This Is the Other World

Samsāra Equals Nirvāṇa

The Lord has the universe for a body.
—Purukṣṭottar-Hridaya (4) of Kāśyapa

The Two Truths

Ever since the emergence of religious and cultural pluralism in the Western hemisphere, more and more people have been wondering, What is the truth about anything? Under the spell of Einstein's relativity theory, many have adopted the extremist view that truth itself is relative and completely dependent on the position of the observer. This viewpoint is not entirely without merit because it may lead one to practice humility and tolerance toward other perspectives. But it is not very satisfactory when one is looking for a higher purpose in life that can bring lasting happiness. In that case, one must go beyond the pedestrian level of understanding that takes truth to be variable. As the great spiritual traditions of the world affirm, truth is always one, though there are many pathways to it. Truth is Reality, which is singular. What is relative are our angles of perception and comprehension.

The masters of Tantra therefore distinguish between two levels of understanding, corresponding to two levels of reality. First there is the worldly (laukika) point of view, which believes in a solid material universe and which tends to be partial and often corrupted. And then there is the spiritual (ādhyātika) point of view, which is informed by wisdom and leads one to the truth, that is, the ultimate Reality. The worldly understanding, shot through with desire and delusion, is hardly a reliable guide for those seeking lasting happiness. It is of course very useful in worldly matters, though it is ineffectual in spiritual matters. Similarly, wisdom does not enable us to repair a motor- cycle, but it does enable us to live a harmonious life that is conducive to higher realizations. It contributes to our handling of material knowledge and skills by freeing us from negative emotions and attitudes. Thus even from a mundane perspective, wisdom can be said to make us more functional. That wisdom is senior to worldly knowledge is obvious from the fact that in the absence of guiding wisdom, worldly knowledge all too easily turns destructive. Many critics of our postmodern technological society have argued precisely this way.

The Divine Nature of Cyclic Existence

To the ordinary, unenlightened mind, the world is a place of mixed experiences, affording both pleasure and pain. At times it even gives rise to the impression that it is the best of all possible worlds—until illness, loss, or death make their point again. This describes the naive, unexamined attitude to life.

To a more perceptive intelligence, however, the world is far from an ideal place, for it can give no abiding happiness. Everything is
subject to impermanence, the bloody tooth of time. Human beings especially are quite short-lived and harvest numerous unpleasant experiences. As Gautama the Buddha put it in a nutshell, “Birth is suffering. Life is suffering. Death is suffering. Everything is suffering.”

This famous declaration is echoed in many Tantric and other texts. Thus Patanjali, the author of the Yoga-Sūtra, declares in one of his aphorisms: “To the discerning person everything is suffering.”

But beyond this recognition of the omnipresence of suffering in the sphere of finite reality, and far beyond the naive attitude of the thoughtless individual, there is a third, surprising possibility in understanding the nature of existence. This is the Tantric view, according to which, as one contemporary adept put it, our conditional universe (samsāra) is the “other” world. In more traditional (Buddhist) terms, samsāra equals nirvāna.

What does this mean? It is clearly not the naive perspective that looks upon ordinary life as if it were paradise. No delusion or self-deception is involved here. Rather, the formula “samsāra equals nirvāna” implies a total cognitive shift by which the phenomenal world is rendered transparent through superior wisdom. No longer are things seen as being strictly separated from one another, as if they were insular realities in themselves, but everything is seen together, understood together, and lived together. Whatever distinctions there may be, these are variations or manifestations of and within the selfsame Being. As Lama Anagarika Govinda explained:

Thus, good and bad, the sacred and the profane, the sensual and the spiritual, the worldly and the transcendental, ignorance and Enlightenment, samsāra and nirvāna, etc., are not absolute opposites, or concepts of entirely different categories, but two sides of the same reality.

Strictly speaking, the equation of samsāra with nirvāna belongs to the language and conceptual framework of Buddhism. Both the word nirvāna and the concept for which it stands are also found in Hinduism, however. Likewise, the idea that the world is none other than the ultimate Reality is as much at home in Hinduism as it is in Buddhism. As early as the Chāndogya-Upanishad (3.14.1), which is now thought by some scholars to have been composed in the second millennium BCE, we find a veteran sage declaring: “Verily, all this is the Absolute.” That is to say, this entire universe is nothing other than the singular Being, which contains within itself every conceivable thing.

This ancient notion reached its climax in the medieval Sahajiyā movement, straddling both Hinduism and Buddhism. Sahaja means literally “born (ja) together (saha)” and refers to the essential identity between the finite and the infinite, the phenomenal and the noumenal reality. The term has variously been translated as “the innate,” “the natural,” or “spontaneity”—all denoting the indivisible Reality. The Sahajiyā movement is thoroughly Tantric in orientation and crystallizes the highest metaphysical insight of Tantra. The Tantric adept Sarapāda (8th CE), one of the Buddhist maha-sthānins, characterized sahaia thus:

Though the house-lamps have been lit,
The blind live on in the dark.
Though spontaneity is all-encompassing and close,
To the deluded it remains always far away.

Bears that know in flowers
Honey can be found.
That Samsāra and Nirvāna are not two
How will the deluded ever understand?

There’s nothing to be negated, nothing to be
Affirmed or grasped; for it can never be conceived.
By the fragmentations of the intellect are the deluded
Fettered; undivided and pure remains spontaneity.

According to the Ratha-Sāra, a text of the medieval Vaishnava Sahajiyā tradition, beings are born out of sahaia, live in sahaia, and again vanish into sahaia. In the two extant versions of the Akula-Vīrata-Tantra, a scripture of the important Kaula tradition, sahaia is described
as a state of being characterized by omniscience, omnipresence, and
goodness. When the spiritual practitioner attains it, all cognitions
merge into it and the mind becomes utterly silenced. Then all duality
is banished, all suffering is eliminated, and all karmic seeds are burned
to ashes, so that the tree of unenlightened existence cannot sprout
again.

The Tantric declaration that *samarā* equals *nivāsa* can be read
on at least two levels. First, it can be interpreted to mean that the
finite world is really the infinite Reality and that, in other words, what
we conceive to be the limited universe is fundamentally an illusion.
Second, it can be understood to mean that the sage who made the
declaration experiences the world to be none other than the perenni-
unal, unchanging Reality. Both readings are correct and go together.
A third interpretation would be to take the statement to be a pre-
scription, and this too is implied in the traditional formula. The pre-
scription or admonition is this: because world and Reality are not
truly distinct, therefore realize this to be so in your own case. This
encapsulates the approach of Tantra, which is emphatically practical.
As noted in the introduction, the *Tantras* are first and foremost *sād-
hana*-śāstras, or teachings designed to aid spiritual discipline. Our
true nature, *sāhaja*, is always with us. It is like honey in our mouth.
Yet, out of ignorance, we continually look for it outside ourselves.
Tantra teaches us to enjoy the sweet-tasting honey that is already on
our tongue by enhancing our awareness.

**Verticalist, Horizontalist, and Integral Teachings**

In another book, I have made a distinction between verticalist,
horizontalist, and integral approaches to life. The Sanskrit equivalents
for the first two are *nivṛtti-mārga* (path of cessation) and *pravṛtti-mārga*
(path of activity) respectively. The third orientation can be dubbed
*pūrṇa-mārga* (path of wholeness).

The horizontalist approach characterizes the typical extroverted
lifestyle of the worldling (*samsāra*), who is preoccupied with his or
her job, family, belongings, status, and prospects. At a certain stage
of spiritual development, these horizontalist concerns are appropriate
enough, and the Hindu authorities have produced textbooks (*śāstras*)
on a wide range of topics enabling worldly-minded people to live a
better life. In the West perhaps the best known such work is the
*Kāraṇa-Sūtra*, which deals with the subtleties and technicalities of sexu-
ality and was originally designed for the privileged class of Hindu
society.

To the category of horizontalist teachings belongs also the vast
legal literature of Hinduism, known as *dharma-śāstras*. Here the best
known work is the encompassing *Manava-Dharma-Shāstra* (or *Manu-
Smriti*), which consists of 1,685 verses ascribed to the legendary Manu.
All such Sanskrit scriptures seek to provide guidance on the first three
goals or pursuits of human existence, namely, material welfare (*ārtha*),
passionate self-expression (*kāma*), and moral virtue or lawfulness
(*dharma*).

Manu, who is remembered as the progenitor of the present
human race, divided the course of human life into four stages—those
of a student, householder, renouncer, and liberated being. Each stage
is thought to extend over a period of twenty-one years, yielding an
ideal total of eighty-four years. In the first stage the foundations for a
solid intellectual, moral, and spiritual life are laid. In the second stage,
the Vedic training is applied in everyday life. Then when one’s chil-
dren are grown and have their own children, it is time to renounce
the lifestyle of a householder and retire to the forest or a similar
remote area. This is the beginning of the verticalist approach. The
renouncer in the third stage of life intensifies his or her ritual prac-
tices, meditation, and prayer, increasingly focusing on the ultimate
ideal of liberation. This ideal is traditionally recognized as the fourth
and highest human pursuit (*purusha-artha*, written *puruṣārtha*). When
one’s renunciation has born fruit and one has realized the transcen-
dental Reality, or innermost Self of oneself and all beings and things,
it is appropriate to adopt the spontaneous lifestyle of a liberated
being. The lifestyle of the fully illuminated sage is inherently integrated
but may tend toward verticalism or horizontalism without, however, being confined to either orientation.

In the West, which is driven by the philosophy of horizontalism, we have no equivalent to the last two stages of human life as envisioned in Hinduism. Our concept of retirement does not include the ideal of striving to realize our higher human potential. Rather, we commonly see it as an extension of the pursuit of pleasure that also governs much of our active life. Our materialist approach does not permit the notion of inner work, never mind the grand ideal of liberation. Exceedingly few people seize the opportunity of retirement to deepen their self-knowledge and dedicate themselves to exploring the spiritual dimension of existence. Our modern society is dominated by horizontalist concerns. It offers much knowledge but precious little wisdom. Attempts at verticalist teachings, as we find them for instance in the New Age movement, often remain on the level of mere intellectualization, popularization, psychologization, and quasi-religious exhortation. All these are substitutes for genuine spiritual practice that aims not at knowledge, pleasure, personal growth, or moral goodness but at the transcendence of the self and the complete transformation of human nature.

Genuine liberation and the liberated life are the focus of the body of wisdom known as moksha-shãstra, which comprises scriptures belonging to both revelatory authority (shruti) and traditional authority (smriti). To the former belong the Vedas, Upanishads, Brãhmânas, Āranyakas, and—for adherents of Tantra at least—the Tantras. The category of traditional teachings is vast and diversified. It includes, among other things, such works as the Mahãbhãrata epic (of which the Bhagavad-Gãtã is a part), the numerous Purãnas (though some, like the Bhagavata-Purãna, are counted as revealed literature by certain groups), and the Sûtras (notably the Yoga-Sûtra) and their many commentaries and subcommentaries.

A large proportion of India’s liberation literature avows teachings that fall into the category of what I have called “verticalism.” They show a pathway out of the karmic entanglements of the horizontal, worldly life. Their declared goal is some otherworldly state of freedom. They view liberation as being opposed to the condition of ordinary life, which is equated with one of bondage (bandha). All their recommended techniques are geared toward liberating the seeker from his or her self-imposed confinement in a human body and a finite world. The metaphor that best describes this orientation is that of a flight from the world straight up into a dimension beyond the conditional universe.

The verticalist approach to liberation has been enormously influential on Indian culture. Its beginnings can be witnessed in the early Upanishads, such as the Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka and the Chânḍogya. It reached its peak in the teachings of Advaita Vedânta, as popularly expressed, for instance, in the Viveka-Cûdamani, ascribed to the great preceptor Shankara. Here the objective world is characterized as being more virulent than the poison of a cobra and the body as being worthy of little more than condemnation. Since the body and the world as a whole are deemed insignificant, the spiritual seeker is further advised to focus exclusively on the Self, abandoning all conventional pursuits. That Self is said in verse 132 to be luminously present in the “cave of the mind” (dhr-guha), that is, within oneself, in the heart. The path to it is described in verse 367 as consisting in restraint of speech, nongrasping, nonhoping, nonwillful, and always cultivating solitude. These means comprise the foremost gateway of Yoga—clearly understood here as the vertical pursuit of enlightenment.

Had India produced only verticalist liberation teachings, its gift to modern seekers would perhaps not be as pertinent and valuable as it really is. But long ago the Indic sages also won through to an integral orientation that holds special significance for today. Integrative trends can be detected, for instance, in the above-mentioned two Upanishads, and the earlier cited statement “Verily, all this is the Absolute” is a classic expression of these early trends. A fuller manifestation of integralism can be found in the Bhagavad-Gãtã, which describes itself as a yoga-shãstra but has gained the status of a revealed scripture.

The flowering of the integral orientation occurred with the
emergence of Tantra. Although the Tantric scriptures are not free from notions and practices belonging to the verticalist approach, many of them clearly tend toward integralism. Above all, they view the world as a manifestation of the ultimate Reality and the body as a temple of the Divine. For this reason, they look askance at the kind of extreme asceticism favored by verticalism and criticized already by the Buddha around 500 BCE. Thus in the Kula-Aranyaka-Tantra Shiva addresses the goddess in the following way:

Fools deluded by your power of illusion (maya) aspire to the Invisible (paratsha) by such means as asceticism of the body and abstention from food.

How can there be liberation for the ignorant through the punishment of the body? What great serpent has ever died from striking an anthill?

Are asses and the like (yagin) because they roam in the world naked without shame and for whom house and forest are the same?

O Goddess, if people could become liberated by smearing themselves with mud and ashes, then villagers who live amid mud and ashes should all be liberated.

O Goddess, are parrots and myna birds great scholars because they talk and repeat amusing things before people?¹⁹

Integral teachings emphasize the inner work, or inner sacrifice (antar-yagya), rather than any outward ritual, though without dismissing external worship altogether. The Kula-Aranyaka-Tantra (3.70) puts it this way:

Just as a king favors those who move inside [the palace] over those who are outside it, so, O Goddess, you favor those who cultivate the inward sacrifice over others.

The discovery of the inner sacrifice was made long before the appearance of Tantra. But it remained the province of a select few because of the inveterate tendency in human beings to neglect the inner world of consciousness and be overly active in the external realm. Many Tantric teachers reacted against this tendency, which was strongly present in the mainstream priestly culture of Hinduism. They also reacted against the parallel tendency, fueled by the priestly philosophy of non-dualism (advaita), that fled the Many to attain the One. Although in many respects Tantra continued the metaphysics and language of non-dualism, it often sought to express new meanings through them. The Tantric One (aha), for instance, is not the life-negating Singularity of some brahmanical teachers but the all-encompassing Whole (puṇa), which is present as the body, the mind, and the world yet transcends all of these. At its best, Tantra is integralism. This is hinted at in the word tantra itself, which, among other things, means “continuum.”

This continuum is what the enlightened adepts realize as nirāma and what unenlightened worldlings experience as samsāra. These are not distinct, opposite realities. They are absolutely the same being, the same essence (samarasa). That essence merely appears different to different people because of their karmic predispositions, which are like veils or mental filters obscuring the truth. To ordinary worldlings, the One remains utterly hidden. To spiritual seekers, it seems a distant goal, perhaps realizable after many lifetimes. To initiates, it is a reliable inner guide. To the Self-realized sages, it is the only One that exists, for they have become the Whole.

11. Ibid., p. 579.

12. Interestingly, according to a South Indian myth associated with the Shiva temple at Chitaparam (often spelled Chidambaram) fifty miles south of Pondicherry, two of Shiva's devotees witnessed his dance of bliss. Their names were Viśāghrapāda (meaning "tiger-footed") and Patañjali, who is venerated as an incarnation of the cosmic serpent Śesha, serving as Viṣṇu's couch. Some native scholars identify this Patañjali with the author of the well-known Yoga-Sūtra.

Chapter 3: This Is The Other World


2. See the Yoga-Sūtra (1.15), which contains the phrase dhākham eva sarvam vīkṣinānāḥ.

3. The phrase "This is the 'other' world" was coined by Adī Da (a.k.a. Franklin Jones, Da Free John, etc.), who occasionally has declared his teaching to be a form of Tantra. See his Knee of Listening (Middletown, Calif.: Dawn Horse Press, 1995), p. 496.


5. The Sanskrit runs: sarvam khaścidam (= khaścidām) brahma.


9. See Viṣṇu-Śaṁkara, verses 77 and 87.


Chapter 4: The Secret of Embodiment

1. The Sanskrit text reads tat yathā yathā upātate sod eva bhavaṇi (whatever one attends to/worships, that one becomes).

2. For an abbreviated English rendering of the Yoga-Vīshistāda, see Swami Venkatesananda, The Concise Yoga-Vīshistāda (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984). This translation, though not literal, is faithful to the spirit of the Sanskrit original.


6. Knows not merely intellectually but experientially.

7. According to the renowned Śaiva adept and scholar Abhinava Gupta, Pāṇa-Sāiva is the thirty-seventh principle or tattva. However, according to Utpalācārya, another well-known learned adept of Kashmiri Shaivism, Shiva should be understood as being the ultimate Reality rather than an emergent ontological principle.

8. Saṃ-ṣa-adesa is composed of sa (being), as (consciousness), and ṣa (bliss).


10. In recent years, a number of excellent publications on the Pratyabhijñā system and other closely related schools of Kashmiri Shaivism have been published. See, e.g., Deba Braja Sen Sharma, The Philosophy of Śākti (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999); Kamakalav Mishra, Kālakārī Śaivism: The Central Philosophy of Tantrism (Cambridge, Mass.: Radula Press, 1993); André Pa-