Readings in literature, religion & God.

Veritas vos liberabit

On Tantra (to be continued)
Sir John Woodroffe (1865–1936) aka Arthur Avalon was a Judge who studied and propagated Hindu Tantra to the West. He died a true Tantric.

Tantra has been most exhaustively defined by Georg Feuerstein in his book *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy* (Feuerstein, “Tantra. the Great Spiritual Synthesis” 1-19 & also see Whicher 183, 363 for a discussion of the problematics of using the word ‘ecstasy’ within Hindu contexts). Feuerstein’s (1947-2012) definition of Tantra is relevant because he was equally adept at Yoga. *It is only a Yogi who is adept at Tantra.* Only a Yogi has *adhikāra* to the Siddhis and to Tantra in its non-debased forms.

... *adhikāra* is a notion of appropriateness, the right harmony of a certain element in a certain ritual situation with the other elements in that environment, such that the ritual can go forward. Things, actions, people, and the properties thereof have *adhikāra* and can be “actualized” only in the right convergence of circumstances. The most important application of the term was in identifying persons as having or lacking *adhikāra* for various societal and ritual functions, depending on caste, health, stage of life and ritual initiation, etc. Like everything else, persons are carefully “coded” and integrated into a larger matrix of place and meaning, and socially relevant “marks” such as caste, gender, property, etc., are taken into account.

Fr. Clooney has forgotten to mention that the markers he imputes to each "coded" person, are precisely the same markers which the Vatican maintains on each priest including Fr. Clooney. This author just draws the attention of the reader that Fr. Clooney without realising his Freudian slips, has described the exact process of priestly selection (in the lineage of King Melchizedek) within the Catholic Church, proving the universal nature of Hinduism. In this sense, Roman Catholicism is a kind of dualist ascetical Bhakti Marga. This train of thought needs developing without the abracadabra of Jesus having lived in India or such historical inaccuracies. Returning to Feuerstein; Feuerstein was a Yogi, and therefore, a Tantric since he was an adhikari to (of) the disciplines of both Yoga and Tantra as much was Sir John Woodroffe.

Feuerstein has this to say about Tantra, and it is necessary to quote him at length for the benefit of the neophyte to Tantra since he is one of only a few Western scholars who does not distinguish between Tantra and Yoga:

"Tantra" has become a household word in certain circles in the West. But, as is often the case with household words, popularity does not necessarily imply understanding. Frequently we hear words like "consciousness," "holistic," "creativity," or "imagination," but how many people could give an intelligent explanation of any of these? Similarly, Tantra has captured the fascination of a good many Westerners, but few of them actually know what it stands for, including some of those who profess to practice, teach, or write about it.

Tantra, or Tantrism, is an exceptionally ramified and complex esoteric tradition of Indic origin. It made its appearance around 500 CE, though some of its proponents claim a far longer history. Tantra-like ideas and practices can indeed be found in traditions and teachings of a much earlier era. As a full-fledged movement or cultural style extending over both Hinduism and Buddhism, however, Tantra seems to have originated around
the middle of the first millennium CE. It reached maturity around 1000 CE in the philosophical school of Abhinava Gupta. It profoundly influenced the outlook and practices of many non-Tantric traditions, such as Vedanta. Often practitioners of those traditions have been unaware of that influence and might even be offended at the suggestion that they engage in typically Tantric practices.

The reason for this is that within the fold of Hinduism, Tantra gradually fell into disrepute because of the radical antinomian practices of some of its adherents. During the Victorian colonization of India, puritanism drove Tantric practitioners underground. Today Tantra survives mainly in the conservative (samaya) molds of the Shri-Vidya tradition of South India and the Buddhist tradition of Tibet, though both heritages also have their more radical practitioners who understandably prefer to stay out of the public limelight. Particularly Tibetan Vajrayana has become increasingly popular in the West, and it is relatively easy to receive initiation and instruction in this form of Tantra.

From the beginning, Tantra understood itself as a “new age” teaching especially tailored for the needs of the *kali-yuga*, the era of spiritual decline that is still in progress today...many facets of Tantric psychology and practice are relevant to all who seek to cultivate self-understanding and are sincerely engaged in the noble task of spiritual self-transformation.

From the outset, Tantra has straddled both Hinduism and Buddhism, and Tantra-style teachings can be found even in the Indic minority religion of Jainism. Hindu Tantra, which I will somewhat arbitrarily call “Tantra Yoga” to distinguish it from the Buddhist and Jaina varieties, was introduced to the Western world through the writings of Sir John Woodroffe. His English rendering of the famous Mahanirvana-Tantra was published in 1913 and was followed a few years later by his books *Shakti and Shakta* and *The Serpent Power*...Even today, however, Hindu Tantra Yoga is only poorly researched, and most of its high teachings, which require direct experience or at least the explanations of an initiate, remain unlocked.

The situation is strikingly different with the teachings of Buddhist Tantra, in the form of the Tibetan tradition of Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle). Ever since the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 and particularly since the escape of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1959, Tibetan lamas have been generously teaching and initiating Western practitioners into all schools and levels of
Vajrayana Buddhism. To preserve their teachings in exile, many high lamas have consented to work closely with Western scholars on accurate translations of the Tibetan Tantras and on explanatory monographs. Today, therefore, the Buddhist branch of Tantrism is not only more widely disseminated than the Hindu branch but also better understood in the West than its Hindu counterpart.

The many excellent books on Buddhist Tantra give one a real appreciation of the tremendous sophistication of this tradition. Good works on Hindu Tantra Yoga, however, are few, and the books by Woodroffe, though dated and incorrect in places, are still exemplary in many respects. The Hindus never had the kind of extensive monastic tradition of learning and practice that characterizes the Buddhists, particularly the Tibetan Gelugpa school. It is difficult (though not impossible) to find a Hindu Tantric adept who not only has mastered the practical dimension of Tantra Yoga but also can talk knowledgeably about the theoretical aspects. Western scholars are therefore naturally drawn to the study of Buddhist Tantra. A notable exception was the late Swami Lakshmanjoo (1907 – 94), an adept and master expounder of the Kaula tradition of Kashmir, who inspired many Western scholars and Hindu pundits. Many of Swami Lakshmanjoo’s disciples think of him as the reincarnation of the famous tenth-century adept and scholar Abhinava Gupta.

The paucity of research and publications on the Tantric heritage of Hinduism has in recent years made room for a whole crop of ill-informed popular books on what I have called “Neo-Tantrism.” Their reductionism is so extreme that a true initiate would barely recognize the Tantric heritage in these writings. The most common distortion is to present Tantra Yoga as a mere discipline of ritualized or sacred sex. In the popular mind, Tantra has become equivalent to sex. Nothing could be farther from the truth!

(Feuerstein, Preface to *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy*, ix-xiii)
The greatest celibate advocate of (Advaita) Vedanta who ever lived. It is often not noticed within academic circles that Adi Shankaracharya relentlessly built temples dedicated to Shakti.

The force of Vedanta as expounded by the ten over-arching orders of Hindu monks established by Adi Shankaracharya (the dasanamis of the ekadandi group) has well-nigh made Tantra a marginalised force in Hindu missiology. Hindu monks following Adi Shankaracharya’s example, have had no doubts about the need for absolute celibacy in their chosen path and due to their deha-ninda (total annihilation of eros embodied within sarx), these dasanamis have de-prioritised Tantra since the latter is open to debased interpretations by unscrupulous money-makers.
Heruka Vajrayogini from Tibetan Vajrayana (Thunderbolt Tantric system). This iconography would not generally be accepted by celibate Hindu monks, and therefore due to the nature of their vocation, they are more focussed on Vedanta which is more readily accepted by non-Hindus. Vedanta is akin to Continental philosophy and therefore more comprehensible globally whereas Tantra in its myriad forms seems chaotic to the ordinarily reductionist Western Kantian-Freudian mind.

Due to this monastic sanitisation of Hinduism, we find Edwin F. Bryant’s reading of Yoga limited by his understanding of Yoga as derived from the various forms of Vedanta. In Bryant’s corpus, there is a glaring absence of discussions on Tantra.
This is an excellent work though critiqued in traditional circles of Hindu studies. A learned Hindu monk had pointed out to me that this book has no reference to the Tantras and its approach is unacceptable to many Hindus. I find this book indispensable and advise everyone interested in Hinduism to have a copy of this book in their personal collection.

But Feuerstein’s works on Yoga’s psychology and his monograph on Yoga’s philosophy cross-refer to Tantra. Also, the tellingly titled *The Encyclopedia of Yoga and Tantra* by Feuerstein is a testimony to his expansive understanding of both Tantra and Yoga as being primarily one. This unified view of both Tantra and Yoga is what in fact is Tantra because without Tantra there would be no Hindu praxes. *Hinduism is Tantric in essence*. Christoper Wallis understands this as well as the monist Michael Comans. Comans’s book on Advaita Vedanta is important for our understanding of the ontology of both Christianity and Tantra. *Celibate Christian missionaries and inter-religious interventionists* like Fr. Clooney SJ, tend to fix on Vedanta over Tantra since their vow of celibacy forces them to avoid discussions on Tantra. Also, Vajrayana deities disturb normativity (as they are meant to!).
Comans’s epistemology integrates diverse ontologies which include Thomism. This epistemic substratum is vital for understanding Tantra.

To put it in a different manner: unless one is adept in the precepts of say, of the sage Gheranda, one cannot understand Advaita Vedanta. Another analogy will help: if one reads Buddhists on Buddhism, one tends to think that the Buddha(s) had negated Hinduism and one accepts the view that Adi Shankaracharya had only reacted to Buddhist proselytization. But as Chandradhar Sharma has illustrated in his work on Advaita Vedanta, the Buddha(s) were not the arch-enemies of Hinduism as scholars unschooled in praxes would want us to believe. The point here is that Tantra is (sic) Hinduism and Yoga in its various forms, arises out of Tantra. The two are one, and in praxes, there cannot be any separate definition of Tantra and Yoga. As Abhinavagupta would have it: Yoga is that which makes us realise “internal time” (Abhinavagupta 206). Tantra is that which makes possible Yoga or the experience of internal time.

The above is an academic discussion of Tantra. But Feuerstein in his book on Tantra referred above on page 3 has provided a pictorial sketch of the Mahavidya Chinnamasta.
The Mahavidya who signifies renunciation of *ahamkara* (ego) and feeds others with Her own blood and destroys eros and thereby ensures *moksha*.

This is proof of the fact that Feuerstein was able to integrate Tantra and Yoga within the lineage of Abhinavagupta, unlike Wendy Doniger. Doniger is obsessed with the libidinal within Hinduism much in the same manner that some scholars of the Bible stress on Biblical sexuality and spiritually regressive questions like whether Jesus had coitus with Mary Magdalene.
Hesed can be best represented through erotic iconography since the human person experiences momentary bliss through coitus. The Song of Songs is indeed erotic but to see it just so is to miss the point. Brahman-Ananda is nothing like coital joy. It is infinite joy, samadhi. But the limited human being within samsara can only try to understand Brahman through sensuality. This is cliche in religious studies, but materialists fixate on the libidinal. Tantric theories of vibration (spandan) are also erotic to the person who is ensnared by sense objects.

Doniger is like one of these learned savants of the Song of Songs who just see that sacred text as an erotic poem. There is nothing wrong in these readings since they do not detract from the value of the scrutinized sacred Scriptures but only show the spiritual states of the concerned scholars. One impediment to ‘Aparokshanubhuti’ (अ प र ो क श ा न उ भ ू ि त ः or, a direct experience of Ananda) is an excessive desire for mastering the shastras for the sake of being learned. We are not talking here of those who want to appear learned, but learning undertaken as an end in itself is futile and eventually becomes an impediment to attaining samadhi. And all Hindu scriptures and even the Tibetan Vajrayana stress chastity of eight kinds. The fact that Doniger ferrets out these erotic elements which are indeed there in every kind of sacred literature shows that she, unlike Hindus (sic) like Sir John Woodruff, George Feuerstein and Michael Comans has much to learn from Hinduism.

It is indeed a kind of truth, just the truth that one immersed in samsara wants to see. This is a well-written book with hardly any distortion of facts. But Doniger’s cognition is her own and Hinduism is fine with her. But the question remains: whose facts?
Tantra is a living orthopraxy throughout the world, and it is occult and focused on the Siddhis. The Siddhis cannot be had without Yoga, the only exception being Guru Kripa. The Siddhis are not merely to be acquired through the practice of Hatha Yoga. Or even through other forms of Yoga or Lectio Divina. It can only be understood and practised through (sic) a living Tantric. The author of this paper had written of this aspect of Tantra in the only non-academic essay (Chattopadhyay 238-53) in this otherwise scholarly Special Issue on Tantra published in Prabuddha Bharata in January 2016. The discussion by other contributors in this Special Issue on Tantra had become so esoteric that this author was requested to contribute an experiential account of Tantra. So, to further define Tantra, this author posits for the purpose of this blog-post the following working definition of Tantra:

Tantra is the path of obtaining the Siddhis through various occult and esoteric rituals which give to the practitioner results which cannot be obtained by following the various Yogas as commonly understood within Vedanta. It is the path of the Aghora and, Vajrayana.

It is erroneous to separate Buddhist and Hindu and even Jaina Tantra. Tantra is One, the ignorant see it as separate for academic credit. There cannot be any Tantric praxes without Virachara. Interpreting Virachara without practical knowledge which cannot be acquired except in crematoria is akin to know about symphonies from books on opera without ever hearing one. This author insists on the need for rejecting partly the need for structural scrutiny in religious studies. One cannot practice either Tantra or Yoga without accepting the realities represented in say, the various Yantras and Mandalas. One should never forget that Tantra is a throbbing, pulsating lived religion which cannot be understood by scholars who do not have their desires for money and eros rooted out. The aim of Tantra and Samkhya qua Yoga is the same: liberation from samsara. Anything else may sound academically rigorous but is, in fact, superficial and untrue.
Tantra can be best understood as comprising of those rituals faithfully recorded by Koichi Shinohara in his magnum opus on Chinese esoteric Buddhist mandalas. This experiential aspect of Tantra must be incorporated in any definition of Tantra. Only a faint sense of Tantra can be had from intellectual discussions of Tantra. Tantra is so real and yet must be guarded as secret gnosis, not because it is esoteric but because it might feed psychoses in weak minds. Mind here is used in a Freudian sense. The unevolved being in bondage (*pushu*) is attracted to Tantra because it can be used to take advantage of the gullible. Now we come to the discussion of the influence of Tantra on Yoga.
This is a book for serious scholars of both Hindu and Buddhist Tantra.

Yoga has been defined above in the light of Abhinavagupta. Abhinavagupta’s corpus is a testament to the power of Tantra as the sole force informing Yoga. Abhinavagupta’s aesthetic theories, for instance, are informed by his overarching understanding of Hindu theology as being at once Tantric and Yogic. To say that Tantra influenced Samkhya philosophy is to miss the point that Samkhya and Yoga are one. This anxiety of finding influences arise out of a need to reduce both Tantra and Yoga to the immature realms of comprehensibility. That which is comprehensible is reductionist and is an exercise in structural scrutiny which is disastrous to Indology. The corollary here is the scholarly work on the historical Jesus by John Meier SJ. Meier has reduced Jesus to comprehensibility and therefore thrown the numinous out of his own vocation as a Jesuit. Wendy Doniger is brilliant but not brilliant enough to be equal to Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas understood the mystery of Being; Doniger and Meier are archivists who fail to understand that religious studies as a domain is not the same as linguistics or anthropology. Saussure and Levi Strauss only help so much in understanding Tantra and Yoga. Thus, the question of Tantra influencing Yoga should be redefined: how did and in which ways did Tantra and Yoga become one? Let us take the instance of Patanjali. Patanjali’s definitions of samadhi derive directly from Tantra. (This assertion will be elaborated in a later
One weaves, as it were, the mind into silence and reduces the fluctuations of the mind to awake the kundalini from the genito-anal region to the highest ganglion in the brain. This understanding of samadhi is Tantric.

It is interesting to note that works like *Yoga Vashishtha* and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* all mention the awakening of the inner *Purusha*. This is the influence of Tantra on Yoga. But again, to the Hindu, all is Tantra. This fact is found in the fact that all Hindu deities have consorts. They are Yogis but nonetheless, they are non-celibates. The story of Queen Chudala in *Yoga Vashishta* is essential here because there Queen Chudala experiences/attains samadhi and yet she leads her holy but non-dualist husband to experience eros. This insistence on the detached experience of the *vrittis* is Tantric. Another instance of the tight integration of Tantra and Yoga is to be found in the interpretations of Hinduism published by the monks of the Bihar School of Yoga situated at Munger. Their books are explicitly Tantric. One subtle example of Tantra in an otherwise non-Tantric text can be given. In the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad*, women are shown desiring and goading their husbands into renouncing the world. This presence of women searching for the Brahman is itself Tantric. Without Shakti, without Hinduism, the knowledge of Brahman is incomplete. An exception to this kind of gross Tantric insistence on the feminine is not to be found in the *Katha Upanishad*. This *Upnishad* betrays a Freudian anxiety with women as seductresses. Therefore, it cannot be Tantric.

In short, it seems that all Yoga is a preparation for the praxes of Tantra and not the other way around. Textual recensions as has been pointed out above should not be done in a mechanical imitation of Saussure and his acolytes but through a hermeneutics rooted in the lived experience of Tantra. No theology is valid unless tested in the here and the now. Hinduism and Tantra cannot afford to deny orthopraxy (Chattopadhyay ‘Reflections on Hindu Theology’ 664-72).
This blog post is dedicated to the late Georg Feuerstein.

(Partial) Works Cited


On Page 183 Whicher writes: “[Mircea] Eliade uses the Greek term “enstasis” or “enstasy,” … which attempts to clearly demarcate the phenomena of samadhi from that of “ecstasy,” a term frequently confused or conflated with “enstasy.” [According to R. C. Zahnier] … enstasy “is the exact reverse of ecstasy, which means to get outside oneself and which is often characterised by a breaking down of the barriers between the subject and the universe around him.” Patañjali does include ananda …, meaning “bliss” or “joy,” as a state of cognitive samadhi. The Greek-derived word ecstasy means to stand (stasis) outside (ex) the ordinary (empirical) self, whereas samadhi ultimately signifies one’s “standing in” (en) the Self-in-identity as purusa as one’s authentic being or intrinsic identity. In ecstasy, the experience entails at least a partial transcendence of the limited ego-identity or cittavṛtti mechanism accompanied perhaps by a sense of well-being. As normally conceived, ecstasy can refer to states of emotional rapture and mental exaltation. Since these characteristics do not appear to apply to or fully capture the typical yogic state of “mind-transcending” consciousness [Mircea Eliade and George Feuerstein] have proposed to render the term samadhi as “enstasy.” But the distinction is not always clear cut. Both interpretations are correct according to the stage or level of samadhi being experienced.” & then again on page 363, Whicher writes: “Lumping together both kinds or categories of samadhi as “enstasis” … blurs the important distinction made in Yoga between samprajñata and asamprajñata.”

This blog post is a reworking of a paper which I wrote earlier. The draft is freely available online. The conclusions of the draft and this blog post are different. The reader is invited to read the draft and this blog post to show that drafts are just initial readings and during studies, ideas about a scholar and conclusions about a scholar might change. I have ‘re-spected’ Western scholars for their sincerity. My understanding of Bryant’s shortcomings has been formed from conversations with a dasanami monk. I put it on record that I find Bryant’s works excellent and very helpful.

My understanding of shraddha as respect derives from Zoë Slatoff-Ponté’s Yogavataranam. Ponté writes:

“Re-spect” dervies from the Latin respectus...to read a text with “re-spect” literally means to look again, to keep looking with increasingly sensitive eyes...Doing so requires an acknowledgement of one’s own limitations. (Preface xxi, Yogavataranam)

My draft is marked by a hubris which is misplaced, and I am grateful to the humility of Western scholars who genuinely love India and Hinduism. Doniger too loves Hinduism but she is limited by her own samskaras which trap her within a structuralist mode of archive-fever.
The photos used here are used in good faith since the internet makes it easy for scholars and devotees alike to come together in a spirit of openness and sharing. I thank the photographers and assure them that I am not making money out of their photos. The photos of the books are mine, some others are from Wikipedia.

The featured image is of the Epochal Avatara Sri Ramakrishna who was recognised as a Paramahamsa by a Bharavi.

Mother Chamunda, one of the Tantric Yoganis and also a representation of Shakti.