

# Sensuous Awareness Bliss and the Nature of Aesthetic Experiencing

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'The New Yoga of Awareness' is a path which I define as leading from a heightened feeling *awareness* of sensory experiencing to a highly sensuous and blissful *experience* of feeling awareness as such. Since this feeling awareness is the source, not just all bodily but also *worldly* experiencing, it has the dramatic capacity to transform our ordinary and predominantly visual perception of the world around us into a type of tactile 'proprioception' of that world – one that embraces *every* 'thing' or 'body' in it and not just - as the term 'proprioception' usually implies – our own fleshly body. Put the other way round, *what* we 'proprioceive' as 'our' body expands to embrace the entire world around us and every other body in it. The experience of not just perceiving but *proprioceiving* everything in the world around us in an intimately sensuous, feeling and tactile way – as part of our own larger body of feeling awareness – is what I call 'sensuous awareness bliss', an experience by no means limited to Tantric Pair Meditation.

## Instance 1:

I find myself spontaneously entering and enjoying a state of what I call 'sensuous awareness bliss', one in which particular sensory qualities or features of ordinary things and people I am aware of around me are something I sense *within* me – but as unique and exquisitely sensuous qualities of feeling awareness itself. This state lasted for about one and a half hours but felt as if it could have gone on for an eternity.

The first experience began sitting at a table by the window in a seafront restaurant. The last half hour of it was spent walking home from the restaurant, whilst at the same time sustaining this state of awareness bliss.

The episode began with an experience I have had many times – that of falling into a type of blissful 'swoon' merely by watching a particular person eat. The experience happens rarely because it doesn't come about watching just anyone eat – and yet there is nothing special about the particular people who evoke this experience and they can differ hugely in age, gender, class and manner of eating – except perhaps their own concentration on the eating process. For this 'gustatory' process, has, for the body of feeling awareness - something of a deeply meditative nature - drawing us down into the very belly of the soul. It is notable too, that in tantric philosophical 'aesthetics' – a word derived from the Greek *aisthetikos* (meaning both sensitive and sentient) and *aisthanomai* (meaning to discern through the senses) what I call 'soul qualities' are referred to in Sanskrit as *rasa* – which means something like the quintessential *tastes* of words, things, music and, ultimately, all discernible sensory phenomena.

Switching to the dimension of the auditory, I experienced the sound of a feisty little girl's voice having a meal with her parents and it was felt within me as vibrating with a unique intensity of tonal textures and qualities which seemed to touch me inwardly with an exquisite sense of felt vitality, one which, in contrast, her mother, also present, felt totally dead and lacking in vitality.

Then there was the calm demeanour of a middle-aged man sitting at the table next to ours, who, though not in any way fat, felt as if he embodied a most full and rounded soul body, pervaded with soul qualities of roundedness and mellow calmness - yet with a core of vitality or *Shakti*, one revealed only by a spark in his occasionally darting eyes and shifts of expression, and totally absent in his wife.

The animated expressions of a woman talking at a table outside the window next to which we were sitting, evoked - each time I looked at her face - a lightning flash opening of an unbounded space of pure awareness around her seemingly compact and charged body, a space which I knew as her larger awareness body. I was reminded then, of a saying from the *tantras*:

“Shiva am I, of compact mass of consciousness and bliss, and the entire universe is my body.”

The rather plain electric ceiling lights of the restaurant were sensed as streaming with the most intense rays of light-bliss-vitality into my eyes and through them into my soul body.

Walking home, the topmost edges and triangular roof cornices of houses were sensed ecstatically as erotic points of contact with the space surrounding them, as if they were all acting as charged collectors or lightning conductors of the innate vitality within that space. Looking at them I actually sensed this vitality as electrical ‘charges’ touching and exciting different points at the top and back of my shaved scalp.

The seemingly countless shale tiles of another building with a large angled roof surface - all the tiles slightly separated from one another - I heard as a silent chorus.

The topmost part of a fur tree - seen leaning inward slightly toward a row of similar trees - was sensed as its laughter.

Different solid textures and surfaces of brick, paving stone and tarmac were all felt as the manifestation of different textures of awareness made manifest, each unique.

And then the sky with its swifts - swirling and swooping in the evening light. No, not birds flying through space, but space flying through birds! And Shiva as the sky itself and the emptiness of space - an awareness-space embracing the most diverse ‘sensorium’ of manifesting forms or *Shaktis* - yet also in an ‘electrically’ charged, divine-erotic contact with each and every one of them.

No ugliness whatsoever in this entire sensorium of sights and sounds. No ugliness even in the rectangular grey-metal aggregate silo that is the ‘eyesore’ in our harbour town, along with its complex of tubes and conveyor belts that convey gravel from the barges that dock beside it. Instead feeling the inner texture of its metal in my body as the inner ‘mettle’ of its soul.

Having already spoken of sensed ‘electrical’ charge, I will add only that as we finally approached the forecourt of our home I beheld again the large and strangely-structured metal structure that is a fenced in electrical ‘sub-station’ right by one side of our house. Except that this time it appeared quite literally as the living and manifest image or *murti* of a veritable deity - indeed as the divine powerhouse of the house itself.

Leading into a particular box type structure that formed part of it, my awareness became focussed on a row of thick electrical connectors inserted into sockets – feeling in them an extraordinary flow not simply of ‘electrical’ power but of *divine* power - *Shakti* - occurring in front of my very eyes.



Like other experiences of sensuous awareness bliss, this one confirmed once again that ‘God’, being awareness, is truly everything - and that everything in turn is a manifest or embodied portion and expression of that divine awareness. It also taught me that each thing and person too is a *murti* - a manifest face, facet or personification of divinity – as well as an expression of the constant erotic union or *maithuna* of pure, feeling awareness (*Shiva*) and its pure power (*Shakti*) of sensory manifestation.

*“The twinned form of Shiva and Shakti is known as the union. It is termed the power of bliss because the entire universe is emitted by it.”*

Abhinavagupta

### **Instance 2:**

At a later time, I was once again blessed with two further instances in which I experienced long states of sensuous awareness bliss’. Both instances began in the same seafront hotel as the first experience, and also at the same time – as the sun was setting. In both instances, Karin and I sat in silence for over an hour – indeed a full two hours in the second instance recounted here. Getting up and leaving was difficult for me, for I felt I could have remained seated in the same place and within

the same state of bliss for an eternity, swooning with the sense of ever new soul qualities felt through meditating different objects and people.

Once again there was an awareness of *feeling* within me all that could be *seen* 'out there' – whether different densities of cloud, seagulls and waves, aeroplane vapour trails, or 'man-made' things such as brick walls, cars, Victorian lampposts, garage doors, drainpipes, brass doorknobs, metal road signs, a gaudily painted dustbin – as erotically sensuous shapes and textures of soul, sensed 'in here' – within the spaces of feeling awareness seemingly bounded by the flesh.

At the same time all motions of wave or cloud, planes or persons were felt as being in perfect harmony with the music playing in the background in the hotel – as if orchestrated by it.

Sensuous awareness bliss is both ecstasy and 'in-stacy'. For like the nature of the Soul Body itself, Awareness is 'ec-static', extending 'out there', *beyond* the boundaries of the flesh and surrounding, touching and feeling in a most sensuous and tactile way anything sighted at a distance in space. Yet at the same time Awareness is also 'in here' – *feeling* each thing sighted *within* the boundaries of the flesh as 'no-thing' but an innately sensuous and tactile quality, shape and texture of feeling awareness or soul as such – a soul quality experienced with my soul body.

What I especially noted this time however, was that things I would normally perceive as ugly, decayed or 'shabby' appeared like the most wonderful works of art – as if any one of them (the painted dustbin for example) could have been placed in its own empty room in an art gallery as a mesmerising abstract sculpture or creative 'installation'.

There is nothing merely commonplace in the world of our sensory experiencing.

As an example, looking at the bar in the hotel, it was not the multi-coloured range of bottles of brandy and other spirits that drew my gaze and excited my senses to an intense pitch – instead it was a simple plastic milk bottle of the sort one buys in the supermarket – almost empty but for a few centimetres of remaining milk. Next to it was a full plastic container of milk of the same sort, but this was less inwardly touching and erotic than the *almost* empty one – in which the relation of inner fullness and emptiness was itself *full* of innate sensuous meaning.

Then there were people – bodies. Many of these might normally have struck me as somewhat repulsive, ugly, fat, misshapen, badly dressed or somehow 'distorted' or 'disfigured' in their posture, look and expression. Yet now I saw each person's body as an odd or eccentric but nevertheless *perfect* living 'version' of themselves – the very 'distortions', 'oddities' or 'eccentricities' in their appearance or dress being what made them such *fascinatingly* unique living sculptures and works of art. I was reminded of Jane Roberts, who describes a very similar experience of people in one of her books – that of seeing every person on a street as but one 'eccentric' yet perfect 'version' of themselves.

Yet if 'my' experience of both people and things in a heightened state of sensuous awareness was but a small taste of the blissful intensity with which the singular divine awareness (*Paramashiva*) constantly and continuously experiences *all* manifest bodies and beings in the cosmos (all its Shaktis) then it must truly and indeed be in a state that could be described as 'ecstasy'- comparable to a never-ending state of 'being' awareness bliss (*sat-chit-ananda*) this being also the constant and dynamic sexual union (*maithuna*) of the divine couple or *yamala* – *Shiv-Shakti*.

Others have compared my accounts of extended and intensified sensuous awareness bliss with experiences on 'acid' – LSD. Yet had I myself *only* been able to understand or 'bracket' the experiences in this way – as a sort of spontaneous 'trip' that occurred without drugs – I believe the experiences themselves would neither have been *possible* in the first place, nor assumed the particular character that they had. For without the capacity for a higher-level metaphysical awareness or 'recognition' of the 'states of consciousness' I experienced on these occasions, not even a drug such as LSD could have induced them.

Sensuous awareness bliss teaches that all that can be perceived with the senses is imbued with innate meaning or 'sense'. What imbues them with meaning are the sensuous soul qualities manifested in all things sensory. All of these possess a unique beauty of their own – and in this sense – and sensed in this way – there is nothing, and also no one – that one can perceive as 'ugly'. I have long had similar experiences in tantric pair meditations, where no matter whose soul I have sensed and 'resonated' with, whether man or woman – and no matter how 'attractive' in conventional terms or not – has not appeared to me as anything else than divinely beautiful.

### **Instance 3:**

A week later, in the same place and at the same time, there followed yet another experience of sensuous awareness bliss, this time characterised entirely by the aural dimension rather than visual experiencing. It was as if, sitting this time with eyes closed and ears wide open, I was immersed in a 'sonorous bath', one which was at the same time a veritable *symphony* of distinct and diverse sounds – background music and sounds from the restaurant kitchen, the air hum of an extractor fan, the clinking of cutlery and of metal coins in the cash till, the chinking of ice cubes in a bucket and the crash of an empty glass bottle being dropped into a bottle bin, the swinging sound of doors, opening and closing, the soft padding sound of footsteps as people walked to and fro, and together with all this the murmur of human voices of different pitches and tones. This symphony of sounds was a *perfect* symphony, with all its sounds in harmony with one another and with the sounds of actual music being played in the background. And, like an orchestral symphony, it had its phases of acceleration and deceleration, as the general hubbub of activity and sounds now increased, now decreased, raised or lowered itself in pace and volume – yet again in perfect synchronicity with changes in the music itself. Then again, as in a symphony, there were on-going or repeated 'subjects' or 'themes', for example the mellow voice tones of a Yorkshire-accented man sitting at a table behind me, and the occasional low murmur of his wife in response.

Yet the symphony was never monotonous or purely repetitive, but replete with new and unexpected sounds emerging at unpredictable intervals – a burst of speech or laughter, the sound of a chair being scraped along the floor, the clank of a beer or wine glass being set down rather loudly on a table, or the steamy sound of an espresso machine being activated.

What was important was not just hearing these sounds with my ears but sensing them with and within my whole body. Thus sounds heard from behind my back were felt as touching a region of my back with their vibration. I have already referred to the infant's experience of sounds, sounds that they have not yet learned to name or identify – as a type of 'inner vibrational touch'. And indeed the voice tones and pitches of people speaking were felt from *within* my body, arising from exactly the

same regions or resonant cavities – whether head, chest or belly – as in theirs. Every sound literally touched and excited a part of my body, whether from without or within, in a way that had an almost erotic quality - thus giving the whole experience the nature not just of a warm sonorous ‘bath’ or perfect symphony but also and above all a wonderfully deep and blissfully relaxing ‘sonorous massage’. The experience of sounds as the sonorous bath is comparable, I believe, to the experience in the warm waters of the mother’s womb, where it is the aural rather than visual dimension of the baby’s sensory awareness of the world that is predominant – just as it is the mother’s voice and the tactile dimension of her embrace and touch that is most significant in early infancy. The ‘soul body’ is a womb of fluid feeling awareness. Its surface can be described as a ‘sonorous skin’– sensitive to the vibrational touch of sounds from without – able to feel and resonate within them from within.

I have also referred to the way in which, seeing things, one can gain a direct tactile sense of their textures - the materials they are made of – sensing these as textures of one’s own inwardly felt body. Seeing the smooth translucent surface of a glass, one senses its glassy texture, which is at the same time closely related to the sound it would make if struck. So it was that with my eyes open just before leaving the restaurant, I observed a shelf stacked with empty glasses in the bar, and in seeing them also felt and ‘heard’ their smooth glassy texture as a silent or potential sound. I also not only saw but sensed and heard the sight of pure white milk being poured into a glass jug, feeling the milk’s whiteness, fluidity and flow as a silent sound. Whether it was the sound of glass on glass, metal on metal, wood on wood, or glass or metal on wood, these sounds resounded with and revealed to one’s ears the different textures of things. This is similar to the way sight too reveals the way a thing would potentially feel to one’s touch or how it would weigh in one’s hands.

Leaving the restaurant, walking around in the open air and then riding home on my bike, I found myself acutely aware of the different sensuous textures of muscle, tissue and bone that made up my own felt body. Through my legs and feet, indeed even through the metallic structure and rubber tyres of my bike, I was acutely aware of the textures of pavement and tarmac, more or less even or uneven, upon which I walked or rode. The bike had become, in a most unusually intense way, an extension to my body – but in such a way as to enable me to feel the qualities of the ground beneath it throughout my *entire* body, along with *its* variety of sensuous textures.

Being once again in the open, of course, made me more aware of distant sounds such as the cries of seagulls in the sky. In this way, like the open sight of sky and sea, sounds can expand our sense of space. Yet it was the enclosed space of the restaurant, which like the enclosed space of the womb or of a symphony concert hall, facilitated the experience of the ‘sonorous bath’, ‘sonorous touch’ and ‘sonorous massage’. Space as such however is essentially a *singular* openness. It is only our perception of it that may be enclosed, divided or blocked by the walls of buildings and rooms. Essentially also, space *is* nothing but our way of perceiving the open expanse of pure sense-free awareness – within which alone things can appear to us – be seen or heard, touched and felt.

The experiences of sensuous awareness bliss recounted here, however intense, should by no means be considered as basically ‘unusual’ or ‘out of the ordinary’. On the contrary, they simply serve to remind us that we can, at any time, give more time to our immediate sensory awareness of things, and in this way reap the huge healing value of pure sense-free awareness – which is precisely that which *intensifies* our experiencing of the sensory, allowing us to sense with and within our bodies – and that in a most tangible, tactile and erotic way – everything that we otherwise merely see with

our eyes or hear with our ears. Through heightened sensory awareness we can also come to experience the healing power of the *sounds* that all things essentially *are* – letting them touch and massage us from within and without.

The most *fundamental* healing dimension of ‘sensuous awareness bliss’ lies in helping us to recognise how pure awareness itself can *return us to our senses* – letting us literally ‘come to our senses’ in a world, which, paradoxically, tends to *de-sensualise* our perception through flooding us with an ever-changing flux of two-dimensional digital images, or else the assault of sensory stimuli which confront us through advertising or in entering supermarkets – all of which are devoid of any aesthetic quality since they serve a purely ‘sign’ function – serving only to signify and draw our attention to nameable, branded products and commodities.

The key to the experience of sensuous awareness bliss lies in not ‘taking’ what is perceived ‘as’ this or that familiar, nameable thing or person, but instead letting oneself take them in and be taken up by them into their purely sensuous nature and form. This is comparable to the way infants perceive before they have been taught the names of things. Thus an infant or non-speaker (‘in-fans’), lacking language, does not and cannot hear such a thing as ‘a bird singing’, ‘a car passing by on the street’. Indeed, before it learns to translate tactile experiencing into a sense of space, it would not hear such sounds as coming from *anything* ‘out there’ at all. Instead it would simply experience sounds in a purely tactile way – as the *inner vibrational touch* of their tones and textures.

As adults too however, we can still choose at any time *not* to hear a particular sound as, say ‘a car passing by’ or ‘a bird singing’. Similarly, as adults we can re-learn the art of *not* seeing any such ‘thing’ as a bicycle, table or dustbin merely *as* ‘a bicycle’ or as ‘a dustbin’, *not* seeing this building as ‘a shop’, ‘a house’ – or even as ‘a building’ – and also not seeing some person as either a ‘stranger’ or as anyone we already ‘know’ and can name.

It seems to me that there is also an intimate connection between the experience of heightened sensory and sensuous experiencing I have described and the fundamental nature of art and aesthetic experiencing. Indeed I would suggest that the experience of ‘sensuous awareness bliss’ can lead us to an entirely new metaphysical understanding of art itself, i.e. a new philosophical ‘aesthetics’ of a sort that is not rooted in any particular ‘school of art’ and its ‘philosophy’ but rather in the nature of aesthetic *experiencing* as such. For whilst it has long become common to oppose ‘figurative’, ‘representational’, ‘naturalistic’ or ‘realistic’ schools of art with so-called ‘abstract’ art, the truth is that *the sensory is the abstract*, i.e. there is nothing in ‘reality’ that, precisely through the art of not seeing or sensing it in the ordinary ways we tend to, cannot be aesthetically seen, heard and felt as an ‘abstract’ artistic composition *in itself* – and not just ‘as’ this or that thing or person.

What I have called ‘sensuous awareness bliss’ is thus for me the *quintessence of all aesthetic experiencing*. For through it we can come to an awareness that what we see in the natural form of a sea or sunset, tree or mountain, or in the form of a man-made object such as car or building – is nothing less ‘abstract’ in its sensory form than any so-called ‘abstract’ painting or sculpture – but only if we *do not* merely perceive something *as* ‘a sea’ or ‘a sunset’, as ‘a tree’ or ‘a mountain’, as ‘a car’ or as ‘a building’ etc. Any great work of art therefore, even if seemingly ‘realistic’, can help us precisely to *not* interpret what it depicts only ‘as’ some nameable thing or person - allowing us instead to experience it as an innately meaningful ‘composition’ of different ‘abstract’ sensory shapes, tones, textures, each of which is imbued with felt meaning or ‘sense’.

Thus if an 'abstract' or even a 'realist' painting gives us a strong sensory impression, say, of the particular colour, pattern and texture of, for example, 'the brickwork of a building' - yet in a way that prevents us from seeing it merely *as* 'the brickwork of a building' – then the artist is bringing us *back to our senses*. By this I mean back from what has generally become in today's world a wholly *de-sensualised* experience of things and beings, one in which they are merely perceived 'as' this or 'that', i.e. according to whatever name and 'idea' we attach to what or who they 'are'. The portrait artist too, abstract or realist, does not just depict what they see with their own eyes. Instead, in the very act of 'depicting' the face and eyes of a real or imaginary other, what is revealed is the very way of looking out on the world and feeling themselves that manifests itself through the look in the eyes of this other and the cast of their gaze, together with the unique line or colouration of mood or feeling tone that are already inscribed on or that inwardly colour the *face* of this other.

The 'eye of awareness' is like the eye of an artist. It enables us to see and feel the innate meaning or sense present within the outer form and facets of any thing or being, nameable or not – to sense the qualities of soul they give expression to – as works of art in themselves.

We do not transcend the world of 'names and forms' (*namarupa*) by 'controlling' or 'suppressing' the senses but, on the contrary, by intensifying our immediate sensory experiencing of things and in particular *not* merely seeing or hearing any 'thing' merely *as* this or that. In this way we do not let *shadows* be cast on our immediate perception of things by a prior 'idea' of what they are. I think here of Plato's cave allegory, in which shackled prisoners see only shadows cast on the cave wall light by figures from behind – until one prisoner turns to face the light and can re-enter the bright, colourful world of rich sensory experiencing which it illumines. And yet the very word 'idea' comes from the Greek *eidos* – which originally meant nothing 'mental' but rather some 'face' or 'aspect' of the immediate sensuous 'form' or 'look' of anything we perceive – for example its shape, colour or texture.

If portraiture, 'realist' or 'abstract', can reveal the soul of the subject – in particular those shades and colourations of awareness or soul that find expression in their faces and eyes, and if 'Romantic' art was able to reveal the inner soul moods not just of man or of the artist, but of nature too - through *its* faces - then 'abstract art' can, in general, show us precisely that there is nothing more innately 'abstract' than the immediately experienced sensory 'faces' or 'aspects' of all things – their *eidai*. Quite simply then, it is the immediate *sensory* dimension of experiencing that *is* the most 'abstract'.

All that what we call 'abstract art' has ever done then, is to simply 'abstract' or 'lift off' (the meaning of the Latin *abstrahere*) particular sensory dimensions and qualities of experienced phenomena in a way that frees us from perceiving those phenomena solely 'as' this or that, i.e. in the light and through the lens of purely mental or conceptual 'abstractions'. In this way, we can begin to get a sense of what it would feel like to become aware of things as they are, i.e. precisely not, for example *as* 'cars' but as 'abstract' sculptural shapes, each a sensory expression of innately sensuous shapes, densities, weights, colour tones, lustres and sheens *of* awareness itself.

I understand sensuous awareness bliss as an experience of 'enlightenment' or 'truth' in the deepest sense that abstract art strives for – the recovery of a mode of aesthetic experiencing of all things that reveals them as the *sensory* expression of innately *sensuous* 'forms' (Plato) or "idea-shapes" (Seth) of feeling awareness rather than as mere *mental* ideas or verbal constructs (*vikalpa*).



For there is no way that a 'little green man' from an alien planet – one lacking any vegetation or any concept of 'trees' would or could *see* 'trees'. Assuming that this alien's senses included sight, all they would actually see would be nothing but an 'abstract' composition of different shapes and tones of green. The unfortunate, fact is however, that the potential richness of immediate sensory experiencing, free of experiencing 'as', has become over time something *alien* to all but 'artists'. This is what gives art its double role, both opening us too and at the same time concealing – 'painting over' – the rich and still untapped potentials of everyday human aesthetic and sensory experiencing.

Standing on the terrace of the Turner Contemporary gallery in Margate, England, a broad vista of sky and sea, pier and town streets and buildings opens up before me. The whole 'realistic' vista – experienced in a purely sensory way – by not seeing anything 'as' this or that - is an 'abstract' but rich and aesthetic composition in itself. It bears the compositional hallmark of any great work of abstract or realistic art – namely a balance of balance *and* imbalance, a harmony of harmony *and* dissonance, a unity of unity *and* disunity, an order composed of order and disorder.

Yet few of the visitors – except perhaps those who have the eye of a photographer – realise that the real 'gallery' is *outside*, or even that the gallery's many simple plastic terrace chairs, all in vivid primary colours – are no different in essence from any of the primary-coloured works exhibited in the Piet Mondrian exhibition they have just toured.

Meanwhile, primary-coloured cars pass by on the roads immediately below and besides the gallery - some bigger and heavier, some squarer or more rounded than others. Yet I see no 'cars' but rather sense their different qualities of bulk and weight, angularity or roundedness as shapes of my own body of feeling awareness. A weightier, bulkier and more rounded 'car' evokes a delightful sense of sinking into a deep, warm and cavernous abyss opening up within the rounded awareness space of my inwardly felt belly. I do not simply see or perceive the car with my eyes but 'proprioceive' it – feeling myself taking on and enjoying its bodily shape and form in the same way I invariably experience myself doing when looking at an 'abstract' and 'artistic' sculpture or installation of any sort. This is what I mean by aesthetic *experiencing* – felt as 'sensuous awareness bliss' and recognised as both the source and power of all great 'art'. This is also why I can stand *for hours* in front of a Beuys installation or Henry Moore sculpture – enraptured in such a state of tactile, feeling identification with it that it becomes an boundless source of 'sensuous awareness bliss'.

The metaphysical practice behind this bliss is very simple: namely not just to stop seeing 'as', but to feel – indeed to *be* – whatever it is you see.