

Abhinavagupta and the *Tantraloka*
by Adrienne E. Robertson

The *Tantraloka* (The Light of the Tantras) is a text from the tradition of non-dual Kashmir Saivism. Composed by Abhinavagupta (c. 975-1025 CE), the *Tantraloka* is valued as a core teaching and exemplification of Trika Saivism. Founded by Vasugupta in the eighth century, Trika Saivism is the philosophy of non-dual Kashmir Saivism (Ortega 44).

While Vasugupta is credited as the founder, Abhinavagupta is claimed to have been the most influential figure in the tradition. This is due to his unique conception of the tradition expressed in his collection of writings, the exact number of which is unknown. One identified text is the highly esoteric *Tantraloka*, believed to be composed in the late tenth or eleventh century (Ortega 44).

The *Tantraloka* is comprised of 37 chapters. The first half discusses philosophy while the second half explains rituals. Abhinavagupta is stated to have composed the *Tantraloka* at the request of his disciples, so they may have a complete understanding of the Tantras and practices (Dupuche 23).

Written for an audience of which he had taught, the *Tantraloka* is cryptic and difficult to comprehend for those inexperienced in the Trika tradition. Three main concepts are found throughout; the Absolute, the Emanation of the Absolute, and the Reabsorption of the Absolute (Dupuche 33).

These concepts are intertwined and buried within multiple symbols, practices, and prose. The *Tantraloka* is a complex work, representative of Abhinavagupta's philosophy of Trika Saivism. Abhinavagupta held a unique conception of non-dual Kashmir Saivism, largely in part due to his extensive background in theology and in addition to an extensive appetite for learning and fascination with spirituality. Abhinavagupta possessed an uncommon knowledge of multiple religions and schools of thought. He studied dualistic Saivism, under Buddhist and Jain mentors, and belonged to the Kaula lineage of monistic-dual Kashmir Saivism (Ortega 45). This blending of education is

displayed in the *Tantraloka*, with his unique view of Trika and means of achieving enlightenment.

Trika Saivism, as the name suggests, focuses on the number three, and utilizes this through multiple concepts within the tradition.

Trika Saivism is said to have derived its name from the synthesis of the three ideologies of non-dual Kashmir Saivism; Agama, Spanda, and Pratyabhijna. There is also the worship of three goddesses; Para, Parapara, and Aparapara. These goddesses are each related to one of the three modes which comprise the universe; man, Sakta, and Siva, respectively (Flood 150). Following the use of the number three, there is also the triad of knower, knowing, and known. These are symbolized with meditation rituals using the sun, moon, and fire, respectively (Ortega 157). These three symbols are intertwined and held within the most famous of Abinavagupta's symbols, the Heart (Skora 2). The Heart symbol, a main facet within the *Tantraloka*, has received much attention by scholars, and is an example of the unique twist Abinavagupta incorporated into Trika Shaivism.

Simplistically, the Heart is considered the Ultimate. It is referred to throughout the *Tantraloka* as both an object and a symbol with multiple meanings. The *Tantraloka* is a tantric text which focuses on practices using touch and body awareness to achieve higher consciousness. In this context, Abinavagupta refers to the Heart as the main energy center. Ultimate awareness stems from awareness of the body, which is given through mastery of the divine energy of the Heart (Skora 4). Metaphorically, the heart is a symbol of many things. It both represents and is Siva. It is the keeper of higher consciousness and is ultimate reality (Ortega 82). Regardless of the interpretation, the Heart is deemed to be both the center of all things, and all things. To be in touch with the divine energies related to the Heart, one must practice bodily awareness (Skora 16). This includes all that is 'felt', be it emotions, sensory awareness, or touch. The emphasis Abinavagupta places on the Heart, and the body is shown throughout the *Tantraloka*.

Abinavagupta believed that tantric revelation, enabled by the practice of tantric ritual(s), surpassed that of the Vedic orthodox tradition. Tantra was considered to be highly esoteric, and both required and gave a higher level of understanding than the Vedic scriptures. Common to others of the non-dual Kashmir Saivism tradition, Abinavagupta did not reject the Vedas, rather he viewed them as limited (Flood 55). He believed they were external sources, while tantric texts such as the *Tantraloka* allowed for achievement of higher consciousness and liberation. This required internal knowledge and connection with Siva. This, according to Abinavagupta, was accomplished by using the body as well as the mind (Ortega 28). Abinavagupta expressed this use of the body through sexual rather than more traditional yogic

practices. Chapters 13-47 of the *Tantraloka* are filled with tantric rituals; however the most infamous of these is the Kula Ritual.

Chapter 29 of the *Tantraloka* is dedicated solely to the Kula Ritual, an uncommon and highly debated sexual ritual. Due to its esoteric nature, this chapter, along with the remainder of the *Tantraloka*, is widely variable in interpretation and meaning. For rituals such as this, the contribution of Jayaratha's commentary, the *Viveka*, to the *Tantraloka* is regarded as important as the writing of Abhinavagupta itself. Written two centuries following the release of the *Tantraloka*, the *Viveka* explains the passages contained within the *Tantraloka*, allowing for a deeper insight into the esoteric knowledge contained within it. (Padoux 677).

Other writings by Abhinavagupta lend to clarification of his philosophy, and thus the *Tantraloka* as well. The *Tantraloka* was composed in the "tantric" phase of Abhinavagupta's literary life. Along with it, Abhinavagupta wrote several other tantric texts, including the summary text of the *Tantraloka*, the *Tantrasara*. Previous to that were philosophical writings which included commentaries on the works of others. Following his tantric phase, Abhinavagupta wrote mostly of aesthetics. The chronological order of these writings does not represent the stages of Abhinavagupta's life, but rather the time in which he wrote of certain topics (Ortega 45).

The *Tantraloka* is over one thousand years old. Even with the *Viveka*, scholars are forced to draw conclusions with a base of limited information from this time. Missing pieces which may have been lost forever, translation, and logical interpretation of esoteric writings make it difficult to state anything with conviction. As we progress further in time, we risk losing more information to time, but can hope that time will grant clarity into this mysterious and cryptic writings of Abhinavagupta, including the *Tantraloka*.

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