

Indecent Practices and Erotic Trance: Making Sense of Tantra

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Sexual Wayfarers

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The mythic autobiography of Yeshe Tsogyel presents a tricky, headstrong, and wanton woman who created "conflict and schism within the government" (Dowman, 1996: 267) and was not above "taking life while keeping her hands clean" -- when on one occasion a group of Bonpo [1] leaders committed suicide at her behest (*Ibid.*, 268). Living at a time when Tibet was predominantly a pre-Buddhist Bön society, Yeshe had to wander the roads and trails of a mountainous country that was hostile to Buddhists. Nuns were known to be pledged to celibacy but nevertheless had a notorious reputation, deriving perhaps from rumors of a sexual antinomianism that was not understood (*Ibid.*, 263). She called herself an "unlovable spinster rejected by Tibetan men" as well as "wanton, uninhibited, passionate, and stubborn" (*Ibid.*, 267). "She was the Emperor's priestess, the abbess of the principal monastic academies, and the Guru of many prominent figures in government" (*Ibid.*, 268). In short, her conquest of lust by finding the Yidam deity that lives within it made her powerful and suspect. The story of her conversion of the seven rapists, while certainly hagiographic, asserts a central claim of her Buddhist tradition: the lowest forms of sensory compulsion lie open to transformation through Tantric involution -- reversing the natural flow of physiology and emotion that disperses our spiritual strength, forcing it to flow upward and back to its spiritual source.

Yeshe represents the "Old School" (Nyingmapa) established by Padmasambhava in the eighth century, a synthesis of Buddhism, Tantra, and shamanistic Bön practices. It "has been damned as a Hindu Saivite school, a Tantrist school, a path of immoralists and heretics, but without doubt it contains the most potent and efficacious *yogas*, precepts, and metaphysical formulations of the entire Buddhist *dharma*" (Dowman, 1996: 235). The story of Yeshe, its primary female representative, flirts with notoriety and raises suspicions of dissolute sensualism so as to expose the effectiveness of the "clear mind" that is central to her

Nyingmapa tradition. Clear mind sees the Yidam deity in the basest of human propensities and declares on the basis of its gnosis that everything is an opportunity for spiritual ascent.

Yeshe spent most of her life on the road, vulnerable in her female body and Buddhist trappings, often traveling hundreds of miles to find a particular consort revealed on the subtle plane, generally through the words of her guru. In this regard, she may be taken as the transcendent model for all the Buddhist women who live as hermits and wandering yoginis. They have tended to avoid the monasteries, where patriarchal bias predominates (Allione, 1986: 14-5) and have therefore been marginal characters -- attempting to survive and flourish spiritually through their clear mind while held in suspicion or outright hostility by the established powers of government, religion, and popular opinion. However gullible the popular imagination may be deemed to have been and despite the magical legends that abound, such wandering female anchorites have lived in a world without physical or ideological security, "wanton, uninhibited, passionate, and obstinate" in their clear mind.

More than eighty years ago, when Mme. Alexandra David-Neel wandered over vast tracts of Tibet that had never before been seen by Westerners, she put together a very human picture of the lamaseries where, "[S]ubtle philosophy, commercialism, lofty spirituality, and eager pursuit of coarse enjoyment . . . are so closely interwoven that one endeavours in vain to completely disentangle them (David-Neel, 1971: 99). Men who begin their training as mere lads emerge from this incoherent environment in rather motley fashion: "a small élite of litterati, a number of idle, dull, sleepy fellows, wanton braggarts, and a few mystics who resort to lonely hermitages and life-long meditations" (*Ibid.*, 99). Furthermore, despite the several well-defined schools of mysticism and the chains of initiation running from disciple to master back through the centuries, David-Neel found little evidence of orthodoxy. "Humble or lofty, as may be, the goal of each monk remains his secret, and he may endeavor to reach it by any means he chooses. No devotional services in common, nor uniform religious practices are enjoined on the monks of the lamaseries" (*Ibid.*, 104). A lama "may even be an utter unbeliever; this concerns himself alone" (*Ibid.*, 105).

Wandering Anchorites

If all this is true of the monasteries, we have to imagine that the wandering anchorites, both men and women, have been no less a collection of lazy dreamers, con-men, braggarts, sorry refugees on the lam from irate spouses and occasional victims, as well as a small core of sincere and gifted mystics, some practicing celibacy and others maithuna. The women among them, we have to assume, have had very little option other than to wander in small bands insofar as they have not often been welcome in the relative safety and order of the monasteries. For centuries they must have resembled the naked Sadhus of India, constantly wandering without any fixed dwelling place and never staying more than a few days in any one spot (Hartsuiker, 1993: 72). In a cultural and geographical environment like this, wandering itself becomes the symbol and primary practical exercise of following the mystic path. The world may be filled with orthodoxies aplenty, but the anchorite is determined to pursue the truth that reveals itself within her own soul, learning from everyone she meets, from the sanest of the orthodox to the craziest of idiosyncratic gurus, learning and teaching with those who accompany her for weeks or months of her journey, seeking out the most highly reputed among the hermits and lamas whose legends are eagerly exchanged by the

sincere and the gullible of those encountered along the way.

David-Neel presents a vivid picture of a wanderer who travels *without discipline*, mental training, or coherent notion of what is sought:

Such a man sees a lake in the east, and, being thirsty, hurries away to the water. When nearing the shore, he perceives the smell of smoke. This suggests the presence of a house or a camp. It would be pleasant, he thinks, to get hot tea instead of water, and a shelter for the night. So the man leaves the lake without having actually reached its shore and proceeds to the north, the smoke coming from that direction. On his way, before he has yet discovered any houses or tent, threatening phantoms spring up before him. Terrified the wanderer turns away from the fearful beings and runs for his life towards the south. When he deems that he has gone far enough to be safe, he stops to rest. Now, other wanderers pass who tell him of some blissful land of joy and plenty that they intend to reach. Full of enthusiasm, the vagrant joins the party and goes off to the west (*Ibid.*, 118). Death will take such a wanderer on the road, and he will never have clarified the purpose of his life. He will resemble the vast majority of humans, homeless or wealthy, whose lives reek of dissipation, superficiality, and spiritual blindness. In contrast, "the enlightened one" is never distracted from the goal. Seeing through "the mirages and allurements of the roadside, this man controls the forces begotten by his concentration of mind and his bodily activity." If he dies on the way, his clarity of mind will not have been without attainment; and in his next incarnation, he will take up where he left off (*Ibid.*, 119).

We should not read David-Neel's emphasis on the goal too concretely, as though it were a specific geographical place that is sought. Rather the wayfaring of anchorites is guided by inner realities -- intuitions, and convictions obtained on the subtle plane. We have to imagine that the spiritual wayfarer lays out few plans in advance. Perhaps no more than the notion that over the next few weeks I will travel in search of such-and-such a hermit whose teachings and way of life have been continually brought to my attention by the people I have met whose level-headed sincerity has convinced me, and the dreams that have visited me by night. "A pilgrimage distinguishes itself from an ordinary journey by the fact that it does not follow a laid-out plan . . . but relying on an inner urge which operates on two planes: on the physical plane as well as the spiritual plane (Govinda, 1988: xvii).

Sometimes, we should imagine, sexual wayfarers following the example of Yeshe Tsogyel travel with companions of equally spiritual intent as well as with occasional disciples and perhaps a rag-tag band of lost souls, all living from the shaktipat effect of an enlightened being whose inner resolution and spiritual accomplishment provides a halo of security and sense of purpose -- a borrowed "self-object" in an uncertain and confusing world. We can imagine them stopping from time to time to give themselves over to meditation, where again the elevating influence of those who are well-grounded in the spiritual life has a powerful effect upon the whole group -- not unlike the people who visited the meditation room of Muktananda's airline officer. Perhaps maithuna would occasionally be practiced on the road, with a disciple who is ripe for the most powerful form of shaktipat or with a spiritual peer who has a unique capacity for mixing Spontaneous Great Bliss with emptiness.

In the short term a group like this, picking up and dropping off followers as it goes, will be guided by the intentions of its central figure. If she has been directed to a specific hermit some weeks down the road, she moves resolutely but without haste, knowing that the events that occur along the way are as important as any destination. Such happenings may in fact provide precisely the lessons that will prepare her for meeting that hermit. She expects no secrets will be revealed in words. She has no specific expectations for what will happen

when she arrives. Perhaps he will tell her that he has nothing to teach. Perhaps he will want her to teach him. Perhaps they will simply sit in silence before one another for a few days until she moves on. Perhaps they will practice maithuna. Nothing is determined in advance. She knows only one thing. Each enlightened being is a unique embodiment of wisdom.

Just as each human being on earth makes love the same as and yet wholly different from every other, and therefore every sexual partner presents a unique opportunity to learn about love; so every spiritual master teaches and touches in a different but identical manner as every other. Each master presents us with a unique opportunity to appropriate wisdom and shaktipat. Each provides a new perspective on openness, spontaneity, and bliss. Each meeting between enlightened beings is a unique instance of spiritual union, a new and irreplaceable encounter with the pulsating light of consciousness. If each act of union recapitulates the love-play of Shiva and Shakti or the Buddha and the Vajrayogini, each is also a unique primary fact. Each time is the first and the last, each encounter completely the same and wholly different.

Anchorites are those who move between orthodoxies, nourishing themselves with one true doctrine after another, as they pass from monastery to monastery, hermit to hermit. Gathering the pollen of wisdom like bees, they cross-fertilize the mystical blooms they encounter. The wandering of sexual wayfarers continually asks the central Tantric question: What are you learning from your relationship? Those who are preoccupied with the horizontal questions of material and social security wonder whether the future holds the happily-ever-after compatibility of a monogamous marriage. They avoid the present moment in their hopes of putting a lonely past behind them and embracing a smooth and mutually supportive future. Those who are on the road, however, endeavor to cling to no past and no future. They seek to abide in a "now" with negligible horizontality but open to a boundless verticality. They may well be tried and rejected by the hermit they have expended weeks in finding. But they are not set back. What am I learning from my rejection -- is just as important as -- What am I learning from the cross-pollinating bliss I share with Hermit X?

Moving On and Staying Put

Wandering like this with fierce purpose but without goal, there is also no reason to avoid monogamy if an opportunity should appear that offers just the learning I have been seeking without knowing it. In his discussion of the wandering dervishes called Qalandars, Peter Lamborn Wilson describes just such an instance of permanency in the most changeable of all rag-tag bands: "Nur Ali married a beautiful girl, Bibi Hayati, who became a dervish and wandered with him; this unusual woman also composed a divan of charming erotic/mystic poems in which her husband becomes the 'divine beloved'" (Wilson, 1993: 151). The divine beloved is always One and encountered anew in each lama and each hermit the anchorite encounters along her wayfaring path. Sometimes, however, the seeker encounters a partner through whom access to the One is inexhaustible, always spontaneous, and redolent of wisdom to be learned. Nur Ali and Bibi Hayati played this role for one another. Irina Tweedie and Robert Svoboda each settled down with a single guru whose wisdom was seen to be inexhaustible, and remained with that guru until his death. Only then did they begin their wandering.

In fourteenth century Kashmir, a female anchorite wandered naked like a Sadhu singing of her love for God. Some 200 of her songs have been written down and are popularly revered today in her homeland. Known as Lalla [2] ("Darling"), she left her marriage at twenty-four and studied with at least three male masters, distinguishing herself by her nakedness and ecstatic clarity. Without shame and without the cover of madness, she simply sang the lesson she constantly learned on the path -- all is One. The One is to be met in everyone and anyone. What is essential is the consciousness which both is and knows the One.

Don't talk of different religions.
The one reality is everywhere,
not just in a Hindu, or a Muslim,
or anywhere else! Realize:

your awareness is
the truth about God
(Lalla, 1992).

In the last analysis, what I am learning from my relationship determines whether I move on or stay put. Every mountain, every tree, every river reveals the One on the field of emptiness. For some, like Lalla, this realization ordains a life of wayfaring. Others like Saraha, one of the founding fathers of Tantric Buddhism in the eighth century, wandered until the moment the path led only upward. Saraha's legendary life neatly summarizes most of the themes of this book. He began his religious journey with a long course of study at Nalanda University. Thus he began like Caitanya, the Bengali ecstatic who was said to be both Krishna and Radha. He had memorized the Vedas and important scriptures of Hinduism and was committed to the rules of purity proper to his Brahmin caste. His son, Shavaripa, became a hunter and practiced the Yoga of Spontaneity (*Sahaja*), just as did the followers of Caitanya. Father and son wrote songs (*caryapada*) that distain ritual worship and academic scholarship. They exalt in an uninhibited antinomian spirit, spontaneously erupting in divine effusions. Eight centuries later Saraha was reincarnated as Drukpa Kunley (Dowman, 1988: 149, n. 1).

Saraha's life was changed the day he allowed "some girls" -- faint shades of Bhairavis, no doubt -- to convince him to drink beer in violation of his monastic vows. [3] In his drunken euphoria, a bodhisattva appeared to him and told him to seek out a mystically talented arrow-making woman whom he would find in the city. Following orders, he went to the marketplace where, among the arrow-makers, one woman was at work with such spontaneous and exacting deftness that he recognized deep meditative concentration.

Wholly focused on her task, she never looked up or became distracted as she cut the arrow-shaft, inserted the arrowhead, affixed the feathers, and checked the arrow for straightness. Saraha tried to break the ice with a trivial question but, not one for trivialities, her first words to him were, "The Buddha's meaning can be known through symbols and actions, not through words and books." Instantly realizing that he had found a worthy teacher, Saraha put off the monastic robes and devoted himself to his yogini guru. The arrow-maker accepted Saraha as her disciple and Tantric companion. According to Taranatha, she taught him the meaning of things as they are and enabled him to see reality as it is (Shaw, 1994: 132).

The arrow-making yogini taught him "a mode of companionship that is beyond attachment." His wandering was over. He lived the rest of his life in a mountain retreat with his guru and partner, earning his living by making arrows (*Ibid.*, 131-3). For he said, "Only now am I a

truly pure Bhiksu (Buddhist monk)" (Dowman, 1988: xxvi). This story makes the essential point -- that neither wandering nor settling has any value in itself. The crucial question is whether my encounters are teaching me anything. There may be an endless series of encounters between mystics on the path. Or a single meeting may suffice for a lifetime. What is essential is to learn, like Saraha, to give up our dependency on words, rules, and concepts. Leave the citadel self behind -- even a theologically sophisticated citadel self like Saraha's. What is indispensable is that opening the arrow-making yogini provided. Saraha knew immediately he had no need of his robe or the orthodoxy for which it stood. The path lies outside of all established form. In her nakedness, Lalla had it right. We can only imagine the extensive wayfaring those two arrow-makers accomplished -- though they never left their hermitage.

The Return

In our preliminary sketch of wayfaring anchorites, we have imagined how their mystical intent never slackens. Although they wander without setting any goal -- apart from temporary notions of seeking out some storied adept who resides perhaps only a few weeks' journey from where they are -- their wandering itself amounts to a mystical practice. We have been concerned with the enlightened ones, those who know the experience of mixing Spontaneous Great Bliss with emptiness, and we imagine that they never exhaust the value of that bodily and psychic experience. We suppose that as teachers in their own right they continue to initiate disciples through word, through shaktipat, and above all through being the centered individuals they have become. They bring peace, conviction, and the hope of ultimate attainment to the most serious-minded of their disciples; and they continue to seek out others who have reached pinnacles of mystical attainment -- cross-pollinating, enriching, and more firmly establishing their own attainment.

The unexpressed theme in this account is what happens *after* one has ascended to the top rung of the diamond ladder, mixed Spontaneous Great Bliss with emptiness, and in the process demolished the ladder itself. Although we may often think that mysticism is a never-ending climb to higher and higher realization, in fact another question lurks unasked in the background. How does life go on for the mystic who has reached the summit? Is it possible to stay there on the ultimate plane of emptiness, standing on the top rung of the ladder like Simon Stylites on his desert pillar? Does one return to the everyday world of eating, sleeping, shivering in the cold, and baking in the heat? Is mysticism about the upward journey exclusively or is there some possibility -- even necessity -- of returning? And what is it like to return to the empirical world, once one has seen the threads of light in its cloth? Do the threads remain a part of one's everyday perceptions; do they come and go; or is that vision a fleeting glimpse that the mystic seeks again and again to regain, with greater or lesser success?

In his retreat manual, *Journey to the Lord of Power*, Ibn al-'Arabi makes it clear that in his experience being "absorbed in God," which occurs at the summit of the ladder, is only the penultimate stage of mystical attainment. It is a greater accomplishment to return. Furthermore, among those who return are two types: the mystic (*'arif*) who has learned something for himself alone and the one who is sent back as a knower (*'alim*) to guide others:

I shall first describe (may Allah grant you success) the nature of the journey to Him, then the procedure of arriving and standing before Him, and what He says to you as you sit on the carpet of His vision. Then the nature of the return from Him to the presence (*hadra*) of His actions: with Him and to Him. And I shall describe absorption in Him, which is a station less than the station of return (Ibn al-'Arabi, 1989: 26)

As for the returned ones, there are two types of men among them. There is one who returns to himself alone; he is the descender whom we have mentioned. This sort of man is the gnostic, '*arif*', among us. He returns to perfecting himself from other than the road which he traveled. Also among them is the one who is sent back to Creation with the language of direction and guidance. He is the inheriting knower, '*alim*' (*Ibid.*, 51-2).

Ibn al-'Arabi lets us know not only that the return from mystical absorption is a very high level of achievement but also that mystical absorption by itself is not sufficient for "perfection." Gnosis is a wonderful thing and well worth a lifetime of struggle, but gnosis leaves a new task before the gnostic: "perfecting himself from other than the road which he traveled." A great deal of "perfection" is required to ascend the diamond ladder to its summit. But there are other dimensions to our life; and after we have ascended and had the gnostic vision, our "imperfections" remain in the spheres we have neglected. Perhaps they manifest in our boundless impatience when accidents or interruptions frustrate us. Perhaps we are remote from our spouse, tyrants with our children, cowards before our boss. These problems remain, though it is to be hoped the work we undertook on our journey up the ladder has done some good. The struggle with good and evil and the inversion of attention whereby we learn to see what the disturbance is doing to *us* rather than fixate on the disturbance itself: these lessons apply everywhere in life. Ultimately, this is the reason Tantra never tires of repeating the maxim that *everything* can be an opportunity for enlightenment. Tantra, in fact, *seeks out* disturbing experiences; for each harbors one's Yidam deity. The divinity who corresponds to the make-up of our personal being dwells not only in lust but in anger, terror, and every one of the frustrations and peeves that afflict every day of our lives. Every occasion for an unprintable expletive conceals the Yidam deity of our being. Until we can elevate each of them effortlessly, we remain trapped in the profane world as surely as any tethered pashu. [4]

The Persian mystical poet, Farid ad-Din 'Attar (d. ca. 1229), said that those who do not return from Annihilation in the Essence "bring back no news" (Wilson, 1988: 70). They have something to teach us, but only if they come back changed. Life ought to be different after they return. 'Attar might have said, If they come back unchanged, they bring back no news. For it is in the transformation of their being that we recognize their achievement. We would wonder about a petty, supercilious, or dishonest mystic, regardless of what she claims to have seen.

Al-Hallaj, one of the most revered early Sufi spokesmen, was famously crucified for blasphemy in the early tenth century. His crime was to claim, "I am the Truth," in a theological context where Truth is one of the Names of God. He claimed he was God -- that this was the nature of his mystical absorption. He brought back news that was too threatening to hear -- although his crucifixion probably did more to further the cause of his mystical claims than decades of quiet living and teaching might have accomplished. Some two and a half centuries later, Ibn al-'Arabi seems to agree about the nature of absorption in God. But he says not, "I am God," but, "God is me" -- in the sense of the Yidam deity. [5] Ibn al-'Arabi performed a great service in collecting the oral traditions descended from the

Sufism that went before him and systematizing them. In doing so, he was very conscious of slipping his views past the censors. [6] Very likely he handled his everyday life after absorption more effectively than the brash Al-Hallaj. But even Al-Hallaj preached the importance of the return. After the "effort" (*mujahada*) of climbing a ladder of spiritual exercises and after the "constraint" (*idtirar*) whereby effort has to be relinquished so that divine grace can take over and move us into union, the successful mystic "goes back to life and lives an ordinary life in an extraordinary way" (Sviri, 1997: 42).

The Hindu and Buddhist schools of mysticism agree with Islam on the importance of the return. Vimalananda asks: "What is the use of these spurting samadhis anyway? . . . I think it is much better to remain conscious on this plane even while you shift your main focus to other realities" (Svoboda, 1997: 157). Silburn's work with the Tantric texts of Kashmir comes to the same conclusion, "In Tantrism, indeed, unification must be achieved in the course of ordinary life experiences, whatever they may be" (Silburn, 1988: 138). Shaw outlines the work of Tibetan Buddhism in four traditional stages: the *outer*, when one pictures the deity in vivid detail; the *inner*, when one envisions one's own body as a mandala with the deities at different points; the *secret*, when one attains bliss through yogic meditation on the subtle body; and the *final* stage, when one recovers the natural state of mind, now "purified of delusion" (Shaw, 1994: 121). Even more explicitly she says, "The ultimate achievement, after all the complex visualizations, is a divine simplicity, an ability to be spontaneously and fully present to each moment of awareness in a state of pristine clarity" (*Ibid.*, 87).

The sublime clarity of mind that describes a successful return from mystical absorption is called the "fourth state" (*turiya*, in Sanskrit). It transcends the three states of waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep in a way of life which constantly realizes the nature of the atman as "pure, unified consciousness, unspeakable peace" (Fischer-Schreiber, *et. al.*, 1989). It is an enduring state of clear-mindedness that is not dimmed by the necessity of living in the everyday world. Whether asleep, driving on the interstate, or "processing" words, I have an abiding sense that it is not I who lives but atman lives within me. Atman (or "no-self") pulsates in the threads. The pulsating vision may be unavailable to my conscious mind, but atman lives in that world, whether "I" see it or not. Turiya is that state of mind where I know with utter and constant conviction that my ego's reality is but an epiphenomenon of atman's life.

In his synthesis of the Kashmiri doctrine of vibration (*spanda*), Dyczkowski describes the return as an "abiding awareness of Turiya":

The yogi is fully absorbed in this state of consciousness and takes possession of its power when he is able to rise from contemplation (*samadhi*) carrying with him the abiding awareness of Turiya throughout his waking, dreaming and deep sleep. When he achieves this constantly, he continues to experience those states individually, but they no longer obscure the insight (*pratibha*) he has acquired because he realizes that they are all aspects of the bliss of Turiya. . . . The yogi who manages to maintain *Turiya*-consciousness comes to experience the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep as the constant flow of the bliss of consciousness in which all traces of the relative distinction between these states and their contents is eradicated [7] (Dyczkowski, 1987: 214-5).

Quoting the *Digha-nikaya*, Eliade describes the aim of lucidity in Buddhism in very similar terms: "Whether he is eating, drinking, chewing, reposing, or whether he is obeying the calls

of nature . . . in going, standing, sitting, sleeping, watching, talking, or keeping silence, he knows what he is doing" (Eliade, 1969: 168).

Dowman's account of the return according to the Tibetan tradition that shapes Yeshe Tsogyel's autobiography can be summarized in a short phrase, "The starting point is the goal," meaning that "[E]very human experience whatsoever is cognized as primal purity":

The good and the bad, pleasure and pain, all emotion and passion is the path itself. The greater the intensity of pain or passion the greater the potential of creative expression (*rtsal*) and pure pleasure (*bde-chen*); but although pain and passion are not to be rejected, neither are they to be cultivated. If excess is an individual's karmic destiny then the path of excess will surely lead to wisdom, not through an eventual understanding of passion's futility, or the hedonistic pleasure of indulgence, or the hiatus of exhaustion and childlike ingenuousness, or a reactive swing to puritanical expression, but through immediate, spontaneous Awareness. The traditional metaphor for this Awareness is a lotus redolent of compassion growing uncontaminated in a putrid swamp (Dowman, 1984: 236).

In other words, when we return we simply take what life presents. The "putrid swamp" of the empirical world is part of that givenness, but so is our own nature, or "karmic destiny." These two factors, the objective world and our subjective karma, unite in the single phenomenon of everyday life after the return from mystical absorption. This unified world -- which is neither object nor subject but their unification -- describes life, day-in and day-out, on the field of emptiness: "To transit endlessly through time in search of the home-ground of the self is the true form of our karma, that is, of our being in time, our life" (Nishitani, 1982: 248).

The various biographies of Ramakrishna provide powerful hints as to how the vision of divine absorption where "everything is made of consciousness" and therefore constitutes the world as a "mansion of fun" becomes gradually known during the return. Ramakrishna's vision of "the ocean of consciousness" seems somewhat less integrated than Muktananda's "threads in the cloth and cloth in the threads," though this may be more a matter of verbal expression than a noteworthy difference in the experience itself:

Suddenly, without warning, there is light. In such a flaming state, human beings appear as pillows bobbing up and down on the ocean of consciousness. . . . Souls are like countless bubbles in the water. . . . Trees appear as cosmic bouquets, perched on the head of the cosmic man (Kripal, 1995: 184).

Later we learn that this vision occurred when he meditated with his eyes closed and that when he opened them he saw that the vision of light became indistinguishable from the world itself, shot through with God: "I used to meditate with my eyes shut, but is the Lord not there when I open my eyes? When I open my eyes, I see that the Lord dwells in all creatures, in man, animals, trees, the sun and the moon, the water and the ground" (*Ibid.*, 185). Later still, he reports a further refinement: "Long ago *Vaishnavacharan* said that when one has the vision of God in a human form one's knowledge is complete. Now I am seeing that he wanders about in each [human] form" (*Ibid.*, 229; Kripal's brackets).

This series of developments in Ramakrishna's maturity as a mystic reveals the gradual integration of the vision of absorption with everyday life. It describes one man's successful return. His countryman, the poet Ramprasad, has come to the same conclusion. He has a visionary encounter with Yama, the Lord of Death, and realizes that death is but "the

destructive nature of the world, represented by the Goddess." Here he "first confronts the fact that there is really no Goddess as a mother goddess to be seen, she is only that world with which he will finally be united at his own death. . . . [There is] no crossing to the other side" (McLean, 1998: 112-3).

Stay on that raft floating on the world ocean,
Float up with the flood tide and down with the ebb
(*Ibid.*, 115).

Spontaneity

Spontaneity is not a quality we would associate with antinomian heroes. There is something too determined and aggressive about the adepts of the rung of scandal. Although they have broken the "leash" of the persona field's ethical maxims and gone beyond good and evil, their achievement is too single-minded, even coarse. They overcome their obstacles with the brute force of a kundalini who courses through their being like lightning bolts -- dazzling the heroes, too, as she vanquishes the dragons of their appetites. Heroes like Trighantika never distill kundalini into her components, never slow her down and make her acquaintance. Indeed, *spontaneity* only entered our mystical vocabulary when we reached the rung of Spontaneous Great Bliss. Since then we have mentioned spontaneous conduct with some frequency but never paused to examine it.

As a preliminary approach to the nature of spontaneity, we might consider the accomplishment of Yeshe Tsogyel with the seven bandits. Those brutal men certainly posed a violent challenge and may have elicited a more heroic response from someone less subtle than Yeshe. She did not obliterate anyone and she stood no one down. Her response was spontaneous rather than heroic. By the time the bandits had wrestled her to the ground, she had already converted a violating confrontation into a cooperating opportunity. She greeted the rapists' lust with her own and revealed its Yidam deity. When confronted with an immanent rape, few can go beyond the perpetrator/victim dichotomy of the persona field. It is deeply ingrained in the way we collectively construe our environment. We see it played out in the survival-of-the-fittest game that describes our scientific understanding of nature; it characterizes our business deals, political positions, and our negotiation of automobile traffic in terms of win-or-lose. There may be some situations where our internal monologue insists that we win and others when the victimhood of losing seems foreordained by our fate.

Confronted with an immanent rape at the hands of seven violent men, our very life would be at stake, and the obvious fact of our coming defeat and violation would be inevitable in the win-or-lose dictum of life as "everyone" knows it. This is why the stupendous feat Yeshe performed was not the shaktipat conversion of the robbers but her ability to move freely, untethered by conventional notions, even in the face of defeat, violation, possibly death. She never "fell victim." Her spontaneity manifested in her ability to see the most disturbing of challenges in a new and original light, and to do so with such utter conviction that she did not falter. The conventional view of things appears never to have disturbed her concentration. Her attention never fixated on the disturbing threat but moved inward to the emotional reality of her consciousness where she was able to find her own lust and its Yidam deity. Her familiarity with kundalini and its origin in her own lust gained on the rung of Spontaneous Great Bliss found immediate and spontaneous opportunity in the dog-eat-dog quotidian world. She had practiced for an opportunity like this. Having found the Yidam

deity of her lust through her interactions with Padmasambhava and other dharma consorts to whom he sent her, she was ready for the disturbing and unexpected irruption of lust and brute violence that was sure to occur repeatedly in the course of her wayfaring.

In this sense every disturbance we meet in the course of our life -- whether on the road or at home in our kitchen -- manifests itself as a vajroli contest. Every incident with a strong-minded opponent or an inanimate but uncompliant object -- like a toaster that insists on burning our breakfast -- is striving to raise our ire, lust, or fear to the breaking point where we will succumb in an outburst of dissipating energy. Whether we tower in rage, cower in fear, or dissolve in the ecstasy of an external orgasm, we have failed to hold the tension in a contest where both parties are striving to stir an emotional and physiological disturbance that will take the other over the top; and each is equally determined not to yield. Yeshe's conduct with the rapists was spontaneous in that it recognized the opportunity for a vajroli contest in a situation where nearly everyone else would dissolve in rage, impotence, and violation. She was as tough as a wrathful dakini. And like every dakini, she was naked of all convention, flying in the open spontaneous sky of fluid flexibility, where anything can be converted into anything else, where arousal of every sort reveals a Yidam deity.

To place all this in the fundamentally Buddhist context that Padmasambhava brought to Tibet, we might consider the Buddhist "bottom line," the Four Noble Truths which tradition ascribes to the Buddha Shakyamuni's earliest formulation of his gnosis. First, all of life is characterized by suffering -- even moments of pleasure and happiness are contaminated with the painful knowledge that they will come to an end. Second, the root of suffering is desire; it is only because we crave what we think will bring us happiness and cannot relinquish this desire that we are trapped in a world of suffering. Third, to root out desire is to bring an end to suffering. Fourth, desire is to be rooted out through the eight-fold path of right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Conze, 1959: 43).

All the practices we have considered in ascending the diamond ladder amount to fostering the elements of the eight-fold path. In her spontaneity, Yeshe demonstrated all eight of them; and as a Tantrika she took a distinctive approach to the Third Noble Truth. For her and all of Tantra, desire is not to be rooted out by suppression, numbing, or denial, but by entering wholly into it with "right views, right intentions," and all the rest. Tantra roots out desire's attachments through a grand reversal that discovers the divine possibility lurking within it. In this sense, spontaneity means slipping the bonds that our internal monologues are constantly setting for us so as to find a flexibility that is as open and boundless as the sky.

Peter Hershock's original interpretation of Ch'an Buddhism ("Chinese Zen"), *Liberating Intimacy* (1996), interprets suffering as an "interruption of our personal narrative." This comes very close to what we have been calling any disturbance that arouses an emotional reaction in us. According to Hershock's construction, it is the personal narrative of our selectively remembered past flowing into a future whose lineaments are set by our "projections of attachment and aversion" that constitutes our ego or citadel self. The main difference between his formulation and ours is that we have not taken that life-narrative to be a single thing. Rather we operate with a number of fragmentary and partially conflicting narratives maintained by our internal monologues, among which we alternate unreflectively. One fragmentary worldview after another autonomously emerges in unconscious response to

the situation confronting us in the moment, and we respond in stereotyped ways. "The only way to bring suffering -- a personal narrative -- to an end without making some karma which will return to the same configuration is to dissolve the source of the suffering, the 'I' who views the world through the projections of attachment and aversion" (Hershock, 1996: 98). He argues that the disturbing interruption must be spontaneously taken up as the first gesture of an improvisation which will creatively transform the incident.

[T]he end of suffering is best construed neither as an escape nor as an attainment of unbreached control, but as the creative incorporation of what originally arises in our experience as a disruption of the order or timing of our life-narrative. A talented jazz musician will take an accidental or mistaken chord or note and improvise with and around it, creating in the process an entirely novel passage within the context of a perhaps quite familiarly ordered piece of music. And, in much the same way, the interruptions of suffering afford us the opportunity of conducting ourselves in an unprecedented and manifestly liberating fashion (*Ibid.*, 20).

In profane consciousness, we think that our suffering is a matter of unfortunate incidents that happen to us and to which we react. We think we establish our (citadel) self in the privacy of our pure and uncontaminated subjectivity into which those painful events "intrude." We have seen how the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness turns this perspective inside out, saying that both objectivity and subjectivity are illusory. In the world of primary fact, everything centers a world; everything gathers everything else into a whole from which we are not separate. We are Being-in-the-world. The world and ourselves are not separate. Hershock takes these facts and renders them dynamic. According to him, the Buddhist lives in a world that "is irreducibly *dramatic*." This dramatic world is the stage on which we perform; and every move in the performance that is our life story displays how "our choices determine the meaning of our jointly articulating lives" (*Ibid.*, 47). "It is our situation itself that directs us" (*Ibid.*, 189). Because everything is a center without a circumference and nothing can be privileged as the basis of reality, "[W]hat matters is simply the manner in which things come together, their quality of interdependence" (*Ibid.*, 132).

Enlightenment, therefore, is not something we realize privately through climbing the diamond ladder and challenging ourselves in isolation. Rather it is "a unique way of *conducting ourselves* in the narrative space of interpersonality" (*Ibid.*, 63). Hershock means that enlightenment is never a matter of some private vision but rather is expressed only "on the way," while sojourning through the ordinary world in an extraordinary manner, that is by greeting each incident as an opportunity for improvisation. Improvisation is the spontaneous creativity that occurs only between one person and another or between people and events. There is always an established melody within which a particular note or chord surprises us. It can cause us suffering when we dwell on its departure from the rhythm or tonality of the established song. Or it can be taken as inspiration for an improvisatory riff. Enlightened beings are masters of spontaneity and improvisation. They have rooted out suffering by freeing themselves from the internal monologues whose ceaseless rigidity reacts to interruption and discord with pain. Instead, they wander through the world without goals and find opportunity for creative spontaneity everywhere.

In the improvisatory and spontaneous encounter by which enlightenment is realized, there are no pre-determined goals and the meaning results from how two individuals meet. They respond to one another like jazz players who improvise on the melody and rhythm to redeem and transform discord, finding "in it a sign of continued vitality" (*Ibid.*, 79). "Ch'an orients us to . . . a choreo-poetic pedagogy of joint improvisation" (*Ibid.*, 65). In this process, we

relinquish our citadel selves "indirectly" through a partner "with whom we can enter into lively and mutually 'self'-effacing concourse" (*Ibid.*, 148). Indeed, this "partner" need not be human, as we can see from Ch'an stories in which "a stone striking a stick of bamboo, the honking of a flock of geese, or the moonlight shining through a tracery of autumn branches" occasions the dropping of body-and-mind (*Ibid.*, 222).

Dharma Combat

Nevertheless, the primary teaching device in Ch'an, as in Zen, is the encounter between master and disciple in which the latter is "in a very literal sense . . . tricked into enlightenment" (*Ibid.*, 148). This sort of training encounter is called *fa ch'an*, which Hershock translates as "dharma combat" (*Ibid.*, 80), whereby he reveals its resemblance to Vimalananda's vajroli contest. Dharma combat seeks to undermine "everything familiar and comfortingly secure," to deliberately introduce "suffering" in the sense of a disruption of the disciple's personal narrative. But the master is as much at risk as the student; for the master, too, must "drop every pretense, every hope of security in order to awaken" (*Ibid.*, 81). Enlightenment, clearly, is not accomplished once and for all, but only appears "in-between" individuals at ever renewed moments when suffering has been evoked as an opportunity for a crisis-resolving improvisation (*Ibid.*, 63). That this is the paradigmatic structure of Ch'an is shown in the reverence afforded to the outrageousness of its best loved masters:

The most loved masters of Ch'an . . . are those who display the wildest personas, whose teaching is the most iconoclastic. . . . [E]ach one of them is what we might call a "real character," a kind of spiritual maverick. Some are outright rascals, . . . ready to sprout angelic wings, . . . [or] as earthy and carefree as the village idiot. . . . In Ch'an, not only are idiosyncrasy and uniqueness not leveled down with the realization of enlightenment, they seem if anything to be accentuated (*Ibid.*, 191).

Finally, the training of a disciple is designed to force the student into one communicative crisis after another. When the disciple has exhausted one master's capacity for original and spontaneous disruptions, she is urged to travel to another who is sure to produce crises of a new sort (*Ibid.*, 114). She becomes a wayfaring anchorite like Yeshe Tsogyel, where the events that occur along the path of the journey are no less important than the dharma combats designed by the masters holding forth at every waystation.

A story is told about the ninth century master, Lin-chi, [8] who was instructing his disciples on one of his favorite themes: "[T]he true person of no rank (*wu-wei-chen-jen*) -- a person who has no fixed place from which s/he acts, no set patterns of behavior or unchanging tasks and goals." A monk in the audience interrupted, demanding to know who exactly this person of no rank is. Lin-chi leapt off the dais, "began throttling the monk and demanded that he 'Speak! Speak!' When the monk failed to respond immediately, Lin-chi thrust him away, exclaiming, 'What kind of dry shit stick is this "true person of no rank"!'" (*Ibid.*, 193).

This dharma combat is begun by the obstreperous monk who interrupts Lin-chi's lecture. In doing so he calls into crisis Lin-chi's favorite thesis, in that the interruption comes from the "floor," from a man of lesser "rank" than Lin-chi and exposes Lin-chi's position on the dais as a potential contradiction: "Here is a man with the highest imaginable rank lecturing us on having 'no rank.'" It would be a painful moment for the average teacher, but for Lin-chi this

is an opportunity. Immediately he leaps down from the dais, his place of rank, and conducts himself as a highway robber, a man of "no rank." Because he hesitates not an instant, he shows by his conduct that rank means nothing to him. He reacts with a spontaneous improvisation -- completely unexpected and wholly out of character for a man of rank. In this manner he redeems the interruption and turns it into an opportunity to *enact* the thesis he has been expounding. In throttling the obstreperous monk while shouting, "Speak! Speak!" he announces that his second move in the dharma combat requires a third -- as though to say, "If you're going to challenge me to dharma combat, you had better be ready to reply." He disrupts the saucy personal narrative of the irreverent monk with a humiliating crisis. Furthermore by throttling him while demanding he speak, Lin-chi assumes the shape of the dragon that is the poor fool's pride. Being in the grip of his own internal dragon, he would be speechless even without fingers tightening on his throat. He "falls victim." He has found no Yidam deity lurking in Lin-chi's violation of his dignity.

The Yidam deity the obstreperous monk might have found in his terror and humiliation was surely disguised in his victimhood. In that abject place where his ego is destroyed with shame, he might have perceived that having no ego is precisely the goal. In becoming one with his victimhood, he might have become one with the cosmos -- in whose threads and cloth shines the oneness that his opponent strives for. If he goes through a process like this in an instant, he might be composed enough to say, "A monk who is a ruffian throttles his master." This impertinent comment turns choking into victory. He points out that Lin-chi has just exchanged the rank of his dais for that of a perpetrator, merely traded one posture of power for another. And the man he is throttling is his own professed ideal, "the true person of no rank," as though he were to say, "In strangling me, you're snuffing out the one you claim to be." As in the vajroli contest, each monk strives to create the greatest possible disturbance to his partner's line of "riff." Each tries to push the other over the top, where the dragon of panic will get the better of him. Whether in a combat of sexual moves or of ripostes, we lose when we cannot spontaneously convert the crisis into an improvised variation on our partner's theme. "Truly great improvisations occur only when 'we' stop trying to *make* music and simply allow it to play through us" (*Ibid.*, 161).

Spontaneity and Play

Dharma combat is earnest business; but it is also play, a matter of letting go and letting be so that inspiration can show its capricious face. "Ch'an practice occurs as the virtuosity of the middle path between control and caprice, between having (*yu*) and not-having (*wu*)" (*Ibid.*, 123). While the citadel self strives to abolish ambiguity by presenting itself as a permanent subject-entity encountering equally permanent object-entities, the earnest play of dharma combat makes fluidity possible by embracing ambiguity. "If ambiguity and not entitative existence is held basic, morality is most naturally not an orientation toward preserving integrity but toward intensifying intimacy" (*Ibid.*, 189). Intimacy always occurs as a boundary-dissolving encounter revealing the "no-self" of the participants.

Hinduism and Buddhism describe the rigidity of the citadel self, its having-become-what-it-is, as karma. According to karma, our construal of the world and our citadel self is an interlinked accumulation of expectations based on memories, conscious and unconscious, and setting habitual patterns of action. In its most superficial manifestation,

karma reflects the work of our autonomous internal monologues; more deeply it is said to have been constructed through the habits of past lives and therefore lurks deep in our unconscious psyche where it is extremely impervious to change. According to the doctrine of karma, "[O]ur intentions constitute what-has-come-to-be, and how there is no arbitrary line demarcating what we are responsible for and what not" (*Ibid.*, 47). But insofar as karma expresses the link between the world we construe and the citadel self we maintain, it also presents itself as an opportunity. The world we construe is "thoroughly heuristic," in that every incident is an opportunity to bind ourselves further by acting out of the habits of the illusory citadel self or to free ourselves by responding to the ambiguities we habitually gloss as familiar entities (*Ibid.*, 49).

Nishitani is in full agreement with this formulation. He says that living in the world of primary fact is a "serious and earnest" sort of play, an "elemental earnestness" in which we "take-things-as-they-come" (Nishitani, 1982: 255). What arises from moment to moment in our wayfaring life does not have to be seen as "imposed by *fate*" but can be redeemed when it is "accepted as *vocation*" (*Ibid.*, 259). Every incident along the path of our journey through the ordinary world "calls" us to freedom when we are conscious enough not to "fall victim" to the karma our rigid habits create. "A wild, playful, unpredictable quality erupts when experience is released from its predetermined patterns" (Shaw, 1994: 95).

The world of karma is a world where each individual is determined by its ties and causal kinship within an endless nexus, and yet each instance of individual-existence and behavior, as well as each moment in time, arises as something totally new, possessed of freedom and creativity (Nishitani, 1982: 245).

Shouldering the burden [of karmic debt] takes on the sense of play, and the standpoint appears from which we go forward bearing the burden spontaneously and of our own free will. The labor imposed, without ceasing to be an imposition, is transformed into play by arising spontaneously in an elemental way (*Ibid.*, 254).

It is clear from this perspective that enlightenment is not something we attain once and for all through some sort of private practice. It is not something that we "possess" or that belongs to us. Enlightenment appears only in virtuosic and spontaneous practice, in the way we live our ordinary lives in an extraordinary manner. Hershock cites Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch of Ch'an (638-713), "It is precisely Buddhist practice that is the Buddha" (Hershock, 1996: 143), namely "to conduct ourselves . . . as initiators of enlightening partnership" (*Ibid.*, 172). Because the karma of our citadel self stops everything that happens and reconfigures it according to habitual patterns, enlightenment is enacted only when "all things flow unimpeded" (*Ibid.*, 129). "If a buddha-land is to appear right where we stand, 'we' must get out of the way" (*Ibid.*, 141).

Once we realize that enlightenment is a practice, an enactment, a way of life, we obtain a new perspective on Spontaneous Great Bliss. The act of intercourse that makes Spontaneous Great Bliss possible is a virtuosic interaction between partners in which each individual's move provokes a crisis along the lines of the vajroli contest. And each response is a spontaneous improvisation which redirects attention away from my "falling victim" by reinterpreting it as a new development in the riff of the interaction by which we jointly "shepherd" kundalini's rise. The attainment of Spontaneous Great Bliss amounts to the intimate virtuosity of a dharma combat conducted as a fresh and original version of a very old tune. The intercourse practiced in pursuit of Spontaneous Great Bliss is the jousting field

upon which the practitioner of Mahamudra learns the true nature of spontaneity through a series of extreme crises. In the last analysis, it is a learning experience from which the successful student will resume wayfaring better prepared to respond to any crisis with the spontaneous virtuosity of Yeshe Tsogyel. Enlightenment is practiced only on the everyday journey of our life, through the countless crises that arise. The question of whether any individual is enlightened can only be answered in terms of our day-in and day-out conduct; for "Who we really are is 'how things are going'" (*Ibid.*, 195).

The Serpentine Path

Perhaps many of those who are wayfaring through a world that tests their training every day fail again and again in the dharma combats life arranges for them. "How things are going" for them may all too often include opportunities that escape their notice or surprise them with the dragon of their appetites so that they fail in the playful work of spontaneous improvisation. Yet they differ from the rest of us substantially. Though they may fail more often than they succeed, they are *initiated* people. They have served an apprenticeship in the art of spontaneous improvisation and therefore know in principle that crises are opportunities. With their lasting, ineffaceable Tantric conviction that every interruption conceals a Yidam deity, they live on a more subtle plane. They are acquainted with the world of primary fact; and though they may spend all too much of their time forgetting emptiness, they are not surprised when it appears. They see it more clearly than do the uninitiated -- as though in slow motion. In these moments -- when they perceive emptiness while viewing the world through the five senses (Gyatso, 1992: 141) -- they are enlightened. All humans have moments of potential enlightenment, but they pass us by so quickly that we miss them entirely. The initiated remember those moments better than the rest of us, recognize them more readily when they occur, and work at integrating them. They are always on the way toward living in a world where every event reveals the threads in the cloth and cloth in the threads.

Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, in his book exploring the sexual views and practices of ordinary Indians, observes that the uninitiated person "lives on the intersection of several stories, his own as well as those of heroes and gods" (Kakar, 1989: 2). This comment implies that the ordinary Indian lives much closer to the mythic world than the average American. But it also shows the essential quality of those who are uninitiated, wherever they may be. They float through life, linking up their citadel selves with one fragmentary narrative after another -- each emerging autonomously and without self-reflection -- a congeries of conflicting and partial life-narratives that keeps them in ignorance of what they are about. Lama Anagarika Govinda provides an even more mythic picture of uninitiated people. In his wayfaring through Tibet, he spent some time in the village of Poo, where he found, "Nobody thought of Padmasambhava as a figure out of the remote past, but as somebody who had just passed through this valley and might return at any moment" (Govinda, 1988: 267). He says Christian missionaries had to give up trying to convert the people of Poo because they heard all the stories of Christ as the actions of Padmasambhava (*Ibid.*, 268). Here are people who truly live in a mythic world. No doubt they, too, "live on the intersection of several stories," though one story is especially privileged. Nevertheless, the extent to which they are looking forward to the return of Padmasambhava -- a holy man who evidently lives entirely on the subtle plane -- they have not perceived the essential point about enlightenment. They are not

initiated. They do not know that God cannot be given them, that they can only become pregnant with God.

Some eighty years ago, Alexandra David-Neel had a disturbing encounter with an uninitiated disciple of Lama Rabjoms Gyatso. This disciple was in torment because he experienced himself as being eaten alive by ghouls and ghosts, believing that David-Neel was one of them. Rabjoms Gyatso said to David-Neel: "No doubt he is [eaten alive] . . . but he does not understand that he himself is the eater. Maybe he will learn that later on" (David-Neel, 1971: 163). Being eaten by ghouls is this man's crisis. His lama evidently hopes that the day will come when the disciple will be able to see this crisis as an opportunity and by spontaneous improvisation find its Yidam deity. If we are shocked at how "psychotic" this man's brush with divinity may be, Lama Rabjoms Gyatso wants us to see that we are not so very different from that unfortunate disciple. He tells David-Neel that she may be able to follow a path "less coarse" than he, but: "[It] must be as hard as that of my disciple. If it is easy it is the wrong one."

This disturbing scene may be placed alongside another David-Neel gives us, this time of the practice of a certain sort of initiate called *Lung-gom-pao*, a person who has mastered *Lung-gom*, a practice that combines mental concentration with breathing exercises, and has become a traveler who covers great distances in a relatively short time. While maintaining their meditative state, these adepts move along their path by means of impossible strides. David-Neel once followed a Lung-gom traveler with her binoculars:

By the time he had nearly reached us, I could clearly see his perfectly calm impassive face and wide-open eyes with their gaze fixed on some invisible far-distant object situated somewhere high up in space. The man did not run. He seemed to lift himself from the ground, proceeding by leaps. It looked as if he had been endowed with the elasticity of a ball. . . . His right arm moved slightly at each step as if leaning on a stick, just as though the *phurba* [magic dagger held in his right hand], whose pointed extremity was far above the ground, had touched it and were actually a support (*Ibid.*, 203).

David-Neel is convinced her eyes have not deceived her and that seemingly superhuman feats like this are possible:

Setting aside exaggeration, I am convinced . . . that one reaches a condition in which one does not feel the weight of one's body. A kind of anaesthesia deadens the sensations that would be produced by knocking against stones or other objects on the way, and one walks for hours at an unaccustomed speed, enjoying that kind of light agreeable dizziness well known to motorists at high speed (*Ibid.*, 215).

The question David-Neel does not address but might seem obvious to us is whether she herself may not have been in an altered state of consciousness when she witnessed these events. If she was, we may think that the Lung-gom-pao is indeed traveling along the wayfaring path while in a meditative state, that his movements are perhaps more economical than those of a traveler who remains in profane consciousness. His subjective experience may, indeed, be of traveling at great speed with the assistance of his phurba. But it may also be that one who sees him with the eyes of profane consciousness would see only an unusual and intent sort of walking. Others who have been initiated, like David-Neel, and are therefore familiar with the subtle plane, might be shifted into erotic trance on encountering a Lung-gom-pao. Like Promode Chatterjee at the maithuna circle or Carol, the uninvited hypnosis student who accidentally witnessed the mutual hypnosis experiment of Bill and

Anne, David-Neel may have observed the subtle meaning of a mystical practice.

Whether we take the story literally or symbolically, it illustrates a fundamental principle of mystical wayfaring by initiated people. The world is here as it always was, filled with stony obstacles, each a potential stopping point. But by not being fixed in conventional attitudes, the initiated wayfarer encounters each as an opportunity for an improvisatory leap. Once we know the ambiguous state of how things *really* are, there is no going back. Consensus reality is still there, but now it serves as the mud room to a mansion. I still have to buy milk and eggs. But once I have gained a certain confidence in my powers of spontaneous improvisation, even the Pick and Pay may sometimes be shot through with glory. When we get to this stage, there is no question that life is richer and more deeply satisfying. Vimalananda makes this point in his characteristically colorful fashion:

After your graduation [as an Aghori, "when the hordes of ethereal beings find they cannot tempt you"] you are awarded your degree: clairaudience and clairvoyance. Then you go anywhere, eat anything, and you are carefree, because something is directing your every move. You become just like a Yantra. The Cosmic Shakti plays through you, and you enjoy the bliss. But this is the final stage. You must start at the bottom and go through the grind (Svoboda, 1986: 185).

When my body is a yantra, there is no difference between the microcosmic Shakti that plays within me and directs my every move as kundalini and the macrocosmic Shakti. In profane consciousness, Shakti leads us astray with her ever-changing illusions, like Maya. But for the initiated, Maya "can also serve as the self-actualization of the divine creative impulse, as the 'measuring out' (*ma*) or manifestation of pure consciousness, which is free to bind itself if it so chooses." This is what converts the phenomenal world to "a field of play for the realized (*siddha*) individual" (D. G. White, 1996: 279).

Such a point of view is not unique to India; but as Ioan Couliano points out, it belonged to the European Middle Ages. The medieval doctrine of the soul and its phantasms claimed that every reality perceptible in the empirical world had another meaning "on an ontological level inaccessible to direct experience" but available to the soul's imaginal power (Couliano, 1986: 34). Such phantasms of the soul "allegorize" actual events as symbols revealing the "intelligential cosmos" (*Ibid.*, 40). They seem to have arrived at a perspective very close to that of Ibn al-'Arabi who said, "[T]he greatest illumination in this domain is when the vision of God is the very vision of the world" (Addas, 1993: 138). [9] He described his own mystical path as that of "servitude" (*'ubudiyya*): "[O]nly he who greets the spiritual instant (*warid*) in the full state of an '*abd* or servant is capable of mastering it" (*Ibid.*, 195). Because God is potentially revealed in every instant of our lives, we place ourselves in service to God through our spontaneous and improvisatory obedience to life's every instant. "According to the Sufis each 'time' (*waqt*) should evoke its own appropriate response in man. Whoever ignores or disregards what is appropriate to the moment, loses what it has to offer of truth" (Ibn al-'Arabi, 1971: 89, *n.* 1).

Finding subtle esoteric meanings (*batin*) within the external facts (*zahir*) of the everyday world or even in the words of the Qu'ran can be a tricky business. I have had some conversations with Islamic scholars who have used the term *batiniyya* (esoterism) with the greatest scorn. In doing so, they are responding to reckless and irresponsible "symbolic" interpretations, ones that are tangled up with the citadel-self-serving internal monologues of misguided esoterists. Esoterism is always open to abuse by the uninitiated; and this was true

800 years ago when Ibn al-'Arabi wrote. For this reason, he insists that true interpretation (ta'wil) always interprets "upward." [10] In this sense, those who count up the years of life ascribed to the Hebrew patriarchs in order to determine the date on which God created the world are pseudo-esoterists. They are interpreting "downwards" from the sublime words of scripture to the events of history. Ta'wil always moves upward from empirical facts to their meaning in the world of soul, from souls to the angels that guide them, and from angels to the lords they serve. By ta'wil the obstacles I face have a meaning for the progress of my soul on the mystic path. Thus Wilson says of ta'wil, "The symbols one penetrates are the path one follows" (Wilson, 1993: 154). [11] By ta'wil, the wayfaring Sufi travels on a "magic carpet" that moves as impossibly over obstacles as the Lung-gom-pao. Lalla, the Kashmiri songstress who refused to clothe herself or her vision in either Hindu or Islamic garb, captured the meaning of ta'wil in the following verse:

Unconscious people read the scriptures
like parrots saying Ram, Ram,
in their cages.

It's all pretend knowledge
Read rather, with me, every
living moment as prophecy
(Lalla, 1992: 75).

Wayfaring on the spiritual path is called *suluk* in Arabic. The wayfarer is a *salik* (pl. *salikun*). Even a sedentary Sufi is a salik in the sense that her life is a journey to God. But unlike the hermits and the prayer-leaders in the mosque, the salikun travel from master to master in search of their distinctive teachings and conferral of shaktipat (i.e., the khirqah). [12] They seek out those in intimate intercourse with God to cross-pollinate their own experience. But God is also to be found along the road. They beg the "blessings" of everyone they meet and work for the day when every moment will bring its own blessing unasked. "The Sufi Traveler is 'begging' not just for alms but for this divine bahksheesh of signs, portents, encounters, coincidences, marvels, aesthetic shocks, spiritual insights, peak experiences, adventurous (even dangerous) unveilings" (Wilson, 1993: 154). They follow the words of the Prophet, "Be in the world like a traveler, or like a passerby, and reckon yourself as of the dead" (Glassé, 1989).

Indonesian Muslims have a "suluk ceremony" for obtaining psychic and magical powers "by withstanding terrifying assaults from the spirit world during a night in which he symbolically dies" (Glassé, 1989). The ceremony appears to have an Indian flavor: one obtains extraordinary powers of consciousness by successfully wrestling with wrathful yoginis. It is a journey (suluk) that takes place out of this world, entirely on the subtle plane. It describes an exercise that belongs to the heroic rung of the ladder, where the subtle plane and the everyday world are still at odds with one another. They have not yet begun to pulsate as the figure and ground of cosmic oneness. The true salik, on the other hand, the Sufi who wanders through a pulsating world of oneness, is both dead to profane existence and yet alive to everything that is. Like a dead man, he rests in unobstructed intercourse with God. But he also walks on roads of dirt and begs from the humblest he meets. Every turn in the road brings a crisis of ambiguity to be handled with spontaneous improvisation.

The scriptural archetype that grounds every suluk is the story from the Qu'ran (XVIII: 61-83) that describes Moses traveling with "one of our Servants." This servant ('*abd*) is not

named in the Qu'ran, but tradition holds that he is Khidr (variant spellings include Khadir and Khezir). He is sometimes described as an angel but always as one of the *'afrad*, one of the "Unique Ones who receive illumination direct from God without human mediation; they can initiate seekers who belong to no Order or who have no human guide; they rescue lost wanderers and desperate lovers in the hour of need" (Wilson, 1993: 139). Ibn al-'Arabi is famous for three meetings with Khidr in which he was invested with the *khirqah* through a direct intervention from the subtle plane. Ibn al-'Arabi's recommendation that we conduct ourselves as "servants" in the face of each temporal moment as a potential theophanic *kairos* reflects his discipleship under Khidr, the prototype of the servants of God.

Where The Two Worlds Meet

In the Qu'ranic story, Moses is traveling with his own servant, not Khidr, determined to find "the point where the two rivers meet, though I march on for ages" (v. 61). Evidently in a state of unconsciousness, they find this point because, distracted by Satan (v. 64), they forget about the fish they are carrying for their breakfast, "and it took its way into the waters being free" (v. 62). This place where the two waters meet is the *barzakh*, the border region where the *Mundus Imaginalis* or subtle plane and the empirical world overlap, [13] where vision and perception interpenetrate and one who is awake, like Khidr, can simultaneously see "the archetypal realities and hidden truths 'behind' material reality" (Wilson, 1993: 139). In losing their fish, [14] which miraculously comes to life and swims away into the subtle realm, Moses and his servant reveal their profane consciousness. The fact that he knows about searching for the *barzakh* of simultaneity reveals Moses' condition as an initiated one. His slip into forgetting the very purpose of his journey precisely at the moment he comes upon that border region illustrates how difficult it is to remain a servant of the moment. Moses does not miss the fish until he becomes hungry for breakfast, whereupon he has a shock of recognition: "This is that which we have been seeking. So they retraced their steps again" (v. 65). No doubt a Tantrika would point out that the Yidam deity of the *barzakh* is recognized by Moses precisely in his bodily appetites.

Back at the meeting of the two waters, they encounter Khidr; and Moses begs to be allowed to travel with him, so as to learn "right conduct" (v. 67). Khidr is reluctant, saying that Moses will not understand what he sees. But Moses persists and is finally allowed to tag along providing he asks no questions, "till I myself mention of it unto thee" (v. 71). Three disturbing incidents follow. Khidr drills a hole in the bottom of a poor man's boat, kills a lad, and -- after being refused hospitality by a certain town -- repairs its crumbling wall without asking to be paid for his labor. Each time Moses demands an explanation. The third time Khidr tells Moses he has broken his promise and can no longer travel with him. But he answers the questions. He damaged the boat so that a king would not seize it to use in a military campaign. The dead youth would have gone bad; his parents will be given another son, "better in purity and nearer to mercy" (v. 82). There is a treasure under the rebuilt wall which is to be found by a pair of orphan boys when they grow up. Khidr ends by saying that he has been commanded to do what he did by a will other than his own: "And I did it not upon my own command" (v. 83).

This set piece, which comes out of nowhere in the Qu'ran, surely appears to be a folk tale that has been smuggled into the inspired word of God. [15] Its possible origins aside,

however, the tale is as inspired as every other passage in the Qu'ran. Wayfaring Sufis have adopted it as a symbolic description of suluk: one is to travel like Khidr, or with Khidr, so that every empirical event is also a theophany in which Someone Else calls the shots. Moses represents the man so attuned to the values of the persona field and so stuck in the citadel of his self that the world never pulsates for him. Khidr, on the other hand, lives in the conceptually ambiguous world of primary fact. He conducts himself like an outrageous Ch'an master, transforming himself in an instant from shaikh to vandal, assassin, and chump before the astonished eyes of the Hebrew prophet. Each incident is a spontaneous improvisation. Moses is the law-giver of the Jews, the traditional author of the first five books of the Bible. The God of Muhammad makes it clear that there is a higher suluk than has been dreamed of by even the saintliest of those who are confined to the conventional world.

The irony of this Qu'ranic story is that Moses himself might well have been taken as the prototype of all salikun. He led the Israelites on a journey whose geographical goal was unknown, that lasted virtually a lifetime, and in which day-to-day guidance came directly from God, who takes on the appearance of extraordinary empirical phenomena -- a pillar of fire and column of smoke. Moses parted the waters at the divine command, had a mystical vision of God on the mountain top, and was given the laws for living in the ordinary world in an extraordinary manner. The Israelites were fed every morning by food which miraculously appeared from the subtle realm, penetrating into the everyday world of the desert. True enough, Moses doubted and was not allowed to enter the promised land himself. He was more human than Khidr, but he is the primary scriptural example of one who lived the wayfaring life, following a path not laid out straight as an arrow by the citadel self, but ever bending back on itself like a serpent, winding from one theophanic moment to the next. The Exodus is the journey that gathered the Israelites into the people of God and typifies the life of every Jew, Christian, and Muslim who is aware in principle -- though constantly forgetting -- that this ordinary life becomes extraordinary when interpenetrated by the timeless realities of the subtle plane.

The serpentine path of Khidr (and Moses) stays always on the ever-twisting border land where the two worlds meet, the barzakh that can never be known in advance but is discovered anew in every moment, the world of primary fact where the conceptual certainties of the citadel self have been dropped off and left behind.

If you have realized the "Khezz of your being," you may travel even to that place which is doubtless another *border* or gateway between this world and the *Mundus Imaginalis* -- or, to be more precise, you may travel in both worlds simultaneously, like Khezz, seeing each landmark, as in a dream, suffused with significance and hidden knowledge (Wilson, 1993: 145).

Everyone and everything is drawn to such a joyous wayfarer, from madmen and children to local tutelary spirits, the djinns of the locus or spirits of the place. For one in this state, to see a tree in its suchness is to meet its dryad; to bathe in a spring is to meet its undine; to touch a rock is to meet its kobold or troll; and the campfire is the veritable salamander of flame (*Ibid.*, 154).

Wilson implies, here, that those who are at odds with themselves and struggling with their ascetic exercises will always be blind to the theophanic possibilities of the moment. Every incident will be a crisis or a trial for such an unintegrated traveler. Those who follow the serpentine path of Khidr, however, go cheerfully and without a care. They are moved by the blissful force of their soul's energy. They are open to every adventure without forcing it,

without relying on their own will, but with a cultivated imaginal power gained through their initiation -- a playful readiness to employ spontaneous improvisation.

Ibn al-'Arabi began his wandering in three-dimensional space in the year 1194, when he was thirty. At a certain moment in the mosque at Tunis that year, he says he entered the *barzakh* and never left it. Referring to a passage from the Qu'ran (XXIX: 57), "You My servants who believe, My Earth is vast, therefore worship Me," Ibn al-'Arabi called this intersection of the two worlds "God's Vast Earth" (*ard Allah al-wasi'a*). He also called it the "Realm of Symbols" (*manzil al-rumuz*) and the "Earth of Reality" (*ard al-haqiqa*) (Addas, 1993: 117).

When I entered this Dwelling-Place, while staying in Tunis, I unconsciously let out a cry; not a single person heard it without losing consciousness. The women who were on the adjoining terraces fainted; some of them fell from the terraces into the courtyard, but in spite of the height they suffered no harm. I was the first to regain consciousness; we were in the course of performing the prayer behind the imam. I saw that everyone had collapsed, thunderstruck. After a while they recovered their own spirits and I asked them: "What happened to you?" They answered: "It's for you to tell us what happened to you! You let out such a cry that you have been the cause of what you see." I said to them: "By God, I had no idea I uttered a cry!" (*Ibid.*, 119). [16]

Here again we have the theme of uninitiated believers being transported to the subtle plane through the elevating influence of another. Ibn al-'Arabi tells the story as one who is simply amazed by the events. He was transported to that intermediate realm by some power greater than his own. The cry he let out remains unconscious to him. He cannot tell us if it was a shout of joy or a scream of terror, the death-cry of his citadel self. All we know is that, unconsciously, the entire congregation recognized it. Something in them, the dragon of their soul's energy, responded. We are led to believe that anyone who had been there would have been transported by shaktipat to God's Vast Earth. But only Ibn al-'Arabi remembers what happened and stays in that Earth of Reality. Evidently only he has been prepared by the investiture of Khidr's *khirqa* to know what he sees and remain in that elevated state of consciousness.

Ibn al-'Arabi says that "God's Vast Earth" is inhabited only "by those who have realized total servitude (*'ubdiyya*) with regard to God" (*Ibid.*, 118).

The earth in question is located in the *barzakh* -- the intermediary world where spirits receive a subtle body. As Ibn 'Arabi writes: "Every body in which spirits, angels and *jinn*s clothe themselves and every form in which a man perceives himself while asleep is a subtle body belonging to that earth" (*Ibid.*, 118). [17]

It would be hard to find a more explicit description of the subtle plane than this: the realm where spiritual influences are discernible through the human power of imagination. Peter Lamborn Wilson says we would be ill-advised to make too rigid a distinction between that imaginal power (which he capitalizes, following the convention established by Corbin: Imagination) and the more familiar human faculty of day-dreaming. To distrust reverie is to distrust Imagination, "for even the idlest day-dream is open to the sudden irradiation of the divine (*tajalli*), provided the heart is open" (Wilson, 1993: 143). Here, again, we encounter the Tibetan doctrine of the Yidam deity that lurks within the most ordinary and despised of our unconscious desires and impulses.

C. G. Jung makes the same point in describing the sort of reverie he advocates as an adjunct

to his practice of analysis. Calling disciplined reverie "active imagination," Jung urged his patients to follow his own example in coming to know the unconscious dynamics that lie beneath our day-to-day experience. The critical ego is to be consciously held in suspension, while the waking dream is observed:

Consciousness is forever interfering, helping, correcting, and negating, never leaving the psychic process to grow in peace. It would be simple enough, if only simplicity were not the most difficult of all things. To begin with, the task consists solely in observing objectively how a fragment of fantasy develops. Nothing could be simpler, and yet right here the difficulties begin. Apparently one has no fantasy fragments -- or yes, there's one, but it is too stupid! Dozens of good reasons are brought against it. One cannot concentrate on it -- it is too boring -- what could come of it anyway -- it is "nothing but" this or that, and so on. The conscious mind raises innumerable objections, in fact it often seems bent on blotting out the spontaneous fantasy activity in spite of real insight and in spite of the firm determination to allow the psychic process to go forward without interference. Occasionally there is a veritable cramp of consciousness (Jung, *CW 13*: ¶20).

These exercises must be continued until the cramp in the conscious mind is relaxed, in other words, until one can let things happen, which is the next goal of the exercise. In this way a new attitude is created, an attitude that accepts the irrational and the incomprehensible simply because it is happening (*Ibid.*, ¶23).

Thus Jung makes it clear that access to the imaginal powers of the unconscious requires a partial setting aside of the citadel self with its habitual judgments. Only one who begins by attending faithfully to day-dreams will have the capacity for the spontaneous improvisation by which the serpentine path can be discerned. Furthermore, in developing this "new attitude" we do not create something arbitrary; rather we gain access to events that are already "happening" but regarding which our compulsive maintenance of the citadel self leaves us blind and ignorant. An imaginal world co-exists with this one, and we can find it at any moment if only we can learn to rein in our citadel self.

The serpentine path describes a journey to be lived, not talked about. But the very possibility of such a journey, and the fact that one can gain initiation by various means to the art of spontaneous improvisation so as to be able to recognize and convert its "moments": these are exciting facts. And serious wayfarers meet people who have experienced these things -- or know someone who has -- ; and they cannot resist swapping stories of the Way. In the last analysis, stories are the most dependable source of information for those who have not been initiated. Stories intrigue the ego and stimulate the unconscious imaginal faculty in those who have merely heard about mysticism. For those who are sufficiently serious in their intentions and fortunate enough to have found a master capable of initiating them, stories of the Way loosen their preconceptions and call up memories of forgotten moments. Crises that were bungled and led to "falling victim" are recalled as potential opportunities for spontaneous improvisation; and the journeyman mystic is better prepared to meet such challenges in the future.

If sexual stories of lust, longing, indecency, and wrathful yoginis are among the most compelling, the reason is two-fold. On the one hand, nothing drives us more insistently and at the most "inopportune" moments than sex. On the other hand, the sex drive is but the leading edge of eros with all the physiological, emotional, and imaginal changes it effects. Whether we have learned to recognize it or not, every moment of erotic stimulation presents itself as an imaginal opportunity. Every base and panting instance of lust carries within it the

Yidam deity of erotic trance. In moments of sexual stimulation, we are always standing on the barzakh where the empirical world is interpenetrated by the subtle plane. The uninitiated overlook their opportunities. The initiated miss more than they recognize. Eros and its more developed relative, kundalini, constitute the playing field where every moment is charged with lustful significance and lies open to spontaneous transformation. Every erotically interesting partner is a potential Bhairava or Bhairavi capable of opening the vertical dimension of the diamond ladder the moment we take our imaginal projections seriously as a project to be lived. The sexual stories make another fact clear. To have discovered the wrathful and blissful divinity lurking in a single partner is to open up the entire world as a potential barzakh, as Rumi tells us in five potent lines:

If the Beloved is everywhere
the lover is a veil.

But when living itself
becomes the Friend,
lovers disappear
(Barks & Green, 1997: 127).

The Beloved is everywhere because there is no cloth without the threads of light that are our cosmic consciousness. The lover is a veil because as long as we are stuck in the subjectivity of our lover-hood and believe that the Beloved is an "object," Reality is veiled by our citadel self. To drop the veil is to drop body-and-mind and enter the world of primary fact. There "living itself" becomes the Friend, because every moment is a theophany. Lovers have to disappear if there is no longer to be a subject and an object to blind us to what *is*. In this sense, Miranda Shaw's story of the arrow-making yogini and Saraha epitomizes the life of sexual wayfaring. When a single partner opens up "living itself" as the barzakh, each becomes Khidr for the other. In their arrow-making, in their maithuna, in preparing their breakfast and eating it, everything they undertake occurs at the intersection of the cloth and the threads. Spontaneous Great Bliss infuses every moment. The pilgrimage to Mecca as well as the transport to Indra's Heaven can be made without ever leaving one's kitchen. Wayfaring is not about geography. Mountains, trees, and rivers are merely its training ground. Real wayfaring occurs when the heart chakra is open and the serpentine path of the barzakh resides in every "here and now."

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1. Bönpo: the priests of the Bön religion in Tibet, which is a collection of "various religious currents" that existed in Tibet before Padmasambhava introduced Buddhism in the eighth century. In the eleventh century it organized as an independent school, strongly influenced by Buddhism but continuing to preserve the continuity of the old Bön tradition (Fischer-Schreiber, 1989).
 2. "She is also known as Lal Ded, Lal Didi, and Mai Lal Diddi, all of which mean Granny Lal, Grandmother Lalla. And in Sanskrit she is called Lalleswari, Lalla the great yogini, prophetess and practitioner of yoga" (Coleman Barks, in his "Introduction" to Lalla, 1992).
 3. Possibly this life-changing encounter with beer suggests a karmic connection with Drukpa Kunley's love of chung.

4. *Pashu*: (Sanskrit) literally an "animal"; a human being who is as unfree and "tethered" as an animal.
5. "Whoever imagines that he sees the Reality Himself has no gnosis; he has gnosis who knows that it is his own essential self that he sees" (Ibn al-'Arabi, 1980: 77).
6. "Yet Ibn 'Arabi's words and his works created such a violent reaction in his time that the people destroyed his tomb after his death without leaving any trace of it" (Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak al-Jerrahi, "Introduction," in Ibn al-'Arabi, 1989: 10).
7. Citing the *Sivasutravimarsini*, p. 12.
8. Lin-chi I-hsüan, known in Japanese as Rinzai Gigen, d. 866/7. Founder of a school named after himself which became the most influential school of Ch'an and the most vital school of Chinese Buddhism (Fischer-Schreiber, *et. al.*, 1989).
9. Quoting *Futuhāt* II: 507-8.
10. Ta'wil: "the process of tracing something to its origin, to its archetype" (Corbin, 1981: 5).
11. Corbin says ta'wil is phenomenology. "It is a matter of leading the observer to a point where he will allow himself to see what it is that lies hidden" (Corbin, 1981: 15).
12. In large part, the tradition of wandering salikun is defunct today.
13. The barzakh is "the space between, the intermediary between the sensible and the intelligible" (Corbin, 1981: 14).
14. According to Jung, the fish is any "unconscious content" that lives invisibly distant from our conscious attitude -- particularly that of the self or atman (*CW 9ii*). The junction of the two worlds is the place where atman is either found or lost, depending on the level of our awareness.
15. According to tradition, this story and the ones preceding and following are Muhammad's answers to three questions set him by rabbis (Pickthall, [n.d.]). The Qu'ran itself gives no rationale for including them -- and has no need to, as it is merely a catalogue of the things Muhammed said when he was inspired. None of his followers had the temerity to place these sayings into a biographical context -- as the four Christian evangelists did with the words of Jesus.
16. Quoting *Futuhāt* I: 173.
17. Quoting *Futuhāt* I: 130.