

The Method and Significance of Tantra

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

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

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The Birth of Ten Mahavidyas with Shiva and Parvati

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

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

This is the central point worthy of note in this context. The same maya, which is looked upon as insignificant by Advaitic proponents, and indefinable by the aspirants,¹ is the summum bonum of all tantric followers. She is identified with Shiva and is held as the dynamic projection of that supreme Reality. Creation, sustenance, and dissolution are, according to tantra,

Bamakhyapa (1837–1911)



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

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

Etymology and Origin

The word 'tantra' has been derived from the root '*tan*' meaning, to spread. In a special sense it means the scripture by which knowledge is spread.² This does not, however, mean that tantra means any branch of knowledge, though in a general way the word signifies any text of a particular system. Tantra is concerned with the application of *tattva* and mantra, the science of cosmic principles and that of mystic word respectively. In the *Kamikagama Tantra*, a standard tantric text, the word tantra has been defined as that subject which disseminates *tattva*, the science of cosmic principles and mantra, the science of mystic word, and also that which shows the way to emancipation.³

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

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

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

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

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

The Yamalas

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



Bhairava

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

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

Practice

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

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

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

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

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

air, its open mouth the fire called Vaishvanara, and the body of the sacrificial horse is the year. Its back is heaven.⁷ Hence it is meet to say that the tantras emerged out of the Vedic religion and were then developed into a type of esoteric knowledge. But they can rather be called a development than grafting from the Vedic religion. Even some of the Vedic sacrifices could be used for both good and bad purposes. In the Vedic texts traces of what is called 'black magic' are also found. The Atharva Veda is commonly believed to be the source of such rites. This explains the occurrence of magical practices in the tantras.

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

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

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

Shiva and Parvati



IMAGE: HTTP://PORTRAIT.MYGODPICTURES.COM

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

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

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

Mantra and Diksha

Speaking of tantric practice, at least a brief discussion on mantra becomes indispensable. In the tantric system, mantra plays an important role. It is true that in the Vedic system also mantra has an equally important role. The highest Vedic mantra, Savitri Gayatri, is also an adoration of Shakti. The word 'mantra' in Sanskrit means that, a repeated remembrance of which releases the soul.⁹ A mantra is composed of *bija*, a root letter, the name of the chosen ideal, and a word of salutation. Tantric mantras—in sharp contrast with Vedic mantras in the Brahmana portion—are extremely brief, each letter bearing a mystic significance. Besides, they are not to be taken for mere words. The guru or the preceptor adds one's own vital strength into the mantra with intense aspiration by repeating it and meditating on its meaning. In this way the spiritual power of the mantra is transmitted from the guru to the disciple from generation to generation. This process of transmission is technically called *diksha*. Along with the transfer of such power, the guru becomes the spiritual preceptor of the disciple, and such an occasion is marked as a new birth for the disciple.

According to the tantras the real guru is none else than the supreme Lord Shiva, who is not only the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the universe but also holds the twin power of *anugraha*, grace and *nigraha*, punishment. Individual effort without god's grace can never lead to spiritual success. The power of the mantra is transmitted thus from the supreme God and handed down from generation to generation by a traditional line of competent preceptors and disciples.

Diksha or initiation is a must for the performance of any tantric worship. The word '*diksha*' literally means a process by which the guru transmits the mantra and attenuates or destroys the sins of the disciple.¹⁰ *Diksha* has been classified by the teachers of tantra into three types—*Shambhavi*, *shakti*, and *mantri* or *anavi*—depending on the spiritual status of the disciple. The first of these is done with a mere meet, touch, or conversation with the disciple, as happened in the life of Narendranath, Swami Vivekananda's pre-monastic name, on his second meeting with Sri Ramakrishna. In the *shakti* type of initiation, the guru forces into the disciple his own spiritual power with his divine wisdom,

Guru and Disciple



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

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

Varnamala, Shabda, and Speech

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

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

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

unique philosophy demonstrates that the order of the Sanskrit alphabet like *a, i, u*, has a definite link with the process of creation. This is why when the great Lord Shiva appeared in his dancing Nataraja form before Panini, who wanted to know the secret of grammar, the first sound that came out of his *damaru*, pellet drum, gave the seeds of the entire creation.¹¹ The first three letters *a, i*, and *u* are said to be the three vertices of the basic triangle of the universe. Of these, the letter '*a*' represents the ultimate reality beyond which nothing exists. But, left to itself, this letter is not capable of creating anything unless desire arises in it. This desire is indicated by the

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

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



Nataraja
Shiva

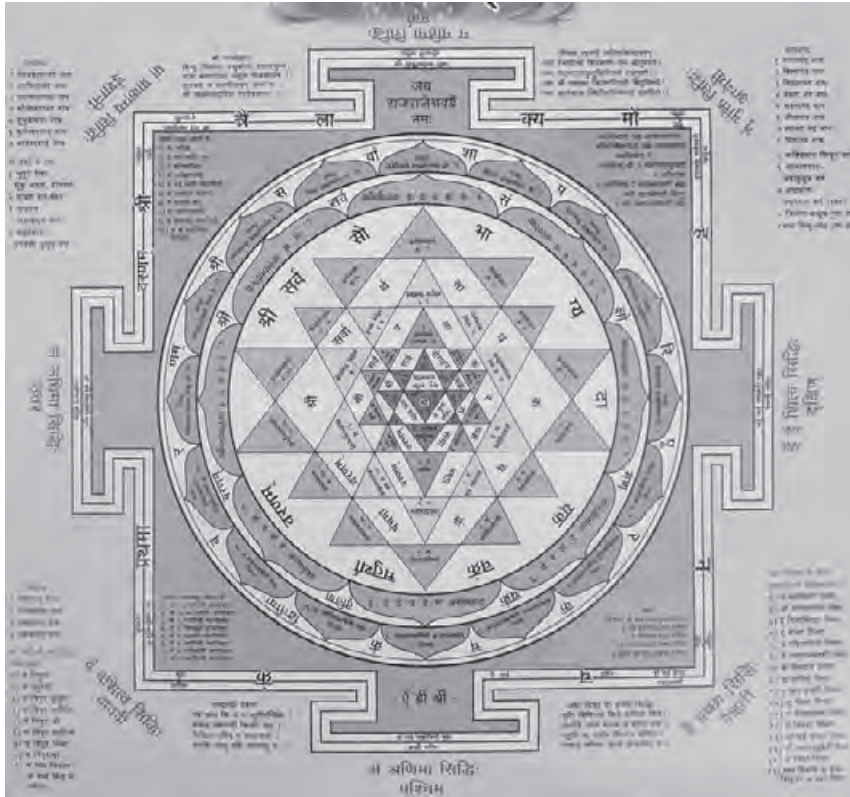
and that in the fourteenth sutra 'ha' together constitute the entire gamut of our existence, as it begins with the first vowel 'a' in the alphabet and ends with the last consonant of the alphabet, 'ha'; and these two poles, when joined by the point represented by 'm', makes it *aham*, 'I'. In the tantric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

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

The Significance of Sri-yantra

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

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



Sri Yantra

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

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


Epilogue

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

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

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

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

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

Notes and References

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