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# THE VISIONARY STATE

A JOURNEY THROUGH CALIFORNIA'S SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE

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LADYLANE

## KALIFORNIA

**B**efore Christopher Hills died in 1997 at the age of seventy, he was a radiant light of the New Age, a tireless explorer of energy fields and subtle vibrations. His investigations initially drew him to hatha yoga, and in 1970, he brought hundreds of yogis and scientists together in New Delhi for the first World Conference on Scientific Yoga. A few years later, seeking the optimum environmental vibes, the Englishman settled in the richly forested mountains above Santa Cruz. There he founded the University of the Trees and published a very thick book called *Nuclear Evolution*, which exhaustively weaves together cellular consciousness, chakras, and the colors of the rainbow. Hills was more than a cosmic light worker, though; he also codiscovered and developed the superfood spirulina, a high-protein blue-green algae he touted as the quickest way to get sunlight into the cells. Though Hills's claim that the green goop could help alleviate world hunger did not exactly pan out, spirulina brought him and his multilevel Light Force Company millions of dollars.

In 1989, shortly before the Loma Prieta earthquake wreaked havoc in Santa Cruz County, Hills poured the concrete foundation for a home and retreat center near the mountain town of Boulder Creek. Initially called the Garden of Forgiveness, the landscape temple was keyed to the vortex energies of Hills's forty-four-acre property, whose towering redwoods he compared to giant antenna. The only thing missing from Hills's spiritual playground was a partner to share it with. In an intentional act of magic, Hills crafted a lengthy description of the *dakini* of his dreams and asked the Goddess to manifest this being in flesh. Shortly thereafter, Hills met Penny Slinger, a British artist and performer who fit the bill. A magnetic sacred sensualist, Slinger had been studying Tantra since the early 1970s and penned the million-selling manual *Sexual Secrets* with her former partner Nik Douglas. In 1994, just a few years before Hills's death, Slinger moved into the estate, which is now known as the Goddess Temple, a place, she says, "dedicated to the goddess by a wizard, and now both a shrine to her and a living testimonial to that man."

The private temple home greets visitors with a hermetic motto emblazoned on the side of a peaked adobe portico: "Neh-Wey Sev-Ia-Nakh," which means "As above so below" in Aramaic. A large gong stands in the main foyer, alongside a large wooden pieta Hills received—still consecrated—from an English nunnery. The hallways are lined with Slinger's

paintings of Arawak maidens and the goddess Kali, the fearsome Hindu deity that she believes brought her and Hills together. At the southeastern end of the building stands an octagonal "wizard's tower," its golden spire complementing the vibrating waves of lapis-blue ceramic tiles that cover the rest of the roof. The tower overlooks a steep meadow surrounded on all sides by magnificent groves of redwoods, including one called, fittingly, the Magnificat. Near a large gazebo dubbed the Kuan Yin Shrine stands an elaborate metalwork dragon gate, which leads into a "Magical Kingdom" of sacred groves, sweat lodges, and weathered yoni shrines. The highest spot on the property is called the Eighth Domain, after the energy field that exists beyond our seven chakras. More dependable energy fields are massaged in the Blue Lotus Temple of Sound and Light, a digital editing studio and blue-screen soundstage accessed through a pair of narrow Balinese temple doors.

Slinger's approach to Tantra—feminist, erotic, cyberdelic—is by no means unusual in her neck of the woods. Orthodox scholar-practitioners like Georg Feuerstein even use the term "California Tantra" to distinguish such Shaktified spiritual hedonism from its Indian namesake, a vast and complex body of ritual practices whose lustiness has been rather oversold in the West. While few orthodox adepts would ever consider California Tantra an authentic expression of the tradition, this wayward path is traditional as far as the

BLUE LOTUS TEMPLE OF SOUND AND LIGHT, GODDESS TEMPLE, BOULDER CREEK

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Golden State itself goes. Over a century ago, a self-taught yogi named Pierre Arnold Bernard founded the Bacchante Academy in San Francisco. Bernard, who was probably born in California around 1875, taught self-hypnotism, hatha yoga, and love received to his largely female clientele. Bernard claimed to have received Tantric initiation in India, and he almost certainly picked up some tips from Swami Ram Tirath, an ascetic yogi and poet from the Punjab who traipsed around northern California in the early 1900s and compared Bernard to "the Tantrik High Priests of India." Whatever his authentic powers, Bernard was also a bit of a flimflam man, and he could not resist dubbing himself the Omnipotent Oom. After the 1906 earthquake, Oom relocated his studio to New York, where he founded the First Tantrik Order of America. Despite a string of scandals surrounding his purported "love-cult," Bernard introduced scads of wealthy New Yorkers to yogic practices like mantra and *pranayama*, or breathwork, while also spinning their heads with a philosophy of carnal

bliss that proclaimed the sex drive to be the animating spirit of the world. The body was the real temple for Bernard, and true religion "the worship of man's invisible power."

Here Bernard misspoke, for Tantra—in both its traditional and Californian flavors—is more accurately seen as the worship of *woman's* invisible power. Shakti lies at the root of Tantra's gendered universe, a feminine power often identified with the earth energies tapped by geomancers like Christopher Hills. Tantric deities like Tara and Durga may ultimately descend from the great Goddess that some believe represents the foundation of human religious consciousness. Such power is not all sweetness and light. No male god in the world's pantheons, for example, can match the bloodthirsty spectacle of Kali, the Tantric goddess of dissolution and death who so fascinates Penny Slinger. The black-skinned goddess is often pictured straddling a dead (but erect) Shiva, her red tongue thrust out between fangs, her nude form accessorized with blades and garlands of skulls

RIGHT: TEMPLE ROOM, GODDESS TEMPLE, BOULDER CREEK  
 FAR RIGHT: YONI TREE, KALI MANDIR, LAGUNA BEACH

