THE CULT OF VETĀLA AND TANTRIC FANTASY*

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Vetāla: (A kind of spirit, ghost, ghoul, vampire, or zombie, residing in a corpse. In Chinese: 起尸鬼, 起屍鬼, 起死屍鬼; or transliteration in Chinese characters: 晃陀羅, 迷怛羅, 吳多拏鬼, 吳多茶.)

New Intellectual Milieu and Tantra

Before investigating the cult of Vetāla as a Tantric ritual, we should explore the intellectual climate of medieval India. Tantrism, as the new Zeitgeist in medieval India, offers a glimpse on a new synthesis of religious thinking as well as a new definition of pouvoir. Tantrism shifted away from tapas (ascetic austerity) to śakti (Tantric power). Its emergence represents a remarkable religious transformation in India, also reflecting Pan-Asian intellectual concerns.1

From the perspective of its two main contributors—the Hindu and Buddhist Tantras,2 this Zeitgeist shows a dramatic reversal of early

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1 David White, “Tantra in Practice: Mapping a Tradition,” in David White ed., *Tantra in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 7: “Tantra has persisted and often thrived throughout Asian history since the middle of the first millennium of the common era. Its practitioners have lived in India, China, Japan, Tibet, Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Korea, and Mongolia as well as in the ‘Greater India’ of medieval Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Burma and Indonesia. No form of medieval Hinduism, Buddhism, of Jainism…has been without a Tantric component…In Hindu India, the Pañcarātra…GauḍīyaVaiṣṇava, Sahajiyā, Kāpālikā, Śaiva Siddhānta, Siddha Kaula, Yogini Kaula…Śrīvidyā…and Tamil Nāyaṇār and Āḻvār traditions…have all been Tantric or heavily colored by Tantra.”

Śraman. This new religious adventure combined two initially irreconcilable entities: asceticism and worldly enjoyment. A Tāntrika (Tantric practitioner) needed to overcome dualistic opposition to gain spiritual realization. But this union of two originally irreconcilable conditions for a higher quest was not unique to Tantrism—the paradox is found in Buddhist Mādhyamika philosophy too:

The truth of the highest meaning takes its reality only through being projected onto the screen (samvṛti) of conventional truth. Recognition of the strictly contextual or pragmatic significance of the thoughts and objects that populate our mental and material world renders meaningless any search for a transcendental ground behind these phenomena. But paradoxically, by stripping away the tendency to reify the screen of everyday affairs, this same recognition simultaneously lays bare the intrinsic nature of all things, which is their "suchness" (tathatā), their quality of being just as they are in reciprocal dependence. What is immediately given in everyday experience is indeed all that there is, for the inherently interdependent nature of the components of this experience is the truth of the highest meaning; both the means to the goal (mārga; upāya) and the goal itself (nirvāṇa).³

I regard this paradoxical thinking as central to medieval India’s paradigmatic intellectual climate because this persuasion mode is shared by the Hindu side. The idea of beyond-dualism (parādvaya) articulated in Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad parallels medieval Buddhism.⁴ Indeed,

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⁴ According to Lehren von Richard Hauschild ed., *Die Śvetāśvatara-Upaniṣad; eine kritische Ausgabe mit einer Übersetzung und einer Übersicht über ihre Lehren* (Leipzig: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1927), p. 74, the date of Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad is around 100 B.C.E.–100 A.D.