

On waking up, say a spell backwards ...

Join a seminar with Chris Dorsett at *Thinking Tantra*
an exhibition at Drawing Room, Unit 8 Rich Estate, 46 Willow Walk, Bermondsey,
London SE1 5SF
1.00 pm - 4.00 pm, Monday 30th January, 2017

DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

The first indication we had of the existence of such an art was in Ajit Mookerjee's book on 'Tantra Art', beautifully designed and published by Ravi Kumar, which has had such a success among the students of wide-awake art schools in Britain, Europe and America. (Rawson, 1968: 256)

The exhibition *Thinking Tantra* is unavoidably tied to a long dormancy. For many art school people the term Tantric art seems to have been asleep throughout the development of Contemporary Art. Or perhaps it is the other way around. With Rebecca Heald's curatorial project at Drawing Room, some kind of art school awakening seems possible. In the exhibition catalogue, Virginia Whiles suggests that Tantra offers opportunities for a 'rebellious search'. Rebellion interests art students and I am now wondering how much Philip Rawson had art school rebels in mind as he wrote his book *Drawing* (1969) and then began work on his Hayward Gallery exhibition *Tantra: Indian Cult of Ecstasy* (1971).

In the article quoted above, Rawson aligns being at art school with the state of being awake to Tantra's possibilities. Perhaps he thought that students would be particularly receptive to the idea that Tantric diagrams were not diagrammatic for Tantric practitioners. Both the *Drawing* book and the *Tantra* catalogue treat imagery not as an abstracted formal proposition, but as a richly evocative reversal of the direction of creation – like saying a spell backwards. Rawson thought this about 'expressive' Western mark-making as well as ritualistic tantric diagrams. But he also believed that the apparently 'generalized' (e.g. diagrammatic) forms of non-European art are likely to be vastly richer in terms of memory-traces and cultural associations than Western abstract artists would want to take responsibility for. (Were these abstractionists 60s art school tutors?)

...for all their apparent abstractness these general forms had in fact a content which was emphatically *not* abstract in the mathematical sense. It consisted of chains of emotionally charged memory-traces directly associated through analogy-systems with the concrete forms. What, in an African Yoruba carving of the female breast [fig.1] may look to *us* like an 'abstract' form, may read to a tribal African as a flat, hence often sucked, opulently flapping gourd-shaped, evoking an endless chain of memories and feelings. (Rawson, 1969: 31)

Such thoughts would today place Rawson within debates about sensual culture and embodied meaning. Nearly fifty years on Heald's catalogue essay is rightly curious about Rawson's teaching in institutions such as the RCA and Goldsmiths (Heald, 2016: 4-5). Well, that's what this seminar is about. Thinking again about Tantra in a 'wide-awake' contemporary art school might need a subversive moment rather like the one Rawson made possible in 1971. Although, of course, a new 'rebellious search' would have to belong not to people like me (his student) but to those studying now. Join our discussion at Drawing Room on 30th January to explore how the kinetic (and performative) aspects of a drawing (Tantric or otherwise) might act as a wake up call today. Let's start with his book on *Drawing*. It is not easy to prise loose self-supporting samples of Rawson's dense writing style but here are some extracts that may prompt discussion.

All well-constructed drawings begin with a specific 'given' nuclear form or form-sequence. This may be any type of form, placed anywhere; but it is important to identify it at once; it is the key to the whole work. And it is the thing which is usually made first. For example, in the case of our illustrated Susa pot [fig.2] it is the pot-body itself, which has both a circular

section and a conic elevation. In the case of a Rembrandt drawing [fig.3] it may be a chain of shadow-lines running round the eyes, nose, and mouth in the centre of a face. In a Greek Lekythos picture [fig.4] it may be an undulant line of a certain rhythm that silhouettes a breast and belly. Against this given form will be set another visual idea. This will usually be in strong contrast to the primary theme. For example, it may be in the Lekythos drawing the strongly marked triplet motive in curved axial lines. In a Rembrandt it may be stated in the dark sweep of a hat-brim over the face. On a Susa pot or a Cretan ceramic it may be volute-like form. The whole drawing consists of a reconciliation between these contrasted and even apparently irreconcilable forms. This is achieved by progressive 'variation' (in the musical sense) of the stated motives, resolving them into a unity through graphic symbolic forms ... which are derived from aspects of the motives. The counterposing of the motives, theme, and counter-subject sets up a kind of unresolved tension among them ... in which a vital role may be played by the format itself. (Rawson, 1969: 221)

This description assumes a formal approach (in a musical rather than a mathematical sense). But watch how the idea gathers ontological, cognitive and psychological dimensions later in the book.

Indian drawing begins by accepting the format as an established and given area which then subdivides by means of feature such as buildings, doors, and windows, or symbolic, outlined mountains, trees, and spaces [fig.5]. All are defined as completely intelligible spatial enclosures. The subdivision is done on the basis of a rhythmic design. Within the nuclear spaces so established may be set the leading formal inventions, usually as figures. But these figures, for all their fluent linear contours, are still conceived as linked assemblages of containing flat enclosures [fig.6]. Every point on the drawn surface is conceived as lying within one or more defined enclosure. In this type the rectangle of the format usually plays a major role in the development of the thematic forms, since its proportions suggest a basic metrical unit.

In contrast, Far Eastern drawn designs are based upon a few nuclei scattered over the open surface of the format [fig.7]. Starting from these points the design evolves outward into the negative, undefined area of the surface, never enclosing it all or defining it, implying always that it extends without a break beyond the limits of the format [fig.8]. Certainly the evolved forms may include enclosures; but they are not usually asserted as dogmatic entities. The emphasis is upon the way in which the lines and chains of forms move about within the arena of the open space. The chains of forms evolved from the nuclei may approach one another and articulate with one another but they need not. In such a style the unresolved space may gain a sort of notional definition, and be identified as mist, sky, or water; but this is not essential. The mind is prepared psychologically to accept the undefined region as in some way an essential part of the visual truth. (Rawson, 1969: 203)

Contrast this notion of thematic sequences (examples will be illustrated at the seminar) with Rawson's discussion of yantra drawings in his catalogue notes for Room 7 of the Hayward exhibition.

... Around the perimeter is a square pattern of re-entrant 'gates' [fig.9]. This represents the 'enclosure' within which the meditating self is shut (what Jung called the 'temenos'); the circuits inside represent successive 'sheaths' or stages of inwardness, the multiple outer petals or triangles being occupied by 'grosser' forms of energy, which are absorbed and further concentrated in the less multiplied inner circuits. The centre is the point where all the original radiating energies are finally focused, usually in a single mantra such as 'Om' or 'Klīm'. (Rawson, 1971: 88)

These 'circuits' allowed Tantric practitioners to move their attention from the outer rim of the image to its centre. Rawson summarises the Kāmākālāvīlāsa in order to describe this process.

The dot, or bindu, at the centre indicates the invisible first principle, the self-originating seed of Being and consciousness which, strictly speaking, can never be visible or imaginable [fig.10]. ... The dot as its first act of motion traces the triangle which is the original form of the generative yoni (vulva) of the Goddess, the first expansion of space and time. ... There is thus in existence at the first stage of creative evolution a dot inside a downward-pointing triangle. The next stages consist in the generation by this couple of

four pairs of triangles, each pair having one pointing up, the male, the other pointing down, the female. ... All represent the 'going forth' or expansion of the nuclear light-energy from within the first triangle, the 'flash' and its 'developed reflection' (in Sanskrit called the Prakāśa and Vimarśa). The interlacing of the five original female and four male triangles generates the circuits of other triangles in which the range of varied forms of consciousness and creation jointly emerge to shape the whole of the moving world and its history in time. ... It is characteristic of Indian artistic thinking, though, to express time-patterns by a closed system of stylised enclosures in flat colours. ... In the Tantrik context, however, one must not forget that the motive force underlying the whole process is a transcendent Desire, which justifies the sexual undertone. Desire creates its objects as cosmic desire created the world. Desire multiplied creates many objects. Withdrawn and focussed on the Void of Ultimate reality it becomes a special inner radiance known only to the Tantrika. (Rawson, 1971: 93-4)

Having followed the exhibition thus far (Time Out called it 'a maze of corridors, first dark red, then a lighter red and so on, lined with the ancient art of ecstasy'), visitors to the Hayward easily connected the process of walking through the gallery to a diagrammatic journey through successive stages of inwardness (this is where my interest in museum environments began). By Room 8, which was painted a vivid turquoise blue, Rawson started to reflect on the curatorial construction he had created (as if he had been drawing a yantra). 'In earlier rooms', he writes, 'the process whereby man's world of reality is developed has been described in various ways' (Rawson, 1971: 97). But the diversity of these earlier stages, he continues, is linked together by the kinds of diagrammatic drawings developed by the Sāṅkhya philosophy of Tantra. With this schematic map in place, the exhibition-goer can, at last, approach the root of the process. Next door, in Room 9, the pure white penultimate space of the exhibition, the exhibits begin to point beyond the visual imagination.

Stones from numerous sacred sites are collected and ritually sanctified for pilgrims to carry away with them [fig.11]. Some of these, especially the Śalagrāmas containing ammonites, may sometimes be bored with twinned holes suggesting the opening-out of space and time at the root of creation. Several types are shown here, all meant to serve as focal points for the imagination, and reminders of the ultimate, many of them relating to the World Egg (Room 5). ... They are self-contained objects which offer the simplest yet most inclusive form the mind can grasp.

Finally, in the sound vestibule beyond Room 9, the exhibition-goers encountered the 'last and the first', the most remote and absolute principle of energy which can only be expressed through sound (nāda).

Mantra (Rooms 1 and 7) systematizes the resonances of the created world, and makes the Sādhaka able to control them. ... Whereas the other symbolisms illustrated here have been primarily visual this tradition thinks of the world of reality as consisting of an immensely complex web of vibrations and 'resonances' ('dhvani' in Sanskrit) which all originate, in a logical not a temporal sense, from a single self-originated point of sound, the Nāda-bindu, analogous to the created point in the centre of the Śrī yantra. The variety of the vibration patterns which constitute the world of experience evolve from its modifications; in Sādhana they can be reversed to the original single vibratory motion in the realm of that subtlest form of matter called aether (see Room 6). ... The spreading resonances and interference-patterns, as their variety increases, constitute the grosser forms of matter down the scale: air, fire, water, earth, which are perceived by the grosser senses. Mantras control and organize these resonances just as yantra organizes the visual patterns. The mantra system can thus lead the consciousness by stages of condensation towards an inner perception of the primal vibration (symbolized by the double drum) and the single Nāda-bindu. The highest reaches of subtle sound are embodied in the mantra 'Om̐', whose physical symbol is the chank or conch-shell that can be made into a powerful ritual trumpet. (Rawson, 1971: 107)

The prestige of the Hayward Gallery guaranteed an enthusiastic reception in arts journals. But interest in Rawson's exhibition reached farther than this. The periodical Yoga and Health wondered how many of the 37,000 visitors who made it through the maze of coloured rooms (initially red, but then purple, grey, pale green, burnt orange, and burlap tan) to the pure white sound vestibule, were affected to the point of seeking to study yoga further. The answer is: many. Back in the 70s the prevailing sense of 'rebellion' entailed a

revolutionary approach to health and lifestyle, a counterculture 'search' which had not, at that time, become the 'spiritual' branch of late capitalism we call 'new ageism' (see Urban 2000). The question is: if art school students wake up and say the spell backwards, what will happen this time around?

Chris Dorsett, January 2017
<http://www.chrisdorsett.com/>

Bibliography

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Editorial copy quoted from:-
Time Out, 29th October 1971
Yoga and Health, December 1971

Exhibition details:

Thinking Tantra

Curated by Rebecca Heald with Amrita Jhaveri

Drawing Room
Tannery Arts, Unit 8 Rich Estate,
46 Willow Walk
London, SE1 5SF

24th November 2016 – 19th February 2017

www.drawingroom.org.uk

Forthcoming:

31st March – 27th May 2017

Peninsula Arts
Plymouth University
Roland Levinsky Building
Drake Circus
Plymouth, Devon, PL4 8AA

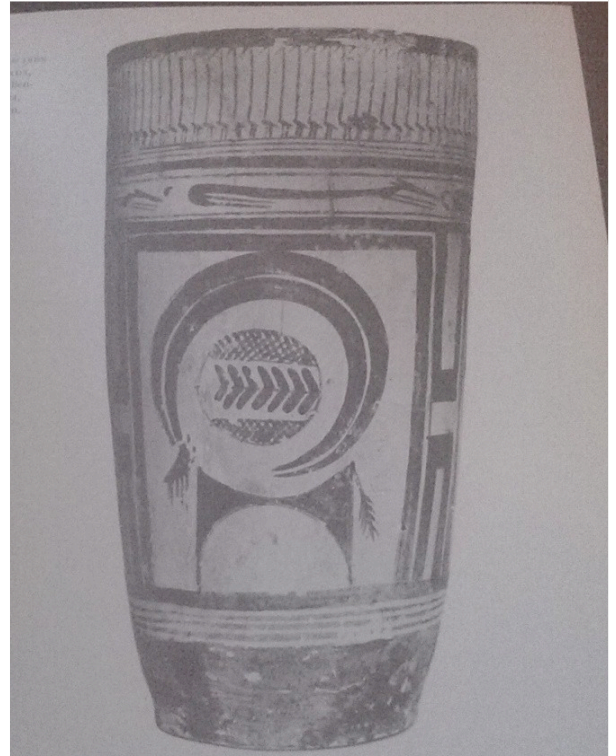
www.peninsula-arts.co.uk

Images:

The following pages contain figures 1 to 11. These photographs were quickly put together to provide basic visual references for the above text. They show illustrated pages in the 1969 Drawing book and the 1971 Tantra catalogue. However, the Rembrandt image comes from a later Rawson publication (*The Art of Drawing*, Macdonald & Co, 1983) and the picture of a Yoruba sculpture is in Philip Webb's *The Erotic Arts* (Secker & Warburg, 1975), which includes an edited transcript of a lecture given by Rawson at Hornsey College of Art in October 1971. More detailed visual material will be considered at the seminar.



fig. 1



between the skew-body of the octopus and the symmetrical
similarly, undulant seaweed and fish rationalize the handles and

fig. 2



fig. 3

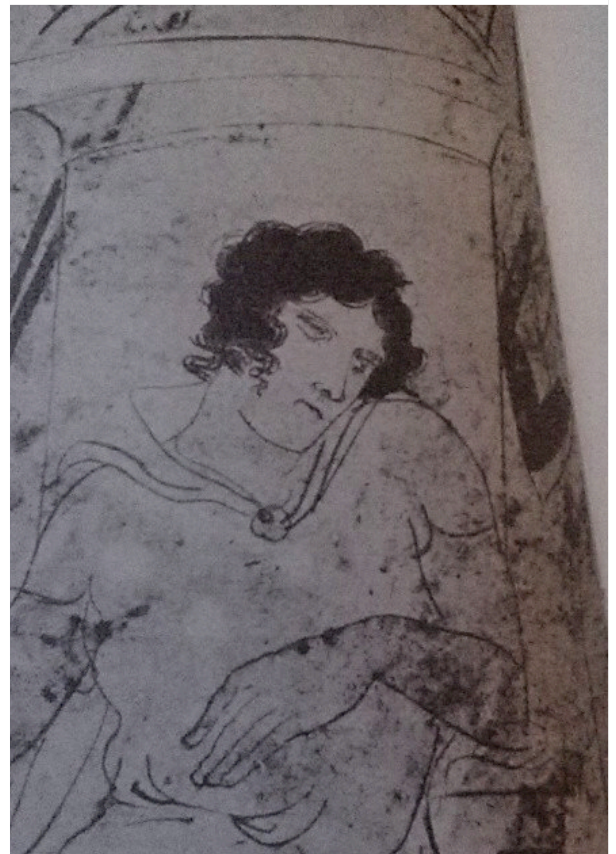


fig. 4

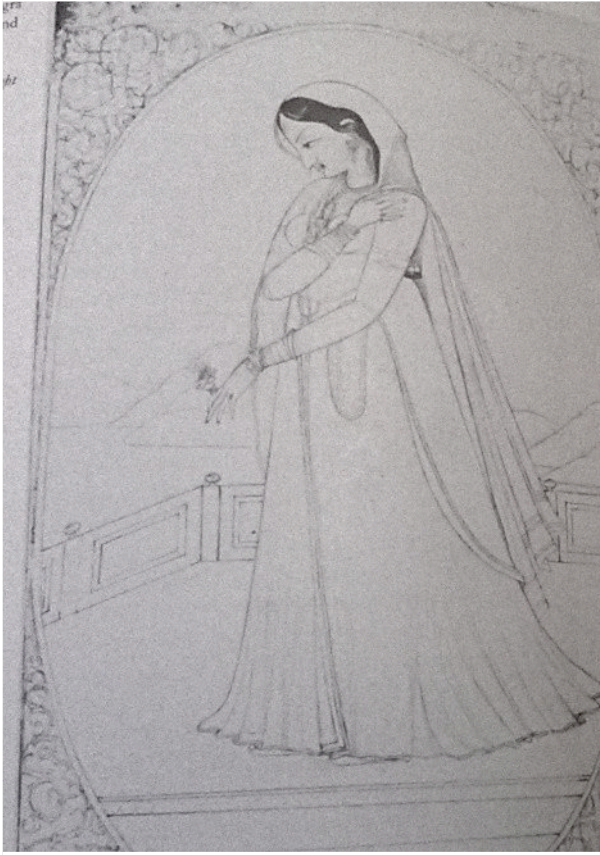


fig. 5



fig. 6

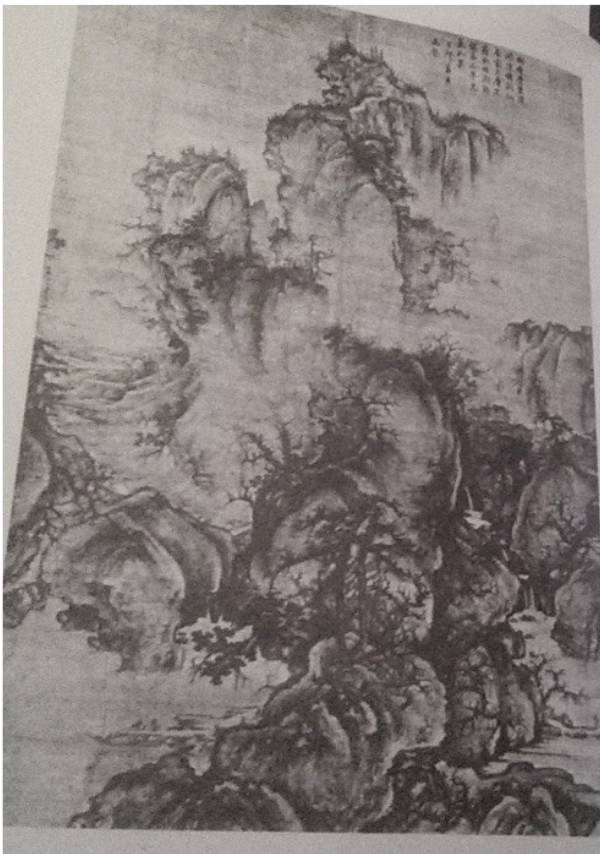


fig. 7

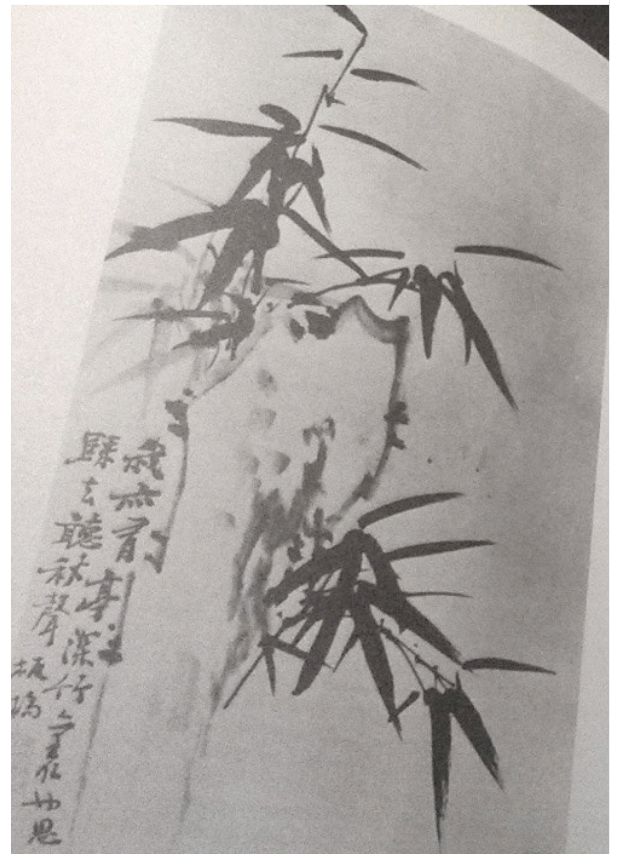
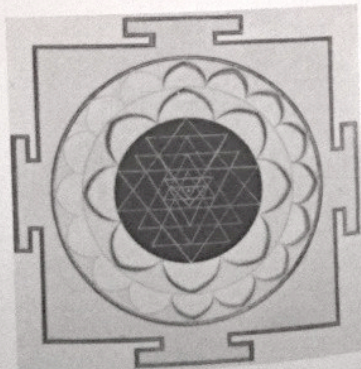


fig. 8

persuaded by a long yogic process to emerge in subtle form from this nostril, and take up residence in the yantra.

Second, the general pattern followed by most, if not all, yantras tends to be constant. Around the perimeter is a square pattern of re-entrant 'gates'. This represents the 'enclosure' within which the meditating self is shut (what Jung called the 'temenos'); the successive circuits inside that represent successive 'sheaths' or stages of inwardness, the multiple outer petals or triangles being occupied by 'grosser' forms of energy, which are absorbed and further concentrated in the less multiplied inner circuits. The centre is the point where all the original radiating energies are finally focused, usually in a single mantra such as 'Om' or 'Klim'. The mantra-identities in all the basic circuits may also be represented in anthropomorphic shape, as Devatās. In the great Sri yantra, the most important of all Tantrik yantras, each of the outer triangles is occupied by the Devatās which represent the subdivided energy-self of the Goddess.



450
Sri yantra

fig. 9



462
Bhuvaneśvari yantra
Rajasthan, 18th century
Gouache on paper 200 x 280 mm (8 x 11 in)
Ajit Mookerjee, New Delhi

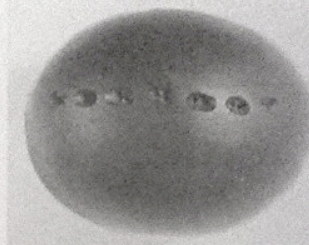


463
Bhuvaneśvari yantra
Rajasthan, 18th century
Gouache on paper 150 x 150 mm (6 x 6 in)
Ajit Mookerjee, New Delhi

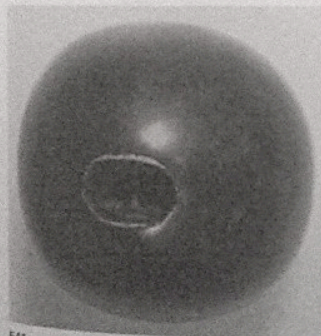
fig. 10

cosmic lingam... springing, as it were, from the Great Lingam. All of them are that form which shows the phallic shaft standing embedded in the female yoni-basin. The colour of the ground, orange-red in a purplish border, the colour of energy and libido, is an important element in the picture.

Stones from numerous sacred sites are collected and ritually sanctified for pilgrims to carry away with them. Some of these, especially the Śālagrāmas containing ammonites, may sometimes be bored with twinned holes suggesting the opening-out of space and time at the root of creation. Several types are shown here, all meant to serve as focal points for the imagination, and reminders of the ultimate, many of them relating to the World Egg (Room 5). Even when they are not shaped much like it, they are usually thought of as emblems of the Svayambhū lingam, which itself represents the crystallization and stasis outside creation of the desire from which creation springs. They are self-contained objects which offer the simplest yet most inclusive form the mind can grasp.



543
Śālagrāma, stone containing ammonites,
pierced
Age and provenance unknown
Stone 1.140 mm (6 in)
Ajit Mookerjee, New Delhi



541
Śālagrāma, stone containing ammonites,
pierced
Age and provenance unknown
Stone 1.110 mm (4 in)
Ajit Mookerjee, New Delhi

The last and the first, most subtle symbolism of all for the remote and absolute principle of energy, is expressed in terms of sound (vestibule). Mantra (Rooms 1 and 7) systematizes the resonances of the created world, and makes the Sādhaka able to control them. This implies a view of the existent material world which tallies very well with recent Western imagery. The topic was discussed in a special strand of tradition in Tantra devoted to Nāda, 'sound'. Whereas the other symbolisms illustrated here have been primarily visual, this tradition thinks of the world of reality as consisting of an immensely complex web of vibrations and 'resonances' ('dhvani' in Sanskrit) which all originate, in a logical not a temporal sense, from a single self-originated point of sound, the Nāda-bindu, analogous to the creative point in the centre of the Sri yantra. The variety of vibration-patterns which constitute the world of experience evolve from its modifications; in Sādhana they can be reversed to the original single vibratory motion in the realm of that subtlest form of matter called aether (see Room 6). One metaphor for the remotest creative sound is the tinkling anklet of the female dancer (Lalitā-Prakriti) whose dancing, according to Saṅkhya, weaves the visible pattern of the world. The spreading resonances and interference-patterns, as their variety increases, constitute the grosser forms of matter down to their fire, water, earth, which are perceived by the grosser

fig. 11