

Notes on Pagan India

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*Dattatreya Gurum Devam / Dhyayannisham Sadashivam
Tanmantram Tasya Gitam Ca / Vyakurve Tat Prasadatah.*

Dattatreya Guru and God, I meditate on Him, auspicious one;
His Mantra and His Hymn. I expound by His Divine Grace.

The Golden Thread

Non-Indians, and even Indians themselves, making an investigation into the spiritual life of this land, soon find they have stumbled on the most complex, outwardly confusing pattern of thought which has existed in any place in the world, or at any time throughout history. Its scriptural texts are enormous, its deities so numerous, its teachers so diverse, and in a land of teeming millions everyone seems to be a separate sect of which he is the only member. Yet it is without dogma or damnation, and everyone is free to believe and interpret as he thinks fit. How strange that in this mystic world of such diversity there is always that Golden Thread of the Absolute which runs through all and everything.

Within the sections of his Notebook, it is intended to present the great spiritual sciences of Yoga, Shastra, Tantra, Vedanta (Upanishads), the early Vedas, and to deal with initiations, rites, rituals, customs and practices. We will base our fundamentals on Absolute Wisdom, realized by Saints and Yogis in the heights of Samadhi, and brought down to a worldly level as their teachings. India is a land where the ancient way of life continued for thousands of years and presented a happy contented people who knew the real joy and rhythm of life. These were a people who knew how to fulfill their duties, attend to their livelihood, and enjoy the harmony of sexual pleasures, just as did the Great God Shiva and Parvati the Mother Goddess, to whom all Hindus bow in respect. This way of life goes beyond the sterility of mere theory. It finds fulfillment only in the living fire of practice.

Tantrik Origins

In its earliest known development, Tantra presented a revolt against established ideas. Until this time, all schools of Hindu Paganism maintained that in order to obtain Liberation (Moksha) and Self-Realization (Atma-Jnana) it was necessary to renounce the

world. The aim of the original Tantra and its basic theory was that householders could attain Liberation if they trained their minds to think of the joys of sexual intercourse, eating tasty foods, and the pleasurable experiences of the other senses as being a form of ecstasy related to and similar to the Bliss of Liberation. By training the mind in this way, the Ultimate Liberation would be made quite easy. We will never know to what extent these ideas were ever successful, and history is silent on any reports of vast numbers suddenly becoming realized. But we do know that Householder Tantra slowly slipped back into purely devotional forms.

Yet it was from this beginning that there emerged groups of Tantrik Sadhus and Ascetics. It was these Tantrik Sadhus and Yogis who not only kept Tantra alive, but brought it to the real peak of development. Some of these Sadhus combined into separate sects such as the Aghoris, and many others are now extinct. In the land which had realized most of that which can be realized, and taught most of that which could be taught, where the wisdom schools had reached the highest peaks, we cannot expect something new and unique either in teaching or in the outward form. It is therefore easy to understand that Tantra, especially the Tantra of the Yogis, presented a similar pattern in appearance to older and more ancient traditions, but giving it a new meaning.

The Descent of the Absolute

The first part of this article was prefaced by a Shloka or verse: a dedication to Shri Bhagavan Dattatreya. Unique among men, it would not be an exaggeration to describe him as the 'Greatest Man who ever lived.' His teachings occupy the very highest strata of Hindu thought. He was the Master Yogi par excellence. We read of Shri Dattatreya in the Upanishads, and one Upanishad bears his name. He was one of the great Naked Saints of India, and took foremost place among a galaxy of spiritual giants. Of his life and teachings we will deal later. Here it is sufficient to say that he was an Avatar or incarnation of the Lord Shiva. He was the Adi-Guru, or First Teacher, of the Adi-Nath sub-sect of the Nathas, into which I was initiated.

If Shri Dattatreya was an incarnation of the Lord Shiva, then who or what is Shiva? Both Vedic and Tantrik paths present and accept a multitude of Gods and Goddesses. Yet, in spite of their numerical strength, Indian Paganism teaches and propounds only one God or Absolute of which all Divine Names and forms are but a manifestation. Different sects and schools of thought may differ in their acceptance of manifestation, but all accept the Absolute (Paramatman or Brahman) as being Supreme. So the manifestations and personifications becomes the product of the descent of the Absolute into the worldly plane.

Long before the Aryans came with the castes and Vedic teachings, the Lord Shiva and his Shakti (or consort) were worshiped throughout India and probably in many parts of Europe also. There is considerable evidence that the religion of Europe, before it was suppressed by Christianity, was a form of Phallus and Yoni worship, such as existed and still exists in India.

The Alchemy of the Absolute

The first and highest strata of Hindu life, both as Vedanta or as Tantra, must be given to the Absolute, the Cosmic Soul (Paramatman). This was never defined, explained or given characteristics. It is the Supreme Reality, and the only real substance. But man, with his many limitations and imperfections, prefers to see That in manifestation and form. It is true that in the life of Sadhus and Sannyasins, their aim was the Absolute; but there always existed that deep understanding that men, for the most part, could only see and think of the Divine in the form and qualities they understood. In creation, or the process of manifestation, the Actionless Absolute had to resort to action, and the non-dual gave rise to duality. Thus there came into existence the Purusha, or Cosmic Personality, and his Power or Shakti, the operative force of natural manifestation.

The Tantriks continued the non-Aryan tradition of Shiva as the Cosmic Person, and his Shakti personified as the Mother Goddess. Tantra eventually developed three harmonious schools based upon this. One gave first prominence to Shiva, and another gave first prominence to Shakti. The third gave equal status to both. In the Tantrik scriptures, some present Shiva as the Guru with the Shakti as the Shishya receiving the teachings, while the Shakti schools reversed the position to present Shakti as the teacher giving instruction to Shiva. To discriminate between Gods is very relative, and all comparisons have a very bad smell. Yet in spite of this, there is something unique, wondrous, miraculous and most fascinating about the very concept of Shiva and his lovely Shakti. Nowadays iconography has degenerated to a very low level, where pictures and paintings of Shiva are more concerned with passing the censor than with presenting Him as the scriptures described him to be.

Guru and Shishya

Gurus as subjects could fill volumes, but here we are dealing with the word Guru as a spiritual guide and teacher, and not of the teachers who instruct lesser creatures in music, dancing or the three R's. In India, the word Gurudev generally used to mean the Spiritual Guru or Divine Preceptor.

The Guru-Shishya relationship is an indispensable part of Vedic and Tantrik practice. Though theory can often be gathered from books, a living Preceptor, who has already trodden the path successfully, is essential for all practice. It is based on the obvious recognition that disciples who are without practical experience of real spiritual life must receive competent instruction from a qualified person. The Diksha rite, in which the Guru transmits something of himself to the Shishya, often increases or manifests his awareness in the Shishya. This Guru-Shishya relationship is a very intimate one, and needs to be so for the Shishya's success. Actually, it is a two-way process, for the Guru in turn is enabled to have a more intimate and deeper understanding of the disciple, and thereby is better able to guide and direct the course of progress. To become a Tantrik Sadhu, or Hindu Sannyasin, one must first receive the Sadhu initiation (Sannyasa Diksha) from one who is already initiated as a Sannyasin. This is the initiation of World Renunciation, where the disciple repeats the Praisha Mantra after the Guru. Once this Mantra has been spoken, the Sadhu must never again return to

household life in this birth. A householder, following the path of Tantra, takes Guru Diksha from any Tantrik Guru, whether Sannyasin or householder.

Tantra differs from Vedic Hinduism inasmuch as the wife must take Diksha also under the same Guru. Because of the nature of Tantrik initiation, they usually take this Diksha at different times. In the Vedic tradition, only the man is required to take initiation under a Guru. In Sannyasa sects, even in Tantrik mode, this initiation is sometimes a very complicated procedure divided into several stages. A householder can easily be taken on his face value, but for those who think they are prepared to renounce the world permanently, he also accepts a serious responsibility. Even if the Shishya cannot obtain Liberation (Moksha) in the present life, he must live in such a way that he secures a favourable rebirth in the next life, of such a kind that will contribute to his spiritual progress.

Gilt and Gold

Although other religions and ways of life have eventually developed a householder community and a higher ascetic or spiritual community, it was Hindu Paganism which first set the pattern and understanding that there were two distinct and separate paths of behaviours, teaching, and general outlook. They are called Pravritti Marga, the Way of the World, and Nivritti Marga, the Path of Return. The Pravrittis, people of the household life, were not regarded as inferior to the Nivrittis. They have their purpose and function to fulfill. Although the householders bow to the feet of Sadhus, the Hindu Dharma recognized that both had an important part to play. A man was not regarded as inferior or a 'sinner' because he could not renounce his worldly life. Instead, a practical outlook required him to give sufficient attention to religious life — no matter how dual it might be — and to enjoy to the full. There always existed the clear understanding that all incarnate should have to drink well of the river of life until they have had their fill. How can it be possible for anyone to renounce anything of which they have had little or no experience? In the long long rounds of countless rebirths, and through the Grace of the Absolute, individual souls or Jivas would realize that these worldly things had lost their taste, and were no longer desirable. Then only could one be ready and able to enter the Nivritti Marg or Renunciation, and strive for return to the Absolute.

Between the two very diverse paths of Pravritti and Nivritti, there occurs a very special strata of society called the Mumukshus. It means one who has a great desire for Liberation and the Absolute. Mostly they remain as householders, as certain duties still bind them. On the other hand, they may not feel desire or readiness to become Sadhus. It is among the Mumukshus that we find the very religious and devout of India, and their sincerity shines like a lamp in the darkness.

Hindu Paganism has always stressed that there are four legitimate aims in life, for which the householder should strive. Collectively, they are called the Purusarthas, and they consist of Dharma, Righteousness and Duty; Artha, the Pursuit of Wealth and Property; Kama, Sensual Pleasures; and Moksha, Liberation. There is nothing akin to Western Puritanism here. They are a pattern for a serious yet joyful life, and one which will have a blissful spiritual unfoldment in the future. The four Purusarthas, the four "Noble Truth" of Pagan Life, are common to both the Vedic and Tantrik patterns.

He who finds the balance and harmony between these four, is one who finds the real rhythm of life.

Naked Magicians

The Tantriks must have welcomed the appearance of Tantrik Sadhus and the new impetus. Indians have always known that the real powers (Siddhis) were more developed in a naked Sadhu than in those who wore clothes. This is far from being a superstition, and the idea persists even today.

We are now dealing with an age when the majority of Sadhus and Yogis were always naked, and nakedness was regarded as an essential demonstration of renunciation. Even at the time of Gautama the Buddha, Mahavira the Jain, and Gosala the Arjivika, nudity was the accepted pattern among the Sadhus. The Tantrik Sadhu could not be an exception, and there is little doubt that, from the early developments of Tantra, they become venerated for the display of powers and the blessing that they could bestow.

Naked Sadhus are still plentiful, though foreign visitors claim disappointment because they hardly ever see them. They are not easily found because they do not live in big cities and tourist centres where the foreign visitors congregate. Also, because of changed conditions in India, naked Sadhus either only travel at night, or wear a cloth when in public. In their Ashrams and Hermitages the ancient custom still persists. A real Sadhu or Yogi generally has no desire to draw needless attention to himself.

Tantra was the sect to introduce nudity, even for householders, when taking Diksha from a Guru. The rule was a wise one because Tantra was so firm in its understanding of the importance of the Guru-Shishya relationship. If a man could not accept the nature of a child before his spiritual father, then he was unworthy of initiation. Ancient traditions, related to forms of magic, stresses that a Sadhu should be completely naked when invoking the powers and help of deities and spirits. Even householders, who dabbled in this art, followed the injunction.

Tantrik Initiation

A personal experience may be of interest to others. I received my first Sannyasa Diksha in 1953, and was initiated into the Adi-Nath, a sub-sect of the Nathas which is considered to be the first actual sect of Tantrik Sadhus. I left for India for some years, and on my return visited Bihar and Bengal for the first time. Although a Natha, I wanted some information on Tantra and actual Tantrik initiation if I could obtain it. It was my very good fortune to meet my fourth Guru. I do not, to this day, know his real or Sannyasa name. At some stage he had started to sign letters "Pagala Baba", meaning "Mad Sadhu". Thus he had become known, and those who might have known his original name soon forgot it.

He had previously initiated two disciples, but both of them died, and he made a vow not to give the Tantrik Sadhu Diksha to anyone anymore. After a few days, to my good fortune, he relented and gave me the Diksha. It was only after the Diksha that he gave answers to my questions, and considerable information beyond my wildest hopes.

He only spoke Bengali, but a young householder disciple translated the questions and answers. My own background and previous experience, to say nothing of my harmony with the Guru, made all his information easily understandable, and yet it was all beyond the translator. India has always made her most secret wisdom public, yet so much remains esoteric because it is not understood.

The actual initiation consisted of three stages, spread out over three days. The first was similar to the initiation I had already received as a Natha. Of the last I cannot speak here, but the second was an experience. It was, in many respects, similar to that given to a householder. I only wore one garment, a Sadhu's robe, the word for which means 'a shroud'. This I was told to remove, and to go and sit in the Kali temple for one hour. The Kali temple was the one suitable and empty.

Naked Among the Gods

From Pagala Baba's residence I walked naked to the little temple. Fortunately the translator who came to lock me in brought a mat for me to sit upon. The Kali image was a crude effort made from clay. As I sat in front of Kali Mata, the young man said that he would be back in an hour, and closed the doors. This placed the interior in darkness, and I shivered a little from the cold and damp atmosphere. As I closed my eyes, a wonderland of brilliant spectacle and vision, all in vivid colour, opened up before me.

First, there was the shining naked Parvati, moving with life, and yet standing still. I could hear Her rippling laughter as though something filled Her with delight and not amusement. Suddenly, the image began to change, and I became aware that the figure was Lord Shiva, as naked as myself. He too was smiling with some delight, but this was not the same as the laughter of his consort.

I suddenly became aware of two figures standing behind me. Shiva waved his hand, indicating an instruction which the two figures obeyed. They put their hands on my face and peeled off some gauze-like material. As they did so the light and colour became so brilliant that I held my hands over my face. The whole scene changed into a whirling mass of stars and gyrating lights. Then came two simple personal visions relating to my own future. One of them has already matured, but the second can only occur after I am dead.

Suddenly, a knock, and the doors opened. At first I thought that the translator had returned to give some message. I was sure that he had left only five minutes ago, and certainly not more than ten minutes. But the hour of full sixty minutes had passed. During the vision of Shiva, I heard a Mantra clearly and loudly spoken. When I returned to Pagala Baba, after my session in the temple, this was the same Mantra which he gave to me. There was no question of coincidence or chance. The Mantra was not only a very unusual one, but one which I had never heard of before.

The Regeneration of the Nathas

Although the vast parade of Nathas winds its way back into prehistoric times, they do not appear to have been a distinctive or separate Sampradaya, or sect. The Nathas became a distinct sect somewhere about 300–400 C.E., a period of great religious revival when many new and differing sects were formed.

The real story begins with a Sadhu known as Siddha Kakkuti. He had received initiation and instruction from an ex-prince who became known as Lui-pada, well known in Tibetan legends. Siddha Kakkuti later took initiation from Siddha Carpati (a Natha), and was instructed by this Guru to complete his Sadhana (discipline) and live in Smashanas (burning grounds).

A simple fisherman named Mina became his lay disciple, continuing his occupation as a fisherman. One day he threw his baited line into the water, and sat on the bank to practice his meditation. Suddenly the line, which was tied to his wrists, pulled taut. He tried to haul the fish in, but instead the fish pulled him into its mouth, and he was swallowed. Because of the power of his meditation, he did not die. Soon another fisherman caught the fish, while it was helpless in very shallow water. When the fish was cut open, Mina escaped.

Mina again returned to Siddha Carpati, this time taking his son along with him. Both were given initiation as Sannyasins. His father became famous as the Siddha Mina, and the son as Siddha Matsyendra. It was this Siddha Matsyendra who became known as the founder of the Natha Sampradaya. His two most important disciples were Caurangi and Gorakshanatha. The latter was destined to eclipse his Master.

Gorakshanatha the Guru

There are books related to the Nathas where Matsyendranatha is stated to be the author. But the real bloom burst forth in the writings of Gorakshanatha, and even today he is considered as the Greatest of the Nathas. There are several temples in India dedicated to Gorakshanath. His Guru seems to have been forgotten in India, but in Nepal there are temples dedicated jointly to Matsyendranatha and to Avalokiteshwara. There they are considered to be the same person.

In India today there are many caves which are claimed to be places where Guru Gorakshanath spent time in meditation. Most have temples built over them. It was Gorakshanath who wrote the first books dealing with Laya Yoga and the “raising” of the Kundalini-Shakti, a Yoga which has now become much misunderstood and distorted. Matsyendranatha had proved himself to be a genius in organization, and many large Natha Ashrams were built in his lifetime, to give shelter to Nathas.

It is not impossible that Laya Yoga was developed to occupy the time of the many Sadhus living in these establishments, and to give them a sound practical basis for their search for Liberation. Around this same period, the Buddhists had also been occupied with the problems of large monasteries, and Bhikku residents had devised the Abhidharma as a form of mental gymnastics, in order to occupy and develop their minds. Gorakshanatha never became a God, nor was he worshiped by the Hindus as was Dattatreya. The temples where his images are enshrined are actually Natha

Ashrams, where he reigns as the sect Guru.

Mad, Mystic and Magic

The Nathas, the Aghoris, and the Pashupatis (Vairagyis) are the three most colourful and interesting sects which ever appeared in India. All found their way into Tibet, to add to the vast agglomeration which settled itself into Tibetan Buddhism. All three were feared and yet respected. The Nathas and Pashupatis were Shiva sects, while Aghoris based their way of life on the Devi Purana and worshiped the Mother Goddess.

All these three sects have wilted with time, but the Nathas still remain numerically stronger. None of them were actually celibate sects, but they could not marry as that would have meant the return to household life. Mostly they were naked, but one Natha sect adopted the custom of plaiting a dead Guru's hair into ropes, and coiling it around the waist.

The Nathas and Aghoris were both associated with magic powers, but while the Nathas were regarded as being the distributors of good luck and blessings; the Aghoris were associated with Black Siddhis, or Black Magic. Alcohol was forbidden to Nathas and Vairagyis, but the Aghoris were often drunkards. One Natha sect became known as the "Pagala Nathas" or Mad Nathas, Nath being the colloquial form of Natha. They became known as such due to their mad and insane behavior. But it was a mystical madness which flouted the conventions of the world for the mad desire for God.

Both Nathas and Aghoris have been closely associated with Tantra, though it was not so with some Nathas. The Pashupatis seemed to have remained completely outside Tantra, but this is probably because they as a sect did not like learning or scriptures, but practiced renunciation in its severest forms.

INTERNATIONAL NATH ORDER

This edition of Shri Gurudev Mahendranath's NOTES ON PAGAN INDIA is one of many projects planned by the not-for-profit International Nath Order. The International Nath Order itself is based upon the fundamental principles and inspiration set forth in Shri Mahendranath's *Master Pattern of the Nath Order*, TWILIGHT YOGA trilogy, and other writings. The three manuscripts which comprise the TWILIGHT YOGA Trilogy offers the building blocks with which to construct a more fantastic way of life. The International Nath Order strives to realize these aims through practical action and was conceived and constructed to serve the needs of many. Our primary concerns are the dissemination of higher wisdom, the construction and maintenance of places of meeting and worship, plus the activities related to continuing a spiritual transmission or initiation lineage which has its roots in a distant past, but continues to burn brightly even today. The International Nath Order seeks to fan this spiritual flame and make available to many the ideas and basics on which to develop a more expansive spiritual experience and fantastic way of life.

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