

Indecent Practices and Erotic Trance: Making Sense of Tantra

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Twelve

The Pulse Of The Cosmos

- Spanda: The Doctrine Of Vibration
- Vibration And Emptiness
- Maithuna
- A Disturbing Brush With Samadhi
- Gnosis And Liberation
- Pulsing Cosmos Of Light

Every school of mysticism incorporates three elements: the direct experience of gnosis, a path leading to that goal, and a metaphysics which describes reality so that the path and the goal are intelligible. Since only the liberated truly know what liberation is, the central fact of every mystical school is the liberating gnosis experienced by its founder and a recognized chain of initiates, some of whom may have revised the tradition. No master is able to initiate disciples without a set of graded exercises, the rungs of the ladder that leads to the goal. These methods inevitably involve a description of the essential structure of "reality," designed to overturn profane consciousness and make gnosis possible. In this sense, metaphysics is the "handmaiden" of gnosis and not the starting point. [1] Even if it masquerades as the dogmatic foundation of a school, metaphysics is actually the most derivative element of all. For it is simply a description of how reality must be configured if the indubitable fact of liberated awareness is to be made intelligible and if the path is to take us there.

The doctrine of emptiness describes the metaphysics of Buddhism. We considered it at length -- not with any intention of asserting some sort of pre-eminence for Buddhism -- but rather to expose the nature of mystical metaphysics. Indeed, Nagarjuna's claim that things neither exist nor do not exist is so foreign to our Western way of thought that it might be described as an "anti-metaphysics." Its very strangeness, however, is what helps us to grasp its intentions as a doctrine designed to remove obstacles from the path of the aspiring mystic. Other schools of mysticism may not seem so radical in the way they frustrate our habits of thought. But in some way or other, they all incorporate a three-stage process leading from profane consciousness through "beginner's mind" and on to enlightened or liberated awareness. The Zen story of mountains, trees, and rivers may be taken as a model for every path to gnosis.

For example, Gopi Krishna found the "mountains, trees, and rivers" of the world of

kundalini to constitute a monumental defeat. The serpent energy was so out of balance in him that he believed the traditional representation of a wrathful, blood-thirsty, and sexually aroused goddess dancing with utter abandon on the supine body of a naked male had to have been painted by someone who had been as much crushed and humiliated by the arousal of kundalini as he had. As extraordinary as his plight seems to have been, he had not shaken off much of his profane consciousness.

Our study of the subtle body, however, has taught us that an encounter with a wrathful goddess can be transformed if we turn our attention away from her punishing dance and focus on what the shattering encounter is doing to *us*. The tubular palace meditation acquaints us with the dragon of our soul's energy, as we distill our overwhelming emotion into its components. The rise and fall of the serpent of light within the central channel of our imaginal construct occupies our whole attention, and we no longer see mountains, trees, and rivers. The common-sense world has been replaced by the indubitable reality that makes Spontaneous Great Bliss possible. At this middle point in our journey, we have exchanged profane consciousness for the tubular citadel of erotic trance and have yet to "return."

If the tubular palace meditation is practiced with a fleshly partner, we join Spontaneous Great Bliss with emptiness when we relinquish all the preliminaries associated with metaphysics and the stages of the path, drop body-and-mind, and redirect our attention to our partner. That incomparable being now centers a world without circumference, gathering all things in an absolute present that incorporates the first day of creation and the dissolution of the universe. Our union pulses and gleams whiter than snow. In the no-self of the field of emptiness, we vibrate back and forth, exchanging places as still, introverted Shiva and boundlessly expansive Shakti. Having left the citadel of our respective selves, neither of us is subject and neither is object. Our union oscillates like the figure and ground in a gestalt drawing that appears alternately as two faces in profile and then fleetingly as a vase before again dissolving into faces. Our pulsing union gathers the vibrating cosmos into itself and becomes the center of all that is, like threads in the cloth and cloth in the threads. Our oscillating consciousness participates in and contains the light of consciousness that is the universe, both One and Many, flux and substance, arising and dissolving.

Spanda: The Doctrine Of Vibration

It is precisely this sort of liberating gnosis that led Abhinavagupta, the principal figure in the doctrine of vibration (spanda) in eleventh century Kashmir, to react with scorn for that feces-smearing antinomian hero, Trighantika, with his distorted features and lust-inspired hangers-on. Trighantika is not without attainments. He has learned the nature of lust and gone beyond good and evil. But he is stuck there in the awareness of his achievement. This is why he exalts. He is grasping the heroic rung of the diamond ladder, justly proud of having overcome the obstacle of scandal. But his grasping locks him up in the citadel of his accomplished self and bars his way back to the world of primary fact.

Trighantika knows kundalini only as an autonomous surging forth of an energy that faces down the disturbing dragon of his appetites. In his exaltation he identifies with it as "mine" and thereby becomes a hero (vira). But he never acquaints himself with kundalini in her multifaceted wonder as the power of consciousness that raises him into the subtle sphere of

the heart chakra or makes available the nectar of his crown chakra. Therefore, he never knows Spontaneous Great Bliss. In all probability his exaltation bespeaks his discovery of the essential self that appears when the manipura chakra opens in the region of the solar plexus, where the danger exists that we will identify with the powerful emotions that characterize this achievement. Trighantika's critics, the associates and followers of Abhinavagupta, have ascended beyond the stage of the antinomian hero. They have become familiar with the sublime experience of their airiness at the heart chakra (anahata), the ether of the throat center, and the identification in oneness with the cosmos through the opening of the sahasrara.

They have come to know the nature of kundalini as the form of awareness that describes both their own consciousness and the woven nature of the cosmos as vibrating light. They conceptualize it as "the ultimate," the intercourse of Shiva and Shakti, where Shiva is the introverted and motionless knowing dimension of consciousness and Shakti its ever-moving, extraverted "content." They describe a vision very similar to that of Muktananda: the light of consciousness becoming the world like threads in cloth, becoming "animals, birds, germs, insects, gods, demons, men, and women . . . silently pulsing as supreme ecstasy within me, outside me, above me, below me." Abhinavagupta's follower, Maheshvarananda, describes this pulsation (spanda) as the oscillation of figure and ground, as though "a picture of a bull and an elephant [were] drawn together in such a way that we see either one or the other depending on the way in which we view it" (Dyczkowski, 1987: 101). Perhaps a more accurate metaphor would picture a transparent cube drawn on paper. When we see its front face pointing downward and to the right, the universe is "manifest"; when the rear face jumps to the front, pointing upward and to the left, the universe has become "immanent" (see Figure 12.1). It never ceases to be the one reality it is, although its aspects oscillate.



The Oscillation of Figure and Ground Within a Single Unity

Figure 12.1

According to this doctrine of vibration (spanda), Shiva dissolves into Shakti when her light expands into and becomes the manifest cosmos ("Thou art That"). Then Shakti is absorbed back into the single point of awareness that is Shiva, and the universe withdraws into immanence ("That is Thou"). In a state of samadhi, the yogin not only witnesses this pulsating rhythm of expansion and contraction but *is* that absolute oscillation. The practitioner is at one with the orgasmic vibration of god and goddess. One who has attained this state is *both* Shiva and Shakti and yet again is *neither* of them. It is similar to that analogous point reached in carezza where we no longer know which of us has the penis and

which the vagina, and our gender seems to pulse.

The full mystical significance of this pulsating experience is realized in that definitive "now" when we are one with the universe. Indeed, it is the function of the ladder rungs of longing, scandal, and the subtle body to explore the intermediate stage where mountains, trees, and rivers are no longer seen, and thereby to prepare our return to the world of primary fact. A great deal of inner work has to be done before our ingrained habit of locking ourselves in the citadel of the self can be overcome. Only when the subject and object have dissolved into a pulsating oneness have we managed to rediscover the world of primary fact. This is the "ultimate experience" of mysticism, which Dyczkowski describes in the imagery of Kashmir's spanda doctrine, employing two passages from the *Tantraloka* (*Ibid.*, 101):

The couple (*yamala*) is consciousness itself, the unifying emission and the stable abode. It is the absolute, the noble cosmic bliss consisting of both [Siva and Sakti]. It is the supreme secret of Kula [the ultimate reality]; neither quiescent nor emergent, it is the flowing font of both quiescence and emergence (29: 116-7a).

"These two aspects, passive (*santa*) and active (*udita*)," explains Abhinava, "arise at the same time in the power and its possessor. The active passes from one domain to the other, the passive is confined within the Self [the essential nature of both]. But even so, in reality, each of them form a couple (*yamala*). Hence the emergent is the quiescent" (29: 119-20).

Shiva, the "quiescent" Self, and Shakti, the "emergent" cosmos, together as a "couple" represent the whole of reality. To know this "within, outside, above, and below" is "the absolute, the noble cosmic bliss." It is both quiescent and emergent, and it is neither. It transcends rational description in the form of a paradox, a union of opposites.

In classical Hinduism, the world "arises" into manifestation when Brahma,[2] the creator, awakes; and it "dissolves" when Brahma sleeps. A "day" in the life of Brahma is a "world cycle" (*kalpa*), which is said to last 4.32 billion human years. In Shaivism, this same process of cosmic manifestation and withdrawal has been configured in a metaphysics that ascribes the pulsation to Shiva and Shakti in their eternal love-play. Vimalananda says that the original Shakti (Adya-Shakti), who appears as Nature, "feels incomplete on her own and wants to reunite with her source," which is Shiva. "When she does the universe dissolves (*pralaya*)." This same event occurs at the level of the microcosm when our own kundalini-shakti reunites with our "personal Lord Shiva" (Svoboda, 1997: 146).

The Kashmiri spanda doctrine, however, also says that the pulsation of reality corresponds to the opening and closing of *Shiva's* eyes (Dyczkowski, 1987: 30). Abhinavagupta, the eleventh century Kashmiri Shaivist, sees this entire process of arising and dissolving in a single "now," in which all of time -- from the moment Shiva opens his eyes in the morning of a cosmic cycle to the moment when he closes them at night -- is simultaneously present. He reveals the emptiness of the entire process, from which it becomes clear that the standard notion of 4.32 billion years is but an exoteric doctrine whose esoteric significance may be seen in gnosis by those who have left the citadel of the self. Although, as a Hindu, Abhinavagupta does not follow the paradoxical anti-metaphysics of Nagarjuna in any strict sense and even names the "ultimate reality" as "Kula," it is clear that he lives on the field of emptiness. He encounters the cosmos as primary fact. An experience of gnosis that appears in all respects to be the same as that found in Buddhism is articulated through a contrasting metaphysics.

Vibration And Emptiness

Abhinavagupta synthesized all the Shiva doctrines of his day as *Trika*-Shaivism ("Three-Principled Shiva-Oriented Tantrism") (Dyczkowski, 1987: 10). The three principles are: (1) the world originates from the desire of Shiva; (2) only Shiva's grace enables one to realize atman; and (3) one who has realized this is qualified to lead others (Fischer-Schreiber, *et. al.*, 1989). Abhinavagupta's influence stems not only from his status as "without a doubt, the most brilliant of Kashmiri Saiva teachers and one of the greatest intellectual giants India has produced" (Dyczkowski, 1987: 10) but also from the strategic position of Kashmir -- a region in India's extreme northwest, about the size and shape of Ohio, whose valley floors are about 5000 feet above sea level, and which shares borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tibet, and China. The official codification of the Buddhist Tripitaka ("Three Baskets of Scriptures") in the first century, c.e., occurred at a Buddhist council in Kashmir, whence Buddhism spread to Central Asia, including Tibet (Dyczkowski, 1987: 2-3). From about 500, c.e., Kashmir was one of the most important centers of both Hindu and Buddhist Tantra. It was conquered by Islam in the thirteenth century, some 200 years after Abhinavagupta's death. The "Lotus Born" founder of Tibetan Tantra who took Yeshe Tsogyel as his favorite dharma consort, Padmasambhava, was born in Kashmir about a century before Abhinavagupta (Fischer-Schreiber, *et. al.*, 1989).

Mutual influences between Hinduism, Buddhism, and Tantra, therefore, were nowhere stronger than in Kashmir. Indeed, the emptiness doctrine of gnosis in Tibet is very similar to that of Abhinavagupta's *spanda*. In the Vajrayana ("Diamond Vehicle") of Tibet, the vajra, or lightning bolt (called *dorje* in Tibet) is the central image of gnosis.

The *dorje* is the symbol of the clear, immutable essence of reality that is the basis of everything. Its immaculate transparency, which nevertheless gives rise to a profusion of manifestations [i.e., the phenomenal world], corresponds to the concept of *shunyata* stressed by Nagarjuna. . . . Padmasambhava [writes]:

The secret mind of all the buddhas,
Omniscient wisdom
Transmitted by the symbol of eternal strength and firmness
Clarity and emptiness, the *dorje* essence
Like heavenly space --
It is wonderful to see the true face of reality!
(Fischer-Schreiber, *et. al.*, 1989).

It is easy to hear echoes of this formulation in Kashmiri Shaivism, which declares that the universe, light, and the self are one (Dyczkowski, 1987: 63), the "eternal becoming and dynamic flux of *spanda*" (*Ibid.*, 52). The absolute is the light of consciousness (*prakasa*):

because it makes all things manifest by shining in its universal form. The phenomena that appear in the field of consciousness are experienced directly in this way at the initial instant of perception when they are still at one with the perceiving subject. The light of consciousness is itself this direct experience made before thought-constructs interpose themselves between subject and object, thus degrading the latter to the level of objectivity, which obscures the light of the subject's immediate perception (Dyczkowski, 1987: 69).

Furthermore, the three stages leading to the gnosis of emptiness are paralleled in the philosophy of *spanda*. When mountains, trees, and rivers are sundered from the citadel self

through "interposed thought-constructs," we negate our true nature and identify with body-and-mind. This dichotomy is overcome in the "direct experience" of attending to consciousness itself, i.e., a withdrawal from mountains, trees, and rivers. Finally, the world of primary fact is discovered when "subject and object are held together and different objects related to one another in a single field of consciousness." The cosmic import of this realization occurs when "individual subject and object, together with all diversity, merge in the reflective awareness the light of consciousness has by its nature as the universal subject" (Dyczkowski, 1987: 74). Even Nagarjuna's view that nothing arises and nothing dissolves is embraced by spanda:

In reality nothing arises and nothing falls away. It is the vibrating power of consciousness which, though free of change, becomes manifest in this or that form and thus appears to be arising and falling away (*Ibid.*, 83).

Reality cannot be discovered if we think of it as a "something" of which we are ignorant but may come to know through practice. Reality is an experience -- the experience of the fully enlightened (*Ibid.*, 110).

The primary difference between Abhinavagupta's spanda and Nagarjuna's emptiness lies in the fact that the emptiness of dependent co-origination is *personified* in the metaphysics of Kashmiri Shaivism, even as it is declared empty:

Sakti represents the all-encompassing fullness (*purnata*) of the absolute, the ever-shifting power of awareness actively manifesting as the Circle of Totality (*visvacakra*). Siva is the Void (*sunyata*) of absolute nature. Integral and free, Siva, the abode of the Void, dissolves everything into Himself and brings all things into being. Fullness pours into emptiness and emptiness pervades fullness (*Ibid.*, 119).

The pulsation of spanda is precisely this oscillation between fullness and emptiness, where everything both is and is empty, where everything *seems* to arise and fall away but does not. There is only undivided consciousness, the world of primary fact. What seems to be an object is but the "appearing" or "content" dimension of consciousness. What seems to be a subject is but the "realizing" or "immanent" dimension of consciousness. [3] These two dimensions are one and united in the pulsing flow of the intercourse between Shiva and Shakti.

Maithuna

Ritual sexual intercourse (maithuna) is not possible for those who have not familiarized themselves with the experience of the vibrating absolute and cannot enter the field of emptiness at will. Indeed, the French scholar of Kashmiri Shaivism, Lilian Silburn, places it in the first stage of her schematic account of maithuna. She warns us in the introduction to her book on kundalini, that raising the serpent energy is a dangerous business and must not be undertaken without the guidance of an initiated master, who alone has a comprehensive view of the esoteric mysteries involved. She endeavors to impart the deeper symbolic meanings of the doctrines and practices without revealing too much: "I have left enough unclarified so as not to incur the wrath of the ancient masters" (Silburn, 1988: xiv). For my part, not only do I not pretend to know those esoteric secrets, I am inclined to agree with Jung that the secrets themselves are secret because *nobody* knows them.

The yoga way or the yoga philosophy has always been a secret, but not because people have *kept* it a secret. For as soon as you *keep* a secret it is already an open secret; you know about it and other people know about it, and then it is no longer a secret. The real secrets are secrets because nobody understands them. One cannot even talk about them, and of such a kind are the experiences of the Kundalini yoga. That tendency to keep secrets is merely a natural consequence when the experience is of such a peculiar kind that you had better not talk about it, for then you expose yourself to the greatest misunderstanding and misinterpretation (Jung, 1996: 28).

Therefore, the secrets, such as they are, will of necessity be discovered by each individual sadhaka in the course of acquiring the experiences that make the pulsating flow of emptiness and fullness the personal achievement and impersonal absolute it has always been. If we are not going to find an initiated master to direct our course, we will have to be satisfied with schematic accounts, the rungs of a ladder which neither exists nor does not exist for those who have entered upon the field of emptiness.

With this cautionary apology firmly in mind, we can summarize Silburn's schematic account of maithuna in four stages (Silburn, 1988: 169-70).

1. The couple unites sexually, and then both partners go into samadhi.
2. Each partner acts separately for herself, but without a single moment's loss of contact, either physically or spiritually, with the other. This is the time that kundalini is rising through the chakras.
3. The real conjunction of the partners occurs with their simultaneous opening of the crown chakra, when they realize the universality of atman together.
4. Finally they realize the ultimate cosmic reality, *kaula* -- what Abhinavagupta calls *kula*. "The couple, freed from the sense of ego, lost in wonder, perceive in the emerging act appeased immobility. They have reached what is called the 'inner' emergence, universal Consciousness, energy at its height. When unified quiescence and emergence are integrated and then transcended, *kaula* manifests in all its glory as cosmic beatitude."

The sketchiness of this account can be appreciated in the first step alone. They unite sexually and then go into samadhi. Putting aside entirely the difficulty of achieving samadhi, and the fact that numerous scholars have observed that many yogins work all their lives without reaching that summit, imagine being able to do so while sufficiently aroused as to be able to "unite sexually." Sexual arousal is one of the most "disturbing" experiences the average human being knows. Arousal is so exciting that it diverts our attention from everything else. Furthermore, we can hardly overlook the reality that when some performance of a contrasting sort is demanded of us at the same time, we are likely to be incapable of being aroused. The fact that both of these demands are made at the same time implies an entirely new meaning for Eliade's term "deautonomization." When the Sahajiya mystics bathe, oil, and dress their dancing girls while striving to keep their erections under control, they are aiming for a deautonomization that would render maithuna impossible. Ritual intercourse requires an entirely different sort of detachment from the autonomic process of sexual arousal. It has to occur -- not fail to occur -- and to do so without disturbing or being disturbed by the one-pointed focus of our attention.

This development reveals for the first time the full meaning of Vimalananda's vajroli contest. Only those whose training has rendered them so free, spontaneous, and utterly familiar with every detail of sexual arousal that nothing catches them unawares -- nothing pushes them over the top and nothing lessens the physiological surge -- will be sufficiently detached from the autonomous response to allow it to take its course unhindered and unhindering. Our sexual arousal has to flow with the natural grace of a porpoise, unthinkingly plunging, becoming nothing other than that pulsating, porpoising glide, while the "whalewatch" ship of our consciousness is guided by its own gyroscope, steady and undisturbed. Two parallel courses. Not fortuitous, but in the spontaneous, blissful harmony of heads nodding through hundreds of millions of years. Absolute control but without concern. Total freedom without exaltation. No longer breathing but breathed. If there is a secret to this, it lies beyond all telling. Thirty years of practice lie behind us, when mountains, trees, and rivers had been banished. They return only on the field of emptiness, where the citadel self and its obsessive control has been disengaged. Where arousal surges and the world *worlds*.

All this is but the context within which other realities come to presence. The porpoise surges without thought of sea or air, but never loses sight of the salty realm's silvery ceiling or the light domain's blue-green floor. Nor does this pulsating vision of the world's interface distract attention from the obtrusive, mechanical sight of the ship on its rectilinear course. Or the man standing at its rail. While the surging and the "worlding" take care of themselves, the partners move on to the second stage, doing what needs to be done to enhance and distill the rise of kundalini and at the same time attending to all the harmonies and discordant notes in their physical and spiritual relationship with one another. Here, again, what has been learned in the vigorous play of the vajroli contest has familiarized them with their separate physiological, emotional, and imaginal states. He feels her arousal within himself. She contains his body and spirit within her own. Their chakras open in a spontaneous, porpoising flow; and they register those distinctive states of unity that occur at the navel, solar plexus, heart, and throat. Their brows open, and they are god and goddess for one another.

None of these things is possible if it has not already passed beyond the guilt, terror, and grandiosity that re-establish the citadel self at the rung of scandal. The partners will be unaware of the nuances of their emotional connection if they have not learned to distill kundalini's energies in the tubular palace of their separate subtle bodies. But they have to have reached a stage of "deautonomization" where they can let go of these preliminary exercises and concerns. There is no calculation or counting time when body-and-mind have been dropped. The world and their bodies lose none of their rich, multifaceted, and undeniable reality. But they are no longer "objects" to be measured or discussed in our internal monologues. We flow with all the things that come to presence, centered in our union. We change our course and speed without thought like the undulating porpoise. While the world of our intercourse throbs and oscillates, we live within it. Without past to remember. Without future to anticipate. We become ourselves in our suchness, partnering our couplehood. Every time is the first time and the last time. An eternal now.

The dropping of body-and-mind clearly plays a dual role in this experience. On the one hand it clears away the conceptual citadel that shuts us off from the world of primary fact and makes the spanda vision of the pulsating light of consciousness possible. On the other hand, by letting things be in their suchness, it gives free rein to autonomous arousal and the rising

of kundalini. These natural facts of our body's physiology proceed as unhindered as streaming herds and swimming porpoises, and just as incontrovertibly constitute the world in which we find our Being. Thus to join emptiness with Spontaneous Great Bliss is to enter a specific sort of primal world, one which is energized and illuminated by kundalini. An arousal that has been mastered and become as familiar as a well-tended garden provides a boost to the world of primary fact; and the cultivation of emptiness enables us to enter that energy-charged world without the clutter of our profane mind's chatter and without the protecting and distorting concepts that wall it off.

The yogi can take pleasure in sense objects; indeed he is specifically instructed to do so, if he maintains an awakened, mindful attitude (*prabuddhabhava*) and does not just blindly follow his natural inclinations as does an animal with a bare minimum of self-awareness. The pleasure we derive from physical objects is, in reality, the repose we enjoy when the activity of the mind is momentarily arrested and delights one-pointedly in the source of pleasure. All pleasure, in other words, is essentially spiritual. It is a state the subject experiences and not a property of the object. . . . This yogi is no hedonist. He is free of the false notion that the body is the Self and so does not crave for the pleasures of the senses, although he does make use of them as springboards to project him beyond the realms of physical, transitory objectivity into the eternal sphere of consciousness (Dyczkowski, 1987: 147).

A Disturbing Brush With Samadhi

Because the cosmic oneness of maithuna is based upon the physiology, emotionality, and imaginal capacity all humans share, it sometimes happens that a person who is completely unprepared for its gnosis stumbles upon it by accident. Georg Feuerstein, the historian of yoga occasionally quoted in these pages, gives several examples of this sort of experience breaking through into the lives of some of our American contemporaries. The most arresting of these anecdotes is told by his wife, Trisha, and concerns an experience she had several years before meeting Feuerstein, when she was only twenty-five years old (Feuerstein, 1993: 35-37). She recounts the story as "my mystical experience," seventeen years after the event. She had fallen in love with a man she had held on a pedestal for about two years before becoming sexually involved with him, and describes him as "one of the most mentally and emotionally uninhibited individuals I had met." She remembers nothing specific about their love-making, only that it was "totally uninhibited, frequent, and never enough!"

Her extended mystical episode, which appears to resemble samadhi, followed a night of love-making with this man. She got up in the morning, feeling as though she had spent the night and continued in a condition of being "constantly awake on some higher plane." In this regard her experience resembles that of the yogins who spend their nights in samadhi, alternately dozing and waking but without losing the lucidity of being beyond subject and object. Trisha says she was "*totally* and *perfectly* relaxed" and found herself standing outside of time for a period of about three weeks in which she had no "edges." She found that her self had no circumference to separate her from the world. "There was no me. The thought arose, and these are the exact words, 'This is what I AM in truth.'" Though she apparently saw pretty much the same things we all see, she had the conviction that there was "no difference between anything whatsoever." "Everything material seemed superfluous. It was all spontaneously and playfully arising from one great source, and it could just as well cease to arise at any moment." Consciousness was the only thing that mattered. She thought that she could lose her body and not care. She had times when she was "drowning in bliss,

overwhelmed with love and compassion . . . for every being and thing I looked at." She felt she was "the source of all creation."

The three weeks of bliss ended one day when she felt that "the molecules of my body were flying apart and that if I allowed the process to continue I would simply fly apart and disappear. . . . I would leave this realm for good." Simultaneously, "knowing that I was not ready to do this," inspired an immense fear. Her citadel self "grabbed hold," divided reality conveniently into subject and object; "and suddenly I had edges again. I felt separate, complicated, neurotic, and unhappy again -- all in an instant." She suffered a depression, considered suicide, and then spent years urgently trying to understand what had happened to her. Since the return of her citadel self, she has known only isolated moments of having no "edges."

Trisha's repetition of the word *uninhibited*, applying it both to her lover and to the style of love-making he introduced her to, inclines us to think it describes both the means (spontaneous sexual expression) and the trustworthy context (the man on the pedestal) by and in which she could let go of her citadel self and enter into that mystical participation which Berman describes as one of the only two situations left to us in the modern West for transcending subject and object (anxiety and lust). That she engaged in this activity frequently, eagerly, and with the sense that she could never get enough, implies that she repeatedly left the citadel of the self and came to know this condition of no-self in an unreflective way as a place of joy, simplicity, relaxation, freedom, and completeness. She was not struggling for anything and had no concept of a ladder of mystical ascent. Rather it appears that her larger being rejoiced in this experience and came to know, all unconsciously, that it did not have to identify with her body-and-mind. This seems to have introduced her to the world of primary fact as a realm of bliss and satisfaction. She had no idea how she got there, and fails to tell us whether she renewed her mystical state through repeated sexual participation with her lover during the crucial three weeks. Possibly sex itself was no longer important to her, since she had already arrived at the condition it was unconsciously designed to facilitate. She says only that after her "devastating" return to the impoverished world of ordinary consciousness the relationship with her lover "slowly deteriorated." We are left to wonder why. Was he unappreciative of what had happened to her? Or was she afraid of encountering again that "crack in the self" that had inspired her terror?

The sense that she might fly apart like whizzing molecules and "leave this realm for good" reminds us of the mad saints. We can hardly accept her terrifying image literally -- that her physical body would dissolve into a mist. More likely it was her mind that was at risk. In this regard her terror was very likely realistic, for she lacked the accepting social container of Bengali mystical aspirations. There was no way for her to recognize in such a threat of insanity the possibility that it might become a divine madness (*divyonmada*), the gift of a frenzied, naked goddess wearing a necklace of skulls. In the context of our society, she would simply be insane; and there would be no hope of having that insanity respected and supported until the day that her psyche found a way to reorganize itself so as to contain that divine energy. She seems to have been transported -- not to Indra's Heaven -- but to the rung of longing where the dragon of her soul's energy frightened her so thoroughly that her ego had to reassert itself autonomously. She was left in a peculiar ambivalence, consciously longing to drop body-and-mind but unconsciously terrified at the prospect of re-encountering

that crack in her self.

Her experience makes abundantly clear the need for the wise guidance of a master who knows the techniques and dangers of the path as well as for the hard work and years of discipline that the diamond ladder of sexual ascent describes. Although she has had an indelible experience of enlightenment and does not have to struggle to remember it as do most of her contemporaries, she has not familiarized herself with the dragon of her soul's energy and has no notion of how to begin to do so. Kundalini has surged forth bringing both bliss and terror, but Trisha has no means for sorting out these two dimensions of the serpent energy. Having been transported directly from the profane world to the world of primary fact and back again, she knows nothing of a world without mountains, trees, and rivers. She has not struggled with the scandalous issue of good and evil and knows nothing of transcending them. She knows kundalini -- not by name -- but only as the bringer of overwhelming bliss and devastating terror. She has not learned to distill these chaotic emotions with the tubular palace of her subtle body.

Trisha's incredible good luck and precipitous fall reveal the importance of the mysterious second stage in the Zen story of mountains, trees, and rivers. Those who swim like porpoises in the world of primary fact while staying sexually aroused and facilitating the rise of kundalini without losing of contact with their partners do not arrive at this stage by accident. There are very good reasons the Zen story-teller spent thirty years without seeing mountains, trees, and rivers. The integration of kundalini represents a life's work. Indeed, if we take seriously the folktale of Machig Lapdron, it takes *many* lifetimes of single-minded endeavor. This is the reason Vimalananda and virtually all the experts tell us that there is nothing that *has* to be done. If we are not ready to take a wanton goddess for our Bhairavi in this life, we can face the challenges of our present life in all earnestness, courage, and humility so that perhaps we will be better prepared next time. The many-lifetimes explanation is, of course, a metaphysical doctrine designed to account for the extraordinary nature of gnosis. We may very well fail to achieve it despite our best intentions and unremitting efforts, while others may arrive at gnosis effortlessly. Nevertheless a single fleeting brush with gnosis only whets our appetites. Gnosis as a fortuitous event represents great good fortune, but gnosis as a way of life involves much more.

Gnosis And Liberation

The terms *enlightenment* and *liberation* are used almost interchangeably. To be "enlightened" means to see reality as it is, to have the gnosis whereby delusional appearances no longer confine us within the unreal world of secondary concepts and neurotic distortions. To be "liberated" means to live spontaneously and without confinement or distortion. Thus, truly to see reality as it is must be inseparable from living the life that gnosis illuminates. At bottom gnosis is a way of life, and not merely a momentary vision obtained by climbing to the top rung of a ladder. The cosmic vision of pulsating light occurs in an ecstatic (or "enstatic") moment. Even if it last three weeks, it is bound to pass. Because Abhinavagupta's vision of spanda occurs as a revelation of the ultimate nature of the cosmos and human consciousness, it may be called the foundation of gnosis in Kashmiri Shaivism. Although, in being "empty," it transcends the vision of Indra's Heaven which transformed the life of Nanda, the Buddha's half-brother, the encounter with the pulsating cosmos of light plays a

similar role in the life of the Tantrika. It liberates by undermining all less-than-ultimate visions. Once one has returned to the world of mountains, trees, and rivers, gnosis manifests itself in the degree of freedom the Tantrika has day-in and day-out. Those who are lost, depressed, and nostalgic for their cosmic vision have no gnosis. By clinging to their memories of ecstasy, they keep themselves bound. Daniel Odier's guru, Devi, describes liberation as "relaxed, without goals and constraints -- free, opened, and light." One does what one is moved to do -- meditation, work, maithuna, a forest walk along a mountain stream -- and in the "now" when one is so moved:

It's the continuous experience of freedom that constitutes the tantrika's asceticism, not any constraint on the spirit. When ecstasy comes, take it. When it leaves, don't worry. If you let the divine come and go as it pleases, it becomes familiar. If you force it to stay within you or pursue it, it can become terrifying. Let yourself be. Be your own master. Stop all searching, and you will find yourself in the truth (Odier, 1997: 166-7).

The divine comes when it will for those who inhabit the field of emptiness. Sexuality helps us to arrive at this gnostic freedom by joining Spontaneous Great Bliss with emptiness. There are other paths. The left-hand path of Tantra distinguishes itself only by seizing upon bodily pleasure as the fastest -- albeit most dangerous -- path for overturning the obstacles that stand in the way of liberation. Nothing is more fascinating and disturbing of our serenity than sexual arousal. Sexual arousal, however, is but the physiological manifestation of eros and appears as kundalini. It is consciousness in its most intense and all-encompassing form; and it presents itself readily. With no help from us, sexual arousal moves us directly onto the subtle plane and reveals the arbitrary nature of profane consciousness. Only our neurotic defenses and the internal monologues we have adopted from the persona field prevent us from recognizing this everyday fact. The roots of enlightenment lurk in the most despised of our daily inclinations. The Tantric path toward gnosis begins by having us open our eyes and see the reality of sexual arousal for what it really is. To see things as they really are -- that is as primary facts -- is to enter the field of emptiness. Sexual arousal has a unique capacity to boost us into that field, but only when we have learned to stop grasping, controlling, and wanting what we do not have. Because it is fascinating, disturbing, and compelling, it constitutes the most efficacious means of reaching emptiness when we can learn to know it as it is and not cling to it or try to shape it according to the predilections of our citadel self.

Maithuna is the ultimate stage on the sexual path to gnosis. It provides the most potent boost of energy, while at the same time requiring the most complex exercise in "letting go," or detachment. The participants have to let go of their separate states of sexual arousal, allowing their physiology to take its course like nodding herds. They have to let kundalini surge like a porpoise. But even as they have let go, they have to stand firm. They are not simply passive but actively engaged in the stillness of the no-self. Heidegger's analogy that human existence -- *Dasein* (Being-here) -- is the "shepherd of Being" suggests this role of a guide who also "lets be." At the same time that they are shepherding kundalini and sexual arousal, however, the partners never lose touch with one another. They shepherd their mutuality as well as their separate internal processes. A whole world of activity is allowed to be as primary fact and at the same time lived through a mystical participation as "creator" (Jung) or "source" (Trisha Feuerstein). They *are* that surging Being and at the same time are its shepherds. Their consciousness pulsates, being in one split second all that is and in the next they are right "here" without circumference as its well-grounded center. Letting be and Being oscillate as figure and ground.

The cosmic vision of a universe of pulsating threads of light reveals the arising and dissipating of the phenomenal world. It is the larger meaning of the partners' couplehood. Cosmic meaning emerges out of the consciousness which is neither subject nor object but the primary fact of union. Spanda philosophy claims that we may begin with any fact at all; for when we penetrate all the way into it, we find pulsating at its center the cosmic consciousness/light/bliss.[4] Here is the ultimate experience of each primary fact becoming the circumferenceless center that gathers a whole world into itself. We have already seen that modern physics seems to be stumbling toward a similar vision. But modern physics does not stand on the field of emptiness. Rather quantum mechanics presents us with a complex conceptual structure explicated in mathematical equations -- a structure built up by the citadel self. On the field of emptiness, by contrast, the vision of cloth in the threads and threads in the cloth appears spontaneously and without calculation. The fullness of physiology, emotion, and imagination coalesce on the field of emptiness through the energetic boost of maithuna, and the primary fact of union between partners reveals the larger primary fact of cosmic emptiness.

Pulsing Cosmos Of Light

In the gnosis central to Tantrism, the cosmic vision of the pulsating light of consciousness has recurred again and again over the last 1500 years. It has been painted in countless variations on a few standard themes in the form of the yantra, a mandala comprised of geometric figures. Such paintings simultaneously represent (a) the cosmos, (b) the human body-and-psyche, and (c) coupled male and female principles as lines of energy, all emanating from a single point at the center, the bindu. Most frequently yantras employ intersecting triangles, some with their points upward which are said to represent the phallus of Shiva, and some with their points downward, evoking Shakti's vulva. Others are composed of intersecting swastikas and have a heritage that dates at least to intaglio seals unearthed from the Harappan civilization of 3000, b.c.e. (Khanna, 1979: 10). The ancientness of this tradition suggests again that, although Tantra emerged as a defined philosophy and practice only in the first centuries of the common era, its cosmic vision is central to Indian civilization as a whole. Its provenance is very likely not limited to any single culture but belongs to all humanity. For even if we confine our attention to Kashmir between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, the moment we wonder about how the cosmos itself is constructed -- apart from the pulsating way it appears in consciousness -- we cannot avoid concluding that the vision of consciousness, light, and bliss in spanda must be a primary fact of human physiology and imagination.[5]

Indeed, research into the human faculty for entering ecstatic states of consciousness reveals four stages. In the first, one sees "dots, zigzags, grids, sets of parallel lines, nested curves, and meandering lines," all bright and pulsating. They "enlarge, contract, and blend one with another." At the second stage, one sees some of them momentarily assume familiar forms, such as cups and snakes. At the third stage, one is drawn or seems to be flying through a tunnel or vortex whose sides bear the geometric lines of stage one. At the other end of the tunnel, in stage four, one finds oneself in a mythic world, "like a motion picture or slide show." "The geometric percepts are still present, but chiefly peripheral" (Clottes & Lewis-Williams, 1998: 16-17). On the basis of these findings, Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams have interpreted the Ice Age cave paintings as visions gained in shamanic

ecstasy.

Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff has found the same four-stage process among the Indians of the Upper Amazon, who employ psychotropic drugs in the form of yajé, a thick infusion which is drunk, and ayahuasca, a powder which is inhaled (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1971, 1975). Reichel-Dolmatoff participated in a yajé ceremony and reports a bewildering and unintelligible sequence of lines, zigzags, and curves -- technically referred to as "phosphenes." Not knowing what sense to make of this experience and wondering whether he had seen the same hallucinations as his informants, he induced them to draw what they had seen and found that their drawings very closely resembled his own. But for the natives each line and shape had a precise mythic meaning. Universal consensus among the Indians of the Upper Amazon is trained and supported by free and open discussion of all the details of yajé experience. The myth is constantly being taught and explored. "The collective ritual of yajé trance, then, is an experience from which the individual emerges with the firm conviction of the truthfulness of the traditional origins of his culture, and of the guiding moral principles of the Creation story" (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975: 181).

When we apply these findings to the Indian version of the cosmos of conscious light -- its threads in the cloth of the phenomenal world and the cloth in the threads -- it is hard to avoid the conclusion that entry into the ecstasy of samadhi introduces the yogin to the phosphenes of the first stage of human ecstatic experience wherever it is found. That the yogin sees this vision as a coherent image of the cosmos arising and dissolving over and over in a timeless "now" is by no means surprising when we think that Indian civilization has been freely and openly discussing the metaphysics of consciousness for centuries, if not millennia. If we wonder why the yogin does not proceed onward to the fourth stage of ecstasy to encounter gods, demons, men, and women engaged in mythic narratives, the answer is to be found in the Tantric theory of the yantra.

In the widest meaning of the term, a yantra is any diagram of the real which represents the microcosm of the human being -- especially the body -- as homologous with the macrocosm. In this sense, the most detailed yantras are mandalic palaces of the gods; and geometric yantras represent the detailed multiplicity of that mythic world in its subtlest form (Khanna, 1981: 141). When the archetype of the sacred cosmos is resolved into a diagram, the resulting "mesocosm" (D. G. White, 1996) reveals the structural identity of microcosm and macrocosm (Khanna, 1981: 106). Icons of divinities in a celestial palace are reduced to geometric symbols, and the latter are further reduced to the bindu, which is their center-point (*Ibid.*, 129). This whole process of simplification corresponds to the *involutional* thrust of Tantra:

Involution is a compulsion into the spiritual. It implies moving against the current of life. In subjective terms it means thirsting for a higher state of consciousness, suppressing the "lower" by ascending the ladder of multiplicity into unity, a spiritual itinerary which takes the form of a return to the state of cosmic foetalization, the *a priori* state before experience begins. Such a return shifts the centre of the personality from a fragmented awareness of his ego-centric consciousness to cosmo-centric wholeness, and brings about the union of the individual and cosmic consciousness (Siva-Sakti). It means a death of the profane self, the perishable phenomenal ego, and a rebirth to an eternal, deathless state of being. The entire discipline of yantra-ritual and meditation is directed towards this single goal, a return to the Supreme Centre. The yantra makes the process of involution conscious to the adept (Khanna, 1981: 80).

"Moving against the current of life" has been the theme of the ladder of sexual ascent at each rung since we considered carezza. The current of life moves toward external orgasm and the spilling of seed; carezza reverses it. At the rung of longing, the natural drive to preserve the ego is reversed through embracing madness. At the rung of scandal, the natural course of upholding the values of the persona field is reversed by the hero who strives to surmount good and evil. At the rung of the subtle body, the natural tendency to be riveted by a threat or enticement that disturbs us is reversed when we pay attention to what the wrathful divinity is doing to our state of consciousness. On the field of emptiness, finally, we seek out "the *a priori* state before [citadel] experience begins." If at this point the yogin sees pulsating lines, zigzags, and nested curves, these are centered automatically and without effort in a primary fact whose gathering of the cosmos is simultaneously an act of perception and an act of imagination. The field of emptiness reverses the natural current of life whereby the phosphenes of zigzags and curves are elaborated into a "thought up" world which lies behind empirical phenomena. The yogin remains in the world of primary fact as it reveals itself in samadhi. The joining of Spontaneous Great Bliss with emptiness in maithuna attends only to consciousness itself and is not misled by the objects to which it would attach itself. The cosmos as primary fact is not an object separated from a subject. Consciousness itself is the primary fact in which subject and object participate mystically. Its pulsation reflects not only the throb of physiology, but the oscillation of figure and ground in the light by which everything that is may appear.

1. Just as in the Christian Middle Ages philosophy was called the "handmaiden" of theology.
2. Brahma (masculine) the creator god, not to be confused with *brahman* (neuter) the invisible reality that underlies and pervades everything that appears.
3. Thus Dyczkowski's articulation of spanda's view of consciousness bears strong similarities with Husserl's distinction between *noema* and *noesis*. It is significant that what Husserl places in "brackets" to avoid the subject/object dichotomy describes what Buddhism calls the non-reality of the citadel self (Husserl, 1962).
4. "Each aesthetic experience, had with mindfulness and a disciplined attention directed toward heightening our general level of aesthetic sensitivity brings us a little closer to the sustained wonder of the pulsation (*spanda*) of consciousness which permeates all experience. The yogi at first practices to penetrate into this state of wonder through the medium of objects more easily pleasing and then, as he makes progress, he learns to discern that same sense of wonder in himself even when confronted with the foulest things or in times of great trouble and pain" (Dyczkowski, 1987: 149).
5. Kashmiri Shaivism says as much: "In reality, succession [of one event after another] and its absence are not objective properties of an entity but only formats of perception" (Dyczkowski, 1987: 82).