

## Tantra and Consciousness

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The purpose of the paper is to focus attention on a little known aspect of Yogatantra, viz., the aspect that was developed by the mystic Siddhas in the early centuries of the Christian era. The contribution of the 84 siddhas, among whom Nagarjuna is counted, has become obscure, owing to the large scale destruction of the Yoga-tantra literature stored and taught in the Nalanda University, when it was attacked and burnt down by the Turushka raiders around 1205 A.D. The continuity of the Yoga-tantra literary tradition in India has been broken for a couple of centuries. But Tibet has preserved this phase, the traces of which are no longer extant in India. The Tibetan translations of the writings of the Siddhas help reconstruct the missing links in Indian Yoga-tantra tradition.

### The Tantra Theory

1. One of the Siddhas who was intimately associated with the Yoga-tantra theory and practice in Nalanda was Mahapandita Nadapada (or Naropa), whose death occurred in 1039 A.D. Student of another Siddha, Tilopa, he passed on the mantle of this tradition to his Tibetan student, Marpa, whose disciple was the famous Tibetan poet-saint Milarepa. Naropa wrote as many as 25 works in Sanskrit, 23 of which are available in Tibetan translations. Only one of his works is extant in its original Sanskrit: a constructive commentary on the Kalachakra-tantra, entitled Sekoddesa-Tika. There are many glosses and annotations on this work in Tibetan; and the lamas of the Kargut-pa sect have preserved oral explanations pertaining to this manual.
2. Naropa's text is valuable for the insights it provides on the Yoga-tantra outlook on the actual and potential dimensions of human consciousness, as also on the technique of actualisation of Being-Awareness which forms the main theme of the Kalachakra system. In Naropa's words, 'Ka' refers to the physical equipment of man (kaya), 'la' to the energy system (prana), 'cha' to the mental processes (chala-chitta) and 'kra' to the orderly restraint of these ordinary and outward extensions (Krama-bandha). He also involves the condition of wakefulness with the physical body, deep sleep with the energy system, and dream with the mental processes. Their restraint is calculated to bring about the 'natural' condition of tranquil bliss (sahaja-sukha). Further, there is an identification of the psychic centres corresponding to the above: head with wakefulness, throat with dream, heart with deep sleep and navel with the 'natural bliss'.
3. Tantra has many meanings, and this is conceded by the Tantrik texts themselves. Excluding the meaning of 'expository manual', all the other meanings operate within the framework of Yoga. The Tibetan word for 'Tantra' is rGyud, which derives its meaning from the Guhya-samaja interpretation of Tantra as "reality defined by consciousness" (Prabandham tantram akhyanam): it comprehends

three dimensions of reality viz: the inalienable awareness which is none other than Being (prakrtih asamharyaphalam), the ground for constructions of the transactional world (adhara), and the actual modes of constructions (Upaya).

Tantra as an expository manual informs us about this continuity of consciousness (Chitta-srota, in Tibetan Sems-rgyud). Tantra as practice helps us actualize this continuity in one's own being.

Basic to Tantra of the Siddha or Vajrayana tradition is the idea of 'bodhichitta' which originally signified 'intention for enlightenment', but the meaning of which was later crystallized as 'consciousness inclining spontaneously to its own inalienable nature' (i.e., content-less flow, in Tibetan gtsosems), symbolized by the mystic seed-syllable 'Hum'. Bodhichitta abides in every one of us in its twin aspects:

(1) ordinary consciousness, soiled by actions and agitated by thoughts, and

(2) the aspect that is hidden and beyond phenomenal involvements, utterly tranquil and unaffected, "ever washed bright".

The former aspect is identified in Guhyasamaja with manas (Tibetan = yid =), or mind, and the latter with chitta (Tibetan Sems), or consciousness.

The purpose of Tantra as a practical discipline is to transform the former into the latter, for the former is characterized by stress (klesa) while the latter is experienced as bliss (sukha). The agitated waters of the mind need to be stilled before the jewel of consciousness that lies hidden beneath it can be perceived. The waters cannot be stilled by being beaten or stirred violently. The art of letting mind alone so that it can naturally settle in silence and stability forms the core of the Sadhana advocated by the Siddhas.

3. The perception of contentless but energetic consciousness as a result of the natural stilling of the constructional mind is referred to as Vipasyana or clear vision (Tibetan rig-pa). The mystical model for the enduring vision of this stable and creative consciousness (Chittavajra, Tibetan bdorjesems-dpa) is technically known as 'mahamudra'. It is the great seal of discernment impressed upon the ordinary transactional dimension of consciousness. The Tibetan word for 'Mahamudra' is 'Phyag-rgya', which brings out the detail of 'grasping' (phyag) before an impression (rgya) can take place. Consciousness is 'grasped' as stable, beyond the possibility of agitation by sensations or thoughts. And impression refers to the creativity of consciousness. It is beyond the scope of thoughts which tend to become stereotyped, and can affect a breakthrough by its inherent energy.

'Mahamudra' is defined as the essential and unagitated consciousness (nishpandagati) which both is and has effects. Herbert V Guenther following the Guhya-Samaja text distinguishes between the static and dynamic aspects. The former is consciousness as mere existence, the source of our being, our inalienable awareness. The latter seals man's existence in the world, in the sense that he is no longer 'a cog in the machine'. Mahamudra, thus, enables one to operate in the world from the deepest layers of one's being, and thus steer clear through the illusions and stresses incidental to transaction form superficial levels. When our being is impressed by the stable and inalienable awareness, our transactions acquire extraordinary energy, which is referred to as Vajra-sattva. When the energy suffuses the three dimensions of being (body, speech and mind), the resultant integration is hidden in the sense that it is deep down one's own being. This is actually what 'guhya-samaja' signifies.

The core instruction of 'mahamudra' adepts is: "Cast aside all clinging, and the Essence will at once emerge." (Lama Kong ka). The first part of the message has a three fold involvement - equilibrium, relaxation and naturalness. Equilibrium (samya) is the balance of the three dimensions of

transactional consciousness, body, speech and mind. The physical equipment must be loosened (kaya); verbal expressiveness must be solved down by regulated breathing (prana); and mind is trained not to rely on any object or thought.

Relaxation (visrama) is refusal to be distracted by sensations or thoughts. It is described as letting the sense-organs and mind to function unloaded and therefore unagitated. Naturalness (sahaja) is to make no effort; not to grasp at anything, nor to reject anything; it is to be spontaneous. 'Non-effort' has an important role in the 'Mahamudra' practice; it also presupposes refraining from the tendency to correct the wandering thoughts. The great handicap for the practitioners is said to be constant anxiety about distractions, obstacles and progress in practice. The 'mahamudra' manuals suggest methods by means of which daily activities can be pressed for meditational ends.

The three (equilibrium, relaxation and spontaneity) together are meant to facilitate the encounter with the 'void' (sunyata) which is not the negation of existence but empty of discriminating thoughts.

'Like a cloudless sky, the sphere is broad and free from obstruction,

'Like a waveless ocean, consciousness is steady, without discriminating thoughts Like a bright lamp on a windless night the consciousness is clear, bright and stable."

Lama Kong Ka suggests: "Let the ordinary mind remain in its own natural state. If mind adds or subtracts anything to this, then it is not ordinary mind, but it is mind-object (yul). The practice correctly make not the slightest intention and effort to practice; and yet not be distracted for a single moment."

l. Naropa's text insists that for effective 'Mahamudra' practice, it is necessary to understand by actual experience how the energy (prana) the web of veins through which the energy flows (nadi), and the psychical collocations (bindu) function. Towards this end the yoga of six limbs (Shadanga-yoga) is prescribed as the only means of this transcendental attainment (lokottarasiddher asadharana-karanam).

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## Six-fold Yoga

In the Tantra crystallised by the Siddhas, three yogas are recognised as successive stages:

- (1) kriya-yoga-tantra, where reliance is almost exclusively on external rituals; the purpose is to cleanse the physical body;
- (2) charya-yoga-tantra where reliance is equally on external rituals and internal meditations; the purpose is to cleanse the inner constitution dominated by verbalizations; and
- (3) Yoga-tantra - where the reliance is almost exclusively on internal meditations; the purpose is to cleanse the inner constitution dominated by thoughts.

The third stage has two phases, the first being penultimate (where meditative stabilisation still depends on external modes) and the second being ultimate (anuttara-yoga-tantra), where meditative stabilization is spontaneous and blissful). This stage involves the complete cleansing of body, speech and mind altogether.

The 'six-fold yoga' finds its relevance and fulfilment in the third of the above stages. The six limbs mentioned in Guhyasamaja tantra and explained in Sekoddesa-tika are named: pratyahara, dhyana, pranayama dharana, anusmrti and samadhi, in order. The names as well some of the involvements

bear correspondence with some of the eight limbs of classical yoga (omitting yama, niyama and asana, and adding anusmrti). But the correspondence is more superficial than fundamental; the sequence of the limbs is also significantly variant.

- (1) Pratyahara means withdrawal of the sense-functions from their respective spheres both within the body and outside the individual. Concomitantly, it is the turning of one's thoughts to one's own essential and inalienable nature (sunyuata). It involves the effective suppression of intentionality form transactional consciousness and elimination of subject-object polarity.
- 2) Dhyana is intense contemplation on the reflexive image (bimba) of the essential and inalienable nature (sunyata). It takes the forms of
  - (a) discussive thinking (vitarka) in order to comprehend the true nature of each of body, speech and mind (guhya-traya);
  - (b) exploratory thinking (vichara) in order to ascertain the exact nature of all three;
  - (c) mounting pleasurable interest of the cognitive content generated in the previous phase (priti or rati);
  - (d) deeping of the pleasurable interest (sukha), and
  - (e) one-pointed or unitary consciousness (eka-chitta), which results from the entire absence of object-subject coordinates (grahya-grahaka-sunya-lakshya).
- (3) Pranayama is the regulation of breathing in order to integrate the vita energies (prana) with the individualised consciousness. It implies the recognition that breath is constituted by the five primary elements (earth, water, fire, air and akasa). And the practitioner at this stage rejects the right-left polarity of the breathing process (ida-pingala vamadakshina, lalana-rasana, male-female) and allows the vital breath to course right in the variously called sushumna, avadhuti and chandali. The practice of vajra-japa ('om' while breathing in, 'Hum' while retaining the breath and 'Ah' while breathing out) is recommended in this context.
- (4) Dharana is the stabilization of the energy-loaded consciousness (niruddham ratnam dharayet) in the navel region which is regarded as the centre of individuality, or alternatively, in the middle of forehead, which is the centre of cognitive awareness. It is at this stage that vajra-sattva enters into the individual, rendering his being stable and irradiant.
- (5) Anusmrti is mindfulness concerning the visions or reflex images that flash forth in the region of consciousness (nimittodgraha). This is supposed to generate the true understanding of the nature of phenomenal existence (samvrti-darsana).
- (6) The final phase of Samadhi is actually profound contemplation, frm which the liberating knowledge arises. The consummation of this knowledge is the final and irreversible destruction of all veils (avarana) that make the individual ignorant of, and involved in, phenomenal transactions. The individual's consciousness here is no longer discrete states of awareness bound by relationships and harassed by stresses. It is no longer automatic, stereotyped and relational. It is identical with one's own being, and is described as unperishable bliss (akshara-sukha).

This is not only the highest object of human existence, but it is the inalienable essence of consciousness. Hence its relevance for the Tantra.