

Third Lecture

Tantra as Text

We have seen in the first lecture that the word Tantra first of all means a text and a system, Śāstra, in particular a revealed scripture of one of the tantric traditions: Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Śākta, Saura or others. We have also mentioned that these scriptures are not always called Tantra, but often Āgama, ‘sacred tradition’, and sometimes Saṃhitā, ‘collection’. This literature in Sanskrit is very rich and extensive, and to date only a part of it has been edited and published, only a limited number of texts has been translated into English, and even less has been subjected to a thorough study. Manuscripts of extensive Tantras are still lying for instance in Nepal and await publication. Even if we limit ourselves to published texts, the area is vast. It would be boring for you if I give you a list of even the most important Tantras. (I remember a seminar on Buddhist Tantra at Sarnath, at the Tibetan Institute, where the great scholar Prof. Alex Wayman gave a lecture on Buddhist Tantras. After a brief introduction he enumerated about a hundred or so titles of Tantras, concluding by saying “the end”. It was a harrowing experience which I don’t want to inflict on you!)¹ I have therefore chosen to, *first*, describe the nature and general content of a Tantra, along with an interpretation of what a revealed text implies in the context of the tradition; *two*, I will present you a few examples of Tantric texts; *three*, I will give you examples of the vast commentarial literature which has to be seen together with the original text; and *four*, I will refer at least briefly to tantric texts in vernacular languages, which are not revealed, but which show the continuity of the tradition in the regional religious movements.

(1) Over and against the Vedic revelation, called Śruti, which traditionally is said to have no author (*apauruṣeya*), but which has been “received” by the rishis or sages, the Tantras are considered to have been revealed, either by Śiva or by the deity

¹ An excellent survey up to date with the latest stand of scholarship is given by D. Goodall and H. Isaacson in the Continuum Compendium to Hindu Studies, titled: Tantric Traditions.

central to the particular tradition: Viṣṇu, the Goddess, etc. But what means revelation? Again I am relying on the Śaiva exegetes for explaining the meaning of Āgama, because they are most explicit.

First of all, what is the literary form of the Tantras? They are revealed in form of a dialogue between the revealing deity (say, Śiva) and the receiver of the revelation, mostly a form of the Goddess, or a lower form of Śiva. The latter assumes the role of disciple who asks questions about ultimate reality and about the way (*upāya*) to attain it. This dialogue form is, first of all, in the tradition of guru-disciple relationship, but at the divine level. It is only the query of the disciple which solicitates the revelation by the master, whether at the human or divine level, or an intermediate one (the Śaiva tradition speaks of five types of relationships, *sambandha*). In the context of *advaita*, as in the non-dualist Śaivism, the question about the duality of revealer and receiver is already addressed by the Tantra itself. The *Svacchanda Tantra* states thus: “The God Sadāśiva himself, assuming the role of both, guru and disciple, revealed the Tantra by means of former and latter sentences, that is, by means of question and answer.”²

Abhinavagupta paraphrases this verse in his *Tantrāloka* in the light of *advaita*: “Consciousness itself thus becomes question and answer, in the position of master and disciple. The difference in their bodies is insubstantial”.³ And his commentator, Jayaratha, responds to a possible objection: “It not the difference between master and disciple a matter of direct perception? Where is the place for the nature (and unity) of consciousness? (He answers to this objection:) This (difference) is insubstantial or unreal. For consciousness, out of the greatness of its own freedom, makes these different bodies to appear within itself” (ad TĀ I. 256). Abhinavagupta further states how Consciousness itself “flows out” from its inner state of fullness. This ‘descent’ (*avaroha*) takes place in the process of the stages of the Word, from the ‘Visionary’, through the ‘Intermediary’ to the ‘expressed’ (*Paśyantī*, *Madhyamā*, *Vaikharī*, as

² Svacchanda Tantra 8, 31 f.: *guruśiṣyapade sthitvā svayaṃ devaḥ sadāśivaḥ, pūrvottara padair vākyais tantra ādhārabhedataḥ*.

³ TĀ I. 256.

explained in the last lecture).⁴ Thus the dialogue form is a device for making the ‘flood of knowledge’, which is the Śāstra, descend and be expressed in human language. Consciousness in this system means Light:

We teach that all knowledge (*jñānaugha*) is part of the light of consciousness and nothing but being aware (*āmarśa*) of consciousness (itself), as it is (logically) connected to the nature of light. Here ‘being aware’ means the inherent quality of the light to shine (i.e. become manifest).

Is not this (conscious light that which constitutes) the flood of Śāstras? What is the use of further arguments? In this state it (the flood of Śāstra) exists only as pervaded by the goddess of the highest (plane) of speech, but not yet differentiated into a mass of sound which are used in every-day life and are a product of *māyā*.

Mālinīvijaya Vārttikā 1, 25-28⁵

Therefore, although we find several mythological accounts of revelation of the Āgamas, such as the five faces of Śiva from which five different traditions or streams of revelation (*srotas*) come forth, it is based on a sound philosophical understanding of (absolute or pure) Consciousness manifesting itself for the sake of liberation. Therefore the role of the Goddess assuming the position of disciple is described as one of grace or compassion for the whole world.

Furthermore, Abhinavagupta defines Āgama as a fundamental, well-established knowledge (*prasiddhi*) which underlies the specific traditions and their scriptures and their instructions regarding way-of-life (*vyavahāra*, cf.. *Tantrāloka* 35, chapter called *Śāstramelanam*, “the meeting of scriptures”). In spite of a great variety of texts and their religious and philosophical positions, he states on the basis of the same *prasiddhi*:

Only one is the sacred tradition (*āgama*), on which, starting from secular texts (*laukikaśāstra*), Vaiṣṇava, Buddhist and Śaiva, all are established.

⁴ Cf. TĀ I. 253 and Jayaratha’s commentary.

⁵ Transl. by J. Hanneder, p.63.

(TĀ 35.30)

This is again a very universalist statement which does not stress the differences of these traditions, but their common basis in a fundamental knowledge which has found various expressions. He does not hesitate to include the Buddhist scriptures, which would be unthinkable in a Vedic-brahmanical context.

Apart from the dialogue form and its interpretation, what is the content of an Āgama/Tantra? Traditionally it contains four sections (*Pāda*): *Kriyā*, ritual, including in the Śaiva Siddhānta texts temple architecture and iconography; *Caryā*, religious observances (*vrata*) and behaviour of an initiate, according to his status; *Vidyā* or *Jñāna*, philosophy, and *Yoga*, spiritual practice. This fourfold division is not found in all Tantras, some contain only *Vidyā* or *Yoga*. But the four sections indicate that a Tantra should contain all that a practicing Śaiva (or Vaiṣṇava, as the case may be) has to know about religious practice and doctrine.

(2) We may now consider some textual examples of Tantras.

One of the central themes of tantric traditions is the importance of the Guru, and the tradition itself is the continuity from master to disciple: *guruparamparā*. Therefore, many Tantras contain long lists of the qualities a Guru has to possess, as also the qualities of a disciple. This is all the more necessary since the misuse of the power of the Guru is most dangerous, and the texts can be used to ascertain the quality of the Guru.

Thus the *Kulārṇava Tantra*, one of the most well-known Tantras, contains such descriptions, some of which are recited daily by Hindus. The most famous verse reads:

dhyānamūlaṃ guror mūrtiḥ
pūjāmūlaṃ guroḥ padam |
mantramūlaṃ guror vākyaṃ
mokṣamūlaṃ guroḥ kṛpā ||

Kulārṇava Tantra 12-13

The form of the Guru is the root of meditation.

The feet of the Guru are the root of worship.

The word of the Guru is the root of the mantra.

The grace of the Guru is the root of liberation.

A warning is immediately added in the following chapter:

Many are the Gurus who relieve their disciples of their possessions,
but rare is the Guru who relieves the disciple from all affliction.

Kulārṇava Tantra 13.108

The *Mālinīvijayottara Tantra* gives a brief but important description of the ideal Guru:

He is one who knows all the principles of reality (*tattva*) as they really are, he is equal to Śīva, and he manifests the power of the *mantra*. Any human being whom he touches, addresses or looks at is liberated from all his sins, even those committed in seven lives. Those who are initiated by him are guided by Śīva himself (*śivacoditāḥ*, v.12 implies also the meanings: inspired, directed, impelled, helped by Śīva), they attain the fulfillment of their innermost desires and the ultimate state. The Guru is ever established in union with the Divine, and he can be recognized by certain signs. These signs are: his unflinching devotion to Śīva, his perfection in *mantra* (*mantrasiddhi*), his control over all his senses, and his being free from the effect of accumulated actions (*prārabdha karma*). Finally, he is gifted with the gift of poetry and with an understanding of the meaning of all the scriptures.

Mālinīvijayottara Tantra 2,10-16.

Coming to a highly esoteric Tantra belonging to the *Anuttara Trika*, we may look at the *Parātrīśikā Tantra*. Here the Goddess opens by asking a question to Bhairava, which contains already all the fundamental concepts which the Tantra, and its commentator Abhinavagupta, are going to unfold:

Śrī devī uvāca

anuttaraṃ kathaṃ deva sadyaḥ kaulikāsiddhidam |
yena vijñātmātreṇa khecarīsamātāṃ vrajet ||

Parātrīśikā, 1

The Venerable Goddess said:

How does the Unsurpassable Absolute
bestow immediately the perfection of the Totality (*kaulikasiddhi*),
by the mere knowledge of which one attains harmony (unity) with the Power of
Consciousness moving-in-the-Void?

As we have seen when speaking about the dialogue form of the Tantras, and of the non-dualistic interpretation of question and answer, this is an extraordinary example how the question of the Devī is already at a very high level of understanding. She seems to know the meaning of the high sounding and mystical words: *anuttara*, *kaulikasiddhi*, *khecarīsamatā*, but what she is asking for is the means (*upāya*), the “how” of attaining these lofty experiences. She even knows this “how” by stressing that it is by (spiritual) knowledge or gnosis alone (*vijñātamātreṇa*), implying that neither ritual nor yoga can be instrumental in attaining that Unsurpassable, *Anuttara*. The way the question is put implies also that *Anuttara* is not the *object* of this attainment (*vrajet*) or perfection (*siddhi*), but that it is itself the bestower (*-da*) of perfection. In other words. *Anuttara* is both, the subject and the object of the attainment.

In his *Vivarāṇa* commentary Abhinavagupta goes into great length in explaining each of these terms. He gives sixteen interpretations of the word *Anuttara* alone.

The question of the Devī continues at the same high level:

etad guhyaṃ mahāguhyaṃ
kathayasva mama prabho...

PT 2ab

Tell me (reveal to me), my Lord, this secret, this great secret.

Here we are coming back to the question of secrecy of the Tantra addressed in the beginning. Abhinavagupta analyses this apparently simple sentence with his usual genius. He takes *mahāguhyam* in two senses, the one straightforward: *mahā-guhyam*,

“great secret”, the other by splitting the compound as *mahā-a-guhyam*, “the great non-secret”.

This is a secret mystery, because of its not being evident for though it abides in *guhā* (cavern) or *māyā* in which the essential nature remains unknown, it is not evident. Moreover, it is largely unhidden, for it is known to everyone as the source of delight.⁶

If the revelation of the Tantra - of *Anuttara* – were completely secret it would not even serve the purpose of leading to supreme experience and liberation. It is non-secret in so far as this truth is already known by all and hence evident. What the Tantra reveals is precisely that which is both, hidden and well-known.

We find a similar opening of the divine dialogue in the *Vijñāna Bhairava*, where the Devī equally shows a high level of knowledge of the Tantric concepts and practices, but she still has doubts and is missing the practical experience, which alone can give her “full satisfaction”. The expression is similar in the *Parātrīśikā: yena tr̥ptim labhāmi aham* (verse 2), “that knowledge by which I attain satisfaction”.

In both Tantras the purpose of the teaching is practical, it is obviously directed to experience, as the question of the Devī in both cases indicates.

This does not mean that there is no philosophy implied, which is developed elsewhere.

(3) The Hindu tantric literature has produced a large number of commentaries and widen exegetical literature, in which the tantric world view, the symbolic and philosophical meaning of the often very concise texts is expounded. Commentaries are essential for understanding the Tantras also because of their code language. Many texts or passages would remain obscure or misunderstood were it not for the commentaries. Of course, commentators are also often in danger of interpreting a text in terms of their own philosophy, so that we may find the same Tantra interpreted in the light of dualism (*dvaita*) or non-dualism (*advaita*). As the language of the Tantras is polysemic, and allows many meanings, they are open to such various interpretations.

⁶ PTV transl. by Jaideva Singh, p. 53f.

The importance of tantric hermeneutics has been expressed most clearly by E. Steinkellner in the context of Buddhist Tantra, which applies equally to Hindu Tantra:

Religious contents, beliefs, are subject to history. They stagnate and die as soon as they become unresponsive to new needs and questions arising in the societies harbouring them, but they also lose their religious value when they deviate from tradition by such changes. Hermeneutics works against such deviation. Its methods have been established in order to separate, via an act of interpretation, the various forms of religious contents within a tradition in such a way that the unity with revelation is preserved in each case and that freedom is created at the same time for a rational foundation of the differences. While the possibilities of change in this way guarantees the survival of a religious tradition, it is hermeneutics which guarantees the continuity of this tradition as such.⁷

Any number of examples could be given. In the context which has been more or less the focus of these lectures, that of *advaita* Śaivism of Kashmir, the most prominent commentators and exegetes were Abhinavagupta (10th-11th cent.) and his disciple Kṣemarāja (11th cent.). The former expounded the content of the central *Mālinīvijayottara Tantra* in two of his works: the *Mālinīśloka Vārttika*, and the most voluminous and comprehensive work of the entire tradition, the “Light on the Tantras” (*Tantrāloka*, in 12 vols together with the commentary by Jayaratha, 12th-13th cent.). Both are not direct commentaries, the only direct commentary on a Tantra being his *Parātrīśikā Vivaraṇa*. His disciple, Kṣemarāja, completed the task by composing extensive commentaries on the other Tantras, mainly *Svacchanda* and *Netra Tantra*, and other tantric texts, including Stotras, and early texts of the school such as the *Śiva Sūtras* and *Spanda Kārikā*. His works are an invaluable contribution to the understanding of the Tantras and of the entire philosophy.

In fact, it is difficult to quote any passage from a commentary outside its context, because they often imply an esoteric interpretation.

⁷ Ernst Steinkellner, “Remarks on Tantristic Hermeneutics”, in *Csoma de Körös Memorial Symposium*, ed. L. Ligeti, Budapest (Akademiai (Kiado) 1978, pp. 445-46.

To see the typical ‘tantric’ play with multilayered meaning we may take just one verse of the *Svacchanda Tantra* and its Udyota commentary by Kṣemarāja. The verse itself already contains or suggests three meanings: One is the relation of time with breath, and the Sun (Sūrya) being the embodiment of light and of time. Further implied is the yogic practice with *prāṇa* (not exactly *prāṇāyāma* as in *Patañjali’s Yoga sūtra*), and again with the Word or the Sanskrit syllables forming a mantra. The verse of the Tantra is so brief that it requires a commentary to unfold all its implications. Here it is:

śivo dharmeṇa haṃsastu
sūryo haṃsaḥ prabhānvitaḥ ||29
ātmā vai haṃsa ityuktaḥ
prāṇo haṃsasamanvitaḥ |

Svacchanda Tantra 7.29-30.

Śiva is by his own nature *haṃsa*.
 The Sun filled with light is *haṃsa*.
 The soul is also called *haṃsa*,
 And breath goes along with *haṃsa*.
 Kṣemarāja Udyota:

“What has previously been defined as ‘Śiva’, (being) a condensation of consciousness and bliss, is by nature, that is by his innate nature of freedom (called) ‘*haṃsa*’, that is, the one who emanates and resorbs the universe, hence being of the nature of *hāna*, giving up, and *samādāna*, taking back (i.e. the two syllables *ha+sa*). And because of his śivahood (*śivatvāt*) he performs the five cosmic acts which are essentially a ‘giving out, and ‘taking back’ (*hāna-samādāna*). Just as he is endowed with light which is the splendour of the Sun, consisting of his power of knowledge, he is ‘*haṃsa*’ by his nature of giving out and taking back (the light) in the process of absorbing and taking back the essence and the emission (*rasa-visarga*). Therefore, according to this principle, Śiva himself becomes the soul, who is essentially consciousness, being the contracted form of his manifested freedom. And thus (the

soul) is also *haṃsa*, by the process of the withdrawal and opening of the senses, of the nature of giving out and taking back (*ha+sa*). And this *haṃsa* is verily the breath (*prāṇa*) which, being established at the basis of the vital energy (*prāṇa* in its encompassing form) it moves out and goes in by the movements of giving out and taking back. Therefore the Sun, the soul and breath are endowed with *haṃsa* in the form of the Venerable Śiva in his undivided nature consisting of the inner unstruck sound. It is he alone who, in descending order rests on the state of breath with its outgoing and incoming movements, creating and reabsorbing (the universe). Therefore, by the absorption in this practice (of *prāṇa-apāna*), the great yogis immediately enter the supreme divine state (*parama-śivatām*).

Due to the connection the esoteric meaning has been expounded.”

(Kṣemarāja on SvT 7,29-30, pp.188-189).

Translated literally this commentary may appear difficult, but the connection between all the elements called ‘*haṃsa*’ by the Tantra is, according to Sanskrit semantic analysis, their common nature of the twofold movement. In the case of Śiva it is the cosmic movement of emanation and withdrawal; in the case of the Sun it is the sending forth of the rays and taking back, in the case of the soul it is the outgoing and incoming movement of the senses; in the case of breath the two movements of *prāṇa* and *apāna* (exhalation and inhalation). The mantra *haṃ-sa* consists precisely of the two syllables combined with inbreath and outbreath, it is the basic mantra connected with *prāṇa*. All these are aspects of Śiva in the form of his unlimited energy of freedom, and the basis of the *haṃsa mantra* is the ‘unstruck sound’, *anāhata nāda*. As the Tantra proclaims later: “*Haṃsa* can neither be emitted nor held back, it is spontaneously uttered and dwells within the heart (chest) of all living beings.” (SvT 7.59).

Haṃsa, meaning Swan, has in the Indian tradition ever symbolized the freedom of the soul, hence the energy of autonomy of Śiva who is himself *haṃsa*. Finally, the *yogī* who is given to the continuous practice of awareness of *prāṇa-apāna* (as *haṃsa mantra*) attains the divine state.

It is difficult to express the simultaneity of all these levels of meaning, from the cosmic, divine, physiological to the yogic, all bound together by a mantra and its interpretation.

The *Svacchanda Tantra* says further, “All the Śāstras are made of sound (*śabda*), and sound is called *haṃsa*.” (SvT 7. 341). In the yogic sense Kṣemarāja explains that *haṃsa* being the supreme Śiva and the spontaneous sound, it penetrates with the unification of the two breaths, *prāṇa* and *apāna*, in the central channel of *suṣumnā*, “ceaselessly shining and pulsating, indestructible, eternal, higher than the phonemes, and dwelling in the heart of all living beings to which it gives life.”⁸

In order to complement this example of tantric exegesis we may consider another example from the voluminous *Tantrāloka* of Abhinavagupta, a kind of encyclopedia of Tantric theories and practices. Let me give a random example, where he speaks of different kinds of masters.

He who cannot attain the Consciousness (consisting in) Pure Wisdom without the scriptures, should, with the help of a Guru, search for a (fitting) Śāstra and follow its (prescribed) process. 69-70.

Having rendered homage to the Guru with devotion by any proper means, he passes through the stages of initiation and understands the meaning of the scriptures.

When he receives consecration he becomes a ‘created master’. Even as such he has the power to remove the mass of all the bondages. 70-72.

He who attains enlightenment without any cause, according to the true order and practice understands the transcendental meaning of the Śāstras, he is both, a ‘created’ and ‘uncreated’ master (*kalpita-akalpita*).72-73.

However, the part which is ‘uncreated’ (by spontaneous enlightenment) is known to be the most excellent, because it has a share in the Pure Wisdom (*śuddhavidyā*). 73-74.

...

⁸ SvT 3.67 with comm., also SvT 4.260. See A. Padoux, *Vāc*, p. 141 (his translation).

However, if the one who is 'uncreated' makes his knowledge firm by receiving consecration by another master, such a Guru is verily Bhairava. 76-77

Because, thanks to the increasing knowledge of the Śāstras, and following closely in practice the wisdom of the Guru, the knowledge which is obtained by personal experience leads to fullness, and to identification with Bhairava. 77-78.

Therefore the *Kiraṇāgama* declares that knowledge is attained by three ways: from the Guru, through the scripture, and by one's own experience.78

(4) Finally, Tantra as text is not only found in the Sanskrit literature and in the revealed texts, but it has had widespread influence on spiritual movements in vernacular and regional languages. It is precisely because Tantra was not confined to any social or religious class that it could penetrate down to the so-called lower strata of society, beyond caste and gender restrictions of brahmanical Hinduism. Here it is mainly the mystic poets of the Sant traditions who have expressed tantric ideas and practices in their own way, based not on revelation but on their experience.

The question has been asked whether the tradition of the Nāthas should be included in Tantra. I am convinced that it cannot be seen apart from the tantric traditions. It is precisely the influence of the Nāthas which has had a strong impact on the medieval and even later religious movements. Here belong also the Buddhist *Sahajīyas*, the *Siddhas*, and Sants of all regions and languages of India. Here tantric elements are closely related to *bhakti* or devotional traits. If in the classical tradition of Tantra gnosis (*jñāna*) is essential, at the popular level it is *bhakti*, therefore the emotional and personal element is predominant, which has a special appeal to the common devotee. The tantric elements consist mainly of the same symbols and images, but without the ritual dimension, or with a highly simplified *bhakti* kind of ritual. The other important element is tantric yoga, close to the Nāthas, with its secret or 'twilight' language (*sandhyā bhāṣā*). The proportion between these two aspects, *bhakti* and tantric yoga, varies according to the mystic poet and his or her tradition. The literary expression of these saint-poets is mostly in the style of songs, poetry, hymns etc. I am not giving a survey of the different movements and linguistic groups,

but I want to give a few examples of what is meant by ‘tantric elements’ and tantric yoga.

The Marathi saint-poet Jñāndev (12th cent.) speaks of the union of Śiva and Śakti, and he refers to the four levels of the Word, among other aspects of Nātha yoga to which he belonged. The Muslim saint Kabir of Banaras (15th cent.) used the paradoxical ‘twilight language’ (*sandhā bhāṣā*) to express his mystical experience. His yoga is *kuṇḍalinī* reaching to the highest point of *unmanā*, transmental.

Bengal and Orissa have many mystic poets and living traditions such as the Bauls, being under the influence of Tantra, both Buddhist and Hindu. In the South the Tamil saints have popularized the tantric *bhakti*.

But let me end with a woman mystic from Kashmir, Lallā or Lal Ded of the 14th century, who was a Śaiva but had close contacts with Sufis. Her mystic poems are still sung by Muslims and Hindus alike, and she has brought down the lofty spirituality of the Sanskrit Tantras to the people. Thus she sings:

When Tantra disappears,
 the mantra remains.
 When the mantra disappears,
 Consciousness remains.
 When consciousness disappears,
 Nothing remains.
 Nothingness merges with nothingness.⁹

⁹ Cited from: Jaishree Kak, *Mystical Verses of Lallā*, N.96, p. 137.