Introduction

Tantra, the Great Spiritual Synthesis

The thousands of evils arising from one's birth can be removed by means of practice.

—Matsyendra-Samhita (7.20a)

Definitions

Tantra is a Sanskrit word that, like the term yoga, has many distinct but basically related meanings. At the most mundane level, it denotes "web" or "woof." It derives from the verbal root tan, meaning "to expand." This root also yields the word tantu (thread or cord).1 Whereas a thread is something that is extensive, a web suggests expansion. Tantra can also stand for "system," "ritual," "doctrine," and "compendium." According to esoteric explanations, tantra is that which expands jnāna, which can mean either "knowledge" or
“wisdom.” The late Agehananda Bharati, an Austrian-born professor of anthropology at Syracuse University and a monk of the Dashanami order, argued that only knowledge can be expanded, not the immutable wisdom. But this is not entirely correct. Wisdom, though coessential with Reality and therefore perennial, can be expanded in the sense of informing the spiritual practitioner more and more. This process is like placing a sponge in a shallow pool of water. It gradually soaks up the water and becomes completely suffused with moisture. Thus while wisdom is always the same, it can also, paradoxically, grow inside a person. Or, to put it differently, a person can grow to reflect more and more of the eternal wisdom.

But tantra is also the “expansive,” all-encompassing Reality revealed by wisdom. As such it stands for “continuum,” the seamless whole that comprises both transcendence and immanence, Reality and reality, Being and becoming, Consciousness and mental consciousness, Infinity and finitude, Spirit and matter, Transcendence and immanence, or, in Sanskrit terminology, nirvāṇa and samsāra, or brahman and jagat. Here the words samsāra and jagat stand for the familiar world of flux that we experience through our senses.

Historically, tantra denotes a particular style or genre of spiritual teachings beginning to achieve prominence in India about fifteen hundred years ago—teachings that affirm the continuity between Spirit and matter. The word also signifies a scripture in which such teachings are revealed. By extension, the term is often applied to textbooks or manuals in general. Tradition speaks of 64 Tantras, though as with the 108 Upanishads this is an ideal figure that does not reflect historical reality. We know of many more Tantras, though few of them have survived the ravages of time.

A practitioner of Tantra is called a sādhaka (if male) or a sādhikā (if female). Other expressions are tāntrika or tantra-yogin (if male) and tantra-yoginī (if female). An adept of the Tantric path is typically known as a siddha (“accomplished one,” from siddh, meaning “to be accomplished” or “to attain”) or maha-siddha (“greatly accomplished one,” that is, a great adept). The female adept is called siddha-angana ("woman adept," from anga, meaning “limb” or “part”). The Tantric
path itself is frequently referred to as sādhana or sādhanā (from the same verbal root as siddha), and the spiritual achievement of this path is called siddhi (having the dual meaning of “perfection” and “powerful accomplishment”). Siddhi can refer either to the spiritual attainment of liberation, or enlightenment, or to the extraordinary powers or paranormal abilities ascribed to Tantric masters as a result of enlightenment or by virtue of mastery of the advanced stages of concentration. A Tantric preceptor, whether he or she is enlightened or not, is called either an ācārya (“conductor,” which is related to ācāra, “way of life”) or a guru (“weighty one”).

Tantra: A Teaching for the Dark Age

Tantra understands itself as a gospel for the “new age” of darkness, the kali-yuga. According to the Hindu worldview, history unfolds in a cyclical pattern that proceeds from a golden age to world ages of progressive spiritual decline, and then back to an era of light and plenty. These ages are called yugas (yokes), presumably because they fasten beings to the wheel of time (kala-cakra), the flux of conditioned existence. There are four such yugas, which repeat themselves over and over again, all the while maturing all beings, but especially human beings. The scriptures speak of this developmental process as “cooking.” The four world-ages, in order, are:

1. The satya-yuga, in which truth (satya) reigns supreme, and which is also known as krita-yuga because everything in it is well made (krita)
2. The treta-yuga, in which truth and virtue are somewhat diminished
3. The dvarapala-yuga, in which truth and virtue are further diminished
4. The kali-yuga, which is marked by ignorance, delusion, and greed

These correspond to the four ages known in classical Greece and ancient Persia. Significantly, the Sanskrit names of the four world ages derive from dice playing, a favorite pastime of Indic humanity ever since Vedic times. The Rig-Veda, which is at least five thousand years old, has a hymn (10.34) that has been dubbed “Gambler’s Lament” because its composer talks poetically of his addiction to gambling. Of the dice he says that “handless, they master him who has hands,” causing loss, shame, and grief. The Bhārata war, chronicled in the Mahābhārata epic, was the ill-gotten fruit of gambling. For Yudhisthira lost his entire kingdom to his wicked cousin Duryodhana with the throw of a die.

Krita signifies the lucky or “well-made” throw, dvarapala (lucky) a throw of two points, tretā (trey) a throw of three points, and kali (from the verbal root kal, “to impel”) the total loss, indicated by a single point on the die. The word kali is not, as is often thought, the same as the name of the well-known goddess Kāli. However, since Kāli symbolizes both time and destruction, it does not seem far-fetched to connect her specifically with the kali-yuga, though of course she is deemed to govern all spans and modes of time.

The Tantras describe the first, golden age as an era of material and spiritual plenty. According to the Mahābhārata-Tantra (1.20–29), people were wise and virtuous and pleased the deities and forefathers by their practice of Yoga and sacrificial rituals. By means of their study of the Vedas, meditation, austerities, mastery of the senses, and charitable deeds, they acquired great fortune and power. Even though mortal, they were like the deities (deva). The rulers were high-minded and ever concerned with protecting the people entrusted to them, while among the ordinary people there were no thieves, liars, fools, or gluttons. Nobody was selfish, envious, or lustful. The favorable psychology of the people was reflected outwardly in land producing all kinds of grain in plenty, cows yielding abundant milk, trees laden with fruits, and ample seasonal rains fertilizing all vegetation. There was neither famine nor sickness, nor untimely death. People were good-hearted, happy, beautiful, and prosperous. Society was well ordered and peaceful.
In the next world age, the "treta-yuga," people lost their inner peace and became incapable of applying the Vedic rituals properly, yet clung to them anxiously. Out of pity, the god Shiva brought helpful traditions (smriti) into the world, by which the ancient teachings could be better understood and practiced.

But humanity was set on a worsening course, which became obvious in the third world age. People abandoned the methods prescribed in the Smritis, and thereby only magnified their perplexity and suffering. Their physical and emotional illnesses increased, and as the Mahānirvāna-Tantra insists, they lost half of the divinely appointed law (dharma). Again Shiva intervened by making the teachings of the Sambhitās and other religious scriptures available.

With the rise of the fourth world age, the "kali-yuga," all of the divinely appointed law was lost. Many Hindus believe that the kali-yuga was ushered in at the time of the death of the god-man Krishna, who is said to have left this earth in 3102 BCE at the end of the famous Bhārata war. There is no archaeological evidence for this date, and it is probable that Krishna lived much later, but this is relatively unimportant for the present consideration. What matters, however, is that most traditional authorities consider the kali-yuga to be still very much in progress. In fact, according to Hindu computations, we are only in the opening phase of this dark world age, which is believed to have a total span of 360,000 years. Thus from a Hindu perspective, the current talk in certain Western circles of a promising new age—the Age of Aquarius—is misguided. At best, this is a mini-cycle of self-deception leading to false optimism and complacency, followed by worsening conditions. This is in fact what some Western critics of the New Age movement have suggested as well. Other critics have argued, conversely, that the Hindu model of cyclical time is unrealistic and outdated.

Whatever the truth of this matter may be, the Tantras emphasize that their teachings are designed for spiritual seekers trapped in the dark age, which is in effect today. This is how the Mahānirvāna-Tantra (1:36-42), in the prophetic words of the Goddess, describes the current world age:

With the sinful kali-yuga in progress, in which all law is destroyed and which abounds with evil ways and evil phenomena, and gives rise to evil activities,

then the Vedas become inefficient, to say nothing of remembering the Smritis. And the many Purāṇas containing various stories and showing the many ways to liberation

will be destroyed, O Lord. Then people will turn away from virtuous action

and become habitually unrestrained, mad with pride, fond of evil deeds, lustful, confused, cruel, rude, scurrilous, deceitful,

short-lived, dull-witted, troubled by sickness and grief, ugly, weak, vile, attached to vile behavior,

fond of vile company, and stealers of other’s money. They become rogues who are intent on blaming, slandering, and injuring others

and who feel no reluctance, sin, or fear in seducing the wife of another. They become destitute, filthy, wretched beggars who are sick from their vagrancy.

The Mahānirvāna-Tantra continues its description of the dreariness of the kali-yuga by saying that even the brahmans become degenerate and perform their religious practices mainly to dupe the people. Thus the custodians of the law (dharma) merely contribute to the destruction of the sacred tradition and the moral order. The Tantra next reiterates that Shiva revealed the Tantric teachings to stem the tide of history and correct this tragic situation. The masters of Tantra are profoundly optimistic.

The Radical Approach of Tantra

The adepts of Tantra believe that it is possible to attain liberation, or enlightenment, even in the worst social and moral conditions. They also believe, however, that the traditional means devised or revealed in previous world ages are no longer useful or optimal, for
those means were designed for people of far greater spiritual and moral stamina who lived in a more peaceful environment conducive to inner growth. The present age of darkness has innumerable obstacles that make spiritual maturation exceedingly difficult. Therefore more drastic measures are needed: the Tantric methodology.

What is so special about the Tantric teachings that they should serve the spiritual needs of the dark age better than all other approaches? In many ways, the Tantric methods are similar to non-Tantric practices. What is strikingly different about them is their inclusiveness and the radical attitude with which they are pursued. A desperate person will grasp for a straw, and seekers in the kali-yuga are, or should be, desperate. From the vantage point of a spiritual heritage extending over several thousand years, the Tantric masters at the beginning of the common era realized that the dark age calls for especially powerful techniques to break through lethargy, resistance, and attachment to conventional relationships and worldly things, as well as to deal with the lack of understanding. Looking at the available means handed down from teacher to student through countless generations, they acknowledged that these required a purity and nobility of character that people of the dark age no longer possess. To help humanity in the kali-yuga, the Tantric adepts modified the old teachings and created a new repertoire of practices. Their orientation can be summed up in two words: Anything goes. Or, at least, almost anything.

The Tantric masters even sanctioned practices that are considered sinful from within a conventional moral and spiritual framework. This feature of Tantra has been termed antinomianism, which, as this Greek-derived word implies, consists in going against (antá) the accepted norm or law (náman). The Tantric texts use words like pratiloma (against the grain) and pararájita (inversion) to describe their teachings. Some Tantric adepts have made a way of life out of this principle of reversal, as can be seen in the extremist lifestyle of the avadhítas, who walk about naked and live amid heaps of garbage. They model themselves after the god-man Dattātreyā, who supposedly lived in the tretā-yuga. In the Puranic literature he is celebrated as an incar-
cially great because of their often close association with the shadow side of life, notably the realm of the dead.

At one end of the Tantric spectrum we have highly unorthodox practices such as black magic that go against the moral grain of Hindu society (and that of most societies). At the other end we have Tantric masters who decry all doctrines and all rituals and instead applaud the ideal of perfect spontaneity (sahaja). Most schools fall between these two poles; they are typically highly ritualistic but infused with the recognition that liberation springs from wisdom, which is innate and therefore cannot be produced by any external means. All the many Tantric techniques merely serve to cleanse the mirror of the mind so as to faithfully reflect the ever-present Reality, allowing the native wisdom to shine forth without distortion.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF TANTRA

Tantra, though highly innovative, has from the beginning deemed itself a continuation of earlier teachings. Thus while Buddhist Tantra understands itself as an esoteric tradition going back to Gautama the Buddha himself, Hindu Tantra by and large regards the revelatory teachings of the Vedas as its starting point. Some authorities have associated it particularly with the Atharva-Veda, no doubt because of that Vedic hymnody's magical content with the marginal status it has within more strictly orthodox Hindu circles. Then again, the Tantras are sometimes referred to as the “fifth Veda.”

The Tantric claim to a Vedic origin is controversial and disputed by orthodox brahmins. They not only deny the Vedic origin of Tantra but consider the Tantric teachings to be corrupt, if not altogether heretical. Their evaluation lags behind actual social reality, however, for Tantra has been an integral part of Hindu culture since at least the turn of the second millennium CE. To be able to understand Hindu Tantra, we must first understand Hinduism and the Vedic heritage, just as a proper understanding of Buddhist Tantrism (Vajrayana) presupposes an understanding of at least Mahayana Buddhism.

Introduction

The Vedas, originally a purely oral literature, form the sacred bedrock of Hinduism, and they may well be the oldest literary compositions in any language. In the nineteenth century, Western scholars arbitrarily fixed their date at around 1200-1500 BCE, whereas for India’s pundits they are timeless revelation. Recent geological evidence of a great cataclysm that overtook North India around 1900 BCE has forced scholars to reexamine the facts. In this cataclysm, a major tectonic shift followed by far-reaching climatic changes, the Saraswati River was reduced to a mere trickle. Because this river is hailed in the Rig-Veda as the mightiest of all rivers, this particular hymnody at least must have been composed prior to 1900 BCE, and probably long before then. A growing number of experts now favor the third and even the fourth millennium BCE for the time of the original composition of the bulk of the Rig-Vedic hymns. The other three Vedic collections—the Yajur-Veda, the Sama-Veda, and the Atharva-Veda—very probably also belong to the precataclysmic era. Also some of the Brāhmans—explanatory ritual texts—may have been composed in the third millennium.

The revised date for the Vedas makes the Vedic civilization contemporaneous with the so-called Indus civilization, which flourished between c. 3000 BCE and 1900 BCE in what is now Pakistan, in the western portion of Northern India. The parallels between the two civilizations are so striking, in fact, that we must assume they are not separate civilizations but one and the same. This means that, in addition to the testimonial of the Vedic scriptures, we also have archaeological artifacts that can help us better understand this ancient civilization. The stereovision we obtain from the joint images of literary and archaeological evidence is exciting, for the Vedic civilization appears to have been governed by profound spiritual insights and values. It now appears that India is not only the oldest continuous civilization on earth (going back to the seventh millennium BCE) but also the one that harbors the most enduring spiritual heritage. As anyone who has studied the wisdom traditions of India without prejudice will have discovered, the Indic heritage is a gold mine with
countless boulder-size nuggets. And the Tantric nugget is one of the largest.

Except for the most orthodox pundits, who view Tantra as an abomination, educated traditional Hindus have long looked upon Tantra as running parallel and in close interaction with (rather than merely in opposition to) the Vedic heritage. They distinguish between Vedic and Tantric—vidika and tantrika—currents of Hindu spirituality. This distinction demonstrates the huge success of Tantra as a tradition or cultural movement within Hinduism. In many instances, Tantra has been so influential as to reshape the Vedic stream by infus-
psychospiritual practices is considered worthless in itself, only that people of the kali-yuga are incapable of employing them successfully. In the Kula-Amara-Tantra (2.18) Shiva even declares that he extracted its teachings by churning the “ocean of the Vedas and Āgamas with the staff of wisdom.” This is a clear vote of confidence in the Vedic revelation. Yet in the same Tantra (2.68) we find this stanza (uttered by Shiva):

O Beloved, those who are proficient in the four Vedas but ignorant of the kula are “dog cookers.” However, even a low-caste dog cook who knows the kula is superior to a brahmin.

Here the word kula, as I will explain in detail later, denotes essential Tantric wisdom, which is the wisdom of divine power (shakti). The above stanza contains a concealed criticism of the priestly establishment, which is thought to favor intellectual learning over actual spiritual experience. By contrast, the Tantric practitioners are first and foremost practical theologians. Their sole purpose is to gain mastery over the subtle realms and, finally, to realize the transcendental Reality itself. It is by virtue of their powerful spiritual practice that, as the Tantric authorities affirm, they outrank the brahmans, the hereditary custodians of the Vedic revelation who form the highest social class of Hindu society.

Is there any evidence, as some pundits have claimed, of Tantric ideas and practices in the Vedas? According to the pundit Manoranjan Basu, the Tantras “are the most ancient scriptures contemporaneous with the Vedas if not earlier.”10 Since the Vedas have recently been dated to the third and even fourth millennium BCE, this would make the Tantras at least five or six thousand years old. This agrees with some Tibetan Buddhist lammas, who believe that Tantra (in its Buddhist variety) was first taught thousands of years prior to Gautama the Buddha. They ascribe the original Tantric teachings to an awakened being, the Buddha Tenpa Shenrab, founder of the Tibetan Bon tradition.11 According to the Narâyanya-Tantra, a late Hindu work, the Vedas originated from the Tantras, rather than the reverse. The typical Tantric view, however, is that the Tantras are a new revelation replacing that of the Vedas. Likewise, most scholars reject the notion that Tantra originated in the era of the Vedas or earlier.

What we may safely say is that there is an undeniable continuity between the Vedic revelation and the Tantric revelation. Many important Tantric practices have their Vedic equivalent. Thus, scholars have pointed to the magical ideas and practices of the Atharva-Veda, which is especially associated with the very old priestly family of the Angirasas, chief custodians of ancient magical lore. Researchers also have seen Tantric overtones in the Vedic gods Shiva and Rudra and the Vedic goddesses Nirriti and Yam. Furthermore, the Vedic seers used mantras, sacrificial formulas, animal sacrifices, magical diagrams (yantras), and visualization in their rituals, as do the Tantric initiates. It is generally thought that the Vedic people did not practice worship with the aid of statues and that this was the unique contribution of Tantra. However, the Rig-Veda (1.21.2) has the intriguing line “men adorn Indra and Agni” (indra-agnī śūmbhātā narah), which could be a reference to the practice of pājā. Also, like the tāntrikas, the Vedic seers were eager to acquire knowledge about the hidden realms and realities, and not merely the ultimate liberating gnosis. As the eleventh-century Siddha-Siddhānta-Paddhati (2.31) states, a yogin is someone who truly knows the psychospiritual centers (akṣai) of the body, the five kinds of inner space, and so on.

There is even a possibility that the Tantric notion of kundalini, the multiply coiled spiritual energy, is present in Vedic times. In one hymn of the Rig-Veda (10.136.7) the expression kunammām is found, which means “he who is badly bent.” Some scholars have regarded this as a hidden reference to the kundalini-shakti or serpent power, also called kujñikā (crooked one) in some early Tantric schools.

To return to our historical overview: as the ancient Vedic ritualism became more and more complex, the surrounding explanations also became increasingly sophisticated. Before long the brahmans felt the need for interpretive scriptures. These are known as the Brāhmaṇas, the earliest of which were created in the time just before the cataclysms mentioned above. As their name suggests, these works are intended for the brahmans (or brāhmaṇas) and their students, who
needed to learn not only how to perform the Vedic rituals but also the cosmology and theology behind them.

If we look for Tantric elements in the Brāhmaṇas, we can readily find them in the idea that sexual union is a form of sacrifice, a notion that builds a bridge to the Tantric māntrān. Sexual symbolism is pervasive in the Brāhmaṇas, but can already be amply found in the Vedas. Moreover, bīja-māntras (seed māntras) first appear in the Brāhmaṇas, where they are associated with specific deities. For instance, in the Shata-Patha-Brāhmaṇa the māntra of the solar deity, Sūrya, is given as om ghrīnīṃ sūryānamah, or "Om. Ghrīni. Salutation to Sūrya." The bīja-māntra "ghrīnī" is explained onomatopoeically in the following legend: Once upon a time, Vishnu was resting his head on the end of a bow. Ants ate through the bow string; it snapped and severed Vishnu's head from his body. The head fell, making the sound ghrīni, and thenceupon became transformed into the sun. (I will say more about bīja-māntras in chapter 12.) Another idea that bespeaks the continuity between the Vedic and the Tantric heritage is the notion, first expressed in the Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa, that during ritual sacrifice all participants are elevated to the status of a brahmin. Some Tantras went further, though, by rejecting caste differences outside the ritual context as well. This is, in fact, one of the hallmarks of the Tantric tradition.

Chronologically, the Brāhmaṇas were followed by the Āranyakas (scriptures for forest hermits) and the Upaniṣads (gnostic treatises for mystics). The last-mentioned texts afford further comparisons with Tantra. The early Upaniṣads present the concepts of subtle currents of life energy (pārāś or vāyu), psychospiritual vortices (cakra), and channels (nāḍī) so typical of the Tantric teachings. These ideas, however, were not altogether new, because already the Aitareya-VEDA mentions the various currents of the life force (15.15.2–9) and the eight "wheels" (cakrā) of the stronghold (i.e., the body) of the deities (10.2.31).

The early Upaniṣads also continued the sexualological considerations of an earlier era. Thus the Chāndogya-Upaniṣad (2.1.13.1–2), through magical analogy, equates the various parts of the Vedic chant (ātman) to the various phases of sexual intercourse, which invites comparison with the māṇḍūnak ritual of the left-hand and Kaula schools of Tantrism. The text even employs the word māṇḍūka (intercourse). Also, the phrase vāma-desa in this passage, which refers to a particular kind of chant, reminds one of the Tantric expression vāma, standing for both "woman" and "left hand."

The Brahma-Āranyakya-Upaniṣad (6.4.3) compares the various female parts to religious objects:

Her genitals are the sacrificial altar, her hairs the grass offering, her skin the soma press, and her two labia the fire in the center. Verily, as great as the world is for him who sacrifices with the vāma [strength libation] sacrifice, so great is the world for him who, knowing this, practices sexual intercourse. He diverts the good deeds of women to himself. But he who practices sexual intercourse without knowing this—women divert his good deeds to themselves.

The Brahma-Āranyakya-Upaniṣad goes on to say that as soon as the man enters the woman, he should press his mouth on hers, stroke her genitals, and mutter the following incantation:

You who have arisen from every limb and have been generated from the heart are the essence of the limbs! Distract this woman here in me as if pierced by a poisoned arrow!

This ancient Upaniṣad also describes what ritual steps are to be taken when the man's semen is spilled: "He should take it with ring finger and thumb and rub it on his chest [i.e., the location of the heart cakāra] or between his eyebrows [i.e., the location of the so-called third eye]." This prescription, by which the man can reclaim his vigor, could come straight out of the Tantric literature. Not surprisingly, one of the more orthodox translators of the Brahma-Āranyakya-Upaniṣad omitted this passage altogether.12

Despite the similarities between the Vedic and the Tantric heritages, however, Tantra is a distinct tradition, meandering down India's history as a mighty companion to the Vedic stream of spirituality and culture. The interplay between both traditions has been extremely complex and continues to this day, yet the adherents of the Vedas...
heritage by and large have looked upon Tantra as a false gospel. They have often branded Tantric teachings as nātika—from nea, “not,” asti, “it is,” and the suffix ku, meaning “unorthodox” in the sense of not affirming the truth of the Vedas. As we have seen, the situation is not so simple, and particularly some later Tantras deliberately seek to construct a bridge to the Vedic heritage of the brahmans.

Tantra Yoga

Tantra is a profoundly yogic tradition, and the Tantras call themselves sūdhanā-shastras, or books of spiritual practice. The Sanskrit word yoga means both “discipline” and “union” and can be translated as “unitive discipline.” It stands for what in the West is called spirituality or mysticism. The oft-used compound tantra-yoga means simply “Tantric discipline” and captures the intensely experiential character of the Tantric heritage, which emphasizes the realization of higher or subtle states of existence right up to the ultimate Reality itself. Tantra Yoga is unitive discipline based on the expansion, or intensification, of wisdom by means of the beliefs and practices promulgated in the Tantras and the exetical literature that has crystallized around them. By “unitifying” the mind—that is, by focusing it—Tantra Yoga unifies the seemingly disparate realities of space-time and the transcendent Reality. It recaptures the primordial continuum that is apparently lost in the process of becoming an individuated being.

Tantra Yoga, as understood here, is a relative latecomer in the long history of Yoga. As we have seen, however, proto-Tantric elements can be detected even in the Vedic era. To be sure, the taproots of Yoga are to be found in the Vedas, composed some five thousand years ago. In its most archaic form, Yoga was a combination of ritual worship and meditation, having the purpose of opening the gates to the celestial realms and beyond. It was closely associated with the Vedic sacrificial cult, priestly hymn making, the mystery of the sacred ecstasy-inducing soma potion, and visions of the sublime dimensions with their hierarchy of male and female deities, as well as ancestral and other spirits.

The typical Vedic yogin was the rishi or “seer,” who envisioned or perceived the reality or realities given voice in the sacred words (mantra) of the hymns. Crafting the Vedic hymns was a fine yogic art demanding not only extraordinary linguistic skills but also tremendous concentration in their composition and delivery. Here we have the very beginnings both of mantra-yoga and meditative visualization, which are fundamental to Tantrism.

The Tantric epos continued to evolve through the period of the Bhādhāmanas and Upanishads, as well as the intellectually and spiritually fertile era of the Mahābhārata, until it reached its typical form in the Tantras of the early centuries of the common era. In the subsequent centuries, Tantric schools proliferated and created a massive literature in Sanskrit and various vernacular languages, which is still scarcely researched. Much of this corpus has been lost and is only known to us from stray quotes and references in the extant manuscripts.

Whatever Tantra you may read, you will always discover an emphasis on personal experimentation and experience. Westerners thirsting for a direct encounter with the spiritual dimension of existence relate to such an orientation easily enough. But they may not understand quite so readily the theoretical and practical framework within which the Tantric adepts have pursued their supreme goal of Self-realization, or enlightenment. There are many things in Tantra, however, that will be familiar to students of Yoga. From the larger perspective of the history of India’s spirituality, Tantra Yoga is simply another form of Yoga, or spiritual discipline. Yet it also represents a vast synthesis of spiritual knowledge and psychotechnology. Because of its integrative approach, Tantra holds special appeal for modern Western seekers, who have come to appreciate the value of holistic thinking.
Entries 1 to 5 are not visible in the image.