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## **The Greatness and Culpability of Tantra**

*by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.*

In various publications, I have spoken of the greatness of traditional Tantra. Some of my readers seem to believe that I have only praise for this pan-Indic tradition and entertain absolutely no misgivings about its various known excesses. They obviously have not read my works carefully enough, and so I need to clarify my position. In this brief essay, then, I will be more specific about what I consider to be Tantra's strength, but will also be more explicit about its weaknesses.

To begin with, I would like to articulate those features that, in my mind, make Tantra a vitally important spiritual tradition. First of all, as I have stated on a number of occasions, Tantra emerged in medieval times as a sweeping synthesis of then current traditions as well as many significant preceding cultural, philosophical, and practical spiritual strands. As Mircea Eliade pointed out in his magnificent (if slightly dated) book *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (p. 200), the Sanskrit word *tantra* itself connotes, among other meanings, the sense of continuity or unfolding. This suggests that Tantra is not a brand-new system that appeared about 500 A.D. or earlier, but is a development out of ancient India's astonishingly rich and complex heritage. It achieved mature expression by c. 800 A.D.

Eliade correctly recognized that Tantra emerged more or less simultaneously both within marginal circles in what later came to be called Hinduism and also within Buddhism. In both religio-cultural complexes, Tantra was destined to develop into an overarching practice-oriented spiritual tradition that consciously attempted to integrate several crucial features of Indic culture. I happen to believe that this integrative effort was as successful as it could have been at that time and that it offers us moderns important lessons. The salient integrative efforts of Tantra, which are both on the theoretical and practical levels, are the following:

1. to round out the protracted process of amalgamation between mainstream Brahmanism and Buddhism on the one side and the Indic folk traditions on the other;
2. to bridge the gap between the supreme socio-cultural ideal of spiritual liberation (*moksha*) and the three other legitimate socio-cultural goals of Indic society, namely material security (*artha*), pleasure (*kâma*), and moral lawfulness (*dharma*);

3. to integrate the powerful cultural trend inherited from ancient India (certainly ever since the days of the *Upanishads*) to renounce the world lock, stock, and barrel with the equally powerful trend toward liberation in the context of a spiritual life lived as a householder respectful of the usual social mores and customary obligations; we see this integrative trend first clearly emerging in the teaching of Karma-Yoga (Yoga of self-transcending action) in the *Mahâbhârata* epic in general and its *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* episode in particular;

4. to overcome the body-negative attitudes found in extreme renunciatory schools by means of an integrative approach that respect material embodiment and even regards the body as a fit vehicle for spiritual growth and liberation;

5. to surmount the restrictive notion of sexuality as being necessarily a substantial stumbling block on the spiritual path with a more moderate orientation that, at least in some Tantric schools, even includes the notion that sexual vitality is a necessary ingredient of successful spiritual practice and ought to be properly cultivated;

6. to replace the widespread misogynic attitude, especially among renunciatory schools, with a more positive regard for women and the feminine principle in general;

7. to emphasize individualistic metaphoric spirituality over orthodox rigid literalism, particularly in the area of moral behavior.

The above features are all interconnected and form an essential part of what has been called the Tantric Revolution. They are praiseworthy developments in themselves and clearly worthy of consideration from within any cultural context. We know from psychoanalysis what happens when a person merely represses instinctual impulses for the sake of achieving higher “noble” ideals. Premature “renunciation” of desires merely leads to neurosis and possibly psychosis.

We also know that no good can come of ignoring the body or even bodily existence in general, as some ascetics East and West have been wont to do. This tends to lead to mere neglect, which has undesirable physical and mental consequences. Then again, one can also not fail to notice the unashamed narcissism of a certain orientation within the Tantric branch of medieval Hatha-Yoga, which foreshadowed the fitness cult of our contemporary Western society.

The phenomenon of Neo-Tantrism, which is a poor imitation and even a distortion of traditional Tantra, must be cited here as being among the most self-indulgent trends of modern times. Even the most cursory glance at Neo-Tantrism shows that it lacks the integrative spirit of Tantra and in particular has replaced the central Tantric notion of innate bliss (*mahâ-sukha*) with mere instant pleasure, as if pleasure (specifically orgasm) could lead to or signal spiritual maturity and liberation. One way of looking at this is to say that Neo-Tantrism favors simplistic literalism rather than the sophisticated metaphoricism of traditional Tantra.

In an attempt to soften my strong criticism of Neo-Tantrism, I have in a couple of previous publications regrettably allowed for the possibility that the overt sexual preoccupations of Neo-Tantrism may prove helpful to some individuals who are sexually inhibited and in need of sexual self-exploration. Upon further reflection, I would now like

to amend my earlier view by saying that I am doubtful that Neo-Tantrism has any such therapeutic merit. Basing myself on my acquaintance with a number of proponents of and participants in Neo-Tantra, I now consider it much more likely that it facilitates rather than dissolves sexual fixations.

The women's liberation movement has brought to our attention many areas in which our culture has systematically repressed the psyche's feminine side to everyone's detriment, which thankfully has led to a progressive reassessment of the role of the female gender in our society and the function of the feminine principle in our mind. In particular, the work of C. G. Jung has contributed significantly to this reevaluation leading to a more balanced view of the role of the feminine principle in our personal life and in society at large. In some ways, this reevaluation represents historically a rediscovery of core Tantric insights.

With the rise of the physical and social sciences, not least the psychological disciplines, to cultural preeminence, we have also had ample opportunity to examine the stranglehold of ideology, particularly in the form of religious orthodoxy.

For a variety of reasons, our own culture has undergone far-reaching changes, which has brought the topic of integration and a nonideological spirituality into sharp focus for us and which makes a careful study of the historical phenomenon of Tantra especially relevant.

At the same time, the very plasticity, or liberalism, of Tantra has unquestionably given rise to certain reprehensible features to which I will pay attention next. The most blameworthy aspect of medieval Tantra is its inclination toward unbridled antinomianism and an excessive licentiousness in the sexual domain of the so-called "left-hand" schools. More moderate Tantric schools and scriptures may still utilize a sexually explicit language but, in fact, understand it in highly symbolic ways. Other schools and scriptures, however, intend for their sexual suggestions to be taken literally, which effectively amounts to an inversion of common morality. Thus, the left-hand stipulation to pursue sex with minors or with one's own mother is appalling whichever way we want to look at it. If meant only metaphorically, such notions are intended to shock and startle the conventional mind out of its complacency in order to guide it to inner freedom, but even so we must question the educational value of coarse ideas of this kind.

It is on account of the perverted ideas and practices of certain Tantric schools that Tantra early on fell into disrepute in its native land. Such perversions should be equally shunned by Western spiritual seekers. Viewed from a sound spiritual basis, perversions are perversions whatever the country or epoch may be. Immorality simply does not equate with healthy spirituality, which is always connected with the cultivation of the great universal moral virtues, such as nonharming, love, compassion, generosity, and patience.

Many Tantric adepts, even of the more moderate schools, have seen an advantage in deploying shock techniques to their disciples and also the public at large in order to elicit in them a better understanding of psychological and societal blocks to inner freedom and wisdom. So-called crazy-wisdom teachers have tended to freely avail themselves of all sorts of ploys to force the conventional mind to face reality as it is, without cultural or personal (egoic) cushions. In the case of an enlightened adept, such shock tactics may

be excusable. But the problem is that the unenlightened person cannot ascertain who is or who is not truly enlightened, which is why there can be so many self-styled enlightened teachers in the East and the West.

There have been numerous so-called masters who act in highly unconventional ways for the real or imaginary benefit of their students. Often, one suspects, they neither know the full effect of their behavior nor are necessarily deeply concerned about their disciples' spiritual welfare. In my experience, the greatest masters fairly consistently behave with utmost simplicity and with exceptional kindness and generosity.

Crazy Wisdom, as the unconventional mode of behavior of adepts is often labeled, is a very tricky matter and, as H. H. the Dalai Lama has suggested, is best avoided. This is very good counsel especially in modernity, where self-appointed adepts of this or that denomination or lineage can readily attract numerous followers, who then are liable to become subject to exploitation, abuse, and vast disappointment. This danger is heightened whenever an adept purports to initiate students sexually, which is particularly inexcusable in our culture in which sexual exploitation is rampant. In addition, our culture lacks proper spiritual bearings and thus makes it almost impossible for the ordinary individual to correctly gauge the spiritual or moral integrity of a teacher, thereby making students susceptible to exploitation.

Ever since the entrance of Tantra into the Western hemisphere, I would argue, the liability of exploitation of various kinds among Western students has greatly increased. I see two major reasons for this. First, there is the ignorance, naïveness and gullibility of Western spiritual seekers, which, secondly, are pitted against the natural human frailty of those placed in a position of authority and power over others. That this is an age-old problem can be gleaned from statements in the medieval Tantric scriptures themselves, which cautioned against false gurus, who seek the disciple's wealth but are incapable of true spiritual guidance.

In view of Tantra's well-known failures and liabilities, we may ask whether this tradition is still worthy of our attention? As I stated at the beginning of this essay, I believe so. I think that especially in the form of Buddhist Tantra (Vajrayana) and the Hindu Tantric branches of Shrî-Vidyâ and Kashmiri Shaivism, Tantra not only deserves to be studied but also practiced. Unfortunately, there are few teachers, never mind qualified adepts, of Hindu Tantra in the West. Buddhist Tantra is far better represented in our part of the world, largely because of the Tibetan diaspora.

Moreover, Vajrayana Buddhism, particularly the Gelugpa Order, has perhaps more built-in safeguards than Hindu Tantra, which has tended to breed mavericks. Because of their strict monasticism and focus on the bodhisattva ideal, the Gelugpas have a tighter educational system in place and—in my opinion—have produced fewer teachers whose moral integrity could be challenged.

A radical spiritual tradition like Tantra unavoidably challenges the habit patterns of the unenlightened mind, which is the same mind that creates and maintains conventional society and culture. It is, therefore, crucial that the teachers of Tantra have great integrity and also demonstrate this to their disciples and the wary public. Spiritual seekers, in turn, ought to be sincere about their pursuit of inner growth and liberation and examine closely the adepts they wish to call their teachers. They should feel free to readily

dismiss self-appointed gurus, who are without a recognizable and respected lineage, and have reasonable expectations of their teacher or teachers—expectations that are firmly based on careful study of the specific tradition with which the seekers wish to be aligned.

In other words, for the spiritual process to be successful under the guidance of a qualified teacher, at least two elements need to be present: the integrity of the teacher and that of the student.

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