

Non-dual vibrations: Sexuality in Tantric Buddhism

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Buddhist tradition holds that while sitting in meditation underneath a Bodhi tree, the Buddha overheard a musician passing by. He said, “If you tie a string too tight, it will break. If you let it hang too loose, it will not play.” With this realization, the Buddha was said to have received the wisdom of the Middle Way. This philosophy holds that just as string plays best when tightened in moderation, so too should one’s way of life follow a path of modesty free from excess and austere renunciation. One of the traditional components to this modesty for members of the sangha was a vow of celibacy. Any sexual activity was deemed transgressive and could result in expulsion from the sangha. In the analogy of the string, sexual engagement was always deemed an over-tightening our string. Similarly, Buddhist tantra that employs sexuality as a fundamental component of its practice has often been seen by outsiders as transgressing the philosophy of Buddhism. It has been accused of indulgence in forbidden activity, an over-tightening of the Middle Way. However, this simple metaphor of a vibrating string being wound tighter reveals a much deeper truth behind the Buddhist tantric practice. This essay will aim to explore the role of sexuality in tantric Buddhism while keeping this image in mind. Ultimately, in tantric Buddhism, as can especially be seen in the *Hevajra Tantra*, sexual energy and sexual union become the instrument through which one can destroy the illusion of duality, and experience the oneness of nirvana.

In order to understand this truth, we must first see that the essential critique of the siddha movement: humans remain in ignorance because of their dualistic constructs. Siddhas were known for their blatant disregard for common conventions of morality and

moderation found in traditional Buddhist communities. As a result, according to Paul Williams, “From the perspective of conventional society, they appeared to be crazy. From their point of view, however, they were delighting in the spontaneity of non-dual cognition” (216). In operating a non-dual cognition, siddhas come from a place of understanding that transcends conventional morality and modesty. Consequently, the tantric Buddhist tradition is filled with stories of great siddhas partaking in forbidden practices like drinking and sexual escapades. In his book *Masters of Mahamudra*, Keith Dowman explains the philosophy behind the mahasiddha, Saraha, and his indulgence in alcohol. “It is possible to infer from the first part of this legend of Saraha that the master is teaching transcendence of both truth and falsehood, and that in this self-ordained ordeal he is demonstrating that all phenomena are delusory and that there is no truth anywhere” (69). Saraha’s case underscores the cognitive framework that sees dualistic constructs such as truth and falsehood, and morality and immorality, as mere illusions. Those trapped within the right and wrong framework attempt to attack Saraha for his transgressions. In terms of our analogy, the string has been tightened too much, and the music is too high pitched. But as Saraha’s illustrates, these transgressions in reality come from a mode of thinking transcending all dualistic morality. This form of non-dualistic thinking becomes the essence of the tantric Buddhist philosophy that dispels ignorance and moves one toward higher realms.

The frame of mind that makes this non-duality possible in tantric Buddhism is the ability to find sameness on all levels of experience, from absolute renunciation to sheer

indulgence. Dowman explains in his book that excessive renunciation and indulgence can lead one down the proper path:

In these so-called left handed (*vacacara*) practices there is an element of William Blake's 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom,' but more than it, it is in the basest impurity, in depravity and the lowest forms of life, and in tamasic food and drink, in the outcaste whore, the *kapalika* ascetic, excrement, corpses, alcohol, drugs, fish and meat, that the ultimate truth becomes accessible. Finding purity in impurity through the experience of the one taste of all things, the ultimate sameness of all phenomena, which is emptiness is realized. (129)

The point to be emphasized here is that excess must be approached with the wisdom that sees sameness in everything. One of the fundamental teachings of Buddhist wisdom is that all is empty and all lacks essence. The tantric frame of mind, therefore attempts to awaken one to see this emptiness and this sameness in all things. As the Dalai Lama has said, the proper frame of mind required for the tantric path requires one to first feel the same toward consuming excrement and urine as enjoying a delicious meal and wine (Harrison, Lecture 2/21/08).

The chief consequence of this unique frame of mind in tantric practice has been a reevaluation of the so-called negative states, such as passion, that when experienced properly can significantly empower oneself. This view has been especially evident in the *Hevajra Tantra*. The *Hevajra Tantra* is known by Western scholars as the "Mother" tantra of the *Anuttarayoga Tantra* class, particularly for its emphasis on female deities (Wayman 1214). This tantra would also become very influential in the formation of tantric schools, such as the Sa Skya school of Tibet (Stearns 751). The tantra asserts that supposed negative states can actually be essential toward the path of Buddhahood. According to Williams,

The *Hevajra Tantra* (II: ii, 51) declares that ‘the world is bound by passion, also by passion it is released’. It gives a homoeopathic argument by way of justification: ‘One knowing the nature of poison may dispel poison with poison, by means of the very poison that a little of which would kill other beings’ (202).

The *Hevajra Tantra* asserts that the best way to become immune to the strong powers of desire is to properly experience desire. This metaphor of comparing passion to poison is significant because it also suggests that the proper handling of desire grants one uncommon strength and powers just as poison can be used to counter its effects.

The proper handling of these forbidden experiences consequently gives rise the powers of the siddha, granting him truths and hidden powers contrary to nature. As Dowman explains,

When a yogin enters the sphere of his unconditioned being and reprograms the elemental, materiality-producing forces (solidity, fluidity, heat and motion; ‘earth, water, fire and air’), which reside in potential in the vital energy (*prana*) of the body, he can create illusions ‘contrary to nature’ (69).

By properly handling the forbidden states in the body properly, a siddha attains powers “contrary to nature”. That is, the siddha can encounter higher truths that tap into a far greater potential for worldly power. This understanding falls in line nicely with the metaphor of the tightening of a string. It is said that if a string is tightened too much, it will break. However, if a musician carefully tightens the string, properly feeling the increasing tension, he can avoid this breaking. If he handles it adeptly, he can actually tighten the string so that it gives off a higher frequency. In doing so, he reveals a hidden potential in this string to play higher notes and expand his range of musical experience. However, just as this tantric path is dangerous for the unskilled or those clinging to monastic vows, a musician who has had no proper training in creating these higher

frequencies enters a perilous path that can lead to the snapping of his string. Thus, the tantric path, with its use of forbidden states, walks a fine line between danger and the unleashing of higher powers.

The most important reevaluation of these forbidden states in tantric Buddhism, especially in the *Hevajra* tradition, is that of the body. The *Hevajra Tantra* expounds on the essentialness of the body:

Without bodily form how should there be bliss? Of bliss one could not speak. The world is pervaded by bliss, which pervades and is itself pervaded. Just as the perfume of a flower depends on the flower, and without the flower becomes impossible, likewise without form and so on, bliss would not be perceived.”
(*Hevajra Tantra* II: ii, 36-7, trans. Snellgrove, as cited in Williams 200)

The body in the *Hevajra Tantra* rather than being an impediment toward higher states of bliss becomes the instrument for this attainment. The analogy of the flower serves to make the same point as the earlier analogy of the poison. The body and desire are inseparable. The solution therefore must not attempt to separate the inseparable. Rather the solution lies in embracing and properly handling this body and its energies.

The reevaluation of the body in the *Hevajra* tradition comes from the view that higher meditative states can only be achieved through the direction of sexual and bodily energies. Gray speaks of the role of sexuality in the “Perfection Stage” in the *Hevajra Tantra*:

The Hevajra tradition is particularly noted for its theory of the four joys (*caturānanda*) achieved via sexual union in the context of Perfection Stage meditation practices that involve focused attention upon the subtle body, and the manipulation of “winds” of vital energy and “drops” of subtle sexual fluids within this body's channels. (Gray 3965)

As the siddha is an “accomplished one”, the highest form of accomplishment, the “perfection stage,” builds itself on sexuality. Only through the manipulation of the vital winds and drops of sexual fluid in the body can this perfect stage be reached. Williams adds in reference to this perfection stage: “In later tradition, practices of this type were seen by some as an indispensable part of the path to Buddhahood” (Williams 200). Even though Buddhism stresses the Middle Way, the *Hevajra Tantra* stresses that even Buddhahood requires the proper embracing and manipulation of these sexual forces. When we return to the metaphor of the string, we see that this understanding makes sense. The Buddha, after all, only came upon his realization of the Middle Way after traversing both extremes of renunciation and luxurious pleasure. Buddhahood therefore builds itself not only on the Middle Way, but an understanding of the entire spectrum of life experience. Only through this full understanding does one properly see the centrality of the Middle Way and the meaning of Buddhahood.

Awakening lies at the core of Buddhahood, and the tantric Buddhism and the *Hevajra* assert that sexual bliss naturally leads one toward the great bliss of awakening.

Williams describes this relationship:

“Of the passions, it is sexual craving and pleasure that tend to be placed in the foreground, sexual bliss being homologised with the great bliss of awakening. In general a discussion of the tantric religion, André Padoux (1987: 273) cites the French Indologist Madeleine Biardeau’s summary of tantric doctrine as ‘an attempt to place *kama*, desire, in every meaning of the word, in the service of liberation.’” (Williams 202)

This relationship between sexuality and awakening exemplifies the emphasis the tantric tradition places on seeing awakening in ecstatic terms. Sexual bliss, representing the

height of human bliss in all sensual experience, therefore becomes the instrument through which the great bliss of awakening becomes possible.

Sexual bliss becomes the central instrument of tantric Buddhism because sexual union gives rise to the attainment of non-dual reality. As the siddha movement attempts to destroy ignorance and its clinging to a dualistic view of the world, tantric Buddhism declares that the true nature of cognition is non-dual. As Williams explains, “This idea is in turn rooted in the view that the true nature of cognition is in some sense non-dual, and that this non-dual and awakened state can appropriately be approached through non-dual practice” (Williams 202). According to the tantric understanding, non-dual cognition does not merely become the framework that enables non-dual practice; non-dual practice also becomes the instrument through which this framework and this state of mind can be approached.

This non-dual understanding and practice beautifully resonates with the tantric image of the male and female in union and once again resonates with our metaphor of the string. The central image of the Vajrayana way is the union of wisdom and compassion, symbolized by the union of the female and the male. Williams explains the relationship between wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuna*): “Together they stand for the non-dual unity of the awakened mind. As has been noted, this unity can also be symbolized by the sexual union of male and female tantric deities” (Williams 219). Similarly, in the *Hevajra Tantra* the central iconographic image is of the mandala with Kapāladharī Hevajra depicted in sexual union with his consort Nairātmyā. As Gray underscores, “They are in turn surrounded by a circle of eight *yoginīs*: Gaurī, Śavarī,

Caurī, Candālī, Vetālī, Dombinī, Ghasmarī, and Pukkasī. Because the central deity couple are said to be ‘nondual,’ it is described as being a nine-deity *mandala*” (3965). Kapāladharī and Nairātmyā, depicted in sexual union, are not seen as separate beings but as one. The image of sexual union is an image of non-duality, of oneness.

A similar process takes place when we return to the analogy of a vibrating string. While unmoving, a string remains still, completely straight along the y-axis. When plucked it moves along the x-axis, oscillating between the two ends of the axis: the negative and positive end. The positive end can represent the male, and the negative end can represent the female. Just as a string oscillates back and forth, sexual energies flow back and forth between the male and female. However, we soon realize that the separateness of two beings in the sexual bond begins to disappear. Sexuality is a coming together of where sensation meets sensation. The female senses the male’s touch, the male senses her senses sensing his, and she senses this reciprocal sense. This sensation bounces back and forth ad infinitum. Thus sexual union really becomes an endless back and forth oscillation of energies. As sexual exchange heightens, these back and forth energies become more intense, and the two in union feel higher and higher forms of energy. Similarly, as a string becomes more taut, the frequency of vibration increases, and the pitch becomes higher and higher.

Sexual union heightens to the point of great bliss, which in tantric terms, heightens to the experience of great awakening. A string being taut tighter and tighter reaches a point in which the string vibrates so quickly, that there is no separation between the negative end and positive end of the x axis. It appears motionless to the outsider. But

to the trained musician who is plucking this string, it is vibrating infinitely fast, infinitely in union between the negative and the positive. There exists an absolute oneness between the two ends of the axis, as they now bounce back and forth along one dimension. In sexual union, the bouncing back and forth of sexual energies reaches a height in which there manifests a oneness between the flow of sexual energies bouncing back and forth so infinitely fast. At this point there is no longer two beings; there is simply one union. At this point there exists no duality; there is simply non-dual reality. Such becomes a manifestation of the experience of nirvana. Such an understanding only becomes possible through sexuality.

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