

"Liberation While Living" in Hindu Tantrism*

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Abstract—The concept of “liberation while living” (jivanmukti) arose in Advaita Vedānta as a response to the paradigm of “disembodied” liberation (videhamukti). The condition of jivanmukti is highly appreciated in Hindu Tantrism. The concept of jivanmukti often includes the meanings of identification with the absolute, the supreme deity. There are different kinds of jivanmukti, for example, active and passive ones. The state of jivanmukti is the complete independence, highest ideal, spiritual perfection. Jivanmukta considers the entire objective world to be a reflection of the higher Self. The status of jivanmukta can have an ideological dimension when it is opposed to traditions that are considered ineffective in Tantra. The acquisition of jivanmukti is primarily due to spiritual knowledge. On the one hand, knowledge is a certain state of the carrier of knowledge himself; on the other hand, it is always knowledge of “something”. Although jivanmukti can be reached through almost all tantric practices, there is a certain gradation of the time spent on it. The man reaches liberation during life not in isolation from the world. Outwardly, jivanmukta cannot stand out among ordinary members of society; all his uniqueness is hidden inside his consciousness.

Keywords—Hindu Tantrism; jivanmukti; liberation; spiritual knowledge

I. INTRODUCTION

Almost all Tantric schools confirm the value of gaining “liberation while living”, or jivanmukti. This concept has historically emerged as a kind of response (not in Tantric circles) to the dominant paradigm of the “posthumous” or “disembodied” liberation (videhamukti). According to this paradigm, which was shared by all the pre-Advaita Vedānta and pre-Tantric spiritual traditions, the highest goal (mokṣa, nirvāṇa, kaivalya) cannot be achieved while remaining in the physical body, perceived as a whole extremely low. The body, being a product of karma accumulated in the past, was considered a powerful obstacle to spiritual life in general and to spiritual liberation in particular. Since, while alive, it is impossible to “throw off” the body without risking life itself, liberation could not be anything other than posthumous, and during life it was possible “only” (although this, of course, is very important) to obtain the key experience of the subsequent posthumous state, an experience that was

achieved at the highest levels of Yogic concentration. But this experience itself (enlightenment) was not tantamount to liberation itself. While there is a body, there is no final freedom: here Buddhism of Hīnayāna and classical Mahāyāna, Jainism and Brahmanism, Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika expressed the same opinion. Thus, the value of liberation was incompatible with the psycho-bodied structures of the individual.

However, there were a few exceptions. For example, the ancient *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣat* noted the possibility of acquiring a higher state without losing the body: “When all desires that lived in the heart of a mortal disappear, he becomes immortal, reaching Brahman here” (IV.4.7) [1]. In this sense, the state of liberation does not depend on the body, which is not so much regarded as an annoying hindrance, as it generally drops out of consideration. However, this view still did not become dominant. The *Chandogyopaniṣat*, created around the same period as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (circa the 7th – 6th cent. BC), makes it clear that liberation is possible only upon death: “I remain in this [world], and [only] then I reach the goal” (VI.14.2) [2]. Dharmic texts negatively perceive freedom in life. The *Āpastamba-dharmasūtra*, one of the oldest treatises on dharma, compiled probably shortly before the new era, states: “[Some people think that] liberation can be achieved by knowing [Ātman. However], this [opinion] is contrary to the śāstra. [After all], if [a person] had gained liberation [in this way], he would not have experienced any suffering here [in the earthly world]” (II.9.21.14-16) [3]. For many hundreds of years, the idea of jivanmukti, not really being developed (needless to say that the term itself was absent), dragged out a rather miserable existence.

With appearance of Advaita Vedānta, this idea received a fresh impulse for development. Since this version of the “new” Vedānta positioned itself as a continuation of the “ancient” Vedānta, i. e., the Upanishads, it, among other things, reanimated (and creatively reworked) the idea of lifetime freedom, implicitly assumed in some ancient Upanishads. The term jivanmukti itself appears. However, the soteriological potential of the body continues to be ignored in Vedānta also.

In parallel with the folding and strengthening of Vedānta, the primary Tantric groups developed, differing from both Vedāntic and other non-Tantric traditions with their closer

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attention to the physical, material aspects of spiritual practices. It was in these circles that the potential of the “thin” body was discovered, the concepts of *nāḍī*, *chakras* and *kuṇḍalinī* were formed. And it is precisely in these circles that the ideal of *jīvanmukti* was formed as the lifetime liberation of not only consciousness (as in the Upanishads and Vedānta), but also physicality. There are good reasons to believe that the development of the *jīvanmukti* ideal in this milieu was due to the archaic roots of Tantra, with its interest in the bodily-material side of life in the context of its close relationship with powerful female deities. The Vedāntic idea of liberation in life overlapped with ancient cult practices, which, without changing in essence, nevertheless obtained a somewhat different connotation.

II. THE MEANING OF JIVANMUKTI IN TANTRISM

Jīvanmukti is very highly praised in Tantrism. It is not only put on the highest level, but is also offered for the most part as the only true one, whereas liberation in disembodied state is considered insufficient, and the desire for it is sometimes reproached and ridiculed. In the Tantric alchemical treatise *Rasārṇava* [4] it is said that “the idea of posthumous liberation is meaningless, because then even a donkey would die free after the death of his body”. Against the idea of *videhamukti*, the same treatise (I. 12) argues that such a state cannot be observed directly, unlike the *jīvanmukti*, which makes it an empty abstraction.

The ancient Vedic ideal of immortality, which preceded the ideal of liberation, is also integrated into the Tantric discourse. On the question of the relationship between notions of immortality and liberation during life all Tantric schools can generally be divided into two groups. The first of them identifies these categories. In all likelihood, this group of schools is the successor of the ancient proto-Tantric cults with their interest in physicality and materiality in general. The second group does not carry out such identification; moreover, it believes immortality is secondary compared to liberation, in which cognitive components come to the fore.

Thus, the identification of *jīvanmukti* and immortality is actively supported by the currents of the Siddhas and Nāthas. According to Sh. B. Dasgupta, “The final aim of the Nāth Siddhas is *Jīvanmukti* or liberation while living, and this state of liberation is what is meant by immortality” [5]. However, the immortality sought by the siddhas is still impossible for an ordinary mortal body. Such a body must be completely transformed, transformed into a “divine” (*divya*). “The Siddhas seeks liberation in a transformed or transmuted body whichever is the perfect body” [6].

In those schools that do not identify immortality with liberation, *jīvanmukti* is the ideal lifetime condition of a person. But such a person is still mortal. According to the *Yoginītantra*, the text related to the tradition of worshipping the goddess *Kāmākhyā*, “a person liberated while alive has a body, and upon death he acquires the highest abode” [7]. Nevertheless, the post-mortem state of the final freedom is rather a “technical” consequence of what happens in life, and without this gain it simply would not have come.

Quite often (may be always) the concept of *jīvanmukti* includes the meanings of identification, unity with the absolute first principle of being, the highest deity. Examples of it are often found in philosophy of Kashmir Śaivism. Thus, Tantric thinker *Kṣemarāja* (XI cent.) considers an identity with the absolute consciousness as the main element of *jīvanmukti*: “When achieving bliss of consciousness, even with a body, etc., there is a steady focus on identity with the Consciousness” [8]. The autocommentary explains that even in the waking state, in the presence of dense and subtle bodies, it is possible to experience unity with the Consciousness, thereby overcoming limitations. Such a person sees everything around as a “game of God” [9].

Abhinavagupta (X–XI cent.), the teacher of *Kṣemarāja*, spoke earlier about the same in the treatise *Parātrīśikālaghuvṛtti*: “This is the attainment of Heart, which gives liberation while alive, characterized by total absorption into the union of *Bhairava* and Energy” [10]. An incredible degree of bliss is present in this case also.

Depending on which integrative practices are used, there are different types of *jīvanmukti*. In particular, *Abhinavagupta* in his other work, *Īśvarapratyabhijñāvivṛtivimarśinī*, distinguishes two forms of liberation during life in relation to the idea of *samāveśa*, active and passive. The author notes that in the first (active) case, it “denotes an absolute, perfect entering into one’s own true nature”, and is inherent in “connoisseurs” (*jñānins*). In the second (passive) case, it is implied to “soak” the higher Consciousness, the transformation of all sides of a limited subject [11]. In both cases, we see deep metamorphosis in the practitioner’s mind.

Due to the peculiarities of the Tantric worldview, liberation while living is not so much a cardinal, decisive break with the world and a departure from it, as the restructuring of relations with it and control over it. Such a liberated one acquires the power of a world ruler, who, however, is engaged not so much in creative reorganization of the universe as in maintaining his own stable, independent state, which cannot be shaken by anyone and nothing. In other words, this “control over the world” is not an intervention in the current world processes, but a kind of protective mechanism against the negative influences of the surrounding world. The *jīvanmukta* itself chooses what is to be allowed from the elements and levels of the universe to him, what to deal with, and what to leave “beyond the threshold”.

The state of *jīvanmukti* is a complete independence from anything, the highest ideal, spiritual perfection. According to the *Yoga Bija*, “*Jīvanmukta* is always independent, free from all faults” [12]. Such a person is devoid of any impurity. The *jīvanmukta* regards the entire objective world as a reflection of the higher Self, inseparable from this root cause. Such a person does not need to perform religious rituals, produce sacred gestures, recite mantras, and generally worship deities. This, in particular, is stated in *Paramārthasāra*, written by *Abhinavagupta*: “And besides himself, there is no one whom he, freed, could honor hymns and sacrifices, please with praises, etc. He worships [nobody] and does not exclaim

“vaṣaṭ” (verse 73) [13]. Possessing the highest knowledge, such a person is deprived of any preferences, indifferent to the things of the material world and “does not see the difference between a lump of clay and a piece of gold”, notes the *Kubjikā-tantra* (IX. 7) [14]. In his mind, the distinctions between the pure and impure, sacred and profane, sublime and insignificant disappear.

The status of a *jīvanmukta* can have not only a social, but also an ideological dimension, when it is opposed to traditions that are considered insufficiently effective in tantra. In particular, the *Meru-tantra* (XVII. 361) conducts a dichotomy between Veda and Tantra, arguing that “the followers of the Veda are known as cattle (paśu), whereas Tantrists are liberated while alive”. [15] A somewhat harsh-looking comparison of “followers of the Veda” (probably orthodox Brahmins) with cattle is actually quite logical, based on the traditional Indian metaphor: cattle is subordinate animals that fulfill the will of the master, they are dependent, are not free; likewise, adherents of the Vedas are not free, “attached” to *saṃsāra*, in contrast to the independent adherents of Tantra, who have overcome their “bestial” state.

The attainment of *jīvanmukti* (and here Tantrism converges with the general Indian tradition), is primarily due to spiritual knowledge. On the one hand, knowledge is a certain state in which the connoisseur is located, and, on the other hand, it is always knowledge “about something”. So, Kṣemarāja, commenting on the *Spanda-kārikā*, writes that “when ... [a person] has the immutable knowledge that everything is identical with [the higher] Self, then he is liberated while living” (III. 14) [16]. The monistic nature of the *jīvanmukta* position correlates with the monistic character of knowledge itself, which is expressed in one form or another in specific forms. For example, it is often the knowledge of a mantra (usually a female deity). According to the *Kubjikā-tantra* (I. 20), only by listening to the mantra a person can attain liberation while living [17]. At the same time, understanding the essence of the mantra is conjugated with the qualitative effect of its repetition. The more repetitions the mantra has, the stronger and deeper its knowledge will be. The commentator of the *Karpūrādistotra* clarifies that the one who repeats the mantra a hundred thousand times becomes *jīvanmukta*, similar in appearance to Shiva (I. 15) [18]. Even if knowledge is not mentioned directly, it is still meant to some extent or another. In particular, the *Kūlārṇava-tantra* (III. 137) states that “the happy way of liberation during life is hidden in the *kūlaśāstra*” [19], i. e. the teachings of the school of Kula.

In its turn, knowledge (as a state) does not appear in a Tantric adept merely: to get it, he has to make a lot of efforts and go through a serious and long-term practice. This practice is always religious in nature and is combined with a cultic appeal to certain deities. Therefore, the followers of Tantrism are deeply convinced that the deity gives them both knowledge and liberation while living.

Sure, knowledge does not disappear anywhere even after a person has gained liberation while alive. It forms the main platform of his perceptions and actions. Everything the

“liberated person” is dealing with now is passed through the filter of this knowledge. It is no coincidence that the *Kubjikā-tantra* (I. 15) claims that “a *jīvanmukta* is one who unswervingly adheres only to knowledge” [20].

The attainment of liberation while living naturally follows from the very logic of the Tantric path. After all, Tantra is positioning itself as the “easy” way, most suitable for the inhabitants of the “age of misfortune” (*kaliyuga*). Accordingly, the demand for effective methods that save time, the demand for actions that increase the level of energy is increasing; after all, human life is short and its capabilities must be fully utilized. And the sooner such a freedom can be obtained, the more valuable this method is considered.

So how soon can liberation while living happen? In the Tantric texts there is no unity on this matter, since the timing is a subjective quantity. But the very “fact” that this will happen over a human life, while Indian thought has become accustomed to countless reincarnations, already eloquently testifies to supporters of such views about its effectiveness. Usually, *jīvanmukti* is acquired quite quickly (by Indian norms): at least, mastering the soteriological technologies that lead to a similar effect does not take the whole life. Tantric Yogic Upanishads even lead a comparative ladder of soteriological psychotechnologies designed for different types of practitioners. Four types of yoga are usually listed in ascending order, i. e. Mantra, Laya, Haṭha and Rāja Yoga. The Haṭha Yogic *Śiva Saṃhitā* [21] in chapter 5 mentions how many years are needed for “success” (*siddhi*) in these disciplines. The number of years depends on the level of disciples. There are four types of disciples. The first type is “weak” (*mṛdu*): they are forgetful, unstable, criticize teachers, sweet-loving, greedy, attached to their wives, etc. However, even such people achieve liberation, albeit with difficulty, in 12 years (V. 11), and “only” Mantra Yoga is suitable for them. The higher level is the “middle” (*madhya*) students, for whom Laya Yoga is assigned. These are intelligent, kind, virtuous practitioners with a pleasant speech (V. 12). The number of years for practice is not specified here; however, based on the logic of the further presentation, it can be assumed that approximately 9 years are given to achieve the freedom of Laya Yogis. The third class of students, “strong” (*adhimātra*), is distinguished by a concentrated mind, independence, energy, courage, and respect for the mentor. They gain liberation in 6 years, and their practice is Haṭha Yoga (V. 13). The strongest (*adhimātratama*) *sādhakas*, possessing a huge supply of forces, persistent, moderate in food, compassionate, worshiping God and guru, can practice all three types of Yoga; such talented yogis gain freedom in three years (V. 14) [22].

Abhinavagupta in the 13th chapter of his *Tantrāloka* mentions various types of yogis, building them along a ladder of spiritual perfection similar to the previous case. The classification is based on the principle of receiving divine power (*śaktipāta*). The stronger this stream, the faster the yogis are liberated. The most gifted adepts are able to receive the most powerful stream of divine grace (*tīvatīvraśaktipāta*). These people no longer need rituals or practice yoga, they are instantly released and at the same time their interest in worldly life disappears completely [23].

As B. N. Pandit believes, such people either die immediately or remain alive for some time, but are “in a state of complete inaction, insentient like a log of wood” [24].

Thus, although a *jīvanmukti* in principle can be acquired through any Tantric strategies, there is a certain gradation of the time spent on it. It is noteworthy that Tantra takes into account the level of development of practitioners and does not offer any single soteriological recipe that is appropriate for all adepts. Apparently, this is due to the general Indian belief in reincarnation: every person born into life does not start life from scratch, but continues to act in accordance with the baggage of skills and knowledge that he has acquired in his past lives. Disciples differ in character, temperament, abilities, and if they reach *jīvanmukti* at all, this happens for everyone in their own turn, exclusively on an individual basis and taking into account personal characteristics.

Man achieves liberation while alive not being isolated from the world. No matter how far he goes in his spiritual wanderings of *jīvanmukti*, he still maintains some connections with society, even if these connections are quite specific. According to K. Mishra, the Tantric *jīvanmukta* differs in a favorable side from its Advaitic “colleague” in that it retains and even improves its socio-cultural activity after achieving liberation [25]. This activity grows out of the very freedom to act (*svātantrya*). “Such a person responds to every call; he or she takes an active interest in the affairs of the world <...> the liberated person does this out of universal love, in a free and relaxed way” [26].

Undoubtedly, the opinion of K. Mishra has been modernized to meet the demands of this century, which requires more social activity and less contemplation from people than it used to be. It is unlikely that the written eight hundred years before these words *Kūlārṇava-tantra* (IX. 12) would agree with him: “Keeping its senses in a passive state, plunging its mind into its own Self, seemingly dead, it is called a *jīvanmukta*” [27]. However, in fairness it should be noted that *jīvanmuktas*, like ordinary people, differ in their characteristics, and along with passive spectators, one can certainly meet active people who believe that they are involved in the divine drama of life.

However, why is it that a *jīvanmukta*, while continuing to act in the world after his liberation, does not experience the consequences of its actions? To clarify this subject, K. Misra makes an original distinction between the concepts of *kriyā* and *karma*. Although both etymologically means “action”, the first of them, in his opinion, is an act of disinterested, not entailing karmic consequences and being drawn into *saṃsāra*. This is precisely the action without ego that only the liberated while alive can do. “Pure *kriyā* is possible only in the state of perfection that is found in the life of a *jīvanmukta*,” the author suggests [28]. But what is such a person free from, it is from karmic deeds. For such a person, the whole world of phenomena is not some kind of dungeon where his freedom-loving soul languishes, but a space of divine “play” bringing him supreme bliss. However, with all this, a *jīvanmukti* does not mean the complete elimination of all accumulated karma. It is impossible even physically,

since the *jīvanmuktas* have a dense material body. The absolute exhaustion of all karmic consequences is achieved only in a state of complete excarnation. After death, such a “living liberated” is in a state of perfect identity with the Lord. At the same time, as M. L. Pandit believes, after the completion of the life cycle of the liberated, two scenarios of further actions are opened: on the one hand, he can either immediately “submerge in I-consciousness or he takes a divine form like that of Bhairava” and participates in cosmogonic and soteriological processes initiated by God [29].

III. CONCLUSION

A person who has attained *jīvanmukti* overcomes “human, too human”. Outwardly, he may not stand out among ordinary members of society, sometimes engaged in a trivial, unremarkable activity. All the majesty and uniqueness of the *jīvanmukta* is hidden inside, in his mind. He sincerely believes that he has found unity with divine reality. At the same time, focusing on the identity with the highest first principle, the “living liberated” has the ability to integrate all the diverse phenomena of the surrounding reality into a single whole, through which the “game” of the great God shines through. And in this “game” the *jīvanmukta* takes the most direct part.

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