

Understanding Tantra

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(The text matter prescribes for Class)

Introduction

Tantra has been an integral part of all the ancient religious traditions that were developed in India. Here we will discuss the tantra in general and Buddhist tantra in particular. We will deal with some key issues of tantra that have become a stereotyped version of the current academic discourse.

Here we will inquire for the larger contours of historiographical issues and the possible motives and reasons behind the particular approach taken up by early scholars who were working under the British rulers of India who were responsible for creating the general perceptions about the different tantric tradition that is still prevalent today.

We will also look into the details of the conventional mode of looking at tantrism, as it has been developed in the departments of religious and Asian studies of Western universities. We will discuss, how these models that were developed for European studies and Biblical studies have been deployed to interpret the religious tradition of India.

We are going to investigate, how the colonial interpretation has influenced the historians and how they have responded towards the conceptual models and narrative forms developed by their Western counterparts. A diverse range of texts produced in the colonial and post-colonial period are analysed in this talk. The concern is not with the chronological periodization of texts but with the ideological orientations underlying in these textual productions.

We will also examine the neo-orientalist version of tantra as it has been conceived in the West and to what extent it has influenced the Indian scholars. Many such models that were developed by Western scholars have constantly dominated the historical imagination of Indian scholars.

We will then take a few case studies to highlight the symbolism in tantric traditions and show how their practices are backed by profound philosophical doctrines. Through examining the exegetical texts written by the traditional masters, we will posit that the appearance of tantric deities and practices are to serve the purpose of transcending all sorts of dualistic thoughts for attaining enlightenment.

After examining some of the contemporary tantric practices of within Hindu and Buddhist tantric tradition this talk makes an effort to find harmony between the overlapping layers of popular belief and the profound philosophy of tantra.

Understanding Tantra: Some Methodological and Textual issues

श्वा-खरोष्ट्र-गजाद्य-अरूक् पित्वा मांसेन भोजनम् नित्यम् /

*Drink the blood of dog, donkey, camel, and elephant; thereafter feed on their flesh,
regularly.*

इष्टं सर्वविशेष रक्त-विलिप्त-महामांसं समस्त-कुत्सितमांसं प्राणक-शत-लक्ष-सम्युक्तम्-दिव्यम् |

*Desired is the very special, smeared with the blood, the human flesh, awful meat of all
species, full of millions of maggots, is divine.*

वैरोचनेनाति-पूतम् कीट-शतैर्ह सिमिसि-मायमानम् श्वान-नर-च्छर्दित-मिश्रम् मांसं वज्राम्बु-मर्जिका-युक्तम् वैरोचन-सम्मिश्रम्-
भोक्तव्यम् योगिनोत्साहैः //

*Meat solidified by rotten excrement, mixed with the dog and human vomit, simmering
with hundreds of worms, with a coating of urine mixed with excrement; [it should be]
consumed by the yogi with delight.*

— संपुटोद्भवस्वर-तंत्र-निदान-महाकल्प-राज

— *Samputodbhava-svara-tantra-nidāna-mahākālpa-rāja*¹

*‘Well, traditionally it would be better not to publish it [tantra scripture] at all;
but if it is going to be published inevitably anyway, it is important to explain it
clearly and authoritatively so as to avoid damaging misunderstandings.’*

— H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama²

For the readers outside of the tantra tradition, it is not an easy task to shed their dispassion while reading a tantric text. To the scholars of comparative religion, the tantra scriptures and their doctrines have represented the ultimate challenge. The deliberate use of the antinomian in the tantric religious system makes its ritualistic presentations, the language, and its semantics so offensive and repulsive that even if the reader is sympathetic to the tradition, it is not an easy task to get away from the distaste. The distaste, however, has been the creation of cursory and superficial readings of tantric texts.³

Any such reader is bound to be astonished by the characteristics and the discussion of these tantric treatises when they unfold. They have an unconventional tone of language, a different style of their expositions, and persuasion for a radical approach towards the practice for achieving the highest state of wisdom, what these texts refer as nondual wisdom (*advaya-jñāna*) or ‘unsurpassable knowledge’ (*anuttara-jñāna*). The tantra texts present an altogether

¹ Unpublished manuscript in the collection of Tokyo University, new catalogue no. 428 (old no. 319), f. 38b, quoted by Wedemeyer; See, C. K. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, 1.

² H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama, quoted by Robert Thurman in the preface of translation of *Śrī-caṅkṛasamvara-tantra*, xii.

³ Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 1-5.

different category of epistemic place and subjective approach. And, they purposely and overwhelmingly urge their readers to be well aware of the technicalities of the inherent cryptic language (*sandhyā-bhāṣā*), the hermeneutical renditions (*nītārtha-neyārtha*), and the appropriations of intention-intended (*abhiprāya-icchataḥ*), in the prescribed rituals; failing which, the whole tantric liturgy would just remain as an objectionable and nonsensical subject.⁴

A century ago, when the modern studies on Indology were in their premature stage, many Western explorers, who came across the tantric traditions of India, had to wrestle with the issue of this issue of tantra antinomianism. The normative rendering of Sanskrit textual lexicons, and other philological tools, which were helpful for the understanding of other scriptures in Sanskrit, did not provide any help, and these texts were incomprehensible even to the greatest of Sanskrit scholars of that time, both Indian as well as Western.

As most of the scholars failed to make much sense out of the unconventional rhetoric presented in the texts; they concluded the tantric form of religion to be a disgusting form of some primitive practices. Nonetheless, it was evidently puzzling for these scholars, to fathom the widespread popularity of the tantric traditions of India that was still predominant in the vast range of the Himalayan region of India, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, and in the trans-Himalayan regions of Asia such as China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan.

Observing the widespread of tantric forms of religious tradition of the 19th century India, Swami Vivekananda perceptively quantified that in the contemporary sphere of Indic religion, it is the tantric tradition which is pervasive. He states:

To call ourselves in the sense of following the *Karmakāṇḍa* of the Vedas, I do not think, would be proper...In our ordinary lives we are mostly Paurāṇikas or Tāntrikas, and, even where some Vedic texts are used by Brahmins of India, the adjustment of the texts is mostly not according to the Vedas, but according to the Tantras and Purāṇas.⁵

Colonial biasness and racial prejudices

Within the colonial paradigms, the tantric traditions were seen from a Western historical perspective. European scholars fashioned the tantra, largely in their own image. According to their conceptual frameworks, the idea of objectivity, rationality, scientific temperament, linear progress, and development; all these qualities were shown to be deficient or degraded in the form of tantra traditions as well as other forms Indian religious traditions, that was surviving in different parts of the Asian subcontinent.

Therefore, the quest of so-called restoration of Indian religious traditions was crucial for oriental studies. Indeed, this quest was heavily biased and had its grounding in racial

⁴ In the non-dual Buddhist tantra, some practices present this provocative juxtaposition, given the traditional precepts of Buddhism, some elements that are considered extremely polluting or taboo are prescribed to be used as means (*Upāya*). See, Michael M. Broido, "Killing, Lying, Stealing, and Adultery: A problem of Interpretation in the Tantras." In *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, edited by Donald S. Lopez Jr, 71-118. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988, 71-80.

⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*. Vol. III, 263-265.

prejudices. In order to establish colonial hegemony, the oriental scholars devised the mechanism of advocacy for 'scientific truth' and 'objectivity' in their own terms and often deprecated the indigenous traditions and principles.

Making sense of tantra – the way insider practitioners of it have perceived it

Since time immemorial, one of the basic motivations of the human mind has been gaining control over visible and invisible natural forces. This ancient quest of moulding nature and manipulating it for the benefit of humankind has played a crucial role in the development of modern western science. In the east, this quest of conquering was not only limited to the outer domain but conquest over bodily physical and psychic forces of the inner domain was more emphasized upon. This resulted in the development of pragmatic rituals and practices in the religious system which consisted of techniques that tried to trigger a man's individual energy to harmonize with the universal cosmic energy. Such practices were developed in various religious traditions in India.

These practices prescribe various means such as mantra recitations, yogic practices on bodily wind channels, fixating the mindstream in an exalted state of wisdom, and through elaborated and sophisticated rituals accompanied with liturgical implements such as visualisation of various types of imagery of deities in their elaborated iconographic forms.

In the tantric yogic practices, the imageries of divine figures or deities are used as such implements for symbolic representation and a tool for meditating upon the innate wisdom. Within the tantric Buddhist expressions, these deities represent some metaphysical or practice related concepts in an anthropomorphic form. Therefore, meditation based on visualisation of deities, in actuality is a reflection upon those philosophical insights. The icons of a deity just serve as a means to actualize and enhance the dynamics of the psychophysical reality of the practitioner.⁶

With the development of the tantric system, these practices have resulted in a structured form of pragmatic rituals and practices in the religious systems, which consisted of techniques that tried to trigger one's individual energy to harmonize with the universal cosmic energy. Such practices were developed in various religious traditions in India.

The concept behind these practices employs the macrocosm-microcosm homology, an idea of symmetrical contiguity between subjective-objective reality, where the practitioners unite their subjective nature of an individual with objective phenomenal effulgence. This is given in the expression, '*yat pinḍe tat brahmāṇḍe*' in the Hindu texts or *yathā bāhyaṃ tathā-dhyātmam*, which means, 'as in the outer cosmos, so within the body' in the Buddhist texts.⁷

Myth of tribal origin of tantra

Some of the studies on Buddhist tantra have identified it as either an aftermath development of primitive or tribal religion. Such scholarly habits are difficult to change – they have yielded some plausible interpretative models that we have been used consistently and not

⁶ The description of the goddess Vajrayoginī says, 'Homage to you, Vajrayoginī! You hold a skull bowl and staff on your left as [wisdom of] Emptiness [and], a chopper in your right hand [as] compassion.' (*vāme kapālakhatvāṅge dakṣhiṇekartridhārīṇī, śūnyā-karūṇāvāhi Namaste vajrayoginī*). See, *Bauddh-tantra-kośa*, 208.

⁷ It is quoted in a Buddhist tantra text, *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, compiled in the early 12th century CE by Abhayākara Gupta. See, *Niṣpanna-yogāvalī*, 26-27.

subjected to a critical analysis. Ascribing tantra to be of tribal origin is one such habit that can be seen within the domain of studies on Indian religion. In order to contextualize tantric traditions in their socio-political, cultural, and material settings, scholars often fixate on this well-trodden ‘tribal-origin’ theory, so that the traditions of tantra can be appropriated to justify the scholars’ ideology.

Readers of historical literature are familiar with this rhetoric of **tribal origin**, which has been redeployed and reinforced for those religious traditions, which were esoteric in nature and were not part of mainstream religion. Holding the notion that the origins of a thing determine its fundamental nature, once a religious practice is concluded to have a tribal origin, it can easily be designated as cultic, marginal, and sometimes superstitious. Thus, such religious traditions become exotic, primitive, and therefore rather nonsensical to historians. The historians thereafter just have to construct paradigmatic socio-political context within which associated motifs of deities and rituals can be appropriated.

Early tantra traditions

It is generally accepted that the formalized form of psychic-yogic practices took concrete shape in *Yoga-sūtra* of Pātañjali, which was compiled in its present form around 3rd century CE. However, it is evident from recent studies on *Yoga-sūtras* that the vocabulary of this text heavily draws upon Buddhist concepts and terminology, for explaining its practices and their subsequent attainments.⁸

The psychic-yogic practices have been part of ancient religious systems of India since a much earlier period. The archaeological artefacts obtained from Indus valley civilization have the three-headed figure of Paśupati that depicts yogic practices present at that time. The *Atharva Veda* has the reference to yogic practices and role of *prāṇa* (vital-breath) within the body.

If we accept the several stone statues of female figures found at the Indus valley sites, usually dated around 2500 BCE, as goddesses statue, as do many scholars, this would add another dimension of early feminine worship in the Indian subcontinent, which is intimately connected with the *Shākta tantra* of Hindu tradition and *Yoginī-tantra* tradition of Buddhist tantra.

The philosophical schools that were developed in the post-Vedic period, often exhibit a tendency to explore and comprehend the mysteries of the phenomenal world in its entirety. These systems often advocate omniscience and omnipotence as a necessary attribute of any perfect being. In the post-Vedic period, as it is evident from the literature of Purāṇa, Shaivite tradition literature, and Mahayana literature, some philosophical systems were frequently making use of psycho-yogic techniques as a means to achieve this omniscience and omnipotence.

As these schools often proclaimed their roots to be some specific and well-established older system of Vedic or non-Vedic philosophical system, they had to enter into a dialogue or debate with other schools of Indian philosophy.

⁸ It is evident from the recent researches that Patañjali has successfully adapted the terminology of Sarvāstivāda school of Buddhism. For more details, see Philipp A. Maas, *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma and the Yoga of Patañjali*, accessed on 1 October 2014.

This way, these schools got their prominence amongst the masses and accepted the modalities and rules of their time, and established themselves in the strata of social normality.⁹

Such approaches led to the development of a coherent system that was formalised and structured. This was happening in many religious systems of medieval India. This system was termed 'tantra', and it was concerned with different modes of disciplined and systematic methods for training and controlling the mind-body complex and reshaping the human consciousness towards a higher spiritual goal.

As the tantric movement gained popularity around 6th century CE in northern and central India, every religion had its own form of a tantric system. Around the eighth and 9th century CE, the phenomenon of tantra traditions could be observed in all the religious traditions in India, which incorporate esoteric practices, deities, mantras, and other occult elements that also included the transgressive practices as its means.

Since 7th-8th century CE onwards, the Buddhist Siddhas (tantric adepts) and Hindu Yogis within the tradition of Nātha-sampradaya, have played a key role in popularising the tantra tradition. These wanderers were a combination of saint, eclectic scholar, and behaved like lunatics. They helped imbue Buddhism and Hindu traditions with a renewed spirit of vigour and enthusiasm. Siddhas and Nāthas chose to live outside the monastic communities and often mocked institutionalised religious traditions or monastic institutions. In their unorthodox teachings, they ridiculed the conventional mode of human behaviour. Although many types of research on them have alleged them to be corrupt libertines, the true Siddhas were simply using unorthodox and radical means to achieve the ultimate state of supreme gnosis, what they called *Sahaja*. The miraculous yogic powers displayed by these Siddhas seems to have played a big role in popularizing the tantra tradition amongst the common masses.

Tantric Symbolism: Abstract representation of Philosophy and ideas

The language of symbolism plays an important role in the tradition of tantra. The icons and semiotics are used extensively to illustrate the philosophical concepts of Tantric traditions. The symbolic union of male and female figures represented the union of Shiva and Shakti in Hindu tantric traditions. In Buddhism, the *prajñā* (intuitive wisdom) was considered to be a passive female quality of human nature while the *upāya* (skilful means) such as compassionate action was the male quality and a union of both in the process of enlightenment was represented by an ecstatic union of male and female deities. Such symbolism implied that a similar union of the male and female mode could be experienced on a higher plane of consciousness where all opposites appear in dynamic unity.

Another method of practice in the tantric tradition is uses of *mantra*, known as seed syllable mantra (*bīja mantra*) was the phonemes without any specific meaning but supposedly consisted of a blueprint of the iconographic details of tantric deities. The repetitive utterance

⁹ In the West, most scholars have not recognised these unique and peculiar components of India's philosophical and religious scenario developed from medieval times onward. Scholars such as Georg Feurstein incautiously remark, "Tantrism's contribution to philosophy is negligible. Its unicity lies wholly within the practical sphere, the *sādhana*. From a philosophical point of view, there is no hiatus between Tantrism and previous traditions." For detailed discussion see, Raffaele Torella, "Importance of Utpaladeva: An Introduction." In *Utpaladeva, Philosopher of Recognition*, edited by Raffaele Torella and Bettina Bäumer, 1-13. Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2016, 1.

of seed syllables was supposed to lead the practitioner to the manifestation of the perceptual image of a tantric deity.

In its practical aspect, tantra uses a variety of methods to achieve this stage. It consists of a set of spiritual techniques that gradually take the consciousness of the practitioner to a nondual liberating state. Preliminary tantric practices emphasize the external purity of the body, speech, and mind. The body in a correct meditation posture is visualized as a **virtual shrine** where offerings are made and *mudrās* (hand gestures) are performed. Speech is used for reciting mantras while the mind is used for contemplating upon the deity and imprinting itself with the visual form of deity. The deity here represents some philosophical idea in an anthropomorphic form. As practitioners invoke the quality of the deity, they try to awaken similar features within them.

In Tantric traditions at the primary level, the approach is that of having control over sensual desires. However, at a higher level, a revolutionary approach of not subjugating but exploring a psychological path of transformation of desire into spiritual bliss is followed. This is achieved through a tantric-yogic process of manipulating subtle wind channels that act as a link between the body and the mind.

In the higher stages, the use of transgressive practices associated with the cremation ground and so forth, are recommended in tantric texts for achieving an insight of nondual wisdom.

It is suggested that in tantra at certain transitional states, such as meditation and dreaming, the body-mind is in a very subtle state that can be used by advanced practitioners to transform the mindstream. Thus, by changing the gear of consciousness, the practitioner accelerates the process of enlightenment. These transitional states are used for penetrating deep inside the human psyche. Tantra recommends transgressive actions in order to take apart the sense of duality, that is, any knowledge of good and evil and making the mind free from any sort of conditioning. Such concepts of tantra connote to the idea of non-dual nature of all existing reality, beyond good or evil, and the tantric practitioner must act only with compassion for the benefit of the salvation of the world.

Thus, tantric practices are designed in a way to process the dismantling, the ‘conditioned known’ and getting to *Sahaja* (effortless equipoise), the last achievement of all thought perceiving every phenomenon as pure and non-inherent.¹⁰ Such ideologies can be commonly found in the verses of the eighty-four *Mahasiddhas* (great adepts) – common to the Hindu and Buddhist traditions – who claimed to be in a state of *Sahaja*.

Traditionally the practice of tantra is supposed to be kept secret. Because of this, tantra has often been subjected to a great deal of misunderstanding. As it will be pointed out in detail in the coming slides of this talk. The early research on tantra have wrongly positioned it in the mode of immoral worship because of its repulsive outward sign and an incomprehensible meaning for an uninitiated person.

All tantra texts warn about its secrecy and put restrictions on the independent practice of tantra in the absence of a qualified guru. The texts clearly state that teachings should not be revealed to those who are not initiated and who lack faith. Thus, public accessibility to authentic tantric teachings is limited.

¹⁰ A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999, 140.

In recent decades, some of the Tibetan Buddhist lamas have been more willing to bestow initiations and impart commentary on tantric *sādhana*s and scholars in the academic world have begun compiling and translating tantric teachings and texts. H. H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's advice of partially lifting the secrecy – in order to avoid the great misunderstandings – has made the written commentary on some of the secret practices readily available to the academic world.¹¹

Interpretation of Tantra by modern scholars

Early research on tantra mainly focused on the socio-religious aspect and viewed it more as a magical cult and rituals. Books authored by Indian authors such as P. C. Bagchi and N. N. Bhattacharyya are also helpful in understanding different tantric traditions in India. Ananda Coomaraswamy and Benoytosh Bhattacharyya were amongst the earliest indigenous scholars of tantric art and iconography. While Ananda Coomaraswamy focused on the idealistic–philosophical aspects of art, Benoytosh Bhattacharyya dealt with the iconography of tantric deities and also edited *Niṣpannayogāwālī* and two volumes of *Sādhanamālā* manuscripts obtained from Nepal.

In recent years, the voluminous works of Lokesh Chandra have also contributed to the research of Tibetan and Nepalese iconography. However, the difficulty with these researchers, who are established scholars, research is that they do not have any real experience of tantra as practitioners. Their explanations about tantric concepts are based on textual accounts. Scholars such as Benoytosh Bhattacharyya have admitted their limitations in this regard.¹²

Largely, much of tantra that we talk about today is a product of the late 19th and 20th century Hindu and Buddhist renaissance in which Western ideas about science, psychoanalysis, and mental fitness play a crucial role. In the last decade, tantra has also come to the centre of a much larger debate on the politics of scholarship and the interpretation of South Asian traditions. A number of Western scholars and their books such as Jeffrey Kripal's *Kali's Child* (1998), David Gordon White's *Kiss of the Yogini* (1998) and Sarah Caldwell's *Oh Terrifying Mother* (1999) have received strong criticism from some Indian readers for their allegedly hypersexual and neo-orientalist interpretations of tantra.

With the development of psychoanalysis, researchers on tantra have tried to establish a rational basis for its erotic-yogic practices.¹³ Nevertheless, the tantric erotic yoga practice is considered to be a very advanced meditative practice.¹⁴ It has almost no resemblance to everyday lovemaking. It is supposed to be an intense meditative and yogic religious ritual, which has never been a part of any established form of the tantric tradition. There have been stories of expulsions and severe punishments given to the monks of Buddhist traditions for violating the monastic code of celibacy. One of the recently published practice manual with

¹¹ *Vajrayoginī Sādhnā and Commentary*, vii.

¹² Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, "Bauddha Sadhna." In *Kalyaan Sadhana Ank*, edited by Hanuman Prasad Poddar. Gorakhpur, Gita Press, 1940: 637.

¹³ Louise Child, *Tantric Buddhism and the Altered State of Consciousness*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007, 5-23.

¹⁴ It is observed by scholars that mostly, the popular books on tantra that present the 'secrets of tantric sex' are not different from a traditional sex manual and they hardly reflect any concern with the true objective of the tantras. For a detailed discussion, see, James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 158-159.

authoritative commentary by contemporary Tibetan masters clearly states that ‘at this time of degeneration, the practices have been reduced to a mere recitation of the words of the *sadhana*’.¹⁵

The practitioner is allowed to go for actual practice only if he could, through his meditative yogic concentration, exhibits his power over controlling the ontological reality; needless to say, that such advanced practitioner visibly non-existent in the contemporary times.

However, in the manner in which these practices are presented or prescribed in the tantric scriptures; they have the high potential to mislead the practitioners and to be misused in the name of tantra. As Miranda Shaw reports that while she was researching her book on women in Tantric Buddhism, several Tibetan lamas approached her with offers of a ‘tantric sexual relationship’, when in fact they actually knew little or nothing about those practices.¹⁶

Neo-tantra movements and the Occult paradigm of Vajrayana Buddhism

Propagators of Indian occult science institutions such as Theosophy Society have put forward their rationalizations for their mysterious meditative practices that have been widely used by and the followers of neo-tantra movements. One such movement was propagated by Osho (formally known as Rajneesh). Osho’s commentary on several Buddhist tantric texts has played an important role in popularizing Buddhist tantra and generated a new readership for it. Similarly, Tibetan tantric master Chögyam Trungpa’s ‘Crazy Wisdom’ tantra teachings have led to the evolution of a new generation of tantric Buddhist scholars.¹⁷ Trungpa also warned about the dangers of tantra practices and advised them not to rush to them. Some of Trungpa’s students, later on, tried to give a feminist face to the Buddhist tantra.¹⁸

In recent years, the encouragement given by H. H. Dalai Lama to explore Tibetan Buddhism has given the outside world an opportunity to investigate the rational basis of tantric practices. In this way, a massive multi-level hybridization has taken place in the recent decade and mystical aspects of tantric practices have been rationalized to some extent.

Observing the utmost importance given to feminine elements, modern scholars Many modern scholars have drawn upon their articulations of feminist epistemology. Rita M. Gross’s *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993) has examined the feminist history of Buddhism, Judith Simmer Brown’s *Dākinī’s Warm Breath* (2001) interweaves traditional stories of the feminine divine with commentaries by contemporary teachers. Similarly, Serinity Young’s *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts* (2004) tackles a complex issue of sexuality and gender by examining textual and historical data. Miranda Shaw’s *Passionate Enlightenment* (2004) argues against the subordinate role of women in tantric Buddhism. She argues that historical records are androcentric and biased. She presents extensive evidence of independent female founders of tantric traditions and their role in establishing a distinctive vision of gender relations within the tantric tradition.

¹⁵ For details see, Sharpa Tulku and Richard Guard, *Self-initiation of Vajrabhairava*. Dharamshala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1991, vii-viii.

¹⁶ Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, 175.

¹⁷ ‘Crazy wisdom’ is a term coined by Chögyam Trungpa, an iconoclast Tibetan Lama, who came to teach Buddhism to young Americans in the 1970s. He described ‘Crazy wisdom’ as unconventional and shocking pedagogical methods, used as a ‘skillful means’, intended to awaken the students from their ignorance. See, Chogyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa*. Edited by Carolyn Rose Gimian. Vol. 10. Boston & London: Shambhala, 2017.

¹⁸ Trungpa’s students include the feminist scholar such as Rita M. Gross, Simmer S. Brown and others.

Most of these books have been published in the last two decades and they draw on an external-observer perspective about the tantric sources to pursue questions related to the construction of women's subjectivity within the tantric framework. Feminine aspects of the Indo-Tibetan tantric traditions are although well researched in these books, however as it has been pointed out by Rita M. Gross, '[S]uch discussions cannot be done by outsiders, no matter how knowledgeable and sympathetic they may be.'¹⁹

Contemplative practices and tantric deities

It is also commonly accepted in the tantric literature that the deities do not have a fixed form and they may appear as per the visualizations of the practitioner. The deities are referred to as mind-made formations (*manomaya-kāya*) of the practitioner's own consciousness. Different forms and physical features of tantric deities are symbolic and given in a coded language that is explained in tantric manuals. Depending on the specific enlightened qualities that they embody, the deities may have peaceful or wrathful appearances. The *sādhans* prescribed for these deities are meant to destroy or transform habits of the mind, often by unconventional methods.

Visualization is a major component of tantric practices. Most of the tantric deities are visualized with multiple heads, arms, and legs, representing the multifunctional nature of an enlightened mind, which they embody. They have key identifiers such as postures, hand gestures or symbols, and colours to tell who they are and what they represent.

As these deities embody some yogic or philosophical ideas, their iconic forms are created that are used as a tool for visualisation-based practices. The deities of advanced stages of tantra are portrayed with a backdrop of cremation ground. Their naked body is adorned with ornaments of bone. The flames around their body depict the yogic heat impassioned.

Forms of tantra deities and their visualization

Visualization is a major component of tantric practices. Most of the tantric deities are visualized with multiple heads, arms, and legs, representing the multifunctional nature of an enlightened mind which they embody. They have key identifiers such as postures, hand gestures or symbols and colours to tell who they are and what they represent. As these deities embody some ideals, their forms are created in the art for contemplation and used as a tool for spiritual development.

The appearance of tantric deities has twofold facets: the esoteric side which can be deciphered from tantric texts through lineage teachings held by learned and initiated practitioner and a facet of popular devotional practices and rituals which plays in the hearts and minds of their lay adherents in which, the traditions of tantric deities vary based on the needs of different people.

Tantra practices consist of self-visualization in which the practitioners visualize themselves as the central meditational deities of an elaborate, elegant *mandala*. However, here the deity has to be visualized precisely with her non-inherent existence emanating from the wisdom of clear light (*prabhā-svara*) of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

¹⁹ Rita M. Gross, "Is the Goddess a Feminist?" In *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, edited by Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl. New York: NYUP, 2000, 109.

Yogic practice depicted in Chinnamastā or Chinnamunḍā-vajrayoginī image

Chinnamastā or Chinnamunḍā form of Vajrayoginī is one form of meditational deities of in Hindu and Buddhist tantra. Conceptually, she is an embodiment of wisdom (*prajñā*), representing the feminine aspect of one's innate nature and the clarity gained from the discriminating awareness in female form. She is one of the most often cited deities in tantric texts and there exists a number of praise verses (*stotra*) dedicated to her in different tantric texts.

Chinnamunḍā-vajrayoginī in which she manifests in a three-body form.²⁰ Chinnamunḍā, which literally means severed-headed, is the self-decapitated form of Vajrayoginī. In this unusual form, Vajrayoginī appears with her two attendant yoginīs, Vajravairochanī and Vajravarṇanī. In Śākta tantras Chinnamunḍā is named as Chinnamastā where she is amongst the ten-great-wisdom (*das-mahāvidyā*) goddesses. In Buddhist tantra, Chinnamunḍā is a personal meditational deity, existing not outside the practitioner's own mind.

One of the prominent sources for Buddhist tantra practices is *Sādhnamālā*, in which the *Sādhana* number 232 portrays her as:²¹

The practitioners should visualize their navel as an opened white lotus surmounted by a red solar disk. On the top of that is a *Hṛim* (the seed Mantra of Vajrayoginī). This *Hṛim* transforms into the yellow coloured Vajrayoginī who is holding her own self-cut-off head in her left hand and a scimitar in her right hand.... Three streams of blood gush out from her severed body as falling into the mouth of her cut off head and into the mouths of the two yoginis, Vajravarṇanī, blue in colour to her left and Vajravairocanī, yellow in colour to her right both of whom hold a dagger in their left and right hand respectively, and the skull cup in the right and left hands respectively.... On all sides in the intermediate space between the yoginīs is the very frightening cremation ground.

The esoteric meaning of this 'awful' depiction of the goddess is hidden in yogic practice which is related to the three major wind channels (*nāḍī*) of the subtle body commonly known as Lalanā, Rasanā and Avadhūtī in Buddhist tantra and Idā, Piṅgalā, and Suṣumnā in Hindu tantra.

The practice manual named *The guide to Dākinī Land* states that the inner winds are special subtle energy that flows through channels when the mind is engaged with an external object or activity.²² The wind that flows through the left and right channels is impure and causes the false notion of a self-intrinsic existence of the phenomenal world, obscuring the experience of clear-light-emptiness (*prabhā-svara-śūnyatā*). When the central channel, which is pure in nature, is invoked, the practitioner experiences the falling off of the false notion of selfhood (*ātmagrāha*) which gives rise to the wisdom of great bliss and the two other left and right wind channels continue to exist drawing their source from the central channel.

This yogic *sādhana* has been portrayed in an anthropomorphic representation of Chinnamunḍā in which she represents the central wind channel while her two attendants

²⁰ Elisabeth Anne Benard, *Chinnamastā: The Awful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2010, 74–75.

²¹ Benard, *Chinnamastā: The Awful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess*, 85.

²² Gyatso, *Guide to Dakini Land*, 218.

represent the left and right auxiliary channels. The five energy-nodes (*cakra*) that pass through the central wind channel are also labelled as tantric goddesses.

From this analysis of the iconography of the Chinnamastā image, it can be observed that the symbolism of tantra has a profound practical basis inherent in it.

Similar to any scientific research procedure in which experimental facts are correlated with mathematical symbols to work out a mathematical model, tantric masters also discover the practices by experimenting with their own psyche and the results obtained from their experiments are given a schematic form. This scheme which is modelled as an anthropomorphic figure represents yogic practices in an abstract manner. However, tantric texts are silent on or speak metaphorically about, these symbols to avoid their trivialization.

Conclusion

A deeper understanding of tantric iconography reveals that much of the symbolism of tantra has been derived from a profound practice-based tradition which is often esoteric in nature. Tantric manuals suggest that the figures are not icons of beings, be it god or human, but that they are icons of ideas in a stylized mode. With their literature encoded in symbolism and their practices veiled in secrecy, most often such iconography is improperly assessed by people who are unaware of these esoteric concepts.

Any discipline of the scholarship is not just concerned about just collecting the data, but also understanding them in their own context. Besides the question of ‘what’ they represent, the question of ‘why’ and ‘how’ are equally important. As Ananda Coomaraswamy has pointed out, ‘For as long as the work of art appears to us in any way exotic, bizarre, quaint, or arbitrary, we cannot pretend to have understood it.’²³ Therefore, unless a discrete and unbiased study of the historicity of tantra, encompassing the perspective of tradition is not done, the misconceptions are bound to persist in our academia.

²³ A. K. Coomaraswamy, *A True Scholar*, 14.