

An Introduction to Hindu Tantra, Bir, September, 2011

First Lecture: What is Tantra ?

It is with a great sense of respect and trepidation that I fulfill the task given to me by Ven. Dsongtsar Khyentse Rinpoche. Respect for the tradition which I am trying to unfold before you, a tradition which I am both, studying and practicing, being conscious that I have not delved deep enough into this ocean (*jñānasāgara*). Respect also for the listeners, their tradition and their spiritual achievement. At the outset I want to quote His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who repeatedly tells his followers that they should study other traditions with a spirit of openness, in their own right, and without immediately comparing or evaluating them. He says so in the context of a necessary dialogue, a dialogue which He himself is leading at different levels: with other religions, with science, and, especially in the Indian context, with other systems of Indian philosophy (cf. his *Samvād*). While this is one aspect of this teaching, there is another one: What I am going to tell you about Hindu Tantra will certainly remind you of many teachings and practices of your own tradition. This is not surprising, because there is a lot of common ground of these traditions, and then also mutual influences over the history of Buddhism and Hindu Tantric schools. My main purpose in these lectures is not to give you the history and the mutual relationships, which I will touch upon only briefly by way of introduction. The main purpose is to present to you the essence of Hindu Tantra, based on the texts and on selected practices, since this is a very vast field. Therefore my method is not to compare, for which I am also not qualified, but to leave it to you to discover related notions, practices, symbols. etc. I request you first to follow His Holiness' instruction: to look at Hindu Tantra in its own right.

The first question we have to address is: what is Tantra ? and after a definition of the word, what are Tantric traditions, how to identify them and how to distinguish them from other Hindu traditions?

The Sanskrit Pandits love to analyze words and to extract meaning from every syllable, from roots and phonemes. This method is called *nirvacana*, we could translate it as semantic or hermeneutical analysis. Thus, *tan-tra* is analyzed by its two syllables: *tan-* is a verbal root meaning to stretch, to expand, also to be diffused as light, to weave (with the image of extending the threads which are to be woven); *-tra* is taken in the sense of *trāṇa*, the root meaning to save, to protect, to liberate.

The further meaning of *tan-* is to show, to manifest; to accomplish, perform; to compose (a work). In the non-technical sense *tantra* means a system, a model or type, then a doctrines, rule, theory, and a work propounding a system, what is all contained in the term *Śāstra*, a text, in the same sense which has been lost in the European languages but which is still implied: a text is a texture woven and interwoven with many threads which constitute a coherent whole, like a piece of cloth consisting of many threads. In the technical sense it means a system, theory or practice which saves and protects. As a text it is not restricted to what we call technically and religiously *Tantra*, it can be any treatise, a *Śāstra*, a scientific or even narrative text, like *Pañcatantra*. Now coming to the religious meaning which is the only one that concerns us here, the question may be asked: if something is expanded or extended, what is the content? In general it is the doctrine or revelation which expands, and has thus a kind of universal implication. But there is a more specific sense in the context of Śaivism: what expands *in* and *as* the universe is the divine power or Śakti, often compared to the rays of the sun. Thus the meaning expansion of light is applicable here. At the same time, the image of texture and interwovenness implies an interconnectedness of all the diverse threads which are but divine energies, into what modern physics would call an ‘energy field’ – we find also terms like *śaktijāla* or *yoginījāla* for this complex and yet unified network of the universe. Here we have already touched upon not only the form, but also the content of *tantra*.

Once we have explained the word, the more difficult question arises: how do we define the tantric phenomenon? As Professor Padoux asks: "How do we know that some texts, or certain practices and beliefs are 'tantric' ? what are our criteria of 'tantricity'?"¹ In the following lectures we will be dealing with specific tantric phenomena, doctrines and practices, such as initiation, the role of the guru, the importance of mantra, the spiritual ways to liberation (*upāya*), etc. But first we must know which are the traditions we are talking about.

If we divide Hinduism roughly into three great streams, we can distinguish the Vedic (*vaidika*), Tantric (*tāntrika*) and Bhakti currents, which are variously interrelated. The distinction is based on the relative scriptures, as well as the religious and social practices. Even within the Tantric traditions there are some which recognize the authority of the Vedas (mainly the Vaishnava schools), along with the caste system based on the Dharmaśāstras. Others reject the Vedas along with the orthodox social system, or they accord the Vedic revelation (Śruti) the lowest place in a hierarchy of ascending systems of liberation. The more radical Śaiva and Śakta Tantras reverse the Vedic orthodoxy by giving a higher place to women and outcastes in the religious practice, and by ridiculing the caste system. Often the contrast between the Vedic and Tantric traditions concerns more the social behaviour than the doctrines. In the living practice a Hindu can follow the Vedic system by accepting caste and performing the rituals of *saṃskāras* (for example *upanayana*, the investiture with the sacred thread as brahmanical initiation), but as a spiritual practice he or she may follow a tantric guru and receive a personal initiation. One has to keep in mind these interrelationships before posing a strict separation of these two great traditions.

As far as Bhakti is concerned, it can be found combined with both, Vedic and Tantric, but there are also trends in Bhakti which are extremely critical of Vedic orthodoxy and of the caste system. On the other hand, there are Bhakti saints

¹ Concerning Tantric Traditions, p.9

(*sant*), men and women, who have a strong tantric spirituality, as for example Lal Ded or Lalla of 14th century Kashmir who was also a mystic of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*.

This brings us back to the starting question: what are the specifically tantric elements within Hinduism? Added to the three streams mentioned above comes a fourth one, not to be neglected: tribal or popular cults and practices which have flown into Tantra "from below", so to say, from the autochthonous religiosity. To mention only by way of example: the sacredness of elements of nature – trees, mountains, rivers etc.; the phenomenon of possession – by spirits or *devatās*, and others. In a way, *tantra* has elevated these practices to a high level of spirituality and theory, integrated them into its rituals, etc. It is at the level of the texts where the distinction becomes clear: Tantra as text, which is, in their view, a higher level of revelation than the Vedic one.

The Tantras, also called Āgama (sacred tradition which has come down to us), and in the context of Vaishnavism Saṃhitā, offer a rich and fascinating literature, which is certainly based on much more ancient beliefs and practices, but which has found literary expression approximately between 400 and 800 A.D. We shall come to Tantra as text in one of the following lectures. A. Padoux distinguishes also between “hard core” Tantra, which is extreme, transgressive but certainly limited to a minority, and “soft core” Tantra, which can be found combined with other practices and beliefs of Hinduism. It may not be very helpful, but it is certainly true what A. Padoux states: That “we must admit the fact that the tantric phenomenon, so special yet so difficult to characterize, is both pervasive and elusive.” (art. cit., p.13) One of the pioneers in the study of Tantra, A. Avalon, stated already in 1913 (in his Principles of Tantra, Preface):

“Mediaeval hinduism was, as its successor modern Indian orthodoxy is, largely tantric. The Tantra was then, as it is now, the great mantra and sadhanā śāstra, and the main if not the sole source as regards worship, initiation, yoga, the supremacy of the guru, and so forth...”

As far as the interrelationship of the different traditions is concerned, within Hinduism, within different tantric schools, and in a wider sense, within all Indian religious traditions, the typical attitude of the tantric authors is to place them in a hierarchy, thus not to deny any tradition its place in a plurireligious universe, but to assign them an ever ascending soteriological value (*uttarottaravaiṣiṣṭya*), placing the more esoteric at the top, be it the *kula/kaula* or *trika* in the context of Śaivism. Even as far as the revealed scriptures are concerned, Abhinavagupta in the 10th-11th century states: “There is in reality only one sacred tradition (*āgama*, or scripture), on which everything is based; the popular belief, the doctrines of the Vaiṣṇavas, of the Buddhists and of the Śaivas” (*Tantrāloka* 35.30). This is a very tolerant, universalist attitude which respects all the traditions, while following one’s own for the sake of liberation (*ibid.* 35.31).

In relation to exoteric schools and scriptures, Tantra (and particular schools) has been called *rahasyasampradāya*, the esoteric or mystical tradition. We shall come back to the question of secrecy (*rahasya*), but it can be stated already that it has to do with the necessity of initiation to understand and practice certain tantric rituals and *sādhana*s. It is repeatedly mentioned that mantras and other practices are either ineffective or even dangerous without the proper initiation. The reason is not exclusivism, but the high spiritual power of these practices and experiences.

In view of the high literary, spiritual and philosophical content of the Tantras it is sad that both, in India and the West, the word ‘Tantra’ evokes such negative associations: with black magic on the one hand, and with sexual transgression on the other. This image is based on actual misuses of Tantra, where magic and sex are not absent, but integrated in a whole system of ritual, mantra and *sādhanā*. I am not going into these misrepresentations. In order to concentrate on the essential aspects of Tantra as doctrine and practice I am also not dealing with the Western scholarship of Tantra which has seen a great development in the last decades. However, occasionally I will quote some of the most important scholars.

There are two more points which I have to mention (if not develop) in this introductory lecture: a brief history and geographical spread; and some of the salient features to be found in any Tantra or Tantric tradition. And finally the question: what is the aim of Tantra?

As mentioned earlier, history is not our main concern here, but a few facts or conclusions are worth mentioning in order to avoid some existing misconceptions. Difficult as it is to have any certainty about the origins of the tantric tradition, one can find some traces of tantric conceptions already in the Upaniṣads (ca. 800-400 BC). The most important common feature is the micro-macro cosmic relationships, or the correspondences between the body and the cosmos. This includes also the conception that the sense organs (*indriya*) are deities (*devatā*), to mention only these examples. This does not mean that the Tantras recognize the Upanishads in toto as revealed scripture (Śruti), but it shows a certain continuity of basic conceptions of Man and the Universe in the Indian traditions. Of course, many factors and elements from outside the Vedic tradition have contributed to the formation of Tantra, but a lot of this is based on speculation. As mentioned before, it is the indigenous and may be pre-Vedic elements such as the importance of feminine divinities and powers which has contributed much to the Tantric universe. Besides, extreme ascetic group of Śaivas such as the Pāsupatas, the Kāpālikas and Lākulas have contributed to the extreme and transgressive forms of religiosity, and to the search for supernatural yogic powers (*siddhi*), characteristic of many forms of tantric yoga. These ascetic traditions are grouped under Atimārga, “the transmundane, extreme path”. The ascetic practices at cremation grounds (*śmaśāna sādhanā*) which are also characteristic of certain tantric schools belong to these early traditions.

Over against certain speculations seeking the origin of Tantra outside India, or in the pre-Vedic Indus culture scholars now agree that “there is no historical reason to consider that the tantric cults and practices have come from anywhere

else but the Indian soil.”² Besides, it is also agreed that there is no break but rather continuity between the popular cults and the refined sanskritic tradition. It is precisely Tantra, as text and as practice, which bridges this gap and which makes for the fertile combination of the autochthonous elements with the high, sophisticated intellectual and spiritual culture as expressed in Sanskrit.

Apart from the texts we have the testimony of inscriptions and monuments indicating clear features of Tantra. To mention only an early example: An inscription at Gangdhar in Madhya Pradesh dated 424 AD describes the building of a temple dedicated to the Mothers (*mātrī*) which is also populated by *Ḍākinīs*, wild female goddesses. No doubt, such a temple presupposes that there was already an existing cult to the Mother goddesses, classified as the eight *Mātrkās*. Not by chance Jayaratha, the commentator of Abhinavagupta, states in the 12th century that the *tantraśāstra* has originated from Madhyadeśa or central India. No wonder that in medieval time we find the sanctuary of the sixtyfour *Yoginīs*, and the highly artistic and tantric temples of Khajuraho not far from this early inscription. However, geographically the North and the Himalayas have played an important role at the origin of tantric traditions: The legendary *Oḍḍiyāna*, identified by scholars with the Swat Valley now in Pakistan, is for both, Śaivas and Buddhists a place of origin of important tantric traditions. Kashmir has played a central role in the entire development, from the origin of texts and traditions to their highly developed stage of philosophical interpretation, as we shall see later. Besides, the North-East, Bengal and Assam, and the East, present-day Orissa, with its early *Yoginī* shrines (8th cent.) have also seen early phases of tantra which are still living traditions. Nepal has equally been an important centre and still preserves many tantric traditions and texts. South India has also played an important role in the development, and its great temples testify to the ritual and artistic traditions of *Āgama-Tantra*. Thus it is no exaggeration that tantra has pervaded and left its

² A. Padoux, *Compendre le tantrisme*, p. 45.

traces in the entire subcontinent. The expansion to Tibet, China and South-East Asia is outside the scope of these lectures.³

Having mentioned the *Atimārga* as the extreme path followed by Śaiva ascetics to attain liberation, we have to complement it by the other Path which covers most of the tantric traditions: *Mantramārga*.⁴ This Path of mantra is not confined to ascetics but can be followed by householders and people living in the world. One of the differences between the two Paths is that the central deity of the *Atimarga* is the solitary Rudra, an early form of Śiva, thus the *ekavīra* or solitary spiritual hero, whereas the forms of Śiva worshipped and meditated upon in the *Mantramārga* are associated with different forms of the female Energy: Śakti. Here too there is a difference between the “mild” form of Tantra in the Śaiva Siddhānta, where the Śakti is more or less subordinated, and the other, mainly non-dualist Śaiva-Śākta schools, “with their greater emphasis on feminine and transgressive power.” (A. Sanderson, art.cit., p. 668). Śaiva Siddhānta is the school which was prevalent in medieval Kashmir, but which has also Tamil sources. It moved to the South and is still a living tradition in Tamil Nadu for instance, with its temples, rituals and art. We shall come back to the philosophical implications later.

Tantra has impregnated and pervaded Hindu India not only through the texts, the temples and monuments, but as a living practice and world view. Whatever the other elements of Hinduism may be, the Tantric elements are inextricably woven into religious life. In their more esoteric form they may be confined to the intimacy of spiritual practice, but their more visible forms are expressed in ritual, in festivals and in various art-forms. Considering the richness of Tantric traditions. I will concentrate in my presentation on a few representative ones, because otherwise the sheer quantity of information will be confusing. I am more interested in trying to give you examples of an in-depth understanding. These examples come mainly from the Śaiva schools of Kashmir, which include

³ Cf. A. Padoux, op. cit. p. 53.

⁴ Cf. Alexis Sanderson, Saivism and the Tantric Traditions,...

the Kula/Kaula, Spanda, Krama and Trika. This will be explained in a following lecture.

In the second lecture I want to expand on some salient features of tantra, or basic principles which distinguish the tantric view of Man and of the world from other systems of Indian religions and philosophies. We will look at the tantric traditions as text, as ritual and as yoga, and the emphasis will be more on the meaning, the symbolism, the philosophical interpretations and the spiritual practice than on a detailed description. Tantra as expressed in art forms will be outside the scope of these lectures.

At the end of this preliminary overview we may ask the question: what is the purpose of the revelation and practice of Tantra?

There are clearly two goals offered to a practitioner of Tantra, as mentioned in every text, which can be achieved by a wide variety of rituals, initiations, mantras and yoga: *bhoga* and *mokṣa* (or *bhukti* and *mukti*), the first leading to extraordinary experiences and powers (*siddhi*), the second aiming at liberation. *Bhoga* is often misunderstood as worldly enjoyment, but this is too primitive a translation. Many tantric practices do lead to powers, and hence its association with magic, but this is only the lowest scale. We know from the tradition of Siddhas, which is shared by Hindus and Buddhists, that these powers can be of a very high order. The ultimate aim is however liberation, not at death, but in life: *jīvanmukti*. It is mainly the non-dualist systems which keep this as the only goal worth pursuing.