

Tantra and Zen Buddhism

Part 1 of 6

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June 5, 1974

This morning I propose to produce a preliminary tape on the subject of Tantra and to some extent on Zen Buddhism.

After the publication of *Pathways*, and more especially after the later publication of *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*, we have been in correspondence with a man who is manifestly possessed of great erudition especially in the field of Buddhism, particularly in that form of Buddhism which is known as Mahayana, and then more especially in that branch of Mahayana which is known as Vajrayana. We've been happy for this correspondence as it is very stimulating and brings out points that are of major importance.

In the original text of *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*, but not in the portion that has been so far published, I took a stand rather strongly against the tantric technique and have done so elsewhere in certain lectures and in certain tapes.¹ This correspondent took certain exception to this position, and there does appear the need to clarify my position with respect to this form of yoga. Tantra is not the whole of yoga by any means. There are non-tantric techniques of which that formulated by Sri Shankara in the *Commentaries on the Brahma Sutras* as translated and interpreted by Paul Deussen in his *System of the Vedanta* is a case in point. There is evidence that Shankara wrote commentaries on the Tantra also, but I am not familiar with them. The yoga developed in the former mentioned book is strictly non-tantric and is that which is known as *jnana* yoga. It is the technique which I found successful and led to the breakthrough of August 7, 1936.

Let us first make clear why I took a position against the use of tantric technique in the case of Western man. First of all, it is not because I regard it as ineffective. On the contrary, there is evidence not only from the literature but also from a certain experience which I had with a certain student which bears out the point that it can be effective. The basis of the objection was that it can be effective without the individual being adequately prepared and that it can lead to adverse results because of this fact. The person in question violated a certain injunction to use a certain technique only very sparingly. He used it extensively with the result that he had the experience, as it were, of being on fire and could not control the condition. The last report I had was that he was committed to an insane asylum, and this illustrates the point. I warn against the use of Tantra not because it is ineffective, but because it can, if not wisely guarded, be equivalent to the placing of a high explosive in the hands of children, and can lead to disastrous results. There is insufficient guarding against improper use. That is the basis of the point. I do not say that

¹ See the audio recordings "Yoga of Knowledge," part 2, and "Three Fundamentals of the Introceptive Philosophy" part 5.

Tantra should not be used by the right man under the personal direction and continuing direction of a *guru* competent in this field and who is capable of controlling the processes that are aroused in the *chela*. That is another matter. I am opposed to the dissemination of this technique to improperly prepared individuals, particularly by Eastern yogis who leave the technique with the students and then depart from them leaving them to themselves. It is not adequately guarded against misuse. I am not opposed to the application of such techniques in the case of competent practitioners with properly selected individuals who are oriented to this kind of method. But its general dissemination without sufficient guarding I regard as extremely dangerous and can lead to insanity. Not that there is not always some hazard in connection with the penetration into the psychical depths, but there are other forms of yoga which are much better guarded against mistakes. Among other things, it is of the highest importance that there should be a training in moral conduct of a very exacting sort and a guidance that is fully understanding not only of the technique but of the psychology of the individual *sadhaka*.

Now, what is Tantra? To introduce the subject, I shall turn to the terms as they are handled in *The Theosophical Glossary*. We have here two words that are pertinent. First, Tantra:

Lit., “rule or ritual”. Certain mystical and magical works, whose chief peculiarity is the worship of the *female* power, personified in Sakti. Devi or Durga (Kali, Siva’s wife) is the special energy connected with sexual rites and magical powers—the *worst form of black magic or sorcery*.

Next, the word Tantrika:

Ceremonies connected with the above worship. Sakti having a two-fold nature, white and black, good and bad, the Saktas are divided into two classes, the Dakshinacharis and the Vamacharis, or the right-hand and the left-hand Saktas, *i.e.*, “white” and “black” magicians. The worship of the latter is the most licentious and immoral.²

While I do not exclude the possibility that the higher forms of non-tantric yoga known as the *Trimarga*, which is familiar to us from the study of the *Bhagavad Gita*, could be misused, nonetheless, the misuse is not obvious. The aim of the three yogas known as *jnana* yoga, *bhakti* yoga, and *karma* yoga is toward the end of attaining Realization and not toward the end of developing powers. In the strict yoga as given by Shankara, the development of powers is discouraged. The end is Liberation and the *sadhaka* is warned not to develop powers since that could divert him from the ultimate end. After he has attained Liberation, he is in a position where powers might be useful and he is sufficiently guarded by the effect of the liberating Realization that he would not easily be inclined to use powers in a dark and nefarious direction. On the contrary, the methods employed by Tantra tend to arouse powers without sufficient moral guarding of the individual; for instance, if the only condition is that one pay a certain sum of money and then he is given a certain technique and that technique tends to arouse powers and the

² H. P. Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary* (Los Angeles: The Theosophy Company, 1892), 319.

individual is not freed from a tendency to go into a direction that is selfish and personal power seeking, he can break forth those powers and use them in a dark way. It is simply too easy to enter into the left-hand path. I do not take an opposed position to the individual that has avoided this hazard; but remember, powers placed in the hands of the unprepared is like placing dynamite, percussion caps, and fuses into the hands of infants. And I take, therefore, the most powerful stand I can against such hazards.

I have spoken of a case where an individual *sadhaka*, by use of a tantric type of technique, aroused a quality which he called fire which he could not control. This is a form of danger involving the practitioner himself. But long ago I heard of use of powers in a way that was highly nefarious. This goes back to my days as a student in Stanford and Harvard universities. There were, then, certain scholarship students from India who were working in these universities and I made a point of cultivating their acquaintance and even friendship. From certain of these I learned of a certain phenomenon known in India. And bear in mind this was before I was seriously interested in yoga. They told me that there are certain individuals known in India who have developed the Vamacharya method and are a real danger to peoples in India. This is a case of certain individuals who are in the habit of lingering in the vicinity of villages, perhaps in the bush or the forest, for the purpose of intercepting some woman who may have wandered out there, and then to seduce her or bring her under control, probably by hypnotic method, entering then into a sex relation and employing a device, which I do not at all understand, by which the operator withdraws from the woman all of her vital force and leaves her body a corpse. It is maintained that with this force, magic can be performed. It was told me that village elders keep their eyes open for such entities with a view to discouraging them. Now, this is an aspect of the Vamacharya which is much worse than the hazard involved by arousing of fire in oneself which he cannot control. And I think it should be evident that there is plenty of reason for being completely cautious with respect to the development of techniques that arouse powers of a magical sort without a sufficient moral control.

Let us now consider Tantra in the positive sense and come to some understanding of it in that larger and more ideal significance. First, as to my own personal sources of information; in addition to the material garnered from *The Secret Doctrine* and *The Theosophical Glossary*, my information is based upon the following sources: first, in the field of Hindu Tantra, which is to be distinguished from Buddhist Tantra, it seems from the literature that the Hindu Tantra was first developed and that it was later introduced into Buddhistic Tibet by Padma Sambhava. The literature concerning the last will also be classified. As to the Hindu Tantra, my principle source of information lies in the works of Sir John Woodruff who wrote under the *nom de plume* of Arthur Avalon. These works are: *The Serpent Power*; second, *The Principles of Tantra*; third, *Tantra of the Great Liberation*; and finally, *Hymns to the Goddess*. The principle sources of information concerning Tibetan Buddhistic Tantra are the four works produced under the editorship of Evans-Wentz. These are: *Tibetan Yoga Milarepa*;³ *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*; *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrine*; and fourth, *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*; and there is, finally, a modern work called *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet* by John Blofeld. I have received verbal information to the effect the basic Buddhistic Tantra of

³ The actual title of the volume is "Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa."

Tibet, which is said to have been introduced by Padma Sambhava, is of a lip to ear type of instruction. In as much as I have not personally received such lip to ear instruction, I can pass no judgment whatsoever concerning this form of Tantra. It is maintained that this form of Tantra is sufficiently guarded against the misuse of which I have spoken heretofore. I shall leave all evaluation of this for the future.

My use of the works of Arthur Avalon is based upon his interpretations of the subject matter. The original subject matter is a very difficult matter to understand and Arthur Avalon has gone to the immense work of giving it an interpretation which is intelligible to the Western mind. The principle source among these works is *The Serpent Power* itself. The words *Serpent Power* constitute a reference to the energy called *Kundalini*, which is said to rest quiescent in the case of most individuals at the base of the spine. But there are indications that the raising of *Kundalini* is not the whole of Tantra, but it is central to certain forms of Tantra. As to this question, I cannot form a judgment. I can only assume that the statement of Arthur Avalon is valid and that, at any rate, a large portion of the tantric orientation is oriented to the raising of the *Kundalini*, or in other words, the Serpent Power.

There are many stages outlined in this particular form of yoga. It starts with a discipline of the body known as *hatha* yoga involving the taking of many postures, particularly the one known as the *padmasana*, but not that exclusively. Some of these postures would seem to be well-nigh impossible for a human body, as for instance the closed *padmasana* posture, which is of the following form: in addition to the placing of the left foot upon the right thigh and the right foot upon the left thigh, the arms are extended behind the back so that the right hand grasps the right foot and the left hand grasps the left foot. Part of the theory behind this posture for deep meditation is that when the individual enters into a state of profound *samadhi*, he becomes unconscious on the objective plane. There is a stopping of the breath and of the beating of the heart. In such a situation there would be, if one were not in some posture of this sort, a tendency for the blood to drain down into the lower portion of the body; and in the case of coming back to outer consciousness, the beating of the heart could well be without being immersed in the mass of blood and there might be difficulties because of that. But in this locked position the blood is retained in the torso so that when the heart starts beating it is already immersed in blood. Secondly, the body is so braced that it would not fall sideways or forward, and if one were near a wall it would not fall backward but would remain locked in that position. These are technical points and involve a very exacting physical training.

In addition to *hatha* yoga, it is represented that there follows what is known as *raja* yoga which deals more with the psychical being and is supposed to be a second step. Then in addition, there is what is known as the *laya* yoga, *mantra* yoga, and the ultimate raising of the *Kundalini* through the different *chakras* of the body to the *Sahasrara* at the top of the head. The orientation here is to *Shakti*, which is another name for the energy known as *Kundalini*, and it is said that she takes the *sadhaka* to her lord *Shiva* who rests at the pericarp of the head, a thousand-petaled lotus, that with this there is an awakening to a liberated state of Consciousness. But in the process, the *Kundalini* passes through several *chakras*. It abides originally in the *Muladhara*, said to be at the base of the spine; then passes through *Svadisthana*, which corresponds to a point low in the abdomen; then through *Manipura*, corresponding roughly to the solar plexus; then to *Anahata*,

corresponding to the heart center; then to *Visuddha* in the throat; then to *Ajna* located at a point roughly behind and a little above the eyes; and finally to *Sahasrara* at the pericarp on top of the head. In passing through these *chakras*, it is said that the *Kundalini* power tends to awaken to activity each one of them, but as it leaves each one they go into a state of quiescence, and the *sadhaka* is urged not to stop in the process until he reaches the final goal, and, in any case, not to let the energy rest at any *chakra* below that of *Anahata*, or the heart center. This is all very technical. It makes major use of the physical body. It is not an intellectual or a moral discipline. It is partly a mechanical, a physiological, and a meditative discipline involving certain concentrations.

It should be added that the literature associates with each *chakra* a given *mantram* that belongs to that *chakra* alone and also a certain geometrical figure, which in the practice may be visualized. The *mantra* are supposed to be effective in the producing of certain effects characteristic of each *chakra*. It should further be noted that the description here is not with respect to the gross physical body, but with respect to a postulated, or realized, subtle body which parallels the physical body; that the operation with the gross physical is instrumental in arousing activity in the subtle body; that the *Kundalini* does not literally use the physical nerves, but certain vehicles known as *nadis* which correspond to the nerves. Of these *nadis*, the three most important are *Sushumna*, *Pingala*, and *Ida*. *Sushumna* is the central channel corresponding to the spine, and *Pingala* and *Ida* are pictured as weaving around it—*Pingala* corresponding to solar energy, *Ida* to lunar energy. The ideal is to cause the *Kundalini* power to rise up through the *Sushumna*. But if you bear in mind the report I made concerning Gopi Krishna and his experience with *Kundalini*,⁴ it happened that at one stage it ascended through *Pingala*, or the solar energy, as he said, and he had a desperate fight with enormous heat experience that was almost fatal. Although he ultimately gained control, it took him several years to achieve that control. I do not question the factuality of these steps. I have not gone through this form of yoga and cannot testify directly as to its operation; but it obviously involves difficulties, and if you recall my report on Gopi Krishna's confession concerning it, you will see that it involves some very serious problems. There is no doubt at all that the guidance and protection of a qualified *guru* is required for all of this.

Attention should be given to an incidental point brought out by the correspondent in his last letter up to this date. He spoke of my attitude toward *mantra* as being scornful. How he derived that position, I do not understand. He quoted something I said in listing the instrumentalities employed in Tantra, and there I mentioned, among other steps, the use of *mantra*. I could not possibly be scornful towards *mantra*. It does not logically follow in any way from what I said, and in point of fact, I am not scornful. I have every reason to believe that it exerts actual powers, and I have every reason to believe that Tantra produces important effects. I am, therefore, not scornful with respect to either. If they were nonproductive, they would be innocuous and merely a waste of time and not a source of real danger. My whole statement as given heretofore is based upon the premise that Tantra is effective and along with it *mantra*, and that it can lead to effects that are dangerous for the unprepared and unpurified individual. As to *mantra*, there is every evidence that it does produce certain effects in consciousness, but there's also this point,

⁴ See the audio recording "Three Fundamentals of the Introceptive Philosophy," part 5.

that there are many *mantrams* and it's very important that the *mantrams* used by the *sadhaka* should be carefully selected. There are mantrams that can produce questionable effects, as well as *mantrams* that produce exalting effects in consciousness. The most familiar one is the 'OM', or *OM*; or in another form the 'AUM'. There is the *Om Mani Padme Hum*. There is also the *Tadyatha, Gate, Gate, Para-gate, Para-sam-gate, Bodhi, Sva-ha*.⁵ These are *mantra* of a higher order. There are *mantra* connected with the lower *chakras*, which I would insist must be carefully avoided, for they develop resources or ways of consciousness not desirable, at least for the beginning student. I could not possibly scorn something that has a power potential.

But another word may be said about the subject of *mantra* at this point. *Mantra* is a certain way of using the word. The word has two aspects: that, namely first, what we might call its tonal aspect or, in other terms, its musical value; the second usage is its meaningfulness as a concept—the way we ordinarily use words and the use to which I give my principal application in all that I write or formulate as lectures or on tapes. The tonal use of the word is a field in which I am not by any means an expert, but I have evidence that it does lead to modifications of consciousness and these modifications can be in the direction of certain exaltations if the right *mantram* is selected and it is used in the right way. The *mantram* to which I am personally most oriented is the *Tadyatha, Gate, Gate, Para-gate, Para-sam-gate, Bodhi, Sva-ha*. But it impresses me because of its meaning. A translation has been given taking this following form: “. . . departed, departed, departed, to the Other Shore, disembarked on the Other Shore . . .”⁶ And with that meaning I am in the strongest sympathetic accord.

No, I respect *mantra*, and I respect Tantra. I do not necessarily recommend extended use of either save under appropriate direction. It is not a natural form of use that belongs to Western man; but, no doubt, it has its powers and it has its use. I regard *mantra* as an aid in yoga whether the yogic form is tantric or non-tantric. I regard also meditation as an aid in yoga, just as Aurobindo himself has pointed out. But aids are not essentialities. There are many forms of yoga and the methods used by the different forms vary considerably. The question then arises: what is essential to yoga and what is simply that which is an aid, more or less of value to one individual perhaps and not to another, something which may be dispensed with in one case and other aids employed, and so on? The essentiality, so far as I have been able to isolate it, the something which is in common with all effective yogas, are two: intense aspiration and intense and complete self-dedication. And it would appear that everything else is instrumental and may vary from individual to individual because of psychological differences, psychical differences, and differences of background. All of this is subsidiary, but all that is subsidiary may be highly useful though it varies from individual to individual.

In the yoga of Vajrayana Buddhism more is involved than the technical processes which I outlined earlier. Right ritual or ceremony evidently plays a very important part. To introduce this, I shall make a quotation from the book called *The Tantric Mysticism of*

⁵ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 358.

⁶ Ibid.: “O Wisdom, departed, departed, departed, to the Other Shore, disembarked on the Other Shore, Sva-ha!”

Tibet by John Blofeld. This quotation starts on page 42 of this book under the heading “*The Vajrayana for the West.*”

I have suggested that the Vajrayana may not achieve Zen’s popularity in the West because many of the people attracted to oriental forms of mysticism do not care for ceremonial usages. Though the Vajrayana does include paths wholly free from set forms of any kind, by and large it makes elaborate use of rites because the power generated by emotion and by aesthetic satisfaction is a force too valuable to waste. The rites have a tremendous psychological value and this may in time become more fully appreciated by those temperamentally not fond of ritual. Meanwhile, it is likely that some people will from the first find the Vajrayana’s colorful techniques a boon to their spiritual practice and that even some non-Buddhists may wish to adapt them—especially the technique of visualization—for use in the context of their own religions. Though prayer-wheels may never turn in Madison Square or prayer-flags flutter from the roofs of Westminster, already there are lovely Tibetan-style shrinerooms tucked away in private homes.

The varied rites and meditative practices within the Vajrayana afford to widely different kinds of people means to still the monkey-like leaping of their thoughts, develop their latent powers and, by entering ever-deepening states of consciousness, to be flooded at last by the dazzling light of wisdom. Concurrently, they develop an enviable attitude to life, learn to transmute ugliness into beauty, become expert in harnessing the energy of their passions and presently discover that their own nature soaringly transcends man’s highest conception of divinity. The choice between Zen and the Vajrayana is not a choice of goal but of method and even the methods are alike in that both deal with the mind at a level that transcends conceptual thought; but the Vajrayana caters to people who find it easier to use symbols and concepts as the very weapons with which to do away with concepts, instead of trying to banish them from the first. With Zen we start, so to speak, at the Ph.D level; with the Vajrayana, we may enter the path at any level from kindergarten to professor.⁷

Before entering into a discussion of a number of points brought out by this quotation, I should like to direct your attention to one word that was used within the text, namely, the word ‘visualization’. This is a process that apparently occupies a very important position in the Tibetan Vajrayana yoga. I would refer you to the volume called *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrine* edited by Evans-Wentz. In there, there are seven forms of yoga—four of them are listed as tantric, three as non-tantric. But in the tantric forms there is great use of the power of visualization, visualizing of entities, making an object to appear to become enormously large, as large as the cosmos, or as smaller than a grain of sand, which evidently has certain values in these techniques.

⁷ John Blofeld, *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet* (New York: Causeway Books, 1974), 42-43.

Now, I'm not going to question the value of visualization for those with whom it is appropriate, but I'd like to make this point: not all people are of the same psychological types. Type differences are considerable. There are the type distinctions involving the body and the psyche of Kretschmer, of Dr. Sheldon, and of Dr. Carl G. Jung. But in addition to these, there are certain type distinctions which were well-known back in the days when I was a student in the university. The division here was in the form of the instrumentality by which concepts acquired meaning to different individuals. One type was called the *visual type*. From the pure visual impression of the word, a meaning was immediately derived. Apparently this type is the one that can attain great speed in reading, can acquire great skill in the spelling of words, and the like. There was the *auditory type*, which in an extreme form could never get meaning from the visual image, but from the sound of the word. If they were forced to move within the pattern of pure vision, they seemed to be stupid individuals, but if they were allowed to operate in such a way that they could hear the word, they might be intelligent and even highly intelligent. There's a third form known as *motor-verbal*, which involves a principle of pseudo-pronunciation to give the key to meaning. The mere seeing without the pseudo-pronunciation would not give meaning, or the hearing without this was not a secure way of acquiring meaning, but the word had to be pronounced, as it was, by the throat—a small movement that could be recorded by instruments.

Now, if you take an individual that is developed in the direction of the auditory key to meaning or the motor-verbal key to meaning, it would seem that he would be very ineffective in the field of visualization. It would be using a power with respect to which he was weak. Now, to say that everybody must use the process of visualization is to favor the visualizing type and to operate to the disadvantage of the auditory and motor-verbal types. I conceive yoga as existing for all men and not for the skillful visualizers.

Each type has certain advantages. Thus, for instance, those with the photographic memories seem to be wholly of the visualizing type. Where this function is well developed, you have individuals who can merely glance at a page and then can read it off with the page removed from them afterwards. They can have a visual memory of whole volumes and can name page and place for a quotation. They have here then without question a definite power, a definite advantage in certain directions. But a certain limitation is also imposed and this is illustrated by a statement made by Bishop Berkeley of the empiric school of philosophy. He was a man who was strong in the visual sense, in the sense of using visual images, and he made the misstatement that there could be no such thing as a general triangle. Any triangle considered had to be a specific triangle. In other words, one could not effectively, so he thought, grasp the conception of abstract triangularity. This imposed a limitation upon his thought. It limited him in the use of abstractions. On the other hand, for the motor-verbal type, there is no difficulty in the conception of abstract triangularity without envisaging any particular triangle. This suggests that for the essentially abstract thinker, the one who can advance most in fields such as philosophy and mathematics, the motor-verbal type is the most favorable because the most abstract the least involving concrete particularity.

It is also suggested by this consideration of type differences that in the case of the auditory type, the instrumentality that might be of major importance in effecting a breakthrough into the higher states of consciousness could be the appropriate selection

and listening to of certain music. In other words, there is a way for all men, but it is important that we depart from the habit of saying that the only way is the way that is effective for me.