

Reflections on Tantra

by Phil Hine, based on a talk at Treadwells bookshop,
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This article is based on a recent talk presented at Treadwells Bookshop in London (2004). After talking for just under an hour, there was lively discussion on some of the issues raised. What I've attempted to do here is blend together some of the themes I outlined in the talk itself, together with further reflections post-presentation, and some fleshing out of the texts - issues I wanted to touch on but didn't have time (or just forgot). This isn't a direct transcript of the talk, but is based on some of the notes I made in preparation.

One way to begin would be with a short, snappy definition of Tantra - however, for reasons that will (I hope) become clear, I'm not going to do that.

I think that a better starting point would be to consider how Tantra is *imagined*.

The dominant imagery is that Tantra is about SEX. Sacred sex, spiritual sex, the 'cult of ecstasy'. Spirituality through pleasure-seeking. Liberation via multiple orgasms. Coaxing the Kundalini-serpent through the spinal chakras, meditation, achieving satori, nirvana, liberation - oh yeah, and dubious goings-on in cremation grounds too - becoming a "spiritual dissenter" through the deliberate use of antinomian practices and smashing taboos - these too are ideas associated with Tantra.

Many modern "New Age" books seem to take the position that anything remotely 'erotic' in Indian culture is "Tantric", which has led to a cobbling together of information from erotic manuals (i.e. the Kama Sutra), massage techniques, Ayurvedic medicine and yoga postures - the goal of which is 'better sex' with the added bonus that the quest for longer or more orgasms is in itself, 'spiritual'. All of this tends to be presented as 'ancient teachings'.

Tantra is one of those categories of discourse which is widely pervasive, appears in all manner of contexts and yet, proves annoyingly elusive when one attempts to say *exactly* what it is. Benyotosh Bhattacharyya commented (in 1932): "The definitions of Tantra given by students of Sanskrit literature are not unlike the descriptions of an elephant given by blind men." And Herbert Guenther described Tantra as "one of the haziest misconceptions that the Western mind has ever evolved"

To my mind, one of the major underpinnings of the problem of saying what Tantra is - is that "Tantra" as a "thing" - a single, coherent "system" if you like, is a relatively recent concept. It's also a category that - until relatively recently, was used by outside observers - an *etic*, rather than an *emic* entity.

The concept of Tantrism (as a distinct category) originated with 19th century orientalist who

believed that the practices they were identifying via Hindu and Buddhist texts called 'Tantras' was something very distinct from the general - respectable - field of Indian philosophy and religion. 'Tantrism' became, if you like, a 'box' into which could be circumscribed "the most horrifying and degenerate aspects of the Indian mind" - everything that smacked of black magic, licentiousness, and paganism.

There are Indian texts called "---- Tantra" which aren't about tantra (in the sense that we understand it), and equally, the majority of texts which are said to be 'tantric' don't use the term Tantra as a descriptor. Sometimes, the word 'tantra' is used to imply exoteric teachings rather than more esoteric ones.

Western audiences have had a long fascination with Indian esoteric practices. In some ways, the New Age Tantra phenomenon that focuses almost exclusively on "sacred Sexuality" isn't so different from the first western writers - missionaries, Imperial administrators and Orientalists - who wrote about the 'debauched ways of the Hindoos'; for example the Reverend William Ward:

"Hinduism is the most material and childishly superstitious animalism that has ever masqueraded as idealism. It has no morality, and the absurd object of its worship is a mixture of Bacchus, Don Juan and Dick Turpin. It is not a religion at all, but is a pit of abomination, as far set from God as the mind of man can go."

Ward, writing of famous tantric texts such as the Yoni Tantra, reverted to asterisks occasionally whilst describing :

"...things too abominable to enter the ears of man, and impossible to be revealed to a Christian public..."

Also, there is the Abbé Dubois, author of the seminal work on Hindu life, "Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies" (1807), who wrote in much detail of the "abominable debaucheries" of 'sakti worship'. The Abbé's work contained the first detailed account of the orgiastic ritual that came to be known as 'cakrapuja' (circle-worship), and his book did much to fix the European notion that Hindus were depraved.

And in 1874, Talboys Wheeler defined Tantra as "*essentially a cult wherein nudity is worshipped in Bacchanalian orgies which cannot be described.*"

What's interesting about texts such as these is that whilst on the surface, they are expressions of moral outrage, they also serve to *entice* the reader - allowing the reader to project their own fantasies, and mentally 'fill in the blanks' as it were.

The earliest accounts of what came to be known as tantric practice focused on sexual licentiousness/freedom, and over the last 200 years or so, there have (according to David Gordon White) been 3 major reactive strategies to the 'discovery' of tantra:

Denial - Tantra is nothing to do with 'orthodox Hinduism - or it's a 'degeneration' from orthodox Brahminic Hinduism.

Rehabilitation - including the attempt to distinguish between RHP (acceptable) and LHP (transgressive) tantras

The New Age Tantra product-peddlers and self-styled Gurus.

All 3 of these can be viewed as 'legacies' of the colonial 'discovery' of tantra as a category of Indian religion and its subsequent misrepresentation.

Let's look at Denial and Rehabilitation in more depth.

Denial

Here I examined the idea - again arising in the 19th century (and still alive and kicking today) - that Tantra was nothing to do with the noble, Brahmanic, sanskritised 'Hindu Tradition' as *imagined* by orientalists - descriptions of which sound not dissimilar to the idealisations of Classical Greece. For those taking up the 'denialist' position, Tantra was a collection of 'degenerate' practices which to varying degrees is responsible for the current moral laxity and idolatry found by the British in India - and hence another reason why it was necessary to export Victorian values and standards to India. However, as Hugh Urban points out, the strategy of 'denial' did not just come from European orientalists, but also informed the way some Indians - particularly those with various reformist agendas - came to understand their own traditions - and in so doing joined in the making of scathing attacks on Tantra. Some Indian reformers believed that it was the upsurge of interest in Tantra effectively 'weakened' the Indian psyche and left it vulnerable to foreign invasion - first by the Muslims, and secondly, by the British. For these voices, Tantra was part of India's 'superstitious past' which needed to be shrugged off if the nation was to advance. For some, it was unthinkable that anything so degenerate and licentious as Tantra could have originated from within India, and so Tantra was *imagined* as a corrupting influence from barbaric Central Asia or the licentious practices of Tibetan Buddhists. Of course, Buddhist scholars have returned the 'favour', and argued that Buddhist Tantra arose from Hindu influences, or that unlike Hindu forms of Tantra, Buddhist Tantras had only pure and enlightened aims, rather than mucking about with black magic.

Rehabilitation

In the talk I briefly outlined Sir John Woodroffe's role in the attempt to 'rehabilitate' Tantra, and repeated the story (possibly apocryphal?) that John Mumford relates in his book *A Chakra & Kundalini workbook* of how Woodroffe became interested in Tantra. Woodroffe (aka 'Arthur Avalon' - a composite personality comprising of Woodroffe and his Bengali translator, Atal Behari Ghose) has been called 'the father of modern Tantric studies'. Woodroffe believed that the different forms of Hindu religious expression formed a unified whole. In contrast to the writings of orientalists such as William Ward, Woodroffe believed that Tantra, rather than being a sign of cultural degeneration, was a sophisticated philosophical system in full accordance with the Vedas and the principles of Vedanta.

Woodroffe's work has had a massive influence on the contemporary Tantric imaginary. Firstly, it is his book, *The Serpent Power* - a translation of the *Satcakranirupana Tantra* which has

become the primary source for most modern western overcodings of "the chakras." Secondly, Woodroffe was an early exponent of what is now called "Vedic Science". For Woodroffe, Tantra was not only fully in accordance with the principles of the Vedas, but its principles also echo the discoveries of modern, western science. Woodroffe was one of the first western writers to make connections between a system of chakras and glandular or endocrine organs. Thirdly, in his desire to demonstrate that Tantra had a lofty, 'spiritual' aim (as opposed to its 'sleazy' reputation of being associated with night-time orgies and dubious goings-on in cremation-grounds), Woodroffe went to great lengths to rationalise some of the more worrisome manifestations associated with Tantra. He criticises orientalist such as Dubois and Ward for finding evidence for Tantric immorality in passages from Tantric texts such as "Having drunk, drunk and again drunk, and having fallen, let him rise again and attain liberation" - instead, Woodroffe maintains that passages such as these require a metaphorical interpretation. Furthermore, he denies that Tantra's aims are related to black magical practices or the acquisition of worldly powers. For Woodroffe, the *siddhis* (accomplishments) are obstacles on the path to spiritual liberation that must be avoided - again, an idea that has become pervasive both for Westerners and Indian practitioners of yoga - particularly those influenced by Indian spiritual reformers such as Swami Vivekananda. But even a cursory glance at texts such as the *Kaulajnana-Nirmaya Tantra* will show that the attainment of *siddhis* is very much a concern of the text.

And that's where I'm going to hold it for the moment.

Post-talk Reflections

On Refusing to define Tantra

At the outset of the talk, and later, even when directly asked to, I refused to offer a 'thumbnail' definition or summation of Tantra.

One of the core features of Tantra for me is *complexity*, and I feel that for entities to remain complex, we must resist the temptation to 'define' them in simplistic terms. Perhaps a useful analogy (I think I mentioned this) is that attempting to define Tantra is rather like attempting to come up with a simple definition of modern paganism or Wicca - as 'entities', both are highly diverse, heterodox collections of practices, concepts, 'traditions' - continually mutating and shifting categories of discourse, and extremely difficult for outsiders to appreciate. It's a similar situation with Tantra, I feel, except that given the complexities of history, culture, and the all-pervasive imaginary - it's even harder. In the talk I occasionally likened trying to grasp Tantra like grabbing at a piece of soap in the bath - as soon as you think you've got it, it slips out of your grasp.

Reflecting on this brings up a further point - "do I need to define myself as something specific?" Something I mentioned in the talk was that I don't tend to think of myself as a practitioner of Tantra per se, and that it might be more appropriate if I thought of myself as a Natha, or a practitioner of Kaula, or even a *Vishvanathi* (sorry Andrew!). Of course, in the discussion group, we periodically return to the question of "just what is tantra" - it's never an easy question and it always brings up lots of issues. This also led me to reflect on how occult practitioners

selectively define themselves. How are chaos magicians different from Wiccans? Is it important for me to define myself? I don't think so.

Gurus & Religion

Thinking back to some of the questions that were raised in the discussion, two issues that seemed to me (and some fellow naths who were in attendance also) to be somewhat contraversial were the religious angle of Tantra and the necessity of having a guru.

Someone asked me did I think Tantra had a religious element? I replied that yes, in my opinion it did, and that this was one reason why I felt so drawn to it. I felt that there was some surprise over my response here. There is a degree of antipathy to the idea of religion amongst modern pagans or, more particularly, those who think of themselves as 'occultists'. This is interesting in relation to Tantra, which I feel, in occult circles, has, as part of its *imaginary*, the idea that it is innately bound up with antinomean - 'outsider' practices which place the practitioner in opposition to the mainstream culture. Another possibility which came up for me is the idea the religious 'devotion' - identifying as a devotee of, say Kali or Ganesha, is viewed as submissive - as though one is losing some degree of individuality (perhaps there's an equation being made between 'religion' and 'mainstream religion', i.e. Christianity or Catholicism). There's also the concept I referred to earlier, that Tantra is 'scientific' in its approach, which I also feel is still seductive. Modern occultists like to use the language & concepts of science of course, but I think there's more to it than that - 'science' is still seen as 'real' knowledge in a way that religion isn't.

The responses to the question about Tantric religiosity also came up when someone asked me if I thought it was necessary to have a *guru*. Earlier in the talk, I'd mentioned that Tantra was not, at least historically, a book-bound tradition; that the transmission of knowledge was primarily *oral* rather than textual. I'd also drawn attention to the idea that in many ways, Tantra, rather than something that was done by individuals, was at some stage in its development, structured into 'spiritual families' - hence the use of the term *kula* in denoting a tantric 'clan' or extended family. Anyhow, I said that having a guru was very important for me in my own development, and I went on to describe our relationship and how important it was for me. Someone asked the question "how do you know whether or not someone's a genuine guru?" which drew some discussion - what Christina said was that the way it works in Wiccan circles is that you don't just accept someone as a guru uncritically; that you ask other people you respect about them first before making a commitment. Tracey also made the very moot point that you learn from whatever's around you - that if you want to learn about grass, then your guru should be a blade of grass, or perhaps a gardener.

Some occultists are very resistant - or wary, about the idea of having a guru, and the notion that in order to practice a particular esoteric approach - like Tantra for example, seems to some, to be anathema. I feel this kind of reaction, and the responses I felt came from my advocacy of tantric religiosity are both bound up with attitudes around autonomy. At some point I was asked about 'good books' on Tantra i.e. could I recommend a good general, practical introduction to Tantra? I couldn't. (One of my friends recommended *Tantra Magick*, which, though out of print, is still possible to acquire) and someone at that point said it was possible to get some

material off the internet, and the rest you could pretty well work out for yourself. I thought this comment was interesting as it illustrates an occult subcultural dominant - the idea that all one needs is a book (or website) and you can work it out for yourself - so the production of knowledge becomes a matter for individuals, rather than something which arises out of dialogue & conversation with others. It's as though people want occult knowledge to be 'scientific' - in the sense that it's an 'objective' form of knowledge that can be acquired individually and maintained without any loss of personal autonomy. And, from a rather cynical stance, I'd add that this form of knowledge production doesn't involve much in the way of belief-risk either. There are plenty of good books coming out at the moment on various aspects of Tantric studies - but they don't seem to be popular with contemporary occultists - probably because they challenge so many occult 'sacred cows' about Tantra.