Chapter 1

THE HERMENEUTICS OF DESIRE

By whatever thing the world is bound, by that the bond is unfastened.

(Heruka-tantra)

One who, possessing desire, represes desire, is living a lie.

(Cāṇḍamāhāravaṇa-tantra)

AFTER SIX YEARS of asceticism, Śākyamuni realized the ultimate truth under the bodhi tree and became the Buddha, the Awakened. What is this truth according to the first Buddhist orthodoxy (for as we will see, there have been several)? Is it expressed in the form of a tetralemma known as the "four noble truths": suffering, the cause of suffering, the possibility of ending suffering, and the method of achieving that end. The first two rubrics describe the world of saṃsāra, the cycle of transmigration through birth-and-death. The driving force of this cycle is desire. Actually, desire is itself produced by ignorance, which makes one believe in the existence of an enduring self where the sage sees only fleeting states of consciousness. The third rubric deals with nirvāṇa, the ultimate quiescence and extinction of all defilements or passions; the fourth describes the path to nirvāṇa—the so-called eightfold path.

Some of these ideas were common in the Indian culture of the time. They were not radically new to Śākyamuni himself. Despite the attempts of his own father, King Śuddhodana, to shield him from the harsh realities of the outside world, Śākyamuni had encountered these realities—in the form of a sick man, an old man, a corpse and an ascetic—during four excursions outside the palace.

It is another event that led him to leave the palace, however. One night, he awoke and looked at the women of his harem, asleep around him in unflattering postures—frozen in a corpulent slumber. Sleep had stripped them of their charms, and revealed their ugliness. This scene revealed to Śākyamuni the vanity of his hedonistic life. He thus came to understand that everything, including pleasure, is ephemeral and painful in the end, and that suffering takes root in desire and the illusion of a self. More precisely, he came to understand the nature of sexual desire, which ties humans to their earthly body, to the cycle of rebirths, and incites
them in a long line of ancestors and descendants. This first insight, which led Sākyamuni to abandon his wife and his newborn son, would eventually mature into full awakening under the bodhi tree. By renouncing the world, Sākyamuni "left the family." The expression "leaving the family" soon came to designate monastic ordination, and this is why, in Theravāda, the postulant ritually reenacts the founder's "flight from the palace." By an ironic turn of events, this ordination, in East Asian Buddhism, came to be seen as an adoption into another (spiritual) family, an affiliation to the "lineage of the Buddha": Chinese and Japanese monks bear the patronym Shi (Sāky). More generally, Buddhist monks and nuns are called "children of the Buddha."

Whereas Sākyamuni left his wife Yasodhara and the other women of his gynaecium without regrets, such renunciation was not always as easy for his disciples, as shown by the case of his half-brother Nanda. After entering the Buddhist order at the request of the Buddha, on the day he was to get married, Nanda was unable to forget his love, the beautiful Sundari. To help him take his mind off her, the Buddha showed him successively the most extreme ugliness—a dead and disfigured ape-monkey—and of beauty—the celestial nymphs in Trāyastrīma Heaven. Nanda came thus to realize that, from an aesthetic standpoint, the distance between the nymphs and Sundari was greater than that between Sundari and the monkey. The stratagem turned out, however, to be a double-edged sword, as Nanda now became infatuated with the nymphs. Therefore, the Buddha permitted him one of them as a wife if he would only persevere in his practice. Fortunately, the mockery from his co-disciples brought Nanda to his senses (or rather, away from them, back to reason), and thereafter he devoted himself to the practice of meditation. The story affirms that he was eventually able to realize the vanity of all desires and the emptiness of beauty. He consequently united the Buddha from his promise and renounced the nymph he had so coveted.1

Protean Desire

Sākyamuni succeeded in cutting off desire, yet his disciples were not always as successful. In the later Buddhist tradition, desire was usually displaced, intensified, modified in manifold ways. Even when repressed in its sexual form, desire was often merely displaced to thirst for power. Political ambition, in turn, seems to have legitimated sex. Political success multiplies temptations and opportunities and, as we all know, "opportunities make the thief." A truly vicious circle.

1 The story was well known in Japan. See, for instance, the Konpaku monogatari shi, "How the Buddha Converted Nanda and Caused him to Abandon Secular Life," in Uy 1979, 35–37.

Sexual desire belongs to the realm of the senses, and these senses are deluding us. We might recall Laozi's saying that the five senses make a person blind and deft. Only the mind, a sixth sense according to Buddhists, can reveal things as they really are—provided that it can detach itself from sense perceptions. Buddhist soteriology teaches that there are three obstacles to deliverance: passions, acts, and their retribution. According to the Dāhādālāwya, a commentary on the Pratīkāpāramitā-sūtra (Great Perfection of Wisdom) attributed to Nāgārjuna: "Among these three obstacles, the act is the greatest." Indeed, it is the act that brings retribution, but only because it is itself caused by passion. The Dāhādālāwya insists on the inescapable nature of karmic retribution:

The wheel of transmigration pulls man
With his passions and hindrances.
It is very strong and revolves freely.
No one can stop it . . .
The waters of the ocean may dry up,
The earth of Mount Sumeru may become exhausted,
But the acts of former existences
Will never be consummated or exhausted.2

Desire is almost as defiling as the act itself, however: "He who enjoys looking at women, even in painting, is not detached from the act."3 In the traditional Buddhist classification, there are three passions: hatred, love, and ignorance. Desire, in the form of love (īdāa, a word meaning color, but also lowness, concupiscience, lust, attraction), is therefore one of the "three poisons" that pollute and maintain human existence. According to this conception, all existence (human or nonhuman, because this is true even for the gods) is fundamentally defiled. The Buddhist notion of desire is not limited to sexual desire; it encompasses all sensual desires. Desire is usually described with ten similes: it is said to be like a dry meat bone, a piece of meat for which many birds are fighting, a torch made of straw carried against the wind, a pit full of burning coal, a dream of a beautiful landscape, borrowed things, a tree laden with fruit on which it is dangerous to climb, a slaughterhouse, the point of a sword, a snake's head. Carnal desires are commonly associated with hunger and thirst, more precisely eating meat and drinking alcohol, and therefore nondesire implies not only chastity but vegetarianism and sobriety as well. Buddhist desire—this "creepers of existence"—

3 La Vallee-Poussin 1927: 79.
realms, desire is still needed to put an end to desire. Thus, in Tantrism, desire, once refined, may serve as fuel to awakening. In his study on rationality (and the subversion thereof), Jon Elster points to the paradox of states that are “by-products” and cannot be the direct effect of a cause. Likewise, desire cannot lead directly to awakening, yet the latter derives from it—but it is only a paradoxical by-product, not a direct effect. The Chan master Shenhui, for instance, distinguished two kinds of illusion, the gross and the subtle. Gross delusion is to be attached to passions, subtle delusion is to attempt to get rid of passions in order to reach awakening.

Desire for beauty belongs to the second category of delusion. Infatuation with beauty can remain long after physical craving has disappeared. We recall the story of Nanda, who was infatuated with the beauty first of a mortal woman and later of a celestial nymph, but who was eventually able to overcome fire with fire. Alienation not only in someone else’s beauty but also in one’s own beauty may become a stumbling block, as Narcissus learned at his own expense (or experience). Likewise, the handsome Ánanda confronts dangers and difficulties unknown to the aesthetically looking Mahákāyapa. Women fall in love with him, and he is lured into temptation by them. Sometimes, this love at first sight has disastrous consequences. The Jūrin shiō, for instance, explain that monks no longer have their shoulder bare because a woman who was drawing water was troubled by the sight of Ánanda and his skin “white as snow,” and as a result let the child she carried fall into the well. Sometimes, however, Ánanda is able to use his beauty as an instrument of conversion. In the Ikidōn shiō, the well-known episode of the seduction of Ánanda by the courteous Mātāiga becomes a moral victory for Ánanda, who declares: “If you want to become my wife, become a nun.” In the Sado-e koizōha, we find that Ánanda was, toward the end of the Heian period, the object (bonzon) of a penance ritual for women.

The “historical” Buddha himself is said to have been very handsome and he became at times the object of sublimated desire, in spite of the hagiographical or iconographical tops of the thirty-two corporeal marks that depicts him with hands reaching his knees, webbed fingers, and many other features that hardly meet our classical canon of beauty. Nevertheless, transfigured by spirituality, his beauty can be beneficial, making him an object of devotion, an instrument of conversion. Even after his death, the fragmented body of the Buddha in the form of
Desire and Rebirth

What makes desire so nefarious according to Buddhism? It is the force that gets us bogged down in being, making us fall into what Augustine called the “slide of temporality” (in lubrico temporali). According to the idealist version of Buddhist thought, desire produces the act; the craving thought produces the three worlds. Every person is thus the product of his or her own karma, and this karma manifests itself both subjectively and objectively, as the individual consciousness and its environment, the world in which the individual is immersed at birth. Therefore, desire plays a properly ontological, or even ontogenic, role: it is what drives beings, after death to be reincarnated in a certain maternal womb. According to the scholastic conceptions of the Abhidharmakosa-sastra, a kind of Buddhist Summa Theologia, after death, the human being exists in the form of an “intermediary being” (Skt. antarabhava) until the time when, seeing a man and a woman making love, he or she feels, due to his

or her karma, irresistibly attracted toward one of the partners and repel- led by the other. According to this Buddhist version of the Oedipus complex, he or she will be reincarnated as a child of this couple—as a girl (if the attraction comes from the male partner) or as a boy (if it comes from the woman).

Rebirth is by no means always human, however, and the intermediary being, depending on past deeds, may well be reborn in one of the five other destinies (gati)—among heavenly beings (devas), hungry ghosts (pretas), titans (asuras), animals, or the damned in hell. All these destinies belong to the world of desire: even the devas, who live in constant bliss, are motivated by desire. According to Dirgha-gama, in the Trisaya-trisastra Heaven male and female gods are able to achieve orgasm simply by thinking about each other. The Dzogchelung also says: “Heavenly women (aparanta) have no eunuch to keep them, / They are free from the troubles of pregnancy. / [With them] pleasure and debauchery [have only joys]. / After a meal, no need to go to pass a motion.” Sensual pleasure is in this case admitted because it does not create new acts, since it is much more subtle than that of humans. However, these celestial beings are themselves still chained to the wheel of saṃsāra, condemned to fall back into a lower rebirth sooner or later, when their good karma is ex-hausted. This realm of desire is the lowest of the three worlds that constitute the Buddhist universe. The two others are the world of subtle matter and the immaterial world, which can be reached only by those who, having “entered the stream” of the Buddhist Path, are on their way to becoming arhats.

Māra

In Buddhist mythology, one particular figure incarnates the vital—yet deadly—drive that animates and binds all beings. This mythical figure is Māra, the Evil One, also conceived of as Kama, Desire. We are told that when Śākyamuni was about to reach Awakening, Māra, afraid of losing dominion over the human world, sent his daughters to seduce him. This is one of the “three attempts” made in vain by Māra to weaken Śākyamuni’s resolve and prevent him from becoming a Buddha. Georges Dumézil has argued that the episode should be read in the context of the Indo-European ideology of the three functions (justice/sovereignty, war, and sensuality/tamidity). In this schema, desire belongs essentially to the third function. Māra’s goal was to make Śākyamuni fall “in the trap of one of the highest values admitted in pre-Buddhist societies: the riposte to
aggression, spiritual perfection, and the procreation of heirs.” One could argue that Sakyamuni had almost fallen into Mara’s trap by marrying the beautiful Yasodhara and begetting a son. However, it is nowhere implied that Mara used Yasodhara to lure the Buddha, although she is presented in an ambivalent light as both chaste and seductive, forlorn and dangerous. In the Buddhacarita, a life of the Buddha compiled by Asvaghosa, Mara, after his three vain attempts, realizes that he has lost control over Sakyamuni. He tries, however, to limit the damage by painting the perspective of a spiritual lineage in glowing colors: “Let the Perfect One return home and procreate with his legitimate wife many sons, who will in turn become Perfect Ones.” According to the most widespread version, Mara subsequently makes one last attempt to convince the Buddha to enter into nirvana without further delay, so that he would not share with men his realization of the Dharma. Although he ultimately fails, the Buddhist tradition has been at times troubled by the apparent hesitaton of the Buddha.

Desire is therefore the “law of the genre” in the French sense (of gender, but also of genus—human and nonhuman). Sexuality is dangerous, above all because it binds men, as if with a “red thread,” to human existence and to lineage: A Greek euphemism for penis is “necessity.” In Japanese, too, the popular etymology connected maza (penis) with the homonymous Sanskrit term māra (obstacle, killing) and Mara (the lord of obstacles or of Death). Sakyamuni’s son was also called Rāhula, another word meaning “obstacle.” According to some brahmanical texts, another son’s performance of appropriate rituals assures his father of one kind of immortality (“below the navel”), physical immortality. However, a higher kind of immortality (“above the navel,” that is, spiritual immortality), advocated in the Upāsikā, is lost through the birth of a son and the resultant ties to samsara. The Buddhist notion of continence ran against Indian and Chinese notions of lineage. It was ironically turned against the Buddhists themselves in the Huadh jing (Scripture on the Conversion of the Barbarians), a Daoist polemical tract. In this work, Laozi plays the part of the Buddha. In one variant, he even enters the womb of Queen Maya. However, the main episode is that in which a barbarian king who has refused allegiance to him is subdued by his divine power. Although the king repents, Laozi/Buddha punishes him and his subjects by ordering them to practise asceticism—that is, to wear red.

18 Ibid., 42.
19 Brown 1988: 64.

The Buddhist Economy of Desire

The desire to exist, analyzed in Indian Buddhism as one of the twelve nidānas (causes of existence), tended to merge in Chinese Buddhism with the popular Chinese conception of a “fundamental destiny” (bèi mìng). According to this conception, every person receives at birth a certain destiny, and if he/she dies fulfilling this destiny, he/she wanders about, like a lost soul, unable to renounce his/her memory and to fuse into the great cosmic word of the Dao, or into the social word of lineage. Victims of violent death, who still have a portion of life remaining, cannot be inscribed into familial memory; they are out of place, outlawed, out of the “economy” (sīkōu nǐmō, the “law of the house”). To prevent them from harming the living, an attempt is made to reintegrate them into that socio-cosmic economy: they are turned into gods or ancestors through elaborate rituals. By taking charge of the cult of the dead, Buddhism was able to take root in China.

We recall that Mara’s last attempt to divert the Buddha from preaching the Law was an argument for the continuation of Sakyamuni’s physical (and spiritual) lineage: “Beget many sons who will reach awakening.” Sakyamuni rejected this temptation, thereby forsaking his duties (and his name) as an heir and leader of the Śākya clan. The rise of the Buddhist saṅgha coincides with the destruction (for karmic reasons, we are told) of this lineage and of his father’s kingdom.

Like the Christian message according to Peter Brown, the early Buddhist message was unfamiliar in both senses of the word: “It was a message of which those caught in the narrow confines of the family could have no inkling.” The Buddha himself had apparently cut off what Paul Eluard called “the dreadful snake coils of the blood ties.” This anti-familial and antisocial aspect of early Buddhism drew sharp criticisms for the new doctrine: “At that time, sons of well-known and distinguished families from the country of Magadha were practicing the reli-

brown garments like criminals, mutilate their bodies, and abstain from sexual intercourse in order to put an end to their rebellious seed. If, the authors of the tract argue, Laozi taught the barbarians in order not to save them but to humiliate and weaken them, and eventually to destroy them, would it not be insane to introduce this teaching to China?
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gious life under the guidance of the Blessed One. This upset and angered people: ‘He is on a path which takes away [people’s] children, the monk Gotama. He is on a path which makes w.ows, the monk Gotama. He is on a path which destroys families, the monk Gotama.”22

From a Chinese perspective in particular, the apparent lack of filial piety of the Buddha raised serious issues. In response to this criticism, Chinese Buddhists worked hard to assert a typically Buddhist form of filial piety: the Buddha even went to heaven, we are told, to preach the Dharma to his mother. He also took good care of his father: tradition has it that when King Siddhadana died, the Buddha and his half-brother Nanda were at his pillow, and Ānanda and Rāhula at his feet. At the time of the funeral, the Buddha is said to have shouldered his father’s coffin, “in order to admonish sentient beings in our latter age against ingratitude for our fathers’ and mothers’ loving care.”23 According to the apocryphal Fawuaw jing: “When Sākyamuni Buddha sat under the bodhi tree and attained supreme awakening, that was when he first enjoined the bodhisattva precepts and filial submission toward parents, teachers, clergy, and the Three Jewels. Filial submission is the Dharma of the ultimate path. Filial piety is called śila, it is also called restraint.”24

The fact remains that the Sākyas’ seed became extinct with the Bud-

23 Tominga 1990: 40.
24 Fawuaw jing, 1004a. The 15th light precept of the Fawuaw jing also begins with a vow of filial obedience (ibid., 1007b). However, the 40th precept says that monks should not pay obeisance to rulers or parents, nor honor kin and spirits (ibid., 1006a).
26 For instance, Yoshitome, trying to seduce a young woman, cynically reasons to this argument. In a parodic text of the Edo period criticizing Confucian and Buddhist sexual morality, the Onna tawara bosatsu, we find a list of similar arguments. See Minamoto 1995: 105-6.
27 According to the Vinaya of the Mālāpasamādīvaddhā, for instance, the Buddha had three wives, named Yasodhara, Gopā, and Mañjū—no to mention the sixty-thousand women of his genealogy. See T245, 1450: 111-12.
man" Pang. In his case, we do hear about his family—a strangely nuclear family in Tang times, consisting of his wife and daughter. They all live like pure Chan adepts, and their lineage comes to an end with them, since there is no male heir. To make matters worse (from a Chinese viewpoint), Pang destroys his family's wealth by throwing it in the river. Furthermore, his daughter, who apparently never considers marriage as an option, turns out to be quite unfaithful (at least by Confucian standards) by choosing to die before her parents.

The Buddhist ascetic, in a sense, wanted to be irresponsible. Responsibility means to respond to the call of the other, to trade solitude for solidarity, the silence of nature for the bustle of society; it is to reintegrate the economy. Yet Buddhism was eventually reintegrated into the "economic circle" and diverted from its early ideal of renunciation in the name of the collective. An example of such relapse is found in the following tale, which shows how an eminent monk could fall into the trap of lineage. Shi Hao, the prime minister of the Song Emperor Xiaozong, despaired of having a male heir. Having heard that one way to get one was to lure an old hermit and hope for his death, so that the latter would be reborn as a male child in one's lineage, Shi Hao invited an eminent priest named Jae. Despite his many years of ascetic, Jae was dazzled by the wealth of his host, and the thoughts of envy that arose at the moment of his death caused him to be reborn in the house of the minister. Later, he became a cruel and corrupt statesman. Beyond the karmic morality of this tale, which shows us the fall of an insufficiently virtuous monk in the whirlpools of evil, its interest is to illustrate the belief in the possibility of the transformation of spiritual power into vital power, of divesting moral virtue to the profit of procreative virtus.

A similar motif is found in the biography of Kumarakariva. The Indian translator was the son of a monk who had been forced to marry a Kuchean princess against his will. After the boy had come of age, another Kuchean king attempted to force the young Kumarakariva to marry yet another princess; a proposition the young monk steadfastly refused. Undaunted, the king then forced Kumarakariva to become drunk one night and locked him in a "secret chamber" with the girl, after which time, we are told, Kumarakariva "surrendered his integrity." After Kumarakariva ar-
bodhisattva, a last rebirth whose function is to exhaust some karmic residue. The story is ambivalent, however, because of the widespread belief that children who died before their third year were actually demons, incarnated in a human family to expunge some karmic debt. The Nikōyōki mentions another case, that of a famous hermit known as Bodhisattva Jakuuen. When he was about to die, Jakuuen told his disciples that he would be reborn twenty years later as a prince named Kanino. He is, says Kyōkai, the present emperor, a truly a sage ruler, although some have unduly criticized him due to the occurrence of droughts and plagues under his reign. The point of this story for us is that the rebirth of the priest is clearly seen as the reincarnation of a bodhisattva’s expiatory manifestation by compassion to help people.

More often, it is attachment to life (or to a living being) that causes the desire to be reborn in this world, despite all its suffering. In the worst case, such desire can create ghosts with “unfinished business,” unable to move on along the path, trapped forever in a liminal realm. In Japanese literature, for instance, we have several instances of a monk’s rebirth as a “malevolent spirit” (oryō) because of a burning love. Thus, when Lady Nijō tells Emperor Go-Fukakusa that she has had an affair with the Ninna-ji priest Ariake, he says, “None of this bodes well for the future, for events from the past teach us that passion respects neither rank nor station. For example, the spirit of the high priest Kakinnomoto pursued Empress Somesotono relentlessly, and it was beyond the power of the buddhas and bodhisattvas to prevent her from yielding to his malevolent spirit. The holy man of the Shiga Temple was also smitten by passion, but he was lucky to return to the true way by the sympathy and skill of the lady he loved.”

When Ariake comes to take leave of Nijō, after she has given birth to a child who is taken from her, and he has contracted a fatal disease, he tells her:

Sometimes after our sorrowful parting on that far-away day I learned that you had gone into hiding, and having no one else to turn to, I began copying out five of the Mahāyāna sūtras. In each chapter I inserted a phrase from one of your letters with the plea that we might be reunited in this world, so deep are my feelings. The sūtras are copied now but not dedicated. I shall dedicate them after we have been reborn together. If I store the more than two hundred chapters in the treasure hall of the dragon king, I will certainly be reborn to this life, and then I shall dedicate them to Buddha. To accomplish this I plan to take the sūtras with me after death by having them added to the fuel of my funeral pyre.

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29. According to one version of the legend, the lady in question was Empress Kyōgō, consort of Emperor Uda (r. 887-897). See Brazell 1973: 125. On Empress Somesotono and the Shiga priest, see below, chapter 3.

ASCETIC LUST

For early Buddhists, continence was imperative in order to break the vicious circle of human existence. Buddhism was also influenced in this respect by Hindu conceptions. In Hinduism, desire was also seen as perturbing the self-control of the ascetic. In yoga, for instance, chastity...
was essentially a way to accumulate spiritual energy. The consummation of the sexual act is usually perceived by the male as a vital deprecation: the loss of semen—the vital essence par excellence—entails a loss of energy. Similar conceptions were also formulated in Daoism, and they may have reinforced the ascetic and monogynistic tendencies in Chinese Buddhism. From this viewpoint, sex is not only a hindrance but it can also make one lose the benefits of a long ascetic practice. This is what happens to many ascetics who lose all their powers at the mere sight of feminine beauty.

The paradigmatic example is that of the hermit Unicorn, an ascetic so powerful that, in a moment of anger, he imprisoned the dragon kings, desires of Ṛṣṇ, and provoked a terrible drought. To bring the rain back, the king sent five hundred beautiful maidens into the mountain where the hermit dwelt. One of them seduced him, and the dragons were able to escape, bringing on a sudden deluge. The courtesan took refuge in a cave with the hermit, who fell in love with her. After a few days, when the rain stopped, she decided to return to the city, and the hermit showed her the way. At one point, he offered to carry her on his back to cross a stream. When they entered the city, he was still carrying her on his back, and thus became an object of ridicule. When he attempted to fly off back to his mountain, he realized to his great dismay that he had lost all his powers. In one Japanese variant, the hermit, under the name Kume Sennin, returns for good to the profane world: “One day, whilst he was flying over a river, his eye was so violently caught by the unusual whiteness of the legs of a young, lovely washerwoman that instantly he lost all his miraculous gift, and fell down before her quite topsy-turvy. Subsequently, he married her, but persisted in adding the title ‘Ex-Saint’ to his sign-manual.”

The Demonization of Desire

Desire seems to stem from inside oneself, yet most desires are external to the self and come from the outside world. In spite of the dogma of no-
self, Buddhist ascetics, like Indian yogis and Greek Stoics, seem to have conceived the self as a citadel besieged by the external world. Their renunciation to the world was above all an attempt to regain self-possession, and it therefore implies a rejection of desire. Because of its association with desire, the world was perceived as evil, and vice-versa. In order to eradicate desire, extirpate its root, they also had to negate the phenomenal world. Such a conception, resonating with that the Gnostics, seems far from the Middle Way between asceticism and hedonism advocated by the Buddha. Once the world is perceived as impure, salvation lies at the end of a long and painful process of purification. By the same token, sexuality, until then merely a technical obstacle, a potential stumbling block for ascetics, is now identified with defilement, and is loaded with moral affect. In other words, it becomes a form of vice. Buddhist deprecatory depictions of the body, a fortiori the female body, aim at provoking a holy horror of sensual desire.46

Although sexual desire may not be the more fundamental form of desire, sex is usually the essential object of continence. Because they meet the vital needs of the individual, other forms of avidity (hunger and thirst) may be controlled, but they cannot be entirely suppressed. They reach their limits more easily, however whereas sexual desire, based in great part on imagination, can lead an individual to his or her doom.

The goal of desire, fulfillment, or pleasure, is itself ontologically deficient. The emptiness of pleasure is a leitmotif of the Daśabhidumā:

He who enjoys pleasures is never satisfied;
He who is deprived of them suffers greatly;
When he does not possess them, he longs to possess them;
When he possesses them, he is tormented.

The joys of pleasure are rare;
The grief and pain that it exudes are plenty.
Because of it, men lose their life,
Like moths dashing into a lamp.48

The fire of desire is often described in similar terms in later Buddhist literature. In the Chinoske, for instance, it is said that the body devoured by love is like a moth being drawn to the flame of a lamp.49 We also find in the Daśabhidumā the story of a fisherman who burns to death in the flames of his own passion when unable to sleep with a beautiful princess.50

Buddhist continence, like its Christian counterpart, has been the object of various judgments.51 It is traditionally exalted as an effort toward a state of perfection in which the individual develops all his or her potentialities, reaching a plenteous incomparably superior to the illusory pleasures of the senses. Some modern commentators, on the contrary, think that it reflects a fear of sexuality, and more generally an anxiety toward life, a withdrawal into oneself through fear of losing one’s physical and above all spiritual energy. The loss of energy caused by the sexual act—the so-called “small death”—was obviously a major concern for ascetic Vāsūs.52 For the ordinary monk, however, the karmic consequences of desire seem to have been more important. The sexual act is the karmic act par excellence, because it inserts the person into two different processes, individual retribution and collective perpetuation of the lineage. Desire creates “impregnations” of consciousness, germs that sooner or later will develop, bringing about the constitution of new physical and mental series geared toward perpetuating or reproducing a false sense of self. It also contributes to the perpetuation of the human species, and more specifically, of the clan or lineage. The “red thread” that runs through the lives of individuals and connects them to the collective is also that of the blood in their veins. To consummate the conjugal act amounts to sacrificing the autonomous self on the domestic altar.53 However, if reproduction is essential for the survival of the species as well as that of the individual in his descendants, it also anticipates, or even precipitates, the individual’s death. To this fatal sequence, the ascetic opposes a blunt refusal. When the warrior Kūrenōs longs for his wife, a holy man tells him:

The heretic demon king in the sixth heaven [Māra], who rules as he pleases over all six heavens in the world of desire, resents the efforts of that world’s inhabitants to escape the cycle of life and death, and thus he hinders them by

46 According to the Śākyavī doctrine, desire is produced at the stage following the union of purusa (mind) and prakṛti (matter). Nonexistence is therefore is itself insufficient for emancipation; it must be accompanied by correct knowledge. There must be a direct (non-rational) knowledge of purusa.

47 These descriptions remind us of the words of Odilon of Cluny: “This feminine grace is only... blood, humors, gall. Consider what is hidden in the sounds, in the throat, in the belly, everywhere filthy. And we, who are so foolish to touch with our fingers vomit or dung, how can we desire to clasp in our arms the bag of excrement itself?”


50 See Daśabhidumā, 166.

51 On Christian views regarding continence, see Brown 1988.

52 This interpretation is found among various Western commentators on Buddhism, such as the anthropologist Melford Spears, who interviews Burmese monks. Georges Bataille wonders if it is not precisely fear that provides a basis for the sexual sphere and its attraction. See Bataille 1957.

53 In this sense, Rattī is right to argue that the sexual act in some ways resembles a sacrifice. See ibid., 200.
assuming the guise of a wife or a husband. The Buddhists of the Three Worlds, who regard all mankind as their children, and who seek to lead us to the Pure Land from which there is no return, have issued strict injunctions against loving the wives and children who have claimed us to the wheel of transmigration from remote antiquity to the present.

The individual karmic perspective seems at first glance to contradict the perspective of the lineage, but in practice their effects reinforce each other: to reach awakening, one must not only "leave the family," putting an end to the lineage from which one stemmed (we know that it is precisely on this point that Chinese Buddhists were criticized by Confucianists), but in Buddhist orthodoxy one must also "leave the cosmos"—a structure created and maintained by one's deluded consciousness. According to the Yogācāra teaching, from which an important part of Mahāyāna Buddhism derives, the three worlds—of desire, form, and formlessness—are indeed nothing but the product of our mind, they are conditioned by our thought. In order to transcend them, therefore, it is essential first to purify one's mind, to put an end to thought by depriving it of its fuel—deep-rooted desire stemming from ontological ignorance.

Cutting Off Desire at the Root

One could also say that the source of all evil is the penis (appropriately called the "root"). The sting of carnal desire can be felt by the most hardened ones, as the Chinese erotic novel the *Ros putuarn* (The Carnal Prayer Mat) makes clear apropos its hero Weiyangsheng who, after a youth spent in debauchery, has decided to become a monk:

But any young man joining the order has certain problems he must face. However strongly he tries to rein in his lusts, however firmly he tries to extinguish his desires, prayer and scripture reading will get him through the day well enough, but in the wee hours of the morning that erect member of his will start bothering him of his own accord, making a nuisance of itself under the bedclothes, uncontrollable, irresistible. His only solution is to find some form of appeasement, either by using his fingers for emergency relief or by discovering some young novice with whom to mediate a solution. (Both methods are regular standbys for the clergy.) Had Weiyangsheng done so, no one who caught him at it would have been disposed to criticize. Even Guanyin herself would have forgiven him, if she had come to hear of it; she would hardly have had him consumed in the fires of his own lust! Weiyangsheng felt differently, however. He maintained that those who joined the order ought to accept its commandment against sexual desire as a cardinal rule, whether or not their

standbys took the form of actual adultery. Even if the standbys broke no rules and brought no dishonor to those practicing them, they represented a failure to suppress desire just as surely as adultery itself. Moreover, the hangman led to intercourse, and homosexual relation to heterosexuality. Sight of the make-believe causes us to yearn for the reality, and one act leads to another by an inexorable process that we must not allow to get started.\(^5\)

In a related upsurge of virtuous, Weiyangsheng chooses to emasculate himself, despite the fact that castration was clearly denounced by the Buddha. We are told that when the Buddha was in Šrávasti, there was a monk who castrated himself by severing his penis in order to cut off desire. The Buddha scolded him, saying: "This foolish man, monks, cuts off one thing when another should have been cut off. Monks, one should not cut off one's own organ. If anyone should cut it off, there is a grave offence."\(^6\)

Despite this clear-cut indictment, Weiyangsheng's case was not exceptional, and there were occasionally cases of self-inflicted mutilation. Let us just give one other example, that of the scion of a great family, Guangyi, who at the time of Wu Zetian's usurpation became a monk to escape the emperor's fury. With the restoration of the Tang he was invited to court, and on his way to the capital he happened to lodge in the house of a distant relative named Li Shijun. When Li Shijun's daughter fell in love with him, rather than to respond to her advances he preferred to castrate himself. His "relax" was enshrined by Emperor Zhongzong in a monastery of the capital, and became the object of a flourishing cult.\(^7\)

In Japan, too, there are cases of an individual castrating himself by cutting his "jade shaft." This form of castration differed from the traditional cutting of the testicles performed for eunuchs. Called *rasetus* (literally, "cutting [setu] the [mafa] penis"), it was sometimes a penal punishment. Like their distant contemporary Abelard, and for similar reasons, some of Hōnen's disciples were subjected to this ordeal. Minakata Kumagusu, commenting on the term *rasetus*, writes: "The virile energy is vulgarly called masa. This is why, cutting the beginning, one says za. In my view, nowadays there are people who are castrated to punish them for adultery. This does not harm their life, but their sexual energy is naturally not very strong any more." However, Minakata is skeptical on that point, and he mentions the case of a monk who, toward the end of the Edo period, castrated himself out of remorse for having sinned. Later, during the early Meiji period, when the interdiction against

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\(^5\) Li Ya 1999a, 104.


\(^7\) See Song guocheng shu, T. 59, 2061. 073b.
monks having sex was lifted, this monk took a mistress and, despite his diminished sex, succeeded in giving her a child. 

Sometimes the mutilation was displaced toward lesser anatomical parts. A case in point is that of the monk Jōshō (alias Saga Sōza, abbot of Kongōji on Kōya-san, d. 983), who applied a Buddhist version of the biblical principle, “If your right hand makes you sin, cut your right hand”: “Jōshō never violated the precepts on women, but he just once happened to touch a woman with his index finger. He said, ‘By touching a woman with my finger, I have committed the sin of attachment. Thus, my finger, is the cause of sin.’ He repent ed by burning his index finger, and paid homage to the Three Treasures. He feared such a minor sin so greatly, how could he commit any major sin?”

The importance of a “wholesome” body is well illustrated in the Sōhōgenzō, where Dōgen, to illustrate the mysterious ways of karmic retribution, tells the story of the eunuch who, seeing a herd of five hundred bulls taken to be castrated, thinks: “Although I have a human body, because of my evil past karma, I am unable to function as a man. I should truly use my wealth to save these animals from a similar destiny.” Therefore he buys the animals and frees them. As a result of his good karma the eunuch’s male functions were restored. Dōgen seems unaware of the ironic element of the story, since the good karma, in this case, restores the procreative power that will re the redeemed eunuch to existence. The notion of the integrity of the body, the corporeal compensation that results from this indemnification, is more important to Dōgen than an asceticism at all costs (although in other passages he advocates “crushing one’s body” in order to reach the spiritual goal). Furthermore, the number five hundred is, by an uncanny coincidence, that of the arhats, spiritual castaways.

The root of desire, in the case of a woman, could be cut just as “radically” in other ways. A particularly implacable exemplum is the following story, relating the conversion of a lustful woman named Miao-yo. To achieve this conversion, the Buddha conjures a handsome youth who seduces her. At first, Miao-yo experiences sheer bliss, but after a full day of lovemaking she grows tired and wants to get some rest and food. The youth will not relent, however, telling her that he practices a sexual method of long life according to which one cannot rest before twelve days. Her continuous orgasms soon turn into a nightmare. After four days of this plethoric diet, she feels as if she had been run over by a cart; after five days, as if she had swallowed iron balls; after six days, as if her heart had been pierced by arrows. Now utterly disgusted, she vows never to have sex again. The youth gets angry, accusing her of spoiling his practice. When, astounded by his failure, he says that he wants to kill himself, she does nothing to stop him. Without getting off her, he cuts his throat, splashing blood over her. Panicked, she realizes that she cannot disengage herself from his corpse, which soon begins to putrefy, decomposing so quickly that after seven days only stinking bones remain, adhering to her as if glued to her body. From the depth of her despair, Miao-yo implores the gods, but it is the Buddha who appears, accompanied by Ananda, and he frees her, readily obtaining her conversion.

Passions and Impregnations

Desire is only one of the three fundamental defilements or “poisons” that vitiate all existence, along with anger and ignorance. Buddhist deliverance results from metaphorically cutting off these passions. It is much more difficult, however, to destroy their tenacious impregnations. The concern about impregnations, perceived as distinct from the passions themselves, moved to the front stage with the development of Mahāyāna. The problem seems to have arisen from the need to explain why the arhats, who were supposedly free of all defilements, still behaved sometimes as ordinary men. As the Dazhiduian puts it: “If certain corporeal or vocal acts do not conform to knowledge, they seem to stem from passions, and those who do not know the thought of others see them as such and have for them a feeling of horror. Actually this has nothing to do with passion, but those who have long obeyed passions perform acts of this kind. Likewise a prisoner long laden with chains, when freed, still walks hesitantly, although he has no more chains.”

The Dazhiduian gives several specific examples from among the direct disciples of the Buddha, ascetics who were still affected by the stench of the “three poisons.” Thus, due to the impregnation of lust, Nanda could not help staring at women in the assembly; due to the impregnation of anger, Sāriputra overreacted when the Buddha accused him of eating impure food; due to the impregnation of hatred, Mahākāyapa, after the Buddha’s death, expelled Ananda from the group of the arhats with harsh words.
Ananda had not at that point extinguished the passions in himself, but after his public humiliation he rapidly succeeded, so we are told, and was thus able to join the arhat community. What should we think, however, of Pindola, whose gluttony led him to show off his supernatural powers? This so angered the Buddha that he condemned him to remain in the world and to wait for the coming of the future Buddha Matreya. Are we dealing here with passions or merely with impregnations? Pindola became the first of the Sixteen (or Eighteen) Arhats, assuming the function of guarantor of ritual orthodoxy. The motif of gluttony, however, did not disappear: due to an offence committed in a past life (according to a Japanese source, he had broken his vow of chastity) he is said always to be hungry.

The question of residual impregnations should perhaps be raised in the case of the Buddha himself. Sometimes the words of the Enlightened One sound like those of a Victorian clergyman. When one reads the episodes during which he set the rules of what would become monastic discipline or Vinaya, one cannot but be struck by statements that reflect gross sexist prejudice. Certain episodes in the life of the Buddha are also puzzling. Is it not said, for instance, that he died from diarrhea caused by pork meat? Later commentators have tried to downplay that shocking detail by arguing that the word for meat was used metaphorically, referring actually to a kind of mushroom. The Buddha was eventually exonerated when Buddhist doctors decreed that, although the impregnations of desire remain in the case of saints, they were in his case entirely destroyed. To the same end, the Dāchchīdānī resort to a comparison between ordinary and cosmic fires: if arhats still have impregnations of passion, it is because the fire that destroyed their passions is like an ordinary fire; when this ordinary fire has burnt its fuel, there still remain ashes and coals, because its strength is not sufficient to consume them, whereas the fire of omniscience, which destroys the passions of the Buddha, is like the fire that destroys the universe at the end of a cosmic period.

In the third century B.C.E., the question of the purity of the Buddhist saint became the pretext of a famous controversy in which scholars see the appearance of anger because during five hundred lifetimes he had been a sorcerer. No doubt he had been deeply immersed in sensuality, and even after he attained the fruit of arhatship, he still had an eye for women. When wise men are so, who among ordinary men will not have this flaw? Quoted in Mertell 1985: 217.


45 In this respect, the Buddha differs from the Christ who, according to the Gospels, "ate, drank, but did not depurate." In later Buddhist biographies, however, the Buddha stops excreting.


47 Lamotte 1944-1940, 3: 1741.

The distant origin of the split between Mahāyāna and Hinayāna (or, more correctly, Theravāda). A monk named Mahādeva argued that the arhats may still show signs of defilement. The emergence of this notion may reflect a criticism of the arhats, stemming from lay Buddhists. It could also be a justification on the part of the monks, trying to explain why, in practice, they seemed less perfect than the arhats described in the scriptures. They could argue that, in their cases, appearances were misleading, since residual impregnations, which are merely the effects of a karma about to become exhausted, did not by any means call into question their purity. At any rate, this theory, together with a number of ideological and social factors, caused a breach in the uncompromising stance of early Buddhism toward desire. It allowed a reasonable doubt, a margin of tolerance toward behaviors that seemed characteristic of an impassioned mind to a noninformed observer. This paved the way to a more positive conception of desire in Mahāyāna.

The Trend Reversal

With the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism, a trend reversal takes place—or perhaps one should speak rather of a progressive shift toward more positive conceptions of desire and passions. Mahāyāna is generally said to have advocated a less ascetic, more tolerant (or laxist, depending on the viewpoint) conception of Buddhist practice. As noted above, the rise of Mahāyāna is attributed to the schism of the Sarvāstivādins at the time of King Asoka. Paradoxically, the Theravāda interpretation of the schism remained the official version, even in Mahāyāna countries. According to this version, the schism resulted from the "five false views" of Mahādeva, a character charged with the worst sins: committing incest with his mother, killing his parents, and killing a monk. King Asoka himself, by mistakenly taking his side, is implicitly blamed for the Sarvāstivādins' exile to Kashmir. Even in death, Mahādeva was smeared by his enemies—literally, since we are told that, when the sandalwood of his cremation pyre would not burn, someone advised smearing his corpse with dog excrement, after which the fire finally erupted. It is ironic that this story, clearly originating within the Theravāda faction, would still be propagated centuries later in Japan, in popular Buddhist collections of tales such as the Konjakumonogatari shin and the Sangokubonben. With the development of Mahāyāna, radically new doctrines like the Two Truths theory came to the forefront. The pervading logic of non-duality that led to the identity of the Two Truths implied a revalorization of everyday life, of the phenomenal world, according to the principle that

samsāra is none other than nirvāṇa, that passions are no different from awakening. This evolution was most radical in Vajrayāna and Chan/Zen.

Many factors have contributed to this revalorization of the world, of the body, and of desire. On the social level, the emergence of a lay Buddhist was more down to earth, more preoccupied with tangible benefits—happiness in this world, a better rebirth in the next—than with a distant ideal of perfection reserved for monks. Among the doctrinal elements, let us simply mention, at the risk of oversimplifying, Mahāyāna expressions of non-duality such as the identity of wisdom and compassion; speculations regarding the immanence of the Buddha nature; and finally, the inner dialectic of the Prajñā wisdom, according to which the mind should abide nowhere. This dialectic is found in particular in texts of the Perfection of Wisdom (prajñāpāramitā) tradition. Thus, according to the Dachidulam, "one must fulfill the virtue of morality by relying on the non-existence of sin and its contrary." Nevertheless, the person who transgresses the eight kinds of precepts of traditional discipline is still said to fall into the three evil destinies after death.

The emphasis on values specific to Mahāyāna, in particular compassion, allows one in some cases to break the rule. According to the apocryphal Fanweng jing (Brahma Net Sūtra), for instance, although transgression ordinarily reveals a lack of compassion, it can, conversely, be used as a vehicle of compassion. In Mahāyāna scriptures, the formal criteria regarding what constitutes transgression and its consequences are no longer minimal compared to the fault that would consist in taking a dislike to others: "By doing the good for others, / There is neither offense nor attachment. / But our dislike is always in contradiction / With [the interest of] all living beings." In other words, nothing is formally condemnable for a bodhisattva. If a (male) lay practitioner acts out of love and compassion, everything he does is a bodhisattva action, and none of his acts can be considered to be an offense. Normal ethical rules can therefore be transgressed when needed. Nevertheless, the rule against illicit sex for monks and nuns is not lifted, and even in the case of a lay practitioner it is allowed only if the other person who benefits from the act does not become attached to it. As Asaṅga puts it in his Bodhisattvabhūmi (Treatise on the Stages of the Buddhisattva [Career]):

When a woman is alone and her thought is prey to the agony of the desire to put an end to her celibacy, the lay Bodhisattva approaches her with the dharma of sexual union. He then thinks: "May she not develop a thought of unfriendliness, which would lead to demerits. May she on the contrary, under my influ-

ence, abandon her unwholesome thoughts, so that the object of her desire becomes a root for good."

Adopting this thought of pure compassion, he returns to the dharma of contemplation, and there is no error; but this produces on the contrary many merits. Nevertheless, Asaṅga takes care to specify that for a bodhisattva-monk to transgress the rule of celibacy remains out of question. If Asaṅga and other commentators refuse to extend to monks the authorization they give to lay practitioners, it is because, more than any other serious crime, sexual transgression remains particularly attractive.

Although still inscribed in the negative tradition regarding the body, a text like the Vinaya-kiran-ratnaśāstra contributed largely to modify attitudes regarding desire and sexuality. This trend did not develop without hesitations, even in the apparently most radical texts, like the apocryphal Viśramgama-sūtra. This text warns among other things against the dangers of desire. It opens with the famous episode in which Ananda, about to succumb to the charms of a courtesan, is rescued in extremis by the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. The Viśramgama attempts to refute "heretical" teachings that equate desire with awakening. We find in some esoteric texts an affirmation of heterosexual love and the thesis that "desire in itself is pure," since all things, including the "exquisite capture" of sex, belong to the pure realm of the bodhisattva. The Tantric master Yixing, in his commentary on the Mahāvairocana-sūtra, glosses the term bhūga ("Blessed One") as bhūga, which means "woman" and "designates the origin." It is precisely in this kind of esoteric text that one finds the identity between desire and awakening, dharma body and human body, sense organs and "true abodes," or both and nirvāṇa. This theory was the object of the fierce criticism of the apocryphal Viśramgama—a work which is itself strongly impregnated with Tantrism. The sūtra also tells the story of a monk and a nun who, convinced of the emptiness of everything, fell into hell—the nun, for having had sexual relations with a man, the monk, for having committed a murder. The latter story contrasts with that of the two monks mentioned by Jizang in his commentary on the Vinaya-kiran-ratnaśāstra. To hide the fact that one monk had sex with a village girl, his friend caused the girl's death. When the two monks confessed their offenses to Upāli, "the first keeper of Vi-naya" told them that they could not be forgiven. Fortunately, the layman Viśramkārti happened to pass by, and he told the monks that their crime, having been produced by thought, was illusion. Realizing this, the monks were freed from remorse and produced the thought of awakening.

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Variants of this story are found in Chan texts such as the Dama lun (Treatise of Bodhidharma), but the description of the offenses is generally omitted. As the Zhengdao ge (Song on Realizing the Way) by Yongjia Xianjuan (fl. 8th c.) puts it: “There were two monks. One transgressed the vow of chastity, the other the precepts against murder. / But the ephemeral wisdom of Upāli could only tighten the knot of the fault. / The Mahāsattva Vimalakīrti was able to put an end to their doubts, / as the warm sun melts frost and snow.”

In Mahāyāna, the pleasures of human existence seem desireful in light of the pure bliss of nirvāṇa. Buddhist nirvāṇa was initially defined as a pure extinction, about which nothing can be said except that it has none of the characteristics of this world. But the Mahāyāna teaching went one step (or several) further, causing by the same token a mental revolution. Nirvāṇa is now described with four terms: permanence, bliss, subjectivity, and purity. Compared to this supreme bliss the pleasures of this world grow pale, however attractive they may at first appear. Pleasure is thus twice vitiated because it is ontologically twice deficient: on the one hand it is impermanent; on the other, even in its positive character it is only a pale reflection of the plenitude of nirvāṇa. The notion of nirvāṇa becomes identified with that of awakening, that is, a pure experience that, instead of putting an end to the world of the senses, sanctifies it and takes place within that world. Far from being a rejection of the world, awakening becomes a sovereign affirmation of it, an ultimate enjoyment of this world purified of all its negative aspects. As Vimalakīrti tells Sāriputra, who complained of living in a too imperfect world: “When your mind is pure, the world becomes a pure and.” In the same way, he scolds Subhūti when the latter hesitates to accept a bowl of fragrant rice: “Revere Subhūti, take this food if, falling in all false views, you reach neither the middle nor the extremes . . . if identifying with defilement, you do not reach purification; if you associate with all the Māras and with all the passions.” Let us note in passing that Sāriputra and Subhūti symbolize the two opposite ideals of solitary access and life in a monastic community. Having dismissed these two paragons of traditional Buddhist practice, Vimalakīrti concludes: “Sons of good family, without entering the great sea it is impossible to get the precious pearls; likewise, without entering the sea of passions it is impossible to produce the all-knowing thought.”

The paradoxical character of the Mahāyāna teaching appears clearly in the following dialogue between a goddess (devi) and Sāriputra. When the devil tells the arhat that “the identity of all dharmas is the holy deliver-
In another passage of the Vimalakirtinirdesa, two monks come to confess a fault to Upali, who admonishes them severely. Thereupon Vimalakirti appears, and says: "Reverend Upali, without further aggravating the fault of these two monks or harming them, destroy the remorse that they have from their sin. Reverend Upali, sin exists neither inside, nor outside, nor in between. . . All dharmas arise from imagination, like the moon in the water and the reflection in the mirror. Those who know that are called the true keepers of discipline; those who know that are well disciplined." In another passage, Vimalakirti explains to Śāriputra how truly to meditate: "Not to destroy passions that belong to the realm of transmigration, but to enter nirvāṇa, that is how to meditate." The same idea is expressed as follows: "The bodhisattva must exert patience toward his own passions and must not cut off his ties. Why? Because if he cut off these ties, the disadvantage would be too great; he would fall to the rank of arhat and would not differ from a man deprived of his senses. This is why he stops his passions, but does not cut them off."

We have seen how the two Buddhist paths constituted by impassive access and deliverance through passions were opposed through the examples of the two monks Prasannendriya and Agramani. According to Agramani, "love is characterized by passion"—in other words, it is nefarious. According to Prasannendriya, however: "love is the path. Hatred and ignorance are also the path. In these three things are enclosed / Immutable states of Buddha." Prasannendriya nevertheless is careful to point out: "Love is not born, nor does it perish, / It cannot give cause for worry. / But if a man believes in the self, / Love will lead him to evil destinies." The Perfection of Wisdom in 150 verses, translated by Amoghavajra, states: "The Bodhisattva takes his posture in the purity of touch, he takes his posture in the purity of concipiscence, he takes his posture in the purity of pleasure, he takes his posture in the purity of passion."'

Desire in Chan/Zen

The ambivalence of Chan/Zen regarding desire and passions finds its paradigmatic expression in the verses composed by Shenshu (606–706) and Huineng (d. 713) in their contest for the rank of sixth Chan patriarch. Shenshu is (dis)credited with the gradualist viewpoint, according to which the practitioner must strive on all occasions to "polish the mirror of the mind" and prevent it from tarnishing, that is, to purify the mind from all defilements. Huineng's verse, on the other hand, denies the very reality of defilements, which, to use a Buddhist metaphor, are mere "flowers in the sky"—hallucinations of a feverish mind. Does the fever, and the mind itself, have some kind of reality? For Huineng, or at least for his "biographer," none of these things, insofar as they depend on false notions, retain any ontological status.

The Chan repudiation of desire is suggested by the story of the bath offered by Empress Wu Zetian to Shenshu. The old master (he was then in his nineties but, we are told, had an imposing allure) was entrusted to the expert care of ladies-in-waiting. Seeing that he kept a perfect composed appearance, the empress, duly impressed, sighed: "Only in the bath can one see the great man." This comment could be interpreted allegorically, the hot water of the bath meaning the passions that cannot move the sage. Perhaps the canonical age of the Chan patriarch played a role, although the empress herself, hardly younger, had lost none of her flame. The story also appears in a chronicle of Japanese Buddhism, the Genkō shakushō, next to that of a monk—actually an avatar of the bodhisattva Kanon—who had sexual relations with an empress in order to convert her. From that viewpoint, Shenshu was not yet a true bodhisattva—or perhaps the Japanese empress was more attractive.

This hagiographical topography of the temptation of the Buddha by the daughters of Māra is often imitated in the "lives" of Chan/Zen masters. In the autobiography of Dīvyānābhadra (Zhikong), an Indian master who traveled all the way to Korea, we hear about an experience he had while staying in a Central Asian kingdom: "In this country, the king is an infidel and, knowing that my vows forbid any violence or lasciviousness, he ordered a dancer-girl to take a bath with me. I showed the most complete indifference, being no more disturbed than if I had been a corpse. The king sighed, saying: 'Here is truly someone extraordinary!'" The same anecdote is found in a more recent "autobiography," that of the Chan Master Xuyun (d. 1952): "During the night, I felt that someone touched my body. I woke up and saw a girl near me undressing and offering her body to me. I did not dare say anything and got up promptly, sitting with legs crossed, and recited a mantra. She dared not move after that." A similar anecdote is told by the Zen master Shiōdō Bunan (1603–1676): "Once, when my master was taking a bath, a woman washed his back and front, all the parts of his body. I believe that this is a rare event
among us." The bath seems to have played an important role in Buddhist imagination. The Chan master Hsuan T'ang (546–1623), for instance, once dreamt that he ascended to T'ou T'ieh Heaven and was invited to take a bath in Maitreya's palace. The apparent presence of a woman in the bath horrified him at first, but he regained his serenity when he turned out to be a man, and Hsuan T'ang let the man scrub him without feeling the least trouble.

Desire is clearly affirmed in another Chan story, in which Empress Wu questions Shenluxu as well as several other Chan masters (Xuan-yue, Luanan, Xuanze, and Zhishen). When the empress asks them whether they still have desires, Shenluxu and the others answer negatively, whereas Zhishen—whom the story is intended to lionize—declares that he has desires. When pressed by the empress, he explains: "That which is born has desire, that which is not born has no desire." Zhishen's answer could be read in several ways, but obviously it does not simply reflect conventional wisdom, which in this case is represented by the other monks and their quasi-Hinayana belief that desire is wrong. Zhishen directly expresses the Mahayana identity of passions and awakening. Instead of searching to please the empress, Zhishen reacts in a perfectly spontaneous way (or at least this is what the authors of the chronicle attempts to suggest).

Passions Are Awakening

Starting from the identity of awakening and passions, Chan did not reach the same practical or ritual conclusions as did the Vajrayana, at least in its Indo-Tibetan form. As a matter of fact, the Chan teaching, which recapitulates on that point the various positions of Mahayana, is more ambivalent—or less consistent—than Tantric Buddhism, characterized by its extremism, its rejection of any morality, and its taste for despised aspects of physical or social reality. True, these elements are also present in Chan, for instance with Linji Yixuan, but on the whole the emphasis is on more sublime (or sublimated) realities.

Linji comments as follows on Moa's dictum, "the ordinary mind is the Way": "What are you looking for, worthies? These unsupported monks now in front of me, clear and distinct, listening to the Law, have never lacked anything." Linji seems to consider the individual as a spiritual monad, intrinsically identical to the Buddha in its natural perfection: "From my standpoint, adepts, you are no different from Sakyā. Today, amidst so many activities of all kinds, what are you lacking? The spiritual radiation from your six senses never stops! Whoever can see things thus will be during his entire life a man without affairs." What Linji means by being "without affairs" is to know how to remain ordinary—to shit and piss, to put on clothes and eat. No need, therefore, to waste time in vain practices such as reciting scriptures—or even sitting in meditation, the eponymous practice of Chan. All this amounts to producing karma, to bringing about karmic retribution: "It is said everywhere, adepts, that there is a Way to cultivate, a Law to experience. Tell me which Law, which Way? What are you lacking in your present activity? What do you need to complete through cultivation?"

This kind of question already appears in the work of early Chan masters. We find, for instance, in the Liang-yuan ge (Song of the Realization of the Origin), attributed to Tengteng, the following passage: "You cultivate the Way, but the Way cannot be cultivated. . . . In awakening, there is fundamentally neither observance nor transgression. . . . No need to study much, nor to show discrimination and intelligence. Forget the phases of the moon and the intercalary months. Passions are awakening, the blue lotus grows in the mud and on manure."

In the apocryphal Sāramājñā, a text widely used in Chan, we find several warnings against the excesses to which the teaching on nonduality may lead. The text rejects in particular the ecstatic behavior of Chan "madmen" or of Tantric siddhas. The ambivalence of Chan appears well in this text which, despite its Tantric ideas, is deeply moralizing in its condemnation of desire. We recall that it opened with the episode of the almost successful attempt at seduction of Ananda by a courtesan. Nevertheless, if it emphasizes the importance of morality and Vinaya, it seems at times to advocate an easier path and even provides an incantation to get "at once"—a reference to the sudden teaching dear to Chan—the deliverance from passions. Another formula allows one to avoid all the heretical views of those who believe that "passions are awakening," and more precisely, that the six organs are the "true abodes" of awakening and nirvāṇa.

The Tantric Turning of the Wheel

Whereas in early Buddhism continence was an absolute necessity because of the fear of a sexuality that binds us to existence(s), and in classi-
Sexual Allegories

By emphasizing the identity of passions and awakening, Vajrayāna Buddhism developed the notion of Wisdom (prajñā) as Bliss, and asserted the possibility of becoming a buddha in this very body. The pairing of meditation (samādhi) and wisdom (prajñā) was universalized and perhaps enacted symbolically as a ritual union between two partners, one representing the male principle (vajra, diamond, the male organ), the other the female principle (lotus, the female organ).

Indo-Tibetan Tantric rituals also achieve the transmutation of the two fundamental passions, hatred and desire. Hatred is transcended by ritual murder, love by ritual coitus. In both forms of ritual, we are told, the aim is to “free” human beings, women through love, men through death. Many tantric texts contain fairly explicit references to sexual practices. Recall, for instance, Yixing’s commentary according to which the Buddha, the “Blessed One” (bhagavat), dwelt originally in the bhaga, that is, the sex organ, of the goddess. As Louis de La Vallee Poussin puts it: “In the same way as Śiva organically united with his consort, the Budhā [Vajrasattva] rests in the mysterious bhoga of the Bhagavatī; this sublime embrace . . . , essential to the diamond body, realizes the mahāśākha [Great Bliss] and in the mahāśākha the perfect sambodhi [illumination]. Buddha is inseparable from Tāra. . . . It is through love and for love that the world becomes double, and in love that it finds again its original unity and its eternal non-differentiation.” The sexual elements play a central role in Tibetan Vajrayāna, whereas they have been marginalized in Chinese and Japanese Vajrayāna. They did not disappear, however, and were even canonized, becoming an integral part, although often in a symbolic guise, of Sino-Japanese Buddhism. Some tantric texts such as the Hesvarā and the Gohyasaṃāśā were translated into Chinese only during the Song, and then in a fairly euhemerized form, since the transcription of Sanskrit terms often made the sexual meaning less obvious. However, the sexual metaphor was at work in the very notion of their lineage of transmission. The lineage of the Hesvarā was that of the Mother (emphasizing prajñā, wisdom), that of the Gohyasaṃāśā that of the Father (emphasizing upāya, means). In Japan, the sexual features resurface in the “heretical” teaching of the Tachikawa-ryū, a branch of Shingon that became quite popular during the Kamakura period.

If sexual union is often expressed metaphorically in Chinese translations of Tantric texts, in some cases it becomes itself the “metaphor” for the samādhi of the Buddha Vajrasattva. Instead of interpreting certain terms with erotic connotations as metaphors of the sexual act, commentators came to interpret certain explicit sexual expressions as metaphors for a mystical state, often with the intention of providing a literal interpretation. We know that a similar kind of spiritual hermeneutics was also common in the effusions of the Christian mystics, which, rather than interpreting erotic representations of mystical union as expressions of a sublimated sexuality, saw on the contrary in human sexuality a reflection of a mystical coincidence oppositum. The Buddhist doctrine is expressed through a network of symbolic oppositions that lend themselves to sexual metaphors. One may wonder what led people to use the sexual act as a metaphor for samādhi and to give a symbolic and classificatory value to sexual representation. At any rate, these metaphors and symbols may have contributed to revalorizing the sexual act, and leading in some cases to quite literal interpretations of certain injunctions that were essentially ritual—or even serving to justify laxist behavior.

98 See Sela 1975: 41c.
99 See ibid., 486.
The pairing of wisdom (prajñā) and skillfulness in means (upāya), or wisdom and compassion (karunā)—as representing the female and male principles—is also expressed on the mythological plane by the representation of the Buddha with a feminine companion (śakti), symbolizing his energy. This perfect union, prajñāgupāya, can be concretized by the union of a male practitioner with a female partner (the Tibetan yab-yum). The Great Bliss (mahāsukha) that ensues coincides with the realization of Emptiness (called vajra, diamond or thunderbolt). During the sexual union, the male practitioner is supposed to meditate "in the forehead or in the sex organ."¹⁰⁰ This meditation is also called samapatti, a term that in Mahāyāna means the achievement of a state of equanimity in which all mental constructs are gradually eliminated, but that in Vajrayāna refers more specifically to the union of Hendra and his female companion. Nairāmya. During the preliminary ritual "invocation" of the deity, it is a meditation through which the practitioner sees himself as male (Tib. yab) united to a goddess (Tib. yum), or as a female (yum) united to a god (yab). In the course of the ritual, this mental copulation can be translated into a real coitus with a "wisdom woman" (vidyā), or "seed" (mudrā). During the act, the practitioner must concentrate on his bodhicittta, a term that in Mahāyāna refers to a psychic and mental state, the "thought of awakening." But this is used here in a more specific sense, to designate the semen. The thought of awakening (bodhicittta) is identified with the bindu, the "drop," that is, the product of the fission of the seed (akha, the "white"). semen = āpaya) with the yam (akha, the "red"); the semen = prajñā.¹⁰¹ The bindu is the egg, the germ, just as the thought of awakening is the germ of a new being. This practice is related to the "coitus reservatus" with a female partner (mudrā). The trick is to stir this seminal essence without losing it through ejaculation, so that it may ascend through the central artery into the seat of Great Bliss located in the brain. The process, which is said to lead ultimately to the union of Bliss and Emptiness, can be practiced either alone during meditation, or with a female partner. Likewise, the term "Great Bliss" (mahāsukha) means not only a spiritual state but also "sexual fluid."¹⁰² This basic schema receives an interesting development in some Tantric texts describing the initiation of the disciple through the sabhā rite. The sabhā, "simultaneously arisen," is usually connected with the Tantric ritual of consecration (abhijñaka), where it refers to the relation between the ultimate and the preliminary joys. The master first unites with the

female partner, ejaculates, and deposits his bodhicitta in her lotus receptacle. Then, after consecrating the disciple in his union with the female partner, he confers on him the five sacraments.

As Per Kvaerne points out, the term abhijñaka is commonly used for the act of impregnation, and perhaps retains this connotation in those cases where the abhijñaka involves a "sacred union" (lātus gāmas). The term referred initially to an "aspiration," consecration by sprinkling with holy water, and this idea was never lost.¹⁰³ Indeed, "while there were only two actors in the minor consecrations, the neophyte and the preceptor, there now enters a third, the heroine, one might say, of the sacred drama, namely a young woman variously known... as mudrā ['Seal'], vidyā or prajñā ['Wisdom'], or simply deśī ['Goddes']."¹⁰⁴ Summing up the ritual according to the Hendra-tantra and the Sekoddeśaṭīka by Nāpadāpa, the first three major consecrations can be characterized as follows: in the first, the disciple is permitted to touch the breast of the woman (mudrā), "thus experiencing the subsequent bliss by anticipation, as it were"; in the second, this bliss is actually experienced by the preceptor, and its essence, in the form of the Thought-of-Enlightenment (bodhicitta, that is, the preceptor's semen), is transferred (actually, swallowed) by the disciple, who is thereupon permitted to regard the Lotus [the sex] of the Seal, that is, the source of bliss; and in the third, the disciple is himself united with the Seal, thus fully experiencing the bliss of union for himself."¹⁰⁵ Here is how the Hendra-tantra, for instance, describes the Consecration of the Secret: "The Prajñā girl of sixteen years [no longer twelve] clamps within his arms, and from the union of the vajra and bell the Master's consecration comes about. Then with thumb and fourth finger he drops the bindu [that is, the bodhicitta, or semen] in the pupil's mouth."¹⁰⁶ Likewise, in a fifteenth-century text entitled "Fundamentals of Buddhist Tantras": "The procedure of conferring the initiation is as follows: the red-and-white element of the 'Father-Mother' union are taken from the lotus of the mother with the thumb and ring-finger of the 'Father-Mother' and placed on the tip of their own tongue."¹⁰⁷ The Sekoddeśaṭīka further elaborates this point: "Having by means of his own Vajra-Jewel... had intercourse with a beautiful maiden, twelve years of age, adorned with all ornaments and like molten gold [in hue] so that she becomes] impassioned, having [moreover] realized the purity

¹⁰⁰ See ibid., 91.
¹⁰¹ See van Gork: "The female energy acquired from the woman stimulates the bodhicitta of the man, it blends with his activated blessed semen into a new, powerful essence now called bindu, the drop [samajj]." (van Gork 1961): 342.
¹⁰² On this term, see Asley 1994: 931-46.
¹⁰³ Kvaerne 1975: 89-91.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 95. In one source she is supposed to be "trembling... twelve years old and in all aspects perfect" (Ibid., 96). We seem far from the egalitarian relationship described in Shaw 1994.
¹⁰⁶ Hendra-tantra II, 3-4, quoted ibid.
¹⁰⁷ Leeming and Wayman (1968) 1943, p. 319, quoted ibid., 98.
of the disciple, and having thrust the Vara with its seed into the mouth of the disciple, only then is his own seal to be given to the disciple."  

However, it is made clear that the rite "is not taught for the sake of enjoyment," but for the purpose of attaining buddhahood. It is sacred. According to Snellgrove, "one might even claim that these new elements, far from issuing in a degeneration brought about a rejuvenation, nourished in the hidden well-springs of Indian religious life."  

As Kvearene points out: "Dealing with the tantra, it is, in fact, difficult to say where a ritual, whether external or interior, is described in sexual terms, and where a sexual act is expressed in ritual terms."  

The tendency to interiorize practice, which led to the denial of the flesh-and-blood woman, was also found in Hinduism. Whereas the Brahmanas interpret the ritual in sexual terms, the Bhadarana-siva-upaniṣad identifies the sexual act with the fire ritual: "Woman, in truth, is Agni. Her bosom is the combustible, her [public] hair the smoke, her vulva the flame, what one introduces in it the charcoal, bliss the sparks. In this fire, the gods offer the sperm; from this offering man is born."  

Thus, the Tantric consecration implied the ejaculation of the master (in the second consecration), although not of the disciple (in the third consecration). The disciple, actually, must not emit his bodhicitta. (He will be authorized to ejaculate only when he has become a master initiating his own disciple.) The union of the red and white (of the semen of the master and menstrual blood of the woman, that is, of wisdom and skillful means) produces an embryo that is transferred to the disciple, who is, as it were, impregnated. Although the woman cannot be entirely dispensed with as an intermediary, we seem to have here an attempt to create a male lineage.  

Prostate orgasm is merely a reflection of the sahaja, the joy "arisen simultaneously" through an orgasm without emission. The state of sahaja is said to be ineffable, blissful, timeless, omniscient, nondual, cosmic, transcendent, sacred, the luminosity of one's own mind. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, however, connects the sahaja with the act of conception.  

As noted earlier, Tantric ritual is a sacred union (hieros gamos), yet one

"utterly void of connection with 'fertility' of any kind; its sole legitimation resides in the restoration of wholeness—or, which is the same, the 'holiness'—of the Buddha-nature, the unity of Wisdom and Means."  

In some cases, Tantric sexual practice, not unlike the Chinese "art of the bedchamber," evokes a kind of sexual battle in which the woman, just like the man, can reach the ultimate stage if she is able to draw up, "through a skillful contraction," the male bindu and to keep it, thus increasing her power. Paradoxically, this sterile anna mystica lends itself to the symbolism of gestation and fertility.

The motif of the couple in sexual embrace can have at least two different, yet related meanings: it can indeed symbolize the conjunction of opposites, or hierogamy; it can also represent the submission of evil forces. Tantrism constitutes from this standpoint an attempt to save (by conversion, or taming) all beings, even the most evil. This explains in part the Tantric taste for terrible deities, the only ones able to impress impermanent people. Above all, this motif derives from the notion that buddhas and bodhisattvas adapt themselves to beings to convert them by the most appropriate method. They therefore manifest the fundamental passions, hatred and love, in order to transmute them into their opposites. In other words, the buddhas take the same appearance and act in the same way as the beings they must tame. Thus, the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin/Kannon) assumes the appearance of, and copulates with, the demons that he/she wants to "tame." A well-known example is her taming of the elephant-headed demon Vināyaka (J. Shōten or Kangiten).

According to some sources, one of the eight supernatural powers of the Buddha is the transmutation of desire or of the sexual act, a transmutation that allows him to remain in Great Bliss and to avoid any defeat in the midst of the passions. The Tantric notion of transmutation of desires seems to originate in the Buddhist notion of "revelution," which was one of the main features of the "epistemological" Yogācāra school. The goal is "not to reject or run away from phenomena, the body, the passions, but to transmute them through such revelation or metamorphosis, a kind of simple inversion from a negative sign into a positive one." Let us note in passing that the term translated by "transmutation" (or "revelution," paravṛtti) is also applied, on the mythological level, to the change of genre of the figures of the pantheon. This notion, which appears as early as the third century C.E. with Asanga, will be taken up
in China, in particular in the “apocryphal” Sarvagama-sītā, which describes the “inversion” or “reversal” of the impure into the pure. Likewise, the idea of conversion through sex appears in canonical texts such as the Gāndhariāka, in which the young Budhāna is “initiated” by the courtesan Vasumitra.

The Tantric reinterpretation in physiological terms of spiritual categories like bodhicitta shows that the Tantras give a great importance to the human body, and in particular to the sexual act. We are dealing here with an eroticized mystique that attributes as active role to the male principle, and a passive one to the female principle. Since the phenomenal world results from a primordial differentiation of reality through these two principles, deliverance is conversely conceived as a return to this reality: it is the awareness of their essential unity. Paradoxically, the enjoyment of sex is supposed to lead to detachment; whereas ordinary desire leads to attachment to self and the defilement of passions, the “great desire” makes the practitioner lose his/her self into pure bliss: “the functioning of desire, quickly and violently, in the way that an arrow flies, as an arrow points to its target, sexual desire turns to the opposite sex and begins to move. Desire develops and one loses sight of one’s ego-self.”

The Ambivalent Body

The changes regarding desire result from (and in turn cause) changes in the conception of the body, to which we now turn. In early Buddhism, the body was perceived as an impure thing. Many Buddhist descriptions resonate with Augustine’s famous statement: “We are born between excrement and urine” (Inter feces et urinam nascimur). One Buddhist locus classicus can be found in Vimālakīrti-nirādās, a scripture that had a great influence on Chinese Buddhism:

This body is like a ball of foam, unable to bear any pressure. It is like a water bubble, not remaining very long. It is like a mirage, born from the appetites of the passions. It is like the trunk of the palm tree, having no core. Also! This body is like a machine, a nexus of bones and tendons. It is like a magical illusion, consisting of falsifications. It is like a dream, being an unreal vision. It is like a reflection, being the image of former actions. It is like an echo, being dependent on conditioning. It is like a cloud, being characterized by turbulence and dissolution. It is like a flash of lightning, being unstable, and decaying

The Female Body

If the body is generally deficient in every respect, the female body is even worse. Even the bodies of the goddesses are no exception. Here is how the Buddha, always gallant, describes the body of Māra’s three daughters, Lust, Discontent, and Craving, when they try to trap him “with the snare of lust”: “This body [of yours] is a swamp of dirt, a filthy heap of impurities. / In these wandering latrines, / How could one revel?” In another famous episode, when the brahmā Māganyāda wants to marry his beautiful daughter to the Buddha, the latter tells him about the unsuccessful attempt of Māra’s daughters to tempt him and adds that, compared to them, Māganyāda’s daughter is like a corpse with the thirty-two impurities, “an impure vessel painted without,” and he would not touch her even with his feet. As if to add insult to injury, this contempt for the female body had been internalized by women. Here is, for instance, how the monastic rule deals with novice nuns: “Let the novice hate her impure

119 This passage brings to mind the “machine discontents” in Delsem and Guzzardi 1997.
120 See Trauman 1976: 22.
121 Ibid.
122 Lamotte 1944–1980, I: 384
123 Ibid., 2: 883. Women are “wholly slaves of Māra,” and their bodies are metaphors for all sexual desires; see Augustine 3, edited by R. Morris and E. Hardy, 67. See also Lamotte 1944–1980, 2: 880–81. The refrain of the Thevagāla’s verses (“Like a master of Lord Death laid out”) presents man as the prey, Māra as the hunter, and woman as the hated snake. See Lamotte 1944–1980, 2: 70–71. Some of the verses in the Thevagāla are by eyewitnesses reflecting on the transience of beauty. See Tellahoul 1973, 265, 269.
body as a prison where one is locked up, as a cesspool into which one has fallen. Let her fear passion as fire, as the encounter with bandits.¹¹²¹¹³

This conception of the female body is illustrated by many stories. We recall the episode in which the future Buddha, seeing the women of his gymnacium plunged into an ugly slumber—exclaimed in disgust: "I live in truth in the muts of a cemetery!" At that very moment, life appeared to him in its true light (or darkness), as a mask of death. This abrupt realization, which precipitated Śākyamuni's conversion, prepared him for his encounter with Mara's daughters.¹¹⁵

Early Buddhist texts have often recourse to the rhetorical strategy that consists in defacing the female body, turning it into a memento mori. This imaginary transformation of the feminine body actually corresponds to a common visualization technique.¹¹⁶ One of the best examples is the story of Upagupta and Vasavadatta, a famous courtesan of Mathurā. Vasavadatta hears about a young perfume salesman named Upagupta, and sends his servant to propose a love meeting to him. Upagupta refuses. Thinking that he may have misunderstood her offer, she sends her servant again to explain that it is a free service. Upagupta refuses again. Later on, Vasavadatta kills her lover in order to find a more powerful patron. Her crime is discovered, and she has her hands and feet, nose and ears cut off—the usual punishment for the crimes of murder and adultery—and is exposed on the cremation ground. Upagupta now visits her, but she tries to hide from him. When she asks him why he has finally come, he answers: "Sister, I did not come to you driven by desire, I came to see the intrinsic nature of desires and impurities. When you were covered with splendid clothes and various other external ornaments arousing passion, those who looked at you could not see you as you really are, even when they tried. But now, free from these ornaments, your form is visible in its intrinsic nature."¹¹⁷ The righteous Upagupta, who can turn everything into spiritual grit in his mill, reaches deliverance thanks to this vision of the maimed courtesan. The story does not tell how Vasavadatta reacted, nor what happened to her afterward.

A further edifying apologue is the story of the beautiful Sarasà, a courtesan of Rājagaha, with whom a monk had fallen in love. When she died prematurely, the Buddha asked the king to expose her corpse, and proceeded to auction it. But, as no one made an offer, he gradually lowered the price, and eventually offered to give the corpse away—again without success. He concluded his presentation with a sermon on impermanence. The monk in love, who had been witness to all this, was radically cured from his infatuation with physical beauty. The motif of the contemplation of the corpse—or more generally the contemplation of impurity (āsāsābhāsāvāna), a psychological method to understand the true nature of things—was developed by Buddhist preachers into the "nine phases" of the decay of the female body, a body whose owner was, in Japan, seen to be the famous courtesan Ono no Komachi.¹¹⁸

The horrible transformation of the female body serves both to thwart its power of seduction and to reveal its true nature. These stories betray a fundamental ambivalence toward the female body: feared and despised, fascinating and grotesque, it constitutes a stumbling block for the male practitioner. Death is not the only event that reveals the horrible reality of the female body; another such "moment of truth" is menstruation. Because its outflow threatens the self-enclosure of the body, menstruation became a convenient emblem of defilement, and its cyclical nature served as a reminder of change and decline.¹¹⁹ Corporeality renders women particularly vulnerable: they can be—and are often—penetrated, and cannot help overflowing their bodily limits, spilling an impure blood. Their body is therefore open, passive, and expansive. Thus, despite the Buddhist advocacy of nonduality, it seems practically impossible for them to transcend sexual difference.

These descriptions of the female body remind us of Bakhtin’s evocation of the grotesque body of Western popular culture in his work on Rabelais. According to Bakhtin, the Rabelaisian character (Gargantua, Pantagruel) is characterized by his/her open body—in stark contrast with the closed body of "classical" culture. The grotesque body is essentially orifices and excreta. It is "emphasized as a mobile, split, multiple self, a subject of pleasure in processes of exchange; and it is never closed off from either its social or ecosystemic context. The classical body on the other hand keeps its distance." Yet the morality of Buddhist exempla is hardly Rabelaisian: they aim precisely at denying procreation and regeneration. Even the "immaculate" birth of Gargantua reads like a parody of the birth of the Buddha (and of course of that of Christ). Gargamelle, Gargantua’s mother, is no Queen Māya, either.¹²⁰

¹¹² Wiegert 1910: 189.
¹¹⁵ Archbold, quoted in Strong 1943: 181.
¹¹⁶ On this motif, see Sanford 1958 and Lachaud 1997.
¹¹⁷ On the sociological meaning of bodily fluids, see Douglas 1967.
¹¹⁸ For Bakhtin, see Stallybrass and White 1986: 22. Here is how Rabelais describes Gargamelle’s delivery: "A little while later she began to groan and wail and moan. Then suddenly swarms of midwives came up from every side, and feeling her underneath found some rather ill-smelling excrecences, which they thought were the child, but it was her fundament slipping out, because of the swelling of her right intestine— which you could call the bum-gut— owing to her having eaten too much tripe...At this point a dirty old beggar of the company...made her an antecedent, so horrible that her sphincter muscles were squeezed and constricted... As this miserable the condition of the matrix were loosed at the top, and the child leaped through them to ensue the hollow womb. Thus, climbing through..."
However, there is another side to these stories, another message that should not be ignored. The writers of texts such as the *Lalitaisthara* have dwelt on the physical beauty of Māra's daughters more than necessary—even if only as a narrative device—to show the Buddha's superhuman detachment. The contrast between the details of this beauty and the gruesome description of the underlying reality by the Buddha is all the more striking. However, we find precisely a similar description in the case of the devils and demons, but also in that of Buddha's mother, Māya.\(^{131}\) For instance, Māya is said to have given birth to the Buddha in a position identical with that commonly given to yakṣis and devatās (female demigods). This suggests that, as in the rest of rest of Indian culture (think of the sculptures of Khajuraho), feminine beauty was still felt in Buddhism to be a positive element. Like the Virgin Mary (and unlike Gargamelle), Māya is what Max Weber calls a *theotokos*, and her semi-divine nature is expressed by her physical beauty.

The Opened and Closed Body

Buddhist practice seems to be aimed at bringing about the physical and mental closure of the practitioner, by reinforcing first his corporeal barriers. One is reminded here of Mary Douglas's point about the importance of boundaries for the individual body as metaphor for the social body. We will see later the importance of the rules of corporeal behavior in the Vinaya. The goal is to reach physical, but also and above all, mental, chastity. In contrast with the porous mind of the profane, which is like a sieve or like a leaking roof, the mind of the Buddhist saint is hermetically sealed, like a waterproof roof.

Several conceptions seem to have coexisted (or alternated). We have noted above the negative judgment passed on the body because of its transitory nature. This conception paved the way to the Mahāyānist dogma that the human body is illusory, and, more fundamentally, empty. According to the Heart *Sūtra* (Skt. *Hṛdaya-sūtra, J. Hannyja shingyō*), for instance, it is not only the empirical, corporeal self that is empty but also the “series” or psychosomatic “aggregates” that constitute it. The unstable, fluid, exercisable body of early Buddhism was concurrent with (and often superimposed by) an immutable, immaterial, admirable body, one that was emptied, precisely, of its organic impurity.

According to Vimalakīrti, the practitioner, resigned and in despair over his perishable body, should cultivate admiration for the body of the
forty main marks and the eighty-two secondary marks of the imaginary body of the Buddha. Endowed with all its marks, this body is properly speaking a semiotic body, a kind of living symbol that embodies the Buddhist teaching. It constitutes a "religious program," an illustration and a memento of the Buddhist doctrine. This physical "body of Law," counterpart of the metaphysical Dharma body, is a kind of "Table of the Law" on which the Buddhist (and Hindu) imaginaire is inscribed.135

Some of these corporeal characteristics have aroused the Buddhist imagination, for instance the "cryptocrisy" of the Buddha—the belief that "the secret part of [his] abdomen is contained in a sheath, as in the case of an elephant or a horse."136 The Buddha is said to have shown his penis to suppress doubts in his listeners on several occasions. This shocked some commentators, who attempted to "encrypt" the story and the sacred pudenda under prudish glosses. It is for showing this superlative sexual organ to women during the futurity wake of the Buddha—in order to convert them!—that Ananda was scolded by Kātyāya and excluded from the assembly.137 According to Nancy Barnes, "The sheathed penis symbolizes that the [Buddha's] genital virility is controlled and contained and is replaced by his oral 'virility.'" Noting that another of these

135 In a sūtra it is said, "If all those who slander the Mahāyāna sūtras, or steal the property of monks, or commit any of the Five Transgressions, or violate any of the Four Great Prohibitions will contaminate one of these marks or signs of the Buddha for one day and one night with great concentration, all their sins will be erased, and eventually they shall not fail to see the Buddha." See Sānchi ekākha in Kanaya 1988: 101-2.

136 This is the origin of the "horse-penis samādhi," or, more precisely, the "samādhi of the sheath of the horse-penis" [J. Meisner sammaj, on which see Mākyō daitem, edited by Mākyō daitem: ike ike (revised ed., 6 vols., Kyoto Hinkōkaku, 1970)], 5: 211s. According to the Japanese commentator Raijō, it is another name of the "samādhi to get rid of all obstacles," and it means that the production of the bodhisattva is like the fact that, when the horse feels desire, its penis comes out, and when desire is appeased, it penis is hidden. The locus classicus for the horse-penis samādhi is the "Chapter on King Rāparaja," in the Yasu Jing (T. 18, 867), translated by Vajrabhū. See also Jakabodhā jkob dū, in DN 8.149: 35a.

137 Buddhist monks act as though, like the Buddha, they had no sexual organs. Sex remains hidden in their discourse. But Japanese Buddhist sculptors came to represent the Buddha and Buddhist divinities as being like all men in this; a first attempt was made with the representation of visiera inside the famous statue of Sakyamuni at the Senjō-ji (Shalka-dō) in Saga, on the Western outskirts of Kyoto. However, it stopped short of revealing the secret mark of the Buddha. Unlike the Mahāvīra in Jainism, the Buddha is never represented naked. The same is not true of other lesser Buddhist figures. For instance, when the clothes are removed from certain statues of Jōi and Beisen they reveal a fully realistic anatomy. But Buddhists, on the whole, remain rather anatomical shy. In the Visaya, nakedness is rejected by the Buddha. "Nakedness would not be suitable for monks, but un worthy of them. This is not the right thing to do. How could one, ignorant man, adopt nakedness as it is practiced by other ascetics?" See Mahāvīra, in Visaya 1: 505, quoted in Wujayarama 1990: 43. Here, however, the point seems to be to distinguish Buddhist monks from other ascetics, such as the Jainists.

marks, the "long, broad tongue," is closely connected in the earliest textual references with that of the sheathed penis. Barnes argues that the Buddha is the father of sons and daughters "who are born of his mouth, that is, of the truth he teaches." His procreative energy, in other words, has been "displaced upward."138 Another conception of the human body, apparently more optimistic, was found in the traditional cosmologies of India and China, in which the body is perceived as a microcosm. Through this microcosm one may reach into the macrocosm and eventually realize its underlying principle, or the other way around. Through Tantrism in particular, Buddhism came to be influenced by these cosmological conceptions. The point here is that the body becomes the indispensable organ for contact with the absolute. The Sūkūlakacakra, for instance, argues that supreme bliss cannot be realized in this life without the body.139

From a different standpoint, the development of funerary rituals leads to the notion of a twofold body—mortal and immortal, individual and social. The aim is to transmute the mortal body into the immortal, or at least to transfer a vital principle from the former into the latter. Cremation, which was seen at first like a mere destruction, becomes a recreation, a reincorporation. What matters in relics is the creation of an immortal ritual body. By contrast with the self-contained body of the meditator, closed on itself, the "fragmented body" (gārita) is a disseminated body. However, the opposition must not hide the fact that in both cases the goal is to obtain, or to rediscover under the gangue of gross sensations, an incorruptible "adamantine body."

Like the body of the Tathāgata, which "does not flow through the nine orifices, because he does not have the nine orifices," the ideal body of the Buddhist practitioner was a closed body, without "outflows" (a metaphorical designation for defilements).140 The latent symbolism of the meditative posture—of control and recollection—seems to contradict some of the aims of meditation, a dissolution of the self that recalls the "oceanic feeling" described by Romain Rolland, and analyzed by Freud as primary narcissism.141 As Peter Brown points out in the case of Christian ascetics, "Virginity involved the heroic defence of the integrity of a specifically male or female body.... Bodies defended with such care were not destined to melt away in some distant transformation. Far from being a superficial and transitory layer of the person, sexual differences,
and the behavior appropriate to them, were validated for all eternity."142

A revealing case, in which continence truly becomes the contrary of incontinence, is that of Wulou, a Korean monk living during the Tang, whose name, meaning "Without Outflows," was interpreted literally by hagiographers who attributed to him the gift of never excreting.143

This conception made perfection much more difficult, if not impossible, for women, whose body is open to inflows and outflows, penetration and menstruation. However, Buddhist texts also describe an open body, in which sexual differences, as in the West according to Thomas Laqueur, were a matter of degree rather than nature.144 It is in the social construction of gender, based on clear-cut juridical, social, and cultural distinctions, that the difference became radical. In early Buddhism at least, a bad karma could lead to a change of sex in this very life.145

The metaphor of defilements/outflows, as it is used by "spiritual" Buddhism, draws our attention to "properly" physical outflows, in particular to excreta.146 One has a feeling that the "untouched" of the tradition—not only what one may call its "soft underbelly" but also its most radical undermining of dualistic thinking—might find its expression in excreta imagery. In its desire for purity and neat boundaries, mainstream Buddhism refused the refuse. Excreta, evacuated from its official discourse, return in its twilight language. In a nondualistic teaching, impurity is not as easy to eliminate or contain as in a dualistic (or trinitarian) religion like Christianity.147 We are reminded of the frigid perplexity of the Chan monk who has just been told that the entire world is the pure Dharma realm, the sphere of ultimate reality: "If this is so, where can I shit?" To the traditional Buddhist practitioner, still relying on dualities like pure and impure, mind and body, the Chan master Linji Yixuan opposes the ideal of the "man without affairs," a fellow who is content to

143 See Song gassou, shun. T. 30, 2066: 845c.
144 See Laqueur 1990.
145 Similar examples are found in the Western tradition. See ibid., 144.
146 We recall that the "universal" Buddhist died from diarrhea, a death which Christians reserved to heretics. Thus, St. Hilary attributes to a mortal diarrhea the death of the heretic Arsenius, whose impure soul had to leave through his lower body. See Gaigebeiner and Périer 1990, 1: 836.
147 The Christian dualism is pleasingly expressed by Martin Luther, who in his Table Talk tells the story of a monk who is visited by the Devil while being in the latrine: "Menschachus super latrinen! Non debet esse primum?" 148. "Deo quod supra! Tibi quid cadit infra!" (The Devil): "The monk in the latrine, shall not recite his prayer?" 148. (The monk): "To end what is above! to you what falls below?" ibid., 1: 833. There is actually in exoteric Buddhism a "god of the latrine" who destroys defilements, Ucchusita (U. About The Mokos). His cult became particularly important in Zen monasteries, in which the latrine was one of the three "silent places" (shamshaku), together with the bath and the meditation hall (or the refectory). See Braak 1990: 154-59.

149 According to the Sanhō kihōsha, the bath water of the monks has healing virtues. See Kamata 1990: 261. "If you prepare a bath for monks and take the water used for the bath and wash your pockmarks with it, they will heal immediately." The custom of drinking the urine of saints as a panacea (as in the case of the Pure Land ascetic Tokuhatsu) was quite widespread in Japan. In this case, excrement truly becomes sacrament. See also Broeker 1987.

All the examples examined above suggest that salvation or awakening has to do, in one way or another, with sex—whether sexuality is denied (abstinence), affirmed, or displaced (usually in a ritual context). As Georges Bataille pointed out, the experiences of sex and of mysticism, although they cannot be reduced to each other, nevertheless communicate and express a similar sense of "plethora" or fullness. Confronted with such a plethora of materials, the most striking fact is the diversity of the Buddhist hermeneutics of desire. The standpoint usually presented as orthodox—the initial rejection of desire—is after all only one among others. We may wonder whether, if rather than the rule of the game itself, it is not only the opening move on an ideological checkboard, or better a go board, all the positions of which will be gradually occupied, all the virtualities explored. In the end, we should perhaps downplay the "moral" or "soteriological" interpretations of sexual desire, of its denial or affirmation. In most cases, what is at stake is neither purely consensual sex or individual awakening, but rather collective strategies aimed at the preservation of the lineage.