

# ŚRĪ TANTRĀLOKA

*By the great master*  
**ABHINAVAGUPTA**

*Chapter 1 –*  
*English Translation*

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“Man will deny the truth even if it is as vivid as the Sun,  
but embrace deception as dark and dank as the gutter. Like  
seeks like, this is an old truth. Nearly as old as lies. The  
wicked at times lives a longer life, so that they may suffer  
for the truth.” –

*The Hexagrammaton,  
Baron and Baronessa Araignee*

<sup>22</sup> To begin with, in our system, it is declared in all the scriptures that lack of awareness (*ajñāna*) is the cause of saṃsāra (*the cycle of suffering*) and insight (*jñāna*) is the sole cause of liberation.

<sup>23</sup> It is taught in this way in the sacred Mālinī-vijayottara: “The wisdom-masters of our tradition hold that Impurity is nothing but unawareness (*ajñāna*), and that is the cause of the ‘sprout’ of saṃsāra.”

<sup>24</sup> With the last phrase in the verse above, the scripture refutes vain speculation concerning the possibility that intellectual knowledge might liberate, since all of it is subsequent to the activation of saṃsāra and so cannot address its cause, and states that when there is an absence of this fundamental ignorance/unawareness, there is liberation (*mokṣa*).

<sup>25</sup> ‘Ignorance’ (*ajñāna*) does not mean a total lack of understanding/awareness, because that would overextend the scope of the word, and then it would also apply to a clod of earth and suchlike, and there is no cycle of suffering for it!

<sup>26</sup> For this reason, the Śiva-sūtra teaches that ‘ignorance’ is any kind of knowledge that does not entirely illuminate the reality of that-which-is-to-be-known.

<sup>27</sup> This is the teaching demonstrated by the first two sūtras, caitanyamātmājñānaṃ bandhaḥ, when reading them both in conjunction and separately (“*Consciousness is the Self; knowledge/ignorance is bondage*”).

<sup>28</sup> In the first sūtra, ‘Consciousness’ is a word with an abstract ending, indicating that it is a reality/being (*sat*) that is pure autonomy, without other particulars.

<sup>29</sup> But with the second sūtra (*jñānaṃ bandhaḥ*), referring to ‘knowing’ as either the act of knowing or the means by which one knows, a subject-object duality within this pure Awareness is taught.

<sup>30</sup> Through a second reading of the sūtra, breaking the sandhi to read ajñānaṃ bandhaḥ, it is taught that ignorance is that which manifests duality. Because of its worthlessness, it is called a ‘bond/fetter.’ Thus it can and should be completely eliminated.

<sup>31</sup> There is no liberation whatsoever, higher or lower, other than the realization of this autonomous Self-that-is-Consciousness. That is why it, liberation, has not been mentioned separately in the Śiva-sūtra.

<sup>32</sup> As for the variously ranked insights of other systems, which should be ranked in accordance with the fact that they make manifest more and more full & inclusive vistas of the reality of that-which-is-to-be-known depending on the system, they bring to cessation the various aspects of the cycles of suffering that they address.

<sup>33</sup> “I am free of the taint of desire and so on;” “I am the inner void;” “I am free from doership”—these forms of insight, collectively or separately, liberate one only so far, only from the corresponding forms of bondage.

<sup>34</sup> Though one may be liberated from the specific limitations that those systems successfully address, one is in fact not liberated (*amukta*), because other types of limitation remain. Only one who is free of all forms of separation & limitation is truly liberated.

<sup>35</sup> That insight (*jñāna*) into the reality of that-which-is-to-be-known which is completely free of all limitations can never be partial or incomplete in any way: it grants true liberation.

<sup>36</sup> In the teachings of Śiva, it is said that gnosis and ignorance each have two kinds, called personal/innate/spiritual (*pauruṣa*) and mental/intellectual/conceptual (*bauddha, buddhi-gata*).

<sup>37; 38</sup> Of these, the innate ignorance is called ‘Impurity.’ Though it arises from Śiva, it is the veiling of one’s innate divinity, which consists of fully expanded (*pūrṇa*) awareness and activity; that is, this ‘Impurity’ is nothing but contracted awareness and activity, incomprehensible to & unconstructed by (*avikalpita*) the bound soul. This type of ignorance is not an aspect of the intellect, because it does not entail mental determination or judgement, or other mental operations.

<sup>39; 40</sup> When a mental determination or objectifying judgement—such as “I know this to be thus”—arises due to a reflection within awareness produced in and by the limited soul veiled by the six obscurations (*5 kañcukas + māyā*), that kind of mental knowledge is rightly called ignorance. In this way, mental ignorance and spiritual ignorance each nourish and are nourished by the other in a vicious cycle.

<sup>41</sup> By contrast, spiritual insight is the expansive nonconceptual awareness had by one who has attained the supreme state once the impressions of his bound condition (*paśu-saṃskāras*) have withered away.

<sup>42</sup> Intellectual knowledge is here defined as a conceptual cognition in harmony with that expansive nonconceptual knowledge of the Self (*ātma-jñāna*). It nourishes and is nourished by spiritual insight in a virtuous cycle.

<sup>43</sup> On that point, though spiritual ignorance is destroyed by initiation and the practice that follows it, spiritual insight manifests clearly & vividly only at the end of one’s body.

<sup>44</sup> But when the expansion of ignorance on the level of the mind is dissolved by the knowledge appropriate to that level (*bauddha-jñāna*), then liberation-while-living is in the palm of one’s hand.

<sup>45</sup> Initiation, for its part, is truly liberating only when it is based upon thorough intellectual understanding (*bauddha-vijñāna*); therefore, even in that case, intellectual understanding is of the foremost importance.

<sup>46</sup> And this two-fold distinction applying to both insight and the lack thereof has been made by [a variety of] teachers, beginning with the venerable Kheṭapāla (= *Sadyojyoti*) in his commentaries on the Svāyambhuva, the Raurava, and the Mataṅga-pārameśvara.

<sup>47</sup> For mastering in fullness the mental/intellectual understanding characterized by this kind of correct discernment (*avasāya*), it is scripture that is the primary factor, since only it reveals the reality of that-which-is-to-be-known.

<sup>48</sup> Even though the innate spiritual ignorance is destroyed by initiation, (*māyic*) mental constructs will still persist if intellectual ignorance has not also ceased.

<sup>49</sup> Since feeling/believing that the mind is the self lasts for most people as long as the body exists, but not past its end, liberation occurs only then for one whose spiritual ignorance has been removed by initiation, but whose mental ignorance remains uncorrected.

<sup>50; 51</sup> But because mental constructs are uprooted upon total cessation of wrong understanding, liberation certainly follows just then. This is taught by the Creator in the sacred Niśāṭana-tantra: “Whose mind is yoked to mental constructs attains God only at the fall of the body; but another whose mind is not so yoked does so right then.” Thus scripture is primary in our system.

<sup>52</sup> The ultimate reality of that-which-is-to-be-known is God, which is simply the Light of Manifestation (*prakāśa*). If its nature were other than this Light, it would not be manifest (*prākāśya*), nor would we even be able to say it exists at all.

<sup>53</sup> Yet even the unreality of any entity has as its sole domain the delightful relishing that awareness has of itself. Even the idea “This does not exist,” is also a vibrant expression of awareness, not something inert like a wall.

<sup>54</sup> And this is indeed the Light of Consciousness that manifests as everything whatsoever. Since it can hardly be denied, what is the point of fabricating methods of knowing it?

<sup>55</sup> Cognitions bestow ‘life’ on objects; and Parameśvara, the Light of Consciousness that is the ultimate principle of life (*jīva*) bestows life upon them.

<sup>56</sup> For even one whose whim is to refute everything exists in just such a way, when he denies that cognition implies a self, saying “It does not appear (*bhāsate*) so to me!”

<sup>57</sup> How could methods of knowing be appropriate or useful with regard to this Primordial Reality which is one and the same whether one is trying to prove it or deny it?

<sup>58</sup>; <sup>59</sup> For that very reason, it is said in the Kāmika-tantra: “This Primordial Reality is beyond logical argument. The God beyond all gods does not depend on any other; rather, because the other depends on him, he exists as the autonomous source of all.

<sup>60</sup>; <sup>61</sup> The sequences of place, time, and form do not constitute limitations of the One who is independent and self-contained—that is the all-pervasive Lord, the eternal Śiva, who adopts all forms.

<sup>62</sup> Because He is the all-pervasive Lord, He is in all things; because He is eternal, He is without beginning or end; because He adopts all forms, He manifests the wondrous variety of all conscious and unconscious things.

<sup>63</sup> For that reason, He is described as ‘multiform’ (*bahurūpa*) in the Dīkṣottara and other scriptures. Divided into aspects such as the Point (*bindu*) and the Resonance (*nāda*), Śiva is said to be six-fold: World, embodied Form, Light, Space (*or Void*), Sound (*śabda*), and Mantra.

<sup>64</sup> Being intently focused on the nature of any of these six aspects, he attains the state/reality (*bhāva*) of that aspect. Supreme liberation certainly results from direct experience (*vijñāna*, = *anubhava*) of that to which the words Void and so on refer.

<sup>65</sup> In light of the aforementioned omniformity of God, any of these six forms is merely a synecdochic aspect, a partial definition (*upalakṣaṇa*), as is apparent when His unlimited, unconditioned nature has arisen and His particularized aspect(s) has dissolved.

<sup>66</sup> And this is also declared in the Kāmika-tantra: “God is formless yet assumes all forms, as in the case of still water or a mirror. Everything, moving and unmoving, is pervaded by Him.”

<sup>67</sup> And these qualities of His—all-pervasiveness and so on—are not essentially separate from one another, so they do not constitute divisions within Him. In fact, He has only one fundamental quality (*dharma*), which alludes to all the others.

<sup>68</sup> Therefore, the true and straightforward precept is that He is united with the Power of Freedom (*svātantrya-śakti*). The fact that He is said to have many powers follows from his inseparable union with that one Power.

<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the power of any entity is its innate nature as understood by its Knower. Thus, He is non-dual, though conceived as possessing many powers.

<sup>70</sup> So the beautiful forms of the Divine are conceived by knowing subjects variously—but how could that indicate an actual division within Its nature? Is it the case that the fire’s capacity to burn and its capacity to cook mean it has a dual nature?

<sup>71</sup> Yet we cannot in truth say that difference does not exist, for this shining manifestation includes everything. So there is some reality to the difference between God and his Power (*śakti*).

<sup>72</sup> For Power (*śakti*) is that which, due to its oneness with God, generates an abundance of powers innate to itself; we also call it the Goddess. Though manifesting in this way, her ultimate nature is Other than anything which can be conceptualized in human terms.

<sup>73</sup> And likewise, through his Power of Freedom, God can and does manifest—with undiminished power—as the ‘created entity’ one visualizes in meditative contemplation (*bhāvanā*) and other practices, appearing in the mirror of the Knower—the awareness of the individual that is one with His own.

<sup>74</sup> Therefore, whichever means He manifests through—though He remains partless—is a Power (*śakti*). Thus this succession (*krama*) from Power to the Divine Consciousness which holds all Powers is clearly a reality.

<sup>75; 76; 77</sup> And in the sacred Kirāṇa-tantra, we find this issue addressed in its question-and-answer section: “Belief (*anubhāva*) is but a mental construct, and the mind cannot approach God; but without knowing God, how could there be any seeking or giving of initiation?” The answer follows: “The experience (*anubhava*) of hunger and the like is not at all a mental construct, for it is not derived from the mind. Though it is not perceptible to the sense of taste or hearing, one may directly know a tree because it possesses an appearance (*rūpa*). In the same way, a mental construct may lead one to apprehend God in one of His comprehensible aspects such as Resonance (*nāda*), Point (*bindu*), etc.”

<sup>78</sup> It is taught that Śiva has many śaktis, since the great extent of his diversity encompasses the Sixfold Path of cosmic powers (*kalās*), principles of reality (*tattvas*), and worlds (*bhuvanas*), and phonemes, mantras, and words; the five divine acts of creation, stasis, dissolution, concealment, grace, and more; as well as the Fourth state. All this is the unfolding of the many Powers of God.

<sup>79</sup> So too the states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, and other states beyond them—all constitute the abundant mass of ‘waves’ of the infinite Freedom of that Lord.

<sup>80</sup> The Seven Perceivers - the Mahāmantrēśvaras, the Mantrēśvaras, the Mantras, with Śiva at the head of all them, and the Vijñānākalas, Pralayākalas, and Sakalas, are also nothing but all-pervading powers of Śiva alone.

<sup>81</sup> The sacred Triśirobhairava-tantra teaches that the indestructible nature of the entire collection of Principles of Reality (*tattva-grāma*) is simply the Self, for they have the Self as their essential nature.

<sup>82</sup> The exceedingly subtle collection of Principles situated in the Heart, in the whole body, in essence-nature (*svabhāva*), is known in this tantra by the word *grāma* (*the 'collectivity'*).

<sup>83</sup> The nature (*dharma*) of that collectivity is simply the Self, it is taught, the realization of which is flooded with the immortal nectar (*amṛta*) of Śiva. Realization resides in and is incumbent upon the Light of Awareness (*prakāśa*), which is discovered in the Center (*madhya*) between Being and Non-being, between feeling and absence of feeling, and between all other pairs of opposites.

<sup>84; 85</sup> That which must be known is the state of abiding in one's true home, which is the state of seeing free of all obscurations. One who has become 'stainless' by virtue of this pure insight—described as clear naked Reality—is said in this tantra to be one whose conduct follows the 'way of the village'." For such a one, everything is accomplished.

<sup>86; 87; 88</sup> Abandoning the upper and lower breaths, (*prāṇa and apāna*), he should enter the Center. He then abides in beauty & delight (*rāma*), situated in the Center. Then, even while moving about, staying still, opening or closing the eyes, dreaming or in the waking state, running, jumping, toiling, feeling all the currents of energy (*śakti-vedana*), and likewise in countless diverse states of mind, feelings, thoughts, and actions, this delight & beauty (*rāma*) pervades. It is God (*śiva*) who is the supreme cause in all this.

<sup>89</sup> With the mind's impurities having waned, and due to his ability in restraining the activity of memory, s/he meditates on the supreme goal of meditation, that which remains steady in all coming and going.

<sup>90</sup> He then attains supreme Śiva, who is called Bhairava, through his japa. Japa is taught to be Śiva's own nature, free from the states of existence and non-existence.

<sup>91; 92</sup> Thus, here too, any apparent divisions such as imagining one's true nature to be 'distant' or 'close' are conceived out of His Freedom, relying solely upon the absolute Autonomy of Awareness. Thus, due to the all-encompassing fullness of that Freedom, it accomplishes what seems impossible. Indeed, in what form does the Highest Divinity not shine?

<sup>93</sup> He/it shines without veils; yet veiling its own nature, it appears as whatever is perceived. He/it appears veiled and unveiled, becoming manifold by joining with differentiation.

<sup>94</sup> Thus the triad of Powers within the Lord—Willing, Knowing, and Acting—are collectively known by another name, that is, Freedom, as was made clear by the gracious Masters of our lineage.

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