

FROM IGOR KUFAYEV

## CAMATKĀRA – THE HIDDEN PATH OF TANTRA

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# Camatkāra – The Hidden Path Of Tantra: Aesthetic Astonishment & The Power Of Beauty

by Igor Kufayev

Certain terms, prevalent in spiritual discourses, remain elusive to categorization. Though universally recognized as foundational to the human psyche, they are often obscured by the glossy veneer which conceals their real meaning. A telling example is Dostoevsky's enigmatic "Beauty will save the world," still causing considerable unease 150 years after it was spoken by the main character of his novel. Taken at its face value, the saying sounds idealistic and far removed from the realities of the world and our experience of it. After all, what has the term beauty come to mean today? What is the hidden message behind the words of the Russian writer, whose explorations into the depth of the human condition are unparalleled, whose literary work is foundational to the history of existentialism?

We know that for Dostoevsky, beauty – along with truth and justice – was part of a trinity. For beauty, here, cannot be separate from truth. Nor is truth ever an abstract reality, and our experience is a tangible

confirmation which ennobles our understanding. Just as mathematicians look for harmony and symmetry as a validation of their breakthroughs in unlocking the laws of nature, the true experience of beauty is a confirmation of truth through direct perception. In that respect, what is set to save the world is the realization of beauty, as an inherent ability to cognize truth in the most direct of ways. For it is the experience of beauty that makes truth a tangible reality.

Whether or not Dostoevsky invested his message with Christian theological perspectives, there is a direct analogy traceable to Vedic thought, which defined three major aspects of the Absolute: Truth, Auspiciousness, and Beauty, known in Sanskrit as Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram. Accordingly, the otherwise attribute-less Absolute has these foundational, fundamental qualities. The first two, Truth (Satyam), and Auspiciousness (Shivam) are imperceptible and abstract. They can only be experienced “inwardly”. It is only Sundaram, the experience of Beauty, that is open to direct perception. In other words, we can have the most intimate experience of our Divine Self anytime a wave of beauty takes us over. These terms Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram, in turn, are the expressions of the well-known Vedic Sat Chit Ananda: Being-Consciousness-Bliss. Satyam, as absolute Truth, stands for Being. Shivam stands for Auspiciousness of conscious experience, which affords the possibility to know Being. And Sundaram is the expression of Ananda. It is through Ananda that this quality of consciousness, perceiving itself as Being, can be palpably experienced through Bliss. Ananda is the only tangible experience. Every joy – however fleeting, however intense – one way or another, is an expression of Ananda. When we speak of these fundamental qualities of the Absolute [Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram], the quality of Beauty is the only one available to perception. It is the only tangible aspect of the Self that can be experienced amidst daily life, and this is what makes it so formidable and accessible at the same time. It is available throughout and permeates all of creation. This is why we crave beauty, in whatever way.

**“** But what is Beauty? Beauty is an indispensable aspect of the Absolute, as our Awareness. It's the substratum. Beauty here is that which is an expression of the experience of Ananda. Ananda and Beauty are synonymous in this respect. The true experience of Beauty is a spontaneous but powerful wave which takes over the sense of separate identity, even if temporarily. Beauty is open to all the senses, and is beyond the experience of the senses.



There is the beauty of a child's face, of a young woman, of an old man, of a tree, of anything that our eye gets captivated by. We experience beauty when there is a direct cognition of the essence of who we are, being reflected back to us through the form that we behold. Artists and poets know this intuitively, even if they will not necessarily be able to explain this. This experience of beauty is not limited to visual form. We can speak of the beauty of a touch, the sense perception. We can speak of the beauty of a sound, the beauty of a fragrance, the beauty of a taste. And from there on, it gets subtler and subtler, as we perceive the beauty of a feeling, or the beauty of a thought. If we are attentive enough, we can experience directly, very palpably, the beauty of a movement, the beauty of stillness, where everything subsides. In fact, there is no such thing as an experience of nothing, because if nothingness is experienced attentively enough, it is Beauty in its most still and quiescent of ways.

There is beauty in every aspect of the way we are made, if only we pay close enough attention. There is beauty in that which goes unnoticed – like the beauty in the simple act of breathing, in the simple act of walking, in the simple act of sitting. There is beauty in beholding the world with eyes open. There is beauty in beholding the world with eyes closed. All this is steeped in beauty, and conceived in beauty. It is all made for the sake of that experience of beauty. Therefore, knowingly or unknowingly, consciously or not, we always seek Beauty. In fact, we might even say that we don't even seek God – that we actually, secretly, seek Beauty, because it is the most perceptible, experientially available communion with God. There's no way to know God so intimately, other than through the experience of Beauty—and intuitively we know it. Therefore, we are always driven to it, and we are driven by it. Because Beauty is the Supreme Form of the

Goddess. It is the Shakti Herself in Her full magnificence. And that magnificence is for the sake of Shiva's enjoyment. Whenever we experience beauty, our awareness rejoices. Beauty is the most healing and wholesome experience. Nothing is superior to the experience of beauty, and recognizing that truth makes us worshippers of Beauty. When we worship Beauty, inadvertently, at the heart, we worship the most intimate part of ourselves. It is a very comforting, very reassuring understanding, and is equally profound. We crave communion with the Divine, and it is in the experience of beauty that we find the most direct communion with the Divine. This is the path of aesthetic rapture. This is known as *camatkāra*. It is the perpetual sense of wonder. It is the delight that rises spontaneously from the void of the heart, from the core of our being, whenever and wherever we behold beauty in any of its forms. Therefore, seek Beauty, and you will find God.

Fortunately, the experience of beauty does not require any preparation. It doesn't require any practice—it is direct, immediate, spontaneous and open to all. It is literally the realization that God is here and now, as my eyes, as my ears, as my hands. In every sense perception, there is this union, and this union is here for the sake of the experience of that beauty. All cultures that understood this on any of its levels made it into a leitmotif of their ideals. And it is now, more than ever, that we crave the authentic experience of beauty. Because although beauty is available through any experience, if only the windows of our perception are clear enough, the experience of beauty is often supplanted with the trivial, superficial appeasement of what simply pretends but doesn't deliver. And so we walk around craving it. Even after the most sumptuous meal, we leave the table with a sense of utter dissatisfaction. This is the way we are living today. This is what our culture, our fragmented culture, has become. Therefore, there is less and less propensity to recognize beauty as it is. Great attempts are made to force that experience. Our culture of entertainment is an attempt to compensate for our lack of attention, for the impurity of our perception. And yet, even amidst these times, the real experience of beauty is always there, open to all, if only we can tune ourselves to that present moment, whatever that moment is. With that attuning we will not fail to experience beauty as a true union of form and content.

Let me just share something with you from my many years as an artist. Some of you may know that I've considered myself to be a professional artist from the age of about 12 years old, when I clearly knew that's what I would be doing in life, for a living. And this is indeed what I was doing on a daily basis. So, among the peers in the field, among friends and fellow artists, in my late teens and early twenties, when we would show each other what we were up to — our own work, experiments, and whatever we were doing — the two words that were a no-no were "nice" and "pretty." If someone called your work nice, it was an invitation to simply take a knife and cut your canvas to pieces. But of course, this also has these elements of radicalism youth is known for. But it is precisely that very uncompromising feedback that we would receive from each other that kept us on and on, to refine that sense of perception. Because the experience of beauty, though available to all, if we are to speak of the works of art, has very little to do with the terms "nice" and "pretty."



The purpose of art, then, is to give us a glimpse, however vague and short, of that which is our essential nature, and to spur us on to evolution. Even in a fragment, the best works of art are capable of transporting our consciousness. It matters little what kind of art form we're speaking about. Art's noble purpose is to give us a direct and visceral experience of the Self.

True art and true artists were never for the sake of entertainment, and the cultures which succumbed to that notion are known to be decadent cultures. The late, great Indian classical singer, Kishori Amonkar, would walk off stage during performances when she did not feel that people appreciated fully what was going on during these performances, or when she felt that people came just to be entertained. She considered the act of singing classical ragas to be an act of worship, an act of invocation. Of course, not everyone has to adhere to these very uncompromising standards, but this is a telling example. Some may dismiss her actions as the capriciousness of the diva. But who is to say that that capriciousness of the diva was not the goddess herself on stage, fully entering and taking full possession of that body as her own instrument?

That's what the work of art in essence is about. It's when the Muse takes over. The true work of art never comes from the will of the artist. The true work of art comes from the place where the artist ceases to be. Let me speak from my direct experience a little bit here, again. Now as a young artist already living in London and having the luxury of my own studio, I remember very well those moments, those often painful days of waiting, when there was this solitude of being in your own space, and giving yourself to the process – how just doing something will not suffice. There was this visceral sense when you are being transported, and once it is fully experienced, there is this realization that something else is going on altogether. Yes, of course there are the practicalities of the day, the necessities of the daily life. The bills

need to be paid, the work needs to be delivered, the commission, whatever that is, preparing for exhibition, anything—use your imagination. And yet, in the sheer honesty with that process, there was this realization that at some point became all too obvious that the best times, the most enjoyable, the most rapturous experiences in the studio — which would often result in a manifestation of a work that had very little to do with the original concept before one can set to create it —were the result of some sort of communion with the divine, when something falls away, when the need to control falls away, when even the sense of ‘knowing-how’ falls away. The body then becomes this very fluid instrument. That communion, that connection, is often referred to in the arts as waiting for the Muse to take over.

In Tantra, this communion is spoken of as the process of merging into (samavesha). It’s a mysterious process, a mysterious path, known as re-possession by the deity. We all have an idea of who we are. We have an idea of what we are in terms of our personality. Samavesha is the process whereby that conceptual sense of ourselves is essentially melted in the blazing light of rising consciousness. It’s when the goddess takes over and the yogic transformation takes place. This process is often alluded to and metaphorically concealed when it is spoken of in Tantra. The similarities with the creation of a work of art are all too apparent.

The creation of a work of art is the transformation of one’s own consciousness. And when this is properly understood, or even better, intuited, then this is one of THE most beautiful parts of any sadhana because one’s life becomes that—an offering to the goddess. Bit by bit, one offers oneself into the light of one’s own awareness. The goddess simply takes over. It can happen in various ways—some are more dramatic and others less. It can happen so gradually and so sweetly and so tenderly, that one would not even know when or how one is being consumed by that Power. And that is the greatest work of art. This is the hidden path of Tantra, the path of Beauty. “Thou art that” – Tat Tvam Asi.

Will Beauty save the world? The salvation of the world is spoken of here in terms of ourselves, for there is no world outside of our perception of it. This dynamic is exemplified by the ability to evaluate the finest aspects in creation through direct partaking, where perceiver and perceived are in perfect equilibrium – a hidden dimension of experience we call true beauty. The cognitive power of this partaking depends on the amount of light streaming through the windows of our perception. This ability to bring beauty forth through refinement of perception is, at once, what makes us truly human and what transcends that notion altogether.



- Igor Kufayev, adapted from the discourses at the immersion in Assisi, Italy, Sept 2018. Edited, Ojai CA, December 2018.

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