

PREFACE

IN APRIL 2018, I SPOKE AT Florida International University on “Jain Tantric Meditation.” The talk was funded by the local Jain community and was attended mostly by Jains—about fifty local families and a few nuns (*samaṇī*) from the Śvetāmbara Terāpanthī order who were teaching at the university. I was initially nervous about using the term “tantric” in a talk for a Jain audience, since in both English and in Indian vernaculars, it is linked to transgressive acts such as ritualized sex, black magic, and the consumption of meat and intoxicants. In addition, the topic of my talk—a Jain monk’s ritual transformation into an enlightened being through visualization practices, the showing of hand gestures (*mudrā*), the recitation and placement on his body of mantras, and the making of offerings of sandalwood powder to a cloth diagram inscribed with mantras—is not often called “tantric” in relevant texts or by modern monks who practice these rites. I anticipated pushback on the use of a word with such unsavory connotations to describe Jain practices, since the Jain path to liberation requires nonviolence, celibacy, adherence to truth, and the rejection of intoxicating substances. I feared that the Jain community would see only harm in the use of this term.

The title of my talk was motivated not by malice, however, but by a desire for academic inclusion. The last few centuries have marked a huge increase in the production of scholarship on “Tantra” and so-called “tantric traditions.” Just a few of the many sources of this scholarship include the yearly conference of the American Academy of Religion, which hosts multiple panels in its “Tantric Studies” unit; the academic press Routledge, which publishes the series Studies in Tantric Traditions; and the Society for Tantric Studies, which holds a conference in Arizona every year. But scholarship on Jainism is rarely present in these forums.

By using the term “tantric” as a second-order category to explain some rituals of modern Jain monks, then, I showed the many ways in which the

mantra-based practices scholars have defined as tantric form an important part of the path to liberation in some sects of Jainism. And to my relief, my talk was well received. Afterward, a master's student studying Jainism—a devout Jain himself—approached me to recommend a YouTube video of the influential Jain monk Ācārya Mahāprajñā (1920–2010) explaining that the Sanskrit term *tantra* simply means a “system,” so *tantra* can mean a systematic ritual use of powerful invocations, or mantras.

This student's understanding of *tantra* as a system of mantras recalls other Jain discussions of the Sanskrit term. The modern monk Ācārya Somacandrasūri, in a Gujarati explanation of monks' daily use of mantras, has explained that a teaching (*śāstra*) on the ritual use of diagrams that contain mantras (*yantra*) is called a *tantra* (NĀV, 11–12). The fourteenth-century Jain monk Ācārya Jinaprabhasūri, in a Sanskrit praise poem, declared that the use of the most popular Jain mantra, the Fivefold Praise (*pañcanamaskāra*), should be understood as *tantra* combined with devotion (*bhakti*).¹ And Sagarmal Jain, the important scholar of Jainism and the author of the Hindi study “Jainism and Tantric Ritual Practice,” *Jaindharm aur Tāntrik Sādhnā* (1997), chose a Sanskrit verse from the medieval Śaiva text the *Kāmikāgama* to provide a definition of Tantra that can apply to Jainism. This verse has been cited in other academic introductions to Tantra—most famously in *Shakti and Shākta* (1918) by the pioneer of tantric studies, the British Orientalist John Woodroffe, alias Arthur Avalon—and draws upon an etymology of *tantra* as deriving from the Sanskrit root *tan*, to “spread” or “propagate,” and the termination *tra*, “protecting.”² Summarizing this verse, Sagarmal Jain explains that something is called *tantra* when it is connected to mantras and the components of reality (*tattva*) and it propagates an abundant amount of knowledge of a variety of topics. By means of that knowledge, oneself and others are protected (*Kāmikāgama*, *Pūrvabhāga* 1.29).³

Not all uses of mantras are tantric, however, and these sources do not present a coherent, consistent definition of how mantras are used in *tantra*. In different ways, these Jains gesture at larger dialogues taking place in South Asia among various religious communities—Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain. Therefore, my talk at Florida International University, like Sagarmal Jain's study, highlighted this dialogue by engaging with existing scholarship on tantric traditions. That talk asked the question: What if we apply scholarly definitions of what constitutes a “tantric tradition” to Jainism, which is itself a tradition that has been characterized as ascetic (*śrāmaṇika*), not tantric (*tāntrika*)? How might that complicate our understandings of asceticism, Jainism, and scholarly uses of the term “tantric”?

The student who recommended the video recognized parallels between some scholarly and Jain definitions of the term “*tantra*.” He also recognized that Jains perform and discuss many of the worldly and soteriological mantra-based practices that scholars posit as defining components of tantric traditions. Including Jainism in the conversations about tantric traditions, then, can help wrest the term “tantric” from popular connotations involving transgressive acts and the appropriation of material powers, thereby enriching and clarifying the term.

A year after my talk, when I attempted to reach out to the student, I learned that he no longer had email access because he had renounced the world, joining Mahāprajñā’s Śvetāmbara Terāpanthī mendicant order. He had become a monk (*muni*), what early Buddhist and Jain scriptures call in Pali and Prakrit a *niggaṇṭha*, literally meaning “the one without ties,” or more broadly, “the unattached one.” This foundational practice of detachment remains essential to the continuation of the Jain tradition.

Jains have not, however, remained frozen in time as the unattached ones of the early Jain scriptures, adverse to an engagement with innovations in Indian religiosity. They have contributed profoundly to every major religious development in India, so any rigorous historical or theoretical analysis of Indian religions must, by necessity, engage with Jainism. In one way, then, this book continues the conversation from Florida and reattaches the unattached ones to a larger discussion of the history of ritual development on the Indian subcontinent.

