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David Loy^a

^a Independent scholar and Zen teacher, Boulder, Colorado

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What's wrong with sex? A Buddhist perspective

David Loy*

Independent scholar and Zen teacher, Boulder, Colorado

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As Buddhism infiltrates the West, one of the important and interesting 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?

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As Buddhism infiltrates the West, one of the important and interesting 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 sexual 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 Godless 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 some others decry the self-centeredness of those who do. Yet Buddhism, unique among the major religions, is not pro-natalist. There is no doctrinal encouragement that 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”.

*Email: david_loy@yahoo.com

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 an opportunity to interrogate the Buddhist traditions: to ask why they had certain rules and guidelines about sex, which helps 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 pre-modern 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 lay Buddhists is usually understood to exclude casual relations – "sex without commitment". Since the crucial concern for Buddhism is always *dukkha* "suffering", the most important thing is avoiding sex that harms others or causes pain to them. That covers a lot of ground, yet it also leaves a lot of possibilities. There is no blanket prohibition of non-marital 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 acceptance of prostitution makes early Buddhism seem more broadminded than modern Buddhism, this tolerance 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 *suttas*, which are the earliest Buddhist texts, 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 birth-control (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.

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 different and stricter for *bhikkhuni* nuns).

Of course, this rule 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 to follow 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 mustn’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 adequate 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 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? 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 Buddhist perspective better than the Mahayana Buddhist perspective. 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 non-dwelling 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. Non-attachment 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. According to the tantric tradition, the energy of that urge can be used in a liberative way. Can attention retain awareness of its intrinsically non-attached 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 non-dwelling 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 needing to avoid it.

Such tantric practices are not found in the Pali sutras or in Theravada Buddhism. 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 an historical artifact, resulting from a general disparagement of the physical body that seems to have become common in India and elsewhere. The Axial Age that developed in several civilizations during the first millennium BCE 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 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 were inserted into the Canon later?

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. Needless to say, it wouldn't do to have monks seducing their supporters' daughters or wives. Moreover, laymen and women 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 now? 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 (periods of intensive practice) and places (within practice communities) when sexual abstention is obviously wise to observe. Few Western Buddhists, however, 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 a problem unless and until we want them to be. A new category of Buddhist has become common in the West: less than monastic in focus (hence not subject to Sangha vows or regulations) but also more devoted to practice than Buddhist laity have usually been. This creates more distractions, since we must provide for ourselves, but many, perhaps most Western converts are middle-class folk, 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 us to devalue nature, our material bodies, women and sexuality. Today it is easy for us to make

fun of 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 images that intrude upon us, traditional marriage is not primarily about sex, but about babies. Pleasant though it be, the act of procreation is momentary, while the activity of raising kids involves intense responsibility for many years. In the last few 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 to reproduce the species – and marriage is society's way. 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 was always nature's trick. 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!

This also helps us understand the painful transition that couples endure when they have children. The semi-official myth – a widespread social belief that no one dares to contradict publicly or to warn new parents about – is that the great joy of having children brings mother and father closer together, as they beam down at their little offspring. The near-universal reality is that the unremitting stress of nuclear couples having and raising kids cannot but affect, and usually damage, the romantic relationship between the parents. The stronger the expectation of marital bliss, the greater the interpersonal difficulties – hence

the high divorce rate among younger parents who are not yet mature enough to make the transition to a different type of child-centered relationship. To meet the persistent and ever-changing needs of young children, parents end up relating to each other mostly through the kids and their requirements. That's tough for those still trying to live the romantic myth.

Since babies are no longer inevitable, is that a reason for not having kids? Sometimes, given the population crisis, we should think twice and thrice before we decide to reproduce. But sexual relationships tend to have a dynamic of their own and – *surprise, surprise!* – the urge to have children becomes stronger as couples age and the woman's biological clock starts ticking more loudly. Mothers usually seem to make the transition more easily from focusing on the spouse to focusing on the baby, while many of us men have difficulty coping with that, especially the woman's reduced interest in sex. That change that is also natural: sex isn't the biological process that needs to be emphasized anymore. Needless to say, however, none of this accords with the over-sexualized images of gratification that surround us today: *Sex is the way to become happy!*

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 are 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 don't and can't. The Buddhist path offers us a better understanding of our situation and a more effective way to resolve our *dukkha*.

Note

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Notes on contributor

David Robert Loy is a professor, writer, and Zen teacher. He was Besl Family Professor of Ethics/Religion and Society at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. He is a teacher in the Sanbo Kyodan tradition of Japanese Zen Buddhism. His books include *Nonduality*; *Lack and Transcendence*; *A Buddhist History of the West*; *The Great Awakening*; *Money Sex War Karma*; and most recently *The World Is Made of Stories*. He lectures and offers workshops nationally and internationally. www.davidloy.org