

What's Wrong with Sex? By David Loy

As Buddhism infiltrates the West, one of the important and interesting (of course!) points of contention is sexuality. Buddhism in Asia has been largely a cultural force for celibacy (among monastics) and sexual restraint, so how is Western Buddhism adapting to the sexual revolution?

Today many people in contemporary Western societies are sexually “liberated”—liberated, however, in a somewhat different fashion than the Buddhist tradition has usually understood liberation. We still have many problems with sex, but nowadays they are less likely to involve guilt and repression than various types of obsession such as addiction to pornography. Since the 1960s our lifestyles and customs have become very different from those with which patriarchal societies regulated sexual urges—often providing outlets for men while strictly controlling women and procreation. Our culture is saturated with sexuality, not only because sex is commodified in every possible way (being indispensable for grabbing our attention) but also because preoccupation with sexual gratification helps to fill up the void left by the collapse of any larger meaning. The importance of sex has ballooned because we are not sure what else is important in a God-less world that often seems intent on destroying itself.

This is not to demean the pleasures of sex, or the libidinal freedoms we enjoy today. Despite new kinds of social pressure, most of us benefit from many more options. The liberation of sexual preference means that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals can come out of the closet, leading to an important reduction in collective social *dukkha*. Premarital sex is more or less taken for granted, and marriage itself is no longer a matter of course. It has become a decision that many choose not to take, or to take and retake. Thanks to effective contraception, children too have become a matter of choice. Some people decry the self-centeredness of those who decide not to raise children, and some others decry the self-centeredness of those who do. Buddhism is unique among the major religions in not being pro-natalist. There is no doctrinal encouragement that we should have lots of children, which is another aspect of the Dharma to appreciate, given our overpopulation of the earth. The emphasis on monasticism works the other way, encouraging an alternative to procreation. The Buddha, like Jesus, was not a big proponent of “family values.”

But how does Buddhism fit into our freewheeling ways today? Well, many of us aren't sure. Western monastics continue to follow the established regulations of their own tradition, or at least appear to do so (like some of their Asian counterparts, no doubt). However, most serious practitioners in the West, and probably in Asia, are lay. Since sexual morality is also a matter of karma rather than God's commandment—“Do this or else!”—for the most part we continue to do what we want to do. And is there anything wrong with that?

The issue, I think, is not whether we should or shouldn't “be faithful” to the sexual mores of Asian Buddhist cultures. Instead, this is another opportunity to interrogate the Buddhist traditions: to ask why they had certain rules and guidelines about sex, which can help us determine how relevant those policies remain for us today. Needless to say, evaluating such an intimate topic is a delicate matter, yet such an examination cannot be avoided without risk of hypocrisy on the one side or merely yielding to established tradition on the other. We need to find the middle way between doing the same as pre-modern Buddhism, simply because that's what they did, and another extreme that simply accepts what has become acceptable to many people today. It is the tension between these two perspectives that can be so illuminating. If Buddhism is to realize its emancipatory potential in our modern, globalizing world, such challenges cannot be evaded.

The rapid change in sexual morality has been uncomfortable for many, but for Buddhism the pelvic issues are mostly secular matters. The third precept is often translated as “sexual misconduct,” which for laypeople is usually understood to exclude casual relations, “sex without commitment.” Since the crucial concern for Buddhism is always *dukkha*, the most important thing is avoiding sex that harms others or causes them pain.

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