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# Awakening to the Human Condition

From a talk given by Ajahn Thanasanti

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Awakening, in all its aspects, continues to be a deep-seated interest. Over the years if I look at experiences that have continued to reappear in my own journey and in the journey of others, I can see there have been times of intense pleasure, strong energy, deep pain, suffering, confusion, profound fear, transcendent joy and the stillness of a peaceful heart. These experiences have been both the gateway for and the result of much learning. As this entire range has been a part of my experience of sexuality, I'd like to explore this theme. In particular, I wish to connect the experience of sexuality with aggression on the one hand and loving kindness on the other as aspects which need to be understood whether celibate or not, in our endeavor to awaken to this full human condition.

For more than twenty years most of my Dhamma teachers have been men. Occasionally, there have been some very bold, insightful, very sensitive Dhamma teachers who have talked about sexuality in language I have been able to relate to and understand. I've felt grateful for their courage and compassion to bring light and clarity into these deep waters. As a laywoman, I also

heard Dhamma talks describing the power involved in dominance, the objectification and raw attraction to physical attributes driven by a desire for gratification, all devoid of affection and genuine respect — which I couldn't relate to.

For me the most familiar expression of sexuality was one accompanied by tenderness and care, much spaciousness, joy and opening of body and mind as the sense of self released through giving and sharing with another. The presence of mindfulness, awareness, perception changes as well as the emotional experience were the predominant features. To hear sexuality being described emphasizing the instinctual component of desire, the raw drive for physical gratification involving the dynamics of power and aggression sounded demeaning and very foreign. However, years later, I came to realise that what these teachers were describing was in fact possible and within me at that. This was discovered only after the crucible of mind and body had become sufficiently strong to withstand the fire of transformation that come from awareness in the way things are.

Growing up in California, with its lack of boundaries and cultural norms regarding courtship and sexual relationship, it took some learning to discover how much care was required to ensure ease and well being within relationship, to discover the impact of sexual intimacy and the degree to which one's partner's thoughts, moods, feelings and kammic formations are internalized. For this reason respect, kindness, genuine

love, friendship and commitment were essential to protect the environment necessary to open to the complexity of what ensued.

So if in relationship, it is important to bring every aspect of relationship fully into consciousness and be clear about the forces that are operating. It is important to see the nature of desire, the nature of pleasure, the way of attachment, grasping and wanting more and the fear of rejection or loss and their effects on the mind and body. It is important to recognize that the longing for love, acceptance and fulfilment are part of the human experience and part of the dance of our sexuality. All of these things need to be seen and understood.

After I decided to come to the monastery to live as a nun, I remember that there were a few people who said in their departing blessings to me, "Well I hope that on your way to the monastery, you meet the man of your dreams and fall in love." I understood what they were saying. They wanted me to be happy. To them, going to the monastery was the embodiment of a life-denying existence. In our culture, the highest life affirming experience is the consummation of a romantic relationship. The advertising strategies and movies are oriented towards the pleasure and happiness that come from falling in love and having a romantic relationship. It is considered the pinnacle of fulfilment.

Anybody in a healthy enough relationship certainly knows that there is a lot of happiness and pleasure, as well as the potential for healthy inquiry and

learning. But anybody in relationship also probably knows that it is not the whole story. It is not always so sweet. There can be times when intimacy can be boring. One of the greatest experiences of loneliness is when two people are physically close but miles apart in every other way. Sometimes it becomes very ugly. While on this retreat, we heard the story of a person whose unrequited love led to stalking, several acts of vandalism, attempted suicide, followed by physical assault.

So consummate love brings delights but unfulfilled love where desire, jealousy and power reign can become a nightmare. We see love easily turn to hate. For me this kind of love is one of attachment, not genuine love. Attachment and grasping cannot fulfill. They cause frustration. When there isn't insight into the frustration as it arises, the aggression that follows is an attempt to blame the trigger rather than understand the response.

After ten years working within the field of practice as a lay person, I left and went to the monastery. I remember, not long after entering the monastery, a much loved and respected senior monk saying that when he first became a monk, his mind was so shattered that it was years before he could get together a healthy case of lust. He was very candid and open. I appreciated that very much. In the ensuing years as a monastic, I was to learn much about this subject. And still what a surprise after several years of being in the monastery, and much life experience, to discover sex with capital letters and on big screens.

In a monastic lifestyle dedicated to meditation, inquiry and investigation, where restraint is cultivated, and where there are relatively few opportunities for distraction, the energetic system of a human being potentizes. The familiar becomes intensified.

I thought I knew a few things about my body, energies and the cycles of mood, emotion and sexuality. I thought I understood men. I was surprised to discover there was a lot I didn't know about the way energy moves through the body and mind, and what it does to various parts of the system, and how differently men and women experience things.

It was at this time I began to have an appreciation for what the monks and male Dhamma teachers had been talking about — the connection between sexuality and aggression. I could feel the power involved in captivating and holding a person's attention. I could see clearly how fast moods swing and how sexual desire was triggered by a myriad of things not only by an expression of heart-felt openness and tenderness. I could see the desire impulse working and feel the movement of mind towards pleasure and gratification. I could see how the strategies that were employed in optimizing pleasure either for oneself or in relationship with others were often based on control, manipulation, competition, defining one's territory and objectification. As long as my conscious experience of sexuality was just an expression of heart opening and tenderness, the potential for what it is capable of was not something I had

understood. Later I wondered how I'd missed some of the most basic instinctual elements of sexuality and its drive.

As these dynamics became clearer, the connection between sexuality and aggression became more apparent. A human being is made out of energy. Thought, moods and feelings are all manifestations of energy which changes in colour and tone depending on the characteristics it takes on but at its root it is just energy. We are often absorbed in these characteristics in the same way that we are absorbed in the objects of our experience. What we think, feel, experience is of great interest. When there is intense energy in the system, it can flow out in different ways. With sexual energy for example that manifests as desire, if unskillfully restrained or suppressed can cause confusion, frustration, anger and easily be released as aggression.

Working with restraint then requires that one become familiar with the experience of these feelings and the skillful means one can develop to work with them. Awareness is the key. One first needs to allow one's attention to rest with the experience. Feel the direct physical sensations in the body: the tightness, increased warmth, change and texture of the breath, the tension. Let one's attention rest there. Feel the experience is unpleasant. Feel the mind contracting and notice the desire not to experience these feelings. When one can see things as they arise and let one's attention rest there, then one doesn't need to be a slave to one's desire for

fulfillment or one's aversion to the unpleasant. One can be directly aware of the experience as it arises, and watch as it changes and ends of its own accord or is channeled through skillful sublimation. Once there is a connection of mindfulness and a clear comprehension of what is being experienced, options open up. With attention focused on the whole body or the breath, through awareness, one can allow the energy to flow. It doesn't have to be blocked or forced. By bringing awareness and attention to the breath, release will come from exhalation and vitality from inhalation. The contraction can be shifted. As the whole body is kept in mind, the energy can flow and become a source of vitality, creativity and radiance. Energy can be released or sublimated through the breath, physical work, and long walks or devotional practice. It is important to know the difference between repression, which doesn't allow and sublimation, which allows through skillful channeling.

It is important to recognize how much patience; kindness towards oneself and skill is needed to find one's way through this human predicament. Humour helps a lot. But sometimes tears are inevitable.

Even as one develops increasing skill allowing energy to flow throughout the system, it is important to see fundamentally that, when there is desire, there is suffering. There is 'me,' here who wants and something out 'there' that is supposed to satisfy. It is important to recognize whether one is sublimating in a skillful way and working to transform desire into something that is



useful. As long as there is a 'me' here and a something out 'there' that either needs to be got or gotten rid of, there is suffering.

Sexuality and the way aggression is experienced and expressed need to be understood if one is interested in opening up the field of one's experience and coming to terms with what it is to be fully human. It is scary because it takes people into the realm where they feel out of control and where they are confronting things about themselves that aren't in congruence with what they think they should be experiencing.

Some people think meditation is about developing clarity, concentration and kindness but is divorced from coming to terms with these basic and primordial energies. Understanding these energies, seeing what sets them off, what brings them into balance, how much of it is part and parcel of having a human body and how it can be used in its transformed potential is important for our aspiration for freedom. Rejecting one aspect of what it is to be alive and to be a human being can be profoundly destructive, and affect the way we see and relate to others and ourselves. It has a direct connection to our physical and mental well being.

Many people come on a retreat and the big question when the retreat is over is how to integrate the insights and bring the spiritual practice into daily life. It is a great sadness if someone feels practice on retreat to be holy and sacred and the practice at home, to be inferior, complicated or impossible. There is no split.

As for celibacy, it isn't meant to be a repression or denial of being a sexual being, a condemnation of sexuality or of sexual relationships. It is not a life-denying experience. The standards of behavior are clear. Our pathway is through insight and understanding, and for me, love. When lived to its full potential, celibacy is a vital, embracing and creative lifestyle in which one is aware of sexuality in all of its manifestations, aware of the way it can be transformed into other types of energy and in which one is at ease with life as a human being.

To those interested in understanding the end of suffering, the Buddha recommended seeing value in celibacy. Celibacy is a very powerful tool for understanding desire and coming to terms with the nature of attachment. It isn't an easy path, but it can be very valuable because one has to consciously face the habitual patterns of this deep-seated energy.

For all of us, if understanding and freeing the heart from suffering is of interest, we need to question our relationship with sexuality in a sincere and genuine way. Have the courage to look carefully at the way desire, attachment and power are embedded within our experience. See for ourselves what is appropriate and how mindfulness, understanding and restraint can be further cultivated. Ask ourselves if there is room for more honesty and integrity in this area.

Each of us has areas that are more difficult to resolve than others. We need to know what they are. I grew up in an environment where being hostile and

aggressive wasn't O.K. Coming to terms with these aspects in myself has been difficult because they were not congruent with my view of being a loving, giving and caring person. When there is a lack of familiarity with the energy for example of anger, it first gets screened through thoughts like, "I don't want to see it, I don't want to know about it, I don't want to deal with it, I don't want it to be there." Sometimes the thoughts aren't conscious. And so one suppresses the unacceptable form of energy until there is both the courage and strength of mind to be able to wake up to these aspects of what it is to be a human being and embrace them. So then, when anger comes, it is familiar. It is known. It is recognised and doesn't terrify or isn't being used against oneself or others. It doesn't have to go underground.

So what does this have to do with compassion and loving-kindness? Classically it is taught that we first need to have loving-kindness and compassion for ourselves before we are in any position to spread it outwardly. Awareness has an all-embracing quality. Whatever the experience, awareness can embrace, know and receive. Judgment isn't needed. Resistance isn't needed. As moods, feelings, bodily sensations, tensions and struggles are held in awareness, the reactive qualities of wanting and not wanting the experience diminishes. Compassion comes from opening to suffering with the right perspective. It is not the all-glorious compassion of loving a million people in a far distant land. It is the nitty-gritty compassion of being at ease with the things

that we experience whether or not they are to our liking. True loving-kindness isn't a construction of a thought or a feeling. It is the ability to be present with experience on a moment to moment basis with awareness. Loving-kindness is awareness.

It is important to see that within all experience there is a direct path to the stillness of the heart. Be it confusion, rage, the coarsest desire for gratification, within each there is a direct path to the stillness of the heart. When there is sufficient strength of mind to let awareness embrace the feeling, without either rejecting it or believing in it, without absorbing into it, a profound change takes place.

The identification we normally have with experience eases up. Instead of needing to get something, get rid of something or change one's experience in some way in order to find peace, fulfilment and rest; simply resting in the knowing of the experience, peace, fulfilment and rest are found.

This still, loving heart isn't a lovey-dovey sweet marshmallow pink smear one spreads all over the universe — that metta is a kind of goo. This still, loving heart is real. It is connected and appropriate. The only way it can be is if we understand what is appropriate in terms of actions of body and speech and feel at ease with the full range of what it is to be human being. As long as one remains cut off from sexuality or aggression, one is denied full access to the heart. Cut off doesn't mean an inability to act out, but an inability to feel fully,

understand, allow and transform. It seems to me, spiritual maturity is when we can see through the veils of the world, the myriad of our human experience and let everything bring us back to the stillness of the loving heart.

My experience is that the heart does open. Energy that used to be expressed in a sexual way or released in an aggressive response manifests through the heart but is not colored with the desire for gratification, possession or control. The heart is just open. It's allowing, it's receptive, and it's universal. There is no focus on the one that 'I' love or the one that pleases 'me.' It is a bit like loving the whole universe rather than an individual person, not the glittery kind of being in love that rejects things that don't fit. It's abiding in love, a still, alive, vital place, a place of rest.

There was a nun who spent some time at Amaravati. We all loved her very much. I remember her saying that she felt much more sexually liberated being a nun than she ever did as a lay person. I totally understand what she was talking about. Within a clearly defined boundary of restraint, we have the encouragement, teachings and support to let the body be the way it is: to allow the energies to be the way they are, to understand them, to be at peace with them.

We're not trying to get anybody's attention. We're not trying to dominate or control. We're not trying to live up to the culturally accepted norm of what a woman or a man should be. We are given the encouragement to

know what it is to be alive, to be a human being, to be a woman, to be a man and to know it fully and completely. Not so much that we can take this as our identity, but so this knowing can take us to the stillness of a loving and peaceful heart. One of the many blessings of this celibate life is that one doesn't need to be tied up into a pretzel. One can be fully human, utterly alive and be in peace.

It is a rich subject, one that I continue to learn about. I don't know if I've managed to do it justice or speak to your experience. You decide. My willingness to be candid is largely motivated by the suffering and insight I've gained over the years and by the suffering and need to understand of others. We can, celibate or not, bring awareness, integrity and kindness to this aspect of our lives. If there are things I've said that you find useful, use them. If not, leave them with me. I wish for everyone as for myself that the practice bears the fruit of awakening to the full human condition, allowing suffering to end and letting the awareness of everything we experience be the still point of our resting in a peaceful, loving heart, a heart whose freedom is unconditioned.