

# **TANTRA AND TAOISM**

**On their Essential Nature and Relation**



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## Introduction

“The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.” *Laozi*

How are we to compare chalk and cheese? Well at least we have a *common language* by which to *name* them. How, however, are we to find a *language* by which to compare the spiritual terms and traditions of two or more cultures whose languages are *fundamentally different* from one another and from our own? I am thinking specifically of the difference between Indian Tantric tradition and those traditions native to Japan and to China – Chinese Taoism in particular. So different are the languages of Indian and East-Asian civilizations that we can even speak of them as expressing a fundamentally different *relationship* to language as such. Both Chinese and Japanese are of course ideographic rather than alphabetic languages. And it could be said that the Japanese *relationship* to language is a fundamentally aesthetic and poetic one rather than a logical-conceptual one.

The question of the relation between the spiritual traditions of Indian and East-Asian or ‘Oriental’ cultures and civilizations is made even more difficult by the fact that just to refer to them as having ‘spiritual’ traditions is to rely on a word from *Latin*. For this is a language, which, though it derives from the same Indo-European language family as Sanskrit, has left us with words such as ‘spirit,’ ‘spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’ which have no cognates in Sanskrit, let alone Chinese or Japanese. There is also a world of difference between the roots and connotations of the Latin *spiritus* and those which once belonged to the Greek words *psyche* and *pneuma*, or to the German word *Geist*. Yet this word (whose principal English cognate is ‘ghost’) is, paradoxically, far closer ‘in spirit’ to the meaning of the ‘spirit’ in China and Japan than the word ‘spirit’ itself – which in Oriental cultures has long been associated, with ‘ghostly’ or ancestral ‘spirits’ (plural).

The task of just finding words by which to compare two cultural traditions so different in their language to each other and to our own is compounded by our own specifically European linguistic mindset – one which assumes for example that such ‘spiritual’ keywords such as ‘Qi’ or ‘Chi’ must necessarily have a common or fixed meaning, both in everyday speech and philosophical discourse - when almost the very opposite is the

case. A case in point is the Japanese kanji syllable 'ki' - a Romanisation of the Chinese 'qi'. For as James Deacon notes, Japanese contains many words ending with the syllable 'ki', none of which at first glance reveals a common, easily definable dimension of meaning:

“As a loose, *general* guide, the meaning of a word written with a specific kanji-pair is *ultimately* (if often indirectly) based on / derived *from*, a *synthesis* of the meanings of the individual kanji making up that pair. For example, if we take the single word *tenki*. As a stand-alone, the individual word *ten* signifies heaven, or sky. The word *ki* is of course most commonly translated as spirit, energy (or feeling). So, if in an attempt to arrive at the meaning of the single word *tenki*, we simply combine the meanings of the two other words *ten* and *ki*, we would end up with something like “Heavenly Spirit” or maybe “Heaven Energy” (as opposed to Earth Energy)? In fact, *tenki* simply means ‘weather’. Let us now look at several other ‘ki-words’.

As is the case with 'tenki' (and also 'Reiki'), it is important to remember that each of the following, although written using two kanji, are in fact *single*, complete words in their own right.

Kekki ['blood ki' ]	actually means:	vigour, ardour
Denki ['dragon ki']	means:	electricity
Konki ['root ki']	means:	perseverance, patience
Heiki ['flat (or even) ki']	means:	calmness (also indifference)
Gen ki ['foundation ki']	means:	ones health - being in good spirits
Ninki ['person ki']	means:	popularity
Yoki ['positive ki', ('Yang' ki)]	means:	liveliness - cheerful, jolly
Inki ['negative ki', ('Yin' ki) ]	means:	gloomy, melancholy
Kuki ['sky ki']	means:	air
Reiki ['cold ki']	means:	cold air

And in some *ki* words, the *ki* kanji does not actually add anything to the meaning of the *other* kanji - it simply speaks to the *dynamic aspect* of the whole word.

Jōki ['steam ki']	means:	steam or vapour
Yuki ['brave ki']	means:	courage, bravery
Byōki ['illness ki']	means:	illness, disease, sickness

Jiki [ 'magnet (also porcelain) ki' ] means: magnetism

And so it is that, just as in the examples given above, simply combining the literal meanings of the two individual words whose kanji are paired to form the separate individual word 'Reiki', will not really give us a truly accurate understanding of the single word 'Reiki' itself.

Ongoing research would suggest that *Reiki* - as the term is used in the name *Usui Reiki Ryoho* - more immediately translates simply as 'spirit' or 'spiritual'; thus *Usui Reiki Ryoho* translates most clearly as: *Usui's spiritual healing-method*

Now while it would be perhaps somewhat incorrect to deny that, at least on a very simplistic level, the single word Reiki still carries with it a sense of 'spiritual energy', it can, amongst other things, also be understood to mean: 'spiritual essence' 'spiritual feeling' 'spiritual intent' 'spiritual influence' 'spiritual emanation'

Also: 'soul power', 'soul force' and, quite importantly, I feel: 'aura' (i.e. the emanation of spirit around the body).

As the term *Reiki* is used in the name *Usui Reiki Ryoho*, there is not necessarily any direct reference to 'energy' - in this context, the *ki* part of the compound would simply seem to speak to the dynamic - the *effect* of spirit in action.”

We see here how, despite the knowledge of Japanese he offers, Deacon ends by once again seeking to superimpose Greek, Latin and Germanic words ('aura', 'spirit' and 'soul') on the essence of the Japanese 'ki-words' he lists. What he does not do is to explore the etymological roots of these Greek, Latin and Germanic words themselves.

Were he to do so he would emphasise that the Greek word *aura* simply means 'a breeze'; that the word 'spirit' derives from the Latin verb *spirare* ('to breathe') and that the word 'soul' stems from the German *Seele* - thus hinting at a connection with the fluid element of water (*See* - meaning 'sea'). The very use of the word 'action' in Deacon's phrase 'spirit in action' is Latin-derived, and very different from notions of a harmony and interplay of rest and *movement* central to the Chinese polarity of Yin and Yang within the 'Supreme Ultimate' or 'Tai Chi'. How can we even begin to explore the original, native sense of such words as 'Ki' or 'Qi' if even teachers of Tai Chi ignore their etymology or confuse them with 'Chi'? For 'Chi' is *not* simply a different Romanised spelling of 'Qi' but is a spelling of the Chinese 'Ji'. 'Tai Chi' is not 'Tai Qi' but 'Taiji' - which translates as the 'Supreme Ultimate' or 'Supreme Limit', and is in many ways equivalent to the

Sanskrit and Tantric term ‘Anuttara’. The ideogram ‘ji’ is a ridgepole – indicating a direction or point of ultimate extent in space. In its root meaning however, the Chinese *Qi* meant ‘breath’ and therefore can indeed be said to be a Chinese equivalent of the Greek word *psyche* (‘life breath’) and *pneuma* (wind), the Latin *spiritus* (breath) and the Sanskrit *prana*. All these words can thus be said to refer to ‘air’ in its truly *elemental* dimension - not as a mere set of gaseous molecules but as a fluid, flowing medium like blood or water (a sense through which the Latin word *anima* can also come to bespeak the Germanic words ‘soul’ or ‘Seele’). What all these words point to therefore is a type of ‘aware-ised’, ‘animated’ or ‘ensouled’ breath – an ‘aether’ or ‘higher air’ with flowing or fluid water-like character of the sort postulated by Anton Mesmer in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Difference in Similarity

It would seem that we have, despite all our reservations, solved the problem of comparing and translating ‘ki-words’. *Qi* or *ki* = *prana* = *psyche/pneuma* = *spiritus* = *soul/Seele* = fluid, flowing ‘breath’ or ‘air’.

Similarly, we can find *formal parallels* between philosophical notions of a fundamental metaphysical *polarity* in different cultures whether under the name of *yin/yang*, *purusha/prakriti*, *Shiva/Shakti*, *dynamis/energeia*, *spirit/matter* etc.

Yet how does this neat equation of naming words from different languages and cultures fit with the words of Laozi:

*“The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.”*

And if the equation of the ‘ki-words’ of these cultures is not so simple – then where, how and in what way can thinking lead us to any significant differences that might be concealed in their similarity? Precisely through not ignoring differences in *the way of thinking* through which these seemingly equivalent notions were thought in different cultures – and in particular through the very different way in which what unites them –

*breath and breathing* – came to assume a central role in their spiritual practices, in *embodying* these notions. Here we are back again to chalk and cheese. For there is simply *no way* in which the basic *bodily* comportment, bearing or way of ‘being in the world’ that was embodied in traditional Chinese and Japanese culture can be likened to that of either India or Europe.

For what Chinese and Japanese culture and civilization reveal is not just a wholly different relation to *language*, but also a wholly different relation to the *body* and with it a wholly different understanding of ‘thinking’ as such. Indian spiritual thought and discourse, not least as expressed in the tantras of Kashmir Shaivism, is perhaps the most sublime and refined expression of a thinking that unites ‘head’ and ‘heart’, ‘intellect’ and ‘feeling’. I must emphasise however, that I am not speaking here of a type of intellectuality or ‘head thinking’ that is merely *driven* by the heart – whether by passionate emotions of any sort (*rajas*) or even devotional feeling (*bhakti*). I am speaking of a *feeling intellect* grounded in *feeling awareness* – by which I mean a thinking ‘of’ the heart and not simply one driven *by* the heart. This distinction remains one of great significance in Indian culture – both traditional and post-colonial. For one of the enduring characteristics of Indian culture is its domination by a type of head thinking (whether of the *least* or *most* sophisticated sort) that is driven by the passions of the heart or – and this amounts to the same thing – used to control and suppress them. This is the reason why a religious and *emotionally purified* concept of the heart – understood as identical with the heart of the Divine itself – came to assume a central place in the thinking of Indian Tantrism and in what has been called “The Tantric Body”. This parallels the way in which a *conceptually purified* intellect or ‘head’ came to assume a central place in Western thought and the Western Body – a body ruled by the brain. No greater contrast can be found between Tantric and Taoist thought however, than in their relation to the *heart*, just as no greater contrast can be found between Taoist and Western thought than in their relation to the *head*. In traditional Japanese culture, to say of someone that they ‘think with their head’ was an insult – implying that their thinking was wholly superficial. For *thinking itself* was both understood and experienced as something that

had its seat in *neither head nor heart* but rather in the belly or *hara*. Similarly, a strong sense of self was associated with a strong belly.

*“If you ask anyone where in his body he feels his 'I' he will probably consider it a strange question at first, but pressed for an answer, he will reply 'in the head' or 'in the chest' or he will indicate with a vague gesture the region of his stomach and heart. Only very rarely will anyone indicate a region further down....”*

Karlfried Dürckheim *Hara, The Vital Centre of Man*

What could therefore be called ‘The Taoist Body’ has its spiritual and physical centre not in the head or heart but in the *hara* – specifically in the *tan tien* (Chinese) or *tanden* (Japanese), a centre that has no *central place* in any Indian anatomy of the ‘chakras’. For though it can be identified with the *svadhithana* chakra – which is sometimes described as a few inches below the navel – this chakra is also often falsely associated with sexual feeling and the sexual organs, whereas the *tan tien* is understood as both the physical and spiritual *centre of gravity* of the human being – hence the point of ultimate balance of rest and movement. This reflects the literal meaning of *svadhithana* as “the seat of the Self”.

Yet there remains a stark contrast between the heart-centred ‘Tantric Body’ and the *hara*-centred ‘Taoist Body’, one nowhere more strikingly enunciated than in the words of Laozi himself:

**“Empty the heart, fill the abdomen.”**

The message is echoed by Zhuangzi:

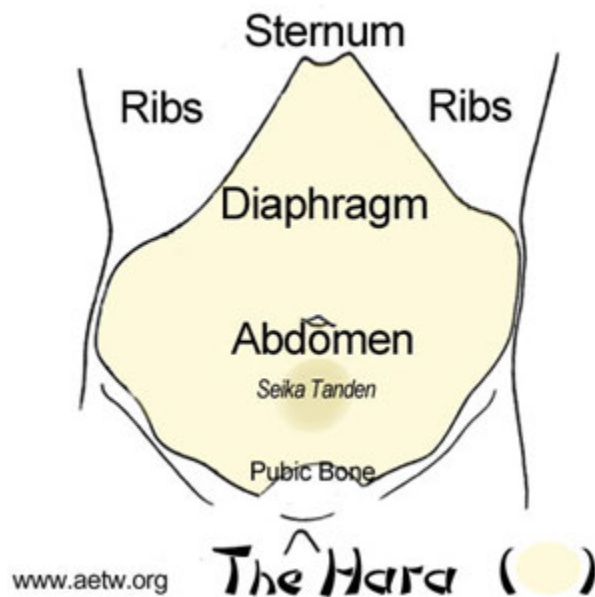
**“Rather than listen with the ear, listen with the heart. Rather than listen with the heart, listen with the Qi.** [ie. the ensouled breath with its centre in the **hara** - the *tan tien*]

**“The Way ... is the fasting of the heart.”**

Deacon writes also that "...in Japan there are also several disciplines - either of Chinese origin or alternatively heavily influenced by Chinese Qi Gong philosophy - which speak of *three* tandens. He defines these as follows.

1. The Lower (*Shimo*) *Tanden* (also: *Ge Tanden*)  
[essentially the same as the *seika tanden*]  
- located deep inside the 'hara'
2. The Middle (*Naka*) *Tanden* (also: *Chu Tanden*)  
- located inside the chest at about the heart level
3. The Upper (*Kami*) *Tanden* (also: *Jo Tanden*)  
- located in the middle of the head between the eye

This basic threefold or triadic schema contrasts with the multiplicity of traditional yogic 'chakras'. And as Deacon notes, "Traditional Japanese disciplines - martial, spiritual, therapeutic or artistic – tend rather to speak of a single Tanden." This is the lower or 'Seika' Tanden - 'Seika' meaning simply 'below the navel', and the Seika Tanden being located midway between the navel and the top of the pubic bone.



The word *tanden* is sometimes called *dan tian* or 'field of the elixir'. It is also called *kikai* – meaning 'the ocean of ki'.

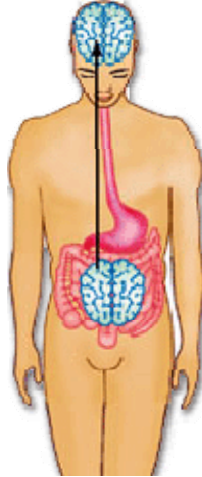


**“Where awareness goes Qi [the ensouled breath] flows.”** Laozi

Conversely, by centering our breathing entirely in the lower-abdomen or *hara* the *hara* can come to be felt as a vast, warm and womb-like *ocean* of awareness - into which we can comfortably let our awareness sink or flow down into - yet without losing our centre or sense of self, but instead *ful-filling* it.

This basic practice of centering both *breathing and awareness* in the warm and womb-like interiority of the *hara* is also the key to the ‘belly thinking’ acknowledged and so much valued in traditional Japanese culture. For it is from the ocean of awareness that expands within the *hara* that all thoughts are first conceived and germinate, only to rise as ‘steam’ or ‘air’ into the space of the head where they take form as mental words. This is reflected in the ideogram for Qi - steam rising from a rice bowl.

Today this understanding is once again affirmed by the recognition that the abdomen is, even in neuro-physiological terms, indeed a ‘second brain’. For there are more nerve cells in the gut than in the entire remainder of the peripheral nervous system, and it contains the same hormones and as many neurotransmitters (approximately 100 million) as are found in the ‘head brain’. What has not been fully understood is the inner meaning of this second brain – the ‘hara brain’ or ‘abdominal brain’ - which is not simply something reflected in phrases such as ‘gut feeling’ but rather rooted in the fact that thinking itself arises essentially through the *digestion* of all we experience, that *meaning* itself is a product of the *metabolisation* of what we experience – and that these processes of *digestion and* metabolisation of lived *experience* are precisely what finds living, fleshly embodiment in principal *organs* of digestion – stomach and intestines. That is also why Rudolf Steiner spoke of our potentiality for a type of thinking entirely *independent* of the brain. For the ‘head brain’ is in essence but a receptacle for thoughts arising from the ‘womb’ of the ‘abdominal brain’ or ‘hara brain’ – wherein a process of deep *wordless* ‘gestation’ of thought goes on – one that we can enter into far more deeply than most people identified with their heads and with ‘head-thinking’ can even begin to imagine – and one that is the source of the deepest levels of wordless inner comprehension and thought itself.



### Head and Hara

Verbal thoughts arise in the Head and brain from a process of wordless digestion of our life *experience* embodied in the abdomen and intestines – the abdominal brain or *Hara*.

### 3. Similarity in Difference

What then, is the relation between a downward sinking movement of awareness into the *hara* and something else which is so much stressed in both the Tantras and in my own writings on ‘The New Yoga of Awareness’ – namely the experience of awareness itself as an unbounded space *surrounding* the body and pervaded by its ‘higher air’ or *aether* – the vital ‘aether of awareness’ known as Akash in Sanskrit? To find a *similarity in difference* as well as *difference in similarity* between Tantric and Taoist understandings we need only listen to *Laozi*.

“*Extend farthest towards the void holding steadiest to the tranquility.*”

The phrase “extending farthest towards the void” echoes the basic practice of identifying with the entirety of ‘empty’ space that is advocated in the *Vijnanabhairavatantra*. The phrase is the essential meaning of the expression *taiji* or ‘Tai Chi’ – which has nothing to do with *qi* or *ki* but refers to a farthest boundary or limit (*ji*) of cosmic space. In this way it also hints at an *experience* of the ‘void’ as a vast universal space of pure or ‘empty’ awareness distinct from all contents of consciousness - and tranquilly centered in the *hara* and *tan tien*. Like the meditative thinking of the belly or *hara*, this is something that requires no gymnastic exercises of the sort associated today with ‘Tai Chi’ or ‘Qi Gong’ (the latter being a term that was coined only in 1957).

#### 4. 'Tantra' and 'Taoism'

So far we have explored the relation between 'Tantra and Taoism' without questioning these terms themselves, without asking the basic questions: 'What is 'Tantra'?' and 'What is 'Taoism'?' First and foremost they are of course *words*. The question is then not simply how these words are bandied about today or understood by scholars but how they might be understood in their essence. The words of a poem or saying *say* something. A sage, like a poet, is someone with something to *say*. The poet is known by his poems. The sage is known by his sayings. Indeed the very word 'sage' refers to a 'sayer'. Yet 'saying' is not reducible to speaking or writing. For what is *said* through a word or words is not reducible *to* words. That is why the sayings of a sage, like the poems of a poet, say something which cannot be rendered or defined *in any other words* than those through which they *say* something to us. The understanding of language itself as *saying* - and not merely as speaking or writing - belongs to the very essence both of the Tao and of the East-Asian relationship to language. For the Chinese word 'Tao' not only means 'way', but also 'saying'. And not least in traditional Japanese culture it is what is *said* - whether in silence or *through* the word - that counts above all else - and not merely that which is written or spoken 'about'.

Not all the books in the world that have been written 'about' Taoism or Tantra would suffice to say what the words 'Tao' or 'Tantra', could be understood as *saying*. The same applies to words such as 'Qi' and 'Chi', 'Yoga' and 'Dharma', 'Spirit' and 'Soul', 'Matter' and 'Energy'. 'Yoga' for example, is a prime example of a *sui generis* concept, being historically *unique* to a particular culture and its language and therefore not capable of definition in terms of words stemming from wholly different cultures and languages. Our only clue to it comes from its Indo-European root *yug*, as echoed in other words from the same language family such as the word 'conjugation'. We have already alluded to the double meaning of the word Tao as 'way' and as 'saying'. What then of the word 'Tantra'. Its root meaning is 'loom' or 'weave'. We can dismiss this as a mere etymological curiosity or footnote to the countless books and articles 'about' Tantra. Or else we can ask ourselves what the word 'weave' *says* to us in contrast to the word 'way'.

By this I mean not just what these words mean as single words but also the understanding of language itself that they point to. For just as *Tao* means both ‘way’ and ‘saying’, and in this way points to a fundamental understanding of language itself as the basic *way* in which things are *said* – not least the way in which things and events themselves speak to us or say something – so also does the word ‘Tantra’ have something to say about language as such. We know from the Indian scriptural ‘tantras’ – a plural term which refers to treatises of any sort, that theirs is a language which above all is renowned for suggesting *interweaving* different layers and levels of meaning in a way that makes even single words irreducible to simple definitions or denotations of the sort that, in the West, we are used to just assuming as ‘given’.

The language of Indian thought – and of the *tantras* in particular – is above all remarkable in its way of preserving and transcending – interweaving – both old and radically new senses of an ancient word. This unique relationship to language, this uniquely artful manner of interweaving old and new meanings of basic words, is the very ‘tantra’ or ‘loom’ of ‘the tantras’. It contrasts dramatically with the way in which, in the West, what single words *say* has undergone radical changes – yet in such a way that older meanings or senses are totally eradicated and replaced by new ones. Thus the modern scientific word ‘energy’ says something or speaks to us today in a way different from its ancient predecessor – the Greek *energeia*. The word *energeia* spoke of things visibly and enduringly present in our environment. The term ‘energy’ speaks to us of something largely invisible. In modern physics it is reduced to a set of mental mathematical abstractions which are taken as *more real* than any thing or phenomenon we can tangibly or visibly experience as present. Thus the experienced and visible actuality (*energeia*) of light and colour is now reduced to a mere perceptual phantom of the brain produced in response to invisible wavelengths of ‘energy’. In this way what the word *energeia* once said – its original sense - has been replaced by its very opposite in physics. In this connection it is noteworthy that the invisible source that gives form and pattern to all things was named by Confucius with the word *Li* and *not* with the word *Qi* or *Chi* - words that are now almost universally translated with the abstract term ‘energy’.

Indeed this term ‘energy’ has now been unquestioningly and universally taken up in the West as a suitable translation for Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese key words central to both Taoism and Tantra - words such as ‘Qi’, ‘Ki’ and the Sanskrit ‘Shakti’. As a result these words cease to *say* anything even remotely connected with the historical languages and cultures in which they are rooted – but have instead been wholly expropriated within the globalised Western culture and languages of modern science and technology. Is there any way out of this linguistic colonialism and imperialism – out of the *linguistic violence* to which words belonging to ancient non-Western words are now universally subjugated, not least by ‘teachers’ of these traditions? Not unless the almost total historical and linguistic forgetfulness that pervades the use of modern *Western* terms themselves is undone, allowing them once again to speak in a way that actually *says* something rather than merely ‘denoting’ some taken for granted ‘thing’. This can only happen if *the way* or ‘saying’ of the sages once again becomes part of *the weave* of senses – and of the senses – that is the native language of all experiencing, letting it speak to us anew. With this in mind, perhaps we can now risk provisional ‘definitions’ of both ‘Tantra’ and of ‘Taoism’ that are in resonance with their historic roots and essence – ‘definitions’ that do not simply treat them as single words derived from different languages but reveal them as saying something about language itself and our relation to it. Understood in this way, and respecting also the double meaning of the word ‘Tao’ as both ‘Way’ and ‘Saying’, what is called ‘Taoism’ could be defined as *The Way of Saying*. ‘Tantra’, on the other hand, could be defined as *The Weave of Language* which extends (*tan*) and guards (*tra*) all ‘Saying’. By ‘Saying’ is meant not only that which is said through the *word*, but also that which speaks through all the things of our experienced *world*. For things too have the character of words – being imbued with an innate meaning which says something to us. What ‘Tantrism and Taoism’ most essentially share in common therefore, is an understanding of ‘Saying’ itself as the essence of both *word* and *world* – which are in a constant process of being ‘said’, and thus also bespeak their common *source*. This is the ‘Supreme Ultimate’ (*Taiji*) or ‘Non-higher’ (*Anuttara*) which is the Silent Source of all Saying. It cannot be named in words, reduced to some worldly ‘thing’ denoted by them, or defined by any particular spiritual path of way – for it is that which both *Words* and *Worlds* – as well as being that ‘Guarding Awareness’<sup>1</sup> which first *shows us* The Way.

1. The Sanskrit *-tra* of *tan-tra* means ‘to guard’ or ‘protect’. The English words ‘guard’ or ‘ward’, like the German verb *bewahren* (to guard or protect) are cognate with the words ‘beware’ and ‘aware’ – as echoed in the German *gewahren* (to ‘be aware’) and *Gewahrsein* (‘awareness’).

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Front cover image: stone sculpture of *Laozi*

