

Indecent Practices and Erotic Trance: Making Sense of Tantra

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Erotic trance is about changing the world. In the examples we have considered, erotic trance supervenes as a result of our physiological and emotional arousal and presents us with an imaginal vision supremely convincing in its self-evident truth and compelling reality. The empirical world is altered or even replaced by another world whose overwhelming significance we are incapable of doubting. Because the vision appears on its own and may even surprise us with its unexpected character, it may seem to those who only read about such occurrences that it must be arbitrary. Only the subjective conviction of a trance state that leaves us no option to doubt can lend the vision a quality of just-so-ness, so that the practitioner can say, "Although I'd never have guessed it, this clearly is the way things really are."

Not every erotic trance has this character of being wholly unexpected. Indeed, it is well known that in some traditions, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, the meditative vision is carefully predetermined in minute detail. Consider, for example, the highly elaborate mandalas that are designed to resemble the floorplan of a temple with a god and goddess coupled in the center. Arranged about this central pair in concentric circles are other divine couples. At the four "gates" of the temple other gods are to be found; and in a wider circle outside the sanctuary, still others -- each distinctively attired and in a characteristic pose. Border designs are vividly painted in a variety of colors, providing us enough detail for hours of study before we can hope to have an even approximate sense for the intricacy of the design.

Such mandalas may also be painstakingly painted over the course of several days by one or several monks using colored sand. If so, the mandala is used for a single ritual purpose and then destroyed by stirring the colored sand grains into chaos. The mandala represents the ordered divine world of mythology, perceptible through the third eye of the ajna chakra. That heavenly world is created and brought to earth by means of ritual trance and then destroyed when the communal altered state of consciousness ends and the monks return to ordinary consciousness. The fact that it can be painted in advance of the ritual indicates clearly enough that the monks are not surprised by the view that occupies their consciousness when they enter trance. They know exactly what to expect.

More important than the sand painting, however, is the visualization that takes place in the minds of the monks who perform the ritual.

We must remember -- and this point should be emphasized -- that the visualization is performed during a ritual; that is, the practitioner is reciting a text . . . , and the visualization takes place in time with the rhythmically chanted textual description of the evocation. . . . The reading of the ritual text in the assembly hall often goes at break-neck speed, and the vast majority of monks are unable to visualize that quickly, if indeed they are able to visualize at all. Practice in speed and accuracy came in a monk's periods of solitary contemplation, where the pace might be slowed sufficiently to allow concentration on the process of forming the deity, but there was never a break in the ritual process itself, for the solitary yogin so timed his contemplative periods that they fitted the structure of the ritual as a whole (Beyer, 1973: 71).

The simplest way to think about this sort of ritual is to take note of three gross stages in an ideal performance of the work: (1) Before the ritual begins, the monks are in an ordinary state of consciousness. (2) By means of the ritual, they enter an erotic trance wherein the ordinary world is vividly replaced by the subtle world of the mandala, a palace of gods and goddesses. (3) At the end of the ritual, they deliberately destroy it and re-enter the world of everyday. When the visualization works like this, the stolidity of ordinary consciousness, its rootedness in the empirical world, is seriously undermined. The monk realizes the arbitrariness of *any* world construction. The sacred world gains a stability and reliability that clearly rivals the givenness of the profane world.

In an "ideal performance" of the ritual, all the monks would be capable of visualizing the mandala at the "break-neck speed" of their chanting. As it stands, however, few can do so. Those with some facility have, in their private practice, been able to make parts of it vividly present; and they strive to use what they have accomplished in private to add to the communal ritual. Factoring in the well-established principle that people can accomplish more in group practice than they can in solitude, we can well imagine that, difficult as it must be, the mandalic world of the divine palace becomes at least vaguely present for the community as a whole. The result, although surely less than ideal, must nevertheless be a powerful evocation of the world of the gods, whose invocation and banishment certainly serves to loosen the absolute character of the profane world.

Stephen Beyer, whose book *The Cult of Tara* (1973) not only describes the process in detail but builds upon his own practice in a Tibetan monastery, tells us that the novice monk works first at producing a clear and vivid mental picture of the mandala, beginning with the image of the principal deity and allowing the rest to remain vague. If the central figure has several faces and hands, the novice is to begin with the principal face and pair of arms. When these become clear and vivid, additional details are added.

Once the deity's body has appeared in this rough way, the practitioner must practice in the same way the formation of all the subtle parts, the other faces and hands, the ornaments, and so on. After that he must contemplate the deity's consort in the same way; then he adds on the other deities of the retinue; and finally he should be able to settle his mind one-pointedly on a complete and vivid formation of all the rough and subtle parts simultaneously, the entire retinue of the residential palace and all the deities who are its residents (Beyer, 1973: 70).

What we see taking place in this process is a form of discipline we have not yet considered. We have determined that erotic trance involves at least three distinct but mutually contributing elements: physiology, emotion, and imagination. Those who practice *carezza* seek to master physiology. Those who follow the heroic and antinomian path strive to master the emotions which disturb the uninitiated but which can be turned into strength through gaining familiarity with the upsurge of kundalini. Beyer's Tibetan monks are working to master their imagination, so that what appears fortuitously and in an unpredictable fashion for mystics on the lower rungs of the diamond ladder attains for them a real stability and predictability. The difficulty of this achievement can easily be experienced by any reader who will take the time to pause and try to hold before the mind's eye for perhaps ten seconds the image of a red, capital letter A. Possibly that red A will appear immediately. But if it does, it is likely to change colors, becoming yellow, blue, or black. It may stand on its head, lie on its side. Its straight lines may become rubbery. Inevitably it will begin to disintegrate. It takes on a life of its own and frustrates our attempts to hold it steady.[1]

Overcoming what is for us a nearly insuperable difficulty will constitute "the first qualification" for the novice monk. After what would doubtless be years of practice, the monk will be able to hold the whole mandala steady in his erotic trance. At this point, a richness of imaginal experience becomes possible -- something that is wholly beyond the power of those who have not submitted to the discipline of the imaginal path. For instance, as we gain control of the imagination, we create opportunities to witness subtle but important changes in the mandala. Consider for example that god in the upper right quadrant, a few inches from the central pair of divine consorts. He should be sitting on a red lotus petal; but the day he insists upon sitting on a blue petal, kundalini appears to be sending us some very specific information. The stability of the mandala as a whole enables us to appreciate the finest of nuances. There is no telling how we will interpret this alteration. Perhaps it indicates some resistance in ourselves, possibly a passionate defense in the region of our solar plexus. Or it may give evidence relating to our intention in performing the ritual, a statement related to the goal we are trying to achieve. Perhaps it is a particularly auspicious or inauspicious moment for performing the ritual. We will need to know what that god in the upper right quadrant stands for, what role he plays in the mythic narratives underlying the mandala itself. Such subtlety in apprehension is impossible for those who have not mastered imagination.

The Mesocosm

Surely it is possible to begin one's mystic path with the way of imagination. There are all sorts of mystical schools, and the earnest student will likely "shop the metaphysical mall" until she finds an approach that best suits her own nature and speaks most directly to her experience. But in the end none of them fail to address the three principal elements of erotic trance: physiology, emotion, and imagination. Indeed, Beyer's monks do not at all neglect the body. They identify every aspect of the mandala with a specific body-part as this quotation from the Tantric College at Trashilhunpo illustrates:

Before and behind my body, to the right and the left, are the four sides of the mandala; my mouth and nose, anus and penis, are the four gates; the five-colored winds of my five knowledges -- the steeds of my constructs -- are the five-tiered walls; my tongue-perception is the jeweled border, my intestines the net, my sinews the half net, my portion of semen the half-moons, my eye perception the mirrors, my nose perception the flower garlands, my tongue the bells, my body the yak tails, my ear and body perceptions the flags and silken streamers on the balconies; my calves, thighs, upper and lower arms are the eight pillars, my stomach the flask within the mandala, my ears the vajra-marked half-moons in the intermediate directions; my five aggregates, purified, are the five colors of the mandala; my secret place,[2] navel, heart, and tip of my nose are the four gateways, my eyes the wheels, my mind perception the deer and my nose the flags that decorate the gateways; my mind is the lotus in the middle -- and in this way all the parts of my body become the various parts of the divine mansion (Beyer, 1973: 72).

Between the microcosm of the subtle body and the macrocosm of the universe at large, resides what D. G. White (1996) calls the "mesocosm" of the mandala.[3] The mandala is a "psycho-cosmo-gram," an entity in itself which maps both the body and the greater cosmos. By means of the mesocosmic image, the body is brought into line with the cosmos; and the energy that surges through the universe, carrying the stars and planets on their courses, is the same kundalini that rises through the body, opening our eyes in a graded series of erotic trance states, as she activates the several chakras, each with its own physiology and psychology.

Only the emotional and physiological components of erotic trance that we have considered extensively in the first eight chapters of this book can account for the fact that the mandala of the divine palace becomes "real" enough for the monk that it can replace the empirical world during the course of the ritual. It is not merely the way we "see" things that must be rearranged. For the empirical world is truly compelling, and only a world that is equally compelling can convince us that the empirical world is not absolute. In the empirical world, for example, our life is at stake every time we cross a busy street or traverse a narrow mountain ridge. We cannot afford to let our minds wander and neglect the on-coming cars or the loose stones. Similarly, our sanity is at stake when the svadhisthana chakra opens in the lower abdomen. Our personal identity is at stake in the solar plexus, our feeling-connectedness in the heart center, our conceptualization of the world and ourselves at the throat chakra, and so on. Thus the mandala works as a mesocosm only when it is informed with the physiology and emotion that are rooted in the subtle body. According to the *Anguttara-nikaya* (II, 48), the Buddha himself preached this doctrine: "It is in this fathom-long carcass, friend, with its impressions and its ideas, that, I declare, lies the world, and the cause of the world, and the cessation of the world, and the course of action that leads to the cessation of the world" (Eliade, 1969: 179).

In this body lies the world and the cause of the world: It is, for example, the body's potential as seated spectator that gives rise to chairs and amphitheatres and the dramas that take place on stage. In this way the body as incarnate observer causes the empirical world to appear as object, set over against the subjective ego as other. In this body lies the cessation of the world and the course of action that leads to the cessation of the world: the subtle body which opens in distinctive ways in response to the rise of kundalini stops the world of subject/object empiricism. The subtle body reveals itself as participant in an energetic process far greater than the world, where subject and object evaporate as the illusion they always were, when the spectator's chair is abandoned for the meditation mat. Then the body becomes the instrument whereby the energy of the macrocosm and that of the microcosm are recognized as one and indivisible.

The mandala meditators seek to stop the world through a disciplined imagination that painstakingly creates a cosmic palace of the gods. It rivals the reality of the empirical world by calling on the physiological and emotional energy of kundalini rising through the body -- a force as overwhelming and death-dealing to the ego as a car crash or an avalanche. In doing so, it reveals that what has been "stopped" is nothing but a conventional illusion, and what surges forth in its place is a power of far greater ultimacy; for it is the origin of the possibility of every world. It is the brahman or Shakti that can take any form and therefore is the ground of everything that *can* appear.

Subtle Body As Mesocosm

Whether we start with the imaginal construct of a detailed mandala or with the physiological arousal of *carezza*, the body is the instrument by which the world is stopped. Some mystical schools, having recognized this fact, have dispensed with the mesocosmic palace of the gods and directed their attention to the subtle body itself. For them the subtle body -- as the object of meditation -- is itself the mesocosm. In fact the subtle body is a collection of mandalas. Every one of the chakras in Indian and Tibetan culture can be represented as a mandala, a lotus flower with a specific number of petals, each one bearing a Sanskrit letter or a seated divinity with a certain number of faces, arms, and ornaments. It is therefore possible to master the imagination by carefully constructing these four, seven, or twelve mandalas in our erotic trance. But it is also possible to pay attention to the "plumbing" through which kundalini rises: the *sushumna nadi* that describes the course of her ascent and the "spoked wheels" of the chakras where she spreads out in opening those bodily centers, and where she becomes indistinguishable from the kundalini of the cosmos as she flows out and in -- a single energy, the stuff of consciousness that animates "my" subtle body and the universe at large.

In our efforts to familiarize ourselves with kundalini more intimately and in greater detail than the antinomian saints who are aware only of the life energy of the soul as it surges forth to face down the sexually disturbing figure of an enchanted or divine challenger so as to convert that challenge into worthy opposition -- to transform the energy of sexual disturbance into worshipful consortship -- we can find no better guide than one who has taken the subtle body's "plumbing" as the object of meditation. To this end we shall consider some of the details in Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's *Clear Light of Bliss* (1992). But before doing so we require some orientation; for I have found that several individuals to whom I have

recommended Gyatso's book have seen only dry technical details. One angry woman pointed out to me that if this is a book about sexual mysticism, it is sadly lacking in that it fails to provide any reference to women. Even the icons on the cover and between each pair of chapters give us only the figure of an isolated man in meditation.

Again we require the guidance of a shameless and uninhibited teacher like Vimalananda. In effect, he tells us to hook up with a Bhairavi (or Bhairava) and behave with her like a vira so as to learn that kundalini will surge forth and "absorb her power." Although he does not remind us of this context on every page, Gyatso's position is not so different as it might seem. He says, in effect: Let's look at that instrument, the subtle body, that "hooks up" and "absorbs." If we allow ourselves to get lost in the details of Gyatso's book, it is possible to forget that his subtle body is hooking up with a Bhairavi.

The doctrine of the body as the instrument of liberation is universal in Tantra. For example, members of the Nath sect:

"advocate neither outer religious practices nor scriptural knowledge. Their only emphasis is on a direct path, as short as possible, a way which the mystic discovers within himself, right in his own body -- the privileged place for the experience of the Godhead, the energy, or the universe" (Silburn, 1988: 122).

The Pine Forest Myth of Shiva makes the same point:

"[Siva] sports with the daughters and the wives of the sages, with erect hair, a great penis, naked, with an excited look. He laughs, sings, dances charmingly, speaks like a madman, speaks sweetly, laughs horribly." A later text is more blunt: Siva violated a thousand sages' wives (O'Flaherty, 1973: 173).

The tragedy for the sages is that they need their wives as assistants in performing religious sacrifice. They have been blinded by their rituals and have not seen that it is in their bodies, which are their means of becoming "second Shivas," that realization takes place. Shiva says: "Those ascetics who lust for their wives' lotus mouths [vaginas] will worship my *linga* and do honor to me with their wives, and they will regain their sight" (O'Flaherty, 1973: 201).

The Sexual Initiation Of Yeshe Tsogyel

In one of the sacred texts of Tibetan Buddhism, which certainly informs Gyatso's meditation on the subtle body's "plumbing," the great female sexual mystic Yeshe Tsogyel describes her initiatory sexual union with her guru Pema Heruka. In this passage, lotus and vajra refer to vagina and penis, as well as to the mandala and the diamond body:

Then with three fingers stirring the pollen dust of the lotus, I offered my *mandala* to the *mandala* of the Guru's Body with an intense snake-like dance. The *mandala* of dynamic space having gathered into itself the nature of the Great Pema Heruka himself by means of the hook of the lower member's focal point, the Absolute Heruka, his magnificent flaming *vajra* in a state of rapacity and violent abuse, his wrinkles increased, projecting his full emanation, took command of the lotus throne with a roar of scornful laughter that flooded appearances with glory, transmuting them into pure pleasure. Thus he revealed to me the Mandala of the Blazing Sun of Radiant Inner Space, conferring his power upon me (Dowman, 1984: 40).

This is a fairly explicit passage. She stirs the "pollen dust" of her "lotus" with three fingers, and offers the mandala of her subtle body to his with a "snake-like dance" that personifies kundalini. She uses the physiology of sexual arousal to waken her kundalini through masturbation. She identifies with the kundalini that opens her abdominal chakra, thereby using the energy that terrifies those of us who feel victimized by an animal-like power we cannot control. In her erotic trance she allows the impersonal instinctuality of the svadhithana chakra to enact the serpentine goddess's overwhelming intentions. Her ego is "out of the way." Kundalini is the life energy of her soul, and the Lady Yeshe has become the instrument of that power -- not only for awakening herself but also her guru. The svadhithana's opening dissolves the ego-erected barriers between them, so that it is no longer her "I" and his "you," but their "we" which opens as a "mandala of dynamic space." [4]

That "mandala" that opens up between them is the subtle plane, which becomes filled with "the nature of the Great Pema Heruka," presumably his essential being which is ageless and innocent of the wrinkles that bespeak the long biography of Pema's ego. All of this happens "by means of the hook of . . . his magnificent *vajra*," that is by the arousal of kundalini that not only makes his penis spring erect (its "wrinkles uncreased") but also wakens kundalini herself who "stops" the empirical world in favor of "the Blazing Sun of Radiant Inner Space." This is the mandala of the ultimate vision, that seen in the crown chakra -- the universe as the macrocosmic orgasm that reflects their microcosmic bliss.

The lotus throne is Yeshe's vulva within which sits Heruka's vajra penis, unmoving as any of the lotus-sitting gods of a mandala palace. It is always the "Shiva" that is unmoving, while Shakti's nature is to move constantly with utter freedom. For her vibrations constitute the underlying energy which assumes all the forms that comprise the empirical world as well as all the forms that populate the subtle plane.

The Lady Yeshe goes on to describe how each of her chakras were opened, her attachments destroyed, and a different mandalic palace of the gods opened before each one (*Ibid.*, 40-1). Everything changes through that "roar of scornful laughter," that is, laughter at the puny illusions of the empirical world, revealing the "glory" that fills them when our subtle eyes are opened by the uprush of kundalini. [5] Simultaneously she sees all the mandalas that constitute her subtle body, each differentiated from the others by its unique vision of the subtle plane. Above all is the Blazing Sun of Radiant Inner Space, the view from her crown chakra. But her awareness of her subtle body is so refined that she misses none of the nuances. Every level of erotic trance -- every lotus on the interior diamond ladder -- is simultaneously present; and she sees it all in a glance as the monks who have become experts in mandala meditation see the entire palace of the gods in complete detail.

This sounds like an impossible achievement for any human being, regardless of the degree of her familiarity with erotic trance and her mastery of imagination. The reader may suspect we have fallen under the influence of another "Sun among exaggerators." In fact the life of Yeshe -- although she was an historical individual, the favorite consort of Padma Sambhava, also known as Pema, the legendary/historical founder of Tibetan Buddhism in the eighth century -- is a "revealed text," a *terma*. The Tantric yogin Taksham Nuden discovered it on the subtle plane a thousand years after Yeshe's death and employed all the literary devices of Tibetan hagiography in writing it down [6] (Dowman, 1984: xii-xvii). It has less "historical accuracy" than the New Testament. But is it an exaggeration worthy of Vimalananda? Does

it possess an "emotional accuracy" that renders its historical exaggeration irrelevant? Again we have to look to the community that reveres the text to see that it has become a classic precisely because it articulates the goal of sexual yoga. Just as only a few mandala meditators can imaginably construct the palace of the gods at break-neck speed, so few if any mystical consort pairs can see the various levels of the subtle plane in a single glance. Nevertheless, it remains the goal and expresses what is theoretically possible for any human being who has mastered the imaginal dimension of erotic trance.

The Subtle Body As Ladder

It is beyond my powers to analyze a single palace of the gods, much less a condominium tower of stacked residences. But even if I were to attempt such a thing, my analysis would surely exceed the patience of my readers. To understand the achievement of the subtle-body rung of the diamond ladder, we require a description much simpler than a series of mandala palaces, some way to see the subtle body as fitted out with rungs that can be recognized and distinguished from one another. For ladders are a universal metaphor for us. It is not only the mystics who speak in terms of ladders: for example, Jacob's vision in Genesis of a ladder between heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending; Muhammad's ascension through seven heavens to the presence of God; the *merkabah* ("throne" or "chariot") mystics of Judaism, who speak of the same graded ascent to the divine throne; the "states," and "stations" of the Sufi path; the levels of yogic trance states. We also see our everyday lives in terms of ladders: the steps of maturation; the stages of life; the rise of our careers; the hierarchy of a business or law firm; the "glass ceiling" that limits the rise of women and minorities. In all these cases a ladder tells us what to expect of ourselves and of our world and is useful to the extent we can recognize the rungs.

Thus, when it comes to the internal ladder of the subtle body, we need some relatively simple index for recognizing the stages of kundalini's arousal. For it is not enough to know that kundalini rises and changes our consciousness, we need to recognize the course of these changes in some detail. "Even more important than awakening Kundalini is learning how to direct it so that it remains at chosen centers of consciousness" (Ajaya, 1990: 100). In *The Clear Light of Bliss* (1992) Gyatso has recognized this. Indeed, he defines the subtle body as comprised of two elements. The first is the movement of an impersonal, spiritual force, the energy of kundalini, which he calls "a very subtle wind." This "wind" blows through the cosmos to animate it and blows as well through our bodies, where it activates the chakras. But the wind does not become a subtle *body* until it is recognized as such. We must appropriate that impersonal movement as stirring and flowing through *us*. We have to learn to recognize it, know where it is within us, and which direction it is moving. We have to have a "mentality" that is attuned to the movement of kundalini. This he calls our "very subtle mind": "Our subtle body is the very subtle wind upon which our very subtle mind is mounted" (Gyatso, 1992: 38). By "gathering" those subtle winds and "riding" them with our consciousness, we familiarize ourselves with the passageways and chakra-stations that comprise our subtle body -- what I have called the "plumbing" of the subtle body.

Mounted winds and the minds that mount them are inseparable, just like the body and its shadow, and so if the mind gathers within a vacuole inside the central channel the winds must also gather there. Strong and consistent practice of this meditation will cause the central channel gradually to open (Gyatso, 1992: 31).

Kundalini moves through the channels of our subtle body only when she is aroused. Her arousal generates "bliss," but in Gyatso's language mere bliss implies attachment. We become attached to the being who generates bliss in us, as anyone who has ever fallen in love knows very well. It requires no skill at all. Skillful practice -- our familiarizing ourselves with our subtle body in all its details -- is the means for transforming bliss into the spiritual path. Only the bliss-filled mind can ride the wind of kundalini. In this way our attachment reveals the movement of kundalini and enables us to "mount" it. Then comes the crucial transition: we detach ourselves from the blissful movement by making it the object of our meditation. By changing the standpoint of the observer from the saddled rider of the wind to a place outside, where the rider's movements can be followed as though presented on a movie screen, we turn the microcosm into a mesocosm. We dis-identify with the process and become its observer. This, too, is the goal expressed in the autobiography of Yeshe Tsogyel: "Desireless, blissful wisdom is the essence of all desirable goals, undistractedly going and coming in endless space" (Dowman, 1982: ix). As long as we remain attached to our bliss and distracted by its movements, we cannot go or come in endless space. We are stuck where we remain attached. Vimalananda puts the same idea into a challenge: "Try to enjoy sex without self-identification and you will see how hard it is" (Svoboda, 1997: 148).

Hooking Up With A Bhairavi

Gyatso's book can be misunderstood if we forget how that bliss-attachment is actually achieved. He reveals the background of the practice in the introduction to the book and rarely refers to it again before the end. His entire effort is devoted to the exercises which enable the meditator to transform attached bliss into detached wisdom. Therefore, as I describe some of those exercises, I shall amplify them by recalling the context, to which Gyatso devotes only three sentences:

In Action Tantra the meditator generates bliss by looking at a visualized goddess, and then transforms that bliss into the path. In Performance Tantra, the meditator generates bliss by exchanging smiles with the goddess, and in Yoga Tantra by holding hands with her and so forth. In Highest Yoga Tantra the meditator generates bliss by imagining sexual embrace with a consort and, at advanced stages, by engaging in actual embrace; and then transforms that bliss into the spiritual path (Gyatso, 1992: 4).

Obviously the female practitioner will visualize a god, and the homosexual practitioner a divinity of the same sex. The gender of the imagined divinity is incidental. Nevertheless, for simplicity I shall continue to speak of goddesses.

Although Gyatso's language is highly restrained, he is clearly talking about sexual bliss and sexual attachment. Therefore the visualized goddess will have to resemble the one Vimalananda alludes to when he gives Svoboda instructions on how to attract a visualized "enchanted woman" and then resist her advances so as to attract the attentions of a goddess. Evidently goddesses are attracted only to the strongest of viras, only to those who have some chance of engaging with them as worthy opponents. For the goddess Vimalananda and Gyatso have in mind is clearly a sexual enchantress of formidable power. Very likely she is going to be naked with flying hair and dripping genitals. Engaging with her is a dangerous business. We need only recall how disorienting Muktananda's enchanted woman was for

him -- and he never referred to her as a goddess but only as a "girl."

Imagining a wanton goddess vividly enough that she stirs our kundalini and makes our penis burrow into our navel, as the girl in the red aura did for Muktananda, is already an exceptional achievement. We have to be well-established in the employment of erotic trance even to consider Gyatso's exercises. But if we are capable of invoking such an imaginal consort, Gyatso tells us how to conduct ourselves -- something that Vimalananda leaves entirely to our undisciplined imagination. Vimalananda says that if we do not dare take that sexual goddess for our consort we must treat her as a mother. Gyatso never gives us that option. But at the same time he knows she is too much for us and gives us a graded series of steps in dealing with her.

When we first see her, the mere sight of her beauty and sexual excitement is enough to generate bliss in us; and that bliss implies attachment. Thus we begin Gyatso's meditation exercises with the intention of transforming that initial bliss at the sight of the goddess into detached wisdom. Only then are we able to exchange smiles with her. Exchanged smiles, as we know from our everyday experience, amounts to flirting and generates far more excitement than the mere sight of a potential partner. Thus, at the level of smiles we have to begin our work of detachment all over again. The kundalini generated within us has to be as potent as the disturbing energy generated by the flirtatious goddess if we are to neutralize her effects and transform the bliss she generates into wisdom. Thus it goes through hand-holding "and so forth." As it is a big jump from hand-holding to sexual embrace, we must imagine that Gyatso's "and so forth" covers several discrete stages. For example, there might be hugging, kissing, and eventually Vimalananda's image of seating her on our left thigh with our hand on her left breast and her right hand on our penis.

Only after all these graded exercises with an imagined consort does the practitioner take up the bodily work of actual intercourse with a fleshly consort. In this final stage, direct bodily arousal with lips, tongue, hands, breasts, and genital organs fuels a physiological charge that precedes the work of imagination. In all the previous exercises, imagination is used to move our physiology. Even if we court the danger of being so turned aside into lust as to fall into Matsyendra's sleep in the Forest of Women's Thighs through our imaginal activities, imagination has always taken the lead. Now, if we are to engage in actual intercourse, we really put our mastery of imagination to the test. The ultimate goal of Gyatso's meditation exercises is to enable us to transform the bliss of actual, physical intercourse into the spiritual path. The imagined goddesses, the level of their sexual abandon carefully graded, are only preliminaries. Each stands on a separate rung of Gyatso's ladder, enticing the practitioner upward toward "Indra's Heaven." Like the Buddha, Gyatso seizes the arrow of our lust and turns it into the means of our mystical attainment.

Mahamudra

Gyatso's *Clear Light of Bliss* describes the central meditative practice of Mahamudra, one of the highest teachings of the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism. Literally, *Maha-mudra* means "great seal" (Fischer-Schreiber, *et. al.*, 1989). Dowman translates *Mahamudra* as "the Magnificent or Sublime Stance"; he calls it "the ultimate aim of all practitioners of the Tantras," and cites Drukpa Kunley as a prime exemplar of this realization

(Dowman, 1988: 152). He says that the goal of the work is to attain the "free space wherein action is called Non-Action," which means to be "in such harmony with the universe that it requires no effort or striving; spontaneous and uninhibited, it transcends our concepts of work or activity" (*Ibid.*, xxxiv).

Gyatso breaks down the discipline of Mahamudra into three fundamental goals: (1) the attainment of "Spontaneous Great Bliss," (2) the attainment of "emptiness," and (3) the union of Spontaneous Great Bliss with emptiness. "Spontaneous Great Bliss" refers to an emotional and physiological arousal of kundalini which has been transformed from attached bliss to detached wisdom. It is still "blissful" in the sense that it is an aroused state. It is, in fact, the sexual component in the practice of Vajrayana ("the diamond vehicle path") in Tibet.[7] Gyatso gives a brief history of Tibetan meditation, arguing that his method of "inner fire meditation" is the central doctrine in all Tibetan forms of Buddhism (Gyatso, 1992: 36). We shall follow Gyatso's instructions only as far as they concern the first goal of attaining Spontaneous Great Bliss; for this is the achievement distinctive to the subtle-body rung of the diamond ladder.[8]

What we have been calling the rise of kundalini that activates the subtle body from within, Gyatso calls "penetrating the channel wheels" (chakras) with "subtle winds." In his view, the subtle body is activated only when at least one chakra is open so that cosmic winds coming from the outside can penetrate it and fill the entire subtle body with their power. Gyatso thus refers to an experience that is not at all foreign to what we have considered. For example, when the abdominal chakra (or "navel channel wheel") opens like a camera eye, we feel that a powerful force beyond our capacity to resist invades us from the body of our partner. It seems too much for us and threatens to destroy our integrity, our sanity, and our propriety. It leaves us feeling naked and undefended. All the protective barriers have fallen between ourselves and our partner, and we are in danger of being torn apart by instinctual forces. When the heart chakra opens, we again feel penetrated by forces that have the quality of a wind or air. All is "sublimed," and the experience is not so dangerous-feeling. But the impression of being penetrated by a force from outside our own body is undeniable. Thus Gyatso pays attention to the experience of open chakras without imagining kundalini as a serpent that sleeps at the base of the spine and needs to be awakened. He considers her manifestation at the several chakras that comprise the rungs of the internal ladder and how, once inside, she moves up and down the central channel.

Although Gyatso's system involves ten chakras, most of the work deals with four of them: navel, heart, throat, and crown. These, he says, are the only ones where knots occur (*Ibid.*, 21). The brow chakra plays an important role near the end of the process of realizing Spontaneous Great Bliss.

The essential practice in attaining Spontaneous Great Bliss is the yoga of inner fire meditation (*tummo*), in which a flame is created in the navel center which rises up the central channel and melts the "drops" (i.e., opens the chakras) at the heart, throat, and crown. *Tummo* (also written *tumo* and *tunmo*) which means "Fierce One," is usually a "wrathful Heroine," i.e., a fiercely sexual goddess (*Ibid.*, 35). It is the Tibetan equivalent of kundalini. The wrathful heroine is the wanton divinity that Vimalananda warns us about, advising that we treat her as a mother if we believe we are not prepared for her to become our consort. Gyatso's method provides another means of taming the wrathful one. It directs our attention

away from the imaginal goddess to the effects she creates within our subtle body: the flame that results in the navel chakra. Gyatso thereby reverses our natural tendency to stand before her in aroused horror, feeling our navel chakra yawning uncontrollably open and threatening to rip us to shreds. In effect Gyatso urges us to stop dancing around that crater of terror and pain, wondering how to stop a force that is greater than we are. He urges us to plunge right into its center and become one with the flame that wrathful heroine generates within us. Stop riveting your gaze on the challenger, and pay attention to the process that is going on within you.

To that end, we have to familiarize ourselves with the subtle body and its central channel (sushumna) in particular. For in normal consciousness, the winds travel through the side channels (ida and pingala) and generate the "gross thoughts" by which we construct the empirical world. Erotic trance occurs only when the winds move within the central channel. Then our gross thoughts and the empirical world they create are stopped, and we enter upon the subtle plane (*Ibid.*, 31). We might well recall in this context the woman described in the previous chapter who had to learn the hard way that just because the visions are *true* does not mean they should be taken "literally." What she might have realized as belonging to the subtle plane, she tried to apply "literally" to the empirical world; and this unhinged her, resulting in a couple of weeks of apparent psychosis. Gopi Krishna's problems very likely resulted from the same failure to distinguish clearly between the subtle plane of the central channel and the empirical world of the side channels. Note that the imagery of channels is a way of "anatomizing" states of consciousness. The anatomy of the subtle body is the mesocosm that "maps" the various levels of erotic trance and contrasts them with profane thinking.

Inner Fire Meditation, Preliminaries

Inner fire meditation begins with fairly standard preliminaries, including a mandala meditation in which one's "root guru"[9] occupies the central position, and a Buddhist prayer of intention to perform the inner fire meditation successfully for the liberation of all beings. After this, the mandala is dissolved into the root guru who is brought through the crown to the heart chakra, where he "dissolves into the indestructible wind and indestructible mind inside the indestructible drop in the center of the heart channel wheel" (*Ibid.*, 38). In short, we begin by identifying with the author of our tradition, who takes up residence within our heart chakra, which is our own home-base within the subtle body.

After some breathing exercises, the first task of Gyatso's method is to familiarize ourselves with the subtle body that is comprised essentially of channels, the "plumbing" through which the "mounted winds" travel. First the gross body is reduced in imagination to a transparent empty shell:

First we regard our body as being in its normal form -- made of skin, flesh, bone, blood, and so forth -- and then we strongly imagine that all the contents of our body melt into light and gradually disappear into emptiness, leaving only our skin like an empty shell. Once this meditation is stable we imagine that our skin becomes clear and transparent, without any physical resistance, like a rainbow (*Ibid.*, 43).

Next the subtle body itself is carefully constructed in the imagination, beginning with the central channel. We may begin by seeing it as thick as an arm, but then it should be reduced gradually in size until it is "the width of a drinking straw." When the visualization of the central channel and two side channels has become stable for us, we begin to construct the chakras, each with a precise number of "spokes" or secondary channels. We begin with the heart chakra, which is always our home-base.

We imagine that if we were to turn on a light it would shine down the corridors of the eight spokes of the heart channel wheel. We look down these spokes carefully, inspecting each one closely, and then conclude, "Now I have seen the eight petals of the heart channel wheel clearly" (*Ibid.*, 45-6).

Once we have the entire subtle body stable in our imagination, we proceed to "correct all the defects in the spokes," making them "smooth, soft, and supple" (*Ibid.*, 48).

Gyatso says that this training in clearly seeing the plumbing of the subtle body is very much like visiting a museum in which we systematically study all the rooms and exhibits, always returning to our starting point (the heart chakra) until we have the entire building in all its detail firmly in our memory (*Ibid.*, 50-1). In doing so, he clearly reveals the mesocosmic role of the subtle body. It is no longer something we imagine to be merely "inside us." Rather we reverse this common-sense point of view and take up residence within it. Our subtle body becomes an imaginal palace whose grand staircase is the central channel, and whose palatial rooms are the chakras. The movement of kundalini within this palace becomes a "wind" that we "mount" and ride. Kundalini is no longer a vague and uncontrollable force surging through us in response to the threat of a wrathful and wanton heroine challenging us from without. Kundalini's movements become tractable when we learn how to ride and direct them. What kundalini does to us takes on a spatial significance, where the architecture of the subtle body becomes a kind of index for the level of her arousal. Precisely imagining a subtle body amounts to creating an alchemical vessel within which the forces of transformation can be controlled, slowed down, and pin-pointed with accuracy.

As we take up residence within the subtle body, we are very tiny, indeed. We are inside a drop which is inside a vacuole at the very center of the heart chakra, where the central channel runs through. We can see down to the navel center, where a fire blazes, and up through the throat chakra to the sahasrara, where a white drop of nectar hangs from the very crown of the head. The heart seems to be an ideal location. It is above the diaphragm and therefore curiously removed from the instinctual tumult of the lower chakras. And the upper chakras are too rarefied. Only in the heart chakra can we relate equally well to the sublime and the earthly.

Inner Fire Meditation, Arousal

To view that flirtatious goddess who stirs our kundalini, we descend the translucent tube of the central channel to the vacuole at the center of the navel chakra. By placing our consciousness in the navel, we concentrate all the kundalini energy the wrathful beauty has stirred up in the anatomical region where we feel the danger, instinctual force, and fragmenting terror of the challenge. We are a vira, for we brave the challenger head-on. But we do not look directly at the seductive one. We let a more fleshly set of eyes take care of

that detail. Instead, we pay attention to what is happening right here in the basement of our mansion. Rays of energy are streaming through the "spokes" of the navel channel wheel and converging with terrifying force upon the very vacuole in which we are sitting. It bursts into flame. We hasten back to the safety of the heart chakra. From our home-base vantage, it appears that a column of fire is rising up the central channel from below, and we know that it will eventually reach us.

The fire in the belly expresses very accurately the unhinging power of kundalini, as she is felt when we identify with our fleshly body and fear we may lose all control. Fire burns and destroys, but it also generates usable energy. If we were to stay in the navel, we would very likely be burnt alive -- at least in the sense that we would lose our sanity. Undoubtedly, we spend most of our time in the drawing room of the heart chakra because it is far enough from the furnace that we can feel the heat without risking our destruction. The disembodied sublimity of the heart chakra allows us to feel the effects of kundalini in a rather blissful way. Kundalini changes us more gently.

Outwardly, the heart chakra is the region in which we find our union with that wrathful deity takes place primarily in the realm of feeling. People have described this to me in almost the same words I have used to describe it to myself. It is as though the two of us are comprised of mist. We enter one another in such a way that the molecules and droplets of our separate mists become thoroughly mixed into a single body of mist. The terror of being torn apart that belongs to the navel chakra no longer applies at the heart chakra. Some resistance has melted within us, and this is symbolized by the softening of the drop in the center of the heart chakra.

As the column of fire slowly rises below us, we feel the drop which surrounds us warm and soften. This opens the spokes of the heart channel wheel, and energy from the goddess streams in, focused right on the drop in which we sit. While our more fleshly body is experiencing the whirling fans of light and blissful union, we remain focused on the events taking place in the drawing room of the heart. The column of flame has encircled the drop, which is becoming more and more subtle. We seize our opportunity to mount the fiery wind of kundalini and ride to the throat and crown chakras.

Already we can begin to appreciate the advantage of imaginally constructing an interior palace of translucent tubing. We place different sorts of feelings in different rooms. We begin to sort out the emotional chaos brought on by the disturbing divinity. We allow our erotic trance to be driven by the flaming force of physiological arousal, and then because the several chakras are so refined in what they admit, we can tour our inner mansion and see how our favorite rooms have been transformed. In the heart we sort out feelings, in the throat make conceptual sense of them.

We have distinguished imagination from feelings and emotions, perhaps giving the impression that mastering the one might have nothing to do with the other. Now we see that the way of the antinomian hero does not need to be a crude facing down of force with force. True enough, heroes have to stand up to wrathful divinities. But when they do so, they need not remain unconscious of how kundalini is changing them. If they will imaginally construct a sort of distillation device such as Gyatso's tubular palace, they can begin to familiarize themselves with the various components of that emotional dragon that rears up within them

as a sinuous column of fire.

To climb the interior diamond ladder -- at least as high as the throat chakra -- is to imagine a device (the tubing of the subtle body) to differentiate emotion and then make sense of it. In this sense it resembles the "cat-cracking towers" we use in the refinement of petroleum. Crude petroleum is viscous and sludgy because it is comprised of long multiply branched molecules that fail to disentangle quickly enough to pour easily. In this regard it is not unlike the undifferentiated emotion of raw kundalini as it is felt in the navel chakra. The raw petroleum is heated with catalysts [10] which "crack" the big molecules into smaller ones, which then vaporize and stream into the vertical tube of the "cat-cracking tower" -- the heaviest ones settling near the bottom and the lightest rising to the top. Refiners separate the various components by relative size when they draw off the vapors at different levels of the tower. Gyatso's tubular palace works in precisely the same way, breaking emotional chaos down into its smaller and lighter components which are drawn off selectively in the several rooms of the internal mansion.

The difference between the refinement of emotion and that of petroleum, however, is that nothing leaves the system of the subtle body. Nothing is drawn off. The rooms are part of a single laboratory apparatus that lets nothing escape. What we learn in the heart chakra we take with us as we ascend to the throat. D. G. White (1996: 245-62) presents overwhelming evidence that the Hindu alchemists of the Middle Ages conceived of the subtle body's plumbing as a pair of long-necked flasks joined together at their mouths. The resultant long tube with a bulb at either end was sealed with rags and mud, which were said to represent the fleshly body. Just like the Western alchemists, they required a *vas bene clausum*, a well-closed vessel. [11] Kundalini is not to escape, either through ejaculation or through emotional tumult. Even saintly madness implies a squandering of valuable erotic energy. Every molecule of kundalini, from the most subtle to the most gross, is to be folded into the work.

Inner Fire Meditation, Nectar

Gyatso's tubular palace is a more elaborate apparatus than the medieval Hindu alchemist's pair of long-neck flasks. But it works pretty much the same way. This becomes particularly clear when we ride the hot wind of kundalini to the crown. Because none of her heat has been lost, kundalini can melt the white drop in the sahasrara until it begins to drip down the central channel in a long glistening strand "like the thread of a spider's web" (*Ibid.*, 67) -- or perhaps like a delicate thread of prostatic fluid with a tiny drop bulging at the bottom. We who have learned to ride the wind of kundalini can also ride that drop down the central channel, as slowly as we wish to let it go. When we do so, we find that it brings joy to each chakra, a different quality of joy in each case. Gyatso fails to tell us what this joy is like. We are led to conclude that it adds an ineffable something to each chakra as it descends. A more refined form of kundalini enlarges and intensifies our experience at the levels of the throat and heart. When it slowly stretches down to the region of the navel, it catches fire and fuels a roaring blaze in our mansion's furnace.

The medieval alchemists said that semen, whose course is reversed through the practice of vajroli, rises through the tube of their subtle body just as vapors rise in their laboratory

apparatus. When it reaches the crown, it is transformed into nectar through the copulation of Shiva and Shakti. As nectar drips down to the throat and heart, it brings bliss. If their two-bulbed tube was really a "well-closed vessel," nectar must have added to the solution that was heated in the lower bulb, and transformed the upward flow as it vaporized. Such, certainly, is the effect in Gyatso's inner palace. As nectar feeds the fire in the navel chakra, we can ride up the central channel more vigorously and experience yet another nuance at the heart and throat as we rise. For the flame is enriched with nectar. This time, however, we cause kundalini's sinuous fire to loop around the drop in the crown chakra and continue on as the central channel bends forward and down toward the brow chakra.[12] Here, at the third eye, the flame that begins at the navel gives rise to the vision of a great mandala in which all the Buddhas are seen as coupled heroes and heroines "in single-pointed embrace" (68).

Surely Padma Sambhava (Pema Heruka) and his favorite consort, Yeshe Tsogyel, will be among those naked copulating heroes and heroines, for Padma Sambhava is the most important Buddha (enlightened being) Tibet has known. Probably they are the central couple in a sexual chakra ceremony of coupled divinities. The vision we enjoy when we ride the fiery wind of kundalini to the ajna chakra resembles very closely that testimony from Promode Chatterjee we saw in the first chapter of this book. Chatterjee had the privilege of being witness to an Aghora sexual chakra performance that took place in a cremation ground (smashan) during a thunder storm. He was very impressed with the holiness, sweetness, and ecstasy of the event; and, then near the end, a flash of lightning revealed the divinity of the scene: "light-figures of naked gods and goddesses in the midst of their divine play, surrounding a large statue of Hara and Gauri, as still and profound as the Himalayas" (McDaniel, 1989: 124). This vision that greets us from the observation deck of the subtle body's third eye is undoubtedly a variation on what the Buddha's half-brother, Nanda, observed when he was transported to Indra's Heaven.

Spontaneous Great Bliss

In Gyatso's account, we watch this mandalic scene of divine sexual union with intense interest, as one by one, the couples experience great bliss and melt into light. The separate drops of light melt into a single one that we draw into the third eye and ride up the central channel back to the crown chakra. There it dissolves into the drop of nectar hanging from our crown so that it becomes "completely identified with the essence of all the Heroes and Heroines" (*Ibid.*, 68). The vision of a divine subtle plane of sexual union informs and gives new meaning to what formerly was undifferentiated nectar. Only now that we have enriched the nectar with divine vision do we allow the fiery wind of kundalini to melt the drop. The elastic springiness of the glistening thread with its tiny, bulging drop at the end allows the unification of all the blissfully coupled Buddhas to bring great "joy" to the throat and heart centers and a huge increase of heat at the navel (*Ibid.*, 69).

However, now that the drop of nectar has been "distilled" through its contributions to each of the four main chakras and has been enriched with divine vision, we take it beyond the navel, all the way out to the end of the sex organ, where we hold it steady (*Ibid.*, 102). Although Gyatso does not say so, his account seems to imply that this is the moment when, in our intercourse with an actual or imaginal partner, we reach the stage of an "internal orgasm." For, in the practice of semen retention, it does seem as though the semen charges down the

seminal ducts and out the urethra to poise precariously at the inner tip of the penis. At this crucial moment, if we are able to hold back from an explosive orgasm, ejaculation is stopped at the last possible moment, holds steady at the tip of the penis, and pauses there for what seems to be an eternal instant of motionlessness before "internal spasms" occur in the urethra. These spasms are called "internal" because they do not result in the discharge of semen. They mark the passing of the crisis, after which it seems as though the charge of semen begins to withdraw.

It is reasonable to think that Gyatso refers precisely to this male experience which occurs only during the practice of carezza. One feels that a tube that runs through the body and ends in the penis has closed down at the tip at the last possible moment; and after the crisis of an internal orgasm, the substance that fills the tube retreats. If vajroli does not actually amount to a "sucking up" of sexual fluids with the penis, the sensations just described would be a sufficient explanation for why the sexual/mystical practices of the Orient have generated the conviction that it does.[13]

This means that the fiery wind of kundalini, after having united the divine vision with nectar, brings the substance of bliss to the very end of the penis where it is charged with the energy of an internal orgasm. The nectar of spiritual realization, now informed by the divine vision and charged with the ecstasy of orgasm, is ridden up the central channel of the subtle body, where it brings Spontaneous Great Bliss to each chakra. Each room of the internal palace experiences Spontaneous Great Bliss in its own unique manner (*Ibid.*, 102-3). Spontaneous Great Bliss combines the vision of the divine subtle plane with the raw energy of sex.

Inner Fire Meditation, Summary

This alchemical transformation of divinity with sex and sex with divinity is made possibly only when we detach from the wrathful and wanton divinity that disturbs us, and place our one-pointed attention on the changes she effects in our subtle body. The changes in us are at least as real as she is. But when our attention is attached to her, we remain ignorant of what is happening within ourselves. Gyatso directs our attention to the imaginal palace of our subtle body, where we can watch the disturbances generated by kundalini as if under a microscope. We find that new possibilities emerge as each chakra opens; and we find that each new level of experience we become familiar with adds to our experience of the others.

For those of us who have not practiced inner fire meditation, the process may seem all too abstract. But analogies are readily available. Note the difference, for example, between the terrifying panic that attends the first opening of the navel chakra and how this same energy becomes sublime when it has risen to the level of the heart. Once we have become familiar with this transition, our next meeting with the fierce consort who affects us so strongly will no longer be attended by such a frightening opening of the navel chakra. Our familiarity with kundalini has grown, and the sublime associations gained at the heart chakra will not be missing when the navel opens again. Now it opens with a warm, insistent vibration that corresponds very well to Yeshe Tsogyel's claim that she offered the mandala of her subtle body to the mandala of her guru.

The same sort of transition occurs when the brow chakra has opened and we have seen our consort as a divinity. I do not refer to perceptions of beauty and goodness, for these -- important as they are -- belong to the solar plexus. When we perceive our partner as a divinity, we are gripped by the reflex to worship. We have passed beyond the personal. When, after this, kundalini subsides to the level of the heart, the experience of the sublime has a new divine quality. The intermingling mists of the heart center are flavored with coupled divinities.

Gyatso, unfortunately, does not speak of these things. He is interested only in teaching us the technique of mounting the winds of kundalini and riding her up and down the central staircase of the subtle-body palace. He leaves it to us to learn what these things feel like. In the end this may be the best solution, for anticipating what an experience should be can interfere with our having it.

For example, Günter Nitschke (1995), a follower of Osho, otherwise known as the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, gives an overly simplified adaptation of Gyatso's meditation practice that makes no mention of the tubular palace. Perhaps this is the reason Nitschke's distinctions between the several states of consciousness we are considering seems vague and at times contradictory. Thus, when he describes an experience he calls an opening of the heart chakra, we may wonder whether it might more likely have been his throat, or brow that opened.[14] Nevertheless, it seems that something monumental did in fact occur:

"I" disappeared and for the first time in my life "was." All that remained was the whole universe in the form of a dark-blue starry night-sky with one central red spot. The overall sensation was one of being bigger than the universe or at one with it, of liberation from my separate existence, from death (Nitschke, 1995: 38).

This was surely a little bit of enlightenment, the realization that an erotic trance was possible in which a vista "bigger than the universe" informed him of the smallness and illusory nature of the empirical world. But he confesses that it also became a block to his further progress. He waited in vain for this experience to occur again instead of remaining open to whatever might appear upon the subtle plane. It may be that Gyatso wants to avoid blocking our spontaneous experience of bliss by refusing to tell us what it feels like to him.

If so, I have perhaps corrupted the clean abstract lines of his book by identifying with the tiny inhabitant of the tubular palace and recounting my imaginal experience upon ascending and descending the central ladder. My account is much more vivid than his. He goes for pages and pages without mentioning the fierce and wanton goddess that appears to be central to his method. He dryly presents a series of imaginal exercises that are so abstract that the careless reader might well conclude that kundalini is raised not through an encounter with a wrathful deity but by "pure meditation" -- setting up a standing wave in the aorta. If many of his followers, however, have relied entirely upon a standing wave generated by the absolute stillness of sitting in meditation, Gyatso's references to wrathful heroes and heroines make it clear that doing the work without a wrathful opponent would function as a sort of preliminary exercise, a pursuit of "the first qualification." For there can be little doubt that the goal of inner fire meditation on the interior tubular palace is eventually to be used in the course of actual sexual intercourse with a fleshly but highly accomplished consort. *Tummo*, the Tibetan word that means both "inner fire" and "wrathful Heroine," (1) begins in sexual arousal, (2) adds the attainment of nectar, (3) informs that nectar with a vision of the divine

subtle plane of ecstatic sexuality, and (4) completes the process with the orgasmic energy of a fully realized internal orgasm.

The Conquest Of Death

These four elements lead to Spontaneous Great Bliss -- a topic we shall pursue further in the next chapter by examining the mystical consorts' experience of divinization. But Spontaneous Great Bliss is only the first of three goals, the others being the achievement of emptiness and combining emptiness with Spontaneous Great Bliss. But even this third achievement, as abstract as it may be for us at this point, is not the end of the Mahamudra practice. For Gyatso, the purpose of building the tubular palace and becoming intimate with kundalini is so that he can ride out of his physical body at the moment of death upon the fiery life energy of his soul. To ride into death on the reptilian head of kundalini means liberation from the endless round of uncontrolled reincarnations, and gives to the enlightened being an extraordinary choice. Either she can attain Indra's Heaven for eternity, or she can choose the route of the Bodhisattva: to return to another incarnation as an enlightened one, a Buddha, and work for the liberation of all beings.

Those who learn to ride into death on the head of kundalini have, first, to be able to generate Spontaneous Great Bliss while alive and awake. But this is only the beginning of their work. Their next task is to learn to perform the same imaginal, emotional, and physiological task of riding kundalini while asleep. For this, they need to develop the throat chakra, which Gyatso claims enables the practitioner to obtain a deep and long sleep quickly and to have vivid dreams (*Ibid.*, 32). These are the necessary conditions for the practice of inner fire meditation while asleep. To be able to generate Spontaneous Great Bliss in one's sleep, then, amounts to a training exercise for the ultimate moment of death.

Thus Gyatso's method has to be seen in the context of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1960), where the imaginal scenes (*bardos*) that threaten to trap the dying soul are read over the body of the deceased to raise the consciousness of the discarnate soul which is believed to be hovering in the vicinity of its putrefying body for several days after death. Obviously to recognize the moment of death as an opportunity implies an attitude completely foreign to profane consciousness and requires a formidable mastery of erotic trance. Recognizing a passing moment as an opportunity has been expressed vividly by Carlos Castaneda (1972) in his phrase "the cubic centimeter of chance." Life presents us with countless variations on our cubic centimeter of chance, whose ultimate moment is death. For example, the moment of waking from sleep and the moment of falling asleep each present us with a "cubic centimeter" of contentless thought which can be used to realize that we are not the empirical ego which talks to itself incessantly about the empirical world and the persona field's obsession with survival. There is also an empty moment between each pair of thoughts our ego entangles itself in. If we are attentive, we can catch that centimeter moment and use it to stop our internal monologue and the world it tirelessly sustains. When we work in waking life to catch hold of these countless cubic centimeters of chance, we are preparing for the ultimate opportune moment, the one our whole life is directed toward, the instant of death.

To become conscious in minute detail of what orgasmic bliss effects within us; to detach ourselves from the crude impressions of physical orgasm as they are felt in our genital organs and chakras; and to convert that ordinary bliss into detached wisdom: these sublime intentions of the Vajrayana tradition certainly introduce us to the spiritual potential of sex. If we thought Bregman (1982) expressed a wise skepticism regarding the alleged spirituality of "liberated orgasm," Gyatso shows us why she was right. If we wondered about the authentic spirituality of the mad saints and the antinomian heroes, Gyatso has given us a dependable yardstick for judging the spirituality of sexual practitioners. Indeed, it is possible for the psychic re-organization of the mad saints and antinomian heroes to stop at the level of the manipura chakra in the solar plexus, where one's eyes are opened to one's "essential being." Gyatso, however, bases all of his achievements upon the condition of our being able to sustain a lengthy habitation in the heart chakra; and his espousal of inner fire meditation during the state of sleep implies our gaining real familiarity with the throat chakra as well. In the last analysis, these are the reasons why turning to the internal ladder and learning to negotiate it takes us beyond the rung of scandal to that of the subtle body.

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1. This sample exercise was proposed by Beyer in a lecture he gave in Philadelphia in 1972, during a pre-publication speaking tour on behalf of his book. What happened to the capital letter A describes my experience as I sat in the audience.
 2. Secret place: the root chakra, located in the perineum, between the anus and the sex organs.
 3. D. G. White is not concerned with Tibetan mandalas, but with the mandalic fire-altars of ancient Hinduism and the alchemical vessels of the medieval Siddha tradition. Nevertheless, his term *mesocosm* describes any such intermediate symbolic structure that maps the cosmos to the body and the body to the cosmos.
 4. In a minor way, the various schools of psychoanalysis have recognized this phenomenon as "transitional space," the "interactive field," the intermediate realm where transference and countertransference are two aspects of the same unity.
 5. A fuller description of "glory" occurs later in the book. Dowman translates the text as follows: "The one naked mind arising from within, the absolute Awareness of primal purity (which is the sameness of all phenomena) is all-pervasive, and dammed like a lake the golden-eyed fishes of heightened perception multiply. Sustaining the consummation of visionary experience and pleasure, on the wings of perfect creativity, running and jumping in the meadows of visionary appearances, you fly into the sky-matrix and vanish. In the immense space of absolute Awareness, the seed-essence of pure pleasure stands thick as a lake, Pure Being and Seed-Essence glisten and pulsate, and seed-syllables and light garlands sparkle and shimmer, the vision of reality manifest expands, intensive visionary experience increases and the castle of optimal Knowledge is finally seized." Dowman comments: "This is not only a poetical expression of the four visions; it is a metaphysical statement, and also precise instruction on the practice. Unfortunately the precision of the terminology is lost in translation . . ." (*Ibid.*, 142).
 6. Dowman finds evidence of several authors in the text he translated.
 7. The "diamond vehicle" is, of course the "diamond body," the ultimate means of attainment, and what we are calling the internal diamond ladder.

8. In the next chapter we shall pursue Spontaneous Great Bliss further by considering related traditions that transform sexual practice into an erotic trance in which we and our partner become a pair of copulating divinities. Chapter Eleven will take up the topic of emptiness (Gyatso's second goal) through considering other traditions; and Chapter Twelve will take up Gyatso's highest goal (again through other traditions) of uniting Spontaneous Great Bliss with emptiness.
9. The root guru is apparently the historical/legendary figure responsible for having developed the particular sadhana (spiritual practice) that one is following.
10. Catalyst: hence the "cat" in "cat-cracking."
11. The *vas bene clausum* is a major theme in Jung's writings on alchemy, in which he sees the analytic hour as the Bunsen burner to effect changes by heating up the patient's psyche. Ideally the patient and analyst will "contain" the emotions generated so as to learn from them. For example, discussing the work with third parties can let off too much steam.
12. This is clearly a different arrangement of the chakras than we have considered. Hindu Tantra generally prefers to place the *ajna* chakra on the central channel between the throat and the crown, while Buddhist Tantra places it on an extension of the central channel, which turns at the crown chakra and then proceeds down the front of the face -- more in keeping with the laboratory discoveries of Lee Sannella and Itzhak Bentov.
13. In a more precarious experience even than the one just described, it is possible for both the man and the woman to detect a tiny emission of semen at the moment of the crisis, which is followed by the internal spasms which give the impression that the penis has reversed the flow. This set of natural impressions might well account for the wide-spread belief in sexual mysticism that commingled male and female fluids are absorbed by the penis. Vimalananda's words concerning the vajroli contest should be remembered in this context: "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" (Svoboda, 1986: 288).
14. He identifies the experience with his heart chakra on the authority of Osho, but reports no supportive evidence based in bodily sensations that accompany the opening.