

Vijñāna Bhairava

Selection of fragments from the book of Swami Lakshman Joo and Jaideva Singh.

The *Vijñāna Bhairava*, one of the basic Āgamas containing the spiritual practice of the non-dualistic Śaivism of Kashmir, It has been considered authoritative by all the masters of the Śaiva tradition of Kashmir, such as Somānanda, Abhinavagupta, Kṣemarāja and Jayaratha. It is called the essence of the *Rudrayāmala Tantra*, which is now lost in its entirety. (...) Abhinavagupta shows his great respect for the *Vijñāna Bhairava* by calling it *Śivavijñānopaniṣad*, 'the Secret Teaching (of the mystical knowledge) of Śiva', As the title suggest, this Tantra belongs to the Bhairavāgamas, and along with *Mālinīvijaya* and *Parātrīśikā* it is among the most revered Tantrik texts of the tradition.

The title has been explained as 'the (mystic) knowledge of the Ultimate Reality (named Bhairava in this tradition)'. *Vijñāna* implies here experimental knowledge, pure consciousness, awareness, rather than analytical knowledge. It refers to the aim of the text, i.e. to lead to a state of entering Divine Consciousness.¹ (...) ... *Bhairava* is of the nature of pure I-consciousness (*aham*) which is therefore resounding in every conscious being. He pervades, sustains and absorbs the univers. He liberates beings from the fear (*bhaya*) of *samsāra* and he illumines everything with his light (*bhā*).² (...) ... In the words of Lilian Silburn: "What the Āgamas offer us of the deepest and most original expressions of the mystical experience is found in condensed form in the *Vijñāna Bhairava*".³ (...)

A complete Śaivāgama consist of four sections or parts (*pāda*), concerning ritual (*kriyā*), way of life (*caryā*), philosophy (*vidyā*) and spiritual practice (*yoga*). The *Vijñāna Bhairava* is only concerned with *yoga*, and the philosophical background is presupposed but not explained, and it has to be complemented by other Tantras and basic texts of the Kashmir Śaiva tradition.

As most Śaivāgamas, the *Vijñāna Bhairava* is also presented in the form of a dialogue between Śiva and Śakti, or Bhairava and Bhairavī.⁴ (...)

The *Vijñāna Bhairava* teaches 112 methods or means of concentration of union with the Divine, traditionally called *dhāraṇās*. However, the text itself does not speak of *dhāraṇās*. It calls these ways 'undistracted instructions' (*nistarāṅga upadeśa*, verse 139) or spiritual instructions leading the mind to an undistracted 'waveless' state.⁵ (...) The *dhāraṇās* contained in a single verse can be practices individually, since every one leads to the goal. ... every method or practice is complete in itself, and yet there is a certain order and grouping of *dhāraṇās* in a mystical progression. (...) ... a group of *dhāraṇās* which is very prominent in the *Vijñāna Bhairava* [is] the meditation on the Void or emptiness: *sūnya*. Many experiences and practices aim at emptying the mind of its oscillating thoughts (*vikalpa*) and making it supportless (*nirādhāra*), in this way gaining access to a state of pure consciousness. One way of entering the void is to focus one's awareness on the void between any two states, movements, breaths or thoughts. It is a practice of centring (*madhya*), which could be called the fundamental theme of the *Vijñāna Bhairava*.⁶ (...) But there are various others ways of entering the Void, related to the body, the senses and the universe. Even ordinary experiences can lead to a transcendental state, if they happen in a state of awareness (...) This text is unique in that everything, from the most daily experience to the most sublime contemplation, can be used for attaining God Consciousness. It offers thus a practical application of the Trika maxim that "everything is contained in everything" (*sarvam sarvātmakam*), and that everything is a manifestation of the supreme, Divine Consciousness.⁷

¹ **Vijñāna Bhairava. The Practice of Centring Awareness.** Commentary by Swami Lakshman Joo.

Published by Indica Books, 2nd edition, Vanarasi 2007. p. 13

² *Ībidem* p. 15

³ *Ībidem* p. 16

⁴ *Ībidem* p. 18

⁵ *Ībidem* p. 21

⁶ *Ībidem* p. 22-23

⁷ *Ībidem* p. 24-25

In the present state of our knowledge, it is impossible to give the exact date of *Vijñāna Bhairava*. The earliest reference to it is found in Vāmananāth's Advayasampatti-vārttika. It is likely that Vāmananātha may be the same as Vāmana, the celebrated writer on Poetics who flourished during the reign of King Jayāpīda of Kashmir (779-813 A.D.). If that be so, then it can be easily said that *Vijñāna Bhairava* was very well known in the 8th century A.D. Perhaps, it may have been compiled a century earlier.⁸

The Tradition that it embodies goes back to the origin of Tantrism in India, but its writing form has hardly been received before the 6th century A.D.⁹

Important bases of the dhāraṇās recommended¹⁰

1. Prāṇa

According to Indian Philosophy, between the body and *manas* or mind, there is *prāṇa* which serves as a link between the two. *Prāṇa* is not mind; it is insentient, but it is not like gross physical energy. It is subtle biological energy which catches the vibrations of the mind and transmits them to the nerves and plexuses and also physical vibrations to the mind. By controlling the mind one can control the *prāṇa*, and by controlling the *prāṇa* one can control the mind.

According to Śaivāgama, *prāṇa* is not something alien to *saṁvit* or consciousness, but the first evolute of *saṁvit* (*Prāk saṁvit prāṇe pariṇatā*). In the process of creation *saṁvit* or consciousness is at first transformed into *prāṇa*. So *prāṇa* is a phase of consciousness itself. (...) The word *prāṇa* is ... used in three senses – (1) in a general sense of *prāṇa-śakti* or live-force, (2) in a specific sense according to the various biological functions, and (3) in the sense of breath. (...)

Uccāra is the natural characteristic of *prāṇa*. *Uccāra* means expression in the form of *nāda* or sound-subtle, inarticulate, or unmanifest and moving upward. The unmanifest, inarticulate sound of *nāda* is known as *varṇa*. (...) Abhinavagupta gives the following description of this *nāda*:

एको नादात्मको वर्णः सर्ववर्णविभागवान् ।
सोऽनस्तमितरूपत्वाद्नाहत इहोदितः ॥ Tantrāloka VI, 217

“There is one *varṇa* in the form of *nāda* (sound vibration) in which lie all the *varṇas* (letters) latently in an undivided form. As it is ceaseless, it is called *anāhata* i.e. unstruck, natural, spontaneous, uncaused.” As all the *varṇas* (letters) originate from this *nāda*, therefore, it is called *varṇa* proleptically. (...)

सृष्टिसमारबीज च तस्य मुख्यं वपुर्विदुः ॥ Tantrāloka V, 132

“There *sr̥ṣṭi bīja* and *saṁhāra bīja* are its main forms”. (...) *sa* is the *sr̥ṣṭi bīja* or the mystic letter denoting expiration and *ha* is the *saṁhāra bīja* or the mystic letter denoting inspiration. In verses 155 and 156 of *Vijñāna Bhairava* is given the process by which this *nāda* expresses itself in the breath of every living creature. (...) Thus the empirical individual always recites this *mantra haṁsaḥ*. (...) Since the repetition is automatic, it is known as *ajapā japa* i.e. a repetition of the mantra that goes on spontaneously without anybody's effort. This *haṁsaḥ* (I am He i.e. I am Śiva or the Divine) is the *ādi prāṇa* i.e. initial *prāṇa* which is the first evolute or transformation of consciousness. (...)

2. Japa

Japa is not the muttering of some sacred formula, *Japa*, in its real sense, is the *bhāvanā* or contemplation on one's essential Self. Kṣemarāja in his commentary on III, 27 of the Śiva-sūtras puts

⁸ *Vijñāna Bhairava or Divine Consciousness* by Jaideva Singh.

Published by Motilal Banarsidass, 5th reprint, Delhi 1999. p. x

⁹ *Vijñāna Bhairava. Das göttliche Bewußtsein*, Aus dem Sanskrit übersetzt, Kommentiert und herausgegeben von Bettina Bäumer. Verlag der Weltreligionen, Frankfurt am Main und Leipzig 2008, 3. Auflage 2013. p. 12 [Translation to English: Q]

¹⁰ Text Jaideva Singh: *Ībidem* p. xiv-xxiii

the idea of *japa* beautifully: “स्वात्मदेवताविमर्शानवरतावर्तनात्मा जपो जायते ।” “*Japa* consists in the repetition of constant contemplation on the deity that is one’s own essential Self. (...) Abhinavagupta also gives expression to the same idea about *japa* in *Tantrāloka* (I, 90). “तत्स्वरूपं जपः प्रोक्तो भावाभावपदच्युतः ।” “*Japa* freed of all ideas of ens and non-ens is the constant contemplation of Śiva’s nature.”¹¹

3. *Bhāvanā*

Man’s mind manifests itself in all kinds of *vikalpas* or thought – constructs. *Vikalpa* is the very nature of mind. If that is so, the aspirant should mentally seize one *Śuddha* or pure *vikalpa*, viz. of the highest I-consciousness, of the real Self as being Śiva. He has to practise the *bhāvanā* of this pure *vikalpa*. *Bhāvanā* is creative contemplation. Imagination plays a very large part in it. One has to imagine oneself with all the faith and fervour at his command that he is Śiva. This *śuddha vikalpa* eliminates all other *vikalpas*, or thoughts and a time comes when the *śuddha vikalpa* also ceases. Then the empirical, psychological self is dissolved, and one is landed in one’s real metempirical, metaphysical Self. (...) *Bhāvanā* is the power of spiritual attention, a total dedication of the mind to one central thought, a nostalgia of the soul, a spiritual thrust towards the source of one’s being.¹²

4. *Śūnya*

Contemplation of *śūnya* or void is another basis of *dhāraṇā* recommended.¹³ The word *śūnya* means void, a state in which no object is experienced. It has, however, been used in various senses in this system. (...) The main philosophical sense of *śūnya*, ... is given in the following verse quoted by Śivopādhyāya in his commentary on verse 127 of *Vijñānabhairava*:

सर्वालम्बनधर्मैश्च सर्वतत्त्वैरशेषतः ।
सर्वक्लेशशयैः शून्यं न शून्यं परमार्थतः ॥

“That which is free of all supports whether external existents like jar or flower or internal existents like pleasure, pain or thought, that which is free of all *tattvas* or constitutive principles, or the residual traces of all *kleśas*, that is *śūnya*. In the highest sense, it is not *śūnya* as such (i.e. as non-existence)”.

Avidyā, *asmitā*, *rāga*, *dveṣa*, and *abhiniveśa* i.e. primal ignorance, the feeling of I-ness, attraction, repulsion and fear of death are considered to be *kleśas*. (...) ... Śiva is full and free and fundamental ground of all that is known as void, from whom all the *tattvas* arise and in whom they are all dissolved. Since Śiva or foundational consciousness cannot be described in words or any determination of thought, therefore, is He called *śūnya*. (...) “It is the absolute Being, that state which abides as transcendent and absolute peace.” *Svacchanda Tantra* IV, 293¹⁴

5. *Experience of Vastness or Extensive Space*¹⁵

Experience of a vast, extensive space without any trees, etc. has no definite, concrete object as *ālambana* or support for the mind. In such a condition, the *vikalpas* or thought-constructs of the mind come to a dead stop, and super-sensuous Reality makes its presence felt.

6. *Intensity of experience*

Even in the intensity of sensuous experience, one can have the experience of the Divine, provided one is careful to track the joy felt on such occasions to its source. The text gives several examples of the intensity of experience. The first one is the joy felt in sexual intercourse mentioned in the verses 69-70. (...) Sex is an example of the joy of intensive experience derived from *sparsā* or contact. Verse 71 which describe the intensive experience of joy at the sight of a friend or relative is an example of the joy of *rūpa* or visual perception. Verse 72 gives an example of the joy of *rasa* or taste and verse 73 gives an example of the joy of *śabda* or sound.

¹¹ *Ibidem* p. 133-4, nota 2 del verso 145.

¹² *Ibidem* p. xviii-xix

¹³ *Ibidem* p. xix

¹⁴ *Ibidem* p. xxv

¹⁵ *Ibidem* p. ...

7. *Mudrās and Āsanas*

Various *mudrās* are recommended as helpful in *dhāraṇās*. *Mudrā* is a technical term meaning a particular disposition and control of the organs of the body as a help in concentration. (...) *Āsana* means posture. Several *āsanas* are helpful in *dhāraṇā*.

The following concepts have to be clearly grasped in order to be able to understand the *dhāraṇās* recommended in Vijñānabhairava.

Kṣobha

The word *kṣobha* means mental agitation, disquiet, turmoil. Verse 74 says that wherever there is *tuṣṭi* or mental satisfaction or joy, there the mind should be fixed. In all such joys or intensive experience, it is implied that the fixation of the mind should be without *kṣobha* or mental agitation. When one is deeply moved by some beautiful object ..., the attitude should be “This beautiful tabernacle houses Śiva who is my own essential Self.” It is this attitude which leads to the right *dhāraṇā* based on aesthetic experience. If one’s mind is agitated by such experience and he is carried away by sense-pleasure, he cannot have the proper *dhāraṇā*. He will be unable to utilize that experience for yogic purposes. As Spandakārikā puts it:

यदा क्षोभः प्रलीयेत तदा स्यात् परमं पदम् (I, 9)

“When the mental turmoil disappears, it is only then that the highest state is attained.”

Vikalpa

A *vikalpa* is a thought-construct. (...) *Vikalpa* may refer to various things of the external world like tree, flower, river, etc. or various images, fancies, etc. of the mind. ... ; mind constructs a ‘particular’ by means of thought which it marks off from the rest of the world or from other ideas. (...) *Vikalpas* are concerned with particulars. Secondly, *vikalpas* are relational i.e. there is always a subject-object relationship in *vikalpas*. Reality is non-relational, there is no object outside Reality. Therefore *vikalpas* are unable to grasp Reality.

There is, however, one *śuddha* or pure *vikalpa*, namely, the ‘thought that I am Śiva’. By the *bhāvanā* or creative contemplation of this *vikalpa*, all other *vikalpas* are eliminated. Finally this *vikalpa* also disappears and one is landed in a *nirvikalpa* or thought free state which denotes the awareness of Reality.

Madhyavikāsa (The development of the middle state)¹⁶

When the *prāṇa* or exhalation arising from the centre of the body does not return from the *dvādaśānta* (a distance of 12 fingers in the outer space) for a split second and the *apāna* or inhalation arising from the *dvādaśānta* does not return from the centre for a split second, this is known as *madhyadaśā*. By intensive awareness of this *madhyadaśā*, there is *madhya vikāsa* or the development of the middle state. (...) Sūtra 17 of *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam* says: “मध्यविकासाच्चिदानन्दलाभः” which means “By the development of the *madhya* (middle or centre) is there acquisition of the bliss of *Cit*”.

What is this *madhya* (middle or centre)? *Kṣemarāja* explains it in the following way in his commentary on above *sūtra*. “*Samvit* or the Universal Consciousness is the centre of every thing, for everything depends on it for its existence. In the empirical order *samvit* is at first transformed in to *prāṇa*. Assuming the role of *prāṇaśakti*, resting in the planes of *buddhi*, body, etc., it abides principally in the *madhya nāḍī*, in the innermost central channel of *prāṇa* in the spinal column. When the *prāṇaśakti* in the central channel develops or when the central Universal consciousness develops in any other way, one acquires the bliss of universal consciousness and becomes liberated while living.”

So *madhya-vikāsa* means the development of the met-empirical or universal consciousness. In such state *citta* or the individual empirical consciousness is transformed into *citi* or the met-empirical consciousness.

¹⁶ *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, Sūtra 17.

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