

KING'S QUEST

I used to own a series of role-playing video games for my computer called King's Quest. In one of them you controlled a character called Cedric, who had the task of saving the ailing kingdom of Daventry by finding a magic mirror in which one could foresee the future, a magic chest that was always filled with gold coins and a magic shield that would protect the bearer from all harm.

Cedric travelled around exploring the kingdom, meeting mysterious people and creatures who would give him the information, and finding and acquiring the objects, he would require in order to fulfil his task. Quite near Cedric's starting point, for example, was a piece of ploughed earth which, on further investigation, turned out to be a carrot patch. It was obvious that Cedric was supposed to pick a carrot but less obvious was what he was supposed to do with it. Eating it didn't seem to achieve anything. But how about eating it in the dark? Would that enable him to see in the dark? You would put the carrot in Cedric's bag and carry on exploring, waiting for the moment when the carrot might come in useful.

As I eventually discovered, Cedric was supposed to show – but not feed - the carrot to a goat that he would meet elsewhere in Daventry. This would cause the goat to follow Cedric around and, later in the game, Cedric's goat companion would be critical in his progress when it would help him to cross a bridge that was guarded by a troll. As in the story of Billy Goat Gruff, the goat charged the troll and knocked it into the water. This wouldn't happen, of course, until after you'd made several frustrated attempts to get across the bridge to the mysterious island that, it was obvious, contained some element essential to your progress. All of these attempts would end with you being unceremoniously thrown into the water by the troll.

Finding and collecting the items and information that you'd need, and piecing together the clues that enabled you to solve the puzzle, would take hours of game play over the course of weeks, and sometimes months. Periods of frustration, where you seemed to have exhausted all your exploration possibilities and couldn't figure out what you were supposed to do with the items in your bag and the information you'd acquired, would be followed by the joy and excitement of making a breakthrough.

Sometimes a breakthrough would open out whole new areas of the game to explore, such as when you overcame the troll and crossed the bridge to the previously inaccessible island. Sometimes, the seemingly unrelated items in your bag would all suddenly turn out to be connected. For example, you might have been re-exploring a room in a castle for the umpteenth time when you discovered a catch that caused a secret panel to slide open and reveal a hidden door. The mysterious gold key that had been given to you earlier by an elf would turn out to open that door, and the matches that you'd bought from the shopkeeper and the candle that you'd picked up in a deserted house would enable you to illuminate and explore the darkened passage beyond. The purpose of the hunk of ham that the farmer's wife had given you would then be revealed – you'd use it to distract the lion that was guarding the door at the end of the passage – a door that could be opened by the silver key you'd found under Dracula's pillow. In the room beyond lay a beautiful sleeping princess. Oh yes, you'd plucked a red rose from the flower bed outside the house....

I used to think that the search for spiritual enlightenment was like a journey on a path or, more particularly, along a series of interconnected paths which all ultimately led to the same place. Thus, someone pursuing spiritual enlightenment might start off on the path of one of the

established Western religions, switch at some stage in their life to one of the Eastern religions and, from there, into one of the more New Age “Mind Body Spirit” practices that abound nowadays. Ultimately though, I felt that the person who pursued the yogic path would end up in the same place as the Tai Chi devotee or the person who pursued the path taught by Christ. The important things, I felt, were to find a path that suited and attracted you, to stick to that path in a disciplined manner to the exclusion of other possible paths that might distract you (“one deep well is better than twenty shallow ones”) and that it be, as Don Juan told Carlos Castaneda, “a path with heart”.

In recent days, I have changed my view on the search for spiritual enlightenment. I now think it is more like a role-playing video game than a path or series of paths. Over the course of our lives, I believe, we move about picking up clues, information and tools. We may not even be aware that these items are clues, information or tools, let alone useful ones. Then later on, when we have forgotten that we are even carrying them, and the possibility that they are in any way related hasn’t even crossed our minds, they combine together to enable us overcome a barrier, or series of barriers, at which we have been stuck for some time.

My change in view has come about as a result of personal experience. At the beginning of 2002 my girlfriend Sophie and I embarked on a year-long Tantra course for couples. It comprised five residential blocks of five days each spread over the year, with “homeplay” exercises for the couples to practise between blocks. A couple of weeks before the fourth block of the course, I began to get the feeling that several rather disparate areas of my life were coming together at a meeting point.

John Hawken and Hilly Spenceley, our teachers, had spoken a lot about the importance to the male sexual energy of the perineum and the prostate. The prostate, apparently, is the male equivalent of the G-spot, and is the source from which the negative polarity of the male sexual energy stems. As with the G-spot, it is not something that most heterosexual men discover without being taught. When I was a young child, however, I discovered that by pressing near my groin when I had a full bladder, I could give myself a pleasant sensation in my genital region. I have now realised that I was indirectly stimulating my prostate by pressing my bladder against it, thus discovering the negative polarity of my sexual energy. I stopped doing this when I reached puberty and the positive polarity of the energy became more significant, but while my fellow Tantra students were experimenting with the negative polarity for the first time, I found myself rediscovering something with which I had been familiar since early childhood.

In my late teens and early twenties I experimented heavily with drugs and developed a particular fondness for LSD. At the time I thought I was just having fun, but I was, in retrospect, also having revelatory experiences and opening up the portals into altered states of consciousness. This would help me years later when it came to Tantra. John and Hilly have often talked about exploring the “is-ness” of the feelings and sensations we experience whilst practising Tantra. “Is-ness” seems to be translated from the German *Istigkeit*, a label used to describe a concept, albeit a somewhat intangible one, with which Germans are presumably familiar. Like many such words, there is no English equivalent and the translation into English merely clouds even further an already obscure and amorphous concept.

But *Istigkeit* seems to me to be a concept with which acid-trippers are familiar. I understand it to be the feeling that a tripper has when gazing endlessly into an object and revelling in its form and existence: the feeling that the object is imbued with a significance – and even a life - beyond its superficial form; the feeling even that infinity and the whole universe are contained within that

object. Once again, seemingly irrelevant behaviour in my past appeared to have been good preparation for my Tantric training.

There was more. Some ten years earlier a friend of mine had told me about a book she'd read about Taoist sex for women. I'd read the companion book for men and, for the couple of months that it held my interest, I did some of the exercises recommended in the book. I became adept, for a while, at ejaculation control. As a result of the book I adopted the habit of pressing three fingers on my perineum when I masturbated. I didn't know it then, but the experimentation with ejaculation control was to prove enormously helpful years later when I began to learn Tantra, as ejaculation control is necessary to the practice. Even the fact that I used to press on my perineum when masturbating turned out to be relevant: the perineum is the route to the prostate and the negative sexual polarity. By pressing the perineum whilst I masturbated, I was stimulating both my positive and negative sexual energy, the required blend for the practice of Tantra.

In the weeks leading up to the fourth block of our Tantra course, I began to be less scientific and more experimental and instinctive in my approach to it than I had been previously. As a result of this I made several breakthroughs in my practice of Tantra during that period. These breakthroughs, combined with the growing realisation that these random and eclectic experiences from my past all seemed to be connected with, and even some sort of preparation for, my study of Tantra, began to lead me to feel that I was reaching a significant moment in my Tantric learning.

Towards the end of the fourth block of our course we did a structure known as Vajra Pleasuring. To describe it simplistically, the men had their genitals manipulated by their partners in order to stimulate and blend the positive and negative sexual energies. When sufficient energy had built up, we would try and draw the sexual energy up through our chakras to our heart and then to our third eye. The build-up to the structure had been fraught for me and my partner as our demons fought to try and sabotage the coming experience. Having overcome those issues, further demons raised their heads early in the structure but I was lucky enough to recognise what was happening and put them firmly in their place. It seems, in retrospect, that the demons, recognising the significance of the moment that was coming, were mounting one last desperate rearguard action to prevent it happening.

The demons dealt with, we continued with the pleasuring. As Hilly led the group through the steps though, I began to get a strong internal message to ignore what she was saying and to follow my instincts instead. I got Sophie to start with my perineum before moving on to the actual shaft of my penis – the opposite of the order that Hilly was suggesting. John and Hilly had always emphasised to the group that their suggestions were an invitation only and should not be taken as instructions. I had always previously interpreted this as meaning that they weren't forcing us to follow their instructions, but I realise now that part of their message was that if our instincts told us to do something else, then we should follow our instincts rather than their instructions.

The Vajra Pleasuring was sensational. I had had no idea before just how much pleasure could be derived from massaging the perineum and a flaccid penis. It seems that the capacity for pleasure that can be derived from the male genitals is almost infinite. It was certainly out of all proportion to any pleasure I had ever experienced from conventional sex or masturbation. A huge amount of sexual energy, of both polarities, built up in my pelvic region. Using the breathing and visualisation techniques that we had learnt, I was able to spread this energy around my body.

Towards the end of the Vajra Pleasuring ceremony, I asked Sophie to stop touching me and I began to concentrate on drawing the energy up to my heart with my breath, assisted by pumping the "fire muscle" in the pelvic floor. I could feel the energy rising through my abdomen and chest

towards my heart region, but couldn't feel any tangible sensation of it entering my heart. I carried on with the breathing and pumping and tried drawing the energy up towards my head and third eye. Again, I felt the energy in my pelvic floor and felt it flowing up through my body, but it felt like it was dissipating rather than entering my heart and third eye.

Up until this point, my experience on the Vajra Pleasuring wasn't that different to previous Tantric experiences: enjoyable and nurturing, but primarily a physical, rather than spiritual, experience. All that was about to change.

It began with a strange sensation in my head: a feeling that my head was expanding beyond its physical limits. A slightly irreverent vision of some large-headed characters from Star Trek sprang to mind. A couple of breaths later I began to feel like something was growing out of the top of my head. This was a physical sensation, not a mental image, although images again came to mind: Struwwelpeter's hair; antlers; the branches of a tree...

Something – an energy that I had never previously experienced - began to travel out of my head along these protrusions and flow up towards the sky. I had an image of black beads with spots of light along their length, though the image was secondary to the actual sensation of something flowing out of my head, which was as physical and tangible as the computer on which I am writing. I realised that the energy was flowing out of my head with the out-breath and into it with my in-breath. Almost immediately, the power of this energy began to grow exponentially, and within a few breaths, the power had grown so unimaginably huge that it was clear that its source was no longer internal, but was rather some vast untapped energy source up in the heavens.

In our Tantric structures we had often been asked to visualise ourselves drawing red fire energy up from the belly of the Earth into our first chakras, located near the perineum, and sending it out as white light energy into the heavens through our seventh chakras, the crown of our heads. It was obvious that there was a flow occurring between my crown chakra and the heavens, and some instinct told me to try and complete the flow by making the connection between my first chakra and the Earth. I sat up in the lotus position. By this stage I was completely ignoring Hilly's instructions and just following my instincts. The external energy source had by now completely swamped the internal energy that I had created through the Vajra Pleasuring. This energy source felt infinitely vast and infinitely powerful: the most powerful force I had ever encountered; indeed, the most powerful force in the Universe. With my breathing, I was drawing this energy down from the energy body in the sky and sending it down to my first chakra, where it seemed to dissipate into the ground.

The feeling I had was of the whole of the power of this infinite energy body in the heavens being channelled into a column that joined heaven to Earth. Film footage of distant tornadoes came to mind. It felt like the energy was flowing gently up and down this column through me into the Earth, as if I myself were a column at the centre of the Universe through which all the infinite energy that flowed between heaven and Earth was being channelled. As the energy was flowing up and down through me, I also had the sensation that I was floating up and down on this column. As the energy flowed down through my body, I felt myself gently floating up the column on the up-wave of my in-breath, then floating gently down it again with the down-wave of my out-breath.

After several minutes of sheer bliss, the energy flow began to slow until it finally came to a rest. I was left with a feeling of being more at peace, more satisfied and more contented than I had ever felt before in my life. I knew, with absolute certainty, that my understanding of myself and the world around me had grown immeasurably. It was like my whole life's work had been rewarded

with this confirmation, by direct and incontrovertible personal experience, of the existence of a higher power. I felt like I had been blessed.

The feeling of transcendence lasted all night, most of which I spent wide awake and totally alert, sitting in the dark just revelling in the *Istigkeit* of my existence. By morning, exhaustion and the enormity of my experience had become a factor and for the next few days my mood swung between the high on which the experience had left me and a feeling of overwhelm.

For much of my life I had been sceptical about the possibility of the existence of higher powers and what could loosely be described as “the supernatural”. My interest in spirituality had generally taken the form of psychological self-development rather than mysticism. In recent years my scepticism had turned to open-mindedness, though I had still been far from convinced. About a year before my epiphany, a friend of mine – the same one who had introduced me to the book on Taoist sex – had told me certain things about Sophie’s childhood, father and grandmother which it was utterly impossible for her to have known by conventional means. Presented with irresistible empirical evidence, I had had to accept that there were energies, forces and powers in existence that could not be perceived by our senses or detected by science.

That discovery itself had been life-changing enough, in its way, but it paled into insignificance when compared to that of having direct personal experience of a manifestation of a divine, supernatural reality. Until then, I had thought that the energy with which Tantra dealt was internal fire and electricity and that the practice was essentially about personal wellbeing. My discovery that we were dealing with energy sources which, instead of my anticipated internal fire and electricity, were actually external and thermo-nuclear by comparison, was daunting in the extreme.

As I write, an irony strikes me. One of my issues with conventional religions is that the texts on which they are based seem to me to be clearly written in metaphor, but are interpreted by fundamentalists as being literal. In Tantra, where John and Hilly had often talked about the divine and, in particular, couples seeing the manifestations of the god and goddess within each other, I had assumed that this was also all metaphor. It seems that I should have been taking their words literally.

Perhaps the greatest effect of my experience on me was not, surprisingly, the absolute proof of the existence of other realities to those that we perceive. It was the validation of my life’s path to date. As with King’s Quest, I felt that I had only reached the place I had reached as a result of the people I’d met and the knowledge that I’d gleaned in the past. More importantly, I felt that I could only have got to where I was by having all the required elements and prerequisites in place.

Without my childhood experiments with my prostate, my teenage dabbling with drugs and my interest in Taoist sex, I never would have had the experience that I had – or at any rate, not at the actual time that I had it. But these weren’t the only relevant experiences that had led me there. My interest in Vipassana meditation, transcendental meditation and Eastern religions and my love of India all had a role to play in preparing me for Tantra. In addition to, and more significant than, the conscious choices and interests, there were also the “co-incidences” that had led me there: a comment by a friend that my heart chakra was blocked; a passing remark shortly afterwards by someone I hadn’t seen for years – “co-incidentally” the ex-husband of the Taoist sex woman – that he was studying Tantra and that it was more about heart energy than about sex; a discarded newspaper on a Tube train that I picked up and which contained an article on Tantra. The childhood experiences that had led me to want to take drugs in the first place had been out of my control; perhaps even they had happened for the purpose of preparing me for Tantra.

With regard to Tantra, I thought that I had previously pursued a variety of different paths but had finally found “a path with heart” that attracted me and that I was going to be able to stick to. What I discovered through my experience was that I had, in fact, been on a single path all along, acquiring the tools and skills I would need later in life to enable me to have my epiphany. Tantra was – like the hidden catch in King’s Quest that opened the panel and revealed the secret door - merely the final key that enabled me to put all my acquired tools and skills to use in one extraordinary moment of breakthrough and self-discovery that, as in the computer game, opened up new worlds for me to explore.

I’m not clear whether my journey through life has been guided by some external force or whether it is my own instincts that are guiding me through it. After years of doubt about the way I’ve lived my life and the things I’ve done with it though, I have received confirmation that I haven’t been wasting my time after all. I’ve had it right all along. My life has a purpose and my whole journey to date has been, and will continue to be, “a path with heart”. The liberation that has come with that knowledge has been of far greater significance to me than the discovery that there is indeed a higher power.

In truth though, there are no real destinations in life. The place where I have arrived, significant though it may be, is not a destination. It is wonderful, nevertheless, having been lost – or having, at any rate, feared that I was lost - to have discovered that I was going the right way all along. I feel that I have reached a place now where I can get my bearings. In life’s journey, I have arrived at a place where I can, metaphorically, rest up in a nice hotel for a while, have a good bath and a couple of good meals, get a shave, sleep in a warm clean bed for a few nights and think back with fond memories about the places that I’ve visited along the way. Then it’ll be time to put on my rucksack and hit the road again.

What next? Having discovered that my life has a purpose, maybe the next step is to discover what that purpose is. Who knows?

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I wrote the above about a week after my experience. It may come as no surprise to hear that, in the nine months since, my life has changed. What may come as a surprise though, is the manner in which it has changed.

In the immediate aftermath of my experience, I found myself to have become – when I wasn’t exhausted – a completely different person. The generally irritable demeanour with which and frame of mind in which I went about my normal day-to-day activities seemed to have gone. Sophie stopped calling me “Old Grumblebum”, her pet name for me since early in our relationship. My default setting appeared to have switched from grumpy to cheerful.

All of a sudden, I appeared to have discovered compassion. I had known for some time, on an objective and intellectual level, that I needed to become more compassionate if I wanted to feel happier and less alienated from the world, but I hadn’t really understood it on a subjective and emotional level. When I had acted compassionately, it had always felt forced. Suddenly, I was actually feeling compassion, and acting compassionately, without even having to think about it. It seemed to be totally spontaneous, as if my heart had opened to compassion and my heart, rather than my head, was now dictating my actions.

I found myself listening to Sophie more and no longer offering her, or anybody else for that matter, unsolicited advice. Like many men with their partners, whilst I didn't have a problem listening to her when I felt that she had something interesting, important or amusing to say, I tended to treat the more general chatter like it was almost background noise. Now, I was genuinely listening to everything she was saying. What's more, I was doing it without offering unsolicited advice in response. I was just happy to let her share her life with me. I'd read about the theory of this in "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus" but hadn't been able to put it into practice. Now, it appeared to be happening spontaneously.

I found myself less judgmental than before. Less controlling than before. I was able to see situations from other people's perspectives more easily. Instead of rushing around with my head full of plans and thoughts, I seemed to be "in the moment" the whole time. This meant that I had the time to respond to situations rather than react to them in accordance with established habit patterns. Combined with my enhanced ability to see other people's perspectives, this led to me finding it easier to resolve problems and stressful situations in a calm and objective manner. What's more, in conflict situations (I should explain that I am a lawyer and that they therefore tend to arise fairly frequently in my day-to-day life), people also seemed to sense that I was trying to resolve problems rather than having a go at them personally.

I had known for a long time that these were all things that I wanted to do to improve the quality of my life. I had been acutely aware that, despite this knowledge, I had been unable to do them. I had often been able, when looking back in retrospect on situations I had found myself in, to see how I might have been able to handle them better. But in the heat of the moment, in my day-to-day existence, habit had been dominant and the changes in behaviour had been minimal. Suddenly, I seemed to be doing it all without trying.

That I now feel much more inclined and confident to follow my instincts is logical. After all, it was following my instincts, both in life generally and in the Vajra Pleasuring specifically, that had led me to having my experience. Why my experience should have led to the other changes though has no obvious logical explanation. All I can think of is that, whilst I had previously accepted on an objective intellectual level that changes of this nature would be of benefit to me, my heart now also seemed to have embraced that knowledge, leading me to understand it on a subjective subconscious level as well. What's more, my heart seemed to be making more of a contribution to my behaviour than it had been before.

These changes began to fade a couple of weeks after my experience as I came down from the high I was on. My old self started to return and some of the old patterns of behaviour began to creep in. Nevertheless, the decline has been minor compared to the quantum leap that preceded it, and the plateau on which I now find myself is at an incomparably higher level than the level I was on prior to my experience. Whilst a diluted form of my old behavioural self has returned, there has been an undoubted shift in my behaviour that I am confident will remain. The change is most obvious to the person closest to me; nine months after the event, Sophie can't imagine that she will ever start calling me "Old Grumblebum" again.

I hope that at some stage I will have a repetition of the experience I had through the Vajra Pleasuring. But if I don't, I feel that there will be a reason for not having it that will be as valid and will have as much relevance in my development as the original experience itself. I may have reached a plateau but I have not reached a summit, and the climb continues. What I now believe, with absolute conviction, is that the path that I am on, and indeed have always been on, is a path that leads, maybe not in this lifetime, but eventually, to enlightenment. A path with heart.