

# TOUCH, AESTHETICS AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE TANTRAS

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**Pure, sense-free awareness is itself what senses and feels all things.**

Many Eastern 'spiritual' traditions see the attainment of a type of pure *sense-free* awareness as an end-in-itself and to downgrade sensory experiencing to the level of less refined or 'grosser' levels and modes of awareness ('tattvas'). Western spiritual traditions have also tended to elevate the intellect and downgrade the realm of the sensory, and, like many Eastern traditions, to falsely identify the latter with 'gross' matter and with a 'material' world. The paradoxical truth concealed by this ancient but still-maintained prejudice is that it is precisely what can be called 'pure' or 'sense-free' awareness' *that is what senses and feels all things* – which are but forms taken by it - just as it is also pure-sense free awareness that inwardly *touches* all that it feels and *feels* all that it touches.

For just as in touching something with our hands we also come to feel it, so also does the simple feeling *awareness* of anything also and automatically touch it - and that even without any outer 'physical' contact occurring. Alone in the Eastern 'tantric' tradition do we indeed find some 'reflection' of this truth, and of the experience of the *touch* ('sparsha') of *pure awareness* ('cit').

**"[Oh Goddess, who is] beyond the five voids and whose characteristic is the touch of *cit*."**

from the *Jayadrathalamayatantra* or 'King of the Tantras' as cited by Fülrlinger in *The Touch of Śakti*.

**Space is the embrace of the divine.**

Space too ('the void') is no 'objective' or 'physical' dimension but a field of subjective, sensory experiencing. In essence, space is the *embrace* of the divine - of that pure sense-free awareness ('cit') which - in making space for and manifesting as all that can be experienced in a sensory way - also feels and touches it, both from within and without. Yet we tend to *see* space only or principally as a field of *visual* experiencing – and then reduce this in turn to a visual perception of 'material' objects or bodies. In reality however, nobody ('no-body') can see, hear or even touch 'matter' - which is a purely abstract *concept* to which there corresponds no 'objective' reality we can directly experience or prove the existence of. Instead, what we think of as sensory qualities or properties of 'matter' are simply particular qualities of *tactile* experiencing such as hardness or softness, roughness or smoothness etc. In other words, as Samuel Avery points out, it is only because something we *actually* see in space is also sensed as something that can *potentially* be felt or handled in a *tactile* way - that we think of it as 'material'.

**Visual experiencing of and in 'space' is itself a visual and spatial interpretation of *tactile experiencing* in all its dimensions, actual and potential - which include hearing, taste and even smell.** For hearing is vibration that *touches* us - and that also gives us a sign of something that can potentially be touched. Similarly, smell gives us a sign of something that can potentially be tasted - taste itself being a mode of touch. That is why a dog's experience of space is shaped as much - if not more - by their acute sense of hearing and smell than by sight alone.

It is not sight but *touch* that can be said to be the true essence of *all* sensory and bodily experiencing. Thus not only sensations of hardness and softness, weight and density, warmth and coolness, but also of air and breathing, of taste and digestion, lightness or heaviness, movement and stillness, tension and relaxation, sound and silence, even pleasure, pain and emotional states, are felt in a principally *tactile* way, as are such senses as ‘pressure’ of time, of spatial expansiveness or confinement, closeness or distance - not to mention our sense of how inwardly close or distant, ‘in touch’ or ‘in contact’ we feel with ourselves and others.

**“The tactile realm of perception is the same thing as the body.”** Samuel Avery

All that we see from the outside and call ‘a body’ is in essence nothing but a realm of actual and potential modes of *tactile experiencing* - proprioceptive and kinaesthetic, respiratory, auditory, olfactory (smell) or gustatory (taste and digestive sensations), emotional and relational.

As a result of these considerations, however, one may ask whether the very word ‘body’, with its immediate connotation of something principally *seen* in the form of a visual, mental or technological image, has itself become an obstacle to a more basic understanding of what ‘a body’ – ‘any body’ - essentially *is*. The same can be said of the word ‘soul’ – which is why I prefer the term ‘feeling awareness’.

In this context however, it is important to distinguish ‘feeling’ and ‘touch’. If we touch something we of course ‘feel’ it. On the other hand we can be ‘touched’ in a feeling way and not just in the physical way *implied* by the term ‘tactile’ - just as feelings can also ‘touch’ us in a non-physical way. What we call ‘soul’, therefore, can be understood precisely as this *feeling* dimension of tactile experiencing. To say that “the tactile realm of perception is the same thing as the body” is to say that not just what we call ‘body’ but also what we call ‘soul’ are, in essence, anything ‘in the world’ that we experience as ‘touching’ us in a manner that is *felt* in what may be more than just a ‘tactile’ way - whether this be a visual image or perception, a sensation of pleasure or pain, a look on a person’s face or in their eyes; a sound, word or tone of voice, a painting, poem or piece of music, or an experience, event or encounter of any sort. This is what makes it impossible to separate our self-experience from our lived or experienced world. For what most essentially constitutes that world is all that has the potential to *touch us in a feeling way*. Indeed any ‘world’ consists of nothing but particular potentials of felt, tactile experiencing – none of which arise from some ‘thing’ called ‘the body’ or ‘the soul’, but rather from ‘feeling awareness’ - an awareness which knows no bodily boundaries and yet is the essence of both ‘body’ and ‘soul’ - both of which consist essentially of felt shapes, patterns, tones and textures of awareness.

As human beings, whilst we can see a plant or even a single-celled organism under a microscope – neither the cell nor the plant can either see, hear or even smell. What the plant senses, it senses only in a directly tactile way – whether as a breeze, insect or chemical on its surface. What a single cell experiences – even a cell of our own ‘body’ and its multiple ‘sense organs’ (a retinal cell for example) it experiences through the touch of its feeling awareness alone. It is only through the sense of sight that has been developed by ‘multicellular organisms’ that human beings in particular first come to perceive and conceive ‘cells’ themselves principally as visual and ‘material’ objects – rather than *feeling* them in the tactile way that they feel themselves.

**What we call ‘a feeling’ (singular noun) or ‘feelings’ (plural noun) is one thing. ‘Feeling’ (verb) on the other hand, is another.**

‘Feelings’ are something we experience ourselves as ‘having’. *Feeling* on the other hand is something we *do*. Or rather not something that ‘we’ do but that awareness itself ‘does’ – for without a feeling awareness of a self or selves – of an ‘I’, ‘you’, or ‘we’ - there could be no self or selves to experience, just as without a *feeling* awareness of *all* there is to potentially experience, there would be nothing to experience - and so also no field or felt world of experiencing, tactile or otherwise. The terms ‘feeling awareness’ and ‘body of feeling awareness’ therefore remain an important reminder that it is *not* the visually perceived and seemingly ‘physical’ or ‘material’ forms (cellular and bodily, thingly and worldly) that feel or touch, but rather *awareness itself* in all its manifest sensory shapes, patterns, tones and textures - and that *what* awareness feels and ‘touches’ are essentially nothing but *other* such shapes and patterns, tones and textures *of* awareness.

It has long become common to oppose ‘figurative’, ‘representational’, ‘naturalistic’ or ‘realistic’ art with so-called ‘abstract’ art in all *its* shapes and patterns, colours, tones and textures. Nothing does more to undermine this dualism than the mode of aesthetic and sensory *experiencing* of the world around us that is the essence of what I call ‘Sensuous Awareness Bliss’. For through it we come to an awareness that what we see in the natural form of a sea or sunset, tree or mountain - or even a man-made object such as car or building - is nothing less ‘abstract’ in its form than any so-called ‘abstract’ painting or sculpture – but only if we *do not* merely perceive something *as* ‘a sea’ or ‘a sunset’, as ‘a tree’ or ‘a mountain’, as ‘a car’ or ‘building’.

**Any great work of art – whether ‘realistic’ or ‘abstract’ can prevent us from interpreting what it depicts only as some familiar or nameable thing or being, and allows us to experience its shapes, tones and colours as shapes tones and colours of feeling awareness.**

In this way, art can help us to see and sense all things and beings as works of art in themselves. Thus if an ‘abstract’ or even ‘realist’ painting gives us a strong impression, say, of the particular colour, pattern and texture of, for example, ‘the brickwork of a building’ - yet in a way that prevents us from seeing it merely *as* ‘the brickwork of a building’ - then the artist is bringing us *back to our senses*. By this I mean back from what has generally become in today’s world a wholly *de-sensualised* experience of things and beings, one in which they are merely perceived ‘as’ this or ‘that’, i.e. according to whatever name and ‘idea’ we attach to what or who they ‘are’. The portrait artist too, abstract or realist, does not just depict what they see with their own eyes. Instead, in the very act of ‘depicting’ the face and eyes of a real or imaginary other, what is revealed is the very way of looking out on the world and feeling themselves that manifests itself through the look in the eyes of this other and the cast of their gaze, together with the unique line or colouration of mood or feeling tone that are already inscribed on or that inwardly colour the *face* of this other.

**The ‘eye of awareness’ is like the eye of an artist. It enables us to see and feel the innate meaning or sense present within the outer form and facets of any thing or being, nameable or not – to sense the qualities of soul they give expression to – as works of art in themselves.**

We do not ‘transcend’ the world of names and forms (‘namarupa’) by ‘controlling’ or ‘suppressing’ the senses but, on the contrary, by intensifying our immediate sensory experiencing of things, any in particular by *not* merely seeing them merely *as* this or that (for example *as* ‘a bird’ or as ‘a tree’, as

‘a car’ or as ‘a lamppost’). In this way, we do not let *shadows* be cast on our immediate perception of things by a prior ‘idea’ of what they are. We are reminded of Plato’s cave allegory, in which shackled prisoners see only shadows cast on the cave wall light by figures from behind – until one prisoner turns to face the light and can re-enter the bright, colourful world of rich sensory experiencing which it illumines. And yet very word ‘idea’ comes from the Greek *eidos* – which originally meant nothing ‘mental’ but rather some ‘face’ or ‘aspect’ of the immediate sensuous ‘form’ or ‘look’ of anything we perceive – for example its shape, colour or texture.

### **The sensory is the most abstract.**

If portraiture, ‘realist’ or ‘abstract’, can reveal the soul of the subject – in particular those shades and colourations of awareness or soul that find expression in their faces and eyes, and if ‘Romantic’ art was able to reveal the inner soul moods not just of man or of the artist, but of nature too - through *its* faces - then ‘abstract art’ can, in general, show us precisely that there is nothing more innately ‘abstract’ than the immediately experienced sensory ‘faces’ or ‘aspects’ of all things – their *eidai*. Quite simply then, it is the immediate *sensory* dimension of experiencing that *is* the ‘abstract’. We only need to observe a seemingly random or ‘abstract’ patchwork of moist green seaweed on a sandy beach at low tide to recognise in it what might, if depicted in a painting hanging in an art gallery, be seen only *as* some piece of what we call ‘abstract art’ – appearing as it would to depict nothing recognisable or nameable at all.

All that what we call ‘abstract art’ has ever done then, is to simply ‘abstract’ or ‘lift off’ (the meaning of the Latin *abstrahere*) particular sensory dimensions and qualities of experienced phenomena in a way that frees us from perceiving those phenomena solely ‘as’ this or that, i.e. in the light and through the lens of purely *ideational* ‘abstractions’. In this way, we can begin to get a sense of what it would feel like to become aware of things as they are, i.e. precisely not, for example *as* ‘cars’ but as ‘abstract’ sculptural shapes, each a sensory expression of innately sensuous shapes, densities, weights, colour tones, lustres and sheens *of* awareness itself. I understand Awareness Bliss (‘cit-ananada’) as thus an experience of ‘enlightenment’ or ‘truth’ in the deepest sense that abstract art strived for – an experience of all things as the *sensory* expression of innately *sensuous* ‘forms’ (Plato) or “idea-shapes” (Seth) of awareness rather than as mere *mental* idea or verbal constructs (‘vikalpa’). The fact that immediate sensory experiencing, free of experiencing ‘as’, has become something *alien* to all but artists can be put in another way. For there is no way that a ‘little green man’ from a alien planet – one lacking any vegetation - would or could see ‘trees’. Assuming that this alien’s senses included sight, all they would actually see would be nothing but an ‘abstract’ configuration or branching of different shapes and tones of green. Similarly, like an infant without language and words (‘in-fans’) would and could not hear a sound *as*, for example, the sound that of ‘a bird singing’ or ‘a car passing by’. In fact they would not hear sounds as coming from *anything* that ‘out there’ at all. Instead they would simply experience these sounds in a tactile way - as the *inner vibrational touch* of their tones and textures.

### **Words are a translation of the wordless - not of other words.**

It is not words but only the wordlessly *felt* meaning or ‘sense’ – their resonance and the way they touch us – that can be translated. Because of this, no amount of knowledge of Sanskrit and no amount of scholarly ‘interpretation’ alone allows us to translate so much as a single Sanskrit word of ‘the tantras’ – whether into English or any other language.

### **The only true form of translation is translation from experience.**

We can only translate into our own language and words *experiences* that we have *independently* of the tantras - but *feel* to be resonant with their language and terms. Even such 'experiential translation' – translation from the language of experiencing itself - however, will lead to error if the *very experiences* we translate are already shaped and coloured in advance by a framework of purely *verbal* translations or interpretations of the tantras themselves. To in any way 'make sense' of the tantras – or anything else - in words, is therefore only possible on the basis of our own independent *sensory* experiencing and its wordlessly felt 'meaning' or "sense" (Gendlin). By speaking of '*felt meaning*' as '*felt sense*' we are already and implicitly hinting speaking from out of the wordless realm, not just of *sensory* experiencing in general, but of felt, tactile experiencing – of feeling and touch - in particular. Unless the primacy of the tactile is understood, all sorts of errors of translation and interpretation result. An example of such error is the common interpretation of 'kundalini' as a path of *ascent* through 'the body' from the realm of tactile, sensual and sexual experiencing to a state of pure, sense-free awareness - one that is associated with both 'the void' and 'Shivatattva'. This is paradoxical – since, again, **it belongs to the very essence of pure 'sense-free awareness' to be precisely that which senses, feels and touches all things**. The supposed 'highest' state of 'sense-free' awareness is therefore itself and in essence *tactile* – a self-perception or 'proprioception' of itself through all the infinite sensory modes, actual and potential, in which it manifests, and which are associated in the tantras with its 'Shaktis'.

**The ultimate result of any 'ascent' of 'Kundalinishakti' through the 'tattvas' and 'chakras' therefore has, paradoxically, as its true goal an experience of its 'fall' or *descent* ('Shakti-pata'), i.e. an experience of the touch and pervasion ('samavesa') of all 'lower' things by that pure sense-free awareness (Shiva) which alone senses, feels and touches them as its 'Shaktis'.**

For this experience however, no rise or ascent of 'kundalini' through the body is required at all! Indeed no *body* is needed at all, since what we call 'the body' is not some bodily object which senses or feels or touches – but rather a particular felt shape taken by the entire *field* of sensory experiencing – and of tactile experiencing in particular – that embraced and pervaded by pure awareness. To even speak, as Furlinger does, of "the Touch of Shakti" is therefore also a misnomer. For 'Shakti' itself is nothing but the sensing, feeling touch of pure awareness or 'Shiva'. For it is this touch which allows pure awareness to feel *itself* through all that it touches and feels – through all its potential and actual manifestations or 'Shaktis'.

### **Non-duality as such is touch.**

The *inseparability* of touching and being touching – of 'con-tact' - is what is abstractly named with the term 'non-duality'. In essence however, non-duality *as such* is nothing other than the most elementary, sensory experience of *touch*. It is through the feeling, sensing touch of pure sense-free awareness or Shiva that it comes to feel *itself* - through, within, around and *as* all actual and potential things and all bodies - and in this way also to *first* gain or attain a primordial sense of what is called 'Self'. Shiva' is, in this sense, *not* our highest or ultimate 'self'. Instead it is that pure, sense-free awareness which *first makes possible* any and all *experience* of 'self', itself an essentially *sensory, feeling and tactile* experience of a sort which we actually need no *tantras* at all to come to and be aware of. Yes, we can find echoes and reflections of this experience, if we come to it ourselves, in the Kashmiri Shaiva tantras, for example in the single word 'vimarśa' - whose root is

*mrś* means 'to touch'. Even if we do not know this root meaning however, if we translate the word *experientially*, it seems absurd to verbally translate it, as Dyczkowski does for example – as 'reflective awareness'. For from experience we will know that all reality is not so much a mirror-like 'reflection' of the light of pure awareness (any 'perception' or 'reflection' of light being something which is itself only possible through the *touch* of that light) but rather a felt, tactile *proprioception* of that light - in all its sensuous, bodily shapes and forms.

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