

TRICYCLE

Copyright 2024. Tricycle. All rights reserved.

Sexuality, Desire, and the Dharma of Relationships

By Martine Batchelor and Laura Bridgman

This excerpt has been adapted from Tricycle's online course, "The Dharma of Relationships: The Paramis in Action" with Martine Batchelor and Laura Bridgman. Learn more about the course and enroll at [learn.tricycle.org](https://www.learn.tricycle.org).

Martine Batchelor: When we look at relationships, one question that often comes up is: What about practice and sexuality? Often there is talk about desire as something negative. But you also have the desire, of course, for awakening.

As human beings, one can have sexuality and intimacy with oneself. But here, we're talking about sexuality in terms of relationships with others. Whenever the Buddha talked about sexuality, he generally only discussed sexual misconduct. Outside of that, he did not say, "Do this or that to benefit sexuality or intimacy." So we have to be careful if we think we'll find all this in the text in terms of sexuality and relationship. We also need to consider modernity, the cultural mood, ways of intimacy, and sexual exploration. Sexuality is such a broad topic, so of course, we cannot cover every aspect of it.

Laura Bridgman: When you mentioned how the relationship to sexuality is depicted in the scriptures, I remember when I came across those teachings and read those teachings, I just didn't find them that helpful. It felt like they were almost developing aversion, actually. So instead I thought about what would actually help me in this area of my life, and I realized it was incorporating the Buddha's teaching on desire. It's so easy to feel like desire is something we have to get rid of. But it's so much more. It's about how we develop our relationship with desire.

Sexual energy is pretty much the strongest desire we experience in our lives. Interestingly, one question that arises is whether sexuality is fundamental to survival, individually. It's possible to be celibate, to live a life without being sexually active. In my life, I've moved through different phases of celibacy and being sexually active, and I've found it incredibly helpful to apply the basic principles and teachings around desire. Such as how to be present with craving and what fuels craving. A lot of sexuality is about what we project in terms of fantasy, and then seeing if it is possible to witness those projections in awareness and what happens when we do.

Martine Batchelor: Yes, and at the same time, I think we have to be careful of only looking at sexuality in terms of sexual energy because not everybody has that. There are people who say, "Well, I don't feel like having sex at all. I want to be able to love somebody, to be intimate with somebody, but I have no sexual desire." So I think we have to be a little careful saying it is the strongest force in the universe. For some people, maybe. But what if you have none? Like you see somebody and you cannot experience them in that way.

We have to also put sexuality in terms of the dharma of relationships. Of course, you can have different types of sexuality and you can do different things, as long as it's harmless, but what about in terms of relationships? Here we're talking about in terms of being a partner, of being quite close with somebody. We are really talking about love and how we love each other with our mind, heart, and body. We are talking about how sexuality can enhance being together, feeling strongly together, and bringing pleasure to each other.

One thing to be careful of is that if we have a very intense experience, we might become self-centered. "This is for me." This is one of my experiences with sex—the feeling was so strong that I then thought to myself, "Wow, this is so pleasant!" And the other person disappeared in that ecstatic feeling. Experiencing that ecstatic

feeling is fine, but can you remember the other? When we share intimacy, when we share the body, we have to be careful with how we treat the other person. That is so important.

We also have to be careful of what I would call the tropes—the idea that if somebody does not want to have sex with me, it means they don't love me anymore. In reality, there are so many different circumstances. They might be tired, they might be ill, who knows, lots of things can happen. So we have to be careful of the perception we bring to the relationship and to sexuality itself.

Laura Bridgman: As you're talking, I'm reminded of another aspect of sexuality, which is the **element of vulnerability**. That quality of intimacy brings vulnerability. How are we with our vulnerability with another? What are our needs there? The practice of presence supports this sensitivity to these different areas we've been touching on, and it can really support the fullness and the delicacy of connection in sexually relating. Martine Batchelor is a former nun who studied in the Korean Zen tradition of Master Kusan for ten years. She is the translator of Kusan Sunim's *The Way of Korean Zen* (Weatherhill) and author of *The Spirit of the Buddha* (Yale University Press). She teaches several online courses with Tricycle, including: *Knowing How It Feels: Creatively Engaging with Habits* and *Reimagining the Eightfold Path*.

Laura Bridgman began meditating in her early teens and ordained as a Buddhist nun in 1995. She was resident at Amaravati and Chithurst monasteries under the guidance of her teachers Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Succito. Laura left the monastic tradition in 2015 and is now Staff Support Teacher at Gaia House, a retreat center in Devon, England. She has spent extended periods practicing with the Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya. She teaches multiple Tricycle online courses, including *Beyond the Inner Critic* and *The Dharma of Relationships*.