



# Kālī Kaula

A Manual of Tantric Magick  
by Jan Fries

Kālī Kaula



Published by Avalonia

BM Avalonia

London

WC1N 3XX

England, UK

[www.avaloniabooks.co.uk](http://www.avaloniabooks.co.uk)

KALI KAULA

Copyright © 2010 Jan Fries

Original illustrations © 2010 Jan Fries

Cover photography and digital artwork © 2010 Astrid Bauer

ISBN (10) 1905297-37-8

ISBN (13) 978-1-905297-37-5

First Edition, September 2010

Design by Satori

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data. A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, microfilm, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, or used in another book, without written permission from the authors.

# Kālī Kaula

A Manual of Tantric Magick

Jan Fries

Published by Avalonia  
[www.avaloniabooks.co.uk](http://www.avaloniabooks.co.uk)



Figure 1 - Tigerblossom.

## Acknowledgements

This book took quite a while to develop, and then a further few years to find its way to print. In the process, a good many people influenced, supported and inspired the project. There are many whom I want to thank.

Thanks are due to all those who shared in the weaving, who contributed, provided literature, agreed, disagreed, made me happy or mad and otherwise did their share to make this book much better than I could have made it on my own. It's been a difficult journey and many of us underwent considerable changes in the process. I am very grateful to all of you.

This goes for my personal deities, who encouraged, confused and amazed me many times as I transformed with the writing, but it also goes for the many kind and dedicated souls who participated in this communion.

First of all, I would like to thank Astrid and Gavin for their friendship and the wonderful job they did in streamlining the manuscript, designing the front cover and helping me to find a new editor. Without their untiring help, this book would still be unpublished.

In the years between writing and publication, the manuscript went through the hands of several dedicated friends, each of whom contributed in one way or another to its final publication.

Heartfelt thanks and blessings go to Mogg Morgan of Mandrake of Oxford, Robert Ansell of Fulgur and Nigel Saunders.

Finally, thanks to Marina, it found its way to Avalonia.

Sorita D'Este and David Rankine proved to be a pair of inspired, patient and reliable co-workers, for whose excellent efforts I am very grateful.

Then there are my dear friends who supplied ideas, criticism, encouragement, books, inspiration, practical advice, support, provocation and much needed diversions.

Thank you (in alphabetical order), Alex, Anad, Dieter, John, Julia, Kenneth, Maggie (Nema), Mike and Volkert.

I am very grateful to Louise Finn for her advice on shaking in literature, a very special mantra and her kindness in allowing me to quote from her writings. May your work prosper.

Thanks are due to the gurus of my childhood, my parents, grandmother and to Gisela Eberlein, who taught me much more than she knew.

Greetings and thanks to my main Wushu teachers Kim Dagu Nee and Little Lee: some of your lore has gone into the chapters on posture and breathing. Wherever you are: blessings.



Thanks are due to the local Bengali community for allowing me to participate in many of their annual rituals. Jay Durgā!

Special thanks to Xiaonan. Your laughter was essential for the completion of this book (and the foundation of the next).

Many thanks to Richard Bandler, whose pioneering insights on hypnosis, submodalities and innovative trance induction are a mind-blowing source of fresh inspiration. Your work has transformed my magick and my life.

More than three decades ago, Kenneth Grant's gloriously darksome writings aroused my interest in the Nightside of tantric magick. And Maggie (Nema) taught me how to discover this magick in any ancient religion I came upon. Indeed, Maat goes across time and space on wings of nothingness. Thank you both for this blessing.

While writing this book, Maxine Hong Kingston's books were a delightful source of fresh ideas. I admire her passionate way of blending alternate realities and the many practical and poetic references to subconscious thought processes. Peace be with you.

At the same time, I discovered the unique movies of Hayao Miyazaki. They helped me through some difficult times and gave new enthusiasm to my work. If you want to see real magick, shamanism and modern mythology, the Studio Ghibli movies are a must.

Next, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all the magnificent indologists and tantric scholars whose exemplary work has made this book possible. Your names appear in the bibliography, which ought to inspire all readers to buy your books and enjoy them. It's a great boon that there are academics who struggle with eldritch manuscripts (instead of, say, sitting in the sunshine at the beach) and share them with the world. I have quoted from your work and hope that I have not misinterpreted your insights. Let me apologise for errors, misspellings and misunderstandings; they are my own responsibility. And I can only ask my readers to study your works in full length. There is no shortcut to enlightenment, and all who really wish to understand what a fascinating, multi-layered subject Tantra is, are invited to read up on the subject in full length. All I have written is a brief introduction to a huge subject: be assured that a lot of exceptional material, well worth exploring in body and mind, remains to be discovered.

Finally, I wish to thank all of you who go beyond reading and develop something new and wonderful. Tantra is a living art, and it is you who make it so. Here's to the future!

Dedicated to five living geniuses:

Richard Bandler, Kenneth Grant, Maxine Hong Kingston,  
Maggie Ingalls, Hayao Miyazaki.

Blessings to you all!



## Other Books by Jan Fries

*Visual Magick: A Handbook of Freestyle Shamanism*, Mandrake, 1992 & 2001

*Helrunar: Manual of Rune Magick*, Mandrake, 1993 & 2002

*Seidways: Shaking, Swaying and Serpent Mysteries*, Mandrake, 1996

*Living Midnight: Three Movements of the Tao*, Mandrake, 1998

*The Cauldron of the Gods: Manual of Celtic Magick*, Mandrake, 2003

## Disclaimer

Although both Avalonia Books and the author of this book have taken great care to ensure the authenticity of the information and the techniques contained therein, we are not responsible, in whole or in part, for any injury which may occur to the reader or readers by reading and/or following the instructions in this book. It is understood that many of the techniques, rituals and meditations are only discussed for scholarly purposes, and that there exists a potential for injury when using the techniques or practices described in this publication, especially when the full text is not carefully studied.

It is essential that before following any of the activities, physical, meditative or otherwise, herein described, the reader or readers should first consult his or her physician for advice on whether practising or using the techniques, rituals or meditations described in this publication could cause injury, physical, mental or otherwise. Since the techniques and physical activities could be too demanding or sophisticated, it is essential that a physician be consulted. Also, local, state or federal laws may prohibit the practice of physical activities, rituals or exercises described in this publication. A thorough examination must be made of the federal, state or local laws before the reader or readers attempt to try or practice any of the exercises, techniques, rituals, meditations or any other activity described in this publication.

Neither Avalonia Books nor the author guarantees the legality or the appropriateness of the techniques, acts, rituals, exercises or meditations herein contained.

# Table of Contents

Illustrations .....	13
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>17</b>
The Scope of this Book .....	19
Abbreviations of primary sources with comments .....	22
<b>1: Dakṣa's Feast.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2: Before Tantra.....</b>	<b>30</b>
The Indus Valley.....	32
The Vedic Period .....	41
Seers on Soma .....	43
Vedic Religion.....	46
Spiritual Discipline.....	54
The World Soul.....	58
Classes of Society.....	61
Beyond Veda .....	63
New Faiths: Buddhism and Jaina .....	67
Elder Hinduism .....	71
Dharma and the Pattern of Society.....	74
Problems with Purity .....	76
Ups and Downs of the Deities.....	77
Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas and Śāktas .....	82
<b>3: The Texture of Tantra .....</b>	<b>88</b>
Twilight Language .....	88
Śiva and Śakti.....	92
Sex, Gender, and Religion.....	97
Three and a half consciousness states.....	110
Skulls and Corpses.....	113
Animal Sacrifice .....	115
What have you learned? .....	117
<b>4: Tantric History .....</b>	<b>119</b>
Tantric Traditions.....	127
Kāpālikas and Aghoras .....	129
Kula and Kaula.....	131
Krama.....	135
Śrī Vidyā .....	139
Mahācīna.....	141

<b>5: Masks of the Divine.....</b>	<b>155</b>
The Guru Game .....	155
The Primal Guru .....	157
Guru Pūjā .....	159
Learning Together.....	160
Hymn:.....	161
Webs of Delusion .....	161
Divine Actors .....	163
Female Saints .....	167
Female Ascetics.....	172
Tāntrikās.....	174
 <b>6: Body as a Whole .....</b>	 <b>181</b>
Maps of the Body .....	183
Being at Ease.....	185
A Choice of Postures.....	186
Shaking, Swaying, and Primal Vibration .....	191
Nyāsa: a Touch of the Divine .....	195
Initiation and Nyāsa .....	196
An Armour of Protection .....	198
Mudrās.....	199
Helpful Hands.....	202
 <b>7: The Joy of Breath.....</b>	 <b>205</b>
Breath and suggestion .....	226
Prāṇa in Antiquity .....	229
Classical prāṇāyāma.....	232
 <b>8: Mantra .....</b>	 <b>236</b>
A World of Vibration.....	236
Recitation .....	236
A Structure of Mantras .....	238
Svāhā .....	240
A Choice of Mantras.....	241
Śrī Vidyā's Playful Goddess .....	245
Bīja .....	251
Māyā: Waking the Mantra .....	259
Lakṣmī: Maintaining a Mantra.....	263
Kālī: Transcending a Mantra.....	265
Japa Mālā.....	267
Using the Japa-Mālā .....	271
Counting digits.....	274
A Chance to Wake Up .....	276
 <b>9: The Heart of Kula .....</b>	 <b>280</b>
The Heart in Veda.....	280
The Heart in Tantra.....	281
The Heart as an Organ.....	284
The Heart as a Cakra.....	284
Home of the Personal Deity .....	285

The Heart in Kashmir Tantricism.....	286
Experience of the Heart.....	288
A Note of Caution .....	292
The Heart of Dao .....	292
<b>10: Seeing in the Heart.....</b>	<b>296</b>
A World of Visions.....	296
A Question of Perspective .....	298
Coding your Perception.....	299
A Shower of Ambrosia .....	302
The Black Elixir.....	305
Yoni Mudrā .....	307
Going for Colour.....	308
Union with the Gods .....	310
<b>11: The Path of the Serpent .....</b>	<b>314</b>
Occult Anatomy .....	319
Bhūta Śuddhi: the Purification of the Principles of your Body .....	320
A Look at Tradition .....	326
Kuṇḍalinī: Consciousness, Power, and the World Glamour .....	330
Nātha Lore.....	334
A Classical Approach .....	337
Kuṇḍalinī Yoga .....	339
A Practical Approach .....	340
<b>12: A Feast of Five.....</b>	<b>346</b>
Tantric sex.....	346
Erotica .....	348
Pañcamakāra.....	352
Orgasm.....	363
Substitutes .....	367
A Day in the Life of a Neo-Kaula.....	369
<b>13: Red and White .....</b>	<b>382</b>
The Yoni Shrine .....	382
Menstruation .....	385
Mothers, Seizers, and Yoginīs.....	388
Alone with Lilith.....	397
Secret Sacraments .....	400
Science of Rasa .....	403
Fluid Gnosis .....	404
The Partner for You .....	409
<b>14: Mahāvidyās .....</b>	<b>411</b>
Ten Principles of Wisdom .....	411
The Mahāvidyās and You.....	447
Direct Experience .....	450



<b>15: Kālī's Kula .....</b>	<b>463</b>
Nirṛti .....	463
Kālī Rising .....	465
Kālī Abroad .....	473
Masks of Kālī .....	478
Hymn to Kālī - Karpūrādi-Stotra .....	491
Rites of Kālī .....	500
Kālī Yantra .....	505
Kālī's Flowers .....	506
Tribute to the Jackals .....	507
Playing in Guyana .....	508

<b>Appendix One: Language and Pronunciation .....</b>	<b>514</b>
Vowels .....	516
Consonants .....	518

<b>Appendix Two: A Brief Glossary of Saṅskṛt Terms ..</b>	<b>520</b>
A .....	520
B .....	523
C .....	524
D .....	525
G .....	526
H .....	527
I .....	528
J .....	528
K .....	529
L .....	533
M .....	533
N .....	535
O .....	536
P .....	536
R .....	538
S .....	539
T .....	542
U .....	544
V .....	544
Y .....	545

<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>547</b>
---------------------------	------------

<b>Index .....</b>	<b>558</b>
--------------------	------------

## Illustrations

Figure 1 - Tigerblossom.....	4
Figure 2 - Śiva.....	16
Figure 3 - Mesolithic Rock Art.....	31
Figure 4 - Indus Culture, seals. (Not to scale.).....	33
Figure 5 - Proto-yantras in rock-art.....	38
Figure 6 - Indus Culture, seals.....	39
Figure 7 - Indus Culture. Figurines from Mehrgarh.....	40
Figure 8 - Buffalo-horned, three-faced deity, surrounded by wild animals.....	48
Figure 9 - Agni.....	49
Figure 10 - Rudra the archer.....	53
Figure 11 - Early yogis.....	57
Figure 12 - Life after Life.....	62
Figure 13 - Unknown Goddesses.....	70
Figure 14 - Divine Heads.....	72
Figure 15 - Śiva.....	84
Figure 16 - Nandī at night.....	86
Figure 17 - Ardhanariśvarī or Ardhanariśvara.....	91
Figure 18 - Bhairava.....	96
Figure 19 - Bhairava.....	98
Figure 20 - Spotted Mouse-deer.....	106
Figure 21 - Female musician (drummer).....	109
Figure 22 - Lakṣmī statue.....	111
Figure 23 - Hyena dreaming.....	118
Figure 24 - Nightside Gaṇeśa of the cremation ground.....	128
Figure 25 - Chinese influence.....	144
Figure 26 - From womb to womb like spiders.....	164
Figure 27 - Fig tree weaving.....	176
Figure 28 - Lotus.....	187
Figure 29 - The Living Wasteland.....	193
Figure 30 - Mudrās.....	201
Figure 31 - More Mudrās.....	203
Figure 32 - Yantras for Sorcery from the Saundarya Laharī.....	252
Figure 33- Bijas.....	256
Figure 34 - Bijas. Five phases of Krama.....	258
Figure 35 - Indian Black Vulture.....	279
Figure 36 - Bhairava.....	282
Figure 37 - Triple Śakti.....	291
Figure 38 - Kāmadeva.....	306
Figure 39 - Circles.....	328
Figure 40 - Lovers.....	350
Figure 41 - Śiva and Pārvatī.....	353



Figure 42 - Gaṇapati and Siddhī.....	361
Figure 43 - Lovers. ....	365
Figure 44 - Lovers. ....	379
Figure 45 - Yantra of the Kula ritual. ....	384
Figure 46 - Woman or Yakṣī holding her own (or a stolen) child.....	390
Figure 47 - Yakṣī. ....	392
Figure 48 - Yoginī with serpents. ....	394
Figure 49 - Skanda / Kārtikeya. ....	402
Figure 50 - One way of doing Yoni-mudrā.....	405
Figure 51 - Tārā.....	414
Figure 52 - Tārā yantras. ....	415
Figure 53 - Lalitā Tripurā Sundarī. ....	420
Figure 54 - Lalitā Tripurā Sundarī yantras. ....	421
Figure 55 - Bhuvaneśvarī. ....	422
Figure 56 - Bhuvaneśvarī yantras. ....	423
Figure 57 - Bhairvī. ....	427
Figure 58 - Bhairavī yantras. ....	428
Figure 59 - Chinnamastā. ....	429
Figure 60 - Chinnamastā yantras. ....	430
Figure 61 - Dhūmāvatī. ....	433
Figure 62 - Dhūmāvatī yantras. ....	434
Figure 63 - Bagalā.....	435
Figure 64- Bagalā yantras. ....	436
Figure 65 - Mātāṅgī. ....	441
Figure 66 - Mātāṅgī yantras. ....	442
Figure 67 - Lakṣmī yantras. ....	443
Figure 68 - Contemporary Lakṣmī yantras. ....	444
Figure 69 - Kālī & Śiva yantras. ....	449
Figure 70 - Siddhilakṣmī Kamalā. ....	461
Figure 71 - Statue of Kālī as a young woman.....	464
Figure 72 - Kālī in folk religion.....	466
Figure 73 - Kālī and Śiva making love.....	476
Figure 74 - Bhadrā Kālī. ....	483
Figure 75 - Two classical Kālī yantras. ....	487
Figure 76 - Aranyā.....	490
Figure 77 - Heads and hands for Kālī.....	504
Figure 78 - Gate after Gate. ....	509
Figure 79 - Kālī rising.....	512





Figure 2 - Śiva.

# Introduction

**Na-aham-asmi-naca-anyo 'sti kevalāḥ śaktayas-tv-aham**

*I am not, neither does another exist; I am only energies.*

(Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka*, 29, 64, trans. Dupuche, 2006: 221)

This may be the beginning of the strangest journey you ever made.

The book you just bought (or are snuggling up to in the bookshop of your choice) is an invitation. Here you find Tantra way beyond the glitter and foam of New Age eroticism. Here is the hard core stuff, the real thing as it was developed in the harsh mountains of Kashmir, the scorching heat of southern India and the moist, fever infested jungles of Assam. Here is the vast and void heart of the black goddess, the secret seat of initiation and a dark doorway leading to ... you'll find out as you pass through and then, at last, beyond. Tantra.

Which isn't quite true. It's not a book about Tantra at all. There is no such thing as Tantra, at least to those who live it. The folk who invented Tantra did not call it that. It was other people, many of them way outside of the phenomenon, who coined the term, centuries after the fun and madness of the beginning. Tantra is just a word, and not a very good one. There were and are hundreds of 'Tantric' systems all over Asia, most of them in happy disagreement with each other. The more you learn about Tantra the less will you like the expression. 'Tantra' is so vast you can't pin it down, you can't define it nor need you bother to try. If you need a word for what you are doing, or a tradition to cling to, you'll never discover the essence that makes you pulse and vibrate with life. Confused? You should be. So am I, and I wrote this thing.

So it's not 'Tantra' after all, which is quite a relief, what with so many badly informed dabblers giving it a bad name. Here is something you might call Kaula, if you have to. Or which you could call Krama, if you need a name for something mysterious we can't be really sure about. It's way beyond names that the real thing happens. Beyond the labels, beyond the traditions, beyond the glamour of commercialisation or the stuffy earnestness of some academics who haven't had a good laugh in a decade. Here is the concentrated essence of experience. It's your chance to discover something new, and your invitation to make up what you can't find and manifest what you will as it suits you.

Now some of you may yearn for arcane traditions. Some may wish for 'mysterious India' - gleaming palaces, babbling mynah birds, half starved yogis placidly baking in the sun, alluring ladies in stunningly colourful



saris and, of course, the hallowed wisdom of the ancients, sticky and sweet. India, the land where everybody is spiritual. India, a culture of divine eroticism, of enchanting fables and a romantic wisdom that the poor bleary-eyed West never really had. Except for some Druids of course, who probably got it from India. Or was that Egypt? Or Atlantis? You're welcome. One huge naan bread covered with sweet and spicy things, many of them made of plastic. No, we won't have that. This is not the place for idealisation. Here is your chance to enjoy vindaloo Mahākālī and find out what it does to you. Here is your chance to think and do and discover. Because if you go for tradition you'll never get anywhere.

One reason I wrote this book is that Kālī asked me to. She is mightily fed up with all the Tantric New Age rubbish that clutters up those horrid little shops where goody-goody muzak fills the air, spirituality equates with reduced expectations, and people look as if they ate soap all day. She loathes 'Tantric Kits' filled with aromatic massage oils, scented candles, honey-dust, and ten page guidebooks offering mantras, postures, and rituals to spiritualise a boring lovelife. And she spits on those who call themselves Tantric Masters. It's true. It happens all the time. Because Kaula, Krama, Trika, Mahācīna et al are so much more. More than sex, more than religion, more than a hobby or an interest. They are all of life and go way beyond each single lifetime. They also go way beyond your personality. Beyond any personality.

You don't get it by reading books. You certainly won't get it for money. Nor is imitation enough. The one and only way to get in there and out again happily is to live the way with all the power, joy, and passion you can raise. And you can, as you will learn, when you transcend the limit. It's not enough to repeat a few mantras. It's not enough to dabble into cakras or visualise a little serpent in your spine. It's a lot more than playing gods to legitimise your lovemaking. The fun begins when you give all you've got and find that there is a lot more you never knew of. It's when you charge your body with bliss and power and take that good feeling with a huge smile and double it and fill yourself up with that joy, double it again, and double that. (Thank you, Richard!) It's when you saturate yourself and all around with sheer, mind-blowing enthusiasm. It's when you take that mantra and turn on the volume and add chorus and echo and make it blast all the way through your being so it shakes you to the core. It's here when you stop mucking around with half hearted images and serene indifference. That vision can be brighter, larger, clearer, closer, better! That experience can be a lot more impressive if you make it so! It's your brain, it's your nervous system and you can take them wherever you want. Don't just think of Kuṇḍalinī, live her, be her, know her as yourself and the whole world, and go beyond! And when you descend into the heart, go deeper and deeper, shed the forms that appear, layer after layer, until you reach the point of utter reality where form and emptiness make love. Who are you now? Who have you ever been?

Here we are way beyond mind games. If we have to call Tantra anything, let's call it a set of techniques that work; coupled with

wildness, joy, daring, and the sense of going for it that shakes you out of whatever you used to be before. That's what the pioneers did. And why they got so far. That's what later generations lost when they got stuck in tradition, regulations, fancy speculation, tons of theories, chatter and dumb-headed obedience. Here is a book for those who dream and dare and do. When you wake up, you can find Kālī in here. She doesn't want tepid worship, part-time devotion, or imitation of saintliness. There are too many pretenders around as it is, in India, California, and in any occult organisation, you name it.

She wants you to put everything into the offering, Because that's the only way of getting everything out of it. Your belly for joy, lust, and good feelings. Your heart for love and laughter. Your head for learning and thinking and learning anew. When you bring these together, you are ready to surprise yourself. Do it now.

## **The Scope of this Book**

When I was completing *Cauldron of the Gods*, a friend asked what I was reading. 'It's the *Kaulajñāna nirṇaya*', I replied, glancing happily at the little red book, with its tattered cover and the goddess-knows-what-do-they-use-instead-of-paper look so popular among Indian publishers, '...wonderful stuff on mediation and one of the most practical Tantras I've ever come upon.'

'Not Celtic stuff any more?'

'It's getting on my nerves. There is far too little practical material in surviving Celtic lore. I'm fed up with question marks, medieval myths, and idle speculation. At least the Kaula folk had a clear interest in things that work. And they had a sense of humour. That's something amazingly rare in old literature.'

'You're not going to write a book on Tantra, are you?'

'Oh no. Tantra is huge, vast, and overwhelming. You could write a hundred books on that topic. Given the amount of surviving literature, you could spend all your life researching and it still would only amount to a fragment. Sorry, a book on Tantra is impossible.'

Well, this is it.

Luckily, I did not have to write about all of Tantra. I just picked a small section of surviving (and translated) literature, combined it with a lot of daily practice, promised myself that this book wouldn't be such a monster as *Cauldron* and went to work. Luckily, I had been researching some of the more exciting 'Tantric' traditions for several decades. I decided to focus on these early traditions, basically Kula, Kaula, Krama, and a bit of Trika, to add whatever happens to work, some history at the beginning, and to ignore the vast majority of Tantric movements that belong to Buddhism or Right-Hand-Path-Stay-in-Line-and-do-as-you-are-told Hindu Tantra. Regrettably, I had to leave out several fascinating traditions, and even more that are so dull and boring that I won't bother you with them. As a result, the book you are reading is in no way



representative for what modern Indians or Westerners deign to consider 'Tantric', for the very simple reason that only a few early, minor movements are examined, and these only in respect to practical application. Even among these lineages, a huge amount of material was not included.

Take initiation for example. For the early Kaulas, initiation refers to a complex of highly refined rituals involving a fair share of hypnosis. Here, initiation is not a formality but an experience that liberates the initiate from being a 'bound animal'. Now the Kaulas were practical people. They did not attach much importance to trust and faith. Instead, they tested their results. So should you. A student who showed the five signs of Śaktipāṭa, the 'descent of energy' (without being told about them previously) was encouraged to continue. For those of you who wish to know what signs they are, Abhinavagupta lists them in *Tantrāloka*, 29, 208: bliss, lightness of the body, trembling of the body, sleep of the outer sense-organs, and a certain reeling or staggering. These indicate a descent of energy (Śaktipāṭa), they are also signs that Rudraśakti has cleansed the various bodies of the initiate (for the time being). Which is by no means the only approach to the subject. There is a vast range of initiation formulas, many of them so obscure that it takes an amazingly competent guru to make them work. As this is a practical book, and as you obviously do your thing without such a guru (most of them seem to have died out with original Kula, Kaula, and Krama before the 14th century CE), the topic had to be left out. Nevertheless, it is an essential part of the original traditions and I apologise for not devoting much space to the subject.

Another such subject is the science of the phonemes, of the categories of existence, and the vast range of philosophical insight that appeared out of the practical experiences of those wonderfully mad seers. Here you encounter so much mind-boggling cosmology that Hebrew Qabalah, Mesopotamian astrology, and the otherworlds of the Egyptians seem like children's toys by comparison. Some systems were entirely founded on such speculations. Others focused on practical matters and when the budding Tāntrika happened to have world-shaking insights, these were acknowledged with a grin, but nobody made a big issue out of them. There are 'Tantric' systems that appear 'philosophical' but are not, as they were based on spiritual experience instead of thought and speculation. In fact, there are a lot of them and they do not agree with each other, not even in the basics. Hence, in this book 'Tantric theory' was reduced to a tiny little minimum. While you and I may prefer the practice to theories, I would not want to give the impression that all 'Tantric' gurus thought like that.

Another topic I have neglected is practical magic, sorcery, and spellcraft. Western writers tend to give the impression that 'Tantra' and 'Yoga' are disciplines meant to produce well-being, health, enlightenment, and liberation, and that their application for sorceries are perversions of the originally pure creed. Which may sound good but is simply not true. Sorcery was always there, and for most practitioners it was the main thing. You find it in the earliest texts. Rituals to create

magic swords that decapitate enemies from a distance, rituals to shake cities, paralyse, stun, blind, or otherwise crush opponents and so on. Such rites appealed to sorcerers who made a profit selling spells, they were also amazingly popular among kings and politicians seeking to control other kingdoms. Far from being a low-caste perversion, such rites were cherished by well-educated folk from the highest levels of society. It may not be a popular idea, but it is true that many of the earliest yogīs and Tāntrikas did not give a damn for ethics or what modern people consider 'spiritual'.

Alchemy is another topic that had to be largely disregarded. It has been ignored by most researchers, apart from such pioneers as David Gordon White. The art of refining and ingesting mercury and cinnabar are essential to many 'Tantric' systems, such as the Siddhas, and by no means peripheral. Numerous adepts who developed Hāṭhayoga and the modern seven cakras system were happily ingesting poisons, no matter the consequences. As, from the practical point of view, there is very little use in this topic - unless you want to kill yourself - I have only mentioned the matter here and there.

Last, there is an enormous range of what we may loosely call 'Folk-Tantra', based on a myriad ethnic traditions and local deities, customs, and rituals. While the word 'Tantra' essentially means 'a weaving, a text' and all we know of the earlier systems is based on their written heritage, there is an enormously complex, colourful, and mind-boggling range of non-literate traditions developed by people out on the road or leading a life as a householder in society. These topics are beautifully presented in the books of June McDaniel.

To make up for all these omissions, I can only encourage you to read as much scholarly literature on 'Tantra' as you can lay your hands on, to discover what works for you, and to improve it. 'Tantra' is not a fossil from the museum of outdated spirituality; it is an attitude that will transform your life in many ways. If you want to thank those who went before you, learn all you can, improve the lot, and take it into new dimensions.



## Abbreviations of primary sources with comments

**AV *Atharvaveda*** Youngest of the four *Vedas*, the AV offers a wide range of hymns, spells and sorceries, ritual instructions, formulae and unusual material that had no place in the earlier Vedas. The Atharvaveda is remarkable for its practical-minded outlook and for its poetic refinement. The AV stands between classical Vedic thought and the more refined philosophy of the Upaniṣads.

### **BāUp *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad***

**DM *Devī Māhātmya*** (also known as *Śrī Durgā Saptasatī* or as the *Caṇḍī*) A 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century CE text that survived by becoming part of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. One of the earliest manifestations of the Śākta movement. A brief and poetic work in seven hundred mantras describing three episodes of the Devī's battles against demons. The contradictions indicate that this early work combines several elder traditions.

**DBh *Devī Bhāgavatam Purāṇa*** A massive work in 100,000 verses on goddess mythology and the typical Purāṇa topics, such as cosmology, genealogy, pseudo-history, geography, daily ritual, meditation, worship, one thousand names of the deity etc. Most of it was complete by the 13th century CE but a few sections seem to have been added up to the 17th century. The DBh, though professing to be a Śākta work, is strongly influenced by Vaiṣṇava philosophy and traditional Hindu ethics. Tantra is usually considered with suspicion, class remains a must, and in spite of all goddess veneration, women are not entitled to read it on their own. In spite of such shortcomings, the DBh remains an important source of unusual ideas.

**GS *Gheraṇḍa Saṁhita*** The teachings of saint Gheraṇḍa on yoga. One of the classic works on early yoga.

**KP *Kālikāpurāṇa*** c. 9<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, earliest surviving manuscript 1726 CE.

**KS *Karpūrādi Stotra*** Hymn to Camphor (Kālī). Possibly the shortest summary of left-hand worship in Tantric literature.

**KN *Kaulajñāna nīrṇaya*** a Tantra attributed to Matsyendranātha, c. 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, containing practices of the Yogīnī and the Nātha schools. The *KJN* is remarkable for its refreshing style, its detailed instructions on meditation and visualisation and for its unorthodox, practical approach. Highly recommended.

### **KBUp *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad***

**KCT *Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra*** 'The Crest-Jewel of the Kula' (i.e. menstrual blood freely given for the purpose of sādhana), an early Tantra (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century CE). A wild nigama full of ambiguous instructions for ritual and/or internal worship. Unique material on Kālī, Mahiṣamardīnī and the Mātṛkā Devis. The text often seems outspoken and down-to-earth, but this impression may be misleading. As the practical instructions are usually brief, much has to be learned from other sources (or invented). Highly recommended for advanced practitioners.

**KT Kulārṇava Tantra** An influential Tantra begun in the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE but modified repeatedly over the next centuries. The style is strict and unpoetic, it contains numerous contradictions due to the many contributors. Useful details on Kula and Kaula traditions of the wilder sort, such as the Five Ms, ecstatic worship, obsession, yoga etc. Occasionally very narrow-minded and given to long catalogues of prohibitions. The translation by Pandit/Woodroffe is strongly abridged, that by Rai is not quite scholarly but (except for the mantras) complete.

**LT Lakṣmī Tantra** A Vaiṣṇava Tantra of the Pāñcarātra tradition in the form of a nigama, c. 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century CE. A brilliant blend of refined philosophy and practical ritual, often expressed with clarity and consideration of detail.

**MHB Mahābhārata** An ancient epic in c. 100,000 verses. The core of the tale (the original *Bhārata*) dates around 1000 BCE, its 'modern' form accumulated up to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the textual form reached its completion in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. It details the legendary war between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. The *MHB* has encyclopaedic character. It aims at recording every item of Indian lore and succeeds remarkably.

**MNT Mahānirvāṇa Tantra** A late (17<sup>th</sup> century CE?) but very influential Tantra containing some excellent (elder) material on Kālī and several chapters on law, inheritance and social regulations, most of them boring and conservative.

**MāUp Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad**

**MM Mantramahodhadhiḥ** 'The Ocean of Mantra', a collection of mantras, yantras and their attribution to deities and ritual, by Mahidhara, written in 1588 CE.

**Mup Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad** An innovative text dating c. 500 BCE, including the earliest reference to Kālī.

**PP Pādukā Pañcaka** 'The Fivefold Footstool', a short, late text on Kuṇḍalinī and the cakras.

**PTL Parātrīśikālaghuvṛttiḥ** (also called *Anuttaratattvavimarśinī*) Abhinavagupta's short commentary on 36 verses of the *Rudrayāmala Tantra*.

**PTV Parātrīśikā Vivaraṇa** (also called *Tattvaviveka*, *Tattvavivaraṇa* and *Anuttaraprakriyā*) Abhinavagupta's long commentary on thirty-six verses of the *Rudrayāmala Tantra*. The *PTV*, written in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, is remarkable for its intense clarity and its mind-blowing sophistication. Very hard to understand for those who only have theoretical knowledge but a blessing for all advanced practitioners. Good material on the heart, occult grammar, the word, phonemes, Trika lore etc.

**RY Rāmāyaṇa** Famous ancient epic that took written form between 200 BCE and 200 CE. It describes Rāma's search for his abducted wife Sītā.

**RV Ṛgveda** The earliest Veda, a collection of more than a thousand hymns to various deities, collected c. 1200 BCE.



ŚCN *Ṣaṭ Cakra Nirūpaṇa* 'Description of the Six Centres', a late text on the cakras and the raising of Kuṇḍalinī.

SL *Saundarya Laharī* A difficult poem in one hundred verses that hides the secrets of practical Śrī Vidyā worship under a veil of extremely cryptic symbolism. Parts of it constitute the *Ānanda Laharī*. Each verse is supposed to have sorcerous power when recited over a specific diagram.

SSP *Siddha Siddhānta Paddhati* A brief but very deep text attributed to Gorakṣanātha, Nātha pioneer, siddha and allegedly the founder of Haṭha yoga. Good, clear instructions on the tattvas, the internal universe, practical yoga, meditation, advanced Śaivite philosophy etc.

ŚS *Śiva Samhita* An important practical work on Śaiva yoga, visualisation and ritual with a touch of Kaula influence.

ŚLS *Śrī Lalitā Sahasranāma* A hymn to the goddess Lalitā consisting of one thousand names. The text aims at a synthesis of the Śrī Vidyā and the Kaula current.

TT *Toḍala Tantra* An important Kaula Tantra detailing the worship of the Mahāvidyās, plus short passages on yoga, mantra, Kuṇḍalinī, daily worship etc. Each of the Mahāvidyās is equipped with a partner who is a form of Śiva and Viṣṇu.

TR *Tripurā Rahasya* A practical work on meditation and liberation by introversion along the lines of Śrī Vidyā. Few technical instructions but many inspiring parables and tales on the cultivation of the mind. Remarkable as two major protagonists are saintly women.

VT *Vāmakeśvara Tantra* (also known as Vāmakeśvarīmatam) Usually only the first five chapters (the Nityāṣoḍaśikāṇava) are treated. A highly sophisticated Tantra much concerned with worship along the lines of Śrī Vidyā. Long passages on the Śrī Yantra, mantra, mudrā etc.

VBT *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* A short text in 112 verses on enlightenment. Contains very little 'typical' material (such as mantras, phonemes, ritual, worship, sorcery etc.) but a lot of Zen-like thoughts. Highly inspiring.

VST *Vīṇāśikhatantra* A Śaiva Tantra that was highly influential in south-east Asia. It details the worship of Śiva as Tumburu in the centre of the world-map and the four Śaktis Jayā (east), Vijayā (south), Jayantī (west) and Aparājītā (north).

YT *Yonitantra* A short work, possibly 17<sup>th</sup> century CE, praising the yoni, its worship and the sacredness of menstrual blood. Śaivite setting but strong Vaiṣṇava undertones.

# 1: Dakṣa's Feast

In the time before time, the Supreme Śakti shed three forms. Meet Sarasvatī, who became wife of Brahmā; Lakṣmī, who became the mate of Viṣṇu; and Gaurī, the Golden One, lover of Śiva. Then the usual thing happened. Ever so often, there is an Asura or a Dānava who becomes too ambitious. Like the Devas, the Demon folk have a desire for liberation, and sometimes, they take spiritual discipline really seriously. This was the case with the Halāhalas, a particularity ambitious group of Dānavas. They went for extremes of tapas, they indulged in austerities, they exercised through day and night and eventually Brahmā, the Creator, had to grant spiritual powers to them. Which may not have been a very wise idea. However, Brahmā is noted for this sort of thing, no matter how often it gets the Devas into trouble. The Halāhalas said 'Thank you!' to Brahmā and left to conquer the universe. Soon they dominated the three worlds of heaven, earth, and underworld, they even stormed Mount Kailash, evicted Śiva and occupied the Vaikuṇṭha regions in the deep. In sight of such calamities, Viṣṇu and Śiva prepared for war. Brahmā would have none of this. He merely sat back and hoped the others would sort things out properly. And the gods did. Viṣṇu went to the battle accompanied by his heavenly troops and so did Śiva, whose troops are not quite as heavenly. The war lasted for 60,000 years. When the last Halāhala was sent to flight, the gods, tired, weary, and somewhat beside themselves returned to their spouses. They took off their armour, they laid aside their weapons, had a bath and a good drink and began to boast. 'We cut them down' said Viṣṇu. 'We destroyed them utterly!' declared Śiva 'In all the worlds, none could stand against us!'. 'None of you amounts to anything without us!' replied their spouses, 'Who gave you the power to fight? Who granted strength, energy, and valour to you? Who could you ever fight without Śakti?' 'Come on' said the gods, 'we did pretty well, didn't we?' The goddesses broke out laughing. 'Sure', replied the devīs, 'and now you'll learn how to get on without us.'

And without a further word, Lakṣmī and Gaurī disappeared.

The gods remained speechless. Then they began to weep. They bewailed their losses, they lost their divine radiance, they walked the world like madmen. Their power disappeared and so did their function in the universe. Seeing this, Brahmā became very worried. He knew there would be another bunch of Dānavas around before long, and he knew even better that he, on his own, had not a chance against them. In his fear he closed his eyes, introverted, and entered the sacred space of the heart. Within the all-creating cavern of truth, he learned that Paraśakti was angry with the gods, and that she had withdrawn her blessing from them. And Brahmā realised that he had to work for three. With Viṣṇu



mad and Śiva deluded, he had to work as maintainer and destroyer, not that he was much good at the job. The other gods were just as shaken. Then primordial Dakṣa invited the deities, seers, and heavenly ascetics for a placation rite. They went to the slopes of the Himalaya and chanted 'Hrīm' for 100,000 years until the supreme goddess appeared. Paraśakti manifested in their hearts in the form of being, intelligence, and bliss. She held the noose and the elephant goad, her other two hands made the signs that dispel fear and grant boons. The gods and sages praised her, and finally she responded to their worries. 'Listen' the goddess said, who had appeared in the form of Mahāmāyā, 'the madness of the gods will soon pass away. Lakṣmī will reappear when the milk ocean is churned, she will be born together with the elixir of immortality. Gaurī is soon to be reborn, and it will be in Dakṣa's family'. The assembly was delighted to hear this, most of all ancient Dakṣa, who had been a major god in Vedic times but whose importance had faded much over the years.

Now one inauspicious day the seer Durvāsā went to the river Jambū to meditate. He saw the supreme Śakti on the riverbank. Keeping his senses controlled (was the goddess nude?) he recited her bīja 'Hrīm' and this pleased the goddess. She approached the seer and gave him a garland of jasmine, so sweet that numerous bees hovered around the blossoms. In his bliss, the seer put the garland on his head and went to visit Dakṣa. 'What a marvellous garland this is' said Dakṣa. 'Would you like to have it?' replied Durvāsā, who was too generous for his own good. 'Everything in the three worlds may be given to a devotee of Śakti'. 'I will accept it gladly' said Dakṣa. He took the blossom and put it on the pillow of his bed. That night, the jasmine smelled so sweetly that the old god could not sleep. Desire kept him awake, heat and longing. He rolled around on his couch, sleep evaded him, and finally he arose and had intercourse. Soon, Dakṣa's wife gave birth to a daughter. The gods all showered blossoms from the skies, the sun shone brightly, and the rivers began to flow again. The girl was named Satī, she was of the nature of the supreme Brahman and truth herself.

Satī grew up and soon she was old enough to wed Śiva. The very thought made Dakṣa mad. He did not want to give up his daughter, he did not want the incarnate goddess to leave his house, and least of all did he want her married to a god who walked nude, smoked dope, and practised austerities on mountains and in jungles where no sane person would ever wish to dwell. Śiva the impure, the skull-carrier, the mad dancer at the edge of reality. Dakṣa hated Śiva, he hated the thought that his daughter would leave him, but essentially he could do nothing against it. So, in spite of much angry debate, Śiva was invited to Dakṣa's court. There, the ash-smeared god of ascetics married beautiful Satī, then the two left and made their home on the highest mountains. Some say that their lovemaking took another 100,000 years.

One day, Satī learned that her father was giving a great feast. All the gods were invited, the Gandharvas would sing, the Apsaras would dance, and there would be drinking, joy, and merrymaking. Every important deity was invited, except for Śiva and herself. Now, Satī was

not at all happy about being left out. She was still angry that her father had made such an issue out of her marriage, and angrier yet that he was slighting her husband and herself. 'I shall go to that feast,' Satī declared, 'whether we are invited or not!'

'Is it worth it?' replied Śiva, who felt much happier in the jungle than in High Society.

'Why don't we just stay home and have a nice time?'

'We shall go!' shouted Satī, 'and if you won't come I'll go there on my own! I'll show my father just what I think of him!'

'You'll get into trouble' predicted Śiva, 'with your temper, there is bound to be trouble for all concerned.'

'I will go' Satī declared, 'whether you like it or not.'

And so it happened. It was a bad day indeed, when Satī came to her father's house, her face red with rage. Dakṣa had been expecting something like this. When he heard that his daughter had come, he refused to greet and honour her. It turned out to be a fatal mistake.

In her rage, Satī transformed into Kālī. She cursed her father, the feast, and the offerings, and burned herself in yogic fire. She closed the nine gates of her body, her mind turned into fire, her body collapsed and her spirit, liberated, soared elsewhere. Then Śiva arrived on the scene. Seeing his wife dead, a flood of rage surged through him, manifesting demons, vampires, and evil spirits. Screeching with glee they came over the hallowed ground. See Śiva on the rampage! The guests scream as the offerings are ruined, burned, trampled, obliterated, defiled, and demons dance between the dishes. With one blow, Śiva decapitated the father of his bride. He took the head of a sacrificial goat and stuck it on Dakṣa's neck, so that to this day, Dakṣa is obliged to look like the goat he really was. Then the sacrifice was destroyed, destroyed utterly, and nothing remained as it was. And Śiva lifted the body of his wife. Carrying her corpse, he stumbled from the site of havoc and devastation, and returned into the solitude of the mountains.

Great evil befell the world. Like one who is mindless, speechless, and mad, Śiva walked in loneliness, the dead limbs of his mate on his shoulders. Between the frozen pinnacles of the highest mountains, along the ice-crustured rims of the greatest rivers, and in the darkness of the mountain forest, between pine and spruce and rhododendron. Wherever he walked, his tears fell, and yet he found no place to rest the body of his wife.

Soon the gods became worried. With Śiva gone, what would happen to them all? Gods have obligations, they have to listen to the prayers of their worshippers, they have to receive sacrifices and grant luck and success to those whose karman is ripe. They have to support the order of the world, and keep the demonic Asuras under control. Viṣṇu by himself was not up to the job, and Brahmā could offer little help. So the gods approached Śiva and asked him to leave the body of his wife. Alas, Śiva was so overcome by grief that he could not understand. He did not want



to see that his wife was dead and rotting, he did not care about his worshippers, about the cosmic order nor did he listen to the Devas.

So the gods made a cunning plan. As Śiva walked every day, the carcass of Satī on his back, Viṣṇu sat in ambush. Whenever the god of the dance was overcome by tears, Viṣṇu hurled his cakras. The discus swept through the air faster than a speeding arrow, faster than a ray of light, and cut a limb from Satī's corpse. So Śiva walked, but every day his load became lighter. Day after day he made his circuit through India, and every day a limb of the goddess fell and was forgotten. The face of Satī fell at Kāśī, the yoni at Kāmarūpa, each part of the goddess became a place, a site of worship, a seat of power, and a place of pilgrimage where intelligence manifests. Eventually, Śiva's step became firm and his gaze cleared again. He saw the wide land of India beneath his feet, the majestic snow mountains in the north, the ochre deserts to the west, the jungles and swamps in the east and the sparkling blue ocean to the south, where islands lie like emeralds and whales sport in the waves. Śiva stopped and considered. The spell had broken, Satī was gone, but everywhere in the land, sacred places had appeared. Wherever a limb of Satī had fallen, a pīṭha was inviting pilgrims, locals, and ascetics to worship the goddess who had become all of India. It is said that 108 sacred seats were born of the limbs of Satī, but to those who have eyes to see, the goddess extends all over the land. Satī, far from being dead, had become the fullness of the world.

Eternities passed. Dynasties began and ended, great kingdoms arose and were forgotten again, Asuras and Devas fought, and life continued much as ever. Śiva, well used to loneliness, often went into the great mountains to enjoy the cold, fresh air, the sparkling diamond beauty of the snowfields and the gentle growth of swaying birches in heights where few men walk. Here, in the land of musk deer, mountain goat, and snow leopard, the god of ascetics found his peace of mind. Whenever he could, Śiva went to his beloved heights to forget the world and himself. Now the Himalayas have a king, the lord of the mountains, Himavat. He is the ruler of the heights and the generous giver of waters. From his court, the great rivers run, rivers that offer life and nourishment to the dwellers of the plains. And Himavat had a daughter. Her name was Pārvatī, She of the Mountains, and unlike most gods and goddesses, she enjoyed long walks through lonely mountain valleys and peaks. One day Pārvatī chanced upon Śiva. The lord of ascetics sat on a tiger skin, nude apart from the beads and serpents wrapped around his throat and arms, his half closed eyes unseeing and empty with the wisdom of the void. Pārvatī saw Śiva and felt her mind come apart. Long, long ago, she had been Gaurī, then Satī, and the memory of that life burst into her mind like the avalanches sweeping down the slopes in summer. Shyly, she approached Śiva, and spoke to him. Śiva, however, was way out of his mind and did not hear her. Pārvatī spoke again, she came closer, she touched the ascetic, and still she could not break his trance. Like a pillar of stone, Śiva remained unmoved, inattentive, with the far-away expression of a being who has turned inwards. Pārvatī, however, would not give up. She sent a call, a prayer to Kāma, the god of lust, love, and

desire, the ancient being who had brought forth creation. Kāma appeared instantly and laughed. Here sat the lord of ascetics, in total oblivion for the fate ordained by karman. What a target! This was just the sort of fun that Kāma craved. Swiftly he lifted his bow of flowers. He aimed the arrows of the senses. He muttered a mantra and shot.

At this instant, Śiva awoke. His third eye of absolute reality opened, the eye that destroys ignorance, delusion, and glamour. The fire of truth incinerated bow and arrows. His gaze touched Kāma, and Kāma said 'Ouch!' and disintegrated. Like a fine shower of ashes, the god of desire and lust fell to the ground and was no more.

Then Śiva saw Satī, and as their eyes met, remembrance returned. They saw, and in that timeless moment, the world held its breath. Then the other gods appeared. Gods are usually curious, and when something unusual happens, they like to be around, if only for laughs. The sight of Śiva and Pārvatī embracing, yes, that was good news. But what was this? What was this miserable pile of ashes on the ground? The gods saw, and tears began to seep from their eyes. Here were the ashes of desire, of lust and love. Gone was the god whose never-ending charm had kept the universe in motion. Rati, his wife, came to her senses first. 'You killed him!' she shouted at Śiva.

'Sorry, I did not see who he was' replied the god of ascetics 'it was just an accident...'

'Well, go and resurrect him, then!' replied Rati, and so did the other gods, who were mightily scared of a dull, boring world without desire and lust. Śiva shrugged. Focusing his glance on the pile of ashes, he allowed illusion to return to the world. And Kāma arose, reborn out of the ashes of disenchantment and the gaze of the all-seeing one. From Śiva's ojas, Kāma was reborn, vibrant with life and glad to embrace the worlds again. And Kāma laughed. Of all the gods, he knew best what was to come. Śiva looked at Pārvatī, and Pārvatī at Śiva, their eyes met and desire arose between them. When the gods left, the two were still embracing. They had eternity to unite.

Note for the curious. This tale is at the core of Tantric myth. It appears in numerous versions. In this simplified version, I have blended elements from several sources, the major one being *Devī Bhāgavatam* (7, 29-31). Before you go on, read the story once again. Then tell yourself the story a few times, until it becomes a lively and vivid experience. This is a useful trance practice. Make the story vivid, add detail and put emotion into it. As you make the tale come to life, you may find that it works a magick on your mind. This is a story of initiation and you can make it yours.



## 2: Before Tantra

Let me invite you to a journey through time. It is also a journey through the simplified fiction that people term history, and a journey through the possibilities in belief and religious behaviour. Few countries offer such a rich field of religious development as ancient India does. Now you may be well acquainted with this topic, have read the *Vedas*, know the principal *Upaniṣads* and have a good basic knowledge of the literature of early Hinduism. If this is not the case, a little background info may help. The following chapter offers a simplified map of religious developments in ancient India before the middle of the first millennium CE when the first pieces of Tantric literature were composed. Now, Tantra did not appear from a vacuum. It did not drop from the skies ready made. Every innovator, no matter how independently minded, relies on what earlier innovators discovered. Innovation can mean creative new invention. It can mean adaptation, new interpretation, and combination with novel ingredients, and generally it involves a lot of syncretism and daring originality. There were hundreds of Tantric schools (if I may use this misleading expression) in history, most of them extinct nowadays, and each of them began when some people decided to improve matters. Even those who reject a tradition find themselves reacting to it. The history of magic and religion is not only a history of traditions but also of creative new innovation. When you plough through the next pages you will encounter the bare materials out of which Tantra was woven. You will also find the philosophies that the Tantrics did not subscribe to, for one reason or another, and emerge with a wider vision of the human quest to contact and unite with the divine. For all scholarly readers I should add that the next pages offer only a brief synopsis. I had to leave out a lot of fascinating material and to simplify the complex: in short, there are lots of half-facts and misrepresentations around. To make up for these obvious defects, let me ask you to do your own research. Generalisations are lies, and when we have to condense several thousand years of highly complex activities in a few short pages, the unique, the unusual and most exceptions to the rules tend to be overlooked. There are exceptions, keep this in mind - Indian religion is full of them. Consider this chapter an attempt at model making. Also, I cannot give sources for every little detail. In general, I have made much use of Glasenapp (1958), Gonda (1960), and Franz (1991). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the *Rg Veda* (RV) are in Griffith's translation, quotations from the *Atharva Veda* in Whitney's rendering. The *Upaniṣads* are quoted in Radhakrishnan's translation.

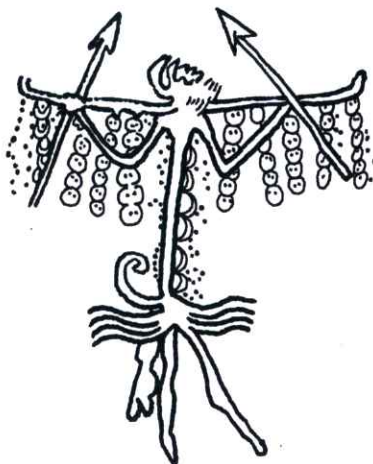


Figure 3 - Mesolithic Rock Art.

Top right and left: Two figures from Pachmarhi, Madhya Pradesh. The left figure is an animal-human dancer, perhaps a shapeshifting sorcerer, the one on the right carries an amazing contraption of skulls, and wears an animal hide loincloth, perhaps an early ancestor of skull bearing deities.

Bottom: Ritual or dance with shapeshifters, Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh.  
After Mode and Chandra.

## The Indus Valley

When the ruins of the great cities of the Indus valley culture (otherwise called Harappa culture) were discovered, they led to a creative reinterpretation of history. The long-held belief that the Aryan invaders were the first high culture of India had to be abandoned. In the Indus valley, and considerable distances beyond, a number of great cities were unearthed, each of them built of sun-dried or burned brick, and with a systematic layout of long, straight streets and buildings. These cities seemed too perfect to be the result of a local development. Consequently, their origin was suspected elsewhere. This elsewhere turned out to be Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamian Sumerian and Akkadian cultures expanded eastwards during the sixth and fifth millennium BCE, a migration that covered most of Iran and southern Turkmenistan and reached the Indus around the fourth millennium BCE. These migrants had a well-developed agriculture and a good idea how to build settlements and towns. They did so in many places, and always used a fairly similar architecture and technology. Consequently, the scholars of the early twentieth century proposed that the Indus culture, for all its original developments, was an upshot of a Mesopotamian migration. This theory was strengthened by evidence for lively trade with Sumeria. Goods from the Indus valley were transported to modern Dilmun and then to Mesopotamia. The Sumerians mention this trade in their accounts (c. 2500 BCE), and called the Indus valley the land Meluhha. There are even finely carved Sumerian roll-seals showing ambassadors from Meluhha. Along the trade route, a number of weights, ornaments, and characteristic pottery turned up. The Indus people had excellent technical skills and produced a considerable amount of jewellery for the Mesopotamian market. They worked in gold and copper, but also in seashells, lapis lazuli, agate, and carnelian, which they cut, polished, and ornamented by etching.

However, evidence for earlier cultures was also unearthed. In Mehrgarh some pioneering folk joined the Neolithic revolution around the 7th millennium BCE and became farmers. At the same time we have evidence for settlements made of brick, the cultivation of barley (wheat came later), and the first, extremely crude, human figurines made of unburned clay. These figures usually show sitting humans, but they are so unsophisticated that neither gender, social status, nor personal dress can be discerned. Some of them hardly look human at all. At this stage people still depended on hunting and the domestic animals looked much like their wild forms. Over the next millennium, cattle breeding became the foundation of society. So the Indus culture is nowadays considered a blend of Mesopotamian immigrants and native farmers, which explains both the similarity to many Near-Eastern cultures and the unique character of the culture. As usually, it pays to look into recent research. The first excavations focused on the famous cities Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, and produced the impression that these were the main cities of a culture that was well organised, developed, standardised and utterly boring. Several authorities proposed that the Indus valley



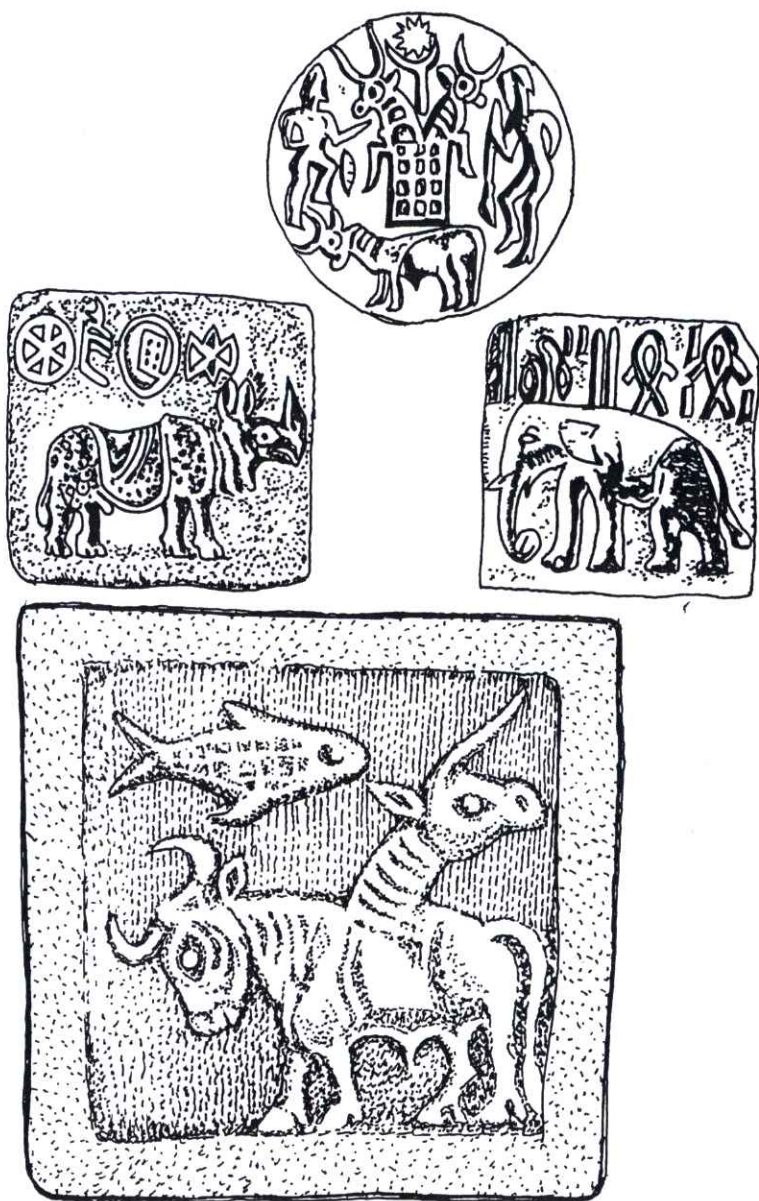


Figure 4 - Indus Culture, seals. (Not to scale.)

Top: Ritual scene. Made by the Indus people, exported. Discovered at Failaka, an island near Kuwait.

Middle left: Rhino. Mohenjo Daro, 3.85 x 3.85cm.

Middle right: Elephant, Mohenjo Daro, 2.58 x 2.63cm.

Bottom: Bull / Wild ox hybrid with fish. Plaster cast of a seal from Mohenjo Daro.

underwent great periods of stagnation in art and craft. Recent excavations have shown that the Indus culture is geographically larger than was ever suspected, and that there were a lot of unique local developments beyond the Indus valley. Very similar cities have been discovered in north-east Afghanistan, on the shores of river Oxus, between Pakistan and Iran, and north of Bombay. Estimates based on excavations in the 1970's propose a terrain of at least half a million square miles, this is larger than Pakistan. It is also larger, geographically and in terms of population, than the other two high cultures of the period, Mesopotamia and Egypt. Sadly, we have no idea whether the Indus culture extended all over the place or if it remained isolated in a number of cities. When there is a distance of up to a thousand kilometres between one city and another, it can hardly be expected that the city folk exerted a complete control over every farmer and nomad dwelling in-between. To this day, the cities form the main source of our knowledge. They were masterpieces of planning and engineering. Many of them had over 50,000 inhabitants. They also had the highest sanitary standard in the entire early history of the Near-East. Of the remaining houses, the majority were equipped with wells or a fresh water supplies, they also had drainage systems and often a bathroom. Buildings were probably in several storeys - windows did not face the street but an inner courtyard. What is really confusing is the lack of representational buildings. There are no palaces or temples in these cities. There is evidence for huge baths and public spaces. Baths (i.e. large water-tanks with no certain purpose) were discovered in Mohenjo-Daro and Lothal. Huge platforms made of bricks appear prominently in Mohenjo-Daro, Lothal, Chanhudaro, Kot Diji, and Harappa. These platforms have been interpreted as meeting spaces, ritual sites, foundations for further building, and as an artificial rise in a landscape constantly threatened by floods. When you look at modern pictures, you may get the impression that the Indus valley people lived in a near desert. This is quite wrong: the land was extremely fertile, thanks to regular deluges, providing vast amounts of fresh, fertile soil. There were dense jungles near the rivers populated by bovines, tigers, elephants, rhino, monkeys, and crocodiles.

The Indus culture attained its height between 2500 and 1750 BCE. It is still highly enigmatic, as to this day, its script has not been deciphered. Most texts appear on seals. These are usually tiny steatite objects, between 17-30 mm in size, and you can find an average of five signs on each seal, as well as images. This suggests names, possibly titles, which makes the deciphering extremely difficult. So far, the experts cannot even agree on the number of different signs in the Indus script, estimates range between 200 to 450, depending on how you count them. Most seals also show animals. The great favourite is a bull, shown in profile, with only one horn. Whether it represents a unicorn is unclear. It is usually shown near a mysterious item identified as a flag, a stand, a feeding-trough, and as a device to crush and filter Soma, believe what you will. Cattle, such as the aurochs and zebu, appear on many seals, also water buffalo, antelope, rhino, and tiger. A lot rarer are images of elephant and crocodile. There are several fantastic beasts, such as three-



headed bulls, tigers with horns, antelopes with elephant trunks and humans with the heads of tigers. Human images are the rarest of the lot. They show people, but can we be sure it is people, and not demi-gods (such as the hero holding two tigers in a classical Sumerian design) or even deities? What shall we make of the human sitting on a tree, faced by a prowling tiger underneath? Who identified with such a picture and made it a personal seal? This leads to one of the riddles of the Indus culture: just what did these people believe in? So far, the evidence is extremely sparse. No temples, churches, shrines, or altars have been discovered. The Indus folk may have worshipped at home, or on the spacious platforms, they may have had ritual baths or sacred fires, but so far, none of this can be proved. There are no stelae or large statues of gods or humans. Only seven stone statuettes have been discovered so far; they are small and look as if they were copied from Sumerian originals. They are somewhat damaged and show kneeling men. This left the excavators with two possible sources to reconstruct religious activity. One of them is the clay figurines which have been produced, in some places, since the beginning of the Neolithic. These figurines include a large amount of women. In the early twentieth century, the scientific mainstream was still fascinated by the idea of matriarchy, and consequently, they were taken as evidence for the worship of female goddesses. Some even imagined a single great goddess. Whenever scholars came upon feminine images they were sure to propose matriarchy before starting to think. Recent researchers have become a lot more cautious. Let's take a closer look at those statuettes. Nowadays we are happy to have an idea about the different periods that produced statuettes, at least in some places.

Here is a brief synopsis by C. Jarrige, 1987, 95, in *Vergessene Städte am Indus*. The first and second periods in Mehrgarh provide the primitive images mentioned earlier; they roughly resemble sitting human beings, legs joined and extended, no arms, face, or details worth mentioning. Some show slight bulges symbolising belts or necklaces, a few are coloured with red ochre. At the same time, red ochre appears in funerals. In period 3, the human figurines disappear completely. They are replaced by clay images of bulls, some of them lovingly ornamented. Period 4, c. 4000 BCE, provides a revival of human figurines and a technical break-through: the figurines are made of separate parts. Here we have female images with bulging breasts and some attempts to show hair and clothing, mind you, they are still crude and do not look very venerable. In period 5, a new quality of clay allowed the artists to make finer figurines and to burn them at higher temperatures. There are first attempts to show arms and mask-like faces, and the hairdo becomes extremely elaborate. This process of technical refinement goes on for a while. Then in period 7 a few of the females seem to hold infants (usually blobs of clay with a face). At the same time male statuettes appear. They have a different posture and detailed genitals. This is unusual. In the female statuettes, the breasts were usually elaborated but the genitals were never detailed. Several sorts of male haircuts, such as knots and braids can be observed.



At the end of this period a new male type with a round, bald head appears, and then things become standardised. The last period of settlement in Mehrgarh provides mass-produced statuettes in large amounts, most of them very uniform and carelessly executed. Were these items objects of worship? Most figurines are crude, cheap, and fragile. Few would have survived daily handling or transport. Some female statuettes look more like budgerigars than human beings, let alone goddesses. Also, they are often broken, damaged, and occasionally burned. A lot of them did not come up in prestigious places but were discovered in rubbish pits. Statuettes, no matter whether 'Venus figures' of the Palaeolithic or clay figures from Cretan tombs, cannot always be assumed to be objects of worship. Egyptian pharaohs had images of people in their tombs as they wanted to be served by them in the otherworld. Early Chinese rulers had themselves buried with their favourite slaves, in later times statues became a cheaper substitute. Cretans had crude clay figures in their graves. These figures were not gods, they were not worshipped in daily life. Early studies on Crete over-represented the female images and proposed that they all represented some single Great Goddess. A visit to a Cretan museum will soon reveal that there were lots of male as well as female statuettes, most of them looking pretty shabby, and this is not enough evidence to reconstruct a religion. In ancient Sumeria, it used to be fashionable that better placed people had images of themselves made in clay or stone. These images (often crude and by no means supposed to show a likeness) were set up in temples and shrines. As the image represented the worshipper, the worshipper was (theoretically) worshipping at all times in the temple, even when haggling in the market place or lazing in bed dead drunk. Other cultures have statuettes to represent absent or deceased members of the family. As you can see, there can be lots of reasons to make statuettes. The ones from the Indus valley are often crude and plain, and if they were really supposed to represent gods, those gods clearly did not amount to much. So the fable of a matriarchal Indus valley worshipping one Great Goddess was dismantled. The possibility remains, but the evidence is too slim.

Then there are the steatite seals. As you'll remember, most of these have images of animals. A small number show human figures. Unlike the other great civilisations of the orient, such images are rare and have little to do with daily life. The Sumerians loved to show social events, such as court-life, work, feasting, travelling; the Indus people avoided such topics. Their human images may be people but they could also be deities. Some figures have elaborate crowns, some of them wear horns. It has been claimed that these are deities, however, the horned folk are sometimes shown worshipping trees and plants. Were the cults of the period dedicated to vegetation? Worship of fantastic trees and plants appears on several seals, and occasionally there are figures standing between the trees and receiving veneration. You might propose that the Yakṣas, the tree and plant spirits of later Hindu mythology originate in this period. It might even be true.

There are also images appearing to be gods, some of them three-headed, sitting cross-legged between animals. These have often been claimed to be early representations of the much later god Śiva, who has the title Paśupati: Lord of Domestic Animals. The animals surrounding the figure are not always domesticated, so maybe we are dealing with Śiva's ancestor Rudra, who is indeed a lord of the wild places and their beasts. However, it is hard to tell whether the figure is male or female, as all clear indications of gender are missing. This leaves us as perplexed as ever. The female images are not necessarily the (or a) Great Goddess. The sitting god is not necessarily Śiva/Rudra. How inconvenient for all those enthusiasts who took them as evidence for a 'Tantric' religion in the Indus culture.

In plain reality, we know so little about the dwellers of those cities that any attempt to define their religion amounts to speculation. And did the cities share a common religion? When you consider the enormous distances between some cities, original development is almost inevitable. The cities in the eastern part of the culture (Rājasthān, Haryana, and Gujārāt) had fewer figurines than the western ones. Were they less religious? And while it's hard to guess about the city dwellers, it is much worse among the villagers and country folk, who had neither seals nor figurines.

And how did the Indus valley civilisation end? In older studies, you can find plenty of speculation on how the violent Aryans with their well-trained warriors and their horse-driven chariots destroyed the Indus valley folk. Archaeologically, there is no evidence for such warfare, let alone the terrifying massacres imagined by some scholars. It turns out that the Indus civilisation ended four or five centuries before the Aryan migrants appeared. The great ancient metropolises were not plundered or destroyed. People left them, taking along a good many items that modern archaeologists would have been happy to find. This caused some scholarly problems. Why were the great cities abandoned? So far, there is little agreement on this topic. It seems that several influences were responsible for the decline. One was tectonic activity in the Himalayas, causing earthquakes and the drying of important rivers (Ghaggar and Hakra). There seem to have been extreme irregularities in rainfall, and some cities near the Indus may have been flooded and buried under tons of mud. In other locations, the river may have moved away from the settlements. Whatever the reasons may have been, they did not stop people from living in the country. While the vast cities were abandoned, a number of flourishing new villages and towns were founded. These soon said goodbye to their past. Gone was the age of standardised bricks, measures, and weights; each settlement developed individual ones. Gone was the time of seals, statuettes, and literacy. When the Aryans arrived, they encountered an illiterate farmer's culture showing little evidence of the sophistication of the past.



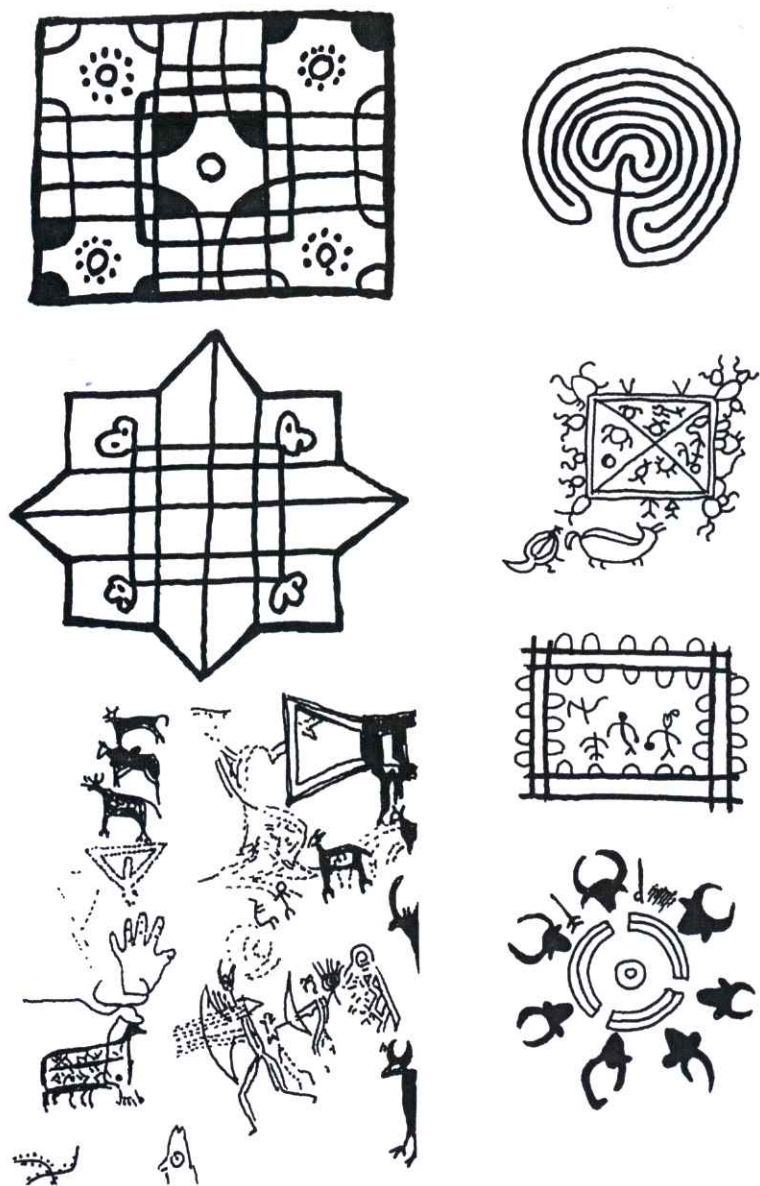


Figure 5 - Proto-yantras in rock-art

Mostly prehistoric (or hard to date).

Top left and middle left: Diagrams, Chambal valley, India.

Top right: Labyrinth, Tikla, Madhya Pradesh.

Middle right: Square diagrams, Kharwai, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.

Bottom left: Mesolithic images including bulls, hunters, peacock, hand, fish (?) and yoni triangle, Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh.

Bottom right: Bull heads, Chambal valley, Central India.





Figure 6 - Indus Culture, seals.

Top: One of several deities with three heads, Mohenjo Daro, 2.65 x 2.7cm.

Bottom: 'Unicorn' and strange device, Mohenjo Daro.

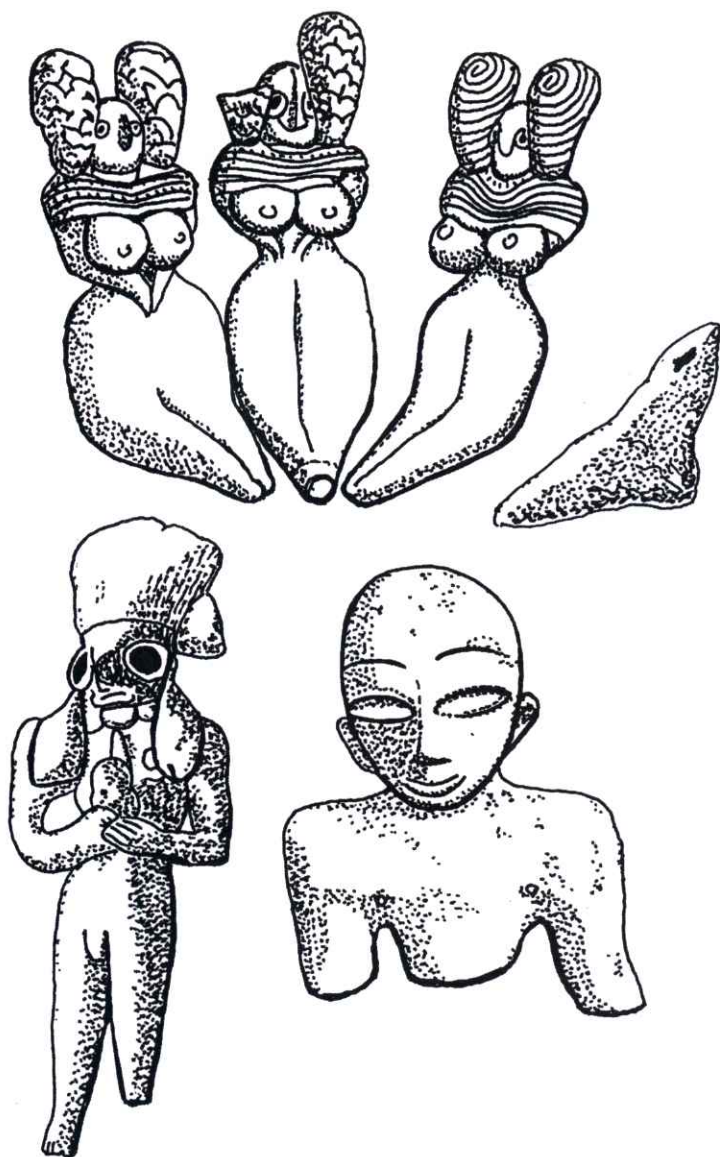


Figure 7 - Indus Culture. Figurines from Mehrgarh.

Top: Three developed female figures with characteristic headdress, abstract faces, huge breasts and no genitals. 3300 - 3000 BCE, clay, found in a rubbish pit.

Top right: The first stage of human figurines. No face, limbs or details whatsoever. If it were not for the later female figurines, we wouldn't recognise this piece of clay as a figurine at all. At this stage the item looks hardly human, let alone like a deity.

Bottom left: Male figurine, 2700 - 2600 BCE.

Bottom right: Male figurine of the bald-headed type, 2800 - 2700 BCE. At the time, male figurines amount to 30%.



## The Vedic Period

Sometime between 1500 BCE and 1200 BCE, migrating tribes of Indo-European speaking nomads began to invade India. These dates are rough estimates - the chronology is far from satisfactory. The invaders called themselves Ārya (Noble Ones) and they spoke languages that share a common origin with most European tongues. Where their migration had begun is still much disputed, but we can be moderately sure that they entered India from the west, through the passes of the Suleiman Mountains, and through the Hindukush into the fertile Panjab. Their migration was not very fast. The Aryans were mainly into cattle breeding, but they paused once in a while to cultivate land. Their long journey may have taken generations. Travel transforms and shapes culture. When whole tribes are on the move for years and years, they adapt to conditions by cultivating a light sort of culture that needs less material equipment than a stationary one. The Aryans came travelling in horse and cattle drawn chariots and wagons, and the amount they could own and move was limited by their means of transport. As a result, archaeology finds little evidence for their progress. A typical sort of pottery was unearthed on several locations (usually hilltop settlements), dull stuff with grey designs, not much to teach us about the values and beliefs of an entire people. Luckily, the Aryans had a highly developed religion (or several), a wealth of poetry, and the will-power needed to memorise and pass on long texts. Here we come to the *Vedas*, our major source of information regarding the ages of conquest.

Veda, meaning sacred wisdom and lore, is a religion (or several) that was imported into India by the Aryan people. We are happy to have a few references to the conquest in the *Rg Veda*. A few hymns mention battles against dark skinned and flat nosed locals, the Dasyus, who are derided as worshippers of lingas. The word linga can refer to a phallus or a phallic image. It can also mean 'image' in general, so we cannot be sure just what those locals worshipped. According to the Aryans, the Dasyus had no proper religion and no real sacrifices. That they had sacrifices is implied, but they were by no means as refined and complicated as the sacrifices of the Aryans. The Dasyus occasionally lived in fortified settlements, which is why the Aryan god Indra, here called Purandara (Destroyer of Cities and Castles) was called upon to crush them. 'Cities and castles' is a bit too grand: at the time, fortified means rough wooden palisades. Stone fortifications appear at a much later date. In battle, the local armies used four-wheeled war chariots drawn by oxen. This did not help much against the Aryan warriors, who used two wheeled, horse drawn chariots, wore heavy armour, and began to make iron weapons around 1200 BCE. The Aryan warriors used their swift and mobile chariots to get close to the enemies, whom they showered with arrows. In the early period, and among those who could not afford much, the arrow-tips were made of deer-horn. Whoever could afford it made use of bronze, later iron. Often enough, the arrows were poisoned (*RV* 6, 75). Much later, the *Law of Manu* prohibited poisoned missiles, but during the invasion, they were liberally used and praised. Soon there were Aryan settlements on hills and mountains. What remains



a riddle is the nature of the locals. It was assumed that the Dasyus were a Dravidic people, hence related to the modern population groups of southern India, but this point is not easy to prove. So how did the Aryans get along with the aboriginal population? In some places, such as the Panjab, they almost completely expelled the locals. They could afford to do so as they were in the majority and had enough people to control and cultivate the land.

As the conquest continued, fewer and fewer Aryans were available to work the conquered territory. In these districts the locals were valuable as a work force. Aryan society was still half-nomadic then. There were minor kings who owned large herds of cattle. Wealth was counted in cattle and cattle raids were one of the priorities of warfare. Society was ordered into two classes: the *kṣatra*, or warrior nobility, and the *viś*, the free members of each tribe. A few centuries later, when Aryans conquered the Ganges plain and the Dekkan, they were not numerous enough for complete occupation. The locals remained where they were, ruled by a small upper class of Aryans. To promote separation, the Aryan nobility gradually evolved a class system. They also had a lot of wars and cattle-raids among each other. *Rg Veda* 7, 33 mentions a battle between ten Aryan kings, good evidence that the invaders were not very friendly to their own kin. It might have been the very battle celebrated in the much later *Mahābhārata*. But how exactly did the conquest happen? Early historians imagined a single wave of war-crazed Aryans sweeping through India. These scholars were used to thinking in terms of nations and empires, they imagined large populations on the move, and this implied large wars and devastation. As archaeology could not give evidence for such a wave of destruction, the theory was gradually toned down. The next theory proposed that the invading Aryans were not a single horde but several independent tribes entering India over a span of several centuries. Better but not good enough. A gradual conquest also leaves traces of violent destruction, and so far, such evidence is not very conclusive. Possibly some of these conquerors settled in uncultivated locations or co-existed with their local neighbours in relative peace. Maybe we ought to wait a century or two until archaeology has really made some progress. Until then, the *Vedas* remain the major body of evidence. Now the *Vedas* contain a lot of lore that is excellently suited to a war-loving, mobile culture. If we assume that the invading Aryans adhered to the *Vedas*, a violent invasion is the likeliest alternative. But did all Aryan tribes subscribe to the *Vedas*? We have no way of knowing whether the conquered population cared much for the Aryan faiths, nor do we know whether all immigrating Aryans did so. It is possible that much of Vedic lore was originally restricted to a minority of Aryan people, while natives and other Aryans worshipped in different ways. Recent research indicates that the *Vedas* are not, as has been proposed so often, a purely Aryan body of writing. There are native Indian elements in them.

Here I would like to mention another common fable. Plenty of authors pretend that we are dealing with a conflict of small, dark Indian aborigines and tall, fair-skinned, aggressive European Aryans. This

picture is so simple that it hurts. Were all of the locals dark and flat-nosed or is it just a few we are lucky to know about? Did all the Aryans come from a single source? We have a good idea what some of the Aryans believed in, but what was the religion of the locals? If you trust some popular writers, any item of Indian religion that cannot be found in the Vedas is automatically a product of the local population. In recent years, a good many writers have proposed that Tantra is not a phenomena of the middle of the first millennium CE but goes back to earliest prehistory, mainly because they would like to have it so. Many new age books propose that the Great Goddess happens to be pre-Aryan. The same goes for the cakra concepts, the idea of reincarnation, even the Kuṇḍalinī is thought to predate the Vedic period. The proof for this? Such concepts do not appear in Vedic literature. This is a moot point. For one thing, the Vedas are a conglomerate of hymns, beliefs, myths, rituals, and spells that are far from homogenous. Even the earliest texts contradict themselves and others, and if there is a consensus, it derives from the editors and copyists who have kept these works in circulation for more than two thousand years. There was no script in the Vedic period, writing in India started during the third century BCE under emperor Aśoka, who made the brāhmī script popular (modern devanāgarī developed out of brāhmī). Up to that point, the Vedas, the Upaniṣads and all other texts were faithfully memorised, and we can only guess the age of a given item by estimating how archaic the language is. Thus, what we call Veda is not all of the original material. Next, consider the so called natives. At the present time, anthropology and genetic analysis come to the same conclusion as the analysis of the pre-Aryan languages: the 'natives' of India were of European origin (Wilhelm in Franz 1991: 36). The earliest settlers we know of are the Weddids, the north Indian Gondids and the middle Indian mountain dwelling Malids. All were of European origin. Next followed the Dravids, another culture of European origin. It seems that we are dealing with a conflict between several parties who were of European ancestry. The main difference between them is the date of their arrival in sunny India. But can we be sure about this? How many unknown people lived in or near India over the millennia?

## Seers on Soma

Vedic religion was shaped by drugs. The early seers celebrated a deity called Soma who was identified with the moon and with a powerful intoxicating drink. Soma, they chanted, is the tawny bull of heaven, the steer, the eagle in the sky. *On flows the potent juice, sustainer of the heavens, the strength of Gods, whom men must hail with shouts of joy.* (RV 9, 76, 1). Soma gave blessings and abundance, fertility to cattle, success in war, riches for the nobles, and gladness to the seers. The gods themselves feasted on Soma, who was their source and joy: *Soma, thundering, hath produced the Gods* (RV 9, 42, 4). Ingestion of Soma formed a vital part of the greater sacrifices and influenced the minds of those who 'saw' the proper rituals and 'heard' the true chants and sound



vibrations. Indeed, Soma made the seers. The god was called Pavamāna, the Self-Purifying, and his sweet, ambrosial juice amṛta, 'death-less' (undying), the elixir of life. A good many of the early rites were received (or invented) by seers who were, we might imagine, spaced out of their minds. When we want to understand this sacrament, we encounter difficulties. The seers composed a large number of hymns to celebrate Soma, the *Rg Veda* contains roughly 120 of them, most of them in the 9<sup>th</sup> book, which is almost exclusively dedicated to the deity. Only Indra and Agni have more hymns, the majority of Vedic deities have to make do with half a dozen hymns or less. Soma constantly comes up when Indra the Thunderer is lauded, evidently, the rites were celebrated with his blessings. The Soma rites were the most important sacrifices of the entire Vedic period. In Soma we encounter the first panacea, the first elixir of immortality of Indian lore. This idea survived long after the secret of Soma was forgotten. Now the seers were quite aware that, no matter how much Soma they consumed, their bodies did eventually grow old and die. In Vedic lore, as in later traditions, 'immortality' is a general idea meaning 'great age', the preferred optimum being a hundred years. The only real immortality that Soma could guarantee was an immortality of consciousness, which left the body at death and departed to Indra's heaven for an eternity of joy and revelry. Reincarnation wasn't invented (or discovered) yet.

Things become complicated when we wish to work out what sort of plant Soma was and how it was prepared. The soma rites incorporated a wide range of ritual activities. They were not performed frequently, and the use of the drug was restricted to the Brahmins who performed the ceremonies. Not even the kings and nobles, the only people able to afford proper sacrifices, were permitted to taste Soma. Instead, they were offered a substitute. Each Soma ritual began with the preparation of the drug. This was an immensely complicated affair requiring days, sometimes weeks of preliminaries. Even the pressing of the Soma sap took two to twelve days of continuous ceremony, followed by another twelve days of sacrifices. Animals were slaughtered almost continuously and each stage of the rite was accompanied by the singing and recitation of hymns. The Soma rites were all-round ceremonies involving a wide range of ritual activities. They exalted the sacrificer (the noble who paid for the event) to almost divine status and provided blessings for the entire community. The greater rites involved numerous acts of dedication, purification, elaborate baths, oracles, preparations of ritual space, dances, a symbolic fight between an Aryan and a dark Śūdra, ritual arguing between a scholar and a prostitute, public coitus performed by a native couple, shooting arrows to ward off evil influences, song, music, and any amount of feasting. The priests had a strict hierarchy and there was an elaborate ritual schedule that had to be followed perfectly. Each hymn had a specific form of recitation and was divided into segments that required specific metric forms, intonation, and singers of a specific rank. Here we encounter the first bījas (seed-syllables) and 'holy words', such as Om̐ and Hum̐, useful for general purposes, and specific terms such as Hīs, to invoke rain, and Ūrj to ask



for food or power. As the Soma rites are amazingly complex I can't even offer a crude outline. It would take several hundred pages to give all the references and to sum up the procedure. For a readably brief account, see *Die Religionen Indiens I* by Jan Gonda (1960: 149-162). The Soma hymns are full of riddles. We read that Soma was pressed by ten sisters clothed in gold. In plain reality, the ten sisters were the ten fingers, each of them wearing a golden ring. Such metaphors are all too common. Over the last century, many scholars have argued what sort of plant Soma may have been. Soma was born on mountains and hills. It was gathered, ritually 'bought' - the seller being ritually beaten up in the process - and driven to the ritual space on a chariot, celebrated like a king. The stalks were crushed between boards or in a mortar, pressed between sacred stones, the sap was filtered in a sieve, poured into water and strained through a woollen cloth. It was mixed with the milk and curds of several sorts of cows and consumed according to elaborate regulations. Most hymns insist that the pure juice, as it comes flowing through the sieve is brown, hence the need to pay for it (symbolically) with a brown cow. Other hymns call it tawny, yellow, gold, occasionally red and sometimes green. Soma was brilliant, clear, radiant, foamed, and tasted sweet.

One plant that may have been Soma is the fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), as mushroom pioneer R. Gordon Wasson proposed in 1962. Fly agarics are highly hallucinogenic when prepared properly. The mushroom has to be heated before ingestion, be it by drying in strong sunlight, over a fire, or by cooking, to transform the ibotenic acid, a slightly psychoactive but very disagreeable substance, into the five times more psychoactive muscimol. Raw fly agaric is well known to induce stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, and other unpleasant experiences, and can even be fatal (Stafford 1977, R. Schultes and A. Hofmann 1979, Alberts and Mullen 2000). In Siberia, people on fly agaric used to collect their urine as it contained almost all of the psychoactive substances ingested earlier. Some fly agaric was recycled up to six times while losing little of its potency. There is a reference to urine-drinking in the *Rgveda*. The heating is strangely absent in the *Rg Veda*. There is just one hymn, 9, 46, 4 stating *Deft-handed men, run hither, seize the brilliant juices blent with meal, and cook with milk the gladdening draught*. What speaks against the identification of Soma with fly agaric are the varied colours of the sap, which suggest that we are not talking about any single plant or fungus, and the frequent statement that Soma tastes sweet. For more than a century, scholars have been searching for 'the' Soma plant. More than a hundred psychoactive plants have been proposed. One candidate, wild rue (*Peganum harmala*), may have been the old Persian wonder drug Haoma, a word that is related to the term Soma. Wild rue is mildly hallucinogenic, increases the effects of other drugs but produces unpleasant side effects such as vomiting, nausea and, in overdoses, paralysis of the central nervous system. The plant is usually burned as an incense, not digested, this continues to this day among the Parsian Hunza people. Other drugs that may or may not have been Soma are given by Christian Rätsch (1988), who suggests that

Soma may have been a general term for a group of psychoactive plants. Which could explain the contradictions in the hymns. That plant lore was highly developed can be seen in the *Atharva Veda*, a work that attributes the most amazing powers of healing and sorcery to a wide range of plants. Some of them were venerated much like deities. The Soma rites eventually lost importance. Wasson proposed that this happened as the Aryan tribes moved further from the cold mountain forests of the Himalayas, where fly agaric grows in the company of birch, spruce, and pine. I doubt this. The conquest of India started with the warm and flat riverlands of the Panjab. Settling in this country, seers made Soma, and proceeded to do so for several centuries while they moved across India. In the late Vedic period, the sacrifices became smaller and cheaper, and when we enter the Upaniṣadic period, around 700 BCE, the importance of drugged exhilaration had greatly declined. Instead, we observe an increase in the methods that were to become early yoga. The seers of the *Upaniṣads* cared little for sacrifices, drugs, and ritual and began to seek the divine by fasting, tapas, breathing exercises, isolation, and various forms of meditation.

## Vedic Religion

Now for a brief look at the spiritual culture of the *Vedas*. As the topic is enormously complex, I shall have to restrict myself to a few generalisations, hoping not to offend too many scholars. There are basically four collections of ancient writing called *Vedas*. A *Veda* is a store of knowledge. It is also a faith and a way of life. The *Vedas* were not really written or composed, they were 'seen' by the early ṛṣi, the seers. The earliest is the *Rg Veda*, which was assembled between c. 1200-900 BCE. It is a collection of 1028 hymns to a wide range of deities. Some of these hymns are so old that we may wonder whether they predate the invasion of India. They are an invaluable source on early religion and mythology and offer glimpses of a culture that was just beginning to develop a common philosophy. In this period, there were no churches, no temples, and the idea of reincarnation had not been developed. Next the *Sāmaveda saṁhitā*, the Veda of songs and ways of singing was compiled. It consists of hymns from the *RV* plus a small amount of new material on sacrificial routines. In the *Yajurveda* you can find a compilation of sacrificial hymns and ritual, plus dedications, spells, mantras, and ritual riddles. The fourth is the *Atharvaveda (AV)*, a younger work, which is primarily concerned with the role of the house-priest. It blends elder hymns from the *RV* with new ideas and some really archaic items. Much of it is concerned with magic, spell craft, enchantment, plant lore, and all sorts of rituals to control the world. Unlike the first three, the *AV* was never universally accepted. It is an invaluable work for anyone interested in practical spell-work, invocation, dramatic exorcism, ritual cosmology, herb-lore, and hypnotic suggestion. Also, much of it constitutes brilliant poetry.

The main thing about religion of the early Vedic period is the role of the priest and the sacrifice. Spiritual power came from the word, song,



and sound-vibration of the *Vedas*, and in a sense, the *Vedas* were thought a greater power than the gods.

At this stage there was already a wide range of deities. You can find them listed in numerous books on Indian religion, but when you enjoy the original hymns (please do so) you will discover that it is far from easy to give an adequate summary of them. Already at the earliest period, gods appear in several guises, and occasionally merge into each other. Attributes, symbols, functions, and appearances can be exchanged. This shows that the *Vedas* were by no means a homogenous system: consider them as an agglomeration of beliefs of various tribes of Aryans with additional material from the locals. Also, new gods were being made up all the time. The Brahmins were fond of turning any special power, event, or quality into a deity. Every human trait, every natural force, and everything unusual could be venerated and personified as a god or goddess. This is sound thinking: if it is strong, it must be divine. The result was a world full of major and minor deities.

Let's take a look at the major deities. The *Rg Veda*, with its 1028 hymns, contains roughly 250 hymns for Indra (and Indra-Varuṇa) and 206 hymns for Agni (plus 11 for Agni-Indra). These deities are the most popular of the lot. Place three in the charts is Soma with roughly 120 hymns, nearly all of them in the 9<sup>th</sup> book. If the ninth book had not survived, we would hardly be aware of his importance. In fourth place, around ninety hymns are addressed to several gods at once. Place five is held by the horse riding Aśvins (54 hymns), place six by the tempestuous, howling Maruts (37 hymns), seven is Mitra-Varuṇa (27 hymns), eight is Uṣas, Dawn in her rosy splendour (21 hymns), nine is Br̥haspati, the priest and guru of the gods (14 hymns) and the rest celebrates a range of minor deities, some of whom became the most important gods of Hinduism later on, plus diverse subjects, such as cows, frogs, horses, weapons, pressing stones, ritual equipment, heaven and earth, and creation.

Usually, each book of the *Rg Veda* starts with luminous, flickering, all-devouring **Agni**. Agni is often considered a fire god, but this is misleading, unless you understand the dominant role of the sacrificial fire. Vedic religion was not a matter of churches, temples, or cults. Families employed priests, and priests performed the sacrifices. To sacrifice was the main religious practice of the period. The sacrifice nourished the gods and maintained divine harmony, the cosmic order (ṛta). There is an enormous body of texts dealing with more sacrifices than you'll ever want to know about. The main thing about these rites is that they had to be perfectly performed. The ethical qualities of the sacrificer were hardly important, compared to the precise performance of each single ritual act. Most sacrifices ended in the ritual fire and it was Agni who conducted them to the gods. In this sense Agni became the divine representative of the priest, a mediator between the human and the divine. As sacrifices were often extremely costly, it was usually the nobility who indulged in them. Through sacrifices, blessings, status, and merits could be gained.





Figure 8 - Buffalo-horned, three-faced deity, surrounded by wild animals. Considered by some to be a prototype of the much later Śiva. Mohenjo Daro, after a plaster cast.

Agni, however, is not merely the sacrificial fire or the household fire (the Lord who is always at Home). Agni also represented the solar fire and this function overlaps with such solar gods as Sūrya and Savitar. Agni also lives in wood (fire is hidden in wood) but things get more confusing as Agni was often associated with water. You find him called the child or bull of water, and when the king was inaugurated he was sprinkled with water while the Agnis of Water were called upon. This mysterious connection disappeared eventually. Similar transformations can be seen with the other gods.



Figure 9 - Agni.



**Indra**, for example, as a thunderbolt wielding deity of rain and storm was also related to the function of kings, and gave them their royal status. Like a king of the gods, Indra governed in might and splendour and set a shining example for his earthly representatives. Indra's net covered heaven and earth and regulated the spaces of life. He was much concerned with the order of things, battling demons and occasionally punishing evildoers. In this period there were still gods who corrected humans. He was not only a deity of the nobility but also much venerated by farmers, as his thunderstorms gave fertility to the soil.

In Indra's company you sometimes encounter a minor deity called **Viṣṇu**, who later inherited much of Indra's royal function. Today Indra is rarely worshipped, but Viṣṇu, duly transformed, is one of the most popular deities of India.

**Soma** is an enigmatic deity. As a god, Soma is well defined, but as a plant, or a mixture of plants, much remains to be understood. With Soma, we encounter the first references to an elixir of immortality, the production of which was occasionally likened to coitus. When a few much later Tantric movements relate their elixir of immortality to the moon and lovemaking, they are using metaphors from the earliest Vedic period.

When we look at **Varuṇa**, we encounter an all-encompassing deity closely related to the concept of divine space. Some called him a sky god, but this is only possible when we disregard a lot of his attributes. Varuṇa is a god who measured the universe, ordered its spaces, set up the mountains, regulated the rivers and so on. In one sense, Varuṇa is ever present, in another, the god disappears behind the sheer vastness of the world. He is also a god concerned with right and wrong who punishes sinners and criminals. In Vedic thought, Varuṇa came from the divine family of the **Asuras**, just like Agni, Soma, the sky deity, Uṣas, Rudra, Sarasvatī, and the Ādityas. Modern Hinduism made **Devas** (Shining Ones, i.e. gods) out of them, and turned the Asuras into a pack of dangerous demons. In the process, Varuṇa became a god of the oceans and the great deep. He is related to the Greek god Uranus. Such connections between Indo-European deities are still obvious in the early Vedic period. The Vedic wind and storm-god Vāta, who still plays a minor role in the *RV*, is closely related to the Germanic Wodan, Wods, Odin, Gwodan, and possibly the British Gwydion. The Vedic Mitra has some overlap with the Persian Mithra, who influenced the famous solar Mithras, popular all over central Europe courtesy of the Roman legions. Perhaps Agni is related to the Nordic god of fire, cunning Loki, certainly both of them are associated with goats. Indra's battles against the world-compressing demon-serpent Vṛta have their counterparts in Thor's fights against the Midgardworm and in the Avestic dragon slayer Thrīta. Maybe the (originally) divine family of the Asuras has some connection to the Nordic gods, the Aesir.

The *Vedas* also invoke a number of goddesses. We know most about **Uṣas**, the goddess of the red morning sky, who is related to beginnings of all sorts, and who is reborn every morning, hence, there are any



amount of Uṣas, and every day a new one appears. *RV* 1,92 offers a brilliant description of the goddess. Uṣas is a warrior-lady who arises in splendour and radiance. She anoints herself with sunlight, spreads her web of brightness, and sings as she comes out of the dark on her ruddy, cow-drawn chariot. Uncovering her breasts, she gives light to the world. The hymn celebrates her as a giver of food, a fulfiller of ambition, and the mainspring of blessings, victory, and glory. She also has a negative side, as she makes people age and die. With every new Uṣas, life becomes shorter. She gives all beings the chance to use the day, but she is also compared to a gambler who wastes life away. Her sister, briefly mentioned in *RV* 10,127 is **Ūrmyā**, the goddess Night. She is briefly invoked in a single hymn to give protection from thieves and wolves. The *Atharva Veda* contains more hymns for her.

**Nirṛti**, black goddess of destruction and doom was widely known and feared, there are lots of texts mentioning her briefly. Her name implies the negation of ṛta, the cosmic order. Like most dangerous deities, the Aryan priests did not celebrate but placate her, and asked that she stayed far away. More on her in the chapter on Kālī.

The *RV* already knows a few **Mothers**, such as a Mother of the Sky, a Mother of Cattle and a forest goddess, **Aranyānī**, who is called The Mother of Game. None is described in much detail. It would be wrong to conclude that the Aryans in general did not care much about goddesses. We simply know that the compilers of the *Vedas* did not devote much time to them. In plain fact, the *RV* is so obsessed with lauding Indra, Agni, and Soma that little room remains for other gods.

Another obscure goddess is **Prthivī** (Earth) whose mate is **Dyaus**, the personified sky. The union of the two features in an early creation myth. In *RV* 1,160, sky and earth are two sisters, but as they are also male and female, they become the parents of the sun. The hymn invokes them to grant the sacrificer, probably a king, supremacy over the people.

A famous goddess is **Aditi**, who is related to creation, nourishment, and occasionally appears as a primeval cow. *Aditi is the heaven, Aditi is mid-air, Aditi is the Mother and the Sire and the Son. Aditi is all Gods, Aditi five-classed men, Aditi all that hath been born and shall be born.* (*RV* 1, 91) She may be related to the Nordic Audhumla, a goddess in cow shape who appears right at the beginning of creation, before the gods and humans come to be.

Then there are lunar goddesses, such as **Rākā**, who rules the full moon, **Sinīvalī**, who eases childbirth, and **Kuhū**, goddess of the new moon.

The *RV* also gives the first evidence for the goddess **Sarasvatī**, originally the river goddess of the most sacred stream of early Vedic times. In the early days this river may have been the Indus. When the Aryans began to move further east, they identified Sarasvatī with another river. *Inciter of all pleasant songs, inspirer of all gracious thought, Sarasvatī accept our rite! Sarasvatī, the mighty flood, She with her light illuminates, She brightens every pious thought.* (*RV* 1,3). River Sarasvatī has long since disappeared, though legend says that it is flowing underground. Sarasvatī

was a giver of victory and blessings, a healer and a patroness of poetry and hymns. She mixed with another deity, **Vāc**, who is the personification of voice and speech. Their union produced the highly popular modern Sarasvatī, patroness of learning, song, poetry, and the muse of many writers.

Another prominent goddess is called **Śrī**, a term meaning well-being, good fortune, wealth, abundance. She merged with the late Vedic goddess **Lakṣmī** (for whom see the later chapter on the Mahā Vidyās). As Śrī Lakṣmī she is the most popular goddess of modern India.

The *ṚV* also has goddesses who are the female expression of male gods. *Spouses of Heroes, Goddesses, with whole wings may they come to us, with great protection and with aid. Indrānī, Varuṇānī, and Agnāyī hither I invite, for weal, to drink the Soma juice.* (*RV* 1,22, 12-13). This idea was the foundation of the later concept of Śakti. We are at the beginning of a tradition here that allows the gods to change into the other sex.

Last, let us take a look at the outcast among the gods, the dangerous **Rudra**. Rudra received less veneration than most gods. Only three hymns of the *ṚV* are entirely dedicated to him. He is a terrifying red god, a deadly archer and 'the Tawny Boar of Heaven', who is constantly asked to be kind and compassionate. His hymns do not invoke, they placate. The original Rudra is a dweller of the solitude and the wild places, a lonely wanderer, he is a lord of wild beasts, poisons, and diseases. An expert in herbal lore, he is also the healer of the gods. He is the creator, protector, and killer of cattle. With his bow, he takes the lives of beasts and men.

As father of the **Maruts**, Rudra is accompanied by storms and gales. The Maruts (winds) are usually Indra's warriors, but their parents are Rudra and **Prṣṇi**, the colourful cow of earth. The Maruts are celebrated as workers of marvels, bards, heroes, and protectors of the divine order. They move over earth like the howling storm gales, splitting mountains, shaking forests, and releasing storm, lightning, thunder, and rain. They are the patrons of poets and singers. Their common wife is **Rodasī** (Firmament), who appears elsewhere as a wife of Rudra. Occasionally the Maruts are addressed as Rudras, i.e. as personifications of Rudra.

In the later Vedic period, we meet Rudra clad in fur, dwelling among desolate mountains, with green hair, a red face, and a blue-black throat. He is called upon by hunters and folks who have to dare the forest and by herders fearing for the health of their cattle. His sons Bhava and Śarva roam the jungles in the form of wolves. Much like the Germanic storm god Wodan, Rudra appears in a wild hunt, and is accompanied by a horde of dangerous women who are noisy and hissing, snatchers and devourers of flesh (Gonda). One of his names is Hara, meaning the Bandit, the Destroyer. Later he acquired the placating name **Śiva** (the Auspicious One), and today he is almost exclusively known by this title. As you can see, much of the Tantric Śiva is already evident in the Rudra of the *Vedas*. As an expert in poisons and diseases, Rudra became the patron of healers. He is a god of the wilderness, an eater of raw flesh, a drinker of blood, and a lord of all terrible spirits. *RV* 10, 136, 7 gives the





Figure 10 - Rudra the archer.



first reference to his close association with hermits, ascetics and ecstatic folk living in the wilderness. In later periods, he sometimes appears as a group, the Rudras, who were invoked in specific places. Each location has a spirit, a genius loci, and each of them is a Rudra. Thus, there was a Rudra of the cremation place, a Rudra of the crossroads, of the wind, of a river, and even a Rudra of the dung-heap. Some of this reappears in the much later Tantras.

## Spiritual Discipline

The *Vedas* also provide the first glimpses at what later became Yoga and Tantra. Welcome to the concept of *māyā*. This word has come to mean illusion, but it can also mean creative skill. The gods use *māyā* for their miraculous deeds. Demons acquire *māyā* by austerities. Seers wield *māyā* when they are pure enough, and make the gods tremble. *Māyā* can mean magickal power, the power to create, transform, and destroy. All of this is slightly confusing, as the word *māyā* is a combined term that connects two streams of meaning. One of them connects with talent, knowledge, and the ability to craft and create something. The other relates to deception, glamour, lies, and illusions. As the two word streams combined, *māyā* became a power of creativity and deception, the magic wielded by a range of gods, demons, and seers. It was also personified and eventually became a goddess, red *Māyā*, creatrix of worlds, enchantress and deceiver. This *māyā* is a power that can be cultivated. It can be gained and used, by gods and humans, in a process that often involves *tapas*.

*Tapas* originally meant inner heat. It can also mean practices that generate heat, hence magical power, or it can be a general term referring to all sorts of austerities, such as starvation, exposure to the elements, or standing on one leg for a millennium. *Tapas* is used (or done) by humans who wish to cultivate special skills and powers, but it can also be performed by demons or gods. Each important event in Hindu mythology involves a measure of *tapas*. To become the creator (well, one of them), *Brahmā* had to perform austerities. When *Pārvatī* courted *Śiva*, the later was not much impressed by her. So *Pārvatī* performed *tapas* and practised spiritual exercises till the stability of the cosmos was threatened. *Śiva* immediately fell in love with her. Similar events abound in Hindu mythology. There are lots of tales where gods or demons do *tapas* to gain supernatural powers. *Soma* is generated by *tapas*, the dead gain the light by *tapas* (*RV* 10,154,2), the seers find insight and vision through *tapas*. In later periods, *tapas* became a collective term for a good many difficult and painful activities. We are at the roots of yoga here. It might be proposed that a lot of yoga consists of refined techniques of *tapas*, eliminating the totally painful and harmful ones.

Closely related to the meaning of 'inner heat' is the practise of shaking. The term *vip-*, source of our word 'vibration', means to tremble, shake, shiver, quiver, or be stirred. *Vipra* is to be stirred, shaken, excited, it can also mean one who is a sage, seer, ecstatic, poet, priest, or simply

inspired. It can also mean the moon. In ritual, a vipra is one who uses shaking and trembling as a means of trance-induction. A vipra can be a human worshipper, a seer, priest, or forest-dwelling lunatic, but it can also be a deity busy gaining tapas. Several gods, such as Indra, the Āśvins, the Maruts (*shakers of the earth and heaven* (RV 1, 37, 6), Rudra, the sun god Savitar (the *deep quivering Asura*, RV 1, 35, 7) and of course restless, flickering Agni are described as vipras. A vipra may 'win', may call the gods, may function as a healer, an exorcist, and a seer (Gonda 1960: 184). These trances do not appear often in Vedic literature, but they continue to our day in folk worship. Obsessed women and men still shake and tremble in their divine ecstasy and some Tantras mention tremors and shuddering during cakra visualisation or when a jolt of divine grace takes you out of your mind. Trembling is part of the worship of many fierce goddesses. For those who still have not learned trance shaking: yes, folks, it works, it's fun and a lovely way to spend an evening. You can find a practical introduction to shaking trances and how to induce and enjoy them in *Seidways*.

Apart from this we find hints on breathing exercises in the AV, 15, 15-17. Seven breaths are named in these hymns: AV 15, 15: *Seven breaths, seven expirations (apāna), seven outbreathings*. 1. Fire, 2. Sun, 3. Moon, 4. Cleansing, 5. Yoni (vulva), 6. Cattle, 7. the Creatures. AV 15, 16 has: 1. Full moon, 2. Moon's quarter, 3. New moon, 4. Faith, 5. Consecration, 6. Sacrifice, 7. Sacrificial gifts. AV 15, 17 offers the following expirations: 1. Earth, 2. Atmosphere, 3. Sky, 4. Constellations, 5. Seasons, 6. They of the Seasons (?), 7. Year. What can you develop out of this? Systematic breathing exercise is hinted at in AV 6, 41, 1-2: *To mind, to thought, to device, to design, and to intention, to opinion, to instruction, to sight, would we pay worship with oblation. To expiration, to perspiration, to breath the much nourishing, to Sarasvatī the wide extending, would we pay worship with oblation*. While there are several sorts of breaths in Vedic literature (and not all of them are related to breathing), the idea that proper breathing increases life is already expressed. AV 3, 11, 5-6 is a spell to banish disease and to recover health. First, the sufferer is freed from the lap of Nirṛti (Perdition, Doom), then, life is won for him for a hundred autumns: *Enter in, O breath-and-expiration, as two draft-oxen a pen; let the other deaths go away, which they call the remaining hundred. Be ye just there, O breath-and-expiration; go ye not away from here; carry his body, his limbs, unto old age again*.

Then we have early yoga, such as sitting or standing still for long periods (AV 15, 3, 1: *He stood a year erect; the gods said to him: Vratya, why now standest thou?*) and silence (RV 7, 103, 1: *They who lay quiet for a year, the Brāhmins who fulfil their vows*) to cultivate skills and magical power. And we have hymns that indicate that seers become the equals or superior to the gods: AV 6, 58, 3: *Glorious was Indra, glorious was Agni, glorious was Soma born; of all existence am I most glorious*.

AV 6, 86 exalts some (unknown) person: *Chief of Indra, chief of heaven, chief of earth is this man, chief of all existence; do thou be sole chief. The ocean is master of the streams; Agni is controller of the earth; the moon is master of the asterisms; do thou be sole chief. Universal ruler art*



*thou of Asuras, summit of human beings; part-sharer of the gods art thou; do thou be sole chief.*

In AV 5,11, 10-11 the seer Atharvan sings: *Of us two, O Varuṇa, (there is) the same connection, the same birth. I know that which is of us two this same birth; I give that which I have not given thee; I am thy suitable companion of seven steps; - a god, bestower of vigour on a singing god; a sage (vipra), of good wisdom for a praising sage.*

And we have the first references to an identification of the body with the universe: AV 5, 9, 7: *The sun my eye, wind my breath, atmosphere my soul (ātman), earth my body; unequalled by name am I here; (as) such I deposit myself for heaven and earth to guard.*

What else did the ascetics do? The following hymn, RV 10,136, is the fullest account of an ecstatic in early Indian literature.

1. *Long-hair holds fire, holds the drug, holds sky and earth.  
Long-hair reveals everything, so that everyone can see the sun.  
Long-hair declares the light.*
2. *These ascetics, swathed in wind, put dirty red rags on.  
When gods enter them, they ride with the rush of the wind.*
3. *'Crazy with asceticism, we have mounted the wind.  
Our bodies are all you mere mortals can see'.*
4. *He sails through the air, looking down on all shapes below.  
The ascetic is friend to this god and that god, devoted to what is well done.*
5. *The stallion of the wind, friend of gales, lashed on by gods -  
the ascetic  
lives in the two seas, on the east and on the west.*
6. *He moves with the motion of heavenly girls and youths, of  
wild beasts.  
Long-hair reading their minds, is their sweet, their most exciting  
friend.*
7. *The wind has churned it up; Kunamnamā prepared it for  
him. Long-hair  
drinks from the cup, sharing the drug with Rudra.*  
(Doniger O'Flaherty, 1981: 137).

This hymn is not only remarkable for its contents. Each of the verses is associated with one of the Seven Ṛsis, the seven stars of the Great Bear or Wain (Ursa major), one of the holiest constellations of ancient India. According to Griffith, it is also a charm to restore a sick man to life. Here we have the earliest association of shaking trances with journeys in the imagination and the manifestation of gods near or in the body. The wind in this poem is not only air in motion, it is also a term to describe the ecstatic rush of energy and excitement that accompanies shaking trances and obsession. It should be noted that our vipra is not merely a worshipper but a friend of the gods, the Apsarases and the Gandharvas .





Figure 11 - Early yogis.

Top, stone statuette, Madhya Pradesh, 13th century, 17.5cm. If you look like this, you might be overdoing it.

Bottom: Stone statuette, yogi using a sash for prolonged trancing. Tamil Nadu, 16th century.

This is worth considering. In Hinduism, the Apsarases are a class of heavenly nymphs who dwell in Indra's heaven. Occasionally they visit earth to tempt a seer or to marry a king or hero. Gandharvas are heavenly youths and celestial musicians. In Vedic times, both were a lot more sinister. The *Atharva Veda* contains several spells and hymns to exorcise them. In AV 4, 37 the Apsarases are banished into a stream while the Gandharvas are castrated by Indra's missiles. Both are told to remain among themselves, married to each other, and to leave humans well alone. AV 4,38 gives a spell that can be used to evoke an Apsaras who promotes gambling: *She who delights in the dice, bringing pain and anger - the rejoicing, the delighting one: that Apsaras I call on here*. In AV 8, 6 we learn that the Gandharvas are devourers of infants and slayers of embryos. The situation is ambiguous. In some hymns of the AV, the Apsarases and Gandharvas are celebrated and praised as divine beings, in others they appear as demons, haunters of humans, bringers of disease. What sort of friendship did our long-haired seer cultivate with them?

We also have a reference to an unspecified drug our shaking ecstatic received from a goddess called Kunaṁnamā. Her name may mean witch or, more precisely, hunchback. There is an entire Tantric tradition devoted to a goddess called Kubjikā, the Curved, Crooked, or Coiled One. Maybe Kunaṁnamā is her prototype. What sort of drink did our seer share with Rudra? It probably wasn't Soma, as Rudra was excluded from the Soma sacrifices. Spirituality in Vedic times was not only conducted by serious-minded sacrificial priests but also by crazy ascetics dwelling happily at the fringes of society.

## The World Soul

In the early Vedic period we encounter the first roots of a phenomenon that was to become one of the essentials of Indian thought. There were always a lot of deities around, both among the Aryans and the local populations, but this was not to everyone's satisfaction. Some seers sought for a unifying principle. Here we encounter Prajāpati, Puruṣa and, a little later, the ātman concept (Gonda 1960, 180-198). Prajāpati began as a god of creation. The *Rg Veda* offers several differing accounts of creation, without much enthusiasm, as in the early Vedic period creation myths did not matter much. The main issue was proper conduct during sacrifice. Prajāpati starts as a god who is associated with creation, fertility, and the genitals. He is called the Lord of Descendants and All Creatures and is called upon to grant children. This was a bit too simple, so other seers elaborated on the theme. We enter the time of the *Brāhmaṇas* here, which celebrate him almost as the highest deity. In the before-the-beginning, Prajāpati was bodiless consciousness. It felt lonely and desired (kāma) to become many. This makes the god Kāma one of the earliest deities in evidence. It is, first of all, Desire who motivates creation. Prajāpati assumed form and created the world out of himself by speech. Naming things made them be. This job was possible thanks to the goddess Vāc/Vāk (Voice, speech), who is his mate and Śakti. Well,



this is just one of the variations that can be found in our early sources. The tale of Prajāpati was retold and transformed numerous times. Usually Prajāpati is creator by making things appear out of himself. These emanations include sun, moon, stars, earth, the primal oceans, the gods, Asuras, humans, the Brahmins, and even the rituals and metric forms. The order of the seasons, the times of the day, the whole ritual year are the body of Prajāpati. Like all great artists, Prajāpati does not only create, he also does tapas to gain power and suffers great fits of exhaustion after creation. He 'saw' the Soma sacrifice and performed it, thereby creating it. Afterwards he felt exhausted. So he saw the sautrāmaṇī rite, which restored him to health again. Prajāpati does not get everything right from the start. He occasionally makes mistakes. The first creatures he made out of himself devoured each other. I should add that the activity of Prajāpati is not something vague and obscure happening at the beginning of time. In Indian thought, creation is never finished. Every new thing that appears is creation at work. And Prajāpati is the sacrificer and the sacrifice. One myth tells us that his head became heaven, his feet earth and his chest the atmosphere. As in real life, creation and its creator are never completely separate.

Prajāpati, however, was not the only candidate for being an all-encompassing deity. Here's a figure with a similar function: Puruṣa. This deity is a close relation of the primal giant Ymir whom you can find in the *Eddas*, the primal being Pan Gu and the creatrix Nü Wa of early Chinese myth, and a few similar Eurasian proto-deities. We are on the track of something really old. Puruṣa is usually a huge giant who is sometimes simply called 'the man'. 'Man' sounds human but isn't. *RV* 10.90 tells us that Puruṣa extended all through the earth. It had a thousand eyes, heads, and feet. It was all that has been and all that was to be. The gods laid out Puruṣa as the primal sacrifice. They dismembered the primal unity and created the seasons out of it. Its fat became the animals of forest, air, and village. Its body became the poetic metres, the verses and chants. The moon was made out of mind, the sun out of the eye, the wind out of living breath, while the mouth brought forth Indra and Agni. The head became the sky, the navel the middle realm, the feet turned into earth, the ears divided the quarters of space. The limbs were separated to create the varṇas (classes) of society. Good evidence that we are dealing with a fairly late hymn: in the earliest Vedic period, the classes are still unknown. The Brāhmaṇa (priests, teachers, scholars) were created out of the mouth, they recite the sacred texts and maintain a tradition of learning and ritual. The arms became the Kṣatriya (warriors, aristocracy), whose duty is to fight, to protect, and to govern. The thighs became the Vaiśya (farmers, merchants, traders, money-lenders), i.e. those who produce food and distribute it. The feet became the Śūdra (craftspeople, servants, artisans, menial labourers, hired hands), who are literally at the bottom of the social system. Everybody else, such as foreigners, tribal people, aborigines, and those handling unclean substances do not even appear in this model. Puruṣa, though cut up and divided, did not die. *Gods, sacrificing, sacrificed the victim: these were the earliest holy ordinances (RV, 10, 90, 16)*. Puruṣa became the

origin, but also the wholeness of the Vedic world. The spirit of Puruṣa was the all-pervading sentience, the body, the substance of all that exists.

This is not the only creation myth of the *RV*; there are others, who attribute everything to a golden embryo (10, 121), to cosmic heat (10, 190), to an All-Maker (10, 81-82), and to the cosmic cow Aditi: *In the first age of the gods, existence was born from non-existence. After this, the quarters of the sky were born from her who crouched with legs spread.* (10, 72, 3, trans. Doniger O'Flaherty). Aditi brought forth Dakṣa, Dakṣa brought forth Aditi, who brought forth eight sons, and the gods made the worlds swell.

A third concept is ātman. Originally, the ātman is the self-principle, the consciousness behind the senses and the mind. In the *RV*, the word means breath, vitality, life. Ātman resides in all living beings but disappears into the winds upon death. Later periods transformed this simple concept. In the *Upaniṣads* the ātman becomes an undying, eternal 'soul'. It is the essence behind all consciousness but it dwells in the primal voidness of deep, dreamless sleep. Call it the subtle essence of all that lives and breathes. Before long, the *Upaniṣads* equipped every being with the essential quality of ātman. It is only a small step to the concept of ātman as the world-soul and the all-consciousness. The *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* identifies ātman with Brahman and proposes that to behold ātman is to unite with it.

Puruṣa and Prajāpati are not very well defined, as their primary function is to produce everything else. This role was developed in the *Brāhmaṇas*, but by the time of the early *Upaniṣads* (c. 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE) they fade. In their place arose the concept of Brahman as an all-self, a world-soul, and a nameless, formless, all inclusive consciousness, source of the gods, the demons, humans, beasts, plants, and the elements. This concept has remained popular to this day and is one of the essentials of Hindu philosophy. It is precisely as all beings take their awareness from Brahman that gods and humans can become one another, beings change their shape and awareness and the attainment of cosmic consciousness is possible. Of course these ideas were developed over the centuries. Puruṣa was not completely forgotten but became a metaphor for spirit and consciousness; in some Tantras you can find Śiva or even Viṣṇu called the Puruṣa, occasionally the term simply means 'the self'. Brahman was personified by some and turned into a deity called Brahmā. As the earlier Brahman remained such an important concept, it was not replaced by the personified Brahmā. Indeed, Brahmā always appears as a relatively minor god. He is associated with the act of creation but receives fairly little veneration. Even this function is not his proper right. You find Brahmā saying 'But I am the creator!' and Viṣṇu replies 'Sure, and I made you'. Once, when Brahmā boasted too much, Śiva cut off one of his heads with a swipe of his fingernail. This was not very polite and Śiva had to make up for the deed, but still, Brahmā lost a head and never got it back again. Obviously, if you personify the un-personifiable, a lot must be lost.



## Classes of Society

The class-concept is one of the most restrictive inventions of the late Vedic period. You are probably used to the word 'castes'. It's not a useful term. 'Caste' comes from 'casta', a term used by the Portuguese when they attempted to colonise India to designate different ethnic groups. It was later applied to social classes. As you recall, there are basically three upper classes who are entitled to a superior spiritual status. Every boy of these classes receives spiritual education from one or more gurus and is invested with a sacred thread to show that he is twice-born. The lower classes and all women are not entitled to this initiation; they never reach spiritual maturity. The upper three classes are expected to devote some of their time to learning and sacrifice, the lower classes are lucky when they are allowed to listen to a Brahmin. From the beginning, classes were rigidly defined. It was believed that it is better to be a failure in one's class profession than a genius in the profession of another. Knowledge was a monopoly of the Brahmins, who did much to keep it that way. Now the *Vedas* were obviously composed by people belonging to the Brahmin class, who had a strong interest in keeping themselves at the head of society. Brahmins were not only priests but also incarnate deities, or so they taught. To feed a Brahmin is to sacrifice to the gods, hence the importance of dakṣiṇās. A dakṣiṇā is a part of the sacrifice that is not offered to the gods by means of fire but given to the Brahmins. If the offering is food, it is eaten by the officiating priests, who conduct it to the gods. There is an amazing amount of literature extolling the virtues of the dakṣiṇā (see *Devī Bhāgavatam*, 9, 45). A lot of priests insisted that the choice morsels (originally, the minimum was one cow) they personally received were the very part of the sacrifice that is most auspicious and sure to get good results. While the Brahmins were certain that they were the heads of society, the warrior class (Kṣatriya) disagreed. The Kṣatriya were fighters, warriors, and aristocrats, and consequently the wielders of power. Each king came from this class, and kings are not the sort of folk who like to be ordered around by priests. As a result, there was a lot of quarrelling between Brahmins and Kṣatriyas, and it might be proposed that the hostility between these classes became so strong that the entire Vedic world-view was threatened. Perhaps the amazing speculations of the *Upaniṣads* are grounded in a social situation that cast doubt on traditional theology. The hostilities did not end then, of course. They are still alive in modern India.



Figure 12 - Life after Life



## Beyond Veda

The early Vedic period, incorporating much lore and ritual that may have been imported by the Aryans, gave way to the later Vedic period, which did much to develop the rituals and sacrifices. Here we can observe a change from imported concepts to beliefs developed in India. Much of what we know about practical worship comes from a class of writings called the *Brāhmaṇas*, most of them composed between the tenth and seventh century BCE. The *Brāhmaṇas* are often commentaries to the *Vedas*, but they also show major new developments. One of these was the class structure discussed in the last section. As this idea came to be generally accepted, it caused considerable friction and unease in society. Another is a wealth of original mythology, much of it based on earlier beliefs. Younger are the *Śrautasūtras*, specifying the do's and don'ts of sacrifice, the *Grhyasūtras* on household sacrifices and finally the *Āraṇyakas*, the Forest-books, discussing works elaborated and developed for village communities. All of these works elaborated and developed Vedic ideas. Gradually, they also came to transform them. This is a matter you should keep in mind when studying Indian thought. Most philosophers shied away from declaring that they had invented anything new. Old stuff is good stuff in Hindu philosophy. So when some seer wished to propose something new, it was politely claimed that this was just a new interpretation of a much older (and usually Vedic) tradition. Several Tantras propose that Śiva gave the *Vedas*, then the *Upaniṣads* (when people were ripe for a new understanding), and eventually the *Tantras*. Of course these texts are in wide disagreement. However, it is not very polite to say so. Old stuff was rarely disagreed with. It was simply laid aside as an elder wisdom and ignored.

With the early *Upaniṣads*, we are entering a new period of Indian thought. In the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, several new philosophies were being defined. These found their first manifestation in the early *Upaniṣads*, namely *Aitareya*, *Kauṣītaki*, *Chāndogya*, *Kena*, *Taittirīya*, *Īśa*, *Kaṭha* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. Next, possibly between the seventh and fifth century BCE, followed *Praśna*, *Muṇḍaka*, *Māṇḍūkya*, *Śvetāśvatara*, *Maitrī*, *Subāla*, *Jābāla*, *Paṇḍita*, *Kaivalya*, and *Vajrasūcikā*. There are a lot of other *Upaniṣads*, as the name refers not only to a class of literature but also to a way of thinking. Some *Upaniṣads* were composed only a few hundred years ago. These, the so called 'minor *Upaniṣads*' are roughly divided into three groups: Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and Śākta. Such concepts did not exist in the time of the early *Upaniṣads*; we can roughly date the minor *Upaniṣads* as beginning in the first century BCE and continuing to the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. (Sharma 1972).

Outwardly, the *Vedas* were still the backbone of religious activity, but on a more subtle level, the later commentaries brought about a flourishing growth of innovative interpretations. There were so many changes that I shall restrict myself to a few basic ones. Starting c. 1000 BCE the sacrificial priests began assembling and elaborating creation myths. You have already heard a few of them, there are even a few in the *ṚV*, but the topic was only of minor importance at the time. Now it

assumed a greater importance, as more and more minds began to speculate about the nature of the world. In the wake of these speculations we observe the growth of different philosophical schools. There had always been a lot of variation in worship, but now the variation began to engulf the entire world-view. With it we encounter an increase of doubt. Gradually the gods began to lose importance. The rites, developed to extremes of complication, were thought to be so important that the gods, if the sacrifice was well-performed, were obliged to offer their blessings. This is almost an automatic process: proper sacrifice equals predictable results. With this sort of belief a god can be expected to perform just as the priests desire. In consequence, much of the original vitality of the deities began to disappear, while the power and authority of the ritual specialists was ever increasing. This produced tensions between the Brahmins and the warrior-aristocracy. We also observe the increase of 'all-self' concepts, such as *Puruṣa*, *ātman*, *Prajāpati*, and finally, *Brahman*. Here Indian thought left polytheism and began to explore pantheism. With the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahman* became the most important spiritual concept. This implied a new estimation of the human role in reality. Earlier periods had insisted that cosmic order (*ṛta*) is upheld by regular and precise sacrifices. Now, the main connection of humans to the divine was the all-soul. As each being is endowed with a self (*ātman*) it may remember its connection to the all-self, *Brahman*, and eventually return to it. We are at the roots of the quest for liberation. The early Vedic priests sought to uphold cosmic order, they were not interested in dissolving in an all-self. The priests of the *Upaniṣads* began to see sacrifices as secondary priorities; the object of their quest was freedom from limited human existence by becoming one with the all. In the wake of this enterprise appears a dramatic re-evaluation of the meaning of existence. This appears in two radical new ideas: rebirth and *karman*.

How rebirth was discovered (or invented) remains one of those riddles. In Vedic times, there were a few otherworlds, some paradises of the gods and some vague hells that people could go to after death. These were not very defined at first, but the *Brāhmaṇas* certainly developed the theme. At some point this began to change. The otherworlds remained, but they became mere points of transition. For example the *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad*, 1, 2 proposes that after death, souls go to the moon. Those who understand the moon as the door of heaven and know 'how to answer it' may ascend to the higher realms. Those who do not return to earth as rain and find rebirth as animals or humans. Just when the change from afterlife to reincarnation took place is unknown. The *Upaniṣads* were still developing the theme, they had not reached the consensus that appears in early Hinduism. However the idea of rebirth came up, it was certainly useful. In a society which was steadily becoming more rigid some must have worried how to make sense of it all. A firm division into classes is just the thing that strikes some as jolly unfair. Perhaps the idea that things can get better in the next life is a small comfort to those who are down at the bottom. The same may be said about the idea that your present misery is not fated but your own



fault. In this sense, reincarnation became a convenient explanation for those who felt unhappy within the class-system. It proved a philosophy that kept people more or less where they were supposed to be. This sort of thinking reduces social unrest and is generally encouraged by the government.

The elder *Upaniṣads* introduced the idea that all doing produces effects. The same goes for not-doing: whatever you happen to do or avoid doing influences the world. As beings go through life, they produce karman. Karman means action, doing, and the results of the deeds. This simple observation had a radical character. In the early Vedic period, human fate was believed to depend on proper ritual, sacrifice, magic spells, and being on good terms with gods and priests. People could do something to avert an evil fate, they could find release from bad luck and past sins by doing the proper rituals. Even a horrible fate after death, the dreaded second death (punarmṛtyu), could be avoided by proper sacrifices. Karman put a stop to this. In the earliest rendering of the karman philosophy, we learn that people are responsible for themselves. What happens after death depends on proper conduct while living. Karman was considered a subtle influence that attaches itself to the individual soul (ātman) during life and influences the next birth. If you are enjoying a good life right now, this is due to the karman you developed in your last lives, as well as your conduct in this. Karman was not only an abstract quality, the law of causality, it also became a moral principle. Good deeds and bad deeds both produce karman, and karman, no matter whether good or bad, implies bondage. This is not quite what modern Hindus, let alone New-Agers or Theosophists, consider karman. In many people's beliefs, karman is like a bank account. Good deeds increase the value of the account, bad deeds reduce it, and when you have collected enough bonus points you may become holy or pop out of existence entirely. The flaw in this social philosophy is distinguishing between good and bad deeds. Good and bad are categories of evaluation, they depend on the individual point of view and have no existence as such. Good deeds do not necessarily have good results, bad deeds and sins are not necessarily harmful for everyone. And just because your intentions are good does not mean that your deeds have good results. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1,2,7-11 derides such activities as proper social conduct, doing good deeds, cultivating knowledge, performing rituals, sacrifices, and acquiring merit as useless. Instead it proposes the life of the forest dwelling mendicant as a road to liberation.

In the philosophy of the *Upaniṣads*, the karman idea was just being developed, and our sources are not in agreement with each other. Some saw karman as an abstract principle (the law of causality, if you like) while others made it primarily a moral principle. We even encounter the notion that a father's karman is inherited by the son (*Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad*, 2, 15), but it never really became popular. What is important for the Upaniṣadic period is the idea that all karman, no matter whether good or bad, causes attachment to the world. Liberation from this attachment was possible for those who managed to merge their human

self (ātman) in the all-self, Brahman. This notion transformed the entire religious landscape.

All beings produce karman at all times, whether they like it or not, and this includes the gods. If the gods are held in bondage of karman, just as humans are, they are no longer free to wield their divine powers as they used to. This put a stop to the Vedic belief that gods punish evildoers. The all-seeing Varuṇa, the club-throwing Indra, the deities of law and order simply lost their function. If a person did evil, the karman of the deed was just punishment. The gods had nothing to do with it, unless it was their karman to enact a punishment which had been decreed by the karman of the evildoer. Divine rewards were likewise only possible when allowed by karman. In short, with the introduction of karman and rebirth, the gods lost much of their importance. Indeed, some texts, such as the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 1,4,10 propose *Whoever knows thus, 'I am Brahman,' becomes this all. Even the gods cannot prevent his becoming thus, for he becomes their self. So whoever worships another divinity (than his self) thinking that he is one and (Brahman) another, he knows not. He is like an animal to the gods.* Just as humans feed on animals, the gods feed on ignorant worshippers. The ritual sacrifices, while still being celebrated, were despised by many philosopher saints. Instead of ritualism, they proposed that liberation can be found by direct experience of Brahman. This is the knowledge that frees from evil, that liberates from all bondage, this is way superior to all ethics. The authors of the early *Upaniṣads* had a good word for ethics once in a while, but they repeatedly emphasised that liberation is something beyond ethical values altogether. It's not doing good or doing bad, the trick is to leave the whole game - and everything else. Now the idea of karman does seem a little pessimistic. This was not so at the beginning. The *Īśa Upaniṣad*, proposes that, while bondage is the norm, liberation is possible to all who sever their attachment to the world. We are at the beginning of a new movement here: at the time, there is evidence for growing communities of forest dwelling ascetics, nude drop-outs, and wandering mendicants of all descriptions, folks who have said goodbye to the values of society. While some texts praise the life of the forest ascetics (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5, 10) others plead for a spiritual life within society. At the same time, the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* introduces a totally pessimistic vision of karman. Here we can find the bitter and hopeless mood that became so typical for early Buddhism. To begin with, the body is foul-smelling, insubstantial, full of faeces, phlegm, urine, and disease, bound by desire, anger, delusion, covetousness, a '*cart without intelligence*'. The gods themselves may be worshipped, as expressions of Brahman, but their benefits are temporary and should be discarded. Unity is attainable when all is destroyed. The best methods to attain peace are yoga and austerities, by shaking off all good and evil the sage becomes self-less, empty, absent. The text contains some useful new concepts, such as the *suṣumṇā*, meditation on sound, meditation of the thumb-sized seer within the cave of the heart, voiding thoughts, plus some odd elements of ritual, but on the whole it is certainly no happy message. This attitude became one of the prevailing elements in Indian



thought. When modern people hear of reincarnation, they generally see this as good news. To the people of old India it was something rather to be avoided.

## New Faiths: Buddhism and Jaina

The *Upaniṣads* proved to be a breakthrough in Indian philosophy. Though they did not attempt to invalidate the earlier *Vedas*, they had a liberating effect on many thinkers. The Brahman concept reduced the importance of personified gods and allowed the development of an abstract and sophisticated spirituality that could do without many of the earlier rites and sacrifices. This change came subtly, not in a clear break from earlier traditions. In the centuries after the early *Upaniṣads* a host of new philosophical schools appeared. Many of these were highly dissatisfied with stratified society and rigid adherence to class-duties. Two innovative systems survive to this day. They were founded by contemporaries, but the actual date of this event is highly disputed. Buddha's death (at the age of eighty) was thought to be one of the few reliable dates in Indian prehistory, and many sources agreed that it happened around 486 or 480 BCE. Recent research has thrown doubt on this and shown that the demise of the Enlightened One could just as well have happened around 350 BCE. If this is the case, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Vedas*, and indeed the Aryan invasion have to be re-dated (Willhelm in Franz 1990: 99).

Enough has been written about the Buddha and his teachings, so you'll forgive me for not repeating material that can be studied better in any library. For the present, it should suffice that Buddha built on the foundation of the *Upaniṣads* in that he accepted the concept of reincarnation. Early Buddhism is full of *Upaniṣadic* ideas. The evils of the body, the snares of bondage and attachment, the futility of human effort and the like were taught for centuries before Buddha incorporated them in his lore. He also made use of a good many practices, such as meditation, voiding of thoughts, cultivation of poverty, and so on, which had been developed in the early *Upaniṣads*. In his time a growing number of mad sages had begun to dwell in forest communities. Many of these went their own ways; good evidence that loneliness, isolation, absence of social pressure, and plain lack can lead to interesting states of mind. One strong school proposed that the soul, and its fate after death, are not only unknown but also unknowable. What is unknown and unknowable does not exist. Buddha combined the idea of reincarnation with the non-existing soul, and proposed that there is no enduring or lasting thing whatsoever. Unlike earlier sages, Buddha claimed that *karman* is not dependant on a personal soul, an *ātman*, to continue its influence. Causality continues, no matter whether there is a soul or not. Instead of a soul there is a group of illusionary and painful states ('self') that continue life after life. These states are what people consider themselves to be. Eventually the dance comes to an end: the last remnant of personal identity disappears and the 'self' fades into nothingness. This is liberation in the primal Buddhistic sense: the disappearance of all

illusions together with anyone who could perceive them. End of form, end of awareness, end of the show. This essentially pessimistic philosophy held a lot of attraction for folk fed up with life and its limitations. (A friend suggested that I shouldn't call it 'pessimistic'; in his opinion, 'realistic' is more accurate. I call that cynical). Buddha's teachings turned out to be highly attractive to the rulers of the time, who liked their subjects to sit back and resignate. Unlike many other philosophers of the time, Buddha did not call for a change in society but expected his followers to leave or endure it. We are a long way from the *Vedas* here. The hope of celestial paradise has given way to the longing for total disappearance. Buddha made much use of the elder term *nirvāṇa* for the goal of all spiritual effort. This word, often understood as 'liberation' means literally expiration, cessation, and was frequently applied in Buddha's favourite metaphor, that of the extinguished flame of an oil-lamp. When the oil is burned up, the flame disappears without trace. Likewise, when *karman* is consumed, the self disappears. We have a polarity here: *nirvāṇa* (cessation) against *saṃsāra* (the cycle of rebirth). Together with the self a number of other fancies were abolished, mainly those that make people form bonds of attachment to life. This included emotions, such as greed, hate, desire, craving, ignorance, love, duty, friendship, and so on. When all bonds are severed, the soul attains liberation (i.e. disappears) though body may continue living until it drops dead. The whole thing was packaged as four noble truths, starting with the idea that all life is suffering and the root of all suffering is desire. *Kāma* again, the deity of desire, had become the epitome of evil. In a world where no such thing as a self exists there is obviously little need for deities. The historical Buddha considered them as unhappy and bound by illusion as his fellow humans. In this sense Buddhism was never a religion, and to this day many Indians consider Buddhism a form of atheism.

The faith, thoroughly serious and grim in its early stages, underwent a lot of changes over the centuries. It split into two basic movements and developed into many degrees of subtlety as it spread throughout Asia. It also underwent a lot of reinterpretation. Buddhism had to become a lot more tolerant to become really popular. When you hear a modern Buddhist say that *nirvāṇa* is identical with *saṃsāra* you are witnessing an insight that is centuries away from the early Buddhists and their escapist efforts. In India, Buddhism began to decline around the seventh century CE. While the cult was still expanding into China, Japan, Korea, south-east Asia, and, a few centuries later, into the Himalayas, its original country was beginning to transform the core teachings of the Enlightened One. The seventh century saw the development of a new Buddhist school in northern India, the *Vajrayāna* (diamond vehicle), which was highly influenced by Hindu Śākta doctrines. What we call Tantra today (the people of the time did not) may be a fusion of several Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Tantric Buddhism is a long way from the pure and stern asceticism of the historical Buddha. For a start, it is not as negative and pessimistic. Also, it began to refine yoga, visualisation, ritual, drama, trance-practice, obsession, divination, music, and, in some



traditions, ritual lovemaking. When the Muslims came to conquer northern India in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Tantric Buddhism was so thoroughly interwoven with Hindu Tantra that they were hard to distinguish. Many worshippers felt at home in both systems. The Muslims did not approve of either. As the Buddhists were dependant on temples, monasteries, and libraries, it was an easy matter for the invaders to crush the cult. It continued to thrive outside of its home country.

The faith of the Jaina developed in the same period as Buddhism. Its founder was called Mahāvīra (Great Hero) or Jina (Victor), his original name was Vardhamāna. These martial titles do not imply that their bearer was a violent man. In Jaina, the real fight is against the demons within, and the road to victory is total asceticism. Like Buddhism, Jaina was in strong opposition to the Vedic class-bound society and to the sacrificial excesses of the Brahmins. Unlike Buddha, Mahāvīra believed in reincarnation and the reality of the soul. In his faith, all souls keep reincarnating and all beings and things are endowed with a soul. Thus, the first principle of the Jainas is to cultivate ahimsa (non-injury): if you hurt even the smallest creature you hurt yourself, and the all-self, and suffer a lot of bad karman. Ahimsa became the prime law of the faith. No other religion in the world has been so careful to avoid hurting fellow life-forms. You can recognise strict Jainas as they brush the ground to avoid stepping on insects and wear a cloth before the mouth to avoid inhaling them. In their practice, the Jainas had to cultivate strict asceticism. Desires were ignored or negated and basic comforts were denied. The question of whether clothes might be worn split the religion into two quarrelling factions, one in white, the other sky-clad (nude). Not all followers of the cult went to such extremes. The lay followers were allowed to lead a worldly life, provided they adhered to the important regulations. As ahimsa remained the summit of perfection, a lot of professions were unattractive. Even a farmer kills life when he ploughs the ground. As a result, the majority became traders and gained considerable economic influence. Many made more money than their faith allowed them to spend. Their cult was never a mass-movement, as it demanded too much discipline and ascetic idealism (plus the rigorous adherence to hundreds of rules), on the other hand it never became decadent or lost its early ideals. Ahimsa influenced many Hindu religions and several Tantric movements. I should add that Buddha and Mahāvīra were by no means the only original philosophers of the time. As long as forest communities existed, far from the influence of city-bound Brahmanism, there were new schools of salvation available. Thanks to Buddhist historians we know of three other schools. We know of gloomy Gośāla who proposed a fierce pre-determined fatalism. In his lore, all beings are as they are and cannot change one bit. Fate, nature, and chance are inexorable, free will is an illusion and karman functions like a blind machine. His followers, called Ājīvikas had an initiation and spent most of their lives cultivating an extreme asceticism. This cult seems to have survived in southern India up to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it influenced the Vaiṣṇavas (Gonda 1960: 286).



Figure 13 – Unknown Goddesses

Top: Unknown Goddess, terracotta, second century BCE, Bangarh, Bengal, 15cm height.  
Bottom: Unknown goddess, terracotta, c. 150 BCE, Mathura.



A more indifferent attitude was taught by Pūraṇa Kāśyapa, who believed that no activity, no matter how bad or good influences karman. The very ideas of sin and merit are meaningless in his system. By contrast Ajita Keśakambalin proposed a materialistic interpretation: beings consist of the four elements. After death, the body dissolves into the elements. A soul does not exist, hence, death is final and absolute.

If you want to treat yourself to some interesting experiences, explore such philosophies for a while. Spend a day as a raging fatalist or become a materialist. Find out how your behaviour changes when you change the parameters of your beliefs. You'll be surprised!

## Elder Hinduism

After these preliminaries you will no doubt be happy to come to a topic that is even more complicated. What is Hinduism? The Indian government defined Hinduism as all of the religions that were developed in India. This includes Veda, Buddhism, Jaina, worshippers of Śiva, Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Śakti, tribal religions, village cults, and the Sikhs, who vehemently protested against this classification. The word Hindu comes from Persia, it means a native of the land of the Indus. The term began to have a religious connotation when Muslims began to settle in the Indus valley in the eight century, it became popular when they occupied northern India in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The English formed the modern term 'Hinduism' under the mistaken impression that all India would adhere to a single religion. In their eyes, there was a main religion divided into numerous sects. Like many Europeans, they could not imagine that so many distinct religions could exist in relative tolerance. Indians tend to speak of their religion as dharma, i.e. the eternal law, duty, rightness, truth, order that defines each person's place and spiritual development.

When we come to early Hinduism we encounter such a vast field of study that I can only recommend that you do some on your own. There were so many developments between, say, 500 BCE and 500 CE that a single lifetime would not suffice to explore all of them. I shall restrict myself to a brief summary of some of the major trends and hope that the gods of learning and scholarly precision will forgive the oversimplification.

As you have seen, Hinduism is not a very specific term, nor was it a concept the people of the time were aware of. That something new was developing escaped their attention. The evolution of spiritual concepts took place gradually and without radical cuts. The teachings of the past were never denied, they were simply superseded by new interpretations and customs. The holy writ of antiquity remained holy, as it remains holy to this day, even if it had to be reinterpreted as an elder vision of the truth.



Figure 14 - Divine Heads

Top: head of Pārvati or Umā, terracotta in Gupta style, 5th century. Śiva temple of Ahicchatra.

Bottom: Head of Śiva, terracotta in Gupta style, 5th century. Śiva temple of Ahicchatra.



The thousand years treated in this section saw a lot of political changes on the subcontinent. In this place I should only mention the rise of new large kingdoms, the introduction of writing under emperor Aśoka (himself a Buddhist), the invasion of India under Alexander the Great (an event of such minor importance that Indian historians hardly bothered to mention it), and the rise of Greek-Indian dynasties, which had such an enormous influence on art and sculpture. During this period, India became a concept that fascinated Europeans. Greek and Roman historians began to record weird tales from the east where giant ants collect gold, unicorns thrive, and elderly men set fire to themselves. Trade began, and India was soon connected with the economic networks of the Roman empire. By 25 BCE there were 120 ships a year voyaging to India from Myos-Hormos alone. The journey was partly overland through Egypt and Arabia by caravan and partly by sea, it was long, dangerous, and demanding, but it was certainly profitable and led to the establishment of Egyptian and European sailor communities in north west India. Under the first Caesars, Indian trade produced enormous profits. The Indian market was highly interested in metals, in purple colour, chemicals, and wine, whereas the European markets were so hungry for Indian spices, incenses, ivory, rare woods, and luxury goods that every year a lot of Roman money went to India, where it remained. In some districts it became the most valuable currency. Soon enough, ideas were being exchanged and so was religion: just look at the introduction of the Egyptian goddess Isis, patroness of sailors in the Roman Empire, to India where she became the only veiled deity of the pantheon (Mogg Morgan discusses this fascinating topic in his currently unpublished work *Isis in India*). In a similar fashion, India acquired Mesopotamian astrology, if in a Grecian form, and adapted it to its own needs. A similar amount of trade and cultural exchange took place with the countries east of India, mainly with China. Hindu religions were also exported into the countries of south-east Asia between the second century BCE and the sixth century CE. Within India, writers began to produce not only about 200 new *Upaniṣads* but also a flood of law texts, poetry, and finally two massive epic poems, the *Mahābhārata* in 100,000 double verses and the slightly shorter *Rāmāyaṇa*. On the surface, both epics are concerned with heroism. The first is the extensive account of the battles and disputes of two branches of a royal family, many of whose members happen to be incarnate deities. The second, younger and shorter, piece expounds the life of Rāma (an incarnation of Viṣṇu), his marriage with Sita, her abduction by a demon, and the rescue mission. These works developed over several centuries and eventually reached encyclopaedic dimensions. No other works had such a deep influence on the development of Indian thought. To this day, priests and storytellers recite episodes of these epics, and though this happens in archaic saṁskṛt, and most of the audience understands little but the names and a few odd words here and there, these events are not only popular but sacred. When the *Mahābhārata* was shown on TV, pious Hindus decorated their TV sets with flowers and burned incense. Partaking of these tales means winning merit and finding release from past sins. Another such field of literary evolution were the (basic)

eighteen *Purāṇas*, which set down an enormous amount of mythology, rituals, hymns, scientific discourses, geography, cosmology, genealogies, and anything that fascinated their authors. These works can be considered encyclopaedias. Some were dedicated to single deities, others attempted to reduce the tension between the growing cults of Śiva and Viṣṇu by being nice to everybody. All of this literature is complex, stylistically refined, and full of contradictions. This has never bothered Indian people much: there has never been a single dogma about anything.

## **Dharma and the Pattern of Society**

With the advent of early Hinduism we observe an increasing importance of dharma. Dharma is a term that used to refer to cosmic order in the elder days. This order was reflected in society and in the life of each living being. A lot of concepts went into this package. Dharma can mean harmony, truth, rightness, it can be the laws of nature, and when applied to human behaviour it is the force that binds people to stations of society. By following class duties, each Hindu supports dharma, by violating social laws, cosmic dharma is threatened. Dharma permeated the entire body of Hindu religion. It allows for connections that do not exist in other philosophies. A sin or crime, though they violate human dharma, is apt to have repercussions in the natural world. A sinful king, a ruler who disregards the rites or breaks some religious taboo, violates dharma, and this can lead to terrible weather, plague, or invasion by enemies. Corrupt priests, kings, and ministers can be a threat to order on all levels. The social world, the natural world, and the divine are not separate, they are one dharma, and a damage of dharma can upset them all. Of course dharma was more than just a principle, it was also a force and a deity. The most important aspect of dharma in daily life was the duty of each being to follow its natural obligations. Plants follow dharma, animals follow dharma, gods follow dharma, and humans are obliged to do the same. In the process, the class system became ever more complex. Where the late *Vedas* were satisfied with three upper classes and one lower (plus a lot of class-less folk), early Hinduism developed more and more classes. Likewise, distinctions between classes became stronger. Late Vedic texts still mention a fair share of class-changing by merit, achievement, and marriage (especially between Brahmins and warriors). Early Hindu literature does not approve of this sort of thing. We observe a proliferation of class distinctions. This was due to the integration of more segments of society, the need to account for new professions and ethnic groups, and so on. To this day, scholars are debating why the class system became so exaggerated and oppressive. Here it should suffice that by the time of Manu (well, one of them) there were already more than fifty classes. The class system worked by giving each person her or his dharma and hence a duty in the world. It also worked as it allowed all newcomers a niche in society. This is important: each new influence could be integrated. In



one package with classes and dharma came karman, reincarnation, and purity laws.

Now the status of the individual in society does not only depend on varṇa (class) but also on jati. Jati is an extremely difficult concept for non-Indians. It is not a Vedic idea but one that developed together with early Hinduism. Jati describes, roughly speaking, what specific groups in society a person belongs to. Jati can be birth, origin, kinship, clan, or family relationship. It can also be connection to specific religious groups, provinces, country, profession, ethnic background, and so on. These are the fine details that specify the personal status within a given varṇa. Jati can also transcend varṇa. People with high income may well achieve a status that is much higher than their varṇa. Brahmins, though theoretically the heads of society, often have a tiny income and are happy to get a job as a teacher, an accountant, or a cook. Warriors and Brahmins often depend on money-lenders to keep up their place in society, and merchants occasionally make more money than both. Doctors were often considered unclean, as they came in contact with secretions, blood, corpses, and other dirty substances. Nowadays their status has improved amazingly, thanks to high wages. Add to this the widespread habit of improving the past. There are lots of low-class people in India who stoutly insist that they were originally of Brahmin stock, but had to change names and professions to evade persecution. As a result, many people try to improve on their varṇa, and few believe in what their neighbours claim about theirs. Hindu society, nowadays divided into more than 3000 classes, looks like a well-ordered hierarchy, but things are less rigid than they seem. This makes marriage a really complicated matter. In theory, the classes are supposed to marry within themselves, or preferably with their superiors. In practice, there are a lot of considerations involved, such as property and power, and finding a proper mate provides entertainment for the entire clan. If possible, families try to marry their daughters into a class of higher status, and usually the husband's family demands a lot for this honour. When there are many daughters, too much marrying can ruin the family. Marriages of men into higher classes are frowned upon and rarely happen. This makes it hard for top-class women to find a mate. I have to add that there is still a lot of persecution going on. While class-discrimination was theoretically abolished by the British and is frowned upon by the modern Indian government, in the real world it goes on as ever. To deny the existence of classes is to deny the structure of dharma in the human world. Where do the people come from who dive into the sewers of Indian cities without any protective gear to unclog drains? Who do you guess gets beaten up for showing self esteem? Who builds houses and tills the fields of the landowners for free? Every year class-less folk get stoned by their social betters. In the cities, this trend is gradually weakening, but out in the country everything is as bad as ever. Sometimes people are killed just because their shadows touched an upper-class fanatic.

## Problems with Purity

Every person is contaminated every day. You only have to go out of doors and the purity of your class is threatened. There are millions of unclean and forbidden things in the wide world, and each Hindu has to do a lot to remain clean and pure. A daily bath and worship ceremony are the basics to keep up one's spiritual and social status. Company is the next issue: even talking with an inferior equals contamination. Public transport was not an issue in early Hinduism but nowadays it is. Few innovations have endangered class-separation as much as taking a ride in a train or bus. Food is especially difficult. Hindu theology is so obsessed with food as it can only be accepted from people of one's own class or superior ones. Everyone is supposed to eat and drink with people of the same *varṇa*. While travelling this obviously becomes a problem. To make up for inevitable contamination a host of minor rites were invented. If you buy food from a lowly trader, you have to clean it by ritual or by contact with sacred substances, such as the five jewels of the cow. *Vasiṣṭha* 6,27 insists that if a Brahmin dies with food accepted from a Śudra in his belly, his next life will be as a pig. Study of Veda and scripture won't help one bit. Poor Brahmins often become cooks. Their *varṇa* is so high that everybody in society can accept food from them. The result is an amazingly complex set of feeding rules. You find a major obsession with food in many *Upaniṣads*, and things did not get better over the centuries.

Keep this in mind as you read Tantric texts. When the Kaulas propose that there are no rules to feeding, that ritual food can come from any source, that adepts can eat what they like and with whom they like, this is an enormous break from social norms. The same appears in certain forms of clandestine group worship where social classes are abolished. Kaula rituals involving worship with or of women is another break with Vedic tradition. To venerate a low-class woman as a goddess or to make love with her is unthinkable to traditionalists. It's even worse when unclean substances, such as body secretions, are treasured and ingested. To foreigners such things may not matter much, but to strict minded traditionalists they constitute anarchy and mind blowing heresy. Such acts threatened social stability, one more reason why certain Tantric cults were not popular.

Purity was also threatened by contact with dead humans and animals, hides, excrement, body secretions, and a wide range of unlucky people. The list includes criminals, murderers, classless folk, illegitimate children, and women, especially when they are nude. Some early texts recommend that men should protect themselves with amulets when they approach women, on some days (and many nights) women should not be approached at all. Menstruation is one such time, more detail about this will be found further on. Pregnancy is another dangerous time, birth is worse, but marriages and deaths in the family also require special rituals and purification. The range of purification rites is extensive. There are simple rites to clean food by repeating the *Gāyatrī* mantra 108 to 1008 times, more serious contamination can necessitate weeks of ritual



bathing, prayer, extensive sacrifices, making gifts to Brahmins, ascetic exercises, fasting, and doing good deeds. Some sins, such as travelling over the ocean, leaving India, having a child from a Śūdra woman, murder, or stealing from a Brahmin were so dreadful that a Hindu lost his class and had to reacquire it at great cost and effort. Indian troops, employed by the English outside of India had one hell of a time when they came home to their relations, who refused to speak with them. Purity aside, dharma dictated the role of each person in life. The early Hindus believed that life should be ordered in stages, and that each male should go through a specific set of functions in life. This began with the age of initiation (differing for each class) and continued through maturity. Theoretically, each upper class male was supposed to fulfil three obligations: the gods demand sacrifice, the ancestors demand sons, and the seers demand study of the *Vedas*. Those who did not fulfil their obligations could expect a long time in hell, followed by some nasty reincarnation as a beast. Part of these obligations was the idea that life should end by withdrawing from society. This took several forms. In some cases, elderly householders left their families and clans and became pilgrims or hermits. In other cases, the aged couple left the family and began to live in a crude hut in some secluded forest, dedicating their lives to extreme asceticism and saintliness. It was considered good form to find eventual death by starvation. Still others claimed that it is a waste of time to delay holiness to the end of life and proposed that the earlier one becomes a recluse, the better. Here we have the same old conflict as in the early *Upaniṣads*: should people bother to become householders or should they drop out straightaway?

## Ups and Downs of the Deities

Gods do not die, but eventually they may fade out of common awareness. Divine powers and attributes can shift from one deity to another, the same goes for myths and functions. Some Vedic gods remained in business, but their relative importance changed a lot. Another innovation was a system of attributes, such as divine animals, colours, weapons, and so on. Possibly this attempt connects with the introduction of divine images. We know that the Aryans originally did not worship using images (or at least those Aryans we know about) but that some of their dark skinned opponents venerated liṅgas, images, possibly phallic. Images did not matter much in the religions before early Hinduism, but in the centuries before the common era they begin to multiply. Soon enough, the gods were equipped with more or less permanent attributes. A good many of these had been around since the early *Vedas*, you'll find them changing now. I should add that the gods, after they had lost so much of their fear-inspiring qualities now became a popular topic for poets and storytellers. Some of them had a strong, even bizarre, sense of humour. As a result, most gods began to develop highly human qualities, characteristics, and shortcomings. Here we observe a pantheon that is not really feared any more. The gods, just like humans and all other beings, are subject to karman. They are no longer rulers but

fellow actors in a divine play. By contrast, the dangerous power of seers and ascetics turned into a popular topic. The *Mahābhārata* contains several tales of seers who did their tapas so fiercely that they became a threat to the gods. Good reason to distract them by sending a few alluring Apsaras to earth.

The **Asuras**, once a respectable family of gods, were turned into a bunch of terrifying demons. This happened during the period when the *Atharva Veda* was compiled - before 500 BCE. With the advent of early Hinduism, gods who had been Asuras in earlier times were considered members of the Deva clan, their past history was conveniently ignored. Much of early Hindu mythology is based on the theme of good Devas fighting evil Asuras, a topic that can become a trifle boring after a few hundred repetitions.

Several Vedic deities almost disappeared. They were not forgotten, as the *Vedas* remained sacred literature, but they ceased to receive much veneration. Among them were the Maruts, the horse-riding Aśvins, Uṣas, Nirṛti and a host of minor deities.

**Agni** lost some importance as the great sacrifices of the Vedic period were being downsized or abandoned. He has remained popular to this day due to his connection with the household fire. This fire was and is the sacred focus of domestic life - it is the centre of home, family, and daily ritual. His earlier connections with water disappeared. In the new interpretation, Agni can also be like a hungry demon and an untrustworthy companion who is apt to go away from time to time. He also appears as a greedy old man and as a sex-hungry goat. In goat form, he could also appear as a favourite sacrifice and as the entire universe.

**Varuṇa**, once the god who ordered the universe, became a god of the oceans. As his power extended over the waters and water was a prominent part of the healing sciences, he also assumed the role of the divine healer. In general his importance declined.

**Indra** remained popular as the king of the gods. In actual worship, his importance gradually faded and most of his divine functions, especially with regard to kingship, were assimilated by the cult of Viṣṇu. Gradually, Indra assumed the form of a heroic young man who lives in a happy otherworld with hundreds of youths. In this form (and others, as he is a competent shape-shifter) he appears in lore and legend. His supreme status faded, by the end of the period he is a god who makes mistakes, needs help of others and occasionally shows fear and cowardice. This makes him immensely human, possibly likeable, but goes much against his earlier Vedic status as the summit of divine authority. Eventually, he needs 60,000 years of yoga and tapas plus the help of Śiva and Viṣṇu to fight the world serpent Vṛta, now in human form, who appears as a regent and even a Brahmin (hence Indra's reputation as a killer of Brahmins).

**Sūrya**, god of the sun, is equipped with a family. He is not of general importance any more, but remains popular with a group of worshippers called Sauras (after his name) and as the patron deity of astrologers. His old crony **Mitra** is now also a deity of the sun, provided he is mentioned



at all. His cult had a revival in north-west India in the first century CE, thanks to Persians who introduced their own solar, fiery Mithras.

**Yama** remains lord of the desolate realm of the dead. He is made more darksome and terrifying than before: the great epics make him a god of war, doom, and disease. He becomes lord of all hells, judge of the dead, and is occasionally identified with Kāla, time, as the devourer of all. Whether he received much veneration or remained as a popular literary figure is one of those questions.

**Vāyu**, god of wind and storms splits into several Vāyus, who are in charge of various phenomena. He appears occasionally as Indra's messenger, then again he is independent and receives worship as a god of speech, freedom, poetry, and even the soul. Some praise him as the essence of life and identify him with prāṇa. He swiftly gobbles up the functions of the **Maruts**.

The goddess of wealth and prosperity, **Śrī**, merges with the goddess of beauty and rural fertility, **Lakṣmī**, together they become Śrī Lakṣmī, to this day the most popular goddess in India. The river goddess **Sarasvatī** unites with the goddess Vāc/Vāk (Voice, Speech). Together they become the goddess of learning, music, poetry, and knowledge. The river Sarasvatī remained one of the sacred rivers of India, even after changes in climate made it dry up. You can still find it invoked in blessings and water rituals. Sarasvatī had much popularity in literature, mainly as the poets and writers saw her as a patron deity of their craft and regularly invoked her blessings at the beginning of a book.

**Kāma**, Vedic god of desire, had become the epitome of vice and temptation among the early Buddhists, who occasionally equated him with Māra, god of evil and death, and opponent of the Buddha. In Hinduism, he was not such a negative figure. Equipped with a bow of flowers he shoots arrows of desire and love, this made him a popular deity for lovers and a useful figure for literature. He is equipped with a wife called Rati (Lust), together the two appear in Tantric art. He develops a connection to Śiva, who once incinerates him by mistake, and refashions him on popular request.

**Viṣṇu** is one of the two winners in early Hinduism. In the early *Vedas*, Viṣṇu was a minor god in the company of Indra, whose prime function was to make space for Indras Vṛta fight by walking three steps. This produced the three realms of heaven, earth, and underworld, and allowed Indra to wield his thunderbolt. Starting from these humble beginnings, Viṣṇu became so popular that with the advent of early Hinduism, Indra had become a pale shadow and Viṣṇu is the installer of kings, ruler of the cosmos, and supreme sovereign of the spiritual world. He is married to Bhūmī, goddess of the divine earth and all prosperity. By the time of the *Mahābhārata*, the kings rule in Viṣṇu's name, and Viṣṇu, in one form or another, is the most celebrated deity of that monumental epic. The early Viṣṇu is still equipped with a few characteristics of the Vedic original. He is omnipresent, pervades everything, and contains the universe. As such, the god is of such a universal nature that we cannot discern much of a personality in him.

This changed when Viṣṇu was blended with two non-Vedic gods. One of them is a deity of herders and farmers called Kṛṣṇa (Black) who appears in popular mythology as a warrior deity and as a happy flute player who spends his days at the edge of the wilderness flirting with the cow girls. The other is Vāsudeva, who has such an active part in the *Mahābhārata*. Vāsudeva and Kṛṣṇa may have blended by the fourth century BCE, and only a few hundred years later both were considered incarnations of Viṣṇu. Kṛṣṇa did not begin as a god. Early Hinduism was highly interested in the figure of the half-god, the incarnate deity and the human who becomes deified (generally after death). Many of the heroic figures of the great epics are incarnate deities. As such, they have human nature and are inferior to the non-incarnate gods, but they still amount to much more than mere humans and return to their divine status after death. When a deity incarnates, it tends to become subject to human traits. It may err, be subject to emotion, delusion, and desire, and is often in need to pray to other gods. In the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa is one of the crucial figures. He is not the hero, he is the person who helps the heroes to win supremacy and uses the opportunity to dictate a new approach to religion. This is the theme of the *Bhagavadgītā*, one of the later additions to the *Mahābhārata*. Kṛṣṇa is an innovative deity. He is not very fond of the old Brahmanic order of things and has frequent conflicts with Indra. Kṛṣṇa is also the god who praises a new approach to salvation: bhakti (devotional love). The main innovation of the *Bhagavadgītā* is the idea that ritual and sacrifice are not as important as right action and total devotion to the deity. Action and participation in dharma were promoted, instead of resignation and withdrawal. This devotion was originally simply love and affection, but as the bhakti movement gained popularity, it developed into a whole series of sentiments and emotions. Of course loving devotion to a deity is not a thing that began with the cult of Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu. Throughout history there have been seers, drop-outs, and lunatics who came to love the divine in one form or another. The great innovation of bhakti is the idea that loving devotion can be used systematically and that it is superior to the earlier forms of worship, ritual, sacrifice, and asceticism. Kṛṣṇa of the *Mahābhārata* is both a human hero (who dies after receiving an arrow in his foot) and an incarnate god. He appears under several names, each of them possibly another human or deity who got assimilated in the cult, such as Janārdana (The Oppressor of Enemies), Govinda (related to go-, meaning 'cow'), and he is even called an incarnation of Nārāyaṇa. Originally, Nārāyaṇa used to be an ecstatic sage and a son of the god Dharma who lived near the Ganges. He was occasionally identified with Brahman and appears in company of Indra. Fairly early, Viṣṇu was identified with Nārāyaṇa, of whom the *Mbh* 12,334 states that he was born in the first world age as Nara, Nārāyaṇa, Hari (Lion), and Kṛṣṇa. The basic teachings of bhakti are attributed to him. Sometime between the early *Mahābhārata* - around 200 BCE - and its late version, Kṛṣṇa became an incarnation of Viṣṇu. He was not to be the only one. As Viṣṇu is such a pervasive god, he is in charge of cosmic order and balance, and as such a maintainer of the universe. It's not an easy job. To ensure the continuity of the world, Viṣṇu tends to reincarnate from time to time. The



idea of regular divine incarnation came to form the avatāra succession. This is fundamental to the cult of Viṣṇu; it is not very important in other Indian religions. Over the centuries, worshippers of Viṣṇu selected a series of ten heroic or divine figures, who were thought to be incarnations of their god. The selection took quite a while, and not all texts are in agreement on the range of divine impersonations. Some invented more than twenty. Nowadays the basic ten are:

### ***First world-age***

1. The divine fish (Matsya) who saved the first human, Manu, from the great flood.
2. The tortoise (Kūrma) who was the support of the world mountain when the gods stirred the milk-ocean and won the elixir of immortality.
3. The monstrous boar (Varāha) who lifted the submerged earth from the depths of the ocean.
4. The man-lion (Narasimha) who destroyed the demon Hiranyākṣa.

### ***Second world-age***

5. The dwarf (Vāmana) who defeated the demon Bali by measuring the three worlds in three steps.
6. Rāma with the Axe (Paraśurāma), destroyer of the warriors who had killed his father.
7. Rāma, son of Daśaratha, husband of Sītā, destroyer of the demon Rāvaṇa, hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

### ***Third world-age***

8. Kṛṣṇa, slayer of the demon Kāṁsa.

### ***Fourth world-age***

9. Buddha, the Enlightened One (an idea that made a lot of Buddhists angry).
10. Kalkin, the white horse (or rider of the white horse) who will come at the end of the present age to begin a new era.

Out of this complex of myths and divine personages arose the thriving cult of Viṣṇu whose followers are generally called Vaiṣṇavas. They form the majority of worshippers in wide parts of modern India. Over the last centuries, they had an enormous influence on Indian thought. When it comes to rewriting history, taming wild deities and turning raging goddesses into obedient housewives, Vaiṣṇavas cannot be equalled.

The other winner of early Hinduism is **Śiva**. He began as Rudra, the fierce god of the wilderness, lord of ascetics, hermits, healers, and all who live at the fringes of society. The name Śiva (Auspicious) is one of

the many titles the god acquired in the late Vedic period. Unlike such names as Hara (Destroyer), Bhīma (Terrible), or Kāla (Time, i.e. the great destroyer) the term Śiva attempts to placate the deity with a respectful and friendly title. Being nice to terrifying gods is something you can find in many cultures, just think of the term 'the Good Neighbours' for the dreaded fairy folk of Celtic countries. The Vedic Rudra was a dreaded and terrifying god who received placation, not praise. As Śiva, he became more popular. In character, Śiva has a function that is diametrically opposite to Viṣṇu. Where Viṣṇu maintains cosmic order, Śiva tends to disregard or avoid it. Śiva is a wild god, an outcast from divine society, and his followers were often dreaded as they tended to be as wild, mad, and anti-social as their deity. Rudra became popular in some of the early *Upaniṣads*. We encounter him as Śiva in early Hinduism. By that time the god has changed a great deal. He has become identified with the liṅga, a phallic image well known from folk-worship, and with the true liṅga, the unmeasurable, eternal column of sheer energy that gives direction to the cosmos. This pillar is not a phallus. It comes closer to such concepts as the tree of life, the pole reaching to the north star, the cosmic axis, allowing seers and shamans to travel to the height and depth. Also, he has gained the bull Nandi as his vehicle. Rudra is called a bull in one of the hymns of the *Ṛg Veda*, but this is an exception, as in Vedic times, the bull was the vehicle and symbol of Indra. Nevertheless, we find Rudra closely associated with cattle in the *Atharva Veda*. When Śiva acquired liṅga and bull, he also acquired a vital function in rural life. As god of the phallus, Śiva was identified with fertility, lust, and general procreation. This is not very much in tune with the ascetic Śiva, the half starved mendicant dwelling alone in mountains and jungles. Early Hinduism made Śiva a god full of paradox and extreme contrasts. Śiva gives life and fertility, but his children are diseases, poison is his elixir, and the battlefield is his playing ground. He gives life and death, and is the liberator from both. Such notions seem to conflict, but to devotees of the deity the conflict is a dance of equipoise, and the extremes balance. This enigmatic figure is much more clearly defined than the vague and omnipresent Viṣṇu. Like Viṣṇu, Śiva inspired several devotional systems. Unlike the simple method of bhakti, which can be adopted by any person, no matter the age, class, or level of intelligence, the teachings of Śiva demands a lot of learning, training, and discipline. You can find these expressed in many of the Āgamas and Tantras, where Śiva, or some form of Śiva, teaches complicated rituals, visualisations, and sorceries.

An important part of the cult of Śiva was the integration of female deities. The cult embraced sexuality, and this made the partner of the god an important and active figure. The followers of Śiva equipped their god with a wide range of partners, all of them former local goddesses.

### **Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas and Śāktas**

By the time we reach the end of early Hinduism, the main cults were those of Viṣṇu, Śiva, and local deities, most of whom were female.



Hence modern Hinduism developed the basic religious movements called Śaivas (worshippers of Śiva) and Vaiṣṇavas (worshippers of Viṣṇu). These movements were by no means clearly defined and there were no hard boundaries between them. Think of them as temperamental preferences, not as churches: no religion of India has ever managed (or bothered) to evolve a single dogma. A good many worshippers delighted in both movements, or made up their own personal version of them. One of the new ideas of these systems is that Viṣṇu can be a personification of Brahman, and that worship of Viṣṇu equals union with the all-self that had been of such importance since the *Upaniṣads*. Thus, to Vaiṣṇavas, Viṣṇu became Brahman, the supreme principle. The Śaivas saw things in the same light, only that they proposed that Brahman is really to be found in Śiva, who happens to be the supreme principle. This idea was first proposed in the *Kaivalya Upaniṣad*, 16-18, but it took some centuries before it became popular:

*He is the supreme Brahman, the self of all, the chief foundation of this world, subtler than the subtle, eternal. That thou art; Thou art that. The world which shines in the states of waking, dream and dreamless sleep, knowing that it is Brahman who I am, one is freed from all fetters. In the three states of consciousness whatever appears as the object of enjoyment, or the enjoyer, or the enjoyment, I am different from them, the witness (thereof), pure consciousness, the eternal Śiva.*

Viṣṇu and Śiva assumed function and characteristics of the all-self, they became the vast consciousness that extends throughout all being. Here we have religions that were interpreted in many ways. In folk religion, Viṣṇu and Śiva remained gods with tales, personality, and temperament who could be called upon to get things done. In more intellectual circles, the anthropomorphic representations of the gods were seen as conveniences. Thus, the gods could be understood in many ways, and every single one of them is true.

With the advent of Śaiva worship, the role of the local goddesses, village goddesses, and goddesses of the land began to gain importance. These goddesses had been popular for a long time before we encounter them in literature. Literature is usually written by learned people, often city-dwellers, who have little interest in the customs of the countryside. Few Brahmins bothered to record the beliefs of the common population, and, for this reason, our knowledge of goddess worship in early times is tantalisingly incomplete. With the advent of the Śaiva movement, some of these goddesses began to be mentioned in literature. At first they are only partners of Śiva, who functions as their superior and often as their teacher.

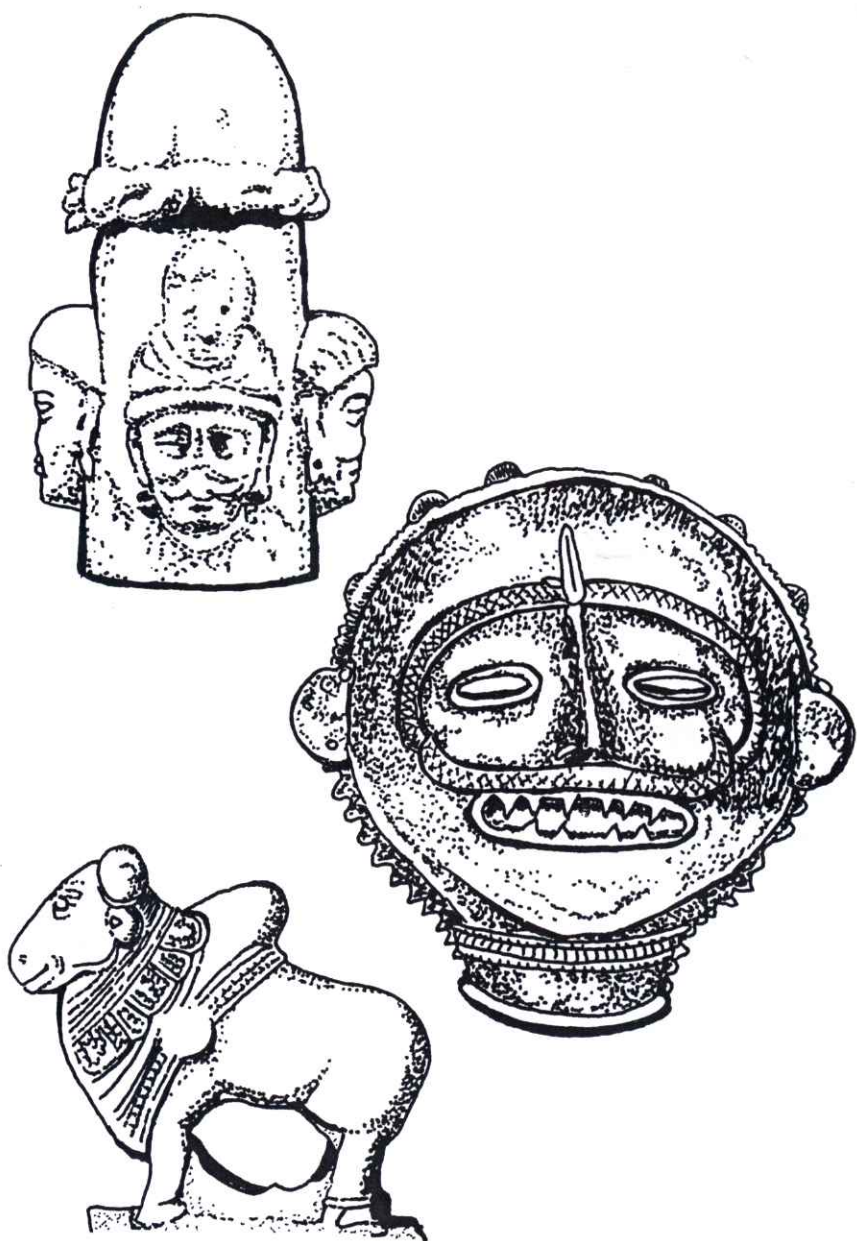


Figure 15 - Śiva.

Top: Śiva linga with four heads, stone, 2nd century BCE.

Middle: A terrifying Śiva, brass, Rajasthan, 17th century, 32.5cm.

Bottom: Śiva's bull Nandi (The Happy One), terracotta, 2nd century BCE.



When you see images of large Śivas with tiny women sitting on their knees, you are witnessing this sort of attitude. The goddesses were the personal Śakti (power, energy, might) of their male partner. Evidently some people thought the goddesses were more important than that. Two passages in the *Mahābhārata* show that goddesses like Kālī, Durgā, and Jayā were not only worshipped but also considered to share a common essence (see the later chapter on Kālī). A few centuries later, around the year 500 CE, this situation changed completely. A new group of worshippers surfaced who are nowadays called Śāktas. These accepted Viṣṇu and Śiva, but they insisted that the highest road to liberation can only be found through the worship and experience of the goddesses, i.e. Śakti. Śakti means energy and power, a term that includes form and matter in Indian thought.

This power can be understood in many ways. To the Śaivas, Śakti is power but Śiva is the power-holder. As Śiva could be equated with the formless, undefinable Brahman, the all-pervasive consciousness of the worlds, Śakti could be understood as the totality of all form, being, manifestation. This forms a divine couple composed of consciousness (Śiva) and form, energy (Śakti). Or we have Śiva as formless consciousness and Śakti as consciousness in form. In the basic Śaiva model, Śiva is the supreme awareness and Śakti is his expression. Now Śakti rarely appears as such. Generally she manifests as one of the thousands of goddesses of popular folk religion. The Śāktas insisted that Śakti is not just energy/matter but also consciousness. In their world-view, Śakti is the supreme principle. It is Śakti who leads to liberation, and it is Śakti who creates Brahman plus all gods, spirits, and living beings. You find Parāśakti as the absolute consciousness, sometimes but not always coupled with Sadaśiva. Parāśakti gives birth to everything, her first child being Śiva as formless consciousness. Śiva in turn creates Śakti as consciousness-reflected-in-form-and-energy. Out of this Śakti appears the entire universe. Such matters were developed to amazing degrees of enlightened complication. In southern India we have an emphasis on benevolent and well behaved goddesses while northern and eastern India developed the cults of dangerous and destructive goddesses. Their cults show some radical differences with regard to how you approach the deity and what she does with you. But things are more complex than this. As June McDaniel (2004: 5) summarises so neatly:

*Some Shakta traditions say that all goddesses are manifestations of the same great goddess, Adi Shakti or Parama Shakti, while others say that the many goddesses are separate and unique, or sometimes that they are manifestations of one or more gods. There is Shakta monism, in which all phenomena are the parts of the goddess, whose deepest nature is brahman or universal consciousness. There is Shakta monotheism, in which all other deities are aspects of a single goddess, who has created the universe. There is Shakta dualism, in which the divine couple Shiva and Shakti are the primordial deities, and Shakti is the more important figure, the mother of the universe. There is Shakta polytheism, in*





Figure 16 - Nandi at night.



*which many goddesses hold great power, and sometimes compete for power and devotees with other goddesses or with male gods. And there is Shakta henotheism, where many goddesses are recognized as legitimate, but one is most powerful.*

The Śāktas emerge as a cult that venerates the divine female. In their world-view, the gods are static and passive while the goddesses are dynamic, active, and alive. This could mean a local goddess or a group of them. Śākta worship became especially popular in Orissa, Kashmir, Gujarāt, north east India, Bengal, Assam, and the southern Himalayas. By the sixth or seventh century it began to seek a unifying principle, i.e. a goddess who could incorporate the many local goddesses. One such goddess was simply called Devī, a term meaning literally Goddess, from dev- shining one. Her first appearance is in the sixth or seventh century *Devīmāhātmyam*. The Devī attracted worshippers from all classes of society. Many Westerners assume that The Devī is the hidden essence of all the other goddesses, a single goddess who manifests in a myriad of forms. This is to say, the unifying principle is the essence of all the particular forms. Historically, it was the other way around. For thousands of years a wide range of goddesses had been worshipped. Each of them has been praised as the great goddess by her devotees, just as each god has been celebrated as the greatest god of all. To each devotee, the personal deity was and is the greatest of them all. In this sense the Devī was the sum of all goddesses, but on the other hand the Devī was just the manifestation of the personal goddess. Each village deity is The Great Goddess to the villagers, who manifests as all other goddesses and of course as the Devī. I emphasise this point as there are still writers who claim that there may have been a single great goddess (monotheism) in unknown prehistory who became thousands of separate goddesses (polytheism). The goddesses are not simply aspects of one great goddess. Some Śāktas called her Devī. Others had a similar idea and sought to install Lalitā as the great goddess. Or they went for Kālī, Lakṣmī, or Durgā. There is no single great goddess in Indian thought, though you may encounter many Indians who insist that their personal deity is the greatest of them all. Then there is worship. Śākta worship can take several highly distinct forms. It can be intellectual or illiterate. It can be silent and serene, as in calming meditation, or ecstatic and mad, as in shamanic cults of divine possession. It can be based on obscure Tantras or widely known Purāṇas. It can be folk worship in ritual and sacrifice, it can be the highly refined rites of inner (meditative) alchemy or it can be bhakti, involving extreme emotionality and loving devotion. Or it can be a mixture of these. As you can see, Śākta is a very loose term that may be understood in many ways. And with the emergence of the Śāktas we are happily at the beginning of the Tantric period.

### 3: The Texture of Tantra

#### Twilight Language

If you have read a few original Tantric texts, you will be aware that their contents are usually veiled in a highly metaphoric form. Unlike most books, they do not convey their messages as an author speaking to a reader. The frame of most Tantras is a dialogue between a form of Śiva and some form of Śakti. The reader is invited to witness this dialogue, the author remains in the background. The question of the author's human persona becomes irrelevant; the text is basically what you make out of it. Most Tantric works make use of a number of key concepts, but as you will soon become aware these concepts are not always interpreted in the same way. There was never a consensus regarding terminology in the Tantric lineages. Each metaphor has several meanings, and is coded in a way to suggest rather than define. In this respect, Tantra is not unlike the coded gnosis of the *Eddas*, the Qabalah, the alchemical writings of the Daoists, or the bizarre ravings of the Celtic bards. In each case, the meaning is not obvious, and if it does seem obvious for a brief and surprising interval, you will soon find another secret lurking behind it. 'What the hell is this all about?' is a good question, no matter whether it is asked of mystic writings or of works of art.

In Tantric literature we frequently come upon examples of the *sandhyā bāṣyā*, the so-called 'Twilight Language'. This term is not without difficulties. Early translators considered the *sandhyā bāṣyā* a language of riddles and mysteries. Haraprasād Shāstri (1916, cited in Eliade 1960) proposed that the term means twilight-language, mainly as *sandhyā* means twilight. In 1928, Vidushekar Shāstri proposed that the term is a corruption of *sandhāyā*, meaning 'intentional'. In his interpretation the secret language is not twilighty and diffuse but on the contrary aims at something specific with full intent. There is some truth to both interpretations. On one hand, the metaphors are full of a secret and hidden intent, on the other, they are twilighty in that they half suggest and half define, and leave a lot open to your interpretation. Eliade preferred the '*Intentional Language*', as do others who believe that there is something specific hidden behind each odd piece of symbolism. However, this is not always the case. In many instances a metaphor turns out to be a code for another metaphor, meaning something else in turn which is equally perplexing. The hidden meaning is an entire series of hidden meanings and there is no end in sight. Good! An open system is just the thing to keep you alert and awake. The body itself can be a metaphor and any thing can represent something else. Now there are



some scholars who believe that the sandhyā bāṣyā was employed to hide a true meaning from uninitiates. I have my doubts regarding this interpretation. Here is a passage from a poem by Rāmprasād Sen, translation by Rachel Fell McDermott, highly recommended (2001: 106-7)

*All her modesty gone,  
she plays with him  
overturning sexual custom  
by being on top.  
Choked up,  
waves of bliss sweeping over Her,  
She hangs her head and smiles-  
Love incarnate!  
The Yamuna, the heavenly Ganges, and between them  
the honourable Sarasvatī-  
bathing at their confluence  
confers great merit.*

What is the meaning of the passage? Our poet alludes to the raising of the Kuṇḍalinī. The three rivers are the subtle channels within body; here, river Sarasvatī corresponds to the suṣūmnā. Their confluence is the ājñācakra in the brain. Now why would anyone bother to keep the technique of Kuṇḍalinī waking secret? It's hardly worth the effort. There are millions of people on this planet today who have read something regarding the Kuṇḍalinī at one time or another. What was it good for? How many have any practical experience? When we speak of Kuṇḍalinī, of the fire snake or the supreme Śakti we are still deep within the realm of twilight language. Kuṇḍalinī is not a serpent, the serpent is not on fire, and the supreme Śakti is such an enigmatic concept that getting to understand her can take years of dedicated spiritual exercise. The rivers are a metaphor (i.e. a useful lie), but so are the energy channels of your body, and indeed so is your body. Everything that has form is a metaphor. Mere talk, and explaining one symbol with another, has never made anybody happy. If you think that you can find the real thing hiding behind a cryptic term, you are forgetting that in Indian thought real things do not exist. So what if we leave the concept of a language of codes and ciphers and replace it by a language of suggestion and stimulation?

Let's look at some examples of sandhyā bāṣyā, the Twilight Language.

Kālī, as you can see in countless images and statues, wears a garland of human heads. What is the meaning of this gory image? On the crudest level it could be an image of human sacrifice. Humans were occasionally sacrificed for religious reasons in ancient India, though in later periods only the kings retained the right to make this offering and rarely made use of it. Here is a goddess, say the severed heads, for whom people died, a goddess used to consume humans and beasts, a deity with the power of life and death. On a more subtle level the heads are symbols for the phonemes of the Saṁskṛt alphabet. Each head signifies one of the primal sounds that make up the world-glamour, a current, a path, a form

of energy and sentience. As the heads can be sounds, so the sounds can be heads. Each sound has a consciousness, has organs of sensual perception, and each of them has a subtle personality. Assembling the syllables of Kālī's necklace is to create words, dreams, images, is to combine streams of fluid vibration that form, maintain, and dissolve realities. In this sense each word is alive and the purer its vibration the more powerful its efficiency. A third interpretation is more personal: the heads are the lifetimes you have given to the Great Work, the many, many reincarnations dedicated to the refinement of yourself. A fourth interpretation could cite the heads as the personalities you assembled and shed during this lifetime. How many persons have you been? How many of them were built up, worn, and discarded in your dance through the spirals of time? You change, as you have ever changed, and all that you were, are, and will be are the jewels adorning the throat of the dark goddess. How precious are those gems? What have you offered and what will you offer next? Here we meet Kālī as sheer liberation. The head you are wearing now will be the next one to drip its quintessence into the polished bone cup, and so will be the next. Who feeds on the essence?

Which interpretation do you prefer? You just won 52 bonus karma points if you chose all. The true meaning is all of them, and a good many besides which you or I have never even thought of. This is the time to be creative. What else do the severed heads mean to you? Think up at least five before you decide that you understand anything.

Śiva's ash-smeared body is another good example. The lord of ascetics appears white due to the ashes on his naked body. What are the ashes? On a material level, ashes can be used to repel some insects and parasites, which may be useful when one is living on mountains, roadsides, and cremation places. Some ashes make good disinfectants, their astringents being useful to draw wounded tissue and insect bitten sores together. On a more subtle level, the ashes are the metaphorical ashes of the world consumed by fire. Having burned up all desire and bondage of and to the world, the god of adepts goes naked, clothed only in a thin and dusty layer of soot, the purified memories of past attachments. A third level is more specific, here the ashes are the ashes of the dead, collected at the cremation place, and worn on body to show the death of the personal or human identity. A fourth interpretation, more pastoral in its outer form, appears in the numerous rituals telling in long detail how the manure of a cow should be collected - caught in mid-flight - consecrated with various gestures and mantras, and burned on a sacred fire till only the ashes remain. These are applied to body as a heal-all, they are also use to whitewash houses. The manure is considered one of the five jewels of the cow and appears prominently in Āyurvedic medicine. These rituals were carried to amazing extremes of pointless complication. See, for instance, the *Devī Bhāgavatam*, 9, 9-15. On a much rarer and more obscure level, there are a few Tantric sects that hold the term cow as an euphemism for the sacred human female, the five jewels being bodily excretions of the inspired and entranced priestess. These systems evolved a science of refining psychosexual





Figure 17 - Ardhanariśvarī or Ardhanariśvara  
The divine hermaphrodite, the Lady or Lord made of two parts. Stone, central India, 12th century.

sacraments. One of these is the incinerated excrement of the priestess who has refined it in her state of raging ecstasy. Is this all there is to them? Of course not. Pause and think up at least another five meanings if you want to plumb the deep for further insight.

Whatever level of meaning you obtain in your contemplation, you can be sure it is not the final one. One true purpose of twilight language is not to veil a single and obscure 'real meaning' but to open the mind for fresh inspiration. The Tantrics had no need to be secretive about the 'real thing', there are lots of 'real things' around for anyone to comprehend, and most of them go by unnoticed. By avoiding defining their terminology precisely, those adepts created texts of such depth that you can spend all of your life seeking and finding meaning in them without ever coming to an end.

## Śiva and Śakti

Well, you know about this. Everybody does. There's Śiva and Śakti, male and female, penis and vulva, and the whole thing can be packaged as divine sexuality. We owe so much rubbish to New Age Tantra. In the real world things are a lot more complicated. They also make much more sense and are not quite as sexist. Ready to open your mind?

One of the basic concepts that people assume to be Tantric is a polarity. Before we go into polarity, we should start out at the beginning. Most Indian religions postulate an ultimate Brahman, an un-defined, nameless, all-enclosing consciousness. As Brahman is everywhere and nowhere, it is also everything and nothing. What you, I, and every other living entity perceives as its self is essentially Brahman in the form of jīva (the incarnate all-self, i.e. 'soul') plus a lot of misconceptions. These are called personality, personal history, ego, or identity. To be conscious of everything, Brahman has to be No Thing. Out of Brahman arises the divine game. Numerous Indian religions started out from this point and decided that out of Brahman arises a polarity. This polarity is sometimes (not always) personified as Śiva and Śakti. And here things begin to get complicated. Śiva, as you know, is a much older deity than the Tantric movement. In popular folk belief, he is a god of ascetics, dancers, philosophers, saints, and yogīs who walks the earth nude, or only clad in a leopard loincloth, smeared with white ashes, hair long and tangled, wearing serpents around his neck, a moon on his head, and a trident in his hand. It's an image of the ascetic who has left society to seek liberation. To make things more complicated, his sign is a liṅga, usually a phallic image, carved out of wood, stone, or made from clay or other materials. This has lead a lot of Western writers, especially disapproving ones, to identify him as a god of fertility and sexual indulgence. While there is some truth to this identification, you might consider that liṅga has several meanings. In the Purāṇas, the liṅga appears as a radiant pillar of flame and sheer energy. It has no beginning or end, is attached to nothing and crosses all the heavens, earths, and underworlds. The primal liṅga is a column of vibration much like the countless trees of life, world



pillars, world mountains that appear in Eurasian Shamanism. It is the axis of the world and the way by which a shaman may travel into other realities. The primal liṅga is not a penis at all. The word liṅga has more meanings. 1. characteristic; 2. sign, symbol, emblem; 3. Śiva's emblem; 4. penis; in twilight language it can also be a metaphor for the human spine, or for the entire human form sitting erect in meditation and yoga. Some texts, such as the *Kaulajñāna nirṇaya*, describe a liṅga within body which is adorned with various flowers: an image of the energetic counterpart of the human spine and the various cakras. Here, the worship of outer liṅgas, no what material, is considered a grave misunderstanding. Other systems propose that one should meditate on liṅgas in head, breast, and belly, here the word means signs or characteristics. The *Tirumantiram*, verse 1726 (D. J. Smith, 1996) states:

*The human form is like the Śiva liṅga*  
*The human form is like Cidambaram*  
*The human form is like Sadāśiva*  
*The human form is like the Holy Dance.*

Now Śiva is not only a god of folk-religion, he is also a god with numerous faces. There are hundreds of gods in India which have been identified, at one time or another, as aspects of Śiva. When you read original texts (which I dearly hope you will) you will notice that the usual frame of the text is a dialogue between Śiva and Śakti. This does not necessarily mean that these names appear anywhere. Often you can find the two calling each other by dozens of names within a single text.

Folk religion often misleads when its imagery is too simple. When Śiva's image is a penis (liṅga), the image of Śakti is a vulva (yoni). The two forms often appear in temples and shrines, much to the disgust of conquering Muslims, Christian missionaries, and Indian reformers, and have produced the mistaken idea that their cult is primarily one of lovemaking. To this day, and possibly today more than ever, people assume that Tantra is a form of sanctified eroticism, and that its devotees are obsessed with sexuality. Some of them may be, but just as many are living in chastity, in fact most of the surviving schools of Tantra recommend celibacy.

While Śiva is easy to recognise due to his highly specialised iconography, Śakti remains universal. There are few representations of Śakti as such. Śakti, meaning force, power, energy (this includes form and matter in Indian thought) is rarely shown as herself in popular iconography. Instead, she appears as one of many hundreds of goddesses. Depending on the mood of their interaction, Śakti and Śiva assume various forms and personalities. In folk-religion, the two are a divine couple whose lovemaking creates, maintains, and destroys the multiverse. This is a very simple idea as it implies human gender and sexual dynamics. It also implies a male and a female participant. Well and good for the simple minded, or for the people who go to 'Tantric workshops' to get a bit of basic sexual education. In the more refined

systems of Tantra, especially among the traditions of Kashmir, the polarity of Śakti and Śiva is a lot more refined.

Tantric lore is complex when it comes to the question of gender and divinity. Some Tantric texts proposed that males manifest Śiva while females manifest Śakti. In the influential *Kulārṇava Tantra* 8, 103, Śiva states: *O Kuleśvarī! Why to speak much. In the midst of a Cakra all men become like Me and all women like You.* Maybe a step in the right direction, as it acknowledges a divine element in all human beings. However, as Śmaśāna Kālī insists, to believe that people are divine according to their genital shape and social role is daft beyond comprehension. It may violate the sensibilities of a good many simple minded Śāktas, but it takes much more than a simple set of genitals, costumes, and mannerisms to manifest Śakti or Śiva. People who invest humans in roles of deified sexuality simply do not go far enough. Being Śakti or Śiva according to gender roles and anatomy is not good enough. We have had millennia of sexual discrimination without anybody being significantly happier or wiser. Bodies may appear female or male, incarnate souls are both and neither. In most human beings divinity resides only in potential, and possession of a vagina or penis is hardly enough to claim holiness. In fact, the more 'male' or 'female' people pretend to be, the less divine they usually are. Spirituality should aim at wholeness and understanding, sexism aims at keeping people different and separate. It hardly matters whether a given gender is damned or deified: to insist on fundamental differences is to further apartheid. What happens when you forget about gender definitions (biological and social) and begin to see each being as unique?

Think about it. In a few generations, the biological sciences will have developed to such a point that there will be dozens of genders in body and mind. People of the future will chose what they want to be. They will look back at the past and wonder how incredibly primitive we were.

Luckily, there is a deeper stratum to Kaula which transcends the limits of body and social conditioning. Above, you read how the *Kulārṇava Tantra* deifies gender roles. The good book is a compilation that has been meddled with for at least three centuries. Hence, it is hardly surprising to find contradictions. *Kulārṇava Tantra*, 8, 97, trans. Rai:

*Whether a woman or man, a Cāṇḍala or a high-born Dviija, there is absolutely no discrimination in the cakra (ritual circle). Everyone here is considered like Śiva.*

9, 41. *O Devī! Body itself is the temple. The Jīva (incarnate soul) itself is god Sadāśīva (Eternal Auspiciousness). Do away with the faded flowers of ignorance and worship with the consciousness of 'He am I' (So'ham).*

42. *Jīva is Śīva, Śīva is Jīva, the Jīva is only Śīva. When in bondage it is called Jīva; when freed from bondage it is called Sadāśīva.*

In advanced Kaula, Krama, Trika, Śiva is not a male god but pure consciousness. Śiva could be described as pure, passive awareness, as a



watcher and witness, as the formless self that delights in the ceaseless play of images, entities, and realities that constitute the world. As such, the supreme consciousness is literally nothing. Abhinavagupta wrote:

*"That thought, viz 'nothing is mine' by which the senseless creatures are reduced to wretchedness incessantly, that very thought viz 'nothing is mine' means to me 'I am everything'"*  
(PTV, 2002:57)

Śakti, by contrast, is force, power, energy, and as all things that exist are energy, Śakti is literally every thing. We are a long way from gender here. Let's have a look at kula and akula. Kula means family, group, cluster, clan, and refers to Śakti. As Śakti is form and power, she is also all things, and things, as we all know, relate to each other, create, maintain, and destroy each other, in short, you cannot even perceive a single thing without being in relation with a lot of others. Thus, the way of kula is from the monad to the multiple, everything that exists is a Śakti and every Śakti creates more Śaktis. Akula means without family, group, cluster, or clan and refers to Śiva. Here Śiva is the sentience that, free of relation and attachment, exists within the play but is not part of it. In meditation, kula is a form of trance where you disappear into everything, and akula a trance where you withdraw from everything to nothing. Both of them are pretty much the same regarding the outcome, but the way of trance-formation differs. When kula and akula unite, we attain Kaula. In this model, there are no male or female participants. Every being is consciousness (Śiva) and form/energy (Śakti). Awareness is Śiva, body is Śakti. This means that every single thing this wide world consists of is Śakti. The body of every person, animal, plant, mineral, element, spirit, or god is Śakti. This goes for males as well as females. *The male form, the female form, any form - all forms are undoubtedly Her Supreme Form. (Gandharva Tantra)*. And where it comes to ritual worship, whoever YOU are, you are Śiva consciousness in Śakti body. When you unite with your partner, you are always Śiva, no matter whether you happen to inhabit a male or female body, and your partner, no matter the gender, is always Śakti. By the same mouth you are Śakti to every other living being. In a very important way Śakti is what Austin Spare referred to as All-Otherness, while Śiva might be considered all Thisness, if the Thisness were anything at all (which it isn't). As most Tantric traditions proclaim, Śakti and Śiva are two in principle, but in reality they are one (or none). It's impossible to tell the difference. Without awareness, form does not exist. Without form, there is nothing to be aware of. Hence the famous saying that Śiva is Śava (a corpse) without Śakti. Nor is this all there is to it. Another interpretation goes beyond this and proposes that both are consciousness, Śiva being formless consciousness and Śakti being consciousness-in-form. A third interpretation proposes that both of them arise out of the Supreme Śakti, who happens to be pure consciousness.



Figure 18 - Bhairava  
Bhairava in Chola style, bronze, 10th - 11th century. Today in Paris.



## Sex, Gender, and Religion

In traditional Indian thought, women seem a necessary evil. This was not always the case, if only barely so. In Vedic times (1500-800 BCE), as W. F. Menski (in Leslie 1992) shows, women still had a few rights and a measure of respect. The *Vedas* honour women for fertility and compare them with the fields which nourish all. This may not seem much, but it is better than in classical times (800 BCE-200 CE), when they were considered mere vessels to receive sperm and bring forth sons. In the Vedic period, girls were considered ripe for marriage when they were physically old enough to bear children. In the classical period, child marriages became the norm. In Vedic times, women could play an important, though secondary part in the great śrauta sacrifices. Like everybody else, they had to employ a host of Brahmins to do the ritual for them. It did not happen often, but we do have evidence for high-ranking ladies sponsoring sacrifices and gaining the spiritual benefits. In the classical period their role was much reduced. Those women who used to participate in ritual were replaced by priests who assumed some of their roles, and their presence could be substituted by items of gold or female figures made from sacred kuśa grass. As a result, female ritualism shifted from the public śrauta rites to the private, domestic grhya rites. These rituals were not as standardised as the official ones, in fact, they developed into a wide range of individual varieties. In certain circumstances, such as marriage, the women's contribution to ritual remains essential.

Now what sort of life could a woman expect in ancient India? The birth of a girl is not generally a happy occasion. To this day, there are families who are driven into bankruptcy by having too many daughters. Sons remain in the family and often provide the old age support for their parents. Daughters leave the house after marriage, and indeed the dowry, marriage celebration, and the feeding of the guests can throw the family clan into debt for decades, if not generations. So in spite of human instinct, a good many families saw the birth of a daughter as yet another step towards starvation. When a girl married, she was supposed to forget her old family (not that this ever worked). She was literally expected to venerate her husband as a deity, to obey all commands, to satisfy all of his whims, and to give up any individuality she had possessed earlier. In a traditional Hindu marriage, the woman becomes 'half of her husband', but her husband doesn't become half of his wife. Hindu women had very few choices. When they were young, their parents ordered them around, when they were married the new family continued the job. Look at the *Varmāśrama Dharma* (Glasenapp 1958), where you can read that the girl is protected by the father, the wife is protected by her husband, the sons protect her in old age, and never shall she be independent. The *Laws of Manu* have a very similar passage, only that Manu did not care about protection. In his version, the issue is 'being obedient to'. The laws of Manu also state: 'animals, drums, illiterates, low classes and women are worthy of being beaten.' This trend began



Figure 19 - Bhairava.  
Wooden sculpture, southern India, 19th century.



fairly early. In the Soma rites, Soma is occasionally identified with sperm. In the great Soma rite, women were not allowed to draw the sacred fluid.

As a legend relates (F. Smith in Leslie 1992) the Vedic goddesses tried to draw Soma with a cup, but the Soma was weak and 'could not stand'. *Taittirīyasamhitā* 6.5.8 states: *Therefore women, who are powerless, inherit nothing and speak more humbly than an evil man.* For the same reason, we learn, they have no identity. Finally, the gods fashioned a vajra (thunderbolt) out of ghī. It strengthened the Soma, but it smote and emasculated the goddesses.

Old Indian literature is full of nasty remarks on women and the laws based on these teachings are just as merciless. A traditionally minded Hindu woman spends all of her life serving the males in her family. Even women of high caste do not have the right to undergo the ritual of the second birth, when Brāhmaṇa (priests, teachers, scholars), Kṣatriya (warriors, aristocracy), and Vaiśya (merchants) acquire their spiritual maturity and are invested with the sacred thread. Śūdra (farmers, servants, artisans), tribal folk, untouchables, and outcasts are not admitted to this ritual and neither are women. Officially, women are not allowed to study the *Vedas*, to sacrifice for themselves, to lead religious ceremonies, or to leave society as an ascetic. The situation may be a bit easier for women of high castes and good family, and a lot better in the city than in the country, but on the whole there is an amazing amount of cruelty to women that continues to this day. Just as an example, in 2001 more than seven thousand newly married Indian women were killed by their husbands or husband's families because their dowry was considered too small.

Now the general opinion of society is not quite what the fringes believe. Hindu scripture is thoroughly Brahmanical, i.e. it reflects the way the Brahmin class would have liked to order the world. They never really managed to get so much control, so when you find regulations in the holy writ, you should remember that the vast majority of Indians did not quite live up to scriptural law. In India, just as everywhere in the world, you find parents who dearly love their daughters, and husbands who have the good sense to listen to their wives. Nor should we project Western notions of liberation and equality on a culture where a good many people believe that liberation can only come to people who endure and suffer anything and everything the universe can throw at them.

The value of women depends very much on the society they live in. The Vaiṣṇavas generally accept strict Brahmanical lore, meaning that women are to serve their husbands as ever. Nevertheless, there are small groups of Tantric Vaiṣṇavas who worship women in general as embodiments of the goddess Śrī Lakṣmī. This idea is elaborated at some length in the *Lakṣmī Tantra* 43, 59-72, where the goddess herself explains that all women are her manifestation. To abuse a woman is to abuse the goddess, to think badly of a woman is to disrespect the goddess. *O Śakra, just as there is sin neither in Nārāyaṇa nor in myself, nor in a cow, nor in a brahmin, nor in a scholar of Vedānta, so, O Śakra, there can be no evil in a woman ... Those who aspire to the attainment (of fulfilment) in*

*yoga should always act so as to please a woman barring to commit a sin. One should regard her as one's mother, as god and as myself.* (trans. Sanjukta Gupta). This sort of ideology must have galled the traditionalists a lot. It was also much against the belief of those Vaiṣṇavas (the vast majority) who did not embrace Tantra. The *Lakṣmī Tantra* (LT) is an almost revolutionary work in the eyes of the fundamentalists. Nevertheless, it contains elements of traditional restriction, such as the notion that a woman may receive initiation only if she respects her husband, never neglects her religious and social duties, has a clear idea of truth, and when her husband allows it (LT 21, 40-41). There were several ladies who were acknowledged Tantric saints and who had to keep their spiritual activity private as their husband's families were against it (Gupta in Leslie 1992). This sort of thing is typical for Vaiṣṇavas, you don't find it so often among Śaivas and Śāktas. To Tantric Vaiṣṇavas, the identification went even further. In the worship of Viṣṇu, the most popular form of the deity is charming, cheerful Kṛṣṇa. Consequently, worshippers attempt to unite with him. To do so, they imitate the loving yearning felt for Kṛṣṇa by his Śakti Rādhā. In this system, Rādhā is not only in love with Kṛṣṇa, she also goes through a detailed and systematic range of emotions that range from mild affection to raging passion and involve a lot of special performances, such as jealousy, obsessive brooding, spite, mad rapture, delirious scatterbrainedness, and whatnot. The entire spectrum of human longing and fulfilment is her art, and as she loves not a human but a deity, she is a role model for the worshipper. Easy enough for the women in the congregation and mind-expanding for the men. Some of the more devout male worshippers identify so intensely with Rādhā that they dress as women and live in the women's quarters. A good example is Bengal's mad saint Rāmakṛṣṇa, who went into Rādhā-consciousness to such an extent that the women in his company completely forgot that the bearded guy in a sari was physically a man. Rāmakṛṣṇa usually did things to extremes, so no-one was really surprised when, a while later, he decided to worship Rama as Hanuman, the monkey-god, tied up his cloth so that a long tail dangled between his legs and spent some weeks living in a tree.

Among the Śaivas, Śakti became the perfect role model for the partner of the god. Here the bias was still towards Śiva, who was often assumed to be the source, guru, and lover of Śakti. Women had their place in this system, even if it was a slightly inferior one. Among the Śaiva Tantrics, women are sacred in that they embody a goddess. However, Śiva remains the supreme principle. Here Śakti is the supreme power, but Śiva is the power holder. It is only among the top level mystics of Śaivism that you encounter the realisation that Śiva and Śakti are not only the same, they can't even be told apart. At this level of no-difference, it does not matter whether you speak of Śiva or Śakti, as all you are saying is merely words.

Then there are the Śāktas, worshippers who believe that Śakti is the highest principle and that the male gods are mere expressions of her will. *Therefore, O king! Know this that this whole universe is under the*



control of Yoga Māyā; The Devas, men, birds, what more everything from Brahmā down to a blade of grass are all under the control of Yoga Māyā. Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Hara all are bound by the rope of Her Māyā. So they roam easily by Her Māyā from womb to womb like a spider. (DB, 5, 1). There are several distinct movements among the Śāktas, but most of them propose some goddess, or group of goddesses, as the gate to Brahman. The more extreme sects even propose that Brahman is an expression of Śakti, and teach that the polarity of Śakti/Śiva is really a unity, which is Śakti. You would think that such cults tend to have a high opinion of women, but this is not always the case. It is one thing to worship a goddess and quite another to treat the little housewife well. Even the most massive work of Śākta theology, the *Devī Bhāgavatam*, (1, 5) has a nasty little episode where the goddess Lakṣmī declares that the natural qualities of women are falsehood, vain boldness, craftiness, stupidity, impatience, over-greediness, impurity, and harshness. Quite a contrast to hundreds of pages celebrating the absolute sovereignty of goddesses! Casual sexism can also be observed in the very last chapter of the work (DBh 12, 16) where we learn that at navarātrī, all can read the book, no matter what caste or which goddess is worshipped as the personal deity. *Never any woman nor any Śūdra is to read this herself or himself, even out of ignorance; rather they should hear this from the mouth of a Brāhmaṇa.* Very considerate, especially as the Brahmin deletes anything he doesn't like and wants to be paid for the job. Thus, being a Śākta means that a goddess is worshipped but does not always imply that women have rights. The existence of powerful goddesses says nothing regarding the rights of living women. Just think of ancient Greece. Athena, goddess of war, crafts, and wisdom (an uneasy mixture) was venerated by a good many respectable men. Nevertheless, the women of Athens had hardly any rights. They could not leave the house without male company, they had to wear heavy veils in public, could not own property, and were generally treated with contempt. Most grew up without any education and the sole respect they received was for fertility. The only women who were cherished in classical Greek society were the better sort of prostitutes, who were often skilled in the arts, learned in literature, and able to converse on all manner of subjects. The respectable Greek housewife had fewer rights than most women in the classical world. In ancient Rome, by contrast, where Athena was venerated as Minerva, women owned property, went where they liked, worshipped any god of their choice, and divorced their husbands when they felt like it. So when we think of Śāktas, we should keep in mind that this is a general term for a wide range of religious movements. A few of these accepted the idea that women embody a goddess, and some of the worshippers certainly made an effort to live according to this teaching. However, a religion is not the same thing as a system of self-cultivation. A good many Śāktas simply imagined their god in female form without attempting to do something regarding woman's place in society.

It is only among movements of the left-hand path, such as the Kaula, Krama the Yogīnī Kula, and some minor schools of Tantric Buddhism that anyone tried to do something for women as such. Several important

source texts explicitly insist on the rights of women. The *Kaulajñāna nirṇaya* declares that worshippers should never speak harshly to maidens or women. It also advises that girls and women should be worshipped as they are Śakti. The same mood can be found in several Kaula texts. *One should make obeisance on seeing a young woman of a Kaula family. One should bow to any female, be she a young girl, or flushed with youth, or be she old, be she beautiful or ugly, good or wicked. One should never deceive, speak ill of, or do ill to a woman and one should never strike her. All such acts prevent the attainment of Siddhi.* (Kaulāvali Tantra).

The *Mantra Mahodhadhi* 1 states: *The devotee of Kālī should refrain from killing or beating women or misbehaving with them, or indulging into unpleasant dialogues with them if he is desirous of welfare.*

Likewise, the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* contains several chapters in which Śiva advises kings on matters of law. These legal chapters, while full of the dulllest middle-class morality, contain very clear instructions regarding the protection of women. Men who commit incest or seduce Brahmin women are to be castrated, and *a man who ravishes a woman, even if she be the wife of a Chandala, should be punished by death, and should never be pardoned.* The laws are also very strict with regard to adultery and generally punish the man harder than the woman. This may be because in old India a woman who lost her reputation also lost her husband, her home, her status, her children, and often her life. What a price to pay for a bit of fun! Among Kaulas, harming a woman was a major offence, and for this reason, some Kaula Tantras favour a monogamous lifestyle and propose that the worshippers should be married. I should add that in ancient India, there were several forms and types of marriage ranging from the very serious and traditional involving ritual participation of both family clans to the more informal rites performed by lovers who have run away from their families (and who could blame them?). The Vaiṣṇava Tantrics do not always concur with this opinion. As their favourite incarnation of Viṣṇu, the black, flute playing god Kṛṣṇa is not very faithful to his consort Rādhā and spends lots of time flirting and making love with the cow-girls of the countryside, the worshippers of some cults consider adultery a form of worship and attempt to imitate their deity by doing likewise.

The topic of adultery is one of the most enigmatic in Tantric literature. Many Tantras propose that the worshipper should have congress with the Paraśakti. Now 'para' has two meanings. It can mean the supreme or ultimate, in which case the Paraśakti is the absolute goddess, the supreme reality which creates Śiva (consciousness) and Śakti (form/energy) plus everything else. This supreme Śakti is not a human being. However, in the preparation for ritual intercourse the human partner is identified with the Paraśakti. The partner is adored as the deity and the image of the deity is superimposed over the body of the partner. When the deity and the partner fuse, obsession begins. The other meaning of 'para' is 'of another'. In this reading, the Paraśakti is the Śakti (here, mate, or woman) of another (man). A text proposing that the worshipper should unite with the Supreme Śakti may be misunderstood



as adulterous union with the wife of another man. The first interpretation is often taken by adepts, the second is very common in anti-tantric propaganda. There are, after all, Tāntrikas who take everything as of symbolic value while others insist on taking everything literally. To confuse things further, there were some Kaula teachers who believed in transgressing any social norm on principle. These people went for adultery simply as it was forbidden, but they also identified the partner with the supreme Śakti. Finally, we should keep in mind that a large number of worshippers chose an ascetic lifestyle on the road. Some of them married other ascetics, but others lived primarily alone and had very few opportunities for making love with anyone, except married women and prostitutes. One of the reasons that several Tantras eulogise barber girls, washerwomen, and prostitutes is that these low-class women were more easily available than women from the higher classes.

In the teachings of the left-hand-path, gender distinctions are not always of importance. To quote Vimalānanda (commentary to the *Karpūrādi Stotra*, 1837 in Woodroffe 2001): *He who is Śiva is also Śakti and She who is Śakti is also Śiva. Fatherhood and Motherhood are mere distinctions of name. In reality they stand for one and the same thing. The Tantra Śāstra again says that Śakti, Maheśvara, Brahman all denote the same Being. Male, female, neuter are verbal and not real distinctions... We may meditate on Mahādevī as either female or male, for these terms may be attributed to any gross body.*

A similar sentiment is expressed in the *Devī Bhāgavatam*, 9, 1: *... those that are foremost and the highest of the Yogīs do not recognise any difference between a male and a female. All is Brahman.*

The same appears in Tantric Buddhism. Padmasambhava allegedly said: *The basic condition for enlightenment is a human body. Male or female makes no great difference. But when the spirit turns towards enlightenment, a female body is better.*

Or take this highly revolutionary statement attributed to the goddess Tārā: *As there is no such thing as a male or female, bondage to the 'male' or 'female' is hollow.* (Trimondi 1999: 381, 373)

When it comes to divine conduct, we encounter gods who are apt to change their gender as they will. Each male deity has a female form. In each case, the Śakti form is the active and powerful one. In a certain sense, Śaivī is the Śakti of Śiva, but so are a number of goddesses, such as Durgā, Kālī, or Pārvatī, who appear as independent entities and not simply as Śiva in feminine form. This may sound paradoxical but isn't: in Hindu religion, gods are not sharply defined separate beings but tend to change appearance and merge into one another whenever they (or the worshippers) feel like it. In mythology, cases of sex-changing are not unusual. In the *Cidambara Māhātmya* the gods Śiva and Viṣṇu go to the pine forest to tempt the ascetics. Śiva assumes the form of an unusually good looking young beggar while Viṣṇu appears as his beautiful wife. They successfully seduce all the younger ascetics and their wives but fail with a few elder sages, who try to destroy them by magical weapons projected from the sacrificial fire. Out of the raging flames tiger, deer, axe, mantra, and dwarf appear and assault the deities. Śiva subdues them

all and takes each of them as his attribute. Then he dances the world destroying, liberating t̃nḍava dance for the very first time.

Śiva also appears in female form. Mookerjee (1988) gives an episode from the *Purāṇas* (no source specified): ... King Īla, while hunting, came upon a grove where Śiva was making love with Pārvaṭī and had taken the form of a woman to please her. Everything in the woods, even trees, had become female, and as he approached, King Īla was turned into a woman. Śiva, laughing, told him he could 'ask any boon except masculinity'.

It should not be assumed that the invention of such Śaktis is merely a philosophic device to produce a female form of a usually male god. Some texts, such as the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* (5, 56) include such Śaktis in their daily ritual routine. In the morning, the worshipper meditates on Brahmī, who is a reddish maiden, clad in black antelope pelt, adorned with a crystal mālā, holding a gourd of sacred water and riding on a swan. At midday, the worshipper meditates on Vaiṣṇavī, who is a golden lady within a solar disk wearing a garland of wild flowers. She has full breasts, her four hands hold conch, mace, discus, and lotus, and she rides a Garuḍa bird. The evening meditation is on Śaivī, who appears as an ancient crone, white and clad in white, friendly and generous, whose four hands hold trident, noose, spear, and skull. She rides a bull.

Here we encounter Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva in female form. The Śaktis, however, are more than just copies of the male gods. There are individual developments to the devis (such as the three times of the day) which do not occur in their male form. Some male deities were modelled on female goddesses. The terrible Mahākāla (Great Devourer, i.e. time), black, nude, with bulging eyes, terrifying teeth and snakes, is modelled on Mahākālī. He is Mahākālī's spouse and officially a form of Śiva, but on close examination he is clearly a male personification of the dark goddess herself.

### Three Temperaments

Indo-Europeans in general were crazy about trinities. If anything could be ordered in groups of three, it usually was. You find this foible among Celts and Germans just as in Greek myth and Indian cosmology. One of the best known and least understood trinity is the guṇas. The word guṇa has several meanings, two of which are: 1. Thread 2. Quality or characteristic. The three qualities are one of the fundamental ideas in Hindu philosophy. Śakti as Prakṛti (nature, matter) is thought to consist of three guṇas: sattva, rajas, and tamas. Tamas is easiest to understand: the word means 'darkness' (related to English 'dim' from the IE. \*demu-, darkness, twilight, gloom) and is used to describe heaviness, inertia, stability, and, in the range of human emotions, ignorance, sloth, routine-mindedness, worldliness, and materialism. Rajas is hot, energetic, active, restless, and the only changeable guṇa. In human experience, rajas is expressed as excitement, passion, outbursts, obsessions, drives, restlessness, sadness. Sattva, the saguṇa, is called 'good' in the sense of



'goodness'. Sattva is the most delicate of the three guṇas. It appears as refined, calm and subtle, hard to define, and not always comprehensible.

The three qualities are often identified by colour. Tamas is dark, black, or brown, rajas is red and fiery, and sattva is of a pale, moonlike whiteness. These colour codes are often found in Hindu literature, where they sometimes yield a deeper meaning and just as often produce confusion. An example. To some people, the popular trinity of gods follows the pattern of creator, maintainer, and destroyer. These functions are filled with several deities, and as many believe, the proper order is Brahmā for creation, Viṣṇu for maintenance, and Śiva or Rudra for destruction. This is a popular idea that looks good in books but has little to do with what the worshippers of these deities believe. To devotees of Śiva, Śiva is not only in charge of destruction but of all three functions, and the same is believed by all devotees of Viṣṇu and the few who still worship Brahmā. Śiva is often coupled with Kālī, who also appears dark and destructive to the uninitiated, and consequently a lot of folks believe that Śiva and Kālī have a tamasic nature and are dark gods. To the worshippers of these gods, things look a lot different. Kālī's all-devouring mouth, for instance, is said to contain all three qualities: the lips are dark (tamas), the gums are red (rajas), and the pointed teeth are white (sattva). When the goddess devours the worshipper, the latter goes through all three guṇas before finding liberation in the central void.

From the guṇas arose a triple structure that is vital for the understanding of Tantra. Worshippers are classed according to the qualities that dominate in their character. We are talking of qualities here, not of people as such. Keep in mind that this is a very fluid model of the world and that people change all the time. Imagine a string spun of three fibres, one black, one red, and one white, and imagine the weaving in the texture of the world. Each living being is composed of all three guṇas and all three are needed for liberation. It is only when one guṇa dominates the others that things tend to become extreme.

**Paśu.** First are the paśus, a word that can mean a layperson, a person lacking spiritual education, or a domestic animal. Depending on the tone of the Tantra, a paśu can be a simple and ignorant fellow-human or, more often, a beast of burden, bound by the chains of attachment, involvement, and sensuality. Some texts portray the paśu as a stupid beast, a crude and unspiritual person. This is not quite true. The paśu is already a Tantric worshipper. The word paśu evolved from paś, meaning to bind, a pāśa is a noose. The *Kulārṇava Tantra* lists eight basic forms of bondage:

1. Pity, 2. Ignorance and Delusion, 3. Fear, 4. Shame, 5. Disgust, 6. Family, 7. Custom, and 8. Station in Society, Caste.

Anyone bound by these snares is still, technically speaking, in the realm of the paśu. You may notice that this goes for almost everyone on this bonny earth. Paśus suffer of three inpurities: 1. Lack of or wrong knowledge of self, 2. Belief in separate identities, and 3. Bondage to activity, doing, and its results. To be free of all these is to be Śiva. In the



Figure 20 - Spotted Mouse-deer.  
You know those tusks!



paśu, rajas acts on tamas and this tends to produce worldliness, ignorance, and sloth. Lots has been written about this type, suffice it here to say that paśu lives in a dualistic reality where s/he is apart from the gods, the gods are apart from each other, society has its ordained distinctions, and so have cultures, religions, and countries. The paśu leads a worldly life and likes it. S/he is religious to some extent, in practice or in principle but there is often a wide gap between what is believed in general and done in particular. Paśu worship has its time and place, it is not usually extended into daily life or allowed to interfere with a good meal. Regarding deities, paśus are often inclined to install them in parent roles. *'Hey dad, these boys were nasty to me! Go and hit them! Hey mum, can I have some sweets?'* In this sense, a good many worshippers chose to curl up in the lap of Mother Kālī, not because Kālī's mythology is particularly motherly, but as appealing to her as a mother expresses the hope that she'll be nice to her child-like devotee. With regard to Tantric ritual, paśus are not allowed to do night-time ritual; this excludes them from personal Kālī-worship. They do not usually make use of yantra or practice night-time japa of mantra. Instead, their worship often follows Vedic lines, involving external sacrifices, lots of ritual baths and abstention from eating meat, fish, or having sexual intercourse except for procreation. When a paśu wants to practice the pañcamakāras, meat, wine, fish, parched grains and ritual intercourse are prohibited. Instead, a number of symbolic alternatives are used. It should be added that a paśu is such due to her/his spiritual competence. There are rituals forbidden to paśus because they simply couldn't comprehend, let alone participate in them. A paśu attempting to enjoy the five sacraments in their vīratī form is not likely to do much worship, because of getting too excited.

**Vīra.** A vīra is literally a hero. Here rajas dominates and acts on sattva. The vīra exhibits a 'heroic temperament'. S/he tends to be active (if not over-active), ambitious, and is rarely satisfied with any achievement. Vīras are excitable and often have a sense of the dramatic. Vīratī worship can involve rituals that make use of skulls, bones, and even corpses, it can be practised in bed-chambers, jungles, deserts, crossroads at night, and at the cremation place. In encountering the goddesses and gods, the vīra stands upright and heroically integrates all fears and desires. Vīratī meditations usually include fierce, terrifying, and revolting deities. In coming to terms and eventually uniting with them, the vīra transcends the limits of the human personality. When their temperament is more sattvic, they chose the path of liberation, but when their temperament shows strong tamasic influences, the vīra may prefer to cultivate siddhis (magical powers, skills, accomplishments) to achieve something in the world. There are also vīras who think, pragmatically, that liberation alone may be well and good, but a few magical skills may make things easier. This is true enough, but the difficulty is in doing it. The classical rite of the pañcamakāras is expressed in vīratī terms. The greatest problems of vīras is that they often act faster than they think. As they go in for drama and excitement, they naturally produce lots of it. Being involved in the world and acting with so much energy, they tend

to make loads of mistakes and generally suffer from them. Indian literature associates sadness and sorrow with *vīras*, as they so often fall flat on their face.

**Divya.** Here we encounter what is sometimes considered the 'highest class of worshippers', i.e. those in whom the divine quality is strongest and a *sattvic* nature dominates. This sort of person is very hard to describe as the divine quality, whether in humans or the world at large, often tends to appear paradoxical. Some texts have attempted to define the *divya*. The *Kubjikā Tantra*, quoted by Sir John Woodroffe in his introduction to the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*, gives such a description. To mention just a few points, we learn that the *divya* spend most of the day with worship (at least thrice daily) and most of the night doing *japa* of mantra, is clean, well-read, educated, tolerant of other faiths, gives charity, makes no difference between friends and foes, eats only food blessed by the guru, always speaks truth, avoids godless company and talk, bows to the feet of women (whom he regards as his guru), worships all deities, offers everything to the supreme goddess, perceives Śiva in all people, and so on. This sounds like holiness, and like holiness it can be misunderstood and imitated. Plenty of people err when they try to play the *divya*. Mere imitation of outward holiness may impress fools, but not the gods, and certainly not the all-consciousness. If being a *divya* takes effort, it is obviously not natural. The more refined *divyas* transcend all this, they even transcend the notion of holiness, and where they practice ritual it is often veiled as profane acts in daily life or happens completely in the mind. Their big problem is that the people around them are not quite as holy. *Divyas* tend to see the deity in everyone. They forget that people are run by their egos, and that a potential deity is not the same thing as a manifest one. In short, they often assume the best and encounter disappointment. Also, *divyas* have problems in coping with every-bloody-day reality, with power politics, hierarchies, and a wide range of very typical human games.

Of course you have already wondered what class you belong to. This is a useful thought but also a misleading one. The three temperaments are not arranged in a linear progression from ignorant to active to divine. Think of a triangle. Each of the points is one of the temperaments; each has its strong points and its weaknesses. The temperaments in themselves are not role models but extremes. In between the points is where you encounter life. Invent at least two stages between *paśu* and *vīra*, two stages between *vīra* and *divya*, and (here we enter new lands) two stages between *divya* and *paśu*. You will soon learn that each temperament has advantages and shortcomings. A *paśu* may be more steady, reliable, and patient in devotion than a *vīra*, for example, and a *vīra* may get things done when *paśu* and *divya* are still sitting around waiting for something to happen. Of course the *vīra* is also likely to make mistakes when being busy, the price of doing is always misdeeds, and the price of interference is bondage. *Vīras* are so excitable and hasty, they often begin things without considering their outcome. *Divyas*, by comparison, may be calm and holy, but they do have problems in comprehending ordinary humans. A *divya* may be inclined to forget





Figure 21 - Female musician (drummer).

Surya temple, Konarak, Orissa, 13th century. To gladden oneself by making music, as the KCT advises after the morning purification and before beginning worship, is probably the most neglected part of Tantric worship nowadays. This is your chance for something new. Get an instrument and make yourself feel good!

about material necessities. Divyas in general often require help, if only to survive, as few of them manage to hold steady jobs. Often enough they damage their bodies when their ritual ecstasy is stronger than common sense (drinking Ganges water for instance or staying in cold or heat for too long). Occasionally the 'vision of no-difference' can destroy their physical vehicles or waste away their property.

Several Tantras point out that in our day and age, vīras are rare and divyas are a lot rarer. They find it hard to exist in a world that is run by materialistic idiots, war-mongers, profit-seekers, and exploiters of the innocent. Perhaps this is the chance to introduce some innovations. Make a pause now and think of yourself as all three characters. What are you like when you act the paśu, the vīra, and the divya? At what times do you play these parts? On what occasions? In which company? What mask is useful for which activities? When do you move from one consciousness to the other? What marks the moment of change? When could you do with a change for another role?

### Three and a half consciousness states

In the *Upaniṣads* you can find attempts to order the way people experience the multiverse. This is called model making. In the classical model, there are three basic states of experience. These states are roughly known as deep sleep, waking, and dreaming. In **deep sleep** you are unaware of body, mind, and yourself. All definitions of what you consider yourself to be cease to operate, all sense of identity disappears, as does all awareness and attention. In this sense, dreamless sleep is pretty close to perfection. **Waking consciousness** is what you can perceive with your senses. Now the senses do not show the world as it is. What they offer is a suitably abridged summary of sensual experience, edited and adapted to your belief of what reality is like. No matter how good you hear, observe, feel, or otherwise sense the world, what your mind is showing you is still a representation. No matter where you are and what you do, you are living in an artificial representation, and this goes for all of us. **Dreaming**, in Indian thought, covers all internal experiences. These include dreams you have asleep and dreams you dream when awake. Each time you think something, some of your attention goes away from the outside world and into an inner world of your own making. Some call this thinking, planning, speculating, remembering, or imagining. The seers of the *Upaniṣads* called it dreaming. These three states, so the seers thought, are the basic material of the divine play that we consider of our reality. Beyond or within them is a secret core. This is the fourth state, **turiya**, which is considered to cause and transcend the other three. Turiya is hard to define as it transcends definition. It is not even a fourth state but a mysterious in-between sentience, hence it is usually not counted as a full state but as a half one. This gives us three and a half states, which correspond to the three and a half coils of the Kuṇḍalinī. In literature, turiya is usually defined by telling us what it is not. Just look at the definition given in the mantra chapter (under Om). It is very hard to approach something that





Figure 22 - Lakṣmī statue  
Stone, probably Khajuraho.

does not exist as a positive value. You cannot do, obtain, reach, or control *turiya*. As long as there is effort and intent, there is still thinking, doing, and dreaming, and a person who is involved in such things. How about not-doing? This implies that the way to *turiya* is an inward way, a return to the source of the three other states. Some authors compare *turiya* to dreamless sleep, in that it is not waking nor dreaming, not in the outside nor inside world. Unlike dreamless sleep, *turiya* is very much awake.

To understand these three and a half states it can be useful to devote some days to observe your activities. Whenever you remember, consider what you are doing. Are you awake right now? Or are you dreaming? Or are you somewhere in between? Here it can be helpful to consider the states as 'worlds'. The world of waking consciousness is what you can sense with your sensual organs. It is, as others propose, the material world. It can be seen, touched, heard, smelled, and tasted. It can be measured, it can be shared (to an extent) with others. Some, usually folks who have lived in a hole in the ground for the last few centuries, assume this to be the objective world and consider it 'real'. Others, who have bothered to torture their minds with philosophy and brain research, propose that it may be relatively sort-of-objective, not that we'll ever be sure about this, but for the time being it will do. The material world is real to the instruments that can perceive and measure it. The dream-world is a different matter, as it is much more subjective and suited to your body/mind system. Unless it has a material carrier, such as a painting, a statue, a poem or a movie, it is very hard to communicate or share with others. I would propose that we speak of two worlds here: the world of sleep-dreams and of waking dreams. The dream-worlds are real in their own way, in that they provide the ideas, emotions, and inspirations which shape the material world. Every item in your environment which did not get there naturally is a manifestation of the dream world. Houses, streets, cars, books were all ideas and dreams before they manifested in material shape. Lots of people confuse the reality of these two worlds. Indeed there is a lot of overlap between them. You can see, feel, taste, smell, and sometimes hear a tree, this makes it part of the material world and waking consciousness. You can visualise a tree and sense it with your imagination. If you do it well, that tree will impress you, move you, cause a reaction; a test for the reality of imagination is that it moves you and causes a reaction. Both experiences will become memory; a memory of a tree you experienced with your outer and with your inner senses. Both trees were real in their own world, both trees are representations. What remains is a memory of a representation of your outer and inner senses. Both trees are real, but each is only real in its own world. A monster hiding under your bed is not real or measurable with the outer senses (waking consciousness), it is part of the dream world. It is not real in the material world, but it sure is real in the imagination. Hidden monsters have kept a lot of kids scared in the middle of the night, and any idea that can do that is pretty real. The same goes for the trances that people have when they are in love, afraid, paranoid, greedy, angry, ambitious, sad, inspired, and so on. You



cannot measure love in the waking world, but it is certainly strong enough to affect people. You cannot measure fear, and yet fear is so strong that it causes wars, social obligations, hierarchies, traditions, and regular working hours. Each of the states has a lot of reality in itself. The reality of waking consciousness is absent when you sleep and dream, it is meaningless when your mind day-dreams and you experience strong inner sensations such as longing or worry. Sleep-dream experience is utterly real when you are in dreamland, it fades into memory when you wake up in the morning. In magic, ritual, and religion, the worlds tend to overlap. A material object can have a strong imaginal reality, a dreaming can be projected on the world of waking experience. When the worlds coincide, we get transformation. It is only from in-between and outside, i.e. *turiya*, that the other states are accessible to change under will.

## Skulls and Corpses

Over the last decades, a host of ill-informed would-be gurus have popularised the idea that Tantra is simply spiritual eroticism. It proved to be an idea that sells. Countless new-age prophets are selling costly 'Tantric Workshops' where people receive a bit of much needed basic sexual education. What sells as 'Tantra' in this market has very little to do with the original. Massage, overcoming shyness, sensuality, odd postures, retaining ejaculation, producing an erotic atmosphere, Reichian body therapy, bio-energetic exercises, and the like are well and good, but they are certainly not what the *Tāntrikas* had in mind. In fact, if you accept the new-age vision of Tantra as the real thing you may arrive in a mind space that promotes hedonism, sensuality, and worship of the body as an end to itself. I suspect that those Tantric lineages that actually promote lovemaking in their program knew what happens when people see the erotic as the only road to liberation. If you worship body too intensely you may end up in total attachment to it. If you cultivate only the beautiful, the alluring, and the desirable, what will you do when you and your partner grow old? Buddha had his own radical ideas regarding the beauty of youth. To help his followers overcome the temptations of the flesh, he recommended meditation on age, death, and decay. The same idea appears in numerous Tantras, especially of the northern tradition. Here we encounter *Tāntrikas*, Hindu and Buddhist, who made a point of seeking out sites of danger, horror, fear, revulsion, and pollution. Most prominent among these were cremation grounds. In orthodox Hinduism, corpses are among the most polluting objects conceivable. A strict Hindu may not touch corpses, and visits to cremation places require considerable re-purification. At this point it may be useful to understand that cremation places are not only sites where corpses are burned. Poor people often did not receive much of a funeral, corpses were not always thoroughly incinerated, and in some famous cremation grounds, burial is common. Kinsley (1998: 153) mentions the famous *Tārāpīṭh* in Bengal, where up to 60% of the corpses are buried. The regular addition of new corpses shifts elder ones, and consequently it is an easy matter to acquire skulls and bones. Several resident ascetics

collect skulls which they use for begging bowls, ritual decoration, or for the erection of the classic corpse-seats. Such a seat may be freshly arranged, but it can also be made by burying a number of skulls in the earth floor of a hut or ritual space. Traditionally, under the seat should be the skulls of a Śūdra, jackal, tiger, snake, and a kumārī (virgin girl). These five skulls form the seat of the adept, they constitute a focus of power and a link to the otherworld. Then there is corpse-sitting, another topic you'll never hear about in a 'Tantric Workshop'. It features prominently in the rites of Kālī, Tārā, Bhairavī, and is often associated with the Mahāvidyās. Usually, corpse sitting was part of the basic initiation, sometimes it was practised for specific rites of sorcery to gain special powers or to attain liberation. Some worshippers were initiated on a corpse at night. Traditionally, Tantric adepts used fresh corpses. Usually those of low class men or women who had died suddenly, be it from suicide, poison, snakebite, accident, drowning, murder, or killed on the battlefield. Corpses of immoral, famous, starved, or diseased people were not recommended. Nor those of the upper classes, if only because their relations kept them guarded at night. In general, the corpse was specially laid out, decorated, identified with a deity, and worshipped. Incidentally, such worship was thought to benefit the soul of the deceased. At some point the corpse was laid on its belly. A yantra was drawn on the back, a mat placed on top, and the worshipper straddled the corpse much like riding a horse. During the night the initiate worshipped the corpse, and the deity within it (often Śiva), recited mantra, did prāṇāyāma, and made offerings. At some point, the corpse moved, made weird sounds, or even began to speak. You have to be pretty spaced out to get this effect. Others placed a board on the corpse and sat on that. Then there are those who buried the corpse of an infant, baby, or foetus to sit on. Such rituals, revolting as they may seem, were not rare perversions of a spiritual tradition. They appear in earliest Tantric literature and for all I know they are still practised secretly. Think deeply about the symbolism. The corpse, a thoroughly polluting thing, becomes a vehicle that carries its rider out of acceptable social reality and conditioning. It destroys all class-connections. A Hindu who touches a corpse loses class and literally drops out of the social and divine order. Moreover, the freedom enjoyed by the freshly initiated adept is based on acceptance and integration of death. While the rite may produce karmic benefits for the soul of the deceased, it certainly reminds the initiate of her or his own mortality. In a certain sense the corpse is not just a corpse. It is your own corpse. When you can sit on your own dead body you'll understand what liberation is all about.

Starting with such rites, numerous Tantric adepts introduced emblems of death in their worship. Several schools of Tantric Buddhism use thighbone trumpets and bone ornaments for ritual. Yoginīs, both Hindu and Buddhist, frequently wore aprons made of human bones. Skulls feature prominently in several Tantric systems of Bengal. They were often placed on altars or buried beneath them, just as they were buried underneath buildings and shrines. It might remind you of the skull worship in Celto-Germanic religions. Skulls could represent deities, they



could also represent deceased worshippers. Some assembled skulls, painted bright red to represent energy, in their shrines as a source of power. Others accepted the skulls as students and taught them to achieve liberation, just as human disciples are educated. A guru gains power and merit by liberating others, no matter whether they are alive or dead. It was assumed that the souls that used to inhabit the skulls obtain blessing and karmic benefits in the process. For a vivid account of the use of skulls in Kālī worship see June MacDaniel in White, 2000: 77, and her full presentation of the subject *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls* (2004). All of which may suggest that a well organised Tāntrika needs good connections to the Untouchables who collect and burn the dead. Finding corpses is not very difficult in a country where every new plague provides dead bodies at the roadside. The problem lies in collecting them. In old India, folks who handled the dead and the dying had an extremely unpopular place in society. Those who touched corpses in their worship did so as secretly as possible. The alternative to using real corpses is meditation. Numerous Tantric adepts repeatedly imagined their own death in trance states. They visualised their dying cramps, the final spasms, the release of excrement and urine, the cooling of the flesh. Many imagined how scavengers devour them, beasts like jackals, hyenas, ravens and crows, all of them vehicles of the goddess. They imagined decay, putrefaction, and the final dissolution of all body. Then they rebuilt their body-vehicle from mantras, energies, coloured lights, and returned to daily life full of enthusiasm.

## Animal Sacrifice

Killing beasts for religious reasons is one of the earliest expressions of human worship. Whenever we observe humans sacrificing, we find the sacrifice is something valuable. The sacrifice is a means of saying 'Thank You!' for favours received or an appeal for favours to come. Humans are gift-making animals. We give to each other and when we approach the spiritual world the giving and taking continue. No matter the period, an animal was always a highly valued gift. Think of the Ārya who invaded India around maybe 1500 BCE. These migrants were breeders of cattle, sheep, and horse, and to them, the sacrifice of a horse amounted to the greatest gift that could be given. The horse sacrifice, often elaborated and sometimes used as an easy excuse to wage war against other countries, was turned into a more philosophical matter in the Upaniṣadic period. The horse ceased to be a simple, if admirable and expensive, gift to the deities and became a complicated philosophical concept. This drift appears with a lot of regularity in Indian religion; a material gift is reinterpreted as a spiritual one. The trend is from the crude to the refined. In Brahmin society, eventually all killing of animals became unfashionable and to this day the better sort of Brahmin is supposed to live a strictly vegetarian life and to abstain from drinking alcohol. Humans being what they are, these rigid religious demands were never adhered to by everyone. Though religious laws are strict in these matters, a good many Brahmins preferred to ignore them, and as their caste is

(theoretically) the highest in society, it was often the Brahmins who could most easily afford such luxuries as meat and alcohol, and sneer at those who dared to criticise them. On the other hand, there was always a large number of low caste people, allowed by religious law to feed on any unclean substance that came their way, who preferred to become vegetarian, as this was sure to improve their *karman*.

In India, most of the carnivorous deities are female. These deities are often dangerous. Where religion was controlled by Brahmins, i.e. in the civilised parts of the country, near cities and governmental institutions, these blood hungry divinities were often set on a highly symbolical vegetarian diet. I've seen pumpkins sacrificed to Durgā, instead of her traditional bull-offering. In the outskirts of the Brahmanical world, among tribal people and outcasts, such replacements were not always acceptable. A lot of blood-hungry goddesses were equipped with a little sister. While the acceptable goddess in her temple gets a lavish offering of vegetables and flowers from the local Brahmin, the little sister in her secluded shrine receives the blood offering from an unofficial priest of lower class.

At this point I have to add that a blood sacrifice in India is not as brutal as most Westerners tend to believe. Unless things are totally debased, or the temple wants to set up a record for mass-destruction, animals are not slaughtered wholesale. Usually, only male goats are sacrificed. They are brought to the altar with care and consideration, they are treated with kindness and calmed with prayers and mantras. To sacrifice an unwilling animal is to commit a crime. The goat is watched closely, if it exhibits fear or struggles it is unsuitable for the sacrifice. Behind this is the belief that an animal can gain a better station in its next life when it allows itself to be sacrificed to a deity. The killing is actually a kind act that reforms and improves the beast's soul and perchance allows it to incarnate as a human being. When the curved knife falls, it falls swiftly and the animal dies fast. Death comes with a single, clean stroke. The offering does not stop here. The deity receives the goat, usually through the service of some priest. In the process the goddess devours the spiritual energy of the offering and imbues the carcass with divine power. The dead body of the animal becomes *prasāda* (purity, grace). Most of it is returned to the worshippers who are now free to eat it. The goat is often grilled over an open fire next to the shrine and the worship ends with a happy meal for the whole family. Given that India is a poor country, this meal is often a lot better than what people have to survive on the rest of the time. It's strange that so many Western people feel revolted at the thought of such sacrifices. Nowhere in the world are animals raised, kept, and slaughtered under such insane conditions as in the flesh hungry industrial world. The Indian goat has lived a real life and is gently dispatched from one world to the next. The pig, cow, or chicken of the industrial world has never seen the light of day and spent its sorry existence narrowly confined in concrete and metal, feeding on waste, hormones, and antibiotics, before it is slaughtered with all the indifference of an assembly line.



Here is a little meditation on animal sacrifice. Imagine a rite where a goat is sacrificed. Use a dissociated perspective, i.e. see it as if you were an outside observer. Now go in. See the ritual through the eyes of the worshipper. See it through the eyes of the goat. And finally, see it through the eyes of the deity.

### **What have you learned?**

We have at least three levels of meaning in animal offerings: the actual animal sacrifice, the symbolic animal sacrifice (think of the pumpkin), and the spiritual sacrifice, which makes use of the symbols of animal sacrifice to convey an altogether deeper layer of meaning. When Tantric texts speak of animal sacrifices, they often have the third variety in mind. In their language of animal symbolism, we encounter the Six Enemies or Vices that have to be offered to the deity: the cat is greed, the camel is envy, the sheep is delusion and stupidity, the buffalo is anger, the goat is crude lust, and man is pride and arrogance. All six are well known sacrifices to the dark goddess, which have to be made again and again.



Figure 23 - Hyena dreaming.



## 4: Tantric History

**What is Tantra?** Let us begin with one of the most enigmatic questions. Since early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Sir John Woodroffe began to translate Tantric texts (much against the resistance of established Indology), scholars have been debating what exactly constitutes Tantra. Then, the question was almost impossible to answer. Today, we are much better informed but we still don't know. Tantra is such a vast subject that all definitions tend to become invalidated by the sheer amount of exceptions to each rule. However, as you have been kind enough to read to this point, you may hope to find out just what Tantra is all about. So do I.

Tantra is a word that means literally 'an extension', 'a weft', a 'piece of woven material', 'a textile'. Textile is a brilliant word, as it is so closely related to our word 'text'. A Tantra is just that: a piece of writing and a literary tradition. In this sense, 'the Tantras' is a loose term for a wide range of texts. As you recall, there were any amounts of texts in Indian history. So just what is so special to the Tantras that they came to be identified with a cluster of spiritual movements?

We have our first evidence for what became Tantra around the fourth or fifth century of the common era. Some scholars doubt this, and prefer to locate the beginning of the movement in the first centuries of the common era. Others argue for the sixth or seventh century, or point out that the phenomenon became most popular after the tenth century. The first appearance of a Tantric adept is in a seventh century satire describing a south Indian ascetic who managed the temple of the goddess Caṇḍikā. Our Tāntrika is described in unsympathetic terms. He has a tumor on his brow (knocking the head against the floor can do this to you), is blind on one eye (invisibility salve destroyed it), and has ruined his health by ingesting a mercurial elixir of doubtful quality. Apart from this he is a collector of manuscripts on Tantra and mantra, and babbles all day about alchemy and hidden treasure (White 1996: 49).

The very term 'Tantra' is artificial. None of the early practitioners of what we choose to see as a 'movement' nowadays called themselves 'Tantrics'. They called themselves by their lineage, by their particular tradition, if they called themselves anything at all. Just as often, it was the disapproving outsiders who coined descriptive terms. Vedic traditionalists, Hindu reformers, missionaries, and disapproving scholars made the term 'Tantric' popular during the last centuries. They also produced the misleading impression that Tantra is something like a movement, a religion, or a world-view, and that it can be divided into various schools. Outsiders think like this. They make up a name to specify something that goes beyond their comprehension. By contrast, a good many of the people we call 'Tantrics' today did not bother to muck about with formalities, traditions, and the need to keep themselves distinct from other people. Practitioners went for direct experience, and

this leads to the cultivation of subjectivity and original new insights. They also learned from other folk. Many important teachers had several gurus from several traditions, and there are texts that recommend guru-hopping as it widens the mind. The key word is syncretism. As our Tantric practitioners wanted practical experience instead of second-hand revelations, they, like you and me, went for anything that works. Keep in mind that even the established Indian traditions had no single dogma nor did they have a centralised control. There were no churches in our sense, people did not subscribe to any single piece of holy writ, nor to a specific set of rules and regulations. This went for the main religions but it went even further for the minority of drop-outs and crazed ascetics living at the fringes of society. The beginnings of Tantra were developed by people who did not belong to the mainstream. We know that there were early 'Tantric cults' around the middle of the first millennium CE, but as next to none of their literature has survived we are very much in the dark regarding their origin and nature. With so little evidence almost anything can be argued (and generally is). What we do know is that there was a growing body of revelations called 'Tantras' in those days. As a Tantra is primarily a text, you may wonder what it is about. We know that there were lots of Tantras in those days, as later Tantras occasionally list them, or quote from them. Sadly, most did not survive.

Now a Tantra is not just a text, it is often a text that aims at spiritual development. In some contexts, the word 'Tantra' can mean a text on ritual. Here our difficulties continue, as not all Tantras are like this. The most popular 'Tantra' is undoubtedly the *Pañcatantra*. It was composed fairly early, was widely read by all sorts of classes, translated into Arabic, and before long it found its way to medieval Europe where it was translated into several languages and became highly popular. Tough luck that it is not a 'proper' Tantra at all: the book is a collection of moral tales and animal fables that has very little relation to spiritual activity. Not all texts called 'Tantric' belong to the Tantric movement, whatever that may be. On the other hand, there are a wide range of texts that were highly popular among 'Tantrics' which do not call themselves by the name. Some are called *Āgamas*: texts on spiritual discipline, mythology, and ritual as revealed by Śiva. Others were called *Nigamas*: much like the *Āgamas*, only that they were revealed by a goddess. In the *Āgamas*, we find a goddess questioning Śiva, in the *Nigamas*, we have a form of Śiva (often Bhairava) questioning a goddess. The question of superiority does not occur in this frame. As so many texts make clear, both goddess and god are quite aware of the hidden truth. They merely assume the roles of questioner and answerer to provide a new revelation for initiates. The format has some similarity to the popular question and answer contests favoured by Hindus and Buddhists as a spiritual discipline. It may be a contest, but it can also be a game. Then there were *Yāmala*s, *Śaiva*, and *Śākta Upaniṣads*, plus a wide range of *Stotras* (hymns) often with a distinctive 'Tantric' content. Some well known Tantras (such as the *Vāmakeśvara Tantra*) received the name 'Tantra' several centuries after their composition. Last, there is a distinction between original works ascribed to a divine author and the later 'Tantric digests' (*Nibandhas*)



which have a known, human author who compiled elder texts. In between are a range of semi-mythical authors who revealed and compiled. What is generally classed as Tantric is a body of texts which relate to spiritual activities as practised by a general movement. This may sound as if it means something but actually it doesn't. Just what movement are we talking about? To begin with, there is no way to define this movement with any degree of precision. So let me frame the matter as a series of questions.

**Who started Tantra?** We simply don't know. The earliest Tantric cults were so thoroughly unpopular that none of their literature survives. We know of several sects, cults, and lineages from the works of other people. Several Purāṇas contain references (usually unfriendly) to such systems. Even the best known of these cults, the Kāpālikas, has to be reconstructed from a tiny body of unfriendly references. However Tantra began, it certainly found no approval from the Vedic establishment. We shall examine the early systems further on. Here it should suffice that our knowledge is so fragmentary that we cannot even be sure whether Tantra began as a Hindu system or as a Buddhist innovation. The matter has been discussed for decades but, in the absence of so much early material, I wonder whether it can ever be decided.

Let's take a brief look at the matter. The Buddhists were good at a number of refined meditations but their dogma was, at best, indifferent regarding women. The historical Buddha did not want to admit women to his system. Tough luck that he depended on the donations of a number of aristocratic ladies to keep the community alive. One fine day, his favourite disciple Ānanda said that it might be a good idea to allow women to participate. The Buddha would not have this. So Ānanda remarked that the great Enlightened One himself had stated that even worms and plants can attain to Buddhahood, so why not women, too? Reluctantly, old Grumpy gave in. Nevertheless he stated that due to the admittance of women the system would become extinct several centuries before its due time. He also ordered that men should not look at women, or speak with them, unless forced to. Better, he declared, for a man to insert his penis in the mouth of a serpent or in a furnace than in the yoni of a woman. This mood continued through early Buddhism. Theravāda/Hīnayāna Buddhism recommended celibacy and taught its adepts to flee women. Its ideal was the Arhat, a saint who had passed through temptation, delusion, and material bondage to find release, and obliteration, in total cessation. Women were tolerated, but even the highest-ranking woman remained inferior to the youngest and least intelligent male. Then came the time of Mahāyāna Buddhism, with its keyword 'compassion'. The ideal of Mahāyāna is the Bodhisattva, who does not seek liberation (cessation) for himself but remains in the world of illusions to help others find release. It was accepted that women could be spiritually competent, but regarding their ability to attain Buddhahood, they would need to be reborn as a male first. The very notion that a woman can be a ritual partner, let alone an initiatrix or a guru, is alien to original Buddhism. This changed when certain Buddhist adepts encountered Hindu adepts belonging to the proto-Śākta

movement. (The term Śākta only became popular around the tenth or eleventh century, long after the fusion we are discussing here). Soon enough, the Buddhists noticed that they were missing something vital. By the seventh century CE there were 'Tantric' Buddhists whose rites included worship of women, lovemaking, and ingestion of sexual secretions. They travelled extensively and often encountered their Hindu colleagues at the places both favoured for worship and meditation: cremations grounds, forests, and mountains. It produced a number of new Buddhist movements, such as Vajrayāna, Tantrayāna, and Mantrayāna. By the fusion of Buddhist and Hindu methods, what we call 'Tantra' was born. Plus some techniques from Daoism and elsewhere, often introduced by Buddhists who had been to the east. When we explore the Yoginī cults, we find Buddhists and Hindus embracing very similar ideas, rituals, and meditations. They also worshipped very similar women. So let us leave the question 'Is Tantra a Buddhist or Hindu invention?' to scholars who like to squabble about words. Considering that so much early literature has been lost, and that the people of the time did not call themselves 'Tantrics' anyway, it may well remain an unsolved problem of Indology.

**Is Tantra a religion?** Most of the Tantric systems we know of function within a religious context. The theme is often a dialogue of two deities. Also, many Hindu Tantras incorporate references to gods and goddesses, sometimes as a literary convention, usually as symbols for states of energy and consciousness. However, Tantra is not simply a faith. Most religions demand faith and sacrifices from their worshippers to maintain the status quo (dharma) or to improve it in times of need and danger. What we may loosely class as Tantric are a number of systems that go a long way beyond these simple demands. Many Tantras emphasise experience, direct experience, and faith in a couple of deities is simply not enough. In this sense, much of Tantric literature is concerned with practices that aim at the attainment of various goals. These goals are widely different. Some want liberation, or union with the gods, or aim at becoming identical or superior to the gods. Others cultivate magical powers (siddhis) for worldly purposes. Some systems are highly devotional, others tend towards intellectual contemplation or deny the existence of deities (plus everything else). Some wish to join enjoyment and liberation simultaneously, others seek total release from rebirth or aim at becoming immortals. A few cultivate sexual worship, the majority practice lovemaking in the imagination or symbolic form, or demand total chastity in order to conserve vitality. What is common to the lot is the idea that you have to do something to be successful. Various sects developed techniques of spiritual practice to achieve the stated goals of the movement. These techniques proved more enduring than the lore that came with them. We find a wide range of Tantric techniques in all sorts of Asian religions. The two major realms of Tantric practice are in Hinduism and in Buddhism. Hinduism is a religious affair while Buddhism, strictly speaking, does not accept the existence (or reality) of gods at all. Both traditions happily incorporated a lot of Tantric



activity in their program. It gets more complicated when we extend our field of vision. Tantra had a strong influence on a wide range of Asian cultures. You find Tantric elements in the Bön religion of old, pre-Buddhist Tibet, in the wide diaspora of Buddhist cults in China, Japan, Korea, and south-east Asia. There is Tantric lore in Nepalese shamanism and in cults of Mongolia. Some Jaina sects are largely Tantric, and there are even a few Tantric cults in Islam. There is also a fascinating core of similar practices in Daoism and Tantra that ought to be explored more fully. More on this later on. In Hinduism, Tantra can appear anywhere. There is a majority of Śaiva and Śākta worshippers in Hindu Tantra today, but there are also Tantric Vaiṣṇavas, not to mention worshippers of Gaṇeśa and many obscure cults. And Tantra is not a world to itself. Some 'Tantric' practices have their roots in the *Upaniṣads* and in early yoga. If anything, this is good evidence that Tantra is a practical approach that can transcend ideology and faith whenever people feel like it. Good news for all enterprising mind explorers: Tantric practice can be adapted to pretty much any religion or world-view you chose to entertain. This has been going on for a long time. You can find Tantric elements in Arabian alchemy, in medieval European sorcery, and even in such recent cults as The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Crowley's Cult of Thelema, the original OTO, and in modern Wicca (which incorporates elements of all the former). All of which boils down to the insight that Tantra may be religion, atheism, polytheism, pantheism, or monotheism, but it is certainly practical.

**Is Tantra yoga?** There are numerous similarities between the approaches. When we examine them more closely a few crucial differences appear. For a start, what we call yoga is not a single thing, school, practice, or method to while away the time. Yoga means union, and union is something that appeals to many spiritually minded persons. Some find their yoga by fasting, pilgrimage, isolation, physical exercise, breathing, meditation, recitation, art, music, devotional love, or sensory deprivation, to name just a few options. We have our first evidence for practices that were later termed 'yogic' in the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads*. At that time, they were generally classed as tapas, i.e. austerities. Tapas were practised by recluses living in isolated jungle communities, or by gods and semi-divine heroes when they needed a bit of extra power. Later on, the tapas-practices underwent a certain refinement and came to be systematically applied. At this point we notice the emergence of several distinct systems emphasising different means to attain union. Some of these systems predate Tantra. However, they did not develop in isolation. A good many early Tantrics learned from yogīs, and likewise a good many adherents of yoga came to incorporate Tantric methods and symbols in their craft. This does not make the terms interchangeable, but it does indicate that cross-fertilisation happened frequently. Several influential Tantrics were also accomplished yogīs, such as the famous Nepalese adept Gorakṣanāth, who blended Kaula and Nātha methods with his favourite, Haṭhayoga. Some Tantrics were yogīs, but this certainly did not apply to all of them. Many yogic and Tantric systems

emphasise the importance of body for joy and liberation, but the way to accomplish this aim differed widely. Allow me to utter a few dreadfully oversimplified generalisations. Yoga evolved from *tapas*, and *tapas* is usually an unpleasant occupation. Consequently, there were yogis who went for austerities, and carried fasting, self-mortification, and doing-without to extremes. Sorry folks, the idea that yoga is good for your health is a recent innovation. Some of the elder sorts of yoga were so keen on union with the divine that they simply did not care what happened to body. Many prominent yogis, sages, and hermits were celebrated renouncers. In these schools, a yogi (one who aims at union with the absolute) could not be a *bhogi* (an enjoyer of worldly pleasures) and vice versa. The Kaula lineages, always good at opposition, went against this attitude and proposed that a Kaula should be both (*Kulārṇava Tantra*, 2, 23-24). This revolutionary step demands more discipline, as it aims at reaching liberation by any means, including desires and pleasures, in fact by the very things that are deemed dangerous, sinful, and delusive by the religious orthodoxy. Many Tantras aim at making enlightenment enjoyable. While several Tantras declare a basic amount of physical training essential for advanced practice (or simply do not mention the matter at all) they do not make such an issue of it. Competent yogis may devote hours every day to the cultivation and purification of the body, in Tantric literature the emphasis is often on ritual, visualisation and inner alchemy. The Krama system, and a number of Tantric Buddhist systems, reduced the classical eight-limbed yoga to a six-limbed variety by deleting three disciplines and adding a new one: spiritual discrimination. Some Tantras ridicule elements of standard yoga, such as vegetarianism, nudity, isolation, self-denial, recitation of sacred words, and sacred baths (*KṛT* 1, 79-86). Others claim that the yogi is so proud of physical skills that the result is vanity and attachment to body. *Lakṣmī Tantra* 44, 54-56 praises mantra *sādhana*. It points out that recitation of mantras requires no hardship, no tiresome sitting in postures, no painful breathing exercises. You can simply assume a pleasant posture, calm the mind, focus on the mantra and attain the objective. Nevertheless, we can observe a lot of overlap between Tantra and yoga. However, comparing the 'two' may be a wrong idea from the start, as yoga is a wide range of systems and methods, and the same goes for Tantra.

**Is Tantra rebellious?** A lot of activities that were called 'Tantric' over the last centuries tend to upset social norms. Worship with and of women, drugs, alcohol, meat, disregard of social convention, class-less assemblies, breaches of Vedic purity rules, cultivation of magical powers, necrophilic symbolism, veneration of 'unclean substances', and a healthy appreciation of body are just what you need to make a lot of people go hopping mad. There is something to upset most orthodox Hindus in Tantra, and consequently, a lot of folk have been trying to put a stop to it. So much for one half of the picture. On the other hand, many issues, often considered typical for Tantra, are not so typical at all. The well known rite of the Five Ms, for instance, involves a feast that includes



eating meat and fish (abhorred by Vedic traditionalists and Jainas), drinking wine (forbidden to Hindus, Jainas and Muslims) and ritual lovemaking (forbidden since the late Vedic period). This well-known format is only one version. The heroic worshipper is supposed to practice such rites, while the beast-like worshipper has to use harmless substitutes, and the divine worshipper transcends the physical enactment by feasting in the mind or in symbolic form. So only one of three classes of worshippers were supposed to practice in this form, and only with the guru's permission, after several years of strict training and spiritual refinement. The rite of the Five Ms is not as popular as some would have it. While badly informed books make it the sum and total of all Tantra, many sects of Hindu Tantra do not practice it at all. A few enact it in symbolic or imaginary form. And when we look at Buddhist, Jaina, or Islamic Tantra, even less of it appears. Several Tantric traditions go to great lengths to deny its validity. In short, what characterises Tantra in the eyes of most Westerners is an exception practised by a section of a minority. To these, however, the rite involves the breach of many taboos. Should we call it a ritual of rebellion then? Again, this is not necessarily the case. The rite, as we know it today was not always such an upsetting activity. Meat and alcohol were not always forbidden, and ritual intercourse can be traced to a few rites in the early Vedic period. As to rebellion, it may come as a surprise that Tantric movements were not always unpopular. The common notion that 'Tantrics' were shy folks who had to hide their activities to avoid persecution has a foundation in historical fact. Many early Tantras demand secrecy and advise the worshippers to pretend that they are Vaiṣṇavas, fools, imbeciles, or madmen. Many 'Tantrics' had to live in hostile environments. Nevertheless, this did not apply to all Tantric movements. Scattered throughout Indian history you can find kingdoms that chose to include Tantric rituals and philosophy in their state religions. Between the eighth and eleventh centuries, a number of kings embraced Kaula lore, mainly as it promised power, success (in war), possibly even physical immortality. The regents of the time became the centre of the cult of the yoginīs and built numerous temples for them, usually round and roofless, so the yoginī spirits could arrive from heaven. Among their ministers were gurus who trained generation after generation of kings to take the central place in the world-maṇḍala. Under such kings a good many 'secret' rituals were performed more or less openly, including rites to generate and ingest sexual fluids. In these periods, Kaula ritual was the religious mainstream while the Vedic traditionalists found themselves out of favour (White 2003: 12). These parts of Indian history are rarely discussed. It seems that the Hindu scholars of the last centuries went to considerable lengths to Vaiṣṇavise history and to delete Tantric influences wherever possible. What we loosely call 'Tantra' today has not always been a fringe phenomenon. For a few centuries it was the state religion in several parts of India. A few of these traditions continue to this day. Many 'Tantric' monarchies were destroyed by Brahmanic monarchies, the Moguls, by invaders from Afghanistan, Holland, and Britain. However, the regents of Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibet were and are Tantric monarchs and occupy the central space in the socio-religious

mind/world maṇḍala. Their priesthood has just as much right to the term 'Tantric' as the obscure worshippers who celebrated unspeakable rites at cremation places. Tantra is not always a movement of spiritual non-conformists. In some cases kings were installed with Tantric rites and government was formed along Tantric principles. Architecture was based on Tantric cosmology and art followed Tantric conventions. Much of this was the sort of Tantra where people do not assemble for nocturnal orgies, ignore class-distinctions, purity laws, and become free to do what they will. Whenever a movement becomes a state religion we can be sure that its wilder elements are either reduced or restricted to the aristocracy. It may not be the Tantra that appeals to you, but it was just as Tantric as anything enjoyed by obscure worshippers in clandestine rituals.

**An attempt at synopsis.** So just what have the many Tantric cults, sects, lineages, and movements in common? This is the toughest question of the lot and can only be answered with extreme caution. Let us narrow the scope to Hindu Tantra to make things easier. In my ignorance I would propose the following points:

- Tantra tends to emphasise practical means to attain direct experience. These means vary enormously. Practitioners use what works for them; in this sense, Tantra involves enlightened subjectivity.

- Tantra projects one or several mind/world maps on experience which appear in diverse forms that include yantra, maṇḍala, mantra, mudrā, numerology, obscure language, symbolism of phonemes, cakrasystems, and sacred anatomy. All of these unite the outer and the inner, the human and divine, the seer and the seen. This can be an act of projection, but it can also be an act of remembrance and recognition, a return to a lost unity and wholeness.

- Tantra is often (not always) highly critical of orthodox faith and religion, established dogma, social norms, and common morality. Lore is often communicated by initiation, ritual, and regular lessons by one or more gurus (human and/or divine) as suits the individual disposition of the student. The main thing is practice, not talk. The system aims at transcendence: the capable student surpasses the guru, the tradition, and possibly the gods when all goes well.

- Tantra is usually a revealed system given by various deities or semi-divine teachers.

- Tantra is theoretically open to all, regardless of gender, age, nationality, or class, provided the guru is willing and the aspirant has a lot of desirable character traits to begin with. In this sense, Tantra is practised and developed by an elite. The basic idea is integration, be it physically, symbolically, ritually, or in the imagination.

- Tantra incorporates body in spiritual activity instead of denying it. Body, awareness, and the multiverse are closely related and form an experience-whole-totality (piṇḍa). Most, though not all, Tantras I have read had a positive, benevolent attitude towards body.



-Tantra usually seeks to unite pleasure and liberation. The mood is generally optimistic and the ideal state is freedom to do your true will.

-Most Tantras emphasise the interaction of consciousness and energy/form in some way, often characterised as Śiva and Śakti, Bhairava and Bhairavī, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, Prakṛti and Puruṣa, Brahman and Māyā or some similar polarity.

## **Tantric Traditions.**

Now for a bit of confusion. When we look at the history of the 'Tantric schools' we run into a number of difficulties. For one thing, the 'schools' are not schools at all, nor can they be compared to cults or churches. Practitioners identified themselves by their lineage, and by the sacred texts and mantras they were initiated into. As most gurus had several students, each generation produced several lineages. These interacted, cross-fertilised each other, and when a student learned from several gurus, we find separate strands coming together again. All of which produced an amazing 'weaving' of lines and links, and prohibited the formation of exclusive systems. As a result, the 'traditions' of Tantra are not really distinct or sharply defined. Gurus interpreted the lore according to their own understanding and the comprehension of each student. As there was no fixed dogma anyway, we encounter any amount of individual development. To make things more complicated, you should remember that the Hindus were by no means as good as the Buddhists at keeping records. The Buddhists favoured monasteries, and built up huge libraries, while many Hindu teachers worked in a badly organised way as they travelled through India. They relied on literature, just like the Buddhists did, but their collections were private and usually much smaller, unless the Tāntrika happened to come from a noble family with an extensive library, like Abhinavagupta. Over the centuries, the Hindu gurus kept few records, and this is bad news when you rely on an unbroken tradition for your pedigree. Consequently, by the eleventh century a number of Tantric lineages began to make up their own past, and invented gurus wherever there was a gap in the transmission. They got entangled in lore and myth, confused preceptors with similar names and generally made a mess of their own history. When we try to work out how the different Tantric systems evolved we find ourselves in a quagmire, which may be the main reason why there is not a single satisfactory history of Tantra to this day. In the following section I shall supply a very brief introduction to some of the movements that are mentioned in this book. I had to ignore several fascinating traditions, such as the Western Transmission of Kubjikā, the Nātha schools, the Siddha alchemists, and the refined Trika of Kashmir. This book is by no means complete, please do not confuse my rough sketches with proper definitions.



Figure 24 - Nightside Gaṇeśa of the cremation ground.



## Kāpālikas and Aghoras

One fine day the gods were sitting in heaven quaffing Soma. As it so happened, Brahmā, the Creator, began to boast about the wonderful job he was doing. Śiva disagreed, there were words, and punches, and then Śiva got really cross and chopped off one of Brahmā's heads with a fingernail. This left Brahmā with four heads and a pain in his neck, while Śiva had to do penance to make up for the deed. He had to carry the skull of Brahmā, or perhaps only a bowl made of that skull, and make a living by begging for alms for twelve years. It didn't make Brahmā very happy, as he never got his fifth head back, but it started Śiva on a career as the divine skull carrier. This myth is at the roots of one of the earliest recorded Tantric systems. The Kāpālikas seem to have been well known by the sixth century and their cult flourished till the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, in the beginning nobody thought of any activity as 'Tantric'. The concept hadn't been invented yet. Each Kāpālika (female form: Kāpālīni) made a living by carrying a skull bowl, preferably made of the cranium of a Brahmin. It served to collect alms, food, or share drink, which often (and preferably) happened to be alcoholic. The Kāpālikas were pioneers. Before the advent of the infamous Kaula tradition they were already exploring the limits of Hindu religion and often transgressed the social and ethical taboos. As a result, few of their contemporaries had a kind word for them. Nor did anybody bother to record (or copy) their scripture. Not a single text composed by a Kāpālika has survived. What we know, or believe to know about them, comes from the writings of unfriendly outsiders. You can find a good synopsis of such material in Mircea Eliade's *Yoga* (1960). Sadly, Eliade presents his material as if it were genuine evidence, not slander, and hardly hints that things may have been otherwise. To summarise those fables, the Kāpālikas worshipped Śiva in his terrible form as Mahākāla, meaning Great Time or Great Devourer, as it is time which devours everything. They considered the killing of animals and humans 'heroic', wore ornaments of human bone, practised human sacrifice (by throat slashing) for Mahā Bhairava (the Great Terrible One, a form of Śiva), and generally worshipped on cremation places. This took the form of drunken orgies involving public coitus and cannibalism, with crazed worshippers feeding on charred corpse-flesh. For sexual rites, prostitutes were highly esteemed and generally assumed the role of the goddess. They considered incest a sacred act and twice a year, in spring and autumn, they assembled for group-sex orgies to which a number of other religious and philosophical groups were admitted.

So much for the negative, and highly questionable, reputation of the cult. An entirely different picture emerges from the researches of David Lorenzen (in White 2000). In his essay, Lorenzen offers a short satirical play (*Mattavilāsa*), allegedly composed by Mahendra Varman, a south Indian king who reigned from 600-630 CE. The story revolves about a Kāpālika and his beautiful companion. The former, completely drunk and tottering, loses his skull-cup and accuses a passing Buddhist of having stolen the item. The two quarrel, then a Pāsupata ascetic mediates, and finally a madman turns up who had abducted the bowl in

the first place. Fine amusement for better society and as fresh and entertaining today as it was during its composition (please read it, will you?). Anyway, what concerns us here is the way the Kāpālikas are described. To begin with, the couple are parodied, but they remain sympathetic. There is not a single hint at human sacrifice, group-sex, or cannibalism. The Kāpālika is drunk and certainly blasphemes, when he identifies the drinking stall with the Vedic altar, but apart from this he is not stupid, evil, or threatening. He simply drinks, eats meat, and enjoys lovemaking. Even more interesting is his female companion Devasomā. As the daughter of a barber, she comes from a very low class (contact with hair is polluting). The two share alms, meat, and drink from the same skull-bowl. He addresses her as 'my beloved' while she calls him 'lord', but apart from that, their behaviour is by no means typical for Hindu couples. Devasomā is not an inferior. She says what she likes, speaks with outsiders without any sense of shame, looks after her drunken companion, and even fights with the Buddhist after her mate has collapsed. In one scene they both go happily mad and dance around, drumming on their cheeks, thereby copying the famous cheek-drumming of Śiva and Kālī. It comes as no surprise that she is oath-bound (an initiate) and a 'female devotee'. As she is strikingly beautiful, both the Buddhist and the Pāśupata ascetic (unsuccessfully) lust after her. What makes this episode so interesting is that we encounter a proto-Tantric couple which lives pretty much as equals. There have been too many scholars (usually Western and male) who proposed that women had little say in Tantra, apart from being worshipped and 'used' for ritual reasons. Devasomā does not fit this theory at all. More so, as the play is from the early seventh century, it predates most surviving Tantric literature, and gives good evidence that spiritual women of the time did not automatically assume the 'little housewife' role expected by Hindu orthodoxy.

What else do we know about the Kāpālikas? Lorenzen gives a few points worth considering. The Kāpālikas undertook a Great Vow (mahāvratā), specifying that the adept must beg, drink, and feed from the skull bowl. The cult had a doctrine (nowadays lost) called Soma-Siddhānta, the Doctrine of Soma. Unlike the Vedic Soma, the Kāpālikas identified Soma as the union of Śiva and Umā (Parvatī). Here, Śiva is the sound Sa plus Umā yields Soma. It may be an early identification of the elixir of immortality, the divine drug of the Vedic seers, with the fluids generated by lovemaking. The Kāpālikas were not always dangerous nutters dwelling at the fringes of society. One account mentions a vipra called Somi-Bhaṭṭaraka who was an expert in Soma-Siddhānta and happened to be the abbot of a Śiva temple. He walked covered in ashes, equipped with a club-staff, a skull, a rotation drum (ḍamaru), a two-faced drum (the mṛdaṅga), and a (thigh bone?) trumpet, plus six insignia. These are given in another source, they consist of two sorts of earrings, a necklace, a jewelled (?) crest, ashes, and a sacred thread. If we follow a hint in the *Mattavilāsa* the 'sacred thread' may have been snakeskin.

Eliade proposes that the Aghori or Aghorapanthi developed out of the Kāpālikas. Aghora means 'not terrifying' (or should that be 'not



terrified?) and is usually used to denote a group of friendly goddesses, i.e. those who seem nice to the ignorant. Again we encounter a lot of vicious rumours. The Aghori were associated with the same sorts of fun activities as the Kāpālikas, with an emphasis on eating forbidden things. Allegedly they ate all sorts of polluting things, including any form of meat (except, for some inexplicable reason, horse) to destroy their basic social conditioning and to make the devotees realise that good and bad, clean and polluted, and so on, are mere categories of thought. They did not believe in class, saw the function of parents as a coincidence, and respected only the guru and Śiva, plus some goddesses such as Sītālā, Paṇṇagīrī, and Kālī. Unlike the Kāpālikas, they devoted themselves to absolute chastity. How true is this account? As before, Eliade did not bother to question his sources. He was so keen on discovering head-hunting religions in Tantra that he took any odd rumour for gospel. Including tales of cremation place cannibalism practised to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under British rule.

## Kula and Kaula

The term Kula is one of the most important and thoroughly perplexing in the wide field of Tantric movements. There are more than twenty different explanations for it, and for the closely related term Kaula. Briefly, because we'll get to the deeper meaning of this symbolism further on, Kula means family, group, clan, cluster, and organisation. All of these imply form, and form is energy, and vice versa, hence they are Śaktis. Indeed, Kula can be a name of the Clan-goddess. Form produces more form and Śaktis generate more Śaktis. In this philosophy, anything that has form is Śakti. This goes for constellations, planets, continents, countries, districts, communities, biospheres, landscapes, people, groups, organisms, individuals, animals, plants, elements, molecules, atoms, and smaller particles. We are not talking about personalised gods here, nor are we discussing the divine feminine. Women, men, gynanders, androgynes, gods, spirits, plants, beasts - as long as they have name, form, shape, duration, and body they are Śakti and belong to the category of Kula. By contrast, Akula means without clusters, family, group, or suchlike. This is a term for Śiva/Bhairava, provided we understand that Śiva is not a male god who walks around as a stoned nudist. Here Śiva is formless, nameless, undefined pure consciousness. What the Kaulas term Śiva was called Brahman in earlier periods. It has no name, no form, no energy. If you could name it, it would immediately become form, i.e. Śakti. This Śiva is in the core of every being and every thing.

For each being, all other beings are Śaktis, each of them containing a Śiva within. When Śiva (Akula) and Śakti (Kula) unite, we arrive at Kaula. This is one explanation for the name of the Kaula movement, and it is not the only one.

Another aspect of the term Kula is simply the family or clan structure. Those who joined 'the group' became Kulas. Men received an initiation

by the kulamīṭa, they imbibed the elixir of the clan i.e. the elixir of the goddess, and became sons of Kula. Women shared the drink. They usually manifested yoginīs or fierce goddesses by direct obsession. As sources of the sacred juice, they were the central focus of the cult. Relationship within the Kula was modelled on families. A guru was known as 'father' or 'mother', fellow students as 'sisters' and 'brothers' and disciples as 'daughters' and 'sons'.

In history, Kula and Kaula are by no means a single phenomenon. Some traditions, such as the Yoginī-Kaula, can be ascribed to historical founders (here: Matsyendranāth). Others, and White lists eleven of them (2003:25-26), are listed in the *KJV* but remain tantalisingly obscure: the Kaula of Emission, the Great Kaula, The Darkness-Kaula, the Mother Kaula, the Serpent-Kaula, and so on. All of these are very early branches listed in an early Tantra. As their literature is lost, we may never know what they were all about. In later periods the term Kaula became even more enigmatic. It seems that around the 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century CE, most of the elder Kaula traditions disappeared. The reasons are unknown. However, I would guess that the Muslim occupation of northern India plus several devastating plagues contributed to the situation. This did not stop people from using the name. Kaula revivals of all sorts, with widely different teachings, continued up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Several of them are so tame and law-abiding that the earlier Kaulas wouldn't have recognised them.

There have been numerous Kula movements, as the texts that call themselves 'Kaula' show wide divergence, especially regarding deities, mantras, and rituals. A good study on this subject is long overdue. In general opinion, the Kaulas are practitioners of the left hand path who indulge in all those rites that are considered unclean, heretical, heterodox, and dangerous by orthodox Hindus. For most of Indian history the Kaulas were not popular at all. For good reason, most Kaula Tantras insist on strict secrecy and hide their teachings behind a veil of metaphors. This is not always the case, some late Kaula texts, such as the *Yoni Tantra*, can be astonishingly outspoken. Not that they are easy to understand. All Kaula texts I have seen, no matter whether in plain or secretive language, convey several levels of meaning where the ignorant only sees one. All of them leave things hidden, unsaid, or vague on purpose, and woe to the reader who takes everything at face value. A single interpretation is never enough. Now what exactly constitutes Kaula depends very much on what Tantra you are reading. Let's have a brief look at a few.

One of the earliest surviving Kaula Tantras is the remarkable *Kaulajñāna nirmaya*, attributed to Matsyendranāth (also called Macchendrapada, Macchindrapada, Matsyodara, or Macchagna) who is today worshipped in two shapes (red and white) as the guardian deity of Nepal. He is sometimes credited with founding the Kaula tradition, but on closer examination it is only one branch, the *Yoginikaula*, which can be attributed to him. The 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century *KJV* is one of the most lucid Tantras ever written. The emphasis is on meditative practice, mantra, extensive visualisation and a wide range of internal forms of worship.



The text has a few references to the worship of women, who generally represent or happen to be yoginīs, and the ingestion of sexual elixirs. Apart from this, the emphasis is meditative visualisation, inner alchemy, 'cheating death', and cakra stimulation to obtain siddhis. As you will read later on, it describes a wide range of distinct cakra systems. An interesting detail is the definition of the yoginīs, who are incarnate women (who practice yoga), mantric formulas, and a wide range of dangerous nature spirits who move and play in the world in the shape of (mostly) female animals. The text is much concerned with the three Śaktis Kriyā, Jñāna, and Icchā, while the usual Hindu deities are rarely mentioned.

The *Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra* (9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century) offers Kaula worship with all the elements of heroic drama. It is a mysterious, highly metaphorical account of worship, sorcery, and ritual involving plenty of darksome cemetery celebration, sexual mysteries, refinement of secretions, rites for Kālī, Tripurā, Aranyā, Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, and the Mothers. Much of it looks darker than it really is and often behind the frozen language lurks a refined ritual of internal meditation. When lovemaking is intended, it is usually on a small scale, i.e. internal with the Paraśakti/Kulakuṇḍalinī, in the imagination, with a spirit, deity, or a single partner. Those passages that seem to pertain to group orgies tend to happen in the imagination, when you consider them with a bit of common sense (see the chapter on the secretions). Likewise drinking is encouraged, but the text makes a point that the real wine is the elixir generated in the cakras of the head, i.e. the yogi's internal brain-secretions. The Kaula rites of this Tantra seem wild and heroic, but they are often spiritual and internal.

By contrast, Kaula teachings, as formulated by Abhinavagupta (10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century CE), show a degree of spiritual refinement and a sophisticated philosophy that is amazing in its depth and abstraction. Abhinavagupta wrote on a level that pertains very much to the divya, the divine temperament. Abhinava was something like a universal genius. He joined several distinct traditions, learned from a wide range of gurus, wrote the most refined works on Tantra imaginable, turned dualistic Kashmir traditions into monistic ones, and in-between composed a wide range of books on art, architecture, grammar, aesthetics, and similar matters. It may be claimed that he not only recorded the lore of numerous Tantric systems, he also refined it to a point where only well-educated intellectuals with practical experience were able to digest what he was talking about. Here and there some of the hard-core Kaula stuff appears in his works, but most of it disappears under a flood of mind-blowing speculation. It's one of those questions whether he 'cerebralised' Kaula beyond recognition, making it inaccessible for most, or whether he simply recorded a refined Kaula philosophy which is rarely apparent in Kaula Tantras. Without his contribution the full depth of many Tantric systems would have remained unknown.

Now for the well-known *Kulārṇava Tantra*. This complex work was begun in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but it was edited and elaborated over several centuries and is consequently full of contradictions. Some of it is of the

highest quality and offers brilliant insights and great freedom of experience, other sections praise dull-minded obedience, guru-worship, and offer far too many rules and regulations. Long passages give a definition of the Kaula yogī who fits the common image of the wild and orgiastic celebrant. Heroic drinking coupled with spiritual practice and lovemaking are encouraged to the point of delirium and seem to happen in clandestine group orgies. Celebrants are intoxicated to the point at which when they forget who and where they are (more on that in the later chapter on the Five Ms), it's goodbye to feeding rules, purity laws, marital relations, gender, and rules of conduct. Instead, the party is loud, exhilarated, and a long way from the hidden rituals promoted in earlier works. Of course secrecy remains a must, but then, how do you keep a bunch of drunken revellers secret when the entire neighbourhood can hear the noise? All of this might be metaphorical, but it certainly does not read like symbolism. In the 9<sup>th</sup> ullāsa the Kula or Kaula yogī is defined as one who lives in the divine truth, always in the ecstasy of wine and meat, completely free from doubts. The Kulamārga (Kula path) is treasuring what is rejected by the world and rejecting what the world cherishes.

9, 56, trans. Rai: *O Kuleśvari! Improper conduct is proper conduct. What should not be done is to be done. Even falsehood is Truth for the Kaulikas.*

57. *O Kuleśvari! For a Kaulika non-drink is a drink, not to be eaten is worth eating, and that which should not be resorted to is worth resorting.*

58. *O Kuleśvari! For a Kaulika there is neither injunction nor rejection, neither merit or demerit, neither heaven nor hell.*

Likewise bad qualities become good, enemies become friendly, kings become servants, and lack of dharma becomes dharma, death becomes a helping healer, and the Kaula's home becomes heaven. All of this utilises the law of reversal and contains a much stronger spirit of revolt than earlier sources. Indeed, unwanted and inappropriate conduct becomes a key to hidden power and doing-things-contrariwise a virtue. Such a spirit of rebellion looks as if the authors of the work had to stomach a lot of suppression. Where earlier Tantras prescribed ritual for its own sake, these sections of the *KṛT* are much in opposition to the establishment. In the next passages, we learn about the need to hide and disguise Kaula practice. The Kulas may dwell anywhere and do anything, may wear any disguise and behave like the ignorant, the uncultured, the mad, and lowly. They may seem drunk, like children, dullards, or idiots. They must never reveal their lore, to avoid people flocking to them (as if they ever would), and yet they must act only for the good of the world and never for their own desires.

73. *Such a Yogī lives in a way that the men of the world may laugh, feel disgust, revile and seeing bypass him from a distance leaving him alone.*

74. *He would go about in different guises, at times like one worthy, at time like one fallen, and at times like a ghost or a demon.*



In spite of such a dismal appearance, the yogi is ever pure, ever full of compassion, and never tainted by any sin. The superior Kulika plays with the serpent of the senses but is never stung, lives free of duality, without misery, released from ego, jealousy, arrogance, anger, pretence, and desire. The Kulika who is beloved by Śiva is truthful in speech, peaceful, and when the Kula is lauded, his hair stands on end, his voice quakes with emotion, and tears of joy pour down his face. What better thing can happen than to have a Kaula yogi in the neighbourhood? Śiva goes on to elaborate the great blessings granted to people who show generosity and respect to Kaulas, to places and communities where Kaulas dwell, and to families who offer their girls and women for worship. We are getting into the wishful thinking department here, it continues over several pages, and the admonitions to be nice to a Kaula become increasingly strained. What a tough job, you play the loony all day, being a boon to the universe, and still nobody loves you. This mood is entirely absent in earlier texts. Last, a brief look into the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*. This late work - some parts were composed under British rule - also claims to offer Kaula teachings. However, its general style is miles away from earlier works. We encounter so-called Kaulas who are well settled in society, who try to blend Vedic and Tantric lore, who worry about middle-class virtues, and with regard to lovemaking, the text is so shy that it hurts. Ingestion of secretions, the main focus of the early Kaula traditions, is hardly hinted at, the rite of the 5M's is so complicated that it takes years to master the ritual schedule and what really excites the author are several long chapters on laws, property rights, inheritance, and similar issues. If it did not include a few useful sections on Kālī I would wonder just what it has to do with Kaula at all.

## Krama

The word Krama in general can mean a succession, tradition, or lineage. Applied specifically to Kashmirian monism, it is the name of a Tantric tradition which started around the 7<sup>th</sup> century and had its peak between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Kashmir became a place of great spirituality and scholarship thanks to the patronage of several Tantric kings. Then the tradition gradually lost importance. There were a few brilliant revivalists but by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Krama had faded into oblivion. Unlike the other monistic systems of Tantra, Krama originated in Kashmir. According to the earliest sources, the system was founded by a woman who appears under the names of Mangalā Devī or Makāra Devī. Sadly, we know next to nothing about her, and the same goes for the first generations of participants. Nowadays, Krama is one of the most enigmatic systems. In an attempt to become popular and easy to understand, the majority of Krama authors chose to use the local language instead of saṁskṛt, which turned out to be a good idea for the time being, but a bad strategy in the long run. As a result, much of Krama literature developed outside of the scholarly elite, who did not take much notice of its teachings. Today only a small amount of Krama texts survive, most of them remaining untranslated. Add to this the difficulty

that Krama appears under a wide range of names, such as Mahānaya (Great System/Way), Mahārtha (Great Principle of Meaning/Reality/Truth), Devatānaya and Devīnaya (System/Way of the Goddess), Kālinaya (System/Way of Kālī), plus several others which may or may not be names for Krama or Kula, if only we knew. According to Navjivan Rastogi, whose brilliant study of Krama is my main source on this topic, Krama started out as a philosophical system and became more 'Tantric' and practical as it developed. Our knowledge of Krama is far from satisfactory, as so much has been lost. However, a few points emerge which might be worth considering. Krama, like Kula, is very concerned about practice. It aims at direct experience of the unity of the individual self and the universal all-self. This is not a process of attainment but of remembrance and recognition. The experience of the world and oneself is not something distinct from the universal self, but an expression of reality. The Krama adepts shared the Buddhist idea that 'all is void', but unlike the Buddhists, they did not see this as a negative thing. To the Buddhists of the time, the realisation of voidness implied that life is meaningless and futile, while the Krama folk saw the voidness (*sūnyatā*) as a positive and beneficial state. Now Krama starts, just like the other schools of Kashmir Śaivism, with the idea that there are four or five Acts of the Absolute.

1. *Sṛṣṭi* - emergence, emanation, appearance.
2. *Sthiti* - sustenance, maintenance.
3. *Samhāra* - withdrawal, submergence, disappearance, retraction.
4. *Tirodhāna* - concealment, potential existence, resting.

This phase appears in Krama as *Anākhya* or *Kālikrama* and refers to the nameless, unknown state of being and becoming. So far our system has four phases, and for many practitioners this was good enough. I hope you noticed that the first three stages are very close to the general Hindu model of creation, maintenance, and destruction. Some worshippers went beyond the fourfold symbolism and proposed that there is a fifth stage, *Anugraha* (dispensing grace). In Krama, an alternative term for the fifth stage is *Bhāsakrama*, meaning Pure Light. There was a lot of theological quarrelling about the question of whether the fifth stage is included in the fourth or not, which happily does not concern us here. To the Krama *Tāntrikas*, the important thing about the succession of phases is not the phases themselves but the mystery that combines them, and makes them cyclic. It is *saṁvit* (Awareness Reality) which continues through the cycle, in fact *saṁvit* is the absolute and Krama (succession) itself. In Krama lore, *saṁvit* is the hidden unity that continues through the cycle. To realise *saṁvit* as oneself and the all-self is to attain liberation within one's lifetime. But Krama went beyond this. As a philosophical system, it is much concerned with sequences. Each of the four phases of the system were subdivided into three stages (beginning, maintenance, and dissolution), resulting in twelve phases, which were identified with twelve *Kālis*. Some went beyond this and proposed that the ultimate cycle of development consists of thirteen *Kālis*, and so the system split again. These *Kālis* are important for the



sequence in which they appear. Krama means sequence, succession, and the like, consequently it appears as time in the phenomenal universe. In the realm of the absolute truth it appears as the potential that lies hidden as a substratum of all apparent changes, a timeless awareness termed Akrama (not-succession). Krama and Akrama are one phenomenon, their relative existence depending on the point of view.

As a practical system, Krama is said to have been revealed (or invented) by a number of yoginīs. In this context, yoginīs are not necessarily spiritual entities but women who practice a form of yoga, or who manifest the presence of a divine yoginī through their being. Things may have started with the mysterious Mangalā Devī or Makāra Devī. Then followed Nīskriyānanda and his wife Jñānadīpti, Vidyānanda and Raktā, Śāktīyānanda and Mahānandā, and finally the earliest preceptors of whom we have some data, Śivānanda and Samayā. It seems remarkable that the first four 'generations' of Krama teachers are remembered together with their wives. While the guru's wife represents the incarnate goddess and receives respect, if not veneration from the Tantric student, it is by no means common that the names of these women are recorded in history. That Krama starts with the transmission of these couples may say something about the importance of these women in the system. Sadly, there is no information regarding the lives or teachings of any of these persons. With Śivānanda, otherwise known as Avatārakanātha (c. 800 – 850 CE), a widely travelled guru, scholar, and innovator, we arrive at the first traceable preceptor of the tradition. As his immediate students he had three female ascetics, Keyūravatī, Madanikā, and Kalyāṇikā, plus approximately twenty other students who remain obscure. Each of the three became the guardian deity of a pīṭha (seat, sacred place) and had a number of capable students. The wide range of different Krama lineages began with these brilliant ladies. Keyūravatī seems to have been the most influential of them. Her disciple Eraka eulogised her in a poem as one who has attained the state of khecarī, a goddess in constant unity with absolute reality. In early Tantra, khecarī means 'She who moves in the Void' and refers to a class of yoginīs who have attained supreme siddhis, such as the power to fly through the air. In contrast to her is the bhūcarī (She who moves on Earth). Khecarīs were considered eminently powerful beings who may do considerable harm to anyone who is afraid of them. Later, Abhinavagupta proposed a four-fold flow of cosmic energy going through the phases of khecarī, gocarī, dikcarī, and bhūcarī, i.e. from the most sublime to the firmly manifest, which may well have its roots in Krama thought. Anyway, after our three illustrious initiatrixes, Krama history becomes rather silent about female participation. Many of the early proponents chose to live in chastity, hence there are few guru's wives in evidence, and regarding a good many others we have no details of their private lives. Rastogi has done an excellent job in researching the (small) range of known Krama exponents, but his account suffers from the fact that most of them are writers and innovators, while the vast majority of practitioners did not write books and were not remembered. Does this mean that Krama became more male-oriented? Or do we simply remain ignorant of its female worshippers? I would not like to

give any judgement on this issue. In medieval India, it was a lot easier for men than for women to break out of the cage of conventions and become travelling ascetics. Likewise, men were usually more literate than women. Consequently they left more traces of their activities in history. However, Krama is a tradition of which so little material survives that, before Rastogi's pioneering study, scholars were inclined to disregard it as a minor deviation from the Kula tradition. How many illiterate practitioners, female and male, contributed to Krama is something we will never know for certain. With regard to its general orientation, Krama split into two distinct (and quarrelling) schools, one of them favouring the idea that Kālī is the absolute reality while the other insisted, in conformity with the other schools of Śaiva monism, in an absolute reality as Śiva. As the followers of Kālī were in the majority, and often more influential than the Śiva worshippers, Krama is generally considered to be a Śākta system, or at least more Śāktic than Kula, Trika, Prājñāpāra, and the philosophical Spanda system. Provided such distinctions make sense at all.

This leaves us with the question just what sort of practices the Krama folk believed in. According to a beautiful model, Krama is equated with the northern face of Śiva, i.e. the Northern Seat (*uttara pīṭha*) tradition. Śiva's northern face corresponds to the left (*vāma*) side, hence Krama overlaps with certain aspects of the *Vāmamārga*, the left-hand path. How far this similarity goes is far from certain. Krama ritual involved the three sacraments: wine, meat and love-making, with regard to the other two M's very little is recorded. We do not know how widespread these rites were nor whether they were performed physically or in the imagination. What differentiates Krama from other systems is its general attitude of indifference. As it expresses unity in duality, it generally tends towards an ambiguous attitude. Krama perceives realisation as a gradual process which follows certain stages. Prājñāpāra (a general term for Kashmir Śaivism) and Kula disagree. In their lore things appear in clusters (Kula) and enlightenment is an instantaneous event. With regard to orthodox ritual practices, Siddhānta Śaivism insists that they are a must, while Kula and Kaula either condemn them or propose their own rites often in direct opposition to the mainstream. The 'forbidden and impure' is a major obsession of many Kula works. There are Kula Tantras that make a point of taking a non-conformist attitude at any cost, and aim at liberating the practitioner by making her/him break as many taboos as possible. Where it comes to reversing the common order, several prominent Kula Tantras are just as dogmatic and narrow-minded as traditional Hindu lore. Krama, by contrast, accepts all and does not insist. Likewise, the matter of freedom versus bondage, always something that gets the Kulas excited, is largely ignored by Krama and Trika, which refuse to see the world in such narrow categories. The very distinction between freedom and bondage seems irrelevant to the Krama writers, and the same goes for the concepts of duality and non-duality. In daily practice, Krama does not care about such matters as religious vows, pilgrimage, wearing matted hair, smearing ashes on body, worship of liṅgas, and disregards a lot of orthodox regulations. It is even indifferent



towards the question whether the gods should be worshipped. With regard to yoga, Krama replaced the classical eight-fold yoga by a six-fold yoga which is similar to the yoga of Tantric Buddhism. It eliminates the three stages yama, niyama, and āsana (recommended forms of living, prohibitions, and posture) and adds tarka: the pure knowledge that discriminates between the spiritually relevant and the spurious. In other words, a certain amount of critical thinking was cultivated. In the eyes of the spiritual mainstream, such distinctions did not matter much. Krama was often confused with Kula. Over the centuries Krama ceased to be a separate system. It became so thoroughly mixed up with Kula that few could tell the difference.

## Śrī Vidyā

Corresponding to the southern face of Śiva is the Śrī Vidyā tradition, a term which might be translated as Auspicious Wisdom, as Douglas Brooks put it. His study is one of my main sources for this section. Śrī Vidyā began sometime between the fourth and sixth century, but it made its major emergence around the eleventh century. As a Tantric system, Śrī Vidyā is characterised by three elements around which the system revolves.

One of them is the well known Śricakra, also known as the Śrī Yantra, which appears prominently in most popular books on Tantra as a diagram of 'the Devi'. This symbol is more than a meditational device and a focus of attention. It is also a map of the body/mind system and of the ritual circle. When projected in three dimensions the diagram appears as the sacred Mount Meru, home of the gods, and so does the worshipper. In worship, the yantra is carefully measured, drawn, and a wide number of deities are installed at the various points. This arrangement is extremely complex. Within Śrī Vidyā, there is some controversy regarding the way the diagram is drawn. Early sources, from the time when Śrī Vidyā was still linked with the Kaula tradition, prefer the version where the central triangle points downward. In this form, the deities are installed from the rim to the centre, where absolute, formless consciousness resides. It's the way from the material world to absolute reality, and, as you can see, it is a way of simplification and dissolution. After the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the school of Lakṣmīdhara turned the diagram upside down, reinterpreted the design, and proposed that worship should begin with the absolute at the centre and proceed to the outside, into the manifest world.

The second element of Śrī Vidyā is the worship of an all-inclusive goddess called Lalitā or, in full form, Lalitā Mahātripurasundarī. The goddess is also worshipped under a wide range of names, such as Ṣoḍaśī, Tripurā, Kāmeśvarī and Rājarājeśvarī. Indeed the term Śrī Vidyā itself is a name of the goddess. More on her nature and appearance in the chapter on the Mahāvīdyās.

The third element is a mantra that was supposed to be secret, but can be found in numerous works, such as the *Vāmakeśvara Tantra* and the

*Saundaryalaharī*. The mantra has fifteen or sixteen syllables, corresponding to the lunar stations, and is divided into three 'peaks' which correspond to stages of initiation and realms of the body/mind complex. More on it in the chapter on mantra.

These three elements form the foundation of Śrī Vidyā. All of them are highly esoteric in that there is an enormous amount of theology associated with them, most of it incomprehensible to outsiders. Where it comes to defining the system we have to consider two very distinct phases. In the earlier period, up to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, parts of Śrī Vidyā seem to have overlapped with Kaula. Adepts of the time had no problems in calling themselves Kaulas, though what exactly they meant when they used this vague term remains open to speculation. After all, kula means 'the group' and there are plenty of groups one can belong to.

Śrī Vidyā is a tradition that can be found all over India, though its two main centres were Kashmir and southern India. Today the Kashmirian branch is extinct, but the south Indian form thrives and constitutes the most popular Tantric system in existence. In fact it is the only Tantric system that finds any approval in modern India. Typical for Śrī Vidyā is its closeness to the Vedic tradition. Where other Tantric systems saw themselves in opposition to the Brahmanic mainstream (Kaula), or simply didn't care (Krama), Śrī Vidyā made a point of uniting Tantra and Vedic practice. Many of its adherents consider themselves members of both traditions. To make this unlikely mixture work, a wide range of basic rituals and meditations were abolished. It produced a system that could be mentioned in public, mainly as all wild elements had been excluded. Of course practitioners do not agree. In their opinion Śrī Vidyā is the 'original secret' of the *Vedas*, and their sādhana is conveniently considered the oldest that exists. Śrī Vidyā Tāntrikas are often intellectual types. Most come from the upper classes, are educated, literate in saṃskṛt, well acquainted with Vedic lore, and often belong to the class of smārta Brahmins. Though Śrī Vidyā is basically a textual tradition, it relies on the guru to interpret the texts. As in other branches of Tantra, there is no special canon of sacred literature. However, the adherents tend to read what their gurus recommend and show little interest in other systems. In consequence, Śrī Vidyā became a narrow little world to itself. This is especially visible in such works as the *Saundaryalaharī*, which looks like a bizarre hymn to praise the goddess but contains, deep under the surface, instructions for practical worship. To find these you have to understand the idiom, which may take several decades, and depends much on what the guru tells you. The language of Śrī Vidyā is so specialised that it remains incomprehensible to outsiders, including initiates of other Tantric traditions. As Brooks points out, Śrī Vidyā adepts show little interest in other traditions and lineages, even to those belonging to their own system. To read sacred texts remains a must, but studying their commentaries, let alone textual analysis, remains unpopular. Who needs a commentary when, after all, the guru is the final word on everything?

In Śrī Vidyā you can observe a system that contains very little internal conflict. Goddesses are mostly adored in their benevolent (saumya or



aghora) form, while those with terrifying (ghora) characteristics are largely excluded. Śiva and Lalitā appear as a happy couple. In actual worship, Śrī Vidyā contained Kaula elements of the softer type (known as the Śrī Kula tradition) up to the time of Lakṣmīdhara (16<sup>th</sup> century), who transformed the system by eliminating a lot of Kaula festivity. In Lakṣmīdhara's opinion, the supreme pinnacle of Śrī Vidyā consists of internal worship. This approach, termed Samaya Śrī Vidyā, prohibits all outer rituals. It is vehemently opposed to the Five Ms, to meditation on genitals, to group worship, and especially to activities that threaten class-purity. Such practices, he proposed, are to be abhorred as 'Kaula' Tantra. We owe Lakṣmīdhara the emphasis on differences between the right and left-hand path, together with the notion that internal worship is the most superior form of spiritual evolution. Now Lakṣmīdhara had by no means invented internal worship. You find it praised in Kaula literature well before the tenth century. However, the early Tāntrikas considered inner worship, using imagination, visualisation and deep meditation, as one option among several. Several esteemed it highly, but they did not prohibit the outer, physical forms. It is typical for Lakṣmīdhara's narrow-minded attitude that he simply damned outer ritual, group worship, and anything remotely resembling lovemaking. After his time, very few Śrī Vidyā adepts dared to call themselves Kaulas any more. Nevertheless, Lakṣmīdhara was not completely successful. Modern Śrī Vidyā practitioners still perform minor rites of outer worship, but they draw the line at matters involving unclean substances, violations of Vedic taboos, and physical congress. Lovemaking is allowed for procreation if the participants are married, but it is not considered a valid form of worship. Even during internal worship a host of abstract symbols keep the matter of sex conspicuously in the background. Consequently, numerous members of India's most popular Tantric system prefer to live in chastity.

## Mahācīna

The Mahācīna (or Cīnācara) tradition is one of the most notorious in Tantric literature, both Hindu and Buddhist. It is closely associated with all the prohibited practices that orthodox worshippers condemn as dangerous, morally corrupt, and contaminating. Bharati quotes the following account from one of the *Rudrāmalas*. In it the saint Vasiṣṭha (more on him in the section on Tārā) complains to Buddha about the Mahācīna tradition: *How is it that wine, meat, women are drunk, eaten, and enjoyed by heaven-clad siddhas who are excellent and trained in the drinking of blood? They drink constantly and enjoy beautiful women. With red eyes they are always exhilarated and replete with flesh and wine.* (Bharati 1983: 68). Luckily, Buddha assures him that this is quite as it should be, and that with a bit of worship of the goddess, everything will be all right.

Where do the left-hand path rituals originate? From where did the Tāntrikas derive those infamous rites involving coitus, ingestion of body elixirs, and worship involving corpses? To this day, such questions are not entirely cleared up. To respectable Hindu scholars of the past

centuries the question was easy to answer. Such rites, they assumed, could not really be an invention of the locals. Like all bad, corrupt, and contaminating things, they must originate in foreign parts. For an orthodox Hindu, all foreign countries are dangerous territory. A strict Hindu may not leave India, neither by ship nor over land, and consequently few bothered to travel and even fewer brought back reliable information. So, when we read that the rite of the Five Ms originated in Mahācīna what shall we make of this proposition? Just where is Mahācīna on the map? Here we encounter difficulties. The term Mahācīna means literally 'Great China'. It sounds like geography, but isn't. Various authors have identified Mahācīna with a wide range of countries. You find the term used with total carelessness for any country north or east of India. In most cases it is applied to Tibet, China, and Mongolia. As Indian geographers had only the vaguest of ideas about the lands to the north, this does not get us much further. For this reason, a good many Tantric scholars take the term Mahācīna to mean 'foreign' with no specific geographical location in mind. While this may be accurate in many instances, I would argue that occasionally, Mahācīna may have been a real reference to China.

Mahācīna is closely related to the cult of the goddess Tārā, who is often called Mahācīnatārā, and who is typically invoked by ecstatic rites involving meat, wine, and congress (Bharati, 1983: 58-79). There are two basic forms of Tārā; one of them Buddhist, the other Hindu. The two are so distinct that I wonder whether they were really developments of each other. Just as possibly, two different goddesses became popular under the same 'name'. Or maybe a single foreign goddess was reformed in two widely different ways. Today the Buddhist Tārā is the patron goddess of Tibet, but her cult did not originate there. The Tibetan King Songsten Gampo (617-650 CE) had two queens. One of them hailed from China, the other from Nepal. The latter introduced the King to Buddhism and imported a statue of Tārā to Tibet, where she sought to establish the cult. Her efforts, and indeed the King's attempts, to introduce Buddhism to the Tibetans did not prosper. The new faith had a slow start and didn't get very far. While King Songsten was later identified with Avalokiteśvara and his wives with a green and a white Tārā, the locals cared very little. It took several centuries before the Tibetans were ready to accept Buddhism. So much for the legendary account. Presently, only the Chinese Queen can be considered historical. She was definitely a Buddhist and came to Tibet in the company of numerous scholars, artisans and skilled labourers, who did much to improve Tibetan culture and technology. So Tārā allegedly came from Nepal. Not that she originated there, we can find her earlier in India, where the Buddhists wrote about her. Yet to the Indians, Tārā was a foreign goddess. How did she come to India? One option is the journey by sea. Tārā is often called the saviouress who helps believers to cross the ocean of life. In this function she is represented by a boat, which might imply that her cult had come from overseas. Another option is the journey overland. One Buddhist tradition claims that Tārā, and the knowledge of using mercury for alchemy, were introduced into India by Nāgārjuna. This



famous saint is very hard to identify as there were quite a few ascetics of that name. Anyway, we find Tārā and mercury connected, and both of them were said to come to India from Mahācīna. There is almost no mercury in India; the siddha alchemists had to import their favourite minerals. Most of the mercury and cinnabar came, along with the basic ideas on alchemy, from China, where the Daoists had been experimenting with them since at least the second century BCE. A text on life extension from 133 BCE (Eichhorn 1973: 119) proposes that by sacrificing to the oven (deity) one can reach the spirit beings. When this has succeeded cinnabar can be turned into gold. By eating from cups and dishes made of such gold, life is extended and one may visit the Xian ('immortals') on the triple peaks of P'êng Lai island in the eastern ocean. The oven goddess, by the way, is a beautiful girl dressed in red. It might remind you of a lot of red yoginīs, semi-naked, smeared with blood, who aid the Tāntrika during the rites of inner alchemy (*KJN*, 19, 2-5 & 24, 4-12).

While we cannot estimate whether Tārā and mercury arrived in India by land or sea, we do have evidence for quite a bit of travelling between India and China. Most of it was done by Buddhists, who didn't have to fear contamination when leaving Indian soil (White, 1996: 61-66). If Tārā was originally a Chinese or Mongolian goddess, we might wonder about her original name. Tārā means 'saviour, protector', and is a title, not a name or a description. Her Hindu iconography is so close to Kālī that the two can hardly be told from each other. Both are dark and terrifying deities with wild hair and wilder manners.

Tārā's connection with mercury and alchemy is worth considering. In ancient China the most famous goddess in charge of alchemy, the elixir of life and immortality, was Xiwangmu (Hsi Wang Mu), whose name used to mean 'Queen of the Western Land of Mu'. Before the common era, she was venerated as a dangerous goddess dwelling in the mythical Kun Lun mountain (usually a metaphor for the human spine) in the west (the land of the dead) with a range of immortals. She is the guardian of the elixir of immortality and, as this elixir is produced by rites of alchemy (meditative, sexual or using chemistry), she is also known as Jin Mu, 'Mother of Metals' or 'Mother of Gold'. Her first appearance may be on the oracle bones of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600-1045 BCE), where we find reference to a Mother of the West who is associated with tigers and counterpart of an unknown Eastern Mother. Sometime between the fourth and third century BCE Zhuangzi (Chuang Tse), chapter 6, recorded: *The Queen Mother of the West got it (the Dao) and took her seat on Shao-Kuang - nobody knows her beginning, nobody knows her end.* Another work of the fourth to second century BCE, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (trans. Anne Birrel, 1999: 24) gives the first detailed description: *Three hundred and fifty leagues further west is a mountain called Mount Jade. This is where Queen Mother of the West lives. In appearance, Queen Mother of the West looks like a human, but she has a leopard's tail and the fangs of a tigress, and she is good at whistling. She wears a victory crown on her tangled hair. She presides over the*

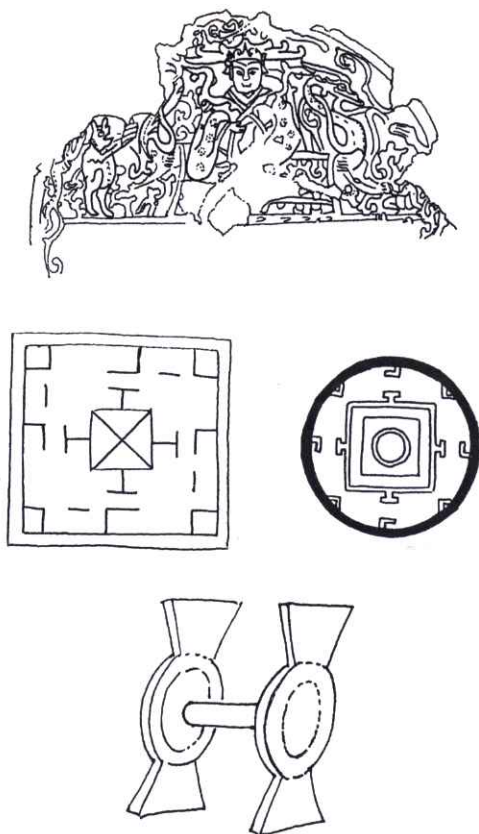


Figure 25 - Chinese influence.

Top: Upper half of a gilded bronze disk that graced a coffin from Wushan, late second to early third century, after Kaogu 1998 in Bagley 2001:54. The design, partly damaged, shows Xiwangmu seated on a throne in the centre. She holds two sceptres and wears a leopard-skin robe. She is flanked by dragons. To the left is a hare holding an object which might contain the classical medicine of immortality. To the right a toad is kneeling. It's hard to see as the head is missing.

Middle left: the basic design of the gameboard used for Liubo. The earliest such board possibly dates from the middle Shang dynasty, maybe around 1400 BCE. The central design shows a square, possibly symbolising the world mountain, from which four T shapes emerge. In Shang oracle bone script, the T signifies both 'deity' and 'altar'. The four T shapes signify the four directions of the (mythological) map of Shang religion, the four gods of the quarters, the four winds, clouds, sacred mountains and so on. Several royal tombs of the late Shang capital Yin (near modern Anyang) show a similar groundplan: a central squarish or rectangular chamber flanked by a smaller square in each direction. The same image appears in the centre of early Chinese astronomical maps.

Middle right: Around 200 CE, the basic symbols of the Liubo 'map' had become a popular design on the back of round bronze mirrors, which were often elaborated with writing, mythical animals, gods, plants etc. The centre became a hub. These items are generally called 'TLV mirrors' due to their basic symbols. Mirrors were more than household articles.

They were among the most popular tools of Wu shamans, sorcerers and exorcists.

Could this design be the ancestor of the basic shape of so many yantras?

Bottom: The special Sheng headdress occasionally associated with Xiwangmu (drawing based on Cahill, 1993: 24).



*Catastrophes from the Skies and the Five Destructive Forces.* (2, 3) Mount Jade is just one of the many peaks associated with the goddess, who enjoyed a thriving mountain cult and is intimately associated with the Xian, the so-called 'immortals', a word that combines the ideograms of 'mountain' and 'human'. The 'Catastrophes' and the 'Five' are two constellations otherwise known as 'Grindstone' and 'Five Shards'. Here the goddess appears as a shaman's deity. Partly human and partly beast, she represents the powers of the West, of metal (gold), tigers, autumn, harvest, and death. Tigers might remind you of the Hindu Tārā, who is often worshipped as a blood-drinking, semi-nude, laughing, madwoman with tangled hair, clad in a tiger skin. The 'victory crown' is a sheng head-dress (see illustration), possibly a symbol for the brake mechanism of a loom. She is also related to the Weaver girl star. Another passage associates her with the north and with Mount Snake-shaman (12): *Queen Mother of the West leans against her raised seat. She wears her victory headdress and holds her staff. To her south, there are three green birds which gather food for Queen Mother of the West. The place where Queen Mother of the West resides lies north of the Waste of Offspringline.* Offspring is something many early Daoists were not overly keen on. As a goddess of death and immortality Xiwangmu makes and guards the golden elixir. It is her job to devour those who come and ask for it. All part of the initiation and you are welcome to it. As Laozi (33) had it: *He who dies without perishing, will have long life.* Later generations did a lot to tame this wild goddess. Where earlier generations had invoked her as a goddess of death and immortality (at plague times the population was encouraged to play the board game liubo in her honour), the post-Han Chinese transformed the spelling of her name, and with it her nature and function. Xiwangmu ceased to be the Queen of mysterious Mu (which nobody could find on the map anyway) and became the Queen Mother of the West. Today she is venerated as a mother goddess and she is not very happy about it. She had a strong revival during the T'ang dynasty (618-907), when the ruling emperors all belonged to the Li family. The family's supreme ancestor is said to be Li Erh, or Li Tang, otherwise known as Laozi (Lao Tse), and Daoism became the state religion. In this period, the cult of Xiwangmu reached unequalled popularity. The goddess was identified with the Dark Female (chapter 6 of the *Daodejing*) and became the supreme Daoist goddess. Even Chinese Buddhists felt obliged to worship her. Some of them travelled to India searching for scripture. For a mind blowing study of the goddess in the T'ang dynasty see Suzanne Cahill, 1993. After the end of the T'ang things changed radically. Daoism fell from favour and Neo-Confucianism became the supreme (and suffocating) dogma. Xiwangmu remained as an important, but rather boring, goddess with an emphasis on her 'motherly role' that had little to do with the raging shaman's goddess of earlier times. Art usually represents her as a stately matron who dwells in an all-purpose paradise and entertains guests with banquets of immortal peaches every couple of thousand years. Only poets, Daoists, or mad folk like you and me seem to remember her dramatic past. It is quite possible that Xiwangmu contributed to the cult of Tārā.

With regard to rites involving congress, Chinese history is not very helpful. After all, most Chinese scholars were Confucians, and Confucius was strictly against any sort of lewd living. His followers even proposed that husband and wife should never touch or come close to each other in daily life. Just what were they afraid of? In spite of the Confucian influence a touch of the erotic remains in the myths of Xiwangmu. One legend, quoted by Blofeld, proposes that she used to be a human woman. She collected the sexual elixir of a thousand young men and became a goddess. Now did she actually collect it or did she receive offerings? A similar story, attributed to a woman called Nü Ji, appears in the *Liexian Zhuan* (Eskildsen 1998: 16-17). Nü Ji used to brew and sell wine. One jolly day an immortal had a drink at her place and left a number of scrolls in lieu of payment. Heavy drinking, I should add, is an activity frequently favoured by Daoist immortals. The scrolls contained instructions on gaining immortality by 'nurturing the vital principle by copulation'. Nü Ji was impressed. She invited young men into a specially prepared room, gave them a drink, and enjoyed them overnight. Soon she had regained her youth. When the immortal came for a visit, he was delighted by her transformation and accepted her as a student. Likewise, the jade girls and jade boys dwelling in the gardens of Mount Kun Lun have a sexual connotation, as indeed does pretty much everything related to jade. They are frequently invoked in rites of Jia Daoism, the dangerous Dao of the Left and in rites of inner alchemy, where they become helpers and mates of the practitioners.

When we look for early evidence of sexual alchemy in China, the manuscripts of Mawangdui (written before 165 BCE) come to mind (in Cleary 1994). They include several treatises recommending retention of sperm, special diet, lots of sleep, gentle and leisurely lovemaking, and the importance of female orgasms. The last point is emphasised. Though the Mawangdui texts generally address themselves to male readers, those readers, called 'knights of heaven' were concerned that their partners had one or several good orgasms. Such ideas appear in the Huang Lao school of Daoism before the common era; you won't find much of them in later literature.

The *Liexian Zhuan* (Lives of the Immortals), attributed to Liu Xiang (77 BCE-6 CE), claims that Lao Tse (Laozi) attained immortality by nurturing his jing (vital essence, here: sperm) and by copulating without ejaculation. His teacher Rongchengong used the same methods and consumed the jing of the Dark Female (Eskildsen 1998: 16-17).

Regarding the cultivation of inner energy, Daoism and Tantra are very close. Both considered the sexual secretions as something magical and special. The actual meaning of this varies a lot. Some Daoist schools, just like some Tantric schools, believed that the sexual secretions should be conserved by all means, and that any form of orgasm or ejaculation should be avoided. This meant total abstinence for some. Others indulged in lovemaking (without orgasm) to make the body produce a maximum of secretion, which could be refined and circulated through body in rites of inner alchemy. A few became exceedingly obsessed by the matter. It may be a late development; in the Mawangdui manuscripts,



orgasm is still allowed occasionally to release overmuch pressure. Others believed that the secretions attain their full potency when they are mingled in the vulva and recycled by ingestion afterwards. These people enjoyed orgasm, and took great care to feed on the secretions, directly or diluted in water or wine. Modern ritual Daoism, I should add, frowns on sexual disciplines, and men who practice sperm retention are barred from the higher ranks.

This brings us to the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*) attributed to Laozi and dating from around the fourth or third century BCE. The standard Wang Bi version (3<sup>rd</sup> century CE) refers to the mysterious Dark Female in verse 6 (trans. Duyvendak): *'The valley spirit never dies'; this refers to the dark female. 'The gate of the dark female'; this refers to the root of heaven and earth. In fibrous ramifications it is ever present; its activity never ceases.*

The two Mawangdui versions, c. five-hundred years earlier, state: *The valley spirit does not die - this means: hidden femininity. The gate to hidden femininity - this means: root of heaven and earth. How continuous! Ever present. Untiringly active.* (after the German trans. By Möller). Likewise, verse 20 has Laozi exclaiming: *I alone am different from others because I prize feeding on 'the Mother'.* An alternative rendering is to eat of the mother. Such lines remain a mystery to most Sinologists, but they do make sense in a Tantric interpretation. Here Chinese and Tantric alchemy meet on a very similar terrain. Both of them link immortality with the cultivation and/or ingestion of sexual fluids.

They also exchanged ideas in historical times. White (1996: 62) mentions that during the T'ang dynasty, around 664 CE, a group of Chinese alchemists travelled to India. They presented a saṅkṛt version of the *Daodejing* to the king of Assam in exchange for information on elixir- and transmutational alchemy. So there were people in Assam, one of the hottest places for yoginī Tantra, who had access to Daoist lore. When they read of the Dark Female it must have brought Kālī to their minds. In Hindu iconography, Tārā, the Chinese goddess, looks exactly like Kālī.

Next, let us take a look at another Chinese tradition. The earliest form of (known) Chinese spirituality may be loosely classed as 'shamanistic'. Some scholars don't like this term at all, so perhaps we should prefer the Chinese word Wu. The Wu had a colourful history. First traces of their activity appear in Neolithic burials and in masked faces painted on pottery. But the evidence remains slim until we come to the Shang dynasty. This is China's earliest traceable 'dynasty', though, as you'll read in my next book, the term 'dynasty' is woefully wrong. Let's call it period instead. The Shang period lasted from c. 1600 to 1045 BCE, a date chosen by a number of leading historians by common consent. The Shang were a well developed, literate bronze age culture thriving around Anyang, Henan not far from where the Yellow River ran. Their culture was extremely religious, so that we find the kings, queens and aristocrats conducting a wide range of rituals which would have been the domain of priests and shamans in other countries. But they also had a group of professional ritualists, the Wu. Their activities are recorded on a number of oracle bones. The Wu sacrificed to the high god (or gods) Di. Usually small sacrifices, as Di wasn't much into offerings, such as a dog, or

maybe a dog and a pig, or a dog and a sheep. They calmed the howling tempests (the storm bird Peng), and soothed the rage of the deities of the holy Yue mountain, the Yellow River and the earth god. It's not much information, but enough to tell us that a group of people called Wu were ritual specialists. The only such ritualists apart from the diviners and the highest aristocracy. Sadly, we have no idea who belonged to the group.

Wu is also a place name, and a family or clan name, as T. T. Chang pointed out, and if we assume that professions were inherited, it might be that the Wu clan, from place Wu, supplied these early sacrificers. 'Place' Wu comes from a reading of oracle bone inscriptions, saying things like 'Yi-Chou (day 2) crack making (divination) / pour wine/ sacrifice human/ on Xin-Wei (day 8)/ at / Wu?' (Hu, 1, 4, 1). The tricky bit is the word 'at'. The Shang had a rather careless approach to grammar and 'at' could also mean 'for'. In which case it might be a sacrifice for Wu. Which lead scholars like David Keightley to propose that Wu might be a deity. A deity of the directions in fact. The original ideogram shows a cross composed of four equal-sized 'T' shapes. In oracle bone writing, the radical 'T' often appears in words relating to the divine. And when we have four T shapes extending in the four directions, we have a sacred glyph indeed. Now perhaps Wu in this reading was really a deity of the directions. The Shang had plenty of them. In fact they had so many that I wonder if they would have needed yet another one. Or it could be a shaman/ess well balanced in the centre of the magical universe. Or the Wu (shamans) were considered something like incarnate deities. Or they became divine when they were obsessed by deities. It's all possible. We just can't be sure.

And we read in Sima Qian's history that two persons called Wu Xian served under Shang regents. One governed the royal household and advised the prime minister under king Tai Wu. Another appears four kings later, under the reign of Zu Yi, and is likewise entrusted with high office. One Wu Xian used to sacrifice at mountains and streams, as the *Bamboo Annals* have it. Wu Xian became something like the ancestor of the profession and appeared in numerous later works, such as the *Chuci* (Lisao) and the *Shanhaijing*, where he resided on a holy mountain, holding a blue and a red snake in his hands.

Animals were highly important in Shang religion. Numerous people and families had animal names or animal clan-totems, and on two remarkable Shang vessels we can see Wu clinging to huge tigers. Mind you, these tigers are highly abstract. The Shang were fond of blending numerous animals. And so the tigers incorporated other beasts such as goat, bats, snakes and dragon (on the bottom of the vessel). This passion for animal totems has been a reason why many scholars perceived something like animal-spirit shamanism among the Shang.

The Shang period ended when the House of Zhou killed the last Shang king and set themselves up as regents. In their time the scholars began to record and invent proper history, and so the data on Wu increased a lot. In the venerable *Shujing* (Book of Documents), the Shang time minister Yi Yin admonishes a young regent not to have



constant drunken dancing and singing in his palace, as this would be Wu fashion. It is just one reference which connects the Wu with ecstatic activities. Wu of either sex (a large number of them was female) were famous for conjuring spirits with song, dance, drumming or by strumming lutes. And as this is not the place for a detailed account (sorry), let me just summarise that Wu excelled at several occult discipline. They sacrificed, conjured, banished, exorcised evil influences, participated at demon-dispelling processions, recalled souls from the otherworlds, prophesied and divined. Some Wu had a remarkably high reputation for spiritual attainment. A passage in the *Guoyu*, relating to King Zhao (c. 500BCE) states that in early times, the Wu were perceptive, focused and dedicated people, which allowed them to understand what was occurring far away and beyond. For this reason, the spirits descended into them. When they were women, they were called Wu while men were called xi. They regulated the rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies. The spirits were pleased and natural disasters did not occur. But at some point, the world fell into disorder and every family began to have their own amateurish Wu and xi. The people lost their respect for the spirits and vice versa, and life became chaotic. At that point, the connection between heaven and earth had to be severed, so that only skilled professionals could be in touch with the spirit world. It's a neat story, but has its weak points. Only very few sources bother to give a special term (xi) for male Wu. Before and after the *Guoyu* was composed, most authors simply said Wu, regardless of gender, and some, such as Zhuangzi and Liezi, did not specify gender at all.

Another early Wu, Wu Peng ('peng' is the word for drum) was credited for inventing the yarrow stalk oracle. The very thing that later became the Yijing (I Ching). They also got involved in politics. During the Shang, they already had a very high status, and were possibly recruited among the semi-divine aristocracy, just like the few diviners whose family connections we can reconstruct. And in the Zhou period, a group of Wu accompanied the king at several state occasions. Especially dangerous visits of condolence, when the king was required to visit the family of a deceased minister. They carried white reeds and staffs of peach wood to exorcise demons (Liji). On other occasions, there were even two groups of Wu, female and male, in the company of the regent. Ranking as officials, they had a fixed number of attendants and servants. They advised kings, but they also were involved in plots. Some served as spies for King Li of Wei (878 BCE), who employed them to oppress the population (*Guoyu*). According to the *Zhouli*, male Wu performed the court sacrifices of wintertime, the dangerous, dark yin-season, when they exorcised innumerable spirits. In spring, they invoked the gods and expelled the demons of disease. The female Wu exorcised at fixed periods of the year and made offerings with aromatic herbs. When drought prevailed, they performed dances and rituals to exorcise the drought demoness and to invoke rain. Some regents, believing that the Wu were especially beloved by heaven, used them as drought sacrifices. At such occasions, the Wu were exposed to the glaring sun, in the vague hope heaven might be compassionate with them and send rain. On other

occasions, the Wu themselves performed human sacrifices. One well known tale (Sima Qian writing about King Wen of Wei, who ruled around 400 BCE) relates how an old Wu lady, accompanied by a whole troop of young initiates, toured the countryside to select the annual bride for the river god. The rich families all offered bribes to the sorceress to avoid the honour of having their daughters chosen. For after a lot of worship and public festivity the river-bride floated away on a sinking boat. Such marriages to deities were widely celebrated, but they did not always have a fatal end. Usually brides and husbands for rivers and mountains lead a chaste life and took no human mate. For the simple reason that no-one dared to marry them. The custom seemed offensive to strict minded officials, who eventually passed a law that only the offspring of the Wu might be married to a nature deity. In consequence, most of these marriages ceased (*Books of the Late Han Dynasty* on the year 57 BCE). They did not stop entirely, however. Gan Bao, writing in the fourth century, recorded several cases where people married spirits or deities and acted much like mediums for them. Otherworldly marriages happened all through Chinese history and were by no means limited to professional Wu. From time to time the odd visionary fell in love with a spirit lady, maybe one of the many daughters of Xiwangmu, and lived a spiritual life recording the wisdom of his bride. You might call it automatic writing, if you prefer a modern expression. Quite a few mystical books were dictated by spirits. Even Xiwangmu occasionally visited earth to grant such a heavenly document to a select emperor.

Wu were also the first who experimented with herbal and mineral medicine, and indeed the early form of the character 'healer' (Wu yi) was written with the character 'Wu'. And they were the pioneers of longevity. *Lü Bu Wei*, writing shortly before the so-called first emperor united China (for a brief fifteen years of sheer terror) mentions adepts of life extension, drinkers of dew and exhalers of stale energy, sitting at the feet of Wu Xian. The Wu developed the first breathing exercises of Chinese history and fed on a wide range of unusual items to improve their health and life expectation. It killed lots of them. In all likelihood they were also influential in the development of qigong exercises and early gongfu. The *Zhuangzi*, assembled between the fourth and first century BCE, contains a passing reference to those who do breathing exercises to prolong life and imitate the motions of animals, such as bears and birds, for physical exercise. It was the dawn of the first recorded form of qigong, the 'play of the five animals'. Much earlier, there used to be a class of Wu exorcists with the grand title Rescuer of the Country who participated at demon expelling processions and funerals. They wore four-eyed masks, bear skins, and wielded spear and shield. And like so many animal-related shamans world wide, we might assume they imitated the motions of their helping animals.

The Wu were a varied lot, ranging from highly educated advisors of the highest regents to mad inspired mediums living in the outskirts of the cities. And with the advent of Confucianism they began to encounter massive opposition. Kongzi (Confucius) himself avoided to comment on religious matters. His aim was the reform of society by moral behaviour,



strict rules of behaviour and a generous amount of law and order. Ecstatic rituals or drunken singing and dancing were not his idea of proper conduct. His followers went beyond this, and deliberately sought to destroy what they considered superstition. Instead, they promoted serene and calm sacrificial rites which upheld the due order and hierarchy of society. People were to worship the ancestors, not to become obsessed with them. In consequence, whenever they influenced a king, that court would become a bad place for the Wu. But the descendant of the Wu went a lot further than this. King Wudi of the Han dynasty, himself passionately interested in magic, spells, divination and longevity recipes, became highly paranoid in old age. Several times during his reign he had the court purged of wugu sorcery. The first of these witchhunts (130 BCE) is badly documented, while the second (91 BCE) got the full attention of grand historian Sima Qian, who narrowly escaped with his life. When a human figure was allegedly discovered buried in the innermost chambers of the palace, a number of high ranking aristocrats were sentenced to death and armed troops slaughtered suspicious folk among the citizens. Finally, the crown prince himself, under threat of execution, sent his troops against the king's army. They fought it out in hand-to-hand combat, right within the capital. The fighting took five days and ended with several ten thousand people dead. It was not the only such incident. Another Wu-hunt happened in 89 BCE, when judges, equipped with 12000 armed followers were sent to arrest any person suspected of Wu sorcery or sedition. And when King Wu was finally dead, one of his five sons employed a talented Wu lady who performed sorcery on the Wushan (Wu-mountain) to help him win the throne. When his plan was discovered, he had her and her attendants poisoned and committed suicide with his favourite concubines. The emperor approved of the suicide and granted a pardon to his eight sons, who were merely reduced to the rank of commoners. (Books of the Early Han Dynasty).

Wu were frequently blamed for supporting ambitious aristocrats with gu sorcery or dangerous prophecies, and a good many came to a painful end. Gu sorcery, by the way, is one of the more obscure arts associated with the Wu. In one version, which remained popular until the end of the Qing dynasty in the twentieth century, a vessel is used as the home of a spirit. A number of venomous animals, such as toads, snakes, centipedes and scorpions are thrown onto the pot, which is carefully sealed. In the narrow, dark enclosure they fight it out with each other. The surviving animal becomes a spirit who has acquired all the lethal powers of its companions. It can be sent out to kill people and steal their wealth. Another form of gu sorcery involves making human images of wood or cloth for spell casting. Usually such figures were buried at prominent places or near public roads. A third type of sorcery involved the killing of a person by charms, poison or violence. Then the soul was attracted, caught and bound and became a slave of the sorcerer. Such forms of magic were heavily punished. They were generally only taught to close family members. And they were by no means only practised by the Wu.

But the Wu were not only opposed by no-funny-business Confucians and paranoid kings. They also lost prestige when a new class of sorcerers, the fang shi or method masters, occupied their position at court. These spell casters used sigils and writing for much of their art, and were usually skilled diviners, historians and scholars. In short, they were better behaved than ecstatic spirit mediums and exorcists. And finally, the Daoist movement, getting on the way around the third century BCE, began to intrude on the occupation of the Wu. The early Daoists made use of a wide range of Wu techniques. They experimented with weird drugs, plants and minerals in their quest for longevity. Yijing divination passed from the Wu into Daoist control, and many of the trances that were usually Wu sorcery, such as spirit journeys to the other worlds, became typical Daoist activities. The very mountains, so popular for Wu ritual, now came to house Daoist hermits fleeing uncaring society. Where in earlier ages, the Wu had been flying up and down Mount Kunlun, it now became the skill of highly trained Daoists to ascend to heaven and come back with remarkable tales. In short, most of the Wu found their functions distinctly reduced. Finally, healing became the job of professional physicians. The Wu remained at the fringes, performing as exorcists and spirit mediums, and suffered the scorn of all who profited from the Wu tradition. Sometimes they made a brief comeback, when a gifted Wu performed for a warlord or when a Hunnish or Mongol regent usurped the throne, and introduced shamanic Wu from his homeland, but on the whole, they never regained their former rank. And how could they, what with Confucian scholars writing the history books. But no matter how bad things became, they never disappeared either. To this day there are a handful of Wu performing as spirit mediums for poor people in Taiwan. And there are shamans of all sorts among the minorities of Yunnan, Guangxi and Sichuan, many of whom believe that their clans originate from sacred animals, plants, sacred locations or even objects. A few shamanic traditions survive in China's rural Wild West, among the Uighurs, Tartars, Turks and the descendants of the Mongols. A few elderly shamans, many of them female, make a living in the Amur region between China and Siberia. They still recall what tiger spirits are all about, and believe that to initiate a healing, a patient should make the shaman laugh. And the Wu's close relations in Japan (the miko) and Korea (the mudang) also manage to make a living. They are by no means popular, and often suffer from anti-superstition campaigns and political oppression, but when it comes to placating an angry spirit or removing bad luck from a sufferer, they do their job much as they ever have. When medicine and psychotherapy fail, the Wu are often successful.

As you can see from this much simplified account, some Wu rites have similarities to Tantric activities. For a start, all through history a large number of Wu were and are women. It must have been one of those surprises for any travelling yogi or Buddhist from India. That women can be spiritually competent had largely been forgotten by Indian philosophers. Another common element is excited and even ecstatic ritual, involving a wide range of offerings, drinking, dancing,



gesture and music. Singing, music and dancing appear in some Tantras as part of the solitary morning worship (see KCT. 2, 13). It's excellent magic. Play some music and change your feelings. And as some of the more refined Wu used string instruments, so did their Tantric colleagues in India. Indeed the Indian lutes were often identified with the human body, the frets corresponding to the power zones. It works much like suggestion, but it doesn't rely on words.

Then there is alchemy, be it by ingesting drugs, plants and minerals or inner alchemy making use of breathing, posture, visualisation, animal imitation and so on. Some early Daoists made much of ingesting sexual fluids (jing). Was it a Daoist innovation or an earlier Wu tradition? Journeys to the otherworlds are also worth considering. Then there are sacred spaces within body, and the trances of introversion. You find them popular in early meditative Daoism and alchemy. Again, were they an inheritance from the much derided Wu? What about talisman drawing and weird sigils? We will never know for sure. And finally, there is a special relationship to the spirits and deities. Remember how people married gods?

Now let me introduce you to the magnificent *Nine Songs* (see *Altchinesische Hymnen* trans. Weber-Schäfer 1967, *The Songs of the South* trans. Hawkes 1985, *Teachings of the Tao* trans. Wong 1997) These songs are among the earliest evidence of Wu shamanism. Regretfully we do not have their original text as it was sung during invocations, but an edited and paraphrased version. They were sung by female Wu when the deity was male and by male Wu for goddesses. Not that it is easy to tell the difference. With regard to several of those gods the gender is not altogether clear. Generally each song consist of two parts. In effect, the first part of each song consists of the invocation. Then follows a pause during which the ritualist celebrated union with the deity, whatever that may mean. Each song ends with a lamentation for the deity who came so briefly, united with the Wu, and departed to its own realm. What makes these early songs unique is not only the brilliant poetic style. The Wu shamans approached their deities as lovers. The songs express longing, love, erotic symbolism, and the sadness that comes when one's beloved has departed. In a sense, the shamanesses and shamans of ancient China were spouses of their deities. You can find a similar mood in several early Tantras. Lovemaking with a partner who manifests a deity (or the Paraśakti) is not very far from this attitude.

Another interesting ritual of the period is mentioned briefly by Marcel Granet (1963: 56-57). Again we encounter a group of high ranking women who seem to be aristocrats, shamans, or both. In this ritual the assembly was divided into two groups. One group consisted of witnesses and musicians who crowded into a small, closed room with thin walls and played on drums and flutes. The other group consisted solely of women who were nude, wore perfume, and danced in a circle. As they danced they passed a flower to each other. The flower was the moving focus of the rite. It was used to attract the soul of a deceased human, spirit, or deity, to gain magical power or life-extension. To the Chinese, a human soul is not far from a god or spirit. Most Chinese gods

began as human beings and became deified after death. Or they began as gods, were turned into mythical ancestors, and then became deified again! Anyway, the flower moved from woman to woman. Once the soul arrived it was trapped by the blossom. The woman holding the flower began to look insane (obsession?), passed the flower to the next in line, and collapsed (tranced off). The rite was accompanied by a 'ghostwind' and the terrifying voices of the otherworldly ones.

So far, we have encountered alchemy, sexual rejuvenation, dark and red goddesses, obsession, ecstatic rites, union with deities, heavy drinking, and an assembly of nude shamanesses in Chinese ritual. Others points where Chinese traditions share close similarities with Tantra, including the Heart, the Rain of Elixir, and the cakras will be discussed in other chapters. While I would not claim that Mahācīna is simply a term for elder Wu shamanism or early Daoism, it may well be that these systems contributed to the concept.



## 5: Masks of the Divine

### The Guru Game

*The Guru is oneself. The Siddha is oneself. The pupil is oneself. Śiva is oneself. Those fettered by ignorance know not of this, whilst he who does know is already free.*

(KJN, 11, 26, trans. Mike Magee)

First, last, and in between, the aim of many Indian religions is union with Brahman. As Brahman is formless, undivided, total consciousness beyond all names and definitions, it cannot be perceived directly. Brahman can be sensed in all the forms it sheds, all the masks it wears, all the gods, spirits, humans and beings and shapes it casts off in its manifestation. To attain the consciousness, union with and ultimate merging in Brahman, a variety of forms are employed. Here you encounter the gurus. The primary guru of each practitioner is her or his iṣṭadevatā (personal deity). For Śaivas, the personal deity is some form of Śiva, and Śiva is the supreme guru. To Vaiṣṇavas, Viṣṇu or, more often, Viṣṇu's incarnation as Kṛṣṇa is the supreme guru. The Śāktas encounter the supreme guru as a Devī (goddess) of their choice, or as several. Then there are the followers of Gaṇeśa and a few who worship the sun. Other traditions add tribal deities, family deities, deities of professions, classes, or even the deity of the (incarnate) guru to this list. Even ancestors can be venerated as deities, or as representatives of deities. Each of these deities can be the supreme deity to its worshippers, the Gate to Brahman, and whoever it may be to you, it is your primary guru.

If you acknowledge your deity as your guru, you stand a good chance of learning much that is hidden to your everyday human personality. As few are able to speak with the gods from the start we have to bridge a gap and human teachers may be convenient. The human guru is considered an incarnation of the divine guru. This is the ideal state: you have a student hungry to learn and an experienced teacher who has "been there and done it". If the two are well attuned, willing to learn, and open to all sorts of feedback, you get the ideal teaching situation. The guru is not only an enlightened being, to the student (śiṣya) s/he is the deity itself.

Most Indian traditions place great emphasis on the role of the guru. This is especially the case in the Tantras, where you can find lengthy hymns that praise the guru and emphasize the importance of total submission to the guru's instructions. Again and again you can read that the guru is the jewel of wisdom, the incarnate deity, and the one and

only solution to the countless problems of the aspiring sādḥaka. The guru initiates, the guru teaches, the guru enlightens, and in order to enjoy these wonderful feats the pupil has to offer total and absolute submission. Theoretically, the student bows to the guru, washes the guru, houses the guru, feeds the guru, and clothes the guru. The slightest whim of the guru is a divine command for the pupil. To break the ego of the student, a good many gurus demand servitude of the hardest sort, including austerities, penance, and doing a lot of dirty work. This topic is elaborated to some length in several Tantras. *Kulārṇava Tantra* devotes several (slightly boring) chapters to the interplay of guru and śiṣya. It demands so much sanctity from the aspiring śiṣya that I wonder why a guru is needed at all. Then again, it goes to the topic 'what can be expected from a true guru' and the requirements are just as superlative. The process does not demand faith. Instead, the śiṣya and guru are supposed to test each other. Again and again the śiṣya is warned of false gurus, of pretenders and charlatans, and is asked to discriminate cautiously between the fake and the living reality. This is something of a joke, for if you can recognize the real thing you are hardly a student any more. A guru who is truly inspired can appear crazy, childish, or demonic to the uninitiated. Who says that divine madness and enlightenment have to conform to conservative middle-class notions of ethical behaviour? So let me ask a difficult question. By what sign can you tell the presence of true holiness? Pause now and think about this before you go on. Write it down in your diary and read it again after a few years, so you know how far you have come.

If you wish to explore Tantra, the scriptures say that you need a guru. Such scriptures were generally written by gurus, many of whom had a strong interest in getting food, shelter, clothes, and twenty-four-hours of free room-service. As it turns out, not all acknowledged saints had a guru. Some simply learned from fellow ascetics, some naturally developed states of intense awareness, and some only started to learn properly once they had left the guru and retired into the wilderness. Others, like Abhinavagupta, learned from a wide range of gurus and sought initiation into anything. A guru may be well and good, but sometimes the incarnate teacher gets in the way of the real guru within.

Do you need a human guru? The answer to this one depends on what you wish to learn. If you wish to master the more complicated forms of classical ritual, or if your will drives you to explore the more athletic forms of yoga, a guru is essential. Classical ritual involves a good many deeds, gestures, moods, and atmospheres, which written texts cannot communicate. If you have no guru, you may practice classical rituals, but they will be very much of your own interpretation. This is something abhorred by traditionalists, while I for one encourage it. It's much more efficient to suit a tradition to a practitioner than to force a practitioner to conform with a tradition. When you invest an old ritual with new meaning, new passion, and new inspiration, it may well turn out to work a lot better than any dull routine sanctified by tradition. Not for the world at large but for specifically you. With yoga things are less simple. While Haṭha yoga in general should be a gentle process of growth and



development, there have been an amazing number of traditions that attempted to force results. Not all ancient forms of yoga are actually good for your health. Prolonged staring into the sun may seem spiritual, but it will certainly destroy eyesight eventually. Pressing the neck's arteries to reduce the oxygen supply won't make your brain very happy. Many advanced breathing exercise are only suitable for a fully trained and absolutely healthy yogi under the observation of an experienced teacher with a good knowledge of medicine. Some systems of yoga train the body/mind complex for decades to make it a fit vehicle of the divine current. If you attempted to use their techniques without a rigorous training, your body would get hurt.

This, however, does not mean that you cannot progress without a guru. Lots of exercises can be learned from books and even more can be discovered by learning from yourself, the gods, the spirits, your partner, your friends, and whoever else participates in your magical multiverse. An old adage says that when the student is ready, the guru appears. This saying is absolutely true, even if you live in the slums of Calcutta, Glasgow, or Washington DC, provided you extend the term guru to its full meaning.

## **The Primal Guru**

Who was your first Guru? And who was the guru before that? Who taught the first lessons? Just after you came out of your mother's womb somebody gave you a slap. It triggered a reflex and you began to breathe. Your breath guru did the job well and so you are alive to read this book. You don't even have to think about breathing, it happens naturally. Next someone else held you. It felt strange enough and then a huge nipple appeared. This triggered another reflex, and you began to suck. Your first nourishment was white and fluid, and if you were lucky it came from your feeding guru, your mother, and not from a bottle. As the mother is usually the first guru, she is called the *ādyāguru*, the primordial teacher. Note that the very first lessons were taught by triggering reflexes. You learned something radically new by awaking a potential skill that had always been there. These genetic programs are another *ādyāguru*: the coded wisdom of all ancestral flesh, the memories of past bodies, the serpentine wisdom spiraling in each cell.

They made you twist around, made you move your limbs, made you wriggle fingers, and explore muscles. The first thing you learned was yourself. You did not know that the hands were your hands. When you looked, they were amazing things with many wriggly ends that somehow moved when you did something within yourself. You put them into your mouth and, wow! You felt both ends of the sensation. The baby has to learn its own body, and body is guru, who teaches the possibilities of motion and rest, of pleasure and pain. Well you moved around for a bit and twisted this way and that and somehow you rolled over. This was great; all of a sudden the world looked totally different. How had you done this? Welcome to another guru for life: gravity is beginning its

lessons. You learn to wriggle like a maggot, to crawl on all fours (usually backwards for a start, another weird surprise), and when you rise up, gravity shows you the way down again. It's a tough game learning how to pull yourself up, how to stand holding on to things, and how to take the first steps. Here you were pretty much alone. Parents may lend a helpful hand on occasion, but most of the work in learning to get along with gravity is something you did on your own. Whatever you did, you got instant feedback from the gravity guru. You fell on your bum and you got up again. You learned, you learned, and you learned anew. The gravity guru was not always kind to you, as you learned soon enough, but it could also provide a lot of fun. Do you remember the joy of being tossed in the air and caught again? This is playing with gravity, it made you squeak with delight. At this time you had already learned that there were lots of incarnate gurus around. Practically everybody in your world was busy with incomprehensible things. This didn't surprise you much, for when you were really young the entire world was an amazing and often overwhelming multi-sensual experience. Luckily, you had a guru within yourself who helped you sort it out: this was the guru of interest. This is one of the tricky gurus who likes to stay in the background. Other gurus may teach this and that, but without the guru of interest, they are simply background noise. The guru of interest made a pact with the guru of pleasure, then the two set out through the jungle of experience, the swamp of the unknown, and the mountains of great events. On the way they met the guru of unpleasantness, who is in charge of teaching the nastier parts of reality, and the guru called memory who likes to predict stuff by looking at things that may have happened. His friend, the guru of imagination joined the fun, and just look at what became of you!

Or let me mention some other gurus who were vital to you. Can you remember the trees, stones, cliffs and buildings who were your gurus of climbing? The animal gurus who taught you how to deal with non-human consciousness? Children like to play with animals, some of them love to pretend being animals, the same goes for a good many shamans and sorcerers, and all of them get a great kick plus un-human abilities and wisdom from the experience. So you had gurus wherever you went. Inside and outside. Most of them before you even went to school. It was your will to learn that allowed them to do their job.

Before we go on, here is a little meditation to remind you of your evolution.

Close your eyes now and think of all the persons, animals, natural forces, spirits, deities, artists, authors, events, and so on. who were guru to you. Think of those from whom you learned valuable skills, and give your thanks to them.

Next, think of all the people and entities from whom you learned what to avoid. An idiot can be an excellent teacher if you wish to avoid that particular idiocy. You can learn a lot from errors, and if you are wise you leave committing the worse errors to other people, and simply learn from them what to avoid. Think of these teachers, and give your thanks to them.



Then think of those gurus who showed both characteristics: you learned some fantastic stuff from them, but you also drew a line and refrained from copying their shortcomings. How many can you think of? Give your thanks to them.

Now reverse the game. Think of those for whom you were or are a guru, whether you knew this or not. Recall what has been useful to others and thank them and yourself for having participated in this learning.

Then think of all the errors you made, and how you can help others to avoid them.

Last, think of what others are learning from you and what you can learn from their learning. What are you missing? What could be better? And what should you be glad and happy about?

You can do these exercises as a discipline and an offering right up there in your mind. You can also make it more impressive and touching by making a ritual of thanksgiving out of it. When you have meditated on the various gurus from whom you profited, and all those who profited from you, bring the whole thought structure into ritual form.

## Guru Pūjā

Here are a few ideas on how you can proceed. Feel free to improve on them as you will and enjoy, this is your life, your will, your magick, and your self expressing themselves.

You could close your doors and windows for a start, turn off the light and sit in the dark for a while, breathing deeply but gently. Go easy and aim for smooth breath, if you get dizzy or find your head throbbing you are overdoing it. Let silence reign, then ring a bell or clap your hands, light a candle and some incense, and offer these to your gurus and all other players in the learning game. Then name the gurus who have influenced you most and thank them in a friendly voice. Do this audibly, not only in the imagination; some things have to happen on the physical plane. You could start by thanking the spiritual gurus, such as the spirits and deities of your reality cluster. Then thank the human gurus, all the persons in the wonderful game of life from whom you learned, for good or ill, what was beneficial for you. This can turn out to be a formidably long list, so it might be a good idea to give detailed thanks to the persons from whom you learned most, and to mention the others only briefly. Last thank the animal and plant gurus, the places of power, and finally the abstract gurus, such as the sun, moon, stars, gravity, time, weather. When you are well prepared, a lot will come to mind, and you may find yourself busy for an hour or more. Good! The primary offering is emotion; put feeling into your words, speak from the heart, and fully sense what you are talking about. It does not have to be well-worded or precise, simply open your mind and heart, and unseal your mouth. If you allow your words to speed up you may well become excited and ecstatic. Don't worry if you repeat yourself or if things don't seem poetic enough; the important thing is deeply felt love and passion. You are

giving your thanks for a lifetime of support. You are doing well when you are getting carried away. This is an ecstatic feast, go ahead and enjoy.

As to the words, give attention to the tenses: past, present, and future. Give thanks for what you learned, what you are learning, and what you will learn. This is an ongoing process, if you remember only past experience, you may forget the present and future. You can offer passionate words, you can offer sheer honesty, you can offer song and dance and music. On the physical plane, you can offer good food and drink to the gurus and add whatever you feel is fitting. Dare to be creative! You have lots of unique gurus and I hope you are a unique guru yourself. If you invoke and thank your gurus in three groups (gods, humans, nature) you might give three offerings, one for each group. No, I won't burden you with classical formalities here. You will know what works when you find out what turns you on. Thank those from whom you learned and learn, thank those who learn from you, and thank all for participating in the learning game. This is intelligence multiplying with intelligence. Finally, affirm that the world is guru to you as you are guru to the world. Give your thanks to all, give your thanks to yourself. Then confirm your unity with the gurus of the universe, eat the offerings and drink the blessed fluid. Last, end the rite, extinguish the flame, pour the excess energies out of your body into the earth, and sit in silence and darkness for a while before you get up and enjoy life.

## **Learning Together**

In the Indian traditions, much has been done to give firm rules for the conduct of guru and student. Formality, as you will remember, was already a major obsession in Vedic times and for many Indian traditions it still is. When we see the communion of guru and pupil as a divine game, or as a very rigid ritual of interaction, several behavior forms become apparent. The student is supposed to get various powers, skills, and ultimately enlightenment and liberation, but for this treasure a price has to be paid. S/he has to give up ego and make servitude to the guru, as the incarnate deity or divine principle, the central act of worship. Now, if the guru is really a fully enlightened being, this may work. A good guru teaches, but the teaching may have unusual forms. Discourse and answering questions are part of this program, but they are certainly not the most important elements. Words often veil more than they disclose. An answer may disclose an intellectual truth, but this is only a very limited experience. If you want the full experience, you have to go beyond the simple answer and use your own brain. Just look at yourself! Here you are reading this book! How fast are you? Are you reading faster than you think? Have you thought about the things you want to learn, and thought deeply? Do you think about a topic or do you want me to do the thinking for you? Words are miles away from direct experience. Too many people know the words and understand them rationally. They think they understand what they can define, explain, and prattle about. All of this is a diversion from true knowledge. You can study Kālī, you



can speak about Kālī, you can define the forms of Kālī, but when you meet Kālī, you will know the difference.

Sometimes a guru can be a diversion from thinking and experiencing for oneself. When information becomes too easily attainable, people consume more and contemplate less. So how can you think, contemplate, and understand more deeply?

Give yourself time.

Pause frequently.

Think NOW.

Go for long and silent walks.

Think and think again before you ask or look things up in a book.

Ask inward before you ask outward.

Invoke and assemble a specific thought-cluster, then open your mind and experience.

Assume unusual points-of-view.

Connect the unexpected.

Cultivate many interpretations.

Be insider, outsider, and in-between.

Trust jackals and hyenas to have the last laugh.

## Hymn:

**Hrīm, Śrīm, Krīm.** And as you do this and enjoy your Tantric awareness meditation of today you can sense that you have always known wake up a lot more than you ever knew before you learned that it has always been there and what effects it has on you and your reality to understand that living it is the full knowledge of yourself which is coming from you for you as you advance and realize it's here and now body mind spirit secretes secrets to enjoy when you see what is without you are looking through the eyes of within, who knows and you can turn to. Welcome back home and there's knowbody there. Thank you. **Svāhā.**

## Webs of Delusion

Sadly, human gurus tend to bring out not only the best but also the worst parts of a person. Addiction to words instead of experience is one such pitfall. Then there is lack of initiative. When the guru is traditionally minded, or stuck in the formalities of Vedic ritual, the best students will turn out to be the least original ones. It's dangerous to follow a person who does your thinking for you. Another danger is copying the guru too closely. When the student looks like a copy of the guru, something went wrong. People can't help being unique. We all grow up differently, have distinct experiences, and by the time we are old enough to consider spiritual evolution, we do not need spiritual practice in general but

specifically the practice that suits our talents and hang-ups. So a good guru seeks to develop the connection between the student and the divine, and when a student begins to behave exactly like the guru, does everybody a favour by tactics of chaos and confusion. Seemingly mad behaviour has its place here, weird humour and spontaneous disruption of belief patterns. Luckily this happens pretty naturally, as no real guru can be expected to accord with the silly views that students have regarding holiness.

It is not only the student, however, who is in danger of delusion. Being the guru is just as dangerous a trap. If you are the person who is supposed to be the ultimate authority, you may find yourself in the trap labelled 'perfection'. Not even your own perfection but the idea of perfection that other people entertain. When one plays the guru game round the clock one may get totally out of touch with the divine game of the world. After all, it's an easy job to play 'holy, holy' when everyone around you plays the same game and supports your belief in yourself. The true test and the real guru for all spiritual enclaves is the dreaded outside world. A guru is supposed to be free from bondage, but when s/he has to think, act, and decide for a student, it's goodbye to freedom for all concerned. Worst of all, the guru may begin to entertain the delusion that s/he really knows best. When you know best you are not learning any more. This has happened to many people in guru functions, including therapists, priests, and scholars. If you get paid for being right you may forget how to be wrong. So the guru has to break out of the trap of the guru profession. Some gurus embrace mad behaviour for this purpose. Others, like Bengal's mad saint Rāmakṛṣṇa, refuse to be called guru or father. In Rāmakṛṣṇa's view there are thousands of gurus, but the only real one, and the only one he ever had, is Sat, Chit, Ānanda (Being, Consciousness, and Bliss). Think about it. A good guru learns at least as much from the student as the student from the guru. A good guru does not claim saintliness, all-knowledge, or perfection, and thereby remains in contact with the divine. The whole thing reaches its summit when the student decides to devote all to spiritual development, and becomes a sannyāsin or sannyāsinī. This used to be an extremely solemn and important ritual (see the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*). A sannyāsin gives up everything, including family ties, religious belief, faith in gods, ownership of property, relation to the guru, and station in society, and conducts her or his own funeral rites, thereby breaking all social bonds forever. During the ritual, the guru reverses the roles and worships the sannyāsin as guru. After this rite, there is no student and no guru any more.

The same sort of thing can happen with the divine guru. One of the countless legends in the *Devī Bhāgavatam* describes how Manasā worshipped Kṛṣṇa with such fervour that Kṛṣṇa in turn worshipped her. She became a serpent goddess in the process.

Nowadays it is mightily hard to find good gurus of the more interesting Tantric currents. This even goes for India, where devotees are persecuted by militant atheists, narrow-minded traditionalists, totally unspiritual folk, and, worst of the lot, fluffy-minded New-Age tourists. A



lot of lineages have become extinct over the last three centuries. You can make up for it by getting really close to your iṣṭadevatā / s. And you can decide that learning never stops and that everyone can be a guru for everybody else.

Dhyāna:

Every person whom you meet is better than you at something.

Everybody you meet can learn something from you.

Pause now to think of various friends, acquaintances, relations, and even totally fictional characters. All of them are good at something. This could be something you admire. It could be something you would like to learn from them. Or it could be something that you would much rather avoid. Some people are perfectly good at perfectly horrid things. This is also an achievement and ought to be appreciated. All behaviour, when well done, is an achievement if not a work of art. Study them really well so that you can learn their strengths and avoid their errors. How precisely do they do their thing? What do they have to think, believe, and imagine in order to do it? What skills go into the process? What do they do, in body and mind, and in what order? Imagine a situation where those horrible things might be really useful. Can you imagine how perfectly horrid behaviour may be applied usefully? Change the setting of the behaviour. Or keep the setting and change the behaviour. Learn from those who are good at things. Think of at least twenty persons and work out what they are really good at. Make a list and write it down if you like. Meet them, ask them, find out HOW it's done. And how can you use it?

Next, reverse roles and think of the same people. What skills do you have which might be of use to them? Think deeply. Learning is everywhere.

## Divine Actors

What is there beyond the game of guru and śiṣya? Here we leave the realm of strict learning relationships and come to the wider world of anything-can-happen. Who are you in this world, what parts do you play in the līlā, what is the motion, direction, and purpose of your life?

One of the transformations that come up in any sort of magick, Tantra, or shamanism is the development of a magickal personality, or a divine one, if you like. The word 'person' literally means 'mask'. The personality of the aspirant is always artificial. All personalities are, all persona you have been, in this and other lifetimes, are convenient masks assumed to allow you to do your thing. When you grow up, a name is attached to you, a family, a location, a time, and a lot of other matters that shape your early childhood. You grow into a mask, a stage, a play, and though there are minor changes possible, you have to assume these forms before you can decide what you really are and what you want to do with it. Thus, you developed childhood personalities. You developed adolescent personalities, you developed personalities that seemed more

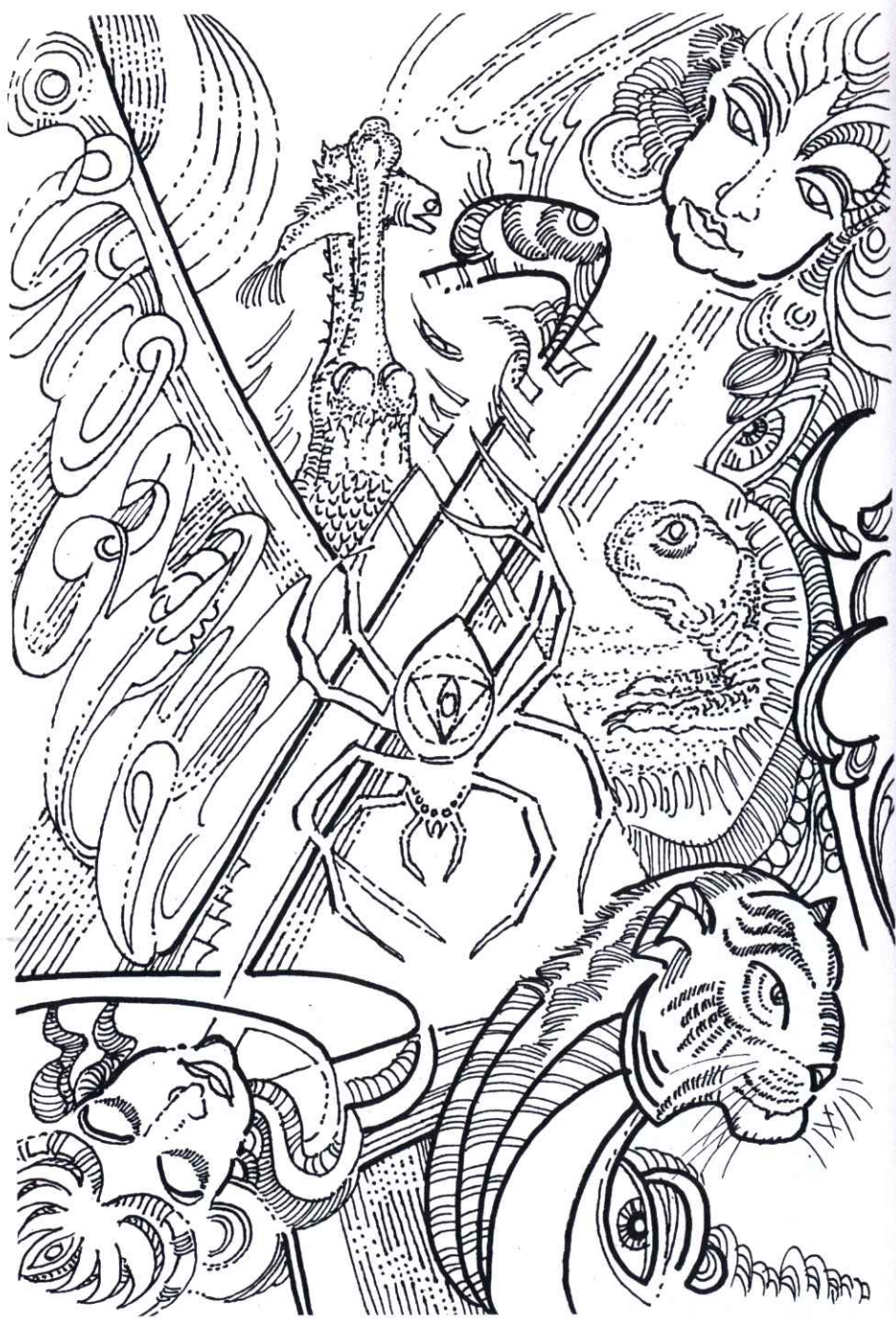


Figure 26 - From womb to womb like spiders.



adult and mature to you (in your innocence), and later in life you changed them again. When you were young, you probably sought to be older, riper, wiser; when you are getting old you may be busy becoming younger again. Some folks get so serious minded in the 'adult world' that they need to have children, or to get drunk, to rediscover spontaneity and playing. In most societies, the first things you learn are the ones relating to your survival. Next come the rules that define good behaviour, socially acceptable norms, and though these norms differ from culture to culture, there are always some norms, no matter where you grow up. This is the worst part of reincarnation: you have to learn a lot of rubbish before you become old enough to question whether it is worth it.

In this sense, growing up equals getting really involved in the world of appearances (some call this bondage). You have to get attached to the world to learn to handle it. And you have to get out of it at some point if you wish to discover your primordial self-nature and live the life that is natural for you. In between these two states comes the dream of religion and spiritual refinement. If people have any brains at all, at some point they become dissatisfied with consensual reality. This happens easier to minorities, to outcasts, to folks who are not in the sugar coated top level of the American dream. It is often those who are socially unacceptable who resign first from the usual rat-race of ambition and achievement, and search for other spaces to enjoy. So they get into student roles, and with a bit of luck they also find teachers, within and outside of themselves. Yet life is more than being in a teacher-student relationship. The student who is not having lessons is just a human being. The guru who has no student is just a practitioner. Both of them coexist only in company. So what happens when they get along on their own? More precisely, what happens to YOU as you travel through life? How do you achieve the consciousness you will, how do you manifest your experience in word and deed and action? What do you do when you are neither beginner nor expert, neither teacher nor student, neither innocent nor experienced?

When you discard the role definitions of spiritual maturity, you come to something very simple. And you begin to develop your own expression of living a whole life, a magickal life, a life that is precisely what you will to live. You require a personality to make this easy.

Here we have to get rid of a lot of rubbish. What does holiness look like (to you)? How can you recognize divine awareness when it appears in human form? What will you be like when you come to yourself?

Most people in the industrial world cherish a dream of holiness that has very little to do with the real thing. Generally, the dream tends to take two forms. One of them is the glamour of the silent, motionless adept who sits in serene meditation. This person is usually imagined self-sufficient, often a recluse, who moves like a shadow through the world of illusions without being part of it. If that person speaks, it is slowly, and each word drips enormous importance. If this person walks, it is lightly and with dignity. If this person encounters others, it radiates love and

understanding. Alone or in company, our perfect adept is always serene, joyous, blissful, competent, wise, and free of any problems or confusion. Such a dream has its attractions. Many desperate seekers look for the outward manifestations of this sort of holiness and fall for any actor good enough to mime them. This has always been a nuisance, nowadays it is a whole industry. Many entertain the opinion that the perfect saint is permanently blissful, dignified, slow, understanding, tolerant, radiating a general I-love-anything spirituality, no matter whether in ritual or everyday life. In short, this wondrous creature is permanently stuck. If you have to be in a single consciousness at all times and in all places, this can only be done by getting rid of a lot of other states. If you wish to be an example, you need those who need such examples. In short, the saint depends on the not-so-saintly to exist at all.

The other form of holiness that sells well on the spiritual market is the extroverted shaman figure. Here we have dancing, singing, chanting, drumming, animal imitations, wild playacting, dramatic gestures, and a lot of fancy fetishes, symbols, talismans, and knickknacks. You find people playing at being 'spiritual warriors' who have never considered what war is all about.

Popular opinion in the Western world generally attributes serene, silent stillness to Oriental saints while Native Americans and African fetish priests are the favourites for extroverted, loud, and passionate spirituality. So are we to imagine the practitioners of yoga and Tantra as blissful, introverted, withdrawn recluses? Even a brief look at elder literature shows that the Indians themselves rarely entertained such beliefs. The *Mahābhārata* is full of episodes describing enclaves of saintly seers and yogīs. These are usually set in paradise landscapes where sacred waters flow, enchanted birds sing, and age-old trees offer shelter from the elements. Gentle breezes waft through lush growth, the scent of a thousand blossoms bedazzles the mind, animals play innocently in the sunlight glades, and all nature is generous, beautiful, and divine. Unlike the setting, the saints themselves are rarely beautiful or enchanting. Many of them are given to amazing fits of rage and anger. They are proud, arrogant, and take offence at the least provocation. True, in principle the yogī is supposed to be above such sentiments. However, why are the most powerful saints, whose power is feared by highest gods, so given to aggression, pettiness, and a total lack of tolerance? Why is it that Indra, fearing that a given saint may acquire world control, has to ask a heavenly Apsaras to seduce and distract? And why are even the Apsaras mistreated and abused with depressing regularity? Similar events occur in many venerable works of Indian literature. A lot of top-notch saints of the Purāṇas may be admired for their discipline, their austerities, and their uncompromising efforts. Still they remain an unfriendly bunch you wouldn't like to spend an hour with. So we arrive at the first insight regarding human saintliness: it does not mean being nice to everyone.



## Female Saints

Let's take a closer look at a few saints. Some of the most famous saints of Indian lore were historical persons, and though their histories are cluttered with legends of all sorts, you may find it useful to see a few examples of what you can expect from the thoroughly inspired. Usually people discuss male saints. You find loads and loads of them in Hindu literature. Here's something different. Here are a few women who became saints, one way or another, and profoundly influenced Indian belief.

**Kāraikkāl Ammai** was of Tamil origin. She lived in the sixth century and is one of the earliest known practitioners of bhakti (devotional love). Unlike most devotees of bhakti, Kāraikkāl came from a Śaivite background. In her time the loving dedication of bhakti was not yet expressed in erotic terms. Devotees assumed filial roles to the deities of their choice. Kāraikkāl must have shown signs of her spiritual powers early on. Freshly married, she was abandoned by her husband, who was scared of her spiritual powers. He moved away, married elsewhere, and named his first child, a daughter, after her. Kāraikkāl was not too upset about the episode. She retired to the nearest forest and became an ascetic. Living in isolation she worshipped Śiva and asked two gifts from him. The first was to become as ugly as a ghost, thus ensuring that she could remain alone and unmolested. It sounds like a woman who is scared of bandits, rapists, and the like. But Kāraikkāl made it a magical personality. She literally became the ghost of her former self. This is more than appearance, it is the complete identification with one who has lived, died, and become a member of the spiritual world. The other boon was to witness the legendary dance contest of Śiva and Kālī. When the great event happened, Kāraikkāl participated as her own ghost amongst Kālī's retinue. She herself became part of the mind-blowing savagery when hordes of skeletons, demons, ghosts, seizers, and body-snatchers, accompanying the deities entered the most ferocious dance contests of all times. Her vision survived. She saw Kālī defeated by Śiva's supreme dancing skills (he could stand on one leg and lift the other to the sky while Kālī allegedly could not) and wrote two famed poems on the event which survive to this day. In art, Kāraikkāl is usually shown as a nude, emaciated woman, skinny, with thin, hanging breasts, and enormously tangled hair. As Sanjukta Gupta (in Leslie, 1992: 196) points out, as she adored Śiva, she may have copied the appearance of Śiva's mate Kālī. However, her poems describe her as Śiva's servant, not as his spouse. Her life is largely undocumented. She became a Kāpālīnī (skull-bearer) and composed a number of poems (four survive) for which she was highly praised by several famous Śaivite ascetic poets.

**Āṇṭāl**, otherwise called Godā (Cow-giver), lived in south India of the early ninth century. She came from an exceptionally devout Brahmin family and dedicated all her life to the worship of Kṛṣṇa. She was so mad for her god that she married him in an extended ceremony. Her primary aim in life was the practice of Tantric Vaiṣṇava rites. She was an adept of visualisation and successfully superimposed the primitive rural village of

Kṛṣṇa over the town where she lived, all the way to the point where she couldn't keep the two apart (or didn't want to). In spite of her high birth, she chose to live in a cow stable, or so it is said. Her poetry is full of erotic elements testifying to her lifelong yearning. She certainly achieved a high degree of enlightenment and left us a wide range of magnificent poems. Nevertheless, she did not quit city life as so many female worshippers of Kālī and Śiva did. Doing duty at a temple, she spent her life in isolation and died young. Her pilgrimages remained all in the imagination. Today she is acknowledged and worshipped as a wife of Viṣṇu. (Hudson in White 2000: 206-227, and Gupta in Leslie 1992: 202)

**Akkā Mahādevī** lived in the twelfth century. She came from an upper-class family in Karnataka and was famed for her beauty and her unusually long hair. A local king proposed to marry her. Akkā came from a Śaiva family and was intensely devoted to her *Lord, white as jasmine*. The king happened to be a Jaina. As the story goes (and you don't have to believe this, kings being kings), he promised to become a Śaiva if only she would marry him. They married but, as could have been expected, the royal house did not abandon Jainism. This made Akkā raging mad. She left the palace and threw away all of her ornaments, possessions, and clothes. Clad only in her long hair, and looking much like raging Kālī, she disappeared into the forest and took up the life of an ascetic. Akkā eventually travelled to an ascetic community of viraśaiva ascetics in Kalyani. Coming from an upper class family, I wonder whether she was very good at living on the road and in the wilderness. Apparently she looked so mad and wasted by the time she arrived that the adepts wondered whether she might be a dangerous lunatic. Non-Indians sometimes assume that in India any devout madman is venerated as a saint. This is not the case. Indian ascetics draw a line between those who are touched by the gods and those possessed by demons, and there are strict examinations to determine whether a given person is inspired or simply insane. In Akkā's case, a verbal examination sufficed. The ascetics asked all sorts of highly critical questions, and Akkā, in spite of her looks, gave the right sort of answers. She was accepted and found a guru, Allammā Prabhu, who gave her the name Akkā (Elder Sister). Gupta remarks that in Saṅskṛt, the word Akkā would be Jyeṣṭhā, who is a complex goddess. She became an honoured member of the community and wrote a lot of devotional poems. People occasionally commented on her habitual nakedness, but Akkā replied with poetry stating that shame cannot exist in a world where the eye of the lord (Śiva) sees everything. When one ascetic remarked that her densely matted hair would also constitute a form of clothing, she answered with a poem asking his pardon. She gracefully acknowledged that she had not yet become completely free of her personal shame, but then, neither had the ascetics around her. Later in life she travelled to a hill-top temple in Kalyani, where she ritually married Śiva in his form as Mallikāṭjuna (White as Jasmine). Allegedly, she merged into the statue of Śiva and disappeared.

**Lallā Ded** was born into a Brahmin family in Kashmir in the fourteenth century. She married (or was married) early, but as her biography indicates, her husband was very much under the control of



his mother, who hated the young and highly devoted wife. Lallā did not have any children and before long she was kicked out and told to go back to her family. She didn't. Instead, she went for the forest and became a yoginī. Practising her worship in isolation, she favoured Tantric practices that would have disgusted most Brahmins. Lallā wore very little or no clothes, ate meat, drank alcohol, worshipped Śiva in devotional poems, and proceeded to raise Kuṇḍalinī. Her poems hint at deep meditation and breath-retention, making truth arise and a light radiate through her body into the outer world. She was highly critical of contemporary worship and derided the renouncers as folk who are just as bound as worldly people: *Those who win a kingdom find no rest. Those who give it up will not find peace. Free of desire, the soul will never die. The soul who knows, dies while it is alive.* (after Glasenapp's German translation, 1958: 236). She also derided conventional sacrifices and those who make a difference between one deity and another. It is uncertain whether she ever had a proper guru. She may have learned from ascetics, and discovered a lot in her trances, but if there ever was a human teacher she fails to mention it. In her poems, she gives good evidence that her guru and lover was simply Śiva. Some of her songs show radical views. She was against the worship of images, just as she didn't approve of temples, and called both mere lumps of stone. In worship and behaviour she took the uncompromising attitude of an avadhūta, i.e. an advanced Tantric practitioner who simply goes where s/he wills and does what s/he wills. She met some harsh criticism from the establishment but gained the respect of her fellow ascetics, of the common population, and (allegedly) even of several Sufis. Her poems survive.

**Bhairavī Brahmanī** was a scholar and a Tantric saint of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She came from a high class family and combined a number of hard core Tantric practices with Vaiṣṇava-style devotion (bhakti). She is chiefly remembered in connection with her most famous student, the celebrated Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa (1836-1886). Rāmakṛṣṇa was a natural. As a child he used to develop natural trance states which blew his mind but which he could not control. Driven by an amazing hunger for the divine he served Kālī and Śiva (plus, later on, an astonishing range of other deities) but he was still given to fits of swooning, obsession, and mad behaviour. Bhairavī, so the story goes, arrived by boat. Allegedly, she greeted him by saying: *'My son, everyone in this world is mad. Some are mad for money, some for creature comforts, some for name and fame; and you are mad for god.'* (McDaniel 1989: 96). She had dreamed of Rāmakṛṣṇa, her third student, and soon proceeded to train him. All in all, she lived about three years with Rāmakṛṣṇa. She also arranged a conference of scholars and seers and introduced Rāmakṛṣṇa to them. Arguing fiercely and quoting wide ranges of scripture, she convinced the experts that Rāmakṛṣṇa was neither mad nor possessed by demons, but an avatāra, an incarnation of the divine. Bhairavī did not leave it at that. June McDaniel gives a brief summary of practices which are not usually found in biographies of Rāmakṛṣṇa: *She had him sit on skull-seats, chant mantras, eat fish and human flesh from a skull and*

*perform the practices described in the major Tantras. She brought him women with whom Rāmakṛṣṇa could perform some of the rituals, but the biographies are unclear about his practice with them - Rāmakṛṣṇa claimed to have fallen into trance, and been unaware of performing anything.* (McDaniel 2004: 114) He often did that. There are several episodes in his life where close proximity to women made him lose consciousness or prompted fits of devotional worship. Bhairavī taught him a range of Tantric techniques, including the raising of the Kuṇḍalinī, and two important techniques of Vaiṣṇava bhakti. In the first, vātsalya, Rāmakṛṣṇa transformed into a woman to serve the goddess. He dressed as one, spoke as one, wore artificial hair, and lived among the women of the house, completely forgetting his male conditioning. Doing mādhyura bhāva, the sentiment of erotic love, he became Rādhā, lover and mate of Kṛṣṇa. Rādhā loves Kṛṣṇa, but as her mate is often absent, or dallying with pretty cow-girls at the fringes of the jungle, she is frequently alone, unhappy, and jealous. Rāmakṛṣṇa had fits of anguish, wept for days, and refused to take food. At one point, he became paralysed, then unconscious for three days. Coming to his senses again, Bhairavī dragged him to the river for a bath. He was in such a state of hypersensitivity that he could not bear the touch of her hand. As it turned out, Bhairavī was only the first among numerous teachers. Rāmakṛṣṇa joined a wide range of religions and discovered the divine again and again. He became the most famous Indian saint of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and founded a movement that is alive and well to this day. Considered from the Tantric point of view he was a bit of a failure. In spite of being trained by an exceptional female guru, and becoming a woman for more than six months of his life, he never managed to come to terms with women. Rāmakṛṣṇa married Śaradā Devī (1853-1920) when she was six. The two began to live together when she was nineteen and led a devout but singularly unerotic life. They never had children. She acted more like a mother to him and to the thousands of followers flocking to Dakṣhiṇeśwar, and when his trances and ecstasies became overly intense, it was she who muttered mantras into his ears to bring him back to sense. Rāmakṛṣṇa appreciated her support, he identified her with Tripura Sundarī, and told others to worship her. But he did not make much of an effort for women in general. To the end of his life he insisted that women and money are the two prime obstacles to spiritual progress.

**Phoolan Devi** (Flower Goddess) was born into a poor Mallah family (a low class of śūdras) in a tiny village in Uttar Pradesh on the day of the flower-feast in 1962 or 3. Her childhood was characterised by continuous harassment, violence, and exploitation. Mallahs frequently have to do the worst jobs in any rural district and they rarely get any payment apart from blows. At the age of eleven she was (illegally) married to a widower of thirty-five who turned out to be a crazy sadist. Phoolan was raped, abused, and tortured, each attempt to flee ending in being sent back. In rural India, women have very few rights, and are supposed to obey their husbands at all costs. A woman without a husband has no honour or protection whatsoever. When she finally managed to escape, her family, and indeed her entire village, considered her defiled, leading



to ever increasing abuse, exploitation, and repeated rape by the police and by members of the superior classes. Unlike so many poor women in India, Phoolan refused to submit and fought back as well as she could. She had no education but a lot of determination. Finally, a mixed gang of bandits was hired to abduct and kill her. One of their leaders, Vickram Singh, an educated and religious outcast with a strong sense of ethics, married her and made her his partner. Whether they had a love-life remains an open question. Whatever may have been the case, he certainly adored her. Eventually Vickram was assassinated by his former teacher, a bandit called Shri Ram, and Phoolan fell into the hands of that gang. More torture and rape followed. Finally, a village Brahmin helped her escape (and was burned alive by Shri Ram). Phoolan founded her own gang and began a successful career as a 'bandit queen'. Driven by a tremendous hunger for revenge and justice, she specialised in robbing rich people. Low class villagers, especially women, were asked about the ethics of the rich of their district. Phoolan, identifying with her personal deity Durgā, sought the exploiters and rapists. She punished, castrated, and killed. Her gang was so successful that major police operations were launched against her; one chief minister had to retire from office as he couldn't handle the situation. Eventually, most of her gang were exterminated. In February 1983, after lengthy negotiations, she capitulated under her terms in a public ceremony. She went to prison without trial, where she lived like a minor celebrity. In February 1994 she was released. Soon she began a political career. In 1996 she became a member of parliament. She was among the nominees for the Nobel peace prize and was so popular among the lower classes that she became a candidate for the office of prime minister. She was expected to get around 70% of the votes. A few days before the election three professional, and well-informed, assassins gunned her down. The case was never cleared up but the government set up a grandiose memorial. Now you may ask what exactly makes Phoolan Devi a saint. To the common people Phoolan was not just a saint, she was an incarnate deity. This identification goes back to the first days of her abduction, when a saintly ascetic declared that she was an incarnation of Kālī. It was Vickram who told Phoolan that she should have a personal deity, and Phoolan chose Durgā. She never seems to have practised any classical sādhanā, apart from informal prayer and the odd offering at Kālī's and Durgā's shrines, as was common custom among the more ethical bandits. However, she certainly got her share of extreme consciousness states. As a bandit leader, and for several months on her own in the jungle, she frequently suffered from hunger, thirst, lack of sleep, and the paranoia that comes naturally when hordes of police are out to shoot you. During these states she developed very close ties to wild animals. Frequently, Durgā appeared to her in the shape of a young girl, telling her when to avoid drinking water, which road to take, where the police was waiting in ambush, or where to hide during bombardment. These visions seem to have occurred in half-sleep, during dreams or in states of extreme exhaustion. Sometimes she saw the goddess, more usually she heard her voice in her head. Phoolan's life became an example for many of the poor and low of India. Numerous movements tried to make her a

symbol of their creeds and turned her into a socialist revolutionary, a feminist, or a freedom fighter. Others saw her as a romantic figure and made movies of her life. None of these designations are strictly true, as Phoolan spent most of her life being simply an uneducated, abused girl without any greater aims than simply staying alive. It was Durgā, not socialism, who made her become a scourge of the mighty. Her life turned out to be highly embarrassing for many cultivated Indians who found the international press becoming interested in the social conditions of the countryside. If you think that slavery is a thing of the past, that India is a holy land, or that the class-system is abolished, let me recommend Phoolan's autobiography.

## Female Ascetics

Female ascetics, as Lynn Denton has shown in her study *Varieties of Female Hindu Asceticism*, tend to come in three basic forms. Doing her field work in Varanasi (Benares), the most popular site for pilgrimage in India, she found some 1300 ascetics in the city. Of these, roughly ten percent were women. Some of them were old, some were acknowledged gurus, but the majority were, at the time, in their twenties. These women can be classed in three types.

First we have **sannyāssinīs**, renouncer ascetics who have cut all ties to the world. Initiation ceremonies differ widely, but they do contain a few typical elements. One of them is an extended ritual (often several days long) during which the woman renounces her place, name, and past in human society. Usually she fasts, does the funeral rites (śraddha) for herself, and sometimes she burns a straw effigy representing herself. She vows to forget her past, family ties, place in society, assumes a new name, and proceeds to live an entirely new life under very harsh conditions.

Nowadays the word sannyāsa (renunciation) has lost a lot of the meaning it used to have. A number of would-be gurus, the best known being the incomparable 'Osho' Rajneesh, have felt free to give this title to their devotees, most of whom did not even know the status it used to have, nor what it really entails. To the traditional renouncers, the journey into asceticism is not a fancy game but the complete dedication of all their being, nature, identity, and property to a spiritual idea. During the initiation ceremony, the guru asks the initiate whether she chooses to follow the path of the householder or to renounce it for spiritual liberation. The contrast is crucial. To most of the women interviewed by Lynn Denton, being an ascetic renouncer defined itself exactly by not being a householder. To these women, the wheel of phenomenal existence (saṃsāra) is precisely the sort of lives they left behind: work, household duties, raising the kids, venerating the ancestors, being obedient to almost everybody. While ordinary Hindu women are expected to do a wide range of religious acts for the sake of their husbands and children, they gain little spiritual benefit for themselves. At best, they can hope to be reborn as a man. The sannyāssinīs, by contrast,



seek to leave the entire cycle of rebirths. Apart from this, the actual activities of sannyāssinīs differ enormously. Most meditate frequently and practice mantra-japa. Some devote themselves to rituals of worship (if they still have any relation to the gods), others practice yoga, visualisations or devote themselves to extended pilgrimages. Others seem less religious. Some run spiritual schools or make a living by conducting hymn-singing sessions or tell legends. Some advise their neighbourhood regarding worldly matters, a few were running fashionable private schools. As it turned out, not all sannyāssinīs believed that they have to make real efforts to reach liberation. For many, liberation is guaranteed by the initiation ritual, ensuring that, if they stay away from worldly life and duties, they will automatically find liberation when they die.

**Brahmacārya** is celibate asceticism. The women (brahmacāriṇī) who chose this path make much of the earliest stage in life, that of studentship, and remain at this level indefinitely. As a result, they simply do not enter the life of a householder. Studentship is the first stage in life. It involves celibacy, study of sacred writ, a strictly vegetarian diet, obedience, and service to a teacher and great care not to breach any of the purity laws. Being a brahmacāriṇī is not an easy path, as there are so many rules and regulations for proper purity. Nevertheless, almost two thirds of the ascetic women studied by Lynn Denton fall into this class. Denton describes several distinct forms of celibate studentship. One consists of living under monastic conditions until the woman is old enough to become a renouncer. Another field for chaste ascetics appears in several new Hindu movements, where groups of celibate women accumulate around teachers. There they tend the sacred fires, make offerings, recite ancient texts, and often acquire a respectable amount of learning. Brahmacāriṇīs often live in communities led by elder women. Their daily life is rigorously scheduled. They tend to wear white and have their hair cropped short. Most of their lives are confined within their small monastic communities. They only dare the outside world in groups.

The third category of ascetic women studied by Lynn Denton is the group of **tāntrikās**. These women were less easy to class than the others, as they show more individual development. They were also smaller in number, Denton could only find a dozen of them. Generally, tāntrikās can rarely be classed by specific traditions or schools. They often have close ties to their gurus, and to the lineages of those gurus but, all in all, they tend to favour whatever practices suit them. Tāntrikās have a certain disposition towards fierce and dangerous asceticism. Their rituals involve a number of terrifying elements, and meditation on or near cremation places are still encouraged - unlike corpse-sitting, which may have become a thing of the past (or isn't discussed openly). The Tantric ascetics generally seek to attain and cultivate siddhis, but unlike some major Tantric movements, they do not believe that the acquisition of magical powers (siddhis) and liberation are mutually exclusive. Our tāntrikās of Varanasi go for both. Sexual rites may be practised freely, that is, each tāntrikā may have intercourse with her father (guru), brother

(fellow aspirant), or son (her own student). In a similar way, a male practitioner may have congress with his mother (guru), sister (fellow aspirant), or his daughter (his own student). In tantric circles, such family (kula) titles are used to indicate the closeness within the group-community. To outsiders they look like incestuous relationships, which is certainly not the case. Such rites, however, are not of major importance. More essential are daily discipline (sādhana), difficult and dangerous practices, and good interaction with the guru. Denton loosely classed the tāntrikās in three groups. The first consists of yogīnīs, i.e. women who practice yoga or tapas in some way. Such women often favour a very strict discipline and cultivate will-power by performing difficult and painful austerities. The second call themselves Perfected (siddhā) and prefer rituals of the left-hand-path. The siddhās aim at getting rid of worldly ties and do rituals to ensure their liberation. Some practise yoga, but this is not a must. As the main object of their asceticism is the cultivation of magical skills, they are ready to perform a number of acts that seem disgusting to purity minded traditionalists. Here sexual rites have their place, just like the morbid rites, and the many 'rebellious' acts that aim at the deconditioning of the mind. The third class of tāntrikās may be considered professional sorceresses. These women have cultivated siddhis, one way or another, and put them to use. Some make a living near shrines or temples by selling amulets, good luck, or protection. It may be interesting to consider that the tāntrikās in general do not simply aim at liberation. In their world-view, humans can go much further. Liberation is well and good, but it does not have to wait till death. It can be experienced while alive, and the same goes for divinity. Many tāntrikās seek to become divine, equal or superior to the gods, within their lifetime. Quite a few succeed.

## Tāntrikās

More on this important topic appears in June McDaniel's *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, the best study on Śākta folk religion and obsession in modern India which I have ever come upon (highly recommended). McDaniel classes several types of Tāntrikās. Of course, the situation of modern Tāntrikās differs from those a thousand years ago, hence I would ask your caution in projecting the status quo on periods about which we know far too little. Nowadays, several types of women are involved in Tantra. First, there are the **female gurus**. Like male gurus, these women are professionals who have dedicated themselves completely to the spiritual life. Most of them have undergone decades of training. Especially the ones who were never married and remain celibate have a high status in the eyes of the population. However, celibacy is not a must.

Then there are **holy women** and **widows** who lived a married life, had children, but received a religious call. These Tāntrikās left their families, went on pilgrimage, associated themselves with some temple or institution, and generally only visit their husbands and kids on occasion. Such women often live on the road. They make a living by begging,



making talismans, telling fortunes, and some of them gain followers or students. Obsession by deities is an important part of their spiritual discipline.

Then there are the **Tantric wives**. Here we encounter women who are living in marriage with their husbands. In many cases, it is the husband who is devoted to Tantric discipline, while the wife sees it her spiritual duty to participate. Orthodox Indian thought demands absolute obedience from housewives, hence, even if the woman participates in hard core ritual she still remains dutiful to traditional Dharma. Such women generally receive training from a guru. Some of them achieve a high degree of spiritual and magical competence. Others only do the rites as this is expected of them. In either case, the married Tāntrikā is usually reluctant in talking about her activities. She does not seek fame, wealth, or contact to outsiders.

An early form of the 'Tantric wife' may be the **veśya**, who appears in elder literature. The term *veśya* literally means a prostitute, but the actual meaning is that of a sexually active and independently minded Tāntrikā. Unlike a prostitute, the *veśya* is married to her partner. She practices ritual, has training in mantra and visualisation and seeks union with the divine. Within the relationship she can be quite demanding. Nevertheless, she is expected to remain true to her husband. Should she have congress with other men, she is sure to suffer divine punishment, and so will the men who bed her.

Then there are **celibate wives**. Usually they receive a divine call, or simply become obsessed or visionary. Such women remain living in the household, but they dedicate themselves completely to a religious life. Some achieve a high status as holy women, organise public ceremonies, or run religious communities. Their husbands can say goodbye to any sort of lovelife, but they do gain a high status in the eyes of the community. They often profit from the money made by their spouses and generally believe that their *karman* improves.

Last there is a group of **professional Tantric ritual assistants**. These women often follow a hereditary tradition, you might almost call it a class. Such women receive training from one or several gurus. The program includes breathing exercises, meditation, mantras, and a lot of yoga aimed at controlling sexual passion and inner energy flow. Such women hire their services to Tāntrikas who have no competent ritual partners. The greatest danger to their profession is to become pregnant. In this sort of ritual format, men are expected to retain their sperm. A pregnancy is not desirable at all, in fact, a male orgasm means that the rite has failed. McDaniels cites a study by Bholanath Bhattacharjee, who interviewed forty-eight professional ritual consorts. In one case story, the worshipper impregnated the woman and then abandoned her. *However, he later came back, saying that if his guru liked practicing with her, he would take her back and also pay her rent and support the baby.* The woman agreed, mainly as poverty forced her to. Eventually she met the guru and became his ritual partner (*bhairavī*).





Figure 27 - Fig tree weaving.



It has become a fashion to claim that Tantra was basically a male affair where women participated as ritual aides. In the opinion of several experts (it's a nice day and I won't bother to name names) women were simply used by the male adepts.

They were a part of the rites, but the rites were performed for the spiritual and magical aims of the males. Women, so it is claimed, got some food, presents, got drunk, and got fucked for the sake of male spirituality or sorcery. They may have had a bit of fun when they were venerated as the goddess and perhaps an orgasm or two, but that's it.

This picture is so incomplete that it hurts. What of the women who founded Tantric lineages, such as Krama? What of the women who initiated men? What of the women who were gurus? True enough, Hindu Tantric literature cites few instances of female leadership. For all their Śāktic preferences, many texts seem aimed at male readers, if only as it was highly uncommon that women could read. Then there are the conventions of language. In Saṁskṛt, just as in many European languages, it is common usage to use the male form, all the while implying that female readers (readeresses) are also addressed. Such conventions make it difficult to discern female elements. Likewise, Tantras are usually attributed to gods. There are Tantras around which may well have been written, edited, or amended by highly initiated women, but as the text is of divine origin, we have no idea who composed it. And there are further signs for those who look closely. What of the Yoginīs mentioned in the *K/N*, dwelling at the Yoni shrine, eager to initiate devout men? No, this is not a reference to temple prostitution, which became a fashion a few centuries later, and had no Tantric meaning whatsoever. Shared ritual in Tantra is by no means confined to sexual activity. Indeed, lovemaking constitutes only a small section of possible activities and it is usually not the most important one. After all, Tantra aims at liberation, and if you go for that, you will find daily discipline, meditation, ritual, devotion, and the transformation of your own demons, fears, cravings, and hang-ups to be more essential than an occasional feast of the Five Ms. Only New Age Tantra is totally obsessed with sex and hedonism. While most Hindu Tantrics seek to transcend or transform the world, Western Tantrics wallow in it. McDaniels spoke to numerous Bengali Tāntrikās who considered sexual rites to be of peripheral importance. In general, so she was told, it is the men who need sexual ritual to learn to control their passions and desires. From this perspective, men are weaker than women. As she points out, *Indian sons are indulged and petted, while Indian daughters are taught to give the best food and toys to their brothers. Indian women thus learn to sacrifice their desires at an early age. Sexual ritual is basically for people who are weak rather than strong - and weak people do not belong at the burning ground.* (McDaniels 2004: 121)

The same may be said regarding larger ritual assemblies or cakras. In some Tantras (such as the *KNT*) the ritual circle is described like a mad, drugged group-sex orgy. However, we have no way of estimating what they were like in real life. Some of the accounts are so over-the-top that I suspect that they happened in the imagination. In modern Bengal, cakras

are prohibited. Even so, they do happen on rare occasions. However, as June McDaniel explains, they are not opportunities for sexual indulgence or wife swapping. The main goal of a cakra is to attain union with the gods or to become temporarily obsessed by them. When sex is involved, it is simply to copy the behaviour of the deities. There exists, however, a new sort of ritual cakra in modern Bengal. It is called the paśu cakra and promotes all sorts of indulgence, sexual and otherwise. The aim of the paśu cakra is pleasure by all means. Its participants lack all spiritual training and discipline, their sole ritual being a parody of the genuine rites. As it turns out, the paśu cakra celebrates exactly the sort of loose living that Westerners, in particular New Age Tantrics, mistake for real Tantra.

What of female gurus (stri guru)? One of the *Rudrayāmala*s (Goudriaan & Gupta, 1981: 48) quotes her specifications. She must be righteous, of good conduct, devoted to her guru (i.e. in a line of spiritual succession), she must be in command of her senses, know the essential meaning of all mantras (this is much like taking a university degree), enjoy worship, be of good character, with lotus-like eyes, good at recitation, she must possess jewels and ornaments (a reference to her cakras?), peaceful, of kula-family, with a moon like (cool and serene) face, able to explain Śiva's wisdom (you can do that only if you are Śiva), and able to grant final release. Well, a woman like this wasn't born enlightened. To become a guru you need training.

The *Tripurā Rahasya*, a beautiful work on inner worship of the Śrī Vidyā tradition, gives a lengthy account of one such guru. One day prince Hemacūḍa was out in the forest hunting. He lost his companions, as royals always seem to do when faced with the real world, but eventually he came upon a singularly beautiful hermitage. There he encountered Hemalekhā, the adopted daughter of the jungle dwelling Śaiva saint Vyāghrapāda. The two fell in love and before long they were married. Instead of being a well-behaved queen, however, Hemalekhā proceeded to initiate her husband, mainly by telling him wonderfully complex stories and sending him to a lonely room for months of meditation. In due course, Hemacūḍa became an enlightened sovereign, fiercely devoted to the inner worship of the goddess Tripurā. Thanks to Hemalekhā's teaching, all inhabitants of the city became enlightened and even the birds chanted mantras through the lazy, sunny day. If you like trance-stories closely resembling the style of Milton H. Erickson, this is the book for you. And while we are at it, another interesting woman sage, clad in saffron robes, with long, tangled hair and a youthful appearance thanks to rejuvenating yoga appears in chapter 15. She instructs the court of king Janaka and defeats the hot-headed Aṣṭāvakra in philosophical argument.

K/JN 20, 13-19 gives a list of the qualities a ritual Śakti should have. Among them are beauty, white eyes, dishevelled hair, eloquence, fearlessness, devotion to Kulāgama, calmness, a lovely nature, freedom from doubts, truthfulness, freedom from cruelty and being grounded in her own body. The good book calls her a heroine and 'the ultimate one'. Again, a partner with so many good qualities does not fall from heaven.



Such a character needs years of training and meditation, possibly over several lifetimes.

The *KCT* goes beyond this. Chapter 4, 21-34 describes a form of courtship. The well-advanced *sādhaka* arrives in a village, town, marketplace, or square where he is seen by a young woman. On seeing him, she is freed of her sins. Looking at him sideways, longing enters her mind. She is jolted out of her everyday behaviour, her mind is troubled, she allows her sari to slip, revealing a nipple, and hastily covers herself again. At the junction of her feet (i.e. at the *yoni*) the sexual urge arises. She speaks with her friends, makes enquiries, and learns who the *sādhaka* is, from what family he comes, what he is doing, and so on. About five minutes later the two are in bed together and he is moving his penis just like the god *Kāma*. The episode is striking as it tells of the entire affair from her point of view. She picks the worshipper, she gives him a sign of invitation, she enquires about his qualifications, and allows him to approach. All of it in highly poetical language. It is her desire that makes the union possible, without her consent he stands no chance at all. Later on she addresses him as 'my son', and indeed, the relationship between them is much like that between a goddess and her worshipper. Was this passage of the *KCT* composed by a woman?

In Tantric literature women (just like gurus and students) suffer from idealisation. You read of their exalted qualities and their closeness to the divine. Often they are called young, beautiful, tender, wise, un-worldly, polite, well behaved, highly spiritual, quiet, peaceful, and so on. How about elder *Tāntrikās*? How about *Tāntrikās* who despise fancy dress and submissive behaviour? What of those resolute ladies who have survived years on the road, who have shaved their hair, slept on cremation places, and run their own spiritual communities? In some texts, the ritual partner is described in the same poetic metaphors as a goddess. Which makes it hard to tell the difference. Are we talking of flesh & blood women living real lives, of idealised consorts worshipped from a distance, or is the perfect ritual partner a spiritual entity, a manifestation of the *Paraśakti* in the imagination?

*Tāntrikās* are easier to trace when we look at Tantric Buddhism. Buddhism itself was not very favourably disposed towards women (apart from pitying them), but when Indian Buddhists encountered Tantric Śāktas, usually while having a picnic at a cremation place, the systems fused and created something entirely new and practical. Indeed there are some systems, such as the *Yoginī-kula*, which can be found in Hindu and Buddhist Tantra. Anyway, it seems that the Buddhists learned to worship women, and with women, when they encountered Hindu Śāktas. Unlike the Hindus, the Buddhists were organised and they collected books in libraries. Now once the Muslims invaded northern India, they crushed what remained of Indian Buddhism and destroyed all the monasteries and libraries they could find. This meant the end of Indian Buddhism but, of course, the libraries in other countries survived. For this reason we find some of the most important Indian Buddhist scriptures in Nepal, Tibet, China, and other countries. Not that the *Yoginī* cults were popular. The Buddhists may have been better at documenting

history than their Hindu colleagues, but nevertheless a good many frowned at spiritually dominant women. As a result, a lot of female gurus were turned into male gurus by the simple method of misspelling their names. It often takes only a single letter to change the gender of a name. Last, there is plain dumb sexism. Tibet, for instance, had a wide range of pioneering female saints (see Miranda Shaw's ground-breaking *Passionate Enlightenment* and read it!). These women composed scripture, sang songs of enlightenment, gave Tantric feasts, initiated males (including most of the founding fathers of Tibetan Buddhism), founded lineages, taught, educated, trained, and shaped much of what remains best in Tantric Buddhism. Many were sorceresses, ran Tantric organisations, performed miracles, healed, cursed, and brought enlightenment. Today, with regard to women, Tibet has the most retarded sort of Buddhism anywhere. The brilliant ladies of the early days are happily forgotten. For several decades, the present Dalai Lama has been sharply criticised by feminists. In his branch of Buddhism, unlike all the others, women cannot attain the highest degrees. Will this ever be changed? Sadly, as he claims, he is stuck within the system and cannot alter it. Which strikes me as a dumb excuse. If Avalokiteśvara incarnate cannot change this sorry little system, who can? Anyway, there is a lot missing in Hindu scripture that appears with glaring directness in Tantric Buddhism. Where most Hindu Tantras barely hint at lovemaking, secretions, and the role of the Śakti, some Buddhist texts of the Yogīnī school are more than explicit. Ingestion of fluids, veneration of women, men who fail in their liberation as they cannot transcend their sexism... all of it appears, boldly outspoken, in works composed by brilliant female gurus. And as it just so happened, these masterpieces of spiritual literature happen to be thoroughly unpopular in modern Tibetan Buddhism.



## 6: Body as a Whole

Most of the sages who composed the *Upaniṣads* were not very keen on body. To the renouncers of the post-vedic age, body was a means for incarnation but not anything to identify with. When we read of body we occasionally come upon the most negative descriptions. To identify body with self, for example, was frowned upon. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 8, 8, 1-5 mentions two ascetics, divine Indra and demonic Virocana, who performed austerities under the tutelage of Prajāpati. Seeing their reflection in water, they assumed the image of the body to be an image of the self and went away deluded. Sighing, Prajāpati declared that anyone following this doctrine, no matter whether god or demon, is bound to perish. Nevertheless, Virocana, returning to the demons, declared that body is the self and should be satisfied, served, and made happy. Indra had second thoughts, went back to Prajāpati, and learned that body is not identical with the self. *Maitrī Upaniṣad* 1,2-3 goes beyond this point. We read of king Bṛhadratha, who, disappointed that body is not enduring, went into the jungle to perform austerities. For a thousand days he stood with uplifted arms, staring into the sun. Such practices are not unusual. To this day there are worshippers who believe that holding up an arm, day and night, is a sure way to transcendence. In the process, the limb withers and decays. A great example of how will-power can be abused to mutilate oneself. This sort of thing is not far from the austerities practised by Christian mystics of the past, many of whom made a high art out of the mortification of the flesh. When king Bṛhadratha met the ascetic Śākāyanya, he declared that body is foul-smelling, insubstantial, a mixture of bone, skin, muscle, marrow, fat, sperm, blood, mucus, tears, rheum, excrement, urine, flatulence, bile, and phlegm, subject to fear, desire, greed, delusion, envy, hunger, thirst, disease, and sorrow etc. etc. - so what good is the enjoyment of desire?

By contrast, some of the classical works on yoga and Tantra assume a different attitude. Please note that I wrote *some*. There are Tantric texts that echo exactly the same mood, such as the *Tripurā Rahasya*, 4, 85-88, where we learn that the components of the body are full of decaying elements and hopelessly disgusting. Who thinks of the parts of the body feels revulsion, and who enjoys the pleasures of the body is like an animal. Thank you. In 20, 103-5 the goddess Tripurā declares: *Perfection means considering the body to be non-self and centring one's awareness in the self*. Whoever wrote this certainly favoured worship in the mind, and only in the mind. Luckily, there are also Tantras that get along without abusing or disrespecting the body. *Kulārṇava Tantra* 9, 41 states that body itself is the temple. The jiva (incarnate 'soul'/divinity) is the eternal

Śiva. The *Śiva Samhita*, 2, 1-5 also sees body as something divine, but goes a long way beyond the 'temple' metaphor.

*In this body, the mount Meru - i.e., the vertebral column - is surrounded by seven islands; there are rivers, seas, mountains, fields; and lords of the fields, too. There are in it seers and sages; all the stars and planets as well. There are sacred pilgrimages, shrines; and presiding deities of the shrines. The sun and moon, agents of creation and destruction, also move in it. Ether, air, fire, water and earth are also there. All beings that exist in the three worlds are also to be found in the body; surrounding the Meru they are engaged in their respective functions. (But ordinary men do not know it). He who knows all this is a Yogī; there is no doubt about it.*

Let's have some details. Gorakṣanātha's *Siddha Siddhānta Paddhati*, 3,1-5 offers an amazingly complex system identifying all worlds with the human form. He describes a wide range of cakras, energy points, energy connections, and much more. *Who knows all moving and unmoving beings and all things in the body is a yogī, and to know these is to know the body.* The tortoise (foundation of the universe) is in the soles of the feet, *Pātāla* in the big toes, *Talātalam* in the tip of the big toe, *Mahātalam* on the back of the foot, *Rasātalam* in the ankle, *Sutalam* in the lower legs, *Vitalam* in the knees, and *Atalam* in the upper legs. The seven underworlds are governed by Rudra in his angry form as the fire of destruction (*Kālāgnirudra*). The world Bhū is near the anus, the world Bhuva near the genitals, the world Svar near the navel. All three are governed by Indra, who is the lord of all senses. Brahmā rules the four worlds Mahar (at the root of the spine), Jana (near the 'cave of the spine'), Tapas (within the spine), and Satya (at the root cakra). These worlds exist in body in their self-form of manifold egoism and will. Viṣṇu's world is in the belly, causing manifold doing. Rudra governs the heart in his fierce self-form. Īśvara governs the world of the self-form of satisfaction in the chest, Nīlakaṇṭha's (blue throated Śiva) world is in the throat, existing eternally. In his incomparable self-form, Śiva resides in a world at the opening of the palate. Bhairava dwells in the world at the root of the tongue in his all-transcending self-form. The world of Anādi (without beginning) is in the centre of the brow, in it, the self-form of the highest self of bliss resides. The Śṛṅgāṭa point contains the Kula world, where Kuleśvara resides in body, in the self-form of bliss. The opening of Brahman contains the world Parabrahma. Here, Brahman resides in body as infinite perfection. The upper lotus contains the world Parāpara, where the supreme lord Parameśvara exists in body as the state of the all-including highest. The place of the three peaks within the sahasrāra is the world of Śakti, inhabited by the supreme Śakti who resides in the state of being the all-creatix of all deities. Such is Gorakṣanātha's account of the twenty-one places of the cosmos, plus the seven underworlds, within the body. He continues at great length (*SSP* 3, 6-14). There are seven continents in marrow, bone, head, skin, hair, nails, and flesh, and there are seven oceans in urine (the salt-ocean), spittle (the



milk-ocean), slime (ocean-of-sour-milk), fat (the ghī-ocean), brain (ocean-of-honey), blood (sugar-ocean), and semen (ocean-of-immortality-nectar). The nine apertures of the body are identified with India, Kashmir, the Land of Potters, Sandalwoodland, Shell-land, Land of the one-legged, Land around Kandahar, Land of Fishers, and the Land of Mount Meru. The major eight mountains are Meru in the spine, Kailāsa (aperture of Brahman), Himālaya (back), Malaya (left side of the neck), Mandara (right side of the neck), Vindhya (right ear), Maināka (left ear), and Mount Śrī on the brow, plus lesser mountains in fingers and toes. The major nine subtle nerves are identified with nine great rivers. The inside of body houses twenty-seven constellations, twelve signs of the zodiac, nine planets, fifteen lunar days, while the great amount of stars and asterisms reside in the 'waves' (hair?). 330 million gods dwell in the hair on the arms. Gods, spirits of nature, demons, and ghosts dwell in the bones. The supreme lord of the serpents resides in the chest. Seers and wise ascetics dwell in the hair of the armpit, the mountains in the hair on the belly, Gandharvas, Apsarasas, Kinnaras, and their kind in the belly, Śaktis and fierce deities in the swift body-winds. The places of pilgrimage are in the joints, the infinite perfection in the illumination of the mind, sun and moon in the eyes, trees, plants and flowers in the hair of the legs, worms, insects, and birds in excrement. *What is joy is heaven. What is suffering is hell. What is doing is attachment. What is free from differentiation of thought is liberation... in this way, the highest lord, the highest self, who has the all as his own form, dwells in all bodies... such is the knowledge of the body.* (3, 14) You may observe that this account does not even hint at decay, corruption, and disgusting organs. Similar systems can be found in several Tantras, especially among the Nāthas, Siddhas, and Kaulas. When the *Hymn to Kālī* speaks of the worship of the *greatly satisfying flesh* this is a long way from the mind-space of adepts who got a kick from abusing their physical form.

## Maps of the Body

Indian philosophy produced several models to describe what happen within body. Alas, this is already an oversimplification. There are several distinct schools of Indian philosophy and, as you know, they are not always in accord with each other. Just look at the cakra systems (discussed in full later on). Early proponents of the cakra theory agreed more or less that there are foci of energy and sentience along the subtle equivalent of the spine, but they could not agree on the actual amount of cakras, let alone on their appearance, function, and characteristics. This may be confusing from the scholarly point of view. For practical minded people it constitutes a blessing. Where so many models contradict each other anything is possible. Welcome to individual subjectivity.

Take the model of the five kośa (sheaths). The human body, so several philosophies propose, appears on several planes of being. The coarsest form is the **annamaya kośa**, the 'sheath of food' which might be called the material human being. Food, in this context, is thought to be the essence out of which the material body takes its existence. This is

the body of differentiation. It has age, form, gender, and a lot of genetic characteristics. It is similar to other human bodies but is not the same as any of them. Some parts, such as bone, muscles and marrow are thought to come from the father, while hair, blood, and flesh were thought to come from the mother. Here you can find the organs of sense and the organs of action (mouth, arms, legs, anus, genitals). In an attempt to unite this model with the cakra models it was proposed that the physical body connects with the three lower cakras. The next kośa is the **prāṇamaya kośa**, the sheath of vitality, breath, and life-energy. This sheath consists of the 'winds' that move within body. Breathing is one function of these winds, another is the metabolism. It is the energy body that feels hunger and thirst, that feeds, digests, excretes, wakes, and sleeps, is powerful or feels exhausted. Your energy body is the mediator between spirit and matter. More refined is the **manomaya kośa**, the sheath of thought. This sheath has four aspects (in some systems), namely: doubt/certainty, determination, I-sense (ego, identity), and evaluation of sense impressions. Without the sheath of thought, the sense organs may do their job but there is nobody there to be aware of it. The thought sheath is something you develop while you grow up. How healthy this body is depends on your use or abuse of the sense organs, the importance you attach to your ego, or the way you decide what to believe and what to doubt. The thought sheath is also the origin of desire, which in turn influences the sense organs. The **Vijnānamaya kośa** is a lot more subtle. Here you can find the faculties of understanding, contemplation, and the ability to imagine and to create. The sheath of understanding is usually associated with the higher cakras in the mouth or third eye region, meaning that when your attention dwells up there, you are literally thinking with your body of understanding. I shan't bother to comment on this refined body, mainly as I mistrust models that define very subtle processes in a flood of vague nominalizations. For a thorough, but somewhat confusing, treatment of these issues look into the introductions of the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* and into *The Serpent Power* by Sir John Woodroffe, which can at times be even more perplexing. Last we have the **ānandamaya kośa**, which is the sheath or body of bliss. This may be alluded to as the immortal self, the seat of the divine intelligence. This body is so subtle that it does not die. It experiences reincarnation time and time again until it finally cuts all bonds of attachment and finds liberation in dissolution. In the cakra system it is usually localised above the brow, sometimes above the head. In this model each body is more subtle than the former. The degree of subtlety connects with the cakras, hence when your awareness rises from cakra to cakra, you are also moving from kośa to kośa. This idea is vital for your understanding of such rites as raising Kuṇḍalinī or the purification of the elements (**bhūtaśuddhi**). Whether such models are relevant for your actual practice is another matter. In general, I find it more useful to experience and observe what happens than to force experience into a model from the start.



## Being at Ease

Tantric practice begins and ends in body, flesh, and living reality. Body is the primary temple of each practitioner, and this is not a poetic metaphor but a sober statement of fact. The form you inhabit is Śakti, and as Śakti is consciousness-in-energy/form, you are living in the manifestation of the divine. In magickal rituals, the identification of body with the Multiverse constitutes the key to causing changes in the phenomenal world. By identifying your body and your reality with the entire macrocosm - and vice versa - both can influence each other. This is the background for numerous trances and things you can do to surprise yourself. So how do we integrate body in our meditation?

As you know, there are lots of postures in yoga. Some of them are supposed to improve health. Some refine the sensitivity of your system. A few are recommended for meditation. Most non-Indians assume that āsana (seat, posture) is always something exotic, cramped, and complicated. This may be the case for beginners, and it may be the case with postures which regulate health, but when we want a posture for meditation we need something that is moderately relaxed and can be enjoyed for a while. This is in tune with some of the earliest traditions. Patañjali's famous textbook on yoga makes a point that:

*2,46. Āsana implies steadiness and comfort.*

*2,47. It requires relaxation and meditation on the Immovable.*

*2,48. Then opposing sensations cease to torment.*

Before we move on, consider. The seated posture is steady and comfortable, Patañjali said. Sounds like a contradiction? It may seem that way before you get used to it. A good sitting posture has a straight spine, neck, and head. To do this properly you need a certain amount of tension. Unless some muscles in your back and shoulders stay tense and alert, your body will lean in one direction or another, and before long you'll be out of balance. So we need a certain amount of tautness. On the other hand, we are not trying to fulfil a military ideal. Tense muscles inhabit the circulation of blood, hence the oxygen supply to the cells, one of the reasons why tense people look pale. Tension is also a great inhibitor of pulsation, joy, laughter, and well-being. We should keep the amount of tension at a necessary minimum.

Then there is relaxation. For long trances, I prefer to lie on the ground with a small pillow under my head and a piece of cloth over my eyes. In this posture, I can relax very deeply and remain content for an hour or two. As the hard ground supports body, I can ignore physical sensations. Soon I forget the periphery and body seems to lose shape and is forgotten. When you can forget your body, you can focus on your mind. All of this is easiest when you rest.

It is more difficult when you wish to meditate or trance in a seated posture. When you sit, you need some tension. Complete relaxation while sitting means that you collapse. So what we need is a sort of balance between tension and relaxation. Learning to find this is already a meditation which will teach you a lot about body, breathing, balance,

and your attention span. In general, the idea is to relax into each posture. So you learn to sit. But how do you meditate? As you'll soon discover, watching your posture is a job that requires attention. This is not a good start if you want to trance. Many trances require forgetfulness of your body, and you'll never get there when you keep watching it. At this point, two forces can be helpful. One is habit. When you persist in sitting in a specific posture for a while every day, some aspects of the posture will become 'natural' as you grow accustomed to them. You will begin to enjoy the tautness of your back, and will find that you can relax into it. The other force is attention. Did you notice that Patañjali recommended relaxation and meditation on the immovable? Some may think that you have to get the posture right before you begin to meditate. However, when you meditate, you may find that your posture stabilises. This is especially the case when your attention moves. An old rule of yoga and Chinese martial arts is that when your attention goes up, your body tends to become unstable or top-heavy. When your attention moves down, so does your weight. In consequence, if your attention stays up there in your head and you glance down to check if your body is erect, you are already out of balance. If you allow your awareness and the senses to go inward, and descend into the vast cavity of the heart, or deeper still into the 'golden pavilion' of the belly, your posture will stabilise naturally. Meditation can be one of those activities that make good posture possible.

## A Choice of Postures

In the *Gheraṇḍa Saṁhita*, we learn that there are as many āsanas as there are life-forms. 84,000 have been explained by Śiva. Of these, eighty-four are exceptional, and of these thirty-two are auspicious in the realm of the living. This means that lots of postures are available. Though some treatises attempt to classify the thirty-two auspicious postures, there are also some, such as dear Abhinavagupta, who claim that any posture assumed in moments of ecstasy and enlightenment automatically becomes an expression of these states and hence, holy. As this is a book on left-hand Tantra, and not on yoga, we shall limit ourselves to a very few postures here and discuss them for their relevance in meditation and breathing.

A straight spine is essential for good and natural breathing. This is easiest in five postures:

1. **Lying** on the ground. Use a blanket or a warm quilt if you live in a cold climate. A bed is not recommended as it is too soft and may invite dozing or sleep. Lie on your back, keep the feet together and the hands at the sides. This is a form of śavāsana, the posture of the corpse. A small pillow under the head may be useful and a piece of cloth over the eyes if you want to improve inner vision. Note that this is a matter of preference; some people visualise and imagine easier against a dark background, others against a bright one.



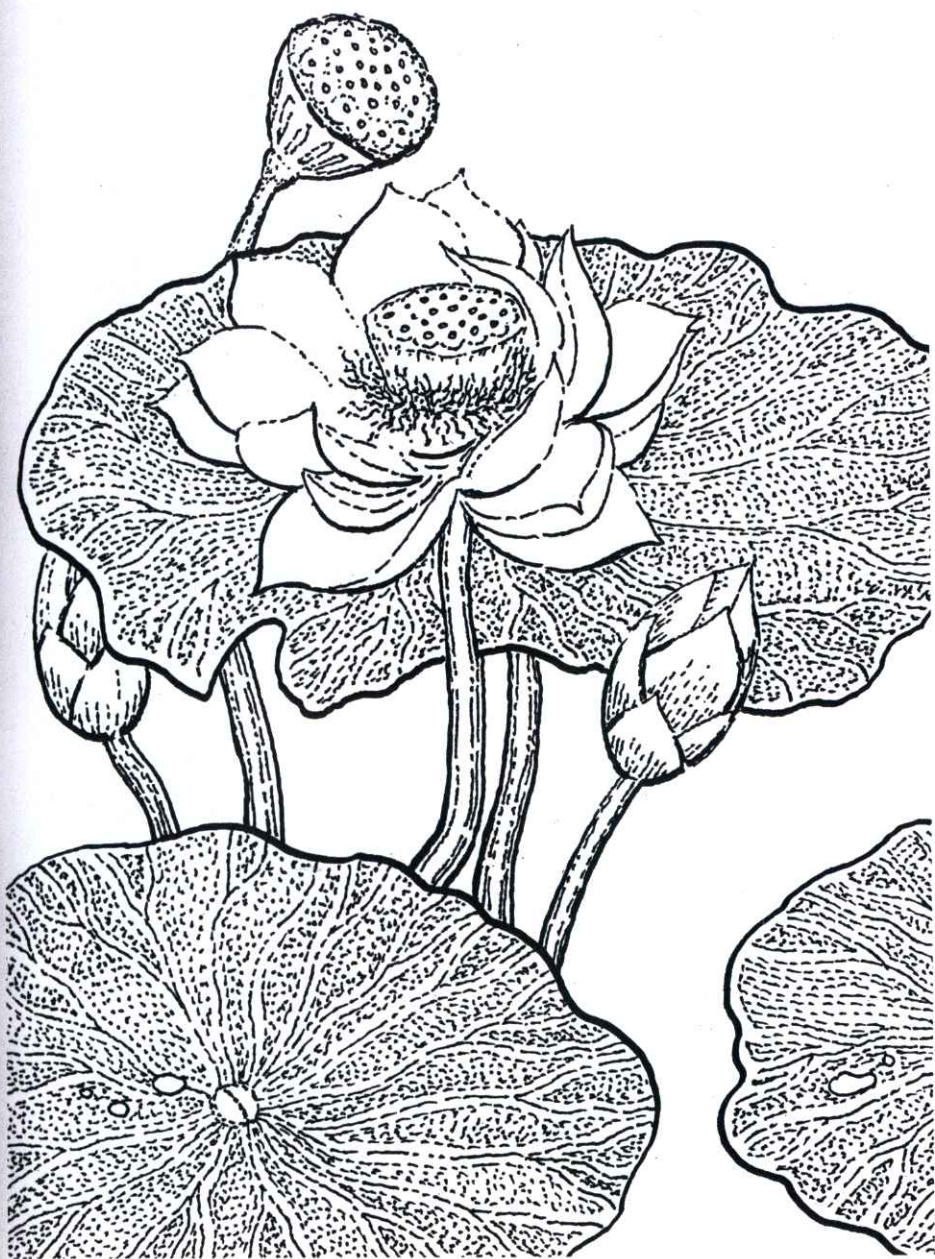


Figure 28 - Lotus.

Śavāsana is a nice way of relaxing for long periods. It can also be a trance state when you identify with Śiva as a corpse and play dead. The advantage of śavāsana is that the posture is almost completely relaxed. You can let go and trust gravity to support you. At first you may find that body needs a few minor adjustments. Relaxing begins with becoming aware of your body. Make yourself comfortable. Adjust your limbs, wriggle around a little, then let go and forget.

2. **Seated** on the ground. In many Tantric and Yogic traditions, the recommended position is the Lotus-posture (padmāsana), where you have the legs crossed, each foot lying on top of the opposite thigh. The spine is kept erect and the head bends down slightly at the junction of the skull and the spine, the hands rest in your lap, on the thighs or soles of the feet or are crossed behind the back. Personally, I would counsel that you are very careful with such postures or simply avoid them. Much depends on where you come from. People in Asia generally have more compact and durable knees than Caucasians, whose limbs are generally longer and whose joints connect more loosely. This is not racism but the outcome of a study made by *Black Belt magazine* around the late seventies or early eighties. Studying advanced Taekwon Do practitioners, it turned out that knee injuries are a lot more common among Caucasians than among Asians. Hard and high kicks can really wear out the meniscus, the same goes for the wonderfully twisted postures used by some Wu Shu styles and for a good many meditational āsanas. This does not mean that Westerners can't practice such things. They should be aware, however, that after some years, they may get a heavy bill for their pursuit. Generally, knee injuries do not appear instantly, but when they do they may result in swollen knees, stiff legs, and a lot of pain whenever one tries to walk up or down a slope. They do not only happen to yogīs, martial artists, dancers, or soccer players. Half of the people who undergo knee surgery are housewives, gardeners, tile-layers, archaeologists, and anybody who happens to kneel a lot. Meniscus surgery, by the way, is not a well developed art and frequently results in long-term damage.

I should add that people who practise Crowley style Yoga also feature on this list. Crowley wrote about an obscure form of yoga he claimed to have learned in Ceylon. To master posture, he proposed one has to assume one of the more advanced and straining positions of classical yoga and remain in it without any motion. This soon leads to cramp, then to pain, and if you persist, so the old trickster proposed, eventually the pain disappears and you obtain a wonderfully relaxed and blissful posture that can be held for hours with no problems whatsoever. So much for the theory. Of course I tried this and spent months of daily practice in sheer agony. Instead of becoming pleasant the posture only became unbearable, and the only relief happened when the blood circulation stopped and the limbs went 'to sleep'. Not even this was satisfactory and the result was totally useless for meditation. Over the years I met a few people who had been through the same torture. None of us had achieved any good results, but some had severely damaged



their knees. I wonder whether Crowley actually practised what he wrote about. Pain is a warning signal. If you ignore it out of sheer stupid thick-headed persistence, you may hurt yourself more than you notice.

Other kneeling postures, such as the diamond-posture (*vajrāsana*) i.e. kneeling on your shins, sitting on your feet or between them, can also eventually lead to knee troubles. This is a great shame as the posture is so good for absolutely centred resting. Sitting with crossed legs, especially when these are sort of loosely crossed, may be a little easier on the joints but tends to produce a slumped posture, which may interfere with breathing. This can be reduced to some extent by sitting on a hard and high cushion.

Some yogis use a variant of the cross-legged seat. They tie a broad belt or sash in a loop. Sitting cross-legged within the loop, they gain some support for their back by putting pressure on the legs. This makes the knees rise to some extent. Of course this posture is not very upright and does not invite deep breathing. It can be useful for minimal breathing and prolonged visualisation, however.

Last, there is a posture for meditation that does not involve sitting with a straight back. It is called *yonimudrā* in the *Toḍala Tantra*, 2, 17c-22 ab (see Sanjukta Gupta in White 2000), but you shouldn't let the term confuse you. There is a wide range of different postures, acts, and gestures that have been called *yonimudrā* at one time or another. Sit on the floor, facing east or north. Stretch your legs before you. Now pull up the knees and cross your arms on top of them. Lean forward and rest your head on the knees. This is easiest when you do not keep your feet side by side but cross them at the ankles. This posture requires a lot of relaxation. It is useful for trancing and seeing visions. When your head rests on the hands/knees, you will find that your breathing is restricted. It's very hard to take deep full breaths when there simply is no space for them. Instead, the posture promotes shallow and reduced breathing. This makes it eminently useful for visions, oracles, or when you simply want to refresh your system. Note that shallow breathing can be enforced if you want to do this the stupid way. It's much easier when you introvert and go into the heart-cave within yourself. When you turn inward, you may find that breathing becomes shallow and faint naturally.

3. **Sitting on a chair** is a useful alternative. Sure, it does not look very yogic, holy, or even moderately exotic. Nevertheless it has a lot of advantages and quite a long tradition in the East. If you sit on a hard chair, your bum almost on the edge, and the legs about one shoulder width apart, hands on thighs or knees (depending on the length of your arms), you can enjoy an erect spine, full lung motion, and avoid all strain on the knees. Men should take care that their testicles hang freely, that's one of the reasons to sit on the edge. Watch out for a few minor details. Make sure your chair is really level. Keep your lower legs vertical and the feet at the same distance and angle - it's amazing how easy it is to get out of balance by even the slightest difference in leg position. And keep the upper arms hanging vertically too, otherwise your torso might bend

slightly forward or backwards. The proper position of the hands on the thighs is easy to find. Sit erect and allow your arms to hang at your flanks. Take a few deep breaths. Then lift up your hands and lower arms while keeping the upper arms exactly as they are hanging, and place the hands on the thighs. The shoulders should be set back a little. Keep them down as you breathe. You'll know when you sit straight as it feels good. The proper sensation is firm, relaxed, and pleasant.

4. **Standing** is easiest but also a bit tricky. Most people do not stand very erect, and when you learn (or remember) to do so you may find that there are more joints where posture can be a tiny little bit off centre, out of balance, or away from the centre line than you ever imagined. Keep your feet shoulder width apart. The knees may be slightly bent, as stiff legs tend to freeze the pelvis (Wilhelm Reich's expression). You will soon learn that body tends to slump from time to time, unless you happen to experience an all-body energy flow that keeps you vertical. This means awareness, watchfulness, and regular adaptation. Hold your head high! Tilt it forward so that you look slightly down. This tilting is traditionally recommended for most postures, it is done by bending the head at the junction of the spine and skull, like drawing your chin towards the throat. If you simply allow your head and neck to slump forward this may obstruct the flow of energy. Keep the shoulders down and back, the arms hang relaxed at the sides. Some like to cross their arms behind the back, or to clasp their hands behind the back. All of this sounds not only difficult, it may also overload the beginner with so many points to watch that breathing becomes strained and posture is cramped. Relax and smile. You are journeying, and learn as you proceed. Things take a while to develop. Learning upright posture can be quite an achievement. Every posture has a lot of advantages and shortcomings, especially when kept for longer periods. Occasionally it is useful to move a little. Especially when you practice full breathing you may find that you have to move your arms from time to time, to stretch, or to walk a few steps. Do so!

5. **Walking**. This is hardest to learn, as you need to stay in motion while keeping very much erect. On the other hand it is most fun, as it allows you to combine a gentle and slow (or slower) walk through nature with a lot of highly enjoyable breathing. If you do breathing exercises while walking, stop from time to time to check your posture and to make sure the energy is steadily aligned and your weight is centred in the belly.

6. Any **relaxed posture**. Yogis do not always sit straight like a pillar. Apart from some loonies who get a kick from suffering, a yogi likes to recline just as everybody else does. One way to ease the back is a small crutch. You can see it on some pictures of Śiva. The god sits wonderfully upright, but one of his arms is set in the crutch so he can relax and lean a little. Others sit with their back against a wall. Chose a warm one,



leaning against a cold wall in a cold climate is not very good for your health. Another option is to recline on some easy chair or sofa. You won't find this in the elder textbooks on yoga, but it is certainly recommended by more recent teachers, such as Swami Śivananda (1982: 187). Insisting on any special posture is a form of rigidity. As a species humans have evolved sufficiently to leave trees and move on ground. We have adapted to upright posture, but we are not properly developed for it. Every posture, no matter how tense or loose, becomes unbearable when assumed for too long. As mobile animals we should move from time to time, and enjoy it.

## Shaking, Swaying, and Primal Vibration

As you discovered earlier, there used to be a class of seers in ancient Vedic India who were called *vipra*, as they used to vibrate when in states of ecstasy. These seers came from many levels of society. Some were Brahmins by birth, others came from less exalted classes. Some were seers, sages, recluses, yogis, or simply dropouts living on the fringes of society. Even the gods became *vipras* when a bit of magic was required, and shook merrily while they projected glammers. With the advent of early Hinduism, such events seem to have become less common. The class of *vipras* continued, you can find a fair share in the *Mahābhārata*, but the act of shaking is suspiciously absent in many texts on yoga. Did people cease to shake, just as they ceased to ingest soma? Or did they cease to mention it in literature? Is shaking something that appeals to Brahmins, or is it restricted to folk religion?

Here are some sources that show how shaking, trembling, and swaying continued. Not necessarily in straight yoga. A good many yogins attempted to become completely still, if not rigid, and succeeded remarkably. They formed the common impression that in Indian yoga trance and meditation require a body as inert and stiff as a corpse. What most overlook is that a vast amount of spirituality happens without any sort of yogic discipline.

Consider *bhakti*. *Bhakti* means partaking. In the *bhakti* movement, you can see fervent believers who go to extremes of god-loving, settle down, and live there. You do not need much training for *bhakti*, nor do you need a keen intellect, self-knowledge, education, or any special merit. All you need is love. Maybe this sounds simple, but love, as a pure emotion, is also a world-shaking experience and a complex trance-state. Love can be woken, purified, refined, and applied with devastating results. In *bhakti*, love for the divine mingles with dedication and sacrifice. Devotees offer themselves to their deity, just as they are, and give their all. Some attain great states of longing, yearning, and craving, others float off into a bliss of sheer, unsophisticated unity and the deity manifests through them. In *bhakti*, the main thing is not technical skill or intellectual knowledge. *Bhakti* works with strong emotions and total abandon. It is based on simplicity and produces the greatest effects when the worshippers are simple, unpretentious, and humble. Such events are

common enough at public festivity, during group rituals, or on holy days, especially among members of the 'lower' classes. Some sway while they sing, others stagger around like they are drunk, or shake all over. All of which works excellently, but rarely makes it into serious treatises on yoga or Tantra, which are generally written and read by intellectuals, i.e. folks who are naturally challenged by simple, humble emotionality. But even among studied folk there are occasions when the old excitement wells up and body begins to shake. The *Kaulajñāna nirmaya*, 14, mentions trembling of hands, limbs, head, voice, and the entire body during the activation of the cakras. When June McDaniel interviewed Tapan Goswami, a priest of Kālī (in White, 2000: 74), he related that possession by Kālī or his grandfather (an ancestral spirit) usually begins with a cold wind in his back. Then follows shivering, his hair seems to stand on end, and then the deity or spirit takes over. Unlike many possessed people, Tapan Goswami does not suffer amnesia but remains fully conscious and is able to recall the entire event. More on shaking Kālī worshippers further on.

In the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, 2,2,63 by Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, (in June McDaniel, 1989: 36). We read of the famous Caitanya, devotee of Kṛṣṇa: *Caitanya's body was paralyzed, trembled, perspired, paled, wept and choked. He was thrilled. He would laugh, cry, dance and sing, running here and there, and sometimes he would fall unconscious on the ground.*

The *Caitanya Bhāgavata*, 2, 8, 157 by Vṛndāvana Dāsa (McDaniel, 1989: 37) states: *From time to time all of his limbs shake violently and his teeth chatter like a child who is freezing.* Such behaviour is not unusual for the mad saints of India. Indeed, Indian medicine draws no firm distinction between behaviour exhibited by ordinary lunatics and the spiritually excited. The behaviour of both may look similar, but the internal experience differs. An ecstatic seer goes into the 'fit' voluntarily and may also leave it at will. No matter how odd the symptoms, the genuine saint rides the flow of divine ecstasy and returns with a vision of integration. S/he is spiritually nourished by the experience, while the ordinary lunatic is not. June McDaniel describes Kālī priests and worshippers who sway while they sing hymns to the goddess, and adds: *The Śākta states of divine madness are characterized by confusion, passion, and loss of self-control: trembling, laughing, weeping and crying out before the goddess, rolling on the ground.* (1989: 117).

Swaying may be considered a slower form of shaking. Body easily begins to sway in rhythm with mantra and song, and when this is encouraged, the mind may become excited, inspired, and accelerate the pulsation. Slow swaying can lead to calm and soothing trances, vigorous and enthusiastic swaying may naturally give way to full shaking. Before long, you may find yourself happily trembling. The frequency of the shudders can be influenced by your mind, just as your awareness is influenced by the ecstatic pulsation. Your mind's excitement can make body shake, your body's shaking can make your mind excited. Done properly, body and mind form a feed-back loop and reinforce each other. Add the presence of the divine and you'll find yourself exploring states of awareness you've never known before.





Figure 29 - The Living Wasteland.

The *Kulārjaya Tantra*, 14, 64-65 (trans. Rai) cites the symptoms of vedha, the 'piercing' that happens during a special form of initiation. The impact of the guru and the deity produce six symptoms: 64. *Ananda (joy), Kampa (tremor), Udbhava (new birth), Ghūrṇā (reeling), Nidrā (sleep), Mūrchā (swooning) these, O Kuleśvarī, are said to be the six conditions of Vedha.* 65. *O Kuleśvarī! These six characteristics are seen at the time of the impact of Vedha. Wherever be the person so struck he is liberated, there is no doubt about it.*

Do the Tantric gods shake? Mike Magee's translation of the *Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra*, 4 seems to suggest so, as it shows Kālī shaking. In Louise Finn's more scholarly translation, it is not Kālī but the earth beneath the goddess who shakes. In our correspondence (spring 2005), she admitted that it might be conceivable that the earth, seen as a goddess (Medinī), trembles, but the original text does not allow for Kālī's trembling. However, from practical experience I can add that when the seer shakes, both goddess and the earth beneath her take on a certain vibrating appearance. The optic system in eyes and brain tends to reduce the visual effects of the jolts, but even when vision is perfectly smoothed, a certain vibration remains.

Louise Finn kindly supplied me with two quotations (thank you!) from a text she is translating, the *Prapañcasara Tantra*, 34, 74: It describes the goddess as 'the daughter of the mountain' (i.e. Pārvatī) with 'three eyes... and a quivering slender body.' The word used for quivering is 'sphurita' from the root 'sphur'. It can mean 'to dart, tremble, throb, quiver, palpitate, flash, gleam, sparkle!' However, as the goddess is also (unusually) riding a horse, the context does not suggest ritual shaking behaviour. Also 34,28: 'There will approach a submissive woman enfeebled by the arrows of the god of love and swaying/stumbling with desire'. She added that the more usual verb to indicate 'shaking, excitement and agitation' would be *kṣubh*.

Here is another one: **kampa** (see *Tāntrikābhidhānaśāstra*, 2, p. 49). Kampa can mean shaking, trembling, but it can also mean a column (good news for all who know the world tree, earth axis, Mount Meru, or Mahāliṅga within them). In shaking, it can easily happen that you feel like a pillar of sheer energy, oscillating, vibrating, and pulsating between the height and depth. In Siddhānta literature, kampa is part of the Śaktipāta, a moment of grace when the power of Śakti shoots through the body of the worshipper. Śaktipāta can be granted by the touch of a guru, but it is a blessing given only to selected, rare disciples who have exhausted all their resources and still find themselves stuck. What modern systems call Śaktipāta, namely a ritual when entire groups are blessed, has no relation to the elder custom. More frequently, Śaktipāta is spontaneously granted by the gods. Kampa can also occur during dikṣā, when a mantra wakes or during the ascent of Kuṇḍalinī. Abhinavagupta related kampa (like everything else) to the heart, and classed it as the third (of five) visible signs of divine possession. It may be interesting to note the importance of sphur in Abhinavagupta's lore (Muller-Ortega, 1989: 118). Here, the self-consciousness within the heart is characterised by a certain vibration (spanda) that turns out to be the sub-stratum of all



manifest experience. The whole world, and our experience of it, is based on vibration. If you are an experienced trancer, you may be aware that good shaking is not done by conscious effort, it happens by inspiration and release. You do not enter the world of vibration, you return to it. When you allow your body and mind to participate in the all-inclusive sphurita you may realise that all things vibrate all of the time.

The fifth sign is called **ghūrṇi**, staggering. According to Abhinavagupta (*Tantrāloka*, 5, 104b-105a and 107b-108), staggering happens when a yogī has united with the universe, be it by experiencing divine bliss or by possession by a deity. *Then, having attained the plane of the supreme Reality, experiencing (his own) consciousness as the universe, he staggers, for staggering is 'the great pervasion'.* (*Tāntrikābhidhānaśāstra*, 2: 217). He adds that the five signs show when five cakras are pierced, staggering appearing when the Kuṇḍalini reaches the highest sphere (above your head). It can also happen when the yogī, immersed in Kula/Śakti, has drunk the supreme wine of Bhairava. In this state, any posture assumed by the adept automatically becomes a sacred mudrā. He goes on to describe Śiva as *staggering, intoxicated by his absolute freedom*. Staggering is well attested from devotional ritual. When Rāmakṛṣṇa became ecstatic, he staggered and stumbled, and had to be supported by his students. The same went for Rāmprasād Sen, who staggered when the bliss of Kālī came over him. Both seers were often thought drunk by the uninitiated. Drunk on the divine, they both tended to assume that real drunkards are enflamed by divine grace.

For a practical introduction of swaying and shaking trances and how to enjoy them, read *Seidways*.

## Nyāsa: a Touch of the Divine

Nyāsa means 'placing'. This ritual act can happen at several points of ritual. How does the Tantric start the day? In many texts, we begin with a ritual bath involving immersions in a river and some mantra recitation. After the bath, the worshipper collects water in a vessel for further ritual and goes home. S/he prepares a ritual space, a place to sit, and usually performs a little purification ceremony. One such method is briefly alluded to in the *Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra* 2, 15.

First, the **Purification of the Self (ātmāśuddhi)**. This may be done by intoning your favourite mantras while 'placing' (nyāsa) them on a number of cakras. Placing means touching. The actual technique is of little importance. Some spots will be fine when you apply your fingertips, others, such as the belly and heart, may be stimulated when you use the whole palm. You can touch, but you can also use a Daoist technique and gently rub the location in circles. In some systems, it is enough to touch navel, heart, and head. In others, you begin by touching the heart and then move upward, touching various cakras. Every cakra system is a convenience. There are as many cakras as you chose to discover and develop. Body is full of sacred spaces. Find those

that make sense to you and develop them. In addition, the palms of the hands are anointed. As you recite the proper mantras, you circle the palm of one hand with index and middle fingers of the other and strike it sharply. Incidentally, this mudrā (index and middle fingers extended upward, the other fingers curled) appears prominently in practical Daoism and in Chinese martial arts, where it can symbolise a sword, and in the esoteric rites of Tantric Buddhism of China and Japan, where it is frequently used to bless, invoke, place, move, banish, anoint, or draw sigils. The amount (and nature) of mantras placed at various locations varies widely. Some systems carried the rite to extremes of complication, others preferred the fast and simple style. May I suggest that you explore both possibilities to become really flexible?

**Bhūmīśuddhi, the Purification of the Earth**, is the next step. This simply involves striking the ground with your heel while reciting mantra. Usually the practitioner turns around and stamps on the ground in all (four or eight) directions. This act is a banishing, especially when it is accompanied by clapping hands and vibrating the fierce mantra 'Phat!' (the Ph sounds like an aspirated, explosive P, not like an F). It scares away evil spirits, to be sure, but it also has the advantage that it wakes attention, puts out a clear signal, and gives a certain shock to the body. It is very useful to shake the mind out of routine thinking and lethargy.

Last follows **dehaśuddhi, the Purification of the Body**. For this rite, you call upon your personal deity by intoning its seed mantra. Visualise and feel the seed mantra vibrating in your palms. Then smear it over your body from head downwards to the toes seven times, vibrating it all the time. Well done! With these preliminaries you have purified your consciousness, ritual space, and body and are ready and prepared for further meditation.

## Initiation and Nyāsa

These simple ritual acts are not the only forms of nyāsa. Something very similar takes place during initiation rites. In traditional Kaula worship, it was good form to make love only among initiates. To practice ritual love-making with an un-initiate was strongly forbidden. Good thinking. When you integrate someone else in your ritual, you have to be certain that this person is competent for the job. Most Tantras are very strict on this point, and for good reason. If you want to energise your magic with the participation of a partner and her/his elixirs, you have to be sure the partner is competent to handle the ritual and its energies. In many rituals, the partner assumes the role of the deity, in some cases s/he is obsessed by that deity. You can't get such a level of magical competence by simply falling into bed with anyone who strikes your fancy. To make sure that a certain standard of skill was achieved, several Tantras give catalogues of virtues that a ritual partners should exhibit. Being very devoted to the gods, inward of nature, peaceful, of good character, and of pure thinking are just the beginnings of the requirements. And even with the best character in the world, the ritual



partner still required some form of initiation. This might be a safety mechanism, as it ensured that rites involving congress were only performed among people who knew what was going on. Compare this with Crowley's sexual magick. The old crow was not very considerate of other people and frequently engaged prostitutes for his purposes. Unlike most Tāntrikas, he did not bother to initiate them, or even to inform them that they were participating in a ritual. Of course finding a partner for sexual rites is a lot easier when that person simply assumes that you want to make love. It's not very honest, though, and can put a lot of pressure on the partner, who probably is not very competent in dealing with it. Such things are apt to recoil.

In left-hand Tantra, initiation of the partner is a must. The simplest way of doing it is to whisper a seed mantra into her/his left ear. This is usually the mantra Hṛīm, useful for beginnings of all sorts and one of the basic vibrations of the goddess in her creative phase. This act starts the initiation, which is completed only when the deity is fully brought into the body of the partner. Anything below this standard is not good enough.

In the *Kulacūdāmaṇi Tantra*, 4, 56-58, a basic initiation by nyāsa appears. As usual, the description is very brief, meaning that you either need a guru to fill in the gaps or an inspired creative mind to develop something really good. If you know your inner guru, you can have both. By touch, the sādḥaka places cakras on a number of places and worships them with devotion. According to Louise Finn's commentary, these spots are 1. Devikuta (the top surface of the feet), 2. Uḍḍina (legs?), 3. Kāmarūpa (the genitals), 4. Sloping Ground (thighs), 5. Jālandhara (breasts), 6. Pūrṇa (belly, stomach?), and 7. Sacrificial Ground (inner genitals). After reciting mantra eight times, ten times, a hundred, or a thousand times at these places of worship, the sādḥaka finally moves his pīṭha (seat, sacred place, here: penis) into *the abode of the pot*. This does not end the ritual, indeed the worship continues all the time. You may notice that there are faster and simpler ways of making love. Initiation by nyāsa is a complex and extended affair that takes a while. This is typical for lovemaking or adoration of genitals in the left-hand path. Usually, the preparations involve a formidable amount of mantra repetition, giving even an inexperienced partner time to tune in to the divine consciousness. More so, the process was not a formality. When you go to a Catholic mass, nobody is going to check whether the sacrament had any effect on you. In many cults, people are initiated as the initiator says so. Some experience a change of awareness and others do not. The convenient excuse is that these were initiated unconsciously, and that the effect will (hopefully) appear sometime in the future. For Tantric explorers, such acts of wishful thinking are not good enough. As the *Lakṣmī Tantra* 43, 78 makes absolutely clear, there are signs that show when Lakṣmī has entered the body of a Śakti. S/he experiences stillness, complete relaxation, and a blissful state of samādhi. The text cautions the sādḥaka that the Śakti will love this state so much that the rite should better be performed only with one's own spouse. Doing it with the partner, mate, or wife of another can lead to problems. Initiation is more

than just making a show according to ritual formulas and hoping for the best. When it works, there are specific symptoms that the divine presence has entered the body/mind of your partner. Many schools of Tantra were eminently pragmatic. They did not simply assume that things work, they observed closely and tested their results.

## An Armour of Protection

Placing of mantras equals placing of deities: a mantra is usually a deity in its body of sound. Using touch, you can localise deities, spirits, power-beasts, energies, elements, and numerous other uplifting experiences in your body and thereby earth them in your world. One such form of *nyāsa* is to install a number of deities all over your body, so that wherever you walk or rest, you are effectively within a complex temple and well protected from dangerous influences. Such a rite was considered the creation of an armour. It is especially popular among worshippers of the heroic sort, who are expected to do their rituals and meditations in dangerous, dramatic, morbid, or unclean locations. Let's just look at one variation of the rite. It comes from the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*, 7, 55-64 and is called: The Protective mantra Trailokya-Vijaya (Three-Worlds-Conqueror) of Ādyā Kālīkā. I have used and adapted Woodroffe's 1913 translation.

Its seer is Śiva, the metre is *anuṣṭup* (thirty-two syllables in each verse), the deity is the primordial Kālī, the seed is *Hrīm*, the Śakti is Kāma bīja (*Klīm* or *Śrīm*), and its kilaka (bolt, i.e. ending) is *Krīm*.

*Hrīm*, may the Ādyā (Primordial One) protect my head;  
*Śrīm*, may Kālī (Black) protect my face;  
*Krīm*, may Paraśakti (Supreme Energy/Form) protect my heart;  
May Parātparā (the Supreme of the Supreme) protect my throat;  
May Jagaddhātṛī (the Universe-Supporting Mother) protect my two eyes;  
May Śaṅkarī (She who grants Prosperity) protect my two ears;  
May Mahāmāyā (Great Illusion/Creation) protect my power of smell;  
May Sarva-Maṅgalā (All-Auspicious) protect my sense of taste;  
May Kaumārī (fem. of Kaumāra/Kārttikeya, god of war) protect my teeth;  
May Kamalālaya (Lotus-Dweller, i.e. Lakṣmī) protect my cheeks;  
May Kṣamā (Benevolence or Forgiveness) protect my upper and lower lips;  
May Cāru-Hāsinī (Sweetly Smiling) protect my chin;  
May Kuleśānī (Sovereign Mistress of the Kulas) protect my neck;  
May Kṛpā-Mayī (Merciful One) protect the nape of my neck;  
May Bāhu-Da (Arm-Giver) protect my two arms;  
May Kaivalya-Dāyinī (Giver of Emancipation) protect my two hands;  
May Karpadinī (Wearer of Tangled Hair) protect my shoulders;



*May Trailokya-Tāriṇī (Saviour of the Three Worlds) protect my back;*  
*May Aparṇā (She who had not even Leaves for Food) protect my two sides;*  
*May Kamaṭhāsanā (She who sits/dwells in the kamaṭa vessel, i.e. gourd, coconut etc.) protect my hips;*  
*May Viśālākṣī (Large-Eyed) protect my navel;*  
*May Prabhā-Vatī (Radiant One) protect my genitals;*  
*May Kalyāṇī (Propitious One) protect my thighs;*  
*May Pārvatī (Daughter of the Himalayas) protect my feet;*  
*May Jaya-Durgā (Victorious Durgā) protect my vital breaths;*  
*And Sarva-Siddhi-Dā (Giver of Perfection) protect all parts of my body.*  
*As to those parts as have not been mentioned in this Kavacha (armour), and are unprotected, may the Eternal Primeval Kālī protect all such.*

As you may have noticed, this sort of protective nyāsa is by no means unique to the Tantrics. Very similar consecrations of the body by naming divine entities and touching various parts of anatomy abound in worship worldwide. Just consider how Catholics cross themselves, how the devil is officially exorcised from each limb, or think of the Island-Celtic Loricas (Lorica: armour) of the late Middle Ages. I wonder whether these are imported Tantric techniques. Anyway, I am sure you need no further illustration. Just go ahead and compose a similar spell that incorporates the gods and spirits of your world - in *your* body. Find, discover, make up, or invent what you need. You need not worry if this takes a while. The gods like to be integrated in body, but they may also like to move around a bit. Don't worry about getting everything perfectly right. Magick requires flexibility. When you have invented a useful system, ask the gods if they like it and put it to practice. You may need a bit of experience. After a few weeks of daily application you will know whether things are fine. Maybe some of your gods, spirits, power animals, or whatever will shift around or find a better place. Maybe you'll have to integrate a few more, or find that similar ones move into the same spot. Whatever you cook up will be a working solution. It will work when you imbue the rite with passion and joy, and put a great big ecstatic smile into each centre that you touch. Go for feeling! Mere imagination and speech are not enough. You will sense when the proper connections are made. The presence of the gods should make your body feel joyous, ecstatic, powerful. And don't you simply sit there waiting for it to happen! When you want joy and bliss in your body you can jolly well put it there!

## Mudrās

Fingers have power. Gestures have power. You only have to find and wake it. Look at a baby. At a very early stage, it will begin to explore its hands. Hands are weird things. They are attached to your body in a

distant sort of way. They come out of your wrists and end in five wriggly things that move independently. It takes a baby a while to discover how this works. At this stage it often rests in deep concentration and stares at its fingers in awe.

Mudrās! Each position of the hands is a miracle. And each of them can mean a lot to you.

When we get older, we get used to this, and forget the miracle. You can put the magick back in your fingers. Simply go into trance, return to baby consciousness, remember, and discover anew.

Now that you have done this you might like to explore the matter further. Think of the Tāntrikas who used to roam India up to a few centuries ago. Many worshippers, male and female, went travelling and visited sacred places, teachers, and sites of learning. On the long, dusty road, all excess baggage is too much. So the religious equipment was reduced to a few basic items that could be carried easily. Tantra includes many minimalist elements. Why shrines, temples, and images of gods when you can locate the deities in your body and wake them with a bit of mantra and inspired imagination? Why carry a huge diagram of the cosmos when you can scratch a yantra into the ground? Why use all sorts of ceremonial daggers, swords, wands, fly whisks, flowers, blossoms, sacrificial animals, and whatnot when you can represent these phenomena, and involve them in ritual, simply by shaping your fingers in an odd way?

Mudrā is one of the most enigmatic concepts of Tantra. In most books the term is simply translated as an unusual position of the hands. Mudrās can be complicated alignments of fingers and hands, but the term has a much wider range of meanings. The root 'mud' may come from 'to please' (yourself, a deity, your partner, or whoever).

A mudrā can be a seal or a bolt. It can be a posture of the body, sealing the apertures. It can be a gesture of hands and arms, but it may also be a posture of the entire body. Occasionally, the terms mudrā and āsana (seat, posture) are synonyms.

Here is a good one. Karālā, Karālī (She with the Terrifying Gaping Mouth) is a fear-inspiring Tantric goddess (or a whole group of yoginīs) who exhibits awful teeth and has the power to attract anybody. To do her mudrā, pull the corners of your mouth apart with ring and little fingers, look fiercely, wriggle your tongue, and shout 'hāhā'. This scares demons and improves your mood. Try it first thing in the morning before your bathroom mirror.

In the rite of the Five Ms, mudrā may mean 'parched grain', which may be real grains or a spicy dish made of kidney beans (an aphrodisiac). It can also, as some scholars hypothesise, be a code term for some unknown drug. Or it could be a reference to bījas, i.e. seed mantras parched by the fire of desire. Or to the seed (sperm) of a yogī after its parching in the yoni of the yoginī. Among the north Indian Nāthas, mudrās were heavy wooden ear-rings, a sign of their spiritual tradition. Not that this is all. In ritual, a mudrā can also be a reference to some trance state, or to the technical means of obsession. And to round



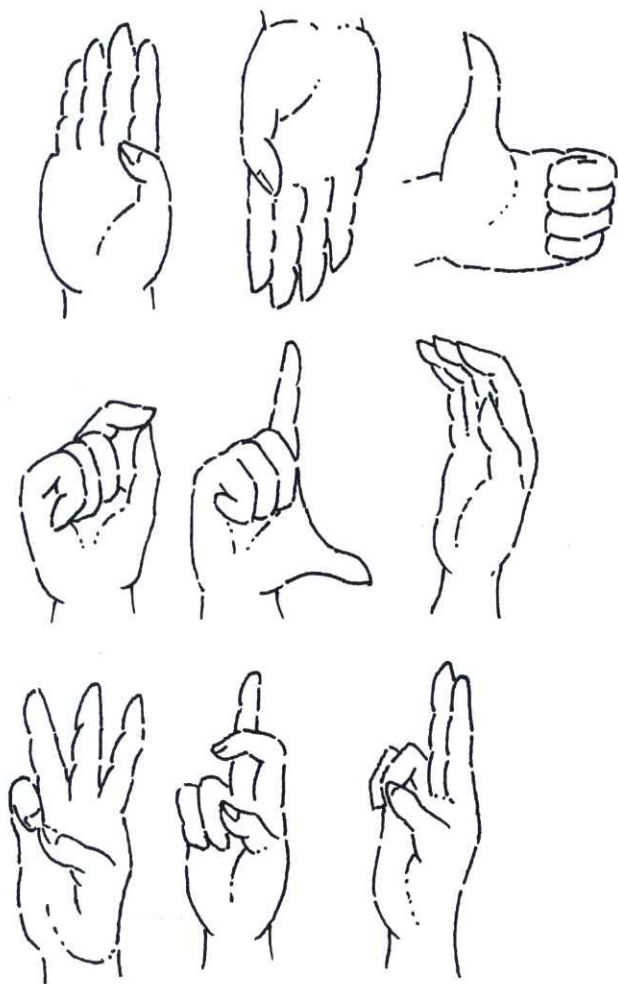


Figure 30 - Mudrās.

Top left: Abhaya. Top centre: Vara. Top right: Sikhara.  
 Middle left: Kapitha. Middle centre: Candrakalā. Middle right: Sarpasirsaṁ.  
 Bottom left: Trisula. Bottom centre: Aṅkusa. Bottom right: Khadga.

things off, in early Hindu and Buddhist Tantra a mudrā is the term for a female ritual partner. Or for the juices created by making love.

As this book makes things nice and simple (I'm sure you noticed this), we'll focus on mudrā as hand gestures here. No doubt you have seen a lot of mudrās in Indian books or dance performances. They look elegant and exotic and carry their very own glamour and enchantment. Some find it enough to look up a few in some trashy book. They knot their fingers and believe that all sorts of powers and blessings transform

their lives. Well and good. For some people, a simple placebo seems to be enough. For the more sceptical, things are less easy. They do not experience massive changes of consciousness just because their fingers are twisted in a meaningful way. Pretence is one thing, but when you want effects, you may have to be more thorough.

## Helpful Hands

Let's look at a few mudrās of the Tantric traditions. Some may be useful for you, others too strained or specialised. No matter. Any mudrā will work when you associate it properly to the states you wish to experience. If you find nothing suitable, invent a new one. Some mudrās simply happen. You may find yourself in some extreme trance state and use the postures and gestures of that state as a link to access it another day. Just like āsanās, mudrās may happen naturally. Body tends to invent mudrās, given half a chance.

**Abhaya Mudrā.** This gesture appears prominently in divine images. It liberates from fear and assures safety. The thumb position can be varied. As you can see, the hand is open, signifying emptiness, and the fingers point upwards. This symbolises the upward path of Kuṇḍalinī, i.e. the process of dissolution that frees the jīva from the limitations of body, identity, and form. Fear is only possible when there is somebody to be afraid. When body/identity dissolve, fear cannot exist. This is the path of liberation,

**Vara Mudrā.** This gesture is the opposite of abhaya. It symbolises generosity, the granting of boons, and the fulfilment of wishes. On a simple level it means that the deity gives to you. In a more mystic interpretation it symbolises the downward path of Kuṇḍalinī, or of the shower of elixir, which creates the worlds as it descends from the height. As consciousness returns to earth, it becomes ever more dense and material, and induces changes in the world. This is the path of magical manifestation.

**Sikhara** is a popular mudrā from the sacred dance traditions of India. It symbolises, among other things, Śiva and the Śivaliṅga, but it can also mean holding a bow or sounding a bell, a pillar, asking a question, and embracing another.

**Kapittha** is another dance mudrā. First of all it can represent the goddesses Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī. It can mean an offering of incense and camphor, denote the act of milking cows, and represent pulling and holding things.

**Candrakalā** is the unit of the moon, hence a symbol of the elixir. It means the moon, a face, Śiva's crown (Kālī and Śiva have moon-sickles in their hair), and a cudgel.

**Sarpasirsam** signifies serpents in general and cobras in particular. It can also mean 'to sprinkle water' in a context of benediction, the ears of an elephant, or the broad arms of a wrestler.



**Trisula mudrā** represents the trinity. Well, you know that are quite a few trinities in Indian lore, so go ahead and make your choice. It also represents the trident carried by Śiva and Durgā.

**Aṅkusa** is an elephant hook. This is a useful utensil to prod and pull any big beast (such as your ego) and to direct its course. The sign has its relevance in learning and teaching, but it can also be used to pull something to you or to make it move away. Good for invocations and consecrations!

**Khadga** means sword or sabre. This mudrā is one of the most popular in east Asian Tantra, and can be found among Hindus, Buddhists, and Daoists, including Chinese martial artists. In general, the sword is the force of the intellect to differentiate, to separate, to divide, to cut complex things into smaller elements. A highly useful but also a very delusive tool. You can wield a sword to banish an undesirable or hostile influence, but you could also understand that separation is only possible on the plane of phenomenal existence. Good exorcists don't banish so much, they integrate. However, in the realm of difference, the sword is a tool that makes a difference. Hence the gesture is often used for banishing and purification. It can also be used to project energy and consciousness, especially when a few mantras have been muttered over the fingertips. In the hand of Kālī, the sword liberates.

**Lelihāna** means 'to stick out'. The little finger sticks out of the fist and represents the ONE, Brahman, the single unifying principle, your personal deity, and who- or whatever occupies the central spot of your mind/world maṇḍala. Use it to anoint objects (or your brow) with fluids, red colour, or what you so will.

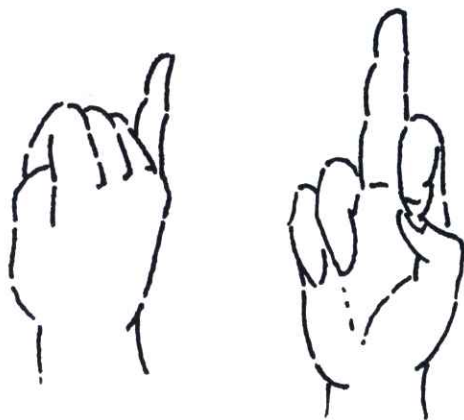


Figure 31 - More Mudrās.  
Left: Lelihāna. Right: Paramī.

**Paramī** is a useful mudrā for consecrations. Generally, you look at the object or person you wish to bless and draw a circle around it with the middle finger. You can use paramī to consecrate food, offerings, ritual tools, but you can also do the gesture in the air to consecrate from a distance.

While these mudrās appear very occult and exotic, I can assure you that they won't amount to much unless you activate them first. If you want to use the sword mudrā, learn the sword first. Have a few meditations on swords and all they mean to you. Wake up to the nasty side of swords and also understand their beneficial use. A good fighter is not angry, a noble soul does not delight in violence. The sword, properly used, separates what does not belong together. Go into this consciousness. Understand that analytical thinking is the sword of the mind. It can cut apart illusions but it cannot join. Meditate on the sword in your magical universe. What is its purpose, what is its nature, how is it wielded wisely? When you have sorted all these matters out, make the mudrā. Allow all the sword power and awareness of your meditations to flow into the form of your fingers. Put emotion into the act, and determination, and responsibility. A sword is not a toy - great power requires responsible use. When you can allow all of these to unite in the mudrā, you have begun to create a gesture of power. Use it for a few months in your meditations and rituals and it will begin to work properly. The same goes for all mudrās. Twisting fingers and hoping is not enough. Each hand-sign has to be identified and connected with whatever it is supposed to convey. The association should be so direct that making the gesture almost automatically wakes the relevant power and sentience.



## 7: The Joy of Breath

Breath is rhythm. Breath is flow. Breath is pulsation. Above all, breath is bliss. In daily life, breath is nourishment. There is energy in breathing, which may be refined, stored, and moved through body. This energy is called *prāṇā* and its application is called *prāṇāyāma*. *Prāṇāyāma* is one of the eight limbs of yoga and has been used for several millennia to transform consciousness, to instil the body of the yogī with a lot of extra energy, and ultimately to achieve union with the divine. As breath is shared by all living entities, it is also a unifying principle. Consider it a way of sharing life.

I would like to emphasise that breathing is a not a technique, it's a communion. There are people who believe that, using the right technique, any state of awareness may be produced in anyone. This is a very materialistic attitude. If simple technique were enough, yogis would not bother to clean and simplify their minds. Who cares for refinement when a simple cycle of out- and in-breaths, or maybe just an overdose or lack of oxygen could produce enlightenment? Yoga is a lot more than technique, and Tantra even more so. No single technique is ever guaranteed to produce a desirable result. This is the reason why there are hundreds of techniques in Tantra. Even with the best of them, you need an element of spiritual grace and personal magick to get results. Enlightenment, absorption, insight, and inspiration can happen anytime. They may appear after you have learned and practised something really difficult for years, or they may happen when you return to something so simple and basic that you hardly think about it. Remember. Technique is a tool, it is not the solution.

*Prāṇāyāma* may be translated in various ways. *Prāṇā* can mean breath, wind, life, energy, power, and refers to vital energy, the life-force. This concept is very close to the Chinese *Qi* (Ch'i) and the Greek *pneuma*. The concept of *prāṇā* goes back to the Vedic period. In the *Atharva Veda* and the *Upaniṣads* references to *prāṇā* abound. The concept of breath, however, is not limited to our modern idea of breathing. *Prāṇā* is closely related to *ātman*, the soul principle, which resides within body. At death, the *ātman* escapes upwards towards the heavenly regions. One hymn that invokes the power of breath is *AV* 2, 15, 1-2: *As both the heaven and the earth do not fear, are not harmed, so, my breath, fear not. As both the day and the night do not fear, are not harmed, so, my breath, fear not.* The formula is repeated with sun and moon, sacrament and dominion, truth and untruth, what is and what is to be. In each case, breath is connected with freedom from fear. Good psychology; when people are afraid they tend to tense up, which makes proper breathing difficult. Emotional upset generally restricts breathing,

one of the reasons why people who want to avoid or repress emotions often tense and breathe badly. In AV 2, 16,1 we read: *O breath-and-expiration, protect me from death, svāhā.* AV 3, 31, 6-9, a healing chant, gives a good example that the seers considered breath a cosmic force: *Agni puts together the breaths; the moon is put together with breath: I away from all evil have turned, away from yakṣma, to union with life-time. By breath did the gods set in motion the sun, of universal heroism, I away from etc. By the breath of the long lived, of the life-makers, do thou live, do not die: I away from etc. With the breath of the breathing do thou breathe; be just here, do not die: I away from etc.* (trans. Whitney 1987).

These examples show that breath was a lot more than a simple activity of the lungs. Breath was a cosmic force shared by all beings, an energy that gave motion and life to the universe. Similar ideas abound in the early *Upaniṣads*. Here, breath is often coupled with the senses. The *Brhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* offers some good examples for the miracles of breath. In 1,5,9-10 mind, the form of what is known, is contrasted with breath which is the form of what is unknown. In 1,5,20 we hear of the divine breath, born from water and the moon, which, whether moving or non-moving, cannot be injured or upset. Who knows this becomes the self of all beings. Another popular topic are rivalries between the senses, faculties, and breath. It usually turns out that beings can survive without hearing, sight, smell, taste, feeling, or cognition, but when breath ceases the system dies. Breath is also a divine energy. It infuses the chants with vitality, thereby making them magically potent. Breath is a force giving success in the struggle between Devas and Asuras, breath produces nourishment and food. Breath is formless, 2,3,5 identifies it with the sacred space within the self. This breath is so much more than mere inhalation and exhalation that I can only ask you to think of it as a mystery.

In many texts, *prāṇāyāma* is used primarily as a synonym for breathing exercises. There are, however, a few texts that use the term *prāṇa* for a range of vital energies that have little to do with breathing. Gorakṣanāth speaks of ten breaths or winds within the body (*Siddha Siddhānta Paddhati*, 1,68). The *prāṇa*-wind dwells in the heart, regulating in-breath and out-breath, consisting of Ha and Sa. The *apāna*-wind dwells in the anus, its nature is to hold and empty. You can find the *samāna*-wind in the navel, regulating the fires that digest food. The *vyāna*-wind is everywhere within body, regulating drying and nourishment (i.e. distributing the food-essences). *Udāna*-wind is in the palate, controlling feeding, speech, and vomiting. The *nāga*-wind penetrates all limbs, invigorating and liberating. *Kūrma*-wind opens and shuts the eyes. *Kṛkala*-wind causes the sensation of hunger and releases gas from the stomach. *Devadatta*-wind causes yawning. *Dhanañjaya* is tone, this, the tenth wind, produces sounds. Other sources give fewer details. Often, the *prāṇa*-wind is only contrasted to the *apāna*-wind, *prāṇa* being the upwards moving breath, vitalising and inspiring, while *apāna*-wind is the downward moving energy, manifesting as excrement, urine, and sexual fluids. Some exercises require that the yogi pulls up the muscles of perineum and genitals, thereby preventing the *apāna*-wind



from descending, while allowing the prāṇa-wind to rise. When you study elder texts on breath and winds, find out what the author is talking about first.

The idea that breathing influences consciousness and vitality is shared by many ancient cultures. Prāṇāyāma is not just a science of energy generation and management, it is also an art of refining consciousness. Prāṇā is more than force (Śakti), it is also sentience (Śiva), and prāṇāyāma is the pulsation of both. The *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad* (see below) tells us that the breathing (living) spirit is Brahman, the mind is the messenger, the eye the protector, ear the announcer, and speech the house-keeper (2, 1). Breath is the hidden force behind the functions of the senses and the operations of the mind. Indra declares (3, 2-3) that he is the breathing spirit, life, the intelligent spirit, and immortality. *Life is breath and breath is life... or indeed with the breathing spirit one obtains immortality in this world, by intelligence true conception ... What is the breathing spirit, that is the intelligence self.* Here we are at the beginning of a spiritual tradition that equates awareness with breath. (More on classical prāṇāyāma below.) There is practical value in such words; breathing changes consciousness and consciousness changes breathing. I hope that you are perplexed enough to open your mind really wide. Prāṇāyāma is a lot more than simple breathing exercises.

Āyāma means to extend, stretch, lengthen, control. Thus, prāṇāyāma means to extend, refine and control breath. This is a tricky concept as the very idea of control is misleading. Control is not something achieved by the conscious mind, nor is it done by force. Good breathing is not learned by force, it is achieved by allowing things to develop naturally. An Indian proverb compares prāṇāyāma with the taming of dangerous beasts like lions and tigers. You need a certain amount of force for this job, but you need even more love, respect, caution, attention, and the wisdom to allow the beasts to follow their own true nature. A lion trainer can 'force' a lion only by setting up a situation where the lion likes to do what is expected of it. This looks as if there were control, but it is really a way of making will manifest naturally.

Another etymology of the word prāṇāyāma proposes that it consists of the words prāṇā and Yama. Yama is the god of death, the ruler of several hells and otherworlds. Thus, prāṇāyāma means the cessation of breathing. It implies a practice cultivated by those who think that minimal breathing is still too much.

According to the *Devī Bhāgavatam* (11, 1), there are six basic forms of prāṇāyāma.

1. When the breaths are not steady.
2. Better than the former.
3. When united with one's mantra.
4. When without thought of any mantra.
5. When the heart (attention) is fixed on one's deity.

6. When the heart is not fixed on one's deity. This may sound confusing but is worth thinking about. Are we dealing with a linear progression?

Last, a thought on prāṇā. If you consider prāṇā as a sort of energy you may not be thinking deeply enough. In Indian cosmology, all that exists is alive (to some extent) and all that is alive is sentient. Prāṇā is not only alive, it is the essence of life and consciousness, and as a form of energy it is obviously a Śakti. Volume 11, chapter 8 of the *DB* gives an account of her:

*There is a red lotus on a wide boat in a vast ocean of a red colour; on this lotus is seated the Prāṇā Shakti. She has six hands holding, in due order, the trident, the arrows made of sugarcane, noose, goad, five arrows and a skull filled with blood. She is three-eyed. Her high breasts are decorated; the colour of Her body is like the Rising Sun. May she grant us happiness. Thus meditating on the Prāṇā Shakti, Who is of the nature of the Highest Self, one ought to apply ashes on his body in order to attain success in all actions.*

Invoke her as you explore the joy of breath.

**General Considerations.** Prāṇāyāma is a loose term that can refer to a wide range of exercises and meditations, many of them related to breathing. Some of the basics can be learned and explored on your own, provided you are careful, cautious, and refrain from overdoing them. For the more refined types of prāṇāyāma, a teacher, incarnate or within you, is essential. Not all of the techniques in this chapter are suitable for everyone. Much depends on your health, your fitness, and the wisdom you need to observe what happens and to know when you have had enough. For those who wish to explore prāṇāyāma, let me give a general outline. Keep in mind that prāṇāyāma is much more than simple exercises. Prāṇāyāma influences the motion of vitality within body and the state of awareness of your mind. Be gentle and cautious with yourself, proceed with patience, and use your brain to observe the results.

Breathing exercises should be done gently. Breath should flow through the nose in most exercises, the flow should be smooth and gentle. The nose is the ideal organ of breath as it has a system of filters that clean the air and temperate it.

If you have a clogged nose, you can try cleaning it with a solution of lukewarm water and a tiny amount of salt. Most yogīs take a little of this mixture from a cup or the hollow of the hand and hold it right under the nostrils. To pull it up, they make a pumping motion by allowing the jaw to drop while keeping the mouth shut. This pumps up a small amount of fluid and is a lot nicer than trying to breathe it in. Some use their own urine for this purpose, urine is both salty and has body temperature, it also contains a mild disinfectant.



Nose breathing is especially important when the air is cold. If you have to breathe through the mouth, keep the lips almost shut and the tongue fixed to the palate (not the teeth or gums). The tongue should also be at the palate when you breathe through the nose. Keep it there without pressure, experience will teach the right location. Saliva generated during exercise is traditionally supposed to contain beneficial substances and swallowed. In general, breath should be smooth, uninterrupted, and pleasant. You will find that you have more time when you use your lungs with more efficiency. Hasty breathing and panting are only acceptable when they happen naturally for brief exercises or short periods in trance states of extreme excitement. Prolonged hasty breathing is harmful and can lead to bad health. The same goes for forcing air into your lungs and indeed for any activity that causes strain, unease, or pain. Be nice to yourself. Belly breathing is a natural thing, when done gently and unconsciously it can go on all day. Full breathing is intentional and has the character of an exercise, the same goes for all the special variations developed by Indian yogis. These forms of breathing should be learned patiently and the length of the exercise should be built up slowly. You will progress faster when you go slowly. If you can, begin the day with a cup of warm water and a bit of breathing. This should be done gently. Have an open window if the climate permits it and chose a style of breathing that gradually supplies a lot of fresh air. Never force your breathing. Be nice and gentle to yourself, in the morning body is still stiff and waking up should happen gradually. When you want to take deeper breaths make sure that you exhale properly. The trick is to use what you have instead of cramming more air in. When you exhale properly more fresh air will flow in naturally. May I repeat this? Exhale, exhale, exhale.

**Troubles.** When your health is weak, when you have breathing problems or are recovering from an illness, be extra gentle with yourself. It is better to stop doing exhausting exercises than to make the disease worse. This is especially the case with diseases of the respiratory system and the heart. Gentle belly breathing lying on the ground is less strain than doing complicated exercises sitting or standing up. Great care should be taken when you have just had a cold (or are almost having one). When you breathe too much cold air, you will cool your nose, mouth, the cavities, the bronchial system, and the lungs. For similar reasons, deep breathing should be avoided when the air is moist.

**Food.** Breathing exercises on a full stomach are a remarkably unpleasant experience which doesn't make anyone really happy. Likewise, hunger can distort posture and reduce the calming or exhilarating effects of breathing by causing edginess and unease. The golden mean is a state between fullness and hunger. Traditionally, opinions on this subject vary a lot. One authority, B.K.S. Iyengar (1981) proposes that one should not practise breathing exercises for four or six hours after a meal. After breathing exercise another half hour should

pass before you eat again. This is an eminently unpractical solution, unless you happen to be independently rich (or on welfare) and able to organise your whole day around your yogic training. It does make sense when you practise the Iyengar type of yoga, which is much like the training of a world-class athlete and involves plenty of painful episodes. Other sources, speaking of Kuṇḍalinī yoga, propose that the yogī should never be entirely hungry and never fully stuffed. They propose a light meal every three hours. One good solution is breathing exercises (of the more gentle sort) before breakfast.

**Ground ozone** and other sorts of **air pollution**. Exhaust fumes of cars (without a catalyser), lorries, tractors, and lawnmowers produce fumes that interact with strong sunlight and heat to produce ground ozone. They also produce substances that bind ground ozone, but they are in the minority. A few sunny, windless days in the city can produce formidable amounts of this irritating gas. Ground ozone has a lot of negative effects. It can make people weak, edgy, ill-tempered, and tense. It irritates the mucous membranes, makes the eyes burn, and may lead to headaches, nervous disorders, and sudden breakdowns of blood pressure. During the long, sunny day, the concentration of ground ozone builds up in the city and along highways. In the process it is pushed out into the country. By night traffic continues within the city. Lacking sunlight, the ozone production stops and other ingredients of the exhaust fumes begin to bind the stuff. This clears the air to some extent. Out in the country, traffic is reduced by night and the ozone is not bound. It is often in the periphery of cities, far out in the country where everything looks green and natural that the highest concentrations of ground ozone accumulate. Some governments are sensitive to this and warn farmers, lumberjacks, and athletes to avoid physical activity. Ground ozone may also increase when meadows or fields are cut, not to mention indoors ozone pollution from printers and photocopy machines. When you've had a few windless sunny days and find the air tasting horrible and notice that even small activities seem to exhaust, you can be sure that the ground ozone level is high. Breathing exercises should be avoided at such times or done extremely cautiously, preferably very late at night or in the early morning. In some places, such as Los Angeles, Mexico City, or Beijing, it might be a good idea to consider moving.

The yogīs of old did not have to consider ozone pollution. However, they had to worry about other things. Dust storms are very common in Northern India, where the country is much like a desert. Any yogī doing prāṇāyāma under such circumstances has to get rid of a lot of colourful phlegm through the day.

Smoke is another such problem. Air pollution has been around since our ancestors learned how to handle fire. Wherever people depend on burning of wood, coal, animal manure, and so on for heating or cooking, they are doing damage to their lungs. Most of history took place in small buildings with bad ventilation and a lot of smoke pollution. To this day,



a spittoon is one of the few objects that a yogī may own. If you do prāṇāyāma, you'll find that some of the exercises will clear your throat and nostrils. It's useful to have a vessel nearby which can be reached with a minimum of motion.

**Preliminary exploration.** The lungs are not a muscle, they are two spongy bags, which are protected by the ribs and moved by muscles from outside. You cannot feel with your lungs, but you do have nerves around them. Try this. Lie down on the floor and take a few breaths. Sense how you do this. Which muscles are moving? Where do they pull, where do they push, where are they attached to your spine? Then try a few variations. The muscles needed for belly breathing are not the same as you use when you breathe with chest or shoulders. Explore!

Breathing has several variables. Each breath has a certain speed, length, pressure, rhythm. How fast do you breathe? Please take a watch now and find out how often you breathe in a minute. This is great fun - you will notice how your awareness tends to influence the score. Do this a few times so you'll know your average for resting, walking, and during exercise. Make notes. It can be useful to time how long you keep tea stewing. Next use the opportunity of timing breathing during unusual circumstances. How fast do you breathe when you are calm or excited, tired or awake? How do you breathe when you are really happy? How do you breathe when you wake up, are working, moving about, or going to sleep? What is your breathing like when you read or watch a movie? How do you breathe when you are overworked, have serious emotional problems, or feel sick and miserable? And just how are your lungs moving in these states? Any chance your belly is still moving or is it just the shoulders that go up and down? Does your breath change when you are in company and when you are alone? How do you breathe when you make love? How do you breathe before you come, as you come, and afterwards?

Do you like the way you breathe? Will you enjoy the changes that you're going to experience?

**Watching breath.** This is the beginning of your journey, it is also a point to which you will return again and again. What is the sound of your breath as you inhale and exhale? Please listen carefully. Indian tradition has it that the in-breath sounds like the letter Sa and the out-breath like the letter Ha. This is the usual form, a few sources give it the other way round. Generally, the letter Ha is assigned to Śiva and the letter Sa to Śakti. Each complete breath cycle is the union of Śiva and Śakti and forms the Śrī Parāprāsāda mantra (the auspicious mantra of the highest sacrifice) called variously Haṁsa (a title of Śiva, occasionally of Viṣṇu or Brahmā), Sa'haṁ (I am She) and So'haṁ (I am He). The letter m is the nada-bindu (vibration-point), introduced for grammatical reasons between the Ha and the Sa, and pronounced nasally between M and NG. The mantra Haṁsa is one of the most celebrated in the whole body of Tantric literature. It is repeated by every living creature, it is inherent in

every being and thing, mobile and immobile, from the smallest particles to the greatest galaxies. Humans are said to recite it 21600 times within one-day and night. There is an immense amount of theology behind it, which will be explored further on. Right now it should suffice that the mantra is called *ajapā*, it takes no effort to do *japa* (repeated recitation) of it. This means quite simply that you shouldn't make a fuss about it. Don't interfere, don't attempt to control. Breath takes its own way, breath makes its own rhythms. Relax, calm down, and observe. How smooth is it? How long does it take? How does it move your body? Be aware of the flow. Hear it, feel it, enjoy. If you listen carefully, your inner speech will become silent. With a bit of practise you will get into calm and tranquil trance states using this method. How about ten minutes of practice every day?

**Watching pauses.** There are four distinct phases in each breath. For convenience's sake we might consider that in-breath is creation, holding (full) is maintenance, out-breath is destruction, and resting (empty) is transcendence. No doubt a lot of deities will come to mind now who are more or less associated with these functions. When you identify the breath-phases with seed mantras and visualisation of colours or figures you can make this an entire meditation. Breath consists of at least four phases, but it is generally only the two active ones, in-breath and out-breath, that appear in awareness. This is doing, and people usually define themselves by their doing. Change now! Just as important (and often even more so) is not-doing. Not-doing (*Wu wei*) was developed into a fine art by the Daoists, but you can also find it lurking in the hidden corners of Tantric yoga. Before doing is not-doing. After doing comes not-doing. After repeating mantras, *Haṁsa* allows you to be silent and listen. The highest mantra is no word at all. When images and words have exhausted themselves, silence reigns supreme. The equivalent to silence is the pause between breaths. This is the gap, the interval, the timeless space in-between. This is the gate of insight and the moment of absentminded tranquillity. It is the *śmaśāna* (cremation place) where desire is burned up and self is freed from thinking. It is the cross-roads between realities. As you read this, pause now. Focus attention on the gap. You can observe the pause between in-breath and out-breath, when your lungs are full and the energy pulses in your body. This is nourishment. You can observe the pause between out-breath and in-breath. This is transcendence. Do this often. As you go about your daily business, as you sit down to a cup of tea, as you wait and as you do. Pause now. Open your mind and embrace the silence.

**Warm up.** Breathing is easiest when your body is flexible, limber, and warm. This is not always the case, especially among modern folk, who generally tend to spend too much time sitting. For a start, you should begin your breathing practise by a bit of physical exercise. The easiest way is to join a yoga group or a martial arts class. A few months of regular exercise will teach you a wide range of warming, stretching,



and limbering-up exercises. If no group is available, you might proceed as follows.

PLEASE BE CAREFUL WHILE YOU DO THE EXERCISES. This is not a contest, it is not a sport nor a form of muscle building or toughening up.

Everything should be done with care, caution, and consideration. Never force results. Go gently, rather do too little than too much. Be friendly with yourself. Body is easily hurt, especially in times of ill health, cold temperature, when too hungry, or too stuffed with food or drink. You alone are responsible for the well-being of your body. You are the student, but you have to be the teacher too. So put a lot of awareness into your exercise and listen, watch out, and feel how your body responds to the motions.

Good breathing is easier when your body is limber and relaxed. A few short minutes of exercise may be just the thing to prepare you. Here are some suggestions.

Warm up by shaking your limbs. Run and jump on the spot, forwards, sideways, on one foot, with both feet at once, with crossed legs, dance with swinging feet, and when you are thoroughly warmed up, move on to the hips. Move the pelvis forward and backwards, in small and large circles, make motions as if you wanted to scoop up water with your pelvis, try oval motions, fast and slow, experiment and keep moving. This sort of thing works wonders in unfreezing the hips. Imbue the motions with lust and passion. What you are enjoying here will improve your lovemaking. Try obscene motions. After doing hip and belly motions for a good while, do something for the flanks and back. Stretch upwards, stretch sideways, reach for the sky. Bend forward and down, then reach up again. Gently turn around to the left and right. Be careful with your spine! Stretch your arms and let them move in large, slow circles along your sides. Make the circles smaller, then big again. Move the elbows in circles, stretch your hands in the eight directions (up, down, right, left, and four in between) while you exhale, draw them in as you inhale. Moving up and out you exhale, moving in and down you inhale. Rotate your shoulders gently. Move your head in slow and gentle circular motions. Careful! Look after yourself. There is no need to hurry, if you go slowly you will progress faster. If you exercise in haste the result could be a torn or strained sinew, a dislocated vertebra, or a torn muscle. The risk of such accidents is greater when the climate is cold and when your body is stiff, especially after resting or sleeping. You are exercising with body, not against it.

Good breathing can be done in many positions. Read the section on posture before you start. It's useful to have a straight spine when you breathe.

**Belly breathing.** As you breathe in, your belly comes out, as you breathe out your belly goes in. Remember. As a child it was natural for you. Belly breathing is a more efficient form of breathing than the usual adult-person chest breathing, it utilises more of the lung volume, so you can take deeper breaths. Anatomically, you may observe that it is not

actually the belly that breathes. Your lungs are up there in the chest, protected by the ribs, which is quite as it should be. How do you expand them? In chest breathing, the ribs expand and allow the fresh inflow of air. As the ribs can't move much, the amount of air you process is not very large. In belly breathing, the lungs expand downwards and press against the diaphragm. This is the horizontal membrane that divides the upper cavity of your body, containing heart and lungs, from the lower cavity where the liver, spleen, intestines, and the enteral nervous system do their job. As you breathe in, the pressure massages the intestines and the belly bulges out. Good for the digestion and it also centres your balance.

There is a spot approximately five centimetres below your navel which is the centre of your body and one of the most important energy sites. In Hindu yoga and Tantra, it is occasionally called the *maṇipūra cakra*. The exact location of this point differs from system to system, some place it on the navel, others below it, and still others propose both to provide for all possibilities. In Chinese Daoism, which also makes use of this power site, it is called the lower Dantian (Tan Tien) and symbolised by such metaphors as the 'Lowest Cinnabar Field', 'the Palace of the Golden Pearl', the 'Oven of Immortality', 'the Gold Pavilion', and so on. The very place to meet Xiwangmu and to relax within the swirling golden vapours. Many Chinese arts, such as drawing, painting, calligraphy, singing, and martial arts make use of this point to centre the body and to concentrate the life energy. The place can be used to store excess energy, which is especially important in states of high-power functioning, rituals of obsession, Kuṇḍalinī Yoga, spontaneous rapture, and overwhelming emotions. When you are emotionally upset, you may find that a few minutes of belly breathing, focusing your attention near the navel, will calm your mind and energy.

In learning to do belly breathing, the easiest approach is to lie on the floor on your back with the hands at your sides or on your chest. Place a small weight on your belly so you can feel it more distinctly. Simply breathe in (the weight rises) and out (the weight sinks) and observe all sensations. Once you can do this without too much consideration, try it in a seated posture. This is easiest to learn when kneeling, sitting on the feet or between them, but it can also be done sitting on the edge of a chair. Keep your spine straight and focus your attention below the navel. As you breathe in, the belly comes out, make sure it is ONLY the belly, and that the chest remains immobile. Breathe slowly and in calm, even waves through the nose. As you breathe out, the belly comes in again, and at the very end of the exhalation, you bow forward a little. Do this the way it is done in Asia. Europeans tend to bow from the shoulders or mid torso, Asians tend to bow from the hips. This keeps your spine straight as you bend forward very gently. Hold a tiny instant, raise your spine again until you are quite erect and allow the next breath to flow in. In this exercise, the main thing is that you go gently, slowly, and peacefully. Stay relaxed as you sit and breathe quietly through the nose. Your awareness should emphasise the outflow of breath, and you will notice how you calm and slow down, how your body becomes really



centred, and how your attention focuses in the power zone of the belly. This is a meditation in itself, it is also a fine art. It will take a while before you develop the proper feeling in the belly. Practice this technique for a few months, at least twice a day, if only for five minutes. Beginners should do this often, but only for short periods. Practitioners report that they feel calmed and soothed, that their body becomes stable within itself, that they have more energy and better health than before. They may also report that all sorts of suppressed feelings come up, this is especially the case with people who have spent years tensing their bellies in order to reduce feeling, lust, and emotion. Go gently as you practice, never force your breathing and give yourself time. All breathing exercises should begin and end with a bit of belly breathing to ensure your physical, emotional, and spiritual stability.

**Rubbing the Belly.** This should be the finale of your daily exercises. Place your palms on the belly and feel the warmth of your hands. Imagine the rich power zone within you. Now circle your palms on your *manipūra* cakra and imagine how the energy of your whole being comes to this point and spirals inward to the belly cauldron, where it can be refined and stored. As you feel this, imagine that the energy expands again. Radiating from the centre, it spreads in a delightful golden hue through your belly, your torso, through limbs, legs, and head. The trick lies in putting a great big smile into it. Smile into the belly, smile into the energy that comes out of your belly, smile into your whole body as the energy saturates you. Can you feel the joy? This should be stronger. Take that small little smile and make it bigger. Expand it. Make the joy stronger, fill yourself with joy, have the joy drench every cell of your body and lighten up the aura beyond. When you begin to smile an unbearably crazy Timothy Leary smile you are doing just fine. Life should be more full of joy anyway, so help yourself to a good amount several times a day. Wherever the joy flows, there is also an increased flow of energy, and where the energy goes, body heals and refreshes itself.

Some modern Daoist schools make a lot of fuss about the direction of the circling hands. In their opinion, rubbing in a clockwise direction is yang and counter-clockwise is yin (imagine a watch lying on your belly). Men who circle counter-clockwise and women who circle clockwise are supposed to be in grave danger to mess up their sexual energies. These schools recommend that each gender should circle in its proper direction plus a little bit of the other direction, as there should be a little yin in yang, and a little yang in yin. Indians are different, in their belief clockwise is usually a lucky direction. Going anti-clockwise also has its uses, it appears in dangerous nightside rituals, exorcisms, and acts of destructive magic. Anatomically, I can only add that if you circle clockwise you are following the direction that food takes. Prolonged counter-clockwise circling goes against the intestines and may upset the belly.

**Reverse belly breathing.** Your belly comes out as you breathe out and moves in as you breathe in. This is not the natural way of breathing but can happen occasionally to beginners when they get confused. The technique is used for short, therapeutic treatments in Chinese hospitals to provide a strong massage of the intestines in order to prevent constipation, and in some more powerful Daoist exercises.

**Chest breathing** is a very common matter in our society. As you breathe in your chest expands, and as you breathe out it compresses again. Chest breathing utilises less of the lung volume than belly breathing and is less efficient, a reason why professional singers, players of wind instruments, and actors who have to speak in a loud and clear voice avoid it. It also makes the body top heavy and upsets balance, which is why martial artists and many dancers do not like it either. However, it conforms to the military ideal and produces a posture that allows people to repress their deeper feelings more easily. In exclusive chest breathing, you can keep your belly cramped all of the time, this reduces emotional sensibility, inhibits sexual pulsation, and produces what Wilhelm Reich called muscular and character armour (please read his classic book *The Function of Orgasm* for full details). Much of our culture is based on this terrible ideal.

**Shoulder breathing** is when your whole body stays inert as you breathe, only the shoulders move up and down as the lungs expand and constrict. This is the least efficient way of breathing. You can occasionally observe it in sick people, very old people, and those suffering from extreme anxiety.

**In-breath and out-breath.** As you breathe you can emphasise the inhalation and the exhalation. To emphasise may mean putting attention into it. It may also mean extending it. One way to relax is to emphasise the out-breath. Be aware how breath gently flows out of you and how it becomes slow and slower as you reach the end of the exhalation. Go with the flow. It is easy to relax into the exhalation. Body naturally tends to relax on the out-breath (this means you feel a slightly heavier) and to tense a little on the in-breath (meaning that you feel a little lighter). If you put attention into the slowing down and the sensation of heaviness, you can reach states of deep relaxation and tranquillity. Amplify this! Imagine that you sink deeper and deeper with each exhalation.

For some mysterious reason most people tend to associate the direction DOWN with calming, soothing, and relaxing sensations (parasympathetic nervous system) while they react to the direction UP with excitement, passion, and wakefulness (sympathetic nervous system). Just compare what it means when I tell you to 'slow down' or 'speed up'. These metaphors tell us something about direction and tempo, and though they make little sense to the rational mind they do work. How come people 'sink' into 'deep trance' and 'get up' or feel their 'spirits rise'? Think about it. How many 'ups and downs' can you



find in everyday metaphors? Several modern schools use the slow out-breath, combined with the visualisation of sinking down, and a soothing mantra to allow their students to drift gently into a calm and peaceful trance state. Others replace the mantra with counting. You can count one number with each exhalation, going from nine to one (repeat this cycle as long as you like), and find yourself getting slower and more tranquil with each breath. All of this is well and good to calm and refresh your mind. After a while you will arrive in a pleasant and calm trance state. This is assumed to be meditation. I disagree. Meditation is not going into trance, it's what happens when you are in trance. So what will you do now you are deeply in trance?

No matter whether you want to relax or wake up, much depends on congruence. The out-breath relaxes providing you do it in a relaxed fashion. If you blow it out sharply or strain to force the last bit of air out of your lungs it won't relax you at all. In a similar manner, emphasising the in-breath can lead to energetic and dynamic states. If you breathe in visualising all the extra energy that rushes into your lungs and belly, this may provide a powerful boost. It gets even stronger when you imagine (or realise) that the pores breathe and that fresh air goes into all pores at once and saturates your whole being with fresh energy. Your whole being can breathe this universe in! Pore breathing is another idea of early (Huang.Lao) Daoism. It is recommended by some works found in the grave library of Mawangdui (before 165 BCE).

There has been some research on the effects of inhalation and exhalation. Hu Bin (1982) mentions Chinese clinics where animal experiments were conducted. Stimulating the brain at the centres of exhalation extended to the parasympathetic nervous system while stimulation of the inhalation centres excited the sympathetic nervous system. Considering that our culture obsessively overemphasises the sympathetic nervous system (which makes you active, fast, dynamic, and restless, just like your employers crave), most of us could do with a bit of calming to appreciate the joy of life.

**Physical power.** Most martial artists are aware that the exhalation can be used to increase the physical power of the body. When you have to lift or move something heavy, you will find that this is easier when you exhale a little as you apply force. The same goes for vigorous hitting and kicking. If you add a sharp, short exhalation (or a shout) to your punch, the impact will be stronger. Likewise, when you receive a blow to the belly, you can take some of the force out of it by exhaling a little. All of this needs practise.

**Full Breathing.** This is the method of breathing that permits maximal use of the lung volume. Great care should be taken as you learn it. Be gentle with yourself, train your lungs carefully, avoid strain and tension and be nice to yourself. Full breathing takes months to learn properly, and you will progress faster when you avoid overdoing it. **Should you suffer from diseases of heart, lungs, or any other organ, consult**

**your doctor before you experiment.** This is a very powerful technique and should be approached with caution and respect.

Begin with a straight spine. Exhale properly. Now breathe deeply into your belly so it bulges out. Then take in more air as the chest expands. Keep the belly out as you do this. These are two distinct motions: belly bulges forward and the ribs expands sideways. Keep your shoulders down as you do it and your posture straight. This results in a peculiar and pleasant feeling of light tension under the arms. Now the important thing is that you do not force results. Whatever you do, be gentle with yourself. Regular practise will make this complex motion easy and natural. It will also teach you how to keep an erect posture in the process. Hold the breath for a moment, then slowly empty your chest (ribs move inward) and afterwards the belly (belly moves inward.) Rest a moment. Then breathe into the belly again.

Thus, the pattern is as follows:

belly moves out as you inhale, chest moves out as you inhale, pause, chest moves in as you exhale, belly moves in as you exhale, pause.

A common error in this routine is to move the belly out and when the chest moves out to allow belly to go in again. Belly should stay out when the chest expands.

With a bit of practice the various movements will blend into one elegant and extended motion like a surging wave.

This is the basic form, but of course variations are possible. If you like to make the exhalation as complete as possible, bow forward a little. This is not obligatory and only recommended for those with good posture, should they like to introduce a slightly swaying motion. Another option is to allow the pelvis to tilt forwards at the end of the exhalation. Still another is to lift the muscles around the perineum, the genitals and the anus, i.e. the entire pelvic floor, as you exhale, this sort of thing may happen naturally in certain trances. Don't worry too much about these special forms, doing it in a simple and immobile straight posture without any bending is absolutely fine.

Full breathing produces a wonderful energy and oxygen high which can be combined with visualisation and mantra practice. It is really useful for ecstatic trance states, euphoria, and inspired madness. It is not a good way to go through the day and should not be done for prolonged periods or using force. If you overdo it, your energy will be disrupted, you may become dizzy, or suffer a black out: this is called hyperventilation, for which see below. Too much oxygen at once is not a good idea. If you encounter any sort of pain, pressure in the head, tingling limbs, or find sparkles dancing before your eyes you are overdoing it. Go gently. For the beginner, five minutes are quite sufficient. If you want to do more, do it twice a day but not for twice as long. Prolonged deep breathing has to be built up.

When you practice full breathing while sitting, standing, resting, or walking (slowly) you supply body with more air than it actually needs. There is a great difference to deep breathing as it happens during



physical work or sport. Athletes usually breathe pretty fast and deep when they train but they need the increased amount of air to make up for the physical motion. When you breathe deep and swiftly without physical motion, the excess has to go somewhere. One of its effects is a change of consciousness. A light excess can lead to states of exhilaration, especially when you combine it with mantra, prayer, visualisation or the assumption of god forms. A strong excess also exhilarates, it can also make you dizzy and produce headaches, hyperventilation, and over-emotionality. People who like to breathe deep and fast get a kick which might be compared to some drugs. It's an extreme and dramatic experience, sometimes pleasant, sometimes utterly draining and exhausting. The important effect, however, does not happen during the intense breathing itself but sets in afterwards. I suspect that full breathing releases endorphins, as it can produce a sensation of joy, happiness, and bliss that may last for hours. You can get this effect simply by breathing deep and hard for ten or fifteen minutes if you want to do it the rough, stupid, and damaging way. You can also do it by gentle full breathing at a moderate speed. A little more air over a while works just as well as a lot more air in a short period. It takes longer than the extreme method, but it produces a smooth consciousness of higher quality and is less straining on your health. If you love to breathe, you will sooner or later go for the moderate form, as frequent hard and fast breathing tends to be so demanding. I know that moderation is not easy for the more ecstatic among my readers (it's not easy for me either). Keep in mind that maximum efficiency is not simply breathing as hard and fast as possible. If you pump your lungs like mad you don't give them enough time to make efficient use of the excess air. There is a limit to the amount of air your lungs can process at a given time, and breathing harder and more forceful is not going to improve things one bit. The trick is learning to breathe at a rate that permits your lungs to process the air properly. This means efficient posture to make best use of the lung volume without strain and tension, and a breathing rate that is not fast but only a little faster than usual. If you use the lung volume properly, even your normal breathing speed will produce an excess of air intake. Really good full breathing is a high art form that needs lots of practise and watchfulness. Be gentle and careful with yourself! When you are doing it really well, it comes easy and naturally, with very little effort, no strain, and is pure joy. Another trick is to do it briefly, but often. I like to do it on forest walks. First five minutes full breathing, then a little slow walking, then another pause for breathing and so on. In between I stretch a lot and loosen up the body. This gets me much further than doing it for half an hour at once. Also, remember that full breathing is a strong stimulant. Don't do it before going to bed, unless you like being wide-awake and sleepless.

After you have done full breathing for a while, end the practise with a few minutes of belly breathing and belly rubbing. Give yourself a great smile. It will ensure that your energy is centred and your body-mind is in balance.

**Kapāla bhāti.** This exercise means skull-shining, it is supposed to clean and clear up the head (i.e. the nose cavities). It simply consists of rapid full breathing without pauses. The exhalation in particular is done by contracting the belly muscles. Done properly, it can clear up a lot of phlegm from mouth, throat, and nose, so keep a spittoon handy. Beginners generally start by doing twenty rapid full breaths to clear up the head prior to less violent exercises. With practice, one can gradually build this up to more than a hundred breaths. This should be done gradually and over several months. Keep in mind that the respiratory tract needs training. This is a short exercise, if you overdo it you'll get hyperventilation.

**Hyperventilation** is what you get when you breathe too much, too fast, or both. It sometimes happens when people are under shock or suffering from extreme stress or emotional turmoil, and can also be a regular disease requiring the attention of a physician. Hyperventilation can be caused by too fast and too deep breathing. Some people like this state as it produces a remarkable kick. It is also extremely exhausting for body and mind and may well result in damage of the respiratory tract and other parts of your anatomy.

Several modern cults and forms of therapy make use of what comes dangerously close to hyperventilation. They like to do ecstatic breathing and lots of oxygen (so do I) but they take it to the point where you have to ride a wave of dizziness, tingling limbs, head pressure, and be really careful not to suffer a blackout. This can damage the respiratory organs, it can also produce numbness, paralysis of the limbs, and a lot of cramps. Seated hyperventilation, followed by getting up suddenly can even knock you out. How much is too much?

**Gentle Breathing.** This is one of the methods of calming the mind by smooth breathing. It is quite easy and some, such as Swami Śivananda, claim that it is a preliminary exercise prior to real *prāṇāyāma* (which, as you can imagine, is supposed to be complicated breathing using various forms of rhythm and counting). Gentle breathing means that you breathe in without a sound. Excellent, when you listen closely to yourself being very silent, you'll gradually become more silent. Exhalation is as slow as possible (without straining yourself). You'll have a slow in-breath (inaudible breathing is never hasty) and a much slower out-breath. The latter, especially if you use full-breathing, will involve a steady tightening of your muscles as breath smoothly leaves your lungs. When you have fully exhaled, you just have to allow your abdominal muscles to relax slowly, and the in-breath will fill you naturally. In doing gentle breathing you do not hold your breath at any time. This practise is very useful to clear mind of emotional worries, it produces a smooth consciousness that has an almost ophidian quality. As you'll spend each in-breath listening to silence, inner voice activity will be reduced. You'll soon learn how slowly you may exhale in order to keep up an adequate supply of air. Too slow and your body will show strain. All in all, gentle



breathing is not just a preliminary but something you can enjoy and come back to all through your life. It can induce interesting trance states and occasionally leads to light swaying and nodding. Allow it.

**Minimal breathing.** Some early Daoists, and a lot of early yogis practised techniques that reduce the amount of breathing to a minimum. This was usually done while resting on the ground or a hard bed. The early Daoists called it 'foetal breathing' and assumed it might lead to an immortality of consciousness - what happened to their physical body was not always important to them. Foetal breathing is so soft that it can hardly be detected by an outside observer. The same thing was aimed for by a good many yogis, who noticed that their meditation took on a special depth and clarity when breath was very shallow. There were attempts to produce this breathing by technique, but on the whole, technique tends to interfere with it. Light and shallow breathing happens naturally when you rest in a deep trance and your mind is busy elsewhere. I find it happening naturally when I introvert and descend into the cave of the heart, the void centre of all being. The same happens when I do astral projection and my body rests for an hour or two. It also happens in moments of deep insight, when the mind is really fascinated by something important. This does not mean that shallow and light breathing itself goes on for hours and hours, just as a resting body is not necessarily totally immobile. When you sleep, you move your body occasionally, and this is good for your health. People who do not move in their sleep, like alcoholics, tend to get problems with their blood circulation and may develop a characteristic paralysis of the limbs they sleep on. Shallow breathing is nice for a while. Body wants some fresh air from time to time, so allow it to take a few deep breaths on occasion to freshen up the lungs. Minimal breathing, when it happens naturally, has a calming and soothing effect. When you are tired it might send you to sleep. This is why the early Daoists did this in company. One person held watch while the other went trancing.

**A pause in breathing.** Whenever a rhythm shows a gap, you can discover something new. It happens in meditation, when you become aware of the pause between two thoughts, and expand it. It also happens in breathing practice. In yoga, the pause between breaths is termed kumbhaka. Kumbhaka is usually translated as holding breath, but the word really means 'vessel', such as a clay pot. Kumbhaka can occur at two times. You can pause after you have taken a breath, with your lungs full. This stimulates the sympathetic nervous system and may improve dynamic power and wakefulness. Or you can pause after exhaling, which stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system and tends to soothe and calm. In each case, the effect only happens when the pause is not forced but occurs gently and naturally. In practice, kumbhaka happens easiest when you practice full breathing. If you use your full lung capacity at the speed of your normal breathing, you will get an excess of air. This may be exciting, but it does not make for long

trances or for a calm and tranquil state of mind. To make up for the excess of air, you will notice that body slows the breathing. One good way to do this is to pause a little between each breath. This is a natural and gentle thing. To quote Akashanath (1995): *...the yogi becomes aware of a slowing down towards the end of the out-breath, and a slow acceleration of the breathing during the first part of the in-breath. Eventually, a complete pause naturally occurs at the end of the out-breath, during which the body is completely still for the first time since birth, and when the mind and body are coherent. After this point is reached, the techniques tend to focus on various ways of extending this moment (through muscular control, use of drugs, mantra and sexual intercourse). This is pranayama proper. What many people, including Crowley, completely fail to grasp was that this can only be achieved by complete relaxation and total concentration, and cannot be forced in any way.* The pause in breathing is there to be enjoyed. It is a delicate moment of great peace and clarity. It can also last for a surprisingly long time, provided you simply enjoy the silence and wide minded wonder that happen naturally. Allowing such pauses to happen, you can turn full breathing (essentially a stimulating, dynamic activity) into a tranquil and calm trance of great intensity. Kumbhaka is not holding breath, it is allowing breath to pause effortlessly, a moment when time stops and mind returns to simplicity.

Let me mention something from an entirely different cultural setting. When you do kumbhaka, emptying the lungs well and holding for a while, the next breath will rush in naturally. This requires really good posture so breath can come in smoothly. It also requires care, as it should be done without forcing results. Now look at these lines by one of the Taliesins:

*Which are the four elements.  
 Their end is not known.  
 What pigs, or what wandering of stags.  
 I salute thee, Bard of the border.  
 May he increase thee, (whose) bones (are of) mist.  
 (Where) two cataracts of wind fall.  
 (Book of Taliesin 7, trans. Skene)*

I suspect that this might a reference to breathing exercise. There are several references to breathing in the songs of Taliesin, such as the line when the inspired seer inquires when the breath is black (*BoT*, 7), and even more material can be found in Irish lore. Regarding the meaning of this passage here are some of my intuitions. Of all the animals popular in Celtic lore, pigs and stags are most closely connected with the otherworlds. Both are well known to pass from this world to the other/s. The bard of the border stands between mundane reality and the otherworld (the Land of the Living). A common metaphor for the translation of consciousness between the worlds is the hedge of mists, well known from Irish Druidic sorceries and European folk lore. The bones are the trans-personal essence of a person, they feature prominently in Celtic burial rites; in *Cauldron of the Gods* I included material on phased burials involving corpses decaying in the open until



some bones could be extracted and used for ritual exposure or burial. Bones are what remains when the person and the flesh have disappeared. The two cataracts of wind fall through the nostrils and through the windpipe where they divide again and go into the two lungs. The *falling* breath is important. You do not suck it in using strain and force but allow it to come naturally. Curiously, a text of the Huang Lao school found in the tomb of Mawangdui uses almost the same metaphor. The text *Ten Questions*, 4, proposes that during the morning meditation, exhalation should follow nature (i.e. without any effort or meddling of your conscious mind). The inhalation should fill the lungs as if the air was stored in a deep abyss (Cleary 1994). How much did the bards know about going to the otherworld using unusual forms of breathing?

**Breathing in fixed intervals.** This is part of the routine of many yogic schools and constitutes what many believe to be *prāṇāyāma*. The idea behind classical *prāṇāyāma* is that you regularise the time of in-breath, holding, out-breath, and holding. Usually a steady rhythm was sought. Various traditions invented numerous rhythms and attributed a wide range of effects to them (B. K. S. Iyengar 1981). The timing was done by repeating mantras, usually the short *bīja* (seed) mantras, and by counting them with the help of a *japamālā* (rosary for the counting and offering of mantra). This combined *japa* (repetition of mantra) with breathing and produced interesting states of mind. Sadly, it is also a technique that can lead to a lot of unpleasant side effects. One common method to increase vital energy is given by the *Devī* in the *Devī Bhāgavatam*, 8, 35:

*Taking in the breath by the Idā (the left nostril) so long as we count 'Om' sixteen, retaining it in the Susumnā as long as we count 'Om' sixty-four times and then exhaling it slowly by the Pingalā nādi (the right nostril) as long as we count 'Om' thirty-two times. This is called one Prāṇāyāma by those versed in the Yogas. Thus one should go on again and again with his Prāṇāyāma. At the very beginning, try with the number twelve, i.e. as we count 'Om' twelve times and then increase the number gradually to sixteen and so on. (...) When this Prāṇāyāma is practised repeatedly, perspiration comes first when it is called of the lowest order; when the body begins to tremble, it is called middling; and when one rises up in the air, leaving the ground, it is called the best Prāṇāyāma.*

A very similar technique is recommended by Śiva in the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*. Here the count is on the *Māyā bīja* *Hrīm*, the only difference being the remark: *The doing of this thrice through the right and left nostrils alternately is called Prāṇāyāma.*

The *Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra* (trans. Louise Finn), a much older work, offers another version. 5, 47 gives the classical *Kālī bīja* *Krīm*, the most secret of secret. The *bīja* may be faulty (mantras can have numerous

faults, see the chapter on mantra), i.e. it appears *asleep, drowsy, intoxicated, delusive and inclined away*. 48 suggests that these can be remedied by combining the bīja with the breath mantra (pallavam/Haṁsa). When reaching the end of the exhalation, known as *night worship, day worship and twilight worship* the bīja is recited. In real life, night worship is taking a breath through the left nostril (the *idā*, or moon channel), day worship is breathing through the right (piṅgalā or sun channel), and twilight worship is breathing through both nostrils at one. Note that this form of breathing is not identical with the method treated above. Night, day, and twilight worship are one breath each, ending with the mental recitation of Kṛīm.

Another technique from the *DB* (11, 1) identifies the mantra Om̐ (spelled AUM) with the three phases of inhalation (through the left nostril counting A thirty-two units for Viṣṇu), holding (count U sixty-four units for Śiva), and exhalation (M sixteen units through the right nostril for Brahmā). This practice is used as a preliminary to the raising of Kuṇḍalinī.

Breathing in intervals may sound nice and easy. This impression is misleading. Anyone who forces breath into a rigid rhythm, especially when it involves holding breath for such a formidable interval, is in grave danger of exploding. It is easier when the rhythm does not involve holding breath (one of my favourites is two units inhalation to eight units slow exhalation) but even this requires training if you want it to happen elegantly and without strain. Holding breath can make things a lot more difficult. Even when the units of time are reduced to a shorter rhythm, (the formula being 1:4:2 or 2:4:1) the whole thing is not without danger. Any sort of forced breathing can damage the body. If you have breathed deeply for a while, your body will be so saturated with oxygen that it may naturally get into long intervals of resting breath. Likewise, some trances naturally involve a cessation of breath from time to time. Making yourself do so on purpose and without preparation is a very different matter. In exercises that regulate breath according to fixed patterns, a guru well versed in emergency medicine is essential. Just remember the case of Victor Neuburg who was ordered to do complicated breathing at fixed intervals by Aleister Crowley, who was a brilliant magician but an inexperienced yogī. During the process Neuburg found his mouth filling with blood and, as his sister remarked, his health never fully recovered.

**Dog-like panting.** Not an exercise but a technique to raise body temperature. For this I am indebted to Dieter who learned it from Lama Anagarika Govinda. It can be very useful up in the mountains in winter. Pant as fast and shallow as a dog in summer. Use rapid belly breathing for it. Your belly should go in and out really fast, this heats the belly muscles which in turn generates heat for the whole system. Do it for a minute, then go easy and relax again. Rub your belly if you like and spread the joy and glow and happiness. Resume in a few minutes till you feel comfy and warm. Remember to do it only for very brief periods. This is one of the practices that makes use of mouth-breathing as the rate of



exhalation and inhalation is too fast for the nose. To guard against the cold air, keep the mouth almost shut and the tongue against the palate. Visualise fire spreading out of your belly and through your body for amplification. Note: do not breathe through the mouth for long periods when the climate is cold and wet, as this may lead to bronchitis and other afflictions.

**The Crow Beak.** One of the favourite methods of Abhinavagupta. Discussing the vital breath that penetrates the entire being and merges in the form of the heart, Abhinavagupta introduces a form of breathing called the crow beak (Muller-Ortega 1989: 216). The idea is that you pursue your meditation in the heart with your lips pursed as if you wanted to kiss the entire manifest world. The position of the lips resembles the beak of the crow, hence the name, and produces *the enjoyment of an extremely cold taste, whose nature is the soma-moon and whose form is the condition of 'being' - and, 'being sealed in the navel', that is, having as limit the site of the navel by the practice of the absorption into the 'full pot', then the entire assemblage of mantra-s and mudrā-s are manifested in his body, which is then as if ruled by them.* Not easy to understand but worth contemplating in depth, that's Abhinavagupta for you.

The *Śiva Saṃhita* 69-83 has an easier explanation:

69. When the skilful Yogī, by placing the tongue at the root of the palate, can drink the *Prāṇa vāyu*, then there occurs complete dissolution of all Yogas (I.e., he is no longer in need of Yoga).

70. When the skilful Yogī, knowing the laws of the action of *Prāṇa* and *Apāna*, can drink the cold air through the contraction of the mouth, in the form of a crow-bill, then he becomes entitled to liberation. Verse 71 recommends the crow bill in order to destroy fatigue, heat, fever, decay, and old age.

72. Pointing the tongue upwards, when the Yogī can drink the nectar flowing from the moon (situated between the two eyebrows), within a month he certainly would conquer death.

74. When he drinks the air through the crow-bill, both in the morning and evening twilight, contemplating that it goes to the mouth of the *Kuṇḍalīni*, consumption of the lungs (*phthisis*) is cured. To continue, the crow beak destroys diseases, produces clairvoyance and clairaudience, frees from sins, makes the yogī a *Bhairava*, *Kāmadeva* frees from obstacles, hunger, thirst, and so on.

**Viloma.** This technique, meaning literally 'against the hair' (against the natural flow), is based on interruption. Breath does not flow continuously but is interrupted repeatedly. There are several forms. In the basic form, the yogī relaxes in a comfortable posture, preferably lying on the back. In-breath happens slowly and gently, and is interrupted by a brief pause every two or three seconds. During these pauses, the belly

remains still. The exhalation is slow and steady. The second type is to inhale in a smooth, slow flow and to interrupt the exhalation several times. The third variety is to interrupt both inhalation and exhalation. Each method should only be performed for five to ten minutes. Viloma should be gentle and pleasant. If you feel strained or uneasy something is wrong. After the exercise, rest for a few minutes and relax without interfering with breath in any way. In the fourth form, for well advanced yogis, the method is coupled with prolonged kumbhaka and done sitting.

### **Breath and suggestion.**

Let me tell you a story. As I mentioned in *Seidways*, I used to be an overexcited kid. When drawing exciting pictures (which I did lots of times, who cares about unexciting ones?) I used to get into states that set my body trembling, my imagination was often as vivid as 'real life', and at night I had plenty of nightmares. Then, one summer holiday with my grandmother Nena on the island Sylt, things changed enormously. One of my granny's friends was Dr. Gisela Eberlein, who had studied hypnosis under Dr. Schulz, the inventor of Autogenic Training. AT is one of the early forms of self-hypnosis and, like so many early things, it was full of crude and inelegant elements. Being such a nervous and wild-minded kid, the adults decided that some relaxation would do me good. So I became the first child she ever taught. I had to lie on a table, a rolled up blanket under my head, and she began suggesting. The first thing I learned was to speak to the parts of the body. She suggested I should imagine telephoning my arm, but this was not too efficient, as my arm was so close that speaking into it was much easier. Well, Autogenic Training makes use of some very simple suggestions which are repeated with a lot of monotony. Those were the days when hypnosis was based on endless, dull repetition. So, as I was breathing out, she slowly repeated 'your right arm is very heavy. Your hand is very heavy. Your muscles are heavy as lead. Very heavy. Everything is heavy...' This was done with all parts of the body. Sometimes she repeated the suggestions, then again she had me say them to myself in my inner voice. Nowadays few practitioners of autogenic training use Dr. Schulz's 'heavy like lead' any more. Thanks to pollution, lead has become a very negative concept, so it was replaced by 'heavy like stone'. Not too elegant either, isn't 'heavy' enough? Metaphors are tricky things. Lead is heavy but it is also toxic, stone is heavy but it is also hard. Good trancing shouldn't make you hard, hardness interferes with good relaxation. When you introduce metaphors, consider what they suggest apart from what you want.

The next stage, when body is really heavy and relaxed, was to suggest that the blood circulation and blood pressure are steady. 'Heart beats slow and steadily', 'blood pressure is even and steady', 'body is pleasantly warm' were typical suggestions. Then followed 'The solar plexus is radiantly warm' until I felt a wonderful glow saturating my torso. Then it was 'breath flows slow and steady', 'breath flows steady as



the waves on the sea', 'it breathes me'. This was a good one, every day I sat on the beach and stared at the white foaming waves come thundering, surging, hissing, and licking over sand, shells, and tangled seaweed. It's not easy to breathe in the same rhythm. If you want a bit of extra fun at the seaside, give it a try. Some wave rhythms can be paced by a good breather, others cannot (depending on the weather). The basic training ended with the suggestion 'the brow is pleasantly cool'. By then I had become so wonderfully relaxed and warm that I felt totally at home. She left me in this state for a while. Luckily I did not get a treatment of Dr. Schulz's suggestions 'to build character' ('duty is pleasure', 'order is pleasure', 'my desk is tidy' etc.). Coming out of the trance consisted of speeding up the inner voice, making it sound interested and exciting. 'I come out of trance now. Body is lightweight, my breath goes faster, my body wakes up, my limbs move, I feel refreshed and wide awake.' This was accompanied by stretching the limbs and speeding up the breathing. Finally I was allowed to open my eyes, taking in an amazingly fresh and impressive new world, and getting up very slowly. We had these sessions over several weeks, coupled with other exercises, such as vowel song and deep breathing. By then I was using the method several times day, whenever I had a pause, did not know what to do, and while going to sleep, and she was beginning to teach other kids. Of course I was very curious about what else could be done. I kept asking her to hypnotise me, as I had read that hypnosis is something really exciting, she always said no, and then did it anyway. Of course I never noticed, as I expected hypnosis to be dramatic and to involve blackouts, loss of memory, and doing things against my will. Instead, I felt very much aware and in touch with myself in these trances. At home I read up on Dr. Schulz and began to invent my own suggestions.

The art of suggestion has come a really long way since then. In the old days, it was believed that 'the subconscious mind does not understand negations'. Studies over the last decades have clearly shown that this is not the case. It simply needs more time to process negations, and when suggestions are fast and involve a lot of negations, it can get confused about them.

Or it may get annoyed when suggestions are too boring. People who repeat the same dull suggestion to themselves hundreds of times may end up with a really annoyed deep mind.

Also, suggestions should remain in the range of possibilities. If you tell yourself 'my headache is gone' when this is plainly not true, it won't work. Instead, you will keep the headache on your mind and it will hurt more than ever. It's easier to suggest that body feels better with each breath (most of it actually does), that you relax, that muscles loosen, and to send a lot of attention into all those parts which do not suffer from a headache. It's amazing how well your feet and legs can feel while your head throbs. Send your attention there and spread this feeling upward to all other parts that do not hurt until the headache is confined to a tiny area. Or ignore the sense of feeling altogether and put attention into inner sound (voice or music) or images. Doze off and if you are lucky

you will feel better when you come round again. This is even more important when you use suggestion for 'positive thinking'. Telling yourself that you are successful, popular, and sexy when this is simply not true will only produce delusion or frustration. Suggesting that you are LEARNING will get you a lot further. Avoid suggesting impossible states (I am X) and go for process (I am learning to X).

The old belief had it that suggestions should be short, direct, and brisk, many of them actually sounding like commands. Modern hypnotherapy uses more organic forms of speaking, meaning long sentences made up of short suggestions connected elegantly 'so as you listen you may notice that your body relaxes and your limbs feel warm and loose as you lie there and notice that while I speak you feel rested and enjoy the good feelings of your body as you let go and calm down and slow down and feel deeply refreshed as this is good and it is coming home to yourself...'. The old school believed in constant repetition of the same few suggestions, the new methods involve dozens of really artful forms of suggestion, direct, indirect, subconscious signalling, hidden emphasis, story telling, journeys in the imagination, and a lot of other joys. People differ, circumstances differ, and suggestions have to be adapted to the person who listens to them. Monotonous repetition of the same stuff may work occasionally with some people, but in the long run you will get a lot further when you introduce variation and play. If you wish to learn something really valuable, read and practice the brilliant *Tranceformations* by Bandler and Grinder, Richard Bandler's *Guide to Trance-formation* or study the works of Milton H. Erickson. I also recommend that you watch Richard doing hypnosis on DVD. It is a miraculous experience and a wonderful work of art.

What remained similar in old and new hypnosis is the use of breath. Ms. Eberlein used to give calming suggestions using a calm and soothing voice while I was exhaling. This is sound practice: while exhaling, the body tends to relax, while inhaling it tenses a little. If you wish to suggest something soothing, emphasise the outflow, if you suggest something exciting, use the inflow. The same thing applies to yoga: emphasising exhalation tends to soothe and sedate, emphasising inhalation tonifies and excites. To emphasise can mean that you put more attention into it, or that you prolong it, or make it congruent. To relax, put a sensation of 'letting go' into the out-breath; to excite, make the in-breath dynamic. Body becomes naturally heavier while you exhale and lighter as you inhale. Thus, when you suggest that your body feels heavy and relaxed on the exhalation, you are confirming what happens anyway. Of course this pattern needs not to be followed slavishly. It's inconvenient to suggest exclusively on the exhalation. A natural speech flow in a calm and soothing, slow voice that merely emphasises the exhalation is a lot more efficient. Nor does it always have to be slow and calm. Good trancing has its ups and downs like the motions of the waves. Trances can and should involve interesting, fascinating and exciting stuff from time to time, and on these occasions, you are wise to use an exciting and swift voice. Nor do suggestions have to remain on the level of spoken words.



A Chinese system of soothing breathing found in *The Method of Reading Silently* (Hu Bin 1982) has the practitioner write the characters of words such as 'silent and loose' in their minds while they exhale. Advanced practitioners can become extremely relaxed simply by thinking 'relax' while exhaling, and when I feel bored by suggestions I simply focus on the out-breath and enjoy to let go. When you use a mantra or vidyā instead of spoken suggestions, consider whether you wish to soothe or excite yourself and adapt it to the flow of your breath.

Finally, I should mention the little known fact that Autogenic Training is Dr. Schulz's adaptation of a Tantric system of meditation. Schulz developed his process over a decade and was not very clear about his sources. He did mention the Indian background and the fact that he had eliminated the religious elements of the practice. In some of his more scholarly works, there are references to yoga, śavāsana (the corpse posture), prāṇāyāma, the Kāpālika sect, and even attempts to introduce shamanism to the medical establishment. The combination of breath and suggestion has a long history in yoga. You can find the idea in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1,5,23 where we learn that only one observance should be performed. *He should breathe in and breathe out wishing, 'Let not the evil of death get me.'* This process wins complete union with the deity. You may argue that the suggestion is formulated in a very negative way, i.e. you have to imagine what you do not want to happen, and then cancel it. This is too complicated. 'May the goodness of my life continue' is easier to imagine. Well, we are at the beginning of hypnotherapy here, maybe 800 BCE, and shouldn't blame the early pioneers for not getting everything right from the start. In Autogenic Training, the monotonous and unchanging repetition of the same suggestions has its roots in mantra-yoga. The suggestions of heaviness correspond to pṛthivī (earth); the blood flow to āp (water); the warm solar plexus to agni (fire); the sensation of 'it breathes me' to vāyu (air); and the slightly cool brow to ākāśa (spirit/space). The sequence of suggestions follows an Indian system of occult anatomy, which places earth in legs and perineum, water in the belly, fire in the chest, air in shoulders and throat, and spirit in the head. The cool brow was originally supposed to activate the third eye but Dr. Schulz eliminated that. I should add that the brow should be only slightly cool. My grandfather used to be very interested in oriental philosophy. Once he experimented with Autogenic Training on my mother who was still a child. He got it wrong and suggested 'your brow is cold', which made her faint. Sometimes good intentions are simply not enough.

## Prāṇa in Antiquity

The early Upaniṣadic period, around the eighth and seventh century BCE, provides us with the first attempts to define the role of prāṇa in religion, consciousness, and meditation. It was a magnificent time for really complicated cosmology and subtle texts alluding cautiously to ritual practices and meditations with hardly a clear word among them. What is lacking in conciseness, however, was made up by repetition of

lines and by creative interpretation expected from students and sages. After all, the prime function of an obscure text is to make you think for yourself. At this early age, prāṇa had become a central concept of philosophy and life. The idea of prāṇa goes a long way beyond 'breath' or 'life energy'. The prāṇa of the *Upaniṣads* is also the force behind the senses, and the senses, as I'm sure you already guessed, happen to be deities. It is prāṇa which gives life to the senses, and these in turn make body and intelligence possible. A bit of practical experience with various breathing techniques will soon reveal that breathing does indeed alter sensual perception. The senses, however, do not entirely correspond to the five senses that Aristotle defined. Some flexible thinking is required here. As you are by now hopefully delighting in breathing exercises every day I would like to add some of the fascinating ideas that may get you beyond the realms of mere breathing and vitality into magickal and philosophical spaces really worth exploring. Let me sum up some ideas from the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 2, 1-3, 4 (trans. Radhakrishna, 1953).

The breathing spirit is Brahmā. Brahmā's messenger is the mind, the protector is the eye, the ear is the announcer, and speech is the keeper of the house. It is possible to become obsessed by any of these. The breathing spirit, Brahmā, receives offerings from his servants, the deities mind, eye, ear, and speech, though he never begs for them, thus, the prime lesson is 'Do not beg' for there are always those good enough to give without being asked. The divinities come in a certain order, which leads gradually to refinement. First comes speech, behind speech the eye, behind the eye the ear, and behind the ear the mind and behind the mind the breath (prāṇa). The text gives a multipurpose rite to obtain results: the highest treasure can be obtained in the night of a full or new moon or in any night of the bright fortnight provided there is an auspicious constellation. The ritualist sweeps the ground, strews sacred grass, sprinkles water, builds a fire, and bends a knee while offering oblations of ghī (melted butter), saying : '*The divinity named speech is the attainer. May it obtain this for me from him. Hail to it.*' These lines are repeated inserting the names 'breath', 'eye', 'ear', 'mind' and finally 'wisdom'. Then the ritualist smears the limbs with the ointment of melted butter, inhales the smoke, declare the wish, and goes forth in silence. As you can see the order of the divinities does not agree with their earlier appearance, can you detect or invent a reason? The same ritual is used to become dear to any woman or man. The phrase to repeat is: '*Your speech I sacrifice in me, hail to you.*' Speech is replaced by breath in the next repetition and so on. Then one only has to stand close to the person, preferably from windward, and success is ensured. Our text goes on to explain that when you speak, you cannot breathe (properly), thus you are sacrificing breath. When you breathe (properly) you are unable to speak, this means sacrificing speech. One or the other are always being sacrificed at any moment of your life, they are the unending immortal oblations which are always offered, whether you are waking or sleeping. Unlike other sacrifices, which have a beginning and ending, these two are continuous.



Brahman, we learn, lives when the fire burns and dies when it is extinguished, then its light goes to the sun, and its breath to the vital breath. The same goes for the sun, which returns its light to the moon, the moon dies and its light goes to lightning, and the light of lightning, in its dying, returns to the regions of space. Though all this speaks of Brahman's dying, all these things do not really die when they enter the vital wind, but come forth again. Next, Brahman shines forth when one speaks, when one speaks not, Brahman dies and its light goes to the eye and its vital breath to the wind. When the eye sees, Brahman shines forth, but dies when one sees not, thus the light of the eye returns to the ear and its vital breath to the wind. Hearing makes Brahman shine forth, not-hearing makes the light go to the mind and its vital breath to the wind. Brahman thrives when the mind is thinking but dies when thought ceases and its light goes to the vital breath, like its vital breath goes to the vital breath. And though they all die in the process, they are not really dead but come forth again. Confused? This is clearly a process of meditation, there is a progression towards simplicity until consciousness returns to the non-defined vital breath. The next discipline is a little obscure. If I interpret it properly, it has the ritualist lying un-breathing like a rotten log of wood. A process akin to astral projection (travelling in the imagination) seems to be implied: First, breath disappeared (or seemed to, a case of minimal breathing) from body, next mind went, then the ear, the eye, and finally speech. This is the pattern of dissolution, it resembles the process of death. In its reversed form the text tells us how to come to life again: first, speech enters into body, and body lies speaking with speech (hypnotic suggestion?). Next the eye comes along, and body speaks and sees. Then follows the ear, body speaks, sees, and hears. Mind follows, so body speaks, sees, hears, and thinks. Finally, the vital breath comes in and body arises at once. In between the two phases comes the actual journey:

*All the divinities, verily, having recognised the superior excellence of the vital breath, having comprehended the vital breath alone as the seat of intelligence, went forth from this body, all these together. They, having entered into the air, having the nature of space went to the heavenly world. The sage who knows this can travel on the vital breath. He goes to the place where the gods are. Having reached that, he who knows this becomes immortal as the gods are immortal.*

Another rite follows during which the dying or seriously disabled father invests his son with speech, vital breath, eye, ear, food, pleasure, pain, wisdom, mind, and a lot of other blessings to transmit the tradition. Should death ensue, a good funeral is assured, if not the father has to live under the authority of the son or leave the house to become a wandering ascetic. No doubt this rite was only performed when death was really imminent. To confuse things a little, the next sections disagree with the beginning by telling us that it is Indra, not Brahman, who is actually the breathing spirit. This can only come as a surprise to those who believe in

specific gods with sharply defined functions, anybody acquainted with Indian thought will only give a brief sigh and read on. Indra said:

*I am the breathing spirit, meditate on me as the intelligent self, as life, as immortality. Life is breath and breath is life... with the breathing spirit one obtains immortality in this world, by intelligence true conception... the vital breaths, verily, go into a oneness, (otherwise) no one would be able, at once, to make known a name by speech, a form by the eye, a sound by the ear, a thought by the mind... while speech speaks, all the vital breaths speak after it. While the eye sees all, the vital breaths see after it. While the ear hears, all the vital breaths hear after it. When the breath breathes, all the vital breaths breathe after it.*

(3, 2 Radhakrishna 1953)

This doctrine is developed at some length and I am sure you are happy to read it for yourself. Suffice it to say that speech produces all names, breath all odours, the eye all forms, the ear all sounds, and the mind all thoughts. These constitute the totality of experience, and the driving sentience and force between these divinities of the senses is *prāṇa*, vital breath. The *Chândogya Upanishad* (3, 13, 1-6) expands this scope of concepts by aligning the breaths with the directions. At the time, the concept of the heart as a hollow space within the centre, seat of the soul, was well developed. The heart has five openings for the gods:

In the **east** is the up-breath (*prāṇa*), the eye and the sun, which should be meditated upon as glow and health.

In the **south** is the diffused breath (*vyāna*), the ear and the moon, meditate on them as prosperity and fame.

In the **west** is the downward breath (*apāna*), speech and fire, meditate on them as the lustre of sacred wisdom and health.

In the **north** there is equalised breath (*samāna*), the mind and rain, meditate on them as fame and beauty.

**Above** is the out-breath (*udāna*), air and space. Meditate on them as strength and greatness.

These are known as the Five Brahma-persons, the doorkeepers of the world of heaven. By meditating on the five, their qualities are attained. And so they should be. Even reading such complicated stuff should improve your *karman* no end.

## Classical *prāṇāyāma*

When we explore the early teachings of yoga, we encounter a wide range of breathing techniques. Sadly, most of the early pioneers of Yoga did not bother to give many details. Thus, we find only a few bare bones in Patañjali's famous treatise. His comments on *prāṇāyāma* are so brief that you have to know what he knows to understand what he's talking about:



1,33. *Mind attains peace by associating with the happy, pitying the miserable, appreciating the virtuous, and avoiding the vicious.*

1,34. *Also by expulsion and retention of breath.*

2,49. *The next step is prāṇāyāma, the cessation of exhalation and inhalation.*

2,50. *Exhalation, inhalation, cessation of breath, may be short or long, according to length, duration and number of breaths.*

2,51. *A fourth method of breathing is that which is determined by a uniform external or internal measure.*

This is not exactly helpful. Luckily, other authors supplied more details. To give you an idea of what these techniques include I shall give a brief summary of the eight basic methods of kumbhaka listed in the *Gheraṇḍa Saṁhita*. These are classical techniques which appear with some regularity in a good many Tantric and yogic treatises. Of course there are also plenty of variations. The texts are not always very clear, quite understandable as the author/s assumed that any reader would practice with the help of an experienced guru. Please understand that the technical descriptions are not complete and that such exhausting techniques require the presence of a skilled teacher. Do not practice these methods on your own!

1. **Sahita** (with in-and out-breath). Seated towards the north or east, the image of Brahmā full of bright red rajas is visualised in the shape of the letter A. Inhalation is through the left nostril while sixteen A-bijas are repeated. At the end of in-breath, the uḍḍiyana-Bandha is performed. Then Hari (Viṣṇu) is visualised full of sattva in the shape of letter U while the U-bija is repeated sixty-four times. While exhaling through the right nostril, Śiva full of tamas but of white colour is visualised as the letter m, the m-bija is repeated thirty-two times. The nostrils are traditionally closed by using thumb and ring- or little finger. The exercise can also be done without counting bijas by circling the palm of the left hand around the knee the required number of times. The result of this method is first sweating, then trembling, and finally levitation.

2. **Sūryabheda** (penetration of the sun). In-breath through the right (solar) nostril, assume jālandhara mudra, and hold until sweat runs down your hair and hands. This is supposed to excite the vāyus (winds) and to wake body. The vāyus are focused around the root of the navel. Hard and uninterrupted exhalation through the left nostril follows.

3. **Ujjāyī** (conquering). Breath is inhaled through both nostrils into the mouth, where it is compressed. This description is hardly clear, but the *Yogabija* adds that a sound should be made while inhaling (in between snoring, buzzing, and singing) which prolongs inhalation. The

technique is supposed to clear the phlegm out of the lungs and to conquer death.

4. **Sītālī** (cooling). Inhale through the rolled up tongue, fill the lungs slowly (use belly-breathing), hold for a while and exhale through both nostrils. This is supposed to cool the yogi. Note that the ability to roll the tongue is a genetic gift, part of the population cannot do it.

5. **Bhastrikā** (bellows). Gently but swiftly breathe in and out through both nostrils without pause. After twenty repetitions hold breath. Repeat three times, this is supposed to destroy all diseases.

6. **Bhrāhmārī** (like bees). Practice at night in silence (not very likely in India). Close the ears and hold breath. Listen for the following sounds in your right ear: crickets, flute, thunder, drum, bee, bell, gong, trumpet, horn, various drums, and the like. All of these are expressions of the heart sound, the sound that is not produced by striking. In their sound is light and consciousness dissolves in it. This practice eventually reduces breathing to a minimum, as it is very hard to listen to fine internal sounds when the lungs are doing their job.

7. **Mūrcchā** (to faint). Consciousness is centred between the eyebrows and breath is held effortlessly and without strain (*sukhena*). According to some, this is done until one is really close to fainting. The other interpretation points out that holding breath gently is not the sort of thing that leads to loss of consciousness. Patañjali (1,34) hints that the real thing is to exhale very thoroughly and to hold breath.

8. **Kevalī** (exclusively holding). Inhalation is through both nostrils. Mind is focused on the *ajapā* mantra *Hamṣa*. The force of breathing is reduced. Force is measured as distance at which the exhalation is still perceivable. When resting, breath is supposed to extend twelve fingers, while making love thirty-six fingers, during physical work even more. The idea behind these measures is that life-energy is lost when the breath extends far, and conserved when it extends very little. To keep breath within body is to conquer death. In a very difficult passage, we learn that the amount of *ajapā* mantras (i.e. breaths) is doubled. The yogi practices to hold breath for sixty-four units of time. This is repeated every three hours until the *kumbhaka* lasts for 5 x 64 units. This is supposed to produce the *unmanī* state, i.e. exaltation of consciousness. The text is very difficult and the technique has seen several widely different interpretations. One interpretation proposes that the amount of breaths is doubled, leading to very fast breathing. Maybe this comes from the meaning of *unmanā* in modern Hindi, where it is primarily used for restless, scatterbrained, and absentminded states. In older texts, *unmanī* is considered a synonym for *samādhi*, i.e. for the highest trances possible. This interpretation proposes that breathing is slowed so much



that in-breath and out-breath practically become kumbhaka, as there is always air within the lungs which does not move very much. For a detailed treatment of these methods see Sacharow 1954.

## 8: Mantra

### A World of Vibration

Mantra yoga is the art and science of using sound, vibration, rhythm, breath, melody, and words to effect changes in consciousness. The word mantra means *liberation by thought*. According to the etymology chapter in the *Kulārṇava Tantra* (Pandit 1984), the word consists of Ma from manana (thinking, meditation) *on the luminous deity who is the form of Truth* and tra from trāyate (to save), meaning liberation from bondage to the world of phenomena. Thus, a mantra is something thought to attain liberation. This is not very reliable etymology, but it makes a lot of sense. The *Gāyatrī Tantra*, quoted by Woodroffe (1979) tells us: *...that is called Mantra, by the meditation on which the Jīva acquires freedom from sin, enjoyment of heaven and Liberation and by the aid of which he attains in full the four-fold fruit*. A mantra can be a word, a meaningful phrase, a magic spell, a sound-pattern, a name of a deity, and the deity itself. Mantra is all of these, and much more. It can be a tool to invoke, to calm, to excite, to banish, to focus, to offer, to manifest, and to purify. This does not mean that mantra is only a tool. It is one of the essentials in mantra yoga that the mantra is very much alive. As primal sound (śabda) arises from Brahman, all mantras are manifestations of consciousness itself. Think of them as a forms of Kuṇḍalinī-Śakti, the force and sentience that manifests the worlds. Each mantra has a Śakti, which is the deity who manifest in the vibration. In this sense, mantra is not only a device to contact a given deity but a manifestation of that deity in its body-of-sound.

In general, a mantra is practised in three ways.

### Recitation

**Vācika Japa:** loud recitation. This can be useful in the beginning of a ritual, especially when the sound vibration is refined by over- or undertone singing. Vibrating a mantra aloud can be useful to clear the mind and to induce a new consciousness. It can also be a great start when you want to learn a new mantra. This is especially the case when you happen to feel shy about it. Loud vibration affects the physical universe. It can be heard by others, including neighbours, and so the wise know when and where to do it. To sing a mantra aloud needs determination, any sort of 'foolish' behaviour in public does. Are you up to it? Do you really care about the deities your mantra is to evoke? Do you dare to experience them in the flesh, the world, the manifest universe?



It can also happen that mantra becomes loud during a trance. Here the sound-body of the deity wishes to emerge, to release, and to earth itself. It manifests the sentience of a deity (your sentience) and releases all the fierce energy into the wonderful wide world. Vibrating a mantra aloud a few minutes to sense its vibration on the physical plane is a lot more efficient than singing it for hours. If you keep vibrating it physically, a lot of your awareness will be tied up in the physical act of chanting, which may make it harder to turn inward and realise. For this reason many gurus frown on extended loud recitation. And for reasons of secrecy, of course.

**Upāṃsu Japa:** whispered recitation. Whispering is considered more refined than loud chanting, especially when the whispering gradually goes silent and only the lips move. This sort of practice has a remarkable in-between quality, it is partly physical and partly in the imagination. As you whisper, watch your tonality. Does it sound exciting? Whispering often does. Quite early in life, you learned to associate whispering with secrets, hidden communication, and the dangers of being discovered. A whispered mantra can be very exciting when it is whispered in precisely the right way. Give yourself a treat and do it. Then try an unexciting tonality. What makes the crucial difference? What turns you on? Make it sound alluring. Make it sound dramatic. How can you whisper your mantra so that it sounds soothing? There are many ways to whisper. Experiment!

**Mānasa Japa:** mental recitation. The subtle form is to vibrate a mantra entirely in the imagination. This is favoured for prolonged repetition, especially when you move among people and want to avoid being locked up. In many Tantric traditions it is also preferred as a lot of mantras are thought to be highly secret. This involves a curious paradox. Traditionally, worshippers used to receive a mantra from a guru or directly from a deity, if they were among the more inspired sort, and this mantra was assumed to be extremely powerful. If it were to become known, it would be liable to be abused by anybody who chanced to hear it. Other schools claim that revealing a mantra exhausts its power; a worshipper who reveals the mantra necessarily needs a new one, please consult your local guru. Learning a mantra from a book is damned by some Tantras, such as the *Kulārṇava Tantra*: using a mantra heard by chance leads to disaster, while getting it from a book is to commit a sin tantamount to Brahmanicide.

Nevertheless, the good book gives numerous mantras in code. It specially emphasises the importance of one mantra, the famous Hamsa, which is not really a mantra but the sound of out-breath and in-breath. Other sources reveal mantras in plain language on every page, just look into the magnificent *Mantramahodadhīḥ*. How secret should a mantra be? I wouldn't recommend that you tell your favourite mantras to anyone who comes your way, but insisting on absolute secrecy, when all the secrets have been revealed time and time again, seems totally absurd.