

A Tantric Quarrel

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Abstract

Reading *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (Govinda, 2012), a text dedicated to Tantric Buddhism, brought me back to my seven years of intense practice and study of Tantra. I was delighted to have an opportunity to come back to one of the traditions that have most influenced my life and spiritual development.

Writing 2500 years after the Buddha's teachings, Govinda strives to conciliate his modern sensitivity with the need to maintain the essential purity of the transmission he has received from his Guru. Yet, his exposition ends up showing some of the cracks and fissures present within Mahayana Buddhism, exposing some of the existential conflicts of a spiritual lineage that is struggling to maintain the pace with the ever-changing requests of modernity.

Govinda (2012) impacted me in equal measure for the sincerity of the passion for his lineage, and for a certain spiritual sectarianism. His comparison between the Buddhist and Hindu Tantras left me wondering whether it is worth antagonizing two spiritual traditions that obviously share a common origin.

I have thus availed myself of other authoritative sources on both Tantra and Tibetan Buddhism to help me recreate a more comprehensive, less partisan picture of a spiritual movement that is as dear to my heart as it is revolutionary.

A Tantric Quarrel

In *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* we find more the handbook of a passionate practitioner than the work of a detached scholar. Therefore, rather than presenting a systematic exposition on Tibetan Buddhism, Lama Govinda takes us into the depths of his practice, using as a guideline a highly revered Mantra, or sacred symbolic sound, of the Buddhist tradition: the famous Om Mani Padme Hum. Govinda (2012) reveals to us the power and sacred function of Mantra, a sound whose power does not depend on meaning or pronunciation but on the harmonious cooperation of the sound, the devotion, and the mental attitude of the practitioner (p. 33). Govinda is wary of scholarly attempts to explain away Tibetan spirituality without actually immersing oneself in it. He warns us, for instance, that a merely historical or philological interpretation of a Mantra is “the most superficial and senseless way of looking at it, since it takes the shell for the kernel and the shadow for the substance” (Govinda, 2012, p. 255). Mantras, like Yantras (visual symbols) and Mudras (bodily gestures), are props for the Sadhaka (spiritual practitioner), technical aids that we must use in order to master the functions of our mind (Govinda, 2012, p. 92). Still, as the title implies, Govinda also endeavors to give the reader a comprehensive understanding of Tibetan Buddhism, as seen by a man who chose to dedicate his life to its practice.

Lama Govinda focuses principally on one branch of Tibetan Buddhism: Vajrayana, the “diamond path,” also known as Tantric Buddhism. While some regard this current as a separate Buddhist tradition, Govinda (2012) considers it as part of Mahayana, the “great vehicle” of Buddhism that emphasizes the liberation of all sentient beings (p. 40). In order to grasp the peculiarity of Vajrayana, we need to have a basic understanding of Tantra, one of the most influential mystical traditions of India, believed to have arisen around the 5th-6th century AD.

The origins of Tantra are shrouded in mystery. In *Tantra: the path of ecstasy*, Georg Feuerstein (1998) maintains that Tantra appeared as a revolutionary “new age” teaching, specifically tailored to the needs of Kali Yuga, the dark epoch of spiritual decline that is still in progress today (p. 4). Assessing the dire situation of spiritual and moral decay, Tantra unfolded as a radically inclusive approach that was willing to use anything and everything for the sake of spiritual awakening (p. 7). Govinda (2012) does not credit such revolutionary birth to Tantrism and instead argues that it developed with logical necessity from the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism (p. 93), thus supporting the thesis of an eminently Buddhist origin of Tantra. In my blog article, “What is Tantra?” (Manacorda, 2014) I warned against giving a schematic, scientific definition of Tantra. I described Tantra as a holistic approach to spirituality, that embraces Shakti, the Feminine, in all her expressions, including our physical bodies and sexuality, worshipping her as the feminine aspect of the Universe, enjoined with her masculine consort Shiva in a dance of equals. My view, based on personal studies and years of practice, is that the Tantric outlook arose from a natural impulse to counterbalance and complement the ascetic, monastic Buddhist and Hindu lineages, their emphasis on austerity and solitude, and their demands of renunciation, hard to maintain for everyone but the most committed monks.

Be it as it may, the new Tantric perspective ended up influencing every spiritual lineage it came into contact with, from Hinduism to Buddhism to Yoga, bringing significant, often revolutionary innovations, and questioning the very fundamentals of the pre-existing religious practices. Govinda (2012) states that “like a gigantic wave the Tantric conception of the world swept over the whole of India, penetrating and modifying Buddhism and Hinduism alike and obliterating many of their differences” (p. 94). Overall, however, Govinda (2012) seems to overlook the original unifying function of Tantra, and he ends up placing much

more emphasis on the differences between the Hindus and Buddhist Tantras than on their similarities. In fact, one of Lama Govinda's chief preoccupations is defending the Buddhist Tantras against the prejudice that they were a corrupted offshoot of the Hindu Tantras. Quite the opposite, says Govinda (2012): the Hindu Tantric traditions are spiritually indebted with Buddhism, and a comparison of both proves "the spiritual and historical priority and originality of the Buddhist Tantras" (p. 94). Govinda's exposition is littered with such comparisons between the Buddhist and Hindu Tantras. He concludes that not only are the Buddhists Tantras historically antecedent to the Hindu Tantras, but there is a fundamental difference of intentions and value between both. Govinda thus quotes—and subscribes—the position of scholar Benoytosh Bhattacharyya who, in *An Introduction in Buddhist Esoterism* (1932), stated that "the Hindu Tantras represent baser imitations of Buddhist Tantras" (as cited in Govinda, 2012, p. 96).

Asserting that a spiritual lineage is a baser imitation of another is a formidable statement, which begets the question: What is then the key spiritual difference between Buddhist and Hindu Tantras that justifies this position? Govinda (2012) is unambiguous: "the main difference is that Buddhism is not Shaktism. The concept of Shakti, of divine *power*, of the creative female aspect of the highest God (Shiva) or his emanations does not play any role in Buddhism" (p. 96). Govinda is here adamant in differentiating Buddhism from *Shaktism*, a branch of the Hindu Tantras devoted to the worship of Shakti, the creative female power of the Universe.

Vajrayana, according to Lama Govinda, derives its original spiritual identity within Tantrism from a complete exclusion and dismissal of Shakti, the divinized symbol of female creative power.

Shakti Versus Prajna

That the Hindu Tantras are mainly centered on Shakti is in itself debatable. The Tantric tradition acknowledges the relevance of both the masculine principle of Shiva, representing the aspect of consciousness, and the feminine principle of Shakti, representing energy or power (Feuerstein, 1998, pp. 76-77). Beyond the duality of energy and consciousness, Tantra recognizes the existence of a supreme principle, which can equally be represented by Shiva or another male deity, or by Shakti under her various forms of Devi, Kali, Lakshmi, and others (Feuerstein, 1998, p. 72). Most studies of the Hindu Tantra present it as a holistic system that gives equal space to both elements of the Feminine-Masculine polarity, represented symbolically by the divinized figures of Shakti and Shiva. Arthur Avalon (2012), acknowledged by Govinda as an authority in the Hindu Tantras, writes that “Shiva represents the static aspect of Reality and Shakti the moving aspect” (p. 24), and that “Pure Consciousness is Shiva, and His Power (Shakti)... is one with Him.... Completed Yoga is the Union of Her and Him in the body of the Sadhaka” (p. 27). Tantra, as Avalon (2012) illustrates, acknowledges that “the general action of Shakti is to veil consciousness” (p. 52), and yet, “both Shiva and Shakti are Consciousness, [but] the former is the changeless static aspect of Consciousness, and Shakti is the kinetic, active aspect of the same Consciousness” (p. 31). The world we inhabit is thus created through the infinite, playful veiling of consciousness by its own power; together, “they symbolize the play of life and death, creation and annihilation, emptiness and form, dynamism and stasis” (Feuerstein, 1998, p. 81). The same interplay is going on in the human body, for “What is here is there. What is not here is nowhere”—an Indian version, as Avalon himself recognizes, of the Hermetic statement “as above, so below” (Avalon, 2012, p. 50). Our body, therefore, is a vast

magazine of power (Shakti), and the object of Tantric rituals is to raise these various forms of power to their full expression (Avalon, 2012, p. 50).

Lama Govinda, as noted above, maintains that in Tantric Buddhism the concept of Shakti is altogether absent. But Tibetan Vajrayana is a Tantric system, and it must, by necessity, find some way to represent the Feminine. What might then occupy the space left vacant by Shakti? In Govinda's thesis, the role of Shakti is taken by Prajña, which means superior knowledge. Prajña is presented not so much as an alternative form of Shakti, but as its direct antithesis. According to Govinda (2012), when a male-female symbolism is used by the Buddhist Tantras, the female principle is never represented as Shakti, but always "*as its contrary* [emphasis added], namely Prajña (wisdom), Vidya (knowledge), or Mudra" (p. 100). The shift from Shakti to Prajña is not a mere technical substitution, but it has profound spiritual and ontological implications that may be difficult to fathom for the uninitiated. One for all: if knowledge is the feminine principle, and consciousness the masculine one, then, in place of the Tantric understanding of Reality arising from the interplay of consciousness and energy, we end up with a duality made of consciousness and knowledge. This leaves us with a highly intellectualized system that has no space for energy and power, in short for what the Tantras have symbolically represented as the Feminine.

The Lost Chakra

Among the distinct forms and manifestations Shakti can assume on a physical level, the Hindu Tantric tradition reserves a special place to Kundalini Shakti. Kundalini is believed to be an enormous reservoir of energy that lays dormant at the base of the spine (Feuerstein, 1998, p. 175), and that can be awakened through extended Yogic practices or exceptional events. The Indian Yogis have developed Kundalini Yoga, a whole science devoted to the

controlled arousing and channeling of this latent force. One of the basic tenets of Kundalini Yoga states that, when this powerful energy is awakened with care and directed to the higher energy centers (Chakras), it allows the practitioner to enter elevated states of consciousness, all the way to Samadhi, enlightenment, when it reaches the crown Chakra. In its journey upwards, Kundalini Shakti activates and “pierces” the six energy centers, or Chakras, breaking them open, vitalizing, and balancing them (Feuerstein, 1998, p. 182). Kundalini is so relevant for Tantra that Feuerstein (1998) states that “the goal of Tantra is to have the Kundalini remain perfectly elevated to the topmost psychoenergetic center, which state coincides with liberation” (p. 183). Yet, despite the undiscussed centrality of Kundalini in the Tantric systems, Govinda (2012) is adamant about negating any relevance to Kundalini in Tantric Buddhism: “Shakti Kundalini is not even mentioned in the Buddhist system—still less is she made the subject of meditation” (p. 193). Once again, Shakti, this time in the form of Kundalini, is marginalized and excluded from Govinda’s understanding of Tantra.

That Kundalini Yoga is the science of reference in matters of the Chakras is implicitly recognized by Govinda who, when speaking about the Chakras, frames his teaching as an exposition of “the psychic centers of the Kundalini Yoga and their psychological counterparts” (Govinda, 2012, p.140). But in the map of the energy centers presented by Govinda (2012), we find a radical departure from the tenets of Kundalini Yoga. The texts of Kundalini Yoga present a system composed of six Chakras surmounted by the “thousand-petalled lotus”—Sahasrara, the abode of pure consciousness (Avalon, 2012, p.103). From down upwards, these are the root center, the sacral center, the navel center, the heart center, the throat center, the third-eye center, and the crown center or Sahasrara. While Govinda (2012) acknowledges the map of Kundalini Yoga and uses it as a base for his diagrams (pp. 144-145), he argues that the Tibetan systems of meditation only recognize five centers,

because the uppermost and lowermost two Chakras have been combined into one center each. Thus, the third-eye center is regarded as part of Sahasrara, the crown center; and the sacral center, also known as Svadisthana, is combined with the root, Muladhara Chakra (p. 141).

In Kundalini Yoga, Svadisthana Chakra, presiding over the reproductive organs and the sexual functions, is described as being of a beautiful vermilion color, connected to the element of water and the God Vishnu (Avalon, 2012, pp. 356-360). Whoever meditates deeply on Svadisthana Chakra becomes “a Lord among Yogis” and “is freed immediately from all his [inner] enemies” (Avalon, 2012, p. 364). But in Govinda (2012), Svadisthana Chakra disappears. Govinda argues that Svadisthana is not to be regarded as an independent center; its functions are dismembered, and some of them get assimilated with the root Chakra (Muladhara), while others are associated with the next-higher center, the navel Chakra (Manipura) (Govinda, 2012, p. 140). Yet, from the standpoint of a practitioner who has invested time in the embodied practices of Yoga, that the sacral center does not exist as an independent entity seems untenable. Anybody who has done deep introspection realizes that, on a physical and energetic level, the sexual organs constitute a strong and independent center, which has its own “voice” and energetic signature, distinct from both the root and the navel Chakras. One can’t help but wonder if the operation of dismemberment of Svadisthana hides any psychological or ethical reservations on the functions this Chakra fulfills, and whether the nullification of this center’s specific role in the economy of the whole system responds instead to a general predisposition to exclude sexuality from spiritual practice.

Fault Lines

While Govinda’s conclusions on Vajrayana and its complete rejection of Shakti have behind them all the authority of a man who dedicated his life to the practice and teaching of

Buddhism, they are not unanimous even within the community of practitioners and scholars of Tantric Buddhism. One example of an alternative perspective is *Passionate Enlightenment* by Miranda Shaw (1994), associate professor of Religious Studies at Richmond University. Shaw is more a scholar than a practitioner, and her research is explicitly oriented at investigating the often undervalued role of women in Tantric Buddhism. Shaw's conclusions on the relationship between Hindu and Buddhist Tantras are diametrically opposed to Govinda's. Whereas Govinda (2012) asserts that Tantric Buddhism completely rejects the basic principles of Shaktism and specifically the idea of an erotic, world-creating divine force (p. 100), Shaw (1994) offers abundant indications to the contrary. In fact, she says, the links between Tantric Buddhism and Tantric Hinduism are so inextricable, the reciprocal influences so pervasive that Tantric Buddhism could properly be called Shakta Buddhism (p. 33).

Shaw goes on to challenge the idea that Shakti, as a symbol of female creative power, is utterly absent from Tantric Buddhism: "Both [Shaktism and Tantric Buddhism] display a tendency to see the universe as generated by female creativity" (Shaw, 1994, p. 32).¹ Using as source some of the most esoteric Tantric Buddhist texts,² Shaw (1994) dares to question even the traditional view on Buddha's asceticism, suggesting that the Buddha attained enlightenment thanks and through the bliss of sexual union (p. 143), and that his insistence on celibacy was a protection mechanism intended for those weaker adepts who "would not benefit by a teaching on Tantric union or might be even harmed by it" (p. 145).

¹ Shaw (1994) also offers an interpretation to explain the lack of reference to the word Shakti in Tantric Buddhist texts: "Tantric Buddhists use the term *adhithana* where Hindus would use Shakti, that is, to express the energy that women can bestow upon men, strengthening them psychically. ... Tibetan translations of shakti include *mthu*, meaning "power" or "energy," and *nus-pa*, which generally refers to spiritual ability or power that a practitioner has attained through religious discipline." (p. 216, n. 30). While Shaw's conception of Shakti as the energy that women can bestow upon men seems reductive, her suggestion may be worth investigating. I have been unable to find any reference to either *mthu* or *nus-pa* in Govinda (2012).

² The one referenced here is the Candamaharosana-tantra.

While Shaw's theses may never find confirmation or widespread acceptance, they at the very least serve us as a healthy reminder that, when figures such as that of the Buddha or Christ are at play, the passage of time allows for a score of sometimes contradictory interpretations around their lives and teachings. That some of those explanations end up constituting the accepted orthodoxy does not always respond to their accuracy or even credibility, but is often the result of centuries of theological and political struggles. In any case, Shaw's view of Tantric Buddhism aligns much more closely with my own experience of Tantra, where Shakti was held as an essential object of meditation and spiritual practice.

Another area where Buddhism's inner fault lines are visible is the position towards the physical body, as a comparative reading of Govinda (2012) together with another classic of Mahayana Buddhism, the *Bodhicaryavatara* by the 8th-century Indian sage Shantideva (Shantideva, 2008), will immediately show. Although separated by over 1200 years, both Govinda and Shantideva share the same spiritual backbone, rooted in the Mahayana tradition. As far as the critical elements of Mahayana are concerned, Govinda and Shantideva's views are in perfect harmony. But when it comes to addressing our physical body and our attitude towards it, their positions are strikingly at odds.

Shantideva (2008)'s teaching on the body takes the shape of a stern warning. On our path towards enlightenment, we should relinquish any unwarranted appreciation for our physical form, which is "from filth arisen and replete with it" (p. 197). Shantideva (2008) proceeds to dismount our attraction and consideration for our own and other people's body with unforgiving logic. For instance: if we do not enjoy touching a place full of excrement, why do we wish to touch the body that those excrements came from (p. 196)? If we are ever in doubt about the filthiness of our body, Shantideva advises us to visit the cremation grounds, and "observe the fetid bodies there abandoned" (p. 197), until we realize that all human

gatherings are really “cities of the dead, frequented by such skeletons that live and move” (p. 199). I argued against this form of absurdly unassailable logic in my paper “Shantideva, a Solar Hero” (Manacorda, 2019, p. 7), pointing out its logical flaws as well as its ethical dubiousness.

Lama Govinda, writing in the twentieth century, somewhat softens Shantideva’s position, and asserts that regarding the body as a “bag filled with various grains or pulses,” or trying to create an artificial aversion against the body by contemplating corpses (the reparatory practice suggested by Shantideva), amounts to self-deception. We do not feel aversion towards dead flowers, reasons Govinda (2012): on the contrary, we appreciate the beauty of flowers all the more because we are conscious of their transience—just as the briefness of our lives gives each moment of those lives a special value (p. 276). Does this mean that Govinda accords dignity and value to the physical body? Not necessarily, for his conclusion is that “as long as we feel aversion against the body, we have not overcome it,” and that “we overcome [the body] only if we grow beyond it” (Govinda, 2012, p. 276). While using the same tools of logic and argument, and sharing the same goal of “overcoming” the inconvenience of our physicality, Govinda and Shantideva come to radically different conclusions. What is notable here is how both Shantideva and Govinda recur to a decontextualized, disincarnate use of reason to prescribe the correct attitude towards the physical body.

But we construct syllogisms and carry on logical dissections of the human experience at our own risk. For, in a way hardly questionable by logical means, a living body and a corpse are qualitatively different for most of us most of the time, and so are human bodies and flowers; trying to syllogize our way to spiritual revelations may, in fact, lead us into hopeless contradiction and disconnection from life. Govinda (2012) himself seems to

recognize the shortcomings of logic, when he admonishes us to consider that “the logic of syllogistic thought, of historical and psychological analysis, of abstract concepts and values, is not the only one, and that there exists an equally justified and far more profound logic of growth in the realm of spiritual experience” (p. 254).

Conclusion

Today, we are witnessing a renewed interest in embodied forms of spirituality, of which Tantra represents one of the most ancient and powerful lineages. Unlike the monastic, ascetic spiritual traditions, Tantra accords equal dignity to the masculine and feminine aspects of man and the Universe. From this balanced appreciation of Shakti and Shiva, of the Feminine and the Masculine, derives one of the salient and, for modern sensitivity, most appealing characteristics of Tantra, namely that it does not exclude the body, and all of its manifestations including sexuality, from the tools available for spiritual practice. There seems to be an ever-increasing demand for spiritual paths that not only include but celebrate the body, the emotions, and sexuality. I see this as a healthy compensatory phenomenon after over two millennia of near-absolute dominance of the ascetic, male-directed, sexually repressed religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

The Tantric approach, despite the inevitable alterations and misinterpretations, holds a unique position in the spiritual arena, because it maintains a respectful and dignifying attitude towards Shakti, the divine feminine creative power, and even towards Maya, the manifest world of sensory perceptions. Tantric spiritual traditions stand in contrast and counterbalance to the prevailing ascetic spiritual lineages of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam in advocating an inclusive attitude, one that allows the pursuit of the higher goals by means of embracing life rather than renouncing it. This inclusiveness exposes Tantric practitioners to a

specific set of challenges, different from those of more ascetic paths. But we can consider ourselves fortunate to have at least one influential and established spiritual lineage that does recognize the body, the emotions, and sexuality as part of the unalienable baggage each human being has at his or her disposal for the purpose of evolution and healing. Govinda's (2012) position on the subject emerges from his praise of the Tibetan master Milarepa, "the most saintly and austere of all the great masters of meditation, whom, certainly, nobody could accuse of sexual practices!" (p. 103). Even if we choose a Tantric path, implies Govinda (2012), we should forgo the joys and challenges of sexuality, and seek the to unite the opposites within ourselves, "by the union of our male and female nature in the process of meditation" (p. 103).

Is this a message that can withstand the demands of our time? Trying to answer this question brings up even more challenging dilemmas. Is it right, for instance, to ask young adults to consider their body as ephemeral and devoid of importance? Today's youth aren't likely to look up at Buddhism any more than they do with Christianity if both religions insist on ignoring their real and pressing demands. They will feel let down, perhaps even betrayed by the promises of Enlightenment or the Kingdom of God. They feel unseen in their emotional and sexual urges, unheard in their relationship dramas.

World religions are, to a greater or lesser extent, scrambling to update their message to the current rapidly changing times, even as the principles on which those religions are based are trembling. Is Tantric Buddhism an exception? For all his attempts to include the Feminine, Buddhism remains a philosophy and a religion of the Masculine. The replacement of Shakti with Prajña is a reflection, on a high philosophical level, of the Buddhist tendency to regard emotions and desires with great suspicion, a tendency based on the assumption that our ultimate goal is the end of suffering and the attainment of inner peace and emotional

equanimity. That we always want to move away from suffering and towards enlightenment is, however, an unquestioned hypothesis which, if allowed to crystalize into a principle, is destined to show its limitations. There may be a voice in all of us that has a goal other than spiritual perfection, a voice that yearns to live intensely, with passion, accepting both great joy and great sorrow as necessary aspects of life. To that part, the Buddhist teachings may continue to come across as hopelessly dry, and the intricacies of the Vajrayana system as presented by Govinda (2012) may continue to seem disjointed from the actual experience of life.

Ultimately, Buddhism, whether Tantric or not, must face the conundrum of finding the right relationship with the teaching of a spiritual master who lived thousands of years ago, in a world not just quantitatively but intrinsically different from the one we inhabit today, and whose transmission was mainly intended for male monks. Buddhism, in all of its variants, is giving signals of its longing for a major overhaul—yet this necessary update may be so radical as to uproot it from its very foundations.

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