

Robert Crampton
at Florence House,
East Sussex

MY WEEKEND SEX RETREAT
IT'S SUNDAY, 4PM, AND I'M IN
A ROOM WITH 35 PEOPLE WHO
ARE REMOVING THEIR CLOTHES

PORTRAITS Tom Jackson

Would he go naked? Or just down to his underwear? It might be the new thing in self-improvement but exactly how far is Robert Crampton willing to go on a tantric sex course?

Picture the scene. It's Sunday afternoon, 4-ish, and I'm in a room with 35 other people, equally split between men and women, aged from their mid-twenties to early sixties, the median age probably mid-forties. At 53, at least a quarter of those present are older than me, for which I'm grateful.

We've been invited to remove as much clothing as we'd like. Some of us, your correspondent included, have kept our pants on. Most, however, are stark naked. Dreamy, trancey, Indian-tinged music is playing. The woman in charge suggests in a soothing, spacey tone that we should now begin to move through the throng, making such contact as we will, and look each other up and down.

Or picture this scene. It's the night before the nudey business, Saturday, 9-ish. We've broken into small groups of four, two women and two men, and we're taking it in turns to lie down on a mattress and be touched by the other three. Boundaries – ie no-go areas – have been discussed. While barefoot, most of us are otherwise fully dressed, bar several men who've elected to go barechested and one or two women who are down to their bras. I end up giving a foot massage to an overweight chap of about my own age with, I have to say, rather sweaty feet. To be fair to him, the room is stiflingly hot. And to be fair to him again, although I am no sort of expert, he seems to enjoy it. Enjoy it rather noisily, in fact.

Then again, given what he'd previously told me, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that a mediocre foot massage is more than enough to float this sweaty guy's boat. It is possible, he had confided, to have sex with someone in India while you're actually in England. "You what?" I'd asked, confused and yet trying to be all cool and kinky. "You mean like on the phone?" "No," he'd replied, his tone implying I was tragically square. "Telepathically." Blimey.

And now picture this third scene. It's 8 in the morning, any morning, and we've all stumbled out of bed for an hour of meditation before breakfast. I haven't slept well – most of the rooms are shared, and I'm billeted with a big guy who not only snores loudly, but on whose digestion the retreat's delicious yet exclusively vegetarian menu is having a particularly violent effect. What's more, with every session (and the sessions total about nine hours each day) beginning with dance music, grooving to which is pretty much compulsory, I am fatigued. The dance intros are good fun – I enjoy cutting a little rug – but these days, for me, four times a day is a bit much. A bit like sex, as it happens.

We aren't afforded much downtime, either. There's a couple of hours off over lunch, during which sensible people nap while others

of us escape for a dip in the bracing waters of the English Channel. It's a full-on schedule – "deep work", as one veteran describes it. After the final session concludes at 10pm, we are advised to go straight to bed. While R&R is not forbidden, neither is it encouraged. No booze and no telly are available on site. On my final night, I inveigle two other rebels into nipping off to a pub in town. We only have a cheeky shandy – yet the next day, after I've gone, with news of the transgression having leaked, my fellow reprobates get a bollocking.

Neither is the morning meditation of the chilled-out, lying-down, falling-back-to-sleep variety. It is, rather, "active meditation". This process starts with you violently shaking yourself for ten minutes, and ends with a classic, moderately laid-back chakra-balancing routine. There is no scientific evidence whatsoever that chakras even exist, let alone that they need balancing, but hey, all well and good. Except you're wearing a blindfold, required throughout, which makes even the most innocent move feel a little kinky.

In between the shaking and the chakras it gets properly weird. Besides a blindfold, you bring a pillow. A pillow upon which, blindfolded, you are invited to express your innermost yearnings, desires and frustrations. Sexual, familial, whatever. While making as much primeval racket as you care to. Which for most people, once the pillow procedure gets under way, turns out to be a lot of racket. Grunting and groaning, whimpering and wailing, shouting and swearing, keening and cursing – cacophony swiftly ensues.

I hate it. "I felt as if I'd been painted into a medieval fresco," I later tell a confidante. It is hellish. Horrific. Tortured souls, writhing in a pit of eternal fire and damnation. One morning, when I overhear a guy telling his pillow to, "Take it, take it, you bitch," it counts as light relief from the diabolic howling and hurting in the room. I get through it by performing a version of the warm-up routine I use before playing football: a lot of stretching, plus a few added "oohs" and "aahs" for the benefit of anyone who might be monitoring my commitment levels.

Maybe I just don't fancy my pillow enough. I don't doubt it is cathartic for some people, but I find it the opposite of enjoyable, let alone sexy, let alone tantric. Or what I understand by the word tantric. An understanding that is – even following three days on a tantric sex course, of which the preceding scenes form a part – not entirely clear. I now know enough to realise tantric sex is about more than Sting taking six hours to reach orgasm with Trudie Styler, but I am still reluctant to offer a ready definition.

Perhaps Monique Roffey, the acclaimed novelist who has written a memoir, *The Tryst*, about the sexual adventure she embarked



Robert Grampton with, from left, course leader Jan Day, her husband, Frieder, and assistant, Hanna Angell

A MAN TELLS ME YOU CAN HAVE SEX WITH SOMEONE IN INDIA WHILE YOU'RE IN ENGLAND. 'ON THE PHONE?' 'TELEPATHICALLY'

on following a relationship break-up and the discovery of tantra, says it best: "We're all starving for real sex as opposed to 'porn sex,'" Roffey tells me. "That's why tantra is a rising movement. It's been described as 'goddess sex' – sex for women – and I think there's some truth in that. It's slow sex. Penetrative sex works well for getting men to orgasm and women pregnant, but not for the 70 per cent of women who cannot achieve orgasm through conventional intercourse." Roffey thinks that tantric techniques – or rather, tantric philosophy – "allows you to open yourself up to things you didn't know you might like". Many women, she says – men, too – "are carrying so much sexual grief in their bodies".

A statement I can confirm, even on the basis of one weekend, to be tragically true. Without going into too much detail, many people "share", to use the jargon, harrowing tales of rejection, shame, lack of confidence

and trauma. The usual culprits all emerge: childhood abuse; toxic adult relationships; shoddy 20th-century parenting; Catholic priests and nuns; boarding schools; crippling shyness; sheer physical embarrassment.

And yet more contemporary reasons for attendance come up, too, most of them originating from raised female expectations. Some of the women are there because they are no longer prepared to endure destructive, distressing or merely disappointing sex. Some of the men are there because their

partners feel precisely the same way and had urged them to attend.

My tantric sex course takes place in the genteel setting of Florence House, a wedding, conference and – as it turns out – tantric sex retreat venue in Seaford, East Sussex. Next door, visible across the garden through the French windows of the main room, is a golf course. At the end of the drive are neat suburban semis. A couple of minutes beyond them, late-season visitors are enjoying the beach. Little do any of them know what's

going on up at the big house. If they did, surely they'd be shocked?

Or would they? Seeing the cross section of British society – albeit white, middle-class British society – represented by my fellow participants on the course, and having researched the growing popularity of such workshops, I think it's entirely possible the golfers and retirees and holidaymakers wouldn't be shocked at all. Rather, they may well say, "How do I get some of that for myself?" I have to accept the possibility that, over the past 25 years or so, while I haven't changed much, mainstream culture in this country has changed a great deal. Relative to most people, I used to be a liberally minded guy. I'm not sure that's true any longer.

I said there were three dozen of us in the room. Of those, six are conducting the course. In charge is Jan Day, 61, a seriously impressive woman, of whom more later. She has five assistants: her husband, Frieder, whom I guess is in his early fifties, and four younger helpers. As regards the remaining 30 punters, besides myself and another journalist (female, 40), they cover a fairly wide spread of the British middle class. There are five couples, and some of us with partners elsewhere, and some of us single.

I say British because, a couple of continental Europeans resident here apart, we are all Brits. And I say middle class because the course costs upwards of a grand. Which isn't extortionate – it is residential and it lasts a week – but still, you have to have a bit of cash. To make a further generalisation, many people – as far I could ascertain, biographical details are sketchy – do not have children. That said, my sense is of a group extending well beyond what a prejudicial view might expect.

A prejudicial view that would, I admit, have included my own. I first came across the self-development/retreat world almost 25 years ago. Then, back in the early Nineties, it was largely populated by exactly those whom anyone would have expected to find in that environment. Now, the offer attracts a wider audience. Still plenty of the usual suspects (Brighton is, after all, just down the road), but I also meet a computer programmer, a local government official, a teacher, a telecoms guy and a chap whose trade I did not discover but who drives a top-spec Range Rover.

As opposed to a camper van. Of which there are several, too. Not that there is anything wrong with camper vans – I wouldn't mind one myself. I'm just trying to illustrate these courses now have a wider appeal than they once did. The country is lightening up, loosening up, and many of us – women especially – are becoming more willing to confront formerly embarrassing issues and consult expert advice to help deal with

I'M JUST NOT MINDED TO STROKE A STRANGER'S BREASTS. NOT HOW I WAS BROUGHT UP

same. Where couples' counselling, yoga – even spas – have led, tantric sex has now followed. Got a problem? Get it sorted!

"People now expect a lot more from relationships," Uta Demontis, a veteran sexologist, tells me. "They have higher standards, particularly women."

"We're all hungry for a different quality of experience," says Rose Rouse, a publicist steeped in the tantra world, professionally and personally. "Years ago yoga used to be weird. Since then we've discovered how to enjoy food. And festivals. Sex and intimacy are the next thing."

"We live in very strange times," says Simon Matthews, a psychotherapist who, after a career in the City, now leads "Path of Love" retreats for those anxious to fill "the spiritual vacuum" of the modern world. "People have a deep longing for a heart-based connection with their fellow humans."

It goes without saying the Americans are ahead of the game. At Mama Gena's School of Womanly Arts in New York, as featured in *Vanity Fair*, high-flying businesswomen attend courses to learn how to orgasm. Back in Europe, retreats run by Shh... in posh country houses charge serious money to women hoping to "get their glow back". A weekend at Relationship Reconnect in Lanzarote will set a couple back £4,000. This premium pricing has helped to erase the seedy image such courses may once have had. "Twenty years ago, there was still a stigma attached to all this," says Matthews. "Now, therapy culture is much more acceptable."

Another factor in the burgeoning popularity of tantric retreats, courses and dating workshops is the emergence, and latterly pre-eminence, of Jan Day. A former research chemist from Surrey, 25 years ago Day started to study tantric philosophy, partly as a disciple of the controversial Indian mystic Osho, who advocated, inter alia, greater sexual liberation. She then began to lead courses herself. "Jan is in a league of her own," says Roffey. "She's a scholar, a seriously clever woman. Remarkable. I was very resistant to the whole idea when I started – I hated the hugging, the earnestness, the whole group thing. But Jan's compassion and wisdom made it work for me."

I share Roffey's assessment of Day – my problem, as we gather on the first evening for an introductory session after dinner, is that I find myself getting stuck at the same stage Roffey was ten years ago, yet lacking

her incentive to overcome a similar degree of anxiety, given that I'm happy with my partner and our sex life. Subject to the usual conflicts that arise, naturally. Conflicts I don't feel the need to discuss with people I've only just met.

That anxiety kicks in right from the off. The first night, Day conducts an exercise in which men and women separate into our respective gender groups and then stand, assessing our feelings about ourselves and each other, at opposite ends of the room. It is strangely affective. Rather primordial, in fact. I look around at the blokes and think, "Which of these would be any use in a fight?" And I look at the women and I think, "Over there is where I'd rather be." When we are instructed to move as far from or as near to the opposite sex as we wish, I rapidly shove my way towards the women, getting right to the front of the queue indeed. Some of the men, I am alarmed and yet also atavistically gratified to see, shrink back against the wall.

One young couple crawl towards each other on all fours, panting. I reckon they are having more sex than the rest of us combined. When we had to wear the blindfolds, I noticed, while many of us had to stump up a quid to buy an airline eye mask from the organisers, this obviously horny twosome produced their own customised cloths. I wanted to ask them, but never did, what are you doing here? Why aren't you off having a similarly massive amount of sex elsewhere in a less demanding setting? Why stress?

Similar thoughts occur to me with several of the youngsters: plenty of time for angst when you get older and hurt and your body starts falling apart, but for now, crack on! I'm glad I keep my mouth shut. It would be frivolous. Possibly even offensive, in the highly charged emotional atmosphere that develops in any small, closed group. Besides, who am I to judge whatever secret sadness may blight someone's sex life? Certainly, the younger the participant, the more serious their issues around the subject of sex, love and intimacy seem to be. Or the more seriously they take them.

It won't do to snigger either. Because here they are, trying to resolve whatever problem they feel they have. Good for them. One chap becomes publicly tearful at the conflict he feels over the "cock-heart dichotomy". Nicely put, I think. But not necessarily a

condition of which (within reason) a youngish fella ought to be too ashamed.

Still, even early on in the week, the process becomes difficult for me. Not just for me – it's supposed to be difficult – but whereas others stick it out, I don't. I speak to several other initially sceptical people subsequently, who all assure me that staying the full week was worthwhile. "It was ghastly, but helpful," says one. "I was totally uncomfortable with everything the whole time," another confides. "But in the end, I'm glad I did it." "A very, very long week," a third says. "I felt like I'd been there my entire life. But I left feeling positive and energised."

Respect. For myself, I draw the line at checking out naked women I barely know. When we do the naked (or near-naked) touching session, I tell all my partners I am going to look in their eyes (that is hard enough) and nowhere else. No offence. Just not right. One night, in some similar activity, having determined it as the safest course of action, I try to move in with one woman for a slow shuffle, end of school disco style, by placing my hands on her hips. Turns out she is a fellow northerner. "Oi," she instructs, "put yer 'ands sumwhere else!" Somewhere less intimate. Mortified, yet also relieved, but mostly proud of her attitude, I comply.

During the small group touching exercise, while being the recipient isn't too tricky (I issue a long list of no-go areas before we get going), I struggle with the other 75 per cent of the session acting as "servicer". Never mind the bloke I have to deal with, in terms of the women, I'm just not minded to stroke a stranger's boobs. Ain't gonna happen. Not how I was brought up to behave. Not something I would want to explain to my wife.

The other fella got stuck straight in, by the way. I had to suppress an urge to deck him.

When I relate this in the feedback I get told off for being a "caretaker". "What? A grumpy bloke in overalls with a mop?" I ask. "No. Someone who avoids revealing their own stuff by assuming the role of looking after other people," I am informed. Being a caretaker, apparently, is tantric retreat-speak for dodging self-exposure with altruism. "What's wrong with altruism?" I ask.

On the Monday morning, feeling a little guilty at abandoning my new friends, and yet feeling a far greater sense of release, I make my excuses and leave.

I wouldn't claim to be any sort of a sex god – and if I did, my wife would laugh in my face – but I'd hit the very edge of my comfort zone, and I prefer to be comfortable. If you're made of sterner stuff, give it a go. But be warned: it won't be easy. But neither, perhaps, will it be as difficult as you might imagine. ■

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