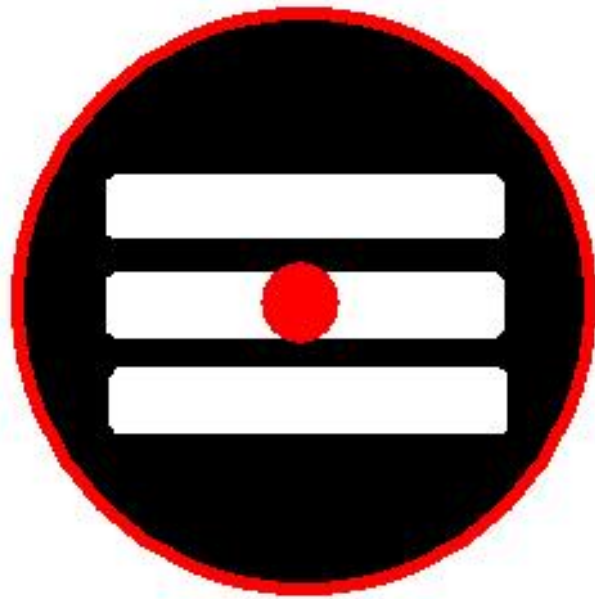


**ON THE CENTRALITY OF  
SENSUOUS EXPERIENCING  
IN TANTRA**



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## The Centrality of Sensuous Experiencing in Tantra

One basic way of understanding the essence of ‘tantra’ is that it rejects all *buddhi-ist* notions of ‘yoga’ (Hindu or Buddhist) which understand it as a discipline aimed at the *control and suppression* of the senses by faculties of the mind (*buddhi*). Such notions of ‘control’ confuse a settled and undisturbed awareness (*chit*) of sensory and sensuous experiencing with an awareness that has become disturbed by or identified with its flux (*chitti*). Tantra, on the other hand, affirms sensuous and sensory experiencing in all its forms - including seeing – as real and valid expressions or *Shaktis* of pure ‘sense-free’ awareness (*Shiva*) which are at the same time both distinct and yet also *inseparable* from it. Of particular interest and importance in this context is the distinction and mutual relation between visual awareness or ‘seeing’ on the one hand, and sensuous experiencing in all its dimensions – inner as well as outer, tactile as well as visual – on the other. Many practices of Buddhist ‘tantra’, like those of contemporary neo-Shamanism and NLP, seem to rely principally on techniques of visualisation and mental imaging. In my view however, from a truly tantric perspective such practices or ‘inner seeing’ do not sufficiently emphasise or cultivate the importance and practice of *inner sensing*. Nor do they recognise such *inner sensing* as not only the source of *inner seeing* but also the key to the inner meaning or *sense* of all that can be seen – whether outwardly and inwardly.

In what follows I firstly describe a variety of reciprocal relationships between *seeing and sensing* – both inner and outer – through which their essential unity or non-duality can itself be *sensuously* experienced through the medium of refined tantric practices or *sadhanas* of ‘The New Yoga’. Secondly, I focus specifically on the particular significance attached to the *tactile* dimension of sensing in the *tantras* of the Trika Shaivist tradition.

## The Unity of Seeing and Sensing in Tantra

1. *Seeing as illuminative awareness.* Such a mode of seeing is a most fundamental and valid one in terms both of the doctrine of recognition and earlier Indian philosophies of language. Its sensuous character is precisely that of a vitalising and illuminative ‘bursting forth’ (*sphuratta*) of recognitions or ‘insights’ that are each themselves an awareness.

This specific mode or ‘sense’ of seeing *as* awareness has to do with the way in which awareness spontaneously comes to reflect or mirror itself in its own light (for example in the mirror of the mind or language). Such ‘seeing’ is of course innately transcendent in the specific sense of having no ‘object’.

2. *Inner seeing as inner sensing.* By inner sensing I do not mean awareness of localised *sensations* of the *physical body* - though sensations such as heat can accompany inner sensing as they can also accompany *seeing as heightened awareness*. What I mean here however, is a sensuous experience of different *directional flows* and *centres* of awareness itself in the hollow spaces of one's inwardly *felt body* (the ‘soul body’ or ‘awareness body’). It is the *spatial loci* or vectors of these sensed centres and/or air- or breath-like flows of awareness (upward, downward, radial or centripetal) that gives the *inner sensing* of them the character also of a type of *inner seeing*.

3. *Outer seeing as inner sensing.* In tantric pair meditation, I use visual awareness or *outer seeing* of another person's physical or surface form (for example the surface of their face, chest or belly) as a means to inwardly *sense* the hollow inner spaces of awareness within them. *Outer seeing as inner sensing* is also the working principle of *puja* as *murti darshan* (literally ‘image seeing’ of

the divine). From your outward seeing of the beauty of your shrine and its murti you inwardly *sense* something that transcends a mere seeing of beautiful images and objects.

4. *Inner sensing as inner seeing.* Through coming (through outward seeing of the eyes) to *inwardly sense* the hollow inner spaces of awareness within another person's body I can also come to *inwardly see and see into* those spaces with my inner 'eye'. Sometimes this inner seeing, arising from inner sensing, can take shape as inner visions. For example with my inner eye I have inwardly *seen* the inner *sense* I have seen a blissful quality of awareness sensed in another person's heart space as a most beautiful flower. Similarly others have seen her *inner sense* of their own body as having the shape of a goddess with a multiple cobra hood.
5. *Inner sensing as outer seeing.* Here, through inner sensing I come to see with my eyes the 'outer' physical form of another person transforming - for example into the form of a god or goddess. Similarly, others have many times seen my face and entire physical form 'morph' or transform into countless shapes - animal, human and divine or trans-human.
6. *Outer seeing as outer sensing.* This is a great and wonderful *sadhana* of everyday life - taking continuous delight in *sensing with our body as a whole* whatever is there to be *seen with the eyes* in the awareness space of our visual field - whether building and houses, bricks or roof tiles, sea and sky, trees and gardens, streets and cars - and *all* the sensory objects in the spaces of one's domestic environment. And through this *sadhana* - if focussed on the meditating the shape, texture and density of a particular

object - whether wood, brick, metal, fabric or plastic - one can also learn to *sense oneself into* things, experiencing their sensory qualities as the expression of sensuous qualities of awareness. Then a single *colour*, for example that of a flower's petals, can then be felt inwardly as the sensory manifestation of a unique and subtle sensuous quality of awareness pervading one's entire body - indeed as an entire plane of awareness imbued with this subtle sensuous tone-colour and texture.

In other writings I have several times referred to Samuel Avery's understanding that our experience of the 'materiality' of things is nothing but an awareness of different *potential* ways of sensing them. We *see* something (a cup of coffee for example) as 'real' and 'material' rather than 'imaginary' because we do not *just* see it as a visual image, but also *see* what it would potentially be like to *sense* in other ways - for example to touch, pick up, feel in our hands or taste from. Yet even in just seeing objects of any sort we can actually and already use our bodies to *sense* them in other ways - in particular to sense them in a directly *tactile* way - for example sensing, even at a distance and without direct touch, the temperature and fluidity of a puddle in the road, the bark, trunk and foliage of a tree, or the surface walls and shapes of a building. This is the *sadhana* which makes *seeing* a route to a rich and continuous tactile *sensing* of things - not just in nature but any place and any time, outdoors or indoors.

I have also constantly reiterated in my writings the importance of understanding the *body as a whole* - and particularly its entire surface - as both a sensory image of the soul and its principal sense 'organ' - one which preceded the differentiation of the senses into *localised* organs of sight, hearing, smell and taste on that surface. The skin is sensitive above all to touch. Transforming

outward seeing into sensing is above all about adding a *tactile* dimension to 'seeing' things. Conversely, it is about transforming the skin's all-round tactile sensing of air and space itself into a type of all-round, 360 degree 'seeing'. For all this one must first of all heighten awareness of one's body surface as a whole, even if this means engaging in long hours of practice in bringing awareness to one area of one's skin at a time and then another – without losing awareness of the previous areas.

Finally, there is the basic New Yoga understanding that there is not a single state of mind or consciousness that *cannot at the same time* be experienced as a *bodily state* – as a the sensuously experienced tone and texture of one's *body as whole*. All these understandings of 'seeing and sensing' can come to be continuously experienced through the repeated practice of three basis New Yoga *sadhanas*:

1. Giving awareness to sensing every area and every square inch of one's body surface – helped by being aware of which areas of one's body surface one is not sensing at any given time. The result is an on-going but subtler experience of the way one experiences one's skin when first entering a lake, sea or swimming pool – except that the tactile medium is air and space not water.
2. Using this skin-awareness to sense things that one sees around one in space in a tactile way – even at a distance – and to cultivate also a tactile *sense* of the very air and space around them.
3. Attending always to the overall 'tone' of one's bodily self-awareness at any given time – as if one always had a piano or *keyboard* on hand from which one could at any time select a tone or chord that would echo it perfectly. Together with this go a sense of different qualities of bodily feeling tone such as degrees and qualities of lightness or heaviness, density or airiness, brightness or darkness, openness or closedness etc.

The result of these *sadhanas* is an ability to attend to both the *things* and *people* that one meets and sees in everyday life with the same degree of *heightened awareness* that one gives to a *murti* and other ritual objects during *darshan*. This is an awareness that greatly enhances and enriches our *sensuous* experiencing and enjoyment of ‘seeing’ things and people, whilst also sustaining a *tactile*, breathing skin-sense of the air and empty space surrounding them – of space as the very aether of pure awareness (*Shiva*) surrounding all that can be seen (*Shakti*).

*There is nothing and nobody that is not a wondrous Murti of Shiva.*

*There is nothing that is not Sensuous manifestation of the Great World Soul.*

*Therefore take delight in Sensing all you See, both outwardly and inwardly.*

*This is the Great Darshana and Sadhana of Tantra, for without Delighting in the*

*Sensuous, how can we De-Light in Shiva, in that pure, sense-free awareness which*

*Is the very Light in which all things and all people, all Jivas are seen and sensed?*

*Shiva Darshan is also ‘seeing people’ and sensing them too - Jiva Darshan.*

## The Significance of Tactile Sensing in Tantra

In his book *The Touch of Śakti* Ernst Furlinger<sup>1</sup> emphasises the significant role of *tactile* sensation and touch (*sparsba*) in the tantric tradition of Trika Shaivism. That is why the sensuous words that it employs – such as ‘immersion’ and ‘pervasion’ are not to be taken as mere ‘metaphors’. Instead, and in line with Abhinavagupta’s own understanding of the deepest levels of meaning in language, such words should be recognised as intentionally *suggestive* terms, designed to both convey and evoke sensuous and *tactile* experiences of awareness - up to an including the highest dimension of pure awareness “...the touch [*sparsba*] of anuttara-samvit”. (*Tantraloka* 5.142)

The way in which the sounds and senses of words themselves ‘touch’ us inwardly is itself something tangibly sensed or felt - and no mere metaphorical use of the word ‘touch’. All of the senses – including sight – can touch us inwardly. Even to that type of *seeing* which corresponds in its essence to vision and perceptions arising from and giving visual form to pure awareness, there always corresponds a subtle tactile *sense* – as is the case also in the visions that make up our dreams.

Space itself touches the very molecules of air (*vayu*) that pervade our bodies as breath (*prana*). In the tantras, air in particular is associated with the sense of pervasive touch. What I have referred to as ‘inner sensing’ finds its counterpart in Utpaladeva’s use of the term *antarasparsba* - often used synonymously with *prana* and literally translatable both as ‘inner sense’ or ‘inner touch’. This is understood as the second of four dimensions of awareness:



1. the seeing 'void' (*shunya*) of sense-free awareness
2. inner tactile sense or touch (*antara sparsha*)
3. the mind or intellect (*buddhi*)
4. the body (*deha*)

The body is referred to in the *Tantraloka* of Abhinavagupta as being “the highest linga”. This is a significant comment given that the *linga* as bodily organ is also designated as the “place of touch” (*sparshdhammani*) in the sexual dimension of tantric practice. Yet if the body (as a whole) is the “highest linga” this implies a dimension of whole body tactility and tactile sensing of the sort I have described. This implication is confirmed when Abhinavagupta writes of the body as being “surrounded by the wheel of deities” and thus “the best abode (*dhama*) for worship (*puja*).”

“The Lord (*ishvara*) attains the highest abode due to having satisfied all the deities.” These are understood as *deities of the senses* – made not only visible but *tangible* through air (*vayu*) and empty space (*akasha*) surrounding the body as *linga*. The latter constitute the larger cosmic vagina or *yoni* of the body itself as *linga*. Sex is of course principally a tactile experience. Thus the entire sexual dimension and language of the *tantras* is in itself a pointer to the significance attached to *touch and tactile sensation* (outer and inner) in coming to experience the highest awareness and awareness-bliss.

Even that central term of Trika Shaivism - *vimarsha* – which refers to the self-reflection of the light of pure awareness in all that it illuminates, bring to light and allows to be seen – derives from the Sanskrit root *mrs* – to touch. Further to this point, F rlinger cites a section of *Jayadrathamalatantra* – seen within the

*Krama* school of Kashmir Shaivism as the “King of Tantra” – in which the highest Goddess, understood as *Kundalini* is explicitly defined as “the *touch* of pure awareness” [my stress]. In the *Tantraloka* Abhinavagupta draws on the teachings of the *Malinivijayottaratantra* – which he explicitly refers to as his principal source and designates as the foremost and highest of the *tantras*.

Fürlinger also cites a key section of this *tantra* in which, as in The New Yoga, the role of the skin as an organ or all-round, whole-body sensing is affirmed through a specific meditation – one specifically designed to cultivate a mode of tactile sensing independent of direct physical contact with another body.

Next, I now reveal to another contemplation, [that of the Sensory Medium] of touch, whereby the yogin becomes adamantine-bodied. One should contemplate oneself as seated within a hexagonal diagram; [one should imagine oneself] to be dry, black and overcoming by twitching in every part of the body. Then, within 10 days, O Goddess, the [crawling] sensation of ants arises everywhere on his skin. Then, contemplating that [sensation], he attains an adamantine body. Who can ward him off who contemplates the previously [visualised] form as the afore-mentioned diagram, and thereby attains the [esoteric] knowledge of the touch realm. One should contemplate the self without the diagram in order to achieve sovereignty of that [reality-level], by perfecting which, he will become a knower of all sensations.” MVT 14..28-33

The closing words of the *Vijnanabhairavatantra* read:

“Having said this, the Goddess, full of bliss, embraced Shiva.”

This embrace is the all-embracing ‘touch’ of Shakti, as pure awareness, embracing Shiva’s divine or glorious body (*vapus*) itself constituted of nothing but the immanent bodily fullness (*purnata*) of pure awareness. Abhinavagupta himself writes of the touch of this fullness (*purnatasparsha*) as the highest means of attaining bliss through the body, just as Kshemaraja writes of the (inwardly

sensed) touch of the power of the inner Self. Such uses of and emphasis given to the nature of touch should not surprise us. After all, by its very nature, touch is the very embodiment of ‘non-duality’ – for to touch is at the same time to be touched, and in this way to experience the body itself as a mere boundary state or ‘skin’ of pure awareness, one which does not divide us as bodies but unites them as one in their mutual embrace – both with each other *and* with the all-embracing and all-pervading *space* of awareness in which we all dwell.

“As the mighty air, which pervades everything, abides in space  
know that in the same manner all beings abide in me.”

*Bhagavadgita 9.6*

“Where the supreme Lord Himself is meditated upon, thereafter  
being seen and then touched – there, where You are experienced,  
may the great festival of your worship always occur to me.”

Utpaladeva *Śivastotravali* 13.6