

Sex Healing Bodywork as Shamanic Altered State

By Margaret L. Wade



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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 experi-

ence 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

and modulate the experience. Journeyers 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 whether it's called chi, prana, seiki, kundalini, or something else.

In this situation, the woman's psychedelic and tantric experiences complemented one another. She had developed a level of competence in them separately, and the synergy between the two produced a powerfully ecstatic experience for her. It's doubtful if a strong kundalini release like hers would have happened to

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assisted women working with building and maintaining their erotic energy. Sexological bodywork is not Tantra, but it uses some similar breath, sound and movement techniques. After learning these techniques with coaching, the women develop comfort modulating their own experiences with ecstasy. Like the energy built and managed by shamans in plant medicine sessions, erotic energy can power the resolution or healing of many emotional and physical difficulties.

Having done such practices for a couple of years, one of the women found herself in a shamanic circle taking turns ingesting a fast-acting entheogen. Here is part of her description of her journey:

"My intention for this session was to appreciate being female and let go of all the crappy things I'd learned about myself from the culture and my family about it. Couldn't I just let go enough to enjoy some of the advantages of being a woman?..."

"I sort of popped out of my body at first and when I came back, there was a digeridoo sounding in my ear. Then energy began in my tailbone and went up my spine pulsing, in this rhythmic flow. As it went, it undulated my body. I could feel it blast out all the kinks in my body and the negative emotions I held in my tissues. My body stretched and bent to make it easier. Some of the time I sort of thrashed around like a garden hose when it's first turned on. Then my body jumped up and took on the position that Kali holding the human skulls is always shown in, with legs apart, knees bent,

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 experience 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 practicing 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 these 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

someone who was not as prepared, but if it had, it could have been dangerous. Unexpected emergent spirituality has created 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 universally prohibit sex activities for those partaking, it's a good question. On the other hand, some tantric traditions in India use intoxicants (soma, bhang) as part of specific ceremonies that include tantric sex. They also have centuries' worth of wisdom to drawn 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 journey 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 woman'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. •