

RELEASEMENT FROM THE DELUSION OF AGENCY

Tantric understandings of 'ego', 'evil' and 'liberation'

An individual's actions in the world do not stem from their identity. Instead an individual's whole identity is an expression of unique patterns of action. Beethoven's music did not 'express' a pre-given personal identity. Rather his personal identity was but one expression of the unique patterns of musical action through which we know him *personally* ('through sound') as 'Beethoven' – and know him in a far deeper way than any biography of the 'person' would allow us to do.

Amongst all types of artist it is above all the dramatic artist or 'actor' who is most aware that identity itself – the parts he or she plays – are constituted by patterns of action (for example the vocal, verbal and gestural patterns associated with a specific 'part'). If identity is essentially a pattern of action, then it is not 'I' that do this or that. Instead each pattern of action our assumed 'I' engages in - whether cooking a meal or composing a symphony, constitutes that very self or 'I'. The idea of the self, ego or 'I' as 'agent', 'cause' or 'subject' of its actions is what I call 'the assumption of agency' – in reality a delusion of agency. The argument against this assumption of agency (and thus belief in agents of good or evil) is simple. For if identity or selfhood is itself nothing but a pattern of action how can it be regarded as being the origin of action, its agent or 'subject', or that which initiates or causes it? Yet the assumption of agency is embedded in language, in which each sentence has a subject, verb and object, the subject being taken as the agent of the action described by the verb. Thus whether 'I' cook or 'I' compose, the 'I' is assumed to be a fixed agent whose identity is independent of its actions - and unchanged by them. This is an 'I' that thinks that it acts or produces its objects but is not in

turn acted on or constituted by them; an 'I' that is the origin or cause of all its actions, but is not itself a result of action or a part of it.

Consciousness of self involves a consciousness of self within – and as a part of - action. Ego consciousness on the other hand, involves a state in which consciousness of self attempts to divorce itself from action – an attempt on the part of consciousness to perceive action as an object ... and to perceive action initiated by the ego as the result, rather than the cause, of ego's own existence. (Seth)

Our ego awareness and ego identity says 'I did this' or 'I did that' rather than being aware that it is what it does - that 'I am what I do'. Or alternatively it says 'You did this to me', rather than 'This happened to me through you' - assuming agency on the part of the other. And because 'You did this to me' the ego decides that 'I will now do this to you' – whatever 'this' may be, giving itself a sense of power through the assumption of agency. This assumption of possessing an independent power of agency, a power over action, is what best defines the nature of the 'ego'. It goes together with the assumption that all acts are acts of an agent and that all the ills of the world can be solved by identifying some causal agent - whether in the form of an individual or nation, an ideology or gene, a virus or The Devil himself. The ego then sees itself as a counter-agent to these agents – needing to re-act, to take up arms, to militantly or militarily attack or defend itself against them – effectively declaring war on 'evil', illness, poverty, crime, or suffering of any type.

The paradox here is that it is the very assumption of agency by the ego that is responsible for such ills - for wars, crimes and suffering of all sorts. For along with this goes the ego's belief that its ills are either a result of its own acts or caused by some other agent, evil or malign. Taking for granted its own supreme power of agency, if the ego feels powerless in

any way it explains this by the power of some other agent. That way it can seek to restore a sense of its own power by countering the supposed actions of that agent with its own. This is also the basis of that institutionalised 'culture of blame' which must at all cost find something or someone to blame as principal responsible agent or cause of an action or event. Within this culture, if we feel bad or bad things happen to us we either blame ourselves as agents or seek someone or something other to blame as agent. The endless round of suffering and rebirths known as the 'karmic' cycle is not essentially do to with reaping what we sow through our actions as agents - a rebound in the present or future of our past actions as agents. Rather the very cycle of birth and rebirth, of past action and its present and future consequence, is rooted in the delusion of agency that constitutes the essence of the 'ego'. Both perpetrator and victim, wrongdoer and penitent, are karmic victims of this delusion of agency. Release from 'karma' can never come from holding to the delusion that the ego is a causal agent. It has essentially nothing to do with the nature of one's actions or those of others, but rather with attaining a higher awareness of the nature of action and agency as such. This was well understood by the great Indian thinker Shankara:

We maintain that the knowledge of the Self does not pertain to something which is to be done. [It] is not for the purpose of avoiding or pursuing anything. Our excellence is in [maintaining that] when there is the realisation of Self as Brahman, there is the abandonment of everything which has to be done, and the completion of what has to be done ... This is what one who knows Brahman realises: "I am Brahman, which is completely different from that [limited self] known previously as agent and enjoyer; and is neither agent nor enjoyer in any of the three times [past, present and future]. Thus previously I was neither agent nor enjoyer. Nor am I now, Nor will I be at a future time." Only thus is liberation possible.

The solution to karmic cycles of suffering is the abandonment of the assumption of good or evil agency – either our own or that of others. For whilst there are actions that are bad there are not people - or things - that are bad. The belief that there are bad people assumes that their bad actions - actions, which cause ourselves or others to suffer – are free actions. In reality, with whatever power they act, their actions are not free actions at all. Instead they arise out of the ego's sense of powerlessness, its surrender to that sense of powerlessness, and its attempt to counter it through the false sense of the ego's power of agency – the belief that 'I can do what I want because my ego or 'I' is master of my actions'.

Free actions arise out of the awareness that actions in general do not originate in the ego or in causal agents of any sort, whether things or beings, clearly identifiable or 'secret'. Together with this goes the awareness that our own ego-identity and that of others is something that itself arises from awareness and is itself made up of patterns of action (for example patterns of thought, movement, speech etc). This awareness of our egos as - more or less rigid or fluid - patterns of action is not something the ego itself possesses however. For neither action nor awareness belong to the ego. Instead the ego belongs to them – owing its very existence and characteristics to them.

What we perceive as bad actions or 'evil' then is a result not of agents of evil – not even a result of the limitations of the ego. Instead it is a result of lack of awareness of our egos – lack of awareness that they are not originators of action but made up of patterns of action. Only with awareness of the patterns of action that make up our ego and that of others can we act freely and directly out of awareness – freely choosing between different possible actions or patterns of action. Such awareness alone stops us from seeking to blame or punish people

for bad or 'evil' acts, however dire their consequences for ourselves or others, for then we are aware that these acts arise out of ignorance or lack of awareness. With this goes the acknowledgement that an ignorant or unaware person is not to blame for their ignorance or unawareness – for they are as yet as unaware of their unawareness and as ignorant of their ignorance as a truly 'insane' person is one who is still unaware of their insanity.

And though there are many individuals who would seem to seek or take pleasure in their own bad and wrong actions, this too, is nothing but an expression of their ignorance – lack of awareness of alternative patterns of action and alternative sources of pleasure and satisfaction. Their apparently selfish egotism stems, paradoxically, from an almost total lack of awareness of their own ego, along with its assumption of agency and its addiction to the delusory power of its agency. Liberation or 'enlightenment' is a movement back from limited and limiting, deluded and delusory ego-awareness to a pre- and trans-egoic awareness of our egos and those of others. A liberation from bondage to limiting patterns of ego-activity and an awakened awareness of action in all its unlimited patterns and alternative possibilities.

Yet if awareness is not the property of the ego, where and how is it to be found, and to whom or what does it belong? And if the ego is not the subject, agent or origin of action, then who or what is? Last but not least, if the ego is unaware of its unawareness, ignorant of its ignorance - indeed ignorant and unaware of itself - how can it come to awareness and to knowledge, including awareness and knowledge of itself? The answer to all these questions rests in the fundamental relation between awareness and action as such - symbolised in the philosophy of Kashmiri Shaivism by the relation of Shiva (awareness) and Shakti

(action). In this philosophy, awareness is understood as the source of all action, even as intending or guiding that action, but not as its agent in the egoic sense.

How can there be such a thing as 'non-egoic' or 'non-agential' action - action not originating in an agent or being, self or subject, ego or 'I'? We find an answer to this question in nature. The plant or tree grows, but nothing and no one (no agent) grows it. Nevertheless, its soil, climate and human caretakers can create better or worse conditions for that growth. Similarly, awareness is the soil and climate out of which action unfolds. Particular patterns of action however, can cut off their own roots in the soil of awareness, reduce its nourishing power, pollute it or disrupt the whole climate of awareness in which they grow.

The free or liberated ego does not restrict or obstruct the awareness out of which it itself emerges as patterns of action. Nor does it experience action as its own but as something that emerges out of the soil of awareness. It does not experience itself as acting but as waiting for and allowing action to unfold, like a gardener who allows a plant time to grow and creates the best conditions for it. The composer allows the music he feels and/or hears to find expression in his compositions. The writer allows the word to formulate itself in his writing. The ego can only allow or block the expression of particular impulses, emotions or patterns of thought (themselves patterns of action) in action. Non-agential action therefore, is an allowing or blocking, suspension or release of action. It is supported by an awareness of action in all its potential and actual patterns, not an awareness of its own, but one which tantric philosophy understands as the very essence of 'self'. This self is not the egoic self which thinks it has or 'possesses' awareness but that self (Atman) which IS awareness. In the tantric philosophy this Self is also identical with that Awareness that IS 'God' -

the divine. Thus all action is understood as ultimately stemming from that Divine Awareness, an awareness present in all beings as their essential Self or 'I' – a self whose light is reflected in the smaller 'I' of the ego as the light of the Sun is reflected in the Moon.

Instead of assuming awareness to be the property of a being or body, ego or 'I', subject or self, tantric philosophy can be understood as reversing this fundamental relation - seeing selfhood or 'I'-ness itself as a primary characteristic or property of awareness as such, its self-reflection or 'recognition'. Shiva, in this sense, is not a divine being 'with' awareness, but is the very 'I'-ness of that absolute, foundational awareness that is The Divine - an awareness that is in turn the source of all action and all beings, and one whose 'I'-ness is present within them all as the Sun of their essential and divine Self. The awareness of all things, all events and even of all beings or identities as nothing but patterns of action is what breaks through the entire veil of perceptual illusion or 'Maya' - that which is treated as unreality in Vedantic philosophy. Yet in Tantric philosophy awareness penetrates this veil only to reveal the reality of action as 'Maya-Shakti' - that which arises out of the Divine Awareness to shape and form all things and all beings.

'Shakti' as the power of action is not, in my interpretation, a form of agency or the action of Shiva as an agent, but an expression of Shiva's desire and intent (Iccha), realised through the autonomous, spontaneous unfoldment of ordered action throughout the entire universe. The wild, dance-like release of Action (Shakti) that occurs within the Divine Awareness, is at the same time its self-recognition - that which first constitutes the divine selfhood or 'I'-ness of awareness that is Shiva. The ego's delusory assumption or mis-cognition of agency can only be overcome through a recognition of itself as a part of all action and not its agent, together with a recognition of the origin of all

action in the Divine Awareness. Neither the cognition of the ego as a delusion of agency nor the overcoming of that delusion can themselves be regarded as cognitive acts of the ego as agent. Instead such cognitions can only arise from a pure, unrestricted awareness of the ego and of action – an awareness of the same nature as the self-recognition of the Divine Awareness in action and self-reflection in the ego itself. Yet conceptual understanding of these truths can play a decisive role in liberating this cognitive awareness. For as Abinavagupta writes:

He whose [delusion] is not removed in any way has delusion due to the Shakti (action) of the Lord (Shiva). However even his latent tendencies [his desire for liberation] will ripen because [these very understandings] have come to his ears. Certainly, at some time in the future, he will realise his essential nature.

On the other hand:

She due to whom, having accepted these arguments and having their hearts encouraged, become successful, is the Wisdom Power [the active power of cognition known as Jnana Shakti].

Along with the ego's delusion of agency goes its tendency to treat others as mere objects of its actions, thoughts and emotions, with the ego alone experiencing itself as sole subject – or alternatively only as an object of another person's thoughts, feelings and actions. The reduction of the other to an object is the ego's only way of defending or reinforcing its sense of being an entirely separate subject of awareness and of action. Because of this however, the delusion of agency obscures and obstructs a deeper experience of the innately inter-subjective nature of action and of the interactive nature of awareness. In reality however, awareness in itself is action - indeed reciprocal interaction. Thus our awareness of how we think of, see, and feel another person is already a response to their awareness of us, and vice versa. And our awareness of others communicates to their awareness

even without any outward expression in action or speech. Awareness as such is communicative action - and the nature of people's inner awareness of one another is the basis of all outward speech and action.

The ego's urge to act or speak in order to 'get its message over' to the other, is an attempt to give expression to that silent unspoken communication whose medium is awareness as such. At the same time it is a denial of the reality of awareness as an automatic medium of silent communication. For the ego also falsely believes that unless it gives outward communicative expression to its thoughts or feelings towards others, those others will be inwardly unaware of them. The aware individual is not trapped by this belief, but knows that their awareness of others communicates directly – indeed intends it to do so. This is the secret of 'telepathy'. It is also the secret of those modes of silent reception and direct transmission of awareness on which the intuitive and initiatory powers of the 'guru' are based. Yet the 'guru', as a 'liberated' or 'enlightened' human being, is not one who has annihilated their ego to achieve liberation or enlightenment - but rather one whose awakened and sustained awareness embraces and includes awareness of his or her personal ego and that of others. Yet he or she is also one who knows the direct communicative power of awareness itself, its power of communicative action. 'Guru' is one who intends this power of awareness to work on others, with the intent that it should cultivate their awareness and its powers.

Those who are deaf to the words of the guru, failing to comprehend them or forgetting them in an instant, are those who do not recognise that the guru's words serve to communicate a wordless awareness. The ear of the ego however, is open only to what words already mean to them - not to what is being wordlessly said to them through those words by others – not least by guru. Those whose eyes are still blind, see guru as just another personal ego or agent of action - albeit one whose actions and words may have a different or more exotic character to that of an 'ordinary' person. The deaf and blind neither see nor hear the other side of guru - the awareness he or she seeks to silently communicate through their words and deeds and entire body – instead they reduce the guru to those words and deeds, and never behold

the guru's true body. The guru's aim is ultimately to free others from the delusion of agency, yet the guru knows at the same time that he or she may, for a long time simply be seen as just another 'ego' or agent of speech and action - whether good or bad, humble or arrogant, divine or all-too-human. Like the actor, the guru is aware of their ego and of different sides of their outward personality as parts that they play - that they 'act' directly out of awareness. Unlike the actor however, the guru knows who he or she is when not acting a part, knowing that self which is not simply some form of stable personal identity, but is identical with the divine awareness as such.

For guru, awareness (Shiva) is a place of near-absolute stillness or non-action within himself. 'Near-absolute' because it quivers with a subtle or slight movement through which infinite potentialities or powers of action are felt (the Shaktis of Shiva). This 'quivering' or 'slight action' within stillness or non-action is the meaning of the tantric term 'spanda'. Stillness or non-action, however, is quite distinct from blocked or repressed action. It is a state of profound quiescence - not to be confused with wooden rigidity, or with passive acquiescence either to action or to its suppression. The place of near-absolute stillness is also a place of near-absolute silence. 'Near-absolute' because it throbs with the hum and murmur of that soundless realm of potentiality or 'non-being' out of which all beings emerge and take shape as patterns of inner sound (nada). This 'throbbing' - another meaning of 'spanda' - is that felt inner sound of that most profound silence which is echoed in the primordial syllable OM.

'Spanda' is what quite literally spans the realms of non-action and non-being, - understood as a realm of potential being or existence - with the worldly realms of action and of actual beings. It is the very hyphen in 'Shiva-Shakti', the subtle dynamic tension of their relation - understood in its most essential sense as the relation of pure awareness on the one hand (Shiva) and potentiality or power of manifesting action on the other (Shakti). The Brahmins of Kashmir, as noted by Alexis Sanderson, held not only to the traditional value of Purity and pure awareness represented by Brahman, but twinned Purity with Power, Awareness with Action, in the form of God as Shiva-Shakti. This

tantric understanding of the divine character of awareness and action, and of their inseparability or 'non-duality', runs directly counter to the ego's delusory power over action, and its belief that awareness is its private property or possession. The ego's delusion of agency is in effect a human claim of power over God, both as Shiva (awareness) and as Shakti (action). In contrast, the ego is portrayed as a powerless 'dwarf of ignorance' in Hindu imagery – held firmly down under the foot of Lord Shiva, whether as lord of the dance (Nataraja) or bound in sexual embrace (Maithuna) with his consort Shakti. As for the image of Lord Shiva lying prostrate and pale as a corpse ('Shava') under the feet of the wildly dancing goddess Kali, no better symbol can be found of the relation between the pure quiescent awareness (Shiva) and the unbounded power of action (Shakti) which this awareness both supports and lets be. The image is a perfect symbol of awareness itself as non-agential power of action, the unity or 'non-difference' of Shiva and Shakti. The dancing Shiva himself however, is circumscribed by the circle of time (Kala), which is nothing other than Kali herself - understood as the bounding circumference of an infinite time-space within which all temporal action, throughout the universe, occurs simultaneously.

Kali dancing upon the 'corpse' of Shiva. Shiva dancing within the womb of the infinite time-space of Ma Kali. The goddess Parvati aroused to sexual frenzy in the embrace of a passively seated Shiva.

Different images concealing a common meaning – the unity of Shiva and Shakti, awareness and action, purity and power, transcendence and sensuality, that is the essence of 'tantra' - both as a religious-scientific teaching and as a set of life-practices or yogas to which the ego must yoke itself. The ego needs to fervently study, heed and yoke itself to both the teachings and practices of tantra if it genuinely seeks liberation (Moksha) - liberation from its delusory assumption of agency and of power over action. And liberation too, from the highly limited identity, awareness and power of action that this delusion yokes it too – unawares.

Another word for 'liberation' is 'releasement'. And another word for 'agential action' is 'willed' action or simply 'will'. In his 'Conversations on a Country Path', the profound German thinker Martin Heidegger spoke of non-agential action as 'non-willing' and of this non-willing as a type of 'releasement' - a translation of the German 'Gelassenheit' – with its literal meaning of a state or mood of 'letting be'.

“So far as we can wean ourselves from willing, we contribute to the awakening of releasement.”

The Conversations emphasise however, that 'non-willing' cannot itself “be carried out or reached by any type of willing”, that releasement itself is not something we awaken in ourselves, as if “effected” by an act of will - but rather “let in”. Nor is releasement - as 'letting be' - “a matter of weakly letting things to slide or drift along”. And yet, despite being non-willed and non-agential, Heidegger's meditations on releasement hint, like the tantras, at a higher dimension of action, if not opening the way to releasing it – through 'Releasement from the Delusion of Agency'.

“Perhaps a higher type of acting is concealed in releasement than is found in all the actions in the world and all the machinations of all mankind.”

The importance of releasement for Heidegger lay in releasing humanity from that type of ubiquitous technical, scientific, economic and political 'thinking' - as evident in our world today as it was in Heidegger's time – which is nothing but a wilful activity of objectifying, labelling, calculating and machinating – all with the aim of gaining power over action. For Heidegger the importance of 'releasement' lay in opening ourselves to a wholly new way of thinking – not willed or wilful but arising directly from a higher awareness. Herein lies the resonance of his thinking with those tantric teachings which recognise in thought how both a higher thinking and a higher power of action (Shakti) can 'release' themselves in us out of awareness (Shiva), if only we allow them to, and cultivate the meditative capacity to wait for them to do so - unwilled.

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