

Book Review

THE TANTRIK TRADITION

By Agehananda Bharat (Rider, 50s.)

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It is not easy to write about such a lofty theme as the Tantrik tradition. Volumes upon volumes have been published on Hindu doctrine and practice but detailed studies on the Tantrik forms have been very few, largely because certain features thereof were unacceptable to 19th century prudishness; among European scholars it was Sir John Woodroffe who initiated these studies early in the present century. Messrs. Rider are to be congratulated on bringing out this latest contribution by one whose knowledge of the Tantrik field is both detailed and penetrating.

Tantrik tradition is a particularly delicate theme just because of its methodic use of erotic symbolism; the text of the *Kamasutra*, which is but one treatise among others, has only recently become available in print. In their own country the Tantras had always been studied very carefully under the guidance of qualified masters; but in later times many puritanically-minded Hindus, sensitive to modern western opinion, began to feel ashamed of that section of our Indian *shastras* which accepts wine, meat and sexual intercourse, as possible adjuncts to contemplative living. The point to grasp here is that the *Tantras*, *qua* method, do not teach the repression of the senses, but rather their harnessing in the service of a spiritual training of which the aim is true unity or, to be more precise, "non-duality"; this purpose evidently ties up with the rest of the Hindu tradition. As one Tantrik master put it, by the very acts which in an ordinary person lead him to perdition the initiated *yogi* obtains permanent emancipation from birth and death. This gives us the basic principle: methods based upon it may at times have led to abuses, but it is a mistake to assume, as many have done, that such is always or even commonly the case.

Goodness of deed comes from goodness of intention. Tantras should only be studied from worthy motives, such as exclude mere curiosity or a craving for experiment, let alone enjoyment of a blatantly immoral kind. Von Glasenapp, a German commentator of unusual perceptiveness, has aptly expressed the spirit of Tantra when he says: "...the notion that the whole universe with the totality of its phenomena forms a single whole, in which even the smallest element has an effect upon the largest, because secret threads connect the smallest item with the eternal ground of the world, this is the proper foundation of all Tantrik philosophy."

Brahmins call the Tantrik literature *mantra-shastra* because, on its technical side, *mantra* is the chief instrument of Tantrism. *Mantra* is meaningful formula, not in any descriptive or persuasive sense, but within the mystical universe of discourse, as sonorous form of the divinity. *Mantra* is verifiable, not by what it describes but by what it effects, by its power to create a particular and often complex "feeling-tone" in the devotee. Among its range of meanings one can include thought, speech, prayer, aspiration as also mystical verse, magical formula, charm etc., Zimmer has appropriately defined *mantra* as "power," opposable as such to argument or proposition of a kind that the mind is able to resist or avoid. To pronounce *a mantra* is always an

event: to quote Lama Anagarika Govinda, "...the symbol word, the holy sounds which are transmitted to the initiate by the preceptor, make his personality vibrate in consonance and open it up to higher experience."

In the Hindu scale of values everything that is created carries an intrinsic purpose. The same thing may become a stepping-stone or a stumbling block according to how one views it. For instance marriage may provide a vantage-point for spiritual enlightenment, or else the couple may simply become ensnared in one another and emotionally exhausted. According to the Hindu teachings actions are never to be performed for their own sake or as a matter of habit and still less in fun. One becomes immediately guilty of intellectual suicide if one does not have a purpose in life, one that is related to a transcendent goal. Hindus hold three states to be blessed: a human birth, the company of saints and the desire for *moksha*, Deliverance. The Vedas teach that men, beasts, trees are all alive but that he only truly lives who lives by intelligence. The purpose of Tantra is to quicken and focus this higher intelligence. As our learned author moreover clearly shows, the knowledge to which this intelligence gives access, using *mantra* as its operative support is knowledge by *identification*, the only kind that once gained can never be obscured. Dante when he said that if you cannot be a thing you cannot paint it, spoke like a true Tantrika.

Our author concludes his exposition with a warning which I hope will not go unheeded: the Tantrik tradition is in great danger of disappearance under the impact of the puritanical, moralistic, technological and egalitarian ideologies that have invaded India in the wake of its former colonial overlords; though they have quitted the scene now, they have left behind them a terrible residue of undigested ideas of the most questionable kind. A different danger might take the form of an attempted exporting of Tantrik methods to the western world itself, minus the indispensable traditional safeguards which, in India, have always accompanied their use, including reticence concerning many details and the disguising of certain features under symbolical forms only intelligible to initiates...One has only to observe the grotesque perversions that have already resulted from attempts to propagate Vedanta and Zen in the west to gauge the kind of consequences likely to follow from a similar attempt in regard to the Tantrik techniques. The power of the *mantras* is such that they cannot be played about with by the unqualified with impunity. The modern world is full of people who from sheer boredom are looking for spiritual riches or cheap happiness though resorting to methods borrowed from the Orient in a haphazard and amateurish manner. An attentive study of the present book should, over and above its other benefits, help to underline the need for genuinely qualified guidance, failing which the Tantra were best left severely alone.