

# The Tantric Body

by Kalkinath

*This is a work in progress - it'll be added to as it develops.*

One of Tantra's most fundamental teachings is the primacy of the body. Unlike Western philosophies of Judeo-Christian bodily denial, the various Tantric schools assert that just as the world is real, so is the body; that if the world is, essentially, divine, then so too is the body, and therefore just as the world is honoured as a creation of the divine power, then so too must we honour the body. While the practices of asana and pranayama commonly associated with Hatha Yoga have become popular (trendy, even) in the West, there is a diverse range of other practices & concepts relating to the body in the Tantric systems.

Tantric practice sadhana continually directs attention back to the body. A brief example of this is given in the *Sat-Cakra Nirupana Tantra*, wherein it is stated that the top lip is Sakti, the bottom lip is Siva, and the lips smacking together is the union of Siva-Sakti.

## The Senses

Most of the Tantric traditions feature the veneration of the senses. Often, the senses are personified, identified with deities and venerated as surrounding and attending upon the presiding goddess or god. It is said that the saktis of the senses are continually agitated - moving around in search of the most pleasing sensations in order to offer them to the presiding devata. The sense-offerings are often described as flowers (and the offering of flowers in ritual can reflect the senses (although flowers has many contexts): thus *buddhi* (intellect) offers the flowers of certainty; *Sambhavi* (ego) offers the flowers of egoity; *Manas* (mind) offers the flowers of thought; *Vaisnavi* (the ears) offers sound; *Varahi* (the skin) offers the flowers of tactile sensation; *Indrani* (sight) offers the flowers of forms; *Camunda* (tongue) offers tastes; *Mahalaksmi* (the nose) offers smells.

All sensations, all pleasures are essentially emanations of the Divine. The sadhaka however, does not merely react blindly to sensations, but cultivates a mode of mindful awareness whereby the senses feed consciousness with wonder and delight. By cultivating mindfulness and willed intention towards heightening sensitivity to the beauty of everything around us, we can, according to Tantric teaching, move closer and closer to the sustained awareness of the wonder of the pulsation of consciousness that pervades all experience. At first, it is easier to experience this state of wonder through the medium of objects that are pleasing, but eventually, one may discern that same sense of wonder even when confronted with things that are repugnant, or painful.

## The Severed Head

The severed head is a recurrent theme in Tantric iconography, and is generally interpreted as

symbolising the annihilation of the ego whereby practitioners rid themselves of false notions of identity. One of the most striking depictions of this process can be seen in images of *Chinnamasta*, the self-decapitating goddess, who cuts off her own head in order to feed her devotees with her blood.

Offering one's own head as a sacrifice to the goddess is a theme that often recurs in Indian mythology. One popular folk tale tells of *Dhyanu Bhagat*, a devotee of the goddess **Vindhyavasini**, who offered her his head as a sacrifice. The goddess appeared to Dhyanu Bhagat, restored him to life, and granted him the boon that in future, she would accept a coconut as an offering of equal value to a head. There are a group of male devotees of Dhyanu who, each spring, gather at the village of *Vindhyachal* (where the shrine of Vindhyavasini is located) and, becoming possessed by the goddess, pierce their tongues and cheeks with long metal spears, without drawing blood or apparently, without feeling pain. Like Dhyanu, they are honoured for this expression of their devotion.

## The Feet

There is a great deal of symbolism related to the feet in Indian culture. Excavations at *Harrapa* have indicated that ritual purity through washing and bathing were an important feature of the early Indus Valley civilisation, and that cleanliness was considered necessary to ward off malign spirits. It is still customary, particularly in rural areas, to wash both hands and feet before entering the inner areas of one's home. This is so much a part of Indian body culture that specially-designed prosthetics have been developed to allow amputees to engage in this social practice. Washing a person's feet is associated with attitudes relating to service and selflessness. There is a popular story of a young man, a devotee of **Krishna**, who was famed for his tireless devotion and service to his parents. So devoted was he, that Krishna himself came to the young man's home to witness this for himself. When Krishna arrived, the young man was busy washing his parent's feet, and could not tear himself away from the task to greet the god, and Krishna was enthralled by the young man's service to his parents.

In traditional Indian marriage ceremony, the bride's parents wash the couple's feet with milk and water to purify them for their new life together. Foot-washing is also related to purification and is usually required of visitors to Indian temples. Some Brahmin castes prescribed ritual foot-washing as expiation for defiling events such as coming into contact with a menstruating woman.

Another common practice in India is that one should remove one's shoes before entering any place where a deity has been placed for worshipping. Traditionally, to appear bare-footed was a mark of respect, and in South India and Bengal, women were, until a few years ago, brought up not to wear shoes, as not wearing shoes was seen as respectful behaviour to their husbands.

Given the importance of the feet in Indian body culture in general, there is equally a wealth of meanings attached to the feet in Tantra. The feet are the point where the human and the divine intersect. By touching the sacred foot of the guru or devata, the human worshipper touches the divine. For example, washing the feet of the Guru (and drinking the water afterwards although this is usually taken as metaphorical rather than literal!) is traditionally a feature of guru-puja, as is touching the feet of the guru (or an elder) as a sign of respect and devotion. In some texts, the

devotee is enjoined to worship the sandals of the guru in absentia. Equally, in ritual litany, there are many references to the lotus feet of deities such as Ganesha, Lalita or Kali. There are also particular meanings related to the feet of various deities. For example, as Jeffrey Kripal observes in *Kali's Child*, Kali's feet have an erotic dimension, as seen in iconography where she is depicted standing upon the corpse of Shiva. The implication is that Kali's feet causes Shiva's lingam to rise.