

# Human Hair or Cotton Thread : Remarks on the Prescription of Impurity in Some Early Tantras

Judit Törzsök

The use of impure substances, such as meat, fish, human blood or skull, is considered an important tantric trait, and one that is supposed to distinguish Bhairava Tantras including Yoginī Tantras from Tantras of the Siddhānta. However, as Sanderson (1985:565-6) has shown, Tantras of the Siddhānta occasionally prescribe the use of impure substances and rites involving cremation ground practices, especially to obtain supernatural powers (*siddhi*), in spite of exegetes' claims to the contrary. Concentrating on the evidence of the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* and the *Brahmayāmala*, the two earliest Tantras of the Yoginī cult, this paper shows that prescriptions of impurity are not always unambiguous in early Yoginī Tantras either. Although there are passages that explicitly laud the power of illicit substances for the performance of *siddhi*, many verses on ritual allow pure substitutes or make no distinction between the use of what is pure or impure; thus, one can use a human skull or a silver vase, *vāmāmyṛta* or milk etc. without distinction. It is also often said that one may use whatever one can obtain (*yathālābha*). The principle of not caring about whether something is pure or impure may well go back to some *pāśupata* practices (see *Pāśupatasūtra* 1.8ff.), but the reason that explains it is new. For, according to the *pāśupatas*, it is the power of the Lord that transforms the inauspicious into auspicious ('and what is inauspicious becomes auspicious here' *amaṅgalaṃ cātra maṅgalaṃ bhavati* PS 2.7, on which the commentator, Kauṇḍinya, says: '... it becomes auspicious through the power of the Lord's image' *kāraṇamūrtisāmarthyān maṅgalaṃ bhavati*); but in Yoginī cults, as the *Brahmayāmala* (91.57-8) explains, the reason for which there is no distinction between pure and impure is that everything is made of the Goddess and the whole universe is in one's self. Although this explanation may well be behind what is called tantric nondual practice (*advaitācāra*), its formulation, it will be argued, seems comparatively late.