Kashmir Shaivism developed the unique yogic technique of pratyabhijna, spontaneous recognition, based on bhakti to understand one’s identity with God. Shaivism is very popular all over India and the Shaiva Agamas, traditional texts, are innumerable. Like other philosophies of India Shaivism too diversified itself into various branches to form sub-schools within the system. Kashmir Shaivism is one such school and is also called trika, triad, because it teaches three entities: Shiva, Shakti, and the individual soul. The triad is not ultimately real but only apparent, as this school teaches monism. In the beginning Shiva, who is universal Consciousness, manifests himself through a special power as the first cause of creation. Then he manifests through his second power as the innumerable individual souls who, because of a veil of impurity, forget that they are the embodiment of Shiva. This veil can be torn off by intense faith and constant meditation on God, by which the soul transmutes itself into a universal soul and eventually attains liberation through pratyabhijna into its own nature. Hindus who adhere to this group consider the doctrine of Kashmir Shaivism a manifestation of the highest Reality.

Kashmir Shaivism has a rich and detailed description of the ascent of individual consciousness to universal Consciousness, called Paramashiva. This mystical philosophy has also been described as ‘the mystical geography of awareness’ because it offers many practical approaches to the ultimate realization. In Vijnana Bhairava Shiva as Bhairava sets one hundred and twelve sadhanas to be used by different sadhakas. The narrative begins with Devi feigning ignorance and asking Bhairava the secrets of Consciousness, creation, and liberation.

Swami Lakshmanjoo (1907–91) was a saint, mystic, and master of this mystic philosophy. For more than fifty years scholars and numerous sadhakas studied Vijnana Bhairava with the swami, who also has many other commentaries on Kashmir Shaivism texts to his credit. John Hughes’s masterful editing of the text and thoughtful inclusion of an audio CD is to be praised. His reason for adding an audio CD is solid: ‘I am convinced that the deeper truths of this scripture will be revealed through hearing the spoken word of a realized master’ (xviii). All contemporary texts of any worth today have CDs accompanying them, as repeated empirical research in psychology shows that the additive and salutary effect of synaesthesia—when two or more senses are simultaneously occupied—is more impressive than only reading a text. The CD is a fit accompaniment for a text that is a ‘practical training guide, not a theoretical exposition’ (xvii).

The Vijnana Bhairava is one chapter in the Rudrayamala Tantra, which is purely monistic. There is no doubt that this scripture resembles Advaita Vedanta. It is a very lucid text divided in concise topics. The first two, ‘Cosmology’ and ‘Concealing and Revealing His Nature’, directly address questions of soteriology: ‘Why has Shiva created this external objective world, this manifestation of supreme energy?’ The next part of the text deals with the means ‘Upāyas’: ‘The first and highest means is called śāmbhavopāya. The second, for aspirants with medium qualifications, is called śāktopāya. The third means, called āṇavopāya, is regarded as inferior’ (xxxi). These stages are the means of travelling from individual
consciousness to universal Consciousness. The Dharana and Upaya guide, at the beginning of the book, makes it easy to navigate the rest of the text. Finally, the book deals with ‘Mokṣa’ and its nature. Kashmir Shaivism teaches that Shiva has manifested this external world for only one reason: to create the possibility of recognizing his own nature—the objective universe is a means, a tool, to be used to realize the universal reality of Shiva. By contrast, South Indian Shaivism stresses on the duality of the seeker and Shiva.

The main body of the Vijnana Bhairava comprises of the original shloka in Sanskrit and its transliteration, followed by the swami’s commentary. Each word and term is dwelt upon. The rest of the explanations are in the form of a Socratic exegesis on each shloka. For example: ‘John: “What is the point of these lotuses, one up and one down? Is that just a simile, or a way of speaking?” Swamiji: “No, they are existing; these lotuses are existing there. One who perceives that in samādhi, he perceives these two lotuses, one in the upper side and the other in the lower side”’ (88).

A few last technical observations: while the ‘Guide to Pronunciation’ at the beginning is a valuable addition, the bibliography is the only weak point in this excellent text; with only seven entries the bibliographic list shows lack of consideration for deeper researchers and puts a damper on texts as old as 1918. If Kashmir Shaivism is to carve its niche in the world of philosophy, then such frail bibliographies will have to be improved. There could have been a ‘primary texts’ bibliography and then a sort of ‘further readings’ bibliography.

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