

"WHAT IS TANTRA?!"
RIDING THE WISDOM TIGER

Introduction:

From the beginning of time there have been those rare women and men who, following their hearts great yearning, have answered the existential question of birth and death with realization of who they truly are - who we all are. Pranama is such a one. He invites, cajoles, dares us to join the dance. Read his words, let them enter your heart and smash the taboo against unreasonable happiness. The flame of being is passed from master to disciple in the great silence of the heart - these words are an engraved invitation.

R. F.

"What is Tantra?"
an interview with Tantric Master Prem Pranama

This interview occurred in the summer of 1994. The interviewer, Ralph Abrams, has been a spiritual seeker for the last 25 years. He has worked with Swami Muktananda, Nisargadatta Maharaj, Chagdud Tulku, Nagkpa Chogyum, Native American teachers and currently lives in the Crazy Cloud Hermitage where he studies the Tantric path with Pranama.

R: The word Tantra is thrown around quite a bit in spiritual circles these days, and it often means very different things. I'd like to start off with the simple question: What is Tantra?

P: Tantra is the hot blood of spiritual practice. It smashes the taboo against unreasonable happiness; a thunderbolt path, swift, joyful, and fierce. There are many different types of paths. Some touch you like a gentle spring rain, but Tantra is the wild summer thunder storm churning with creation, destruction, bliss and emptiness. Tantra is a wild mother tiger - if you approach her with right motivation, right intention, and integrity, she'll suckle you at her breast; but if you come to her in a sloppy way, she'll rip apart your body-mind, eat you for dinner, and shit out what's left.

R: Wow! I think that this sense of joyful abandon and the force and bliss you've described would make the Tantric path attractive to many people. Plus the fact that it is known to be a very swift path to enlightenment.

P. Swift, yes. But the Tantric Vajrayana path is complex and can be dangerous. It requires a strong, well integrated sense of self prepared through careful preliminary practice. Otherwise it is possible for the practitioner to make gross errors in judgment. On the Tantric path, it is perhaps easier to become the ultimate form of

egoism and delusion than it is to become free. You can start off intending to liberate the tyranny of ordinary appearance into primordial awareness and end up crystallizing the ego into diamond-hard delusion. There is no authentic Tantra without profound commitment, discipline, intelligence, courage, and a sense of wild, foolhardy, fearless abandon.

R: Why is that? And why foolhardy abandon?

P: Foolhardy because the path is for gamblers. There is a beautiful Rumi poem which speaks to this from the Sufi tradition.

"Love is reckless; not reason. Reason seeks a profit. Love comes on strong, consuming herself unabashed.

Yet in the midst of suffering love proceeds like a millstone, hard surfaced and straight forward.

Having died to self interest, she risks everything and asks for nothing. Love gambles away every gift God bestows.

Without cause God gave us Being; without cause give it back again. Gambling yourself away is beyond any religion.

Religion seeks grace and favor, but those who gamble these away are Gods favorites, for they neither put God to the test nor knock at the door of gain and loss"

(translation by Edmund Helminski)

Tantra takes the jump into crazy wisdom by eliminating even God from the equation, leaving only the mystery with no ultimate attempt to define it. This is a path for those whose hearts are so wild that they are ready to throw it all away on a hunch, for an intuition.

Discipline, courage, hard work and intelligence are required because that is what any quest of the heart demands. Tantra, which molds the power of creation and ego into skillful means cutting through delusion, requires careful preparation. We don't expect someone who just wants to play around now and then on a keyboard to become a concert pianist. We don't expect someone to be able to get up off the couch one day and run a four minute mile. Great tasks require great effort.

With Tantra we are taking the mind and body as cauldron, feeling, ego, elements and world as alchemical ingredients, and imagination informed by divine power as catalyst; and we are accomplishing the great magical task of alchemical transformation. The base metal of dualistic view becomes the infinitely valuable gold of pure and luminous awareness. Tantra is a path of tremendous power. This power is not easy to use without getting burned by it. Yet, at the same time, it is a path of great joy.

If you're going to use poison, pleasure, and personality as the path, you have to be careful not to auto-destruct. In working with an advanced sadhana (practice) such as Vajrakilaya, which is central to

our lineage, powerful energies of psyche, nature, and the subtle realms are harnessed. When such a powerful sadhana is introduced into one's system through authentic empowerment, it is not something to be taken lightly. Let's say you're going to bring anger into the path. It's a razor's edge between liberating anger into the wrathful compassion of mirror-like wisdom and just becoming an arrogant, self-righteous prig. With Vajrakilaya, either you are actually transforming your mind stream into this wisdom-being of great wrath and power, or you are just dressing up your egoistic anger in the deity's clothes. If Tantra is misused, the divine becomes a demon.

When you work with the Tantric path, you are playing with a live wire. It's charged not with electricity, but with the power behind creative force. Tantric sadhana deconstructs and constructs reality, as play, until the essence of reality becomes obvious. Through the sadhanas, private non-realities interface with the public non-reality until you realize the true nature of both. You use illusion to cut through illusion.

R. I am not sure I understand what you mean by public and private non-realities. Are the images, energies, and beings worked with in the practices real or not? Could you elaborate on that bit?

P. The basis of all this lies in an understanding of Dharmakaya and sunyata, "the realm of essence" and "emptiness". The Dharmakaya is not a place or even a state of being or consciousness. Dharmakaya is the field of pure potential, which is exploding into actualized energy and matter at every moment. Each object or thing, even in its "thingness", is still in essence characterized by this field of potentiality. In other words, each "thing" is empty of permanent characteristics; its characteristics share the quality of pure dynamic potentiality and are always tending towards the expression of that potential via constant change and transformation.

All worlds and fields of perception explode from this pure potentiality, which is also pure awareness or emptiness. This essence, this emptiness, is unspeakable and is not any thing at all. And yet it is the dynamic matrix from which all of this (waving his arm about the room) arises, and of which all of this is a presentation, and into which all this returns.

This explosion of essence creates fields of energetic perception. This energy is conditioned into forms by the play of cause and effect. These forms are our world and our self. The world, and all worlds, are coincident with the essence of awareness, which is birthless and deathless and utterly free of the implications of form and limit. The manifest world is not other than essence, but essence is not limited to the shape or conditions of the manifest worlds. One might say that the world and all worlds are held together as form by the conditioned and habitual intent of consciousness. Our particular world is held together by the intent of human beings. The worlds of other beings are held by the force of their conditioned intent.

The structures of existence are not "real" in any ultimate sense. They are public non-realities, playful dreams shaped out of essence and molded in form. They are the radiance of pure

potentiality, momentarily given shape by intent and held in a seemingly cohesive pattern by karma or patterned habitualized consciousness. A Tantric yogi shatters the tyranny of ordinary appearance - the forgetting of how things took on their seemingly real forms - by molding new structures of existence - private non-realities.

We are not talking here about "creative visualization" in the sense generally used. Imagination is, generally, simply mind forms within the public non-reality. We are talking about the actual deconstruction of the building blocks of reality and reconstruction of alternatives. Both public and private non-realities are conditioned forms of consciousness. By enacting the process of creation and destruction in the private non-reality the unquestioned authority and permanence of the public non-reality is undermined. Through the process of advanced Tantric sadhana one is able to recognize the ground of intrinsic awareness within all conditioned forms. This realization allows one to live as intrinsic awareness and recognize all arising as ornaments of that awareness.

The idea of Tantra is not identification with endless new conditioned forms of awareness and color. The point is to slip between the cracks into the matrix of pure potentiality itself. The goal is not achievement of unusual states it is to recognize your primordial intrinsic nature in all appearance. Then all appearance has the single taste of bliss and wisdom. That's not the end either it's the beginning of endless play.

R. That goes quite a bit beyond the general view of Tantra as merely a way of advanced self-help rather than a profoundly magical or transcendental practice. But isn't it also true that Tantra (in this radical form) works with the ordinary emotions and everyday problems?

P. There are no ordinary emotions and everyday problems. That's the point. Being is the natural luminous quality of this matrix of pure potential and Being presents itself in the play of existence. The bliss-mad radiance of pure awareness plays in the colors of Being. The world and your own body, your mind and your energies are nothing other than the natural communicative thrust of limitlessness. There is absolutely nothing ordinary about anything.

When the colors of Being are read through the distortions of dualistic view, they appear as emotions and confusion, and one is bound in the tyranny of ordinary appearance. Being freed from distorted view plays as feeling and clarity in the wild and raucous romp of manifestation. When the true nature of every event is recognized, even the most seemingly mundane moment will hold such great beauty that it will shatter the mind.

Tantra's power lies in its ability to recognize the poisons of ego as distortions of the qualities of enlightenment. The practices transform these distortions or, depending on one's capacity, spontaneously liberate dualistic distorted view into its own true nature. For Tantra the stuff of body, emotion and mind, ordinary emotions and events are the essential ingredients needed for the alchemical transformation of distorted view into Buddhahood.

R. You mention Being's appearance as a play of colors, and that intrigues me. So often Being is described as clear light or white light. Non-dual realization seems to be a one dimensional and one flavor thing, whereas this seems to have depth.

P. Light broken open by a prism displays the colors that are always its nature. Its essence is clear light and its nature is to manifest as the colors of the rainbow. Pure awareness is completely transparent like a sheet of glass. But when broken open, it displays the rainbow of colors or flavors that are the substance of manifestation. Pure awareness and the colors of Being are not in opposition or even in any way two. They are aspects of singleness. So many spiritual paths inherently, though often subtly, negate world, body, and existence. They are always seeking to get elsewhere into the "light" failing to recognize that all is light.

Spiritual systems often misinterpret bondage as resulting from being in form rather than from wrong view. Because of this, they wrongly assume that enlightenment means to be abstracted out of form into subtle realms or "pure" awareness. These spiritual systems try to negate form and dissolve, or return, into the pre-form matrix of pure potentiality. This is possible and that radical act of transcending form is most blissful - but it is not enlightenment. Form and formless are not two; they are a single mystery. These systems are spiritualized forms of the dualistic delusion. Tantra, which in its true form is Advaitic (or non-dual), transcends this limitation. Tantra is wisdom gone wild embracing the totality of what is.

With Tantra you are not getting somewhere; you are just waking up to the true nature of things as they are. The colors inherent in clear light are not other than the light. The display whereby Being presents its limitless mystery is not other than the birthless and deathless pure mystery from which Being comes..

R. It's interesting that you mention Advaita. I recently read Poonjaji, an Advaitic master. He advocates no practice. Form is illusion and every action by the illusory self adds to unenlightenment. What do you think of that.

P: Well, I have great respect for the traditional forms of Advaita. I have always been intimately connected with Ramana Maharshi, and the path that I teach is "Advaitic Tantrayana". On the other hand, there are some serious problems and limitations with the talking school of Advaita versus the various practice schools such as Tantra.

R: What do you mean by "talking school"?

P: Talking schools are those that understand that delusion is only an illusion and all that you need to do is understand the illusion to be free of it. Because all you need to do is understand, then all I need to do as master is explain the truth to you, and all you need to do is listen and you will "get it". The problem is that this is a superficial

grasp of understanding. Understanding in the talking school is considered a primarily mental act. I talk; you listen. In truth understanding is a whole body act. You must understand with the cells of your body, your mind and your feelings. Listening involves a profound action of the entire self. This action is what practice is. Spiritual practice is the act of listening to the teaching with the whole body.

There are fundamental differences between a teacher, even an awakened one, and a master. Poonjaji is a teacher. He speaks about Truth very nicely, though he suffers a bit from the delusion of viewing form as illusion rather than presentation of the formless. Due to this he lacks the skillful means needed to deal with the actual roots of delusion. He lacks the skillful means to communicate with the whole bodily being rather just the mind. In a recent interview he said that he teaches the pure Truth - some get it, some don't, and he doesn't know why. That's the difference between a teacher and a master: A master knows why and can deal skillfully with the causes. A master is willing to deal with delusion on its own ground if necessary. He or she is willing to take on the dragon in its cave, even if the dragon is only an illusion.

The teachers of the endless talk no practice school go on to say "open your eyes and see the beautiful sunset. You do not need to do anything, add anything to yourself. Just open your eyes". While it is true that you don't need to add anything, the problem is that your eyes are shut and you are wearing a blindfold. You open your eyes and see nothing. These teachers do not see you because they are too busy admiring their own "non-dualism".

The teachers of the Advaita talking school do in fact give practices. They give the very difficult practice of pre-verbal inquiry which works once you have taken off your blindfold. But until then it leaves you stranded. All too often people make sense of the words and develop conceptual enlightenment. You understand the description of the sunset so well that you think you are seeing it, even though you are still wearing a blindfold and have your eyes closed. People in this condition even go on to become teachers of the talking school, endlessly describing the imagined sunset to others. I am sure that it is based on my Tantric predilection for wisdom gone wild, my delight in manifestation, but I often find these Advaitic teachers a little prissy. They are unable to enjoy the game, unable to enjoy the madness and wildness of existence. There is no space for non-dual dualism in their non-dualism.

R: That clears up some confusion about Advaita which I hadn't quite been able to put into words. You mentioned Ramana Maharshi. As I understand it your path was not originally Tantric. I would be interested in hearing about how you evolved into this style of practice and teaching. What led you to awakening and to teaching the way that you do?

P: My introduction and initiation into the world of Tantra began with a naked menstruating woman in the University of Michigan's graduate school library. She danced and sang and placed her bleeding cunt over

my mouth and I drank from that source the nectar of immortality, the liquid union of bliss and emptiness. She was the Vajra Dakini Yeshe Tso-gyal, Mother of my true life. But that is the end of the story and was not planned, asked for, or expected. For most of my spiritual journey I had nothing to do with Tantra nor wanted to.

My own spiritual work began in the Gurdjieff system. Gurdjieff was influenced by Tantric teachings though more strongly influenced by the Sufi schools. In his system I found a concrete practical method for working with the habitual conditioning of my body, mind, and emotions. I got to see myself without any veneer. It was in this school that I began to truly crystallize the wish to grow and forge it into a center of gravity that could begin to pull the unintegrated parts of the self into a unified whole.

After some time I began to find that certain axioms on which the work depended were, for me, limited in their view. Given the lack of anyone I considered a true Master, I resumed my search for a system that could take me farther. I visited many different teachers and communities, read enormous amounts, and engaged in a variety of rather extreme experiments on myself. Eventually I encountered the work of the enigmatic and rascally Master Osho. My meeting with Osho, who was called Bhagwan at that time, awakened my heart into intense ecstasy and devotion. It also began a long period of powerful visionary experiences that centered on the Virgin Mary and the Goddess Kali.

For me devotion was an instant and natural though hard path often filled with confusion. My heart exploded in love. The Guru is the trigger. The Guru is the object that the devotee uses as an excuse to slip through the boundaries of ordinary feeling. I learned, in a trial by fire, that irresponsible devotion to the master always ends in serious suffering. In other words the Guru ain't your daddy, the Guru is an introduction to your own nature. What is most important is that I did learn, and over time the love that Bhagwan awoke in me matured into non-dual inquiry.

One day all the energy that had been pouring outward in love for five years simply stopped and began to move inward. This process was fundamentally Ramana Maharshi's question "Who am I?". Who is the one who experiences all experience? This process cuts through all hierarchy of "higher" or "lower" experience by cutting to the root of all experience. Each time I sat down it was like a vortex of energy moving into expanding fields of silence. I would feel this vortex and rest in it. It would draw me into deeper and deeper states of silence from where I would engage pre-verbal inquiry. What had been ecstasy and love before was now recognized as a womb-like place of silence.

When I started the meditative phase of my practice, all the visions stopped short. Previously they were explosions of love, and they kind of rode on the outflowing energy of devotion, my interest in them fueling their appearance. Very late in the silent phase of practice, several months before my own awakening, a new series of visionary experiences began. Visions of Yeshe Tso-gyal, Queen of the Lake of Awareness, Mother of Pure Pleasure. These visions exploded from the depths of emptiness and silence.

One morning, after I had finished my practice, I went to the library to study Sufi texts. I was reading two volumes of Rumi's

works. As I was walking towards the library, I had a feeling that was familiar from previous visionary experiences. It was an intense pleasurable sensation that pushed out from the center of my body, from my heart, towards my skin, though this time it seemed to open forth from silent space. I felt giddy and drunk. I looked up and for a moment I could swear I saw the outline of a dancing woman standing in the air above the library. She was huge! Maybe three hundred feet tall.

The vision lasted for a second, and I went in and began reading on the nearly deserted fourth floor. The longer I sat, the more intense this vibration became. I knew this process very well, and I knew it would lead to a feeling of such intensity, that the ordinary world around me would black out. This feeling of ecstatic drunkenness gets stronger and stronger as if it's resonating more and more swiftly through the entire body. At a certain point visionary experience outshines the "ordinary" world.

I found myself in a cemetery. A woman approached. She was naked, except for some bone ornaments. She was singing and dancing a tune of haunting melody, which I later discovered was the mantra of her consort Padmasambhava: Om Ah Hung Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hung!

I was entranced, simultaneously with ecstatic love and an absolute feeling of overwhelming sexual desire so strong that I was sure I would die from it. She danced around me and then swiftly stood directly in front of me placing her genitals over my face. Her vagina was over my mouth, there was blood flowing from it, and I drank this blood deeply in an unending flow. I could feel it coursing through my body like liquid heat. Suddenly the vision disappeared. I got up and went home - well, actually, I think I first went and had a chocolate chip cookie. This began a period of what my wife and I refer to as the "drooling in the living room" period. I spent close to a month, mostly sitting in a rocking chair in our living room unable to function because the force of Bliss that was flowing through my body was so overwhelming. I was also unable to speak about what was happening.

R: You have a very understanding wife.

P: Yes. Without her I cannot imagine what would have happened to me during this time. These experiences awoke in my mind and body such intense unending bliss and latent neurotic traces of such force that it was unbelievable. Feelings of every kind of distortion, rage, anger, lust, grasping, aversion. I am sad to say that I did a fair amount of acting out on these before any balance was restored, causing suffering to myself and others. Needless to say, this was a very trying time for our marriage.

One of the things that happens in spiritual practice is that the subtle aspects of our ego, the seed essences of ego, hide within our own practice. If you are lucky enough, at some point the bliss force of the divine will force these out into the open.

So it wasn't all just bliss. It was an encounter with the ugliest sides of myself and the most beautiful. The whole picture. The visions, on a daily basis, kept arising. By and large they involved an experiment in mixing states of bliss with my previous practice of

self inquiry and the feeling of silent emptiness. Bliss wed to emptiness produces tremendous power and that's what was being introduced at this point.

R: I can see the evolution of you path from Gurdjieff's very concrete self work into the devotional relationship with a master and mystical states and that leading into silence and inquiry. It seems kind of like this Tantric part was finishing you off. So did this practice lead to your realization?

P: This was all going on without any conscious volition at all. I was continuing Advaitic non-dual self inquiry with all the force I could: Who is the one experiencing this? And if I had actually been able to stop these experiences I probably would have, because they were distracting me from inquiry as well as provoking some pretty stupid behavior in my ordinary life. Luckily, the power of the Dakini, the wisdom woman, was so much greater than my piddling efforts to prevent it. But as these experiences continued in the body, mind and emotions I continued my inquiry.

The awakening came as a result of this practice mix. The mind of bliss is capable of penetrating much more deeply into truth. Happiness, bliss and pleasure inspire a radical kind of courage. Without it no one would leap into that sky of deathlessness and selflessness. Without the bliss force no one would be such an idiot as to throw their life away on a hunch. Realization itself is beyond any and all experience. It is, however, not exclusive of experience or even rejecting of it; it is all-inclusive. After awakening one is restored to absolute and endless humor.

R. So how did your teaching work begin and where did the Tantric transmission figure in that?

P. Several months after Awakening, a friend of my wife's, feeling the difference in me, asked if I would help her with her spiritual practice. I agreed, and several months later more friends of our family asked if I would work with them. My teaching began very slowly and gradually. In the beginning, what I taught was non-dual inquiry, because it seemed the most direct. What I realized over time was that the practice of inquiry and also the natural practice of devotion toward the formless divine is ineffective in most people's lives. It doesn't carry with it the skillful means to work with the obscurations and defilements - the gross and subtle neuroses - that prevent people from realizing their own nature of bliss and awareness in perfect union.

The Advaitic practice that I was doing was extremely similar to the Dzogchen or Ati Yoga teachings of the Nyingma lineage. It was through the Advaitic practices that I was able to reconnect.

One of the most amazing things about Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tso-gyal's Guru, was his recognition that there were many teachings that would need to be re-discovered at a later time. He and Yeshe Tso-gyal wrote the practices down and hid them in the elements and in the pure nature of awareness - in the mind stream of his

disciples. This is the true origin of my connection to Tantra. Padmasambhava created what is called a Mind Mandate Seal and hid teachings on Tantra's skillful means like a timed-release capsule. When my own practice matured to the point where it was appropriate this force of wisdom opened. The force, power and bliss of it was released also, even though I had completely forgotten this connection.

R: So you really didn't have any contact with Tibetan lamas, or the Nyingma (Padmasambhava's) lineage, yet your teaching is very much influenced by Tantra and you recognize Padmasambhava as your root Guru. Without any contact with the lineage, you're kind of a wild card as a teacher.

P: (Laughing uproariously) Yeah, I am a wild card as a Tantric Master. But even wilder than this crazy connection with Tantra is that I am free. Free of birth and death, fear, anxiety, worry. Free beyond being and non-being. Free to do anything. And I just might - and it's a wonderful thing!

A wild card like me who has awakened into and embodied the heart of Tantric practice is unique in terms of the trans-cultural migration of Tantra to the West. Padmasambhava was a wild guy because he was the freedom and bliss of this mysterious reality. Those who awaken to their true nature are the same one - though in their own unique appearance. As Tantra develops in this culture, many aspects of its form are going to have to change. At the same time this must be done in such a way as to not damage the teachings. This is a job of great delicacy. These changes need to be done by someone who stands outside the traditional lineages yet respects the heart drop of the teachings with extreme reverence..

All Tantric practice originates from Pure Vision revelation. Tantric practices in the Buddhist form originate from the Sambhogakaya, or the Visionary Bliss Realm of reality. An advanced practitioner can receive teachings from this source though it is very rare. An awakened master is this realm - it is an aspect of their body.

It is certainly reasonable to be skeptical, and I ask my students not to accept anyone's teachings on blind faith, but to test them in the laboratory of their own body/mind. The faith needed to have a Tantric relationship to a Spiritual Master has to develop over a long period of time. You can't simply jump right into it. There must be testing on both sides - time and deeds. I certainly am mad by any standard. You and I don't live in even remotely similar worlds. I know the universe to be my body, time itself to be my subtle form, and the sky of deathless awareness to be my mind. My interest now is to spark this awakening in others, not to have them fixate on me. That would only destroy their growth and in the long or short run cause them to hate me. We all hate what we are dependent on - no one likes to be a slave.

You should take a little time before hopping into the Dharma bed because once in it there really is no such thing as safe sex. Think about it as carefully as you would a marriage partner. It can take

years.

There is a safety catch: You don't receive advanced Tantric practices in the beginning anyway. You begin with the pre-preliminary practices, which in our community are a series having to do with developing stability in body, mind and emotion at the ordinary psychological level. You can use the traditional meditations on loving kindness, and exchanging oneself for others. These styles of meditation work very deeply. At the same time, I might suggest that somebody seek out therapy, or work in a Twelve Step program.

If you are obsessed with anxiety, fear, worry, comparison, shame, self doubt, body doubt, sex doubt, then those things become your center of gravity. The constant effort to compensate for the pain of neurosis saps you of the joy of ordinary life and the energy for spiritual evolution. In this state of being, people try to replace the work needed to develop an authentic center of gravity with the Master or God - as if some external could be it for you. This must be outgrown.

Next there are the extraordinary Tantric preliminaries involving Prostrations, Vajrasattva practice, Mandala practice and Guru Yoga. These are fairly traditional. This is not an assembly line to enlightenment. Each person's path is unique and possibly very different from this description. There are people in our community who never work with the Tantric path at all, who work along other lines. The extraordinary preliminaries however are profound psycho-transformational methods weaving together body, emotion, energy and mind to awaken latent potential.

During this phase and after the preliminaries are finished students begin to work with the energies of diety yoga and the radical practices of Advaita and Mahasanti. Another way I work with my students is to send them to the best of the living masters from the traditional lineages. This broadens their view and them to test my teaching, my style of teaching, and the authenticity of my transmission in the context of those who are commonly acknowledged to be Tantric Masters. Three wonderful Masters I send my disciples to are Chagdud Tulku, Lama Tharchin, and Nkgapa Chogyam.

R: It doesn't sound like you're shy about letting your students go out and experience other Masters.

P: Absolutely not!

R. That seems a bit unusual. Most people have a great fear of Gurus entrapping them in dependency relationships. Sending disciples to other masters seems like it would help cut through that.

P. It is necessary for two reasons. One is that it cross-pollinates the lineage. This is one of the beautiful things about Tantra. You need the foundation of more than one master. You need to receive the special energies of transmission and empowerment from a variety of skillful masters. This cross-pollinates, just like in gardening; it creates a stronger plant. There is one Guru in your heart and many in the world. It is up to each person to figure out who their heart

connection is with.

The other reason is, I am a wild card as far as Tantric teachings go. I claim the authority to teach Tantra based on my own radical awakening into non-dual awareness and my own Mind Mandate Transmission from Padmasambhava. Such claims could easily be made by any idiot - and often are. I want my students and disciples to have a strong ground on which they can evaluate me and decide where our connection will go. I would like my students who do Tantric practice to be able to work with other masters so that they can come to a greater degree of understanding of my work when evaluated in the context of the traditional tantric practice.

R: It seems to me that there is a lot of information and books written about sexual Tantra, and certainly more people are interested in that than in other forms of Tantra. Perhaps they are seeking this bliss courage that you mentioned earlier. Do you think that people practicing sex yoga are by and large serious Tantric practitioners?

P: Well, there's no point in judging other peoples' spiritual paths. If your path is not authentic over time that becomes clear. Traditionally, the use of sexuality in Tantra comes at a very developed stage of the path. There is no sexual Tantra if one has not transcended desire. Certainly a lot of people are trying to explore and play with sexual energy, and that is great, and they are relating it to the word Tantra because Tantra uses sexuality as part of the path. We live in a seemingly open and permissive culture that actually is very uptight, prudish and provincial. We hype neurotic sense stimulation in order to sell everything from shampoo to cars. Underneath, there is fear of everything genital.

Tantra, however, is not about sexuality. It is about enlightenment. Compared to the bliss force of your true nature, the pleasure of orgasm is pretty puny. The teachings can be used to bring a certain degree of ordinary balance to the psyche, including openness about sexuality. That's a very good thing but let's not stop at the doorway!

R: Enjoying Tantra for the psychological help is good but no substitute for radical absolute spiritual liberation.

P: Right.

R: You emphasize community and that is very interesting to me. I find that many people these days want their practice to be a personal and private part of their life. Relationships are hard and spiritual practice is hard mixing the two seems like it could ease up the process or complicate it.

P: For spiritual practice, community is of vital importance in our culture. In traditional cultures the shock that broke one out of complacent patterns came from moving out of a community that had been the center of one's life. In our culture, we have just the opposite scenario. The shock here is brought about when people move into community from the isolated lives that our culture creates. This was

central to the Gurdjieff system and very powerful.

R: That sense of isolation we have as a culture is very sad.

P: It is very sad - heartbreaking! As you grow and mature in sadhana you need to test your growth in daily life, in job, in relationship, and in the community of other practitioners. There are of course exceptions to this, people who need solitude for their practice to grow strong, and there are practices which require prolonged solitude for accomplishment. Right now I am discussing with the community the formation of a Hermitage center for long term intensive retreats. This is very important if we are going to actually manifest the higher levels of practice and destroy the tyranny of ordinary appearance.

We must be careful that the higher and highest levels of Tantric practice do get transmitted. The loss of these great methods is a real danger. There is a danger to the traditional forms of Tantra because the cultures of Tantric practice are being decimated by war or westernization, the cult of scientism. I think in our culture there is a different threat: That the deeper levels of practice will not be reached to begin with. In our culture the threat is that Tantra will be stillborn. Practitioners will have to break through the cult of TV. mentality and mediocrity into the dignity of their Vajra natures if Tantra is to take root here and flower in its fullness.

R: There might not be enough students who have the basics down and then move into the deeper levels of practice.

P: Right. As Tantric practice takes root in our culture it is important that there be an understanding of the vastness of possibilities that Tantra offers. Waking up into the bliss-mad realm of the perfect union of perception and pure pleasure is really quite something. It is better than what people are dreaming up in the sex workshops.

For one who is awake, the relationship to the world, to the elements, is completely different than for anybody else. We have to be able to move into the really magical and wondrous forms of transformational practice where you are working not only with your own body/mind at its most subtle levels, but the elements themselves. That level of awakening needs to be realized. Its power needs to be applied to the culture and the actual ground upon which we live. To work at these levels - the beginning levels and the most advanced levels, which bring radical awakening or enlightenment - to work with all of these is the real gift that Tantra brings. The gift is that we can encompass the whole of our lives, from the ordinary to the most wondrous, in a single path.

R: Which is quite a feat.

P: It is! The Tantric yogi, who can live married with children, a completely ordinary life, but at the same time play with the world as an ornament of awareness, is really something! To recognize all appearance as the ornament of your own wisdom nature and to live in

the bliss-mad realm of freedom where all perception is delight: That is the goal of Tantra.

R: Thank you.

P: Remember we are talking here about your birthright. Awakening is your birthright. Accept your inheritance!

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