# Tantra, Imagery, and Integral Dynamic Therapy

*Emily J. Wolf*

The Indo-Tibetan Tantras offer a comprehensive set of power tools for optimal well-being, oriented toward realizing one's highest prosocial potential. Tantric practices utilize our innate capacity for imagination, work with the subtle energetic networks in the body, and draw on fundamental relational processes to realize our full capacity for conscious transformation of our selves and lives. In this chapter, I will contextualize these traditions historically, describe their philosophy and psychology, and illustrate their profound healing methods by presenting the role-modeling imagery of the seven-limbed mentor bonding practice through the lens of self-psychology and psychotherapy.

Tantra comes from the Sanskrit word for "loom," and refers to the warp threads that fabrics are woven onto. It is best understood as a metaphor for the process of enlightened cultural transmission (Loizzo, 2009b). In this, Tantra refers to the cultural art of consciously shifting the course of human development by means of a mentoring bond (loom), which allows us to culturally replicate (weave) an enlightened way of integrating the information-matter (pattern-fabric) of a human mind and nervous system (tapestry). The Tibetan Tantras emerged in India as the third wave of Buddhist contemplative science, stemming from teachings attributed to the historical Buddha. According to tradition, Shakyamuni gave over 84,000 teachings, providing a variety of methods to accommodate individuals' divergent needs, motivations, and capacities (Yeshe, 2003). Since its formative years, this tradition has been integrated in a number of cultures across Asia, and is currently being assimilated in Western cultures.

Historically, Buddhist contemplative science took shape in three major vehicles connected with various teachings and cultural influences: the Individual Vehicle (*Theravada/Hinayana*), the Universal Vehicle (*Mahayana*), and the Process or Diamond Vehicle (*Mantrayana*, *Vajrayana*; Loizzo 2000; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Tibetan scholars assert that both the exoteric Mahayana and the esoteric Vajrayana were secretly taught by Shakyamuni to some of his disciples, and that seeds of those teachings took root and blossomed when Indian civilization was ripe for them (Thurman, 1996; Dalai Lama, 2009; Loizzo, 2009b). The central aspects of Tantric practice were clearly taught in Shakyamuni's day, as we can see from the literature of the Upanishads. Yet they were passed down from teacher to student in

secrecy and were not published until much later, based on cultural and historical trends in India and Asia (Thurman, 1996; Loizzo, 2009b).

While the core principles of Buddhist psychology are similar across all its forms, each vehicle of practice developed distinct approaches to implementing that basic science (Thurman, 1996). The first wave of the Buddha's teachings, the Way of the Elders or Individual Vehicle, represents the classical monastic approach to personal self-healing and self-liberation. The second wave known as the Universal or Great Vehicle emerged during the first centuries of the common era, and represents a lay-oriented approach emphasizing love, compassion, and altruism, and a prosocial ethos geared toward social transformation. The third wave of teachings emerging from about 500 CE is referred to as the Diamond or Process Vehicle, and also falls under the larger umbrella of the Universal Vehicle. This last wave represents the esoteric tradition of Buddhism preserved in Central Asian cultures, which remained largely unknown to the West until the Tibetan Diaspora of 1959. Tibetan Buddhism integrates all three vehicles into one, since it is maintained by monks who live according to Theravada tradition, who teach the exoteric Universal Vehicle, and who practice the esoteric Diamond Vehicle. As part of that three-in-one approach, Tibetan monks and lay teachers emphasize the complementarity of the exoteric teachings of Transcendent Virtue (the *Paramitas* of generosity, justice, tolerance, creativity, meditation, and wisdom) with the esoteric arts of embodying blissful openness as an expedient way of cultivating those virtues (Cozort, 1986; Thurman, 1996; Loizzo, 2012).

## The Process Vehicle: Tantric Buddhism

The Vajrayana is characterized by an insistence on realizing and enjoying the ultimately blissful nature of reality, here-and-now. The ideal of the *Mahasiddha*, the Great Adept or Master conceived as a living Buddha in human form, also emerges in this tradition (Thurman, 1996), as well as the social inclusion of marginalized groups, women and people of lower socioeconomic class. Vitally important to this tradition is the idea that Tantric practice rests on the foundation of Theravada and Mahayana wisdom and ethics, specifically the prerequisites of true renunciation, universal compassion, and non-dualistic wisdom.

Renunciation can take many forms, but in essence it involves realistic assessment and subsequent abandonment of the causes of suffering. Often misunderstood as extreme asceticism or austerity, renunciation more accurately involves a moderating practice based on the determination to be free of unconscious cycles of stress and trauma that perpetuate suffering. The Buddha's initial teaching of the Four Noble Truths provides a medical framework from which to diagnose our suffering and discover its origins in the unhealthy workings of our own minds. Vital here is the active letting go of the core causes of suffering: misapprehension, attachment, and aversion. In renouncing these sources, we can taste the natural liberation or freedom from the poison we feel enslaved by. For some, behavioral restraint is key, for others more important is deep analysis, and for still others, strengthening self-love and compassion—all of which depend on help from others. These helping

reliances are referred to as the three refuges: the Buddha, the Awakened Mentor that has overcome suffering and can show us the way; the Dharma, or Teaching of principles and practices we can draw on and experiment with in our own lives; and the Sangha, the Community of enlightened friends providing support.

Compassion practices involve a reorientation away from self-involvement and toward care for others. The Buddhist tradition refers to great compassion as *bodhicitta*, the altruistic resolve to reach awakening to benefit others. Compassion practices are geared toward cultivating this aspiration, rooted in the self-healing renunciation and self-compassion of Theravada practice. While others are still suffering in the world, one cannot truly be free and happy, as we are infinitely intertwined. From this perspective, the Theravada awakening of the individual Ascetic (*Arhat*) is incomplete, and misses the truth of our deep interconnectivity. While we cannot be fully free and happy when those around us are suffering, we can taste the freedom and joy that naturally arises when we help others. Of course, compassion has to be skillful, rooted in our own self-awareness so as to avoid co-dependency, and based on a clear analysis of what is truly helpful. This concept of empathic art (*upaya)* involves drawing on the most skillful means to help each individual, whether that takes the form of mirroring and listening or of analyzing and challenging, of being permissive or being fierce.

The teachings on selflessness and emptiness are unique to Buddhist philosophy and psychology. In the Buddhist perspective, insight into selflessness facilitates the path to health, lasting happiness, and liberation (Wallace, 2005). Teachings on emptiness extend beyond the individual self, and describe how all phenomena lack inherent existence. Emptiness can be defined as "the absence of an inherent identity or self; the lack of an intrinsic nature that exists in and of itself. Physical phenomena, the mind, and the self all are empty, all are dependently related events" (Wallace, 1993, p. 182). This insight points to the absence of any fixed, permanent, unchanging, or non-relational aspect of self or things that exists independent of everything else. Key to understanding emptiness and selflessness is the insight that the self *does* exist as a vital social construction, referring to a relative, insubstantial confluence of aggregates (*skandhas*) and elements (*dharma*) in constant flux and change (Thurman, 1996). These insights reveal the sheer relativity, interdependence, and interconnectivity of what we experience as our self and world. Of course, misconceptions of emptiness abound, the most insidious being that it entails a negation of real persons and things, i.e., nihilism. The key point here is that emptiness does not negate existence, it negates the reified view of existence as an inherent or intrinsic reality. Upon analysis, one cannot find an essence or self that exists in a singular, permanent, and independent way. Emptiness therefore reveals how all subjective selves and objective phenomena are in fact only possible based on this pervasive reality of relativity.

## Transformational Practice Based on These Preliminaries

In Tantric practice, the practitioner renounces his or her ordinary perception and experience of self through imaginatively dissolving them in the wisdom of

emptiness. Then moved by the spirit of compassion, she re-envisions herself in the form of a heroic archetype or deity (*devata*), revises her inner and outer dialogue in the form of enlightened speech (*mantra*), and engages in enlightening activities or embodied gestures (*mudra*). These aspects of Tantric meditation are symbolic manifestations of the blissful wisdom of emptiness, expressing ecstatic compassion and altruism (Dalai Lama et al., 1981). These practices create an enlightened frame of reference from which the practitioner can deconstruct his or her compulsive misapprehensions of self and world and reconstruct them in the mirror of enlightened realization (Loizzo, 2009b, 2012).

Tantric practice harnesses the insight of emptiness, in that seeing the emptiness of all things opens the space for visualization practice. The visualization process trains the ability to see one's ordinary perception of self and world as a projection of mind, helping one become experientially familiar with emptiness by dissolving that unconscious projection into the "womb" of emptiness, and rebirthing a new, transparent self and world. This process facilitates a softening of the mind's habitual processes of reification, undermining the habit pattern of inherent existence that makes self and world seem solid and fixed (Dalai Lama et al., 1981). Furthermore, that greater mental flexibility not only frees one *from* reifying habitual perception but also frees one *to* identify with and internalize a new sense of self and life, envisioned in the image of an idealized mentor-archetype. This combined practice of perceptual deconstruction and reconstruction further facilitates the realization of one's capacity to gradually reshape oneself in the image of the ideal mentor-archetype.

## Visualization: The Art of Self-Transformation

The psychological understanding of emptiness and the power of visualization practices are supported by current neuropsychological theory and research. The quantum theory of consciousness developed by Llinás (2001) describes how the brain works as a dynamic system similar to a virtual reality simulator, rather than as a static mirror of reality. Llinás' research in brain-wave patterns during dreaming and waking states reveals how a forty-cycle-per-second bioelectrical rhythm generated by the thalamus and basal ganglia creates coherence and connection between various functional brain processes. This wave involves an interaction of internally generated images and mental events evoked from the previous wave of perception along with novel external input in order to create a coherent simulation of reality. This model of perception as a synthesis of sense-input with memory, fantasy, and association suggests that the world we experience is not as objective as it seems, but is in large part a virtual reality projected by the mind and brain, as predicted by the Buddhist understanding of emptiness. This mentally generated inner world would seem to be what psychoanalysts and shamans have recognized as the subconscious dream-world of unresolved past fears, wishes, needs, hopes, and traumas. The only difference between this waking simulation and the dream state is the incorporation of a few bits of corrective external data to update the waking simulation. So whether we are waking or

dreaming, the basic process of perception is one of an active imaginative construction of reality. This constructivist psychology provides the basis for self-conscious visualization practice, designed to serve as a natural method for enhancing healing and internal development by activating the best associations and qualities within us, rather than what we habitually project through self-protective worst-case scenarios (Loizzo, 2012).

Recent research further demonstrates the power of internally generated imagery, suggesting that the brain registers internal imagery and external stimuli with the same neural activity. Studies of mental imagery and brain activation have shown the overlap in brain activation during visual imagery and direct perception (Kosslyn et al., 1998; Mellet et al., 1998). Kosslyn et al. (2000) demonstrated through brain imaging that a vivid mental visualization of a color (i.e., purple), can override the sense data and perception of color in the actual visual field (i.e., gray). These studies reveal that from the brain's perspective there is little difference when the object is internally generated or externally located, supporting the power of visualization practices. The science of vivid imagery helps us understand how to create a positive vision of life that prepares us to act in ways that match our true values, and helps us realize our highest aims for ourselves and our world. Such a method of reliably changing our perceptual software and responsive engagement could dramatically expand our horizons of healthy change.

## Four Levels of Tantra

There are four classes of Buddhist Tantra that involve practitioners' increasing intimacy and identification with divine archetypes. These are Action (*Kriya*), Performance (*Carya*), Integral (*Yoga*), and Unexcelled or Optimal Integral (*Anuttarayoga*) Tantra. The four levels are designed to meet the particular needs, capacities, and skills of diverse practitioners and are characterized by increasing intensity of blissful energy and increasing intimacy (Cozort, 1986). In Action Tantra, the mentor-archetype is encountered with a sense of awe and refuge, and the practitioner engages in ritual actions of cleansing, fasting, and sustained concentration on the mentor-deity and mantra. Performance Tantra involves admiring the mentor-deity and receiving guidance; it is marked by greater proximity and engagement with one's ideal. Integral Tantra emphasizes the internal practices of mind, envisioning communion with the mentor-deity as a catalyst for transformation, and envisioning arising as the mentor-deity oneself. Finally, Optimal Integral Tantra involves advanced methods of simultaneous internal and external transformation, based on meditating on the nature of mind (clear light), and the subtle body (virtual body) of energies (*prana*), drops (*bindu*), channels (*nadi*), and hubs (*chakra*). This fourth level emphasizes male–female archetypes in intimate union, inner and outer offerings, transformative worlds (*mandala*), affirmative statements (*mantras*), and expressive gestures (*mudras*) (Loizzo, 2009b).

Each of these levels of Tantra meets the needs of diverse practitioners to help them sublimate their passions to develop greater emotional maturity and

psychosexual intimacy. The Optimal Integral Tantras are further classified as Father and Mother, based on the particular approach they take to sublimation. Mother Tantras such as *Chakrasamvara* "specialize in sublimating instinctive delusion into the objective intuition of emptiness," while Father Tantras such as *Guhyasamaja* "specialize in sublimating addictive desire or compulsive anger in to pure bliss-void intuition" (Loizzo, 2009b, p. 19). Each type of Unexcelled Tantra provides a path to work with a unique personality type or disposition, in order to reach spiritual awakening.

## Creation and Perfection Stages

Optimal Integral Tantra distinguishes two stages of practice: creation and perfection. These two stages can be practiced sequentially or simultaneously depending on the particular Tantra's scripted practice (*sadhana*). Visualization during the creation stage focuses on developing single-pointed vision of and identification with the mentor-archetype, as well as internalizing a heroic life narrative. In the perfection stage, the practitioner works with the subtle energies in the body to actualize the gradual transformation of the mind and nervous system into the enlightened mind and body of a Buddha. These stages transform perception, instincts, energies, and capacities into optimal psychosocial and psychospiritual functioning. Teachings on the two stages take place within a confidential collaboration between a spiritual mentor and practitioner, guided by specific guidelines to ensure effective transmission of practice, based on the specific developmental level and capacity of the practitioner. For example, private instruction on perfection stage practices will be given to the most adept students, while creation stage practices are appropriate for group instruction (Loizzo, 2009b, 2012).

## The Optimal Integral Creation Stage

Similar to a flight simulator, the creation stage of Optimal Integral Tantra empowers the practitioner to re-envision his/her self and world in light of a heroic ideal vision of life. This occurs through an imaginative conversion, "transforming the human body-mind from its natural, compulsive state into a triumphant, cultivated form fully adapted to a life of spiritual self-mastery and cultural creativity" (Loizzo, 2009b, p. 32). Visualization in the creation stage is a powerful means of regulating affect through the symbolically charged content of its imagery. Similar to a schema in cognitive science (Corsini & Wedding, 2000), the transformative impact of Tantric visualization is based on its implicit, depth-psychological meaning, which encodes healing insight and emotion within the imagery. Furthermore, each image is a symbolic representation of a philosophical insight, which the practitioner actively recognizes and reflects on. There is an interpretative quality as one moves through the symbolically potent visualization, along with a narrative storyline enacting a heroic life plan of creativity and prosocial action.

## Overlap of Creation Stage with Western Psychotherapies

Athletes and coaches, as well as integrative medical therapists, have increasingly turned to visualization and imagery (Rossman, 2000; Banyan & Klein, 2001). Use of imagery cognitively encodes new information, but more importantly accesses emotional responses and rehearses new action-patterns. Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990) works along similar lines, recreating and reconstructing optimal stories about oneself that serve to support living more value-based lives. Similar to the relationship between the spiritual mentor and practitioner, the role of the therapist in Narrative Therapy involves co-creating the narrative, and emphasizing the implicit message that the client already has the capacity to reach their aims.

Jung (1934) pioneered the concept of archetypes in his psychoanalytic theory and practice, based on his observation of the power of universal symbols in the human psyche. For Jung, universal archetypes are narrative patterns from which individuals can organize personal experience, as natural manifestations of the collective unconscious, accessed in order to resolve developmental complexes. They also personify ideals that the individual can access to realize her deepest potential through active imagination.

Affirmations are used in a number of behavioral therapies including Beck's cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), rational emotive behavior therapy, reality therapy, and self-instructional training (Ellis, 1962; Glasser, 1965; Beck, 1976; Meichenbaum, 1977). Affirmations in CBT replace habitual negative thought patterns that have developed and been reinforced over time with repetitive positive statements that become ingrained in one's inner narrative and speech. In creation stage Tantric practice, the power of affirmation is strengthened by the relationship between practitioner and mentor. Rather than convincing oneself that the affirmation is completely self-generated, one imagines communication coming from an external idealized person and eventually becoming an internalized resonance.

## The Optimal Integral Perfection Stage

In the perfection stage, the practitioner accesses and manipulates the most primal layers of the mind and nervous system. Perfection stage practices are based on an extensive map of the subtle body that represents a qualitative, interoceptive analogue to modern maps of the central nervous system. This map explains the flow of energy and drops through channels and hubs in ways that bear some resemblance to our model of neural impulse and synaptic transmission (Lutz et al., 2007). According to this system, embedded in the subtle nervous system are core instinctive patterns of life, including attachment, aversion, and delusion, as well as love, acceptance, and wisdom. The practitioner's capacity to influence and control the subtle energies and drops in this stage consciously regulates instinctual drives and transforms the nervous system on the most basic structural and functional levels. By mastering the male and female energies of the polar side channels of the subtle nervous system and infusing them into the central channel, "the practitioner

gains full access to the deepest sources of blissful energy and chemistry" (Loizzo, 2009b, p. 35). Levels of sexual arousal may also be utilized in perfection stage to enhance access to euphoric states, which reinforce learning and empower the practitioner to shape the direction and culmination of his or her transformation and development. The perfection stage

> involves a mind/body science and art of harnessing the sexual response to seed psychospiritual healing, maturation, and communion with the world at large. In this, it represents a rare cultural system of know-how to facilitate the cultivation of Eros in the service of helping humanity adapt more quickly and fully to the unnatural condition of civilization.
>
> (Loizzo, 2009b, p. 40)

## Overlap of Perfection Stage with Western Psychotherapies

Somatic therapies have their roots in early psychoanalytic thinking and the search of analysts like Reich to glean important information about the unconscious from the body. More recently, therapists have developed somatic approaches that explicitly attend to internal physical experience as a means to heal psychological trauma and emotional disorders (Caplan et al., 2013). These approaches emphasize the importance of working with the body, and identifying ways in which repressed traumatic affect coalesces in the physical body and our embodied nervous system. By working from the bottom-up, somatic practitioners use visceral experience to enact somatic experiments meant to engender emotional discovery, tolerance for deep affect, embodied insight, and awareness (New York Society for Bioenergetic Analysis, 2011).

Recent research on the vagal nerve such as Porges' (2011) Polyvagal Theory align with somatic therapies and help us understand the psychosomatic impact of Tantric practices. This model proposes that the autonomic nervous system underwent a sea change from reptiles to mammals in order to support increasing demands for maintaining social safety, regulating social emotions, and mobilizing behavioral responses for social engagement. Key here is the new, myelinated vagal nerve or "smart vagus" designed for rapid mobilization and bonding. The smart vagus travels from the brainstem to face, throat, heart, and lungs, inhibits fight–flight (sympathetic) reactivity, stimulates safe arousal, social emotions like compassion, social mobilization in the face of danger, as well as communication and creative collaboration when safe. There is also a complex interaction between the smart vagus, the heart–face connection, and middle-ear muscles, which uses social cues of facial expression and vocal tone to assess the safety of the social environment. Central to this system is the way vagal tone inhibits sympathetic reactivity and supports social emotions and social engagement. Porges links poor vagal tone to clinical syndromes such as autism, borderline personality, social phobia, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Porges, 2011).

Embodied practices like those of the Tantras are key to developing vagal tone. Practices like chanting and mantra recitation simulate human vocal tones and

prosody, indirectly stimulating vagal tone. Deep breath work such as abdominal breathing, alternate nostril breathing, extended exhalation, and breath retentions, as well as visualization of mentors with calm, warm facial expressions and embracing postures, stimulate vagal tone. A recent study measuring neuro-hemodynamic correlates and visceral resonance of chanting demonstrated significant deactivation in limbic brain regions (Kalyani et al., 2011). These findings are consistent with the findings of vagal nerve stimulation in epilepsy and depression, lending empirical evidence to the theory that mantra recitation can increase vagal tone.

Positive psychology and positive affective therapies (Peterson, 2006) further align with the perfection stage model and vagal theory in terms of harnessing the healing power of prosocial emotional states. These modalities do not deny suffering, but rather embrace and cultivate the positive that is already present but under-utilized. One study examining the relationship between deep positive affect and cardiac vagal tone showed a significant increase in vagal tone after a sixteen-week positive psychology group intervention (Lu et al., 2013). The new mammalian circuitry elicited by perfection stage practice allows us to stay calm and socially engaged while accessing core transformative affect states that facilitate learning, healing, and transformation. The effectiveness of somatically oriented practice such as embodied imagery, recitation, posture, and breath-work, as well as mental states of health and connection, appears to be due to higher neural integration of the autonomic nervous system.

## Defining the Uniqueness of Buddhist Tantra

According to Tsongkapa, founder of the Gelug lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, the power and efficacy of tantric practices does not lie in the harnessing of subtle body energy or ritual objects/experience, but rather in three core processes (Dalai Lama et al., 1987). These unique characteristics include (a) simultaneous training in non-dual wisdom and compassion, (b) use of mentor devotion and role models, and (c) working with a fruitional (or resultant) approach.

In the exoteric Universal Vehicle, training in wisdom and compassion are developed individually, which facilitates a slow maturation. In contrast, the Vajrayana involves simultaneous training by conjoining symbolic images of altruism with consistent insight into the emptiness of that imagery (Thurman, 1996). This entails first envisioning a new self and world as altruistic archetypes on the basis of emptiness, then giving the mind/body system a coherent neuropsychological pathway from the old reactive self to a new one of proactive engagement. The symbolic imagery of the mandala allows one to let go of the familiar self and reconstruct a new self within an optimal learning environment. The touchstone of the visualization practice is the constant insight that it is inseparable from emptiness, as well as an art of routinely dissolving and recreating the self and the world within each practice. This facilitates a profound experiential insight, and creates checks and balances that protect the practitioner from grandiose or depressive extremes.

Furthermore, Vajrayana practice cultivates multiple levels of internal capacity simultaneously that speed transformation relative to the sequential structure of exoteric practice. When the symbolic tools of visualization and affirmation are applied to the nervous system and conjoined with advanced breath control, they can induce profound altered states by accessing deeper levels of consciousness and neural function (Loizzo, 2012). Mastering these states gives the practitioner access to normally unconscious processes as well as state-specific faculties for influencing them, allowing the practitioner to expose and reform learned and instinctive habits of mind on their own level and providing the experiential basis for rapid maturation. These levels include: the (a) cognitive/perceptual layer accessed through the de-reifying insight of emptiness, converting conditioned traumatic perceptions into direct healing intuitions; (b) the positive affective level of universal compassion, converting reactive habits of clinging and aversion into deeper positive emotions; (c) the ethical behavioral level converts reactive action patterns into a more mature lifestyle and aspirations; (d) the creation stage level transforms ingrained reified self-images and the pride of ordinariness into an ideal self-image with awakened dignity, accompanied by affirming inner dialogue, and prosocial gestures; (e) the perfection stage level involves an alchemical conversion of reactive neural energy and chemistry into the positive neural energy and chemistry of blissful openness.

Social learning from role models is core to our evolution and development as mammals. The bonds of kin provide current cultural know-how to navigate an ever-changing environment. While parent and child remain in a long pattern of dependency, the mammalian advantage over reptiles is that current learning can be imparted to enhance adaptation quickly. The narratives that have been internalized through primary relationships with parents set the stage for one's current worldview and relationships, some healthy, others maladaptive. Understanding that this internal landscape is co-created in the child–parent relationship serves as the basis of seeking a "better" role model when one commits to consciously growing oneself.

The tradition of mentor bonding involves developing a profoundly intimate relationship with a new parental figure, someone with the qualities to help one complete the process of healthy development. From the Tibetan standpoint, this could occur through proximity with a mentor or more at a distance, where the intimacy takes place virtually within the visualization practice augmented by support from a like-minded community. Key to the relationship is the interpersonal contract to embark on the path together, in which the practitioner commits to maintaining the practice, and the mentor to skillfully guiding the practitioner along the path.

The Process Vehicle of the Tantras takes a resultant path, bringing the future result of full awakening into present practice, rather than the gradual approach of the Universal Vehicle that focuses on creating the causes of future maturity, concentration, and wisdom. In essence, the Tantric practitioner starts at the goal, acts-as-if, and "learns to think, speak, and act now as if he or she were already a fully enlightened Buddha" (Yeshe, 2001, p. 3), thereby simulating and habituating to the final attainment of full awakening. This fruitional approach involves

"trying on" the mentor's enlightened experience, speech, altruistic actions and view of herself as a living Buddha within a Buddha's perfected natural, social, and cultural sphere of action. Creative imagery, poetic formulas, and performative gestures provide a working linguistic construction and imaginative simulation of enlightened perception that serves as an alternate system of reference by which the individual can critique his or her compulsive misperception of self and world. By choosing to enhance a positive view of self and other, one essentially begins to build and connect the neural structures that support the optimal experience, thereby making it more viable to elicit that positive experience again. This creates a mind–brain–body feedback loop, simulating and reinforcing new integration.

This fruitional path further involves a profound worldview that informs working with others, in line with some forms of psychodynamic thought and practice (i.e., Orange et al., 1997; McWilliams, 2004). The basic assumption is one of openness and plasticity. In working with others therapeutically, it is essential to address the relative suffering presented by the client, but equally important to maintain the fruitional view; that the client has an enlightened nature and that his/her challenges are temporary obstacles that can be overcome. By relating to this underlying truth, the therapist maintains hope and flexibility, and overtly and covertly evokes the openness for the client to manifest rapid transformation.

## Therapeutic Integration of Mentor Bonding: The Essence of Tantra

All preliminary practice of Tantra involves what is called the seven-limbed practice of mentor bonding. This is core to the Tantras, whether the lower-level practices or more intricate integral and optimal integral performance scripts (*sadhanas*). In fact, this fundamental art structures the more elaborate practice of all *sadhanas*, and in many ways is the quintessence of the Tantras. As a preliminary practice, it is accessible to everyone, and does not require traditional initiation. As such, Loizzo has integrated and implemented the mentor bonding in clinical settings and populations with significant positive outcomes (Loizzo et al., 2009, 2010). He has also developed an in-depth explanation of the psychological mechanisms by which it effects change, connecting it to the work of Heinz Kohut. I first briefly highlight some of Kohut's key theories and concepts underlying self psychology and the relational approach to therapy. The developmental needs and therapeutic goal of Kohut's transmuting internalization serves as the base from which to understand the depth of the mentor bonding practice.

Kohut (1971) described three core needs for healthy development: mirroring, idealization, and twinship. Mirroring involves being acknowledged for one's qualities and accomplishments, often subtle non-verbal approval and validation of emotions and experience, leading to the development of one's self concept and self-awareness. Idealization involves a need to admire and identify with parentified figures with whom children are associated. This provides a sense of inclusion in the caregiver's positive qualities, and allows children to internalize

the capacity to develop ideals, set realistic aspirations, and move through development with a secure sense of self and attachment. The third relevant process is twinship, a fundamental need to feel included and part of a community (Kohut, 1984).

Kohut called the internalization of these self-regulatory factors "transmuting internalization," and applied this same concept to the process whereby patients internalize a healthy sense of grandiosity, idealization, and connectedness through the therapeutic relationship. The seven-limbed mentor practice entails a reparative interpersonal process in which these core elements take place in a contemplative bond, guided by visualization. Loizzo (2012) builds on Kohut's theory to explain how mentor bonding can facilitate psychosexual healing and integration, delineating four phases of the internalizing process: idealization, identification, internalization, and integration.

## The Tantric Art of Mentor Bonding

The seven-limbed art of mentor bonding is based on a real relationship with an admired person, one's teacher, mentor, or any role-model one considers further along the path of development. For some, identifying a mentor is a simple proposition, for others it can be more challenging. When proposing identifying a mentor, we suggest considering a range of options. Traditionally, the mentor is a spiritual guide and friend that one has forged a connection with, either through direct experiences or indirect connection, including past and present historical figures that one feels an affinity with, e.g., Mohammed, the Virgin Mary, Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Moses, Jesus, Socrates, Shakyamuni. Most important is a genuine sense of safety, admiration, hope, inspiration, even affection for a person who embodies qualities one wishes to develop. Of course, mentors we have direct experience of often elicit complex emotions. The intention here is to connect with the mentor's primary positive regard, so that one can work through complex emotions, and eventually accept the common humanity of oneself and the mentor. As in idealizing transference, the aim here is not to deny one's experience, but to intentionally harness the intersubjective power of the positive mentor bond as a crucible for insight, healing, and transformation (McWilliams, 2004). This opportunity rests on a foundation of mutual trust, safety and understanding, based on a reciprocal agreement to work through challenges as they arise.

## I. The Idealization Phase: Action Tantra

### First Limb: Admiration

The first phase of the mentor bonding practice begins with three elements of idealization: admiring, offering, and disclosing. In admiring the mentor as an ideal model, we consciously identify qualities we admire by seeing them in another person. Developmentally we need to idealize, admire, be in awe, feel safe and

worthy of love by someone more capable than we feel. The ideal is someone from whom we seek refuge, validation, and positive reinforcement of healthy self-esteem. This entry point harnesses the creative and positive use of what ego psychologists refer to as regression in the service of ego (Knafo, 2002). In mentor bonding, as in therapy, the close tie allows for lowering defenses, while a relaxed-state consciousness primes the mind for new learning and insight. Key here is to evoke the qualities one seeks to emulate from the mentor, so they are not abstractions, but based on personal experience. One does this by blending real life encounters with the idealized image of a mentor as hero archetype. If one chooses an archetypal or historical mentor like Mohammed or Martin Luther King, the idea is to infuse an abstract knowledge of his qualities with personal experience of inspiring individuals that helps enliven the transference. This conscious transference initiates a positive limbic resonance between practitioner and mentor, in which both freely enjoy and appreciate the connection forged between them.

### Second Limb: Offering

The next limb involves offering, an act of giving freely. As the mentor shares his or her personal qualities for both to enjoy, the practitioner actively deepens the bond and welcomes the connection through sharing experiences, potentials, and resources. This traditionally is rehearsed in the real or imagined ritual of offering things for mutual enjoyment: water to drink and wash, flowers to please the eyes, light to find one's way, perfume to breathe in, food to eat, and music to enjoy, as well as offering an ideal vision of the world. This builds confidence and a kind of entitlement that overrides self-protective guardedness and insecurity, and deepens the sense of reciprocity in the relationship. Most importantly, one envisions such acts of generosity having a positive effect on the mentor, seeing the mentor smiling, enjoying, and feeling gratitude. The resonance of this exchange is key—opening to the experience of deriving pleasure from making others happy.

### Third Limb: Disclosure

On the basis of this safe bond and resonant circuitry, the next step is to disclose one's limits, fears, and doubts to the mentor. Personal struggles, conflicts, maladaptive behaviors are shared, to help dismantle shame-based fear or anger that block the flow of mutual closeness and interchange. Disclosure reduces the sense of isolation, and helps transform toxic emotions of shame, fear, and hate into prosocial emotions like empathy and humility through the active acceptance of the mentor. While this limb is usually translated as confession, disclosure may be a more appropriate term because it speaks to the interactive nature of this kind of openness. One envisions the mentor taking in the disclosure, accepting the limitations expressed from an enlightened perspective, seeing that the practitioner can move past the difficulty and realize his/her full healing potential. The mentor maintains the simultaneous view of the practitioner's relative suffering and ultimate freedom.

## II. The Identification Phase: Performance Tantra

### *Fourth Limb: Rejoicing*

The limb of rejoicing evokes a developmental shift from idealizing to identification through the engagement of gratitude and vicarious enjoyment. In this phase, the mentor is a mirror of our own potential, and the power of this fourth limb lies in opening to the reality that an open, plastic nature exists within us, as reflected by the mentor. Rejoicing involves a vicarious enjoyment of the mentor's qualities and accomplishments, but implies that we too can be free from personal challenges and traumas and fully connect with our inner potential. Often those personal qualities can be overlooked in the spirit of avoiding pride or indulging self-criticism. This limb encourages the practitioner to develop a sense of enlightened dignity or pride in his/her personal "good." Having disclosed personal challenges in the prior limb, the practitioner balances this by sharing and rejoicing in personal strengths and potentials.

By enjoying qualities that could be ours, we distance ourselves from identification with our old traumatic narratives. This involves conscious supplementation of parental models, worldviews, and ways of acting with those we deem more effective. One begins to let go of the shame-based comparison or jealousy fueled by chronic trauma, and opens to the sense that "I too can develop these qualities." This empowers the practitioner to relate to the mentor as both an idealized other and a potential equal; both parties ultimately share the same nature.

## III. The Internalization Phase: Integral Tantra

### *Fifth Limb: Requesting Guidance*

Requesting guidance includes a number of steps that foster internalization. In requesting guidance, one is not asking the mentor to magically transmit positive qualities, but rather for support and guidance to find those qualities within oneself. The process of asking for help comes from an empowered sense of agency, that we too can develop these qualities with some help, as well as a confidence that the mentor has already taken the necessary steps so has the experience to help us on the way. This marks a distinct shift in the power differential away from the childlike awe and idealization as well as the identification phase in that the mentor here is even closer to a peer, one who has developed her own mind and potential, is a bit further along the path, and can show the way.

In this internalization phase, the mentor's presence is relocated from external to internal as an inner presence. Here, one visually rehearses taking in the mentor's help, downloading the support without one's own selfhood being replaced or obscured. It is a mixing of subjectivities, and a discovery of one's open potentiality. This internalization traditionally takes the form of a visual and linguistic affirmation transmitted from mentor to practitioner, which are essentially potent seeds of meaning that ripen over time. Over time, the mentor's thoughts, speech,

and actions find their way spontaneously into one's daily life, and this inner presence can be drawn upon in between sessions. This resembles the internalization of a therapist's voice, a symbolic presence and sense of connection that can be experienced independent of the therapist being actively engaged in one's daily life.

## IV. The Integration Phase: Optimal Integral Tantra

### *Sixth Limb: Requesting Constancy*

Requesting constancy deepens the internalization by envisioning the essence of the mentor's qualities merging with one's own. Here one imagines the mentor's mind stream coalescing into a drop of light, which enters through one's crown, travels past the throat, and finally reaches the heart, where it merges inseparably with one's own. The merging here is a deeper level of mixing subjectivities, not an overriding of the practitioner's subjectivity, but a kind of twinship, a congenial sharing of mental qualities, affirmative language, and embodied altruistic spirit. The request for continued guidance comes with the understanding that the path is long and that one may need access to the mentor's support at any time. Again, the mixing of minds is not a replacement or graft, but rather a discovery and harnessing of what is already there.

### *Seventh Limb: Dedication*

The dedication limb focuses on the empowered commitment to oneself and the work that lies at the end of the path. It is a conscious redirecting of one's energy towards fully embodying the mentor's qualities in one's daily life, relationships, and mind/body processes. This also draws on the power of twinship, a deeper and wider sense of solidarity with the community, and a personal commitment to the social development of a fully conscious species and awakened planet.

### Flipping the Practice: Psychotherapist as Mentor

Given this background, one can see how the seven-limbed offering could be an excellent training-ground for a therapist's sensibility and maturation. Not only is the mentor internalized through the practice, but the relational healing that occurs within that practice provides a corrective experience we can draw on and relay in our work with others.

The first limb of idealization evokes the responsibility of the therapist to hold the relational capacity of being idealized. In order to take on that responsibility, one has to develop confidence in one's role in the therapeutic process, continue to work on one's own conflicts and interpersonal concerns that would block taking on the idealized relational role. Therapists may feel some reluctance and resistance around accepting this role by diminishing or denying clients' transference due to their own unexamined neuroses, shame, or fear, or conversely may exaggerate and reify the transference to serve narcissistic validation. So it is

incumbent on therapists to face their particular nuances and reactions to taking on the idealized role. This limb further speaks to harnessing and developing the positive attributes of the mentor. Current psychodynamic approaches to optimal therapeutic attunement suggest giving one's "best self" to the therapeutic relationship, attending to and learning from one's subjective responses to patients, and skillfully using the subjective response in a way that patients can hear, take in, and learn from (McWilliams, 2004). So we bring our best genuine selves to the therapeutic encounter for the benefit of healing, and this requires the personal development of the optimal aspects of one's relational capacity.

The second limb of accepting generosity involves an overall appreciation for the extremely sensitive material that clients are sharing, or offering, in therapy. Therapeutic content and relational processes can be the most intimate material that one can entrust with another, and being able to take in clients' content as though it were a precious offering impacts the therapeutic landscape. This is a practice of openness for the therapist, keeping perspective on what is truly happening when clients are exposing their inner worlds.

The relational dynamic of accepting disclosure in the third limb shifts the field from purely focusing on the immediate concern or pathology to including the view of a patient's ultimate potential. As a therapist, one can see both the client's challenges and the freedom from those challenges simultaneously, avoiding getting stuck having the difficulty obscure the full landscape of the client. By relating to the healthy nature of open potential in our clients, we are also able to help clients find this internal capacity within themselves. We relate and attend to what is already covertly there in order to help clients discover it for themselves. This limb also speaks to the key element of love as a healing process in psychodynamic therapy. McWilliams (2004) highlights the therapeutic power, and actual necessity for therapeutic healing, of coming to genuinely love the full subjectivity of one's patient. It is the relationship between the therapist and client that heals, and this rests on the bond of mature and reciprocal empathy developed over time.

The fourth limb of shared rejoicing can extend beyond the positive circuitry of appreciating the positive qualities between client and therapist, to include a connection to the positive qualities of all people psychologically present in the room. As clients share about problematic relationships, this inclusion involves a radical practice of discerning and acknowledging the full spectrum of humanity even in the most difficult or harmful dynamics. Rather than reducing those difficult others to "all good" or "all bad," we develop empathy by seeing the underlying sources of their harmful behavior (delusion, anger, or unhealthy attachment), and maintain the openness of possibility that this person has done some things right. This is not to deny, justify, or minimize the negative impact, harms, and traumas caused by others as these require validation, processing, and exposure. However, maintaining the connection to the full spectrum of all human beings allows for greater power and flexibility in our clients' and our own relational landscape.

The fifth limb of sharing guidance and inspiration from the therapist's perspective draws on one's skillful present attunement to clients' evolving and developmentally maturing needs over time, and not getting stuck in old perceptions or

analyses of the client. The imagery here involves the mentor distilling the unique inspiration and guidance in the symbolic form of sending light to the practitioner's heart; a symbolic merging of minds or subjectivities. From the therapist or mentor's perspective, this involves both wisdom and compassion. The therapist has enough wisdom and insight into the truth of emptiness that s/he has the freedom to let go and merge with another's subjectivity as well as enough ego strength to maintain a relative sense of self and differentiation. This commitment also involves the profound compassion and resolution to enter another's subjectivity, go to the depths of hell with each client (Orange et al., 1997), and to be the beacon of light to find the way out.

The final two limbs of continued presence and commitment to altruism from the therapist's perspective invokes the determination to continue on the path toward the deep relational healing with each client. This can broaden the scope of the intersubjective dynamic in that the therapist not only commits to the relational work regardless of duration, but also reaffirms the dedication to one's own development and inner work as a means to help ripen the awakened nature in all our clients and all people we encounter.