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# *Art in the Tantric Tradition in India, China, and Japan*

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"May the sport of Krishna's amours in the song of Shri Jayadeva  
Bring completely to an end the sins of this, the age of Kali."

—Jayadeva, *Love Songs of Vidyapani*

## **Introduction**

The history of Western art is steeped in religious symbolism; perhaps all art is in one way or another an extension of the religious urge in humanity. But to westerners, it is often difficult to leave the comfortable domain of a familiar religious iconography and venture into an utterly alien, sometimes shockingly so, philosophy with an artistic tradition as rich as the one they are familiar with.

It is the aim of this paper to outline briefly the tenets of such an alien philosophy and the artistic expression of that philosophy.

## **Tantric Philosophy**

"Tantra" is a Sanskrit word taken from the root *tan-*, "to expand."

**Figure 1:** Yogi figure surrounded by animals.  
Harappan culture, c. 2300–1750 B.C.

"Tantrism" is a form of religious practice that takes elements from its Vedic roots and combines them with elements of Buddhism and Hinduism to form a synthesis with universal roots. Elements of Tantra date back nearly 5,000 years to the Harappan Culture (Indus Valley Civilization, c. 2300–1700 B.C.), where a stele shows a yogi, with erect phallus, in the lotus position [see Figure 1]. Tantra also shows elements of the Vedic Upanishads. However, it seems likely that the general form of ritualized male/female fertility worship predates even this, hearkening back to Indo-Aryan tribes and, more generally, all fertility worship.

Unlike Hinayana or even Mahayana Buddhism, Tantra involves esoteric sacramental practices, some of them centered on the breaking of taboo as a means to spiritual enlightenment. For instance, sexual intercourse is used in a controlled way to symbolize the attainment of oneness with the universe, in which the barrier between the mystic and the god disappears. However, there are crucial differences between tantric embrace and ordinary sexual contact. At the time of completion, the tantric practitioner has absorbed the energy flow into the center of his or her psyche, and experiences the mental and physical conditions present at death.

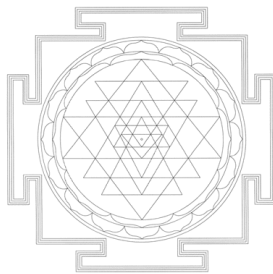
When Siddhartha Gautama was searching for enlightenment, he abandoned the pleasure palace his father had built for him, and set out in the world. He felt he had to rid his mind of desire, and as a means to this end, he denied all the body's desires, culminating in a fast that left him little more than a skeleton. He meditated constantly during his fast, but was unable to achieve the final breakthrough that would allow him to pierce the veil of *maya* (illusion world).

According to Tantric teaching, he failed because it is not by denying the body's desires that one can achieve enlightenment. Rather, the more one tries to deny them, the stronger they become. In Tantrism, the aim is to use the body's desires to generate energy that can be channeled into spiritual growth. This can be thought of as the spiritual equivalent of judo, in which smaller opponents can overcome larger opponents by using their size against them. Or, the goal is not to shrink the senses but to conquer them through experience. "Perfection can be attained easily by satisfying all desires," reads the *Guhya-Samaj Tantra*.

According to Tantric teachings, Shakyamuni only achieved enlightenment when he broke his fast and ate a mixture of rice and milk prepared for him by a young woman. He felt a surge of energy and this time he required only a few hours of meditation to achieve full awareness. The speed with which he was able to reach enlightenment is part of Tantrism; it is considered by its adherents to be the fastest and best way to reach enlightenment.

As mentioned above, Tantrism involves the ritualized breaking of taboos. The five M's of *madya* (wine), *mamsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (fried cereal), and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse) are both ritual elements (left-hand path) and reminders of yogic processes (right-hand path). The most important of these is sexual intercourse. All primitive myths include fertility rites and mother goddesses, but in Tantrism, the union of male and female takes on cosmological implications. In classical Hinduism, the lingam of Shiva is the center of worship. In Tantric Hinduism, the yoni of Shakti is added to the lingam of Shiva to form a symbol incorporating the genitals of both sexes, thereby symbolizing the creation of the universe.

Another important aspect of Tantra is meditation which involves geometric patterns called *mandalas* and spoken phrases called *mantras*. Mandalas are geometrical



**Figure 2:** Shri Yantra.



**Figure 3:** Shiva Nataraja. Chola, A.D. 11th–12th century A.D.

representations of Tantric concepts. They generally involve interconnected squares, circles, and triangles. The Shri Yantra [Figure 2] features interlocking triangles (yoni) surrounded by two circles of lotuses, reminiscent of the flame halo representing the creative-destructive power of Shiva/Shakti, shown in Shiva Nataraja at Chola [Figure 3].

### **Tantric Art**

In a strict sense, there is no Tantric art. In an equally strict sense, there is no Christian art, each religion being an essentially spiritual experience. However, there has accumulated over the centuries a considerable body of what we consider to be Christian art, and the same is true of Tantric art. After all, few religions, from primitive fertility cults to modern Christianity, fail to inspire the artistic urge in humans.

For the most part we will deal with the representational art of Tantra in this essay. The intricacies of symbolism and numerology in a discussion of mandalas would be enough to fill another paper of this size.

### **India**

Although it would be ridiculous to say that eroticism in art or religion began in any one place, it is certain that the specific philosophy known as "Tantra" began in India. It also reached its highest artistic expression there.

Tantric art in India springs from a rich history, as outlined above. Yogic practices, and probably phallus worship, existed in the Indus Valley civilization. A strong tradition of fertility goddesses was not supplanted by the rise of Buddhism, as evidenced by the existence of yakshi figures on Buddhist stupas [Figure 4]. As described above, certain Buddhists reinterpreted traditional Buddhist scriptures and advocated the breaking of taboo and the

embracing of the desires of the body as a means for more rapid enlightenment than was possible under Mahayana Buddhism. This practice was known as Tantric Buddhism.

By medieval times, Buddhism had waned in popularity and was being replaced by Hinduism. The Hindus had a bewildering pantheon of gods, but believed they were all aspects of one god-being. Sects developed to worship different aspects of this god-being, the most popular being Shiva worship. Like the Buddhists, the Hindus had a sect that used

ritual sex to channel energy into the search for enlightenment. This sect was known as Tantric Hinduism, and practitioners worshipped Shiva and his consort, Shakti.



**Figure 4:** Yakshi Chandra. Bharhut stupa, Shunga, 2nd century B.C.

Tantric art reached its zenith in the temple dedicated to Shiva at Khajuraho and Orissa. An incredible diversity of sculpted



figures  
sometimes  
thousands

**Figure 5:** Figures in sexo-yogic pose. Surya temple. Konarak, Orissa, A.D. 1238-64.

of them, surrounded and filled these temples, grouped by twos, threes, or more, all in overt and fantastic variations on sexual couplings, the most mundane involving one man and one woman in a relatively simple position [Figure 5].

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**Figure 6:** Figures in sexo-yogic pose. Surya temple. Konarak, Orissa, A.D. 1238-64.



**Figure 7:** Tibetan Yab-Yum, 18th Century.

of  
figures in many of the scenes was an indication of the ritualized enactments of the sexual act inside the temple, and the impossible postures of many of the figures symbolized the divinity of the sexual partners. As described above, in the Tantric tradition, experienced practitioners could experience godhood through the sexual act; indeed, the practitioners were held to *become* gods during the course of the ritual. This union is symbolized by the Tibetan yab-yum, in which two gods are shown in ecstatic embrace, their limbs so intertwined that one cannot tell which is which [Figure 7].

Invasions  
by the  
Huns, the  
Moslems,  
and

**Figure 8:** Vajradhara. Collection of Herbert Guenther.

Victorian soldiers led to an end of the flowering of Tantrism in India. It continues to this day, but nothing could rival the expression Tantrism found in the Northern Medieval period in India.

### China

When  
Buddhism  
expanded  
from

India into China, it took its iconography along with it. Buddha are found along the northern trade routes dating to the fourth century A.D. Typical was



**Figure 9:** Bodhisattva Padmapani. Ajanta, 5th century A.D.

**Figure 10:** White Robed Kuan-yin. Mu-ch'i, Southern Sung Dynasty.

the colossal Shakyamuni at Yünkang, reminiscent of the Mathuran Shakyamuni at Sarnath. Over the years, however, there was a shift in the mainstream iconography. As the Gupta "Buddha Preaching the Law" at Sarnath and the Bodhisattva Padmapani at Ajanta [Figure 9] replaced the ruggedly masculine Buddhas and bodhisattvas of Mathura, the Chinese developed androgynous Buddhas like the Seated Buddha at T'ien-lung-shan. Michael Sullivan notes that the bodhisattva Avalokitevara, upon his translation into China as Kuan-yin [Figure 10], became female (1). Kenneth Ch'en also notes this change and attributes it to the influence of Tantric Buddhism, which elevates the importance of the goddess.

Tantrism achieved some popularity briefly in China in the eighth century, but never seriously challenged Taoism. It reappeared with the invasion of the Mongols in the tenth century. The Mongols saw in Tibetan Buddhism a similarity to their own barbaric gods, and Lamaism (the *Gelugpa* branch of Tibetan Buddhism) was encouraged during the Yüan dynasty.

The most popular form of Tantra in China was *Chen Yen* ("true word"). This was a highly ritualized form of Tantra in which by thought (*dhyana*), word (*mantra*), and posture (*mudra*) the celebrant assumed the posture of the Buddha. Through the mystic power of these formulae, the body of the celebrant became the body of the Buddha, just as bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ in the Catholic Mass. This echoes the claim of Tantra to be the "lightning path" (*vajrayana*) leading to enlightenment in only one lifetime. But the complex rituals made *Chen Yen* less popular than the Amithaba sect among the common people, and among the literati, the reliance on mystical incantations led many to return to the more Hinayana-type roots of Buddhism and develop Ch'an.

Accounts differ as to the appearance of Tantrism into Tibet, but it appears most likely that by the seventh century Buddhist

missionaries had brought it into Tibet from India. There it met with resistance from the native religion Bon, but was eventually adopted in a new form full of terrifying demons and images of human sacrifice. The terrifying deities of Bon utilized the Tantric idea of ritual sex, and it is this combination of bloodthirsty demons and eroticism that characterizes both Tibetan and Tantric art to most westerners.

Tantrism never held great influence in China, and almost none after the Yüan dynasty. However, it should be noted that a type of right-hand Tantric ritual in which fruit, vegetables, and flowers replace the five M's in ritual practice was introduced by a Tantric master named Vasishtha, who brought to India various practices identified with China.

Tantrism in China and Tibet appears to be suffering greatly from Communist rule, and the Dalai Lama was forced to flee Tibet after the Chinese invasion in 1950. Even so, it is Tibet that is generally considered the center of Tantric practice today.

### Japan

Westerners attribute to the Chinese and the Japanese a strong

**Figure 11:** Wind in the Willow, from Ming Dynasty book *Hua-Ying-Chin-Chen*.

sense of social decorum. However, both the Chinese and the Japanese have a rich tradition in erotic art [Figure 11]. The pillow books given to couples upon their marriage to introduce them to the art of love are reminiscent of the *Kama Sutra* and were frequently painted by the best artists of the time.

In addition, popular painting was frequently

**Figure 12:** Lovers. Hokusai, late 1790s.

risqué. Kitagawa Utamaro's woodblock prints of *Ten Physiognomic Types of Women* and Hokusai's *Lovers* [Figure 12] are illustrative of a tradition that includes numerous scenes of courtesans, lovers, and women in bathhouses.

As the Chinese brought Buddhism to Japan, it is not

**Figure 13:** White Robed Kannon. Ue Gukei, late 14th century A.D.

surprising that the iconography of Japanese Buddhism is similar to that in China. As discussed above, the Chinese Kuan-yin is a female equivalent to a male Indian bodhisattva, having become female as a result of Tantric influence. It should be noted that the same is true in Japan, as shown by the White Robed Kannon [Figure 13].

However, Tantric art *per se* is rare in Japan. The Shingon school, dating from the ninth century, utilized a sacramental form of Buddhism similar to Lamaism in Tibet. It uses sacred formulae (*mandala, mantra*) as a means for spiritual advancement, and

derived from the Chen Yen school in China (Shingan means "true word" in Japanese), having been imported by Kobo Daishi. The *Blue Fud* and related paintings bring to mind the Tibetan tankas of the Bon tradition. Tantrism in Japan was a secretive cult, shrouded in ritual. It was a sign of your advancement in the cult when you were allowed to see a new room and a new painting. Much art in Japan is known to have been lost to fire; it is likely that Tantric cults suffered this fate disproportionately because of this very secrecy.

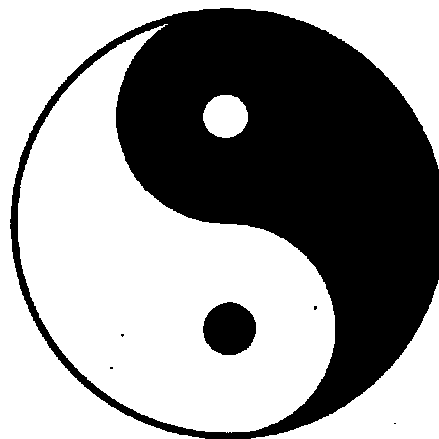
The same forces that led to the development of Ch'an in China led to the development of Zen in Japan. Even the lightning path of Tantrism was unable to compete with the simplicity of the cult of Amita, who required only faith on the part of his followers.

As Lamaism survives to this day (headed by the Dalai Lama), Shingan remains one of the leading Japanese sects today.

### Taoism

No discussion of Tantrism in China and Japan can be complete without at least a mention of the Tao. Although there seems to be no compelling historical evidence for one to be descended from the other, there are similarities in the basic tenets of the two philosophies that are worth mentioning.

As discussed above, Tantra believes that the physical union of the male and the female symbolized attainment of godhood through representation of the universe in the united halves of male and female. That is, in this sense, identical to the concept of *yin* and *yang* as halves of the Eternal Tao [Figure 14]. Taoism believes that the universe is made up of opposite halves, which, when united, make one whole. Examples of these aspects of the Tao are *yin/yang*, goddess/god, yum/yab (2), birth/death, wet/dry, and bell/thunderbolt (3). Taoism holds that men are holders of yang energy, but that they contain a seed of yin, while women are repositories of yin energy, but contain a seed of yang.



**Figure 14:** Yin/Yang.

Taoism underlies virtually all Chinese and Japanese thought, and is at the root of Chinese and Japanese sexual theory. During sexual intercourse, man and woman exchange yang and yin energy. The woman becomes pregnant, and the man becomes "pregnant" of "harmonious intelligence." Like the Tantrists, the Taoists believed that harmony and enlightenment were rooted in life on earth, not in some unperceivable "heaven." Further, the Taoists believed that personal and even societal problems were a result of yin and yang being out of balance.

One would expect that Taoist art would be much like Tantric art from



the foregoing, but most Taoist art is landscape, whether painting or Japanese garden and teahouse. Esoteric meaning was imbued through symbolism alone; for instance, eagle in Chinese—*ying*—is the same word as “heroic” and represents yang energy.

### Conclusion

When Victorian explorers reached India, they were shocked by the graphic sexual imagery they found in sites such as Khajuraho. And these sites were only the ones that escaped the moral indignation of an earlier invader, the Moslems in the tenth century. One can only imagine the extent to which Tantric Hinduism flourished before these invaders came to impose a Western sense of morality on the people they subjugated.

Like other instances of clashes between cultures, the basic problem was one of misunderstanding; or, more precisely, lack of common foundation on which to base understanding: for the Tantric tradition and the Judeo-Christo-Moslem tradition differ profoundly. In the West, religion takes as a premise the fact that the body is evil and that sensual pleasure must be denied. Tantra teaches that the way of the flesh is the way to enlightenment; in fact, ritual sex in Tantrism is analogous to the transmutation of communion in Catholicism: the man and the woman become god and goddess and their union is the creation of the universe.

In the West we traditionally have favored the male over the female. In the Judeo-Christo-Moslem tradition, the inherent good in man (Adam) is subverted by the inherent evil in woman (Eve). Even in the field of psychoanalysis a woman is typically seen as a deformed man. (4) Western society has been, in Taoist terminology, overbalanced on the *yang* side. More recently it has been recognized that each man has a feminine side (*anima* in Jungian terminology) and each woman has a masculine side (*animus*). Today more and more men are trying to “get in touch with their feminine side,” or, in Taoist language, balancing their *yang* with *yin*.

Considering this interest in uniting the male and female in us, it is not surprising that Lama Yeshe believes Tantra to be suitable for the western world because of its emphasis on direct experience. According to Lama Yeshe, Tantra is “scientific”—a practical, step-by-step exploration of the human condition. In his preface to *Introduction to Tantra*, Jonathan Landaw states, “Tantra is a path of joy and affirmation, qualities so sadly lacking in many of the currently depleted forms of what were once powerful spiritual traditions.”

However, it is to be hoped that the overt eroticism of Tantric art does not obscure the basic equality (indeed unity) of the sexes. The traditional western concept of dominance is as alien to Tantrism as the art of Tantrism was alien to those first Victorian explorers who happened upon the temples of Khajuraho and Orissa.

### Notes

1. Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 97
2. *yum* and *yab* are the Tibetan equivalents of yoni and lingam
3. In Tantric art, the god Shiva and his consort Shakti are seen

intertwined into one body through sexual union. They are not merely husband and wife, but two halves of one whole; two aspects of one god. Usually, Shiva is shown holding a thunderbolt and Shakti a bell. These symbolize the phallus and vulva respectively, and the thunderbolt gives its name to the Buddhist sect *Vajrayana* ("diamond/lightning vehicle"), an outgrowth of Tantrism associated with numerous bodhisattvas, especially the androgynous Bodhisattva Padmapani. The bell rings at the moment of union as the two halves attain oneness, just as the bell rings in a Catholic Mass to indicate that transmutation of the host has occurred.

4. Freudians believe that the determining factor in a woman's life is her realization that she does not have a penis.

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