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# Tales of Hindu Devilry: The Vikram Vetala

Mogg Morgan

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In 1987 Shantidevi and myself visited Shri Mahendranath (Dadaji), the now departed guru of the East West tantrik order AMOOKOS, in his retreat at Shamballa Tampovane just outside Ahmedabad. We exchanged gifts and he gave me an inconsequential booklet entitled *King Vikram and the Ghost*. After we had left I packed this away with other things and didn't look at it for several years when a chance conversation drew it to my attention.

It was in fact a reprint of C H Tawney's translation of *Vikram Vetala*, a classic of Tantrik folklore. At the end of the formal part of the ritual, when the gods have been invoked, the elixir shared, the ritual combat complete, then, as in times past, is a good moment for story telling. And what better tale to recall than one of these twenty five.

In earlier chapter I referred to the high tradition of Indian literature and the 'little' or folk tradition in which so much tantrik material finds its roots. The *Vikram Vetala* is part of this folk tradition. As so often when describing things Indian one must have recourse to superlatives. Indian literature has a vast wealth of narrative prose. The orthodox side of this is to be found in the *Puranas* or ancient legends such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. These may have been favoured for recited during the build up to the notorious horse sacrifice.

Separate from this heterodox tradition is the *Ocean of Story* or more accurately the *Ocean of the Streams of Story* (Kathasaritsâgara). A great

collection of tales that is likened to an ocean because the streams of all stories flow into it. But as if the mind needs any more boggling the *Ocean of Story* is itself a rendering of a greater lost original call the *Blooms of the Great Story* (Brihat kathamañjari).

Perhaps it would help if I explained that all Indian art mirrors life in its extreme intricacy - the ideals of Platonic simplicity are alien to it. This can be seen in the sensory overload incurred whenever one gazes upon an Hindu temple. Every available inch seems to be covered with images of the utmost complexity and from every aspect of life. In the temple at Halebid in South India, only one tiny segment is left uncarved - and this is done to underline the fact that despite the thousands of carvings, the temple is an incomplete representation of the world!

But the Indian mind is not so very different to our own and sections of the *Ocean of Story* were circulated in smaller, more manageable bits. Two particular sections have an independent existence from the *Ocean of Story* - the *Pañcatantra* and the *Vikram Vetala*.

### THE PANCATANTRA

The first of these is not a tantrik work despite its name. Remember that the term 'tantra' has the mundane meaning of 'treatise'. The five treatises are in fact five sets of animal stories each of which teach some aspect of everyday ethics, for instance when the weak band together they can often achieve more than the strong. From its emergence approximately two thousand years ago, the *Pancatantra* has been translated into almost every language. Many other sets of animal stories such as Aesops *Fables*, Apulius' *Golden Ass*, Bocaccios' *Decameron* and La Fontane's *Fables* - all are almost certainly related to the *Pañcatantra* stories.

Take for instance the Welsh legend of Llewellyn and his dog Gerlert. Local Pembrokeshire folklore says that the Preseli mountains are the reified remains of the wrongly accused dog Gerlert. In his struggle to guard Llewellyn's child from a wolf, the dog and the baby's cradle is covered in blood. When Llewellyn returns and sees the bloodstained crib

he makes the over hasty assumption that Gerlert has gone mad and killed his child. He hurls his deadly javelin at Gerlert. Moments later he discovers the corpse of the wolf and the baby - alive and well. His remorse reminds us not to make hasty assumptions. The story is identical in almost all details with the frame story of the fifth book of the *Pañcatantra*, although the protagonists in that story are a cobra and a mongoose.

### VIKRAM AND VETALA

*Vikram and Vetala* is thoroughly rooted in the world of witchcraft and tantrik magick. Both are described in a manner far removed from the medieval descriptions of the western witch-hunts. It is obvious that the narrators had a fascination, indeed a love/hate relation with the witches and magicians.

King Vikram, who is one of the central characters of the collection of these twenty five tales of Indian devilry, is encountered in the first or so-called 'frame' story. His name means 'son of heroism' and he is a legendary king, very like King Arthur. He ruled over a golden age that still bears his name and is used to set the date on Indian birth certificates. He patronized all the arts and sciences. Interestingly his father suffered the same fate as Lucius in the *Golden Ass* and was cursed to assume the form of an ass during the day.

The other central character is the Vetala. Richard Burton in his rendering of this book into English suggested that a Vetala is a vampire and this has been followed by many subsequent editors. The Vetala is neither a vampire nor a ghost. As the stories make clear a Vetala is a special class of demon, outwoudly ghoulish but in fact benevolent towards humanity.

It is interesting that the lost original from which these tales are said to be drawn was written in the language of demons -called 'Paishâchi' by the grammarians. I would remind the reader of what I said in chapter two about the possible demonic origin of Tantra. 'Paishâchi' may just mean

‘rough dialect’ of the common folk and is, according to some authorities, a dialect related to the Romany tongue. There is some convincing linguistic evidence that the Romanies migrated from Northern India, in approximately the third century before the common era. Whatever way one looks at it ‘paishâci’ is a lost ‘demonic’ language, which only survives in stories such as *Vikram and Vetala*.

Indian physicians were often called upon to deal with cases of demonic possession and the various kinds of demon are therefore described in some detail within their texts<sup>1</sup>. Their medical expertise at ‘bhuta-vidya’, literally ‘knowledge of spirits’ may seem at odds with the overall materialistic tone of Âyurvedic medical education. In the main it was only in perinatal deaths and also certain intractable kinds of mental illness that the blame was laid on demonic possession. Some modern commentators have even seen in this a rudimentary form of psychiatry.

Demonic possession is called ‘graha’ in Sanskrit and there are said to be nine classes of possessing demon. The standard list begins with possession by the gods (devas), which shows that possession by a god can be undesirable in many circumstances. The other seven in order are Asuras (Elder Gods: see chapter two of this series); Gandharvas or nature spirits; Yakshas or ancient nature spirits; Pitris or ghosts of departed ancestors; Bhujangas or serpent spirits; Rakshasas or ferocious ones and finally Pishachas: demons. A person possessed by the last of these displays the following bad personality traits: haughtiness, emaciation, rough language and behaviour, extreme uncleanliness, restive, voracious appetite, fondness for cold water and lonely places such as the night forest, grave yards etc., where they weep and wail incessantly.

The demons are able to take possession when a ritual is badly performed or the correct observances forgotten. The pishacha demons are the only ones that can be driven out by force and without killing the victim. All the others must be propitiated or they will kill the possessed person. This is further evidence that this class of demon is somehow outside of the pale of orthodox society and can therefore be freely

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<sup>1</sup> See Kris Morgan, *Medicine of the Gods* (Mandrake of Oxford 1994)

insulted if they refuse to leave after propitiation has been tried. They are in this respect like the demonic entities invoked in Goetic magick that are firmly licensed to depart by the magician and threatened if they refuse to go.

Various incenses and potions are recommended to drive them out. Cooked or uncooked meat is another favourite way of tempting a demon to leave a victim of possession. Grahas or possession in children is much more serious and with alarming regularity the incident ended in death. There are nine types of such demonic possession. Mythologically these demons are said to have been created by the gods to guard the new born god Karttikeya or Skanda. Paradoxically these same possessing entities can turn on the child. Unlike the adult versions, these are personified as fearful goddesses, for example Shakuni the bird goddess, or in two instances as male gods. They must be propitiated very carefully with the appropriate rites described in the medical texts of Sushruta<sup>2</sup>.

Indian philosophy divides all matter into three fundamental particles or gunas called sattvas, rajas and tamas - which can perhaps be translated simply as essence, energy and substance.<sup>3</sup> These are thought of as real particles and all matter is composed of them in various permutations. Mind is particularly rich in the three gunas and of them, disturbance of rajas and tamas is said to be the most productive of mental imbalance and not surprisingly we find that all classes of demons are predominantly rajas and/or tamas. Two thirds of the demons have no essence (sattva) at all - they are in effect automata. Some examples of this hierarchy of demons and the possible personality traits they inspire is shown in the following table:

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<sup>2</sup> *Susbruta Sambita*, English translation by G D Singhal et al, *Medical & Psychiatric Considerations in Ancient Indian Surgery* (otherwise known as *Uttara-tantra*) ch 37sq.

<sup>3</sup> See Kris Morgan, *Medicine of the Gods*, p. 10 and Kris Morgan, *Ancient Indian Gnosticism* (Mandrake of Oxford) forthcoming

### The Āyurvedic Personality Archetypes

Sattva Mind	Rājasa Mind	Tāmasa Mind
Brāhma Type (godly)	Asura (ruthless)	Pāshva (bestial)
Rshi (sagely)	Rākshasa (aggressive)	Matsya (fishy)
Indra (authoritative)	Pishâcha (Manic depressive)	Vânaspatya (vegetative)
Yama (restrained)	Sarpa <sup>4</sup> (reptilian/deceitful)	
Varuna (courageous)	Preta (morbid)	
Kuvera (generous)	Shakuni (officious)	
Gandharva (ecstatic)		

The Pishâcha is associated with the one of the three gunas called rajas. This energetic and feminine aspect of our personality when out of balance leads in this system to manic depression or melancholia. In our own tradition enlightened melancholy is a magical state that can lead to liberation. Some of these personality types are associated with the lunar parts of Indian astrology. The Brahma type with the day of the full-moon; the Rishi and Asura with dusk and dawn; the Rākshasa with the moon's dark fortnight and the Preta with its bright fortnight.

One last piece of folklore before returning to our story - there are in the Hindu tradition said to be eight types of marriage - one for each of the classes of possessing entities. Gandharva marriage occurs very commonly in story and happens when the partners are so intoxicated with each other that they marry without informing any relatives or without any formal ceremony. It is said that a Gandharva inspires such unions because of its peculiar affinity with the sense of smell, and hence eroticism in general. The eighth class of marriage inspired by the

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<sup>4</sup>*Sarpa-dosa* is the curse of bareness caused by harming a snake. See Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* p. 94

Pishacha is but a hair's breadth from rape. The erstwhile partner is tricked into union whilst asleep or by being placed into a compromising situation from which marriage is the only antidote.

I'm assuming that the Vetala of our story is one of those class of Pishacha demons given in the table. The standard dictionaries have no ready etymology for this word, a fact I always find exciting because it suggests a folk origin. Vetala's are often seen on the sides of Nepalese temples, shown with a horrific countenance and wearing a yellow skirt. Perhaps the creature became popularized in Nepal when the story cycle was translated into Nepalese in the eleventh century by the poet and folklorist Kshemendra. (I say folklorist because he is also responsible for an encyclopaedia of customs composed in 1037.

The Vetala was once a normal person who overheard Shiva telling Parvati a collection of stories for her ears only. He was cursed to remain a Vetala until such time as he could find someone clever enough to answer the riddles set in each story. There is in fact a whole tantra on Vetala magick in one a huge compendiums of tantrik ritual compiled by Krishnananda.<sup>5</sup> This is called *Tantrasara* one of several works bearing the same title the most famous being the work of Abhinavagupta, who was an adept of the right hand path.

### THE FRAME STORY<sup>6</sup>

And so to the story

Once upon a time there was a mighty king called Vikram. People came from far and wide to offer him presents as a token of their loyalty. And then one day a naked holy man walked into his audience room and offered him a single fruit. The king accepted the humble gift with as

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<sup>5</sup> There is an account his life in Sircar, *The Shakta Pithas* (1948) p. 74sq.

<sup>6</sup> I have adapted this version of the story from C H Tawney's English translation of Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara*. Various editions are available including one from Jaico Publishing House.

much grace as he would any other gift of greater value. At the end of the audience he handed it to his steward thinking he would eat it but in fact he placed it through a window in an abandoned part of the treasury. And from that day on the naked holy man was a regular visitor to the righteous King's audience room and each time he brought the same gift - a single fruit picked from the wild trees in the forest.

Until one day the king took a fancy to give the fruit to one of the semi tame monkeys that roamed about the place and then an odd thing happened. The monkey bit the fruit and then immediately threw it down. Glowing inside the broken body of the fruit they saw a wonderful diamond of the highest value. And when they looked in the place where the other fruits had been thrown they found a large pile of similar gems.

And so the King resolved to question the holy man the next time he came. The holy man said that the jewel was as nothing and that if the King would help him drive away the demons that plagued his forest ritual, then he would give him a gift greater than any so far seen.

And so it was agreed that King Vikram would meet the holy man at midnight at a desolate spot in the centre of a large forest cremation ground. Nervously the King, armed with his finest sword, walked through the fearful and desolate place to a lonely ritual fire. He saw the holy man and began to wonder at what manner of ritual he was celebrating at this hour. But before he could question him, he was reminded of his oath and sent on a quest to the loneliest and blackest part of the cremation ground where he would find a fresh corpse hanging from a tree. Bound by his oath he went there and climbed the tree and brought down the corpse with great difficulty. Sweating with the effort he laid it down ready to heave it up on to his shoulder for the walk back to the holy man's ritual circle. And in his mind he resolved to question closely the supposed holy man as to the nature of his activities. But even before he had struggled but a few yards he felt the corpse move. His heart in his mouth king Vikram steeled himself, took a deep breath and resolved to hang onto the corpse and fulfil his mission. For he had seen

many a corpse on the battle field and knew that this was surely a dead body when he brought it down from the tree.

On his grandmother's knee he had heard tales of the miraculous Vetala spirit that took hold of the body after death and could be very mischievous to the living. He must, he knew, get the possessed corpse to the ritual fire as soon as possible.

But then the Vetala began to speak. 'Righteous King Vikram, the night is black and cold and the way long. Let me tell a tale to shorten the journey.'

'Be silent', yelled Vikram as he quickened his pace, but still the Vetala demon went on:

### THE FIFTH STORY

There was once a handsome washerman, who whilst on a sacred pilgrimage saw a beautiful woman and instantly fell in love with her. He mooned away for some time not knowing what to do. But eventually his loving parents realized his predicament and arranged a marriage to the liking of all involved. And great was the happiness of the loving couple and both families.

And then his brother-in-law, who was a zealous devotee of Kali, suggested that they should visit Kamarupa, the chief temple of the terrible goddess, and show respect to the one at whose festival the star crossed lovers had first met.

But when they got to the temple of Kali the brother-in-law remembered that they had no offerings to make to the awesome goddess and advised that they should not enter the holy of holies. But the bridegroom was flushed with the power of love and thought he would go in anyway and meditate at the feet of Kali. And during that meditation he was seized with a passion for the Goddess and resolved to offer everything he had to Kali, including his own life. And he took up a sword that had been left there as an offering, and fixing his hair to the bell rope

that hung above the shrine, he cut off his own head with one stroke, and his body fell to one side.

And the brother-in-law hearing the bell was filled with foreboding and ran into the shrine and saw the terrible carnage. Such was his sorrow at loosing his new friend and the bridegroom and his dread at causing his beloved sister pain by bearing such bad news, he resolved to repeat the sacrifice. And indeed the bell soon rang a second time.

The beautiful bride was by this time worried to distraction and she forced herself to go into the dreaded shrine and there the terrible sight of the decapitated bodies of her brother and lover she did see.

And with one piteous cry to the goddess she resolved to join them, taking up a nearby creeper she tied it about her neck in order to hang herself. But even as she began to stretch her neck the awesome goddess appeared to her and said ‘enough of this carnage, the piety of your family is not in question, ask what ever you wish of me, for I am moved to pity.’

And the widowed bride asked only for the lives of her lover and brother and was duly instructed to place the heads back on the shoulders and all would be well.

But her eyes streaming with tears she mistakenly placed the wrong head on the wrong shoulders. And when the bodies of the two men revived she saw her mistake.

‘Well’ said the Vetala to the righteous King who had all the time he was walking been listening intently to the Demon’s tale. ‘Well’ said the Vetala, ‘answer me this, which of those two men is now the rightful bridegroom?’

‘That is an evil tale Demon spirit, but according to Tantrik lore the head and not the heart as is sometimes said, is the true seat of consciousness. Whichever body bears the head of her husband, that shall be her rightful lover.’

And saying this the righteous king Vikram, renewed his grip on the Vetala, knowing that if his answer to the riddle was correct the demon would attempt to escape. And sure enough the corpse possessed by a

Vetala spirit slipped through his hands and flew off into the air, screaming through the forest back to its place in the tree.

There are twenty-five such tales, occupying the whole night and through them Vikram is eventually initiated into higher knowledge and learns how to avoid the tricky fate awaiting him when he does eventually get the demon back to the ritual.

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Mogg Morgan is an author and publisher. His books include *Sexual Magick* (under the name Katon Shual) and *The English Mahatma*. He lives in Oxford where he runs Mandrake Press. His metaphysical writing has appeared in numerous publications including *mektoub*, *Nuit-Isis* and *Pentagram*.