

# The Honey Trap

## Reflections on Sexual Misconduct in Buddhist Sanghas

Manu Bazzano

*Now that spiritual life is in the hands of householders rather than monastics, the demands of desire are front and center, not hidden from view.* (Mark Epstein)

*One of the best places to spot narcissism, unfortunately, is at the top of a company or a public organization* (Bruce Gregory).

### **The Lie of Giving**

The voluntary undertaking known as the third Buddhist precept states: “I vow to abstain from sexual misconduct.” (*Kāmesumicchācāra veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*). Classical Buddhism limited itself to an explanation of circumstances by which sexual intercourse was considered suitable, and highlighted the principle of non-harm, i.e. avoiding hurting partners and third parties. As a result, each Buddhist sangha across the centuries had to interpret this precept in relation to contingent mores and values of a specific era. This partly explains why determining once and for all what constitutes sexual misconduct is unfeasible. Nonetheless, at one level the whole matter is unambiguous: Robert Aitken rendered it brilliantly when he wrote of the misuse of sexual intercourse as *the lie of giving*, when the act is really taking. He also said there are many other ways to misuse sex than the sexual act: “A relationship that involves dominance, exploitation, and passive aggression is an ongoing violation of this precept. [And so is] the drive to tear the other down...” (p. 30). Sexual misconduct is not limited to breaking the vow of celibacy or to having sexual relations outside a committed relationship, but is necessarily extended to rape within marriage, incest in the family, to misogynist pornography which creates, in Winton Higgins’s words “a hostile and unsafe environment for women and induces moronic and demonic mind-states in men, including delusions about the nature of women and what they want”. We also need to extend sexual misconduct to the intolerance and prejudice against gays, lesbians and sexual minorities. If we accept this, then we might recognize that a great deal of sexual misconduct happens in the name of and alongside theistic and fundamentalist religions. I think of Buddhism as a non-fundamentalist ethical tradition which comes to life in its dealings with the world and the challenges it poses. Some of the more customary trappings of conventionally theistic religion are just not there in Buddhism: there is no social engineering, no strict rules or injunctions in relation to procreation with its corresponding bias

against non-procreative or “recreational” sex. There is no reason then why as Buddhist practitioners we should be afraid of exploring this rich and complex domain, rather than resorting to a dogmatic appraisal of rules or generic appeals to “conscience”, for conscience has a twofold nature: if on the one hand it is indeed “the sense we have in common”, a shared manifestation of discerning wisdom, conscience is also public opinion, often manifesting as prejudice and intolerance.

Although in no way comparable to either the degree or the sort of abuses perpetrated by clerics of the Roman Catholic Church, “sexual scandals” have nevertheless become a regular, even predictable feature within Buddhist communities. In response to them, we veer towards two types of reaction: we either tend to seize upon the *orthodox* or the *permissive* view. But neither avoidance nor denial (nor, at the other end of the spectrum, unmitigated condemnation) have been useful rejoinders. Both outlooks do not seem to recognize fully the wider context; both tend to minimize the pivotal role of *power*; both emphasize, via contrasting explanations, the *sexual* component and sidestep, or fail to clarify, the element of *misconduct*.

### **Anti-Sexism or Anti-Sex?**

There are interesting similarities between sexual misconduct in Buddhist sanghas and sexual harassment in society at large. Second-generation feminists in the nineteen-seventies rightly opposed sexual harassment: theirs was a political stance, centred on human rights and the abuse of power, tackling the misuse of authority usually perpetrated by an older male boss/teacher/employer towards a younger female employee/student. At its inception, the battle against sexual harassment focused on *harassment* rather than on the *sexual*. Cases of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination had been raised over the years because of *harassment* and of *discrimination*. At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it would appear that attitudes have drastically changed: in our permissive, liberalized western societies, the battle against sexual harassment has increasingly become hostility against sex itself. It is in some ways baffling that the just critique of *sexism*, heralded by both first and second generation feminists, has now metamorphosed into the denigration of *sex*.

From the start, feminism has challenged the boundary that separates the *personal* from the *professional* (Gallop, 2002, p 56), yet the current insistence on professional boundaries has effectively severed the link between the personal and the professional. What is reviled under the current cultural climate is precisely the *sexual*. The philosopher Jane Gallop makes the point with great clarity:

MacKinnon and other feminist scholars and lawyers were successful in getting sexual harassment legally defined as sex

discrimination under Title VII (covering employment) and, presumably, under Title IX (covering education). Yet, in the decade and a half since that clear feminist victory, the feminist definition of sexual harassment appears to be fading, giving way to a more traditional understanding in which this behavior is condemnable because it is sexual (Gallop, 2002, p 58).

Fear of the sexual dimension in pedagogy erases the *personal* dimension, a move confirming a fundamental unease and anxiety in grappling with the complexities of erotic dynamics. But a culture which collectively and more or less consciously decides to bypass the eloquent beauty of the erotic does so at its peril; neglecting the tremendous gifts of the embodied experience of sexuality means neglecting both *dukkha* and *mudita*, both suffering as well as the joy of our peculiar condition.

### **Dukkha and the bittersweet Experience of Sex**

One of the characteristics of Eros is ambivalence, and this partly explains the widespread confusion in all matters of the erotic and the sexual. The ancient Greek poet Sappho was referring to the ambivalence of Eros, when she described it as *glukupikron*, “sweet-bitter”:

*Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me  
Sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing up*

Not bittersweet, but “sweet-bitter”, as Canadian poet Anne Carson reminds us: the pleasurable characteristic is alluded to first. From its genesis Western culture and tradition has recognized the ambiguous, even wounding nature of eroticism following those first delights. The very word *scandal* derives from the Greek *skandalon*, “snare for an enemy, cause of moral stumbling”, and it is certainly an old word meaning ‘trap’, with its derivative *skandalitron*, the spring of a trap. To be at the centre of a scandal, sexual or otherwise, is thus to have fallen into a trap, to have aroused the hatred and condemnation of a righteous and morally upright community, ready and eager to hurl the first stone.

Such recognition of the ambivalent, unsatisfactory nature of sexual desire appears to be gracious and sophisticated if compared to the life-denigrating excesses of some Christian and Buddhist imagery (for example twelfth-century Christian monk Odo of Cluny, in the attempt to disgust believers, declared that to embrace a woman is to embrace a sack of manure) and it carries well into modernity.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre saw erotic relations as “a system of infinite reflections, a deceiving mirror-game that carries within itself its own frustration”. There is for Sartre a kind of stickiness, a clinging inherent to the sexual dimension that is not conducive to freedom and clarity:

“An infant plunging its hands into a jar of honey is instantly involved in contemplating the formal properties of solids and liquids and the essential relation between the subjective experiencing self and the experience world. The viscous is a state halfway between solid and liquid. It is like a cross-section in a process of change. It is unstable but it does not flow. It is soft, yielding, and compressible. Its stickiness is a rap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it. Long columns falling off my fingers suggest my own substance flowing into the pool of stickiness. Plunging into water gives a different impression; I remain a solid. But to touch stickiness is to risk diluting myself into viscosity.” (Sartre, 1956, 606-07)

If not handled skilfully, Sartre seems to be saying, sex may become a trap. Rather than a moralistic or puritanical condemnation of sex *per se*, there is a recognition of how we can get stuck, hindered by our craving just like the child who plunges its hands into a jar of honey. I personally make sense of the Buddha’s teachings on suffering and the causes of suffering not as ascetic condemnation and denigration of our inherently imperfect condition but as encouragement towards greater freedom from hindrances and cravings.

### **Reality Check**

The chronicle of western sanghas has been punctuated by “sex scandals” periodically involving the abuse of power and the misuse of sex from Buddhist teachers towards their students. In these cases too the emphasis seemed to have been predominantly on the sexual rather than on the misuse of power. This is understandable given the ethical and religious nature of Buddhist communal endeavour. I wonder, however, if this has also to do with two other important factors:

- 1) The *hierarchical nature of most Buddhist sanghas*, where the imbalance of power arguably prevents the possibility of a truly equal encounter (which constitutes the very basis of ethics), and fosters instead the proliferation of fantasies and projections directed at the teacher.
- 2) The absence of a structure of support, counsel and peer feedback available to both the teacher and the student.

In psychotherapy the feelings, fantasies and projections a client directs towards the therapist are worked through, and in some orientations such *transference*, as this is called, is deemed essential

and conducive to healing. It is equally important, in turn, for the therapist to acknowledge the feelings he or she might have towards a client. But these – and here is the crucial difference – are not necessarily voiced, least of all acted upon, but instead discussed and worked through with a supervisor. Freud famously remarked that the love a patient said she was feeling for him was not due to his irresistible charm as a man but was to be ascribed instead to the deep intimacy of the therapeutic encounter and, to his mind, to the inevitability of the transference. A net of support, counsel and peer feedback is available to the therapist which provides one with ample opportunities for a reality check. This helps the practitioner stay grounded in the practice itself rather than, narcissistically, in the illusory power of his own charming personality.

Psychotherapy has journeyed through many phases in response to changes in history and society, and the same needs to happen to Buddhism if Buddhism's contribution is to remain relevant to contemporary discourse. Changes, of course, are never pain free; in the case of psychotherapy, it meant giving up the claim that the analyst had the power to tell reality from distortions and projections, a process of change that went from the univocal appraisal of *transference*, to the gradual acknowledgment of *counter-transference* (i.e. the therapist reactions to the client) and finally to the recognition of *inter-subjectivity*. The inter-subjective stance is not a disingenuous claim to "equality" - for the relationship is necessarily asymmetrical, for therapists and dharma teachers alike are in a position of power with regards to clients and students – but an open, acknowledged recognition that the perceptions of the therapist or the dharma teacher are not more accurate than those of the client/student.

If we now consider for a moment a hypothetical Buddhist teacher endowed with great charisma, one who has reached the highest rank and is regarded by his students as 'self-realized' or spiritually proficient: what are his/her chances of facing a reality check? In our predominantly secular and democratic societies in the West a scientist, artist or mental health professional naturally and willingly submits his output to the encouragement and critique of his peers who will appraise, discuss, recognize or constructively criticize her contributions in the field. It is rather strange that in the domain of spiritual practice, and within Buddhist sanghas in particular, different criteria seem to apply. These criteria might be the cultural residue of a feudal or pre-modern understanding of the organization of communities, where the spiritual head was also Lord and proprietor requiring submission and obedience from his subjects. Moreover, the identification of spiritual, political, and economic power is a problematic and even tyrannical notion going back, in the West, to the idea of the philosopher king expounded by Plato. Surely a contemporary sangha needs to take into account how the world has changed and what is there to learn from modernity and indeed post-modernity.

Stephen Batchelor has been a pioneer of this thesis within Buddhist discourse - a writer and teacher who has intelligently critiqued both the hierarchical/institutional side of some manifestations of Buddhism as well as their theistic/transcendental claims. This critique is vital to the creative development of Buddhism in the West, and it needs to be patiently extended to all areas of human endeavour, including those areas we normally feel a little squeamish about, such as sex and sexual behaviour (or indeed misbehaviour). For my part, I feel rather optimistic, and for two reasons: first of all, having been involved in various formal and informal sanghas for thirty-three years, I have seen a great deal of changes yet experienced an overall sincerity, commitment and willingness to face each new challenge. Secondly, I feel a great deal of encouragement by the insight of writers such as Mark Epstein, John Welwood, and Stephen Batchelor, to name a few, writers who have sown the seeds of a more compassionate understanding of desire, relationships, and the hindrances of the Devil himself, a.k.a. Mara.

### **Arrogance and Modesty**

If not motivated by mere puritanical unease towards sex, in what way does a teacher sleeping with his students constitute sexual misconduct? First of all it is abuse of power; secondly a discrediting of Buddhist practice itself, as well as a violation of clerical authority and trust. I believe misconduct in this case might also have to do with a contravention of what the ancient Greek lyric poets called *aidōs*, the sexual modesty and instinctive shyness which “dwells on the eyelids”:

*Aidōs dwells upon the eyelids of sensitive people*

*as does hybris upon the insensitive.*

*A wise man would now this.*

*Stobaeus Florilgium 4.230m*

*Aidōs*, or modesty, is mutual acknowledgement of the ever-present unpredictability and uncertainty of the human encounter; the instinctive response of “sensitive people” dictated by decorum. It is sensitive people who are under the spell and enchantment of modesty, the poet suggests. On the other hand, the insensitive fall prey to *hubris* or arrogance, to the laid-back swagger of the person who exploits a situation to his/her advantage and hides the fundamental unmanageability of his compulsions behind the cosy shield of “crazy wisdom”, who challenges the Gods and worships his own “spiritual” ego. The over-confident person who, in a position of power entices a student and takes advantage of her/his innocence is guilty of arrogance and insensitivity. There is a paradox here: in bypassing modesty, the arrogant person in a position of power also excludes the very heart of the erotic: courtship, wooing, and the manifold, ambivalent facets of longing and desire are also done away with. For this reason perhaps a sexual encounter of this kind doesn’t quite belong to love and eroticism but instead to the realm of sadistic gratification. On the

other hand with the opposite movement, which Mark Epstein describes as *opening to desire*, things do not become less sexual, they become more erotic.

The scenario of a therapist having sex with his clients, or of a Dharma teacher having sex with his students is not too far from that of an adult having sex with a child. In both cases innocence is betrayed: a beginner's mind – the mind of a beginner – becomes a corrupted mind.

It is of course naive to affirm a one-directional reading; the student may have his/her own manipulative agenda. Having sex with the teacher is a way of bypassing the more rigorous requirements of Buddhist training by replacing the difficult curbing of one's ego with narcissistic gratification, in the same way as having sex with one's therapist precludes the very possibility of therapy.

There are also striking parallels between the acting out of spiritual teachers and the damaging impact of narcissistic leadership shown by research in the wider social sphere, e.g. in business companies. A Buddhist community where cult of personality has replaced the shared practice of the Dharma is bound to lose its compass, much like a company's sustainability is being sabotaged by a narcissistic leader whose typical defences (avoidance, acting out, withdrawal, projection and withholding) reflect a basic fear of facing up to reality. In both cases the entire organizational structure continues to exist no longer for its professed aim but in order to sustain the grandiosity and sense of entitlement of its leader. Some spiritual teachers are *charismatic*, from *kharis*, a Greek word meaning favour or grace; these are people endowed with a talent bestowed upon them by the Gods. But charisma is a "gift like hypnosis", as Leonard Cohen said in an interview: "It doesn't necessarily indicate any special concern for others or any sense of maturity in your soul. It just represents the exercise of a gift, usually for your own mean purposes".

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