

Understanding How Tantra and Vedanta Lead to the Same Place

A Note from Sally

Tantra and Vedanta are both non-dual paths, which take different approaches to discovering the Ground of Being, and ultimately recognize that whatever exists is non-material. The Neti-Neti approach (I am not my body, I am not my thoughts, I am not what my ego tells me I am) is an important first step in getting this. It's the most efficient method for disentangling our belief structure based on the dualistic idea that "I am an individual separate from all others and the world." Obviously, as a body, you are unique and separate. But that body only appears as a particular entity and personality when you are in the waking state. In dreams and meditation, it will often morph or disappear altogether, proving that it is not ultimately real. So, when we are interested in the truth about the world and ourselves, we begin to ask the questions that ultimately lead to the experience that our deepest reality is Consciousness or Awareness. And, once you have sensed that, you will begin to be able to recognize that this awareness is not confined to the body, that it is the same in you as in others, and that it pervades the world.

Once you have understood that what you think yourself to be is not what you most deeply are, it eventually becomes natural to broaden that insight and recognize that the consciousness in you is the consciousness in everything else. This is when Vedanta becomes Tantra. They are two sides of the same non-dual understanding. Tantra is, we could say, the advanced course of Vedanta. But the fundamental tantric understanding shared with Vedanta is "Consciousness is Everything." The first line of Shankaracharya's famous Vedantic formulation was, "The Absolute Consciousness is the Real, the world is unreal, and the individual soul is the Absolute Consciousness." But then comes his second line, which the Vedantin is supposed to realize: "And the world is the Absolute Consciousness." So, in the end, it's all That consciousness. Tantra is the exposition of Shankara's second sentence, pointing out that everything we can see, hear, think, touch, etc., is an expression of that Absolute Consciousness in its creative power as Shakti.

The big difference between Vedanta and Tantra is that Vedanta names the power that creates apparent reality Maya and sees it as a trickster we need to see through. On the other hand, Tantra considers Maya an aspect of Shakti and counsels that when we understand that we can worship all of reality as Shakti. BUT: seeing Shakti or consciousness in everything, as the tantrikas do, doesn't mean falling for the illusion that the material world is the true reality!

The teachings of Tantra celebrate the world as an expression of Shakti, whereas Vedantic teachings say that the world's appearance should be seen through so that we can see the ground of everything, which is consciousness. But they are talking about the same truth. These two approaches have very different emotional effects; some of us are temperamentally more tantric than Vedantic. But they both lead to the same place. Neti Neti means "only consciousness is real, not the ever-changing bodies and situations of

ordinary experience.” This too is divine; this too is divine”. But the sense of all-pervading sacredness is based on the recognition that the true nature of everything is consciousness, Shakti, and God-ness. A tantrika doesn’t love the world for its own sake but for the sake of the Shakti that is inherent in it.

For most of us, the kind of contemplation that the *Yoga Vasishtha* emphasizes should be engaged in along with practices of sitting meditation, mantra, breath practice, physical exercise, psychological work, and devotional practice. That’s because most of us need practices that develop the different aspects of ourselves—intellect, discernment, loving-kindness, focus, concentration, etc. The tantric traditions also include a number of practices for developing the subtle body and its centers of consciousness, which are not ‘officially’ part of Vedanta. But in the end, in Tantra as well as in Vedanta, everything we practice is to refine our body-mind so that it becomes subtle enough to recognize Awareness as the truest part of our self and as the basis and source of all experience. In tantra, we are guided to use all experience as a potential doorway into the Absolute. Vedanta emphasizes inquiry into the nature of the self rather than any other practice. In practice, many Vedantins have quite an eclectic and wide-ranging practice.

In India, most people who practice Vedantic self-inquiry also have a devotional practice, a daily concentrative practice (often involving mantra), and usually a relationship with a deity or guru figure. They take for granted that Sadhana uses different modalities to develop other parts of us. And, in our time, we’ve come to realize that psychological work—therapy, trauma work, shadow work—is also part of the process and, for many of us, indispensable.

Maybe we start with a mantra or mindfulness practice. Eventually, the mind calms down enough so that we can begin to notice thoughts without getting lost in them, and eventually (if we have the right teaching!), we can start to pay attention to the actual texture of the mind and identify the part that witnesses thoughts. But, until that happens, the main task is to help the mind relax and let go for a little while of the belief that your thoughts are real. That’s when you can start to inquire into the nature of the mind and learn how to identify awareness as what you really are.

That shift is the essence of Vedanta. Awareness of awareness as the true self takes us behind and beyond our tendency to identify with our personality and/or get lost in distraction (either in the so-called outer world or internally through believing our thoughts). (This is what we really mean by “Neti-Neti”—I’m not just the body, the thoughts, etc.). In my experience, that is the first step towards the tantric vision of “Iti Iti.” “This too is divine, and this too is me.” Tantra will show you how to work with emotions, thoughts, and the physical world to find the essential consciousness/shakti within what seems alien, separate, scary, or exciting. But recognizing that consciousness is the ultimate reality is a core tantric understanding as it is in Vedanta. Tantra does not want you to get lost in the material world.

If we are after liberation from suffering, we need to get the truth that the world is not what it seems and make it real for ourselves. Tantra teaches that the world is not unreal and that physical reality is not an illusion. But it’s important to remember that its “realness” is

not because of its material properties. It is real because it is essentially Shakti, that is, consciousness. Moreover, it is real for you only in certain states. The same goes for passion. True tantra does not teach us to get lost in passion but to look within the experience of passion or fear or whatever to find the Shakti—the energy—within its core. Tantra, with its emphasis on “All this (is divine). All this (is divine),” allows us to integrate the recognition of awareness into our daily life. But in my experience, a truly skillful tantrika will always keep in mind that at the subtlest level, s/he is consciousness experiencing a body and a world, not a body experiencing consciousness. In other words, Neti-Neti is a precursor to Iti-Iti.

As Alice points out on the discussion list thread on this topic, when life is pleasurable and our surroundings are comfortable, we tend to be more drawn to the tantric view that includes everything in the sacred. On the other hand, when life is difficult and harsh, we tend to be more interested in detachment or dispassion and more drawn to a “Neti-Neti” approach. But in the end, we need to integrate the two points of view, and one of the gifts of our time is that we are NOT stuck in dogmas about ‘Only this path works’ but can bring them together!