

# TANTRIC CONNECTION FINDING THE DIVINE WITHIN

It is a universal truth – we all wish to be happy and feel a sense of connection. In the hope of embodying this truth, the saints, mystics, sages and philosophers of ancient times developed numerous systems for people to practise. To this day, many of these practices still thrive in some form, while many more continue to be conceived or are reinvented with the aim of benefiting the human condition. One highly respected methodology comes from the ancient texts called Tantra

Writer Danielle Parla

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The birth of Tantra is the subject of myths and considerable debate when the origin, history and practices are considered. The word 'Tantra' was first documented as early as 1700 BC in the Rigveda – one of four texts from the sacred Indo-Aryan collections of the Vedas, while Tantra as a ritualised practice is widely believed to have risen out of India sometime before the 5th century AD. Tantra means expansion (*tan* means expand and *tra* means liberation) and according to Vedic scholar David Frawley, Tantra

can be easiest defined as an “energetic approach to the spiritual path, using various techniques including mantra, ritual, pranayama and meditation”.

Today, Tantric schools predominate in Vajrayana Buddhism and Hinduism – although practitioners of Kabbalah, Sufism, Taoism, Gnostic Christianity and Shamanism will also identify parallels. There are hundreds of branches, lineages and schools in the Hindu branch and it is not surprising that the philosophical positions of Tantrikas are vast, although Tantrikas and yoga practitioners in the West are most likely

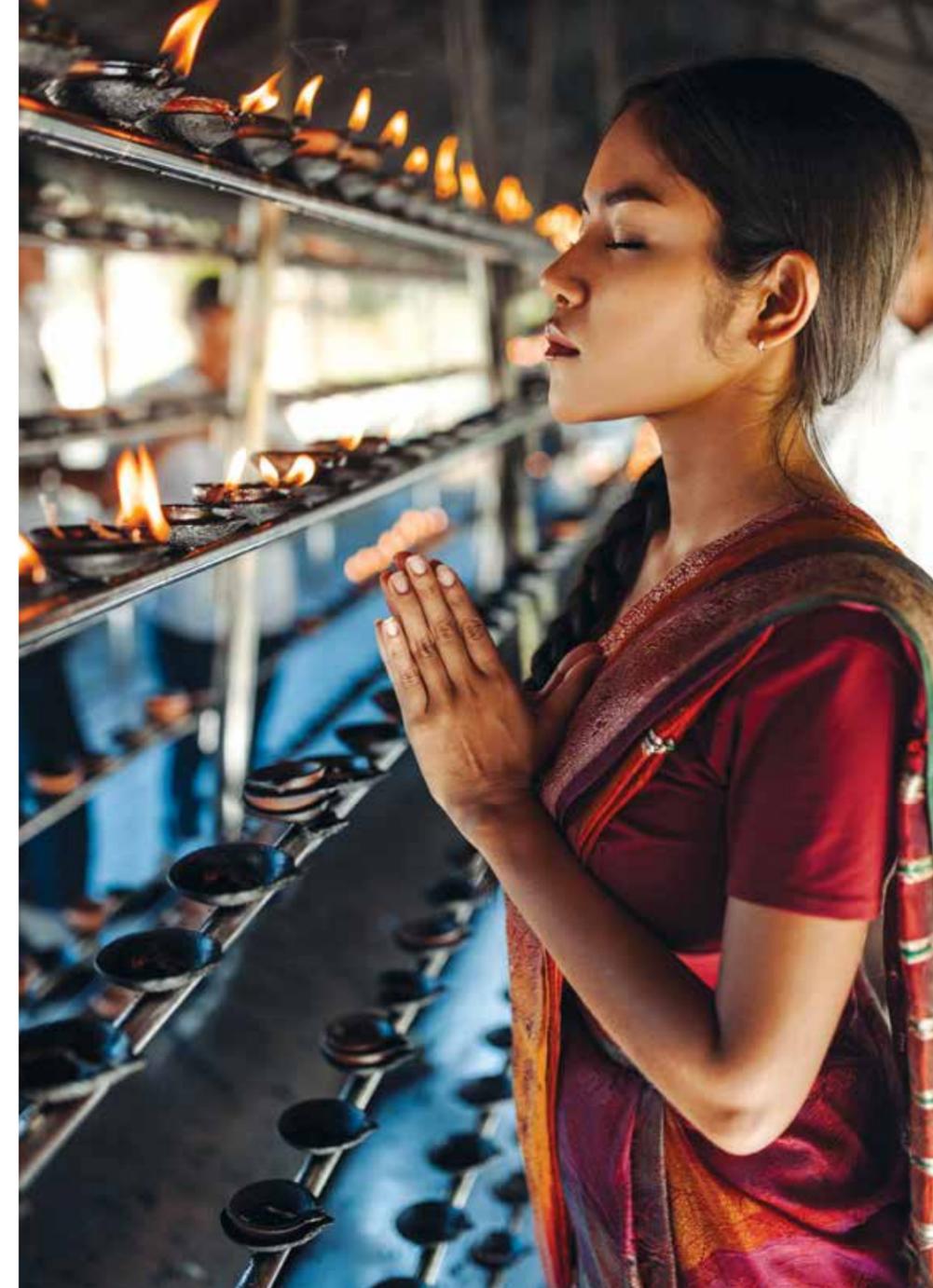
to be familiar with the traditions of Kashmir Shaivism, Shakta or Kaula.

Tantric rituals use a devotional approach that emphasise the worship of the divine feminine, goddess or Shakti and divine masculine, godhead or Shiva as a way to access and embody enlightened consciousness. The divine masculine and feminine are inseparable: the subtle underlying consciousness of beingness (Shiva) and its ability to recognise itself (Shakti).

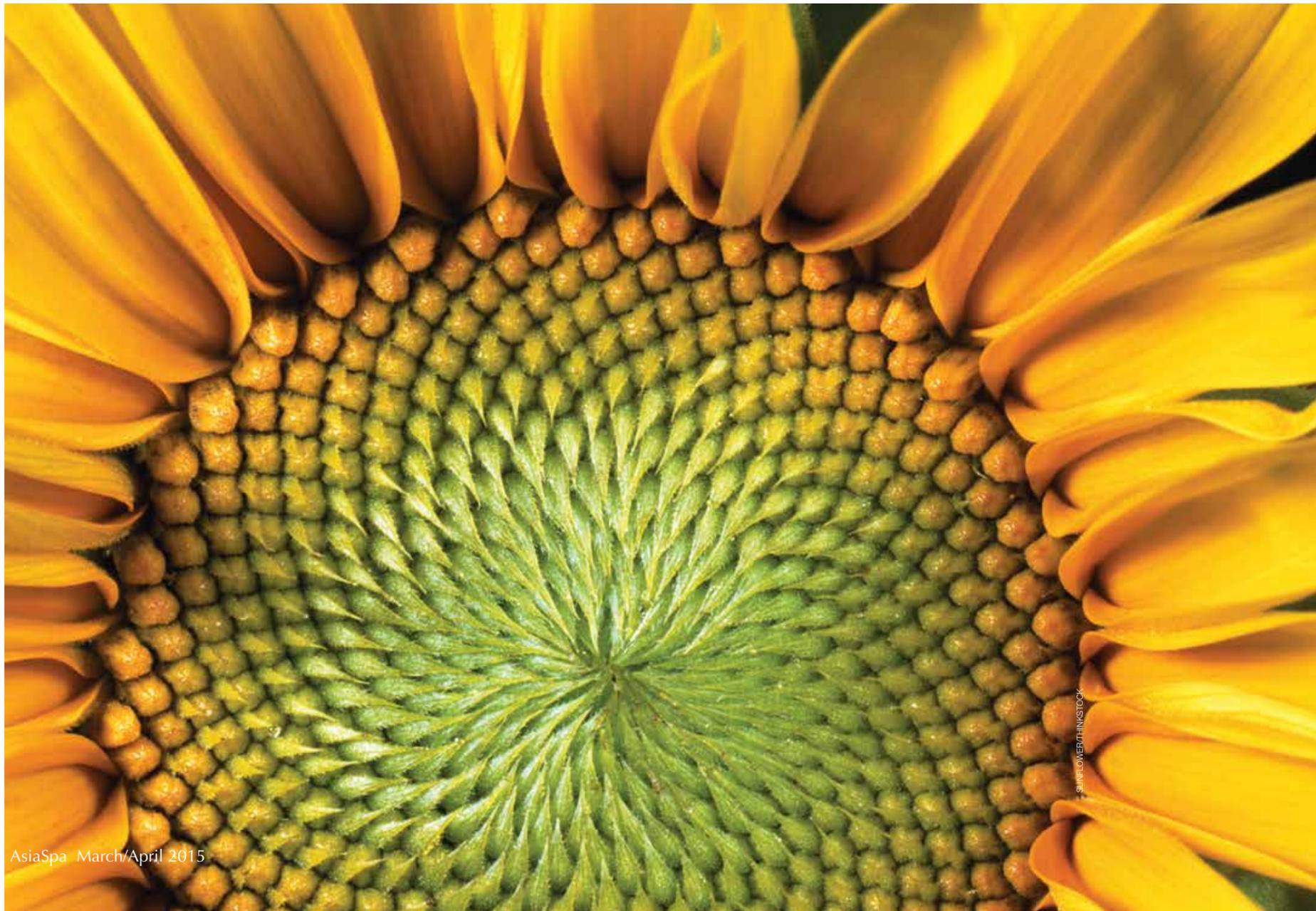
Some schools of Tantra are Shakti-oriented in their practices and ideologies

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~ Georg Feuerstein



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while others are more Shiva-oriented. Notwithstanding differences, there is one fundamental teaching of Tantra that remains consistent and that is the idea of nondualism – the understanding that everything in this world is an embodiment of supreme consciousness. That is, because there is nothing that exists without this fundamental energy, one's true essence exists in every particle of the universe and everything that exists in the universe also exists within us.

The insight comes from understanding

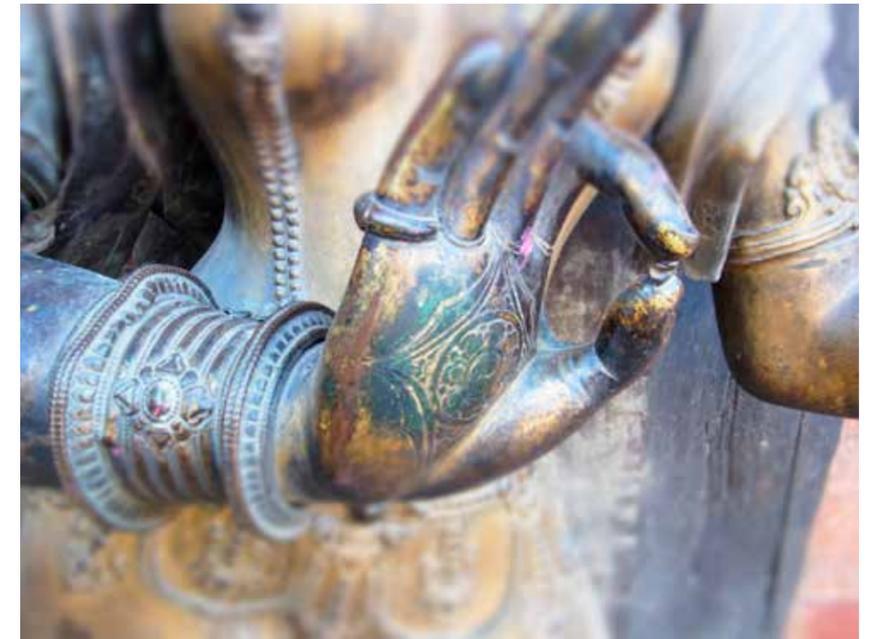
that our tendency to perceive duality in everything – masculine and feminine, good and bad, spiritual and material – is misguided since all apparent opposites are woven from the same universal consciousness. As such the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy that creates and maintains the universe.

Most would agree that these concepts are extremely complex and otherworldly. In recognition of this, the sages had the



brilliant insight to personalise the abstract power of Shakti by creating myths and methodology that would make the Tantric wisdom more tangible and accessible. The system they developed was brought to life with colourful stories of goddesses so that our understanding of, and relationship with, our identified human body and mind could be transformed.

In her book *Awakening Shakti*, teacher and author Sally Kempton illuminates three core features that are common to all systems of Tantra. The first is the attitude of non-rejection, which suggests there is nothing that exists that is not an expression of the divine. That is, “all bodies, all worlds, all ideas are made of Shakti, and are therefore divine in their essence...and to experience this as true within our own bodies, it’s said



BROWN NAUTILUS SHELL/THINKSTOCK; BRIGITTE SPORRER/COORBIS

THIS PAGE: Tantric rituals often involve the practice of mudra; through a conscious lifestyle based on Tantric philosophical concepts and techniques, a couple can elevate and enrich their relationship. OPPOSITE PAGE: Tantra means expansion, while the Tantric universe is thought to ripple out from the One

to be the knowledge that liberates us from all suffering” according to Kempton. This point distinguishes Tantric philosophy from that of classical yoga since in Tantric culture the body is seen as divine in its own right and not less than the true self (also known as the transcendental self, pure awareness, or the divine).

The second is the belief that physical and emotional pleasures can be sacred and doorways to the divine. Of course, pleasure can be found in many things, but what is more provocative and radical is the Tantric notion that “bliss and presence can be discovered in upheaval, in the play of destructive forces, in sorrow and illness – precisely because there is no place that Shakti is not,” says Kempton.

The third common feature is the idea that the power of the divine feminine or universal Shakti is the ultimate source of power. In the Hindu branches of Tantra, the goddess consorts – Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati, are seen as embodying the power and the active energy of each of the male gods. Kempton beautifully describes the goddess practice as a “spiritual technology that has been honed for hundreds and hundreds of years as a way of shifting our vision, so that instead of experiencing the world and our own bodies as dense, hard and outside of us – we can recognise the profound interconnectivity and indeed

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oneness between ourselves and the world”.

It is easy to dismiss the ancient ideals of Tantra as being irrelevant to the times we are living in. However, it could be argued that in our fast-paced and disconnected world, the sacred ideas of Tantra are more relevant than ever and offer a distinct possibility to shift our consciousness and connect with the source of life.

All world traditions, rituals and practices have a way of evolving over time and Tantra is no exception. Among the practitioners of neo-Tantra, Charles and Caroline Muir, authors of *Tantra: The Art of Conscious Loving* believe that “ancient Tantra is a spiritual system, in which sexual love is a sacrament”.

Indeed, sexual practices are acknowledged in one of the volumes in which the Tantric system and practices are described.

While the Muirs don't profess to be teachers of ancient Tantric traditions and rituals, they feel that because Tantra was designed for 'householders', a couple can develop a connection with the divine through intimate pleasure. Through a conscious lifestyle based on Tantric philosophical concepts and techniques, a couple is provided with the opportunity to elevate and enrich their relationship. The Muirs acknowledge that the birth of Tantra gave people an alternative path to grow spiritually within a love relationship to the



solo path of a spiritual aspirant, ascetic or renunciate.

Even today, the idea of combining sexual fulfilment with spiritual growth can ruffle feathers in places where repressive attitudes exist. Indologist and author Georg Feuerstein feels that the focus on the pursuit of pleasure through sex “is precisely what attracts Western seekers who have tired of the sex-negative attitude prevailing in the Judeo-Christian tradition”. A quick Internet search for ‘Tantra’ will expose the popular association between Tantra and sex, and lead some to question whether this ancient spiritual system has been reduced to a ‘cult

EDUARDO MARCHECO/REXUS WOMAN SITTING IN LOTUS POSITION/IMMAGINE



of ecstasy’.

This concern is not dissimilar to the popular view of yoga as simply a physical practice (asana), and perspectives that see Tantra as the ‘yoga of sex’ represent only a part of the vast system of knowledge that is accessible to all who genuinely inquire. To clarify this point, Feuerstein says: “Tantra is not about selfish pleasure but about ego-transcending bliss, and it is not about sex as such but about the transmutation of sexual energy.”

Once cloaked in secrecy, Tantra is an initiatory tradition that is brought to life through speech within the rich and time-

honoured tradition of the guru-disciple relationship. It is central in Tantric culture to develop a relationship with the divine feminine (Shakti) and perform practices and rituals familiar to many yoga practitioners, such as mantra, asana, mudra, pranayama, as well as kriyas (cleansing practices), pujas (deity worship) and yantras (geometric representations of the energy pattern of a deity). These rituals and practices help the *sadhaka* (seeker of truth) to make the body strong and healthy, balance the subtle energy system of the body (chakras) and cultivate a life that is characterised by skilful action, clarity, compassion, joy and love.

Tantric methodology was developed so the individual self is experienced as part of the indivisible. As ambitious as this might sound, it is important to remember that Tantra was designed for modern-day householders and as such teaches us that liberation is possible in the world rather than from it. More than anything, it is a living practice and attitude for those seeking to live an authentic, full and beautiful life. 🌿

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