

Thinking through Texts: Toward a Critical Buddhist Theology of Sexuality¹

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Let me begin by thanking the University for bestowing upon me the honor of being its first Lenz Distinguished Lecturer, and also for the hospitality shown to me during this visit. I hold Naropa – its administration, faculty and students – in very high regard. Almost half of my own graduate students at UC Santa Barbara are Naropa graduates, so I know first hand the quality of the education they receive here in the field of Buddhist Studies. More generally, Naropa is at the forefront of those institutions in North America attempting to integrate the practice and theory of Buddhism into higher education. A pioneer in this project, the University is a model for institutions that are grappling with the complex issues of the role that Buddhism can and should play in the university. Part of my reason for accepting your kind invitation was a selfish one: to learn from you – to witness first hand what your Buddhist heritage means to you and how you reconcile the Buddhist aspect of your identity with your broader educational mission. That, of course, casts me in the role of student and observer, a role that I am happy to occupy throughout many parts of my visit. But tonight, I am cast in a somewhat different role: in the role of what Jacques Lacan called “the subject presumed to know.” So let me now discharge the responsibilities of such “a presumably knowledgeable subject” by turning to substance of my talk.

First a brief biographical note, a little something about myself that is relevant to my remarks today – namely, that I love texts. Of all of the wonderful gifts that my Tibetan teachers have bestowed on me, none is more dear to me than the training I have received in reading texts. I don't mean simply the ability to read these texts in their

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original languages, though this is no small thing, but more important, the ability to *think through texts*: to think about what texts mean, but also to think about what the world means in light of the great Indo-Tibetan textual tradition, to come to an understanding of the world – of what we are, of what our responsibilities are, of what constitutes a meaningful life – in conversation with the classic texts of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. This, I learned from my teachers, does not mean simply coming to an understanding of the literal meaning of the great texts, but also engaging the classic tradition critically: questioning it, using reasoning to determine whether and how (if at all) it is valid, and being willing to wrestle with the great thinkers of the past in a spirit of free inquiry. In this model, the texts are not the endpoint of reflection, but rather the beginning of it, and the great masters of old are not irrelevant “dead brown men,” but living conversation partners whose thought, as reflected in their writings, can help us to reconstruct our lives so that they lead to the flourishing of self, others, and of the communities in which we live. This task – the task of thinking critically about the world through the Buddhist texts – is chiefly the task of Buddhist theologians, but as you will see from what follows, I also believe that it is the task of Buddhists generally. I hope to make a case today for the importance of this enterprise through a very specific lens – that of sexuality (and more specifically of sexual ethics) – a particularly useful lens because of the issues it forces us to grapple with. So much for the confessional preamble. And now, in the words of Salt-N-Pepa, “Let’s talk about sex!”

On a warm June day in 1997 I walked into the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco to attend a meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Several months earlier a group of gay and lesbian Buddhists had requested the audience to discuss with His Holiness his views on homosexuality and to ask for clarifications about statements he had made, statements that the organizers saw as disconcerting.² The hour-long meeting was very fruitful. The

² Steve Peskind, a member for the Gay Buddhist Fellowship, the coordinator of the Buddhist AIDS Project, and one of the most outspoken proponents of the need for dialogue with the Dalai Lama on this issue, officially requested the meeting in a letter to His Holiness in January of 1997. In that same month an article in San Francisco’s gay and lesbian community newspaper, the *Bay Area Reporter*, explored the controversy; and in April, the *San Francisco Examiner* ran an extensive piece on the subject. See Dennis Conkin, “Dalai Lama’s ‘Inappropriate’ Gay Comments Create Discord in SF,” *Bay Area Reporter* vol. 27, no. 2 (January 9, 1997), pp. 14-15; Julie Chao, “Dalai Lama’s Words Sting Gays,” *San Francisco Examiner* (April 13, 1997), sec. C-3, p. 1.

Dalai Lama began by reiterating his opposition to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and his commitment to “full human rights” for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.³ “It is wrong for society to reject people on the basis of their sexual orientation,” His Holiness said. “Your movement to gain full human rights is reasonable and logical.” In society at large there is, he added, “no harm in mutually agreeable sexual acts ... It is wrong for anyone to look down on gay people.”

But then the discussion turned from the general to the specific – from what is acceptable in the society at large to what is acceptable (or not) in the Buddhist tradition. Relying on a very detailed passage – a text – from the fifteenth Tibetan scholar Tsong kha pa, His Holiness explained what the work has to say about “sexual misconduct” – the type of sex that, as one of the ten nonvirtues, is considered a moral evil. Among other things, Tsong kha pa’s formulation prohibits sex between men (but not, as we shall see, between women), it also prohibits solitary masturbation, both hetero- and homosexual oral and anal intercourse, and even sex during daylight hours. On the other hand, it does not prohibit a married man’s employing the services of prostitutes, and it permits heterosexual men up to five orgasms per night. Lest it be thought that this delineation of the boundaries between permissible and illicit sex is idiosyncratic to Tsong kha pa, let me say that very similar formulations are found in a variety of important Tibetan texts written both before and after him: including Gampopa, and Dza Patrul, for example. More important, every element in Tsong kha pa’s formulation has a basis in the Indian Buddhist sources.

Having explained Tsong kha pa’s text, His Holiness went on to speak about “the possibility of understanding these precepts in the context of time, culture and society... If homosexuality is part of accepted norms [today], it is possible that it *may be* acceptable ... However, no single person or teacher can redefine precepts. I do not have the authority to redefine these precepts since no one can make a unilateral decision or issue a decree... Such a redefinition can only come out of sangha⁴ discussions within the various Buddhist traditions. It is not unprecedented in the history of Buddhism to redefine

³ For a previous statement on this issue by the Dalai Lama, see http://www.ilga.org/news_results.asp?LanguageID=1&FileCategory=1&ZoneID=7&FileID=782.

⁴ The *sa gha* is the community of monastic and lay Buddhists.

[moral] issues, but it has to be done on the collective level.”⁵ His Holiness called for further research and dialogue on the topic, and concluded by reiterating the fact that, however the notion of sexual misconduct comes to be defined, it can never be used to justify discrimination against sexual minorities.

In the years following this meeting with the Dalai Lama I have taken up His Holiness’s call for more scholarly research on the issue of sexuality, and am close to completing a monograph on the subject. Initially envisioned as an exploration of the history of sexual ethics in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism – how the tradition arrived at this specific notion of what constitutes sexual misconduct – I slowly came to the conclusion that in order to fully understand the ethical dimensions of the issue, a much broader treatment of sexuality was really necessary. I realized that the Tibetan position on what constitutes “sexual misconduct” could only be understood by first understanding what Tibetan scholars took for granted – their views of the human body, sex and sexual desire *in general*. That broader treatment, I further realized, would require examining what Indian and Tibetan texts have to say about such things as the differentiation of the sexes in the Buddhist cosmological narratives, the nature of the body and of the sexual act, the psychology of sexual arousal, the classical interventions for dealing with sexual desire, and the doctrinal construction of sexual “deviance,” or, we might say, of “queerness.” In this way, what began as a fairly narrow study of the historical evolution of one specific doctrine – that of sexual misconduct – has evolved into a much broader book on sexuality in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Now as important as the issue of sexuality is to the Buddhist tradition, there is no single classical work that deals with sexuality in its entirety. While there *are* compilations or compendia, called *sa gr aha*, on a variety of topics in the Indian and Tibetan literature, there is nothing like a *maithunasa gr aha* (a compendium on sex). My first task, therefore, was to collect materials from a variety of individual texts of different periods and genres. This was and is the fodder for my study. But in the spirit of what I just mentioned, understanding what the texts have to say about sexuality is only half the

⁵ These various quotes were taken from a document compiled by Ms. Eva Herzer immediately after the meeting, “Minutes of Meeting between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Gay and Lesbian Leaders, San Francisco, June 11, 1997,” unpublished.

battle. The other half, of course, is to assess this material: to subject it to critical scrutiny. More on what I mean by that in a moment.

As I was beginning to put together the pieces of the Buddhist (textual) sexual puzzle, it occurred to me at some point that contemporary Western Buddhists must already have come to some conclusions about these issues, and so I turned to that font of all knowledge, the internet, to see what people were saying about Buddhism and sexuality. I want to cite three examples that illustrate what I found.

- One commentator writes: “So where is Buddhism’s list of naughty sexual practices? The answer is short and sweet. Buddhism doesn’t (for once!) have a list.”⁶
- In a similar fashion, another blogger tells us, “Where Buddhism differs noticeably from other religions, is in its lack of a list of forbidden sexual practices. Unlike other religions that forbid homosexuality, contracepted sex, crossdressing, etc. Buddhism does not list forbidden sexual practices.”⁷

Each of these two writers is clearly unaware of the extensive Buddhist scholastic literature on sexual misconduct – a literature that “lists” inappropriate partners, organs, times and place and then goes into exquisite detail about when, where, how and with whom Buddhists may and may not have sex. In still other sources we find long lists of both men and women who are to be denied Buddhist ordination on the basis of their sexual preferences, gender identity, and sexual anatomy. So, contra to what our bloggers think, lists there are aplenty.

In the third and final example, the writer *is* aware of the very detailed treatment of sexual misconduct found in the scholastic sources because, in fact, it is a review of the translation of Tsong kha pa’s *Lam rim chen mo* on Amazon.com.

⁶ Winton Higgins, http://www.buddhanet.net/winton_s.htm.

⁷ Sanja Blakburn, “A Buddhist Sexual Ethic,” http://www.healthkids.net/course.phtml?course_id=46.

- Here the writer states of Tsong kha pa's instructions: "I felt that they were not the true teachings that I have come to learn about Buddhism. For example, in the teaching about sexuality... I'm not sure how true to the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism it [i.e., Tsong kha pa's work] is."

When confronted with the reality of the scholastic treatment of sexual ethics, this writer's response is to dismiss it. "Surely this can't be what Tibetan Buddhism is about." How ironic then that almost six hundred years after Tsong kha pa wrote his famous text, arguably the most prominent representative of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, should be opening this very volume when he is about to engage Western Buddhists in discussions of sexuality. Obviously, *one* representative of the Tibetan tradition still thinks that the *Lam rim chen mo* is "true to the tradition."

To sum up, what I found in my peregrinations through the Web is that Western Buddhists were either unaware of what the classical Indian and Tibetan tradition had to say about sexuality, or else, when not unaware, were ready to dismiss it because it did not jibe with their preconceptions of what the Buddhist tradition is all about.

As my research evolved and as I began to share some of my findings with audiences of nonspecialists (for example, lay Western Buddhists in Dharma centers), I discovered a similar pattern playing itself out. I found, first, that many people were uninformed about – and that some were simply *uninterested in* – what the great texts had to say about sexuality. Having been written in a place and time far removed from us, many Western Buddhists, I came to realize, simply see these texts as having little to say about how we should live our sexual lives in the here and now. (In response to this I have often asked myself why my co-religionists are so willing, and indeed keen, to adopt the minute meditation instructions of the classical masters, and so quick to slough off the advice of these same masters when it comes to matters of sex.)

Be that as it may, I have come to see a fundamental disconnect between what the classical Buddhist tradition has to say about sexuality and what contemporary, Western Buddhists believe about the subject. I realized that much of the background and many of the ideas I was taking for granted were either unknown to, or else were summarily rejected by my audiences as "un-Buddhist." Part of the purpose of my project, therefore,

became didactic, one might even say “cathectical”: to educate a Western Buddhist audience about what the classical Indian and Tibetan texts have to say on the subject of sex. (Whether the views of the classical authors are reasonable is, of course, a different question – one that I will turn to in a moment.) In any case, the first goal of my project, I realized, had to be informational, descriptive, bibliographical and pedagogical.

Now while some of my friends simply rejected what the texts had to say, others had a different reaction, one that was just as disconcerting to me. It can be summarized in two words: “reluctant resignation.” Having been made aware of the classical tradition, the second group was, albeit reluctantly, ready to hop on the bandwagon of the more restrictive sexual ethic and to live life according to the literal message of the scholastic texts, not fully realizing, I think, what this meant. To give you a very concise overview, a literalist reading of the Indian and Tibetan sources tells us:

- That male homosexuality is prohibited, but that lesbianism is not
- That nothing but penile-vaginal coitus is permissible, and then only at night
- That it is acceptable for married men to hire prostitutes
- That polygamy is allowed
- That men have the right to their wives’ bodies at all times except for one – when the wife has taken the one-day precepts. And even then, a woman loses her right to refuse her husband’s sexual advances if she has not received prior permission to take the precepts.
- And finally, that a variety of individuals are to be denied ordination on the basis of their sexual/gender identity or anatomical characteristics – men chiefly on the basis of non-normative sexual desires, and women principally on the basis of non-normative sexual anatomies.

Those who are ready to accept the sexual teachings of the scholastic tradition literally are committing themselves to living by these guidelines. But is this really the kind of sexual ethics we want to buy into – a life dictated by centuries-old Indian norms? If not, then what is the alternative? And perhaps most important of all, how do we justify a different (and I would claim a more just) sexual ethic?

To sum up, as I began to interact with living (and virtual) Buddhist communities in the West, I found three problems that needed to be addressed: (1) pervasive misinformation about what the traditional texts said, (2) a tendency to dismiss the textual tradition in an ad hoc fashion, and (3) when not dismissed, to accept the tradition literally without any felt need to engage in critical reflection.

At the center of these issues is a more fundamental problem that confronts all religions: the issue of authority. How much credence should we give to the ancient teachings of the tradition? What hold should these doctrines and tenets have on our lives? Before continuing with the topic of sexual ethics, let me outline for you what I believe to be one way – my way, but I believe also a very Buddhist way – of dealing with the issue of authority. My method is quite simple to state, but often difficult to put into practice. It can be outlined in three basic points:

(1) As Buddhists, we commit ourselves to learning about Dharma, about doctrine. While our teachers are, for the most part, the purveyors of this information, we should not simply stop at what our teachers tell us, but rather, as the great saint Atisha says, we must be ever willing “to seek more learning.” The basis for this learning is the classical texts of India and Tibet.

To turn our back on this great textual tradition – either by refusing to study it or by simply dismissing what we have learned – is to turn our back on the jewel of the doctrine, the true source of refuge. Just as important, it is also to create an irreconcilable rift between our own (Western) forms of Buddhism and those of Buddhist Asia, for of course in most forms of Asian Buddhism, the texts are an important source of guidance.

Therefore, hiding our heads in the sand and refusing to confront the textual tradition – as difficult as this is in some cases – is not an option in my view. Nor is it an option to study the texts and then to sweep under the rug, in an ad hoc fashion, all those aspects of the textual tradition that make us uncomfortable. When we take refuge as Buddhists, we are in a sense marrying the tradition. We are committing to this tradition as a whole, with all its imperfections, the way we commit to a partner as a whole person in a relationship. This does not mean that we become blind to the imperfections of the

tradition, or that we might not work for its betterment – just the contrary – but it does mean at some level accepting the tradition as a whole, for better and for worse.

(2) Once we find out what the tradition has to say, we must reflect critically on this. This is chiefly the responsibility of Buddhist intellectuals – or we might say of Buddhist “theologians.” But non-scholars, Buddhists believers/practitioners should not be content to be spoonfed the truth by those who claim to be representing and interpreting the tradition – like baby birds being nourished with the regurgitated food from the gullets of their mothers. Rather, they should subject the theological interventions of specialists to analysis, keeping theologians honest, and making them accountable both to the tradition and to reason.

This is not to downplay the importance of faith, but as the great Indian sage Haribhadra, commenting on Maitreya’s *Ornament of Realization*, reminds us, there are different types of faith. The type of faith that immediately accepts whatever one hears – even when it comes from an authoritative source, like one’s master – is considered a lesser type of faith. The higher type of faith, by contrast, is one that begins not with immediate belief *but with skepticism*. It is a faith that begins in doubt and that then uses the power of reason to overcome that doubt and to ascertain the truth. This higher type of faith, unlike the former, is considered unshakeable. Nothing can destroy it. And once we have come to this unswerving kind of faith about a certain point of doctrine, then of course we must internalize the truth of the doctrine through the practice of meditation, so that our lives become seamless expressions of this truth.

(3) The process of critical reflection, as traditionally understood, is relatively narrow. Critical reflection – what in Sanskrit is called *cinta* – is a process of analysis that tests doctrines by determining whether they are consistent with our perceptions of the world, and whether they are rational – that is, whether good reasons can be given for accepting them.

I would argue that today we have at our disposal *other* tools– for example, historical analysis – and other concepts not found to any great extent in classical Buddhism – for example, the concepts of “justice” and “equality” – that are just as

important in the task of critically appraising the tradition. What is more, many of the critical tools that have been developed in the West over the past decades – in fields like discourse analysis, gender studies, queer theory, and cultural studies – are not without their uses when it comes to critically reflecting on Buddhist doctrines, though here I think we have to be somewhat cautious in the way we appropriate these theoretical perspectives.

So much for my three points. Briefly, then, what I take to be authoritative for Buddhists (or at least for Buddhists of my ilk), are those doctrines and practices that have an established textual pedigree, but that are *also* rationally and publically defensible. A doctrine is authoritative in the Indo-Tibetan tradition not simply because the Buddha spoke it, for it is recognized that the Buddha spoke many things that cannot be accepted as literally true. Nor is something authoritative simply because a great teacher said (or says) that it is, for the tradition is not inerrant. Instead, something is true and worthy of our allegiance, when, in the words of Tsong kha pa, “it has been analyzed with and stood the test of stainless reasoning.” In the end, the authority of a Buddhist doctrinal or ethical claim – whether we are warranted in believing something or in living our lives on the basis of a certain principle – is determined by whether or not it passes unscathed through the critical gauntlet. This puts us at times in the position of arguing with our own teachers, with the great saints of India, and even with the Buddha himself. But so be it. When I sometimes find himself in disagreement with Tsong kha pa, Asanga or Buddha, I remind myself that these great men *themselves* disagreed with others that came before them, that they spoke up about what they believed, and that none of them asked us to follow them blindly.

So once again: (1) it is incumbent upon us to learn the classical tradition, (2) we must appropriate the tradition critically, and (3) we should do so using all the tools at our disposal, including the tools of modern scholarship. With this detour behind us, let us once again turn our attention to the topic of sexual ethics to see how these principles play out in this particular instance.

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama suggested, at our meeting in San Francisco, that certain aspects of the doctrine of sexual misconduct – for example, the acceptability of married men buying the services of prostitutes – were problematic by today’s standards, he was of course suggesting that this doctrine contained elements that were culturally and historically specific, elements that by today’s standards we would consider not only anachronistic, but indeed ethically problematic. More generally, His Holiness’s comments, it seems to me, opened up the possibility of rethinking the doctrine of sexual misconduct as a whole, encouraging us to subject the ethical norms found in the classical texts to the same type of critical scrutiny that we would any other aspect of the Buddhist tradition. In my larger project, I have attempted to do this in great detail. In my few remaining minutes, let me give you just a brief summary of my findings.

Let us recall how the doctrine of sexual misconduct was formulated in its most elaborate version. Our scholastic authors tell us that sex is unethical if it involves inappropriate partners, organs, times and place. Inappropriate partners, these texts tell us, are all “protected women” (girls who are still under the protection of their parents, married women, etc.); but inappropriate partners also include boys, men and hermaphrodites. The list of inappropriate partners explicitly *excludes* prostitutes or courtesans, at least so long as they are hired directly and not through an intermediary. “Inappropriate organs” refers to the mouth, anus, the hand, and in between the thighs of one’s partners – by which is meant the insertion of the penis into any orifice or fold of skin other than the vagina. “Inappropriate time” refers both to the daylight hours, and to specific times in the life of one’s female partner – for example, when the woman is menstruating, breastfeeding or when she has taken the one-day precepts. Finally, under “inappropriate place” we find a list of sites where sex is not permitted – a list that includes sacred sites, public spaces, but also the *number* of times that orgasm is permitted (up to five times in a night).

Now part of the process of critically reflecting on such a doctrine involves paying attention to the subtleties of the text, including its “gaps” – what is missing. For example, something that is not at all obvious at first blush is that the presumed audience here is *only* men. From the language used in these texts it is clear that only men and not women

are *ever* being addressed. The case of what constitutes sexual misconduct for women was simply not considered by classical Indian or Tibetan authors. That in itself is a good reason for why the classical formulaion of sexual ethics needs to be rethought.

Critical appraisal of the doctrine also involves understanding the *context* in which these ideas were elaborated. For example, we cannot take for granted that the rules found here were being put forward *for the same reasons* that make these same actions inappropriate for us. While many of the elements mentioned in the texts make sense to us as moderns – for example, the fact that children and others’ wives are off limits as sexual partners – we cannot presume that ancient Indian thinkers were operating with the same assumptions that make such things as pedophilia and adultery problematic for us today. Specifically, there is no indication that the texts have anything like a notion of “sexual abuse” – where it is, for example, the child who is the victim. Rather, when a man takes a young girl or the wife of another as a sexual partner, the party whose rights have been violated are the guardians: the parents of the girl and the husband, respectively. Today we operate under a very different worldview that sees children and women as agents, a worldview that also understands the longterm effects of things like child sexual abuse. But this was not the same worldview motivating our authors, and understanding this aspect of “context” is an important part of the critical process.

Notice also that there are a number of morally reprehensible actions that we take for granted that are simply not mentioned in this formulation. For example, rape is not explicitly mentioned. While some texts do speak of inappropriate “ways” of obtaining a sexual partner (such as guile, and, yes, force), I have already mentioned the fact that a husband’s right to his wife’s body was taken for granted, making impossible any notion of “marital rape.” The same appears to be true of a man’s right to a prostitute whom he has already paid. Once a woman “belongs” to a man – whether it is permanently (through marriage) or temporarily (through a sexual contract) – a woman simply loses her right to say “no.” Once again, the ancient authors were operating under a very different set of presuppositions than those that we operate under today.

The broader point is that a close-reading, one that is open to absences and gaps, and that is committed to the unpacking of context are important elements in the process of critical reflection. So too, of course, is historical analysis. What do we find when the

doctrine of sexual misconduct is subjected to historical scrutiny? This, to my mind, is one of the most interesting results of my research. To make a long and complex story short, what we find is that the earliest mentions of sexual misconduct in the Buddhist canon know nothing of the fourfold division into partners, organs/orifices, time and place. Instead, in the earliest scriptural sources – in the sutras – sexual misconduct is understood simply as adultery: a man taking another’s wife as a sexual partner. While still androcentric in that women’s agency is disregarded (no mention is made of women taking married men as sexual partners), this simpler formulation of the doctrine is, at least to my mind, more elegant and also more effective. I say “more effective” because I see the attempt to micromanage people’s sexual lives a losing strategy. Lists of minute proscriptions simply kick people’s imaginations into high gear, as they begin to think about ways of getting around the letter of the law.

Now the obvious historical question then becomes this: If the early doctrine of sexual misconduct is so simple and elegant, when and why did it get so complex and restrictive – that is, when do we find the transition to “organ/orifice mode”? The answer to the “when” question is simple. We don’t find any examples of the more elaborate formulation of sexual misconduct before the third century CE. The answer to the “why” question requires us to think about the identity of the Indian authors who compiled the more complex versions of the doctrine. Those authors are, first of all, celibate monks, and secondly, scholastic philosophers – men who think in terms of lists, and who want to cover all the bases. And why did theologians like Asanga, Vasubandhu, and others began to elaborate lay sexual ethics precisely as they did? I believe that they chose these terms – partners, organs, orifices, times and places – because these are the terms with which they were familiar. And why were they familiar with these categories? Because they were the categories used to discuss the breaking of rules in the monastic code, the Vinaya. Hence, what a historical analysis shows us is that Indian authors began to read lay sexual ethics through the lens of monastic discipline, reading monastic norms (like where penises can and cannot be inserted) into lay behavioral codes. In their exuberance to elaborate, I would argue, they went overboard, on the one hand leaving behind the earlier, more elegant, and simpler formulation of sexual misconduct, and on the other

inappropriately reading lay sexual ethics through the filter of monastic discipline. The end-result was to make lay sexuality increasingly more restrictive and monastic-like.

Now even after our various analyses of the subtleties of the texts, of their context and of history have been completed, there still remains the task of subjecting the doctrine to rational scrutiny. This obviously can take many forms. Let me give you just one example so that you see what I have in mind.

What, we might ask, is the *purpose* of the doctrine in the first place? Why should lay people refrain from engaging in sexual misconduct? The answer is probably twofold: to avoid actions that are harmful to oneself, and to avoid actions that are harmful to others. Now it is clear why an act like adultery – having sex with another’s spouse – might be considered a moral evil. It harms others by leading to psychological pain and in many cases to the breakup of stable relationships. It is harmful to oneself because it puts one’s own short-term gratification before others’ welfare. Refraining from adultery also, of course, has social benefits. But what benefits are forthcoming from the more elaborate and restrictive scholastic sexual code? What reasons can be given for restricting sex to penile-vaginal penetrative intercourse performed only at night? What possible Buddhist reason could be given for dooming gay men (and more generally, people who work at night!) to a life of celibacy while allowing heterosexual men five orgasms per night, and lesbians complete sexual freedom? Is this rational? Is it just? These are the types of questions that a reasoned analysis of the doctrine must ask.

When we put these various aspects – philological, historical, rationalist –together this is where I believe we end up:

1. That there is no scriptural warrant for the more restrictive, scholastic formulation of the doctrine. That it was the concoction of celibate monks who inappropriately read monastic norms into lay sexuality. The individuals who did this were great scholars and saints, but on this issue, they simply got it wrong.
2. That the doctrine, both in its earlier simplified version and in its later, more elaborate scholastic one, is androcentric (it privileges men), and is therefore unjust. Any sexual ethic worth its salt must see women and transgender people as moral agents.

3. And finally, quite independently of historical or other criteria, the more elaborate doctrine cannot be justified on rational grounds.

Where does this leave us? It leaves us with the task of having to rethink sexual ethics in a way that is both rational and just – in a way that does not privilege heterosexual men, that considers the agency of women and queer people, and that does not discriminate against anyone on the basis of their sexual tastes or anatomies. The details of this more just sexual ethics are of course something that still needs to be worked out, but at a minimum, it seems to me, it must be based on general principles like gender egalitarianism, on pan-Buddhist doctrinal positions – for example, acknowledging that the body is vehicle for pleasure, but that sexual pleasure (like all sense-pleasure) can be a source of attachment. Such an ethic must also be based on general Buddhist moral principles like the commitment not to do harm.

And so here I leave you: not with full-blown answers, but with hints – hints about what a just Buddhist sexual ethic for our time should look like. And I leave you with these hints in the hope that you will give this some thought, and that as you do so, you will accept my invitation to join me in this very exciting task of thinking about sexuality through the medium of the great Buddhist textual tradition.

Thank you once again for kind invitation, and thank you all for your patience and attention.