Tantra: Ecstasy Through Rituals

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Tantra is a subject which has recently hit new marks of popularity especially among those of the new generation who are interested in finding out rather unfamiliar and novel solutions to the human problems of our times. These problems arise mainly out of a need for a healthy adjustment between the human individual and the fast-changing world around him. This need has grown very acutely during the past two or three decades, giving rise to a revival of interest in ancient disciplines like Indian music, vegetarianism, herbal cures, meditation, and so on. Tantra appears to be the most recent addition to this list.

It is rather strange that this revival of interest in Tantra has come about at such a time when for the past one century or so this ancient discipline had gone almost totally out of practice, and it has been a very rare phenomenon to come across real tantrics who could actually demonstrate and not merely speak about the various achievements claimed by the tradition of Tantra.

Tantra is a subject which has been grossly misunderstood by its critics and largely abused by its followers in spite of being very highly spoken of by its exponents and very ardently practised by a few of them. Tantra is a kind of philosophy having its own explanation of the world and of the human individual, the various problems facing him, and their possible solutions. It describes in great details a very concrete system of practices directed towards the goal of self-knowledge (atmajnayana), which is a state which every school of philosophy of ancient India placed before its adherents as the most cherished ideal of human life.

To decide whether or not the Tantra is capable of offering us solutions to some of the problems peculiar to the present age of science, we must first understand clearly the tradition of Tantra, its contents, and how far it may be possible to apply its principles in the modern setting.

Meaning of the word “Tantra”

The Sanskrit word “Tantra” is derived from the root ‘tana’, meaning ‘to spread’. “Tra”, the last letter in the word Tantra, means ‘to save’. Thus Tantra means the scripture which saves us by spreading or expanding our knowledge. The word Tantra may also be derived from ‘tatri’ or ‘tantri’ which means ‘to explain’. It seems that it was common in ancient Sanskrit:
literature to apply the word Tantra to any kind of religious and philosophical discussion. Thus the Sankhya work of Kapila has been referred to as Kapilatantra. There was another famous Sankhya work called Shashtitantra. Shankaracharya in his reputed bhashya of the Brahmasutra (II. ii. 32.) has used the word vainashikatantra for the Buddhist view of momentariness. The two Mimamsa schools of Indian Philosophy, namely, Purvanimamsa and Uttaramimamsa were also sometimes called Purvatantra and Uttaratantra respectively. The great scholar Vachaspati Mishra who wrote commentaries on various schools of Indian philosophy was aptly called ‘sarvatantrasvatatantra’ i.e., master of all tantras.

The word tantra has also been used in Sanskrit literature to mean various other things such as, a loom, a thread, rule, theory, science, doctrine; the right way or technique, the order of the world, and so on. Tantraka means unbleached cloth. Tantri means a string. Tantric is a person well versed in a science or doctrine. But when the word tantra is used in the sense of a shastra or science including principles and techniques, it indicates worship using mysticism and ritual for the attainment of supernatural powers. And a tantric in this sense means a sadhaka who practises such worship. In this sense tantra is also called agama or mantrashastra.

How old is the Tantra tradition?

In the Indian tradition if anything is to be considered as very old or ancient in origin then it must be traceable to the Vedas. We see this, for instance, in the case of various schools of Indian philosophy. All the orthodox schools of philosophy in India, which believed in the final authority of the Vedas in philosophical matters, have always taken great pains to show how their views had the sanction of Vedas. Vedas, also called ‘Shruti’ have always commanded the most unflinching respect in the minds of the ancient Indian thinkers. If any opinion or view should be shown to be sanctioned by the Shruti, then no further justification for its acceptance was called for.

The Tantra is also believed by its orthodox exponents to be vedic in origin. It is said that the Tantra originated from the Saubhagya-kanda of Atharvaveda. This belief gets some credibility from the fact that Atharvaveda deals with topics like magic, charm, sorcery, driving away evil spirits, and various rites resembling the procedures described in the Tantra. But such a tendency to trace the origin of any idea to the Vedas on the basis of finding some ideas related to it somewhere in the Vedas sometimes leads to a sort of confusion. For example, elementary notions similar to monism, dualism as well as pluralism are all found mentioned in the Vedas, and therefore the followers of all these three conflicting views trace their beliefs to the Vedas. That would make the Vedas a storehouse of conflicting views.
But whether the Tantra may or may not have originated from the Vedas, it is called the fifth Veda by the orthodox believers. This belief makes Tantra as authoritative as the Veda itself. It is said to be the guiding Shastra of the Kaliyuga. According to the ancient Indian chronological system the universe is said to pass through an endless cycle of four Yugas or ages repeating itself over and over again. We are at present believed to be living in the fourth age of the cycle, called the Kaliyuga. It was preceded by Satyayuga or Kritayuga, Tretayuga and Dwaparyuga. The four Yugas together consitute one Mahayuga. In a mahayuga the first, namely, Kritayuga is the longest of the four, its duration being 1728 thousand years. The following yugas go on becoming shorter in duration, and the Kaliyuga is the shortest of the four, Its duration is 432 thousand year. One mahayuga consists of 4320 thousand years, Such one thousand mahayugas make one day of Brahma, the creator of the universe.

The present Kaliyuga was started nearly 3100 years before Christ, or roughly, more than 2500 years before the birth of Lord Buddha, The great battle of Mahabharata between the Pandavas and Kauravas was fought toward the end of Dwaper yuga.

Now each of these four yugas has its own shastra which tells the rules governing the behaviour of the people of that age, their mode of worship, religious observances, ritual and rites. It is said in the Mahanirvanatantra (I, 28.) that in the Kritayuga shruti guides the people, in the treta the smriti, in the dwapara the puranas, and in the kaliyuga the guiding shastra is nothing else but the agama or tantrashastra. This saying is repeated in two other tantra works, namely, Kularnavatantta and Kubijakatantra, But this statement about the importance of tantra in the Kaliyuga can not, obviously, be taken too strictly. We can not say, for instance, that the shruti or Vedas are now secondary to the Tantra, or irrelevant or useless in the Kaliyuga. It must be admitted that the shruti, smriti and purana are as important even today as they were in the past ages. Moreover, if the importance of Tantra would have been mentioned in the shruti itself than it would have been far more authoritative. But actually we find that tantrashastra is not mentioned in the early works at all. The word Tantra does not appear in the Amarakosha. Nor does it find a mention among the vidyas or shastras listed in ancient literature like the upanishads or early smritis. This shows that Tantra with its elaborate ritualistic discipline must have come into wide-spread use at a comparatively later date, and in all probability this might have happened about the third or fourth century A. D.

While determining how old the Tantra is, we must differentiate between Tantra as an elaborate system of ideas and practices, and particular tantric beliefs. The latter are, indeed, found in very antient Sanskrit literature but
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it can not be concluded from this that the shastra itself is so old. For instance, in the Arthashastra of Kautilya we find reference to offering of sacrifices in cremation grounds on the night prior to amavasya (no moon night). The Buddhacharita of Ashvagbosha, which is a very ancient treatise, has mentioned the Goddess Kali. Buddhist tantric works called Dharanis are supposed to be quite old (first century A.D.) In them we find many tantric ideas clearly described.

It seems that the oldest tantric works belong to the period about the fourth century A.D. The Shaivagamas are shown to be older than the sixth century A.D. Tantra works like the Kubjakatantra, Sarvajyanottaratantra Parameshwaritantra, and Nishvasa-samhita are also supposed to have been written roughly about that period. There seems to be a good deal of similarity between the puranas and the tantra works, regarding worship and ritualistic procedures. Thus the Devimahatmya in the Markandeya purana is almost the same as that found in the Kathyanitantra and Varahitantra. Many puranas are mentioned in Tantra works, and Tantras are mentioned in the puranas. For instance, the Kurmapurana gives a description of how the Tantras originated, while details of tantric rites and sadhana are found mentioned in the Agnipurana. In the Shivapurana we find the names of the ten mahavidyas arising from Goddess Durga. On the other hand the word “ashtadashapurana” has appeared in the tenth chapter of the Nirvanatantra. This shows that many of the puranas and Tantras were composed during the same period. This period is believed by many scholars to be around the tenth century A.D.

It is an interesting fact to note that although most of the important texts of the Tantra literature were written between the fourth and the tenth century A.D., Tantras have continued to appear even during much later period, up to the seventeenth and even eighteenth century A.D. Sir John Woodroffe, the famous modern writer on Tantras, who has done a tremendous job in dispelling many doubts and misgivings about the Tantra, has given an example of how one of the Tantra works has mentioned the city of London and the English people. Obviously this work must be of a very recent origin. Such a thing has happened even in the case of Upanishadas. While the older Upanishads which are definitely a part of shruti are very ancient, there are some others which describe phenomena of Hathayoga (for example, Yogashikhopanishad, Mahopanishad, Yogakundalayopanishad, Brahmadindoopanishad, and so on), and they are ascribed by scholars to as late a period as the sixteenth century A.D. A similar thing has happened in case of the Tantras. Some new Tantra works have come up as modifications of the old ones which have perished.
Thus it may be said that although the tantric ideas have actually been extremely old, the tantric literature has developed over a long period extending upto quite recent times.

**Place of origin of the Tantra**

Like many other questions pertaining to the ancient Aryans, such as, the origin of the Indian Aryans, the place of their original abode, the location of the mountain Meru, the time of the great poet Kalidasa, nothing is as yet conclusively established or known about the place where the Tantras might have originated. There are three different opinions held by scholars. Those who are brought up in a more traditional framework of mind have argued that the Tantra belonged to the whole of Aryavarta or Bharataravarna, i.e., India of the ancient times since time immemorial, and that it was in vogue everywhere in India and governed all the religious and spiritual observances of the Indian people. According to another line of thinking the Tantra came to India from outside via the north-western frontier. Some scholars hold the view that Tantra did not originate in the western parts but rather in the north-eastern regions surrounding India. But the majority of thinkers seem to be more inclined to believe that the Tantra originated in Bengal and that from there it was spread to Nepal, Tibet and China after the invasion of that part of India by Islam. The destruction of the great Universities of Nalanda and Takshashila in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.D. speeded up such a migration of Tantra.

It seems that Tantra came into prominence after Buddhism established an upper hand over Brahmanism which was the official religion of the Vedas, around the beginning of the Christian era. It also seems likely that the Tantra originated among the culturally backward strata of society, which were more influenced by the inroads of Buddhism. The Tantra travelled northward and eastward outside India along with Budhistic religious ideas and practices. Following this, many Sanskrit treatises were translated into Chinese.

The opinion that the Tantra originated in Bengal is backed by the fact that most of the modern writings on Tantra have been in Bengali, and a vast majority of the followers of Tantra have been from the province of Bengal. This is especially true of the Shakti School of Tantra.

But wherever Tantra might have originated it did spread to the whole of India, and different deities gained prominence in different parts of the country. Thus Kali or Durga got settled in Bengal, Shiva in Kashmir, and Vishnu in the central and southern parts of India.

The Tantra is believed to be divine in origin. Thus many tantras are ascribed to Lord Shiva, and many others have Parvati, the consort of Shiva as the author. Similarly there are some tantras told by Lord Vishnu, some by
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the Lord of the *vighnas*, namely, Ganapati, and others by Dattatreya. Some tantra works are said to be written by the *Natha siddhas* like Matsyendranatha, Gorakshanatha, Minanatha, and others. Although the tantra writings are thus supposed to be divine in origin and they are in the form of a dialogue between the deity and some adept or disciple, they are not considered to be *apaurusheya* (without a known author) like the vedas.

**Important Tantra works**

The Tantra was, for many centuries, a very important part of Indian culture, and although it is not much in practice now, there was a time when *tantrics* were plentiful in all parts of India and the *tantric* rites were very extensively practised. The tantric literature in the Sanskrit language has been tremendous. Due to lack of use over the past century or so, many tantric works have now been lost completely. In the Nityashodashikarnava (I. 22.) it is said that there were millions of Tantra works. The Sammohana Tantra has mentioned five hundred different titles of Tantra works under various categories such as *samhitas, yamalas, damaras, puranas* and *upa-puranas*. Some of the important Tantra works available even now in printed or manuscript forms are: 1. Mahanirvanatantra, 2. Mundamalatantra, 3. Kupijakatantra, 4. Kularnavatantra, 5. Yoginitantra, 6. Kankalamalinitantra, 7. Brihannilatantra, 8. Varahitantra, 9. Gandharvatantra, 10. Hevajratantra, 11. Bhutadamara, 12. Kalivilasa, 13. Kamakeshara, 14. Prapanchasara, 15. Vishvasara, 16. Kalikulamrita, 17. Yoginihrdaya, 18. Malinivijaya and, 19. Rudrayamala.

Among the more recent works on Tantra the Sharadatilaka, Mantramuktavali, Pranatoshini, Tantrasara, Shaktanandatarangini, Mantramahodadhi and Shritattvachintamani are well-known.

The tantra works were written somewhat in the form of an encyclopedia. They are a storehouse of Indian mysticism, occultism, and spiritualism. *Sadhana* or practice is the mainspring of the Tantra. *Sadhana* is what one actually does in practice and action, including purification of the body and mind, worship of gods and goddesses in the form of images and idols, offering flowers, fruits, cooked food, water for washing and drinking, perfume, incense, light, cloth, seat and so on to the deity, identification of the body and its parts with the deity, chanting of mantras, concentrating the mind, and so on. All these items of worship have been described in great details in the Tantra literature. *Sadhana* can not stand without a theoretical and philosophical foundation, and so, that foundation also finds an important place in the Tantra. It includes topics like how the universe came into existence, how it is sustained, what will happen to it in the end, what is the goal of human life, how to lead a pious life, what virtues one must cultivate, what vices one
should avoid, how to take pilgrimage and so on. Tantra also contains many mythological stories.

Nature of Tantric sadhana

The Indian mind since ancient times seems to be overwhelmingly influenced by certain beliefs which it has passed on generation after generation without any change till today. One such belief pertains to the predominantly painful nature of human life. This belief is held equally by all the schools of Indian thought, orthodox as well as heretic. The fact that human life is fundamentally a matter of dukkha has been the starting point of almost all philosophical enquiries and religious observances. Having started with this presupposition, all the thinkers have ultimately turned to a state which is eternally free from dukkha. This state has been given various names like moksha, mukt, apavarga, kaivalya, nirvana and so on. Tantra, like all other shastras in the spiritual field, concerns itself with dukkha as the starting point, and leads upto moksha through its peculiar ritualistic sadhana.

Tantra recognises atmasakshatkarā i.e., self-realisation as the final goal of the shastra. There are various ways available according to one’s capacity and inclination. For instance, there is the way called jñyana-marga or nivrutti-marga which may be followed by those whose minds have already acquired qualities like stability, concentration, peace, and vairagya. But such persons who can turn their minds away from worldly enjoyment and attractions and apply it to the understanding of the real nature of the atman are very rare. Most of us do not want to be left to ourselves, to think for ourselves, or to be guided by our own thoughts, because we are not capable of doing atma-chintana. Thus the nivrutti-marga, although it is a sure way to mukti, is of no avail for most of us. We need somebody to show us the way, something concrete which can be felt, which can be experienced and practised and enjoyed. We need some practical activity, not merely an intellectual exercise. Our need is always for a practical sadhana which can lead us step by step towards the attainment of the final goal. Tantra aims at fulfilling this actually felt need of the common man.

Tantra offers a way for every one, not only for the chosen few. It welcomes men as well as women of all castes and creeds to its fold, and offers them a practical discipline to be followed in daily life so that one can gather the virtue and capacity in a progressive manner leading ultimately to chittashuddhi or purity of mind so that the mind can become an instrument fit for atmadarshana. Tantra does not show the way to mukti from a distance. It is not like a sign-post. It is the way itself. And it is a practical way based on theoretical foundations. It tells us what to think, what to aspire for, what the nature and goal of human life is, and through what
concrete procedures the final goal of atmajnyana may be achieved. And the means prescribed by Tantra are for everybody.

The common man, unlike a learned man can not think in a detached manner. His thinking is attached largely to the experiential field. So he needs some concrete form of sadhana, a gradual course of action for training both the body and mind. The common man can visualise the nature of absolute reality only through a saguna and sakara form of deity. Therefore, tantric sadhana provides a practical way of taking the mind slowly towards a realisation of the formless nature of the atman through what the mind can actually handle and experience. It takes the mind from the gross to the subtle, from the external to the internal, from the superficial to the hidden nature of the world, and from the world to its original source, from the indriyagamya or apparent to the buddhigamya or essence. This can be achieved only through ‘practice’ or abhyasa, and not merely through contemplating, visualising, or imagining, Tantric sadhana is thus the way of starting near in order to go far.

Tantric sadhana does not call for blind faith or hollow ritual. Its preceptors seem to have devised the various parts of the discipline on the basis of a good deal of philosophical thinking. They believed certain basic principles which appear quite reasonable and sound even on a scientific scrutiny from the point of view of modern knowledge. This is perhaps the reason why young men and women from the most affluent societies all over the world are getting attracted toward tantric sadhana in actual practice in ever increasing numbers.

The first principle underlying tantric sadhana is that the body influences the mind and vice versa. In modern terminology this is called the principle of psychosomatic interaction. Of course, it is true that this principle has nowhere been stated explicitly in Tantra works. But it does unmistakably underlie the tantric rituals. It is now recognised in modern medicine that there are certain disorders of the body whose cause is located in the anxious states of the mind. Such disorders cannot be cured simply by treating the affected body parts. They need the mind to be treated, so that the tension and anxiety is removed from the mind. When the cause of the trouble is thus removed the trouble vanishes along with the symptoms. This principle of psycho-somatic interaction is used in tantric sadhana. The bodily and simple looking acts of the worshipper like image worship, bhootashuddhi, nyasa, homa, tapa, and so on actually influence the mind. They help to purify the mind and remove afflictions like fear, envy, greed, ignorance (avidya) etc., and thereby promote true knowledge of the self. This same principle of training the mind through training the body is also used in Hathayoga in the practice of asana, pranayama, and mudras.
Our ancients knew it very well that the mind which is by its very nature savage, unsteady, and vicious, can be restrained and disciplined by doing certain bodily acts again and again. These acts were included in tantric sadhana with the aim of influencing, improving, purifying and enlightening the mind. This was called the state of chittashuddhi. It was, indeed, a wonderful discovery on the part of the ancient masters of Tantra that chittashuddhi can be tremendously helped to come about through doing some simple looking acts regularly and religiously.

Tantric sadhana is a passage from the gross to the subtle, from the superficial to the essential and from the apparent to the real. Tantra is a realistic doctrine. It does not look upon the world of objects and persons as illusory. It advocates the use of images, idols, pictures, and diagrams for concentrating the mind. When a sadhaka applies his mind to these instruments and forgets the world around him, he learns to internalise his mind. Just as counting, addition, and subtraction can be taught to a child with the help of marbles, balls, or coloured objects, so Tantra utilises image (murti) of the deity of one’s choice (ishta-devata) and prescribes such acts as invoking the deity, waking it, feeding it, and offering flowers, bath, and so on. By doing these acts the mind of the sadhaka is trained to get attached to the deity, thus giving up attention from all else. Thus one can learn to do concentration (dharana) and contemplation (dhyana) progressively. Otherwise these two acts are almost impossible in the case of the common man. And Tantra is meant for all, including the common man. But Tantra does not ask the sadhaka to stay where a beginning is made. It advocates a steady progress of the mind from the gross image to its inner power, from the things used in worship to what they signify. Tantric Sadhana is based on the belief that a passage from the gross to the subtle is possible, and it gives due importance to such a passage. It is true, of course, that many of us do not actually show any such progress and we get caught up in the preliminaries and crudities only. But that is not a shortcoming of Tantra itself.

The real trouble is that most of us have only a very mild curiosity and very weak will to achieve the final goal of self-realisation. So we either do not make a start at all, or if we do, then we do not march on for long. For those who tread the path of Tantra with firm resolve a really wonderful experience of the subtle state of unification of the mind with the deity becomes a reality. But we must give the tantric sadhana a fair chance. Then it does not fail.

The most remarkable philosophic presupposition of tantric sadhana is the reconciliation of monism and dualism. Monism is the doctrine that there is only one single basic reality underlying the multifarious universe. Only that absolute reality is what exists. The multitude of objects of
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experience is not real. It is illusory. As against this, dualism holds that there are two basic realities underlying the universe, one representing the material, the other representing the spiritual. According to the Tantra view, the world is many so long as the sadhaka is ignorant; but it becomes one when the sadhaka becomes a siddha by a complete unification with the ishtadevata.

One special characteristic feature of tantric sadhana is that there are ways and means in it available to aspirants of all dispositions, tendencies, and abilities. For the lowest type of aspirants there are crude and preliminary forms of sadhana, while increasingly subtle, intelligent and advanced procedures of sadhana are also available, which are meant for the superior aspirants. Such catholicity and flexibility of sadhana was natural for the Tantra since it was meant for all castes and, unlike the vedas, also for women. It is said, for instance, in the Gautamiyanata (chpt. 1.)—

शर्म वर्णालिकारक्ष नारीणां योग्य एवं च ॥

Thus, all were allowed to read the Tantra works, recite the mantras and perform worship (puja).

Tantric sadhana consists of two types of practices. First, there are the general practices which are followed by students of all schools of Tantra, such as, the Shatva, Shakta, Saura, Ganapatya, and so on. They usually include the following:—

1. Japa—Reciting a mantra received from a guru at the time of initiation or diksha.
2. Purascharana—Reciting the mantra a million times or more.
3. Homa or Yajuya—Offering sacrifice to the fire God.
4. Tapa—Austerities like fasting, giving up one meal, foregoing certain items of food, etc.
5. Puja—Image worship.
7. Nyasa—Imagining oneness of the deity with different parts of the body.
8. Sandhya—A special form of worship and prayer without using an image, flowers, food, or other materials.
10. Mudra—Facial expressions and arrangements of hands and fingers.
11. Asana—Postures for sitting for prayer or meditation.
12. Pranayama—Techniques of controlling the breath in order to control the mind.
13. **Dhyana**—Meditation including concentration of the mind and contemplation.

But these aspects of the *tantric sadhana* are hardly different from the general spiritual practices of Hinduism. If these were the only practices included under *tantric sadhana*, then perhaps there would have been no justification for the tantra to have a separate existence as an independent discipline. But there are certain specialised practices which belong to tantra alone. *Tantric sadhana* is sometimes undertaken for attaining powers to harm others and ability for black magic. These are called black rites. There is another kind of *sadhana* called *Nila* and *Shava sadhana* which is performed in the cremation ground and a corpse is used in it. Then there is the practice of *vanachara*, which is a highly specialised technique of tantra. In fact this technique has been the most outstanding part of the tradition of tantra.

**Panchatattva : The much abused tantric sadhana**

Out of the various schools of Tantra the *Shaktas*, i.e., the worshippers of *shakti*, have been condemned by other religious men throughout the history of tantra, because of the apparently licentious and libertine tendencies shown by many of them in the use of wine and woman as a part of worship and ritual. *Vanachara* or *panchatattva-sadhana* has been a peculiarity of the *shakta* school which has not been accepted in religion or any spiritual discipline outside the tantras.

*Shakti* means power. In tantra it has been worshipped in three forms. The Goddess Kali is one manifestation of *shakti*. Another manifestation is the dormant Goddess in man called *Kundalini*. Woman who takes part in *sadhana* with a *sadhaka* including prolonged sex is also called *shakti*. The *shaktas* who worshipped *shakti* and performed *sadhana* along with a *shakti* got an upper hand among the schools of tantra because of the libertinism advocated by them. Offering animal sacrifices to the Goddess, eating meat as a part of worship, drinking wine, and having uninhibited sex pleasure as a part of *sadhana*......all these must naturally have been very attractive propositions for a large number of followers, so that in course of time the *shakta* school alone survived as a major cult of tantra, and people started identifying tantra with *shakti* worship and *panchatattva* only.

*Panchatattva-sadhana* is also called *vanachara*, *virachara*, *kaulachara*, *guhyatattva*, or *latasadhana*. Each of these names brings out some special feature of this form of worship. *Panchatattva* means five materials used in *sadhana*. They are also called the *Panchamakaras* or five ’m’ s, as the Sanskrit names of these five materials begin with the letter ’m’. They are—1. *Matsya*, (fish) 2. *Mansa* (flesh) 3. *Madya* (wine) 4. *Mudra* ( parched grain) and 5. *Maithuna* (copulation).
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In Sanskrit Vama means the left and Dakshina means the right. A woman in tantra is called Vama because her position is always on the left side of her man. This fact is seen in all the images and pictures of couples of deities like Rama and Sita, Shiva and Parvati, Vishnu and Laxmi, and so on. Thus Vamachara is that sect of tantra in which a Vama or woman takes part in the rituals, especially in sexual intercourse as a part of the tantric rites.

Virachara is the tantric sadhana followed by the vira sadhakas. Vira means a warrior. In tantra it means a sadhaka who has conquered his senses. He is not swayed away by lust and other passions. He is a fit person to do tantric sadhana with the five ‘m’ s, because internally he has reached a highly developed peaceful state which can not be disturbed by the use of wine or woman.

Kaulachara means the way of practice of the Kaula sadhakas. Kula in tantra means the female sex organ, which is called yoni or trikona. An esoteric meaning of the term ‘kula’ is the seat of the divine power ‘kundalini’ i.e., the mooladhara lotus situated between the anus and the genital organ. Akula, in this context, means Lord Shiva located in the sahasrara-chakra. Thus a kaula is one who achieves a union of Shiva and Shakti. Panchatattva sadhana, according to this interpretation, is meant for arousing the dormant power called Kundalini.

The word ‘latasadhana’ indicates the form of tantric worship in which a woman lies down like a creeper (lata) or embraces the male worshipper in sexual act as a part of sadhana.

The panchatattva worship is based on the principle that poison is the antidote for poison. This is a very sound principle which has been largely used in medicine. Tantra seeks to achieve liberation or emancipation through those very things which are considered harmful for it. Food and sex are the two most important sources of deriving enjoyment and pleasure in life. Most of our thoughts and activities are primarily influenced by these two basic desires. If these two desires remain unfulfilled then there can be no peace in life. Rather most of our tensions and conflicts in life issue from the unfulfillment of these two basic urges.

One way of coming out of the influence of these desires is to negate them, to deny any expression to them, and to train the mind to do away with them. But for most of us this proves to be an impossibility. It is not at all possible to remove these desires from the mind simply by starving the sense organs. Tantra does not recommend this way. It believes both in bhukti, i.e., enjoyment, and mukti or emancipation. It shows how one can attain mukti with the use of those very things which are supposed to come in the way of mukti. Of course, it does not advocate libertinism, and it does not recommend this way to the ordinary sadhakas of tantra. On the contrary,
the tantra has mentioned great caution to be exercised in the worship with wine and woman, and has fixed a very strict standard of eligibility for the *Panchatattva sadhakas*. In actual practice these standards and cautions were neglected by the followers of tantra and this highly specialised *sadhana* was put to a great misuse. Actually, the way of tantra was to satisfy the desires completely and once for all through enjoyment as a part of worship, and not through running away from enjoyment. It was a way of going from *maithuna* to the divine union of *Shiva* and *Shakti*.

It is very important to remember that when tantra advocates the use of wine, meat, and sex as a part of ritual and *sadhana*, it clearly demands a very high degree of *vairagya* from the *sadhaka*. *Panchatattva sadhana* was never prescribed for the one whose mind was not under control. If a *sadhaka* practised *panchatattva* worship with any desire for sensual pleasure, then strict punishment was recommended. For instance, it is said as follows in the *Kularnava tantra* (II. 122.):—“If a *kaula sadhaka* drinks wine out of desire for enjoyment, then boiling hot wine should be poured into his mouth as a punishment. This will be a corrective treatment for his sin”.

There are hundreds of instances in the important tantra works like the *Tantrasara*, *Mahanirvanatantra*, *Tantrarajatantra*, *Rudrayamala*, *Gandharvatantra*, and so on, where detailed instructions are given about the attitude with which worship is to be done in the *panchatattva sadhana*, about the restrictions on drinking wine and under-going sexual union, and about the general behaviour of the participants. If these instructions would have been followed by all the *sadhakas*, than *tantric sadhana* could have become the main spring of all the spiritual endeavours of mankind. But it seems that the lofty ideals of the ancient masters of tantra were forgotten by the lesser followers and therefore a great *shastra* came into disrepute. It may be hoped that with a proper understanding of the principles of tantra its practices may be revived with care and caution. Such a revival would certainly be very worthwhile and useful.

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