

The Essence of the Tantras

by the great Master Abhinavagupta

vimala-kalāśrayābhinava-sṛṣṭi-mahā jananī
bharita-tanuś ca pañca-mukha-gupta-rucir janakaḥ |
tad-ubhaya-yāmala-sphurita-bhāva-visarga-mayaṃ
hṛdayam anuttarāmṛta-kulaṃ mama saṃsphuratāt || 1

Meaning 1: The Mother is She who is the ground of *pure* power, *radiant* with *ever-new* genesis. The Father is He who is filled (with all the śaktis), maintaining his *Light* through his *five* faces. May my Heart, one with the *diverse* creation *flowing forth* from the *fusion* of these two, embodying the nectar of the Absolute, shine forth!

Meaning 2: My mother *Vimalā* is she for whom the *birth* of *Abhinava* was a *festival of joy*; my father is *renowned* as *Siṃhagupta*, full (of the state of Śiva). May my heart, formed from the *emissions* of the *ecstatic state* of their *union*, embodying the nectar of the Absolute, shine forth (through this work)!

Not everyone is able to plunge into the extensive Tantrāloka; therefore, may all listen to this Tantrasāra, composed in straightforward language. || 2

As an act of divine worship, may all contemplate the lotus of the heart of Abhinava Gupta, < its blossom opened by the light falling from the rays of the sun, || its contraction (forever) banished by the wisdom descending from the feet of the illuminator, (my master) > Śambhunātha. || 3

Introduction

In our way,¹ realization (jñāna) is the [sole] cause of liberation, because it is the opposite of ignorance, the [sole] cause of bondage. Now, there are two kinds of ignorance: mental² and ‘personal’ [i.e., innate³]. Of those, mental [ignorance] has these [two] varieties: a lack of conviction and false convictions.⁴ Personal [ignorance], on the other hand, is essentially differential cognition itself (vikalpa), which is the manifestation [of the universal Consciousness] contracted [into the form of an individual]. That [dualistic/contracted perception] alone is the root cause of the cycle of suffering. We will speak of this [further] in our analysis of Impurity (mala).⁵

¹ The word *iha* also means “in this world”, and that sense seems suggested here, for Abhinava believes that *only* liberation through knowledge is full and complete liberation.

² Sanderson translates: ‘ignorance present in [an individual’s (false)] judgments’.

³ Sanderson translates: ‘the ignorance implicit in individuality’.

⁴ I.e. doubt or error, not having sufficient knowledge or else believing something erroneous.

⁵ Because this *pauruṣam ajñānam* is really just another name for *āṇava-mala*.

Of these two, it is the case that personal ignorance can be removed by [the rite of] Initiation and [the observances] that follow it. However, initiation itself is not possible when mental ignorance—characterized by a lack of that discernment derived from diligent effort⁶—continues to exist. The certain understanding of what is to be let go of and what is to be cultivated is a prerequisite of initiation, for that consists of the purification of the [lower] Principles of Reality [that are to be transcended] and unification with Śiva.

Thus in that [process of liberation], it is specifically knowledge on the level of the mind, i.e. discernment derived from diligent effort, that comes first. And that [knowledge] itself, being repeatedly cultivated through practice, dispels the personal ignorance as well, due to the fact that the practice of conceptual awareness culminates in the end in non-conceptual [experience].⁷ That which is to be cultivated [in our way] is the [one] insight that pertains to all things in every way and is the correct conviction: that **the Self is truly Divine (= Śiva), the manifest Light of Consciousness, ineffable, non-differential, and uncontracted.**⁸

Now this [insight] is based on the [wisdom of the] scriptures; and only those scriptures uttered by the Supreme Lord are the [completely] authoritative means of knowing [this truth]. [They are authoritative] because they accept with discernment⁹ the doctrines taught in other [traditions]’s scriptures, and [also] teach [additional] realities established by higher realizations¹⁰ than [found] in those doctrines. Therefore, the knowledge revealed in other sacred texts liberates [one] from bondage, [but] only up to the point [that their knowledge extends], not from all of it. However, the scriptures of the Supreme Lord do liberate [one] from all of it.

[This scriptural canon] consists of five streams, divided into the classes of ten (the *Śiva-bhedas*), eighteen (the *Rudra-bhedas*), and sixty-four (the *Bhairava-tantras*). The essence of all that [is taught in these texts] is [revealed in] the scriptures of the Trika. Of these, further, [the essence is expressed in the scripture called] *Mālinī-vijaya[-tantra]*. Now, the truth [taught] in that [text] can be examined [clearly] once it is organized (e.g.

⁶ I use a phrase to translate *adhyavasāya* because the notion of diligent effort is so central to the word, though the primary meaning here is ‘understanding’, ‘discernment’, or ‘intellection’.

⁷ I.e., any discursive conceptualization (positive or negative) that is constantly repeated will become so internalized that it becomes the non-conceptual terms of one’s immediate experience.

⁸ ‘Manifest’ and ‘Light’ both translate *prakāśa*, as ‘ineffable’ and ‘non-differential’ both translate *avikalpa*.

⁹ *Vaiviktya*: means the Śaiva scriptures accept the key doctrines of other systems, assigning each to an appropriate level of the cosmic hierarchy, and interpreting them in consonance with the coherent Śaiva picture of reality.

¹⁰ This is one possible translation; otherwise we would read “established by superior reasoning”.

here in the *Tantrasāra*). For a person who has not examined the nature of reality [as taught in this scripture], there is no [possibility of] liberation nor [of] liberating others; because such a nature is possessed only by one who has thoroughly practiced and cultivated [this] realization. Because well-cultivated and well-practiced wisdom is the root of the supreme goal of human life, this [work] is undertaken for its attainment.

It is well known that ignorance is said to be the cause of bondage: it is taught under the name ‘impurity’ (*mala*) in scripture. When the power of all-encompassing realization (*pūrṇa-jñāna*) arises, ignorance is completely uprooted; and with this arising of the Awareness of the Self—by which all impurity is destroyed—one is liberated. Therefore, by means of that scripture (the *Mālinī*), I will clarify the entire reality which must be known [to bring about liberation]. || 4 ||

Key points in the Introduction:

- Insight/realization is the sole cause of liberation.
- The root cause of *saṃsāra* is ignorance, specifically the false sense that individuality = separation (*pauruṣa-ajñāna*) and the differential mental constructs (*vikalpa*) that arise from it.
- Removing the fundamental ignorance is contingent on the cultivation of discernment regarding what is to be let go of and what is to be held close (*heya/upādeya*).
- The central insight to be cultivated is that one’s innermost being is Śiva, whose nature is the Light of Consciousness, i.e. nondual and uncontracted awareness.
- The teachings of the *Mālinī* contain the essence of all the Śaiva scriptures and are conducive to liberation; and these are presented clearly in the *Tantrasāra*.
- Full awareness of the real Self is liberation.

First Day('s Teaching)

Illumination of the Modes of Realization

Therefore, in our way the highest (goal) to be attained is simply the essential nature (of oneself and all things); and that is nothing other than the Light of Creation [*prakāśa*¹¹] in all existent things, because it is impossible that anything uncreated could be one's essential nature. And that Light is not multiple, because there can never be any division of its essential nature, since it is not possible for anything having a nature different from it to enter it.¹² Even space and time do not divide it, because both have that very Light as their real nature. Thus the Light of Creation is only one, and that is verily Consciousness; for consciousness is the illumination of objects—on this there is definitely consensus amongst everyone. And that Light is not dependent on anything, for dependence is specifically the quality of needing to be 'illuminated' [= created], and the quality of 'to-be-illuminated' specifically connotes the requirement of another light [= source of creation], and there is not any other light whatsoever. Thus the Light of Consciousness is One and Independent. Due to that very independence it is free of limitations of space, time, and form: thus it is all-pervasive, eternal, and remains formless even while assuming all forms. It has (five) primary powers: its freedom is expressed as its Power of Bliss; its relishing (of that freedom) is expressed as its Power of Will; the fact that it is the Light of Creation expresses its Power of Consciousness; the fact that it is (also) self-reflective expresses its Power of Knowledge; and the fact that it is endowed with (the capacity to assume) all forms expresses its Power of Action. Though conjoined thus with these principal powers, in actuality it is the unbounded Light of Consciousness, reposing in innate bliss, endowed with the Powers of Will, Knowledge, and Action, that we call God.¹³

When that same Being, in his (total) freedom, causes himself to appear in a contracted form, we call him 'the individuated self' [*aṇu*]. And through that (same power of) freedom he again manifests his true Self (in that self), by which (action) its nature as Śiva, i.e. the unbounded Light of Consciousness, shines forth. When he manifests his true Self in this way, through the power of his freedom, it may be done without recourse to any method [*anupāya*] or with such method [*upāya*]. When utilizing a method, those

¹¹ The word *prakāśa* has no precise equivalent in English, as it means on the one hand light, illumination, shining, and on the other created, manifested, displayed, visible, made apparent, brought into the open.

¹² Because anything that entered into the Light of Manifestation would thereby be illuminated/manifested, and thus one with that Light.

¹³ Here Abhinava is simply asserting that of the five powers, Consciousness and Bliss are the intrinsic being (*svabhāva*) of God, while the other three are his *śaktis*; the distinction then is between what he *is* and what he *does*.

methods are (three): Will, Knowledge, or Action. Thus there are three modes of (attaining) Immersion [*samāveśa*]: the Divine [*śāmbhava*], Empowered [*śākta*], and Individual [*āṇava*] (means).¹⁴ These four types (of means to realization) will be taught here in sequence.

[Summary verse:]

This Self is an embodiment of the Light of Consciousness; it is the Divine, free and independent. As a play of independent joy, (the Divine Self) conceals its own true nature, and may also (choose to) reveal its fullness once again (at any time). That (occurs) spontaneously or through a process; and (if the latter) in three modes. || 5 ||

This Self, which is the Light of Consciousness, freely conceals its own form. It manifests (its original nature) again immediately or gradually. In reality, (all) this is (simply) God's intense joy. |

[this verse written in vernacular instead of Sanskrit]

Thus ends the first day (teaching)'s in *The Essence of the Tantras*, composed by the revered Abhinavagupta, entitled 'Illumination of the Modes of Realization'. || I ||



Key points in Chapter One:

- The essence-nature of all beings is the Light of Consciousness, one, indivisible, independent, unlimited, all-pervasive, eternal, and formless.
- Its powers are Awareness, Bliss, Willing, Knowing, and Acting.
- That Light appears in a contracted form as the individual self, which is a means to know the true Self.
- The method of manifesting the unbounded Light of Consciousness in and through an individual being is that of actualizing the powers of Willing, Knowing, and Acting as the three modes of Immersion into reality.

¹⁴ The names are derived from Śambhu [= Śiva], Śakti, and Aṇu respectively; see p. 37a.

Second Day('s Teaching)

Light on the 'Non-Means'

Now, to begin with, we will explain (how one spontaneously attains realization) with (almost) no method [*anupāya*].³³ When one who has been pierced by an intense Descent of Power [*śaktipāta*]¹⁵ hears and contemplates a single teaching of his Guru, and he thus spontaneously¹⁶ discerns (the truth),¹⁷ as a result he attains an Immersion [*samāveśa*] that without any (further) methods (of practice) continually arises.³⁴ (Question:) Given that in this system, discrimination [*tarka*] itself is one of the components of yoga practice,¹⁸ how does one 'discern' (the truth without any formal method)? We reply (that this is the form of that spontaneous realization): “This very Highest Divinity, the self-manifest Light of Consciousness, is my very own Self—when that is the case, what could any method [*upāya*] achieve? Not the attainment of one's true nature, because that is eternal(ly present); not making (that nature) known, because it is (constantly) illuminating itself; not the removal of veils [*āvaraṇas*], because no 'veil' whatsoever exists; not the penetration into That, because nothing other than it exists to enter it.³⁵ What method can there be here, when there is an impossibility of anything separate from That? Therefore, this Whole (existence) is one reality: Consciousness alone.—unbroken by time, uncircumscribed by space, unclouded by attributes,³⁶ unconfined by forms, unexpressible by words, and unaccounted for by the (ordinary) means of knowledge [*pramāṇas*]. For it is the cause, through its own Will alone, by which (all these sources of limitation) from time to the *pramāṇas* attain their own natures.³⁷ **This Reality is free and independent, a mass of bliss, and That alone am I; thus the universe is reflected within me.**” One who discerns (the truth) in this way, with firm certainty, immediately attains an Immersion [*samāveśa*] into the Highest Divinity, without any (necessity for other) means. For such a one, there is no (necessity) whatsoever for constraints³⁸ such as *mantras*, worship [*pūjā*], visualization, observances, and so on.

¹⁵ See my monograph on the subject, “The Descent of Power”, published by the Journal of Indian Philosophy 36.247-95.

¹⁶ In the original Latin sense of the word, i.e. of one's own accord, without further aid.

¹⁷ I.e. he has a correct perception of the nature of reality as taught above, in boldface on page 83.

¹⁸ The standard list of practices in Śaiva *ṣaḍaṅga-yoga* (“yoga attained through six ancillaries”) is *pratyāhāra*, *dhyāna*, *prāṇāyāma*, *dhāraṇā*, *tarka*, and *samādhi*. (See VASUDEVA 2004: 367-82.)

The network of means could not illumine the Divine. Can a pot
illuminate the thousand-rayed sun? Discerning (the truth)
thusly, one with the highest insight can enter into (the state of
the) self-luminous Divine One in an instant. || 6 ||

“Any manifestation that manifests is the complete and stainless
Highest Divinity shining in me. Ultimately, that is my very
Self.” Having known this, there is nothing more to be done. ||

[this verse written in vernacular]

Thus ends the second daily [teaching] in *The Essence of the Tantras*, composed by the
revered master Abhinavagupta, entitled ‘Light on the Non-Means’. || 2 ||



Third Day('s teaching)

The Divine Means

The Divine Principle has been taught as the Light of Creation [*prakāśa*]. When one is not able to enter (all at once) into its undivided wholeness [*akhaṇḍa-maṇḍala*], then, focusing (completely) on just its highest³⁹ Power of Independence [*svātantriya-śakti*], one may experience the (liberating) Immersion into Bhairava entirely free of mental constructs. This is the teaching for such a one:

This entire conditioned reality⁴⁰ is simply a reflection in the sky of awareness; (this is said) because of the fact that it possesses the characteristic of a reflection. For this is the characteristic of a reflection: a reflection⁴¹ is that which being unable to manifest on its own, shines forth only by the fact of being intermingled with another—like the appearance of one's face in a mirror, like the (sympathetic) flavor in saliva, like smell in the nose, like the sensation of sexual union in one's organs of pleasure, like the touch of a lance,* spear, etc.⁴³ in one's organs of internal sensation, or like an echo in the sky.[†] Indeed, the 'flavor' is not the primary one, due to its lack of an observable effect, such as the soothing of an ailment and so on.⁴⁴ Neither are (the sympathetic) smell and sensation (like) the primary ones, due to their disjunction from the substances that they are (properly) qualities of, which are not actually present; and due to their (resultant) failure to catalyze a series of effects. Nor (can it be said that) these two [sympathetic 'reflections'] do not exist, because we see (such symptoms as) convulsion, ejaculation, and so on. Sound, too, is not the primary thing, because it is the one who speaks (alone) who hears the echo returning, as it were. Thus, just as these (things) manifest as reflections, in precisely the same way, the universe (manifests as a reflection) in the Light of Creation of the Highest Divinity.⁴⁸

“But here, what would be the original image⁴⁹ (that is reflected)?” (the interlocutor might ask).⁵⁰ There is no such thing whatsoever. “What, it has no cause?” Oh, then your question concerns a *cause*! Then what's the point of using the word 'image'? The cause is simply the Power of the Highest Divinity, which will be (understood as) another synonym for his Independence. Because he holds the universe (within himself) as

* Or perhaps 'colic', following the reading at TA 3.36.

† The idea here concerns *sympathetic* experiences: the seeming flavour in one's saliva when merely seeing delicious food one has eaten before; the painful contraction in one's own innards when seeing someone speared with a lance, and so on.

a reflection, the Blessed Lord is the universe. For the universe consists of Consciousness; it is the substratum for the manifestation of Conscious Spirit.⁵¹ For that very universe is in (Him), (yet appears) in opposition (to Him); in this sense he can be said to “hold a reflection“. And thus, insofar as the very nature of the Highest Divinity is his capacity to embody himself as the universe, he is not unaware of it,⁵³ due to the impossibility of lack of awareness of one’s own nature on the part of one whose essence is Consciousness. For if he were unaware of his own form, he would necessarily be *insentient*. And this (self-)awareness is not conventional/symbolic [i.e. linguistic thought], but rather is taught (in the scriptures) as filled with the Supreme Sound [*paranāda-garbha*], inseparable from its own nature as pure Consciousness. And he knows (himself) as a array of the Powers of the Highest Divinity, which establish and order the universe.⁵⁴

Among those, there are then three main Powers of the Highest Divinity: the Absolute (*anuttara*), Will (*icchā*), and Expansion of Knowing (*unmeṣa*).⁵⁵ Those very (Powers) are (expressed and embodied by) the triad of articulate ‘awarenesses’ [*parāmarśa*] which are ॐ a, ॐ i, and ॐ u. From this very triad, the unfolding of all Powers is iterated and is understood [*caryate*].⁵⁶ For repose in the Absolute itself is Bliss (*ānanda*), repose in Will⁵⁷ itself is Sovereignty [*īśāna*], and repose in Expansion⁵⁸ itself is indeed the ‘Wave’ (*ūrmi*), which is the incipient Power of Action.⁵⁹ Those very (Powers) are (expressed and embodied by) the triad of articulate ‘awarenesses’ ॐ ā, ॐ ī, and ॐ ū.

Regarding these, the former triad of articulations has a ‘solar’ nature, due to the fact that their essence consists of the Light of Manifestation [*prakāśa*] aspect. The latter triad of articulations has a ‘lunar’ nature, due to the predominance (in them) of refreshing delight which is the true nature of repose (deriving from Self-reflection or *vimarśa*).⁶⁰ So far there is no entry of (even) a bit of objective action.⁶¹

Now when an object of action enters into Will and Sovereignty, and (can thus be) referred to as something which is being ‘willed’ and⁶² ‘ruled’, then it has two divisions: (experienced) as Light alone, it is the sound (underlying) ॐ ra, and as repose, the sound (underlying) ॐ la, because the respective qualities of *ra* and *la*⁶⁴ are fire/illumination and earth/stability [i.e. the two elements of directed Will].⁶³ (The object) being willed and (ruled) is not (yet) manifest, like (something) external [but is still an idea]; for if there was a manifested form, that itself would be a creation, not (pure) Will or Sovereignty. Hence,

specifically because of their lack of (concrete) manifestation, there is only sonorance⁶⁵ in *ra* and *la*, not stopping as with a manifest consonant.⁶⁶ Thus this is the four-fold group of syllables, which are 'neuter' [or 'hermaphroditic'] due to having the likeness of both [*yoni* and *bīja*, 'womb and seed'⁶⁷]: ऋ ṛ, ॠ ṝ, ॡ ḷ, and ॢ ḹ.

When the Absolute (*a*) and Bliss (*ā*) diffuse into Will (*i*) and Expansion (*u*),⁶⁸ then (arise) the pair of syllables ए *e* and ओ *o*. In that (same way) also, due to the fusion of the Absolute or Bliss again (this time with *e* and *o*), the pair of syllables ऐ *ai* and औ *au* (arise). This very set of four syllables, *e*, *ai*, *o*, and *au*, (constitutes) the Power of Action.⁶⁹

Next, moreover, all that has become an effect (of this process), up to the Power of Action,⁷⁰ abides in the form of a point of pure Light [*bindu*]⁷¹—which is the essence of experiential awareness [*saṃvedana-sāra*]⁷²—precisely because it must first (re-) enter⁷¹ into the Absolute [before projecting out into manifestation]: [this is] अ̎ aṃ [the *anusvāra*].*

Next, in that very (point of ultimacy), the Emission⁷² of the Absolute is born: अः aḥ [the *visarga*]. Thus the sixteen articulate 'awarenesses' [i.e., the vowels] are said have the nature of 'seeds'. Arising from these are the (powers) which are (called) the 'wombs', consisting of the manifesting consonants. Of these, the 'ka' class (of consonants comes) from the Absolute [*a*]; the 'ca' class[‡] (comes) from pure⁷⁴ Will [*i*], the two classes (beginning with) ढा *ṭa* and ता *ta* (arise) from directed Will; and the 'pa' class (comes) from Expansion [*u*]. There is a five-fold (classification of consonants) due to connection with the five Powers.[§] From the same (Power of) Will in its three forms [*i*, *ṛ*, *ḷ*] (comes) य *y*, र *r*, and ल *l*; from Expansion [*u*] (comes) the letter व *v*. From the same three-fold Will (comes) ष *ṣ*, स *s*, and श *ś*. From Emission [*visarga*] comes the letter ह *h*. The letter क्षा *kṣa* comes from the combination of (two) 'wombs' [i.e. the first and last consonants].

Thus this is the Blessed Lord, the Absolute itself in the form of the Lord of the Family (of Powers); and he has only One [consort], the Familial Power of Emission [*kaulikī visarga-śakti*], by which the 'articulating awarenesses' of the classes (of consonants) and (semi-vowels etc.), due to vibrating through (the vowels) from Bliss [*ā*] up to external

* Parallel passage: TA 3.110-111 and Jayaratha on same. Note that we could also translate this passage as "Because it is (all thus far) purely Consciousness [*saṃvedanasāra*], it all must first abide in the form of a point..."

‡ This would usually be referred to as the 'ca' class [ca, cha, ja, jha, ~na], but I am following Abhinava's hint and filling the 'womb' with the appropriate 'seed'.

§ Cf. TA 3.148c-150b. How to reconcile this statement with the schema just presented is so far unclear to me.

creation [h], attain the form of external realities.⁷⁵ This very Emission is of three types: that pertaining to the Individual [āṇava],⁷⁶ which has the nature of the repose of the mind [citta-vīśrānti]; that pertaining to Power [śākta], which is characterized by the awakening of the mind [citta-saṃbodha]; and that pertaining to Śiva [śāmbhava], which has the nature of the dissolution of the mind [citta-pralaya]. Thus Emission is the only Power of the Blessed Lord in (his) creation of the universe.

Thus It is this many: when (one's) awareness is totally undivided, then there is only one: the Blessed Lord. When one perceives in terms of the division into masculine and feminine [lit., 'seed and womb'], there are (two): Power [śakti] and the Power-holder. When perceiving in terms of the eight individual (elements), there are nine classes, with (Śiva as) the Lord of the Circle.⁷⁷ When one perceives predominately in terms of each individual (unit), It has a fifty-fold nature.⁷⁸ Regarding those same (phonemes), when one perceives in terms of the sub-divisions that are present, It takes the form of eighty-one aspects.⁷⁹ But in fact, there are really six (fundamental) articulating Awarenesses, becoming twelve by diffusing and reabsorbing,⁸⁰ that develop the perfection of the universal Power of the Supreme Lord. These are the very powers that, due to their quality of articulating awareness,⁸¹ are interpreted as 'the Blessed Auspicious Little Kālīs'.⁸¹ These pure articulate awarenesses are Power alone [on the highest level]; they assume an intermediate form on the level of Pure Knowledge [śuddhavidyā-tattva], that of Wisdoms and Lords of Wisdom, due to the contraction (of Consciousness) which is merely the expansion of Projection [māyā].^{19 82}

Further, within the realm of manifest reality [māyā], their separation into distinct phenomena becoming clear and explicit, they assume the quality of māyic syllables — which, having taken on their ordinary practical quality (as the phonemes of language) on the Visionary, Intermediate, and Articulate (levels of the Word), conclude by assuming their nature as external principles [tattva]. These (phonemes), when viewed as almost like (dead) bodies⁸⁴ and when one re-enlivens them with the pure awarenesses [parāmarśa] that are the life (to those inert bodies)—whose system is explained (above)—then, though those (syllables) are 'māyic', they become potent, and (only) as such they give both enjoyment and liberation.

⁸⁵ A meaning of the verbal root kal is 'to sound', here interpreted as 'to articulate': so Kālī can mean 'She who articulates'.

¹⁹ alternate translation: "due to being contracted by a trace of the awakening of māyā" – Sanderson.

Thus it is that a person, seeing himself as nothing but the place of repose [*viśrānti*] of all these articulate awarenenses, in whom all the divisions of the Principles [*tattvas*], beings, and worlds are reflected, attains embodied liberation through the Immersion of the Benevolent One [*śāmbhava-samāveśa*], free of differentiated mental constructs. Here too, as before, there is no necessity whatsoever (to practice) mantras and so on.

The entire universe shines here within the Self, just as a complex creation (appears) in a mirror. However, awakened Consciousness [*bodha*] consciously articulates [*parāmrś*] the universe in accordance with the nectarean taste [*rasa*] of its own self-awareness [*vimarśa*]
—but a mirror does not do so. || [7]

Everything is one's own essence, vibrating within this stainless mirror of Consciousness. Reality shines in the form of a mystical contact with the nectarean taste of Awareness. ||

Hearing thus, one who unites (with) this pure Self of his, comprising all things, becomes Supreme Bhairava, i.e. he attains supreme liberation. ||

Thus ends the third daily [teaching] in *The Essence of the Tantras*, composed by the revered master Abhinavagupta, entitled 'Light on the Divine Means [*śāmbhava-upāya*]'. || III ||



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Tantrasāra: The Essence of the Tantra(s)

Now, the Fourth Day['s Teaching]

This is the [discussion of] the Empowered Means (*śākta-upāya*).

When a person [chooses to] gradually refine & purify his understanding [of reality] in order to enter into [an experiential realization of] his true nature as described above, he employs a process of contemplation (*bhāvanā-krama*) that presupposes proper reasoning & discernment (*sat-tarka*), true scriptures (*sad-āgama*), and instruction by a teacher of Reality (or true teacher—*sad-guru*).

To explain: due solely to the power of dualistic thought-forms (*vikalpas*), living beings imagine themselves bound, [and] this [very] egoic conception (*abhimāna*) is the cause of the repeated bondage that is the cycle of suffering (*saṃsāra*). Thus, [when] a thought-form that opposes [that egoic conception] arises, it crushes the thought-form that is the cause of *saṃsāra*, and thereby causes liberation (*abhyudaya*).

And that [salvific thought-form] has such a nature:

“That which is pure unlimited Awareness—transcending all Principles that are by nature limited & circumscribed, up to [and including] God—alone is the supreme reality. That is the ground for the establishment of [all] things. That is the life-force of the universe. By That the universe lives & breathes, and That alone am I. Thus what I am is one with [/embodies] everything and yet transcends everything (*viśvottīrṇo viśvātmā cāham*).”

This [understanding] does not arise amongst those blinded by *māyā*, because they lack *sat-tarka*, *sad-āgama*, and *sad-guru*. For Vaiṣṇavas and others are limited by [and to] the Principle of Attachment (*rāga-tattva*), [though] only to the extent that [they keep to] their scriptures. Thus they do not participate in the turn toward the higher View, [and] therefore, they are averse to proper reasoning & discernment, true scriptures, and instruction by true teachers. As it is said in the *Pārameśvara-tantra*:

“All these Vaiṣṇavas and others are ‘stained’ by limited knowledge and attachment. They do not discover the highest reality, being deprived of the wisdom of the Omniscient One.”

Therefore, only those who are pierced by a strong Descent of Power from Śiva, [and] who [subsequently] refine & purify their conceptual understanding (*vikalpa*) through true scriptures and [instruction by a teacher of Reality], [are able to] ‘enter’ their own ultimate nature.

An objection might arise (here): In that case, would not the ‘highest reality’ be reducible to a [mere] concept? We say: not so, because the [beneficial] conceptual understanding [described above] is effective merely in breaking the substratum of [the experience of] duality (and once it has accomplished that, it dissolves—A.S.). But (by contrast) the highest Reality is self-manifest everywhere as everything [/self-luminous in its entirety in everything]. Thus a conceptual understanding (*vikalpa*) can neither help it [manifest] nor undermine it in any way.

On that point, for one who has been pierced by an extremely strong Descent of Power, discerning understanding (*sat-tarka*) arises entirely spontaneously, for such a one is ‘naturally self-perfected’ (*sāṃsiddhika*). Such a one [needs no formal initiation, for s/he] is said to be ‘initiated by the goddesses’ [of his own awareness (*sva-saṃvitti*: TĀ 4.43)].

For another person, [lacking the discernment arising from the intense Descent of Power, it is achieved] through the scriptures. This and more will be discussed in detail in [chapter 11], *Illumination of the Descent of Power*.

Now, the function of a teacher is to explain the scriptures; and the function of the scriptures is to give rise to a proper conceptual understanding (*vikalpa*) which catalyzes a continuity [of accurate insights] that flow one after the other in a connected series [leading inevitably to the final liberating insight]. It is just such a continuity of conceptual understandings of this kind that we define as ‘right reasoning’ or discernment (*sat-tarka*). And it is precisely this that is [also] called *bhāvanā* (creative contemplation / realization), for through it the Reality—which, though existing, appears not to exist due to one’s inability to perceive it—is ‘realized’ (*bhāvyate*) by making It perceivable.

In our way, none of the Components of Yoga (*yogāṅgas*) is a direct means [to liberation] apart from this discernment that manifests Pure Wisdom (*śuddhavidyā*). The class of Observances (*niyama*)—discipline (*tapas*) and so on, the class of Restraints (*yama*)—non-violence and so on, the class of Breath Extension Exercises (*prāṇāyāma*)—yogic inhalation and so on: as these all relate only to specific objects of consciousness, what could be the possible use of them with regard to Awareness [itself]? Even Sense-withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*) can only exalt the sense-faculties. Even Concentration, Meditation, and Absorption (*dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna*, *samādhi*), being accomplished in the successive stages of practice, [merely] confer on the meditator an (increasing) state of identity with the object of meditation. And practice (*abhyāsa*) is not at all possible with regard to the supreme Reality, which is Śiva, one's own essence-nature. For the nature of practice is that it takes something developed in awareness and fixes it within the *prāṇa*, mind, or body—such as practice in weight-lifting, knowing the meaning of a [particular] science, or dancing. But in the nature of Consciousness there is nothing to be added nor subtracted. How, then, could there be [any point to] practice?

If it be objected “What then is the point of reason (*tarka*)?”, it has already been stated here that it is only a way of removing the substratum of duality and nothing else whatsoever. Or rather, even in mundane practice, what ‘practice’ really means is that some aspect [of oneself]—such as the body and so on—makes manifest a desired form and suppresses all other [possible] forms, for the true nature of all such aspects is Awareness and thus they are omniform (= can take on any form). But in the case of the ultimate Reality, there is nothing that needs be rejected, as I have said.

Even the substratum of duality itself is not a distinct actual entity, but rather is merely the lack of insight concerning one's own nature. Thus, when we say that the removal of duality is accomplished through a conceptual understanding, this is what is really meant: one's ultimately true nature (*paramārtha-svarūpa*), illuminating itself, having gradually laid aside its condition of ignorance—which it freely took on—shines forth in these (three) stages: (first) turning towards expansion, then expanding, then expanded. Revealing (himself) in this way is simply the nature of the Highest Divinity. Therefore, none of the Components of Yoga are a direct means in our system, though they may support discernment.

True discernment alone is a direct means to That. It alone is Pure Wisdom, and it is refined in many ways, such as worship (*yāga*), fire-offerings (*homa*), mantra-repetition (*japa*), vows & observances (*vrata*), and *yoga*.