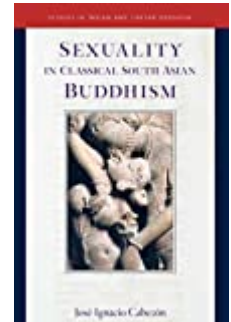


**Jose Ignacio Cabezon.** *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism (Studies in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism)*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2017. viii + 617 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61429-350-7.



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There was perhaps no better time for José Ignacio Cabezón's book, *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*, to appear. The year 2017, following the exposure of the widespread sexual-abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein, saw the sudden rise to fame of the *#MeToo* movement, an international effort to promote justice for those suffering various forms of sexual abuse. Since then, the need has been felt for informed discussions on themes such as sexual violence, sexual diversity, and sexual discrimination, to name but a few areas of concern related to gender and sexuality in general. Cabezón's work is carefully designed to provide historical background precisely on such issues relevant to contemporary international communities of scholars and followers of Buddhism. As a reference work, this book is set to remain a monument in the field for a long time. Though not totally virgin, as pioneering work had already begun with scholars like Bernard Faure and Janet Gyatso, for example, the field had not yet produced anything close to the towering and detailed 617-page-long overview presented here by Cabezón,

spanning classical genres of literature in three ancient Asian languages, Pāli, Sanskrit, and Tibetan. While Cabezón provides a broad overview of the rich perspectives on sexuality ancient Indian Buddhist texts offer, he rarely takes a definite position on contemporary debates. It is after all to be expected of a history manual that it will open doors to dialogue rather than close them. Hence Cabezón's book can be well integrated into broader discussions on ritual purity, ritual taxonomy, or even on Buddhist Madhyamaka, for example, as it provides textual evidence for a variety of hermeneutical strategies in matters of sex. The book is driven by the laudable conviction that "any serious study of Buddhism and sexuality must take the classical texts into account" (p. 5).

Upon opening the book, I found it rather unfortunate that the table of contents has been designed as a very minimalistic account of the whole work. Each of the eight chapters enumerated therein have numerous and meaningful subdivisions and it would have been most convenient, in the spirit of a reference book, to include them in

the table's listing to facilitate browsing. In an attempt to provide such an overview, this review will therefore present a broad sketch of the book's content while trying to make its subdivisions more apparent. I will focus my comments on a few exemplary issues while presenting the main topics in order, chapter after chapter. I must apologize in advance for the length it requires. My general concern here is to present to the reader an exhaustive, useful, and traceable overview of the wide coverage of literature and problematics assembled under Cabezón's praiseworthy title.

To anchor the Buddhist discourse on sexuality in the broad thought-paradigm of its plurimillennial tradition, Cabezón usefully begins his study with an exploration of the Buddhist cosmology of sex (chapter 1). He further divides the literature grouped in this section depending on whether the cosmological concerns of the texts are "temporal" or "spatial." Within the temporal passages, one finds myths recalling how human beings progressively fell from subtle to ever grosser bodily forms, how greed or craving (p. 22) for food allegedly bound humans to the earth and made them lose their natural luminescence while gaining in bad habits. In such literature, it is pleasure, and not procreation, that is the main purpose of sex (p. 32). Notions of romantic love are simply absent (p. 33). Spatial cosmological concerns discuss the various Buddhist realms of existence, including the realms of form, the higher realms, and the hells. Cabezón highlights the types of sexual activities conceived as taking place therein. We learn that higher spirits enjoy more refined types of sex (p. 38); that sexual misconduct is unknown in the form realm, while sexuality is totally absent from the realm of the formless gods onward. In brief, sexuality prevails only in the desire realms, where there is an implicit hierarchy, however, concerning whose sex is the best. Ages before the advent of the internet, for Buddhist cosmologists, the best sex was considered to be that which requires the fewest senses, the least effort, and the smallest amount of physical contact (p. 42). The discussion on the hells, as ex-

pected, is quite colorful, too. According to the *Smṛtyupasthāna*, for example, sex in hell is compulsive and thwarted. It ends in torture. Worst of all, it is repetitive and cyclical (pp. 47-48)! Sexual sinners are principally found in hot hell no. 3, "compression" or "crushing," and in hot hell no. 7, "really hot," the second worst of all hells (p. 48). There are various subhells suited for men who engage in different forms of misconduct, including oral and anal sex, the rape of women or of young boys, bestiality, and so on (p. 48); there are special hells for lustful monks as well (p. 49). The Great Lotus Hell (*mahāpadma*), for example, is the abode of the latter, along with homosexuals (p. 50). Men who seduce nuns (p. 55), monks who seduce lay women (p. 55), men who rape laywomen (p. 56), women who tempt monks (p. 56)—the book covers the karmic outcomes imagined for a complex typology. On the basis of this, Cabezón speculates that the rape of nuns must have been widespread (p. 63). He also posits a relation between the Buddhist hell literature and that of the *dharmasāstra*-s (p. 67). In conclusion, Cabezón stresses that the strangeness of the hell literature reflects the concerns of their likely authors: monks/men (p. 72). Most important, to recast such discussions within the monastic worldview in which they took place, Cabezón remarks that, in general, the Buddhist path functions to reverse the devolutionary momentum of history that is articulated by such cosmologies (p. 76), to transcend time and space and the cosmological-historical order altogether (p. 77). In other words, one should not be surprised to notice that Buddhist monasticism mirrors the imagined pure way of life of the first humans. We have here a telling illustration of the famous Eliadian ritual-effort at the reversal of time, supported by an implicit taxonomy of purity. Cabezón generally shies away from such theorization, however, as I will demonstrate further on.

The second chapter takes us to a broad discussion on desire and human sexuality according to Buddhist sources of a more psychological and philosophical bent. This section is perhaps the

most useful to frame the ideological underpinnings of Buddhist sexual theories in religious studies classes. Of crucial significance is the notion that the “function of desire” is to attach the mind to the object, binding or fastening it to the wished-for thing (p. 98). Cabezón highlights five recurring Buddhist views toward “desire”: 1) Sense desire occurs only when in contact with the beautiful or agreeable; (p. 101). 2) Desire involves the misrepresentation of the object; (p. 102). 3) When a mind predisposed to reifying objects experiences something as pleasurable, this causes the mind to dwell on the object or to “stick” to it, refusing to let go; (p. 104). 4) Desire leads to a compulsion to acquire the object so as to realize the pleasure that is thought to be associated with it; and (p. 104). 5) Desire is unable to bring lasting happiness (p. 105). The section moves on to discuss the widespread practice of prostitution in ancient India (pp. 106-114). Sexual desire and the sexual act then come into focus with Cabezón’s own attempt at formulating an encompassing Buddhist definition of “sexual desire.” In brief, “sexual desire is a yearning for bodily pleasure. It can either be self-directed (autoerotic) or directed at another. In the former case, it is yearning for or relishing of the pleasurable tactile sensation that results from self-stimulation of one’s own genitals. In the latter case, it is a yearning for and relishing of the pleasurable feelings that come from erotic flirting, nongenital tactile contact, or genital-tactile pleasure achieved in dependence on another” (p. 116). Sexual desire is always object directed (p. 124) and that object can be human, animal, or even a spirit (p. 124). The same, the opposite, or the third sex may be its object (p. 124), just as it may be a whole body or a part of it (p. 135). In itself, sexual pleasure is a mental state and is therefore nonphysical (p. 126). Cabezón then examines what the monastic code (*Vinaya*) has to say about sexual desire (pp. 132-138). Basically, if the act does not involve desire, it is not the type of sex that results in “defeat” (breaking one’s vows) (p. 138). The discussion moves on to examine what scholastic sources have to say about the

ancillary factors that contribute to sexual desire (pp. 138-141) and about sex and love (pp. 142-162). We learn that Buddhists shared with non-Buddhists the belief that marriage did not require love, and that as long as one was not violating conventional morality, there was nothing ignoble or unethical about having sex for the sheer pleasure of it (p. 145). Finally, Cabezón assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the Buddhist doctrine of sexual desire. According to him, its strength lies in considering that sex is for pleasure, allowing for a candid acknowledgement of the tremendous diversity of sexual desires (pp. 162-163). The simplicity and parsimony of the Buddhist theory also play in its favor in the eye of the author (p. 164). However, this simplicity has a downside (p. 165). The fact that all lust is seen as coming from sense perception is too simplistic for Cabezón, for whom it appears “narcissistic and genitally obsessed,” oblivious of any notion of “mutuality” (wanting to give pleasure to someone else) (p. 168). He nonetheless concedes that “it is hard to imagine someone really having sex apart from some kind of physical contact” (p. 167). On this last comment, one may observe that new developments in artificial intelligence may eventually trigger Cabezón’s imagination.

With chapter 3 we move into a general discussion on the function of monasticism and its methods in dealing with sexuality. Cabezón lists three types of interventions generally considered by Buddhist authors to deal with lust: 1) to take distance from the object of desire (p. 175); 2) to apply appropriate antidotes (pp. 175-177); 3) and, for the most advanced, to meditate on emptiness and no-self (p. 177). Moral discipline, concentration, and wisdom are then presented as complementary strategies for dealing with desire (p. 177-201), followed by a discussion on the difficulty of celibacy (pp. 201-206) and the alleged efficiency of monasticism in dealing with desire (pp. 207-219). This section also contains an interesting theoretical discussion on the relation between the *Vinaya* (as a legalistic ritual code) and Buddhist soteriology (pp.

195-200). Cabezón argues that “there is no reason not to see the Vinaya as operating *both* functionally/sociologically *and* soteriologically” (p. 198). While I agree with Cabezón, I believe that the argument could have been made stronger by involving ritual theories in the discussion, if only to illustrate how legalism, ritualism, and soteriology commonly work in tandem to anchor metaphysical beliefs in concrete communal experience. Yet, as noted already, Cabezón seldom ventures onto broader comparativist theories. The scope of the book being broad enough already, one can understand this theoretical stance. Yet I feel that, at times, a broader theoretical scope would have been possible without losing focus. A further theorization of the intersection of ritual norms and sexual taboos could be done, however, in the context of a religion class on Buddhist sexuality in South Asia.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to those practices which aim at curbing lust through meditation. Within this are listed practices that fight desire through contemplation (pp. 223-27) and those meditations which focus on the impurity of the body (pp. 227-236). As is to be expected of a literature produced by monks, the texts depicting such practices put greater emphasis on the foulness of the female body (p. 228). Interestingly, Cabezón explains that, because they fail to address the most fundamental cause of desire, that is, ignorance, these forms of meditation are “at most balms that bring temporary relief to the symptoms of desire” (pp. 238-239). Following a presentation of the synthetic treatment of such practices by the Tibetan author Potowa (pp. 239-241), the chapter concludes with a reflection on the general mentalist attitude of Buddhist authors toward desire. Cabezón stresses that further dialogue on desire between Buddhism and modern science, and especially with psychology, are a desideratum (p. 245), but he himself offers little in this respect but preliminary lines of inquiry summarizing his previous points.

Along with chapter 2, chapter 5 is perhaps most appealing to scholars versed in Buddhist philosophy. Its general thematic is the antidote of wisdom as a means to deconstruct sexual desire. The basic principle here is that the most fundamental cause of desire is delusion, “ignorance” (p. 250). Ignorance requires a firm and solid object to cling on to. It literally creates objects (p. 256). These mental fabrications require a thorough deconstruction, through analysis. Here comes a section on Nāgārjuna and his deconstruction of desire, stressing the therapeutic value of analysis (pp. 257-60). This section is followed by the deconstruction of desire in Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (pp. 260-263); by how *Madhyamaka* deconstruction eliminates desire (pp. 263-266); by how to theorize the emptiness of bodies and the reappropriation of beauty (pp. 266-273); by how *Mahāyāna* scriptures in general, and *Madhyamaka* in particular deal with sex and gender dichotomies (pp. 274-278); and finally, by what to do with Āryadeva’s deconstruction of the self through gender (pp. 278- 280). The last subsection is most fascinating, dealing with sex in the aftermath of wisdom, the *Mahāyāna* antinomianism and its control (pp. 280-296). Again, Cabezón formulates a general hermeneutic principle of broad significance, this time concerning the theorization and hierarchical classification of competing claims to authority coming from within Buddhism. “When we examine the Buddhist tradition as a whole, we find that what is proscribed by one law is often prescribed by another, higher law. Hence what is antinomian from the earlier Buddhist ethical perspective comes to be considered ‘pronomian’ from the perspective of a new *nomos*—in this case, the law of the *Mahāyāna*” (p. 286). One is here tempted to see this hermeneutic principle as another reflection of the most common hierarchical classification scheme found in South Asian philosophical doxographies: the latter truth expands the previous one. Pedagogy and rhetoric are here intertwined. Within this last section one also finds a brief reference to recent sex

scandals, but this angle is not deeply explored. (p. 292).

Sexed bodies, gender, and sexual desires take center stage in the sixth chapter. Here, again, Buddhist speculation is not homogeneous (p. 300). To launch the discussion, Cabezón presents an overview of the European and North American theoretical perspectives on these issues (pp. 300-305), followed by a discussion on gender in selected non-Buddhist literary genres (pp. 305-312), before getting deeper into the various degrees of the theorization of gender found in selected Buddhist sources (pp. 312-320). An interlude on the Buddha's sex ensues (pp. 320-326), moving on to a more sobering overview of gender norms from the treatment of celibacy in the Vinaya (pp. 326-333). Cabezón notes that the Vinaya's treatment of women's sexuality is highly androcentric (p. 329) and, that, when sexual norms are constructed negatively, the door is open for loopholes to be exploited (p. 333). The following subsection explains how the Buddhist tetralemma (*catuṣkoti*/fourfold negation) serves as an organizing principle grounding discussions on sex, gender, and desire (pp. 334-350). This discussion is meaningful for the wider practice of categorization within Mahāyāna Buddhism. Here, Cabezón also argues that a case can be made for a Buddhist acceptance of a third gender (p. 345). Then the Abhidharmika view on related topics is enunciated (pp. 350-360) prior to a discussion on the male and female faculties in the Pāli tradition (pp. 361-367). The chapter concludes on Buddhist theories concerning the role of sexual desire in conception and how sex and gender arise in fetuses (pp. 367-371).

Chapter 7 offers a detailed treatment of the Buddhist construction of sexual deviance. The overall focus here rests on queerness and queers (*paṇḍaka*-s). We are first introduced to a queer story from the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya (pp. 373-379) before proceeding to a discussion of the hypothesis that the chief purpose of the Buddhist typologies of queerness is the control of the sexual

“other” (pp. 379-385). An expose on sexual deviance and social marginalization in the broader social context of South Asia follows (pp. 385-389), and we learn that Buddhist texts never challenge Brahmanical literature in their denigration of queer people (p. 386). As an aside comes a brief but insightful discussion on lists in Buddhist literature (391-393). Then, the anti-queer rhetoric behind the ethical and cognitive denigration of *paṇḍaka*-s is made clear (pp. 389-391) before the chapter moves on to an enumeration of lists of bodies classified as queer found in various literatures: lists of queer people in the medical literature (pp. 393-403); queerness in the *Nārada Smṛti* (pp. 403-406); Pāli Buddhist lists (406-413); *saṇḍha*-s (impotent or castrated men) and their relationship to *paṇḍaka*-s (pp. 413-421); the Sanskrit *paṇḍaka* lists (pp. 422-432); and the five female *paṇḍaka*-s (pp. 433-441). According to Cabezón, the typology of male *paṇḍaka*-s allows us to deduce what it means to be a normal male (p. 431). Normative male sexual desire is, first and foremost, the desire to penetrate. As for normative women, they are those women who offer to men an “unambiguous, hospitable, and nonthreatening receptacle for the phallus” (p. 439). When it comes to discussing the neuter gender, Mahāyāna antinomianism, and Tantra (pp. 441-447), we are reminded that “nowhere do we find the slightest hint that a tantrika ever took (or could take) a person of the same sex as a partner in sexual yoga” (p. 446). In the last section of the chapter, on the end(s) of deviance (pp. 448-451), we read that taxonomies of queerness had a practical reason. The clergy needed to know whom not to ordain in order to avoid ill-repute (p. 446). However, Cabezón also alludes to the possibility that such theories betray deeper motives of social engineering—to create an ideal community cleansed of deviant bodies and abnormal sexual desires, for example. For this reason, he suggests that the time has come to challenge the assumptions behind these views. He benevolently recognizes that Mahāyāna Buddhism offers a fertile ground on which to elaborate such a “queer Buddhist theo-

logy” discourse (p. 447). Yet he does not take up the challenge of enunciating what such a discourse would look like. Unfortunately, Cabezón’s rather descriptive enunciation of Buddhist treatments of queerness does not make a full argument on its own—in favor of reforms for example—but leaves it short of a strong rallying point: a conclusion. This is perhaps better left to be done in the classroom or in conferences, in fact, using Cabezón’s book to facilitate otherwise difficult discussions. Cabezón’s caution is appreciated.

A quantity of queer details found in literature is not in itself an explanation for their meaning in human history, nor does it alone offer any reason as to why things *should* be different. Here again one feels that, in the context of a classroom, Cabezón’s arguments could be engaged further in dialogue with well-known theories in religious studies. In this case, I particularly suggest involving it with the kind of conceptual analysis of the notions of “pollution” and “taboo” found in Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* (1966). The advantage would be to sustain Cabezón’s considerations on the ritual context of these discriminative taxonomies of queerness. After all, Cabezón insists that the Buddhist ban against sexual minorities is an idea that belongs to the Vinaya (p. 451). This collection of texts, as we know, is primarily vested in legislating the collective performance of monastic rituals and routines, telling what to do and what not to, in different contexts built out of narratives. When it comes to their ban on deviant bodies and abnormal desires among the members of the Buddhist monastic community, one may insightfully draw parallels with Douglas’s general law about clean and unclean meats in *Leviticus*, wherein, as a rule, hybrids and other confusions are abominated. “To be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind,” she observes, while pointing out that dietary rules merely adapt the metaphor of holiness, that is, not being “mixed up” or “confused,” both being signs of decay and perversion.[1] She later adds that “those species are

unclean which are imperfect members of their class.”[2] In other words, in many known ritualist mindsets, strange crossovers, mixtures, and similar hybridizations of preestablished categories set in scriptures are ritually unclean and improper for holy life. If the ideological principles at play behind ingrained hygienic views are, as Douglas suggests, derived from ancient myths and ritual customs in order to micro-legislate the behaviors of entire communities, even up to their minute dietary habits, the same likely holds true when it comes to other hygienic concerns, such as those related to sexuality. Integrity of form, or conformism, is a prime ritual concern in human cultures worldwide. It tends to reverberate in diverse metaphysics as well as in politics. Read in the context of ritual taboo, the Vinaya ban on queerness and abnormality reveals a common human attitude towards impurity and dirt, a mindset in tune with deep psychological habits of severe consequences in the social environment of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. If these habits were to be acknowledged for what the theoretical study of religion allows us to see them as, as expressions of taboos—perhaps the equivalent of “mental formations” (*saṃskāra*-s) in theoretical Buddhism—for example, grounded in cultural notions of ritual purity, then Mahāyāna Buddhism could indeed, as Cabezón suggests, offer a fertile ground for their refutation, through an analytical contemplation of a Nāgārjunian kind, for example. However, once undertaken, it is likely that this same analytical criticism eventually leads to a much broader reform than a “queer Buddhist theology.” For, since a renewed perspective on “gender,” “hybridity,” and “normativity” would unavoidably affect the entire taxonomy of Buddhism, and since taxonomy is so intimately related to ritual practice, such a theoretical shift, even if it appears to deal only in abstract categories, would reverberate throughout the “reformed” Buddhist church, in deed and creed. In other words, while it is conceivable to imagine a pro-queer reform of Buddhism, it is impossible to predict how this reformed religion will develop in the

future. The general caution of Cabezón, felt throughout the book, is thus again warranted. If a queer Buddhist theology takes roots, would Buddhism be the same or different? What would Nāgārjuna say?

The final chapter of Cabezón's book is dedicated to Buddhist sexual ethics and the evolution of views on sexual misconduct. Michel Foucault's theories on the power dynamics at play behind Western shifts of discourses on sexuality are introduced herein. Cabezón wonders whether similar shifts in discourses can be noticed in India. This section "traces the evolution of the doctrine of sexual misconduct from the Pāli sources through a sampling of Indian Sanskrit works down to the writings of Tibetan scholars" (p. 456). It is subdivided as follows: lay sexual ethics in the Pāli *Suttas* and *Jātakas* (pp. 456-470); wives and their classification (pp. 471-485); Indian scholastic literature on sexual misconduct (pp. 485-508); the Tibetan sources (pp. 508-519); and the conclusion: Buddhist sexual ethics then and now (pp. 519-528). In summary, Cabezón concludes that it is the Sanskrit scholastic tradition that is principally responsible for the more restrictive sexual ethic that became standard in later Indian and Tibetan Buddhism (p. 508). Among the Tibetan sources, the most complete and systematic treatment comes from Tsongkhapa's *Lam Rim Chenmo* (p. 510).

Can Cabezón's book be easily introduced in the context of a standard academic course on religion or Buddhism? It undoubtedly can and should. For the study of religion, it provides ample materials to illustrate the significance of symbolic taxonomies in defining ritual and social norms, for example. The style of the work as well as its main topics are accessible even to nonspecialists. As I hope to have made clear, the scope of this research is of the same magnitude as its academic significance. Once more, José Ignacio Cabezón has both enriched and indebted his field.

Notes

[1]. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 55.

[2]. *Ibid.*, 66.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

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