ways like almost all societies round the world, it is no small achievement for Hinduism to have accorded this exalted position to Shakti. This has had a domino effect in the West and Western feminists are trying to emulate this model and striving to bring in changes in Christianity with emphasis on the worship of Mother Mary juxtaposed with that of Jesus Christ. It is also reflected in a more conciliatory approach to admitting female bishops and rabbis into Christianity and Judaism respectively. In Hinduism while the Vedic tradition has preferred male pujaris for temple worship there have always been female pujaris for the wayside shrines and in some non-Vedic shrines mainly dedicated to Shakti worship.

Shakti has been identified with yoga-nidra, yogic sleep, and the reason for this is narrated in the following manner in the Devi Mahatmyam: Vishnu has entered his yoga-nidra and the demons Madhu and Kaitabha use this moment to start tormenting Brahma who tries to awaken Vishnu from his yoga-nidra. The same story occurs in the Mahabharata, which version is slightly different and it does not give due importance to the Devi. Thus the Mahabharata mentions Brahma shaking the lotus, in which he is born from the navel of Vishnu, in order to wake Vishnu up from his yoga-nidra, who eventually wakes up and then slays the two demons. But in the Devi Mahatmyam Brahma prays to the Devi addressing her as *mahamaya*, who then agrees to

withdraw herself limb by limb from Vishnu, who then wakes up and kills the demons. The emphasis of the *Devi Mahatmyam* is on the grace shown by Yogamaya to a devotee and by granting the wishes.

In the story of the slaying of Mahishasura, the story goes that in the long protracted war of a hundred years between the devas and asuras, Mahisha, the leader of the asuras, defeated the devas who were led by Indra, and in a sense, took over Indra's position. Faced with this situation the devas went to Shiva and Vishnu and explained their plight. Filled with anger there arose a light from the faces of Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma. There also arose energies from the other devas like Indra and they all gathered in one place and transformed themselves into a fiery mountain. That same energy then became a woman called Devi who was also given various weapons by the devas. Equipped with all this, the Devi was able to defeat Mahishasura and restore peace in the world. If one reads between the lines it becomes clear that the Devi Mahatmya extols the tremendous power of Devi, who surpasses all the individual male deities. Moreover one notices that she is not one of the consorts of the male devas like Shiva and Vishnu but is independent and is capable of removing all obstacles of her devotees.

When one talks about the supreme Mother Goddess in Hinduism one cannot ignore the tantra tradition in which women are given great prominence. In fact to be initiated by a woman guru is considered more meritorious than being initiated by a male guru in the tantra lineage. Sri Ramakrishna himself was initiated by a woman tantric as is well known. While there are Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Shakta tantra literature, increasingly tantra has come to be identified with Shakti over the years. Tantra nowadays is also associated with the awakening of the dormant kundalini power, which lies in the *muladhara* chakra at the base of the spinal column and making it

ascend through the five chakras—svadhishtana, manipura, anahata, vishuddha, and ajna—to finally merge in the sahasrara chakra situated in the top of the skull. It is a highly esoteric philosophy having many divisions and needs to be dealt with separately in its own right.

I have briefly dealt with the importance accorded to the Mother principle in Hinduism and have demonstrated how widely she is worshipped in this tradition. Shakti worship spans both the great Vedic tradition as well as the little non-Vedic schools that proliferate throughout the length and breadth of India. One could safely say that there are an equal number or maybe more worshippers of one or another form of Shakti as there are those who worship male deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, Sri Krishna, and so on.

### References

- 1. Rig Veda, 1.164.46.
- 2. See Kena Upanishad, 3.12-4.1.
- 3. Shvetashvatara Upanishad, 4.3.
- 4. Gita, 9.17.
- See Swami Harshananda, Hindu Gods and Goddesses (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1994), 98.
- See David R Kinsley, 'Kālī: Blood and Death Out of Place' in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, eds John S Hawley and Donna M Wulff (Berkeley: University of California, 1996).
- 7. Gita, 5.14.
- 8. See Hindu Gods and Goddesses, 118.
- 9. Devi Mahatmyam, 5.20-2.

Lord Vishnu in Yoga Nidra





**Prof. Arvind Sharma** 

THIS ARTICLE IS A PERSONAL meditation on tantra and may therefore appear idiosyncratic to some readers. I hope, however, that despite this feature it contains some points of interest.

I would like to use the following fact as my starting point: that the development of tantra, usually dated from around the fifth century in the religious history of India, was a feature shared by both Hinduism and Buddhism, and even Jainism. I would also, alongside this fact, like to claim, that a similar movement is discernible in the teachings of Ramana Maharishi (d. 1950). This raises the question: how might one

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account for the similar movement of thought in classical Hinduism, Buddhism, and in the teachings of Ramana Maharishi?

I would like to start with the example of Buddhism, as it seems to provide the most cogent example of my point, which can then be extended to Hinduism and to the teachings of Ramana Maharishi. What I have in mind here is the manner in which the concepts of samsara and nirvana are juxtaposed differently at different stages in the development of Buddhist thought. In Theravada Buddhism, the *opposition* between samsara and nirvana is emphasised. The spiritual aspirant or the seeker of truth is caught up in the world of samsara in which one typically suffers and, with the help of Buddhist practices, ultimately transcends it to reach the state of nirvana. The main

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obstacle for the spiritual aspirant, while she or he is in samsara, is the concept of the permanent self, which we all presume we possess. Theravada Buddhism, however, developed the concept of pudgala-shunyata, or the doctrine of the emptiness of the person. Very briefly, the idea is that human personality, consisting of the body, sensations, perceptions, mental volitions, and acts of consciousness, is totally devoid of any element which could be considered permanent. Theravada Buddhism, however, accepts the ultimate reality of what it calls dharmas or dhammas, which, in the use of the word here, mean the constituent elements of the universe. These were accepted as lasting. However, Mahayana Buddhism, which succeeded Theravada Buddhism. argued that these dharmas also did not possess any independent, permanent, or real existence because they were also the product of causes and conditions and were relational to each other. In a way, the Mahayana thinkers could be seen as saying that while the Theravada critique of the person was a useful insight, it did not go far enough and just as the *pudgala* or personality could be shown as lacking in substance, the same argument could also be applied to the dharmas. Thus, the doctrine of *pudgala*-shunyata needed to be supplemented with that of dharma-shunyata.

The Mahayana thinkers, however, did not stop here and proceeded to apply this critique to the distinction between samsara and nirvana, arguing that just as nothing permanent could be predicated of the person in samsara, so also nirvana was beyond any predication. So, samsara and nirvana could be negatively identified as sharing the property that nothing could be predicated of them. Sometimes the argument was also made that samsara and nirvana are implicated in each other, that is to say, one exists in relation to another, so that neither of them possess an independent reality, because they are dependent on each other.

Be that as it may, a major doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism consists of the claim that samsara and nirvana can be equated or at least placed in apposition, by way of contrast with Theravada Buddhism in which they were in *opposition*. It is easy to see how this negative identification of samsara and nirvana, in the sense that nothing could be predicated of either, could easily lead, in due course, to their positive identification, which is what happens in tantra. So we could identify three stages in the movement of thought relating to samsara and nirvana: one in which they are in opposition, followed by a second in which they are brought together, and a third in which they are identified. We may refer to these three stages as those of opposition, apposition, and identity. Should we wish to describe this movement of thought only in terms of opposition and identity, we might say that the first stage was represented by one of opposition or contrast, and the second and third by identity, but with the suggestion that one could distinguish between two kinds of identities—a negative identity and a positive identity. The third phase, that of identity or positive identity, is represented by tantra. We shall later see how a parallel development also seems to occur in classical Hinduism and in the teachings of Ramana Maharishi.

It might, however, be useful to refer to a perhaps uniquely Buddhist argument which was used to justify the emergence of tantra. Intention plays a very important role in Buddhist thought and the Buddha is even famously known to have virtually identified karma with intention. So it was argued that if the intention of tantric practices was to secure 'enlightenment', then they could be justified. One could even broaden this argument and claim that to engage in the quest for enlightenment was to engage in such a demanding enterprise that it required the mobilisation of *all* powers and dimensions which constitute the human personality, especially if

one wanted to achieve this enlightenment in the course of one life. Arguably, the identification of nirvana and samsara provided the requisite metaphysics for the development of tantra, along with the kind of soteriology which went hand in hand with it. It is also worth noting that, in Mahayana Buddhism, the soteriologically sharp distinction between the life of the householder and the life of a monk, found in Theravada Buddhism, was replaced by a willing acceptance of the fact that householders could get enlightened, and that not all monks were necessarily fully enlightened.

To turn now to classical Hinduism. The first major school of Vedanta to achieve pervasive and lasting influence in Hindu thought was that of Advaita Vedanta, which distinguished sharply between nirguna Brahman as the ultimate reality and the world as the product of maya, which was ultimately unreal. However, the various schools of Vedanta, which succeeded Advaita Vedanta, like those of Vishishtadvaita Vedanta and Dvaita Vedanta, concede far more reality to this world. In fact, one could argue that the manifest world is regarded as unreal in Advaita Vedanta, less unreal in Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, and even more real in Dvaita Vedanta. To the extent that reality is conceded to the universe and to the jivas, it is clear that the gap between them and what is ultimately real is reduced. From such a perspective, the development of tantra within Hinduism could be considered as carrying this process further.

The point may be illustrated with the help of a standard example—that of the rope and the snake. When the rope is mistaken as a snake, it could be argued that there really was no snake present because, when the rope is realised to be a rope, nothing of the snake remains. According to this interpretation of the phenomenon, the rope alone possesses any reality and the snake virtually none. One could, however, argue that the rope is

real and the snake can only be seen where there is already a rope within which the snake could be seen as possessing a derived reality. This line of interpretation, however, is capable of being extended further. It could be argued that the rope was in some sense present in every part of the snake, otherwise how could you see the snake at all? This virtual identification of the snake with the rope may provide us with a clue to how the development of tantra could also find a philosophical justification within Hinduism, whether articulated in this way or not.

There is also a very Hindu justification, which could be offered for the development of tantra. This has to do with the fact that ritual practice is sometimes sharply distinguished in Hinduism from ordinary practice, to the extent that killing an animal in sacrifice was not considered killing in the ordinary sense. Now we can see how the ritual use of substances, which are normally considered polluting or hindrances on the path to moksha, could be considered as possessing a special power if used ritually.

Anyone who reflects on the teachings of Ramana Maharishi over the years carefully is likely to be struck by the fact that whereas his teachings in the earliest phase are very succinct, sharp, and almost severe in their economy, they become more and more accommodating of human frailty as the audience of Ramana Maharishi expands and more and more people seek his guidance. Towards the end of his life he is even reported to have said on seeing a group of people, 'All of them are Buddhas, they just don't know it,' which reminds one of the equation between samsara and nirvana.

As more and more people started approaching Ramana Maharishi, the implications of his teachings for ordinary life also started to come into prominence. For instance, in his later teachings he expresses himself clearly against the idea

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that the performance of the last rites in Hinduism involves pollution of any kind. He openly opposed the taboo associated with menstruation and was quite averse to the practice of untouchability. He also emphasises the basic tenet of Advaita Vedanta—of the identity between Atman and Brahman—by stating that you yourself are the ultimate reality, which again parallels the equation between samsara and nirvana.

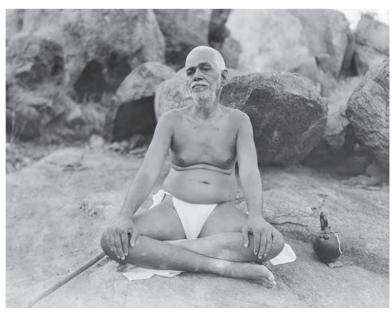
All these three positions, which we have discussed, namely, those associated with Buddhism, Hinduism, and the teachings of Ramana Maharishi, involve the acceptance of the idea of two levels of truth: the conventional and the ultimate. This important doctrine is perhaps less abstruse than commonly imagined, as the following example might serve to illustrate. We get up every day in the morning under the impression that the sun has risen. As students of astronomy, we know that it is the earth that moves, not the sun, and we can only say that the sun rises in a conventional sense. It is the conventional everyday truth; it is not the ultimate astronomical truth. Similarly, all of us accept the idea

that the earth is a sphere, based on the knowledge imparted to us in our geography classes. However, when we step out of a building we are not paralysed by the fear that, as the earth is a sphere, we run the risk of rolling down it. The conventional everyday truth, on the basis of which we live, is that the world is flat, although we know full well the ultimate truth that it is really a sphere.

The doctrine of the two levels of truth helps us function in this world without any sense of contradiction, by grading

reality into the proximate or conventional reality and the ultimate reality. It could be argued that the doctrine of the two levels of truth can be seen as pointing in the direction of tantra if one asks the question: is the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth conventional or ultimate? The answer has to be that it is itself conventional; so that in the end, all that we are left with is the ultimate truth, and the conventional truth gets swallowed up in it. Now of course, all religious traditions warn us against conflating these two levels. Somebody asked Ramana Maharishi: 'If this world is a dream, then do we have to give food to the person who is dying of hunger?' Ramana Maharishi replied: 'So long as you are in this dream world you have to give the hungry person in the dream dreamfood to eat.' He was arguing that one cannot use or abuse, the distinction between the two levels of truth to escape one's responsibility. One can appreciate the warning, but one can also appreciate that the temptation to mix or merge the two levels may also be an ever-present one.

Ramana Maharishi





Abhinavagupta in Assembly

### Light on Abhinavagupta's Contribution to the Advaita Shaiva Spiritual Philosophy of Kashmir

Dr Debabrata Sen Sharma

UT OF THE EIGHT SCHOOLS of Shaiva spiritual philosophy that had their origin and development in different parts of India in different periods of time, the Advaita Shaiva spiritual philosophy of Kashmir is the

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most prominent one on account of richness in terms of literary output and the depth in its spiritual thought projections. Eight schools of Shaiva spiritual thought arranged in chronological order are: the Pashupata Shaiva school, the Lakulisha Pashupata school, the Nandikeshvara Shaiva school, the Shaiva Siddhanta, the Virashaiva school, the Raseshvara Shaiva school,

the Advaita Shaiva school of Kashmir, and the Shaiva school founded and propagated by Shrikantha in Kashmir. The first three schools of Shaivism mentioned above originated in the beginning as religious cults in chronological order in the pre-Christian era in the north-western and south-western parts of India. Very limited literature that was created later is available pertaining to them, shedding light on their spiritual thought projections.

The Shaiva Siddhanta school of spiritual thought is also one of the ancient schools of Shaivism that has extensive literature and also following even today in Tamil Nadu. The original texts were created in Tamil based on the oral teachings of Shaiva saints. Later works were written in Sanskrit by some writers for dissemination of their spiritual philosophy in North India, especially in Kashmir. The Virashaiva school that flourished in Karnataka was founded by Revana, later developed by Basava. It has a fairly rich literature written in Sanskrit and also a large following even today in Karnataka. The followers of this school wear an idol of Shiva on their body, a practice started by Basava in the twelfth century. The followers of this school are now called *lingayatas*. The existence of the Raseshvara school of Shaivism is known to us only from the description of the main tenets of its philosophical thought given by Madhavacharya in his well-known Sanskrit compendium, Sarva-darshana-samgraha.

The Advaita school of spiritual philosophy was founded in Kashmir by sage Vasugupta in the last quarter of the eight century CE. It is said that he was an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva and was very keen to learn the Shaiva mode of spiritual practice. But he could not find a suitable guru, who could satiate his thirst for learning the Shaiva mode of spiritual practice. His intense yearning for learning the spiritual philosophy of

Advaita Shaivism and the mode of their spiritual practice to realise his true nature was fulfilled by Lord Shiva himself, who appeared before him in his dream and told him: 'Here, on this mountain [Mahadeva mountain], there is the Secret Esoteric Teaching under a big stone. Having obtained it, reveal it to those who are fit for receiving [my] Divine Grace.'

On waking up next morning, Vasugupta went there, and by a mere touch that particular stone slab turned upside down, and he found the *Shiva Sutra* inscribed on it. The mountain and the stone slab still exist in the valley of Harvan stream, behind the Shalimar Gardens, near present-day Srinagar in India. Thus, Vasugupta was *not* the author of *Shiva Sutra*. It is a revealed text, technically called *Agama*. Other works belonging to the category of *Agama* and also those that are oft-quoted in the later works describing the spiritual philosophy of this school are the *Malinivijaya Tantra*, the *Svachchhanda Tantra*, the *Netra Tantra*, the *Vijnanabhairava Tantra*, and the *Rudrayamala Tantra*.

Vasugupta taught Kallata (c. 855 CE) the spiritual philosophy contained in the Shiva Sutra. Kallata grasped the purport of the spiritual thought conveyed in the Shiva Sutra, which were reproduced by him in his own way in the work Spanda Karika. In this way, he gave rise to a distinct phase in the development of the Advaita Shaiva thought, called Spanda. Kallata wrote a vritti, gloss, on these karikas, which together with the commentary is known as Spanda Sarvasva. Three commentaries on the karikas are available: Vivriti by Ramakantha (c. 925 CE), Pradipa by Utpala Bhatta (tenth century CE), and Nirnaya by Kshemaraja. Kshemaraja also wrote a bigger work, Spanda Nirnaya, which he summarised in Spanda Sandoha.

Vasugupta's disciple Siddha Somananda (c. 850 CE) gave a new turn to the development of

the Advaita Shaiva spiritual philosophy by writing Shivadrishti, in which he made an attempt to rationalise the philosophical thought projections by introducing dialectics for the first time. He is therefore spoken of as 'Tarkasya karta; the creator of logic'. His pupil, Utpaladeva (c. 970 CE) wrote Ishvarapratyabhijna or Pratyabhijna Karika, in which he tried to present the summary of the thought projections of his teacher. But this work assumed so much importance that the Advaita Shaiva philosophy came to be known as the Pratyabhijna Shastra, even outside Kashmir. Abhinavagupta wrote two commentaries on this work: Vimarshini, a shorter commentary and Vivriti Vimarshini, a detailed commentary.

Abhinavagupta (950–1020 CE) was a master

syncretist, who discovered the thread of unity underlying the divergent spiritual thought-currents that had their origin and development in successive periods of time. In his magnum opus, *Tantraloka* and *Paratrimshika*, he has said that the spiritual thought-currents known as *Agama*, *Spanda*, and *Pratyabhijna* are not divergent in nature, but these are mutually complementary. Historically speaking, these represent three successive phases in the development of the Advaita Shaiva philosophy in Kashmir. He has therefore named it as the Trika school of Shaivism.

Abhinavagupta has mentioned three triads, *trika*, in his magnum opus *Tantraloka* as constituting the subject matter of the Trika school of Shaivism. These are: Shiva, Shakti, and their union; Shiva, Shakti, and Nara; and Para Shakti,

Abhinavagupta



Apara Shakti, and Parapara Shakti. He has projected the idea of their essential identity by naming the Advaita Shaiva school of spiritual philosophy as Trika.

When we carefully study the early formative life of Abhinavagupta, we find that the syncretic outlook developed in his mental make-up due to his studying different subjects with different teachers of his time, whom he has mentioned by name. For instance, his father Narasimhagupta alias Chukhulaka was his first teacher from whom he learnt Sanskrit grammar, Sanskrit literature, and logic or Nyaya (37.58). He studied Nyaya, Mimamsa, Yogachara Buddhism, Arhata philosophy, Pancharatra Vaishnavism, and so on, under different teachers. He stayed in different mathikas or gurukulas, schools that were meant for initiating students into the study of different schools of philosophical thought with a view to generate a balanced philosophical approach in them. He has mentioned Bhutiraja and his son Helaraja of Nathamathika (37.60), Vamananatha for studying dualistic Shaivism, Lakshmanagupta of Trayambaka Mathika for studying Kulaprakriya, which is the same as Yogini-Kaulamata founded by Siddha Matsyendranatha. Matsyendranatha is said to have founded the Yogini Kaula school of Kamakhya, where he performed his sadhana and obtained perfection. He was venerated as a siddha in Tibet where he is known as Luipa. He was venerated in Nepal as an incarnation of Bodhisattva. He was also the guru of Gorakshanatha.

Abhinavagupta has mentioned that he moved from one guru to another like a black bee to collect scented honey from different flowers and blend them to produce a masterpiece, namely, a spiritual philosophy that is rich and sublime in the form of the Advaita Shaiva philosophy of Kashmir (13.335).

He also borrowed spiritual thoughts from the

Chumma tradition that was then popular with the common masses in Kashmir, and assimilated them in the spiritual philosophy named by him as Trika. It may be mentioned here that no literature was available to him then, which is evident from his quoting verses in the local dialect without naming the source and incorporating them at the end of some chapters of his work, *Tantrasara*. In this manner, Abhinavagupta made the Advaita Shaiva philosophy, the most perfect and powerful school of spiritual philosophy in Kashmir, eclipsing the popularity of other schools like Shaiva Siddhanta, Yogachara Buddhism, and Pancharatra Vaishnavism in Kashmir.

Abhinavagupta's syncretic outlook is also reflected in his description of the Advaita Shaiva cosmology. According to him, Samvid or the supreme Real conceived in a non-corporeal form as abstract metaphysical principle or Parama Shiva or Parameshvara conceived in a corporeal form resolves to manifest himself as the universe out of his free will. He does so by exercising his divine power, technically called the svatantrya shakti, the power of divine freedom. His power then functions in three different forms, technically called Para Shakti or Mahamaya, Parapara Shakti or Maya Shakti, and Apara Shakti or Prakriti Shakti on the three stadia in world creation. As a result of this, the universe is manifested in three different forms, technically called shuddha adhva, shuddhashuddha adhva or mayadhva, and ashuddha adhva or Prakriti. In his work. Paramarthasara, Abhinavagupta conceptualised these adhvas as constituting spheres which he named as andas.3 These are named by him as *shaktyanda*, in which the divine power functions in its pure form as chitshakti or mahamaya; mayanda, in which the divine power is held to be functioning as sukshma achit shakti or maya; and prakrityanda, in which achit shakti functions in its gross form or Prakriti. Abhinavagupta adds

one more anda, a sphere, which he calls prithvyanda. He has classified thirty-six tattvas or levels of manifested universe admitted in the Advaita Shaiva school of Kashmir under four andas: sadashiva tattva; ishvara tattva and the shuddhavidya tattva constituting the shaktyanda; mayashakti and five kanchukas namely, kala, vidya, raga, kala, and niyati, constituting mayanda; Purusha, Prakriti, buddhi, ahamkara, and manas, five powers of sense perception called *inanendri*yas, five powers of action called karmendriyas,

same time. His creative nature is represented by

Shiva-tattva, which symbolises the initial cre-

ative movement. The universe manifested by the

supreme Being, Parama Shiva out of his free will, not only consists of thirty-six tattvas or levels

and five primary subtle elements called tanmatras constituting the prakrityanda; five gross material elements called mahabhutas that are the product of five tanmatras constituting prithvyanda. The total number of tattvas constituting the manifest world is thirty-four. The remaining two tattvas out of a

Trident Yantra of Parama Shiva total number of thirty-six tattvas, Shiva-tattva and Shakti-tattva are held to be eternally existent as such, as these stay above the world creation. Parama Shiva, the supreme Being exists on the top as the transcendent Reality and the Absolute. He is also immanent or creative at the

of creation mentioned earlier, but also of infinite number of limited beings—pramata, experients, and their objects of prameya, experience, which exist on each of the levels of the manifested universe described above. Actually, it is the supreme Being, Parama Shiva, who manifests himself both as so many tattvas or levels of creation and also as an infinite number of experients and their objects of experience by assuming selfcontraction out of his free will (6).

The experients thus manifested by Parama

Shiva can be classified under two heads—pure experients existing on three levels within shaktyanda or shuddha adhva are technically called mantramaheshvara, mantreshvara, and mantra existing on the pure levels of sadashiva-tattva. ishvara-tattva, and shuddhavidya-tattva respectively. These

pure experients are equipped with pure bodies made up of bindu or divine power in a concentrated form, technically called baindavadeha. Baindavadeha of pure experients serves as a vehicle for enjoyment only by them. Pure experients have no independent will of their own, hence they exist like gods immersed in their true consciousness nature tasting bliss.

The experients existing on a different level of world manifestation existing within the sphere of Prakriti called *prakrityanda* are technically

known as sakalas, literally meaning equipped with kala or gross physical body. Abhinavagupta has described in his work Paramarthasara, the constitution of psycho-physical body framework of sakalas. According to him the body structure, individual, of sakalas is made up of the gross physical body and the subtle body technically called puryashtaka. The gross physical body is made up of five gross physical elements called the mahabhutas, while puryashtaka is comprised of five subtle elements, intellect, the sense of ego, and mind. Abhinavagupta conceives the physical body of an embodied individual as a temple in which Shiva resides as the Self (7). Embodied human beings participating actively in world transactions are not aware of his presence in the innermost core of their being on account of their vision directed towards the world existing outside them. Spiritual practitioners have to pursue the path of spiritual disciplines to discover the presence of Shiva in the sanctum sanctorum of their physical body and recognise him there. This involves the changing of the direction of their vision from the world existing outside oneself to within by performing the appropriate kind of spiritual practices called introversion, developing an inner vision. When they would succeed, they would realise the supreme goal, namely the recognition of their real self or Shiva. This is technically called pratyabhijna, recognition. Incidentally, it may be mentioned here that the same idea also occurs in a mantra in the Katha Upanishad: 'The self-existent Lord destroyed the outgoing senses. Therefore, one sees the outer things and not the inner Self. A rare discriminating man, desiring immortality, turns his eyes away and then sees the indwelling Self.<sup>4</sup>

Abhinavagupta holds perfect knowledge to be the cause of the attainment of liberation. The perfect knowledge, according to him, is the revelation of Shiva nature in the spiritual aspirants that is characterised by his fullness nature in respect of both knowledge and action. Exercising his power of divine freedom that 'vibrates' without break coalesced with him, Shiva appears as limited in knowledge and action out of his free will to manifest himself as the multiplicity of the world. Again, it is he, the supreme Lord, who removes all veils in the form of defilements in the form of the idea of smallness and the like, hiding his true nature by exercising the same power of divine freedom. As a result, he shines, as it were, in his pristine form as Shiva, the supreme Lord. This is described as moksha.

In his *Paramarthasara*, Abhinavagupta states that there is no separate region for liberated persons to proceed towards.<sup>5</sup> Moksha is attained by them by piercing the knots of ignorance by developing in them the power of divine freedom. Abhinavagupta says in his *Tantraloka* that moksha should not be considered as the attainment of knowledge but it is the cause of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> It is the manifestation of one's real nature as Atman or Shiva.

All schools of Indian philosophical thought are unanimous in regarding ignorance as the root cause of embodied beings passing through repeated cycles of birth and death, but these schools describe the nature of ignorance differently. Without going into a discussion of the nature of ignorance as conceived by these schools, let us confine ourselves to the examination of the nature of ignorance postulated by the Trika school of Shaivism. According to the teachers of this school, ignorance is the product of the self-contraction assumed by the supreme Lord exercising his divine freedom out of his free will in order to manifest himself as the multiplicity of the world. This results in the creation of anavamala, the impurity of limitedness, which is regarded as the basic defilement, mulamala, innate in all individual beings in the world. Its origin

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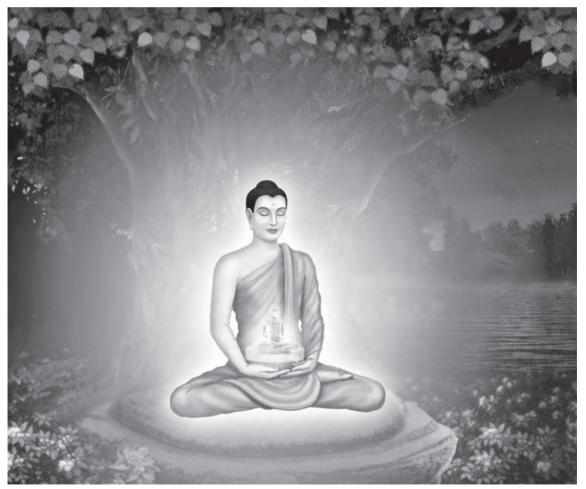
lies in the power of divine freedom operated by the supreme lord in order to manifest himself as the multiplicity of the world.

Anavamala operates in the individual limited beings in two ways: causing loss of consciousness or awareness of their true nature in them, technically called *bodha* or jnana; causing the loss of freedom of action in them, technically called *kriya*.<sup>7</sup>

The loss of consciousness or awareness of their true nature as well as the loss of freedom of action in them following their self-contraction or envelopment by *anavamala* is technically called *paurusha-ajnana*, ignorance in respect of their true consciousness nature.

Since the root cause of *paurusha-ajnana* in the individual beings is self-contraction assumed by the supreme Lord in the beginning of his self-manifestation as the world, it is eternal in the sense that it is coterminous with the cosmic dissolution. It is innate in all limited beings covering his true self. It cannot be eradicated by them despite their making all the efforts in the form of spiritual practices but it gets destroyed immediately following the influx of the divine grace in them, technically called *shaktipata* from the supreme Lord through his representative guru at the time of their initiation, *diksha*.

The bauddha-ajnana, as its very nomenclature indicates, has its seat in the buddhi or



intellect of embodied beings. It is of the nature of both indeterminate and determinate knowledge. Its presence in the intellect of all embodied beings prevents them from knowing the real nature of their Self as well as simultaneously produces the experience of Self in what actually is not-Self in them represented by their physical body and so on. The experience of Self in not-Self is technically called vikalpa or kalpana, thought-construct, which is symbolised by the ego-experience. It is produced when the real Self becomes associated with the gross physical body at the time of its appearance on the mundane plane as an embodied being. It ceases to exist with the Self's dissociation from the gross physical body at the time of the death of the embodied being. Sri Ramakrishna called this egoexperience in embodied beings, the 'unripe ego'.8

The Advaita Shaiva texts of Kashmir admit paurusha-jnana and bauddha-jnana as counter to paurusha-ajnana and bauddha-ajnana described above. The nature of paurusha-jnana is described by Abhinavagupta in his Tantrasara as the experience of the Self in the real Self.9 It is eternal as it exists in every sentient embodied individual right from the time of his manifestation simultaneously with the Self manifestation by the supreme Lord, Parama Shiva as the multiplicity of the world. Though it is eternal in nature, it is not experienced by the embodied individual beings on account of the 'screen' created by the ego-experience, which hides the experience of Self in real Self in them. The ego-experience is a product of the bauddha-ajnana existing in the intellect of all embodied beings since their appearance on the mundane plane in the beginning of world creation. But when the individual spiritual aspirant is infused with the divine grace of the guru at the time of initiation, the 'screen' veiling the true Self in oneself, that is,

bauddha-ajnana, is annihilated in the disciple for some period of time. As a result, the paurusha-jnana arises in the disciple and the disciple becomes aware of one's real Self. It illumines the intellect, producing the experience, 'I am Shiva, I am Shiva' in the disciple.

The disciple then experiences the entire universe consisting of different objects of the world existing in the clear mirror of one's consciousness nature, everything that exists in one's consciousness nature to emanate from one, like varied objects experienced in dream appearing in a concrete form in the waking state, as it were. It is the supreme Self experienced as pure 'I', who takes the form of the universe like gross physical body composed of hands, feet, and so on. It is the pure 'I', who alone is manifest in all illumination. 'The universe shines forth in myself alone just as a pot, and the like, (appear) in a spotless mirror. All springs up from myself just like the variegated variety of dreams (arises) from sleep. I myself have the form of the universe as if it were a body that by nature consists of hands, feet, and the like. I myself shine forth in all as the (Shakti or Power) whose essential nature is brightness with reference to (all) the positive entities.'10 OPB PB

#### References

- Kshemaraja, Shiva Sutra Vimarshini, Introduction.
- 2. See Abhinavagupta, *Tantraloka*, 1.7–21.
- 3. See Abhinavagupta, Paramarthasara, 4.
- 4. Katha Upanishad, 2.1.1.
- 5. See Paramarthasara, 60.
- 6. See Tantraloka, 1.156.
- 7. See Utpaladeva, *Ishvara Pratyabhijna Karika*, 3.2-4.
- 8. M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 860.
- 9. See Abhinavagupta, Tantrasara, Introduction.
- 10. Paramarthasara, 48-9.

## Tantric Mysticism and Some Issues of Religious Authority

### June McDaniel



HERE ARE MANY FORMS of tantric mysticism, and many competing understandings of its meaning. In this article, we shall examine two major types of tantra, classical and folk tantra, and the forms of mysticism associated with each. We might begin to analyse these by examining our terms.

### **Definitions**

The English term 'mysticism' comes from the ancient Greek mysteries, which were a set of rituals

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believed to bestow immortality. A mystic was one who had been initiated into the mysteries, and had thus been transformed. The word is derived from the Greek verb 'muo', meaning to close—usually the lips and eyes—and it implied silence, for the initiates were forbidden to speak of the rituals under threat of death.

The term 'mysticism' was first used in Western religion by the early Christian theologians Origen and Clement of Alexandria, to describe a way of knowing and a style of biblical interpretation. Other early patristic writers used it to refer to a way of understanding ideas that were too difficult to grasp rationally. The term was popularised by Dionysius the Areopagite, often

called Pseudo-Dionysius, in his book *Mystical Theology*, which speaks of union with the Divine Light. It led to the medieval term for special insight into God, *theologia mystica*. This was knowledge of God through unifying love, gained through experience rather than reason.

In modern usage, mysticism generally refers to the idea that a person can attain a direct experience of the ultimate Reality, a union with ultimate truth gained through love, awareness, or wisdom. It is an intense experience which transforms the mystic, who realises that there is a deeper aspect to the world than what she or he perceives through ordinary awareness. It is the vivid presence of a divine reality, usually mediated by the images and symbols of the mystic's culture.

However, the term 'mysticism' is sometimes associated with mystification or confusion. As the origin of the term deals with knowledge which cannot be communicated and is mysterious and forbidden, it has thus come to be associated with the supernatural and with magic. 'Mysticism' may refer to a path, a goal, an experience, and a philosophical claim. It has been subject to many recent critiques from the Freudian and Marxist perspectives. The constructivist definition of mysticism, which denies any ultimate mystical goal and understands such goals to be created by different cultures, has become popular over the last few decades. It excludes the universalist or perennialist perspective, which it claims cannot be proved and is overly idealistic and naive. The constructivist position shifts the study of mysticism from experience and consciousness to culture and language.

We see the same problem of multiple meanings in tantric tradition. The term 'tantra' has many of the same problems as the term 'mysticism'. Some definitions focus on practice, some on goals, some on doctrines, and some on history. For some people tantra is a text, for some a set of rituals, for some a lineage of teachings, and

for others a mixture of yoga and *bhoga*. The term has been associated with weaving and stretching threads on a loom, implying expansion of doctrine, and some authors derive tantra from 'tanu' or body. We also see folk etymologies: tantra is tattva plus mantra. There are more classical forms of tantra, which deal with meditation leading to divine union and knowledge of brahman, *brahmajnana*, and folk forms, which include astrology, use of gems, alternative healing, and the development of supernatural powers, siddhis.

We also see tantric belief and practice associated with different deities. In West Bengal, Shiva or Shakti tantra is the most popular, though Vaishnava Sahajiyas are also widely considered to be tantrics, for their identification with Radha and Krishna and their *lilas*. In other areas of India, deities like Ganesha and Hanuman are worshipped in tantric forms. The two major schools of Shakta tantra are the Kali *kula* in north-eastern India—especially West Bengal, Assam, and Orissa—and the Sri-*kula* in South India.

### The Question of Authority

The legitimacy of tantric mysticism is generally based on either experience or textual authority. These bases of authority are shown in different forms of tantra. The two major forms that I shall discuss here are what I shall call classical and folk forms of tantra. In this article, we shall look at Bengali Shakta tantric mysticism, using both text and fieldwork. The data is based on two years of fieldwork interviewing Shakta tantrics in West Bengal. We shall argue that the *Kularnava Tantra* is a central mystical text for Bengali Shakta tantra because it responds to both folk and classical approaches, both emphasising experience and justifying its lineage through the Vedas.

Classical tantrics tend to deal with philosophical concerns: the creation and destruction of the universe, the nature of the self, and the

highest ecstatic states. Practitioners seek mystical union with Shiva or Shakti, seeking to enter infinite consciousness. Authority is based on lineage, scholarship, and interpretation of texts through commentaries.

Folk tantrics, on the other hand, tend to deal with more pragmatic concerns: healing diseases, attaining supernatural powers, and controlling the weather. Authority in folk tantric mysticism is charismatic, based on visionary experience, possession trance, and gaining supernatural knowledge and abilities from the deities.

Classical tantra claims a Vedic origin, understanding tantric texts as a 'fifth Veda' or an extension of the Vedas and the Advaita Vedanta interpretation of the Upanishads. Some qualities by which we can identify classical tantra: the emphasis on tantra as shastra, the use of Sanskrit for texts and mantras, a philosophy of non-dualism, initiation by a guru into an accepted lineage, sampradaya, worship of Sanskritic deities, and an understanding of tantric ritual—mudra, mandala or yantra, chakra, and various exotic forms of sadhana—as symbolic rather than literal. The literature of classical tantra has roots in a variety of traditions: Kaula Shaktism and the Kashmiri Shaiva tradition, Sankhya and Yoga philosophies, some tantric Buddhist and Nath Yoga influence, and some incorporation of Vedanta. Certain Puranas—especially the *Chandi* section of the *Mar*kandeya Purana—and tantras—especially the Kularnava Tantra—are highly valued. Classical tantrics are often Brahmins, who interpret tantric agama as a part of the Vedic commentarial tradition. This differs from folk tantra, which has a greater focus on individual revelation in dreams, with invocation of regional deities and little focus on scholarship and philosophy.

West Bengal has traditionally been a centre of tantric practice in India, and many Bengali writers have agreed with Winternitz in claiming that Bengal was the origin of all Indian tantra. Veda and tantra have been called twin brothers, who follow a parallel course and are both forms of sacred commentarial literature, Shruti. However, there has been a certain amount of sibling rivalry between these twins, as well as some uncertainty as to the nature and understanding of tantra.

The issue of authority is important in Shakta tantra, because the texts are ambiguous and often inconsistent. To whom or what does one listen in order to understand Shakta tantra?

For folk tantra, authority lies in the individual's experience, which is much more important that any text or ritual, even if the text is written by such a revered figure as Krishnananda Agambagish or Abhinavagupta. One can listen directly to a goddess, who will inspire the understanding of any text, and no particular text is authoritative. For classical tantrics, authority derives from orthodox texts and their interpretation, and an organised system of tantric philosophy and theology. Perhaps the most debated issue is the relationship of tantra and Veda.

Many classical tantrics have sought to show that tantra is really a form of Vedic knowledge, with a slightly greater focus on goddesses and less focus on large sacrificial ceremonies. Both tantra and Veda are ways of seeking spiritual knowledge, and both have inner and outer dimensions. Classical tantra accepts the world philosophically, but views the true tantric as attached to Brahman rather than worldly pleasure. She or he would perhaps be comparable to Weber's 'inner-worldly ascetic', who acts in the world but is inwardly detached from it. Images of sensuality are only symbolic of spiritual union and the male and female aspects of the self. Ritual expresses spiritual ideas, and is also largely symbolic.

There are many writers who emphasise the Vedic roots of tantra, for a variety of reasons. Veda means traditional knowledge, it means ancient

and thus venerable, it is contemplative and high status. To emphasise folk knowledge is to deny the cachet of the ancient—though many forms of folk ritual are likely pre-Vedic—and to neglect a philosophical approach to religious concerns.

When confronted by tantras which speak of gaining supernatural powers, one classical response is to say that these are to be interpreted symbolically, for they represent the gaining of mystical insight rather than other-worldly powers. They just need to be interpreted by someone who understands their secret code, who is capable, *adhikari*, and properly initiated. From this perspective, tantra is not open to everybody, but restricted by education and spiritual development rather than caste or gender. It is the perspective of bhakti, which claims that anybody can be a tantric; many tantric texts restrict membership, and birth and education have both been used as criteria for acceptance.

While tantra is often equated with Veda, respect for the Vedas varies within tantric texts. Some tantras are actively anti-Vedic, some claim to be in a Vedic lineage, some respect the Vedic texts but despise the Vedic pandits. In India, the term 'Veda' is often used quite loosely, and does not refer to the four traditional Vedas. It is taken to mean 'wisdom', so that any admired text is called a Veda, and 'Vedic' is understood to mean 'respectable'—as in, to act in a Vedic manner. It is such breadth of definition which allows the ISKCON group, which follows Gaudiya Vaishnavism and the deities Radha and Krishna, to call themselves Vedic—when neither Radha nor Krishna is mentioned in the four Vedas.

Vedic antecedents act as a form of social selfdefence, so that tantric practitioners are associated with the mainstream religion. This may well be a reaction to the condemnation of tantra by both Eastern and Western scholars, who have called it licentious, degenerate, perverse, corrupt, and



Moriz Winternitz (1863-1937)

a variety of other unflattering names. Because of the general assumption that people in older times were more pure and dedicated than modern practitioners, a good way to defend a modern religion is to claim that it is really ancient. Thus we have the claim that tantra is really Veda, no matter how obviously its texts disagree with the Vedas. This conflict is handled according to three major strategies:

I. Tantra is the practical extension of the Vedas and Upanishads. Vedas are theoretical, tantra is practical, but both are really describing the same knowledge and the same states of consciousness. One approach makes use of sacrifice, another of mantra and mandala, but there is really no difference. As Gopinath Kaviraj states:

Though Veda and tantra sound different, they differ only in the two names for the same source of knowledge. Apparently the name Veda may bear a different meaning, but intrinsically it means transcendent knowledge. Rishis used to attain

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First Day Cover of the Indian Postal Stamp Issued in Honour of Gopinath Kaviraj (1887–1976)

this knowledge by meditation, and fulfilled their desires. It is written in the epics that those hermits who could successfully inherit the essence of dharma, enjoyed freedom beyond the range of the senses. Those who couldn't attain this essence, were unable to witness the spiritual realities. This is why the rishis created the Vedas, to give this essence of spiritual reality to the layman. <sup>1</sup>

2. Veda is an earlier stage of spiritual knowledge while tantra is a later stage, adapted for the modern world or the Kali Yuga. Though they look different, they are just specialised for different environments, for both tantra and Veda have the same 'inner essence'. The differences or contradictions are merely superficial. As M P Pandit states, though the tantras may look different and sometimes condemn the Vedas, they are really helpful additions to the Vedic texts:

The Tantras declare, repeatedly, their foundation in the Veda, claim their doctrines to ensoul the Truth of the Veda (*vedatmakam*) and some

describe the Tantra as the fifth Veda. They are not grafts from an alien tradition or civilization as alleged by some. Nor are they a departure or revolt from the authentic Shruti or the Veda ... Whatever differences there are in the teachings of the Tantras, they are really in the nature of revisions and adjustments indispensable to meet the requirements of an age or ages which came far later when the society had developed further in the evolution of its mental and emotive faculties.<sup>2</sup>

3. Tantra is the hidden core of the Vedas, the end or crown of the Vedas, thus identical to the Upanishads. As Woodroffe interprets the *Kularnava Tantra*'s condemnation of Vedic pandits, they simply miss the tantric essence of the Vedas and focus upon Vedic knowledge:

Once this essence, this Truth is known all other knowledge is useless. Mukti, Liberation, is not to be obtained by the chanting of the Vedas, nor by the study of the Sastras; Jnana, real knowledge alone can give the liberation. ... All

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other ways are deceptive, oppressive; the Truth-Knowledge alone is life-giving.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we see a statement that Vedic mantras and study are ultimately useless, deceptive, and oppressive, for they do not give the Truth-Knowledge which can only be gained through religious experience. However, for Woodroffe, this is still pro-Vedic, for Vedic comes to mean transcending the Vedas, claiming that the tantras are really the esoteric core of the Vedas. This approach rejects studying the Vedas or practising Vedic rituals. All of these strategies allow apparent contradictions to be dismissed.

There are a variety of other similar stances: tantras are not consistent and range in their views of Veda, but the most important tantras support the Vedas; tantras which are anti-Vedic only show the beliefs of rebellious and low-caste practitioners, and not the really knowledgeable ones; tantras and Vedas have influenced each other over time, and are parallel traditions or strands which have been woven together. The most important fact, which seems to be rarely noted in the literature, is that the tantras are quite varied in their views, and are both inconsistent with each other and inconsistent with the Vedas, which are quite varied themselves.

According to Shivachandra Vidyarnava Bhattacharya, the Vedic shastras do not speak of tantra because of their reverence for it. Tantras are so authoritative that Vedic shastras do not examine or refer to the tantras. He states that the shastras 'have timidly assumed silence, considering the saying of Tantra to be as weighty and solemn as royal messages, and beyond penetration on their part. Consequently, they do not launch into a discussion upon Tantra at every word. This is not due to want of faith, but bespeaks perfect reverence on their part.'4

He also mentions that tantra precedes the shastras, as proved by the shastras condemning

it, and they would not try to disprove something that did not yet exist. That this latter statement disproves the shastras' 'perfect reverence' is not a problem for him. Besides, we do not have a full collection of shastras today; many are missing, lost in political and religious revolutions. Thus, we cannot depend on the shastras as we know them (229). Another problem is that the lines between Veda and tantra are fluid, and one type of mantra can become another. As Bhattacharya states:

The Vaidik Mantras which have been prescribed in Tāntrik rites, such as the ten Sangskāras and the like, have, in spite of their Vaidik origin, become Tāntrik owing to their having been repeated by Maheṣhvara and Maheṣhvari in connection with the Tāntrik Method (527).

Tantric deities may be equated with Vedic deities; as it is the Kali age, the Gayatri mantra, though originally Vedic, has now become tantric. As the *Shaktisangama Tantra* states:

The Goddess Bhavatārinī is the Deity presiding over the four Vedas, and the Goddess Kālīkā is the Deity presiding over the Atharva Veda. ... Rites, according to the Atharva Veda, cannot be performed without Kālī or Tārā (545).

Classical tantra is much concerned with class and eligibility. Every man on the street cannot be a true tantric. Eligibility, *adhikara*, is a great concern, and it is dependent on Brahmin status, Sanskrit literacy, and an education in the shastras. In this approach, tantra is based primarily on Sankhya philosophy, with a touch of Advaita Vedanta. One must be properly trained in philosophy in order to be a tantric. From this perspective, the folk material in the tantric texts comes from the intrusion of the ineligible, the improperly-educated souls who practise tantra with a different perspective.

Sukhamaya Bhattacharya Shastri states in his *Tantraparichaya* that originally tantra was philosophical and contemplative, but was corrupted



by practitioners who did not belong to the right social and literary status needed for practice:

Some distortions of tantric ideas occurred because of the participation of ineligible people. For this reason, many people believe tantra sadhana to endorse violence and other such ideas. Due to the invasion of these ineligible people and their inappropriate actions, there was misunderstanding even in the literate society.<sup>5</sup>

He does not accept the legitimacy of folk tantra, and argues that the wrong people are attracted to tantra for the wrong reasons. This directly affects our understanding of tantric mysticism.

#### The Kularnava Tantra

One way to examine inconsistencies is to examine a text accepted as authoritative in the Shakta tantric tradition in Bengal. The *Kularnava* 

Tantra is probably a major text for Shakta tantric practitioners in West Bengal. Even during Sir John Woodroffe's time it was an important text. He calls it 'the most frequently cited text in the Tantra literature, 6 and 6 leading and perhaps the foremost Tantra of the Kaula School' (3).7 As Chattopadhyaya states: 'The most important text of Shakta tantra is the Kularnava Tantra, which bears the inner image of the tantric literature.'8 Many Shakta tantric practitioners told me in interview that the Kularnava Tantra was the most important Shakta tantric text. This discussion shall work from the Bengali translation of the Kularnava Tantra published by Nababharat Publishers, Kolkata, which was the version used by most informants. It is a medieval text, at least as old as the end of the thirteenth century, when it was mentioned by the scholar Lakshmidhara.

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While it is Shiva who does most of the talking in the *Kularnava Tantra*, and the highest state is often called 'Shiva-hood', *shivatva*, the text is nevertheless understood by Bengali tantrics interviewed as Shakta, for Shiva and Shakti are ultimately the same deity, and their forms are only a superficial difference. Both deities are to be worshipped together as a unity, and there are many instructions for the worship of deities as couples. As the second chapter of *Kularnava Tantra* states, all male and female forms of deities are representations of Shiva and Shakti's dual form, as are all male and female forms. Both deities and humans in the ritual context partake of that unity.

This is a mystical and ecstatic text, but its more classical commentators have emphasised its intellectual nature, rather than its mysticism. It has a few lines which support the notion that it follows and respects the Vedas. As Shiva says in the second chapter of Kularnava Tantra: 'The six philosophies are my six limbs: my two hands, two feet, stomach, and head. Therefore whoever differentiates between them mutilates my body. Beloved! these six philosophies also make up the six limbs of the Kula. Therefore, you should realize that the Kula shastras can also be called Vedic shastras.<sup>10</sup> The third chapter also has a line which speaks in favour of the Vedas: 'There is no truth higher than the guru, there is no god greater than Shiva, there is no knowledge greater than the Vedas, there is no philosophy equal to Kaula (philosophy)' (3.113).

These lines appear to support the notion that both Vedic and tantric knowledge are valued. The *Kularnava Tantra* also speaks in occasional lines about how Vedic practice and precept give a person a longer life (1.48), and how they are a part of knowledge that one should learn. However, the text is clearly not in favour of Vedic scholars and priests. As the first chapter states:

Such men are constantly performing their own caste duties and little else, O Parvati, they do

not know the highest truth, and thus they perish. Some carefully perform rituals, some roam about doing observances and sacrifices, but they are ignorant and they cheat themselves and others. They do rituals, but they are satisfied with only the name. They roam about in circles, repeating mantras, performing *homas*, (sacrificial fires), and elaborate sacrifices (1.72–4).

The problem in the text is that the word 'jnana' meaning knowledge is used in several different senses. It is used to describe both scholarly knowledge and mystical insight. Ostensibly all senses are equal, as the first chapter states: 'There are two kinds of knowledge: one comes from the agama texts, and the other comes from insight. Knowledge gained from texts is truth in the form of sound, and that (gained from) insight is the ultimate truth' (1.109).

Now, as both of these are Brahman or ultimate truth, both should be of equal value. However, as we look at the text, it is clear that they are not. Vedic study and book learning is clearly inferior to spiritual insight. The shastras are said to delude people, and do not give real knowledge, though many people are fooled by them and spend their time in arguments. Here the text criticises Brahmin intellectuals:

O Beloved! Many ignorant people fall into the deep well of the six philosophies, but they are controlled by their instincts and cannot attain the highest knowledge. They are drowning in the dreadful ocean of the Vedas and shastras, and they are driven in one direction and then another, by philosophical discussions and debates, which are like terrible waves and crocodiles. (There are) people who have read the Vedas, Agamas, and Puranas, but who do not know the highest truth. All their knowledge is like the cawing of crows, and nothing more. O Goddess, they turn their backs on truth, and read books day and night, always worrying about what they should be learning, saying

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M P Pandit (1919-93)

this is knowledge or that is knowledge. They know literary style, syntax, and poetry, and ways to make writing attractive, but they are fools, and they are confused and worried. What they understand is not the highest truth, and what they interpret is not the real meaning of the sacred books. They speak of ecstatic consciousness but they do not experience it. Some are vain, and some have never been taught by a guru. They chant the Vedas and fight among themselves, but they do not know the highest truth, as a cooking ladle does not know the taste of the things in it (1.87–94).

Studying the shastras does not give the seeker what she or he needs, which is mystical consciousness. The *Kularnava Tantra* condemns shallow pandits and academics: 'Discussion of ideas cannot destroy the illusions of the world, as talk of a lamp will not get rid of the darkness. A person who studies but does not gain true wisdom is like a blind man looking at his face in a mirror. Only people with experiential wisdom can really understand the shastras' (97–8).

Theology without direct experience is generally seen by tantra as a waste of time, for a person can spend a thousand years listening to scriptural knowledge, and never understand it or reach its

end (1.101). In the following stanzas, the term 'tattva', is translated by me as 'truth':

(Even) men famous for their wisdom, generosity, and acts of merit quarrel over truth, chasing truths forwards, backwards, and sideways, talking about this kind of truth and that kind of truth. This is truth, that is truth, truth is distant (or extensive), they speak this way. Since they have no direct experience and no realisation of truth, how are they going to attain truth by merely talking (about it)? Those who spend their time talking about truth, will remain ignorant and very far from the (real) truth. There is no doubt about this (1.99–100).

Perhaps the best and clearest means of understanding the Vedas in relation to the tantras is by using a developmental model. Such texts are important for beginners, but no longer necessary for more advanced souls—we see this in the famous listing of practitioner styles, in which Veda is the lowest type and Kulachara the highest. While the Vedas do not give liberation, they do give other knowledge:

As a person who collects rice-grains, leaves the rice-husks behind, so the intelligent person should learn all religious texts, grasp their inner truths, and then leave them all behind. O Goddess, as a person who has drunk divine nectar is satisfied and needs no other food, so a person who has experienced truth needs no other shastras. Liberation is not gained by chanting Vedas or studying the shastras. O Goddess of the heroic spiritual aspirants! Only experiential knowledge gives liberation (1.103–5).

Traditional ritual and austerity do not necessarily lead to enlightenment: 'All of these actions (the outward show of austerities), O Kula goddess, are only for deceiving the world. One gains liberation by direct experience of truth' (1.86). Rather than book learning in one life, what is required is learning over the course of many lives, as the second chapter states:

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As dream visions give a sleeping person knowledge without any other instruction, so spiritual knowledge arises without instruction, due to spiritual practice in past lives, and the soul's development. Only the understanding determined by a thousand previous lives gives realisation, instruction accomplishes nothing. ... Spiritual knowledge is revealed to those people who have been freed from taint by asceticism, repetition of mantra, charity, sacrifice, observances, pilgrimage, and other practices performed in the previous lifetimes (2.28–9, 32).

While the Vedas and shastras are a useful beginning, they are not necessary: 'Even without the knowledge of the Vedas and shastras, one who knows the Kula is omniscient, while a scholar of the Vedas, shastras, and *Agamas*, who is ignorant of the Kula, knows nothing. (O Goddess) only your devotees know the Kula's glory, and not others, as only the Chakora bird knows the taste of moonbeams, not the other birds' (2.78–9).

The Kularnava Tantra emphasises the importance of Kula practice, which involves the worship of the goddess by various ritual and devotional means. The term 'kula' is a difficult one, for it variously means family, clan, lineage, pedigree, aristocracy, family religion, race, tribe, species, class, collection, herd, flock, and swarm.<sup>12</sup> In this text, the term 'kula' refers to the practice of the kuladharma lineage, and a person may be called a kula or kula sadhaka, while the practice is kula or kula sadhana. The term kula shakti refers to both the goddess and the woman who joins in the ritual practice. In order to practise properly, one must be devoted to the goddess. Those who join the tradition and do not worship the goddess in these ways will suffer, for they will be tortured by elemental beings. 13 As the tantra states:

Those who are scholars of all four Vedas, but do not know the Kula tradition, are inferior to the outcaste. However, if an outcaste knows the Kula tradition, such person is superior to a Brahmin. O Goddess, the person who gains the guru's grace, has lost his evil tendencies through initiation, and who enjoys (the worship of Shakti within the ritual of) *kulapuja*, only he is the true *kula* (practitioner), nobody else. The Kula practitioner who does not seek the *kulashakti*, and who does not attain or respect Kula wisdom, he is to be condemned; his life is like that of a crow. O Goddess! Those in whose minds the Kula wisdom shines are full of merit, peaceful, worthy of praise, and yogis (2.68–71).

It takes something of an effort to make the argument that the *Kularnava Tantra* is really a Vedic or Upanishadic text. Can a text which speaks of 'throwing away' the Vedas like the husk of a nut, which compares the Vedic texts to prostitutes—who reveal themselves to everybody—and its students to fools and crows, really be said to view the Vedas as a 'final authority'? If it does not, what is its final authority? What is its greatest value?

The guru is extremely important in classical tantra, for the guru is equal to god and the greatest authority. Devotion to the guru yields greater reward than millions of sacrifices, observances, mantras, and ritual worships, and protects against disaster and evil events. The most important visualisation is that of the guru's form, the most important worship is at the guru's feet, guru's words are mantras, and liberation comes from guru's grace (12.13). Once the guru has given his grace, gods like Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, as well as sages and yogis, also give their grace. An outcaste devoted to god and guru is superior to a Brahmin who is not, and the knowledge gained from devotion to the guru cannot be gained in other ways. The guru is father, mother, and god, and when Shiva is angry the guru may save the devotee, but if the guru is angry, nobody can save the devotee (12.49). The devotee should consult the guru, and only accept what he approves—the rest should be thrown away (12.61).

However, even beyond the guru, the text values mystical experience. While its Vedic-ising commentators tend to emphasise the intellectual goal of tantric study and practice, and use such words for tantra's goal as *vidya*, learning or scholarship and jnana, wisdom, understanding, or consciousness; we see the text itself using terms like *pratyaksha*, immediate experience; bhava, mood, feeling, emotion, ecstatic state, or trance; *upalabdhi*, realisation; and *ullasa*, blissful joy. True knowledge comes from the various forms of initiation by the guru, in spontaneous knowledge which arises from past lives, and from ecstatic states which occur in ritual contexts.

One way to induce mystical states in the *Kularnava Tantra* was meditation in the chakra ritual. It becomes a sort of microcosm or speeded-up version of the spiritual development which occurs over a lifetime. Ecstatic states occur which are compared to birth, childhood, youth, early adulthood, and later adulthood. The sixth state is spiritual excitation while the seventh state is blissful joy of the heart, or the state beyond states. These are states of bliss, which are not described in terms of knowledge:

In the sixth ecstatic state, which is called unmana ullasa, the person often swoons. When this occurs with a strong desire to experience the ultimate state, the practitioner may enter the seventh state of ecstasy, called the state beyond all states. In this condition, the practitioner is beyond control by body and senses. In the state of this highest swoon, one takes on the form of the greatest mantra and this state of altered consciousness brings one to the root of liberation. The practitioner gazes outward but looks inward, and the eyes are unblinking. This is called the *shambhavi* mudra. This is the greatest of mudras, the true form of the bliss of union, expressing the nature of the Self. By means of this, the person truly becomes Shiva. There is no doubt about this. People in

meditation can know some of this bliss. But the state is beyond description, and must be experienced, as the pleasure of drinking sweet milk must be experienced. With concentration, this state leads to god possession. This stage is called the vision of Brahman, and it is expressed through ecstatic symptoms (such as one's hair standing on end). People who are absorbed in this state of god-possession cannot describe the great joy of this state; the virtuous and wise become absorbed in this bliss. Such people cannot tolerate even a moment's interruption of this state, and if this happens, they become saddened. The blissful nectar of the state of brahmadhyana is the great fruit gained in the seventh state of ecstasy (8.81–90).

The ecstatic symptoms which accompany these states are similar to the Vaishnava ecstatic states: trembling, crying, hair standing on end, sweating, laughter, dancing, and singing, though these are said to arise out of the knowledge which the person gains of the past, present, and future (8.92). They are also accompanied by the eight yogic powers. The person may enter the state of god-possession in which she or he is dominated and controlled by the deity or full union with the deity, which usually involves some individual consciousness maintained as well.

What is the result of such states in the person? Does the ecstatic become a pandit, an academic who gets involved in the 'dreadful ocean of the Vedas and shastras'? Not necessarily—there are many possibilities. She or he may become a roaming eccentric, playing, pretending to be drunk and irrational, as well as a wise sage. The tantric avoids the traditional world of people following dharma, for ecstatic mystical experience has liberated her or him from the rules of society.

Thus we see in the *Kularnava Tantra* an appeal to both major types of tantra, classical and folk. For classical tantrics, the tantra emphasises

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knowledge of Shiva and Shakti, and the value of initiation. Its authority comes from its scholar-ship and lineage. For folk tantrics, it emphasises ecstasy and possession, and the value of spontaneity. Its authority comes from its emphasis on experience.

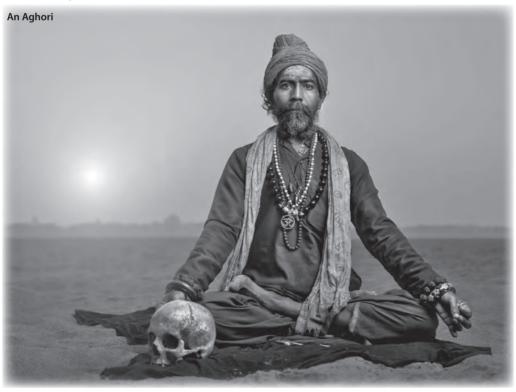
In examining tantric mysticism, we should also address some popular negative stereotypes of tantrics: they are portrayed in stories as people who are impure, unwashed and intoxicated. We hear stories of tantric madmen who have no moral rules or inhibitions, who seek malicious rather than religious ends, and who drink blood and kill people for sacrifices to Kali. Such stereotypes are found among both nontantric Indians and Western writers on India. In West Bengal, most Shakta tantrics are not flamboyant Aghoris and Kapalikas wearing skulls and bones. They are rather teachers, writers, homemakers, engineers, and temple priests, and

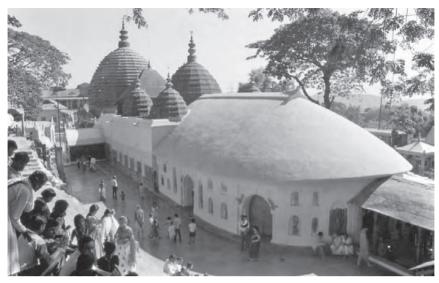
many follow other socially-acceptable professions. Even those practising in isolation in caves and outside of villages tend to look and act like more traditional monks than skull-draped villains. They accept negative stereotypes to ensure privacy for meditation.

Most Bengali Shakta tantrics I interviewed understand themselves to be following an alternative ethical system, and they are bound by a different set of rules than non-practitioners. This is complicated by the perceived necessity of secrecy and the isolation which comes where there are few people in whom they may confide. Many feel the necessity to take on the protective colouration of being Vedantins, yogis, and bhaktas.

#### **Conclusions**

In closing, what can we say of tantric mysticism? It depends on the kind of tantra that we examine. Tantra is a developmental system, with





Kamakhya Devi Temple in Assam

different forms of mysticism for different types of people, at different stages of life. In the case of the *Kularnava Tantra*, Veda leads to tantra, and contemplation leads to the vision of Brahman. Tantra tries to lead people out of attachment to knowledge and ritual, to union with Shiya and Shakti.

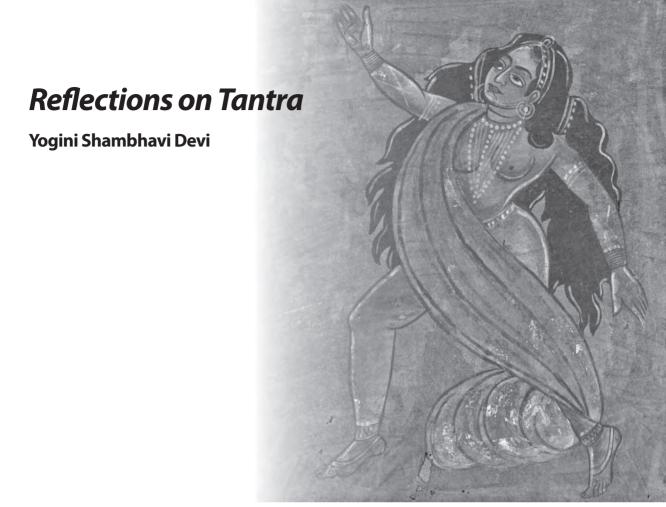
In the US, most studies of tantra deal with analyses of text and its interpretations, emphasising theoretical models. Siddhas like Sri Ramakrishna and texts like the *Kularnava Tantra*, remind us that mysticism deals primarily with awareness. While texts can be important in understanding the goals of tantra, we should not be trapped in the 'dreadful ocean' of linguistic and cultural analyses when we study it.

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- 3. *Kularnava Tantra*, trans. Arthur Avalon (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), 27.
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- 6. Arthur Avalon and M P Pandit, *Kulārṇava Tantra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), 17.
- 7. Woodroffe's commentary on the text is useful. However, Woodroffe's translation of the *Kularnava Tantra* has many problems. It emphasises the Vedic rather than experiential focus of the text. He leaves out many lines, and does not use line numbers. As in the Good News Bible, the translator adds his own commentary, and does not distinguish between the actual words of the text and his own additions and interpretations. It is thus not an accurate translation.
- 8. Satindramohan Chattopadhyaya, *Tantrer Katha* (Bengali) (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1983), 39.
- 9. See *Kularnava Tantram*, ed. Upendrakumar Das (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1363 BE).
- 10. Kularnava Tantra, 2.85-6.
- 11. Avalon translates this as 'caught up in the subtleties of the Sastras'.
- 12. These definitions come from the Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary.
- 13. See *Kularnava Tantra*, 2.60. These are the five *bhutas*, who in this case enforce proper religious etiquette.

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ANTRA, THE ANCIENT Shakta tradition, is a reflection of the cosmic reality in our lives. Life must unfold as a celebration of Shakti's *soma*, nectar of grace, to flow through us at all times and all seasons. Reverence and devotion to Shakti not only satiates the heart, but transforms our mind and senses into channels of spiritual vitality, delight, and divine grace. The tantric evolves her or his consciousness through unravelling the deeper symbolism of life, searching the limitless, timeless totality of the divine Self.

The realisation of the importance of tantra is progressively dawning within many sadhakas'

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hearts today. Today's world is moving through the calm before the storm of yet more radical transformations. Tantra is not a passing exotic phenomenon; it is an acceptance of our true nature and the power of all life. Tantra is our ultimate repose in the reality of the true self; it is an affirmation of the inherent purity within. There is no duality in the realm of tantra; it is an assertion of our inner reality in the sacred flame of the spiritual heart.

In the ancient sacred Sanskrit texts, *bridaya*, the heart, is the *garbha*, the deep cavern of bhakti, all love, compassion, empathy, tolerance, understanding, and kindness. Tantra must unfold its mysticism in the spiritual heart. The enrichment and expansive expression of beatitude is expressed through Devi worship. Worship allows the soma, 'sacred nectar', to flow through

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our expressions of deep nurturing through tender loving care. 'The summit of purity, of the nature of consciousness, self-effulgent, of the form of eternal bliss, pervading the entire universe, yours is the image of perception that belongs to oneself, which is why you should be meditated upon by us within our hearts.'

The divine being and the Self are not separate entities. The divine rests in the cavern of everyone's heart. The Mother Goddess ignites the flame, allowing her lightning power to illumine the intensity of its cavernous heat. The heat creates the quest for deeper love, compelling one to experience the heights of Ananda Bhairavi in the supreme ecstasy of Shiva Bhairava. As Ranjani, 'the one who colours all things', the Goddess showers her devotees with immense joyousness.

The sacred deeper love guides one to unfathomable caverns of mystery, allowing us the delightful flow of beatitude and bliss. Beatitude is the essential nature of Bhairavi, the mystical aspect of the Mother Goddess, whose expression is eternal love. There is a subtle transcendent magic in the utterance of *hridayam*, the heart, the very centre of Bhairava, Shiva, and his Bhairavi, Shakti, being the ultimate abode of repose for the Lord of divine mystical love. The heart holds the consciousness of transcendental reality. In the throes of transcendence, the heart is the source of Shakti's creative energy.

The path to Ananda Bhairavi's ecstasy lies in the mysticism of tantra's inner secrets. The supreme essence of love and wisdom open the doorways for higher spiritual experiences, nourishing, and nurturing the soul. The hunger of the soul craves for the inner self to be unleashed. An inner silence through meditative shanti, peace; *prema*, love; *shraddha*, faith; *karuna*, compassion; and *kshama*, forgiveness draws us into a samadhi of boundless eternal love. This mood of bhakti guides us to the hushed whispers of

our soul stirrings and heartbeats. The nurturing warmth of Shakti's stability cushions our sadhana for the profound mystical practices and encounters in the throes of sacred divine love.

## Tantra is the Yogic Transformation of Shakti

Shakti is the divine power guiding us to spiritualise our lives, giving us a deeper understanding of our destiny and its sacred unfolding. Tantra is not about an endless struggle with one's urges and cravings. Tantric yoga is the path of the gentle warrior; the yogini's weapons are the celestial weapons of the gods. The warrior here is the brave one, and the battleground is the human mind. Tantra is the mystical discipline through which every experience is cherished as a reflection of the deeper energy of consciousness. The awareness through Shakti sadhana allows one the ability to accept all things as the flow of grace and in this acquiescence is our ultimate surrender. Yielding to this grace of Shakti holds the key to the secret door through which all divine grace flows.

Sacred symbolism unravels the subtle nuances of tantra. Symbols unveil the imagery, allegory, and metaphors of deep hidden tantric secrets. The ancients called it 'deep hidden sciences', where only the tantric adept could practise the sacredness of divinity. The tantric or 'sacred adept' sifts through the veils of mysticism opening the doorway to higher truths and sacred realities. Ancient native cultures used symbolism to communicate with divine powers relating to profound wisdom through myths.

The sadhaka with an inner vision and deep devotion realises and nurtures the divine currents of God working through the forces of light, fire, time, space, and all of Nature. One experiences that Brahman manifests as the unchanging ground of being within the entire cosmic revelation. Brahman prevails in God, the guru, and the

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sadhaka's own self. The Deva and Devi are two aspects of this supreme Brahman as its Shiva or 'supreme will' and Shakti or 'feminine power and energy'.

The Devi's grace, through devotion, prayers, sacred rituals, and the maintenance of a pure sattvic lifestyle, transforms our individual personality into a vast impersonal and balanced nature of equipoise. Divine grace energises and personifies the Infinite, allowing us to move through the entire gamut of life, death, and rebirth. In experiencing the divine forces as Brahman, we truly allow ourselves to envision the powers and characteristics of their divinity through the yearnings of our spiritual heart. We discover the divine person who is not limited by the taints of any human personality, who has the peace of the impersonal, and can manifest it through divine love.

Not bound by limitations and prejudices of the human mind, one can experience the deeper meaning of

the entire cosmic play of innumerable gods and goddesses. In profound inner yogic practices, one learns to resonate with the sacred name to the nameless; through the sacred form to the formless. Vibrations of the sacred mantra lead us into a deeper silence and transcendental bliss pervading the Absolute void. The sadhaka associates oneself with human factors in one's worship of God. Yet the goddess or god gradually merges into the one godhead, the absolute Brahman, who is beyond all personality and form. The human heart understands and responds easily to the expressions of divine love and emotion held in such visionary forms. The deity is propitiated in the form of a living or manifest



Kali and Shiva

divinity with rituals, sacraments, ceremonies, and celebrations. In reality it is the divine within ourselves which we are propitiating, celebrating, and consecrating.

For Shakti-sadhana or spiritual practices, one needs to cultivate a heroic, valiant, and fearless approach. Only a courageous soul can perform the internal and external puja, or worship of the goddess's supreme power, in Nature's profoundness. The heroic seeks the truth in every sphere of life unfolding the higher ideals of a spiritual existence. Life plays out the sacrificial yajna, 'sacred ritual' with every simple act of worship in every living moment of our existence, in which

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we learn to offer ourselves to this higher unknown power.

The true tantric awakens the power of yoga within the various energy centres or lotus chakras in her or his being, invoking the supreme Spirit into one's own heart. All ritualistic worship aims towards drawing the divine into the inner seat or throne in the small flame of the spiritual heart. The tantric sadhaka must realise the absolute truth of worshipping the transcendental reality within the core of her or his being, allowing divinity to unravel its mysticism and deeper potential in our own lives.

Sacred rituals hold a deep meaning, symbolising Nature and the cosmic Reality. Yoga itself is an internal ritual of worshipping the divine within. Propitiating a divine form with flowers, incense, fire offerings, sacred chants, food, and prayers, we initiate the sacred rites into our own consciousness. Bathing in the waters of sacred rivers purifies our inner and outer being. Through fire rituals we burn away impurities in ourselves and in the environment. Re-

sidual sensory impres-

sions, mental agitation, and emotional anguish are purified through using incense, the sattvic 'pure' bounty of Nature's food, mantra, meditation, and a yogic lifestyle.

The secrets of tantra rest in the beneficence of Mother Nature and her universal energies. Shakti, the divine feminine power is the cosmic light of Bhudevi or Mother Earth, Maha-Prakriti or the great Nature, and the cosmic heavens. Devi, the mother goddess is the *vidyut*, the lightning energy or electrical force, that arises

from the numinous light to awaken in us her force. These ancient secrets divulge their potent powers through the wisdom of the 'inner yogic eye', our intuitive perception and insight. The elements of Nature play a pivotal role in creating a deeper awareness of this yogic tantric Reality. Each element, be it the stability of Mother Earth, fire's flaming frenzy, the magic wisps of air, cooling waves of water, or the atmosphere's ethereal

hint—all serve to unravel an inner sacred reality. Nature encodes every cosmic reality for our inner unfolding of divinity.

Jnana or sacred knowledge is most important in understanding the astuteness of manoeuvring our karmic journey. Without the deeper jnana or wisdom we can easily get waylaid through the temptations of our worldly maya. Maya holds the intrinsic play of worldly illusion and delusion. When we understand the intrinsic nuances behind these Vedic and tantric teachings, we can draw on this inner wisdom to guide us in our sadhana which stabilises our inner and outer

The guru mani-

experiences.

fests as the remover of all darkness and plays a most important role in showing us the higher light of wisdom in tantra. A guru must propound the ancient teachings to lead us from this shadowy play of maya to seek the grace of this lightning Shakti. A guru can reveal this light to her or his disciples only if the guru herself or himself has held this jnana in high esteem.

The ancient tantric teachings unfold when we create a stillness born of peace in our inner and outer existence. Most of our energies are spent

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in cultivating the universal maya which is momentarily illusory and keeps us in its whirlpools. Recognition with responsibility is an important part of propelling this ancient wisdom through its knowledge.

## Tantra is Kala and the Tantric is the Divine Artist

Tantra is an artistic and energetic approach to the spiritual path through Shakti sadhana. Energy manifested through Shakti sadhana is no mere blind force; it is the surge of Shakti as the grace unveiling the mystic realms of the tantric's *kala* or art form. The sadhaka understands tantra as an expansion of cosmic energy of the sun and the moon, masculine and feminine energies, Self and maya, the infinite and the eternal.

The divine artist uses tantra in weaving one's true nature with the universal Shakti power and grace, as an art form or true *kala*. Tantra is the art of Shakti sadhana and tantra becomes a powerful spiritual path and a potent tool for self-transformation through artistry, creativity, skilfulness, and worship. The tantric identifies the body as a mystic symbolism of the cosmic universe consecrating the heart-mind-body-spirit as the temple of the Devi or mother goddess.

Every tantric unfolds the artistry of inner worship, esoteric worship, and ritualistic worship to reveal the power of one's true nature, the essence of one's deeper self, and our essential nature. It is the divine blessings of Devi and the guru which bestows us individuality, originality, free spirit, and freedom to express our creativity or divine power.

# Tantric Kala is a Meditative Expression of Mystic Art

There is a deep metaphysics which motivates the Devi's depictions and forms through art. The beauty and mysticism of the artist portrays the expertise and expression of a poet through its painting. Painting and art are the richest forms of expression endowing the artistic play of dharma, artha, kama, and moksha when meditated upon. The artist through her or his expression captures the significance of the various forms of Devi; the attributes or weapons are interpreted keeping in mind the predominant mood of the form of Devi being meditated upon in her calm or fierce form.

Meditation as an incessant flow of divine consciousness manifests a deep awareness of the object or art form of one's concentration. The verse of meditation draws us into meditation through a descriptive art form, drawing the Shakti seeker to withdraw inwards and contemplate deeply on the goddess's mystical form. Her totality is expressed through her world of images and forms through which her divine play unfolds through our worship of her divinity. Devi is the supreme source of all powers and she uses her divine play as and when the need arises to colour our sadhana.

# Why the Divine Feminine Form for Worshipping Divinity in Tantra?

In our worldly unfolding of karma the most revered relationship is that of the nurturer, the Mother who has the power to manifest, create, give birth, and sustain. 'My salutations to the goddess, who abides in all beings in the form of mother.'<sup>2</sup>

Taking this concept of the Mother to a higher plane, the source and sustenance of the cosmos is conceived as the universal Mother. In Hinduism, Devi is conceived in all her completeness as the source of all sustenance, as that supreme cosmic force. Envisioning the Devi's form is essential for every Shakti worshipper as it enhances the glories and divinity of the goddess within us through this sacred meditative visualisation.

In Hinduism, the Devi is not a mere myth and Shakti worship must not be confused with

the Western thought of a guardian or angel as is the worship of Isis in Egypt, Ishtar in Babylon, Demeter in Greece, or Cybele in Rome. Shakti is the light which illumines our consciousness through power, wisdom, and beauty.

The *Lalita Sahasranama* and *Gheranda Samhita* clearly explain that the imagery of the various Devi forms with their weapons, ornaments, and vehicle are absolutely essential to every Shakti seeker in their meditation and worship of the goddess. Contemplating on her form, aroma, taste, sound, and touch, one consecrates the divine within ourselves.

In the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, Vajra probes Rishi Markandeya: 'By you the Supreme God (Purusha) has been described as devoid of form, smell and rasa and destitute of sound and touch; so how can this form (an image) be made of him?'<sup>3</sup>

The rishi astutely explains that *prakriti* and *vikriti* are two natures of the supreme soul. That nature of the Divine which is not discernible or invisible is called *prakriti*, whilst that which has a form is called *vikriti*. The universe comprises such a Purusha with the nature of both *prakriti* and *vikriti*. By attributing a form to the formless, helps the seeker in bringing one's focus to a point of focused concentration on the finite form, which ultimately yields a realisation of the infinite oneness of all creation.

The tantric worship of the form with rituals helps one to invoke the divine principles in one-self, identifying the body as a mystic symbolism of the cosmic universe. The devotee invokes Shakti as the energy inherent in all creation, where the formless takes the form, enhancing the three qualities of sattva, rajas and tamas within us.

In worshipping the Tridevi as Mahasarasvati, Mahalakshmi, and Mahakali, we embrace the form of knowledge and fine arts, wisdom, good fortune and joy, and transformation moving beyond all time and space. The attributes of

the Devi Shakti unfolds the divine play of life as in beauty represented by Sundari, Sri Lakshmi, and Sri Kamala; creativity represented by Matangi and Jagadamba; transforming represented by Bhairavi and Chandi; destructive power represented by Kali and Chinnamasta; liberation represented by Kameshvari, Mahakali, and Chhinnamasta; cessation represented by Sri Bagalamukhi; and the power of annihilation represented by Sri Dhumavati.

The tantric vision must find its poetry in the gentle flowing waters of our minds, the rushing blood of our compassionate hearts, the pure effervescence of Shakti's grace as a waterfall, the vibrant spirit of rivers, the whirlpool of an ocean and the deep stillness of placid mountain lakes. Sacred waters hold the mystic essence of all divine grace, the *soma*, the honey nectar of life, the ultimate bliss of immortality. Sustaining and energising these *pranic* waters in our global world and our personal lives revitalises the soul, allowing the being to traverse the hidden delights of our universal existence.

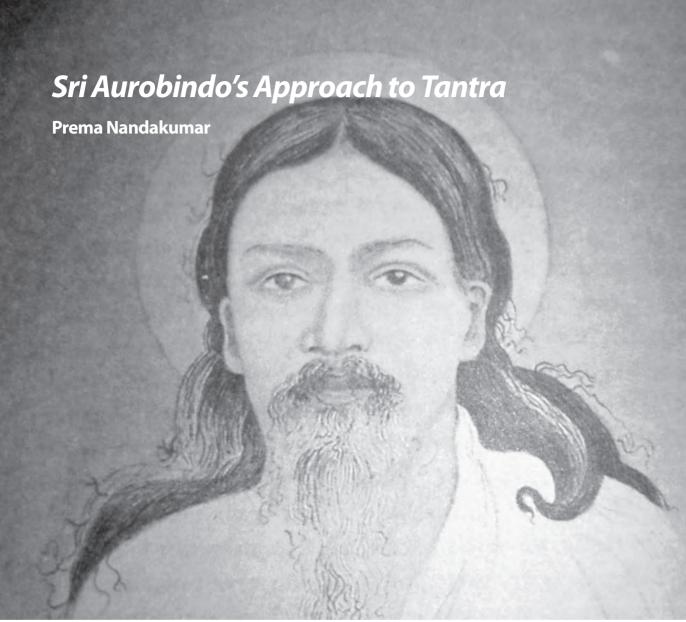
Tantra Shakti sadhana represents the ultimate beauty of pure perception which manifests when we embrace the entire universe in ourselves, mirroring the light of beauty in all things as the light of our own deeper awareness. Devi helps the flow of bliss descend from the thousand petal lotus of the *sahasrara* throughout our entire being.

May our prayers seek the tantric *kala* or spiritual art of flowing with the sacred waters through life's surging streams invoking the divine grace of the Goddess within! 'My salutations to the goddess, who abides in all beings in the form of peace.'

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RI AUROBINDO (1872–1950) wrote a series of articles on *The Synthesis of Yoga* in the journal *Arya* from 1914 to 1921, published from Pondicherry. Several years later, when it was decided to publish the articles as a book, he revised parts of the work lightly and a good deal of it thoroughly. This revised work was published in 1955 by the Sri Aurobindo International University Centre.

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Hatha yoga and raja yoga apart, Sri Aurobindo gives a very detailed treatment of jnana, karma and bhakti yoga in his book. While each pathway can be taken to achieve realisation when pursued with single-minded sincerity, Sri Aurobindo wonders whether these yoga can be integrated for the benefit of aspirant humanity. Of course they cannot be combined like a building-block toy. An individual might pursue them one after another but one may not have the swiftness to go to the centre of the yoga and gain all

its fruits so that one could turn to the next. Not that it is impossible, says Sri Aurobindo:

And in a recent unique example, in the life of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, we see a colossal spiritual capacity first driving straight to the divine realisation, taking, as it were, the kingdom of heaven by violence, and then seizing upon one Yogic method after another and extracting the substance out of it with an incredible rapidity, always to return to the heart of the whole matter, the realisation and possession of God by the power of love, by the extension of inborn spirituality into various experience and by the spontaneous play of an intuitive knowledge. Such an example cannot be generalised. Its object also was special and temporal, to exemplify in the great and decisive experience of a master-soul the truth, now most necessary to humanity, towards which a world long divided into jarring sects and schools is with difficulty labouring, that all sects are forms and fragments of a single integral truth and all disciplines labour in their different ways towards one supreme experience.1

However, Sri Ramakrishna had shown the way. Could one integrate the yogic pathways in a manner acceptable to be pursued by the common person? For Sri Aurobindo could never think of an individual's transcendence or perfection alone. One could not ignore the call of the humanity around. One needed to gain something more than personal salvation. Humanity needs the help of these great achievers and it needs to be given the key to rise to a higher plane of consciousness. What then is the catalytic agent that could fuse these yogas and prepare an instrument for achieving self-perfection for all? Of course, the integration of the yogas should not be a potpourri. There ought to be an instrument that could make them all work in unison towards progress. And it will not be an instrument that had to be prepared newly. Like the yogas, it should also have had an immemorial

existence. Ah, a central principle, a tremendous power which moves all of them!

Scouring the past, his attention fastened upon a system of yoga which had suffered almost total neglect from the Vedantic schools. Tantra comes into his vision. Tantra, which had found a 'great dynamic force of Nature' as Nature's central principle, had missed the royal pathway and lost itself in the stultifying gulleys of 'self-indulgence, a method of unrestrained social immorality'. We all know how the left-handed tantra has been a discredit to India's religious and spiritual history. However, Sri Aurobindo will not throw away tantra. The decay of the externals can be ignored, it is the principle that we need and have to put to good use now. Contrasting the way of the tantra with the schools of Vedanta, Sri Aurobindo says:

In all of them the lord of the Yoga is the Purusha, the Conscious Soul that knows, observes, attracts, governs. But in Tantra it is rather Prakriti, the Nature-Soul, the Energy, the Willin-Power executive in the universe. It was by learning and applying the intimate secrets of this Will-in-Power, its method, its Tantra, that the Tantric Yogin pursued the aims of his discipline—mastery, perfection, liberation, beatitude. Instead of drawing back from manifested Nature and its difficulties, he confronted them, seized and conquered. But in the end, as is the general tendency of Prakriti, Tantric Yoga largely lost its principle in its machinery and became a thing of formulae and occult mechanism still powerful when rightly used but fallen from the clarity of their original intention (47-8).

Tantra, to put it simplistically, is a worship of Shakti, power, or energy. However, Vedanta finds Shakti to be actually the power of illusion to help us overcome the deceptions of active energy. What else is this cycle of repeated births and deaths that finally creates disgust in us for worldly life? So, is Shakti a power or mere illusion? 'But

in the integral conception the Conscious Soul is the Lord, the Nature-Soul is his executive Energy. Purusha is of the nature of Sat, the being of conscious self-existence pure and infinite; Shakti or Prakriti is of the nature of Chit, — it is power of the Purusha's self-conscious existence, pure and infinite. The relation of the two exists between the poles of rest and action' (ibid.).

Which, of course, means there need be no ascetic denial of the world. Nor going for solitary austerities in an inaccessible place to gain the bliss of Brahman. What is asked of the aspirant here is facing and overcoming its blandishments, pain, and sorrow. This would mean a dedicated attempt to transform our lower nature that clings to worldliness in spite of our higher nature garnering knowledge and devotion-laden love for the Divine. It is for achieving this that we need a synthesis of the yoga systems with tantra as the instrument to organise an individual's approach to yoga.

If indeed our aim be only an escape from the world to God, synthesis is unnecessary and a waste of time; for then our sole practical aim must be to find out one path out of the thousand that lead to God, one shortest possible of

short cuts, and not to linger exploring different paths that end in the same goal. But if our aim be a transformation of our integral being into the terms of God-existence, it is

in tantric discipline Shakti is allimportant. This power starts from the very lowest point and then goes up a variously graded ladder to the summit. After dealing at length with karma, jnana, and bhakti yoga in his

text, he takes up tantra's place in attaining 'the yoga of self-perfection'. Tantra aims at liberation too, but also aspires for 'a cosmic enjoyment of the power of the Spirit, which the others may take incidentally on the way, in part, casually, but avoid making a motive or object. It is a bolder and larger system'. Briefly stated, tantra aims for mukti as well as *bhukti*, enjoyment. This leads to the question, what is Shakti, what is this Soul-Nature combine, the Purusha-Prakriti duo?

The highest and real truth of existence is the one Spirit, the supreme Soul, Purushottama, and it is the power of being of this Spirit which manifests itself in all that we experience as universe. This universal Nature is not a lifeless, inert or unconscious mechanism, but informed in all its movements by the universal Spirit. The mechanism of its process is only an outward appearance and the reality is the Spirit creating or manifesting its own being by its own power of being in all that is in Nature. Soul and Nature in us too are only a dual appearance of the one existence (862).

This Shakti is very much around us and within us, as well. It is for us to recognise it and make use of it. Sri Aurobindo points out that the familiar pranayama is itself a 'mechanical means of freeing and getting control of the pranic energy'.

This is, of course, at the level of the ordinary mind. Once we go higher up in mental planes and seek to gather in the universal energy by progressing in mental purity, we would recognise the action taking place within us. When we allow this action to go on within us as a two-in-one. we would have reached the first step of self-perfection.

For the supreme Spirit is one as Purusha or as Prakriti, conscious being or power of conscious being, and as the Jiva in essence



Sri Aurobindo

then that a synthesis becomes necessary (50). According to Sri Aurobindo,

of self and spirit is one with the supreme Purusha, so on the side of Nature, in power of self and spirit it is one with Shakti, *parā prakṛtir jīvabhūtā*. To realise this double oneness is the condition of the integral self-perfection. The Jiva is then the meeting-place of the play of oneness of the supreme Soul and Nature (869–70).

To achieve this we must remain conscious of the divine Shakti, pray to her, call her to come down, and make all our activities to be that of her cosmic work. If we could bring the kind of dedication and full faith demanded of us, then the Divine Mother herself would go to work.

She will change the mechanical energies of the mind, life and body which now govern us into delight-filled manifestations of her own living and conscious power and presence. She will manifest in us and relate to each other all the various spiritual experiences of which the mind is capable. And as the crown of this process she will bring down the supramental light into the mental levels, change the stuff of mind into the stuff of supermind, transform all the lower energies into energies of her supramental nature and raise us into our being of gnosis. The Shakti will reveal herself as the power of the Purushottama, and it is the Ishwara who will manifest himself in his force of supermind and spirit and be the master of our being, action, life and Yoga (870).

This is all well as a general assurance, an overview of the way tantra yoga works when we allow the mother power the Nature-Soul, to take charge of our aspirations and aims. However, Sri Aurobindo has given plenty of technical details also on the workings of tantra. *The Synthesis of Yoga* has a chapter on 'the Action of the Divine Shakti', which teaches us to recognise the fact that we are not the persons who are executing action, it is Shakti who is the doer. The I-ness has to be completely eliminated. Once we inch towards the successful implementation of this

rule, we move into a vaster world of consciousness. The 'I' and the 'You' may remain for practical uses but they do not imprison us anymore into ourselves. Thus do we slip into the universal and feel 'one with the total power of the spirit in Nature'. Even if we gain this plane of consciousness, we have to remain wary for at anytime our past of ego-centeredness may leap upon us and choke our aspirations. Sweeping aside the ego, the sadhaka must learn to have a double vision as it were about this million-hued creation as the presence of Prakriti with Purusha in the background. It is they who activate me!

The sadhaka has therefore first to keep the idea and get the realisation of a one self or spirit in all behind all these workings. He must be aware behind Prakriti of the one supreme and universal Purusha. He must see and feel not only that all is the self-shaping of the one Force, Prakriti or Nature, but that all her actions are those of the Divine in all, the one Godhead in all, however veiled, altered and as it were, perverted—for perversion comes by a conversion into lower forms—by transmission through the ego and the gunas. This will farther diminish the open or covert insistence of the ego and, if thoroughly realised, it will make it difficult or impossible for it to assert itself in such a way as to disturb or hamper the farther progress (872).

The universal Shakti does help us by sending down her revelations, but we must be wary of mistaking the revelations as hers totally. As the divine power comes down the mental, vital, and physical planes to transform them, inevitably it also gets mixed up occasionally with the lower powers, in case our aspiration has not been total. Sri Aurobindo says that these ups and downs in yoga 'must be regarded as the natural vicissitudes of a process of transformation from the normal to the spiritual being'. One must strive to gain equanimity; or else, be prepared to make a total surrender. Such a surrender helps us not

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claim something from the Divine but accept a fulfilment of the Divine in us 'content with the delight of oneness in being, content to leave the supreme Self and Master of existence to do whatever is the will of his absolute wisdom and knowledge through our more and more perfected Nature'.

These are indeed difficult, even dangerous experiences. Closeness to Shakti achieved by surrender might occasionally get disturbed by the ego which is still hidden somewhere in us; this ego could be tempted to use the mighty Shakti within our grasp for selfish or gross purposes. For a while it is all excitement, pride, rajasic delight and the person may even use the power for evil purposes. Shakti has not given her or him power to do this! Hence the aspirant who takes to the way of the tantra must simply allow Shakti to enter her or his being and guide her or him, nay, use her or him for her delight, for her plans for one's transformation. This would mean a surge of self-mastery in us to do Mother's work. This is when the Purusha is not just a witness to the doings of the Shakti in us, but is also the Ishvara, a doer. The jiva becomes 'the meeting-place of the play of the dual aspect of the divine, Prakriti and Purusha', and soon the aspirant is constantly aware of the presence of the Lord.

The distinction between the Shakti and the Ishwara begins to disappear; there is only the conscious activity in us of the Divine with the great self of the Divine behind and around and possessing it; all the world and Nature is seen to be only that, but here it has become fully conscious, the Maya of the ego removed, and the Jiva is there only as an eternal portion of his being, amśa sanātana, put forth to support a divine individualisation and living now fulfilled in the complete presence and power of the Divine, the complete joy of the Spirit manifested in the being (880).

To gain a drop of the illimitable power of

Shakti is no easy task; even more difficult is to retain this power granted by the Divine Mother as she pervades the aspirant's personality. In matters of teaching yoga Sri Aurobindo's patience is infinite. He points out that having come thus far, what the aspirant would need to have in abundance is *shraddha*.

This soul faith, in some form of itself, is indispensable to the action of the being and without it man cannot move a single pace in life, much less take any step forward to a yet unrealised perfection. It is so central and essential a thing that the Gita can justly say of it that whatever is a man's śraddhā, that he is, yo yacchraddhah sa eva saḥ, and, it may be added, whatever he has the faith to see as possible in himself and strive for, that he can create and become. There is one kind of faith demanded as indispensable by the integral Yoga and that may be described as faith in God and the Shakti, faith in the presence and power of the Divine in us and the world, a faith that all in the world is the working of one

Goddess Maheshwari



divine Shakti, that all the steps of the Yoga, its strivings and sufferings and failures as well as its successes and satisfactions and victories are utilities and necessities of her workings and that by a firm and strong dependence on and a total self-surrender to the Divine and to his Shakti in us we can attain to oneness and freedom and victory and perfection (881–2).

But the 'soul faith' is not easy to gain either. An enemy who cannot be spurned easily is skepticism, a common enough presence to weaken our faith in the Divine Mother. Another is envy, which is described as 'the constant carping of the narrow pettily critical uncreative intellect'. Fortunately if our dedication and surrender is wholesome and complete, if we hold on to shraddha, Shakti herself will strike down the enemies of promise. For shraddha is the result of Shakti's call to our inward soul and that never fails. Whenever a doubt or difficulty attacks us, just turn to the Shakti within, for to the heart of abundant faith, she descends to direct the sadhaka on his onward journey. Remember, she is the supreme Mother! So we have a breathless sentence from Sri Aurobindo:

She is Maheshwari, goddess of the supreme knowledge, and brings to us her vision for all kinds and widenesses of truth, her rectitude of the spiritual will, the calm and passion of her supramental largeness, her felicity of illumination: she is Mahakali, goddess of the supreme strength, and with her are all mights and spiritual force and severest austerity of tapas and swiftness to the battle and the victory and the laughter, the aṭṭahāsya, that makes light of defeat and death and the powers of the ignorance: she is Mahalakshmi, the goddess of the supreme love and delight, and her gifts are the spirit's grace and the charm and beauty of the Ananda and protection and every divine and human blessing: she is Mahasaraswati, the goddess of divine skill and of the works of the Spirit, and hers is the Yoga that is skill in works, yogah karmasu kauśalam, and the utilities of divine

knowledge and the self-application of the spirit to life and the happiness of its harmonies. And in all her powers and forms she carries with her the supreme sense of the masteries of the eternal Ishwari, a rapid and divine capacity for all kinds of action that may be demanded from the instrument, oneness, a participating sympathy, a free identity, with all energies in all beings and therefore a spontaneous and fruitful harmony with all the divine will in the universe (892).

Since tantra yoga was not looked upon favourably by spiritual aspirants in those days as it had slipped into 'left-handed' practices, disciples kept questioning Sri Aurobindo about the subject and the importance given to it in Integral Yoga. Again, was not this world an illusion, maya as taught by the great philosopher, Acharya Shankara? Sri Aurobindo rejected these mental formulations outright in letters to his disciples:

It is only if you approach the Supreme through his double aspect of Sat and Chit-Shakti, double but inseparable, that the total truth of things can become manifest to the inner experience. This other side was developed by the Shakta Tantrics. The two together, the Vedantic and the Tantric truth unified, can arrive at the integral knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

In his answers to his disciples explaining the Integral Yoga, tantra with its mother-image gets evoked often. Here is a dream of a disciple getting an explanation:

It is in answer to your aspiration that the Mahakali force descended—the serpent is the Energy from above working in the vital answering to the Serpent Kundalini which rises from below. The white fire is the fire of aspiration, the red fire is the fire of renunciation and tapasya, the blue fire is the fire of spirituality and spiritual knowledge which purifies and dispels the Ignorance.<sup>3</sup>

The colourful image of the kundalini is central

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to tantra. The coiled power at the base which loosens itself to rise and reach the sahasrara at the crown has been visualised as a serpent that lies coiled in the box of the snake-charmer. The siddha poets of Tamil Nadu have used this image very often to describe their yoga. Sri Aurobindo accepts the serpent-power's presence in the Integral Yoga but says it has less to do with the forms and rituals of tantrics engaged in yoga. Once the prayer is heard by Mother and her descent takes place, the pressure automatically opens the six centres in a human body. Though Integral Yoga is not interested in the descriptions of experience as is found in tantric books, Sri Aurobindo said, 'the ascent of the force from the Muladhara does take place'.4 He has given a visual experience of this movement in yoga, in his epic poem Savitri:

As in a flash from a supernal light, A living image of the original Power, A face, a form came down into her heart And made of it its temple and pure abode. But when its feet had touched the quivering bloom, A mighty movement rocked the inner space As if a world were shaken and found its soul: Out of the Inconscient's soulless mindless night A flaming Serpent rose released from sleep. It rose billowing its coils and stood erect And climbing mightily, stormily on its way It touched her centres with its flaming mouth; As if a fiery kiss had broken their sleep, They bloomed and laughed surcharged with light and bliss. Then at the crown it joined the Eternal's space. In the flower of the head, in the flower of Matter's base. In each divine stronghold and Nature-knot It held together the mystic stream which joins The viewless summits with the unseen depths, The string of forts that make the frail defence Safeguarding us against the enormous world, Our lines of self-expression in its Vast.



Goddess Mahakali

An image sat of the original Power Wearing the mighty Mother's form and face. Armed, bearer of the weapon and the sign Whose occult might no magic can imitate, Manifold yet one she sat, a guardian force: A saviour gesture stretched her lifted arm, And symbol of some native cosmic strength, A sacred beast lay prone below her feet, A silent flame-eyed mass of living force. <sup>5</sup>

After the siddhi or spiritual perfection attained by Sri Aurobindo in 1926, he retired into near-total seclusion. In the very first year of Sri Aurobindo's seclusion, came out his slender book, *The Mother*. It is a seminal document which reveals the combination of Vedanta and tantra in his yoga. The book was published in 1928. This was the time when Mirra Alfassa Richard from France—who had come to Pondicherry and settled down to follow yoga—had been asked to take charge of the ashrama. When T V Kapali Sastri, one of his disciples, asked Sri Aurobindo whether the book was about 'our

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Mother', the answer was 'yes'. This statement in the book makes this clear: 'Individual, she embodies the power of these two vaster ways of her existence, makes them living and near to us and mediates between the human personality and the divine Nature.' At the transcendental level we may not be able to envision the Mother figure. That is why the great rishis of the past visualised innumerable cosmic godheads seen by them in their meditation. Of these Sri Aurobindo had chosen four—Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, and Mahasaraswati—and placed them as inspirations for the yoga of self-perfection in his *The Synthesis of Yoga*.

He gives a more detailed explanation of these powers in the last chapter of *The Mother*.

The chapter itself was originally written as a reply to Kapali Sastri who had asked questions about the place of the deities in Integral Yoga.

Once a student of Kapali Sastri, Sankaranarayanan, told him he could see that of these four personalities in *The* 

Mother, only Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, and Mahasaraswati were invoked in the *Durga Saptashati*. How was he to identify Maheshwari then? Sastri assured him that Maheshwari is very much in the scripture and that is why Sri Aurobindo had included her among the four great and powerful personalities of the Mother. Sastri recited a verse from the *Durga Saptashati* and said that she combined all the other three personalities as one. After the destruction of Mahishasura by Mahasaraswati, the gods hail the Divine Mother: 'Devi! You are Durga, the boat that helps us cross the terrible sea of birth; you are the knowledge-formed Medha (Saraswati),

the essence of all the scriptures; you are Lakshmi who resides in the heart of the slayer of Kaitabha, Vishnu; you are Gauri of Mahadeva who wears the crescent moon.'<sup>7</sup>

Sri Aurobindo begins with Maheshwari describing her as 'the mighty and wise One who opens us to the supramental infinities and the cosmic vastness, to the grandeur of the supreme Light, to a treasure-house of miraculous knowledge, to the measureless movement of the Mother's eternal forces. She is absolutely calm. These cosmic powers who chisel human beings are not interested in mechanical productions.

That is the secret of this creation which has innumerable forms where even two leaves

of the same tree are never exact twins. Maheshwari brings maternal love as also a high detachment to her work:

Nothing can move her because all wisdom is in her; nothing is hidden from her that she

chooses to know; she comprehends all things and all beings and their nature and what moves them and the law of the world and its times and

how all was and is and must be. A strength is in her that meets everything and masters and none can prevail in the end against her vast intangible wisdom and high tranquil power. Equal, patient and unalterable in her will she deals with men according to their nature and with things and happenings according to their force and the truth that is in them. Partiality she has none, but she follows the decrees of the Supreme and some she raises up and some she casts down or puts away from her into the darkness. To the wise she gives a greater and more luminous wisdom; those that have vision she admits to her counsels; on the hostile she imposes the consequence of their hostility; the ignorant and

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Symbol of Sri Aurobindo Ashrama

foolish she leads according to their blindness (ibid.).

One may wonder whether it is possible for people to reject grace when it comes to them, but nothing should surprise us in this vast, manytinted creation. In fact, these tests themselves are imposed by the Divine to make the person a disciplined soldier of the Mother. If the individual is not prepared to undergo the

discipline, the Mother leaves him alone. He will learn it after a long interval of suffering. However, Mahakali does not leave rebellious people alone. She takes disciplinary action on the spot. As we draw closer to the ways in which Sri Aurobindo has brought in the central tenets of tantra into his yoga, it is fascinating to note how carefully Sri Aurobindo has studied tantra. Maheshwari may seem a trifle remote to our experience, but Mahakali is familiar to us all:

Mahakali is of another nature. Not wideness but height, not wisdom but force and strength are her peculiar power. There is in her an overwhelming intensity, a mighty passion of force to achieve, a divine violence rushing to shatter every limit and obstacle. All her divinity leaps out in a splendour of tempestuous action; she is there for swiftness, for the immediately effective process, the rapid and direct stroke, the frontal assault that carries everything before it. Terrible is her face to the Asura, dangerous and ruthless her mood against the haters of the Divine; for she is the Warrior of the Worlds who never shrinks from the battle (19).

The Mahakali force is very important in the cultural history of India. Invoking the Durga power for battle victory has been the tradition ever since we hear Sri Krishna asking Arjuna to pray to Mother Durga before commencing



Goddess Mahalakshmi

the battle in Kurukshetra. Arjuna immediately leaves his bow and arrows in his seat, gets down from the chariot, stands with folded palms and begins: 'I salute you, O Durga, who lives on the Mandara mountain and are an accomplished commander of army.'9 The fourteen-verse prayer in the Mahabharata is by itself a tantric text. The prayer is answered by a vision of Ma-

hakali when she assures Arjuna that in a short while he would achieve victory: 'O Pandava, you will conquer your enemies in a short time' (6.22.16.35). Whether it was the rulers in Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, or Andhra Pradesh, they invariably offered prayers to Mahakali for victory before starting out for battle. In recent times we had Shivaji of Maharashtra praying to Bhavani to bless him with victory. It is interesting to note that to achieve victory in spiritual life also, Sri Aurobindo wrote a hymn to Durga in Bengali and Swami Vivekananda has recorded his vision of the Divine Mother in 'Kali the Mother':

Dancing mad with joy,
Come, Mother, come!
For Terror is Thy name,
Death is in Thy breath,
And every shaking step
Destroys a world for e'er.
Thou 'Time', the All-Destroyer!
Come, O Mother, come!
Who dares misery love,
And hug the form of Death,
Dance in Destruction's dance,
To him the Mother comes.

Mahalakshmi is almost a contrast to the Mahakali experience. The tantric texts do not give any special place to Mahalakshmi though



Goddess Saraswati

Kamala of the ten *mahavidyas* has the attributes of Mahalakshmi. The Pancharatra texts of Vaishnavism do have a Lakshmi tantra where Lakshmi is seen as the active force while Vishnu is identified with transcendent Brahman. The tantra texts do not give any special place to her but Sri Aurobindo thinks we need not only wisdom and force, but also grace and tenderness. She is the very image of harmony, an ideal we would do very well to imitate in our outer and inner lives.

For she throws the spell of the intoxicating sweetness of the Divine: to be close to her is a profound happiness and to feel her within the heart is to make existence a rapture and a marvel; grace and charm and tenderness flow out from her like light from the sun and wherever she fixes her wonderful gaze or lets fall the loveliness of her smile, the soul is seized and made

captive and plunged into the depths of an unfathomable bliss. Magnetic is the touch of her hands and their occult and delicate influence refines mind and life and body and where she presses her feet course miraculous streams of an entrancing Ananda.<sup>11</sup>

But then, there is the major problem of living an ideal life in a world which poses a challenge every moment. There needs to be a willingness to work patiently, keep the mind alert for shortcomings and remain focused on the goal. This is the realm of Mahasaraswati, who is 'the Mother's Power of Work and her spirit of perfection and order' (22). This power is that of the well-organised builder, administrator, and artisan. If Mahakali is invoked for battle heroism, the Mahasaraswati spirit has to infuse us so that we can give our full attention to the details and never lag in our work. We may move forward slowly, but with her grace we move surely towards our goal. Beware of her wrath as well! 'Carelessness and negligence and indolence she abhors; all scamped and hasty and shuffling work, all clumsiness and à peu près and misfire, all false adaptation and misuse of instruments and faculties and leaving of things undone or half done is offensive and foreign to her temper' (23). But she is kind and smiling if we are ready to rectify our mistakes and proceed patiently. This persistence itself brings the reward of perfection in course of time. Sri Aurobindo now comes up with a aphoristic sentence which is by itself a Mahasaraswati Upanishad:

A mother to our wants, a friend in our difficulties, a persistent and tranquil counsellor and mentor, chasing away with her radiant smile the clouds of gloom and fretfulness and depression, reminding always of the ever-present help, pointing to the eternal sunshine, she is firm, quiet and persevering in the deep and continuous urge that drives us towards the integrality

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of the higher nature. All the work of the other Powers leans on her for its completeness; for she assures the material foundation, elaborates the stuff of detail and erects and rivets the armour of the structure (ibid.).

We do put before her our inexhaustible wants, desires, aspirations but this does not make her tired at all. She is a mother who understands her child's cravings, does not get angry and proceeds to help us find fulfilment by our own strivings. She is a mother who teaches her child to walk, speak, read, write, and swim. The Divine Mother knows what we need, she listens, smiles, and gives, for she is a mother. Only, we must have the absolute trust that a child has for its mother. This Mother of all-love is also indicated by Sri Aurobindo so that we can hold on to her with hope and proceed on the path of yoga. These powers do not exhaust the facets of the Divine Mother, says Sri Aurobindo:

There are other great Personalities of the Divine Mother, but they were more difficult to bring down and have not stood out in front with so much prominence in the evolution of the earth-spirit. There are among them Presences indispensable for the supramental realisation,—most of all one who is her Personality of that mysterious and powerful ecstasy and Ananda which flows from a supreme divine Love, the Ananda that alone can heal the gulf between the highest heights of the supramental spirit and the lowest abysses of Matter, the Ananda that holds the key of a wonderful divinest Life and even now supports from its secrecies the work of all the other Powers of the universe (23-4).

Sri Aurobindo's message has a sterling simplicity about it: 'Be conscious in your mind and soul and heart and life and the very cells of your body, aware of the Mother and her Powers and their working' (24). In short, be conscious of

the Mother always. If we do that we would have caught the core idea of tantra, which has been set up as the central pillar of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga.

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## Looking Beyond the Screen: The Seventh Inclusive Darshana

HALL WE BEGIN WITH A SONG the child of Bhavatarini himself sang:

Who is there that can understand what Mother Kali is?

Even the six darsanas are powerless to reveal Her.

It is She, the scriptures say, that is the Inner Self Of the yogi, who in Self discovers all his joy; She that, of Her own sweet will, inhabits every living thing.<sup>1</sup>

If the darshanas, philosophies, themselves

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# Sri Ramakrishna Tantra Darshana and the Dialectics of Desire

**Prof. M Sivaramkrishna** 

are powerless, devoid of Shakti, what could be the alternative? The radiant, eternally immersed in Kali—Sri Ramakrishna himself—is the key. When Mother is his inner Guide, there is only joy. Indeed, his inner travelogue is a journey into joy—A joy which is joyful even alongside anything that is negative, including the 'invasion' of what we are calling these days, 'The Emperor of Maladies', cancer. It is Mother's body which, if it really suffers, then, let it suffer. Accept it.

Sri Ramakrishna's 'spirituality' is inclusive, happily, vibrantly accommodative of all faiths— 'major or minor'. All are Mother's own manifest forms with joyful variations and not jaded, repetitive unity. But the core of it is tantra sadhana. The Master, surely, upheld the validity of all major faiths and enriched them with his 'own' vision and in his own way. And, single-handed, he paved the path of joy in an ethos which is predominantly materialistic and focused on sex and Sensex. The two human goals of artha and kama are at the root of almost all cultures today. The upshot of this is: every activity has at its core the age-old aim: *sukha prapti* and *duhkha nivritti*— acquiring happiness and avoiding sorrow.

### Kali Yuga: Congenial to Faith

Alain Daniélou suggests that the very negatives, the paradoxes of Kali Yuga, are precisely the raw materials needed for the Divine Mother's play. They are available in plenty to warrant the advent of Kali. And may I add, for the arrival on the scene of her greatest devotee, Sri Ramakrishna? With the Mother at the centre, her unique child becomes the conduit for unrolling her 'agendas'. What Girish Chandra Ghosh told the Master is extremely relevant: 'I am a sinner', he declares and 'the very ground where I sit becomes unholy'. Sri Ramakrishna questions the very idea: 'How can you say that? Suppose a light is brought into a room that has been dark a thousand years; does it illumine the room little by little, or all in a flash?' (679). A song sung by Narendra is much more explicit of the ambience of Kali Age residents:

We are born O Lord' in the dust of earth And our eyes are blinded by the dust; With dust we toy like children at play: O give us assurance, Thou Help of the weak! Wilt Thou cast us out of Thy lap, O Lord, For a single mistake? Wilt Thou turn away And abandon us to our helplessness? (997)

Obviously, a grief-stricken appeal—somewhat the result of a crisis of faith. When, listening to this song, a devotee, Prasanna, complained that 'sometimes Narendra sings such songs' and later asserts through another song in which the Lord assures: 'Where are you seeking Me, My servant? I am very close to you!' (999). The dialectics are perfect.

# Descent by the Very Tamasic Way

It is here that Alain Daniélou's insight is extremely relevant:

In a sense, the Kali Yuga is a privileged era. The first men, those of Satya Yuga, were sages still close to the divine. But the last men, those of the Kali Yuga, in drawing near to death, also

draw near to the principle to which all things return at the end. In the middle of the moral decadence, injustice, wars and social conflicts which are characteristic of the end of the Kali Yuga, contact with the divine by means of the descending, Tamasic way is more and more easily accomplished.<sup>2</sup>

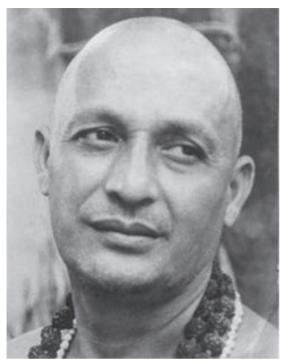
And with Shiva in command and Kali around, 'the divine is defined as "that in which contraries co-exist" (227).

If we look at the narratives of what Geoffrey A Oddie calls *Imagined Hinduism*, the views of Calcutta and in particular Hinduism at its worst phase, the field was fertile to need a towering personality to stem the tide. He quotes Alexander Duff, a missionary and his scathing critique of Hinduism: 'What could be more affecting,' he declared, 'than to behold thousands intensely occupied in the investigation of the noblest truths, and only *accumulating heaps of vilest error*.' This was around 1835–40. At home he used to exhibit





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Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1923–2009)

pictures of 'heathen idols' like Jagannath and "the extravagances of Hinduism" were "worse than worthless" and millions of Hindus were 'votaries' of violence, he declared.<sup>3</sup>

The special target was maya 'which was so contrary to "the dictates of reason" that even "the great majority of the learned in the orthodox schools" required a system "more level of ordinary comprehension", and offering "less violence to the evidence of sense and consciousness" (ibid.).

Ironically, within a few years, Mahamaya—Kali herself—seems to have taken the matter into her hands in collaboration with Vishnu! In 1836, the advent of Sri Ramakrishna signalled the required treatment.

## Sri Ramakrishna Darshana: A Radical New Text

The Sri Ramakrishna tantra is needed much more now than at any other time. In fact, we have to get out of negative attitudes which are prevalent about the very tradition. Swami Satyananda Saraswati's observation in this respect is salutary:

In fact, it is a tantric belief that old texts on tantra will fade away and new ones will always be written to replace them. The essence of the texts will be the same, but the expression and relationship to prevalent social conditions will be different. Tantra has changed and been developed throughout the ages. It has not remained attached to a fixed dogma. It is still growing and adapting itself in the present era and will continue to mould itself to man's need in the future.<sup>4</sup>

This is already evident in the studies of Sri Ramakrishna tantra.

#### Sri Ramakrishna Kali Holds the Keys

Sri Ramakrishna's tantra sadhana is a colossal event in the history of humanity. Basically, it is spiritual but the bases touch the roots of all that exists as Mother's play. This is a confirmed and undebatable fact. The well-known scholar and Indologist David Frawley says: 'It was the power of Kali that enabled Ramakrishna to first project India's great spiritual traditions into the global arena through his disciple Swami Vivekananda, at the turn of the twentieth century. As the power of transformation through time, Kali holds the keys to the planetary changes that we need today to move beyond our current global crisis. ... That Kali Shakti remains active and will take any and all forms that it needs in order to lead us through and beyond all time."

# Looking 'Behind the Screen'

If this is to happen—and it did, surely—'looking behind the screen' at the real play is the way. The prose and passion of life today, the compositional magic of, especially, *The Gospel of Sri* 

Ramakrishna is surely that of a modern Champu Kavya. It is a panorama, a spacious spectacle of events, persons, and emotions, which reflect almost a replica of our world today, visibly or invisibly. As Swami Saradananda, a participant in and a biographer of the divine play, which unfolded before him notes, drawing a distinction between Shakti and energy: 'The votaries of science might be called, in a manner, the worshippers of energy, although physical energy alone is the object of their consideration. In India we have also worshippers of Sakti or energy; but the Indian worshippers have always looked behind the screen and found something different in it from what has been found by modern science, to justify their reverence for it as an object of worship.'6 In effect, Shakti as incarnate Kali and the other mahavidyas.

#### 'Tantric Method' Embodies Evolution

With desire as the origin of all creation, says Alain Daniélou, 'the Tantric method reproduces in man the very history of evolution. It starts from the basic mechanisms of the living being in order to rise to the higher functions—the intellectual and mental mechanisms—and the spiritual openings of the human being, so as to control and go beyond them.' So the Freudian and Marxian irrational excesses get a dose of restraint. For in recent times, scholars find everything as amenable to analysis of the mind. The conception of the human mind behind is based, almost wholly on the 'other's' methodology.

### Body, Mind, and Chakras

Instead, there are tantra 'analysts' who are emphasising what they call 'Eastern Body and Western Mind'. Andrea Judith says: 'We are desperately being called upon to rise to the level of the heart from our collective immersion in the third chakra. Presently, world issues center

round power and aggression. We live in the shadow of a potential nuclear holocaust. Western civilization has exalted the cult of the individual.' How do we cope up effectively with this impasse? By, Judith says, 'Harmonious weaving of primordial opposites, natural and divine, male and female, Siva and Shakti, spirit and matter, heaven and earth' (ibid.). If we look beyond the screen, this very 'harmonious weaving' is the outstanding aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's advent. God—the Divine Mother—sports in the guise of various facets: the sadhu on one side and the sadist on the other, an honest with a cheat. A song of Ramprasad balances it, 'Kali's sword and Krishna's flute are one':

O partially perceiving mind, Your basic error of double vision has not been corrected Though profoundly attracted to worship Divine reality as feminine, Its masculine aspect remains foreign to you. Why are you unable to perceive the embracing unity Behind every manifestation of divinity? O deluded mind, Your narrow devotion to the Goddess Is mere self-seeking and self-adoration You have not yet entered the radical contemplation She reveals her final secret: Kali's sword and Krishna's flute are one.9

Ramprasad still votes for the 'Dark Kali'; he is overwhelmed sitting with tears of rapture: 'Those who long for conscious union with reality should meditate with constancy on the dark blue lotus feet of Kali, enshrined in the secret heart of humanity, ensuring the liberation of all finite beings from the illusion of finitude' (ibid.).

# Perils of Kali's Sword: 'Passionate Enlightenment'

This is the title of a study focusing on tantric Buddhism and the role of physical, passionate

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contact in tantric sadhana. To phrase it, there is not much difficulty: Mirinda Shaw describes this process of physical contact in sadhana as part of 'Inner Yoga'. The arguments are impeccable, the scholarship impressive, but with no attempt at analysing the *perils of passion*. In another book on tantra which I saw, the text was insightful but the images so 'raw' that the analyses of the field are, incredibly incongruous alongside. Is there a compulsive kanchana, greed, factor also involved! A related issue is how far are the texts cited in translation accurate and reliable? And the symbolic fields are—even in the case of Sri Ramakrishna— choked with readings in terms of alleged childhood insecurities and losses. Above all, the authors' scholarship incredibly goes Mother Kali's Sword at along with intolerable insensitivity. Dakshineshwar Temple During Kamana is desire; the generic longing Sri Ramakrishna's Time for happiness. If it is only seen in the

woman desired by a man or in the man desired by a woman, the interpretation is hopelessly misunderstood. It is bifurcation without balance.

## The Tantric Practice as an Equaliser

Once the Holy Mother asked Sri Ramakrishna how he looked upon her. He replied that he saw no difference between the Devi in the temple and herself. Perhaps, this is likely to be seen as 'obvious'. But the implications go deep. In his study of tantric practice Keith Dowman made a very far-ranging observation: 'It cannot be sufficiently stressed that in the realm of tantric practice there is no distinction between woman in her everyday reality and the all-inclusive divine female archetype that permeates her being and dominates her mind.'<sup>10</sup>

But then, says Dowman, 'the Tantric pantheon includes ... blood-sucking, flesh-eating, and child-devouring Dākinīs ... besides the sublime consorts

of the Bodhisattvas' (255). Obviously, Kali too has comparable traits. Sri Ramakrishna himself gave a comprehensive list of the various manifest forms of Kali. Describing Smashana Kali, he said that she 'is the embodiment of the power of destruction'. After the process of *laya*, dissolution, she 'garners the seeds for the next creation' (ibid.). And, therefore, she is comparable to the 'elderly mistress of the house who has a hotchpotch-pot in which she keeps different articles for household use' (ibid.). Let us look at an 'aesthetic' of Kali, the destroyer.

## Kali as the Source of Reality

John Blofled in his study of mantras observes: 'Kali is the Source Reality, though ultimately calm, remote, intangible, giving rise to every kind of violent contrast in the realm of ap-

pearances. How can this be disregarded by those who seek to know the Truth as a whole?' And, 'unless beauty and ugliness are accepted how dualistic thought can be overcome?' Now look at the song exemplifying this:

Who is this terrible Woman, dark as the sky at midnight? Who is this Woman dancing over the field of battle,

Like a blue lotus that floats on a crimson sea of blood?

Who is She, clad alone in the Infinite for garment,

Rolling Her three great eyes in frenzy and savage fury?

Under the weight of Her tread the earth itself is trembling!

Siva, Her mighty Husband, who weilds the fearful trident,

Lies like a lifeless corpse beneath Her conquering feet. 13

The uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna's tantra is

to accept all that exists in Nature and all the psychological and emotive dimensions they evoke.

## 'Desire' as Emanation from the Divine Mother's 'Side Glance'

Acharya Shankara's Saundarya Lahari has with its 'erotic', other subtle aspects of dialectics, besides the splendour of Devi. In a verse Shankara's imagination is graphic and candid: 'Damsels in hundreds, with their locks dishevelled' and other 'items' run, after a decrepit, ugly, impotent man, who falls within the range of Mother's sideglance. Explicating 'the dialectic', the commentators say that this may be misunderstood as 'the poet's fancy running riot'. But the subtlety of the context is deeper: 'to the exquisitely beautiful side-glances of the Devi is attributed the virtue of converting even the most repulsive into the most attractive. ... It expresses quintessential Kama, the satisfaction of desire and passions.'14

Paramacharya's reading of this is unique. He points to the significance of every aspect and weapon of Manmatha. On 'side-glance', he comments: 'To bestow blessings ... on everything in creation is the function of Maya belonging to Saprapancha. For this, the sidelong glance of Amba for a fleeting moment is enough. But for the fullness of Her grace, Amba should inhere in one fully.'15

## Merchant-Led Foreign Power

The significance of Sri Ramakrishna's advent is precisely 'targeted' to this situation. The advent of a merchant-led foreign power was the temporal dimension of the Bengal—indeed, Indian—intelligentsia, the so-called *bhadralok*, they say, suffered a sense of insecurity paralysing almost everything that the great culture of the country maintained so long. Yet, we cannot think of it as negative: for, as Sri Ramakrishna tantra *darshana* shows, craving for physical well-being is

an integral aspect of the psyche. Where it goes wrong is when it is elevated to be the exclusive goal of human existence. Nature's strategy is to use the very materials which appear negative as implicitly the sources of recycling our aims and goals. This is the mystery of the most difficult tantric *panchamakara*.

#### Why Sri Ramakrishna?

The divine play of Sri Krishna skilfully moves between the universal paradigm of the Mahabharata which embodies the Bhagavadgita as the framework of war and peace. Yet, alongside is the Bhagavata, a saga of serene love enfolding a balanced ethos. Radha's beloved plays a role in leading his disciple and friend Arjuna to the war—a colossal war to set right *adharma*, unrighteousness, not by banishing it but making *dharma*, righteousness, as its balancing element. The dualities are the very building blocks of Nature.

As for Sri Ramachandra, he also had to contend with the 'evil ones' around. They are capable of any amount of sins including 'womensnatching'—to put it somewhat crudely! A long period of sorrow and separation ensues, yet, if 'our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought,16 let there be sadness—all of it. Behind these two figures, whose selective features Sri Ramakrishna embodies, is a truth which is often forgotten: again decline of dharma alone is a warrant for an incarnation. 'I am come as Time', says Sri Krishna, 17 who neutralises the paradoxically—timeless evils. Indeed, everything exists: good or bad. 'I am the dice-play of the cunning', Sri Krishna says (10.36). So, gambling in Las Vegas also is a part of the play. Sri Ramakrishna himself saw gambling by priests going on in a temple premises, in Kali's abode, Calcutta.

#### Why Vishnu?

Why Vishnu particularly in Gaya kshetra, place,



Gaya Vishnu

when the Great Master's path was that of Kali, the Mother? Upon what Wendell Charles Beane describes as 'the regenerative power of the goddess in the cosmological, rituological-eschtalogical context. Since there are five avenues—veda, vaishnava, shaiva, dakshina, in addition to varna—which is the hardest knot to untie. What is relevant to the Great Master can hardly be thought of as a selective process. Since Gaya Vishnu is the basic initiator, it could make a difference. Beane's explanation is to the mark: 'The injunctions of the *Veda* are still followed but Vishnu is worshipped. It is distinguished from the earlier stage by the endurance of great austerities (*tapas*), and by the cultivation of the Supreme everywhere. It is the Path of Devotion (bhaktimārga). The

worshipper passes from a blind faith to an understanding of the supreme *protecting energy* of the Brahman' (ibid.) [Emphasis added].

The next is the path of knowledge. Meditation is the means of both. But *dakshina-marga* is 'the final preparation for passing out of the *Paśu* state ... Meditation is on the *Devi*' (ibid.). It is clear that the Vishnu legacy of bhakti is related to the *pashu* releasing itself of the animal traits. Now the supreme element is the protecting energy—for the Master: Kali. Hence, Gaya is the place of final dissolution of humans. Love underlies that advent.

#### Sri Ramakrishna Incarnation of Kali

In the light of the existing bhakti-jnana blending that cannot be overlooked; it needs a new perspective, a new orientation. And the orientation has to be in tune with the logistics of Kali Yuga. Kali is always both a creator and a destroyer. They are natural elements. This background needs an incarnation, as we saw, who never uproots everything but nourishes the unseen roots which have not been so far manifested. And they should be in harmony with the Kali Yuga ethos. Therefore, Vishnu approved the manifesto and the ageless Kali brought one who addresses everything of the Kali Age.

In fact, Swami Vivekananda himself told Sister Nivedita: 'The future, you say, will call Ramakrishna an Incarnation of Kali? Yes, I think there's no doubt that She worked up the body of Ramakrishna for Her own ends.' Nivedita adds: 'Kali the mother is to be the worship of the Indian future. In Her name will her sons find it possible to sound many experiences to their depths.'<sup>19</sup>

This is in tune with, obviously, Hinduism itself as its nerve center. This fact has not been emphasised as frequently as it ought to be. In his analysis of Shaiva-Shakta, B N Pandit says: 'Hinduism during its long history has been bearing outwardly a Vedic garb and colour but from within its soul it has been Saiva-Sakta in nature and character.'<sup>20</sup>

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#### Tracing Kali's Evident Footprints

At present books on Kali appear quite regularly and surprisingly. There are very fascinating studies. A brief account of this is the very balanced study of Kali versus the dialectics of desire. 'Kali has been', says Neela Bhattacharya Saxena,

quite ubiquitous in various cultural and academic discourses: she appears as the Great Mother in the Jungian analysis of the archetypes; she becomes a vehicle of liberation for many feminists; she epitomizes the very nadir of pagan barbarism for the Christian missionaries. She presides over the temple of doom in Hollywood movies. And of late she is portrayed as lover of aberrations. In short, a vehicle for relieving and perversions.<sup>21</sup>

Also an inspirer of the so-called Bohemian nonchalance of enjoyment.

#### The Paradox of Avatara vis-a-vis Desire:

The paradox of an avatara is expressed in a Telugu epic that is a conversation between Sri Ramachandra and Sita, with Hanuman present as a participant. There is a stanza in which Hanuman addresses Sri Rama: 'You are the Desireless One, who creates Desire and its related emotions. You, the seeker of Desire are its conqueror, too; [strange]. You the Lover of Desire is the one who dispels Desire!' For 'desire', Sri Ramachandra is the word the poet uses. And Sri Ramakrishna, blending the functions of these two avataras, takes on lust and greed, *kamini-kanchana*, as the primal desires of war and peace in all fields!

## Gaya Vishnu, the Initiator; Kali, the Executor

Gaya is known as a place where rituals for the dead are performed. How come, for Kshudiram's rituals for his ancestors, Gaya was the place where he received Vishnu's intimation of his advent as his son? Is this a myth to be taken only as a myth?



Oil Painting of Kali on Canvas, Used by Sri Ramakrishna

For, according to Sri Ramakrishna himself, not only was his father a parent of sterling character but he was also a devotee of staunch faith. And the family itself has an aura of supernatural happenings. One was Kshudiram's dream in which Vishnu announced him as the key figure in his reincarnation as Gadadhar, the future Sri Ramakrishna. How should we respond? In terms of the song the Master himself sang:

O Mother, all is done after Thine own sweet will; Thou art in truth self-willed, Redeemer of mankind! Thou workest Thine own work; men only call it theirs.<sup>23</sup>

# Why Songs?

Sri Ramakrishna's *Gospel* is remarkably prolific in terms of music, songs, and other related aesthetic aspects of culture. Why? Gaurinath Sastri in his elaborate listing of tantra and other related areas—more than thirty—mentions the relation

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of tantra to music. He says: "Tantra exercised influence on such a fine art as music. For example, the *Sangita-ratnakara* of Sarngadeva mentions *Cakra*, *Nadis*, etc., within the human body. The idea of *Nada* found in Sanskrit works on music, has a close parallel to that occurring in Tantra. The idea of *Vayu* within the body, which is supposed in musicology to produce *Nada* in conjunction with fire, is also similar to that found in Tantra:<sup>224</sup>

### Persistence of Misperceptions

On the one hand, tantra today is subject to scholarly studies and on the other to indefensible dismissal of it as weird. Even scholars who are experts on Indian history exhibit incredible, crass ignorance when they approach this area. John Keay, for instance, in his 'bulky' volume on Indian history, with 'enviable' confidence, says:

Tantras were esoteric texts of uncertain origin and profoundly difficult import which offered the initiates the chance of communing with the divinity and assuming supernatural powers and states. The rituals and disciplines involved were complex and secret. Some mimicked the sexual imagery of myths involving the union of the deity and his *shakti*, or female counterpart. Breaking the taboos of caste, diet, dress and sexual fidelity, practitioners might enjoy both a liberating debauch and an enhanced reputation even if magical powers eluded them.<sup>25</sup>

This 'critique' is an echo and continuity of the misperceptions common in the colonial era but appears indefensible in every aspect, even today. That one can entertain such views is, of course, late in the day, I would like to think, the very *mahamaya*—grand illusion—that Mother Kali herself creates!

## Unearthing Memories of Kali, the Powerful Female, the Revolutionary

As an antithesis to what John Keay wrote are the views of Cassia Burman in her observations on

'Dancing with Mother Kali'. The centrality of the view is the emerging 'collective consciousness' of versions of Kali in different faiths:

Both male and female scholars are now unearthing, in every tradition around the world, memories of a powerful female Deity, both creator and destroyer, fearsome and nurturing, beautiful and limitless and black. Her names or the names of her priestesses—the Celtic Caillech, the Saxon Kale, the Irish Kelles, the Semitic Kalu, the Spanish Kalifa, the Finnish Kalma, the Christian gypsy Sara Kali, the Greek Kelli—are often variations of Kali. As news and memory of her spread into the collective consciousness, the effect on both the male and female is bound to be revolutionary.<sup>26</sup>

This appears in the well-known scholar and devotee Lex Hixon's collection of tantric hymns. In fact, he was among the earliest scholars to draw attention to Sri Ramakrishna's tantra. A comparable view is to be found in the study of Indian theogony.<sup>27</sup> There are parallels between Demeter and other goddesses and Kali. Indeed, comparison with Kali is quite common and ancient but eternal, shall we say, enigma?

# Kali: The One And Only 'She'

Few Kali-watchers were able to invoke the unique phenomenon of Sri Ramakrishna's Kali accurately. Maybe this is desirable for, she herself allows all kinds of interpretations to be foisted on her. New entrants to tantra are, if one can venture to say, mostly seekers of pleasure which Sri Ramakrishna condensed into 'lust and greed'. In one of his ecstatic moments the Master sang:

Can everyone have the vision of Syama? Is Kali's treasure for everyone?

Oh, what a pity my foolish mind will not see what is true!

Even with all his penances rarely does Siva Him-



Oil Painting of Shiva and Kali on Canvas Used by Sri Ramakrishna. Frame Made in 2003.

self behold

The mind-bewitching sight of Mother Syama's crimson feet.

To him who meditates on Her the riches of heaven are poor indeed;

If Syama casts Her glance on him, he swims in Eternal Bliss.

The prince of yogis, the king of the gods, meditate on Her feet in vain.

Yet, worthless Kamalakanta yearns for the Mother's blessed feet!<sup>28</sup>

## The Hegelian Dialectic of the Only 'She'

Heinrich Zimmer describes the comprehensive spectrum of Kali's being as

the "Fairest of the Three Spheres of the Universe", the one and only "she", this majestic, wonderful figure is the embodiment of man's desires and delights, the archetypal object of all longings and all thought. In order that she may represent the *full* significance of Shakti-Māyā, this alluring, the ever-charming Eternal Female

of our Soul has to be painted black, has to be clad with the symbols of destruction and death as the symbols of life.<sup>29</sup>

Extending her area into 'dialectic', Zimmer further says: 'We may learn from her Tantric philosophy and art, which unfold the rich Hegelian implications of her dialectic. ... the Goddess in the fullness of her terrible beauty' etched in the 'utterly disillusioned and yet world-affirming, profoundly living productions of the last great period of Indian creative thought' (215).

#### 'What Else Shines is But Her Reflection'

The Holland-born, Ramakrishna Order's Swami Atulananda—whose pre-monastic name was Cornelius J Heijblom—wrote in a letter: 'We are Mother's children. Good or bad, She will look after us. So, no fear. In the end all will be well. After all, in our heart of hearts, we want Her beyond all else. Let the surface mind have its little play. When we get tired of playing, She will come and take us home. "There the Sun does not shine, nor the moon, nor stars, nor lightning. What else shines is but Her reflection."

#### 'Boundless Dark'

Yet, Kali is an exception: darkness only heightens her sparkling presence. Look at this song:

In dense darkness, O Mother,
Thy formless beauty sparkles;
Therefore the yogis meditate
in a dark mountain cave.
In the lap of boundless dark,
on Mahanirvana's waves upborne,
Peace flows serene and inexhaustible.
Taking the form of the Void,
in the robe of darkness wrapped,
What art Thou, Mother,
seated alone in the shade of samadhi?
From the Lotus of Thy fear-scattering Feet flash
Thy love's lightnings.
Thy Spirit-Face shines forth
with laughter terrible and loud!<sup>31</sup>

The darkness of Kali has, by and large, lifted her stature through Sri Ramakrishna's sadhana, and is now a worldwide phenomenon, connecting the mythic as also the historical. As Mahendranath Gupta or M., puts it, the saga of Sri Ramakrishna is 'perfected in dream, perfected-in-moment, perfected-through-practice, everperfect, all these are true'.

#### A Life-Boat in the Sea of the World

Before we go further, we have to be clear about the uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna as a figure comparable to earlier incarnations. This is not 'a holier than thou' gimmick but a fact. While Sri Krishna 'oversaw' a war and Sri Ramachandra ruled a kingdom, Sri Ramakrishna's was a total and uninterrupted awareness of the presence of the Divine Mother as his sole mission. M. reports that Sri Ramakrishna's 'mind held back and the outside affairs proceeded of their own accord' and 'he was kept in that very state by the Mother'.

'Mother', says M., 'would not let him descend lower. All his states are there to serve as an example. The whole world is one covered with a thick fog of materialism. Thakur had such a state to show to the world the ideal of eternal truth at this point of time—that God-realization is the highest ideal of man. The divine character of Thakur is like a life-boat for the Bhaktas in this sea of the world.'

#### Essence of All Essences

Sri Ramakrishna pointed out that if you have 'firm conviction' you will know the real nature of the Divine Mother. Her true nature is today inching towards tantra as that nature, which is universal. In her basic rationale and relevance, the Mother is the 'creatrix'. Therefore, she represents a global phenomenon. And 'global' used not as an impressive word but as a truth that can be seen. A tantric writer, Bernard Soulie says:

'Tantra is the fundamental form of all religions, the one which has given rise to virtually all the religions which for thousands of years have had hundreds of millions of followers in that part of the world.' And it is seen now as 'the essence of all essences' in the words of M.

But, then, what emerged as the Dakshineswar phenomenon has its preliminary divine play enacted in his birthplace, Kamarpukur. The unfolding of what is infolded took place there—in a miniature form, in the form of a rehearsal of an ensuing divine play in Calcutta. In short, whatever we see later began manifesting in that hamlet.

## The Kamarpukur Naandi, the Prologue: **Three Phases**

Kamarpukur—the 'Bengal Bethlehem', as Swami Vidyatmananda called it—saw glimpses in Gadai's life which acquired or manifested their full-blown dimensions in Dakshineswar. A few instances are highly relevant. The most prominent was his plunging into states of consciousness which signal the samadhi state later on. The wellknown incident of his seeing a flock of birds, against the backdrop of the blue sky, is very familiar. The normal reaction is bhava, which later on was termed as bhava-samadhi.

Nothing in the Master's life is unilateral in its significance. The celebrated writer Pico Iyer's observation evokes enormous range of significance connected with birds.

Birds ... in every kind of folklore, stood for the world of the heavens, emissaries from above. Birds were messengers from the gods bringing inspiration to earthbound men. That was why among the American Indians, and the tribes of Africa too, chiefs traditionally wore crowns of feathers as if their heads were flocks of inspirations. That was also why Plato called the mind a cage of birds?<sup>32</sup>

#### Parama Hamsa

The wonder implicit here is that a state of almost mini-samadhi of Thakur has, in the background of nature, so many aspects of significance. In a sense, the aspect of messenger from the gods could also be applied to the Great Master's 'stature' as an incarnation. In his own name 'Paramahamsa', there is *hamsa*, the celestial swan which separates milk from water. And 'hamsa' has the bijakshara, seed words, ha and sa, which constitute that word.

M. tells another incident which a sadhu of the Nanak sect told him. The sadhu used to frequent Thakur at that time. And one incident was: 'Somebody was performing the yajna of birds at Manasarovar. He hoped that this would bring all kinds of birds to him. So, the *hamsa* (swan) would also come. It would definitely be accompanied by the Paramahamsa. Paramahamsa, in other words Narayana, you know. It means this: By keeping company of sadhus, one can have darshan of God.

Kamarpukur During Sri Ramakrishna's Times





Goddess Visalakshi of Anur

There is another dimension to this: Sri Ramakrishna, we know, was fond of music, songs even dance. Any aesthetic element is enough to heighten his feeling which made him 'unconscious' and even fall on the ground. Was this element of song and music also a part of the bird-in-the-sky incident? Scholars in the area of bird-song are, says Frits Staal, 'concerned to show that it is impossible to define "human" music in such a way that will not also encompass bird song'. And, the scholars 'have demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that bird songs cannot be explained in functionalist, utilitarian, or pragmatic terms'. The young Gadai's experience was a glorious proof of the absence of all these intentions. Hence its naturalness.

#### **Anur Incident: Darshan of Divine Mother**

This illustrates how Gadai was, even in Kamarpukur, subject to near samadhi. An emotional upsurge was always a feature of the Great Master. This incipient feature, in due course, developed into *bhavamukha*. Another incident is also worth recalling. Some women wanted to go to Anur for the darshan of goddess Visalakshi. As the group was crossing a field, Gadai 'suddenly appeared to be stricken dumb. His body stiffened and became numb'. They tried desperately to revive him. But in vain. One of the women Prasanna, who knew Gadai's natural tendency to slip into such states, suggested: 'Instead of calling God, let us call "Mother Visalakshi" wholeheartedly.'

Within a few minutes Gadadhar's face glowed with a sweet smile.<sup>34</sup> From Anur Visalakshi to Dakshineswar Kali! What an unfoldment, continuously evolving, until it embraces every incarnate divinity, male or female.

#### First Intimations of Incarnation

It was Bhairavi Brahmani who declared Sri Ramakrishna to be an incarnation after tantra sadhana. But it was the same Prasanna of Kamarpukur—one of remarkable 'simplicity, spirituality, purity and amiability', who intuited this profound truth. 'The simple-hearted Prasanna was captivated when she heard [Gadai] recount the sacred stories of Gods and Goddesses and sing devotional songs. She often asked him: Look, Gadai Why is it that you sometimes seem to me to be God? Yes, I truly feel you are God' (ibid.).

## **Bangle Srinivas**

What took several scriptures for Bhairavi Brahmani to declare the Master as an incarnation, Prasanna did intuitively. She measures up to the Great Master's norm: 'Unless a man is simple, he cannot recognize God, the Simple One.35 An equally simple, deeply moving perception came from the 'Bangle-maker Srinivas'. He also discovered the young Gadai to be God himself. Srinivas Sankhari invited Gadai to his place, worshipped him in a simple way by garlanding, and the like. He also regretted that being aged he won't be able to witness Sri Ramakrishna's future divine play.<sup>36</sup> The significance of Prasanna and Srinivas can be seen in a passage from Narada Pancharatra: 'What need is there of penance if God is worshipped with love? What is the use of penance if God is not worshipped with love?'37

#### Transcendence of Gender

The paradox is comparable to the way in which we have indexing today and thereby avoid the

overload of communication and information; all obstacles to spiritual growth are summed up by Sri Ramakrishna as the interrelated kamini and kanchana. The same Sri Ramakrishna-Gadai was looked upon by Kamarpukurean women—particularly Vaishnava women—as Krishna and as a friend. They believed that the handsome Gadadhar, who was endowed with divine qualities, was God himself. Such faith dispelled gender consciousness. Above all, 'Gadadhar [who was then thirteen or fourteen] would sometimes put on women's clothing and jewellery and perform important dramatic roles for the village women'. And 'his gestures, posture, conversation, and movements were exactly like those of a woman.<sup>38</sup> No one could tell he was Gadadhar.

One would like to take this as spontaneous transcendence of gender and not a mere performance to regale village women. And if we recall his enacting the role of Shiva, can we not also say that the archetype of Radha and Krishna blended in him earlier in Kamarpukur itself. Shiva here was not a rehearsal in a drama but a reality; recall Mathuranath's darshan of both Shiva and Divine Mother in his person. Above all, the isolation of women in the Payne family came to an end when the Master exercised the irresistible appeal of his enacting as a woman. We may therefore say, that choosing Kali, the foremost Divine Feminine, as his mentor is an offshoot of an early phenomenon, enacted in Kamarpukur itself.

#### **Dream is No Illusion**

As we approach the Dakshineswar phase, an appropriate preamble is Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's first journey to the Ramakrishna *lilasthala*, the place of his divine play. On the way, travelling with her father, the divine consort developed fever. It was a long journey, strenuous and tiring. 'Delicate' Sarada Devi was forced to

stay in a rest house for two days. She had a vision which is as amazing as it is appropriate. And it deserves to be cited in full:

A divine vision came to her in this hour of dejection, and cheered her up. As the Mother lay unconscious on the bed, she saw a dark woman of peerless beauty sitting by her caressing the Mother's head and body with her soft, cool hands. It seemed to remove all her pain. The Mother asked, 'Where do you come from, my dear?' The stranger replied, 'I come from Dakshineswar'. The Mother wondered at this and said, 'From Dakshineswar! I thought I would go there, see him, and serve him. But as I am laid down with fever on the way, I fear this may never come to pass.' The dark woman said, 'Don't you worry! You will certainly go to Dakshineswar; you will recover soon and see him. It is for you that I have been keeping him there.'39

Elizabeth Harding, who cites this, says: 'The Holy Mother had visions of Kali throughout her life, and it is safe to infer that she was aware of her own divinity at all times.'40 And her own stature was celebrated by the Master in his own way. The dream is no illusion. Our psychologists today say: 'Self-awareness in the dream state is an integral part of self-knowledge and has its place on the spiritual path.' Indeed, 'Dream-yoga as mental training offers a gateway to self-knowledge that transcends bodily egotistic identifications'. Perhaps, Kshudiram experienced this state but without any training.

## Kali's Kolkata Divine Play: Sri Ramakrishna's Lilasthali, Panchavati

The location for sadhana is as important as initiation itself. In his translation of *Jnana Sankalini Tantra*, Paramahamsa Prajnanananda says that there is what is called *munda*-sadhana, which is 'finding an appropriate place for meditation. The scriptures abound with elaborate descriptions of suitable places for spiritual exercises.

Suggestions include isolated and beautiful spots such as a temple, a riverbank, a mountain valley, a place close to a pond or lake, a well-ventilated cave, or a room that is quiet and clean.'41 The tantric texts suggest two additional requirements: the first comes under the heading of Panchavati or an assemblage of five special trees planted together: Ashoka, Bilva, Bel, Amalaki, and Ashvattha. Prajnanananda adds: 'According to the Gospel of Ramakrishna, the neem tree (margosa) is included instead of the ashoka' (ibid.). Later, Sri Ramakrishna brought from Vrindavan, a branch of the Vrinda tree and planted it in Panchavati.

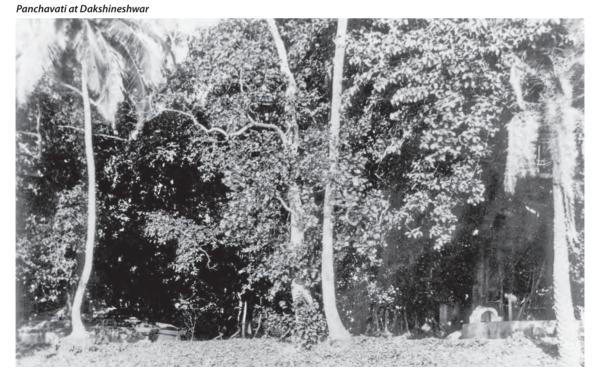
# The Indigo Merchants, Identifying Tag—Kanchana

M. gives us a further aspect: 'Formerly the foreign Indigo planters lived here. [The] banyan tree and the platform are of that period. The platform is the original place of sadhana of Thakur.' Sitting under the trees—on the platform 'Sri Ramakrishna had cried yearningly for the Mother of the Universe, for days and days like a child crying for his Mother.' 'What a Divine Play!' of the Master was witnessed here!

Mother, Master, merchants of Indigo! A locale and its participants for the divine play! We know the place of divine play, was an appropriate place for, specially, tantra sadhana. Perhaps, observing the merchants' business, I would like to think that the *kanchana*, greed aspect of his formula struck the Master's mind. The word, I mean which has its own aesthetic and linguistic nuances. Sri Ramakrishna's language is crisp and simple, condensed crystallisation: for instance, the words 'mind is all', has immense interpretative potential. In these days of profusion of words and limitless knowledge systems, the Master's coinage has sterling brevity like an index card.

#### **Mental-Environmental Fusion**

Environmental factors certainly affect the mental.



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The ground of the Great Master's divine play has elicited mention in a Harvard study of Hinduism and Ecology. The motif focussing on rivers says 'Rivers of Love', like the Ganges for the Master. We require them 'in an age of pollution'. The Ganga, besides the Dakshineswar temple, is the liquid form of Nature's Love. Making a specific reference to Sri Ramakrishna and others, George A James says: 'A revalorization of nature can be found in the teachings of Aurobindo, Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, and others.'42 And, Madhu Khanna says, 'Both Durga and Kali originated as the vitalizing energy of the forest.'43 Vana Durga is a popular name. In those days Panchavati would have been a mini forest! There is a song which catches Radha's agony on hearing Sri Krishna's flute which has the background of a Kadamba tree: 'Who is the Sorcerer that dwells in the kadamba grove? / His flute-notes suddenly enter my ears and strike a chord in my heart; Piercing my very soul, they slay my dharma and drive me mad.'44

#### **Tantric Sound**

If we replace the sorcerer by a tantric guru and for flute-notes if we substitute a tantric sound, we get an astounding incident in Sri Ramakrishna's preliminary awareness of that tantric sound. It came about in this way: Gauri Pandit, a well-known tantric of those days, when entering a debate would literally roar the syllables 'ha-re-re', to frighten the opponent who instantly concedes the guru's victory. Sri Ramakrishna was unaware of this, and never thought he had occult powers. 'As soon as Gauri entered the Dakshineswar Kali temple and roared "Ha-re-re" a few times, immediately someone within the Master made him shout those syllables louder than Gauri.' The impact was that the entire compound of the temple almost shook and 'the temple guards heard the ruckus [and] they ran to the spot, armed with sticks and clubs'. By then Gauri was outwitted and could not shout louder than Bhavatarini's child. 'The Divine Mother drew his power into here (*pointing to himself*) for his good.' Gauri 'ultimately completely surrendered to him [Sri Ramakrishna].'<sup>45</sup>

Besides dislodging the occult, the Great Master's act has to be perceived from varied meanings of the 'sound' of syllables. If we take shabda as sound, and many more of its synonyms, as the sound that emanated from the Great Master, it is beyond any hermeneutical exertion. Music, for instance, the music of sounds—for example, from veena—do not warrant any attempt at definitive artha, purport or meaning. Though it is beyond meaning, it is not beyond our immense joy. The sounds are not without instinctive receptivity. In short, we require to settle at the level of vaikhari, sounds, when trying to understand incidents, one of which we cited above—an example which elicited many interpretations is the Kali's garland of human heads.

The ultimate in which we can rest our logic seems to me the observation of Sri Anirvan: 'In studying the Tantras, one discovers progressively thanks to sound and by means of sound, how the idea, by taking on density, gradually becomes the object that is perceived.'

## Spanda: The Primal Sound and the Source of Maya

This incident suggests the dynamic, subtle nature and role of what Guy L Beck calls 'Sonic Theology,'<sup>47</sup> the 'sound', which is interior yet accessible to experience. And in tantric texts this plays a very vital role. Perhaps, the songs we find in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, though having a script, are potentially available to its transcendence wherein words and meanings do not matter. The instance impact, for instance, evident in Sri Ramakrishna's listening leading to interior immersion is a revelation of this aspect.

William Corlett and John Moore in their

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exploration of 'Hindu Sound' say: 'The heard or revealed' or shruti. In its basic nature, 'it is not so much the meaning of the words that mattered but the spoken sound'. Ignoring 'obsession with intellectual meanings', we should 'realize or hear the quality, rhythm and effects of the human mind'. This is 'not some primitive system of chanting but it represents the fact that revelation through sound is an eternal and everpresent possibility for anyone who is minded to listen'. Indeed, this is, says Guy Beck, 'the supreme sound which has no sound'. And specially 'tuned' to the 'feminine' power.

#### Shodashi: The New Tantric Celebration

Obviously, the Shodashi puja is, in a sense, the inaugural of Sri Ramakrishna tantra *darshana*. In many ways, it is a profound dialectical feature of Sri Ramakrishna tantra. The one who 'indexed' woman as the antithetical nucleus to spiritual quest, gets a startling jolt, if we slightly use *vakrokti*, oblique expression. Even the followers of Sri Ramakrishna find that the 'woman and gold'

needs change and, negating gender bias, give other alternatives in tune with 'feminist' upsurge.

In these terms, if we see the worship of Sri Sarada Devi as Shodashi, it relieves us of an alleged guilt. 'Shiva-Shakti' is a primordial reality and with the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, that equation emerged as a glorious reality in our times; whether it is a renewal of the old or a brand new mode is an academic matter. The consequence of this momentous event we see in the results: many women devotees and the renewal of women's monastic orders.

The worship took place on the Phalaharini Kali worship day and was held in Sri Ramakrishna's room. He followed the norms of the puja meticulously and offered all the items as befitting the Devi. Even as the worship was complete—even as it was progressing—Sri Sarada Devi lost consciousness followed by Sri Ramakrishna himself. The Master's sadhana, says Swami Saradananda, 'culminated in this worship of the Divine Mother in the body of a woman who was an embodiment of spiritual wisdom.



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Both his divine and human aspects had achieved ultimate perfection.'49

## Select Facets of Sri Ramakrishna's Tantra Darshana

It is an experience-based path with openness to anyone who has genuine longing to understand it. It is, in retrospect, a way of sadhana in tune with our existence today. And it is based on rigorous disciplinary rationale. 'Trust' and 'test' inseparably function to establish a saga which is an authentic, intensely, pragmatic yajna. Without mincing matters the Master declared: 'In the Kaliyuga the discipline of Tantra is very efficacious.' <sup>50</sup>

Let us see how severe testing came even before the Great Master undertook sadhana according to tantric rites. The first four years of the Master's sadhana were so severe that he was regarded as subject to mental disorder. People thought that it was because of severe celibacy. Until very recently, psychologists diagnosed spiritual matters as the consequence of a child's parental insecurity, fear of losing the security of the parents. Even sexual aberrations were also added to this diagnosis. Rani Rasmani and her son-in-law hit upon the Freudian agenda, in a sense—much before.

This is to be linked to an early incident relating to *kamini*, lust, the first of Master's formula. If a person's behaviour is otherwise in regard to desire for erotic enjoyment, it is branded as insanity—now we use the psychological terms of this 'disorder'. Such diagnosis led, naturally, to both the Rani and her son-in-law to arrange a meeting with a group of young women. In no time the Master lost body-consciousness and he saw only the manifestation of the Divine Mother in those women. The Master himself said that 'saying "Mother, Mother" [he] lost his consciousness'. Looking at his childlike nature and his amazing innocence the women bowed down to him. A song evokes the context which ended harmlessly,

as a result of unbreakable bond with Kali:

O Mother, I hide myself in Thy loving bosom; I gaze at Thy face and cry out, 'Mother! Mother!' I sink in the Sea of Bliss and am lost to sense In yoga-sleep; I gaze with unwinking eyes Upon Thy face, powerless to turn away. ... Cover me with the spreading skirt of Thy love (394).

#### Facets of Sadhana

We dare not peep into the tantric worship and its real course through which the Master went, under the guidance of the Bhairavi Brahmani. Rituals such as meditation using rosary passed by because, the Great Master himself said that he was so absorbed that he would merge into samadhi while turning the rosary and he had vision after vision and innumerable wonderful spiritual experiences. More amazingly, he went through sixty-four sadhanas prescribed in the scriptures. And he worshipped a young woman—though he overcame the initial fear of sitting in her lap by praying to the Mother. As soon as he evoked Mother, he said he was filled with divine strength. He sat in the lap of the woman and went into samadhi.

## The Presence of Chandi

The Master ate fish cooked in a human skull. But when it came to a piece of human flesh, he felt 'aversion'. Bhairavi Brahmani tried to induce him by swallowing a piece herself, and exhorted the Master to do likewise. 'Please shun aversion', she said. The Master however had Mother! Seeing the piece of human flesh placed before him, the Master says, 'the Divine Mother's terrible form of Chandika arose in my mind; then repeating 'Mother, Mother', I went into ecstasy.' No aversion; what he had to do, he did.

There are two implications which emerge from the above. If Kali is all that exists, there



can be no question of relative value judgements: Kali and Chandi as 'ferocious' and Bhavatarini as benign. As Young says in his remarkable volume of a tantric journey, the apparently terrifying Mother also cleanses all that is 'dark' in us: 'The first glimpse of Kali is devastating. The purpose of the meditation is to allow Kali to devour everything in you that is dark and terrifying so that what's left is beautiful. When you sit through an evening of meditation with Kali devouring you, what you are left with in the morning is an image of Kali that is extraordinarily beautiful.'52

## Chidgagana Chandrika

In Kalidasa's *Chidgaganachandrika*, there is a verse which invokes Chandi along with an explanation of why she gets angry as Chandika. She is angry with those who, leaving behind the engrained Shiva-ness, desire to go after other faiths. Hence it is Kali. There is also another insight: 'Purusharthas mean more than *kanta*, woman and *kanaka* gold. The duo is engulfed by ignorance. Therefore, transcendence is eternal joy.'<sup>53</sup> And Ramakrishna shows this eternal joy immanent everywhere in Nature.

Coincidentally, Sri Ramakrishna himself, in a rare moment full of 'divine inebriation' sings:

This time I shall devour Thee utterly, Mother Kali!
For I was born under an evil star.
And one so born becomes, they say, the eater of his mother.
Thou must devour me first, or I myself shall eat Thee up;
One or the other it must be. 54

The content of the song is startling if we consider the Master's *sattvic* nature. But if we look at the succeeding history of the world, it includes the colossal atomic explosion and the two world wars. Even as science and technology took unimaginable strides, the world shrank in space. We have perfected, as thinkers say, methods of

mass murder of our own species. One described such things as MAD, 'Mutual Acceptance of Destruction'. Does it have anything to do with the advent of the Great Master? Especially when his mentor was Kali? Is the Master executing the dual work of *abhaya* and *pralaya*, protection alongside tsunami? Let us look at the phenomenon of Mother's agenda.

## 'Feminine as Everything Incarnate'

The lines of a song, 'If at the last my life-breath leaves me as I repeat the name of Kali, I shall attain the realm of Siva' (619) are prophetic. Dr E M Hummel, a devotee-visitor from America asked M.: 'Were you present at the time of his [Sri Ramakrishna's] passing? Did he quit the body in *samadhi*?' M. replied: "Ma, Ma Kali": he uttered these words and immediately his whole body got horripilated. The body was preserved in that state for eight hours.' 55

Young makes another observation which illuminates the implications: 'We tend to phrase the Feminine exclusively in relationship to women and in fact the Feminine is everything Incarnate—men, women, all of nature, energy and phenomena. A lot of suffering comes from having a very narrow view of what the Feminine is actually ... we need to discover the Feminine as it is which is much broader, much larger, much deeper than that. Then there is a natural harmony, a natural respect of the women.' All creation is the sport of my mad Mother Kali, sings the Master.

#### **Vedic Wisdom: The Dialectics of Desire**

The preamble to the dialectics of desire is found in the immemorial Rig Veda: 'Desire first stirred in it, desire that was first said of the spirit. The connection of the existent in the non-existent, the sages found, seeing in their hearts with wisdom.'58 In the cosmic womb—Hiranyagarbha—the first sound could easily be about the omnipresent

desire with its vast network of ambitions. Let us take some hints from the Great Master: Come, let us go for a walk, O mind, to Kali, the Wish-fulfilling Tree,

And there beneath It gather

the four fruits of life.

Of your two wives, Dispassion and Worldliness, Bring along Dispassion only,

on your way to the Tree,

And ask her son Discrimination about the Truth.<sup>59</sup>

The metaphor of the wish-fulfilling tree became a reality when Sri Ramakrishna enacted its role. Giving whatever the devotees present in that context desired. No holds barred, you are free to ask. The dialectics of desire as a structure has the triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The implication therefore is if you desire, that very desire contains undesirable elements. Nothing comes without its dark shade. If we look at the present situation, the incredible global commerce in consumer goods is overwhelmingly compelling. For sheer fun of shopping we seem to live.

Swami Vijnanananda (1868-1938)



#### From Brahman to Bankim

The paradox was sharply evident or rather was beginning to, as we see the nonchalant responses of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to the Great Master's question: 'Well, what do you say about man's duties?' And the reply was transparent: 'If you ask me about them, I should say they are eating, sleeping, and sex-life' (669). A frank, not funny, articulation of fact. Stung to the quick, the gentle Master responds with evident impatience: 'You are very saucy!'

## **Code Today of Almost All Nations**

Was Sri Ramakrishna annoyed? Apparently yes. But then is there anything saucy about telling the truth? Obviously, no. But then what kind of person asked the question—somewhat playfully—is very important. It is there that Bankim overstepped the canon of discretion. Perhaps, literary sensibility may not care for niceties. Desires are so instinctively compelling that decency takes a dip. Sri Ramakrishna continues the conversation but Bankim never realised Ramakrishna's spiritual affiliation of tantra.

## Desire and Liberation: 'Not Incompatible'

Gavin Flood makes a very balanced point: 'Part of the ideology of tantric traditions, particularly the more philosophical accounts, is that liberation and the world-affirming value of desire are not incompatible, but desire can be used to transcend desire. ... Conceptually the distinction between kāma in the Tantras and kāma in erotic science is clear in the former being teleological (the goal being power and/or liberation) and the latter being an end in itself, but some blurring of the boundary does exist.'60

Perhaps panchamakara is, in this sense, a snakes and ladders structure. But the cosmic kundalini that the Great Master is, he made tantra, a method without titillating tantrums.

### Cosmic Kundalini's Dance in Joy

The primal Shakti operated through the Master. Swami Chetanananda's intuitive observation is highly relevant: 'As he [Sri Ramakrishna] sat in the village of Dakshineswar, he shook the Cosmic-kundalini so vigorously that his message encircled the globe within a short time of his passing. The Cosmic-kundalini is the Divine Mother Kali.'61 We have the most invaluable evidence of Swami Vijnanananda, a direct disciple of the Master. He observed that this experience 'remained imprinted in my memory forever. From the base of the Master's spine right up to his head, the whole column had become inflamed like a thick rope. And the energy that rose upward towards the brain seemed to be spreading its hood and swaying like a snake dancing in joy' (51).

Affirming and extending this striking truth, Swami Shivananda said: 'The Master was after all none other than Mother Kali, who in the form of the Master is saving the world even now. ... Swami Vivekananda once said: "In this age the Brahmakundalini—the Mother who is responsible for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe—has been awakened by the fervent prayers of Sri Ramakrishna. No wonder the individual kundalini will be awakened now!" (484).

More instances cited by Swami Chetanananda: Golap-ma described her experience: 'Once I saw that when the Master was eating, a serpent-like being was gulping the food from his throat. I was amazed. The Master asked me: "Well, can you tell me whether I am eating or someone else?" I told him: "It seems a snake is sitting in your throat and gulping the food." The Master was pleased, and said: "You are right. Blessed you are that you have seen it." I really saw that the Master was offering food to the serpent-formed kundalini.' ...

Nistarini Ghosh also saw the kundalini in the form of a snake in the Master's throat, taking food. Her son Swami Ambikananda later



Nistarini Ghosh (?-1932)

described what happened: 'When the Master came to our house in Calcutta, my mother took him to our inner apartment for some refreshments. The Master was fond of sandesh, so the best available sandesh was purchased. The Master was seated and my mother sat in front of him with folded hands. The Master: "Well, what do you want? You want to feed me with your own hand? All right." When the Master opened his mouth, she put a sandesh into it and saw that someone gulped the sandesh. My mother was frightened by this' (50).

There is a profusion of terrible negatives—a profuse panorama in *Kalatantra*. A N Jani, draws attention to these 'terrible qualities', which he narrates: 'This form [of Kali] is worshipped in Calcutta. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa also adored this form in the Dakshineshwar temple in Calcutta.'62 In *Kalika Purana*, however, Kali is benevolent in all aspects but, Jani describes it as a 'caste purana'. No problem to Sri Ramakrishna: 'The Master used to say that the devotees formed

a separate caste by themselves; among them there could be no caste distinction.'63

#### Tantra Arthashastra

Gaurinath Sastri talks about polity and economics:

Tantra became such a powerful force even in pre-Christian times that it infiltrated into the mundane science of polity. Systematic work on Tantra, perhaps, did not exist in those times but Tantric ideas harking back to the Vedic Age, gripped the mind of the populace. Evidence of this is contained in the Arthashastra of Kautilya (fourth century BCE).

Kautilya, among other things, refers to destruction of enemies, long life, love of women, wealth, royal favour, son. For each one, there were 'charms' to get fulfilment. Sri Ramakrishna's index of *kanchana* is a prophetic truth which gets much more primacy now.

## The Recurring Desires

'Lust and Greed' are extremely persistently recurring phenomena. They are built into the human psyche. And they have a tendency to bifurcate themselves from the two of their controlling mechanisms: dharma and moksha. If desires can be tempered by ethics and emancipation, lust and greed release their energies in healthy channels. But then during the Master's pilgrimage to Varanasi arranged by Mathuranath, he found that even in that sacred place and context—and when Sri Ramakrishna was present—he conversed with his friends about money matters which mattered to them! Master regretted that he would be much better in the temple. But, then, should we decide that the two *purusharthas* are inimical? Let us see M.'s answer.

During his talk with M., Dr Hummel asked him: "Renounce *Kamini-kanchan*", this is his [Sri Ramakrishna's] advice. What exactly did he try to make people understand by giving this advice? Did he mean to say: Give up their enjoyment—give up lust and greed? Or was it something else? M.'s response was in the form of a quote. Before that he 'remained silent for a while' and said: 'Mary hath chosen that good part (love of God), which shall not be taken away from her. (St. Luke 10:42).'65 Beyond that he never made any comment. He was silent and moreover remained thoughtful. Love of God is the only answer for

the doctor's question. Yes, there is certainly love between husband and wife, for children, and others. But, if love of God is not centred, every other manifest form is potentially volatile and may lead to disastrous consequences. M.'s experience itself is an exemplar.

## From Self Annhilation to Revelation

Disastrous domestic contexts led M. to the brink of suicide. And, the one who himself thought of it to achieve the perennial presence of Kali in his consciousness is an interesting parallel. The one, samsara and its travails, and the other, the Goddess who is both ruthless and benign. One should observe the paradox: the one who attempted self-immolation turned out to be the other's Vyasa. Was M., so disturbed by samsara and



M., Sri Mahendranath Gupta (1854–1932)

if so, is it incompatible with his academic excellence and literary sensibility? The chronicler of *Kathamrita* in the Bengali version chose 'some' passages from *Mahanirvana Tantra*. Desire to die voluntarily chosen is the ultimate of despair? So effective are matters connected with woman and gold—can we say?

#### The Goddess as an 'Accountant'!

Strange are the perceptions of devotees regarding the Mother. While devotees think of her as the Divine Mother, the others may foist their other desires and longings on her. Carmel Berkson, in her study of the struggle between Mahishasura and Durga, points out that 'Medieval India' conceived the Divine Mother as 'blood thirsty', the 'Mahisha' motive, but they also 'conceived' her 'to be an accountant, making their credits and debits'.66 A striking analogy, but not in tune with the ambience of the Divine Mother. However the recurrence of 'money' and its technicalities always exist. With Sri Ramakrishna, the irrepressible human longings—'Lust and Greed' are prophetically identified as the invariables of contemporary life. Yet, Berkson also cites 'the psychological inheritance' of Mahishasura connected with 'suicide'—attempted by his father.

There is, in this text, a 'slight' shift in perspective: an inclination towards Mahishasura more than the Goddess herself. Perhaps, the negative only makes the positive of an avatara's descent. It is this analogy which helps us to understand the advent of Sri Ramakrishna. The ethos of Bengal with the advent of colonising as also the middle class's 'confusions' seem to have propelled the Sri Ramakrishna phenomenon.

## Insights from the Heart of the Yogini: Bhavana

Bhavamukha and bhavana are the central hermeneutics of tantra. Tentatively, one can itemise

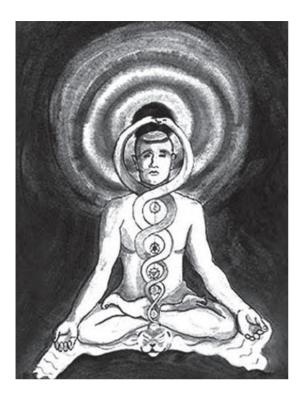
the hermeneutics in four areas: Divine Mother is the centre of all creation; 'Kali Yuga' is the field for sadhana; desire is the manipulator of the mind; and the recycling of the natural energies of *panchamakaras*. One can add that all combined to achieve the goal through the most severe path. All aspects, needless to say, explored and absorbed in terms of the Sri Ramakrishna tantra *darshana*.

We find very useful insights from the tantric text, Yogini-Hridayam, 'The Heart of the Yogini'. It identifies three sorts of puja, the lowest of which is concerned with rituals. 'The highest one ... the "supreme worship", is purely spiritual. It is a *bhāvanā* assosciated with the *kuṇḍalinī* by which the adept experiences mystically his unity with the supreme Śiva. It is the total plenitude of the absolute I (pūrņāhambhava), an experience of the nature of the Goddess as the flashing forth of consciousness.'67 This seems the state, says Sri Ramakrishna: 'I realize it is the Mother alone who has become everything I see. I see Her everywhere. In the Kali temple I found that the Mother Herself had become everything—even the wicked ... one cannot exclude even a wicked person. A tulsi leaf, however dry or small, can be used for worship in the temple.'68

He points out the functioning of kundalini:

I distinctly perceived the communion of Atman. A person exactly resembling me entered my body and began to commune with each one of the six lotuses. The petals of the lotuses had been closed, but as each of them experienced the communion, the drooping flower bloomed and turned itself upward. Thus blossomed forth the lotuses at the centres ... The drooping flowers turned upward. I perceived all these things directly (744).

What can be a better illustration of the heights of *bhavana*, than these revelations. Though we read them as the words of the Master, every word is a *matrika*, charged with tremendous visuals.



Moreover, the panchamakaras, in this state, are not rejected but recycled so that the energy gets redirected. But for sadhakas, rigorous rules have to be followed. As Shiva tells Parvati, the adept is one who follows the rules and offers 'wine and meat' to Shiva-Shakti. But then, they transform themselves: wine becomes Shiva, meat transforms itself into Shakti and liberation is signalled by joy. Moreover, the adept is assured that one will be granted what one desires. The Goddess herself assumes the form of desire. But it is imperative that what is desired as desirable is decided by the Mother. In short, the reins lie in the hands of Kali! There is an instance in which the Great Master bursts with unusual rage: 'This time I shall devour Thee utterly, Mother Kali!' (564). Behind this terrifying outburst there seems to be Sri Ramakrishna's unerring awareness of the Mother's fearful form of Shmashana Kali, Kali of the cremation ground, the 'eater of everyone'. The description in Kalatantra has a

profuse panorama of her terrible form. It is even in reading, a startling spectrum of terror motifs. And, therefore, it is a 'miraculous' phenomenon that Sri Ramakrishna had unqualified, unlimited, immeasurable love for Kali.

The Great Master himself gave us the tantric magic of wine. In an ecstatic moment, the Master stood up and went into samadhi, repeating the Mother's name. Coming down a little to the plane of self-consciousness he sang:

I drink no ordinary wine,
but Wine of Everlasting Bliss;
As I repeat my Mother Kali's name,
It so intoxicates my mind
that people take me to be drunk!
First my guru gives molasses
for the making of the Wine;
My longing is the ferment to transform it.
Knowledge, the maker of the Wine,
prepares it for me then;
And when it is done, my mind imbibes it
from the bottle of the mantra,
Taking the Mother's name to make it pure.
Drink of this Wine, says Ramprasad, and the
four fruits of life are yours (95).

Sri Ramakrishna's consciousness doesn't permit any negatives and he does it either in prose or poetry with a sensitivity and passion which evoke the rasa along with surprise or even shock, which creates a new perspective to the apparently negative: 'Wine', 'Everlasting Bliss', as also the natural images of 'molasses' as the guru, 'longing' as ferment, 'knowledge' as the Mother, 'mantra' as the bottle—a transformation which takes the punch out of the *panchamakaras*, as the Master did. We can also have another set of *panchamakaras*: mind, motivation, meditation, moderation, all resulting in *madhu*, nectar in the Upanishadic sense.

#### Bhavamukha and Bhava-Samadhi

Bhavamukha is described as an 'exalted state of spiritual experience, in which an aspirant keeps

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his mind on the borderline between the Absolute and the Relative. From this position he can contemplate the ineffable and attributeless Brahman and also participate in the activities of the relative world, seeing in it the manifestation of God alone' (1031). The related bhava-samadhi is 'ecstasy in which the devotee retains the ego and enjoys communion with the Personal God' (ibid.). Besides Kali, there is Bhavatarini in the temple and the latter means 'the Saviour of the Universe' (ibid.).

## Bhava: A Forseeing Faculty?

Does the bhava of the Great Master crystallise its energy as desirable desire? And can this, a sort of imagining, assume the shape of a concrete reality? Yes. For instance, when he desired to build a small hut to do his sadhana it was a spandana of the Spanda Karika of Kashmir Shaivism instantly fulfilled. The required materials came floating down the Ganga! Above all, he knew all that is to be known of the disciples who came to him—to some he used to reveal their previous births also. But, then, when he desperately desired for Bhavatarini Kali's darshan, it was materialised only when he was on the brink of selfdestruction. While Sri Ramakrishna attempted this for the sake of darshan of Bhavatarini, his recorder M., also attempted it, at least decided to do it. The reason: domestic strife. Bhava—simple thought for M.; vision for his Master.

## The Visions and their Range

The visions of Sri Ramakrishna are themselves a romance. How many gods and goddesses had he seen and sang about or listened to their voice: the dancing Gora, Radha standing by Sri Krishna, Nitai, Hari, Ramlala, Sita, Yashoda, and of course the consort of Shiva and Shiva himself, whose darshan made him almost fall into the Ganga at Varanasi, from a boat. Above all, Mother is envisioned as the three sounds and

their related features. There is a song the marvellous Master heard which describes Kali as the manifest form of matras:

Svaha, Vashat, and Swadha art Thou; Thou, the inner Self of the mantra, Thou the Nectar of Immortality, O Everlasting One! Eternal and unutterable art Thou, and yet Thou art manifest In the three matras and the half matra (616).

This is followed by declaring Mother as the 'Ultimate Mother' and 'All things have their support' in her, 'by whom this universe was made'.

Every word that concerns the Divine Mother is gospel truth for the Master. This is illustrated most movingly in Girish Chandra Ghosh's Star Theatre. Girish invited him to see the play on that day, 'Daksha Yajna'.

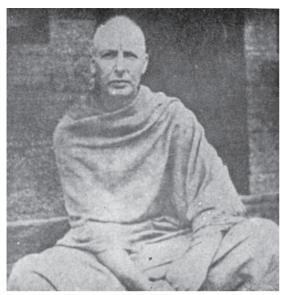
The Master went and sat in a box seat. Girish requested him to bless the actresses who were to perform on that day. 'They came immediately' and Girish told them: 'Bow down at the Master's feet. You won't get another chance such as this to purify yourselves.' Addressing them as 'blissful mothers', the Great Master told them: 'please get up. You are giving joy to people by your singing and dancing. Now go back to your dressing room for your makeup.'69

Not a word of censure or criticism escaped the lips of the Master. His bhava has no place for seeing any negative. He saw those women also as children of his own Divine Mother. In fact, his divine play accommodates every kind of human pature

## 'Imagining as Knowing'

We already saw that Sri Ramakrishna's imagination has never been fanciful. For him the real and the imagined are essentially transferrable entities. This accounts for the unique phenomenon of imagination becoming a psychological reality which can also be taken as bhava. A lucid

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Sri Krishna Prem (1898–1965)

interpretation of this phenomenon is found in Sri Krishna Prem's exegesis of what 'imagination', taken as bhava, is: 'The formative power in the universe is the power which we know as imagination. Fundamentally, the power of imagining is the same as the power of knowing. This may seem startling, for we are often apt to contrast knowing with more imagining as fact with false-hood. This however is a superficial view.'<sup>70</sup>

## Imagining and Sense-Data

Drawing the three together, Sri Krishna Prem says: 'The act of imagining is just as much an act of knowing as is any perception of sensedata, but it is one which takes place on a subtler level than the physical. The data known by imagination are real data but they are on the psychic data of the other senses' (ibid.). In short, imaginative knowing is as definitely law-determined as is sense-knowing but the laws in question are those of subtler levels of being.

## **Imagination Linked To Desire**

Sri Krishna Prem also suggests that imagination is linked to desire and hence its significance.

Explaining this he says: 'Because imagining is the mode of knowing most associated with desire, its creative nature is more overt, because in desire is manifest the interaction, tension, or power aspects of Reality. If all-knowing as "imagining" is reversed as an "equation" we can say "imagination is knowing". It is "transcendental magic". Citing a mystic, Sri Krishna Prem says: 'For such men to imagine is to see but the imagination of the adept is diaphanous while that of the crowd is opaque' (ibid.).

## Longing for the Divine

The truths mentioned above illumine the colossal nature of the Great Master's *bhavana*. When we equate this perception with desire as spiritual, it is transformed into divine longing. *Kamana*, desire, vanishes into irrepressible longing for the Mother and in Sri Ramakrishna it takes the form of uninterrupted awareness of the Mother's presence. In short, desire is not mere longing but bursting out energy, which makes the image a reality.

#### Chitshakti: The Primal Source

In a 1933 study, Pratapchandra Chakravarti suggests that tantric hermeneutics are unique. Chitshakti is the source from which shakti, power, of all kinds emerge: 'To a Tantrika it is the muladhara or the seat of eternal consciousness from which all active impulses come out. Every sound, according to this view, has its ultimate source in the muladhara and a sound is held to be nothing but a distinct manifestation of chitsakti, that lies dormant in the shape of a sleeping serpent.' Chakravarti also cites Bhartrihari who 'more than once draws our attention to the fact that tejas (energy) largely contributes to the manifestation of sound'. Every sound 'is under the stimulus of the mind'. Sri Ramakrishna himself made the classic statement that the mind is all. If what we call inner speech is the direct reflection of the mind, the psychologists seem to be

perfectly right when they say that all speech has its origin in the mind.' 71

## Word and Image

Chakravarti takes the argument further and says:
Every word has its particular image behind it.
These verbal images often presenting themselves before the thinking mind as visible pictures are interpreted by the Naiyaikas as visible presence of the object (padarthopasthiti), excited by the utterance of words. ... they repeat themselves in the course of receiving the impressions through the medium of sensory organs. The mind is apt to attain, though temporarily, the particular form of the object apprehended (tadakarenakarita) (ibid.).

### **Verbal and Visual Cognition**

Sri Ramakrishna's visions are perceptions, which arise even from a verbal element. For instance, the various manifestations of Divine Mother have a name but they are also for the Great Master, dynamically alive entities. Therefore, his uniqueness is instant transformation of the verbal as the visual or a mode of the dynamism of the mind which creates visuals. In recent studies of Mimamsa, there are interesting arguments about *bhavana*. Bogdan Diasconescu, in a recent study, says that verbal cognition could also be called 'Bhavana, "bringing into being", "efficient force" or "productive operation expressed the verbal affix".

Though it is highly technical, Sri Ramakrishna's *bhavana* offers an insight into the subtle transformative process of the verbal into the visual. This process is so accurate in him that he made a valid point about Christ's nose. Finally, the *Tantravartika* translated by the eminent scholar Ganganath Jha, has an intellectual uniqueness which is not debatable. I located something coincidental—in Adhikarana eightyone, the topic was 'the wearing of gold ... pertains to the man' and not to other things like

the excellence of colour. Whether, it should be part of yajna, going to heaven, and so on, are also considered. In this mystic way the counterpart of woman, gold, makes its appearance in that remarkable book. 'Verbal' Mimamsa should be used to explore these elements.

#### **Inconclusive Conclusion**

'As this resourceful earth carries within its bowel all the nourishing ingredients of the trees, plants and shrubs, producing beautiful flowers and fruits, exactly in the same way, nourishing juice flow, from the attractive body of Ramakrishna Deva, nurturing energy to the followers of all faiths.'<sup>73</sup> Here Sri Ramakrishna has been called arbitrator of all controversies, the Supreme preceptor.

Sri Ramakrishna's tantra will never have any conclusion or beginning. It is a natural phenomenon emerging at the very beginning of the universe as desire, both desirable and undesirable. That depends, shall we say, exclusively on 'mind as all'. The Great Master singing a song on this theme with 'ecstasy of love' is for this context, the final truth:

How are you trying, O my mind, to know the nature of God?

You are groping like a madman locked in a dark room.

He is grasped through ecstatic love; how can you fathom Him without it?

Only through affirmation, never negation, can you know Him;

Neither through Veda nor through Tantra nor the six darsanas.

It is in love's elixir only that He delights, O mind;

He dwells in the body's inmost depths, in Everlasting Joy.

And, for that love, the mighty yogis practise yoga from age to age;

When love awakes, the Lord, like a magnet, draws to Him the soul.

Sri Ramakrishna, that 'Being', has spared us guessing! The dialectic is love.

## **Tantric Journey into Joy**

I have cited mainly Western scholars whose translated texts made tantra a truly global phenomenon. They have done an invaluable job though there are expected aberrations in some interpretations. This is perhaps due to either conscious or unconscious allegiance to 'Western' hermeneutics. Global exposure is bound

to create such anomalies. Whatever it is, tantra has come to stay, in some form or the other, as a path for the Kali Yuga. And, Sri Ramakrishna's tantra *darshana* is the imperishable, dynamic factor which brought about this amazing phenomenon. 'Desire' minus its undesirable consequences: that seems the mantra for societies inundated by unlimited consumerism.

Sri Ramakrishna's Kali brought the Divine Feminine to the forefront. As John Selby says: 'There is no question that a woman's womb and her heart are intimately connected, as a natural condition for successful motherhood. Therefore, moving one's kundalini energies up into the higher chakras especially into the central heart chakra is considered easier for a woman than a man.'75 Sri Ramakrishna tantra would say 'Amen



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to that!' Let the journey into tantric joy exercise its prerogatives!

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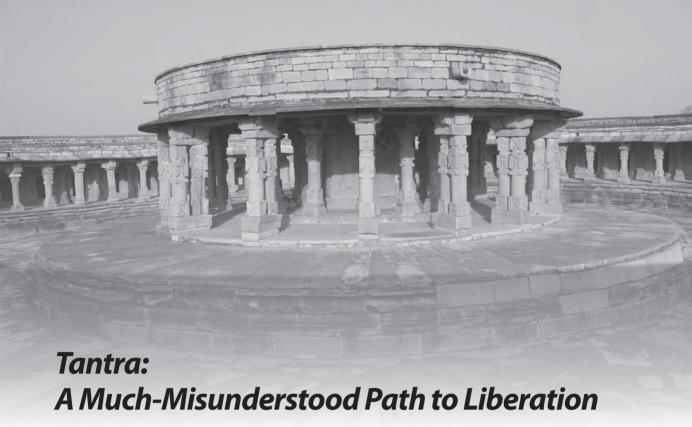
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#### Dhumavati, the Widow Goddess





**Jeffery D Long** 

## Introduction: A Misunderstood Spiritual Path

ANTRA. The word brings to mind a vast range of images and connotations, some positive and some extremely negative. How any given person views tantra will depend on a range of factors, including that person's cultural background and general orientation towards spirituality and the formal religious and moral conventions of one's society. In the minds of many, tantra is associated or even identified fully with practices that defy most traditional standards of moral purity, both in India and in the West: practices called by scholars *antinomian*. These practices include transgressive

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sexual behaviours and even, in some cases, cannibalism. Depending on how conservative a person might be, this image of tantra will inspire either revulsion and disapproval or great excitement at the thought of a spiritual path that allows—indeed requires—the free indulgence of the senses. Both types of reaction can be found in both India and in the West, though it is probably fair to say that the first kind of reaction—revulsion and disapproval—has been more common in India and the second—excitement and intense interest—has come to characterise Western approaches to tantra—a pronounced shift from the Victorian period, when tantra began to attract the attention of the Western world, reflecting the broader shift that has occurred over the last century in Western attitudes towards sexuality and sensuality.

Both types of reaction, however—positive and negative—are based upon a profound misunderstanding of what tantra truly is. Can antinomian practices be found in certain tantric traditions and given justification on the basis of tantric philosophy? Certainly. Are these practices in any way representative of tantra as a whole? Certainly not.

Finally, it is worth pointing out to the readers of *Prabuddha Bharata*, although many will already be aware of this fact, that tantra played a central role in the spiritual path of Sri Ramakrishna, and is therefore not something to be easily dismissed.

What is tantra, then? And why is it that so many people both in India and in the West have gotten it wrong? And finally, what was the role of tantra in the spiritual life of Sri Ramakrishna? Although entire volumes could be, and have been, written on these topics, these are the questions that this essay hopes to address in a concise and succinct fashion.

## What Is Tantra? The Complex Question of Tantric Origins

Tantra could be characterised most broadly as a style or even as a repertoire of spiritual practice. What does this mean? First, it means that though what could be called purely tantric systems of practice exist, such as Kaula Tantra and Srividya, elements of tantra can be found across a wide range of systems. These include the mainstreams of both Hindu and Buddhist practice, and even some facets of Jain practice. This means that elements of Hindu practice not generally associated with tantra, such as the recitation of mantras, meditation on yantras, and even image worship and the architecture of many Hindu temples, are rooted in tantric philosophy. So, even many Hindus who could not properly be called tantrics partake, nevertheless, of some aspects of tantra.

How did this style of spiritual practice

originate? And what is the philosophical position that underlies it, and to which it gives expression? The question of the origins of tantra is as mysterious as the question of the origins of religion itself, and as productive of creative theories among scholars. Texts known as tantras and the schools of thought that produce them first appear, according to contemporary scholarship, around the middle of the first millennium CE in India. Many, however, point out that this style of practice may be far more ancient than this. Some even point to the Indus Valley Civilization, also known as the Harappan or Indus-Saraswati Civilisation, as a possible source of tantra. This hypothesis is of course highly speculative, as is anything definite regarding Indus Valley culture, until the mysterious writing system of this civilisation is deciphered.

Marxist scholar Debiprasad Chattopadhyay connects tantra with the materialist system of Indian philosophy known as Charvaka or Lokayata, finding common elements in the thinking of these two systems.<sup>2</sup> In support of this view, it could be noted that the Lokayata system is traditionally traced to the Vedic sage Brihaspati, and that there is a text in the Srividya tradition called the Barhaspatya Tantra—a tantric text also attributed to the sage Brihaspati. Chattopadhyay, however, and most other scholars emphasise the non-Vedic nature of tantra, suggesting that the Vedic and tantric systems grew up alongside one another. In these accounts, tantra either emerges as a reaction against Vedic thought and practice or it is an older indigenous system that asserts itself against Vedic religion as the latter is carried by its brahminical adherents from the northwestern part of India to the rest of the subcontinent. Again, tantra as such does not emerge definitively until the middle of the first millennium CE, so the system that scholars postulate as having existed prior to this period might best be seen as 'Proto-tantric' or 'Pre-tantric.'





Harappa Indus Valley Civilisation Mohenjo-daro

Given the nature of tantra as a spiritual style, rather than as a well-defined system of philosophy and practice, it is also difficult to make strong assertions about how Vedic or non-Vedic, or even anti-Vedic, tantra might be; for these two systems actually share a great deal in common. Both, for example, make extensive use of mantras, including bija or monosyllabic 'seed' mantras, and both operate according to ritual principles in which certain physical items and gestures stand in for broader spiritual realities. In fact, these ritual principles are, to some extent, shared by magical and religious traditions from all over the world. They may point to a common point of origin or to a universal instinct in human beings to shape the world around them through ritualistic performance. In both a Vedic and a tantric ritual, one can see the history of the cosmos—its emergence from a state of pure potential to an ordered universe, and then its self-transcendence into a state of pure consciousness—enacted.

One could conceivably argue that tantra emerged from Vedic practice, or even vice versa, or—as seems most likely—that each is an originally independent practice and that the two of them have interacted and influenced one another extensively through the course of the centuries. This process has certainly been facilitated by the peculiar genius of the people of India for combining and integrating aspects of many spiritual paths into one. In any case, the origins of both systems

remain mysterious and difficult to define. In the words of religion scholar Brian K Smith, 'attempts at locating the temporal and cultural origins of Tantrism remain theoretical and speculative.' 3

At least some of the mystery that surrounds the origins and even the subsequent history of tantra is no doubt a deliberate effect of the fact that a major factor in tantric practice is an element of secrecy. Tantric rituals are esoteric or occult in nature. That is, their practitioners see them as possessing great power and significance. These practices and their deeper meanings are intended only for those whom an experienced practitioner deems worthy—that is, possessed of the spiritual maturity to receive this knowledge and to be entrusted with its responsible use. A true tantric practitioner thus must receive *diksha* or initiation into the practice by a guru or teacher, in a tantric lineage.

Again, this esoteric character of tantra is shared by other traditions, including the Vedic traditions. Vedic secret knowledge—knowledge imparted directly from teacher to student—is indeed what makes up the Upanishads. In the Vedic case, though, the secret is out. The Upanishads have now been widely circulated, translated into various languages, and so on; though there remain passages within the Upanishads whose meaning remains mysterious, and which could probably only be fully understood if one were able to travel back in time and learn directly from



a Vedic sage. Similarly, the concept of initiation and the practice of imparting a secret mantra from guru to *shishya*, from teacher to student, are forms of tantric esotericism that are shared by other Hindu traditions, including Vedanta.

Many tantric texts, however, remain untranslated, and many of those which have been translated are still extremely difficult, if not impossible, to understand fully. They utilise *sandhya bhasha*, 'twilight language', a kind of secret code of symbolism that is known only to those who have been initiated.<sup>4</sup> No doubt one reason for the association of tantra in the minds of many with sexual promiscuity is the fact that much symbolism that is used in the *sandhya bhasha* is of a sexual nature. Thus a text which may, on its surface, appear to be speaking very

graphically about the interactions of the male and female sex organs may actually be speaking about the relationship of mind and pure consciousness. The graphic imagery turns away those who lack the spiritual maturity to delve deeply into the meaning of the text—prudishness being as much a mark of attachment to the physical as licentiousness, and often a cover for the latter—and the true meaning remains obscured to the uninitiated—to those who are not spiritually ready to handle it. Thus the 'filthy' language used in many tantric texts acts as a kind of filter, to weed out those who are not able to see past the surface of the material world to the spiritual reality that underlies it.

All of this secrecy and esotericism, while certainly serving a spiritual purpose and having

a spiritual rationale, does not make at all easy, the job of a scholar who wishes to understand the history of this tradition. A scholar might be tempted to take initiation into a tantric tradition specifically to learn more about it. Such a scholar, however, is then in an ethical quandary; for she or he is now bound by the sacred vows of secrecy that are entailed by tantric initiation, which conflict with one's duty as a scholar to write and teach about what one has learned. The study of tantra thus places the scholar, certainly the one who does first-hand field research, in a difficult position. This has only added to the confusion surrounding tantra among the wider public, for it can be quite difficult to discern which sources of information about this mysterious tradition are truly trustworthy and which are compromised—and perhaps even deliberately obfuscated to preserve tantric secrecy.

## The Philosophy of Tantra

While much about tantra remains mysterious, however, there is also a great deal that can be known and which has been made public—knowledge that can go some distance towards dispelling misconceptions about this tradition.

Again, tantra is a style or repertoire of spiritual practice. Though there are purely tantric systems, which we shall discuss in a moment, tantric elements can be found in a great variety of Indic spiritual systems. If elements of tantra can be utilised by schools of thought as diverse as Shakta, Shaiva, and Vaishnava Hindus, Mahayana Buddhists, Jains, and others, it is clearly a practice with enormous flexibility, and not a rigid or dogmatic system incapable of compromise or transfer across ideological boundaries.

There is, nevertheless, a basic conceptual core that ties together the vast range of tantric practices that exist. What is the fundamental philosophy of tantra?

Tantric philosophy can most easily be presented by way of contrast with another major thread of Indic spirituality, which one could, for want of a better term, call yogic. This is not intended to refer specifically to the yoga philosophy of Patanjali. Nor is it meant to suggest a conflict between what I am calling the tantric and the yogic movements of Indian thought, much less another origin story for tantra. It is intended simply to shed a light on certain assumptions that cut across the many systems of tantra that exist, and the use of tantric elements in what are generally regarded as non-tantric systems.

By the yogic thread of Indic spirituality, I am referring to a style of practice—a spiritual repertoire—that, like tantra, is shared across many systems, but that is in many ways a mirror image or reversal of tantra. The yogic style of spiritual practice, which can be found, of course, in Patanjali's yoga system, but also in Vedanta, Buddhism, and Jainism, is based on the idea of withdrawal from the senses and sensory objects in order to focus inwardly: on the mind, and eventually beyond the mind, to the very nature of consciousness itself.

How this process of inward concentration is conceived, of course, varies depending upon the spiritual tradition in which the yogic practice occurs. Patanjali's system, which shares the vocabulary of the Sankhya system of philosophy, conceives the center of pure consciousness as the Purusha, which one is seeking to differentiate and distinguish from Prakriti, or material nature. Vedanta sees the basis of pure consciousness as Brahman, the ground of all being. The Vedantic practitioner seeks to realise one's nature as Brahman by cultivating detachment from material objects and from the fruits of actions as described in the Bhagavadgita. In Buddhism, the practitioner is to see the ultimate unreality of the individual self and realise the truth of No Self.

In the Jain tradition, one seeks to realise the pure nature of the the soul or living being that is free from the limitations of materiality.

For all these iterations of the yogic style of practice, materiality, the realm of the senses, is problematic. It is that which is to be escaped in favour of the realisation of a non-material spiritual reality or transcendent principle. All of the various practices that are associated with the yogic spiritual style are built upon this ultimate aim of finding the highest truth through an experience of intense inwardness, shutting out the realm of the senses as a distraction: closing the eyes, breathing deeply, focusing on the breath, letting distracting thoughts melt away and shutting them out, one-pointed concentration, and so on.

Tantra, by contrast, can be seen as the path of

Hevajra and Nairatmya, Surrounded by a Retinue of Eight Dakinis in the Tantric Practices of the Shakya School of Tibetan Buddhism.



transcending the senses not by the shutting out or denial of the senses, but *by means of* the senses. Unlike the yogic style of practice, which sees the desires evoked by sensory objects as obstacles to be overcome, tantra sees these desires as energies that can be redirected productively towards the aim of spiritual liberation.

This aim—moksha or liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth and the effects of karma—is shared by both yogic and tantric spiritualities. Again, these two are not to be seen as necessarily in opposition, but as differing paths to the same ultimate end.

From a yogic perspective, one can understand why tantra is often perceived as a dangerous path; for in practice, there is a very fine line between utilising the desire for sensory objects as a source of spiritual energy to use on the path to liberation and simply indulging such desire. Tantric traditions themselves are aware of this danger, which is why serious tantric practice, as already mentioned, requires initiation by an experienced teacher, and is often shrouded in secrecy. It is not a practice for which everyone is fit.

At the same time, practitioners within yogic traditions became aware, around the middle of the first millennium CE, of the spiritual heights that could be attained by means of tantric practice, and began to integrate elements of tantra into their own systems. It is at this point that one begins to find tantric practices and sensibilities starting to infuse traditions such as Vaishnavism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The use of mantras, for example, meditation on geometric patterns such as yantras and mandalas, and the construction of beautiful temples designed to physically recreate the spiritual journey to higher realms—all become prominent features of practice within these traditions during this period.

Among these traditions, Buddhism was probably the most transformed through its

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integration of tantric elements and philosophies, giving rise to what is sometimes seen as an entirely new yana or vehicle for the attainment of awakening: the Vajrayana. Tantric Buddhism, philosophically, is an extension of Mahayana Buddhism. It incorporates the tantric practice and sensibility into the Bodhisattva path. Its very name, Vajrayana, is an indicator of this sensibility. The term vajra itself has a double meaning, evocative of the sandhya bhasha, with its hidden meanings and connotations. A vajra is a thunderbolt—the weapon of the Vedic deity Indra—but it is also a diamond. This double meaning conveys an idea of the quality of the state of awakening to which Vajrayana practice is intended to lead. Such awakening comes in a flash, like a thunderbolt, rapidly transforming the one who pursued this practice. But it is also a steady and unshakable state, a concept evoked by the image of the hardness of a diamond. In some texts, this path is also referred to as the Mantrayana, which highlights the importance of mantras in this practice.

The importance of Vajrayana practice in the wider Buddhist world is shown by the prominence of this form of Buddhism in particular regions. The dominant forms of Tibetan Buddhism, historically, have all been tantric; and Vajrayana is the Buddhism of Nepal, Bhutan, and the Himalayan regions of India as well. Tantric Buddhism was also transmitted into China, Korea, and Japan. Two of the major systems of contemporary Buddhism in Japan, Shingon and Tendai, are both thoroughly tantric.

The incorporation of tantric elements into Vaishnava practice was eased, no doubt, by the fact that Vaishnava traditions are already deeply rooted in bhakti—the practice of intense devotion to the personal form of the Supreme Lord. Bhakti, like tantra, channels the emotions toward a spiritual end—in this case, emotions of intense love and

devotion. In their focus on cultivation, rather than suppression, of emotional energies, as well as their disregard for traditional strictures relating to social status or 'caste', the traditions of bhakti and of tantra could be seen to share a common sensibility.

The tradition that was most resistant to tantra was Jainism. The eighth century Shvetambara Jain philosopher, Haribhadrasuri, who is probably best known for his broad-minded religious pluralism and openness to seeing the truth in a variety of spiritual paths, was sharply critical of tantric practice. The centrality of cultivating moral purity and restraint of sensory desires in the Jain path made it very difficult to reconcile with tantra. Nevertheless, even Jains incorporated tantric elements into their practice during this time in the form of beautiful and elaborate temples, the use of spiritual diagrams such as yantras and mandalas, and the recitation of mantras, including *bija* mantras.

Similarly to Jainism, the Theravada tradition of Buddhism was more resistant to tantric elements than was Mahayana. As with Jainism, Theravada conservatism, with its emphasis on closely adhering to the path of the Buddha, with little or no innovation, did not lend itself to the incorporation of tantric elements on a large scale.

The traditions that have the strongest associations with tantra, though, are the Shaiva and Shakta traditions of Hinduism. Indeed, the Shakta traditions are, for all intents and purposes, synonymous with tantra. The sacred texts known as tantras, from which the tantric tradition takes its name, are overwhelmingly Shakta texts. The Shakta traditions are of course centered on the worship of Shakti, the Mother Goddess, who embodies the power, *shakti*, of creation. Indeed, one reason for the aforementioned speculation that the tantric system might be traceable to the Indus Valley Civilisation is the fact that Goddess worship appears to have been a prominent

part of the religion of that ancient culture. The deity Shiva, being the husband of Shakti, the Shaiya, and Shakta traditions share many things in common, including a deeply tantric sensibility. In addition to the Shakta traditions, the Kashmiri Shaiya tradition, too, could be considered a purely tantric system of thought and practice, systematised by the Shaiva philosopher,

Abhinavagupta, in the late tenth century CE.

At the heart of tantric philosophy is the idea that Shakti is not only the power of creation, but that all of existence is her manifestation. This is the tantric version of non-dualism or Advaita. In contrast with the mainstream interpretations of Advaita Vedanta, in which Brahman is real and the world an illusion, tantric Advaita teaches that the world is a real and true manifestation or transformation of the Divine Mother. Maya is seen in tantra not as a deluding illusion, but as a creative power by which the Mother Goddess brings all things into being, thus giving expression to her infinite glory. Or rather, maya is deluding if one fails to see the Divine Mother within all things, but conducive to liberation if one sees the world as nothing but the reflection of her beauty.

This is the tantric version of the 'two truths' doctrine of the Mahayana Buddhist master Nagarjuna and the Advaita Vedanta master Acharya Shankara. The material realm is non-different from the realm of awakening. Reality as perceived through the lens of ignorance is samsara. The same reality, perceived truly, is nirvana. Reality itself is one.



Three Vajrayana Ritual Implements: Vajra, Rosary, and Bell

Sri Ramakrishna expresses this tantric sensibility when he invokes the distinction between *vidya*-maya and *avidya*-maya:

This universe is created by the Mahamaya of God. Mahamaya contains both vidyamaya, the illusion of knowledge, and avidyamaya, the illusion of ignorance. Through the help of vidyamaya one cultivates such virtues as the taste for holy company, knowledge, de-

votion, love, and renunciation. Avidyamaya consists of the five elements and the objects of the five senses—form, flavor, smell, touch, and sound. These make one forget God.<sup>6</sup>

The aim of tantric practice is therefore to effect a revolution in the awareness of the practitioner—to shift the practitioner from the state of *avidya*-maya, perceiving a world of persons and objects which are separable into 'pure' and 'impure,' to the state of *vidya*-maya, or wisdom, in which God is all and all is God.

## Tantric Subtle Physiology: Kundalini Shakti and the System of Nadis and Chakras

One of the most distinctive features of tantra is its subtle physiology. According to tantra, co-existing with the physical body or gross body, and also occupying the same space are various subtle bodies. The idea of subtle bodies is of course an ancient one, and can also be found in the Upanishads—such as the idea of the *koshas*, or 'sheaths,' surrounding the *atman*, or Self; the *ananda-maya-kosha*, or body of bliss, the *vijnana-maya-kosha*, or body of consciousness, the *mano-maya-kosha*, or

mental body, the *prana-maya-kosha*, the body of vital energy, and the *anna-maya-kosha*, the outermost 'food body,' or physical body.

Tantra, however, describes a highly complex subtle body made up of seventy-two thousand *nadis*, or nerve channels, which fill almost the entire space of the physical body, and which, when depicted visually, appear not unlike the physical nervous system as it is known to medical science. Much like the physical nervous system, the complex of *nadis* connects to a central channel, the *sushumna nadi*, which corresponds to the spinal cord.

Along the *sushumna nadi* are located a series of seven subtle energy centers known as chakras. Each chakra is associated with a different type of emotional and spiritual state. The bottommost chakra, located in the space corresponding with the base of the spine, the *muladhara* chakra, 'symbolizes immanence, physical limitation, and bondage'. In most persons, a powerful subtle energy lies coiled within this chakra. This energy or *shakti*, is the immanent presence of Shakti, the Mother Goddess, in all beings. The aim of much of tantric practice is to awaken this coiled or kundalini *shakti* and cause it to ascend up the *sushumna nadi*.

As the kundalini energy ascends, it activates each of the chakras in succession, thus unleashing the energies associated with them. Just above the *muladhara* chakra, in the area of the navel, is the *svadhishthana* chakra, which is associated with 'lust (*kama*), greed (*lobha*), delusion (*moha*), pride (*mada*), and envy (*matsarya*)' (ibid.). Next, in the area of the solar plexus, is the *manipura* chakra, which is associated with the power of creation and destruction. Above this chakra, is the all-important *anahata* chakra, or heart chakra, which is associated with the higher spiritual emotions of compassion and devotion. This chakra is given a strong emphasis in many traditions, and is in fact depicted in the *Katha Upanishad* as the

dwelling place of the Self within the body. Above this chakra is the vishuddha chakra, located in the area of the throat and connected with purity. Then there is the *ajna* chakra, located in the space just above and between the eyebrows. This chakra is also known as the 'Third Eye', because of its location, but also because of its association with the cultivation of spiritual perception. Finally, at the very top of the head, and corresponding with the physical brain, is the sahasrara chakra or 'thousand-petalled lotus'. The aim of tantric practice is to cause the kundalini chakra to rise, energising and illuminating all of the chakras, culminating in the sahasrara chakra. In some texts, the illumination of this last chakra is equated with the experiences of awakening and liberation.

### **Sources of Controversy**

The spiritual power that is unleashed with the rising of the kundalini shakti is such that, again, many yogic masters from a variety of traditions have been attracted to tantric practice, in order to make use of the energies inherent in the subtle body as an aid to the attainment of spiritual goals. It is also the case, however, that this practice has attracted those who are interested in becoming powerful for worldly reasons. Tantric practice that is pursued with the aim of achieving magical powers, rather than for the sake of spiritual awakening, could be seen as the Indic equivalent of what is known in the West as 'black magic'. One reason for the negative reputation that tantra has in many parts of India is the existence of persons who have, indeed, cultivated tantric practice in order to exercise control over others. This is of course another reason that serious tantric teachers are not willing to pass on their knowledge to those students whom they regard as lacking in the spiritual maturity needed to handle the power of the kundalini shakti responsibly.

Yet another source of controversy and of

negative perceptions is the existence of bona fide tantric traditions that, in the name of cultivating a state of non-dual awareness in their practitioners, encourage them to engage in practices that would normally be seen as impure in conventional society. One of the most extreme examples of such a tradition is the Shaiva Aghori or 'free from terror' sect. Aghori practice is designed both to express and to cultivate a state beyond fear. It includes meditating in cremation grounds, which are normally regarded as unclean places, and even eating the corpses of the dead, in order to overcome the sense of disgust. The begging bowl of an Aghori monk is a human skull.

Though regarded as extreme by mainstream Hindu society, one can see the philosophical rationale for Aghori practice in the teaching that all of reality—including those parts that are normally seen as unclean, impure, or terrifying—are but manifestations of the infinite and pure consciousness that is the ground of all being. If all of reality is truly one, then 'pure' and 'impure' are illusions—dualities created by an unenlightened consciousness. Tantra breaks beyond such duality in a dramatic and powerful fashion.

Tantric practices involving ritualised sexual activity—practices intended not for monastic practitioners, but for householders—and intended to harness the power of sexual desire in order to awaken the kundalini energy are another source of controversy, and of negative perceptions of tantra. As with the use of tantra to gain magical powers, the use of tantric practice merely as a sexual indulgence is something that the guardians of the tradition, the gurus of tantric lineages, seek to guard against by initiating only those that they see as spiritually ready to engage in and benefit from such practices without falling into lust and attachment. However, with the rise of sexual freedom in the Western world, many in the West have been drawn to tantra as a path that affirms the inherent

divinity of sexuality, and the potential for sexuality to lead to a state of spiritual freedom. Mixed with what is clearly a genuine sense of the immanent presence of the divine in all aspects of human existence, there are also those who—as with Yoga in the West—see tantra only as a way to enhance their sensory experience. Versions of tantra marketed to Western audiences therefore often bear little resemblance to the spiritual paths developed in India. This creates yet another source of negative reaction by mainstream Hindus to tantra—or that which passes itself off as tantra.<sup>8</sup>

## Tantra in the Sadhana of Sri Ramakrishna

As we have already seen, Sri Ramakrishna expresses a tantric understanding of the nature of existence in his account of maya. And as a priest of the Goddess Kali, the most tantric of Hindu deities, he certainly had an intimate awareness of tantra. In fact, Bengali culture generally has a strong tantric undercurrent, Bengal being a part of India where tantra and Shakta traditions have been especially prevalent. According to the accounts of Sri Ramakrishna's life and spiritual practice, he spent a substantial amount of the period of his life that was dedicated to sadhana under the tutelage of a tantric teacher, the Bhairavi Brahmani.

As with the numerous other sadhanas or spiritual practices that Sri Ramakrishna undertook, it is said that he achieved the ultimate state to which tantra is aimed: the awakening of the kundalini *shakti*. 'He actually saw the Power, at first lying asleep at the bottom of the spinal column, then waking up and ascending along the mystic Sushumna canal and through its six centres, or lotuses to the Sahasrara, the thousand-petalled lotus in the top of the head. He further saw that as the Kundalini went upward the different lotuses bloomed. And this phenomenon was accompanied by visions and trances.'9

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## Conclusion: An Important Dimension of Indian and Global Spiritual Heritage

In practising tantric spirituality, alongside various Vaishnava devotional practices, Advaita Vedanta, Christianity, and Islam, Sri Ramakrishna shows that this path, like the others, is a valid and effective path to God-realisation. Like the Jain master Haribhadra, Sri Ramakrishna did not recommend the more extreme or vamachara, 'left-handed' tantra to his followers. He said, for example, that 'it is extremely difficult to practise spiritual discipline looking on woman as one's mistress. To regard oneself as her child is a very pure attitude' (123). He also condemned the pursuit of tantra for gaining magical powers, saying that 'one cannot get rid of maya as long as one exercises supernatural powers' (285). But he also defended the practice of tantra to those who were sceptical of it and also went into great detail in teaching his disciples about the kundalini *shakti* and the chakras (311, 499–500).

Tantra, a spirituality which affirms the inherent divinity of the world and calls its practitioners to see and experience God in all things, is fundamentally compatible with the deepest teaching of Vedanta: 'All this world, all reality, is indeed Brahman.'

In a time when the physical world has been devalued as mere raw material for the fulfilment of our desires, leading us to environmental catastrophe, the tantric sense of the universe as the body of the Divine Mother could help to fuel an ecological ethos that would facilitate more respectful treatment of the Earth and the life forms which inhabit it. And in a time when the unbridled pursuit of sensual desire has similarly led us to the brink of disaster, the spiritualisation of the sensual might lead, again, to a more respectful and less exploitive attitude toward other persons, especially towards women, who would be seen as forms of the Goddess. There is much to be gained from tantric wisdom; and



the example of Sri Ramakrishna encourages us to discern this wisdom and learn from it.

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## **Tantra: Embodied Enlightenment**

#### Rita D Sherma

HE IDEA OF SACRED IMMANENCE, the affirmation of the force and presence of the supreme Reality in every dimension of the manifest universe, is powerfully expressed in Shakta theology and is the hallmark of tantric Shaktism. Models of the Mahadevi represented by Shakta strains in Hindu theology expand the roles of the Divine Feminine, and associate

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Shakti with transcendence as well as immanence. It is, however, an emphasis on the sacred nature of *this world* and the valorisation of earthly life that especially distinguishes Shakta theology.

The term 'Shakti' appears early in Vedic literature where it tends to denote some sort of potency, capability, or service. The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* describes a Supreme Being who, by the manifold application of his creative power, his *shakti*, manifests the polymorphous universe. The conceptualisation of Shakti as

a creative force inherent in all things began its development in the philosophical literature of the classical period but did not represent a fully systematised principle representing a universal Feminine Divinity with cosmogonic, soteriological, liberative, and theistic significance until the sixth century CE with the appearance of the Devi Mahatmyam, which is the first elaboration of the theology of the universal Goddess, Mahadevi, or Shakti. It melds together various philosophical constructs—such as Shakti, maya, Prakriti, and the notion of ultimate Reality—to create the portrait of the great Goddess, Mahadevi. The text portrays her as the causal agent of creation and implicitly identifies her with the ground of Being—thus crowning her with transcendence.<sup>3</sup>

By the early medieval period, a more extensive and nuanced development of a theology of Shakti occurs in the soteriological structure of an orientation identifiable as tantra, which offers a profound and detailed system of Shakti worship and enfolds, within its tradition of praxis, the glorification of the feminine, not only as nurturing aspects of Shakti or Mahadevi, but as embodiments of her manifold energies: creative, dissolutive, veiling, and enlightening. Tantra draws on various ancient, indigenous, village, and primal practices, as well as the legacy of Vedic rites. In doing so, it articulates methods of connecting with the pervasive but diffuse powers of Shakti in order to channel these energies for spiritual or material benefit. The life and needs of the householder are not devalued or perceived as an obstacle to liberation; nor are women, who are explicitly identified with Shakti, the feminine principle in tantra.

In all of India's prolific philosophical output, no system born of the soil of Indian thought has attracted as much controversy as the religious practices of tantra. The reason for this is simply that tantra dared to uphold, in practice, the

notion of divine immanence that it enshrines in doctrine. That is, that an essential unity underlies all phenomenal existence, that one consciousness pervades all life, male and female, the brahmin and the outcaste, the incense-scented temple, and acrid smoke-filled cremation ground; and is expressed in the rich diversity of the manifold universe. To bring down the doctrine of divine immanence to the level of practice, some tantric sects, for example, *kula-marga*, have felt it necessary to sacralise and consecrate activities and places deemed impure or profane according to orthodox norms.

Tantra asserted that since all life was thus imbued with the energy of the Divine, all activity was also thus imbued. The profession of the weaver or the potter is, in essence, no different from the cosmic viewpoint, than that of a priest or scholar. The practices of tantra challenge the existence of abuses arising out of varna-jati related distinctions, sexism, and classism; philosophical teachings rendered inaccessible to the lower economic classes and women; religious practices mired in a complex of ritual purity rules; and life fraught with taboos. Moreover, it has been assumed in orthopraxy that to begin a journey of spiritual realisation, it was first necessary to forsake the material, physical, and emotional content of life.

Tantra maintains that life is sacred and that enlightenment should be found in the rhythm and flow of natural living. What is required is a suspension of preconceived notions of physical reality. While we see through the veil of dualism, we will be repulsed by the charnel ground and uplifted before a temple gate; contemptuous of the street sweeper and reverent towards the priest; terrified of death and clinging fearfully to life. When the veil of maya or the prism of dualism lifts from our vision, we see through enlightened eyes the one shimmering field of

energy that holds all existence together. We see that we are also part of this timeless field and thus are also eternal. With the illumined mind we do not denigrate this life; we simply enhance our experience of it immeasurably. This, then, is true enlightenment—embodied enlightenment—according to the tantric vision.

The sacred texts of tantra are mostly anonymous. They are numerous and are categorised into three groups: agamas, nigamas, and yamalas, and are in the form of instructional dialogues between divinities, often, Shiva and a form of Mahadevi. For example, the type of tantra in which Shiva addresses Parvati is known as agama; whereas, nigama generally indicates a revelation by Parvati to Shiva. The original tantras can be grouped into sections according to deities, that is, Shaiva agama for worshippers of Shiva, Vaishnava agama for devotees of Vishnu, Shakta *nigama* for those who hold Shakti as the supreme Divine. The tantra literature was developed over a long period of time; the earliest texts date back to the early part of the common era: some were assembled as late as the last century. Tantra became a significant and distinct movement during India's medieval period, eighth to twelfth centuries CE, and continues to be a living tradition to the present day.

The roots of tantra are shrouded in the mists of antiquity. Tantric ritual symbols are found in the Harappan culture, Indus Valley civilisation, in the form of yogic postures and in Mother Goddess icons. In tantric theology the Mahadevi or Shakti is the creative and sustaining, as well as the dissolutive or re-absorptive power underlying the manifest cosmos. She is the matrix of the universe and, as *mula*-Prakriti, its foundational material substance. Hence, she fully permeates the world. Indeed, Shakti does not employ a specific power or force to create the world—ultimately, she *is* the world, and all

its diverse forms are aspects of her being. This insight offers a potential paradigmatic theological framework towards a Hindu eco-theological perspective.

## The Tantric Theological Paradigm

Since we see, feel, and think in dualities, tantra regards a dyadic model to be the most effective starting point for practices aimed at the eventual transcendence of dualistic conceptions. This, indeed, is what tantra does when it uses the Shiva-Shakti construct. We perceive life in black or white, good or evil, masculine or feminine. The Shiva-Shakti model of divine forces uses this universal tendency effectively. Tantra worships the Divine as these two principles masculine and feminine, Being and Becoming, static ground of consciousness and dynamic field of energy. From the eternal Brahman, emanates Shiva, parama-Purusha, the masculine aspect, timeless Being, pure potentiality, primal consciousness and Shakti, the Divine Mother, the dynamic power of Becoming, the origin of created form, and the cause of time. She mediates between the absolute and the relative, between the eternal and the ever-changing. The cosmos is a synthesis of this pair of polarities and thus is, in essence, dyadic as opposed to monistic or dualistic. Distinct phenomena neither melt into a unity in which their individual qualities are subsumed, nor do they exist in independent solitude wrapped in their distinctness. This universal truth is symbolised by the masculine and feminine principles which are seen by the illumined mind not as two separate entities or as one being, but as a dyadic or twofold unity. In this bi-unity, each mutually interpenetrates the other, is inseparable from it, and is co-necessary with it.

Since it is the feminine principle which is the creative aspect of the divine, the intermediary

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between the absolute and the relative, tantra gives this dynamic divine power a face—a feminine face. In the mind of the worshipper, all life, all that exists becomes infused with sanctity because she or he experiences the presence of the Divine Mother of the universe in all phenomena. Only the gossamer threads of duality separate us from this understanding.

The play of Shakti is eternal. Her energy moves in orderly cycles of dynamism and rest. During periods of motion, the energy undergoes changes and alterations; it reorganises itself during the period of rest and, thus, the continuous process of creation, preservation, dissolution, reorganisation, and recreation continue ad infinitum. It is important to remember that in tantra, Shiva and Shakti are not meant to be reduced to gender stereotypes. Shakti does not preclude or precede Shiva; they are part of each other. Shakti is thought of as feminine because she is the productive, creative principle. However, all docile female stereotypes are shattered when one contemplates Shakti in her destructive phase.

### The Concept of Shakti in Tantric Theology

The concept of Shakti is found as far back as Vedic literature. But Shakti as a fully systematised cosmogonic and cosmological feminine principle arises primarily on the margins of orthoprax Vedic-Brahmanical tradition, in the tantric and Shakta sacred texts. Three primary foci can be identified in the development of the concept of Shakti: a creative ability, perceived as feminine and described as the consort or aspect of a male divinity; the notion of a cosmogonic power possessed by a single supreme Being, signifying creative ability but not necessarily identified as feminine; and an all-pervasive divine power inherent in creation.<sup>5</sup> These various perspectives on the concept of Shakti eventually fused and gave rise to the notion of the Feminine



Divine who represented the power of her divine masculine consort to manifest the cosmos.

The further development of the principle of Shakti into the Mahadevi first occurs in the sixth century text, Devi Mahatmyam, which signifies 'The Glorification of the Goddess', found in the Markandeya Purana. In the Devi Mahatmyam, various conceptions of the feminine principle—Prakriti, maya, Shakti—combine with the ideal of an ultimate Reality to create a great Goddess who is the power inherent in creation and dissolution. She is the primordial material substance, mula-prakriti, endowed with the creative impulse, ichchha-shakti, formless, shunyarupa, yet the matrix of all forms, transcendent but immanent. In this text, many mythic representations of female deity are merged into the great Goddess as her aspects. Thus, in the Devi Mahatmyam, the distinct theologies of regional goddesses merge with the universal theology of

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the great Goddess. An important development in this text is its departure from the normative understanding of Shakti as the capacity or power of a supreme masculine divinity. Here, the feminine principle has self-agency and complete autonomy—she is the Absolute. While the entire cosmos is the material form of the Mahadevi, she is specifically identified with women.<sup>6</sup> However, this identification was not emphasised in the ritualised Shakta traditions. While the emergence of the Shaiva bhakti movement allowed women a certain degree of spiritual self-agency, the Shakta priestly tradition and devotion directed towards Shakti developed into a sphere, which moved away from empowering the spiritual authority and self-agency of women. It is only in Shaktatantra that the divine-human identification for women is emphasised, and women's right to spiritual authority and self-determination affirmed. As Payne noted: 'Shaktism and Tantra form two intersecting but not coinciding circles.'7

The philosopher Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta has identified three viewpoints on the relationship between Shiva and Shakti: Shiva and Shakti are two aspects of the same truth—static and dynamic, transcendent and immanent, masculine and feminine, and absolute reality is a state of unity between the two, *samarasa*; Shiva is the Ultimate Being to which Shakti eternally belongs; nevertheless, neither is real without the other; Shiva is *shava*, like a corpse, without her dynamic power, and Shakti has no existence without him; Shakti is the highest Reality and Shiva is her support—she is the ultimate power of which he is merely the container, *adhara*. 8

It is in this third aspect that she is often referred to as Lalita Devi in the Puranas, Tripurasundari or Mahakali in the tantras. The Shaiva *agama*s tend to support the second viewpoint and the Shakta tantras present either the first or the third perspective.

In tantra, the feminine principle is understood to be the kinetic aspect of consciousness. In tantric rituals, a woman is seen as the embodiment of the feminine principle representing cosmic creative energy, the underlying essence of reality. The feminine principle—although co-necessary with the masculine principle—is ontologically primary. According to tantric doctrine, Shakti contains all aspects of life: manifestation and dissolution, the sensual and the sublime, bliss and agony. The universal power of Shakti manifests as the phenomenal universe, a vast morphogenic field, and dissolves and merges once more into her. She represents the matrix of consciousness underlying universal life as chit-shakti, and is the source of all polarities, variance, and distinctions in her guise as maya-shakti. Commensurate with tantra's life-affirming standpoint, is the inclusion of all life experiences and sensory stimuli as potential vehicles for spiritual transformation since all forms and phenomena are imbued with the force of Shakti and thus are neither innately pure nor impure.

### Tantra and Divine Immanence

Tantra transforms Sankhya dualism into a bipolar view of reality which, in its final resolution, becomes a consummate non-dualism. Shakta tantra avoids rigid disjunctions between the mutable, morphogenic multiplicity of the phenomenal world and the unchanging, formless singularity of Brahman. Tantra accepts the Sankhya correlation between materiality with the feminine principle, here, Prakriti, but the latter is elevated in stature to accommodate tantric reverence for Shakti as the genetrix of the universe. Despite the fact that she is the principle of change and materiality, which certain other schools of thought may devalue, she is perceived as the ultimate Reality—transcendent as well as immanent, approachable, and all-pervasive.

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The *Mahanirvana Tantra* presents Shakti as the matrix of the universe of forms, the source into which the universe dissolves at the end of a great cosmic cycle and, in the vision of realisation, identical with Brahman. The text proclaims that 'whatsoever fruit is attained by the initiate in the Brahman-Mantra [a sadhana devoted to Brahman], the same may be had by the sadhana of Thee [Shakti]'. In the *Kulachudamani Nigama*, Shakti in the form of Bhairavi describes the first stage of her being as the quiescent, primordial, transcendent state where she is in blissful union with Shiva. This state is identified with ultimate Reality, Nirguna Brahman. 10

Some Shakta texts endow Shakti with an ontological primacy. Dasgupta maintains that there are tantric and puranic texts, which perceive Shakti as the paramount truth and Shiva as the *shaktiman*, the 'holder' of Shakti, as her masculine aspect: '[This] view makes Shakti the highest truth, and Shiva is conceived of as the support of Shakti. Shakti is the more important as the contained while Shiva is the container (adhara) ... It is from this point of view that the Mother worshippers would give a subsidiary place to Shiva, whereas Shakti as the Mother, is taken to be the highest.'<sup>11</sup>

Dasgupta identifies Tripurasundari in the tantras, and Lalita Devi in the Brahmanda Purana with this facet of Shakti. The *Vamakeshvara Tantra* expresses the primacy of Shakti, Tripurasundari in this text, in a way that clearly emphasises her autonomy and dynamic causative self-agency:

Tripura is the ultimate primordial Shakti, the light of manifestation. At dissolution She is the abode of all things (*tattvas*), still remaining herself [not merged into Shiva] ... After she emanates, there is no more need for the Lord. Devoid of Shakti, Shakta (Paramashiva) cannot act ... She becomes Shiva with no qualities, no characteristics, devoid of the form of Time ...

She becomes oneness, pure being ... She is pure spirit, and also the process of manifestation. <sup>12</sup>

Tantra recognises the divine presence within all persons regardless of gender, class, or varnajati. Kularnava Tantra, for example, proclaims that upon initiation into the tantric path, all status-based distinctions of caste and class dissolve. 13 The Mahanirvana Tantra asserts that even a chandala who has knowledge of Brahman is superior to a brahmin who does not possess this knowledge.14 The tantras encourage women's spirituality and confer on them the right to be a guru to male and female disciples. Indeed, in some texts, initiation by a female guru is considered the highest form of induction into tantric yoga. To the enlightened Shakta, the whole universe is Shakti but she is most powerfully manifest in the feminine way of being. Although the feminine principle has ontological equivalence with the masculine principle, it enjoys primacy in the spheres of ritual, devotion, and iconography.

Goddess Lalita Tripurasundari



Through a process of devolution, Shakti first manifests as *chit-shakti*, the power of consciousness, then maya-*shakti*, the veiling power of the Divine, and finally as embodied life in her form as Prakriti-*shakti*—materiality, nature, which births sentient beings. Because she is the force of consciousness inherent in all things and indeed, because all things are simply modes of her being, the natural world is imbued with sanctity.

### The Tantric Perception of Embodiment

From an ecological perspective—so critical now—the right perception of embodiment is of prime importance. A hedonistic view of bodily satisfaction leads to a life of craving and loss of care for the environment which is perceived as a resource for material goods for the gratification of the senses. A negative view of the body results in the devaluation of nature, which for each individual is experienced first and foremost in her or his physical being. Philosophy and knowledge may point the way to an enlightened consciousness in relation to ecology, but nature experienced through sights, sounds, scents, colour, texture, taste, and touch—all evoke far deeper echoes of feeling and resonate with our sense of being within the care of the natural world. Tantra endows embodiment with a positive valence and emphasises sensate experience in its ritual, honouring the order and functioning of nature in an immediate and intimate way. The human body is regarded very differently in tantra than in ascetic traditions. Of primary importance is that the tantric practitioner does not have to renounce ordinary life as tantra affirms the divine presence in all activity. Consequently, a practitioner can lead the life of a householder and simultaneously practise her or his sadhana without fear of contamination from the 'impurities' of everyday life.

In the tantric paradigm, there is no stark matter-spirit dichotomy splitting body and

consciousness in which the body is the devalued pole of the axis. In tantric doctrine, the body is not only the means of spiritual realisation; it also contains the truth which is to be realised. Tantra suggests that the ultimate reality underlying the universe is the same reality as that which forms the foundation of the embodied state. The microcosm reflects the macrocosm. Harsh ascetic practices mortifying the impure flesh are not recommended. Essential, instead, is the recognition and conscious emotional, cognitive, and physical realisation of the inherently pure nature of the body. The Kularnava Tantra suggests that the body encased in karma, is known as the jiva; freed from karma, it is Sadashiva, the supreme self. The cycle of life, seen as the stage on which the play of Shakti is enacted is sacred to tantra.

Sankhya-influenced soteriologies see the individual as consisting of both Prakriti and Purusha, but maintain that the two belong to completely separate realms— materiality and consciousness. The realisation of the Self as Purusha involves a devaluation of materiality, Prakriti which, traditionally, has de-sacralised the body and by corollary the natural world of which the physicality is a part, in the process. Tantric doctrine is life and world affirming and maintains that realisation, experiential knowledge of the immanence of the divine in all things, can only take place on this earth in this body. To be sure, Sankhya does believe in *jivanmukti*, liberation while living, and Advaita Vedanta, of course, affirms that moksha must first be realised—although it cannot be completed—in the body. However, Sankhya approaches embodiment and embeddedness in nature as the obstacles that must be transcended in order to know ultimate freedom. In tantra, the body-mind is not to be transcended, but divinised. Tantra's method is not rejection but inclusion and transmutation. Whereas the ascetic begins with the assumption of impurity as

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inherent in the embodied state, the tantric practitioner starts with the belief that her or his body is the phenomenal manifestation of the noumenal. This is evidenced in the tantric notion of a series of vital currents through inner etheric channels, *nadis*, and seven focal points of energy, chakras. The liberating life-force or power of Shakti, called kundalini-*shakti*, resides in a dormant state at the lowest level in the unrealised being, resulting in the individual remaining unaware of the power and presence of Shakti within. The objective of much of tantric sadhana is the catalysation and dynamic rechannelling of the force of Shakti, as life-force, through the chakras.

The sacramentally sensorial nature of tantric rites is designed to awaken the dormant kundalini-shakti. The physiological intensity of tantric sadhana, turned to the goal of the immanence of the divine within, aims at directing the kundalini-shakti through the chakras vivifying each center and raising it to the conclusion of its journey in the final chakra, wherein lies unity-consciousness. The key to the attainment of this goal is meditation on the chakras as abodes of different manifestations of Shakti and Shiva, which enhances the aspirant's perception of the body as the site of divine forces.

This penchant for sacralising embodiment finds further expression in the tantric practices of *bhuta-shuddhi* and *nyasa*. *Bhuta-shuddhi* requires the aspirant to engage in the yoga practice of pranayama, breath control, and the chanting of Devi mantra, sacred sounds that represent the sonic frequency of particular aspects of Shakti, in order to clear all negative thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations and to heighten the perception that her or his body is indeed infused with the force of the noumenal. During the performance of the *nyasa* ritual, the aspirant chanting Devi mantras touches parts of the body with the fingertips ritually infusing her or his physical being with



Goddess Durga

the power of Shakti. This phase of meditation, which grounds the worshipper in the physicality of the body as the vehicle of transformation, is the antithesis of the ascetic bodily mortifications. In tantra, the body is already the abode of Shakti; the rituals of *bhuta-shuddhi* and *nyasa* only serve to communicate this to the consciousness of the seeker, and by raising that consciousness, such rituals serve to manifest the indwelling Shakti.

### The Theology of Mahakali

According to tantric doctrine, a determined attempt to see through the duality and into the underlying unified field of consciousness and energy that inheres in, and surrounds us at all levels is the only course of action to take in order to break through the conditioning of both human culture and our physical-biological limitations which, together, impose the dualistic perception on our consciousness. Such a perception is

contrary to both the natural and societal sensibilities under which we humans function. Thus, what is needed is a methodology by which we can surpass our dualistic mode of understanding and see through the sense perceptions as well as the culturally induced conditioning to the ineffable unified reality underlying phenomenal existence. Such a methodology would have to include a way of glimpsing the eternal in the fleeting moments of earth-bound time, of seeing the presence of the Absolute even in sight of death and destruction, of experiencing the omnipresence of the Divine at all times and in all places. The fierce iconographic representations of the tantric system answered the need for a methodology that could effectively induce a radically non-dualistic perception of reality and catapult the mind to a realm of knowledge transcending the rational and sensorial epistemological framework. The fierce appearance of Mahadevi Kali,

for example, seeks to catalyse the worshipper to confront innate fears, hatreds, and aversions. The iconography of Mahakali is also designed to challenge the notion that ultimate Reality resides only in the realm of pleasantness and comfort. The theology of Kali posits that when one can palpably experience the liberating omnipresence of the Divine Mother in the midst of disease, disaster, and death, one has actually crossed the gulf separating ordinary human consciousness from the consciousness of an enlightened mind.

Such a vision of radical divine presence destroys all fear. This is reflected in the art of Mahakali in which she is often shown with one hand raised in the *abhaya*-mudra which dispels fear, eliminates hate, and instils courage in the face of trauma. However, although she shows herself in her destructive form in the iconographic image, Kali is often referred to as Mother, emphasising her role as genetrix of the cosmos. The twelfth





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verse of the *Karpuradi Stotra* extols her beneficent aspects while acknowledging her destructive or re-absorptive power: 'O Mother! You have given birth to the world and continue to protect the world. And at the time of dissolution, you will withdraw your creation into yourself.'

Thus, in identifying the various forms of Mahakali with Shakti in the fullness of her powers, the tantric texts seem to imply that while Shakti is present in all phenomena as Vishvarupini, the embodiment of the universe, it is most difficult to see her in that which we experience as unpleasant, undesirable, or fearsome. Hence, according to the tantric world view, the work of sadhana must begin in the arena that we most wish to avoid.

The tantric understanding of divine immanence is more fundamental than a theory of immanence which, for example, might posit the all-pervasiveness of divine 'spirit'. She is more than pervasive divine spirit—she is the causative, material, elemental, and conscious power in the cosmos, the agent behind all action, the action itself, and its result. Although this framework of understanding may seem susceptible to nihilism, it has not led to such an attitude in tantra. The meaningfulness of life is preserved in the tantric ethos because Shakti is envisioned as Divine Mother and the world as her offspring. Hence, the destructive forces of Shakti, iconographically depicted as the various forms of Mahakali, can be understood as reabsorbing into herself that which she has birthed and nourished. An analogy would be the earth which gives life, sustains life, destroys life, and dissolves the remains into herself to begin the process anew. From this organic similarity between the way Shakti is envisioned, and the way the earth actually functions, a pattern can be elicited that joins humanity, the world, and the Absolute in a symbiotic system of identification and relationality. I conclude with a song by Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (c. 1769-1821):

Is my Mother, Shyama (Kali), dark?

The world says Kali is dark; but my mind says No, she is not dark.

The black form is her sky-clad appearance illuminating the lotus of my heart,

Sometimes she is pure white, sometimes golden, sometimes blue or red;

I have never known such a Mother before; my life passes in her contemplation

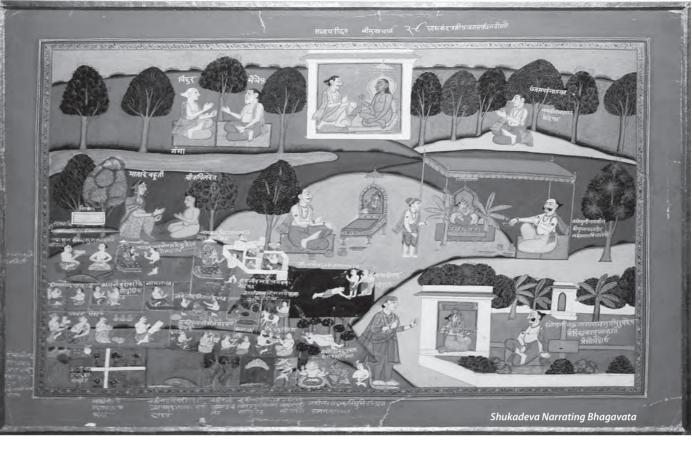
Sometimes she is Purusha, sometimes she Prakriti, sometimes she is Formlessness itself;

Reflecting on these many moods of Mother, Kamalakanta simply loses his mind.

### **Notes and References**

- 1. See Tracy Pintchman, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), 97–8.
- 2. See Shvetashvatara Upanishad, 4.1.
- 3. See Rita DasGupta Sherma, 'Sacred Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra' in Lance E Nelson, *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998), 89–132.
- 4. See Swami Nikhilananda, *Hinduism: Its Meaning for the Liberation of the Spirit* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), 55.
- 5. For an extended elucidation, see *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition*.
- 6. See Devi Mahatmyam, 11.4.
- 7. Ernest Alexander Payne, *The Saktas: An Introductory and Comparative Study* (London: Garland, 1979), 72.
- 8. See Rita Sherma, 'Sa Ham—I am She: Woman as Goddess' in *Is the Goddess a Feminist?—The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, eds Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen Erndl (New York: New York University, 2000), 31–49.
- 9. Mahanirvana Tantra, 4.34-5.
- 10. See Kulachudamani Nigama, 1.16-7.
- II. Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta, 'Evolution of Mother Worship in India' in *Great Women of India*, eds Swami Madhavananda and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1982), 72–3.
- 12. Vamakeshvara Tantra, 4.4-16.
- 13. *Kularnava Tantra*, trans. M P Pandit (Madras: Ganesh, 1953), 75.
- 14. See Mahanirvana Tantra, 4.42.

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## Vaishnava Tantra As Outlined in the Bhagavata

Krishna Kshetra Swami

F YOU ASK A VAISHNAVA whether she or he practises tantra, the answer is likely to be: 'No, absolutely not. I practise bhakti!' Indeed, it is safe to say that most Vaishnavas consider devotion, bhakti, to Vishnu, Narayana, or Krishna to be the defining feature of Vaishnavism. What may be less known even within current Vaishnava circles is that tantra—or aspects of what can be identified as tantra—is

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generally an integral feature of Vaishnava culture and practice. This is particularly the case in the area of formal or ritual, practices, which Vaishnavas often identify as *archana*—the constellation of activities centred on the worship of Vishnu as embodied in a physical form, graphic representation, or feature of physical nature. Here I want to sketch some features of Vaishnava tantra, particularly as these are found in one of the most important sacred texts for Vaishnavas, namely, the Bhagavata. I hasten to add—and this is one reason mainstream Vaishnavas may reject the idea that they practise tantra—that

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the Vaishnavism I describe here firmly rejects the sorts of transgressive practices associated with some forms of tantra, sometimes referred to as 'left-handed' tantra, or the *vama-marga*.

Without lingering on attempts to define tantra as such, let us very briefly look at the Vaishnava scriptural corpus in which tantra plays a part. Here the beginning point of inquiry must be the classical locus of the tradition, a group of texts known as Pancharatra Samhitas or Pancharatra Agamas. Srivaishnavas, in particular, have regarded these texts as revelation, on a par with the revelatory Vedic Samhitas. Pancharatra is, broadly speaking, concerned to link the phenomenal world with the transcendent realm, where Narayana rules as the supreme divinity, with whom a practitioner seeks to gain some form of union or communion, and whose eternal association and residence in his realm is sought. A key principle in Pancharatra literature that links this world with the transcendent world is the notion of vyuha, whereby a fourfold expansion of Narayana—as the deities Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha—bring into manifest form the fundamental constituents of this world, thus bridging the otherwise unbridgeable chasm between the phenomenal and transcendent realms. Also important in Pancharatra for establishing a connection to transcendence is the employment of mantra—sacred incantations in meditation and audible recitation, as regular practices for divinisation of the practitioner, bringing her or him to the level of purity fit for approaching the divinity.

In later *Pancharatra* literature, possibly after 500 CE, the application of mantra is seen less as a matter of mechanical recitation and more as a vehicle for the realisation of bhakti, devotion, in relation to the deity. In this view, the carefully recited mantra, properly received through

initiation from a qualified guru or acharya conveys divine grace to the sadhaka, practitioner, facilitating devotional, reciprocal exchange that comes to be the dominant ideal of the various Vaishnava bhakti traditions. Within these traditions, along with the recitation of appropriate mantras, the worship of physical images of the divinity is common, and the particulars of worship continue, to the present day, to be drawn from Pancharatra and related or derivative literature. Thus, the emphasis on bhakti may somewhat obscure practitioners' conscious awareness that their ritual practices are tantric in character. Still, one can speak of these practices as Vaishnava tantra, recognising 'family resemblances' to more explicitly tantric traditions.

In a much different genre of Sanskrit texts than Pancharatra literature, is arguably one of the most important and popular works for Vaishnavas of several traditions, the Bhagavata, also known as the Srimad Bhagavata Purana or Srimad Bhagavatam. The time and place of this work's provenance is much disputed, but most agree that at least by the tenth century CE its present form and content were fixed. Evidence of its popularity can be found—aside from its wide-ranging interpretation in the performing and graphic arts throughout India—also in the high degree of Sanskrit commentarial attention it has received from representatives of several different Vaishnava traditions, because the Bhagavata is a springboard for reflecting on Vaishnava tantra, broadly conceived.

Here I will not make a detailed examination of the Bhagavata in terms of tantra. Suffice to note that throughout most of the Bhagavata there are occasional allusions to *Pancharatra* elements, such as reference to the four *vyuhas*, initiation into the practice of mantra recitation, and—more on this later—allusions to circular graphic shapes, mandalas, conducive

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for meditation. However, we find one chapter in particular, in the eleventh, out of twelve *skhandhas* or books, that expressly focuses on ritual worship, overviewing practices that the narrator—Sri Krishna, addressing his devotee Uddhava—explicitly refers to as a mixture of both Vedic and tantric elements. Here I offer my translation of a few selected verses from the twenty-seventh chapter of book eleven of the Bhagavata, and I provide brief elaborations and explanations in pursuit of a broad understanding of how many Vaishnavas from both early and contemporary times engage with tantra.

'In an image, on the ground, or in fire; in the sun, in water, or in one's own heart, the twiceborn, imbued with devotion, may forthrightly worship me—one's own guru—with physical objects and substances.' The idea of 'worship'—here the Sanskrit term *archana* is used—can have a variety of associations. Here the emphasis is on ritual practices involving the presentation of physical objects and substances considered pleasing to the divinity, in this case Sri Krishna, since it is he, speaking to Uddhava, who refers to himself. In turn, such physical objects and substances are to be offered to the divinity seen as present in a physical object—image, ground, or sun—or substance, fire or water.

The inclusive spirit of the Bhagavata is indicated here: Sri Krishna offers a variety of options regarding physical and non-physical objects and forms in which he is willing to receive worship. But he also indicates two restrictions. First, he stipulates that one must be *dvija*, 'twice-born', referring to the Vedic rather than the tantric system, wherein birth into what Vedic-brahminical culture regards as one of the three higher *varnas*—brahmana, kshatriya, or vaishya—is a prerequisite for initiation into Vedic study and ritual practice. However, more broadly and accommodating of the tantric system, it may refer

to one who has received a 'second birth' in the form of initiation, *diksha*, which in Vaishnava tantra is possible for anyone who accepts and seriously follows a qualified guru's guidance, regardless of one's family background. Tantra is also implied in the second of the two restrictions, namely, that the worshipper must be 'imbued with devotion'. Although bhakti, devotion, is typically contrasted with tantra, in Vaishnava tantra traditions, a proper mood of selfless devotion must be the driving force and basic principle of all tantric practices.

'It is declared that there are eight types (of sacred images appropriate for worship), namely, those formed of stone, of wood, of metal, of clay, of sand, of jewels, as a painting, and in the mind' (11.27.12). One might well wonder: 'How is it possible to have devotion for a lifeless image made of material elements?' In the practice of Vaishnava tantra, one learns to regard all 'matter' as energy, shakti, of the supreme energetic, shaktiman, person, Bhagavan or Vishnu. Since all energy originates in Vishnu, he can transform or perhaps better, 'transubstantiate', any material substance for his own purposes, or for benefiting his devotees. The Vaishnava tantra texts, Pancharatra Agamas, provide detailed ritual procedures for invoking Vishnu into an image, either temporarily or permanently. The aggregate of these procedures is called prana-pratishta, literally 'establishing life'. But equally important as such formalities is the devotional attitude of the practitioner, by virtue of which her or his eyes are said to be 'smeared with the salve of love', enabling the practitioner to see the object of worship as the divine subject.

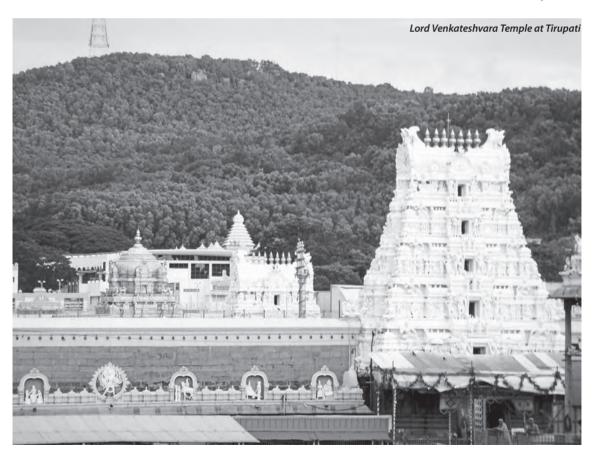
'The ritual worship of me in images, and so on, is done with prescribed items; yet for the desireless devotee, (ritual worship is done) with whatever items can be readily obtained, as well as by mentally fashioned offerings' (11.27.15).

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Vaishnava tantra facilitates becoming free from selfish motivation while uncovering the supreme Self or Subject, residing in the heart. Here 'desireless' translates amayin, literally 'void of trick or guile'. In this understanding, the Vaishnava is so absorbed in the spirit of selfless service that she or he can very easily please the Lord, Vishnu, by offering him simple, easily obtained items. As Sri Krishna, a form of Vishnu; or as many Vaishnavas would say, the original Lord, of whom Vishnu is a secondary form, tells Arjuna in the Bhagavadgita: 'A leaf, flower, fruit, or water whatever is offered to me with devotion, I, who am moved by such devotion, accept.'2 Still, there are more detailed prescriptions of how one may please the Lord, and votaries try their best to follow them.

'O Uddhava, in the worship of images, ritual bathing and decoration are most pleasing; for a graphic design on the ground, *tattva-vinyasa* (ritual invocations with mantras) is most pleasing; for worship in consecrated fire, oblations of food grains soaked in ghee is most pleasing.' The devotional Vaishnava engaged in Vaishnava tantra practices is eager to know what pleases the Lord. Such a Vaishnava understands that perfection is attained simply by giving pleasure to the supreme person. Just as one naturally seeks to please a person whom one respects and admires, the same principle applies in relation to Vishnu.

Today, in India especially, some temple images of Vishnu or Sri Krishna are well known for receiving rich ornamentation. For example, Lord Venkateshvara, also known as Balaji, who





Tirupati Balaji

is visited daily by thousands of pilgrims in his temple in Tirupati, south India, is always seen adorned with genuine diamonds, rubies, and gold finery.

Especially in tantric forms of worship, there are numerous types of *vinyasa* or *nyasa* prescribed. Typically, these procedures involve the meditative 'placement' of particular mantras or single syllables, often with a physical gesture of touching the intended location, on parts of one's own body or on parts of a sacred image or diagram. The idea is that by such placement, one is infusing the body, image, or diagram, with the sacred sounds, thus raising it to the level of atemporal being on which proper worship takes place.

Worship in sacred fire, though generally associated with Vedic, rather than tantric practices, is included here to affirm the Bhagavata's inclusiveness. Oblations of grains and ghee are conveyed by sacred fire to various divinities invoked by mantras—divinities who are understood to be representatives of Vishnu in specific functions and capacities.

'Offerings (such as arghya and flowers) are preferred in sun worship; worship in water is best performed with water oblations accompanied with mantras. Even a little water offered with faith by my devotee is most pleasing, whereas abundantly presented (items) of a non-devotee do not bring me satisfaction, what to speak of (a non-devotee's offering of) perfumes, incense, flowers, lamps,

and foods' (11.27.17-8).

Arghya, literally 'valuable', is a ritual vessel that usually contains water into which certain food grains have been added. It is offered as an honorific gesture to a respected guest. In relation to this ritual practice, Vaishnavas like to remember a famous episode in the Mahabharata, in which Sri Krishna is honoured with an arghya offering at the beginning of King Yudhishthira's rajasuya sacrificial rites. In that situation, Sri Krishna's cousin Shishupala, who had been nursing a growing hatred for Sri Krishna, vociferously objects to Sri Krishna being revered so much, spewing out at him a volley of one hundred insults and disparagements. In response, Sri Krishna blesses Shishupala with instant death, by decapitation with his divine weapon, the Sudarshana discus, and thereby with liberation—Shishupala's soul, entering into Sri Krishna's body. As in verse fifteen earlier, here the emphasis is on the attitude of devotion rather than on the particular items or procedures of offering. Shishupala's hatred of Sri Krishna, though the opposite of

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devotion, was so intense that his sheer concentration of emotion earned him freedom from the cycle of birth and death, samsara. By rendering *arghya* unto Sri Krishna or Vishnu, practitioners of Vaishnava tantra remember Shishupala's death and its circumstances, confirming for them that Sri Krishna, as the primal God, is indeed the proper recipient of this offering.

'The practitioner should consecrate the three vessels—(containing water) for foot-bathing, for *arghya*, and for refreshing the mouth—with the heart mantra, head mantra, and hair-tuft mantras respectively, followed by the Gayatri mantra' (11.27.22). Both Vedic and tantric rituals have much to do with the establishment of equivalences—a local, 'microcosmic' item or

substance being ritually identified with another 'macrocosmic' entity or principle. In this case, the common element, water, becomes identified—through mantras associated with different parts of the body—with physical, human or human-like form. This practice underscores the identification of the divinity being worshipped—Vishnu—with the substances offered to him. The consecration of sacred waters for offering is similar to the *nyasa* functions of mantra placement we have already encountered in verse six-

teen. But here the additional invocation of the Vedic Gayatri mantra—considered the concentrated embodiment of the Veda—again indicates the Bhagavata's inclination to bring Vedic and tantric traditions together to emphasise completeness and complementarity.

'When one's physical body has been purified by air and fire, one should meditate on my supreme, subtle presence on the lotus of the heart—the Lord of all beings who is apprehended by adepts in the reverberation that concludes the syllable Om' (11.27.23).

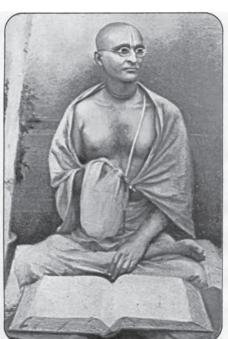
This verse refers briefly to a fairly complex ritual called *bhuta-shuddhi*, 'purification of the elements'; by processes involving mantras and visualisations, the worshipper is to purge her or his own body. We might think of this process as a 'subtle bath' that follows the physical, but nonetheless ritual, bath, *snana*, that one takes prior to performing the worship of Vishnu.

After *bhuta-shuddhi*, one is ready to go a step deeper in meditation, by bringing to awareness

Vishnu's presence within oneself. Here is mentioned that 'perfected beings', *siddhas*, are able to experience Vishnu's presence by carefully invoking the sacred syllable *Om*. This syllable, much praised in the Vedas and Upanishads, is considered the sound-embodiment of Vishnu, especially in his 'non-personal' aspect, often equated with Brahman, the absolute, devoid of limiting qualities, gunas. Generally, however, Vaishnavas prefer to meditate on a non-abstract form of Vishnu. Indeed, the Bhagavatam advises else-

where to visualise the divinity within one's heart in a human-like form that is in a sitting, standing, or reclining position (3.28.19).

To gain success in both (the pursuit of pleasure and of liberation), one should mentally arrange my eight-petalled lotus seat—its whorl radiant with saffron filaments—with (personified) dharma and so on, and with the nine (divine powers). Then, following both Vedic and tantric prescriptions, one should make offerings such as foot-washing water, water for refreshing the mouth, and *arghya* (11.27.25–6).



Srila Bhaktisiddhanta (1874–1937)

Sridhara Swami—an

important fourteenth to fifteenth century Bhagavata authority—and other early Sanskrit commentators fill out the details of which personages are to be represented in the lotus seat: dharma, righteousness; jnana, knowledge; vairagya, renunciation; and aishvarya, plenitude, are placed by mantra and visualisation, respectively between the four cardinal directions, beginning with the southeast and moving clockwise. Their opposites, adharma, irreligion;

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ajnana, ignorance; and so on, are placed in the four cardinal directions, beginning with the east. More toward the centre of the seat, one mentally places the nine feminine powers, shaktis, namely, vimala, purity; utkarshini, eminence; jnana, knowledge; kriya, accomplishment; yoga, communion; prahvi, modesty; satya, truthfulness; ishana, sovereignty; and anugraha, mercy.

These verses describe a yantra, a symmetrical graphic design that is typically two-dimensional but may also be three-dimensional—a common device found in many varieties of tantric practice. Here, the yantra of Vishnu serves as a graphic illustration of the notion that Vishnu is the centre and source of all principles upon which the phenomenal world operates, as well as of the feminine powers—counterparts and complements to his identity as the supreme *powerful*. The combination of masculine and feminine principles in the *yantra* particularly marks this account as tantric in character, more on this below.

Then, assets permitting, one bathes the image of Vishnu daily, using waters scented with sandalwood paste, khus-khus, camphor, vermilion, and aloes wood, while reciting mantras such as the *svarna-gharma*, the *Mahapurusha Vidya*, the *Purusha Sukta*, and Sama Veda hymns such as the *Rajana* and the *Rohinya* (11.27.30–1).

We come now to a central moment in the sequence of Vaishnava ritual worship, the bathing of the image. Although the image, seen as the very form of Vishnu, is understood to be beyond all contamination, still, the act of bathing is understood as devotional service, rendering to the Lord a sense of freshness and well-being that is understood to be not unlike the experience we all have from bathing ourselves.

Some of the mantras mentioned here are less known today. However, the *Purusha Sukta* is widely known and recited. It narrates a cosmic sacrificial rite in which the cosmic person's

dismemberment as a process of sacrificial offering generates the various features of the experienced cosmos. Although the *Purusha Sukta* is decidedly a Vedic hymn, it has become well-integrated into Vaishnava tantra worship; indeed, often the sixteen verses of this hymn are recited sequentially with the offering of each of sixteen worship items (11.27.38–41).

'Next, following appropriate prescriptions, my loving devotee may decorate me with garments, a sacred thread (upavita), ornaments, painted designs, garlands, and unguents' (11.27.32). Vaishnavas celebrate the physicality of Vishnu's sacred image, caring for it, for him—as one would attend a highly respected person—by providing clothes, ornaments, and other accoutrements. In many of the countless public temples of Vishnu and Sri Krishna in India, and indeed outside India, worldwide, dress and ornamentation is a source of special attraction for visiting votaries. Priests are likely to dress and decorate the image in accord with the season or in connection to a particular festival or theme. In some temples, in a playful and artful spirit of participating in divine lila, pastime, on certain occasions the image will be dressed in such a way as to make him appear as one of the many Vishnu avataras. All such practices are largely sustained by local tradition more than by specific scriptural injunctions. By such services, physicality and visibility of the deity remind the votive of the divinity's actual presence in the world and thus of his accessibility to all, despite—or in gracious response to—the limitations of human physical embodiment. Put another way, as I have written elsewhere:

The practices of image worship are practices of embodiment, both acknowledging the shortcomings of embodiment and celebrating the sensory functions with reference to the object of worship as the perfect embodiment of sentience. Yet they are also practices aimed at

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transcending temporal embodiment, to gain full and uninterrupted participation in Kṛṣṇa-līlā. As such they involve not only the senses, but also the disciplined imagination, a thinking and functioning more or less as if one is already situated in the transcendent realm.<sup>4</sup>

Again, the emphasis on embodiment and engagement of the physical senses can be regarded as an indicator of the tantric character of Vishnu or Sri Krishna worship.

'If possible, one then arranges food offerings (such as) molasses, *payasa* (sweetened rice boiled in milk), ghee, fried cakes, biscuits, sweets, *samyava* cakes, yogurt, and soups.'5

Unlike some Shakta tantric traditions, Vaishnava practitioners follow the sattvictantra principle of strictly excluding all nonvegetarian foods from their worship and their own diet. Here Sri Krishna provides only a very minimal list of vegetarian items that one might offer him, emphasising sweet and dairy preparations. Other texts dedicated to the details of Vaishnava worship, archana, such as the sixteenth-century work Hari-bhakti-vilasa, provide detailed lists of offerable and un-offerable foods. Regarding dairy products, the assumption is that they are obtained from cows which are under life-long protection, go-raksha, meaning that, unlike in modern factory dairies, cows that no longer give milk will not be sent for slaughter; rather, they will be maintained throughout their natural lives.

Vaishnavas invest great attention in the preparation of food for offering to Vishnu or Sri Krishna in the *murti*-form. Since the Lord is understood to be fully present in his image, he can receive food offerings that have been properly prepared with high standards of cleanliness, and without the cook having tasted any of the items to be offered, prior to offering. Here again, the key element is devotion, bhakti, which, if present

in the practitioner, inspires Sri Krishna to receive and relish the offerings, leaving the 'remnants', prasad for Vaishnavas and others to accept as the Lord's grace in the form of consecrated food.

The practitioner may then meditate on my serene form as having the hue of molten gold, with four arms, bearing conch, disk, club, and lotus flower, and wearing brilliant garments the colour of lotus filaments. I bear a glittering helmet, bracelets, belt, and precious arm-bands; and the Shrivatsa emblem, shining Kaustubha gem, and forest flower garland adorn my chest. While thus meditating, one proceeds to offer worship: throwing ghee-soaked wood (into the fire), one then sprinkles the fire with two portions of ghee and offers ghee-soaked oblations to sixteen divinities, beginning with Dharma (Yama), accompanied with the appropriate mula-mantra and appropriate verse from the sixteen-verse Purusha Sukta, followed by "svishti-krite svaha" (11.27.38-41).

As part of the concluding rites in Vaishnava tantric worship of Vishnu, Sri Krishna here advises another 'mixed' practice: Meditation on the divine form, as detailed here, is arguably specifically tantric in character, while offering oblations into a consecrated fire with various mantras is a Vedic practice. Mention of the *Purusha Sukta* hymn, particularly marks the fire rite as Vedic in character. A *mula*-mantra, literally 'root mantra', invokes a particular deity by sound. The idea is that the deity, in effect, 'sprouts' from the properly intoned mantra.

'Having thus worshipped, one then shows obeisance to the Lord's associates and renders them offerings. One then softly chants the root-mantra, remembering Brahman to be Narayana himself.'

We may notice that Sri Krishna provides no specific root-mantra in this chapter, nor indeed throughout the Bhagavata. The Bhagavata is committed to a non-sectarian stance that gives

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a sense of inclusivity, such that a variety of traditions or schools, sampradayas could identify with the Bhagavata vision. Within this broad world view, the gurus of particular traditions give specific detailed instructions for the practice of their disciples, along with the particular mantra(s) that have been handed down by the guru's succession, parampara, of preceptors. As in other tantric traditions, Vaishnava tantra is a practice grounded in a close preceptor-disciple, guru-shishya relationship. And although Vaishnava tantra is not essentially a secretive practice, practitioners are nonetheless careful to preserve a spirit of intimate reverence for their gurus. One way such intimacy is preserved is by keeping the mantra(s) received from one's guru to oneself, unless and until one is blessed and commanded by one's guru to take responsibility for becoming oneself a preceptor.

'One may then be my entertainer for a while—singing, reciting praises, dancing, acting out my activities, and hearing or narrating about me' (11.27.44). Sri Krishna encourages his votaries to display their various performative talents for his pleasure. Some temple traditions are particularly supportive of this aspect of worship, attracting visitors to see and hear such skilled and devotional performances. Some temples maintain a complete repertoire of songs that are sung by temple musicians on appropriate occasions, and particular ancient poets whose songs are in praise of Vishnu may be honoured by the recitation of their works. Classical Indian dance traditions such as Bharatanatyam are regarded as having been originally developed for the specific purpose of facilitating dance performances for the pleasure of temple images, as have classical forms of drama. It is also common for recitations and discussions of Vishnu's or Sri Krishna's divine pastimes,

*lila*, especially as recounted in the Bhagavata, to take place in temples, within hearing distance of the sacred image as well as for the upliftment and pleasure of the attending audiences.

'Eulogising me with formal and informal hymns and prayers—from the Puranas and even from folk traditions—one may then pray: "O Bhagavan, be pleased (with me)!" while lying prone in obeisance' (11.27.45).

One reason the Bhagavata has enjoyed enduring high regard among Vaishnavas is its very strong focus on theological reflection. This particular chapter is concerned with ritual rather than theology, but elsewhere is expressed in considerable detail the nature of Bhagavan. In particular, we find the notion that he is *atmarama*,

Vishnu as Narasimha Kills Hiranyakashipu, Stone Sculpture, Hoysaleshvara Temple, Halebidu, Karnataka



'self-satisfied'. Thus, one might be surprised to find here that Sri Krishna blatantly welcomes eulogy of himself from his votaries. However, we may take into consideration a prayer found in book seven, in which the young devotee Prahlada declares that, because the Lord is complete in himself, the rendering of offerings and prayers is for the benefit of the devotee who makes them.

'One's head placed at my feet, with hands together (one may pray): "O Lord, please protect me, a supplicant. I am terrified by this ocean wherein lurks the crocodile of death" (11.27.46). Sri Krishna offers another example of a prayer that one might voice as she or he completes the process of daily worship to Vishnu. One is thereby reminded of the urgency of practising and, one hopes, soon perfecting one's practice, of devotional worship: Temporal existence is a condition of perpetual uncertainty, in which the gross and subtle bodies of the bound jiva, individual soul, are ever vulnerable to the ravages of time. Again, this is a major theme of the Bhagavata as a whole, beginning with book one, in which the main inquirer, King Parikshit, urgently seeks spiritual guidance after having been cursed to die in seven days, due to an infraction of etiquette. Facing death, Parikshit listens, while fasting completely for seven days and nights, to the words of sage Shuka, who recites before him and many attending sages the Bhagavata.

'Thus praying, respectfully placing on one's head the remnants I have given, if (the image is) to be dismissed, one may now dismiss it, its light again placed within the light (of the lotus within one's own heart)' (11.27.47). Here the word 'remnants' refers to various items that have previously been offered in worship, especially flowers and food. Having been offered to the Lord, these items are understood to be sacred, to be regarded respectfully as the Lord's mercy, prasad. By contacting such items in the proper

devotional mood, it is said that one can progress rapidly in spiritual life.

The practice mentioned here of 'dismissing' an image or other worship-able form refers to 'temporary' or 'moveable' forms, chala-murti, as opposed to permanently consecrated forms, for which no such ritual is to be done. Dismissal, udvasa, is associated with tantric practice, whereby the form is employed as a means of externalising the image understood to be present within the practitioner's heart. The particularly tantric character of this practice is in the practice of visualisation, in which, according to classical commentators, the practitioner, in effect, relocates the light that she or he identifies with the presence of the deity in the worshipped form back into the light that is visualised as situated in her or his own heart, which is conceived as being in the shape of a lotus flower.

'Surely one should worship me in my sacred image or elsewhere—wherever one has faith—for I, the self of all, abide in all beings, as well as (independently) in myself' (11.27.48). We already saw, in verse nine, that Sri Krishna suggests several options as objects or forms in which he may be worshipped; and there also we saw that Sri Krishna specifies the attitude with which such worship must be imbued, namely, 'with devotion', for such worship to be efficacious. Now, in this verse, Sri Krishna broadens the range of possibilities for his reception of worship to include 'wherever one has faith'. Sridhara Swami explains that this verse intends to counter the notion that one type of worship-able form is superior or inferior to another. The later commentators Vishvanatha Chakravarti and Vamshidhara Sharma elaborate: Although the archa, worship-able image, is to be seen as foundational with respect to the practice of ritual worship, with deeper faith one may appreciate the Lord's presence in other forms,

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knowing that he abides as the 'self of all'. They cite the example of Prahlada, for whom the Lord appeared as Narasimha, the half-man, half-lion avatara, described in the Bhagavata, book seven, chapter eight, from an apparently inanimate palace pillar because of Prahlada's complete faith in his presence therein. Vaishnavas place great importance on the panentheistic notion articulated here, namely, that Vishnu is simultaneously present in all beings and he is situated beyond and independent from all beings. Thus all beings are understood to be dependent on him.

'Thus worshipping with the Vedic and tantric processes of ritual activity, one receives from me one's cherished fulfilment in both (this life and the next)' (11.27.49).

Tantra is widely conceived as seeing worldly

desire, kama, as a legitimate human pursuit that need not be denied in the course of pursuing ultimate release from temporal bondage, moksha. Here Sri Krishna reiterates that both Vedic and tantric practices serve their purposes in facilitating the engagement of one's physical and subtle bodies for the complete fulfilment of one's aspirations. The implication is that in the course of performing such practices, which revolve around actions aimed to elevate one's consciousness, one will naturally shed unnecessary and unbeneficial aims, leaving one free to pursue true fulfilment in accordance with divine will. Elsewhere in the Bhagavata, Sri Krishna says that, in the case of his dear devotees, he does not fulfil worldly longings when he sees that they will be detrimental to their spiritual progress. In this way he shows



his care for them, not wishing them to become distracted from the ultimate goal of achieving unmotivated and incessant *prema*—spiritual love—for the supreme person.

Having gone through this sketch of Vaishnava tantra as represented in a relevant chapter of the Bhagavata, one might well wonder: Isn't a more fundamental level of the tantric world view missing from this account? What about tantra's well-known emphasis on the feminine principle or indeed on the multi-level principle of male-female polarity that features so prominently in both Shakta and Shaiva forms of tantra? True, these features of tantra are hardly present in this particular chapter, though there is a hint of it in verses twenty-five and twenty-six, wherein the nine divine powers, shaktis, surrounding the deity are mentioned. Rather, it is in the Bhagavata's celebrated tenth book that we find this theme fully developed, albeit inseparably from the theme of selfless devotion. It is in a series of five chapters, the twenty-ninth to the thirty-third, in book ten, that the dramatic narrative of Sri Krishna's rasa-dance lila with his eternal consorts, the cowherd maidens of Vraja, gopis, is elaborately developed. In this episode, Sri Krishna, as a young cowherd, by his charming flute-playing attracts all the village girls to join with him in a grand circle dance that extends through the night. For our purposes here, suffice to note that the text's Vaishnava commentators have taken pains to emphasise that, contrary to what is commonly thought, Krishna's association with the *gopis* is by no means illicit; rather, as the eternal consorts of the supreme divinity, they are his own shaktis, with whom only he can consort. Thus, for the majority of Vaishnavas, it is entirely inappropriate and deeply misguided for any man to think that he can imitate Sri Krishna by consorting with women. What is proper and

indeed purifying for a mainstream Vaishnava in regard to Sri Krishna's rasa-dance *lila* is to visualise and meditate upon it as described in the Bhagavata. In this way, not only can a practitioner be drawn to identify her or him-self as a humble female servant-assistant to the *gopis*, but she or he can gradually become perfectly suffused with the emotions of bhakti that constitute the ultimate aim of Vaishnava practice. Far from wishing to become a non-differentiated unity with the deity or to 'transcend' the variegated-ness characteristic of the rasa dance, Vaishnavas seek to remember and thus participate eternally in it, ever deepening their love for the supremely beloved Lord.

This has certainly been a rudimentary overview of what we can call 'mainstream' Vaishnava tantra. No doubt many, if not all, features of it may appear similar to tantric currents in other Indic traditions, and from an historical perspective this is not surprising. If we see tantra, broadly conceived, as a current which has, over a period of several centuries, flowed through South Asia, touching more or less deeply all the various paths of spiritual perfection, we can appreciate its importance. For Vaishnavas, not unlike other traditions, tantra continues to play an important role. And the Bhagavata, a sacred text of the Vaishnavas that enjoys enduring presence as a living tradition, provides a clear window into Vaishnava tantra practice. OPB PB

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# Abhinavagupta's Tantric Theology of Becoming and Contemporary Secularism

### Loriliai Biernacki

Who knows for certain?
Who shall here declare it?
When the creation was born, and from what?
The gods were born after this world's creation:
Then who can know how it came to be?
From what this creation arose,
whether produced or not,
That witness, surveying it
from the highest space knows,
Or maybe he does not know.

Debates between secular thought and the three monotheisms are pertinent but insufficient to our time.<sup>2</sup>

NE OF THE SIGNATURE FEATURES of the history of India has been its comparative impulse towards a relatively harmonious acceptance of a multiplicity of traditions occupying the same political and civic spaces. Even if we do not see in India's past a perfect and unadulterated picture of utopic religious harmony, it is hard not to be favourably impressed by the pervasive 'live and let live' ethos

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that gave rise to so many different religious traditions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, among the more persistent—and so many different gods, flourishing, and thriving in the midst of competing praxes and faiths. In view of this history of plurality, I think it may not be too far off to compare this landscape of multiplicities to Western post-enlightenment, secular society with its constitutional embrace of variety in religious expression. Religion for us today is a matter not subject to official rule and outside the contours of legal regulation. We too, today have opted for a vision of religiosity that presupposes inherent multiplicity and does not restrict the abundance and variety of religious expression.

With this in mind, I want to bring into dialogue two heterogeneous positions. On one side, I am looking to a contemporary world view that offers itself as representative of a particular secular progressive consciousness of a rapidly

accelerating world. Not a religious faith per se, but rather a sensibility attuned to our modern predicament, an atheism challenged by the shrinking of our globe and urged on by new scientific discoveries that upset old paradigms. So we have on one side of the conversation a progressive twenty-first century expression of secularism urging us to move past eliminative materialism. On the other, a particular Indian medieval thinker, Abhinavagupta, an eleventh century Shaivite, tantric philosopher who synthesised a radical conjoinment of immanence and transcendence in his understanding of how to link mind and matter. This heterogeneous juxtaposition will, I hope, be fruitful in elucidating a resonance that can connect these two distant geographic and temporal ways of understanding our place in the world. I choose these two perspectives because they both share an attention to tracking the relationship between immanence and transcendence. And both perspectives reclaim immanence as foundational in understanding who we are. I draw from some contemporary philosophy and biology, but for the purposes of this paper focus in particular on the thought of the atheist political scientist Bill Connolly, especially because his philosophy of becoming offers provocative points of contact with this eleventh century Indian mystic, Abhinavagupta. I will focus on three particular points of contact—immanence, transcendence, and agency.

For this dialogue, I will need first to clarify some caveats. With this I address ideas of faith, particularly in relation to contemporary secularism with its anchor in science, and briefly in relation to monotheisms and the dharma traditions. Following this I discuss in tandem Abhinavagupta's understanding of immanence in relation to Connolly's conception of immanence. Here, I also note that recent work in the philosophy of science suggests reformulating our understandings

of matter away from eliminative materialism. After this I touch on the notion of transcendence, a problematic concept for Connolly's philosophy of becoming and its role in Abhinavagupta's theology. Following this, I address the idea of agency, both in terms of the extension of agency beyond its usual humanist boundaries for both Connolly and Abhinavagupta, and in terms of the implications of unity of self.

So I begin with some caveats; first, of course, it certainly needs to be mentioned that just as various forms of religiosity all differ from each other, it would also be a mistake to lump together in a singularity the variety of positions one finds for secularism, scientists, and scientific materialism. Daniel Dennett is pretty far from Thomas Nagel. And here I also tend to agree with Bill Connolly when he suggests that even for a secularist creed, gods abound; we live in a world of contending faiths, where a secularist creed still nevertheless entails creedal commitments (11, 85, 149, 15). As he puts it: 'But why bother to state such a faith? Because faith, argument, and evidence typically become mixed into each other, it seems wise to state your existential wagers on this front actively and openly, to the extent you can. For each disposition does make a difference to how you engage the world' (40).

Apart from skilfully problematising the view from nowhere that a particular view of scientific materialism presents, Connolly also points to why it might make sense to enlarge our pool of conversation partners to representatives of the varieties of secular atheism and religiosity of our times. Namely, because what we hold to be true about the nature of the cosmos affects how we act in the world.

### Faith and Secularism

Connolly's definition of faith for his own atheist position is wedded to evolution and science:

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We define the term 'faith' in a way that touches but does not correspond completely to some transcendent readings of it. Faith to us means a contestable element in belief that extends beyond indubitable experience or rational necessity but permeates your engagement with the world. It does not mean the receipt of a divine grace that infuses devotees with a confidence that cannot be communicated to others without such an infusion. Immanent and transcendent traditions probably define faith in overlapping but different ways (39–40).<sup>3</sup>

He pulls out of the term 'faith' an impetus towards cosmology, stretching and nuancing it beyond its traditional location within Western monotheisms. He reminds us that we structure our views of the world based on our prior commitments. We can of course, locate within Indian traditions a notion of faith that aligns roughly with what he points to in Western monotheisms and I am thinking here for instance of bhakti traditions like Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Perhaps though, we might also entertain the suggestion that the nuanced and retrofitted understanding of faith that Connolly offers for a contemporary secularism has a natural compatibility with other representatives of the Indian dharma traditions.

An obvious first glance points to the shared atheism with Buddhism and Jainism, both already at least technically atheist. Digging a little deeper, we might also suggest that the pervasive world view of the dharma traditions which upholds karma as a primary structuring principle in itself tends towards a kind of secularism in so far as it displaces the authority of any particular divinity. Even for the monotheisms of India we find still often the suggestion that even an ultimate God-personality too, like the rest of us, does not have unlimited fiat, but operates instead within a system of balances of power based on deeds and retribution. For instance, the great god Vishnu is born as Sri Ramachandra



William Connolly (b. 1938)

precisely because he is subject to the law of karma and must pay through Bhrigu's curse for killing Bhrigu's wife. If we think of mechanistic causality, say, Richard Dawkins' style, as a driving etiological principle for contemporary scientific secularism, then the capacity karma displays as mechanistic law to trump an idea of deity is certainly suggestive. Here however, it is not my aim to formulate a general comparative analysis between contemporary secularism and the dharma traditions.

My larger project here rather, to recapitulate, is to articulate points of resonance we find in a particular expression of a dharma tradition, Abhinavagupta's tantric Shaivism, with an unlikely and vibrant contemporary tradition of secularism in terms of their respective formulations of

immanence. My conjecture is that the resonances that Abhinavagupta shares with some newer forms of contemporary secular and scientific thought may prove helpful for thinking about our underlying conceptions of the relationship between materiality and consciousness. So not so much about a tolerance of different positions, or comparison, rather I focus on points of resonance, specifically in Abhinavagupta's formulation of immanence, agency, and transcendence, which may offer insights into our contemporary conceptions of materiality, as new secular perspectives question the established coupling of secularism with eliminative materialism.

### Varieties of Immanence

We see, in fact, on the edges of contemporary discussion a fraying of established paradigms for understanding the nature of our world. Science philosopher Thomas Nagel's 2012 book, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly* 



*False*<sup>4</sup> is perhaps emblematic. The maelstrom it stirred up across popular media is an indication of a shift in winds. Philosopher of mind, David Chalmers also, beginning from a squarely materialist, explicitly atheist position in his seminal formulation of the 'hard problem of consciousness'5 comes to his own reluctant but inevitable rejection of eliminative materialism. He, like Nagel, proposes finding a solution that does not entail a return to a notion of transcendent deity; in these views no god of the gaps can suffice to paper over our real deficiencies of knowledge. Biologist Terence Deacon also notes the need to expand beyond a strictly materialist, physicalist paradigm, particularly in view of the blatant disruption of the second law of thermodynamics that happens ubiquitously with the emergence of life forms. Recently neuroscientist, 'new atheist' Sam Harris, known for his habitually vocal denunciations of religion, has also pointed to a need for a paradigm shift in our understanding of matter and consciousness, in a work that opts for the term 'spirituality' in place of faith. In this context he even argues for considering as science a first-person engagement and categorisation of mystical experiences in the 'laboratory of the mind.8 This starts to sound a bit like the programs for meditative practices we find in dharma traditions, for instance in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra and a variety of tantric texts, even if writers in the dharma traditions typically shy away from recording their own personal experiences. Moreover, both Nagel and Chalmers ultimately propose models of mind and matter that even as they adhere to a foundational atheism tend towards approximations of panpsychism. Panpsychism, traditionally understood as the doctrine or belief that everything material, however small, has an element of individual consciousness, 10 starts to veer awfully close to Abhinavagupta's and Somananda's tenth and

eleventh century nondual conceptions of tantric Shaivism. In these medieval formulations, consciousness as Shiva, both deity and principle, pervades all of reality in a non-dual expression of its unfolding nature. Typically glossed as *chidanandaikaghana*, <sup>11</sup> a single dense mass of consciousness-bliss, Shiva as *tattva* or principle, substratum that is consciousness, is fundamentally the core essence of all variety of existence, material, sentient, and even insentient.

I should stress that the fundamental theological perspective of Abhinavagupta's Shaivism precludes any easy linkage to these twenty-first century embraces of panpsychisms. For instance, when we examine Connolly's understanding of immanence in his philosophy of becoming, we first encounter the rejection of a higher power, a rejection that for Abhinavagupta's philosophy somewhat misses the mark, like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. It does not quite make sense, particularly considering that Abhinavagupta's non-dualist understanding of that higher power is never very far, or separate from one's own always-present sense of self-awareness, svasamvedana. Connolly tells us: 'By immanence I mean a philosophy of becoming in which the universe is not dependent on a higher power. It is reducible neither to mechanistic materialism. dualism, theo-teleology, nor the absent God of minimal theology. It concurs with the last three philosophies that there is more to reality than actuality. But that "more" is not given by a robust or minimal God.'12

So to find our resonances between these perspectives we have to overlook some obvious disjunctures, here for instance, a 'higher power'. Connolly also considers the possibilities for comparisons of his vision with a deity-free tradition of Hinduism in his discussion of John Thatamanil's work on Acharya Shankara. He admits Advaita Vedanta as a compatible

contender, with its rejection of even a minimalist God. However, he ultimately finds Shankara lacking in precisely the area where Abhinavagupta offers a corrective to Acharya Shankara's thought, namely in trading the stasis of Advaita Vedanta for the dynamism of becoming in Abhinavagupta's own tantric non-dualism (99–105).

Thus to give space for the resonances that may profit our own contemporary musings on immanence, we will need at least for our purposes here to bracket aside Abhinavagupta's theology in favour of his encompassing immanence and incorporation of time in his conception of the unfolding of this immanence.

Consider for instance this quote from Abhinavagupta: 'The principle of consciousness indeed is the body of all entities, all categories. On the back of the wall of the world [which is itself Shiva] the picture of all beings shines forth into being.'13

Here we see especially a fusion of consciousness with materiality; consciousness is the 'body', vapuh, of beings and even things and categories, padartha, in the world here. Consciousness is not one thing and the world of matter something else. Rather consciousness itself is a multiplicity transforming materiality that expresses itself through a becoming into material form.

And we have also the following quotes, taken from this same discussion of the immanence of the principle of consciousness within the world: 'The mastery associated with the forms of consciousness connected with [ordinary beings]<sup>14</sup> is not in any way separate or different from that mastery which has the nature of knowledge and action.'<sup>15</sup>

The point Abhinavagupta makes with this is to counter the idea that some all-powerful being may have a capacity to transform the world that humans and other beings do not have. He emphasises that all entities participate in the mastery that we associate with god or some highest

force. The immanence of creative capacity that he extends to those of us here offers a resonance with Connolly's philosophy of becoming. Connolly tells us, for instance that humanism 'too often supports a consummate conception of human agency' which doesn't acknowledge proto-agency and non-human agency<sup>16</sup> and that a 'postulation of a world of inert facts is the product of a human subjectivity filled with hubris' (35). The philosophy of becoming that Connolly proposes seeks to move away from a mechanistic understanding of the world as mere object for human manipulation. Likewise, Abhinavagupta's universal postulation of subjectivity to all facets of reality preempts any human exceptionalism. As we see with Connolly's perspective, for Abhinavagupta, creative capacity does not stop with only limited entities like us humans; indeed it extends also to animals, cattle for instance. Gods as well, have no privileged access here; they are also considered to be in the same boat as us.<sup>17</sup> And Abhinavagupta extends this capacity even to insects as we will see shortly. Again: 'Or by his own independence'—accepting the idea that there is creation which is not dependent upon the creation of the lord.'18

That is, creation occurs on its own without regard to an omnipotent creator god. With this Abhinavagupta again takes pains to establish the idea that fundamental creativity is a feature of all beings, not limited to God. It would be a mistake here to read Abhinavagupta's dynamic theology of becoming as a gesture towards a species of intellectual deism, with an idea that some sort of clockwork God set the process of creation in motion, and then retired to let things happen, and to let beings like ourselves continue the business of creating. Abhinavagupta's emphasis on freedom and his understanding of a pervasive non-dual consciousness precludes this reading. If anything, his view more readily approximates an

emergent conception of cosmos. For instance, he tells us: 'The essential nature of the highest lord is just only awareness, which continuously naturally manifests ever anew the fivefold activity.' 19

Here, in a move that gestures towards a panpyschism, divinity, the 'highest lord' itself is understood as awareness. The fivefold activity is a well-trod, pan-Indian concept referring to the powers of creation, destruction, maintaining things, the influx of grace, and obscuration. Without getting sidetracked into a discussion of this very interesting fivefold capacity, the point Abhinavagupta makes with this is that this process of creating new things, new things emerging, and some things being destroyed is a process that continually occurs on all levels of subjectivity and agency, from the merest insect to humans, to entities whose consciousness has expanded beyond the normal awareness of most humans.<sup>20</sup> This is a philosophy drenched in a notion of becoming. With one small step we might slide into a conception of the 'layered complexity of thought, multiple modes and degrees of agency in the world, innumerable intersections between nonhuman force-fields of several types'21 that Connolly finds characteristic of our world as he maps it as a 'world of becoming'. By 'nonhuman force-fields', Connolly refers to things like bacteria, yeast, and the weather.<sup>22</sup> His use of the term 'force-fields' maintains an agnosticism regarding the imputation of consciousness, even as he champions the agency of these forces. This functions as a non-issue for Abhinavagupta's non-dualist immanence. Consciousness is pervasive, so certainly bacteria and yeast introject their own limited agendas in the greater whole. Indeed Abhinavagupta's careful assertion of agency beyond both human and divine explicitly finds expression on the level of insects: 'When those [beings] belonging to maya—even down to an insect—when they do



Shiva as Nataraja in Rameshwaram Cave at Ellora

their own deeds, that which is to be done first stirs in the heart.<sup>23</sup>

In what we might consider a sort of radical democracy of subjectivity, even insects for Abhinavagupta participate in the plenitude of becoming. They participate not as inert or mechanical

products of evolutionary forces—as we might assert today from a neo-Darwinian perspective that Connolly finds inadequate. Rather these insects, stirring in their hearts as they scurry across the floor lay claim to subjectivity as an evolving expression of a primary, pervasive consciousness.

The non-human force-fields that Connolly embraces abound in Abhinavagupta's panentheist-panpsychism. Moreover, Abhinavagupta's predecessor Somananda carries this pervasive intersection of multiple and non-human forcefields even one step further in a move that would delight the new materialists among us these days as he tells us: 'The clay pot knows by means of my self and I know by means of the self of the clay pot.'24 Even the insentient clay jar can lay claim to a subjectivity that interacts with and formulates my own. Does this radical inter-subjectivity leave room to extrapolate to systems like the weather? It is not clear, and certainly Abhinavagupta and Somananda did not have a concept of systems theories.

Connolly also notes that the principle of a

refined ethical sensibility is not 'derived' from a transcendent command, the transcendental subject, but rather it is a thing of this world.<sup>25</sup> Abhinavagupta's position would here approximate a both/and to Connolly's distinction between the transcendental subject and the world. A refined and sentient sensibility for Abhinavagupta certainly expresses itself in the world. It is a thing of the world, rising in the heart of the scurrying insect. It also necessarily derives from a transcendent source because his non-dualism entails no real difference between the transcendental subject and the things of this world. This, of course, is the difference between Connolly's radical and exclusive immanence and Abhinavagupta's panentheism. The side of immanence in Abhinavagupta's panentheism is the novelty he

> brings to Indian thought. His world view weds immanence to a transcendence that seeps through all of the stuff of the world here below, to humans of course, but also insects and for Somananda, even the humble clay pot. Connolly also tells us that exclusive humanists, that would be most of us in the academy, are not of his camp because they are closed to ideas of agency in other force-fields—again, think here of bacteria, yeast, and the weather (ibid.).26 This Kashmiri non-dualism easily resonates with Connolly's view on this score; the insects and clay pots of Abhinavagupta's and Somananda's theology would concur.

> We should keep in mind then, that the world for Abhinavagupta is real and valid; his is not a philosophy of transcendence. Indeed for him, the wholeness of reality



very much includes the world. Further, counter to much Indian philosophy, he tells us that the world itself is not transient, not a temporary glitch in perception, as we might find in some forms of Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta, but *nitya*, eternal. He says: 'In its essence the "whole", which has the nature of form and action, and which is, in fact, the proliferation of place and time—this "whole" shines in consciousness as undivided. The whole shines through by its own light alone, pervading everywhere, having all powers, and eternal (*nitya*) form.'<sup>27</sup>

The 'whole' which is the expansion of place and time—the two primary conditions of materiality—shines by its own light. It is also probably fair to read Abhinavagupta's emphasis on the 'eternality' of the world as an embrace of the world; it serves as a counter of immanence to the transcendence of Advaita Vedanta, which marks the world of becoming as anitya, impermanent, and consequently flawed. In this case, Abhinavagupta's embrace of immanence places the 'whole' as precisely the proliferation of place and time. A varied and changing expression of becoming; like the inflationary theory of the Big Bang, here too, place and time expand forth continually, proliferating. In resonance with Connolly's philosophy, Abhinavagupta's theology requires a notion of dynamism and becoming.

### **Transcendence**

How then, we might wonder, does Abhinavagupta address the idea of transcendence? For Connolly, it is clear that he contrasts his secular philosophy of immanence against philosophies of transcendence. Transcendence for him carries the whiff of deity, outside of time, an unappealing idea for his secularism of becoming. He professes a 'radical immanence' and not a 'radical transcendence' noting that the former rejects a notion of deity.<sup>28</sup> Transcendence, of course, also affords the possibilities of an 'outside' and an unpredictability that counters the mechanistic hubris of an eliminative materialism. These two features he wishes not to throw out with the bathwater of deity. On this count he draws from complexity theory as it offers possibilities for moving beyond reductionism, bringing the sciences closer to cultural theory (17). So he can still look to an 'outside', through a notion of systems theory, as systems collide, for instance, weather systems and global flows of capitalism, which bring some utterly novel and irreducible forces into play. With this he dispenses with our familiar notions of transcendence as somehow linked to deity and a space outside the world of change here.<sup>29</sup> Abhinavagupta, in contrast, relies fundamentally on a notion of transcendence. The starting point of his received tradition and his cosmological map is the principle of consciousness, which is also deity, Shiva, fundamentally transcendent, which expands out to become the immanent stuff of all that we see here. Far from being separate, above, and looking down on the world of immanence, the transcendent in this perspective unfolds immanence out of itself. In one important sense, it seems Abhinavagupta's system seeks to unravel the very idea of transcendence by linking transcendence inextricably with immanence. Like a Möbius strip that seamlessly transforms inside to outside, for Abhinavagupta, consciousness itself transforms in its becoming from a place of internality as knowledge or awareness into externality as action and materiality—the world outside. He tells us 'that creation is twofold when the highest Shiva, spreads open. When that energy manifests inwardly, naturally it is called the energy of knowledge. However when it expands in stages with its active awareness gradually becoming more firm and fixed, then it manifests externally.

This is pointed to as the energy of activity.<sup>30</sup>

The two poles of knowledge and activity reference our seemingly incommensurable facets of consciousness and materiality. This transversibility of transcendence into immanence and back again is precisely how Abhinavagupta links consciousness to materiality. This is his solution to the problem we encounter today in trying to understand the relationship between mind and matter. His ingenious solution also manages to put forth a non-dualism that dodges the pitfalls of a 'real' level to reality, *paramartha*, in contrast to the merely illusory world we experience here, *vyavahara*, that we find in Advaita Vedanta and some forms of Buddhism.

The really difficult component for his notion of transcendence in relation to immanence has to do with the problem of time. We might suggest that the very point of a notion of transcendence is the excision of time and change, in a word, a refusal of a concept of becoming. Certainly transcendence as a concept affords an emotional, psychological lure, buffering us from the world of loss, change and death. One could argue that a refusal of change and becoming is a driving component of a number of early Indian philosophical traditions' rejection of the world. That which changes is not permanent; it is *anitya*; as such it cannot be truly existent.

Abhinavagupta's response to the problem of time is layered. He carries the weight of a tradition that asserts a fundamental timelessness of deity. On the other hand, his theology of becoming requires a definitional dynamism, an incorporation of time into transcendence. To accomplish this, he presents first the traditional exegetical position, which asserts that only the level of the world, maya, incorporates time. He says:

You might complain—while it's fine to have sequence in the creation of maya because of the unfolding of the archetype of time [which

occurs within maya], but how can it be said that the creation above the *vidya* archetype [on levels of creation that precede the emergence of time], could have sequence, since there maya has not emerged? Consequently there can be no connection with time there [at these more primordial stages of the development of consciousness].<sup>31</sup>

Traditional theological exegesis for his tradition entails that time arises later in the evolutionary unfolding of divinity. The tradition wants to assert a pristine timelessness for the highest transcendent absolute. Abhinavagupta however suggests otherwise, saying: 'Even the highest reality, Shiva, the energy of bliss—which is that form where unfolding is just about to happen—that energy of bliss has priority, that is, primacy, and prior existence with regard to the energy of will. The word "tuti" is explained as a unit of time. Otherwise in the absence of sequence how could there be states of priority and posterity?'<sup>32</sup>

Time is a fundamental feature of his philosophy. It lies at the heart of his conception of existence. Even at the most transcendent level of existence, time marks the transitions of becoming, transforming. Abhinavagupta explains his divergence from accepted orthodoxy through an appeal to esotericism: 'Here it is because the limited souls who are to be taught are associated with duality ... with reference to those who are to be instructed and to those limited souls who are completely within [the grip of maya], it is appropriate.<sup>33</sup>

Dangerous doctrines which undermine a stable sense of transcendent timeless deity are not for all ears. Abhinavagupta uses this notion of skilful means in teaching to reconcile tradition with his theology of becoming.

### Agency

I touched upon the idea of agency earlier noting Connolly's critique of a humanism that 'too often supports a consummate conception

of human agency, which doesn't acknowledge proto-agency and non-human agency.<sup>34</sup> Here I would like to expand briefly on this idea and also point it towards Abhinavagupta's response to the always partial character of identity and agency as well.

Discussing 'the Augustinian-Kantian sense that human beings are unique agents in the world, while the rest of the world must be comprehended through non-agentic patterns of causality', Connolly tells us that this is an idea whose time may be up (150). With this he argues for a reclamation of at least some sort of protoagency for disparate classes of things, for amoebas, for cloud systems, even if the distributive sense of multiple agency he proposes is differential in its force, with humans, for instance, clocking in with greater agency than amoebas (21-2, 150). I noted earlier Somananda's radical extension of agency even to the insentient clay pot. This idea deserves amplification. Somananda's clay pot participates in an inter-subjectivity that enables my own formulation of identity, a conception of agency similar to the Whiteheadian conception of agency articulated by Catherine Keller's understanding of the fold of becoming,<sup>35</sup> not entailed however in Connolly's formulation. Somananda also understands agency as coterminous both with existence and self-reflexivity of at least some sort. He tells us elsewhere: 'Knowing itself as the agent, the clay pot performs its own action. If it were not aware of its own agency, the clay pot would not be present.'36

Is he suggesting that a clay pot cogitates in ways we can understand? Likely not; rather his panpsychism in this context points out a kind of protoagency that announces itself in simple existence. Agency also always entails awareness. However, how might this notion of agency as self-awareness be framed in contexts that push against notions of self-containment as a feature of identity?



Connolly identifies himself as a 'connectionist' proposing connectionism as an incomplete and partial hermeneutic mapping both the ways that systems,<sup>37</sup> or for our purposes here, identities, follow specific patterns and also become transformed by other identities intruding upon or augmenting them. 38 In this context, Somananda's pot, which knows itself through me demonstrates a connectionism, while the pot that knows itself as agent points to the partial character of inter-subjectivity. In both cases the clay pot still maintains some sense of self-identity even when that identity is tied to another. However, in some sense, ideas of unity of identity are always fragmented. Connolly points to this as well, quoting Merleau Ponty: 'The unity of either the subject or the object is not a real unity, but a presumptive unity on the horizon of experience' (49).

The fragmentation of self-identity and the critique of its essential unity is a dominant Buddhist critique of Hindu ideas of self and Abhinavagupta also recognises the force of this critique. His response is not to invoke an idea of self here unifying the multiplicity of experience on the horizon. Rather, he offers us a partial

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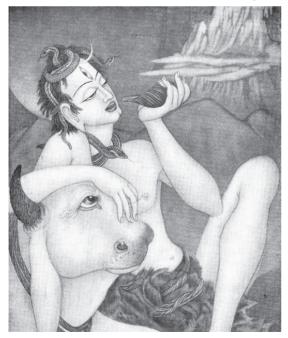
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sense of persistent identity obtained through breath-force, prana. He says:

Everywhere the three types of vital breaths [prana, apana, and samana] are said to predominate in the three states which are the domain of the subject [the waking, dream, and deep sleep states]. By being controlled through the solidity acquired from that [prana], what is in a fact a multiplicity of unrelated objects exists as the body [as it passes through and changes] each moment. This is the division of the body into past and present existence. As said by Sri Kallata in the Shiva Sutra:

[because] it makes the effects persevere, it is called breath-force, prana.<sup>39</sup>

The body here for Abhinavagupta is not a singular entity; 'what is in a fact a multiplicity of unrelated objects exists as the body'. His non-dualist immanence allows for the multiplicity of experience without a singular self as the experiencer, the subject driving the show. Instead it is the breath, that ubiquitous sign of life, even if insects, for instance, use trachea instead of lungs. In



a very down-to-earth way this makes sense, if for instance, we think of what distinguishes a living person, a sentient and unitary persona, from a corpse, the collection of body parts in decay—it is precisely the breath. What is remarkable here is his use of the breath-force, prana, as that which generates a sense of unity, of contained identity, out of the multiplicity of experience.<sup>40</sup> While we tend today to get locked into opposing models of a) either a soul, hovering somewhere, somehow connected to the body, or b) a mechanistic cycle of cells, molecules, and chemistry only accidentally generating a sense of subjectivity, this medieval conception attributes the unifying factor of identity not to a subject inhabiting a body, but rather to a particular expression of air moving in and out, as breath tends to do, in a dynamic oscillation through time. Here Abhinavagupta explains our psychological assumption of unity through a process that articulates itself differentially in various bodies. His response to this essential lack of unity of the self in this case is to note that the idea of the self persists through time not because of a personality that remains unchanging underneath the fluctuations of body and identity through time so no soul here. Rather it persists because of the unifying feature of breath in formulating identity. The sense of identity that is maintained in this context is not an idea of the self, but part of the limited sense of personality, the puryashtaka, the subtle body that transmigrates from life to life, but not any essence of self.

### **Notes and References**

- Nasadiya Suktam, Rig Veda, 10.129.6-7; all translations from the Sanskrit are my own unless otherwise specified. However, this translation has been modified from A A MacDonell, Hymns from the Rigveda (London: Clarendon, 1917).
- 2. William Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (North Carolina: Duke University, 2011), 16.
- 3. Of course, we'll see with Abhinavagupta that an immanentist position does not necessarily

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- imply atheism, as Connolly points out in relation to William James and Alfred North Whitehead.
- 4. See Thomas Nagel, Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False (New York: Oxford University, 2012).
- 5. See David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford University, 1996).
- 6. See Terence Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York: W W Norton, 2011), 109.
- 7. See Sam Harris, Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion (New York: Simon and Schuster 2014).
- 8. See an interview with Harris on this new book: Gary Gutting, 'Sam Harris's Vanishing Self' in *The New York Times*, 7 September 2014 <a href="http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/sam-harriss-vanishing-self/?\_php=true&\_type=blogs&\_r=1> accessed 16 November 2015.">http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/sam-harriss-vanishing-self/?\_php=true&\_type=blogs&\_r=1> accessed 16 November 2015.
- 9. Three quick and easy examples are: Kulārnava Tantra, ed. Taranatha Vidyaratna, with Introduction by Arthur Avalon (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975); Tantraloka of Abhinavagupta with Commentary by Rajanaka Jayaratha, eds. Mukund Ram Shastri, et al, 12 vols (Allahabad: Indian, 1918), 38; reprinted with introduction and notes by R C Dwivedi and Navjivan Rastogi, 8 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987); and a text I studied in depth, the Brihannila Tantra, ed. Madhusudan Kaul (Delhi: Butala, 1984), but real examples of programming mental and external transformations of the mind and body through meditation practices abound in tantric texts. Not to mention, of course, the voluminous literature in Buddhism, Jainism, and so on.
- 10. The Oxford English Dictionary: 'Panpsychism: the theory or belief that there is an element of consciousness in all matter.' First cited in 1879, with the OED's most recent citation in 1991.
- 11. For instance, in Abhinavagupta's Tantraloka, 1.82, Jayaratha's commentary, where he describes Shiva as 'Chidanandaikaghanah paramarthah shiva; Shiva as the highest reality, one dense mass of consciousness-bliss'. Also in Abhinavagupta's Paramarthasara on verse 5:

- 'Chidanandaikaghanah svatantryasvabhavah shivah; Shiva, whose own nature is freedom, which is one dense mass of consciousness-bliss', in Paramarthasara by Abhinavagupta with the commentary of Yogarāja in Kashmir Series of Texts and Studies, 75 vols (Srinagar: Jammu and Kashmir State, 1916), 7.16 <a href="http://www.muktabodha.org/index.htm">http://www.muktabodha.org/index.htm</a> accessed 16 November 2015.
- 12. A World of Becoming, 43.
- 13. Abhinavagupta, *Īśvara Pratyabhijñā Vivṛti Vimarśinī* [hereinafter *IPVV*], ed. Pandit Madhusudan Kaul Shastri, 3 vols (Delhi: Akay, 1985), 3.257: 'Shivatattvam hi sarva padarthanam vapuh. Tad bhitta prishte cha sarva bhava chitra nirbhasa.' Note that my translation of 'Shiva-tattva' as consciousness refers back to the chidanandaikaghana; this pervasive understanding of the tattva as a consciousness not moored to a notion of deity per se is pervasive in the tradition and articulated in this same text at *IPVV*, 3.325.
- 14. I draw the idea of 'ordinary beings' from the 'pashupramatri; the limited, bound subject', a few lines earlier.
- IPVV, 3.260: 'Tasyash-chito rupam yad aishvaryam, na hi jnanakriyatmakaishvaryatirikta chit kachit.'
- 16. A World of Becoming, 115.
- 17. The idea of cattle is implicit in the etymological derivation of 'maya-bound beings', *pashu-pramatri*. For the limitations of gods, see *IPVV*, 3.325.
- 18. IPVV, 3.260: 'Svatantryena va iti ishvarasrishtyanapekshaya. Nirmanam iti samarthitam iti sambandhah'.
- 19. IPVV, 3.260: 'Bodhasvabhavo hi parameshvarah satatam navanavakrityapanchakavabhasanasvabhavah'.'
- 20. These beings, whose capacities extend beyond that of most humans, by the way, are not necessarily gods. Some are humans who have achieved more expanded states of consciousness; they can also be other species, and some also belong to categories of entities who are not currently in familiar material forms.
- 21. A World of Becoming, 17.
- 22. Particularly at *A World of Becoming*, 23–8; but also at various other places.

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- IPVV, 3.260: 'Mayiyanam kitantanam svakaryakaranavasare yat karyam pura hridaye sphurati'.
- 24. Somānanda, Śiva Dṛṣṭi, Kashmir Series of Texts and Studies, 75 vols (Srinagar: Jammu and Kashmir State, 1916), 54.105–6. See also John Nemec's fine critical edition and translation of the first part of this seminal text, chapters 1–3 in John Nemec, *Ubiquitous Śiva*, (New York: Oxford University, 2011).
- 25. A World of Becoming, 80.
- 26. Discussing Charles Taylor's work.
- 27. IPVV, 3.256: 'Samastasya hi murti kriyanmano deshakala prapanchasya samvidi avabhasane tad aparicchinna svabhava asau vibhu nitya rupa sarva shaktih svaprakashataiva nirbhasate'.
- 28. A World of Becoming, 74-5.
- 29. He does reprieve one sense of transcendence in its spiritual dimension, however. He notes: 'There is another sense of transcendence that is important to the spirituality pursued here. That is transcendence as an intensification of everyday experience so as to amplify sensitivities' (A World of Becoming, 39). This notion of transcendence which allows him to propose an openness to his philosophy of immanence is suggestive of the sense of wonder, chamatkara, that we find in Abhinavagupta's philosophy. Derived from a multitude of ways, this 'suspended' (ibid.) and open attitude plays a fundamental role in Abhinavagupta's understanding of both spiritual and aesthetic transformation. A discussion on this topic will take us too far afield for this paper and cannot be explored here, however.
- 30. IPVV, 3.262: 'Sa esha dvayo'pi sargah paramashivasya bhagavatah shaktivijrimbha. Tatah sa shaktir antaravabhasmanasvabhavataya jnanashaktir uchyate, bahirbhavarupena tu kramopabrimhitena vimarshadardhyena upalakshita kriyashaktir iti vyapadishyate.'
- 31. IPVV, 3.262: 'Nanu mayiye sarge kalatattvonmeshat bhavatu kramah, vidyatattvante tu maya'nunmeshat kalayogabhave katham asau kramayogah uktah'.
- 32. IPVV, 3.263: 'Paramashive'pi bhagavati aunmukhyarupaya anandashakterichchhashakty apekshaya prathamatvam purvabhavitvam, tutir iti kalamsarupatvam tad upapadyate; anyatha kramabhave katham purvaparibhavavyavaharah'.

- 33. IPVV, 3.262–3: 'Iha dvaitavanto mayiyah pramatara upadeshyah ... kintu, upadeshyapekshaya antargatamayiyapramatrapekshaya cha yukto'.
- 34. A World of Becoming, 115.
- 35. See Catherine Keller, Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement (New York: Columbia University, 2015), 176.
- 36. Somananda, Shiva Drishti, 5.16: 'Janan kartaramatmanam ghatah kuryat svakam kriyam/ ajnate svatmakartritve na ghatah sampravartate.'
- 37. Connolly's use of the terminology of systems derives from his use of complexity theory, but also acknowledges the fundamentally plural character of all identity.
- 38. A World of Becoming, 36.
- 39. IPVV, 3.349.
- 40. Prana is not simply physical breath, but also a subtle analogue of breath, that operates on a more refined, subtle level than the physical movement of air.

Matangi





## Givenness versus Cultivation on the Religious Path: Philosophical and Historical Reflections on Linji Yixuan and Abhinavagupta

**David Peter Lawrence** 

T FIRST GLANCE, two great religious teachers can hardly seem more different than the ninth century sudden Ch'an master Linji portrayed in the *Linjilu*, and the tenth to eleventh century Kashmiri non-dual Shaiva

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philosophical theologian, tantric exegete, ritualist, and aesthetic theorist, Abhinavagupta. However, even though some of their core doctrines and pragmatic styles and emphases are very different, there is a similarity in a sort of *non-cultivatedness* or *givenness* both ascribe to the highest, liberative spiritual realisation.<sup>1</sup>

My own academic specialisation is in

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Kashmiri non-dual Shaivism, and especially the thought of Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta. However, I have also taught Linji, through English translations, in classes on Buddhism in Hong Kong, Canada, and the US, and have found his interpretations of the religion fascinating and incisive. At first I intended to discuss this subject only in a philosophical manner. However, I have become convinced that there actually are also strong historical reasons for some of the agreement. I believe that what is important is not making a link between just these two individuals, but rather understanding the reasons for their areas of deep philosophical and historical commonality. I hope that the following reflections will provide some direction for further research into the subject, by others as well as myself.

### Linji

Turning first to Linji, since the earliest Buddhist literature some aspirants have been said to have attained shortcuts in the path. One can find roots of these pursuits in the Pali texts, in accounts of sudden enlightenment, and in some of the reflexively deconstructive implications of early Buddhist scepticism—Lord Buddha's refusal to answer theoretical questions, the teaching of the three attributes, and the doctrine of dependent origination. Shortcuts may also be associated with expressed greater valuations of lay practice in the Mahayana. The proliferation of examples here include the Vimalakirti Sutra, the Ratnagotravibhaga and other Tathagatagarbha and Mahamudra texts, Atiyoga or Dzogchen traditions, the Sukhavativyuha Sutra and the varieties of Pure Land, the Lotus Sutra, and later Tiantai and Nicherin Buddhisms. The more streamlined practices became popular in later Chinese Buddhism.

I will not enter into questions here about the

historical Linji, but the figure portrayed is supposed to be connected with the earlier sudden Ch'an of the *Platform Sutra* through a disciple of Hui-neng named Ma-Tsu Tao-i (709–88). Through successive teachers, including Te-shan (780–865) there developed the rude and 'violent' style that was further advanced by Linji.

Now, it should be understood that Linji's tradition like other subitist religions *does engage in practice or cultivation*. This is well illustrated by the centrality of intense meditative practices to the eighteenth-century Rinzai revivalism of Hakuin. Hakuin criticised those who used Linji's teachings as an excuse for complacency, as lazy and do-nothing Buddhists.<sup>2</sup>

Linji's method of teaching involves frequent testing of the students and their testing of him, through koans and other apparently irrational language and behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Testing indicates the state of realisation of each and also endeavours to evoke the non-dual realisation of the Buddha nature (53, 55–6).

Now, Linji was in my understanding trying to convey an advanced understanding that practice leads to a realisation and that practice is not really doing anything. One is already the dharma *kaya*, shunyata, and so on:

Fellow believers, you lug your alms bag and this sack of shit that is your body and you rush off on side roads, looking for buddhas, looking for Dharma. Right now, all this dashing and searching you're doing—do you know what it is you're looking for? It is vibrantly alive, yet has no root or stem. You can't gather it up, you can't scatter it to the winds. The more you search for it the farther away it gets. But don't search for it and it's right before your eyes, its miraculous sound always in your ears. But if you don't have faith, you'll spend your hundred years in wasted labour (58).

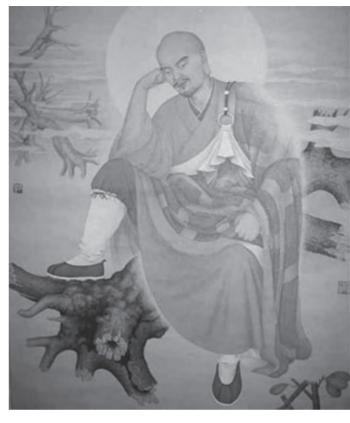
Though Linji doesn't teach Buddhist devotionalism, he does find in immediate realisation

the essence of the Pure Lands, believed by adherents to have been graciously provided by various Buddhas or bodhisattvas. For the one who understands, 'every place for him is clean and pure, his light pierces the ten directions, the ten thousand phenomena are a single thusness' (34).<sup>4</sup> As already indicated, he interprets older Buddhist ideas of self-reliance in terms of a kind of faith in oneself:

When students today fail to make progress, where's the fault? The fault lies in the fact that they don't have faith in themselves! If you don't have faith in yourself, then you'll be forever in a hurry trying to keep up with everything around you, you'll be twisted and turned by whatever environment you're in and you can never move freely. But if you can just stop this mind that goes rushing around moment by moment looking for something, then you'll be no different from the patriarchs and the buddhas. Do you want to get to know the patriarchs and the buddhas? They're none other than you, the people standing in front of me listening to this lecture on the Dharma!

One has faith in the Buddha who is oneself, just as in non-dual Shaivism one has faith in Shiva who is oneself.

Linji frequently makes iconoclastic denials of Buddhism as a set of teachings, ironically stating when he ascends the hall for his distinguished lecture that in adhering to his tradition there is nothing to say and that there is not much to his teacher Huang-po's Buddhism (9). He explains: 'And things like the Three Vehicles and the twelve divisions of the scriptural teachings—they're all so much old toilet paper to wipe away filth. The Buddha is a phantom body, the patriarchs are nothing but old monks. ... If you seek the Buddha, you'll be seized by the Buddha devil. If you seek the patriarchs, you'll be fettered by the patriarch devil. As long as you seek something it can only lead to suffering' (47).



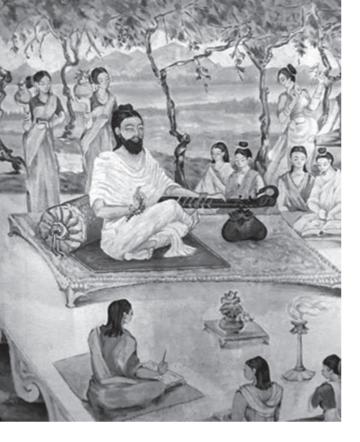
Linji's notoriously violent advice would have been shocking even though it is not meant literally:

Followers of the Way, if you want to get the kind of understanding that accords with the Dharma, never be misled by others. Whether you're facing inward or facing outward, whatever you meet up with, just kill it! If you meet a buddha, kill the buddha! If you meet a patriarch, kill the patriarch. If you meet an arhat, kill the arhat. If you meet your parents, kill your parents. If you meet your kinfolk, kill your kinfolk. Then for the first time you will gain emancipation, will not be entangled with things, will pass freely anywhere you wish to go (52).

This idea of wandering in freedom also sounds like the Daoist sage Zhuangzi.

Other shocking statements by Linji are that one should cut the heads off of the *sambhoga kaya* and dharma *kaya*, that those who perform

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bodhisattva practices are 'hired field hands', 'arhats and *pratyekabuddhas* are so much filth in the latrine', and '*bodhi* and nirvana are hitching posts for donkeys' (26).

The master is violent not only in language but in his performances. He often shouts at his students (9, 98), and compares the proper Ch'an master to a lion who through roaring spits open the brains of little foxes (44). He frequently hits students with his swatter or punches or grabs them (15–6, 52–3, 94). Again, it is believed that this can actually lead them to enlightenment (97). He and the monk P'u-hua get into crazy physical altercations about koans, with the latter turning over tables at meals (87).

Linji often advocates a teaching of not doing, manifestly synthesising conceptions of Buddhist subitism with Daoism on *wu-wei*: 'Followers of the Way, the Dharma of the buddhas calls for no special undertakings. Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you

get tired, then lie down. Fools may laugh at me, but wise men will know what I mean' (31).

Linji's provocations have a far more cuttingly subversive and profound soteriological import than the 'Beat Zen' of Orientalist counterculture or late capitalist spectacles.<sup>6</sup>

# **Abhinavagupta**

Turning to Abhinavagupta, though he characteristically scatters elucidative comments and clues throughout his writings, there are two places where he focuses on givenness: a) in the discussions subsidiary to verses 1.1.2 and 2.3.15–6 in the *Ishvarapratyabhijnavimarshini*<sup>7</sup> and Ishvarapratyabhijnavivritivimarshini<sup>8</sup> by Abhinavagupta, commentaries on Utpaladeva's Ishvarapratyabhijnakarika and Ishvarapratyabhijnavivriti by Utpaladeva respectively, and b) in the treatment of what he calls the anupaya, 'non-means', in the second chapters of both Tantraloka and Tantrasara. The discussions in the Pratyabhijna best articulate the understanding of givenness per se, which is repeated in the Tantraloka and Tantrasara. The latter two texts add considerations about a sudden realisation with little or no practice, which we will consider subsequently.

In the *Pratyabhijna* texts, Abhinavagupta follows Utpaladeva in advancing two main considerations for the ultimate givenness of the Shaiva realisation: a) self-luminosity, *svaprakashatva* and b) divine omnipotence or grace. To quote: 'Who, having a non-insentient self [*ajadatma*], could accomplish the negation [*nishedha*] or establishment [siddhi] of the Great Lord, who is agent [*kartari*], knower [*jnatari*], one's own Self [*svatmani*], and is established from the beginning [*adisiddhe*]?'

The discussion in *IPK*, 2.3.15–6 is roughly similar, though formulated in terms of means of justified knowledge, *pramana*.<sup>10</sup>

One main point of Abhinavagupta's explanations is that it is only the divine Shiva-self that could know anything and that it is already realised, as self-luminous, *svaprakasha*. No knower, *pramatri*, other than the Shiva by any means, *pramana*, could have any knowledge or *prama*, *pramiti* or achievement, siddhi, of which the object, *prameya*, is the supreme Shiva. <sup>11</sup> Abhinavagupta explains that it is in order to minimise the confusion about viewing the Great Lord as an object of perceptual cognition that Utpaladeva mentions him in the verse quoted in the locative absolute, referring to a pre-esetablished, or given, condition. <sup>12</sup>

Likewise, describing Utpaladeva's own state of self-realisation, Abhinavagupta explains that the Shiva-self does everything, including liberating through his grace. It is because of the obfuscation of its real nature that actual causation by the Lord appears as ordinary observed causal relationships, such as the relations between means and goal, *upayopeyabhava*, accomplisher and accomplished, *nishpadyanishpadakabhava*, and that which makes known and that which is made known, *jnapyajnapakabhava*. <sup>13</sup> Abhinavagupta, furthermore, completely identifies the givenness of self-luminosity with that of grace:

The fundamental cause is nothing but awarenesss [prakasha] of one's unobstructed Self, abounding in the Shaktis of the unsurpassed [anuttara], and having the nature of the manifestation of one's own pure self [shuddhasvatma]. ... This is the fifth and final act of the Lord, characterised as grace [anugraha], which accomplishes the supreme goal of the person [purushartha], for from that fundamental cause, there is genuine liberation [moksha]. ... [That grace] is a wonderful thing produced by the yawning forth [vijrimbha] of Lordship [aishvarya], which has the character of doing what is impossible; [it] cannot be obtained by hundreds of desires for removing the beginningless

dark obscuration of what is [actually] self-luminous [svaprakasha]. 14

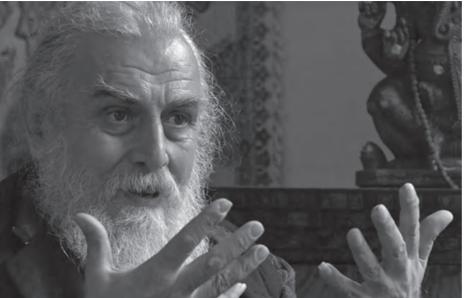
The reference to the supreme Lord as unsurpassed is central to descriptions of the non-means in the *Tantraloka* and *Tantrasara*.

As I understand Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, they discuss these issues in the *Pratyabhijna* texts, not to propound a subitism there, but rather as a sort of dialectical qualification of the modus operandi of the apologetics. The *Pratyabhijna* arguments work by eliminating ignorance about one's possession of Shakti. By these, one leads oneself inferentially to the discovery of the fact that is already given, that one is the Shakti-possessing Lord. Through study one breaks through to the level of one's ever-realised identity.<sup>15</sup>

Abhinavagupta in his discussions in the second chapters of Tantraloka and Tantrasara articulates some of the same considerations of givenness, but also postulates the subitist nonmeans, anupaya, on the top of a hierarchy of three increasingly internal upayas, the anava, shakta, and shambhava upayas. These are built upon a similarly named scheme of mystical submersions, samavesha, in the Malinivijayottara Tantra. Although Abhinava and Utpaladeva discuss the givenness of the Shiva-self in the Pratyabhijna texts, I think it makes best sense to classify the *Pratyabhijna* argumentation itself within the intellectually oriented shakta upaya, which uses good reasoning, sattarka, for the purification of conceptualisation, vikalpasamskara. Some have assumed that the Pratyabhijna system should be classified as an anupaya. However, my interpretation accords with those of Hemendra Nath Chakravarty, Navjivan Rastogi, and Alexis Sanderson.<sup>16</sup>

In any event, for sources of the *anupaya* teaching itself, Abhinavagupta in the second chapters of *Tantraloka* and *Tantrasara* refers to

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Mark Dyczkowski (b. 1951)

the philosopher Somananda as well as apparently lost texts such as the *Urmimahashastra*.<sup>17</sup> He describes the *anupaya* as founded on the same self-luminous and omnipotent or gracious aspects of the Shiva-self's givenness already considered. The non-means utilises literally no effort or very slight effort, such as the glance of the guru—no hitting, cursing, or screaming. Like Buddhists with means, *upaya* and wisdom, *prajna*, Abhinavagupta describes the relation of *upaya* and *upeya* as nothing but awareness, *prakasha*.<sup>18</sup> Abhinavagupta says that ultimately there is no need for instruction, *deshana*,<sup>19</sup> concentration, *avadhana*,<sup>20</sup> meditation, *bhavana*,<sup>21</sup> or other ritual.<sup>22</sup>

In the sections on *anupaya*, Abhinavagupta apophatically qualifies the supreme Lord with the aforementioned term unsurpassed, *anuttara*, a term that as Mark Dyczkowski corroborates, is coming Buddhism.<sup>23</sup> Parts of this discussion indeed sound very much like the rigorous and self-reflexive negations of a Prajnaparamita or Madhyamika text. Maheshvara is neither Shakti nor the possessor of Shakti,

neither the worshipped, pujya, nor the worshipper, pujaka, 24 nor mantra, 25 nor agent, action or result. 26 We even have fourfold ontological negations, chatushkoti, for example: 'It is not existence, not nonexistence, not [both] existence-and-non-existence and not devoid of both [existence and non-existence]. This state is difficult to understand. Whatever this is, it is the unsurpassed, anuttara. 27

Though Jayaratha cites here the authority of Sri Bhargashikha, <sup>28</sup> it seems that Abhinavagupta and/or his sources are paraphrasing if not quoting Buddhist texts. <sup>29</sup> Abhinavagupta also refers to the Lord as *para pada* and Shaktigarbha, reminding us of the concept

of Tathagatagarbha.30

# From Philosophy Back to History

As we have seen, in both Linji and Abhinavagupta cultivation is conceived as leading to a state where one transcends cultivation. I have pointed to discussions in the Tantraloka and Tantrasara that seem like Madhyamika and Prajnaparamita. These traditions are among the root Buddhist sources for Linji, to which he added Daoist teachings of returning to an uncultivated natural state, like uncarved wood. While the sudden Ch'an traditions make slight gestures towards an assimilation of grace to luminosity, this aspect of supernatural agency is fully developed in nondual Shaivism. The effort-grace dialectic of course aligns the Shaivas with the Hindu as well as the Buddhist bhakti traditions. One may think of the Japanese Pure Land theologian Honen on salvation by Amitabha rather

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than self-effort, as well as the various dialectics of work versus grace, including 'infused' mystical grace, in the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

An ultimate background to some of the self-luminosity doctrines in both Shaivism and Buddhism is certainly the Upanishads. Abhinavagupta, Utpaladeva, and other Shaivas do on occasion refer to Upanishadic authority on this subject. In his *IPV*, Abhinava quotes for support the rhetorical question of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: 'Indeed by what can one know the knower?'<sup>31</sup>

Abhinavagupta also often adverts to a statement that 'this Self has already and always manifested [sakridvibhata]. There is never the possibility of the non-illumination [aprakashana] of that which is perfect [purna].<sup>32</sup>

The same or a similar statement is quoted or alluded to in numerous places in Shaiva texts, including Utpaladeva's statement of the lack of temporal sequence in the Shiva-self: 'In all things, the differentiation of manifestations may be the basis for the sequence of time for the knower, such as the void [shunya, knower as blank witness], and so on, who has a delimited light. However, it cannot [be the basis for the sequence of time for the unlimited knower], who has manifested already and always [sakridvibhata].<sup>33</sup>

A possible original source for the idea that the higher Self has manifested already and always, *sakridvibhata*, is *Chhandogya Upanishad*:

Now, this self is a dike, a divider, to keep these worlds from colliding with each other. Days and nights do not pass across this dike, and neither do old age, death, or sorrow, or even good or bad deeds. All evil things turn back from it, for this world of *brahman* is free from evil things.

Upon passing across this dike, therefore, a blind man turns out not to be blind, a wounded

man turns out not to be wounded, and a sick man turns out not to be sick. Upon passing across this dike, therefore, one even passes from night into day, for, indeed, this world of *brahman* is *lit up once and for all.*<sup>34</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the great number of later Advaita Vedanta elaborations of Upanishadic 'givenness'. Though the Shaivas and Buddhists share common ancient precedents in the Shruti and perhaps some interpretations of later Vedanta, there are also reasons to affirm more direct relations.

Abhinavagupta was familiar with Buddhist tantra such as Kalachakra, as well as a very wide range of Buddhist philosophes, including writings of Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Dharmakirti, Dharmottara, and so on. I am not sure whether Abhinavagupta would have directly read any Mahayana Sutra or Buddhist tantras. One wonders about direct or indirect connections with a great number of texts such as the Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra, 36 the Ratnagotravibhaga, the Sanskrit Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra,<sup>37</sup> the Abhisamayalamkara on Ekakshanabhisambodhi, the Uttara Tantra attributed to Asanga,38 the Guhyasiddhi, and so on. It is well known that a large portion of Buddhist philosophical and tantric traditions entered Tibet through Kashmir.<sup>39</sup> This is more than a matter of a continuity with what became Ch'an. I suggest that some of the roots of Dzogchen subitism were somehow common to Abhinavagupta. It will require the work of scholars of both Buddhist and Shaiva traditions to throw light on this issue.

I will close with a quote from one of a number of old Kashmiri works ascribed to somebody named Nagarjuna. Some of these texts are basically Shaiva works, though there may be traces in them of Madhyamika or Prajnaparamita. I am not sure of their age or where they fit in

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the relationships of the traditions, but many of these writings refer to both kinds of givenness discussed here, of a self-luminous divine self and of divine grace. <sup>40</sup> In the words of this Nagarjuna's *Paramarchanatrimshika*:

Shiva, is constantly devoid of conceptual constructions [kalpana] regarding cognition and object of cognition, and is without fixed abode. Worship [archana] has no value when there is not very deep absorption into him in an instant [kshanat].<sup>41</sup>

This subitism also appropriates related practices of meditations on the temporal instant, *kshana*, again with roots going back to the Veda as well as Buddhist and Yogic literature. Historically as well as philosophically, Abhinavagupta and Linji might not be as far apart as they first seem to be.

## **Conclusion**

What if Linji and Abhinavagupta were actually to meet each other? I want to believe and

I do believe, from the perspective of a version of Hindu religious pluralism itself derived from non-dual Shaiva hermeneutics, 43 that they were both such highly awakened persons that they would instantly recognise each other. However, assuming that neither was intellectually omniscient, they would probably also be greatly challenged by one another. Linji was supposed to have studied academic subjects, which one would presume included Buddhist philosophy, and thought it all dealt with just the 'surface matters'. 44 Abhinavagupta argued—in opposition to various Buddhist skepticisms for the value of understanding the non-dual and ineffable truth to be a God who is omnipotent agent, svatantra karta, and, as comprising paravak within his Shakti, the 'protosemiotic' foundation of verbalised theories as well as mantras. Nevertheless, in spite of the disagreements, he often expressed great respect for Buddhist philosophies. Of



course it is possible that Linji would try to hit Abhinavagupta, and that Abhinavagupta would prevent that with learned arguments or tantric siddhis!

### **Notes and References**

- An earlier version of this paper was presented at Religion in Chinese and Indian Cultures: A Comparative Perspective Group, at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Diego in November 2014. This work benefited from advice and suggestions of Mark Dyczkowski, Lawrence Y K Lau, Navjivan Rastogi, and Sthaneshwar Timalsina.
- 2. See Hakuin, *Wild Ivy*, trans. Norman Waddell (Boston, Shambhala, 1999), 3, 55–6, 65–6.
- 3. See *The Zen Teachings of Master Linji*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University, 1993), 12–3, 98.
- 4. Hui-neng developed a much more elaborate interpretation of the Pure Land of Amitabha as internal and immediate. See *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, trans. Philip B Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University, 1967), 156-9.
- 5. The Zen Teachings of Master Linji, 23.
- 6. See Alan Watts, Watts, 'Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen', Chicago Review, 12/2 (Spring 1958), 3–11; Edward W Said, Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient (London: Penguin, 1995); and Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle (Detroit: Black and Red, 2000).
- 7. Hereafter, IPV.
- 8. Hereafter, IPVV.
- 9. IPK, 1.1.2; Utpaladeva, The Īśvarapratyabhijñā-kārikā of Utpaladeva with the Author's Vṛttti, ed. and trans. Raffaele Torella (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002), 2.
- See The Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā of Utpaladeva, 53.
- 11. See IPV, 1.1.2, 2.3.15-6.
- 12. See *IPV*, I.I.I and Abhinavagupta, *Īśvarapratya-bhijñāvimarśinī* (with Bhāskarī), ed. K A Subramania Iyer and K C Pandey, 2 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), I.54. Abhinavagupta's interpretation would equally apply to Utpala's later explanation of self-luminosity. See

- *IPK*, 2.3.15–6 and *The İśvarapratyabhijñākārikā* of *Utpaladeva*, 53, where the Lord is mentioned in the same syntax.
- 13. See IPV, 1.1.1 and Īśvarapratyabhijñāvimarśinī (with Bhāskarī), 1.24–6.
- 15. See IPK and IPV, 1.1.2–4 in Īśvarapratyabhijñāvimarśinī (with Bhāskarī), 1:56-79; and IPK and IPV 2.3.17 in Īśvarapratyabhijñāvimarśinī (with Bhāskarī), 2.139–49.
- 16. Based on personal conversations. See arguments in David Peter Lawrence, 'Tantric Argument: The Transfiguration of Philosophical Discourse in the Pratyabhijñā System of Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta', Philosophy East and West, 46 (April 1996), 165–204.
- 17. See *Tantraloka*, 2.48 in Abhinavagupta, *The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha*, ed. Madhusudan Kaul Shastri, Mukunda Rama Shastri, R C Dwivedi, and Navjivan Rastogi, 8 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 2.349.
- 18. For example, see Tantraloka, 2.17; The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.323.
- 19. See Tantraloka, 2.2; The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.312.
- 20. See Tantraloka, 2.12; The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.321.
- 21. See Tantraloka, 2.13; The Tantraloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.321.
- 22. See Hemendra Nath Chakravarty, 'Kṣaṇa: Its Spiritual Significance', *The Indian Theosophist: Thakur (Dr.) Jaideva Singh Felicitation Number*, 82/10-11 (October-November 1985),

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- 121–6; 125, on haṭhapākapraśamaṇa versus madhurapākaśamana.
- 23. Based on a personal conversation with Mark Dyczkowski.
- 24. See Tantraloka, 2.24–5; The Tantraloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.329–30.
- 25. See Tantraloka, 2.6; The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.330.
- 26. See Tantraloka, 2.27; The Tantraloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.331.
- 27. See Tantraloka, 2.28; The Tantraloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.332.
- 28. See Jayaratha, Tantraloka-Viveka, 2.28; The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.332.
- 29. See the entire section of Tantraloka, 2.28–33; The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.332–7.
- 30. See Tantraloka, 2.32; The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 2.336.
- 31. IPV, 1.1.4; The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Jayaratha, 1.72 and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.5.15; in Jagadisha Shastri, Upanishat-Sangraha (Sanskrit), ed. Prof. J L Shastri (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), 121.
- 32. IPVV, 2.1.7; İśvarapratyabhijñāvivṛtivimarśinī, ed. Madhusudan Kaul Shastri, 3 vols (Delhi: Akay, 1987), 3.23.
- 33. IPK, 2.1.6; The İśvarapratyabhijñākārikā of Utpaladeva, 43.
- 34. Chhandogya Upanishad, 8.4.1–2. Translation from The Early Upanishads: Annotated Text and Translation, ed. and trans. Patrick Olivelle (New York: Oxford University, 1998), 169. Emphasis added.
- 35. See Bettina Baumer, 'Krama' in *Kalātattvakośa*, eds, Kapila Vatsyayan and Bettina Baumer (Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1992), 2.247–73; 263, on the Advaita Vedanta distinction between gradualist *kramamukti* and subitist *sadya-mukti*, for instance, in Acharya Shankara's commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* 1.3.13.
- 36. See *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, ed. Watson Burton

- (New York: Columbia University, 1997).
- 37. See The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra: Last and Most Impressive Teachings of the Buddha about Reality and the True Self, trans. Tony Page and Kosho Yamamoto (Sydney: F Lepine, 2008).
- 38. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, The Uttara Tantra: A Treatise on Buddha Nature—A Commentary on the Uttara Tantra Shastra of Asanga (Delhi: Satguru, 1989).
- 39. Jean Naudou, *Buddhists of Kaśmīr* (Delhi: Agam Kala, 1980).
- 40. See R K Kaw, 'Nagarjuna's Contribution to Shaivism', *The Sharda Peeth*, 1/3 (1960), 25–35; and Jankinath Kaul 'Kamal', 'Philosophy of Nāgārjuna and Kaśmīr Śaivism', *Indologica Taurinensia: Online Journal of the International Association of Sanskrit Studies*, 21–2 (2014) <a href="http://www.indologica.com/volumes/vol21-22/vol21-22\_art10\_KAUL.pdf">http://www.indologica.com/volumes/vol21-22/vol21-22\_art10\_KAUL.pdf</a>. 2014> accessed 17 November 2015. These works include editions of *Chittasantoshatrimshika* and *Paramarchanatrimshika*, ascribed to Nagarjuna.
- 41. *Paramarchanatrimshika*, 10; 'Nagarjuna's Contribution to Shaivism', 32.
- 42. See A K Coomaraswamy, 'Time and Eternity in Hinduism and Buddhism' in *Time in Indian Philosophy: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Hari Shankar Prasad (Delhi: Satguru, 1992), 133–85; Louis De La Vallée Poussin, 'Notes sur le "moment" ou kṣaṇa des bouddhistes' (Polish), *Rocznik Orjentalistyezny*, 8 (1934), 1–9; and Hemendra Nath Chakravarty, 'Tantric Spirituality' in *Hindu Spirituality II: Postclassical and Modern*, eds K R Sundararajan and Bithika Mukerji (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 209–31.
- 43. See David Peter Lawrence, 'Zu Abhinavaguptas Offenbarungstheorie', *Polylog: Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren* (German), 5 (2000), 6–18; and David Peter Lawrence, 'The Plurality and Contingency of Knowledge, and its Rectification According to the Pratyabhijña' in *Abhinavā: Perspectives on Abhinavagupta—Studies in Memory of K C Pandey on His Centenary*, eds Navjivan Rastogi and Meera Rastogi (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2013).
- 44. See The Zen Teachings of Master Linji, 52.

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# The Secret and the Revealed —Mantra and Meaning within Bhaskararaya's Guptavati

**Caleb Simmons** 

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ANTRAS ARE ONE OF THE MOST interesting and debated elements of the tantric traditions. These oftenenigmatic phrases have piqued the interest of practitioners and scholars alike as we seek to understand their relationship to language and ritual. The interest in mantras, language, and meaning is not only of contemporary interest but has engaged the minds of many great traditional Indian philosophers from various schools of thought, including but not limited to grammarians, Vedantins, and tantrics. For each, their philosophical perspective, darshana, shaped the way they viewed the relationship between mantra and language and how both are related to ritual performance. In this essay, I will examine how the Srividya scholar Bhaskararaya understood the relationship between mantra and meaning in his Guptavati, 'Repository of the Secret', an eighteenth century commentary on the Devi Mahatmyam. After a brief introduction to mantras and the scholarly debate surrounding mantras and meaning, I take up his exegesis of the navarna mantra found in the Guptavati. While this mantra is often believed to hold only secret or esoteric meaning that is exclusively accessible to the Srividya intitiate, Bhaskararaya explains that the mantra also contains translatable semantic meaning when properly understood. I suggest that, following Srividya Shakta philosophy, Bhaskararaya believes that mantras contain meaning, both discursive and hidden, and both are ultimately the same when properly understood. To put it another way, mantras, particularly the navarna mantra are simultaneously secret and revealed.

#### What is a Mantra?

One of the most central ritual acts of the tantra

Caleb Simmons is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies and Classics at the University of Arizona and a Religious Studies Global Advisor. traditions is the use of mantras. Mantras are set phrases that when recited verbally or mentally within the right context by a skilled adept have power to bring about results, soteriological, metaphysical or spiritual, immediate, and/or physical. Mantras have been a vital part of Indian traditions since the Vedic period and have continued through almost all aspects of the Hindu traditions, most widely seen through the usage of the *bija*, seed mantra Om. The usage of mantras, however, is proliferated in the esoteric tantric traditions where they are central to the practice of Srividya initiates.

The ubiquity of the mantras within the Indic traditions has garnered the attention of many scholars of Indology and Religious Studies; however, the vast array of mantras from various traditions and historical periods has led to a gaping disparity in how scholars have understood mantras and their function within the Indian traditions. The range of formulae that are considered mantras have given rise to a variety of scholarly definitions of the phenomena. Patton Burchett has emphasised the vocalisation of mantric phrases as he defined them: 'In the Hindu tradition, mantras are verbal formulas whose sounds, when properly vocalized, are believed to possess an innate power—the power of the deity with which they are identified—to affect reality.'2 Other scholars have downplayed the vocalisation of the mantras, arguing that within some traditions the mental repetition of the formula is also efficacious practice. Thus, Agehananda Bharati offers a different definition of the term that instead emphasises the esoteric nature of mantra in respects to the adept's diksha, initiation: 'A mantra is a quasi-morpheme or a series of quasi-morphemes, or a series of mixed genuine and quasi-morphemes arranged in conventional patterns, based on esoteric traditions, and passed on from one preceptor to one

disciple in the course of a prescribed initiation.'<sup>3</sup> Yet other scholars still have opted for a different approach in which each period and traditional context shapes the function of mantras so that the term must be viewed as dynamic in its deployment and connotation. This was the approach taken by Jan Gonda in his foundational essay on the study of mantras, effi-

ciently summarised by Harvey Alper:

Gonda first focuses on the Veda and defines mantra 'provisionally and for practical purposes' as 'a general name for the formulas, verses or sequences of words in prose which contain praise ... are believed to have magical, religious, or spiritual efficiency, are recited, muttered or sung in the Vedic ritual and which are collected in the methodically arranged corpora of Vedic texts'. He immediately qualifies this by adding that the word applies to 'comparable "formulas" of different origin used in the post-vedic cults'. Focusing on practical morality (dandaniti), Gonda [259] offers a second definition of mantra as 'consultation, resolution, advice, counsel, design, plan, secret'. Moving on to classical Hinduism [271], he offers a third definition, notable for its anthropological and heuristic breadth: In the religious practice of the Hindu age, as well as earlier, the term mantra 'covers also all potent (so-called magical) forms of texts, words, sounds, letters, which bring good luck to those who know or "possess" them and evil to their enemies'. By the very next page, Gonda has moved on to another, Tantric, context and defines mantra as 'a power (śakti-) in the form of formulated and expressed thought.4

Given this breadth of possible definitions,



Alper in his introduction to *Understanding Mantras* arrives at the conclusion that one comprehensive definition is neither fruitful nor possible, instead suggesting that the study of mantras ought to: 1) consider whatever the tradition calls a 'mantra', a mantra; 2) recognise that the word and the practice are not coterminous; 3) understand that many

other terms have been used to describe the phenomenon within the tradition; and 4) be cautious of the broad and imprecise usage of the term. While there is no scholarly consensus over the definition of the term, collectively they build a framework through which we can analyse the broader phenomenon.

# Mantra and Meaning

A more hotly contested academic debate still persists over the nature of mantras and their meaning or lack thereof. To put the question another way, what is the relationship between mantra and language? As we saw above in Bharati's definition of mantra and seems to be assumed in Burchett's and Gonda's definitions, mantras can be understood as, containing, linguistic components. Mantras, however, come in a variety of forms, including full hymns and verses that are translatable into other languages, enigmatic and formulaic phrases, and/or monosyllables, bija mantra, with no discursive or translatable meaning. This then begs the question of the relationship between mantra and meaning.

The notable scholar of Indology Frits Staal has argued that mantras are meaningless, that

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is they have no discursive meaning.<sup>6</sup> His initial formulation of the meaninglessness of mantras was through his inquiries into Sanskrit linguistics and the philosophy of the pre-Paninian grammarian Kautsa, who argued that Vedic utterances were meaningless. As Staal continued to refine his thesis, he argued that mantras are intimately related to ritual within the evolution of humanity with both predating language. He suggests that language develops out of the ritual context in which these utterances had first appeared. For Staal this means that mantras are part of a ritual program that is independent of discursive meaning with form being the critical component of mantra-ness. Therefore, even when a mantra appears to have a discursive and translatable meaning, the true 'meaning' of the mantra is 'ineffable and beyond language' because the mantric form predates any semantic practice.8 Its primary role is its function within the ritual program. Though at its most well-developed stage Staal's argument is largely based on his assumptions of cultural human evolution in which ritual and ritual utterances predate the creation of language, even without accepting this justification one cannot quickly dismiss Staal's overall thesis that all mantras arise from a ritual complex in which the discursive meaning of the word, phrase, sentence, and the like, is not as important as its role in proper completion of the rite.

Staal's thesis, however, is not without its detractors. For our purposes, the critique of Staals's theory by Harold Coward is most pertinent. Like Staal in his initial work on meaning and mantra, Coward attempts to explore this phenomenon through the traditional Indian texts, framing his essay through the lens of not only Kautsa, but also Vasubandhu—'meaning of mantras is to be found in their absence of meaning'—and Shabara and Jaimini—'mantras

express the meaning of dharma' and 'where the meaning is not intelligible, it is not that there is no meaning ... people are ignorant of it. To fully engage Staal's theory of the meaninglessness of mantra, however, Coward thoroughly analyses Bhartrihari's Vakyapadiya, which he interprets to offer a broader view of 'meaning' and 'language'. Coward argues that 'meaning' in relation to mantra cannot be confined to 'word meaning', but for the initiate the meaningfulness of mantra is its encapsulation of a reality that is beyond word meaning occurring on a 'mystical level' in which the practitioner has direct perception of the 'truth of the mantra' (169-72). 11 Therefore for Coward 'the meaningfulness of mantras is not merely intellectual, this meaning has power, shakti, for 'purging ignorance and revealing truth, and [as an] effective instrument for realization of release (moksha).12 For both Coward and Bhartrihari, meaning is much more than discursive and translatable, but it is meaningful for its latent ability to affect results—the secret and 'true' meaning.

These discussions of meaning and/or lack thereof do not sufficiently show how mantras are understood within a tantric tradition or its indigenous scholastic traditions. In order to understand more fully the role of mantras within a tantric tradition, let us now turn to the Shakta Srividya philosopher Bhaskararaya and his *Guptavati*, an eighteenth century commentary on the *Durga Saptashati* or the *Devi Mahatmyam*.

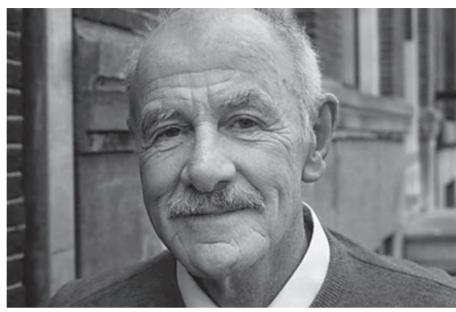
# Bhaskararaya, Srividya, and Guptavati

Bhaskararaya Makhin was born in the town of Bhaga in present-day Maharashtra in the last quarter of the seventeenth century after his father Gambhiraraya of Vishvamitra Gotra had completed a recitation of the Mahabharata for the ruler of the kingdom, who conferred

upon the Brahmin the title of 'Bharati'. His father sent Bhaskararaya to Varanasi, where he received his sacred thread. upanayana. There, he studied with Narasimhadhvarin and was simultaneously initiated into a Sarasvati-Shakta lineage by his father. According to the tradition, in Varanasi, he became renowned for his skills in philosophical debate. After completion of brahmacharya, he married Anandi and had a son. According to his hagiographers, he is credited with the restoration of the Atharva Veda

and the popularisation of the Devi Bhagavata Purana in Varanasi. Later he travelled to Surat, where he was initiated into the Sri Vidya lineage by Shivadatta Shukla. Bhaskararaya, then, travelled around India debating philosophers from rival lineages, sampradayas, such as the dvaita Vedanta Madhva school and the Shuddha-Advaita Pushti Marga. 14 After a brief return to Varanasi, where he built a Chakresha temple and performed Soma yajna, and he moved south for a short period and taught on the banks of the Krishna river. Finally, Bhaskararaya moved to the former Chola lands in Tamil Nadu to study with the Nyaya guru Gangadhara Vajapeyin. There he was gifted a city named Bhaskararajapuram in his honour on the banks of the Kaveri river by Serfoji I, the Maratha ruler of Thanjavur, where his wife constructed the Bhaskareshvara temple after his death.

As noted above, Bhaskararaya was initiated into the Srividya tradition in which esoteric tantric Shakta rituals are an integral part of the practice. The practices of Srividya have a great influence on his writings and commentaries,



Frits Staal (1930-2012)

which include those written on the Lalitasahasranama, the Varivasya Rahasya, the Tripura Rahasya, the Setubandha, and his commentary on the Devi Mahatmyam called the Guptavati. Within the Srividya tradition, the esoteric experience of comprehending the cosmos as the Goddess through abstract understanding is the pinnacle of practice. Initiates of Srividya employ three primary tools in order to perceive this reality: images and worship of the goddess Lalita Tripurasundari, Sri chakra-yantra and the use of mantras.<sup>15</sup> Of the various representations of the Goddess within the tradition, each is individual yet encapsulates the power of the whole through which the practitioner can entertain the divine. Of these, mantras are extremely important within the commentarial tradition because of their, seeming, affinity to language; however, they are only understood by the disciple, *shishya*, through the teachings and exegesis of the acharya or guru. Therefore, in an effort to make the process more efficacious, Bhaskararaya, like many of the commentators on the text, spent a great deal of time and effort discussing the words that

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are contained within mantras and texts. In his introduction to the Guptavati, he emphasises the role of mantras that produce power when properly employed. Therefore, he focuses his lengthy introduction—its three-hundred and fifty lines are almost as long as all of his other comments on the Devi Mahatmyam combined—on two mantras: the Durga Saptashati—the Devi Mahatmyam divided into seven hundred mantras and the navarna mantra. In order to explicate these mantras, Bhaskararaya situates them within a discussion of broader Srividya philosophy, the iconography of the Devi Mahatmyam's attendant goddesses-Mahalakshmi, Mahasarasvati, and Mahakali and the Sri chakra-yantra, geometric representation of the goddess. Throughout his introduction, Bhaskararaya highlights the different forms of the Goddess. These forms though individuated, are ultimately all the same as they all represent the 'true' unmanifested ultimate reality that is the Goddess. In this way all forms of the goddess are different avenues to the

next and ultimately self-referential. This multiple manifestation of ultimate reality within concrete and abstract realities is central within the Srividya tradition's theology and ritual practice. As Douglas Renfrew Brooks explains it in his discussion of Lalita:

Lalita's physical form is used as a gateway to her more abstract mantric and yantric forms. Lalitopakhyana, for example, associates her with the cakraraja, which it describes in unmistakable terms as the sricakra. In this case, however, the yantra's esoteric symbolism is encoded and obscured deliberately by identifying her army leaders' names with the yantra's attendant deities. While there is no mistaking her association with the esoteric symbolism of the srividya mantra or the sricakra even in myth, the emphasis on the anthropomorphic form (sthularupa) is meant to create a more intellectually accessible and ritually localized goddess. <sup>16</sup>

This philosophy of concurrent and simultaneous secret and revealed realities, as we will see, underpins Bhaskararaya's understanding of





the relationship between discursive and hidden meanings within Shakta *mantric* formulations.

In this introduction, Bhaskararaya goes to great pains to emphasise the power of the entire Devi Mahatmyam text as mantra. The majority of his comments on the verses of the Devi Mahatmyam concern the proper division of the overall text in which its power lies in the ability to look beyond the narrative of the text but to harness the power that is latent within it as mantra. As a narrative, the Devi Mahatmyam is divided into five hundred and seventy-nine verses, but the common name for the text, Durga Saptashati—the 700 verses to Durga—evokes the esoteric ritual context that is more important to the tantric initiate. In this ritual context, the text is viewed as a collection of seven hundred smaller but powerful mantras that combine into one very long and very powerful mantra. Additionally in his introduction to the Guptavati, he offers different arrangements of the text for more efficacious recitation.17

### Navarna Mantra

In the bulk of his introduction to the Guptavati, however, Bhaskararaya explicates the other mantra under consideration, the navarna mantra, which he argues has the same ritual power as reciting the entire Devi Mahatmyam and is central to the practice of the Srividya path. The navarna mantra has been discussed by several scholars of tantric and Shakta traditions, who seem to agree with popular consensus that the mantra has no discursive meaning but only is meaningful to the tantric adept. Thomas Coburn represents this perspective in his discussion of the *navarna* mantra when he states: 'Like many Tantric mantras, it does not "mean" anything in the conventional semantic sense.'18 In the Guptavati however, Bhaskararaya provides a remarkable explanation of the mantra including a tedious discussion of semantics, ritual value of sounds and syllables, and etymology that elucidates our understanding of the relationship between mantra and meaning in which the secret and semantic are coterminous.

The navarna mantra—aim hrim klim chamundayai vichche—like many other esoteric mantras is believed by many Shaktas to have the power to give liberation that cannot be attained through the senses, and therefore its literal or translatable meaning is not central to their understanding of its power. Because of the power of the phrase, however, Bhaskararaya painstakingly elucidates the meaning of mantra for his reader. Like other commentators, he begins in a rather esoteric vein by dividing the mantra beyond the typical word-dissection, pada-chheda, and offers an esoteric breakdown of the full mantra in which each syllable contains a secret meaning. The author connects these sounds to the Upanishadic tradition tying each syllable to a word or phrase contained in the twenty-second and twenty-third verses of the Devi Upanishad. 19 Bhaskararaya, however, is not content simply offering an esoteric explanation of the syllables that comprise the mantra; so he continues by explaining the mantra within the context of normative semantics.

To explain how the esoteric meaning is also accessible through normative language, Bhaskararaya analyses the mantra word-by-word beginning with *chamundayai*. He explains that the power of the mantra is particularly associated with the recitation of the name Chamunda. <sup>20</sup> Because of the supreme soteriological value of the name, Bhaskararaya attempts to explain the correct etymology of the name within the context of the *navarna* mantra. Curiously, Bhaskararaya explains the etymology of the name Chamunda in his introduction to the *Guptavati*, rather than in his interlinear commentary on the *Durga* 

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Saptashati, in the third episode where the text offers its own etymology of the name. Nonetheless, he does begin by quoting the etymology that is provided within the *Devi Mahatmyam*. There he cites chapter seven of the text in which Kali battles Chanda and Munda and subsequently receives the name Chamunda in verse twenty-five: 'Because you have grasped Chanda and Munda and brought them (to me), you will be called the goddess "Chamunda". The text of

the *Devi Mahatmyam* implies that the name of the goddess is derived from a combination of the names Chanda and Munda or that Chamunda means 'She who [has slain] Chanda and Munda'. After quoting the text, Bhaskararaya very innovatively explains that the name is not derived from a combination of Chanda and Munda, as the text erroneously seems to suggest and would ultimately result in an improper metonymical, *bahuvrihi*, compound. Instead, Bhaskararaya



proffers another etymological possibility that the name is a combination of chamum, 'army' and lati, 'eats'; so that Chamunda is literally 'she who eats armies'—a clear reference to the Kali narrative from the Devi Mahatmyam scene in which Kali as Chamunda drinks the blood-army of the demon Raktabija.<sup>22</sup> In order to explain the shift from the root la to da, Bhaskararaya expounds that the *la* and *da* syllables have the same mantric power and thereby are interchangeable in mantric formulae.<sup>23</sup> He goes on to analyse the conventional grammatical declension of Chamunda within the mantra, explaining that chamundayai is the dative case of the epithet of the goddess Chandika and has the literal meaning of '[Praise] to Chamunda'!<sup>24</sup>

He proceeds in his comments on the mantra by elaborating on the first three syllables aim, brim, and klim, which are common individual mantric monosyllables for which he simultaneously provides metaphysical and discursive meaning through a rich philosophical discussion. To elucidate the syllables, he relies on his Srividya background and associates them with the unmanifested yet variegated, vyashti, goddesses Mahalakshmi, aim, Mahasarasvati, hrim, and Mahakali, klim. He then connects these bija mantras and *vyashti* goddesses with the classical Vedantin tripartite classification of Brahman as sat-chit-ananda, being, consciousness, and bliss, respectively. Through this explanation of the bijas, again, Bhaskararaya situates the navarna mantra into the context of the Devi Mahatmyam and its attendant ritual context, as these three goddesses are the 'presiding deities' over the three episodes of the text, and it also reaffirms Chamundi's role as the highest form of the Goddess, who is none other than Brahman, and within whom aim hrim klim or Mahalakshmi, Mahasarasvati, and Mahakali—are all constituents. For Bhaskararaya, these seed mantras are

slightly more exoteric, and therefore, more accessible forms of the Goddess's ultimate form as Brahman. As Brooks has noted that within the Srividya tradition, 'The origin of the mantras is said to be the goddess's subtle form (sukshmarupa) as the srividya. Thus, the names used in ritual need not be intelligible to everyone nor must the activity of naming be open and unbounded.<sup>25</sup> This, again, highlights Bhaskararaya's Srividya tantric perspective as he connects these vyashti goddesses and their corresponding bija mantras as 'entres' from the world of sound and senses to the most esoteric and secretive reality of the goddess, part of the process of gradual internalisation of Srividya practice.<sup>26</sup> As a point of discussion for many Indian theologians or philosophers, Bhaskararaya's commentarial link between the *bija* mantras and their goddesses to the ideology of sat-chit-ananda not only demonstrates his association with the tantric lineage of Srividya but to a broader tradition of Indian philosophical speculation, especially those adhering to Vedanta or *Uttara-mimamsa darshana* and the renowned Advaitin Acharya Shankara, who was considered by Bhaskararaya to have been a Shakta and Srividya practitioner.<sup>27</sup>

Bhaskararaya quickly, however, returns to the esoteric tradition at the heart of *navarna* mantra with his exegesis of the final term in the formula, 'vichche'. Here, perhaps, the philosopher provides the most interesting and important point for understanding of the relationship between the metaphysical and semantic meanings of mantra as he discusses the term within tantric ritual and non-Sanskritic linguistics. He argues that the phrase, while it might appear to be a non-translatable, non-discursive phrase upon first glance, is a fully translatable sentence when its etymology is correctly understood. <sup>28</sup>As he begins his explanation of 'vichche', Bhaskararaya glosses it with the Sanskrit root word 'manch'—meaning

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'to grow' or 'to move'—an interpretation that upon first glance might be the commentator's fanciful creation, an oral transmission of the tradition, or relate to the hidden meaning of the mantra that is only directly perceived by the initiated practitioner. Bhaskararaya is compelled, however, to elaborate on this gloss and his exegesis to make sense of the mantra as a phrase that contains discursive meaning. He suggests that vichche is a common term within mantras and provides another example from the Shakta tantric tradition with a ritual to the goddess Bhagamalini, one of the sixteen Nityas, in which the pujari says: 'Amogham chaiva vichcham cha tatheshim klinnadevatam', or 'The Goddess of the klim is the unfailing and the 'vichch." He explains that vichche is not originally part of Sanskrit vocabulary or grammar, but that the term, and perhaps the mantra, originated within the Dravidian language group. He argues that non-Sanskritic vocabulary and language mixing, bhashamishrana, is common, if not central, in mantric formulations. He continues by stating that many words that are frequently used in mantras like the *nav*arna and Bhagamalini mantra are actually widely recognised words in Kannada, karnatabhasha, Tamil, dravidabhasha, and Telugu, andhrabhasha.29 Though not explicitly stated, Bhaskararaya seems to have connected the term vichche with the Tamil vichchu/i or vittu/i, meaning 'to sow' or 'to spread', which has the same connotation as his Sanskrit gloss manch, meaning 'to grow' or 'to move'. He then concludes his discussion of the mantra by writing that within this context vichche conveys the meaning of mochayati, 'to cause to be liberated' and interprets it as modifier of the goddess Chamunda, chamundavisheshanam, in the navarna mantra, which gives the term the discursive meaning: 'The one who causes [her devotees] to be liberated.' Therefore, for Bhaskararaya the *navarna* mantra is not only

a power mantra, but it contains meaning within normative semantics and can be translated as: 'Praise to Chamunda, the causer of liberation, the aggregate of *Mahalakshmi*, *Mahasarasvati*, and *Mahakali*.'<sup>31</sup>

Through his exegetical comments in his introduction to the *Guptavati*, Bhaskararaya inserts himself into the discussion of mantras and meaning. The author insinuates that powerful mantras are not exclusively from the Sanskrit lexical and semantic field, but they include vocabulary from other languages and language groups. While scholars and practitioners may have lost or forgotten their meanings, the mantras themselves carry the weight and efficacy of the discursive force of their words and their meaning.<sup>32</sup>

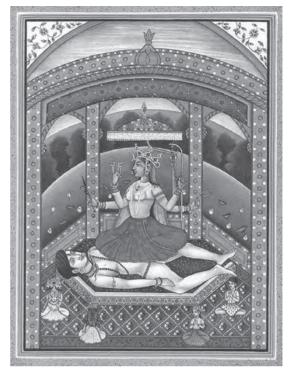
### **Conclusion**

To conclude, let us return to Bhartrihari's understanding of language and meaning as presented by Harold Coward. Coward argues that to understand meaning in mantra we must expand our understanding of 'meaning' as a category to include not only normative, semantic, and discursive meaning, but to include the hidden meaning of a mantra that contains a truth only perceivable through the direct insight of the initiated practitioner. For Bhaskararaya, however, the greater 'truer' meaning is not divorced from the discursive meaning of the words and sounds that comprise the mantra. Therefore, the Srividya scholar has turned to non-Sanskritic etymologies in order to explicate the meaning of the navarna mantra. In doing so, he has managed to bridge the gap between the ends of Bhartrihari's meaningfulness spectrum—the ultimate, unmanifested, hidden, 'true' reality of mantra and its sensory manifestation that is written or uttered. In this way, through his introduction to the Guptavati Bhaskararaya incorporates the Srividya perspective of corresponding realities into

a theory of meaning and mantra in which discursive meaning and hidden meaning are simultaneously individual but ultimately the same.

## **Notes and References**

- For thorough discussions of the various contexts and traditions of mantras see the diverse set of essays contained in *Understanding Mantras*, ed. Harvey Alper (Albany: State University of New York, 1989).
- 2. Patton Burchett, 'The "Magical" Language of Mantra', Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 76 (December 2008), 808. For a supporting argument also see Ellison Banks Findly, 'Mántra kaviśastá: Speech as Performative in the Rg Veda', in Understanding Mantras, 15–47. For a counter-argument in which vocalisation is downplayed see Frits Staal, 'Vedic Mantras', in Understanding Mantras, 66; and Wade T Wheelock, 'The Mantra in Vedic and Tantric Ritual', in Understanding Mantras, 120.
- 3. Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* (London: Rider, 1965), 111.
- 4. Jan Gonda, 'The Indian Mantra', *Oriens*, 16 (31 December 1963), 244–97, quoted and summarised in *Understanding Mantras*, 3–4. For another example of analysis using this approach see 'The Mantra in Vedic and Tantric Ritual'.
- 5. See Understanding Mantras, 4-5.
- See 'Vedic Mantras', 70. See also Frits Staal, 'Sanskrit Philosophy of Language', in Current Trends in Linguistics, eds T A Sebeok, et al (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), 449–531; Frits Staal, 'The Concept of Metalanguage and its Indian Background', Journal of Indian Philosophy, 3/3–4 (September 1975), 215–54; Frits Staal, 'Meaninglessness of Ritual', Numen, 26/1 (1979), 2–22; and Frits Staal, 'Oriental Ideas on the Origin of Language', Journal of American Oriental Society, 99 (1979), 1–14.
- 7. 'Sanskrit Philosophy of Language', 508-9.
- 8. 'Vedic Mantras', 74.
- 9. See *Understanding Mantras*; Wade T Wheelock, 'The Problem of Ritual Language: From Information to Situation', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 50/I (1982), 49–71; 'Mantras in Vedic and Tantric Rituals'; and Harold Coward, 'The Meaning and Power of Mantras



Tripurasundari

- in Bhartrhari's *Vakyapadiya*', in *Understanding Mantras*, 165–76.
- 10. 'The Meaning and Power of Mantras in Bhartrhari's Vakyapadiya', 166.
- 11. Bhartrihari's theory of language has three levels of 'meaning': 1) the discursive meaning of a mantra; 2) the mystical direct perception of the true meaning; and 3) the 'middle meaning' that exists between spoken sentences and the sounds yet to be uttered.
- 12. 'The Meaning and Power of Mantras in Bhartṛhari's *Vakyapadiya*', 172.
- 13. For biographical information see Varivasya Rahasya and its Commentary Prakasha by Bhaskararaya Makhin, ed. S Subrahmanya Sastri (Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1976); Thomas B Coburn, Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a Study of its Interpretation (Albany: State University of New York, 1991); and Douglas Renfrew Brooks, Auspicious Wisdom: The Texts and Traditions of the Śrividya Śakta Tantrism in South India (Albany: State University of New York, 1992).

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- 14. In the case of Bhaskararaya's foe from the Pushti Marga of Acharya Vallabha, Bhaskararaya won Parvati, a female relative of his opponent, as spoils of their verbal warfare. This along with an interesting story about refusing to bow to a passing sannyasi promotes the life of a householder initiated in *Shodhanyasa* over the life of a renunciant, which is a recurring theme in Bhaskararaya's hagiographies.
- 15. Thomas B Coburn, Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a Study of its Interpretation, (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), 122.
- 16. Auspicious Wisdom, 71.
- 17. Durgasaptaśati with Seven Sanskrit Commentaries, ed. Harikrishna Sharma (Delhi: Chaukhambha Sanskrit Pratishthan, 2006), 14–6. He rearranges the chapter order to be recited from back and front working toward the inner chapters, that is, 13, 1, 12, 2, 11, 3, 10, 4, 9, 5, 8, 6, and 7, or to recite the second episode, then the first, and then the third.
- 18. Encountering the Goddess, 136.
- 19. The verses from the *Devi Upanishad* are almost equally enigmatic. 'Fashioned by speech; born of Brahman; the sixth with face equipped; the sun; the left ear where the point is; the eighth and the third conjoint. The air, with Narayana united with the lip; the voice, the ninelettered; the letter shall delight the lofty ones.' (A G Krishna Warrier, 'Devi Upanishad' in *The Shakta Upanishads* (Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1967), 77–84.)
- 20. See Durgasaptaśati, 10: 'Chamundashabdo hi mokshakaranibhutanirvikalpakavrittivisheshaparah'.
- 21. See Durgasaptaśati, 187; verse 7.25: 'Yasmach chandam cha mundam cha grihitva tvamupagata; chamundeti ato loke khyata devi bhavishyasi.
- 22. See Durgasaptaśati, 10: 'Chamum senam viyadadisamuharupam dati dalayoraikyal lati; adatte svatmasatkarena nashayatiti vyutpatteh'. This scene is also contained within the third episode of the Devi Mahatmyam in which the demon lords Shumbha and Nishumbha send their demon general Raktabija, 'blood-seed', and his army to defeat the Goddess. The demon general, however, has the special ability through

- which every time a drop of blood falls from his body, it replicates into another Raktabija, creating an almost unstoppable force until Kali or Chamunda drinks up all the blood before it can hit the ground.
- 23. He derives this conclusion from the 'sameness of the *la* and *da*', presumably not simply phonetic similarity but ritual efficacy given the preceding and following discussion of mantras.
- 24. Durgasaptaśati, 11: 'Chandikarupadevatapara eva chamundashabdah.'
- 25. Auspicious Wisdom, 4.
- Bhaskararaya also discusses this process in his Upanishadic commentaries. See Auspicious Wisdom. 24.
- 27. This serves to broaden the tradition, part of what Annette Wilke has termed the 'Vedantization of Tantra'. See Annette Wilke, 'A New Theology of Bliss: "Vedantization" of Tantra and "Tantrization" of Advaita Vedanta in the Lalitatrishatibhashya', in Samarasya: Studies in Indian Arts, Philosophy, and Interreligious Dialogue in Honour of Bettina Bäumer, ed. D Sadananda (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2005), 149-75.
- 28. Durgasaptaśati, 11.
- 29. The term *vichchai* does appear in Tamil lexicons meaning 'learning or education'; however, the subsidiary meaning relates back to mantra and might be derived from its perceived meaning in the *navarna* mantra. See *Cologne Online Tamil Lexicon* <a href="http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de">http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de</a> accessed 18 November 2015.
- 30. See Thomas D Burrows and Murray Barnson Emeneau, *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998), 489.
- 31. Durgasaptaśati, 11.
- 32. Though the commentator does not suggest any further inquiry into the relationship between the mantra and the deity Chamunda, Coburn is of the opinion that 'regional and non-Sanskritic languages may bear on understanding this name [Chamunda]. (Encountering the Goddess, 137). Indeed, many scholars have suggested that the tantric and Shakta traditions arose from non-Sanskritic roots that over time were Sanskritised. This thesis seems plausible but is altogether unsubstantiated by sufficient evidence and is beyond the scope of this essay.



# The Psychology of Tantra

# **Venerable Robina Courtin**

#### Buddhahood is the Goal

ROM THE MAHAYANA BUDDHIST point of view, all sentient beings possess Buddha nature, the potential to become a Buddha, just naturally. This potential defines us. For the Tibetan Buddhist, every practice—from the most basic: harnessing the energy of our behaviour; to the most advanced: tantric meditation—is for the purpose of achieving Buddhahood, enlightenment. The Tibetan word for 'Buddha', sang-gye, conveys the meaning beautifully: sang implies the utter eradication of all negative states of mind, all delusions, which Lord Buddha has established to

Venerable Robina Courtin is a renowned Buddhist nun and works with the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition. be adventitious; and *gye* implies the development to perfection of all positive states, all goodness, which he has found to be at the core of our being.

What are the implications of this bare-bones etymology? How does a Buddha exist and function? Buddhas have three essential characteristics: infinite wisdom, infinite compassion, and infinite power. They pervade existence and are omniscient: they see perfectly all phenomena without mistake, especially the minds of all sentient beings, their past and future. Beyond the dualism of a separate sense of self, they have effortless empathy with every one of these sentient beings and exist only to benefit them. And they have the power to manifest simultaneously in countless bodies throughout countless universes to joyfully

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do whatever needs to be done to benefit these countless sentient beings and lead them to their own Buddhahood, no matter how long it takes.

## What is the Mind?

Besides the body of a sentient being, which is made up of the four elements, Buddha does not assert any phenomenon other than mind—or consciousness: these are synonymous—such as a self or spirit or soul. The presence of consciousness within this body of ours makes us a sentient being, in Tibetan, *sem-chen*: mind-possessor. And it's the mind that becomes enlightened.

It has several characteristics. First, it is defined as that which is clear—in other words, not physical—and that which knows, or cognises, or is aware. Cognises what? Finally, that which exists. Obviously mind exists in dependence upon a body, at least at the grosser levels, but it is not a function of the body.

Second, as implied by the etymology of *sanggye*, consciousness is pure in its nature.

Third, mind encompasses the entire spectrum of our inner being: intellect, feelings, emotions, unconscious, subconscious, instinct, intuition, as well as our sensory experiences, those parts of our mind that function through the medium of the eye, the ear, and so forth.

Fourth, our consciousness is not the handiwork of any external source, neither a creator nor our parents. In fact, there's not an atom of our being that comes from a superior being, although indeed our body comes from our kind parents. We don't need creating; our mind is a beginningless continuity of mental moments, each moment of awareness necessarily being the result of—having as its substantial cause—the previous moment of cognition in that very mindstream, or mental continuum. Mind, being a product of the law of cause and effect, necessarily cannot have a first, causeless, moment.

Fifth, from the Mahayana point of view our mind-stream is also endless—as opposed to the Hinayana view, which says that it ceases at the end of the life in which the person achieves their own liberation, *pratimoksha*, *nirvana*: cessation of suffering and its causes.

And sixth, mind has far subtler, more refined, levels of cognition than are posited as even existing in the materialist models. In order to accomplish Buddhahood—to rid our mind utterly of all delusions and their imprints and to develop to perfection all goodness—we need to access the subtlest level of our mind, the clear light consciousness, by using tantric meditation techniques.

# Three Categories of the States of the Mind

The Buddhist model of the mind has its origins, of course—as His Holiness the Dalai Lama often points out—in the marvelous experiential findings of the great Indian thinkers and yogis: it was they who began the extraordinary investigation into the nature of self. The literature studied in depth in the Tibetan monastic universities up to the present day encompasses the epistemological and psychological models explained by these great masters.

Mental consciousness—as opposed to sensory—has three categories of mental factors, or states of mind: negative, positive, and neutral. These are technical, not moralistic, terms. The negative states, such as attachment, anger, jealousy, and pride, are necessarily disturbing, as well as delusional—literally, misconceptions—and, when they're the motivating force behind actions of body and speech, are the causes of suffering.

The positive states, such as love, compassion, and generosity, are necessarily not disturbing and not delusional—relatively, at least—and, when they're the motivating force behind actions of body and speech, are the causes of happiness.

The neutral states—that is, those that are

neither negative nor positive—such as concentration, mindfulness, and alertness, are involved in both positive and negative actions. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche often points out, even 'thieves need mindfulness'.

The root misconception, ignorance—Tibetan *ma-rig-pa*, unawareness—also referred to as self-grasping, underpins all the other states of mind, including the positive. Until this is uprooted—with the realisation of emptiness, shunyata, the utter lack of the intrinsic self that ignorance believes in—samsara never ends, and certainly Buddhahood can never be achieved.

Nevertheless, according to Lord Buddha's four noble truths the main cause of suffering in the desire realm—which encompasses gods, humans, animals, spirits, and hell beings—is desire, attachment. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says in *How to Enjoy Death*: '[Attachment] is what ties us to samsara continuously, has been tying us to samsara continuously, and will continue to tie us to samsara, because our consciousness has existed since beginningless time and will continue to exist forever. Until we have cut the causes of samsara, body after body will keep coming, like the assembly line in a car factory.'1

# The Qualified Yogi or Yogini

It is not a cliché to say that Lord Buddha is a psychologist, that his expertise is the mind, and that Buddhist tantra is the most sophisticated psychology of all. The unique skill of the tantric yogis and yoginis is their ability to utilise the energy generated by the delusions, in particular attachment, as a tool for achieving enlightenment. This is the essence of the psychology of tantra.

As Lama Thubten Yeshe says in *The Bliss of Inner Fire*,

According to Lord Buddha's general teachings, known as Sutrayana, desire is the cause of human beings' problems, so it must be avoided.

According to Tantrayana, however, this very desire can be used in the path to enlightenment. ... tantric practitioners use the energy of their own pleasure as a resource and, in the deep concentration of *samadhi* meditation, unify it with the wisdom that realizes emptiness. Eventually this gives rise to simultaneously born great blissful wisdom, which in turn leads to enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

#### The Ouick Path

Tantrayana is said to be the quick path to Buddhahood. By using the tantric methods, the most qualified, most sublime yogis and yoginis can achieve enlightenment in 'one brief lifetime of this degenerate time', as Lama Zopa Rinpoche puts it in *How to Enjoy Death*. Using only the Paramitayana methods, the meditator would take three countless great eons to achieve the goal.

This gets us very excited! In response to a question at a public teaching in Los Angeles years ago about the quickest way to get enlightened,





Vajradhara Buddha

I recall that His Holiness the Dalai Lama cried: 'I don't want to know about quick, fastest', he said sadly. 'Look at Milarepa!'—the eleventh-century tantric yogi beloved by Tibetans. There he was, with 'callouses on his arse', never giving up working to become a buddha *only* for suffering sentient beings.

These great practitioners want desperately to become enlightened as quickly as possible because the suffering of sentient beings is unbearable, but they would happily spend eons in hell if it would benefit just one of them.

#### **Buddhist Practice is Gradual**

Tantra might be the most advanced level of

practice and the quickest way to Buddhahood, but it needs a sound basis in supporting practices. In the system of practice of the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, the stages of the path to enlightenment, Tibetan, *lam-rim*, all the teachings and practices that lead to Buddhahood are presented gradually, from the easiest to the most difficult, like in any good education system, starting with the Hinayana and leading to the Mahayana, which includes Paramitayana and Tantrayana, also referred to as Vajrayana or Mantrayana.

Another way of framing these teachings is as the three principal aspects of the path: renunciation, *bodhichitta*, and insight into emptiness.

As the fourteenth century Gelug founder Tsong Khapa says in his *Hymns of Experience*, 'Success in your practice of Paramitayana qualifies you to practice Tantrayana; Success in your practice of Tantrayana is the result of having mastered Paramitayana. Renunciation, bodhichitta and the correct view of emptiness, the three principal aspects of Lord Buddha's teachings, are stages shared by both Mahayana vehicles.'<sup>3</sup>

A heartfelt appreciation of these three entitles the devoted practitioners to receive the appropriate initiations from their guru, empowering them to practice. But the only person who actually gets results is the one who has genuine realisations of them. Who else could possibly utilise the energy of desire, the very cause of this body, this desire realm, this samsara?

Even the accomplishment of the first of the three, renunciation, is astonishing. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche often says in his teachings: we have achieved renunciation when 'just the thought of another moment of attachment is so disgusting it's like being in a septic tank'. With this renunciation the meditator has the power to cut the belief in the intrinsic self, thus realising emptiness, and, moved by infinite compassion for sentient beings, engage in the 'highly technical, internally technical' practices of tantra, as Lama Yeshe refers to them in *The Bliss of Inner Fire*.<sup>4</sup>

#### Four Classes of Tantra

The explanations of the practices of the four classes of tantra in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition have their source in the *Kangyur*, the canonical teachings of the Buddha, twenty-six of the one hundred and four volumes dealing with the topic.

There are the three lower tantras, action, performance, and yoga; and highest yoga. In general, the main practices in the Tibetan tradition are from the action and highest yoga classes.

In each class the practitioner is capable of taking into the path different levels of attachment. As Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche explains in *Principles of Buddhist Tantra*, 'disciples of the three lower tantras take as their path the attachment that focuses on the five [sense] objects visualized as goddesses in front of themselves. ... In highest yoga tantra, disciples take as their path the attachment that desires union with a [consort] ... so that they may enhance the [*kundalini*] ... in their body that is the cause of generating strong innate great bliss as the special awareness realizing emptiness.'5

Highest yoga is the only class that deals with the energy systems of the body: the seventy-two thousand channels of the subtle nervous system; the subtle winds and various levels of consciousness inextricably connected to these winds that course through the channels; and the subtle red and white drops, or kundalini. The control over these energies is what allows the yogis and yoginis to access the subtlest level of their mind, the clear light mind, and, combining it with great bliss, use it to realise emptiness and eventually achieve enlightenment. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says in *How to Enjoy Death*, 'they are able to open the chakras, causing the winds to enter into and flow in the central channel and dissolve at the heart chakra, and thus meditate in the clear light'.

# **Preparing the Mind**

In the Gelug tradition there are various practices that need to be accomplished to prepare the mind to engage in highest yoga tantra, known as the common and uncommon preliminary practices, Tibetan, *ngon-dro*. They function to purify obstacles caused by the past negative karma of the practitioner and create vast merit, making the mind ripe for realisations.

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The common practices include thorough engagement in the earlier stages of the path to enlightenment, the essence of which are renunciation, bodhichitta, and emptiness.

There are nine uncommon preliminary practices. Usually in the context of retreat, the practitioner completes one hundred thousand of each of the nine: Refuge mantras, prostrations, Vajrasattva, one hundred-syllable mantra, mandala offerings, guru yoga recitations, water bowl offerings, Vajra Daka mantras, small bas-relief images of the buddhas—Tibetan, *tsa-tsa*—and Samaya Vajra mantras.

### **Vows and Commitments**

All levels of Buddhist practice come with their own sets of vows and commitments, and practitioners cannot enter the more advanced levels without the earlier ones. There are three sets of vows: *pratimoksha*, bodhisattva, and tantric. A vow is a decision to refrain from something and a commitment is a decision to do something. Vows are said to be subtle physical forms that are visible to clairvoyants.

Entry-level Buddhists formally take refuge in the Three Precious Sublime Ones—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—and commit to various daily practices. Next they take the five layperson's *pratimoksha* vows: to not kill any sentient being, not steal, not lie, not engage in sexual misconduct, and not take intoxicants. There are also the *pratimoksha* vows for men and women who choose the monastic life: two hundred and fifty-two for the men and three hundred and sixty-three for the women.

Now qualified to enter into the bodhisattva path, they will take the eighteen root vows and forty-six secondary vows.

Now qualified to enter into Tantrayana, they can take an empowerment in the first of the two lower tantras. They're also qualified to take a highest yoga tantra empowerment, during which they receive the four initiations, and with this they take the tantric vows: the fourteen root vows, the nine and eight and three secondary vows; also, if appropriate, the ten vows related to mother tantra. They also agree to the nineteen commitments of the five Buddha families and various other commitments, such as daily recitation of the sadhana of the deity—in tantra, synonymous with Buddha.

Keeping pure *samaya*, one's word of honour, one's pledge, by keeping one's vows and commitments is seen as a prerequisite for any realisations on the path to enlightenment. As Losang Chökyi Gyaltsen, the fourth Panchen Lama, says in a favourite Gelug practice, *Guru Puja*: 'I seek your blessings to complete the perfection of moral discipline, Not transgressing the bounds of the pratimoksha, bodhisattva, and tantric vows even at the cost of my life.'6

### Guru Devotion: The Heart of the Path

Crucial to the practitioner's success is pure devotion in the guru, the essence of which is seeing her or him as a Buddha. Throughout Tibetan Buddhist literature guru devotion is said to be the root of the path, the basis of all realisations. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche advised a disciple in answer to his question in a letter: 'Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo, the great enlightened being, the actual Heruka, said that if one is able to stop all thought of faults and look only at the good qualities, seeing the guru only a buddha, one can achieve enlightenment in this life. ... with the realization that sees all buddhas as the guru and all gurus as the buddha, one can. This is said in both sutra and tantra and in all four Tibetan Mahayana traditions.'7

How to find a qualified guru? Lama Zopa Rinpoche, in the same communication, advised the following:



[The Ten Qualities of a Mahayana Guru]

- I. Discipline as a result of his mastery of the training in the higher discipline of moral self-control;
- 2. Mental quiescence [samadhi] from his training in higher concentration;
- 3. Pacification of all delusions and obstacles from his training in higher wisdom [insight into emptiness];
- 4. More knowledge than his disciple in the subject to be taught;
- 5. Enthusiastic perseverance and joy in teaching;
- 6. A treasury of scriptural knowledge;
- 7. Insight into and understanding of emptiness;
- 8. Skill in presenting the teachings;
- 9. Great compassion; and
- 10. No reluctance to teach and work for his disciples regardless of their level of intelligence.

Even if one doesn't have all the ten qualities but has five, six, or seven qualities, the main quality is having more knowledge than the disciple and having great compassion. [The Ten Qualities of a Tantric Guru]

A tantric master must have even more good qualities. Most important is that he be an extremely stable person, with his body, speech, and mind totally under control. He should be someone in whose presence everyone feels calm, peaceful, and relaxed and even the mere sight of him brings great pleasure to the mind. And his compassion must be unsurpassable.

There are two sets of ten fields in which the vajra guru must be a complete master. The ten inner ones are essential for teaching the yoga and ... [highest yoga] classes of tantra, which stress the importance of purifying mainly internal mental activities. These are expertise in:

- 1. Visualizing wheels of protection and eliminating obstacles;
- 2. Preparing and consecrating protection knots and amulets to be worn around the neck;
- Conferring the vase and secret initiations, planting the seeds for attaining a Buddha's Form Bodies;
- 4. Conferring the wisdom and word initiations, planting the seeds for attaining a Buddha's Wisdom Bodies;

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- 5. Separating the enemies of Dharma from their own protectors;
- 6. Making the offerings, such as of sculptured tormas;
- 7. Reciting mantras, both verbally and mentally, that is, visualizing them revolving around his heart;
- 8. Performing wrathful ritual procedures for forcefully catching the attention of the meditational deities and protectors;
  - 9. Consecrating images and statues; and
- 10. Making mandala offerings, performing the meditational practices (*sadhana*) and taking self-initiations.

The ten external qualities are required for teaching the ... [action] and ... [performance] classes of tantra, which stress the importance of purifying mainly external activities in connection with internal mental processes.

These are expertise in:

- I. Drawing, constructing and visualizing the mandala abodes of the meditational deities;
- 2. Maintaining the different states of singleminded concentration;
  - 3. Executing the hand gestures (*mudras*);
  - 4. Performing the ritual dances;
  - 5. Sitting in the full meditation position;
- 6. Reciting what is appropriate to these two classes of tantra;
  - 7. Making fire offerings;
  - 8. Making the various other offerings;
  - 9. Performing the rituals of:
- a) Pacification of disputes, famine, and disease,
- b) Increase of life span, knowledge, and wealth,
  - c) Power to influence others, and
- d) Wrathful elimination of demonic forces and interferences: and

10. Invoking meditational deities and dissolving them back into their appropriate places.

Lama Tsong Khapa explained that in degenerated times it is difficult to find ... [gurus] having all these qualities mentioned above, so if the ... [guru] does not have all those qualities then having two, five, or even eight is sufficient.

... the minimum qualities the guru should have ... [are] having the lineage of the initiation (that he is giving), living according to samaya vows and tantric vows, and that the deities have not prohibited him from offering the initiation by, for example, giving signs, etc. 8

Having found such a guru, the meditators cultivate devotion and develop pure view in their practice of guru yoga: the seeing of the guru and the Buddha as inseparable.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche further advised:

Since you have received highest tantra initiation from ... [Rinpoche], this means he is your guru. Any time that you take a teaching with the recognition that you are the disciple and the teacher is the guru, then even if the teacher only says a few words, a verse of teachings, or one mantra recitation, that person is your guru from then on and there is no change. After one makes that Dharma connection of guru and disciple, then if you give up it is the heaviest negative karma, the greatest obstacle to your spiritual growth. It brings heavy obstacles and one has to experience, especially at the time of death, eons of suffering in the lower realms and hell realms.

According to the texts, the teachings of the Buddha, the lam-rim, one is supposed to think only of the qualities of the guru and only praise them. The heaviest negative karma is if anger and heresy arise, and you criticize him or her.

It is said in many tantric teachings—the Kalachakra and Guhyasamaja—that even if one has accumulated the five uninterrupted negative karmas, one can still achieve the sublime

vehicle in this life, in particular the ... [highest yoga tantra] path. This path has the most skills to grant enlightenment in a brief lifetime of these degenerate times. But if you criticize the guru from the heart, even if you practice the sublime vehicle, you will not achieve this.

In the Lama Tsong Khapa lam-rim it is clearly mentioned that even the thought that the virtuous friend is ordinary becomes a cause to lose realizations, which means that it also becomes an obstacle to developing the mind on the path.

The most important thing is to analyze as much as possible before making Dharma contact. When the recognition of guru and disciple is present, since the Dharma contact is established, then from that time there is no change. One has to have a new relationship with the guru, it is another world, looking at that person with a new and pure mind.

#### The Four Initiations

In order to practise highest yoga tantra, the practitioner receives the four initiations from the guru in relation to a particular deity.

The vase initiation purifies the negative karma created by the body, entitles the practitioner to meditate on the generation stage, and creates the cause to achieve the *nirmanakaya*, the emanation body of a Buddha.

The secret initiation purifies the negative karma created by the speech, entitles the practitioner to meditate on the impure and pure illusory body, and creates the cause to achieve the *sambhogakaya*, the enjoyment body of a Buddha.

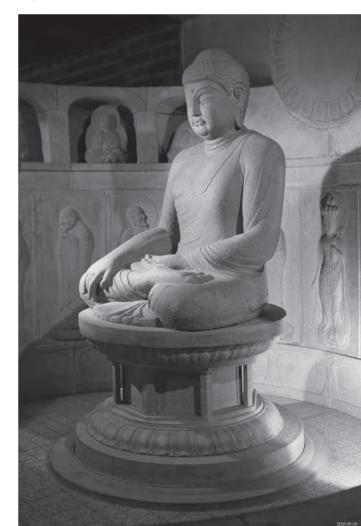
The wisdom initiation purifies the negative karma created by the mind, entitles the practitioner to meditate on the clear light, and creates the cause to achieve the *dharmakaya*, the truth body of a Buddha.

The word initiation purifies the general subtle stains of the body, speech, and mind, in particular subtle dual view, entitles the practitioner to meditate on the path of unification, and creates the cause to achieve the unified state of Vajradhara, the tantric aspect of Buddha, Buddhahood.

# Achieving the Bodies of a Buddha

Having received the four initiations, the yogi or yogini practises seeing themselves as the deity in the context of the mandala of that deity.

After achieving some stability in their meditation they can train in using the three experiences of sleep, dream, and waking up as preparation for the experiences of death, intermediate state, and rebirth in order, finally, to transform death into the *dharmakaya*, the intermediate, into the *sambhogakaya*, and rebirth into the *nirmanakaya*.



In Tantrayana, it is explained that the gradual deconstruction of the person from the gross, to the subtle, to the extremely subtle levels of physicality, and the associated levels of gross, subtle, and extremely subtle consciousness that occurs during the dying process, as well as the gradual reconstruction of the person from extremely subtle, to the subtle, to the gross that occurs during the intermediate state and rebirth, are more powerful experiences of the same process that occurs every time we go to sleep, dream, and wake up. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says in *How to Enjoy Death*:

Death is what [the yogis] have been waiting for. At the point in the death process when all the grosser consciousnesses have ceased and only the extremely subtle consciousness is left, the yogis—those who have observed karma well, kept their precepts purely, spent their lives



training their minds in the clear light meditation and have been able to recognize the base-time clear light, the imagined, visualized one—are now able to recognize the clear light of death. They can remain in meditation in the clear light conjoined with emptiness for as long as they wish—one hour, three days, many months; some meditators stay in the clear light meditation in their hermitage for years.

# The Purpose of a Consort

The most qualified yogis and yoginis do not need to wait until death to access their extremely subtle consciousness in order to become enlightened. Already in their meditations they have trained in their visualisations of themselves as the deity in union with a consort. The special bliss that is generated in their mind is powerful enough to induce the subtler levels of consciousness that are necessary to realise emptiness.

As Lama Yeshe says in *The Bliss of Inner Fire*: [Having] perfectly learned the three stages of entering, stabilizing, and absorbing the winds; and, through familiarity with this practice and the power of the absorption of the winds, they have developed complete control over the flow of kundalini and thus experienced simultaneously born bliss. In order to increase the experience of the four joys, the yogi or yogini can then practice with a consort ... when the heart chakra opens and the kundalini flows. ... they should not practice with a consort until they have opened the tightness of the knots of the heart chakra.

Why is a consort necessary? At this point, the airs have already entered the central channel, stabilized, and absorbed. The four elements have ceased and the yogi or yogini has seen all the visions. With the flowing of the kundalini energy, they have experienced the four joys, culminating in the experience of simultaneously born bliss, and with that bliss they have comprehended nonduality. In other words, they have gone beyond grasping. Since they have already experienced simultaneously born great blissful wisdom, why

do they need to practice with a consort?

The point is that there are degrees of these experiences: degrees of air absorption, degrees of bliss, and degrees of realization of nondualiry. Practice with a consort causes the airs to enter the central channel more strongly; and the more strongly the airs enter, the more strongly they will stabilize and absorb, and the more bliss will be generated. The purpose of practicing with a consort is to increase these experiences, and eventually to energize total absorption of the winds at the heart chakra, total bliss. and total realization of nonduality. Up to this point, the yogi or yogini has used a mental consort in meditation and has only begun to open the heart chakra. They need the help of a daka or dakini to totally open it. To energize the complete experience of great bliss, the male and female must help each other to bring the embracing energy into the central channel.

There is a lot of confusion about consort practice, so you should understand clearly what Buddhist tantra has to say about it. The completion stage experience of great bliss achieved with a consort is incredible. It is beyond expression, beyond all concepts, beyond words. Accepting a consort is the unsurpassed way to achieve enlightenment. In fact, having reached the point of being qualified to take a consort, a yogi or yogini will definitely become enlightened in that life; they will achieve Vajradharahood.

It is also explained that both the male and female practitioners should be qualified to practice and should be of equal good fortune and intelligence. When the male and female partners are equally qualified, they both experience the absorptions.

Je Pabongka also explains that the consort should be shown to you by your deity, your ... [guru], or the dakinis. Of the four types of consorts, he considers the best to be the mantra-born consort, which means someone who has become qualified through their practice of tantra.<sup>9</sup>

Lama Tsong Khapa also explains this in

Having the Three Convictions. The actual consort is merely a tool rarely used for the greatest practitioner.

Lama Yeshe continues: 'for yogis and yoginis who have reached a certain level of development, it is enough for them to have the experience with a consort just once. Merely by remembering their previous experience with a relative consort, they will go effortlessly into deep samadhi and experience perfectly all the absorptions. In the terminology of tantra, emptiness is the absolute consort, and finally that is enough' (167).

# **Prayer of Dedication**

Because of the past, present, and future merit Created by me and by the buddhas and sentient beings,

May all sentient beings be able to actualise completely in this very lifetime

Lama Tsong Khapa's path of unified sutra and tantra, which is pure like refined gold.

May this pure teaching of Lama Tsong Khapa Spread in all directions and flourish forever.

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# Of Experiential Tantra: Being With a Tantric

# **Subhasis Chattopadhyay**

The purpose of this article is to demystify tantra and establish the path of tantra as a valid contemporary spiritual method to attain to the supreme Godhead qua Brahman. What does not lead us to that effulgent Being is not tantra and it is not real and effective. We have to

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remember how Sri Ramakrishna learnt the discipline and practised tantra himself. And his tantric mentor, Bhairavi Brahmani, knew not only tantra but could tell from memory entire passages from texts on Advaita Vedanta. The learned Bhairavi Brahmani and the 'illiterate' epochal avatara are our gurus in tantra. What the avatara practised cannot be wrong and redundant.

Sri Ramakrishna knew that some tantrics can help us by reducing our material, physical,

and emotional sufferings. If these sufferings are not lessened by the compassion of the supreme Godhead or Brahman, we will find it hard to focus on the only thing which matters—Brahman. Tantrics can help those in distress by taking the aid of spiritual beings like dakinis, creating a favourable environment aimed ultimately at the spiritual growth of the person being helped, and through rituals reducing the force of past events. Dakinis are to be found both in Hinduism and in Tibetan Buddhism. Dakinis in tantra are liberated spirits but not yoginis as they are in Tibetan Buddhism. Unscrupulous and moneyhungry tantrics have made tantra obscure and purposely made the discipline mysterious and therefore, people are generally afraid of tantrics and keep a safe distance from them so as not to incite their displeasure. Further, the red or black dresses of tantrics put people off—they are more objects of fear than of veneration. But this article is a message to the world that true tantrics are to be recognised if they show the qualities of holy people given in the first shloka of the sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavadgita: 'Fearlessness, purity of mind, persistence in knowledge and yoga, charity, and control of the external organs, sacrifice, (scriptural) study, austerity, and rectitude.' Those who curse or harm others can call themselves tantrics but they are charlatans.

But what if, a tantric spends one's time and power acquired by sadhana for the wellbeing of fellow human beings and helps in the alleviation of their suffering without ever causing any harm to anyone? What if a group of practitioners of this vast and majestic spiritual discipline of tantra, decide to use their spiritual wisdom in mending the matters of worlds and phenomena not perceptible through ordinary means? This is an account of such an anonymous tantric adept whom this author knows. This tantric is a strong and wise mentor to the author, a reluctant and

unworthy disciple of both the tantric and the discipline. The tantric in question has forbidden even the writing of this article. But the world should know that tantra is a living and benign part of Hinduism.

Sri Ramakrishna warns us over and again not to dabble with the occult. This volume has scholars writing about the philosophy and the importance of tantra within world philosophies and Indian philosophy and, within dharmic studies. I write here about the experiences of being with a contemporary tantric. And particularly being his reluctant disciple from 1998 till date. He has flatly denied me permission to either write of his or my experiences with him and his work. But if this section about the praxis of tantra is missing, then this issue will probably be incomplete and merely abstract. Because of a very strong secular Western education, which I received and transmit to my students, I am sceptical about such esoteric practices. I do not consider tantra or tantrics to be the resort of anyone in distress. This is a disclaimer: please do not even show curiosity about tantra in the form described here. However, I do present here my observations just to place on record that such a form of tantra does very much exist, even today, when the age of the post-human is imminent and the world is in the cusp of a paradigm change to be brought about through the dominance of the simulation of reality through what is otherwise known as the World Wide Web.

Tantra helps people to have that space in their lives where life becomes slightly simpler and better for them to contemplate the Godhead qua Brahman. Rare is the person who utilises this space created by sincere practitioners of tantra. Tantra is to be used to help others to realise in the here and the now the blissful Atman. Tantra is never to be used to harm or doom others. Run for your lives if you find a person proclaiming oneself

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to be a great tantric and cowing you down with abracadabra of future doom. Those who even speak of simony or of their great powers and the need for animal sacrifice are out to cheat those in extreme distress. Tantra makes people stronger and not dependent on the practitioner's whims.

I know this man who lives in the northern fringes of Kolkata from 1998—he has been living there from his childhood when this author was not even born. He has four kids and I have never seen him wear any particular dress associated with any sect of tantrics. Neither does he wear the red, black, or white dresses, sometimes worn by tantrics and brahmins. He is a brahmin originally from Uttar Pradesh in India and one of his gurus is still living. This living guru is from Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh and is a Vaishnavite. I have met the latter: he is a vegetarian and a man who sees Sri Krishna everywhere. My tantric mentor goes every other year to pay his respects to his Vaishnavite guru who is now nearly a hundred years old. The tantric I talk of here, is about sixty. He has had a bye-pass heart surgery about six years ago; and recently he told me again of recurrent chest pains. Even if he tries very hard, he cannot help himself or his own family. Except hard-core science nothing works for him.

He is a fair main with rugged looks and wears a suit and can do a nice jig over a wedding feast Dashamahavidyas



and rocks to the latest movie song in fashion. Yet from 1998 till date I have never heard him judge, criticise, or even say a bad word about anyone. He has never drunk even a drop of alcohol. He has no ill-will towards anyone—and to my knowledge; he has harmed not even a bird. He does not generally help the rich; he opts preferentially for the marginalised and the abject. Now what does he do? First a few case histories and then a few things I have seen him do—the readers can reserve their right to believe these incidents, I am just stating them as I know they happened:

- I have sent to him more than three people with terminal diseases. He has completely cured two and extended the lifespan of another for over a decade. When I say complete cure, I mean, for instance, complete cure of advanced malignant cancer of the pancreas.
- 2. One of the several couples sent by me to him was declared infertile by all known medical tests and parameters. This couple, after consulting him for less than three months, conceived a child who is now hale and hearty. The couple remain clinically barren.
- He has saved two people whom I know, from financial ruin.
- 4. Once, he altered natural phenomena too.
- My mentor told me of one of his tantric gurus whom he saw bring to life a little child after the parents pestered this now deceased tantric. The parents nagged my mentor's tantric guru so much that the latter in exhaustion brought the child back to life. Something one ideally should not do, but this is not an ideal world and holy people have their own reasons to do what they do. Incidentally two of his living gurus who taught my mentor this discipline, live in total anonymity in the heart of Kolkata. These two are in their nineties and of strong mind and body. But except my mentor none anymore knows of them. These two men live quiet humdrum family lives away from

any scrutiny. These men are also teetotallers, chaste, and totally free of pride. You would not know them as holy men with supernatural gifts if you were to meet them on your way to office. Tantra has to be learnt from other tantrics and one cannot become a tantric by reading books on tantra.

For his services, this tantric whom I am writing about, charges rupees two and a half to rupees ten. If one consults him he advises physical exercises; psychotherapy, and the best possible allopathic medical help. But if one persists with him then he can and has done these things, among many other things.

I have been to crematoriums with him and have seen him offer tobacco and alcohol to corpses and I have unbelievingly witnessed the same being emptied by I do not know what. After this he does elaborate fire-sacrifices. Then the persons for whom he has prayed receive their chances at contemplating God without say, thinking of pancreatic cancer; the effects of marital discord, or as I shall relate, of evil spirits. He recently took me to a house in Kolkata. The man who brought him there is a very well-known person in Kolkata. This is what I saw:

A car first picked him up from the north of the city and then he picked me up from my home. We proceeded to this man's house during the day and while going there I had an ice-cream. My mentor had some tobacco. We reached the house and this very frightened family met us with a lot of respect. His feet were repeatedly touched and they tried to touch mine too. I being a secular and liberal person, who believes more in science and the power of psychoanalysis and suggestion, refused to accept their obeisance. I am born into a brahmin family and had a Western education—my perspective makes me not wear even the traditional brahmin sacred thread. I burnt my Indian horoscope long ago, to the great anger of my parents. I wear no

amulets, gemstones, or repeat any special mantra. Melanie Klein and Jean Piaget are more admissible to me any day than tantrics.

Coming back to our visit to this house, we ate a few sweets and I had black coffee and my mentor some milk coffee with sugar. Then he and I toured the mansion. He prayed to Shakti as represented by the ten mahavidyas; especially to Mother Chinnamasta. I really do not care much for the ten mahavidyas. I believe that they are representations and configurations of the repressed feminine in our society. I have been trained in the tradition of Western psychoanalysts and had to read Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and Julia Kristeva, as part of my training as a psychoanalyst, and my understanding is so influenced by their thought that it is tough to convince me that there are evil spirits, to speak nothing of warding them off! To me, most spirituality is so much humbug and manifestations of what Freud classically termed as 'fixations'. As I write this I am still of the opinion that those overtly religious suffer from some crises in their psychic apparatus. This is what my reading has convinced me of. But this family had decided to sell their house since after they had shifted here they were continually ill; continually disturbed by marital discord, and their sleep was daily and collectively punctuated by nightmares. In short, they were half crazy with fatigue and chronic diseases. My mentor and I visited this house three times. And he did his rituals and prayed in each room to the ten *mahavidyas*. For this family we two went to a place where corpses are available easily and fed them the usual tobacco and alcohol, and also meat to I do not know what. This tantric is a strict vegetarian but occasionally he has to use meat in his rituals. As a rule he does not kill animals or perform any sort of violent sacrifice. Meat is collected from already naturally dead animals only when such is absolutely necessary. I remain a voracious non-vegetarian skeptic. The family is now functional and all their diseases have gone and

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Chinnamasta, Standing on Rati and Kamadeva

their financial health is strong now and those nightmares have ceased for good. They have a chance at what in psychology is called 'selfactualisation', both individually and as a family.

Please make of the above cases what you will. I can only add a few things which are a tad theological in nature:

- Hindu exorcisms are done to obtain moksha for the evil spirits, who through Hindu rituals, transmigrate to suitable bodies and births, and strive to realise the Godhead through working out their bad karma.
- Hindu exorcisms are done over smaller durations and Hindu exorcists like my mentor, ensure that, the evil spirit never infests the person or the home again. The evil spirit is allowed to choose sanctity. Contrary to what many believe; tantra believes a lot in personal choices. Tantra is there to give you and I another chance at becoming holy.

- Further, tantra actively uses the help of spirits to do good to others; including such things as healing a hole in the heart or uniting fractured bones.
- A baby was born with a hole in his heart and this child was facing imminent death. This tantric decided that if the child died then his parents would be lost to this samsara for good. He cured the wee little fellow overnight. The child has just completed one year. Medical tests show no heart issues for the boy. The parents were preferentially helped since without their child they would be so much in the grip of grief that their search for transcendence would have ended with the death of their baby boy. The aim here was to let the parents have another chance at realising God in this life itself. The boy survives since without him, this couple would be facing spiritual death. Everyone cannot give up the world as easily as sannyasins can. Further, this kid was born after five years of marriage.

My mentor has never been part of any erotic ritual; he is strictly monogamous. His wife is my daughter's godmother and my wife and I think of this tantric as a very holy man. I am being taught by him now despite my unwillingness. But that is another tale, not to be ever told. It will be morally wrong for me to not declare that this tantric teaches me of his own free will and compassion. I still remain an empiricist who is sure that suggestion, psychoanalysis, and other talk-therapies are more effective over the rituals and effects of tantra.

So that I am not thought to be psychotic; let me clarify something about myself: I do not have any allegiance to any religious sect. So dear reader, I am not a gull for the miraculous and the occult as you may hastily presume, but from 1998 this tantric mentor of mine has predicted about others with a success rate of ninety-nine per cent. For instance, my mother was diagnosed with end-stage liver cancer in 2001 and she had ascites. She was admitted then in one of the best multi-speciality

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hospitals in India. The doctors and I had given up on her. But my mentor said she was misdiagnosed. It turned out she had too much prescription Nimesulide and she is still fit and fine. Do not please take tantra as praxis lightly: it does a lot of good and to my knowledge, no harm, unless one gets stuck with getting more and more good things done from tantrics. Then one is doomed. So my teacher has taught me to tell people to read the scriptures and to keep the holy company of monks and to meditate before sending people to him.

Every Saturday I go out with my mentor on his mission to rid people of their woes. I write this in the hope that the public will understand that the aim of this aspect of tantra is to unite the victim of bad circumstances with Brahman. If tantra, as I have seen it, had anything to do with sex, money, power, or harming others, I would have run away long ago from my mentor. It has nothing to do even with animal sacrifice. And my mentor *can* indeed force one person to fall in love with another; but he can never make two people *be* in love. Therefore, since he does not interfere in others' private lives; I have learnt never to even give life-advice to people.

The company of monks and holy people can clear the mind of muck over a period of time. Tantra teaches one to rely on human effort rather than supernatural interventions. I see advertisements invoking supernatural aid for quick-fix solutions to everything from getting jobs to becoming rich. Tantra does not have these quick and quack remedies. A true practitioner of this difficult discipline will never even think of say, facilitating divorces, encourage illicit relationships, or help in the humiliation of others. One can help an individual but with the sole aim of making her or him grow in the desire for knowing Brahman. Any other aim is dross.

Practised tantra aims at opening one's being towards the life of the Upanishads and is not for

the ambitious, the unchaste, or the weak of will—
it is the way of strength since it validates Advaita
Vedanta. If one practises basic moral principles
perfectly—if such a thing is humanly possible—
then such a person may venture into the practise of
tantra. One caveat must be added; when my mentor knows that some apparently bad thing cannot
be prevented; he just avoids telling the person anything that might frighten one. This tantric chooses
to remain anonymous and I can answer no queries
about him or about anything related to tantra.
Tantra as a canon can answer mostly everything.

I have to repeat again that this article is for academic purposes only and none should experiment with the occult or even read of the same unless academic purposes demand such studies. Generally, academics is only an excuse to satiate our insatiable curiosity about the supernatural. All that matters is experiencing Brahman in the here and the now. The author will not discuss this article with anyone and wrote this at the invitation of the editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*. It is in bad form to turn down the requests of sannyasins.





# Creation As Explained In The Tantra

## Mr Justice J G Woodroffe

[The world renowned tantric scholar and practitioner Sir John Woodroffe, also known as Arthur Avalon, wrote many articles in *Prabuddha Bharata*. Since these articles have an historical value, we are reproducing three of them in this issue. This article was originally published in the February, April, May, and June 1915 issues of *Prabuddha Bharata—Editor*.]

PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS of our worldly experience ordinarily gives us both the feeling of persistence and change. This personal experience expresses a cosmic truth. An examination of any doctrine of creation similarly reveals two fundamental

concepts, those of Being and Becoming, Changelessness and Change, the One and the Many. In Sanskrit they are called the Kutastha and Bhava or Bhavana. The first is the Spirit or Purusha or Brahman who is true Being (Sat), pure consciousness (Chit) and pure transcendental feeling or Bliss (Ananda). According to Indian notions the Spirit as such is and never becomes. It is Nature which is the subject of change. We may understand Nature in a two-fold sense: first as the root principle or noumenal cause of the phenomenal world, that is, as principle of Becoming and secondly as such world. Nature in the former sense is Mulaprakriti which means that which exists as the root (Mula) substance of things before (Pra) creation (Kriti) and which in association with Spirit (Chit) either truly or apparently creates, maintains, and destroys the Universe. This Mulaprakriti, the Sharada Tilaka calls Mulabhuta Avyakta and the Vedanta, (of Shankara to which I alone refer) Maya.

Nature is the second sense, that is the phenomenal world which is a product of Mulaprakriti, is the compound of the evolutes from this root substance which are called Vikritis in the Sankhya and Tantra, and name and form (Namarupa) by the Vedantins who attribute them to ignorance (Avidya). Mulaprakriti as the material and instrumental cause of things is that potentiality of natural power (natura naturans) which manifests as the Universe (natura naturata).

Touching these two Principles there are certain fundamental points of agreement in the three systems which I am examining, Sankhya, Vedanta, and the Advaitavada of the Tantra. They are as follows. Spirit or Brahman or Purusha as Sat, Chit, Ananda is Eternal Conscious Being. It is changeless and has no activity (Karttrittva). It is not therefore in itself a cause whether instrumental or material: though in so

far as its simple presence gives the appearance of consciousness to the activities of Prakriti. It may in such sense be designated an efficient cause. So according to Sankhya, Prakriti reflects Purusha and in Vedanta Avidya of the three Gunas takes the reflection of Chidananda. On the other hand the substance or factors of Mulaprakriti or Maya are the three Gunas of the three characteristics of the principle of Nature according to which it reveals (Sattva) or veils (Tamas) Spirit (Chit) and the activity or energy (Rajas) which urges Sattva and Tamas to operation.

It also is Eternal but is unconscious (Achit) Becoming. Though it is without consciousness (Chaitanya) it is essentially activity, (Karttrittva) motion, change. It is a true cause, instrumental and material, of the world. But notwithstanding all the things to which Mulaprakriti gives birth, its substance according to Sankhya and Tantra is in no wise diminished by the production of the Vikritis or Tattvas; the Gunas which constitute it ever remaining the same. The source of all becoming is never exhausted though the things which are therefrom produced appear and disappear.

Passing from the general points of agreement to those of difference we note firstly those between the Sankhya and Vedanta. The Sankhya which is commonly regarded as a dualistic system affirms that both Purusha and Prakriti are real, separate and, except for the purpose of creation, independent Principles. The Vedanta however says that there cannot be two Principles which are both absolutely real. It does not however altogether discard the dual principles of the Sankhya but says Mulaprakriti, which it calls Maya, while real from one point of view that is empirically, is not truly real from another and transcendental standpoint. It affirms therefore that the only real (Sadvastu) is the atrributeless (Nirguna) Brahman. All else is Maya and its



Sir John Woodroffe (1865-1936)

products. Whilst then the Sankhya Mulaprakriti is an Eternal Reality, it is according to transcendental method of Shankara an eternal unreality (Mithya Bhuta Sanatani). The empirical reality which is really false is due to the Avidya which is inherent in the nature of the embodied spirit (Jiva), Maya is Avastu or no real thing. It is Nistattva. As Avidya is unreal, so is its cause or Maya. The world is then transcendentally unreal. The kernel of the Vedantic argument on this point is to be found in its interpretations of the Vaidik Mahavakya 'That Thou Art' (Tat tvam asi). Tat here is Ishvara that is Brahman with Maya as His body or Upadhi. Tvam is the Jiva with Avidya as its body. It is then shown that Jiva is only Ishvara when Maya is eliminated from

the latter and Avidya from Jiva. Therefore only as Brahman is Tvam the Tat; therefore neither Maya nor Avidya really exists (they are Avastu) for otherwise the equality of Jiva and Ishvara could not be affirmed. This conclusion that Maya is Avastu has far-reaching consequences, both religious and philosophical, and so has the denial of it. It is on this question that there is a fundamental difference between Shankara's Advaitavada and that of the Tantra which I am about to discuss.

Before however doing so I will first contrast the notions of creation in Sankhya and Vedanta. It is common ground in all three systems that creation is the appearance produced of Nature (Achit) existing in association with the Spirit

or Chit. According to both Sankhya and Tantra in Mulaprakriti or the potential condition of the natural Principle the Gunas are in a state of equality (Samyavastha) that is, they are not affecting one another. But as Mulaprakriti is essentially movement, it is said that even when in this state of equality, the Gunas are yet continually changing into themselves (Sarupaparinama). This inherent subtle movement is the nature of the Guna itself and exists without effecting any objective result. Owing to the ripening of Adrishta or Karma creation takes place by the disturbance of this equality of the Gunas (Gunakshobha) which then commence to oscillate and act upon one another. It is this initial creative motion which is known in the Tantra as Cosmic Sound (Parashabda). It is through the association of Purusha with Mulaprakriti in cosmic vibration (Spandana) that creation takes place. The whole universe arises from varied forms of this grand initial motion. So scientific 'matter' is now currently held to be the varied appearance produced in our minds by vibration of and in the single substance called ether. This new western scientific doctrine of vibration is in India an ancient inheritance. 'Hring the Supreme Hansa dwells in the brilliant heaven.' The 'Hansa' comes, it is said, from the word Hanti which means Gati or Motion. Sayana says that it is called Aditya because it is in perpetual motion. But Indian teaching carries the application of this doctrine beyond the scientific ether which is a physical substance (Mahabhuta). There is vibration in the causal body that is of the Gunas of Mulaprakriti as the result of Sadrishaparinama of Parashabdasrishti; in the subtle body of mind (antahkarana); and in the gross body compounded of the Bhutas which derive from the Tanmatras their immediate subtle source of origin. The Hiranyagarbha and Virat Sound is called Madhyama and Vaikhari. If this striking

similarity between ancient Eastern wisdom and modern scientific research has not been recognised, it is due to the fact that the ordinary Western orientalist and those who take their cue from him in this country are prone to the somewhat contemptuous belief that Indian notions are of 'historical' interest only and as such a welcome addition possibly for some intellectual museum, but are otherwise without value or actuality. The vibrating Mulaprakriti and its gunas ever remain the same though the predominance of now one and now another of them produces the various evolutes called Vikritis or Tattvas which constitute the world of mind and matter. These Tattvas constitute the elements of the created world. They are the well-known Buddhi, Ahankara, Manas (constituting the Antahkarana), the ten Indriyas, five Tanmatras and five Mahabhutas of 'ether', 'air', 'fire', 'water', and 'earth' which of course must not be identified with the notions which the English term connotes. These Tattvas are named for the elements which we discover as a result of a psychological analysis of our worldly experience. That experience ordinarily gives us both the feeling of persistence and change. The former is due to the presence of the Atma or Chitshakti which exists in us in association with Mulaprakriti. This is the Chaitanya in all bodies. Change is caused by Mulaprakriti or Mayashakti and its elements may be divided into the subjective and objective Tattvas or what we call mind and matter. Analysing again the former we discover an individuality (Ahankara) sensing through the Indriyas a world which forms the material of its percepts and concepts (Manas and Buddhi). The objects of thought or 'matter' are the varied compounds of the Vaikrita creation which are made up of combinations of the gross elements (Mahabhuta) which themselves derive from the subtle elements or Tanmatra. Now according to Sankhya all this is real, for all

are Tattvas. Purusha and Prakriti are Tattvas and so are the Vikritis of the latter.

According to the Vedanta also creation takes place through the association of the Brahman then known as the Lord or Ishvara (Mayopadhika Chaitanyam Ishvara) with Maya. That is Chit is associated with, though unaffected by, Maya which operates by reason of such association to produce the universe. But really only the unchanging Sadvastu or Brahman exists. The ever-changing world is, when viewed by the spiritually wise (Jnani) nothing but an unreal phantasm imposed by the world-dreamer on the Changeless Sat. It is true that it has the quality of being in accordance with the greatest principle of order namely that of causality. It is the Sat however which gives to the world-dreamer the character of orderliness because it is on and in association with that pure Chit or Sat that the world-dreamer plays. It is true that behind all this unreal appearance there is the Real, the Brahman. But the phenomenal world has no real substratum existing as its instrumental and material cause. The Brahman is no true cause and Maya is unreal (Avastu). The world has only the appearance of reality from the reflection which is cast by the real upon the unreal. Nor is Ishvara, the creating and ruling Lord, in a transcendental sense real. For, as it is the Brahman in association with the world-dream which Shankara calls Ishvara, the latter, is nothing but the Brahman viewed through this world-dream. It follows that the universe is the illusory product of the association of the real and the unreal and when this dream ends in liberation (Mukti) the notion of Ishvara as its creator no longer exists. For, His body is Maya and this is Avastu. So long however as there is a world, that is so long one is subject however slightly to the world-dream or is to any extent or in any degree embodied, so long do we recognise the existence of Ishvara.

The Lord truly exists for every Jiva so long as he is such. But on attainment of bodiless liberation (Videha Mukti) the Jiva becomes himself Sachchidananda and as such Ishvara does not exist for him since Ishvara is but the Sat viewed through the world-dream of which Sat is free. 'The Brahman is true, the world is false. The Jiva is Brahman (Pramatman) and nothing else.'

The opponents of this system or Mayavada have charged it with being a covert form of Buddhistic nihilism (Mayavadam asachchastram prachchhannam baudham). It has however perhaps been more correctly said that Sri Shakara adjusted his philosophy to meet the Mayavada of the Buddhists and so promulgated a new theory of Maya without abandoning the faith or practice of his Shaiya Dharma.

All systems obviously concede at least the empirical reality of the world. The question is whether it has a greater reality than that and if so in what way? Sankhya affirms its reality, Shankara denies it in order to secure the complete unity of the Brahman. Each system has merits of its own. Sankhya by its dualism is able to preserve in all its integrity the specific character of Chit as Niranjana. This result on the other hand is effected at the cost of the unity for which our mind has a kind of metaphysical hunger. Shankara by his Mayavada secures this unity, but this achievement is at the cost of a denial of the reality of the world whether considered as the product (Vikriti) of Mulaprakriti or as Mulaprakriti itself.

There is however another alternative and that is the great Tantric doctrine of Duality in Unity. There is, this Shastra says, a middle course in which the reality of the world is in one sense affirmed without compromising the truth of the unity of the Brahman for which Shankara by such lofty speculation contends. I here shortly state what is developed more fully later. The

tantric Advaitavada, in distinction from that of Shankara, recognises the reality of Mulaprakriti, though it holds that Vikriti is, in a sense I state later, unreal. Here in a qualified way it follows the Sankhya. On the other hand it differs from the Sankhya, in holding that Mulaprakriti or Mayashakti is not a principle separate from the Brahman but exists in and as a principle of the one Brahman substance. The world therefore as mere appearance is not real in the Indian sense of that term but the ground principle of such appearance or Mayashakti is real. There is thus a reality behind all appearance, a real natural substance behind its apparent transformations. And as Maya, which is the body of Ishvara, is both eternal and real so is Ishvara. I pass now to the Advaitavada of the Tantra.

The Indian Tantra is not a formal system of philosophy (Darshana). It is in the broadest sense a generic term for the writings and various traditions which express the whole culture of a certain epoch in Indian History. The contents are therefore of an encyclopaedic character religion, ritual, domestic rites, law, medicine, magic, and so forth. It has thus great historical value which appears to be the most fashionable form of recommendation for the Indian Scriptures now-a-days. The mere historian, I believe, derives encouragement from the fact that out of bad material may yet be made good history. I am not here concerned with this aspect of the matter. For any present purpose the Tantra is part of the Upasana kanda of the three departments of Shruti and is a system of the physical, psychical and moral training, (Sadhana) worship, and Yoga. It is thus essentially practical. This is what it claims to be. To its critics it has appeared to be a system of immoral indiscipline. I am not here concerned with this charge but with the doctrine of creation to be found in this Shastra. Underlying however all this practice, whatsoever be



the worth or otherwise which is attributed to it, there is a philosophy which must be abstracted as I have here done for the first time with some difficulty from the disquisitions on religion and the ritual and Yoga directions to be found in the various Tantras. The fundamental principles are as follows.

The equality (Samya) of the Gunas is Mulaprakriti which has activity (Karttrittva) but no consciousness (Chaitanya). Brahman is Sachchidananda who has Chaitanya and no Karttrittva. It is true therefore that considered in

themselves and without reference to the other they are separate, distinguishable and differently characterised Principles. But this is so only if we endeavour so to think of them. As a matter of fact however the two admittedly ever and everywhere co-exist and cannot, be thought of without the other. The connection between the two is one of unseparateness (Avinabhava Sambandha). Brahman does not exist without Prakriti or Prakriti without the Brahman. Some call the Supreme Chaitanya with Prakriti, others Prakriti with Chaitanya. Some worship it as Shiva: others as Shakti. Both are one and the same. Shiva is the One viewed from Its Chit aspect Shakti is One viewed from Its Maya aspect. They are the 'Male' and 'female' aspects of the same unity which is neither male nor female. Akula is Shiva, Kula is Shakti. The same Supreme is worshipped by Sadhana of Brahman as by Sadhana of Adyashakti. The two cannot be separated; for Brahman without Prakriti is actionless and Prakriti without Brahman is unconscious. According to Sankhya, Prakriti is eternal and so is the Maya of Shankara. There is Nishkala Shiva or the transcendent attributeless (Nirguna) Brahman; and Sakala Shiva or the embodied immanent Brahman with attributes (Saguna). Kala corresponds with the Sankhyan Mulaprakriti or Samyavastha of the three Gunas and the Vedantic Maya. But Kala which is Mulaprakriti and Maya eternally exists. Therefore when we speak of Nishkala Shiva it is not meant that there is then or at any time no Kala, for Kala ever exists, but that Brahman is meant which is thought of as being without the working Prakriti (Prakriteranya). Maya Shakti is then latent in it. As the Devi in the Kulachudamani says 'Aham Prakritirupa Chet Chidananda Parayana, Sakala Shiva is on the other hand Shiva considered as associated with Prakriti in operation and manifesting the world. In one case Kala is working or manifest; in the other it is not but exists in a potential state. In the same way the two Shivas are one and the same. There is one Shiva who is Nirguna and Saguna. The Tantrik Yoga Treatise Shatchakranirupana describes the Jivatma as the Paryaya of, that is another name for the Paramatma; adding that the root of wisdom (Mulavidya) is a knowledge of their identity. When the Brahman manifests it is called Shakti which is the magnificent concept round which Tantra is built. The term comes from the root 'Shak' which means 'to be able'. It is the power whereby the Brahman manifests Itself and the Brahman Itself, for Shakti and possessor of Shakti (Shaktiman) are one and the same. As Shakti is Brahman it is also Nirguna and Saguna. The former is Chit-Shakti, that is Chit in association with the operating Prakriti as the efficient cause of the creation; and Maya Shakti which means Maya as a Shakti that is in creative operation as the instrumental (Nimitta) and material (Upadana) cause of the universe. This is the Shakti which produces Avidya just as Mahamaya or Ishvari is the Great Liberatrix. These twin aspects of Shakti appear throughout creation. Thus in the body the Chit or Brahman aspect is conscious Atma or Spirit and the Maya aspect is the Antahkarana and its derivatives or the unconscious (Jada) mind and body. When however we speak here of Shakti without any qualifications what is meant is Chit-Shakti in association with Maya-Shakti, that is Ishvara or Devi or Mahamaya, the Mother of all worlds. If we keep this in view we shall not fall into the error of supposing that the Shaktas (whose religion is one of the oldest in the world; how old indeed is as yet little known) worship material force or gross matter. Ishvara or Ishvari is not Achit which as pure Sattvaguna is only His or Her Body. Mayashakti in the sense of Mulaprakriti is Achit.

In a certain class of Indian images you will



see the Lord with a diminutive female figure on His lap. The makers and worshippers of those images thought of Shakti as being in the subordinate position which some persons consider a Hindu wife should occupy. This is however not a conception of Tantra according to which She is not a handmaid of the Lord but the Lord Himself, being but the name for that aspect of His in which He is the Mother and Nourisher of the worlds. As Shiva is the transcendent, Shakti is the immanent aspect of the one Brahman who is Shiva-Shakti. Being Its aspect, it is not different from, but one with it. In the

Kulachudamani Nigama the Bhairavi addressing Bharava says 'Thou art the Guru of all, I entered into Thy body (as Shakti) and thereby Thou didst become the Lord (Prabhu). There is none but Myself who is the Mother to create (Karyyavibhavini). Therefore, it is that when creation takes place sonship is in Thee. Thou alone art the Father who wills what I do (Karyyavibhavaka; that is She is the vessel which receives the nectar which flows from Nityananda). By the union of Shiva and Shakti creation comes (Shiva-Shaktisamayogat jayate srishtikalpana). As all in the universe is both Shiva and Shakti

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(Shivashaktimaya) therefore Oh Maheshvara, Thou art in every place and I am in every place. Thou art in all and I am in all.' The creative Word thus sows Its seed in its own womb.

Such being the nature of Shakti the next question is whether Maya as Shankara affirms is Avastu. It is to be remembered that according to his empirical method it is taken as real but transcendentally it is alleged to be an eternal unreality because the object of the latter method is to explain away the world altogether so as to secure the pure unity of the Brahman. The Tantra is however not concerned with any such purpose. It is an Upasana Shastra in which the world substance and its Lord have reality. There cannot be Sadhana in an unreal world by an unreal Sadhaka of unreal Lord. The Tantra replies to Mayavada:—If it be said that Maya is in some unexplained way Avastu, yet it is admitted that there is something, however unreal it may be alleged to be, which is yet admittedly eternal and in association, whether manifest or unmanifest, with the Brahman. According to Shankara Maya exists as the mere potentiality

of some future world-dream which shall rise on the ripening of Adrishta which Maya is. But in the Mahanirvana Tantra, Shiva says to Devi 'Thou art Thyself the Para Prakriti of the Paramatman.' (4.5.10). That is Maya, in the sense of Mulaprakriti, which is admittedly eternal, is not Avastu but exists in the Brahman as one of two principles the other of which is Chit. In Nishkala Shiva, Maya lies inactive. It manifests on and as creation, though Chit thus appearing with the three Gunas is neither exhausted not affected thereby. We thus find Ishvari addressed in the Tantra both as Sachchidanandarupini and Trigunatmika referring to the two real Principles which form part of the one Brahman substance. The philosophical difference between the two expositions appears to lie in this. Shankara says that there are no distinctions in Brahman of either of the three kinds: svagata bheda, that is distinction of parts within one unit; svajatiya bheda or distinction between units of one class: or vijativa bheda or distinction between units of different classes. Bharati, however, the commentator on the Mahanirvana (2.5.34) says that



Advaita there mentioned means devoid of the last two classes of distinction. There is therefore for the purposes of Tantra a svagata bheda in the Brahman Itself namely the two aspects according to which the Brahman is on the one hand, Being, Spirit, Chit; and on the other the principle of Becoming (Achit) which manifests as nature. In, however, a mysterious way there is an union of these two principles (Bhavayoga) which thus exist without derogation from the partless unity of the Brahman which they are. In short the Brahman may be conceived as having twin aspects in one of which It is the cause of the world and appears to change and in the other of which It is the unchanging Soul of the world. Whilst the Brahman Svarupa or Chit is itself immutable, it is yet the efficient cause of change in the sense that by the association of Chit with the Mayik principle in the Brahman substance Prakriti creates the world.

But what then is 'real', a term not always correctly understood? According to Indian notions the real is that which ever was, is and will be (Kalatraya sattavan); in the words of the Christian liturgy 'as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end'. Therefore that which changes, which was not, but is, and then ceases to be, is according to this definition unreal, however much from a practical point of view it may appear real to us. Now Mayavada calls Mulaprakriti, the material cause of the world, unreal (Avastu). The Tantra says that the Principle, whence all becoming comes, exists as a real substratum, so to speak, below the world of names and forms. This maya is an eternal reality: what is unreal are these names and forms (Avidya), that is the changing worlds (asattriloka-sadbhanam-svarupam Brahmanah smritam. 3.5.7, Mahanirvana Tantra). These are unreal for they are not permanent but come and go. The body is called Sharira which comes

from the root 'Shri' 'to decay'; for it is dissolving and being renewed at every moment until death. Again, however real it may seem to us, the world is unreal in the sense that it is something other than what it seems to be. This thing which I now hold in my hands seems to me to be paper, which is white, smooth and so forth, yet we are told that it really is something different namely a number of extraordinary rapid vibrations of etheric substance producing the false appearance of scientific 'matter'. In the same way (as those who worship yantras know) all nature is the appearance produced by various forms of motion in Prakritic substance. The real is that which all things are (sarvam khalvidam Brahman), that is spirit, and that associated primordial Substance which in a way unknown to us exists in It but without derogation from Its partless spiritual unity. That this is not perceived is due to Avidya or those limitations which are inherent in our nature as created beings (Jiva). The Brahman whether in Its Chit or Maya aspect eternally and changelessly endures but Avidya or Samskara appears to break up Its undivided unity into the unreal, that is, the changing manifold world of name and form which are imputed to it.

It follows from the above that as Maya is the body of Ishvara, the Ishvara-body is in Tantra eternal, though in dissolution (pralaya) it exists in a latent potential state. Whilst the phenomenal world is unreal the world-principle or body of the Lord is an eternal reality. Ishvara is not therefore in the terms of the Paravidya of Shankara a transitory appearance of the Brahman viewed through the veil. As the reality of Mulaprakriti is affirmed the theory is in this sense dualistic (Dvaitavada). But again it is monistic (Advaitavada) for as Shankara points out (in his commentary on the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 1.2) Devatmashakti, the cause of the world, is not separate from the Paramatma as Sankhya alleges its Pradhana to be.

And thus it is that Shiva in the Kularnava Tantra (1.110) says 'some desire dualism (Dvaitavada), others monism (Advaitavada). Such however know not My truth, which is beyond both monism and dualism (dvaitadvaitavivarjitam).' This saying may doubtless mean that to the 'knower' (Jnani) the arguments of philosophical systems are of no account as is indeed the case. It has also a more literal meaning as above explained. The Shastra in fact makes high claims for itself. The Tantra it has been said takes into its arms, as if they were its two children, both dualism and monism, affording by its practical method (Sadhana) and the spiritual knowledge generated thereby the means by which their antinomies are resolved and harmonised. Its purpose is to give liberation to the Jiva by a method according to which monistic truth is reached through the dualistic world; immersing its Sadhakas in the current of Divine Bliss by changing duality into unity and then evolving from the latter a dualistic play thus proclaiming the wonderful glory of the Spouse of Paramashiva in the love embrace of Matter (Jada) and Spirit (Chaitanya). It therefore says that those who have realised this, move and yet remain unsoiled in the mud of worldly actions which led others upon the downward path. It claims

Greek Icon of St Dionysius the Areopagite



therefore that its practical method (Sadhana) is more speedily fruitful than any other. Its practical method is an application of the general principles above described. In fact one of its Acharas which has led to abuse is an attempt to put into full practice the theory of Advaitavada. Shankara has in his transcendental method dealt with the subject as part of the Jnana Kanda. Though the exponent of the Mayavada is esteemed to be a Mahapurusha, this method is not in favour with the Tantrik Sadhaka who attributes much of the practical atheism which is to be found in this country as elsewhere to the transcendental doctrines of Mayavada. There is some truth in this charge for, as had been well said, the vulgarisation of Shankara's 'Higher Science' which is by its nature an esoteric doctrine destined for a small minority must be reckoned a misfortune in so far as it has in the language of the Gita induced many people to take to another's Dharma instead of to their own which is the 'Lower Science' of the great Vedantin followed in all Shastras of worship. Such a Shastra must necessarily affirm God as a real object of worship. Dionysius the Areopagite, the chief of the line of all Christian mystics, said that we could only speak 'apophatically' of the Supreme as It existed in Itself that is

other than as It displays Itself to us. Of It nothing can be affirmed but that It is not this and not that. Here he followed the 'neti neti' of the Vedanta. Ishvari is not less real than the things with which we are concerned every day. She is for the Indian Sadhaka the highest reality and what may or may not be the state of Videha Mukti has for him, as the Tantra says, no practical concern. Those only who have attained it will

know whether Shankara is right or not; not that they will think about this or any other subject; but in the sense that when the Brahman is known all is known. A friend, from whom I quote, writes that he had once occasion to learn to what ridiculous haughtiness some of the modern 'adepts' of Sri Shankara's school are apt to let themselves be carried away when one of them spoke to him of the personal Ishvara as being a 'pitiable creature.' The truth is that such so-called 'adepts' are no adepts at all, being without the attainment and far from the spirit of Shankara whose devotion and powers made him seem to be to his followers an incarnation of Shiva Himself. Such a remark betrays a radical misunderstanding of the Vedanta. Some of those who to-day discuss his Vedanta from a merely literary standpoint have neither his nor indeed any faith. What some would do is to dismiss the faith and practice of Shankara as idle superstition and to adopt his philosophy. What is the intrinsic value of a philosophy which emanates from a mind which is so ignorant as to be superstitious? Shankara however has said that faith and Sadhana are the preliminaries for competency (Adhikara) for the Jnanakanda. He alone is competent (Adhikari) who possesses all good moral and intellectual qualities, faith (Shraddha), capacity for the higher contemplation (Samadhi) the Sankhyan discrimination (Viveka), absence of all desire for anything in this world or the next, and an ardent longing of liberation. There are few indeed who can claim even imperfectly all such qualifications. But what of the rest? There is no Vaidik Karmakanda in operation in the present age but there are other shastras of worship which is either Vaidik, Tantrik, or Pauranik. These provide for those who are still, as are most, on the path of desire. The Tantra affirms that nothing of worth can he achieved without Sadhana. Mere speculation is without result. This principle is entirely sound whatever may be thought of the

mode in which it is sought to be applied. Those to whom the questions here discussed are not mere matters for intellectual business or recreation will recall that Shankara has said that liberation is attained not merely by the discussion of and pondering upon revealed truth (Vichara) for which few only are competent, but by the grace of God (Ishvara anugraha) through the worship of the Mother and Father from whom all creation springs. Such worship produces knowledge. In the Kulachudamani the Devi says: 'O all-knowing One if Thou knowest Me then of what use are the Amnayas (revealed teachings) and Yajanam (ritual). If thou knowest Me not then of what use again are they?' But neither are without their uses for thereby the Sadhaka becomes qualified for some form of Urddhvamnaya in which there are no rites (Karma).

With this short exposition of the nature of Shakti-tattva according to Tantra I pass to an equally brief account of its manifestation as the Universe. There are some apparent varieties of detail in the various Tantras. Our present knowledge of this little known Shastra is so small that it would be hazardous (even were it possible which is by no means certain) to construct a scheme with claims to represent their combined teachings. Nor is it necessary for the present purpose to do so. It is sufficient to deal with the main lines of the doctrine without going into their very great accompanying detail. I here follow on the main theme the account given in the celebrated Sharada Tilaka a work written by Lakshmanacharyya, the Guru of Abhinava Gupta, the great Kashmirian Tantrik about the commencement of the eleventh century and its Commentary by the learned Tantrik Pandit Raghava Bhatta which is dated 1454 AD.

Why creation takes place cannot in an ultimate sense be explained. It is the play (Lila) of the Mother. Could this be done the Brahman

would be subject to the law of causality which governs the Universe but which its Cause necessarily transcends.

The Tantra however in common with other Indian Shastras recognises Adrishta Srishti or the doctrine that the impulse to creation is proximately caused by the Adrishta or Karma of Jiva. But Karma is eternal and itself requires explanation. Karma comes from Samskara and Samskara from Karma. The process of creation, maintenance, and dissolution according to this view unceasingly recurs as an eternal rhythm of cosmic life and death which is Mother's play (Lila). And so it is beautifully said of Her in the Lalita Sahasranama that 'the series of universes appear and disappear with the opening and shutting of Her Eyes'. The existence of Karma implies the will to cosmic life. We produce it as the result of such will. And when produced it becomes itself the cause of it.

In the aggregate of Karma, which will at one period or another ripen, there is at any particular time some which are ripe and others which are not so. For the fruition of the former only creation takes place. When this seed ripens and the time therefore approaches for the creation of another universe the Brahman manifests in its vishvarupa aspect so that the Jiva may enjoy or suffer thererin the fruits of his Karma and (unless liberation be attained) accumulate fresh Karma which will involve the creation of future worlds. When the unripened actions which are absorbed in Maya become in course of time ripe, the Vritti of Maya or Shakti in the form of desire for creation arises in Paramashiva for the bestowal of the fruit of this Karma. This state of Maya is variously called by Shruti, Ikshana, Ichchha, Kama, Vichikirsha.

It is when the Brahman 'saw', 'desired', or 'thought' 'May I be many' that there takes place what is known in Tantra as Sadrisha parinama in which the Supreme Vindu appears. This in its triple aspect is known as Kamakala a manifestation

of Shakti whence in the manner hereafter described the Universe emanates. This Kamakala is the Mula or root of all Mantra. Though creation takes place in order that Karma may be suffered and enjoyed, yet in the aggregate of Karma which will at one time or another ripen, there is at any particular period some which are ripe and others which are not so. For the fruition of the former only creation takes place. As creation will serve no purpose in the case of Karma which is not ripe, there is after the exhaustion by fruition of the ripe Karma a dissolution (Pralaya). Then the Universe is again merged in Maya which thus abides until the ripening of the remaining actions. Karma like everything else re-enters the Brahman and remains there in a hidden potential state as if it were a seed. When the seed ripens creation again takes place.

With Ikshana or the manifestation of creative will creation is really instantaneous. When the 'Word' went forth 'Let there be light' there was light for the ideation of Ishvara is creative. Our mind by its constitution is however let to think of creation as a gradual process. The Sankhya starts with the oscillation of the Gunas (Gunakshobha) upon which the Vikritis immediately appear. But just as it explains its real Parinama in terms of successive emanations so the Tantra describes the Sadrisha Parinama in the body of Ishvara, their cause. This development is not a real parinama but a resolution of like to like, that is, there is no actual change in the nature of the entity dealt with, the various stages of such Parinama being but names for the multiple aspects to us of the same unchanging unity.

For the sake of Upasana a development is described in Ishvara, but as it is apparent only it is really a species of Vivartta. What is called an evolution is but another name or aspect of that which is the immutable subject of such ideal process. Shakti is one. It appears as various by its manifestation in various functions. There can of necessity

be no real Parinama, for in the first place Sachchidananda or pure spirit is as such immutable. Before and after creation in every stage it remains what it was. There is therefore no real Parinama in or of the Aksharabrahman as such. Nor again though Prakriti is the source of change is it changing here. For Maya considered as the body of Ishvara is undifferentiated, that is as such it is assumed not to change. And this must be so, for directly there is a real development (parinama) the Jiva-body of Avidya appears. Even the three Gunas do not change each remaining what it is. They are the same in all forms but appear to the Jiva to exist in different combinations. The appearance of the gunas in different proportions is due to Avidya or Karma which is this apparent Gunakshobha. The three worlds are Asat. It is Samskara which gives to the Samya Prakriti the appearance of an existence as Vaishamya. Ishvara is free of all Avidya. What the Tantra describes as Sadrisha Parinama is but an analysis of the different aspects of what is shortly called in other Shastras Ikshana. The Sadrisha Parinama is concerned with the evolution of what is named Para Sound (Parashabdasrishti). This is Cosmic Sound; the causal vibration in the substance of Mula- prakriti which gives birth to the Tattvas which are its Vikritis. Such cosmic sound being that which is distinguished in thought from the Tattvas so produced.

The Sharada says that from the Sakala Parameshvara who is Sachchidananda issued Shakti. This Shakti is not in a sense co-extensive with the Parameshvara but is only that power of Him which is necessary for creation. God and His power are more than the creation which He manifests. Shakti is said to issue from that which is already Sakala or associated with Shakti, because as Raghava Bhatta says, She who is eternal (Anadirupa) existed in a subtle state (as it were Chaitanya) during the great dissolution (pralaya). Ya anadirupa chaitanyadhyasena



Ardhanarishvara

mahapralaye sukshma sthita. This important passage contains the whole teaching on this particular point. Adhyasa is the attribution of the nature of one thing to another according to which something is considered to be what it is not. In other words during pralaya there is some principle in the Brahman which is not Chit but which owing to the absence of operation is identified with it. Chit and Maya appear as the former, the latter being suppressed.

With however the disturbance of the gunas Prakriti became inclined (uchchhuna) to creation and in this sense is imagined to issue. Shakti, in other words passes from a potential state to one of actuality. The Parameshvara is, he adds, described as Sachchidananda in order to affirm that even when the Brahman is associated with Avidya its own true nature (Svarupa) is not affected. According to the *Sharada*, from this Shakti issues Nada and from the latter Vindu (known as the Paravindu). The *Sharada* thus

enumerates seven aspects of Shakti. This it does according to Raghava so as to make up the seven component parts of the Omkara. In some Shakta Tantras this first Nada is omitted and there are thus only six aspects. The Shiva Tantras mention five. Those which recognise Kala as a Tattva identify Nada with it. In some Tantras Kala is associated with Tamoguna and is the Mahakala who is both the child and spouse of Adyashakti; for creation comes from the Tamasic aspect of Shakti. In the Sharada Tilaka. Nada and Vindu are the same as Shakti being the names of two of Her states which are considered to represent Her as being more prone to creation (Uchchhunavastha). These are two states of Shakti under which It creates (upayoga-avastha). As there is no mass or ghana in Nishkala Shiva that Brahman represents the aghanavastha. The Prapanchasara

Tantra says that She who is in the first place Tattva (mere 'thatness') quickens under the influence of Chit which She reflects; then She longs to create (vichikirshu) and becomes massive (ghanibhuta) and appears as Vindu (Paravindu). Ghanibhuta means the state of being with ghana (Ghanavastha). It involves the notion of solidifying, coagulating, becoming massive. Thus milk is said to become ghanibhuta when it condenses into cream or curd. This is the first gross condition (Sthulavastha). The Brahman associated with Maya in the form of Karma assumes that aspect in which It is regarded as the primal cause of the subtle and gross bodies. There then lies in it, in a potential undifferentiated mass (ghana), the universe and beings about to be created. The Paravindu is thus a compact aspect of Shakti wherein action of Kriya-Shakti predominates. It



is compared to a grain of gram (chanaka) which under its outer sheath (maya) contains two seeds (Shivashakti) in close and undivided union. The Vindu is symbolised by a circle. The Shunya or empty space within is the Brahmapada. The supreme Light is formless but Vindu implies both the void and guna for when Shiva becomes Vindurupa He is with guna. Raghava says 'She alone can create. When the desire for appearance as all Her Tattvas seizes Her She assumes the state of Vindu whose chief characteristic is action' (Kriyashakti). This Vindu or Avyakta as it is the sprouting root of the universe is called the supreme Vindu (Paravindu) or causal or Karana Vindu to distinguish it from that aspect of Itself which is called Vindu (Karyya) which appears as a state of Shakti after the differentiation of the Paravindu in Sadrisha parinama. The Paravindu is the Ishvara of the Vedanta with Maya as His Upadhi. He is the Saguna Brahman that is the combined Chitshakti and Mayashakti or Ishvara with undifferentiated Prakriti as His Avyaktasharira. Some call Him Mahavishnu and others the Brahmapurusha. Here is He Paramashiva. 'Some call this the Hansa Devi. They are those who are filled with a passion for her lotus feet.' As Kalicharana the Commentator of the Shatchakranirupana says, it matters not what It is called. It is adored by all. It is this Vindu or state of supreme Shakti which is worshipped in secret by all Devas. In Nishkala Shiva, Prakriti exists in a hidden potential state. The Vindu or Parashaktimaya (Shivashaktimaya) is the first manifestation of creative activity which is both the expression and result of the universal Karma or store of unfulfilled desire for cosmic life.

It is then said that this Paravindu 'divides' or 'differentiates'. In the Satyaloka is the formless and lustrous One. She exists like a grain of gram surrounding Herself with Maya. When casting off (utsrijya) the covering (bandhana) of Maya

She, intent on creation (unmukhi), becomes twofold (dvidhavhitva) or according to the account here given threefold and then on this differentiation in Shiva and Shakti (Shiva-Shakti vibhagena) arises creative ideation (srishtikalpana). As so unfolding the Vindu is knowrn as the Sound Brahman (Shabda-brahman). 'On the differentiation of the Paravindu there arose unmanifested sound.' (Vhidya-manat parad vindoravyaktatmaravo bhavat). Shabda here of course does not mean physical sound which is the guna of the Karyakasha or atomic Akasha. The latter is integrated and limited and evolved at a later stage in Vikriti Parinama from Tamasika Ahankara. Shabdabrahman is the undifferentiated Chidakasha or Spiritual Ether of philosophy in association with its Kala or Prakriti or the Sakala Shiva of religion. It is Chitshakti vehicled by undifferentiated Prakriti from which is evolved Nadamatra ('Sound only' or the 'Principle of Sound') which is unmanifest (Avyakta): from which again is displayed (Vyakta) the changing universe of names and forms. It is the Pranavarupa Brahman or Om which is the cosmic causal principle of the manifested Shabdartha. Avyakta Nada or unmanifested Sound is the undifferentiated causal principle of manifested sound without any sign or characteristic manifestation such as letters and the like which mark its displayed product. Shabdabrahman is the all-pervading impartite unmanifested Nadavindu substance, the primary creative impulse in Parashiva which is the cause of the manifested Shabdartha. This Vindu is called Para because it is the first and supreme Vindu. Although it is Shakti like the Shakti and Nada which precede it, it is considered as Shakti on the point of creating the world and as such it is from this Paravindu and not the states above it in the imaginary procession of Shakti that Avyakta Sound is said to come.

Raghava Bhatta ends the discussion of this

matter by shortly saying that the Shabdabrahman is the Chaitanya in all creatures which as existing in breathing creatures (Prani) is known as the Shakti Kundalini of the Muladhara. The accuracy of this definition is contested by the Compiler of the Pranatoshini, but if by Chaitanya we understand the manifested Chit that is the latter displayed as and with Mulaprakriti in cosmic vibration (Spandana) then the apparently differing views are reconciled.

The Paravindu on such differentiation manifests under the threefold aspects of Vindu, Nada, Vija. This is the only development and kinetic aspect of Parashabda. The Vindu which thus becomes threefold is the principle in which the germ of action sprouts to manifestation producing a state of compact intensive Shakti. The threefold aspect of Vindu, as Vindu (Karyya), Nada and Vija are Shivamaya, Shivashaktimaya, Shaktimaya; Tamas, Sattva, Rajas; Moon, Fire and Sun; and the Shaktis which are the cosmic bodies known as Ishvara, Hiranyagarbha, and Virat. All three, Vindu, Vija, Nada are the different phases of Shakti in creation being different aspects of Paravindu, the ghanavastha of Shakti. The order of the three Shaktis of will, action and knowledge differ in Ishvara and Jiva. Ishvara is all-knowing and therefore the order in Him is Ichchha, Jnana, Kriya. In Jiva it is Jnana, Ichchha, Kriya. Ichchha is said to be the capacity which conceives the idea of work or action, which brings the work before the mind and wills to do it. In this Vindu Tamas is said to be predominant, for there is as yet no stir to action. Nada is Jnana Shakti, that is the subjective direction of will by knowledge to the desired end. With it is associated Sattva. Vija is Kriya Shakti or the Shakti which arises from that effort or the action done. With it Rajasguna or the principle of activity is associated. Kriya arises from the combination of Ichchha and Jnana. It is thus said 'Drawn by Ichchhashakti, illumined by Jnanashakti, Shakti, the Lord appearing as Male creates (Kriyashakti). From Vindu it is said arose Raudri; from Nada, Jyeshtha; and from Vija, Vama. From these arose Rudra, Brahma, Vishnu.' It is also said in the Goraksha Samhita, 'Ichchha is Brahmi, Kriya is Vaishnavi and Jnana is Gauri. Wherever there are these three Shaktis there is the Supreme Light called Om.' In the Sakala Parameshvara or Shabdabrahman in bodies, that is Kundalini Shakti, Vindu in which Tamas abounds is, Raghava says, called Nirodhika: Nada in which Sattva abounds is called Arddhendhu and Vija the combination of the two (Ichchha and Jnana) in which Rajas as Kriya works is called Vindu. The three preceding states in Kundalini are Shakti, Dhvani, and Nada. Kundalini is Chit Shakti into which Sattva enters: a state known as the Paramakashavastha. When She into whom Sattva has entered is next pierced by Rajas She is called Dhvani which is the Aksharavastha. When She is again pierced by Tamas She is called Nada. This is the Avyaktavastha, the Avyakta Nada which is the Paravindu. The three Vindus which are aspects of Paravindu constitute the mysterious Kamakala triangle which with the Harddhakala forms the roseate body of the lovely-limbed great Devi Tripurasundari who is Shivakama and manifests the universe. She is the trinity of Divine energy of whom the Shritattvarnava says:—'Those glorious men who worship in that body in Samarasa are freed from the waves of poison in the untraversable sea of the Wandering (Samsara). The main principle which underlies the elaborate details here shortly summarised is this. The state in which Chit and Prakriti exists as one undivided Whole that is in which Prakriti lies latent (Nishkala Shiva) is succeeded by one of differentiation that is manifestation of Maya (Sakala Siva). In such manifestation it displays

several aspects. The totality of such aspects is the Maya-body of Ishvara in which are included the causal subtle and gross bodies of the Jiva. These are according to the *Sharada* seven aspects of the first or Para state of Sound in Shabdasrishti which are the seven divisions of the Mantra Om, namely:—A, U, M, Nada, Vindu, Shakti, Shanta. They constitute Parashabdasrishti in the Ishvara creation. They are Ishvara or Om and seven aspects of the cosmic causal body; the collectivity (Samashti) of the individual (Vyashti) causal, subtle and gross bodies of the Jiva.

Before passing to the manifested Word and its meaning (Shabdartha) it is necessary to note what is called Arthasrishti in the Avikriti or Sadrisha Parinama; that is the causal state of Sound called Para Shabda; the other three states, namely: Pashyanti, Madhyama, and Vaikhari manifesting only in gross bodies. As Paravindu is the causal body of Shabda, He is also the causal body of Artha which is inseparably associated

with it as the combined Shabdartha. As such He is called Shambhu who is of the nature of both Vindu and Kala and the associate of Kala. From Him issued Sadashiva 'the witness of the world' and from Him Isha and then Rudra, Vishnu, and Brahma. These six Shivas are various aspects of Chit as presiding over (the first) the subjective Tattvas and (the rest) the elemental world whose centres are the five lower Chakras. These Devatas when considered as belonging to the Avikriti Parinama are the Devata aspect of apparently different states of causal sound by the process of resolution of like to like giving them the semblance of all pervasive creative energies. They are sound powers in the aggregate (Samashti). As



appearing in, that is presiding over, bodies they are the ruling Lords, of the individual (Vyashti) evolutes from the primal cause of Shabda.

The completion of the causal Avikriti Parinama with its ensuing cosmic vibration in the Gunas is followed by a real Parinama of the Vikritis from the substance of Mulaprakriti. There then appears the manifested Shabdartha or the individual bodies subtle or gross of the Jiva in which are the remaining three Bhavas of Sound or Shaktis called Pashyanti, Madhayama, Vaikhari. Shabda literally means sound, idea, word; and Artha, its meaning, that is the objective form which corresponds to the subjective conception formed and language spoken of it. The

conception is due to Samskara, Artha is the externalised thought. There is a psycho-physical parallelism in the Jiva. In Ishvara, thought is truly creative. The two are inseparable, neither existing without the other. Shabdartha has thus a composite meaning like the Greek word Logos which means both thought and word combined. By the manifested Shabdartha is meant what the Vedantins call Namarupa, the unreal world of name and form, but with this difference that according to the Tantrik notions here discussed there is, underlying this world of name and form, a real material cause that is Parashabda or Mulaprakriti manifesting as the principle of evolution.

The *Sharada* says that from the Unmanifested root being in Vindu form (Mulabhuta avyakta vindurupa) of the Paravastu (Brahman) that is from Mulaprakriti in creative operation there is evolved the Sankhyan Tattvas. This Tattva Srishti, as it is called, is regarded as real from the standpoint of Jiva: the notion of Vikriti involving that of change just as the idea of Chit implies changelessness.

Transcendentally creation of all things takes place simultaneously and transcendentally such things have only a Mayik reality. But from the standpoint of Jiva there is a real development (Parinama) from the substance of Mula bhuta avyakta vindurupa (as the Sharada calls Mulaprakriti) of the Tattvas, Buddhi, Ahankara, Manas, the Indriyas, Tanmatras, and Mahabhutas in the order stated. The Tantra therefore adopts the Sankhyan and not the Vedantic order of emanation which starts with the Apanchikrita Tanmatra, the Tamasik parts of which on the one hand develop by Panchikarana into the Mahabhuta and on the other the Rajasik and Sattvik parts of which are collectively and separately the source of the remaining Tattvas. In the Tantra the Bhutas derive directly and not by Panchikarana from the Tanmatra. Panchikarana exists in

respect of the compounds derived from the Bhutas. There is a further point of detail in the Tantrik exposition to be noted. The Tantra, as the Puranas and Shaiva Shastras do, speaks of a threefold aspect of Ahankara according to the predominance therein of the respective Gunas. From the Vaikarika Ahankara issue the eleven Devatas who preside over Manas and the ten Indriyas; from the Taijasa Ahankara is produced the Indriyas and Manas: and from the Bhutadi Ahankara, the Tanmatras. None of these differences in detail or order of emanation of the Tattvas have substantial importance. In one case start is made from the knowledge principle (Buddhi), on the other from the subtle object of knowledge the Tanmatra.

The above mentioned creation is known as Ishvara Srishti. The *Vishvasara Tantra* says that from the Earth come the herbs (Oshadhi), from the latter, food, and from food seed (Retas). From the latter, living beings are produced by the aid of sun and moon. Here what is called Jiva Srishti is indicated, a matter into which I have no time to enter here.

To sum up, upon this ripening of Karma and the urge therefrom to cosmic life, Nishkala Shiva becomes Sakala. Shakti manifests and the causal body of Ishvara is thought of as assuming seven causal aspects in Sadrisha Parinama which are aspects of Shakti about to create. The Para Vindu or state of Shakti thus developed is the causal body of both the manifested Shabda and Artha. The Paravindu is the source of all lines of development whether of Shabda or as Shambhu of Artha or as the Mulabhuta of the Manifested Shabdartha. On the completed ideal development of this causal body manifesting as the triple Shaktis of will, knowledge and action, the Shabdartha in the sense of the manifested world with its subtle and gross bodies appears in the order mentioned.

From the above description it will have been seen that the creation doctrine here described is

compounded of various elements some of which it shares with other Shastras and some of which are its own, the whole being set forth according to a method and terminology which is peculiar to itself. Thus there is Adrishta Shrishti up to the appearance of Shakti as Paravindu. The theory which is a form of Advaitavada has then characteristics which are both Sankhyan and Vedantic. With the latter it posits a Nirguna Atma and Maya in the sense that Avidya produces an apparent changing manifold where there is a real unchanging unity. In this Tantrik Advaitavada, three special points are Shaktitattva, the reality of Mulaprakriti, Sadrisha Parinama which is a kind of Vivarta and a doctrine of Laya. This development extends up to the appearance of the manifested Shabdartha. In such development it posits a real principle of Becoming or Mulaprakriti. Thereafter it states a real Parinama of the Tattvas in general agreement with the Sankhya. Other points of similarity with the latter system have been already noted. Lastly there is Yaugika Srishti of the Nyaya Vaisheshika in that the world is held to be formed by a combination of the elements. It accepts therefore Adrishta Srishti up to the appearance of Shakti; Vivarta Srishti up to the complete formation of the causal body known as the Kamakala; thereafter Parinama Srishti of the Vikritis of the subtle and gross body produced from the causal body down to the Mahabhutas; and finally Yaugika Srishti in so far as it is the Bhutas which in varied combination go to make up the gross world.

There are (and the doctrine here discussed is an instance of it) common principles and mutual connections existing in and between the different Indian Shastras notwithstanding individual peculiarities of prsentment due to natural variety of intellectual or temperamental standpoint or the purpose in view. Shiva in the *Kularnava* says that all the Darshanas are parts of His body



and he who severs them severs His limbs. The meaning of this is that the six Darshanas are the six minds and these as all else are parts of the Lord's Body.

Of these six minds Nyaya Vaisheshika teach Yaugika Srishti; Sankhya and Patanjali teach Yaugika Srishti and Parinama Srishti; Vedanta teaches Yaugika Shristi, Parinama Srishti according to the empirical method and Vivartta according to the transcendental method. The Tantra includes all these various forms of Srishti adding thereto an Adrishta Srishti of the nature above described. In this sense it is their synthesis.

#### Notes

 A paper read at the Silver Jubilee of the Chaitanya Library, Calcutta held on 18 January 1915 under the presidency of H E The Governor of Bengal.

## Is Shakti Force?



[This article was originally published in the September 1919 issue of *Prabuddha Bharata—Editor*.]

THERE ARE SOME PERSONS who have thought, and still think, that Shakti means force and that the worship of Shakti is the worship of force. Thus Keshub Chunder Sen (*New Dispensation*, p. 108), wrote:

'Four centuries ago the Shaktas gave way before the Bhaktas. Chaitanya's army proved invincible, and carried all Bengal captive. Even to-day his gospel of love rules as a living force, though his followers have considerably declined both in faith and in morals. Just the reverse of this we find in England and other European

countries. There the Shaktas are driving the Bhaktas out of the field. Look at the Huxleys, the Tyndalls and the Spencers of the day. What are they but Shaktas, worshippers of Shakti or Force? The only Deity they adore, if they at all adore one, is the Prime Force of the universe. To it they offer dry homage. Surely then the scientists and the materialists of the day are a sect of Shakti-worshippers, who are chasing away the true Christian devotees who adore the God of Love. Alas! for European Vaishnavas! They are retreating before the advancing millions of Western Shaktas. We sincerely trust, however, the discomfiture of devotion and Bhakti will be only for a time, and that a Chaitanya will yet arise in the West, crush the Shaktas, who only recognise Force as deity and are sunk in carnality and voluptuousness, and lead natures into the loving faith, spirituality, simplicity, and rapturous devotion of the Vaishnava.'

Professor Monier Williams (*Hinduism*) also called it a doctrine of Force.

Recently the poet Rabindranath Tagore has given the authority of his great name to this error (Modern Review, July, 1919). After pointing out that Egoism is the price paid for the fact of existence and that the whole universe is assisting in the desire that the 'I' should be, he says that man has viewed this desire in two different ways, either as a whim of Creative Power, or a joyous self-expression of Creative Love. Is the fact then of his being, he asks, a revealment of Force or of Love? Those who hold to the first view must also, he thinks, recognise conflict as inevitable and eternal. For according to them Peace and Love are but a precarious coat of armour within which the weak seek shelter, whereas that which the timid anathematise as unrighteousness, that alone is the road to success. 'The pride of prosperity throws man's mind outwards and the misery and insult of destitution draws man's hungering desires likewise outwards. These two conditions alike leave man unashamed to place above all other gods, Shakti

the Deity of Power—the Cruel One, whose right hand wields the weapon of wrong and whose left the weapon of guile. In the politics of Europe drunk with Power we see the worship of Shakti.'

In the same way the poet says that in the days of their political disruption the cowed and downtrodden Indian people through the mouths of their poets sang the praises of the same Shakti. 'The Chandi of Kavikankan and of the Annadamangal, the Ballad of Manasa, the Goddess of Snakes, what are they but Pæans of the triumph of Evil? The burden of their song is the defeat of Shiva the *good* at the hands of the cruel deceitful *criminal* Shakti.' 'The male Deity who was in possession was fairly harmless. But all of a sudden a feminine Deity turns up and demands to be worshipped in his stead. That is to say that she insisted on thrusting herself where she had no right. Under what title? Force! By what method? Any that would serve.'

The Deity of peace and renunciation did not survive. Thus he adds that in Europe the modern Cult of Shakti says that the pale anæmic Jesus will not do. But with high pomp and activity Europe celebrates her Shakti worship.

'Lastly the Indians of to-day have set to the worship of Europe's Divinity. In the name of religion some are saying that it is cowardly to be afraid of wrong-doing. Both those who have attained worldly success, and those who have failed to attain it are singing the same tune. Both fret at righteousness as an obstacle which both would overcome by physical force.' I am not concerned here with any popular errors that there may be. After all, when we deal with a Shastric term it is to the Shastra itself that we must look for its meaning. Shakti comes from the root Shak 'to be able', 'to do.' It includes both activity and capacity therefore. The world, as world, is activity. But when we have said that, we have already indicated that it is erroneous to confine the meaning of the term Shakti to any special

form of activity. On the contrary Shakti means both power in general and every particular form of power. Mind is a Power: so is Matter: Mind is constantly functioning in the form of Vritti. Reasoning, Will and Feeling (Bhava) such as love, aversion, and so forth are all aspects of Mindpower in its general sense. Force is power translated to the material plane, and is therefore only one and the grossest aspect of Shakti or Power. But all these special powers are limited forms of the great creative Power which is the Mother (Ambika) of the Universe. Worship of Shakti is not worship of these limited forms, but of the Divine will, knowledge, and action, the cause of these effects. That Mahashakti is perfect consciousness (Chidrupini) and Bliss (Anandamayi) which produces from itself the contracted consciousness experiencing both pleasure and pain. This production is not at all a 'whim'. It is the nature (Svabhava) of the ultimate.

Bliss is love (Niratishayapremaspadatvam

Anandatvam). The production of the Universe is an act of love, illustrated by the so-called erotic imagery of the Shastra. The Self loves itself whether before, or in, creation. The thrill of human love which continues the life of humanity is an infinitesimally small fragment and faint reflection of the creative act in which Shiva and Shakti join to produce the Bindu which is the seed of the Universe.

I quite agree that the worship of mere Force is asuric and except in a transient sense futile. To worship force merely is to worship matter. He however who worships the Mother in Her Material forms (Sthularupa) will know that She has others, and will worship Her in all such forms. He will also know that she is beyond all limited forms as that which gives being to them all. We may then say that Force is a gross form of Shakti, but Shakti is much more than that 'here' (iha), and the infinite Power of Consciousness 'there' (amutra). This last, the Shakti of worship, is called by the Shastra the Purnahambhava or the experience 'All I am'.



# Reality in Maya-Vada and Shakti-Vada

### Sir John Woodroffe

[This article was originally published in the September 1928 issue of *Prabuddha Bharata—Editor*.]

ISCUSSION ON THE SUBJECT of the reality of the world is often vain and tedious because the word 'Real' has several meanings and that in which it is used is not stated.

The terms 'Absolute' and 'Transcendental' also should be clearly defined; the distinction between Māyā-vāda and Shakti-vāda hinges on these definitions.

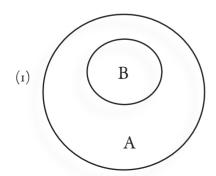
Both 'Absolute' and 'Transcendental' mean 'beyond relation'. But the term 'beyond' may be used in two senses: (a) exceeding or wider than relation; (b) having no relation at all. The first does not deny or exclude relation, but says that the Absolute, though involving all relations within Itself, is not their sum-total; is not exhausted by them; has Being transcending them. The latter denies every trace of relation to the Absolute; and says that the Absolute must have no

intrinsic or extrinsic relation; that relation, therefore, has no place in the Being of the Absolute.

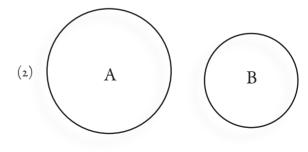
Shakti-vāda adopts the first view, Māyā-vāda the second. From the first point of view, the Absolute is relationless Being *as well as* Manifestation as an infinity of relations. This is the true and complete Alogical Whole. Inasmuch as the Absolute exceeds all relation and thought, we cannot say that It is the Cause; though It is the Root of Creation; and so forth; but inasmuch also as It does involve relation and thought, we can say that It is the First Cause; that there has been a real creation, and so forth.

The Māyā-vāda view by negating all relation from the reality of Brahman negates from its transcendent standpoint the reality of causation, creation, and so forth.

'Beyond' may, therefore, mean (1) 'exceeding', 'fuller than,' 'not exhausted by', or (2) 'excluding', 'negating', 'expunging'. By diagrams:—



A is beyond B, that is, exceeds B.



A is beyond B, that is, excludes and is quite outside B.

In Shakti-vāda, the Supreme Reality is fuller than any definition (limitation) which may be proposed. It is even beyond duality and non-duality. It is thus the Experience-Whole, the Alogical. In Māyā-vāda Pure Brahman is an *aspect* of It: but It is not the Whole (Purna).

The expression 'wider than relation' may be thus illustrated: I am related in one way to my wife; in another way to my children; in yet another way to my brothers, friends, and so on. I am not fully expressed by any one of these relations, nor even by their aggregate; for, as a member of an infinite Stress-system I bear an infinity of relations. Pragmatically, most of these are ignored, and it is thought that I am expressed by a certain set of relations which distinguish me from another person who has his own 'set'. But Brahman as Absolute can have no such 'set'. It is expressed, but not fully expressed, even by the infinite set of relations which the Cosmos is, because relations, finite and infinitely, imply a logical and therefore segmenting and defining, thought; but Brahman as Absolute=Experience=Whole=the Alogical.

Since Brahman=Experience=Whole=*Chit* as Power-to-Be-and-Become, it is nothing like the unknown and unknowable Being ('Thing-in-Itself') of Western Sceptics and Agnostics.

In all Indian Systems the world is real in the sense that it has objective existence for and is not a projection of, the individual mind. In all such Systems Mind and Matter co-exist. And this is so even in that form of *Ekajiva-vāda* which holds that Brahman by Its own veiling and limiting power makes one Primary Self of Itself, and that all other selves are but reflexes of the Primary Self, having as reflexes no existence apart from that of the Primary One. The world of matter is not a projection of an individual mind, but its reality is co-ordinate with that of the individual mind, both being derived from the Self-veiling and Self-limiting operation of Brahman

appearing as the One *Jiva* or Primary Self. Brahman in appearing as Primary Self also appears as its (logical) correlate or Pole—the Not-Self; and this Not-Self is the Root-Matter on which the Primary Self is reflected as multiple selves and their varied relations. Matter, in this fundamental sense, is not therefore the product of the First or Primary Individual (Self); it is with Self the co-effect (logically speaking) of a common fundamental activity which is the veiling and limiting action of the Supreme Being.

The version commonly given of Ekajīva-vāda, namely, that the one Primary Self is Me, and that You, He and the rest, and the world of objects are the projection of Me—is loose and unpsychological. In the first place, 'Me' cannot be there (logically) conceiving without its Correlate or Pole—the 'Not-Me', so that, by the very act by which Me is evolved from Brahman, its Correlate is also evolved, and this Correlate is Root-Matter. In the second place, projection, reflexion, and so forth, presuppose not only the projecting or reflecting Being (that which projects or reflects) but also something on which the projection or reflection is cast. Projection out of nothing and projection into nothing will give only nothing.

Where then there is Matter there is Mind. Where there is no Matter there is no Mind. One is meaningless without the other. Each is every whit as real as the other. But there is no Indian system which is Realist in the sense that it holds that Matter as experienced by man exists when there is no Mind of man to perceive it. Such a state is inconceivable. He who alleges it himself supplies the perceiving Mind. In the First Standard¹ Mind² and the so-called 'atoms'³ of Matter are separate, distinct and independent Reals.⁴ Matter does not derive from Mind nor the latter from the former. In the Second Standard⁵ both Matter and Mind are equally real but derive from a common source the Psycho-physical Potential⁶

which, as such, is neither. 'Psychic' here means Mind as distinct from Consciousness in the sense of *Chit*. This Psychophysical Potential is a Real independent of Consciousness which is the other Real.<sup>7</sup> In the Third Standard as non-dual Vedanta the position is the same, except that the Psycho-physical Potential is not an independent Real but is the power of the One Supreme Real as God. The world is then Real in the sense that it has true objective Reality for the individual Experiences for the duration of their experience of it. No one denies this.

The next question is the problem of Monism. If ultimate Reality be One, how can it be the cause of and become the Universe? It is said that irreducible Reality is of dual aspect, namely, as it is in relation to the World as Ishvara the Lord or God, and as it is in Itself beyond such relation which we may call Godhead or Brahman. According to Māyā-vāda, Ishvara is Brahman for Ishvara is Brahman as seen through the Veil of Maya that is, by the Psycho-physical Experiencer. But Brahman is not Ishvara because Brahman is the absolute alogical Real, that is, Reality, not as conceived by Mind but as it is in Itself beyond (in the sense that it is exclusive of) all relation. The notion of God as the Supreme Self

is the highest concept imposed on the Alogical which, as it is in itself, is not a Self either supreme or limited. The Absolute as such is not a cause. There is, transcendentally speaking, no creation, no Universe. The Absolute is and nothing happens. It is only pragmatically a Cause. There is from this aspect no nexus between Brahman as Godhead and the World. In the logical order there is. What then is the Universe? It is said by some to be an 'illusion'. But this is an inapt term. For to whom is it an 'illusion'? Not to the Psycho-physical Experiencer to whom it is admittedly real. Nor is it an illusion for the Experience-Whole. It is only by the importation of the logical notion of a Self to whom an object is real or unreal that we can speak of illusion. But there is in this state of Liberation no Self.8 More correctly we say that the World is Maya. But what is Maya in Maya-vada? It is not real for it is neither supreme Brahman nor an independent Real. Nor is it altogether unreal for in the logical order it is real. It is neither Brahman nor different from it as an independent reality. It is unexplainable.9 For this reason one of the scholastics of this System calls it the doctrine of the Inscrutable.

In the doctrine of Power (Shakti-vada) Maya is the Divine Mother Power or Mahamaya. The



two aspects of Reality as Brahman and Ishvara are each accepted as real. The Lord is real but that which we call 'Lord' is more than Lord, for the Real is not adequately defined in terms only of its relations to the Universe. In this sense it is alogical that is 'beyond Mind and Speech'. As the one ultimate Reality is both Ishvara and Brahman, in one aspect it is the Cause and in the other it is not. But it is one and the same Reality which is both as Shiva-Shakti. As these are



real, so is their appearance, the Universe. For the Universe is Shiva-Shakti. It is their appearance. When we say it is their appearance we imply that there has been a real becoming issuing from them as Power. Reality has two aspects. First as it is in itself and secondly as it exists as Universe. At base the Samsara or worlds of Birth and Death and Moksha or Liberation, are one. For Shiva-Shakti are both the Experience-Whole and the Part which exists therein as the Universe. Reality is a concrete unity in duality and duality in unity. In practice the One is realised in and as the Many and the Many as the One. So in the Shakta Wine ritual the worshipper conceives himself to be Shiva-Shakti as the Divine Mother. It is She who as and in the person of the worshipper, Her manifestation, consumes the wine which is again Herself the 'Saviouress in liquid form'. It is not only he who as a separate Self does so. This principle is applied to all Man's functionings and is of cardinal importance from a Monistic standpoint whatever be its abuse in fact.

Real is again used in the sense of eminence. The Supreme Real is that which is for itself and has the reason for its being in itself. The Real as God is the perfect and changeless. The Universe is dependent on the Ens Realissimum for it proceeds from it and is imperfect as limited and changeful and in a sense it is that which does not endure and in this sense is called 'unreal'. Though, however, the Universe comes and goes it does so eternally. The Supreme Cause is eternally 'creative'. The Real is then both infinite Changeless Being as also unbeginning and unending process as the Becoming. In this system the Real both is and becomes. It yet becomes without derogation from its own changelessness, as it were a Fountain of Life which pours itself forth incessantly from an infinite and inexhaustible source. Both the infinite and finite are real.

Real is again used in the sense of interest and

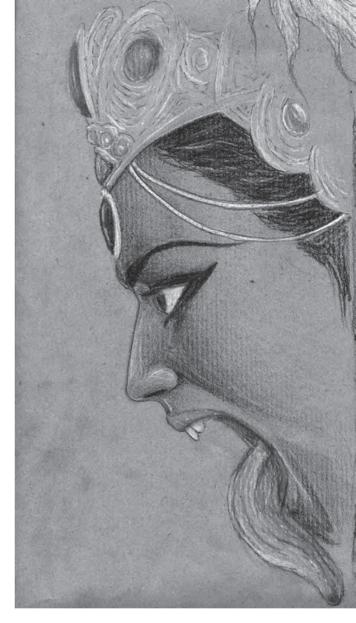
value and of the 'worth while'. In this sense the worshipper prays to be led from Unreality to Reality but this does not mean that the world is Unreal in itself, but that it is not the supreme worth for him.

In whatever sense then the term Real is used the Universe is that. All is real, for as Upanishad says 'All this Universe is verily Brahman.' The Scriptural Text says 'All'. The whole is an alogical concrete Reality which is Unity in Duality and Duality in Unity. The doctrine does not lose hold of either the One or the Many, and for this reason the Lord Shiva says in the *Kularnava Tantra*, 'There are some who seek dualism and some non-dualism but my doctrine is beyond both.' That is, it takes account of and reconciles both Dualism and Non-dualism.

Reality is no mere abstraction of the intellect making jettison of all that is concrete and varied. It is the Experience-Whole whose 'object' is Itself as such Whole. It is also Partial Experience within that Whole. This union of Whole and Part is alogical, but not unknowable, for their unity is a fact of actual experience just as we have the unity of Power to Be and Power to Become, of the Conscious and Unconscious, of Mind and Body, of freedom and determination, and of other dualities of Man's experiencing.

#### **Notes and References**

- 1. Nyaya-Vaisheshika.
- 2. Manas.
- 3. Paramanu.
- 4. Dravya.
- 5. Sankhya-Yoga.
- 6. Prakriti.
- 7. In Sankhya one, in *Sarva-Darshana-Sangraha* many.
- As the Buddhists said—in Nirvana even the knowledge that the phenomena have ceased to appear and are therefore unreal is not found— Das Gupta, History of Indian Philosophy, 142.
- 9. Anirvachaniya.



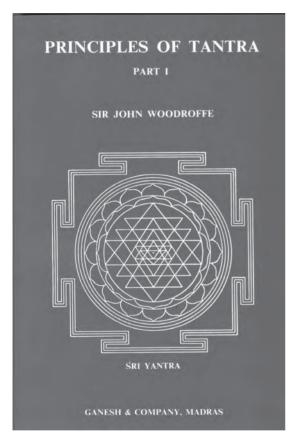
- 10. Sir John Woodroffe says in his *Shakti and Shakta* (page 74, 1st edition): 'Shiva Tattva and Shakti Tattva are not produced. They thus are even in dissolution. They are Saguna-Brahman; and Parāsamvit is the Nirguna-Brahman.' So he recognises Parāsamvit (Transcendental Consciousness) to be a Higher Reality than Shiva-Shakti and calls it Nirguna-Brahman which is the Absolute according to Mayavada. He says further: 'Where there is pure experience there is no manifested universe.' Is not Pure Experience the Experience-Whole?—*Ed*.
- 11. Tārā Dravamayī.
- 12. Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma.

PB January 2016 27 I

## REVIEW IN RETROSPECT

# **On The Conning Tower**

### Swami Saradananda



[This review article of the book *The Principles of Tantra* by John Woodroffe was published in the July 1914 issue of *Prabuddha Bharata*. Due to its historical importance, it is being reprinted here—*Editor*]

THE APPEARANCE OF Arthur Avalon as an exponent and defender of the Tantras is a momentous event in the history of Sanskrit research. No better or sturdier champion the Tantras could secure in modern times, and

his powerful grasp of the Tantric philosophy and ritualism, his thorough appreciation of the Tantric ideals and methods, his unabating energy and zeal in tackling the Tantric mysteries, more than justify in us the hope that educated minds in the East as well as West will be ere long disabused of all that mass of prejudice that they have allowed to gather round the name of the Tantras. It is needless to point out that this noble vindication of the Tantras redounds directly to the benefit of Hinduism as a whole, for Tantrikism in its real sense is nothing but the Vedic Religion struggling with wonderful success to reassert itself amidst all those new problems of religious life and discipline which later historical events and developments thurst upon it.

In his Introduction to the 'Principles of Tantra' ('Tantratattwa' of Pandit Shivachandra Vidyarnava), Mr. Avalon has made an able attempt to trace the origin of Tantrikism and to adjudge its importance and place in the spiritual culture of the Hindus. In this new publication, (Messrs. Luzac & Co. of London), the author has not only fully maintained the tradition of superior merits in his translation, but has again brought out before the world of Sanskrit research another testimony of his wonderful amount of study and insight in the shape of another Introduction, no less profound and weighty than his Introduction to the 'Tantra of the Great Liberation'. But the most noteworthy feature of this new Introduction he has

written for the Tantratattwa is his appreciative presentation of the orthodox views about the antiquity and the importance of the Tantras, and it is impossible to overestimate the value of this presentation.

For hitherto all theories about the origin and the importance of the Tantras have been more or less prejudiced by a wrong bias against Tantrikism which some of its own later sinister developments were calculated to create. This bias has made almost every such theory read either like a condemnation or an apology. All investigation being thus disqualified, the true history of Tantrikism has not yet been written; and we find cultured people mostly inclined either to the view that Tantrikism originally branched off from the Buddhistic Mahayana or Vajrayana as a cult of some corrupted and self-deluded monastics or to the view that it was the inevitable dowry which some barbarous non-Aryan races brought along with them into the fold of Hinduism. According to both these views however, the form, which this Tantrikism—either a Buddhistic development or a barbarous importation has subsequently assumed in the literature of Hinduism is its improved edition as issuing from the crucibles of Vedic or Vedantic transformation. But this theory of the curious co-mingling of the Vedas and Vedanta with Buddhistic corruption or with non-Aryan barbarity is perfectly inadequate to explain the all-pervading influence which the Tantras exert on our present-day religious life. Here it is not any hesitating compromise that we have got before us to explain, but a bold organic synthesis, a legitimate restatement of the Vedic culture for the solution of new problems and new difficulties which signalised the dawn of a new age.

In tracing the evolution of Hinduism, modern historians take a blind leap from Vedic ritualism direct to Buddhism, as if to conclude that all those newly formed communities, with which India had been swarming all over since the close of the fateful era of the Kurukshetra war and to which was denied the right of Vedic sacrifices, the monopoly of the higher threefold castes of pure orthodox descent, were going all the time without any religious ministrations. These aryanised communities, we must remember, were actually swamping the Vedic orthodoxy, which was already gradually dwindling down to a helpless minority in all its scattered centres of influence, and was just awaiting the final blow to be dealt by the rise of Buddhism. Thus the growth of these new communities and their occupation of the whole land constituted a mighty event that had been silently taking place in India on the outskirts of the daily shrinking orthodoxy of Vedic ritualism, long before Buddhism appeared on the field, and this momentous event our modern historians fail to take due notice of either, it may be, because of a curious blindness of selfcomplacency or because of the dazzle which the sudden triumph of Buddhism and the overwhelming mass of historical evidences left by it, create before their eyes. The traditional Kali Yuga dates from the rise of these communities and the Vedic religious culture of the preceding Yuga underwent a wonderful transformation along with wonderful attempt it made to aryanise these rising communities.

History, as hitherto understood and read, speaks of the Brahmins of the pre-Buddhistic age—their growing alienation from the Jnanakanda or the Upanishadic wisdom, their impotency to save the orthodox Vedic communities from the encroachments of the non-Vedic hordes and races, their ever-deepening religious formalism and social exclusiveness. But this history is silent on the marvelous feats which the Upanishadic sects of anchorites were silently performing on the outskirts of the strictly Vedic

community with the object of aryanising the new India that was rising over the ashes of the Kurukshetra conflagration. This new India was not strictly Vedic like the India of the bygone ages, for it could not claim the religious ministrations of the orthodox Vedic Brahmins and could not therefore perform Yajnas like the latter. The question therefore is as to how this new India became gradually aryanised, for aryanisation is essentially a spiritual process, consisting in absorbing new communities of men into the fold of the Vedic religion. The Vedic ritualism that prevailed in those days was powerless, we have seen, to do anything for these new communities springing up all over the country. Therefore we are obliged to turn to the only other factor in Vedic religion besides the Karma-kanda for an explanation of those changes which the Vedic religion wrought in the rising communities in order to aryanise them. The Upanishads represent the Jnana-kanda of the Vedic religion and if we study all of them, we find that not only the earliest ritualism of Yajnas was philosophised upon in the earlier Upanishads, but the foundation for a new, and no less elaborate, ritualism was fully laid in many of the later Upanishads. For example, we study in these Upanishads how the philosophy of Pancha-upāsanā (fivefold worship, namely, the worship of Shiva, Devi, Sun, Ganesh, and Vishnu) was developed out of the mystery of the Pranava ('Om'). This philosophy cannot be dismissed as a post-Buddhistic interpolation, seeing that some features of the same philosophy can be clearly traced even in the Brahmanas (for example, the discourse about the conception of Shiva).

Here therefore in some of the later Upanishads we find recorded the attempts of the pre-Buddhistic recluses of the forest to elaborate a post-Vedic ritualism out of the doctrine of the Pranava and the Vedic theory of Yogic practices. Here in these Upanishads we find how

the Vīja-mantras and the Shatchakra of the Tantras were being- originally developed, for on the Pranava or Udgitha had been founded a special learning and a school of philosophy from the very earliest ages and some of the 'spinal' centres of Yogic meditation had been dwelt upon in the earliest Upanishads and corresponding Brahmanas. The Upakarnas of Tantric worship, namely such material adjuncts as grass, leaves, water, and so on, were most apparently adopted from Vedic worship along with their appropriate incantations. So even from the Brahmanas and. the Upanishads stands out in clear relief a system of spiritual discipline—which we would unhesitatingly classify as Tantric—having at its core the Pancha-upāsanā and around it a fair round of rituals and rites consisting of Vija-mantras and Vedic incantations, proper meditative processes and proper manipulation of sacred adjuncts of worship adopted from the Vedic rites. This may be regarded as the earliest configuration which Tantrikism had on the eve of those silent but mighty social upheavals through which the aryanisation of vast and increasing multitudes of new races proceeded in pre-Buddhistic India and which had their culmination in the eventful centuries of the Buddhistic coup de gráce.

Now this pre-Buddhistic Tantrikism, perhaps then recognised as the Vedic Pancha-upāsanā, could not have contributed at all to the creation of a new India, had it remained confined completely within the limits of monastic sects. But like Jainism, this Pancha-upāsanā went forth all over the country to bring ultra-Vedic communities under its spiritual ministrations. Even if we enquire carefully into the social conditions obtaining in the strictly Vedic ages, we find that there was always an extended wing of the aryanised society where the purely Vedic Karma-kanda could not be promulgated, but where the moulding influence of Vedic ideals worked

through the development of suitable spiritual activities. It is always to the Jnana-kanda and the monastic votaries thereof that the Vedic religion owed its wonderful expansiveness and its progressive self-adaptability and every religious development within the Vedic fold, but outside the ritualism of Homa sacrifices, is traceable to the spiritual wisdom of the all-renouncing forest recluses. This 'forest' wisdom was most forcibly brought into requisition when after the Kurukshetra a new age was dawning with the onrush and upheaval of non-Aryan and semi-Aryan races all over India—an echo of which may be found in that story of the Mahabharat where Arjuna fails to use his Gandiva to save his protegees from the robbery of the non-Aryan hordes.

The greatest problem of the pre-Buddhistic ages was the aryanisation of the new India that rose and surged furiously from every side against the fast-dwindling centres of the old Vedic orthodoxy struggling hard, but in vain, by social enactments to guard its perilous insulation. But for those religious movements, such as those of the Bhagavatas, Saktas, Souryas, Shaivas, Ganapatyas and Jains, that tackled this problem of aryanisation most successfully, all that the Vedic orthodoxy stood for in the real sense would have gradually perished without trace. These movements, specially the five cults of Vedic worship, took up many of the non-Aryan races and cast their life in the mould of the Vedic spiritual ideal, minimising in this way the gulf that existed between them and the Vedic orthodoxy and thereby rendering possible their gradual amalgamation. And where this task remained unfulfilled owing to the mould proving too narrow still to fit into the sort of life which some non-Aryan races or communities lived, there it remained for Buddhism to solve the problem of aryanisation in due time. But still we must remember that by the time Buddhism made its appearance, the

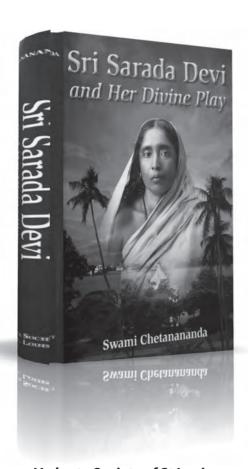
pre-Buddhistic phase of Tantric worship had already established itself in India so widely and so firmly that instead of dislodging it by its impetuous onset—all the force of which, by the bye, was mainly spent on the tottering orthodoxy of Vedic ritualism—Buddhism was itself swallowed up within three or four centuries by its perhaps least suspected opponent of this Tantric worship and then wonderfully transformed and ejected on the arena as the Mahayana.

The latest configuration of Tantrikism dates from this, its wonderful absorption and assimilation of Buddhism, and from this important fact it derives some important features of its later development. The prophecy of Gautama Buddha on the eve of investing his aunt with Abhisampadā or Sannyasa was fulfilled too literally when the proximity and free intercourse between the two orders of monks and nuns created in Buddhist history that odious problem of their religious life which they had to solve by introducing some mysterious rites, the philosophy of which, however, can be traced in the Vedas. No wonder if the current of such developments grew deeper and dirtier in time; only it is alleviating that there were cross-currents of constant correction flowing from Vedantic sources. Neither is it possible to deny that the Buddhistic phase of Tantrikism absorbed into the fold of Hinduism non-Aryan conceptions and rites of worship far more promiscuously than its pre-Buddhistic phase, but history proves that the digressive and secretive processes, as it were) have ever since been working, tardily some times, but successfully always, and the Tantras as the marvelous restatement of the Vedas and the Vedanta have at last appeared in ,the boldest relief through that miraculous embodiment of the synthetic spirituality of the whole race which we have to recognise today by the name of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Sri Sarada Devi and Her Divine Play

### Swami Chetanananda



Vedanta Society of St Louis, 205 S Skinker Blvd, St Louis, MO 63105, USA. Website: www.vedantastl.org. 2015. 876 pp. \$ 35. HB. ISBN 9780916356996.

### Satya Yuga Begins

N THE CHAPTER ENTITLED 'Two Flowers on One Stem', Swami Chetanananda tells us: 🗘 'In 1895 Swamiji wrote a letter to Swami Ramakrishnananda from America: "The Satyayuga [Golden Age] started the day Ramakrishna was born as an Incarnation." The Holy Mother concurred, saying: 'The Satyayuga began with the birth of the Master.' But, Chetanananda adds: 'People expect peace and happiness in golden age; but within 28 years of Ramakrishna's passing away, the first world war took place and millions of people were killed.' When the Holy Mother was asked why this happens, she said that 'storm comes before the rain. Storms obscure people's vision by blowing dust, breaking trees, and destroying homes. Then the rain comes and settles the dust so that people can see clearly again. Similarly, at the advent of an avatar, terrible disasters occur, clearing all unrighteousness, falsehood, hypocrisy, greed, and evil from society. At that time the realm of dharma or righteousness, becomes manifest.' Did Holy Mother come like that?, asked a devotee. Moreover, 'Did you come with all the avatars?' he queried. 'Yes, my son', she replied.1

## **Unity of Mankind**

In a volume on *Women Saints of East and West*, Kenneth Walker wrote in his introduction:

'Although Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother to whose memory this book is dedicated, did not directly expound the metaphysical doctrines of the Vedanta to her disciples, they formed the background of all her teachings. And being a practical woman—in the way that most women are practical—she demonstrated the unity of mankind and of man's religions in her own life. When she was weak and ill and about to die a disciple came to see her, and in a low voice the Holy Mother managed to give her the personal guidance she obviously needed. "If you want peace of mind", she said, "do not find fault with others. Learn rather to see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own, no one is a stranger, my child, the whole world is your own."2

Continuing, he wrote: 'In these few simple words, she was warning her visitor against that superficial egoism which separates one from another and was stressing to her the underlying unity of all mankind, a unity in which there is no reason for such words as "yours" and "mine" and no place for strangers (ibid).'

'Unity of mankind', the gospel of Sri Sarada Devi, hailing from, in those days, an unknown village near Calcutta. And her strange journey to a person who does not know her language—nor does she know his. Figuring in a volume from London! From Jayrambati through London—the original edition came from there—to the Vedanta Press, Hollywood. And receive a respectful homage of distinguished scholars and devotees. An incredible phenomenon, equal, if not superior, to that of her mentor-husband Sri Ramakrishna.

## The Highest Truth

In another volume encompassing over two thousand years of women's spiritual writing, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), organiser of the Women's Rights Convention 1848, wrote: 'The object of an individual life is not to carry



Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902)

on fragmenting measure in human progress, but to utter the highest truth clearly seen in all directions, and thus to round out and perfect a well-balanced character. 'Specially,' she adds, by women 'who are all suffering from inherited idea of inferiority.'

## **Transformatory Role Model**

Sri Sarada Devi, a contemporary of Stanton, embodied in her life and character, teleologically, all that is required for achieving that goal, in her own dynamic way. No fanfare, no flashy coverage. Living in total anonymity, yet she blossomed—to use her 'messenger internal' Vivekananda's words—'like the gentle dew that drops unseen and unheard but brings into blossom the fairest of roses'. She, embodying the comprehensive model of character, experienced the sharpest thorns of those roses, too, as the

inevitable counterparts of life. 'A perfect role model', of the entire spectrum of life—rhythms of harmony alongside discords of life.

Books: they remain sources of joy to devotees and resources for all those who wish to delve deep into Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi's unparalleled spiritual wealth.

#### A Text For All Contexts

This is not a hyperbole. My initial reading itself made it evident that this is a multilayered text. An encyclopaedia of Sri Sarada Devi's life, it *integrates inter-texts* of her existing biographies carefully, context-wise. This highlights how the new findings enrich the existing ones. Her life itself sustains such enriching of aspects, both secular and sacred, can we say steering clear of the contemporary debates about being spiritual but not religious by authors like Sam Harris, religion for atheists by thinkers like Alain de Botton, philosophers without God and above all the God question of Dawkins, and so on?

Besides religion this is a saga exemplifying the economic, social, academic, colonial, aesthetic, literary, and other fields. Not to speak of the fine arts—A few songs that Sri Sarada Devi used to sing, are cited—above all, the baffling *psychological dimension of handling Radhu*. Alongside, the overly alleged 'bhadralok' phenomenon. Indeed, there is an immense quantum of simple things which imbed profound implications. Let us take the structure of the book for clarity: A new model of marriage for a new age—renunciation in the married state. In an ethos of live-in relationships, *a nun and a monk* equation is a vital source of stemming the imbalances of marital disharmony.

# Blending the Hagiographic and the Historical

Sri Sarada Devi is not a mythical figure of an

archaic past. And, whenever an element of 'supramental' figures, the tendency is to dismiss the entire data as hagiographic. Of course, psychologists, by and large, are inclined to bracket religion as the end-product of parental loss and the resultant insecurity of the child. And Kali's children are no exception.

In this climate, Chetanananda has triumphantly and skilfully juxtaposed hagiographic frames with realities drawn from Sri Sarada Devi's life. One could even say that the realities give new strength and stability to the elements of what look mythical. Details and facts are verified and verifiable so that the impending dialectic and hermeneutics of 'suspicion' is neutralised.

Sri Sarada Devi's life is a saga of suffering which is not the sorrow of feeling inferior. It is an 'alchemical' phenomenon in which out of the saddest experiences get transmitted sweetest songs—to paraphrase the poet. Let go this aesthetic. Her sorrow could also be awareness of what will follow after the beginning of Satyayuga. An awareness that is prophetic. The 'stunning' facets of her own 'deprivation'—a surfeiting abundance of it—made her surely what would ensure her advent and exit, in a temporal dimension.

## The Envisioning of Future

Things are relatively better. We are global now. But are we global in sharing the prosperity and abundance that is available without deprivation anywhere? Without overwhelming 'negatives' all over? Ironically, in a comparable volume entitled *Women of Power and Grace*, Dr Timothy Conway is forthright: 'Let us face facts. Our society is in deep trouble on the psychological level; stress, conflict, depression, frustration, addiction, hatred and greed are rampant.' Listing several other problems, Conway cites the more dangerous 'deterioration of our own immune systems and genes, resulting in a swarm of diseases.' 4

Indeed, Sri Sarada Devi suffered from rheumatism and Sri Ramakrishna from what these days we call, in a pathetic tone of euphemism, 'the emperor of maladies': cancer. The *rangasthala*, theater, for Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's divine play.

## Eleven Mahavidyas: Sri Sarada Devi as Shakti

Jayrambati, says Chetanananda, is not on the world map. It only means that it is in tune with her amazing anonymity. Even those who were visitors to the Sri Ramakrishna's room declared that they never saw her. But now 'people from all over the world visit the birthplaces of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi or Holy Mother'. Anonymity is gloriously replaced by recognition as Divine Mother herself. Holy Mother's mentor, whose tongue never spoke a word that is untrue, himself declared that she was truly the embodiment of the

blissful Mother of the universe. Indeed, the Shakti of all *mahavidyas* crystallised in her being, with appropriate variations of the divine play, in tune with the dynamics of Kaliyuga. Reinforced by adhering to Sri Ramakrishna's affirmation, for Kaliyuga tantra sadhana, she is adored as Shodashi. And received all the sources of *power* and *grace*, that the great Master had. No surprise, if Jayrambati is a Shakti-*pitha*, a place where the cosmic energy—the Divine Mother—took a human form. Chetanananda says: 'Swami Prabhavananda once told me that Holy Mother ... never went below the *vishuddha chakra* (throat centre.) And Visuddhananda, apt coincidence, regarded her as the 'Mother of the Universe' (19).

## **Her Divine Play**

'Her' acquires great significance. So long, should we say that Sri Sarada Devi was as a consort discharging the dynamics of her role under the



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overall supervision of Sri Ramakrishna. But she had her autonomous identity and her divine play enacted with her own script. Is this heretical? Clockwise her role lasted longer than Sri Ramakrishna's. And this was at the instance of Sri Ramakrishna himself. Functionally *Mahamaya* but fundamentally an integral limb of *Mahashiva* Shakti. Chetanananda puts it picturesquely: 'Truly, while Ramakrishna's life was one of condensed spirituality that may be compared to the snow in the Himalayas, Holy Mother's life was one of flowing spirituality: like the water of the Ganges' (11).

### Lila

In *lila*, the divine play, the playful is the key; in reality, the dialects of dualism operates. As the inclusive vision of Shakespeare shows: 'The web of our life is of mingled yarn, good and ill together.' More: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods. They kill us for their *sport*.' If it is not improper, our Jazz Age Scott Fitzgerald, the author of *The Gatsby*, said: 'The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.' Good insight but hardly practised by the author himself. Though he knew the ethos of *kamini-kanchana*, lust and greed, he mistook illusion for reality. This is also an aspect of the divine play.

# Play as Real, the Real as Play

Chetanananda's eight-hundred and more pages of the life of Sri Sarada Devi shows a narrative 'craft' which a highly intuitive awareness alone can handle with both reverence and meticulous care for authenticity of sources. This is not an easy job; alert one can be but if admiration overtakes it, the narrative yields to myths. It is this paradox that is handled by Chetanananda with rare caution and sensitivity. The playful and the real have

their own limits. Yet they can achieve harmony if the play-element is handled cautiously.

## **Trinity of Lilas**

The *lila*s of Sri Sarada Devi, 'spiritual companion and spiritual phenomenon of this age' is portrayed in three parts. 'Companion-phenomenon' is an exquisite distillation, the comprehensive index-card for the entire volume. This points the emphasis of the word 'her' play. The Adi Lila, early lila, narrates events from 1853 to 1886. The Madhya Lila or the middle play begins from the very next year 1887 and stretches to 1908. The Antya Lila, the final lila, covers events from 1909 to 1920. But there are events which occurred in more than one period. However, Chetanananda gives us a very helpful compass for themes: the first phase narrates, in chapters one to nine, the preparatory events for her future role as a world teacher; the second focuses on the lila by 'demonstrating the four yogas in her ideal life'. The temporal close comes through chapters twenty nine to thirty five. One feels empowered to read the text in terms of these index-cards. How does one approach the text? Perhaps, in my tentative view, the compass could be the purusharthas: ethics, economics, enjoyment, and equilibrium.

# The Maya of Lilas

There are events which figure but make us *feel* that they are incongruous in Sri Sarada Devi's life. The land on which her temple stands had to be bought from her brothers, after her passing away. And she told that a Bagdi woman of Jayrambati was present when she was born. This woman revealed the exact spot of Sri Sarada Devi's birth after she got five rupees. Then she revealed that Sri Sarada Devi was born near a thatched shed—and a cow shed and from there to an immortal Divine Mother enshrined in temples in many places. But then the initial step

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was possible through money—is this because Goddess Lakshmi is also *her* aspect?

## 'Family of Gods and Godly'

Sri Sarada Devi's mother 'Shyasundari's household consists of Gods and godly people'. But her daughter declared, 'Where will you find another like me? Try and see. Let me tell you something. Those who constantly contemplate the Supreme Reality develop a subtle and pure mind. Whatever object such a mind takes hold of, it clings to with tenacity; people regard this as attachment. When lightning strikes a building, the flash is seen in the glass panes and not in wooden shutters' (281).

#### Two Ranis

They say that coincidences are God's or Nature's pat on our shoulders suggesting that amidst apparent chaos there is cosmos. Do they appear to be clichés? Chetanananda offers us two coincidences. Rani Rasmani built the temple complex of Dakshineswar. A woman of her own variety of Shakti. In some contexts she prevented even the British residents from moving on the Ganges. And our Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi was also known as the Rani resident of Nahabat as her abode. Three hundred rooms constitute Rasmani's residence while Sri Sarada Devi could hardly move even in her room at Nahabat. Living there without complaint and with no space there for answering calls of nature, but managing the very deprivations as challenges for resilience and patience. In her village, her experience exposed her to more heart-rending incidents—faminestruck destitute women reduced to eating from the tub of food kept for cattle (34). Devastation is also divine—divine agency to alert what needs to be done. This is a characteristic aspect of Chetanananda's art of juxtaposing inter-texts: 'an empty stomach has nothing in mind except food'. If one can go further, this remarkable lifestory can be experienced from all the 'sheaths of consciousness' from the *Annamaya* to the *Anandamaya*. Economics does matter.

# Ethics of Desire: Sri Sarada Devi as a 'Spiritual Athlete'

Sri Sarada Devi, transcending but not truncating anything, shows her *lila* in terms of ethics in life. She appears now in many texts on women saints of varied faiths. And 'desire' has its own dynamics of non-ethical behaviour.<sup>10</sup>

## **Pragmatic Bifurcation**

Sri Sarada Devi is gentle, submitting herself to her Lord and Master with willing suspension of—if at all—her own views. M., wondered: 'What superhuman patience, perseverance and self-control! Her self-sacrifices are incomparable.' Any time of the day and night is food

Rani Rasmani (1793—1861)



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preparation time. This, alongside continuous pain from rheumatism: the result obviously of living in that 'cribbed, cabined, and confined' space. But, then, she was very clear in her mind about her autonomy in matters that matter to her, no interference. When Sarah Bull asked what her attitude to Sri Ramakrishna was, her answer was pragmatic: 'In spiritual matters absolute obedience; in other things, I use my own commonsense.' Her right to differ is transparent. An immoral woman's visits to Sri Ramakrishna annoyed him and he told Sri Sarada Devi to stop them. Her answer transcends this event to affirm she is the Mother of all: 'If anyone calls me "Mother", I cannot resist', reminding Sri Ramakrishna 'you are Lord of all'. Moreover, Mother as Radha rescues all. Ethics is contextual dharma.

#### Bagalamukhi



## **Herself A Song**

Chetanananda's revelations are inclusive: there is a section on Sri Sarada Devi as a lover of music and she herself a singer. One such is a song that the Great Swan, Sri Ramakrishna, himself asked her to meditate upon:

O Flute Player Krishna you are Never greater than Radha When people are in trouble they call you. But when you are in trouble Your flute sounds the name of Radha.

Radha-Ramakrishna, with her Lord enacting as guru, father, mother, companion, husband, and himself. In her resonant voice mother sang a song from the divine play of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Sarada-Ramakrishna *lila* cannot be otherwise with regard to music.

Always hiding, she rarely showed her good musical voice. It was very resonant and reached Sri Ramakrishna's ears. She herself, of course, was the prime mover of Ramakrishna *Lila*. 11

# Sri Sarada Devi and the Pastoral Counselling of the 'Margins'

Brought up in a pastoral environment, Sri Sarada Devi had developed early a dimension of pastoral relationship to the so-called margins in society. Between them there was an intimacy and mutual concern which annulled the sickening hierarchical divider. Brinde, Jadu's mother, Aunt Bhanu and the young wives of fishermen—recall that Rani Rasmani herself belonged to the fishercaste. Above all. Sri Sarada Devi's love for Muslim women, their children, and later on, for the thief Amjad. She is 'Machili Fisher of Machili Nari'. Pastoral inclusiveness of human relations made her the embodiment of Mother of all. Perhaps, in terms of this aspect of Chetanananda's volume, she is a practical demonstration of Sri Ramakrishna's firm view: 'Devotees of God are all of one caste.'

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## 'Don't Voluntarily Show Affection'

The sensitivity of Sri Ramakrishna made him apologise to Sri Sarada Devi for inadvertently using the word *tui* to address her. She has the same sensitivity. She was so practical that when wives complained about the cruelty of their husbands, her advice was 'postmodern': 'Don't show your affection voluntarily, let him think that everyone in the world is equally valuable.' In other words, in Chetanananda's metaphor, drawn from the Master-Mother duo that men and women ought to be 'Two flowers One Stem'. No wonder, the ocean of her spiritual experience was as bottomless as Ramakrishna's (115). The mask is of householders—for divine play.

# Cosmic Kundalini Shakti: 'Spiritual Athlete'

Still waters run deep. And anonymity is a cloak, a dressing for underlying Shakti. I, for one, felt tremendous joy reading about the incident of Harish, a devotee getting a thrashing from the usually tender Sri Sarada Devi. It can recall a page from any Purana. The roudra rupa, fierce form, of the Divine Mother. She herself tells us that in this incident, she was forced to assume her real nature. Chetanananda says that 'one way to recognize divine beings is when they speak about themselves; otherwise it is not possible for ordinary human beings to comprehend the infinite Lord' (593). And when, a devotee asked the Sri Sarada Devi about Harish's crazy behaviour, she said: 'Who knows, my child? I was then not myself.' Perhaps, her mention of Bagala points to the role in her life of the ten goddesses mentioned in the text. A comparison or rather contrast is the incident of her transforming dacoits into her parents. In short, the one is sattva and the other is the fierce form.

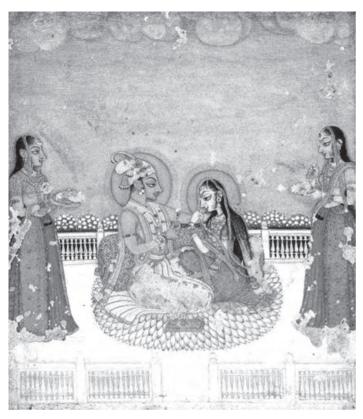
In this context, may I cite a description of the Harish incident that Ray Berry gave in his book *Spiritual Athlete*, that contains profiles of women saints and obviously that of Sri Sarada Devi too. Here is his rendering of the event: 'Harish, a mentally deranged disciple of Ramakrishna was chasing the Mother with carnal intentions. And Mother herself told "I ran out of energy and breath. I was forced to assume my real nature [that of Bagala, the terrific aspect of the Divine Mother]. I stopped running and turned to face Harish. When he came up to me with that crazy look in his eyes, I threw him to the ground, put my knees on his chest, pulled out his tongue and slapped his face till he came to his senses."<sup>12</sup>

#### Kamini-Kanchana

The twin traits that Ramakrishna identified: lust and greed, if taken to unbearable, irrational, obsessive heights, it is only the Holy Mother, Shakti-rupa, who can balance and tame, if not terminate the phenomenon. Isn't it a phenomenon which we face every day? This biography of Sri Sarada Devi signals what theologians and psychologists have suggested as early as 1969. Paul Tillich often stated that 'depth psychology represents a re-discovery of the spirituality of the West, something that the West has known all along'. And Mircea Eliade, keeping in view 'Eastern invasions', says that 'one should look at "counselling" for a new humanism, which he believes 'the West can acquire by becoming open to the spiritual preceptor-ship of other cultural and religious traditions.13

I have made an attempt to introduce only a few representative aspects of this comprehensive volume. Surely, it is of inestimable value in these times of radical feminist frames. We have to remember what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has noted: 'The practice of freedom especially in the context of women, does not come simply because of the fact of gaining something

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called independence.' This is, I felt, where Sri Sarada Devi's biography has immense practical significance. And if it needs a role model, Sri Sarada Devi is there. She knew the distinction between freedom and independence. She is so sensitive in this case, to the nuances of Sri Ramakrishna's voice that when she wanted to go for a religious function along with him and he felt that the gathering will consider it inappropriate, but did not voice the opinion clearly, even then she understood it and gave up her idea. The decoding of an idea through communication skills is so subtle that our academic courses in that area can benefit from such incidents.

Chetanananda's *Sri Sarada Devi and Her Divine Play* is a timely, vibrant manifesto of the power and grace of womanhood as a transformative phenomenon for global togetherness seeking a transcendental oneness of lifestyles rooted in Shakti as manifest in Sri Sarada Devi. A rich

selection of photographs enhances the racy narrative content. This should make us alert to the fact that one of the most valuable dimensions Chetanananda has unveiled is the fact that education is not academic alone. Sri Sarada Devi's sources have been drawn from variegated aspects of the 'school of life' and the syllabus is what we mentioned in the beginning: 'unity of spirit'. Beginning with the sixteen miles walk to reach Sri Ramakrishna, she fulfilled those lines of Robert Frost: 'Many miles to go before I sleep'. She will not sleep and she has infinite miles to go.

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- 7. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 1. Emphasis added.
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- 13. The Dialogue Between Theology and Psychology, ed. Peter Homans (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), 2-3.
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- 15. Robert Lee Frost, Stopping by Woods On A Snowy Evening.

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# **REVIEWS**

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA, publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications



# Vishnu: A Step Towards the Infinite S Deepak Raj

Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, PO Box: 5715, 54 Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi 110 055. Website: www.mrmlbooks.com. 2015. xxi + 254 pp. ₹ 995. ISBN 9788121512664.

Rishi Medhatithi sings in the first mandala of the Rig Veda: 'Idam vishnur-vichakrame; Vishnu advanced through Earth's regions with three steps; and the entire world lay at his feet'. When was this hymn set down? We do not know. But for several millennia this image of Vishnu has endured. Hailed as the supreme Lord, the Vishnu idea has been sustained through the theory of incarnations, several Agamas, Puranas, and the two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Naturally, there will be no dull moment in any book that takes up a study of Vishnu.

However, the very rich spread of Vaishnavism in scriptures and literature in different Indian languages, art, and the unimaginably rich temple wealth the religion possesses not to mention the innumerable varieties of practising it all over the world, has created a genuine space for explaining its basic concepts in English. There is an anxiety to know in the younger generation who are attracted by the inclusive nature and colourful ritualism of Vishnu worship. It is good that the author has stepped in with this book.

Putting together a file of colourful information is easy enough in this rich area. The author begins with a brief introduction and moves over to Paravasudeva, an image of the supreme that is transcendent and yet one that becomes visible to yoginis in deep meditation. After a survey of the ten incarnations of Vishnu from Matsya to Kalki, he has chapters on some familiar versions of the Vishnu cult: Ananta-shayana, Varadaraja, Hayagriva, and Dattatreya, among others. But he is an

author in a hurry. All the myths and legends are so crowded together that there is no breather for the reader. A frequent shower of words like *apabhramsha* and sattvic-*rupa* makes the text almost incomprehensible for the English reader who meets Hinduism for the first time, and the Indian who does not know Sanskrit.

There are also some lacunae in the text, like the failure to mention the sixth major religious classification, Kaumara or the fifth form assumed by Vishnu, that is, *vibhava*. The line drawings are welcome and the photographs are excellent. Careful distillation of the present text and a helpful glossary of Sanskrit terms as also a select bibliography ought to be the task of the enthusiastic author for the second edition to make the book viable for scholars as well.

Prema Nandakumar Researcher and Literary Critic Srirangam



# Enigmas in Valmiki Ramayana Explained

S R Krishna Murthy

Suneeti Prakashan, No. 7, 36th Main, Bhavani hbcs, Banagirinagar, bsk 3rd Stage, Bengaluru 560 085. Email: *srk-murthy36@gmail.com*. 2015. xvi + 305 pp. ₹ 500.

Valmiki Ramayana, a masterpiece replete with poetic excellences and perennial values, is also a victim of ugly interpolations, indecorous innuendos, thoughtless criticisms, and unseemly controversies surrounding various episodes. It needs a thorough familiarity with the epic, a research-oriented intellect, a keen sensitivity to the nuances of style of Valmiki and an uncanny flair for detecting the 'black sheep' in the epic to do an effective job of sanitisation of the epic and present it in its pristine purity. It is precisely this arduous task of cleaning the Augean stables that the learned

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author of the book under review does quite ably. The impassioned arguments, the trenchant criticisms, the logical refutations of the false theories of carping critics, and the stout defence of Valmiki's flawless narrative and fine positions make the book an absorbing read.

The Introduction in the first chapter gives a concise life-sketch of Valmiki and clearly states that Valmiki Ramayana is professedly a picturesque exposition of Vedic verities. The criticisms against the epic on various counts such as the age of Ramayana, the archaic and un-Paninian modes of expression in the epic, Valmiki's ignorance of geography, Valmiki's violation of Indian tradition, the irrelevance and inappropriateness of certain episodes, the redundancy of Balakanda and Uttara Kanda and the strong case for their expurgation as advocated by foreign scholars like Jacobi and Holtzmann, the un-historicity of Ramayana, and so on, are all listed.

The second chapter titled 'Truth and Perception' points out the rigid constancy and inviolability of truth as contrasted with the variability of perception by citing some examples from common experience. This chapter has the categorical assertion that 'unvarnished Truth shall be the rockbed of life is what the Rāmāyaṇa expounds' (28).

In the third chapter titled 'Texts and Emendations', several verses are brought under the scanner and their misinterpretations by scholars are exposed and branded as clearly 'un-Valmikian' or even 'anti-Valmikian'. Not only are certain texts and their interpretations pronounced un-Valmikian and therefore interpolations but slight emendations like altering the vibhaktis, case-endings, of words or reshuffling of lines or outright deletions of repetitions are commended to invest the verses with Valmikian flavour. It is pointed out that the phalashruti, in Yuddha Kanda are riddled with interpolations. Several episodes like the Kakasura episode, the dog episode, Shambhuka episode and the Nidra Devi episode are declared un-Valmikian on grounds of their being incompatible with the Valmikian ethos.

Chapters four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, and twelve titled 'The Incarnation', 'The Plot', 'Valivadha', 'Humour', 'Why Does Hanuman Hug Lakshmana', 'Dasaratha', 'The Fire Ordeal', 'Sita Parityaga', and 'Sita and Lakshmana'

respectively delve into the various episodes deeply and highlight their fallacious interpretations of both Indian and foreign scholars. The myth of Valmiki Ramayana as being, Nestor-like, solemn and sombre, and destitute of humour is exploded by citing pertinent explanations. Many popular misconceptions of the episodes caused by shallow interpretations of scholars are dispelled by suggesting more rational and convincing annotations. The shlokas, episodes, and their interpretations are tested against the touchstone of Valmikian spirit and ethos and summarily rejected if they fail to reflect the lofty tone and tenor of Valmikian weltanschauung.

Chapter thirteen titled 'Identification of Vālmīkian Locations: Lankā, Kiṣkindhā, Etc.' marshals a mass of credible evidence to prove that Valmiki's knowledge of geography is faultless and his locations of Lanka and Kishkinda as evidenced in his mellifluous verses are not off the mark. The chapter torpedoes the laboured attempts of the so-called authorities on Valmiki Ramayana to spin their own theories of location and thereby try to prove Valmiki's bankruptcy of geographical knowledge.

Chapter fourteen, the last chapter, explains the allegorical significance of the great epic by sagacious interpretations of the Sanskrit nomenclature of the dramatis personae and also of things and events.

The highly informative book speaks volumes of the gifted author's versatile genius, his extensive study of the extant commentaries of the epic, and his inflexible fidelity and deep devotion to Valmiki. The ease and facility with which he draws examples, comparisons, and analogies from diverse fields such as English and Kannada literature, insurance, science and technology, the celluloid realm, daily life, and so on, to drive home his points are remarkable. His courage of conviction in literary and philosophical spheres, his faith in Vedic culture, his proficiency in Sanskrit, his rigorous diligence in amassing factual materials for the book and his faith and certitude in his ideals that embolden him when it comes to crossing words with world-renowned scholars are all amply reflected in the book under review.

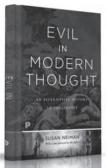
This neatly designed book shields Valmiki

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from shallow criticisms and vindicates his legitimate claims to pre-eminence at the bar of both the scholarly judgement and public opinion. A lengthy bibliography at the end of the book adds value to the book.

N Hariharan Madurai



# Evil In Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy

Susan Neiman

Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540. USA. www.press.princeton.edu. 2015. XXII + 382 pp. PB. \$24.95. ISBN 9780691168500.

Hannah Arendt wrote about evil being so banal that one does not recognise it when it is encountered in its esse (See Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (New York: Penguin, 1963). Arendt is central to any study of evil today and in her Afterword in this revised edition of her book originally published in 2002, Neiman re-evaluates Arendt. We will have the opportunity to speak of Arendt at the end of this review.

Jean Baudrillard sees evil as an intractable virus which has infected the cosmos:

In a society which seeks—by prophylactic measures, by annihilating its own natural referents, by whitewashing violence, by exterminating all germs and all of the accursed share, by performing cosmetic surgery on the negative—to concern itself solely with quantified management and with the discourse of the Good, in a society where it is no longer possible to speak Evil, Evil has metamorphosed into all the viral and terroristic forms that obsess us (Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 2002), 81).

Susan Neiman's book makes it possible once again to speak of evil explicitly; and thus seek ways to annihilate it. Her act of including the word 'evil' in the title of the book is the beginning of her cultural work as a philosopher who

continues and responds seriously to the works of both Arendt and Baudrillard. Naming anything, and in this case, evil as it is, demands existential honesty in an atmosphere which does not want to discuss this ancient problem of evil which the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev felt was unsolvable. Neiman's book's praxis lies in its very existence: if we neglect the study of evil, genocides and terrorism will continue. Neiman, unlike most career philosophers, discusses terrorism in detail near the end of her book. The book under review has established the urgency of studying evil if one wants to truly comprehend what the philosopher-turned-novelist, Iris Murdoch had called the 'Sovereignty of the Good' (See Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good (London: Routledge, 1967)), which is the *telos* of all history, including Neiman's own reading of the history of philosophy as we find here. Neiman does not write on evil to exalt in it but to show how the sovereign nature of the good has been repeatedly apparently displaced by the existence of evil. Evil is no privatio boni or simulation vide Jean Baudrillard; it is very much a happening phenomenon. This reviewer has discussed about evil in Subhasis Chattopadhyay, 'Prolegomenon to the Study of Evil', Prabuddha Bharata, 118/4 (April 2013), 278-81, 293.

Neiman has done successfully what no other contemporary philosopher has the temerity to do: she has shown how the history of philosophy demands new (mis)readings qua responses since evil is inherent in the *esse* of the idea of the *being* in the here and the now. Except Arendt and Baudrillard and to some extent Giorgio Agamben, contemporary philosophers have been silent on the problem of evil. Neiman says:

The picture of modern philosophy as centered in epistemology and driven by the desire to ground our representations is so tenacious that some philosophers are prepared to bite the bullet and declare the effort simply wasted. Rorty, for example, finds it easier to reject modern philosophy altogether than to reject the standard accounts of its history. His narrative is more polemical than most, but it's a polemical version of the story told in most philosophy departments in the second half of the twentieth century. ... What began as metaphysics—the description of

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the basic structure of reality—ended as epistemology: the attempt to ground the foundations of our knowledge (5-6).

Empirical research bears out the truth of her important thesis that the larger thematic study of the problem of evil took a backseat in professional discourses of philosophy during the last century and even in this century professional philosophers shy away from discussing the problem of evil since contemporary philosophy has engaged itself with 'timeless matters' like 'Goodness, truth, and beauty' (xvii). Yet 'Every time we make the judgment this ought not to have happened, we are stepping onto a path that leads straight to the problem of evil. ... For it involves questions more natural, urgent, and pervasive than the skeptical epistemological quandaries said to drive modern philosophy' (5). Neiman is bold enough to attack Richard Rorty; a fact that will ensure that she remains a prophetic and therefore a marginalised voice within mainstream philosophy. Martha Nussbaum, in her magnum opus The Fragility of Goodness, for instance, keeps defining what Aristotle thought about the good life (See Martha C Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness (London: Cambridge University, 2001)). She, like Neiman, is a Jew; but she simply cannot face the spectre of Hitler. Yet she is venerated globally as the philosopher of Cosmopolitanism. How does reviving Cosmopolitanism from the detritus of the philosophy of the Cynics help one prevent the recurrence of the rise of another Hitler escapes this reviewer. Nussbaum nowhere attacks Rorty or A J Ayer—if she did so, she would not have been known universally as a humanist. Neiman errs on the side of being a rigorous scholar and pays for her rigour by remaining relatively yet undeservedly unknown.

In this book Neiman shows us how the Hitler event should have been tackled by professional philosophers and what exactly needs to be done to prevent mass genocides of the nature committed by the Nazis. Neiman studies the Lisbon earthquake and discusses Leibnitz and then correctly points out the epistemic retreat enacted by contemporary thinkers—this statement too has ensured that she remains an academic pariah. She is the only voice writing today asking the right questions: what happened to philosophising which dealt with the hard questions of life?

Why is it that some of the best minds of this and the last centuries avoid the issue of Hitler? Why do philosophy courses stress the abstract over the practical lived experience of the individual in the here and the now? Evil, that is 'absolute wrongdoing that leaves no room for account or expiation' (3), apparently defies all analyses. Thus, the reality and the inexplicability of evil forces an otherwise rigorous Alvin Plantinga to lose himself in the jugglery of logic while justifying the truth of evil and a benign God. Neiman's concern in this book is not God per se but rather the reality and inevitability of evil in all its forms and particularly, for example, why David Hume needs to be reread to understand evil-Neiman reads Immanuel Kant and then through him judges Hume and how the latter had effected the current course of philosophy and emasculated the academic domain or the study of philosophy. The section 'The Impotence of Reason: David Hume' in the second chapter is a tour de force in itself that should be made compulsory reading in all philosophy syllabi. This reviewer has scoured the internet and called up professional philosophers asking them whether they have read Neiman's contentions regarding Hume vis-à-vis Immanuel Kant elsewhere. None has. This chapter is sufficient reason for us to consider Neiman as one of the greatest philosophers alive.

Philosophers are notoriously bad stylists, but Neiman's style is cosy and jargon-free:

The question could be raised during a conversational lull in a good salon: would you live your life over, if given the chance? Eighteenth-century thinkers took a rest from more serious business by discussing it. Few of them were entirely clear about the form of the question. Were they seeking an empirical survey, or a normative claim? Were they asking whether people in general, and any one of us in particular, would in fact repeat their lives over—or whether it would, on balance, be reasonable to do so? (206).

This is how Neiman begins writing on Nietzsche in the section 'Eternal Choices: Nietzsche on Redemption' in the third chapter. Anyone familiar with Nietzsche will know from the title that Neiman is going to scrutinise Nietzsche in a way he has not been evaluated before: one should read this section for the scope of Neiman's own

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readings in philosophy and ancient Greek drama and for her power to connect philosophers as disparate as Voltaire and Hegel with Nietzsche keeping in mind her stated aim in this book. She never forgets to point out how all major Continental philosophers were writing willy-nilly on the problem of evil. She establishes that contemporary philosophers have got their priorities at least partially wrong: philosophy is in fact a coming to terms with the reality of evil. This reviewer recommends this section for another reason: stylistically it is one of the most lucid and witty treatments of Nietzsche that can be found in any history of philosophy. Neiman is aware that what she has written will not be accepted by her peers: hence she appends to the title 'An Alternative Philosophy of History'. But this is the history of philosophy which should be taught to neophytes and not the drab stuff which is the lot allotted as compulsory reading to philosophy majors.

Neiman is one of the few philosophers living today who can write about the reality of the Jewish cabal or 'lobby', and draw the ire of other Jewish philosophers:

Let me take an anti-Semitic bull by its horns and address the most common suspicion. There is indeed a Jewish lobby, more accurately known as AIPAC, which seeks to support right-wing Israeli governments who deflect responsibility for their own policies by emphasizing the ways in which Jews have been victims, particularly at the hands of the Nazis. But it is not responsible for the movement of popular consciousness from Hiroshima to Auschwitz. For decades following the war, survivors of Auschwitz were viewed with shame and even disgust; the newly founded Jewish state wanted heroes, not victims (345).

Neiman is frankly Jewish; she is ready to critique her Jewish peers and this is a kind of transparency not to be found even in Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Emmanuel Lévinas. All of them were Jews reacting to their understanding of the Torah and the Fall of Jerusalem, which is repeated in the Holocaust in a Nietzschean transvaluation of values and in the case of Derrida and Foucault; their own excommunications by orthodox Jews. Neiman's self-critique as a Jewish philosopher is refreshing. Her book *The Unity of* 

Reason: Rereading Kant (See Susan Neiman, The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant (New York: Oxford University, 1997)) had established her as a moral philosopher and this book secures her place as the only philosopher writing now worth reading, both for the truth about the history of philosophy as well as the real and not an alternative history of philosophy, as has been mentioned above.

Neiman contrasts Martin Heidegger with Theodor Adorno's conception and expectations of death (309). Her analysis of Heidegger is perfect within the context of this book. But she misses the point that it was Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) which triggered the retreat of philosophy into epistemology and to be precise, to become the study of language and other abstractions. Heidegger's complicity with the Nazis is well documented.

In this edition of the book we have Neiman revisiting Otto Adolf Eichmann. She takes into account recent historical research and partly modifies Eichmann's evaluation by Hannah Arendt. Neiman sees through Eichmann's pose as a humdrum bureaucrat and through now available documents from Argentina where Eichmann hid himself, she sees Eichmann as the true butcher that he was; a man well aware of Kantian categorical imperatives but bent on not applying these moral imperatives to his own butchery of the Jews. He boasted in Argentina of wanting to exterminate every Jew on earth. During his trial in Jerusalem, Eichmann as it now emerges, pretended to be just another regular person doing his job under orders from his bosses. Eichmann through this tactic of being banal wanted to live on and escape punishment—evil never wants to effect its own erasure from the world as it is.

One last point needs to be mentioned about Neiman's thorough research of evil—she asks the question whether the bombing of Hiroshima was necessary? Chances are that the Americans knew that destroying Hiroshima was not needed to win the war. It takes courage to revisit the evil that happened in Japan during the Second World War and accept that this evil was unleashed by those who were purportedly good.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay Assistant Professor of English, Ramananda College, Bishnupur

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# MANANA

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## The Religion of the Future

Roberto Mangabeira Unger

Harvard University Press, 79 Garden Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. USA. www.hup.harvard.edu. 2014. 480 pp. \$52.50. HB. ISBN 9780674729070.

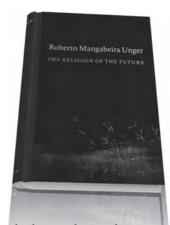
VERYTHING IN OUR EXISTENCE points beyond itself. We must nevertheless die. We cannot grasp the ground of being. Our desires are insatiable. Our lives fail adequately to express our natures; our circumstances regularly subject us to belittlement.

Religion has been both an attempt to interpret the meaning of these irreparable flaws in the human condition and a way of dealing with them. It has told us that everything is ultimately all right.

However, everything is not all right. A turn in the religious consciousness of humanity would begin in an approach to these defects that abandoned the impulse to deny them. Religion would cease to console us for these frightening facts. Our hope might survive, changed.

Life is the greatest good. With life come surfeit, spontaneity, and surprise: the capacity to see more, make more, and do more than all the social and conceptual regimes in which we move can countenance. In the face of all constraint, the experience of life is an experience of a fecundity and a fullness without foreordained limits.

We exceed immeasurably the social and cultural worlds that we build and inhabit. There is always more in us, in each of us individually as well as in all of us collectively, than there is or ever can be in them. There is always more that we have reason to value and power to produce than any of these orders of life, or all of them together, can contain.



The principle that applies to the organization of society and culture applies as well to thought and discourse. No method, no system of procedures of inference and modes of argument, no apparatus of reasoning in any one discipline, or in all disciplines combined, can do justice to our capacities for insight. We can always discover more than our established practices of inquiry can prospectively allow. Vision exceeds method. Method adjusts retrospectively to suit vision.

We are unlimited, or infinite, with respect to the practical and discursive settings of our activity. They are limited, or finite, with regard to us. Our excess over them is what, in a traditional theological vocabulary, we call spirit.

Everyone dies anyway. The response of nature to our experience of fecundity, of amplitude, of reach over circumstance and context is to decree our death. The finality of this annihilation, in contrast to the vibrant presence that preceded it, is the first and fundamental reason why death is terrible. The good that is the highest, preceding all others and making all others possible, is the good that will be most definitively destroyed.

Our fall toward death is surrounded on every side by tokens of the wasting of life. At any given moment on our planet, as Schopenhauer reminded us, countless living creatures tear one another apart the better to live a while longer. We are unable to distinguish our situation from

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theirs as much as we would like. Science teaches that death forms part of the continuance of life. However, what is necessary for the species is fatal to the individual.

Regardless of whether death is resisted or accepted, its aftermath follows a regular course. The body is now a corpse. It becomes first rigid, then bloated. It soon rots, stinks, and begins to be devoured by vermin and bacteria, unless it is promptly burned. From having been revered, it turns into an object of revulsion.

It is all the more terrifying to know that those whom we love most will be brought to the same altar, and offered in the same sacrifice, sometimes under our eyes. In their death we see what we can only imagine for ourselves: the annihilation to which we are all doomed confirmed, as love proves powerless to sustain the life that love may have given.

The terribleness of death becomes clear as well from another vantage point: the perspective of consciousness and of its relation to the world. The experience of life is an experience of consciousness. The mark of consciousness is to present a complete world: not just how I see, feel, and think about myself, but a whole world centered on me, extending outward from my body. For consciousness, everything that exists, or that has existed, or that will exist exists only because it plays a part in this mental theater of mine. Beyond the perimeter of its stage, there is no world, and there is no being.

Continuity of consciousness, embodied in an individual human organism, is what we mean by a self. The experience of selfhood is the experience of consciousness associated with the fate of the body and persistent over time, until the body fails and dissolves. There are no human beings for whom the world fails to be manifest in this way as extending outward, and backward and forward in time, from the conscious and embodied self.

We come to learn that this view of the world is an illusion. We correct the illusion, or compensate for it, but only theoretically; that is to say, by telling ourselves that the world is not in fact the way in which we will continue to experience it.

Death not only brings the conscious self to an end; it also shows, in definitive and incontrovertible form, that the representation of the world as extending outward in space and time from the self was false from the outset. The dead person will not be there to see the demonstration of his error, but the survivors will register what has happened. Each of them will know what awaits him.

With the end of consciousness, it is not just the conscious self that disappears forever; it is the whole world that perishes, as it existed for consciousness. The events and protagonists that filled it all vanish suddenly, in the instant of death, unless their disappearance has been foreshadowed by the ruin of the mind.

No afterlife, of the kind promised by the religions of salvation, can—or, if it can, it should not—console us for our mortality. An afterlife would not suffice to give us back our bodies; we would need to be given back the time of the historical world: the struggle and the connection with other people in a time that is irreversible and decisive. To be restored to our bodies and made forever young without being reinstated in the time of history would be to suffer the torture of an eternal boredom. For this reason, portrayals of a paradise of eternal life in the salvation religions remain unconvincing and even repellent. They offer us the shell of immortality without granting us what makes life irresistible.

The embodied self is the same person who woke to the world in a burst of visionary immediacy, who soon found that he was not the center of that world but on the contrary a dependent and even hapless creature, and who then discovered that he was doomed to die.

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# REPORTS

## **New Centres**

Ramakrishna Math, Bamunmura, till recently a sub-centre of Ramakrishna Math, Barasat, has been made a full-fledged branch centre of Ramakrishna Math, Belur, at 'Ramakrishna Math, Bamunmura, PO Badu, Kolkata 700128', phone nos.: 033–2552-3044 and 2562-9669, and email: <br/>
<br/>
<br/>
damunmura@rkmm.org>.

A branch of the Ramakrishna Mission has been started in Imphal at 'Ramakrishna Mission, Opp. Old Secretariat, Babupara, Imphal, Manipur 795001', phone nos.: 0385–2444624 and 2055626, and email: <imphal@rkmm.org>.

Ramakrishna Math, Mekhliganj, till recently a sub-centre of Ramakrishna Math, Cooch Behar, has been made a full-fledged branch centre of Ramakrishna Math, Belur, at 'Ramakrishna Math, Mekhliganj, Dt. Cooch Behar, West Bengal 735304', phone: 03584–255272, and email: <mekhliganj@rkmm.org>.

# Celebration of the 150th Birth Anniversary of Swami Akhandanandaji Maharaj

Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur held a special programme for 41 children of an orphanage in Nagpur on 12 October 2015, the sacred birthday of Swami Akhandanandaji Maharaj. After bringing the children to the Math, they were taken around the campus and shown a video film on Swamiji. They were also given food, clothes, and stationery.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Morabadi, Ranchi conducted a special lecture on 30 September which was attended by 125 people.

# Durga Puja

Durga Puja was celebrated at Belur Math from



Kumari Puja at Belur Math

20 to 23 October with due solemnity and joy. The weather was fine on all the four days and about two lakh devotees attended the Puja to receive the blessings of the Divine Mother. The Kumari Puja performed on 21 October drew huge crowds, and the Sandhi Puja on that day was also attended by many devotees. The Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court, Smt J Manjula Chellur, attended the Puja on the Saptami day. Cooked prasad was served to nearly 52,000 devotees on Ashtami day and to about one and a half lakh devotees during the four days.

Durga Puja, in image, was celebrated at the following 25 centres: Antpur, Asansol, Barasat, Contai, Cooch Behar, Dhaleswar (under Agartala), Ghatshila, Guwahati, Jalpaiguri, Jamshedpur, Jayrambati, Kailashahar, Kamarpukur, Karimganj, Lucknow, Malda, Medinipur, Mumbai, Patna, Port Blair, Rahara, Shella (under Cherrapunji), Shillong, Silchar, and Varanasi Advaita Ashrama.

Shri V Shanmuganathan, governor of Meghalaya, Dr Mukul Sangma, chief minister of that state, and several other dignitaries attended Durga Puja celebrations at **Ramakrishna Mission**, **Shillong**.

Durga Puja, in image, was performed at Mauritius Ashrama and the following twelve centres in Bangladesh: Baliati, Barisal, Chittagong, Comilla, Dhaka, Dinajpur, Faridpur, Habiganj, Jessore, Narayanganj, Rangpur, and Sylhet, and also at the Narail sub-centre of Jessore Ashrama.

At Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna

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Mission, Dhaka, Prime Minister of Bangladesh Ms. Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh Chief Justice, Sri Surendra Kumar Sinha, Health and Family Welfare Minister, Md. Nasim, Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister, Md. Rashed Khan Menon, local M P, Md. Kazi Firoz Rashid, Dhaka City Corporation (South) Mayor, Md. Syed Khokan and several other distinguished persons attended the Durga Puja celebration. On the Ashtami day, nearly 15,000 people witnessed the Kumari Puja and were served cooked prasad.

### **News of Branch Centres**

Four students of **Vivekananda Veda Vidyalaya**, **Belur Math**, received gold medals for securing all-India first ranks in Purva Madhyama (equivalent to Class 10) and Uttara Madhyama (equivalent to Class 12) examinations conducted by Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, New Delhi, in 2013 and 2014. Smt. Smriti Zubin Irani, Minister of Human Resource Development, government of India, handed over the medals in the convocation of the Sansthan at New Delhi on 30 September.

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Kadapa conducted a special workshop for teachers from 9 to 11 October which was attended by 126 teachers.

Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Silchar conducted youth conferences for school and college students on 9 and 10 October respectively which were attended by a total of 742 students and 62 teachers.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Visakhapatnam celebrated the silver jubilee of its temple consecration ceremony from 15 to 18 October which was attended by about 400 devotees.

Dr V Manikantan, a professor of the Vivekananda College of **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith**, **Chennai**, secured Session's Best Presentation award for his paper in the First Annual International Conference on Education organised by the International Institute of Knowledge Management at Beijing, China, on 9 and 10 April. A medal and a certificate were handed over to the professor.

A student of Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar secured first position at the state level in the National Science Seminar held by the National Council of Science Museums at Ranchi on 2 and 3 October. Subsequently, he participated in the national level seminar at National Science Centre, Delhi, on 8 October and secured 11th position. Two students of the Vidyapith were adjudged first runners-up at a quiz competition conducted by Reserve Bank of India at Ranchi on 7 October.

Swami Vivekananda College, Ramakrishna Mission, Fiji conducted a value education programme on 10 September; 150 high school principals participated. Students of the Cookery Department of Vivekananda Technical Centre run by the centre won the first prize in the International Food Festival Cooking Competition held at Fiji National University on 14 October. Dr Mahendra Reddy, Minister of Education, government of Fiji, visited the centre on 25 October.

#### Relief

Flood Relief • West Bengal: In continuation of our relief operations for the flood-affected people, (a) Chandipur Math distributed 247 saris, 100 dhotis, 100 jackets, and 80 packets of biscuits among 447 families in 11 villages of Purba Medinipur district, (b) Kamarpukur centre distributed 300 saris, 309 dhotis, and 1,261 assorted garments among 1,019 families in 25 villages of Hooghly district on 10 and 19 October, and (c) Naora centre distributed 50 kg rice, 50 kg potatoes, 1,159 saris, 370 dhotis, 1,447 children's garments, and 104 assorted garments among 3,080 families in 11 villages of South 24 Parganas district from 10 to 13 October.

**Distress Relief** • The following centres distributed various items, as shown against their names, to needy people: **India**: (a) **Bamunmura**: 300

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saris, 200 dhotis, 121 shirts, and 124 pairs of shoes from 27 September to 19 October. (b) Baranagar Math: 542 saris, 30 dhotis, and 328 children's garments on 12 and 13 October. (c) Barasat: 395 saris, 140 dhotis, and 177 assorted garments from 2 to 16 October. (d) Chapra: 400 saris and 200 dhotis from 10 to 17 October. (e) Coimbatore Mission: 330 saris, 310 dhotis, 300 children's garments, 300 solar lamps, 10 calves, and 300 saplings among 300 families and assistive devices to 10 disabled persons on 12 October. (f) Gadadhar Ashrama: 200 saris from 21 September to 14 October. (g) Garbeta: 300 saris, 270 dhotis, and 182 assorted garments from 13 to 26 October. (h) Jalpaiguri: 500 saris on 11 October. (i) Kailashahar: 300 saris and 200 dhotis from 9 to 14 October. (j) Manasadwip: 850 saris and 50 dhotis from 16 to 18 October. (k) Sikra Kulingram: 200 saris, 100 dhotis, and 200 children's garments from 26 September to 8 October. (1) Taki: 331 saris from 19 August to 14 October. (m) Vrindaban: 1,250 kg rice, 1,250 kg flour, 250 kg dal, 250 kg mustard oil, 250 kg salt, 25 kg tea leaves, 50 kg milk powder, 125 kg sugar, 250 bars of bathing soap, 250 bars of washing soap, and 62 kg washing powder among 250 old women on 12 October. Bangladesh: Dhaka: Food materials and saris to 1,000 poor families of Keranigoni Upazilla in Dhaka district and Harijan Palli in Dhaka city.

*Winter Relief* · **Taki** centre distributed 300 blankets to poor and needy people from 19 August to 10 October.

# Free Child Eye Care and Eye Camps

Child Eye Care Programmes			
Centre	Children	Spectacles	Surgeries
Chandigarh <sup>1</sup>	2,113	150	-
Jamshedpur	2,131	250	-
Khetri	10,044	1,161	-
Lucknow	16,874	572	-
Madurai	503	18	-
Ranchi Morabadi	3,811	94	-
Vadodara <sup>1</sup>	5,647	413	6
Total	41,123	2,658	6

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Includes data for October to December 2014

Eye camps and child eye care programmes were conducted by several centres of the Ramakrishna Mission. Some of the centres provided patients with free spectacles and vitamins. A cumulative report is given here in two tables, covering the period from 1 October 2014 to 30 October 2015.

Eye Camps			
Centre	Patients	Spectacles	Surgeries
Bankura <sup>1</sup>	5,400	592	1,360
Baranagar Math	50	22	25
Chandigarh	256	-	30
Chengalpattu and	1,426	538	158
Chennai Math <sup>1</sup>			
Ghatshila <sup>1</sup>	694	142	242
Jamshedpur	637	322	346
Kamarpukur	2,608	476	514
Khetri	1,713	-	627
Lucknow	16,605	-	3,019
Madurai	2,317	34	454
Malda	440	167	98
Mayavati	1,454	-	283
Medinipur	631	-	114
Nagpur	250	149	22
Narottam Nagar	222	-	-
Porbandar	920	-	304
Pune	86	27	8
Puri Mission	236	32	-
Rajahmundry	1,784	345	174
Rajkot	1,696	-	650
Ranchi Morabadi	4,303	78	65
Salem <sup>1</sup>	5,164	818	417
Saradapitha <sup>1</sup>	3,791	-	606
Seva Pratishthan	25	-	25
Sikra-Kulingram	165	-	24
Silchar	1,869	26	446
Ulsoor (Halasuru)	3,515	18	1,533
Vadodara <sup>1</sup>	2,561	116	175
Visakhapatnam	377	50	97
Total	61,195	3,952	11,816

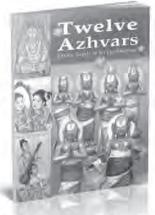
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Includes data for October, November, and December 2014

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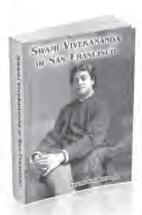


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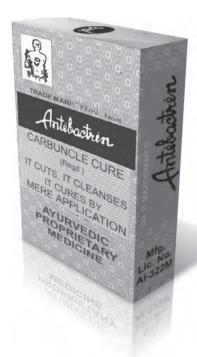
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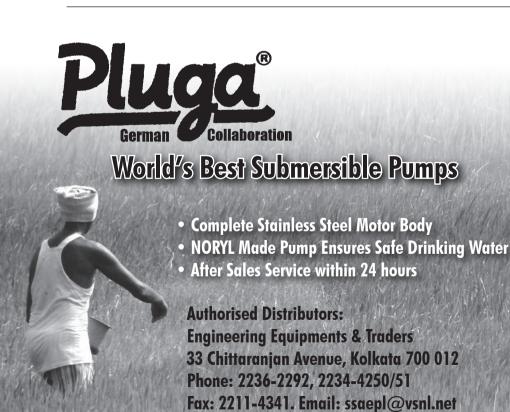
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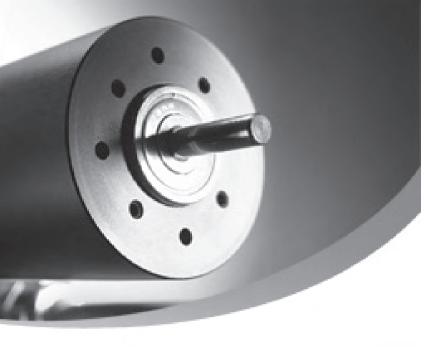
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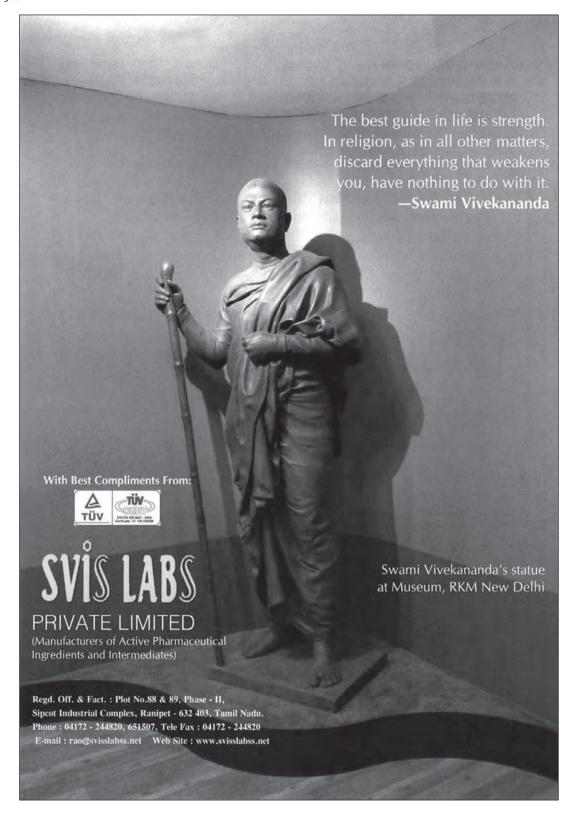
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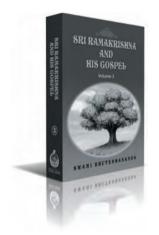
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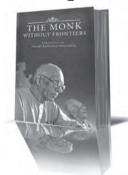
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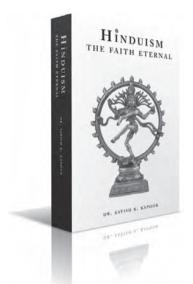


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ertain men are born in certain periods to perform certain actions in combination. Ajit Singh and myself are two such souls — born

to help each other in a big work for the good of mankind. We are as supplement and complement."

— Swami Vivekananda. It was at Fatteh Billass in Khetri that the Maharaja inspired Swamiji to give his message of one-ness to the world. It was here where he launched forth his mission to the West, taking the name 'Vivekananda'.

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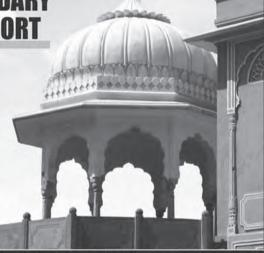
impact it had on the world. As a tribute on his 150 th birth anniversary, the Khetri Centre has been trying to renovate this dilapidated edifice and restore the glory of this 'Temple in memory of Swami Vivekananda'.

When complete, Fatteh Billass will also have a magnificent museum, bringing to fore the glorious chapter of history that records the unique king - monk relationship and its influence.

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# Monasticism and its Duty to Society Today

## Swami Vireswarananda

(Tenth President, Ramakrishna Math & Mission)



From ancient times our society was divided into four Ashramas, viz brahmacharya ashrama, grihastha ashrama, vanaprastha ashrama and finally, sannyasa ashrama. For each of these ashramas, certain duties were prescribed. Sannyasa ashrama is the one where all possessions were relinquished and men wholly devoted themselves to God realization. They held aloft the torch of renunciation and, by their lives and teachings, held the ideal of moksha before the nation. Society, in turn, helped them with the minimum necessities of life so that they could concentrate on their sadhana without any hindrance.

But now the situation has changed. Our society is now disrupted, higher values of life have been lost and a chaotic condition prevails not only in India but all over the world. We find a dismal picture all around.

In this tragic situation what should be our duty as sannyasis? Either we can cut ourselves off from society as we have been doing till now, thinking that we have nothing to do with it, or we can feel the sorrows of the society as our own and go to the people, come down to the level of the common man, and work to uplift them. I feel the second alternative should be more emphasized, for if we cut ourselves off from the society and do not mix with the people, our monasticism will be at peril and gradually lose all its force. It is evident that the number of good monks is continuously decreasing because now the spirit of renunciation is not there in our society in general. We, the sannyasis, do not drop from heaven; we come from the society. A society that is morally healthy and ethically strong alone will produce good sannyasis. If we avoid going to the people and work among them, how will they mend themselves and tread the right path? If there is no improvement in them, morally and spiritually, how can we get boys with the fire of renunciation? So it is incumbent on us in our own interest to go to the people and try to uplift them morally and economically. Moreover, as sadhus, we have a debt to the society which we must repay by trying to ameliorate the condition of the masses and by helping them to reconstruct society on a stronger basis.

We, the sannyasis, can do something positive. When the schools and other institutions have failed to give character-building education, the sannyasis have to take up the duty of imparting education and try to educate our boys properly. Wealth cannot provide everything to humankind, as they say, 'Man does not live by bread alone'; he requires something more for sustenance and this 'something' is but the higher idea or the sense of values. The sannyasis have to visit the villages to teach everyone religion and spirituality and the art of character-building on the one hand, and train the people in cottage industries, hygiene, life-style etc. on the other.

So, we, the monks, must go to the people of India and abroad to eradicate the menace of manmade inequality, casteism and superstition in order to establish a new social order. They should open more schools and colleges where the students can learn secular as well as value-based education following the eternal man-making principles and system of Indian life.

[Extracts from a Speech delivered by Revered Maharaj at Kankhal Sevashrama on December 4, 1981 and quoted from "Swami Vireswarananda: A Divine Life" (Revised edition 2015), Swami Vireswarananda Smriti Committee, Belur Math, Howrah, pages 131-133]In reverential homage

Bani, Bhaskar, Debasree, Devajit & Ruchira Roy (Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi)



Your help will be palpably a real homage to Swami Vivekananda whose heart bled for the poor and downtrodden.

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Inspired by the sayings of Swami Vivekananda "This life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive", many eminent Doctors, Surgeons, Medical Specialists in different areas and Paramedics, have voluntarily come forward to serve the poor. The foundation stone for this building has already been laid by our Most Revered Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission on the 14th December, 2014. The construction work commenced on 28th March 2015 with a target of completion within one and a half years. Presently the construction of the ground floor roof slab is under progress.

Owing to paucity of funds, we earnestly appeal to devotees, admirers and organizations to kindly come forward and contribute generously so that the poor and needy may receive proper medical services.

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is a premier Educational Institution in South India, offering high quality Engineering and Management Education for the past three decades, KCT was founded with the vision to create transformation in India through Technical Education. Spread over a campus area of 150 Acres, the college has over 5,600 exemplary students, Excellent Academic & Research ambience, state of the art infrastructure & amenities, collaborations with 8 foreign universities, experienced and committed faculties are the other unique features of this Institution, KCT STPI-IT PARK - is functioning under the STPI umbrella with 2,00,000 sq.ft, of space. A record placement history in reputed Multinational and National Companies is a live testimony to the quality of education that is imparted at KCT.

DEAD - Center of Excellence in Advanced Design was established to bring "SCIENCE TO ENGINEERING" culture using "HIGH PERFORMANCE COMPUTING" and address the technological needs for the country through quality education and training.

Technology Incubation Center that aims at people working on their ideas to see it as a product.

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