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TURNING WHEEL

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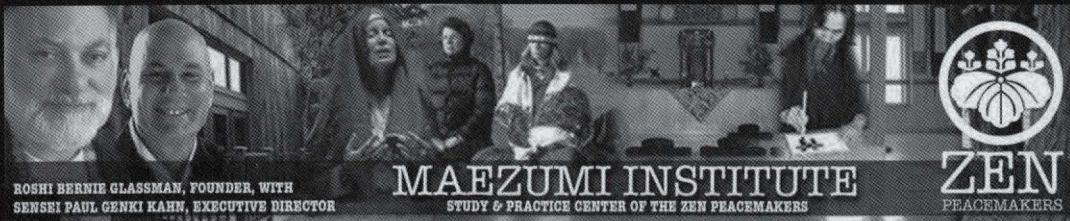
Awareness & Sexual Engagement

What's Wrong with Sex?

Monogamy, Polyamory & Beyond

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No Shame, No Guilt



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THE NAME "TURNING WHEEL"

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship uses the name "Turning Wheel" for its magazine as a way of acknowledging Buddha's teachings on social action. Within these pages we create a community of compassionate voices that address the social issues we face in today's world. Our intent is to foster peace and educate the public in how Buddha's teachings can impact contemporary causes of suffering.

Specifically, the term "Turning Wheel" refers to an activity: setting in motion the dharma-chakra, or the wheel of the teaching. Though different Buddhist schools took different teachings of Buddha (known as sutras, suttas, or sermons) as their basis, all agree on the first turning of the wheel.

In the Dhammacakkapavattanasutta, the first turning of the wheel at Sarnath near Varanasi, Shakyamuni Buddha first taught the Four Noble Truths of suffering:

- We suffer.
- We suffer because we crave a permanence that does not exist.
- We can end this suffering by ending the craving.
- We can end the craving by following the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path includes Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

Many Buddhists mark the second turning of the wheel as the teachings given at Vulture Peak, Rajagriha. This is the Prajna Paramita literature, which expounds the Perfection of Wisdom in many different sutras ranging from one letter to many thousands of verses.

Often the third turning of the wheel is given as the teachings of Sravasti or Vaishali, which further expound the teachings on the infinite variety of expression of the Dharma. Sometimes the "turnings of the wheel" are given as: first teachings, Abhidharma, Mahayana, and Yogacara.

By using the name Turning Wheel, BPF wishes to uphold part of the teachings of the Buddha that otherwise might stay in the background. The Buddha went against social convention to unite people. Therefore, we publish writing by and about people who are working nonviolently alleviate suffering caused by institutionalized violence or hatred against sentient beings and the environment.

We are grateful that you have found us. ■

TURNING WHEEL

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From the Executive Director

Obama, Gaza, and True Nature

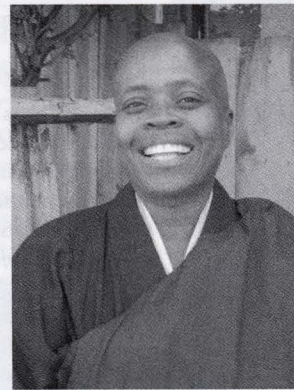
Inauguration Day, January 20, 2009. As it happened on the night he was elected, once again tears flowed. This time it was as Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul, sang of freedom during the inaugural ceremony for the 44th president of the United States, Barack Hussein Obama. I thought of my mother, who was born in 1910, my father, born in 1898, and their struggle to keep three little black girls alive and well. I thought of my grandmother, Marselean, born into slave labor. My sense was that the tears were for the real possibility of peace, healing, and reconciliation in this country. Without such change we would fall short of being “mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors,” as President Obama eloquently said in his inaugural address.

Many in this country have come together through Obama’s inspiration and by our own faith in rebirthing America, recommitting to a life of purpose despite the conflict that has nearly destroyed us. I would go further to say that as a country we are slowly returning to our true nature, which can be described as being awakened to all beings and all things. In such an awakened state, fear is a hindrance to our innate wisdom, and the illusions of “I am this and I am that” dissolve into just being.

The world is exploding with ancient conflicts. However, it does not matter whether the conflict is old or new, we cannot turn a blind eye to any of it. In violation of humanitarian law, both the Hamas attack on Sderot and the Israeli attack on Gaza illustrate how we forget the many sacrifices already made by our ancestors.

If we are to truly be awake then we cannot turn our attention to the suffering of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip without being awakened to the suffering of the Israelis. We cannot pay attention to the 250,000 Hutu who fled their home of the Congo on Inauguration Day in the U.S. without being conscious of the 5 million, both Hutu and Tutsi, civilians who have died in this conflict over the years. In essence,

our true nature is to be profoundly aware that we are all intrinsically bound by our intent for peace and our steady struggle for faith in transformation. There can be no rebirthing of America when the ground for such birthing has lost its fertility, its ability to make things grow.



**Zenju Earthlyn
Manuel**

As poet Elizabeth Alexander read at the inaugural ceremony, “what if the mightiest word is love, love beyond marital, filial, national. Love that casts a widening pool of light. Love with no need to preempt grievance.” As we deliver this issue of *Turning Wheel* themed Awareness and Sexual Engagement, you will see that we are not talking about sex as much as we are wanting to stimulate a discourse on a kind of love that cannot be captured by us and formed into something called being lovers. This issue, which features writers such as Mark Nepo, David R. Loy, and *Caroline Brazier*, is meant to stimulate awakening around love and sexual action as social engagement.

Understanding sexual engagement as part of the path in recommitting to a life of purpose, as a path of peace in our lives, is to consider sexuality as an activity of love as expressed in the lines from Alexander’s poem. To consider sexual engagement with awareness of how our sexual actions impact social justice is to consider how such conscious engagement can bring peace.

There are hard choices to be made to further the vision President Obama has entrusted to us. If we are to raise the horizon by which our young can see tomorrow, there are hard choices to be made around the ancient wars of our forbears. So, I ask, how can all of our actions, including sexual engagement, become common ground for peace? ■

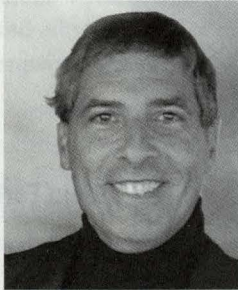
Contributors



Soha Al-Jurf (“Disappointment”) is a Palestinian American writer and performer. After spending 2004-2005 living in Occupied Palestine, she lived for three months in a Buddhist monastery before settling in Oakland, California. She currently works as a voice-specialized speech-language pathologist at UCSF Medical Center in San Francisco.



Jorge N. Ferrer, Ph.D. (“Buddhism and Intimate Relationships”) is Chair of the Department of East-West Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco. He is the author of *Revisoning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (SUNY Press, 2002) and co-editor of *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (SUNY Press, 2008).



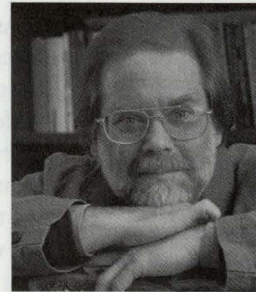
Ezra Bayda (“Practicing with Sexuality”) has been practicing Zen meditation since 1970, receiving Dharma transmission in 1998. He now lives and teaches at Zen Center San Diego with his wife and fellow teacher, Elizabeth Hamilton. He is the author of four books, including *Zen Heart* (Shambhala, 2008). For more information, go to www.zencentersandiego.org.



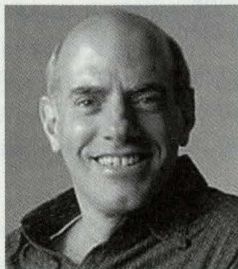
Ajahn Thanasanti (“Celibacy and the Awareness of Sexuality”), born in California, was first introduced to insight meditation in 1979. She received ordination at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in 1991. Her interest is integrating insight into the full human condition and using nature as a support in the practice.



Caroline Brazier (“A New Puritanism?”) is a member of the Amida Order, a socially engaged Pureland group based in the UK. At the Amida psychotherapy training program, she leads courses grounded in a Buddhist understanding of human process. Her most recent book is *Guilt: An exploration*, O-Books, 2009.



David R. Loy (“What’s Wrong with Sex?”) is Besl Professor of Ethics/Religion and Society at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. His recent books include *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* and *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution*. A Zen practitioner for many years, he is qualified as a teacher in the Sanbo Kyodan tradition.



Mark Nepo (“Our Fierce Impulse to Live”) is a poet, philosopher, teacher, and author. His most recent nonfiction book is *Facing the Lion, Being the Lion: Inner Courage and Where It Lives* (Red Wheel/Weiser/Conari, 2007). He serves as a program officer for the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a nonprofit foundation devoted to fostering awareness of the power of love and forgiveness in the emerging global community.



Daigan Vincent Gaither is a HIV+, gay man who has been practicing Buddhism since 1995. His ministry started with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and he continues to be an irreverent presence as a health and diversity educator, hospice worker, student, and dharma bum. He currently lives at San Francisco Zen Center where he was lay ordained by Ryushin Paul Haller.



FEATURED ARTIST **Jeanette Madden** is a native of Northern California. Creating art for a number of years, her work has been exhibited and collected coast to coast. She regularly attends sitting groups, retreats and workshops at East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland. She continues to donate “service as dana” in support of the ongoing life of this unique, diverse center.

History

The Buddha and the Sex Worker

by Diane Patenaude Ames

In the fifth century BC., Indian law gave prostitutes a status even lower than that of other women. Crimes against them were more lightly punished than crimes against respectable members of their sex. A few prostitutes grew rich, but most ended up in the almshouse. All were, basically, trapped in a stigmatized profession that tended to be hereditary. Religious men were supposed to avoid them because they embodied sexual temptation.

Thus the monks traveling with the Buddha must have been surprised when, on a trip to Vesali, their master decided to camp in a mango grove belonging to the courtesan Ambapali. Although the lady was at the top of her profession, a hired companion of princes, and one of the wealthier people in the area, she was hardly an appropriate person for monks to lodge with. More surprisingly still, Ambapali herself soon appeared in a magnificent carriage and requested teaching. After listening respectfully to the Enlightened One, she invited the entire company of monks to dine at her mansion the next day. And the Buddha agreed.

As she left the Buddha's campsite, Ambapali encountered the local ruling clan, the Licchavis, riding in gorgeous regalia to greet the holy man. When they asked, as well they might, what she was doing there, she told them that she had come to invite the sangha to dinner the next day and the invitation had been accepted. The Licchavis, who had come with the same intention, offered her a fortune to relinquish to them the honor of entertaining the Buddha. She refused. The Licchavis extended their invitation to the Buddha anyway. He replied that he was sorry but the Sangha had a previous engagement. And the next day, after warning the monks that it was their responsibility not to get carried away by female beauty, he led them to Ambapali's house.

After feasting the monks, Ambapali offered her mansion to the sangha and became a nun. In her old age, she wrote a poem, recorded in a collection of poems by early Buddhist nuns called the *Therigatha*, about the impermanence of earthly beauty. To quote a verse:

My breasts were beautiful,
high, close together and round.
Now, like empty water bags,
they hang down.

This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

At least three other prostitutes, one of whom states in the *Therigatha* that she used to work in a common brothel, were given permission to become Buddhist nuns by the Buddha himself. Considering the attitudes of the day, this was surely a powerful statement about these women's humanity. ■

Principle source: Murcott, Susan. *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therigatha*. Berkeley, Ca.: Parallax Press, 1991.

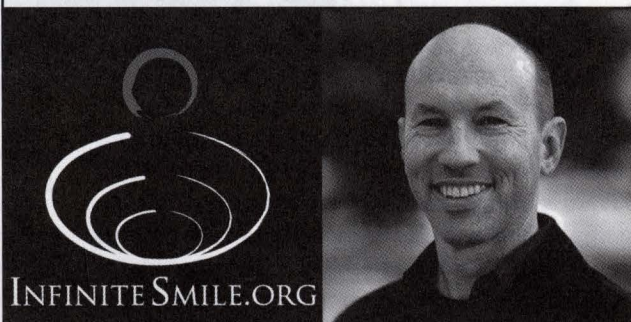
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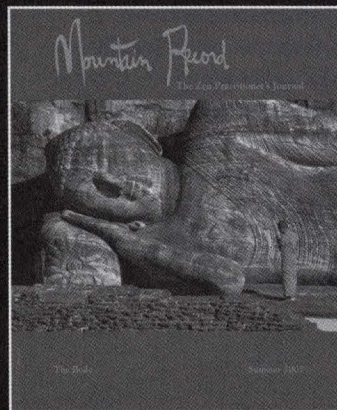
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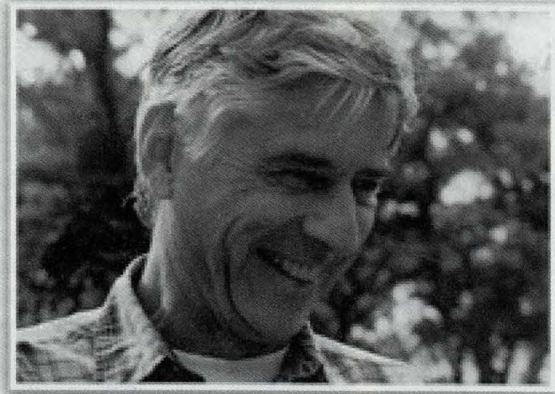


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BPF Remembers Francis Macy

February 19, 1927 – January 20, 2009



Francis Macy, a dedicated environmentalist, energy activist and citizen diplomat, whose groundbreaking work inspired fresh collaborative ventures with the former Soviet Union, died unexpectedly of an apparent heart attack in Berkeley on January 20 at age 81. His wife, Joanna Macy, has been a long-standing supporter of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

The founder and codirector of the Earth Island Institute's Center for Safe Energy since 1995, Macy trained hundreds of activists in Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Kazhakstan to address the environmental legacy of the nuclear arms race and the Chernobyl disaster. Initiating scores of professional delegations and exchanges between Americans and their counterparts in the former Soviet Union in the areas of psychology, environment, and citizen organizing since 1983, Macy's work empowered the rise of non-governmental organizations—a strong contribution to the health of post-Soviet life. In 2005, he was awarded the Nuclear Free Future Lifetime Achievement Award.

Macy "pioneered as a citizen ambassador linking Russians and Americans in shared concern for the environment, at a pivotal time when environmental activism was just emerging in the Soviet Union" and "led in the formation of permanent protection and restoration efforts, such as Earth Island's Baikal Watch project," said John Knox, executive director of the Earth Island Institute. Knox said Earth Island's founder, David Brower, was "particularly grateful for Macy's leadership in engaging him with Russia's foremost environmental leaders."

Having organized in 1961 the first U.S. government traveling exhibit to the USSR, Macy became one of the first Americans to establish trusted working relationships with the Soviet Union. Drawing on his experience, he was a board member of Center for Citizens Initiatives, which fostered cooperative partnerships between the U.S. and Russia.

Deeply interested in the world views underlying policies that despoil the earth, Fran Macy complemented his organizational trainings with experiential teachings in deep ecology. He served as

director of the Institute for Deep Ecology beginning in 1995, and led deep ecology transformational workshops around the world with his wife, Joanna, a leading Buddhist and systems theory teacher. Together they trained people to become leaders in the broader environmental movement. Especially concerned with the dangers of nuclear contamination, Fran worked tirelessly to promote safe energy alternatives and was active on the board of Tri-Valley CARES, a watchdog group at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, as well as the Nuclear Guardianship Project and the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability.

Born in Evanston, Illinois, in 1927, the youngest of four brothers, Macy attended North Shore County Day School and Wesleyan University, where he majored in government and was active in drama. He then received an M.A. in Slavic studies at Harvard University. Fran was one of the first students to live in racially integrated student housing, both at Wesleyan and at Harvard. Roommates Ernie Howell, the former director of the Asian Society, and Chuck Stone, the eminent African American journalist, became lifelong friends. Fran married Joanna Rogers in 1953.

Macy's life was emblematic of the 20th century. Feeling called to play a role in the great drama of his age—the Cold War struggle between the U.S. and the USSR—he learned Russian, and in the 1950s, he worked for Radio Liberty, a Russian language radio station based in Munich. In 1961, at the time of the “thaw” under Khrushchev, he led the first U.S. traveling exhibit to the USSR, recruiting young Russian-speaking American graduate students to serve as exhibit guides. People queued up for hours to meet Americans for the first time. This introduction to people-to-people diplomacy motivated Fran Macy to decline a prestigious Moscow post and opt for service to the American Peace Corps. For eight years, from 1964 to 1972, he

served as deputy Peace Corps director in India, as country director in Tunisia and Nigeria, and then as director for all Peace Corps programs in Africa.

From the Peace Corps, Macy's career journey led him to create the Central New York Regional Learning Service, a first-of-its-kind service to counsel adults on life changes. Based on the success of this model, Macy developed a national organization to support the development of similar services around the country.

Macy's career then evolved into directing the Association of Humanist Psychology, where he developed a Soviet exchange program that took delegations of educators and psychologists to Russia for professional exchanges and trainings. Macy's Soviet citizen diplomacy work later expanded and encompassed critical environmental and energy issues faced by the former Soviet Union. His efforts led to the creation of the Center for Safe Energy with Enid Schreiberman, who was codirector with Macy.

Macy was considered by many who knew him to be an extraordinary man who deeply affected people's lives with his love of life and the natural world and with his great ability to listen and inspire those around him.

He died hours after watching with great joy the inauguration of President Barack Obama, an event he described as a high point in his life.

He is survived by his wife, Joanna Rogers Macy, son Christopher Lewis Macy of Amsterdam, son Jack Macy of Berkeley, daughter Peggy Macy of Berkeley, son-in-law Grégoire Vion and daughter-in-law Charlotte Dickson, and grandchildren Julien, Eliza, and Lydia, all of Berkeley.

In honor of Francis Macy, the family requests that donations be made to the Center for Safe Energy, 2828 Cherry Street, Berkeley, CA 94705. ■

Our Fierce Impulse to Live

by Mark Nepo

From a spiritual perspective, attachment is the complex of dynamics that bind our capacity for love to self-centered desires. The root of the word, *a-tache*, means “nailed to.” Spiritual traditions see attachment as nailing our capacity for love to something other than what it was meant for.

—Gerald May

At first, our fierce impulse to live is bent on survival, fending off events and each other. But then, by some ever-shifting miracle, our stubbornness is broken and we are moved, if blessed, through that primitive survival into a deeper reality in which our lives depend wholly on each other, the way blood relies on organs to keep it flowing.

A complex journey stands between our primitive want to survive and this more humble recognition of how everything is connected. That journey takes many of us through the purging of our attachments. Or, as Gerald May so powerfully puts it, we must live through the nailing of our capacity to love to certain ideas, people, and things.

Just how does attachment start? It's hard to say, but I know, for me, like many, it began when as a boy my want to live and my want to be loved became confused. Pretty soon, I nailed my sense of survival to the idea that life was only possible if in love. When love relationships failed, I grew desperate to make them work, to make them last, until I gave myself away as kindling to keep the fire of life as I imagined it going.

Often, our personal forms of attachment grow out of painful situations that we spend much of our lives trying to correct. My mother was an angry person. She seethed and smoldered much of the time. It was like living near a volcano, never sure when it might erupt. I'm not sure what painful situation she was reacting to. But I quickly learned how to absorb her heat and threw my attention on her like water.

But it was never enough. There was always more fire than I had water. And even when leaving home, I looked for fires to put out, thought this was love. I became attached to the idea and kept thinking, “If I could only find more water.”

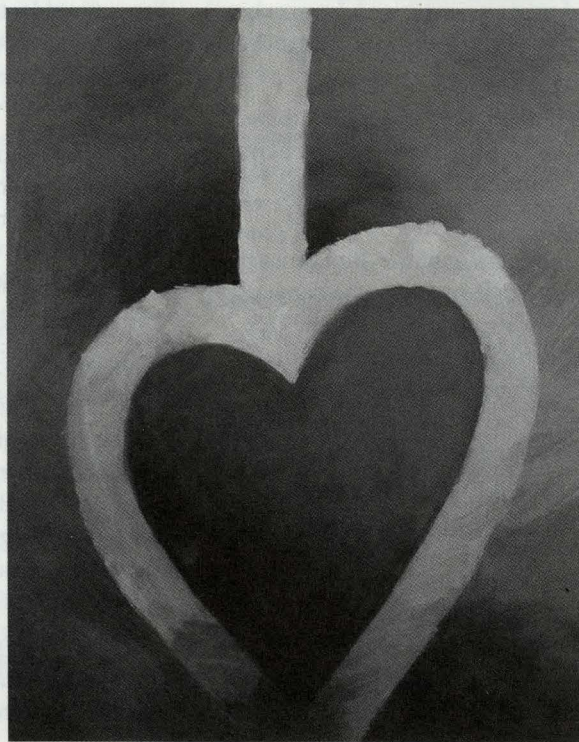
Once our fierce impulse to live is nailed to what we want or think we want, that fierceness keeps us from the direct joy of living. Feeling cut off, we work harder and longer at getting

what we want. If worked at hard enough and long enough, our attachment can deepen into addiction—that is, we can make a god of attachment. In fact, we could say that addiction is a collapse of attention by which we pursue one thing repeatedly, as if that one thing will give us everything, as if that one thing sucked on enough will take away the pain of living.

Whatever the object of such focus—alcohol, drugs, love, sex, success, money, the thrill of adventure, or the tumble of crisis—addiction is attachment run wild until, like a self-replicating Midas, everything we touch turns into our troubled self. Ironically, addiction attaches to everything in its path, nailing

our troubled self everywhere we go, when all we want is to lead our self out of its trouble.

Yet the skin between reverence and addiction is thin and always near. It is humbling that we can so easily aim for one and land in the other. When attached, we can become



preoccupied with one thing (the touch of a loved one or a painful image of ourselves that we need to drown) until it prevents us from being touched by anything. When we can let go of our self-interest and simply lean into our capacity to love, we can be surprised by a tender strength that appears for caring openly for the smallest thing (a wave breaking or a stranger laughing) until it becomes a doorway to everything.

It seems that compassion is only possible when we dare not nail down our capacity to love. It is only when we let our impulse to live flow without preference or judgment—in essence, when we love everything—that all skins of separation vanish, at least for the moment. In this way, when I am hurtful or cold or vengeful, I can feel at once both my striking out and the hurt it causes, as if I'm doing this to myself. Likewise, when I am giving or listening or loving, I can feel at once both my ache to care and the comfort it stirs, as if I'm doing this to myself.

This is the mystery of compassion at the core of all the spiritual traditions: when we dare to open our hearts to life as it happens, we are doing all this to ourselves. For the gift of compassion, entered without hesitation, is that we are humbled by the truth that despite our separate bodies and personal histories and all the nailing down, we are each other.

It is both troubling and freeing to realize that everyone is born with a fire within that we try to ignite by rubbing our hearts against the things of the world. The feel of the fire coming up from within is what we call passion. The rubbing of our hearts against the things of the world is the purpose of experience. When we are centered in our capacity to love, the friction of experience ignites our fire—the edge and lick of its flame is curiosity and wonder, and the fire is illuminating. When we are divided and nailed to our desires, we simply burn up. We are capable of both and often shine and burn by turns.

The gentle love of everything makes a life of being lighted, while the pitfalls of attachment and addiction make burning up a way of life. A thin edge of grace often separates the two. Often, we need others to pull us out of burning up. The mystery is that, while burning, we can still love. While burning, we can let love in. When the love overcomes the burn, we somehow cease being eaten by the fire and are warmed by the fire. In these blessed moments, or moods, or even days, we stop looking for love and become love. We cease being lighted and become light. ❧

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What's Wrong with Sex?

by David R. Loy

As Buddhism infiltrates the West, one of the important and interesting (of course!) points of contention is sexuality. Buddhism in Asia has been largely a cultural force for celibacy (among monastics) and sexual restraint, so how is Western Buddhism adapting to the sexual revolution?

Today many people in contemporary Western societies are sexually “liberated”—liberated, however, in a somewhat different fashion than the Buddhist tradition has usually understood liberation. We still have many problems with sex, but nowadays they are less likely to involve guilt and repression than various types of obsession such as addiction to pornography. Since the 1960s our lifestyles and customs have become very different from those with which patriarchal

societies regulated sexual urges—often providing outlets for men while strictly controlling women and procreation.

Our culture is saturated with sexuality, not only because sex is commodified in every possible way (being indispensable for grabbing our attention) but also because preoccupation

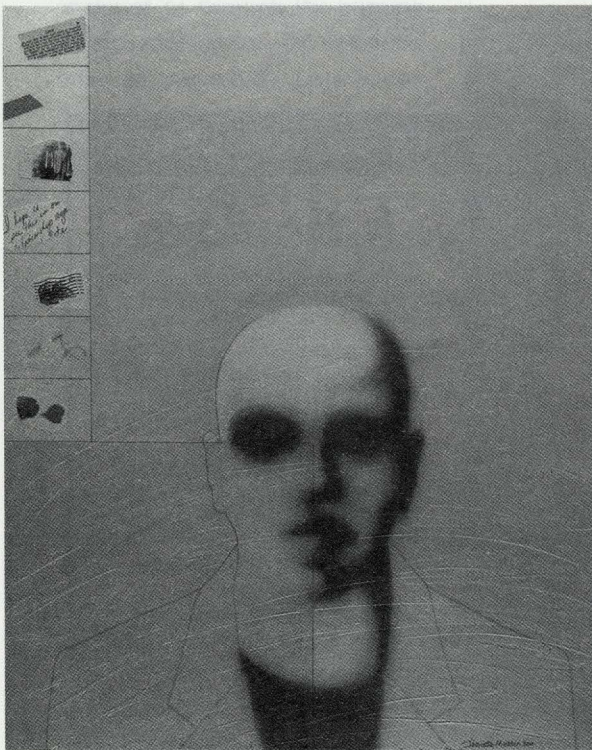
with sexual gratification helps to fill up the void left by the collapse of any larger meaning. The importance of sex has ballooned because we are not sure what else is important in a God-less world that often seems intent on destroying itself. This is not to demean the pleasures of sex, or the libidinal freedoms we enjoy today. Despite

new kinds of social pressure, most of us benefit from many more options. The liberation of sexual preference means that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals can come out of the closet, leading to an important reduction in collective social dukkha. Premarital sex is more or less taken for granted, and marriage itself is no longer a matter of course. It has become a decision that many choose not to take, or to take and retake.

Thanks to effective contraception, children too have become a matter of choice. Some people decry the self-centeredness of those who decide not to raise children, and others decry the self-centeredness of those who do. Buddhism is unique among the major religions in not being pronatalist. There is no doctrinal encouragement to we should have lots of children, which is another aspect of the Dharma to appreciate, given our overpopulation of the earth. The emphasis on monasticism works the other way, encouraging an alternative to procreation. The Buddha, like Jesus, was not a big proponent of “family values.”

But how does Buddhism fit into our freewheeling ways today? Well, many of us aren't sure. Western monastics continue to follow the established regulations of their own tradition, or at least appear to do so (like some of their Asian counterparts, no doubt). However, most serious practitioners in the West, and probably in Asia, are lay. Since sexual morality is also a matter of karma rather than God's commandment—“Do this or else!”—for the most part we continue to do what we want to do. And is there anything wrong with that?

The issue, I think, is not whether we should or shouldn't “be faithful” to the sexual mores of Asian Buddhist cultures. Instead, this is another opportunity to interrogate the Buddhist traditions: to ask why they had certain rules and guidelines about sex, which can help us determine how relevant those policies remain for us today. Needless to say, evaluating such an intimate topic is a delicate matter, yet such an examination cannot be avoided without risk of hypocrisy on the one side or merely yielding to established tradition on the other. We need to find the middle way between doing the same as premodern Buddhism, simply because that's what they did, and another extreme that simply accepts what has become acceptable to many people today. It is the tension between these two perspectives that can be so illuminating. If Buddhism is to realize its emancipatory



potential in our modern, globalizing world, such challenges cannot be evaded.

The rapid change in sexual morality has been uncomfortable for many, but for Buddhism the pelvic issues are mostly secular matters. The third precept is often translated as “sexual misconduct,” which for laypeople is usually understood to exclude casual relations, “sex without commitment.” Since the crucial concern for Buddhism is always dukkha, the most important thing is avoiding sex that harms others or causes them pain. That covers a lot of ground, yet it also leaves a lot of possibilities. There is no blanket prohibition of nonmarital sex in the Pali Canon or its commentaries. One should not have sexual relations with someone married or engaged (to someone else), or with those who are under the protection of parents or guardians, but especially today many women (and men) do not fall into those categories, including sex workers. Although apparent tolerance of prostitution makes early Buddhists seem more broad-minded than many modern Buddhists, this acceptance can also be understood as an aspect of patriarchy that we have outgrown, or should have outgrown.

There is, however, an important exception to this pelvic freedom. Abortion is killing. According to the Pali Canon, the Buddha said that it breaks the first precept to avoid killing or harming any sentient being. Any monastic who encourages a woman to have an abortion has committed a serious offense that requires expiation. We may wonder how much the Buddha knew about the genetic physiology of conception and pregnancy, but the textual prohibition is unambiguous.

This absolute rule in early Buddhism is a source of discomfort and embarrassment to many Western Buddhists, and is often ignored by those who are aware of it. Abortion is common in many Asian Buddhist societies, perhaps most of all in Japan, where it has become widely accepted as a form of birthcontrol (partly because oral contraceptives were not legal until recently). Again, karma relativizes even this prohibition: to break the precept against harming others may create more suffering for yourself, yet that is your own decision—a flexibility precious to many liberal-minded Western Buddhists.

The Case Against Sex

So can we conclude that, except for this exception of abortion, there is no problem reconciling basic Buddhist teachings about sex with our own proclivities today? It's not so simple, I think. There is another monastic offense that needs to be considered: the strict prohibition of sexual activity. Any bhikkhu whose penis enters a woman is “defeated” and expelled from the sangha. (The rule is somewhat stricter for bhikkhuni

nuns: any sexual activity is grounds for expulsion.) Of course, this prohibition does not apply to laypeople, so why should the rest of us be concerned about it? Because it raises issues that are relevant to anyone who is concerned with following the Buddhist path.

First and foremost, we want to know why the rule is so absolute. In most ways, Buddhism is a very pragmatic religion (or, if you prefer, spiritual path). There is no God or god that must be obeyed, nor did the Buddha set himself up as one. In place of punishment for sin, our unskillful intentions and deeds accumulate bad karma: more suffering for ourselves. But if sexual activity is an offense it is usually a victimless crime. One moment of physical weakness and you are out of the sangha for good—that's a heavy penalty to pay for a natural urge, isn't it?

In short, we shouldn't ignore this issue just because we are not monastics. The distinction between lay and monastic has become somewhat different in the West, and outside Asia today there are many more laypeople than monastics who are conscientiously practicing a meditative path aimed at awakening. What does it mean for us, then, that the Buddha strictly prohibited any sexual activity for his most serious and devoted followers?

Understanding this issue may be crucial for our own spiritual development. It is not enough to say that “the Buddha said it, and that's enough for me.” Since the Buddha himself was so pragmatic, we need to understand what is pragmatic about that strict rule, the better to preserve and practice his Dharma today—and sometimes the best way to preserve a teaching is by modifying it. To be true to Buddhism's own emphasis on impermanence and insubstantiality, maintaining the Dharma in very different times and places, means we need to take into account what motivated the Buddha in his own time and place.

So, once again: why did Shakyamuni Buddha strictly prohibit sex for sangha members? Evidently sexual purity was not an issue, as it has been for Catholicism, for example, with its emphasis on the Virgin Mary and the asexuality of Jesus. According to the New Testament, Jesus had no family of his own, but the Buddha had a wife and son, whom he deserted. The courtesan Ambapali was much respected for her gift of a mango grove to the sangha; later she became a celibate bhikkhuni and after her awakening an esteemed teacher. The Buddhist tradition did not condemn or

What does it mean for us, then, that the Buddha strictly prohibited any sexual activity for his most serious and devoted followers?

patronize her for her background as a high-class prostitute.

So what's the problem with sex?

Obviously sexual desire is a good example—the “best” example?—of *tanha*, “craving,” which according to the four ennobling truths is the cause of *dukkha*. Nevertheless, we still want to know: is that because sex is somehow bad in itself, or is sex bad because it interferes in some way with the path to liberation? If the former, why is sexual activity intrinsically such an awful thing? The answer is not obvious, at least not to me. After all, our continuation as a species—not only physically but culturally, including spiritual traditions such as Buddhism—depends upon the reproduction of each generation. If, on the other hand, sex is bad because it interferes with following the path, precisely how does it obstruct? Is it a distraction? A bad habit?

Failure means becoming more entangled in the craving that leads to more dukkha. Success may mean freedom from addiction to pleasure, which is not the same as avoiding pleasure.

But then it's hard to see why a single offense is so serious: one strike and you're out.

Is it a physiological issue? According to the tantric traditions, it's important to sublimate sexual energy and direct it

up the kundalini to the higher chakras, where it can blossom into enlightenment. That would make sexual activity unwise during periods of intense practice, when that energy is needed for other purposes, but not necessarily a bad thing during other times, such as after enlightenment.

If craving is the cause of *dukkha*, however, isn't sexual desire incompatible with the deep serenity of nirvana? Even if unawakened monks still have such urges, it is important that they endeavor to live the dispassionate life that their practice is aiming at.

That may well be the most important reason, but I wonder if such an argument reflects the Theravada perspective better than the Mahayana. The Mahayana emphasis that form is no other than emptiness (and vice versa) challenges any duality between *samsara* (this world of *dukkha*) and nirvana. Nirvana is simply the true nature of this world, when our nondwelling awareness is not fixated on particular forms...including attractive sexual ones. According to the Mahayana teachings, we should not reject form by dissociating it from our emptiness. Instead, awakening liberates us to dance freely with forms and between forms, without getting stuck on any.

The difference is instructive. When a friend dies, for example, I might respond by dwelling in that quiet, empty place at my core where there is no life or death, no gain or loss, no joy or sadness. Yet I might also respond not by denying or resisting my feelings of grief but by “becoming one” with them and allowing the process of mourning to run its natural course, confident that I will not remain stuck there. What does that difference in perspective imply about sexual desire? As we know all too well, it's very easy to get fixated on the object of our passion or become obsessed with sexual pleasure generally. Nonattachment to forms does not mean recommending promiscuity over monogamy (or vice versa), for the issue is the relationship between one's nondwelling awareness and sexual drive.

According to the tantric tradition, the energy of that urge can be used in a liberatory way. Can attention retain awareness of its intrinsically nonattached nature, even while engaged in sexual activity? The normal tendency, of course, involves an increasingly urgent focus on the future release that is orgasm. In contrast, formless nondwelling awareness is not driven to go anywhere or do anything, because it has nothing to gain or lose in itself. In climax, can one become more aware of that which does not climax, does not peak or decline? Failure means becoming more entangled in the craving that leads to more *dukkha*. Success may mean freedom from addiction to pleasure, which is not the same as avoiding pleasure.

Such tantric practices are not found in the Pali sutras or in Theravada. Although the Theravada tradition should not be automatically identified with what the Buddha himself taught, its texts are the closest we get to those original teachings. Still, I can't help wondering if the sexual puritanism now found in the Pali Canon is a historical artifact resulting from a general disparagement of the physical body that seems to have become common in India and some other places. The Axial Age that developed in several civilizations during the first millennium B.C.E. involved a stronger sense of transcendence, which included greater tension between that “higher world” and this material one. The duality between them opposed the immaterial spirit to the corruptions of the flesh, denigrating nature, women, and sex—perhaps because they are associated with death? Our animal bodies remind us of our mortality... so let's make the soul immortal!

Such an explanation might help us understand some Pali Canon passages that seem excessive in the ways they disparage physical bodies as impure because they are composed of unattractive things such as urine, feces, pus, mucus, and so forth. A soul/body dualism doesn't quite fit Buddhism—on the contrary, Buddhism's emphasis on impermanence and not-self

suggests a reaction against it—but such attitudes were apparently part of the cultural milieu the Buddha was raised in. Or did they arise afterwards, and get inserted into the Canon later?

Practical Concerns

Whether or not such metaphysical considerations were a factor, other, more basic issues must have been important. Some of them are obvious and have already been mentioned. Monastic sexual activity would be a distraction, to say the least, and expend a lot of energy that would be better used in other ways. It is not only a matter of awakening the kundalini: think of how much time and effort sexual affairs and liaisons can involve, even when they are not secretive. Add to that all the tensions and jealousies that would be created within the sangha.

Already it becomes apparent that having a more relaxed attitude towards sex would be fatal to the spiritual focus of the community. However, at least two other concerns must also have weighed heavily.

We tend to forget that until the 1960s there was really no reliable contraception. Since Buddhism prohibited abortion and infanticide, sex meant babies and all the work of caring for them and raising them—especially the unremitting daily task of providing enough food, which is incompatible with a mendicant life. The consequences of this can be seen in the cautionary tale of Japanese Buddhism. Japanese culture has always viewed our natural urges as, well, natural. That very much includes the sexual urge, and many if not most temple monks had common-law wives and children before they were legally permitted to marry after the Meiji Restoration. The task of providing for them eventually transformed the temple into a family business, with the oldest son expected to become a priest to keep that temple business in the family, regardless of whether he had any religious inclinations. As a result, Japanese Buddhism today is a thriving (and lucrative) industry focusing on funerals and memorial services, and not much else.

One more factor may have been the most important of all. Buddhist monastics are traditionally dependent on lay support. This means that the sangha must be sensitive to the expectations of their supporters. For example, Chinese monks and nuns became vegetarian not because their vows required it but because the laity began to expect it. Also, needless to say, it wouldn't do to have monks seducing their supporters' daughters or wives. Moreover, laypeople would not look kindly upon sharing their hard-earned food and other resources with renunciants who, instead of devoting themselves to their spiritual practice, spend time

dallying with lovers. Even today, when monks in southeast Asian countries like Thailand are discovered with girlfriends, it's often the local lay community that takes the initiative in forcibly disrobing them.

To sum up, there are many strong reasons for the Buddhist sangha to be strictly celibate. Which of these were the important factors? Early Buddhist texts do not help us decide among them, but my guess is that all of them were.

How does this list shed light upon our situation today? If it is more or less inclusive, there are major implications for Western Buddhism, because few if any of those reasons for celibacy are valid for lay practitioners today.

Yes, there are still times (during periods of intensive practice) and places (within practice communities) when sexual abstinence is obviously wise to observe. Few Western Buddhists, however, still look upon nature, women, and sex as impure entanglements to be avoided. Most of us don't have to worry about what our lay supporters think, because we don't have any, at least not in the traditional sense.

Today we have access to effective means of birth control, so babies usually aren't an issue unless and until we want them to be. A new category of Buddhist has become common in the West: less than monastic in lifestyle (hence not subject to sangha vows or regulations) but also more devoted to

practice than laity have usually been. This creates more distractions, since we must provide for ourselves, but most Western converts are middle-class folks able to find some balance between their careers and their Buddhist practice—that is, between periods when it is suitable to be celibate and times when that is not important. So does that mean we can breathe more easily now, as we accept and enjoy the new sexual mores? Not quite yet. There is another aspect of sexual relationships that we need to be aware of, and it's one that is not usually acknowledged.

Earlier I raised questions about soul/body dualism and how it encouraged the devaluation of nature, our

It's very easy to get fixated on the object of our passion, or become obsessed with sexual pleasure generally. Nonattachment to forms does not mean recommending promiscuity over monogamy (or vice-versa), for the issue is the relationship between one's non-dwelling awareness and sexual drive.

material bodies, women, and sexuality. Today it is easy for us to disparage such dualisms, which seem historically dated, but we should also become attentive to our own preconceptions. Our own cultural perspective should not be taken for granted, as if it provided some universal standard. Present Western attitudes are historically conditioned too, in this case by a myth about romantic love that evolved in late medieval Europe, originating in troubadour songs and the legend of Tristan and Isolde. Prior to that, European society, like most traditional societies, subordinated love to marriage, which was not merely a bond between individuals but a relationship between families, which

is why the preferences of the young couple themselves were often not a decisive factor.

Despite what we are led to expect from all the media images that intrude upon us, traditional marriage is not primarily about sex but about babies.

Pleasant though it be, the act of procreation is brief, while the activity of raising kids involves intense responsibility for many years. In the last couple generations the almost inevitable link between sex and babies has been somewhat severed, but most of us take for granted an important, often essential link between sex and personal happiness.

Today some of the emphasis has shifted from finding the right spouse to finding the right sexual partner, yet there is still the same expectation of personal fulfillment whether through romance or sexual intimacy. Buddhism questions that conscious or unconscious expectation, just as it challenges other myths that predispose us to seek happiness—the end of dukkha—in an unskillful way.

Sexual intimacy is a source of pleasure and gratification, and a very nice one it can be; it can also help create and sustain deeper, more meaningful relationships. Nevertheless, the sex drive is basically biological. Sex is an appetite. We do not use our sexual organs; they use us. That is why there is ultimately something delusive about the myths of romantic love and sexual fulfillment. Sex is nature's way, and marriage is society's way, to reproduce the species. Genuine happiness—that is, the end of dukkha—for any of the parties involved has little if anything to do with it.

We don't like to hear this, and we don't want to believe it when we do. "Those intense feelings I have towards my partner make our physical and emotional bond unique! We are swept up in something wonderful that helps each of us transcend our individual sense of isolation and open up to something other than ourselves." Yes, your relationship is special, but that is simply because it is yours and not someone else's. It is part of the game that nature/biology/evolution plays with us, and if we don't understand this we are in for a fall and more dukkha.

The fall is the disillusionment that later occurs: the discouraging fact that, whether or not one marries, the relationship never quite works out to be as satisfying as expected, whether or not one eventually separates. We should recognize the uncomfortable truth that sex and romance cannot provide the long-term fulfillment—the end of dukkha—that we usually hope for. Sex is always nature's trick, and romance a cultural gloss on it. We anticipate that our partner will somehow make us feel complete, but that never happens, because no one else can ever do that for us.

The myth of romance encourages a delusive cycle of infatuation and disappointment followed by a different infatuation. The romantic high has faded? Then obviously he (or she) was not really the right one for me. Time to separate and try again with someone else!

None of this is an argument for celibacy or against sex, nor am I making an argument against (or for) marriage. A committed sexual relationship, married or not, has much to offer. So does the celibate life of a monastic. The issue is what we expect from those relationships.

Without the myth of self-fulfillment through romance and/or sex, we would be less obsessed with sexuality and therefore suffer less when our expectations were frustrated. When we assume that sex is what can really make us happy, that my partner can and should complete me, we expect too much of it. Consciously or unconsciously we hope that romance and sex will fill up our sense of lack, but they can't and don't. The Buddhist path offers us a better understanding of our situation and a more effective way to resolve our dukkha. ■

We should recognize the uncomfortable truth that sex and romance cannot provide the long-term fulfillment—the end of dukkha—that we usually hope for. Sex is always nature's trick, and romance a cultural gloss on it.

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No Shame, No Guilt

by **Daigan Vincent Gaither**

It's 5:30 AM, and I step out the front door into the approaching sunlight. As I realize that I went into this cave at 10:00 PM last night and it was dark out, a wave of sadness and deep loneliness hits me. It occurs to me, for what feels like the first time, that the first pure precept of not harming life might actually apply to not harming myself as much as it applies to not harming others.

It is then I decide to look at my interaction with sex and sexuality, and how I have sometimes used it both consciously and unconsciously to hurt my partners and myself. I have had some great times, and amazing experiences, but always this loneliness, this dissatisfaction, this dukkha.

I want to say, I am not a prude, I have finally come to a place, for the first time in my life, after much therapy, practice, and turning towards, I can finally say that I have no shame, guilt, or remorse around my sexuality, sex, or the wide range of expressions of this karmic existence. I have followed Dogen's advice when he said, "To study the Way is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, to forget the self is to liberate the 10,000 things." I have found that like all parts of life, I can use sex and sexuality to either separate myself or liberate all beings.

It just took a willingness to turn towards the shame inflicted on me by socialization, turn towards what I want to run away from, and study my sexual self. To study what is true and untrue about what I have been taught. I can see the unfolding of the 10,000 things in that stillness of investigation. ■

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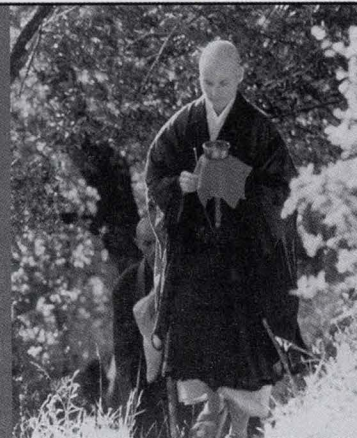


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Practicing with Sexuality

by Ezra Bayda

A young Zen student realized he had some sexual difficulties. He thought about going to his teacher for help but felt a lot of hesitation: "Maybe it's not appropriate to talk to my teacher about sex. What's he going to think of me?" He went to the teacher anyway and described the situation. The teacher told him, "We must struggle with desire. We must struggle with desire. Go back to your cushion and learn what it means to struggle with desire."

The dutiful and persevering student went back to his cushion and struggled and struggled with his desire. But for some reason he didn't get very far. In fact, it seemed like his problem became even worse. So he decided to go to another teacher. This time he went to a teacher who was very famous for his deep Zen wisdom. The student told the teacher about his situation. The teacher peered at him in an inscrutable Zen way, and said, "No sex. No not sex. Not one. Not two." And he rang his bell, dismissing the student.

The student was impressed by this teaching, but when he got back to his cushion, he had no idea what to do with it. Finally he decided to go to another teacher, one famous for his ardent devotion to practice. The student went to the teacher and described his problem. The teacher said, "Okay, this is what you need to do. Whenever your sexual difficulty arises in your mind, you just stop whatever you're doing and do 108 full prostrations, thinking only of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion." The student really liked this advice, because now he had something he could do, something that he saw as being right in the heart of practice.

The student followed the third teacher's advice and became very, very good at bowing. But after some time, he felt as though he were squeezing a balloon right in the middle: as the middle would scrunch up, both ends were close to bursting at the seams. He realized he still wasn't addressing the situation.

Even though the student was discouraged, he decided to go to yet another teacher. He saw that maybe he was trying too hard, pushing too hard; so he decided to see a teacher who was famous for being laid-back. He went to this teacher and described his situation. The teacher said, "No problem. Just be one with it. Just let it go." By this time, the student was becoming cynical. He realized this advice was just words. But still, he had a real aspiration to deal with his situation. He didn't want to just shove it under the carpet.

Again, he found another teacher. And finally, in this last teacher's reply, he understood what all the other teachers were telling him: "We don't talk about sex here."

Like most of the other "Zen stories" in my book, *Zen Heart*, this didn't actually happen. Nevertheless, it can help us understand our own situation. It's true: we don't talk about sex, at least in terms of practice—and especially in public. Why not? Because even though sexual themes, as well as so-called sexual freedom, are running through the mainstream of our culture, as a culture we still view sex with definitive moral overtones. Regardless of whether we're conscious of this perspective, we still regard sexuality as something dark and forbidden. Even though we may not be conscious of this shadowy undercurrent, it's deeply embedded in our collective cellular memory.

Awareness of Sexual Conditioning

As practitioners, the first thing we need to do is bring sexuality issues into the context of awareness. This is how we make them part of our practice world. We need to see our own expectations in this area. Because they may be hidden, they're often not what we think they are. For example, we may have been raised in a family where sex was rarely talked about, or where there was little physical affection. Yet sexual freedom might have been very much the norm on television, in the movies, and among our friends.

Although we speak the words of sexual freedom, and even act seemingly freely, underneath it all we may still experience sex in terms of guilt and shame, or at the very least, from a slightly prudish point of view.

Isn't sex one area of our life that is mostly uninspected, at least in terms of practice? What we have to look into is the beliefs and attitudes that we haven't questioned, the ones we still experience as the unexamined truth. What do we require of our partner? Do we know what these requirements are? Do we expect that our partner should respond whenever we want them to—that their role is to satisfy us? Do we have the belief that our partner should always ask before they touch? Do we believe that too much sex is unreasonable? Or do we have the attitude that not enough sex is unreasonable?

Do we have the view that if our partner is not satisfied in the sexual relationship it means that somehow we're defective or deficient? If we experience this feeling of deficiency, what do we do? Do we try harder, lash out, close down, or even avoid sex altogether? Whatever we do, can we see it as just our conditional pattern, as just our long-standing mechanical reaction?

Notice how you feel right now. How are you responding to these questions? It's possible to not even want to consider

them in terms of practice. Yet sexuality is often a place where we don't know what we really think or feel. In just such a place—untouched by awareness—we're most likely to be caught right in the middle of the self-centered dream. As a result, we may find ourselves engaging in power struggles in the sexual arena that actually have very little to do with sex itself but rather with vaguely disguised issues of control, guilt, or otherwise unfinished business.

For example, a student recently came to me to discuss what might be called a sexual problem. As we talked, it became apparent that the student's real problem was that he was experiencing his sexual behavior mainly in terms of guilt and shame, with the result that he withdrew from a relationship, at least in terms of being intimate. When it became clear that this was not a sexual problem but a problem related to believed thoughts, then he could practice with the

As long we're having a war between one part of ourselves and another, both parts lose. Softening our relentless tendency to judge requires that we first see all of our conditional beliefs for what they are. They aren't the truth; they're just beliefs.

distressing emotions in the same way that we practice with any emotion-based thought. But because he'd never applied the practice perspective to this particular area, he was calling his amorphous confusion a "sexual problem."

The Role of Fear

Along with opening our awareness to sexual issues, we also need to see where our deeply held beliefs are based in fear. Once we recognize our fears, we need to find where our workable edge is. For example, do we believe that we require monogamy in a relationship? That is, do we believe that our partner has to be sexually faithful to us? If this is our belief, is it based on a clear understanding of human nature? Or is it based on a fear of being betrayed, abandoned, or seen as inadequate? Even if it's based on fear and insecurity, we may still need to acknowledge that this is our personal edge, beyond which we presently believe we cannot go. This is where we're at right now. With such awareness, at least we're not basing our requirement of monogamy on simple or absolute moral terms. We're seeing it for what it is, as fear-based conditioning—not as some truth about reality.

Let's look at the flip side of this same issue. Perhaps we believe that monogamy is just an unnatural social constraint on our natural desire to be sexual beings. Is this belief based on some clear understanding of human nature or on our own self-centered pursuit of pleasure? Do we then justify this pursuit by saying that monogamy is unnatural, thereby taking license to do what we want? If we see clearly that it is based on our own self-centered desires, then how do we practice with that?

We also have to be able to acknowledge the power of sexual energy itself—not as something bad or good, but just for what it is. What is sexual energy? Do we think we know what it is? Can we even say what it is? Can we see how much we take for granted that we don't even know?

Further, can we see how strong a role sexual desire plays in our life, in spite of how "spiritual" we may think we are? Can we see how, when desire is particularly strong, it can have its own mind, totally superseding any intention to confine it? When strong sexual desire arises, do we see that we often have the belief that we must satisfy it? This belief feels so solid that we see it as the unquestioned truth. If this type of belief is running us, at the very least we need to see it clearly. How do we practice with our intense desire for pleasure, which we feel must be satisfied now?

Perhaps we believe that all we really need to do is sit in meditation to deal with our strong sexual desires. Will sitting in itself take care of our difficulties? If we think it will, how are we really addressing this issue as practice? Are we expecting some magical transformation?

Sexual desire isn't the only issue we need to consider. Because desire is what it appears to be, at least we can see it with some degree of clarity. Sexual fantasies are not as plain to see. While they are sometimes based on sexual desire, they might also have their roots in some other form of neediness. Can we see to what extent our fantasy is just a form of mental comfort to fill the anxious quiver of being, the hole of longing?

As sexual fantasies arise, can we meet them with the question, "What's the practice here?" Are we even willing to practice in this area? From a practice standpoint, we have to see our fantasies for what they are. Most often they're a cover, almost like sucking our thumb. We'll do anything to avoid experiencing the hole of painful longing and loneliness that lies beneath these juicy thoughts. We need to see how unwilling we are to give them up. The more clearly we see our attachment, the more workable our practice is.

We also need to look at sexual longings that are imbued with our own particular darkness, such as the need to conquer or the need to pursue what we see as forbidden. How do we bring our own shadow world of private demons and core fears into the context of awareness? What about sexual addictions, which, no matter how fervently we pursue them, never lead to real satisfaction? Within these shadowy realms, what is practice? When we're under their influence, do we ever think to ask this question?

Labeling our sexual energy and fantasies as thoughts is possible. Such a practice might look like this: "Having a believed thought that I need to fulfill this sexual desire." "Having a believed thought that I need to fantasize." Labeling sexual energy in this way helps take away the intense identification we have with our desire, allowing us to see it as just our mechanical response, or our obsession, or our own naturally arising phenomenon. When we believe what the mind tells us—"This desire is me, I am this desire"—we remain in a closed state of mind, which usually leads to disappointment and suffering. In practicing with sexuality, instead of relating from desire, feeling that we *are* the desire, we can relate to the desire, within the context of awareness.

Much of the heaviness and guilt around sexual issues arise directly from believing self-imposed moral judgments. The judgmental mind is merciless. Statements like, "This is who I am, and it's bad; I shouldn't be this way" add another layer to our suffering. Our incessant self-judgment is compounded by the fact that we think we should be able to stop our desires and fantasies. We think that once we decide to stop, we'll be able to follow up on our resolution. Even though we make a decision wholeheartedly with one part of our being, other parts of ourselves may not be quite on board. Which "I" makes the decision? Someone once said that God created man with a brain and a penis, and enough blood

to run only one at a time. We never quite know which part will be in charge. Disappointment and the pain of mechanical behavior may be what it takes to finally awaken our sincere effort to stop hurting ourselves and others by acting blindly.

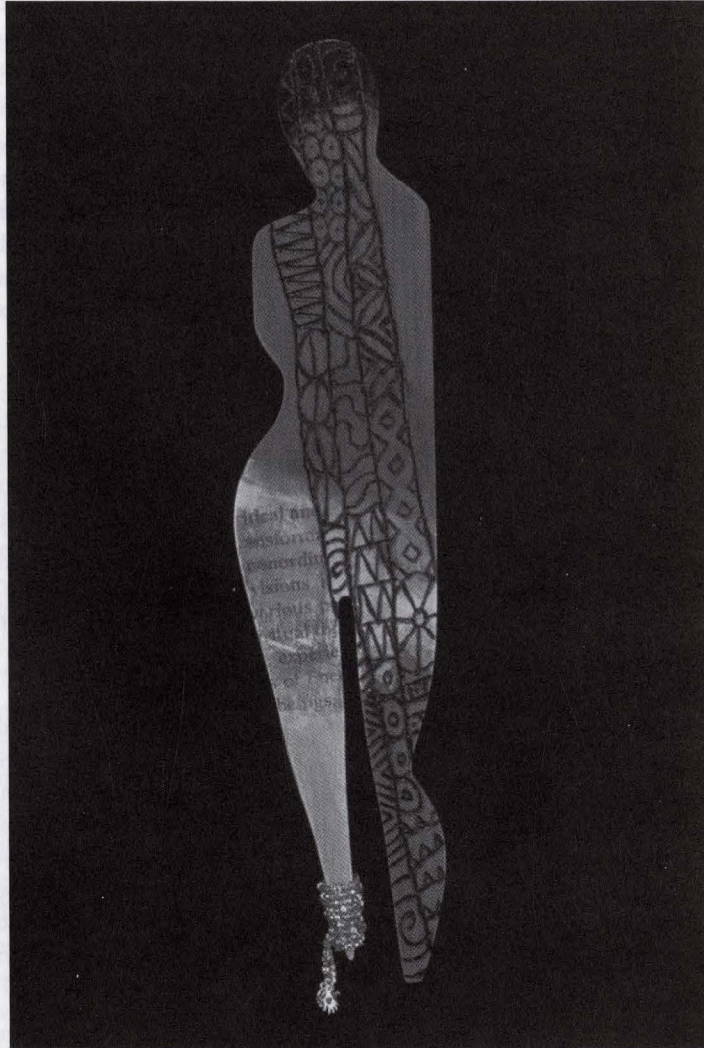
Suppressing desire, one of the main thrusts of our religious and cultural morality, is not the answer. Trying to suppress desire rarely works. Suppressing desire usually gives it even more power. Renouncing the object of our desire as "bad" may result in temporary disengagement, but in the end it usually just makes our desire and attachment stronger.

There are no formulas for dealing with the issues around sex. In addition to the fact that we rarely attempt to look at these issues within the context of awareness practice, each situation has its own layers of complexity. For example, suppose someone is feeling very strong physical desire for his mate yet senses a definite lack of mutual interest. This person is now caught between the strong urge to satisfy an intense physical desire and the protective urge to withdraw in order to avoid being hurt. What is the practice?

Again, there is no formula. The crucial thing is to bring awareness to what's actually going on. Once the inner conflict is clearly seen, we can look more deeply. Do we really believe we have to fulfill our desire just because we

feel it? This is a blind spot for many of us and one that helps to perpetuate a great deal of unnecessary suffering. Further, are we willing to look at our hurt, at the real or imagined "rejection" from our partner? What pictures are we living from? Do we believe that our partner should want us whenever we want them?

Seeing this clearly will allow us to experience the hurt directly for what it is: a protective response to defend the fragile image of our "self." Whenever we feel angry or hurt, we can be fairly certain we're in this protective mode. We can also be fairly certain that we're trying to avoid feeling our core



fears, whether they're based on the belief that we're not enough, that we're not worthy of love, that we don't count—whatever our own particular flavor is.

Working with these core beliefs, which run our lives not only in the sexual arena but in countless ways, is an integral part of our practice. Going back to the example of the person whose intense desire for their mate is unreciprocated, the core beliefs need to be seen for what they are: deeply held beliefs that we've maintained as truths our whole conditioned life. Once we see this, which is no easy matter, we then can enter into the physical experience of hurt itself, allowing ourselves to reside in the sensory world without wallowing in the believed thoughts. What does hurt actually feel like? What is its texture? Where do we feel it in the body? Can we answer the question "What is this?" without

We also need to look at sexual longings that are imbued with our own particular darkness, such as the need to conquer or the need to pursue what we see as forbidden.

thinking or analyzing but through experiencing the moment itself?

What will come out of it? No one can say. But the fact is that awareness heals. It may take years of work and many

failures, but what other choice do we have? The sexual issue always comes back, at least in part, to the basic practice of coming to know ourselves and learning the willingness to be with whatever life presents.

Again, practicing with so-called sexual problems often has little to do with sex itself but instead with the overall patterns we've brought into the relationship. Often our impulses are the product of our minds rather than the natural arising of sexual energy. Just look at our fantasies, our love for the forbidden, or the pernicious judging and evaluating of sexual performance. How often do we experience or appreciate sexuality apart from the filters of our thoughts and conditioning? The main questions we need to raise are these: To what extent do we see our particular conditioning and mechanical behavior? To what extent are we driven by cultural morality, which often goes unseen? How much are we driven by thoughts, fears, and core beliefs?

Noticing Self Judgment

Furthermore, we need to inspect to what degree our emotional reactions around sex are tainted with self-judgment. The practice stance has nothing to do with moralistic notions of right and wrong, good and bad. Even with the sticky issue of monogamy, I'm not suggesting there's a right or a wrong position, and

certainly not that I know what's best. All I'm saying is that most judgment—both of self and other—arises as a result of uninspected, deeply conditioned beliefs.

When the issue of monogamy arises, can we look at it clearly, devoid of our conditioned beliefs? The reason we do this isn't to create a new "should" but rather to see clearly what we're doing with our life. Having had my own struggles and confusions with this subject over the years, I know it's hard to bring it out from the shadowy world of conditioned beliefs and relentless self-judgment. But I also know that with a combination of perseverance and kindness, it too is workable.

There's no point in continuing to do battle with ourselves, because there's no enemy within. Striving to perfect ourselves by making ourselves more moral, with all of the implied self-judgment, isn't the issue. The motivation is not to change ourselves or others but to aspire to a deepened awareness and a more genuine way of living.

As long we're having a war between one part of ourselves and another, both parts lose. Softening our relentless tendency to judge requires that we first see all of our conditional beliefs for what they are. They aren't the truth; they're just beliefs, whether they take the form of moral dictates, opinions, or self-judgment. When we see this clearly, we can relate to sexual issues from a more open place. Without this softening, this lightness of heart, practice may never move out of the heaviness of "my suffering."

Until we bring this subject into the context of practice, looking with honesty and precision at what we do, how we think, and what we believe, we'll continue to hurt ourselves and others. Can you see how you hurt yourself by holding onto your pictures of what sex is "supposed" to be? Can you see how you hurt others with these pictures, expectations, demands? Can you see how these beliefs, and the reactions that come from them, get in the way of real intimacy?

When issues arise around sex, it will make all the difference if we can accept that these issues are our path. They're not obstacles on the path but the path itself. Until we understand this point, sex will continue to have its way with us, either overtly in our behavior or covertly in all of its disguised but potentially destructive forms.

The power of our sexual energy cannot be denied. But in itself, this energy is neither good nor bad. As in everything, heaven and hell are both right here, right now. The difference between experiencing our sexuality as heaven or as hell is rooted in one thing only, and that is the clarity of our awareness. ■

Celibacy and the Awareness of Sexuality

by Ajahn Thanasanti

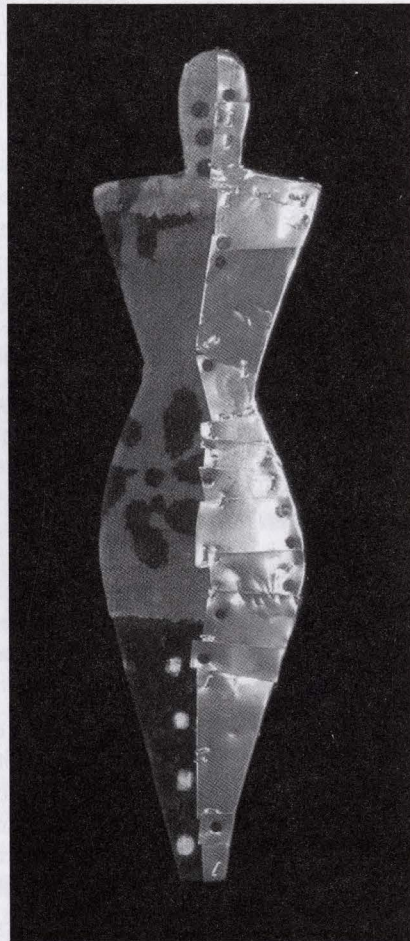
If I look at the experiences that have reappeared on my journey, I can see that over the years there have been times of intense pleasure, strong energy, deep pain, suffering, profound fear, transcendent joy, and the stillness of a peaceful heart. These experiences have been both the gateway for, and the result of, much learning. This entire range has also been part of my experience of sexuality, which is the theme I'd like to explore.

In particular, I want to discuss the connection between the experience of sexuality and aggression on the one hand, and sexuality and lovingkindness on the other. We need to understand both these aspects of sexuality, whether we are celibate or not, as part of our endeavor to awaken to the full human condition.

For more than 20 years, most of my dhamma teachers have been men. Occasionally, there have been some very bold, insightful, sensitive dhamma teachers who have talked about sexuality in language that I have been able to relate to and understand. I've felt grateful for their courage and compassion in bringing light and clarity into these deep waters. But when I was a laywoman I also heard dhamma talks describing sexuality in ways that I could not relate to; that is, describing sexuality as dominance, objectification, and raw attraction to physical attributes driven by a desire for gratification—all devoid of affection and genuine respect.

For me, the most familiar expression of sexuality was one accompanied by tenderness and care, spaciousness, joy, and an opening of body and mind as the sense of self is released through giving and sharing with another. To hear sexuality described emphasizing the instinctual component of desire,

the raw drive for physical gratification involving the dynamics of power and aggression, sounded demeaning and foreign. However, years later, I came to realize that what these teachers described was in fact within me.



Growing up in California in the 1960s and 1970s, with its lack of boundaries and cultural norms regarding courtship and sexual relationships, it took me a while to learn how much care was required to ensure ease and well-being within a relationship. I had to discover for myself the impact of sexual intimacy and the degree to which we internalize our partner's thoughts, moods, feelings, and kammic (karmic) formations. I discovered it is important to fully bring every aspect of a relationship into consciousness and to be clear about the forces that are operating. It is important to see the nature of desire, the nature of pleasure, the way of attachment and grasping, and the fear of rejection or loss, as well as the effects of these emotions on the mind and body. It is important to recognize that the longing for love, acceptance and fulfillment is part of the human experience and the dance of our sexuality.

After I decided to come to the monastery to live as a nun, I remember there were a few people who said in their parting blessings to me, "Well, I hope that on your way to the monastery, you meet the man of your dreams and fall in love." I understood what they meant.

They wanted me to be happy and, to them, going to the monastery meant choosing a life-denying existence.

In our culture, the highest life-affirming experience is the consummation of a romantic relationship. Advertising strategies and movies are oriented toward the pleasure and happiness that come from falling in love and having a romantic relationship. It is considered the pinnacle of fulfillment.

Anybody in a healthy-enough relationship knows that relationships can bring a lot of happiness and pleasure, as well as the potential for healthy inquiry and learning. But anybody in a relationship also knows it is not always so sweet. There can be times when intimacy can be boring. One of the greatest experiences of loneliness is when two people are physically close but miles apart in every other way. Sometimes it becomes very ugly. I recall the story of a person whose unrequited love led to stalking, several acts of vandalism, attempted suicide, and physical assault.

So consummated love brings delights, but unfulfilled love, where desire, jealousy and power reign, can become a nightmare and easily turn to hate. This kind of love is one of attachment; it is not genuine love. Attachment and grasping cannot fulfill and therefore cause frustration. When there isn't insight into the frustration as it arises, the aggression that follows is an attempt to blame the trigger rather than understand the response.

In 1989, after 10 years as a lay practitioner, I entered the monastery. Not long after, a much loved and respected senior monk said that when he first became a monk his mind was so shattered that it was years before he could get together a healthy case of lust. He was very candid and open about it, which I appreciated very much. In the ensuing years, I was to

teachers had been saying about the connection between sexuality and aggression. I could feel the power involved in captivating and holding a person's attention. I could see clearly how fast mood swings and sexual desire were triggered by a myriad of things, not only by an expression of heartfelt openness and tenderness. I could see the desire impulse working and feel the movement of mind toward pleasure and gratification. I could see how the strategies that were employed to optimize pleasure—either for oneself or in a relationship with others—were often based on control, manipulation, competition, objectification, and the desire to define one's territory.

As these dynamics became clearer to me, the connection between sexuality and aggression became more apparent. A human being is made out of energy. Thoughts, moods, and feelings are all manifestations of energy that changes depending on the characteristics it acquires. We are often absorbed by these characteristics in the same way that we are absorbed in the objects of our experience. What we think, feel, and experience is of great interest. When there is intense energy in the system, it can flow out in different ways. For example, sexual energy that manifests as desire, if unskillfully restrained or suppressed, can cause confusion, frustration and anger, and can easily be released as aggression.

Even as one becomes more skillful at allowing energy to flow throughout the system, it is necessary to see that ultimately when there is desire, there is suffering—there is “me” here who wants and something out there that is supposed to satisfy. It is important to recognize whether one is sublimating in a skillful way and working to transform desire into something useful. There is suffering as long as there is a “me” here and something out there that I either need to grasp or get rid of.

We need to understand sexuality and the way aggression is experienced and expressed in order to open up the field of life's experience and come to terms with what it is to be fully human. It's scary because it takes us into a realm where we feel out of control and where we are confronting things about ourselves that aren't congruent with what we think we should be experiencing.

As for celibacy, it isn't meant to be a repression or denial of one's sexual being, nor a condemnation of sexuality or of sexual relationships. It is not a life-denying experience. The standards of behavior are clear: the pathway is through insight and understanding, and for me, love. When lived to its full potential, celibacy is a vital, embracing, and creative lifestyle in which one is aware of sexuality in all of its manifestations and aware of the way it can be transformed into other types of energy. With celibacy, one is at ease with life as a human being.

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learn a great deal more about this subject as a monastic.

I thought I knew a few things about my body, energies and the cycles of mood, emotion, and sexuality. I thought I understood men. I was surprised to discover there was a lot I didn't know about the way energy moves through the body and mind, what it does to various parts of the system, and how differently men and women experience things.

In a monastic lifestyle dedicated to meditation, inquiry and investigation, where restraint is cultivated and where there are relatively few opportunities for distraction, one's energetic system becomes more potent and the familiar becomes intensified.

After entering the monastery I began to have an appreciation for what the monks and male dhamma

To those interested in understanding the end of suffering, the Buddha recommended seeing the value of celibacy. It isn't an easy path, but it can be very helpful because one has to consciously face the habitual patterns of this deep-seated energy.

If we want to free the heart from suffering, we need to question our relationship with sexuality in a sincere and genuine way. We need to have the courage to look carefully at the way desire, attachment, and power are embedded within our experience. We must see for ourselves what is appropriate and how mindfulness, understanding, and restraint can be further cultivated. We must ask ourselves if there is room for more honesty and integrity.

So what does this have to do with compassion and lovingkindness? Classically it is taught that we first need to have lovingkindness and compassion for ourselves before we are in any position to spread it outwardly. Awareness has an all-embracing quality—whatever the experience, awareness can embrace, know, and receive it. Judgment isn't needed; resistance isn't needed. As moods, feelings, bodily sensations, tensions and struggles are held in awareness, the reactive qualities of wanting and not wanting the experience diminish.

Compassion comes from opening to suffering with the right perspective. It is not the all-glorious compassion of loving a million people in a distant land. It is the nitty-gritty compassion of being at ease with the things that we experience, whether or not they are to our liking. True lovingkindness isn't the construction of a thought or a feeling. It is the ability to be present with experience on a moment-to-moment basis with awareness—lovingkindness is awareness.

It is important to see that within all experience there is a direct path to the stillness of the heart. Be it rage or the coarsest desire for gratification, within each there is a direct path to the stillness of the heart. A profound change takes place when there is sufficient strength of mind to let awareness embrace the feeling, without either rejecting it or believing it, and without becoming absorbed in it. The identification with experience we normally have eases up. We no longer need to get something, get rid of something, or change our experience in some way in order to find peace, fulfillment, and rest; by simply resting in the awareness of the experience, peace, fulfillment, and rest are found.

This still, loving heart isn't a lovey-dovey, sweet, marshmallow smear one spreads all over the universe—metta is not a kind of goo. This still, loving heart is real; it is connected and appropriate when we understand the appropriate actions of body and speech and feel at ease with the full range of what it is to be a human being. As

long as one remains cut off from sexuality or aggression, one is denied full access to the heart. "Cut off" doesn't mean an inability to act out; it means an inability to fully feel and understand the energy, and to allow it to flow and transform. It seems to me that spiritual maturity is when we can see through the veils of the world, the great range of our human experiences, and let everything bring us back to the stillness of the loving heart.

My experience is that the heart does open. Energy that used to be expressed in a sexual or aggressive way still

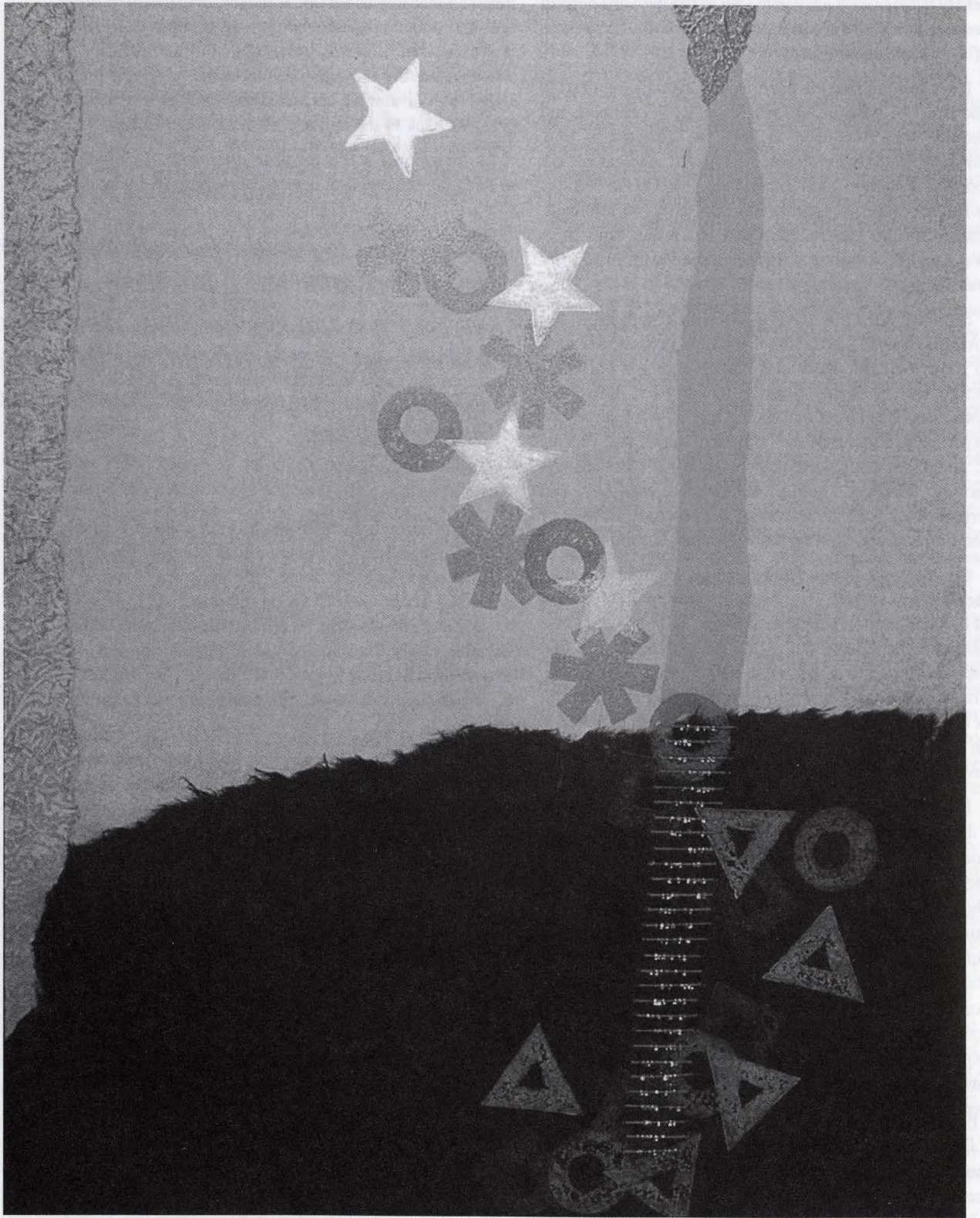
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manifests through the heart but it is not colored with the desire for gratification, possession, or control. The heart is just open: it's allowing, it's receptive, and it's universal. There is no focus on the one that "I" love or the one that pleases "me." It is a bit like loving the whole universe rather than an individual person; it's not the glittery kind of being in love that rejects things that don't fit. It's abiding in love—a still, alive, vital place, a place of rest.

There was a nun whom we all loved very much who spent some time at Amaravati. I remember her saying that she felt much more sexually liberated being a nun than she ever did as a layperson. I understand what she was talking about. Within a clearly defined boundary of restraint, we have the encouragement, teachings, and support to let the body be the way it is, to allow the energies to be the way they are, to understand them and be at peace with them.

We're not trying to get anybody's attention. We're not trying to dominate or control. We're not trying to live up to the culturally accepted norm of what a woman or a man should be. We are given the encouragement to know what it is to be alive, to be a human being, to be a woman, to be a man, and to know it fully and completely—not so much so that we can take this as our identity but so that this knowing can take us to the stillness of a loving and peaceful heart.

One of the many blessings of this celibate life is that one doesn't need to be tied up like a pretzel. One can be fully human, utterly alive, and be in peace. ■



Buddhism and Intimate Relationships: Monogamy, Polyamory, and Beyond

by Jorge N. Ferrer

In Buddhism, sympathetic joy (*mudita*) is regarded as one of the “four immeasurable states” (*brahmaviharas*) or qualities of an enlightened person—the other three being loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). “Sympathetic joy” refers to the human capability to participate in the joy of others, to feel happy when others feel happy. Although with different emphases, such understanding can also be found in the contemplative teachings of many other religious traditions such as the Kabbalah, Christianity, or Sufism, which in their respective languages talk about empathic joy, for example, in terms of opening the “eye of the heart.” According to these and other traditions, the cultivation of sympathetic joy can break through the ultimately false duality between self and others, being therefore a potent aid on the path toward overcoming self-centeredness and achieving liberation.

Though the ultimate aim of many religious practices is to develop sympathetic joy for all sentient beings, intimate relationships offer human beings—whether they are spiritual practitioners or not—a precious opportunity to taste its experiential flavor. Most psychologically balanced individuals naturally share to some degree in the happiness of their mates. Bliss and delight can effortlessly emerge within us as we feel the joy of our partner’s ecstatic dance, enjoyment of an art performance, relishing of a favorite dish, or serene contemplation of a splendid sunset. And this innate capacity for sympathetic joy in intimate relationships often reaches its peak in deeply emotional shared experiences, sensual exchange, and lovemaking. When we are in love, the embodied joy of our beloved becomes extremely contagious.

But what if our partner’s sensuous or emotional joy were to arise in relation not to us but to someone else? For the vast majority of people, the immediate reaction would likely be not one of expansive openness and love but rather of contracting fear, anger, and perhaps even violent rage. The change of a single variable has rapidly turned the selfless contentment of sympathetic joy into the “green-eyed monster” of jealousy, as Shakespeare called this compulsive emotion.

Perhaps due to its prevalence, jealousy is widely accepted as “normal” in most cultures, and many of its violent consequences have often been regarded as understandable,

morally justified, and even legally permissible. It is worth remembering that as late as the 1970s the law of states such as Texas, Utah, and New Mexico considered “reasonable” the homicide of one’s adulterous partner if it happened at the scene of discovery!

Though there are circumstances in which the mindful expression of rightful anger, not violence, may be a temporary appropriate response—for example, in the case of the adulterous breaking of monogamous vows—jealousy frequently makes its appearance in interpersonal situations where no betrayal has taken place or when we rationally know that no real threat actually exists—for example, watching our partner’s sensuous dance with an attractive person at a party. In general, the awakening of sympathetic joy in observing the happiness of one’s mate in relationship with perceived “rivals” is an extremely rare pearl to find. In the context of romantic relationships, jealousy functions as a hindrance to sympathetic joy. To begin exploring the roots of this widespread difficulty in experiencing sympathetic joy in the arenas of sexuality and sensuous experience, we need to turn to the discoveries of modern evolutionary psychology.

Evolutionary Origins of Jealousy

The evolutionary origins and function of jealousy have been clearly mapped by contemporary evolutionary psychologists, anthropologists, and zoologists. Despite its tragic impact in the modern world—the overwhelming majority of mate battering and spousal murders worldwide is caused by jealous violence—jealousy very likely emerged around 3.5 million years ago in our hominid ancestors as an adaptive response of vital evolutionary value for both genders.

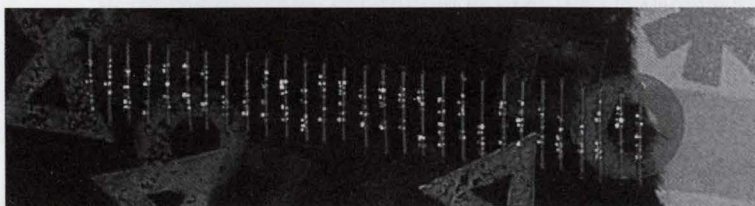
Whereas the reproductive payoff of jealousy for males was to secure certainty of paternity and to avoid spending resources in support of another male’s genetic offspring, for females it evolved as a mechanism for guaranteeing protection and resources for biological children by having a steady partner. In short, jealousy emerged in our ancestral past to protect males from being cuckolded and to protect women from being abandoned. Modern research shows that this “evolutionary logic” in relation to gender-specific jealousy patterns operates widely across disparate cultures and countries, from Sweden

to China and from North America and the Netherlands to Japan and Korea.

The problem, of course, is that many instinctive reactions that had evolutionary significance in ancestral times do not make much sense in our modern world. Many contemporary men and women suffer from jealousy independent of whether they want children or plan to have them with their partners. As evolutionary psychologist David Buss puts it in his acclaimed *The Evolution of Desire*, most human mating mechanisms and responses are actually “living fossils” shaped by the genetic pressures of our evolutionary history.

Interestingly, the genetic roots of jealousy are precisely the same as those behind the desire for sexual exclusivity, or possessiveness, that we have come to call “monogamy.” In contrast to conventional use, however, the term “monogamy” simply means “one spouse” and does not necessarily entail sexual fidelity. In any event, whereas

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jealousy is not exclusive to monogamous bonds—swingers and polyamorous people also feel jealous—the origins of jealousy and monogamy are intimately connected in our primeval past. Indeed, evolutionary psychology tells us jealousy emerged as a hypersensitive defense mechanism against the genetically disastrous possibility of having one’s partner stray from monogamy.

In the ancestral savannah, it was as imperative for females to secure a stable partner who would provide food and protect their children from predators as it was for males to make sure they were not investing their time and energy in someone else’s progeny. Put simply, from an evolutionary standpoint the main purpose of both monogamy and jealousy is to provide for the dissemination of one’s DNA.

Jealousy and Genetic Selfishness

In a context of spiritual aspiration aimed at the

gradual uncovering and transformation of increasingly subtle forms of self-centeredness, we can perhaps recognize that jealousy ultimately serves a biologically engrained form of egotism which we may call “genetic selfishness”—not to be confused with Richard Dawkins’ “selfish gene” theory, which reduces human beings to the status of survival machines at the service of gene replication. Genetic selfishness is so archaic, pandemic, and deeply seated in human nature that it invariably goes unnoticed in contemporary culture and spiritual circles.

An example may help to reveal the elusive nature of genetic selfishness. In the movie *Cinderella Man*, an officer from the electric company is about to cut off the power of the residence of three children who will very likely die without heat—it is winter in New York at the time of the Great Depression. When the children’s mother appeals to the compassion of the officer, begging him not to cut off the power, he responds that his own children will suffer the same fate if he does not do his job. Is it not both humanely understandable and morally justifiable to favor the survival of one’s own progeny over that of others? But, we may want to ponder, was the officer’s decision the most enlightened action to take? What if by saving our only child we were condemning to death three or four children from another person? Should numbers be of any significance in these decisions? What course of action is most aligned with universal compassion in these admittedly extreme situations?

Any effort to reach a generalized answer to these questions is likely misguided; each concrete situation requires careful examination within its context and from a variety of perspectives and ways of knowing. My aim in raising these questions is not to offer solutions but merely to convey how tacitly genetic selfishness is embedded as “second nature” in the human condition.

Transformation of Jealousy

The discussion of the twin evolutionary origins of jealousy and monogamy raises further questions: Can jealousy be truly transformed? What emotional response can take the place of jealousy in human experience? And how can the transformation of jealousy affect our relationship choices?

To my knowledge, in contrast to most other emotional states, jealousy has no antonym in any human language. This is probably why the Kerista community—an urban commune located in San Francisco that was disbanded in 1991—coined the term “compersion” to refer to the emotional response opposite to jealousy. The Keristas defined compersion as “the feeling of taking joy in the

joy that others you love share among themselves.” Since the term emerged in the context of the practice of polyfidelity (faithfulness to many), where members were faithful to a family group of more than 2 and up to 18 people, nine women and nine men, and all primary relationships were within the family cluster, sensuous and sexual joy were included, but compersion was only cultivated when a person had loving bonds with all parties involved.

However, the feeling of compersion can also be extended to any situation in which our mate feels emotional/sensuous joy with others in wholesome and constructive ways. In these situations, we can rejoice in our partner’s joy even if we do not know the third parties. Experientially, compersion can be felt as a tangible presence in the heart whose awakening may be accompanied by waves of warmth, pleasure, and appreciation at the idea of our partner loving others and being loved by them in nonharmful and mutually beneficial ways. In this light, I suggest that compersion can be seen as a novel extension of sympathetic joy to the realm of intimate relationships and, in particular, to interpersonal situations that conventionally evoke feelings of jealousy.

Discussing the samsaric mandala, Chögyam Trungpa writes in *Orderly Chaos*, “It is not exactly jealousy; we do not seem to have the proper term in the English language. It is a paranoid attitude of comparison rather than purely jealousy . . . a sense of competition.” Since Buddhist teachings about jealousy were originally aimed at monks who were not supposed to develop emotional attachments (even those who engaged in tantric sexual acts), the lack of systematic reflection in Buddhism upon romantic jealousy should not come as a surprise.

Let us explore now the implications of transforming jealousy for our intimate relationships. I suggest that the transformation of jealousy through the cultivation of sympathetic joy bolsters the awakening of the enlightened heart. As jealousy dissolves, universal compassion and unconditional love become more easily available to the individual. Although to love without conditions is generally easier in the case of brotherly and spiritual love, I suggest that as we heal the historical split between spiritual love (agape) and sensuous love (eros), the extension of sympathetic joy to more embodied forms of love becomes a natural development. And when embodied love is emancipated from possessiveness, a richer range of spiritually legitimate relationship options organically emerges.

As people become more whole and are freed from

certain basic fears (e.g., of abandonment, unworthiness, and engulfment), new possibilities for the expression of embodied love open up that may feel natural, safe, and wholesome rather than undesirable, threatening, or even morally questionable. Once jealousy turns into sympathetic joy and sensuous and spiritual love are integrated, a couple may feel drawn to extend their love to other individuals beyond the structure of the pair bond.

Partnership and Polyamory

Even if mindful and open, the inclusion of other loving connections in the context of a partnership can elicit the two classic objections to nonmonogamy (or polyamory): first, that it does not work in practice, and second, that it leads to the destruction of relationships. (I am leaving aside here the deeply engrained moral opposition to the very idea of polyamory associated with the legacy of Christianity in the West.)

As for the first objection, though polygyny (“many wives”) is still culturally prevalent on the globe—out of

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853 known human cultures, 84 percent permit polygyny—it seems undeniable that with a few exceptions modern attempts at more gender-egalitarian open relationships have not been very successful. Nevertheless, the same could be said about monogamy. After all, the history of monogamy is the history of adultery. As H. H. Munro wrote, monogamy is “the Western custom of one wife and hardly any mistresses.”

Summing up the available evidence, David Buss estimates that “approximately 20 to 40 percent of American women and 30 to 50 percent of American men have at least one affair over the course of the marriage,” and recent surveys suggest that the chance of *either* member of a modern couple committing infidelity at some point in their marriage may be as high as 76 percent, with these numbers increasing every year. Though most people in our culture consider themselves—and are believed to be—monogamous, anonymous surveys reveal that many are so socially but not biologically.

In other words, social monogamy frequently masks

biological polyamory in an increasingly significant number of couples. In her *Anatomy of Love*, prominent anthropologist Helen Fisher suggests that the human desire for clandestine extramarital sex is genetically grounded in the evolutionary advantages that having other mates provided for both genders in ancestral times: extra opportunities to spread DNA for males, and extra protection and resources plus the acquisition of potentially better sperm for females. It may also be important to note that the prevalent relationship paradigm in the modern West is no longer lifelong monogamy (“till death do us part”) but serial monogamy (many partners sequentially), often punctuated with adultery. Serial monogamy plus

Mindful polyamory may also offer an alternative to the usually unfulfilling nature of currently prevalent serial monogamy in which people change partners every few years.

clandestine adultery is in many respects not too different from polyamory, except perhaps in

that the latter is more honest, ethical, and arguably less harmful. In this context, the mindful exploration of polyamory, practiced with the full knowledge and approval of all concerned, may help alleviate the suffering caused by the staggering number of clandestine affairs in our modern culture.

But wait a moment. Dyadic (two-person) relationships are already challenging enough. Why complicate them further by adding extra parties to the equation? Response: From a spiritual standpoint, an intimate relationship can be viewed as a structure through which human beings can learn to express and receive love in many forms. Although I would hesitate to declare polyamory more spiritual or evolved than monogamy, it is clear that if a person has not mastered the lessons and challenges of the dyadic structure, he or she may not be ready to take on the challenges of more complex forms of relationships. Therefore, the objection of impracticability may be valid in many cases.

The second common objection to polyamory is that it results in the dissolution of pair bonds. The rationale is that the intimate contact with others will increase the chances that one member of the couple will abandon the other and run off with a more appealing mate. This concern is understandable, but the fact is that people are having affairs, falling in love, and leaving their partners all the time in the context of monogamous vows. As we have seen, adultery goes hand in hand with

monogamy, and lifelong monogamy has been mostly replaced with serial monogamy (or sequential polyamory) in our culture. Parenthetically, vows of lifelong monogamy create often unrealistic expectations that add suffering to the pain involved in the termination of any relationship—and one could also raise questions about the wholesomeness of the psychological needs for certainty and security that such vows normally meet. In any event, although it may sound counterintuitive at first, the threat of abandonment may be actually reduced in polyamory, since the loving bond that our partner may develop with another person does not necessarily mean that he or she must choose between them or us (or lie to us).

More positively, the new qualities and passions that novel intimate connections can awaken within a person can also bring a renewed sense of creative dynamism to the sexual/emotional life of the couple, whose frequent stagnation after three or four years (seven in some cases) is the chief cause of clandestine affairs and separation. As surveys have shown, the number of couples who successfully navigate the so-called four- and seven-year itches is decreasing every year. Mindful polyamory may also offer an alternative to the usually unfulfilling nature of currently prevalent serial monogamy in which people change partners every few years, never benefiting from the emotional and spiritual depth that only an enduring connection with another human being provides.

In a context of psychospiritual growth, such exploration can create unique opportunities for the development of emotional maturity, the transmutation of jealousy into sympathetic joy, the emancipation of embodied love from exclusivity and possessiveness, and the integration of sensuous and spiritual love. As Christian mystic Richard of St. Victor maintained, mature love between lover and beloved naturally reaches beyond itself toward a third reality, and this opening, I suggest, might in some cases be crucial both to overcome codependent tendencies and to foster the health, creative vitality, and perhaps even longevity of intimate relationships.

I should stress that my intent is not to argue for the superiority of any relationship style over others, a discussion I find both pointless and misleading. Human beings are endowed with widely diverse biological, psychological, and spiritual dispositions that predispose them toward different relationship styles: celibacy, monogamy, serial monogamy, or polyamory. In other words, many equally valid psychospiritual trajectories may call individuals to engage in one or another relationship style either for life or at specific junctures

in their paths. Whereas the psychospiritual foundation for this diversity of mating responses cannot be empirically established, recent discoveries in neuroscience using DNA of prairie voles support the idea of a genetic base. Although the implications of this finding for our understanding of human mating await further clarification, it strongly suggests that a diversity of relationship styles—both monogamous and polyamorous—may be genetically imprinted in humans.

For a variety of evolutionary and historical reasons, polyamory has a “bad press” in Western culture and spiritual circles—being automatically linked, for example, with promiscuity, irresponsibility, inability to commit, and even narcissistic hedonism. Given the current crisis of monogamy in our culture, however, it may be valuable to explore seriously the social potential of responsible forms of nonmonogamy. And given the spiritual potential of such exploration, it may also be important to expand the range of spiritually legitimate relationship choices that we as individuals can make at the various karmic crossroads of our lives.

Buddhist Teaching on Appropriate Sexual Expression

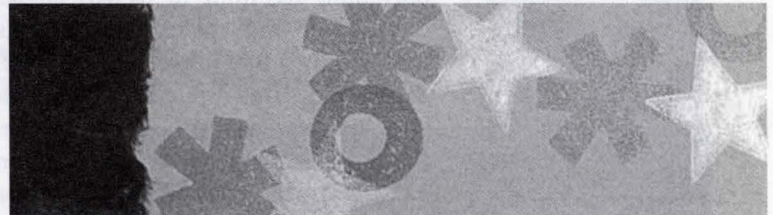
I address the objections to polyamory because lifelong or serial monogamy (together with celibacy) are still widely considered the only or most “spiritually correct” relationship styles in the modern West. In addition to the traditional Christian prescription of lifelong monogamy, many influential contemporary Buddhist teachers in the West make similar recommendations. Consider, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh’s reading of the Buddhist precept of “refraining from sexual misconduct.” Originally, this precept meant, for the monks, to avoid engaging in any sexual act whatsoever and, for laypeople, to not engage in a list of “inappropriate” sexual behaviors having to do with specific body parts, times, and places.

In *For a Future to Be Possible*, Thich Nhat Hanh explains that the monks of his order follow the traditional celibate vow in order to use sexual energy as a catalyst for spiritual breakthrough. For lay practitioners, however, Thich Nhat Hanh reads the precept to mean avoiding all sexual contact unless it takes place in the context of a “long-term commitment between two people,” because there is an incompatibility between love and casual sex (monogamous marriage is a common practice for laypeople in his order). In this reading, Thich Nhat Hanh reinterprets the Buddhist precept as a prescription for long-term monogamy, excluding the possibility of not only wholesome polyamorous relations, but also spiritually edifying

intimate encounters. (It is important to note, however, that “long-term commitment” is not equivalent to “monogamy,” since it is perfectly feasible to hold a long-term commitment with more than one intimate partner.)

In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama also assumes a monogamous structure as the container for appropriate sex in intimate relationships. Since reproduction is the biological purpose of sexual relations, he tells us, long-term commitment and sexual exclusivity are desirable for the wholesomeness of love relationships.

Despite the great respect I feel for these and other Buddhist teachers who speak in similar fashion, I must



These assessments of appropriate sexual expression, which have become influential guidelines for many contemporary Western Buddhists, are often offered by celibate individuals whose sexual experience is likely to be limited, if not nonexistent.

confess my perplexity. These assessments of appropriate sexual expression, which have become influential guidelines for many contemporary Western Buddhists, are often offered by celibate individuals whose sexual experience is likely to be limited, if not nonexistent. If there is anything we have learned from developmental psychology, it is that an individual needs to perform a number of “developmental tasks” to gain competence (and wisdom) in various arenas: cognitive, emotional, sexual, and so forth. Even when offered with the best of intentions, advice about aspects of life in which one has not achieved developmental competence through direct experience may be both questionable and misleading. When this advice is given by figures culturally venerated as spiritual authorities, the situation can become even more problematic. What is more, in the context of spiritual praxis, these assertions can arguably be seen as incongruent with the emphasis on direct knowledge characteristic of Buddhism.

It may be worth remembering that the Buddha himself encouraged polyamory over monogamy in

certain situations. In the Jataka 200 (stories of Buddha's former births), a Brahman asks the Buddha for advice regarding four suitors who are courting his four daughters. The Brahman says, "One was fine and handsome, one was old and well advanced in years, the third a man of family [noble birth], and the fourth was good." The Buddha answered, "Even though there be beauty and the like qualities, a man is to be despised if he fails in virtue. Therefore the former is not the measure of a man; those that I like are the virtuous." After hearing this, the Brahman gave all his daughters to the virtuous suitor.

As the Buddha's advice illustrates, several forms of relationship may be spiritually wholesome (in the Buddhist sense of leading to liberation) according to various human dispositions and contextual situations. Historically, Buddhism hardly ever considered one relationship style intrinsically more wholesome than others for laypeople and tended to support different relationship styles depending on cultural and karmic factors.

From the Buddhist perspective of skillful means (*upaya*) and of the soteriological nature of Buddhist ethics, it also follows that the key factor in evaluating the appropriateness of any intimate connection may not be its form but rather its power to eradicate the suffering of self and others. There is much to learn today, I believe, from the nondogmatic and pragmatic approach of historical Buddhism to intimate relationships—an approach that was not attached to any specific relationship structure but was essentially guided by a radical emphasis on liberation.

It is my hope that this essay opens avenues for dialogue and inquiry in spiritual circles about the transformation of intimate relationships. It is also my hope that it contributes to the extension of spiritual virtues, such as sympathetic joy, to all areas of life and in particular to those which, due to historical, cultural, and perhaps evolutionary reasons, have been traditionally excluded or overlooked—areas such as sexuality and romantic love.

The culturally prevalent belief—supported by many contemporary spiritual teachers—that the only spiritually correct sexual options are either celibacy or monogamy is a myth that may be causing unnecessary

suffering and that needs, therefore, to be laid to rest. It may be perfectly plausible to hold simultaneously more than one loving or sexual bond in a context of mindfulness, ethical integrity, and spiritual growth, for example, while working toward the transformation of jealousy into sympathetic joy and the integration of sensuous and spiritual love. I should add right away that ultimately I believe that the greatest expression of spiritual freedom in intimate relationships does not lie in strictly sticking to any particular relationship style—whether monogamous or polyamorous—but rather in a radical openness to the dynamic unfolding of life that eludes any fixed or predetermined structure of relationships.

It should be obvious, for example, that one can follow a specific relationship style for the "right" (i.e., life-enhancing) or "wrong" (i.e., fear-based) reasons; that all relationship styles can become equally limiting spiritual ideologies; and that different internal and external conditions may rightfully call us to engage in different relationship styles at various junctures of our lives. It is in this open space catalyzed by the movement beyond monogamy and polyamory, I believe, that an existential stance deeply attuned to the standpoint of Spirit can truly emerge.

Nevertheless, gaining awareness about the ancestral—and mostly obsolete—nature of the evolutionary impulses that direct our sexual/emotional responses and relationship choices may empower us to consciously co-create a future in which expanded forms of spiritual freedom may have a greater chance to bloom. Who knows, perhaps as we extend spiritual practice to intimate relationships, new petals of liberation will blossom that may not only emancipate our minds, hearts, and consciousness but also our bodies and instinctive world. Can we envision an "integral bodhisattva vow" in which the conscious mind renounces full liberation until the body and the primary world can be free as well? ■

NOTE: Data from evolutionary psychology included in this article are mainly drawn from the following sources: David P. Barush and Judith E. Lipton, *The Myth of Monogamy: Fidelity and Infidelity in Animals and People* (Henry Holt and Company); David Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (Basic Books) and *The Dangerous Passion: Why Jealousy Is As Necessary As Love or Sex* (Bloomsbury); and Helen Fisher, *Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray* (Random House) and *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love* (Henry Holt and Company).



Disappointment

by Soha Al-Jurf

Several years ago, while spending three months living in a Buddhist retreat center, I was invited to cofacilitate a dharma discussion on sexuality. One of 12 “long-term” lay practitioners, I was the only laywoman who was in her thirties at the time, and the nun who was giving the talk, also in her thirties, thought she might preemptively offset any question of her credibility by teaming up with someone who hadn’t taken a vow of celibacy.

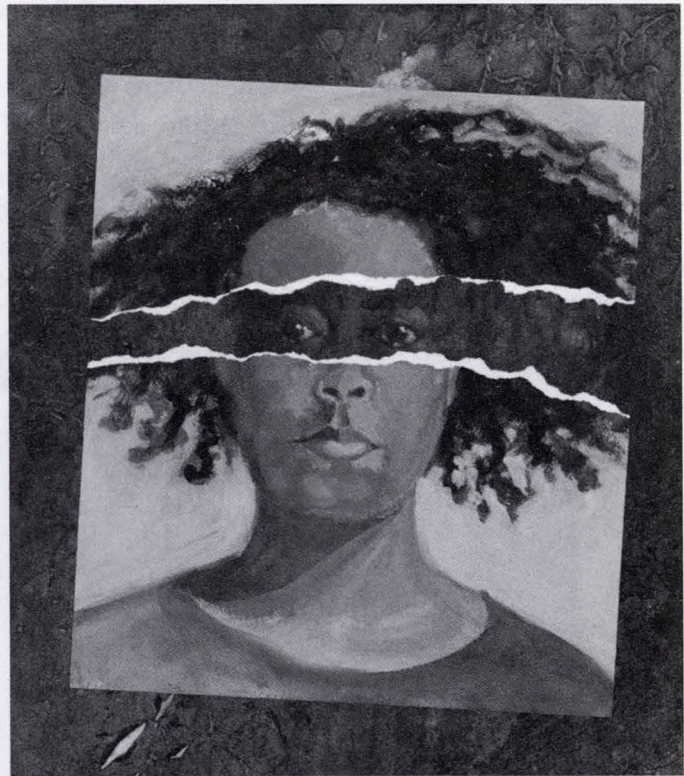
The nun had been asked to discuss the Third Mindfulness Training with a group of undergraduates who were visiting from a small Catholic college. They were spending two weeks practicing at the center, and the monastics had tailored a program to guide them through their practice period. By the time of their arrival, I had already spent a couple of months cultivating my practice within the synergistic energy of the powerful sangha, and I had grown accustomed to a certain rhythm. Sitting. Walking. Eating. Sleeping. Observing my breath and its intricate interconnectedness with the rest of the living beings around me. What I observed during the two weeks when the students were there, however, disrupted this rhythm, throwing my beginner’s mind into what could only be described as a period of profound upheaval.

Young energetic men and women with no prior meditation experience swarmed the place. The women wore form fitting tops and sweatpants, with the occasional thong-strap visible above the waistline during prostrations. This once peaceful practice center turned into a Buddhist summer camp. Bonfires blazed late into the night, with loud singing and laughter silencing the tree frogs. Silence at mealtimes was loosely enforced at best, with lively outdoor “picnics” becoming the norm. Monks stopped showing up for morning meditation, and it was rumored that some of them started showing up outside of the young women’s cabins. The nuns, on the other hand (and a few of the more seasoned monks), seemed almost to intensify their practice, perhaps in an effort to balance their brothers’ transgressions.

I was crestfallen. I had sought out a meditation practice in order to transcend the traps of the mind, to evolve, under the direction of “true” practitioners, into something (or someone) more...I don’t know...enlightened. After spending weeks marveling at the

way in which bodhichitta seemed to emanate from the monastics’ faces, watching these otherwise dignified monks revert to the behavior of adolescents was devastating. I began to suspect that my sense of being carried by the powerful magic of the dharma had been, at least partially, an illusion.

Aware of my disappointment and confusion, many of the elder monastics tried to excuse the monks’ behavior by pointing out that several of the monks in question were young men, near the ages of the college women. They reasoned that it was only natural that they would be lured into this temptation. They



explained that the monks would have to transform this powerful habit energy as they grew in their practice, but they were still lacking maturity.

Having been raised Muslim, I saw this as the chronic iteration that women’s “lewdness” is guilty of seducing unsuspecting and vulnerable men. And these Catholic girls, like Eve in the garden, were being scapegoated to excuse the lewdness of men. I was sickened by the

blatant sexism, the complete objectification of these women. I was particularly disturbed that even the elder monks didn't seem to see the sexism and objectification at all. Rather, they acknowledged only the young men's "struggle" in dealing with the challenges posed by the insidious predation of young women, and their implicit sexuality, into the monks' practice space.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the discussion with the Catholic students about sexuality largely centered around their beliefs about whether or not having sex before marriage was a sin. They spoke of parental expectations, God's commandments, and the Church's rules. In response to this, I referenced the Third Mindfulness Training, translated by Thich Nhat Hanh:

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

The principles of Buddhism do not describe actions and outcomes in terms of sin. The issue is not whether my soul will be sent to heaven or hell, but rather, will my actions and behaviors, sexual or otherwise, create a potential heaven or hell on earth, either for myself, my partner, my community, or future generations? If I can know, with clear mind and heart,

preferably in advance of acting, that my actions will cause no harm, then I am free to do with my body whatever I choose.

But then I did not take a vow of celibacy. And because the monks did, their responsibility to protect the safety and integrity of individuals and society is, as far as I'm concerned, even greater than that of "ordinary laypeople." Yet, as disappointing as the monks' behavior may have been, my expectation that taking a vow of celibacy should place them in an unwavering position to transform sexual energy into spiritual energy was probably a bit naïve.

Monastics do, after all, make the choice to live within the safety and discipline of a sangha, in partial isolation from the rest of the world. This choice is made, among other things, in order to support their desire to practice in the absence of distractions or objects of craving. Even monastics can be shaped by society's misogynistic beliefs such that they can perceive women as objects, completely missing the fact that their minds, not the "objects" of their minds, are creating their dukkha.

As the nun who led the dharma discussion said to me, "I've agreed to follow 348 precepts, but these precepts do not form the core of my practice. My greatest practice is to learn to sit, eat, walk, and speak mindfully. Without learning first to do these things, I will be incapable of being mindful of anything else. Being mindful of these four things in every moment is enough for a lifetime's work." Taking vows, making the commitment to be awake and aware: this is the beginning of one's practice, not the end. ■

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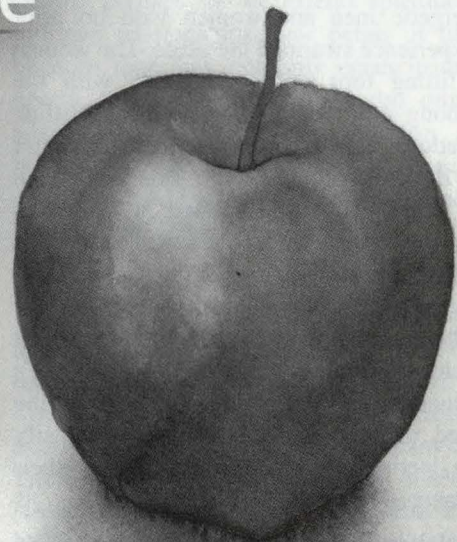
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A New Puritanism?

by Caroline Brazier

Is Buddhism in the West poised to become the new Puritanism? Despite a little dabbling around the edges in tantric exoticism, Buddhism does not have a sexy image. Celibate monasticism and pristine imagery, meticulously manicured Zen gardens, ethereal people exuding meditative calm, and lotus blossoms floating on unsullied waters suggest an ideal of asexual harmony, contrasting starkly with the eroticism of Buddhism's native India. Yet does becoming a serious practitioner really require the amputation of our passionate desires? Does the elimination of karma imply a severing of all the bonds of earthly pleasure?

For the monastic, sexual expression has always been proscribed, at least in theory, by the *vinaya* rules. Of course, with human frailty, the actuality has not always been so, but in theory, distractions of bodily longing have been viewed as the lure of mara, the energy they represent as a source of spiritual fuel that is better diverted to the path.

But what of the modern practitioner, often lay, who may be in relationship? Does sexuality need to be viewed as a distraction, a failure in the path? As we progress, should we expect our desires to lessen and finally fade out? Do we aspire toward the ideal of the celibate life, even when our circumstances are otherwise, or is there another way in which our sexual nature can authentically become a source of spiritual celebration and expression?

While the renunciant path is a strong one in the Buddhist tradition, with a valuable contribution to make, I fear its idealization has sometimes been a hindrance to our development in the West. Traditionally, lay and monastic practitioners played a complementary role. In different Buddhist countries, the exact balance of activity and status has varied as each culture has made its own accommodation to the teachings, but often the visible manifestation of Buddhist practice has been the celibate male practitioner.

Here in the West the picture is complex. On the one hand, some groups are traditionalist, anxious to adhere rigorously to the letter of particular lineages. On the other hand, other longtime practitioners are seeking to adapt practices to modern circumstances. Such processes have always happened when Buddhism

encountered new cultures. New forms of Buddhist commitment are emerging, often in the middle ground of serious engagement, which Shinran, founder of the Jodoshinshu sect, described as being neither monk nor layman. In this new and often developing space, what is the role of sexual expression in our practice?

For some the legacy of renunciant traditions pushes people to relinquish expression of feeling at all levels. Whether grief or joy, creative energy or sexual attraction, giving in to emotional involvement on any level is seen as surrender to attachment. In such ambiances, equanimity is practiced as a route to lessening human ties. But is this really what the Buddha intended?

I am saddened to hear repeatedly of couples separating or reducing their relationship to minimal contact because one or both believes that being together diminishes their capacity for practice. Yet with the high esteem of its monastic role models, can the religion really support an ethos that actively supports the couple and family? Surely there is another way of viewing our sexual nature and its relationship to the spiritual life.

The idea of bringing our sexual expression into the spiritual arena is not new. The precept on sexual misconduct has often been interpreted in the context of bringing mindfulness and compassion into our sexual relationships. What better way to experience the present moment than in another's arms; to observe the arising of sensation in the rousing of the body as it receives their loving caress? What better way to know impermanence than in holding the body of the loved one and knowing that this too will decay? Such practices are no doubt valuable if one can hold such a cool reflective mind in the midst of the passions of sexual encounter, but do they miss the energy that sexuality evokes? Do they still import into the bedroom the virginal sweetness of the celibate ideal?

In loving another intimately, we experience the other's reaction to us; we see the effects that thoughtless or self-serving acts have, but also the opening to tenderness and vulnerability which come from trust.

What of our raw and lustful moments? What of the full-throated cry of our bodies for satisfaction? What of our yearning for our lover's body wrapped in our own? Can these also be temples of our spiritual nature?

Pureland Buddhism recognizes our ordinary nature. We are *bombu* (the term used by Pureland Buddhism to describe the ordinary person). In this recognition is the root of our salvation. Seeing ordinariness strips away layers of pretense, of false propriety. Our authentic nature is our deludedness, seen in contrast against the immeasurable omnipresent otherness that is Buddha. We recognize again and again our distorting grandiosity against the stability of Amida's presence.

So in our sexual relationships, too, we see all the naked passions of our bodies, but more, the cravings of our minds, not just for satisfaction on the corporeal level but for new facets of identity that sexual conquest or relationships bring. With such insight, we can smile wryly at our nature. But more than this, while endlessly subverting the experience to such deluded ends, we are exposed to the reality of another at a level of intimacy far outweighing that experienced in more limited meetings—if we take the risk to persist in the relationship and strive for as much honesty of loving communication as we are able. While we can pretend at

niceness to others on silent retreats where interactions are limited to brief exchanges, in the bedroom such pretensions are soon debunked.

In loving another intimately, we experience the other's reaction to us; we see the effects that thoughtless or self-serving acts have, but also the opening to tenderness and vulnerability that come from trust. The loving presence of another at a bodily as well as emotional level both mirrors our humanity and shows us the unique qualities of the other, distinct from our own. He is not I, and I am not he. In the nuances of touch we learn to trust and also that we do not always trust. We test the boundaries of our existence and hold the preciousness of life itself. In our moments of release, we relinquish our need to control the universe, and we flow with force of our love.

So our sexual nature need not be separated but can become our teacher.

Our sharpening senses in the moment of consummation awaken our capacity to embrace not just our lover but also our human condition, with both its samsaric reality and its aspiration to spiritual connection. In the melting pot of practice, everything may become the source of energy for the path if we have the humility to face it honestly. ■

Do we aspire toward the ideal of the celibate life, even when our circumstances are otherwise, or is there another way in which our sexual nature can authentically become a source of spiritual celebration and expression?

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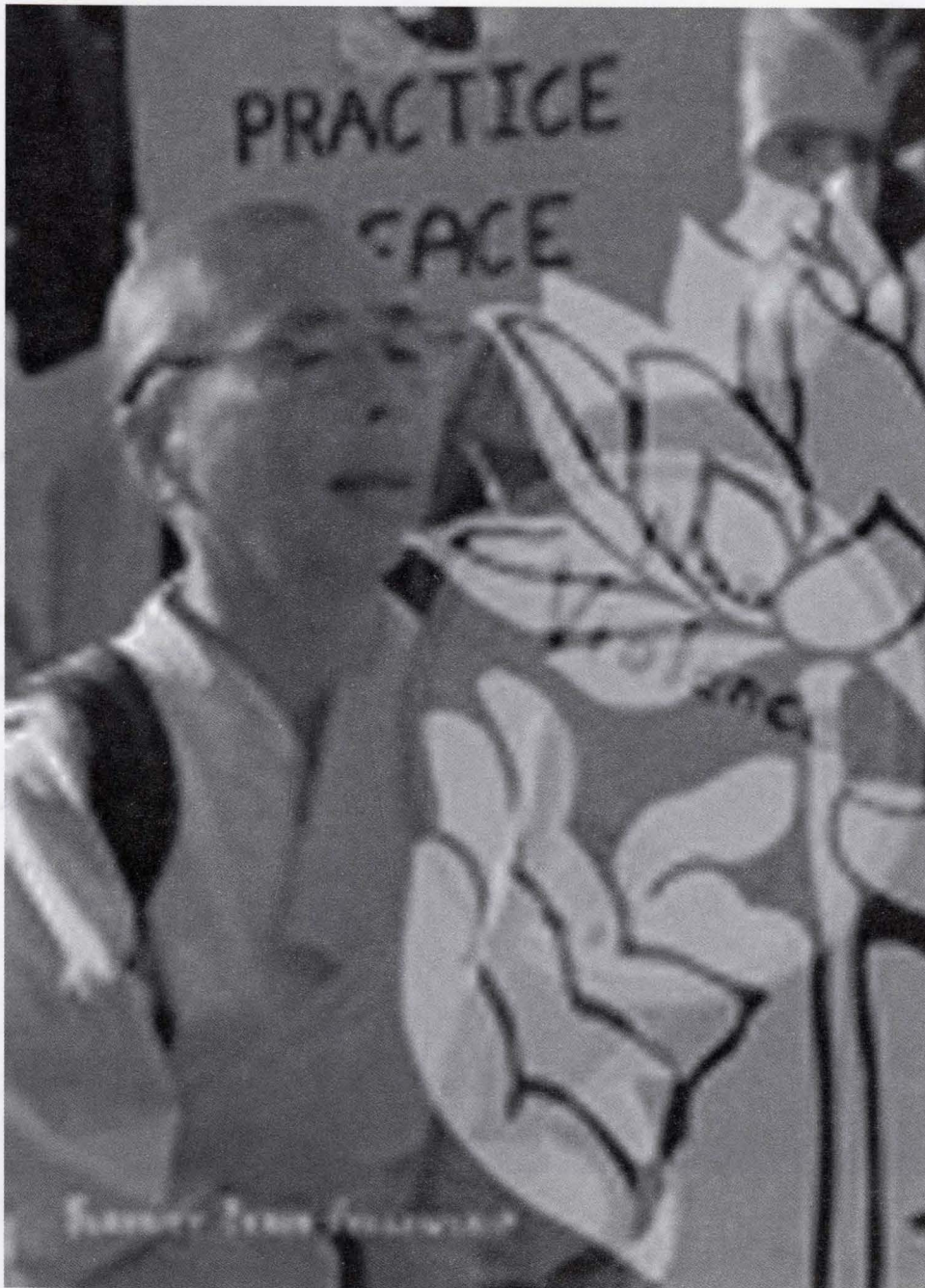



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Opening

by Kate Rice



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What of pain-love and joyful all events? What of the full-
fringed eye of our body for satisfaction? What of our
yearning for our lover's body wrapped in our own? Can these
also be temples of our spiritual nature?

Purpled Tenth
down the torn
ordinary person
advancing. Being
away from it
passing. Our au



niceness of objects on silver retreats where interacting are
limited to brief exchanges in the bedroom such pretensions
are soon debunked.

In loving another intimately we experience the object's

Behold

by Amy Pence

Behold how love illuminates,
radiates, erases—
a manmade filament
Behold
the colon: a little un-
locking noise. Be
and hold.

In the charged new
dark, with you
inside me—I find
there's room
for both.

Opening

by Kate Rose

Lying quietly with you in the fields of Kun-lun
 I raise myself up and lean softly over
 My gaze washing down like dew from the mountaintop
 Barely perceptible, tender, eternal
 It collects on the bud, which grows heavy and wet
 Arcing down toward the earth from which it has sprung
 In the constancy of sunlight, the hunting rhythm finds it
 Bursting into bloom in the warrior's hand

Unknown Traveler

by Kate Rose

An unknown traveler
 Wanders by a fallen tree
 Observing without pity
 The pithless hollow
 Collapsing upon itself

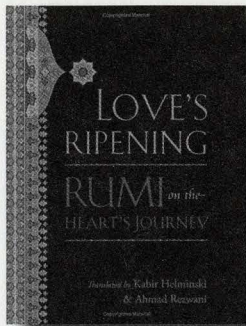
Its exposed roots sag
 Sprawling in mindless protest
 At decay's sweet scent
 Too soft to bear her weight, still
 Its presence offers comfort

Straight, silent, willing
 She stretches alongside it
 Soft, yielding, hollow
 Merging with the primal floor
 And long-forgotten creatures

Soft, white pearls of dew
 Hover over the forest
 Entering its folds
 Seeking the secret chamber
 Pulling creation within

Elixir pooling
 In the mellow, loamy earth
 Blue petals unfold
 In the fresh, black midnight air
 To reveal the eye of love

Book Reviews



Love's Ripening: Rumi on the Heart's Journey

Translated by Kabir Helminski &
Ahmad Rezwani

Shambhala Publications, 2008,
120 pages, \$16.95, hardcover

Reviewed by
Zenju Earthlyn Manuel

Circle the Kaaba of the heart,
if you possess a heart.

The heart is the true Kaaba, the other is just a stone.

LOVE'S RIPENING IS A BOOK OF POEMS by Rumi, a Sufi poet of the 13th century. When I read the above excerpt from the poem "The True Kaaba," I understood why Rumi spoke of the Kaaba, a sanctuary of prayer and the most sacred site in Islam, as the heart. From my own life experience I know the heart to be the temple of the deepest aspirations for peace. And truly the heart is just a stone without the breath of life and blood flowing through it.

The second stanza reads:

God enjoined the ritual
of circling the formal Kaaba
as a way for you to find a heart.

Although it speaks of God, the poem did not steer me away from resonating with seeing the circling of the Kaaba as a ritual to find a heart. We circle our hearts when the suffering in the world troubles us. We circle our hearts constantly in our journeys for compassion and wisdom.

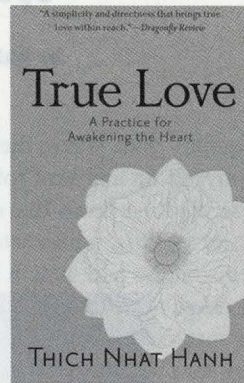
Rumi goes on to say that the circling of the Kaaba is not just about our own hearts. We can circle it a thousand times and yet are capable of injuring another's heart. He is talking about a basic Buddhist principle of nonharming in our actions.

He wrote:

But if your feet walk around
the Kaaba a thousand times,
and yet you injure a heart,
do you expect to be accepted?

On the jacket of the book there is a teaching that infuses Rumi's work: "Love is the meaning of our existence, the raw material of transformation, the glorious way of access to the Divine intimacy." Rumi writes, "There is no love greater than Love with no object, for then you, yourself, have become Love itself." I could go on and on.

When I finally closed the book for a rest, I was fully aware of the need to expand love into such an infinite realm. The experience was sobering.



True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart

by Thich Nhat Hanh

Shambhala Publications, 2004,
120 pages, \$6.99 paperback

Reviewed by
Zenju Earthlyn Manuel

WHEN I SAW THE TITLE of Thich Nhat Hanh's book True Love, it reminded me of an incident that occurred while I was staying at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center.

In one of our study classes there were many questions about how to express anger, such as What can I do as a Buddhist to work with anger? How can I speak with the anger? After some time, I interjected, "Why doesn't anyone ask how to express love?" Many in the room became angrier as I brought up the word "love."

As in many of Thich Nhat Hanh's books, attention to the human experience of love is simple and to the point. He speaks as if he were sitting next to you talking about your personal problems. On the other hand, his message is all-encompassing because he is also addressing societal views of love.

In relationship to activism, he writes, in his chapter titled "Learning to Speak with Love Again," "There are pacifists who can write protest letters of great condemnation but who are incapable of writing a love letter." He is asking about how can we communicate in a way that is peaceful? How can there be love in our actions toward war, homelessness, or sustaining the resources on the earth?

What does he call "love?" He is not talking about sentimentalism or romance. He is speaking of the Buddha's teachings on *maitri* (lovingkindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity or freedom). In true love we experience these four elements of love.

If you are interested in seeing how a relationship between two people is fodder for the depth of love in the world, this is an easy and simple book that may help.

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel is an essayist and author. Her most recent book is Tell Me Something About Buddhism (Kasai River Press, 2009).



Touching Enlightenment: Finding Realization in the Body

By Reginald A. Ray, Ph.D.
Sounds True, 2008, 395 pages,
\$24.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Everett Wilson

USUALLY I THINK OF READING A BOOK as a mental activity, but while reading this book, I was reminded again and again of how physical an activity reading actually is: the strain in the muscles around my eyes from squinting, the strain in my lower back from hunching over the book, the strain in my ankles and thighs from using my lap as a desk to take notes, my cold fingers and feet—a sign of sluggish circulation from sitting for too long. I was unusually aware of the physical demands of becoming absorbed in a good book. For the first time since I learned how to read, I found myself taking more care in how I held my book, my head, my shoulders, letting my body take in Reginald Ray's words about how to become more embodied.

A well-known scholar of Vajrayana Buddhism, Ray has written a remarkably accessible study of body-centered meditation. He begins by discussing the horribly disembodied state of most people living in modern Western culture. According to Ray, as modern men and women, we are typically only dimly aware of the actual physical experience of our bodies, allowing only the part of our experience into our awareness that supports our sense of self, our agenda of where we want to go.

"The icon of our culture is the jetliner," writes Ray, "where we are flying at a tremendous rate of speed, but in a very real sense, going nowhere, a million miles from the earth, inhumanly trapped in an intimacy for hours with strangers as troubled as we, against a backdrop of lurking dread that maybe we are going to die."

According to Ray, in any given moment, the body experiences a world much more vast and rich than our constructed sense of self can accommodate, so out of fear we force ourselves into a kind of numb blindness. But this unacknowledged experience doesn't just go away. Yogacara philosophy shows us that this unacknowledged experience is stored in a kind of "universal unconscious," or *alaya*. Ray posits that *alaya* is not some sort of ethereal dream world but a kind of numbness and tension stored in the body itself.

Given the right causes and conditions, this unacknowledged experience can rise into our conscious awareness. The tension most bodies feel is the struggle between our threatened sense of self and our own body's attempt to awaken us. This

experience goes on from birth to death to rebirth in a seemingly endless cycle, and is the root of our suffering.

For me the greatest insight in the book comes when Ray applies this view of embodiment to the story of Buddha's enlightenment. According to Ray's interpretation of the Buddha's enlightenment story, on the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha brought to his awareness "the knowledge held in his body at deeper and deeper levels." This process begins with his memory of his past lives. "In particular, a buddha is a person," Ray writes, "who is present to and remembers all his former lives, all his previous births. Not only does he remember them, but he feels and lives through them as if he were living them again."

Why is this memory of past lives—a concept particularly troublesome for the West's scientific orientation towards experience—so important a part of the traditional stories of the Buddha's enlightenment? Because before we can truly accept that there is no self separate from others, we need to embody the experience of "the other." If there is no self separate from me and you, then there is no self separate from historical people either. Thus in Ray's vision of Vajrayana, the genetic truth that every one of us is an expression of every person who has lived and died before us is a visceral experience. Our karmic past is stored in our body, waiting for us to experience and release it. This, argues Ray, is the profound truth Gautama discovered under the bodhi tree. As he became more and more embodied, there was finally no room for any sense of self at all.

Perhaps the ultimate irony of Ray's book is its philosophical slant. Ray carefully explores all the philosophical implications of somatic meditation but tends to leave the actual practice relegated to the appendix of the book. It might have been helpful to see some of the meditation exercises integrated a little more carefully into the profound philosophical argument Ray presents.

Even so, after I set this book down to take a break from the exertion of reading, I looked out the window into the fog of another East Bay morning to find a surprise: a family of black-tailed deer gathered beneath the pine tree. Carefully I slid open the sliding glass door to the balcony and slipped out quietly so as not to frighten the deer. The fog enveloped me like a blanket, cool and moist. Watching the doe nuzzle among the leaves of the bed of ivy beneath the pine, ears cocked, listening intently to the news of the world around her, I began to hear, to feel a kind of awareness in the outside world, a world waiting for me to experience it, with my body. I could feel the cool wet, smell the damp lushness of the ivy, even taste the green of the leaves, while the doe raised her head to chew, and this, perhaps, is the kind of world Reginald Ray would invite us to embody.

Everett Wilson is a poet and writer who has been practicing Zen Buddhism for eight years. He lives in Moraga, California.



Together Under One Roof: Making a Home of the Buddha's Household

by Lin Jensen

Wisdom Publications, 2008,
268 pages, \$16.95, paperback

Reviewed By Patrick Carolan

IN LIN JENSEN'S *Together Under One Roof: Making a Home of the Buddha's Household*, readers see a longtime teacher of Zen Buddhism speaking in riddles about ancient Zen masters speaking in riddles. The founder of the Chico Zen Sangha, Jensen presents us with a book that offers a series of short two- or three-page dharma talks—*teishos*—analyzing various koans posited by masters and pupils of Zen study. By relating them to examples taken from subjects including world politics, hiking, environmentalism, and cooking an evening meal, to name a few, he elegantly gives these ancient puzzles clarity and relevance to our everyday lives. This is all done with the goal of showing us the beauty of the ordinary and our own ultimate oneness with the world around us, a place alive with the Buddha.

One such koan examined is “to play an iron flute with no holes.” Given such a challenge there are two possible options, the first being to shrink away from the impossibility of the task and “retreat within the limits of the conceivable.” But the second option is to dive in and revel in the boundless freedom of an undefined instrument and somehow give it form. To simply “play it anyway.” In doing this, what is revealed is the power and creativity of ordinary mind.

Jensen also explores the story of Elder Ting, a monk who, after asking Zen Master Lin-chi, “What is the great meaning of Buddhist teaching?” is literally struck dumb by an earnest slap across his face. Nowadays we might ask, what is the real meaning of this Zen story, an authentic case of what Jack Kerouac would call “Zen lunacy”? Well, as Jensen explains this curious tale, on the brink of what Elder Ting assumes will be a complete answer to his quandary, a moment of even deeper clarity is brought on by this completely unanticipated destruction of all his expectations, of his desiring mind.

Anyone with an entry-level experience of Zen teaching is likely to have heard this hoary tale in one manifestation or another; what Jensen does is relate this classic Zen parable to his own experience. Following a hike, a new friend tells the

author that when they'd first met on their trip, he'd thought Jensen was a “real pain in the ass.” Like Elder Ting, the author is flabbergasted: in his own mind he had thought the outing was a great success. Haven't we all experienced this feeling at one time or another? Jensen's point seems to be that in the uncertainty brought on by the shattering of our perceived realities (e.g., I am a good student, I am a good lover, I can hold my liquor, etc.), there is a beauty, because with our own personal drama destroyed we can free ourselves from the illusions we inadvertently create for ourselves.

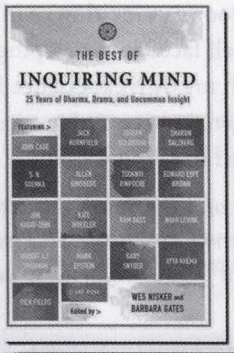
These kinds of situations largely shape this book. Collectively, they form a compendium of lessons gathered by a teacher who has himself learned that the Buddha's real household is found in the stuff of everyday life. Small prayers of contrition the author offers when overwhelmed by the burden of failures in day-to-day living provide examples of how, even in a secular age, we can still find solace in the simplicity of everyday sacraments. Jensen's accounts and tales of birding and hiking in the Sierras evidence his grounding in the natural world and give a poetic sensibility to his sense of hope as he shares his contemporary take on the Buddha's ageless insight.

Interestingly, at times these *teishos* bear a striking similarity to Catholic teachings, both in their sermon-like form and in their call to practice universal compassion: to recognize the sacred in all things. This view likely has roots in Jensen's time spent as Buddhist chaplain at High Desert State Prison in California, where he worked to preserve some of the “loving mercy” among those who society has swept aside by locking them away.

Indeed, Jensen bows reverently to the equality of the whole picture of daily experience—the pots and pans, beets and beans, pity of it. As he relates, this is the Buddha's real household, and “the Buddha's household happens to be wherever I am at the moment.” He concludes that asking how his Zen practice is going is tantamount to asking how his entire life is going; “there is no valid distinction between the two.”

Readers may question whether there is a central thread to these accounts. Rather than flowing from one another, each lesson is more a fragment of knowledge within the larger collage of this teacher's cumulative wisdom. More useful than earthshaking, it's the kind of book you'll appreciate having handy when a friend asks, “What's the real meaning of the Buddha's teachings?”

Patrick Carolan writes from Vancouver, Canada where he studies cognitive psychology, history and Korean language at the University of British Columbia.



The Best of Inquiring Mind: 25 Years of Dharma, Drama, and Uncommon Insight

Edited by Wes Nisker and Barbara Gates

Wisdom Publications, 2008, 338 pages, \$17.95, paperback

Reviewed by Diana Fisher

CERTAIN COMPANIONABLE BOOKS can be opened anywhere, at any time, and to any page. They are found treasures small and accessible enough to be appreciated in the rare fragments of free time doled out in a busy life, yet are also complex and sonorous, endowing such moments with greater cohesiveness and depth.

The recently released *Best of Inquiring Mind* fulfills such a role. Gleaned from the Berkeley-based magazine's 25-year history, this anthology chronicles—and celebrates—the span of its history with selections of short essays, poems, and interviews with some of the most influential Buddhist teachers and writers. Born out of the Theravadan tradition of Vipassana meditation, *Inquiring Mind* has drawn readers and writers from an array of Buddhist traditions, and, in the spirit of *dana*—freely giving—the journal has survived on donations, offering its pages to anyone who writes in with an address. Generosity has spawned generosity, and the diverse offering of these pages testifies to the rich heritage of Buddhism in the West.

From the Zen tradition, Ed Brown shares an earthy, self-effacing, and hilarious drama of a failed rhubarb torte. Susan Moon tells us how Buddhist practice both helped, and hindered, recovery from depression for the “worst Zen student there ever was.” Jack Kornfield shares the Dalai Lama’s advice on choosing teachers: spy on them. From the Thai forest, where he saved trees by ordaining them, Ajahn Passano discusses love and community with Julia Butterfly Hill. From New Delhi, Kiran Bedi tells firsthand of the groundbreaking Vipassana meditation program she brought to the prison where she serves as inspector general.

Out of this rich convergence of traditions, many of these voices resound with a sense of wakeful suspense, as if poised for the next “turning of the wheel.” For most of these writers and speakers, impending transformation will involve the healing of divisions; the implicit message of the collection

may be that this healing will be fostered by the kinds of dialogues found within its pages.

An anthology like this lends itself to further, imaginary conversations across the boundaries of its chapters, each voice playing off the others. When Sharon Salzberg expresses concerns about programs that introduce practice as a form of stress reduction without the moral foundation, as if in response, Jon Kabat-Zinn, pages later, tells of the Dalai Lama’s answer to a similar protest: “there are 4 billion people on the planet, and only 1 billion of them are Buddhist...does that mean we should ignore the suffering of the other 3 billion?”

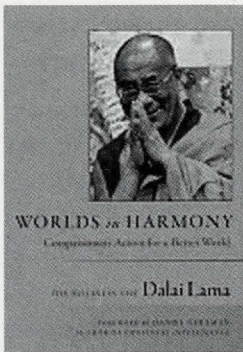
Many speak to the need, in one way or another, to universalize the Dharma, or to render it more accessible. When Gary Snyder correlates our stage of assimilation of Buddhism with a period in ancient China when it was studied by “a small highly privileged aristocratic elite,” other voices complete this picture with personal testimony.

Charlie Johnson, in his “Memory of a Near Lynching,” movingly recounts how, as one of the few people of color at a meditation retreat, he was retraumatized as a memory of being beaten in an all-white neighborhood resurfaced. For *Dharma Punx* author Noah Levine, the privileged idealism of his parents’ “hippie”—and Buddhist—ethos could not translate to his own generation’s “defiant nihilism fed by hopelessness,” until he found himself “lost at sea, and the life raft that came along was full of hippies.”

The multiplicity of these voices mirrors the ongoing internal dialogues within each of us. Each voice, however distinct, highlights the subtlety of the whole, the voice that holds it all. In the book’s culminating section, “Tending to the World,” activist Joanna Macy’s words encapsulate the shared theme of this pluralistic voice. In what she calls the “third turning of the wheel” of Dharma, “there will be no split between meditation and action in the world,” and our focus will shift from the suffering we seek release from, toward that which we will be released into: the state of inter-being. Macy’s message, and that of the entire collection, serves as a beacon in these dark stages before dawn.

Hope no doubt inspires the enthusiasm Macy shares when, speaking of the Dharma, her “eyes lit up and she exclaimed, ‘It’s so beautiful... just pick it up anywhere!’” I found this equally true of the book as a whole: it is beautiful, and you can pick it up anywhere.

Diana Fisher is a psychotherapist-in-training, bodyworker, and Zen student in Berkeley.



Worlds in Harmony: Compassionate Action for a Better World

by the Dalai Lama
Parallaz Press, 2008,
108 pages, \$11.66, paperback
Reviewed By Jamie Meyerhoff

IMAGINE SPENDING THREE DAYS TALKING with the Dalai Lama about your deepest concerns and daily confusions. Imagine holding a record of his kind and thoughtful responses in your hand: an almost pocket-sized book, full of hope and wisdom. *Worlds in Harmony* is a compilation of the Dalai Lama's words during a three-day conversation with almost a thousand people that, incidentally, corresponded with the week he received the Nobel Peace Prize.

The simplicity and breadth of *Worlds in Harmony* is impressive. The text stands on its own without need for the historical context of its becoming. The tone is intimate, informal, and friendly; the depth is fathomless. During the course of reading the book, I found myself anticipating my time with it as I would time with a wise, dear friend.

With the directness of a true how-to manual, the book cuts to the core in Chapter One with a frank discussion about the cultivation of happiness. It then proceeds to directly address hope, despair, anger, love, compassion, fear, and worry. The Dalai Lama shares his thoughts on many of the major political and social issues of our day, including environmentalism, international affairs, and feminism. In his advice and encouragement, he often speaks to the American who may have little if any experience with meditation. Although this slender book will be an unintimidating introduction to Buddhist practice and philosophy, it also bears slower reading.

For longtime meditators and activists, the Dalai Lama shows the clear path of maturation of a human mind. He offers himself as a spiritual friend and fellow human. In the section "Hope and Despair," he draws from his own decades of meditation and activism. "If you go deeply into your own spiritual practice, you will encounter the suffering of other sentient beings again and again," and he cautions, "When contemplating suffering, do not fall into depression." Practical suggestions and exercises follow.

We learn from the Dalai Lama as we learn from a friend. Through sharing himself, his thoughts, his experience, and

his feelings, he beckons from an open doorway, inviting us in. After recounting the challenges he himself faced in developing mental stability, he concludes, "Through my own experience I am convinced that as a result of less anger, we become happier and healthier, smile and laugh more, and have more friends."

Jamie Meyerhoff was raised at Tassajara and the San Francisco Zen Center. She is currently raising her own son at the SF Zen Center while completing a master's in nurse-midwifery at University of California, San Francisco.

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 What does living integrally mean?

Guest Teachers

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 Diane Hamilton
 Swami Durganada
 Bill Plotkin
 Dorothy Hunt
 Mukti
 Sylvia Boorstein
 Leonard Jacobson
 Duane Elgin
 Richard Miller
 Dianne Timberlake
 Sean Hargens
 Bert Parlee
 Terry Patten
 John Prendergast

Partial List of Practices

- Integral Awakening Process
- Meditation
- Physical Exercise
- Shadow Work
- 3-2-1 Shadow Process
- Big Mind Meditation
- Deep Imagery

Partial Reading List

- *True Meditation*
by Adyashanti
- *Soulcraft*
by Bill Plotkin
- *The Power of Now*
by Eckhart Tolle

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Dimension	Name	Path	Practice	Purpose
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c) Ego	Middeworld	interdependence	ego integration	ego maturation

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b) **SOUL:** The lowerworld journey is a path of decendence: a burrowing down into our depths where we encounter soul, which depth psychologist Bill Plotkin describes as, "The deepest core of your human nature, the reason spirit has taken shape as you, and the essence of your specific life purpose." Through *soul work* practices we can become soul embodied human beings, thereby fulfilling our deepest longings while serving the human and more-than human realms.

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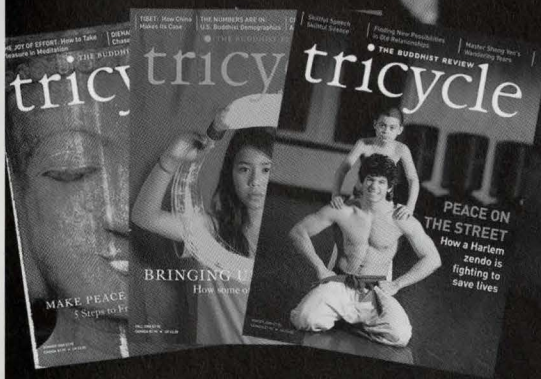
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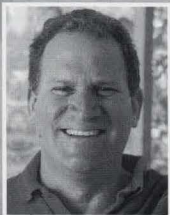
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LAMA SURYA DAS is the author of *The Big Questions* (Rodale, 2007) and *Buddha Is As Buddha Does*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007). He is also the author of *Natural Radiance (Sounds True)*, as well as a number of other books including *Letting Go of the Person You Used to Be* and the *Awakening* trilogy, which includes the classic *Awakening the Buddha Within* (Broadway).

Lama Surya is a Lineage holder of Tibetan Buddhism in the Rimè (non-sectarian) tradition. For over thirty years, including more than eight years in secluded retreat, he has studied with the great masters of Tibetan Buddhism. With his open and lively style, he is particularly effective in the transmission of Buddhism in viable Western forms by presenting Buddhist ethics and insight, as well as methods of practice, in a manner accessible to all.

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