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RECONFIGURING REALITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO THE EPISTEMIC FOUNDATIONS AND METAPHYSICS OF TANTRIC NON-DUALISM

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Abstract

The academic study of tantra has long been dominated by sensationalist accounts emphasizing ritual and antinomian practices, creating a significant gap between popular perceptions and the sophisticated philosophical systems embedded within tantric traditions. While scholars have extensively documented tantric rituals and iconography, the philosophical dimensions—particularly the epistemological foundations and metaphysical structures—remain underexplored in contemporary academic discourse. This gap is problematic because tantric traditions themselves present their practices as expressions of coherent philosophical systems rather than as mere ritualism. This article addresses this gap by investigating the philosophical foundations of tantra, focusing on the transition from mainstream Indian epistemological frameworks toward a distinctive non-dual metaphysics. The study employs a historical-philosophical approach and conceptual analysis of primary texts from the Kashmiri Śaiva Pratyabhijñā tradition and Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayāna, examining their engagement with Yogācāra idealism and their development of distinctive epistemological and metaphysical positions. The findings reveal that tantric philosophy centers on the conception of consciousness as the ultimate reality (prakāśa) accompanied by reflexive awareness (vimarśa), offering a sophisticated idealist system that integrates epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and soteriology. The article concludes that tantric philosophy provides an alternative model of how reality is constituted and how liberation can be achieved through recognition of the fundamental identity between individual self and absolute reality, with significant implications for cross-cultural philosophical dialogue.

Keywords: Tantric Philosophy, Abhinavagupta, Pratyabhijñā, Pramāṇa, Reflexive Consciousness, Non-Dualism, Yogācāra.

INTRODUCTION

The academic study of tantra in the Western world has long been dominated by an interest in sensational aspects: antinomian rituals, sexual symbolism, and seemingly transgressive practices. Such representations, while capturing attention, have actually hindered a deeper understanding of tantra as a coherent and sophisticated system of thought (Payne & Hayes, 2024, pp. 2-3). This orientalist legacy, stemming from colonial encounters and missionary reports, created a persistent framework that viewed tantra as degenerate, primitive, or morally suspect. Yet beneath the layers of ritual and esoteric practice that so fascinated early European observers lies a robust philosophical edifice that offers a profound critique of mainstream Indian epistemology and proposes an alternative

metaphysics centered on the concept of absolute consciousness.

The problem of situating tantra within the broader history of Indian philosophy is compounded by the very nature of tantric texts themselves. Unlike the systematic philosophical treatises (śāstras) of Brahmanical or Buddhist traditions, tantric literature often embeds philosophical discourse within ritual manuals, commentaries on esoteric practices, and poetic hymns. This has led some scholars to conclude that tantra is primarily a practical or ritualistic tradition with little philosophical content. However, such a conclusion rests on a mistaken identification of philosophical expression with a particular literary genre rather than with the presence of sustained rational inquiry into fundamental questions of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.

Recent developments in Tantric Studies show a significant shift from sectarian studies that separate Hindu tantra and Buddhist tantra toward a more integrative topical and comparative approach (Payne & Hayes, 2024, pp. 5-8). This shift recognizes that tantric traditions across religious boundaries share certain philosophical commitments and methodological approaches that justify treating them as a distinct field of inquiry. The Oxford Handbook of Tantric Studies (2024), edited by Richard K. Payne and Glen A. Hayes, is evidence of this development, presenting diverse topics ranging from philosophy and soteriology to contemporary practices within a single comparative framework (Payne & Hayes, 2024). The handbook brings together contributions from scholars working on Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain tantric traditions, revealing common patterns of thought and practice while respecting historical and doctrinal differences.

Nevertheless, there remains a need for more in-depth philosophical studies capable of bridging the gap between the study of classical philosophical texts (such as the works of Dharmakīrti and Abhinavagupta) and the study of tantric practice (Komarovski, 2024; Sur, 2024, pp. 32-35). Too often, philosophical analysis remains confined to the "purely philosophical" texts of a tradition, while tantric materials are left to scholars of religion or anthropology. This disciplinary division obscures the extent to which tantric traditions themselves understood their practices as embodying philosophical insights and their philosophical reflections as grounded in contemplative experience.

The research question driving this study is: Can tantra be seriously studied as a philosophical system, with its own epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics? The term "tantric philosophy" is understood here not as an emic category used by tantric practitioners themselves, but as an analytical approach to tantric texts and traditions. This approach allows us to excavate the philosophical dimensions often hidden beneath the rich language of ritual and symbolism. It requires reading tantric texts with attention to their arguments, their engagement with competing philosophical schools, and their systematic articulation of a coherent worldview.

This article argues that tantric philosophy is grounded in an "absolute idealism" in which consciousness (citti in the Kashmir tradition, vijñāna in the Buddhist tradition) is not merely a passive receiver of reality but an active entity that constitutes reality through the power of its reflexive awareness (vimarśa). This philosophy develops from an internal critique and creative synthesis of Yogācāra epistemology and Buddhist logic, offering an alternative model of the relationship between consciousness, reality, and liberation (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 15-18; Sur, 2024, pp. 45-47). The absolute idealism of tantra differs from other idealist systems in its insistence on the dynamic, creative, and blissful nature of consciousness, and in its articulation of a path by which this nature can be directly realized.

The objective of this article is threefold: first, to trace the genealogical development of tantric philosophy from its engagement with Yogācāra idealism; second, to analyze the distinctive epistemological and metaphysical positions articulated in the Kashmiri Śaiva Pratyabhijñā tradition and Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayāna; and third, to demonstrate the coherence and sophistication of tantric philosophy as a system capable of engaging with contemporary philosophical discourse.

METHOD

This study employs a historical-philosophical approach combined with conceptual analysis of primary and secondary sources. The historical-philosophical approach traces the development of tantric philosophical ideas through their engagement with other Indian philosophical traditions, particularly Yogācāra Buddhism, while conceptual analysis examines the internal structure and implications of key philosophical concepts.

The primary data sources for this study are philosophical texts from the Kashmiri Śaiva Pratyabhijñā tradition and the Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayāna tradition. The main texts examined include Utpaladeva's Īśvara-pratyabhijñā-kārikā, Abhinavagupta's Paramārthasāra and his commentaries on Utpaladeva, Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo's Establishing Appearance as Divine (Snang ba lhar bsgrub pa), and Samantabhadra's Sāramañjarī as discussed in contemporary scholarship. These texts were selected because they represent the most systematic philosophical expressions within their respective traditions and because they explicitly engage with the epistemological and metaphysical questions central to this study.

Secondary sources include recent scholarship in Tantric Studies, particularly the Oxford Handbook of Tantric Studies (Payne & Hayes, 2024), the special issue of the Journal of Contemplative Studies on "Philosophy and Contemplation in Tantric Buddhism" (Komarovski, 2024), and contemporary philosophical analyses of tantric epistemology and metaphysics (Sur, 2024; Dasgupta, 1950; Saccone, 2021). These sources provide the scholarly context for understanding tantric philosophy and offer critical interpretations of primary texts.

Data collection involved systematic examination of these texts through close reading, with attention to their arguments, their engagement with competing philosophical positions, and their articulation of distinctive philosophical concepts. Data analysis proceeded through several stages: first, identification of key philosophical concepts and arguments; second, analysis of their internal structure and implications; third, comparison across different texts and traditions; and fourth, synthesis into a coherent account of tantric philosophy.

The analysis focuses on four main areas: (1) the genealogical relationship between tantric philosophy and Yogācāra idealism; (2) the epistemological framework of tantric philosophy, particularly the concepts of prakāśa and vimarśa and the expansion of pramāṇa; (3) the metaphysical system, including theories of emanation and reflection; and (4) the ethical and soteriological implications, including the concepts of samaya and jīvanmukti. Throughout the analysis, attention is paid to both the internal coherence of tantric philosophy and its engagement with competing philosophical traditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Genealogical Foundations: Yogācāra Idealism and Its Tantric Appropriation

The philosophical foundations of tantra cannot be understood without examining their relationship to Yogācāra Buddhism, the idealist school founded by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu in the 4th-5th centuries CE. Yogācāra teaches the doctrine of citta-mātra or "consciousness-only," holding that there are no external objects independent of the consciousness that perceives them. What we take to be the external world is actually nothing more than internal representations within consciousness (Dasgupta, 1950, pp. 45-48). This position was developed in response to the realism of earlier Abhidharma schools, which held that the world is composed of ultimately real atomic constituents (dharmas). By arguing that these dharmas themselves are nothing but modes of consciousness, Yogācāra philosophers inaugurated a tradition of idealist thought that would profoundly influence subsequent Indian philosophy.

The Yogācāra analysis of perception reveals the sophistication of their epistemological arguments. When we perceive a blue object, what we directly experience is not an external blue thing but a blue appearance within consciousness. The notion that this appearance corresponds to an external object is an inference, not a given of experience. Moreover, the very idea of an external object is inherently problematic, as we can never step outside consciousness to compare our representations with the things they supposedly represent. This line of argument, anticipating similar moves in Western idealism from Berkeley to Kant, established the Yogācāra school as the foremost exponent of epistemological idealism in India.

Dignāga (c. 480-540 CE) and Dharmakīrti (c. 600-660 CE), as the most influential successors to the Yogācāra tradition, developed a highly sophisticated epistemology to support this idealism. Dignāga's reformulation of the theory of perception and inference, and Dharmakīrti's refinement of these arguments, created a systematic philosophical framework that would dominate Indian epistemology for centuries. The principle of sahopalambhaniyama, or the "rule of co-insidence of perception," became a key argument: an object is never known separately from the consciousness that knows it. Whenever we become aware of an object, we are simultaneously aware of the consciousness itself. From this, it is concluded that object and consciousness are fundamentally inseparable (Sur, 2024, pp. 40-42). Dharmakīrti famously stated this principle in his Pramāṇavārttika: "Blue and the consciousness of blue are not different, because they are always perceived together" (sahopalambhaniyamād abhedo nīlataḍ dhīyoḥ).

This epistemological argument has profound metaphysical implications. If object and consciousness are invariably co-given in experience, then the postulation of an external object beyond consciousness is not only unnecessary but also incoherent. The object just is the intentional content of consciousness, not a separate entity that causes that content. The Yogācāra position thus combines epistemological idealism with a form of phenomenological analysis that anticipates Husserl's method of bracketing the natural attitude.

Dasgupta (1950, pp. 52-55) explains that the Yogācāra school became one of the important foundations for the development of Buddhist tantric philosophy. The concept that reality is ultimately pure consciousness provided the groundwork for transformative practices in tantra. If the world of ordinary experience is a construction of consciousness, then by transforming consciousness one can transform reality itself. This insight lies at the heart of tantric soteriology.

However, Dasgupta also notes important differences between classical Yogācāra and tantric appropriations of its ideas. Classical Yogācāra tends toward a quietistic conception of liberation as the cessation of the discrimination between subject and object, culminating in a state of consciousness without content (nirākārajñāna). Tantric traditions, by contrast, emphasize the positive and creative aspects of consciousness, seeking not to extinguish appearances but to recognize their luminous nature as manifestations of ultimate reality. This shift in emphasis would be developed most fully in the non-dual Śaiva traditions of Kashmir.

In the Kashmiri Śaiva tradition, philosophers such as Utpaladeva (c. 900-950 CE) and his grand-disciple Abhinavagupta (c. 975-1025 CE) creatively appropriated Yogācāra epistemology while maintaining a critical stance. These thinkers belonged to the Pratyabhijñā ("Recognition") school, which sought to demonstrate that the individual self is none other than Śiva, the absolute consciousness. They accepted the Yogācāra arguments for epistemic idealism—the claim that objects cannot be known apart from consciousness—but rejected their conclusions about the nature of consciousness itself.

Utpaladeva, in his foundational work Īśvara-pratyabhijñā-kārikā, used Dharmakīrti's argument about the co-insidence of perception to build a new ontology. He criticized what he saw as Dharmakīrti's residual "external realism" while appropriating his "epistemic idealism." The critique proceeds as follows: If Dharmakīrti argues that we only know impressions within consciousness, Utpaladeva agrees, but then poses a crucial question: whose consciousness is it? Is it a discontinuous stream of discrete cognitive moments, as the Buddhists hold, or the continuous self-luminous awareness of a single subject?

For Utpaladeva, the Buddhist position faces a serious difficulty. If consciousness is nothing but a series of momentary cognitions, each arising and perishing instantly, then how is memory, recognition, or even the simplest unity of experience possible? When I recognize an object as the same one I saw yesterday, there must be some continuity of consciousness that connects the past perception with the present one. The Buddhist appeals to subtle causal connections between moments, but this fails to account for the first-personal character of experience—the fact that my past perceptions are given to me as mine, not merely as causes of my present state.

Abhinavagupta, in his commentaries on Utpaladeva, develops this critique further. He cites Dignāga and Vasubandhu to refute the reality of material atoms, strengthening the foundation of non-dual idealism. If the external world is not composed of real atoms, and if all we ever experience are appearances within consciousness, then what grounds the distinction between the apparent world and the consciousness that appears? The Buddhist answer—that consciousness is nothing but these appearances—fails to account for the unity and self-awareness that characterize every cognitive episode.

Abhinavagupta argues that consciousness requires the foundation of a single, continuous, transcendental subject, namely Śiva as Cosmic Consciousness (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 45-48). This subject is not one object among others but the very condition for the possibility of any object appearing at all. It is the light (prakāśa) that illuminates all appearances, and its self-awareness (vimarśa) is what distinguishes conscious illumination from the mere reflection of light in a lifeless medium.

The Pratyabhijñā school thus offers a transcendental argument for the existence of a unitary, self-aware consciousness that is the ground of all experience. This argument bears striking similarities to Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, though the Indian

context gives it a distinctly metaphysical and theological interpretation. For Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, the subject of transcendental apperception is not merely a formal condition of experience but the very reality of Śiva, whose nature is consciousness, bliss, and creative power.

Abhinavagupta's Paramārthasāra, or "Essence of the Highest Reality," provides a concise summary of Trika philosophy and develops the central theme of jīvanmukti, or liberation while living (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 1-5). The text begins with an invocation of the supreme reality as consciousness (citi), which is both transcendent and immanent. Abhinavagupta then proceeds to analyze the nature of the individual self, the process of bondage and liberation, and the means by which liberation is attained. Throughout, he engages with competing philosophical positions—Buddhist, Sāṃkhya, Nyāya, and others—demonstrating his mastery of the entire Indian philosophical tradition.

Interestingly, beneath his philosophical exposition, Abhinavagupta also inserts instructions on esoteric techniques that form the heart of tantric practice (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 67-70). These passages, often encoded in cryptic language, point to the experiential dimension of the philosophy he expounds. For Abhinavagupta, philosophy is not merely an intellectual exercise but a guide to direct realization. The arguments he presents are meant to remove obstacles to recognition (pratyabhijñā), not to establish propositions for their own sake.

From this critical dialogue with the Yogācāra tradition emerged a distinctive formulation of absolute idealism in tantric philosophy. Unlike Yogācāra idealism, which tends to be phenomenalist and rejects substance, tantric idealism affirms the substantial reality of consciousness as the source of all manifestation. Kashmirian thinkers integrate Yogācāra epistemological insights into a broader metaphysical framework in which consciousness is not only the foundation of experience but also the creative power that manifests the universe (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 78-80). Consciousness is not merely a passive backdrop for the emergence of phenomena but an active agent that freely plays with its own powers.

This conception of consciousness as active and creative has important implications for understanding the relationship between philosophy and practice. If consciousness is essentially creative, then the path to liberation cannot be merely cognitive—it must also engage the creative powers of the practitioner. This is why tantric traditions place such emphasis on visualization, mantra, and ritual: these practices are not merely aids to concentration but direct exercises of consciousness's creative power. By consciously creating and dissolving mental forms, the practitioner learns to recognize the creative nature of their own awareness and, ultimately, to identify with the absolute creativity of Śiva.

Epistemological Framework: Prakāśa, Vimarśa, and the Expansion of Pramāṇa

One of tantric philosophy's most original contributions to Indian philosophical discourse is its analysis of the internal structure of consciousness. In the Pratyabhijñā tradition, consciousness is understood to have two inseparable aspects: prakāśa and vimarśa. This analysis goes beyond the usual epistemological concerns of Indian philosophy to articulate a phenomenological description of consciousness that has profound metaphysical implications.

Prakāśa (illumination/luminosity) is the objective aspect of consciousness that makes everything appear or become manifest. It is the light of consciousness that

illuminates all objects, similar to the concept of "intentional consciousness" in modern phenomenology. Without prakāśa, nothing could appear or be known (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 82-83). Prakāśa is the condition for the possibility of any object whatsoever—the ontological light in which beings become manifest.

However, prakāśa alone is insufficient. For consciousness to be truly alive, vimarśa (reflexive awareness) is required—the subjective, dynamic, and creative aspect of consciousness. This is the universal "I" that grounds all cognitive activity and existence. Vimarśa is the power (śakti) that unifies experience and provides self-awareness. Without vimarśa, prakāśa would be merely empty light without self-consciousness (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 85-87). A lamp illuminates objects but does not know that it illuminates them; consciousness not only illuminates but knows its own illumination.

The relationship between prakāśa and vimarśa is not one of separation but of mutual implication. There is no prakāśa without vimarśa, for illumination that is not aware of itself would not be consciousness at all. There is no vimarśa without prakāśa, for self-awareness is always awareness of something—even if that something is simply the self itself. The two aspects are like fire and its heat, or the sun and its light: distinguishable in thought but inseparable in reality.

This concept of vimarśa is crucial because it bridges the gap between epistemology and metaphysics. It is the principle that allows absolute consciousness, though one and indivisible, to manifest itself as a diversity of subjects and objects without losing its unity. This distinguishes tantric idealism from simple pantheism or static monism. The absolute is not a static substance in which all distinctions disappear but a dynamic reality that contains all distinctions within itself.

The analysis of consciousness into prakāśa and vimarśa also has important implications for understanding the nature of ordinary experience. In everyday cognition, we are aware of objects but rarely aware of awareness itself. The light of consciousness is directed outward, illuminating the world while remaining invisible. Tantric practice aims to reverse this outward direction, turning consciousness back upon itself so that it recognizes its own nature. This is the "recognition" (pratyabhijñā) that gives the school its name.

The debate over the status of non-conceptual knowledge (nirvikalpaka) versus conceptual knowledge (savikalpaka) has long been a central topic in Indian epistemology. Most schools of Indian philosophy recognize a form of perception that is free from conceptual construction—a direct, unmediated awareness of particulars. For the Mīmāṃsakas and Naiyāyikas, this non-conceptual perception provides the foundation for all knowledge, grounding the conceptual constructions of language and inference in immediate sensory contact with reality.

Buddhist epistemologists, following Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, also affirm the reality of non-conceptual perception but give it a different interpretation. For them, non-conceptual perception reveals the unique particulars (svalakṣaṇa) that are the ultimately real entities. Conceptual thought, by contrast, deals with generalities (sāmānyalakṣaṇa) that are constructed by the mind and have only conventional reality.

Tantric philosophy, particularly in the Pratyabhijñā tradition, offers a unique position in this debate. Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta reject the sharp separation between non-conceptual perception and conceptual knowledge. They argue that even what appears non-conceptual has a reflexive dimension (vimarśa). When we directly experience something, that experience is always accompanied by the implicit awareness that "I am experiencing this." Without this reflexive dimension, experience would be no

different from an inanimate object being struck by light (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 90-92).

This critique has important implications for tantric practice. If even the highest non-conceptual experience has a reflexive structure, then the path to ultimate realization is not to extinguish all mental activity but to perfect reflexive awareness until it achieves full identity with Cosmic Consciousness. The goal is not a blank, contentless state but a state of perfect self-awareness in which the distinction between subject and object is overcome.

One of the most significant developments in tantric philosophy is the formulation of what Dominic Sur (2024, pp. 35-38) calls "tantric pramāṇa." In his article "The Art of Imagination at the Intersection of Pramāṇa and Samaya," Sur shows that Tibetan tantric thinkers, especially from the Nyingma school, developed an epistemological approach that philosophically integrates exoteric thought with esoteric ritual and ideology (Sur, 2024, p. 40). This integration represents a significant expansion of the traditional pramāṇa framework, which had been developed primarily in the context of inter-scholastic debate.

The pramāṇa tradition, originating with Dignāga and Dharmakīrti and continuing in both Buddhist and Brahmanical schools, sought to establish reliable criteria for knowledge. It identified perception (pratyakṣa) and inference (anumāna) as the two principal sources of valid cognition, and developed sophisticated analyses of their operation and scope. This tradition dominated Indian epistemology for nearly a millennium and exerted enormous influence on all subsequent philosophical developments.

Tantric thinkers did not simply reject this tradition but engaged with it critically, appropriating its insights while expanding its scope. Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo (11th-12th century), one of the most important early Nyingma philosophers, provides a striking example of this approach. In his text Establishing Appearance as Divine (Snang ba lhar bsgrub pa), he argues that valid sources of knowledge are not limited to perception and inference as in classical epistemology, but also include direct realization through tantric practice authorized by tantric commitment (samaya) (Sur, 2024, pp. 45-47).

This is a radical expansion of the definition of pramāṇa that allows high-level contemplative experiences to be recognized as valid sources of knowledge. Rongzom is not simply adding a third pramāṇa to the traditional two; he is reconceiving the very nature of epistemological authority. The experiences gained through tantric practice are not merely subjective states but genuine cognitions that reveal the true nature of reality.

Sur (2024, pp. 50-52) argues that the purpose of this approach is not merely propositional logical sharpness and "right view," but rather the validation of the ideology behind the practical epistemology of samaya. In other words, philosophy here functions to clarify and validate the highest non-conceptual experiences achieved through tantric practice. The pramāṇa framework provides the conceptual tools for this validation, but it is itself transformed in the process.

Serena Saccone's research (2021) on Samantabhadra's Sāramañjarī further strengthens the picture of interconnection between tantric tradition and pramāṇa. She shows that Samantabhadra, when commenting on a tantric meditation text, explicitly introduces several views and materials from the pramāṇavāda tradition, especially from the mainstream Dharmakīrtian tradition, to support his arguments about binduyoga meditation (Saccone, 2021). This demonstrates that tantric thinkers were not isolated from the broader philosophical culture but actively engaged with it, using its resources to articulate and defend their own insights.

From this analysis, it is clear that tantric epistemology offers a fundamentally different model from mainstream epistemology. The phenomenal world is not an illusion

to be abandoned but a real manifestation of the play of consciousness. Epistemology becomes possible not because of a correspondence between internal representations and external reality, but because the subject-object structure is fundamentally the structure of consciousness itself. We can know reality because we are that reality in modified form. True knowledge is not about acquiring new information but about recognizing (pratyabhijñā) what has always been there (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 95-97).

Metaphysical System: Emanation, Reflection, and the Play of Consciousness

If tantric epistemology explains how we know, tantric metaphysics explains what exists and how it comes to be. Key concepts in tantric metaphysics are spanda (vibration) and krama (stages of creation). These concepts articulate a vision of reality as dynamic, creative, and inherently meaningful.

Spanda is the principle of dynamic movement that characterizes absolute consciousness. It is the first tremor of differentiation within the undifferentiated, the initial impulse toward manifestation. This is not physical movement in space and time but a metaphysical vibration within consciousness itself—the stirring of its innate creative power. The Spanda Kārikā, a foundational text of the Kashmir Śaiva tradition, describes this vibration as the very essence of consciousness.

When consciousness "vibrates," it emits its power (śakti), which then manifests as the universe (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 100-102). This emanation is not a creation ex nihilo but a manifestation of what was already implicit in consciousness. The universe is not other than consciousness but consciousness appearing in a particular form—the form of multiplicity and differentiation.

The process of emanation occurs in stages known as krama. From the transcendent Śiva, through His Śakti (vimarśa), emerge the 36 categories of reality (tattva), ranging from the purest levels of manifestation down to the material elements. This cosmology of 36 tattvas is not merely a map of objective reality but also a map of subjective consciousness and a map of the spiritual path (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 105-108). Each level of reality corresponds to a level of experience and consciousness, and the path of return to the source involves traversing these levels in reverse order.

The 36 tattvas are typically divided into three groups: the pure path (śuddhādhvan), the pure-impure path (śuddhāśuddhādhvan), and the impure path (aśuddhādhvan). The pure path consists of Śiva, Śakti, Sadāśiva, Īśvara, and Śuddhavidyā—levels of reality that are still free from the limitations of space, time, and individuality. The pure-impure path includes the three coverings (kañcukas) that limit consciousness: māyā (the power of limitation), kalā (limited agency), vidyā (limited knowledge), rāga (attachment), kāla (time), and niyati (causality). The impure path comprises the 24 tattvas of Sāṃkhya philosophy, ranging from prakṛti (primordial nature) down to the five gross elements.

This elaborate cosmology serves multiple functions. Philosophically, it provides a comprehensive account of the relationship between the absolute and the world, showing how the one becomes many without losing its unity. Pedagogically, it offers a map for contemplative practice, guiding the practitioner through successive levels of realization. Experientially, it corresponds to the stages of meditation, in which the practitioner progressively transcends limitations and approaches the source.

Tantric thinkers explain that cosmology and embryology cannot be separated from the understanding of spiritual transformation. The process of cosmic creation is paralleled with the process of fetal development, and both become models for the process of

liberation (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 110-112). By understanding how the universe emerges from consciousness, the practitioner can reverse that process and return to its source. This is the meaning of the famous tantric maxim: "The path of return is the reverse of the path of emergence" (yena praveśas tena praveśaḥ).

The relationship between the One and the Many is further articulated through the theory of reflection (pratibimba). The world and individual souls (jīva) are reflections of pure consciousness in the mirror of māyā. This theory draws on the ancient Indian analogy of reflection: just as one face can appear in many mirrors, so one consciousness appears as many souls. The reflection is not identical with the original, but it is also not entirely different. It depends on the original for its existence, yet it has its own reality as a reflection.

However, māyā here is not merely illusion as in Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. In tantric philosophy, māyā is the real creative power of God, not an inexplicable principle of illusion. A reflection is not unreal; it has a legitimate derivative reality. When your face is reflected in a mirror, that image is real as an image, even though it is not your actual face (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 115-117). The image depends on the face and the mirror, but it is not nothing—it is a real phenomenon with its own characteristics.

Thus, tantric philosophy teaches a model of identity-in-difference (bhedābheda). The individual soul is identical with Śiva in its essence but different in its manifestation. The goal of spiritual practice is not to destroy this difference but to realize the fundamental identity that underlies it. When the soul recognizes itself as a reflection of Śiva, it understands both its dependence on the absolute and its own reality as a manifestation.

The reflection theory also illuminates the relationship between transcendence and immanence. Śiva is both transcendent—the original face beyond all mirrors—and immanent—present in every reflection. The absolute is not somewhere else, far removed from the world, but intimately present in every aspect of existence. To realize the absolute is not to leave the world behind but to see the world as it truly is: a reflection of divine consciousness.

No account of tantric metaphysics would be complete without addressing the central role of śakti—the dynamic, creative power of consciousness. In tantric philosophy, śakti is not a separate entity but the very activity of consciousness, its power to manifest, sustain, and reabsorb the universe. The relationship between Śiva and Śakti is often described using the analogy of fire and its burning power, or the sun and its light. Just as fire is inseparable from its heat, so Śiva is inseparable from Śakti. Yet within the unity of consciousness, we can distinguish the static aspect (Śiva) from the dynamic aspect (Śakti). This distinction allows tantric philosophy to affirm both the unchanging nature of the absolute and its creative activity.

Śakti manifests in multiple forms, corresponding to different aspects of cosmic and individual life. The Krama school of Kashmir Śaivism, for example, identifies twelve kalīs or goddesses who represent different phases of the cognitive process. These are not merely mythological figures but personifications of metaphysical principles—the powers through which consciousness experiences itself and the world.

In individual experience, Śakti appears as the life force (prāṇa), the cognitive powers (jñānaśakti), and the power of action (kriyāśakti). These are not separate faculties but expressions of a single consciousness operating through the limitations of the individual organism. Tantric practice aims to liberate these powers from their limitations, allowing them to function in their full, unrestricted form.

The tantric vision of reality as the play of consciousness has profound implications for understanding the nature of existence. First, it affirms the intrinsic value of the world. If the world is a manifestation of consciousness, then it is not to be rejected or transcended but appreciated and understood. The tantric attitude toward the world is one of reverence and wonder, not of ascetic denial. Second, it provides a framework for understanding the relationship between unity and diversity. The world is not a collection of independent entities but a unified field of consciousness appearing in multiple forms. This insight has implications for ethics, suggesting that all beings are ultimately connected and that harm to any being is harm to oneself. Third, it offers a basis for understanding the transformative power of practice. If reality is consciousness, then by transforming consciousness we transform reality. The practices of tantra are not merely means of achieving subjective states but ways of participating in the creative process itself.

Ethical and Soteriological Implications: Philosophy as a Path to Liberation

The ethical implications of tantric philosophy are as radical as its epistemological and metaphysical implications. Tantric ethics are not based on external good-bad dichotomies but on the extent to which an action reflects awareness of unity (citi). This represents a fundamental revaluation of values, moving the foundation of ethics from social convention or divine command to the nature of consciousness itself.

In this framework, actions performed with full awareness of one's identity with the Divine are good actions, whatever their outward form. Conversely, actions that appear outwardly good but are performed without this awareness remain imperfect. This is not ethical relativism but a shift in the foundation of ethics from external rules to internal awareness (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 125-127). The same action can be liberating for one person and binding for another, depending on the state of consciousness from which it proceeds.

This approach to ethics has deep roots in the tantric understanding of human psychology. Ordinary ethical thinking operates within the framework of the ego, which experiences itself as a separate individual confronting other separate individuals. From this perspective, ethical rules are necessary to regulate interactions between essentially separate beings. But from the perspective of non-dual awareness, this separateness is itself a kind of ignorance. The truly ethical action is one that flows from the recognition of unity, not from obedience to external rules.

Of course, this approach is potentially subject to abuse, and history records many examples of such abuse. Tantric texts are aware of this danger and emphasize that the freedom to transcend conventional ethics is available only to those who have achieved a certain level of realization. For beginners, conventional ethical rules remain necessary as a foundation for practice. The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta, for example, contains extensive discussions of the ethical observances required of tantric practitioners.

The central soteriological concept in Kashmir Śaivism is pratyabhijñā—recognition. Liberation is not the attainment of something new but the recognition of what has always been true: that the individual self is none other than Śiva, absolute consciousness. This recognition is not a mere intellectual assent but a direct, transformative realization that changes the very structure of experience.

The path of recognition involves three stages: hearing (śravaṇa), reflection (manana), and meditation (nididhyāsana). These stages, adapted from the Upaniṣadic tradition, are given new meaning within the tantric framework. Hearing involves studying

the teachings and receiving instruction from a qualified teacher. Reflection involves subjecting these teachings to critical scrutiny, using reasoning to remove doubts and objections. Meditation involves internalizing the teachings until they become direct experience.

The Pratyabhijñā school places particular emphasis on the role of reasoning in the path to liberation. Unlike some forms of mysticism that dismiss reason as an obstacle to realization, tantric philosophers see reasoning as a valuable tool for removing obstacles and clarifying understanding. The arguments developed by Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta are not merely academic exercises but aids to recognition, designed to help the practitioner see through the illusions that obscure the true nature of self and reality.

However, reasoning alone is insufficient. The culmination of the path is a direct recognition that transcends discursive thought. This recognition is described as a sudden flash of insight, an immediate intuition of one's true identity. Yet this sudden realization is usually preceded by long preparation, including study, reflection, and meditative practice.

One of the most distinctive features of tantric philosophy is the close integration between theory and practice. Philosophy is not merely intellectual speculation but a direct guide to spiritual transformation. Conversely, practice is not merely mechanical ritual but an active implementation of philosophical insights (Komarovski, 2024). This integration distinguishes tantra from both purely scholastic traditions and purely practical traditions, showing how philosophical understanding and contemplative practice can mutually reinforce each other.

In this context, ritual practices, yoga, and visualization are philosophical laboratories. The mandala is not merely a diagram but an ontological map to be realized in direct experience. When a practitioner visualizes a mandala and identifies with its central deity, they are not engaging in mere fantasy but actively exploring the structure of consciousness. The mandala represents the cosmos as a manifestation of consciousness, and by entering it through visualization, the practitioner comes to understand this truth from within.

Mantra is not merely sacred sound but a phonematic manifestation of ultimate reality. The sounds of mantra are not arbitrary conventions but expressions of the fundamental vibrations (spanda) that constitute the universe. By reciting mantra with proper understanding and concentration, the practitioner aligns their own being with these cosmic vibrations, effecting a transformation at the deepest levels of consciousness.

As explained in the special issue of the Journal of Contemplative Studies on "Philosophy and Contemplation in Tantric Buddhism," the relationship between philosophy and contemplative practice in tantra is reciprocal and mutually reinforcing (Komarovski, 2024). Philosophy provides the framework (view) that guides contemplative practice, preventing it from becoming mere technique or fantasy. Contemplative practice provides the experiential verification that philosophical claims require, preventing philosophy from becoming mere speculation. Together, they constitute a complete path to liberation.

The concept of samaya (tantric commitment or vow) becomes a bridge between epistemology and ethics in tantric philosophy. Sur (2024, pp. 55-58) shows that samaya functions as an ethical foundation that integrates philosophical insights into the practitioner's daily actions. It is through samaya that philosophical understanding becomes embodied in a way of life.

Samaya is not merely a vow to follow rules but a commitment to live in awareness of ultimate reality. It is an existential recognition that ultimate reality is not only an object

of knowledge but also the ground of action. By accepting samaya, the practitioner commits to aligning their entire life with the philosophical insights they have gained (Sur, 2024, pp. 60-62). This commitment transforms every action into an expression of realization.

The content of samaya varies among different tantric traditions, but certain elements are common. Typically, samaya involves commitments to maintain the integrity of the body, to practice with diligence, to maintain secrecy about certain teachings, and to maintain proper relationships with the teacher and fellow practitioners. These commitments are not arbitrary but flow from the nature of the path itself. The body is the vehicle of practice and must be respected; diligence is necessary because the path requires sustained effort; secrecy protects the teachings from misunderstanding and misuse; proper relationships maintain the transmission lineage through which realization is passed.

Breaking samaya is considered a serious matter, not because it violates an arbitrary rule but because it represents a betrayal of one's own deepest commitment. To break samaya is to act in contradiction to one's own understanding, creating a division within consciousness that hinders further progress. For this reason, tantric traditions emphasize the importance of maintaining samaya with utmost care.

The ultimate goal of tantric philosophy and practice is jīvanmukti, liberation while living. This concept, which distinguishes tantra from traditions that locate liberation after death, has profound implications for understanding the nature of the spiritual path and its relation to ordinary life.

In the Paramārthasāra, Abhinavagupta extensively develops this theme of jīvanmukti (Abhinavagupta, 2011, pp. 130-135). The liberated while living are those who, although still living in a body and interacting with the world, have realized their identity with Cosmic Consciousness. They act not from egoic impulse but as conduits of divine power. They enjoy the world without being bound by it. Their consciousness, though still embodied, has expanded to embrace the totality of existence.

The jīvanmukta (liberated one) continues to engage in ordinary activities—eating, sleeping, working, relating with others—but these activities are transformed from within. They are no longer motivated by personal desire or aversion but flow spontaneously from the nature of consciousness itself. The jīvanmukta acts for the benefit of others, not out of a sense of duty or compassion but because such action is the natural expression of a consciousness that recognizes itself in all beings.

This concept has important implications: liberation is not an escape from the world but a transformation of the mode of being-in-the-world. What changes is not the world but the consciousness that experiences the world. The jīvanmukta sees the same world as everyone else but sees it differently—as a manifestation of consciousness rather than as a realm of separate objects.

The possibility of jīvanmukti also has implications for understanding the relationship between spiritual realization and social engagement. If liberation can be attained while living, then the spiritual path does not require withdrawal from the world. One can pursue realization while remaining engaged in family, profession, and community. This makes tantra particularly relevant to modern practitioners who seek spiritual transformation without renouncing worldly life.

Comparative Dimensions: Buddhist Vajrayāna and Points of Convergence

Philosophical developments similar to the Kashmir tradition occurred also in the Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayāna tradition. Tibetan thinkers, especially from the Nyingma school,

creatively appropriated the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka heritage within a tantric framework. This parallel development, occurring independently of the Kashmir tradition for the most part, suggests that certain philosophical insights emerge naturally from the tantric approach to practice and realization.

The introduction of Buddhism to Tibet in the 7th-8th centuries brought with it the full range of Indian Buddhist traditions, including both exoteric and esoteric teachings. Tibetan scholars quickly mastered these traditions and began to synthesize them in distinctive ways. By the 11th-12th centuries, an indigenous Tibetan philosophical tradition had emerged, engaging creatively with Indian sources while developing original insights.

Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo developed a "tantric pramāṇa" approach that integrates classical epistemology with tantric practice (Sur, 2024, pp. 45-47). For him, "establishing appearance as divine" (snang ba lhar bsgrub pa) is not merely an exercise of imagination but a philosophical realization of the true nature of reality. This approach involves using the methods of classical epistemology—analysis, inference, debate—to establish the tantric view, then using tantric practice to realize that view directly.

The debate over the role of reflexive awareness (rang rig) in the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions shows interesting similarities with the concept of vimarśa in the Kashmir tradition. In both traditions, reflexive awareness is understood as an essential dimension of consciousness that enables self-realization (Komarovski, 2024). This awareness is not a second-order reflection on experience but the very nature of experience itself—the self-luminosity of consciousness that makes knowledge possible.

The Dzogchen (Great Perfection) tradition of the Nyingma school offers particularly striking parallels with Kashmir Śaivism. Both traditions emphasize the primordial purity (ka dag) or absolute purity of consciousness, its spontaneous presence (lhun grub), and the possibility of direct recognition without elaborate practice. In Dzogchen, the ultimate nature of mind is described as rigpa—a non-dual awareness that is primordially pure and spontaneously present. This rigpa is not something to be achieved but something to be recognized; it has been present all along, obscured by the adventitious defilements of conceptual thought and emotional afflictions. The Dzogchen path involves receiving direct introduction (ngo sprod) to this nature from a qualified teacher, then stabilizing that recognition through practice.

The Mahāmudrā (Great Seal) tradition, associated primarily with the Kagyu school, offers another parallel. Mahāmudrā meditation involves resting in the nature of mind, allowing thoughts and emotions to arise and dissolve without interference. Through this practice, the practitioner comes to recognize that all phenomena are the play of mind—appearances arising within and as the nature of awareness itself. This recognition is not merely intellectual but experiential, transforming the practitioner's relationship to all experience.

Despite significant theological differences—especially concerning the existence of a personal God—there are important points of convergence between Kashmir Śaiva tantra and Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayāna. In both traditions, there is a consensus that ultimate reality is luminous consciousness aware of itself. Both traditions affirm the possibility of direct realization of this nature, and both emphasize the importance of practice in achieving such realization.

The concept of mahāsukha (great bliss) in Buddhist tantra has a functional similarity to the concept of ānanda (bliss) in the Kashmir tradition. Dasgupta (1950, pp. 95-98) shows that mahāsukha in Buddhist tantra is understood not as mere sensory enjoyment but as

the highest realization that transcends the duality of pleasure and pain. It is the bliss that arises from the realization of the unity of all things. Similarly, in Kashmir Śaivism, ānanda is not a feeling among others but the very nature of consciousness, inseparable from its luminosity and self-awareness.

In both traditions, philosophy functions to clarify and validate the highest non-conceptual experiences achieved through tantric practice. Philosophy is not an end in itself but a means to achieve and verify spiritual realization. The philosophical arguments developed in these traditions are not merely academic exercises but tools for removing obstacles to recognition.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that tantra can indeed be seriously studied as a philosophical system, with its own distinctive epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and soteriology. The investigation has revealed that tantric philosophy is grounded in an absolute idealism in which consciousness is not merely a passive receiver of reality but an active, creative power that constitutes reality through reflexive awareness. This philosophy develops through a critical engagement with Yogācāra idealism, appropriating its epistemological insights while rejecting its conclusions about the nature of consciousness.

The key findings of this study can be summarized as follows. First, tantric philosophy emerges from a sophisticated engagement with the Yogācāra tradition, accepting its arguments for epistemic idealism while critiquing its conception of consciousness as a discontinuous stream. The Pratyabhijñā school articulates a transcendental argument for a unitary, self-aware consciousness that serves as the ground of all experience.

Second, tantric epistemology centers on the analysis of consciousness into prakāśa (luminosity) and vimarśa (reflexive awareness). This analysis reveals the structure of consciousness and provides the foundation for understanding both ordinary cognition and liberating knowledge. The expansion of the concept of pramāṇa to include contemplative realization represents a significant development in Indian epistemology.

Third, tantric metaphysics articulates a vision of reality as the play of consciousness, manifested through the dynamic principles of spanda (vibration) and krama (stages of emanation). The theory of reflection (pratibimba) provides a model for understanding the relationship between the absolute and individual souls, affirming identity-in-difference rather than simple identity or difference.

Fourth, tantric ethics and soteriology integrate philosophy and practice in a unified path to liberation. The concept of samaya bridges epistemology and ethics, grounding ethical life in the recognition of ultimate reality. The ideal of jīvanmukti (liberation while living) affirms the possibility of spiritual fulfillment without withdrawal from the world.

The contributions of this study to the field of Tantric Studies include: (1) providing a systematic account of tantric philosophy that integrates epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and soteriology; (2) demonstrating the sophisticated engagement of tantric thinkers with mainstream Indian philosophical traditions; (3) revealing points of convergence between Hindu and Buddhist tantric traditions that suggest common philosophical insights; and (4) showing the relevance of tantric philosophy for contemporary cross-cultural philosophical dialogue.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the academic study of tantra. For comparative philosophy, tantric philosophy offers resources for engaging with Western idealist traditions, phenomenology, and contemporary philosophy of mind. For the study

of religion, it demonstrates the importance of attending to the philosophical dimensions of religious traditions often dismissed as merely ritualistic. For contemporary spiritual seekers, it offers a sophisticated framework for understanding contemplative practice and its relationship to philosophical inquiry.

Future research should explore several directions. Detailed comparative studies of "tantric epistemology" in the commentarial texts of Abhinavagupta and Tibetan scholars such as Śākya Chokden would illuminate the distinctive features of tantric approaches to knowledge. Further exploration of the implications of tantric philosophy for contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science could open new dialogues between Eastern traditions and Western science. Ethnographic research on how tantric philosophy is understood and practiced in contemporary contexts would enrich our understanding of this tradition's relevance in the modern world. Finally, studies of "neo-tantra" and the modern transformation of this tradition are important for understanding how tantric philosophy adapts to the challenges of modernity and globalization.

In conclusion, tantric philosophy represents one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive philosophical systems ever developed. Its analysis of consciousness, its articulation of the relationship between the absolute and the world, and its integration of theory and practice offer resources for philosophical reflection that remain relevant today. By understanding how tantric thinkers approached these questions, we may find resources for addressing them in our own context. The dialogue between traditions is not a luxury but a necessity if philosophy is to fulfill its promise of wisdom about the most important matters.

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