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AND IMMANENCE

LINDSAY JONES
EDITOR IN CHIEF

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Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition

Lindsay Jones, Editor in Chief

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DAVID GORDON WHITE (2005)

TANTRISM: HINDU TANTRISM

Tantrism must certainly rank as among the most problematic and controversial categories in the study of religion generally and the study of Hinduism specifically. Virtually every proposition about Tantrism is disputed, ranging from its origins and distinctive traits to the evaluation of its place in the history of religions. Herbert Guenther, one of the last century's greatest scholars of the subject, once observed that Tantrism is "probably one of the haziest notions and misconceptions the Western mind has evolved." Often enough one encounters completely contradictory statements concerning Tantrism in the scholarly literature. As one modern observer puts it, the term is a sort of "floating signifier . . . gathering to itself a range of contradictory qualities." Because of this some have argued that there is no real referent to the words *Tantrism* or *Tantric* and therefore such terms should be abandoned entirely. Others choose to retain the terminology, albeit not without reservations.

We may start with the problematic nature of the name *Tantrism* itself. The term derives from the Sanskrit root *tan-*, "to extend, stretch, expand." *Tantra* thus can mean "succession," "unfolding," "continuous process," or "extension." The term appears already in the Vedic *Shrauta Sūtras* (c. fifth century BCE) in the sense of a "ritual framework" or "interweaving of rites," and *Tantrism* does indeed refer often enough to a certain type of ritual practice. The term is also used in the sense of an "extension" or "expansion of knowledge," or the "weaving" of various threads into a text; it can also be used as a synonym for a "system," or "system of thought," or a "compendium." Certain texts in the Hindu tradition are thus labeled *Tantras* (one common definition within the indigenous tradition is "a scripture by which

knowledge is spread"), although not all of these "Tantras" can be regarded as "Tantric," and other texts that may indeed be so regarded are called by different names (e.g., *Āgamas*, *Nigamas*, and *Samhitas*).

A practitioner of Tantra is known as a *tāntrika* or a *sādhaka*. The Tantric adept is termed a *siddha* or "accomplished one." The ritual and meditative method or path distinctive to Tantra is called a *sādhana* ("performance leading to a goal"), which is supposed to result in the attainment of certain "powers" (*siddhis*). As a path that often entails physical practices, Tantricism overlaps considerably with the Hindu traditions of yoga: one sometimes encounters the term *tantra-yoga* and a Tantric practitioner is frequently called *yogin* or *yoginī*.

Many scholars argue that there is, however, no indigenous Indian term that corresponds to *Tantrism*; that is to say, there was in the native tradition no recognition of a unified school or system or religious sect called *Tantrism*. Under this view, the word and conceptual apparatus that usually clings to it is entirely of foreign invention. David Gordon White has contended, however, that the term *Tantrism* does closely correspond to the scholastic tradition of ritual exegesis embodied in the textual corpus known as the *Tantrasāstra* (Theoretical treatises on Tantra), the most famous of which is the *Tantraloka* of Abhinavagupta (eleventh century CE).

One should also note, as we have above, that the adjective *tāntrika* ("Tantric") does appear in Sanskrit texts, in some cases to contrast a form of belief and practice to the more "orthodox" or "Vedic" (*vaidika*) forms of Hinduism. In some of the non-Tantric Sanskrit texts, *vaidika* refers to forms of practice suitable for *brahmins* and others of the higher classes, while the *tāntrika* rites are relegated to the lower castes. In the Tantric texts, unsurprisingly, the *tāntrika* path is defined very differently. Some contrast the wise *tāntrika*, whose knowledge penetrates to the true meaning of things, to the superficial *vaidika*. One text defines this form of practice in the following way: "He by whom the senses are conquered and whose mind is fixed . . . he whose intellect is still with regard to his own affairs or those of others . . . this, in short, is said to be the *tāntrika* method."

The origins of Tantricism are, like virtually everything else about the phenomenon, also contested. Some think Tantrism originated in Buddhist circles. Indeed, the oldest known "Tantric" texts are Buddhist; the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, attributed to Asaṅga, dates back perhaps to the third century CE. Other scholars, however, presume Hindu origins for this form of religious belief and practice. Andre Padoux (1987) states unequivocally that "Tantrism is fundamentally a Hindu phenomenon."

Given the paucity of historical materials and the general uncertainty involved in the subject, the question of whether Tantrism was originally Hindu or Buddhist will probably never be resolved. What is sure is that Buddhist and Hindu Tantrism share much by way of doctrine, imagery, and prac-

tice, and they apparently cross-fertilized each other over the course of centuries. Within Hinduism per se, there are also Tantric strains within most of the major divisions of that tradition—Vaiṣṇava, Śaivite, and Śākta (the latter is often regarded in its entirety as “Tantric”).

The term *Tantrism* thus refers to a broad movement, probably originating in the middle centuries of the first millennium CE, which spread into Hindu, Buddhist, and (to a lesser extent) Jain traditions. This “movement” (some prefer to envisage Tantrism as simply an attitude) is usually conceptualized as encompassing activities (symbolically imagined or ritually enacted) normally prohibited in the bourgeois India of the time, including some form of sexual intercourse (although the sexual component is often minimal in such groups and is, in any event, to be understood within a larger symbolic and ritual contextual framework).

Tantrism in its origins was, then, fundamentally a set of reinterpretations of the various existing religious traditions of India. It was also often perceived—both in historical India and the modern West—as controversial if not dangerous and degenerate. As Hugh Urban (2003) has written, for most understandings of Tantrism (both popular and scholarly, Indian and Western), the key element is “the very *extremity* of Tantra, its radical Otherness.”

HISTORY OF THE STUDY AND REPRESENTATION OF TANTRISM. For many modern specialists, the category is now viewed as inextricably bound up in the prejudices and cultural psychodynamics of the Westerners who, it is argued, “invented” it in the nineteenth century. Some of the early Western scholars of Tantrism seemed aware of the constructionist nature of their label. Arthur Avalon (also known as John Woodroffe), one of the pioneers of Tantric studies, wrote in 1922 that “the adjective *tantric* is largely a Western term.” Once constructed, however, “Tantrism” took on a life of its own and often served as a screen onto which outsiders projected either their deepest anxieties and fears or their desires and hopes.

Tantrism for many was the most degenerate and peripheral form of Indian religion. When it was first “discovered” by Westerners at the end of the eighteenth century, it was almost universally regarded as the most horrifying example of the excesses of Indian religiosity. Otherwise put, *Tantrism* was the label placed on those practices Westerners regarded as most abhorrent. Such views were only strengthened in the Victorian era where Tantrism was all but equated with illicit sexuality. The “so-called Tantric religion,” writes one such Victorian, is essentially nothing more than a cult where “nudity is worshipped in Bacchanalian orgies which cannot be described.” Already by this time the standard stereotypes of “Tantrism”—and ones that have often endured to this day—were in place. What was definitive of this debased form of Hinduism was sexual licentiousness, as well as the consumption of prohibited substances, such as liquor, beef, and aphrodisiacs. In sum, as the nineteenth-century Indologist H. H.

Wilson would opine, Tantrism stood “for all that is abominable in the present state of Hindu religion.”

In the twentieth century some scholars arose to proclaim the exact opposite: that Tantrism was, in fact, both the root and crowning achievement of Indian religiosity. Avalon regarded Tantrism as both “orthodox” (meaning, for him, “Aryan” or “Vedic”) and in conformity to science. As for the sexual components of this form of Hinduism, Avalon would write that “There is nothing ‘foul’ in them except for people to whom all erotic phenomena are foul” (1975, p. 134). Other Western Indologists, including Heinrich Zimmer, would also champion the cause of Tantrism as the ideal religion for the modern age—creative, life-affirming, sensuous. For Mircea Eliade, Tantrism represented the “autochthonous heart of aboriginal India” and “reveals an experience that is no longer accessible in a desecralized society—the experience of a sanctified sexual life” (1959, p. 172; 1970, p. 201). It is, according to Eliade, in Tantrism that the opposition of the sacred and profane is finally resolved.

Such views, positive and negative, in the West were echoed in India. Many of the reformers of the so-called Neo-Hindu movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries specifically targeted Tantrism as the prime example of how far Hindus have fallen from the purity of the golden age of Vedic origins. For many of the leaders of what is sometimes called the “Hindu renaissance,” Tantrism represented everything wrong with Hinduism and for all that was an embarrassment about India in relation to the West. Vivekananda, in his nationalistically inspired opposition to Tantra, claimed it was “un-Indian,” with origins in Central Asia and Tibet.

For other Indians, however, Tantrism represented the very best of the Indian religious heritage. Perhaps the greatest of all the modern Indian saints and mystics, Ramakrishna, seems to have been a Tantric practitioner. On the other end of the spectrum, Tantrism’s association with radicalism, subversion, and transgression made it appealing to Indian revolutionaries in the extreme wings of the nationalist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For revolutionary nationalists like Aurobindo Ghose (in his early years), Tantric symbols and deities (especially the terrifying figure of the Tantric goddess Kālī) became sources of revolutionary inspiration. And for others, like the Marxist scholar N. N. Bhattacharyya, Tantrism represented evidence for an ancient classless society based on matriarchy and the worship of the Mother Goddess that was largely eclipsed by the patriarchal, caste-oriented Vedic culture and its legacy.

Among the many controversies regarding Tantra found in the scholarly literature, there is also dispute about whether Tantrism has been relegated to peripheral or tangential status vis-à-vis “real” Hinduism, or, conversely, whether the fascination with Tantrism—bordering on obsession—has blown out of all proportion its place in the study of that religion. Paul Muller-Ortega (1989) and Douglas Brooks (1990) both argue that, despite the apparent vogue and inter-

est in Tantrism, it is nevertheless the unwanted “stepchild” of Indology—a persistence source of shame and embarrassment, and thus neglected and poorly attended to. On the other hand, Hugh Urban contends that “Tantrism has in fact been central to both academic and popular discourse about India in the twentieth century. Indeed, it has in many cases clearly been exaggerated and exploited” (2003, p. 8).

THE ORIGINS, HISTORY, AND TRADITIONS OF HINDU TANTRA. Andre Padoux observed that “the history of Tantrism is impossible to write” due to the paucity of data (and, it could be said, by virtue of the definitional uncertainty as what counts as “Tantrism”). Such pessimism has not changed much. Urban has reiterated that “the historical origins of the vast body of traditions that we call Tantra are today lost in a mire of obscure Indian history and muddled scholarly conjecture” (2003, p. 23).

Scholars have nevertheless put forth two very different narratives to account for the possible sources of Tantrism. The first locates the earliest “Tantrism” in the Indus Valley civilization, here conceived as a matriarchal culture complete with goddess worship, fertility rites, and proto-yogic practices. When Aryan invaders destroyed the Indus Valley civilization, Tantrism supposedly went underground, where it survived among the tribal groups at the periphery of Indian culture but also as the “autochthonous substratum” of later Hinduism. According to this account, Tantrism then re-emerges a thousand years later in texts of the middle centuries of the first millennium, but only as the Sanskritized, elitist expression of a continuous and fundamentally popular form of Indian religion.

A quite different narrative assumes that Tantrism derives from the Aryan or Vedic religion itself. From this point of view, Tantrism is in essence the outgrowth of the intellectual and religious elite, and not based on a popular movement (let alone “autochthonous substratum”) within Hinduism. Scholars adhering to this position cite the fact that the texts in which the beliefs and practices of Tantrism are first encapsulated are written in Sanskrit, and not in any popular vernacular.

A third, and mediating, possibility for accounting for the origins of Tantrism is to see it as the combination of both autochthonous and Vedic roots, or perhaps a synthesis of shamanic and magical practices (possibly originating in Central Asia) and the mystical speculations characteristic of the *brahman* elite.

All such attempts at locating the temporal and cultural origins of Tantrism remain theoretical and speculative. The geographical origins of the Tantric movement of the middle centuries of the Common Era is no less fraught with uncertainty. Although many of the centers of the Tantric movement were located in the frontier or border areas of India (e.g., Kashmir and Assam), other equally important geographical locales for Tantric expressions include Andhra, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, and Orissa. There does not seem to be one central place from which Tantrism sprung.

There is also no conclusive evidence of Hindu Tantras in the period before 800 CE, although most scholars agree that the classical form of Hindu Tantrism originated at least two or three centuries before that. Stone inscriptions indicate that Tantric deities were worshiped in the fifth century and many agree that Tantrism was well established by the sixth or seventh centuries CE. While there is little precisely dated evidence available, it seems that the period from the eighth or ninth century to the fourteenth century was one in which Tantrism flourished in India. Most of the texts regarded as “Tantric” (the Tantras, Samhitas, and Āgamas) date from this period, as do many temples and some of the greatest thinkers of the Tantric traditions (e.g., Abhinavagupta).

Already in the medieval period and then in subsequent centuries, the Tantric movement exerted influences on all forms of Hinduism. It has been noted that the pantheon of present-day Hinduism is largely comprised of Tantric deities. Tantrism also left its imprint on the temples, iconography, and rituals of the more “mainstream” Hinduism. Indeed, as we have seen, some scholars believe that the influence of Tantrism was so great that virtually all of Hinduism from medieval times forward can be understood as “Tantric.” Mainstream Hinduism, under this view, is more “Tantric” than not.

But despite the huge influence of Tantrism on the theology, arts, iconography, temples, and rituals of the orthodox or mainstream religion, most Hindus have not in the past and would not now regard themselves as *tāntrikas*. The esoteric nature of much of the practice together with the initiatory structure of many of the Tantric groups have insured that membership of self-identified Tantric practitioners would always be limited, even while “Tantric” influences on Hinduism have been pervasive. The secretive and esoteric nature of many Tantric groups has also, in India as in the West, helped to generate a dubious reputation for Tantrism. In much of today’s India, the label carries the same negative connotations it has borne for so long in the West. Brooks observes that “The word ‘Tantra’ in vernacular languages [of India] . . . is frequently used to conjure notions of black magic, illicit sexuality, and immoral behavior” (1990, p. 5).

“Tantrism,” writes Padoux, “is essentially sectarian.” The main division of sects in Hinduism as a whole consists of the worshipers of Viṣṇu (Vaiṣṇavas), the worshipers of Śiva (Śaivas or Śaivites), and those who worship the Goddess, in one or another of her many forms, as the supreme deity (the Śāktas). There are Tantric sects within each of these main divisions, although the Tantric groups within the Śaivite and Śākta groupings regard Śiva and Śakti as inseparable and therefore are not themselves clearly distinguishable according to these sectarian divisions. There is also considerable similarity between the terms *Tantrism* and *Śāktism*; while groups labeled in these two ways are not identical, they do intersect and often overlap.

Among the Vaiṣṇavas, the Pāñcarātra sect (with origins circa sixth century CE) was heavily influenced by the Tantric

movement, although today most members of this sect do not consider themselves as Tantric practitioners. The Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyās of Bengal, however, remain close in spirit to other forms of Tantrism. The Sahajiyās, who flourished especially between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, worship Viṣṇu in the form of Kṛṣṇa and his lover Rādhā. The poems of the Sahajiyā Tantrics are replete in erotic imagery, and practitioners use devotional singing and dancing to try to induce a state of mystical ecstasy envisioned as the union of the god and his consort.

It is, however, most especially in certain of the Śaivite sects that we find the classical instantiations of what is called *Tantrism*. One of the earliest of the Śaivite groups, the Pāśupatas (dating to perhaps the second century CE), emphasized radical asceticism and bizarre or disreputable behavior (thought to be in imitation of the wild divine ascetic, Śiva) in the pursuit of supetnatural powers or *siddhis*. Other early Śaivite sects that display Tantric tendencies include the Kāpālikas and the Kālāmukhas, about whom little is known because no texts from these groups survive. Contemporary reports about them, however, insist on their outrageous, scandalous behavior and socially abhorrent practices. As their name indicates, the Kāpālikas (“skull-bearers”) probably used human skulls as begging bowls, were said to frequently practice in cemeteries, and may have engaged in ritualized sex. While evidence is scanty, it seems that such early Śaivite Tantrics embraced practices that subverted conventional morality and embraced controversial methods in the service of power and liberation.

Another set of Śaivite Tantric practitioners were known as the Nātha Siddhas (also known as the Kānpaṭās, or “split-ears”). They were also called the Gorakhnāthis due to the name of their founder, Gorakhnāth or Gorakṣa, who was supposedly the author of many of the Tantric texts of the *haṭhayoga* tradition. The aim of these practitioners was that of many other Tantrics, the state of liberation in this lifetime known as *jīvanmukti*, here thought to be achievable through the distinctive practices of yoga entailing breath control and retention and the “regression” of sexual energy and fluids.

Special mention must be made of the great philosopher of the “non-dual” Śaivism of Kashmir, Abhinavagupta (born c. 950 CE), who is responsible for many philosophically sophisticated and systematic Tantric treatises written in Sanskrit. One of the most famous of these is entitled the *Tantrāloka* (Elucidation of the Tantras), a commentary or exegesis of the Tantras. David White has argued for the importance of Abhinavagupta in the systematization and rationalization of Tantra. In his exegesis of the esoteric rites of Tantric practice, Abhinavagupta “sublimates, cosmeticizes, and semanticizes many of its practices into a type of meditative asceticism whose aim it was to realize a transcendent subjectivity. In the process, he transforms ritual from a form of ‘doing’ to a form of ‘saying’” (2003, p. 16).

For some, then, Hindu “Tantrism” has been understood as referring to a particular kind of sect within Hindu-

ism. In recent years, however, there has also arisen a tendency to envision it as an extremely widespread, even ubiquitous, trait of Indian religions in general. Eliade, for example, writes that “from the fifth century CE onward Tantrism becomes a pan-Indian ‘fashion.’ One meets it everywhere in innumerable different forms” (1970, p. 200). If, however, Tantrism is found everywhere within Hinduism, “in innumerable different forms,” then what, if anything, constitutes its distinctiveness?

A SURVEY OF DEFINITIONAL TRAITS. It is generally agreed that there is no one body of doctrines and practices shared by all forms of Hindu Tantrism, and most scholars now also believe that a search for a unitary definition of *Tantrism* is futile. What we refer to as *Tantrism* is not so much a unified tradition but a loose grouping of particular texts, traditions, practices, and doctrines that differ in some regards from each other and overlap considerably with other “non-Tantric” currents within Hinduism. At best, then, there are elements that may be regarded only as characteristic, but not definitive, of Tantrism. Tantrism cannot be defined in terms of one or more standard traits but only in a “polythetic” manner in which any particular instance participates in one or more of a set of “family resemblances.”

As a way to familiarize readers with what scholars have meant by “Hindu Tantrism,” the following list of definitional traits may be useful. Many—indeed most—of these traits do not fit all instances of what has been called “*Tantrism*.” Some of them are hotly contested by scholars (as noted below), but each has appeared in the scholarly literature as at least partially definitive of the phenomenon.

Non-Vedic or extra-Vedic in origin or scriptural authority. The ritual practices and methods for attaining religious goals in Tantrism are often characterized as “non-Vedic” (by which is meant, to some extent, “unorthodox” or at least “new,” “unprecedented”). Tantric rituals and most of the distinctive worldview associated with Tantrism do not appear in Vedic texts nor in the strictly Brahmanic or “*smārta*” traditions that represent themselves as closely based on the Veda. Tantric texts, like the Vedas, do claim to be revealed from a transcendent source, but often enough there is no attempt to link the legitimating origin of Tantric practice back to the Vedas—as is indeed the case with the more orthodox traditions of Hinduism.

Tantrism, in other words, often represents its revelations as “new,” or rather “newly revealed.” This hitherto secret knowledge is said to have now become available because it is especially suitable for the *kali* age, the present era of degeneration when previously revealed methods and wisdom are no longer realizable by corrupt humans. As we have seen, the orthodox traditions themselves sometimes draw a distinction between *vaidika* and *tāntrika* rituals and practitioners and, in this way, the Tantric traditions agree.

This possible trait for what goes into constituting a group as “Tantric” does not preclude the claims sometimes

made in Tantric texts to Vedic legitimacy, which may have in some cases been introduced at a later date in order to facilitate acceptance of Tantrism by the more orthodox Hindus. Nor does it necessarily deny that certain features of Tantrism, especially the emphasis on correlations and connections between the body, seen as a microcosm, and the universe as a whole or the macrocosm, at least resemble (if not derive) from modes of thought that may be characterized as "Vedic" (see below). What the emphasis on the non- or extra-Vedic character of Tantrism does begin to point to is Tantrism's controversial and "unorthodox" nature.

Controversial or antinomian practices. It is indeed the radical and transgressive methods prescribed by certain groups in the history of Indian religion that are often enough assumed, at least in part, by the label *Tantric*. For some groups, this has meant antisocial ascetic practices, such as eschewing clothing and ordinary hygiene, meditating in cemeteries, and carrying human skulls as begging bowls, as well as practices involving human corpses and the worship of deities in gruesome, terrifying forms. For others it has meant engaging in ritualized sex and the exchange of bodily fluids, or rituals that call for the ingestion of otherwise prohibited substances. In all cases, the purpose of such antinomian behavior seems to have been in one way or another to transcend the world of dualities (including "pure" and "impure," "good" and "bad").

Among the best known of these controversial practices is the ritual of indulging in what are called the five elements or principles (*pañcatattvas*) or the "five M's" (referring to the Sanskrit letter with which each of the five begins). This practice forms the core of the so-called "left-handed" path (*vāmamarga*) of Tantrism. Members of the group form a circle of alternating males and females, which represents the cosmos or *maṇḍala*. Having ritually constituted each male as the god and each female as the goddess (and the embodiment of the female energy known as *śakti*), practitioners then make what are regarded as sacrificial offerings to the divine within. These offerings consist of substances normally forbidden in caste Hinduism: meat (*mamsa*), fish (*matsya*), alcohol (*madhu*), and parched grains (one of the meanings of term *mudrā*, and perhaps indicating some kind of aphrodisiac). The ceremony culminates in the "fifth M," ritual intercourse or *maithuna*, which epitomizes the transcendental unification and resolution of all opposites. This kind of practice could also, however, be done entirely imaginatively within meditation, following the "right handed" path.

Esoteric Tantric groups thus claimed to be able to engage in practices that for the uninitiated would result in the most disastrous karmic ends. Such a path is termed "heroic" (*vira*) and dangerous in that it intentionally confronts head-on the most deep-seated desires and the most repulsive of aversions in the attempt to rise above both. Through various meditative and ritual techniques, the Tantric practitioner could "do whatever fools condemn" and rid himself "of passion by yet more passion":

So, with all one's might, one should do Whatever fools condemn, And, since one's mind is pure, Dwell in union with one's divinity. The mystics, pure of mind Dally with lovely girls, Infatuated with the poisonous flame of passion That they may be set free from desire. By his meditations the sage . . . draws out the venom (of snakebite) and drinks it. He makes his deity innocuous, And is not affected by the poison. . . . When he has developed a mind of wisdom And has set his heart on enlightenment There is nothing he may not do To uproot the world (from his mind). . . . Water in the ear is removed by more water, A thorn (in the skin) by another thorn. So wise men rid themselves of passion By yet more passion. (*Cittaviśuddhiprakaraṇa*, Embree, 1988, pp. 24–38)

An anti-ascetic and anti-renunciatory attitude and a positive attitude toward the body. Tantrism has often been viewed as a kind of reaction to the renunciatory and ascetic strains in Hinduism. From the time of the ancient Upaniṣads, asceticism and world renunciation were usually thought to be more or less essential in the quest for liberation or *mokṣa*. Such an attitude is accompanied by a fundamentally negative evaluation of the body and its desires.

The "first characteristic" of Tantrism, according to Eliade, is its anti-ascetic attitude. The body is "revalorized" in Tantric circles and "acquires an importance it had never before attained in the spiritual history of India . . . The Upanishadic and post-Upanishadic pessimism and asceticism are swept away. The body is no longer the source of pain, but the most reliable and effective instrument at man's disposal for 'conquering death'" (1970, p. 227).

In Tantrism, the physical body becomes the vehicle and microcosmic locus of powers that can be tapped and enjoyed as the means to liberation. As such, the body must be kept healthy and strong, and a very different understanding of desire emerges. Tantrism sometimes represents itself as the "easy" path in which desire is not renounced but utilized on the road to salvation. As one text puts it, "No one succeeds in attaining perfection by employing difficult and vexing operations; but perfection can be gained by satisfying all one's desires."

Madeleine Biardeau has summed up *Tantrism* as "an attempt to place *kama*, desire, in every meaning of the word, in the service of liberation . . . not to sacrifice this world for liberation's sake, but to reinstate it, in varying ways, within the perspective of salvation" (cited in Padoux, 1987, p. 273). Thus *Tantrism* here means the use of desire to gain both worldly and supernatural "enjoyments" (*bhukti* or *bhoga*) as well as powers (*siddhis*) and to attain the state of liberation in this very lifetime and in the embodied state. The this-worldly is not renounced but rather reintegrated into the soteriological quest.

Such a view of the Tantric embrace of the body, desire, and sensuality must also be contextualized by the often equally characteristic trait of an emphasis on ritual and the use of yoga or mental and physical "discipline" in Tantric

groups. Desire—especially in its most powerful form, sexual desire—is not simply indulged in Tantric practice but rather is harnessed and “disciplined” by ritual or yogic methods. “The ‘easiness’ of the tantric path is more apparent than real,” writes Eliade. “The fact is that tantric road presupposes a long and difficult *sadhana*” (1970, p. 206).

Religious use of sexual intercourse. David White has stated that “sexual ritual practice is the sole truly distinctive feature of South Asian Tantric traditions. All of the other elements of Tantric practice . . . may be found elsewhere” (2003, p. 13). We have seen above how ritualized sex is integrated into the “left-handed” forms of Tantric practice and how “desire” is not to be avoided but utilized. The ritualized or even “yogic” sex of traditional Indian Tantric practice at least theoretically has nothing to do with simply indulging one’s desires, let alone with the orgiastic and lascivious. It rather takes place secretly under what might be called “laboratory conditions” and within a context where all the participants are advanced practitioners. The event is totally sacralized; the participants are all fully divinized beforehand and the act of intercourse is to be envisioned not as sex at all but as the unification of all polarities, and most especially the union of Śiva and Śakti, the passive and active principles of the cosmos. Such a union is thought to represent or indeed actualize absolute reality itself.

The purpose of the ritual is not climax in its conventional sense of self-gratification, and indeed sometimes orgasm is prohibited in this yogic form of sex. The goal is rather the experience of cosmic union, the highest and ultimate end of Tantric practice. As Georg Feuerstein (1998) notes, in opposition to the lurid notion of “Tantric sex” sometimes current among outsiders, “There is nothing glamorous about Tantric sexual intercourse.”

Esotericism and secrecy. Given the controversial nature of Tantric groups, a high premium was (and may very well still be) placed on secrecy. Many, if not most, of the practices characteristic of “Tantrism” were traditionally carried out privately, away from the gaze of the uninitiated. Practitioners were aware of the disapproval that would accompany public knowledge of certain of their rituals. Texts warn of the dire consequences that will befall those who reveal the secrets to outsiders. Tantric methods are also often said to be extremely dangerous to those who practice them without proper initiation and guidance, and therefore on these grounds too they should be kept from the awareness of the general public.

The esoteric nature of Tantrism was insured in part by its initiatory structure. Only those who had gained the permission of the Tantric master or *gurū* and who had undergone what can be very complex initiation or consecration (*dikṣā*) ceremonies were eligible to learn the secrets of a particular sect. In opposition to the Vedic or Vedic-based orthodox groups, Tantric practice was typically open to initiates of all castes and both genders. “Initiation, secrecy, and the

necessity of a spiritual master are essential Tantric traits,” according to Padoux.

Another way in which the esoteric knowledge and practices of Tantrism were protected was through its elaborate system of symbols and especially by the utilization of an enigmatic and highly ambiguous form of language that renders many texts unintelligible to outsiders (and that provides endless difficulties for scholars trying to decipher such discourse). This form of writing is sometimes termed *sandhya bhasa* or “twilight speech” to indicate its capacity to convey within it two different meanings at once, and also to point to the paradoxical and ultimately indescribable qualities of esoteric realizations. Twilight speech may thus have as its original purpose not only to protect secrets but also to indicate that ordinary language is incapable of expressing the deep truths of Tantra.

Homologies and correlations between the macrocosm and the body regarded as a microcosm. The idea that the cosmos in its entirety, the macrocosm, is replicated or represented within the very body of the practitioner (conceived of as a microcosm) is frequently encountered in Tantrism and, indeed, is a necessary assumption for much of Tantric ritual and meditative practice. The positing of correlations between the body and the world, between the microcosm and macrocosm, between the human and the divine, and between the beings and actions involved in ritual and the cosmic entities, energies, and processes—all these are more or less necessary presuppositions for other elements of the worldview and practices of Tantrism.

In spirit, at least, if not in the specifics, this notion of a potentially discoverable nexus of resemblances linking the human, the ritual, and the cosmos is identical to that of Vedism, culminating in the Upaniṣadic equation of the Self (*ātman*) and the macrocosmic principle of unity (the *brahman*). As such, the idea that Tantrism is entirely or pervasively “non-Vedic” and “unorthodox” must be qualified.

The positing of a mystical physiology or “subtle body” and the projection of divinities into the body. An essential part of the idea of the body as a microcosm was the typically Tantric conceptualization of an “inner” or “subtle” body and an intricate science of veins, channels, winds or energies, and centers that comprise what one may call a mystical anatomy or physiology.

While there are vague correspondences between the structure and elements of this subtle body and the anatomical organs and endocrine system of the physical body, the two are not identical. Thus, for example, the various centers or chakras (“wheels,” so called because they are envisioned as whirling circles) of the mystical body (some traditions count five of these, others seven) are located near, but are not identified with, parts of the physical body: the crown of the head, between the eyebrows, at the areas of the throat, heart, navel, and sexual organ, and at the base of the spinal column. Each of these centers forms the locus of a complex set of im-

agery; each is said to contain lotuses of different colors and shapes, different Sanskrit letters or *mantras*, geometrical designs, deities, cosmological elements and entities, and so forth. Each chakra, in other words, is a tremendous potential source of cosmic power of a certain sort. Taken together these centers within the human body contain the universe as a whole.

Linking together and springing forth from these centers is a vast system of tens of thousands of *nadis*—veins, nerves, currents, or channels—the most important of which is a “central channel” (*sushumna*) surrounded on either side by two other *nadis* called the *ida* (on the left) and *pingala* (on the right), the latter of which, among other things, is correlated with the moon and the sun. Running through these channels are various “winds” or energies known as *prāṇas*.

Tantric practice, especially but not exclusively in its more meditative forms, consists of realizing the cosmic nature of this subtle body and then tapping into its transformative powers. This is done initially by imaginatively projecting divinities and powers into the body (the practice is called *nyāsa*), thereby homologizing it with the Tantric pantheon in order to realize and awaken these forces within. This process is often accompanied by the use of sacred and powerful syllables called “seed” or *bija mantras* and the use of secret gestures called *mudrās*.

But the real centerpiece of such meditation is the awakening of the energy, force, or power within the practitioner’s being called *śakti* (the female and active principle of the universe) or *kunḍalinī* (envisioned as a snake coiled at the base of the spine). As one text puts it, “As a door is opened with a key, so the *yogi* opens the door of liberation by awakening the *kunḍalinī*.” This cosmic power, once aroused, is moved up through the central channel where it passes through, one by one, each of the chakras and invigorates the dormant powers within them. This results in the attainment of progressively higher states of consciousness and ability by the practitioner. When the *kunḍalinī* reaches the chakra at the crown of the head—the divine seat of the god Śiva—the female *śakti* is said to be reunited with the male principle. This is equated with liberation for the practitioner, a state that is said to be accompanied by “great bliss” and ecstasy.

Many scholars regard this mystical physiology as distinctive to Tantra, especially the notions that the active force in the universe (*śakti*, conceived as the Goddess) is present also in each individual in the form of *kunḍalinī*. The identification with and appropriation of the power of the Goddess, and the emphasis on tapping the *śakti/kunḍalinī* power within one’s body, forms what some would regard as an essential element in what we call *Tantra*.

Distinctive goals: The attainment of *siddhis* and the realization of liberation in this lifetime (*jīvanmukti*). While all forms of Hinduism seek the goal of liberation or release from the bonds of *samsāra*, one of the features shared by most Tantric groups is the urgency with which that quest

is imbued. Indeed, some scholars have focused on the “experiential” nature of Tantrism as its distinctive quality, its emphasis on practice over doctrine and on results above all. Tantric practitioners typically seek, in this very lifetime and in this very body, the experience of unity or oneness (“nonduality”), of “spontaneity” (*sahaja*), or of “moving through the void” (*khecari*), which is most commonly known as “liberation in this life” (*jīvanmukti*). While there are, as we have seen, many and various methods for attaining this goal, the conceptualization of the goal itself in these terms is perhaps one of the most basic commonalities shared by Tantric groups.

The liberated Tantric practitioner, the “accomplished one” or *siddha*, is, according to one text, free from the “pairs of opposites” or all duality, no longer bound by the forces of *karma*, unconquerable, “without inhalation and exhalation,” invulnerable to all weapons, and immortal. Other extraordinary powers (the “accomplishments” or *siddhis*) are also sought and supposedly realized along the way to the ultimate goal. These include the ability to fly, to know the past and future, to decipher the languages of animals, realize one’s previous lives, read the thoughts of others, become invisible, and so on. In some texts, abilities such as these are summarized as the eight “great powers” (*mahāsiddhis*): miniaturization, magnification, levitation, extension, irresistible will, mastery, lordship over the universe, and fulfillment of all desires.

MODERN WESTERN APPROPRIATIONS OF HINDU TANTRA.

The problems inherent in the study of Tantrism have been further compounded by the widespread interest in and appropriation of the term *Tantra* to identify certain modern and Western New Age beliefs and practices. This form of “Neo-Tantrism” may or, more often, may not have anything much in common with the Tantrism practiced traditionally in India. Neo-Tantrism is, however, often represented by its adherents and supporters as both “ancient” and “Indian,” perhaps in part as a means to legitimate its blend of spirituality and sexuality, sacred transcendence and materialistic indulgence. Furthermore, Tantrism has also appealed to, and been appropriated by, some modern Western feminists. Tantrism’s supposed matriarchal roots, its elevation of goddess figures, its emphasis on the female power or *śakti*, its “embodiedness” or valorization of the body and physicality, and the supposed equality of the genders in its ritual practices—all these traits have endeared Tantrism to a certain segment of modern feminist spirituality.

Neo-Tantrism first emerged as part of the spirituality associated with the counterculture of the 1960s. An important cross-culturally transitional figure was Bhagawan Shree Rajneesh (also known as Osho), an Indian *gurū* who attracted a largely Western following with an eclectic philosophy revolving around his particular vision of “Tantra”: “Tantra does not believe in improving your character . . . Tantra says—if you are greedy, be greedy . . . If you are sexual, be sexual, don’t bother about it at all” (1974, p. 190). His teach-

ings, he claimed, were particularly suitable for modern Westerners, an "iconoclastic brand of spirituality" or a "religionless religion" that does not deny or repress life and the body but rather affirms and expresses sensuality and physicality.

Since Rajneesh, New Age groups claiming to be in one way or another Tantric have multiplied and spread. The internet is replete with sites offering "Tantric sex," "sex magic," "sacred sex," "spiritual sex," and so forth—all under the umbrella of Tantrism. Neo-Tantrism, it has been argued, represents the ideal religion for consumer society, embracing the most materialistic and hedonistic desires and repositioning them as "spiritual" and as the means for achieving transcendence.

This new twist in the already extremely complex history of the phenomena called *Tantric* has provoked yet more controversy among scholars of Tantrism. Most view the appearance of neo-Tantrism as a trivializing perversion of the "authentic" Tantric traditions. For these observers, neo-Tantrics have mistaken, among other things, the "sexualization of ritual" of traditional Tantrism for the "ritualization of sex." Or, otherwise put, they have (intentionally or not) blurred the distinction made in the Indian tradition between the science of Tantra (*tantraśāstra*) and the science of erotics (*kāmaśāstra*)—the former entailing the use and transformation of desire in the service of liberation, whereas the latter's goal is the fulfillment of desire as one of the "ends of life" of a householder. One scholar thus refers to the "pathetic hybrid of New Age 'Tantric sex.'" For other observers, however, the neo-Tantrism of the modern West is just another incarnation of the infinitely protean, and always contestable, category of Tantrism.

SEE ALSO Buddhist Books and Texts, articles on Canon and Canonization; Goddess Worship; Hindu Tantric Literature; Kuṇḍalinī; Maṇḍalas, article on Hindu Maṇḍalas; Mantra; Mudrā.

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BRIAN K. SMITH (2005)

TANYAO (mid-fifth century CE), Chinese Buddhist monk and central figure in the revival of Buddhism after its suppression by the Northern Wei dynasty (385–534). Little is known about the early life of Tanyao except that he was eminent monk in the non-Chinese Bei Liang kingdom (397–439, in what is now Gansu province) before it was conquered by another non-Chinese kingdom, the Northern Wei.

As was the case in many of the northern dynasties, Buddhism was popular among the rulers of the Northern Wei. Thus when Tanyao arrived in the Northern Wei capital of Pingzheng (modern Datong), he found allies among the many Buddhists at the imperial court, the most prominent of whom was Crown Prince Huang. But Huang's father, the reigning emperor Taiwudi, came under the influence of an anti-Buddhist clique led by the Daoist adept Kou Qianzhi and the Daoist literatus Cui Hao, both openly hostile toward Buddhism. In 446 the emperor instituted a series of repressive measures against Buddhism, culminating in the issuance of an edict for its wholesale proscription.

The guiding hand behind the edict, which among other things ordered the execution of every monk in the realm, was Cui Hao, who effected it by taking advantage of the emperor's fury upon discovering a cache of weapons in a monastery in the city of Chang'an, a fact that the emperor took to be evidence of Buddhist complicity in a rebellion he had only recently suppressed. Other officials at court, including Kou Qianzhi, presented memorials urging the amelioration of the harshest points of the edict, thus delaying its actual promulgation and allowing monks time to flee or return to lay life, Tanyao resisted giving up the robe until the concerned