THE ROAR OF AWAKENING:
THE EROS OF ESALEN AND THE WESTERN
TRANSMISSION OF TANTRA

JEFFREY J. KRIPAL

Tyger Tyger, burning bright
In the forest of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

. . . . .
When the stars threw down their spears
And water’d heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

William Blake, “The Tyger”

The multiple weavings of eroticism and esotericism within the history of the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California—the mother of the American human potential movement founded in 1962 by Michael Murphy (1930) and Richard Price (1930–1985)—is a vast half-century tapestry whose multiple patterns, colors, and textures I have woven elsewhere in some detail.1 The present essay is not a summary or replication of that historiographic project. Rather it is a further theorization of and reflection on the results of it. It is a “standing back” to see one, and only one, of the final weaves or gestalts, in this case an erotic one.

Admittedly, the colorful complexities are bright, but also more than a little daunting. There are, after all, many ways into the erotic here, far too many for as brief an essay as this. Anecdotal humor is perhaps the quickest way into the subject, like the scene I witnessed in the Big House in the spring of 2003, when the psychical researcher Marilyn Schlitz and founder Michael Murphy got into an animated discussion about the strange phenomenon of “bodily elongation” during a research

---

1 KRIPAL, ESALEN: AMERICA AND THE RELIGION OF NO RELIGION. VERY SMALL PORTIONS OF THE PRESENT ESSAY APPEARED ORIGINALLY IN THIS TEXT AND ARE USED HERE WITH PERMISSION. THE SECTION ON JOHN HEIDER ALSO APPEARS, IN A DIFFERENT AND MUCH EXPANDED FORM, IN “FROM PARADISE TO PARADOX: THE PSYCHOSPiritUAL JOURNEY OF JOHN HEIDER.”
symposium. Murphy asked Schlitz if she had any material on bodily elongation in her archives. “No,” she quipped back, “that would be in the porn section.” Bodily elongation aside for a moment, there are certainly other, less anecdotal, more theoretical ways into the eros of Esalen. We could dwell, for example, on the eros of the founders, the eros of Big Sur literary culture, the eros of the baths, or the eros of Esalen’s contemplative massage tradition.

Richard Price grew up in a Jewish family posing as Episcopalians outside of Chicago in the 40s in the painful emotional shadows of a beloved twin brother who had died at the age of three (from a burst appendix), with a too distant father who retreated into his work, partly perhaps to avoid the pain of the loss of his infant, and with a controlling, sexually repressive mother Price came to more or less hate. Price would find a new life in California, that is, as far from Chicago as he could get, in Buddhism and Taoism, that is, as far from his mother’s social-climbing Christianity as he could get, and in a form of gestalt psychology in which he could find some measure of peace and healing.

He would need the latter, especially after his own mystical awakening erupted within a psychotic state in 1956 that resulted in months of hospitalization and what amounted to psychiatric torture with shock therapy, drugs, and more drugs. It was during one of these psychotic breakthroughs that Price’s sexuality awoke alongside and within his spiritual life and a whole series of psychical experiences, including past-life memories in which he remembered himself as a monk, a bodily superpower involving a kind of invisible “energy field” around his body, and a spontaneous healing of an old sports back injury. On the sexual side, Price spoke of “a kind of early shut-up in my genitals” that lasted until these openings. He thus noted that he did not masturbate until he was twenty-two. But the sexual shut-up had been opened now, like his spirit, like his Buddhism, like his life. The mystical, the erotic, and the psychical all appeared together in Price’s breakdown that was also a breakthrough.

Unlike Price, Michael Murphy grew up in what was by all accounts a happy family life. He came to his mystical life in college via the reading of Sri Aurobindo, the Indian metaphysician who encouraged a form of traditional sannyasa or celibate “renunciation” as an alchemical tech-

---