

When It Is Good To Be Bad

Medieval Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Apologetics

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When do you think it could be good to be bad? Had you met Hitler in a dark alley in Vienna in the 1920's, and been armed with infallible foresight, would it have been good to kill him, even though killing is otherwise bad?

By Isabelle Onians

This question is as apposite today as ever. By the time these words are published the concept of a pre-emptive strike may well have been pushed to its illogical limit as justification for invasion of a country which happens to encompass Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization. Not to mention that launching such an attack must rank highly as a cause for being attacked oneself.

Perhaps violence, for example, is more normal or normalized in some traditions than others. Yet to call an act normal is different from formulating the paradox that the abnormal is normal. Discussing various aspects of rules is not the same as envisaging a system which makes it the rule to break the rules: antinomianism as a norm.

Antinomianism comes in at least two forms: strong or weak. Weak antinomianism is permissive: one may do what is bad and nevertheless somehow remain not guilty. Strong antinomianism is normative: one is compelled to commit an offence, with the same impunity. Antinomianism as a norm is strong antinomianism: one is obliged to transgress.

From the beginnings of Buddhism, action has famously been defined as intention. It is not what you do, but the way that you do it, or why. That sounds like weak antinomianism. Provided one has the correct intention, slapping a child or ostracising an adult may be the best medicine. The corollary and, perhaps, the point is that coveting one's brother's wife is a crime, whether or not the seduction succeeds. When one has no choice but to be cruel, for someone's own good and that of others, then that is strong antinomianism.

For a Buddhist monk or a nun, however, rules and regulations are non-provisory. Their five fundamental precepts are equally binding for the laity: to refrain absolutely from killing, theft, sexual misbehaviour, lying, and intoxication by liquor. The single amendment for a monastic individual, or, temporarily, for a householder, is that the third is, effectively, the vow of sexual abstinence, *brahmacarya*.

Such are the rules which it must be the rule to break for us to have found our paradox. Logically impossible maybe, but that is precisely what Tantric Buddhism uses as self-definition. One scriptural verse is quoted countless times: what is a bond for fools – non-Tantrics – is the means to freedom from bondage for the wise – Tantric adepts.

Tantric Buddhism is notorious for this claim. The shock of first acquaintance with its practices has repeatedly discouraged modern inquirers, while the lure of forbidden pleasures has led many contemporary seekers to the religion, albeit in its radically bowdlerized present forms.

However, in medieval India and Tibet, between the eighth and eleventh centuries, when the ideas under consideration were undeniably gaining

institutional acceptance, who was shocked? What were the mores of Buddhists? Were they different from the ethics of proponents of other religions, and those in the secular world?

Before revealing one or two explicit examples of the normalized antinomianism we have so far only alluded to, the counter-intuitive data should be noted: the sheer volume of Victorian and modern vilification swamps the scarce evidence for attacks found in contemporary medieval sources.

Besides this remarkable imbalance, the tradition itself offers few deliberately theoretical apologetics. Given that Tantric Buddhists presented their system in powerfully paradoxical terms, this implies that they were conscious of the apparently bizarre nature of their practices. Were they not driven to make a reasoned defence against charges of moral delinquency, from within their own religion and without?

Tantric Buddhist authors were not overly concerned with apologetics, neither in the sense of regretfully excusing an offence or failure (to apologize), nor even in the paradigmatic sense of European texts offering ideological justification (apologias). Perhaps what was later labelled disgusting did not arouse such emotions at that time. Or, was the silence due to the absolute esotericism of the system?

Moreover, the obscure nature of this religion is, it should be noted, a real obstacle to any enquiry, including this. I have been threatened with what one might call the Valley of the Kings syndrome. In parallel to the torments explorers of Egyptian monumental tombs suffered last century, the study of Tantric texts is said to be potentially fatal, or lead, at the very least, to madness.

That is because their medicine is strong stuff, strong enough to be able to swiftly heal the entrenched ailment which is human suffering. Without the personality to withstand the treatment, disaster is inevitable. Only a teacher's consummate professional judgement can determine one's suitability. Without the guidance of a teacher, even reading the texts is firmly disallowed.

Accordingly, we will start where an aspirant to the religion would begin, with initiation, the point of transformation from being an outsider to belonging. The paradoxical employment of the afflictions (*klesas*) is ritualized in the second and third of the developed set of four initiations (*abhiṣekas*), found first in the eighth-century Guhyasamāja Yoga Tantra and then in all the Yoginī Tantras (Hevajratra et al.). The first initiation is a group of innocuous rites of preparation.

The second of the four is called the secret initiation (*guhyaḥṣeka*). This involves the teacher having sexual intercourse with a female consort. He places some of his semen on the student's tongue. The sources agree that the purification of speech is brought about by this act, the previous preliminary

package, with its provision of physical accoutrements, having purified the body.

The third is the wisdom-knowledge initiation (*prajñājñānābhiṣeka*). In it the student himself has intercourse with the consort. It is said in turn to purify the mind. The fourth is different, simply called the fourth (*catūrtha-*), and consists of an explanation by the teacher of the nature of reality (*tattva*).

Evidently these two erotic events would be out of bounds for a monk, whether as candidate for initiation or teacher. One can cast monastics in these roles because of the second sense in which this antinomianism is as a norm.

Early Tantric practitioners appear to have rejected general morality. However, the method definitely became institutionalized. By the tenth and eleventh centuries eminent abbots of great monastic universities in India and Tibet were high-ranked proponents of the Tantric Buddhist way. Ratnākaraśānti, Abhayākara Gupta, and Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna are well-known exponents of this phenomenon of the normalization of antinomianism, and sophisticated advocates for, even, the contravention of the rules of monastic discipline.

In the writings of these men are answers to our flurry of questions: what happens when candidate or initiating master is a monk? From where did the female partners come, and could they be initiated on their own behalves? And, perhaps most crucial of all, what earthly function are these sensual relations supposed to serve on the path to enlightenment? What kind of causal relationship can one imagine between oral insemination and sexual intercourse on the one hand, and transcendent liberation on the other?

While illicit pleasures need not be sufficient conditions for spiritual release, if they are not necessary conditions then why ever take the risk of indulging them? Some claimed that this was a specialised strategy for pulling the attainment of enlightenment into the time-frame of one's present life, for instance, instead of leaving *nirvāṇa*, the remote if not unattainable goal on offer in many traditions.

This is not the place to analyse the apologetic details found in the writings of establishment commentators: namely, whether the initiations are sine qua non for a Tantric enlightenment; if so, whether monks can properly enact them with a substitute mind-made, virtual, and hence virtuous, consort, rather than with an incriminating woman of flesh and blood; how exactly, in that case, it is that the initiations are necessary; the connection between ontology and ethics such that if the phenomenal world is the illusion Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy demonstrates it to be, then no harm is really done; but then again, if so, why perform the passionate charade in the first place; and so on.

Sex is not the only or main manifestation of the religion's antinomianism.

It happens to be in immediate conflict with monastic celibacy as well as, in the component of oral insemination, with wider Indian norms of purity. The fact that it figures at such an early stage in initiation is unlikely to be pure chance.

Abhayākara Gupta explains the importance of the union when he asserts that the third initiation must be taken for full entitlement to higher Tantric practice. He appeals to the standard authorities, scripture and reason, to prove that without having experienced the innate reality which is the bliss of non-duality one cannot go on to discuss it in the fourth initiation. If we were to follow through his unspoken argument, it would thus be impossible to direct post-initiatory practice towards the goal of realizing that reality.

However, in Tantric Buddhism we find that a whole plethora of antisocial practices, including killing and violence, are the natural complement to sex.

Already in Mahāyāna Buddhism, in the centuries before the rise of Tantric Buddhism, such activities were, in certain circumstances, permitted for the bodhisattva, because he was a new type whose motivation was broadened to include the spiritual well-being of everyone alive. If we meditate again on a hypothetical meeting with a young Hitler, the threefold question is whether a bodhisattva: 1) could get away with murder; 2) would carry out the deed, because that is the kind of man he is; or finally 3) should do so since to do otherwise would be wrong. This last is our strong antinomianism: not only is it good to be bad; it would be bad to be good.

In Tantric Buddhism a different, homeopathic principle is at stake. Homeopathy refers to a treatment of disease which should produce the disease's symptoms. However, unlike the twentieth century medical tradition, Tantric Buddhism does not distil its drugs until there is nothing but shadows remaining in the medicine.

The disease in Buddhism is 'ignorance without beginning', in tandem with the other afflictions, passion and aversion, and their subsidiaries, pride and jealousy. The central triad can be reformulated as 'yes, no, and don't know'. The overwhelming symptom of the sickness is suffering (*duḥkha*). Dissatisfaction may be a better translation, because it is caused by our 'ignorance without beginning' of the one inescapable fact of life: impermanence.

Scriptural verses from the Hevajratra insist that fitting similes for the mysterious workings of Tantric Buddhism are that it is like someone with flatulence eating beans, or the fuller who uses clay ('dirt') to clean cloth. Thus, passion, aversion, and ignorance have become their own antidote. <

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