

Question #25

Sexuality doesn't seem to be discussed much in Buddhism, yet it's a powerful, biological drive that can be destructive, especially within sangha. How does one deal with one's sexuality on an individual level, within sangha, especially with Buddhists in a teaching role?

Narayan Liebenson Grady:

I agree that sexuality is not discussed much in Buddhist circles and I think it is essential, as lay practitioners, to hold this subject up to the light of the dharma. As a colleague of mine says, most of us have made fools of ourselves at one point or another because of the strong tug of sexual desire. It is an arena in which delusion often reigns supreme. Life cannot be fragmented; whatever is not examined in our lives is where there will be difficulties and a lack of inner freedom. This means that on an individual level, in our sanghas, and as teachers, it is necessary to learn how to use our sexual energies wisely and with the utmost compassion.

Sexual activity, when aligned with ethical sensitivity, can encourage a greater degree of connectedness and intimacy. Woven naturally into a loving relationship, it can be one of the beautiful aspects of life. Sexuality in and of itself is not a problem. As a matter of fact, it's a natural expression of life. However, when we are seeking pleasure as an end to itself, what can be beautiful becomes suffering. Attachment to self-interest creates an obstacle, making it difficult to examine our intentions and actions. Fortunately, the Buddha gave us one guiding principle in areas where discernment is difficult: it is the wisdom of restraint. In other words, he recommended pausing before acting, to question an action before taking it, if there is any question about its skillfulness or wholesomeness. We need to step back and ask: will this action cause harm?

The expression of our sexuality often involves the desire to meet our conscious or unconscious needs. Because of this, we may not be able to immediately discern the impact of our actions. Beyond the obvious suffering that adultery (usually co-existing with deception) causes, this is especially apparent in situations involving casual sex. Given how complex our histories are, sexuality is a charged area for many people. The only way to assure that our actions will not cause harm is to know the person and his or her situation very well. Knowing someone well means there is an established intimacy before having sex. I have a friend who, when involved with many partners simultaneously, asked a Tibetan lama if it was okay. He reassured the Lama that no one was getting hurt. The Lama was silent for a time and then quietly asked, "Are you sure?" Of course, my friend realized he was not at all sure.

As for sex in teacher/student relationships, it is neither wise nor compassionate on the teacher's part. As some sanghas know all too well, sexual misconduct on a teacher's part can be extremely divisive as well as deeply harmful.