

Vijanabhairava Tantra

The Radiance Sutras:
a zesty life-affirming approach to meditation

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Vijnanabhairava Tantra

Preface

This little book is the Vijnana Bhairava Tantra, one of the early teachings on yoga and meditation. The name, loosely translated, means “The terror and joy of realizing oneness with the Soul.” It is said to date back to the second millennium B.C. For most of that time, it was purely in the oral tradition, meaning that it was chanted and memorized. I say it is little because it is only about three thousand words in the original Sanskrit, perhaps half an hour of chanting. It is astonishing that in so few words it describes the essence of many of the world’s meditation techniques. I call it The Radiance Sutras because it is so luminous.

A tantra is not poetry, although it may sound that way in the original and in translation. A tantra is a manual of practices. This one is a book of meditation instructions, set as a conversation between lovers. The focus is on full body spirituality, being at home in the universe, and how to accept every breath, sensual experience, and emotion as a doorway into deep and intimate contact with the energies of life.

The text feels as though it was composed by a couple, a man and a woman who sang the verses to each other as they co-composed. They lived this teaching. The techniques that are described here occurred to them naturally, as an evolution of the questions they were asking of life, and their explorations of the body of love. As was the convention of the time, they frame the conversation as the Goddess and the God in them speaking. The conversation is about how to enter into the vibrant essence of the world with the dual balance of passion and detachment.

A translation of this tantra came into my hands about 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 in 1989 I started to write a fresh version and it evolved into this book.

Introduction

The Bhairava Tantra is 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.

The teaching emerges from their love-play, reminding us that we are educated from within our own hearts in the spirit of love. The secrets of how to meditate are revealed as one friend or lover would to another. What Devi and Bhairava sing to each other in this conversation are called sutras, and every sutra is an invitation to freshly appreciate what it is to be alive, to breathe, to exist and express and feel.

The conversation begins with the Goddess asking, “Beloved, tell me, how do I enter more deeply into the reality of the universe?” In reply Bhairava describes one hundred and twelve techniques for awakening into reality through everyday life experience. Each of these is a way of attending to the rhythms, pulsations and sensuousness of the divine energy flowing through us always - and out of which we are made.

Through these techniques, we are alerted to the presence of the sacred that is always permeating our bodies. All of these methods involve savoring the incredible intensity underlying the most common experiences and they work by activating the senses, extending their range further into the inner and the outer world. The basic dynamics of life such as breathing, falling asleep, waking up, walking, loving, all of these are used as gateways into alignment and enlightenment.

Each meditation is a dive deeper into life, 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, walk through the guardians of the gateway, face the terrors and make our way into the immense and timeless depths that are always calling us.

Many of these meditations are surprisingly informal: notice a moment of powerful emotion, or hunger, or desire, and enter into the awareness of that with total abandon, so that you go with it right into the root of the movement of the universe. When making love, put your awareness into the flame of desire flowing through the body, and become that flame. When falling asleep, pay attention to the transition from waking consciousness to unconsciousness, and catch a glimpse of what consciousness is in itself. Or go outside on a moonless night and be there for a long time, simply merging with the darkness and vastness of space. The text also describes what we think of as traditional sit-down meditation techniques, ways of savoring breath, sound and internal luminos-

ity. The informality and intimacy with the self implied in this teaching means that meditation is not a technique imposed from outside. Rather, the techniques emerge naturally from one's relationship with the Self and with Life.

Taken as a whole, this teaching 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 teachers too often present it - 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 which 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.

You'll find here in one place many of the essential techniques that are utilized in the meditation traditions of the different cultures. If some of the experiences the sutras describe seem familiar to you as you read this book, it may be because you tend to invent your own private meditation techniques (that you probably never tell anyone). Or you may have had inexplicable realizations in the midst of some life experience. I am pretty much continually astonished at how frequently people who come for instruction in meditation already have one or more of these techniques going on spontaneously. It seems to me that it is an awakening-in-progress that gives a person the desire to study meditation. Sutras like these are there to remind us of what we already know. And they are there to remind 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 Bhairava Tantra (its full name is vijnanabhairavatantra) is a syllabus of the types of techniques that could be discovered anywhere. The hundred and twelve techniques that are presented are those that are used all over the world in many different traditions.

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 songs of creation,
I have heard the sacred sutras being sung,
and 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?

What are these instinctive energies
that undulate through our bodies,
moving us into action?

And this “matter” out of which our forms are made -
What are these dancing particles of condensed radiance,
Are they an illusionist’s projection?

What is this power we call Life,
appearing as the play of flesh and breath?
How may I know this mystery and enter it more deeply?

Beloved, my attention is ensnared by a myriad of forms,
the innumerable individual entities everywhere.

Lead me into the wholeness beyond all these parts.

You, who hold the mysteries in your hand -



of will, knowledge and action,
Reveal to me the path of illumined knowing.

Lead me into joyous union
with the life of the universe.

Teach me that I may know it fully,
realize it deeply,
and breathe in the truth of it.

1.

The One Who is Intimate to All Beings said,
Beloved, your questions require the answers that come
through direct living experience.

The way of experience begins with a breath
such as the breath you are breathing now.
Awakening into the luminous reality
may dawn in the momentary throb
between any two breaths.

The breath flows in and just before it turns
to flow out,
there is a flash of pure joy -
life is renewed.
Awaken into that.



As the breath is released and flows out,
there is a pulse as it turns to flow in.
In that turn, you are empty.
Enter that emptiness as the source of all life.

2.

Radiant one,

The life essence carries on its play
through the pulsing rhythm
of outward and inward movement.
This is the ceaseless throb, the rhythm of life -
terrifying in its eternity, exquisite in its constancy.

The inhalation, the return movement of breath,
sustains life.

The outgoing breath
purifies life.

We breathe out the old air, the old thoughts, the old feelings.

These are the two poles
between which respiration goes on unceasingly.
Between them is every quality you could ever desire.

As the breath turns from in to out,
and again as the breath
curves from out to in -
through both these turns, absorb intensity.

3.

Enter these turning points
In the play of respiration and expiration,
Where the rhythms of life transform
Into each other.

Breath flows in, then surrenders to flow out again.
In this moment, drink eternity.

Breath flows out, emptying, emptying,
Offering itself to infinity.

Cherishing these moments,
Mind dissolves into heart,
Heart dissolves into space,
Body becomes a shimmering field
Pulsating between emptiness and fullness..



4.

In any quiet moment when you are breathing,
the breath may flow out and pause of itself,
or flow in and pause of itself.

There experience opens into an exquisite vastness
with no beginning and no end.

Embrace that infinity without reservation.
Dive into it, drink deeply of it and emerge renewed.

5.

Follow the path of the radiant life force
as she flashes upward like lightning
through your body.



Attend simultaneously
to the perineum, that bright place between
the legs, to the crown of the skull,
and to that shining star-place above the head.

Notice how this living electricity becomes ever more subtle
as she rises, radiant as the morning sun
until she streams outward from
the top of the head into all-embracing gratitude.

Thus become intimate with the life of all beings.

6.

Or trace the river of life that flows through you,
the luxuriously rising energies,
Gradually kissing each of the centers along the spine,
Savor each particle of color along the way.

Enter each area tenderly, loving as you go
and then finally, gently
dissolving in the crown of the head.

7.

Let your attention glide
Through the centers of awareness along the spine with adoring intent.

There is a song to each area of the body.
Listen to these sounds resonating in sweet vortexes,
long rhythmic vowels.
Ah . . .
and Eee . . .
Hummm . . .

resonating on and on.

Listen to these as sounds,
then more subtly as an underlying hum,
eventually as most subtle feeling.

Then diving more deeply,
expand into freedom.

8.

Rest the attention easily in the forehead,
in the eye that is made of light.
Follow the flow of breath outward from there
into the spaciousness before you.
Tenderly permeate that spaciousness.



Awakening attention notices it is on a bridge,
outside the little house of the skull.
Extending not only outward, but upward,
into the radiant space above . . .

Set free to travel the bridge, the small self
enters a radiant omnipresence.
This it remembers, and knows as its truth.

Gradually the luminosity of that truth
fills the body to overflowing
as it rises through the crown of the head
into a shower of light.

9.

Embrace each of your senses in turn,

Seeing as being touched by light.
Hearing as immersion in an ocean of sound.
Tasting as enlightening.
Smelling as knowing.
Touching as electrifying.

Then leave all these behind,
and be intimate with the unknowable.

10.

Whenever the attention rests on anything -
on the emptiness of space,
looking at a vast blue sky,
when looking on a wall
or some wonderful person,
let that attention gradually be absorbed into itself,
so that the one who is paying attention be known.

11.

Inside the skull there is a place
where the essences of creation play and mingle -
the ecstatic light of awareness
and the awareness of that light.
The divine feminine and masculine
sport with one another in that place.
The light of their love-play illuminates all space.

Rest in that light ever present,
and gradually awaken into the steady joy of
that which is always everywhere.

12.

There is a current of love-energy that flows
between Earth below and the Sun above.

The central channel of the spine is the riverbed.
The streaming is as delicate and powerful
as the tingling touch of lovers.

Entering there,
radiance arches between the above and the below.

The whole attention resting in the nerve,
tingling delicately in the center of the spinal column,
tracing that current between earth and sun,

become magnetism relating all the worlds.

13.

Lift your hands, and with a thought, let the hands become
magical weapons, divine shields
that turn aside all the energies of the outer world.

Spread the fingers over the eyes,
covering the ears
the nostrils, the mouth,
and abandon yourself to the space inside you.
Enter the vital energies thus contained within.
As the charge builds,
lovingly and fiercely
plunge into the inner centers.

As the surge of light-substance rises
follow it up into the space between the eyebrows
where it breaks out as an orgasm of light.

14.

The light that sparks into being when the eyes blink
is witnessed by the single eye between the brows.
That eye is the place where the elements merge -
all the elements of your being.

Consider how lightly the eyelids touch the eyes
with each blink.

That lightly, place the fingers over the eyelids,
and become aware of the space between these two exquisite centers of
seeing.

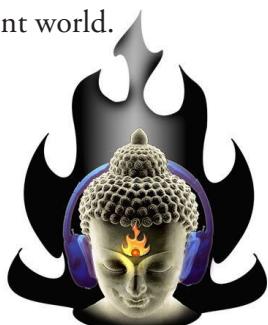
There is the singular eye, which sees into a different world.

With this eye, you can see very well
by the light of the inner fire.

The fire that is always flowing up the channel,
the medial channel of the spine.

Enter the core of any spark of that fire.

Be rooted in your heart, connect even to the tips



of your hairs,
and attend the birthing of the light within you.

15.

Bathe deeply in that ocean of sound
which is even now vibrating within you,
resonating softly,
permeating the space of the heart.

The ear that is tuned by rapt listening
learns to hear the song of creation.

First like a hand bell,
then subtler like a flute,
then subtler still as a stringed instrument,
eventually as the buzz of a bee.

Entering this current of sound, the Listening One
forgets the external world, and becomes
absorbed into internal sound,
and then absorbed in vastness
like the song of the stars as they shine.



16.

Hum a sound,
such as ahhhhh . . . uuuuuu . . . mmmmmm,
or hreeeeeemmmm, or eemmm,
or even the sound hum itself.

Bathe in the sound with infinite leisure . . .

As the sound fades
into an imperceptible hum,
it will carry you
into the hum of the universe.

17.

Think of any vowel, they are all delicious.
Savor that sound with reverence,
attend to where it comes from within you,
and where it goes to when it fades away.

Discover what gradualness is.

Learn to relish each minute variation.
As you feel the full range of sound, layer upon layer,
the power of sound
will teach you the power of being.

18.

Listen with total attention
to the sounds of stringed instruments.

When performed with grace,
each note appears to rise out of eternity
and disappear back into it.

When the music ends,
stay with the echo of the music
reverberating inside you,
and as the reverberation fades away into silence
go with it.

19.

Lightly begin a sound,
saying it audibly,
and then gradually, less and less audibly.



Continuing thus, it eventually sounds only internally.
Listening to the sound as it goes on resounding within,
let it continue as of itself.

Then it becomes just a thought, a remembered hum.

Then as even the echo of that hum fades away,
be intimate with the silence that is the home of all music.
20.

The emptiness of space permeates the body
and all directions simultaneously.
Space is always there,
already there before your noticing of it.
What we call space is a presence that is a more solid foundation than

the firmest granite. Space is permission to exist and worlds within which to express.

Without thinking about it,
without forming mental images of it,
rest in this vast expanse
and become friends with infinity.

21.

Attend simultaneously
to the space below the body
and the space above the body,
as emptiness itself.

If you can tolerate the nothingness,
the ecstatic energy of that emptiness will surge
through you and carry you
into the world beyond all thought.



22

Consider vast spaciousness as permeating
above your head, below your tailbone,
and within your heart simultaneously.

In this, find complete freedom to exist.

23.

Forget all of your ideas about the body -
it's this way and it's that way.
And just be with any area of it,
this present body
as permeated with limitless space.
Drenched in freedom.

24.

Contemplate the constituents of the body -
muscles and blood and breath and bones
as made out of radiantly dancing emptiness.

Consider the body as permeated with

the essence of the universe, the unendingly generous givingness of space.

Practice this and life will reveal to you
the wonder of becoming steady
in the radiance that is consciousness.

25.

Attend to the skin
as a subtle boundary containing vastness.



Enter that shimmering and pulsing vastness,
discover that you are not separate from anything there,
and there is no other,
no object to meditate upon that is not you.

26

The One Who is at Play Everywhere said,

There is a place in the heart where everything meets.
Go there if you want to find me.
Mind, senses, soul, eternity, all are there.
Are you there?

Enter the bowl of vastness that is the heart.
Give yourself to it with total abandon.

Quiet ecstasy is there -
and a steady, regal sense of resting in a perfect spot.

Once you know the way
the nature of attention will call you
to return, again and again,
and be saturated with knowing,
“I belong here, I am at home here.”

Answer that call.

27.

Put the attention into the luminous connections

between each of the centers throughout the body.

The base of the spine and the top of the skull,
The genitals and the heart!
The heart and the throat,
the throat and the forehead,
the forehead to the top of the head . . .

Attend to the current of relationship
electrifying, ever-pulsating, richly textured,
between each of these and every other.

Then attend simultaneously to resonance of all with all.

Enter that glowing net of light
with the focus born of awe
and even your bones will know enlightenment.

28.

Return again and again to savoring
the space between breaths.
Learn to delight in each momentary turn.

Rest the attention in your blessed core
as you practice this,
and continually be born into a new and fresh world.



29.

Live continuously for a few days
in the meditation,
“I am immersed in the flame, the flame of Life.
The universal fire flows through me without resistance.”

Step into that fire fully, wholeheartedly,
starting with the toe of the right foot -
and then surrendering everywhere.

Only the not-self, which doesn't exist anyway, is burned.
Your essence will emerge renewed in the flame,
for it already is flame and knows itself as flame since the dawn of time.

30.

See the entire world as being consumed by flames.
Stay steady and do not waver
as the flames devour everything.

As the objects of the world all dissolve into light,
the subjective world emerges as infinite.

31.

Experience the substance of the body and the world
as made up of vibrating particles,
and these particles made up of
even finer energy particles.

Drifting more deeply,
feel into each particle
as it condenses from infinity
and dissolves back into it
continuously.

Noticing this, breathe easily
with infinity dancing everywhere.



32.

Lying in bed, with the gentlest of breaths
centered in the forehead,

fall in to the center of the heart
as you fall asleep.
Thus fall into freedom as you dream.

Conclusion

Bhairava said,

Beloved power-permeated one,

When the elements of your being –
the creative mind,
the one who divides things up,
the identification with your limited self –

When all these dissolve into essence,
and are experienced as delightful
manifestations of the true Self,
then that Self is known.

Being established in even one
of these hundred and twelve practices,
you can know from inside
the one who permeates all.

You will have the power to say a word, and
it will be done, the power to bless and un bless.
The one who goes deeply into any of these,
becomes friends with the life-force itself.

The goddess then asked,

If this is the nature of the universal self,
then who is to be worshipped?
To whom do I offer oblations,
To whom do I sacrifice?
If everything is divine,
and consciousness merges with that divine essence,
then what happens to the distinction between worshipper and wor-
shipped?

Bhairava replied,

Oh goddess, the practices you are speaking of
refer only to the externals.
When you enter into the great Self,
then all prayers go on inside you spontaneously
without ceasing.
In reality all songs of gratitude
and ecstatic lovemaking are resonating in



every particle of creation at every moment.
When you are established in mindfulness
you are listening, and you hear them.

Plunging without reservation
into the ocean of being is meditation.
No image, no thoughts, no prop.

Concentrating on the image of a god
with a body, eyes, and a mouth,
is not meditation.

Worship does not mean offering flowers.
It means offering your heart to the vast mystery
of the universe. It means to let your heart pulse with the life
of the universe, without thought and without reservation.
It means being so in love that you are
willing to dissolve and be recreated in every moment.

Being transformed by even one of these practices,
fullness of experience develops day by day.
One day the desire of the self for the great Self
is consummated. Come ready for that day!

To dissolve in the fire of the great void,
senses dissolve, mind dissolves,
the objects of sense dissolve,
even the void is dissolved -
that is worship.

Sacrifice is to let your sins be destroyed
by the vast power of the universe;
It is to live in radiant bliss,
having sacrificed your shame before infinity.
The real purification with water
is to bathe in the essence of eternity.
Stunning autonomy, radiant bliss,
invisible consciousness permeating you
always and in every direction.
The flowers, the candles, the honey



that are offered in worship are
made out of the same divine stuff as you.
Who then is worshipped?

As the breath flows in, and as it flows out,
it travels always the curving path of the goddess.

Breath flows in and out spontaneously of its own will,
thus all breathing beings continually worship the goddess.
Be conscious of this unconscious prayer,
for she is the most holy place of pilgrimage.

The breath flows out with the sound sa,
The breath flows in with the sound ha.
Thus thousands of times a day,
Everyone who breathes is adoring the goddess.

Know this, and be in great joy.
Listen to the ongoing prayer that is breath.
Life shall dance in you
a dance of ever-renewing delight.

Devi said,

Beloved Revealer,
I am suffused with satisfaction.
My questions have led to fullness.

You have sung to me of the ways of union
of the god and the goddess,
space and time, personal and impersonal,
energy and form, infinite and finite.
You have sung the song of being at home in the universe.

Having said that, the goddess,
radiant with delight, embraced her lover.



Notes

By coincidence or grace, the first thing that I ever read on meditation was the English translation of the vijnana bhairava tantra by Paul Reps, contained in Zen Flesh, Zen Bones

It was 1968. I was 18, a freshman at the University of California. In the physiology lab where I worked, a woman graduate student happened to show me the book one day for a few minutes, because she was delighted with it. The verses reminded me of something I had experienced two months before, when I had participated in an experiment in which I sat in a totally dark room for three hours every day for three weeks.

The study was about brain waves (EEG) <<http://www.noetic.org/research/medbiblio/ch1.htm>> . The experimental subjects got brain-wave biofeedback. Someone had flipped a coin and my name was selected as a control subject; so I received no instructions whatever, no feedback. I was just wired up and left there in a room that was utterly blacked out and soundproofed. I had never heard of meditation, and I had never sat in a dark room for several hours before, so I simply noticed what was going on. Gradually my senses opened up in ways that I had no words to describe.

After walking out of the lab each afternoon, I felt refreshed and wonderful. It was as if my entire previous life had taken place in a mild sleep state, and now I was really awake. Everything alive seemed to glow, especially the trees. I felt in love with existence. It was as if I had never seen the world before. I began to appreciate every detail of light, every touch of air, every sound, in a way I had never imagined. The feeling was somewhat similar to the joy I had after surfing or sailing my catamaran on the ocean all day, but much more intense and steady. Even taking calculus tests was easier; my mind was so lucid that I could remember a formula that I had simply looked at the night before, and then derive its applications right there during the test.

This heightened sensing lasted for weeks after the experiment was over. Then the woman, whom I knew only slightly, handed me the little book. It seemed to speak right to the heart of those experiences that I underwent while sitting in the dark room and afterwards. Since she wouldn't lend it to me I immediately went out to a bookstore and bought it.

The experience in the lab taught me that meditative attention occurs to people spontaneously, if given a suitable situation - in my case, I had nothing else to do in that blacked-out room for two or three hours. From the Bhairava Tantra I learned that there are many gateways into meditation, many types of touch, breath, sights, sounds that can be used as vehicles for the movement of attention. Meditation experience is immediate and sensuous, although there are far ranges of it that are so refined people mistakenly believe are "beyond the senses."

My entire approach to teaching meditation the last 40 years has been influenced by these insights. When I am "teaching" meditation what I am really doing most of the time is listening to people talk about their inner worlds, their longings, their sensory worlds. During these sessions, it seems, eventually everyone spontaneously goes into something resembling one of these hundred and twelve meditation techniques. What I do is notice when the person has entered meditation, and after awhile I ask them to describe to me in their own words how they got there.

The shift into meditation is so natural that people often don't notice it until a few minutes later. Sometimes toward the end of a session the person might say, "You know, I haven't remembered this for years, but as a child I used to do a special thing. . . and then they describe something with breath, or with movement, or with looking at the sky, that they made up or that occurred to them. Year after year, I hear people who have not read the yoga literature repeating in clear detail one or more of these classic meditation techniques. I now take it for granted that many, many people make up or rediscover these practices. What a meditation teacher can provide is a context for people to learn from their own experiences.

