

tantric SEX

You've read about it. You've wondered about it. Hours and hours of kissing. Soul-melding eye contact. Transcendental sex.... Hey, I'll have what they're having! But what's involved? And what does a weekend workshop in the Poconos have to do with the real thing? **AIMEE LEE BALL** comes back with a firsthand report.

The breath of
love: The union of
male and female
in this stylized
version of a classic
tantric position



AN URBAN LEGEND WITH THE RING of authenticity cites a survey in which tantric sex tops the list of subjects that most interest 14- to 25-year-olds—the prototype MTV generation. Me too, although I'm hardly MTV's target audience. Who wouldn't be curious about a practice that is alleged to foster staring into a beloved's eyes for hours and hours, kissing for hours and hours, making love for hours and hours?

It's not as if we don't already commit enough time and energy to sex in our society—we live in a sexually saturated culture; both Madison Avenue and Hollywood are truly obsessed with the subject—but much of what we read, observe, and experience in our bedrooms seems to be about performance, about attracting a partner and being “good in bed” and reaching some multi-orgasmic goalpost. There is now on my desk a small library of books about tantric sex, and while the explicit detailing of intimate behavior might make our grandmothers blush (and might at first be confused with garden-variety porn), the practice of tantra (based on ancient Hindu and Buddhist scriptures) is supposed to facilitate a more meaningful intimacy, an actual spiritual connection between partners. Mark Epstein, MD, a New York City psychiatrist and the author of *Open to Desire: Embracing a Lust for Life—Insights from Buddhism and Psychotherapy*, reframes this concept as the dropping of a veil between “self” and “other.” Tantra is not just some postmodern *Kama Sutra* or post-graduate search for the G-spot, according to its aficionados. It is intended to develop the “awakened mind” of meditation in a sexual context. It is, although this sounds incredibly highfalutin, about finding aspects of the divinity in one's beloved.

I don't hang out in X-rated shops, but I doubt there's much pornography that talks about men and women transforming erotic energy into a refined state of consciousness. I don't get HBO either, so I learned only recently that *Sex and the City* (inevitably) seized upon the idea of tantra, veering perilously close to *Hustler* territory. The four main characters (hardly prudes) were embarrassed

but crippled by the “inability to look away from a car crash” as they attended a tantric seminar and were instructed how to perform genital massage on a man “as if you are using an orange juicer.” Mastery of the technique would make a man faithful, said the coach, “because once they go tantric, they don't go back.”

There was nothing even remotely spiritual about this sordid display, but it's not hard to understand the impetus behind the desire for a legitimate tantric experience—the yearning for a passionate bond. The idea that tantra can dissolve the boundaries between two people, that through the body you can meet the essence of another person, is so attractive. The “real” tantra seems to be about connection, generosity, being in the present, and transcending sex as a competitive sport. But go searching for the spiritual dimension of sex, and you'll encounter a lot of gooey rhetoric. “It's the art of disappearing inside each other,” says Margot Anand, of San Rafael, California, who uses the term SkyDancing for her tantric workshops. “Lovers are like two instruments

before a concert: They have to learn how to be in tune; otherwise it will not be melodic. When a man and a woman practice tantra, they have the tools to go beyond ego, beyond gender, even beyond having a body, like navigating into space.”

What exactly are the men and women doing? “Dancing, moving, breathing, visualizing, contracting and releasing the internal muscles, relaxing the pelvis, understanding sexual anatomy, confronting their shadows, learning how to scream, learning how to breathe from the sexual organs all the way to the heart, breathing in a circular fashion with each other, understanding successful communication. These are great secrets that transform couples' lives.” Isn't all that muscle work just like Kegeling, taught by most gynecologists to maintain internal muscular strength? And isn't “communication” the key to all good coupleness, not only tantric?

“Sometimes I think I shouldn't call what I teach tantra; I should call it the Margot Anand method,” she says, and she gets annoyed when I ask her to describe any more unusual or specific techniques—as if writing

“People need help with their sexuality. It's gone so far away from anything spiritual.”



is too imperfect a medium for conveying the concept—but finally mentions a game called Yin-Yang, in which partners act as king and queen for the day, taking turns trying to grant the other any wish within reason. “What you get to practice is daring to ask, being supported in the asking, and letting go of your own will to control things,” Anand explains.



THIS NEWLY POPULARIZED VERSION of tantra is the Western “repackaging” of an honorable, even scholarly Eastern body of knowledge, according to Michael Witzel, PhD, professor of Sanskrit at Harvard University and managing editor of the *International Journal of Tantric Studies*. “As with yoga, what we get in the West is mostly gymnastics, just body exercises,” he says with ill-concealed contempt. And yet there are seemingly sane people who claim to have gotten something valuable from such lessons. When 48-year-old Californian Tracy first went to a tantric workshop, her boyfriend observed that it was exactly what the rest of the country expected of anyone living in Northern California. “We’re straight and normal people,” says Tracy, a development director of a nonprofit organization. “We were in a fairly new relationship, a second-time-around relationship, and taking the course together sounded like a good way to establish the intimacy I was looking for. But it felt scary and really pushed me to some of my edges.” Tracy and her boyfriend learned techniques such as “streaming energy” (one partner bends at the waist, head and arms hanging loosely, and begins to shake slightly, drawing energy up from feet to head as the other partner strokes her back) and “lion’s play” (the partners put palms together, growl at each other, and pseudo-wrestle). “One goal of tantra is to spread sexual energy throughout the body,” says Tracy. “I get to the point where I feel completely orgasmic, and it feels like it’s coming from the genitals all the way up to my head. It’s the opposite of rushing to orgasm.”

After four years as workshop faithfuls, the couple often decides to have tantric dates, which start with “heart salutations”: sitting across from each other, hands brought into

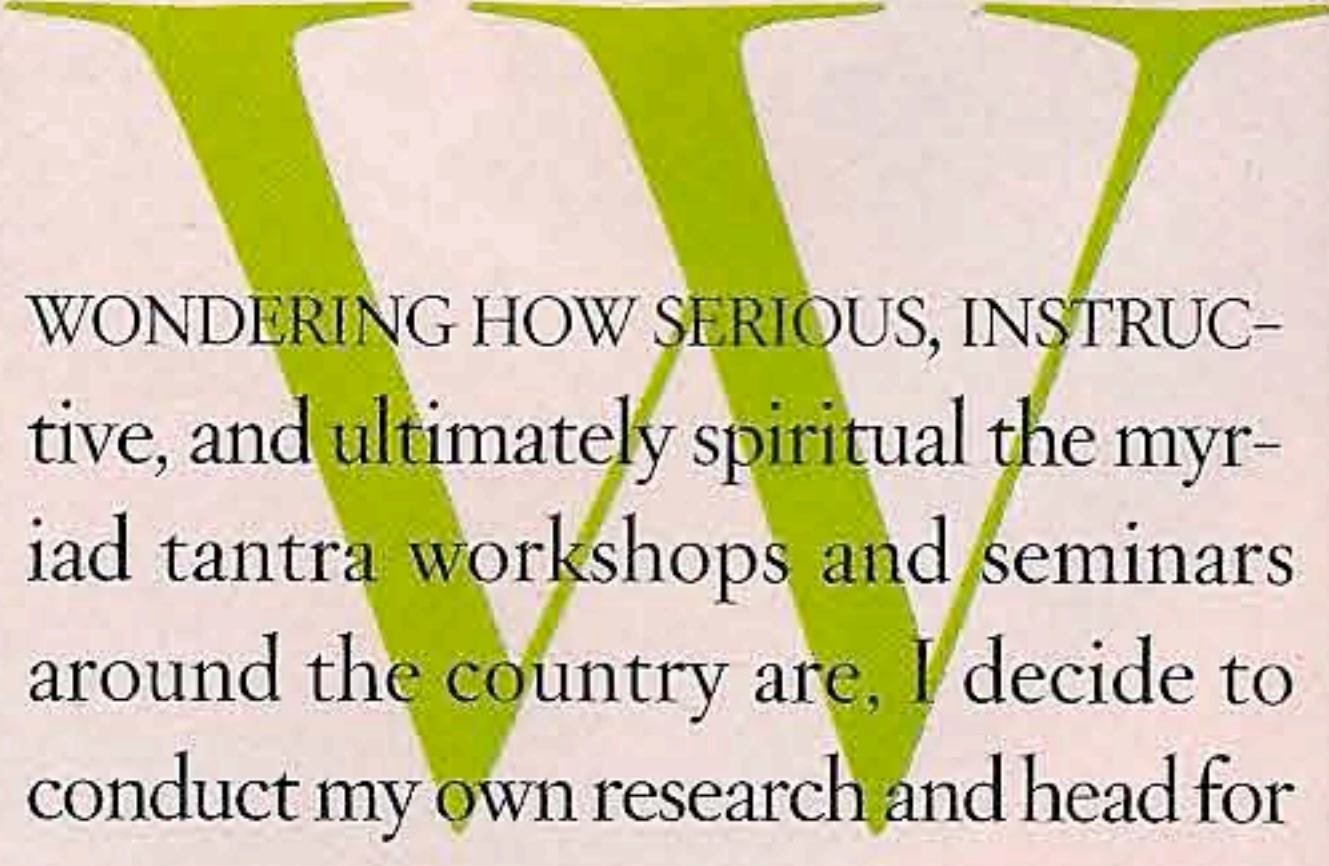
prayer position, then leaning toward each other and breathing. “It’s a sweet and simple way to mark that we’re entering sacred space,” says Tracy, who creates a tantric “temple” in their home, cleared of clutter, candles lit, sarongs hung on windows. “We don’t ever have alcohol, because it’s all about being present, but we might have feathers or chimes. We’re attending to each of the senses.” One of her favorite exercises is called the breath of love, which she ends with the classic tantric position called yab-yum, the man sitting cross-legged with the woman straddling his waist, her legs wrapped around him. “It doesn’t actually involve sex at all,” says Tracy, “but it feels more intimate than sex, which is saying something. First you imagine that you’re breathing from your sex organs up to your heart; then you imagine a bowl of energy between the two of you that you’re both filling up; then you share the energy, looking into each other’s eyes and breathing into each other’s mouths. At the end, the kissing is electric. There’s no penetration, no genital stimulation, but I am so much more turned on than when having regular sex. You get so high, it’s amazing.”

One basic tantric tenet is that men can withhold ejaculation and prolong erection, and that seminal fluid contains drops of vital energy, the spending of which ages the body and dulls the senses. This premise accounts for the boom in Westernized tantra, according to Jonathan Margolis, author of *O: The Intimate History of the Orgasm*. In a chapter called “A Little Coitus Never Hoitus” (a witticism poached from Dorothy Parker), Margolis posits that hours and hours of love-making is more about male ego than female pleasure. The idea of a sexual marathon is fodder for a man’s braggadocio—“an under-the-duvet power politics play,” he writes, and “the long-lost cousin of Viagra,” which is “thinly disguised as sensitivity to women.” But from an informal scan of tantric sex Web sites, Margolis reports that the withheld orgasm is not as intense—“more like a quiet, ‘held-in’ sneeze than a full-blooded *ker-chow*.”

Unsurprisingly, the subject has found a welcome reception on the Internet. The Web site tantra.com reports that it gets about 13,000 visitors a day. Visitors to the site are promised “deeper intimacy” with a \$14.99-per-month membership and are directed to purchases of books and videotapes, sex “furniture,” and rabbit-fur massage mitts. (A popular item is Kama Sutra Honey Dust, a

“velvety-soft powder” that comes with its own handmade feather duster.) Much of the so-called expertise bandied about on the Web and in books is hardly distinguishable from ads for escort services. (One site, geared toward men, suggests that visitors “scroll through the complete list of available goddesses.” Goddess Grace, for instance, on call from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. in Southern California, is pictured with hands in the *namaste* prayer position over bare breasts.) Some of it seems eccentrically esoteric or just plain silly (“Tantra is the wild summer thunderstorm...,” “Tantra is the mother tiger...”). The World Tantra Association talks about weaving a “magic carpet” with “yarn” from the seven chakras, or energy centers, in the body.

I react badly to such grandiose language. It all just means: You’ll feel better. The same could be said for Tylenol. I question such an intense sales pitch. Years ago there was an advertising campaign for something I’ve now forgotten whose simple and direct tagline was “Try it, you’ll like it,” and I thought: *That must be a pretty good product*. So this must be a pretty bad one, if it’s so consistently overstated. “There’s a lot of pseudo stuff,” says Mark Epstein, “people trying to create workshop-y types of things. It’s a growth industry. Why is it happening in the culture right now? People need help with their sexuality. It’s gone so far away from anything spiritual.”



WONDERING HOW SERIOUS, INSTRUCTIVE, and ultimately spiritual the myriad tantra workshops and seminars around the country are, I decide to conduct my own research and head for the Pocono Mountains of eastern Pennsylvania for a weekend of “love without limits.” The workshop is led by a woman I’ll call Dr. Madge, a psychologist and “leading-edge healer” dedicated to “reintegrating sexuality into spirituality” and “expanding the boundaries of the family.” The setting was promised to be a “beautiful mountain retreat center” where we would be “working with breath, energy, conscious touch, and movement to create a glorious space of love, which invites heart opening, sensuality, and spiritual communion.” I was e-mailed a list of *CONTINUED ON PAGE 260*

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suggested useful items, including a flashlight, drums or other musical instrument, massage oil, sensual fruit or sweets, and a flowing costume (“a beautiful scarf or two is very versatile”). Despite language that seemed intentionally nonsleazy (and the fact that anything involving sweets is okay by me), I wondered about that massage oil. But before I remitted \$475, a phone call to Dr. Madge’s California office assured me that the workshop was appropriate for both couples and singles.

The accommodations at the lodge, built for Christian retreats in the 1940s, could generously be called monastic—a clean towel and set of sheets waiting on each bed, with meals served cafeteria-style. The group assembled on floor cushions in front of a makeshift altar with candles and photos of an Indian yogi “no longer in the body.” There were four couples, three single men and three single women—matched sets, I noticed—ranging in age from their 30s to 60s, and we began with Dr. Madge-led breathing exercises. An older woman, who had been exhaling most audibly, announced right away that she’d recently ended 15 years of celibacy and now froze when her partner, a divorced former pastor, touched her anus. Hello, Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore. Another couple had just met the previous day, after a cross-country e-mail correspondence and one night spent at a Best Western: The woman declared herself to be a “pagan” practicing “polyamory,” which, Dr. Madge clarified, meant “responsible nonmonogamy.” A chunky 30-something guy admitted that he had trouble satisfying women; a Nordic-looking American businessman now living in Europe had recently begun a ménage à trois with his wife of 20 years and another woman—he cheerfully offered to teach us “a great three-way kiss” they had perfected. Two of the singles, a plain Jane who ran an animal hospital and a handsome man who worked in politics, seemed to be tantra junkies—frequent fliers at this kind of workshop.

The maxim about the “wallflower at the orgy” fit me perfectly. I reached for the keys to my rented car several times—this level of intimate talk among strangers wasn’t what I’d anticipated, but it was, after all, just talk, so I carried on with jour-

nalistic detachment. And as we formed two circles, men and women facing each other, the exercises were innocuous. Everyone was asked to share a story about some wounding life experience—for instance, being taught as a child that sex was dirty. We were instructed to inhale one-third of a breath and then try to lay an egg, feeling the force of pelvic pressure. We were asked to stick our tongue between our teeth and try to complain (all attempts devolved into laughter). We were told to look at the other person without seeing the physical body. And we kept rotating the circles, changing partners, so that even the couples that had arrived paired up were now interacting with strangers. I can’t say that I learned anything—because there was no relationship with these others, no basis of information on which to layer more classified disclosures, and I was too self-conscious to have any epiphanies myself—but it was all moderately interesting.

THE NEXT DAY, WE MOVED beyond interesting. Tantra, Dr. Madge explained, means a willingness to embrace whatever shows up, and she announced that we would be breaking down our “genital armory,” worshipping each other as gods and goddesses through massage, so everyone should think about partnering up. I in turn announced that they’d have to buy me dinner and a movie first. I wasn’t taught that sex is dirty, but I did learn that it’s private, and I had no intention of participating in a gropefest on an ancient Sears, Roebuck carpet with a dozen strangers. “Just do the energy work, the breathing,” Dr. Madge urged. “You’ll get tremendous benefit. The three best tantric partners are fear, chaos, and confusion, because it’s only in a state of ‘I don’t know’ that you can learn. You can decide on your own zone of comfort, and if you don’t want to see what’s going on, keep your eyes closed.” She then removed her only article of clothing, a pareu, exposing pendulous breasts and blondish pubic hair, and everyone in the room followed except me and the ménage fellow, who apparently took pity on me and rather sweetly offered to be my (fully clothed) partner. Dr. Madge picked up a microphone and directed the group through

seven levels of breathing and rubbing, while signaling time to move on by ringing chimes. I stopped my partner just north of the heart chakra and kept my back to the room. Okay, I peeked. All around us, naked couples were grunting through various kinds of foreplay (the singles with someone they’d just met) while Dr. Madge led them, as if calling a square dance, occasionally inquiring in her electronically amplified voice, “Does anyone need lube?”

After this session, everyone went into dinner: tuna casserole and butterscotch pudding with (I’m not making this up) Reddi-wip.

Now truly ready to bolt, I was persuaded to stay for the evening’s festivities, which sounded like a return to civility: the women dancing for the men, the men dancing for the women, with canned music since nobody had brought drums. But I knew my limitations when everyone started getting creative with those sensual fruits, artfully arranging grapes and cherries on the eyelids and in the belly buttons of prone partners before moving on to other places. With a reputation now bordering on Amish, I surprised no one when I beat a path out of Dodge, taking an extremely long shower at the earliest possible opportunity.

I’m rarely shockable, and I’m willing to concede that some of the exercises might be fun to implement in private with a beloved significant other, but the idea of being assigned to select a stranger with whom to be erotic grosses me out. The experience impresses me as the ignominy of a singles bar taken to its penultimate creepiness. At the very least, it seems anachronistic, like something out of the sixties, when sexually bored suburbanites threw their car keys into a bowl at the beginning of a party and went home with whoever belonged to the keys they retrieved. And co-opted tantra does seem of a piece with the current zeitgeist, along with cable porn and 14-year-olds “hooking up” in the Clintonian belief that oral sex is not sex. My reading of the group I encountered is that the couples were basically exhibitionists getting off on public displays of mutual masturbation, and the singles were looking for some noncommittal sexual contact in the guise of enlightenment. CONTINUED ON PAGE 262

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Merely engaging in sex, or attempting more intimacy as my Poconos friends did, doesn't deserve the name tantra, according to Jeffrey Hopkins, PhD, professor of Tibetan Buddhist studies at the University of Virginia and author or translator of 31 books on the subject. "Traditional tantric teachings are aimed at overcoming lust and desire, as opposed to an excuse for having sex," says Hopkins. "Sex is used only as a technique to have a powerfully blissful encounter with another person, to utilize a more deeply concentrated mind that in turn will overcome lust and afflictive desire. The aim is to use lust to overcome lust. It is counterintuitive." In her book about adolescent love, *The Ripening Seed*, the French novelist Colette referred to sensory objects and experiences as "these pleasures so lightly called physical" because they affect us on more than just a tactile, tangible level. I wonder whether such a concept would have much meaning to that 14-to-25-year-old audience so fascinated by tantric sex, although it would seem that the potentially transformative nature of physical intimacy is the secret of real tantra. "White tantra" seems to be code for a more chaste educational experience in the workshop world. But it's a minefield out there, even if your motivation is pure and you choose a literary route to enlightenment.

"There are many good, dull books about tantra and many that are bad but interesting," wrote Wendy Doniger recently in the *London Times Literary Supplement*. "This is true of many areas of knowledge, but tantra is particularly susceptible both to juicy sensationalism and to an overcompensating academic desiccation." Doniger goes on to say that the book she was reviewing, *Kiss of the Yogini*, by David Gordon White, berates Americans who "cobbled together the pathetic hybrid of New Age 'tantric sex,' who "blend together Indian erotics, erotic art, techniques of massage, Ayurveda, and yoga into a single invented tradition." This amalgam, White contends, "is to medieval tantra what finger painting is to fine art."

So, what if you wanted to find the real thing? There seems to be a prosaic truth about tantra hidden by the hype: Just like religion, it's been commercialized, and just

like ads for toothpaste or automobiles, it's been overly sexualized, but there's a great deal more to it than the physical. "Contrary to popular view, tantric practice is not primarily about sexual practices with a partner," warns Robert Sachs, a clinical social worker who wrote *The Passionate Buddha: Wisdom on Intimacy and Enduring Love*. "As prerequisites to tantric lovemaking, mutuality and an affectionate, loving bond between the partners are essential. From the Buddhist point of view, working with subtle energies in the body must be rooted in a morality that demonstrates a caring and regard for all beings, especially our partner." Caring and regard on the floor of a Pocono lodge? I don't think so....

Sachs advises: "Beware of any seminar or crash course promising to make you a tantric lover in one weekend," which reminds me of Thoreau's advisory: "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes." I'd amend that to: "Beware of all enterprises that require no clothes." ●

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WOMEN WHO OUTEARN...

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and figured out how much cash she could raise without jeopardizing her company. She offered Baker a lump-sum settlement: \$400,000. She now thinks it was incredibly decent of him to accept it—most women in his shoes would have felt entitled to more. By law he was entitled to a lot more. She believes now that she was wrong to enable Baker's lack of achievement during their marriage while she herself was uncomfortable with that choice.

IT'S NOT EXACTLY A SCIENTIFIC SURVEY, but of the 20 or so people I interviewed for this article, those over 40 were significantly less successful at sustaining an economically nontraditional marriage than those under 40. (The exceptions were 56-year-old Mary Ann Tighe and her husband, 52-year-old David Hidalgo, an alpha-alpha couple. She was the primary supporter while he went to medical school and did his residency and surgical training. Though his education took nearly a decade, they both always saw their income inequity as a temporary situation. I think that gave each of them the freedom to "really never think about who paid for what." Tremendous

mutual success has only enhanced that freedom. Today Tighe and Hidalgo each make more money than either of them ever envisioned, she as a real estate mogul and he as a top-tier plastic surgeon. Tighe and Hidalgo each pay their own credit card bills and don't even share their individual totals with each other—the only financial issues they discuss are investments, major art purchases, and charitable contributions. For those of us whose hearts sink at the sight of the Visa bill, the gender politics of American family finance appear to be moving toward whatever works. In 2003, 58 percent of U.S. husbands earned at least \$5,000 more than their wives did, 25 percent earned within \$5,000 of their wives, and 17 percent earned at least \$5,000 less than their wives did. There's been a nearly 60 percent increase in the number of women outearning their husbands since 1981.

The Census Bureau doesn't break down those numbers by earners' ages. But given how rapidly the figures have changed, I wonder if maybe, at 45 and 39 years old (a baby boomer and a Generation Xer), my husband and I aren't caught between generations, if our formative years left us with mixed-up expectations.

That's what Ben Agronick and his wife, Lili Schwartz, 35, tried to convince me of. He used to be the technical director of a market research company, but two years ago—when they had their first baby—they traded places as the family's primary earner. "Ben didn't really enjoy working, but he made about three times what I did. I had my own business [a graphic design company] as a supplemental income. So once I decided to be the sole provider, it was a lot to figure out financially," Schwartz admits. "Emotionally, however, it was a piece of cake."

"Neither Lili nor I has gender-stereotype issues," Agronick explains. "I have no problem telling you that I'm passive, she's driven. I hated meetings, managing. She loves deadlines. I think there are three keys to a happy marriage: being honest about who you are, accepting who your spouse is, and having very few overlapping skills."

"You and your husband are a little older than us," Schwartz tells me. "Maybe in those few years, feminism finally got traction. Maybe you and Andrew have some leftover hang-ups. I mean, I love