

Snug in Smoky Smashans

Of Sacred Sadhana in Spooky Places

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One of the strange mysteries of modern India has been the presentation of a semi-Westernized surface pattern and the mystic undercurrent of the ancient traditions and lore which still flows quietly underneath. The most drastic and unpleasant changes have been made in the larger towns and-cities and certain new industrial areas.

Sometimes, not very remote from these places, we find the simple sincere sadhus and yogis performing their austerities and spiritual disciplines, much the same as was done by their ancestral gurus of thousands of years ago. But the oddest feature of these yogis is often due to their being associated with ancient Tantrik practices where Vedic ways and ideas are completely remote. Much of this may be due to sadhus and sannyasins of all the yoga cults and sampradayas having remained aloof from ideas which became accepted when Tantra and Veda merged to become a general united pattern for the greater part of India's population.

Veda had little to offer except rites and rituals and the caste system, but, in spite of this, the merger was a triumph for India's spiritual tradition. Sadhus of yoga sects never recognized the caste system either with regard to disciples or among visitors. Even kings, queens and wealthy brahmins were content to sit at the feet of spiritual saints and sages and in the presence of the saint there were no caste divisions, because he would not recognize them. Caste today is only strictly observed by some of Sankaracharya's Dasnami sects, even though it is against Hindu teachings for a sadhu to observe or practice it. Not all brahmins approve of these sects and many condemn the maintenance of caste concepts by people who are supposed to have renounced them.

Yoga, meditation and all forms of spiritual discipline which were intended to lead the individual jiva to the Supreme Reality, originated in Tantra and flourished in India long before the Aryans invaded. One of the unique practices of Tantrik sadhus and their disciples was the Smashan Vidya or Yoga, the Cremation-Ground Discipline. It was one of the few Hindu practices openly accepted by the early Buddhists, and was again revived when some sects of Buddhists remembered Tantrik practices. It was appreciated from many aspects. The first was that it helped to overcome fear of the cremation- ground as a place which most men shunned, especially at night. It was also a location of solitude and where one would not be interrupted. It helped to overcome the attachment to life and served as a practical reminder that this was an end to which all must come and nothing could be done to avoid it. Every man, woman and child, success or failure, famous or obscure, all had to come to this place where worldly hopes

and ambitions were burnt to ashes.

India's Yoga of Reunion took two very distinct forms. First there was the life of complete inaction and the long, solitary periods of meditation. It was, however, recognized that this type of yoga was only suitable for those who had reached a high stage and also had the suitable karma and predisposition from the past. For those not so favourably equipped, the Tantriks had another pattern to help speedy development. This involved utilizing the sexual energy and the natural forces of the sexual drive to unleash the inner consciousness, and thus combining a physical, mental and spiritual ecstasy. This type of yoga is useless among people inhibited by a puritan society. To them it might only appear as an obscene thrill and could never attain its objective. Without "naturalness" in one's attitude toward sex rites and the sadhana which involves it, they are best avoided.

Western patterns of magick ritual have been developed in the last century or so by occult masters such as Aleister Crowley but they owe much to inspiration gleaned from Indian yoga. Even today, in the smashans or burning-grounds of India we can still see the esoteric-erotic rites of the yogi and his efforts to unleash the forces of the Cosmos.

The ritual patterns are simple and generally spontaneous. Sometimes the yogi may be accompanied by a shakti. The shakti is generally a woman hired for the purpose but there are still female Tantrik sannyasinis who will combine with a yogi to perform the rite. In some cases a disciple would provide a female. When none of these are possible the yogi will use the natural means of attaining orgasm with the hand. Sometimes a group of yogis will join together for this purpose. Some burning-grounds in the north are favoured for this purpose, as it is in this area that Tantrik sadhus tend to congregate more. -

The rite starts after sunset and a suitable place or portion is cleared of bones and the ashes evenly spread. Here the yogi will sit naked and let his long hair fall loose to flutter in the breeze, He will sit in a cross-legged position for a while in silence. Then, after a suitable period has elapsed he will break into a low weird chant which grows louder and louder. Then when a certain peak of power is attained he will probably stand up and move or twist the body 'about and cry out the shlokas and mantras to awaken the vital energy. These in turn rouse the sexual energy and, at a suitable moment, favourable for the climax, the semen is released in the ecstasy of wild abandonment, and rubbed on the forehead and chest. If the yogi has a shakti the procedure is the same except that it will involve embraces before the moment when they will be in the ashes for the final sex act. Complete uninhibitedness is essential in the rite. People don't generally wander in burning-grounds at night but even if there are sly onlookers the rite goes on just the same.

The only variation of this rite is when a corpse, awaiting burning, might be available, but this has become the rarest of rarities today, and relatives are usually on the spot to see that the corpse is burnt with the minimum of delay. In Tantra, on all levels, men and women were always taught that during the sex act, the man was Shiva and the woman was the Goddess, Shakti, Parvati or Durga. This helped people to understand sex as a sacred rite in itself which required both participants to assume the role of a divinity. This, in turn, helped people to understand what, in spite of their own humble role in worldly life. that they too were immortal souls, no different from the Gods and Goddesses they worshiped.

Western Magick rites which are intended to release the latent cosmic forces from the inner consciousness of man's being, are always associated with the dynamic drive of the sexual energy. This is because it is the most powerful force in man and also in the entire process of the vast cosmos. Inhibitions, complexes, repressions and perverted moral ideas are the greatest stumbling-block to any spiritual progress. Apart from the fact that they impair the mental and physical health they tend to become webs of delusion and obstacles which can become a permanent block between physical man and his immortal soul. Pagans have always taken a pleasant delight in naturalness associated with sex as in all other things. In ancient days the yogi too gave sex its proper place in life without exaggerating it on the one hand, or suppressing it on the other. Thus the real yogi, free from Vedic limitations, lets nothing foolish stand in the way of his liberation.

The Pagans were well aware that of all manifestations of the Absolute, the God of Death was the most just and impartial. And where would he rule more than in the cemetery or cremation ground? These were but the gateways which lead into his kingdom. These eternal patterns of thought keep emerging spontaneously throughout life. This is typical of Paganism which always has its own inner inspiration and keeps springing up from the slumbering mind to express itself in revived Pagan rite. It does this even though some of the external patterns could be borrowed from older traditions and records.

Paganism has its own purity but it is a purity of mind free from ignorance and wrong ideas. Whenever there has been a resurgence of Pagan life springing into fulfillment it does so in three related aspects:

1. The sacredness of sex, sex symbolism and ritual nudity, reverting to the natural uninhibited man or woman.
2. Two distinct sections of people; those who express devotion to the God or Gods in name and form, and those who seek the Supreme Reality. This is a matter of inner understanding and outward expressions do not always appear to be different.
3. A spontaneous concept relating to rebirth into another life on earth or into a heaven of happiness and enjoyment. Sometimes, but much more rare, the endeavour to attain the state of Absolute Divinity.

Features of spontaneous Pagan resurgences in Europe have caused historians to wonder. Often in quiet suppressed Christian communities the Pagan blossom has burst forth. It has never appeared as a mere collection of ideas which are contrary to Christian dogmas, but new patterns having an independent expression of their own. These historical "mysteries" are due to the fact that it is quite impossible to trace the roots. Also the historian can see clearly that Pagan cults might meet in cemeteries and burning grounds as these places were lonely spots and less liable to any disturbance. But all too soon it became obvious that death and the burial ground have an important significance of their own.

The element of Pagan purity was occasionally associated in Christian countries, where Pagan cults spontaneously burst forth, with the Hebrew concept of the perfect, natural unconditioned Adam and Eve before their fall; originally a Chaldean legend.

In 1286 A. D, Pope Honorius IV found his slumbers disturbed by a new Pagan outbreak among a group of Germans of both sexes. They preached that men and women should refrain from wearing clothes and that it was healthier, more natural and infinitely

more spiritual to go naked. They drew an analogy from the Bible of Adam and Eve and the innocent perfection they enjoyed before Jehovah turned nasty. The Garden of Eden would always be where men and women were naked and free, They also preached against men doing manual labour involving the use of the hands. Their reasons for this were not explained except that it must be assumed that Adam and Eve had not done so either. They condemned marriage and encouraged freer relations between men and women. The Holy Father Honorius ordered their persecution and extinction, and a little more human happiness was ground out of existence by the heavy heel of the Church–Nice people!

The naked Adam and Eve were resurrected as late as 1925 in a revival of the already ancient Adamite Cult from England. This revival took place in the American town of Drowille, California under the leadership of Anna Rhodes, the high priestess. She and her husband lived on their farm as the naked Adam and Eve and they called their land the Garden of Eden. They were not alone and the sect had many supporters. On this farm they held naked rites and danced round a bonfire – Nicer people !

The most astounding resurgence of Paganism in modern times is the case of the Ozark Witch-cult. Although this cult has flourished in modern times its origin cannot be determined. An American writer heard about these people and went into the Ozark hill country to investigate for himself. Seeing that until recent times, America would provisionally have been regarded as a Christian country, the existence of this Pagan community was all the more astounding. There was no attempt at secrecy and the cult members spoke freely. Women admitted that their initiation into the cult was a much more moving spiritual crisis than anything to be found in Christianity.

The cult was not a mere once a week affair, but the members accepted it as their religion and way of life. Although so many thousands of miles away from the land of Tantra, and in an absence of all obvious connections, yet these people held to the universal pagan idea of symbolic union with the God which was expressed on physical levels of sexual union.

In the primitive Ozark hill country a woman took initiation in a cemetery at midnight. First there was a formal renunciation of the Christian faith and the dedication of oneself, body and soul, to the God of the cult. She would then step naked and repeat certain verses and words which had the power to attract the energy of the departed dead. The priest of the cult, also naked, instructed her in the words to be spoken. Then at a suitable and auspicious moment, she copulated with the priest and this endowed him with the responsibility of giving her future instruction into the cult and its secret lore. This rite had to be witnessed by at least two other initiates and they had also to be naked. For initiation to be complete, the rite was repeated three times. The rite, so far away from all Christian standards, had its own spiritual values and was in no sense of the word a sex orgy.

The Pagans seem to have had sufficient intelligence to see that sex was the most powerful energetic drive in man and it was quite impossible and also undesirable to suppress it. The Christians, in trying to do so have proved the Pagan point by their own failures. But Paganism, East and West has taken the nature of natural man to its logical conclusion and utilized the power of sex to transport men and women to the highest levels of attainment.

The ancient pre-Vedic cult of Tantra always regarded good and bad as only rela-

tivistic aspects of the whole, like the two sides of the same coin. The Bhagavad and Uddhava Gitas stress the point also. In his attempt to become immortal and to be worthy of the robe of immortality, the yogi has first to experience and then become the master of all things. The senses cannot reject sensations of which they have no- experience and nobody can progress on the path of higher yoga if the way is littered and obstructed with prohibitions. Shri Bhagavan Sukadev, the great naked Mahatma who preached the Bhagavatam to King Parikshit clearly states:

“The Absolute assumes the senses, intellect, etc., to enjoy both the diversity as well as the bliss of the final attainment.” This cannot be done except through the action of the gunas or nature qualities of each individual. These three gunas are:

Sattvic: harmony or illumination

Rajasic: active or passionate

Tamasic: inert or delusive

Human beings have and express these three gunas in various proportions. They are all part of maya or illusion and the yogi is he who has tasted their bondage and overcome all three. Sri Sukadev also points out that what he has spoken constitutes the secret of the teachings of the (Hindu) Dharma. This teaching was fully expressed in Tantra and accepted in moderation by the Vedic school of thought.

The yogis of Tantra rarely describe themselves as Tantriks. They generally use the term Vamamarga which means literally “left-hand path” actually it is the Nivritti marga under a different name, and really means turning about or reversal of generally accepted ideas and patterns of the householder’s path. The word also occurs in Tibetan Lamaism with the same meaning. It has caused havoc among Western brains because they tend to think of left as sinister or evil, It should be explained here that there has not existed for thousands of years, a pure Tantrik community. Here and there, there have always been individuals and even families who have leaned toward Tantra but for most of its latter history it has only existed as a separate idea among sadhus, and this only because they practice patterns of yoga and disciplines which have to be’ clearly defined or expressed. Few among householders practice sadhana with such intensity as to prevent them floating in the general stream of Hinduism. Even a householder disciple taking instruction under a Tantrik guru would hesitate to regard himself as essentially Tantrik and would prefer to wander freely among the many varied patterns of the Hindu way of life. When Western visitors come to India seeking for Tantrik communities which have not existed for two to three thousand years. their failure is not surprising. It is something like pilgrims going to modern Palestine and expecting to see Jesus riding on a donkey.

It is in the smashan where you will still find the rites of millennia still practiced, but where no “Welcome” mats will be spread out for strangers. Even burning-ground sadhana is never conducted by inexperienced people without the guidance and instruction of the guru. It might not even be advised for some disciples as it is by no means a formality which all must undertake. One mutt know what to do and why it is done. While staying in Benares – now called Varanasi or Kashi – a guru was asked by some Western visitors to conduct them through a night rite on the famous Manikarnika Ghat. Of

course it was refused as the only real desire was for some unique “experience” as part of their tour. It is not possible for an inexperienced person to sit naked through most of the night in a cremation-ground or anywhere else. Seven or eight hours of meditation at a stretch requires considerable practice and training. The magick of meditation is with the individual and not with the smashan.

Tantra classified all devotees under three distinct headings. These will be understood better by reversing the order of the gunas given earlier. The first and lowest, constituting the majority is Pashu – literally an uncomplimentary but accurate expression meaning “beast”. It is the guna of dullness and inertia. The second group was the Vira, having the meaning of “brave, heroic or determined”. It is the Rajasic man risen from the stage of pashu. The third group constituting only the minority which would include the best of the community was Divya, having the same meaning as the similar English word “divine”. This is the sattvic man of harmony and illumination.

Tantra also makes a further subdivision of seven stages of progress. They are not actually fixed ideas or grades through which one actually needs to pass like working one’s way through Masonic degrees. While it is untrue to say that Tantra was a secret or obscure cult, it is equally true to say that there is much in the nature of rites and teachings which have been neglected to India’s great loss, while less worthy values have been preserved. If the Tantrik calendar and festivals had been more strictly maintained we would not have seen the rise of the perverted form of the Bhakti cult which has degenerated higher spiritual life and debased the higher concepts of immortality and liberation and the ultimate goal of moksha.

Tantra taught two fundamental bases for all true spiritual life. The first is Ishvaranugraha, and is usually translated as the blessings of the Absolute or Grace of God. This is not incorrect in itself. What is wrong today is the Christian or Muslim interpretation of divine blessing or grace. Thus it is now popularly accepted that God as a benevolent Jehovah or Allah type will bestow great favour on certain people and give them liberation. Tantra implied no such delusions but stressed that Divine Grace was not a present from heaven, but something the individual earned by his own efforts. In this way Tantra teaches Ishvaranugraha as being the blessing of maturity when man is in harmony with the cosmic ruler (Ishvara) and has the suitable karma an:!¹ archaic memories to give him the real sincerity to strive and attain. They never did imagine that Grace of God alone could turn a jackal into a tiger.

The second basic fundamental was Ishwarapranidam, or resignation to God. Again, this is all too often, misunderstood to mean that if everything is left to God then he will manage and arrange everything. In the relative world where harmony with the Cosmic Ruler (Ishvara) is very minute, such resignation will prove to be of a very disappointing nature. A saint or sadhu living in the realm of the Absolute is another matter. Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras uses the term Ishwarapranidam but to indicate that once the disciple has progressed so far, the inner soul wisdom will take over to carry him onwards. Thus resignation becomes desirable. A guru explains resignation to God to the following way:

If you beg rice from house to house, through the grace of God you will get sufficient. If you do not get sufficient then the grace of God has indicated that you have gone to the wrong houses.

“If you put the rice in water and swill it round and round, then God will wash it for

you. If you light a fire or stove and put the pot on the flame, God will cook it for you. If after about twenty minutes you fall asleep God will burn the bloody lot for you. This is resignation to God. If you can go part of the way, God will take you the rest- God has already made the laws of the universe – be resigned to them and live in accord with them.”

The yogi goes near to death in order that he may truly fulfill his life. Meditating, is, in fact, nearer to the state of death than any other aspect of life, and the naked yogi seated in the burning-ground dwells in the place which is permeated with death itself. He strives to attain the state where standing on the brink of the bottomless pit he cannot fear or fall for the power of the Absolute can only carry him onward and upwards. Thus the last resting-place in life becomes the spring-board into the infinite realm of the Absolute. His is a world where of all things, dust and bones are the most sacred.

In the smashan, as in his place of residence, the yogi will make an altar of skulls. They are set in a line, straight or semi-circular. with the fleshless grinning faces to front. The space between the skulls is filled with mud and the top made flat. On this top he may put a stone, an image or lingam symbol, to be used as the focal point in his concentration. The wise yogi usually contrives to have a symbol which is so unlike the Thing or Power It represents that nobody could mistake it for the real thing. This becomes his cosmic altar, having as its base the symbols of grinning death. and from its microcosmic platform the infinite essence of man’s real Substance and which is projected into the eternal vortex of the Macrocosm. This is the Pagan magick of a happier and more spiritual world than most people experience today. Thus it is said:

In lonely solitude of hills and caves
There is a place of peace and happiness,
Where those bewildered by the whirl of life
Can barter it for everlasting bliss.

To the Christian. in spite of their teachings of a happy heaven, the grave-yard and burning-ground have always been seen as places of tragedy. To the Pagan, with his vaster and more realistic outlook, they are only the places of change and transformation into a new and fuller life. The Pagan East has still retained the concept that in the termination of life. to most people death can be a blessing if it leads to a better rebirth. Wherefore can there be tears for any transformation which is to the advantage of the individual? Clinging to life is one of the five pain-bearing obstructions to attainment. It is a wise disciple who can sincerely pray:

If I have to be born again,
In this world with its aches and pains,
Grant that I be more contented
As an idiot with less brains.
Cleverness has made me suffer,
In city life instead of the wild;
Please grant that I never grow up,
But die as an innocent child.

Ashes are the supreme substance and product of their own. Those who think of ashes as insignificant will be surprised to learn there is a whole Upanishad of considerable length devoted to the subject of ashes. It is a non-Vedic Upanishad and is probably of considerable antiquity. Ashes are also dealt with in the Shiva Purana and in many of the Tantras. It now appears to be evident that Agni was a non-Vedic word for fire and yet might have been the same word used by the Aryans for fire and also as the god of fire. The mystery tends to confuse scholars but it can be easily resolved because the Tantrik non-Vedic traditions go back so far in antiquity. Since many ideas and teachings spread into other lands they might have been adopted by the Aryans and brought back with them into India. The only other alternative is that the word agni was adopted by the Aryans soon after entering India. Since they were a nomadic race it would be improbable that they held a fire-god as very sacred, since sacredness in the form of fire requires a stationary location. But no harm is done. It is necessary to explain that we find that one of the early names of Lord Shiva was Kalagni-Rudra—"Rudra of the Fire of Time." The Upanishad also deals with what might be one of the earliest creation concepts in the world. It tells us that fire (agni) came from Aghora which is Shiva in one of his five primordial aspects. There can be no mystery why yogis mark the body with ashes or completely cover themselves with it. The Brihajjabala Upanishad explains its esoteric teachings at great length. This extract will explain itself:

"If ashes (bhasma) are applied to all parts of the body there is a downpour of immortal power, and through this the root matter, prakriti (maya) ceases to hold in bondage. If the touch of the Immortal, the Auspicious (Shiva), the Power (Shakti) is received. how can mortality endure? Thus bathing in the Immortal Power and following the path of yoga, one is rendered Immortal; Yes, rendered Immortal. Thus the Upanishad concludes."

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