

# ***Some Notes on the Tantric Tradition & Our Method of Study***

(For Transformative Practice Journey with Sally Kempton)

Dear Friends,

The tradition behind our practice asks us to step outside of our left-brain, daily universe and enter a zone where the language and the assumptions are mystical and devotional.

Yet part of the process of becoming familiar with this world is to read, and since not everyone is familiar with the assumptions and teachings behind our practice, I offer you some notes, like Cliff's Notes, which explain the basic world view of the tantra.

These notes are optional. However, if you have the time, I suggest that you read through it at least once, and perhaps refer back to it, or come back to it when you have more time.

These are some basic points that underlie the tantric worldview. Like all mystical traditions, tantra has many branches. It also has an extremely rich body of texts and practices behind it, which cannot all be absorbed at once. However, certain core assumptions are carried through all the teachings of this tradition, and some of these assumptions are particularly liberating and fruitful for people like us. Here are some of them:

- 1) Divine Awareness chooses to manifest as a world. It does this because it is inherently creative and free. (That same creativity and freedom is within us, because we are made out of divine awareness.) The absolute freedom of divine awareness is its most important quality. It is free to be anything. It is free to become dense, and free to evolve into higher forms of consciousness.

It is also free to conceal its own vastness within a universe of dense matter and within a mind full of thoughts. It is also free to awaken itself inside an individual human or a whole society, and give us the power to see that we and everything are made of one divine Awareness.

- 2) Divine Awareness manifests this world as an expression of its own joy. This remains true even when everything seems to be totally screwed up. It is the fundamental paradox of manifestation, at the core of tantra, that both ecstasy and suffering can co-exist within the overarching awareness that is the known as the Great Heart, or Shiva.
- 3) Reality at its heart is self-reflective. It is conscious of itself. It is self-aware. As self-reflective Awareness, it has two aspects, which are part of its wholeness. These are

known as Shiva and Shakti, also called Spanda. Shiva means Primordial Auspiciousness, and Shakti means Primordial Power.

- a. The Shiva aspect is the absolute Beingness of reality. Reality is. That isness of reality has been called the 'divine ground', the 'ground luminosity', and the 'fundamental beingness.' One meaning of the name Shiva means 'that which underlies.' Before anything exists, Reality exists. Whatever is manifested is manifested within reality.
- b. The Shakti aspect is Reality's inherent ability to feel, to be aware. This innate capacity for awareness is also the source of Reality's creative power, its intrinsic dynamism, its creativity.

The Shakti aspect of reality is also called spanda, because its nature is to undulate, or pulsate. These two aspects of Reality are the source of all that is, and are also expressed in all that is.

We find them by looking into our own awareness, our own consciousness.

A human being has the capacity to experience the self-reflective Beingness AND Power of Reality in and AS our own consciousness. This experience is at the heart of true spiritual practice.

- 4) Because every particle of existence is inherently divine, **everything has intrinsic meaning.**

In other words, the meaning of life *is not in what we do per se*. **The meaning of life is in the very texture of reality, the is-ness of reality.** (This, of course, is what is meant by the now-famous phrase 'the power of Now.') However, human beings are not aware of that, so we constantly search for meaning in our actions, relationships and thoughts. The meaning of our life cannot be found by searching for it, because *it is what we already are*.

- 5) The understanding of life's intrinsic divinity and meaningfulness is self-revealing, which means that it shows up for us *on its own, of its own accord, in its own time*. This is what is meant by 'grace.' **Grace is the spontaneous self-revelation of the Divine.** Grace comes by its own will. However, by asking for grace, we both open ourselves to the presence of grace, and invite grace to reveal itself to us.
- 6) **The very fact that we are interested in knowing ourselves is a sign that we have been touched by Grace.**
- 7) The truths stated in paragraphs 4, 5, and 6 does not imply that we aren't supposed to do anything with our lives, or that actions don't count, or that ethics are irrelevant, or that we don't need to do spiritual practice. This is one of the fundamental paradoxes of human existence.

- 8) Moreover, even though everything is already inherently divine, and even though we already *are* that, the practice of Self-reflection is necessary in order to make this our daily experience. This, of course, is another fundamental paradox.
- 9) The gift of the tantric teaching is the experience of wonder, delight, and amazement that begins to infuse your life as you start to contemplate these truths. Even the merest fragment of insight into the blissful, aware essence of Reality, and into the divine paradoxes inherent in Reality, is itself transformative and delightful!

**The texts at the core of the tradition – the *Shiva Sutras*, the *Spanda Karikas*, *Vijnana Bhairava* are artistic (as opposed to a linear, or systematic) expressions of these truths.** The original verses and the commentaries on them were written by sages steeped in yogic practice, whose point of view was highly devotional, and who had grown up from childhood embedded in a certain mythological framework.

They are, to put it mildly, aphoristic and compressed. Each verse conceals or encodes a vast amount of teaching into a very small number of words.

That, of course, is why they need to be interpreted and unpacked by teachers and by personal study.

That is also why many contemporary teachers who speak from the tradition (including me, John Friend, Gurumayi, Rod Stryker, Shiva Rea, and others), often elect to take nuggets of truth from the tradition and unpack them in ordinary language, without specifically quoting or referencing the original texts themselves.

Truths from the tantras have become widely disseminated and are expressed, sometimes without recognition of the tradition they come from, by many contemporary teachers of yoga, meditation, Buddhism, etc.

We will be working with a contemplative process, which includes self-inquiry, meditation, and also inquiry into the ways in which these teachings apply to our lives.

In studying a traditional system and applying it to your lives, it's helpful to start with the assumption that what the text is saying is true. That's part of the value of studying a text like this: to take it on its own terms, and let it impact you. The more you steep yourself in the text, the more the wisdom that is encoded in the verses begins to seep into you. It's a bit like walking in a mist...at first you don't feel it, but eventually you get wet.

There are multiple layers of realization that come from working with these teachings – multiple layers of insight, multiple layers of experience. What at first seems obscure begins to become clear through meditation and discussion. What at first seems simplistic begins to reveal its depth. There are multiple ways to apply these teachings – as you know, a lot of contemporary New Age teaching is based on the core understanding that the universe is made of consciousness, is one, and is divine. Yet the

important truths, when they come through a particular tradition, demand to be understood inside the context of the tradition. We can't understand them so deeply if we assume that because we have read New Thought teachings, that we have assimilated the tradition.

Traditionally, in approaching an enlightened teaching, you begin by honoring it, with an intention to understand it through contemplation.

In other words, you assume that what you are encountering is the truth expressed by an enlightened sage, who knew what he was talking about because he was writing from a place of awake awareness, channeling truth from the very highest level of consciousness available at the time.

Maybe it's not being expressed in clear, user-friendly language. That is usually because he was compressing a lot of teaching into a single aphorism or verse. Or, it might be because he was deliberately pointing to the truth rather than unpacking it.

Just as important, if you want to receive the wisdom of a text like this, is to approach it in a meditative mood. Your intention is to allow the truth contained inside the text to unfold for you, sort of the way one of those scrunched-up Japanese flowers unfolds when you put it in water.

Every week, you'll be given contemplation or self-inquiry assignments, as well as several meditative practices, which you'll be asked to work with during the week. There will be several suggested practices, so you can experiment and find ones you're especially drawn to.

However, each one of them 'works', if you do it. In addition, you have the option of doing self-inquiry, contemplation and discussion with a study partner. This partner work is optional, but many of you have elected to do it.

The same is true for the contemplations on ethical practices that we'll be doing.

## **Some Truths about Consciousness**

Two practices, which we will be working with during the class, meditation on the space at the beginning and end of the breath, and meditation on the space at the end of a thought, are deceptively simple but actually can be profound vehicles for the flashing forth of revelation.

They are considered the core meditation practices of the tantras.

Why? Because the space at the beginning and the end of the breath and at the beginning and end of a thought are the two most accessible doorways into the power concealed inside our limited human consciousness, which is a contracted form of Divine Consciousness.

When we keep bringing our awareness to the space at the end of the breath or at the end of a thought, we are making ourselves available for that consciousness which

has contracted to appear as the limited, thought-filled mind, to expand back into its original vastness.

The first sign that this is happening is often a slowing down of the breath, a slowing down of thoughts, a sense of dropping or rising into a deeper state, or a literal feeling of expansion of awareness. Sometimes lights appear, or other manifestations of deeper levels of consciousness. Sometimes, the inner Presence, which is the true Self, simply surges forward, and we experience a shift out of ordinary mind into the Big Mind, Consciousness itself.

Between the breaths is can be found a trapdoor into stillness, the state known as Samadhi. That stillness is the abode of the full, concealed, power of the primordial shakti, the goddess.

When you attend to the space between breaths, you invite the underlying Presence, which is vast and deep and filled with wisdom and love, and is usually concealed, to come forward into awareness. Then, the movement of the breath becomes still, the rapidity of thought becomes quiet, and we discover the underlying vastness that is our true Self.

Similarly, when you focus on the pulsation within mind, without getting lost in its content, the pure energy of Awareness that is the screen or ground of thoughts reveals itself.

Ordinarily, the true Presence that is living through us – the Spanda or Shakti – is concealed behind the ceaseless flow of experiences and thoughts. The practices of the tantras are ways to coax it to reveal itself.

The whole universe conceals much more than it shows us at any one time. The great analogy for the way the universe conceals the vast potential hidden in its folds is the fertilized ovum.

When a sperm penetrates and joins with an egg, it exists as a mass of cells. There is no such thing as a differentiated human being in there. The being is pure potentiality, hidden inside a tiny cell of matter, enfolded inside the plasma of that zygote. If you look at the zygote under a microscope, you'd have a hard time seeing the human being. Yet there's intelligence within that potentiality that is unfolding the zygote into an embryo and the embryo into a full human infant. The infant is fully concealed, yet fully alive within the zygote.

In the same way, different layers and levels of reality are concealed, yet fully alive within the folds of this manifest universe. We are able to apprehend only a tiny fraction of the reality within our experience of this manifest universe. This is true even on the so-called physical level – think of the wonder and awe with which we greet the new brain research – and true on a much deeper level when it comes to the subtle underpinnings of our universe.

So one principle for entering the tantras is to recognize that much of what is concealed will be revealed, but that revelation will happen in its own way and its own

time. As we'll see — and those of you who've studied this text will know already — concealment is an innate aspect of the divine.

Our sense of that is, of our bodies, our minds, our thoughts, and of what the so-called external world shows us, is going to be totally different at different levels of consciousness, and even in different states. Robert Kegan, the developmental psychologist, has a formulation that describes the way this process works: "The subject at one stage becomes the object of another."

Our understanding of who 'I' am shifts as we grow. One of the first stages of spiritual awakening is the recognition that we are creating our inner experience through our thoughts. We begin to realize that our awareness, our sense of Self, can actually be separated from thoughts, and that instead of believing every thought we have, we can witness our thoughts and emotions.

Eventually — especially if we study tantra! — we begin to realize that our thoughts and emotions have energy. One thought might have expansive energy, another thought might feel sharp and dense. We begin to realize that the energy in our thoughts and emotions is actually more significant than the content.

When we begin to be able to set aside the content of thoughts and tune into the energy, we start to enter into subtler and subtler levels of our own consciousness. And eventually, we begin to recognize consciousness itself, and to realize that on the deepest level, we ARE awareness, consciousness.

As we become more established in that recognition, we begin to experience more and more freedom and power. This is known as awakening.

At a later stage of development, we may recognize that our awareness is part of a larger awareness that actually contains and threads through all that is. Tantra describes this recognition as self-realization, or *atma vyapti* — the experience that awareness pervades everything.

At a still later stage, we recognize that 'I' *am the whole* of reality, the great awareness that contains all the parts. Our individual ego-awareness literally melts into the recognition of Awareness, or Presence, the vastness that is the source of all. We realize as an actual felt experience that the awareness that I am includes all that is, and is actually the source of the universe.

This state is known as Shiva vyapti, or the experience of being that which is the source and ground of all. This is the highest stage of development according to the tantras. The personal 'I' is then experienced as a shell or garment that the Godness, the Great Consciousness, assumes or discards at will.

Our sense of self, our perspective on self, keeps enlarging, growing, always transcending itself, yet including all previous perspectives of who we are.



## Different Levels of Reality

In the meantime, here we are living our lives, having emotional ups and downs, and trying to figure out how to reconcile this very high, sublime teaching (which many of us have received from our spiritual teachers, from books, and from our meditation experiences) with the way mundane reality. The tantras, like most eastern traditions, have several ways of explaining the fact that we experience reality differently at different levels of development. First, they point out that what we call reality looks and feels different in different states – in other words, the ‘truth’ we experience about the world in the waking state is not the same in meditation or dream, and what is real for us in deep meditation may not feel real at the breakfast table. This idea is central to the tradition...the idea that there are different levels of reality: ordinary reality, or *vyavaharika* reality – sometimes translated as the reality in which we do business – and ultimate reality – *paramarthika*.

Yet, tantra also says that the so-called ordinary reality is not false or unreal. This is a crucial difference between tantra and non-dual advaita paths, which tell you that your daily experience of life is actually false, not to be trusted, as ephemeral as a dream, and that your historical self and identity and the wants and wishes of your historical self are illusory. The historical result of this view has tended to be a tendency to withdraw from the world and consider it unimportant.

Tantra says that all the so called ordinary or intermediate levels of reality ARE real *while we are experiencing them*, even though they are not the only reality. (Even a dream is totally real while we are dreaming it!) Therefore, we must act in the reality we are currently experiencing with maximum skill and presence. The tantrika strives to act in the world with intelligence, artfully, because s/he recognizes that the world is not unreal, but is actually an expression of divine consciousness, and therefore totally sacred. There are many implications of this view, which it is important for a would-be tantrika to contemplate. The fundamental koan for a tantrika always is, “Given that everything around me is sacred, how do I treat my world? My food? My garbage? My neighbors? And how does this attitude of experiencing everything as sacred be made congruent with the necessity to discriminate between safe situations and dangerous ones, between ‘good’ actions and ‘harmful’ actions? How do we acknowledge sacredness while maintaining boundaries?” “How do I see everything within me as sacred while acknowledging that there are qualities in me that are not helpful to my own happiness or the happiness of others? How do I bring about inner change in a context of sacredness?” “How do I honor my meditation experiences without assuming that they are the ultimate truth?” “How do I welcome my meditative experiences, insights, and awakenings without being tossed aside either by fear or excitement?”

These are some of the questions that a tantrika confronts and works out in life. It is a matter of being able to hold multiple perspectives.

For example, on a societal level, you recognize that the economic situation is real and important at the level of our daily experience as Americans, even though from a different perspective we could see it as its part of a much larger historical movement, as

the unfolding of our collective destiny, as part of the natural cycle of birth, maintenance and dissolution, or simply as a play of awareness.

At a personal level, you recognize that emotions arise strongly, but that they also subside. You see that certain personal tendencies are present at certain moments, while at others, you are free of them.

With this understanding, you begin to be less controlled by your emotions and tendencies. In the same way, you recognize that opinions change, that relationships grow and decline, and that depending on your perspective you can see this as painful or as interesting, or as an expression of impermanence, or as part of the cosmic dance of Shakti manifesting in your personal field of consciousness.

Of course, the fact that our experience needs to be taken seriously doesn't mean that it's true at the deepest, most ultimate level. This is really important, and this is where traditions, like science, draw distinctions that are important.

The famous example is the fact that our experience of the earth is that the earth is flat. This is authentic experience. It's real to us. But it isn't actually valid from a scientific point of view.

The tantric philosophers make the claim that many points of view may be authentic in that they are genuine experiences. Yet they are not valid in terms of the actual truth.

The point is always context: the recognition of the larger frame for experience. So tantra never invalidates personal experience. Never says that the mind and ego are to be discarded per se — on the contrary, they are necessary for experience, valuable, and full of their own power.

In the same way, the psychological schema that affect our relationship to ourselves and our world, the cultural prisms that serve as the lenses through which we see reality — all these things are real in the sense that they exist and determine our experience at a certain level of consciousness.

However, and this is really important, they are NOT necessarily true at all levels of consciousness. Just as the pain in your arm disappears when you're asleep, and the suffering of losing a loved one can disappear when you're watching a movie, the different identities you identify with keep changing as you age, change jobs, move between different roles, and especially between different levels of consciousness.

This is especially apparent when you do spiritual practice.

At one level of meditation, your inner world may be full of thoughts, at another level full of insight, revelation, stillness, lights, feelings of bliss, and at still another level, an experience of total nothingness. Beyond that nothingness, you might enter an experience of total ecstatic oneness with everything. Each of these experiences is true and real as far as they go.



Tantra aims at getting us to place all these levels of experience within a larger context. This is one reason why it's such a helpful set of teachings for meditators and yogis.

The larger context in tantra is the context of the wider deeper truth, the truth of Consciousness itself, Consciousness as the container, the context, the source, and the underlying reality behind and within our multiverse, our wildly disparate and multifarious experience. Consciousness as absolute freedom, wildly dancing, ultimately recognized as Us.

### **A Small Glossary: Working Tantric Definitions of Common Spiritual Terms**

For the sake of clarity, I'll be periodically offering specific working definitions of some of the common 'spiritual' terms I'll be using. As we know, many of the English words we use for spiritual experience are understood differently in different traditional contexts.

Depending on the tradition we've been trained in, and the spiritual books we've read, we are used to assigning different meanings to certain key words. In other words, when we use words like 'self' 'god' 'consciousness' 'liberation' 'love' 'bliss' 'enlightenment', we often understand them in a particular way, depending on the tradition we've trained in.

Take for instance, the concepts of 'self' and 'ego.'

Those of you who've been trained in Siddha Yoga, or another of the Indian traditions (including Kashmir Shaivism) use the word 'self' when you mean your true nature, the core of conscious awareness that underlies all experience. You also use the word 'self' as a synonym for the first person experience of God.

Those of you who've been trained in Buddhist traditions, may understand the word 'self' to refer to the illusion that ego creates, through which I might assume that my personal I is a permanent identity defined by my body, my experiences, my thoughts and opinions. So when a Buddhist uses the word 'self', he or she is referring to the phenomenon that a student of a non-dual Indian tradition would call the ego. The word Buddhists use for what the Indian traditions call Self, is something like Buddha Nature, or Original Face, or Big Mind.

If you're a student of western psychology, ego might have a different meaning altogether – it refers to the structure that integrates human experience into a coherent whole. If you're a Jungian, the word Self refers to that in you, which integrate the disparate parts of you into a unique essence that is connected to the collective essence. Then, if you're a Christian or a Jew, or a Hindu or a Muslim, you very often have a unique and particular relationship with a vast transcendental force called God, and a whole language for talking about God that is unique to your tradition. Some of this language is shared, some is not.

So below, I offer you working definitions of some of the *English* words we normally use in spiritual discourse, as they are used in the Kashmir Shaiva tantric tradition.

- 1) **Self** (atma) – The fundamental beingness that is experienced by all living things as the core of their existence. The Self is *the same* in all beings. It is unconditioned – that means, not affected-- by personality or thoughts or physical conditions, even though it is the basis of our existence. personality and thought. The Self has three basic qualities: It exists. It has Being. It is real. One word for this quality of the Self is presence – an inarguable sense of Being that we usually take for granted because it is so basic. The Self is aware or intelligent – it has the capacity to know, to experience, to be aware or cognizant. The Self is innately contented, or blissful. When we are in touch with any of these qualities in ourselves – presence or being, awareness, or unconditioned feeling of blissfulness – we are in touch with the self.
- 2) **God**, known in the tradition as Shiva (underlying ground of all), Shankara (giver of Goodness), paramashiva (supreme ground), parashakti (supreme power), or Paramatma (supreme Self). I AM is the vast, transcendent essence and source of all that is. God possesses infinite powers, which are intrinsic to his nature, and through which he manifests all that exists within his own consciousness. God is self-luminous and self-reflective.

*To experience, to know, and to create is the very nature of God. This capacity to experience, to know, and to create runs through everything in this universe. As we said above, God has two aspects, known in the tradition as Shiva and Shakti. Shiva is the divine ground of everything, the pure light of awareness. Shakti is the power inherent in awareness – the power to know itself, the power to create, the power to will and act. These two aspects of God are not different, though we separate them in order to speak about them.*

- 3) **I am:** (aham) The sense of being oneself. “I am” is experienced differently at different levels of consciousness. When we identify I am solely with the body, mind, personal history, we experience limitation, suffering, constriction, and all the manifestations of egoism. At that level, “I am” always has an object: “I am Cathy, I am tired. I am sexy. I am the mother of Danny.” When identified with the Self, or God, or Truth, it gives the experience of the self as totally pure Consciousness, one without a second.

Then, the I is identified with all that is, as in ‘I am Everything’ “I am pure awareness.” When acting through a body and mind, according to the qualities of that body, personality, and culture, the I Am is capable of recognizing itself as a unique person expressing God through its body and personality, while *simultaneously* being aware of itself as one with the Wholeness. This is the state that the tantras call Jivamukti, or Self-realization.

- 4) **ego** (ahamkara): The self which identifies with the body, emotions, thoughts, personal history and regards the pleasure and pain experienced by the body, emotions, thoughts as belonging to the self.
- 5) **Bliss** (ananda): The intrinsic joy that exists in every living being and in all that exists. Bliss, like the experience of I am, can be experienced at different levels of consciousness. Some of these are transitory, passing states. At the deepest level, however, bliss is seen at the unending truth.
- 6) **Awareness:** (chit or chaitanya): The capacity for knowing or experiencing. Also, the subtle substance or essential beingness that is the 'ground' of experience. In tantric tradition, awareness can be contracted, in which case we experience it as our 'small' or garden-variety capacity for being aware, or expanded, in which case awareness reveals itself as the ground, the source and the essence of everything; in other words (to use a convenient shorthand term) as God.
- 7) **Consciousness:** a synonym for awareness. Consciousness expanded is Everything. Consciousness contracted is the human mind.

We'll be looking at more commonly misunderstood words as the class goes on!

With love,  
Sally