



Tantra: A Much-Misunderstood Path to Liberation

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Introduction: A Misunderstood Spiritual Path

TANTRA. The word brings to mind a vast range of images and connotations, some positive and some extremely negative. How any given person views tantra will depend on a range of factors, including that person's cultural background and general orientation towards spirituality and the formal religious and moral conventions of one's society. In the minds of many, tantra is associated or even identified fully with practices that defy most traditional standards of moral purity, both in India and in the West: practices called by scholars *antinomian*. These practices include transgressive

sexual behaviours and even, in some cases, cannibalism. Depending on how conservative a person might be, this image of tantra will inspire either revulsion and disapproval or great excitement at the thought of a spiritual path that allows—indeed requires—the free indulgence of the senses. Both types of reaction can be found in both India and in the West, though it is probably fair to say that the first kind of reaction—revulsion and disapproval—has been more common in India and the second—excitement and intense interest—has come to characterise Western approaches to tantra—a pronounced shift from the Victorian period, when tantra began to attract the attention of the Western world, reflecting the broader shift that has occurred over the last century in Western attitudes towards sexuality and sensuality.

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Both types of reaction, however—positive and negative—are based upon a profound misunderstanding of what tantra truly is. Can antinomian practices be found in certain tantric traditions and given justification on the basis of tantric philosophy? Certainly. Are these practices in any way representative of tantra as a whole? Certainly not.

Finally, it is worth pointing out to the readers of *Prabuddha Bharata*, although many will already be aware of this fact, that tantra played a central role in the spiritual path of Sri Ramakrishna, and is therefore not something to be easily dismissed.

What is tantra, then? And why is it that so many people both in India and in the West have gotten it wrong? And finally, what was the role of tantra in the spiritual life of Sri Ramakrishna? Although entire volumes could be, and have been, written on these topics, these are the questions that this essay hopes to address in a concise and succinct fashion.

What Is Tantra?

The Complex Question of Tantric Origins

Tantra could be characterised most broadly as a style or even as a repertoire of spiritual practice. What does this mean? First, it means that though what could be called purely tantric systems of practice exist, such as Kaula Tantra and Srividya, elements of tantra can be found across a wide range of systems. These include the mainstreams of both Hindu and Buddhist practice, and even some facets of Jain practice. This means that elements of Hindu practice not generally associated with tantra, such as the recitation of mantras, meditation on yantras, and even image worship and the architecture of many Hindu temples, are rooted in tantric philosophy. So, even many Hindus who could not properly be called tantrics partake, nevertheless, of some aspects of tantra.

How did this style of spiritual practice

originate? And what is the philosophical position that underlies it, and to which it gives expression? The question of the origins of tantra is as mysterious as the question of the origins of religion itself, and as productive of creative theories among scholars. Texts known as tantras and the schools of thought that produce them first appear, according to contemporary scholarship, around the middle of the first millennium CE in India. Many, however, point out that this style of practice may be far more ancient than this. Some even point to the Indus Valley Civilization, also known as the Harappan or Indus-Saraswati Civilisation, as a possible source of tantra.¹ This hypothesis is of course highly speculative, as is anything definite regarding Indus Valley culture, until the mysterious writing system of this civilisation is deciphered.

Marxist scholar Debiprasad Chattopadhyay connects tantra with the materialist system of Indian philosophy known as Charvaka or Lokayata, finding common elements in the thinking of these two systems.² In support of this view, it could be noted that the Lokayata system is traditionally traced to the Vedic sage Brihaspati, and that there is a text in the Srividya tradition called the *Barhaspatya Tantra*—a tantric text also attributed to the sage Brihaspati. Chattopadhyay, however, and most other scholars emphasise the non-Vedic nature of tantra, suggesting that the Vedic and tantric systems grew up alongside one another. In these accounts, tantra either emerges as a reaction against Vedic thought and practice or it is an older indigenous system that asserts itself against Vedic religion as the latter is carried by its brahminical adherents from the north-western part of India to the rest of the subcontinent. Again, tantra as such does not emerge definitively until the middle of the first millennium CE, so the system that scholars postulate as having existed prior to this period might best be seen as ‘Proto-tantric’ or ‘Pre-tantric.’



Harappa



Indus Valley Civilisation

Mohenjo-daro

Given the nature of tantra as a spiritual style, rather than as a well-defined system of philosophy and practice, it is also difficult to make strong assertions about how Vedic or non-Vedic, or even anti-Vedic, tantra might be; for these two systems actually share a great deal in common. Both, for example, make extensive use of mantras, including *bija* or monosyllabic ‘seed’ mantras, and both operate according to ritual principles in which certain physical items and gestures stand in for broader spiritual realities. In fact, these ritual principles are, to some extent, shared by magical and religious traditions from all over the world. They may point to a common point of origin or to a universal instinct in human beings to shape the world around them through ritualistic performance. In both a Vedic and a tantric ritual, one can see the history of the cosmos—its emergence from a state of pure potential to an ordered universe, and then its self-transcendence into a state of pure consciousness—enacted.

One could conceivably argue that tantra emerged from Vedic practice, or even vice versa, or—as seems most likely—that each is an originally independent practice and that the two of them have interacted and influenced one another extensively through the course of the centuries. This process has certainly been facilitated by the peculiar genius of the people of India for combining and integrating aspects of many spiritual paths into one. In any case, the origins of both systems

remain mysterious and difficult to define. In the words of religion scholar Brian K Smith, ‘attempts at locating the temporal and cultural origins of Tantrism remain theoretical and speculative.’³

At least some of the mystery that surrounds the origins and even the subsequent history of tantra is no doubt a deliberate effect of the fact that a major factor in tantric practice is an element of secrecy. Tantric rituals are esoteric or occult in nature. That is, their practitioners see them as possessing great power and significance. These practices and their deeper meanings are intended only for those whom an experienced practitioner deems worthy—that is, possessed of the spiritual maturity to receive this knowledge and to be entrusted with its responsible use. A true tantric practitioner thus must receive *diksha* or initiation into the practice by a guru or teacher, in a tantric lineage.

Again, this esoteric character of tantra is shared by other traditions, including the Vedic traditions. Vedic secret knowledge—knowledge imparted directly from teacher to student—is indeed what makes up the Upanishads. In the Vedic case, though, the secret is out. The Upanishads have now been widely circulated, translated into various languages, and so on; though there remain passages within the Upanishads whose meaning remains mysterious, and which could probably only be fully understood if one were able to travel back in time and learn directly from

IMAGE: HARAPPA: MUHAMMAD BIN NAVEED / MOHENJO-DARO: USMAN GHANI



IMAGE: GODDESS MEENAKSHI'S WEDDING IN MEENAKSHI TEMPLE, MADURAI / [HTTP://WWW.REMOTETRAVELLER.COM](http://www.remotetraveller.com)

a Vedic sage. Similarly, the concept of initiation and the practice of imparting a secret mantra from guru to *shishya*, from teacher to student, are forms of tantric esotericism that are shared by other Hindu traditions, including Vedanta.

Many tantric texts, however, remain untranslated, and many of those which have been translated are still extremely difficult, if not impossible, to understand fully. They utilise *sandhya bhasha*, 'twilight language', a kind of secret code of symbolism that is known only to those who have been initiated.⁴ No doubt one reason for the association of tantra in the minds of many with sexual promiscuity is the fact that much symbolism that is used in the *sandhya bhasha* is of a sexual nature. Thus a text which may, on its surface, appear to be speaking very

graphically about the interactions of the male and female sex organs may actually be speaking about the relationship of mind and pure consciousness. The graphic imagery turns away those who lack the spiritual maturity to delve deeply into the meaning of the text—prudishness being as much a mark of attachment to the physical as licentiousness, and often a cover for the latter—and the true meaning remains obscured to the uninitiated—to those who are not spiritually ready to handle it. Thus the 'filthy' language used in many tantric texts acts as a kind of filter, to weed out those who are not able to see past the surface of the material world to the spiritual reality that underlies it.

All of this secrecy and esotericism, while certainly serving a spiritual purpose and having

a spiritual rationale, does not make at all easy, the job of a scholar who wishes to understand the history of this tradition. A scholar might be tempted to take initiation into a tantric tradition specifically to learn more about it. Such a scholar, however, is then in an ethical quandary; for she or he is now bound by the sacred vows of secrecy that are entailed by tantric initiation, which conflict with one's duty as a scholar to write and teach about what one has learned. The study of tantra thus places the scholar, certainly the one who does first-hand field research, in a difficult position. This has only added to the confusion surrounding tantra among the wider public, for it can be quite difficult to discern which sources of information about this mysterious tradition are truly trustworthy and which are compromised—and perhaps even deliberately obfuscated to preserve tantric secrecy.

The Philosophy of Tantra

While much about tantra remains mysterious, however, there is also a great deal that can be known and which has been made public—knowledge that can go some distance towards dispelling misconceptions about this tradition.

Again, tantra is a style or repertoire of spiritual practice. Though there are purely tantric systems, which we shall discuss in a moment, tantric elements can be found in a great variety of Indic spiritual systems. If elements of tantra can be utilised by schools of thought as diverse as Shakta, Shaiva, and Vaishnava Hindus, Mahayana Buddhists, Jains, and others, it is clearly a practice with enormous flexibility, and not a rigid or dogmatic system incapable of compromise or transfer across ideological boundaries.

There is, nevertheless, a basic conceptual core that ties together the vast range of tantric practices that exist. What is the fundamental philosophy of tantra?

Tantric philosophy can most easily be presented by way of contrast with another major thread of Indic spirituality, which one could, for want of a better term, call yogic. This is not intended to refer specifically to the yoga philosophy of Patanjali. Nor is it meant to suggest a conflict between what I am calling the tantric and the yogic movements of Indian thought, much less another origin story for tantra. It is intended simply to shed a light on certain assumptions that cut across the many systems of tantra that exist, and the use of tantric elements in what are generally regarded as non-tantric systems.

By the yogic thread of Indic spirituality, I am referring to a style of practice—a spiritual repertoire—that, like tantra, is shared across many systems, but that is in many ways a mirror image or reversal of tantra. The yogic style of spiritual practice, which can be found, of course, in Patanjali's yoga system, but also in Vedanta, Buddhism, and Jainism, is based on the idea of withdrawal from the senses and sensory objects in order to focus inwardly: on the mind, and eventually beyond the mind, to the very nature of consciousness itself.

How this process of inward concentration is conceived, of course, varies depending upon the spiritual tradition in which the yogic practice occurs. Patanjali's system, which shares the vocabulary of the Sankhya system of philosophy, conceives the center of pure consciousness as the Purusha, which one is seeking to differentiate and distinguish from Prakriti, or material nature. Vedanta sees the basis of pure consciousness as Brahman, the ground of all being. The Vedantic practitioner seeks to realise one's nature as Brahman by cultivating detachment from material objects and from the fruits of actions as described in the Bhagavadgita. In Buddhism, the practitioner is to see the ultimate unreality of the individual self and realise the truth of No Self.

In the Jain tradition, one seeks to realise the pure nature of the the soul or living being that is free from the limitations of materiality.

For all these iterations of the yogic style of practice, materiality, the realm of the senses, is problematic. It is that which is to be escaped in favour of the realisation of a non-material spiritual reality or transcendent principle. All of the various practices that are associated with the yogic spiritual style are built upon this ultimate aim of finding the highest truth through an experience of intense inwardness, shutting out the realm of the senses as a distraction: closing the eyes, breathing deeply, focusing on the breath, letting distracting thoughts melt away and shutting them out, one-pointed concentration, and so on.

Tantra, by contrast, can be seen as the path of

transcending the senses not by the shutting out or denial of the senses, but *by means of* the senses. Unlike the yogic style of practice, which sees the desires evoked by sensory objects as obstacles to be overcome, tantra sees these desires as energies that can be redirected productively towards the aim of spiritual liberation.

This aim—moksha or liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth and the effects of karma—is shared by both yogic and tantric spiritualities. Again, these two are not to be seen as necessarily in opposition, but as differing paths to the same ultimate end.

From a yogic perspective, one can understand why tantra is often perceived as a dangerous path; for in practice, there is a very fine line between utilising the desire for sensory objects as a source of spiritual energy to use on the path to liberation and simply indulging such desire. Tantric traditions themselves are aware of this danger, which is why serious tantric practice, as already mentioned, requires initiation by an experienced teacher, and is often shrouded in secrecy. It is not a practice for which everyone is fit.

At the same time, practitioners within yogic traditions became aware, around the middle of the first millennium CE, of the spiritual heights that could be attained by means of tantric practice, and began to integrate elements of tantra into their own systems. It is at this point that one begins to find tantric practices and sensibilities starting to infuse traditions such as Vaishnavism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The use of mantras, for example, meditation on geometric patterns such as yantras and mandalas, and the construction of beautiful temples designed to physically recreate the spiritual journey to higher realms—all become prominent features of practice within these traditions during this period.

Among these traditions, Buddhism was probably the most transformed through its

Hevajra and Nairatmya, Surrounded by a Retinue of Eight Dakinis in the Tantric Practices of the Shakya School of Tibetan Buddhism.



integration of tantric elements and philosophies, giving rise to what is sometimes seen as an entirely new *yana* or vehicle for the attainment of awakening: the Vajrayana. Tantric Buddhism, philosophically, is an extension of Mahayana Buddhism. It incorporates the tantric practice and sensibility into the Bodhisattva path. Its very name, Vajrayana, is an indicator of this sensibility. The term *vajra* itself has a double meaning, evocative of the *sandhya bhasha*, with its hidden meanings and connotations. A *vajra* is a thunderbolt—the weapon of the Vedic deity Indra—but it is also a diamond. This double meaning conveys an idea of the quality of the state of awakening to which Vajrayana practice is intended to lead. Such awakening comes in a flash, like a thunderbolt, rapidly transforming the one who pursued this practice. But it is also a steady and unshakable state, a concept evoked by the image of the hardness of a diamond. In some texts, this path is also referred to as the Mantrayana, which highlights the importance of mantras in this practice.

The importance of Vajrayana practice in the wider Buddhist world is shown by the prominence of this form of Buddhism in particular regions. The dominant forms of Tibetan Buddhism, historically, have all been tantric; and Vajrayana is the Buddhism of Nepal, Bhutan, and the Himalayan regions of India as well. Tantric Buddhism was also transmitted into China, Korea, and Japan. Two of the major systems of contemporary Buddhism in Japan, Shingon and Tendai, are both thoroughly tantric.

The incorporation of tantric elements into Vaishnava practice was eased, no doubt, by the fact that Vaishnava traditions are already deeply rooted in bhakti—the practice of intense devotion to the personal form of the Supreme Lord. Bhakti, like tantra, channels the emotions toward a spiritual end—in this case, emotions of intense love and

devotion. In their focus on cultivation, rather than suppression, of emotional energies, as well as their disregard for traditional strictures relating to social status or ‘caste’, the traditions of bhakti and of tantra could be seen to share a common sensibility.

The tradition that was most resistant to tantra was Jainism. The eighth century Shvetambara Jain philosopher, Haribhadrasuri, who is probably best known for his broad-minded religious pluralism and openness to seeing the truth in a variety of spiritual paths, was sharply critical of tantric practice.⁵ The centrality of cultivating moral purity and restraint of sensory desires in the Jain path made it very difficult to reconcile with tantra. Nevertheless, even Jains incorporated tantric elements into their practice during this time in the form of beautiful and elaborate temples, the use of spiritual diagrams such as yantras and mandalas, and the recitation of mantras, including *bija* mantras.

Similarly to Jainism, the Theravada tradition of Buddhism was more resistant to tantric elements than was Mahayana. As with Jainism, Theravada conservatism, with its emphasis on closely adhering to the path of the Buddha, with little or no innovation, did not lend itself to the incorporation of tantric elements on a large scale.

The traditions that have the strongest associations with tantra, though, are the Shaiva and Shakta traditions of Hinduism. Indeed, the Shakta traditions are, for all intents and purposes, synonymous with tantra. The sacred texts known as tantras, from which the tantric tradition takes its name, are overwhelmingly Shakta texts. The Shakta traditions are of course centered on the worship of Shakti, the Mother Goddess, who embodies the power, *shakti*, of creation. Indeed, one reason for the aforementioned speculation that the tantric system might be traceable to the Indus Valley Civilisation is the fact that Goddess worship appears to have been a prominent

part of the religion of that ancient culture. The deity Shiva, being the husband of Shakti, the Shaiva, and Shakta traditions share many things in common, including a deeply tantric sensibility. In addition to the Shakta traditions, the Kashmiri Shaiva tradition, too, could be considered a purely tantric system of thought and practice, systematised by the Shaiva philosopher,



Three Vajrayana Ritual Implements: Vajra, Rosary, and Bell

Abhinavagupta, in the late tenth century CE.

At the heart of tantric philosophy is the idea that Shakti is not only the power of creation, but that all of existence is her manifestation. This is the tantric version of non-dualism or Advaita. In contrast with the mainstream interpretations of Advaita Vedanta, in which Brahman is real and the world an illusion, tantric Advaita teaches that the world is a real and true manifestation or transformation of the Divine Mother. Maya is seen in tantra not as a deluding illusion, but as a creative power by which the Mother Goddess brings all things into being, thus giving expression to her infinite glory. Or rather, maya is deluding if one fails to see the Divine Mother within all things, but conducive to liberation if one sees the world as nothing but the reflection of her beauty.

This is the tantric version of the ‘two truths’ doctrine of the Mahayana Buddhist master Nagarjuna and the Advaita Vedanta master Acharya Shankara. The material realm is non-different from the realm of awakening. Reality as perceived through the lens of ignorance is samsara. The same reality, perceived truly, is nirvana. Reality itself is one.

Sri Ramakrishna expresses this tantric sensibility when he invokes the distinction between *vidya*-maya and *avidya*-maya:

This universe is created by the Mahamaya of God. Mahamaya contains both vidyamaya, the illusion of knowledge, and avidyamaya, the illusion of ignorance. Through the help of vidyamaya one cultivates such virtues as the taste for holy company, knowledge, devotion, love, and renunciation. Avidyamaya consists of the five elements and the objects of the five senses—form, flavor, smell, touch, and sound. These make one forget God.⁶

The aim of tantric practice is therefore to effect a revolution in the awareness of the practitioner—to shift the practitioner from the state of *avidya*-maya, perceiving a world of persons and objects which are separable into ‘pure’ and ‘impure,’ to the state of *vidya*-maya, or wisdom, in which God is all and all is God.

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Tantric Subtle Physiology: Kundalini Shakti and the System of Nadis and Chakras

One of the most distinctive features of tantra is its subtle physiology. According to tantra, co-existing with the physical body or gross body, and also occupying the same space are various subtle bodies. The idea of subtle bodies is of course an ancient one, and can also be found in the Upanishads—such as the idea of the *koshas*, or ‘sheaths,’ surrounding the *atman*, or Self; the *ananda-maya-kosha*, or body of bliss, the *vijnana-maya-kosha*, or body of consciousness, the *mano-maya-kosha*, or

mental body, the *prana-maya-kosha*, the body of vital energy, and the *anna-maya-kosha*, the outermost 'food body,' or physical body.

Tantra, however, describes a highly complex subtle body made up of seventy-two thousand *nadis*, or nerve channels, which fill almost the entire space of the physical body, and which, when depicted visually, appear not unlike the physical nervous system as it is known to medical science. Much like the physical nervous system, the complex of *nadis* connects to a central channel, the *sushumna nadi*, which corresponds to the spinal cord.

Along the *sushumna nadi* are located a series of seven subtle energy centers known as chakras. Each chakra is associated with a different type of emotional and spiritual state. The bottommost chakra, located in the space corresponding with the base of the spine, the *muladhara* chakra, 'symbolizes immanence, physical limitation, and bondage.'⁷ In most persons, a powerful subtle energy lies coiled within this chakra. This energy or *shakti*, is the immanent presence of Shakti, the Mother Goddess, in all beings. The aim of much of tantric practice is to awaken this coiled or kundalini *shakti* and cause it to ascend up the *sushumna nadi*.

As the kundalini energy ascends, it activates each of the chakras in succession, thus unleashing the energies associated with them. Just above the *muladhara* chakra, in the area of the navel, is the *svadhishtana* chakra, which is associated with 'lust (*kama*), greed (*lobha*), delusion (*moha*), pride (*mada*), and envy (*matsarya*)' (ibid.). Next, in the area of the solar plexus, is the *manipura* chakra, which is associated with the power of creation and destruction. Above this chakra, is the all-important *anahata* chakra, or heart chakra, which is associated with the higher spiritual emotions of compassion and devotion. This chakra is given a strong emphasis in many traditions, and is in fact depicted in the *Katha Upanishad* as the

dwelling place of the Self within the body. Above this chakra is the *vishuddha* chakra, located in the area of the throat and connected with purity. Then there is the *ajna* chakra, located in the space just above and between the eyebrows. This chakra is also known as the 'Third Eye,' because of its location, but also because of its association with the cultivation of spiritual perception. Finally, at the very top of the head, and corresponding with the physical brain, is the *sahasrara* chakra or 'thousand-petalled lotus.' The aim of tantric practice is to cause the kundalini chakra to rise, energising and illuminating all of the chakras, culminating in the *sahasrara* chakra. In some texts, the illumination of this last chakra is equated with the experiences of awakening and liberation.

Sources of Controversy

The spiritual power that is unleashed with the rising of the kundalini *shakti* is such that, again, many yogic masters from a variety of traditions have been attracted to tantric practice, in order to make use of the energies inherent in the subtle body as an aid to the attainment of spiritual goals. It is also the case, however, that this practice has attracted those who are interested in becoming powerful for worldly reasons. Tantric practice that is pursued with the aim of achieving magical powers, rather than for the sake of spiritual awakening, could be seen as the Indic equivalent of what is known in the West as 'black magic'. One reason for the negative reputation that tantra has in many parts of India is the existence of persons who have, indeed, cultivated tantric practice in order to exercise control over others. This is of course another reason that serious tantric teachers are not willing to pass on their knowledge to those students whom they regard as lacking in the spiritual maturity needed to handle the power of the kundalini *shakti* responsibly.

Yet another source of controversy and of

negative perceptions is the existence of bona fide tantric traditions that, in the name of cultivating a state of non-dual awareness in their practitioners, encourage them to engage in practices that would normally be seen as impure in conventional society. One of the most extreme examples of such a tradition is the Shaiva Aghori or 'free from terror' sect. Aghori practice is designed both to express and to cultivate a state beyond fear. It includes meditating in cremation grounds, which are normally regarded as unclean places, and even eating the corpses of the dead, in order to overcome the sense of disgust. The begging bowl of an Aghori monk is a human skull.

Though regarded as extreme by mainstream Hindu society, one can see the philosophical rationale for Aghori practice in the teaching that all of reality—including those parts that are normally seen as unclean, impure, or terrifying—are but manifestations of the infinite and pure consciousness that is the ground of all being. If all of reality is truly one, then 'pure' and 'impure' are illusions—dualities created by an unenlightened consciousness. Tantra breaks beyond such duality in a dramatic and powerful fashion.

Tantric practices involving ritualised sexual activity—practices intended not for monastic practitioners, but for householders—and intended to harness the power of sexual desire in order to awaken the kundalini energy are another source of controversy, and of negative perceptions of tantra. As with the use of tantra to gain magical powers, the use of tantric practice merely as a sexual indulgence is something that the guardians of the tradition, the gurus of tantric lineages, seek to guard against by initiating only those that they see as spiritually ready to engage in and benefit from such practices without falling into lust and attachment. However, with the rise of sexual freedom in the Western world, many in the West have been drawn to tantra as a path that affirms the inherent

divinity of sexuality, and the potential for sexuality to lead to a state of spiritual freedom. Mixed with what is clearly a genuine sense of the immanent presence of the divine in all aspects of human existence, there are also those who—as with Yoga in the West—see tantra only as a way to enhance their sensory experience. Versions of tantra marketed to Western audiences therefore often bear little resemblance to the spiritual paths developed in India. This creates yet another source of negative reaction by mainstream Hindus to tantra—or that which passes itself off as tantra.⁸

Tantra in the Sadhana of Sri Ramakrishna

As we have already seen, Sri Ramakrishna expresses a tantric understanding of the nature of existence in his account of *maya*. And as a priest of the Goddess Kali, the most tantric of Hindu deities, he certainly had an intimate awareness of tantra. In fact, Bengali culture generally has a strong tantric undercurrent, Bengal being a part of India where tantra and Shakta traditions have been especially prevalent. According to the accounts of Sri Ramakrishna's life and spiritual practice, he spent a substantial amount of the period of his life that was dedicated to *sadhana* under the tutelage of a tantric teacher, the Bhairavi Brahmani.

As with the numerous other *sadhanas* or spiritual practices that Sri Ramakrishna undertook, it is said that he achieved the ultimate state to which tantra is aimed: the awakening of the kundalini *shakti*. 'He actually saw the Power, at first lying asleep at the bottom of the spinal column, then waking up and ascending along the mystic Sushumna canal and through its six centres, or lotuses to the Sahasrara, the thousand-petalled lotus in the top of the head. He further saw that as the Kundalini went upward the different lotuses bloomed. And this phenomenon was accompanied by visions and trances.'⁹

Conclusion: An Important Dimension of Indian and Global Spiritual Heritage

In practising tantric spirituality, alongside various Vaishnava devotional practices, Advaita Vedanta, Christianity, and Islam, Sri Ramakrishna shows that this path, like the others, is a valid and effective path to God-realisation. Like the Jain master Haribhadra, Sri Ramakrishna did not recommend the more extreme or *vamachara*, 'left-handed' tantra to his followers. He said, for example, that 'it is extremely difficult to practise spiritual discipline looking on woman as one's mistress. To regard oneself as her child is a very pure attitude' (123). He also condemned the pursuit of tantra for gaining magical powers, saying that 'one cannot get rid of maya as long as one exercises supernatural powers' (285). But he also defended the practice of tantra to those who were sceptical of it and also went into great detail in teaching his disciples about the kundalini *shakti* and the chakras (311, 499–500).

Tantra, a spirituality which affirms the inherent divinity of the world and calls its practitioners to see and experience God in all things, is fundamentally compatible with the deepest teaching of Vedanta: 'All this world, all reality, is indeed Brahman.'

In a time when the physical world has been devalued as mere raw material for the fulfilment of our desires, leading us to environmental catastrophe, the tantric sense of the universe as the body of the Divine Mother could help to fuel an ecological ethos that would facilitate more respectful treatment of the Earth and the life forms which inhabit it. And in a time when the unbridled pursuit of sensual desire has similarly led us to the brink of disaster, the spiritualisation of the sensual might lead, again, to a more respectful and less exploitive attitude toward other persons, especially towards women, who would be seen as forms of the Goddess. There is much to be gained from tantric wisdom; and



the example of Sri Ramakrishna encourages us to discern this wisdom and learn from it. 

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