

Introduction

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Stella's personal spiritual teacher was a wandering Śaivite Tantric monk who belonged to the Aghori orders . . . He tested her through a drastic Śaiva experience in which she was to follow him to the Kalighat temple, where he had her ascend a funeral pyre and sit on a corpse that was about to be cremated. . . . Then he told her to gather the ashes, take them home, and rub them on her body.

—Barbara Stoler Miller, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*

Barbara Miller describes an experience in the life of Stella Kramrisch that took place sometime in the 1920s or 1930s in Calcutta. A pioneer in Indian art history, her volumes on the Hindu temple and studies of Śiva have defined the field. Miller goes on to say, "Throughout the entire happening she [Stella] had implicit faith in its validity as a ritual that confirmed her in her fearlessness and let her understand life with a lightened heart."¹ I bring up this incident because it appears rather outside the bounds of Tantric research and scholarship. It is so highly idiosyncratic and unusual² that it causes one to wonder if it actually happened. It fits, however, with the individualistic and personalized nature of Tantric practices. No one would find it hard to identify the episode as Tantric, despite difficulty in associating it with a specific ritual or text. What Kramrisch derived from the experience was a sense of power and a feeling of well-being, both Tantric goals.

Almost every study of Tantrism begins by apologizing. Scholars say it is little understood, that it cannot be easily or precisely defined and that it lacks a coherent structure. André Padoux in his article in this volume (What do we Mean by Tantrism?) outlines some of what makes defining Tantrism so difficult. First, it is a term, in fact a notion, that is Western. It is not a concept that comes from within the religious system itself, although it is generally recognized internally as different from the Vedic tradition. This immediately makes it suspect as an independent category.

Second, Tantrism is not a coherent system; it is an accumulation of practices and ideas from various sources distributed unevenly in different times, places, and sects and among individuals. While the pieces of Tantrism (doctrines and practices) can be listed, none is exclusively Tantric, and all are components of other

religious systems. Rather, one might see them as cumulative, with some systems having more components being weighted toward the Tantric. Thus there are levels or degrees of Tantrism.

Third, Tantric pieces can be mixed easily with other non-Tantric aspects, such as *bhakti* (devotional) worship being used alongside Tantric approaches to the deity.³ For one who worships the deity in multiple ways, can we say he or she is at one point a Tantric practitioner, and not at another point? Thus, even to argue what it is by saying what it is not is not entirely successful.

Rather than a system, cult, or religion André Padoux speaks of a “Tantric vision” and includes among its characteristics the use of ritual, manipulation of power, transgression of norms, use of the mundane to reach the supramundane, and identification of the microcosm with the macrocosm. The reader may want as well to refer to the list of eighteen constituents of Tantrism in Teun Goundriaan’s introduction to *Hindu Tantrism*.⁴

Unfortunately for the topic of this book, what is or is not Tantric is of importance. The articles in the book came from two conferences focused on the question, what were the roots of Tantrism? Scholars were asked to explore how, when, and where Tantrism began. What were the sources for Tantrism and when can we begin to speak of Tantrism as an independent religious tradition? What were the causes, historical and religious? While these questions are not answered fully in the papers of this volume, they are carefully and extensively explored from a variety of viewpoints, methodologies, and approaches. One of the book’s strengths is that the questions are pursued not only from a textual viewpoint, but from art historical and historical approaches as well.

It was decided to focus on Hindu Tantrism. While Buddhist Tantrism is discussed in some papers, it is not given equal weight in the volume. This is not because we felt Buddhist Tantrism was less important or that it could not be explored for Tantra’s roots, but that it would require another book.

Before turning to the papers, I want to propose a way of viewing Tantrism in terms of process rather than as a static structure of characteristics. Emphasis on process points out that Tantrism is predominantly action, either physical or mental, with less stress on belief, doctrine, or theology. It also allows identification of what is and is not Tantric in terms of application rather than in terms of the qualities and characteristics themselves. I will present the model in a diagram, and then make some comments on it:

<i>Processes</i>	<i>Accomplished by</i>	<i>Guided by</i>	<i>Goals</i>
visualization	ritual (<i>kriya</i>)	teacher/guru	enlightenment
verbalization	yoga, the body,	deity	<i>mukti</i>
identification	<i>maṇḍala, cakra,</i>		worldly power
internalization	<i>mantra, yantra,</i>		<i>bhukti</i>
concretization	<i>pūjā, icon</i>		
transformation			

Starting with the goals first, *both* enlightenment and worldly success are expected. These goals are frequently separated in religions, including Indian religions, with two different sets of activities expected to achieve them. Enlightenment, often seen as a difficult process of endless rebirths achievable only by advanced religious specialists, can be reached in Tantrism during one lifetime while the practitioner is still alive. On the other hand, worldly power, even of the most mundane kind, for example success in love, is also achievable at the same time as enlightenment; they are intertwined. Success in this world need not be shunned to achieve enlightenment, a position held by *śramaṇic* (mendicant) Buddhists, Jains, and the Brahmanic tradition of the Hindus. For non-Tantric Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus, the life of a householder is a serious impediment for full spiritual accomplishment; instead the ascetic life is needed to move forward.

The way for Tantric practitioners to reach dual goals comes by connecting themselves to a power that flows through the world, including their own bodies, a power usually visualized as female. Tantrins identify the power, locate it, activate it, and use it for their own desires. The process brings into play the other three categories of the chart above: a guide, a set of tools, and various transformational actions. The guide is above all the teacher (the guru) who is simultaneously the deity and ultimately the student as well. Indeed, the collapsing and overlapping identities of the teacher is one illustration of the transformational processes so central to Tantrism that involve the movement both toward a unity, an essence, a center, and a monism while *simultaneously* breaking into dualities and multiples that replicate (often in numbered ranks) toward the periphery.

The importance of the guru cannot be overstated, as she/he is the only way for a student to learn Tantric practice. The oft-stated idea that Tantrism is esoteric because a secret tradition is passed between teacher and student is not unfounded. It helps to explain the individual approach to worship, the lack of a temple or monastery, and less focus on a loving relationship with a deity (all characteristics of theistic Hinduism). It also brings into question the use of written texts in the Tantric tradition, the primary source for scholars of Tantrism. Is it like attempting to understand the art of auto mechanics by reading through the auto parts catalogs? We may know a great deal about the components, but how they come together and work is known only by hands-on experience.

The tools used by the teacher and student listed in the second column are not intended to be inclusive. They share, however, certain characteristics: they are all “things” or involve the manipulation of “things.” I have put the word *things* in quotation marks because they can be visualized or imagined, and they can be internalized so that they are placed within the body. There is often a hierarchy imposed on them as well, so that, for example, the drawing of a physical *yantra* is of a lower spiritual power than one drawn in the heart of the practitioner. The spiritual scale going from the concrete to the more abstract is found in all Indic religions.

The tools in Tantrism are less doctrines and beliefs than concrete things that

the practitioner learns to manipulate in certain specific ways, sequences, and patterns. This involves actions and processes with things being taken through time and space. Indeed, the ultimate tool in Tantra is the human body, both the outside and the inside, both the anatomical body of arms, hands, tongue, heart, genitals, and mind, and the yogic anatomy of *cakras* and *nāḍīs*. It is control of the body as a tool used to actuate processes that connects the practitioner with the universal power to reach his goals.

I have listed six processes, again not intending to be comprehensive, that the tools are used to bring about. They can be seen as paired. The first two, visualization and verbalization, involve seeing and speaking the power into being. The importance of seeing (*darśana*) in approaching the deity has often been noted in Indian religions and it is used in Tantric practice as well, but often is interiorized or envisaged rather than directed toward an icon. One of the abilities of a Tantric worshiper is to create visions of the deities (and other signs) in his mind's eye. Verbalization is of the greatest importance in Tantric worship as the recitation of sounds (*mantras*). *Mantras* are learned from the teacher and are conceived as sounds, not as written word; and, just as visualizing brings about the deities and the powers they manifest, so does the use of *mantra*.

The paired processes of identification and internalization indicate actions that make the worshiper divine, the realization of which is needed to gain access to the universal power. An example of identification has already been mentioned above, when the teacher and the deity are identified as one. Such telescoping of identities is needed to pull everything into the body of the worshiper so that the ultimate identification can be made of the deity with the worshiper. The importance of internalizing the concrete "thing" as a mental image is central to being able to create within the body what is outside it. Tantric ritual seems to be set up as a pairing of doing something involving manipulating a thing (like drawing a *yantra*) and then imagining it within through a mental image.

The last pairing consists of concretization and transformation, two seemingly opposite procedures. Once internalization is achieved, it does not mean that the process is unidirectional as the ritual always involves arranging, moving, and changing real things, even when internalization has taken place; the processes are intertwined and oscillating. By concretization I mean that, for the Tantric practitioner, things (including such things as sounds or deities) have a reality that takes form in the world, cannot be abandoned, and must be used. The final process, transformation, can be applied to all the processes, as it seems to me the most essential of them all, as all involve one thing changing into another. Indeed, the ability to change one reality through ritual manipulation of things into another truer, more powerful reality may be one definition of Tantrism.

Finally, what aspects of Indian religions (Purāṇic Hinduism and Buddhism, for example) are less stressed by this Tantric view? Immediately, there are problems; to separate Hinduism and Buddhism from Tantric practices is, as noted above, difficult. André Padoux's observation that "for a thousand years, most

Hinduism has been either Tantric or Tantrified”⁵ underlines the futility in attempting to categorize and divide what is and is not Tantric in current Hindu practices. Still, if we say we are talking about emphasis, not difference, we can suggest several areas less emphasized in Tantric practice than in certain other Indic religions. I will suggest five: less stress on mythology and narrative stories of deities, less stress on love for god, less stress on moral action (for Buddhism), less stress on temple worship and priests, and less stress on patronage of art, temples, and good works (on merit and therefore on *karma*). To expand and explain these would take us too far afield, but I ask the reader to keep them in mind while reading through the articles in this book. Evidence in support of this less-stressed list (and it can certainly be lengthened) is seen in part from observing that the topics are not important aspects of the discussions in the articles in this book.

The very brief and simple introduction to Tantrism given above is intended to orient the reader, particularly one who comes to the topic without much background, as discussions of Tantrism can become fairly complex and technical. The book’s twelve papers are divided into five sections with the first including two papers that give overviews of Tantrism while focusing on the issues of beginnings and relationships.

Overviews

The first essay by André Padoux sets up for us (as mentioned already) some of the overall questions regarding Tantrism and why these questions have not been answered, demonstrating why the search for Tantra’s roots will not be easy. In addition, Padoux points out a source of confusion—and one that is particularly important for us—between Tantric practice and its sources, what might be called its mimetic nature. Again and again, Tantrism appears to replicate or copy either pre-Tantric or local practices. The question is whether the relationship is in terms of sources or of parallel but independent origins. Padoux mentions as examples micro-macrocosmic correspondences, magic use of power, power in terms of violence and transgression, and feminine aspect of the deity, all characteristic of Tantrism but all found in either pre-Tantric or autochthonous local religion. Are these roots or merely parallel branches from the same trunk?

Padoux ends his essay by proposing two possible definitions of Tantrism that might focus its seemingly amorphous nature, both of which, however, he ultimately rejects.

One is to confine Tantrism to the “hard core” practitioners: a system of observances (often transgressive in nature) that are given meaning by a more or less power-oriented vision of man and the cosmos, a system where power is manipulated, where micro-macrocosmic correspondences play an essential role. Also, there is usually a high degree of esotericism (the higher, the more esoteric, the more “Tantric”) together with a particular type of pan-

theon (not necessarily sexually differentiated however), and a particular and very developed type of ritual. Outside these qualifications, there may exist a varying number and proportion of Tantric traits, but not Tantrism as such.

The second definition is one frequently applied to Tantrism, “to stress its ritual aspect without omitting entirely the ideological side, but subordinating it to ritual.” Padoux rejects both approaches and ends his essay saying, “I fear we still have to toil to find a solution to the problem of Tantrism.”

The second essay by David N. Lorenzen, “Early Evidence for Tantric Religion,” is a straightforward review of the historical evidence for the appearance of Tantrism, serving as an excellent pendant to Padoux’s thematic article. Lorenzen suggests that there are two ways to define Tantrism, one is “a narrow definition [that] considers as Tantric only religious phenomena directly associated with the *Tantras*, *Samhitās* and *Āgamas*,” that is texts written in Sanskrit and thus directed toward an elite. The second broader definition adds “an ample range of popular ‘magical’ beliefs and practices, including much of Śākta and Haṭha Yoga traditions,” traditions that use predominantly vernacular languages. Lorenzen chooses the second as a definition, and then proceeds to sort through historical, textual, and epigraphical sources to locate in time and geography the beginnings of Tantrism. He concludes that Tantrism begins to be discerned in the fifth century C.E. and is clearly seen by the seventh. By the ninth it was fully manifested in both Hinduism and Buddhism. He finds its beginnings to be “primarily a northern phenomena,” with its centers in Bihar, Bengal, Assam, Kashmir, Nepal, Tibet, the Punjab, and Rajasthan. While these dates and localities may seem rather conservative to some, Lorenzen’s historical evidence supports them. He does not deny that there are characteristics of Tantrism that can be traced to a much earlier time. His point is that Tantrism as such (“the complex as a whole”) cannot be earlier.

The History and Development of Tantra

Most of the book’s essays deal in some way with developments of Tantrism through time, but the three included in this section demonstrate three distinctly different approaches to understanding development and change. The most comprehensive is M. C. Joshi’s “Historical and Iconographic Aspects of Śākta Tantrism,” which traces goddess worship in India from the Upper Paleolithic through the thirteenth century C.E. Joshi uses as evidence texts, inscriptions, and art to outline the major shifts and changes in the worship of goddesses, and the essay serves as an excellent survey of the historical points at which Tantric-flavored imagery and practices were added. Joshi assumes that goddess worship is, in some way, Tantric by nature, stating at the beginning that “Śākta Tantrism has its roots in prehistoric concepts of a fertile mother goddess and ancient systems for her worship.” He does not suggest any one point in time or change in iconography

that divides ancient goddesses from Tantric goddesses, nor contemporary non-Tantric goddesses from Tantric ones. The advantage of this is that he is never forced to propose a confining and monolithic definition of Tantrism, but outlines a continuous, cumulative development. Nor does he attempt to show why the changes he notes have taken place. In other words, he assumes that Tantrism exists in some form from the beginning of religion in India, that it is connected to goddess worship, and that the way the goddesses developed over time is in itself a history of Tantrism.

A very different approach to Śākta Tantrism is given in Douglas Renfrew Brooks's article "Auspicious Fragments and Uncertain Wisdom: The Roots of Śrīvidyā Śākta Tantrism in South India." Rather than a historical survey of practices, Brooks's study is a detailed look at a particular text, the *Tirumantiram*, written in Tamil by the seventh century saint Tirumūlar. Brooks finds that Tirumūlar knew aspects of a highly detailed and organized form of Tantric goddess worship, the Śrīvidyā. What he is able to show is that Tirumūlar—while a Śaivite and not a Tantric worshiper—knew and used essential aspects, particularly the *śrīvidyā mantra*, of the Śrīvidyā system. Since the Śrīvidyā system developed in north India, probably in Kashmir, and takes form in Sanskrit texts only in the ninth century, Brooks demonstrates that "the structure of Śrīvidyā ideology must have been in place perhaps as long as two centuries before its crystallization in Sanskrit texts." Furthermore, that Tirumūlar was familiar with this ideology and could incorporate it into his own religious system, argues for a surprisingly early India-wide awareness of "Tantric" thought that existed outside of texts and temples. Brooks's paper suggests there was a shared Tantric ideology in India that existed before codification in Sanskrit texts and that was not yet restricted to specific groups.

The third paper in this section, Thomas B. Coburn's "The Structural Interplay of Tantra, Vedānta, and Bhakti: Nondualist Commentary on the Goddess," focuses the discussion on a single passage from the sixth-century *Devī-Māhātmya*. Coburn's approach to the passage is to compare the analysis of two eighteenth-century Indian commentators, Nāgoji Bhaṭṭa and Bhāskararāya, the first an Advaita Vedāntin and the second a Tantric follower of Śrīvidyā (the system mentioned by Brooks). Coburn finds that the two use similar references, and both are involved in attempts to apply a monistic or nondual reading of the passage and of reality. But whereas Nāgoji Bhaṭṭa must ultimately say that even the goddess must be subordinate to a more ultimate reality ("Brahman-without-qualities"), the Tantric Bhāskararāya is:

unwilling to ascribe secondary status to the physical world, or to the senses, or to the manifest diversity of the Goddess's form. The way in which [he avoids] epistemological dualism is not philosophically, but ritually—through the esoteric, experiential transformation of the world. . . . What

differentiates the two nondualisms, then, is that one—Advaita Vedānta—is of a public and profoundly philosophical sort, while the other—Tantra—inclines toward a private and ritualized experience of oneness.

Each of the authors in this section—Joshi, Brooks, and Coburn—has focused on the goddess and the development of Śākta Tantrism, but each has addressed them very differently, demonstrating the advantages and disadvantages of going from a broad historical survey to a focused and highly detailed analysis of a single moment.

The Art History and Archaeology of Tantra

The first paper in this section, that by Thomas McEvilley entitled “The Spinal Serpent,” may at first appear to be neither art historical nor archeological, but I am using McEvilley’s own use of the term archaeology that he introduced in his article “The Archeology of Yoga” in 1981.⁶ His article in this volume can be seen as an extension of his earlier article where he argues for yogic practices in the Indus Valley culture (ca. 2800–1700 B.C.E.), using as evidence six seals showing figures in *mūlābandhāsana*, a Haṭha yoga posture used to activate the *kuṇḍalinī* and that implies the existence of the three channels (*nāḍīs*) of yogic physiology (*suṣumṇa*, *idā*, and *piṅgala*). In “The Spinal Serpent” McEvilley points out, for the first time, the startling parallels between “the Hindu doctrine of the *kuṇḍalinī* [and] Plato’s doctrine in the *Timaeus*.” These correlations are so complete—even to the two subtle channels that flank the spine, the need to retain the “soul-stuff” or sperm in the head rather than expend it through ejaculation, and the visualization of this power as a serpent—that McEvilley undertakes to search for connections between Greece, India and even China. He concludes that the Tantric physiology is not exclusively an Asian element, and that “a diffusion situation probably involving some of the factors just reviewed was involved in its presence in India as well as in Greece.” The roots of Tantra, according to McEvilley, seem here “to direct our gaze into the darkest depths of human prehistory.”

Katherine Anne Harper argues in the next paper “The Warring Śaktis: A Paradigm for Gupta Conquests” that the Tantric notion of female power (*śakti*) was applied to a preexisting group of goddesses, the seven mothers or *Saptamātṛkās*, an association that brought the mothers into the mainstream of Hindu religion. She pinpoints this at ca. 400 C.E., during the Gupta Dynasty, making it among the earliest evidence we have for fully developed Tantric images, and long before we have actual Tantric texts (ca. ninth century). The association of *śakti* with the mothers was, Harper feels, done in a structured, purposeful manner by Vaidika Tantrins who:

devised rituals meant to strengthen the king’s power and protect the established order. Their reformation of older religious symbols resulted in elevat-

ing a female septad from its shadowy past and relocating it centrally in the Hindu pantheon. At the same time, the reformers provided the newly evolved deities with attributes . . . that signified martial and spiritual empowerment, particularly for the king.

Thus, the mothers and their Tantric powers were used by the Gupta kings, a political use of Tantrism rarely argued by scholars. Her suggestion provides a new explanation for the popularization of Tantrism. Harper relies on texts, epigraphy, and art for her evidence.

The third paper in this section, Dennis Hudson's "Early Evidence of the *Pāñcarātra Āgama*," also relies on texts, inscriptions, and art to argue that the Bhāgavata (Kṛṣṇa) tradition was a coherent religious system from the first century B.C.E. or earlier: "I shall discuss early evidence for the *Pāñcarātra Āgama*. The evidence places the Āgama in the first three or four centuries B.C.E. and connects it with a consistent ritual and theological tradition that centers on Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa." Taking as a model the Vaiṣṇa Perumāl Temple at Kanchipuram for the organization and identification of manifestations of Vāsudeva, Hudson applies the schema to a reinterpretation of numerous sculptures, particularly from Mathura dating to the Kushan period (first to third centuries C.E.). Furthermore, he applies the model to the exegesis of texts as well, including the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The result is a new interpretation of an early Hindu religious system, one that displays a series of overlaps with both Vedic and Tantric rituals and practices, and one in which to search for Tantra's roots.

The Vedas and Tantra

The next two essays deal with the relationships between the Vedic and the Tantric traditions. Teun Goudriaan in "Imagery of the Self from Veda to Tantra" shows that Tantrism relied on previously existing concepts and images, those found in the Vedas and the *Upaniṣads*, rather than producing new symbolic systems, and thus he stresses continuity over disjuncture. He focuses on the concept of the "self" or *Ātman*, identifying five categories in Indian thought of metaphorical imagery used to discuss the *Ātman* (soul or self): self as a person—literally a little man—in the heart; self as part of a family; self as a ruler and enjoyer; self as a mover (often as a bird); and self as the sun. This imagery forms relationships between concepts of spirituality and of the world of appearances. Tantric interpretations tend toward concretization, often with a theistic interpretation, so that the self becomes less the individual *Ātman* and more identified with God. Goudriaan writes:

they [the Tantric practitioners] applied the images, which in the older Upaniṣads and some later texts referred to the undivided or individual self, to their conceptions of a Supreme Self, which they experienced as insepara-

ble form the Supreme Godhead worshiped by their school or sect. We could speak of a theistic reorientation of the old auto-mystical tradition, entailing a tendency to loss of authority for the individual self.

Thus, Goudriaan demonstrates shifts in Tantric ideology but using older imagery.

A second paper that analyzes the relationship between Tantric and Vedic traditions is Richard K. Payne's "Tongues of Flame: Homologies in the Tantric Homa." Payne is arguing, as did Goudriaan, for continuity between the Vedic and Tantric traditions. He looks to *homa* rituals ("votive ritual in which offerings are made into a fire"), tracing three groups of relationships: characteristics of the ritual use of fire, identification of the fire with people, and identification of the fire with gods. His evidence includes the Shingon tradition of Japan, Tantric Buddhism that dates from the beginning of the ninth century, as well as the traditions of India. He identifies many continuities between Vedic and Tantric *homa*, with a shift from three fires to one, and then the identification of the fire with both the deity and the practitioner, as indicative of Tantric differences. He concludes that "the Tantras appear to be much more firmly rooted in the Vedas than is usually suggested."

The Texts and Tantra

The final two papers bring us to firm ground with discussions of full-fledged Tantric texts. Paul E. Muller-Ortega in "Becoming Bhairava: Meditative Vision in Abhinavagupta's *Parātrīśikā-laghuvṛtti*," hopes:

that this exploration of the meaning of Bhairava [in the text] will contribute to an understanding of an important ideological shift in the development of early Hindu Tantra. The intent of this essay, therefore, is not so much historiographical as it is patently hermeneutic. If we are to understand the roots of the Hindu Tantra, we need to uncover the radical and crucial interpretive shifts that contribute to its successful ideological consolidation.

One of the shifts he identifies in Abhinavagupta's texts is from Bhairava seen as an external anthropomorphic but fierce deity to the embodiment of all-encompassing reality. Muller-Ortega also stresses the importance of the interplay between ritual and meditation, along with the concomitant oscillation between external and internal Tantric practices. He ends by saying Abhinavagupta's writings (of the tenth century) show:

that this early Hindu Tantra rejects the dry vistas of traditional philosophical debate, which seek only the representation of the Ultimate through conceptual truths. It rejects as well the self-enclosing renunciation of traditional Indian monasticism, which protectively seeks to isolate the monk

from the imagined stain of worldliness. Transcending the dualities and distinctions of conventional thought and morality, the Tantra demonstrates an outward gesture of embracing delight in all of reality. The Tantric hero pushes outward into adventurous, spiritual exploration, into savoring and delighting the experience of so many varieties of blissful *ekarasa*, the unitary taste of consciousness.

Perhaps a more positive and eloquent statement of Tantrism's goals could not be made, particularly when they have been so darkly painted by many other scholars.

The final paper in the book is Lina Gupta's "Tantric Incantation in the *Devī Purāṇa*: the *Padamālā Mantra Vidyā*." This paper will leave the reader with a taste of Tantric ritual. The *Devī Purāṇa*, while difficult to date, is one of the earlier of the *Purāṇic* texts, and may date to around the sixth century C.E. It is in praise of the goddess, and Gupta gives a full exploration of the important *mantra* (the *Padamālā Mantra Vidyā*) in the text that Śiva uses to invoke the goddess. When the worshiper recites the mantra, he or she "changes internally as well as externally . . . The ultimate goal of human life, according to Tantrism, is to internalize the cosmos and unify the inner vibrations with the outer." Gupta discusses the ritual performance of the *mantra*, specifying what are its prerequisites, preparations, procedures, and performance.

Lina Gupta's paper leads, finally, to my brief conclusion. Gupta discusses a word used in the *Padamālā Mantra Vidyā*: "*kapālamathana*," which means skull (*kapāla*) churning (*mathana*). She says that the *kapāla* or skull cup, an essential implement for Tantric ritual, refers to when Śiva cut off one of Brahmā's heads, only to be forced to wander in penance with the skull attached to his hand, using it to beg alms, until finally having it drop when he reached Varanasi. Gupta also tells how skulls were used in rituals, such as drinking wine from them (this is, in fact, the point of the word *churning-skull*, as it involved stirring the wine in the skull cup). Finally, she speaks of the use of skulls to predict the future by tapping on them (*kapālakōṣṭhāni*), specifically by Atharvavedic Brahmins and Tantrins, one of whom (Vaṅṅīsa) is mentioned in a Buddhist text and whom she feels may have lived in Bengal.

There are a series of reliefs from Gandhara, an area in present-day Pakistan, that date from as early as ca. 100 C.E. that actually show skull tappers. The reliefs have been discussed in an article by Maurizio Taddei,⁷ one of which I illustrate here (Figure 1). The Buddha sits in the center, flanked by two skull tappers, both of whom hold a skull. The figure on his left is identified as a Buddhist monk,⁸ while the right-side figure, who has his head wrapped with a cloth, is a Brahmin, identified by his hair knot showing over his forehead. Buddhist texts that discuss this story⁹ tell how Vaṅṅīsa was able to tell from a skull what the future rebirth of the dead person would be. Called before the Buddha, he told future births of all whose skulls were given to him except for that of a Buddhist *arhat*, one who, in other words, was not reborn having reached enlightenment.



Figure 1 Buddha flanked by skull tappers. Gandhara, Pakistan. Ca. first-second century C.E.
(Courtesy of The Russek Collection)

Is this, then, a root of Tantra? We have evidence that skull tappers were known by the first century C.E. Taddei argues that the story “is the reflection of the usual controversies between Buddhists and Brahmins,”¹⁰ and while he may be correct, it appears to me that the Buddha actually accepts the effectiveness of skull tapping, in fact using it to prove that an *arhat* could, indeed, remove himself from the round of endless rebirths. In other words, the roots of Tantra are very old and probably from the beginning predominantly nonsectarian, points made by several of the authors in this book as well.

The second reference in Gupta’s paper is to the *vīra* state (*vīra* is the Tantric hero of Muller-Ortega’s quotation above, an advanced Tantric practitioner). Gupta says that:

The *vīra* state is one that requires great moral effort and the courage to confront endangering situations and steadfast pursuit of spiritual success (*siddhi*). One of the most grueling of the Vāmācāra Śākta practices performed by the *vīra sādhanaka* is the *nilasadhana*. On a special night, the *sādhanaka* must sit on a corpse in a deserted location such as a cremation ground, riverbank, or pond and offer an oblation of consecrated flesh (*mahāmāṃsā*) to the fire deity. Through successful completion of the rite, he transcends to the highest state where he/she is united with the deity.

This, of course, brings us back to the beginning of the Introduction, to Stella Kramrisch sitting on a corpse in Calcutta on orders from her Tantric guru. We do not know whether Kramrisch was united with Śiva, or transcended to the highest state. But it is difficult to argue that her action was somehow not “truly” Tantric. It is a cautionary note, that whatever template we create for what is or is not Tantric, ultimately what a Tantric practitioner does is by one definition “Tantric.”

NOTES

Note: Standard diacritical marks are used for Sanskrit words. Sanskrit terms that occur frequently appear in a glossary with English translations. Other Sanskrit words and phrases are translated into English in the text after their initial appearance.

1. Barbara Stoler Miller, ed., *Exploring India’s Sacred Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 15.

2. The use of a corpse for a seat on which to perform Tantric ritual (*śava sādhanā*) is an advanced form of worship. It is restricted in regard to place and is done with a structured ritual.

3. The notion of *bhakti* or loving devotion is not absent from Tantric texts, but is primarily directed toward the guru. See Sanjukta Gupta, Dirk Jan Hoens, and Teun Goudriaan, *Hindu Tantrism* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 74–77.

4. *Ibid.*, 7–9.

5. André Padoux, "Mantras—What Are They?" in *Mantra*, ed. Harvey P. Alper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 296.
6. In *RES* 1 (1981).
7. Maurizio Taddei, "The Story of the Buddha and the Skull Tapper: A Note in Gandharan Iconography," *Annali: Istituto Orientale Di Napoli* 39 (1979): 395–420.
8. René Russek, *Buddha: Zwischen Ost und West: Skulpturen aus Gandhāra/Pakistan* (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 1987), 54.
9. See Taddei, "Story of Buddha," for reference and a summary.
10. *Ibid.*, 406.