

Buddhism and Sex: the Bigger Picture

In the light of the seemingly never-ending controversy around the issue of Buddhist teachers abusing their authority to gain sexual favors from their students, it might be helpful to step back from an analysis of specific cases, and consider elements of the bigger picture in which this kind of abusive behavior manifests.

1. Sexual desire is the most powerful biological drive known to humankind. No matter what vows one has taken to contain it, lust can arise unbidden under any circumstances and lead otherwise responsible and good people to engage in acts they would unhesitatingly deplore in others.
2. Wherever people are in a position of power over other people, it is inevitable that some will use that power to pursue and fulfill their own sexual desires. Irrespective of the reasons and justifications used to legitimate such behavior, the person in power (usually a man) abuses the trust of the one who has no power (usually a woman or, in a monastery, a boy) in order to satisfy either a physical lust or a longing for intimacy.
3. The Buddha himself was accused of having sexual intercourse with the female ascetics Sundari and Cinca. Tradition explains that these accusations were unfounded, and used by those jealous of his success to discredit him. Having sex with one's students is not a contemporary issue that has only started to rear its head in the simultaneously permissive and puritanical societies of the West. It is simply what human beings in positions of authority are liable to do or be accused of doing.
4. Are there any doctrinal or institutional elements within Buddhist tradition, which would make such behavior more likely to occur? Likewise, can we identify other elements that would work towards making this behavior less likely to happen? I take it as given that no set of rules, however meticulously defined and exactly applied, is ever going to be foolproof.
5. The root of the power disparity between teacher and student lies in the belief that the former is "enlightened" in some sense, while the latter is not. This reflects the difference between the *ariya* (noble being) and the *puthujjana* (ordinary being) that goes back to the earliest texts. This distinction was subsequently given a doctrinal basis when Buddhists adopted the theory of the "Two Truths" as a key tool in their exegetical thinking. While the Buddha never differentiated between "conventional" (*samvrti*) and "ultimate" (*paramartha*) truths in the Pali canon, the theory was embraced by all schools, including the Theravada. As well as having a certain didactic value, the Two Truth doctrine reinforces a two-tier model of authority: those who have direct knowledge of the ultimate truth are *ariya*, while those who do not are mere *puthujjana*. The teacher's authority thus acquires a mystical-ontological rather than a merely institutional legitimacy.

6. As the Buddhist tradition developed over time into an organized religion, the gap between the *ariya* and the *puthujjana* grew wider and wider. The professionals (i.e. monks, priests and yogins) were invested with ever-greater charismatic authority as “enlightened” ones, while the laity came to play an increasingly deferential and servile role. This culminated in the kind of situation we find in Tibetan Buddhism today where the teacher (*lama/guru*) is to be seen as a fully awakened Buddha, while the students are expected to surrender their authority to him in order to make any progress on the path, which, so they are told, is only possible through the lama’s “blessings.”

7. If one set out deliberately to imagine a form of Buddhism that would be best suited to provide sexual opportunities for a teacher, one would be hard-pressed to improve on the model that evolved in Tibet. When combined with a feudal conception of absolute power and a belief in tantric sexual practices as a means of attaining enlightenment, one arrives at a ready-made justification for men teachers to take advantage of women students. This situation is much the same in Japanese Zen, where a feudal model likewise prevails, albeit without the use of tantric elements.

8. It is no coincidence that the majority of cases of abuse reported by students come from the Tibetan and Japanese Zen traditions, i.e. those that place greatest emphasis on submission and obedience. This is not to say that such abuse is absent in the Theravada schools – it occurs there too; nor does it imply that there are no teachers in the Tibetan and Zen traditions who behave with ethical integrity – for there are many. While abusive behavior is always an unethical act performed by a particular human being, who needs to be held responsible and accountable for it, we also need to acknowledge that certain doctrinal and institutional contexts facilitate and legitimate this kind of behavior more than others. As long as systemic inequalities of institutional power remain unchallenged, no amount of soul-searching and drafting of ever more detailed moral “guidelines” will succeed in comprehensively tackling the core issue of the abuse of power.

9. According to the earliest texts, the role of the *ariya* (teacher) is not to make the *puthujjana* (student) dependent on him, but to enable the person to become “ennobled” by entering the stream (*sotapatti*) of the eightfold path. Thus the role of the teacher is to help the student to stand on his or own feet as quickly as possible. For with “stream entry” the person becomes autonomous in his or her practice and is no longer dependent on the authority of another person (*aparapaccaya*) in order to continue on the path. The *suttas* define stream entry as gaining “lucid confidence in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha” and coming to “cherish the virtues dear to the *ariyas*.” What changes is one’s heartfelt ethical commitment to the practice. Stream entry has nothing to do with attaining an esoteric “enlightenment,” which then gives one authority to exercise power over others.

10. At the Buddha’s time, stream entry was something that people from all walks of life, irrespective of gender, whether monastic or lay, were invited to enjoy. “Sangha” referred not just to monks, i.e. those in power, but included anyone

who had entered the stream of the path – even a person like Sarakani the Sakiyan, a man despised by his peers as the local drunk. By recovering this understanding of stream entry, we recover an inclusive model of community that is comprised of autonomous individuals who work to support and sustain each other's practice. Some of these individuals may be "saints," while others may be "sinners." That is not the issue. Rather than a set of agreed upon beliefs or a shared devotion to a guru, what binds everyone together is a willingness to celebrate each sangha-member's wisdom while holding him or her equally accountable for their failings.

Stephen Batchelor
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