

## BUDDHISM AND THE EROTIC INTEGRATING THE SERPENT

### *The New Morality*

One of the most interesting developments of western life in recent years has been the emergence of a new and more tolerant attitude to sexuality. People now in their middle years can remember a time when homosexuals were not only prosecuted but persecuted by the police; in some places courting couples had to be circumspect, and the unmarried mother was a figure of shame. Censorship was strong in literature, theatre and films. There seemed to have been little change since the tribulations of D.H. Lawrence and of Oscar Wilde before him. Yet, imperceptibly change was happening. The grim aspect of law and the self-righteous aspect of morality were being touched into something more humane and understanding, leading to a new era in sexual and social history, with both satisfactions and challenges, not least for western Buddhists.

Especially in the changed attitude to homosexuality it can seem as if the spirit of ancient Greece has come to life again; an astonishing revival indeed, since, in the sexual sphere above all others, the Judaeo-Christian ethic was dominant for so long and 'the Greek vice' was anathema. The influence of that ethic was all-pervasive for the greater part of two millennia, and any departure from its standards was deemed a sin and a perversion. This damning word was uniquely reserved for sexual deviations, the number and nicety of which might well suggest a clinical industry dedicated to their discovery and definition. One notable division of it was to be found in the field of moral theology, where the labors of celibate authorities raised many a scholarly monument.

As in so many fields of human activity, it is to the Greeks that we owe our vocabulary in this one, from androgyny to zoophilia. And it is to them we must turn for the first discussion of the subject in western culture. It is found in Plato's *Symposium*. The setting for this celebrated conversation is a party in the house of the dramatist Agathon. Among the guests are Socrates and Aristophanes. The subject of the evening's talk is love. Socrates' contribution is the culmination of the event, as is to be expected in a work by his most devoted pupil. He recounts what the wise woman Diotima of Mantinea told him about the true nature of the god Eros. More interesting to me here, however, for reasons which will become apparent later, is the contribution of the comic poet Aristophanes.

It may be that he tells the story as a jest, but Plato gives it with a straight face. Once upon a time, says the poet, human beings were found in three forms, male, female and androgynous. This last was said to be a

creature of the moon, as the male was said to be of the sun and the female of the earth. The strength of the three was tremendous and their pride no less. The gods themselves felt under threat from them, so much so that Zeus, the father of gods and men, decided to take action. He cut each form in twain. Since then the divided beings have been men and women as we know them: heterosexuals from the androgynes, homosexual men from the male forms and homosexual women from the female forms. But each man and woman now is really only a half, and in quest of the other half which will make it whole. The story is a fascinating piece of mythopoeia. It illustrates beautifully the tolerance of the classical world in sexual matters, and is a precursive of the liberal western attitude to sexual variation today.

The Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev was deeply interested in the myth of the androgyne, which he found also in the writings of the medieval mystic Jakob Boehme. But Berdyaev saw sex and life as vitiated by original sin. In fact he saw sex in terms of horror: 'The horror of sex is the horror of life and death in our sinful world, the horror of being unable to escape it.' He commends Freud for understanding that 'Eros is bound up with death', and reminds the reader that great poets and artists, too, have seen and shown the connection, as Wagner does in *Tristan and Isolde*. Berdyaev was a great believer in sublimation: 'Man sinks low, overcome by the unregenerate force of sex, and rises high through sublimating it... To sacrifice one's Eros, diverting its energy in another direction, may increase one's creative power. We see it in Ibsen and in the tragic fate of Kierkegaard...' These quotations from *The Destiny of Man* contain an interesting if not unfamiliar idea, but not one with which a Buddhist who knows something of the Scriptures is bound to agree, as I hope to show in due course.

With regard to Eros and death, Berdyaev might have recalled the Greek drama to illustrate his argument. Aristophanes himself gives us the humorous eroticism of the *Lysistrata*, but the great tragedians presented sex in an altogether darker light. A powerful erotic charge runs through the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. There is adultery in the *Agamemnon*, incest in the *Oedipus*, voyeurism in the *Bacchae* and associated homicide in each. So also in the epic literature: the fate of Troy is sealed with the first kiss of Helen and Paris. As for the lyric poetry, the passion, that is, the anguish of love has rarely found purer expression than in the verses of Sappho of Lesbos.

Where the generous modern spirit goes beyond the Greeks is in regard to incest. Most cultures have had a taboo on intrafamilial sexual relations, and the Greeks were no exception. Sophocles' tragedy conveys the horror inspired by such relations even when blameless, for Oedipus did not know that Jocasta was his mother nor she that he was her son.

Today there is an apparent weakening of the taboo, apart from those cases where parents or other relatives exploit defenceless children for selfish gratification. There is sympathy now when, unknowingly, after long separation, brothers and sisters, parents and offspring meet and are drawn to each other, and sexual intimacy occurs. No longer swayed by religious dictates, western people in general seem to be more tolerant of such occasions than formerly.

Another advance we have made is in the equalization of the status of the sexes. In many cultures, both ancient and modern, women have been treated as lesser beings than men. Even Greek civilization was misogynistic, for all that it produced Sappho, Aspasia and Hypatia in history, and Andromache, Penelope and Antigone in literature. Few documents, whether historical or literary, from any ancient civilization, suggest anything approaching equality between the sexes. One of the few is the *Sigalovada Sutta* of the Pali Canon, a discourse attributed to the Buddha which I have dealt with at some length elsewhere. It sets out in a very balanced fashion the reciprocal duties of husbands and wives, among other pairings in society - parents and children, teachers and pupils and so on. Sexual equality is also indicated in another discourse, the *Aggañña Sutta*, one which is more immediately relevant to the subject of this essay and which will be discussed later.

Homosexuality, incest, equality: in these and other areas of human relationships, it would appear that a new morality is forming in the life of the western world.

### *Beauty, Truth and Sanity*

We in the West are the inheritors of two great though contrasting traditions, the Judaeo-Christian and the Greek. With the rise of Christianity certain elements of Judaism and Hellenism were brought together. The Judaic strain, with its sacred history, its moral code, its prophets and its wisdom literature, predominated. In one respect especially the dominance was virtually absolute. The Greek cult of nakedness was lost, both in sport and in art, where the unclothed figure was confined to depictions of 'our First Parents' and of the Last Judgement. Innocent nakedness was considered prelapsarian. When Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit and 'the eyes of them both were opened', their first act of self-consciousness was 'to know themselves naked', wherefore they made a covering of fig leaves for their bodies. And God reinforced their shame by making them coats of skins. Postlapsarian nakedness must then be wrong, and so the Greek way perished. The abolition of the Olympic Games by a Christian Roman Emperor was not only the last nail in the coffin of classical paganism but a proclamation that the body had ceased to be associated with divine

beauty. The only body now deemed worthy of honor was the tortured body on the cross, and people were admonished to make themselves in the image of that god by mortification of the flesh. A thousand years would go by before the body as something of value in itself was rediscovered, and that happened because the Greek past was rediscovered in the Renaissance. The effects of the rediscovery were only partial however, and confined to works of art from the hands of such masters as Michelangelo, Giambologna and Rubens. It led to no revival of games as the Greeks knew them.

There was much more of course to the ancient Games than displays of physical prowess. They were great cultural events, and poets and historians came and recited and read their work, and warring city states laid down their arms for the duration. The modern games have still some way to go before they attain that fullness. Maybe they never will. But the revival of the Olympics proclaimed that the sane Greek spirit was a thing of value in the modern world. It was a sign of change, a change going back perhaps to Walt Whitman in the middle of the nineteenth century, who had the unique courage to say of himself: 'I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul.'

Not everyone is happy with all that has flowed from this neopagan attitude. It is not just the Olympics and the enormous part that sport in general plays in contemporary life; there are what many would consider the downright immoral evidences which they see on every side, in newspapers, magazines, videos, and of course the internet. The old, vague term 'smut' has now been quite superseded by the more accusatory word 'pornography'. It is of course a description merited in some cases, but not, I would suggest, in all. It derives from the Greek word 'porneia', meaning lewdness; but the contemplation of the naked human form may have much less to do with lewdness than with beauty, a longing for an ideal which modern life with all its glitter and distractions is somehow unable to satisfy, and which modern artists all too often seem to ignore. Beauty demands tribute, and sometimes in a sad and lonely way the contemplation of sexual images is an endeavour to pay it. Who can say that it is entirely mistaken? The love of beauty has something to do with the love of truth, and a lot surely to do with the practice of sanity.

What a strange thing, that it has generally been considered proper to pay tribute to the beauty of nature – plants, animals, rocks, landscape, sea, sky and space – but such tribute has so often been denied to the human form in the state of nature. The Greeks saw ethics and aesthetics as essentially one and their art idealized 'the human form divine'. For all that Christianity conceived the body to be 'the temple of the Holy Spirit', it cultivated an attitude which eroded that healthy pagan pride. The greatest of medieval saints, Francis of Assisi, saw the body as 'brother

ass', a humble, punishable beast of burden, and the burden was the soul. As said above, it was not until the rediscovery of the Greek attitude in the Renaissance that the body came to be seen anew as of value in its own right. Since then every age has felt free to do it honor, and through it to do honor to the love of beauty that warms the human mind.

### *Pornography*

That there is, however, something rightly called pornography no reasonable person could deny. In itself the body is neither good nor bad; it is a natural object brought into the moral sphere according to how we act through and with it. Buddhism makes it the basis of its model of man, the *skandhas* in union, or *namarupa*. Its importance is particularly well indicated by this term, for *rupa* is body only, while *nama* denotes the other four skandhas, feelings, intelligence, activities and consciousness together. Granted this importance, however, the body is never to be so regarded as to dominate the whole. If the placing of the term 'rupa' in the compound means anything, the meaning would seem to be that it is secondary to the combination of the others. The implication of this is that the body is not to be seen in life or in art as being or as denoting the whole person. This is the failing of pornography: it tries to create the illusion that what is seen is all there is, that the part is the whole, and that anything not of the body is irrelevant. Buddhism sees greed, hatred and delusion as the fundamental vices, and they are exemplified in pornography: it is usually produced to make money; it exploits the vulnerable, and it makes believe that human nature can be reduced to a sexual mechanism.

Buddhism sees man as an autonomous being, having the faculty of free will and the possibility of liberation from time and inner compulsions. It offers five precepts, the *PañcaSila*, for the conduct of life. The first is the injunction to refrain from violence; by extension, from exerting compulsion on others. It is when compulsion, physical, emotional, economic, is brought to bear on the vulnerable that sex becomes vicious, for then their autonomy is violated and their potential for freedom injured. This is most obviously so when the victims are children, though adults too may be compelled to do things which otherwise they would not. We are here no longer dealing with the desire for the contemplation of beauty but with a pathological impulse, against whose operations society is bound to protect its members.

Opposing this viewpoint there are some who say that freedom of expression is involved, in respect of those who, at whatever cost to the victims, provide the pornographic images. There are some also who say that people have the right to use their money as they will, which includes

purchasing such images, whether in magazines, in videos or on the internet. The argument is that these people themselves perpetrate no abuse; it has already happened; they are only satisfying a natural if unsavory appetite. Analogies are readily available: the moral difference between the diner who enjoys his roast and the person who killed the lamb; between the tourist who attends the corrida and those who torment and kill the bull. But analogies give color rather than substance to the argument. More to the point might be the claim that were the tourists to stay away bullfighting would cease to thrive. Can the like be said about vicious pornography and its paying clients? It is unlikely that those who produce it are motivated by anything so abstract as freedom of expression or so philanthropic as regard for their clients' psychological welfare. The motivation in most cases will be financial gain. If the clients did not pay, the service would not be provided, the victims not sought and exploited. So much would seem to be clear and incontestable.

Yet a doubt remains. The analogies may be something more than a dubious embellishment to the case. The diner and the slaughterer, the tourist and the torero are not fairly to be lumped together; the distinction between them is a real one. Similarly there is a distinction between the 'consumer' and the purveyor of pornography. In a certain sense those who become addicted to the abusive forms of it, whether involving adults or children, are themselves victims. A pit has been dug and they have fallen into it. But instead of struggling out, they let some quirk of their nature take over, generating the illusion that the pit is not a trap but a chamber of delights, a place where they are free to indulge themselves, forgetting that freedom and indulgence are hardly to be found together.

Then the law descends and the illusion is shattered and otherwise decent persons are prosecuted and treated as if they were the direct abusers. Many of them are unable to bear the disgrace and take their own lives, a high price to pay for a failing whose only manifestation is the viewing of images. Meanwhile the profiteers and their agents remain at large, continuing to abuse one sort of victim and to entrap another.

### *Violence*

As said above, the moral code of Buddhism is set out in the *PañcaSila*, or Five Precepts:

1. to refrain from taking the life of any living being
2. to refrain from taking anything that has not been given
3. to refrain from sensual misbehavior
4. to refrain from false speech
5. to refrain from substances that induce intoxication or sloth.

If the order of the five means anything, then the most important is that relating to violence. In some parts of the animal world, violence is inseparable from sexual activity. In the Buddhist scheme of things this animal world is the sphere of *adharmā*, where natural drives rule and the strong prey upon the weak and moral standards are not to be applied. In human sexuality violence is not an inseparable factor, though it may intrude in all sorts of ways. These range from ‘the lover’s pinch’ to rape, as the literature ranges from Casanova’s memoirs, which contain very little violence, to the phantasmagoria of his contemporary, the Marquis de Sade. It is the latter with his grotesque imagination rather than the former with his healthy appetites who is the father of modern erotic literature, especially in France, where much of the most interesting work is produced. Sade resonates with the intellectual life of that country in a way that an outsider may find hard to comprehend. Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski are among those who trace their lineage to the author of *Justine* and *The 120 Days of Sodom*. Eroticism in Sade means cruelty and death; it also anticipates Yeats’s words, that

*Love has pitched his mansion  
In the place of excrement.*

This — cruelty, death, defilement — is the tone of much serious erotic writing, and the effect is not exhilarating. It would probably be unfair to attribute all its doubtful qualities to ‘the divine Marquis’. Other influences may be at work in these writers, not necessarily secular, but it would be inappropriate to try to trace them here.

One of the most famous erotic productions of the last half-century was *L’Histoire d’O*, a novel acclaimed as a classic of the sado-masochistic genre. The basic idea is perfectly conventional: a young woman is subjected to various forms of violence at the hands of the men in her life. Where it differs from the common run of such stories is that the heroine voluntarily subjects herself to the abuse and that women play a large, if ancillary, part in it. This latter feature proved strangely inspirational for certain members of the lesbian community, who were emboldened to proclaim themselves ‘filles d’Anne-Marie’, after the person who ran the establishment where O received her severest treatment. They presented the world in general and the feminist movement in particular with the phenomenon of violence perpetrated by women on women. Orthodox feminists were outraged: at the heart of their struggle was the protest against violence, but male violence on women, and now it appeared that some women sought and others inflicted on them violence of the most extreme description. Clearly this is a problem not only for feminists but for anyone who disapproves of violence. It is not made easier for Buddhists by the fact that the highest value of the Dharma is freedom, the way to which is marked by the

autonomous acts which make up our lives, acts of intent and acts of consent. What then of consensual sado-masochism?

The claim made for this violence is that it enables the passive partner to break through the barrier of pain into equal or greater pleasure. The pain may be extreme and involve highly dangerous practices. Reading the literature one is reminded of the careers of some Hindu and Christian saints who subjected their bodies to extremes of mortification for the sake of spiritual joys, in this world or another. It would be wrong of course to overstate the similarities between the two endeavors. One obvious difference is that the religious practitioner acts alone, though there may be guidance from a spiritual counsellor, whereas sado-masochism involves at least two people. And the masochists who call upon others to hurt them may be compromising the spiritual wellbeing of those persons, and their own, too, of course, through greed: in this case, greed for sensation.

The matter does not end here, however. There is also a curiously positive side to this most passive of desires. At the extremest reaches of a lesbian sado-masochistic relationship one partner may put her life in trust to the other. Trust: this word recurs insistently in the literature. It indicates not only a feeling that one person has about another but also an affirmative attitude to human nature, that it is trustworthy in the truest sense.

But violence is violence, and the first precept enjoins that we refrain from it; which would seem to exclude even consensual relationships, whether lesbian, all-male, or heterosexual. It may be suggested that the purest form of sadism is denial of the other's desire to be hurt. But the refinements of cruelty are not the issue here; it is simple violence – taking the stick, as the precept is also phrased, to a sentient being: stick or whip or knife or whatever the instrument of pain may be, and whatever the nature of the goal. There is always scope for argument in questions of morality, though it often descends to special pleading, and not only in sexual matters. One feature of the Buddhist mentality is reluctance to take up extreme positions even on questions which seem by their nature to belong at the extremes. The force of the idea of the Middle Way is deep and strong. Buddhists are pulled towards the region of the moral spectrum between black and white and sometimes the best they can look for is a luminous gray area. Even on the apparently obvious issue of consensual violence one is reluctant to be judgemental. Paradoxically, for all that it challenges conventional ideas of the self, Buddhism gives the greatest scope to individual judgement and individual conscience, acknowledging that in some of the most critical moments of our lives we are quite alone, even with a loving partner by our side.

The domain of sex has many pitfalls. In earlier times it would have been natural simply to turn to the accepted Buddhist sila or Mosaic commandment for guidance; but we live in changing times, and the traditional condemnation of uncommon practices, including ‘unnatural vice’, no longer comes naturally. There is work here for Buddhist as for other ethicists to do.

### *Buddhism, Sex and Civilization*

A young Tibetan woman working in a field turns and smiles towards a camera. Above the waist she is wearing nothing, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a Buddhist nun to go about her work barebreasted. (I am remembering a photograph seen a long time ago.)

Later, in reproductions of ancient Buddhist paintings from Ajanta and Sigiriya I found women also bare above the girdle, queens and ladies with opulent breasts and slim waists. Unlike the Tibetan nun, they had not discarded the upper part of their robes, but were going about in the costume of the time, and evidently neither they nor the painters saw anything untoward in it. Such a degree of exposure has never, to my knowledge, been a feature of any western court. The only comparable productions in our art are the barebomed ladies of ancient Crete.

Here surely is a question for anyone who considers Buddhism to be a sort of primitive oriental version of Puritanism. There are texts which can be read in that way, but the literature and tradition taken as a whole create a different impression. Those representations of the female form are not anomalous. Ajanta and Sigiriya are in India and Sri Lanka, far from Tibet and its particular developments of the Dharma, but sharing its relaxed, acceptant outlook. The paintings do not represent a revolt of the aesthetic impulse against a repressive ethic. The Buddhist way has not been like that. The third precept in the *PañcaSila* has never attained the unhealthy, indeed lethal prominence given its counterparts in other religions. As said before, violence is the first concern of the Buddhist ethical code; it would claim that there are worse things in the world than those whom other religions call ‘erring women’, violence towards ‘erring women’ being one of them.

The acceptant attitude is manifested not only in the pictorial art but in the literature too, both scriptural and imaginative. Ashvaghosha was an India poet who wrote a Life of the Buddha in verse, the *Buddhacarita*. In it is a description of Gautama’s parents ‘enjoying the delights of love’ before the Bodhisattva descends from heaven into Maya’s womb. We have here a notable contrast with the Christian story. Gautama was an

only child, whereas Jesus is said to have had siblings, only they have never been quite acknowledged as such in the tradition, as if the gestation of merely human children had been unworthy of Mary. They are dismissed as no closer than cousins, or as children from an earlier marriage of Joseph's, whose marriage to Mary is never consummated. This is one of the sad features of the Christian story, that physical intimacy between two loving people is not deemed worthy of a place in it.

What may be the most important text on sexual matters in the Canon is the *Aggañña Sutta*, a discourse of the *Digha Nikaya*. It is also the nearest thing in the literature to a creation story. My first book, *Buddhism and the Natural World*, was devoted to a study of this discourse. I called it 'a meaningful myth', so close it seemed to our concerns about the fate of the natural world. One part of it is peculiarly relevant to the subject of this essay. Briefly the story goes as follows.

In the course of long ages, the Buddha is reported as saying, the universe contracted. Most beings by then had been reborn in what is called the World of Radiance. They are described as made of mind, nourished on bliss and self-luminous as they move through the darkness of space. Thus they continue for a long time, then gradually they begin to change from a celestial into a more human form, though without sexual differentiation. Meanwhile the contractive phase of the universe has ended and the expansive movement has begun, but as yet there is only a watery mass in the darkness of space. Eventually the earth appears, though not as we know it. By their own light the Radiant Beings see it spread out on the water, like the skin of milk-boiled rice as it cools, and with the color of fine butter and the taste of honey. Unable to resist its appeal, they begin to eat of it, upon which their luminance fades and the soft earth hardens.

As they continue to feed, their bodies become ever solidier and they perceive that some of them are comelier than others. This gives rise to pride in beauty, as a result of which the original form of the earth is changed. The delightful color and taste are now contained in a particular type of plant, the eating of which leads to further solidification of their bodies, further differentiation of appearance and further pride. This process is repeated until eventually the prototype of rice appears.

With this, a new phase in human development begins. Not only do the former Radiant Beings grow denser in substance as a result of eating the new food, but sexual characteristics appear, and for the first time the terms 'women' and 'men' are used in the discourse, and in that order. Fascinated by each other they engage in sexual activity, *methuna*. Unfortunately not all the beings have reached this stage of development.

Those who have not are shocked at what they see, and think some sort of violent abuse is going on, and drive the methunists out from among them.

It is well to pause here. Sometimes the *Aggañña Sutta* is described as the story of a Fall, the counterpart of the early chapters of the Book of Genesis and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. But that is not the only way of reading the Genesis story. In *Buddhism and the Western Heritage* I interpreted it as a liberation from ignorance and servitude. Neither does the *Aggañña Sutta* have to be understood negatively. Buddhism teaches that the human condition is the most apt for the attainment of Nirvana, and the movement of the narrative tells of ever deepening humanization, until eventually with the appearance of male and female sexual organs full humanity is achieved, and a new endeavor can be made to go beyond Radiance or any other celestial condition and achieve the ultimate freedom of Nirvana. This is a salutary paradox: individually the beings exhibit greed, ill-will and folly, gradually losing their ethereal qualities, but all the time they are moving toward the sphere of highest potential, which is the human condition.

Returning to the narrative, we find that, to their credit, the asexual beings do not long persist in their animosity and soon readmit the methunists to society. These now take to building houses for the purpose of privacy. Which would seem to suggest that the first step in the cultural development of mankind is attributable directly to the erotic impulse and its gratification. A certain basic social development appears to be already in existence, but it is the once-reviled methunists who build the first houses according to this discourse ascribed to the Buddha. They are not sublimating the erotic impulse, as Freud and Berdyaev would have it, but are directly impelled by it into creativity.

The story goes on to tell of the election of rulers, the social contract, the formation of the caste system and the rise of priestcraft. There is no need to go into these matters here. At the point now reached we have, after long evolution, beings who can at last be called fully human as a result of the appearance of sexual organs, and who, to gratify the sexual impulse in private, put up structures that set the course of civilization. And they do this not with procreation in mind but erotic enjoyment only. At this point it might be well to recall the words of the celebrated Mexican writer, Octavio Paz, in *The Double Flame*, one of the best books written on this subject: 'Eroticism is the human dimension of sexuality, what imagination adds to nature.'

My reading of the *Aggañña Sutta* has convinced me that probably in no other discourse is the essence of the Dharma set forth so fully and so imaginatively, and at its heart I find a most positive attitude to sexuality, with its maturational and creative impulses. True, the Buddha is reported

as calling the erotic absorption of the new humans *asadhamma*, which may be rendered 'Not the very best thing they might be doing'. This is because for the time being it is excessive (*ativelam*) and thus censurable from the standpoint of the Middle Way; and of course the very best thing anyone can do is to travel the Eightfold Path to Nirvana, and the minds of the methunists are not directed to that path and goal. Apart from this, nothing is said, and the story proceeds as indicated above. Sexuality ceases to be of particular concern in the Scriptures and in Buddhism generally until the rise of the Tantra some thousand years after the death of the Founder.

### *Tantrism*

Man is a sexual being; a great religion touches every aspect of life in one way or another, and sex cannot be excluded from its concerns. How its scriptures and its doctrines deal with sexual relationships is quite essentially revealing. In Christianity the sexual urge was considered so dangerous that the mundane arrangement of marriage had to be made into a sacrament to make it safe. Other religions show an almost pathological obsession with sex: the young are genitally mutilated; girls are watched anxiously for the first signs of menstruation, then, children in all other respects, they are despatched into marriage without any thought for their wishes.

It would be untrue to suggest that Buddhism has not a taint of misogyny. It may go with monkhood and celibacy. But it is not central. More than that: taking the *Aggañña Sutta* as our starting point, it seems to me that we cannot but have a positive view of sex and the erotic. It is the appearance of female and male sexual organs that makes our ancestors fully human; it is the motive force of sex that leads to the building of houses and initiates civilization. What could be more positive?

But somehow the message of the myth was obscured and, as said above, a thousand years went by before the movement known as Tantrism emerged from the shadows of folk religion, trying to integrate sexuality into the spiritual quest. Before attempting to deal with this phenomenon, one is bound to remind the reader that Tantrism, also called Vajrayana or the Adamantine Way, is not to be identified in its totality with sexual practice. The tantrists of Japan, for instance – the Shingon – rejected this aspect of it. Historically, Buddhist sexual Tantra means Tibet. It was there that this form of it took root. It was cultivated by the Nyingma, the country's oldest sect, founded by the Great Guru Padmasambhava during his mission of conversion. It is this, or something deriving from it, which has come in recent years to the West,

where, preceded by curious reports, it had long exercised a rather louche fascination.

Tantrism had its origins in India. Some Buddhists there were dissatisfied with the means of liberation offered both by the so-called Lesser Vehicle, the Hinayana, and by the orthodox Mahayana to which they belonged. The ideal of the former was the arahant, the strenuous seeker working towards Nirvana after many lives; that of the latter was the bodhisattva, who postponed Nirvana until all sentient beings should be saved. Looking about them those aspirants found steep-ascending paths leading from the wide road of the Mahayana, paths that might well be dangerous; but they were bold adventurers and pressed on upward. Those whose bent was for meditation formed sects that became Ch'an in China, Son in Korea and Zen in Japan. Those who were drawn to ritual, chanting and visualization created the Tantra. Some of them pushed on to the boundary where the finality of values is brought into question, where what appears wrong to the common view is understood as being but an unacknowledged aspect of what is right, and not its contrary. In this debatable area they came to reason that sex which, crudely indulged or grimly denied, enslaves so many, can be transmuted into a means of liberation for the few.

Tantrism was not a Buddhist phenomenon only. It developed in Hinduism too, though on a different philosophical foundation, and with a different character. In the Hindu form the female is dominant, whereas in the Buddhist form the male is the major figure, or so at least the conventional icon would seem to suggest. Confining the argument to the Buddhist Tantra, it would appear that, in common with orthodox Mahayana, its devotees have downgraded history in a manner scarcely possible to western seekers, our culture being grounded in hard historiography from the time of Thucydides in ancient Greece. Dispensing somewhat with Gautama's life and message, the tantrists, in common with orthodox Mahayana, elaborated a grandiose buddhology centred on the cosmic figures of Akshobhya, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, Ratnasambhava and Vairocana, generated by spiritual imagination out of the Yogacara system of thought.

While Tibet retained its freedom, the Tantra continued as a localized phenomenon associated with the Nyingma, the 'Old Ones' of the tradition. With the fall of Tibet to the Chinese communists, practitioners of Tantra were dispersed. Many of them made their way to western countries, especially, it would appear, the United States.

There they have found followers, as so many spiritual helpers do, but this case is especially interesting, for the feature which distinguishes the Tantra from other forms of Buddhism is the cult of the guru. The Buddha

was an open-handed teacher who kept nothing from those capable of comprehending his message. The Tantra insists on differentiating between initiates and the rest, and the guru alone has the power of initiation. One might think that this would render it uncongenial to people brought up in an equalitarian society, but evidently it does not.

Of course, there are gurus and gurus. Some western seekers, beguiled by the promise of sexo-spiritual highs, have all too trustingly put themselves in the hands of 'masters' whose spirituality, if not their libido, was anything but high, with distressful and disillusioning results. This is not the fault of the Tantra; not even entirely the fault of those 'masters'. Their victims must also accept some responsibility. Surely one of the finest products of the western tradition is what Robert Burns called 'the man of independent mind' (and the like-minded woman). He wrote those words at the end of what a Buddhist might call the Second Enlightenment, and they sum up the achievement of that eighteenth-century struggle against obscurantism, injustice, and superstition in Christendom. The legacy is one of the most precious things we have, perhaps our finest gift to the world. Its compatibility with guruism must be open to doubt.

Then again, every guru, good or bad, liberated or exploitative, is the product of a cultural and spiritual milieu, and one has only to read a little in the accessible literature to realise how exotic is the cultural and spiritual milieu of the Tantra, with its Dhyani Buddhas, dakinis and demons. But the West has been through its polytheistic phase. It has taken Occam's Razor to all the pantheons, reducing the number of its gods to one, and even him the atheists, with a final flourish of the blade, claim to have disposed of.

For all that, however, there is no denying the charm at least of the tantric image. There is the adept sitting cross-legged with his consort on his lap, engaged in *yab-yum*, the sort of sexual embrace which is meant to end in awakening, not in sleep. It reminds one of Aristophanes' androgyne, male and female recombining to restore a lost unity, now on the spiritual plane. The fancy is not too far-fetched perhaps, and there may be something here which the West might profitably assimilate, something of value for our sexually disordered time.

### *Image and Reality*

Is it possible that the prototypes of the dyad may have been Padmasambhava and one or other of his consorts? He had a number of them, women who were both disciples and partners. One was Yeshe Tsogyel, a remarkable person in her own right, who is said to have attained Enlightenment, and who has been commended as a model for

Buddhist feminists, being able, in the words of Rita M. Gross, ‘to integrate enlightenment with enlightened relationships.’ Life was not easy for a woman with Yeshe Tsogyel’s ideas and character in Tibet at that time, but with Padmasambhava’s help and encouragement she overcame all obstacles, going on to have consorts and disciples of her own, and to be honoured as one of the great figures of Tibetan Buddhism.

Gross claims that Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel united on terms of equality. This, for all that can be known with certainty, may be true. If so it questions the conventional tantric image which, like the Buddhist tradition generally, gives pride of place to the male. But the tantric *ideal* brings together four particular virtues and their distribution between the two sexes is by no means to the female’s disadvantage. The male is associated with *karuna* and *upaya*, the female with *prajña* and *shunyata*. The usual translations of these terms are compassion and skillful means, wisdom and emptiness. I would suggest others: tenderness and imagination, understanding and openness. The one which may cause some surprise is the second. But ‘skillful means’ here might seem to suggest mere sexual technique, whereas imagination raises any endeavor to a higher level. It matches well with *shunyata*, in whose boundless domain it may roam free.

Eroticism too, of course, offers wide scope to the imagination, but there is a difference. Eroticism does not look beyond itself, beyond the satisfaction of desire, crude or subtle, immediate or long-projected as it may be. The Tantra seeks to go beyond physical pleasure to something else, something body-based, yes, but reaching beyond the body and its limitations, to what is called *Mahasukha*, the Great Joy. Octavio Paz gives a sense of what it means to reach for the beyond in a section of his poem *Cuento de dos Jardines*:

*What awaits us on the other shore? Passion takes us over:  
The other shore is here, Light in the shoreless air:  
Prajnaparamita, Our Lady of the Other Shore,  
Yourself, girl of my story, nursling of the garden.  
I forgot Nagarjuna and Dharmakirti in your breasts,  
In your cry I encountered them: Maithuna, two in one,  
One in all, all in nothing, Shunyata!  
Empty fullness, emptiness round like your butt!*

Paz wrote the poem as he travelled westward home from India, where the Tantra was born. ‘Light in the shoreless air...All in nothing’; imagination in *shunyata*, reaching for that which words at most may indicate but not express.

### *Conclusion*

The Tantra, developing out of folk religion in India and Tibet, attempted to marry the normal preoccupations of its origins with spiritual striving. How successful the attempt has been one can only conjecture, but some of its admirers in the West make very high claims for it indeed. The charge of spiritual elitism, however, may be fairly advanced against Tantrism, for gurus and special initiations would seem to be at variance with the open, democratic spirit of the original Buddhist movement. It would probably be unfair, though, to leave it at that. Sex is a powerful, subtle, pervasive fact of life, and has to be treated with the utmost respect, the respect paid to something at once valuable, beautiful and dangerous. This may go some way towards explaining the precautions of the tantrists and even towards justifying the cult of the guru, if he be genuine and responsible. They talk about 'handling the serpent' to convey the danger of the tantric enterprise, for sex may have the venom or the wisdom of serpents; it may destroy or enhance.

The literal meaning of the word 'tantra' is a loom, and the corresponding verb means 'to stretch', 'to weave'. The image suggested is an appealing one. Weaving is one of the most ancient arts. Under the inspiration of the Tantra we are invited to weave a fabric which portrays in true colors the elements of our nature, leaving nothing essential out. Sex is an essential element. Figured as a serpent it should have an honored place in the picture.

But what are the threads with which we may weave this figure? Surely they are to be found in the two pairs of qualities ascribed to the genders: tenderness and imagination, understanding and openness. United, they may go some considerable way towards creating a new attitude, even a new personality, in either gender; one that is good for loving and for much else besides. If it be accepted that each man and woman is endowed with something of the nature of the other sex, the tantric message may be interpreted as a call to cultivate these four qualities, each person maintaining and augmenting the generic pair and building up the others. There should be no need to fear any dilution of masculinity in the man or of femininity in the woman; their enrichment rather may be expected, by virtue of the presence of the complementary qualities.

Berdyayev writes of the 'cosmic struggle' of masculine and feminine principles: '...the two not only seek union but also wage war against each other like deadly enemies.' More modestly, it may be said that the sexes find it difficult to treat each other with fairness, trust and understanding. After a hundred years and more, the brave new woman of Ibsen and Shaw reincarnated as the misandrous feminist, while men,

with a shrug, went on much as before. Barring some radical change in our attitudes, the situation would seem bound to continue as it has always been in most societies and cultures.

Even so, what with the triumph of liberal values and the availability of contraception, we in the West do live in an age of wonderful sexual freedom, radically different from all previous history. Like everything else however, wonderful or not, it contains within itself the seeds of decay. Indulgence may cease to satisfy and the orgasm fall empty without a higher goal. Disillusion with this aspect of life, we are told, is an increasing feature of the present time behind the glamor and the licence. Those who look to history for lessons may find something ominous in this. The fullness of living which characterized the Elizabethan Age had a reaction in the Puritan movement. The fullness of sexual life which has characterized our age may lead to something similar, as illiberal institutions establish themselves here and become a refuge for the disillusioned, some of whom may later emerge hostile not only to sexual permissiveness but to western liberal values in general.

Divested of esoteric and exotic elements the Tantra may be of help here. Potentially at least it has a universality which these elements tend to obscure. Elsewhere I have described Buddhism as working towards 'the transfiguration of the everyday'. Here we are talking about the transfiguration of sexuality by means of four virtues whose cultivation is within the scope of most men and women, whether in or out of marriage.

The *Aggañña Sutta* gives the sexual impulse perhaps the highest honor it has had among the scriptures of the great religions, in presenting it as the motive force of civilization. Taking the message of that discourse together with an exoteric understanding of the Tantra, we may be better able to do something towards bringing light into a dark region of our lives and integrating a powerful, wayward force into our spiritual striving.