

# Vamachara

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**Vāmācāra** (**Sanskrit**: वामाचार, Sanskrit pronunciation: [vɑːmɑːcɑːrə]) is a **Sanskrit** term meaning "left-handed attainment" and is synonymous with "**Left-Hand Path**" or "Left-path" (Sanskrit: **Vāmamārga**).<sup>[1][2][3]</sup> It is used to describe a particular mode of worship or *sadhana* (spiritual practice) that is not only "**heterodox**" (Sanskrit: *nāstika*) to standard **Vedic** injunction, but extreme in comparison to the **status quo**.

These practices are often generally considered to be **Tantric** in orientation. The converse term is **dakṣiṇācāra** "Right-Hand Path", which is used to refer not only to "orthodox" (*Āstika*) sects but to modes of spirituality that engage in spiritual practices that not only accord with Vedic injunction but are generally agreeable to the status quo.

Left-handed and right-handed modes of practice may be evident in both orthodox and heterodox schools of **Indian religions** such as **Hinduism**, **Jainism**, **Sikhism** and **Buddhism** and is a matter of taste, culture, proclivity, initiation, *sadhana* and dharmic "lineage" (*parampara*).

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## Nomenclature and etymology

N. N. Bhattacharyya explains the Sanskrit technical term *Ācāra* as follows:

*"[t]he means of spiritual attainment which varies from person to person according to competence.... Ācāras are generally of seven kinds -- Veda, Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Dakṣiṇa, Vāma, Siddhānta, and Kaula, falling into two broad categories -- Dakṣiṇa and Vāma. Interpretations vary regarding the nature and grouping of the ācāras. It is generally held that*



Tibetan Board Carving of Vajrayogini Dakini holding a **flying knife** in her right-hand

| those who participate in the rituals of Five Ms belong to the category of Vāmācāra."<sup>[4]</sup>

Vāma means "pleasant, lovable, agreeable" and *Dakṣiṇa* means "south". Facing the rising sun towards east, *Dakṣiṇa* would be the right side. For this reason, the term Vāmācāra is often translated "Left-hand practice", while *Dakṣiṇamārga* is translated as "Right-hand practice". An alternate etymology is that it is possible that the first word of the expression Vāmācāra is not *vāma* or "left", but *vāmā* or "woman". N. N. Bhattacharyya notes that a main feature of the Tantras is respect for the status of women as a representation of *Shakti*, and that if this was the original conception underlying Vāmācāra the opposing term *Dakṣiṇācāra* may have been a later development.<sup>[5]</sup>

An alternate term *Vāmamārga* ("Left Path") is also used.<sup>[6]</sup> In this compound the ambiguity between *vāma* and *vāmā* is not present because the final "-a" in *Vāmamārga* is clearly short.

## Practices

Vamachara is particularly associated with the *pancha-makara* or the "Five Ms", also known as the *pancha-tattva*. In literal terms they are: Madya (wine), Mamsa (meat), Matsya (fish), Mudra (cereal), and *Maithuna* (sexual intercourse).<sup>[7]</sup> *Mudra* usually means ritual gestures, but as part of the five Ms it is parched cereal.<sup>[8]</sup>

Vamachara traditions place strict ritual limits on the use of these literal forms and warn against nonsanctioned use. If so used they encourage the person to sin.<sup>[9]</sup> Practitioners of vamachara rituals may make symbolic substitutions for these literal things, which are not permitted in orthodox Hindu practice.<sup>[10][11]</sup> The fact that tantric practices can be done without involvement with the literal *pancha-makara* is emphasized by Swami Madhavananda, and said to have been practiced by numerous saints.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Aghori

Main article: [Aghori](#)

Barrett (2008: p. 161) discusses the "charnel ground sadhana" of the *Aghori* practitioners<sup>[13]</sup> in both its left and right-handed proclivities and identifies it as principally cutting through attachments and aversion in order to foreground inner primordiality, a perspective influenced by a view by culture or domestication:

*The gurus and disciples of Aghor believe their state to be primordial and universal. They believe that all human beings are natural-born Aghori. Hari Baba has said on several occasions that human babies of all societies are without discrimination, that they will play as much in their own filth as with the toys around them. Children become progressively discriminating as they grow older and learn the culturally specific attachments and aversions of their parents. Children become increasingly aware of their mortality as they bump their heads and fall to the ground. They come to fear their mortality and then palliate this fear by finding ways to deny it altogether. In this sense, Aghor sādhanā is a process of unlearning deeply internalized cultural models. When this sādhanā takes the form of shmashān sādhanā, the Aghori faces death as a very young child, simultaneously meditating on the totality of life at its two extremes. This ideal example serves as a prototype for other Aghor practices, both left and right, in ritual and in daily life.<sup>[14]</sup>*

## View espoused in the Brahma Yamala

The *Brahma Yamala*, a [Tantric](#) text (though oriented from a right-handed [Vaishnava](#) perspective), says there are three currents of tradition: dakshina, vama, and madhyama. These are characterized by the predominance of each of the three [gunas](#); [sattva](#), [rajas](#), and [tamas](#). According to this text, [dakshina](#) is characterized by [sattva](#), and is pure, [madhyama](#), characterized by [rajas](#), is mixed, and [vama](#), characterized by [tamas](#), is impure. The Tantras of each class follow a particular line of spiritual practice.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Iconography and tools of the left-handed trade

Beer (2003: p. 102) relates how the symbolism of the [khaṭvāṅga](#) that entered [Vajrayana](#), particularly from [Padmasambhava](#), was a direct borrowing from the [Kapalikas](#) of [Shaivism](#) who frequented places of austerity such as charnel grounds as a form of [vamacharin](#) spiritual practice.

*The form of the Buddhist khatvanga derived from the emblematic staff of the early Indian Shaivite yogins, known as kapalikas or 'skull-bearers'. The kapalikas were originally miscreants who had been sentenced to a twelve-year term of penance for the crime of inadvertently killing a Brahmin. The penitent was prescribed to dwell in a forest hut, at a desolate crossroads, in a charnel ground, or under a tree; to live by begging; to practice austerities; and to wear a loin-cloth of hemp, dog, or donkey-skin. They also had to carry the emblems of a human skull as an alms-bowl, and the skull of the Brahmin they had slain mounted upon a wooden staff as a banner. These Hindu kapalika ascetics soon evolved into an extreme outcaste sect of the 'left-hand' tantric path (Skt. vamamarg) of shakti or goddess worship. The early Buddhist tantric yogins and yoginis adopted the same goddess or dakini attributes of the kapalikas. These attributes consisted of; bone ornaments, an animal skin loin-cloth, marks of human ash, a skull-cup, damaru, flaying knife, thighbone trumpet, and the skull-topped tantric staff or khatvanga.<sup>[16]</sup>*

## See also

- [Left-Hand Path and Right-Hand Path](#)
- [Tantra](#)

## References

1. <sup>^</sup> [Bhattacharya, N. N. \*History of the Tantric Religion\* pp. 81, 447. \(1999\) ISBN 81-7304-025-7](#)
2. <sup>^</sup> [Kaal Ugranand Saraswati \*differentiating "traditional Vamamarga" from conceptions of the word "vamamarga"\*](#)
3. <sup>^</sup> [Tantra, Vamamarga \(The Left Handed Path: Kaula sadhana\)](#)
4. <sup>^</sup> [Bhattacharyya \(1999\) pp. 368-69.](#)
5. <sup>^</sup> [Bhattacharyya \(1999\) p. 113.](#)
6. <sup>^</sup> [Bhattacharyya \(1999\) pp. 81, 447.](#)
7. <sup>^</sup> [Bhattacharyya \(1999\) pp. 294, 296-7, 423-25.](#)
8. <sup>^</sup> [Mahanirvana Tantra of the Great Liberation](#)
9. <sup>^</sup> [Tripurā Upaniṣadbhāṣya, v. 15.](#)

10. ^ Bhattacharyya (1999) pp. 86-7.
11. ^ Brooks (1990) p. 113.
12. ^ Madhavananda, Swami. "The Tāntrika Mode of Worship" in: Prabhananda, Swami (2000), p. 5.
13. ^ 'Aghora' in *Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary* [Online]. Source: [1] (accessed: Tuesday February 9, 2010)
14. ^ Barrett, Ron (2008). *Aghor medicine: pollution, death, and healing in northern India*. Edition: illustrated. University of California Press. ISBN 0-520-25218-7, ISBN 978-0-520-25218-9. Source: [2], (accessed: Monday February 22, 2010) p.161
15. ^ Bagchi, P. C. "Evolution of the Tantras" in: Prabhananda (2000) pp. 13-14.
16. ^ Beer, Robert (2003). *The handbook of Tibetan Buddhist symbols*. Serindia Publications. ISBN 1-932476-03-2, ISBN 978-1-932476-03-3 Source: [3]

## Further reading

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