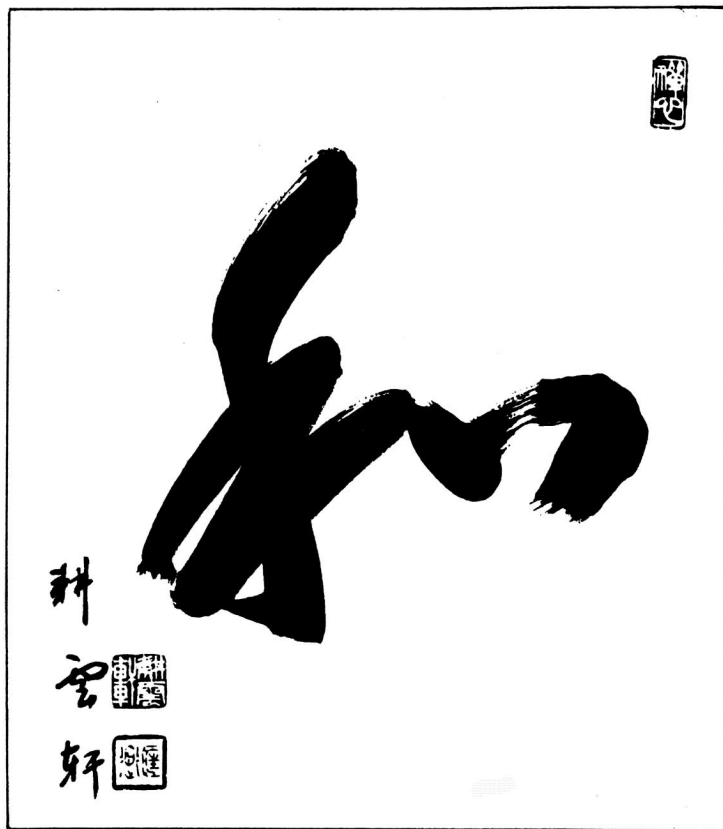


THE THIRD GRAVE PRECEPT: NO MISUSE OF SEX

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calligraphy "Harmony" by Yamada Kōun, Rōshi

The original title of this precept is "No Unrighteous Lewdness," a kind of tautology, which in Chinese (and in older English) is simply a strong negative. "Lewdness" has a rather quaint ring in modern English, but its derivation is instructive. It comes from an Old English world meaning "unlearned," implying boorish. No boorish sex. That's a good precept for us all.

What did our Zen Buddhist ancestors say about sex? In my directory of some 17,500 kōans, I find no entry for this subject in the elaborate index. I do know of one pertinent kōan, however, and although it is perhaps tainted by stereotyped attitudes toward women, it also reproves the puritanical attitudes commonly associated with religion, East and West:

In ancient days, an old woman made offerings to a hermit over a period of 20 years. One day she sent her sixteen-year-old niece to take food to the hermit, telling her to make advances to him to see what he would do. The girl laid her head on the hermit's lap and said, "How is this?"

The hermit said, "The withered tree is rooted in an ancient rock in bitter cold. During winter months, there is no warmth, no life."

The girl reported this to her aunt. The old woman said, "That vulgarian! To think that I have made offerings to him for twenty years! She drove the hermit away and burned down his cottage."¹

While we may question the use of the niece as bait to test the monk's realization, it is clear by the final response of the aunt that fundamentally she too disapproves the misuse of sex. The hermit was not responding to the human being who laid her head on his lap. He was using her to express his own ascetic position.

So the aunt calls him a vulgarian, a boor. Lewdness is boorish; asceticism can be, and often is boorish. Boorishness is thinking just of one's self. She drives him off and burns down his cottage. Fire is a dream symbol for sex.

"You don't belong here! Sex belongs here!" Or at least acknowledgement of it.

This case is listed under "Offerings to Monks" in my dictionary of kōans, and such lack of any classification for sex is in keeping with the curtain that is drawn over the subject in traditional Zen practice. After a careful search of the literature, you may find cautions by Dōgen Zenji to avoid sexual gossip, but that is about all, except, of course, this precept and its brief commentaries. In the Zen monastery, food, sleep, zazen, work, and even going to the toilet are organized and scheduled, but it is as though sex does not exist. In this respect, Zen differs sharply from Theravada Buddhism, and from other religions generally.

The case of the aunt and the hermit is not included in the anthologies of kōans chosen for Zen study by Harada Rōshi, but it is generally part of the Rinzai curriculum. Even so, one wonders how students can apply its teaching. In Japanese Zen monasteries today, women are admitted for sesshin only, as a general rule. They sit in a separate room, and only join the men for meals, sutras, and teishō, and even then they are grouped together. At teishō time, the laymen sit with the monks, and the women sit on the other side of the room with guests who come in from outside especially to hear the talk. The message is clearly, "Zazen is for men."

Japanese generally place the onus of sexual distraction upon women. At least until very recently, Japanese boys and girls mingled very little in their teenage years, and the monk who went off at eighteen to train in a monastery would simply not be able to handle the presence of a woman in the dojo. Her appearance would prompt long-repressed sexual urges to take over his zazen--Mu would disappear, and the result would be failure in the dokusan room and disruption of the monastic routine.

The rōshi, sitting at the heart of the Zen training program, is not likely to be interested in trying to make over the society which presents him with this problem. Within his own milieu, he solves it in the only way that seems to him to be possible, by excluding and segregating the immediate "cause." This is a negative model for us in Western Zen, and as such it can be very instructive.

Senzaki Nyogen Sensei liked the story of the nun Eshun, who, it seems, did practice with a Sangha of monks:

Twenty monks and one nun, who was named Eshun, were practicing meditation under a certain Zen master. Eshun was very pretty, even though her head was shaved and her dress plain. Several monks secretly fell in love with her, and one of them wrote her a love letter, insisting upon a private meeting.

Eshun did not reply. The following day, the master gave a teishō to the group, and when it was over, Eshun arose. Addressing the one who had written her, she said, "If you really love me so much, come and embrace me now."²

One of my students remarked that Eshun's action was self-righteous. I am not so sure. In her context, perhaps it was quite appropriate. In modern circumstances, we seek to be open in such matters, and can appreciate her intention. In any case, if you were the monk, how would you reply to her challenge?

In discussing this matter with students, I said that I would go over to her and make a bow, or in our society, offer to shake her hand. One student said, "If I were the monk, I'd go over and embrace her." This is a Zen-like response, but also very modern and Western.

When Japanese Zen rōshis come to this country to teach, they must deal with very different sexual mores. Some react at first like the late Miura Isshū Rōshi, who maintained separate but adjoining dojos for men and women. Others have erred in other ways. Surely one of the most important tasks of American Zen teachers is to establish ways to include positive acknowledgement of sex as a vital drive in the agent of realization.

So far as I know, all the Zen centers in the United States today accommodate both men and women. This kind of arrangement, like ordinary life away from the center, brings a stream of crises that hinge on sex. In the dokusan room, you may be asked about the aunt and the hermit. The question is, "In that situation, as that hermit,

how do you respond?" Like all good kōans, this one is neat and tidy, and only one sort of response is possible. However, the acid test of the mime in the dokusan room is the act itself thereafter. Here you are in your friend's apartment. The circumstances are thus and so. How do you respond in this time and place, with this person? No dithering allowed!

Every culture sets the parameters of sexual freedom, American no less than Japanese, each in its own way. Thoughts of guilt or justification may form when the limits are ignored, making it impossible to forget the self. Moreover, social controls arise from the collective awareness that sexual freedom is only possible within a harmonious setting. A jealous husband, an angry wife, and disaffected children make a love relationship very difficult, and create barriers to inner peace. A Japanese proverb reads, "Freedom does not violate others." Freedom which does violate others is not really freedom, but exploitation.

In the Western Buddhist training center, men and women sit side by side in the dojo. They eat together, work together, sometimes shower together, sometimes sleep in the same room in the crowded conditions of a sesshin. How do such arrangements affect their Zen training?

I think the overall effect of such proximity is beneficial to the practice. There is an experience of wholeness in having the other sex in close association throughout the day. Fantasies about sex are still present, but surely are less fierce than they might be if there were no chance to experience the humanity of the other in the give and take of cooking, gardening, and re-roofing together. At such a level, one is better able to accept the thoughts as normal and natural, and permit them to pass. There are tensions in a coed community, but so are there tensions in celibate communities. People in combination produce tensions. Tensions can be used creatively, or one can be used by them.

In the broader community, we in the Western hemisphere have gone through many changes in sexual behavior in the past sixty years, particularly in the decades of the 1920's and the 1960's. Young people today may go through a period of sleeping with partners who might merely have been

dates in an earlier time. I have the feeling that these new mores are healthier than the courting games of my youth. People emerge from those years of playing at sex with a better sense of bedroom theatre than we of an earlier generation could possibly attain, with our preoccupations about making the grade, or about walking down the aisle.

There are deeper implications in this change. The sexual drive is part of the human path of self-realization. Sex is a way to search for one's identity. When our mores are relatively permissive, we have increased opportunity to explore our human nature through sexual relationships. At the same time, of course, there is more opportunity for self-centered people to use sex as a means for personal power. The path you choose rises from your fundamental purpose. Why are you here?

The rōshi in charge of a monastery who avoids difficulties simply by dividing humanity in half has his counterpart in Western Victorian authority, which in similar ways excluded and segregated as a means of control. With the help of our evolving Western cultural attitudes, we in the Zen movement can use sex in our practice, rather than trying to exclude it. I don't mean that we should be experimenting with tantra, but simply that we must acknowledge sexual energy as part of the Sangha treasure.

Certainly we cannot justify rejecting sex and accepting the other human drives and emotions, such as anger, fear, hunger, and the need for sleep. All we have learned on our cushions proves that physical and mental condition, the will, and emotions are human elements to be integrated into our daily-life practice and our zazen practice. For all its ecstatic nature, for all its power, sex is just another human drive. If we avoid it, just because it is more difficult to integrate than anger or fear, then we are simply saying that when the chips are down we cannot follow our own practice. This is dishonest and unhealthy. According to the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Jesus said,

If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.³

In the past 15 years, homosexuals have taken this truth to heart. On this subject, again, we are on our own. If the old teachers were quiet on the subject of conventional sex, they were altogether silent about the unconventional. A Zen monk of my acquaintance became a rōshi, and a few months later, looking back on the counselling sessions he had been holding informally with his students, both laypeople and monks, he remarked to me, "I had no idea that homosexuality was so widespread. I thought it was just a very occasional problem."

Homosexuality becomes a problem if society and the individual involved view it as a problem. My feeling is that with the encouragement of teacher and Sangha, the individual member has a chance for personal maturity and realization through Zen practice, whatever his or her sexual orientation may be. Buddha-nature is not heterosexual or homosexual.

Buddha-nature is, in fact, the essence and the quality of sex. Bodhidharma said, "Self-nature is mysterious and subtle. In the Dharma, there is nothing to attach to, and nothing to be attached. If we have no attachment, that is the Precept of No Misuse of Sex." Bodhidharma was a celibate, of course, and his words were directed to his celibate followers. But they apply equally to us all. The non-attachment of oneness is the tao of all the Buddhas. Sasaki Jōshū Rōshi has said, "When you are completely one with your lover, you don't know whether you are doing something good or bad."⁴ Or attached or non-attached.

Bodhidharma expresses the universal body of fullness and completeness, the Sambhogakāya, the Sangha fulfilled. Dōgen Zenji, in his comment on this precept, expresses the Dharmakāya, the universal body of purity and clarity: "The Three Wheels are pure. There is nothing to seek--this is identical with the Buddha Tao." The Three Wheels are the actor, the thing acted upon, and the action. The lovers and their act of love are intrinsically pure and clear. There is no attainment at all. The celibate too, fully realized, finds that Buddha-nature pervades the whole universe.

Bodhidharma and Dōgen Zenji shine light on our path, and if little is said about sex in any direct way in the rest of Zen Buddhist teaching, we can nonetheless use the more general doctrine of personal acceptance and compassion as a complementary guide. Western Zen Buddhist communities, like

their society about them, are still in process of breaking away from Victorian restrictions and of finding their own guidelines. When there is an easy drawing together, a new love relationship can be conducive to deeper practice for the partners and for the Sangha. A difficult relationship may also be a field for practice.

However, practice can be disrupted by actions that Sangha members perceive as boorish sex. If there is a wolf among the lambs, the practice may be overwhelmed throughout the dojo, as though someone had left the television going during sesshin. And what if the teacher is the wolf? With the avoidance of sex in the Japanese training center, sometimes that which was not brought forth earlier becomes very destructive. The confusion a sexually exploitive rōshi creates in the Sangha is a threat to mental health, not to speak of realization. The words of Bodhidharma and Dōgen Zenji are simply profound expressions of common morality. It is up to the Zen teacher and his or her senior followers to build a solid road of example and zazen that will link the wisdom of our ancestors to the exigencies of ordinary living.

To realize the emptiness of greed, hatred, and ignorance; to understand what sex is and how it may be misused--this is the function of each of us. We do this not through the visualization of emptiness, but through focus upon and identification with the matter at hand; Mu on our cushions, and our task in everyday life. Sexual relations are at the heart of human relations; they change as we change, as we grow, mature, and age, and as our circumstances change. Like Shui-yen calling his master, we can only avoid confusion by being completely in touch with ourselves.

This is not, of course, a matter of meditating on sex. Far from it! How much time have you wasted, in the arms of your lover, perhaps a true lover of time past, perhaps a lover that never was, while you sit there on your cushions, your back bent slightly forward at your waistline, your eyelids two-thirds lowered, immobile as a stone Buddha, in mock zazen? How much time have you wasted as a Zendo resident, fooling around in sexual games?

The Three Wheels are pure--can you realize this? All beings are the Tathāgata--can you realize this? As the

Buddha said, we cannot testify to such facts because of our delusion and attachment. It is time to see through those empty clouds and take hold of the source, once and for all. And in this process, in this experience, the myriad Dharmas, empty as they are, confirm our purity, confirm our Buddha-nature, thought-frame after thought-frame, each fresh and new. There is no misuse of sex here, no boorish self-centeredness at all.

TABLE OF JAPANESE-CHINESE EQUIVALENTS

Shui-yen

Zuigan

NOTES

1. Kumotaka Chidō, ed., *Shūmon Kattōshū*, 1 vol., 2 fascicles (Tokyo: Tōkyō Shōho, 1890), II, 6.
2. Paul Reps, compiler, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (Tokyo & Rutland, VT.: Charles E. Tuttle, 1970), p. 24.
3. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. xv.
4. Jōshu Sasaki, *Buddha is the Center of Gravity* (San Cristobal, N.M.: Lama Foundation, 1974), p. 27.