



Celibacy and Religious Traditions

EDITED BY CARL OLSON

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*This book is dedicated to the memory
of Louise and Warren Eisenhower for
their love, hospitality, and good cheer*

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Preface

This book is intended for an educated general readership and for use in college courses. It is also intended to be a supplement to other texts in introductory courses in various religious traditions, because the issues raised by its essays play pivotal roles in many cultures. Moreover, the chapters in this book are intended to introduce students to the role of celibacy, or a lack of it, in various religious traditions, and the contributors present the rationale for its observance (or not) within the context of each tradition. Scholars writing about religious traditions that do not advocate celibacy for its followers call attention to exceptions to this general trend and what lessons can be learned from the absence of celibacy from a culture.

This book grew from my own teaching of courses in various religions (such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Taoism, as well as Native American Indian and African religions). During the course of my teaching, I was not surprised to discover that students are very interested in topics related to human sexuality. Celibacy provides a way to discuss a topic directly related to human sexuality. It also is a way to learn something valuable about the worldview and value system of particular religious traditions.

Using the expertise of scholars in various religious traditions encompassing East and West, ancient and modern, moribund and living, this collection of essays addresses certain questions such as the following: Why do some members of a religious community decide to maintain a celibate style of religious life? Is celibacy

a prerequisite for religious office or status? Are there different contexts within a given religious tradition for the practice of celibacy? Are there gestures or actions that can replace the absence of sexual activity? What is the symbolic significance of celibacy within a particular religious tradition? Besides such questions, these chapters will also address issues about the symbolic significance of celibacy, its function within a religious tradition, its connection to the acquisition of power, and the physical or spiritual benefits of celibacy. In addition to addressing implications for the practice or nonpractice of celibacy within various traditions, this work will enhance our understanding of spirituality, and contribute to our knowledge of asceticism in the East and West.

In a collaborative work of this nature, I need initially to thank the contributors from all over the globe for their hard work, insights, creativity, and willingness to share their knowledge with a wider audience. At Oxford University Press, my gratitude goes to Cynthia Read and others at the press for their faith in and support for this project, such as Meechal Hoffman for her early work on this book and Christine Dahlin for steering it through the production process. This book marks the fifth time that Margaret Case has served as my copyeditor, and I am deeply in her debt. When some contributors were tardy, Peggy helped to keep me sane. I am also thankful to my colleague Glenn Holland for coming through in the clutch, and I am delighted that we could work together on a writing project after being together for so many years at the college on the hill. Finally, I want to extend my thanks to President Richard Cook and Dean Linda DeMerritt of Allegheny College for moving the college forward and allowing me to continue to do what I love. Finally, I want to thank Richard and his wife, Terri, for their many contributions to the college and specifically for his help with my work by offering me a humanities chair. Richard's decision to retire from the college creates a huge gap that we hope will be filled by someone as talented and successful in the near future.

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Celibacy and Religious Traditions



I

Celibacy and the Human Body: An Introduction

Carl Olson

It is biologically natural for human beings to engage in sexual relationships for the procreation of the species, impelled by motives of lust, pleasure, enjoyment, comfort, companionship, relaxation, or a combination of these drives and needs. Upon reaching adolescence, it is not unusual to experience sexual urges due to chemical changes within one's body that for some people can be overwhelming and difficult to control. Many societies channel this sexual energy into early marriage, for the welfare of the social fabric. Due to the dangers associated with sexually transmitted diseases, especially the deadly scourge of AIDS, contemporary governments have encouraged programs of sexual abstinence or protected sex as preferable ways to prevent such hazards. Certain religious organizations have advocated lifelong celibacy for spiritual reasons, whereas some religious traditions that oppose the practice in general allow for instances or exceptions to the prevailing ban on celibacy.

Being subject to sexual urges presupposes that one is embodied, and our bodies are necessarily embedded in the world. The embodied nature of our sexual drives is, of course, equally true of celibacy. In fact, a discussion of sexuality and celibacy presupposes a conceptual grasp of the human body as a sensitive substance with the ability to produce both pain and pleasure. In addition to being a sensitive substance, the body projects a visible, tangible image of itself in space and time. The body can also transform itself into a sign that functions in a self-referential way and as a referent for

others by means of its ability to acquire meaning. If a symbol can be understood as a particular type of sign, the body can be said to symbolize a bridge that connects nature and culture.¹ As a sign or symbol, the body can be an ambivalent entity from a cross-cultural perspective, even as it possesses the potential to embody and reveal cultural values and attitudes.

During the latter half of the twentieth century there has been an acute philosophical interest in the human body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for instance, in his work *Phenomenology of Perception* discusses human bodies as organisms capable of perception. The human body and the perceived world form a single system of intentional relations that form correlations, implying that to experience the body is to perceive the world, and vice versa.² Therefore, the body and world form an inseparable, internal relationship. Mary Douglas, an anthropologist, views the body as a metaphor for reality and a symbolic system, whereas Michel Foucault concentrates his focus on the body as a product of a relationship between power and knowledge. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who are influenced by Merleau-Ponty and second-generation cognitive science, point to the role that the body plays in conceptualization, which is only possible through the body: "Therefore, every understanding that we can have of the world, ourselves, and others can only be framed in terms of concepts shaped by our bodies."³ Mark Johnson, on the other hand, argues that the human body is in the mind, in the sense that structures of understanding are essential to meaning and reason. But he also explores how the body is in the mind, or how reason and imagination have a bodily basis. He thinks that our bodily, social, linguistic, and intellectual being are interconnected in complex relationships that constitute our understanding of our world.⁴ From another perspective, there is also a sense in which one can speak about the history of the body, most clearly evident in the aging process, which demonstrates that the body experiences changes.

In addition to being a sign, symbol, metaphor, mode of conceptualization, and having a history, the body is also flesh, which can express a lustful nature that manifests as threatening and dangerous unless it is controlled and regulated by social processes. Since the body is associated with uncontrollable and irrational passions, desires, and emotions, celibacy is an excellent example of exerting discipline and control upon the human body: "Disciplining is a technical operation designed to form and to fix aptitudes in a body, thus augmenting the body's powers, increasing its functional efficacy. . . . Disciplining makes bodies docile—adapted to instrumental layouts and productive, and also tractable. It makes bodies function as elements that can be programmed and maneuvered."⁵ Sexual urges do not cease until weakened by old age, disease, or afflictions associated with medication for high blood pressure or diabetes, and

celibacy is often part of a pattern of actions undertaken to control and discipline the body.

The decision by an embodied person to engage in heterosexual or homosexual activity is not only a personal and mutual action but also a social one. Since sexual relations occur within a social context, the human body may in this sense also be thought of as the result of numerous social and cultural practices, behaviors, and discourses, which operate to construct the body as a social artifact.⁶ In summary, although our body is biologically given to us, it is socially constructed.

If the human body and sexuality are inherently social, the same thing can be stated about celibacy, although its observance can differ according to individual volition (for example, whether it is elected or imposed) and temporality (for example, whether it is temporary or permanent). For the aspiring Catholic priest, Hindu ascetic, or Buddhist monk, celibacy appears to be an antisocial choice, but such a momentous and personal decision enables the male or female to enter into a new social order and construct a new identity and status. An understanding of celibacy can thus be a useful way to view the significance of the human body and desire within a social context. This book demonstrates how the practice of celibacy differs cross-culturally and historically within different religious traditions, highlighting exceptions to the general ethos of each tradition.

The Nature of Celibacy

Celibacy is commonly understood as entailing a vow to abstain from all sexual relationships. Such a vow or intention does not necessarily mean perpetual virginity, because a person could have been married or simply have engaged in sexual relations before taking a vow to remain celibate. Celibacy does not require a vow, however, when it is forced on a person because of social or religious circumstances, such as being on a religious quest, participating in a hunting expedition, or observing a religious ritual.

Within the Western context, celibacy originates from the Latin term *caelebs*, which means "alone or single."⁷ The implications of being alone are a bit misleading, because choosing to be celibate might make a person a member of a community of other celibates. In Hinduism, celibacy is called *brahmacarya*, which is practiced by an ascetic and by a student (*brahmacārin*), which suggests that for a Hindu celibacy is practically synonymous with being a student. These definitions of celibacy from East and West are indicative of cross-cultural differences; the Indian ascetic can choose to live alone or in a group of other

wandering ascetics, and students have often lived in the homes of their teachers.

The chapters within this book demonstrate that the practice of celibacy is a complex religious phenomenon. The control of sexual desire can be used, for instance, to divorce oneself from a basic human biological drive, to extricate oneself from what is perceived as impure, or to distance oneself from the transient world. Within some religious traditions, one can find the practice of temporary celibacy, a commitment to long-term permanent celibacy, or an outright condemnation of it. By maintaining a state of virginity, members of some religious traditions imitate divine models, whereas other traditions do not admit the possibility of emulating such paradigms. Whether or not a religious tradition encourages or discourages it, the practice of celibacy gives us insight into its worldview, social values, gender relations, ethical implications, religious roles or offices, understanding of the physical body, and its practitioner's connection to spiritual and political power. Celibacy can contribute to the creation of a certain status and play a role in the construction of identity, while serving as a source of charisma. It can also represent a negotiation regarding social values and cultural attitudes. In some religious traditions, it is possible to renounce sex and gain sacred status and economic support from society.⁸

The practice of celibacy reflects a certain understanding of a particular culture's conception of the human body. In fact, celibacy marks the human body, an inscription that may be accompanied by special modes of dress to differentiate the celibate from ordinary people. This has important implications for understanding the image of the body within each culture. From one perspective, a person's body is presented to him or her, while its meaning is taught by society (such as parents, relatives, and peers). Likewise, a person's attitude about his or her body arises from society's image of itself. The human body is a natural symbol system, even though the body is never experienced naturally because it is always mediated by society. Moreover, an individual's body is patterned in a way analogous to the pattern of the social body. The ways that we are taught to control our bodies, for instance, reflects a general cultural style.

Celibacy, Danger, and Purity

For many religious traditions, the physical human body is a microcosm of society. Therefore, intense social controls will be experienced as demands for strong bodily controls. A good example of the direct correlation between bodily and social control can be found in the military, where soldiers stand rigidly at

attention. Because of this correlation, the human body functions as a symbol of society. In fact, the human body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. With such a system in place, this helps us to grasp bodily refuse (such as sweat, saliva, urine, and feces) as symbols of danger. These kinds of bodily refuse are connected to the margins of the body and are considered polluting. By transgressing the boundary of the body, these forms of refuse trigger a concern for purity in religious traditions. In many religious traditions, therefore, celibacy reflects a concern for maintaining purity.

Purity is connected to holiness, whose root meaning implies being set apart. Because holiness is characterized by completeness, it requires that individuals conform to the class or category to which they belong and that classes or categories of things should not be confused.⁹ Moreover, holiness represents order, unity, and perfection with respect to a person. In many religious traditions, celibacy is part of the process of becoming holy, complete, perfect, and clean.

In contrast to holiness and purity, pollution is a form of dirt that offends against order. Standing in opposition to holiness, dirt is unclean and a form of danger.¹⁰ Whether it is committed intentionally or inadvertently, pollution is a danger that tends to strike when form or order is attacked, which can result in disorder, a sign of danger. Furthermore, disorder invokes power because it can spoil pattern or order. If order implies restriction, like the practice of celibacy in some religious traditions, disorder implies a limitless potential for destroying pattern. Thus disorder is dangerous. In some religious traditions, the practice of celibacy is one way in which danger can be controlled.

The person practicing celibacy in some instances becomes an embodiment of power; this is especially evident among Hindu ascetics, Buddhist monks, and Sufi mystics. Possessing within itself a drive, impulse, or tendency, power possesses an impetus to empower, which suggests that power gives itself, increases itself, and enhances itself. Power is, however, ambivalent because it is both creative and destructive. By drawing it into us, we can be either strengthened or weakened by it. Thus to encounter or acquire power demands care if one is not to be overwhelmed or overawed by it. Power possesses the ability to affect things or persons by forcing them to move or behave in a certain manner. This points to the dynamic nature of power and its energetic force. Power also has a compulsive aspect because it can coerce actions and even prohibit actions. By means of its force of compulsion, power coerces that which it encounters, and controls it. Celibacy gives a person power, according to evidence from religious traditions of the East and West. And if one possesses power, this gives one control over oneself, over other entities, and even over the cosmos.

Celibacy, Asceticism, Violence, and Pain

Within a personal and social context of inhabiting a human body and being driven by desire, temptation, and possibly transgression, one may choose to practice celibacy in order to control oneself so as to achieve either a short-term goal or a permanent goal beyond the everyday world. In practicing celibacy, one is denying the body what it naturally strives to exercise in terms of its biological urges, with the result that the body is brought to further attention. Thus the ascetic act of denial as evident in the observance of celibacy is another kind of affirmation, a less carnal and more spiritual one.

By agreeing or choosing to be celibate because, for example, one is entering a religious position, such as the priesthood, that demands celibacy as a prerequisite, a person is making a type of decision that is ascetic. This is true even if he or she is not strictly speaking a full-fledged ascetic, that is, one who strives to harness bodily drives and re-channel them into more spiritual ends by denying fundamental biological drives. As some of the chapters in this book attest, some Eastern paths advocate utilization of natural biological drives to achieve their goals, standing in sharp contrast to more conservative traditions. There is a variety of ways to interpret asceticism within different cultural contexts. It is possible to view asceticism as a structure of compensation in which an ascetic both gives up and receives something.¹¹ Asceticism represents, moreover, a withdrawal from the habitual way of behaving.¹² In some contexts, asceticism is a means of critiquing the dominant society. Or it can be defined as "performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity."¹³

Celibacy is not only associated with an ascetic strain within particular religious traditions but it is also a scripted form of violence. Without claiming that violence is innate to human nature, violence can be defined in the following way: "Violence, in both the widest possible and the most elementary senses of the word, entails any cause, any justified or illegitimate force, that is exerted—physically or otherwise—by one thing (event or instance, group or person, and, perhaps, word and object) on another."¹⁴ Of course, by adopting a celibate lifestyle, one is inflicting the violence on oneself, or in the case of institutional celibacy, the violence is already embodied in the religious institution that demands celibacy as a requirement for membership. By practicing celibacy, a person works against the natural inclinations of the human body and its drives, and he or she thereby perpetuates violence on him or herself. With its inherently ascetic and violent features, celibacy causes emotional, mental, and physical discomfort and pain of an often self-inflicted kind. Pain can be defined

as "a sensation that is tangled with mental and even cultural experiences."¹⁵ When the practice of celibacy is personally chosen by an individual it represents a form of self-punishment. Pain is, of course, intimately associated with asceticism. Moreover, it is possible for pain to be transformed into power.¹⁶

Monotheist Traditions

As a context for the discussion of Western and some monotheistic religious attitudes toward the practice of celibacy, the book begins with the classical world of Greece and Rome. In the worlds of Greece and Rome, citizens were expected to reproduce. Those that chose to remain single were penalized by government legislation. An exception to this general social expectation of reproduction was granted the Vestal Virgins by virtue of their religious office. The position of the Vestal Virgins was significant in the ancient world because it was anomalous, even though many of these women married after their thirty years' term of duty was completed.

The stress on reproduction hid a classical cultural conviction that sexual pleasure was potentially dangerous and antisocial. Sexual pleasure was symbolically connected to heat, and orgasm was seen as akin to minor epilepsy. Moreover, sexual intercourse was associated with the loss of a person's vital spirit. The danger associated with sexual pleasure motivated the Stoics, for instance, to advocate sex for the production of children and not the sake of pleasure alone. The emphasis on reproduction contributed to making celibacy an uncommon practice in the Greco-Roman world.

Willi Braun's chapter reviews Greek myths that provide some examples of celibacy, but he warns us not to interpret myths as representative of social practice or as paradigms of human behavior. Braun also reviews ascetic tendencies among philosophers and their stress on self-control and reason, although such thinking did not include renunciation of sexual relations, which was conceived as a civic duty to produce a new generation, promote moderation, and counteract desire, lust, and effeminate attitudes. Since sexual moderation was the cultural norm and celibacy an aberrant practice, Braun devotes much of his essay to examining the important role of celibacy among the Roman Vestal Virgins and the eunuch-priests of the Cybele cult.

Although there was no ambiguity associated with the Vestal Virgins' vow of celibacy, their roles, status, and privileges did create some ambiguity in the minds of others. Eunuchs, however, who were considered strange figures by ancient writers, attracted only disdain, ridicule, and suspicion. Various thinkers classified eunuchs as a third type of human being, and they were

viewed as immoral, weak, and low on the social ladder. Braun also discusses the association of eunuchism with purity, chastity, desexualization, and sterility. Since the eunuch was disdained and ridiculed by others, what fascinates Braun is the rationale for the continuation of the eunuch's place in the Greco-Roman world, which he traces both to gender ideology of the historical period together with achievement of male excellence, and to accepted notions of the science of physiognomy, with its presupposition that external bodily characteristics determine internal character.

Judaism represents a religious tradition that is strongly opposed to celibacy. In ancient Judaism, marriage was regarded as both a normal condition and a divine ordinance. The generally accepted opinion was that world creation entailed an injunction to multiply the species (Gen. 1:26). With the destruction of the Temple and the strengthening of the synagogue, Judaism became a religion of the book and of the sanctified, married household. No single aspect of normal life could be renounced if it represented the will of God. From the perspective of rabbinic Judaism, the unmarried man is not a whole person. In fact, the unmarried man diminishes the likeness of God. Therefore, celibacy was not common and was disapproved by the rabbis on moral and theological grounds, and the rabbis equated celibacy with sinfulness, as Eliezer Diamond's chapter reminds us. For rabbinic Judaism, sexual abstinence was not a virtue because it was in conflict with the purpose of creation. Although the Jewish idea of holiness includes a reference to restraint of sexual relations, this does not include becoming celibate.

The Jewish tradition did allow for exceptions, with a temporary practice of celibacy during a woman's menstrual cycle. There were also examples of prophetic figures that practiced celibacy as a result of their direct contact with God. And an individual called a *nazir* took a temporary vow of celibacy in order to attain a state of holiness. Although celibacy played only a minor role in Jewish history, Diamond's chapter calls attention to some exceptions among marginal sects, such as the Therapeutides, who wanted to develop discipline and remove social obstacles to the study of divine wisdom; the Essences, who were motivated to reject material and sensual pleasure; and the Qumran community, whose practice of celibacy is open to scholarly debate—but each of these exceptions represents a response to catastrophe of some kind.

Diamond's chapter also calls attention to some exceptions in rabbinic Judaism that were associated with studying the Torah. And Diamond draws a distinction between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic attitudes. Thus Diamond finds some evidence of celibacy within Judaism, and he attempts to recover the motivations and circumstances behind the rare cases where it occurs.

The emphasis on the virgin birth of Jesus, the apparent celibacy of Jesus due in part to his itinerant lifestyle, and the apparent sexual abstinence of many of his disciples served as models for Christian practice at a later period. The narrative of the virgin birth suggests a mentality that closely linked virginity to the gift of prophecy. In the case of Jesus, his celibacy was an adjunct of his prophetic calling. Glenn Holland contextualizes his essay within Roman culture, with its notions of self-restraint that were connected to self-mastery and the idea that vital energy would be depleted by means of sexual relations, which could thus prove harmful to a person. Holland connects the Christian motivation for celibacy to both a decision to refrain from marriage and eschatological expectations of the early community. The message of Jesus and response to it demanded that the hearers repent, believe, and focus on matters that were beyond ordinary and family concerns. Holland calls attention to the period after the death of Jesus, when it was possible to find examples of married and unmarried male and female ministers, although the women tended to be unmarried or widowed.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul affirms that sexual renunciation is not essential to his message, although he does refer to sexual continence as a gift and sexual relations as normal. Holland's chapter reminds us that as the early Christian movement developed, the notion of lifelong celibacy became accepted as a higher path to salvation. In fact, different notions about the nature of a follower of Jesus grew along with rationales for voluntary celibacy.

Holland traces the growing emphasis on celibacy and veneration of the ascetic lifestyle. Before long, lifelong celibacy received a theological foundation with important implications for women. In the second-century Christian churches, sexual abstinence became a distinguishing mark, as it established the authority of prophetic figures and church leaders by making the human body a more appropriate vehicle to receive divine inspiration. For Justin Martyr (ca. 100–ca. 165), continence was associated with fundamental simplicity, whereas Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 225) grasped celibacy as the most effective technique with which to achieve clarity of the soul. If sexuality was symptomatic of humanity's fall into bondage, the renunciation of sexual relations was linked in the Christian imagination with the reestablishment of a lost human freedom, regaining the spirit of God, and the conquest of death. With the growing negative view of sexuality in the fifth century, the works of Jerome, Augustine, and the rule of Benedict, according to Holland, shaped the Latin comprehension of acceptance of celibacy by the church.

Within the context of medieval Christianity, celibacy was increasingly a prerequisite for religious office or position. Celibacy also set a religious person

apart from the rest of society. Karen Cheatham's richly nuanced chapter emphasizes change within medieval Christianity, and it calls attention to writers who discussed three orders of the faithful based on sexual lifestyle, with the highest status reserved for those who refrained from sexual activity. Cheatham makes a distinction between virginity, which was mostly associated with women, and chastity, which represented a choice of lifestyle after sexual activity and did not imply lifelong abstinence. These kinds of choices were associated with sexual purity, preparation for an intimate relationship with God, and imitation of angels, and were connected to superior moral and spiritual conditions.

In addition to discussing the diversity of medieval notions of virginity and the theme of spiritual castration, Cheatham stresses that the concepts of virginity and chastity had wide influence on the shaping of the medieval mind in many ways. An obvious example is clerical celibacy, which is traced to the polluting nature of sexual intercourse and is connected to daily performance of the Eucharist service. In addition to the economic factors involved in clerical marriage, there is also evidence of resistance to celibacy enforced by church authorities. For lay members of the church, there developed so-called chaste marriages for devout couples. Cheatham calls attention to lay sanctity movements, such as the Beguines in the thirteenth century—a group of uncloistered religious women for whom chastity and celibacy were fundamental to their lifestyle. Such examples show that the medieval church and the role of celibacy, within it and outside of it, were complex and never static.

Protestant Christianity exemplifies a different attitude toward the practice of celibacy. M. Darrol Bryant begins his chapter by raising the question of whether or not celibacy is a Protestant issue. After surveying the issue of celibacy in early Christianity, Bryant presents celibacy as a path of obedience and service, although troubling questions about sexuality persisted. Martin Luther, a Catholic priest turned reformer, offered a critique of celibacy after becoming convinced on the basis of his study of the Psalms that God's grace, not our acts, redeems us. In his lectures on Galatians in 1519, Luther denounced priestly celibacy, saying it was not good for all priests. Furthermore, the formal vow of celibacy set clergymen apart from the masses of the people. Being opposed to any coercive authority, Luther argued that monastic vows stand against the Word of God and against Christ because they violate the freedom of the gospel and make religion a matter of rules, statutes, orders, and divisions rather than a spontaneous relation to God through Christ. Moreover, it is ridiculous, he said, to assume that virginity is superior to marriage. The belief that the celibate person attains a higher stage of perfection than the average person is abhorrent because it involves a conviction that Christ has

not done everything sufficient for our salvation. Thus there is a danger that the vow of celibacy could become a substitute for faith itself. In his work the *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther argued that marriage was a natural state, whereas Satan inspired clerical celibacy.

In addition to Luther, Bryant examines other figures, such as the humanistic scholar Erasmus, the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli, French reformer John Calvin (who pointed to the corruption in the church and lack of scriptural basis for celibacy), and Menno Simons, a Dutch Anabaptist. Bryant points out the Protestant undermining of the distinction between priests and laity that contrasts a celibate priesthood with a married ministry. After reviewing examples of lay spiritual and lay-centered movements among the Puritans, Pietists, and Methodists, as well as John Wesley's call for perfection, which had no connection with celibacy, Bryant discusses the neo-orthodox Protestant thinker and pastor Karl Barth (d. 1968), who strikes a balance between the options to marry or remain single. Bryant views Barth's position as a correction to the Protestant tradition, before he concludes with a look at male-centrist thinking in the twenty-first century.

In contrast to Roman Catholicism, the Eastern Orthodox Church does not insist on celibacy for all clergy. They allow some clergy who are content to remain among the "lower" clergy to marry. This attitude toward celibacy reflects in part the tendency of individual Eastern Orthodox Churches to practice independence from each other by forming bodies that more or less correspond to the national states in which they exist.

In contrast to Christianity and the model of Jesus, the prophet Muhammad was a model for married life, a position shared with Judaism. The Qur'an (57:27) denounces celibacy as a human invention. Hence, ascetic practices tend to be un-Islamic from an orthodox perspective. Although the Shi'ite Muslims are an exception with respect to mortification of the flesh, there is in Islam generally no injunction to mortify the body, because such practice does not allow a person to perform ritual duties. In his chapter, Shahzad Bashir shows that the Islamic situation is more complex with respect to celibacy.

In contrast to the orthodox tradition, the Sufi movement expresses more negative attitudes toward the body. Sufi religious leaders express a variety of opinions about whether or not a Sufi should lead a celibate life. In addition to contested ascetic practices among Sufis on the basis of Qur'anic injunctions and personal choice, Bashir finds that celibacy functions as a form of social protest by Sufi groups, and that there is a relation between forced celibacy and political power during the medieval period. Bashir points out that most Sufis marry, with the exception of the Bektashi order in Turkey, although antinomian Sufi groups have arisen that were more radical and insistent on celibacy.

Other exceptions to the Islamic tradition included eunuchs, who served in the military and as government officials and had status in the society and real influence on kings. Bashir also balances his chapter by discussing the female Sufi saint Rabi'a and works that discuss advantages of marriage and celibacy to promote religious life.

Eastern Religious Traditions

In his chapter, which focuses on classical Hinduism, Patrick Olivelle draws a distinction between the terms *chaste* and *celibate*; he views the latter category as a social institution within the Hindu context. Knowing the important role played by celibacy in Indian history, Olivelle finds it ironic that there is no specific term for celibacy, although the term *brahmacārya*, which is later adopted by Buddhists, comes to approximate celibacy—it entails an initiation that requires a celibate lifestyle for several years during a young man's life as a student. In comparison to the minor role of celibacy in vedic religion, the embrace of celibacy by members of newer religious groups, such as Buddhists, Jains, and Ājīvikas, influenced the later Brahmanical tradition.

The importance of celibacy in Indian culture was embedded in the stages of life (*āśramas*) of a student, forest dweller, and renouncer, the sole exception being that of the life of a householder. According to Olivelle, the *āśrama* system was crucial for the development of celibacy in Indian culture, where it evolved from a permanent commitment to temporary stages of life, although the value of celibacy changed when it was domesticated. Olivelle discusses the tension between the values of domestic life and ascetic values. Overall, Olivelle shows how ascetic values were incorporated into the stages of life and also relegated to later in life after a person had been able to meet social obligations. The classical Hindu attitude toward celibacy is captured nicely in the *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* (2.13.3–6), where it affirms that those practicing celibacy attain immortality and acquire superhuman powers on earth.

Although the cultural attitude toward the value of celibacy continued in later Hinduism, the picture became more complex with the advent of devotional religious movements and Tantra. The various devotional movements have tended to be more life affirming and use sexual imagery in poetry to express the erotic and devotional relationship between a person and his or her deity. Devotional Hinduism also tends to be more sensual, with an emphasis on seeing and touching the deities.

The Tantric movement in its so-called left-handed form embraces sexual relations and other forbidden things as a means to achieve liberation. In

Tantra, the human body is considered a microcosm of the divine pair represented by Śiva and Śakti. By engaging in a ritualistic practice of sexual intercourse, a couple imitates the divine paradigm. This forbidden and illicit form of sexuality increases one's spiritual progress and prefigures the union of the divine masculine and feminine forces within one's body; final liberation is conceived as an androgynous condition and the overcoming of one's fragmented condition. The use of sexual relations to achieve liberation stands in sharp contrast to classical yogic techniques.

Celibacy is integral to the religious way of the Jain ascetic. There is a conviction that celibacy protects the soul from the harm associated with passion connected to sexual activity. The Jains also believe that there is a direct connection between celibacy and nonviolence (*ahimsā*). They believe that the act of sexual intercourse destroys numerous single-sense creatures believed to dwell in the generative organs of couples.

Paul Dundas makes creative use of the narrative of the Jain monk Sthūlabhadra to illustrate the struggle against sexual desire and a test of the vow of celibacy. The story suggests a juxtaposition of two opposing conceptual realms: urban sexual relations and renunciation, with the latter being the heroic choice to conquer desire. Dundas places the Jain attitude within its historical context and takes Olivelle's discussion in a previous chapter in another direction by discussing women as sources of temptation and roots of violence, and the monastic guidelines for relating to women. Dundas also connects food with erotic desire because food conditions sexual activity, both promote satisfaction, and both threaten the soul. In addition, Dundas examines the relationship between monks and nuns and the relationship between women and sexual restraint.

Instead of being in sharp contrast to the Jain ascetic, a Jain householder could choose to limit sexual activity to certain times, have a single partner, and curb the sexual drive. These are examples of the strong influence that celibacy has over the Jain religious imagination. Dundas calls attention to the negative view of sexual intercourse that shaped lay attitudes. And he reminds us that attitudes about celibacy are presented from a male perspective.

Similar to ascetic Jainism, a fundamental ethical precept embodied in the message of the Buddha involved the practice of celibacy for those who choose to become monks or nuns. Since ignorant craving was by definition essential to the arising of suffering, it was absolutely necessary for a monk or nun to become detached from sensual pleasure. Moreover, sexual relationships entailed social and family responsibilities and functioned as obstacles to mental concentration. Householders were not expected to share in the latter because they were expected to have sexual relations, although a householder might

practice celibacy on special occasions or for a specific purpose for a specific period of time. John Powers uses narratives to illustrate Buddhist attitudes and monastic rules, and he unpacks various rules and regulations in an attempt to comprehend why celibacy is essential for liberation. Powers discusses instructions for overcoming desire that are directed to the brain instead of the sexual organ, because it is the source of desire.

If we compare the formative period of Buddhism with its later development in Tibet, we find a more complex situation, because some schools of Tibetan Buddhism insisted on celibacy while some schools allowed sexual intercourse within a ritualistic context. Some more elite, advanced practitioners under the influence of Tantric thought imitated the Buddha, who is depicted as engaged in sexual relations with consorts. There were also some sects of Tibetan Buddhism that allowed for married clergy, in sharp contrast to the formative tradition. Powers skillfully distinguishes between Vajrayāna sexual techniques and more popular forms in the West.

In addition to India and Tibet, China and Japan hosted further developments within Buddhism. With respect to the practice of celibacy, there was wide diversity within these countries. John Kieschnick demonstrates the many obstacles to celibacy in China, where sexual activity was encouraged by the culture, was considered healthy, and played an important role in the social-lineage ancestor cult. From the Chinese perspective, celibacy was antireligious and antisocial, although a layman might produce a son to protect his lineage and take a vow of celibacy afterward. Kieschnick also calls attention to the sexual misconduct of monks that harmed the image of Buddhism, the work of critical literary figures, and the fabrication for political reasons of stories about wayward monks.

Although the practice of celibacy spread with Buddhism to Japan, with the advent of devotional movements and an emphasis on the role of lay people the Japanese abandoned celibacy for a married clergy. As Kieschnick observes, the practice of allowing a married clergy needs to be comprehended within the context of a belief in the decline of the Buddhist doctrine. The practice of celibacy never completely died out in Japan, however, as evident in the development of Zen Buddhism, and Korean Buddhism represented a counter movement back to celibacy.

Kieschnick's essay on East Asian Buddhism is complemented by Livia Kohn's essay on Daoism. Celibacy is not central to Daoist ethos or to Confucianism. A basic conviction holds that the family represents the basis of Chinese society; this is an attitude that gives paramount importance to the role of filial piety and marriage in ensuring the continuation of the paternal lineage and perpetuation of the ancestral cult. Nonetheless, the harnessing and refin-

ing of sexual energy, a basic power of life, is essential to Daoism. Inner alchemy schools stress female superiority in harnessing the primal sexual energy, and influenced the bedchamber arts. The practice of inner alchemy is intended to stimulate sexual energy and to transform it into a spirit that creates an immortal embryo. This type of practice is also associated with longevity techniques and mental concentration. Kohn shows that sexual techniques do not completely eliminate celibacy because they are used as a prelude to enhancing concentration and meditation practices, which are not intended to devalue sexuality but rather to gain inner strength. With the body forming the basis for transformation, sexuality becomes internalized into a refined sexual practice.

Shinto, an indigenous religious tradition of Japan, represents another religious tradition that is opposed to celibacy. C. Scott Littleton indicates that Shinto celebrates life and procreation. Littleton places Shinto into a historical and cultural context by reviewing its mythology, divine beings, belief system, shrines, priesthood, relationship between women and religions, and the cultural institution of the *miko*, who must be virgins in order to assist priests. Littleton also discusses the religion's attitude toward marriage and its relationship to the state, and he makes a brief comparison to Judaism. The Shinto tradition stands in sharp contrast to some forms of the Buddhist tradition that exerted an equally profound influence on Japan.

Non-Asian Indigenous Religious Traditions

Within African indigenous religions, celibacy is not viewed with favor because it upsets the social and religious order and the necessity to propagate the species. In African cultural traditions, celibate individuals are treated with contempt to the extent of being ostracized by their families and society. Likewise, sterile people are also despised, and they are compared to unproductive earth that possesses no value. For example, although in some religious traditions celibacy can symbolize purity, it is the emitting of semen that functions as a form of purification among the Zulu of southern Africa. When a Zulu male fears that he has been treated negatively with secret medicines, he does not sleep with his wife. Rather he goes to another woman and has sexual relations with her. Thereby, he expels his evil into her.¹⁷ Such a scenario gives rise to questions about the connection between celibacy and social habits, and the extent of social control over human bodies by the individual and the collective.

Concentrating her essay on the Yoruba society of Nigeria, Oyeronke Olajubu stresses the importance of procreation to perpetuate family and lineages in order to ensure biological immortality. She examines sexuality as it is

connected to the maturation process for males and females, which is also connected to the rhythm of life and ancestors. She also explores the importance of children and the dire consequences of not producing any children. She finds that sex is conceived as a divine gift that must not be abused by the Yoruba.

Contextualizing celibacy among the Yoruba, Olajubu finds it among servant and slave groups within the society, which calls attention to sociopolitical problems related to class, power, and the status of the celibate person as subject to force. Within a religious context, on the other hand, celibacy is not a lifelong commitment; religious functionaries are required to practice it for periods of time when they assume roles as intermediaries between divine beings and worshipers. Some elderly, who dedicate themselves to a deity, also practice celibacy, along with young girls dedicated to goddesses. From the perspective of her sociocultural analysis, Olajubu argues that celibacy is a matter of class and not religion among the Yoruba, and it is connected to the need for loyalty, trust, and protection of royal blood.

As a general statement that invites qualification, Native American Indians do not embrace or stress celibacy because it is not creative, whereas sex is a natural act that is encouraged. Among Native Americans, there is a cultural expectation to gratify one's passions, although there tends to be a double standard for men and women, with the former allowed to be promiscuous while the latter are expected to remain pure, unless women want to compromise their future marital status. Moreover, the dichotomy of body and soul that Native Americans believe in does not contribute to an emphasis on celibacy because sexuality is conceptualized as a creative power.

The cultural encouragement of sexual relations among Native American Indians is sometimes interrupted by short-term celibacy, such as the game played by the Cherokee and by the Eskimo at their Bladder Festival. In another instance, married Cheyenne abstain from sexual relations for long periods of time after the birth of a child and conception of another. Within the context of the Sun Dance ritual, celibacy is imposed by the rigors of the rite and is not specifically required. The Sun Dance also paradoxically embodies numerous sexual aspects that tend to dominate the ascetic aspects of the rite. In general, Native American Indians tend to respect those that choose celibacy, but they do not emulate celibates as a general rule.

Some Native American Indian peoples give overt expression to sexuality in their cultural figures, such as the trickster with his insatiable sexual appetite, which reflects universal human biological urges that need to be addressed before cosmic and social equilibrium can be achieved by members of a society. Trickster narratives are indicative of the ambivalent and dangerous

nature of sexuality. It is also important to mention the role of clowns and their often sexually obscene antics.

As we move from North America to Mesoamerica, we encounter peoples who celebrated sexual pleasure, which placed them into opposition with Catholic priests' intent on converting them. Mesoamericans believed that sexual relations between married couples were healthy, harmonious, and positive, whereas sexual transgressions threatened the social fabric. Jeanne Gillespie calls attention in her chapter to the connection between abstinence and purity; uncleanness is caused by excess and imbalance, creating the general rule that sexual moderation is to be preferred. For unclean individuals, sweat baths were used for purification.

Even though sexual relations are tied to pleasure, harmony, and moderation, there were exceptions to the general social pattern among Mesoamericans. Gillespie calls attention to the practice of periodic celibacy by warriors, the finite nature of bodily fluids, and the necessity for abstinence during some festivals. In fact, celibacy was connected to a return to social and cosmic balance.

NOTES

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3. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 555.
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10. *Ibid.*, 96-97.
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14. Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 1.
15. Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11.
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II

Celibacy in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism

John Powers

It would be better . . . if your penis had entered the mouth of a terrifying and poisonous snake than a woman's vagina . . . It would be better . . . if your penis had entered a charcoal pit, burning, blazing, aflame, than a woman's vagina.

Vinaya III.20–23, attributed to the Buddha

In a pleasant place where there are no distractions, in secret, you should take a woman who has desire . . . Then make your throbbing vajra (penis) enter the opening in the center of the lotus (vagina). Give 1,000 thrusts, 100,000, 10,000,000, 100,000,000 in the three-petalled lotus . . . Insert your vajra and offer your mind with pleasure.

Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra VI.22–24

Early Buddhism in India

The story of Buddhism begins with the Buddha, who was born in the Terai Lowlands of present-day Nepal and probably lived during the fifth century BCE. Traditional biographies report that his father, Śuddhodana, was the ruler of a small kingdom whose capital city was Kapilavastu. His mother, Māyā, conceived him after a dream in which a white elephant entered her womb, and she subsequently asked her husband's permission to take a vow of celibacy. He agreed, and after that regarded her like his mother or sister.¹

After the child was born, several astrologers were asked to predict his future. All agreed that he would be a great king, but one stated that if he were to be confronted by the negative aspects of existence prior to ascending the throne he would renounce his royal heritage and become a buddha ("awakened one," a person who has awoken from the sleep of ignorance in which most beings spend their lives). The king named his son Siddhārtha (He Whose Aims Are Accomplished), indicating his wish that the child follow in his footsteps. He ordered all his servants to ensure that the prince would never see any signs of suffering and would be constantly surrounded by sensual pleasures. "I was comfortable, extremely comfortable, incomparably comfortable," he is quoted as saying. "My father's mansion had lotus pools of blue, red, and white all for my benefit. . . . Day and night a white canopy was held over me to protect me from the cold, heat, dust, chaff, or dew. I had three palaces, one for winter, one for summer, and one for the rainy season. During the rainy season, I was in the palace suited for the rains surrounded by female entertainers, and was never left alone."²

As he grew, Siddhārtha excelled at all sports and martial arts. He had a perfect body and a melodious voice, and he was also highly intelligent. At the age of sixteen he married a beautiful princess named Yaśodhārā, and she subsequently gave birth to a son. By this time, however, Siddhārtha was becoming disenchanted by the sumptuous life of the palace, and he named the child Rāhula (Fetter), indicating that he was one of the factors restraining him from renouncing the world and pursuing the religious life. The king provided him with scores of beautiful women, and traditional biographies report that he indulged in every sort of sexual activity. One day after an extended orgy, however, he alone remained conscious, and the beautiful courtesans were passed out on the floor, their bodies slumped in unflattering positions, their clothes disheveled, makeup smeared on their faces. Some snored, and others drooled. Siddhārtha was disgusted by the sight and concluded that their former attractiveness was merely superficial. He experienced an overwhelming feeling of revulsion and resolved that he would leave the palace that very night and renounce the world.

For the next six years he wandered and practiced austerities, but eventually concluded that extreme asceticism is just as useless as hedonistic indulgence for those who seek liberation from cyclic existence (*samsāra*). According to Buddhism, all beings are born, die, and are reborn again in accordance with their volitional actions (*karma*), which are driven by a fundamental ignorance (*avidyā*) concerning the true nature of reality. They mistakenly imagine that the pursuit of sensual pleasures, wealth, power, and fame can bring true satisfaction, but because all worldly things are transient they eventually lose whatever they have gained; relationships turn sour, former friends turn into bitter ene-

mies, and everyone inevitably ages, becomes sick, loses people and possessions that are treasured, is forced to endure situations that are unpleasant, and finally dies. As long as one's actions are motivated by misguided attitudes, one will inevitably create cognitive attachments to transitory worldly things, which will result in continued rebirth.

Buddhism does not deny that there are enjoyments to be found in the world, of course, but from the beginning Buddhist teachers have pointed out that all mundane delights eventually end and that the pain of separation from what one desires is often more intense than the original pleasures. As long as one's actions are motivated by ignorance, one will create the conditions for successive lifetimes in which the same process will repeat itself.

Siddhārtha eventually found a way to overcome ignorance and put an end to the pointless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in which deluded beings are ensnared. One night he sat under a tree—referred to in traditional biographies as the "Tree of Awakening," near modern-day Bodhgaya—and he attained a series of successively more profound meditative states, culminating in buddhahood. A buddha sees reality as it is, no longer creates karma that will lead to further rebirths within cyclic existence, and has a mind that is perfectly at peace.

Beginnings of Buddhist Monasticism

Shortly after his experience of awakening, the Buddha taught five of his former companions in asceticism the path he had found, and they were subsequently ordained as the first Buddhist monks. In common with other ascetic movements of the time, Buddhist monastics were required to adhere to a strict regimen of conduct and were forbidden to engage in any sexual acts, to kill living beings, to take anything not given to them, or to make false claims regarding attainment of supernatural powers. Any who violated these fundamental norms were to be immediately expelled from the monastic order (*saṃgha*), with no possibility of reinstatement. These offenses are referred to as "defeats" (*pārājika*) in the code of conduct for Buddhist monastics (*vinaya*) because those who commit them are defeated by their passions and sever their ties with the order. In order to ensure that no one could claim ignorance of the rules, the Buddha ordered that all monks or nuns residing in a particular area must meet every fortnight and recite them. To make recitation easier, the regulations were condensed into a text entitled *Individual Liberation* (*Prātimokṣa*). The first of these regulations states that a monk "who has engaged in sexual intercourse with anyone, even a female animal, has committed an expulsionary (*pārājika*) offense and is no longer a part of the monastic community."

As Buddhism developed, different versions of the rules emerged, and today there are three main Vinaya traditions: 1. the Theravāda Vinaya, which is normative in most of Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka; 2. the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, which is the standard for monastics in East Asia, including China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Taiwan; and 3. the Mūlsarvāstivāda Vinaya, which is followed by monks and nuns in Tibet, Mongolia, and the Himalayan region. The only one of these codes that survives today in an Indic language is the Theravāda Vinaya, which was written in a language called Pāli (and so the Theravāda scriptural collection is commonly referred to as the "Pāli canon").

Details vary between these three codes, but all agree on the central importance of celibacy (*brahmacarya*). This is also stressed throughout the sections of the Pāli canon that contain discourses (*sutta*; Sanskrit *sūtra*) attributed to the Buddha. Although these were only compiled after his death by his monastic followers, there can be little doubt that the Buddha and the early monastic community placed a high value on self-restraint, particularly in terms of sexuality. The first rule that monks and nuns recite during the fortnightly convocation (*uposatha*) is the vow to avoid any sexual intercourse, and a large number of supplementary statutes go into extensive detail regarding what sort of actions constitute sexual misconduct. In most cases, the regulations were promulgated when an inventive monk or nun found a potential loophole in the existing codes, forcing the Buddha to consider the situation and pronounce new restrictions on the community's behavior.

An example is the monk Sudinna, who decided to leave his wife and become a monk. One day during his alms round he passed his family's house, and his parents rebuked him for joining the order before leaving them with an heir. He was their only son, and now that he was celibate there would be no one to inherit the family fortune or care for them in their old age. They asked him to return to his wife's bed and get her pregnant, but he initially refused, on the grounds that sexual intercourse is forbidden to Buddhist monks. They pointed out that they were not asking him to do anything he had not done before: he had previously had sexual relations with his wife, and he could return to the order as soon as she became pregnant. He agreed with their logic, and successfully impregnated her, but afterward became troubled, and his health began to suffer. He asked the Buddha if his conduct was acceptable, and he was rebuked in the strongest terms: "It is not allowed, foolish man, it is not becoming, it is not proper, it is unworthy for a monk, it is not lawful, it ought not to be done. . . . For that reason, foolish man, you should go to death, or to suffering like unto death . . . for this reason, foolish man, at the destruction of the body after death, you will enter into distress, to bad rebirths, the pit of hell."³

Buddhism denies that there is any enduring essence or soul. Living beings are conceived as collections of parts (the matter of their bodies, sensations, thoughts, emotions, karmic latencies, and so on) that change from moment to moment, flowing like a river that is in constant motion. Cells die and are replaced, thoughts emerge one after another, emotional responses to the environment change, and nothing endures forever. The psychophysical continuum of a living being is brought into being by causes and conditions, changes from moment to moment as a result of causes and conditions, and eventually degenerates and dies. Taking monastic vows represents a profound shift in this continuum, and certain actions that one performed previously are prohibited. Sexual activity is permitted for laypeople, but a monk or nun who has sexual intercourse violates a fundamental vow, and the Vinaya states that anyone who breaks this vow is no longer a monastic, even if the offense is not discovered. One may still wear robes and claim membership in the community, but one has committed a grave and unpardonable offense and is subject to immediate expulsion if discovered. One who has committed such a misdeed can never retake the vows.

There are exceptions, however. If a person is insane, drugged, or sleeping, there is no offense. The Vinaya contains a story of a monk who fell asleep with an erection, and a group of women passing by noticed and mounted him one by one. He never woke up, and they left praising him as a "bull of a man," but when other monks noticed a stain on his robe, he was reported to the Buddha. Because he was not conscious, did not consent, and did not enjoy it, he was not guilty of an infraction, but the Buddha cautioned his monastic followers to sleep behind closed doors after that.⁴

The Buddha was committed to the ideal of monastic celibacy, which is declared to be essential for those who aspire to liberation.⁵ It is possible for laypeople to successfully practice meditation and become free of desire, anger, and delusion (the three primary factors that enmesh living beings in cyclic existence), and they can even become *arhats* (female: *arhati*, those who have overcome all negative mental states, who have freed themselves from worldly attachments, and who will never be reborn in cyclic existence). An arhat will attain nirvana at the completion of his or her life, and nirvana is declared to be a state of perfect peace, of ultimate bliss, and the supreme goal of the religious path. If a layperson becomes an arhat, however, he or she must immediately take ordination as a monk or nun, because the state of arhathood is incompatible with lay life. A layperson who fails to take ordination will soon die, and then pass into nirvana.

Celibacy is not a problem for arhats; they have overcome even the slightest inclination toward pleasures of the senses, but many of the Buddha's followers

developed highly creative (and sometimes bizarre or amusing) ways of testing the limits of the rules. One limber monk, for example, was able to perform auto-fellatio, and another well-endowed monk could perform auto-sodomy.⁶ The Vinaya reports that two monks ejaculated after penetrating an open sore on a corpse, and another had a female monkey with whom he had sexual relations. He was reported to the Buddha after other monks saw the monkey bending over, expecting that they would have intercourse with her. As a result of these and many other permutations of sexuality, the Buddha promulgated a number of rules—along with various stipulations and exceptions—designed to cover as many types of sexual acts as possible. The second section of the *Prātimoksa* states that monks are prohibited from: (1) intentional seminal emissions; (2) having any bodily contact with a woman, holding hands, or touching a woman's hair or any part of her body; (3) inviting a woman to sexual intercourse or speaking lewdly to her; (4) speaking to a woman about "ministering to his sexuality," that is, indicating to her that this is a virtuous activity because he is a monk; or (5) acting as a go-between in order to bring a man and a woman together, regardless of whether their liaison is a one-time affair or leads to marriage and a stable relationship.⁷

As these rules indicate, Buddhist monks are forbidden to have anything to do with sexuality, either for themselves or for the benefit of others. The ideal is asexual indifference to worldly attractions, and many of the lesser rules relate to acts leading up to coitus, all of which are forbidden. Anyone who commits these lesser offenses is required to confess the transgression during the fortnightly recitation of the *Prātimoksa*. Those who have remained pure should stay silent when asked if they have broken any of the norms they have just recounted. If any member of the assembly has violated a rule, he or she should publicly confess, and in some cases this is sufficient. More serious matters require a meeting of the monastic community (*saṃgha-karma*) to decide on the seriousness of the offense and to mete out punishment (often a period of suspension for actions relating to sexuality).⁸

Commentaries on the Vinayas go into even greater detail regarding exactly what constitutes an offense and the proper punishments. According to one Vinaya text, sexual intercourse involves penetration of any orifice "as far as the width of a sesame seed," and so even if one begins intercourse and subsequently calls it off, one is still guilty.⁹ Forbidden orifices are also listed, and they include the vagina, the anus, the mouth, as well as orifices of animals or openings in inanimate objects. For nuns, any penetration using a severed penis, vegetables, dildos, or self-stimulation, or even washing themselves in a way that produces sexual pleasure, is forbidden. Monks are enjoined to avoid letting women bathe or massage them, from intentionally indulging in any act

that they expect will lead to seminal emission, and from any form of masturbation. In one story, a monk is bitten by an insect on his penis and subsequently finds that he is aroused when the sore rubs against his robes. The Buddha forbids this too, along with blowing on one's penis, inserting it into keyholes or a bunch of flowers, sand, mud, or water.

In one Vinaya story, a young monk named Seyyasaka was having difficulty with the rigors of the monastic life and had become thin and jaundiced from practicing austerities. A senior monk, concerned about his condition, advised him to masturbate regularly. He took the advice, and soon became robust and healthy. The other monks asked him what medicine he had taken for his remarkable recovery, but when he told them what he had been doing, they were appalled and asked him if he used the same hand for masturbation and for collecting alms. When he answered that he had, he was reported to the Buddha, who told him: "Imbecile, you publicly hold out your hand to receive alms, and with the same hand you commit abominations." He then promulgated a rule: "Afraid that this imbecile may later have imitators, I prescribe the following text: . . . If a monk, touching his genitals, causes the semen to flow, this monk must confess his offense in front of the community and be submitted to canonical penance. . . . But if one experiences a pollution during sleep it does not fall under this prohibition."¹⁰

The Problem with Women—and How to Deal with It

As a general rule, it appears that the order of nuns had fewer problems maintaining vows of celibacy than their male brethren. There are stories of nuns who transgress their vows, but far more about men, and there are more cautions for monks regarding the attractions of the opposite sex. The Buddha exhorted his disciples, "The thing that enslaves a man more than anything else is a woman. Her body, her voice, her smell, her attractiveness, and her touch all beguile a man's heart. Stay away from them at all costs."¹¹ In *So It Has Been Said*, women are compared with monsters and demons, and later with poisonous snakes.¹² In one sermon the Buddha states that "a monk is better off embracing a fire than a woman."¹³

Buddhist monks and nuns strive to become asexual. They are required to shave their heads; they leave their homes and wander from place to place with no fixed abode, and the Vinaya enjoins them to clothe themselves in robes made of cast-off rags and dyed saffron. They are expected to devote their time to religious pursuits, and the monastic life is designed to develop a calm mind, untroubled by worldly concerns or attachments, a dignified comportment, and an attitude of detachment from the vicissitudes that afflict ordinary beings.

Some monks appear to have been austere and unattractive to the opposite sex, but others, such as the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant Ānanda, were often beset by advances by women. Ānanda was reportedly a handsome man with a charming personality, and when he asked the Buddha how he should relate to women, he was told, "Do not look at them Ānanda." "But what," he wondered, "if I do see them?" The Buddha responded, "Do not speak to them." "But what," Ānanda continued, "if we must speak with them?" The Buddha cautioned, "Maintain mindfulness and self-control."¹⁴

There is a vast amount of discussion of the faults of sexual intercourse and various forms of sensual indulgence, along with advice on how to overcome desire and live a life of monastic purity. The focus of these instructions is not the sexual organs, however, but a far more important organ: the brain. The mind is the source of desire, and it is also the key to overcoming it. There are several stories of monks who severed their penises because they could not control lustful tendencies, but the Buddha issued rules forbidding any sort of self-mutilation. The goal of meditative training is to eliminate even the slightest vestiges of desire, and castration cannot accomplish this. When the arhat Bakkula was asked by a friend how many times he had indulged in sexual intercourse during his eighty years as a monk, he replied that the question was improperly formed, and that the correct one was how many times perceptions of sensual pleasures had entered his mind during those eighty years. To this question, he replied, "My friend, during these eighty years, no perception of sensual pleasures has arisen in my mind."¹⁵

The Pāli discourses and the Vinaya texts provide a number of mental trainings designed to overcome lust, including learning to visualize all women as one's mother, sister, or daughter.¹⁶ Through this they cease to be objects of sexual desire. There are also extensive descriptions of meditative practices that involve observing corpses in various stages of decomposition. One begins with a mental image of a person of the opposite sex whom one finds particularly attractive, and then one visualizes her as a corpse, going through various stages: rigor mortis, becoming blue and bloated, decomposing, being torn apart by wild animals and devoured by insects, and as a skeleton whose bones are first scattered and then reduced to dust. In another meditation, monks are taught to consider the foulness of the constituents of their bodies and those of potential sex partners, which include blood, snot, urine, feces, bones, muscles, internal organs, hair, and so on. These induce revulsion when separated from the body and laid on the ground, and one should realize that the body is composed of many foul substances and is not worthy of desire. Men should further consider that when they have sex with a woman they are lying on her full bladder and that her body contains various smelly and unpleasant materials.¹⁷

The Vinaya recounts the story of a young monk who zealously tried to maintain his vows but was obsessed by the beautiful courtesan Sirimā. One day she unexpectedly died, and the Buddha requested that her corpse not be cremated but instead left in a cemetery. After the body had begun to decay, he brought the young monk and several others to view it, and he pointed out that a few weeks ago many men willingly paid a thousand gold coins for one night of sexual ecstasy with her. He asked who would now pay a hundred gold coins, but there were no takers. He gradually reduced the price, and finally offered the body for free to anyone who wanted it. No one had any interest in the rotting corpse, and the young monk became an arhat at that moment and never again had any sexual desire.¹⁸

As an indication of how important renunciation of sexual passion is in the Vinaya, the only view that is unconditionally prohibited for monks is the assertion that there is nothing wrong with it. A monk named Ariṭṭha reportedly made this claim, and he even accused the Buddha of overstating the danger of sensual pleasures. He said that attempting to prohibit sex is like trying to fence in the ocean; all beings have desires, they are a natural aspect of the world, and there is no possibility of truly eliminating them. In response, the Buddha declared this to be a false view, and compared those who might hold it to a man who tries to capture a poisonous snake by grabbing its tail and is bitten.

He dies or suffers mortal agony. In the same way, monks, some stupid men study the teaching (*dharma*), but in studying it they do not wisely reflect on the aim of the teaching. Because they do not consider its aim, the teaching does not increase their mental acuity. They only study the dharma in order to criticize it or to refute others in debate. They are not capable of reaching the goal to which the study of the dharma should lead. This doctrine, incorrectly received, will lead them to sin and suffering for a long time, because they did not approach the teaching in the correct manner.¹⁹

In many Asian countries, Buddhist monks are believed to possess magical power, which is related to their taking and maintaining monastic vows. In Theravāda lands, monks are referred to as "fields of merit" (*puñña-khetta*; Sanskrit: *punya-kṣetra*), meaning that gifts donated to them yield greater merit than those given to less worthy recipients. Because of their moral character (closely tied to celibacy), they are resources for the entire community and serve as moral exemplars. Their power is easily lost, however, and this may occur not only through sexual intercourse but through a range of other activities connected with sensuality. For this reason, Theravāda monks will generally avoid sitting on the same car seat as a woman, even if there is a man between them,

and any physical contact with women is considered an infraction. They are forbidden from being alone in a room with a woman with the door closed,²⁰ and during their ordinations are instructed to remain as physically distant as possible in the presence of women and to keep their eyes on the ground. Some monks will even avoid walking under a line on which women's clothes are hanging.

The Vinaya regulations remain normative for monks and nuns today throughout the Buddhist world. Shortly before he died, the Buddha reportedly told Ānanda that in the future monastics could forego some of the minor rules, but Ānanda neglected to ask what these were. As a result, the Theravāda tradition—which regards itself as the most rigorous in maintaining monastic discipline and as the only truly orthodox order of Buddhism—enjoins monks to adhere to all of them. In the Tibetan cultural area and in East Asia, some restrictions are considered to be minor and are often ignored, but there is no dispute regarding celibacy.²¹ Monks and nuns in Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, and Vietnam are expected to refrain from any type of sexual intercourse (whether heterosexual or homosexual), and breach of this rule is an expulsive offense. Despite the theoretical strictness with which celibacy is regarded, there have been numerous sex scandals in Theravāda countries, as well as in other parts of the Buddhist world.²² There have also been several high-profile cases of misconduct in North American Buddhist centers, some of which involve Asian teachers, some offenses committed by Western Buddhists in positions of authority.²³ This has not significantly affected the general rule that celibacy is expected of monks and nuns, just as the fact that there are thousands of murders in the United States every year has not led anyone to seriously propose that murder ought to be decriminalized.

Sex and the Single Bodhisattva: A New Buddha, A New Buddhism

Several centuries after the death of the Buddha, new discourses attributed to him began to appear in India. Those who advocated their authenticity referred to their tradition as the "Great Vehicle" (Mahāyāna) and denigrated their opponents as belonging to a "Lesser Vehicle" (Hīnayāna). The new texts were entitled *sūtras*, implying that they were spoken by the historical Buddha, but their adherents claimed that they had only been revealed to advanced disciples and later hidden until the time was right for their dissemination. Many of these portray the Buddha as a godlike figure who is able to abrogate the laws of physics and whose lifespan and powers are immeasurable. In the *Lotus Sūtra of the True Doctrine* (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*), the Buddha appears on Vulture

Peak and informs an astounded audience that he did not really die, but only appeared to do so in order to give his followers a sense of urgency regarding their training. He then asserts that his birth, life in the palace, renunciation, practice of austerities, attainment of awakening, and his subsequent teaching career were all a show for the benefit of sentient beings. In fact he became a buddha countless eons ago and has been tirelessly engaged in compassionate activities. His physical form was merely an emanation created by him, and he resides in a "pure land" where he is still accessible to advanced practitioners.

Many of the doctrines and practices contained in Mahāyāna *sūtras* are also found in earlier discourses, but there are some striking differences. One of the most important of these is the relegation of the arhat—valorized in early Buddhist literature as an advanced practitioner of meditation who has brought an end to all mental afflictions and attained the supreme goal of nirvana—to an inferior position. The Mahāyāna texts describe the arhat as selfish and limited, only concerned with personal salvation, and as lacking "great compassion" (*mahākaruṇā*). They admit that arhats have some compassion and that they willingly help others to follow the path and attain nirvana, but they are castigated for being primarily concerned with their own salvation.

The Mahāyāna texts extol the figure of the *bodhisattva* (literally "awakening-being"), who is not content with settling for the quick and (relatively) easy nirvana enjoyed by arhats and instead is devoted to the welfare of all sentient beings. The bodhisattva eschews personal nirvana and resolves to become a buddha, even though this process requires a minimum of three countless eons (*asaṃkhyeya-kalpa*) to complete. It is possible to become an arhat and attain nirvana in as little as three human lifetimes, and so the bodhisattva's commitment is vastly more ambitious, and along the way he or she develops such qualities as wisdom, morality, generosity, patience, and compassion to their highest degree.

Their opponents viewed this ambition as wildly misguided and contended that only a minuscule number of beings have the capacity to become buddhas. There were buddhas before Siddhārtha (who is referred to as Śākyamuni or "Sage of the Śākyas" to distinguish him from other buddhas), and there will be buddhas in the future, but most beings ought to recognize their limitations and opt for the more achievable goal of becoming arhats and putting an end to cyclic existence as quickly as possible. The Mahāyānists, however, reject this notion, and contend that all Buddhists should devote themselves to nothing short of buddhahood in order to help others to attain liberation.

One of the main aptitudes that bodhisattvas develop during their training is "skill in means" (*upāya-kauśalya*), which enables them to cleverly adapt Buddhist teachings and practices to the proclivities and level of realization of

trainees. Bodhisattvas can even engage in actions that are forbidden in the Vinaya if by doing so they benefit living beings and contribute to their spiritual advancement. In the *Concentration of Heroic Progress Sūtra*, for example, the bodhisattva Māragocarānūlipta (Defiling the Domain of Māra) has sex with females in Māra's entourage in order to convert them, but he accomplishes this by emanating physical holograms of himself who satisfy their passion, convert them to the dharma and extinguish all lustful thoughts, and then disappear.²⁴ In the *Skill in Means Sūtra*, the bodhisattva Jyotis practices celibacy for 42,000 years, and then journeys to a city, where he is spotted by a woman who falls passionately in love with him. She declares her love/lust, but he informs her that he is celibate and cannot return her affections. She threatens to kill herself unless he does, and out of compassion he consents, even though he might go to hell as a result. Their relationship lasts for twelve years, following which he returns to his meditative practice. He dies soon afterward, however, but because his sexual interlude was motivated by compassion rather than lust, he is reborn in the heaven of Brahmā. The Buddha informs his audience that he was Jyotis, and Yaśodharā was the woman who lured him to her bed. He concludes the story by stating that he could engage in sexual acts with impunity because of his advanced understanding of skill in means: "That which leads other beings to hell leads a bodhisattva who is proficient in skill in means to rebirth in the realm of Brahmā."²⁵

The focus of early Buddhist practice is celibate monks and nuns, and it is assumed in the Vinaya and the collections of discourses that anyone who is serious about attaining liberation will renounce worldly life and enter the *saṃgha*, but Mahāyāna greatly expanded the role of the laity, and there are even *sūtras* attributed to lay men or women that portray them as advanced practitioners. In the *Sūtra Spoken by Stainless Action (Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra)*, for example, the bodhisattva Vimalakīrti is described as a wealthy householder with a harem and a son, but he is also celibate. Because of his lay status, he can go places forbidden to monastics and work for the benefit of sentient beings in ways that monastics cannot. He frequents bars and brothels, but only in order to awaken the patrons to the pitfalls of their debauchery and lead them to the dharma. In justifying his actions, he says, "without entering the great sea it is impossible to obtain precious pearls; similarly, without entering the sea of passion it is impossible to develop the thought of omniscience."²⁶

Vimalakīrti's ability to walk into the morass of sensuality and remain undisturbed by it is said to be an indication of the depth of his realization. Others might succumb to temptation, but Vimalakīrti remains pure and chaste. Even when a bodhisattva manifests as a courtesan, she has no desire, but only takes that form in order to provide a teaching opportunity for men who

would never willingly enter a Buddhist center but who frequent prostitutes. The goal of this sort of skillful means is essentially the same as what we saw earlier: helping beings to overcome desire in order that they might successfully pursue the path of dharma and eventually attain nirvana. In his famous poem *Entry into the Bodhisattva Deeds (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*, Śāntideva extols bodhisattvas who cleverly manifest in various forms in order to benefit sentient beings, and describes the skillful means they use to attract students who are motivated by desire and then set them on the path of dharma, but he is adamant that they must not succumb to passion themselves.

No sword, no poison, no fire, no cliff, no enemies can compare with the passions when one remembers the torments in hell and other lower realms. Thus one should recoil from sensual desires and cultivate delight in solitude and tranquil wildernesses free from contention and strife.²⁷

He also warns aspiring bodhisattvas to view women in ways that are reminiscent of passages we saw earlier in the Vinaya and the discourses of the Pāli canon: "Even though it does not move, you are afraid of a skeleton when you see it like this. Why do you not fear it when it moves as if it were animated by a vampire? [Women] produce both spit and shit from a single source of food. You do not want the shit from it. Why are you so fond of drinking the spit?"²⁸ Even when bodhisattvas manifest as prostitutes, they remain essentially sexless and have no desires. Sexuality is closely associated with awakening (*bodhi*) in Buddhism, whether it is suppressed or skillfully used, but there are descriptions in many Mahāyāna texts of the clever stratagems bodhisattvas employ to avoid succumbing to temptation, along with exhortations to retain mindfulness and to be aware of the dangers of uninhibited indulgence in passions. Bodhisattvas and buddhas can immerse themselves in the sea of sensuality without being affected by it, but ordinary beings are slaves to their desires, and this is the reason why it is so important to be able to confront them where they live and play. Moreover, most Mahāyāna texts that speak of bodhisattvas having sex with lust-obsessed women or men portray them as laypeople and not monastics, and so the ideal of monastic celibacy is maintained. Even when bodhisattvas use passion skillfully it is still clear that the end goal is eradication of desire and that sexual congress is merely an opportunity for facilitating a cognitive shift in deluded beings.

Vajrayāna: Sex Is Good

Around the end of the seventh century, a new wave of texts began to appear in India. Like the discourses of the Pāli canon and the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, they purported to have been spoken by the historical Buddha, even though he had

been dead for over 1,000 years. Most of them were entitled *tantra* (and sometimes *sūtra*), and they followed the general outlines of the Mahāyāna path. They used the standard opening formula of Pāli and Mahāyāna discourses attributed to the Buddha ("Thus have I heard at one time..."), but where the former generally situated him in a location in India associated with his preaching, the *Hevajra Tantra* and a number of others begin with the Buddha engaged in sexual intercourse with female consorts.

The opening phrase of the *Hevajra Tantra* states: "Thus have I heard at one time: The Bhagavan [Buddha] dwelt in the vagina (*bhaga*) of the Vajrayoginī who is the body, speech, and mind of all buddhas."²⁹ In chapter two, the Buddha instructs his audience, "You should kill living beings, you should speak lying words, you should take things that are not given, you should frequent others' wives."³⁰ These actions are explained symbolically, but are obviously intended to shock orthodox Buddhists.³¹ He later urges them to "have sex with women in various modes of existence in the three worlds," and assures them that these "fearful and terrible actions" are "conducive to the awakening of a buddha." The assembled bodhisattvas are so stunned at seeing the Buddha in flagrante delicto and propounding teachings that contravene his earlier dispensations that they collectively faint. He revives them with his magical power and informs them that the new methods they are learning are simply more advanced versions of what he previously taught.

Like the earlier Mahāyāna discourses, the tantras valorize the bodhisattva and proclaim buddhahood as the supreme ideal for religious practitioners, but they describe radically new techniques that they claim can shorten the period required to attain it to as little as one human lifetime. These techniques include meditative visualizations in which trainees generate a vivid image of a buddha and then imagine that their bodies merge with the visualized deity and that they are transformed into buddhas, with the body, speech, and mind of buddhas, performing compassionate actions for the benefit of sentient beings.

The tantras also describe sexual yogas in which men and women engage in ritualized coitus. These are linked with a mystical physiology of the "illusory body" (*māyā-deha*), consisting of subtle energies called winds (*prāṇa*) and drops (*bindu*) and the channels (*nāḍī*) through which they circulate. There are 82,000 channels, the most important of which are: (1) the central channel, roughly contiguous with the spine; (2) the right channel, which is parallel to it on the right side and associated with compassion and skill in means; and (3) the left channel, which runs parallel on the left side and is associated with wisdom. At several places called *cakras* the right and left channels wrap around the central channel and constrict the flow of energies. By loosening the constrictions and causing winds and drops to move through the central channel, meditators are

able to manifest subtle levels of mind, and these practices enable them to make more rapid progress than is possible through the standard Mahāyāna path.

Adherents of the tantras referred to their path as a new vehicle, the "Adamantine Vehicle" (Vajrayāna). The *vajra* is a core symbol in the tantras: it is said to be the hardest substance, and is equated with the union of wisdom and compassion perfected to the highest degree in the mind of a buddha. Iconographically the *vajra* is a five-pointed scepter that is frequently held by tantric buddhas in statues or paintings. It is also associated with the penis, which is commonly referred to as *vajra* in tantric texts.

Vajrayāna follows the earlier Mahāyāna *sūtras* in declaring that all phenomena are empty (*śūnya*) of inherent existence, that is, they are collections of parts brought together by causes and conditions, which change from moment to moment. They have no enduring substance or essence. The same is true, as we have seen, of humans and other beings. According to the *Hevajra-tantra*, there is no real difference between cyclic existence and nirvana (*saṃsāra-nirvāṇa-abheda*): "when the essence is declared, pure and consisting in knowledge, there is not the slightest difference between cyclic existence and nirvana."³²

Ordinary beings falsely imagine that they have enduring souls and that things in their environment have essential natures, and they grasp after them, whereas buddhas have eliminated all false conceptuality and have no cognitive attachments to the fleeting phenomena of the world. The difference between the two is one of perspective; the world does not change when one becomes a buddha, only one's perception of it. The *Tantra of Fierce Great Passion* echoes Shakespeare's statement that "nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so": "The mind precedes all things good or bad, and distinctions of one's situation, location, etc., are merely forms created by the mind."³³

Some Vajrayāna texts propose a radical reversion of the norms found in the monastic codes. Sexual desire is the primary factor that enmeshes sentient beings in cyclic existence, but some tantras contain techniques for transmuting this energy and using it in the path to buddhahood. According to the *Tantra of Fierce Great Passion*, "The same terrible acts that lead beings to hell will certainly lead them to liberation if they are conjoined with method."³⁴ Its practices are prescribed "for the sake of acquisition of supernatural powers (*siddhi*) by the lustful." Far from being an impediment, lust is said to be a necessary prerequisite for anyone wishing to attain buddhahood. The *Hevajra-tantra* asserts:

That by which the world is bound,

By the same things it is released from bondage.

But the world is deluded and does not understand this truth,

And one who does not possess this truth cannot attain perfection.³⁵

Some tantric texts even rewrite the biography of Śākyamuni Buddha in order to make it conform to the notion that sexual yogas are essential for the attainment of buddhahood—even though no mention is made of them in the earlier accounts of his life. *The Compendium of the Truth of All Buddhas* (*Sarva-thātāgata-tattva-saṃgraha*) asserts that he was sitting under the Tree of Awakening meditating during the night he attained buddhahood, but a number of buddhas interrupted him and informed him that it is impossible to complete the path without engaging in sexual yogas. He realized that they were correct, and then left his physical body behind and traveled to a transcendent tantric realm in a magically created body. He was given the highest consecrations, which empowered him to engage in sexual yogas with a physical consort (*karma-mudrā*, literally “action seal”). After his brief rendezvous, he returned to his place beneath the Tree of Awakening and resumed his meditations.

In addition to sexual acts, some tantras also urge trainees to ingest forbidden substances such as meat and intoxicants in order to overcome their aversion to them. Restrictions of diet, behavior, and passion are appropriate for beings of lesser capacities, but for advanced practitioners any preference for some things or aversion toward others becomes an impediment, a lingering vestige of conventional thought that must be overcome in order for one to become a buddha. Buddhas view all things with absolute equanimity; none are inherently good or bad, desirable or repellant, and those who have attained awakening have completely surpassed ordinary notions of conduct or behavior. The *Hevajra-tantra* declares that the advanced tantric practitioner:

has passed beyond oblations, renunciation, and austerities,
and is liberated from *mantras* [incantations] and meditation.
There is nothing that one may not do, and nothing that one
may not eat.

There is nothing that one may not think or say,
nothing that is either pleasant or unpleasant.³⁶

Tantric adepts (*siddha*) are described in a number of Vajrayāna texts. Some belong to despised castes and make their living by the lowliest occupations. Some Indian siddhas wandered naked or seminaked, clothed in animal skins and wearing bone ornaments, their hair matted and sometimes smeared with ashes from cremation grounds, and they often had antisocial actions ascribed to them. They gathered in cemeteries for tantric “feasts” (*ganacakra*), in which they fornicated with multiple partners and ingested forbidden substances such as elephant meat, wine, and drugs. Their biographies contain descriptions of the negative judgments of these iconoclastic figures by mainstream Indians, and they appear to revel in their unconventionality.³⁷

The *Tantra of Fierce Great Passion* urges aspiring siddhas to have sexual intercourse numerous times, and it contains a catalogue of positions, along with ritualized activities before and after coitus. After the two partners have become exhausted, the male yogin is advised to ply the female yogini with meats and intoxicants so that they can regain strength and arouse desire again, following which they should engage in more sexual yoga (2.7). The tantra also includes extensive lists of forbidden substances that they should ingest, including meat and seminal fluids.

Sexual Tensions in Tibet: Siddhas and Monks

Tibetans began importing Buddhism in the seventh century. Traditional histories report that the second of Tibet's Buddhist kings (*chos rgyal*), Trisong Detsen (ca. 740–798) extended an invitation to the Indian scholar-monk Śāntaraksita to travel to Tibet and spread the dharma, but his visit was marred by natural disasters, which were attributed to attempts by Tibet's indigenous demons to obstruct his mission. The king reluctantly asked Śāntaraksita to leave the country, but before he did he advised the king to invite the tantric master Padmasambhava to quell demonic resistance.

When Padmasambhava arrived at the border, a huge snowstorm created by the demons made further progress impossible, and so he retreated into a cave and meditated. The power of his meditation stopped the storm, and he then challenged the demons to personal combat. One by one, they were defeated by the power of Padmasambhava's *siddhi* and the mantras he chanted. The demons offered up their “life force,” but Padmasambhava spared them in exchange for a vow that they would henceforth become protectors of Buddhism. Śāntaraksita was asked to return, and he, Padmasambhava, and Trisong Detsen subsequently consecrated Tibet's first monastery, which was named Samye (ca. 767).

The figures of Śāntaraksita and Padmasambhava represent a dichotomy that still characterizes Tibetan Buddhism. Celibate monasticism is a key feature of each of Tibet's four Buddhist orders, but all of them also inherited lineages that are traced back to nonmonastic Indian siddhas, who often denigrated monastics as plodding and conventional, and asserted that the siddhas' own paths—which included the practice of sexual yogas—were a more rapid path to buddhahood than those of their celibate coreligionists.³⁸

The Nyingma (Old Translation) order claims that its roots lie in the first period of Buddhism's dissemination to Tibet (seventh to ninth centuries), and it follows the early translations of tantric texts. Many of its core practices are

traced back to Indian siddhas, and some Nyingma monks engage in sexual yogas despite taking monastic vows.

The Kagyupa (Teaching Lineage) order views the Indian siddhas Tilopa (988–1069) and his student Nāropa (1016–1100) as its progenitors, and Nāropa's Tibetan follower Marpa (1012–1097) and his student Milarepa (1040–1123) are among the most important figures in the tradition. Milarepa's student Gampopa (1079–1153) instituted a monastic order whose members take vows of celibacy, but the two strands of lay siddhas and monastics continue to be central aspects of the Kagyupa lineage.

The Sakyapa (Grey Earth) order traces its tantric practices to the Indian siddha Virūpa, and it also maintains a monastic order that emphasizes study and celibate monasticism along with the tantric tradition of "path and result" (*lam 'bras*).

The Gelukpa (System of Virtue, founded by Tsong Khapa (1357–1419)), is the newest and largest of Tibet's Buddhist traditions. Tsong Khapa was a reformer whose writings and biography indicate he was deeply concerned with the rising popularity of sexual yogas and practices that he considered to be problematic. Tsong Khapa and the Gelukpa tradition are adamant about the necessity of practice of sexual yogas for the attainment of buddhahood, but at the same time he sought to restrict them to elite practitioners. He believed that for most people celibate monasticism is the surest way to advance on the path, and he denounced monks who violated their vows by engaging in sexual practices, believing that Vajrayāna vows supersede those of the Vinaya. In his commentary on Asaṅga's "Chapter on Ethics" (*Śīla-parivarta*) in the *Bodhisattva Levels* (*Bodhisattva-bhūmi*), Tsong khapa writes that some Buddhists say of adherence to monastic vows:

"We are Bodhisattvas; we are [practitioners of] secret *mantra*. Thus we should 'transcend' [the monastic vows], and the higher [vows] will purify [the transgression of lower vows]." They say this and enter into laxity. When one has adopted the two higher vows [bodhisattva vows and tantric vows], the major transgression of contradicting bodhisattva precepts creates an even larger [transgression] that contradicts the tantric vows in the context of this [Buddhist] teaching. . . . In light of this formulation, how can those who claim to be Mahāyānists but who do not maintain either of the two vows [of laypeople and monks] have the slightest basis for asserting this? Thus they pollute the Teacher's dispensation with the filth of their sick thoughts, and so we who desire what is best should avoid them like poison.³⁹

Such concerns were not unique to Tsong Khapa, and were echoed by other Tibetans from the first importations of siddha tantric lineages to Tibet. In the

tenth century, King Yeshe Öd of Guge in western Tibet issued an ordinance that denounced tantrists who engaged in sexual yogas while remaining monks:

You tantrists, who live in our villages,
Have no connection to the three paths of Buddhism
[Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna];
And yet you claim to follow the Mahāyāna.
Not maintaining the moral strictures of Mahāyāna,
You claim, "We are Mahāyānists."
This is like a beggar claiming to be a king.
Or a donkey dressed in the skin of a lion.⁴⁰

He goes on to accuse such people of being bereft of both shame and true compassion, and characterizes them as "more beset by lust than a donkey or an ox in heat." He warns that those who violate monastic vows in this way will be reborn in hell or as intestinal worms.

Despite Tsong Khapa's strong feelings on the subject of monastic celibacy, he agrees with those who claim that sexual yogas are an essential part of the path to buddhahood, but he holds that only practitioners with unusually keen compassion who are in a hurry to complete the training in order to be of benefit to others should even consider them. Moreover, only those who have directly realized emptiness (*śūnyatā*) should engage in sexual yogas, because successful completion of these techniques requires the ability to generate vivid images of buddhas from the wisdom consciousness directly realizing emptiness. Direct realization of emptiness is considered to be a high level of attainment in Tibetan Buddhism, and only a handful of practitioners would claim to have achieved it. Thus sexual yogas ought to be restricted to a small spiritual elite, and the rest should realize that their progress is best guaranteed by taking and maintaining monastic vows, along with study and practice of meditation that does not involve sexual intercourse.

According to Gelukpa tradition, Tsong Khapa was a physical emanation of Mañjuśrī, the buddha of wisdom, and thus could have engaged in sexual practices without violating his vows, but he feared that if he did it would send a contradictory message to his followers, and so during his life he maintained strict adherence to the Vinaya and expected it of his students. After he died, however, he performed sexual yogas in the intermediate state (*bar do*) between lives in a subtle body, and thus avoided any infraction of monastic conduct. This has been taken as the ideal by successive generations of Gelukpas, but some lineages of the other orders claim that Vajrayāna practice transcends monasticism, and so it is permissible to engage in sexual yogas if they are integral to one's progress and one has been advised to do so by one's teacher (*bla ma*).

All orders of Tibetan Buddhism, including the Gelukpas, also have lay tantrikas (*sngags pa*), who may marry and have families, but are full-time religious practitioners. Many of Tibet's most popular saints were laypeople, and it is also possible to retract one's monastic vows if one reaches a point in one's practice at which sexual yogas are appropriate. This is generally easy to do, and there is no animus toward former monks and nuns who leave the order to further their training. Some may subsequently retake the vows after successful completion of advanced tantric meditation.

Vajrayāna sexual techniques are vastly different from popular notions of "tantric sex" in the West. Most practitioners who engage in them do so only after an extended period of preparation that includes long sessions of solitary meditation and development of advanced levels of realization. Moreover, according to biographies of those who practice them, sexual yogas are only used at particular junctures of meditative training, and are not orgiastic or licentious. For example, the "liberation story" (*rnam thar*) of Yeshe Tsogyel (ca. 757–817)—one of Tibet's greatest female yogins—recounts that she practiced solitary meditation for lengthy periods, following which her lama Padma-sambhava advised her to take a consort and practice sexual yogas in order to help her progress on the path. Following each of these periods, she returned to solitary meditation, and the descriptions of the practices portray them as highly ritualized and not particularly erotic.⁴¹

The goal is to utilize the power of desire in order to access subtle levels of mind, but because of the danger of unrestrained lust practitioners must have engaged in previous mental training and have the ability to manipulate the winds and drops, and they should have at least the inception of direct realization of emptiness. Sex is not done for its own sake, but rather as a means for achieving advanced states of consciousness, and according to Vajrayāna theory one result of these techniques is transcendence of sexual desire. A popular analogy holds that just as two sticks rubbing together produce a fire that consumes them both, so sexual yogas use the power of desire in order to eradicate it. So in the final analysis, these techniques claim to produce the same result as the Vinaya trainings of celibate monasticism, but through radically divergent means.

NOTES

1. The mother of a buddha need not be a virgin—and there is no indication that this was a virgin birth—but after a woman conceives a buddha all lustful thoughts disappear, and even after giving birth she will never again engage in sexual activity. The Buddha's mother is said to have died seven days after he was born, but even if she

had lived she would have remained celibate. He was raised by his stepmother, Prajāpati, who later became a nun.

2. *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, edited by Richard Morris (London: Pali Text Society, 1961), I. 145ff.

3. *Vinaya Pitakam*, edited by Shermann Chenberg (London: Pali Text Society, 1964), III.20–23. This passage also contains the quote in the first epigraph at the beginning of this chapter.

4. *Vinaya* I.6off.

5. Rules prohibiting any type of sexual intercourse may be found throughout the *Vinaya*. An example is *Vinaya* VI (*Parivāra*), in the "Great Differentiation" (*Mahāvibhaṅga*) section (VI.33): "Through indulging in sexual intercourse one falls into three offenses: If one indulges in sexual intercourse with a body that is not dead there is an expulsionary offense. If one indulges in sexual intercourse with a body that has partially decayed this is a grave offense. If without touching the penis one causes it to enter an open mouth this is an offense of wrong-doing." According to this calculus, sexual intercourse with a living woman rates among the five worst possible offenses for a monk, and is more serious than intercourse with a corpse. There are also a number of similar passages in other parts of the Pāli canon, including: the "Sāmaññaphala-sutta" (*Dīgha-nikāya* I.63); "Apāyika-vagga" (*Aṅguttara-nikāya*), edited by T. W. R. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter (London: Pali Text Society, 1947), I.265–273; the "Indriya-vagga" (*Aṅguttara-nikāya* II.141–148); the "Tevijjā-sutta" (*Dīgha-nikāya* I.246–247); and *Sutta-nipāta*, translated by S. Saddhatissa (London: Curzon Press, 1985), 400, 609, 814, 835.

6. See *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya Vinaya* 1. 56 (*Sifen lu*), 55.

7. Heterosexuality is the presumed orientation in the *Vinaya*. There are numerous examples of monks engaging in homosexual acts, but no sense that they are "homosexuals." Rather, it appears that the authors of these texts assumed that men will only engage in homosexual acts when women are not available or as a form of experimentation. There is no indication that there are some men who prefer sexual relations with men; as Foucault noted regarding Europe prior to the nineteenth century, when the concept of "the homosexual" developed, homosexuality is seen as something one does, rather than something that one is. Buddhaghosa asserts that those who engage in sex with other men are unable to attain some advanced meditative states (*Visuddhimagga* I.77), but he does not appear to consider this a differing orientation. Prohibitions against homosexual acts can be found in *Vinaya* IV.287–288, 341–344 (*Pācittiya* rules 31, 32, 90, 91, 92, 93).

8. Any intentional emission of semen requires a formal *saṃgha-karma* (*Vinaya* VI.34). If a monk intentionally rubs his body against that of a woman, this also requires a *saṃgha-karma* (VI.34). Even if he strokes an article of her clothing with his hand, or rubs his clothing against hers, this constitutes a serious offense requiring formal expiation (VI.34). Similarly, speaking to a woman about satisfying his sensual desires requires a *saṃgha-karma* (VI.34).

9. See, for example, *Sphuṭāthata Srighanacara-saṃgraha-ṭīkā* III.1–3, which stipulates that even the slightest penetration of any orifice for purposes of sexual

enjoyment constitutes an expulsionary offense: J. Duncan Derrett, *A Textbook for Novices* (Turin: Instituto di Indologia, 1983), 52–53. The Vinaya (e.g., *Vinaya* III.28–29) indicates that any sexual congress with women, men, animals, eunuchs, humans, or nonhumans constitutes an expulsionary offense. See also *Vinayamukha* I.4.1, which states that any monk who engages in sexual intercourse immediately loses communion (*saṃvāsa*) with the monastic community, that is, ceases to be a monk. This text goes on to say (I.4.1) that any penetration, even to the width of a sesame seed—even if he does not finish the action, and even if his or her partner's sexual organ is covered, and whether the intercourse occurs with living or dead humans, living or dead animals, with trees or inanimate objects, and even if he initially resists but subsequently enjoys it—is an expulsionary offense.

10. *Vinaya* I.192. Masturbation is also prohibited in *Vinaya* III.109 (*saṃghādisesa* rule 1). Masturbation by nuns is forbidden in *Vinaya* IV.259–261 (*Pācittiya* rules 3 and 4).

11. *Āṅguttara-nikāya* I.1–2.

12. *Itivuttaka*, II.4. The *Itivuttaka* is the fourth book of the *Khuddaka-nikāya* section of the *Sutta-pitaka* of the Pāli canon.

13. *Āṅguttara-nikāya* IV.128. Earlier in the same collection, the Buddha states: "In truth, women are a snare devised by Māra [the Buddhist Satan, who tempts people into ignorance]. It is better for you to argue with a man carrying a sword than to speak alone with a woman. It is better for a monk to quarrel with a friend than to speak alone with a woman. It is better for a monk to sit next to a dangerous snake than to speak alone with a woman" (*Āṅguttara-nikāya* III.68).

14. *Dīgha-nikāya* II.141.

15. *Majjhima-nikāya* edited by V. Trenckner (London: Pali Text Society, 1964), III.126–128.

16. See *Samyutta-nikāya* IV.110, where the arhat Pindola tells King Udena that the Buddha advised monks to perceive women in these three ways.

17. This technique worked for some, but according to one story the Buddha taught monks this "meditation on the foul," following which he went into meditative retreat. When he returned, he observed that there were fewer monks, to which Ānanda replied that some monks had become so disgusted with the foulness of their own bodies that as many as thirty committed suicide in one day. The Buddha then wisely decided to emphasize other techniques for eradicating desire.

18. Interestingly, both the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa (p. 184) and the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* (III.68, IV.42) state that men should not meditate on female corpses because they might find them attractive, although in the case of Sirimā this seems fairly unlikely.

19. *Majjhima-nikāya* I.133–134.

20. See *Vinaya* IV.20, *pācittiya* rule 7.

21. The main exception to this is Japan, where priests commonly take the monastic vows but have no intention of actually keeping them. Many get married and have children, and it is generally thought that the world has entered a time in which the dharma will inevitably degenerate (*mappō*) and that humans have become too

depraved to practice as the Buddha's followers did. As a result, monks cannot be expected to maintain the vows they take.

22. See, for example, Sanitsuda Ekachai, *Keeping the Faith: Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads* (Bangkok: Bangkok Post, 2002). The author is a features editor at *The Bangkok Post*; the book chronicles examples of misdeeds by the Thai *saṃgha*, many of which pertain to sexual misconduct.

23. For a discussion of some of the scandals and how Western Buddhists have attempted to deal with the problem, see James W. Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

24. See Étienne Lamotte's translation: *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra: The Concentration of Heroic Progress* (Richmond: Curzon, 1998), 177–178.

25. *Upāya-kauśalya-sūtra*, chap. one. See Mark Tatz's translation of this text: *The Skill in Means Sūtra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 34–35. Although some Mahāyāna texts portray skillful use of desire to lure lustful beings into Buddhist practice as a special feature of the "Great Vehicle," there are precedents in the Pāli canon. An example is the story of how the Buddha had his half-brother Nanda kidnapped shortly before his wedding to a beautiful woman and against his will. The Buddha then brought the still-protesting Nanda to a celestial realm, where he saw nymphs who were far more beautiful than any human woman. Nanda agreed that they were in fact more attractive than his fiancée, and then the Buddha informed him that rebirth in such realms was the result of meditative practice. Hoping to have sex with them, Nanda assiduously applied himself to meditation, but along the way his desire was eliminated. He eventually became an arhat and lost all interest in the nymphs.

26. *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, chap. 7.3. See Étienne Lamotte's translation of this passage: *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)*; English translation by Sara Boin-Webb (London: Pali Text Society, 1976), 179.

27. *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, edited by V. Bhattacharya (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1960), chap. 8:84–85.

28. *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, chap. 8:48–49.

29. *Hevajra-tantra* I.1. My translation (and the translations of other passages from this tantra) follows the Sanskrit text of David Snellgrove: *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), but differs from his translation. Snellgrove translates this passage more delicately: "Thus have I heard—at one time the Lord dwelt in bliss with the Vajrayoginī who is the Body, Speech, and Mind of all the Buddhas." But his own text vol. II: 2 clearly indicates that he "dwelt in [her] vagina" (*bhagesu vijāhāra*).

30. *Hevajra-tantra* II.3, 29.

31. In the following verses, the Buddha explains that "killing living beings" involves cultivating "singleness of thought" (*eka-citta*); "speaking lying words" refers to the vow to save all sentient beings; "what is not given" is a woman's bliss (presumably in sexual yoga); and "frequenting others' wives" is meditation focused on Nairātmyā, Hevajra's consort. This point is also emphasized in the *Commentary on the Condensed*

Meaning of the *Hevajra-tantra* (*Hevajra-pindārtha-tikā*; Tib. *Kye'i rdo rje bsdus pa'i don gyi rgya cher 'grel pa*), which cautions that "the rites of ritual slaying and so forth that have been described [in the tantra] are intended to frighten living beings in order to subdue them, and thus establish them [on the correct path]. If one were really to kill them, one would be violating a vow of the great seal (*phyag chen po'i dam tshig*) and would fall into Avīci hell" (15.86b, 5–6).

32. *Hevajra-tantra* I.10, 12.

33. *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa-tantra*, sDe dge edition, 6.33. "Great Fierce Passion" is the name of the main buddha discussed in the text.

34. *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa-tantra* 7.33.

35. *Hevajra-tantra* I.9, 19.

36. *Hevajra-tantra* I.7, 24.

37. The most popular of these is Abhayadatta's (ca. twelfth century) hagiography, *Lives of the Eighty-Four Adepts* (*Caturśīti-siddha-pravṛtti*).

38. This ongoing tension is the central theme of an excellent study of Tibetan Buddhism by Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

39. Tsong kha pa, *Byang chub sems dpa'i tshul khrims kyi nam bshad byang chub gzhung lam* in *Peking Tripitaka* (Tokyo: Suzuki Research Foundation, 1981), vol. 154, p. 69a.5–8.

40. See Samten G. Karmay, "The Ordinance of lHa Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od," *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*, edited by Michael Aris and Aung San Ssu Kyi (Warminster: Aris & Philips, 1980), 150–152. The Tibetan text is on p. 156. The translator Rinchen Sangpo 958–1055) echoed these sentiments in his *Refutation of Errors Regarding Secret Mantra* (sNgags log sun 'byin).

41. Her meditative training, including practice of sexual yogas, is described in her biography, *The Secret Life and Songs of the Tibetan Woman Yeshe Tsogyel* (*Bod kyi jo mo ye shes mtsho rgyal gyi mdzad tshul nam par thar pa gab pa mngon byung rgyud mangs dri za'i glu 'phreng*), which has been translated by Keith Dowman as *Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel* (London: Arkana, 1984). Padma-sambhava's advice to take a consort and practice sexual yogas can be found on p. 44.

I2

Celibacy in East Asian Buddhism

John Kieschnick

Hundreds of years after the birth of Buddhism in India, in the final decades of the first century of the Common Era, we begin to see rare but unmistakable signs of the arrival of Buddhism in China: a Buddha-like figure among indigenous Chinese deities in a tomb mural; an account of a regional ruler worshiping a strange new god; chance references to exotic foreigners living in communities and espousing a new religion. In the centuries that followed, Chinese Buddhists propagated newly produced legends, explaining that the first image of a Buddha came to China in an emperor's dream. On waking, the emperor sent out envoys to bring back a real image along with the scriptures of this great and mysterious holy man. In fact, the entrance of Buddhism to China was much more prosaic, a gradual process of centuries of transmission and acculturation, interaction with indigenous Chinese culture and innovation that continued long after Buddhism disappeared from India. Once Buddhism had taken hold in China and become a powerful cultural force there (by, say, the late fifth century), it began to spread to the emerging regional powers of Korea and Japan, and later to Vietnam. Unlike areas of Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Cambodia, which were influenced more directly by India and Ceylon, cultures in East Asia were heavily influenced by Chinese culture and, with it, by the Buddhist experience in China.

During the first few centuries of its life in China, Buddhism introduced a host of new ideas, practices, and artifacts first formed