

TANTRA - Martin Jelfs

There is a bridge made of stones – a single arch, splendid in the sunshine, perfectly proportioned, immaculate ... On the left side of the bridge is a land of deep caves ... shrouded in darkness but for the glow of deep red fires ... it is a place of power, the earth, mystery, passion, energy and intensity. It is the abode of Goddesses ... On the right is a land bathed in a cool white light, the air is clear ... in the distance are mountain peaks capped in snow... it is the place of Gods ...the bridge connects the two lands and in its centre is a rose pink crystal gleaming in the sunlight.



Another image from twelve years ago near Katmandu: ancient temples and courtyards full of yoni-lingams. Like plants in a garden, a symbol of the penis in the vagina. More recently in India I saw one surrounded by water at least ten feet tall; others in towns where people would set flower petals around them and daub them with bright coloured pastes...In England we have statues of long-dead generals and statesmen and only pigeons pay them any attention.

Back again twelve years to Bodnath in Nepal full of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.. and trying to find the right one for Tibetan tantra – vajrayana – the “thunderbolt path” so called because it is the fastest path to enlightenment. Vajra means thunderbolt or diamond, or hardness or penis. Books on Tibetan tantra don't even mention sex in the index – the



Nearly thirty years ago – wondering why few people seemed to want to understand how so many ordinary Germans could have created and staffed the lethally efficient machinery of the Holocaust. Surely this was one of the most important questions of the twentieth century? And reading Wilhelm Reich's 'The Mass Psychology of Fascism' on the rigidifying effects of suppressing sexual energy. It made sense, but it was impossible to train: there never has been a full Reichian or bioenergetic training in Britain. Are we a hopeless case?

A few weeks ago in the lunchtime of an initiation in tantric kriya yoga, I went to the British Museum, to the section of ancient Greece: amazing serene stylised figures of women with small pyramidal breasts and large bellies from 7-5,000BCE. Everything living came from the female: people, animals, fruits, plants – even the universe itself. Life itself is a result of the act of love. The circle of stones at Stonehenge, penetrated by the shadow of the heel stone at sunrise on midday, was the sun god impregnating the earth goddess so that abundance could flow. Symbols from the vast natural caverns of Paleolithic Europe around 20,000 BCE match symbols used today in tantra.

At its very core, tantra is founded on the principle that one living Divinity separates Itself into Her and Him, Creatrix and Creator. Everything: God, Truth, Divine Love is viewed as having two aspects: male and female, now and then, self and other-than-self. The continuous relationship between these opposites generates appearances of energy and matter. Our ego sustains the separation of these opposites and

practices mainly involve detailed visualizing coloured drops or flames and lots of very strange deities. The only other practices seem to involve shooting the consciousness out of the top of the head at the moment of death... for a better rebirth. But I wasn't planning on dying yet - I hoped for a little more living first. Years later I phoned a high Tibetan lama who has been in England for thirty years to be proudly told by his secretary that in all that time she could count on the fingers of one hand the number of people who had been initiated into Tibetan tantra.

But isn't tantra exotic sex with candles and joss sticks practiced by bronzed Californians or Australians with a stunning beach in the background?

we are caught in the play of energy and mass by holding on to infinitely complicated relationships between opposites.

Another memory... four years ago in a workshop taking off a blindfold after about two hours and seeing hundreds of candles, a blaze of light, exotic flowers, statues, crystals, shells, bowls, fruit. Abundance. Seeing for the first time. Tantra says yes to life and the senses and the body and sexuality and sensuality and beauty and touch and dance. Exciting for me after a spirituality grown from Quakerism where tea after meeting is the main ritual and Puritan restraint still floats around, now turned to intellectualism. As humanistic therapies got more and more taken over by what I termed 'creeping transpersonalism' I became more and more uneasy.... so many journeys up mountains to meet wise beings ... so much light and love and harmony and searching for 'Higher Selves'. In more conventional psychotherapy object relations had turned us all into objects and Self psychology into selves. The juice had gone. Freud seemed more of a radical. The UKCP and concern over standards and ethics colluded with a climate of playing it safe; in the new integrative psychotherapy the embodied relationship seemed to get left out. In Britain body therapies had largely collapsed the mind-body tension into therapeutic bodywork joining the growing band of complementary therapies. I remembered back fifteen years to my first training where the 'problem' of sexuality was solved by everyone being regressed to a pre-genital stage. If the only model of psychotherapy is mothering then we can never grow up. Perhaps AHP(P) is

in its 'Peter Pan' stage of development? Forever young.

How to connect, but not try and merge, the body with the emotions and the spirit? It is very easy to create subtle hierarchies: five thousand years of patriarchal conditioning cannot be put aside easily. Back to the bridge connecting the two lands. If we upend this so that the arch becomes the spinal column the rose crystal is at the level of the heart half way between the hot red energy down below and the cool white energy above. We are the bridge, the rainbow bridge between heaven and earth. This bridge is 'hard-wired' to channel flows of energy along meridians and chakras. The centre of the bridge is a meeting place, in the heart, for the dance of energy and



consciousness. This does not require any belief – tantra is not a system of belief, let alone a religion. It is a practice perhaps originally developed consciously to teach men what women already knew: that everything is divine, that the body is sacred: that through the body, through the movement of energy, we transcend our limited self and can enter the divine ecstasy. It is the temple and the gateway to the beyond. But tantra teaches method. As tantra predates all religion and the rise of patriarchy, its echoes are found everywhere; not within mainstream religion but usually the mystical fringes. In India and Tibet, practices got hidden within texts through layers of metaphor and esoteric maps partly because they were often written down by celibate monks. Within the European schools elements of tantra remain such as the Tree of Life in the Kabbalah, some Sufi teachings, some pagan and Wiccan practices.

The path of tantra is to be the bridge, not to escape to heaven. That is the danger of the vertical, the hierarchy of up, good, better, towards consciousness or light easily reasserts. We are now trying to rebalance after millennia of patriarchy but it is easy to overcompensate. Much tantra stresses earth energy, and uses dance to connect and bring up energy without giving equal weight to the descending energy of consciousness and awareness. The word tantra is Sanskrit and derives from the root word 'tan' which translates as to extend, expand, spread, spin out, weave. We are weaving energies to expand consciousness. It is easy to embrace tantra as a permission to do all that was forbidden or a form of therapy for

shame or guilt or abuse. It is tempting to see it as a couple therapy to save bad relationships. In reality much modern tantra – sometimes called 'neo-tantra' is at best a preparation for tantric practice and the discipline for a spiritual path.

At one time it seemed as if all the best Reichian therapists 'went orange', became sanyasins and followed Bhagwan, who was later called Osho. Much modern tantra comes from Osho and the people around him, who blended eastern meditation practices with western body therapy. They provided practices for dropping in to meditation and stillness, and observing the mind from a place of high energy. I was used to vipassana meditation; observing the breath done at a low level of energy. This was different.

Osho's is an important contribution but there are other routes to ancient sources. Traditional writers and practitioners criticise modern tantra for its confusion of pleasure and bliss. Like pain, pleasure is of the nervous system, the world of duality and the desire of the ego: we all want more pleasure. Tantra seeks the bliss of union with the divine: ecstasy where duality and the ego are no more. A way to that is through sex, through practice, creating sacred space, ritual, and breathing, with actual intercourse or not. This is perhaps the hardest thing for some to understand – the contact with a partner is energetic, not necessarily physical. We can use sexual arousal to begin to move energy rather than to discharge tension in orgasm. In moving energy we can move consciousness. It is easy to get lost without bringing awareness and thought to the process or with poor teachers. For example the Karma Sutra

is nothing to do with tantra. It may be ancient, Indian and sex-positive but it is a bedroom manual written for city-dwelling men. It says nothing about moving energy or consciousness.

The fifteen-thousand-year old Vigyan Bhairav Tantra has 112 meditation techniques of which six are directly concerned with sex. But for most of us it is important. For nearly two thousand years Christianity has tried to separate love and sex, to elevate one and deny the other. But more people cry out passionately to God in the bedroom than in the church. Tantra's secret techniques are now coming out and can be learnt with practice. We become gods and goddesses, our bodies transformed into temples of male and female divinity.

It has helped me to have a sexual partner committed to the same journey and a support group of people I trained with. I have had moments of ecstasy and communion beyond anything I have ever experienced before. All boundaries dissolved into space and I was no more. That is enough; to visit such places. One tantra teacher I know uses the analogy of dolphins. They live in the sea but are air breathing mammals. They can leap out of the water to breath the air they need but they still have to fall back in to the sea where they belong. In tantra we leap into another reality, another dimension which we need; but our place is the earth, to practice seeing beyond the duality and the play of the ego.

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Further Reading

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