

THE
RADIANCE
SUTRAS

112 GATEWAYS TO
THE YOGA OF
WONDER & DELIGHT

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sounds true
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PRELUDE



The Vijnana Bhairava Tantra is one of the early teachings on yoga meditation. The name, loosely translated, means “the terror and joy of realizing oneness with the soul.” The text is only about two thousand words in the original Sanskrit, perhaps forty minutes of chanting, yet those few words describe the essence of many of the world’s meditation techniques. I call it “the Radiance Sutras” because it is so luminous.

This text is part of the ancient tantras, although how ancient we cannot say exactly. The first written version appeared in Kashmir around AD 800. Before that, it may have been handed down through the oral tradition, which means that it was memorized and chanted for generations.

In ancient texts such as the Rig Veda, the word *tantra* refers to the technology of weaving—“a loom, the warp.” There is the image of stretching or weaving threads in patterns across the framework of a loom. Metaphorically, a tantra is a tapestry of knowledge weaving together the threads of yoga technique.

A tantra is not poetry, although it may sound that way in the original Sanskrit and in translation. A tantra is a manual of practices. This one is a compendium of yoga meditation instructions, set as a conversation between lovers. Its focus is on full-body spirituality and accepting every breath, sensual experience, and emotion as doorways to deep and intimate contact with the energies of life.

A translation of this tantra came into my hands more than forty years ago, and I have worked with the methods every day since then. It has been a love affair, and I am blessed. One day I started to write a fresh version and it evolved into this book.

A LANGUAGE OF LOVE

The Bhairava Tantra is set as a conversation between the Goddess Who Is the Creative Power of the Universe and the God Who Is the Consciousness that Permeates Everywhere. For short, they call each other Devi and Bhairava, or Shakti and Shiva. They are lovers and inseparable partners, and one of their favorite places of dwelling is in the human heart.

This text feels as though it were composed by a couple, a man and a woman who sang the verses to each other as they co-created. As was the convention of the time, the authors chose to be anonymous and frame the conversation as one between the Goddess and the God in them. The text has the feeling of one richly experienced body speaking with love to another body.

Their inquiry is about how to enter into the vibrant essence of the world with the dual balance of passion and detachment. The teaching emerges from their love-play, reminding us that from within our own hearts we are educated in the spirit of love. They lived this teaching. The secret pathways in the body and the flow of delicious energies are revealed in words that one friend or lover would speak to another. The text invites us to be at home in the universe by accepting every intense experience, every sensual delight, every ordinary moment, as a gateway to the divine.

The conversation begins with Devi asking, “Beloved, tell me, how do I enter more deeply into the reality of the universe?” In reply, Bhairava describes 112 techniques for becoming enlightened through everyday life experience. Each of these techniques is a way of attending to the rhythms, pulsations, and sensuousness of the divine energy that we are made of and that flows through us always. As we engage with these meditation techniques, we are alerted to the presence of the sacred that permeates our bodies. All of these methods involve savoring the incredible intensity underlying the most common experiences. They work by activating the senses, by

extending the range of the senses further into the inner and the outer world. The basic dynamics of life—breathing, falling asleep, waking up, walking, loving—are all used as gateways to alignment and enlightenment.

Each meditation is a deep dive into aliveness, into the underlying reality of what life is. Balance is there at every step; the unshakable serenity of the depths is used as a foundation so that we can tolerate the electrifying vastness of the universe. We are invited to cross the threshold, to walk by the guardian of the gate, to face our terrors, and make our way into the immense and timeless mystery that is always calling.

Many of these meditation techniques are surprisingly informal: Notice a powerful emotion, sensation, or desire, and enter into that awareness with total abandon, so that you go with it right into the root movement of the universe. When making love, put your awareness into the flame of passion pulsating through the body and become that flame. Falling asleep, pay attention to the transition from waking consciousness to unconsciousness, and catch a glimpse of what consciousness itself is. Or go outside on a moonless night and simply merge with the darkness and vastness of space.

The text also describes what we think of as traditional yoga meditations—ways of savoring breath, sound, and internal luminosity. The intimacy with the self implied in these teachings means that tantra is not a set of techniques imposed from outside. Rather, the method emerges naturally from one's relationship with the self and with life. Lose yourself in intense experience, and find your Self. In this text, the word *yoga* is used in its etymological sense, “the act of joining, linking together.” Yoga is *connecting*—connecting all the elements and levels of your being.

The tone of the text is playful and exploratory—jump in and feel everything. *Lila* is Sanskrit for “play,” “amusement,” and the sense that the universe has been manifested as an act of play by the divine. Through play, find your way. In play, find freedom, revelation, illumination.

MEDITATION AS EMBRACE

Taken as a whole, the teaching of the Vijnana Bhairava Tantra is startling in its breadth, in the huge range of human experience that it

encompasses. It shatters the picture we have of what meditation is or how meditation is often presented—as a way of dissociating from the human experience and trying to rise above it. There is not a hint of the usual life denial that permeates and distorts spirituality East and West.

This tantra is about going deeply into experience, embracing it fully, without reservation. Nature is embraced, as is all of human nature. Lust and passion become fires that illumine, and gusto is taken to its most refined degree possible. Meditation is presented as the nexus or meeting ground of light and matter, spirit and flesh, and the meeting is to be consummated with great joy. Tantric meditation is an integration of the opposites, not obliteration or mere transcendence of them. It is an alchemical union in which each polarity exists in its fullness and in a relationship of complementarity with the other.

You'll find here in one place many of the essential techniques utilized in meditation traditions the world over. If some of the experiences that the sutras describe seem familiar to you as you read this book, it may be because you have invented your own private meditation techniques, ones you probably never tell anyone about. Or you may have had inexplicable realizations in the midst of some life experience.

People who come for instruction in meditation usually have one or more of these awareness practices vibrating in their body already, spontaneously. This is what propels them to search. Sutras such as these are here to remind us of what we already know. They are here to invite us to go more deeply into the experience of being human.

It is likely that the same meditation techniques are invented or discovered independently around the world in different cultures, whenever people start paying attention to the subtle energies of the body. If this is true, then the Radiance Sutras is a syllabus of the types of techniques that could be discovered anywhere. In my experience, they are discovered and rediscovered continually, by all lovers of life.

THIS VERSION

For the last twenty-five years, the text has been waking me up at four in the morning, purring Sanskrit in my ear and calling me to come out and play. I walk around in the predawn for a few hours, whispering

the words of the timeless language, letting it teach me about itself. In this way, the Sanskrit has sung itself into modern English.

The original Sanskrit of the Bhairava Tantra has a musical, mantric quality that massages the nerves like no other language I have ever heard. Sanskrit, like tantric meditation, is a union of opposites. The opposites embrace each other, as lovers do, as the eternally fascinating polarity of male and female, day and night, sun and moon.

Sanskrit sings of rhythm, vibrancy, and the transmutation of terror into ecstasy, fear into movement, stasis into electricity. It evokes flow, tenderness, intimacy with oneself and the universe, informality, attentiveness, and responsiveness. Devi's opening statement to Bhairava gets my vote for one of the most enchanting phrases I have ever heard in any language. Chant it softly to yourself and listen:

shrutam deva maya sarvam rudra yamala sambhavam.

“Beloved, I have been listening to the hymns of creation.”

Many types of translations—academic, literary, historical, etymological—can be done of this tantra, and yet each conveys only a small part of its meaning. This version is a *bhashantaram*, a rendering of the text into the vernacular and a migration or reincarnation into another tongue.

The language of the sutras is brief, meant to be read over and over. Each Sanskrit verse is only thirty-two syllables, intricately woven and saturated with the power of bliss (*anandashakti*). Just as all of life is interconnected, one word of Sanskrit may have a spectrum of interconnected meanings, encompassing the realms of meditation, music, cooking, medicine, alchemy, sex, ritual worship, art, dance, theater, astronomy, astrology, and mathematics. These definitions are full of physical images that give clues to how to practice.

For example, the word *yoga* has the central meaning of “joining things together,” or “hooking up.” The first definition of yoga listed in the Monier-Williams *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* is “the act of yoking, joining, attaching, putting to (of horses).” If we look up the English phrase “putting to,” we see that it is a British expression for hitching up a horse, “attaching the harness to the load.” *Yoga* also means “equipping or arraying an army, fixing an arrow on the bowstring,

putting on of armor,” and in medicine, “a remedy or cure.” *Yoga* can refer to any junction—in astronomy and astrology, a conjunction of the stars or planets; in grammar, the connection of words together; in arithmetic, addition, sum, total. In alchemy or chemistry, mixing different materials together is yoga. In spirituality, *yoga* can mean the union of the soul with matter, the union of the individual soul with the universal soul, and the disciplines that serve this union.

If we take these images metaphorically, they are saying, “Get connected to your horsepower, the magic animal of your being. Arrange your forces. Put on your protection. Do the practices in a way that is a remedy, a cure, for you. Know the stars that guide you.” These are apt metaphors—*yuktarupaka*—for meditative experience.

TANTRA

The word *tantra* has interesting resonances, each of which provides a vital clue to how to practice. The *tan* of *tantra* has a wide range of meanings, including “to extend, stretch, spread, shine.” When this root sound made its way West, it became *ten*, and we use it all the time when we say *extend*, *tendon*, *tender*, *tension*, *entertain*, *intensity*, and *attention*. To practice tantra is to stretch ourselves, to extend our capacity for attention to the utmost. Tantra is also the pattern of interconnectedness we discover when we practice. Tenderness is important. This text is tender in its approach to human experience and encourages an earthy reverence in embracing your bodily sensations.

Tantra denotes “theory or system” and often refers to a class of texts that are set as a conversation between the gods and goddesses—in this case, Bhairava and Devi. The *tra* of *tantra* means “technique.” The same root shows up in *mantra* (*manas*, “mind,” plus *tra*, “skill,” means “a tool of thought”).

Each verse of a tantra is called a *sutra* (there’s *tra* again), which means “thread” and is cognate with “sew” and “suture,” the thread that joins together. “Seam” and “couture” are also cousins of *sutra*. So with the words *tantra* and *sutra*, we are presented with images of skillfully weaving together all the elements of life—mind, body, emotions, breath, soul, individuality, and infinity—into one exquisite tapestry. (Wordplay was a major form of entertainment in the tantric tradition, so there are often dozens of alternate or “folk” etymologies for these words.)

Jnana (sometimes spelled *gyan*) is “knowledge, to know.” *Vijnana* means worldly, practical knowledge and skill. In this context, *vijnana* refers to your “knowledge body”—*vijnanamayakosha*, the dimension of your body that is in direct practical contact with the mysteries of life.

Life refreshes and evolves itself through a symphony of ongoing rhythms. Brains have *waves*, hearts *pulsate*, breath *oscillates*, the senses *vibrate*. Tantra can be thought of as attending to these rhythms. Breath is a rhythm, and we breathe in and out thousands of times a day. Breathing involves an intimate relationship between our bodies and the ocean of air within which we suspire. A dozen senses inform us of the rhythm, texture, and qualities in each breath. Life is always inviting us into a deeper relationship with breath, with the pulsing of our hearts and emotions.

READING THE SUTRAS AND PRACTICES

In part I, “The Radiance Sutras,” there are three forms of Sanskrit included with each sutra. The first form is Devanagari, which looks like this:

॥ विज्ञान भैरव ॥

The second form is a transliteration into Roman letters with diacritical marks to indicate pronunciation:

dhāmāntaḥkṣobhasambhūtasūkṣmāgnitilakākṛtim

The third form of Sanskrit given is just the raw individual words, spelled out phonetically to give a rough approximation of the pronunciation:

daamaantah kshobha sambhootah sookshma agnih tilaka akritim

There are two numbers for most of the verses. The number accompanying the Sanskrit transliteration is the *verse number*, from 1 to 162. Devi and Bhairava banter for 23 verses, and then verse 24 marks the beginning of the “112 yogas”—meditations, techniques, known in

Sanskrit as *yuktis* or *dharanas*. These *yuktis* are also numbered, from 1 to 112.

You can follow the *yukti* numbers to their counterparts in part II, “Invitations and Illuminations.” There I unpack some of the juiciest Sanskrit words to shed additional light on each meditation, as a way of allowing you to explore that technique more deeply.

SAVORING THE SUTRAS

The Radiance Sutras is a text to savor one phrase at a time, over a period of days or years. The verses are designed so you can read or listen to them for a lifetime and have a new revelation every day. Each of the meditations is meant to be experienced many times under many different conditions. As you become familiar with the practices, you will discover the tactile luminosity and improvisational music of your inner world. As your internal senses become more alert, doorway after doorway will open to you.

The text wants to be thought and spoken in English as well as Sanskrit—whispered, chanted, delighted in, and danced. I am letting the text sing itself back into the spoken word. The sutras remember they were once songs—*caryagita*, songs of realization. Experiment with reading them out loud to yourself or to another person.

The language is crafted so that you may be able to recognize your own innate spiritual experience and have a flash of recognition. The Bhairava Tantra is a love song between energy and consciousness or Shakti and Shiva, and the musical and mantric impulses of their creativity are pulsing in us always. These verses are an invitation to wake up to the marvelous symphony within and around us.

When you discover one sutra that resonates deeply, memorize it. Then you will, as they say, know it by heart. Something happens in the body when you can say a sutra out loud or quietly to yourself. There is a relaxation, an ease and confidence, when you can rest your attention inside a sutra and the words flow effortlessly.

Tantric texts want to be performed. They are not comfortable being hidden in books. Any time you read a phrase tenderly and let yourself be carried away, even for a minute, you are performing a sacred act, offering your attention to the mystery of being alive.

The sutras tend to lay the groundwork for each other, but you

don't have to go through them in sequence. Some of the techniques will speak to you now, and others will only have meaning after you have explored them for a while. When I began meditating, the techniques in the first few sutras and one in the middle kept me busy for a year. Your pace may be faster or slower.

One way to explore the text is to pick one technique—whichever one strikes you—and practice it for three months. Give it time to work. Then read the sutras again and see if it is time to move on or to include another technique in addition to the one that you have been doing. The “Invitations and Illuminations” section following the sutras gives some tips for going deeper into the exquisite world of these practices. The text says that if you go deeply into even one of these ways of experience, making it your own over time, you will awaken.

Meditation is *sambhava*, intimacy with what you love about life. Take one thing and go deeper and deeper into it. Dive into your entire sensorium so fearlessly that you go beyond it into the core of your being and rest there.

Love calls our attention and engages us. When we give love our tender attention, we are in the realm of tantra. Life is a mysterious, self-renewing process. The techniques of meditation are ways of allowing the ecstasy of the life-force at play to renew our bodies and souls. Ask your body to teach you and to take you on adventures into intimacy with your own essence. This is the yoga of wonder and delight.

PART ONE



THE RADIANCE
SUTRAS

विज्ञान भैरव तन्त्र

vijñāna bhairava tantra

BANTER VERSES

The Bhairava Tantra is framed as a conversation between lovers, Devi and Bhairava. Devi is the Creative Energy permeating the universe. Her nature is power, strength, and might. Bhairava is the infinite consciousness that embraces her.

In the initial verses, Devi is speaking from within her awe at existence. She assumes the body of a seeker of truth and dares Bhairava to reveal to her the secrets of yoga. Rising to the occasion, Bhairava accepts her questions as beautiful and invites her to accompany him on the path of intimacy with all life. In verses 1–23, they converse back and forth in this way.

BANTER VERSES I-2



श्री देव्युवाच ।

श्रुतं देव मया सर्वं रुद्रयामलसम्भवम् ।
त्रिकभेदमक्षेपेण सारात्सारविभागशः ॥१॥
अद्यापि न निवृत्तो मे संशयः परमेश्वर ।
किं रूपं तत्त्वतो देव शब्दराशिकलामयम् ॥२॥

śrī devyuvāca |

śrutam deva mayā sarvaṁ rudrayāmala sambhavam |
trika bhedam aśeṣeṇa sārāt sāra vibhāgaśaḥ || 1 ||
adyāpi na nivṛtto me saṁśayaḥ paramēśvara
kiṁ rūpaṁ tattvato deva śabda rāśi kalā mayam || 2 ||

shree devee uvaacha

*shrutam deva mayaa sarvam rudrayaa-mala sam-bhavam
trika-bhedam a-sheshena saaraat-saara-vi-bhaagashah
adya api na ni-vritto me sam-shayah parama-eeshvara
kim roopam tattvatah deva shabda-raashi kalaamayam*

One day the Goddess sang to her lover, Bhairava:
Beloved and radiant lord of the space before birth,
Revealer of essence,
Slayer of the ignorance that binds us,
You who in play have created this universe
And permeated all forms in it
With never-ending truth,
I have been wondering . . .
I have been listening to the hymns of creation,
Enchanted by the verses,
Yet still I am curious.
What is this delight-filled universe
Into which we find ourselves born?
What is this mysterious awareness
Shimmering everywhere within it?