

*Sex, drugs, and black magic? Tantra is infinitely more powerful than that. A modern master reveals the truth about this complex and controversial path.*

**By Pandit Rajmani Tigunait**

I was born and raised in the part of North India that has long been a stronghold of tantric practices. My birthplace, Amargarh, lies in a triangle formed by three of India's holiest cities: Varanasi, Allahabad, and Ayodhya. Varanasi, the city of light, embodies the spiritual traditions of ancient India, including all forms of tantra: Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain tantras; left-hand tantra; right-hand tantra; forbidden tantra; and tantric practices of a purely yogic nature. Allahabad, the city of gods, experiences a big congregation of saints, yogis, and tantrics from every tradition every January and February, and an even larger congregation every 12 years during the *Kumbha Mela*. Ayodhya, the invincible city of Lord Rama, is the most mysterious of all, for thousands of saints and yogis, mostly practicing right-hand tantra, are hidden behind the walls of hundreds of monasteries and ashrams.

There was a monastery a little more than a mile from my childhood home that was a magnet for wandering sadhus, novice seekers, and adepts. The nearby palace had its own circle of tantrics, pandits, and astrologers. My father was one of them. Growing up in this land I saw pandits debating their views, astrologers making their predictions, and tantrics performing their magical rituals. I saw my father spend hours every day reciting scriptures, meditating on mantra, and worshipping the Divine Mother through rituals and fire offerings.

My own spiritual quest began in an extremely simple way. I was afraid of the ghosts who live in dust devils. Inspired by my mother, I started meditating on *Hanuman* by reciting 40 couplets dedicated to him to protect myself from these ghosts. But it was only when I heard an amazing story that I became intensely interested in spirituality and understood that tantric practice could help me discover the best in myself and in the world around me.

The raja of Amargarh was fond of the number 24. He had 24 horses, 24 wrestlers, and 24 pandits. One of the pandits was an accomplished left-hand tantric who worshipped Divinity with alcohol and meat. In those days, palace politics were dominated by right-hand tantrics, who condemned using these articles in rituals. Under pressure from them, the raja demanded that the left-hand tantric clarify whether or not he was using these "impure" articles in his rituals. Instead of answering directly, the tantric said, "I do not indulge in liquor. I worship the Divine Mother in a manner prescribed in the scriptures." This statement annoyed the right-hand tantrics even more. They conspired with the raja to raid the temple at midnight, the time the tantric performed his rituals. They pounded

on the door when the tantric was in the middle of his *chakra puja*, a practice forbidden to non-initiates. Not knowing what else to do, the tantric interrupted his practice and, before opening the door, prayed, “Oh Divine Mother, do whatever you wish.” The crowd stormed in, only to find a chalice filled with milk instead of wine. The tantric, saddened that the Divine Mother had to go out of her way to protect him, resigned from the raja’s court. Many other tantrics followed suit. Soon all kinds of calamities—disease, accidents, and death—began to befall the raja’s family. The royal elephants became deranged and portions of the palace collapsed.

To me everything about this incident—a ritual so potent and sacred it is forbidden to non-initiates, wine turning into milk, and a chain of calamities ensuing from the disruption of a tantric practice—was both fascinating and bewildering. When I asked my father what tantra is and who these tantrics were, he only said, “Tantra is the way to discover the infinite potential of your body, the power of your mind, and the beauty of your soul. Tantrics are the blessed children of the Divine Mother.” Although I was too young to understand the meaning of this answer, the incident at the palace temple was so compelling that it pulled me deeper into the world of tantra.

I began to actively seek out tantrics who practiced special techniques and possessed unique powers. Miracles held a particular fascination so I was thrilled when I met a tantric with an amazing metal bowl. When a theft occurred he would invoke his bowl. The bowl would come to life, rise in the air, float to the place where the stolen objects were hidden, and hover over that spot until the objects were exposed and the recovery acknowledged. I met another tantric who cured cobra bites. Yet another tantric would draw a mandala known as *chakra vyuha*, show it to a woman in labor, and within minutes the baby would be delivered. I met a *sadhu* who specialized in the tantric use of herbs. He would invoke the energy of prickly chaff, for example, and give it to a client whose house was infested with cobras. As soon as the client deposited the herb in his house, the cobras would slither out unharmed. A Sufi fakir specialized in the science of *jantar* (yantra/mandala). He cured nightmares, phobias, and infertility by tying the *jantar* to a patient’s arm. Experiences with these and other tantrics convinced me tantra was as profound, useful, and rewarding as any other science known to man. But when I went to Allahabad and enrolled in the university, I witnessed events that made me wonder if tantra were merely a combination of trickery and superstition.

One of my professors at the University of Allahabad was deeply involved in the study and practice of tantra. He knew almost all the top tantrics of North India, and most of them respected him and sought his guidance. When he became ill, he attributed his sickness to an advanced tantric practice he had recently undertaken. Seeking a cure, he visited a local tantric, Dr. Kapoor, who gave him a miraculous medicine. Each time he took the medicine, he felt much better for a short time. Once the effect wore off, his symptoms returned, so the professor made frequent visits to Dr. Kapoor, who he regarded as his savior and guide. Three years passed. The professor’s wife became concerned because his symptoms were worsening. She asked me to find out if Dr. Kapoor was really a doctor and a tantric.

In time, I discovered that he had a medical degree, but that people were more attracted to him for his tantric powers than for his knowledge of medicine. He did not charge for his services but people were required to bring him one dose of *paan* (a special preparation of betel leaves, betel nuts, and tobacco), a packet of cigarettes, and a small amount of money (less than 50¢). Dr. Kapoor had a remedy for everything from physical ailments to psychosomatic illnesses to the problems that may have had their roots in the spiritual realm and previous *karmas*.

I paid a visit to Dr. Kapoor and found the reception room on the ground floor had such a powerful air of mysticism that a visitor would spontaneously slip into a trance. Dr. Kapoor's consulting room was on the second floor. The stairway was lit only by a tiny oil lamp, which illumined three skulls on a small altar on the landing. The stairs themselves were dark, even in daytime. The consulting room was filled with the smoke of myrrh. Dr. Kapoor sat on an elaborate altar. On either side were smaller altars, each with a flame and a picture of the goddess Kali. A group of followers and students sat before him in the dim light of these two ceremonial flames. The doctor greeted each newcomer by name and announced the problem that brought that person to him. When he made this proclamation, the audience cheered, "*Jai ho! Jai ho!*" (Hail! Hail!). By the time I entered his room, I suspected there was something wrong. By the time I left, I was convinced of it.

I investigated further and discovered that many of the "clients" congregating in the reception room on the ground floor were Dr. Kapoor's agents. Their job was to quietly collect information about the personal life of the clients and pass it on to Dr. Kapoor before the clients went upstairs. Further, the incense smoke contained psychedelic substances, and the people sitting at his feet were drug-addicted courtiers whose job was to enhance the intoxicating atmosphere. Every medicine he gave contained opium, which is why my professor felt better after taking it and why the effects wore off so quickly. Shortly after my professor stopped consulting him—and after decades of successfully practicing "tantric healing"—Dr. Kapoor was arrested for dealing drugs.

This incident forced me to examine the validity of my personal understanding and experiences of tantra. Now, in place of an unquestioning acceptance, I wanted to know the truth about tantra. Are tantric practices as profound, powerful, and fulfilling as they are believed to be? Are tantric practitioners really able to work miracles? Do the consumption of meat, alcohol, drugs, and the inclusion of sex constitute the practice of tantra?

On the bank of the holy Ganges I met a tantric whose popularity far exceeded that of Dr. Kapoor. Everyone knew this tantric was a cannibal. He lived near a cremation ground, and his disciples and followers provided him with human flesh roasted on the funeral pyre. He was always drunk. People criticized his way of life and yet marveled at his spiritual powers. Both his blessings and curses were believed to be infallible. I visited him for several months, risking my life by behaving in a way that would annoy him and draw his curses. I concluded that he was psychotic.

This and many similar experiences made me realize that drugs, deception, cheating, and sexual exploitation constituted a big part of what is called tantra. While I no longer had the same degree of enthusiasm to learn and practice tantra as I'd had before, I did not believe all tantric texts could be wrong or all tantric masters fake.

This belief became a firm conviction one afternoon at the ashram of Swami Sadananda, my beloved spiritual teacher who had guided me during a time when despondency and hopelessness almost engulfed me. He was a wise man with vast experience of both worldly and spiritual life. He lived in austerity—eating little, sleeping little, speaking little. Although he was a great tantric adept, he had shown very little interest in sharing that part of his life.

That particular afternoon, I had just walked into his ashram and had not yet paid my respects when he spoke loudly, “Good, good. You are here.”

Pointing to a young man sitting before him, he said, “A couple of years ago, this man came to me crying that he was going to die in the next few days. When I asked him how he knew that, he told me about a vivid dream. I tried to console him but he argued that so far all of his dreams had come true. He had sent telegrams to his family members, and many of them were with him when he visited me. When I failed to convince him he wouldn't die soon, I invited his death and told him to talk to it face-to-face. Upon hearing directly from the mouth of death that he would live for a long time, his fear vanished. He completed his engineering degree, and here he is, visiting me with his family, alive and healthy.”

The young man and the people with him nodded in confirmation. I was totally unprepared to hear about such a powerful tantric feat from Swami Sadananda. It was not his style to acknowledge his spiritual accomplishments so publicly, let alone appear to boast about them. I felt he was using this incident as an opportunity to talk about a subject he had been avoiding for many years. As soon as the young man and his family left, I asked, “Swamiji, what was that all about? How could you invite someone's death and make it talk face-to-face with someone who is alive?”

He replied, “In fact, I invoked *chaya purusha* and guided the young man to learn about his future, including the time of his death.”

“Swamiji, how unfair!” I exclaimed. “Visitors come and for them you invoke *chaya purusha* so they can be free of the fear of death. You call me your beloved disciple, a slice of your own heart. . .”

Swami Sadananda chuckled. “Why do you want to see magic? Why don't you become a magician yourself?”

“Thank you,” I said, and he immediately got up and walked toward the sandy beach of the Ganges. I followed. Without expecting any response, he began speaking. “Every seeker goes through a stage of confusion, doubt, and skepticism. Distinguishing the real from

the unreal is not an easy task. However, once it's done, it's a great accomplishment. Light and shadow go together. So does what is genuine and fake. Tantra is a great science. With tantra you can see the mind—its visible and invisible forces. With tantra you can see how this world is the mind's magic, and the mind is your greatest friend—a friend who accompanies you all the way to your final destination.” He stepped into the river, washed his hands and face, sipped water, and asked me to do the same. Afterward, I followed him onto the beach. Now Swami Sadananda began to explain, “Chaya purusha is a unique tantric practice. The first stage of the practice involves gazing at one's shadow. Depending on the power of your concentration, it may take a few days, a few months, or even a few years to complete this first step. Gaze at your shadow for as long as you can without blinking. A time will come when you cannot see your shadow. Look at the sky and you will see the outline of your shadow in white. First, this white shadow will be on the far horizon. With practice, it will keep coming closer and will become increasingly vivid until it is as if another you is standing in front of you without touching the ground. As the second and final step of the practice, you infuse this shadow with prana (the life force). You can talk to it as though you were talking to your second self. Today, I'm going to show you yourself through my yoga *shakti*. You may pose any question; it will answer you.”

He asked me to stand with the sun at my back. It was around four in the afternoon so my shadow and I were almost the same size. As guided by him, I fixed my gaze on the neck of my shadow for a few seconds, then looked at the horizon. There I saw a white negative of my shadow. I was amazed. Then I became excited as the shadow began moving toward me. It became overwhelming when I began to see myself clearly—the same face, the same eyes, and even the same clothes. The shadow floated through the sky and stopped four or five feet in front of me. I became disoriented and began to feel myself in both bodies—the one on the ground, the other in the air. One began to look at the other, yet a single sense of I-am-ness pervaded both bodies. With this experience, an unbearable fear descended. I began to question: Who am I? The one standing on the ground or the one hanging in the air? How could I be in two places? I felt like screaming. I did not want to be in two places—I wanted to be in the body that stood on the ground. I felt an enormous pressure in my head from my desire to be in the body below and my unwillingness to be in the body above. But I did not know how to make it happen.

I heard Swami Sadananda say, “Remember, it is a chaya purusha created by me. You are neither this body nor that one. For the time being, however, tell yourself that the body on the ground is yours and it is you. The one in the air is just a chaya purusha. Compose yourself—I am with you. You can ask three questions about anything you wish. The chaya purusha will answer you.”

His voice took away my fear, and my courage and curiosity returned. I asked, “How were you created? How did I feel myself in you? And how do you know more about me than I do?”

The chaya purusha spoke, “This form [body] is an extension of the mind born of *asmita* [pure I-am-ness] of the one standing next to you.”

Looking at Swami Sadananda, the *chaya purusha* then said, “It is his *sankalpa* [determination] that made room in this body for your mind. With that mind came all your desires, attachments, and everything else you identify with yourself. Thus you felt you were in me. The mind that occupies the biological body is totally dependent on the senses, brain, and nervous system. It is always preoccupied with one thing or another. It busies itself counting things in the outside world and has forgotten how to see what lies within. But the mind placed in this body is free from all those limitations and thus can see all that which is normally obscured.”

With this, the *chaya purusha* began to float away and finally dissolved on the distant horizon. With no words to express myself, I followed Swami Sadananda as he walked to a nearby banyan tree. We sat down in the shade and Swami Sadananda said, “There are tantrics who have mastered the science of *chaya purusha*. With the help of *chaya purusha* they predict the future or materialize an object out of thin air. Using the power of *chaya purusha* they perform miracles. I showed you *chaya purusha* not because it is the most important aspect of tantra and not because you need to practice it. I showed you so you will open yourself to comprehending the vast range of tantra.

“Just as there are enlightened people and ignorant people, there are enlightened tantrics and ignorant tantrics. Just as there are good trades and bad trades, there is good tantra and bad tantra. A science by itself is neither good nor bad. What makes it good or bad is how it is applied. These days people often associate tantra with black magic, voodoo, drugs, alcohol, and sex. Tantra has become synonymous with immorality and orgies. That represents only the dark side of tantra.

“The bright side of tantra is supremely enlightening, revealing, and empowering to body, mind, and soul. For untold ages people have been using it to heal themselves and to heal their families and societies. Yogis have used it to accelerate their practice and reach their goal with fewer obstacles. Ayurvedic practitioners have used tantra to make their medicine and healing techniques more effective. Businessmen have used tantra to succeed in their business. In the olden days, kings and emperors used tantric practices to invite rain and to enhance the fertility of the soil. It is well known that astrology without tantra is lifeless. Spirituality without tantra is just a matter of faith and is meaningful only to believers.

“Over millennia, tantrics have invented numberless applications of tantric knowledge. Some of those applications appear lofty and others trivial. You must not forget that everything in life—from the loftiest to the most trivial—has its rightful place. Educated Tibetan lamas apply tantra to protect themselves from the greatest enemies—ignorance, egoism, anger, hatred, jealousy, and greed. Shepherds in Tibet apply tantra to protect their sheep and goats from wolves and disease. Learned sadhus and saints apply tantra to cultivate love for themselves and love for God. But ignorant priests practice tantra to influence the minds of their followers so that their loyalty remains undivided. Yogis apply tantric wisdom to awaken their *kundalini shakti* so that they become adept in the field of yoga. But a person of limited knowledge uses that same tantric wisdom to awaken that same *shakti* in a pendant, only to become a voodoo man. People sell a diamond for the price of cheap glass for the same reason people practice tantra for a cheap experience—

because they don't know any better.”

Intrigued, I asked, “Swamiji, what is tantra really? What are its dynamic principles? How can we learn and practice tantra systematically?”

Swami Sadananda answered, “Tantra is an embodiment of the highest form of healing and enlightenment. Healing occurs when our body, breath, mind, and consciousness work and support each other in a harmonious fashion. When they are disjointed and struggle to function without much mutual cooperation, we fall sick, become old, and die. Tantra is comprised of techniques for reconnecting our body, breath, mind, and consciousness, allowing them to work and support each other. Enlightenment occurs when karmic impurities, mental stupor, intellectual confusion, and emotional turmoil do not block the flow of our inner light. Tantra is comprised of techniques that burn our karmic impurities and make our mind clear, our intellect sharp, and our emotions peaceful.

“The secret of tantra lies in its ability to integrate everything. For ages people have been fighting an unending war—the war of good and bad, right and wrong, virtue and sin, heaven and hell, sacred and mundane, freedom and bondage. Caught in this war, monks and householders, clergy and laymen, politicians and philosophers, men and women, poor and rich, and businessmen and those fully committed to inner life are equally miserable. Tantra has a remedy for this misery. This remedy works because a tantric seeks freedom in the world, not from the world. Here the sacred and the mundane are held together in harmonious balance. Worldly success and spiritual development go hand in hand. It is a joy-driven path. It is a path of active participation in life. It is not a path for those who seek salvation after death, but a path for those who seek health, wealth, peace, and happiness while living in the world.

“That's enough for today. We'll talk later about your questions about the dynamic principles of tantra and how to learn and practice tantra in a systematic and methodical manner.”

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## Living Tantra 2

*Harness prana shakti—the inner divinity—with a potent tantric practice that will charge your mind with vitality, insight, and the power to heal.*

**By Pandit Rajmani Tigunait**

Let's begin by reminding ourselves of the distinctive nature of tantra as encapsulated at the end of my last article:

For ages people have been fighting an unending war—the war of good and bad, right and wrong, virtue and sin, heaven and hell, sacred and mundane, freedom and bondage. Everyone caught in this war—monks and householders, clergy and laymen, politicians and philosophers, men and women, poor and rich, businessmen and those fully committed to inner life—are equally miserable. Tantra has a remedy for this misery. This remedy works because a tantric seeks freedom *in* the world, not *from* the world. In tantra, the sacred and the mundane are held together in harmonious balance. Worldly success and spiritual development go hand in hand. This is a joy-driven path, a path of active participation in life. It is not a path for those who seek salvation after death but a path for those who seek health, wealth, peace, and happiness here and now.

The events I shared with you in the last issue show that the range of tantra is as vast as life itself. Within tantra there are numerous paths—each leading to unique experiences. Some tantric practices are trivial and shallow. Others are profound and deeply meaningful. Some focus on the acquisition of worldly possessions and power. Others have spiritual enlightenment as their central goal. Some tantric paths place exclusive emphasis on rituals and others employ yogic techniques to awaken the *kundalini shakti* and chakras in one's own body. Some use *yantras* and mandalas to awaken and gain mastery over the healing power. Other paths employ unique internal visualizations and concentration techniques to awaken and acquire that same healing power. Some tantrics use herbs to accelerate their practice and others use unique breathing techniques. Some go as far as to use drugs and sex while others abstain from both. But all tantric paths and practices have one common theme: the acquisition of power.

The power to be and the power to become, the power to grow and the power to blossom, the power to explore limitless possibilities and the power to materialize those possibilities—these are the hallmarks of tantric spirituality. Rising above our limitations and gaining access to the limitless domain of the power of will, the power of knowledge, and the power of action is the ultimate goal of tantric wisdom and practice. The term tantra itself tells how to gain access to this boundless field of power.

Tantra is a compound of two verbs, *tan* and *tra*. The verb *tan* has two sets of meanings. The first is “to expand, to grow, to expound, to give meaning.” Tan also means “to weave,

to intertwine, to integrate, to connect, to breathe newness into the old, to pull the present out of the past and give it a meaningful future.” The second verb in this compound, *tra*, means “to protect, to free from sorrow, to help one move away from the domain of afflictions.” Thus *tantra* refers to the path of health and healing, science and spirituality, that holds our full expansion and development as its main objective. It shows us how we can grow and blossom. It shows us how to find purpose in life and how to weave the tapestry of life in the most meaningful manner, how to protect and nurture ourselves, and how to protect and nurture others. The principle of integration lies at the core of tantric philosophy and practice. This principle refers to the integration of our worldly endeavors with our spiritual pursuits, the integration of personal empowerment with the empowerment of others and the empowerment of the natural world. Good and evil, sacred and mundane, coexist harmoniously in this tantric world of integration. Following the principle of integration, a tantric practitioner attempts to find freedom while living in the world and aspires to experience the fullness of life.

To a tantric, life is not bondage but the gateway to freedom. To be born as a human is an opportunity to experience our oneness with Absolute Consciousness—our own inner divinity. God, Absolute Consciousness, deposited Her limitless power of creativity in each of us. Gaining access to that limitless creativity fulfills the purpose of life. And dying without knowing and experiencing that power defeats the purpose of human birth.

**Inner Temple** A tantric begins his spiritual quest by changing his worldview and his attitude toward his own body, mind, and senses. For ages, people have been living with a self-defeating philosophy that condemns the world and thereby promotes the idea of finding freedom from it. According to that philosophy, the body is the focal point of misery: pleasure is the doorway to hell; worldly objects are a burden to the soul. In the view of tantra, this philosophy is deeply flawed.

According to tantra, the world is beautiful. Life in the world is beautiful. Our inability to see the beauty within and without is bondage for it forces us to live in this world purposelessly. The quest for freedom here and now begins with understanding the sacred nature of our body, mind, and senses. According to tantra, the body is the living temple of divinity. The center of consciousness (soul, *atman*, *jiva*) is the highest divinity within us. A vast portion of the powers, potentials, and privileges of this divinity remain dormant. This dormant power is called *kundalini shakti*. Only a fraction of its potentials are available in their awakened form. The power and potential of the soul that is awakened and active in us is called *prana*. Prana, the force that keeps us alive, is the intrinsic and vibrant attribute of this inner divinity. For all practical purposes, this prana shakti is the highest god in us, for it is this particular aspect of divine power that helps us gain access to the infinite dormant potentials within.

The forces that pervade and permeate every nook and cranny of our body are emanations of prana shakti, the inner divinity; they constitute our core being. These forces are gods and goddesses. They live in the body. They heal and nurture it. They maintain order in the body, ensuring that every limb, organ, and system function harmoniously. They preside over our thoughts, speech, and actions. The guiding intelligence of these divine forces offers all the tools and means we need to experience them as integral to ourselves.

This guiding intelligence empowers us to know, through our own direct experience, that these divine forces are us and we are them. That is why, according to tantra, the human body is the most complete yantra and mandala—and the finest of all temples. Gaining access to the innermost chamber and discovering the inner divinity, the center of consciousness, is the goal of tantra.

**Concentrating the Life Force** Over millennia, tantra has discovered countless techniques for entering the inner world and experiencing our oneness with the divinity within. Some of those techniques place greater emphasis on using external tools and means; others emphasize internal means. Those using external tools are ritualistic and follow a set of rules and laws that ensure the rituals are effective and fruitful. This approach is known as *kaula tantra*. Those using internal tools—such as asanas and pranayamas in conjunction with *bandhas* and *mudras*, and meditation on chakras and mandalas in conjunction with mantras and the visualization of deities—follow their own unique rules and laws. This approach is known as *samaya tantra*. The tantric schools that combine these two approaches are called *mishra tantra*. However, the adepts belonging to all of these paths—kaula, samaya, and mishra—share a common understanding: no matter which path you follow or which practice you undertake, you must have a clear, calm, and tranquil mind.

A disturbed, distracted, or stupefied mind is not fit to follow any path. Cultivating a clear, calm, and tranquil mind and infusing it with prana shakti, the radiant, indomitable life force, is the first and foremost practice of tantra. Infusing the mind with prana shakti is the most crucial of all tantric practices for it ensures that the mind—which is at once the most important instrument of practice as well as the container of the energy generated by the practice, is charged with vitality, stamina, and willpower.

In tantric terminology, first infusing the mind with prana shakti and then infusing a practice with this prana shakti is known as *prana dharana*. To clarify why this infusion of prana shakti is so crucial, let us see what happens when a practice—non-tantric as well as tantric—is undertaken without this infusion.

Let's say you have learned the art of creating a mandala. You drew it on silk cloth, accurately and with faith. Before you installed the mandala on your altar, a holy man from India or Tibet blessed it. For five years you have been making daily ritual offerings and meditating following all the guidelines, but you see little or no result. Why is your practice so unsatisfactory? According to a tantric, the main reason is that you have been meditating while facing a piece of silk cloth. The mandala you drew on that cloth was not charged with prana shakti and so it remains lifeless. Meditation on it is also lifeless.

The same is true of an internal non-ritualistic tantric practice, such as meditation on a particular chakra. For example, you are trying to awaken the healing force of the navel center. The mantra you picked from a book is correct. It is an authentic mantra for awakening the healing force. The image of fire your mind has conceived is correct. The technique and procedure you are using to enter the navel center are also correct, yet you have been trying to awaken your navel center for years, without success. Why? The answer is simple: the mantra you picked from the book is lifeless and you did not infuse it

with prana shakti before using it. The image of fire is also devoid of the life force, and the navel center has not been infused with living, awakened, vibrant prana shakti. Thus the whole practice is lifeless.

In a traditional tantric practice, you go directly to the crux of the matter—infusing your mind with the living, vibrant energy of prana shakti. First unite your mind with the prana shakti so it is fully healed and nourished. This fully nourished mind will reclaim its pristine characteristics—clarity and insight, stability and concentration. It will reclaim its ability to receive and retain revelation. It will reclaim its power of discernment. It will learn to travel with the prana shakti to wherever concentration, meditation, and samadhi are needed—to yantras and mandalas, to statues of gods and goddesses, and to spiritual/religious emblems—and will witness the infusion of the life force into those objects. Thereafter, any form of practice—ritualistic or non-ritualistic, external or internal—will become fruitful. This whole process is called *prana dharana*.

*Prana dharana* means “to concentrate prana shakti (the life force); to make prana shakti become concentrated; to intensify the life force until it begins to glow and breathe life into anything falling within its field.” The life force is everywhere in our body in a diffused form. It is performing its function in a diffused manner, which is just enough to keep us alive. In order for this life force to perform extraordinary feats, it must be concentrated.

Concentration begins by collecting the diffused energy and compressing it in a well-defined space. In that confined space, the energy begins to exhibit extraordinary properties which were lying dormant within it. These extraordinary properties include infusing the mind with the power to rise above disturbances, distractions, and stupefaction, and become still and composed. With the unfoldment of its extraordinary properties, prana shakti is able to heal and nurture the body, mind, and senses. It is able to infuse the mind with the power to reach every nook and cranny in the body as well as any destination in the external world. Once it is concentrated, the prana shakti is able to beam its healing and enlightening properties to any point in time and space.

Accompanied and assisted by the concentrated pranic force, the mind is able to awaken the dormant energy of any of the chakras in our body, as well as the energy dormant in mantras, yantras, mandalas, herbs, gems, or any object of meditation or ritual worship. The tantric practice of prana dharana is the means of concentrating the pranic force.

**Bhastrika and Beyond** The systematic practice of prana dharana begins with a tantric variation of the well-known pranayama technique called bhastrika. To practice bhastrika, sit with your head, neck, and trunk in a straight line. Close your eyes and relax your shoulders. Restore your normal harmonious breathing pattern. Then begin to inhale and exhale forcefully through both nostrils. Breathe with the active involvement of your abdominal muscles while keeping your chest region as relaxed as possible. Each time you exhale, pull your abdomen in; when you inhale, push it out. How strongly and forcefully you move your abdominal muscles in and out and how fast and forcefully you inhale and exhale depends on your current level of strength, stamina, and experience with the practice. Don't go beyond your current capacity. Be especially gentle and mindful if you have had surgery in the abdominal area, are pregnant, or have high blood pressure.

In the regular hatha yoga style of *bhastrika*, awareness of the movement of the breath is concentrated at the opening of the nostrils—air flows while brushing this opening. But in the tantric tradition, a practitioner is led to become aware of the movement of breath at different places in the throat and mouth cavity. For example, while practicing the tantric form of *bhastrika pranayama*, you can maintain the awareness of the movement of your breath at the hollow of your throat. This balances the metabolic process. If you are in the habit of overeating, it will reduce your appetite. If your appetite is devitalized, this practice will increase it. Awareness of the breath at the tip of your nostrils, on the other hand, will lead to an entirely different result—the experience of an extraordinary fragrance.

When you practice *bhastrika* as a stepping-stone to the practice of *prana dharana*, however, you focus the movement of the breath as it brushes the soft palate, at the back of the roof of the mouth. The pituitary gland sits slightly above the soft palate, at the base of the brain. This is the region associated with the *ajna chakra*, the eyebrow center. When, with the help of your awareness, you allow the exhalation and inhalation to brush against your soft palate, it creates a pulsation in the region of the pituitary gland, and the energy residing there becomes active. The pituitary gland is a master gland that regulates key organs in the endocrine system. The pituitary gland's role in the regulation of our reproductive organs and, more precisely, the regulation of our moods and emotions (which largely depend on hormonal changes), is well understood. The pineal gland is located in the same general region. The pineal gland not only regulates the secretion of melatonin, but also exerts its influence over the process governing relaxation, renewal, and rejuvenation.

The newly emerging science of psychoneuroimmunology makes it easy to understand why tantric adepts call the energy field of this region *ajna chakra*, the command center. The pituitary gland receives hormonal secretions from the hypothalamus. These hormones contain the information and instructions that our endocrine system and the interconnected network of other organs need in order to function harmoniously. The master glands in this region thus receive an ordinance (*ajna*) from the hypothalamus and pass this same ordinance on to the organs involved in complex and mutually dependent biophysical activities.

It is important to remember that we are talking about the entire region and not a particular organ or spot in that region. Vibration/pulsation in that region will activate the energy of the *ajna chakra*, the center of consciousness that fills the space in the area known as the “third eye.” This is the most suitable center for the concentration of *prana shakti*. Awareness of that center during the tantric version of *bhastrika* will attract the pranic forces that are diffused throughout the body. Complete the *bhastrika*-style breathing by inhaling deeply into the *ajna chakra* and retain the breath to your comfortable capacity, thus compressing the *prana shakti* and containing it at the eyebrow center. Then exhale and breathe normally, letting your awareness rest in the vibrant field of energy at the *ajna chakra*.

As the pranic forces become concentrated at the *ajna chakra*, awareness of that center will intensify. The greater the intensity, the more pranic force will be attracted to that

center. “Intensity of awareness” is another way of referring to the concentration of mental energy. Practically speaking, therefore, the pranic force is making the mind become concentrated, and this concentration of mind is concentrating the pranic force even further. Once this process has begun, it gathers momentum spontaneously and the prana shakti becomes more and more concentrated. This pranic concentration is seen through the eyes of the mind as a radiant field of energy. Tantrics call it *bindu*, an ocean of vibrant, radiant prana shakti compressed in a dot—a point of reference beyond our normal concepts of time, space, and the law of causation. Here, the pranic field is so intense, so compact, that it is lit by its own effulgence. Its healing and nourishing power is so intense, so awakened and active, that anything—yantra, mantra, mandala, form, shape, or visual object—that falls in this field instantly comes to life. It is through this power that we can breathe life into any practice—tantric or non-tantric.

**Advanced Prana Dharana** The tantric practice of prana dharana, which is established on the firm ground of the tantric version of bhastrika pranayama, is completed in several steps. The first step has been described in some detail above: awaken the prana shakti at the ajna chakra with bhastrika-style breathing, retain the last inhalation at the ajna chakra, and rest your aware-ness in the pranic field pulsating there. Through regular practice, you make the prana shakti become stable and compact at the ajna chakra. Do not do this practice for more than a few minutes a day. If it is done accurately and methodically, a five-minute practice will generate more than enough shakti to recharge your entire body and mind. You will have enough shakti to command your mind to attend to the object of your choice. Not only will your mind return from numberless corners of the world, it will stay at the ajna chakra joyfully. Through prolonged and consistent practice, prana shakti and the mind begin to embrace, nurture, guide, and support each other. As this happens, any quest—worldly or spiritual—becomes easy and fulfilling.

Practicing the next three steps of prana dharana requires a deepening understanding of tantra, especially the secret of tantric rituals and why they bring dramatic results. The second step involves selecting an object and bringing it into the field of prana shakti concentrated at the ajna chakra. For example, you could bring an image of sacred fire into the intense pranic field at the ajna chakra. When it falls into the awakened and active pranic field, it automatically comes to life. No longer an inert, motionless image, it will share the vibrant pulsation of the prana shakti. Then you could bring this living fire down to the navel center, and with the power of mantra, formally place it there. Tantric adepts use unique mantras to further feed and nurture the fire at the navel center. An understanding of the dynamics of fire in tantric cosmology forms the basis for these practices.

The third step of prana dharana involves the precise application of prana shakti to accomplish a specific purpose. For example, you wish to cultivate healing power—the power to heal yourself and/or to heal others. Let’s say you wish to boost your strength and stamina. You wish to restore your vitality and youthfulness. In that case, you would meditate on one of the most powerful healing mantras—the *maha mrityunjaya mantra*—while keeping your focus at the navel center, which is already filled with intense, awakened, and active prana shakti. This third step of the prana dharana practice is for

healing oneself. If you wish to heal others, you would go on to the next step.

The fourth step of prana dharana involves undertaking and completing a tantric practice called *purascharana*. This practice consists of reciting a mantra a specific number of times while focusing at the navel center, then making an offering with the same mantra into the sacred fire at the navel center. You would go into your navel center and, with the exhalation, bring the fully awakened, active healing force from the navel center into your nostrils. From there, you would transfer it into a special hand *mudra* known as *trikhanda mudra*. As you dissolve the trikhanda mudra, you would transmit the healing power to the person or precise aspect of the natural world you wish to heal.

The process of prana dharana as described in this fourth step can also be used to breathe life into a particular yantra, mandala, or mantra. As tantrics affirm, only an awakened mantra or mandala can awaken our minds and hearts. Only a ritual brought to life through the power of prana shakti can heal or nurture ourselves or others. The practice of prana dharana is the means of making our practices come to life. The beauty of prana dharana is that we benefit from it while we are practicing it. Once charged with and guided by this energy, we gain the competency to undertake any practice, including the ones forbidden to ordinary seekers.

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