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Traditional Tantra and Contemporary Neo-Tantrism

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Defining Tantra

Tantra is the broad term by which Western students of India's spirituality designate a particular type of teaching within Hinduism and Buddhism. What that teaching is cannot be readily summarized, because Tantra comprises a very wide spectrum of beliefs and practices. However, to proffer a simplified description, we can say that most schools of Tantra include the following features:

1. initiation and spiritual discipleship with a qualified adept (*guru*);
2. the belief that mind and matter are manifestations of a higher, spiritual Reality, which is our ever-present true nature;
3. the belief that the spiritual Reality (*nirvâna*) is not something distinct from the empirical realm of existence (*samsâra*) but inherent in it;
4. the belief in the possibility of achieving permanent enlightenment or liberation while still in the embodied state;
5. the goal of achieving liberation/enlightenment by means of awakening the spiritual power—called *kundalinî-shakti*—dormant in the human body-mind;
6. the belief that we are born many times and that this cycle is interrupted only at the moment of enlightenment, and that the chain of rebirth is determined by the moral quality of our lives through the action of karma;
7. the assumption that we live at present in the Dark Age (*kali- yuga*) and that therefore we should avail ourselves of every possible aid on the spiritual path, including practices that are deemed detrimental by conventional morality;
8. the belief in the magical efficacy of ritual, based on the metaphysical notion that the microcosm (i.e., the human being) is a faithful reflection of the macrocosm (i.e., the universe);

9. the recognition that spiritual illumination is accompanied by, or creates access to, a wide array of psychic powers, and a certain interest in the exploitation of these powers both for spiritual and material purposes;

10. the understanding that sexual energy is an important reservoir of energy that should be used wisely to boost the spiritual process rather than block it through orgasmic release;

11. an emphasis on first-hand experience and bold experimentation rather than mere reliance on derived knowledge.

Tantra, then, is an occult or esoteric tradition comprised of arcane disciplines. This means that its teachings are secret or "hidden" and cannot, or at least should not, be divulged to the uninitiated. Indeed, traditionally, the Tantric initiates were sworn to secrecy. Thus, in the *Kula-Arnava-Tantra* (2.6), a well-known medieval Sanskrit work on Tantra, we find the following verse:

You must keep this a secret and not impart it to anyone but a devotee and disciple; otherwise it will cause their fall.*1

These words were uttered by God Shiva, who figures as the divine author of this and many other *Tantras*. They were addressed to his celestial spouse Devî, the Goddess. Having Shiva himself enjoin the Goddess to carefully conceal the Tantric teaching was meant to impress on students the superlative importance of such secrecy.

While this attitude has at times given rise to snobbish elitism in Tantric circles, it would appear to be essentially sound. For, without due moral, emotional, mental, and spiritual preparation, Tantra can prove a lethal trap. Its methods are potent and can backfire on those who are inadequately prepared. Many of the Tantric teachings were never even committed to writing. They were transmitted by word of mouth—from the *guru* to the duly qualified disciple. Sometimes they were whispered into the student's ear with the demand for absolute secrecy. According to some scriptures, even the gods are to be excluded from the secret knowledge of Tantra.

Neo-Tantrism and the Popularization of Esoteric Teachings

The secretive attitude of traditional Tantra stands in sharp contrast to the Neo-Tantrism of our own time, which tends to be indiscriminately democratic. For instance, the authors of a popular book on Neo-Tantric Yoga begin their instructions about starting a Tantric group with the statement that belief in the usefulness of gurus "became obsolete centuries ago with the invention of printing."*2 They advertise their book as the "perfect guru." We may well question, as I have done in another publication, the function and appropriateness of autocratic gurus for our age.*3 However, we should not dismiss spiritual authority quite so glibly and replace it with books. Instead, we would do well to heed the following observation made in the *Kula-Arnava-Tantra* (1.96-97):

Ignorant of the Truth within himself, the fool is infatuated with books, like the dull-witted shepherd who searches for a goat in the well when it is in its enclosure. Verbal

knowledge is of no use for overcoming the delusions of the world, just as darkness does not cease to exist merely by talking about a lamp.

Neo-Tantrism, by now a stable feature of the New Age movement, is a Western popularization of the Tantric teachings. In many cases, the teachers of this new-wave Tantrism appear not to have had the benefit of proper initiation by a competent Tantric guru; nor have they, generally speaking, studied the Tantric scriptures in sufficient depth to have a clear understanding of the extraordinary heritage they purport to represent. The danger of misunderstanding and vulgarization is obvious when we scan the popular literature.

But this danger is not confined to writings about Tantrism. Rather it is omnipresent in the popular Western paperback culture. The readily available literature on Buddhism, Taoism, and other forms of spirituality has created a surfeit of knowledge about other cultures and religions. It certainly has increased the level of ideological tolerance among the educated masses. However, the wide dissemination of once sacred and hard-to-obtain knowledge has also given rise to the smug presumption that we know it all; that we are farther along in our spiritual quest than we really are; that we do not need to undergo the difficult and lifelong trial of spiritual transformation. The late Chögyam Trungpa said it well:

Our vast collections of knowledge and experience are just part of ego's display, part of the grandiose quality of ego. We display them to the world and, in doing so, reassure ourselves that we exist, safe and secure, as "spiritual" people. But we have simply created a shop, an antique shop.*4

Contrary to popular imagination, there are no shortcuts to spiritual realization. Bliss and freedom are won only through the conquest of the self. Neither drugs nor electronic gadgets nor sexual sophistication can accomplish the noble task of self-transcendence for us.

Because popularized Tantrism is soft on the ego-personality, it runs the risk of degenerating into black magic. True enough, Tantra is founded in a magical attitude toward the world. Its practices operate on the basis of the law of similarity and correspondence: "As above, so below. — As within, so without." However, black magic is the ruthless exploitation of the magical connectedness between things for selfish purposes.

Whereas genuine Tantra seeks to provide avenues for transcending the self, or ego-personality, black magic is always an attempt to gratify egoic desires. Often this involves exerting power over others and destroying their own hope for happiness. The black magician, Tantric or otherwise, has only his or her own self-fulfillment at heart. No other person matters. Of course, they predictably fail to realize the great bliss and freedom promised in the Tantric scriptures.

The history of Tantra in India and the Himalayan countries reveals that Tantra has had its share of moral failure. The Indian scholar Brajamadhava Bhattacharya, who was initiated into left-hand Tantra at a young age, remarked:

From drug addicts to alcoholics, from perverts to maniacs all open their clubs under the undefined umbrella of yoga and tantra. Tantra has become an easy escape for the degenerate. But real tantra engages itself, heart and soul, with the submission of all sensuous emotions to the subjective cause of discovering the true identity of the Self.*5

In its native land, the Tantric teachings fell into disrepute precisely because of their widespread abuse. Genuine spiritual life tends to flourish in secret, but the misguided have always displayed their questionable attainments and formidable egotism in the marketplace.

Orgasm and the Pursuit of Bliss

The peril of selfishness in popularized Tantrism is most readily apparent in the attitude of some Neo-Tantrics toward orgasm. Contrary to the opinion of the late Swami Agehananda Bharati (an Austrian-born American professor of anthropology), both Buddhist and Hindu Tantra generally enjoin on male practitioners to arrest the semen together with the breath and the mind.*6 In other words, orgasm is not part of the core Tantric repertoire. As the Buddhist Tantras put it: the "enlightenment mind" (*bodhi-citta*) must not be discharged. That is to say, the semen is equated with the impulse toward enlightenment. Orgasm does not lead to bliss, merely to pleasurable sensations. The earnest practitioner must bypass orgasm.

Various techniques are recommended for this, mainly for men since they tend to come to orgasm more quickly. Apart from great self-discipline and mastery over their bodily responses, men are advised to apply pressure at the perineum to prevent ejaculation. However, this technique can become a health hazard if it is made a habit. It is far better to avoid sexual arousal to the point where ejaculation is imminent. Besides, once the ejaculatory spasms begin, semen is released into the urethra, and the perineal trick merely forces the semen into the bladder.

Some practitioners, seeking the best of both worlds, learn to control their genital functions to the point where they can actually suck up the ejaculated semen again through the penis. This curious yogic technique is called *vajrolî-mudrâ*, and is described for instance in the *Hatha-Yoga-Pradîpikâ* (3.83ff.), a fourteenth-century manual on Hatha-Yoga.

The spiritual merit of this exercise escapes me, because the nervous system has already fired and thus the creative tension that could serve as a bridge to ecstasy is lost. The whole point of avoiding orgasm is to accumulate the subtle force or nervous energy called *ojas*, which is wasted the moment the nerves fire during ejaculation.

According to Bhattacharya, a person accumulates three units of *ojas* during a lifetime.*7 However, in order to attain ultimate spiritual liberation one hundred units are required, which means that this accumulation must extend over several incarnations. Bhattacharya provides no scriptural source for this statement, and it may well be based on oral tradition. Other schools maintain that it is possible to reach the highest evolutionary goal in a single lifetime. In other words, it is possible to generate sufficient

ojas through sexual abstinence and meditative practice to provide the energetic basis for ultimate enlightenment in the span of one's present life.

In any case, the *vajrolī* technique represents an unfortunate misunderstanding of the underlying energetic mechanism of sacred sexuality. The emphasis in most traditional schools of Tantra is on awakening the body's erotic potential without risking orgasm, which merely scatters the somatic and psychic energy.

In Neo-Tantrism, by and large, a quite different attitude prevails. Not only are the Tantric partners instructed to arouse each other until they are close to orgasm, they are actually expected to achieve one or more orgasms during each session. Or they are encouraged to find relief in orgasm after having stimulated each other for the purpose of achieving an altered state of awareness, which, in my view, defeats the purpose of the preceding ritual.

The ritual itself is turned into a hunt for pleasurable experience. There also tends to be a gaminess to it, with partners teasing and titillating each other. This has nothing to do with the love-play of the divine couple; rather it merely shuts out sacred awe of the whole mystery of eros.

Oceanic Sex and Ecstatic Transcendence

At its best, popularized Neo-Tantric practice leads to what psychiatrist Stanislav Grof labelled "oceanic sex." As Grof explained:

In oceanic sex, the basic model for sexual interaction with another organism is not that of a liberating discharge and release after a period of strenuous effort and struggle, but that of a playful and mutually nourishing flow and exchange of energies resembling a dance. The aim is to experience the loss of one's own boundaries, a sense of fusion and melting with the partner into a state of blissful unity. The genital union and orgasmic discharge, although powerfully experienced, are here considered secondary to the ultimate goal, which is reaching a transcendental state of union of the male and female principles . . . Some of the subjects who have reached this form of sexuality, when asked what function the genital orgasm has in it, would respond that it serves the purpose of "removing biological noise from a spiritual system."⁸

The oceanic sexual experience is certainly superior to the brief rush of genital sensations of conventional sex. Nevertheless, it must not be confused with Tantric sexuality. Grof rightly distinguished oceanic sex from the Tantric approach, where sexuality is merely a vehicle for a higher spiritual realization. The traditional Tantric sexual ritual known as "twinning" (*maithunā*) is a sacred occasion celebrating the transcendence of experience. For, the ecstatic condition of bliss is not an experience at all, since the experiencer is one with the experienced. In the state of ecstasy, the division between subject and object is left behind together with the conceptual mind and the ego-identity that could revel in that bliss. It appears that in Neo-Tantric circles the bliss of Being is all too often confused with a heightened state of sensory pleasure, whether or not genital orgasm is involved. While pleasure has its place in the scheme of things, it is sheer self-deception to think that it can alleviate our fundamental alienation

from the cosmos or help us overcome our basic fear of death, or bring us permanent spiritual fulfillment. Pleasure, like pain, pertains to the nervous system. Bliss belongs to an entirely different order of existence. It is not a feeling or sensation but rather that condition which prevails when all feelings and sensations as well as all thoughts have been eclipsed by the realization of sheer Being. True, ecstatic bliss is apt to register in the body, but the body—as we ordinarily experience it—is not its source. In the ecstatic condition of identity with Being, the body stands revealed as the universe itself. The physical frame is found to be not solid, after all, but a vast ocean of energy in which all bodies are interconnected. Thus, bliss cannot be said to have any location or any cause. Genital orgasms or whole-body orgasms are psychosomatic phenomena, not spiritual manifestations. Bliss is the everlasting "orgasm" of God and Goddess in divine embrace, beyond all concepts. It is unspeakable delight, and even to talk or write about it in such a metaphoric way amounts to a distortion of the truth. Nevertheless, language can be useful because the bliss of Being is our primal condition so that we can have an inkling of what lies beyond words and images. Traditional Tantra is neither orgiastic nor hedonistic in principle. But if Tantra is not to be confused with hedonism, it is also not to be confounded with asceticism. Alan Watts has provided us with the following very insightful articulation of the Tantric modus operandi.

Ascetic and sensualist alike confuse nature and "the body" with the abstract world of separate entities. Identifying themselves with the isolated individual, they feel inwardly incomplete. The sensualist tries to compensate for his insufficiency by extracting pleasure, or completeness, from the world which appears to stand apart from him as something lacking. The ascetic, with an attitude of "sour grapes," makes a virtue of the lack. Both have failed to distinguish between pleasure and the pursuit of pleasure, between appetite or desire and the exploitation of desire, and to see that pleasure grasped is no pleasure. For pleasure is a grace and is not obedient to the commands of the will. In other words, it is brought about by the relationship between man and his world. Like mystical insight itself, it must always come unsought, which is to say that relationship can be experienced fully only by mind and senses which are open and not attempting to be clutching muscles.*9

Neo-Tantrism and the Ego Trap

Neo-Tantrism is riddled with the "false consciousness" of means and goals. The sexual ritual, like the other Tantric devices, is tackled as a means to the end of "higher" states or experiences. But this very goal-directedness is what dooms the attempt to failure. Means and goals presuppose the ego, which we are supposed to transcend. In his book *The Breath of God*, Swami Chetanananda mentioned the case of a man who excitedly told him how, during sex, he had felt "a tremendous rush of energy" to his head and had since been trying to recapture that experience by having sex every day. The Swami humorously remarked:

In the whole religion business, over and over again you'll find this tendency to get everyone looking for something that isn't there, or that means very little even if it is there. Do you see the problem inherent in this whole idea? It's an arrangement worthy of Tom Sawyer and I'll bet somebody's ending up with a lot of whitewashed fences.*10

Wise practitioners realize that enlightenment, or the realization of Being, cannot be coerced. Any self-motivated effort on the spiritual path is self-defeating, because it leads to ego-inflation rather than ego-transcendence. The idea that we can cause enlightenment should be the first to be jettisoned; often it is the last. As Ananda Coomaraswamy noted in his beautiful and by now classic essay on the Hindu-Buddhist ideal of spontaneity (*sahaja*), "All that is best for us comes of itself into our hands—but if we strive to overtake it, it perpetually eludes us."*11

A Critical Evaluation of Neo-Tantrism

Neo-Tantrism has undeniably become a prominent part of the contemporary body-oriented movement. It promises meaning and hope for some of those who have outgrown guilt-ridden puritanism and also offers a certain sense of belonging for those who might otherwise be culturally and socially adrift. Thus, prospective candidates of a Tantric circle are promised, "you will never again be alone," "have loving, supporting friends," "have a purpose in life," and "achieve complete equality with the opposite gender."*12

For most people, these appear to be desirable ideals. However, they have little to do with spiritual life, which is about learning to face life as it is, so that there is no fear in being alone and no aggravation in lacking friends or in having no particular purpose, or, for that matter, in experiencing inequality in different departments of life. In fixating on pleasure, Neo-Tantrism basically condemns its adherents to live at the level of self-indulgence and phantasy. The traditional ideal of spiritual liberation escapes any hedonistic approach, however enticing its formulas, ready-made belief system, or rituals may be.

Notes

1. This and all subsequent translations from the Sanskrit are my own.
2. G. and Y. Frost, *Tantric Yoga: The Royal Path to Raising Kundalini Power* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1989), p. xxi.
3. See G. Feuerstein, *Holy Madness* (Prescott, Ariz.: Hohm Press, 2006).
4. C. Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boulder, Co: Shambhala, 1973), p. 15.
5. B. Bhattacharya, *The World of Tantra* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988), p. 32.
6. See A. Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* (London: Rider, 1965).
7. B. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 377.
8. S. Grof, *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death and Transcendence in Psychotherapy* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1985), pp. 228-229.
9. A. Watts, *Nature, Man and Woman* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. 187-188.
10. Swami Chetanananda, *The Breath of God* (Cambridge, Mass.: Rudra Press, 1973), p. 56.
11. A. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays* (Bombay: Asia

Publishing House, 1948), p. 147.

12. See G. and Y. Frost, *op. cit.*, p. xix.

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