

[This version: 14 July 1994]

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'RED THREAD ZEN - THE TAO OF LOVE, PASSION, AND SEX'

This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious issues. Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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Enquiries: The Editor, "Mind Moon Circle", Sydney Zen Centre, 251 Young St., Annandale, Sydney, NSW 2038, Australia. Tel: + 61 2 660 2993

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Red Thread Zen  
The Tao of Love, Passion, and Sex

by Subhana Barzaghi

Day 4, Spring Sesshin 1993, Gorricks Run Zendo, NSW, Australia

Most of us have arrived at this particular point in our spiritual journey with a little extra baggage about passion, love, and sex, and I have noticed that many people on the spiritual path have a tendency in the mind to create a polarisation or a separation between the spiritual path and the sexual life. There a number of ways in which this polarisation and confusion is reinforced. One of those ways is that we continue to subscribe to a collective cultural belief and myth perpetuated through Christianity, which is the predominant source of myth in our culture, about the fall of Eve. As you know, in the story, Eve touched and ate of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and gave it to Adam, a symbolic gesture. Eve was portrayed as a temptress, a seducer, and she has been held responsible for the fall from heavenly grace; her sacred flesh has been falsely blamed for the evils of mankind for generations.

This belief system is entrenched and deep-seated and runs through our whole society, even today. It is reflected in our present myths around sexual abuse and assault. In my work as a therapist in that field I noticed about ninety per cent of victims primarily women would often come away from an assault feeling that they were to blame. Its the only crime in our society where the victim walks away feeling like somehow they did something wrong, that they are to blame. They would often say things like, If only I hadnt stayed back at that party, If only I hadnt walked down that street, If only I hadnt worn that particular dress, If only I hadnt got in the car and taken a lift home with that person, then maybe it wouldnt have happened. We also hear offenders saying, She deserved it, She led me on, She asked for it, She encouraged me. In some ways women are still carrying the collective blame for abuse and sexual assault in our society. All of us are still redeeming the body of Eve, even today: I see an enormous amount of that in therapy.

Another factor that contributes to the disconnectedness of spirituality and sexuality is the notion of a body/mind/spirit split. It is as if this kind of thinking, this compartmentalising of life, in

some way perpetuates the notion that the body and the passions of the flesh belong to the lower realms, and the flesh needs to be transcended to realise the spirit. This kind of thinking is very dualistic and hierarchical in nature. The orthodox religious mind has separated the physical from the spiritual, the sensual from the soul. Rejection of the body became a common article of faith among the worlds religions, and orthodox religion has never managed to enjoy the innocence and delight of physical beauty and sensuality. Even in our own Zen history there is the story of a nun who was a very beautiful woman, stunningly beautiful, and who went to the monastery to become a nun, and who was rejected. She went three times and she was rejected each time, because, they told her, she was too beautiful, she would corrupt the monks. The tragic story is that she was so intent on being a nun that she took a hot iron and put it to her face, scarred her face, just so that she could enter the nunnery.

This repressed rejection of physical beauty and attraction by orthodox religious authorities has contributed to religions obsession with celibacy and its condemnation of enjoying and beautifying the body. Not so long ago, Christian monks would have to make confession to the priest about masturbation. It was considered a sinful act to experience the normality of sexual arousal in the body. The flesh had to be subdued and conquered. We can laugh about that now, but its not so long ago in our history.

At the other end of the spectrum from the religious orthodox attitude is our Western consumer cultures attitude to the flesh and the body, which has made a devotional practice of adorning the body. On the market we have endless products available for every single region of the body, from the hair, to the skin, to the lips, to the breasts, to the genitals, to the toenails. The human body from head to toe has become an instrument of profit, a multibillion dollar industry.

From these two extremes we are not modelled very healthy ways of relating to the physical, sensual nature of the body. On one side, the religious view of transcending the flesh and treating it as sinful, and on the other side the endless adoring of the body, fussing over its appearances in order to prolong life, which denies the natural ageing process. One of my teachers, Christopher Titmuss, who is of the Red Thread school, said, Religion has been unwilling to see the sensual forces and the spirit as interconnected. Those who are obsessed with preserving their looks and sexual attraction cannot see past their breasts and genitals, while others cannot see the relationship between their genitals and spirituality. Both miss a marriage of the flesh and spirit.

Many years ago maybe not that many years ago I certainly engaged in wild and promiscuous sexual behaviour myself, that caused havoc with my relationships and caused immense suffering to me and to others. I suffer deep remorse and regret for what was clearly a breaking of the third precept, concerning sexual misconduct. In reaction, in a way, to that part of the wild woman in me and in an attempt to make sure that conduct never happened again, I decided to install a kind of policewoman in my psyche. A bit like Hannya: in Japanese temples they have wonderful little demons in the corner, with a sword, little fierce demons called Hannya. So I decided to adopt one of those in my psyche, and my policewoman was available at any moment to cut down

that sexual desire or fantasy the moment it arose. No, you are not going to think about that! Phoom! This went on for some time; while, as I said, I suffered deep guilt and remorse.

This path eventually culminated in my taking of the robes in Sri Lanka, and ordaining as a Buddhist nun. I had really long hair then, longer than it is now, and I went from long hair to no hair at all. A Swiss nun had the wonderful opportunity of shaving my head. I thought in some way shaving my head was maybe shaving off some of my vanity. But after I shaved my head it was the most exhilarating experience. I don't know if some of you have had that experience, but the head is so sensitive when it hasn't got any hair on it, that it was like standing under a shower where you could feel every little drop, every little drop. So I was walking around with a smile, a grin, from ear to ear for days and days. This was a very joyous time and an incredibly sensual experience like being born again. So I couldn't even escape that way. I thought I was going to be a nun; I thought I was going to escape having to deal with all that sensuality stuff; and shaving my head ended up being one of the most sensual experiences.

My policewoman served me well for about ten years. But that too had devastating effects. In some way it was like cutting off a deep part of myself. The shadow comes back in the form of erotic fantasies, attractions, romantic projections, that haunt us until we understand that there is something very deep there that needs our attention. For many of us our sexual vitality is a mysterious life-force which seems to operate under its own laws. Vows of celibacy do not subdue our sexual energies, nor are they contained in the holy vows of matrimony. Sexual feelings have a way of asserting themselves even in the most pious minds, even in the most unlikely circumstances or situations even here in sesshin people have wonderful fantasies. If we do not integrate the mind, body, flesh, and spirit, the spiritual will always struggle with the physical, one attempting to claim sovereignty over the other, and life becomes a struggle and effort to conquer the passions in the name of the sacred. We do agree to be celibate here in sesshin, but the purpose of that is not to suppress sexual feelings or desires but simply to provide an opportunity for us to be completely alone, and experience other expressions of deep intimacy with this undivided nature.

Our own lay practice has its roots in the monastic tradition and lineage of monks and nuns who take vows of celibacy, which does not really speak to us or help us deal with the intensity of love, passion, and desire. But the intensity is there, and it rises up. It

does not help us deal with that energy in our daily lives. In the 17 000 koans in our curriculum some of you are looking a little amazed at that! there are three of four koans relating to sexuality. It barely gets a mention. Yet love and sex and passion are so potent energies that really have a huge impact on our lives. I know that I have spent many years at retreats and I don't think I have ever met a teacher, up until recently, who would open their mouth about sex and love and passion, particularly in a retreat.

So what is the Tao of love, passion, and sex? A few koans or stories at least give us some direction or insight into the sensual nature of the Tao. Unfortunately these three koans get repeated every time

someone gives a talk about this. . . . Anyway, one of the miscellaneous koans is, Why are perfectly enlightened bodhisattvas attached to the vermilion thread? The vermilion thread is the red thread, and the red thread is symbolic: I have recently learned that it is not the line of tears , as I used to think, but it comes from early China, where the geisha girls and courtesans would wear a red garter on their thigh, as the line of passions. So: Why are perfectly enlightened bodhisattvas attached to the vermilion thread? One of the characters I want to introduce you to is a wonderful character in the Zen tradition, called Ikkyu, who is one of my longstanding and favourite Zen masters and who appeals, I guess, to the wild woman in me. He was born in 1394 and was an illegitimate son of the emperor Go-komatsu. He was known by some as the emperor of renegades, a wild wandering monk and teacher, sometimes called Crazy Cloud. He was a lover, a poet, and he could write very tenderly about the beauty of women. He relentlessly attacked the hypocrisy of the then corrupt Zen establishment, and even had women as his students. I think he was one of the first Zen masters to have women as students; that was considered quite radical. It was in the brothels and geisha houses that he developed the Red Thread Zen, a notion he borrowed from the old Chinese master Kido and extended to deep and subtle levels of realisation. This very body is the lotus of the true law. This very body is the lotus of the true law, linking human beings to birth and death by the red thread of passion. This approach was closely related to Tantric Buddhism, that used sexual union as a religious ritual. Ikkyus Red Thread form of Zen practice was a radical approach, a non-dualistic interpretation of the sexual act, realising this very body is the Buddha-dharma. Ikkyu wrote a poem after his first realisation experience:

From the world of passions returning to the world of passions:  
There is a moments pause.  
If it rains, let it rain; if the wind blows, let it blow.

Ikkyus Red Thread Zen and wild, poetic, passionate nature was also tempered, though, by his extensive training in the Rinzai school, very intense training. Rinzai was a very strict master, and Ikkyu was very strict and demanding with his own students.

At the age of 77, Ikkyu had a passionate relationship with a mistress named Lady Shin. She was a blind singer and composer and a very skilled musician, and she was in her late thirties. He wrote lots of beautiful graphic poetry celebrating their love, and it was in Lady Shin that Ikkyu finally located his own missing female self. As Manfred Steger commented in his book Crazy Clouds, Ikkyu incorporated bold elements of the physical relationship into his teaching of Zen, playing on koans in an erotic context, and bound the manifest and essential worlds in a love-knot. His radical methods and practices honoured women and the red thread that binds even the most enlightened Zen masters to passion, birth, and death. Ikkyu celebrated the joy in human love, and within sexuality there lies a profound sacred practice, similar to Tantric Buddhism. He infused Zen for the first time with a feminine element that had long been missing. When Ikkyu was about 80 years old that he was asked to be the abbot of Daitokoji, which is one the great temples in Japan. At that time it was completely in ruin from a civil war, so it was an extraordinary thing to do at 80 years old, to rebuild Daitokoji: which he did. He had an

extraordinary enlightened mind.

Another great character and master is Chao-chou, and he has some comments about the passions. After master Chao-chou visited Mount Wu-tai, his teaching spread widely in north China. He was invited to stay at the Kuan Yin monastery in his own native town of Chao-chou. He came to the assembly and said, It is as if a transparent crystal were held in ones hand. When a foreigner approaches it, it mirrors him as such; when a native Chinese approaches it, it mirrors him as such. I take a stalk of grass and let it act as a golden-bodied one, sixteen feet high, and I take a golden-bodied one, sixteen feet high and let it act as a stalk of grass. Buddhahood is passion, and passion is Buddhahood.

During his sermon a monk asked him, In whom does Buddha cause passion? Chao-chou said, Buddha causes passion in all of us.

The monk asked, How do we get rid of it?

Chao-chou said, Why should we get rid of it?

Its not some great enlightenment verse, but it seems at least to point some of the way in our daily lives.

Another story that Aitken Roshi has told a number of times, a more classical story, also points at and disapproves of puritanical religious attitudes to sex. In ancient days an old woman made offering to a hermit over a period of twenty years, and one day she sent her sixteen-year-old niece to take food to the hermit, telling her to make advances to him and to see what he would do. So the girl lay her head on the hermits 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, and the old woman said, That vulgarian! How outrageous! To think that I have made offerings to him for twenty years!

So she drove the hermit away and burnt down his cottage. As Aitken Roshi said in his commentary on the third precept, of sexual misconduct, While we may question the use of the niece as bait to test the monks realisation, it is clear that the aunt fundamentally disapproves. The monk was not responding to the human being who lay down there on his lap. He was using her to express his own ascetic position. The fire is a dream symbol of sex: You dont belong here! Sex belongs here! or at least some acknowledgment of it. So: what would your response be?

I wish to emphasise that not cutting off the passions is not a suggestion to violate the third precept. It is not a matter of sexual misconduct. There is a translation of the third precept by Thich Naht Hanh which I think is particularly beautiful. Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, family, and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and long-term commitment. To preserve the

happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to protect couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

Not cutting off the passions, for me now, after having gone from one extreme to the other, is more like walking a fine line of integrity. When we deepen in our spiritual practice, our hearts become more and more open. We have such rich and deep connections with people, with one another, truly deep loving intimacy. So how to keep that door open, how to keep that heartfelt life there, but not be seduced by the power and attraction of that intimacy? Because it is in that deep intimacy, of course, that sexual attraction and energy can arise and emerge. So how to maintain an integrity in that intimacy, and be true to our feelings of love for one another, and not fall into that well of sexual misconduct? My own job as a therapist and teacher, of course, is to create deep connections of intimacy, and that does happen with many people, and it is certainly wonderful and rich. Wonderful connections with people are possible in that situation. But I have many boundaries and ethics that I apply in those situations, particularly through my psychotherapy training. There are very strict ethics around that relationship. You never engage in sexual relationships with any client; even six months after you terminate with a client, this is not OK. But while I can keep those strict boundaries and ethics there, when I am in those roles, outside of those roles it is more difficult for me. Then the heart is wide open; where then are the boundaries? I know my shadow is that I fall in love all the time, with lots of people.

Whatever emerges from our lives has its roots in Buddha-nature. So let us gassh and be grateful for our sexuality, the creative energies that it releases to our receptive heart and mind. We do not need to block our sexual energies, nor do we need to be a slave to them. Sexual energy in a loving committed relationship with its fusion of love, play, magic, ecstasy, is life celebrating life. This respectful communion of the sexual act may reveal the divine mystery rather than just simply be pleasurable, entertaining sensations. What makes the difference is our intentions, our love, our faith, and the attitudes that we bring to this experience. If we hold a reverence for life, an awareness of our interconnectedness and oneness, and we experience the other as none other than our very selves, the shared joy of lovemaking is a spiritual meeting of the flesh and spirit. The boundaries of a separate self can fall away and life is making love with life. The Buddha-tao is to be discovered in our daily lives, the sacred is to be found in the ordinary, and the ordinary in the sacred. Christopher Titmuss was great on one-liners, and he said, The bedroom becomes a temple of joy, and the sacred truth can be found equally between the bedsheets as in the holy books. (I told you he was from the Red Thread school.)

There is a koan that I would like to finish with by Rainer Maria Rilke, just a short line out of a long poem, quoted in the book called The Enlightened Heart:

Isnt the secret intent  
of this great Earth, when it forces lovers together,  
that inside their boundless emotion all things may shudder with joy?

May all beings venerate life as a state of deep spiritual intimacy.  
Here in the fields: just those young green fronds making their way out  
of the earth. This is so sensual and beautiful; this is the great  
sensual nature all around us. Please enjoy it!

(A Teisho given at the Spring Sesshin 1993, Gorricks Run Zendo)