

# Tantra in Practice

By Chandra Alexandre

Explorations in the yoga of Tantra as a practice and way of life for all spiritual seekers.

## What is Tantra?



With media and the Internet providing ready information and resources for new-fangled and sex-focused adaptations of Tantra, it is no wonder that many people giggle or perk up when they hear the word. And while many Western contrivances or Neo-Tantras focused on the erogenous may be ultimately beneficial in a world where negative ideas about bodies and body image issues abound, the truth is that there are charlatans out there under the guise of Tantra preying on people's insecurities and self-doubts about what it means to be a powerful and unique incarnation in this world.

I find that troubling. Some do it because they have discovered that putting sex on a spiritual menu under the pretext of an ancient tradition gives their wares or services credibility, and with that the justification for a price tag. The problem with this is that too many people, including some who would likely benefit from a much deeper understanding of Tantra, believe the superficial sexual practices offered to be the doorway to spiritual progress. In truth, these usually

go no further than a freeing of libido—if that—and the cost on both material and subtle levels can be enormous.

But, yes, Tantra is about sex, and sex can help one on the spiritual path. It is just that Tantra is absolutely not about sex in a titillating, seductive, or even exploratory sense. It is about the whole of who we are, inclusive of our sexuality, dedicated to a process of liberation—and not just sexual liberation (although sex may be one vehicle for realization of the ultimate goal). I will write more about the heart of Tantra in other posts, but for now, I will offer that Tantra in its essential teachings, if we are to focus for a moment longer on sex, is strictly about sex as one tool among others capable of quickly moving us beyond internalized and deep-seated fears and oppressions arising from the external impositions, taboos and obstacles of society, culture and religion. And that, I offer, is a lot more than just a new way to attain orgasm.

We care about this in Tantra because we are simultaneously substance of and for the Divine. Drawing one example from the ancient world of Tantra (which in its written sources is heavily focused on the spiritual attainment of men) may help illustrate how sex can serve to push one through restraints that limit freedom and deprive us of energy and inspiration:

A guru instructs an initiate to seek out a woman of a lower caste to be his partner in a sexual rite. Why lower caste? Because the cultural prohibition against inter-caste relations and stigma, particularly for higher-caste men, associated with the reality (held firmly in the practitioner's consciousness) of becoming impure through contact with someone of lower caste (let alone a woman) would be provocation toward liberating potentials. And the intimacies and fluid exchanges of sex? In the circumstances, these would be repulsive and nauseating for their vile uncleanness. If she were menstruating, all the better for invoking disgust and thereby assuring that transformational energies would arise for the initiate, either to be freed through the consummation of the rite if successful or more deeply entrenched if not.

Sex in Tantra, as may now be obvious, was transgressive. The hard core rites such as those involving sex were designed to ignite fear and revulsion in order to fuel movement toward non-dual awareness. This difficult endeavor, according to the Tantras, was possible only insofar as the faculties of ego could be stripped bare and the mechanisms of individual will, such as agendas and attachments, rendered asunder.

So sex was not a play date. It was ultimately one of five extremely effective provocations used by dedicated and stalwart initiates under the guidance of a guru to drive them into altered states of awareness. From there, the point was that the small self would engage shattering questions about the basics of self and the guru would deliver instructions intended to force the initiate into spaces of the unknown where safety, identity, relationships and purpose were uncertain, hidden or denied. If successful, the practices could move one onto a fast track toward spiritual attainment. If not—if, for example, the practitioner was not ready physically or mentally—the practices, it is said, could drive one insane.

Does sex have a role in Tantra today? Yes. Certainly, as a beautiful expression of life force and a pathway to experiencing the subtle realms of existence, it does. But this, I would argue, is no more or less so than in any other spiritual tradition that embraces the facts of living. As

practitioners interested in sex on the spiritual path today, perhaps we might consider first its role in strengthening our minds and bodies to better understand the nature of existence and our particular place within the fabric of creation. In this way, spiritual sex means that we grow qualities of compassion and empathy in ourselves as we build up love, trust and intimacy in the world. Whether or not we need a sex workshop on the path to help us attain sexual freedom may still be an open question, but let's not call that Tantra. And let's keep the Tantric kind of awakening what it was intended to be: priceless.

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