

The Earth on its Axis, We in Our Skin: The Tantra of Embodiment

A conversation between Lata Mani & Sanjay Kabir Bavikatte

Director Nicolás Grandi

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Full Transcript of Dharma Segment

Kabir: Lata, we've been speaking about isness and tantra and the importance of staying true to one's isness and the importance of honoring the isness of everything else around us and tantra being this principle of this abiding communion or conversation between one's own isness and the isness of everything else. And yet we also see around us so many incidents of mostly us human beings deviating from our own isness and dishonoring the isness of things around us. So what happens when these things happen, what happens when we so radically break away from what our essence is and the essence of things around us? What are the consequences? What does tantra do in situations like this? Does that question make sense?

Lata: Absolutely! It makes complete sense. Several things to clarify. First, tantra is. It always has been, always will be, forever and ever amen, in a sense. What we do have as you have said is people acting on a basis that is not congruent with tantra. Now another word for tantra would also be dharma understood in this context as acting on the basis of interdependence, interconnectedness, and the deep imbrication of every isness with every other isness. That is to say, isness is both an individual concept - each of us is isness - but it is also a collectivizing term - we also live in isness. When we act against that principle, we are acting in a way that violates the tantric nature of the universe which is also the dharmic nature of the universe.

Now the word dharma, as you know, perhaps very, very abused, perhaps more abused than almost any other term. Often it refers to caste-based dharma so that there is Kshatriya dharma spoken of for example in aspects of the Mahabharata or the different caste dharmas referred to in an epic like the Ramayana. But dharma as we are understanding it in this context, as I am using it, is not unique to any particular caste, any particular time, any particular people. It's a universal principle.

Within that it is certainly true that for each person, because they are not isolated anomic individuals but deeply connected, there is you can say dharma with a small d, the process of discovering what is my dharma as an intellectual, what is my dharma as a lawyer, what is my dharma as a mother, what is my dharma as a partner, with a small d. There we go back to our questions of responsibility, response ability, discovering what is our isness and engaging in those practices that enable us to introspect and therefore realize the full potential of our existence. But that apart, the universe itself, its nature is dharmic. This is not to say, as we know, that people

live in accordance with these principles. And as soon as you violate these principles you have what you might call adharma.

What I like about this way of thinking about it is one, it does not presuppose the normative content of what is dharma and adharma. As we know, one of... the entire purpose of the spiritual path is to free yourself from conditioning and what is considered to be appropriate for a woman in the nineteenth century is very different from what we consider to be appropriate today. In other words the normative content that we have ascribed to caste, to gender, their social significance, their meaning, their potential, their importance, has varied across time and space. But dharma itself is a steady state. It's the pulse of the universe. So what we need to do is to ascribe, or experiment or contemplate or work with a notion of dharma that is closest to the nature of creation itself, then ask ourselves given that I am here in this time-space, with these set of inclinations, with these desires, how might I realize my isness in the most dynamic way possible?

And the reason for looking for that dynamic momentum is so that we can be joyful. Because even though suffering is so ubiquitous, we have really not come here to suffer. And yet we inflict suffering on self and other because we have not understood what it means to be fully human, fully alive and fully take our place in this deeply interconnected universe. And, going back to the notion of tantra, because if the universe is tantric, it is also dharmic; in that sense isness, tantra, dharma, you could see them as three sides of a triangle...you could also see them as three overlapping triangles. We can retain thereby the specificity of each of the conceptions but also see how because the universe is isness, the universe is tantric, the universe is dharmic, they are terms that imply each other. To say tantra, then, what tantra really is, is a fluid triad: self, other, connectivity; self other divinity, a point we discussed in the previous part of our conversation.

What does it mean to say that the universe is dharmic and at the same time that there is such ubiquity of suffering? It means one thing, that we have misrecognized what it means to be human and we have tried to find happiness in places where we find our desire for happiness or peace or contentment is not met. What it also means on a meta level is that despite human error, despite human misperception, despite individual and collective adharma, the universe at the meta level is hurtling toward dharma. The tendential lines of force, the momentum, the trajectory, tends toward dharma. Now, the long arc of justice bends toward truth? Have I garbled that?

Kabir: The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.

Lata: Beautiful. In other words, multiple temporalities. When one is in pain about suffering, about the suffering of the world in the present moment, it sometimes feels

insufficient to think maybe in future it will right itself. But it's terribly important to think, to know that in the future it will right itself. That does not mean we are passive and we do nothing in the present. We ask ourselves at all times, what is it that I am called to do? And we also embrace whatever that might be; making tea, sweeping the pavement, writing a manifesto, trying to think what reform of the law might be, trying to imagine how to rethink gender in a way that is much more multiplicitous.

Kabir: So Lata, I think what you said is very interesting. You are speaking about us being really aware of our isness and you talk about honoring the isness of things around us. And you also speak of this interconnectedness. At the same time you say something quite interesting. When you speak of dharma, you say dharma exists and it is what it is, it just is. And at the same time you say it is beyond what is normative in today's context; it is beyond what is normative in any time in history; it is beyond that and it is that. So there is this point of one's own individual dharma and doing what one needs to do and we also speak of collective dharma, that is the isness of everything else around us and this dynamic interaction between one's individual dharma and the dharma of everything else around us which is the meta principle of what dharma is all about. But yet it is something that is beyond the situatedness in terms of a place-time context. So how does one know what to do because the only way we know what we must do is in the context we are in, in that situatedness of should I do this or should I do that, what is my role as an individual in the space I am in. And yet the principle, does it stand beyond or is it outside history?

Lata: The principle is prior to history. It is intrinsic to the nature of Creation itself. The reason why we need to keep this distinction in mind is because I use a word like interdependence and interconnectedness. The way in which we may understand that in the twentieth century may be different from the way we understood that in the sixteenth century or in the fifth century. Conditioned knowledge is part of what it means to be human. So we have to always build into our practice an understanding of the fact that our knowledge is always already conditioned and part of what we are needing to free ourselves from is precisely that conditioning and all of the evaluative categories and modes of assessment that pertain to a given time and space.

This is not to say that forms of understanding that characterize a given time and space are erroneous. If you have a universe which celebrates specificity, we cannot say, "let me go to the eternal, give me categories that hold across time and space." That goes against the intrinsic nature of the fact that Creation is constantly moving, constantly dynamizing, and the fact that my isness and my active dynamic relationship with my isness which is always already interconnected with other isnesses, is also evolving, is also moving. So we are in a continually fluid set of

relationships. And not all of those relationships will be understandable to us. Which is why, what do we do? Don't know, take joy in the process, really understand that knowledge is situated, give up preferences. And, if you are someone of a spiritual nature you can say that the divine is in charge and if you are more secular in orientation and you accept these principles of interconnectedness, interdependence and the radical equality of life forms, you can say dharma is in charge. That frees you to use this method, if you like, this way of orienting yourself to the nature of Creation in a way that might be more comfortable to you.

So, we can never give up the burden of interpretation, the responsibility of interpretation. Quite often, adharma is miasmatic interpretation. By miasma what I mean is an illusory or delusory form of perception and following from that an illusory or delusory form of explanation. And I use both terms because illusion is when you see something which is not there and delusion is when you imagine something which is not there. When we have miasmatic thinking it has crossed the border into psyche which is why you will find that there are various miasmas that characterize our world today. Majorities in many different countries feel besieged by minorities in those countries and imagine that they are swamping their culture, coming in droves and bringing their own culture to crisis. Whatever you say about facts and figures seems to make very little difference. Now on the one hand you can say this is because they are invested in a particular point of view. But that is part of the story. Part of the story is that they genuinely believe their perspective, right? And the reason for that is that miasma destroys memory, morality, logic and rationality. It is entirely illogical.

Why is this important? It is important to understanding why it is that sometimes the most just forms of political and social and critical intervention appear to make so little difference...seemingly. The other reason it is important is [in] understanding the miasmatic nature of adharma. What do we do as people who are critical, who wish to cultivate a critical consciousness? We speak from the place of dharma. If we were to take our own conversation over the last couple of days, had we started with a critique of the way religion has been understood today, we would have had to travel through all manner of political, historical, conceptual mazes (in the plural) before we got to say what dharma could be, what tantra is, and how we might recognize the isness of Creation. We didn't take that route.

We decided to start from the place of my own mode of understanding. It is knowledge given to me. It is not my knowledge. It is ancient knowledge. My mode of understanding with all its limitations and perhaps some of its potential: what you are receiving in my words does not escape any of the things I have been saying. It is situated, to the extent that I am aware of it, I have tried to free myself from conditioning but if conditioning defines an aspect of humanness, if conditioning is integral to humanness or conditioning is part of humanness, I can't escape it either.

So I embrace that. I embrace the humility of my understanding and I seek to share it with whoever might be interested.

So, adharma, we will find, because it is not natural to Creation, because it is a different order of understanding, will necessarily move in a shrinking, shriveling direction in which it implodes on itself. Dharma, on the other hand, will move in a continually expansive direction. It may not move fast enough for our heart's desire. And our heart's desire must be honored. As we know there is so much suffering. But it will move in that direction. Simple example, every empire, every political empire that has sought to subjugate another has self-destructed in the end. And look at the enormous violence that meets non-violent resistance; out of all proportion at times to the actual capacity of non-violent resistance to overthrow the systems in power. But the moral force of non-violence is recognized by the structures of power and it metes it a punishment out of all proportion to the justness of that cause. If we look back in history we have many examples of this.

So, yes, there is Dharma with a capital D and that is not caste based, it is not gender based, it is not specific to any particular group. It refers or names those principles on the basis of which Creation *already exists*; but because we do not relate to ourselves, and to each other, and to Creation in that way we have untold confusion, misperception, suffering.

There's always in every society, in every time and place, every community, people who are consciously working in the direction of harmonization, of dharma we can say. There is usually a small number of people and they usually are in a minority, although because of their shall we say disproportionate impact we tend to imagine they represent a majority, this minority is deliberately working against the principles of Creation....I'm using that as a shorthand, trying to do things towards greedy ends, trying to colonize Creation and its potential for their own selfish ends. And then there's large numbers of people in the middle who are conscious to varying degrees about the fact that these are real choices to be made and we do not know in which direction they will choose to go. You will notice social activists, political activists, educators, people who care, often explicitly address this vast middle ground in the hope of inviting them to think otherwise.

Kabir: So would I be right if I say that one way to wear oneself thin to dharma, to kind of be receptive to the dharmic principle would be to do this thing of acknowledging one's own situatedness, acknowledging one's own conditioned nature, so to speak, while at the same time resting in the "I don't know" and eschewing preferences...So one is both here and acknowledging, I could acknowledge where I am and what my own social location is, and my geographic location, class location, whatever else it is, I mean all these other factors that condition how I respond to things. And at the same time approach it with a sense of

doubt with a sense of that there could be more and that more is always discovered in conversation with the dharma of other things. Is that how I would be more open to dharmic principles and is that what this large group of people you refer to who are somewhere in the middle, who are unsure but need to make choices to either behave in a dharmic fashion or behave in an adharmic fashion...people who one would assume because one's innate nature is dharmic, people one would assume would like to move beyond their conditioned nature. Is that how they should live?

Lata: I would be very anxious about clarifying that I have no idea how people should live. All I can say is that given the nature of Creation, and given that not a single action is insignificant, no action is insignificant, embrace what you are given to do, take joy in it and remain open in the ways that you have just described knowing that you are also a work in progress, just as everybody else is. And that if you establish the intention to always remain open and to accept what is given to you to do and to know that no job is too insignificant or too humble to be of any value...If we really think about the people who deeply care, one of the things they worry about is am I doing enough? Am I being enough? Should I be doing something more? And in that anxiety and worry, a lot of prana is wasted.

What would it mean to say, "I think this is what I am meant to do, let me do it and let me remain open to the fact that if I should be contemplating something else it is brought forward and I am open enough to notice the signs. None of us individually can know everything but there are many people around us who know many things we don't know. Remain open. Always be aware of intention. I know we live in a time when consequence is something we pay more attention to, so that we would say, "Regardless of your intention this was the consequence." True. Consequence is extremely important and that is another point to which I would like to return. But intention is very, very important. If we remain open and we establish the intention to always learn and grow and be flexible and open and be trusting and accepting of what one is given to do I think that one can enjoy, take great joy in the process, and enjoy the process of one's transformation.

The question of consequence is also important. One of the things that miasmatic frameworks do is disarticulate the relations between cause and effect and it is precisely in that disarticulation that you can genuinely not see the violence of a certain mode of apprehending the world. And so genuinely not see it, the development paradigm, enormously violent, catastrophic for the planet, right? And yet there are so many people who feel there is no way forward but this. If that means displacement of farmers, if that means taking away the rights of tribals, so be it. What is that perfectly reasonable people, what is it that leads perfectly reasonable people to take such an extraordinary position, miasmatic thinking. This is what I mean by miasma bridging both the psyche and the mind. It is a form of injury. It's a form of

injurious thinking. But it is so deeply held to be true that it becomes difficult to dislodge. And yet that is precisely what we need to do. And if humans do not act in concert, nature will.

We see it with climate change. Three hundred years of industrialization, the earth is responding, lots of human beings are also responding but some people are only now willing to think about the idea of climate change because the earth has responded so forcefully. Unfortunately, from their perspective, the earth has responded furiously. Mother Nature's fury. Mother Nature is not furious. She is following her dharma. If deep oil drilling has led to volcanic activity under the sea bed, that pressure will have to be released somewhere. It can take the form of a tsunami, it can take the form of a volcano, it can take the form of earthquakes. That is the simple principle of karma unfolding.

So, if we think of karma, dharma, tantric dispassion, we can use these three as a way of orienting our activity, knowing that we don't have to have faith in the sense in which people often talk about faith, something that is a belief that cannot be proven. We can rather start to think about faith as a form of precise recognition; recognition of how things actually are. And this is important because people often say to me, "This is all very well but how are you going to get people to believe what you are saying?" I don't know if I can ever get people to believe what I am saying. I can only invite people to notice what is already true and to think about this as an epistemology, as an orientation, as a way of relating to the world and then conduct their own experiments. Which as you know is the oldest epistemology...spiritual wisdom tradition epistemology available to us. We are given orienting points and then told, "Go, experiment!"

Fundamental to all of this is that we need to give up the terror of diversity. If you think about it the universe is infinitely diverse. If we are going to feel that that diversity needs to be tamed, whether we are talking about gender diversity, sexual diversity, biodiversity, social diversity, cultural diversity, we are going to try to live in a way that flies against the very intrinsic nature of Creation. And as soon as we do that suffering is unleashed, personal, social, collective, societal, planetary.

Kabir: So, I'd like you to speak a little bit more about suffering as a consequence because clearly there is a huge amount of suffering experienced by people, by sentient beings around us who by themselves try to live dharmic. And clearly the people who are causing the suffering, the people who are living in this, somehow bought into this miasma have themselves moved away from their own dharmic nature, they too must be suffering in some sense. So if this experience of suffering is so radical or is so acute why doesn't change happen? Where is the dharma in this if suffering as a consequence? And shouldn't there be some dharma for people who are suffering for no fault of their own? And shouldn't the people who are suffering as

a result of living in this miasma automatically self-correct because it is clear that it is not working for them. They too aren't really happy with the way they are or are they in such a delusion that they wouldn't know at all?

Lata: If we accept that relationality is a fundamental fact of Creation it means that even if one person is adharmic many others will suffer. Once we accept that then we cannot be surprised if there is suffering. Is suffering equivalent? I don't even want to get into that game. Are some people suffering more and other people suffering less? How can you quantify suffering? But we do know that there are many, many people suffering from poverty, malnutrition, climate change who had very little to zero role to play in causing the conditions in which they now find themselves living. This is part of the territory once you accept that everything is interconnected. This is why every single action is so significant and meaningful which is why we might want to think about the intrinsic value of what we do, including the intrinsic negative value of what we do. As for the people who have caused suffering to others, some of them are aware and don't care, many are not aware, and they will wake up when they do. You have free will...as humans we have free will. We can cooperate with the principles of the universe or we can resist them. And because we have resisted them and continue to resist them there is suffering.

But for those who care deeply about the fact of suffering there are a number of things that they can consider doing. As long as they are able to honor their essence in choosing their path they will find that they will never tire. They will never tire. Once they are able to find a way to contribute to healing the world...Even a peaceful thought contributes to healing the world. A kind action contributes to healing the world. People have devoted their whole lives to social action in a very meaningful, thoughtful and considered way. All of this matters. And all the activists whose hearts are breaking can take perhaps some comfort in the fact that they have aligned themselves with the forces of harmonization, that the forces of harmonization will always prevail. Always prevail.

One thing that the activist might want to think about is not settling for the antithesis as a response. Always posing the questions that animate them, the concerns that make them want to get up every morning and do something about...always try to see how does this relate to everything else? How do I situate myself in relation to it? Do I position myself as above and separate from that on which I am working, or am I seeing my own deep connection? How do I conceive of the object that I am striving toward healing? And to see the inherent dignity of, not just the work that one is doing as an activist, but the inherent dignity of those who are deeply suffering distinguishing that from the social fact of their discrimination. Because quite frequently we tend to think that suffering modifies someone's dignity. If everything in Creation is as equal to everything else and has as dignified a location as everything

else then even those people who are suffering the greatest amount from adharma, their integrity just as the integrity of the conception of the universe is whole, they are always whole. The social conditions that would enable their capacity to thrive in their wholeness has what has been modified not their wholeness itself. So what is true of the cell is true of the organism. Every cell, every organism is in a beautiful relationship with each other.

Kabir: So it seems to live dharmically not just requires an intention to do so but a discipline, a certain discipline of living that way. Could you speak a little more about this discipline?

Lata: I'm so happy you brought that term up because if there is one thing that is often associated with spiritual practice or religious practice it's the notion of discipline and quite often it's a very punitive notion of discipline. The way I understand discipline within the framework that I have been taught is that discipline is nothing other than a form of remembrance. Your discipline is to remember precisely these variables, these principles on which nature has manifested itself, these principles on the basis of which Creation actually exists. And if you remember steadily, calmly, breathing in, breathing out, always centered in the body, always having your feet on the ground even if your job is to fly in the air, what I mean is always being situated and aware of the inherent beauty and glory of your individual existence and the way in which you wish to dance in your isness, that is discipline.

Kabir: Thank you.