
IMAGINATIVE REALIZATION IN THE *VIJÑĀNABHAIRAVA TANTRA*¹

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**ABSTRACT**

Among the religious traditions that developed in ancient India, the Tantric tradition offers one of the most vigorous efforts at vindicating the powers of the imagination. A key term in this context is *bhāvanā*, literally the “act of bringing something into being”, used to indicate a disciplined cultivation of the mind’s natural capacity to form images. This brief article addresses the meaning of *bhāvanā* in the *Vijñānabhairava Tantra* (VBh), a short scripture written in the spirit of the Śaiva Tantric Trika tradition around the first half of the 9th century CE. In this text, as the article shows, *bhāvanā* is understood not only as a human faculty but now also as a divine power with important ontological and soteriological implications. In this way, the centrality of the imagination common to many Tantric texts reaches a remarkable zenith in the VBh, anticipating the view of later influential thinkers such as Abhinavagupta and Kṣemarāja (10th-11th centuries).

KEYWORDS: Imagination and Religion, Contemplation, Hinduism, Tantra, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*.**RESUMEN** *Realización imaginativa en el Vijñānabhairava Tantra*

Entre las tradiciones religiosas que se desarrollaron en la antigua India, si hay una que vindicó la imaginación, ésa es la tradición tántrica. Al respecto, el término clave es *bhāvanā*, literalmente, el “acto de hacer que algo cobre existencia”, usado para indicar un cultivo disciplinado de la capacidad natural de la mente para formar imágenes. Este artículo analiza el significado de *bhāvanā* en el *Vijñānabhairava Tantra* (VBh), breve escritura redactada hacia el siglo IX en el seno de la tradición śaiva tántrica conocida como Trika. En este texto, *bhāvanā* es concebida no sólo como una facultad humana sino además como un poder divino con profundas implicaciones ontológicas y soteriológicas. De este modo, la centralidad que la imaginación tiene en muchos textos tántricos alcanza una cúspide en el VBh, anticipando la perspectiva de influyentes pensadores posteriores como Abhinavagupta y Kṣemarāja (siglos X-XI).

PALABRAS CLAVE: Imaginación y religión, contemplación, hinduismo, Tantra, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*.

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Introduction

Among the religious traditions that developed in ancient India, the Tantric tradition offers one of the most vigorous efforts at vindicating the powers of the imagination. A key term in this context is *bhāvanā*, literally the “act of bringing something into being”, used to indicate a disciplined cultivation of the mind’s natural capacity to form images. This brief article addresses the meaning of *bhāvanā* in the *Vijñānabhairava Tantra* (VBh), a short scripture written in the spirit of the Śaiva Tantric Trika tradition around the first half of the IXth century CE. In this text, as the article shows, *bhāvanā* is understood not only as a human faculty but now also as a divine power with important ontological and soteriological implications. In this way, the centrality of the imagination common to many Tantric texts reaches a remarkable zenith in the VBh, anticipating the view of later influential thinkers such as Abhinavagupta and Kṣemarāja (Xth-XIth centuries).

Tantra and imagination

No doubt one of the most prominent features of Tantric religion is the extended use of the imagination (Timalsina 2015a and 2015b). Tantric worship rituals and visualization techniques, and the very iconography of many Tantric pantheons often presuppose a contemplative-imaginative dimension. This can be appreciated, for instance, from the close relationship between external “worship” (*pūjā*) and internal “visualization” (*dhyāna*) advanced in many texts. In the same sense, the external representation of Tantric deities often involves an inner or imaginative apprehension. Thus, the idol (*mūrti*, *vigraha*) can be taken as the external (*bāhya*) image of the deity’s *svarūpa*, its true or inner image (Gupta et al. 1979: 8; Brunner 1990: 27-29; Bühnemann 2011, vol. 1: iv-xx; Flood 2002: 28-33).

The scriptures of the Tantric system of ritual we are here concerned with, the Trika cult, are not an exception, and here and there instruct the initiate to internally (*āntara*, *mānasa*) visualize the three goddesses that form its main pantheon (Sanderson 1990: 32), whence the name Trika, the “triad” of Parā, Parāparā, and Aparā. For instance, the *Parātrimśikā Tantra*, a scripture closely related to the *Vijñānabhairava Tantra* (VBh), to

which I will return, teaches the imaginative installation of the goddess Parā upon an altar made of sweet-smelling flowers. Once there, the goddess should be worshipped, also internally, with an awareness of her phonetic (i. e., mantric) and cosmic dimensions, besides the properly iconic one (*Parātrīṃśikā Tantra* 29-33).

There are many terms connected with this application of the imagination in Tantric ritual. One of them, perhaps the most important due to its frequency and its ontological and soteriological implications, is *bhāvanā* (Chenet 1987: 64-84), the focus of this article.

Bhāvanā

As is well known, the word *bhāvanā* comes from *bhū-*, one of the two roots in Sanskrit, along with *as-*, for “to be”. However, unlike the root *as-*, which conveys a more static or substantialist way of being, without paying much attention to aspects like duration or agency, the root *bhū-* emphasizes the process that is implied in any condition or state, and therefore is closer to the ideas of “coming to be”, “becoming”. Now, *bhāvanā* is a noun derived from the causative of *bhū-*, and on that account it can be taken, literally, as “the act of making something to be”, the “act of bringing something into being”. Based on this general meaning, the word acquired specific connotations in diverse intellectual contexts with clear points of contact among them. Three of them stand out: Brahmanical exegesis (*mīmāṃsā*), Sanskrit literary theory (*alankāraśāstra*) and, finally, the contemplative tradition.

Here I would like to leave aside the first two and concentrate only on the third one. Thus, within Indian contemplative tradition *bhāvanā* is related to the individual’s contemplative effort, with an emphasis, derived from the word’s etymology, upon its causative power. It is not abstract contemplation, without images, but contemplation that “brings its object into being”, in the sense that the object’s presence is established vividly and infused with deep meaning. This explains why scholars have proposed more descriptive or explanatory translations such as “insightful contemplation”, “active contemplation”, “creative contemplation”, and so on (Singh 1991: xxx). Again, all these

options indicate an imaginative contemplation, in the basic sense that it works with images, not at the expense of them.

Bhāvanā is thus a kind of specialized, conscious application, in a religious context, of the figurative process intrinsic to mental activity—the power to create and sustain images in the mind. Of course, the direction and limits of this vigilant fostering of the imagination were determined by each tradition in accordance with their canonical truths and values, and therefore were different in each case (Figuroa 2017).

Now, the importance of Tantric *bhāvanā* is evinced not only by the term’s frequency in the texts, but more importantly by the laudatory tone. Here are two well-known examples: “He becomes liberated, even in this life, who gives himself over once and for all to that *bhāvanā*” (*Svacchanda Tantra* 7.259ab), or more laconically: “Supreme knowledge consists in *bhāvanā*” (*Mālinīvijayottara Tantra* 17.20cd).²

Of course, compared to other contemplative traditions, the laudatory tone suggests a particular, more ambitious understanding of *bhāvanā*. To begin with, it is important to recall, as Alexis Sanderson has noted, that the rituals of many Tantric cults (the cults known as forming the *mantramārga*) presuppose the possibility of accessing manipulating, and transforming the person’s inner being, and in all that *bhāvanā* necessarily plays a critical role (Sanderson 2006: 3). Therefore, the centrality of the imaginative component in Tantric praxis does not always end in the intense apprehension of the contemplated object. Rather, such apprehension has the power to reconstitute the initiate’s identity. Describing *bhāvanā* as perfect, liberating knowledge, and therefore as the means for realizing the inner self, amounts to considering *bhāvanā* a reflexive notion. It “brings the person into being” in accordance with the contemplated image, in which that very person sees realized her true identity (Bansat-Boudon 2014: 84; Chenet 1987: 47, 86-87). Ideally, such transformation involves the merging of subject and object, and therefore *bhāvanā* can be more than a mere means to an end. In sum, we move from an intense imaginative contemplation to the ontological efficacy of the contemplated image to the initiate’s reflexive identification and

² Respectively *jīvaṇṇ eva vimukto’sau yasyaiśā bhāvanā sadā*, and *tad eva paramaṇ jñānaṇ bhāvanāmayam iṣyate*. Both quoted in L. Bansat-Boudon 2014: 93. All translations are mine.

universalization (Bäumer 2014: 67), something which seems to reiterate the word's basic meaning, i. e., its causative import.

Here I agree with Lyne Bansat-Boudon that the translation that does most justice to *bhāvanā* is therefore “realization”. Instead of emphasizing the contextual meaning, the practice of contemplation, it seems to be more relevant making explicit the word's literal meaning, with all its causative-reflexive import. And in English “realization” works well (Bansat-Boudon 2014: 84, 89-91). It indicates the act of making something real, as well as the reflexive effect upon the subject of that act, namely, the coming to understand clearly and distinctly, which in turn can be associated with the idea of personal attainment or, in our context, with soteriological realization. Now, since the imaginative aspect is always implied, then perhaps a more accurate rendering might be “imaginative realization”.

To go deeper, in what follows I will focus on the use of *bhāvanā* in the VBh, a short scripture of the Trika composed around the first half of the ninth century, perhaps a bit earlier. It is to be hoped that the analysis may contribute to a deeper understanding of the text, as well as of the role of the imagination in Tantric religion.

The *Vijñānabhairava*

The VBh's conformity to all these implications is to be understood in the light of the text's position within the development of the Trika system of ritual. Therefore, in order to appreciate the doctrine articulated in this scripture, we need first to recall that the Trika underwent important changes throughout its historical development. Like other Tantric systems, early Trika is above all a cult consisting of initiations (*dīkṣā*), worship ceremonies (*pūjā*), mantras to be recited, *maṇḍalas* to be visualized (*dhyāna*), the conduct (*ācāra*) to be observed by the initiates and the disciplines (*sādhana*) they have to perfect; the states that can be reached (*āveśa*) and the fruits (*phala*) that can be obtained, both supernatural (*siddhi*) and properly soteriological (*mukti*). In particular, the early stages (in the VIIth and VIIIth centuries) betray a Śākta orientation. The cult revolves around the propitiation of feminine principles, notoriously the three goddesses representing different aspects or

powers of the transcendent god Śiva-Bhairava: on the one hand, Aparā and Parāparā personify the deity's sinister and dreadful aspects; on the other, Parā is associated with the powers of Speech and Knowledge, and therefore with Śiva's luminous and salvific dimensions.³

The cult's evolution out of this ritualistic substratum distinguishes itself by the growing presence of yogic-contemplative elements, as well as by an insistence on gnostic internalization: the divinities gradually became the powers governing various cosmic levels, as well as mental and sensorial activity. Such emphasis gained notoriety in tandem with three other innovations: external ritual becomes secondary, the goddess Parā attains preponderance, and finally a more systematic theology is articulated as the interplay of Śiva and Parā.

Situated in Trika's final stage, the *Vijñānabhairava* embraces all these ingredients to the point that the text's filiation with the system is sui generis and even paradoxical. As Alexis Sanderson has noted, we know it is a Trika text because its estrangement from ritualism takes the Trika ritual as a model:

This scripture [the *Vijñānabhairava*]... does not engage with the specifics of tantric ritual in a manner that would enable us to conclude that it is a work of the Trika or some other ritual tradition. But its Trika background is apparent from verses in which this transcendence of ritual is formulated as the transcendence of the Trika's ritual. This is, in other words, a Trika work that advocates practices that are free of the specifics of its mantra deities (2014: 23).

The text follows the dialogical pattern of most Tantric scriptures: perplexed, the goddess Bhairavī (identified with Parā herself) asks the god Bhairava about the highest truth (VBh 2-6). After discarding a number of options, Bhairava identifies such truth with the goddess herself, conceived as the power (*śakti*) to pervade everything, the power to become manifest in the form of this multifarious world, and yet remaining one with the transcendent god (VBh 15-17). Parā's eminence lies therefore in the fact of being both superior and inferior at the same time. That is why the text describes her as Bhairava's mouth (*mukha*), in the sense that she is the door or threshold to him (VBh 20, 23). The

³ This is most clearly appreciated, for instance, in *Siddhayogēśvarīmata* 6.19-24.

goddess' intermediary position between both realms —this world and the world beyond— is then interpreted in practical-soteriological terms: the yogi must seek and nourish this elusive intermediate space (*madhya*, *vyoman*) in any circumstance. It is here that the text introduces the notion of *bhāvanā*.

***Bhāvanā* as a progressive contemplative method**

The first, obvious role of *bhāvanā* is thus to serve as instrument for the individual to perceive every event in this world as an event infused with *śakti*, that is to say, infused by Śakti-Bhairavī-Parā. To that end, the text teaches 112 contemplative exercises, 112 *bhāvanās*.⁴ Together, these are meant to transform the differentiated density of man's ordinary experience into an expansive flow of energy that re-establishes the presence of divine power in every circumstance, either internal or external. Ordinary objects and events are now to be conceived as manifestations of that same energy. These are some of the examples articulated in the text: breath is now a rhythmic flux of energy; perception is the momentary alignment of objective and subjective forms of energy; basic feelings like pleasure, fear or pain indicate a sudden change of energy; the body is a vast field of energy comprising channels (*nāḍī*), centers (*cakra*) and gestural seals (*mudrā*); ritual itself is now an uninterrupted inner event made of *śakti*. And again in each of these realizations an imaginative dimension is not only implied, it is instrumental. The causative power of the imagination is pivotal for replacing the ordinary construction of this reality (made of *vikalpas*, “differentiating constructs”) with an “intuitive and non-discursive awareness focused on ultimate reality” (Bansat-Boudon 2014: 87), that is to say, on Śakti herself. Up to this point we speak therefore of *bhāvanā* as imaginative realization based on personal intention and effort, as a human capacity. But there is more at stake. Let us see in what sense.

⁴ *Bhāvanā* and akin forms, especially verbal forms, appear so frequently in the text that there is little doubt about the term that best describes the 112 contemplative exercises. In this regard, the extended use of the term *dhāraṇā* in secondary sources should be avoided. In fact, *dhāraṇā* does not even appear once in text, the only exception being the verbal form *dhārayet* in stanza 73.

The reflexive turn: the divine *bhāvanā*

The exploration of *bhāvanā*'s soteriological efficacy in each and every circumstance becomes the doctrine itself in the VBh. This is the basic truth the text aspires to actualize: the very omnipresence of *bhāvanā*. But, as I said, Tantric *bhāvanā* does not necessarily end with the object contemplated. Rather, while the subject engages in “bringing the object into being”, ideally such *bhāvanā* also *brings the subject into a new, more real being*. Again, the ultimate, soteriological implication of *bhāvanā*, and therefore of the imagination, is reflexive. Put more simply, its aim is the recognition of the initiate's Self as the deity contemplated. This appears in the text with all its intensity towards the end in the following verse: “The realization (*bhāvanā*) that is realized (*bhāvya*) ceaselessly within the highest reality (*parabhāva*) is mantra recitation (*japa*). The spontaneous sound (*nāda*), the essence of mantras, is the mantra that accords to such [*bhāvanā*]” (VBh 145).⁵

On the one hand, the stanza gives a hint of *bhāvanā*'s verbal provenance, namely, the causative of the root *bhū-*; on the other, the use of the passive voice introduces an unexpected turn. Up to here previous exercises had used the form *bhāvayet*, in the active voice: “one should contemplate/realize”.⁶ But now *bhāvanā* does not only “brings this or that object into being”; literally, *bhāvanā* herself is “caused to be” (*bhāvya*), suggesting that it is not anymore something that the initiate does, but rather something that occurs ceaselessly, again and again (*bhūyo bhūyaḥ*).

This explains the mentioning of the practice of *japa*, the recitation of a mantra, whose goal consists precisely in reaching that point where the continuous flow of sound becomes spontaneous. This explains also the mentioning of the mantra that best suits the practice of *japa*, and therefore that best exemplifies what *bhāvanā* is: the primordial sound

⁵ VBh 142: *bhūyo bhūyaḥ pare bhāve bhāvanā bhāvya hi yā | japaḥ so'tra svayaṃ nādo mantrātmā japyā īdrśaḥ*.

⁶ The same is also true for prefixed forms used in the text like *vibhāvayet*, *anubhāvayet*, *paribhāvayet*, etc., as well as for verbs used in the same function like *dhārayet*, *cintayet*, *dhyāyet*, etc.

(*nāda*), defined previously in the text as the sound that resounds by itself (*svayam*), unstruck (VBh 38, 114), allowing also a link with the breath (VBh 24).

In this way, mantra's performative dimension intersects the performative dimension of contemplating and imagining. Both forms of dynamism, sonic and visual, encapsulate the deity's ultimate nature. Moreover, the parallelism confirms that *bhāvanā* is not merely something the yogi undertakes, but something that occurs to him all the time. The question arises: if the yogi must surrender himself to this spontaneous imaginative impulse, upon which rests his deepest identity, who in this case is the real agent who engages in *bhāvanā*?

The text does not say it openly. However, an answer can be obtained from the reference to the locus of this realization: the highest reality (*parabhāva*). Directly derived from the root *bhū-*, *bhāva* is usually translated as "reality", "existence", "state of being". Yet, like *bhāvanā*, it can also be derived from the causative, in which case it designates not a fixed or static condition, focused on what it is, but a dynamic condition, focused on what it should be.

In the VBh, *bhāva* is connected to such a condition, one in which the yogi realizes his true identity (see also stanzas 53 y 61-62). And therefore, the highest reality (the *parabhāva*), where *bhāvanā* is caused to be (*bhāvyate*) again and again, can only correspond, as the very term *para* suggests, to the plane of the goddess Parā, identified in the text with the Power (*śakti*) of Śiva-Bhairava.

In this way, by contemplating Śiva's Śakti in every situation by means of *bhāvanā*, and by identifying himself with that power, the yogi becomes a medium for divine agency: the goddess pervades him substituting his ordinary experience with a more elevated experience. This pervasion is known by the term *samāveśa*. Paradoxically, such non-ordinary experience is also *bhāvanā*, but now taken as the imaginative impulse of the goddess herself. Once again, if *bhāvanā* is "bringing the object of contemplation into being", and if that object is Śakti, the door to Śiva, upon which rests the subject's final identity, then, in his case, to contemplate, to imagine, amounts to *bringing the highest reality (bhāva) into being as the reality that brings him into being*. In this way, the VBh

substantiates what Lyne Bansat-Boudon has said about Tantric or Śaiva *bhāvanā* in general: “From all the sources presented here, it appears that the Śaiva notion of *bhāvanā* has two faces: one which is ‘practical’... and another which is ‘spiritual’, and to which this ‘practical’ function is subordinated” (2014: 94). *Bhāvanā* is the means and the goal; it is a progressive human effort and, at the same time, an ongoing divine event.

Conclusion

The *Vijñānabhairava Tantra* does not say much about the fact that *bhāvanā* can be understood as the deity’s main attribute. Such an extreme possibility was advanced by later thinkers in the same tradition. In any case, the influence is evident. In particular, the *Vijñānabhairava* contains all the ingredients that anticipate the doctrine of thinkers like Abhinavagupta and Kṣemarāja (X-XIth CE), namely, the vision of the divine couple as absolute consciousness (*cit, citi, prakāśa*) which according to its free will (*svātantrya*) displays within itself, like images upon a canvas, this wondrous creation, its own reflection (*vimarśa*). Such would be the deepest, seminal implication of *bhāvanā* in our text. Again, in all this, the imagination not only plays a crucial role; ultimately, it has the highest rank: it is supreme and liberating knowledge.

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