



## ***What Is Tantra?***

**Swami Chetanananda**

In the lotus of my heart do I contemplate the divine intelligence, the Brahman without distinction and difference, who is the object of realisation to even the creator, protector, and destroyer of the universe. Whom the yogis attain through meditation; who destroys the fear of birth and death; and who is existence, intelligence, and the seed of all the worlds; I bow down to that supreme Reality. Om. Peace. Peace. Peace.<sup>1</sup>

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Swami Chetanananda is the minister-in-charge of the Vedanta Society of St Louis.

### ***The Meaning of 'Tantra'***

**T**ANTRA IS AN IMPORTANT, practical, and popular religious path of Hinduism. The word 'tantra' is derived from the Sanskrit root *tan*, *tanyate*, meaning 'to spread'. Tantra means the scripture by which the light of knowledge is spread: '*Tanyate vistaryate jnanam anena iti tantram.*' The suffix *tra* denotes '*trayate*', which means 'to save'. Tantra teaches that knowledge, which saves souls from the trap of maya.

In one standard Tantric text, the *Kāmikāgama*, Tantra is defined as a class of texts “which promulgates profound matters concerning *tattva* and *mantra* (*tanoti vipulān arthān tattvamantra-samanvitān*). The two words *tattva* and *mantra* have a technical sense: *tattva* means the science of the cosmic principles, while *mantra* means the science of the mystic sound. Tantra therefore concerns the application of those sciences with a view to the attainment of spiritual ascendancy.<sup>2</sup>

### Tantric Scriptures

The goal of all spiritual paths is to destroy our ignorance and make us happy. The purpose of tantric scriptures is the same. Like the Vedas, Smritis, and Puranas, tantra plays an important role in the Hindu religious tradition. The Vedas have two parts, one concerning ritual and the other philosophy. We generally teach the philosophical part of the Vedas, which is called Vedanta. Tantra, however, originated from the ritualistic part of the Vedas.

According to the *Kulārnavā Tantra*, a particular scripture has been predominantly taught and practised in a particular yuga or age. In the Satya Yuga, Golden Age, the ritualistic portion and philosophical aspects of the Vedas were taught. In the Treta Yuga, the main scripture was Smriti, which consists of ethical and moral virtues. The ancient sages taught the moral conduct by setting some rules. In the Dvapara Yuga, the Puranas were emphasised. It taught dharma and duties of human beings. And in the Kali Yuga, the *āgama* or tantra scriptures were taught. Those who cannot understand the Vedas or the Smritis will understand the Puranas, which contain marvellous, colourful stories of the kings and of righteous people, so that people can emulate their lives. Those who have renunciation and purity, they can reach the ultimate reality by the path of discrimination of Vedanta. And those

who have not sufficient purity of mind and renunciation, they follow the path of tantra and ultimately reach the goal.

I do not mean to imply that other scriptures are not necessary in this Kali Yuga. However, because people have no longer the capacity, longevity, means, and moral strength required to carry out the Vedic rituals, the tantric scriptures prescribe a spiritual discipline of the soul for the attainment of the common aims of all the scriptures—that is, *abhyudaya* and *nishchreyasa*, prosperity in this world and liberation.

Sri Ramakrishna says: ‘In the Kaliyuga the life of a man depends entirely on food.’<sup>3</sup> Human beings now have very little stamina, patience, and time to do sadhana. In ages past, people could fast for days, months, and even years. Now if one does not have breakfast, by noon, one gets dizzy. In addition, our span of life is short in this Kali Yuga. For these reasons, we need an expedient way to attain liberation.

### Tantra in the Kali Yuga

Sri Ramakrishna says: ‘Truthfulness in speech is the tapasya of the Kaliyuga’ (749). Truthfulness is austerity in this age. If one practises the truth, that is enough.

Charity is the path of the Kali Yuga. Give in charity, and charity will purify your mind.

In this Kali Yuga, chanting the name of the Lord is very helpful, says the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*: ‘In this age of Kali there is no other means, no other means, no other means for self-realisation than chanting the holy name, chanting the holy name, chanting the holy name of Lord Hari.’<sup>4</sup> In this Kali Yuga, chanting the Lord’s names is the spiritual discipline.

Spiritual practices have changed over the ages. In ancient times we find the rishis immersed in meditation. In the Treta Yuga, we find people practising sacrifices and expecting boons from

gods and goddesses. In the Dvapara Yuga, we find people practising severe austerities to attain fulfilment. In this Kali Yuga, however, only pure love and devotion are needed. Chanting god's name is the main spiritual discipline.

### Origin of Tantric Teachings

The tantric scriptures are in question-and-answer form so that ordinary people can easily understand them. There are two branches in tantric teachings: *agama* and *nigama*. *Agama* means the great teachings that come from the lips of the teacher. In *agama*, we find Shiva as the teacher and Parvati, his wife, as the student. She asks questions and Shiva answers them. However, *nigama* is just the reverse: Parvati, the Divine Mother, is the teacher, and Shiva is the student. According to tradition, the tantra scriptures originated from the fifth face of Lord Shiva. I once saw the image of Shiva in Nepal, Pashupatinath. That deity has five faces, one facing each of the four directions and one on the crown of the head. The five faces of Shiva are named Sadyojata, Vamadeva, Aghora, Tatpurusha, and Ishana. Tradition says that Shiva taught the Vedas through the lower four faces, and from the fifth face, he taught tantra.

### Three Schools of Tantra

There are three schools of tantra: Vishnukranta, Ashvakranta, and Rathakranta. Vishnukranta is prevalent from the central part of India to the north-eastern part. It is practised from central India, Vindhya-chal, to the northeast, Assam and Manipur, including Bengal. Ashvakranta is practised in regions that stretch from Vindhya-chal to the great ocean, apparently including the rest of India. Rathakranta is practised from Vindhya-chal up to Nepal. Each branch of tantra, each *kranta*, has sixty-four sadhanas or spiritual disciplines—for a total of one hundred

and ninety-two. Tantric sadhanas and spiritual instructions are recorded in these small treatises.

Sri Ramakrishna practised sixty-four sadhanas of Vishnukranta.<sup>5</sup> This is an amazing accomplishment. An ordinary person would spend one's whole life—even life after life—to attain perfection in even one sadhana. Sri Ramakrishna practised all sixty-four sadhanas in two years.

Tantra does not only mean Mother worship, although most people understand that way. There are five schools, each devoted to a different deity: Shaiva tantra is devoted to Shiva, Shakta tantra to the Divine Mother, Vaishnava tantra to Vishnu, Saurya tantra to the Sun-god, and Ganapatya tantra to Ganesha. When we speak of tantra, we think primarily of the sacred books of the Shaktas, worshippers of Shakti, the Divine Mother.

The philosophy of tantra and Vedanta are more or less the same. In Vedanta, we address

*Pashupatinath in Nepal*



Brahman and maya. In tantra, we address Shiva and Shakti. In the Shakta tantra, God is worshipped as Mother.

I quote a sentence from Sir John Woodroffe: ‘The Śākta is so called because he is a worshipper of Śakti (Power), that is, God in Mother-form as the Supreme Power which creates, sustains and withdraws the universe.’<sup>6</sup>

Those who follow the Judeo-Christian and the Islamic traditions do not accept God as Mother. In those traditions, God is a male principle. In Hinduism, however, God can be both father and mother—or even neuter, as Brahman. You can’t assign a particular gender to God.

Those who follow tantra have a good reason to say that God is Mother, but this is for worship. God is no more female than male or neuter: God is beyond sex. God is thought of as Mother in the mind and is so felt by the heart of the spiritual practitioner, the sadhaka, who worships her lotus feet, the dust of which can create millions of universes. This divine power—the immanent, active aspect of God—is called

Shakti. At the heart of tantra, the static, transcendent aspect of Mother is Shiva. Shiva is all auspicious. Philosophically speaking, Shiva is unchanging Consciousness and Shakti is its dynamic power appearing as mind and matter. Shiva and Shakti are, therefore, Consciousness and its Power. In the static transcendent aspect, Shiva, the one Brahman, does not change. In the kinetic immanent aspect, Shakti, it does. There is the changelessness in change. The individual soul is one with the transcendent spirit, the Paramatman.

Vedanta is similar in this respect: the individual soul, your soul, my soul; this Atman and Brahman are the same. Individual Consciousness and cosmic Consciousness are same. The room-space and the cosmic space, both are the same.

In tantra, however, there is a beauty. There is a little difference between tantra and Vedanta. Let me explain what tantrics say.

In the Vedantic tradition, we say that Brahman alone is the reality. This world is illusion, unreal. It is not permanent. It has an apparent



reality, not absolute reality. We say again and again: ‘Don’t take this world seriously’. It is changing. Every day and every minute, this world is changing. Your body is changing; your mind is changing. But behind this changing reality there is an unchanging reality that is the Atman, which never changes.

Now, in tantra, sadhakas look upon this world as the manifestation of Shakti, the Divine Mother. It is real—not *absolutely* real, of course. But consider this comparison: Vedanta says, ‘Get away from maya, get out!’ Tantra says: ‘No, no, worship maya. Don’t get out; don’t throw it away; don’t discard it.’ This is the beauty of tantra. It doesn’t deny the world; it says, ‘The world is beautiful; it is true; it is the playground of the Divine Mother, and we are all her playmates.’ According to tantra, we have to realise Brahman through this world, not by negating this world. People are often confused by and fearful of the world, but God did not create the world to frighten people. There must be a purpose of this creation. What is the purpose? Play. However, what is play to God is death for us, and we suffer. In *Aesop’s Fables* we read the story of some children who are throwing pebbles at frogs. One of the frogs asks the children, ‘What are you doing?’ The children say: ‘We are playing.’ The frog responds: ‘What is play to you is death for us; we are dying.’<sup>7</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual experiences bore witness to the tantric attitude that God is in all. When he went to the shrine to offer food to the Divine Mother, he saw a mewling cat. He said to the cat: ‘Mother, do you want to eat food? Come, come, eat.’ Instead of offering the food to the deity on the altar, he fed it to the cat. The temple officials were enraged by this heresy. However, Sri Ramakrishna saw the Mother in the cat.<sup>8</sup> Another time, he was coming back to his room from the Panchavati when he saw a dog.



He approached the dog and asked it, ‘Mother, do you want to speak something?’ He was seeing the Divine Mother in the dog (267). Once when Sri Ramakrishna was in Calcutta, he saw courtesans standing on the street. He remarked: ‘Mother are you dressed up and waiting here in this form?’ He saw the Divine Mother in everything. That is the beauty of the tantric tradition.

Can you imagine what would happen if you saw God in everything, in every being? (632) You would experience, ‘the Kingdom of heaven is within you; the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.’<sup>9</sup> You would be floating in bliss.

We see Devil, Satan, in everybody but we do not see God in everything—our outlook must be changed. How? By practising sadhana, spiritual disciplines. When your insides are transformed, your outside is transformed. That is called spiritual life—transformation comes from within. It does not come from outside.

In this Kali Yuga, Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated how to realise God. His first vision came through his yearning, his longing for God. Then came his guru Bhairavi Brahmani, a woman adept in tantra. Under her guidance Sri Ramakrishna practised sixty-four sadhanas of tantra and achieved perfection. Afterwards he practised Vedanta and attained Nirvikalpa Samadhi.

### **Tantric Sadhana and Occult Powers**

When one practises tantric sadhana, one can develop occult powers.

Once Sri Ramakrishna called Narendra into the Panchavati and said: 'Look, as a result of practising austerities, I have long since possessed all the supernatural powers. But what would a person like me do with such powers? I can't even keep a wearing-cloth tied around my own waist! So I'm thinking of asking Mother to transfer them all to you. She has told me that you will have to do much work for Her. So if these powers are transmitted to you, you

*Sri Ramakrishna with Narendra*



can use them when necessary. What do you say?' Narendra had seen various divine powers in the Master since their first meeting, so he had no reason to doubt him. But his deeply rooted love of God did not allow him to accept those powers without careful consideration. After serious thought, Narendra asked, 'Sir, will they help me to realize God?' The Master replied: 'No, they won't help you to do that. But they might be very useful once you have realized God and have started doing His work.' To this, Narendra said: 'Sir, I don't need them. Let me realize God first; after that, there will be time enough to decide whether I need them. If I get these marvellous powers now, I might forget the whole purpose of my life and use them to gratify worldly desires. Then they would only become my ruin.' We cannot say whether the Master was actually ready to transmit those powers to Narendra or was simply testing him. But we do know that the Master was extremely pleased when Narendra refused his offer (827-8).

Sri Ramakrishna was overjoyed that the future Swami Vivekananda was not tempted by these powers. He could have done anything by means of occult power, but he refused. He is a great soul.

Bhairavi Brahmani had two disciples in addition to Sri Ramakrishna—Chandra and Girija. Each of them had occult powers. Chandra had *gutika* siddhi, meaning that he could take a minute form and fly. Once he flew through the window of a rich man and fell in love with his daughter, and then he was caught and beaten up. Girija could generate a supernatural light. One dark night Sri Ramakrishna and Girija were coming from Shambhunath's garden house to Dakshineswar. They could not see the path, so Girija said, 'Do you want to see the path? I can show you.' He touched his forehead and from there emanated a light that revealed the path up to the temple gate (524-6).

## Tantra Sadhana

In tantra, we find the harmony of dualism and non-dualism. According to tradition, Shiva says that some practise *dvaita* or dualism, and some practise Advaita, non-dualism—but whoever wishes to understand the real tantra must transcend both *dvaita* and Advaita. Our goal is to attain illumination, for that purpose we practise sadhana. The *Mahanirvana Tantra* says that when we attain that illumination, all actions cease to function and all spiritual disciplines are no more needed.

The *Mahanirvana Tantra* further says: ‘The highest worship is to think of oneself as Brahman; the second method of worship is meditation on God; the third method is japa, prayer, and glorification of God; and the last method is external, ritualistic worship.’

Human beings vary in temperaments. Tantra classifies humankind primarily within three dispositions: *divya* bhava, divine; *vira* bhava, heroic; and *pashu* bhava, animal. These dispositions correspond to the divine plane, the mental or intellectual plane, and the physical plane, respectively. The animal person can hardly be expected to see beyond the material aspects of things. In the heroic person, there is an urge to reach the plane beyond matter—the true heroic person is one who is fighting the six enemies, the passions that obstruct the path of one’s spiritual advancement. The goal of tantra sadhana is to be established in divine disposition.

Do you know what we really do in spiritual life? We fight. An unseen warfare is constantly going on inside us. We fight against the six enemies who are hidden in our minds: *kama*, lust; *krodha*, anger; *lobha*, greed; *moha*, delusion;



*mada*, egotism; and *matsarya*, jealousy. These are the six enemies hidden in human minds that we want to overcome by practising spiritual disciplines.

The man of *divya* disposition is, as a result of his practice in previous births, endowed with qualities which make him almost divine. The *Kāmākhyā Tantra* says that the man of *divya* disposition is the beloved of all and is sparing in his words, quiet, steady, sagacious, and attentive to all. His all is contented and is devoted to the feet of his *guru* (teacher). He fears no one, is consistent in what he says, and is experienced in all matters. He never swerves from the path of truth and avoids all that is evil. He is good in every way and is Śiva’s very self. The *vira* is a man of fearless disposition, inspires fear in the man of *paśu* disposition, and is pure in

his motive. He is gentle in his speech and is always mindful of the five *tattvas* (principles). He is physically strong, courageous, intelligent, and enterprising. He is humble in his ways and is ever ready to cherish the good. The *paśu* is a man whose inclinations are like those of an animal. He is a slave to his six enemies—lust, anger, greed, pride, illusion, and envy. ... Closely connected with the three *bhāvas* are the seven *ācāras* or rules of conduct.<sup>10</sup>

*Achara*, means ‘conduct’. Your conduct, your behaviour, your style of life are extremely important. If religion cannot bring about transformation, what good is there in it? If you achieve illumination, you will not grow two heads, eight legs, and four hands—your body will remain the same as it is now. Transformation will come within. There are seven rules of conduct described in the *Kularnava Tantra: veda, vaishnava, shaiva, dakshina, vama, siddhanta*, and *kaula*. The aspirant rises step by step through these different *acharas* till she or he reaches the seventh and the highest state, when Brahman becomes an experiential reality.

In the first stage, cleanliness of the body and mind is cultivated. You must be clean physically and mentally. A person who is always suspicious, and is full of doubts and desires, has a soul that is very unclean.

The second stage is that of devotion, bhakti. You must have love and devotion for your teachers, for your disciples, and for God. The third is knowledge. Dakshina is the fourth stage in which the gains of the previous stages are consolidated. This is followed by *vama*, the phase of renunciation. The word *vama* can mean ‘women’, so some people mistakenly believe that *vamachara* sadhana involves practising tantra with women and wine. I shall later explain *panchamakara*, the five elements of tantric practice. However, the word also means ‘left’. Here, *vama* implies that

up to this stage, you have established yourself in the spiritual path: now you have to renounce all worldly things and move towards the Atman, the Self or Brahman, or Shiva or the Mother—whoever is your chosen deity.

If a woman is at all associated in this practice, she is there to help in the path of renunciation and not for animal gratification. A woman as such is an object of great veneration to all schools of Tāntrika *sādhakas* (seekers). She is considered to be the embodiment of this earth, of the supreme Śakti who pervades the universe. She should therefore be revered as such and even if guilty of hundred wrongs, she is not to be hurt even with a flower. It is a sin to speak disparagingly of any women (60).

The sixth stage is *siddhanta*, ‘in which the aspirant comes to the definitive conclusion after deliberate consideration as to the relative merits of the path of enjoyment and that of renunciation’ (ibid.). And the last stage is *kaula*, when Brahman becomes a reality to the spiritual aspirant.

### **The Five Elements of Tantra Sadhana**

Unfortunately, a large number of tantric enthusiasts, in both the West and the East, mistakenly identify tantra as the yoga of sex, black magic, witchcraft, seduction, and so on. Some misguided people use some tantric sadhanas to satisfy their carnal desires. One can find all sorts of wrong information about tantra from the Internet.

Tantra describes five elements, called the *pancha-makara*, to be used in sadhana: *madya*, wine; *mamsa*, meat; *matsya*, fish; *mudra*, silver coin; and *maithuna*, sexual union. These five categories have different meanings for different classes of worshippers—but in all cases it is important to understand that what one is required to offer is the principle or essence, not the article itself. It is impossible to think that Shiva would

have advised people to have all five experiences and assured them illumination. Many people enjoy these things. Are they illumined? People don't need to practise tantric rituals to have sex and enjoy wine. Some people with animal nature want to spiritualise their self-indulgence, and Westerners sometimes portray tantric rituals in this way. Sir John Woodroffe, who was a British judge of the Calcutta High Court, tried to remove this misunderstanding by writing several books on tantra.

The *pancha-makara* should be understood from a spiritual perspective. First, *madya*: do you know what 'wine' means? When you meditate, from the *brahmarandhra* chakra, a sweet nectar flows—that is called 'wine.' A spiritual seeker thinks of that nectar and is intoxicated. *Mamsa* means taste—that means great taste on your tongue. A true tantric aspirant should have full control over her or his tongue; a real tantric is passive and practises silence. By *matsya*, 'fish', the tantras refer to the jiva, the individual self. The *ida* and *pingala*—the two nerve channels on either side of the spinal cord—are like the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, and the jiva, like a fish, plays in these channels as the tantric practitioner breathes in and out. The control of this breath and focusing on that power and putting that power through the *shushumna* channel, is called *matsya*. Mudra, 'silver coin', refers to meditation on the guru in the *sahasrara*—the place of Shiva in the seventh chakra—which is compared to melted silver. As for *maithuna*, 'sexual union', it can be understood in this way: Air represents the male and

space represents the female. When air enters into space—meaning that when we breathe, air enters into the space of our hearts and a yogi attains *kumbhaka*—the mind stops and one attains illumination. This is *maithuna* or union.

### Guru and Disciple in Tantra

In the tantric tradition, one must have a *sad-guru* or *siddha-guru*, that is an enlightened guru. Initiation is extremely important. Before one takes initiation, however, one must determine

Goddess Kali





whether the guru is the right one and the guru must determine whether the disciple is the right one. If the disciple is not attracted to the guru, she or he will not make progress. On the guru's part, she or he must show love and affection towards the disciple. It is a spiritual relationship.

In tantric scriptures we find a long list of the qualifications of a guru and the characteristics of a good disciple. A good teacher is defined to be a person of pure birth and pure disposition who has the senses under control. One who is a guru should know the true meaning of the tantras; always do good to others; and engage in the repetition of God's name, worship, meditation, and the offering of oblations in fire. One should have a peaceful mind and must possess the power of granting boons. One should know the Vedic teachings; be competent in yoga; and

be as charming as a child. It is very difficult to get a guru like that.

There is a funny story in the Vedantic tradition. A guru told his disciple: 'Go, chop wood, bring water, cook, serve me—that is the duty of the disciple.'

Then, the disciple said: 'Sir, what is the duty of a guru?'

The guru replied: 'Well, the guru will relax and give advice to the disciple.'

Upon hearing this, the disciple asked: 'Sir, why don't you make me a guru first? I'd like to be a guru!' Nowadays nobody wants to be a disciple.

The characteristics of a good disciple are as follows: He should be of good parentage and guileless disposition, and be a seeker of the four-fold aim of human existence. He should be well read in the Vedas and be intelligent. He should

have his animal desires under complete control, always be kind towards all animals, and have faith in the next world. He should not associate with non-believers (*nāstikas*), but should be assiduous in his duties in general, alert in the discharge of his duties towards his parents in particular, and free from the pride of birth, wealth, and learning in the presence of his teacher. He should always be willing to sacrifice his own interests in the discharge of his duties to the teacher, and be ever ready to serve him in all humility (61).

Water gathers in low land, not on the top of the mountain. If you have a big ego, if you do not know how to be humble, you will never learn anything. Be humble. Initiation is that which gives knowledge of things divine and destroys all that leads to fall. The guru gives initiation. In the *Vishvasara Tantra*, we find a hymn on the guru:

The guru is Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Maheshvara Shiva (the destroyer). The guru is truly Brahman Itself. I bow to the divine guru.

I bow to the divine guru, who by the application of the collyrium of knowledge, opens the eyes of one blinded by the disease of ignorance.

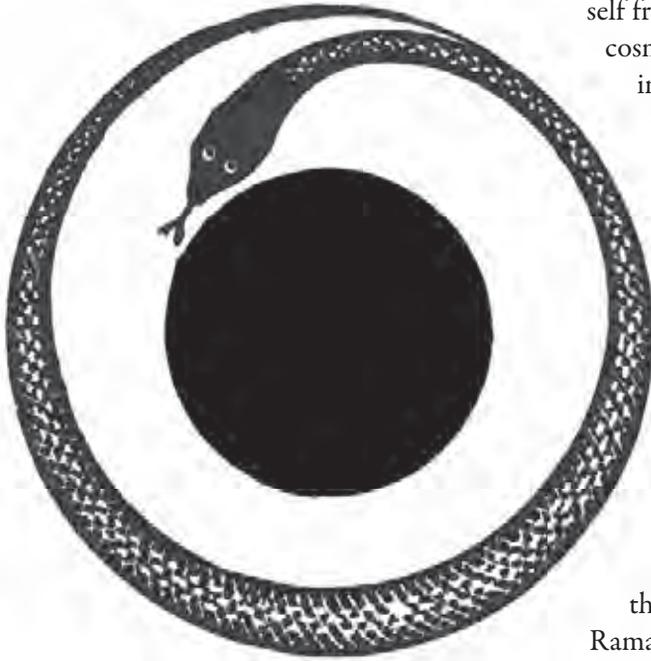
I bow to the divine guru who reveals to one the divine Being that encircles and permeates the moving and the non-moving.<sup>11</sup>

This is the way the guru has been eulogised in tantra. So the real guru is God and his power manifests in illumined human gurus and they transmit that power or *shakti* to the disciples. That power is divine power; the human guru is only a channel or conduit. Electricity comes through a channel of wires to power a light. The human guru is just like that. When you are thirsty do you run to the Mississippi river? No, you go to the kitchen, turn on the faucet and fill a glass, then drink. The guru is just like the faucet in this example and the Mississippi River is God.

If you have a cataract what do you do? You go to the eye surgeon, who will check whether the cataract is ready to operate on and then will do laser surgery and you get clear eyesight. Similarly, the guru uses the sharp sword of knowledge to cut through the thick layer of ignorance so that the disciple can see God everywhere.

Ordinary souls have three kinds of impurities. The first is *anava-mala*, ignorance: each soul is pure, perfect, free, and divine, but one feels that one is bound, limited. The second is *karma-mala*, desire—both good and bad. Because of desire, a person has to go through births and deaths, experiencing happiness and misery. The third kind of impurity is *babhya-mala*, meaning the external world and the sense objects that bring impurities and cover the soul.

*Diksha*, initiation, helps to clean all impurities. According to tantra: '*Diyate jnanam kshiyate pashuvasana iti diksha*; Diksha or initiation imparts knowledge and destroys animal propensities.' It also is of various kinds. In *shambhavi diksha* a true guru like Sri Ramakrishna, Jesus Christ, or Buddha can change a person's life with one glance, one touch, or one word. These great teachers could give religion. In *shakti diksha* a guru transmits power to her or his disciples. For example, Sri Ramakrishna transmitted power to Swami Vivekananda before his death. He told him: 'O Naren, today I have given you my all and have become a Fakir, a penniless beggar. By the force of the power transmitted by me, great things will be done by you; only after that will you go where you came from.'<sup>12</sup> Swamiji later used to say that he conquered the whole world with his guru's power. In *mantra-diksha*, the guru gives the disciple a mantra and instructions for practising it to get the result. Although tantra has these various kinds of initiation, the object of initiation is to lead the disciple to God realisation.



*Kundalini, The Serpent Power*

The chosen ideal is very much necessary for practising sadhana. We must learn the alphabet and grammar before we study literature. If I tell you 'You are That' or 'You are Brahman', you will not understand immediately. One needs tremendous purity of mind to understand this truth. One must have zero body idea to experience 'I am Brahman'. That is why tantra says that the deity of the ritualist is in the fire in which one offers oblation while that of the contemplative is in the heart. The person who is not awakened sees Atman in the image, but the person who knows the Atman sees it everywhere. Beginners need something to focus on, a divine form on which to concentrate. As one progresses, the divine form vanishes and merges into the infinite. Hindus are not idolaters—those divine forms help in practising contemplation. Mantras have power; all mantras are as old as creation.

The individual self is a spark of the infinite

light. The aim of worship is to free the individual self from all that separates her or him from the cosmic Self so that the individual self merges into the divine. The tantric dictum is: '*Devo bhutva devam yajet*; by becoming God, worship God.' But what does it mean to become God? Imbibe these divine qualities so that you will be like God.

How does one perform mantra sadhana so that the power of the divine name is manifest and the divine name can be conscious? The mantra takes the form of the deity. The moment I say 'Jesus', then Jesus's form comes to my mind. If I say 'Sri Ramakrishna', Sri Ramakrishna's form comes to mind. The sound, the name, and the deity are identical. So if you call on Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ramakrishna will appear to you. If you call on Jesus, Jesus will appear before you. However, you must practise that mantra according to your teacher's instructions.

### **Kundalini Shakti in Tantra**

Kundalini is a special subject of tantras. Sri Ramakrishna related his experience about the awakening of the six centres of kundalini:

Just before my attaining this state of mind, it had been revealed to me how the Kundalini is aroused, how the lotuses of the different centres blossom forth, and how all this culminates in samadhi. This is a very secret experience. I saw a boy twenty-two or twenty-three years old, exactly resembling me, enter the Sushumna nerve and commune with the lotuses, touching them with his tongue. He began with the centre at the anus and passed through the centres at the sexual organ, navel, and so on. The different lotuses of those centres—four-petalled, six-petalled, ten-petalled, and so forth—had been drooping. At his touch they stood erect. When he reached the heart—I distinctly remember



it—and communed with the lotus there, touching it with his tongue, the twelve-petalled lotus, which was hanging head down, stood erect and opened its petals. Then he came to the sixteen-petalled lotus in the throat and the two-petalled lotus in the forehead. And last of all, the thousand-petalled lotus in the head blossomed. Since then I have been in this state.<sup>13</sup>

We know that practice leads to perfection. Tantra shows how to practise and attain perfection. It also demonstrates how every action can be transformed into worship. In his hymn to the Divine Mother, Acharya Shankara says: ‘O Lady Supreme, may all the functions of my mind be Thy remembrance; may all my words be Thy praise; may all my acts be an obeisance unto Thee.’<sup>14</sup> 

### Notes and References

1. *Mahanirvana Tantra*.
2. P C Bagchi, ‘Evolution of the Tantras’ in *Studies on the Tantras* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1989), 7.
3. M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami

Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 648.

4. *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, Adi-Lila, 17.21.
5. A list of the various disciplines of tantra sadhana under the Vishnukranta branch has been mentioned in *Principles of Tantra: The Tantratattva of Shriyukta Shiva Candra Vidyārṇava Bhattāchāryya Mahodaya*, ed. Arthur Avalon (Madras: Ganesh, 1952), 88.
6. Sir John Woodroffe, *Śakti and Śākta* (Leeds: Celephaïs, 2009), 8.
7. See ‘The Boys and the Frogs’ in *Aesop’s Fables*.
8. See Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St Louis: Vedanta Society of St Louis, 2003), 217.
9. See Matthew 3:2 and Luke 17:20–1.
10. Atal Behari Ghosh, ‘The Spirit and Culture of the Tantras’ in *Studies on the Tantras* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1989), 59.
11. Guru-stotram, *Vishvasara Tantra*.
12. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 1.182.
13. *Gospel*, 830.
14. *Studies on the Tantras*, 65.