

Mystical Eroticism (Notes on Indian Tantricism)

Troy Dean Harris

troydeanharris@gmail.com

Institute Huyen Vi,

Vitry-sur-Seine

<http://bauddhamata.blogspot.com/>

No single human instinct wields a greater influence upon an individual, in all capacities, at all ages, and at all times, than does sex.

Vatsyayana, Kama Sutra, 4th century CE

1. Making love

A primary aim of the present article is to furnish a broad reflective backdrop upon which a study of the philosophical, ascetic and religious relation between Buddhism and Yoga may be cast. It is therefore essential that we make far more than a passing mention of a major yet highly misinterpreted esoteric or tantric conception. I refer to the topic of mystical eroticism. And although it is a subject upon which one could easily elaborate at very great length, I should only like to offer up a sparing silhouette. This is mainly in attempt to appease the ardent appetites of those who are absolutely dying to encounter these admittedly riveting "left handed" customs. I allude to the performance of maithuna or "ritual copulation."

Maithuna is a Sanskrit term. The Pali language equivalent, methuna, is recorded in the ancient Buddhist Vinaya literature, i.e. the Vinaya-Pitaka or collection of texts that make up the Buddhist Monastic Code, a compilation of meticulously drawn up judicial scriptures generally aimed at conserving a highly disciplined and stylized cenobitical mode of existence. Simply viewed, these behavioural precepts regulate three broad areas of the life of the bhikkhu (lit. beggar monk), or Buddhist friar. These are food, fashion and relations with the opposite sex. Relations with women are far and away the most delicate area of a bhikkhu's moral life. 'He cannot sit next to one, let alone touch one. He cannot be alone with one in a secluded area that might give rise to gossip, and especially not a place with a seat conducive to methuna.'

When I first came across this Pali term methuna I found the language curious. Why, I wondered, had the Pali scholars translated methuna as merely "sexual congress" when the multifaceted Sanskrit equivalent had always retained an avowedly tantric or sexual yoga connotation?

Concerning the scriptural ruling on this act: "Engaging in sexual intercourse with woman, man or animal, living or dead, spells irreversible defeat for the bhikkhu. And a bhikkhu once doing this is no longer a bhikkhu." But how does the legal code actually define sexual intercourse? "Entering the penis even the width of a sesame seed into any of the seven bodily orifices denotes sexual intercourse."

2. Tantra & the Tantras

Whenever the subject of tantra arises it is very helpful to draw a broad distinction between two key terms normally involved in the discussion. These are tantra and the Tantras. In the first place, "tantra" has always proven to be a highly ill defined, vague and confusing notion. On the other hand, the "Tantras" represent a closely affiliated class of religio-philosophic literature from which most of our ideas of tantra rose prior to the middle of the 20th century.

Tantra stems from the two active Sanskrit roots tan and tra. Tan means 'extension, spread, develop, cord or string'; something that functions in a 'a continuous process.' Tra means variously 'instrument or tool, protection, and liberate.' Tantra may thus be briefly defined as "an instrument or technology that extends experience, perception or knowledge in order to release it." According to the Thai historian Dawee Daweewarn,¹ the earliest known literary reference to Tantra is found in a

¹ Dawee Daweewarn, Brahmanism in South-East Asia (from the earliest time to 1445 AD) 1982: 30.

fragmented inscription at Malawa in the region of Gandhara. It is dated at around 423-424 CE. However as for the Tantras, the "texts" themselves, they specifically refer to a technical body of philosophical, religious or yogic literature; and in this way the Tantras must clearly be distinguished from the current media driven notion of tantra.

Broadly speaking, tantra signifies a distinctive philosophical outlook and/or mode of mystical practice or yoga. In Hindu, i.e., "Indian" literature, the Tantras refer to a massive body of post-Vedic treatises giving theoretical treatment to a broad range of subjects. These include medicine, theology, yoga, and architectural design, the crafting of icons, magical symbols, benedictions, rituals, and so on. Formally, a tantric text addresses five themes: 1) the creation of the world, 2) the destruction, dissolution, or resorption (integration) of the world, 3) the worship of a specific deity or guru, 4) the development of supra-normal abilities, and 5) the practice of yoga. Moreover, there are tantric texts (that is to say, tantras) relating to nearly every Indian religious school, orthodox and heterodox alike. In fact, many scholars acknowledge the very strong possibility that Tantrism may not even be of Indian origin.

When viewed in the cult-specific Bauddha context tantra connotes what is popularly configured as Esoteric and/or Tantric Buddhisms. Both names are valid but distinction is warranted. Whereas the Tantric appears to be something blared aloud, the Esoteric seems to be a hidden or perhaps inconspicuous body un-self-publicised theory and practice that is passed discreetly from teacher to pupil.

3. The Irruption of the Mother

About one thousand years after the death of the historical Buddha, Gautama, a profuse irruption of especially Buddhist Tantras occurred in India. For the first time in

the history of Brahmanical India the pre-Aryan religion of The Great Mother Goddess gained a predominant religious position.² Edward Conze writes,

The erotic mysticism and the stress on the female principle owed much to the Dravidian stratum of India which, in the cult of the Village Goddess had kept alive the matriarchal traditions about the Mother Goddess to a greater extent than the Vedic religion had done.³

Naturally, with the waning of the civilization of the Indus Valley (largely comprising present-day Pakistan), tribes of Indo-Aryan peoples migrated eastward and began to inhabit the Ganges Plain and in due course diffused their cultures across the entire subcontinent and slowly brought it under its command. But in the very process of gaining ascendancy, the Indo-Aryan peoples in turn absorbed and assimilated a vast variety of popular and autochthonous cultural trends. Such primordial infusions added rich life blood to the burgeoning Indian conception of Tantra. Romanian-born scholar Mircea Eliade narrates the episode very well as the central figure of pre-Aryan India gains allure amidst the synthetic and syncretic formulations of a burgeoning (so called) "Hinduism" as suddenly

[T]he shakti, the "cosmic force," is raised to the rank of Divine Mother who sustains not only the universe and all its beings but also the many and various manifestations of the gods. Here we discover the "religion of the Mother" that in ancient times reigned over an immense Aegeo-Afrasiatic territory and which was always the chief form of devotion among the autochthonous peoples of India. In this

² Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 1964: 202.

³ Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, 1951: 178.

sense, the irresistible tantric advance also implies a new victory for the pre-Aryan popular strata....⁴

Perhaps Tantra's most exceptional cultural legacy is the anthropomorphic representation of the Female Principle as Shakti, Devi or Bhagavati, the paramount active cosmological force. Shakti is raised to such exalted position that at one point she nearly deprives her husband, her divine consort Shiva of any efficient role or function. Among the varied groups of Vedic Tantras, the Shakta class, which centre on Shakti, deserve the most attention.

4. Buddhist Tantra & Vajravada

Tantra has exerted a profound influence on every aspect of Indian cultural life. In doing so, tantra can only be regarded as a bold and enduring pan-Indian phenomenon. Among the Indian Buddhist schools, Tantra generally goes by the name of Vajrayana, the "diamond-" or "thunderbolt vehicle." But its original name was probably Vajravada, the "thunderbolt-way." Vajra or "thunderbolt" is apparently the Buddhist version of the linga, and the vajravada most likely indicated a special erotic ritual. Linga itself appears to be derived from the very early Austric language. In its earliest sense, then, linga denotes a primitive plough or digging stick. It is said that before the advent Aryan culture to the Indus Valley Civilization, they had never encountered the linga-worship and were initially horrified by the cult. They contemptuously referred to Shiva as shishna-devata or "penis-deity" and forbade all contacts with his worshippers

⁴ Eliade, 202, slight diacritic emendation mine.

5. Guhyasamaja-Tantra

In Indian Buddhist Vajrayana, however, we see the development of complex mystical doctrines. These are largely based on the experimental practices of yoga and the highly evolved metaphysical and psychological ideas of the Mahayana. Asanga (ca. 400 CE) is considered to have authored the first Buddhist Tantric text entitled Guhyasamaja-Tantra. The title is of interest. Guhya means "hidden," "concealed" or "secret," and by extension, "the female organ." Samaja means "enclave," or "association."⁵ The Guhyasamaja's "secret society" appears to have emerged from the ruins of early-disbanded Buddhist monastic orders. The fundamental adage of the Guhyasamaja-Tantra is "Perfection can be gained through satisfying all one's desires." The phrase speaks volumes on the tantric outlook. The underpinning philosophical position of the school is svecchachara or "going where you will."⁶ In Sanskrit, the philosophy is termed nirdharma and is often described as antinomian, or possessing the attitude of "going against conventional wisdom."

6. The Doctrine of Sahaja

Guhyasamaja-Tantra also gave rise to the doctrine of sahaja. Saha- means "together," -ja means "nature." Its followers are known as sahajiya. They maintain that liberation is a person's "natural state" and that any attempt to achieve it through the force of will is an exercise in futility. Truth cannot be gained through the conventional practices of mantras, purifications, austerities, philosophy, and pilgrimage and so on. As Saraha, a noted Sahajiya writer declares:

⁵ Guhya- appears in "Guhyeshvari," another name for the Tantric Goddess. The Guhyeshvari Temple near Pashupatinath in Kathmandu was in former times occasionally a place for human sacrifices.

⁶ The Sanskrit svecchachara is the composite of svaiccha and chara, literally "self-will-going."

The childish yogins like the tirthikas [Jain and Ajivika ascetics] and others can never find out their own nature.... One has no need of Tantra or mantra, or of the images or the dharanis – all these are causes of confusion. In vain one tries to attain moksha [liberation] by meditation.... All are hypnotized by the system of the jhanas [meditation], but none cares to realize their own true self.⁷

It is therefore better to seek liberation through simple occupations such as farming, fishing, weaving, etc., and through a generally rustic life style. According to the view of the Sahajiyas, the most natural and mundane human activities such as eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, etc., are also the most noble. Eliade regards the Sahaja School as a profound mystical movement that, like tantrism, "is as Buddhist as it is Hindu."⁸

7. The Great Goddess Shakti

We now begin to see how in Buddhist Tantra sexuality was openly employed as a means to ultimate identification with godhead or liberation. Tantra was a bold and provocative pronouncement, the product of a forward moving social climate. However, let it be stated that even among its less progressive elements, Buddhism has never viewed sex-in-itself as something morally reprehensible. Sex is not avoided out of a prudish sense of guilt or shame. Rather, sex is reproached for its forceful tendency to bind human beings to the blindness of their passions. So it needs to be affirmed that in the Buddhist Tantras, just as in their Vedic prototypes, sexuality is given a supra-sensual or "metaphysical" interpretation.

⁷ Paraphrasing Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults (As Background of Bengali Literature)*, 1962: 64-65, brackets mine.

⁸ Eliade, 266.

Greatly resembling their Vedic forerunners, the Buddhist Tantras devote themselves largely to the exaltation of Devi, The Great Goddess Shakti. The tone of these writings both condones and inspires an open and liberal social consciousness. They embolden their interpreters with the confidence and courage to ignore if necessary all religious conventions concerning in particular the distinctions and taboos regarding ethnicity, class and sexuality.

Vitally important to the Buddhist Tantras is the stark reversal of the male and female roles as presented in conventional symbolism. The previous ordering of sexual symbology typically recognized the female element as the primary obstacle to the male-yogin's spiritual evolution. In Tantrism in general, however, the feminine component came to be regarded as an indispensable means for the yogin's ultimate realization. And in order to actualize his true divine nature, the yogi implicitly places her above him and yogically embraces her as Parama Shakti, the Immaculate Embodiment of Universal Power.

Here one recognizes Tantra's main vocation where a yogin enters into cosmic accord in order to homologize his spiritual being with the will-force of Existence. To accomplish this he performs the "rites of union" with a woman who is viewed as "the personification of Bhagavati (god)."⁹ Thus a characteristic notion found in all Tantras is that primordial energy issues from a god. It then becomes external and objectified and ends by incarnating itself in a female body or shakti. Metaphysically a shakti is

⁹ Louis de La Vallée-Poussin, "Tantrism (Buddhist)" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion* 1921. The textual reference is to *Culla Niddesha* (VI, 32), etc.

perceived as a "line of force according to which the One, the Absolute, differentiates itself and acts."¹⁰ In a similar vein, Per Kvaerne writes,

One of the most striking features of the Buddhist Tantras is the role played by the female partners of gods, as well as of men... This particular feature has been interpreted as ... a resurgence of a religious universe in which the role of the female creative force, manifested in every woman, comes to the fore. [This] seems to provide a plausible explanation of the emergence of erotic symbolism – and practices! – in Buddhism.¹¹

8. Ritual Nudity & Maithuna

Historically a prevalence of tantric conceptions existed at the Buddha-sect's very beginning. I again refer explicitly to the rite of maithuna or "ritual copulation" and to the striking notion that "Buddhahood abides in the female organ (yoni),"¹² and which is aptly chronicled in the earliest Buddhist scriptures.¹³ In fact, The Buddha himself speaks of certain ascetics that turn sensuality into a path to nirvana.¹⁴ "We must bear in mind," wrote La Vallée-Poussin, "that several sects allowed ascetics to enjoy 'unguarded' women (i.e., not married, not engaged, etc.)... The episode of the former donkey driver (or bird catcher) Ariththa, who though an ascetics, claimed that

¹⁰ Fosco Maraini, *Secret Tibet*, 1952: 9.

¹¹ Per Kvaerne, as quoted in Robert Mayer, "The Origins of the Esoteric Vajrayana," London, SOAS, 1990.

¹² The original meaning of yoni seems to be "holder." Secondary meanings are 'origin,' nest, lap and womb.' The yoni proper (vagina) consists of three parts: bhaga, the "dispenser of delight" (vulva), vedha, the "breach" or "cleft" and garbha or "womb." The yoni is considered the symbol of the Ultimate, the holder of the great mysteries, and its shape is symbolic of the mystical shunya, "zero" or "openness" of which all things are inherent. The garbha is said to be shaped like a rohita (Cyprinus rohita), a kind of fish, i.e., narrow at the opening and expanded at the end. Rohita also means "red," cf. German "rot" (red).

¹³ See "methuna," *Katha-Vatthu* (XXIII, 1-2).

¹⁴ See *Digha-nikaya* (I, 36).

love was no obstacle to the holy life, [and] that of the ascetic Magandika, who offered the Buddha his daughter Anupama, the 'Incomparable,' should be noted."¹⁵

At this point Eliade attempts to elucidate the basis of this fundamental tantric formulation.

Every naked woman incarnates prakriti [nature]. Hence, she is to be looked upon with the same adoration and the same detachment that one exercises in pondering the unfathomable secret of nature, its limit-less capacity to create. The ritual nudity of the yogini has an intrinsic mystic value: if, in the presence of the naked woman, one does not find in one's inmost being the same terrifying emotion that one feels before the revelation of the cosmic mystery, there is no rite, there is only secular act... The second stage consists in the transformation of the woman-prakriti into an incarnation of the Shakti; the partner in the rite becomes a goddess, as the yogin must incarnate the god. The tantric iconography of divine couples (in Tibetan: yab-yam, "father-mother"), of the innumerable "forms" of Buddha embraced by their Shaktis, constitutes an exemplary model of maithuna....¹⁶

A sensitive look at the rite of maithuna therefore reveals its deeply rooted yogic culture. Man and woman come together only after a long and arduous period of apprenticeship with a guru. Stereotypically, the male is taken as a yogic practitioner, the female as a "pious woman" (nayika) who is transformed by stages into a goddess. The whole "iconographic dramaturgy" is played out over a period of a year, after which the couple is no longer merely human, but "detached like gods." The sexual act itself is no longer profane but rite, and because there is no emission of semen, the erotic encounter never ends. During the maithuna, then, the couple is transposed to a

¹⁵ La Vallée-Poussin.

¹⁶ Eliade, 259, parentheses and slight diacritic emendation mine.

kind of "transphysiological plane" where they experience not only bliss (mahasukha), but "contemplate the ultimate reality directly."¹⁷

According to Eliade, the exemplary model of maithuna is found in the innumerable forms of Buddha embraced by their Shaktis or female consorts.¹⁸ He interprets the practice as a "substitute for pranayama" as it makes respiration rhythmical and aids concentration.¹⁹ He furthermore asserts that if the "mythology of the Tantric cycle" is to be believed, "it was the Buddha himself who succeeded in conquering worldly temptation (mara) by practicing the rite of maithuna."²⁰ Asanga in his fifth-century Mahayana-sutralankara, gracefully suggests that 'in the heavenly tumult of sexual congress, the participants obtain superlative bliss with a Buddha-like perception of melting into each other's divinity.' There are two other Buddhist works of interest in this regard. These are the Prajnopayaviniscayasiddhi (I, 15) by Anangavajra, and his student, Indrabhuti's Jnanasiddha. Both of these Vajrayanic Buddhist texts persistently encourage maithuna.²¹

9. The yoga of yonishomanaskara

I briefly return to the stunning notion that Buddhahood abides in the female organ. But here a more temperate reading shall be followed by averring "yoni" a figurative sense via Sanskrit yonishomanaskara. Yonishomanaskara is a technical term that comes to light in the Chinese San Fa Tu Lun²² (Treatise on the Three Dharmas). The short text is one of just four surviving works of the Pudgalavadin

¹⁷ Eliade, 267.

¹⁸ Eliade, 259.

¹⁹ Eliade.

²⁰ Eliade, 263-4.

²¹ Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, editor, Two Vajrayana Works, in Gaekwad's Oriental Series, XLIV, 1932, as cited in Eliade, 411.

²² Taisho Shinshu Daizo-kyo, Vol. XXV, No. 1506: 15c-30a.

School of early Buddhism and that have only come down to us in Chinese translation. The original Sanskrit title of the San Fa Tu Lun text is reconstructed as Tridharmakashastra.

In its discussion of the virtues of asceticism (dhutaguna), restraint of the faculties is said to be accompanied by a special type of "profound reflection" to which the term yonishomanaskara metaphorically refers, and which literally (if graphically) signifies a penetrating form of perception induced by the gentle but sustained attention of the mind on the female organ or vagina (i.e. yoni) as the ultimate basis of higher knowledge. This mental attention on the source of the womb is in fact 'one of four explicit items that the Buddha repeats as both preferred and necessary for the development of wisdom and entering the stream that leads to awakening' (Thich Thien Chau, 1996: 47).²³ The Pali equivalent is yonisomanasikara, a term that is furthermore appropriate to yoga as attested by the Pali-English Dictionary (PTS) and conveys a sense of 'pondering over, concentration on, and devotion to [the yoni]' (588).²⁴ Yet as shown by Chau, a stifling unease and misapprehension regarding the etymology of this suggestive technical term is plainly evinced from very early times. Here Chau points to Kumarabuddhi's 383 CE translation of Ssu A-Han-Mu Ch'ao Chieh (Fragmentary commentary on the four Agamas)²⁵ with its misconstrued context and apparently "mechanical and erroneous" rendering of yonishomanaskara as "the practice of sexual misconduct," Chinese yin hsing (姪行).²⁶ But a far more apt (if

²³ The teaching appears in at least three different places in the Pali Canon: Digha Nikaya III, 277; Majjhima Nikaya, II, 17; Samyutta Nikaya, V: 345-41 (Pali Text Society); cited and discussed in Chau, *The Literature of the Personalists (Pudgalavadins) of early Buddhism*, 1996: 47, n. 199.

²⁴ Viewed online at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/contextualize.pl?p.3.pali.315344>

²⁵ Taisho edition, Vol. XXV, No. 1505: 1b-15b.

²⁶ Chau, 47, n. 199. Kumarabuddhi who came from Turfan, is said to have had an unsure knowledge of Chinese and given a literal rendering faithful to the original Sanskrit text in this, his first and only translation project (Bagchi, *Le Canon Bouddhique en Chine*, vol. I: 156-7 88; cited in Chau, 88).

free) interpretation recommends the Buddhist yogin "to be ever among women in thought." This stance corresponds with the [date] Mahaprajnaparamita-shastra where the search for perfect wisdom mirrors the intensity and exclusiveness with which a man reflects on a beautiful woman.²⁷

10. Cina-cara-sara-Tantra

Sylvain Lévi in his historical studies of Nepal (1905-8)²⁸ cites a Chinese Mahayanic text titled Cina-cara-sara-Tantra wherein yoga practice in the Chinese fashion (Cina-cara) is embellished. The narrative text relates the story of the sage Washistha, son of Lord Brahma, who goes in search of the Buddha and finds him engaged in a form of mystical-eroticism resembling the rites of Maithuna and Bhagayaja ("vulva rites") historically observed by certain tantric adepts.

He enters the great country of China and sees The Blessed One surrounded by a thousand mistresses in erotic ecstasy. The sage's surprise verges on indignation. "These are practices contrary to the Vedas!" he cries. A voice from space corrects him: "If," says the voice, "thou wouldst gain my favour, it is with these practices in the Chinese fashion that thou wouldst worship me!" He approaches the Buddha and receives from his lips the unexpected lesson: "Women are the gods, women are life, women are adornment. Be ever among women in thought!"²⁹

11. Cakrapuja Stripuja & Kumaripuja

Apart from Maithuna and Bhagayaja, there are three other closely associated tantric rites; but their yogic content is far less apparent and they are thus widely recognized for the hazards they present and for their tendency to degenerate into pure

²⁷ Conze, 194. See page 25-6 below.

²⁸ Sylvain Lévi, *Le Népal: Études historique d'un royaume hindou*, 2 vols., 1905-8

²⁹ Lévi, 346-47, as cited in Eliade, 264.

licentiousness. Nonetheless, one should also keep in mind that the Tantric texts seem to never grow weary of repeating the adage, "By the same acts that cause some men to burn in hell for thousands of years, the yogin gains his eternal salvation."³⁰

These three ancillary mystico-erotic rites are cakrapuja (circle-worship), stripuja (woman-worship), and kumaripuja (virgin-worship). They all have affinities with the rites of the Shakta and the Tantric cults where the female nude and the sacred yoni represent the principal objects of worship and meditation.

In cakrapuja the cakra, or "circle" denotes the fact that the participants of the puja, or "worship," are seated in a circle with the women on the left of their male partners. Couples are matched at random. In the centre of the circle is placed a virgin, a yoni, or a mystic diagram (yantra). On another level, the cakra may allude to the energy-centres in the body that are supposed to be awakened.

In stripuja, the chosen woman is offered meat and wine, then sprinkled with wine and rendered sacred. The attendants worship her in various ways. Then the deified woman "is seated on an altar with legs spread wide apart to display the sacred symbol, the yoni, which the priest ritually kisses and to which he offers food and libations in sacred vessels called argha, which are shaped like the yoni. After these offerings are consecrated by touching them to the living yoni, they are distributed among the worshippers and eaten."³¹

In kumaripuja, the "honoured" virgin is often picked for her beauty, youth and purity, but other times also for her ugliness and ill repute. An important element of Tantric rites is therefore the role played by girls of depraved and debauched character,

³⁰ Karman ayena vai sattvah kalpakotiatanyapi, pacyante na rake ghore tena yogi vimucyate.

³¹ O. A. Wall, *Sex and Sex Worship* (1919), reprinted 2006, as cited in Walker, 1968: 2, 431.

even prostitutes; the rationale being, "The more depraved and debauched the woman, the more fit she is for the rite."³²

12. Digression-Loop: The Sacred Dombi

In a similar sense, the preferred sexual partner has long been the dombi or scavenger woman. Celebrated tantric poets have written verse in honour of Her whom by virtue of her veritable social-pariah status is "regarded as the living embodiment of the vulva in its absolute sense, free of all considerations of beauty, birth, social position or pleasure."³³

But there has been some doubt over the meaning of dombi, which I render here as "scavenger woman." Earlier writers such as Mircea Eliade and Benjamin Walker mistakenly translated dombi as "washerwoman." But dombi means without a doubt a female member of the Dom (or Domb) community. The Doms have long been workers at cremation places, scavengers, or weavers of ropes and baskets. Depending on various regional dialects, they are also called Dombo, Domra and Domba. Dombi is simply the feminine form of Domba. Today most Dom settlements are in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. There is a major settlement on the outskirts of Belgaum. These particular Doms are called Dombari. They traditionally only eat leftovers and rotten food. They tend to work as scavengers and street acrobats. Some of them walk around town whipping themselves with a long thick rope while soliciting money from passers-by. The women go around begging for leftover food

³² Eliade, 261, n.

³³ Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World*, 1968: 2, 432.

from the better-off households. They refuse to eat fresh food, at least the old generation does.³⁴

There are many Doms in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu too, and in the eastern states of Orissa and West Bengal and other places. Doms are traditionally well known for their musical ability. A medieval history describes the community as a caste that makes its living from music.³⁵ There are furthermore references to certain ragas (musical compositions) entitled Dombakriti, Dombakriya, Dombakri, Domb and Dombika, and a deshi or "folk" tala (musical meter) called Dombuli. Even to this day the Dom community continues to provide India with skilled musicians.³⁶

13. The Dombi as Dakini

It has been suggested that dombi is a word of Munda origin, a pre-Vedic aboriginal Indian language. Its presumed root, dom, which is connected with drumming, is linked to damara and damaru, Sanskrit terms for drum. The term dakini may have also come from this root.³⁷ A dakini is a feminine celestial beings who is the personification of transcendental knowledge. In the Buddhist Tantras dakinis play highly magical and initiatory roles as genies, and the women historically identified with them are particularly linked to the Munda speaking Dombi and Shavara peoples living mainly in the eastern states of Bihar, Orissa and Bengal. This naturally supports the historical idea that many Buddhist Tantras actually originate from these eastern areas and not in Northwest India. It is further worth noting that the term dakini may

³⁴ In Sri Lanka there are place names dombagod and goda typically denoting a settlement of "lower caste" people. See Raveen Satkuranathan, ".dombii as scavenger woman," email, Archives of Indology (25 Apr 2000).

³⁵ Online discussion ".dombii," 24 messages, Archives of Indology (Apr 2000).

³⁶ Bharat Gupta, ".dombii as scavenger woman," Archives of Indology (19 Apr 2000).

³⁷ Stephen Hodge, ".dombii as scavenger woman," email, Archives of Indology, (22 Apr 2000). The author cites F.B.J. Kuiper, Proto-Munda Words in Sanskrit, 1948.

have made its earliest appearance in India's deep Dravidian South, vis-à-vis the literary Tamil Cilappatikaram.³⁸

14. The Dom & Human Sacrifice

With regard to the Dom community in Orissa, they live as neighbours to the Kondh and play a subordinate role to them and act as their messengers and procure their sacrifice. According to the Stephen Hodge (2000), the Kondh inhabit the entire highland region of Phulbani, most of the highlands in western Ganjam and much of Koraput and Kalahandi in Orissa. Until the middle of the 19th century human sacrifice was practiced in all this area except the highlands of Ganja where female infanticide was endorsed instead.

As derived from the Kondh's early creation myth, the Goddess Teri believes that "there can be no fertility for their community without human blood falling on the ground." The role of sacrifice seems to imply two things here: 1) that the deity, though considered both impersonal and amorphous, could be made tangible; and 2) that communication was obtainable between the abstract god and its surrounding community.³⁹ Over time the Goddess Teri cult evolved the idea that human sacrifice was indispensable not only for maintaining the well-being of the surrounding community, but the entire world. This gave rise to the Meriah sacrifices, the victims of which were usually children. Now similar to the bhogis or "enjoyers" (Harris, 2010), the meriah victims were themselves believed to incarnate the divinity. They

³⁸ Swaminathan Madhuresan, ".dombii as scavenger woman," email, Archives of Indology, (21 Apr 2000). Swaminathan makes mention of the southern Indian Dombar/thombar community, a Dravidian caste found living in Salem and Tiruchy. He further wonders if dombi is not the itumpi in Tamil works. A Tamil Lexicon defines itumpu as "mischief" or "pranks," while the word itumpai means "affliction."

³⁹ Stephen Hodge, ".dombii as scavenger woman," email, Archives of Indology (24 Apr 2000). For the full gory details of the Meriah sacrifices, see Barbara Boal, *The Kondhs: Human Sacrifice and Religious Change*, 2nd ed., 1997.

were strangled and cut into pieces. The pieces were then buried in the fields for the sake of agricultural fertility. Again it was the occupation of the neighbouring Doms to procure the victims for the Kondh's Theri sacrifice.⁴⁰

15. Doms – The Original Gypsies

It may now prove an opportune time to suggest that dom is the origin of the ethnic designation of the European Roma, or Rom, more traditional if pejoratively known as Gypsies. The feminine form of Rom is Romani, which is also the name of their language. According to Harvard Indologist Michael Witzel, the earliest historic record of the Roma describes them "as wandering musicians at the court of a Persian king" while on their way westwards to North Africa and Europe.⁴¹ Many experts on European and North American Roma share the view that Roma is derived from doma or domara. Domba is apparently a Prakrit word, while dumba and doma are found in Kashmiri Sanskrit texts. Dom is also the root of domaki, the name of a central Indo-Aryan language spoken in a small enclave in the Northern Areas in Pakistan. The speakers of this language were originally brought from India as servants and musicians.⁴² But over the centuries the Doms of India have been trapped in a vicious cycle of "downward caste mobility" and poverty has consigned them to a life of scavenging, though this is not always the case.⁴³ In the present-day Indian context, the Doms are classified as a Scheduled Caste.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Hodge, ".dombii as scavenger woman."

⁴¹ Michael Witzel, ".dombii as scavenger woman," email, Archives of Indology (19 Apr 2000). See also ".dombii as scavenger woman (Romani)," 3 messages, Archives of Indology (25-27Apr 2000).

⁴² Elena Bashir, ".dombii as scavenger woman," email, Archives of Indology (19 Apr 2000).

⁴³ Gupt, ".dombii as scavenger woman."

⁴⁴ Raju Balakrishnan, ".dombii as scavenger woman," Archives of Indology (21 Apr 2000).

16. The Cult of the Dombi

By way of closing the current digression, I should only note that when earlier writers such as Eliade and Walker translated dombi as "washerwoman," they presumably mistook dombi for a female dhobi (laundry person). The linguistic lapse is understandable considering that the modern name for a female Dom is dombini. But there is simply no connection to "washer" here.⁴⁵ In any case, a woman from the highly-despised and viewed as repugnant caste of scavengers was a far more superior object of worship in the tantric rites of Bhagayaja and Kumaripuja, et al., as her social standing was so much lower than that of an ordinary washerwoman.

But at another vital level the dombi came to represent "the mystery of creation and the mystery of Being."⁴⁶ She was nothing less than the immaculate incarnation of The Devi, The Great Goddess Shakti, particularly in her terrible aspect as Kali, who has always been associated with the primordial goddess, and who stood in India long "before the Aryan invaders imposed their ways and manners on the native population." Her "ultimate origin is truly unknown."⁴⁷ But in the Hinduized cultures, Kali became known as Shiva's Scary Consort, and even to this day the Goddess is adored in the East Indian city of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), particularly at the riverside temple Kalighat, from which the city derives its name.⁴⁸ She is always seen wearing a garland of dripping skulls. At a temple in the western Indian city of Jaipur, the Goddess was seen with her head twisted right around as if looking backward.

⁴⁵ The confusion over the meaning was probably caused by mistaking the retroflex "d" in dombi for a unretroflex "dh" as in dhobi. Dhobi is based on the Sanskrit root dhav, as is the Hindi word dhona, both of which mean, "to wash."

⁴⁶ Eliade, 203.

⁴⁷ Michael Magee, *The Magic of Kali*, 1995.

⁴⁸ Kol/Cal = Kali; cutta is an early Anglicization of ghat = "riverside."

Tradition relates that she turned her face in disgust when a goat was offered instead of a human being.⁴⁹

So here in the cult of the sacred dombi we find what may well be the clearest demonstration of the "eccentric sacralities" that flourished in the autochthonous current and the popular spiritualities that were "absorbed at all costs" into later mainstream Indian religiosity.⁵⁰ Yet still at another very fundamental level, the divinized dombi comes to life through the yogin's highly developed body as she makes her way into his subtle being through the theory of the psychic body and the cakras. She is therefore interiorized and becomes, indeed, the incarnated symbol of the sleeping primordial force within; she is one and the same as kundalini shakti, which the yogin endeavours to arouse and marshal. To concentrate his mind on the image of the dombi was a way for the yogin to arouse a kind of inner or "mystical" heat, called tapas, and achieve yoga's highly-vaunted alchemical transfiguration. In this way the dombi made her way into the tantric's secret symbolic language called sandhya bhasha or "twilight language." "O Dombi! You are filthy...", one tantric poet wrote. "Some call you ugly, but the wise embrace you.... O Dombi! No woman is more depraved than you!"⁵¹

However, due to the rise of numerous inept and ill-intentioned yogic practitioners, the various tantric rites of India are thought to have eventually deteriorated into a culture of pure debauchery and mystico-erotic vampirism. Such debasing behaviour may largely be the cause for the discredited image that Tantra has to this day.

⁴⁹ Amer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam (A History of the Evolution and Ideas of Islam)*, 1922: xxvi, n.

⁵⁰ Eliade, 203 and 243.

⁵¹ M. Shahidullah, ed. and trans. *Les Chants mystiques de Kanha et de Saraha; les Doha-kosha et les Carya*, 1928: 20, n., as cited in Eliade, 261, n. I have freely rephrased the archaic wording.

17. The Goddesses of Buddhism

Early in the 2nd century CE, two new feminine deities entered Buddhism. These are the Goddesses Prajnaparamita and Tara. Prajnaparamita is clearly the creation of the Doctors of the Mahayana Church. She is the Feminine Embodiment of Perfected Intelligence and the corporal expression of an entire metaphysical system contained in the Mahaprajnaparamitashastra, which advances the doctrine of shunyata or "universal openness."

Prajnaparamita is typically described as the "Goddess of the Perfection of Wisdom." In a stone sculpture from Eastern Java dated ca. 1300 CE., the Goddess is identified by her characteristic ritual gesture (mudra) called Dharmacakrapravartana or "turning the wheel of the law (dharma). A palm-leaf text on the lotus whose stem she holds, represents the Prajnaparamita-sutra.⁵²

Tara, on the other hand, is one among dozens of Indian goddesses of independent origin who were later incorporated into Buddhist tantric ritual and iconography.⁵³ Tara, in particular, is furthermore seen as the epiphany of aboriginal India's Great Goddess Shakti, the Eternal Saviouress. Literally, "star," Tara is also one of the ten Mahavidyas or "Great Knowledge Bearers" that figure prominently in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist tantric traditions. In this regard, Tara is typically identified as an aspect of Brahman's Shakti who opens the way to para-vidya or "superior knowledge," the direct, intuitive transcendental knowledge that leads to ultimate illumination and release.

⁵² Some believe it is also a "portrait" of Dedes, a queen of the first half of the 13th century. The statue has been widely reproduced. It is housed in the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leyden. See two excellent colour illustrations in Dietrich Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism*, 1964: 236-239.

⁵³ Stephen Hodge, "Buddhist Goddess Identification," email, Archives of Indology, (8 May 2000).

As both goddess and "saviouress of compassion" combined, Tara is perhaps the most admired Devi among the Buddhist faithful. In another interpretation, her name means "to cross," as she enables her devotee to cross the ocean of birth and death. But she is mostly adored for protection and material advantage. She is typically depicted as a slender young woman. Her expression is refined and alert. Her hands take the form of graceful mudras, one hand shows the sign for teaching, the other one lowered in the sign of granting boons.⁵⁴

Now two important points are worth emphasising here. Firstly, the Goddesses Tara and Prajnaparamita are both fundamentally aspects of Shakti. They are conceived as embodiments of the active feminine intelligence-function and are commonly shown in passionate embrace with their "inactive" male consort Shiva-Buddha. Secondly, when Mahayana Buddhism recruited Tara, it conferred on India's Savage Goddess the distinguished status of Knowledge Personified as a Voluptuous Goddess. This is not without its Western parallel. The Biblical Sophia has also been regarded as the personification of higher intelligence.

Still at a much more archaic level, Tara is an aspect of the pre-Vedic Durga and the macabre goddess Kali, the goddess of Time and its obliteration. As the "savage" goddess, she represents the infinite cycle of creation, destruction and re-creation. She is the origin of everything. She stands by the funeral pyre as the world is reduced to ashes, but at the same time she is pregnant with the world's renewal.

In yet another aspect, she is called Chinnamasta.

She is eternal night, depicted as a naked goddess, holding in one hand a blood-stained knife and in the other her own severed head, the mouth of which drinks the

⁵⁴ "Tara the Saviouress," in Devi: The Great Goddess, online exhibition, Smithsonian Institution.

blood gushing from her headless body. Two more streams of blood gush from her headless body into the mouths of two nude girls, which symbolize the distribution of her life energy into the universe.⁵⁵

We may also cite the devi Mamaki here, another goddess of "independent origins" and who was later drawn into the Buddhist Tantras. In earlier Tantras such as Kriya and Carya, Mamaki is featured as a "stand-alone" goddess, though she is also mentioned as the consort of Vajrapani. In the later period when the Buddhas had wives, Mamaki is the consort of the Buddha Aksobhya as the text of the Hevajra-tantra narrates.⁵⁶

18. Ritual Copulation Interpreted

In light of its proliferating tantric repertoire, Buddhism recognized the need to formulate a theoretic basis for its big time sensuality. A primary aim, then, of tantric Buddhist practice was to fuse within ones own physio-psychic being the paired male/female energies of nature. This is why high-level tantric discipline is often depicted by the graphic symbolism of man and woman in ritual copulation. "The orgiastic symbolism became enormously popular," writes Fosco Maraini, "and initiates read innumerable meanings into it."

The male divinity represents karuna, compassion, while the female stands for prajna, gnosis, or perfect knowledge.... Such unity can only be adequately represented by the symbolism of Lovers' union. That is what the eye of the initiate reads into the amorous embrace that confronts him on the altar....⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Margaret and James Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, 1977: 172.

⁵⁶ Hodge, "Buddhist Goddess Identification."

⁵⁷ Maraini, 9.

With slight variation, Louis Renou interprets this iconographic coupling as the union of the feminine principle of prajna (gnosis) with the active male principle of upaya (technique).

Even in the Mahayana's greatest scripture, the copious Mahaprajnaparamita-shastra, this sexual yoga is openly encouraged. According to the text, the pursuit of perfect wisdom can easily assume the character of a love affair with the Absolute, and the followers of Buddha are explicitly told that a

...Bodhisattva should think of perfect wisdom with the same intensity and exclusiveness with which a man thinks of a handsome, attractive, and beautiful woman with whom he has made a date, but who is prevented from seeing him.⁵⁸

This high and ennobling spiritual outlook seeks to engage the action of the libido. The yogin attempts to surmount coarse eroticism by bringing his being into participation with the loftiest realms of sublimated passion. Important to repeat, this amorous union is never to involve the actual flow of seminal fluid. As a matter fact, such ritual coupling is said to be obtainable without the presence of a physical partner, as visualization alone is sufficient for the yogin to engender the needed inspiration to advance in his private soteriological probe.

19. The Mantra

Along with a general exaltation of the Goddess the tantric dispensation has a second principal characteristic. I refer to the use of sacred formulas otherwise known as mantras. These are mystic syllables founded on the notion that ultimate truth can never be transmitted by conceptual reference, but only by distilled or radically clipped

⁵⁸ Conze, 194.

non-representational phonemic-coded forms. Normally mantras are uttered singly or else in a sequence. In a devotional sense, they are often benedictions. As applies to yogic-technology, however, the mantra functions as an object or support to profound entrancement and re-integration. The resonance of its invocation aims to achieve a specific act of magic such as launching the yogin to the metaphysic plane and merging his being with the light of intelligence.

Now as regards Buddhist Tantra, it is important to remember that "intelligence" is symbolically depicted as a woman. Furthermore,

To pronounce a mantra is a way of wooing a deity and, etymologically, the word is connected with the Greek word "meimao" which expresses eager desire, yearning and intensity of purpose, and with the Old High German word Minn-ia, which means, "making love."⁵⁹

In fact, Modern German retains the old term in the word Minne-Lieder meaning, "love song."

20. The Guru

We have seen that a distinguishing mark of Indian Tantrism is the extreme adoration of a personal godhead. Yet be that as it may, the following question is bound to arise: How could such a brazenly theistic proposition find agreement with an avowedly non-theistic attitude as Buddhism?

The special agent of the saintly guru brings this apparent incongruity into account. Guru means "weighty" and has a string of indications such as 'serious, important, profound and vast.' The guru is therefore a spiritual heavy weight. The

⁵⁹ Conze.

term is composed of its two root forms: gu means "to remove," ru means "darkness." The guru thus removes the veil of ignorance.

In reality, however, the tradition of the guru is already in-itself divergent to the Brahminical institution of hereditary priesthood and therefore, in effect, heretical. Yet setting that aside, it is further revealing that the institution of the independent guru has long represented the predominant religion in Indian society, as people typically "belong" to no church or temple but pay respect to their personal guru, as a god perhaps and rely on him or her for essential guidance. Nor has Buddhism ever been averse to this convention that is nowhere seen more clearly than within the tradition of Buddhist Yoga, where love between student and guru is marked by a closeness likened to the highest love that exists between any two human beings. Here we have the vision of the bhakti-marga or "path of freedom through devotional love," where the guru is revered as a living god. Such guru-bhakti is the consummation of every form of Indian spirituality. In so-called Hindu and Buddhist bhakti one needs to keep in mind that the guru assumes tremendous importance and becomes the paramount god of his pupil, or the incarnation of Buddha himself.⁶⁰

In fact, the guru is even more important than Buddha. To rephrase the famous verse from Vamakeshvan Santram,

If Buddha gets angry, guru protects.

If guru gets angry, nothing protects.⁶¹

Thus, in the tantric dispensation there is strong intimation of a secret teaching that can only be transmitted from guru to disciple; it can never be learned by text

⁶⁰ La Vallée-Poussin.

⁶¹ Shive rushte gurustrata / Guro rushte na kashcana.

alone. Yet the secrets divulged by guru to disciple are regarded as exceedingly precious jewels that need to be protected with utmost care. For if imprudently revealed their lustre is tarnished; if misused or altered, their force is lost.

Based on this initiative, the yoga we proclaim corroborates the view that the Buddha himself was conclusively a master of the tantric teachings; but he only revealed the practices secretly to a very small number of highly selected students. This may also explain why the tantric traditions fail to appear in the highly expurgated Pali texts; except, that is, in the few rare instances of editorial negligence—or sabotage perhaps—as appears to be the case with the survival of the Pali terms *yonisomanasikara*, "contemplation of the vulva" and *methuna*, "making love."⁶²

⁶² The term appears in the ancient Vinaya-Pitaka or Buddhist Monastic Code. Its Sanskrit equivalent is *maithuna*. Upon close scrutiny one starts to see connections between the Pali words *metta* and *metti*, and the near equivalent Sanskrit *metha* and *maitri*, all of which connote a sense of friendship, benevolence and love, and to the Sanskrit *Mitra*, "friend of all," a classic name for the Sun. Compare as well Pali *metta-jhana*, "love trance/meditation." On a final light note, the High Hindi term *hasta-maithuna* (literally, "hand-love") is a reference to auto-eroticism.

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