

THE MEANING AND ORIGIN OF THE TANTRAS

From *The Yoga of Power* by Julius Evola

In the first few centuries of the Christian era, and in a more marked way around the fifth century A.D., a peculiar upheaval took place in the area in which the great Indo-Aryan civilization had grown: the appearance, development, establishment, and diffusion of a new spiritual and religious trend, characterized by newer features when compared with the prevalent motifs of the previous period. This trend penetrated everywhere and heavily influenced what is generally called Hinduism: it affected yoga schools, post-Upanishadic speculation, and the cults of Vishnu and Shiva. In Buddhism it gave rise to a new current, the so-called *Vajrayana* (the "Way of the Diamond" or "Way of the Thunderbolt"). At last it joined with various forms of popular cults and magic practices on the one hand, and with strictly esoteric and initiatory teachings on the other.

This new current may be designated as *Tantrism*. In the end it led to a synthesis of all the main motifs of Hindu spirituality, finding a particular expression and vindicating its own version of the metaphysics of history. The terms *Tantra* (a word that often simply means "treatise," or "exposition," since it is derived from the root *tan* (which means "to extend" and also "to continue," "to develop"), and *Agama* (a word designating other texts of the same subject matter) have been understood to mean "what has proceeded," "that which has come down." The intent was to convey the idea that Tantrism represents an extension or a further development of those traditional teachings originally found in the Vedas and later articulated in the Brahmanas, the Upanishads, and the Puranas. That is why the Tantras have claimed for themselves the dignity befitting a "fifth Veda," that is, a further revelation beyond what is found in the traditional four Vedas. To this they added a reference to the doctrine of the four ages (yugas) of the world. It is claimed that the teachings, rites, and disciplines that would have been viable in the first age (the Krita or Satya Yuga, the equivalent of Hesiod's "golden age") are no longer fit for people living in the following ages, especially in the last age, the "dark age" (Kali Yuga, the "Iron Age," the "Age of the Wolf" in the Edda). Mankind in these later ages may find knowledge, a worldview, rituals, and adequate practices for elevating humans over and beyond their condition and for overcoming death (*mrityun javate*), not in the Vedas and in other strictly traditional texts, but rather in the Tantras and in the Agamas. It is stated therefore that only Tantric practices based on shakti (*shakti-sadhana*) are suitable and efficacious in our contemporary age: all the others are considered to be as powerless as a snake deprived of its poison.

Although Tantrism is far from rejecting ancient wisdom, it is characterized by a reaction against (1) a hollow and stereotypical ritualism, (2) mere speculation or contemplation, and (3) any asceticism of a unilateral, mortifying, and penitential nature. It opposes to contemplation a path of action, of practical realization, and of direct experience. Its password is practice (*sadhana, abhyasa*). This runs on the lines of what may be designated the "dry way," resembling the original Buddhist doctrine of the awakening, with its reaction against a degenerated brahmanism and its dislike of speculations and hollow ritualism ...

“The special virtue of the Tantra lies in its mode of Sadhana. It is neither mere worship [*upasana*] nor prayer. It is not lamenting or contrition or repentance before the Deity. It is the Sadhana which is the union of Purusha and Prakrti; the Sadhana which joins the Male Principle and the Mother Element within the body, and strives to make the attributed attributelessThis Sadhana is to be performed through the awakening of the forces within the body This is not mere "philosophy," a mere attempt to ponder upon the husks of words, but something which is to be done in a thoroughly practical matter. The Tantras say: "Begin practicing under the guidance of a good Guru; if you do not obtain favourable results immediately, you can freely give it up.”

Thus Tantras often employ an analogy taken from medicine: the efficacy of a doctrine, like a drug, is proved by the results it produces, and in this particular case, by the siddhis, or powers, that it grants. Another text says: "Yoga siddhis are not obtained by wearing yoga garments or by conversation about yoga, but only through tireless practice. This is the secret of success. There is no doubt about it."

In the previous quotation referring to the body, another important point was alluded to. The analysis of the last age, the "dark age" or Kali Yuga, brings to light two essential features. The first is that mankind living in this age is strictly connected to the body and cannot prescind from it; therefore, the only way open is not that of pure detachment (as in early Buddhism and in the many varieties of yoga) but rather that of knowledge, awakening, and mastery over secret energies trapped in the body. The second characteristic is that of the dissolution typical of this age. During the Kali Yuga, the bull of dharma stands on only one foot (it lost the other three during the previous three ages). This means that the traditional law (dharma) is wavering, is reduced to a shadow of its former self, and seems to be almost succumbing. During Kali Yuga, however, the goddess Kali, who was asleep in the previous ages, is now fully awake. I will write at greater length about Kali, a prominent Tantric goddess, in the following pages; for now, let us say that this symbolism implies that during the last age elementary, infernal, and even abyssal forces are untrammelled. The immediate task consists in facing and absorbing these forces, in taking the risk of "riding the tiger," to use a Chinese expression that may best describe this situation, or "to transform the poison into medicine," according to a Tantric expression. Hence the rituals and special practices of what has been named Left-Hand Tantrism, or the Path of the Left Hand (*Vama-marga*), which despite some problematic aspects (orgies, use of sex, etc.) represents one of the most interesting forms within the trend analyzed in this study.

It is therefore stated-and this is significant-that considering the situation of the Kali Yuga, teachings that were previously kept secret may now be revealed in different degrees, though a word of caution is issued concerning the danger they may represent for those who are not initiated. Hence what we have so far mentioned: the emergence, in Tantrism, of esoteric and initiatory teachings.

A third point must be emphasized. In Tantrism the passage from the ideal of "liberation" to that of "freedom" marks an essential change in the ideals and ethics of Hinduism. It is true that even previously the ideal of the *jivanmukta* had been known. The word means "one who is freed," that is, the one who has achieved the

unconditioned, the *sahaja*, while alive, in his own body. Tantrism introduces a specification, however: to the existential condition of mankind living in the last age, it relates the overcoming of the antithesis between enjoyment of the world and asceticism, or yoga, which is spiritual discipline aimed at liberation. In the other schools—thus claim the Tantras—one excludes the other, but in the path we follow these opposites meet." In other words, a discipline is developed that allows one to be free and invulnerable even while enjoying the world, or anything the world may offer. In the meantime, the world ceases to be seen in terms of *maya*—that is, pure appearance, illusion, or mirage—as is the case in Vedantic philosophy. The world is not *maya* but power. This paradoxical coexistence of freedom, or of the dimension of transcendence in one's self, and enjoyment of the world, of freely experimenting with the world's pleasures, carries the strictest relation with Tantrism's formula and main goal: the union of the impassive Shiva with the ardent Shakti in one's being and at all levels of reality.

This leads us to consider a further fundamental element of Tantrism, namely, Shaktism. In the complex movement called Tantrism, a central role was played by the emergence and predominance of the figure and of the symbol of a goddess or divine woman, Shakti, in its various epiphanies (especially under the forms of Kali and Durga). She may be either portrayed by herself, as the supreme principle of the universe, or reproduced under the species of multiple Shaktis, that is, female divinities who accompany male Hindu gods (who had enjoyed a greater autonomy in the previous era), and even various buddhas and bodhisattvas of late Buddhism. This marks the emergence in a thousand forms of the motif of divine couples, in which the feminine, Shaktic element enjoys a great role, to the point of becoming the predominant element in some of its currents.

Strictly speaking, this current (Shaktism) has archaic exogenous origins, and it traces its roots to an autochthonous spirituality that is visibly analogous to that of the protohistoric, Pelasgic, and pre-Hellenic Mediterranean world; in fact, the Hindu "black goddesses" (such as Kali and Durga) and those worshiped in paleo-Mediterranean areas (Demeter Melaina, Cybele, Diana of Ephesus, and Diana of Tauris, including their Christian counterparts such as the "black Madonnas" and Saint Melaina) can be reduced to the same prototype. In this substratum, corresponding to India's Dravidian populations and, in part, to strata and cycles of older civilizations, such as that which was brought to light in various excavation sites at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa (dating from 3000 B.C.), the cult of a Great Mother or Universal Mother (*magna mater*) was a central motif, and it recovered an importance practically unknown to the Aryan-Vedic tradition and to its essentially virile and patriarchal spirituality. This cult, which during the Aryan (Indo-European) conquest and colonization survived by going underground, reemerged in Tantrism, in the manifold variety of Shaktic Hindu and Tibetan divinities. The result was, on the one hand, the revivifying of what had been latent in popular classes and, on the other hand, the outlining of a Tantric worldview.

Metaphysically speaking, the divine couple corresponds to the two essential aspects of every cosmic principle: the god representing the unchanging dimension, the goddess representing the energy, the acting power of phenomena, and in a sense the dimension of immanence ("life" versus "being"). The appearance of Shaktism in the ancient Indo-Aryan world during the Kali Yuga may be considered a barometric sign

of a shifting of perspectives; it speaks of an interest in "immanent" and active principles at work in the world, rather than of anything related to sheer transcendence.

Besides, the name of the goddess, Shakti, comes from the root *shak* ("to be able to," "to have the strength to act"), which means "power." On a speculative note, we may add that the view of the world that identifies in Shakti the supreme principle is also a view of the world as power. More so than others, the Tantrism of the Kashmir school, by associating this view to traditional speculations and by reformulating on this foundation the theory of cosmic principles (*tattva*) typical of Sankhya and the other darshanas, was responsible for developing a metaphysical synthesis of great value, more on which will be found later, and which constitutes the general background for the entire system of Tantric yoga and related disciplines. Here Shakti has almost completely lost her original maternal and gynocratic features and has assumed the metaphysical features of the primordial principle, thus becoming closely related to Upanishadic or Mahayana Buddhist doctrines, which derived from that principle a specifically activist and energetic emphasis.

It is also understandable how Shaktism and Tantrism contributed, in Hindu and Tibetan areas, to the development of magical practices, often of an inferior kind, which bordered on witchcraft; eventually, what frequently took place was a reviviscence of practices and rituals proper of the previously mentioned pre-Indo-European substratum. As we shall see, however, these very same practices, often of an orgiastic and sexual nature, did not fail, in a Tantric milieu, to rise to a higher plane.

As for the rest, the various goddesses, modifications of the one Shakti, were differentiated in two kinds: the first, luminous and beneficial (e.g., Parvati, Uma, Lakshmi, Gauri); the second, frightful and dark, (Kali, Durga Bhairavi, Camunda). This differentiation is not precise, since the same goddess could assume either of the two aspects when reflecting the attitude of the devotee approaching her. In any event, the goddesses of the bright and prevalently maternal kind, who preserved their pre-Aryan nature, have become pivotal in those popular and devotional religious movements paralleling Tantrism, which shared with Tantrism an intolerance for a stereotypical ritualism and for mere speculation. People turned to devotion and to cult (*bhakti* and *puja*), in order to achieve emotional experiences (*rasa*) with mystical overtones. The natural consequence of this was that the Goddess in her bright aspect became the favourite reference point of the masses, coming to hold almost the same status that the "Mother of God" enjoys in Christian devotion. It must be noticed that this orientation was not a new phenomenon, since one of its roots was Vaishnavism (the cult of Vishnu). What was new, however, almost having the value of a barometric index, was its development and diffusion outside the lower classes of Indian society, to which it had so far been confined, and its view of the world as power. More so than others, the Tantrism of the Kashmir school, by associating this view to traditional speculations and by reformulating on this foundation the theory of cosmic principles (*tattva*) typical of Sankhya and the other darshanas, was responsible for developing a metaphysical synthesis of great value, more on which will be found later, and which constitutes the general background for the entire system of Tantric yoga and related disciplines. Here Shakti has almost completely lost her original maternal and gynocratic features and has assumed the metaphysical features of the primordial principle, thus becoming closely related to Upanishadic or Mahayana Buddhist

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The properly Tantric goddesses, however, are the Shaktis of the Path of the Left Hand, mainly Kali and Durga. Under their aegis Tantrism becomes integrated with Shaivism, the cult of Shiva, while through the bright goddesses it encounters Vaishnavism and the Way of the Right Hand. It is claimed that even Shiva has no Vedic origins: in the Vedas one finds Rudra, who may be considered his equivalent, and who propitiated Shiva's reception in the Hindu pantheon. Rudra, the "Lord of Thunder," is a personification of the divinity in its destructive aspect, that of a "destructive transcendence"; therefore, in more practical terms he is the "god of death," the "slayer." Shaivism exalts Shiva, the embodiment of all the attributes of the supreme deity, as well as the creator portrayed in an awesome and highly symbolical icon, Nataraja, which is his dance representing the rhythm of both the creation and destruction of the worlds. In a Tantric context, Shiva, while preserving the features typical of pure transcendence, is usually associated with a terrifying Shakti, such as Kali and Durga, who personify his own unrestrained and untamable manifestation. When Hinduism canonized the doctrine of *trimurti* (i.e., the three aspects of the one supreme principle, personified in three divinities, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva), the meaning of the two ways, the Right Hand and Left Hand, became clear. The first element in the trimurti is Brahma, the creator god; the second is Vishnu, the god preserving creation and the cosmic order; and the third is Shiva, the destroyer (as a

result of his transcendence acting on what is finite and conditioned). The Way of the Right Hand is under the aegis of the first two gods, or aspects of the divine, while the Path of the Left Hand is under the sign of the third God, Shiva. This is the way that essentially emerged from the encounter between Shaivism and Tantrism.

Summing up, we may consider typical of Tantric speculation a metaphysics and a theology of *shakti*, namely, of the Principle as power, or of the "active brahman." What comes next is the use of *sadhana*, the practice leading to self-realization. Together with the metaphysics of *shakti*, we find an emphasis on the magical and empowering dimensions within a vast traditional and ritualistic heritage, which often led to the formulation of esoteric and initiatory teachings. In particular, the doctrine of the mantras, which evolved from a metaphysics of the word, was assimilated to Tantrism. The mantra came to be seen no longer primarily as a liturgical formula, prayer, or mystical sound, but rather as "word of power," gaining such an importance that Tantrism was sometimes referred to (especially in some questionable Tibetan Buddhist versions) as Mantrayana, the Way of Mantras. Practical concerns led to a strict connection between Tantrism and yoga. A specifically Tantric character is found particularly in hatha yoga (the "violent" yoga, for such is the literal meaning of the word, and not "physical" yoga or, even worse, the "yoga of health"), understood as "yoga of the serpent's power," kundalini yoga, which is based on the awakening and employment, in view of one's liberation, of the primordial *shakti* immanent in the human organism. In this kind of yoga we find a science of the "occult corporeity," that is, the hyperphysical anatomy and physiology of the human organism, in the context of correlations between man and world, microcosm and macrocosm. Breathing and sex are considered to be the only two disciplines still available to mankind living in the Kali-Yuga. *Sadhana* is based on them. In yoga, strictly speaking, which carried on the vast majority of Patanjali's classical yoga, the emphasis is mainly on breathing, *pranayama*. Women, sex, and sexual magic play a major role in another sector of Tantrism in which, as it was already mentioned, even ancient practices of the dark pre-Aryan substratum were borrowed, transformed, integrated, and elevated to an initiatory plane. Especially in *Siddhantachara* and in *Kulachara*, considered by authoritative texts such as the *Kularnava-Tantra* (11, 7, 8) and the *Mahanirvana-Tantra* (4:43-45, 15:179-80) to be the two highest and most esoteric schools of the Path of the Left Hand, the emphasis shifted from liberation to the freedom of the man-god, that is, one who has overcome the human condition and is beyond any law. The highest concern in this current is how to achieve the supreme state that is seen as the union of Shiva and Shakti, whose mating symbolizes the impulse of reuniting being (Shiva) with power (Shakti). Tantric Buddhism saw in the achievement of this unity the so-called *mahasukhakaya*, a "body" or a condition even higher than the *dharmakaya* itself, which is the cosmic root from which every awakened one, or buddha, derives.

Recently Tantrism has become well known in the West, and its importance within Hinduism acknowledged. Besides some scholarly monographs, the merit of acquainting the Western world with a vast material of texts and translations concerning Hindu Tantrism belongs to Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon is a pseudonym that he used when writing books together with Hindu scholars). W. Y. Evans-Wentz and the Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdub are responsible for the translation of various texts of Tantric and Tibetan Buddhism, the so-called Vajrayana, that previously existed only in the form of codices and manuscripts. One should also

mention the pioneering works of De la Vallee Poussin, of Von Glasenapp, C. Tucci, and H. Hoffmann, and especially the precious material concerning Tantrism in Mircea Eliade's superb work *Yoga: Immortalité et liberté* (Paris, 1954). Previously, outside the specialized circles of learned orientalists, Tantrism was relatively unknown and even portrayed under a sinister light (someone even referred to it as "the worst kind of black magic"). This happened because what had been known was considered excesses or deviations from this current, instead of authentic elements that clashed with the puritanical and "spiritualist" mentality of the time, thus causing scandals and outrage.

This presentation, in which I have tried to quote the original texts as often as possible (especially those published by Woodroffe), deals essentially with doctrinal and practical aspects of Tantrism. I have noticed that Tantrism appears to be a synthesis, or better, a supplement of previous teachings. I will therefore expound many of those teachings that were incorporated in Tantrism, so that this book may also provide the reader with an overview of Hindu tradition, although mainly from a Tantric perspective.

I have resolved not to add anything personal or arbitrary; however, since my task is not merely to expound but also to interpret esoteric knowledge, which in Tantrism plays a major role, I have been able to substantiate some elements, owing to my ability to read between the lines of the texts, my personal experiences, and the comparisons I have established with parallel teachings found in other esoteric traditions. As for the methodological principle adopted in this book, I have adopted the guiding principle employed in my previous books: to maintain the same distance both from the two-dimensional, specialized findings typical of university-level and academic orientalism and from the digressions of our contemporary "spiritualists" and "occultists."