

a bit of background on tantra

Tantra is a first and foremost a spiritual practice that has been influenced - and has influenced in turn - most spiritual and religious movements originating in the Indian subcontinent. This means that many of the practices in tantra will feel familiar and are an integral part of many Hinduist, Buddhist and Jain traditions. These traditions hold similar beliefs when it comes to living our lives: We need the knowledge to do it right, then we put that knowledge into practice, and lastly we require the means to do it correctly.

The knowledge is often contained in sacred texts and finds its physical counterpart in the chants we associate with Eastern religious practices: the chants (mantras) contain the knowledge we need to move forward, and they are a means to make us remember the wisdom, and pass it on.

Tantra means 'practice', it is the active part of our life's actions, and has been described as a "combination of text (teachings), techniques, rituals, monastic practice, meditation, yoga and ideology". Tantric practice is used to bring the wisdom and knowledge to life and allow us to continue on the right path.

Lastly, we require the means to do the practice. That could be physical means (a space to practice), the time to do it, but also the financial means and the state of mind necessary to continue on this path. This is sometimes referred to as yantra.

practising tantra

One of the cornerstones of tantra is understanding that everything is energy, and that 'me' is actually part of 'everything' and vice versa. Everything is connected.

Tantric practice explores this connection through the use of rituals, focus on energies all around us and focal points (chakras) in our bodies that allow us to connect with different aspects of the universe around us. It is understood that spirit and matter are actually not separate. The practices break down the

boundaries between the mundane and the ultimate reality, and serve as a conduit to form connections not just between ourselves and the universe, but with all other beings around us.

Rituals and practices come in many forms, including breathing techniques, postures, gestures, chants, worship, purification, music & dance, but also devotion to teachers, initiation rituals, use of taboo substances, ritual sexual union, to name just the most obvious ones. Practice also often involves setting intentions, the dedication of the practice to a desired outcome.

Looking at this list, you might already recognise some practices that you would immediately associate with other philosophies: yoga uses breathing techniques, postures and a level of dance in yoga flows, Buddhist meditation involves certain postures, chants, gestures and often the lack of movement. Purification and devotion are universals in pretty much every religion.

what about those energies?

Tantra works with energies and their focal points in our bodies, known as chakras in the Indian tradition. Tantric practice recognises these energies as being sexual in nature (kundalini energy) and aims to channel them through our chakras to either achieve more grounding, connect with the higher levels, or energise ourselves and/or others (Reiki practitioners could be seen in this light).

Energies can be broadly masculine or feminine (not to be confused with male and female!), and the chakras are associated with either or both of those energies. It is an important aspect of tantric practice to learn about yourself at first, to understand yourself before interacting with a partner. If you don't know what you want, what holds you back, what makes you tick, how can you fully align yourself with anyone else? Introspection and meditation, but also physical exercises, can lead to self-evaluation and overcoming negative mental states, and create a balanced mindset that is conducive to working with your partner. If done in the right way, the energies can be made to feed on each other and bring the practitioners to higher levels of bliss, of consciousness and realisation.

Ultimately the practice involves two partners representing two complementary kinds of energy, intertwined and reacting to each other: masculine-feminine, submissive-aggressive, active-passive, bright-dark, warm-cold, etc. If you have ever seen the yin/yang symbol, you'll realise that it represents exactly this concept, because neither of those 'opposites' is complete without the seed of the other inside of it.

what is neo-tantra?

This is the branch of tantra that is currently most prevalent in the West. While most Indian practitioners see tantra as involving all or most of the above practices, the neo-tantrics have a slightly different, more sexual, focus. However, while neo-tantra is most certainly more active on that level, it does retain a lot of the spiritual background and teaches it in its own way. Even traditional tantra practice in the East does not always involve all aspects presented above, and each teacher - while following the traditions of their own teacher - formulates their own mix of techniques and focus.

Osho (previously known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and one of the main proponents of neo-tantra) was convinced that the Eastern, more contemplative approach to meditation does not work for 'active Westerners' as they would never be able to focus long enough. He concluded that we need Catharsis to let go of the stress in order to settle in a more spiritual mindset, and he developed a series of practices, some of which can be excruciating but yield the intended results.

As mentioned before, a common misunderstanding that is much more prevalent in the West than in the East is this: Westerners believe that masculine = male and feminine = female! However, both masculine AND feminine energies can be present in women and men, and in fact this is one of the most interesting aspects of working with energies, leading to many a realisation that we are all just part of a spectrum rather than one or the other.

is there such a thing as gay tantra?

Of course, there is!

Here's the big issue: this misconstrued equivalence of female/feminine and male/masculine excludes homosexual men and women from the practice! That particular interpretation has had its effect on Western tantric literature and until today a lot of books, communities and tantra schools available to the broader public focus on the classic male/female couple only, even to this day.

There are exceptions, of course, and luckily their number is growing. Where Osho was not particularly keen on gay tantra (his stance took a lot of U-turns over time, though), and Margo Anand only occasionally opened up to the possibility, books like "The Man Tantra Letters" by Nathan James and Victor Bliss and "Urban Tantra" by Barbara Carrellas, to name but a few, are brilliant at showing opportunities for couples outside of the male/female combination to participate in this most joyful way to connect with our partners.

MenSensual follows in the footsteps of the open approach, returning to the original concept of masculine and feminine energies being present in both women AND men, with variations that depend more on personality than gender.