

Indecent Practices and Erotic Trance: Making Sense of Tantra

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The Real and the Unreal in Sex and Spirituality

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The linkage between sex and spirituality -- whether it be three, eight, or thirty thousand years old" [1] -- has become a subject of fascination in recent years. A visit to the Barnes and Noble website turns up ninety-one volumes with the word *Tantra* in the title, all of which can be delivered to our doorsteps within three or four days. Many of these purport to reveal the secrets of Tantric sex as a series of easily mastered techniques, some with glossy photographs of beautiful naked models illustrating the various "positions" for us. Although we may find little that is "spiritual" in books that gloss the merely naughty as exotic and possibly "serious," scholarly treatments of the several Tantric traditions may be more convincing. They have little to say of "positions" but much about meditation techniques and the elaborate imagery of gods. There can be little doubt that sex is sometimes employed for spiritual purposes. At the same time we may well be suspicious. Possibly our ancestors of thousands of years ago were simply ignorant of their human dignity, stumbling in the dark grip of their basest instincts until the voice of God was finally heard by our more enlightened and nearer ancestors from Abraham to Jesus.

For 2000 years our Christian culture has envisioned sublime experience as the reward for asceticism and denial -- particularly of the sexual urge. The vast majority of Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims appear to be in substantial agreement. Yet there is another tradition according to which nothing is to be repressed or denied. When used skillfully, sex can be the "engine" that drives spiritual realization. But it is a dangerous engine that crashes into ravines more often than it reaches the top of the mountain. Madness and depravity lurk just around every bend. Psychosis is notorious for the religious and sexual delusions it may induce. The conflict we presently see in our own society reflects only a superficial recognition of the two mystical tendencies of denial and exploration. While a new-agey infatuation with Tantra has been growing, we have been doing our best to expose sexual depravity wherever we find it. An appalling underground of childhood sexual abuse, rape,

and pornography enrages and confuses us as we struggle over how to define and prosecute its evils.

Symptomatic of our contemporary confusion is the fact that in recent decades we Americans have been obsessed with the casual virility of our presidents. We are eager for gossip but unable to interpret it. What are we to make, for instance, of that breathy recording we have all heard dozens of times: Marilyn Monroe in the Kennedy White House singing, "Happy Birthday Mr. President"? Is this America's goddess of love, starved for attention, offering her calendar-enhancing body, all aflutter with sexuality, to the greatest hero of the free world, the inspiring giant who promised to make altruism and social justice into attainable goals? Are we Marilyn, desperate to turn our longing into a force that will change the world? Are we the most powerful man on earth, ready to embrace and finally to satisfy all those innocents whose hearts are in the right place but who have cruelly been wronged? Or is this rather a Hollywood burlesque, where a curvaceous "drag queen" of an actress reveals the American president as starring in a public relations drama, entertaining us with contrived "photo-opportunities" and "sound-bites" so that the skullduggery of CIA assassinations and political corruption can go on unguessed and unchecked?

The "truth" that poses and slips away ungrasped in these modern media events intrigues us and leads us on to related matters. We wonder what to make of reports that John Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe were having an affair. Was the goddess in familiar surroundings at the White House? Did she sing for herself while she sang for us all? Did Jack and Marilyn "belong" together as the god and goddess of our popular imagination, the American divine couple, the Tantric Shiva and Shakti of the Western World? If so, what was joined in that union of the most desired and the most admired? Both beautiful to look at, both a commanding presence, both a reputation for insatiable sexuality. Thousands dreamed of making love with them. And both were dead, in their forties, within a few months of the celebrated birthday. They live on in our memories, unchanged, unwrinkled, surviving countless tawdry exposés of their separate lives. They have become legendary and tell us more of the American soul than of their own private selves.

So it is with the scriptures of all the world's religions. They speak the truth, but always indirectly, always in stories that refuse to be reduced to simple propositions. What do we make, for instance, of Abraham's offering his wife to the Pharaoh of Egypt, particularly when he wanted nothing more than to have a son of his own? Or of Yahweh's ordering the prophet Hosea to take a harlot for a wife? Or of Jesus allowing a woman of notorious reputation to wash his feet and dry them with her hair? Each of these questions has an "official" answer. Abraham feared for his life. Yahweh wanted to tell Israel that she was a harlot who allowed false gods "to play with her breasts." And Jesus loved even "publicans and sinners." An orthodox community of faith gives us these answers, long after the scandalous incidents took place. But what of the contemporaries of our religious heroes, what must they have thought? What would today's media have done with such stories? Is it possible that a hidden doctrine of sex as spiritual engine has been expunged from these accounts?

Throughout the world and over the course of at least three millennia, we have relied on the implications and drama of stories to express our most sublime aspirations. From Genesis and Exodus to the midrash stories of the Talmudic rabbis and the humor of that Hasidic genius,

the Baal Shem Tov; from the gospels to the lives of the saints and the rants of revivalist preachers; from the Qur'an and Jelaluddin Rumi's poetic compendium of holy and ribald tales, the *Mathnawi* (often called "the Persian Qur'an"), to the Sufi trickster stores of Nasrudin; from the Hindu Vedas to the *Mahabharata* and the legends of the Nath Siddhas; and from the Buddhist transmission stories of China to the koans and Zen stories of Japan -- whenever we have been moved to speak of the spirit, whether human or divine, we have resorted to stories. When we wish to be precise regarding our beliefs, we call upon theology and its "handmaiden," philosophy. But in the last analysis, these more linear disciplines are themselves based on sacred stories and often leave us dissatisfied with what they extract from them. For as Sanskrit scholar, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty observes, "Myth takes over where philosophy proves inadequate" (O'Flaherty, 1973: 6).

Stories, myths, and legends portray the delightful and exasperating imprecision of human life, the fact that what we know about ourselves is inevitably called into question by what we do and that our plans are overturned by events beyond our control. There is no way of mapping the unexpected, for it reserves the right to frustrate us at every turn. Whether we celebrate the abrupt turns in the narratives that are our lives by speaking of divine intervention, bemoan them as diabolic temptation, or simply discard them as absurd, they are inherent to the human condition. Only stories get them right.

Therefore, if we wish to approach such murky human questions as sex and spirituality, we have no choice but to collect stories -- stories about what people have attempted and attained as well as those that recount utter failure, corruption, and tragic defeat. We shall reflect upon these stories, pondering manifold meanings that can never be cleanly disentangled and telling more stories inspired by the promising obscurities of the last. We shall be constantly turning that indecent diamond of sexual spirituality to catch the light of ever new facets.

Two Versions of Tantra

Tantra made the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* on December 7, 1998, in an article stressing the "hot market" it has provided for those who teach sexual practices in the language of new-age spirituality (Nomani, 1998). The article speaks of \$700 weekends which "law enforcement authorities complain [are] sometimes simply a front for prostitution." Learning new techniques and attitudes about sex, as well as "sexual healing," seems to be the explicit theme of such gatherings. Several prominent "marketer"-instructors are interviewed with special attention to what they are earning and questionable aspects of their personal lives. Huge profits are to be made on the borderland of therapy, libertinism, and feel-good spirituality by individuals and couples whose lust and greed have compromised their publicly espoused morality. The customers are evidently wealthy, bored, and naive. The story ends with the image of a beaming Monica Giles, just back from spending the night with a partner she had selected from the full complement of male workshop participants in blindfolds the evening before. "Ms. Giles will confess only two things: Her goddess has been served and, 'Oh, my God, my best friend is going to think I'm nuts.'"

Story-tellers and their audiences being integral parts of any narrative, the reputation of the *Wall Street Journal* is essential to this story -- its hard-headed interest in the bottom line and its skepticism for anything that falls outside the domain of common-sense capitalism. It

speaks with confidence of the engine of commerce but hardly represents itself as a competent judge of spiritual engines. In the sphere of religion it is like the art critic who has never been inside a museum: It knows what it likes. It likes profits and eschews nonsense. Therefore we are not surprised to find that Tantra makes the front page of the *Journal* when fortunes are being made by what seem to be snake-oil salesmen.

Still, the most avid proponents of spiritual sex will find much to agree with in this account. It has always been the case that flagrantly unorthodox spiritual practices have attracted far more of the gullible, the lazy, the criminal, and the psychologically unstable than of the devout and the earnest. Fads come and go even in the realm of religion. There are certainly plenty of affluent Americans vaguely dissatisfied with their lives and on the lookout for exciting alternatives in the way of uplifting recreation. Surely the veneer of ancient respectability may serve the very practical function of justifying what would otherwise provoke painful feelings of guilt among those paying hundreds of dollars for a weekend of sexual exploration. Such games take place outside the boundaries of "real life." Possibly insights are gained. Perhaps marriages are reinvigorated, broken, and made. Perhaps a few lives are changed. Probably few, indeed, will look back on such weekends ten years from now and see them as anything more than sensuous adventures. The philosopher of eroticism, Georges Bataille, says that sensuality is to mysticism as a clumsy try is to perfect achievement (Bataille, 1986: 249). We find no evidence of "perfect achievement" in the *Wall Street Journal* article. Evidently financial gain is the bottom line.

B. Bhattacharya, a novelist, English teacher, and secondary school principal who grew up in a Tantric environment in the North Indian holy city of Varanasi, has nothing good to say about the tawdry doings that take place "under the undefined umbrella of yoga and tantra." In his autobiography, *The World of Tantra*, he says, "Tantra has become an easy escape for the degenerate" (Bhattacharya, 1988: 32). "The crux of the matter is that for a hundred of such urbanized and sophisticated institutions, there could be just one genuine school" (*Ibid.*, 294).

Bhattacharya was born in 1910 to a Brahmin family that spoke Bengali but was so immersed in the texts and practices of Hinduism that he calls the dead language of Sanskrit "almost my mother tongue." His father and uncle were locally famous yogins, and Tantra was "the very air I had to breathe" (*Ibid.*, 1). His family was dedicated to "the deity Kali, the Dark Mystic Lady," of horrifying appearance. He presents himself as a care-free, naked child, [2] known by the neighbors (and his mother?) as obstinate, precocious, determined, and hopelessly wayward (*Ibid.*, 2-3). He spent his "entire growing youth in [the] company" of the proprietor of a coconut shop (*Ibid.*, 23), a plump woman of about fifty [3] who earned her living spinning the rough fibers of coconut shells into thread. He often fell asleep with his head on her "ample thigh" as she spun. She was silent, feared, and avoided by her neighbors unless they had a sick child in need of healing (*Ibid.*, 4). He refers to her only as "the Lady in Saffron."

In later life, I discovered that she had indeed been a "fallen" girl (to me a fallen angel) who had run away from her widowed girlhood with a man of "very low caste," and was later abandoned by him; to toss around for a while in the multitudinous waves of the street, until she found her footing, and rediscovered herself in the light of her inner glory and grandeur (*Ibid.*, 6).

His uncle, the Tantrika, impressed upon him the great privilege he enjoyed in being her

favorite, saying, "She is one with Space and Time." Awed and puzzled by this expression, the boy asked his father what it meant. The respected yogin answered: "She is one with Time and Space! She is continuity. For her there is no death, no birth. She takes her body just as a body, and nothing more. . . . She belongs to the ocean that never changes. That is Space and Time. She is it" (*Ibid.*, 13).

Bhattacharya wrote his Tantric autobiography when he was in his late seventies, and we can well imagine that the dialogues he recounts have gained a certain embellishment. [4] We have to read them as the truths of his old age, as the realities they have *become* for a man in whom the "world of Tantra" was simply "the world" during the first two decades of his life. The chronology in his account is often hard for the reader to reconstruct. We learn that around the age of twenty he became politically involved in fighting British colonialism and had to go into hiding for a couple of years in the early 1930's. Then he became heavily involved in academia and skepticism for perhaps another two decades. In 1954, at the age of forty-four, he returned to "the mystery of love, power, bliss, and eternity" as a result of an experience he had while on an expedition in the Himalayas (*Ibid.*, 240-5). The autobiography was written more than thirty years later, some time after the completion of his two-volume compendium, *Shaivism and the Phallic World* (Bhattacharya, 1975).

His childhood peers were in awe of his "daring," sitting in stillness beside the notorious Lady in Saffron as she meditated for hours in cremation grounds. He himself saw nothing strange or terrifying in these activities. At one point, when he was eleven, she asked him how he occupied his mind while sitting beside her. She had never taught him to meditate. *Meditation* was only a word for him. He had no idea what it meant. He answered, "You! I love you . . . I love to watch you absorbed in delight." She responded that that *is* meditation, and proceeded to speak to him at some length about it. At the end she embraced him and he felt her "vibrations -- a total transmission" (*Ibid.*, 20-2).

Some days thereafter she led him to a ruinous temple renowned for the poisonous snakes it harbored. She pulled a straw mat from a crevice in the wall and sat down to meditate. He sat beside her on the flagstones of the floor and closed his eyes.

After what could be ages, I felt her touch. On opening my eyes I was astounded. . . . She was totally naked, and stretched flat on her back on the floor. Her legs were locked in a double lotus posture; her head was on the floor; between the belly's mound and the sloping valley, down to the bottoms of her feet and the heels there yawned a mysterious cavity where a moment before some flowers had been strewn. For the first time I knew that this area of the body too grew a patch of hair. Without minding my conscious confusion she invited me to assume my seat between her thighs. . . . She appeared quite transfigured. Nothing was human about her. . . . Her forehead as well as the grim hairy triangle were besmirched with ashes, and dabs of red and black. . . . My hair stood on end, and my gooseflesh surprised me. The nakedness of the familiar Lady made her appear as a new being from another world.

. . . Another call came. This time heavy, unearthly, magnetic. "Tarry not, delay not dear one. This is your moment. Take what I alone give you. Sit; and cover the *yonis*. . . . I climbed over the sacred body, and sat over the dark space left by the folding of her legs. At the very first contact I was aware that her skin was burning. The heat was forbidding. But I knew it was not for me to question. . . . Minutes passed; perhaps hours. Who cared? A stream of delight rippled through the 84,000 *nadis* (nerves) of which she had always spoken. At the base of my spine I experienced a half-tickling, half-singing urge which ran up and down my spine. I closed my eyes.

. . . [She spoke:] "I am the Lotus; you are the Brahman. I am the dead body, you are the living

flame. I am in time; you are Time eternal. I am the sky, you are the sun. I am the sound, you are the sense. Now take up the book. Open it. Open. Carefully, slowly, deliberately read from it word for word. Start chanting aloud. Spread the book on my bare chest. Hesitate not. Tarry not. Proceed and progress. Be in me. I shall read through your tongue, your voice, oh my darling. Read. I am the dead matter; you are the spirit. I am stone; you are the message. I am soil, you are the stream. Now! Now!! Open the book. Start. Start. No stopping, until you find a hymn, the first hymn."

. . . And entranced I started. . . Gradually and gradually I lost all sense of her presence. . . The verses swam in luminous clarity. Then, at last, came the hymn, and came a strange delightful, absorbing, self-contained darkness. Time passed. . . I felt several strokes of gushing heat-waves lashing my eyes, my head, and what seemed to me very unbearable, deep within my bowels, my heart. The 84,000 nerves were on fire. My heart seemed to jump out of me and float in the air, and mix with the incense smoke that filled the air. I lost consciousness. I became a zero.

Something was happening to the mound around my penis. A vibrating, thrilling, hot, deep throb hammered beat after beat. The more it came in waves the more I was pushing out my spinal base. I sat straight as straight could be. . . Erection, sexual urge and reflex belong to a world I had left long ago. I had shed my body; I was only a "being" (*Ibid.*, 40-5).

In the following years, they worshipped like this on a fortnightly basis. Sexual meditation became the supreme joy and central concern of Bhattacharya's young life. His Lady in Saffron was "methodically" leading him to "a state of total impersonality, i.e., the art of detachment in attachment; love without emotional stress; sleeping when awake, and awake while sleeping" (*Ibid.*, 163). When his classmates tried to interest him in the giggling naughtiness of sexual exploration, he found himself disgusted and perplexed. Addressing that confusion, the Lady in Saffron said:

Tantra "plays" with sex indeed; gets absorbed in sex, but does not allow the sex to indulge, covet, lust or get passionate. Tantra worships it; venerates and adores it. Sex in Tantra is a bath in icy fire. It excites without losing calmness, loves without passion. It reflects the illuminated state of Grace as sunlight reflects the dewy innocence of the colours on a lotus just bloomed (*Ibid.*, 209).

If there is a structure to the autobiography, it is the alternation between mystical transcendence and losing one's way. In the beginning others are seen to have gone astray, and Bhattacharya has to learn the difference between divine attainment and demonic possession. Later on, it is our narrator himself who gets lost on the profane paths of political activism and academic skepticism. The book ends with the death and cremation of an octogenarian Lady in Saffron, ill and wrinkled, her sagging breasts resting on her thighs. Bhattacharya is eighty miles away in Allahabad. Her smell pervades his room, and he has a vision of her standing in the doorway. He feels himself unworthy of her, having "spent three or four years in sensuous self-adulation and careless bohemianism." He "forgot" that "physical craving for a momentary thrill . . . [is] always to be consummated only on a spiritual level" (*Ibid.*, 371). But he cannot resist her "call." He rushes home to Varanasi and searches for her everywhere. No one knows where she is. He wanders in out of the way places. Finally he feels the old "familiar vibration" in his body and follows it like radar. She is in a falling-down temple. His Lady is not upset by his confession. She reminds him of a constant theme of her teaching:

In order to train the tiger one must be close to the tiger. Master the serpent by serving it. In order to master the sex organs, one must remain very close to the sex organs. If an opposite body sets me on fire, I shall cling to that fire, to that body, and discover the secret of the source of that power and utilise it (*Ibid.*, 325).

He sits and prays with her for the last time, both naked, his arms around her depleted body. Two snakes wrap around their waists and pull them forcibly together. The Lady in Saffron has prepared everything. She has hidden a pair of bamboo poles and length of fabric so that he can fashion a drag on which to pull her body through the streets of the city to the cremation ground of the Manikarnika Ghat [5] on the Ganges, where they had meditated regularly some thirty years before. Although still feeling very much unworthy, he officiates at the cremation of her body.

The cool breeze of the hour before dawn fascinated my consciousness, and made me take a good look at myself, at my relationship with this strange lady. I tried hard to think what the world without her would feel like. The flames were lapping the body with intense hunger. I was petrified to see the two large snakes crawl through the ash-covered sand, and approach the pyre. Soon they could be seen wrapping around the flaming body. And I had a vision of the Lady in Saffron sitting on it, with two fire vessels resting on her two palms, and another on her head. This was the second time I had a flame-wrapped vision of her at Manikarnika (*Ibid.*, 457).

The stories of Bhattacharya and the *Wall Street Journal* could not be more contrasting, two entirely different worlds of perception and discourse. For within the world of Tantra there is nothing salacious or recreational about its practices. No double-think such as we encounter from the starry-eyed Ms. Giles, who asserts in a single breath that she is "serving her goddess" and generating gossip for her friends. Bhattacharya's earnestness and sorrow rings too true for us to doubt the genuineness of his account. Although we can hardly fail to grant him his visions, we may wonder about those snakes. Evidently in his eyes there is something so compelling about the Lady in Saffron who has trained her sexual organs -- like a tiger, like a serpent -- that the cold-blooded denizens of her ruined temple cannot part from her. Their instinct to avoid fire has been wholly overcome by their devotion to the notorious saint. If that detail be literally true, the world of Tantra must be characterized by a "transvaluation of values" the profane world takes as immutable. If, on the other hand, we conclude they were visionary snakes, that Bhattacharya cremated his beloved guru in an altered state of consciousness -- as surely he must have -- those snakes represent the deep instinctual forces of the human organism; and their counter-instinctual behavior implies that the natural course of instinct may be reversed. Their devotion in the face of fire stands for the essence of Tantra. The lust that poisons our profane lives with its unrelenting compulsiveness can be retrained as an engine of spirituality. What crashes downward into ravines of immorality and spiritual death can be redirected upward.

The story of Bhattacharya's sexual initiation at the age of eleven by a suspiciously antisocial neighborhood woman of fifty would generate a scandal of monumental proportions, should it occur today in any of our American towns. Our news media would reframe the events in terms of childhood sexual abuse, paranoid schizophrenia, possibly Satanic ritual. "Experts" would be found. Litigation prepared. Rumors would fly. In Bhattacharya's world of Tantra, however, that event constitutes the greatest blessing, an improbable stroke of good luck. For to be introduced to the spiritual engine of the sex organs before the turmoil of puberty and the corruption of public opinion are able to do their work, means to learn to operate that engine upon safe and level ground, to have gained confidence and skill before reaching dangerous ravines. That it is no panacea is proven by Bhattacharya's "forgetting." But because the lesson had been securely learned, the journey could be resumed with confidence.

A Tantric Contest

Those who learn Tantra after having attained adulthood are forced to unlearn what they have been taking for granted. We can see this process operating in the discipleship of Robert E. Svoboda, an American-trained physician who has lived many years in India, beginning when he enrolled in a college of Ayurvedic medicine. Knowing that he was supporting himself by writing articles on indigenous healers and therapists, his Sanskrit professor directed him to an eccentric holy man who lived only a few blocks from Svoboda in the town of Poona. Almost immediately the Guru Vimalananda became Svoboda's "helmsman" in his voyage through Indian society (Svoboda, 1994: 29-30). Svoboda spent eight years and three months with Vimalananda and then cremated his body according to the disreputable customs of the Aghora sect, which Vimalananda's family refused to attend. He managed the guru's racehorses, absorbed his teachings, and has written three books describing what he learned (Svoboda, 1986; 1994; 1997).

Svoboda, the partially informed Westerner, sits at the feet of a man who lives inside the world of Tantra and tells extravagant stories designed to impress us with the wholly otherness of a life lived close to the tiger and serpent. He knows that his disciple is acquainted with the ravines into which sexual compulsion can lead us and works to convince us of the "rigor" and "self-analysis" (Bhattacharya, 1988: 31) we must gain if we are to redirect our instincts. The following story concerns an exercise in sexual yoga that is known in Sanskrit as *vajroli*, an advanced technique in which sexual partners are said to reverse the natural out-flow of their sexual fluids and deliberately absorb the fluid of their partner. Older texts speak exclusively of the male's efforts to absorb vaginal fluid through the penis, though more recent accounts, such as the one that follows, imply an equality of gender in *vajroli*. The underlying rationale for this technique is the metaphysical notion that the sexual fluids of the opposite sex contain a sort of energy which is necessary if the practitioner is to attain a transgender wholeness -- a preliminary to the ultimate realization of his or her oneness with the creative energy, Shakti, that constitutes the universe. The universe itself is seen in myth as the eternal, non-ejaculatory love-play of god and goddess. In some versions of the myth, the divine partners take turns absorbing one another into themselves, so that in one moment all is Shiva and in the next all is Shakti. [6]

Here, in Vimalananda's own words as recalled by Svoboda, *vajroli* is presented as a rollicking contest:

I know I said that the female should under no circumstances climb on top of the male. I stand by this statement as far as sex between ordinary people is concerned, but the situation is different, vastly different, when two people know *Vajroli*. Then it becomes a friendly competition. I start off with one posture and try to take her off guard and overwhelm her with the sensation. She will respond by changing my posture into a slightly different one, trying to get the upper hand. A rhythm of its own develops, a musical melody, and both of us begin to dance while we are still making love. There's nothing like it; you just can't imagine the feeling.

Suppose she tries to maneuver herself on top of me. If she succeeds she will gloat: "Ha, what sort of Shiva are you? Now I will be in control." I can't allow that, so as soon as she comes on top I will suddenly, effortlessly, and gracefully transform that posture into one in which I am in control. Then I can tell her, "You dare not try to control me; I am your controller!" And as I speak those words she will be converting that posture into another one more favorable to her.

When both partners have full knowledge of *Vajroli* there is mutual benefit. She releases a little of

her secretion to him, just enough to lubricate his prostate; he releases just enough of his prostate fluid to rejuvenate her. . . .

Vajroli is not a joke. A man who uses full force Vajroli on an ordinary woman will cause her to bleed. She may even lose control over her sphincters and soil the bed. It can cause complete revulsion for sex, or it can create nymphomania. When a woman who knows Vajroli "milks" a man of his semen he discharges and discharges until he is empty and still must discharge. The tension becomes so great he cannot bear it. So this knowledge is not to be toyed with, lest you ruin yourself and others with you. When both partners know Vajroli, though, well, there is nothing like it in the world. You'll forget all about sex except with that partner.

Vajroli is only the beginning. After Vajroli there are Rajjoli, Sahajoli, Amaroli, and Gaupya -- but no one knows about Gaupya except Lord Shiva Himself. These techniques are very difficult to describe in words and can be practiced only when the two partners can leave their bodies at will. The Vedantins [7] talk about "Atma krida, atma ratih, atma maithunam," meaning the love play, eroticism, and sexual union of the Universal Soul, but they don't understand the true meaning of it. What happens is that the male must enter the female's body with his subtle body, and vice versa. Then the man will be able to feel the spasms his mate undergoes as each erogenous zone is ignited, and she can do the same thing in his body. They both thoroughly enjoy each other's play before the final coitus occurs.

Vajroli is a mutual clashing, interaction, and union of two personalities into one. Shiva and Shakti merge together into Sadashiva; the proton and the electron reunite to form the neutron. Just as in physics such a union is associated with tremendous energy, the union of Vajroli is associated with awesome Shakti, which can be used for great spiritual advancements. It is the achievement of a lifetime (Svoboda, 1986: 287-9).

According to Vimalananda, a vajroli contest consists in each partner attempting to sexually arouse the other beyond the point of no return while maintaining control over her own level of arousal. To succeed in such an endeavor, it is clear that each has to be completely familiar both with his own body and with that of his partner. Amidst this give and take in a high state of sexual excitement, each maintains her own personal control. Nevertheless the boundaries between them are significantly blurred. They find themselves participating in a unitary process, like "music," like "dance." "A rhythm develops"; a larger whole comprised of their separate activities contains them within its larger identity.

Furthermore, an altered state of consciousness obtains, a condition of "ecstasy," a "standing outside oneself" (*ek-stasis*) where, without losing mastery over their sexually aroused bodies, each partner becomes primarily aware of her "subtle body." As a preliminary formulation, [8] we can postulate that the subtle body is a universal psychological reality. In ordinary consciousness we fail to notice our subtle body, for there is no difference between our bodily senses and our psychological apprehension. Vimalananda, however, describes a split in consciousness. One part is aware of the "gross body" and its degree of arousal while the other "leaves" its own "gross body" and, as a "subtle" entity, enters the body of the partner and feels "the spasms his mate undergoes as each erogenous zone is ignited." Here is another blurring of boundaries. Participants in vajroli are aware not only of the rhythm and choreography that unite them, but of one another's sensations as well. This, evidently, is the psychological foundation for Vimalananda's claim that "Vajroli is a . . . union of two personalities into one."

Vimalananda's warnings about the dangers of vajroli imply not only physical damage, pain, bleeding, and unbearable tension, but psychological injury as well. When vajroli goes awry, it can cause obsessions, compulsions, and phobias: "complete revulsion for sex" or

"nymphomania." Although these comments are explicitly applied to women, there is no reason to think that the same sorts of psychological damage may not be visited upon men. Even his claim, "You'll forget all about sex except with that partner," has an ominous ring to it. All of these comments imply that vajroli belongs to a path that is fraught with danger. If we fail at vajroli, we have left the path of spirituality and perhaps been hopelessly corrupted. If we stir up forces we cannot master, we will wind up much worse off than when we started. What might have been spiritual becomes merely pathological.

On the other hand, "Vajroli is only the beginning." Vimalananda describes a path with stages he fails to explicate. Only one thing is clear: in the five stages from the extraordinary mastery of body and consciousness in vajroli to the mysterious technique of "Gaupya," a path is traced from the adept of sexual yoga to "Lord Shiva Himself." This implication is confirmed when Vimalananda calls "the union of two personalities" the merger of "Shiva and Shakti into Sadashiva." Sadashiva is the "Eternal Shiva," represented iconographically as a god whose left side is female and right side male (Svoboda, 1994: 313). Thus, Vimalananda claims that the male and female principles of the universe are united in the persons of the practitioners of vajroli so that in some sense they jointly "become" the ultimate divine principle. He emphasizes the cosmic dimension of this union by speaking of the nuclear transformations discovered by modern physics. Thus partners in vajroli effect and realize in a heightened state of consciousness the unitary principle of the cosmos, the Reality of Shiva-Being.

What we are to make of such claims has a great deal to do with what we think of that race-horse-owning guru who calls himself Vimalananda. Specifically, three questions are uppermost in our minds: (a) who is this Vimalananda, and why should we take him seriously; (b) what is the Aghora sect in which he claims membership, and what credibility does it have; (c) what are we to think of vajroli?

The Identity of Vimalananda

Svoboda presents his guru as a chain-smoking lover of horses and race tracks who died December 12, 1983, of the coronary condition that had plagued him for several years. He may not have been known as "Vimalananda" before Svoboda published his first book in 1986, for we are told that the name was deliberately selected by the two of them "from the many names he used during his lifetime" (Svoboda, 1986: 31). The name means "Bliss of Purity" (*vimala* = pure; *ananda* = bliss) as well as "Son of Vimala" (Vimala, his mother's name; *nanda* = son). He inherited the money he spent on promising but relatively inexpensive race horses. His "Guru Maharaj" disapproved of his horse racing. Vimalananda accepted this opinion with good grace -- after all, a guru is supposed to be interested only in the disciple's spiritual development. "But what he doesn't realize is that without something to attract my interest, I'm not going to be able to stay in this body" (Svoboda, 1997: 311).

In his earlier life, Vimalananda had been a wrestler (Svoboda, 1997: 75) and spent some time in a cave on the side of Mount Girnar as a Sadhu (Svoboda, 1997: 91). A Sadhu ("saintly one") is a naked ascetic with matted hair who generally follows his own practices in a solitary fashion (see Hartsuiker, 1993). At presumably a later time, Vimalananda earned a masters degree in Mughal history, from which he drew a number of his teaching stories (Svoboda, 1997: 40). Doctrinally, he was shamelessly eclectic: "He shopped the

metaphysical mall, donning and doffing assumptions until he found one that resounded with his experience, which he would then wear so long as it continued to fit" (Svoboda, 1997: 13). Probably his central doctrine was that we must "submit to reality," including all the karmic connections between people, events, and even horses.

These sketchy details are about all we learn of the enigmatic guru. But if the truth be told, the cautious reader cannot even be sure of these. For Svoboda also confesses: "Vimalananda cared nothing for historical accuracy. He was interested only in emotional accuracy" (Svoboda, 1994: 183). Thus his stories have surely been "shaped," and their details may not be "accurate" in the sense that we Westerners expect. Furthermore, one of his names was Bandal-e-aftab ("Sun among exaggerators") (Svoboda, 1986: 31). In this Vimalananda was perhaps just another Indian guru; for as Malcolm McLean points out, "India is not interested in historical detail but in the kinds of meaning that the lives [of the saints] had for the devotees and which only the true devotees comprehend (McLean, 1998: 14).

Svoboda's first book (1986) was convincing enough for the very scholarly David Gordon White, whose book, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (1996) traces the confluence of alchemy, hatha yoga, and Tantric sexual practices. White cites Vimalananda's description of vajroli as evidence that the medieval traditions are still being practiced (D. G. White, 1996: 201). Nevertheless, Svoboda's books leave the question open as to whether Vimalananda may be no more "real" than Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan Matus. [9] In the Preface to Svoboda's second book, *Aghora II*, psychologist and investigator of altered states of consciousness Robert Masters writes:

Finally, I feel obliged to say that I do not know whether Vimalananda was an actual person. His name, and other names in the book, are said to be pseudonyms intended to prevent readers from being "distracted" by "externals." We are told that Vimalananda died about ten years ago, so that there is no question of searching him out -- as many tried to do with another such mysterious character, the shaman Don Juan in the books of Carlos Castaneda.

In personal conversation with the author, he states that Vimalananda was indeed an actual person and that the mystery surrounding his identity is merely at the insistence of Vimalananda's own family. Considering the shock content of various of the Teachings, that is quite understandable. Some may wish to pursue this matter further. Most will find it sufficient to benefit from the extraordinary contents of *Aghora II* and its predecessor (Svoboda, 1994: 15).

For all his uncertainty, therefore, Masters finds Svoboda's books as valuable as I do. In the end, they speak truly and revealingly of body, soul, and spirit regardless of whether Vimalananda was an "actual person," whether he is a composite figure compiled of several gurus who influenced Svoboda -- or even whether Vimalananda is a disguise behind which lurks Svoboda's own experience. Svoboda, himself, leaves a disturbing hint near the end of his third book, where he says, "Vimalananda, like Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan, looked to omen as 'agreements from the world,' clues of Nature's approval or disapproval of proposed human action" (Svoboda, 1997: 275). Thus, in the last analysis, Svoboda gives us stories within stories; and the big story that contains all the others is the legend of Vimalananda the story-teller. The central question that only the reader can decide is whether the "emotional accuracy" of the stories is sufficient to override doubts about "historical accuracy." For my part, I shall go on talking of Vimalananda without caring whether he was an "actual person." It is enough to know that he is the story-teller. Whether he is a stand-in for Svoboda makes little difference, for we have never doubted that Svoboda is telling the

story-teller's story.

The Aghora Tradition

Most of Svoboda's material on the Aghora tradition is contained in his first book, *Aghora: At the Left Hand of God* (1986). He tells us that the cover of the book was designed by Vimalananda himself. It is a wrap-around cremation-ground (*smashan*) scene in ominous colors. A bearded, long-haired Aghori sits naked in a half-lotus position on the back cover, his body smeared white with the ashes of human remains, a skull in his right hand, mala beads in his left, surrounded by human bones and cremation fires. He is rapt in horrified awe as he gazes on the scene depicted on the front cover, a supine skeleton consumed in flames that rise high into the air, surrounding a blue-skinned, naked goddess standing on the skeleton with lolling tongue, wearing a necklace of severed heads and a skirt of severed arms. On the page facing the Table of Contents is a paragraph describing this scene that was "dictated" to Svoboda by Vimalananda:

Ghora is darkness, the darkness of ignorance. *Aghora* means light, the absence of darkness. Under the Tree of Knowledge is an Aghori, a follower of the path of Aghora. He has gone beyond ignorance thanks to the Flame of Knowledge which billows from the funeral pyre. The funeral pyre is the ultimate reality, a continual reminder that everyone has to die. Knowledge of the ultimate reality of Death has taken the Aghori beyond the Eight Snares of Existence: lust, anger, greed, delusion, envy, shame, disgust and fear which bind all beings. The Aghori plays with a human skull, astonished by the uselessness of limited existence, knowing the whole world to be within him though he is not in the world. His spiritual practices have awakened within him the power of Kundalini, which takes the form of the goddess dancing on the funeral pyre: Smashan Tara. He is bewildered to think that all is within him, not external to him; that he sees it not with the physical eyes but with the sense of perception. The Flame of Knowledge is that which preserves life, the Eternal Flame, the Supreme Ego, the Motherhood of God which creates the whole Maya of the universe and thanks only to Whose grace the Aghori has become immortal (Svoboda, 1986: 4).

The reader is not apt to guess the personal meaning of this scene for Svoboda until the second volume in the series (1994: 30), where we are told that Vimalananda's first words to him were that he would be the one to cremate the eccentric guru. In effect, Vimalananda took Svoboda as his student in order to have someone to perform traditional Aghori funeral rites after his coronary condition finally got the better of him. Thus, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that the cover scene of *Aghora* depicts Robby Svoboda in the role of the ash-smeared, naked ascetic. The cremation took place three years before *Aghora* appeared, at Bombay's Banganga Smashan. Vimalananda's wife and children refused to attend because they were still angry with him for failing to attend his daughter's wedding -- not to mention their disapproval of his Aghora ways. At his guru's request, Svoboda played over and over a tape of Jim Reeves singing "Precious Lord Take My Hand" (Svoboda, 1997: 313). Thus in the last analysis, Svoboda's narrative resembles Bhattacharya's in that it begins in fascination with an eccentric and disreputable guru and ends in the saint's cremation at the disciple's hands and the image of a goddess wrapped in flames.

Like everything else, the meaning of *aghora* is unstable. At the beginning of the third volume, it is defined not as "without darkness" but as "without gall," "unagitated" (Svoboda, 1997: 7). This definition agrees with scholarly accounts. Georg Feuerstein (1989: 207) says that *aghora* means "non-terrible," which is one of the names of Shiva in his terrible aspect. He goes so far as to quote Vimalananda on the divine madness of the Aghora path.

Feuerstein says that practitioners of Aghora are venerated and feared in India to this day, that they aspire to obliterate all human-made distinctions, that they live in smashans or on dung hills, that they drink alcohol and urine as readily as water, and "breach all social conventions by eating meat and the flesh of human corpses." Eliade (1969:296), who may have been Feuerstein's source, calls Aghoris ascetic worshippers of Shiva. *Aghora* means "non-terrific." They eat from human skulls used as bowls, and "still practiced cannibalism at the end of the nineteenth century." The only meat they refuse to eat is horse-flesh. [10] Eliade also says, "Even as human excrement fertilizes sterile soil, so assimilating every kind of filth makes the mind capable of any and every meditation" (1969: 297). He adds that outside of God, Aghoris respect only the guru; they live a life of vagabondage; and "every guru is always accompanied by a dog" (297). There is a rather vicious-looking dog in front of the meditating Aghori on the cover of *Aghora*, but Vimalananda's own dog, "Lizoo," appears to have been quite gentle.

The cremation ground (smashan) is the preferred location for the Aghoris' ritual of sexual union, performed as a circle of couples with the guru and his consort sexually joined in the center. In her book *The Madness of the Saints* (1989: 123-4), June McDaniel presents a lengthy eye-witness account she found in the autobiography of a wandering holy man, Promode Chatterjee. In his travels, Chatterjee had met an *aghori bhairava tantrika*, a male Aghori who was initiated as a Tantric "Bhairava," or expert in sexual yoga. (The female counterpart of a Bhairava is a Bhairavi.) This unnamed Aghori invited Chatterjee to attend a sexual circle ceremony that took place at night amidst a thunder storm in the Bhairava's hut, located in a smashan.

Chatterjee describes the passing of wine in a skull used as a drinking bowl. The Bhairava enters the circle entirely naked and sits on a tiger skin rug, where he worships his naked Bhairavi, as she stands before him "like a statue." Then she sits in his lap and they both remain "in meditation" as the other couples, one by one, perform the same ritual. "It was not erotic, but rather it evoked a sense of holiness and sweetness and I felt a continuous, ecstatic mood." The men and women feed one another from a plate of meat and fish (foods forbidden to the orthodox, as is wine). Eventually the couples that make up the circumference of the circle begin "to act intoxicated and lustful" while the Bhairava and Bhairavi remain "absorbed in trance."

At the end, I found myself rooted to the spot, and in a flash of lightening saw the scene as divine: light-figures of naked gods and goddesses in the midst of their divine play, surrounding a large statue of Hara and Gauri, [11] as still and profound as the Himalayas. I was not sure how long I remained in this state, but when I returned to normal consciousness, the sun was rising in the eastern sky (McDaniel, 1989: 124).

We might well imagine that, as a "holy man," Chatterjee was more susceptible to altered states of consciousness than we, and surely more steeped in Hindu imagery. Possibly we would not have had the vision he had. We may have been impressed, however, with the "holiness," "sweetness," and "ecstasy" of the occasion, convinced that something earnest and worshipful was taking place despite the nakedness, intoxication, and "lustful" behavior. Without trying to draw any theoretical conclusions from this story, we can surely gather that the Aghora tradition is not idiosyncratic to Vimalananda; that it does indeed favor cremation grounds, sexual forms of worship, forbidden substances, and grisly objects. Possibly the choreography of the vajroli contest describes the "lustful" conduct of the couples Chatterjee

saw on the circumference of the circle. Or perhaps Vimalananda's contest was a sort of training exercise for the Bhairava and Bhairavi, so that eventually they would be prepared to maintain that absolute stillness while in high sexual arousal that renders the central couple as majestic and profound as the Himalayas.

Vimalananda believed *his* Bhairavi was the most experienced sexual initiatrix in all of India. She "made up for" all his "deficiencies" (Svoboda, 1986: 291). He left her only because he "was ordered to return to the world" to continue his work. Theirs was not a temporary and "purely physical relationship," nor even a "mental relationship" that might last a lifetime. It is "permanent" and "eternal," a "spiritual relationship" (*Ibid.*, 294). The "eternity" of this "spiritual relationship," however, takes some fantastic turns:

When she came to me she looked like a fifteen-year-old girl, but she is much, much older than that. . . . She remains naked, but covers herself with her long, matted locks, and she carries a trident, Shiva's symbol.

Once I playfully asked her, "Why don't you let me see your real form? She showed me -- and my God! it was horrible! I was nauseated by the sight: All her skin was wrinkled; her eyelids drooped down on her cheeks and she had to pick them up with her fingers in order to see me. She had become immortal through the use of mercury (Svoboda, 1986: 291).

This Bhairavi sounds less and less like an "actual person." The reader of Svoboda's three-volume story will recall an incident in which Vimalananda describes a meditation ritual employing five skulls, four human and one animal, in which the aspiring Bhairava can invoke an "enchanted woman." [12] "The trick," he says, is to resist this Bhairavi's advances and thereby attract the attention of a goddess. Take *her* for your Bhairavi, if you dare. Otherwise, steer clear of sex and treat her as a mother (Svoboda, 1994: 168). If you cannot reach such divine favor in this life, pray to ready yourself for your next life or the one after (Svoboda, 1986: 295). "You must work at your own rate of speed toward your own goal; no one is required to do anything" (Svoboda, 1986: 168).

In Svoboda's trilogy, it is impossible to tell whether this Bhairavi was as much comprised of (perhaps middle-aged) flesh and blood as the Bhairavi who attended Ramakrishna [13] -- for she certainly resembles her in nakedness, matted hair, and trident (Kripal, 1995: 113-6). But other passages suggest Vimalananda's Bhairavi was an "enchanted" apparition, even a goddess. Possibly she was all three: an "actual" woman whom Vimalananda saw differently when in altered states of consciousness. [14] Moving outside the Aghora tradition to the related practice of Tibetan Buddhism, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso says that the best training is to be had with a properly experienced consort; but failing this, a safer and more easily available resource is an *imagined* consort (Gyatso, 1992: 136-8).

The Mystery of Vajroli

It is one thing to imagine that a woman can gain sufficient control over her vaginal muscles as to "milk" her consort's penis. But the notion that a man can gain such power over his urethra as to reverse the orgasmic spasm reflex and deliberately absorb vaginal secretions seems fantastic in the extreme. Many commentators have taken this position and dismissed the physiological claims of Tantric practitioners as absurd. Eliade admits the difficulties in interpreting such texts when he says, "The tantric meaning is usually erotic, but it is difficult to decide whether the reference is to a concrete act or to a sexual symbolism" (1969: 252).

Nevertheless he cites an article in which Dr. Jean Filliozat [15] translates a passage in the *Hathayogapradipika* that describes the yogin training his urethra over a period of several days by learning to blow air into his bladder through a curved pipe inserted like a catheter (*Ibid.*, 233). Filliozat also describes his personal observation of a yogin sucking up water with his penis under circumstances that made it highly unlikely that he had first inflated his bladder. Possibly urethral retraining is an example of the sort of conscious control over our involuntary "smooth" muscles that the yogic tradition claims regarding the intestines. [16] It is, in fact, widely accepted that yogins can train their intestinal muscles to reverse peristalsis and thereby "cleanse" their bowels while sitting in a tub of water. [17] Furthermore, several passages in the Chinese literature of sexual mysticism make similar claims for vajroli (cf. Wile, 1992: 52-3). [18]

Not surprisingly, Vimalananda is uncompromising in taking the physical possibility of vajroli for granted. In the passage cited by D. G. White as an example of how medieval Tantric/alchemical/yogic practices survive in contemporary India, Vimalananda describes a middle phase of vajroli training in graphic -- even painful -- detail:

After you have been able to suck up water through the penis and hold a bladder full of water for three hours you proceed to use milk, to cool the genital organs. Then *ghee* (clarified butter) to lubricate. Honey is next; it is very sticky and hard to make flow upward. Finally, you do it with mercury, which is extremely heavy. You must use mercury which has been purified and prepared in the Tantric way; otherwise it is a deadly poison. When you can hold a bladder full of mercury for three hours without spilling a drop you have reached the level of the first qualification (Svoboda, 1986: 280).

Even granting Vimalananda's penchant for exaggeration, we can see that he is making two related claims about Tantric sexual practice. The first is that our involuntary, "instinctual" processes can be reversed with careful training, reminding us of Bhattacharya's snakes crawling into the funeral pyre. The second is that if we are to achieve this reversal, a gradual process of desensitization must be involved. To avoid the involuntary spasmodic release of orgasm, we have to be able to train ourselves in a step-by-step fashion to resist the automatic reflex.

Eliade makes this latter point comprehensible when he discusses the Sahajiya tradition in which a "neophyte" prepares himself for physical interaction with a Bhairavi:

He must . . . transform her into a goddess through an interiorized iconographic dramaturgy. Thus, for the first four months, he should wait on her like a servant, sleep in the same room with her, then at her feet. During the next four months, while continuing to wait on her as before, he sleeps in the same bed, on the left side. During a third four months, he will sleep on the right side, then they sleep embracing, etc. The goal of all these practices is the "autonomization" of sensual pleasure -- regarded as the sole human experience capable of bringing about the nirvanic bliss -- and control of the senses -- that is, the arresting of semen (1969: 266).

This "autonomization" of sexual excitement is certainly the aim of the vajroli contest. As each partner strives to stimulate her partner past the point of no return so as to absorb his genital fluids, she is gaining more and more control over her own arousal. The natural response of uncontrolled spasms is held immovable by superior conscious control. Thus, regardless of whether vajroli is possible as a physical *reversal* of the urethral spasm reflex, it is surely the aim of the contest to disengage from that reflex so that higher and higher states of sustained arousal become possible. Sexual arousal, being the engine of spiritual

realization, the Tantric practitioner has to learn to avoid the ravine of involuntary ejaculation.

Furthermore, it appears that vajroli has a psychological meaning. Whether or not we can suck fluids out of one another, it is clear that we can victimize our partners. We can take from one another without giving in return. No doubt we are all familiar with sexual partners -- married or otherwise -- in which one is habitually depleted to the benefit of the other. An integral part of the Tantric discourse on vajroli concerns the belief that the partner who sucks up fluids from the other is depleting his partner for his own selfish gain. Bhattacharya describes such a case, in which there is no talk of vajroli as a physiological reversal (Bhattacharya, 1988: 113-4).

When he was sixteen, a communal worship of the goddess Tara in one of her terrible aspects was conducted at the very doorstep of Bhattacharya's family home. In the midst of the ceremony, the teenager found himself "called away." He followed the call in a kind of trance and was brought to a temple at Manikarnika, where he found a naked yogin with a powerful body and matted locks seated on the entranced naked form of a woman Bhattacharya calls his favorite "auntie" -- evidently not a blood relation, but a "venerable lady" who had often fed him "with her own hands." He himself fell more deeply into trance in the presence of this rite, and "time stood still."

Auntie's open body lay before me like a corpse. I recalled the relevant scriptural lines. Was I not already quite familiar with this part of a seance where a woman offered the sacred seat?

As I watched, she appeared to me as a distant neighbor from another planet. Her staring eyes with their burning look fixed on me expressed both sublime rapture and undisturbed stillness of peace. The animation in the look compelled me to adore her. I would love to be sitting there myself. . . . Gradually she turned into a ball of blazing light. I saw my body too becoming another ball of light, and the two balls were gradually coming together (*Ibid.*, 113-4).

Bhattacharya is brought nearer his senses by a sudden drizzle of rain and has a vision of his Lady in Saffron wrapped in flames and calling out to him, "Come to me at once." Later he asks her why she called him away with such disapproval. She speaks of "reversal" and of "winding clocks backwards," saying there must be "no short-cut, no compromise."

"Did you notice the position of your auntie in the group *asana*?, " she asked.

The yogi was using her as his *asana* of course," I said. "But that is also your position as my *asana*. Isn't it? What is then so strange about it?"

"This is true. But in the process I am the giver. In her case she was the victim, and was being sucked from. In wishful dedication there is the virtue of positive gain. One could gain by giving away. In forced extraction there is evil. This would leave her very weak. I would not like you to be in her position" (*Ibid.*, 124).

"Much later" he learned that his beloved "auntie" had been forced to serve in that position for over three days "without a moment's break" (*Ibid.*, 125).

What Difference Does It Make?

As we circumambulate the story of the vajroli contest and more stories proliferate, we see that there are at least a few tenuous historical and cross-cultural connections. Even though this fails to establish anything like "historical accuracy" for the legendary story-teller, perhaps it softens our firmest initial doubts and enables us to trust whatever we find of "emotional accuracy" in the stories of Svoboda's guru. Surely the vajroli contest is not

wholly foreign to human experience -- even though it may lie entirely outside our own personal narrative. We may retain our skepticism regarding the physiological accuracy of urethral reversal. But the existence of Bhairavis in India (however few they may be) can hardly be doubted. The occasional reader may even have met one of their Western sisters. Undoubtedly, sexual initiatrixes in the West, lacking a supportive tradition, are more likely to suffer from guilt and extreme self-doubt than the trident-bearing, matted-haired women of India. But even in India, a sexual initiatrix will be viewed with horror and scandalized suspicion by ordinary upright citizens. Indian women are generally viewed either as safe and saintly mothers or as dangerous and sexually insatiable savages (Kakar, 1989). Widows, for instance, are held in great suspicion as having weakened and brought on the deaths of their husbands through their inordinate sexual demands (Kinsley, 1997: 183).

If we are to draw any dependable conclusions from the story of the vajroli contest, we will have to cautiously restrict ourselves to universal characteristics of human sexuality and spirituality. In doing so, we must remain open to broad, cross-cultural claims that may lie outside our own personal experience as well as the canons of respectability. I think we can identify six different areas or "domains" of human sexual experience that meet these criteria. The brief sketches of these six domains that follow set the agenda for the rest of this book.

1. *Physical Orgasm*. Surely no one will deny that sexual arousal is characterized by an increase in tension which seeks release in orgasm. The drive for orgasmic release is one of our strongest psycho-physical impulses. It has long been held dangerous for the individual's psychological balance and the stability of society. If we find Vimalananda's story disturbing, it is very likely because it challenges the broad cultural consensus that is our Western heritage. Indeed, the rollicking "indulgence" of the vajroli partners appears to come very close to what Freud called the infant's "polymorphous perversity," which, in "normal development" leads to a "mature sexuality" that strives for an orgasmic encounter between penis and vagina. Traditional Christianity has sanctioned the orgasmic encounter between husband and wife as a permissible pleasure, which God has instituted to ensure compliance with the biblical command to "increase and multiply." Recent literature of the "Sex and Love Addicts" variety largely accepts the same view of human sexuality, insisting that the "sex addict" must learn that he or she has no control over the sexual instinct's drive for orgasm and must look to a "Higher Power" for assistance. The vajroli contest plays with and subverts the sort of sexual experience we all take for granted.
2. *Sexual Longing*. If we read Vimalananda's story in the context of Indian and Chinese schools of mystical sexuality, we discover a long-standing tradition of holding back from orgasm. Selectively borrowing from texts generated in these traditions, Western sex manuals give us a myriad of techniques for resisting automatic ejaculation, some with a spiritual interest and others with an eye merely to enhancing sexual pleasure. Raising sexual tension while avoiding orgasmic release increases our ardor and brings new dimensions of our longing to consciousness. From the Western phenomenon of Courtly Love to the Hindu "path of devotion" (*bhakti*), erotic desire for an unattainable partner -- be it a high-born Lady beyond the lover's station or a divinity -- constitutes the foundation of *spiritual* longing. Many of the bhakti saints claim that longing is more important than union. We need to examine more closely the benefits that are claimed for the physical process of non-orgasmic intercourse and the parallel

psychological experience of unrequited longing.

3. *Scandalous Propensities*. The vajroli contest catches our attention and perhaps stirs our outrage because it is so scandalous. Deliberately flouting the sexual mores of one's society for the purposes of political dissent and mystical attainment has a very long tradition. Examples of this can be found in the Bible, the Rig Veda, Kashmiri Shaivism, the "Witness Game" in Sufism, the followers of Rasputin, the American proto-Theosophist Pascal Beverly Randolph, and the hippies. Hindu practitioners strive for a state of mind in which there is truly no longer a difference between the lawful and the unlawful, the savory and the disgusting. All these people are trying to free themselves from the "letter of the law" in order to awaken the "spirit." Even if antinomianism has become an ideal with which they never cease to struggle, their aspirations have a spiritual intent which requires investigation if we are to understand the broader implications of human sexuality.
4. *Sexual Doorway to Alternate Reality*. Sustained sexual arousal without orgasmic release results in an excitement that can be felt in the whole body. Hinduism has called this the "rising of kundalini," a sort of energy that is described in the language of esoteric physiology. Centuries of experience with this energy have led to detailed descriptions of a "subtle body" that includes the aura, the chakras, and the pathways that connect them. Apparently sexual arousal may induce an altered state of consciousness that is available to anyone willing to explore it. But, as with meditation and shamanic journeying, the non-ordinary conscious state generated in sustained sexual arousal constitutes an opportunity one must learn how to use. Certainly the vajroli contest implies just this sort of initiation and mastery, as it invites higher and higher levels of arousal without losing control while demanding that each partner use the "subtle body" to enter the other's "gross body" in order to feel her "spasms."
5. *Experience of Divine Union*. The slipperiness of Vimalananda's language, as it glides back and forth between the description of a fleshly consort and the traits of a shapeshifting demoness who may sometimes be a goddess, appears to refer to an uncertain line dividing the merely human from the divine. Identification with the gods represents a specific kind of altered state of consciousness characterized by superb control together with extraordinary openness. Intense states of bodily arousal open imaginal capacities that strain toward divine union. In Julius Evola's (1983) language, a "metaphysical leap" is made when the partners shed their individuality and become Shiva and Shakti in eternal love play. Eliade calls it a "rupture of plane." The prerequisite for this attainment is not only a high degree of sexual training, but above all direct, personal experience of the "Absolute" as it is variously named by the different religions. Subjectively, the energy of the subtle body is perceived to be identical with that constituting the universe. Buddhism calls it "emptiness"; Shaivism refers to it as the cosmic vibration of Shakti.
6. *Mutuality*. The vajroli contest involves the partners in a "rhythm" and a "dance" that is greater than both of them, that turns "two personalities into one." While each experiences herself and her partner "from the inside," their separateness softens into a mutual participation in a single, larger reality. We catch a hint of this whenever we find that another's state of arousal has an effect upon us, producing a common

emotional state, which is experienced as an intimacy of profound depth. Hinduism knows this as the *shaktipat*, by which the guru's mystical arousal awakens mystical experience in his disciple. The point is that what obtains *between* people in the form of intimacy and mutuality exceeds what any of us can attain by ourselves. Except in the case of masturbation -- and sometimes not even there -- sexuality is always first and foremost a mutual experience, where my sensations and discoveries are not separate from yours. In the various Tantric traditions, *we* become Shiva and Shakti, male Buddha and female Buddha, *yab* and *yum*. Becoming one with the divinity responsible for the world begins in and is realized through the mutuality of coupled consorts.

After investigating these six domains of human sexuality, the book ends by considering, "What next?" What happens *after* the most sublime encounters with and participations in divinity? How does life go on once the altered state of consciousness comes to an end and we re-enter the ordinary world? Vimalananda presents the vajroli contest as an extraordinary episode and assures us that life will never be the same for us again. We will never be satisfied with ordinary sex or ordinary partners. Will we be able to abide the ordinary world? Or will we, like Vimalananda, have to take up something like horse-racing to keep us from leaving the empirical world forever?

Shaw (1994) and Allione (1986), feminist researchers in Tibetan Buddhism, have revealed the importance of female incarnations of the Buddha as the original gurus of the Vajrayana tradition. Real life and legendary stories portray a sort of sexual anchorite, alternately sedentary and wandering, practicing "liberating intimacy" (Hershock, 1996) with other accomplished masters/mistresses. This appears to be a variation of what has appeared again and again in Sufism. The wandering dervish follows a path that cannot be planned but is rediscovered anew in every moment as the serpentine edge where this empirical world intersects the *mundus imaginalis*, the non-ordinary world. Putting these two traditions together, Bhairava and Bhairavi become sexual wayfarers, living simultaneously in the two worlds, where every stone and tree is a reminder of the eternal love play of god and goddess.

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1. That the linkage between sex and spirituality may be three to four thousand years old is supported by the standard conservative estimate of scholars of the Indian Vedas, who date these ancient scriptures at about 1500 b.c.e., and where we find stern disapproval of wandering bands of ragged mystics, the Vratyas, who belong to the earliest history of yoga and rejected the sacrificial religion of the Vedas. Their central rite included an enactment of the creative, erotic play between god and goddess that constitutes the two worlds: the empirical world of space and time and the transcendent world of the gods and spirits (Feuerstein, 1990). The figure of 8000 years is supported by Daniélou: "From the beginning of the sixth millennium, the marks of Shivaism are to be found everywhere; the cult of the bull, the snake and the phallus, the royal symbol of the horns, Yoga positions, funeral chambers" (1992: 30). Feuerstein, Kak, & Frawley (1995) are in substantial agreement. The argument that the link between sex and spirituality may be 30,000 years old relies on interpretations of the Ice Age cave art of Europe (cf. Clottes & Lewis-Williams, 1998).
 2. He does not tell us when he began to wear clothes; but in an incident when he was sixteen he is asked, "Where is your dhoti (loincloth)?" Probably he was expected to cover his genitals at about the age of puberty.
 3. In his boyish mentality, she was an "old lady." Since she died in her eighties, probably around 1955, she must have been about fifty during the significant events that occur in 1921, when Bhattacharya was eleven.

4. Although Bhattacharya's English is generally excellent, the book is filled with typographical errors, misspellings, and occasional turns of phrase that may be confusing for the reader of this book. In order to avoid burdening the text with notations and explanations, I shall silently correct these defects without drawing attention to them.
5. *Ghat*: a set of steps leading into a river or other body of water for ritual bathing. Many, like the one at Manikarnika, are equipped with cremation facilities.
6. This view is perhaps most fully described in Dyczkowski (1987), who explicates the visionary experience and underlying metaphysical doctrine of Kashmiri Shaivism, the Shiva religion of Kashmir. It has much in common with tantric sects of all sorts and is a close kin of Vimalananda's style of practice.
7. Those who follow the classical tradition in India (Vedanta), basing their philosophy and practice upon the Upanishads. Vimalananda quotes the Upanishads when it suits his purposes but accords them no doctrinal priority over other traditions.
8. The nature of the subtle body will be more fully examined in a later chapter.
9. After initial confusion, Castaneda's books have generally become accepted as "novels." See, for example, Noel (1997). Castaneda's wife, who does not doubt that her husband studied with one or several Mexican Indian informants, believes the name Matus derives from the Mateus wine the two of them loved (Margaret Runyan Castaneda, 1997).
10. This is not only an interesting commentary on Vimalananda's equine avocation, but probably a reference to a tradition that reaches back to the Atharva Veda's depiction of Vratyas, surely forerunners of the Aghora tradition, who went out of their way to outrage practitioners of the sacrificial religion of the Vedas. The principle rite described in the Vedas is horse sacrifice (cf. Basham, 1959: 243).
11. McDaniel's text has *Gouri* instead of *Gauri*. Dr. Cornelia Dimmitt informs me that "ou" is not a Sanskrit form. *Gauri*, however, means "white, yellow, shining" in female form and is a well-known epithet of the goddess.
12. Bhattacharya (1988) describes two such rituals.
13. Ramakrishna, however, worshipped his Bhairavi as a mother.
14. This possibility of an actual woman who can take on frightful and divine appearance is also reported by the French Tantrika, Daniel Odier, in the account of his initiation (Odier, 1997).
15. J. Filliozat. "Les Limites des pouvoirs humains dans l'Inde," *Etudes carmelitaines* (1953): 23-38.
16. The striated muscles of our arms and legs are under our voluntary control, while the smooth muscles of the intestines, urethra, etc., do their peristaltic work automatically and independently of the conscious will -- although we know that additional factors, such as stress, can interfere with this involuntary function.
17. A humble man from the rural American Midwest has assured me -- without demonstration -- that he has learned this technique, albeit imperfectly.
18. For example: "Following the woman's first orgasm, which is absorbed by the man, she should bring herself to orgasm again to give him a second opportunity to absorb her *ch'i*. Finally, they both should reach climax together during which time she uses vaginal contractions to absorb his *ching*" (Wile, 1992: 52-3).