

Tantra and its Misconceptions: Reclaiming the Essence from the Illusions

By David Frawley

Perhaps nothing is more exotic, dramatic and sensational in India's Yoga traditions than the practice of Tantra. No other approach to Yoga has gained such a fascination for the modern mind and its seeking of the bizarre, the entertaining and the enigmatic. Tantra appears to offer both spiritual and worldly success and prosperity and to a superlative degree. It covers not only internal yogic experiences of chakras, lokas and deities, but also has many important healing practices for body and mind. On top of this it adds special means of heightening sexual pleasure, making money, gaining success and defeating one's enemies – as if it could be used for achieving all human desires. There is in Tantra something for everyone, especially those who may be put off by ascetic or renunciate approaches to the spiritual life such as seem to dominate most of the rest of the Yoga tradition.

Even in India, Tantrics are often portrayed as great magicians with special powers to overcome difficulties and fulfill our desires, using gems, mantras, yantras and pujas to get the Gods on our side and remove negative forces and bad karmas that get in the way of our happiness. Such Tantrics may use well-defined systems of knowledge, particularly Vedic astrology but also Yoga and Ayurveda and claim to be experts in them. But often their claim is more personal, relative to their own special powers or siddhis and connections with deities, gurus or even ghosts that can work for us in mysterious ways that circumvent any outer limitations we may be facing.

Some Tantric gurus are considered to be so powerful that their touch or glance alone can grant whatever wish we come to them hoping to gain. They offer us quick and miraculous means to accomplish what our own efforts, karma and destiny appear to deny us. Naturally, these gurus can charge a lot for such results or demand our personal loyalty and devotion in various ways. Many Indian politicians have routinely employed such Tantrics, hoping to use their powers to win elections and defeat their enemies. This magical Tantra makes for entertaining stories and good novels, giving it an additional glamour.

Even genuine gurus may be looked upon with such a vision as being able to grant our desires, though they may not project any magical Tantric image themselves, so much is the human wish for Divine intervention to make our lives better and conform more with what we would like them to be. Such efforts to use God, Goddess or guru for our personal aims, are clearly not deeply spiritual, but have their appeal to everyone, particularly as the world grows more competitive. This Tantric wish-fulfillment allure is very different than deeper Tantric teachings that require profound knowledge, grace and personal effort to reach realms of bliss beyond ego and desire. But they are easier to get people's attention with.

In the West, by a Tantric teacher is usually meant largely one who teaches Tantric sex, a combination of a Tantric ritualistic yogic approach to sex along with the Kama Sutras and New Age psychology. Western Tantric Yoga teachers are generally teachers of sexual yogas and may be sex therapists as well. Their claim is to make the experience of sex not only more sacred but also more enjoyable.

Of course, it is in Tantra that we find the most detailed worship of the Goddess, which naturally brings up the image of sex, particularly in this media age. Traditional Tantra is associated with the Goddess or Shakti, the Shakta tradition, which is the main basis of its teaching, so the image of the Goddess dominates most of Tantra. Western Tantra is similarly part of a revival of the worship of the Goddess, which extends into pagan and indigenous traditions.

Yet Shakti is not simply about sex, which is but one aspect of cosmic energy particularly powerful in our embodied nature, but all forms of the cosmic powers. The forces of nature as lightning, sunlight and moonlight are also Shaktis, as are the powers of the five elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether. The electromagnetic forces of the physical world and of the psyche are also forms of Shakti. Shakti worship is not worship of sex but understanding all these cosmic forces and their workings. Great Tantrics can work with all these Shaktis both of the external and internal worlds.

Other aspects of Tantra have come to the West as well, but not without distortions either. Kundalini and the chakras are a common New Age topic, though these are often portrayed quite differently than in classical Yoga. Chakras are not looked upon so much as centers of spiritual experience as in traditional Tantric Yoga as places of physical and emotional healing. Such chakra healing is common in many New Age approaches, including various forms of massage, body work, energy work and pranic healing. The chakras, which are originally energy centers in the subtle body, are often reduced to a physical formula. While this may have its health benefits, it does not unfold the deeper aspects of chakra energy in Yoga practice, which require intense sadhana, mantra, pranayama and meditation.

Western Tantric gurus have also taken up the approach of the 'crazy gurus' that were found in traditional Tantra as well. Such unorthodox figures act in ways that are unpredictable, contradictory or even immoral. Being such a Tantric can be a catch all for doing whatever one wants and acting in as unusual and idiosyncratic manner as possible. It can put the guru above any ethical standard of behavior, which is hard for those of us in the West, coming out of a culture of rajas and tamas, to achieve anyway.

This combination of New Age fantasies from the West and an innate Indian need for the magical Yogi has created much room for illusion and distortion, if not manipulation and deception. It also causes us to miss the fact that Tantra in the broader sense is a deep, profound, highly spiritual and very aesthetic way of understanding the conscious universe

in which we live. Real Tantra often gets buried under these glittering allures and exaggerated claims.

Such a fascination with Tantra is nothing new in human cultures. Tantra is just another version of the same old attraction to magic, the occult and ritual that we find to some degree in all cultures and was very prominent in the ancient world everywhere. Ancient Vedic rituals, much like modern Tantric rituals, can similarly be employed for all the goals of human life from kama or enjoyment, to victory in battle, to moksha or liberation.

This effort to bend the cosmic powers to our human wishes is there even in monotheistic religions that may consider such pagan practices to be unholy. In western religions, prayer has been used in the same way to promote our worldly or social well-being, like the Christian evangelicals in America performing prayers and church services for the reelection of George W. Bush. The same use of prayer occurs in Islam.

Approaching God – whether in the formless sense, or in the form of various Gods and Goddesses, or saints and gurus – to gain our human desires is one of the first and most common ways for people to attempt. The undeveloped human ego will naturally first approach God with its own needs, rather than any real seeking of knowledge or devotion. Tantra provides one of the most elaborate ways of doing this and recognizes its value as a first step in getting people onto the spiritual path. Chanting mantras in order to increase our prosperity or find a good partner or any other such personal goal is part of that approach. There is nothing wrong with such practices, but they don't represent the higher aspects of Tantra or Yoga.

Broader Aspects of Tantra

Apart from these old and new distortions, we must recognize that Tantra is a complex tradition, with many sides and facets going beyond and even contrary to these popular fantasies. Tantra is interwoven with the spiritual teachings of India and beyond, going back far into ancient history. The popular understanding of Tantra, not only in the West but even in India today, represents only a small part of this vast system of knowledge.

We could compare the state of Tantra with that of Yoga, with which it is related. Like Tantra, the physical side of Yoga is emphasized - the practice of yogic postures or asanas - even though these represent a small part of classical Yoga, whose main concern is meditation. We live in a materialistic and media age in which spiritual traditions are recast or scaled down into a physical and sensationalistic model. This may popularize but it also easily diminishes and distorts.

Such a sensate image of Tantra may cause some people to want to reject anything Tantric altogether. Certain spiritual groups East and West like to avoid Tantra for this reason. This is a mistake of another kind because it causes them to overlook the positive aspects of Tantra, its wealth of knowledge and practices about all the subtle aspects of

Yoga, the worship of deities and how to harmonize actions in the human realm with the Divine worlds above.

The real question then is how to separate the deeper and higher aspects of Tantra from the outer and superficial views. Such fantasy approaches to Tantra obscure the fact that real Tantra is a profound science. Tantra is a precise system of knowledge that provides specific results if employed correctly. The application of mantras, rituals, pranayama and meditation in Tantric teachings is probably the most elaborate and complete in the entire Yoga tradition. Tantra also shows us how to employ such systems as Vedic astrology, Vastu and Ayurveda for deeper levels of protection and healing.

It is in Tantra that we find the most detailed explication of the power of mantra, with every syllable of the Sanskrit alphabet precisely defined. It is the bija mantras of Tantra, the Shakti mantras like Hrim and Shrim that are the most powerful of all mantras. Tantra similarly provides the greatest explanation of the use of yantras or geometrical meditation devices that are important tools of concentration and meditation. For example, the worship of Sri Chakra and Sri Yantra, is probably the most important and detailed of all the Yoga teachings. The entire universe and the subtle body are present in the Sri Chakra. Its worship

Tantra is also a good tool for helping people of all traditions reclaim the worship of the Goddess and restore appropriate forms for her worship. As Christianity developed it rejected and condemned the common pagan worship of the Goddess that had long existed in the West. Even today there is no Goddess in the western Protestant traditions and the only Goddess for the Catholics is Mother Mary, who technically speaking in Christian theology is no Goddess or Divine Mother at all but simply just the Mother of Jesus. To western Tantra has been added many other forms of Goddess worship in Pagan traditions from the Celts to the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians and Babylonians. Yet in these traditions forms of worship, both external and internal, have largely been lost. Tantra helps restore these through its understanding of ritual, meditation and iconography.

Tantra offers such a wealth of images as the Dasha Mahavidya or Ten Wisdom Forms of the Goddess, or the many forms of Kali, Durga and Sundari. Tantra provides the most detailed information on the visualization of such deities, their forms, ornaments and weapons and how to use them. Tantra contains an important tradition of sacred art and iconography. Tantra preserves the great festivals of the Goddess like Navaratri and Durga Puja. Tantric sacred sites from Kamakhya in Assam to Kamakshi in Tamil Nadu preserve not only a tradition of Goddess worship but a living connection with the Goddess in nature.

Tantra is perhaps the main current in Indian spirituality of the last thousand years or more and helps us understand its entire movement. Most of modern Hinduism and even much of Buddhism and Jainism is Tantric. There is a strong Tantric element to the Sikh Dharma

if one looks deeply. Tibetan Buddhism is largely a Tantric form, taken up from Indian Tantrics in Bengal and Bihar. Such a Buddhism of mantras, mandalas, deities, yoga and meditation is much closer to Hindu Tantric and Vedic disciplines than it is to the older Buddhism of Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Traditional Tantra is not just about sex either. It has a strong ascetic and monastic form. Special Tantric worship of different forms of the Goddess go on in the major Shankaracharya Maths in India, using powerful mantras, yantras and rituals. Shankara himself was not only the most famous Advaitic teacher but also one of the most important Tantric teachers. His great poem to the Goddess, Saundarya Lahiri, remains perhaps the most important Tantric text that is used for Sri Chakra worship.

South Indian Agamic temple worship is Tantric in this broader sense. The entire Shakta tradition or worship of the Goddess in India is Tantric. Most of Shaivism is Tantric. Yet even Tantric elements are there in Vaishnava and other traditions.

Tantric teachings have been important for most of the main gurus of modern India since Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, including Aurobindo, Shivananda, Anandamayi Ma and many others. Ganapati Muni, the chief disciple of Ramana Maharshi, was another great Tantric Yogi. Yet this tradition is even older. The main Yoga gurus over the past thousand years or more have been mainly Nath Yogis, who are Tantric Shaivites, starting with Goraknath and Matsyendra Nath. Such Nath Yogis were the founders of the Hatha Yoga tradition as well as many important approaches to Tantra. Nath Yogis were honored by Shankara, Jnanadeva, Abhinavagupta, and many other great Hindu teachers of the medieval period. Even the teachings of modern Yoga guru, Krishnamacharya, are attributed to tradition stated by one Natha Muni. Without understanding real Tantra it is hard to understand Yoga.

In fact the best way to understand real Tantra is as an expanded form of Raja Yoga. Like the Yoga Sutras and in more detail Tantra teaches asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana and samadhi, but providing many more specific forms and techniques. It gives the details on mantras and methods that are only alluded to in the Sutras.

We can also explain real Tantra as a yogic approach to science and art. In this regard there is a cross over between Vedic and Tantric sciences in such disciplines as Ayurveda, Jyotish and Vastu. Tantra is the basis of the rasa Shastra or alchemical side of Ayurveda and much of Ayurveda's psychological treatments. Tantra uses the rules of Jyotish for determining favorable times for ritual, pujas and so on. Tantric architecture and temple building develops from Vastu. In fact, it is in Tantra, contrary to modern academicians who fail to see the obvious connection, that we find the most detailed applications of Vedic teachings of ritual, mantra, yajna, puja and meditation.

So whether we like it or not, Tantra is and will remain a dominant force not only in Indian but in world spirituality. While we can recognize the place of popular and New Age forms

of Tantra as a point of entry into these teachings, it is important to recognize the broader and deeper scope of real Tantra which is more than these flights of imagination and may be quite different from them. Tantra is the practical and energetic application of all the yogic wisdom of life, time, space and energy. If you approach it with the right intention, it can offer more than the fulfillment of your desires, it can help you gain the supreme goal of life of realization of the entire universe within your own awareness!

Recent popular or New Age spirituality in the West, which is now coming to India, looks in many respects like a new form of Tantra, making use of both its occult and spiritual sides. New Age spirituality includes the exploration of a whole range of energetic practices through the body, senses and mind, both for achieving personal and spiritual goals, as well as a recognition of the Goddess. It appears to be an extension of Tantric openness and experimentation into the technological age, but with a consumerist and hedonistic approach. While there is much that is creative or insightful in it, particularly relative to health and healing, there is also much wishful thinking. It is seldom based upon any deep study of traditional teachings but mainly on a

For most people in the Western world, Tantra means sex. Tantra is commonly associated with special sexual practices, different sexual postures, and sexual rituals. This does represent an aspect of Tantra and of Hindu thought, such as is found in the *Kama Sutra*, the Hindu manual of sexual love. While Tantric teachings mention such practices, it should be noted that they are not its main focus, nor are they necessary parts of Tantric Yoga, the main practices of which, like all true yoga traditions, is mantra and meditation. Many Tantric texts contain no references to sexual practices. Others mention them as preliminaries or as only one possible line of approach. Yet others regard them as mere metaphors or symbols.

The broad approach of Tantra contains ways to turn all ordinary activities - including breathing, eating and sleeping - into rituals or sacred actions, but this does not mean that Tantra is promoting such activities for ordinary gratification.

Though Tantra does contain sexual Yogas, it is wrong to think that Tantra is limited to them. In the same light Tantric art, which has an erotic appearance, is meant as a depiction of the higher forces of consciousness through which the primal forces of life can be transformed. It is not a glorification of ordinary sexuality, though it is unafraid of this force and is able to see the cosmic power working behind it.

Non-Sexual Tantra

Tantric teachings are also an integral part of the monastic and ascetic traditions of India. There is a strong Tantric side to the Vedantic Swami orders, which involves the worship of the Goddess and the Sri Yantra. Most Hindu ashrams and monasteries conduct regular forms of Tantric worship. Shankaracharya (c. 500 AD), the founder of the Vedantic monastic orders, was himself a great Tantric adept, yogi and devotee of the

Goddess, though he was also a sage and philosopher of the Absolute.

A true Tantric master is a person who is a master of mantra or an energetic type of Yoga practice and does not connote one who is adept at sexual practices. Great Tantric teachers include figures like Shankara, Ramakrishna, and Nityananda, who were life-long celibates.

Yet this does not mean that one has to be celibate to benefit from Tantra. Tantra is not characterized by sexuality or its negation, but by various energetic approaches like mantra and yantra which can be applied on many levels and which provide tools for people of all temperaments and capacities. Tantra emphasizes methodologies of transforming energies and is not concerned with either suppression or ordinary indulgences through which energy is dissipated.

Sexuality and Liberation

The spiritual traditions of India - whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain - emphasize transmuting sexual energy because sex is the core energy of our existence. This has created two approaches. The first is a renunciate tradition in which all sexual activity is voluntarily given up. The second is a householder tradition in which moderation in sexuality is practiced.

The householder tradition may include sexual yoga practices, though seldom the graphic kind depicted in modern Western books on Tantra. It also aims at sustaining the social order through the family system, and thereby emphasizes sexual purity and loyalty. While the renunciate tradition is generally thought to be more direct because it allows the aspirant to focus entirely on practice, this is only a general rule. Many great yogis have come from householder traditions, and many Vedic rishis were married and had children. According to the Hindu tradition, human beings can live a householder life and fulfill their social and family duties and still achieve liberation. This is particularly important today when monasticism is in decline worldwide and in the West where it hardly exists at all.

While the renunciate tradition is generally more direct, it is more strenuous, and is the exception rather than the rule in all times and cultures, even those eras which are enlightened. It is a particularly difficult path in the modern age and in the Western world where there is no cultural tradition to support it. In this regard Yoga never encourages us to merely repress ourselves, though it does encourage self-discipline and says that we never need to bow down to the forces of desire. Yoga is part of an organic process of higher evolution whereby we naturally come to transcend our outer limitations into a state of inner freedom and contentment. It does not tell us that we must give up what provides us with happiness, but suggests that we should consider where our real happiness comes from. True happiness resides in consciousness, not in any material form, identity, or activity.

The Yoga tradition does not reject sexual energy as evil, bad, or shameful. Celibacy is only recommended along with spiritual practices to transmute that energy for usage on another level. Without meditation practices the Yoga tradition considers that celibacy may be harmful because the unused energy can stagnate and cause various physical and emotional problems. Yet without some control of sexual energy there will not be the power necessary to do higher meditation practices.

Tantra and the Body

Tantra affirms the importance of the body as a temple for the Divine and grants it a sacred reality. It views our psycho-physical organism as a microcosm in which the individual soul can understand the workings of the entire universe. For this reason Tantra has been regarded as a body-affirmative form of spiritual tradition, as opposed to teachings which negate the body. However Tantra does not affirm ordinary bodily identity, but sees the body as a mystic symbol. Yoga and Vedanta, which have been criticized as being against the body or anti-life, do not condemn the body either; they only negate attachment to the body and the sense of bodily identity (the I-am-the-body idea). Yoga looks upon the body as a temple for the Divine and as a mirror of the universe. On the other hand, ordinary values that affirm the body as the means to ultimate happiness end up abusing the body in order to achieve pleasures that are never really fulfilling anyway.

The body is the best vehicle nature can provide to aid us in our spiritual growth and is a great symbol for the different levels and powers of the cosmos. However, the body is not our true Self. The body is subject to disease, decay and death and cannot possibly provide lasting happiness, which can never be found in anything transient. However marvelous a vehicle the body may be and however much we can learn from it, there is no more bodily fulfillment than there is fulfillment for our automobile, which like the body is an instrument of experience but not our true identity.

We should respect the body and care for it properly because it is our means of gaining experience and enlightenment. Without energy and sensitivity in the body we cannot go far on the spiritual path. There is a natural intelligence in the body that shows us how to use it in the right way. This intelligence, which is part of the cosmic mind, reveals itself when we no longer use the body to pursue personal desires but as an instrument of developing higher awareness. The truth is that we are inherently happy and free as conscious beings, even without a body. Supreme happiness lies in being who we really are, which is not mere flesh but pure awareness. Hence the idea that Tantra is body-affirmative can be misleading and should be understood only in the sense that Tantra regards the body as a sacred ground for the Divine Self to be realized.

Tantra and the Reality of the World

Along with the idea that Tantra is body-affirmative is the idea that Tantra is world-affirmative and Tantric philosophy grants a reality to the external world which is not found in other systems. According to this view there is an inherent opposition between Tantra and systems that negate the world (and the body) as unreal. Some Tantric teachings do give more reality to the world of manifestation than the Mayavadic or illusionist view of non-dualistic (Advaita) Vedanta, which states that the world is unreal and God is the only reality. Typical in this respect is Kashmir Shaivism. However, the Tantric systems which affirm the reality of the world, affirm its reality as consciousness and are quite removed from modern materialistic conceptions.

Contrary to this view, we should note that the predominant form of Tantra in India today - the worship of the Goddess through the Sri Chakra - is generally presented from the perspective of non-dualistic Vedanta. Many great proponents of world-negating Vedanta have been Tantric masters. Most notable is Shankaracharya, the greatest of the Vedantic philosophers, who wrote many famous Tantric works on the worship of the Divine Mother (like *Saundarya Lahiri*).

The Shakta tradition itself (the tradition that worships the Goddess or Shakti) is generally Advaitic and Mayavadic and asserts that the world is unreal. The *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, one of the most important Tantric works on the worship of the Goddess, gives such a teaching. This is unlike the *Srimad Bhagavatam* of the Vaishnavis (worshippers of Vishnu), which follows a dualistic (dvaita) view of creation. As Vaishnava teachings grant reality to the outer world, we can see that this view has never been regarded as the sole property of Tantra.

Hence there is nothing in Tantra which is inherently opposed to world-negation approaches, nor is there anything in world-negation approaches that is inherently opposed to Tantra. There is not only a strong Tantric tradition of world affirmation, there is also a strong Tantric tradition of world negation. In the world-negation traditions the Goddess herself is worshipped as the Supreme Self or Absolute beyond all manifestation.

Tantra and Emotions

There is a trend today, particularly in psychological circles, to emphasize the value of expressing emotions or reliving powerful emotional experiences and traumas. This is to counter a cultural tendency to suppress emotions and to deny our feelings. Tantra looks upon emotions as tools for spiritual growth. Hence Tantra has been regarded as affirming the validity of emotions, as compared with traditional spiritual teachings which negate emotion.

However, traditional Tantra does not encourage mere emotional expression, which only causes greater attachment to emotions and through them into the outer world. Tantra

regards emotions as trapped energy and seeks the release of that energy, in which the form of the emotion subsides like a wave into the sea of awareness. This process occurs when we recognize that emotions are various cosmic energies limited and broken up by patterns of attachment. Tantra uses forms of the Gods and Goddesses - like peaceful or wrathful deities - to help us contact the cosmic meaning of emotion, which is just a force of nature. Seeing the Divine energy, or play of consciousness, inherent in emotion, we discover emotion as a means of relating to the Divine within us. While Tantra does not deny emotion, it should not be associated with mere emotionalism but with the alchemy of transmuting human emotions into Divine energies through developing devotion. Tantra does not emphasize the personal expression of emotions but the understanding of emotion as a play of consciousness.

Nor do traditional or so-called ascetic yogic approaches simply suppress or deny emotion or any other force of nature, which cannot be a means of liberation for anyone. It is not emotion or any aspect of energy in itself that Yoga seeks to negate but the ego, which is the selfish appropriation, and therefore abuse, of the beneficent energies of life. Yoga does not encourage suppressing anything that is natural to us, but discovering our true nature in which we can naturally let go of all attachments and dependencies.

Tantra and the Use of Intoxicants

Those who use psychedelics or mind-altering drugs have claimed some affinity with Tantra, where the use of intoxicants sometimes occurs. Like the sexual practices, Tantric teachings regard the use of intoxicants as a preliminary step or as a metaphor - wine for example signifying the inner flow of bliss released by the practice of Yoga. The use of intoxicants is found in Tantra but is also not characteristic of it. There has been some use of marijuana (ganja) by Indian sadhus outside the Tantric tradition as well, but most teachers do not encourage this.

While psychedelic drugs take us out of ordinary consciousness and may help open our horizons in life, their ability to do so is limited and to use them repeatedly must have side-effects. There ways to do this which are safer, more beneficial and long-term ways to do this, as in the mantric and meditational practices of the primary yogic path.

Tantra and Crazy Gurus

Tantric gurus, particularly in this country, have a reputation for acting in an unconventional, dramatic or even contradictory manner, which sometimes includes entering into sexual relationships with disciples, or acting toward them in an abusive manner. Tantra, with its open view of things, is more tolerant of such exceptional behavior, and some Tantric teachings say that such methods can, under certain circumstances, be helpful in shocking a disciple into awakening.

Yet such unconventional behavior can be used as an excuse to cover an inability to control our desires, and can result in exploitation. We should note that many Tantric gurus have been figures of the most exemplary conduct, and unusual behavior is not a necessary prerequisite of Tantric teachers. This does not mean that a true teacher cannot act in an unconventional manner or that he must cater to the disciple's preconceptions, but that being a teacher should generally require a higher, not a lower standard of behavior than that of ordinary people. Being a spiritual teacher should not be a license to do what one wants but an example for others to follow. Hence crazy gurus or crazy wisdom is not the essence of Tantra, though it has a niche within Tantric history.

We should also note that many of those who have become famous in the West as Tantric or crazy gurus have not themselves come from any real traditional background, and many have been self-proclaimed gurus, without having had any real guru of their own.

Not surprisingly, Tantra does have a bad reputation in a number of spiritual circles. This is largely owing to the excesses of Tantra which can include unusual sexual practices, intoxicants, magical practices to inflict harm or take control of other people, and other methods considered to be impure. For this reason many teachers - including some who have been true Tantric teachers - have avoided using the name Tantra. They may prefer to emphasize Vedic, Yogic or Vedantic traditions that include Tantra but are not tarnished by its misconceptions. Swami Vivekananda himself - the first major figure to bring Yoga and Vedanta to the West a hundred years ago - was careful to avoid introducing Tantric concepts to Western audiences, though he was familiar with them from his own teacher Ramakrishna, who was a Tantric adept. This was not only to avoid offending the Victorian mind, but to avoid appealing to the sensate side of the modern mind, which was also in evidence in his time.

Tantra and the Worship of the Goddess

Tantra is associated with the worship of the Goddess, the feminine aspect of Divinity, and this is one of its prime features. Tantra provides a whole spiritual science for the worship of the Divine Mother, not merely a set of beliefs or dogmas but a practical way of developing our higher awareness through Her wisdom and Her grace. For those seeking to understand the religion of the Divine Mother, Hindu Tantra is perhaps the best key.

Yet there are also Tantric teachings which focus on Shiva, Vishnu and other Gods and in which the Goddess does not play a central role. Tantra is not limited to Goddess worship, and some form of Goddess worship is found in all the traditions of India going back to the most ancient Vedic. It is not unique to the Tantric.

Traditional Tantra gives reverence to both male and female powers and affirms that the God and Goddess go together, support each other, and should be worshipped together. Along with the Goddess is her consort, the great God, Lord Shiva. Their children -

Ganesh and Skanda - play an important part, as do the deities of the Hindu pantheon, which are all related to each other.

Tantra and Kundalini

Kundalini, often translated as the serpent power, is a term which has gained some recognition today, particularly in yogic and New Age circles, though it is seldom properly understood. Kundalini literally means a coiled-up energy or the power that dwells in a cave (kunda). For any transformation to be possible, an energy is needed to bring it about. For the transformation of consciousness a special and powerful energy is needed. This is Kundalini.

Tantra presents a whole yogic and mantric science for developing Kundalini. However, this Tantric science has its foundation or parallels in Vedic, Vedantic and Yoga texts that speak of the transforming word (vak), the energy of consciousness (cit-shakti), or the power of knowledge (jnana-shakti), which are synonyms for Kundalini.

The traditional role of Kundalini is different than the way in which it is generally viewed today, which is to regard it as a mere force to control and harness. Kundalini is a form of the Goddess and should be worshipped as Her power. It is not some psychic energy to be aroused but a Divine energy to be revered. Efforts to manipulate Kundalini through willful practice or forceful techniques are not only dangerous, but fail to recognize the reality of the Goddess and are contrary to her worship.

Many yogis, including Tantrics, may use no specific practices or Pranic manipulations to arouse the Kundalini. The arousing of the Kundalini can occur through intense devotion or profound meditation and does not require the use of specific Yoga techniques. Higher direct realization or knowledge approaches may not even mention the term Kundalini. Energy always follows consciousness and does not have to be approached as an end in itself. On the other hand, if we pursue energy apart from consciousness we may gain power, but, as it is not under the control of awareness, it is likely to have undesirable side-effects.

When Yoga techniques are used to arouse the Kundalini - and they are often very helpful - they should be done as part of a practice of surrender to the Divine or inquiry into the Self-nature. Without this basis they cannot be done correctly. Hence the yoga student must first have a background in meditation, control of the senses, and an understanding of the workings of the mind before trying to work with Kundalini.

Tantra and Art

Tantra is allied with all forms of art in India. As the Goddess is the Divine Word, Tantra is closely associated with the tradition of Sanskrit poetry, and the entire tradition of Sanskrit learning and literature has a strong Tantric imprint. Stories of Shiva and Devi (the

Goddess), popular in Tantric teachings, are the basis of Indian music and dance. Shiva is known as Nataraj or the Lord of the Dance. The Goddess has her own special gentle dance called the lasya. Indian art, including painting, sculpture and architecture, has a similar basis in Hindu mythology which Tantra shares. The many images and statues found in Hindu temples are fashioned and worshipped according to the rules prescribed in Tantric texts.

Today we need to recreate a more dharma-oriented artistic tradition and bring back the use of the image, icon and a way of sacred art. Tantric art can show us how to do this. But the artistic side of Tantra has its discipline. It is not a tradition without rules, or one that approves of anything dramatic, sensational, novel or unconventional as art. Tantra provides a structured and orderly conception of art based upon an understanding of the occult and spiritual laws of the universe.

Tantra and Science

Tantra is a kind of science, a way of knowledge both for understanding the outer world and the inner psyche. Tantra is based on and closely allied with the various traditional sciences of India, of which the two most notable are Ayurveda (Vedic medicine) and astrology (Jyotish). In addition some modern scientists find the energetic concepts of Tantra to be similar to their own discoveries.

Tantra is allied with the alchemical traditions found throughout the medieval world, including China, India, the Middle East and Europe. In fact, much of what has been called alchemy is simply Tantra as a global tradition. In this regard Tantra is nothing new, but the revival of the old alchemical and hermetic approach which is the basis of much of European mysticism.

The alchemical tradition exists within contemporary Ayurveda, which uses special preparations or alchemical forms of sulphur, mercury, mica, and other minerals. Ayurveda uses Tantric practices as part of its treatment for mental health, as well as for rejuvenation. Both Tantra and Ayurveda are becoming popular in the modern world; their connections will be discussed in the third section of this book.

Tantric practices are timed according to the rules of Hindu astrology. Symbolism based on Hindu astrology occurs in many Tantric teachings. Tantric methods - including rituals, mantras and gems - are also used for balancing planetary influences as part of astrology. Hindu astrology includes palmistry and other forms of divination, many of which came to Europe along with the gypsies, who originated in India. These are also part of Tantric science which seeks to unlock the underlying laws of life.

Tantric science thus includes spiritual, occult and material sciences and is a possible model for the holistic science that the coming global age demands.



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