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THE TANTRIC VIEW OF THE HUMAN BODY

*Radha Krishna Baror

Assistant Professor, Department of History and Indian Culture, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to many ascetic traditions, Tantras have a very healthy view of life which is also reflected in their wholehearted acceptance of human body. Tantras believe that all the endeavor of life, whether material or spiritual, can be accomplished only through the psycho-physical human personality. Therefore, it is not wise to ignore the human body. In addition, since Tāntric path is the path of yogic sādhanās, some of which are highly technical, a robust body and sound mind become a prerequisite for this path. Therefore, Tantras always advise to maintain physical and mental health. This paper is an effort to understand Tāntric views about human body.

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INTRODUCTION

(Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇatantram, 2020) The role of 'body' in the Tāntric path is extremely important. Contrary to several ascetic traditions, the 'body' is neither degraded as impure nor considered to be a barrier on the spiritual path. The Buddhist Tantras believe that 'body' is sole medium through which one can attain enlightenment. For this reason, it is often compared with a 'boat'. The Buddha advised his disciples that they should refrain from both extreme asceticism and gross sensualism. He advised them to follow a 'middle way' (Soṇa-sutta, *Āṅguttara-nikāya*) which is essential for a healthy body and mind. According to the Pāli-nikāyas, the perfect 'body' and 'mind' is a pre-requisite for the successful attainment of spiritual goal. The *Nikāyas* mention five *balas*, namely *saddhābala*, *vīriyabala*, *satibala*, *samādhībala*, and *paññābala* (*Samyutta-Nikāya-ahāvagga*, cited in Sayadaw 2011: 191). The Yogic *sādhanās* involve several bodily exercises and practices, and some of them are highly complex. Only those who have an energetic body and a sound mind can do them. Thus, the role of 'body' becomes quite significant. The monk Dharmākarasays (in the *Sukhāvativyūha*, pp. 388-9):

"O Lord, if after obtaining enlightenment, those bodhisattvas who are born in that Buddha-field of mine, do not possess bodily strength as solid as Nārāyaṇa's vajra, then may I not obtain the highest enlightenment?" (cited in Snellgrove 2002: 134). Several tāntric *sādhanās* cannot be performed without a powerful 'body', especially those of the Higher Anuttarayoga Tantras.

Therefore, it is warned that on Tāntric path one "should never be entered upon, without a mature or perfect body" (Dasgupta 1946: 108). Tāntric masters devoted a considerable time to understand human body, which is reflected in their writings on human anatomy. In which, we find detailed description of body, its nerve system (*nāḍī-tantra*), psychic centres (*cakras*) etc. For Tāntric authors, the body "embodies the truth of the whole universe" (Dasgupta 1950: 161). For this reason, Tāntric authors tried to locate sun, moon, rivers, mount Meru, mount Sumeru etc. in it. (Dasgupta, 1946) In Hindu Tantras, Kuṇḍalinī yoga is one of the most popular yoga, which identifies seven *cakras* in human body, namely *Mulādhāra-cakra* (root centre), *Svādhīsthāna-cakra* (below the Navel), *Maṇipūra-cakra* (Navel centre), *Anāhata-cakra* (Heart centre), *Viśuddha-cakra* (Throat centre), *Ājñā-cakra* (between the eye brows), *Sahasrāra-padma* (crown centre) (Govinda 1960: 144-5). Most of the Buddhist Tantras, however, recognise merely four *Cakras* namely the *Nirmāṇa-cakra*, the *Dharma-cakra*, the *Sambhoga-cakra*, and the *Mahāsukh-cakra* (Tsuda 1974: 63). However, it must be said that even though Tantras wrote extensively about the human 'anatomy', that 'anatomy' has nothing to do with modern medical sciences. We cannot find such *cakras* and *nāḍīs* as depicted in the Tantras by anatomical intersections. Despite this, value and importance of yogic *sādhanās* remain intact, whether tāntric anatomical knowledge is confirmed or not confirmed by medical sciences. These *cakras* and *nāḍīs* are reflections of psycho-analytical experiences of highly accomplished yogīns on their spiritual endeavour. The *cakras*, from lower to higher, denote the spiritual ascendancy of a *sādhaka*, from *bhautika* to *ādhyātmika*, from ignorance to wisdom, from darkness to light, and from bondage to liberation. That is, "from the state of greatest density and materiality up to the state of immaterial multidimensional extension; from the organs of dark, sub-conscious, but cosmically powerful primordial forces to those of a radiant

*Corresponding author: Radha Krishna Baror,
Assistant Professor, Department of History and Indian Culture,
University of Rajasthan, Jaipur.

enlightened consciousness” (Govinda 1960: 142). (*Samvarodaya Tantra*, 1974) In Tāntric tradition, it is said that goddess kuṇḍalīnī lies in the *Mulādhāra-cakra* in dormancy (*śuṣuptāvasthā*), which if awakened, by a correct *sādhanā*, leads one to supreme realization. In the view of Tāntric masters, the power of kuṇḍalīnī is limitless. Lama Anagarika Govinda remarks, “The wise, who control these forces, may reach through them the highest spiritual power and perfection, while those who ignorantly release them, will be destroyed by them” (Ibid: 139). Indeed, “the forces which dwell in the human body, may lead to liberation as well as to bondage, towards the light as well as into utter darkness” (loc. cit.). Thus, it is advised that one should carefully regulate the life energy. Any mismanagement would be fatally dangerous. (Sayadaw, 1999). In Buddhist Tantras, instead of Kuṇḍalīnī, the terms used are the *dākiṇī* or the *caṇḍālī*. Also, *prajñā* replaces *śakti*: and this is the main difference between the Hindu and the Buddhist tantras (see Govinda 1960: 139). Since Hindu Tantras focus mainly on the *śakti*, it operates in the realm of creation-destruction-recreation; the Buddhist Tantras, on the other hand, focuses on the development of *prajñā*, and seeks to see the things “as they really are” (*yathābhūtam*). With the development of *prajñā*, the net of ignorance extinguishes, which is symbolized as burning of the five *dhyāni Buddhas* by Caṇḍālī, while ascending upward to the highest *cakra*, i.e., the *sahajacakra*, which resulted in attainment of great bliss, the *mahāsukha*. “Caṇḍālī blazes up at the navel/ she burns the Five Buddhas/ she burns Locanā and the others/ HAM is burnt and the Moon melts/” (*Hevajra Tantra* (HT) I.i.31). (Caṇḍālī may be compared with goddess Kuṇḍalīnī of Hindu Tantras). Ascendence of Caṇḍālī up to highest *cakra* is nothing but the spiritual ascendancy of *asādhaka* from gross materialistic to subtle spiritual state. Buddhist Tantras believe that everyone has a possibility to become a buddha. The *Hevajra Tantra* states, “All beings are buddhas, but this is obscured by accidental defilement. When this is removed, they are buddhas at once, of there is no doubt” (HT II.iv.69). And tantric *sādhanās* are intended for the eradication of such defilements.

(Snellgrove, 2002) Furthermore, like *Iḍā*, *Piṅgalā* and *Suṣumnā* of Hindu tantras, Buddhist tantras have *Lalanā*, *Rasanā* and *Avadhūtī* - the three main *nāḍīs* (see *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra* (CMT); HT; *Sekoddeśa-tīka*).

As mentioned in the *Hevajra Tantra*, “Among these (out of 32) three veins are chief, *Lalanā*, *Rasanā*, and *Avadhūtī*. *Lalanā* has the nature of wisdom and *Rasanā* consists in the means, and *Avadhūtī* is in the middle, free from the notions of subject and object” (HT I.i.13-14). It is said that *Lalanā* (left, *prajñā*) and *Rasanā* (right, *upāya*) carry semen and menstrual fluid respectively and meet at the navel where *Avadhūtī* is located. It is advised that a perfected yogi should raise this fluid, the *bodhicitta*, through *Avadhūtī* up to the highest *cakra* to attain *mahāsukha*, the Buddha hood (see Tsuda 1974: 63). This is the culmination of *vajra*-path, attainment of non-dual state, termed variously as the *projñopāya*, *advaya*, or *yuganaddha*. The Tantras try to describe supreme truth, using *sexo-yogic* terminologies, perhaps there is no other way to indicate such an intense ecstatic experience.

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