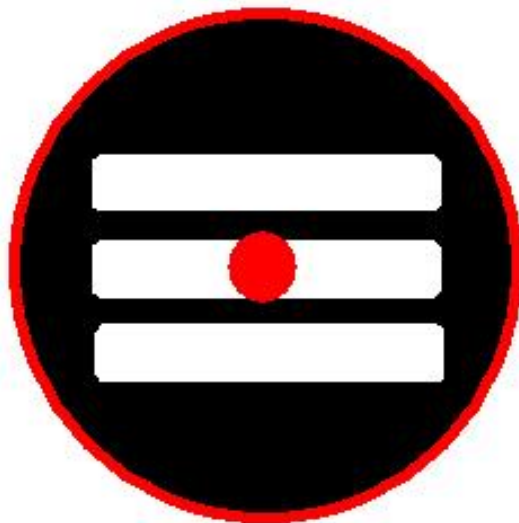


# **FOUR AXES OF SEXUALITY**

**new reflections on sexuality  
from a tantric perspective**



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# New Reflections on Sexuality from a Tantric Perspective

## Introduction

I see 'tantra' as an understanding of divine-universal sexuality, which wholly transcends conventional Western divisions of human sexuality in separable categories such as 'heterosexuality', 'homosexuality' and even 'bisexuality' - if this is reduced to a mere *combination of separable* hetero- and homo-sexual natures or tendencies.

Such conventionalised divisions of different expressions of both animal and human sexuality fail to answer the most basic question of all – what constitutes the essence of 'sexuality' *as such*. For by simply adding prefixes such as *hetero-*, *homo-* or *bi-* to the term 'sexuality' this most basic question is already and completely *foreclosed*.

The terms 'heterosexuality', 'homosexuality' and 'bisexuality' all confuse *biological* gender with the divine essence of the sexual relation as such - understood not as a simply creaturely or fleshly relation but as a *universal relation*.

This relation is the intercourse of pure awareness (Shiva) with *all* its expressions and embodiments (Shaktis).

Sexual polarity — the relation of the divine masculine (*Shiva*) to the divine feminine (*Shakti*) is both prior to and wholly *independent* of biological gender.

As a result it cannot be identified with 'heterosexuality' in the conventional sense. At the same time, since all forms of human sexuality are an expression of a basic sexual polarity - the dynamic interplay and embodiment of femininity and masculinity - there are no forms of sexuality that are not 'heterosexual' - thus rendering *the term itself* essentially redundant.

All bodies, whether biologically ‘male’, ‘female’ or ‘neuter’ – are ‘Shaktis’ of Shiva - and in this sense belong to the realm of the divine *feminine*. Yet since all bodies are in essence nothing but embodiments *of* pure awareness (Shiva), they can all equally be said to belong to the realm of the divine *masculine*.

Understood essentially as bodies *of* awareness or soul, all bodies are by nature androgynous or ‘bisexual’ - being embodiments (Shaktis) of pure awareness (Shiva).

This also renders the term ‘bi-sexual’ redundant in its essence, rather than as a mere *category* of sexual behaviour. ‘Homosexuality’ too, is a term which is therefore redundant as an ‘essential term’ - since even as a mode of human sexual behaviour it is no less an expression of a basic ‘hetero-sexual’ polarity than ‘heterosexuality’ as such.

Contrasting terms such as ‘butch’ and ‘femme’, ‘top’ and ‘bottom’, ‘active’ and ‘passive’, ‘dominant’ and ‘submissive’ reflect an essential gender *polarity* independent of biological gender - *whether or not* a given individual identifies more with one pole of this polarity, and whether or not these poles or roles are reciprocal, reversible or fluid in their sexual relationships.

If the contrast between ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘homosexuality’ is defined simply as ‘opposite sex’ vs. ‘same sex’ attraction and sexual relations, then the *unifying* element of universal sexual polarity and androgyny (symbolised in Hindu culture by the half-male, half-female image of Shiva as Ardhanishvara) is ignored.

Yet whilst there is such a thing as ‘a-sexuality’ or sexual asthenia, therefore, there is no such thing as a ‘neutral’, *a-polar* sexuality.

And if variations in human sexual behaviour are, right from the start, simply classified into separable *behaviourial* categories (such as heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual) then the essential nature of these behaviours themselves cannot be understood in their essence – as *more* than just behaviours, whether learned or genetically predisposed.

Understanding these variations means understanding variation in how the basic gender *poles* of the sexual relation – what we call ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ - are *understood, expressed and embodied*.

Jung recognised the innate androgyny of the soul through the twin concepts of *anima* (the feminine soul aspect of each individual) and *animus* (its masculine soul aspect). What he did not recognise was the innate capacity of the soul body to inwardly transform or ‘shapeshift’ itself into any form (animal, human or trans-human) and to freely alter or alternate its *gender* without any need of outward tranvestism, cross-dressing or permanent anatomical ‘sex change’.

### **Hindu Tantra and Sexuality**

The English ‘gentlemen’ who made up the colonial masters of India saw the gentleness of Indian men as a sign of ‘femininity’, and thus (in their ‘masculine’ eyes) also as a type of despicable effeminacy and ‘feminine’ passivity – a passivity which they in turn identified with ‘weakness’.

In what Hugh Urban<sup>1</sup> describes as a dialectical mirror of this image, the revolutionary anti-colonial movements of Bengal drew upon a uniquely Hindu image of the divine feminine - the bloodthirsty image of the goddess Kali so horrifying to the English - as a divine source of their dynamic *empowerment* as male warriors (Ksatriya).

Here we see reflected Hindu Tantric understandings of the divine *feminine* or ‘Shakta’ principle as the embodiment of dynamism and power, and a corresponding association of the divine masculine with the meditative quiescence of *Shiva* - often portrayed as lying passively and corpse-like beneath the feet of Kali. This iconography represents a complete reversal of European images of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, and the general Western identification of ‘masculinity’ with power, and ‘femininity’ with passivity and weakness.

In contrast, 'Shakti' - the principal Hindu-Tantric term for the divine feminine – *means* 'power' or 'potential for action' (Sanskrit *shak*).

Yet this tantric understanding of the qualities associated with the divine masculine and feminine conceals a deeper truth that transcends mere historic differences of religious cultures and iconography.

This deeper truth is the dialectical truth that qualities of embodied strength and power, normally identified with active, virile 'masculinity', are qualities that one needs to receptively *open* oneself and one's body to.

In other words, the 'feminine' principle - even if it *is* identified with a sexual posture of *passive and receptive opening* - is what first *allows* those very qualities normally identified with masculine 'strength' to first *realise and embody* themselves.

Herein lies a basic paradox at the root of all discussions as to what constitutes the basic 'difference' between 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities - a paradox that simply does not permit the separation or sexual classification of these qualities in the first place but instead reveals their *inseparability* – their dialectical unity or 'non-duality'.

Thus it is that the practice of Kundalini yoga by both men and women involves a receptive *opening* of the lower 'chakras'<sup>2</sup> or centres of awareness (*Muladhara* and *Svadhithana*) of a sort that then allows the 'coiled up' power that is known as *Kundalini Shakti* to rise up through the inwardly felt body.

The *chakras* themselves find embodiment both at the base of the spine and in an area midway between the anus and genitalia. This is closely related in the male anatomy to the 'bulb' (Sanskrit *kanda*) that is the prostate gland.

That is why tantric yoga *asanas* involve using the heel of the foot to place pressure both on the perineum (and through it the prostate or *kanda*) and the coccyx. For the man this intensifies sexual pleasure whilst at the same time delaying or entirely eliminating the need for seminal ejaculation.

Today so-called ‘prostate massage’ - pressure applied on the ‘prostate’ from the perineum or via the rectum - is once again recognised as a principal means of extending and intensifying sexual pleasure for both hetero- and homosexual males.

Indeed ‘sex aids’ are now sold which apply pressure to both the prostate and base of the spine. In this way the prostate is ‘milked’ through its *non-seminal* secretions through the penis.

Here we see a striking parallel to the ritual worship of a phallic *lingam* in temples to Shiva, in which the lingam is regularly doused or bathed in milk. Indeed it may be surmised from archaeological evidence that some of the earliest *linga* were used as ‘dildos’ – with the difference that they were employed by both men and women, ‘heterosexuals’ and ‘homosexuals’ alike.

I have argued that the so-called ‘Shiv lingam’ itself is not merely a male phallic symbol but represents the body – all bodies – as both a *penetration* of pure awareness (*Shiva*) into the space-time universe and a phallic-shaped *invagination* of the latter to allow this penetration.

For both women and men therefore the first stirrings of Kundalini are released through a type of vagino-anal *opening* to a ‘bottom-up’ *penetration* of power from below – something that can in turn be experienced as sensations of both vaginal and anal penetration – and enhanced by either.

## The Second Axis of Sexuality

Returning from tantra to the general theme of human sexuality and its variants, we need to remind ourselves that the term 'homosexuality' is a relatively recent one of European coinage.

And yet as we know, Western-European culture had its roots in ancient Greece, a culture in which worship of the male body and homo-eroticism was accepted without qualm and in which sexual relations between older and younger men were thought of as normal and desirable – indeed as spiritually higher than 'heterosexual' relations (if only on the strict condition that the older man be 'on top', thus making the sexual act 'educative' for the younger man and opening him to a 'higher' masculine power).

What we see here is not simply the historic 'peculiarity' of what was a highly *masculinistic* erotic culture – one in which the image of the effeminate, homosexual 'queer' or 'queen' would have had absolutely no place.

For what this masculinist homo-erotic culture reveals is also a clue to a wholly different dimension or *axis* of sexuality to that of gender - an *age polarity* comparable to physically affectionate and emotionally educative *parent-child* relations.

The homo-eroticism of Greek culture merged these two distinct axes of sexuality, but it is the second axis that is largely ignored in considering the nature of sexuality as such.

For Judaeo-Christianity brought with it not only the vehement religious and social prohibitions on 'sodomy' that still pervades our culture as homophobia. It also brought with it a disparagement of sex and its dissociation not only from 'love' but also from physical warmth and affection of the sort shown by parents to children. Love was seen principally as a relation to God rather than to man or woman.

The Judaeo-Christian ‘father god’ was set up as a divine ‘parent figure’ from whom such love was also received, and yet not in the form of *embodied* warmth and affection of the sort shown by human parents, in the first place through the contact of mother and infant.

In this way the love of this more or less distant father god could easily become a substitute for – or justification of – a type for cold and disembodied human parenting, above all but not only on the side of the human father.

At the same time, the Christian values of brotherly, sisterly and neighbourly love became identified with a shared, childlike relation *to* a common father god or symbolic ‘parent figure’ of some sort, whether religious, communal or political.

In contrast to the Judaeo-Christian God, ‘Shiva’ is no distant ‘Father God’ but is recognised in Hindu-Tantric culture as an all-pervasive reality, not just transcendent but immanent in all beings and all bodies – and that in a way which can be experienced in a warm, sensual and bodily way, through our body of sensual, feeling *awareness*. And the recognition also of a Mother Goddess in Hindu culture encouraged both devotional feeling for and human *embodiment* of her qualities – not just her power but her warmth and compassion.

In European culture, ‘romantic’ love restored a dimension of both spirituality and/or human warmth and affection to sexual relations, and yet it also lacked that *second axis* of sexuality – the parental or age axis – which, not being recognised or affirmed, could then only find distorted expression in abusive paedophilia. I say *abusive* paedophilia – for the word ‘paedophilia’ as such simply means ‘love of children’. This is of course a ‘loaded’ subject. For the so-called ‘universal taboo’ on ‘incest’ in all forms and in its most general sense - sexual relations between ‘minors’ and adults (including older brothers, uncles, other adults, parents and priests) far from being a ‘taboo’, has been and still is a *normative* part of many if not most cultures - not least Indian culture – and that even at the time of Abhinavagupta (where it is affirmed in the *Tantraloka* itself).



Even in the modern West however, such well-known sex researchers such as Kinsey and Pomeroy ‘transgressively’ announced that they saw nothing wrong with consensual, mutually pleasurable sex with minors. Here too there are *questions* that have remained hidden and unaddressed, and that have nothing to do with simply accepting or rejecting such positions. This is because most culturally normative, non-commercial sex with minors is, in reality, non-consensual and abusive – again and not least in India, but also in many other cultures. One key question to be considered therefore is when and why did this almost universal form of sexual ‘transgression’ begin - and when and why did it take on its now generally abusive and non-consensual form?

For its result today is an obsession with ‘age of consent’, together with a generalised taboo, at least in Western cultures, on sexual relations between people of different age groups - and an ever more paranoid blurring of the boundaries between sexual and non-sexual expressions of adult love and affection for children.

This blurring comes, I believe, from a failure to recognise that what I have termed ‘the second axis of sexuality’, which does indeed have an erotic and sensual dimension, and yet one quite distinct from *genital* sexuality. This is both a *pre- and sub-genital* dimension of human eroticism, one aroused by whole-body contact of a sort which generates a sense of being held and embraced by a ‘larger’ body, or else is rooted in lower ‘chakras’ than those associated with genital sexuality. It is also the counterpart to a ‘trans-genital’ form of tantric eroticism. This arises through a tangible, bodily sense of being held within the embrace of ‘God’ or the Divine – sensually touched and penetrated by the all-surrounding and all-pervasive awareness that it most essentially *is*.

### **The Third Axis of Sexuality**

The first polar axis of sexuality is the *axis of gender* – not reducible to biological gender. This axis is the dynamic interplay of masculine and feminine qualities or ‘poles’ of awareness. Yet whatever way ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are seen or interpreted by an individual or culture, this axis of gender seems to be the *only* axis of sexuality recognised

in our culture. I hypothesise a second axis of sexuality – an *axis of age* beginning with the parent-child relations, but also merged with or distorted through neglect or absence into crude or abusive ‘paedophilia’. One might however also speak of a *third* axis of sexuality – the axis of genitality. This is an axis whose poles are genital sexuality on the one hand and pre-, sub- or trans-genital sexuality on the other.

In relation to the third axis it is pertinent to note that most contemporary pornography is *unerotic* in the extreme. This is due to its almost exclusive emphasis on the repetitive and mechanistic portrayal of *genital* sex - lacking any dimension of affection or even bodily contact outside of the genital area, which are simply assumed to be the principle or sole ‘erogenous zones’ of the human body. With regards to the axis of gender it is also predominantly *masculinist*, and ‘the axis of age’ is only portrayed in vulgar, violent or abusive ways. Any tantric understanding of the *body as a whole* as the principal sense organ and sex organ of the soul – an erogenous zone in its entirety - is totally absent, allowing no place for even an intimation of intimate whole body – ‘soul body’ - intercourse. This is the result of a culture in which whole-body awareness is something absent in most people except perhaps whilst swimming, in extreme weather conditions, or in the *briefest of intervals* after embracing another person - and before re-establishing a degree of physical distance which abruptly cuts off any experience of the ‘bi-personal field’. A whole body experience of this field however, can be cultivated simply through close bodily proximity to another, even without physical contact.

Together with an exclusive focus on genital sexuality goes the myth that the principal goal of sexual intercourse is not the enjoyment of sensual desire through bodily intimacy or sexual fantasy, but rather ‘release’ from the ‘pressure’ of sexual desire and with it the exhaustion of sexual pleasure through *orgasm*. In reality the very need for orgasmic release from sexual desire – for example through ejaculation – arises from an incapacity to *contain* and therefore also *sustain* an experience of whole-body awareness and sexual pleasure. The assumption that the whole purpose of sexual pleasure is for it to come to a ‘peak’ through orgasm – rather than being sustained through whole-body awareness - means that most ‘normally’ paced ejaculatory sex is in reality a form of ‘pre-mature’

ejaculation, just as addictive needs for frequent ejaculation or orgasm, whether through intercourse or masturbation and self-pleasuring, is characteristic of an im-mature, adolescent sexuality. The mirror image of this idealisation of adolescent sexuality is the myth that if spontaneous sexual arousal, desire, drive or ‘libido’ abates with increasing age, this necessarily leads to a decline in sexual activity. This myth is based on the false belief that that the purpose of sexual activity is the *satiation* of spontaneous sexual desire through intercourse and orgasm – rather than the *arousal* of that desire *through* intimate bodily contact and intercourse with a partner, and/or through sexual fantasy.

Herein lies the importance of the new understanding and experience of ‘tantric sex’ presented in my book ‘Tantra Reborn’, which describes methods of *pair meditation* through which - even without any skin contact at all - sexual feeling can be aroused and enjoyed through the divine bliss of *soul body intimacy and intercourse*<sup>4</sup>.

### **The Fourth Axis of Sexuality**

Abusive sex in all its forms whether between adults or adults and minors, is an abuse of power. The Church’s attempt to exert power *over* people’s sexuality, not to mention The (ab-)use of sex to exert power over others links all three dimensions of sexuality referred to so far – that of gender, age and genitality. Throughout the ages, and throughout all human age groups, sex and power have been associated with one another, and yet without recognising a most fundamental distinction – the distinction between power *over* and power *of*. To seek to exert power or control *over* people’s sexuality - or to exert sexual power *over* them - is one thing. To freely release and experience the divine power *of* sexuality is quite another. Yet the forced or violent exertion of sexual power *over* another not itself the same thing as a *free* and consensual interplay of dominance and submission, activity and passivity in sexual relation. This interplay expresses in a more tangible way that central point I sought to make regarding the *paradoxicality* of the ‘active/passive’, ‘penetrating/opening’, ‘dominance/submission’ relation normally identified with the masculine/feminine relation. For just as ‘feminine’ receptive openness to power is what first lets that power in and allows its embodiment, so is free ‘submission’ to dominance

what first allows the power *of* that dominance to be experienced and enjoyed. Who can say then, from whence the power *of* sexuality arises. For if the free power of submission to dominance is what first grants dominance or ‘power’ to another, who can say *who is the dominant one* – he (or she) who dominates, or he (or she) who freely submits to and thereby *empowers* that dominance?

Perhaps the most tangible key to transcending the dualities of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, ‘dominance’ and ‘submission’, ‘active’ and ‘passive’ – both in heterosexual and homosexual relations - lies in a *mutual surrender* to wild or unrestrained passion and ‘dominance’ on the one hand, and aware tenderness or tender awareness on the other (awareness, defined as open and receptive *attention* or *attending* having the same root as the words *tend* and *tender*).

Perhaps this very interplay of wildness and awareness is also the tantric key to the question of the essential ‘polarity’ hidden within the ‘axis of gender’ – whether ‘same sex’ or ‘other sex’.

In the literature of Shaivist Tantra, ‘Shakti’, as the divine ‘feminine’ is identified with the power *of* sexuality, and Shiva – as pure awareness - with the source or ‘holder’ of that power.

Perhaps however, the true essence and power *of* sexuality in all three axes of sexuality lies in a fourth axis - ‘the axis of power’ – understood *not* as the exclusive dominance *or* submission of one gender, age group, anatomical region or organ *over* another but in that *free interplay* of Shiva and Shakti suggested by the by the Sanskrit word *lila* ?

***Where Shiva-Shakti reigns as interplay***

***Where true awareness and power hold sway***

***Who is to say who is the power and who the power holder?***

## References

1. Urban, H. *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy and Politics in the Study of Religion* University of California Press 2003
2. “Due to ‘expansion’, ‘satiation’, ‘cutting of bonds’ and ‘power of action’, ‘Cakra’ is said to derive from ‘kasi’ (shining), ‘caki’ (satisfying), ‘kryta’ (cutting) and ‘karoti’ (it does).” *The Kula Ritual, as elaborated in Chapter 29 of the Tantraloka of Abhinavagupta*, translated by J.R. Dupuche, Motilal Banarsidass 2003
3. Wilberg, P. *Tantra Reborn – the Sensuality and Sexuality of the Soul Body* New Yoga Publications 2009
4. For experiential accounts of the divine bliss of tantric soul-body intimacy, intercourse and initiation see [www.thenewyoga.org/initiation.htm](http://www.thenewyoga.org/initiation.htm)).