Refractions: Of Body, Sensuality, and Sexuality (Part 2)

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When we reflect on sexuality, I hope one of the most basic insights in relationship to it is that of dependent origination and emptiness. In other words, we are aware and never lose sight of the fact that sexuality, like anything else, like everything else, does not exist independently of the way of looking. Sexuality doesn't exist independent of the way of looking. It has no inherent existence as this or as that. It's always colored and shaped by the way that we're relating to it, the way that we're regarding it, our assumptions about it and our assumptions about the path and about what is spirituality or morality or what is in contrast to it.

When a person thinks, "Yeah, but really sexuality is this," it's that "really" that needs to be called into question. This is the movement of avijja, not realizing the dependence on the way of looking. So when we talk about sexuality, we're talking about something that is not a fixed independently existent thing. No matter how much it seems to be just a biological fact, we can't look at it independent of all kinds of assumptions, ways of relating and regarding it, and archetypal styles.

How open is our imaginal context for what sexuality is and can be? If we use even just the Greek gods as archetypes, Aphroditic sexuality—with its attention to pleasure and sensuality and the generative urge of procreation—is very different from, say, Hermetic sexuality. Hermes is not interested in monogamy, for example. Or consider the Dionysian, with its ecstasy and intensity, and also the effeminacy as much as the power. These are all different archetypes from that of the faithful monogamous couple in marriage.

We bring both conceptual ideas and assumptions, and a kind of narrowness or breadth of archetypal lens to what sexuality is. Some of that we get from the culture, from the wider culture, and some from the subcultures that we move in. We're always bringing something. We're not talking about something that exists independently that really is like this or really is like that. This is a fundamental insight that we must keep in mind and keep in our consciousness as we're exploring sexuality and opening it up as a topic.

I remember when I was an undergraduate studying psychology, just after Richard Dawkins' book The Selfish Gene had been released and people were talking about it a lot. I actually had Richard Dawkins as a personal tutor for a very short time, which is a whole other story. A student colleague of mine, a friend, was quite influenced by that book and that whole way of thinking. He used to say, "Love is just a genetic program to release certain chemicals in your brain. And that's what love is. That's all love is." This is a very fundamentalist, evolutionary, biological survival-of-the-fittest way of reducing things—a very

reductionistic way of looking.

Or consider a person I knew, a practitioner, who was very adamant that sexuality is just a biological impulse to procreation that's been evolutionarily selected. He was very intent on that conception of sexuality, and that was the same person who described himself as addicted to internet porn. Is there any relationship there between the view and the behavior? Is the behavior coming out of a certain view, because it doesn't allow for much more?

Nicolas Chamfort, a French moralist around the time of the French Revolution, said or wrote, "Love is nothing but the contact of two epidermis"—that's the biological word for skin—"and the exchange of two pale fantasies." I don't know enough about him to know whether that particular aphorism was coming from a broken heart—his wife, I think, died—or how much it was just the view that he arrived at at a certain point in life.

I've talked about the Buddha and what he's recorded as saying in the Pali Canon in relation to sexuality, using very strong language, very dismissive. There are views that reduce sexuality and lovemaking, and even human love, in different ways, and pigeonhole it, either biologically or spiritually.

I remember teaching a retreat at one of the major retreat centers in another country. We were sitting at lunch with a few senior teachers and some others around, and something came up because it had come to their attention that there was a subgroup of teacher trainees elsewhere in the country who had started a group involving something like mindful sex. I'm not quite sure of the details, but it may have involved mutual masturbation. They were promoting it as a sort of spiritual practice to integrate sexuality, to explore and open sexuality mindfully.

I was just listening, not knowing much about it, and watching the back and forth of the conversation. What struck me was the immediate dismissal of this group and this idea, and the wanting to be clearly disassociated from it and make sure the insight meditation world was clearly not in any way associated with it. There were some strong statements about how the Buddha taught that we need to let go of cravings, so this couldn't be related to Dharma.

Then in the very same mouthful, the teacher who said that commented on how this was such a lovely meal that we were being fed by the retreat staff, and how this was in fact their favorite meal. I was struck by the obliviousness or seeming obliviousness of those two statements. One was around the area of sensuality around sexuality, and one was around the area of pleasant-tasting food. One was completely okay—seemingly to just declare one's enjoyment and that one had a favorite there—and one was really not okay.

This struck me very much at the time. I remember being struck mostly by the seeming lack of openness and questioning there.

Sexual ethics often draws intense scrutiny—consternation, outrage, tutting—while other ethical issues,

like climate change, receive almost complete silence. We rarely see the same willingness to speak up, to teach ethics around environmental destruction, or to take strong positions there. Yet sexuality readily provokes heat, strong statements, black-and-white declarations, with people very ready to condemn.

So I wonder: Are we exploring our relationship with sex and sexuality deeply enough? Are we truly examining the views we hold about this? Or are we simply absorbing, drinking in, being unconsciously indoctrinated by some unquestioned legacy—perhaps Western Christianity that saturates our culture? Even in secular contexts, Christian ethics largely remain, as Nietzsche pointed out. We're saturated by Christian-influenced views of body, sensuality, sexuality, alongside those found in Pali Canon Buddhism.

My inquiry concerns how open our questioning really is—how willing we are to examine our relationships and views around sexuality, sensuality, and eros. I'm absolutely not advocating moral nihilism, suggesting anything goes around sexuality. Rather, I'm questioning how much genuine questioning exists regarding our attitudes and assumptions.

For me, this remains an open exploration rather than contracting down to "we know the answer, this is the decree." There is not, as yet, any arrival at a final answer.

When someone declares in a dharma context that "sex is a distraction," or "sexual thoughts and images are distractions," this already implies a particular view. Such seemingly authoritative statements carry assumptions we rarely examine. Yet anything can be a distraction—pleasant food, ideas about dharma, whatever. I'm certainly not advocating abandoning ideas or being "non-conceptual," simply noting that anything can become a so-called distraction.

Similarly, statements like "the Buddha said X, therefore X" imply all kinds of views and fantasies that we rarely unpack. What assumptions lie behind such compact-sounding pronouncements?

What's the most important thing? Is it being a Buddhist? But what does being a Buddhist mean? Is it freedom? What kind of freedom, and how many kinds exist? Is it soul-making? Freedom and soul-making together?

How does what I'm thinking and saying to myself and others actually reflect what I consider most important? Or have other considerations gotten tangled in there—assumptions, views, fantasies I haven't recognized?

Whenever anyone says "Buddha said," there are usually many unseen views and fantasies wrapped up in such statements—fantasies of path, awakening, Buddha, tradition. All these things we've touched on remain typically unexamined.

Is it really true that sex, lovemaking, sexual arousal, sexual energy, sexual images prevent samadhi? I can relate experiences—my own and those many students have shared—where sexuality, sexual energy, sexual images, actual lovemaking, actually quite support samadhi. They don't leave stickiness, craving, or

contraction of being at all.

Yet people often assume it's either-or: either you're open to sex and sensuality, or you're going for the unfabricated. Is this really true? To disprove such thinking, we need only find celibate people who haven't realized the unfabricated alongside non-celibate people who have. Both certainly exist.

This either-or thinking wraps up all kinds of unexamined assumptions. Often there's real polarizing—perhaps tracing back to Plato, Neoplatonism, or Pali Canon Buddhism's rejection of sensuality and sexuality in favor of knowing the transcendent unfabricated, versus rejecting anything transcendent altogether.

We'll return to this later.

We know we've touched on this—the whole field polarizes. Either this or that. Is it really the case? Is that really true?

So we can compare, for instance, such views as we were talking about before—my undergraduate fellow student, or the person who described himself as addicted to pornography, or what Shafo said, or what seemed to be articulated by the teachers around the lunch table. Compare all that with views of sex and sexuality, whether actual physical sex or imaginal, that we touched on the other day: the view of sexuality and sex as participating in, mirroring, echoing something much larger, something cosmic, and even perhaps creating or healing the divine through that engagement.

What a different view that is of what sexuality is—or should we say could be, can be, how it can be transformed, again, by the way of looking. Really quite a different view.

Sometimes I wonder if that kind of view—participating in something much larger, something more cosmic through sex—if that sense is perhaps easier for women. Because of the cycles of menstruation, for example, and because of the potential, at least if not the actuality, of pregnancy, one really feels subject to something much larger. Someone once told me that in the cycles, in what is being born in you and coming through you, what your body is subject to, your whole being is subject to—menstruation, pregnancy—you're subject to something much larger. And there's the possibility of feeling that in a very different way, much more embedded, cosmically reflecting the earth and cosmic cycles. Something bigger than you are.

Whereas potentially, at least for the male, it's possible to scatter one seed, sow one seed, enter and leave, and not have that sense of being caught up in something or at the center of something much, much vaster, much more multidimensional, much more cosmic in its order. It may be easier for the woman, for the female, to feel that than it is for the male, perhaps.

But compare those views I was talking about before with this participatory view, or let me read you something from the myth of Inanna and her courtship with Dumuzi, the shepherd. Inanna was a

Sumerian goddess, and Dumuzi may have been immortal—it's unclear, I'm not an expert on this myth—but may have become divine through lovemaking with Inanna, through partnership with the goddess. There are all kinds of parallels here to what we've been talking about.

This passage is quite long, but because it's so different from the typical ways we regard sexuality in our culture, I think it's worth reading at length, just to get a completely different sense of the regard, the reverence, the texture of what sexuality is and what lovemaking can be.

So Inanna, at her mother's command, bathed and anointed herself with scented oil. She covered her body with a royal white robe. She readied her dowry. She arranged her precious lapis beads around her neck. She took her seal in her hand. She's a goddess, remember. Dumuzi, the shepherd—he's becoming the king through this lovemaking—waited expectantly.

Inanna opened the door for him. Inside the house she shone before him like the light of the moon. Dumuzi looked at her joyously. He pressed his neck close against hers. He kissed her.

Inanna spoke: "What I tell you, let the singer weave into song. What I tell you, let it flow from ear to mouth. Let it pass from old to young. My vulva, the horn, the boat of heaven, is full of eagerness like the young moon."

As an aside, I read a short interview with Diane Wolkstein, who translated this not too long ago. She was talking about translations made first in 1937 of the Sumerian myth, and they kept words like "vulva" in Latin because back then you simply could not publish such things in English. The culture was not ready, she said, though she thinks we're more ready now. She found that rather amusing.

So: "My vulva, the horn, the boat of heaven, is full of eagerness like the young moon. My untilled land lies fallow. As for me, Inanna, who will plow my vulva? Who will plow my high field? Who will plow my wet ground? As for me, the young woman, who will plow my vulva? Who will station the ox there?"

Who will plough my vulva? Dumusi replied, "Great lady, the king will plough your vulva. I, Dumusi the king, will plough your vulva." Inanna said, "Then plough my vulva, man of my heart, plough my vulva."

At the king's lap stood the rising cedar. Plants grew high by their side. Grains grew high by their side. Gardens flourished luxuriantly.

Inanna sang: "He has sprouted. He has burgeoned. He is lettuce planted by the water. He is the one my womb loves best. My well-stocked garden of the plain, my barley growing high in its furrow, my apple tree which bears fruit up to its crown, he is lettuce planted by the water. My honey man, my honey man sweetens me always, my lord, the honey man of the gods, he is the one my womb loves best. His hand is honey, his foot is honey, he sweetens me always. My eager, impetuous caresser of the navel, my caresser of the soft thighs, he is the one my womb loves best. He is lettuce planted by the water."

Dumusi sang, Inanna sang: "Make your milk sweet and thick, my bridegroom. My shepherd, I will drink

your fresh milk. Wild bull Dumusi, make your milk sweet and thick. I will drink your fresh milk. Let the milk of the goat flow in my sheepfold. Fill my holy churn with honey cheese. Lord Dumusi, I will drink your fresh milk. My husband, I will guard my sheepfold for you. I will watch over your house of life, the storehouse, the shining quivering place which delights Sumer, the house which decides the fates of the land, the house which gives the breath of life to the people. I the queen of the palace will watch over your house."

Dumusi spoke: "My sister, I would go with you to my garden. Inanna, I would go with you to my garden. I would go with you to my orchard. I would go with you to my apple tree. There I would plant the sweet, honey-covered seed."

Inanna spoke: "He brought me into his garden. My brother Dumusi brought me into his garden. I strolled with him among the standing trees. I stood with him among the fallen trees. By the apple tree I knelt as is proper, before my brother coming in song, who rose to me out of poplar leaves, who came to me in the midday heat. Before my lord Dumusi, I poured out plants from my womb, I placed plants before him, I poured out plants before him, I placed grain before him, I poured out grain before him, I poured out grain before my womb."

Inanna sang: "Last night as I, the Queen, was shining bright, last night as I, the Queen of Heaven, was shining bright, as I was shining bright and dancing, singing praises at the coming of night, he met me, he met me. My Lord Dumusi met me, he pushed his hand to my hand, he pressed his neck close against mine. My High Priest is ready for the holy loins, my Lord Dumusi is ready for the holy loins. The plants and herbs in his field are ripe. O Dumusi, your fullness is my delight."

She called for it. She called for it. She called for the bed. She called for the bed that rejoices the heart. She called for the bed that sweetens the loins. She called for the bed of kingship. She called for the bed of queenship. Inanna called for the bed: "Let the bed that rejoices the heart be prepared. Let the bed that sweetens the loins be prepared. Let the bed of kingship be prepared. Let the bed of queenship be prepared. Let the royal bed be prepared."

She spread the bridal sheet across the bed. She called to the king: "The bed is ready." Inanna called to her bridegroom: "The bed is waiting."

He put his hand in her hand. He put his hand to her heart. Sweet is the sleep of hand to hand. Sweeter still is the sleep of heart to heart.

Inanna spoke: "I bathed for the wild bull. I bathed for the shepherd Dumusi. I perfumed my sides with ointment. I coated my mouth with sweet-smelling amber. I painted my eyes with coal. He shaped my loins with his fair hands. The shepherd Dumusi filled my lap with cream and milk. He stroked my pubic hair. He watered my womb. He laid his hands on my holy vulva. He smoothed my black boat with cream. He quickened my narrow boat with milk. He caressed me on the bed. Now I will caress my high priest on the

bed. I will caress the faithful shepherd Dumusi. I will caress his loins, the shepherd of the land. I will decree a sweet fate for him."

The queen of heaven, the heroic woman greater than her mother, Inanna, the first daughter of the moon, decreed the fate of Dumusi.

Her advisor, Ninshibur, the faithful servant of the holy shrine, led Dumusi to the sweet thighs of Inanna and spoke: "My queen, here is the choice of your heart, the king, your beloved bridegroom. May he spend long days in the sweetness of your holy loins. Give him a favorable and glorious reign. Grant him the king's throne, firm in its foundations. Grant him the shepherd's staff of judgment. Grant him the enduring crown with radiant and noble diadem.

"From where the sun rises to where the sun sets, from north to south, from the upper sea to the lower sea, from the land of the huluppu tree to the land of the cedar, let his shepherd staff protect all of Sumer and Akkad. As the farmer, let him make the fields fertile. As the shepherd, let him make the sheepfolds multiply. Under his reign let there be vegetation. Under his reign let there be rich grain. In the marshland may the fish and birds chatter in the canebrake. May the young and the old reeds grow high. In the steppe may the deer and wild goats multiply. In the orchards may there be honey and wine. In the grasslands, may the lettuce and cress grow high. In the palace, may there be long life.

"May there be flood water in the Tigris and the Euphrates. May the plants grow high on their banks and fill the meadows. May the lady of vegetation pile the grain in heaps and mounds. O my queen of heaven and earth, queen of all the universe, may he enjoy long days in the sweetness of your loins."

The king went with lifted head to the holy loin. He went with lifted head to the loins of Inanna. He opened wide his arms to the holy priestess of heaven.

Inanna spoke: "My beloved, the delight of my eyes, glistened me. We rejoiced together. He took his pleasure of me. He brought me into his house. He laid me down on the fragrant honey bed. My sweet love lying by my heart, tongue playing one by one. My fair Dumusi did so fifty times. Now my sweet love is sated."

It's possible, I suppose, that some people could hear this poetry and interpret it through a historical lens, deconstructing it: "Ah, yes, well here was the beginning of agriculture—or at some point agriculture was very important to this civilization, and this was just their way of not understanding agriculture, so they presented a myth of how crops grew, and they prayed so that crops would not fail, and the floodwaters would come and irrigate the soil."

There's a way of hearing it that reduces it to some kind of biological evolutionary impulse from an ignorant time when they didn't understand the science of agriculture. But you can hear in that poetry something very different—a completely different regard for lovemaking, for sex, for sexuality, for sensuality. There's nothing there that implies any kind of dirtiness or lessness or demeaningness.

It's juicy. It's completely holy because it's tied in with the cosmos. It's full of cosmopoiesis.

It's full of the earth and references to the fertility of the earth and the agriculture and the blessings of that. Honey and wine and orchards and fields and milk. This whole thing is redolent, pregnant, overflowing with multi-dimensionality of divinity, of spirits, a reverence and sense of participation. I feel the sexual act, the human sexual act, reflecting divinity, reflecting the vision in cosmopoiesis, reflecting and echoing, participating in the cosmic. This gives rise to a very different sensibility regarding sexuality and sensuality.

We live in a different time now, in a very different culture. When we come to sex, it's interesting to see what intentions nowadays are present, what we can use sex for, what is the intention in entering into sexual acts and sexuality between people.

Certainly it's possible that sex is just reduced to wanting to experience pleasant sensations—a desire to experience pleasure, pleasant vedana, basically. It's also possible that we may be using sex, to some degree or as part of the mix, for what we might call ego gratification, to prop up or inflate a certain self-view, a certain ego image. Either this happens through making sexual conquests and wearing them as a feather in one's hat, or through using sex as an indication of one's own desirability or lovability. "He loves me, she loves me, they love me. How do I know? Because we had sex." All this is possible.

Frankly speaking, sex can be for political reasons. Certainly in the history of different cultures, marriages and liaisons have been arranged for political reasons, for empire reasons, all kinds of things. But even within a relationship, there's a political possibility that sex is granted or withheld or used in strategizing, maneuvering for other purposes as well.

Sometimes there's the possibility that one is approaching sex just, either just or in part, seeking a release of stress, a release of tension. Whether it's work or something around the home, there's a certain amount of energetic stress that accumulates in the body and tension, and certainly orgasm can discharge that. Sometimes one is driven by that. Psychologically, it's interesting to consider what's giving rise to that stress in the first place—all kinds of psychological factors that have nothing to do with how busy we are or how much stress there is at work.

There's also the accumulation of energy. Some people are consciously entering into sexuality as described in some tantric practices, entering into conscious sex with another or with oneself, trying to accumulate and gather the sexual energy in certain channels in the body. Either this opens up consciousness or gathers bliss instead of discharging into orgasm.

Of course, the reason for having sex can be about love—expressing love and feeling the connection, the heart connection of love between two people. And sex can be for the sake of soul, for the sake of soul-making to some degree. In that case, the imaginal is involved, just based on everything we've been saying about soul and eros.

So we can come to sex with all these different intentions mixed together, and probably many more besides that I can't think of right now. But if we're talking about soul-making in and through sex, sex in the service of soul—and this doesn't need to exclude any of these other things—that involves soul-making, which implies the presence of images and engagement with images.

If we are interested in soul-making going into every direction and dimension and domain of our existence, then that will include sex. If we're interested in opening up sex and sexuality and sensuality, then it means allowing the soul-making and soulfulness and the imaginal and the erotic to imbue the sex. Because remember, we can have sex without eros. But soul-making involves this meeting and pervading of each other—the imaginal and the sexual.

Then the question arises: if we're interested in soul-making with regard to sex, what allows, what supports memories of sexual moments—whether on one's own or with another—to become images, in the sense of imaginal images? What allows just a memory of a sexual moment to be elevated, to have the fullness of the imaginal?

Or during the actual sex itself, what allows and supports the perceptions, the experiences in the present, to become imaginal, to become image, to have that iconic sense, that sense of the eternal, that sense of dimensionality, divinity, participation? What allows the multidimensionality to be revealed? What supports the multidimensionality to be discovered or revealed?

To me, that's quite an interesting question. What allows the soul—not just talking about heart, not reducing soul to heart—what allows the soul to be present? That's a connected question, but it's a different question.

What allows the soul—not just the heart, but the soul—to be stirred and awakened through sexuality? This is a connected yet distinct inquiry. What is it that allows the sex to be soul-making?

Is it simply a matter of pacing? Do we need to slow down to allow that dimensionality to unfold, for the perception to expand into the fullness of the imaginal? Perhaps, but I wouldn't want to be formulaic about this. Does this mean we must always have slow sex? When I speak of slowness, I don't necessarily mean the physical movements themselves, but rather the pace of the entire encounter—the rhythm of being itself.

Perhaps it's more about not becoming too carried away in a certain momentum of goal-orientation toward orgasm, or swept up in a contracted view or intention. This offers a clearer way of understanding it. Once again, everything returns to contraction—and this encompasses far more than just the heart. We speak of contraction of view, contraction of vision, contraction of sensibility.

The heart could be completely open while the soul-making sensibility, the visionary way of perceiving, remains quite narrow—closed, contracted, restricted to a limited view. So perhaps the question becomes whether we're being carried away in some contraction toward whatever goal we hold, whether orgasm or

something else, or whether our view and intention have become constricted.

But when we're not carried away, when there's no contraction, then possibility opens. The possibility of perceiving, of imagining, of the soul-making dynamic—the *psychopoios*—actually coming alive in the moment, expanding, taking on its own life, filling out. However we might describe it: the fire spreading, the water flowing and filling, plumping out and expanding, so that dimensionality emerges. The cosmic dimension opens, the vision of the other deepens, the vision of oneself clarifies, the erotic imagination flowers—all of this that we've touched upon becomes possible because we're not contracted in greed, craving, or narrow vision.

Still, I wouldn't want to impose any rigid rules or formulas for exactly how this unfolds. This remains, for me, a deeply fascinating question to explore.

What's remarkable and worthy of gratitude is that even when we miss the soul-making in the moment, the beautiful emptiness of memory allows experiences to become soulful later. Dimensionality can be revealed and discovered and opened through remembrance. This applies not only to sexuality, of course, but to any experience. Sometimes the vision in the moment isn't consciously open enough, yet as memory holds the experience—perhaps the next day or whenever—it can begin to gather imaginal reality, imaginal dimensions.

This opens an intriguing exploration: What supports soul-making in sexuality? What allows sexuality to become soul-making? This extends beyond heartfulness, beyond love, beyond all the other elements we've discussed, into the specific question of what nourishes the soul through erotic experience.

Related to everything we've explored, if soul-making through sexuality is what interests us, it might initially seem more obviously soul-making when the sexual experience—whether actual or imaginal—carries certain flavors, tones, or characteristics. For instance, when it's very light, melting, warm, tender—obviously warm and tender. Such experiences, whether imaginal or actual, might feel unmistakably soul-making.

But in the *eros* of *psychopoios*, because of the movement toward expansion, can we—and some will find this easier at certain times than others for many different reasons—include not just the light and melting and warm, tender sexuality that obviously nurtures the soul, but also, as we've discussed, the darker, more voracious, less conventional expressions? These too hold tremendous soul-making potential.

Again, we must resist quick assumptions. Some people assume, because of social norms, cultural conditioning, various forms of indoctrination, that certain expressions must be disrespectful. They assume there's no love in such encounters, that they necessarily involve objectification.

But what does objectification actually mean? To me, it means not seeing and valuing the totality of another person's being. Can we look again, more closely, more openly, without assumptions, and actually question: Is this truly disrespectful? Is there really no love present? Am I actually objectifying?

Perhaps there's a holiness, a divinity, a sacredness here—whatever words we might choose—that becomes palpable and evident when we open our eyes and attune our gaze. Perhaps we need to notice it, to relax the gaze, because this isn't something we can force. We cannot gaze at an image or experience and demand a sense of sacredness appear.

I don't want to be heavy-handed with this approach. Remember: the poetry of perception, the art of perception. This is always an art.

And sometimes that's more a matter of being more open, more spacious, more receptive, more attuned, more subtle, more light. There's a time for heavy-handedness. There's a time for laser beam attention and all that. And there are other times where what we more is revealed in the art of perception through much softer and less pressured approaches.

But again, if we're talking about soul-making and we talked about the three different ways that, for instance, the sexuality and the sexual images and language in tantric Buddhism could be interpreted—as just a symbol, only symbolic, referring to spiritual realities, certainly not bodily or sexual ones. There's one interpretation. But if we're really interested in bringing the soul-making, allowing the soul-making to fill out, to change and to open and to give dimensionality and beauty and divinity to our sense of sexuality and our experience of sex and sexuality, then we have to go beyond just this view that it's only symbolic. That sexuality can only have a symbolic function in the path, in spiritual teachings.

Can we—is it possible, and I think it really is—re-sanctify sex and sexuality, a whole relationship with something that has been deemed dirty and kind of low? Or that has just received a modicum of soulfulness in its relation to heartfulness—"I really love this person"—which is wonderful. But can we actually re-sanctify it?

As I said, that means not just the light, but also the dark. Not just the insubstantial, but also the dense. Not just the gentle, but also the ferocious. So that the whole range of possibilities becomes opened. We're not shrinking down, limiting the soul-making dynamic with regard to sexuality.

In that third possible interpretation of sexuality in Tantric Buddhism, it's only a vehicle. It just happens to be the most expedient vehicle for re-channeling the energy, body energies, so that the consciousness opens to emptiness or clear light, or so that you get a more intense bliss or ecstasy. That's all good and fine and possible and certainly valuable to explore. But in the way we're talking about all this, it's also a vehicle for soul-making. And that means the cosmopoiesis and the divinity is wrapped up with it, as we said, in this whole sense of participation. It's not only symbolic, and it's not only a vehicle for bliss or energy or emptiness.

So re-sanctification of sex and sexuality actually involves the imaginal. It involves the imaginal. This is what will open a multiplicity and multidimensionality of sacredness in the perception of anything, once the relationship with that thing becomes eros, imaginal.

As we alluded to before, what can easily happen is, instead of the relationship with sex and the conception of sex, and the view of it, and the way we regard it, instead of being soul-making—and the sex itself, and the whole way we conceive of it and relate to it—it can very easily become about the ego. And that's different than soul-making, isn't it? Because it's got this reification thing, and it's got this tight self-view thing. Ego's not a word I use a lot, but let's say that. Versus the dimensionality, the openness of our definition of soul-making.

I think I mentioned early on Michel Foucault and his history of sexuality. He did a lot of these studies where he called it archaeology—tracing movements, political movements, or certain discourses in modern Western societies and modern Western culture, and how certain discourses grew or took certain directions and certain institutions developed, and ways of thinking and political laws and all kinds of things.

One of the studies he did was in relation to sexuality. He also did something similar in relation to madness and other things as well. So he traces through the 19th century the upsurge, swelling in the kind of discourses on sexuality. It started then, and suddenly there's this burgeoning of discourses on sexuality. And particularly among these discourses, the focus on details of what was regarded as sexual perversions from the norm. So that suddenly started being fascinating for people—chronicling it and dividing it up and diagnosing it and all the rest of it.

He traces certain institutions that were part of that process and concentrated that process and crystallized it. One was the Catholic confessional. Of course, people go and—"Father, I've sinned." "What have you done?" "Well, I've masturbated," or whatever it is. And then also Freudian psychoanalysis, where there was an intense scrutinizing of sexual fantasy and sexual behavior, put in quite a rigid interpretive framework, as was, generally speaking, the Catholic confessional, and other institutions and discourses that emerged then, in that time, in the 19th century. I mean, the Catholic confessional goes back before, but there was perhaps a growth in that then.

Foucault was quite interested in power dynamics and what happens to the whole notion of the human subject. So he traced, in this archaeology, he traced the emergence of a series of discourses and practices that either were deliberately designed or intended, or inadvertently had the effect of making the subject of these discourses or these procedures or institutions more reliably and extensively responsible for itself.

I'm actually quoting someone called David West now, who wrote a book on certain philosophical streams in the 20th century and before in Western philosophy. But Foucault's quite interested in this—something was really not much of an issue.

Sexuality was promoted in this process from a relatively unimportant fact about bodies, like going to the toilet or digestion, to something decisive for an individual's sense of identity. That's really quite interesting to me. Sexuality promoted from being a relatively unimportant fact about bodies in Western culture of a certain time to being something decisive for an individual sense of identity. Again, not for everyone, but

quite a lot.

So it becomes something quite loaded and quite central and intimately connected with the whole sense of self and identity. And wrapped up in that is this whole power dynamic, which Foucault was particularly interested in. So that, for instance, in the Catholic confessional or in Freudian psychoanalysis, you are now responsible for this. We're opening up this territory. You're talking about this experience. We're interpreting it a certain way.

In Freud's case, it's something very dangerous that civilization needed to keep a lid on, so to speak, and maybe let out enough steam so that the boiler doesn't blow. But generally speaking, the id and the instinct of sexuality needs to be repressed to a certain extent, or controlled at least to a certain extent. And again, in the Catholic confession, it has a certain interpretive view of sexuality, and so this is now getting the subject, this self or that self, to be, in West's words, more reliably and extensively responsible for itself.

So something that hadn't been so, this whole area that one needs to fret about and think about and control - it becomes now an area either to worry about, to feel guilty about, to obsess about, or, what's more common nowadays, central to my identity. So a lot of identity construction revolves around sexuality, sexual expression, sexual style, sexual manifestation, sexual experience, or lack of experience - sexual prowess, whatever it is.

I probably wouldn't make this too black and white. I'm sure these were all seeds that existed in Western culture anyway. But what's interesting is how they get amplified and drawn out and connected with the sense of identity.

This is related to something I've touched on a couple of times over the talks: our whole sense of self, our whole notion of self, and our whole actual sense of self - who I feel I am, who you feel you are, what we feel is involved in a self and important in a self - is actually enlarged in modernism or with the advent of modernism to include, in this case, a new delineation. Sexuality, what kind of sexuality, what's the sexual expression, what's the sexual style, what's the sexual domain of experience, and so on.

The larger point is that the self that we experience as so natural, and in many cases problematic, is actually a different kind of self-experience than, say, that the Buddha was addressing in the time that he was teaching in India - Pali Canon Buddhism. We now have a whole kind of complexity and range and landscape of psychic interiority that didn't really exist for people before these delineations were made, whether it was sexuality or this or that or whatever.

So the whole complexity and range - making these delineations makes the interiority more complex and more stretched, if you like. And then all this plays into questions about identity and our fretting about identity or our celebration of identity and all of that.

Now, I'm not actually judging this or even the rise of the importance of individualism and identity. I mean, it certainly has a shadow side and we don't need to rehearse that again and go over it. It's pretty obvious,

especially if you've been exposed to any Dharma teachings. But go back to what we were talking about - making delineations near the beginning of this course. And Epictetus saying, "Everything's got two handles. Beware of the wrong one."

So when we make delineations, for instance, the whole fretting of identity can get hold of it in a way that's actually, like a double-edged sword, problematic. It can be problematic. There has been a proliferation, according to Foucault and even beyond his time, around sexuality and its relationship with identity, and it's become, as I said, something decisive for an individual's sense of identity. Not for everyone, and certain generations may be less so, but certainly beyond a certain date in Western society.

People may not talk about it so much, but that may also be wrapped up in reasons why we're not talking about it, and there might be someone not talking about it. Actually, there's still a kind of identity view around that. Not for everyone.

But this kind of proliferation of delineations and of the whole emergence into what it means for the self, and what a self is, and the interiority, and the complexity, and the identity there - it is a sort of double-edged sword. There's a growth there, which we could regard as papañca, or we could also regard it as exactly the eros-psyche-logos dynamic expanding in terms of making delineations, thinking about these things, having fantasies and images around all that, and even the eros in regard to sexuality - in other words, the erotic relationship with sexuality, in the meaning of the erotic imaginal, filling it out.

So it can be that, and it can be that for the individual, or it can be a snag for the ego - get too tight around this whole identity business and fretting and worrying and feeling constrained or whatever it is. So as always, in our way of thinking, I'd say the test is: is it soul-making? Is it soul-making? And if it's not, can I actually find a different relationship with it that opens it up as soul-making? Rather than it leading to neurosis or worry about the self and the identity and alienation, pressure to conform, pressure to perform, whatever it is. Or pressure to be interesting or unique or whatever. All this is the concrete, narrow, contracted...

self-view or ego, if we use that language. It's not soul-making. Can soul-making be the test here?

It doesn't need, or it shouldn't need saying, but it's actually important to say: there needs to be kindness with all this. How easily we can get either very self-judgmental with this, or down on ourselves, or worried about ourselves, or actually quite militant and rigid in our thinking. Again, it's just too much concretism, too much concretization, too much literalism, too much reification.

But really, in regard to all this and the possibilities in our relationship with sex and sexuality, we really need kindness in the exploration. So that's really important to say, to realize that.

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