



## The Third Grave Precept: *Not Misusing Sexuality*

### It is Like a Massive Fire

There's an advertisement in the sports section of the SF Chronicle that says: "Sex is Life." It depicts a blurred black and white photo of a large-breasted woman with big teeth, smiling. Presumably the ad is placed in the sports section to entice its largely male readership. I've always found it distasteful and even a bit offensive. Another air-brushed blond grinning up at me from the page. Sometimes I scribble a mustache or devil ears on the image and flip the page.

Exploring the precept of not misusing sexuality, I saw the ad differently. "Sex is life." Well that's true, isn't it? Sex is the source of life. Sex begets life. Sexual energy is life energy in a pure, raw form. Watch two teenagers tease each other, or the electricity flowing on a dance floor. You can't miss the palpable current of life issuing forth. It's alive and juicy.

That's the upside. The downside is that this raw, live energy can be the source of tremendous pain and suffering. Perhaps more than any other precept, exploring the territory of sex and sexuality reveals the capacity for great joy and delight as well as great misery and hurt. So we need to approach this energy with great care and attention.

In the poem, the "Song of the Precious Mirror Samadhi," there is a line that states: "*Turning away and touching are both wrong, for it is like a massive fire.*" "It" in this case is the dharma or truth, passed down from the ancient Buddhas. But this also seems like a vivid description of sexuality—a massive fire. If you get too close, you get burned. If you stray too far away, you freeze to death.

Like a great mass of fire, sexual energy is hot and dynamic and necessary. Each of us has this immense energy inside of us all the

time—whether we’re walking the dog, or making love, or taking out the trash. It’s up to each of us to find out how to handle it. How can we live with this fire at the center of our life without scorching ourselves or turning impenetrable and icy?

Buddhist history reveals a wide array of responses to sexuality—from total abstinence, celibacy, misogyny and a tone of hatred and disgust toward the body in the early Theravada teachings, to the widely celebrated “red thread of passion” in Japan, and the praise of sexual union as the highest manifestation of enlightenment in the Tantric teachings of Tibet. It’s all there, contingent on the culture and social norms rooted in the particular time and place. Like any teaching, Buddhism does not exist in a vacuum. It exists in the lives of the people who practice it. And those lives are, by definition, culturally bound.

So how do we assess what it means to “misuse” sexuality? How do we find a middle path between gross excess and sterile, punitive repression? Each of us must do this ourselves. And, each of us must do it in relationship—with another. It’s up to us to bring this teaching alive in our life, in our body and in our most intimate interactions with others.

### The Life of the Buddha

The life of the Buddha displays the full spectrum of sexuality, played out from one extreme to the other. Before leaving his father’s palace to seek his awakening, the young Prince Shakyamuni was, by all accounts, quite a playboy. Part of his father’s plan to prevent him from renouncing the world to become a sage was to pamper his son, virtually non-stop, with all the pleasures of fleshy delight. In addition to his wife, the prince was entertained day and night by a harem of jeweled, perfumed women, catering to his every sensual need—by some accounts, a 24-hour erotic feast.

One story describes the prince awakening in the middle of the night to find himself surrounded by half-clothed women, asleep after a long evening of sexual play. As he looks out at the room, he is distressed to see the less than seductive poses these once beautifully adorned women now hold. They are splayed across the floor, with

their make up and hair a mess, their clothing stained with food and wine, snoring and drooling and looking altogether unattractive. After being wined, dined and seduced, Siddhartha discovers first-hand the temporality and impermanence of worldly delight.

The king's grand plan backfires. Having received every possible earthly pleasure, Prince Siddhartha leaves the palace to become an ascetic, taking on the most extreme physical measures—inflicting physical pain through deprivation, in order to literally torture his body into subservience. During this ascetic period, they say he ate only a single sesame seed and day, and grew so thin his backbone was visible through the sagging skin of his belly.

At the edge of starvation, Siddhartha realizes that harming the body is not the path to awakening and accepts a bowl of milk pudding from a lovely maiden. This way, the ex-prince and not-yet Buddha finds a middle path between hedonism and asceticism, engaging his body as the vehicle to accomplish what he set out to accomplish: waking up to the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering and the end of suffering.

### The Order of Celibates

The early Buddhist sangha was called the “Order of Celibates,” and it was open to men only. Imagine: the Buddha plus a troop of young, celibate men largely in their teens, 20s, and 30s, just at the peak of their sexual prime. Yikes. In other traditions, men wait until they are older to begin their spiritual journey in earnest—after they have married, raised a family, and so on. But the Buddha drew many young men (to the dismay of their parents) and required that they renounce their sexuality.

It's no wonder all of the first precepts recorded in the early Vinaya were about sex. The initial precepts include admonitions for the monks that forbid sex with women, sex with men, sex with animals, sex with corpses, sex with fruit...Remembering that each precept arose in response to specific situations, we begin to get a picture of what life may have been like!

Even with a teacher as amazing as the Buddha, there were still problems. Sex was and is a big deal, raising lots of difficulties and questions. The Buddha's responses to these problems were fierce and

uncompromising. He is said to have admonished one of his celibate monks, who had a relapse and had intercourse with his ex-wife, saying: “It is better to place your penis in the mouth of a poisonous cobra or in a bed of hot coals than in the vagina of a woman.”

This valence—towards celibacy, asceticism and misogyny continues in Theravadin Buddhism today. Although there is now an order of nuns, all Theravadin monks and nuns are celibate. Within this context, the precept of not misusing sexuality means: do not engage in sex or sexual energy. Here, this great life energy, or massive fire, is preserved and redirected toward awakening.

### Zen and Tibetan Views

In Zen and Tibetan practice we find a very different perspective. Given the cultural and historical contexts, we still see quite a bit of misogyny and bias against women. But the overarching attitude toward sex changes.

In one Zen tale, an old woman who has sponsored a monk—giving him a hut to practice in and feeding him for 20 years—tests his practice by sending a beautiful young woman to caress him. He responds by stating, “An old tree grows on a cold rock in winter, nowhere is there any warmth.” When the young woman reports back, his cold reply doesn’t earn him any praise. Instead, the old woman takes this as a sign that his awakening is dry and incomplete. He doesn’t need to engage in passion but he should at least show some com-*passion*, she declares. And then she marches off and burns down his hut!

Another Zen koan describes the necessity of working out “the red thread of passion that cannot be severed,” demonstrating the central importance of sex and sexuality. Taking this instruction to heart, many famous Zen masters, such as Ryokan and Ikkyu, write prankish poetry about their vibrant sex lives, recounting the benefits of passion in an awakened life. In one poem, Ikkyu declares, “In my underwear, there is a whole universe.” For these great teachers, sexuality was not repressed or denied, it was entered into with playfulness and delight.

I am not a student of Tibetan Tantra, so I cannot speak to that practice from personal experience. However, my understanding is that Tantra specifically uses the power of sexual energy to assist and support awakening. Tantra is set in a the context of non-harming and the pure intention to awaken. Appreciated as both powerful and potentially dangerous (easily misunderstood or abused), Tantric teachings are not readily available or accessible—as perhaps it should be.

Still, it is clear that in almost complete contrast to the Buddha’s words, “It would be better to place your penis in the mouth of a poisonous snake...”, Tantra portrays the vagina as the very doorway to enlightenment. In fact, certain Vajrayana texts open with the line, “When the Buddha was resting in the vagina of his consort...” Needless to say, this is quite a different approach!

So what are we to make of all this? Given the wide range of interpretations, what does it mean “not to misuse sexuality?” What does it mean to avoid the extremes of excess and repression?

We can begin with the root admonition: *do no harm*. Certainly there is much harm is done around sex and sexuality. For most of us this is not an area of pure delight. Many of us can remember instances of great suffering in sexual relationship.

Sexuality is particularly tricky since, for the most part, it happens in relationship. Even if we are clear about what is too much or too little, or juuust right for us, in order to avoid doing harm, we still need to work it out with the other person or persons. Each of us is different. We have different preferences—gender preferences and pleasure preferences and timing preferences and so on. We can’t assume that what is “right” for us will be right for another. In fact, we can assume that won’t be the case. The variety of sexual expression is vast. The point is not to judge and condemn. Rather, the point is to find out what’s true for you and to express that in a way that honors the fire inside without harming anyone else.

### The Three Levels

If we look at the three levels of working with the precepts, we discover an array of approaches to not misusing sexuality. The first

level says: no sex. For monks and nuns this means celibacy. For lay men and women, it basically means no adultery.

At the second level—the level of compassionate questioning—we enter into the heart of the dilemma. Sex is life. Sexuality is a central part of the life-dance played out in relationship. We don't want to squash it. We don't want it to squash us. Sexuality is a powerful energy we each need to learn how to meet and join. Remembering that sex and sexuality are connected to love and passion and compassion, we find our way. There are no simple or prescriptive answers for what this means or how it should look.

Years ago, I was in conversation with Brother David Stendhl Rast, a Christian monk, who described his reason for becoming celibate. "I realized that if I was going to take seriously the admonition, 'to love everyone equally,'" he said, "that meant I'd either need to be completely promiscuous, or celibate. It seemed simpler to be celibate." Brother David's explanation is a beautiful, life-affirming description of celibacy. Rather than being about denial or repression, it's full of passion and care and love for people.

If we don't choose to be celibate, we can use two principles to address "appropriate sexuality. The first is to keep the overarching theme of *do no harm* in mind. The second is to keep checking this precept against the others. There's a good chance that there's "misuse" going on if our relationship to sex or our sexual relations include killing, stealing, lying or intoxicating. If you reflect on your own experience, you may discover that painful incidents in your sexual history include one or more of these. Very often sex is misused as a result of taking what isn't given or dishonesty or drugs and drinking.

Keeping these principles in mind—not harming, and honoring relationship, and checking this precept against the others—can help us discern what is appropriate. Remember, the word "appropriate" is a translation of three Chinese characters: meet each and teach. So discovering an appropriate relationship and expression to sexuality is less about setting out rules and more about staying awake. That's the way we can meet each feeling, situation and person with skill and kindness.

The third level of working with this precept points to how the world of sexuality looks through the eyes of the Buddha. In a word, this is intimacy. The definition of intimacy is, “to bring forth what is innermost.” Intimacy has a quality of vulnerability in it. It’s the tender side of exposing the great mass of fire inside—like turning ourselves inside out, revealing the entirety of our humanness.

Intimacy is also an alternate translation for the Chinese character for enlightenment. Intimacy means no separation. It’s what is left when we see through the sticky, often opaque shell of the self.

Intimacy is what we really want. It’s direct contact with our experience. All the other things we seek, crave, grasp and get addicted to are pale substitutions for this sublime quality of contact—with ourselves, with others and with all of life. Sexuality or “intimate” relationships are a doorway—a way into the wonder and mystery of our true connection and non-separation.