

Kashmir Shaivite Tantra

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Kashmir was a region that for thousands of years benefited from being placed squarely in the "Silk Road" of spirituality. With Mongolia to the north, Tibet to the north and east, Nepal to the south-east, India to the South, Afghanistan to the west and Tajikistan to the north-west, Kashmir was sandwiched by the powerhouses of the Himalayan Tantrik tradition.

Although Kashmir Shaivite (Shiva) Tantra is placed squarely among the ranks of Hindu philosophical systems, it is important to understand that the philosophy and practice of Tantra is vast and not the sole property of any one religious flavour.

Tantra itself defies labeling. In its essence, Tantra is a very practical system of self-liberation wherein enjoyment of the world and spiritual liberation (moksha) are not mutually exclusive. A Tantrik practitioner may consider herself a full renunciate while still living in the world holding a job and raising a family.

In today's vernacular, the word Tantra will, in the most orthodox sense, refer to Hindu Tantra or Buddhist Tantra. The "neo-Tantrik" movement espoused today can be identified by its disproportionate interest in sex.

Though touted as sexual sadhana (spiritual practice) it falls way short of the mark. This New-Age movement that uses the word Tantra to describe its weekend workshops promising longer and better orgasms, increased stamina and ecstasy is a shallow and paltry imitation of the real Tantrik Tradition.

Fortunately for the consumer it's easy to pick the wheat from the chaff. A teacher of traditional Tantra - whether Buddhist or Hindu- will come from a verifiable Guru-disciple tradition and will have been given the authority to teach. Oh, and by the way, sex will not be the primary pre-occupation of the traditional teacher of Tantra.

Kashmir Shaivite Tantra is the central philosophy of Tantra. It evolved to its present lofty form by receiving a steady flow of ideas and practices from its mountain neighbour's Tantrik traditions.

Hindu Tantra had the most obvious effect on Kashmiri Tantra. Kashmiri Shaivite Tantra uses Sanskrit as its language and standard ritual formats and deities associated with Hinduism. Physical yoga also forms the foundation of a beginners practice.

What may not be known to the orthodox Hindu, or what may not be comfortable to admit, is that the Kashmiri type of Tantra probably took whatever was useful from the surrounding traditions and created a synthesis over the last 2,000 years, giving birth to a very powerful, progressive, and all-encompassing system of spiritual philosophy and practice.

An examination of the Bon philosophy and practice of Tibet (pre-dating Buddhism in Tibet) shows it to be very similar in concepts and yogas. One need merely change the

names of the concepts, practices, and deities and it would become difficult to distinguish it from Kashmiri Tantra.

Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhist Tantra, though originally being brought to Tibet from India, exerted an influence on Kashmir Tantra some time later.

The traditions north-west of Kashmir (Tajik, Afghan, Mongolian) have yet to be fully explored by western yogins. These paths are very powerful and emphasize the higher yogas in which the practitioner becomes a master of progressive sets of kriyas or energy practices. It is also easy to see their influence on the yogins and sages of the Kashmiri region.

This cross-pollination resulting in the world's ultimate Tantrik philosophy and practice is considered an auspicious boon to the true spiritual seeker - the yogin. She or he is really not concerned with external religious overtones, only with results that can be gained by effort applied to the practices. The advanced practitioner is a free-chameleon, able to easily take on the outer garb of whatever religious tradition the Tantra has made a home in.

All Tantrik traditions share some common features. Some of these are as follows:

1. Tantra is concerned with demonstrable spiritual liberation. Tantriks do not give any credence to "salvation" in the life after death. Tantriks believe that God's (Absolute Consciousness) Grace is essential to liberation, but the yogin must prepare herself through self-effort in sadhana.

The goal of Tantra is to be a Jivan-Mukta or living liberated Being. In this way, Tantriks take full responsibility for their illusion of suffering and their liberation - however when liberation comes, the credit always goes to Grace of God and Guru.

2. Tantriks may use any and/or all means to liberation. To some Tantrik sects there is nothing profane or too impure to be God, or to be used as a vehicle to self-liberation.

This is why many Tantrik practitioners may go unnoticed in society. They may hold a steady job, raise a family, be involved in the community, or even sports. To a Tantrik, any and all arenas of life are fair game as tools to liberation.

3. Tantra eschews any social hierarchies or caste structures. This is one of the reasons Tantra is looked down upon by the high caste people of India - it threatens their control of the people and society.

Orthodox Brahmins may point the finger at Tantra, saying it is responsible for the degradation of Hindu society. But it is far more accurate to say that the modern emphasis on renouncing the world as an illusion espoused by yoga - vedantins did more to undermine the Hindu society and the 4 classical stages of Vedic life.

Tantra which comes from Veda, and is totally in alignment with Veda, is 100% compatible with life in society. Tantriks view and experience the world itself as divine.

Shakti ! To a Tantrik, Shakti is the dynamic aspect of God - not an illusion which is to be rejected.

4. The transmission of knowledge as both a state of consciousness and shakti (divine power) from Guru to disciple is probably the most important common feature of Tantra. One could even say that transmission from Guru to disciple defines Tantra to a great degree.

This obviously leaves out the majority of so-called Tantrik masters/teachers in the west because they either never had a master who they served fully as a disciple then received that masters transmission and blessings to teach, or they studied briefly with a teacher and then decided they were a master and began teaching without full training or blessings of Guru.

There are more common features of the Tantrik tradition but the 4 listed above will give the reader a good sense of the mind-stream of Tantra.

Kashmir Shaivite Tantra is a philosophy and practice of Absolutism. It takes the philosophical position that all is God, or Pure Consciousness - with no exceptions.

It says that everything emanates from God's spontaneous and free activity. That even though this world, this body, and even this mind are temporary, they are nonetheless real, and are expressions of God's creative action.

This is different than say the southern Indian school of Saiva Siddhanta which is dualistic and shares the same belief as that of Yoga (Samkhya philosophy). These systems say that God (Purusha) is different than creation (Prakriti). They believe that Creation eternally exists and continually changes but is separate from God.

The monistic Tantriks like the Kashmiri's would assert that creation emanates from the Absolute consciousness and Bliss (God), and when the play is over God dissolves it. The philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism is the most comprehensive of all the systems of Indian Tantra. There is not one aspect of spiritual and secular life that has not been fully dealt with by the great teachers of the Kashmiri lineage.

Their texts act as pointers to continually show the modern student how to deepen their understanding and their practice. Abhinavagupta is considered the sage who organised Kashmiri Tantra into an understandable system of philosophy and practice. His masters before him tended to write in a more cryptic and pithy style, whereas Abhinavagupta expounded the principles of the Kashmir Shaivism at great length.

Perhaps what is most important from a Tantrik perspective is that Abhinavagupta was not just the most extraordinarily gifted philosopher and intellectual giant of the Tantrik tradition, he was the consummate practitioner - a Mahasiddha.

He had achieved full realisation, spiritual liberation while still living and had all of the signs important to Tantrik realisation. These siddhis or supernormal powers of mind, body, and energy come to those who exert a tremendous effort in the yogic practices of Tantra.

Here we do not define yogic as purely physical control exercises, but also the internal energy and visualisation exercises (inner-alchemy) that Tantra is known for.

When Abhinavagupta chose to leave this earth plane, he did so by gathering 1,200 of his students and walking deep into a cave in the mountains, never to return.

We can only speculate what happened to them, but in the Tantrik tradition it is common to see great masters use their "death" as an opportunity for their students to achieve final liberation.

Stories abound of Tantrik masters of Tibet and India transforming their bodies to light and thus catalysing the same transformation in the students present. Guru and disciples then leave together as pure light.

In less dramatic fashion, a master of Tantrik Yoga may just consciously exit the body through the crown causing a spot of blood to form there, or in some cases causing the entire skull to split open.

This brings us to what is probably the most salient aspect of Tantra; Tantra is very practice oriented. In the practice of Tantrik yoga we seek a series of successive achievements in practice which lead to realisation. The result of practices is an embodied liberated state.

Kashmir Shaivite Tantra makes the distinction between intellectual knowledge (baudhajnana), and practise induced spiritual knowledge (paurushajnana).

The intellectual knowledge can only confer liberation once the spiritual or experiential knowledge derived from practices is established. However, spiritual knowledge gained from practices independently and unconditionally brings liberation. This is not to say that intellectual knowledge (baudhajnana) is irrelevant or unnecessary. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The study of the philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism is very important to succeed at the advanced stages of sadhana. Below are some reasons why:

1. Clear intellectual understanding of the philosophy guides the practitioner through previously inexperienced, uncharted territory of subtler levels of consciousness. A clear mind, with clear understanding can help assure that the spiritual aspirant does not get side-tracked into endless realms of consciousness and distracting powers.

Baudhajnana, therefore, acts as a type of map for the practitioner attempting advanced spiritual work.

2. All doubt must be erased for a Tantrik Yogin to achieve full liberation. The study of Kashmir Shaivite Philosophy can impart the clear knowledge that his or her real nature is Absolute Shiva consciousness. With this clarity and inner strength, sadhana bears fruit and full realisation is possible.

In my own case, when my guru sent me off to teach, he gave me 3 short, to the point commands. The first and most important was, "Destroy your self-doubt forever!".

That simple command cut through my inability to fully grasp my nature as that of the Absolute Shiva. From that point forward my practices took on a much deeper and vaster reality.

3. Another important reason to study philosophy, especially from a non-dualistic Tantrik perspective, is that since everything is a manifestation of the One Reality - so to is the capacity to reason. The exercise of philosophical study is then, seen in its proper light, an exercise of Shiva's expression in the world as knowledge.

4. The very nature of the limited mind is curiosity. Philosophical study can help quieten the ever-inquisitive relative mind which is a limited form of the actual Cosmic Mind of Shiva. In this stillness- a deepening can take place. Therefore, the mind can be satisfied to a degree through study.

5. If one were to practice Kashmir Shaivite Tantra, then how would one know the appropriate actions to take in the world.

To a beginner - knowing ones' dharma can be the most confusing and daunting of tasks.

By knowing the philosophy attached to a system of Tantrik practice, one can have guidance on what is dharmic activity in the world. This is important so as to reduce ones' negative Karmic burden thus opening up a freer range in which to live and practice spirituality.

6. Contemplation and a daily effort to integrate philosophical precepts transform "dry" philosophy into a live practice.

7. Since the Ultimate Reality cannot be communicated through words as It is ,and can only be experienced, a tool is needed to help the aspirant approximate the Ultimate Reality, or open to the unlimited Reality.

Kashmir Shaivite Philosophy can then serve as a tool for the Guru to begin the process of communicating the uncommunicable until such time as the student is ready for a direct introduction to their Real Nature (as Shiva) via transmission from the Guru, or she or he is open to the fullness of their being through intensive sadhana.

The practice of Kashmir Shaivite Tantra guided by this beautiful life-affirming philosophy is divided into 4 stages.

The first is called anavopaya and can be seen as a purification and foundation forming phase of spiritual work. Physical Yoga, pranayama (control of life-force through breath) and external rituals form the bulk of this stage of work. Once the prana is seated and the mind is less erratic due to the union of body, mind and energy via the hatha yoga, the yogin now moves on to the shaktopaya stage.

In this stage spiritual work takes on the distinct characteristic of effortful, wilful work with the mind and energy. Mantra repetition to liberate mental tensions and concepts which tie down the kundalini is employed here, as is the use of visualisations. The visualisations that Tantra is famous for, attempt to begin the process of turning the shakti of our being from identifying with our illusory individuality to that of our ishta devata (personal image of the Formless Absolute - a god or goddess).

This is the same as saying we are raising our kundalini. For kundalini Shakti is nothing but the energy of consciousness identifying with the greater rather than the lesser.

The shambhavopaya stage of practice is described by Abhinavagupta in his monumental work 'Tantraloka' as the practice of visualising the entire world within oneself as the reflection or projection of one's own Consciousness or Self.

Practically speaking, the student now immerses himself in the pure identification with Shiva.

This is not as much a wilful effort as are the practices of the Shaktopaya stage.

One cannot "make" the Shambhavopaya stage appear. It is a natural evolution, a result of the success at the Shaktopaya stage. Surrender becomes more and more important from this stage onward.

The last stage is called Anupaya - literally "no method". It's not quite accurate to call this a stage of practice, because here the spiritual aspirant simply relaxes into the ultimate Reality and this cannot be wilfully done.

Abhinavagupta sums it up for us in two beautiful paragraphs of poetic verse;

"In the Transcendent, where is the talk of difference between the worship, the worshipper, and the worshipped? Who transits into the Real, who makes one transit, and what is the process of transition? All this difference is false, there is nothing separate from the unity of Consciousness. Everything is the experience of the Self and is pure by its very nature; so do not worry.

Here, there is no going anywhere, no applying of any technique, no contemplating, no meditating, no reciting of mantra, no practising anything, no making effort, nothing.

Then what is the real thing to do? The real thing to do is this - do not leave anything, do not take anything, be with everything as it is.

The role of Grace (unqualified gift of God) can't be over emphasised in Kashmir Tantra. Although in the relative world we live in until fully liberated we must apply tremendous self-effort, the mystic truth, paradoxical as it is, is that God's Grace gives us the final liberation into our true Nature as Shiva - Pure Consciousness.

This truth may not make logical sense but it has been the experience of many great saints of the Tantrik tradition, and therefore is a core principle of Kashmir Shaivite Philosophy and practice.

My Guru - Paramahansa Satyananda Sarasvati - an accomplished Tantrik master, was once asked what is his experience now that he is fully realised. His answer was both profound and humorous. He said " I now know that all the practices I did in the past did nothing to result in this realisation of Who am I, . . . (pause) but I could not have had this realisation without having done the practises."

This is not double talk or trying to appear mysterious. From what Abhinavagupta has written, we can see that it is the truth.

In Kashmir Shaivite Tantra there is one most important principle underlying all successful sadhana (spiritual practice), and it's only fitting to end by explaining it.

The underlying principle of this system is called Advaita Bhavana and can be translated as 'Universal Love for All'.

In the alchemical process of transformation from lead (our individual self) to gold (the Universal Self) which is the whole purpose of Tantra, the laboratory for this process can be perfectly equipped. Our body and its prana are the Crucible, the fuel for the fire is the energy of the negative, selfish habits and thoughts, and the reagents placed in the crucible are our daily life experiences. The fire of transformation is Love.

Without unqualified Universal Love for All there can be no transformation. Universal Love without distinction or difference is the very catalyst of our transformation from limited self to God-Self. And for our life to be an expression of God's beauty, wisdom, and compassion, we must cultivate this most precious quality.

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