# Julius Evola

# What Tantrism Means to Modern Western Civilization

# One

One of the characteristics of the Hindu doctrine that may be described in a general way as Tantrism is its claim to offer a formulation of the traditional doctrine that is only suitable to the last epoch of the present cycle, i.e., for the Kali Yuga. Notwithstanding its importance, it was little known in the West up to a short time ago. It is said that teachings, rituals, sciences, which might have been suitable during the primordial age (Satya Yuga) are no longer suitable for a humanity living in later epochs, especially in the "dark age."

Therefore, such a humanity can find, not in the Vedas or in other ancient texts, but in the Tantras and the Agamas, the knowledge and the efficient technique allowing it to attain the supreme goal of man: freedom from every form of conditioned existence. Thus the Tantras often present themselves as a "fifth Veda" — as a further revelation corresponding to the present phase of manifestation. They further state that former rituals have become as inefficient as "a snake deprived of its venom" inasmuch as the prevailing qualification (*adhikara*) in man has undergone a complete change.<sup>1</sup>

However, such a point of view is not valid only in the spiritual "space" of Hindu civilization and tradition, because the doctrine of the four ages has, so to speak, a general validity. There are Western doctrines that correspond to the Hindu formulation of this doctrine. It is in fact sufficiently clear that the last phase ("the iron age" in Western terminology) bears all the signs of modern civilization, the

<sup>1</sup> With reference to all this, see for example: *Mahanirvana Tantra*, I, 19; II, 7, 14; IV, 47; *Tarapradipa*, 1; Shiva Shiandra: *Tantratattava*, trans. into English by Arthur Avalon (Sir John Woodroffe), *The Serpent Power: The Secrets of Tantric and Shaktic Yoga* (London: Luzac & Co., 1919).

center of which is the West.<sup>2</sup>

As things are, one may be led to consider the extent to which the "relevance" claimed by Tantrism has a certain objective basis, particularly regarding Western Civilization.

# Two

Historically, Tantrism is connected with a characteristic revolution that began in India towards the middle of the first millennium BC. Since that time, certain divine female figures—Shakti—rise to evergrowing importance, accompanying Hindu deities which in the Aryan period appeared as isolated and, in several cases, even obtaining an advantage over them. Shaktism is one of the central aspects of Tantrism.

Now, from a metaphysical point of view, the "divine couple" is a symbol of the two principal aspects of every cosmic principle: the male deity representing the the unchangeable and transcending aspect and the female one representing power, strength, force of manifestation, and, in a certain sense, also the active and immanent aspect. Therefore, the appearance of Shaktism in the ancient Hindu-Aryan world, apart from its popular and devotional forms, is a barometrical sign of a change in beliefs. It tells us how, compared to the former consciousness of man, which was focused on the realm of being, the "manifestation" and "action" aspects of the deity were felt more directly and took on a special importance<sup>3</sup>

Now there is no question whether in this we have simultaneously also the basic character of modern Western civilization, in which immanentism is the by-word. Furthermore, the chief meaning of the word Shakti is capacity to act, authority, and power. Speculative Tantrism conceives the world, life, and man as existing essentially as a sort of power. It speaks of an active "Brahman." Maya, carried back to Maya-Shakti, which no longer means a cosmic illusion, but rather the manifestation of her essence which is made up of will

<sup>2</sup> For comparisons among the various formulations of the doctrine of the four ages and its utilization in general metaphysics of history, see Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1995), part II.

<sup>3</sup> The fact that in certain aspects Shaktism must be considered as a revival of a pre-Aryan archaic substratum does not alter the aforementioned interpretation.

# "icchamayi."

Moreover, Kali – an equivalent of Shakti, who according to the Tantra "is entirely awake" in the Kali Yuga – also has her demonic, unchained, and savage aspects. Could it not be that their counterpart in the modern world is whatever can prove the irruption of irrational and elemental forces, a "tellurism" and a demon of collectivistic currents which, at bottom, reveal themselves as the soul of the same world of technology, while their counterpart is made up by the religion of the future, by "vitalistic" theories, and by the discovery of the unconscious-instinctive, nocturnal face of the soul?

# Three

It cannot be denied that, under this aspect, there are motives in the Tantric conception capable of serving as the mirror of modern civilization in its most daring and problematic forms. On the other hand, what other point of view could be more fascinating for the Westerner's vocation than the one for which, according to De la Vallée Poussin, the Absolute Self ceases to be an ecstatic experience and becomes instead something that he, who has seen the light, can grasp and master.<sup>4</sup>

In the adept, in the Siddha, and in the Vira, the Tantric Kaula exalt the individual who is superior to every pair of contraries, is free from both good and evil, and whose laws is only his will (*cvecchacari*), thus going much further that Nietzsche's "superman." By following this road, the asceticism of a mortifying type is replaced by Hatha Yoga techniques that tend to rule the inmost forces of the body, together with a wisdom that proclaims, together with *Kularnava-tantra:* "The body is the temple of God and the living consciousness (*jiva*) is the eternal Shiva (*Sadashiva*)."

The ritual Tantric secret (*pancatattva*) proclaims the non-existence of the antithesis between asceticism and enjoyment, between *yoga* and *bhoga*. It promises the possession of the one and of the other, pointing out that the place of liberation is in this world and not in the other one (*yoga bhojate, mokhyate samsarah*).

<sup>4</sup> L. De La Vallee Pouissin, Bouddhisme (Paris, 1898), 48.

The observance of moral rules as well as of visible rites is, in such circles, declared to pertain only to the *pacu*, to the man bound, obtuse, and resembling an animal, while Tantrism promises the esoteric knowledge that makes one free and breaks all chains.<sup>5</sup>

On the basis of this, one might be tempted to speak of a "modern" and even a "Western" Tantrism. And yet in doing so a misunderstanding would certainly arise. These convergences do not erase a fundamental difference in planes and tendencies. Only by acknowledging this difference would it be possible to admit that Tantrism may lead the way for a Western elite that does not want to become the victim of those experiences whereby an entire civilization is on the verge of being submerged.

Firstly, it is worth stressing the point that in Tantrism the enhancing of forces, truths, and qualifications prevailing in the Kali Yuga does not allow a lower level, nor does it allow the datum of existence, to be considered as an ultimate appeal and still less (as in the case of many of our immanent philosophies) as something that must be and must also be glorified.

The values belonging to the highest spiritual realization, such as the ancient Hindu metaphysical tradition conceived it, are maintained. The actual problem of our age is to find the method to carry it into effect. This method, justly compared to "riding on the back of a tiger," may be summed up in this principle: "In order to obtain freedom, one must employ those same forces that have led to the downfall."

#### Four

To find the right way in this respect, one must bear in mind that, in the Tantric theory of manifestation, the actual prevalence of the Shaktic element in a given phase (the descending phase, *pravrttimarga*) does not mean anything when compared to the ratio of metaphysical subordination of the Shakti to the principle opposed to it, Shiva, Purusha, or whatever the "male of the Shakti" may be called. In this way some points of reference already exist that are

<sup>5</sup> For more on Tantrism, see Julius Evola, *The Yoga of Power: Tantra, Shakti, and the Secret Way*, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1992).

completely missing in the modern views of Western activism, of which, in a certain sense, they are the reverse.

In point of fact, according to Hindu and also Tantric views, all action, dynamism, and becoming has a female and negative character. On the contrary, whatever is permanent, unchangeable, and central has a truly male and positive character, possessing the gift of light and being, or, in other words, is the "Lord of the Scepter" (*vajra-dhara*).

This point, therefore, establishes a definite difference between modern horizons and those belonging to the higher forms of Tantrism. If, in a modern world, it is possible to ascertain a saturation of the Shaktic element, particularly in its lowest, materialistic and irrational aspects, the Shivaitic counterpart is lacking. The latter may be termed the true spiritual virility, closely connected to values, tendencies, and sciences even the ideas of which are now lost in the West.

And all this is, instead, taken in due consideration by Tantrism, and not in terms of a merely abstract speculation but as a realization. It is thus clear to see what meaning this tendency may have for people who, even if taken as individuals in themselves, want to impose a limit to forces which otherwise would only result in dissolution.

# Five

Shakti is the basis of Tantric life, but the method consists in understanding it with an intensity which, in a certain sense, renders it self-consuming and makes of it an instrument of transformation and transfiguration for an objective change of plane. It must not he forgotten that the main characteristics of Tantric deities must he considered as symbols of destroying forces, "nude," unfettered, superior to all laws. Kali, Durga, or, in some aspects, Shiva-Rudra himself have such a nature as to be simultaneously the deities of pure transcendence and of internal liberation.

In this connection, a "sacrificial" tendency and a "transforming" moment are to be found in all Tantric methods, even in those that border on magic in a strict sense or on orgiastic revelry, just as a sacred and initiative framing is inseparable to all metaphysics and

from the Tantric idea of the world considered as a "power." This again represents a line of separation, and it is easy to understand fully the condition in which the Western ideal of the affirmation of the Self and its freedoms may avoid destructive revolutions, of which we have already certain grim forebodings.

# Six

Leaving aside the more exterior and materialistic aspects of the modern civilization of action, it is now necessary to consider what, in a certain sense, may be taken as its central artery. It is the tendency to glorify man, which began during the Renaissance and which, in passing through critical idealism, ethical rationalism, and the "autonomous" morals of the categorical imperative, has arrived at the training of pure will power and the ideal of the superman.

The basis of this tendency remains, on the whole, on a naturalistic, individualistic, and intellectual plane. In such a way, it ends in a blind alley. If we consider it seriously, it is equivalent to a saturation of strength which, given the limitations of human nature, can only end in a short circuit, in the collapse of the superman into the demonic or into forms of "they are raised to me with exercises," already condemned by ancient wisdom as a dangerous deviation from a true spiritual realization.

There, where one halts in advance of these extreme consequences, it seems clear that, in the West, the only known solution is to give up and to allow religion, in its mystical/humanitarian aspects and forgiveness, to come back into the world.

No less than any other initiatic teaching, even Western ones, Yoga in general, and Tantric and Vajrayanic Yoga in particular, tells us that this alternative may be overcome and that a clear path actually exists, even if according to the saying of the Kathaka Upanishad it looks like walking on a razor's edge. What the West needs to learn here is that it is a question of an essential and ontological change in nature.

To speak of a "superman" may lead to a misunderstanding. The Western superman expresses the extreme limit or potentiality of the human species, while in Yoga it is the bridge from one species to another one, and, as a goal, it is the detachment from every qualified state, be it human or divine, that one strives to reach through a positive technique confirmed by a multi-millennial tradition, a state that has nothing in common with a demonic state of the intellect and with the prevarications peculiar to the religion of materialistic man.

It is therefore obvious to see where the road ends and a new one begins. In specific reference to the Tantra, there are tendencies in common with the Western vocation to realize an independent and sovereign will.

But, in the first place, this vocation no longer appears as "Luciferian" or "titanic," but, one might say, as "Olympian," if one bears in mind the same Tantric symbolism according to which the Shakti embraces the impassible "divine male" made of light and bearing a scepter and to whom she is the raiment of power.

Secondly, in following this course it is necessary *to do things seriously*. An exceptional qualification is required. Carefulness and an intense concentration are also required, and these have nothing in common with the exercises of immanent or voluntary philosophy and, in a general way, with simple mental attitudes.

Thirdly, the illusions and pride of the individual self, of what in Hindu terms might be called the Samsaric Self or the Self of elements (*Bhutatma*) which is practically the only one known to the great majority of modern Westerners, must be forsaken. In fact the *destruction* of this Self is the condition of true freedom and true power, so that it is the aim of a good number of Yogi techniques as well as of the Tantric ones, even if they are of a Dionysian or orgiastic character.

# Seven

All this pertaining to the Kali Yuga must be kept in mind by every Westerner who, although remaining in the same trend in which the predominant forces of his civilization have developed, desires once more by virile means to pave the way towards the higher spheres which he had forsaken under the pretext of conquering the world.

Other factors must also be taken in consideration in order that illusion may not arise and that the contribution of Hindu spirituality

of the Yoga type be well understood.

As already hinted, Tantrism follows above all – as regards Yoga – the way of Hatha Yoga, and this also appears to coincide with modern Western tendencies, because contempt for the body is replaced by the ideal of complete mastery over it. But this mastery is *internal*. In spite of the lack of comprehension due to certain publications divulged in the West, it has nothing of a physical and physiological character.

But the ways leading to the body and originating from the interior, from the "subtle," and along the lines of which also supernormal experiences may develop — as explained in the teaching we are dealing with — present great difficulties for the majority of Westerners on account of internal century-old processes having almost a constitutional character. To modern man the inner side of the body is closed in the same way as is closed the external reality according to its aspects which are not simply physical, sensitive or space-occupying. Yoga points out to the Westerner the way to be followed so that the soul may in reality master the body and — in accordance with the same ancient Western theory of the relation between macrocosm and microcosm — discover in the body thus mastered and rendered conscious, the source of unusual powers. It remains, however, to be seen in what measure anyone may follow this way and acquire a real knowledge of these processes.

The last point to be taken in consideration, particularly because it is generally misconstrued in Western publications, is that it would be difficult to neglect, in realizations of this kind, the transmission of given "influences" of a spiritual and super-individual character brought about by regular organizations of initiation. Just as the short-circuits mentioned above may be caused by immanence and will, one must also point out the difficulty for the individual to surpass himself, unless exceptional cases are taken in consideration, as compared to the whims of a deceptive self-affirmation. We should remember how the greatest European scholar of Tantrism, Sir John Woodroffe, told us that he could not accept the conditions required of him to enter in relations of something more than a simple doctrine with Tantric initiatic organizations.

# Eight

In conclusion, what we have stressed before is hereby confirmed. On the one side there is thus a correspondence between some fundamental Tantric ideas and some predominant tendencies of the modern spirit, on account of which one can seriously notice a certain basis in the Tantra's claim to present an idea suitable to the last age, i.e., to the present day. On the other hand, a well-defined line of demarcation exists between the two dominions, in the exposition of which we have spared no effort.

The capability of certain specially qualified Western minds to cross this line corresponds to the measure in which one can remain faithful to the principal way followed by their civilization without thereby being led towards a crisis without solution. They could change, at least on their own account, a strong poison into a healing medicine. The force that causes some to fall, causes in others a resurrection and participation in something supreme and shining, beyond those powers without center and scope that belong to the dark ages.

Translation anonymous, revised by Greg Johnson

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