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Vladimir Ivanov

**The Exegesis of Kṣemarāja
on the Vijñānabhairava-tantra:
Observations on the Śiva-Devī Tantric Dialogue**

Abstract: The paper presents some observations on the nature of the Devī-Śiva dialogue in the famous *Vijñānabhairava-tantra* based on the interpretation of it given by Kṣemarāja in the extant portion of his *Uddyota* commentary on the text, especially in the initial passages of that commentary. Kṣemarāja interprets the traditional tantric dialogical form as a mystery of Parā, the Supreme Speech-Goddess, in which She generates the process of ‘bringing down’ the sacred text—the tantra—thus embodying the highest truth about the Supreme. The paper contains translations of some important places in Kṣemarāja’s commentary that have not been thoroughly studied yet.

Key words: tantric dialogue, Vijñānabhairava-tantra, Kṣemarāja, Parādvaita, Kashmir Shaivism

Kṣemarāja—a renowned disciple of Abhinavagupta and a prolific 11th-century writer—was the author of a large body of texts that, along with the works of his famous teacher and some other important sources, form the basis for our understanding of the Parādvaita scriptural tradition and the Indian tantric tradition as a whole. Among his works are commentaries on old tantras that are of paramount importance for the tradition. These are the commentaries on the *Svacchanda-tantra*, the *Netra-tantra* and the *Vijñānabhairava-tantra* (VBT). While the commentaries on the first two texts are available to us today, the commentary on the last—the *Uddyota* on the VBT has survived only for the first 23 verses of the tantra. The main content of the VBT,¹ starting from verse 24 onwards, is a description of 112 practical means for the attainment of the universal Supreme Nature that are revealed by Śiva-Bhairava to his spouse Devī. The first 23 verses serve as a preface to the main body of the text. It is really strange that the extant portion of Kṣemarāja’s commentary, as ill luck would have it, cuts off exactly at the

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¹ We are not discussing in the paper the importance of the VBT for the tradition of monistic tantric thought or the issues of the text’s origin and dating, for they were thoroughly highlighted in many research works known to specialists in this field.

23rd verse, when the preliminary part of the text ends and the main exposition is about to start. This “amputation” of the rest of Kṣemarāja’s commentary seems quite enigmatic. We know that it was not Kṣemarāja’s intention to restrict himself to commenting only on the initial part of the tantra. Indeed, we can be sure from his own remarks in another of his texts that he also commented thoroughly on the rest of the tantra. This fact was ascertained by Bettina Bäumer, who determined that Kṣemarāja is referring to his *Uddyota* on the rest of the VBT in his other commentary on the *Netra-tantra*.²

In spite of its incompleteness, the extant portion of the *Uddyota* is worth studying as the oldest commentary on the VBT and a fine specimen of Kṣemarāja’s exegesis on some important tenets of Parādvaita.³ It could be viewed in a certain sense as a separate text—a sort of prolegomenon to the VBT itself, since it is well known that the initial verses of any Sanskrit text are of paramount importance as they present in a condensed form the core ideas of the whole text, provide the context and give keys to the understanding of the subsequent exposition. Besides, in his commentary, Kṣemarāja highlights an important feature in the composition of any Parādvaita tantric text—the ‘tantric dialogue’. This highest type of communication, in which the Supreme converses with Itself, is actually the act of generation of this world by the unfolding of the intrinsic nature of the Supreme—the Highest Speech-energy (Parā-vāk). This energy is the dynamic truth of this world and a way for the seeker to attain the Supreme. As the VBT text puts it:⁴

This state of Bhairava, which is differently praised [here], is [nothing but] the Highest [Energy], because of [her] superior form [she is] renowned as the Highest Goddess [Parā] /17/...

When the [contemplative] experience (*bhāvanā*) of [a person], who has entered the state of Śakti, [becomes that of unity and] without any differentiation, he thus becomes [one] with Śiva’s nature, [for] here [in this tantra] Śaivī is considered to be the entrance [into Śiva]. /20/.⁵

² The *Netra-tantra* (20.36 (a)): ...*śrīvijñānabhairavoddyote’smābhirdarśitam*.

³ Our translation of the extant portion of Kṣemarāja’s *Uddyota* will be presented in ‘Pt. Hemendra Nath Chakravarty Commemoration Volume’ (forthcoming).

⁴ The translation of the passages from VBT and Kṣemarāja’s *Uddyota* are based on the edition of the tantra in KSTS.

⁵ *evaṃvidhā bhairavasya yāvasthā parigīyate /
sā parā pararūpeṇa parādevī prakīrtitā //17//...
śaktyavasthāpraviṣṭasya nīrvibhāgena bhāvanā /
tadāsau śivarūpī syāt śaivī mukhamihocyate //20//*

Let's turn now to Kṣemarāja's commentary. The author precedes his *Uddyota* in a traditional manner with beautiful maṅgala verses where he glorifies the essence of this world—the union of the interplay of the Supreme and its Energy—Bhairava and Bhairavī:⁶

[Who] is causing the tears [of living beings], who are afraid of existence, [and at the same time] makes [these] frightened [ones] free of fear;⁷

[Who] expands [himself] in the abode of the heart [of all and every being]—the Master of [the] fiercely sounding [energies],⁸ [who] puts an end to the end-bringing [death];

Let [Him] be victorious—that Supreme [Being], whose [essential] form is Consciousness, [who] realizes [the activities of] maintenance etc.⁹ in everything, [who] is Bhairava—the Lord of the assembly of yogis, [who have realized] the nature [of the Supreme reality and] dispel [all] intimidation!¹⁰ //1//.

I take refuge in [the great consort] of Śiva, [who] by expansion (*unmeṣāt*) of Her [real] Self leads [us finally] to the Śambhava [type] of absorption¹¹ by revealed methods of *aṃu* etc.,¹² which are manifested by the lights of [Her] clear and free [radiant] vibration.¹³ //2//

By the [streams] of ambrosia of the [initial] tradition etc. a series of cloud [bursts] of the voice of Guru conceives the student's mind and conquers [its] foundations destroying [thus] the unique suffering [of this existence]. //3//

⁶ We should note that these verses are to some extent in tune with other passages from Kṣemarāja's commentary on the *Svacchanda-tantra*. (Namely on the SvT 1.3). These passages are of much help in elucidating some implied meanings of the verses under consideration.

⁷ *bhūrūṇāmabhayaprado bhavabhayākrandasya hetustato* corresponds to the Kṣemarāja's commentary on SvT 1.3: ...*bhūrūṇāmabhayamiti vyutpatyā saṃsāriṇāmabhayadaḥ bhayaṃ bhīḥ saṃsāratrāsaḥ tayā janito ravaḥ ākrandaḥ bhūravaḥ tato jātaḥ tadākrandavatām sphuritaḥ*...). See also: TĀ 1. 96–100.

⁸ *bhīravarucām-īsaḥ* Cf. Kṣemarāja on SvT 1.3: *yāsām khecarīgocarīdikarībhūcarīca-krarūpāṇām saṃviddevīnām tāḥ bhīravāḥ tāsāmayam svāmī bhairavaḥ*...

⁹ Kṣemarāja's commentary on SvT 1.3: *bhairavo viśva-bharaṇa-ravaṇa-vamana-rūpaḥ*—'Bhairava's [essential] nature is the "nourishing" of the universe, the "resounding" [in His self-awareness] and [its] "ejection".'

¹⁰ *svayoginivahaḥ*—here 'sva' stands for *svarūpa*, i.e., the very nature of the Supreme—its 'Self'. The following words from the commentary on SvT 1.3 correspond to the place: ...*kālagrāsasamādhirasikāḥ yoginaḥ teṣāmayamiti āntaraḥ svabhāvaḥ*.

¹¹ *āveśa* means here *samāveśa*.

¹² *aṃvādyupāyataḥ*—*āṇava* and *śākta* types of *upāya*'s are meant here.

¹³ *sphurat* stands for *spanda*.

Whatever shines forth from the ocean of the Highest Tradition churned by the Mandara rock of [energy] of Wisdom is [verily] the highest ambrosia.

Let it be permanently tasted by truthful people, [who are] purified by the Supreme Śakti in order to attain the nature of Śiva in this life and beyond! //4//.¹⁴

In the spirit of the non-dual paradigm of the Trika teachings¹⁵ and following the lead of Abhinavagupta, Kṣemarāja in his *Uddyota* interprets the usual tantric dialogical form at the outset of the VBT as the mystery of Parā—the Supreme Speech generating the process of ‘bringing down’ (*tantrāvātara*) the sacred text embodying the highest knowledge about the Supreme. Using the technical philosophical apparatus of the monistic Śaiva tradition Kṣemarāja presents the mystery of generation of the sacred tantra text as an interplay of the two sides of the Universal Consciousness (Saṃvit)—the light of consciousness (*prakāśa*) and Its Self-awareness (*vimarśa*).¹⁶ This interaction is depicted in the tantra by the dialogue between Śiva-Bhairava and his divine spouse Parā-Devī. As it is presented by Kṣemarāja, in this conversation between the inquiring Devī and the responding Śiva, the Supreme is actually addressing Itself in a request to elucidate what should be considered Its essential nature among the various forms taught in different tantras and what should be the way for the bounded aspect of the Supreme which is the limited sentient being (*aṃu*) to reach this very nature. As Kṣemarāja puts it:

¹⁴ *bhīrūṇāmabhayaprado bhavabhayākrandasya hetustato
ḥṛddhāmnī prathitaśca bhīravarucāmīšo 'ntakasyāntakaḥ
bhīraṃ vāyati yaḥ svayoginivahastasya prabhurbhairavo
viśvasminbharaṇādikṛdvijayate vijñānarūpaḥ paraḥ //1//
svairisvacchaspuradbhābhīrbhāsītāṇvādyupāyataḥ
svonmeśacchāmbhavāveśaṃ darśayantīṃ śivāṃ śraye //2//
āmnāyādyamṛtaiḥ siñcantyantevāsīmano 'vanīḥ
jayatyatulatāpacchidguruḡīrambudāvalī //3//*

*dhīmandarācalavalatparamāgamābdherullāsyate kimapi yatparamāmṛtaṃ tat /
jīvacchivatvamadhigantumamutra sadbhiḥ saṃcarvyatāmavirataṃ paraśaktipūtaiḥ //4//*

¹⁵ Kṣemarāja delivers an eulogy for Trika citing the following verse in his commentary: ‘Śaiva is higher than the Veda and other [Vedic texts], Vama and Dakṣiṇa [are higher than] Śaiva, Kaula is in the higher position than Dakṣiṇa, but even higher than Kaula is Trika— [According to this saying, the] position of the Trika-śāstra is [to be] the essence [of all the systems of knowledge]’ (*Uddyota* on VBT 1–2(a)).

¹⁶ Kṣemarāja draws on several sources in his *Uddyota*. Among them are SvT, TĀ, the *Pratyabhijñā-kārikā*, the *Parātrīśikāvivarāṇa*.

Thus having expressed the majority of chief [tantric] principles [by means of] deliberation (*vicāreṇa*), [that is full of] awareness (*vimarśinā*) of the essential meaning (*arthahṛdaya*) of the entire [tantric] tradition,¹⁷ the Goddess of the Supreme Consciousness (Saṃviddevī), desiring to manifest Her own form of the absolute Consciousness of Bhairava,¹⁸ addressed [Śiva]... So, ‘revealed’¹⁹ by force of awareness, [this] ‘self-sufficient’ (*nirākāṅkṣā*) Goddess,²⁰ [displaying] the previously depicted nature of her own Self (*svasvabhāvoktarūpā*) and possessing the state of Bhairava, started speaking (in the described manner). [And She performs] thus everywhere: as in everyday communication (*sarvavyavahāra*), [the Goddess] of the Supreme Consciousness reveals in Herself the ability to become both questioning, [as well as] answering side; but here [in this dialogue between Devī and Śiva-Bhairava] the specific [character of the conversation is that it] elucidates the Utmost subject (*anuttarārthaviśayā*). So, the Śrī Svachanda-[tantra] reads [as follows]:

Having assumed the roles of *guru* and *śiṣya*, [it is] the Lord Sadāśiva Himself through the phrases [of] asking and answering sides [in a dialogue] made the tantra descend.²¹

This conversation of the Supreme with Itself is, according to Kṣemarāja, the establishment of the specific highest type of relation (*parasambandha*)—the identity of the highest Subject with Itself:

...thus [by this dialogue is demonstrated] the very life (*prāṇatā*) of the highest type of relation in this *śāstra*. So, the very nature of the highest

¹⁷ This refers to the deliberation of Devī upon the nature of the Supreme, based on the different tantric concepts presented in VBT’s verses 2–6.

¹⁸ “...form of the... Consciousness of Bhairava...” (*vijñānabhairavarūpatām*) means here also the text itself—the *Vijñānabhairava-tantra*, for this text is the form, i.e., the embodiment of the Supreme Vāk-Devī.

¹⁹ *unmeṣa* lit. means ‘the act of opening eyes’.

²⁰ Devī is the embodiment of *svātantrya-śakti*, i.e., the energy of the absolute, not depending on anything else, freedom of Śiva.

²¹ *evaṃ samagrāgamārthahṛdayavimarśinā vicāreṇābhīmukhikṛtaprāyatatvārthā saṃvid devī svāṃ saṃpūrṇavijñānabhairavarūpatāmāvivikṣurāha...*

itthamāmarśanaśāstraṇānirākāṅkṣā svasvabhāvoktarūpā devyeva prāptabhairavabhāvā uktanītyā uvāca, sarvasya cedṣyeva prāyaḥ sarvavyavahāreṣvapi svayaṃ praśnaprativacanacaturā saṃvit, iha tu anuttarārthaviśayā iti viśeṣaḥ taduktam śrīsvachande:

guruśiṣyapade sthitvā svayaṃ devaḥ sadāśivaḥ!

pūrvottarapadairvākyastantram samavātārayat // (Kṣemarāja on VBT 6–7(a)). Cf. SvT 8.31(b)-32(a): ...pūrvottarapadairvākyastantramādhārabhedataḥ tajjñānamīśvare 'dāt.

type of relation [becomes] the direct meaning of [this] honorable [text]—
*Vijñānabhairava*²²...²³

Ontologically, this dialogue is the everlasting process of the coming into being of the universe through the very essence of the linguistic substrate of this world—the interplay of the two sides of the linguistic symbol—*vācya* (‘expressed’) and *vācaka* (‘expression’). The *vācya* is the ‘highest’ supreme Anuttara and the text itself is *vācaka*—the embodiment of the supreme Vāk-Devī. This interplay is the essence of tantra—the means through which ‘expands’²⁴ the manifestation of hierarchically organized levels of Being supported by the activity of Speech-energy. Kṣemarāja formulated this in a rather complicated manner using semantically dense scholar-Sanskrit phrasing overloaded with compounds.²⁵

Here, [in this text, the Absolute] Consciousness-Bhairava [inseparable from his] divine Spouse²⁶ on the surface (*bhittau*) of [his] supreme potent (*paraśākṭa*) [vibratory] radiance, [which is of the] nature (*ātma*) of the full-‘I’ reflective awareness (*vimarśa*) [displays his essential] form of the flow of [his] powers of Will, Knowledge and Action [thus luminously] manifesting (*avabhāsana*) the states (*pada*) of Anāśrita[Śiva], Sadaśiva, Īśvara [and others²⁷ in a sequence in which] every succeeding state [is included in every] preceding one [and] expands (*unmiśad*) [itself] by the force of contractive including (*nimeśaṇavaśa*)²⁸ of an endless inherent [in

²² In this context, the title ‘Vijñānabhairava-tantra’ could be interpreted as the ‘[Tantra of highest type of relation between] the [Supreme] Consciousness [and] Bhairava’.

²³ ...*śāstrasya parasambandhaprāṇataiva taditthaṃ parasambandhasatattvaṃ śrīvijñānabhairavābhīdhāyi...*

²⁴ The root *tan* (in tantra) literary means ‘to stretch’, ‘to expand’.

²⁵ This feature of Kṣemarāja’s writings has even made Dr. B. N. Pandit speak of ‘complexity and obscurity’ peculiar to Kṣemarāja’s style (see: Pandit 1989, 150).

²⁶ *śrīman* in the text may simply mean the ‘reverted Lord’, but could also have a sense of ‘[one, who] possesses Śrī’. Śrī means the Supreme energy Bhairavī—the divine spouse of Bhairava.

²⁷ I.e., the rest of the thirty-six *tattva*’s of Parādvaita.

²⁸ ...*pūrvadaśānimeśaṇavaśonmiśad...*—The construction of the Sanskrit phrase highlights the idea that the processes of *nimeśa* and *unmeśa*—respectively ‘expansion’ (lit. ‘the opening of the eyes’) and ‘contraction’ (lit. ‘the shutting of the eyes’)—are in reality the interconvertible phases of one timeless process taking place in the Supreme. Kṣemarāja expounds this idea in his *Spandasandoha* while commenting upon the initial verse (1.1.) of the *Spandakārikā* (*yasyonmeśanimeśābhyaṃ jagataḥ pralayodayau...*). See the detailed exposition of the theme in [Dyczkowski 1994: 62ff.].

him] (*antaḥkṛta*) and distinct [from each other] levels of being (*daśā*), [where every] preceding [one is merged in every] succeeding one, [and each has] the manifestations of creation etc. (*sargādiprapañca*).²⁹

Having become the very seed of [all] these [respective] levels of being, secretly sustaining [them] as the inherent subject of the experience (*sa-tattvagrāhaka*), by His energy through the succeeding manifestations of Paśyantī etc.,³⁰ via the inner throb (*antasphuraṇayā*) [of consciousness Bhairava thus] manifests objects as if maintaining [this] world (*jagad-vyavasthāmiva*).

Through the force of [his] contracted [form] of Vaikharī etc.³¹ [and] through the expansion [of Himself] as a vibrant [manifestation] of Īśvara etc., [He] by the activity of his energy reveals (*unmajjita*) the absorption into the union of Rudra [and Śakti] by the grace, [which] is hidden in the limited subject (*mitamātṛ*)—Such are the five activities determined by the Lord [and described] in the non-dual teachings.³²

Following *Parātrīśikāvivaraṇa*³³ of Abhinavagupa Kṣemarāja tries to present, in terms of logic and grammar, the mystery of the tantric dialogue—the initial moment of the conversation of the Supreme with Itself, when Its omniscient Energy—the Goddess of the Supreme Consciousness (Saṃvid-devī)—as if possessing no universal knowledge presented herself as the questioning side and started to speak (*devyuvāca*):

There the Goddess of the Supreme Consciousness [whose] very nature is to illuminate etc., being awakened on the levels of Paśyantī etc.³⁴ is an inquirer. In herself, [She] is not different from the Supreme

²⁹ The phrase ‘manifestations (*prapañca*) of creation (*sarga*) etc.’ refers to the five divine activities: *sṛṣṭi*, *sthiti*, *saṃhāra*, *pidhāna*, *anugraha*.

³⁰ I.e., in the descending order of Paśyantī, Madhyamā and Vaikharī.

³¹ I.e., in the ascending order of Vaikharī, Madhyamā and Paśyantī.

³² *iha śrīmān cidbhairavaḥ pūrṇahaṃvimarśātmaparaśāktasphurattābhittāvantaḥkṛtānāntāvāntarasargādiprapañcapūrvapūrvadaśānimeṣaṇavaśonmiśaduttarottarāvasthecchājñānakriyāśaktisārānāśrītasadāśiveśvarapadāvabhāsanavarūpo bījabhūtaitadaśāgopanāsatattvagrāhakatācchaktitātpaśyantīyādibhūmyābhāsapuraḥsarameyābhāśāntasphuraṇayājagadvyavasthāmivanimiśadvaikharyādivaśonmiśadīśvarādisphuraṇayā anugrahanimajjītamitāmātṛtācchaktyunmajjitarudrayāmalasamāveśamunmīlayati—ityadvayanayeṣu pañcakṛtyakāritocyate bhagavataḥ/.*

³³ Namely, PTV 1.1. See: KSTS, 9–11; also: Singh 1988, 12–13. The fact that Kṣemarāja refers to the *Parātrīśikā* here could be explained as follows: according to the traditional tantric textual genealogy, both VBT and the *Parātrīśikā* stem from the old, no longer extant *Rudrayāmala-tantra*.

³⁴ At the levels of Paśyantī(vāc), Madhyamā(vāc) and Vaikharī(vāc).

Bhairava, [but] the level of the Highest [Speech] (Parābhūmiṃ), [though it is manifested by her] own light (*svābhāsām*), because [it] is beyond grasping by inner or outer organs of senses [is presented to Her at the level of Paśyantī etc.] always as if [something] beyond (*parokṣāmiva*)³⁵ as well as if [something] ‘was’ [in the past] (*bhūtāmiva*), because of the [activity of the limiting factor] of time [at the levels of] Paśyantī etc.; and [also] because [it is] impossible [to set any] concord (*anvaya*) [in terms] of days and months in the limits of *kalpa*-[period] regarding [an infinite number of] different [superior] subjects (*rudra*) [and] [inferior] subjects (*kṣetrajña*),³⁶ [whose life activities are rooted in the] subtle [and] subtlest particles of *prāṇa*, [this Highest level is presented to her] as if [something happened] right now (*adyatanīmiva*).

When [She tries] to conceive [her Supreme form], it is like [She recalls it waking up from a sleep]: ‘I have talked when I was sleeping!’³⁷ [But it was actually] the same I [who talked], [so verily I am] the Goddess of Supreme Consciousness, the Supreme Mistress [of the Highest Speech descended] (*parābhaṭṭārikā*) to the levels of Paśyantī etc. wishing to awake the progressive states of clearness, [who] ‘has said’ (*uvāca*) [and thus] reflectively presented (*amamarsa*) the shining secret of oneness (*cakā-sadrahasyam*).³⁸

Thus, [because of the state] of absolute completeness [Devī], being fully awakened [in Her] form of [the union] with Bhairava, [whose name should be] ‘etymologized’ [as ‘one that] makes everything sound by fury’, [and experiencing the state of the absolute] ‘I-ness’ the honorable Goddess said...³⁸

³⁵ *parokṣā* (*parokṣa*) characterizes perfect tense form in the starting phrase of the tantra: *śrī devyuvāca*— ‘Devī said’. See: (Pāṇini III.2.115: *parokṣe liṭ*).

³⁶ In a technical sense, *rudra*’s are the *pramātā*’s of the *śuddha* and *śuddhāśuddha* levels of existence, while *kṣetrajña*’s are the *pramātā*’s of the *āśuddha* level (see: Pandit 2005, Vol. II, 573).

³⁷ See: PTV (KSTS, 10). J. Singh interprets this phrase (*supto ’haṃ kila vilalāpa*) thus: ‘While asleep, I, indeed, bewailed.’

³⁸ *tatra paśyantyādīpade dyotanādisatattvā saṃviddevī prabudhyamānatayā praṣṭrī svā parabhairavābhinnā parābhūmiṃ sadā svābhāsāmapyantarbāhyākṣāgocaratvāt parokṣāmiva paśyantyādīkāḷāpekṣayā tu bhūtāmiva tattadrudrakṣetrajñatattatprāṇāṃśāṃśīkāpekṣya-kalpāvadhikadinamāsānvayābhāvāt adyatanīmiva yāvadāveṣṭumāmṛṣati tāvat supto’haṃ kila vilalāpa itivat ahameva saṃviddevī paśyantyādīpade prabubhutsurasphuṭasphuritaparābhaṭṭārikaikyacakāsadrahasyamuvācāmamarśal evaṃ prabuddhā satī nairākāṅkṣyāt bhīyā sarvaṃ ravayati iti niruktabhairvarūpā ahamevovāceti śrī devyuvācal.*

So, starting with the words *śrī devyuvāca* ('the honorable Goddess said'), the actual process of 'bringing down' the tantra begins. It is mediated by the dialogue of Devī and Śiva—the explicit linguistic form of the inner interplay of the two sides of the Supreme, which through the multitude of words and things permanently reconstructs the oneness of the meaning of Itself thus eternally testing the nectarous blend of unity and diversity.

Abbreviations

VBT: Vijñānabhairava-tantra
NT: Netra-tantra
PTV: Parātrīśikā-vivaraṇa
SvT: Svacchanda-tantra
TĀ: Tantrāloka

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