

MIRCEA ELIADE AND THE KUNDALINI

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Mircea Eliade was born in Romania and in 1957 he became professor in history of religions at the university of Chicago. During his life he published many books and he was chief editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religions* (1976-86). He traveled all over the world and besides from in Romania and USA he worked also in London, Paris and Lisbon. Eliade can be said to be part of a hermeneutical, phenomenological tradition which fits well into German idealism. Eliade means like Rudolf Otto that one can not reduce religious phenomena to psychological or social products; religion can only be understood with its own terms and the scholar should instead explore what different phenomena "has to say". According to Eliade, not only children and primitive peoples are using a symbolic thinking. This is an ability that we all share. The symbolic thinking is deeper than language and reason, and he believes like C.G Jung that the symbols fills a function in the psyche through making deep aspects of the being conscious. He writes:

"The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality – the deeper aspects – which defy any other means of knowledge... Consequently, the study of them enables us to reach a better understanding of man – of man 'as he is', before he has come to terms with the conditions of history."

Each symbol can contain numerous significations, not only one of these significations is solely the true one. To use a terminology in which the symbol is limited to only a tangible signification is according to Eliade to annihilate the symbol, it will no longer function as it did in the mind.

Like Otto, Eliade describes religion as first and foremost an experience of the numinous, belonging to "the sacred sphere". He writes that we can conceive the world in two ways: as profane or as sacred. When something is turned into a cult object we will change our behaviour towards it, it becomes a manifestation of the sacred. Eliade's writings are connected by a comprehensive view, which strives to describe the distinctiveness and anchorage of religion in a supernal reality. Eliade advocated to a certain degree a universal religious humanism with elements of eastern metaphysics and experiences of nature. On the invitation of an Indian Maharaja Eliade traveled to Calcutta and to the north of India where he studied Indian philosophy and ascetic practice. He published many writings about yoga, the most known is probably *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*.

Kundalini and the symbolism around "the centre of the world"

What differs a historian of religions from an ordinary historian is according to Eliade that the historian of religions is not only trying to describe historical facts, but also mythological. He explains:

"Although it is true that man is always found "in situations", his situation is not for all that, always a historical one in the sense of being conditioned solely by the contemporaneous historical moment. The man in his totality is aware of other situations over and above his historical condition; for example, he knows the state of dreaming, or of the waking dream, or of melancholy, or of detachment, or of æsthetic bliss, or of escape, etc. – and none of these states is historical, although they are as authentic and as important for human existence as man's historical existence is".

According to Eliade the historical consciousness has a minor significance in the complete mind of man and if we include the unconscious an even lesser significance. In his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade describes the symbolic world of the archaic man, where the surrounding world is viewed as a microcosm, surrounded by the unknown, the formless. Eliade means that all sacred objects and all rituals, according to the archaic man, has a divine, archetypal prototype. Every sacred act is connected to the mythological time in the dawn of the world, just as every sacred area is believed to be the "the centre of the world". According to Eliade most myths of creation describes how the world is created through growing out from a centre-point. This centre-point can be described as an axis which penetrates and connects the three worlds: heaven, earth and the underworld. He writes:

"The most widely distributed variant of the symbolism of the centre is the Cosmic Tree, situated in the middle of the universe, and upholding the three worlds as upon one axis. Vedic India, ancient China and the Germanic mythology, as well as the "primitive" religions, all held different versions of this Cosmic Tree, whose roots plunged down into hell, and whose branches reached to heaven".

It is a Paradox that all sacred areas in the mythological geography can be said to be the centre of the world. In this way every sacred hindu pilgrimage area is identified as being the centre of the world, which in the form of axis mundi is also a meeting point between the different worlds, a place where the gods are present. since the human body, in the Indian mythology is a microcosm in relation to the world, also the centre of the world can be found in man and the pilgrimage becomes an inner journey. Eliade writes about the tantric symbolism:

"Unlike the archaic man or the man of Vedic times, the Tantric devotee had need of *personal experience* reactivate certain promordial symbols in his consciousness. That is why, moreover, some Tantric schools rejected the external *mandala* and had recourse to interiorized *mandalas*".

The mandala is often a symbol of the cosmos and its centre represents the centre of the world. To reach this centre signifies in the myths a form of initiation, a transcendence from the profane to the sacred. Even if the centre of the world is present in every microcosm the path can be difficult and dangerous, which according to Eliade can be illustrated by the hero who is lost in its maze, fights dragons etc, in his search for the sacred tree and "fruit of life". In tantrism the mandala is used as an instrument which assists the yogi in meditation. Eliade writes:

"The mandala 'concentrates'; it preserves one from distraction. The discovery of the mandala on his own body indicates a desire to deny his 'mythological body' with a microcosm."

According to Eliade, chakras can be viewed as meeting points between the cosmic and the mental life and their awakening is homologous to the initiatic symbolism of the penetration of the mandala. The awakening of the kundalini can thus be said to reflect an archetypal symbolism, the realization of the ontological level, the centre of the world. According to Eliade the symbolism around the centre of the world is a recurring theme in most religions, and i believe that this in a representative way illustrates his views, both of religion in general and also of tantrism. Eliade has in one respect accepted the oriental thought that tantrism embodies the most extreme, "completely different", aspect of the Indian thinking, which arose from the religious consciousness of the pre-vedic pelagic population, since the cult of the mother goddess had not yet been subdued by the androcentric Aryan tribes. The kundalini is mentioned, according to Eliade both in the

form of a serpent, a goddess and as "energy". The Hathayogapradipika presents the kundalini with the following names: Kutilangi which means "lingering body", Bhujangi which means "A she serpent", Sakti, Isvari, Kundali, Kundalini and Arundhati , according to Eliade all these names are synonymous. The kundalini is identified with the Sabdabrahman and with the name OM and she contains all the attributes of all gods and goddesses. According to certain myths the goddess Sakti was created from the fire energies of the gods. The nature of the kundalini is often described as fire-like in its character: in the buddhistic tantric writings it is said that the awakening brings the experience of "a great fire". Eliade points out that the production of inner heat is an ancient magical technique which also can be found in shamanism. According to Eliade tantrism joins in this aspect the universal magical tradition, even if the spiritual contents of tantrism partly belongs to another level.