

Good evening, and welcome to our first class, “Freedom, Ecstasy, and Awakening: Meditating with Vijnana Bhairava.”

So welcome to the world of the tantric revelation, the world in which every experience of life can reveal itself as a portal into the infinite.

We’re going to be journeying in the next three weeks into what really is the beating heart of tantric meditation practice. Our guide is the revered text, the Vijnana Bhairava Tantra, roughly translated as “God’s mystical knowledge.” We’ll say more about those words in a few minutes.

Bhairava – and, again, we’ll speak more about that – is a name for the supreme consciousness who is more popularly known as Shiva. Shiva is also known as the primordial Guru, the teacher who divulges the secret practices to his much-loved consort, who is also his own Self. In this text she is called Devi, which literally means goddess or – it’s the feminine form of a Sanskrit word, which stands for “being of light.”

The title describes what the Vijnana Bhairava offers us. It’s literally a series of portals into freedom, ecstasy and awakening, that is, into enlightened awareness. So this is a series of practices that fully intends to wake you up, to give you not only momentary but ongoing access to your luminous consciousness. So it’s a revolutionary book, an initiatory book, so what we’re doing here together is really the beginning of an initiatory process.

Even though the Vijnana Bhairava is 1,500 years old, maybe even more, it retains its full power to transform our consciousness, not so much by what it says, although that’s pretty powerful, as by the states it helps open up in us.

So, as I said, as we practice together, as we study this, as we dip into the dharana – dharana, in this context, meaning centering technique – as we dip into the dharanas, the meditations, both in long and short form, you’ll literally be catching glimpses, short and long glimpses, of the state that we call ‘awakened.’

One thing that I’ve always found very powerful about the Vijnana Bhairava is that it’s not only for people who are consciously on the Shaivite spiritual path. It’s a text that spiritual masters of several different traditions have discovered and adored.

My guru, during the last years of his life, kept it by his bed, and used it as a recreational practice manual. When he was taken to the hospital after a heart attack, it said that he took it into the operating room with him.

There’s a gorgeous and radical idea behind the Vijnana Bhairava, and it’s this: because the infinite ground of being, whose nature is both emptiness and fullness, both awareness and pulsating bliss, because that ground is ever present, we really only need a little jog, a

little shift of attention, in order to flip our consciousness around so that instead of perceiving difference and separation we perceive the sweetness that matures into unity.

The teacher of the Vijnana Bhairava believes that you don't need complex techniques to make this shift, although he does give us some complex practices as well as some very simple and immediate ones. The Vijnana Bhairava can be practiced from many different levels of consciousness, and in many different moods, and states. Its accessible to people with every type of life experience.

Some of the practices here are so simple that you can enter them in the space between breaths, which is, of course, one of the secret, and now not so secret, teachings of the Vijnana Bhairava. It also shows us how to find the secret core of some very complicated yoga processes that the old tantric practitioners tried so hard to master, that require a level of concentration and focus that, for many of us, is just not appropriate in the world we live in. The Vijnana Bhairava takes us to the essence of these practices so that we can actually find the simplicity at the heart of them.

Of course, in the most radical move of all, Bhairava, the teacher of this tradition, points out that your ordinary daily experience, also offers natural portals into true awareness.

We'll be practicing some of the basic techniques of Vijnana Bhairava as well as some of the esoteric, and even some of the weird ones. They're, a lot of them, really fun. And also, we're going to be doing quite a bit of closed-eyed, on-the-mat, traditional meditation practice.

You'll find that some of the practices here, in fact many of them, have become part of the lore of several different traditions, not only Hindu traditions but Buddhist and Taoist traditions, and you find them in some of the Christian contemplative traditions, especially the contemporary ones.

Some of them are open-eyed practices, which I like to call "walking-around practices." And we'll do some of these as what I also like to call "speed meditations," that is short, 10, 15, or 30-second kind of bite-sized immersions that give us a taste of the state they point to. One of the gifts of the Vijnana Bhairava is to reveal how deep an immersion is possible when you really focus for 30 seconds in the middle of whatever else you're doing.

Because tantra, and especially the Vijnana Bhairava, is based on the principle that there's no such thing as a one-size-fits-all practice, we will be sampling a number of different ways in. And among these there is for sure going to be one that can and will transform your consciousness, now and in the future.

Since there are actually 112 centering techniques in this book, that there's way too much material to cover in three weeks, and if that's occurred to you, you are correct.

This three-week immersion in the Vijnana Bhairava, is not the whole of it, and we're going to continue offering classes in this text. We'll continue. In other words, this is Class 1, and we'll be doing three more classes, one every other month, which you're most welcome and invited to join, so that we will find our way, really, to the heart of every type of practice, every type of dharana, and also to some of the more surprising revelations that the Vijnana Bhairava offers us.

Some of these we can come to immediately. Some of them actually ask us to keep going deeper into a practice. We're going to have the opportunity to go as deep as you want to over a period of time, which will let all of us assimilate what we're practicing and learning and having revealed to us in this three-week segment. You'll have a couple of months to assimilate it, and then, if you like, we can go deeper, go farther, go more.

So you can find yourself a comfortable, upright posture. Let your awareness center on the breath. Feel yourself grounding through the base of the posture. Be very beautifully and comfortably soft through the face, through the neck and shoulders, inhaling. Let go of everything that's been on your mind and in your awareness today, and we'll chant.

[Music]

We ask that all beings know the sacred joy that lies beyond suffering. We ask that all beings know the equanimity that lies beyond grasping, hatred, and dullness, and we ask to know the equality of all that lives.

Your eyes are closed. Take a moment to allow your face to soften. Your eyelids are soft. Your cheeks are soft. Your jaw is soft, relaxed. Your tongue is relaxed on the floor of your mouth. Let your shoulders be soft, your neck be soft. Feel your upper back softening, your arms and hands. Soften and release the lower back. Soften the thighs and knees and calves and feet.

And with the next inhalation have the intention. Let your awareness come into the heart, into the center of the chest, and remember a moment when you felt happy, when you felt relaxed. It could be any moment of happiness, of relaxation. Remember where you were, who you were with, what the quality of that feeling was.

Go as deeply into the sense memory of that moment as you can at this moment and see if you can kindle within yourself, if you can tune in within yourself, to the memory that your cells and neurons hold of this moment of happiness, of relaxation, of love.

Notice where in your body that feeling of happiness is stored, and then remove the memory and just let yourself rest in the felt sense of wellbeing of happiness, of relaxation, of love, however that core sense of unconditional, positive experience is felt in this moment. See if you can let that feeling spread through your body, and just enter as deeply as you can into that felt sense of wellbeing, of happiness, of loving presence.

And if thoughts are coming up, or if doubts are coming up, or anything is coming up, just see if you can tune into this felt sense of wellbeing that is perhaps just behind it. And see if you can also sense the fact that this sense of happy, or loving, or relaxed presence has a dynamic quality to it, that it pulsates. It vibrates. It doesn't stay the same. It keeps transforming.

As you read, see if you can stay tuned to that pulsing quality in your own consciousness and to the fact that, at its heart, that quality, that pulsation in your consciousness is constantly creating experience inside you. This, by the way, is Verse 71 of the Vijnana Bhairava, and its become one of the most popular practices in the text.

Whether you call this pulsation of happiness or wellbeing that we've tuned into, whether you call it joy, love, bliss, satisfaction, contentment, or any of the other names in all the different languages that recognize this primal human experience, understand that your inner field has the ability to feel good, and that just as core to your aliveness is the quality of being aware. Core to your aliveness is the capacity for wellbeing, which, even if it manifests in the smallest way, it's always a quality of your aliveness, of your being.

And the practices that we'll be discovering later in this course are all expressions of the primal cosmic impulse to express itself as wellbeing, as love. They're offered to us as hints from our own higher consciousness, which wants us to recognize how our natural state is love. And, really, for each of us to recognize the essence of our own experience as awareness and as love is the goal of all the practices in this text.

The Vijnana Bhairava comes out of a tradition that's usually described as "non-dual Shaiva tantra." One meaning of tantra is a set of tools or texts that give us practical methods for tuning into the sacred. Tantra is sometimes also translated as "weaving", referring to the loom, or tapestry that's the interweaving of this manifest universe. The text itself seems to come from at least the 7th century BCE, though it might be earlier. Not only is it known in the Hindu tantric traditions, it has also become known in many Buddhist schools.

These dharanas, these aphorisms, found their way into one of the early books of Zen stories to come out of the West called *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. Rajneesh Osho, the controversial tantric teacher of the '70s and '80s, wrote a 1,500-page compendium of meditation techniques based on this book. It's called *The Book of Secrets*.

The great Kashmiri scholar and guru, Lakshmanjoo, taught an entire generation of scholars, Indian as well as Western, to understand the the Kashmir Shaiva tradition, including this book. The original English translations by Jaideva Singh as well as Paul Reps have mainly come from this original group of students of Lakshmanjoo.

One reason, I believe, that this text is so significant to contemporary practitioners is because it offers both a direct meditative experience of our deepest consciousness, and a pointing out instruction about the nature of non-duality as your own awareness.

The way you understand reality plays a crucial part in your ability to experience meditation and spirituality. So, although this is primarily a meditation text, it comes out of a certain context, which is helpful to understand..

The word vijnana means “mystical knowledge.” Vijnana is related to the word “jnana,” which means knowledge, but vijnana is direct personal experience, actual entry into the supreme mystery, which in the Shaiva tantric tradition is often called “Shiva”. Here, Shiva is a word with multiple layers of meaning. It refers to the silent, formless pure awareness that is the ground of being. And it also refers to a ‘form’—a deity. As such, he has hundreds of names, many of which are related to the mythic tales that present Shiva as a deity, a half-naked snake-festooned Yogi who both destroys universes when that’s appropriate, but who also liberates us from delusion, and who is known as the Lord of Yogis, and the Adi—original—Teacher of Truth.

In mythology, Bhairava is a particularly fearsome form of Shiva. In tantra, the fierce deity forms are associated with liberation. They’re the aspects of our inner awareness that liberates us.

The story goes like this: Shiva has lopped off the heads of the creator deity Brahma, and he has done this for a good reason. Brahma has created the first woman, then fallen in love with her, and attempted to have sex with her.

Shiva sees this going on, so he manifests in a fierce form and cuts off Brahma’s heads. Brahma is immortal, so this doesn’t actually kill him, though it does give him, as you can imagine, a major wake-up call, and stops him from chasing his daughter.

But because Shiva has done violence, he has to do penance. In doing penance he takes this form of Bhairava, a terrifyingly ugly and frightening figure. In the tantric traditions, this fearsome face is seen as fierce to delusion itself. It’s said that Bhairava creates fear in those who are deluded by the multiplicity of the universe, but in those who seek him as he is, he gives the experience of the all-pervasiveness of one’s own awareness. In other words, he protects us from delusion.

One of the verses of the Vijnana Bhairava translates the first syllable “ba” as meaning both ‘fear’ and as ‘all pervasiveness’. The line says, “Bhairava is one who through fear,” – the Sanskrit word for fear is *bhaya* – “makes everything resound and who pervades the entire universe. He who utters the word Bhairava unceasingly, becomes Shiva.” You might want to try this at home. It’s quite a resonant word!

Lakshmanjoo, in his commentary on this verse, says that actually this makes a lot of sense because it’s when we’re really scared that we most tend to call on divine help. In fact, one of the famous practices in the Vijnana Bhairava points out that one of the best conditions to experience awakening is when we’re frightened, when we’re in a state of terror.

However, the great Kashmiri sage, Abhinavagupta, takes apart the name Bhairava like this. He says the syllable “bha” signifies that which carries the whole universe, which nourishes and supports it, and is carried by it. In other words, Bhairava is not only the source of everything. He’s also inside everything. He’s carried in everything.

Abhinava goes on to say that the syllable “ra” of the second part of the word (rava), means sound, as in the sacred sound “om” and the primordial declaration “I am,” “I am” (in Sanskrit, ‘aham’) is actually the natural sound that the all pervasive, divine consciousness makes when enjoying its own transcendent splendor. “I am”, without name, without form, just simple being, simple “I amness.” “I am” is the experience that we ourselves have when we’re deep in meditation. It’s a wordless recognition of our own existence as that primal source.

Bhairava is not only the primal consciousness. He’s also the inner teacher. He’s the voice of our intuitive wisdom, and his teachings, which were channeled through the minds of sages, are called “agamas,” and many of them take the form of dialogues with Shiva’s inseparable other half, Shakti. Shakti is the energy, the dynamism, the creative power within Bhairava’s waveless consciousness.

In tantra, the ultimate reality is both utter stillness and unceasing, creative movement: Shiva, the stillness, Shakti, the movement.

So the basic teaching of the Vijnana Bhairava and non-dual tantric Shaivism is that one single, vast, intelligence, which is utterly free, creative, and ecstatic, is not only the source of all that is, it is also within everything. We can discover our oneness with that Consciousness in any moment by simply redirecting our attention from the appearance of things to the underlying presence that lurks inside everything. To repeat, we can discover that Source by redirecting our attention from the external appearance of things to the underlying presence that lurks inside everything.

Another way of saying this is that there are cracks, openings in the seemingly solid and opaque surface of reality. There are openings inside this material universe and inside our bodies. When our attention tune into these chinks in the apparent opacity of our body, we can in a moment experience a profound inner shift, so that instead of feel ourselves as limited, we can begin to recognize our true subtlety. This can manifest in many ways, from a feeling of peace to a vast recognition of our oneness with the whole universe.

The Vijnana Bhairava specializes in revealing these cracks. And unlike the more onesided methods of, say, the yogasutras of Patanjali, the tantric meditation techniques in the Vijnana Bhairava are very often playful. There’s an almost mischievous spirit in many of them.

Here’s what, to me, is the most crucial aspect of this teaching: When you realize that there’s absolutely nowhere where divine consciousness is not present, that there’s no experience, including the experiences that we think are not just uncomfortable but

downright negative, when you realize that there's nowhere where divine consciousness is not, you recognize that even when you fall, even when you screw up, you're falling into God. There is nothing anywhere that does not reveal divinity.

When you understand that, there's no reason not to play. There's no reason not to experiment. Obviously, you play with some wisdom, and with the recognition of the laws of karma and consequence. Nonetheless, even the mistakes and failures in your spiritual life have the potential for revealing oneness.

The wisdom of Bhairava is that you're continuously being inundated with possible openings into divine awareness. The only real mistake you could make is not to take the time to notice them. The tantric sages take for granted that you're already always, any moment, no matter what, totally accepted and loved because your body and mind are made out of love. They're powered by the very same intelligence that creates and maintains universes. In other words, there's no outside. There's no me and you. Everything is happening inside this great, pulsing heart, this one great I am.

So if you understand that everything is made of this ecstatic awareness, that it's completely free and endlessly potent, that everything is inside it, that whatever exists and whatever does not exist is part of this ecstatic weaving, then you start to realize that you have the freedom of this consciousness, which is to say you have the freedom to transform your experience by entering deeply into the heart of any moment, and that at no moment can you be separate from that consciousness.

So we'll start our, let's say, verse-by-verse journey into the Vijnana Bhairava, and I wanna begin by setting the scene. One of the things that everyone who's ever studied this text is struck by is the fact that it's a dialogue between lovers.

So maybe because all of us in our secret heart would love to be in eternal dialogue with someone that we adore, perhaps by putting ourselves into the scene where the lovers are together, it will also help us take ourselves more deeply into the understanding of this text.

See if you can take yourself now, in your imagination, into a shimmering grove. If you're a visualizer, imagine it as a summer grove somewhere in the Himalayas with shimmering, snowcapped mountains behind you, with pine, and fir, and cedar trees, with beautiful rocks, and perhaps a few caves filled with hermits somewhere in the distance.

Realize that you're not really in the physical world. You're in an alternate reality on the subtle mountain called Mount Kailas, which is the abode of Shiva and Shakti, who have, for the purposes of this conversation, chosen to take on form. In other words, the formless intelligence, formless, transcendent presence that's the source of all that is, and the dynamic power within that intelligence. They've chosen to divide themselves and take the forms of Shiva and Shakti, Bhairava and Bhairavi, the Mahadev, the great god, and Mahadevi, his consort.

They're reclining at this moment under a beautiful tree on soft, silken moss. And remember their bodies and the grove are made of light. They're made of thought. The leaves of the trees surrounding them are also made of light, and they scintillate in the form of rubies and sapphires and diamonds.

Shiva is luminous white. He has chiseled features. He's got a perfect Yogi's body. His hair is piled on the top of his head in dreads, and there's a crescent moon caught in his hair. The goddess is reclining in his arms. Her body is dark, dark as midnight, and it gleams with a subtle black light. Her face is more beautiful than any human being could possibly imagine, and in the delicacy of her features, the beauty of her body, she incarnates love and blissfulness. She's a goddess.

And lying in Shiva's arms, she addresses him with the loving name Bhairava, meaning "the one who carries the universe and pervades it with his light." And between the two of them, the god and the goddess, a current of bliss flows, a light that ripples erotically at the same time that it manifests as enlightened wisdom.

So they're in their eternal conversation, exchanging wisdom and experience in the endless flow of embodied intimacy and delight that's the highest form of spiritual experience. They're one, and they're also two, and we're going to overhear their conversation.

Tracing Bhairava's chest with the stem of a mountain flower, the goddess murmurs, "Oh, Divine One, I've heard all the esoteric teachings and the incredibly complex practices of the tantra. I've learned the essence of the Trika," – which is the traditional name for Kashmir Shaivism, the philosophy that describes reality in its threefold nature as god, goddess, and world – "I've read all this. I've done all this, but I still have questions. I still have doubts. I really need the answer here, so let me ask you, Bhairava. Please tell me. What's the essential path to enlightenment?"

"Is the right path the one we follow by tuning into the energies inside the vowel sounds in Sanskrit like we learn in some of the tantric text, or is the way to get there by moving backward through the nine-fold mantras to the different levels of consciousness, the _____, or should we follow the path of the vibrations of om as it resounds in the topmost chakra?"

"And, also, Bhairava, tell me about the energy, the Shakti that's both transcendent and imminent. Is the ultimate Shakti the same as the energy that manifests the physical world? Is that energy one, and if it's one, how can it be divided?"

Devi is referring to esoteric practices of tantra. These are quite arcane, but on a meta level, what she is really asking about the relevance of ritual itself, indeed, about all the forms of conventional and even post-conventional religious practice.

As she asks these questions, a smile appears on Bhairava's face.

He says, “Oh, my darling, bravo. This is a worthy question. Your questions go to the tantra ____, the essence of the tantras. And what I’m going to tell you is very secret. It’s guhyaatimom, highly esoteric material, but because you’ve asked this question for the sake of all beings, I’m gonna tell you the secret, the essential tantric secret. Tantra saram idam, my beloved. This is the essence. This is it. This is the essence.

“All these teachings about mantras and deities, and all these divisions and differentiations, the truth is they’re just magical formulas. They’re constructions, with no more ultimate reality than cloud castles. They have no ultimate reality.”

Of course, Bhairava here – it’s not a completely new understanding, especially for those of you who follow direct paths, teachings, or Zen. Bhairava really is stating the ultimate non-dual, hard-ass position. He’s dismissing all the rituals, all the complex practices, all the mantric formulas that are supposed to give special powers, and that are the heart of conventional tantric practice.

He’s essentially saying that orthodox religious practices become irrelevant when we are talking about the ultimate truth. He actually goes on to say that all of these orthodox formulations are like the stories used to frighten children into being good, or, as he says, like the sweets that mothers give to children to get them to behave well.

Another way of saying this is that all these ways of describing God, and all these practices, are actually meant to help unawakened people live decent, ethical lives, which is not a bad thing at all, as we all know, but it’s not the direct path.

And he’s also deconstructing the entire system of tantric practice manuals, including all the Pranayama and breathing exercises. He’s saying is they’re very good for certain aspects of worldly life, but they don’t take you to the Truth.

And then he softens a bit. He says, “Actually, all these descriptions, those three-headed Bhairavas and nine-fold paths and collections of mantras, they’re actually taught to help people clear their confused minds when they’re distracted by worldly life.”

His point is, that we all need different practices that can actually give us a way to focus our minds. And much of tantra, as all spiritual paths, is meant to teach us concentration and to help us focus, to clear our minds, and to create a kind of base-camp for our consciousness to purify itself of the various forms of mundane pre-occupations that numb us to our own subtlety. These practices help the mind to develop the skill that we need in order to stay focused on these very subtle truths that Bhairava’s going to give us. But to use another metaphor, they’re like the car that takes you to the temple. When you get to the temple, you have to leave the car outside.

I just want you to take a moment and consider the practices that you’ve done and continue to do with great respect, actually, because all these practices are enormously

useful. But paradoxically enough, the inner path becomes more and more simple as we go along.

So Parvati, the Devi, the Shakti's aim, is to inspire Bhairava, not only to tell us the practice, but also to tell us who he is and who she is. This is what he says. This is Verse 14, for those of you who are following the text. He says, "The state of Bhairava is free from limitations of space, time, and form. It's not particular to any place or designation. It's inexpressible because it can't be described."

In other words, it's pure awareness. Now for a lot of you this is not news. We are modern practitioners. We're pretty well educated in spiritual truths. We know that the ultimate reality is pure awareness. Even if we haven't experienced it, we know that.

But what you can understand here is that these words of Bhairava constitute an initiation. He's not just giving intellectual knowledge. He's actually asking you to recognize what you are.

So just right now turn your attention back on itself and be aware of your own awareness. Let Bhairava's words help you recognize that his ultimate state is available to you in any moment that you let yourself be present to the awareness that is there behind all your experience. So let yourself be present to awareness. For 15 seconds pay attention to attention itself.

Bhairava goes on to say, "The state of Bhairava is filled with inner bliss, anubhavananda, literally the bliss of one's own inner experience. In that ultimate state, there's nothing but itself. There's nothing outside. There's just the recognition that you yourself are not different than the world, and that whatever is arising is one brilliant soul awareness.

"This state," he says, "should be known as immaculate, all-inclusive fullness. In this supreme fullness, who can be the object of worship, and who is there to be pleased? There's no you, and there's no me. There's just this one great fullness."

As Rumi wrote, "Each thing in the universe is a vessel filled to the brim with wisdom and beauty. Each thing is a drop from the burning river of his infinite beauty. It is a hidden treasure because of its fullness."

So Bhairava is saying that this state of Bhairava, which has no form, which is indescribable, is also overflowing with blissfulness.

He actually says, "The ultimate experience of Bhairava is unknowable because it's the knower." This is the classical non-dual statement. The perceiver cannot be perceived because it's the one who's perceiving, just as an eyeball can't look at itself.

The path to enter that awareness, Bhairava says we need the help of Shakti.

And then he says, “This transcendent state of Shiva, this ultimate consciousness, this truth of who you are, can only be seen, *it can only be known, it can only be experienced through Shakti.*” It can only be known and experienced through Shakti.

We actually need the support of the energy. And in us, in individuals, the form of the Shakti that gives us the power to enter the ultimate state is sometimes called “kundalini,” this specific power that becomes active in us through yoga.

What Shiva is also saying – and listen to this carefully – the energy inside you, whatever form it takes, whether it takes the form of a sensation in your body or a pulsation in your mind, or an impulse or a thought, every form of energy inside your being is an expression of Shakti, and taken together all of these energies are a breadcrumb trail that Shakti, our own internal energy, leaves for us that we can learn to follow. And if we know how to follow these signals, they will lead us into this thought-free state, this awaring that is the ultimate reality. And that’s really what these practices are about.

Among the essential qualities of Shakti are pulsation, creativity, and feeling—feeling in the sense of emotion, and feeling in the sense of inner sensation. So when you enter deeply into the energetics of your experience, including your personal daily life experiences, of pulsation, of creativity, or the different forms of feeling, pleasurable and uncomfortable, you are on the path of Shakti.

He goes on to say – I love this line – is that Shakti is the doorway into Shiva. The word is “shivamukhi,” which means – mukha means mouth, so Shakti is the mouth of Shiva, meaning the entrance point into Shiva. And the entrance into the ultimate state is through the energy.

So what we’re going to experience here, as we follow this path of Shakti, is that the energy that arises as the pulsation within the breath, as the expansion that arises when you tune into the space at the end of a thought, as the sensations in your muscles when you run or do a yoga posture, all these, and much more, contain a hidden fire, a pulsing electric energy. And if you can turn your attention into the fire within your experience, if you can walk into that fire by tuning into the pulsations of Shakti in your body and mind, that energy will ultimately melt the wall that keeps you limited.

So Bhairava says – this is in Verse 20 – that when you really enter into this state of Shakti, into the pure pulsation of the Shakti, when you become really immersed in it, so immersed in it that you let go of your ego and self-consciousness, when you melt into the different ways in which Shakti manifests, then you’ll find yourself carried into the non-dual awareness of Shiva, into the state that’s called in Sanskrit ‘samavesha’ or “sameness with the highest” in which your sense of separation melts. And in that “ah” of relaxing into the energy within experience, you can reach the state of Shiva.

So take a deep breath in and exhale. We're going to go to the practice that Shiva tells us – it's the first and last practice in this text. It's so important. There are actually four verses on it, and we're going to practice it this week in several different ways.

So here we are. Bhairava has just told the goddess that the way to this inexpressible, unknowable state of pure awareness is through her, and she says to him, "Okay, Lord" – she says it much more reverently than that – "Please give me the method. How do I do this? How do I enter this state of supreme Shakti that's the path to the ultimate?"

So in Verse 24, Bhairava gives her a simple and powerful practice that is the root of the whole process. He's going to give us, as I said, many, many more practices. He'll tell us in Verse 140 that any one of them can lead you into the ultimate state, but this one, and the three or four verses that come after, are really the basics, the core, the one – I would say the one indispensable practice.

So here's the translation. This is Verse 24: "The exhaling breath, known as prana, ascends upward from the heart. The inhaling breath, known as jiva, descends. Both pause at two points. Their state of fullness, that is the expansion of the pause between breaths, is found by stopping the ascending and descending breath at the place of their origin.

"The exhaling breath ascends upward from the heart. The inhaling breath descends. Both pause at two points. Their state of fullness, that is the expansion of the pause between breaths, is found by stopping the ascending and descending breaths at their place of origin."

Now this is, on the face of it, a simple practice, but the understanding behind it is complex and extraordinary. Remember, we said that Shakti disguises herself as the space between breaths. She literally hides within the body and breath inside these natural, primal activities, but when you enter the space between activities, you can catch her naked presence, and there the state of Bhairava resides.

So that's what we're going to do. We're going to begin with the practice inside the breath. And some of you will know this practice. Some of you may have received it, but you may not have recognized it for the key that it is because the recognition that you do it with is really crucial.

In Tantra we're always being asked to recognize divine presence inside ordinary experience, so much of the teaching here is actually a kind of pointing out instruction, as the Buddhists say. That is, it's meant to remind us to look inside an ordinary moment to recognize what could happen if we pay attention in the right way.

Without knowing what it is we're looking for, we can miss the significance of the pause between the breaths, and, actually, we could sometimes miss the pause between the breaths, too, but I'm gonna give you a clue as to how to find it.

Meditation in the breath is the most basic of all meditation practices. We've all done it. It's calming. It connects us to a sense of peace. But if you just keep following the in-and-out movements of the breath, you miss the essence of the practice, which is the pause, that gap between the breaths. It's in the gap. It's in the pause that the fullness at the heart of all activity reveals itself.

My guru, when he first introduced us to this practice, said **"The space at the end of the inhalation and at the end of the exhalation is a space of the Self. It's the space where God reveals Himself."**

And so I'm going to ask you, as I instruct you in this practice, to do it with the recognition that what you're looking for **is not just the space between the breaths but that subtle point in your daily experience where divine awareness can reveal itself.**

So close your eyes, please. Allow yourself to simply pay attention for this moment to the inhalation and exhalation. The breath is going in and going out. And I'd like to ask you for now not to try to make the breath go deep but actually to follow the inhalation into where it comes to rest, and it should be somewhere in the region of the heart, or perhaps between the heart and the diaphragm. And then follow the breath as it flows out. The exhalation flows up from the heart, out the nostrils, into the space outside and comes to rest.

So just for this moment, follow it, setting your mind flow with the breath, and see if you can relax with the breaths of it. Your mind is riding the breath. Your attention is riding the breath so that you begin to become aware of the natural length of your inhalation and exhalation. Don't try to prolong it. Just let it settle.

Now if it's comfortable for you, you may hold the breath at the end of the inhalation for just a couple of seconds, and then let it go and let the breath flow out. And then at the end of the exhalation, hold the breath for just a couple of seconds. Only do this if you can do it without strain. Otherwise, just let yourself notice the pauses that naturally occur, without holding the breath.

So now the breath is flowing into the heart, and you're holding the breath at the end of the inhalation for just the tiniest fraction of a moment, and then at the end of the exhalation for the tiniest fraction of a moment.

Now, begin to focus your attention, not on the flow of the breath but on these points where you're deliberately pausing between breaths. So let the breath flow in. Hold the breath at the end of the inhalation just for a second or two. Focus there and let the breath flow out, and then focus on the point at the end of the exhalation where you're holding the breath. And begin to feel as though the breath is moving between these two points, the little pause that you're creating at the end of the inhalation, the little pause that you're creating at the end of the exhalation.

So as I take you into the next verse, or the next phase of this practice, see if you can continue following the breath with your awareness, allowing yourself to pause in the space at the end of the inhalation and at the end of the exhalation. The flow of breath is the flow of Shakti. Prana Shakti is one of the names for the way divine energy moves in the human being.

The pause between the breaths is the subtle place where Shakti gathers herself in order to take the next breath. And, though, in this practice that we're doing right now, we are creating the pause with our own effort, as you deepen your awareness of this practice you begin to realize that the pause is really there. You don't have to create it. The pause, that opening, that space between the breaths is, if you pay attention to it, not just a doorway into the inner Self, not just the doorway into the state of pure consciousness or pure divine awareness. It is God consciousness itself.

So just stay with that practice with the intention to recognize this little space between the breaths as, what I like to call "the God space." In Sanskrit, it's called *Madhya dasha*, which means middle space, center or, in the vernacular, the 'gap'. The Madhya is the pause where Shakti gathers at the beginning and end of the breath, rather like the still point at the beginning and end of a swinging pendulum. More than that, it's the mystical stillness that opens up when we enter deep meditation—the space at the beginning and end of movement where we touch our Source.

Yoga science divides the breath into three parts that are called in Sanskrit "purvaka" which means inhalation or taking in fullness; "rechaka" which means emptying out in exhalation; and "kumbhaka," which means holding the breath. The word kumba means pot, so kumbhaka is also translated as 'pot'

Kumbhaka is the practice in yoga of holding the breath (making a pot) so that the Prana Shakti, the energy inside the breath can expand. There's a saying in yoga that prana and mind are inextricably connected, so when the prana moves, it's said the mind moves. When the prana is still, the mind is still.

And from the point of view of tantric teachings, the reason that prana and mind are so connected is because both of them are aspects of how Shakti manifests human consciousness in the physical world. Shakti becomes prana, life force, and keeps bodies alive and vibrant. Shakti also becomes the individual consciousness itself, the inner field of the mind, or Chitta, that lets us experience life.

And both these forms of Shakti, prana and mind, when they are moving, carry our attention outward through the senses, create our sense of being limited, being particular, being at the mercy of our thoughts and feelings. And, again, as so many of you know, our conceptual understandings, our stories, our perceptions, they are what Jon Kabat-Zinn calls "the full catastrophe." It all begins and ends as waves of movement in the mind.

And these movements in the mind are enacting the outgoing tendency of Shakti, the power – it's called “disarka” in Sanskrit, the power of emission that creates world, both in and out of the mind.

So the core strategy of yoga is to coax the mind and the breath to give up moving, not just for the sake of stillness but so that the Shakti, the expansive fullness that's hidden within the breath and within the mind, which is the true nature of the Self, can actually reveal itself as what it is.

So kshoba, the agitation of the breath and the mind, mask the consciousness that's just behind them, just the way the foam bubbles hides a liquid. And all those practices get us to still the mind. The key to stilling the breath and the mind are hidden within this natural process that lets us dive in between the waves of the moving prana and the waves of the moving mind into the inner Shakti, the fullness and wholeness, the space between the breaths. It's the core tantric strategy for letting the Shakti expand moment by moment by moment.

According to the tantras, you and I breathe 21,656 times a day, and in between every breath is the pause, the mantra. So in this moment allow yourself to flow with the breath. Your focus is on the pause between breaths. Your attention, remember, is on the space, the beginning and the end of the inhalation. It's a tiny space at the beginning and the end of inhalation and exhalation.

And your practice for now is to observe this space, and if you can, hold it just for one or two seconds. Then let the breath naturally arise, flow out. Hold for two or three seconds at the end of the exhalation, and let it arise and flow back in.

And you're letting this happen very easily. The ease is important. You make this small effort to hold the breath, but only for a few seconds, and never long enough so that there's a strain. Your breath tension is so easy, so small, that it's almost no effort at all.

But your focus is not on the rising of the breath. It's on the pause, the space between. It's slowing down and into the heart of the inhalation, out and up through the nostrils, emerging in the air outside, or the exhalation.

And as you become easier with these tiny pauses, if your mind wants to move, let it remind you that these spaces between the breath are the space where the fullness of Shakti, which is the fullness of Bhairava, can expand as peace, as self-revelation.

And as you continue the practice, what you may find happening is that you begin to feel as though the breath is flowing horizontally from the space inside to the space outside. And you may even find that the space at the end of the inhalation and the space at the end of the exhalation become one.

And as you hold this small pause in the breath, you give the Shakti in the breath the chance to expand and draw you into the Shakti _____, the peaceful state of Shakti, the shanta demasal, the peaceful space, which is revealed through the pause in the flow of the breaths.

Allow yourself to stay present with the flow of breaths and with the space at the beginning and the end of each breath, and understand that this is a practice that you can do all day long in any moment that you have a couple of seconds free. You can pause and be present with the space at the beginning and the end of the exhalation and the space at the beginning and the end of the inhalation. And let yourself be drawn into the state of *shanta avastha*, the peaceful space, which is the space of Bhairava.

You'll be receiving a homework assignment and an audio version of this meditation, and, as well, some walking-around practices from the Vijnana Bhairava. And I'm going to encourage you – and I'll give you the instructions – to make these walking-around practices a part of your daily life, even just for 90 seconds a few times a day, and see what happens as you begin to make turning into the Shakti spaces an actual part of your day, a natural part of your day.

Don't forget the handout of translations and transliterations for the first group of verses. I do encourage you to look at the notes on tantra that is on the course website. And I'll also be sending you some other notes on the text and the practices in the course of this week.

Please don't hesitate to share your experience and your questions on the listserv, and I will be answering questions through the listserv. And, of course, other people often have wisdom on the issues that concern you.

It's a total joy to be with you. And as our practice expands, and as we move through the next weeks, just know that we are holding the space for each other, allowing the Shakti to expand our awareness, and help us to touch what we really are moment by moment by moment.

Namaste. Have a wonderful evening and a wonderful week.