

A New Puritanism?

By Caroline Brazier

Is Buddhism in the West to become the new Puritanism? Despite a little dabbling around the edges in tantric exoticism, Buddhism does not have a sexy image. Celibate monasticism and pristine imagery, meticulously manicured zen gardens, ethereal people exuding meditative calm and lotus blossoms floating on unsullied waters, suggest an ideal of asexual harmony, contrasting starkly with the eroticism of its native India. Yet does becoming a serious practitioner really require the amputation of our passionate desires? Does the elimination of *kama* imply a severing of all the bonds of earthly pleasure?

For the monastic, sexual expression has always been proscribed, at least in theory, by the *vinaya*. Of course, with human frailty, the actuality has not always been so, but in theory, distractions of bodily longing have been viewed as the lure of *mara*, the energy they represent as a source of spiritual fuel that is better diverted to the path.

But what of the modern practitioner, often lay, who may be in relationship? Does sexuality need to be viewed as a distraction, a failure in the path? As we progress, should we expect our desires to lessen and finally fade out? Do we aspire toward the ideal of the celibate life, even when our circumstances are otherwise, or is there another way in which our sexual nature can authentically become a source of spiritual celebration and expression?

Whilst the renunciant path is a strong one in the Buddhist tradition, with a valuable contribution to make, I fear its idealization has sometimes been a hindrance to our development in the West. Traditionally lay and monastic practitioners played a complementary role. In different Buddhist countries, the exact balance of activity and status has varied as each culture has made its own accommodation to the teachings, but often the visible manifestation of Buddhist practice has been the celibate male practitioner.

Here in the West the picture is complex. On the one hand, some groups are traditionalist, anxious to adhere rigorously to the letter of particular lineages. On the other hand, other long-time practitioners are seeking to adapt practices to modern circumstances. Such processes have always happened when Buddhism encountered new cultures. New forms of Buddhist commitment are emerging, often in the middle ground of serious engagement, which Shinran, founder of the *jodoshinshu* sect described as being neither monk nor layman. In this new, and often developing space, what is the role of sexual expression in our practice?

For some the legacy of renunciant traditions pushes people to relinquish expression of feeling at all levels. Whether grief or joy, creative energy or sexual attraction, giving in to emotional involvement on any level is seen as surrender to attachment. In such ambiances, equanimity is practiced as a route to lessening human ties. But is this really what the Buddha intended?

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