

Gay Love as a Spiritual Path

by

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Introduction—The Need for Meaning

The human soul hungers for meaning in this life that offers fleeting pleasures fraught with suffering bounded by death. Youth, beauty, material possessions, and all human relationships are transient, and can never by themselves completely satisfy the soul, which being eternal itself, requires nothing short of eternity to fulfill it. Since the advent of AIDS gay men especially have had to confront death in a way that often accelerates the natural process of spiritual maturation, forcing young men, by having to watch large numbers of their generation sicken and die with similar prospects for themselves, to develop a perspective on mortality more typical of the elderly. Mystics from various traditions declare that we can satisfy the hunger of our souls only by experiencing the eternal source of our being. I call this source God or Self, with the understanding that God's manifestations and names are infinite, and that any word or description of God is always by necessity only partial, so that whatever one may assert about God, I reply, "That, too."

Mystics, those who have realized God in one or more aspects, have prescribed methods by which others may also experience the divine source or Self. It is important to understand that mystical religion is radically different from non-mystical religion in insisting that nothing short of direct experience of God is enough. It is not enough to believe that God exists. It is not enough to believe that God has incarnated to bring spiritual salvation to the world. It is not enough to go to a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple or to participate in the forms or rituals of religion. It is not enough to pray, meditate, perform charitable acts, visit places of pilgrimage, fast, endure other physical austerities, study holy books, or associate with holy persons. It is not enough to undergo psychotherapy. Nothing short of direct experience of God is enough.

Spiritual Technologies

To attain this direct experience mystics have employed and taught what I call spiritual technologies, methods of connecting the individual with the divine source. In my opinion Hinduism (more accurately called Sanatana Dharma or Vedanta) and Buddhism contain the most developed spiritual technologies available to us today, passed on in an unbroken chain of teacher-to-student transmission from antiquity. I am not saying that these religions are right and others wrong, nor am I saying that they alone possess effective methods for mystical experience. Students of comparative mysticism can find ample examples of mystical practices leading to spiritual insight in virtually every human society. However, most of these traditions, especially the common forms of Christianity and Judaism, have lost their link to their mystics and their spiritual technologies. It was this fact that prompted the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, for example, to seek spiritual guidance from the Dalai Lama and other spiritual teachers in Asia.

Ascetic and Ecstatic

Mystics and spiritual aspirants of different temperaments and at different stages of spiritual development use methods that may be divided roughly into two major approaches: the ascetic and the ecstatic. The ascetic approach emphasizes renunciation of sensual experience in an effort to achieve a one-pointed state of mind or a transformative insight; the ecstatic approach emphasizes engaging sensory experience with a radical shift in attitude to experience the divine essence within the forms of the phenomenal world.

Both approaches can claim non-dualism as their philosophical foundation, and both approaches utilize spiritual technologies that grouped together may be called "Yoga."

The philosophical differences between the two approaches lead to practices that at their extremes seem diametrically opposed, yet in many stages the practices are quite similar. Ascetics ostensibly renounce the world, and monasticism naturally results from an ascetic approach to spirituality. But even monks cannot make the phenomenal world cease to exist; even the most accomplished contemplatives must open their eyes at some point and engage the sensory world, although they minimize and condition this engagement. Vedanta and Buddhism both contain living ascetic traditions. Ecstatics, on the other hand, ostensibly embrace the totality of human experience, but in practice they also limit and control their engagement with the sensory world through ritual and through moral and mental disciplines not unlike those practiced by monks. Tantric Vedanta and Buddhism are living ecstatic traditions. Many monks utilize Tantric techniques in their personal spiritual practices, and many Tantrics live as monks. However, in this article I will focus mainly on Tantric practice, specifically what I call Ramakrishna Tantra, for this is the tradition in which I have trained for the past nearly 30 years.

Ramakrishna Tantric philosophy asserts that God has become the universe, and that right understanding can reveal the divine through any form. In fact, Tantra is not a separate philosophical system in itself but rather a body of spiritual technologies designed to lead the practitioner to a realization of the Vedantic truth, "All this is, verily, Divine."¹ The bulk of Tantric practice consists of cultivating awareness of the divine within the physical and subtle bodies of the aspirant, and within symbols and implements in ritual worship, and then applying this awareness in ritual action. The beginner starts with rituals that naturally engender an experience of the divine through uplifting and pleasant sensations. But as the aspirant advances, he gradually learns to transfer his awareness of the divine to sensations and actions that previously would have evoked revulsion, shame, and fear, or which engage directly the most powerful and fundamental of psychic energies: the erotic.

Divine Eroticism

Encountering the divine through the erotic is one of the best-known and yet least-understood aspects of Tantra. Compared with monastic celibacy, Tantric sexuality may seem the patently more appealing option. Enjoying an exciting sex partner would seem preferable to abstaining from sex entirely. Unless, of course, the goal is God realization, experience of the divine Self. Although the divine is manifest in all things, no doubt, the divine has two aspects, a revealing aspect and a concealing aspect. Some sense objects and actions tend to reveal the divine more readily than others. For this reason Tantric beginners learn their alchemical rituals in protected shrines and temples where the images and implements of worship embody more of the revealing aspect of God. Divine images, pleasant incense, flowers, sweet-smelling perfumes, ritual purity, beautiful surroundings, uplifting music, the company and support of like-minded companions, and a peaceful atmosphere all help to nurture contact with the divine being.

Unrestricted, unconscious sense enjoyment, on the other hand, typically obscures the divine presence, keeping the mind unfocused, restless, and uncontrollably oscillating between poles of pleasure and pain, happiness and misery, hope and despair. Erotic sense enjoyment is the most intense and powerful of all; engaged unconsciously, the erotic conceals the divine most profoundly. Suffering is the inevitable result of unrestrained sensuality, but this suffering, too, is ultimately salvific, being divine in essence. Hedonism is also a yoga, but it is probably the slowest and most painful one. For the person who is so uncon-

scious that his concept of happiness is limited to the attainment and experience of sense objects there may be no other way. But as consciousness increases through suffering, we naturally adopt a more direct, less painful method to Self awareness, which alone can enable us to transcend suffering entirely and attain full awareness and bliss. Engaged consciously, the erotic is the most direct path to God.

How, then, are we to engage the erotic consciously? This is where things get tricky, even “dangerous” from the perspective of a sincere spiritual aspirant. Like a deadly cobra, whose venom may be milked and used as medicine by someone properly trained, but whose casual bite can quickly kill, the erotic is something aspiring mystics approach with caution. Most of us would prefer simply to avoid close contact with cobras altogether, and this is the appeal of monastic celibacy. Celibacy places the cobra of eroticism behind a glass wall that shields us from its bite. Unfortunately, it also deprives us of its potentially-beneficial venom. For many spiritual aspirants keeping the cobra of eroticism at a distance enables them to progress tangibly on the road to enlightenment in relative safety. To attain the higher states of mystical consciousness in which the mystic experiences the divine in everything, however, every aspirant must eventually learn to hold the cobra and milk its venom to destroy the last vestiges of the disease of dualistic thinking.

In Tantric philosophy divine eroticism expresses itself at every level of being and awareness. At the gross, physical level we experience the erotic through the instinctual drives that are rooted in our biological being, hunger, sexual desire, physical comfort, and through sense perception. At the subtle level the erotic gets expressed as thought, feeling, and imagination. At a subtler spiritual level the erotic connects us with the divine being in an intimate relationship. At the deepest spiritual level all forms, identities, and aspirations merge into one Being. The ecstatic aspirant does not automatically give up the lower expressions to try to experience the higher, as ascetics do, but strives to apprehend the divine erotic presence in every expression. As his experience of the divine deepens, however, the gross expressions drop away of themselves, finding their fulfillment in a more comprehensive experience. The sexual desire for a particular body type, for example, gets replaced by a generalized love for all beings that is experienced as more pleasurable, more deeply satisfying than any less-comprehensive experience. The ecstatic aspirant literally follows his bliss, never resting satisfied until he reaches the Source of bliss within and without.

Naturally Ecstatic

Gay persons by nature are more suited to ecstatic forms of spirituality than to ascetic forms, because gay persons experience a dramatically different relationship to the erotic than non-gay persons by virtue of inhabiting physical bodies that are erotically stimulating to themselves. (This truth may not be self-evident for many gay men who learned at an early age to deny and censor homoerotic impulses and awareness even to themselves.) For a non-gay man merely separating himself from women largely reduces the stimulation. A gay man in a monastery, by contrast, takes the object of his erotic desire with him, moving, breathing, bathing, and even sleeping with his own male body. For many gay men a predominantly ascetic approach to spirituality is almost certainly doomed to failure on this account. A failure to perceive and appreciate this important difference between gay and non-gay Eros accounts for much of the ignorant criticism leveled at gay persons for being “sex-obsessed,” implying that our radically-different relationship to Eros is the result of a moral flaw. A compassionate, reality-based assessment, however, reveals that gay persons by nature possess a unique aptitude for ecstatic approaches to spirituality, and that the moral flaw, if one wishes to think in those terms, exists in those who ignorantly and even

cruelly try to force their own ascetic approach on everyone regardless of aptitude. The Tantric tradition offers a fully-developed system of ecstatic philosophy and methodology for experiencing the spiritual through the erotic.

Traditional Tantra contains no specific reference to gay eroticism², but its principles of conscious erotic engagement readily apply. Although Tantra's male-female erotic imagery might seem particularly non-gay, in fact an important goal of Tantric practice is the union of opposites symbolized in male-female dualism. The male Tantric is to discover and unite with the female aspect within himself, and the female Tantric is to discover and unite with the male. Most gay men experience the union of male and female within their own being without any special effort at all. This is another indication of gay men's special aptitude for Tantric practice.

Gay Identity

I want to address what I call Gay Tantra, the conscious engagement of the erotic by gay men as a spiritual path. Writing about gay eroticism is problematic in part because there is no universally-accepted definition of what "gay" means, although the word is commonly, and I believe imprecisely, used simply as a synonym for homosexual. Part of the problem lies in the complexity of human sexuality itself. Although our language and social structure encourage, indeed, practically force us to define and understand ourselves and others in simplistic terms, such as gay versus non-gay, male versus female, these terms never encompass the totality of our being.

I use the word "gay" primarily to refer to a person's identity, how he experiences himself in himself and in the world in relation to others. I use the word "homosexual" merely to describe same-gender sexual feelings and behaviors. Homosexual feelings and behaviors may contribute to the development of a gay identity, but they often do not. I believe that a person becomes gay through a process of self-awareness and self-labeling. Therefore, I consider a person gay if he considers himself gay, whether he acknowledges this to others or not. He may be homosexual, bi-sexual, or whatever, but he has to become gay.

Part of gay identity, which is continually becoming, continually evolving, is an expanded and expanding awareness of the potentials in human relationships. The gay person knows what non-gay people know, but he also knows what they do not know, or cannot allow themselves to know or acknowledge. A gay person knows experientially that same-sex love is possible. A non-gay person does not. A gay person knows experientially that gender and sexual categories are fluid. A non-gay person does not. Expanding awareness is the essence of spiritual growth; therefore, gay identity is in its very essence spiritual. Gay identity, being more inclusive, naturally transcends many of the dualistic experiences and categories of non-gay identities, and thus lies closer to the all-inclusive, non-dual Oneness that is God's essence.

This expanded awareness makes a gay person an outsider in relation to non-gay society. Being compelled by the cognitive dissonance between inner reality and social reality to question fundamental assumptions about human existence and destiny, *e.g.* the nature of love and relationship, provides a precious and unique opportunity for expanded awareness. Much of the substance of practical spiritual teachings aims to train, coax, or shake aspirants out of limiting assumptions about the nature of self. In this respect being a gay outsider confers certain advantages, but it also exacts terrible costs.

The gay outsider gets greater awareness, expanded consciousness, but society considers his knowledge forbidden, shameful knowledge, and he learns very quickly that he

must hide what he knows to protect non-gay, homophobic people from the “terrible truths” of his and their being, and to protect himself from their ignorant wrath. The instinctive desire for self-preservation may induce him to hide so well, that he hides even from himself, and then he loses the gift of awareness, leaving him only feelings of inferiority, shame, rejection, and fear. He has internalized the homophobia and thus becomes dangerous to himself and to others like himself. He splits his psyche into a socially-acceptable, non-gay, false self and a forbidden, gay, true self. When he awakens to the spiritual longings that are his human birthright, he may naturally try to approach God through the forms and traditions of society. But he comes to the spiritual path with his psychic energies divided and often at odds, and he finds that society’s God has no place for his gay, true self.

Religions of Sin

All mainstream religions, and by these I mean specifically most forms of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, either persecute or at best ignore gay persons. These homophobic traditions through their abuse and neglect inflict horrendous psychic and spiritual damage on everyone, but most noticeably on gay persons. They harm everyone by perpetuating the false notions that gay people are evil or that gay people do not or should not exist. These false notions are antithetical to the Oneness and Love that is God’s essence and thus block the full experience of God in those who hold them. The natural instinct for self-preservation and for sanity impels many gay persons to abandon traditional religions, often leaving these individuals in a spiritual void. Those who remain within traditional religious institutions must resign themselves to the precarious position of a marginalized and despised or pitied minority and thus suffer the psychic and spiritual damage inherent in such a position. The most heinous sin that homophobic religious traditions commit against gay people is teaching us explicitly or through silence that God’s being hates, excludes, or ignores gay being, inflicting the ultimate damage a soul can suffer, ontological alienation from its very source. Banished from heaven and hounded and despised on earth, gay people are truly a lost tribe wandering in the wilderness. Denied fulfillment even through ordinary, worldly relations, forced into hiding, into invisibility, or into an often unwilling militancy, gay people often feel like outsiders even to God. Perhaps, tragically, especially to God.

Religious Alternatives

As an alternative to mainstream religions, some gay people seek spiritual sustenance in so-called pagan, New Age, or in Native American religions, which are thought to have nourished or even honored gay persons in their midst in the past. But, religions reconstructed or newly-invented without a continuous, historical connection to a whole living body of practice and belief may fall short in guiding gay individuals to spiritual fulfillment. Others seek to understand and heal intra-psychic and inter-personal homophobic processes using the tools of modern psychotherapy. Effective, gay-centered psychotherapy can definitely foster a more integrated gay identity as an important step toward psychic and spiritual wholeness. But a purely psychotherapeutic methodology, devoid of any link to transcendental reality, either through a proven spiritual and philosophical tradition or through direct experience, cannot by itself lead a person to God. At best psychotherapy can help clarify and affirm our existential condition, leading us to accept that no lasting peace or bliss can be found in physical or psychological reality because they are transient, and thus, ultimately, inevitably disappointing.

God is Gay

To be able to embark upon the mystical quest with maximum confidence, enthusiasm, and energy gay people need to overcome their sense of ontological alienation from God; they need to know that God also truly is Gay, not in an exclusive sense but in the sense of "That, too." God is Gay because God's being, encompassing all that exists, must include gay being. God is Gay because God is the source of love, all kinds of love. God is Gay because God is both male and female as well as that which is neither. To truly know that God is Gay, that their deepest self is one with the Divine Self, gay people need to learn how they can approach God with and through their gay sexuality, without having to try to leave that essential component of their being at the door, as it were. What is needed to unleash the power of gay love to propel gay persons to the threshold of mystical realization, therefore, is a living spiritual tradition with direct access to the lines of transmission of powerful, systematic spiritual technologies, coupled with rigorous elimination of intrapsychic and interpersonal homophobic processes that divide and dissipate one's psychic energies. I believe that a synthesis of Tantric philosophy and practice with gay-centered psychotherapy, what I call Gay Tantra® (SM pending), can fill this need.

The Tantric tradition in which I have been training is itself a synthesis of traditional Hindu Tantras, Vedanta philosophy, and devotional practices as embodied and taught by the 19th Century Bengali mystic, Ramakrishna, whom many regard as an incarnation of God. As is usual in Tantric traditions part of his teaching and practice is public and part is secret, known only to close initiates. One part that has been mostly secret to non-Bengali students of Ramakrishna until fairly recently are some of Ramakrishna's practices and visions, recorded in detailed written conversations with him, that are clearly homoerotic in content, material that has been omitted from the widely-available English translations. This part of the secret is out now, however, and I believe that many gay aspiring mystics will recognize a kindred spirit in Ramakrishna. To my knowledge Ramakrishna is the only incarnation of God in the recorded history of mysticism who so clearly reveals the ultimate meaning and fulfillment of what it means to be gay.

What I propose, therefore, is that gay spiritual aspirants come together to study the life and teachings of Ramakrishna to put into practice some of the spiritual technologies that have been passed on from him and to discover their own gay being reflected in his. I am retranslating key source materials from the original Bengali, finding many previously-unrevealed gems in the process, vital details omitted or obscured in popular translations that clearly reveal Ramakrishna's Tantric philosophical perspective and gay-familiar way of being in the world. I advocate combining traditional Tantric technologies with gay-centered, individual and group process modalities that have developed out of western psychotherapy. It is my desire to help gay spiritual seekers discover the beauty and develop the spiritual power of their Divine Gay Being to realize God and to become modern mystics in a new spiritual order.

Biographical Information

My formal education includes a B.A. in Sanskrit from UC Berkeley (1975) and a Master's degree in clinical psychology from Antioch University (1986). I also hold a California single-subject teacher's credential in English. I have been studying and practicing Ramakrishna Tantra since 1969, and I lived in India for two-and-a-half years from 1972-1977 first as a pilgrim, then as a student at Banaras Hindu University (Hindi, Sanskrit), and finally as a pre-probationary monk of the Ramakrishna Order. I left the Order in 1977 and rejoined in 1980 at the Vedanta Society of Southern California. I left the Order again in 1982 to teach meditation and Sanskrit and to explore my gay being in relation to my spirituality. I trained and worked as a psychotherapist both in a public clinic

and in private practice, and I founded and coordinated a student counseling program at the public high school where I also taught English for ten years. I retired in 1994 when AIDS complications impelled me to focus exclusively on the needs of my physical body, and I experienced an astonishing recovery starting in May, 1996. My body has changed so dramatically (from a wasted 130 pounds to a muscular 195 pounds) that friends, former co-workers, and even family members often did not recognize me at first. This physical change reflects an equally dramatic mental and spiritual change, and I have been energized by a new vision of my role as a representative of Ramakrishna Tantra in the service of the spiritual development of my gay brothers. I have become a gay Tantric monk, the first in a new Order I am founding, the Ramakrishna Brotherhood, and I invite my gay brothers to take what is useful from my training and experience and to share their wisdom and inspiration with me.

In Ramakrishna,

*Brother William
4 July 1997*

¹ *“sarvam khalvidam brahma”* Here I’m translating the Sanskrit word *“brahman”* as “divine.” Brahman is the non-personal, Absolute also called sat-chid-ananda, Existence-Consciousness-Bliss.

² In my opinion Vaishnava devotional practices that require men to adopt the dress, behavior, and attitude of women to approach Krishna as their Lover imply at least a suggestion of homoerotic potential in divine love. But these are non-Tantric Vaishnava practices, to my knowledge, and largely ascetic (non- sexual) in fact, if somewhat ecstatic in form.

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