

# The Tantras: An Overview

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WHenever Hindus perform worship—whether in Kashmir, Kanyakumari, Kamakhya, or Kachchh—they use tantric modes without even realizing this. Except for Vedic sacrifices, which in any case should not be confused with the common worship of present times, every religious sect in India uses tantric modes of worship for its rituals and spiritual practices, both external and internal. The general body of Hindu ideas, beliefs, and practices are permeated through and through with tantra.

The word *tantra* in Sanskrit is derived from the root *tanu* that means ‘to spread’, and derivatively ‘origination’ and ‘knowledge’. Thus ‘tantra’ means ‘the scripture by which knowledge is spread’. Some scholars also think that the word may have been derived by combining the terms *tattva*, the cosmic principles of Sankhya, and *mantra*, the mystical sound formulations representing deities; this implies that tantra is the application of the principles of Sankhya, and consequently also of yoga, to attain spiritual enlightenment.

The tantras are classed into several sectarian groups: Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnava, and Ganapatya. We thus have the Shaiva Agamas, Shakta tantras, and the Vaishnava Pancharatra Samhita. On a practical basis, the expression ‘tantra’ is used generically for all the works of this class.

The tantras admit the validity of Vedic rituals, of *viveka* and *vairagya*—discernment and renunciation—as prescribed in the Upanishads, the purifying disciplines of raja yoga, and the passionate love for the Divine described in the Puranas. They exhort sadhakas to exercise their will and undertake self-effort even as they practise self-surrender and supplicate for divine grace. The tantras promise their followers not only *bhoga*, enjoyment of

worldly happiness, but also *apavarga*, liberation. The system acknowledges that the kundalini power can be aroused by sincere pursuit of any spiritual discipline, and that this arousal can bring diverse benefits to all aspirants.

## Tantras, Vedas, and Smritis

Going strictly by the definition, tantra is neither Shruti nor Smriti. The followers of tantra treat it as an integral part of the Vedas, the Agama, though not many people would support this view. Historically speaking, the tantric tradition may be considered as either parallel to or intertwined with the Vedic tradition. Later tantric writers wanted to base their doctrines on the Vedas, but orthodox followers of the Vedic tradition did not accept the tantras as products of Vedic learning and stressed their anti-Vedic character instead.

The tantras essentially teach the same tenets as the Vedas; the difference lies in the method and certain subtle points of philosophy. In various tantric works one repeatedly comes across passages where the supremacy of the Vedas is accepted, with the caveat that the present age is for the tantras. Some of the salient similarities between the two systems may be mentioned here:

- The religious attitude in the tantras is fundamentally the same as that of the Vedic rituals. The Vedas are concerned with mastery over the forces of nature. In tantric sadhana also the chief concern is ascendancy over nature, both external and internal.
- Both these systems are highly ritualistic.
- Both systems have a large pantheon of gods who receive ritual offerings and respond to prayers and supplications.
- The animal sacrifice of the Vedas became an

essential ritual in the Shakta tantra.

The tantras draw heavily from the Smritis, with necessary additions and alterations. Some interesting developments in the tantras vis-à-vis the Smritis are as follows:

- The tantras accept the *varna-ashrama* dharma, but add a fifth caste called *samanya* and a fifth *varna-ashrama* called *kaula*. It also privileges two of the four ashramas: Grihastha and Sannyasa.
- With Brahmacharya and Vanaprastha downplayed, the sixteen samskaras, rites of passage prescribed in the Smritis, are reduced to ten.
- The number of purificatory rites are also drastically reduced.
  - The status of women and shudras goes up considerably in the tantra world view.
  - The practice of sati is expressly prohibited.
  - *Prayashcittas*, penances, for various wrongs become much simpler.
  - Punishment for offences committed by common people are made lighter.

### **Origin and Growth of the Tantras**

The tantra system makes use of gross ritual energies to access the subtle spiritual realm; this is possible because of the correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm. The tantric practitioner seeks to use the divine power that flows through the universe, including his own body, to attain purposeful goals, both spiritual and material.

The main reason for the origin and growth of tantra was the failure of the Vedic system in changed times. The stipulations regarding Vedic rituals had become impractical, the ingredients used in Vedic sacrifices were too difficult to obtain, the lifestyle prescribed for practitioners became nearly impossible to follow, and the promised results of heavens after death seemed too distant. On the other hand, Upanishadic meditations were also not easy for common people to follow, and the Puranic injunctions appeared fantastically unrealistic. People needed something concrete, simple, and yet attractive to practise. The result was the birth of tantra.

The great advantage of tantra over other religious systems was in its promise of *bhoga* as well as yoga through the same sadhana. An aspirant who seeks worldly success and enjoyment had only to make the necessary *sankalpa*, resolve, as could the aspirant for mukti. This made tantra particularly attractive.

In its wider sense, tantra is not a unitary system like the Vedas or any of the Hindu philosophies. It is an accumulation of practices and ideas of the Hindus since prehistoric times. Its birth is rooted in the Vedas; its development proceeded through the Upanishads, Itihasas, Puranas, and Smritis; and its luxuriant growth has been fostered by Buddhism, various minor Hindu sects, and also foreign influences. The vitality and elasticity thus acquired made tantra enter every house and temple of India and it also made powerful inroads into every country where Indian thought went. What obtains as Hinduism in India and the West, is essentially tantra packaged to suit the need of a particular community or individual.

Tantra is believed to have been taught by Bhagavan Shiva to his divine consort Shakti. Shiva begins by expounding Vedanta, goes through the principles of Sankhya, and ends with Shaiva tantra. Historically, it is difficult to say when exactly the tantras originated, but many estimate the system to have started crystallizing by the fifth century BCE. The real rise of tantra came with the growth of Shaivism and the Pancharatra tradition, while its necessary framework was supplied by the Sankhya philosophy. Both these religious systems, as well as the Sankhya philosophy, are quite old, which means that the seeds of tantra were sown quite early in the evolution of Hindu thought. By the tenth century brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina sects of tantra had got inextricably mixed up. This gave rise to a particular mystic form which was very near to Shaktism in essence. It also gave birth to new esoteric sects.

### **Tantric Texts and Sects**

The Agamas, Yamalas, Damaras, and Buddhist works comprise some of the primary textual

sources of the tantras. Mention of teachers like Dadhichi, Lakulisha, Kacha, and others in these texts shows that this tradition is old and respected. The Agamas and related texts are theological treatises and practical manuals of tantra. They contain information on mantras and yantras as well as discussion on *jnana*, the tantric philosophy, *yoga*, psychic practices, *kriya*, ritual, and *charya*, worship. They also elaborate on metaphysics, cosmology, the concept and mode of liberation, devotion, meditation, charms and spells, temple-building, image-making, domestic observances, social rules, and public festivals among a host of other topics. There are four classes of tantra, based on geographical location: Kerala, Kashmira, Gauda, and Vilasa; but their influence is not confined to one region alone. With time these texts and traditions have spread all over India and also become inseparable from one another.

**Agama** · Primary tantric texts are normally referred to as Agama and Nigama. In the Agamas Shiva instructs Parvati, whereas in the Nigamas it is Parvati who enlightens Shiva in the art of tantra. However, 'Agama' is the term commonly used for both these group of texts. The Agamas are divided into three principal sections: Shaiva, Shakta, and Vaishnava. The Shaiva Agamas are 28 in number, though the *Sammohana Tantra* speaks of these as comprising 32 tantra texts, 325 Upatantras, 10 Samhitas, 2 Yamalas, and 3 Damaras, among others. These Agamas also form the basis of Kashmir Shaivism or the Pratyabhijna system. Later works of the Pratyabhijna system show a distinct leaning towards non-dual Advaitism. Shaiva Siddhanta, the southern Shaiva school, and Kashmir Shaivism, regard these Agamas as their authority, besides the Vedas. Each Agama has several subsidiary Upagamas, of which only fragmentary texts are presently available. Bhagavan Shiva is the central deity in the Shaiva Agamas.

The Shakta Agamas glorify Shakti as the Cosmic Mother. They dwell on Shakti, the energy aspect of God, and prescribe numerous courses of ritualistic worship of the Divine Mother in various

forms. In some respects these are very much like the Puranas. A detailed list of Shakta Agamas is not easily available.

The Vaishnava Agamas are of four types: Vaikhana, Pancharatra, Pratishtasara, and Vijnanalalita. According to the *Sammohana Tantra*, this group includes 75 tantra texts, 205 Upatantras, 8 Samhitas, 1 Yamala, and 2 Damaras.

Other tantras include Saura, Ganapatya, and Bauddha tantras. *Mahanirvana*, *Kularnava*, *Kulasara*, *Prapanchasara*, *Tantraraja*, *Rudra-Yamala*, *Brahma-Yamala*, *Vishnu-Yamala*, and *Todala Tantra* are some of the important extant tantric works. Among the extant Agamas the most famous are *Ishvara Sambhita*, *Ahirbudhnya Sambhita*, *Sanatkumara Sambhita*, *Narada Pancharatra*, and *Spanda Pradipika*.

**Yamala** · This class of literature has eight texts attributed to realized souls, called Bhairavas. The most famous work of this group is *Brahma Yamala*. The Yamalas introduce a great variety of gods and goddesses, harmonize numerous local deities and cults, present a well-developed mode of worship, and make provision for sadhana by people of all castes. These works preserve the orthodox tradition of the earlier period even as they introduce many heterodox concepts.

**Damara** · These texts, attributed to Shiva's attendants, are six in number and include *Yoga Damara* and *Shiva Damara*.

**Buddhist Tantras** · These are a later group of literature which developed around the seventh century. Tantric Buddhist mysticism assumed three different forms: Vajrayana, Sahajayana, and Kalachakrayana. The philosophical basis for these works was supplied by the Yogachara and the Madhyamika systems of philosophy. Vajrayana emphasises the importance of mantra, *mudra*, and mandala; Sahajayana discards all formalism; and Kalachakrayana attaches importance to specifics of time—*muhurta*, *tithi*, *nakshtra*, and the like—bringing thus the elements of astrology and astronomy into sadhana.

Several tantric sects became prominent over the last few centuries. These include the Kaula tradition

started by Matsyendranath, in which the practices of Buddhist Sahajayana find a lot of importance. The Natha tradition originated from the teachings of Siddhacharyas and was continued by great teachers like Gorakshanath. The Vaishnava Sahajiyas cult was established in Bengal before Chaitanyadeva. In this sect Radha is the Shakti, and Krishna the supreme Reality. The Avadhuta tradition has its roots in the Natha sect, whereas the Bauls of Bengal are inspired by the Vaishnava Sahajiyas.

### **Tantric Paths: Animal, Heroic, and Divine**

The tantra tradition gives a list of seven *acharas*, disciplinary paths, meant for different practitioners: Vedachara, Vaishnavachara, Shaivachara, Dakshinachara, Vamachara, Siddhantachara, and Kaulachara. The first three are meant for practitioners with *pashubhava*, animal tendencies; Vamachara and Siddhantachara for those of *virabhava*, heroic temperament; Dakshinachara for *pashubhava* sadhakas striving to reach the *virabhava* plane; and Kaulachara is for aspirants in *divyabhava*, divine mood.

Vedachara involves adherence to the traditional injunctions of *varna* and *ashrama*; Vaishnavachara, Puranic practices; and Shaivachara, disciplines prescribed by the various *Smritis*. Dakshinachara and Vamachara are generally identified as tantra proper. The general ignorance about the true nature of tantric practice and abuse by irresponsible practitioners of Vamachara, the 'left-hand' path, made the whole science of tantra suspect. The rituals of this path are based on the principle of the 'return current', which seeks to reverse the process that creates bonds for the animal being. An important aspect of Vamachara is the use of *pancha-tattva* or *pancha makara*, the five Ms: *mamsa*, meat, *matsya*, fish, *madya*, wine, *mudra*, cereal fries, and *maithuna*, copulation. These terms, however, have different connotations for different classes of aspirants. Vamachara emphasizes that a person makes progress in spiritual life not by falsely shunning that which makes one fall, but by seizing upon it and sublimating it so as to make it a means of liberation.

The actual drinking of wine and ritual sexual

union are prescribed only for the *vira* aspirants. The teachers of such practitioners carefully point out that the joy and stimulation arising from these are to be utilized for the uplift of the mind from the physical plane. Genuine tantra never countenances excess or irregularity for the purpose of gratification of carnal desire. To break chastity, it says, is to lose or shorten life. Woman, associated with the tantric practices in order to help man in his path of renunciation, is an object of veneration to all schools of tantra. She is regarded as the embodiment of Shakti, the power that projects and pervades the universe. To insult a woman is a grievous sin. The same is true of meat-eating and drinking wine; the tantras specifically prohibit people from indulging in these things excepting when they have been ritually consecrated.

The *Mahanirvana Tantra* explains the five Ms as being representative of the five great elements of nature. Thus wine represents fire; fish, water; meat, air; cereal fries, earth; and copulation, ether. By offering these to the Divine Mother one actually worships her through her creative elements.

Aspirants with animal disposition are extroverted and move along the 'outgoing current', earning merit and demerit from worldly activities. They have not yet raised themselves above the common round of convention, nor have they cut the three knots of 'hate, fear, and shame'. Swayed by passion, they are slave to emotions: lust, greed, pride, anger, delusion, and envy. Such sadhakas are not allowed even to touch the five ingredients of the left-hand ritual.

Aspirants competent for the hazardous ritual using the five Ms are called *vira*. They have the inner strength to 'play with fire' and to burn their worldly bonds with it. Established in complete self-control, they do not forget themselves even in the most trying and tempting circumstances. They have a fearless disposition, inspiring terror in those who cherish animal propensities. Pure in motive, gentle in speech, strong in body, resourceful, courageous, intelligent, adventurous, and humble, they cherish only what is good.

The sadhakas of *divya* disposition are those who have risen above all the bonds of desire and

have nothing to sublimate. *Mahanirvana Tantra* describes such aspirants as sparing in speech, beloved of all, introspective, steady, sagacious, and solicitous about others' welfare. They remain in perpetual ecstasy. For the five Ms used by the hero they substitute *chit*, consciousness, *ananda*, bliss, and *bhava*, exaltation.

### Essential Tantric Philosophy

Reality, according to tantra, is Satchidananda—Existence, Knowledge, Bliss. Satchidananda becomes restricted through *maya*, and its transcendental nature is then expressed in terms of forms and categories, as explained in the Sankhya and other systems of Hindu philosophy. According to Vedanta, *maya* functions only on the relative plane at the time of creation, preservation, and destruction. Neither is Creation ultimately real nor are the created beings real. True knowledge reveals only an undifferentiated Consciousness. According to tantra, however, Satchidananda is Shiva-Shakti: Shiva, the Absolute, and Shakti, the creative Power, being eternally united like word and its meaning—one cannot be thought of without the other. Tantra holds that a conception of pure Consciousness that denies Shakti is only half the truth. Satchidananda is essentially endowed with the power of self-evolution and self-involution. Therefore, perfect spiritual knowledge is the knowledge of the whole—of Consciousness as *Being* and of Consciousness as the *power of becoming*.

In the tantric tradition it is only in the relative world that Shiva and Shakti are thought of as separate entities. Tantra also affirms that both *srishti*, the creative process, and the *jiva* are real and not merely illusory superimpositions upon Brahman. In declaring that the *jiva* finally becomes one with Reality, tantra differs from Vishishtadvaita.

According to tantra, the non-dual Reality undergoes evolution, which is real and not merely apparent as in Vedanta. This process involves the manifestation of certain powers as also of restrictions. This accounts for the various forms of existence and the actions and reactions that we see in the manifest world. These determinants are the *pasha*,

fetters, which weave the whole fabric of the *jiva's* phenomenal life. Bound by them, the *jiva* behaves like a *pashu*, animal. It is the avowed goal of tantra to teach the method by which these *pashas* can be cut asunder to make every *jiva* one with Shiva.

### Some Aspects of Tantric Sadhana

Tantric sadhana is the method of transformation of one's baser nature into the spiritual. In Vedantic sadhana one has to negate all limiting adjuncts of the Self, taking them as unreal, until one realizes Brahman. In order to reach the affirmation of oneness, one has to renounce the world of name and form. On the other hand, tantra prescribes the discipline of sublimation, which consists of three phases: purification, awakening and elevation of dormant energies, and realization. We shall take a brief look at some of the important concepts involved in tantric sadhana.

**Purification** · Evolution and involution go hand in hand. The power that created the world, and the bondages that are associated with it, can be turned back to take the individual away from the world and towards liberation. Tantra believes in these sayings: 'one must rise by that through which one falls', 'the very poison that kills becomes the elixir of life when used by the wise'. The only question is how to transform the cardinal impulses for *bhoga* into the spiritual experiences of yoga? If this can somehow be done, then the *jiva* will undoubtedly become one with Shiva, the individual will definitely become pure.

Tantra admits the presence of a perennial conflict between the flesh and the spirit. The observance of moral and social conventions, however desirable on the plane of worldly existence, does not make a person different from an animal. But when one realizes that the whole process of creation, preservation, and destruction is but the manifestation of the divine *lila*, sportive pleasure of Shiva-Shakti, one does not see anything carnal or gross in the universe. The special techniques of tantric discipline are meant to transform disintegrating forces into integrating ones.

Every action, whether yielding pleasure or pain, adds an additional link to the chain that binds the jiva. The hope of liberty lies in unwinding the coils of nature that has closed upon it. This is called the awakening of the kundalini by which one moves from the plane of impure principles to purer realms.

**Kundalini** · The spiritual awakening of a sadhaka is described in tantra by means of the concept of the kundalini power. Properly understood, the kundalini is not something peculiar to tantra but the very basis of spiritual experiences described in all religious traditions. Every genuine spiritual experience—such as the seeing of light, spiritual vision, or communion with a deity—is only a manifestation of the ascent of the kundalini. In common parlance, kundalini can be equated with the infinite potential energy present in every being, only a very small amount of which is needed for our daily activities. The coiled-up kundalini is the central pivot upon which the whole complex apparatus of body and mind moves and turns. Once the kundalini is aroused, large amounts of this potential energy turns dynamic—much like the energy released in nuclear fission—and is available for use. For the spiritual aspirant, however, the aim of awakening the kundalini is not the acquisition of greater power for the purpose of performing miraculous feats or enjoyment of material pleasures; it is the realization of Satchidananda.

**Chakras** · The awakened kundalini ascends through the Sushumna, which is the central yogic channel along the spinal column connecting the basal centre of *muladhara*, situated at the bottom of the spine, with the *sahasrara*, centre at the crown of the head. Tantra speaks of six chakras, planes of consciousness, which the Sushumna traverses and which the yogic eye visualizes as lotuses of diverse colours with varying numbers of petals located at various levels along the Sushumna. In the ordinary worldly person the Sushumna and these chakras remain closed. The closed chakras are visualized as lotuses drooping down like buds; as the kundalini rises through the Sushumna and touches the centres, these buds turn upward as fully opened flowers and

the aspirant obtains spiritual experiences.

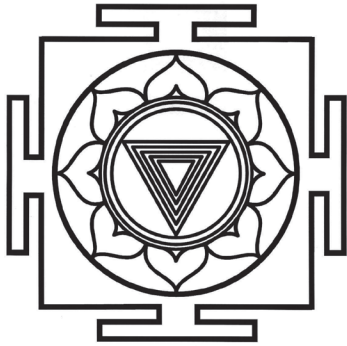
**Mantras** · These play an important part in tantric discipline. The word ‘mantra’ literally means ‘that which, when reflected upon, gives liberation’. The mantra is the sound equivalent of the deity—of the nature of *chit*, Consciousness—whereas the external image is the material form of the mantra. The sound-vibration is the first manifestation of *chit* and nearest to it. It is the intermediate element between pure Consciousness and the physical world, being neither absolutely immaterial like the former nor dense like the latter.

Tantra regards vibration as a manifestation of cosmic Energy, Shakti, and teaches that it can lead to the realization of *chit*, which otherwise eludes the grasp of even an intelligent person. Thus, mantras are not mere words but forms of concentrated thought of great potency. The advanced aspirant finds that a mantra and the deity with which it is associated are identical—the deity being the illumination embodied in the mantra.

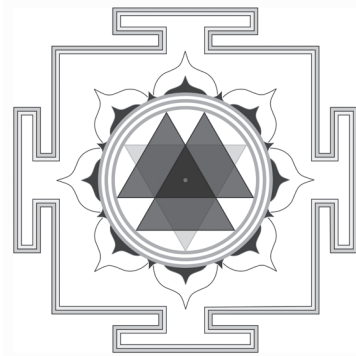
**Bija** · Literally meaning ‘seed’, the *bija* is a very important component of tantric mantras and invocations. Just like the Om of the Vedas, these *bijas* are mystic sounds with specific potency representing particular deities. Thus, *aim* is used in invoking Saraswati; *brim*, Shakti in general; and *shrim*, Lakshmi.

**Yantras** · Mystical diagrams have been used as aids to worship in every religion, including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. In tantra, they are an essential component and are known as yantras. A yantra is a diagrammatic equivalent of the deity, just as a mantra is its sound-equivalent. It is a full representation of the power which evolves and maintains an object of worship. When the yantra is established in its real potency, the concerned deity is present in it. In tantric ritual the yantra is an object of worship, the image being its tangible representation. There is a fundamental relationship between the mantra and the yantra.

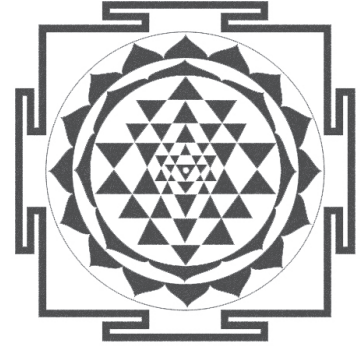
Tantra insists that mantras are efficacious, that the yantras used in worship are potent, that *devatas*, deities, are conscious entities, that supernatural



Kali Yantra



Durga Yantra



Sri Yantra

powers are attained, and that the earnest aspirant experiences the rise of the kundalini through the different chakras, realizing finally one's identity with Satchidananda.

**Tantric Ritual** · Let us take a brief look at the tantric puja ritual. Usually, a tantric ritual consists in assigning the different parts of the body to different deities, the purification of the elements of the body, *pranayama*, meditation, imparting of life to the image, and mental and physical worship. These are all calculated to transform the worshipper, the image or yantra, the accessories, and the act of worship into consciousness. Harmony on the physical and mental planes are necessary for success in worship, which is created in the gross physical elements by means of prescribed postures, *pranayama*, japa, and meditation.

In addition, *snana*, ablution, purifies the physical body; *tarpana*, libations, gives inner satisfaction; *bhuta-shuddhi*, purification of the elements, frees from taints; and *dhyana*, contemplation, enables the worshipper to feel oneness with the deity. The last part of the ritual consists of a *homa*, sacrificial offerings in fire, in which the devotee completely surrenders to the deity—merging and losing one's identity in the deity. At this stage there is no more distinction between the worshipper and the worshipped, the finite and the infinite, the individual and the Absolute.

**Siddhi** · When a sadhaka attains purity of mind through ritualistic worship as prescribed in the tantras, he becomes fit for *siddhi*, the realiza-

tion of Brahman. It is then that the aspirant finds that the meditator, the process of meditation, and the object of meditation coalesce into an indivisible unity.

### Tantra as an Integral Shastra

Unlike many other spiritual treatises, the tantras are a complete scripture. They discuss philosophy; the form and the function of *varna-ashrama* dharma; duties, responsibilities, and penances for the individual; and the code of conduct for daily living. A true follower of tantra need not to go to any other Dharmashastra for enlightenment.

The tantras successfully worked out the synthesis of karma, jnana, bhakti, and yoga for the benefit of practitioners in achieving ultimate union with the supreme Reality. Being a product of the spiritual cross-currents of Hinduism, it drew into its domain everything connected with religion that was to be found anywhere in India. In turn, it churned out numerous spiritual insights that were beneficial for humankind. Despite the blemishes and abuses that it received, it continues to give solace to every practising Hindu in its ritualistic, philosophical, and mystic aspects. The concept and method of transformation it developed has a unique place in the history of world religions. It is this transformation or sublimation that helped millions of materialistic minds attain a semblance of spiritual uplift. That may well be the reason it continues to form a part, in one form or other, of all Hindu spiritual practices.