

Indecent Practices and Erotic Trance: Making Sense of Tantra

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The Way Of Longing

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Although kundalini tells us a great deal about eros in its fullness, the chances are that most of us are not going to be faced with the disorienting torture of a Gopi Krishna as soon as we have learned carezza. Indeed, the factor that carries us beyond the rung of the diamond ladder associated with carezza to the next is a quality that belongs very clearly to our Western familiarity with eros: longing.

Eros, as we have already noted, is characterized by powerful tensions; for the promise of being lifted to the heights of divine union or plunged into the depths of utter destruction is always present, more or less noticed, giving every erotic encounter a sense of thrilling and dangerous fatefulness, lending it a compelling challenge. We know we have to do something about it, although we are torn. We want to give in but something stops us. We think we have acquiesced in this force that wants to carry us into its turbulence like flotsam and then discover to our confusion that we have held something in reserve. We want to run for our life, but something holds us back.

Because eros sinks its roots into the physiology, emotionality, and imaginal immensity of kundalini, it makes us at least dimly aware of a threat to our sanity that is no less significant than its blissful promise. The upsurge of kundalini that would overwhelm our habitual and unthinking efforts to hang onto our memories of who we are, maintain our ego-identity, and cling to the hectic and ephemeral realities of the persona field brings to our awareness a conservative reflex lurking just out of sight in the "pre-conscious" or "subliminal" domain of the psyche and that manifests itself as terror in the face of the unknown. In this context, Toomer's experience of that upsurge as a "seed outgrowing its pod" inevitably inspires ambivalence. On the one hand, we are more than curious about the nature of that "seed," the atman or "self" that is unthinkably immense in contrast to the "pod" of our

limited identity that has protected us with an illusory sense of safety and confidence that we know who we are. On the other hand, the prospect of that pod being torn open from the inside exposes us to an uncanny and horrifying unknown. We might call this the "vertical" tension of eros, for what would take us "upward" into a blissful cosmic consciousness also threatens us with a "downward" plunge into madness.

The vertical tension of eros, however, may lurk in the background of our awareness. For the upsurge of a power as great as kundalini generally hides itself behind a more obvious tension. Whether achieved through the practice of carezza in the style of John Humphrey Noyes (what we have called "artificial eros") or encountered directly through a momentous meeting such as that of Muktananda's factory owner with his earthly Venus ("spontaneous eros"), eros always brings us face-to-face with a "horizontal" tension. The beloved partner in whose presence eros emerges appears to us as uniquely chosen by fate to awaken us from our slumber. We cannot believe that our earthly Venus or Adonis is just like everyone else. That partner of ours seems so fatefully linked with our own destiny, the incipient enlargement of our own being, that we cannot be casual, indifferent, or dispassionate about that special person's identity. We know with the certainty of erotic trance that we and our partner are linked forever on a plane of reality that cannot be obvious to our contemporaries but is undeniable to us. We find ourselves in the position of Toomer *vis-à-vis* the people walking and driving on the streets below. We cannot avoid the impression that their eyes are closed to an immense reality that is beyond question for us. They move robotically like zombies while we are rubbing the sleep from our eyes.

The horizontal tension between ourselves and our partner manifests itself as the simultaneous realization that the two of us are at some essential level "one" and yet distinct. The incontrovertible reality of our belonging to a *we* is opposed by our consciousness that we are nevertheless an *I* and a *you*. We can only get so near and never near enough. Only so distant but never unhooked. The horizontal dimension of eros makes us aware that we cannot get near enough to end the torment of our separateness nor distant enough to silence the shrill anxiety of our longing to be finally and absolutely one. The blissful promise of dissolving into the *we* threatens us with the loss of our habitual identity -- the *I* we expend so much energy retaining (ahamkara, the sense of me and mine). Simultaneously, to insist upon this illusory and ephemeral identity blocks the enlargement of our being that self-evidently can only be attained in the *we*. Caught in this horizontal tension of eros, we find there are only two options open to us. We can allow ourselves to swing heedless in the turbulence of desire, pulled willy-nilly in the roiling current -- headlong, perhaps, into passionate intercourse only suddenly to erupt into anger, hatred, and pain as we try to destroy the one being in all creation who has such power over us that we no longer know who we are. Or we can take a stand: hold firm against the storm, planting one foot securely in the knowledge that we are unquestionably near to one another, more near than we have been with anyone, and the other foot firmly in the realization that our distance is undeniable.

Holding firm in the horizontal tension between the pull into nearness and the push into distance is the psychological counterpart of semen-retention. Carezza employs a physiology of distance to heighten the tension of eros. Once the physical "glide" has been attained and eros occupies the center of our attention, a new optimal distance has to be found. "Longing" is the name we give to desire held in check. Therefore if the rung of carezza is attained through the struggle with our physiology, the next rung is reached by our response to the

challenge of longing.

Encounters With Longing

If we have ever had a powerful encounter with spontaneous eros, perhaps early in our lives, we know exactly what its frantic imperative is capable of doing to us. Recall to mind the first individual whose being issued us a monumental challenge. No doubt there were earlier infatuations and romantic liaisons that seemed important at the time. But this earthly Venus or Adonis leaves them all pale by comparison. In the past we inevitably worried whether our feelings were reciprocated. We were impressed by the physical beauty and personal style of our intended partner and knew an adventure was open before us. But it was a horizontal adventure like everyone else's. We would "date," pledge fidelity, belong to the coupled scene of the persona field that looks forward to marriage, family, a joint bank account, dual ownership.

The earthly Venus or Adonis who opens our eyes to the subtle plane, however, is a being very much apart from all that. The surging forth of eros is unquestionably a mutual event. There is no worry that this special person does not share our interest and is not already present with us on another plane of reality. Everything that went before, all declarations of eternal faithfulness, and all explosive breakups now appear to us as inconsequential and delusional. We know for the first time what Vimalananda meant when he distinguished between a "temporary and purely physical relationship," a "mental relationship that might last a lifetime," and a "permanent, eternal, and spiritual relationship." All of our previous relationships, whatever we may have thought about them at the time, are now revealed to be merely physical or mental. This one alone is spiritual and eternal. At this point we believe that the draw between us is absolute, beyond debate, and points unambiguously to genital union. The terrifying thrill of danger, meanwhile, is easily ascribed to the fear we will turn out to be inadequate to our own destiny. Perhaps my actions will not sufficiently reflect the intensity of my feelings and convictions; perhaps my naked body will inspire disgust; perhaps I will not be "good enough" in bed. We screen our real anxiety -- our terror of being destroyed by the overwhelming power of a kundalini that we do not know directly but only intuit -- innocently behind these practical but relatively trivial fears.

If everything works out and we find a time and place for our sexual encounter, we believe without question that the draw into unity will be realized genitally in simultaneous orgasm. As we approach one another, the imagined difficulties of getting naked are passed through without a hitch, for eros continues to lead the way. We find our own nakedness a delicious freedom, as we seem to shuck the penultimate symbol of the distancing barrier between us with our clothes; and the nakedness of our partner comes as a glorious revelation of vulnerability and openness. Our partner offers us an unrestricted gift that is far more than body, for we see that body on the subtle plane of trance, in the sacred space of cosmic union.

Although we can hardly remain unaware of moist arousal in our genital organs, eros keeps the center of our consciousness behind our eyes as we contemplate the glorious mystery of our partner. Everything we imagined about that incomparable being seems confirmed as we give ourselves to an embrace more momentous than anything we have experienced in the past. The joining of our organs intensifies and deepens that embrace, even surprising us with

its insistent rightness. We are "home" where we were always meant to be, though decades have passed without our knowing how estranged we have been from where we "belong."

As we begin to move together in harmony, our awareness shifts to the bodily level. At first we may overlook this change of focus. Bodily insistence constitutes, indeed, a displacement of our attention but is accompanied by an inevitable intensity that seems at first to confirm our highest hopes. Union is not merely in our minds and hearts, it is realizing itself in our bodies. We retain an awareness that our partner is the very one we have desired so constantly for days, weeks, or months. Possibly we are only trying to remind ourselves of this fact, while our bodily arousal moves to the foreground of our attention. For as we race toward the point of no return, the center of our consciousness slips from our grasp, slides irretrievably down through our body, and fastens tenaciously to our genitals in the moment that our spasm reflex takes over.

Falling "forward" into orgasmic "explosion" releases the tension. If we are not too much identified by this time with the delicious bodily lethargy that results from the release of tension -- if we are able to remember in the reduced erotic trance that remains to us that it was union we sought -- we enter a space of sadness and loss. Somehow the ultimate joining of fiber, bone, heart, and soul that we had taken for granted has eluded us, as we lie spent and soporific, side-by-side but unspeakably distant from one another. We have been through something big, but instead of joining us in ultimate bliss, it has brought us face-to-face with insuperable separateness. We may cling to one another, recalling the immanent proximity that possessed us only moments before. But we are aware as well that these are only arms about rib cage and waist, belonging to two bodies that will ever be distinct. The silky skin of moments before has become unpleasantly sticky. Distance has reasserted itself, and we are left with our longing, undiminished but tempered with sober disillusionment.

In the ordinary pursuit of orgasmic oneness that seeks a "liberated orgasm," therefore, our approach to one another seems hurried, even precipitous. Very likely we are not even able to retain consciousness of our aspiration to dissolve into *wenness* as the point of no return overtakes us. The physiology of the spasm reflex reveals itself as far more than a stimulus-response event that takes place in the body. It draws our consciousness with it, down into our genitals, where bodily ecstasy is not exactly "ours." Our body asserts its primacy over our ability to freely direct our awareness. We lose sight of the goal of conscious union, and the moment passes almost before we can take note of it. Even if we have successfully achieved a simultaneous explosive orgasm with our partner, it has not so much confirmed our hopes for union as reminded us of our bodily separation. The ancient Romans had it right: *Post coitum omnes animales tristes sunt*. We have arrived only at a bodily goal, and this has left us saddened.

At the rung of *carezza*, by contrast, the attainment of union is by no means so precipitous; and our awareness is not so easily submerged in the body's insistent reflex. In the first place, we can learn *carezza* only through extensive practice. We have to become thoroughly familiar with our own body and that of our partner. We have to learn what bodily arousal feels like in all the subtlety of its many nuances. No doubt Noyes learned gradually through months and perhaps years of withdrawal before the point of ejaculation. Perhaps the first stage was marked by the necessity of getting the tip of his penis outside of his partner before the inevitable explosion brought an end to his arousal. As he got to know his body more

intimately, he must have found it possible to withdraw a moment earlier and allow his genital excitement to subside a bit before re-entering to continue his love-making. Perhaps he even learned to maintain his attention on his partner throughout such interludes of withdrawal, so that the erotic interaction did not have to suffer abrupt starting and stopping. Eventually, he must have learned that physical withdrawal was not necessary, that subtle shifts in his movements, breathing, and muscular contraction could reduce his penile stimulation without interfering with his love-making. He must have learned a great deal of what Vimalananda describes in the vajroli contest: moving to stimulate his partner without driving himself to the point of no return.

If we practice carezza we will necessarily be more experienced in matters sexual and erotic. While we learn about our body's responses and those of our partner, we will also be familiarizing ourselves with the emotional and imaginal dimensions of eros. We will become more conscious of its vertical dimension, its power to overwhelm our ego in bliss or madness; and we will be less apt to hide it behind temporary concerns that have long been seen through. Our cultivation of slowness, too, will have taught us something of the horizontal tension so that we will have no illusion about finally overcoming the distance between us. Nevertheless, the shedding of clothes and initial embrace may have much in common with the experience of neophytes. As we begin to move together in harmony, our attention will shift to the bodily sphere -- although rather differently than in orgasm-pursuing intercourse. The center of our consciousness remains behind our eyes; and with it we continue to contemplate our partner while at the same time monitoring our own genital response. Every move we make will have these two objects in sight. Each is a small step forward on a journey with our partner; and each is simultaneously an exploration of our own arousal, testing whether we can go further, employing ways of side-stepping the precipice of involuntary spasms.

Maintaining the focus of our monitoring awareness is both gratifying and frustrating during the twenty minutes leading up to "glide." On the one hand, the monitoring of carezza keeps us sharp, so that we can be more aware of our partner than in the fuzzy and diffuse consciousness of "explosive" intercourse. The drawback is that the arousal we are keeping watch over demands frequent adjustments, and these take our attention away from our partner and remind us of the distance between us.

Upon entry into "glide," however, our freedom is greatly enhanced. The monitoring function can largely be neglected. Indeed, the genital organs themselves recede into the background. We know very well that they are there and are propelling our cruise across the subtle seas of eros, but invisible as the twin blades of an ocean-going yacht. Our attention is now free to explore other aspects of our love-making. We begin to notice, for example, that our own waves of arousal and those of our partner are quite distinct. We no longer have to deduce what our partner is feeling from the pattern of the breathing or other secondary indicators. We feel our partner's arousal ourselves -- almost in our own body. It murmurs through us like a distant rumor of breakers, pulling at us and drawing us along until our own bodily wave materializes, racing in tandem with its leader.

This is the experience Vimalananda describes when speaking of the vajroli contest, as entering the body of our partner with our own subtle body. It is, indeed, a wonderful encounter, even numinous. No volume of experience can make us take it for granted, for it is

perhaps our most dependable access to cosmic consciousness, that sense that we are no longer isolated within the cosmos at large but participate in its oneness. An important barrier has fallen between ourselves and our partner. In our heightened state of trance, our skin no longer confines us. It is hard to tell which one of us is inside the other. But the very fact that this marvelous ambiguity occurs to us emphasizes the horizontal tension. For although our nearness has leapt forward, we know when we feel our partner's body that it is not our own. However intermingled our sensations, there are still two of us. We wonder if Vimalananda has fallen into one of his famous exaggerations when he asserts "the union of two personalities into one." If not, he must surely have been speaking of a ladder rung well above where we are standing. For practitioners of carezza, every increase in nearness becomes a reminder of our distance and increases our longing.

There is another way that the horizontal dimension of eros may impress us while practicing implosive orgasmic intercourse. Everything we have considered about carezza to this point has centered on bodily sensations, some belonging to the gross body and some to the subtle body. We can follow these bodily sensations with our eyes closed. When we open them and gaze into those of our partner, a wholly new domain of erotic interaction becomes available to us; and we are overwhelmed anew by the horizontal tension of eros. We have never seen those eyes so open and receptive. They seem to let us all the way in. Yet there is nothing fuzzy about that steady, intense gaze. Our partner is vividly present -- perhaps even disturbingly so. We are reminded of the flavor of that first gaze that originally transported us to the subtle plane and recognize a similar quality in our present nearness, now profoundly increased but declaring as well our otherness. We find we have moved neither closer nor farther, rather more deeply into the erotic tension. Our longing is less tumultuous but more profound. We stand in it firm and unmoving. There are moments when we can no longer tell which of us has the penis and which the vagina -- almost but not quite interchangeable. Not unlike the "glide" that "secures the semen," bringing us to the rung of carezza, our longing holds us steady on the next rung.

Mythic Images of Longing

Longing desire is well known in most of the world's literatures as a path of spiritual realization. Perhaps the "lowest" of these is our own Western tradition of Courtly Love in which "only unattainable womanhood could be deified" (Coulano, 1986: 16). The errant knight dedicated his warfare and jousts to a woman well above his station whom he had only seen from afar or perhaps merely heard of. In some cases he knew her personally and encouraged her to behave in as fickle a manner as she could contrive so as "to obtain the contempt of the beloved and increase her unattainability" (Coulano, 1986: 19). William IX of Poitiers and Aquitaine, whom Denis de Rougemont (1956/72) calls "the first troubadour," devoted his best efforts to "The Unknown Lady" who first appeared to him as a transcendent fantasy figure while he was out riding. He began writing songs to her, and she assumed greater and greater importance for him as he came to know her better:

She grew into a kind of erotic, mystical queen whom he served with his whole heart and soul. He did not know the difficulties and tasks she had in store for him, but he was burning to undergo them, so great was her worth. Obedience to her coincided with perfect fidelity to himself. "Through her alone," he sang, "shall I be saved" (Haule, 1990: 2).

William set the tone for the troubadours who followed in dedicating his life to a woman who could not be possessed. There was no possibility of setting up house-keeping with The Unknown Lady. William embraced an impediment to consummating his love -- one greater than Isolde's marriage to King Mark or Guinevere's with Arthur -- even greater than the impediment of the "lady far above his station" who had inspired St. Ignatius of Loyola before his mystical conversion (Ignatius, 1974). The unattainable woman of Courtly Love consigned her lover to a life of longing, a life filled with the emotionality and endorphin-charged physiology of eros. Because she could not be possessed, her knight drew near to her only in imagination. Her image loomed before him as inspiration, constantly developed in prayer, song, and deeds of daring-do, transforming his life, removing it from the profane world, and transmuting his adventures to the imaginal plane. Women, too, dedicated themselves to lovers they knew primarily on the subtle plane. Many were "Brides of Christ," their hearts pierced with a sword of longing. St. Teresa of Avila attained this theological plane of love only after having fallen in love with a series of confessors -- spiritual/erotic lovers whose vows of chastity made them unattainable (Lincoln, 1984).

Longing takes us to the subtle plane of eros, where we are very near to a beloved who may or may not possess a physical body. The beloved's constant distance and unattainability in the profane sense places his whole being on the subtle plane. The imaginal interaction between lover and beloved "purifies" eros of all profane possessiveness, elevates what might otherwise entangle itself in the profane considerations of everyday.

More than forty years ago, de Rougemont (1956/72: 105-7) identified what has now become well known, the "Arab" component in Courtly Love, derived from the mystical tradition of Sufism. The most influential Sufi poet to identify longing as the soul's natural inclination to God was Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273), who began his masterpiece, the *Mathnawi*, with the love-song of the reed, given here in the translation of Coleman Barks (Barks & Green, 1997: 28):

Listen to the song told by the reed
of being separated.

Since I was cut from the reedbed
I have made
this crying sound. Anyone
separated from someone he loves
understands what I say.

Anyone pulled
from a Source
longs to go back.

Rumi begins with the mournful sound of the reed-flute (imagine, for example, the sound of an oboe or perhaps the English horn that torments the dying Tristan in the third act of Wagner's opera). The reed is incapable of singing any song other than that of longing, for it has been cut off from its "Source," and its whole being longs to return. Rumi means to say we have all been cut off from our Source, which is God; and as long as we wander the empirical world in the knowledge of this central tragic fact, we too will mourn with the desire to be reunited. Every man and woman in whom eros has surged for a lover who cannot be attained in any profane sense knows this experience of being cut off from the Source. For

the beloved of a subtle-plane longing is always the "Source." A lover like this has awakened us from our profane slumber and revealed to us the outlines of our larger being, the seed that outgrows the pod. In naming that Source as God, Rumi reveals the implications of every longing that replaces a profane life with one that is lived on the subtle plane.

Peter Lamborn Wilson (1988: 177) says this doctrine of desire is fundamental to Sufism, which sees the entire cosmos as moved by longing. Each heavenly sphere is turned by the Angel that governs it, and that Angel is drawn onward as it searches in longing for its Archangel. We humans -- indeed all beings -- whether we know it or not, are moved by our own soul's longing for its Lord, "to find itself in the divine cosmic dance." Ibn al-'Arabi may have been the most influential theoretician of this mythic idea. We know already what he had to say about the sexual union of man and woman in God. Elsewhere he says that separation and longing may be more important than union, "since from the psychological point of view it intensifies and prolongs the purity of love . . . in which the still unsatisfied lover knows the fiercest and most potent states of ardent desire, in themselves a kind of fulfillment" (Wilson, 1988: 88).

In India, the *Bhagavata-Purana*, which dates from perhaps the tenth century of our era and is one of the most beloved, memorized, and recited of mythological histories, "considered by many to be equal in stature to the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the Upanishads because of its poetic language and its philosophical depth" (Fischer-Schreiber, *et.al.*, 1989), is very familiar with the mystical value of longing. Perhaps everyone knows the story of how the Blue God, Krishna, attracted the milk-maids (Gopis) by night to leave their husbands and join him in his erotic *rasa* dance in the forest of Vrindavana. During the dance each one of the Gopis believed that he was dancing only with her. He was in the center of a ring of Gopis -- somewhat like the sexual circle ritual of the Aghoris -- but by the power of his divine magic he appeared at the same time between each two of them:

. . . during the dance Krsna disappeared from them, for into the minds of all the Gopis had come the thought "he is mine," and in that thought "he is mine," *parakiya* [true love in separation] cannot remain . . . But when longing again rose in the Gopis minds, Krsna again appeared to them (Dimock, 1989: 12).

This dance was called *rasa*, meaning "enjoyment, passion," referring to "spiritual delight in a state of ecstatic union with the Divine" -- far above sensuality or whatever can be described by the use of reason (Fischer-Schreiber, *et.al.*, 1989). D. G. White (1996: 189) says, "If the universe is a great pulsating flow of essence and manifestation, *rasa* is the fluid 'stuff' of that flow." Clearly *rasa* is an aspect of kundalini, the greater and impersonal power that rises up within us, reveals the poverty of our ego-attitude, and opens us to a cosmic consciousness in which we are no longer isolated "subjects" contemplating "objects" that are forever separate and alone. On the subtle plane we participate with one another in the oneness of the cosmos.

For the Hindus, as for the Sufis, erotic longing is the link between the movement of the cosmos and the impulse of the human soul. Eros is a powerful and multidimensional term, for it refers both to the psycho-biology of sexuality and to the highest form of mysticism. For this reason, Jeffrey Kripal employs it as a central interpretive concept in his biography of Ramakrishna (1836-1886): "The erotic is a dimension of human experience that is simultaneously related both to the physical and emotional experience of sexuality and the

deepest ontological levels of religious experience" (Kripal, 1995: 23).

In that timeless[1] moment when we gaze into the open and steadily attentive eyes of our partner, pleasantly confused as to which of us is male and which female, we stand on the lower edge of that same longing that both united and separated Krishna and his beloved consort Radha. Whether we see our own earthly beloved as an incomparable human being or as "enchanted" -- even divine -- is a function of the degree of our trance. Those who have shown us the way from the rung of longing on the ladder of ascent have had no doubt of the divine/cosmic nature of the rasa which filled them and changed their consciousness.

Shri Krishna-Caitanya

One of the most exemplary of these is an enigmatic figure born more than 500 years ago in Bengal during a period of romantic enthusiasm in North India, and known as Shri Krishna-Caitanya (1486-1533). Like Vimalananda, Jesus, and the Buddha, he left no writings of his own behind so that we are dependent for our picture of him on the impressions he made upon his followers -- particularly a certain Krishnadasa, who interpreted the events of Caitanya's life mythologically according to his own religious perceptions (Dimock, 1989: 85).

Edward C. Dimock's book, *The Place of the Hidden Moon* (1989) is not only our best source for reconstructing the importance of Caitanya but has become a model for a host of scholars working on the history of religious movements. [2] At a time when the orthodox Hindu priesthood (Brahmanism) was rigidly dogmatic and opposed by various Tantric sects which had a tendency toward licentiousness as well as by the emotionalism of Sufi Islam, Caitanya carved out a middle position based on reverence for Vishnu (Vaishnavism) and expressed in vernacular languages rather than in the sacred but "dead" language of Sanskrit (Dimock, 1989: 25-7). The Vaishnava (Vishnu-focused) revival for which Caitanya is responsible has much in common with the Western tradition of the troubadours -- namely "longing as an act of worship" (*Ibid.*, 14).

The man who was initiated with the name Krishna-Caitanya began his religious career as the master of a small Sanskrit school under the name Vishvambhara. But when he traveled to his father's town of Gaya at the age of twenty-two to perform his father's funeral rites, he apprenticed himself to an emotional ascetic guru, Ishvara Puri. He returned to his mother's town of Navadvip in a state of divine madness and in short order became the central figure in a scene of wild religious enthusiasm for a period of a year, ending it abruptly when he entered an ascetic order. Although he wished to make his home in the distant forest of Vrindavana, where his beloved Krishna had lived and danced with the Gopis, he respected his mother's wishes and stayed in the nearby town of Puri (*Ibid.*, 30-1). He began his life of longing in separation -- not only because his divine lover danced only on the subtle plane, but also because he did not allow himself to travel to the sacred forest where mythology locates that dance.

Because our present knowledge of Caitanya is based on legendary biographies, Dimock says, "What Caitanya was and did is less important than what people thought he was and did; his acts are less important than their quality of immortality" (*Ibid.*, 32). People believed that

Caitanya was both Radha and Krishna. Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu, is the very model of divine love, for he and Radha "were one soul in two bodies." Separated by their two bodies as we are from our longed-for beloved, the union Radha sought always eluded her, eternally increasing her longing. For this reason, the madness of Caitanya's longing and his asceticism has been taken as a description of the path any human being may follow. Regardless of our gender, we are all Radha, longing for our Krishna. But Caitanya was an extraordinary mortal, for he was also Krishna:

He was Krsna internally, Radha externally: his golden color was that of Radha; his deep love and longing for Krsna were those of Radha; and yet, within, he had the full divinity of Krsna. When Radha and Krsna were two [i.e., separated in their two bodies], neither could experience love to the full. Krsna giving and receiving love, could not experience fully Radha's joy in giving and receiving, and so also with Radha. When they became one, in Caitanya, their joy was doubled (Dimock, 1989: 32).

In a variation on this belief, every woman is female because she has a preponderance of Radha in her makeup, while every man is mostly Krishna. When we realize this consciously, our sexual unions become acts of worship that unite the two divine principles. The draw toward sexual union begins in our physiology, with the pleasure principle (*kama*). For most individuals, it never goes beyond *kama*; but when transformed into true love (*prema*) it no longer leads to the miseries of ordinary erotic love, but goes beyond them to divine love (*Ibid.*, 16). Nevertheless *kama* is the beginning point, and one cannot ascend the ladder without negotiating the first rung. Longing to go beyond is the way of salvation. "For the more intense is *viraha* [longing], the greater is *prema*" (*Ibid.*, 17).

This doctrine that longing redirects us from pleasure to true love is no abstract proposition. It is a statement of psychological truth. There is no genuine love in the mere pursuit of pleasure. We are after our own satisfaction, and our partner is no more than the means we wish to employ for our self-centered ends. But when the object of our desire refuses us, perhaps even contrives a tantalizing fickleness, and no other partner can attract our interest, the person through whom we once sought pleasure becomes the object of our longing. Longing itself is a sort of trance state. We see the object of our desire with new eyes. A "subtlety" begins to make itself felt in our attitude. When the object of sexual pleasure becomes the apple of our eye, *kama* has begun its transformation into *prema*; and the engine for this change is longing (*viraha*).

This is why the Hindus say that one who has transformed the pursuit of pleasure into divine longing has conquered illusion (*maya*) and seen beyond appearances to the divine reality that lies beyond them. Longing brings us to the subtle plane, where our intended partner becomes at least an incomparable being for us. The more prolonged and intense our longing, the more subtle our perceptions become. The eye of our imagining soul lends more and more a cosmic dimension to our relationship. Frustrated in gaining the immediate gratification we sought, our seeking itself takes on an "ultimate" quality. Our internal monologue has changed. That remarkable individual we cannot ignore has become our beloved. Our longing may become the central emotional reality in our lives, as it was for the knights of Courtly Love. Everything we do, intend, and wish for becomes saturated with the image of our beloved. Our unattainable one possesses us. A whole life can be revised. This is why the followers of Caitanya believed, "Ultimately one can pass even beyond the pleasure of actual union . . . and know the divine joy entirely within oneself" (Dimock, 1989: 15).

A crucial turning point in Caitanya's life was his meeting with his future disciple, Ramananda Raya. According to the legend, this meeting was distinguished by Caitanya's showing Ramananda his true form as Radha-Krishna. Evidently he meant to show Ramananda the degree of his attainment and satisfaction: that he "knew the divine joy within himself." His longing for Krishna had turned him into Radha, and Radha's longing for Krishna had turned her into her beloved Lord. Caitanya had become both of them, united at last. But Ramananda was apparently unfazed by this claim. He responded by explaining to Caitanya the meaning of the ecstatic emotional attitude in which he identified with Radha (his Radha-bhava[3]). The surprising result of this meeting is that from then "until the end of his life, Caitanya is more and more subject to fits of wild enthusiasm and depressed longing for his Krsna" (*Ibid.*, 149).

The problem here is that Caitanya is said to have abruptly ended his "wild religious enthusiasm" at the age of twenty-three, when he entered an ascetic order. The story suggests that the god-maddened longing that afflicted him for a year brought him to an early realization of his inner Krishna-nature. The fact that his Radha-*bhava*, his insane longing, could be stirred up again and last the rest of his life makes us wonder about the solution he claims to have found in his early twenties. He must have been struggling to reconcile his extravagant madness with the quiet bliss expected by his orthodox beginnings as a Sanskrit scholar. Perhaps he was frightened by his madness and tried to deny it. If so, the meeting with Ramananda convinced him that his insane longing was a legitimate expression of a sacred experience, that anything less amounted to denying reality. The legendary biography, therefore, presents the madness of divine longing as the ultimate truth.

Longing in Sahajiya

Dimock believes that the meeting between Caitanya and Ramananda was constructed by the biographer Krishnadasa in order to make Caitanya into a saint whose life agreed with Krishnadasa's own Sahajiya faith. The Sahajiya movement "was dedicated to . . . the transmutation of sexual pleasure into transcendental bliss," particularly "with a woman other than one's wife" (Feuerstein, 1990). "*Sahaja* literally means 'easy or natural': the natural qualities of the senses should be used, not denied" (Dimock, 1989: 35). We saw an example of this in Chapter One, where Eliade described how the Sahajiya practitioner acts as a servant to his future yogic consort, sleeping at the foot of her bed, on her left side, etc. Caitanya's influential disciple, Ramananda, practiced a variation on this theme in that he kept

two girls "of surpassing beauty," who were skilled in dance and song, whom he would treat in a somewhat intimate fashion, bathing and dressing them, rubbing their bodies with oil, etc. But, the text says, he abstained from sexual intercourse with them. . . . "His passion was the same at the touch of a piece of wood or stone as it was at the touch of a young woman: such was the nature of Ramananda Raya. He played the role of servant to them" (Dimock, 1989: 53-4).

We might be somewhat skeptical of the "piece of wood" claim. Surely Ramananda's goal must have been the "autonomization of sensual pleasure -- regarded as the sole human experience capable of bringing about nirvanic bliss" that Eliade describes. But we would have to understand this practice on the model of carezza, where one's physiology is overcome for the sake of entering trance. Ramananda, although outwardly he acted cool,

must have been seeking to increase his longing, arousing his sexual desire so as to turn pleasure (kama) into divine love (prema). Only this would account for the fact that his meeting with Caitanya resulted in a disturbing increase in the madness of Caitanya's longing, strengthening his identification with Radha, and making the Krishna he inwardly was the unattainable object of his maddened desire (viraha).

The Sahajiya discovered that chastity -- especially in the face of extreme temptation, such as that posed by Ramananda's dancing girls -- formed a useful barrier to easy union, increasing one's longing and thereby purifying one's desire (Dimock, 1989: 53). Because Caitanya's biographer was a follower of Sahajiya, he wants us to believe that Caitanya united Radha and Krishna only in a state of extreme longing in which he lost his orientation in the world of space and time -- lost his ego -- in the madness of Radha who could never get near enough to her beloved Krishna. This is the Caitanya of Bengali faith, the only Caitanya we have.

The wild enthusiasm and depressed longing of Caitanya had a cosmic dimension as well. For Caitanya followed his mother's wishes, settling far from Krishna's forest of Vrindavana, and spent his life longing to be in that place where Radha and Krishna enjoyed their eternal love play. In his divine erotic trance, however, he found an "eternal Vrindavana," "the place of the hidden moon," within himself.[4] By his longing, he turned himself into an image of the universe, a microcosm which contained Vrindavana. In the universe at large (the macrocosm) "a stream of rasa flows perpetually from the eternal Vrindavana to earth, manifested as a stream of rasa flowing to and between men and women" (Dimock, 1989: 168). The human body mirrors the cosmos on a small scale, with hell located in the sexual organs at the bottom and the heaven of "pure consciousness, truth, and bliss -- the brain -- at the highest" point (*Ibid.*, 170).

The idea that the juice[5] of desire (rasa) is both the driving force of the universe and of our own sexual/mystical selves will not be understood if we think that it is merely a theological proposition, handed down from detached philosophers and required of ordinary believers who have barely a clue as to its meaning -- much as we might look upon the virginity of the mother of Jesus or the infallibility of the pope. We come closer to understanding it if we think that the image of cosmic juice forces itself upon those who stand on the diamond ladder's rung of longing. It is unquestionably a manifestation of kundalini, the life-energy of the body-soul that surges up and overwhelms the ego.

The longing that we Westerners are exposed to when we practice carezza inspires us also to speak of "liquid energy" and makes us think that we have had the merest taste (rasa) of cosmic unity. For we have slipped out of our skin and feel the waves of arousal moving through our partner's body -- almost, but not quite, the same as we feel our own. We may try to discard such impressions, saying: "For a moment there, I almost thought I was feeling what you are feeling. Isn't that crazy?" A serious challenge is posed to our consensus view of the world -- the picture we have to follow if we are to get to work on time, or perhaps at all.

The religious cosmos entered through erotic trance convinces us by its numinosity, the terrible power of kundalini. When we enter the subtle plane, we find ourselves in the grip of unthinkable forces; and we have no choice but to believe. We believe involuntarily. In fact, the word *believe* fails to do justice to our experience, for it has a pious and tentative

connotation. It makes us think of fuzzy platitudes and dogmas laid down from on high. In the state of erotic trance, by contrast, we do not feel we "believe": we simply *know*. We know with a conviction that is unassailable. When we say, "For a moment there, I almost thought . . .," we reveal that the trance has ended. We have returned to the profane world of consensus reality, where the religious cosmos is only a pious rumor.

The religious longing of Caitanya and his followers has to be understood as a distinctive state of mind attainable by anyone who enters fully into the longing that becomes available on the step located above *carezza* on the diamond ladder. In that state there is no doubt of the proximity of Krishna, the erotic lord of a love that cannot be contained within the strictures of wedlock. This is why it is important that the Gopis are married. They have risked everything in consensus reality on the strength of a longing that brings a higher reality to presence. Faithfulness to one's divine lord is not a matter of contract, propagation of the species, or "social cement." It constitutes an irresistible pull whose madness is anti-social and an affront to consensus reality. The verticality of the ladder triumphs over horizontal common sense. One is drawn into the sacred sphere, where the rupture between human and divine is analogous to that between male and female -- and the longing of the one symbolizes and incarnates the desperation of the other.

Erotic longing is a psychological reality that no one escapes. It may indeed be construed as a sort of imbalance and pathology that cries out for psychiatric treatment. But Ramamanda's message to Caitanya is that such insane longing is pathological only from the conventional point of view. Give yourself over to it and the divine realm will open itself to you. You will find the juice of desire that fills your body is the same as that which moves the cosmic spheres. Krishna is dancing with his Radha. Close your eyes to that and you have missed the essential point; you have chosen empirical seeming over divine reality. The madness of your trance is your opportunity to bring the profane world to a stop and avail yourself of a greater reality.

From Vishnu to Shiva

Caitanya's influence brought about a "golden age" for the Vishnu religion in Bengal during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But by the end of that time it had become too formal and respectable to have influence on the ecstatic religious sentiments in village life. The great poet Ramprasad Sen (roughly 1720-1780) refocused popular devotion with a body of poems that can still be recited by Bengali school children today. Malcolm McLean's historical study of this legendary figure (*Devoted to the Goddess*, 1998) shows that Ramprasad caused a resurgence of the rival Shiva tradition, which flowered for another two centuries (the eighteenth and nineteenth).

Ramprasad, however, is a far more enigmatic figure than Caitanya. Very little is dependably known of his life, and there may even have been several different poets responsible for the works that bear his name.[6] McLean has solved the problem of how to approach Ramprasad on the model of Dimock's treatment of Caitanya: he has described the Ramprasad who lives in the minds and hearts of his followers. In doing so he has discovered that the legend of Ramprasad bears too many similarities with that of Caitanya to be considered accidental. McLean has, therefore, concluded: "A conscious effort was made to portray Ramprasad as a

Caitanya-like figure in order to generate a revival in Sakta [7] [Shiva-focused] fortunes similar to that gained [for the religion of Vishnu] during sixteenth-century Vaisnavism" (McLean, 1998: 44).

The change in deity from Vishnu to Shiva, however, is no incidental detail. Caitanya's Vaishnavism borrowed a great deal from the Sahajiya movement, responsible for such practices as Ramananda's bathing his dancing girls with his own hands in hopes of becoming as unmoved by their luscious flesh as by a "piece of wood." The Sahajiya were outwardly cool and respectable. Their indecent practices were designed to fuel an erotic chastity practiced in private. They followed a boyish god in Vishnu's avatar, Krishna, a charming and impudent lad whose naughtiness produced a lot of clucking, but with whom no mother could be angry for more than a moment.

Shiva, on the other hand, is a scandalous and outrageous god. He is not to be found dancing with milk-maids in forest clearings. He haunts cremation grounds, smeared with the ashes of human corpses. The ideal of a penis as flaccid in a throng of love-crazed followers as in a placement of wooden statues has nothing to do with the ithyphallic Shiva. Vishnu is the sustainer of the universe, and the followers of Caitanya did their best to sustain decorum while pursuing their madness within established forms. Shiva is the destroyer, and those who cultivate his form of madness delight in overturning every sign of respectability. Incest for example: the Vaishnavas forbid the mingling of parental and erotic love in their ecstatic longing, while the Shaivites make a point of it (McDaniel, 1989: 89). We are reminded of the sexual relationship between the boy Bhattacharya and his "spiritual mother," the middle-aged Lady in Saffron.

June McDaniel's study of contemporary ecstatic religion in Bengal (*The Madness of the Saints*, 1989) begins with the history of this movement, including Caitanya, Ramprasad Sen, and Ramakrishna as exemplary madmen. She notes that the Shiva-oriented Tantrics and Bauls [8] "have sex without sensuality while the Vaisnavas have sensuality without sex" (McDaniel, 1989: 274). This crucial distinction reveals the different orientation of the two religions. Those who worship Vishnu accept the social taboo regarding sex outside the bonds of wedlock. In their chastity they stop short of intercourse but employ all available means to stir up a state of sensual arousal -- subsequently to be transformed through longing into spiritual experience. Worshipers of Shiva, however, are readily prepared to violate the taboo but do so in a way that is spiritual in aspiration rather than sensual. For the Shaivite Bengali saints: "Lack of adaptation to the physical world [i.e., in madness] is secondary to a gain in adaptation to the spiritual one [i.e., the subtle plane of trance]. Rather than a loss of emotion there is intense love and enthusiasm, and instead of primitive sexual and aggressive impulses there is *prema*" (*Ibid.*, 286).

Contemporary Shaivism emphasizes not Shiva so much as his consort, Shakti, weaving together Tantric Buddhism, Vaishnavism, yoga, shamanism, and village deities within an oral tradition whose goal is divine madness for the Mother, a state of possession in which she is worshipped as enthroned in paradise. Her devotee longs for her blessings, conquers her with magic, and merges with her as an aspect of the self (*Ibid.*, 86). Clearly Vimalananda and Bhattacharya live in this version of the Tantric world.

The desire to become mad with love (*divyonmada*) for the goddess is comparatively recent. Goddess worship was more yogic and shamanic, an esoteric cult until its popularization by such

poets as Ramprasad Sen and Kamalakanta in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. . . . Madness then became a sign of devotion, the worshipper being a mad child of mad parents (*Ibid.*, 91).

Religious madness is distinguished by a trance state in which the polar opposites, the "worlds of matter and spirit, are suddenly seen to be united and the illusory barrier between them falls" (*Ibid.*, 250). This results in a formless state of consciousness in which all distinctions are destroyed and the worshipper is filled with a sacred liquid substance (*bhava* or *rasa*[9]) that is said to cause the madness (*Ibid.*, 90). Typically, there are two stages in this form of ecstatic religion. First comes the madness of longing, where the individual is obsessed with the anxious question, "Will the goddess come again?" Later on, perhaps decades later, a calmer state supervenes. McDaniel calls this later form of ecstasy "divine madness" or "love in union," for the worshipper is convinced of the permanent presence of the goddess (*Ibid.*, 195).

The worshipper attracts [the Mother] by his madness -- being mad herself, she recognizes a kindred spirit. The more intense his passion and the more irrational his behavior, the more he is her child. Yet after this is the state of divine madness (*divyonmada*), in which the fires are cooled and the devotee is eternally a child in his Mother's lap; he need not yearn for her, as he has been accepted. At this stage, his madness is action that is beyond human understanding, totally free and spontaneous, beyond good and evil (*Ibid.*, 145).

The Mad Woman of Calcutta

As an example of this process, [10] McDaniel relays the story of the "Mad Woman of Calcutta," as told by the Baul authority Shri Anirvan:

About twenty years ago in a residential section of the city, people used to see a very young and beautiful woman stopping passers-by on the sidewalk in front of her house and asking them, "Where is Shyama Babu? Have you seen him? If you tell me where he is, I will go and fetch him." Her beloved was dead and she was still waiting for him, living from her love of him. And love had betrayed her. The passers-by played cruel tricks on her.

Then another phase began for her. She clung to young men as they were going by and said to them, "You are my Shyama Babu, you have come back." Since she was not a prostitute, these men drove her away and ill-treated her, even threw stones at her.

After several years, one of her neighbors who had known her in the past noticed her sitting all day long at the foot of the sacred tree of that district. She had aged but her face was radiant with joy. She recognized her neighbor. He asked her, "Have you found your Shyama?" "Yes," she replied with a lovely smile. "Look, there he is," and she pointed to her breast (*Ibid.*, 192).

On the basis of many such stories, McDaniel reconstructs the essential pattern of Bengali holy women, identifying five characteristics: (1) Their early life is marked by visions and trances which make family and friends suspect illness and psychopathology.[11] (2) They are usually married, often against their will, resulting in a labile relationship with many split-ups and reconciliations which is finally stabilized when the woman either initiates her husband into her own religious path or worships him as a god. (3) Her life defies all social norms. (4) She never achieves a final "divine marriage" but follows a life of longing. (5) She becomes a legend in which the tales told about her dwell on her life experiences, emphasizing her madness and down-playing whatever miracles may have been ascribed to her (*Ibid.*, 232).

What is most remarkable about McDaniel's research is that for those who enter spontaneously and unreservedly into religious madness, the chaos of psychological disintegration represents only the beginning of the process. Again and again, the saint who submits to the insanity of divine longing finds that that tumultuous condition of being totally out of control eventually organizes itself, as it were from the inside. The saints continue their life of longing. Symptoms of madness do not entirely disappear. But a surprising degree of stability is finally achieved. We might even wonder whether in a cultural context less enamored than that of Bengal with signs of psychological disorientation the stabilized saint might strive to make himself appear a good deal more "normal."

When Gopi Krishna fought the effects of kundalini, he did everything in his power to restore the functioning of an ego that appeared to be no match for the power surging within him. He counted his steps, fixed his eyes deliberately on the empirical objects in his surroundings, one-by-one, and above all avoided meditation. He learned to do nothing that would increase the manifestation of that unconscious power derived from the instinctual foundations of his psyche, and directed as much energy as he could to ahamkara, the sense of me and mine that reorients itself automatically in those who remain innocent of kundalini's reality.

The mad saints, however, have courted kundalini. They valued her spontaneous emergence and the disorientation that she brought them as a sign of favor from their goddess. In most cases, it appears they had little choice but to succumb. Possibly they were cursed -- or as they would say, "blessed" -- with a weak ego-structure to begin with. In any event they seem to have made little effort to restore whatever ego-functioning they may once have had. They embraced their madness as an overwhelming erotic trance that made a chaotic and fragmentary manifestation of the sacred cosmos a constant in their lives. They suffered from their disorientation and from the disapproval and horror of their family members and neighbors. The profane world for them was a place of torment from which they found respite in their visions and trances.

Their trance, however, was by no means the non-dissociative sort that convinced Toomer that the seed which had outgrown its pod was a revelation of wholeness. They spent perhaps decades in a condition of blatant madness, sparked frequently enough with intimations of its divine origin so that they had little desire to interrupt it -- even if they had had the strength to do so. In the end for many of them, kundalini brought them a realization not unlike what blessed Toomer right from the start. They came to realize a wholeness which exists outside the ego in atman or self. The torment of their madness was characterized by a longing for the divine, the greater reality that Hinduism calls brahman and atman. In loving their goddess, they loved kundalini; and in the end she proved a faithful mother. Their psyches were re-organized, and they found their Beloved within.

Respectable saints *strive* for madness, and employ a host of traditionally sanctioned devices to reach a state of religious trance. For them ritual is a means which subordinates madness to its own formal structure. Those, however, who appear to have been mad from early childhood or who have spontaneously lost their minds in adolescence require no ritual to engender their insane longing. For them, ritual develops spontaneously and unconsciously while they are out of their minds. Their madness organizes itself. This phenomenon is fairly common in Hinduism. Not only exemplary individuals like Muktananda (1978) but also several American practitioners of yoga with whom I have spoken report that in the altered

state of consciousness engendered by yogic practice, one finds oneself spontaneously making gestures (*mudras*) which may appear strange and disturbing at first but which are later discovered to have been defined long ago in the yogic tradition. It is reasonable to think, in fact, that all of the yogic practices we have today were originally discovered by individuals who had entered a madness that organized itself.

The story of the Mad Woman of Calcutta exemplifies this pattern very well. We know nothing of her interior life except as it is displayed in her public behavior. In the first two stages, she provokes the disgust, anger, and fear of neighbors and passers-by by her flagrant abnormality. Apparently decades have passed before she reaches the third and final stage of her process; for in the beginning she was "very young and beautiful," and in the last stage "she had aged." But by the end her insane longing has given way to a blissful achievement. She has found her lost beloved within. The self that seemed to have disintegrated in blatantly psychotic fashion has found a higher level of integration. Her experience resembles that of Rumi:

I have lived on the lip
of insanity, wanting to know reasons,
knocking on a door. It opens.
I've been knocking from the inside!
(Moyné & Barks, 1986: 75)

In a cultural atmosphere where spiritual madness is distinguished from profane pathology^[12] and not only tolerated but revered, we find that the intense longing one may experience on the sexual ladder of ascent has spiritual possibilities our own culture dares not contemplate. Those mad with longing, however miserable they may be, have entered a trance which brings numinous realities to consciousness. It reveals that our life in the hectic and ephemeral world of social responsibility is missing something essential. This sense that something is missing and that life cannot be whole without it constitutes a cultural treasure. Ordinary people who are not blessed with such insanity are constantly on the look-out for signs that someone has had a taste of it. From the perspective of what we Westerners take to be "ordinary consciousness" or "sanity," even the common run of Bengalis are insane. Their reverence for the saint mad with longing proves their own disorientation.

Unconscious Reorganization of the Self

There are in effect three forms of god-madness in Bengal: those who long to be insane, those whose longing has made them blatantly insane, and those who have lived with their insanity long enough to have reached a new level of integration -- what we may call the self-organized insane. The last of these categories is the most important and the greatest challenge for our Western assumptions. For the Bengalis it constitutes the ultimate proof that insane longing has a purpose. They make sense of it by saying: "The physical body can only hold so much love, after that one needs a spiritual body. Until the excess love can be organized into a spiritual body, it will overflow into ecstatic symptoms" (McDaniel, 1989: 85). This is an argument about the rung of longing that parallels quite nicely what we have already seen concerning carezza. Those who practice carezza might well say, "The ejaculatory body can only hold so much arousal, after that one needs a 'glide body.' Until the excess arousal can be organized into a 'glide body,' it will overflow into spasms."

Most sexually active adults have no patience for carezza. Consequently they are apt to believe those who have undertaken such self-discipline to be "perverted," "self-delusional," and the like. Those who are standing on the rung of longing and speak of gliding into a "spiritual body" appear to our profane Western consciousness to be even more dangerous and out of touch. The insanity engendered by longing is more than indecent for us. It is psychotic and cries out for medication. We are so disturbed by the flagrant symptoms that we want to do everything in our power to shut them down (asylums, medication, electro-shock). It never occurs to us that they might be leading somewhere -- that a higher state of spontaneous integration is possible.[13] Indeed, it generates no little anxiety among Bengalis:

The highest ecstatic state is Radha's *mahabhava*,[14] which includes incoherent speech, irrational behavior, and all possible emotions experienced intensely and simultaneously. Radha's divine madness is a state so passionate and extreme that it is even a mystery to Krsna, Radha's lover and Lord (McDaniel, 1989: 29).

McDaniel's research controverts our dearest assumptions, for she reveals that when insane longing is allowed to run its course it does indeed generate a "spiritual body," that is, a new psychological integration. The deeper layers of the unconscious that are responsible for the mad symptoms can be brought together into a new, more comprehensive and satisfying sense of self, where the mad saint achieves a "vivid relationship to the deity or Absolute" (*Ibid.*, 23). The kundalini which in the beginning appears to despise and humiliate us turns out in the end to be our divine Mother.

McDaniel illustrates this possibility for a new integration in her concluding chapter, where she contrasts the ritual pattern of orthodox bhakti yoga [15] with the ecstatic life of the spontaneously mad saint. She identifies five stages in each. (1) The sane disciple is initiated by a guru who stabilizes his social role, while the mad saint is emotionally out of control from childhood and finds the visions and trances a nurturing respite from a rejecting social order. (2) In faith and dedication the disciple takes instruction from the guru; meanwhile relatives and neighbors try to restore the mad saint's sanity by medical and religious means or by arranging a marriage, and the ecstatic herself tries to imitate normal life so as to control and understand what is happening. (3) The disciple's practice becomes more intense and disciplined, perhaps involving austerity, isolation, or joining a community; meanwhile the ecstatic withdraws into seclusion or wanders from place to place attempting spiritual practice, generally without instruction beyond inner voices, though there may be one or more gurus. (4) The disciple finds the mantras[16] come "alive" and there are real feelings of love; in contrast, the ecstatic undergoes a crisis involving death and rebirth wherein the spiritual relationship with the deity is finally stabilized. (5) The disciple takes on a spiritual role in the community as a guru; the ecstatic, too, is recognized as a guru, and the persisting mad behavior is taken as evidence of religious insight (*Ibid.*, 263-4). By the end of the two processes, a real similarity has been attained, especially if the ecstatic has learned traditional rituals and nomenclature. Their difference lies in the continuing evidence of madness in the ecstatic.

We may wonder how many spontaneously mad ecstasies achieve a re-organization of the self such as that evinced in the Mad Woman of Calcutta. McDaniel provides no statistics. To some extent numbers are not important. The point is that the diamond ladder describes what is humanly possible. The fact that each successive rung has had fewer visitors than the last is very much to be expected. The majority of us are capable of standing on the first rung -- if

only for the brief moment of spasmodic orgasm. Some have struggled with the meaning of their orgasm and endeavored to enjoy it for its own sake -- regardless of cultural disapproval. A few of these have noticed the rails of the ladder and secured their stance by grabbing hold with their hands and have called their orgasms "liberated."

As soon as the ladder is recognized as a device for ascending, we become curious about where it may lead. Some of those who have "liberated" themselves internally from social censure have experimented with carezza and learned that efforts to contain their physiological tension can lead them into a glide, where an orgasmic state of arousal can be sustained for a period of minutes or perhaps hours. It enables them to explore in erotic trance a subtle plane of non-ordinary consciousness never dreamed of by those who teeter in ignorance of a ladder of ascent.

Each rung challenges us with a new sort of tension that must be held if we are to remain there. On the first rung, we must submit to our physiology while retaining a certain level of individual consciousness that this is *my* experience. When we hold too tightly to our ego-control, the physiology of orgasm is impossible. We are psychologically "impotent" or "frigid." When we give over too completely to our physiology, there is no "I" left to experience it. Because this first-rung tension is not terribly hard to contain, most humans are capable of enjoying "explosive," "forward-falling" orgasm. Furthermore, we are challenged to hold the tension between what appears to be valid for us (the two partners) as well as what is enjoined or condemned by our society. Those unable to hold onto what is "valid for us," succumb to guilt or inhibition and fail to "liberate" their orgasms. At the other extreme, those who lose all social responsibility forget even their partner and fall victim to obsessive thinking and compulsive behavior. At the rung of carezza, we have to hold the tension between the physiological spasm reflex and our erotic consciousness. When the tension is held sufficiently, we glide into a state of trance where our pleasure and mutuality are substantially enhanced.

Exploration of the erotic tension takes us to the rung of longing, where we find that there are two sorts of tension. A vertical tension confronts us with the opposition between divine numinosity and the destruction of madness. Both involve a loss of ego. The promise of bliss encourages us to let go, while the threat of final destruction compels us to cling to our personal sense of who we are. If we are able to hold this vertical tension, we discover a horizontal conflict: we want to get nearer to our partner, but each step forward reveals the insuperability of our separateness and distance. If on the contrary we wish to flee the agony of this tension, we find we are held in spite of ourselves. Such is the nature of eros. Rooted in the physiology, emotionality, and involuntary imaginality of kundalini, it is comprised of unconscious forces much greater than the ego. In longing we find we can relate to eros but cannot control it.

Just as holding the tension between consciousness and physiology at the rung of carezza moves us into a subtle plane of awareness *automatically*, i.e., by a force outside the control of our ego and at a moment we cannot anticipate; so also the double tension of eros on the rung of longing has the power to move us automatically into a sort of god-consciousness. The mad saints have made no effort to hold the tension of eros. Either because their egos are too weak or the arousal of kundalini too strong, they have simply relinquished their ego and allowed the erotic force of kundalini to dance upon their prostrate form. They are awake to a

chaotic stream of highly charged subtle realities of which they can make little sense beyond knowing that they belong to the goddess who batters them. They have been drawn into a state of mind that appears insane from the ordinary point of view but which subjectively is experienced as a powerful and important new development.

The Attainment of a "Spiritual Body"

What we have seen over the 500-year history of ecstatic religion in Bengal is that there are two approaches to the rung of longing. An orthodox and socially responsible approach builds upon a stable ego-structure, employing ritual to loosen the rigid boundaries of an ego that is well adapted to the social world of ordinary consciousness. Although many may not make it securely to the rung of longing, there appears to be a sizable number of gurus who have.[17] On the other hand, some individuals are blessed (or cursed) with a weak ego-structure, inadequately adapted to the social world and ordinary consciousness, and without boundaries to protect them from the onslaught of unconscious forces. Some of these are simply psychotic. Others are "god-maddened." In the context of Bengali culture, to be "god-maddened" means that, however tormented and miserable one may be, a wholly unconscious process has begun reorganizing the personality from within.

By analogy we may say that those of us who have found ourselves on the rung of longing may encounter rigidities or structural flaws in our ego-structure which may take us into experiences not unlike those described in the religious literature of Bengal. Those of us who are too rigidly or defensively secure in our personal sense of self may nevertheless encounter the open receptiveness and steady attention of our partner's gaze as opening onto a subtle plane of relationship in which we are stuck between a well-defined nearness and distance. We will be filled with a longing to go further but an incapacity to do so. Our beloved will be seen with new eyes, more deep and soulful than that "special friend" that appears to the eyes of ordinary consciousness. The mystery of our beloved's unique personality will surely be glimpsed. The timeless moment will have a certain numinosity and promise. But our beloved will remain a human being for us -- a uniquely wonderful personality, but very clearly a human being. If we are tempted to call this longing *bhava*, we are correct insofar as it is a *personal* emotion, but there will be no insanity. We will feel held back from a great promise, dimly intuited. Others who have not reached this stage may be ready to call us crazy even to dream that there is anywhere further to go. But we will find that we are not crazy enough.

If our ego-structure is somewhat weaker, or the unconscious forces more fully aroused, our beloved's personality will be far more numinous to us -- we will be inclined to say "enchanted." An enchanted being is not quite human but redolent of an uncanny power that we will find both fascinating and dangerous. We will wonder if we are up to tangling with one whose moves can be entirely unpredictable, who may demand more of us than we are able to give, who may infect us, too, with a disturbing sense that at any moment we may go out of control. We may detect an impersonal glint in our beloved's eye that speaks of forces distinctly animal-like, suggesting a ferocity and impulsivity that horrifies us. At this point, the word *bhava* seems far more appropriate. Our longing to engage more deeply with this uncanny other seems distinctly ill-considered from any rational point of view. But the promise is too fascinating to relinquish. Our entanglement in the push and pull of eros takes on an unmistakably insane tone.

Enchanted beings dwell rather more closely to the ordinary world than divinities. When in the eyes of our bhava-filled erotic trance, our beloved takes on godly qualities, we tremble with awe. To be in the grip of a divine being is to be moved to adoration and worship. Although no guru has given us a mantra containing our beloved's name, we are involuntarily possessed by the need to acknowledge the august divinity undeniable in our beloved's eyes. Our attitude of worship may last only a matter of minutes. The time cannot be calculated. But it can also persist into the next day or week. If so, we will be beside ourselves in our efforts to find ways to express our impossible emotion. Perhaps we will be moved involuntarily to make gestures, sighs, shed tears, or pronounce the mantra of our beloved's name aloud at the most inopportune moments. If so, we will have had a taste of what the Bengalis mean when they speak of Radha-bhava.

If the diamond ladder's rung of longing brings us madness, and even if it only makes us wish we were insane, it confronts us with the limits of our will-power. For whether we court insanity like the disciple of yoga or try to extricate ourselves from it, we know the power of eros lies entirely outside our control. There is no pleading with eros: "Just take me upward, don't destroy me!" Disciples of orthodox ritual know that a lifetime of supplication may not be enough to obtain even the slightest taste of bhava. On the other hand, those who have done nothing at all to deserve it may be transported immediately into "god-madness" and shattered. Although the way of longing is filled with uncertainties, McDaniel's thesis offers no little comfort. For some of those who have given themselves over entirely to their desperation for the Beloved have been guided from within, through no merit or fault of their own. Bhava prepared a "spiritual body" for itself, and women and men were able to say, "Look, there he is!" and point to their own breasts.

According to the story, the Mad Woman of Calcutta longed for a human beloved who had died. There is no mention of his being "divine." But we do witness an interesting progression in the three phases narrated to us. In the beginning she searches for him in the empirical world: if only people will tell her where he is, she will fetch him. This describes a beloved confined by the laws of space and time. In the middle phase we are told that she clung to young men as they passed her, asserting that they were her lost Shyama Babu. She did not fall on young women or middle-aged men. She showed some discrimination. But we are not told that she identified only young men of a particular build or shape of nose. We are led to believe that at this stage virtually any young man was a candidate to be recognized as her Shyama. Her beloved has shed his definitive shape like a ghost or one who is enchanted. He can appear anywhere, take nearly any form. He lurks within every young man as the reality beneath appearances, and vanishes the moment he is recognized. Her longing has raised her to a subtle plane perversely designed only to further her longing. Longing has deepened her bhava, and her symptoms have become psychotic.

By the end it is clear that her longing has built for her a "spiritual body" capable of containing her bhava. Her florid symptoms have disappeared. She is radiant with joy because, while sitting under the sacred tree of her district, she dances in a cosmic Vrindavana with her Krishna. The bhava that drove her mad and destroyed her personal ego has now become rasa, flowing eternally from the Vrindavana of the macrocosm, invisible to fleshly eyes, into her own breast. Her "spiritual body" contains a microcosmic Vrindavana that fills her with the joy of divine union.

From the profane point of view she is still mad. She dwells in an impossible world. But it is a peaceful and joyful madness which presents a disturbing challenge to what we take for "normal." The narrator of the story wants us to question our notions of normalcy, wants to bring us face-to-face with what we are missing -- with what our internal monologue denies. What we take to be the curse of insane longing is a secret blessing. It takes us through torment to hard-won attainment, even though we have not the faintest idea how it occurs. We ourselves build nothing. We only suffer. An unconscious process constructs a "spiritual body" while battering us mercilessly before smoothing out into a bliss-filled glide.

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1. Vimalananda: "If you can remember what time it is, you have no capacity for love" (Svoboda, 1994: 169)
 2. Cf Wendy Doniger's Preface to the second edition of Dimock (1989) and June McDaniel (1989).
 3. Bhava: "emotion, ecstasy"; any one of the attitudes one may take to one's chosen divinity -- servant, child, parent, sexual lover, etc.(Fischer-Schreiber, *et.al.*, 1989). Radha-bhava is the attitude of being Radha in longing desire for Krishna. In Bengal, bhava represents "the religious extreme of the personal" in one's emotional attitude toward the deity, while rasa is "the religious extreme of the impersonal." Bhava is a sacred fluid that fills our personal ego and bursts its seams, spilling out in the symptoms of insanity. Eventually it builds a new receptacle for itself ("spiritual body" or "self"); our torments are changed to bliss; and personal bhava is replaced by cosmic rasa (McDaniel, 1989: 81, 90).
- Dr. Cornelia Dimmitt points out that these meanings of bhava do not represent standard Sanskrit usage and are therefore evidently peculiar to Bengal. The literal meaning of *bhava* in Sanskrit is "birth, origin, coming into existence, state of being, existence." In making it the fluid of their spiritual existence, apparently the Bengali tradition refers to the physiological, emotional, and imaginal impression of being filled with an awareness-transforming fluid. They only "come into existence" spiritually when filled with this subjective impression.
4. I.e., in his crown chakra, which is traditionally represented as the moon.
 5. "*Rasa* stands for bodily liquid in general and the humors (*dosha*) in particular." It also means the water element, taste, and bliss. In alchemy it refers to mercury (Feuerstein, 1990).
 6. Usually some form of his name has been incorporated into the final two lines of the poems attributed to him.
 7. Shakta is the religion of the goddess, Shakti, who is Shiva's consort.
 8. The Baul sect: probably the maddest of contemporary Bengali ecstasies, they appear to have combined Shaivism with Sufism in their religious understanding.
 9. According to McDaniel's study, the Bengalis attribute *bhava* (personal emotion) to the first stage. It is transformed into *rasa* (impersonal emotion) in the final stage. *Bhava* is *my* longing. *Rasa* is cosmic longing.
 10. This is the shortest of many examples, including some rather famous figures. Another source of information about many of these same female saints in which, however, the element of madness has been somewhat de-emphasized is Linda Johnsen's *Daughters of the Goddess* (1994).

11. This is a universal characteristic of shamanism, an indication that one is "elected by the spirits." Cf. Eliade (1964); Neihardt (1961); Merkur (1992).
12. In a section titled "Madness and the Indian Medical Model," McDaniel shows that Indian culture is well aware of madness as a form of psychopathology and distinguishes this from spiritual madness (*Ibid.*, 11-17).
13. This parallels the argument of psychiatrist and Jungian analyst, John Weir Perry, who has shown that young schizophrenics whose "psychotic process" is accepted and supported with empathy go through a process of disintegration and then re-integration -- a transformation process that brings about a valuable re-adaptation to life. We rarely see this because the schizophrenic's symptoms so frighten the rest of us that we do everything in our power to shut down a process that is striving for a re-organization of the self (Perry, 1974).
14. Mahabhava: "the greatest *bhava*," the highest state of insane longing.
15. Bhakti yoga: the path of love and surrender that, under the direction of a guru, classically follows four stages: (1) bhakti (veneration), (2) bhava, (3) prema, (4) mahabhava (Fischer-Schreiber, 1989).
16. Mantra: a word, phrase, or collection of syllables, usually incorporating a divine name, given by the guru and kept in secret by the disciple; recited continually in meditation; eventually is perceived as being identical with the deity invoked (Fischer-Schreiber, 1989). This last stage is what McDaniel means by "the *mantras* come alive."
17. This is not to deny that some -- perhaps most -- who set themselves up as gurus may be charlatans. Charlatans are everywhere -- among disciples, mad saints, and academics, as well -- which does not prevent there being sincere and accomplished individuals in all of these groups.