

Second Lecture

Some Fundamental Conceptions of Tantra

In spite of a great variety of Tantric traditions with their respective deities, rituals, mantras and theologies, so that there is no such religion or system called 'tantrism', yet all these schools share in some basic conceptions which precisely allow them to be called 'tantric'. Before going into particular examples it will be useful to describe some of these common features underlying and expressed in texts and ritual and spiritual practices. Tantra has been so much misunderstood precisely because the fundamental insights were not understood.

Every religion is based on a cosmology and on a conception of the human being, before leading to the supreme goal, transcendence, the divinity, or enlightenment. It is on the basis of these cosmic and human structures that the way to liberation, through ritual, through yoga or through gnosis is described. If the way to liberation is from worldly bondage, it implies a reversal of the process of cosmic manifestation. However, in Tantra there is no rejection of cosmos and body, as in many ascetic traditions (such as Vedānta), but an integration and transformation of all the levels of the universe and of Man. May be this is one of the extraordinary insights and experiences of Tantra which is followed up to minute details in ritual and *sādhana*. The method of integration is one of identification-and-transcendence, which can happen ritually in a way of symbolic action, and in spiritual practice by imaginative contemplation or *bhāvanā*, which starts with an identification with a certain thought, and transforms it by transcending and embodying it. This general statement will become clear when we come to ritual and yoga.

All this presupposes a cosmology which provides all the elements for practice and philosophy. By way of examples I will give the most pervasive cosmology which is fully elaborated in Śaivāgama. It is the system of 36 *tattvas*, elements or levels of reality.

Although Tantra brings a fresh approach to reality and a new path to liberation (as Utpaladeva says in the 9th century), it also relies on earlier conceptions which are wellknown in the Darśanas or systems of philosophy. After all, what makes the unity and continuity “from below” of the Indian traditions is a common view of the world,, not only the world as bondage (*saṃsāra*), but the structure of the cosmos as well as of the human being. The system which has provided the basis for Indian cosmology is the ancient Sāṃkhya which describes 25 *tattvas*, elements or levels of reality, which reach from the lowest, earth, the five gross elements, the five subtle elements (*tanmātra*), the organs of action and the organs of cognition (*indriya*, together 10), the psychic organs mind, intellect and ego, the primal Nature (*prakṛti*) and Spirit (according to the Sāṃkhya system: *puruṣa*). Even systems which are in disagreement with the fundamental dualism of Sāṃkhya, basically between matter and spirit, have accepted these 25 elements as an existing structure. Now the Śaiva Āgamas have added 11 additional *tattvas* to these 25, thus arriving at a total picture, not only of the universe, but of man and of the divine, in 36 levels of reality. It is therefore wrong to call this scheme simply ‘cosmology’, the more fitting term is ‘cosmotheandric ‘ reality, which includes the human and the divine. This vision of the totality has many implications: One, there is a continuity, a fluidity between the gross, the subtle and supreme (the three levels recognized by Tantra in all contexts), and between the cosmic and the human; two, it represents a hierarchy which can be seen in both directions, again a typically tantric feature: in the order of rising – as is often said, “from earth to Śiva”, and in the order of descending. In Sanskrit *sr̥ṣṭīkrama* and *saṃhāarakrama*, the order of creation (from above below) and the order of re-absorption in the divine source. These two movements are constantly happening, according to the Āgamas, they are the creative and the liberating processes. In spite of a continuity among these *tattvas*, there is only one important break or shift, from the so-called ‘impure Path’ to the ‘pure Path’ (*śuddha adhvān*), which takes place at the level of *Māyā*, the universal illusory principle. When by way of spiritual practice the *yogī*

crosses over *māyā* and transforms her into *śuddhavidyā*, ‘pure wisdom’, he enters the realm of divine levels or hypostases, and rises to the supreme level, which lies even beyond the 36 *tattvas*. Therefore, this whole scheme is not empty speculation, but it shows, on the one hand, the integration of cosmos, body and the mental or psychic levels, and on the other it provides the structure for meditative practices and for the process of tantric initiation or *dīkṣā*. Here we have the principle that, even if the *yogī* aspires to liberation or *nirvāṇa*, no level of reality can be left outside, he or she has to pass through all these aspects before transcending even the highest *tattva*. Even Śiva as a category which can be named and objectified, as it were, is to be transcended, and that ‘beyond’ may be called Parama Śiva or *Anuttara*. In the words of Swami Lakshman Joo, last Śaivācārya of Kashmir:

Parama Śiva is not only found in *śiva tattva*. It is not only here, it is not only there, everywhere you will find it. You will find it from the lowest *tattva* to the highest *tattva*. It is all levels, that is why it is no level. It is everywhere, that is why It is nowhere. The one Being who is everywhere, It is nowhere.¹

Specially in the context of non-dualist Śaivism, the hierarchy of the 36 *tattvas* is explained also with the image of a mirror (*bimba-pratibimba*), where the inversion of levels takes place, and the highest become the lowest, and the lowest Earth, becomes the highest, Śiva. Often, when the texts speak of the totality, they use the expression “from a blade of grass to Śiva”. This has to do with the doctrine that “everything is contained in every thing”, or “every single part contains the whole”: *sarvaṃ sarvātmakam*. This doctrine of the interconnectedness of all things could be meaningfully compared with the Buddhist *pratīyasamutpāda*. In both cases, the higher the *yogī’s* consciousness is developed, the clearer he perceives this interconnection.

With this first fundamental aspect of the tantric vision we have already an idea of the, mainly non-dualistic Śaiva understanding of the Divine as both,

¹ Swami Lakshman Joo, Kashmir Saivism, the Secret Supreme, p. 10.

immanent and transcendent: *viśvamaya* and *viśvottīrṇa*. This is again not just a theological statement, but it has a dynamic expression in the theory and practice of reflectivity (already mentioned), where the macrocosm is reflected in the microcosm, the body of the *yogī*, which he uses for his path of transcending the limitations of both. *Bimba-pratibimba* also implies a holistic vision.

When we speak of dynamism, both in the cosmic and spiritual context, we have immediately to point at one of the most central conceptions of Tantra: the place of *Śakti*, the divine Energy, which is incessantly engaged in the double play of manifestation and of liberation. The ‘higher’ or more esoteric the tantric traditions are, the greater is the role of the *Śakti* in them. If we accept the general division in ‘right’ and ‘left’ tantrism, the ‘right’ is more conform to brahmanical hinduism , as for instance the Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra and other tantric forms of Vaishnaivism and Śaiva Siddhānta. The ‘left’ is more radically opposed to Vedic orthodoxy, and it lays more stress on the feminine or *Śakti* element.²

Śakti plays a role at every level, from the cosmic manifestation to yoga and spiritual realization. Śiva in himself is not acting, he only acts through his power or powers. Although five great Acts are ascribed to Śiva, they are actually performed by his *Śakti*. These Acts comprise: creation, sustenance or continuation, re-absorption (usually but wrongly translated as ‘destruction’), obscuration and grace or liberation: *sr̥ṣṭi*, *sthiti*, *saṁhāra*, *tirodhāna*, *anugraha*. They may be understood more in a mythological way, as in general Śaivism and in Śaiva Siddhānta, but in the non-dualist interpretation they are seen as five phases which are constantly going on, not only on the cosmic plane, but in each individual being, more or less consciously.

The central concept of *Śakti* is then understood both, at the divine and human levels, as diversified. To quote the *Tantrasāra* of Abhinavagupta:

The Supreme Lord is of the nature of fullness of Consciousness, and this Fullness is (precisely) His Energy. In the sacred Scriptures she is called, according

² Cf. A. Sanderson, Śaivism and the Tantric traditions, pp. 668-669. (quote p. 669).

to her functions: Totality (*kula*), Power, Wave, Heart, Essence, Vibration (*spanda*), Glory, the Threefold Goodness, Kālī, Attraction, *Caṇḍī* (the terrifying Goddess), Word (sound), Enjoyment, Vision, the Eternal one, etc. In any one of these forms She is present in the heart of the meditator. When the fullness of Consciousness is manifested, it happens by the vision of the totality of (divine) energies.

And His Powers are innumerable, what else can one say? But if the universe consists of His Energies, how can one describe/teach them? And yet, the universe consists in three Energies...³, and he goes on to describe the three Śāktis of the Trika system: *Parā*, the Supreme, *Parāparā*, the Supreme-cum- Non Supreme, and *Aparā*, the Immanent, corresponding to the levels of consciousness: the non-different (*abheda*), the different-cum-nondifferent (*bhedābheda*), and the different or dual (*bheda*) They comprise all the levels of experience, and yet they are transcended by a fourth Energy which is called “the true reality of the knower”. (*māṭṛsadbhāva*), or “the attractrix/ overcomer of time” (*kālakarṣiṇī*, *ibid.* p. 28). I am giving this as an example for the role of Śakti in non-dualist Śaivism, to show her all-pervasiveness. We will come back to his theme in the context of yoga.

Obviously, the many forms of the goddess are but a manifestation of the principle of Śakti. As said before, the higher in the esoteric hierarchy of Tantric schools, the more powerful will be the respective goddess. In some cases, She alone is the presiding deity, not subordinated or associated with one of the male forms of Śiva/Bhairava. Such is the case with Kālī in the Krama system, and of Tripurasundarī in Śrīvidyā.

As is the case with many phenomena and doctrines of Tantra, Śakti is a classical example for a reality which reaches from the lower, mythological and popular levels to the ever ascending higher levels of spiritual experience and philosophical interpretation, from gross to subtle and to transcendent (*sthūla-sūkṣma-para*), as the Tantras do not tire to repeat. At the levels of name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*) we find the ritual and iconic forms of the goddess. When, in a Śākta

³ Tantrasāra 4, KSTS pp. 27-28.

context, the Goddess stands alone, She is invoked and praised in 1000 names, as in the *Lalitā-sahasranāma* which belongs to the Śrīvidyā tradition, and which has received an extensive commentary by one of the most important tantric scholars, Bhāskara Rāya. These thousand (or 300) names contain her qualities and functions, implying a whole theology. Many or all of the qualities with which the goddess Durgā is identified in the *yā-devī* hymn of the *Durgāsaptaśatī* are also grammatically feminine, a consciously employed method, considering the importance of the Sanskrit language, and of the genders of the deities.

When the question is asked about the meaning of the feminine power or Śakti, we find extensive answers at the level of the Tantras themselves, and of their exegesis and philosophical interpretation by the great commentators, especially of Kashmir, in the 10th-11th centuries: Abhinavagupta, Kṣemarāja and others.

The apparent duality of Śiva-Śakti, the fundamental pair which finds expression in different forms, according to the Tantra concerned, such as Bhairava-Bhairavī, Svachandabhairava-Aghoreśvarī, etc., is explained by the Tantras as an actual nonduality. Philosophically they compare the pair to the relation of *dharma* and *dharmin*, the property or quality and its possessor, which are inseparable. The metaphors used are of fire and its power to burn (when it is a question of several powers, they are differentiated as the power to burn, to heat and to cook); of the sun and its rays (here the plurality of powers is inevitable); or also of the ocean and its waves (equally a plurality),⁴ all implying non-duality in spite of distinction. Philosophically the relation of the two is compared to the pure light of Consciousness (*prakāśa*) and its power of reflection (*vimarśa*), a fundamental conceptual pair of Kashmir Śaivism. Just as Śiva can only be attained through his Energy or Powers, pure and objectless Consciousness can only be reached by self-reflection, which is the essence of meditative practices.⁵ Abhinavagupta says this in the introductory chapter of his “Light on the Tantras” (Tantrāloka):

⁴ Cf.. VBh.

⁵ Cf.. VBh.

The innermost light of illumination,
 the manifestation of the unique Lord,
 pure Consciousness, is worshipped in the limited form
 of a wave of Consciousness,
 the wheel of beneficial (auspicious) or other (energies).⁶

The commentator, Jayaratha, identifies the innermost *pratibhā* with *svātantrayaśakti*, the most fundamental Energy of Freedom of the One Lord. This verse contains in a nutshell the relationship between the Lord and his Energy, as well as the different forms and levels the Śakti takes in the self-manifestation of pure Consciousness. Even the worship of the mild and the wild goddesses (*saumya* and *raudra*) is contained here. And ultimately, this Energy is the illuminating inner power, *pratibhā*, lying at the source of enlightenment. This single verse may show by way of example the complexity of the concept of Śakti. At the same time it shows another characteristic feature of Tantric conceptions: the many layers of meaning implied in texts, concepts and practices. These levels can only be understood by spiritual practice and experience.

The central theme of Śakti is also related to the ancient traditions of *yoginīs*, which have their own Tantras⁷. They represent both, feminine divinities and divinised human *yoginīs*, women accomplished in yoga who played an important role in the whole of tantrism, as is well known in Tibetan Buddhism. This is a vast subject which I cannot go into, but only hint at, because of its complexity and the many expressions it has found, also in ritual and iconography.⁸ However two aspects have to be mentioned because they are generally associated with Tantra. One is the role of *yoginīs* in relation to *siddhas* in the context of sexual rites, called *yoginīmelāpa* or *cākra*. Although the topic of ritual will be dealt with in one of the next lectures, the themes are necessarily overlapping – such as the complex topic of

⁶ Tantrāloka I. 116: *ekasya saṁvinnāthasya hyāntarī practibhā tanu| saumyaṁ vā anyanmītaṁ saṁvidrmicakram upāsyate ||*

⁷ Cf. Kumārikakhaṇḍa of the Manthānabhairavatantra, ed. And transl. By Mark Dyczkowski.

⁸ Cf. Vidya Dehejia, *Yoginī Cult and Temples in Tantric Traditions*, New Delhi, National Museum, 1986.

sexuality. This will be taken up in the context of ritual and yoga. *Yoginīs* are also associated with powers (*siddhi*), even magical powers, and often come close to witches. The medieval circular and open-to-sky temples of the 64 *yoginīs* are a fascinating testimony to the typical tantric borderline character of these semi-divine, powerful and dangerous female deities.

But I should not stray from the topic of fundamental conceptions into the field of concrete manifestations.

In order to understand both, the tantric world view as well as spiritual practice, at least one more conception has to be presented.

The entire tradition being called Mantra-mārga (just as Mantrayāna in Buddhism) shows the central role of *mantra* in tantric *sādhana*. While we will deal with *mantra* in the context of ritual and yoga, what is important is to understand the underlying philosophy. Mantra would not be so powerful were it not based on a theory of speech and language. While the Tantras themselves offer the basis, the philosophical elaboration has been done by their commentators, most explicitly again by the exponents of so-called Kashmir Śaivism, who were also influenced by the philosophy of Grammar (Bhartṛhari above all). In fact, the theme of the Word or Speech – *Vāc* - is closely related to the theme of Śakti which we have just touched upon, as well as to the cosmotheandric hierarchy of the *tattvas*. How?

In the tantric world view the universe is created and sustained by and in the Word (better than language, which has the implication and limitation of human language). The word, *Vāc*, grammatically feminine, is another, and one of the most important, aspect of Śakti, it is a divine creative Energy. However, the universe is manifest in all its details through the phonemes of the Sanskrit language. A whole cosmic and mystical correspondence exists between the elements of language, the cosmic elements, and the manifestation in the human body. This symbolism is only possible with the Sanskrit language, although the implied principles can be universalized (and find parallels in other traditions and language, such as Hebrew and Greek, to a certain extent). There is another basic assumption, namely that the

universe is pervaded by consciousness, and that Consciousness and Language (or *Vāc*) are co-extensive, one does not exist without the other. Therefore even the creative phonematic manifestation in the different sounds is called *varṇaparāmarśa*, the act of awareness of phonemes. In any case, the written word is totally secondary in relation to the word as sound (*nāda, dhvani*). The power of every vowel and consonant of the Sanskrit alphabet, significantly called *Mātrkā*, is therefore a cosmic and divine power. This is a very vast and highly technical subject of Tantra that it is difficult to explain in short. But let me give a few examples so that the theory becomes clearer.

Symbolically, the vowels are said to belong to Śiva, and the consonants to Śakti. Since only their combination brings about language, vowels are compared to seed (*bīja*) and consonants to womb (*yoni*). The first vowel of the Sanskrit alphabet is *a*, and it stands symbolically for *anuttara*, the unsurpassable, Absolute. When it expands, it becomes lengthened and becomes *ā* which stands for *ānanda*, bliss. Here you can already see that this reflection on the phonemes is not abstract speculation, but leads to a symbolic understanding of all the elements of language: the expansion of the *Anuttara* leads to *Ānanda*.

Now the last letter of the Sanskrit alphabet is *ha* and it stands for Śakti. When the first and the last letter are combined we have *aha-* which is concluded by a point (*bindu*), a nasalization (*anusvāra*), and becomes *aham*, 'I'. This is universal I-consciousness embracing Śiva and Śakti, and containing within and between the entire alphabet, which means the entire universe which is co-extensive. Here we have already the basis for *mantra*, and *aham* itself is a *mantra*, with all the implied symbolism. There are two forms of alphabets in the Śaivāgamas, and both are identified with divine energies or goddesses: *Mātrkā* and *Mālinī*. No wonder that *mantras* formed out of their elements have the power of Śaktis.

Another more philosophical theme with far-reaching spiritual implication has to be understood in the context of the word or language, which is more easy to be universalized even in relation to other languages. It is the theory of the four

levels of the Word⁹ which is shared by both, Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva Tantras and their commentators. In the order of descent these four stages are Parā (*vāk*), the supreme level of the word which lies beyond thought and language, but is their source. “It is the supreme sound which has no sound. It is the life of the other three kinds of speech ..., *paśyantī*, *madhyamā* and *vaikharī*.”¹⁰ This supreme level beyond all differentiation (*abheda*) is not only the starting point or source for the descent of the Word, but, as Abhinavagupta says, “She is actually present at the levels of *paśyantī* and so forth, for without her darkness, and therefore unconsciousness, would prevail”¹¹ Thus “The Supreme Word, who is the luminous and living pure Consciousness, ... though transcendent, is immanent to the whole manifestation.”¹² And, as Abhinavagupta says further, “everything, stones, trees, birds, human beings, gods, demons, and so on, is but the venerable Supreme (Word) present in and consisting of everything (*sarvasarvātmaiva*), being the Supreme Lord.”¹³ (

This Supreme Word is the foundation of all language, not only the non-conventional mantric, but even the conventional human language. It contains all the other stages in seed form which will unfold in manifestation.

The second stage in descent is *Paśyantī*, literally ‘the visionary’ Word, because there is no thought or language as such, but the intuitive and initial vision sprouting in the stages of language. It consists in a synthetic awareness containing a tendency towards expression. The intuition of a poet before he expresses a poem in words can be an illustration for this stage. *Paśyantī* is a highly spiritual state, as described by Abhinavagupta:

Paśyantī, although the sequentiality (proper to language) is entirely resorbed in her. possesses however the energy (that animates sequentiality). She is both mobile and immovable and is attained by mental concentration. The

⁹ For this entire thematic I refer to the excellent study by André Padoux: *Vāc, The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*.

¹⁰ Swami Lakshman Joo, *Kashmir Śaivism, the Secret Supreme*, p. 41.

¹¹ Cf. PTV p.5

¹² A. Padoux, *op.cit.*, p. 173.f.

¹³ PTV p. 188, transl. by Padoux, p. 174.

forms of the objects of knowledge appear in her as immersed in consciousness, their forms being either resorbed, or absent. All this appears in her in a variety of discrete aspects or as forms fused into each other, or it may appear as having lost all form. IPVV I.5.19¹⁴

It is not only the stage preceding mental and verbal expression, but, in the reverse order, also the point of return of the thinking and discursive levels to their unity in a single act of consciousness.

In descent then follows the stage called *Madhyamā*, the ‘intermediate’ word, which contain language at the mental level of differentiated thought, but previous to any external expression.

For us, the word (*gīh*, voice) is a consciousness (*saṃvidātmakam*) that is both one and unique and containing within itself the infinite diversity of things. In ordinary life also, on the plane of *māyā*, the Word (*vāk*) is of the nature of light (*prakāśarupa*), producing reflective awareness (*pratyavamarśakāriṇī*). It is indeed made up of the discrete elements linked up in succession by time that are the syllables and words of this world, but these have as their essence one and single act of conscience.¹⁵

The lowest stage of descent is then articulate and differentiated language, *Vaikhari*, ‘the embodied one’. As described by Rāmakaṇṭha:

What is born then is (a form of the Word) present in different parts of the body: in the breast, and so forth, with the wind called *prāṇa*, set in motion according to the will of the person who speaks. It is a form of sound common to all, having the form of the letters which are divided into vowels, consonants, and so forth, but it proceeds without being affected by the variety of those who speak it. This is how the aspect of the Word that is called the Corporeal, the receptacle of the breath manifested with the division of the phonemes and so forth, expands. As has been said: “When

¹⁴PTV p. 150, transl. by A. Padoux, p. 191.

¹⁵ A. Padoux, op.cit., p. 211.

the breath meets the places of articulation, the Corporeal Word (appears), comprised of the fully achieved phonemes and linked to the movement of the breath of those who speak.¹⁶

It is clear that the descent of the Word, which is equal to a descent of pure Consciousness into limitation, is described in order to allow an ascent from the differentiated states of language and thought to their undifferentiated source: Silence. This comprehensive scheme also underlies the whole theory and practice of *mantra*, to which we will come later.

Conclusion:

The three great areas of fundamental conceptions underlying most of tantric practices, with their respective variations according to school, have been briefly presented in order to have a better insight into the meaning of Tantra as text and spirituality. Each of these topics: the scheme of the *tattvas*, the concept of Śakti and the entire area of the Word, sound and language (*Vāc*), could and should have been expanded more fully, which is not possible due to lack of time and a number of subjects still to be presented.

¹⁶Commentary on Spanda Karika 4.18, transl. by A. Padoux, op.cit., p.217.