

## Introduction

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# *Tantra, the Great Spiritual Synthesis*



The thousands of evils arising from one's birth can be removed by means of practice.

—*Matsyendra-Samhitā* (7.20a)

### DEFINITIONS

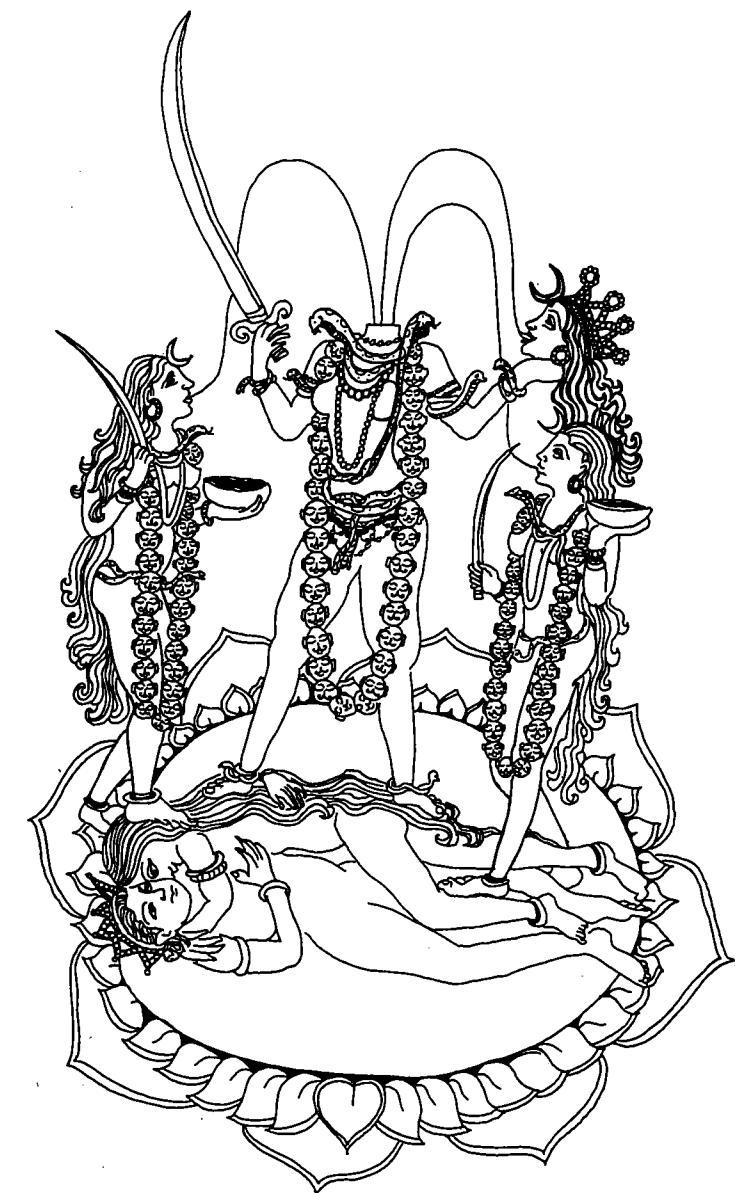
*Tantra* is a Sanskrit word that, like the term *yoga*, has many distinct but basically related meanings. At the most mundane level, it denotes “web” or “woof.” It derives from the verbal root *tan*, meaning “to expand.” This root also yields the word *tantu* (thread or cord).<sup>1</sup> Whereas a thread is something that is extensive, a web suggests expansion. *Tantra* can also stand for “system,” “ritual,” “doctrine,” and “compendium.” According to esoteric explanations, *tantra* is that which expands *jñāna*, which can mean either “knowledge” or

“wisdom.” The late Agehananda Bharati, an Austrian-born professor of anthropology at Syracuse University and a monk of the Dashanāmi order, argued that only knowledge can be expanded, not the immutable wisdom.<sup>2</sup> But this is not entirely correct. Wisdom, though coessential with Reality and therefore perennial, can be expanded in the sense of informing the spiritual practitioner more and more. This process is like placing a sponge in a shallow pool of water. It gradually soaks up the water and becomes completely suffused with moisture. Thus while wisdom is always the same, it can also, paradoxically, grow inside a person. Or, to put it differently, a person can grow to reflect more and more of the eternal wisdom.

But *tantra* is also the “expansive,” all-encompassing Reality revealed by wisdom. As such it stands for “continuum,” the seamless whole that comprises both transcendence and immanence, Reality and reality, Being and becoming, Consciousness and mental consciousness, Infinity and finitude, Spirit and matter, Transcendence and immanence, or, in Sanskrit terminology, *nirvāna* and *samsāra*, or *brahman* and *jagat*. Here the words *samsāra* and *jagat* stand for the familiar world of flux that we experience through our senses.

Historically, *tantra* denotes a particular style or genre of spiritual teachings beginning to achieve prominence in India about fifteen hundred years ago—teachings that affirm the continuity between Spirit and matter. The word also signifies a scripture in which such teachings are revealed. By extension, the term is often applied to textbooks or manuals in general. Tradition speaks of 64 *Tantras*, though as with the 108 *Upanishads* this is an ideal figure that does not reflect historical reality. We know of many more *Tantras*, though few of them have survived the ravages of time.<sup>3</sup>

A practitioner of Tantra is called a *sādhaka* (if male) or a *sādhikā* (if female). Other expressions are *tāntrika* or *tantra-yogin* (if male) and *tantra-yoginī* (if female). An adept of the Tantric path is typically known as a *siddha* (“accomplished one,” from *siddh*, meaning “to be accomplished” or “to attain”) or *mahā-siddha* (“greatly accomplished one,” that is, a great adept). The female adept is called *siddha-angānā* (“woman adept,” from *angā*, meaning “limb” or “part”). The Tantric



Chinnamastā, whose severed head symbolizes the transcendence of the body through Tantra. (ILLUSTRATION BY MARGO GAL)

path itself is frequently referred to as *sādhana* or *sādhanā* (from the same verbal root as *siddha*), and the spiritual achievement of this path is called *siddhi* (having the dual meaning of “perfection” and “powerful accomplishment”). *Siddhi* can refer either to the spiritual attainment of liberation, or enlightenment, or to the extraordinary powers or paranormal abilities ascribed to Tantric masters as a result of enlightenment or by virtue of mastery of the advanced stages of concentration. A Tantric preceptor, whether he or she is enlightened or not, is called either an *ācārya* (“conductor,” which is related to *ācāra*, “way of life”) or a *guru* (“weighty one”).

### TANTRA: A Teaching for the Dark Age

Tantra understands itself as a gospel for the “new age” of darkness, the *kali-yuga*. According to the Hindu worldview, history unfolds in a cyclical pattern that proceeds from a golden age to world ages of progressive spiritual decline, and then back to an era of light and plenty. These ages are called *yugas* (yokes), presumably because they fasten beings to the wheel of time (*kāla-cakra*), the flux of conditioned existence. There are four such *yugas*, which repeat themselves over and over again, all the while maturing all beings, but especially human beings. The scriptures speak of this developmental process as “cooking.” The four world ages, in order, are:

1. The *satya-yuga*, in which truth (*satya*) reigns supreme, and which is also known as *krita-yuga* because everything in it is well made (*krita*)
2. The *tretā-yuga*, in which truth and virtue are somewhat diminished
3. The *dvāpara-yuga*, in which truth and virtue are further diminished
4. The *kali-yuga*, which is marked by ignorance, delusion, and greed

These correspond to the four ages known in classical Greece and ancient Persia. Significantly, the Sanskrit names of the four world ages derive from dice playing, a favorite pastime of Indic humanity ever since Vedic times. The *Rig-Veda*, which is at least five thousand years old, has a hymn (10.34) that has been dubbed “Gambler’s Lament” because its composer talks poetically of his addiction to gambling. Of the dice he says that “handless, they master him who has hands,” causing loss, shame, and grief. The Bhārata war, chronicled in the *Mahābhārata* epic, was the ill-gotten fruit of gambling, for Yudhishthira lost his entire kingdom to his wicked cousin Duryodhana with the throw of a die.

*Krita* signifies the lucky or “well-made” throw, *dvāpara* (deuce) a throw of two points, *tretā* (trey) a throw of three points, and *kali* (from the verbal root *kal*, “to impel”) the total loss, indicated by a single point on the die. The word *kali* is not, as is often thought, the same as the name of the well-known goddess Kāli.<sup>4</sup> However, since Kāli symbolizes both time and destruction, it does not seem far-fetched to connect her specifically with the *kali-yuga*, though of course she is deemed to govern all spans and modes of time.

The *Tantras* describe the first, golden age as an era of material and spiritual plenty. According to the *Mahānirvāna-Tantra* (1.20–29), people were wise and virtuous and pleased the deities and forefathers by their practice of Yoga and sacrificial rituals. By means of their study of the *Vedas*, meditation, austerities, mastery of the senses, and charitable deeds, they acquired great fortitude and power. Even though mortal, they were like the deities (*deva*). The rulers were high minded and ever concerned with protecting the people entrusted to them, while among the ordinary people there were no thieves, liars, fools, or gluttons. Nobody was selfish, envious, or lustful. The favorable psychology of the people was reflected outwardly in land producing all kinds of grain in plenty, cows yielding abundant milk, trees laden with fruits, and ample seasonable rains fertilizing all vegetation. There was neither famine nor sickness, nor untimely death. People were good-hearted, happy, beautiful, and prosperous. Society was well ordered and peaceful.

In the next world age, the *tretā-yuga*, people lost their inner peace and became incapable of applying the Vedic rituals properly, yet clung to them anxiously. Out of pity, the god Shiva brought helpful traditions (*smṛiti*) into the world, by which the ancient teachings could be better understood and practiced.

But humanity was set on a worsening course, which became obvious in the third world age. People abandoned the methods prescribed in the *Smṛitis*, and thereby only magnified their perplexity and suffering. Their physical and emotional illnesses increased, and as the *Mahānirvāna-Tantra* insists, they lost half of the divinely appointed law (*dharma*). Again Shiva intervened by making the teachings of the *Samhitās* and other religious scriptures available.

With the rise of the fourth world age, the *kali-yuga*, all of the divinely appointed law was lost. Many Hindus believe that the *kali-yuga* was ushered in at the time of the death of the god-man Krishna, who is said to have left this earth in 3102 BCE at the end of the famous Bhārata war. There is no archaeological evidence for this date, and it is probable that Krishna lived much later, but this is relatively unimportant for the present consideration.<sup>5</sup> What matters, however, is that most traditional authorities consider the *kali-yuga* to be still very much in progress.<sup>6</sup> In fact, according to Hindu computations, we are only in the opening phase of this dark world age, which is believed to have a total span of 360,000 years.<sup>7</sup> Thus from a Hindu perspective, the current talk in certain Western circles of a promising new age—the Age of Aquarius—is misguided. At best, this is a mini-cycle of self-deception leading to false optimism and complacency, followed by worsening conditions. This is in fact what some Western critics of the New Age movement have suggested as well. Other critics have argued, conversely, that the Hindu model of cyclical time is unrealistic and outdated.

Whatever the truth of this matter may be, the *Tantras* emphasize that their teachings are designed for spiritual seekers trapped in the dark age, which is in effect today. This is how the *Mahānirvāna-Tantra* (1.36–42), in the prophetic words of the Goddess, describes the current world age:

With the sinful *kali*[-yuga] in progress, in which all law is destroyed and which abounds with evil ways and evil phenomena, and gives rise to evil activities,

then the *Vedas* become inefficient, to say nothing of remembering the *Smṛitis*. And the many *Purānas* containing various stories and showing the many ways [to liberation]

will be destroyed, O Lord. Then people will turn away from virtuous action

and become habitually unrestrained, mad with pride, fond of evil deeds, lustful, confused, cruel, rude, scurrilous, deceitful,

short-lived, dull-witted, troubled by sickness and grief, ugly, weak, vile, attached to vile behavior,

fond of vile company, and stealers of other's money. They become rogues who are intent on blaming, slandering, and injuring others

and who feel no reluctance, sin, or fear in seducing the wife of another. They become destitute, filthy, wretched beggars who are sick from their vagrancy.

The *Mahānirvāna-Tantra* continues its description of the dreariness of the *kali-yuga* by saying that even the brahmins become degenerate and perform their religious practices mainly to dupe the people. Thus the custodians of the law (*dharma*) merely contribute to the destruction of the sacred tradition and the moral order. The *Tantra* next reiterates that Shiva revealed the Tantric teachings to stem the tide of history and correct this tragic situation. The masters of Tantra are profoundly optimistic.

#### THE RADICAL APPROACH OF TANTRA

The adepts of Tantra believe that it is possible to attain liberation, or enlightenment, even in the worst social and moral conditions. They also believe, however, that the traditional means devised or revealed in previous world ages are no longer useful or optimal, for

those means were designed for people of far greater spiritual and moral stamina who lived in a more peaceful environment conducive to inner growth. The present age of darkness has innumerable obstacles that make spiritual maturation exceedingly difficult. Therefore more drastic measures are needed: the Tantric methodology.

What is so special about the Tantric teachings that they should serve the spiritual needs of the dark age better than all other approaches? In many ways, the Tantric methods are similar to non-Tantric practices. What is strikingly different about them is their inclusiveness and the radical attitude with which they are pursued. A desperate person will grasp for a straw, and seekers in the *kali-yuga* are, or should be, desperate. From the vantage point of a spiritual heritage extending over several thousand years, the Tantric masters at the beginning of the common era realized that the dark age calls for especially powerful techniques to break through lethargy, resistance, and attachment to conventional relationships and worldly things, as well as to deal with the lack of understanding. Looking at the available means handed down from teacher to student through countless generations, they acknowledged that these required a purity and nobility of character that people of the dark age no longer possess. To help humanity in the *kali-yuga*, the Tantric adepts modified the old teachings and created a new repertoire of practices. Their orientation can be summed up in two words: Anything goes. Or, at least, almost anything.

The Tantric masters even sanctioned practices that are considered sinful from within a conventional moral and spiritual framework. This feature of Tantra has been termed antinomianism, which, as this Greek-derived word implies, consists in going against (*anti*) the accepted norm or law (*nomos*). The Tantric texts use words like *pratiloman* (against the grain) and *paravritti* (inversion) to describe their teachings. Some Tantric adepts have made a way of life out of this principle of reversal, as can be seen in the extremist lifestyle of the *avadhūtas*, who walk about naked and live amid heaps of garbage. They model themselves after the god-man Dattātreya, who supposedly lived in the *tretā-yuga*. In the Puranic literature he is celebrated as an incar-

nation of the *tri-mūrti* (the Trinity of Hinduism), namely, the deities Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), and Shiva (the Destroyer).

Such initiates can still be found today, and the twentieth-century adept Rang Avadhoot (Ranga Avadhūta) of Nareshvar in Gujarat was venerated as a form of Dattātreya. This *avadhūta* was a college graduate who translated Tolstoy's works and composed his own books in Sanskrit, yet he lived in utter simplicity and quite unattached to any formal religion. The members of the Aghorī sect are still more extreme in their unconventionality and can be seen near cremation grounds, where, clothed only in the ashes from the funeral pyres, they pursue their solitary meditations.

Tantric antinomianism can be seen at work especially in the notorious left-hand schools of Tantra. Their members avail themselves of "unlawful" practices such as ritualized sexual intercourse (*maithuna*) with a person other than one's marital partner and the consumption of aphrodisiacs, alcohol, and meat (a taboo food in traditional India's vegetarian culture), as well as frequenting burial grounds for necromantic rituals. I will say more about this "left-hand" side of Tantra in chapter 14.

Understandably, the religious orthodoxy of the brahmins has always looked at Tantra and Tantric practitioners with dismay or even disdain. But Hindu society, which is apparently the oldest continuous pluralistic society on earth, has something of a built-in tolerance, which over the millennia has allowed all kinds of religious and spiritual traditions to flourish side by side. Another factor that facilitated the widespread acceptance of Tantra in the span of a few generations was the reputation of Tantric initiates as powerful magicians, be it of the white or the black variety. People feared the curses and spells of *tāntrikas* and did not want to be seen condemning or denigrating them, even if they thought the Tantric views and practices were in error. Even today, the rural population of India both venerates and fears ascetics, particularly those manifesting a Tantric demeanor. *Yogins* and *yoginīs* have always been looked upon as wielders of numinous power. In the case of Tantric initiates, this power is felt to be espe-

cially great because of their often close association with the shadow side of life, notably the realm of the dead.

At one end of the Tantric spectrum we have highly unorthodox practices such as black magic that go against the moral grain of Hindu society (and that of most societies). At the other end we have Tantric masters who decry all doctrines and all rituals and instead applaud the ideal of perfect spontaneity (*sahaja*). Most schools fall between these two poles; they are typically highly ritualistic but infused with the recognition that liberation springs from wisdom, which is innate and therefore cannot be produced by any external means. All the many Tantric techniques merely serve to cleanse the mirror of the mind so as to faithfully reflect the ever-present Reality, allowing the native wisdom to shine forth without distortion.

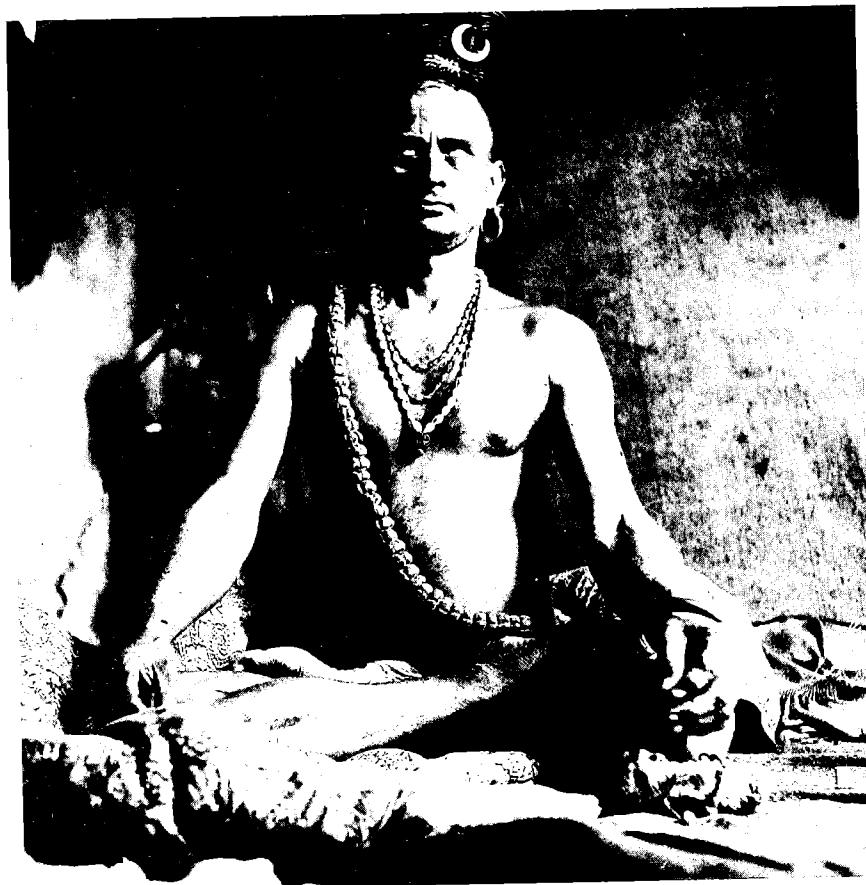
#### THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF TANTRA

Tantra, though highly innovative, has from the beginning deemed itself a continuation of earlier teachings. Thus while Buddhist Tantra understands itself as an esoteric tradition going back to Gautama the Buddha himself, Hindu Tantra by and large regards the revelatory teachings of the *Vedas* as its starting point. Some authorities have associated it particularly with the *Atharva-Veda*, no doubt because of that Vedic hymnody's magical content with the marginal status it has within more strictly orthodox Hindu circles. Then again, the *Tantras* are sometimes referred to as the "fifth *Veda*."

The Tantric claim to a Vedic origin is controversial and disputed by orthodox brahmins.<sup>8</sup> They not only deny the Vedic origin of Tantra but consider the Tantric teachings to be corrupt, if not altogether heretical. Their evaluation lags behind actual social reality, however, for Tantra has been an integral part of Hindu culture since at least the turn of the second millennium CE. To be able to understand Hindu Tantra, we must first understand Hinduism and the Vedic heritage, just as a proper understanding of Buddhist Tantrism (Vajrayāna) presupposes an understanding of at least Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The *Vedas*, originally a purely oral literature, form the sacred bedrock of Hinduism, and they may well be the oldest literary compositions in any language. In the nineteenth century, Western scholars arbitrarily fixed their date at around 1200–1500 BCE, whereas for India's pundits they are timeless revelation. Recent geological evidence of a great cataclysm that overtook North India around 1900 BCE has forced scholars to reexamine the facts.<sup>9</sup> In this cataclysm, a major tectonic shift followed by far-reaching climatic changes, the Sarasvatī River was reduced to a mere trickle. Because this river is hailed in the *Rig-Veda* as the mightiest of all rivers, this particular hymnody at least must have been composed prior to 1900 BCE, and probably long before then. A growing number of experts now favor the third and even the fourth millennium BCE for the time of the original composition of the bulk of the Rig-Vedic hymns. The other three Vedic collections—the *Yajur-Veda*, the *Sāma-Veda*, and the *Atharva-Veda*—very probably also belong to the precataclysm era. Also some of the *Brāhmaṇas*—explanatory ritual texts—may have been composed in the third millennium.

The revised date for the *Vedas* makes the Vedic civilization contemporaneous with the so-called Indus civilization, which flourished between c. 3000 BCE and 1700 BCE in what is now Pakistan, in the western portion of Northern India. The parallels between the two civilizations are so striking, in fact, that we must assume they are not separate civilizations but one and the same. This means that, in addition to the testimonial of the Vedic scriptures, we also have archaeological artifacts that can help us better understand this ancient civilization. The stereovision we obtain from the joint images of literary and archaeological evidence is exciting, for the Vedic civilization appears to have been governed by profound spiritual insights and values. It now appears that India is not only the oldest continuous civilization on earth (going back to the seventh millennium BCE) but also the one that harbors the most enduring spiritual heritage. As anyone who has studied the wisdom traditions of India without prejudice will have discovered, the Indic heritage is a gold mine with



A Tantric adept. (PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD LANNOY)

countless boulder-size nuggets. And the Tantric nugget is one of the largest.

Except for the most orthodox pundits, who view Tantra as an abomination, educated traditional Hindus have long looked upon Tantra as running parallel and in close interaction with (rather than merely in opposition to) the Vedic heritage. They distinguish between Vedic and Tantric—*vaidika* and *tāntrika*—currents of Hindu spirituality. This distinction demonstrates the huge success of Tantra as a tradition or cultural movement within Hinduism. In many instances, Tantra has been so influential as to reshape the Vedic stream by infus-

ing it with typically Tantric practices and ideas. For example, the type of ritual called *pūjā* (worship), which involves iconic representations of deities and their employment in ritual worship, has been characterized as Tantric rather than Vedic in nature. Yet brahmins throughout India employ it either in addition to, or instead of, more typically Vedic forms of ritual. To most of these brahmins it would not even occur to them that they are engaging in a practice that may well have originated in Tantric circles.

Many *tāntrikas* themselves regard the *Vedas* as an earlier revelation that, as has already been indicated, has lost efficacy in the present *kali-yuga*. Thus we can read in the *Mahānirvāna-Tantra* (2.14–15):

In the *kali-yuga*, the *mantras* revealed in the *Tantras* are efficient, yield immediate fruit, and are recommended for all practices, such as recitation, sacrifice, rituals, and so on.

The Vedic practices are powerless as a snake lacking poison fangs or like a corpse, though in the beginning, in the *satya-yuga*, they were bearing fruit.

We can appreciate the gravity of this pronouncement only when we know that the Vedic heritage is deemed to be a revelation of the Divine. It borders on heresy to say that it is no longer useful. The author of the *Mahānirvāna-Tantra* gets around this difficulty by presenting his own tradition as the direct utterances of the Divine as well. He can make this claim because the Indic civilization has always accepted the possibility of profound knowledge and wisdom arising from higher states of meditation and ecstasy. To attribute teachings to the Divine or a particular deity is both a convenient didactic device and an acknowledgment that the teachings are not merely products of the intellect or the imagination; rather, they are based on the sages' direct realizations of the subtle dimensions and the ultimate Reality. This is what is meant when the *Vedas* are said to be "superhuman" (*atimānusha*).

In any case, the *Mahānirvāna-Tantra* does not reject the Vedic revelation in its entirety but uses it as the foundation for its own, novel brand of esotericism. It is not that the Vedic repertoire of

psychospiritual practices is considered worthless in itself, only that people of the *kali-yuga* are incapable of employing them successfully. In the *Kula-Arnava-Tantra* (2.10) Shiva even declares that he extracted its teachings by churning the “ocean of the *Vedas* and *Āgamas* with the staff of wisdom.” This is a clear vote of confidence in the Vedic revelation. Yet in the same *Tantra* (2.68) we find this stanza (uttered by Shiva):

O Beloved, those who are proficient in the four *Vedas* but ignorant of the *kula* are “dog cookers.” However, even a low-caste dog cooker who knows the *kula* is superior to a brahmin.

Here the word *kula*, as I will explain in detail later, denotes essential Tantric wisdom, which is the wisdom of divine power (*shakti*). The above stanza contains a concealed criticism of the priestly establishment, which is thought to favor intellectual learning over actual spiritual experience. By contrast, the Tantric practitioners are first and foremost practical theologians. Their sole purpose is to gain mastery over the subtle realms and, finally, to realize the transcendental Reality itself. It is by virtue of their powerful spiritual practice that, as the Tantric authorities affirm, they outrank the brahmins, the hereditary custodians of the Vedic revelation who form the highest social class of Hindu society.

Is there any evidence, as some pundits have claimed, of Tantric ideas and practices in the *Vedas*? According to the pundit Manoranjan Basu, the *Tantras* “are the most ancient scriptures contemporaneous with the *Vedas* if not earlier.”<sup>10</sup> Since the *Vedas* have recently been redated to the third and even fourth millennium BCE, this would make the *Tantras* at least five or six thousand years old. This agrees with some Tibetan Buddhist *lamas*, who believe that Tantra (in its Buddhist variety) was first taught thousands of years prior to Gautama the Buddha. They ascribe the original Tantric teachings to another awakened being, the Buddha Tenpa Shenrab, founder of the Tibetan Bon tradition.<sup>11</sup> According to the *Nārāyanī-Tantra*, a late Hindu work, the *Vedas* originated from the *Tantras*, rather than the reverse. The typical Tantric view, however, is that the *Tantras* are a new revela-

tion replacing that of the *Vedas*. Likewise, most scholars reject the notion that Tantra originated in the era of the *Vedas* or earlier.

What we may safely say is that there is an undeniable continuity between the Vedic revelation and the Tantric revelation. Many important Tantric practices have their Vedic equivalent. Thus, scholars have pointed to the magical ideas and practices of the *Atharva-Veda*, which is especially associated with the very old priestly family of the Angirases, chief custodians of ancient magical lore. Researchers also have seen Tantric overtones in the Vedic gods Shiva and Rudra and the Vedic goddesses Nirriti and Yamī. Furthermore, the Vedic seers used *mantras*, sacrificial formulas, animal sacrifices, magical diagrams (*yantra*), and visualization in their rituals, as do the Tantric initiates. It is generally thought that the Vedic people did not practice worship with the aid of statues and that this was the unique contribution of Tantra. However, the *Rig-Veda* (1.21.2) has the intriguing line “men adorn Indra and Agni” (*indra-agnī shumbhatā narah*), which could be a reference to the practice of *pūjā*. Also, like the *tāntrikas*, the Vedic seers were eager to acquire knowledge about the hidden realms and realities, and not merely the ultimate liberating gnosis. As the eleventh-century *Siddha-Siddhānta-Paddhati* (2.31) states, a *yogin* is someone who truly knows the psychospiritual centers (*cakra*) of the body, the five kinds of inner space, and so on.

There is even a possibility that the Tantric notion of *kundalinī*, the multiply coiled spiritual energy, is present in Vedic times. In one hymn of the *Rig-Veda* (10.136.7) the expression *kunamnamā* is found, which means “she who is badly bent.” Some scholars have regarded this as a hidden reference to the *kundalinī-shakti* or serpent power, also called *kubjikā* (crooked one) in some early Tantric schools.

To return to our historical overview: as the ancient Vedic ritualism became more and more complex, the surrounding explanations also became increasingly sophisticated. Before long the brahmins felt the need for interpretive scriptures. These are known as the *Brāhmaṇas*, the earliest of which were created in the time just before the cataclysm mentioned above. As their name suggests, these works are intended for the brahmins (or *brāhmaṇas*) and their students, who

needed to learn not only how to perform the Vedic rituals but also the cosmology and theology behind them.

If we look for Tantric elements in the *Brāhmaṇas*, we can readily find them in the idea that sexual union is a form of sacrifice, a notion that builds a bridge to the Tantric *maithunā*. Sexual symbolism is pervasive in the *Brāhmaṇas*, but can already be amply found in the *Vedas*. Moreover, *bīja-mantras* (seed *mantras*) first appear in the *Brāhmaṇas*, where they are associated with specific deities. For instance, in the *Shata-Patha-Brāhmaṇa* the *mantra* of the solar deity, Sūrya, is given as *om ghrini sūryāya namah*, or “*Om. Ghrini. Salutation to Sūrya.*” The *bīja-mantra* “*ghrini*” is explained onomatopoeically in the following legend: Once upon a time, Vishnu was resting his head on the end of a bow. Ants ate through the bow string; it snapped and severed Vishnu’s head from his body. The head fell, making the sound *ghrin*, and thereupon became transformed into the sun. (I will say more about *bīja-mantras* in chapter 12.) Another idea that bespeaks the continuity between the Vedic and the Tantric heritage is the notion, first expressed in the *Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa*, that during ritual sacrifice all participants are elevated to the status of a brahmin. Some *Tantras* went further, though, by rejecting caste differences outside the ritual context as well. This is, in fact, one of the hallmarks of the Tantric tradition.

Chronologically, the *Brāhmaṇas* were followed by the *Āranyakas* (scriptures for forest hermits) and the *Upanishads* (gnostic treatises for mystics). The last-mentioned texts afford further comparisons with Tantra. The early *Upanishads* present the concepts of subtle currents of life energy (*prāna* or *vāyu*), psychospiritual vortices (*cakra*), and channels (*nādī*) so typical of the Tantric teachings. These ideas, however, were not altogether new, because already the *Atharva-Veda* mentions the various currents of the life force (15.15.2-9) and the eight “wheels” (*cakra*) of the stronghold (i.e., the body) of the deities (10.2.31).

The early *Upanishads* also continued the sexological considerations of an earlier era. Thus the *Chāndogya-Upanishad* (2.1.13.1-2), through magical analogy, equates the various parts of the Vedic chant (*sāman*) to the various phases of sexual intercourse, which invites

comparison with the *maithunā* ritual of the left-hand and Kaula schools of Tantrism. The text even employs the word *mithuna* (intercourse). Also, the phrase *vāma-devya* in this passage, which refers to a particular kind of chant, reminds one of the Tantric expression *vāma*, standing for both “woman” and “left hand.”

The *Brihad-Āranyaka-Upanishad* (6.4.3) compares the various female parts to religious objects:

Her genitals are the sacrificial altar, her hairs the grass offering, her skin the *soma* press, and her two labia the fire in the center. Verily, as great as the world is for him who sacrifices with the *vājapeya* [strength libation] sacrifice, so great is the world for him who, knowing this, practices sexual intercourse. He diverts the good deeds of women to himself. But he who practices sexual intercourse without knowing this—women divert his good deeds to themselves.

The *Brihad-Āranyaka-Upanishad* goes on to say that as soon as the man enters the woman, he should press his mouth on hers, stroke her genitals, and mutter the following incantation:

You who have arisen from every limb and have been generated from the heart are the essence of the limbs! Distract this woman here in me as if pierced by a poisoned arrow!

This ancient *Upanishad* also describes what ritual steps are to be taken when the man’s semen is spilled: “He should take it with ring finger and thumb and rub it on his chest [i.e., the location of the heart *cakra*] or between his eyebrows [i.e., the location of the so-called third eye].” This prescription, by which the man can reclaim his vigor, could come straight out of the Tantric literature. Not surprisingly, one of the more orthodox translators of the *Brihad-Āranyaka-Upanishad* omitted this passage altogether!<sup>12</sup>

Despite the similarities between the Vedic and the Tantric heritages, however, Tantra is a distinct tradition, meandering down India’s history as a mighty companion to the Vedic stream of spirituality and culture. The interplay between both traditions has been extremely complex and continues to this day, yet the adherents of the Vedic

heritage by and large have looked upon Tantra as a false gospel. They have often branded Tantric teachings as *nāstika*—from *na*, “not,” *asti*, “it is,” and the suffix *ka*, meaning “unorthodox” in the sense of not affirming the truth of the *Vedas*. As we have seen, the situation is not so simple, and particularly some later *Tantras* deliberately seek to construct a bridge to the Vedic heritage of the brahmins.

### TANTRA YOGA

Tantra is a profoundly yogic tradition, and the *Tantras* call themselves *sādhanā-shāstras*, or books of spiritual practice. The Sanskrit word *yoga* means both “discipline” and “union” and can be translated as “unitive discipline.” It stands for what in the West is called spirituality or mysticism. The oft-used compound *tantra-yoga* means simply “Tantric discipline” and captures the intensely experiential character of the Tantric heritage, which emphasizes the realization of higher or subtle states of existence right up to the ultimate Reality itself. Tantra Yoga is unitive discipline based on the expansion, or intensification, of wisdom by means of the beliefs and practices promulgated in the *Tantras* and the exegetical literature that has crystallized around them. By “unifying” the mind—that is, by focusing it—Tantra Yoga unifies the seemingly disparate realities of space-time and the transcendental Reality. It recaptures the primordial continuum that is apparently lost in the process of becoming an individuated being.

Tantra Yoga, as understood here, is a relative latecomer in the long history of Yoga. As we have seen, however, proto-Tantric elements can be detected even in the Vedic era. To be sure, the taproots of Yoga are to be found in the *Vedas*, composed some five thousand years ago. In its most archaic form, Yoga was a combination of ritual worship and meditation, having the purpose of opening the gates to the celestial realms and beyond. It was closely associated with the Vedic sacrificial cult, priestly hymn making, the mystery of the sacred ecstasy-inducing *soma* potion, and visions of the subtle dimensions

with their hierarchy of male and female deities, as well as ancestral and other spirits.

The typical Vedic *yogin* was the *rishi* or “seer,” who envisioned or perceived the reality or realities given voice in the sacred words (*mantra*) of the hymns. Crafting the Vedic hymns was a fine yogic art demanding not only extraordinary linguistic skills but also tremendous concentration in their composition and delivery. Here we have the very beginnings both of *mantra-yoga* and meditative visualization, which are fundamental to Tantrism.

The Tantric *esprit* continued to evolve through the period of the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Upanishads*, as well as the intellectually and spiritually fertile era of the *Mahābhārata*, until it reached its typical form in the *Tantras* of the early centuries of the common era. In the subsequent centuries, Tantric schools proliferated and created a massive literature in Sanskrit and various vernacular languages, which is still scarcely researched. Much of this corpus has been lost and is only known to us from stray quotes and references in the extant manuscripts.

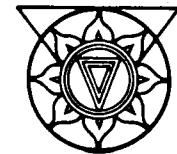
Whatever Tantra you may read, you will always discover an emphasis on personal experimentation and experience. Westerners thirsting for a direct encounter with the spiritual dimension of existence relate to such an orientation easily enough. But they may not understand quite so readily the theoretical and practical framework within which the Tantric adepts have pursued their supreme goal of Self-realization, or enlightenment. There are many things in Tantra, however, that will be familiar to students of Yoga. From the larger perspective of the history of India’s spirituality, Tantra Yoga is simply another form of Yoga, or spiritual discipline. Yet it also represents a vast synthesis of spiritual knowledge and psychotechnology. Because of its integrative approach, Tantra holds special appeal for modern Western seekers, who have come to appreciate the value of holistic thinking.

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# Tantra

## THE PATH OF ECSTASY



Georg Feuerstein



\*Published by Shambhala Publications

SHAMBHALA  
Boston & London  
1998