

THE PHILOSOPHY OF TANTRIC YOGA Part II: THE PRACTICE OF TANTRA with SWAMI



CHETANANANDA

JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. I'm Jeffrey Mishlove. This is Part 2 of our two-part series on "The Philosophy of Tantric Yoga." With me is Swami Chetananda, who is the founder and director of the Nityananda Institute in Portland, Oregon. Swamiji is a disciple of the late Swami Rudrananda of New York, who himself was a disciple of Swami Nityananda of Ganeshpuri. Nityananda was the source of modern Siddha yoga as it is practiced in the United States. Swami Chetananda is the author of a number of books, including *The Breath of God*, *Dynamic Stillness*, *Songs from the Center of the Well*, and *The Logic of Love*. Welcome again, Swamiji.

SWAMI CHETANANANDA: Thank you, Jeffrey.

MISHLOVE: For those of our listeners and viewers who did not tune in to Part 1, it would be useful, I think, if we lay out basically the definition of Tantric yoga and how it's distinguished from other forms of yoga, and also how we would distinguish it from certain popular misconceptions about Tantra.

CHETANANANDA: First of all, what I think we said was that Tantra has nothing to do with sex, and while there is a sexual element to both the iconography and practice of certain Tantric schools, by and large the whole focus is on kundalini, which I translate as vital force. Then I believe we talked before about how kundalini manifests itself as the power of the body, the basic vitality of the body, the vitality of the mind, and in the broadest sense the vitality, the energy, of life itself -- fundamental creative force.

MISHLOVE: That's a very succinct summary of our previous discussion. I think we also noted that the Tantric traditions place an important role on the female deities.

CHETANANANDA: Actually, as Tantra evolved, the feminine deities are the whole focus of Tantrism, because the feminine is considered the creative source, the generative source of all experience, and that generative source of all experience is what we are concerned to come in direct contact with, become established in.

MISHLOVE: Rumor has it in many circles -- I've certainly heard this -- that the Tantric path is a very rapid path toward the spiritual goal of enlightenment, but it's fraught with many dangers. If I can add to that, one of the senses that I've had is that the Tantric path does not recognize the taboos of some of the more conventional approaches, or at least it says that one in a ritualized sense can encounter these taboos and achieve a kind of transcendence through them.

CHETANANANDA: Well, I think one thing is that the idea is that everything -- when we talk about taboos, in the context of Hindu culture anyway you're talking about meat, alcohol, sex, fish, and maybe drugs even. But the important thing here is that perhaps these things exist in the world; they are there, and each of us has to confront all of these different parts, different experiences, which are pleasurable and at the same time potentially dangerous to our well-being and our development, even in our ordinary life. And so what the Tantric tradition attempted to do was not to say, "Oh, all this stuff is bad, just out-and-out evil. Forget about it. Don't touch it with a 50-foot pole." The Tantric tradition says, "Everything, every experience, has its appropriate, proper place, and you should develop within yourself the discrimination to know what is proper and what is not proper, and what will lead you to a growthful experience, what is in the best interest of everybody you're associated with, and what is really for your own immediate gratification and is to be avoided." Because experiences in which we haven't thought carefully enough to see the long-term implication of them will definitely be a detriment to us and to those people with whom we're involved in it. You can think of these rituals as a kind of elementary school, in which we're not life-denying in the slightest. Now, I want to be clear. I don't practice those rituals, nor do I teach them, because there is nobody in India today whom I have ever encountered who really understands the function of those rituals or exactly how they are intended to be performed, what their goal is, and so I avoid it. The second thing is that since all those rituals are intended to be ultimately -- and not in a long time, either -- shortly absorbed into oneself in the form of an internal visualization practice, which then leads to still a higher level of practice, then we cut to the chase. We go directly to the internal visualization practice and begin there, because those rituals that were practiced from ancient times through medieval India, and in some kind of extremely sanitized form still exist in India today, have no place in our culture. Most of the Americans that I encounter who have a kind of interest in this really have the intellectual capacity to go right to vital force and to practice that awareness, and that is in fact the goal of all these basic rituals.

MISHLOVE: You mentioned visualization as being very important in this work.

CHETANANANDA: Visualization means that you are turning your attention inside and focusing the energy of your mind on the mechanism by which energy is accumulated and distributed within your physical body, within the mind itself, and ultimately the tradition suggests that we come to recognize our individuality as naught but a small piece of a very, very, very vast energy distribution mechanism.

MISHLOVE: If I understand you right, it sounds like what you're saying is that these visualizations involve the system of chakras and nadis, which are the traditional energy flows of the prana energy in the body.

CHETANANANDA: I see that you're a very sophisticated person, and you understand already some about this.

MISHLOVE: Well, I'm sure I'm way ahead of many of the people who are listening right now, so we need to perhaps explain these terms somewhat.

CHETANANANDA: Chakras and nadis -- it is understood that in the body the vital force is distributed through the various fields of function, realms of activity -- physical, mental, emotional, and beyond -- and it is distributed based upon a system of nerves or channels and intersections. Now, there are three primary channels, and they are the ida, the pingala, and the sushumna, the sushumna being the nerves within the spinal column, and the ida and the pingala are on either side of the spinal column and cross seven times. At those seven junction points there exist chakras, which are wheels, and it is those wheels, those chakras, that have the function of distributing the energy within some area of either physiological or psychological-mental-emotional part of our existence.

MISHLOVE: I understand that as one enters into these visualizations they can become quite complex, because there are deities and sounds and geometrical images also associated with each chakra center.

CHETANANANDA: That is totally true. I try to keep it simple, and I do keep it simple, because I don't think that degree of differentiation is particularly necessary. But definitely -- say you have nothing to do every day but do this visualization practice, and if you have three or four hours a day to do it, then there are seven chakras. Each of these wheels, or distribution areas, has rays, energy lines, that extend off of them. You will, as you practice, become aware of these lines of force that extend off of different chakras. Each one of those lines of force has a slightly different frequency of vibration, and it is in the tradition given the significance of one of the letters in the Sanskrit alphabet that refers to it, so that all the petals and all the system end up to be the 52 letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. So then each chakra has a different number of petals. Now, the chakras are in the base of the spine; two fingers below the navel; in the base of the sex organ; then in the heart; in the throat; between the eyebrows, the old classic third eye; and the whole crown of the head is called the sahasrara, and that's where all of the nerves -- the sushumna, the ida, and the pingala, fuse, become one. And when the energy expands to that point and beyond, that is the time when we start to become aware of what is beyond our individuality and our individual energy field.

MISHLOVE: Well, this is a most interesting system, because on the one end it seems to be grounded in our own physiology, in our endocrine glands and the ganglia and the nervous system, and on the other end it reaches out into things that are very culturally specific and mythologically connected.

CHETANANANDA: Indeed. Now, one thing, Jeffrey. We talked about these rituals, and one point that I didn't refer to that I will come back to now is one of the reasons why the various taboos, the substances that are taboo in Hindu culture, were used in those rituals, is because the whole of that culture conditioned people to think in a certain way about those things. Our culture also teaches us to think a certain way, and there are some things that are taboo and some things that are not. But the tradition wanted to get the practitioners to recognize that ultimately there is no part of life that is bad, and in that endeavor what we are attempting to do is to extend the boundaries of our awareness through every conceivable set of conditionings and conditions, to begin to accept all of life, all of life, even the difficult and the violent and the brutal and the misfortunate and the unjust -- every experience, every possible experience -- as a part of one fundamentally beneficial, dynamic reality.

MISHLOVE: You've written that there was a period in the history of Tantric practice when the practitioners traditionally would cover themselves in ash and go live in cemeteries, as a way of expressing, in some sort of very visible way, their absolute disregard for conventional morality.

CHETANANANDA: Well, since in Hindu culture the cremation ground is the most polluted of places, then these people would go and live in those places, and they would eat only the food that was offered at the time that the bodies were cremated, which is the most polluted food, in order to make -- there's a twofold statement there. One is all bodies, all individuality, is dissolved on the heap of dust that is the cremation ground. All ego ultimately has no reality whatsoever. That's the first thing. All of us, all of our egos, all of our physical accomplishments, all our physical problems, and mental and emotional problems, all end up in that heap of dust, and that's nothing. So that's a statement about the temporariness of the ego and the body. And the second thing is, then, the next statement beyond that, is that all of life, the fundamental vital power of life itself, is beneficial, it is intrinsically pure; it is incredibly powerful, and functions for the benefit of every human being, always, whatever its form. You will remember Krishna on the battlefield -- and think of this: where did cremation grounds come from? Well, after the battle is over, the battlefield turns into a cremation ground, because all the people who have been slain are stacked up there and cremated. Well, that is an allegory for the struggle that all of us engage in in our everyday life, our struggle for success and accomplishment, recognition, the struggle to fulfill our desires. That's the battlefield, everyday life, that we're out there, all beating our brains out to try to get what we think we want. And that battlefield, after we have -- and most people do -- come to some kind of lack of satisfaction, unsatisfying end, in that endeavor, then, that cremation ground, our dissatisfaction becomes the basis by which we can rise above our ego and begin to experience a fulfillment, a joy, that is ever-present within us, which is in no way dependent on the acquisition of anything. We don't need to get the money. We don't need to get the girl or the boy. It's not relationships that are going to fulfill us in any way, shape, or form. This is one of the incredible illusions of our culture, that we need a relationship. One of the things that really bugs me in all the spiritual magazines and publications that you see is people talking about relationships constantly. I mean, we are even in spiritual circles pointing people outside ourselves lots of times, when in fact the unfoldment of that fundamental power of life itself, which Tantric yoga's goal is to achieve, brings about a state of joy and fulfillment within ourselves that is unconditional. And in that state we recognize that all experience is nothing but the breath of God.

MISHLOVE: That's beautiful. Thank you. All experience is nothing but the breath of God. Yet it seems to me -- and we discussed this earlier -- there are many pitfalls and traps herein. You mentioned the classic story of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita urging Arjuna into battle. And there's an irony there, since it was the philosophy of nonviolence that came out of India. There seem to be many paradoxes here. For example, one approaches the taboos, lives in graveyards, or engages in things that are dangerous, in order to achieve fulfillment. Obviously there are abuses along the way.

CHETANANANDA: Well, I think that the issue is that within the context of vital force, everything happens. Everything just happens. Vital force gives rise to the whole range of experience, and without ever diminishing itself or in any way becoming unpure. So many different things happen. You and I, every day we walk in the world. We encounter wonderful people who are caring and giving and really trying to do something good and far-sighted in their lives. We encounter people who have not been so fortunate as to have the nourishment in their lives that they can have that view, and they may be either selfish or in fact outright violent. They may be like that. But these people, fundamentally, the fundamental underlying reality of their lives is the same as yours and mine. It is nothing but vital force. And so what we want to become established in is not the struggle to make one thing -- you know, to promote good and to push down evil. That isn't it at all. We are to walk through our everyday lives facing all the paradoxes, the difficulties, the pain, the misfortune, and the joy,

established in one awareness, which enables us from within ourself to touch authentically the wonderful and the difficult, and to absorb it all within ourself as nourishment, and to then extend that awareness throughout the whole field of our life as love, as compassion.

MISHLOVE: This I gather is really the essence of the idea of non-dualism.

CHETANANANDA: Right. Now think of this, Jeffrey, because in India especially you have a highly segmented society. And so one of the things that the issue of taboos within Tantrism was intended to address is the caste system. The lowest caste people, the untouchables, were considered -- to relate to an untouchable was considered a total defilement of a person. Tantrism laughs at that. It basically thinks it's ridiculous, and these people demonstrate that in their lives. They are not talking the talk of equality and going home to their mansions. They are walking the walk of equality by living where the lowest people in the whole society live, and sharing with those people who are the least fortunate within the whole society, and at the same time demonstrating the fundamental awareness that they have of their own completeness and perfection. They are not striving for anything; they are automatically already fulfilled. And sharing that fulfillment throughout, without any idea that there's a boundary where this person is deserving, that person is not deserving. That's finished.

MISHLOVE: If I can switch topics a bit with you, one of the things that I've noticed in most of the traditional, classical spiritual paths is that the various siddhis, or psychic abilities, manifestations of the gifts of the spirit, are discouraged. It's acknowledged that they exist, but it's said it's not good to get into; it can be a trap for the ego, or a distraction on the way to enlightenment. But my sense is that the Tantric tradition is a bit different in this respect. Could you comment on that?

CHETANANANDA: Maybe it's not that different, although within Tantric practice the siddhis tend to happen a lot more often. They tend to be a lot more prevalent. There are some very unusual experiences that I've had personally and that I have observed as happening. But the basic idea is still the same, and that is siddhis happen. If you put energy into that, in a month or six months, if you keep perpetuating the presence of the same experiences over and over again, you may end up not as a person in touch with the infinite divine presence, but as an entertainer. So siddhis become the mechanism by which -- it's really a great test to have these powers, because you may embrace them, and it may give you a complete misunderstanding about your own significance. Or you may just allow them to exist within you and to manifest themselves on their own, never distracted in any way by the manifestation of any kind of unusual phenomenon. And that's the right idea. Siddhis are not discouraged because they're a part of the practice; they're in fact a part of life. Life is permeated with miracles that happen every danged day, all the time. Siddhis are not really great accomplishments by powerful yogis. They're simply what happens when there is a flow of creative energy happening anywhere in the world, with anybody. The more intense the flow, the more powerful the manifestation of that creative energy and its transforming ability.

MISHLOVE: So I guess what you're saying is not so much to avoid these things, but rather don't get attached to them.

CHETANANANDA: That's exactly true. You have to continually be looking beyond every manifestation, to the ultimate, highest source of life itself, which is the same point that all of us as human beings find our highest, best interest flows from. So what we're constantly looking to is that point of highest, best interest within our life, and that is the point at which a total unity is. And from that point our life is continuously serving the whole of life. There is a total unity of individuality and universal.

MISHLOVE: My sense is that of course every spiritual tradition talks about total unity, but when I hear you explain it in the context of Tantrism it's as if this unity is vibrant and colorful and rich and dynamic, rather than just a pure, clear white stillness.

CHETANANANDA: I mean, come on -- it's hardly anything but still. I mean, we can open any level of your eyes that you have. Biologically our body is constantly changing. The world around us is constantly changing. Our mind is constantly changing. What we hope to do is to become established in what is the essence of change, and from our contact with, our total absorption in, essence of change, to begin to appreciate all change as the power of -- if you'll excuse me -- the power of love, the power of that highest creative power, pouring forth itself in the form of all experience. And then everything is wonderful, everything. Whatever it is that we come in contact with -- and when I use the word contact, I don't use it lightly; I mean contact with -- we begin to appreciate as part of the vibrant unity of all of life.

MISHLOVE: And this, in contrast to other systems which are dualistic and say, "This is good, and that is bad. Embrace this; avoid that."

CHETANANANDA: Tantra basically says -- if we want to talk about it in Western language for a minute -- that God is not upstairs, somebody who had his phone system installed by some fly-by-night organization. It's not somebody who's upstairs and not listening, not somebody who's upstairs and judging who's a good person and who's a bad person. God exists within each of us as the giver of our life, and the giver of all of the experiences within our life. Both what we deem as positive and what we deem as negative flow from the God that dwells within us. That God is not judging us ever, thinking we are a good person, we are a bad person. That God is manifesting the potentiality for choice and self-expression from within us, and it is up to us to either be in harmony with that God, manifesting that power of self-expression for the benefit of the whole, and in that case extending the flow of creative energy, or we are in touch with the lowest part of us, using that power for our own self-interest, and doing what? Creating tension, creating suffering for ourselves and others. But God doesn't judge that. God provides and allows us to choose. Those people who choose to extend the flow come to a state of compassion and peace and joy, which is also a vast wisdom and understanding of where they have come, from where they have come, and to where they are going. People who choose to create tension suffer, period.

MISHLOVE: Swami Chetanananda, you said it very clearly. We've got a chance at joy, but if we don't choose it we're going to end up with suffering.

CHETANANANDA: Indeed.

MISHLOVE: Thank you so much for being with me. This has been a joy.

CHETANANANDA: For me too, Jeffrey. Thank you so much.

