

# Is Tantra about sex or divine liberation? Why followers are split over the ancient yogic tradition

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In a world of alternative therapies and new-age spiritual practices, Tantra holds a special place. This concept is largely associated with techniques for improving your sex life—but there's a lot more to Tantra than sex.

Modern Tantric sex practices, or so-called [neotantra](#) (which began at the turn of 20th century), sit alongside the ancient philosophical tradition of classical Tantra, for which written traditions go back to the 8th century and oral traditions even further. Practitioners from both sides, or [Tantrikas](#), have tended to view each other with suspicion.

But they have much to learn from one another if only they tried to understand each other more deeply.

## The standoff

The [neotantrikas](#) stand accused of neglecting the deep spiritual truths of the original Tantric movement. They have, it is supposed, replaced the three-course meal of Tantric [philosophy](#) with a bubblegum sex obsession that reflects Western culture.

The paradigm case for this is the Rajneeshee movement. Described by the popular 2018 Netflix documentary [Wild Wild Country](#), this movement was known for blending Eastern philosophy with American counterculture.

While its devotees followed a supposedly Tantric spiritual practice, it ultimately devolved, somewhat ironically, into a consumer culture that devoured its guru [Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh](#) (also known as Osho).

Scholars of classical Tantra draw on examples like this to question the authenticity of neotantra. One such scholar is [Hugh Urban](#), who has traced the complicated development of Tantric ideas in Western countries and their association with [capitalism](#) and [sex](#).

One leading light in classical Tantra (at least in the English-speaking world) is US scholar-practitioner Christopher Wallis. In his most recent book, [Near Enemies of the Truth](#) (2023), Wallis analyses many of the trendiest terms used by alternative spiritualities. He convincingly shows these terms can be misleading if separated from their roots in Indian philosophy.

In his book [Tantra Illuminated](#) (2013), Wallis is more pointed. He specifically distances classical Tantric philosophy from neotantric sexual practices, saying, "The public perception of Tantra as primarily concerned with sex [...] is manifestly untrue. Next to none of the scriptural sources of (Classical) Tantra teach a sexual ritual or sexual techniques of any kind."

This criticism goes both ways. The neotantrikas tend to avoid classical Tantric philosophy for being heady, abstract and obscure. When it comes to sex, the neotantrikas tend to view the classicists as downright squeamish.

## **Not so different after all**

While both sides have valid points to make, it strikes me there is a lot to gain from ending this standoff.

The neotantrikas rightly point out that classical Tantra is a difficult philosophy. Its writings are mostly untranslated from the original Sanskrit, and what has been translated into English is hard to understand unless you're trained in philosophy and theology.

The classical Tantrikas are also right to point out that sexual rites are only obscurely and occasionally referred to in classical Tantra.

What really matters, however, is the underlying philosophy. And it's

clear to me the core of classical Tantric philosophy actually does provide a strong basis for neotantric practice.

For instance, the Kashmiri philosopher [Abhinavagupta](#), who lived around the turn of the first millenium, is widely regarded as the greatest teacher in a long classical Tantric lineage. He taught a philosophical theology that sanctifies human experience. In this theology, every human experience, at every place and at every time, is also an experience of the divine.

As Wallis explains in his book:

"Quite simply, since reality is One, and everything is equally an expression of that one divine Light of Consciousness, every experience is by definition an experience of God."

Importantly, this is as true of sex as it is of washing the dishes, or of an ant crawling in your garden. Every experience of every thing is God experiencing herself.

At the heart of this teaching is a proposed underlying structure to the universe. In this structure there are two divine principles. One is masculine and the other is feminine. The ecstatic union of these principles creates everything that exists.

You don't have to be neotantric to see this as a reference to divine sexuality. Abhinavagupta may not have invented metaphysical erotica, but he certainly wrote it. This is how the opening lines of his [Tantrasara](#) are interpreted for us by his translators: "The highest equilibrium (is a union) of both masculine and feminine [...] this union is known as coitus. In the [creative process](#), expanding from this union, all the principles of reality emerge [...] the 'emission of drops' emerging from perfect sexual union. The drops reflect the colors of masculine and

feminine: one is white and the other is red."

## Reconnection and rediscovery

We can end the standoff between classical Tantra and neotantra by recognizing that one can—and does—give rise to the other. In fact, I would go even further to say they would both benefit from rediscovering each other.

By drawing on this profound philosophical theology, the neotantrikas could enrich their experiments in sacred sexuality. Doing so might even help them avoid the trap of using Tantra to misguidedly chase peak sexual experiences.

It really should be the other way around. Sacred sexuality is one of many possibilities classical Tantra offers—not for the sake of your [sex life](#), but to help you become more spiritual.

The classical Tantra scholars could also enrich themselves by learning from these brave souls who take the metaphysical logic of classical Tantra to its conclusion, not just in theory, but in an embodied practice.

Tantra goes far beyond the sexual. By refocusing our attention on what really matters—Tantric spirituality—we might discover any number of helpful practices. Who knows what awaits the devotee who pursues them to the end?

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