

What is Tantra

“Tantra” refers to an ancient text describing a practice that involves yoga, meditation, mantra and ritual. In Sanskrit, “tantra” means *to stretch in order to transcend*. We could understand this as a way of using our practice to transcend our limiting ideas of who we are, our false or small self.

When teaching psoma yoga, I invite students to move slowly into a pose/position until they feel what I call an “edge”. That’s the stretch. Then, backing off a tiny bit, just staying there. Not pushing, not fighting, not judging, not trying to change anything, also not giving up or getting distracted or bored, but just staying there, fully present.

This is one of the ways that a yoga practice is really a life practice and a metaphor for how to move through life. What usually happens, although it’s not why we do it, is the sensation that the “edge” moves or even disappears. It is a way of remembering, of reminding ourselves, that “this, too, will pass”... as will everything. Not by trying to change it or get rid of it or push through it, not by ignoring it or denying it, but just by staying fully present in embodied mindfulness.

Another translation of the Sanskrit word *tantra* is *weaving*. This is a practice that weaves together form and formless... body, mind, and spirit. It is a way of using form - much as an embroidery hoop holds the fabric so the threads that pierce it can become art - to allow us to hold a “stretch” in order to move more fully into life and not so much to remember who we are as to realize who we are not.

The stretch can be a physical one, as in asana, or more figurative in the sense of stretching or expanding our sense of self and reality. In the stretch we are asked to let go of a limiting idea or pattern, to release something old, to surrender something that might feel like “us” or “safety”.

One verse in the Upanishads says: *Lift up the self by the Self and don't let the self droop low... for the Self is the self's only friend and the self is the Self's only foe.*

When life challenges us with a health issue or a relationship issue or the stress of an external situation, this practice is a way of reminding ourselves to move beyond our identification with an old sense of self or model of reality, a limiting belief or habit, even a physical contraction in the form of a tension pattern. A psoma yoga way to do this is to become aware of how we are embodying an old pattern that is limiting and to bring it more fully into consciousness with kind curiosity. When we can do this, we have the opportunity to bring new possibilities into conscious awareness.

This practice is not about getting rid of anything. Rather it is a practice of using form to stretch past an old way of being embodied, without judgement or force, and to find and stay present at the “edge”. This edge might feel like a place just past our comfort zone but it is not about pushing too far into painful discomfort. We allow ourselves to stay

present here both physically and mindfully. It requires patience and trust and commitment. So many rewards are possible.

One reward, perhaps, but not always, might be a feeling of the edge giving way. Whether this happens or not, the very practice of staying present in this way creates space around what's happening and helps us to remember, by witnessing, that what we are aware of is not who we are. We are awareness itself.

The edges do not define us, nor do they permanently limit us. They are merely residues of old patterns and will, with awareness, give way to infinite new possibilities and new experiences of freedom.