

Tantra for Everyone

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Tantra has enjoyed many different forms of expression. It has been a pan-Asian tradition for centuries and is now becoming a global phenomenon. Tantrik lineages, schools, sects, and points of view are alive and thriving in both Indian-Hindu and Buddhist traditions throughout Asia and the world. The traditional divisions of Indian Tantrik lineages are *Shaivite*, *Shakta*, and *Vaishnava*, in other words lineages in which the supreme, all-encompassing Reality is equated with Shiva, Shakti, or Vishnu. Although it is less common, the ancient “fourth” Tantrik way, centered on Ganapati or Ganesha, the elephant-headed God, still exists in both North and South India.

You might hear contemporary forms of Tantra referred to as “nondual,” but most of them are really “dual/nondual.” Such is the case with my tradition, Kashmir Shaivism. “Duality” simply means “two.” “Nonduality” means—well, you guessed it—“not two!” When we are locked in dualistic experience, we believe that there are distinct objects separated by empty space. Tantrik practitioners come to experience duality, the everyday world of you, me, car, and tree, as an expression of a natural, shared state of continuity, or “not two.” Reality is full and continuous. Emptiness is just a style of experience.

Practices such as Guru yoga, mantra, and meditation do not lead the Tantrika to leave duality behind and transcend to a state of blissed-out “oneness.” Instead, we leave behind the limitation of being stuck in a dualistic View so that we can return to our world, in its entirety, just as it is. Nothing gets left out. Ultimately, the Tantrik practitioner discovers that all of life, in every form or state of formlessness, is of “one taste”: the taste of beauty, wisdom, and compassion.

Buddhists tend to limit the definition of Tantra to transformational practices involving certain deities. Within the Indian context, and particularly within Kashmir Shaivism, Tantra encompasses the totality of life. Tantrik practice includes ayurveda, hatha yoga, ritual, deity practice, mantra, contemplative practice, and, most importantly, the direct transmission of insight from Guru to disciple.

Because of this diversity of expression, there is no single, true-for-all times and places definition of Tantra. However, it is possible to come up with a short list of Tantrik values that inform the View of the tradition as a whole and that have remained consistent over time. These values include: an acceptance of the material world as a real, and not illusory, manifestation of consciousness (Shiva) and power (Shakti); a commitment to non-exclusivity of caste, class, and gender; the belief that the human body is our most valuable tool in seeking liberation; and the insistence that everyday life and Self-realization are not mutually exclusive.

The practices most closely associated with Tantra such as mantra, yantra, puja, hatha yoga, and Guru yoga existed long before anyone uttered the word "Tantra." Artifacts of figures seated in yogic poses and other Tantrik images have been found that are thousands of years old.

Tantra only began to emerge as a written tradition around 500 AD in India. The Tantras, or primary written texts, consist of teachings about cosmology and practice. They are usually,

but not always, structured as dialogues between Shiva and Shakti. This reflects the Tantrik View that the manifest world is a theater of communication. The everyday world appears for the enjoyment of communication and reciprocity. Not until the 19th century did the word “Tantra” referred to anything other than these scriptures. Eventually, the word came to describe a tradition (Tantra) and people in the tradition (Tantrikas).

The Tantras contain instructions for leading the practitioner to a more relaxed, complete relationship with the world. The Guru-disciple relationship is the central Tantrik practice. The Guru acts as a gateway to discovering the natural, uncontrived state. An advanced practitioner will experience the entire world as Guru.

The ultimate goal of Tantrik practice is full, conscious participation in the world process. In its broadest sense, Tantra is a spiritual technology for completing the human relationship to the cosmos. It is preparation for death by fully realizing this thing called “being human.” Tantra is not a transcendental practice because it does not urge us to skip over the being human part. The only way out is through, and the way through is full of beauty.

Kashmir Shaivism is the name that modern-day scholars have given to a cosmological View and body of practices developed by a group of yogi-philosophers living in Kashmir from about the eighth to the twelfth centuries A.D. The most successful practitioner and sophisticated philosopher was Abhinavagupta.

Abhinavagupta was the best kind of philosopher: one who was comfortable with the unknowable, with paradox, and with whatever lies beyond paradox. He synthesized a number of different strands of ancient Tantrik lineages into an incredibly open, exploratory, life-affirming world View solidly based on yogic experience.

Despite the intricacies of Abhinavagupta’s writing, he was a practical guy who always took the shortest route to Reality.

For instance, the *Advaitists* (a-dvaita=“not two”) had been claiming that dualism, the appearing of the world as separate objects, is an illusion to be transcended. Only oneness, or Brahman, is real. This View is still the dominant one understood as “Hinduism.”

Abhinavagupta asked, “Why get so complicated about things?” This is real. That is unreal. His View as a philosopher and a yogi was that both duality, and nonduality, or the continuity of all life, are facts. Neither is supreme. They come together in one package.

To appear in various ways is the nature of the world process. Manifesting the experience of difference or diversity is the *capacity* of the continuous natural state of infinite potential. To elaborate a world is Reality’s essential nature, or its essential freedom, as Abhinavagupta would say.

There is no question of illusion or non-illusion. There is just one, all-encompassing world process of which you can have a limited, or less limited, or limitless View. Having a limited View is the definition of ignorance in Kashmir Shaivism. To be stuck with only dualistic experience when the world has so much more to offer is a case of living with blinders on.

The second fundamental View of Tantra is that the entire cosmos, manifest and unmanifest, is nothing but consciousness and energy. Consciousness and energy, or Shiva and Shakti, are not really two separate phenomena, but they can appear as such. This is exactly the same as saying that the cosmos has the freedom to appear in various ways.

Third, the world is expressive. It expresses itself. There is a communicative aspect. We call this Duality. Duality is an expression, and it is a theater of expression. Only in the appearing of duality is the play of communication possible, for instance, the play of communication between Guru and disciple. Duality is a rich field of freedom of expression, not a curse. It only feels like a curse when we are convinced that separateness is our base condition, or if we treat individual experiencing as something bad to be transcended.

Fourth, the creation operates in a simple way. Everything works the same way all the way through every level. For instance, making a baby in the usual way, making an object appear out of “thin air” as some yogis can, and cosmogenesis all happen through the same fundamental life process of Shiva-Shakti, or consciousness and energy. They only look like different processes from a certain point of View. As above, so below.

Tantra is not a religion or a belief system. It is a spiritual technology for entering into full participation in Reality. Any teacher worth a nickel will tell you that belief is irrelevant. Confidence and practice are what count. Through practice, we gain confidence in the life process and an embodied understanding of our world. We discover Reality for ourselves. We remember our natural state in all of its fullness.

Embodied knowledge means useable knowledge, not conceptual knowing. The search for ultimate truth is a dead end in the View of Kashmir Shaivism. The essential characteristic of the universe is openness, or infinite potential. This cannot be known in the usual sense. But it can be embodied with awareness. And that is a very sweet fruit indeed.

Authentic Tantrik practice ritualizes every aspect of life in order to recalibrate the Tantrika and re-synch her with the rhythms of the natural state. Tantra ritualizes your life from the moment you open your eyes in the morning, throughout your whole day, as you fall asleep, while you are sleeping, and until you open your eyes again the following day. Authentic Tantrik practice will pull from you everything you thought you had to offer and then some. No part of you will be left out. No aspect of your life will remain unchanged.

There is a wonderful saying in Tantra: *It is better not to begin, but if you begin, it is better to finish.*

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