



## Rāma in the Light of Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka*: A Study of Madhya, Svātantrya, and Universal Śiva-Consciousness

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of **Rāma** in the first chapter of Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka*, especially in the light of Swami Lakshmanjoo's oral commentary published as *Light on Tantra in Kashmira Shaivism: Chapter One of Abhinavagupta's Tantraloka* in 2017. Unlike the popular Purāṇic understanding of Rāma as the son of Daśaratha, the *Tantrāloka* presents Rāma as a highly technical non-dual Śaiva term. Here, Rāma signifies the all-pervasive Śiva who plays in and through every movement of experience. The paper argues that Rāma, in this context, is not a separate deity but the very state of **madhya**—the universal center in which the dualities of up/down, movement/rest, prāṇa/apāna, pramāṇa/prameya, jñāna/kriyā, and prakāśa/vimarśa are dissolved. Through verses 68–93 of the first chapter, Abhinavagupta establishes the non-difference of Śiva and Śakti, the multiplicity of Śiva's powers, the fourteen-fold field of Rāma, and the modes by which the yogin enters this supreme state. The study shows that Rāma, in Abhinavagupta's Tantric hermeneutics, is the playful, all-pervading, self-revealing Paramaśiva.

### 1. Introduction

Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka* occupies a central place in the history of non-dual Kāśmīra Śaivism. It is not merely a ritual manual, nor only a philosophical treatise; it is an encyclopedic synthesis of Trika metaphysics, Tantric ritual, yogic practice, mantra-śāstra, aesthetics of consciousness, and the doctrine of



liberation. Modern references describe the *Tantrāloka* as Abhinavagupta's great systematic work on the practice and philosophy of Kāśmīra Śaivism, while the older Sanskrit edition with Jayaratha's commentary was published in multiple volumes between 1918 and 1938. (George, 2014). Swami Lakshmanjoo's English exposition of the first chapter, edited by John Hughes, was released as *Light on Tantra in Kashmira Shaivism* in 2017.

Within this first chapter, Abhinavagupta gives a profound discussion of **Śiva and Śakti**, the nature of divine energies, the means of recognition, and the subtle meaning of **Rāma**. The term "Rāma" here should not be read in the ordinary epic sense alone. Swami Lakshmanjoo explicitly states that in this context "Rāma is not the son of Daśaratha," but **paramātmā**, the supreme God-consciousness. This remark opens the way for a deeper philosophical reading: Rāma is the one who "plays" in the universe—*rāmu krīḍāyām*—and who pervades all the modes of experience as Śiva Himself.

Thus, the central thesis of this paper is that **Rāma in the *Tantrāloka* signifies the universal play of Paramaśiva as the all-pervading center of experience**. Rāma is the state where all dualities are crossed, yet the world is not rejected. Rather, the world is seen as the dynamic field of Śiva's own svātantrya, His absolute freedom.

### **Śiva and Śakti as One: The Metaphysical Ground of Rāma**

Before Abhinavagupta introduces the fuller meaning of Rāma, he first establishes the non-duality of **Śiva and Śakti**. Verse 68 states:

**“śaktiśca nāma bhāvasya svam rūpaṁ māṭṛkalpitam Kāśmīra  
tenādwayaḥ sa evāpi śaktimatparikalpane Kāśmīra Kāśmīra”** (*Tantrāloka* 1.68)

Śakti is the very nature of Being itself. The distinction between Śakti and Śaktimān—the energy and the possessor of energy—is only **māṭṛkalpitam**, a conceptual distinction imagined by the knower. In reality, the two are inseparable. Swami Lakshmanjoo explains this through the analogy of fire: burning, heating, cooking, and illuminating are not separate from fire. They are distinguishable only according to the needs of the perceiver. Similarly, Śiva's powers appear as many, but they are never apart from Śiva.

This becomes clearer in verse 69:

**“māṭṛklṛpte hi devasya tatra tatra vapuṣy alam  
ko bhedo vastuto vahner dagdhrpaktṛtvayor iva”**  
(*Tantrāloka* 1.69)



Just as there is no real difference between fire’s burning-power and cooking-power, there is no real difference between Śiva and His various energies. The differentiation appears only because the limited subject selects one aspect of the divine power according to practical need. Philosophically, this means that the plurality of powers does not compromise non-duality. It is a plurality of manifestation, not a plurality of substance.

Verse 70 deepens this insight:

**“na cāsau paramārthena na kiñcid bhāsanād ṛte  
na hy asti kiñcit tacchaktitadbhedo’pi vāstavaḥ”**

*(Tantrāloka 1.70)*

The classes of Śiva’s energies are not unreal; they are nothing other than the **bhāsana**, the shining appearance, of Śiva Himself. Yet the distinction between Śakti and Śaktimān is not ultimately real. This is a very important point for understanding Rāma. If all energies are Śiva’s own appearance, then every movement, every cognition, every breath, every sensory act, and every state of consciousness may become a gateway into Śiva.

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes Kāśmīra Śaivism, especially the Pratyabhijñā system of Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, as a non-dual system centered on recognition of the identity between individual consciousness and Śiva-consciousness. (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.) This background is essential: Rāma is not introduced as an external divinity but as the recognized universality of one’s own consciousness.

### **Śakti as Upāya: The Energies that Lead to Śiva**

After establishing that Śiva and Śakti are one, Abhinavagupta shows how a particular energy becomes a **means** (*upāya*) for reaching the whole. Verse 71 says:

**“svaśaktyudrekajanakaṁ tādātmyād vastuno hi yat  
śaktis tad api devy evaṁ bhānty apy anyasvarūpiṇī”** *(Tantrāloka 1.71)*

A particular śakti appears as though distinct, but it is truly the expansion or prominence of the one divine power. Swami Lakshmanjoo interprets this as the foundation of **upāya-upeya-bhāva**: one particular energy becomes the means by which the practitioner is carried to the supreme state. One need not practice every upāya simultaneously. The master gives one suitable energy, and through that one energy the sādḥaka enters the totality.



This is why the three main upāyas correspond to the three divine energies:

**Īcchā-śakti** corresponds to **śāmbhavopāya**.

**Jñāna-śakti** corresponds to **śāktopāya**.

**Kriyā-śakti** corresponds to **āṇavopāya**.

Abhinavagupta’s doctrine is not merely theoretical. It shows how metaphysics becomes practice. The one Śiva appears as breath, mantra, thought, awareness, will, and contemplation. The yogin enters Śiva not by rejecting energy, but by tracing energy back to its source.

### **Śiva as Object of Meditation: The Paradox of Svātantrya**

Verse 72 presents a subtle paradox:

**“śivaś cāluptavibhavas tathā sṛṣṭo’vabhāsate**

**svasaṁvinmāṭṛmakure svātantryād bhāvanādiṣu”**

*(Tantrāloka 1.72)*

Śiva never loses His subjective glory—*āluptavibhava*—yet by His svātantrya He appears as an object in meditation. In **āṇavopāya**, the practitioner may experience, “This is Śiva.” In **śāktopāya**, the experience becomes “Śiva.” In **śāmbhavopāya**, the realization becomes “I am Śiva.”

This graded structure is crucial for understanding the later discussion of Rāma. The state of Rāma is not merely reached through one mode. The same supreme reality reveals itself through different degrees of nearness and subtlety. The external object, the inner cognition, and the pure “I” are all possible faces of Śiva’s self-revelation.

Britannica summarizes the Pratyabhijñā school as teaching the essential unity of Śiva, the individual soul, and the universe; this is exactly the philosophical ground upon which Abhinavagupta’s Rāma-doctrine stands. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.)

### **Rāma as Madhya: Entry into the Universal Center**

The decisive verse comes at 85b:

**“ūrdhvaṁ tyaktvādho viśet sa rāmastho madhyadeśagaḥ”**

*(Tantrāloka 1.85b)*



Swami Lakshmanjoo explains that the yogin who abandons **ūrdhva** and **adhah**, the upper and lower movements, enters the **madhyadeśa**, the universal center. Such a yogin is established in **Rāma**. Here Rāma means **paramātmā**, the supreme God-consciousness.

The terms “upper” and “lower” have different meanings according to the upāya:

In **ānavopāya**, they refer to **prāṇa and apāna**, the upward and downward breaths.

In **śāktopāya**, they refer to **pramāṇa and prameya**, or **jñāna and kriyā**, cognition and objectivity, knowledge and action.

In **śāmbhavopāya**, they refer to **prakāśa and vimarśa**, the luminous and self-reflective aspects of consciousness.

Thus, Rāma is the state in which every polarity is dissolved into the center. This center is not a physical location. It is the living axis of consciousness. It is the place where experience no longer throws the yogin outward into objectivity, nor inward into blank absorption, but reveals itself as the play of Śiva.

This is one of Abhinavagupta’s most refined hermeneutic gestures. The name “Rāma” is transformed from a mythological name into a Tantric symbol of universal centered awareness. Rāma is the one who abides in the center because He pervades both sides of every duality.

### **The Fourteen-Fold States of Rāma**

Verses 86–87 define the fourteen-fold states of Rāma:

**“gatiḥ sthānaṁ svapnajāgradunmeṣaṇanimeṣaṇe**

**dhāvanam plavanam caiva āyasaḥ śaktivedanam”**

**“buddhibhedās tathā bhāvāḥ sañjñāḥ karmāṇy anekaśaḥ**

**eṣa rāmo vyāpako’tra śivaḥ paramakāraṇam”**

*(Tantrāloka 1.86–87)*

The fourteen states include movement, rest, dream, waking, opening and closing of the eyes, running, jumping, ignorance or exhaustion, awareness of one’s energies, differentiated forms of knowledge, moods, names, and innumerable actions. All these together are called **Rāma**, because Śiva pervades them all.



This is perhaps the most original feature of Abhinavagupta’s interpretation. Rāma is not limited to sacred ritual, formal meditation, or theological devotion. Rāma is present in movement and stillness, in dream and waking, in opening and closing the eyes, in bodily action and cognitive differentiation. Even ordinary acts become modes of divine play when recognized as pervaded by Śiva.

Swami Lakshmanjoo explains **śaktivedanam** as the state in which the yogin becomes aware of all the senses without being dragged by them. The senses move, but the yogin does not lose himself in their movement. Rather, the senses follow him. In this state, one becomes the actor, not the acted-upon. This is a profound Śaiva psychology: bondage is not sensation itself, but being carried away by sensation. Liberation is not the destruction of the senses, but their reabsorption into awakened subjectivity.

The etymology given by Swami Lakshmanjoo—**rāmu krīḍāyām**, “Rāma is the one who plays”—is central here. Rāma is the divine player, the one who plays through all movements of the universe. This play is not accidental; it is the expression of **svātantrya**, Śiva’s absolute freedom.

### **The Entry into Rāma: Pure Mind and the Cessation of Vikalpa**

Verse 88 describes the means of entry:

**“kalmaṣakṣīṇamanasā smṛtimātranirodhanāt  
dhyāyate paramaṁ dhyeyaṁ gamāgamapade sthitam”**  
(*Tantrāloka* 1.88)

The yogin enters the state of Rāma through a mind whose impurities have been exhausted—**kalmaṣakṣīṇamanas**. The method is **smṛtimātranirodha**, the cessation of memory-forms or conceptual constructions. Here, *smṛti* is not memory in the ordinary psychological sense only; it refers to the repetitive movement of **vikalpa**, thought-formation.

The supreme object of meditation is established in **gamāgama**, coming and going. Swami Lakshmanjoo interprets this in three ways:

In **āṇavopāya**, gamāgama is prāṇa and apāna.

In **śāktopāya**, it is pramāṇa and prameya, or jñāna and kriyā.

In **śāmbhavopāya**, it is prakāśa and vimarśa.



Dhyāna here does not mean merely imagining a deity-form. Swami Lakshmanjoo repeatedly emphasizes that this Śaiva dhyāna is **awareness**: “Just be attentive. Don’t lose your own subjective consciousness.” This does not reject image-based meditation altogether; lower forms of āṇavopāya may use mūrti-dhyāna for purification. But in this passage, Abhinavagupta is speaking of the subtle form of meditation: remaining aware in the center between two movements.

The philosophical importance of this point is immense. Rāma is not reached by manufacturing a mental image. Rāma is recognized by entering the gap, the center, the living thread between experiences.

### **Japa as Awareness of the Thread Between Experiences**

Abhinavagupta next explains that entry into Śiva may also occur through **japa**:

**“param śivaṁ tu vrajati bhairavākhyam japād api”**

*(Tantrāloka 1.89a)*

But this japa is not merely mechanical repetition. Verse 89b defines its inner form:

**“tatsvarūpaṁ japaḥ prokto bhāvābhāvapadacyutaḥ”**

*(Tantrāloka 1.89b)*

True japa is the awareness of that reality which is beyond both **bhāva** and **abhāva**, existence and non-existence, one object and another object. Swami Lakshmanjoo explains this through the metaphor of beads and thread. Each perception is like a bead: one sound, one touch, one form, one taste, one smell. The yogin does not merely count the beads of experience; he perceives the **thread** running through them.

This thread is **śakti-sūtra**, the inner continuity of consciousness. Real japa is therefore not only the recitation of syllables but the uninterrupted recognition of awareness between all sensory and mental events. One sensation arises, another disappears; between them shines the same consciousness. That continuity is Rāma.

Here Abhinavagupta transforms a ritual practice into a phenomenology of awareness. Japa becomes the art of seeing the one consciousness-thread within the garland of the universe.

### **Near and Far Means: The Freedom of Śiva**

Verse 90 explains why different practices appear nearer or farther from realization:



**“tad atrāpi tadiyena svātantryeṇopakalpitaḥ  
dūrāsannādiko bhedaś citsvātantryavyapekṣayā”**

*(Tantrāloka 1.90)*

By His own svātantrya, Śiva has established distinctions among the means. Some are **dūra**, far; others are **āsanna**, near. External worship, sacrificial rites, and mechanical repetition may be far. Subtle awareness, recognition of the center, and direct entry into subjectivity are near. Yet even the distant means are not rejected, because Śiva reveals Himself through every form.

Verse 91 states:

**“evaṃ svātantryapūrṇatvād atidurghaṭakāry ayam  
kena nāma na rūpeṇa bhāsate parameśvaraḥ”**

*(Tantrāloka 1.91)*

Because Śiva is full of svātantrya, He accomplishes what appears impossible—**atidurghaṭa**. There is no form through which He cannot reveal Himself. This is a magnificent Śaiva affirmation: nothing is outside the possibility of revelation. The lowest practice and the highest intuition both exist within Śiva’s freedom.

Dyczkowski’s work on the doctrine of vibration emphasizes Kāśmīra Śaivism’s view of consciousness as dynamically creative, an all-pervasive Śaiva consciousness whose pulse manifests the universe. (Dyczkowski, 1987 ) This insight helps illuminate Abhinavagupta’s point: Rāma is not a static transcendence but the dynamic, playful self-expression of Śiva through every level of practice and experience.

### **The Three Energies and the Three Upāyas**

Verses 92–93 summarize the three modes of revelation:

**“nirāvaraṇam ābhāti bhāty āvṛtanijātmakeḥ  
āvṛtānāvṛto bhāti bahudhā bhedaśaṅgamāt”**

**“īti śaktitrayaṃ nāthe svātantryāparanāmakam  
icchādibhir ākhyābhir gurubhiḥ prakāṭikṛtam”**

*(Tantrāloka 1.92–93)*



Śiva appears **without covering** in śāmbhavopāya, **with covering** in āṇavopāya, and **partly covered and partly uncovered** in śāktopāya. These correspond to the three śaktis:

**Parā / icchā-śakti / śāmbhavopāya**

**Aparā / kriyā-śakti / āṇavopāya**

**Parāparā / jñāna-śakti / śāktopāya**

Collectively, these are nothing but **svātantrya**. This means that all spiritual paths are grounded in Śiva's freedom. The difference lies not in the reality reached, but in the degree of covering through which that reality is approached.

In relation to Rāma, this means that Rāma is not confined to one upāya. In āṇavopāya, Rāma is entered through the center between prāṇa and apāna. In śāktopāya, Rāma is recognized between thought and thought, cognition and object. In śāmbhavopāya, Rāma shines instantly as the unity of prakāśa and vimarśa.

### **Philosophical Significance of Rāma in the Tantrāloka**

The doctrine of Rāma in *Tantrāloka* has at least four major philosophical implications.

First, it universalizes divine presence. Rāma is not confined to temple, image, mantra, or scripture. Movement, rest, dream, waking, sensory awareness, knowledge, names, and actions—all become Rāma because all are pervaded by Śiva.

Second, it redefines practice. Practice is not the creation of spirituality but the recognition of the already-present center. The yogin does not manufacture Śiva-consciousness; he ceases to be distracted from it.

Third, it integrates the senses into liberation. The senses are not enemies. They become problematic only when the yogin follows them unconsciously. When the yogin rests in the center, the senses follow him. This is the transformation of bondage into mastery.

Fourth, it reveals the non-dual meaning of play. Rāma is the divine player. The universe is not a fall from Śiva but the play of Śiva's svātantrya. This play includes motion and rest, knowledge and ignorance, concealment and revelation. Nothing is outside Śiva's field.



## Conclusion

In Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka*, Rāma is a profound Tantric name for Paramaśiva as the all-pervading center of experience. The movement from Śiva-Śakti non-duality to the fourteen-fold states of Rāma shows that every aspect of existence is Śiva's own expansion. Rāma is not merely a theological figure but the living principle of divine play, the one who pervades every movement and every pause.

The yogin enters Rāma by leaving behind the duality of upper and lower, inhalation and exhalation, cognition and object, prakāśa and vimarśa. This entry is the entry into **madhya**, the universal center. True dhyāna is awareness of this center. True japa is awareness of the thread between the beads of experience. True recognition is seeing that the whole universe is already the play of Rāma-Śiva.

Thus, in the light of Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka*, Rāma is **vyāpaka Śiva**, the all-pervasive supreme cause, the one who plays as all states, all actions, all names, all cognitions, and all energies. To realize Rāma is not to escape the universe, but to recognize the universe as the luminous play of Paramaśiva.

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