Sex Healing Bodywork as Shamanic Altered State

By Margaret L. Wade

Tantra practice creates a direct connection with the divine for those who are diligent. That’s the stated purpose of Tantra in every place it is practiced. But that’s one of the few things that remains the same about Tantra from place to place and tradition to tradition. The practices used differ, the amount of interaction with other people differs, even the understanding of the term differs. Sources translate the word variously as “weaving,” “thread, string, or ‘that which joins things together,’” “continuum or stream,” and “treatise’ or ‘dissertation’ of a religious nature.” While Westerners generally believe that Tantra at its core involves sexual practices, that is not true in most tantric traditions.

The characteristics that are consistent from one incarnation of Tantra to another are physical practices that involve the use of breath; sound, including mantras; and body positions and movements, sometimes limited to hand positions or mudras. These techniques are intended to strengthen and stabilize the practitioners’ energetic connection with kundalini, and thereby, to the fundamental energy of creation. These practices can produce ecstatic or blissful states.

Psychedelic journey work can produce some of the same results. People using entheogens commonly experience strong spiritual connections and ecstatic states even when not taken for spiritual purposes. If you’ve learned to do either Tantric or psychedelic journeying well, you also know that neither is the easiest way to spend an evening. They both require knowledge, practice, and wisdom to be enjoyable and safe. Everything you know about set and setting are important in both, and selection of your partner(s) makes a huge difference in your experience.

The most dramatic differences between the experiences of the two are the source of the experience and the reliability of it. By “source,” I’m referring to the fact that the psychedelic journey is triggered by ingestion of a chemical or plant substance. Therefore, it can more readily take on a life of its own and be less controllable by the journeyer. A tantrika usually doesn’t enter an altered state as completely as a psychedelic journeyer; that is, the experience rarely includes the concern that a return to normal consciousness is unlikely. Their way out of the experience is clearer, too, as they have spent many hours learning their techniques.

However, as experienced entheogenic journeyers know, breath alone can help change an overwhelming, or “bad” trip into an ecstatic learning experience. In both cases, breathing and other techniques can help build, re-direct.
assisted women working with building
and modulating the experience. Journey-
ers of either path can learn to increase or
decrease the intensity of their experience
using any of these methods: breathing
techniques; drumming, music and
rhythms; sounds produced and allowed;
physical movement, exercise and dancing.

Even without a tantric practice, people
can create an altered state by using their
breath, especially when combined with
appropriate sound and movement. In my
practice as a sexological bodyworker, I’ve
and arms up. Kali was in me and I started
doing this crazy sort of dance, lifting one
leg and stamping, then lifting the other
leg and stamping. I think I was wailing
or screaming.

“Kundalini poured up from
the ground, through my feet, up my body and
out my head. As it did, goddesses jumped
into my body one after the other. I went
from being Kali to Venus to Demeter to
Inanna and Sophia and Diana and on
and on. I couldn’t name most of them and
movements, both systems that move body
energy intentionally, regardless of wheth-
er it’s called chi, prana, seiki, kundalini,
or something else.

In this situation, the woman’s psy-
chedelic and tantric experiences comple-
mented one another. She had developed
a level of competence in them separately,
and the synergy between the two pro-
duced a powerfully ecstatic experience
for her. It’s doubtful if a strong kundalini
release like hers would have happened to

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someone who was not as prepared, but if
it had, it could have been dangerous. Un-
expected emergent spirituality has creat-
ed plenty of problems for the unprepared,
even without psychedelics involved. (See
Stanislav and Christina Grof’s Spiritual
Emergency for more information.)

Psychonauts who experiment with
psychedelics for fun and curiosity have
asked about combining them with tantric
practices in the interests of achieving
a higher level of what one referred to
as “mind-blowingness.” They tend to
be referring to sexual activities rather
than traditional Eastern Tantra. Since
indigenous healers who use plants and
mushrooms for journey work almost uni-
versally prohibit sex activities for those
partaking, it’s a good question. On the
other hand, some tantric traditions in In-
dia use intoxicants (soma, bhang) as part
of specific ceremonies that include tantric
sex. They also have centuries’ worth of
wisdom to draw upon, however.

The simple answer is that combining
two strong technologies is best done by
someone who has mastered each of them
separately first. Doing intense tantric-
style practices during a psychedelic jour-
ney can be risky, but when used at one’s
level of knowledge and comfort, these
techniques can make a journey more
pleasant and meaningful. In this wom-
an’s case, her ecstatic journey was a clear
response to her stated intention for the
session. And yes, it was mind-blowing.
It changed her life – after she had spent
several years preparing for it.

They came and went so fast I didn’t have
time to ask them who they were. They
just took turns being in my body, flowing
in and being there, then going up and out
with the kundalini. Sometimes my body
changed to a pose that they liked, and I
felt like I was wearing different clothing:
flowing togas, warrior shields, all kinds
of stuff. I came back from this experi-
ence ecstatic, feeling whole. It was the
first time in my life that I felt completely
female and completely happy to be a
woman.”

Since this woman had been doing
erotic energy techniques for months, she
recognized what was happening as the
flow of kundalini. She had been practic-
ing allowing energy to flow through her
body, so the entheogen allowed the last
of the physical resistance to let go. If she
had not been training for this, it probably
would not have happened.

If this level of kundalini uprising
had happened anyway, she might have
freaked out just as some of the others in
the circle did. One of the truisms of both
types of journey work is that “What
you see from the outside has nothing to
do with what is happening on the inside.”
She looked dangerously out of control
from the outside – and she was out of
control. But it wasn’t dangerous. She kept
breathing, moving with the energy, and
letting sounds flow out of her mouth
with the energy (and the goddesses).

One of the people who witnessed her
journey recognized some of the poses she
took on. The observer knew them as yoga
positions and archetypal martial arts

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