

**The wisdom of excess;
Guru, initiation and practice in an extreme tantric ritual**

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Introduction

The term 'tantra' has sometimes acquired a profoundly negative connotation in the West. Georg Feuerstein comments, "This 'California tantra,' [is] based on a profound misunderstanding of the Tantric path. Their main error is to confuse Tantric bliss ... with ordinary orgasmic pleasure."² To which Hugh Urban adds: "... instead of the ideal of unity, order, or harmony, the late-capitalist aesthetic is one of physical intensity, shock value, immediate gratification, and ecstatic experience."³ 'Tantra' has acquired a disreputable meaning also in India where it can mean 'trickery' or even 'black magic.' Yet, in Chapter 29 of his great work *Tantrāloka*,⁴ ('Light on the Tantras'), Abhinavagupta, the greatest exponent of non-dual Kashmir Shaivism, after surveying the vast range of tantras without any of the negative connotations mentioned above, provides a full description of the most extreme of the tantras, namely the Kula tradition. Indeed, Jayaratha (13th cent. CE), who provides a full

¹ John Dupuche, *Abhinavagupta: the Kula Ritual as elaborated in Chapter 29 of the Tantrāloka* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003).

² Hugh Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 205.

³ Urban, *Tantra*, p. 255.

⁴ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka with the Commentary of Jayaratha*, ed. R.C. Dwivedi and N. Rastogi (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987).

commentary on the immense work, states that Abhinavagupta preferred the Kula above all others.

... he esteems more highly the guru who follows the Kula ritual procedure (*kulaprakriyā*)—because of [its] restfulness—in comparison with the guru who is devoted to tantra ritual procedure (*tantraprakriyā*).⁵

Alexis Sanderson lists the Kula and the Kaula traditions among those with the most extreme rituals.⁶ What is there in the Kula tradition which is so appealing to this outstanding philosopher, mystic and poet?

The Kula tradition

In his *Tantrāloka* (*TĀ*), Abhinavagupta names well over one hundred texts⁷ and often lists the various schools in ascending order of importance.⁸ While the lower-placed schools are not entirely bereft of truth, the higher-placed contain and surpass them.⁹ He is generally consistent in his several listings.¹⁰ The order, in increasing importance, is: Veda, Siddhānta, Left, Right, Mata,

⁵ *TĀ* vol. 2, p. 31.

⁶ Alexis Sanderson, "Meaning in Tantric Ritual," in *Essais sur le rituel III: Colloque du centenaire de la section des sciences religieuses de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* (Vol. 3), ed. A.-M. Blondeau and K. Schipper (Louvain-Paris : Peeters, 1995), pp. 23 and 79.

⁷ R.Gnoli, *Luce delle sacre scritture, (Tantrāloka)* (Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1972), pp. 883-892.

⁸ *TĀ* 13.300cd-301a, *TĀ* 13.319b, *TĀ* 15.319-320, *TĀ* 37.25b-27a. See also *Parātrīṃśikāvivaraṇa*, ed. B. Bäumer (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), pp. 217 and 269, and André Padoux, *La Parātrīṃśikālaghuvṛtti de Abhinavagupta* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1975), p. 56.

⁹ The hierarchy is presented ritually in *TĀ* 29.51.

¹⁰ This is true except for the so-called Mata which varies its position, being placed usually before or sometimes after the Kula. But what does 'Mata' mean? Does it refer to that variant of the Northern Transmission called 'the Mata' or to the other variant of the Northern Transmission called 'the Krama' which features so frequently in the *Tantrāloka*?

Kula, Kaula, Trika.¹¹ The highest-placed tradition, Trika, refers above all to the single mantra *SAUH*, which is the phonic expression of consciousness in all its manifestations. Thus the Trika does not refer so much to a system as to ultimate consciousness itself. The mantra *SAUH* is expounded at length in the *Parātrīṃśikāvivarāṇa*.

The Kula and Kaula traditions are explicitly distinguished by Abhinavagupta in his hierarchy of traditions but in *Tantrāloka* 29 he uses the terms ‘*kula*’ and ‘*kaula*’ interchangeably. For example, at one point he will speak of the “Kula ritual procedure”¹² and shortly afterwards define the *kaula* as the “knowledge and the object of knowledge”¹³ without feeling any need to distinguish the terms.

In *TĀ* 29.4 he defines *kula* as “the *śakti* of Parameśa, his capacity, eminence, freedom, vitality and potency, mass, consciousness and body,” moving by degrees from the supreme state “*śakti* of Parameśa” to the material level “body’, but the full meaning of the term is appreciated only in seeing how it unfolds in the whole chapter.

The guru

- i. The variety of personages.

The officiant (*karmī*) is concerned with performing rituals. The *yogī* focuses on securing particular supernatural powers (*siddhi*) and enjoyments (*bhukti*) for which he performs the appropriate ritual. The knowledgeable person (*jñānī*) seeks understanding, discernment (*vijñāna*) and liberation (*mukti*).¹⁴

¹¹ Alexis Sanderson amplifies the list: “below the Siddhānta are the various Pāśupata systems (Lākula, Vaimala, Mausala and Kāruka); below Śaivism is the Vaiṣṇava Tantric system of the Pañcarātra; and finally there is the universal prescription (*sāmānyo dharmah*) of the *smārta* and *śrauta* traditions. Thus the Trika locates itself at the furthest remove from neutral ‘vedic’ orthodoxy” (“The Visualisation of the Deities of the Trika,” in *L’Image Divine*, ed. A. Padoux [Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1990], p. 50.

¹² *TĀ* 29.1b.

¹³ *TĀ* 29.9.

¹⁴ Abhinavagupta describes the roles of *jñānī* and *yogī* in *TĀ* 13.326b-340.

Ordinary initiation (*samaya-dīkṣā*) is essentially a prelude. Indeed, in *TĀ* 29 the term *dīkṣā*, properly speaking, is reserved to initiation as a Son (*putraka*), of which there are four types: he may be *sabīja*, i.e., with a set ritual and way of life; or *nirbīja*, without these. If he seeks liberation he is called *niṣkala*. If he seeks enjoyment as well as liberation he is *sakala*.

Furthermore, the Son may wish to remain in the state of liberation given by his initiation or he may go on to seek a public role and receive consecration (*abhiṣeka*) as either an Adept (*sādhaka*) or a Master (*ācārya*).

The Adept's role is to grant enjoyments; the role of the Master is to grant liberation. In his commentary on *TĀ* 29.231b,¹⁵ Jayaratha notes that the Master can bestow both attainment and liberation.

... the one who is an Adept ... [and who has not subsequently been consecrated as Master and] in this sense is a guru, dispenses only supernatural powers to others. The other [the Master] who is a guru ... [without being consecrated as an Adept], after first bestowing supernatural powers ... [grants] liberation as well. The role of 'Master' is transmitted to the person who seeks liberation [and not to the one who only seeks enjoyments] even if he has been initiated with *sabīja* initiation.

The roles of *karmī* and *jñānī* can also be given to a person who seeks only liberation. However, both the Adept and the Master are minor figures in *TĀ* 29, mentioned in passing but superseded by the guru.

Abhinavagupta distinguishes between three types of guru: the *jñānī*, the *yogī*, and the *guru* who most properly deserves the name and who has the qualities of both *jñānī* and *yogī*.

He who wishes enjoyment and liberation and discriminating knowledge should seek a guru who is well-practised (*svabhyasta*) in knowledge and accomplished in yoga

¹⁵ *TĀV* vol. 7, p. 3435.

(*yogasiddha*). However, if such a person does not exist, he should seek [a guru] who is a knowledgeable person as regards discriminating knowledge and liberation; as regards a particular enjoyment, [he should seek out] a *yogī* who is able to grant that result.¹⁶

TĀ 4.33-85 analyses the nature of the guru (*gurusatattvam*). After speaking of the false guru who leads his disciple into the net of illusion (*māyā*), Abhinavagupta points out that that disciple can still achieve true consciousness by means of reasoning (*tarka*). Consciousness can occur spontaneously (*sāmsiddhika*), from one's own self (*svataḥ*). This is superior to the consciousness that arises from scripture (*śāstrataḥ*), which itself is superior to the consciousness that is due to a guru (*gurutaḥ*). These three terms—*svataḥ*, *śāstrataḥ*, *gurutaḥ*—are central in the process of establishing the varieties of guru.

The person who achieves consciousness by his own self, *svataḥ*, is *akalpita*, that is, he is “initiated by the goddesses of his own consciousness” (*svasamvittidevībhir dīkṣita*), not by another guru. In this sense it occurs “for no reason” (*akasmāt*), that is, for no commonly recognizable reason (*lokāprasiddha*). The real reason of course is the direct communication from the goddess.

The person who comes to knowledge through an interior understanding (*ātmabhāvanātaḥ*) of the scripture—in other words, *śāstrataḥ*—is called a ‘formed-unformed’ (*akalpitakalpita*) guru. That is, he does not depend on another guru but has relied on the scriptures.¹⁷ Abhinavagupta goes on to describe in more detail the subcategories of ‘formed-unformed,’ according to whether their *śaktipāta* is intense (*tīvra*), middling (*madhya*), or weak (*manda*). Such persons may use meditation, recitation, etc. to reach the *akalpita* state.

¹⁶ *TĀ* 13.338-339.

¹⁷ *TĀ* 4.52b-53.

The person who is not able to reach consciousness by himself or through the scriptures, may receive consecration (*abhiṣeka*) from a guru and so himself become a guru, albeit a 'formed' (*kalpita*) guru.¹⁸

There is, therefore, a hierarchy. The person who arrives at consciousness spontaneously is superior to person who arrives at consciousness in dependence on other sources (*āhṛta*). In the presence of the more gifted person, the lesser person loses authority (*adhikāra*), falls silent (*tūṣṇī*), and his activity is dependent (*anuvartana*) on his better.

Although the recipient of an intense descent of energy does not need the external rite of ritual purification (*saṃskāra*), he may, however, seek it for the sake of a certain completeness so that the internal and external dimensions might correspond. In other words, the rite is not performed in order to obtain a consecration as though it did not exist already. Rather, the rite is celebrated in order to manifest the real condition the *akalpita* guru has already received directly from the goddess. He wishes to show that the external world and the inner world coincide. He seeks to "endorse the conviction" (*samvādadṛdhatākrte*) he already has. He is truly Bhairava, since inner and outer coincide.¹⁹ In this way the knowledge (*jñāna*) based one's own self (*svataḥ*), based on the scriptures (*śāstrataḥ*) and based on the guru (*gurutaḥ*) reaches its fullness (*pūrṇatva*).²⁰

This same point is made in the *Tantrasāra*. While discussing the relationship of external and internal, Abhinavagupta notes that if the initiation occurred only interiorly there would be a lack of exteriority and therefore a limitation and a dualism. To avoid any limitation (*avacchedahānāya*), the external rite (*bahir api kāryo yāgo*) is also sought.²¹

Although there is a hierarchy between these various personages, Abhinavagupta makes it clear that it does not matter how a person reaches consciousness. What counts is the one result, consciousness, whether the guru

¹⁸ *TĀ* 4.70b-71.

¹⁹ *TĀ* 4.76b-77a.

²⁰ *TĀ* 4.77b-78a.

²¹ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrasāra* (Delhi: Bani Prakashan, 1982), p. 43.

be 'unformed,' 'unformed-formed' or 'formed.'²² The variation is due to the varieties of 'descent of energy' (*śaktipāta*).

Thus in the Kula ritual the *akalpita* guru bestows liberation and enjoyment, he initiates and teaches, he performs rituals, and he receives the worship of Masters, Adepts, Sons and ordinary initiates.

The *Tantrāloka* is essentially divided into two sections. Chapters 1-12 describe the basic structure of reality and the ways (*upāya*) to experience that reality. The second, chapters 14-37, describes the relevant rituals. Chapter 13 acts as a hinge which joins the two.

TĀ chapter 13 describes nine forms of the descent of energy (*śaktipāta*), all of which are varieties of the one grace (*anugraha*) of Śiva. Abhinavagupta arrives at this number by distinguishing between three major categories: 'intense' (*tīvra*), 'middling' (*madhya*) and 'weak' (*manda*). Each of these categories has three levels similarly distinguished by the terms *tīvra*, *madhya* and *manda*. Thus the highest form of *śaktipāta* is *tīvra-tīvra* (most intense), the weakest is *manda-manda* (most feeble).

The person who receives the most intense form of *śaktipāta* is soon taken out of this transient world.²³ The recipient of the second form, namely the 'intense' (*madhya-tīvra*)²⁴ descent of energy, is enlightened and established as a guru without need for external initiation. The first two forms of *śaktipāta* are due to the goddess alone, namely consciousness itself, without need for a guru. The third level of *śaktipāta*, the 'less intense' (*manda-tīvra*),²⁵ does not bestow the same degree of enlightenment: the recipient will need to seek initiation from a guru if he is to be assured of his enlightenment. The six lower levels of *śaktipāta* are described in just six verses.²⁶

While the *akalpita* guru may be initiated at any stage in life by the goddess, Abhinavagupta has the highest esteem for the person who is

²² *TĀ* 4.80-83.

²³ It is described briefly in *TĀ* 13.130b-131a.

²⁴ The 'intense' form is described at length in *TĀ* 13.131-217.

²⁵ It is described in *TĀ* 13.218-222a.

²⁶ *TĀ* 13.240-246a.

yoginībhū. The child who is conceived while his parents are engaged in a sexual union of such quality that they experience their identity with Śiva and *śakti* is a “repository of knowledge ... even ... in the womb.”

The body (*tanu*) who is conceived during such a mating, who develops in the womb, is called 'yoginī-born.' This [*yoginī*-born] is, by his very self, the repository of knowledge, a Rudra. According to the illustrious *Vīrāvali-śāstra*, even as a child in the womb he has the form of Śiva.²⁷

Jayaratha has no hesitation in seeing Abhinavagupta as a '*yoginī*-born.'²⁸

ii. the *dūtī*

In the Kula ritual, the guru, for all the importance attached to his role, is deemed to be less significant than the sexual partner (*dūtī*).²⁹ This is because the Kula ritual comes from Ardhatryambakā, the daughter of Tryambaka, the founder of the non-dual (*advaita*) school who is also one of the manifestations of Śiva. On the model of Ardhatryambakā, therefore, the *dūtī* brings the practitioner to the form of consciousness that lies at the heart of the Kula tradition, namely the sense of universality which transcends the opposition of clean and unclean, outer and inner and so on.

²⁷ *TĀ* 29.162b-163a.

²⁸ In *TĀV* vol. 2, p. 14, Jayaratha quotes *TĀ*.162b-163a—with two slight changes—in reference to Abhinavagupta himself. Note also that the verse that introduces three of Abhinavagupta's major works, the *Tantrāloka*, the *Tantrasāra* and the *Parātrīṃśikāvivarāṇa*, can be read either as a hymn in praise of his parents or of Śiva and *śakti*. In his translation of the *Parātrīṃśikāvivarāṇa*, Jaideva Singh shows how the one verse can be translated in these two ways (*Parātrīṃśikāvivarāṇa*, trans. J. Singh, ed. B. Bäumer [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988], pp.1-3). For a thorough analysis of this hymn see Alexis Sanderson, “A Commentary on the Opening Verses of the *Tantrasāra* of Abhinavagupta,” in *Sāmarasya, Studies in Indian Arts, Philosophy and Interreligious dialogue in Honour of Bettina Bäumer*, ed. Sadananda Das and Ernst Fülringler (Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2005), pp. 89-148.

²⁹ The word *dūtī* literally means 'female messenger,' but is translated as 'sexual partner.'

Śambhunātha, whom Abhinavagupta describes as “the moon shining on the ocean of Trika knowledge,”³⁰ initiated Abhinavagupta into the Kula ritual.³¹ He is mentioned in *TĀ* 1.13 together with his *bhagavatī*, who, Jayaratha explains, was his *dūtī*. Indeed, Śambhunātha is the only guru explicitly named in the encomium of *TĀ* 1.7-21. In *TĀ* 29.95 “the illustrious Śambhunātha” is praised at the highly significant moment when Abhinavagupta moves from the presentation of the ritual based on the internal *śakti* (*TĀ* 29.56-94) to the ritual based on the external *śakti* (*TĀ* 29.96-166a).

The significance of the ritual based on the external *śakti* is shown by the fact that the *Tantrasāra*, which is a summary of the *Tantrāloka*, repeats *TĀ* 29.96-166a almost word for word; and the *Tantroccaya*, an even shorter summary of the *Tantrāloka*, mentions only the ritual based on the external *śakti* and ignores the other five rituals of *TĀ* 29.

Abhinavagupta states, quoting Kallaṭa: “...by her very being she is superior to [the guru’s] own body.”³² Jayaratha is explicit: “... because her central sacred space is spontaneously fully opening and closing, [the *śakti* is superior even to the guru's own body].”³³

Nevertheless, the guru still has a role, for he must ritually prepare the *dūtī* for her role. Abhinavagupta states, still quoting Kallaṭa: “[The guru] should ritually prepare [the *śakti*],”³⁴ or as Jayaratha explains: “the guru should purify (*saṃskṛtā*) her [for the ritual].”³⁵ This double aspect is brought out well in the play of Sanskrit words: because her being, *bhāva*, is superior, she is prepared, *bhāvitā*, by the guru.³⁶

In this way, the guru uses the *dūtī* as the means of transmitting the Kula tradition.

³⁰ *TĀ* 29.95.

³¹ Lilian Silburn, *Hymnes de Abhinavagupta* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1970), p. 2.

³² *TĀ* 29.123.

³³ *TĀV* vol. 7, p. 3378.

³⁴ *TĀ* 29.123b.

³⁵ *TĀV* vol. 7, p. 3378.

³⁶ *TĀ* 29.123b.

To her alone, because [of the fact that her central path is fully opening and closing], the guru properly transmits the substance of the Kula. And by means of the [mouth of the *śakti*], he transmits [the substance of the Kula] to men.³⁷

She does so by sexual intercourse. She does not teach with her ‘upper mouth,’ her voice, but she initiates with her ‘lower mouth,’ her sexual organ. She initiates him not into just any sort of sexual experience but into the state of consciousness which is at the heart of the Kula tradition, into an experience which cannot be described. As Abhinavagupta says: “how could consciousness, which is unique to oneself, be put into writing?”³⁸ She is, indeed, purified or set apart for her role by the guru and in that sense she is ‘initiated,’ but in turn she initiates her partner.

Initiation (*dīkṣā*)

The guru has himself been initiated and will initiate others, for he functions within a tradition which stretches back in time through human gurus to the Perfected Beings (*siddha*) and thence to the divine realm. This traditional nature of the Kula ritual is shown clearly in the very structure of *TĀ* 29, which is divided into two halves: the first section³⁹ describes the rituals which all initiates, including the guru, are to perform. The second section⁴⁰ describes the rituals of initiation, which the guru performs. The *śloka* that joins these two sections pointedly shows the connection:

After first of all performing the sacrifice in that manner, he should initiate his own disciple—one among a hundred

³⁷ *TĀ* 29.122b-123a.

³⁸ *TĀ* 29.126a.

³⁹ *TĀ* 29.18-186a.

⁴⁰ *TĀ* 29.186b-281.

thousand who possesses the suitability for such things—into such a procedure.⁴¹

In other words, before initiating his chosen disciple, he brings himself to the highest state of absorption; for the ritual is destined for the “most advanced gurus and disciples” who, Jayaratha explains, “dwell in a state of undifferentiated (*nirvikalpa*) thought at the supreme level.”⁴² He gives what he is. As Jayaratha puts it, the guru acquires “the single form of the knowing subject,” “where the state of bliss alone remains,” “the place of repose in one’s self alone.”⁴³

i. Ordinary initiation (*samaya-dīkṣā*)

Although the term ‘initiation’ is strictly speaking reserved to initiation-as-Son (*putraka-dīkṣā*), the entry into ordinary discipleship is described within the general category of initiation announced by *TĀ* 29.187.

The first example of ordinary initiation is taken from the *Mālinīvijayottaratantra* and reads as follows:

After sprinkling the [disciple] with *rudraśakti*,⁴⁴ [the guru] should bring him before the god. After looking at the arms of the [disciple], [the guru] should set them on fire with *rudraśakti*. With the same [*rudraśakti*] he should place a flower in the hands of the [disciple], which have been smeared with sandal-paste. Having ensured that [his disciple’s hands] are unsupported, [the guru] should reflect on them as being pulled by *rudraśakti*, which is a flame with the form of a hook. Then, after the [disciple] has spontaneously taken the cloth, he is blindfolded and he spontaneously drops the flower. From its

⁴¹ *TĀ* 29.187a.

⁴² *TĀ* 29.2a, *TĀV* vol.7, p. 3292.

⁴³ *TĀV* on *TĀ* 29.185b,

⁴⁴ The mantra *rudraśakti* is the mantra *Mālinī* enclosed by either *Parā* or *Mātṛsadbhāva*.

fall [the guru] ascertains the *kula* [to which the disciple belongs]. Then, after [the disciple] has uncovered his face, [the *rudraśakti*] makes [him] fall prostrate at the feet [of the goddess into whose *kula* he has been initiated].⁴⁵

The flower falls on the *maṇḍala*, which in its sacred geography represents the various goddesses who each separately has her own *kula* and who together form the overarching ‘clan’ (*kula*). There are complexities within complexities, wheels within wheels. Similarly, the human body is a microcosm of the universe, each different level corresponding to a different realm with its appropriate advantages. Whilst the guru adverts to the action of the mantra *rudraśakti*, which is the phonic form of the goddess, the *rudraśakti* makes the flower fall on a realm which is sacred to one or other of the goddesses who thus becomes the special object of the disciple’s worship and the particular source of his powers (*siddhi*).

Abhinavagupta is realistic, for he knows that certain initiations have no effect. He goes on, therefore, to describe other initiations which are less external but more fearsome. Thus the initiation described in the *Ratnamālā* involves the use of the mantra *KṢRAUM* and the ‘oblation’ (*caru*). Under the impact of the mantra placed by the guru on the disciple’s hand, the hand moves spontaneously—the movement is called the ‘hand of Śīva’ (*śivahasta*)—and hits the body at a spot which indicates the *kula* to which the disciple belongs, for the body is a hierarchy of *śaktis*. This blow suddenly causes conviction (*pratyaya*). If the disciple hesitates, he is to remain an ordinary initiate.

A third form of initiation, from the *Ānandeśvara*, involves just the ‘oblation.’ Ordinarily *caru* is a grain boiled with butter and milk, but in the Kula ritual, as Jayaratha explains with a quotation, the ‘oblation’ consists of the ‘five jewels,’ which are listed as “male urine, semen, menstrual blood, phlegm, and faeces.”⁴⁶ It is taken as the human equivalent of the *pañcagavya*, the five

⁴⁵ *TĀ* 29.187b-190.

⁴⁶ *TĀV* vol. 7, p. 3420.

products of the cow: milk, curd, ghee, urine and dung.⁴⁷ It is mixed with 'nectar-of-the-left' (*vāma-amṛta*), which means 'wine' but can also take on the further meaning of sexual fluid. If the gentler ritual of *TĀ* 29.187-191 will not work perhaps the shock of the concoction will.

However, if the disciple should show any hesitation (*kampa*) to take the mixture he must remain an ordinary initiate who is only qualified for study, for hearing the scriptures, for daily worship and for service of the guru⁴⁸ till such time as he is ready for true initiation-as-Son.

ii. Initiation-as-Son (*putraka-dīkṣā*)

Abhinavagupta gives several versions of this form of initiation. For the first of these he quotes the *Ratnamālā* which reads as follows:

[The disciple] ... stands upright before [the guru]. The guru who is composed of the *śakti* should [then] reflect on the *śakti*, which is all blazing, as going from the foot to the top of the head of the [disciple] burning his bonds. After that, when the [disciple] has sat down, [the guru] should reflect, step by step, on the [*śakti*] as burning [the bonds], starting right from the cleansing of the base [and] terminating with the final cleansing of the top [of his head]. Having thus burnt ... all the categories etc. that are to be cleansed, he should meditate [on the *śakti*] as merged in Śiva, either in his simple or his composite form. [The *śakti*,] which the *yogī* joins to the path, nourishes that which is of the same nature [as herself and] burns up anything else that belongs to a different class.⁴⁹

The human being is a microcosm of the universe. The highest part, either the tuft of hair (*śikhā*) or the 'end-of-twelve' (*dvādaśānta*), a point twelve finger-

⁴⁷ *TĀV* vol. 7, p. 3420.

⁴⁸ Cf. *TĀ* 15.520cd-521a.

⁴⁹ *TĀ* 29.202-206.

widths above the crown of the head or the crown of the head itself, represents the highest level of consciousness from which the thirty-six categories (*tattva*) or levels of being are progressively emanated down to the foot.

The disciple is “unclean” in the sense that the various dimensions of his being have not been suffused with the purity of ultimate consciousness. They are constrained by the bonds of ignorance.

The guru, who himself is all *śakti*, notices how the *śakti* moves upwards from the feet of the disciple to the head. The *śakti* burns, i.e., transforms every level into pure consciousness, starting from the lowest dimension and finishing with the highest.

Abhinavagupta is again realistic and knows that the initiation may not in fact be successful because of the weakness of the *śaktipāta*. He therefore gives two other initiations, one from an unnamed source,⁵⁰ the other taught to him by Śambhunātha and found also in the *Sadbhāva*.⁵¹ In both these cases the method is just the projected mantra, which is more powerful than an external act.

Initiation-as-Son is essentially an initiation into liberation. However, in the Kula tradition liberation and enjoyment are not incompatible. Accordingly the Son, having attained liberation (*mokṣa*), may also wish to be initiated into a particular category of enjoyment.⁵² Indeed, the person who is liberated-while-living (*jīvan-mukti*), the goal of the Kula ritual, knows both *mukti* and *bhukti*.

iii. Consecration (*abhiṣeka*)

The consecration of the Adept and the Master, taken from the *Mālinīvijayottaratantra*, is not an initiation, strictly speaking, but is quoted in order to contrast with *putraka-dīkṣā*.

The correct consecration into *yoga* of the Adept who desires enjoyments [is as follows]. In this [ceremony], after sacrificing

⁵⁰ *TĀ* 29. 210-211a.

⁵¹ *TĀ* 29.212b-213.

⁵² *TĀ* 29.219.

to the god according to [the disciple's financial] means, [the guru] should light eight flawless lamps made of gold etc., after furnishing them with red wicks and with ghee. The [eight lamps] are to be worshipped according to the set of eight *kula* [goddesses]. Kuleśvara and Kuleśvarī are also [to be worshipped] in the 'conch-shell' full of the nectar of bliss. By using the aforesaid process of the 'hand of Śiva' [the guru] consecrates [the disciple] by using the ['conch-shell']. Afterwards, the [Adept] should undertake mantra practice.

The consecration of the Master is as follows. The [guru] who is qualified should set out for him sixty-four 'lamps' made with paste etc. The ['lamps'] are to be worshipped according to the sixty-four [*kula* goddesses]. Kuleśvara and Kuleśvarī are [to be worshipped] in the centre as before. [The guru] also consecrates him as guru simply by means of what is called the 'hand of Śiva'.⁵³

In *TĀ* 29.233-235, Abhinavagupta gives a form of consecration, taken from the *Vīrāvalibhairava*, which involves simple yogic projection.

iv. Initiation-by-penetration (*vedha-dīkṣā*)

There is a further form of initiation, which is developed uniquely in *TĀ* 29. Initiation-by-penetration is mentioned briefly in *TĀ* 24.13b-15⁵⁴ where it is used in order to secure the liberation of a dying or dead person. For example, at a certain moment in the ritual the corpse trembles or raises the left hand with the result that the bystander realises that liberation has occurred. This ritual is performed, therefore, in the context of doubt and in order to produce effects, i.e., specific enjoyments which can lead the bystander to conviction.

⁵³ *TĀ* 29.226-229.

⁵⁴ This ritual is mentioned in a few other places such as *TĀ* 13.234b-235 and *Tantrasāra*, pp. 175-176.

In *TĀ* 29.236ff. Abhinavagupta lists six types of initiation-by-penetration from the *Gahvara* and nine given by an unspecified group called 'some gurus.' He notes that both the guru, who can perform all rituals, and the *yogī* who is particularly concerned with enjoyments, are qualified to perform *vedha-dīkṣā*.

The first, from the *Gahvara*, reads:

He [first] meditates on the bundle of flames, which is described in his own scripture, a circle of eight beams of light etc. Because he [then] penetrates the circle of [his disciple's] heart with it, this is 'penetration by mantra.'⁵⁵

In other words, the mantra, which is both aural and visual, is summoned up in the guru's own mind and then projected into the inner being of the disciple who then experiences its effects.

Another initiation-by-penetration is taken from the *Vīrāvalibhairava* and reads:

The disciple should sit before the guru. The [guru] should penetrate [him] 'mouth' to 'mouth,' form to form, in various particular ways until [the disciple] becomes perfectly fused [with ultimate reality].⁵⁶

At the end of the long list of such initiations which focus on just the disciple, Abhinavagupta describes the ritual that initiates all beings into Śivahood. This

⁵⁵ *TĀ* 29.240b-241a.

⁵⁶ *TĀ* 29.273b-274a. In her introduction to initiation-by-penetration, Silburn quotes from *Kauṣītaki-Upaniṣad* II.15 which describes the ceremony during which the dying father identifies himself with his son in every part of his body: "I want to put my voice in you, says the father. I receive your voice into myself, says the son. I want to place my breath in you, says the father. I receive your breath into myself, says the son. And so on for sight, hearing, taste, action, pleasure and suffering, procreation, conduct, and intellect" (Lilian Silburn, *La kuṇḍalinī, l'énergie des profondeurs* [Paris: Les Deux Océans, 1983], pp.107-108). See also *TĀ* 28.296-298.

practice, performed by the disciple, involves a double motion: the outgoing awareness of all beings, and the subsequent identification of *prāṇa* and *apāna*, externality and internality, so as to reach that point of origin from which all derives. In this way, all beings are brought into union with Śiva.

The external subtle-breath, which goes outside, which, taking on the form of darkness, has left through the pores, circulates through all the causal deities. After he has aimlessly made the [external subtle-breath] arrive at a centre, he causes it to [continue to] circulate. Then he 'emits.' By increasing the union [of *prāṇa* and *apāna*] he penetrates the five knots. He reflects on the central sacred place, which is the pairing of the modalities of the coupling [of *prāṇa* and *apāna*]. He does not focus on the combination of self or space or external reality or mind or body. This initiation grants the acquisition of the state of Śiva to all living creatures.⁵⁷

Practice (*sādhana*)

Abhinavagupta categories the rituals for the initiate, described at length in *TĀ* 29.18-186a, into six groups or 'sacrifices' as follows:

<i>śl.</i> 18-23	The Daily Ritual (<i>nityapūjā</i>)
<i>śl.</i> 24-55	Sacrifice 1, external (<i>bahiḥ</i>)
<i>śl.</i> 56-95	Sacrifice 2, based on the Śakti (<i>śaktau</i>)
<i>śl.</i> 96-166a	Sacrifice 3, based on the pair (<i>yāmale</i>)
<i>śl.</i> 166b-177	Sacrifice 4, based on the body (<i>dehe</i>)
<i>śl.</i> 178-180	Sacrifice 5, based on the subtle-breath (<i>prāṇe</i>)
<i>śl.</i> 181-186a	Sacrifice 6, based on the mind (<i>matau</i>)

⁵⁷ *TĀ* 29.278b-281.

In this short presentation we must confine ourselves to the Daily Ritual (*śloka* 18-23), which gives the essence of all the other rituals. Its longer form is Sacrifice 1 (*śloka* 25-55).

The Daily Ritual:

- śloka* 18 After entering the hall of sacrifice rich with perfume and incense, facing north-east, by means of Parā or Mālinī, upwards and downwards,⁵⁸ he should
- śloka* 19 perform the cleansing which consists of 'fire' and 'growth,' 'burning' and 'cooling' respectively, in due order. Or else [he may do this] with the mantra Mātṛsadbhāva.
- śloka* 20 If he wishes to perform an initiation, [the mantra] is then ritually installed on the pathway to be purified. Next, by means of *śakti* alone⁵⁹ he should bestow immortality on the articles to be purified.
- śloka* 21 [Mālinī] enclosed by Parā; or [Mālinī] enclosed even by Mātṛsadbhāva]; or Mālinī by itself: these are the [distributions of Mālinī] in all ritual actions.
- śloka* 22 Let him fill the vessel with ingredients, which are the fruit and the causes of joy. At that point, through an identity with the mantra that has been mentioned, he should bring himself to the state of Bhairava.
- śloka* 23 Consequently, he should satiate the self with its multitude [of goddesses] in the circle and sub-circle, externally by sprinkling drops upwards and downwards, and internally by drinking.

⁵⁸ *TĀ* 15.121-125a gives the procedure in detail, in the direction of emanation, from the tuft of hair to the feet. See also *Tantrasāra*, p. 199.

⁵⁹ The term '*śakti*' is to be understood as '*rudraśakti*,' which is Mālinī enclosed by Parā, or Mālinī enclosed by Mātṛsadbhāva.

i. The context

The place of ritual is filled with items pleasing to the senses, such as flowers and incense, for they will stimulate the practitioner (*śloka* 18a), as will even more so the substances in the cup to be mentioned in *śloka* 22a.

In the symbolism of the ritual, the east represents life and its multiple enjoyments for that is where the sun rises to make its varied course across the sky. The north, where the sun never goes, represents that which transcends life, and therefore the realm of liberation. By facing northeast, the practitioner shows that he is 'liberated-while-living' (*jīvanmukti*).

The ritual is directed to the lineage of the Perfected Beings (*siddha*) of the Kula tradition in union with their wives (*patnī*).⁶⁰ They are the expressions of the god and goddess from whose eternal intercourse the universe springs.

ii. Divinisation:

The human body represents the universe. The practitioner begins the ritual by regenerating himself and the universe by means of the great mantras of the Kula tradition, which are the phonic form of the goddess and are imbued with all her powers (*śloka* 18b-19).

The phonic form of Parā is *SAUḤ*. Mālinī consists of the fifty phonemes of the Sanskrit alphabet in mingled fashion such that the vowels, which represent Śiva or seed, and the consonants, which represent *śakti* or the womb, are united. Mālinī is essentially sexual in nature. Its abbreviated form *NA-PHA* consists of the first and last phonemes of the alphabet. Mālinī has, therefore, a more emanative character. The term *māṭṛsadbhāva* can mean either "the essence of the mother" or the "essence of the one who knows." In either case it refers to the ultimate origin of things. By reciting the phonic form of Māṭṛsadbhāva, *KHPHREṀ*, the practitioner acquires the consciousness of the supreme reality, independent of its manifestations. In this way Māṭṛsadbhāva has a more reabsorptive quality.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Cf. *TĀ* 29.2.

⁶¹ The goddess Māṭṛkā consists of the fifty phonemes of the Sanskrit alphabet arranged in their usual order from *A* to *KṢA*. Her abbreviated form, *A-KṢA*, likewise consists of the first and last

The relationship between the practitioner and the mantra resembles that between the initiating guru and the mantra during initiation. That is, the practitioner does not involve his personal will (*icchā*) separately from the will of the goddess. On the contrary, in both cases, there is fusion (*sāmarasya*) or identity between the agent and the goddess. The practitioner using the mantra (*mantrī*) and the mantra itself are inseparable, just as Śiva and his *śakti* are inseparable (*anavacchinna*). The practitioner has submitted to the goddess and she in turn submits to him. They are one.

The practitioner experiences reabsorption (*saṃhāra*) into pure consciousness by the process of ‘burning’ from the tip of the big toe to the tuft of his hair on his head, for he is being consumed in the fire of consciousness. That is, by placing the mantra on his body (*nyāsa*) he is progressively being reabsorbed. He is then refashioned by the opposite process of ‘cooling’ or emanation (*sr̥ṣṭi*), likewise by a process of installing the mantra. He and the universe are thus wholly regenerated.

There are two basic categories of ‘pathways’ (*adhvan*) which constitute the basic structure of reality. The pathway of time (*kāla-adhvan*) is based on the subtle breath; the pathway of space (*deśa-adhvan*) is based on bodily forms. While the ‘burning’ and ‘cooling’ cover all pathways, there is provision at this point to emphasise one or other of them (*śloka* 20a).

Just as the practitioner regenerates himself, he also consecrates the ritual articles, such as flowers and the ingredients of the vessel.⁶² Otherwise they would be inappropriate for the ritual. This is done simply, by means of just a mantra and without any action (*śloka* 20b).

“Mālinī enclosed by Parā” is *SAUḤ-NA-PHA-SAUḤ*. “Mālinī enclosed by Mātṛsadbhāva” is *KHPHREṀ-NA-PHA-KHPHREṀ*. “Mālinī by itself” is *NA-PHA*. The central mantra *NA-PHA* is the focus of this ritual, being enclosed

phonemes of the alphabet. They represent and reproduce the emanation of the whole cosmos. She appears in Sacrifice 1 which is an extended form of the Daily Ritual.

⁶² *TĀV* vol.7, p. 3307.

(*samputita*) by the other mantras (*śloka* 21). Let us remember that Abhinavagupta considers his *Tantrāloka* to be a gloss on the *Mālinīvijayottaratantra*.⁶³

He prepares the vessel with its three “M’s” (*makāras*):⁶⁴ namely *māṃsa*, meat; *madya*, wine; and *maithuna*, which is sexual union, or, by extension, the sexual fluids which result from it (*śloka* 22a).

It must be first noted that the Kula ritual, which involves actual sexual intercourse (*maithuna*) or the substances which arise from it, is for those who have already been initiated. This also applies to the other two “M’s,” meat (*māṃsa*) and wine (*madya*), a point alluded to in *TĀ* 29.99 and noted at length by Jayaratha in his commentary on that *śloka*, where he provides this quotation:

“Without a guru, without a deity, like dullards, O Parameśvarī, forever consuming wine and meat, they are ‘bound animals’.
There is no doubt about it.”

And then comments:

... the [set of three “M’s”] is to be utilised by the person who has entered upon the Kula path for the reason that he is in every way committed simply to manifesting his own bliss. [The set of three “M’s”] is not [to be utilised] out of greed. If that were the case, how would [the use of the three “M’s”] differ from worldly usages?⁶⁵

In other words, the three “M’s” are not a means to achieve a consciousness that does not yet exist but a way of expressing what is already present. The consciousness provided by the *dūtī* in Sacrifice 3 is the enhancement or external

⁶³ *TĀ* 1.17.

⁶⁴ The Kula ritual uses only three M’s, whereas other tantric rituals add two more: fish (*matsya*) and parched grain (*mudrā*).

⁶⁵ *TĀV* vol. 7, p. 3357.

expression of the consciousness already experienced in initiation, whether that initiation be directly from the goddess or from the guru. The Daily Ritual is likewise performed from enlightened consciousness.

These substances are reprobate, as a quotation given by Jayaratha in his commentary on *TĀ* 29.10 states:

"This lineage [of the Perfected Beings] is to be worshipped with ingredients that are both hated by people and forbidden according to the scriptures, that are both disgusting and despised."

The contrast with the agreeable substances such as perfume and incense mentioned in *śloka* 18 is intentional. The Daily Ritual involves both beauty and horror, just as it involves what is forbidden and what is permitted. The non-dualist mind rejects such divisive concepts and shows it by intentionally using irreconcilable opposites. The practitioner has no regard for the categories of pure and impure, pleasant or unpleasant, which are mental constructs. He transcends such divisions for he is identified with absolute consciousness itself.

Of these, the last, sexual fluid, is by far the most important. The cup contains, therefore, the meat and wine, which lead to congress, and the sexual fluid, which results from congress.

The cup (*pātra*) represents the whole domain of bliss: all that leads to it and all that results from it. Indeed, the contents of the cup are not *adharmika* but pure and purifying.

The cup both symbolises all that the practitioner is and enables him to become in fact what he is in essence. Should he have lost, for any reason, his sense of Śivahood, the cup and its contents will restore it. This happens, for example, in the concluding rites when the disciple once again consumes the oblation (*caru*) should he have 'sinned' either through underestimating (defect) or overestimating (excess) the identity of the self with the Self. As

Abhinavagupta states, "The ritual which is 'defective' or 'excessive' is indeed a sin. This [ritual of eating the oblation] is said to be 'the ceasing of [sin]'."⁶⁶

By means of the mantra, the practitioner has regenerated himself as Bhairava, the fearsome form of Śiva, and now proceeds to use the fearsome substances of the cup (*śloka* 22b),

iii. Action

He now performs the act of sprinkling, which has a range of meanings. It refers in the first instance to the emanation of the universe, which proceeds from the bliss of Bhairava in union with his *śakti*. Secondly it refers to the reabsorption of the universe: it is a work of satiation (*tarpaṇa*), for the human being consists of circles (*cakra*) and sub-circles (*anucakra*), which interlock, one leading to the other. The various faculties, or rather the goddesses of the faculties, seek their objects so as to be satisfied and rest content. By providing them with substances⁶⁷ both fearsome and blissful, they are satisfied, and since the lower circles are organically linked to higher circles and ultimately to consciousness, the Self is satiated. The practitioner, Bhairava, thus rests in peace, fulfilled (*śloka* 23).

This essential procedure is at the heart of all the ritual practices of *TĀ* 29. For example, Jayaratha quotes *TĀ* 29.23 in his commentary on *TĀ* 29.109a, so that 'circle,' 'sub-circles' and 'satiating' are given to mean 'the sexual organ,' 'the sexual zones' and 'sexual activity.' Indeed, this basic pattern is quite simply the pattern of vibration (*spanda*) or the cycle of emission (*śṛṣṭi*) and reabsorption (*saṃhāra*) of the universe. Moreover, since the purpose of the ritual practices is to reach the state of supreme Bhairava "ever unattached, liberated-while-living,"⁶⁸ the essence of the procedure is ideally experienced in every situation.

⁶⁶ *TĀ* 29.283.

⁶⁷ See the well-known and ancient ritual of offering fruit and incense to the deity present in the eternal image.

⁶⁸ *TĀ* 29.162a.

The following quotation comes from Abhinavagupta's description of Sacrifice 2, but it is equally applicable to the Daily Ritual, which is the essence of all the Kula rituals.

Moreover, having by his own nature become the sole lord of the *kula*, he should satiate the many *śaktīs* by pairing [with them], he who possesses every form.⁶⁹

Conclusion:

Wisdom and excess go together: that is the essential point of the Kula ritual. But what wisdom, which excess? In Brahmanical eyes, the practices of the Kula are a grave infringement of the *dharma* as set out, for example, in *The Laws of Manu*. For the Kula practitioner, by contrast, the wisdom of the Vedas is at best just the beginning of wisdom, for he knows a higher truth which rises above all constrictions and categories. He seeks to be free precisely by entering into the forbidden and the impure proscribed by the traditional *dharma*. He uses the prohibitions to demonstrate his freedom from prohibitions. He uses excess so as to show that he transcends excess. He is free from illusion, master of his own desires, not constrained by fear; he is equal in pain or pleasure, beauty or horror. He rejects the categories of good and evil, the licit and illicit. He is free.

However, the Kula practitioner is not foolish in the ways of the ignorant who confuse licentiousness with freedom, mindlessness with universal consciousness, as do some misguided forms of twentieth- and twenty-first-century 'tantrism.' Those who follow false teaching on the tantra will succumb to the fate mentioned by Abhinavagupta: "absorption by a Piśāca demon."⁷⁰ This article is an attempt to counter some such misguided presentations of the Kula.

It is this *kaula* perception of transcendent freedom and universal consciousness which leads Abhinavagupta, philosopher, poet, and mystic, to prefer the Kula *prakriyā*. By performing this Daily Ritual and the other rituals of

⁶⁹ *TĀ* 29.79.

⁷⁰ *TĀ* 29.239a.

the Kula tradition, the practitioner, initiated into the tradition by an authentic guru, expresses his 'Bhairavic frame of mind' (*bhairava-mudrā*) whereby the inner and the outer coincide. External reality is a projection of his inner being and the outer world is a revelation of his inmost self. To see the one is to see the other. All is one. All is his very self. Each thought, word and deed is a Kula sacrifice⁷¹ when performed by the Kula hero (*kula-vīra*) who is *jīvan-mukti*, 'liberated-while-living.'

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⁷¹ Cf. *TĀ* 29.6.

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