

Mind The Bollocks

*Pornography As Allegory For
Enlightenment*

By Thomas Buckley-Houston

*Wait: first, are you tired, hungry or about to start your
period?*

— Shelley Anon

*Dedicated to all those that make it to the coal face of the
cushion.*

Preface

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Another Day At The Office

Another Day At The Office was a story us commuters had heard a million times already. Before we even saw the train we had moved closer to the platform's edge. Over, what felt like aeons, we had learnt, Pavlovian-like, to filter the subtlety of iron track squeak from the cacophony of the city. As the decelerating carriages solemnly approached, one of our nameless family of about a dozen, unknowingly dropped her light blue cardigan. Slightly unnerved by the break in routine, but convicted of the task at hand, I reached down to pick it up.

"Excuse me!", I chirped. The owner, a well-presented young women, turned round and saw me holding up her garment. I was surprised by its softness, maybe it was cashmere.

"Oh thank you!", she said with a bright smile. As we got on the 8.44 from Clifton Down Station to Bristol Temple Meads she turned right and I turned left so as not to make her, or rather me, uncomfortable for the duration of the journey. For months, or was it years afterwards, my heart would race every time I saw her. It was as if I had been injected with stimulants. I was sure she noticed. If she was within two seats distance I would gulp continuously thinking about being part of her world.

Then one day, quite naturally by the laws of empty seats, we were sat next to each other. At first we didn't say anything. I pretended everything was normal and strained all my resources not to swallow every other second. My posture felt strange, is this how I normally sit?

The train often had to park for a few minutes between Montpelier and Stapleton Road stations. It's not so boring if you have a window seat on the right side because the track is raised and you can gaze over a vast swathe of the city. Today we were even being treated to winter's morning sun painting postcards with the clouds and urban skyline. I could just about make out a huge, soft red ray bursting behind a cumulonimbus, which in turn silhouetted St. Werbergh's Church. I wanted to take in more of it, but that would mean rudely staring across Cashmere Lady sat by the window next to me.

Her smell. I closed my eyes for a second. It reminded me of friends excitedly turning up to your dinner party with cake and wine. I imagined sitting next to her at the table with our fingers woven together on her lap, where no one can see.

A voice came over the tannoy, "Good morning ladies and gentlemen, unfortunately there's been an incident on the main intercity line ahead. Please be advised that we could be delayed for another 25 minutes. Arriva Trains apologises for the inconvenience."

"Oh dear, I hope I don't miss my connection", announced Cashmere Lady to no one in particular. Though clearly I, more than anyone, now had the opportunity of addressing her. This wasn't the first time I'd heard her say more than 'thank you'. I would sometimes overhear her catching up with a friend that got on at the stop after us. She was well spoken and attentive. "Good parenting", I'd think to myself. I wouldn't be surprised if she had a

degree with first class honours from a top university.

To be honest though, my attraction seemed to be based more on the tenuous connection we had over her dropped jumper than it did with any particular outstanding characteristic. No doubt my imagination was triggered by the countless love stories I'd consumed in my lifetime. The *Excuse Me Madame You've Dropped This Object* trope can only lead to the *Happily Ever After* cliché. I'd compulsively fantasise about where the next chapter would lead. Perhaps regaling our children with it.

"Did you meet mummy at the park as well?", my daughter would ask.

"No, we met on a train. She dropped her jumper as she was getting on and I picked it up for her, so she didn't lose it."

"Which jumper?"

"I don't think she has it anymore."

"And then she kissed you?"

"No." I'd reply with a laugh. "We talked on the train everyday for a while until we were friends. Then we did other things together like going for walks."

"And then she kissed you?"

"Yes, then she kissed me." I'd say with a smile.

But now it was real. Rather abruptly I needed to come out of the fantasy and actually talk to her. What if I'd wasted all those hours in my head planning what it was going to be like, when in actual fact she didn't even like me? Or what if she does like me and I say something that doesn't fit into the story that we're going to tell our progeny? This might be our first conversation, I want her to have a good impression of me. What my beating chest wanted to say was, "I desperately want you to love me", but instead I said with an unnecessary hint of urgency,

"Oh what time's that?"

"The 9.14 to Cardiff."

"Hmm, that is cutting it a bit fine. Will you be in trouble if you have to get the one after that?"

"I better let my boss know", she said whilst reaching for her smartphone.

I was in a similar position, I needed the 9.18 to Bath Spa, so I too reached for my glaring screen.

For a while we made small talk about the weather and the price of tickets. It was easy and unstrained. We never mentioned the jumper. I was slightly self-conscious of other members of our commuter family within ear shot listening intently as if it were the opening scene of a romantic film.

Our train eventually moved on and we arrived at our destination.

"Nice to meet you", I said.

"You too. See you tomorrow I hope", she replied making steady eye contact with me.

I nodded. "Have a nice day at work. Bye." I was grinning at full volume.

Within just a few days of train dates I felt comfortable enough to ask her out for dinner. She said yes and we exchanged numbers. It was all just too perfect. In fact so much so that it worried me slightly. If she was the Cinderella to my Happily Ever After then it fit

the narrative better if the stations of our courtship were further apart. What if she was taking me for a ride? Or what if this was just my hormones conducting the schedule? I had the uneasy feeling that there was something else I should be considering, but I was too caught up in the excitement to give it a second thought.

Being commuters from the same station, the restaurant we met at was just a five minute walk away. It was one of those organic, local produce places with a friendly, rustic vibe. My attire was not that different from my work clothes, but Cashmere Lady had gone for something way more elegant than she'd ever worn to work.

Over the main course we talked about our life's dreams.

"Yeah the money in computers is great, but it's not really my passion." I was trying hard not to look at her dress. It fit her well. It was shades of yellow and cut simply and elegantly, it reminded me of Spain.

"Oh what's your passion then?"

"Well I'm really into meditation and I've got a degree in Religious Studies. I focussed on Eastern Philosophy." When mentioning my degree I always feel the need to add a little extra info, like the 'Eastern Philosophy' clarification. Too many times people jump to the conclusion that I'm a 'man of the cloth'.

"How interesting", she replied as her eyes widened. "But they're quite different worlds, meditation and computers, how did that happen?"

"Well my father was a programmer, so that's always been something that I've had an ability for. In fact I was really interested in science in general when I was a teenager, I thought I'd grow up to solve the Grand Unified Theory." I chuckled to myself. "So I left school and went straight into a physics-based degree, but, uh, unfortunately it didn't work out. I got scarily ill and quit. In hindsight I think it was depression."

"Oh", my new friend half-whispered.

"So then I spent the next two or three years unemployed, taking drugs and playing in bands." I was hoping to impress upon her that I was 'edgy' and not just a spiritual do-gooder, but she had the same intent expression as before. "So it was amongst all of that depression stuff —drugs and lack of direction— that I started meditating. Funnily though, I did it in secret. I still saw myself as a sort of scientist type and didn't want anyone thinking I'd gone all soft and hippy dippy." I chortled again to myself, throwing my head back a little. I got a bit of a laugh back.

"So when did you talk to anyone about it?" she replied with a frown and tilt of the head.

"After about nine months!" I exclaimed. "I was living with my girlfriend from that time, so I couldn't keep it from her forever."

"Wow", came the reply with raised eyebrows.

"I know. It seems silly now when I look back. It was like I was still a scientist, running controlled experiments. I needed conclusive high sigma, primary source evidence that it was making a difference in my life." I paused for a moment. "But anyway, the 'lab reports' were consistently coming back positive, so I persevered. In fact I've had an unwavering daily practice ever since." I loved telling her these details and that she listened so attentively. "Good parenting", I thought. "So it was with my science background and my

new-found interest in spirituality that I signed up for Religious Studies, it seemed like the perfect mix of cold, hard academia and soft, warm humanity." She shifted in her seat and her knee brushed against mine. I suddenly became aware she had a body and I wanted to finish my little story. "But the reality is there aren't many employers looking for Religious Studies degrees so I just started paying my rent with little computer jobs and my career took off from there."

"I know what you mean." She sighed. "So what would be your dream job?"

"I have this fantasy of being a well-known writer." I had a genuine smile when I answered, but half held it back. It felt like I'd admitted to wanting to be a rock star.

I was aching to kiss her. To completely wrap myself in her. After we left I asked if she'd like to come back to mine. She agreed as if she knew it was the plan all along. Again I was happy but slightly anxious about the inevitability of it all. Is this real? But it's useless, I don't care anymore, a little indulgence is okay now and then.

We're sat on my sofa drinking tea and it's all starting to make sense. She wants me and I want her. Our knees are touching and we both know it. As I gaze at her I notice the sun setting out my window across the city. She leans over me to set her cup down and sits back so her legs and arms are touching mine. She's intoxicatingly beautiful. I glance at her lips. After she dropped her jumper this was always meant to happen. This is what it's all been building up to. I lean in to kiss her and my entire body and mind explode with chemicals. There is nothing else in the universe now.

Blood flows to my genitals. It's all too much, like the first drop of a rollercoaster is all too much. I feel her hands on my face. It's perfect, everything is perfect. I put my hand on her knee below her hemline and just as I begin to move slowly up her undressed thigh I hear an old man cough.

As unexpected as the cough is, I instantly recall the source. I don't know his name but I've been sat next to him for the last 48 hours or so. He is, like me, on a seven day silent meditation retreat. In the same instant I remember what it was I should have been considering during my detailed fantasy episode — my breath. But inhalation followed by, you guessed it, exhalation, is a story I've read a million times already. I had heard the faint siren call of a train of thought promising more. As seems to happen every day, Pavlovian-like, I don't even remember how I boarded.

Yasodharā

[The entire history of Buddhism but all genders are switched. Yasodharā is the name of the Buddha's wife who he had a child with and abandoned in the search of Enlightenment.]

About two and half thousand years ago, in the dimly lit bedroom of a home in Kapilavatthu, the capital of the Sakiyan region of North India, a young woman reaches for the warm, naked knee of her husband. Even after all these years of marriage her husband's breath quickens. She kisses him softly as her fingertips reach slowly up his thigh. The nearer her hands get to his genitals the tighter he squeezes his eyes. Gently, she begins to stroke and cup his bollocks. His sack is soft and warm. She recollects her husband's stern and unreserved dressing down of the neighbouring village's councillors earlier that day. It was the climax of a months-long dispute over land rights. The thrill of holding this man's power and vulnerability in her hands sends tiny, ecstatic convulsions through her groin. She moves in closer to bring her body directly in contact with his erection. Little did she know that also within her hands that night was the spermatozoa and in her belly the egg, that would, amongst throes of pleasure, unite to found a global religion crossing diverse cultures and spanning millennia.

...

Ends with gender-changed version of Pema Chodron's visualisation of everyone being female at the conference with the Dalai Lama.

Rule #34

I'd always been vaguely aware that Buddhism has a far higher proportion of prominent male figures than female, but at first I was too concerned with my own imbalances to give it much thought. It wasn't until some five or so years after my introduction to meditation that I was forced to seriously chew over gender in Buddhism. It was during a summer I spent at Chithurst Theravada monastery in England. I was having something of a breakdown and the monastics there, both men and women, were a huge support. Having got to know some of them well it suddenly became personal, rather than anecdotal, to see senior nuns, whom I deeply admired, queuing behind the most junior monks at lunchtime. It was a sobering cough of awareness jolting me back to reality.

As Rita Gross says in *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, "patriarchy is suffering". For most Buddhists, and even casual admirers alike, I suspect this is a difficult statement to acknowledge. Buddhism is two and half thousand years old, surely it's had ample time to put its internal affairs in order? It is true that Gotama, for his time, was certainly progressive in his attitude towards women, allowing an order of nuns to form for example. There is even a matriarchal lineage still in existence today throughout China and Korea, known as the Dharmaguptaka school. However the overriding historical records reveal a religion that is at worst misogynistic and at best male-centric. For instance the following doctrine echoes a sentiment shared by many Mahayana schools;

Completely perfected Buddhas are not women. And why? Precisely because a bodhisattva, from the time he has passed beyond the first incalculable age (of his career) had completely abandoned the woman's estate (stribhavam). Ascending (thereafter) to the most excellent throne of enlightenment, he is never again reborn as a woman. All women are by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence. And not by one who is full of defilement and of weak intelligence is completely perfected Buddhahood attained.

Such unapologetic misogyny is fortunately not ubiquitous, though it is not an edge case either. The reality is, in the words of Gross, that;

most of the things that will make feminists most uncomfortable with traditional Buddhism stem from its androcentrism [male centrism], which is assumed, unquestioned, and deeply held in all periods of Buddhist history and in all traditional Buddhist settings.

My day dream about Cashmere Lady only had its power, and therefore ability to soothe the immediate discomfort of my body and soul, because she was perfect. She didn't challenge me. I was in control of 'reality' so I could tweak it to suit me. With a fantasy, we

start with the assumption that the object of admiration is flawless and from there manipulate everything else to balance the algebra of believability. This is what I think the West, if it is possible to so neatly categorise such a culture, has done with its translation and interpretation of Buddhism.

As a Westerner myself I experience first-hand the colourful mixing pot of bright achievements and dark failures my culture is responsible for. I resonate and therefore sympathise, with those who, in their desire to face our collective shadows, gaze eastward with rose-tinted romance at exotic spiritual philosophies. The grass is always greener on the other side, as they say. However, as Damien Keown argues in *Buddhist Ethics: A Critique*, our rose-tinted spectacles do more than distort our perception of Buddhist gender equality;

Buddhism is depicted as holding 'enlightened' views on any number of contemporary issues, when these have hardly been mentioned in traditional sources, or the evidence is ambiguous or even points in the opposite direction. Thus Buddhism is depicted as eco-friendly, a defender of individual rights, strongly anti-war, 'pro-choice' and tolerant of same-sex relationships, in a manner that coincides neatly with modern and liberal agendas.

Both Keown and Gross are supporters of Buddhism and certainly do not seek to completely dismiss it. They don't attempt to justify what David Chapman, in his web series *Consensus Buddhism* (TODO: cite), describes as "medieval ethics" — they simply want to understand and bring attention to it. The conclusion is, unsurprisingly, that Buddhism is inextricably embedded in the cultures that support it. Just as the West filters Buddhism through the lens of modern human rights, so too did ancient Asian societies shape Buddhism in the reflection of the unquestioned norms of male dominance. I don't think it's hard to imagine the social mechanics that lead to the osmosis between a religion and its host population. However, what I *do* find hard to imagine, or rather stomach, is the level of cognitive dissonance that must have existed, and still exists, in Buddhist's minds to maintain the lofty rhetoric of enlightenment, the English speaking world's translation for terms such as nirvana, buddhahood and bodhi. It's bad enough for a feudal society or a modern office culture to perpetuate gender bias, but it's something else for a belief system that takes great pains to assert the existence, and the path thereto, of a "perfect, undefiled, boundlessly compassionate mind" (TODO: find best example), to do so.

Although it may ostensibly seem that male-bias only affects half of us, it is of course symptomatic of a more fundamental and far-reaching problem impacting both genders. The lack of prominent Buddhist female figures is merely the most conspicuous of the symptoms -- you don't even need to read a single text, modern or ancient, to notice the prevalence of male Buddhists in the media. Although I doubt the deeper, underlying issue can easily be isolated and defined, I have few doubts that enlightenment can be isolated as one of the most celebrated and defining characteristics of Buddhism's identity. How unlikely, or rather how convenient would it be, if enlightenment didn't suffer from the

same inability-to-realise-in-practice, as that of kindness to all living beings? Unfortunately it's next to impossible to answer this question as the nature of enlightenment is buried deep in passionate, frequently disparaging and seemingly endless debate. A fact I am surely guilty of perpetuating here. However, I believe it's fairly safe to say that, although many do have clear ideas about what exactly enlightenment is, there is far from any useful universal consensus. The combination of centrality to Buddhist identity and nebulous definition is a worrying partnership. I can't help but think enlightenment is the perfect hiding place for deeper, if not the deepest, failures of ethics.

Gross reminds us that Gotama's decision to allow an order of nuns is the only recorded instance of him changing his mind (TODO). It's a refreshingly sober and human view of a person so often depicted as beyond human. For me this is the first chink of light illuminating a more sober and human understanding of enlightenment. Gotama engaged in conversation, he wasn't just a set of preexisting rules, he responded to the specifics of circumstance. Even today, the gender conversation continues, responding with various levels of success and failure to circumstance.

A few years after my stay at Chithurst monastery the nun community disbanded amongst what I can only imagine was much drama and heartache. Knowing some of the monks there, I have no doubts they would have sincerely engaged with the nuns and would have been deeply hurt by the outcome. It reminds me of when Tezin Palmo expressed the lack of support for female Tibetan nuns at a conference for Western teachers in 1996 (TODO), making the Dalai Lama cry in response. Buddhism's stance on women may still be outdated for the West, but it's certainly not stagnant. Indeed, on a more progressive note, Ajahn Amaro the abbot of TODO monastery in Australia responded more boldly to the nun community in 2008 (TODO). He allowed the full ordination of women, but at a huge cost, their monastery was excommunicated (TODO: cite). The most positive changes have been seen in Western Zen, which has the honour of being the first school to fully ordain and accept female Zen priests as bonafide lineage holders.

My hope from this embryonic progress made on gender is that similar developments may one day be made on enlightenment. However, I appreciate that due to its deeper ties to Buddhism's identity and its conceptual inaccessibility, progress is far further on the horizon. Nevertheless this doesn't mean the topic isn't being hotly debated today. Most prominent amongst the voices is Stephen Batchelor, a former Zen and Tibetan monk, who now explores and advocates a form of secular Buddhism.

In *After Buddhism: Rethinking The Dharma For A Secular Age*, Batchelor argues that subsequent generations of Buddhists normalised the novelty of Gotama's teachings to make them more accessible and therefore more 'sellable' amongst the milieu of competing spiritual institutions. This is the same osmosis of cultural embeddedness highlighted by Gross and Keown. For instance Brahmanism, the biggest competitor, had a comprehensive description of existence, from the origin of the universe to how a pantheon of gods were responsible for the ups and downs of life on earth. Gotama's voice in the earliest texts is frequently explicit about not being drawn into statements on the nature of reality, yet later Buddhism succumbs to advertising precisely those kinds of claims.

Most Buddhists will know the story told by Gotama of the person wounded by an arrow. Traditionally the victim is male, but let us consider them female for the sake of intellectual curiosity. Gotama says that this woman refuses to have the arrow removed until she knows the name of the person who shot it, from what wood the shaft is constructed and from which bird the feathers were made. This of course seems ridiculous, and so as Gotama concludes -- she can pontificate on abstract truths all she likes, but meanwhile there are concrete tasks at hand able to make her life immediately more comfortable

Yet it's often hard to hear this sentiment elsewhere in Buddhism. Instead there's a 'selling out' of Gotama's pragmatism to follow suite with the prevailing culture of 'describing the arrow'. This is most evident in the common translation of the Four Noble Truths;

This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood...

This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned...

This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized...

This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed.

At first glance this seems to be a set of truth statements, like you might find in science. Yet on closer inspection it's clear that there is a grammatical ambiguity. Take the second sentence for example, are we really supposed to abandon the whole noble truth itself? Or, more plausible, are we to abandon 'the origin of suffering'? This has led some scholars to believe that *ariya-saccam*, the Pali term that gets translated to 'noble truth', was not present in the earliest versions of the Buddhist canon. As Batchelor suggests,

This is tantamount to saying that what is widely regarded as the fundamental doctrine of Buddhism was grafted onto preexistent teachings.

This leads Batchelor to reformulate the Four Noble Truths as the Four Tasks. Gotama then becomes less a keeper of exceptional spiritual knowledge and more a figure of committed spiritual practice. The cessation of suffering --therefore nirvana or enlightenment-- then loses its binary status of either being realised or not. Buddhism becomes not the custodian of an exotic, faraway dimension where suffering is completely eliminated, but the provider of a set of tools that anybody can benefit from at anytime. With these tools we're capable of temporarily suspending our habitual reactivity to suffering, offering us the freedom to respond to the difficulties of life less influenced by the short-sighted and superficial agendas of self-interest, fear and boredom. This makes nirvana more like a verb than a noun — a prescription of tasks to be *engaged with* not a description of statements to be *believed in*.

This puts enlightenment in the ballpark of the cough that awakened me from my fantasy on retreat. The tasks I was engaged in optimised the possibility of stepping into the cold shower of my suffering in order to hear and *understand* it. Suffering, that foremost

ambassador and messenger for reality, knocks patiently and consistently only *abandoning* its post once we have heard and *realised* its message. Just as reality is not something that will only visit once in our entire lives, so too will the ambassador be a regular messenger. Therefore our relationship with them is one to be endlessly *developed*.

Unfortunately Batchelor's views are far from being widely accepted. The most common criticism being that he dismisses those aspects of Buddhism he finds unpalatable to suit his own personal beliefs. As B. Alan Wallace argues;

Rather than presenting Buddhism without beliefs, his version is saturated with his own beliefs, many of them based upon nothing more than his own imagination.

The implication being that by picking and choosing the parts that suit him, Batchelor is unable to generate the necessary spiritual discipline to penetrate the intended meaning of Buddhist teachings.

I'm not qualified to contribute to this debate at the level of Batchelor and Wallace. I've never been a monk like them, nor studied the texts as they have. I don't even like calling myself a Buddhist. My only credentials are that I consider Buddhism and perhaps more importantly, Buddhist practitioners, to have helped change my life. I am both deeply sceptical and deeply indebted to Buddhism. So even though I'm reluctant to identify as Buddhist, whatever it is in Buddhism that has helped me I sincerely want to see continue in the world. Whether that deserves the adjective 'Buddhist' or not.

However, what I am embarrassingly qualified to talk about are my well-developed habits of fantasy and denial. Is it so hard to accept that these habits might also exist in fully-fledged Buddhists, both historical and living? If it's not that hard to imagine, then perhaps I can demonstrate a possible mechanism for the way in which the accessibility of personal transformation gets distorted into the inaccessibility of enlightenment. As the primary symbol for this I will use pornography. There are three main reasons. Firstly, it is the only other subject which comes close to being as difficult to share as that inner dialogue I am most intimate with when I meditate. Secondly, it has illuminating symmetry with Buddhism's male bias. And thirdly, because sex sells -- which is at once both an admission to a cheapening of my argument whilst simultaneously being an example of the very tactic I seek to explore.

'Sexing up' is such a prevalent habit of humans that it actually exists enshrined as an ostensibly cynical, but I think rather perceptive rule in Internet folklore. Amongst geeks like myself it is commonly known as Rule #34. It states,

There exists porn of it. No exceptions. (TODO: cite)

At first glance this would seem to be an off the cuff reference to the sheer volume of mainstream pornography that is known to make up the majority of all known Internet traffic (TODO: cite). Considering the volume of non-pornographic traffic and that porn accumulates to more than that, then that gives you some idea of the number of possible

permutations for potential porn scenes. But can that also literally represent the sum of all conceivable porn? Not without a slightly broader definition of 'pornography'.

The term 'porn', especially on the Internet, has come to take on a meaning beyond sexuality. For instance, 'space porn' is not the act of having intercourse at an altitude above Low Earth Orbit, but rather refers to something like; the gratuitous and unadulterated depiction of the sublime and other-worldly beauty of the cosmos. Although a book or website of space photography may not self-consciously describe itself as pornographic, a consumer may become absorbed in a state of obsessive and perhaps inflated reverence characteristic of traditional pornographic usage.

Another example could be our fascination with the lives of others through social media. It doesn't take much imagination to see the pornographic echoes in the salacious, voyeuristic delight of beholding the objectified private lives of our friends.

Even my morning anxieties walking to the train station have a 'pornographic' quality. I don't like my job, so no expense is spared hiring the film crew of my mind to record all the juiciest possible scenes depicting the effect my career choices will have on my life. I'll argue with my boss and he'll fire me. My boss will see that I'm not working hard enough and he'll fire me. I'll be too depressed and my friends won't want to hang around me. I'll be old and I'll still dislike my job. My unfulfilling job is a manifestation of the ills of society and I won't be happy until society itself changes.

As far as I'm concerned Rule #34 is more a statement about the nature of the mind itself than it is about the ubiquity of mainstream pornography. The brain is nothing but our personal story writer bent on satisfying our every narrative desire. That's just what it does. Thinking otherwise is just another tailored fantasy novella conjured up in its ever-burning engine room. To paraphrase the late Terry Pratchett, it's fantasies all the way down.

So with this broader definition of 'porn' and assuming Rule #34 has some basis in reality, then let us entertain the idea that Enlightenment, when stripped of the distortions caused by its cultural embeddedness, resembles a kind of Spiritual Transformation porn. We're all familiar with the sexual arms race modern media-conscious corporations pursue in order to market their products. Do purveyors of Enlightenment such as Buddhism also straddle the boundaries of social acceptability in search of increasingly provocative images to catch our attention? Sex, the traditional subject of porn, is a natural and mostly beautiful human activity. The same could be said for the beliefs and practices that Buddhism promotes. There is nothing intrinsically problematic in entertaining the possibility of life-changing spiritual transformation *_per se_*. However, when the representations of either sexual acts or mental states start losing their grip on everyday reality, then we have a problem.

As a general rule women don't expect the climax of sex to be the 'money shot' of the man ejaculating on her face, yet if porn is anything to go by it's the most common way for a man to finish. What's more, I suspect, at least in my experience, is that this practice is rarely discussed amongst normal, sexually active couples. It is after all a profound act of male dominance, not mutual pleasure. Unspoken and thus unexplored, it preserves its

function as a hook back into pornography. What if Buddhism's prized climax of Enlightenment serves a similar purpose? It is as absent from everyday life as men ejaculating on women's faces and it is most visibly enshrined as an unapologetic male gang of Enlightened lineage holders. Perhaps Enlightenment is largely ignored by normal, ethically active people because it is after all an aggressive symbol of spiritual dominance? Only Buddhism satisfies our fantasy of reaching a canonically sanctioned and hierarchically honoured state of spiritual superiority over others.

This is of course more hyperbole, or rhetoric porn. I'm dressing up my argument to be as provocative as possible because sex sells. Or more prosaically, the unrealistic exaggeration of a filtered subset of the more digestible aspects of a subject such that it can be conceptually possessed and consumed with little to no thought, sells. The porn industry, Buddhist institutions and me as the author need their money shots to get more viewers, adherents and kudos. I know how the game works. I break the usual routine of traditional spiritual narrative by dropping a metaphorical jumper of controversy and you're hooked, whether in solidarity or outrage. There really is porn of it, no exceptions.

Fucked

The faint whistle of a distant train outside reminds me I'm not going anywhere.

For the second time I wonder if it's the moment to open my eyes. I'm unusually relaxed and concentrated, but the thought of talking to my psychotherapist sat opposite me is not a comfortable one -- even though this is the therapist I've got on with best over the last three years. She meditates too, so at the beginning of each session we sit together in silence. It's left to me to decide for how long.

My breath is slow and steady. Giving it my attention makes me feel like I'm sat by the fire at Christmas.

Surely I should open my eyes now?

My mind is arrested by a girl in the throes of sexual pleasure. The way it hooks so forcefully onto my desires only reminds me of a distant sense of anger and loneliness I can't quite fully feel. It's the same girl from last night. Probably in her early twenties, short hair, innocent and horny. She'd come round on the pretense of a photoshoot. She was shy at first and genuinely seemed unaware of the photographer's ulterior motives. He requested her stand in different poses with decreasing amounts of clothing. Eventually he asked if she'd like to remove her bra. She wasn't sure.

I don't know how much porn I've watched compared to other people because it's not something I, nor my friends, seem to talk about. But to me it feels like a lot. Over the last twenty or so years, I've seen enough that most scenes fail to register any kind of emotional response, whether disgust or arousal. However, there was something about the girl in the photoshoot that felt less contrived than normal. This is after all what I look for.

I don't just type "porn" into Google. Firstly, without the prophylactic protection of an 'ad blocker' I open myself up to a myriad of popups, popunders, trackers, spyware and other exotic digital parasites. Standards are lower on the porn side of the Net because no one complains for fear of publicising their guilty habits. Next I switch my browser to 'Incognito mode', a kind of sandbox that erases all traces of activity once I leave. This avoids the embarrassment of when your friend borrows your computer, starts typing, "hotmail.com" and gets a dropdown list of suggestions for "hot xxx", "hot sluts", "hot justin bieber pics", etc. Finally I navigate to some sites I know where porn is curated by other porn users. I tend to find their suggestions more interesting because their agendas are enjoying porn not selling it.

If she was just an actor, then she was a good one, because I could sense her thinking about whether she should remove her bra. When she did carefully remove it, it was as if it was the first time she'd ever stood naked in front of anyone. A few more photos were taken, but the pace had changed. The girl was biting her lip and the photographer's tactile adjustments of her posture had become caresses. He threw her on the bed and started to have sex with her. She was extremely excited and within moments was starting to orgasm.

She exclaimed, "I've never been fucked like this before". Those words locked into my brain like footprints in fresh cement.

I tell myself it's time. But my eyes, as if chained closed, don't open. I sense an impatience from across the room.

Suddenly I feel like I've been meditating for way too long and quickly, I look to my therapist. It strangely feels like a different place to the one I arrived in. My therapist's eyes are already open. I smile, but it's not fully reciprocated.

"How are you?" she asks.

"Not too bad", I answer. "Well, a bit tired I suppose".

I get a nod and silence, though it doesn't feel unfriendly. Nevertheless I feel awkward. I've spoken with her about porn before. In fact discussing difficulties with porn is something I found the courage to do many years ago. So it wouldn't be a huge step to bring it up now. My reluctance is that I'm trying to find a way to finish therapy, which I know will take a lot of discussion and I don't want anything holding that process back.

"I'm still thinking about finishing."

"Okay, we can talk about that."

"Well I'm still finding it useful, it's that I don't know if I need it enough to justify the cost."

"Yes I can see you still find it useful, it definitely feels like we're making progress."

"I know."

"Last week I really felt your anger at not being allowed to continue the course. It's a big thing not being part of that family any more." She was referring to a training I had started two years ago to become a psychotherapist. I'd become vocally sceptical of their approach, so much so they didn't want me to start the third year.

"Yes, I'm still really disappointed."

"Are you disappointed with me?" The sudden shift in gears catches me unawares. She's right to ask and does so in such a way that it's genuinely more about helping me than defending herself.

I look into her eyes. I can't answer immediately. "Yes, I suppose a bit."

"Okay. Tell me more."

Usually in this situation I would try and skirt around the issue, but we know each other fairly well now and I'm paying enough that indirectness is a false economy. "Well, you know I want to finish therapy. I feel like you're making it harder than it needs to be for us to come to an end."

"Yes, I understand. I can sense that feeling from you."

"It seems like you'll feel you've failed somehow if I leave now. That if only I try harder then I'll see that psychotherapy really works."

She thinks for a while. "From what I know about you, endings and separations are big things. I want to make sure you have the opportunity to explore this particular ending. Maybe it's not just about the money?"

Again, she's right to say these things, but it just creates a dead end in my head. I know there is still so much I could explore with her, but I've already weighed up the situation and

made my decision. My long silence must come across as anger. I do nothing to dispel that perception.

"What are you feeling?"

"A bit of anger I suppose."

"Okay."

The silence is awkward. I know she wants me to open up and I'm certainly tempted, both because I want to explore the feelings and I want to end the silence. The girl from last night groans in my ear.

Lust, disappointment, anger, sadness and dejection coagulate in my chest. It feels like my life has always been like this -- locked in a never ending cycle of pain. I just want to leave now to cry on my own.

Silence lingers in the room like a third person.

Twelve years of meditation and three years of therapy have their benefits. I can hear myself, "Always been like this? That's an alarm bell if ever I heard one."

I relax into the silence. "There's nothing to feel guilty about", I tell myself. I realise the therapy will come to an end one day, just not as quickly as opening an incognito browser and navigating to a URL.

More silence.

"I'm worried about getting stuck in therapy with you", I admit. "You're right, leaving is a big thing. But I don't want the fear of that to stop me moving on."

"You're worried about getting stuck?"

"Yes, that I'll just keep coming because it's a routine. I know there's still a lot of work I can do here. And I know you must wonder why I don't want to take advantage of that. So I could easily take the path of least resistance and just keep coming. That way I never have to face this awkwardness where I think one thing is best and you think another thing is best."

"I see." She thinks for a while. "This is important to you isn't it? It reminds me of what you've said about feeling stuck in other relationships where you feel unable to express your feelings."

Yet again she's right. She's undoubtedly a great therapist. Her response connects feelings in me and triggers illuminating trains of thought. This puts me in two minds though. On the one hand I want to wind things down, perhaps if I can keep my thoughts to myself we can, for example, finish in four weeks rather than five. Yet on the other hand I don't feel great and having someone to talk to would help right now. The turbulent whirlpool of 'should I, shouldn't I?' reminds me of last night.

"I just feel so frustrated. I make so much effort, but not much seems to change. I tried to make a better career by starting the course, but it led nowhere. I'm still just earning my money sat in front of a computer screen. I want to take some control here with you, but I end up just feeling helpless." I sigh. "And then I was watching porn again last night and it stirs me up just as much ever."

Without seeming at all phased, as if perhaps she knew I was going to say these things all along, she replies, "Do you remember what you said before about depression being 'frozen fear'?"

"Yes", I answer and stop to think for a moment. "Depression's a way to put off feeling difficult feelings until a time when I'm stronger, when I can thaw out those feelings."

"Do you think something similar happens with porn?"

Her suggestion unlocks a moment of painful and poignant clarity. It's painful because it points straight to my suffering, but it's also cathartic because it's cut through my stories and agendas. There's just hurt. I don't need to blame anyone or even understand where it's come from. "Hmm, yeah", is all I'm able to muster in response.

We sit in silence some more. I feel patience and respect from my therapist. There's no pressure to say anything.

"It hurts," I say.

"I know." It looks like she has more to say. I wait. "So what was going on for you yesterday?"

I think back and describe my day. Going to work and the politics there. Not seeing any of my friends in the evening and so on. There aren't huge revelations, it's just a load off my mind to have someone to share my inner world with.

It nears the end of the session. "Is there anything else you want to say?"

I realise I'll be back home and on my own soon. I had wanted to leave earlier, but now I don't feel that push. Still I have nothing else to say, so I answer, "no".

"Okay. Thank you for sharing today. I know it's not easy."

I know what she means, but I can't help but feel I didn't achieve what I wanted today. I feel an ungenerous pang of jealousy, that she did achieve what she wanted today. I know it's a silly thought and try not to give it any more attention.

"Thank you", I reply. "See you next week."

Back at home, I sit on my sofa and gaze out the window across the city. I feel empty. I have work to do, but I have no motivation. I make some lunch, which distracts me for a while. I try to do some work on my computer, but the girl from last night is still intruding. My dejection is verging on despair. In a moment of hate, I open up incognito mode.

I feel as if I'm at a point in my life lower than all others. I'm beaten. There is nothing left of me. I'm fucked. I start to cry.

I slouch back to the sofa, curl up in a ball and sob.

I Am The One Who Knocks

There is a turning point in my life that I raise above all others. I think of it as a spiritual awakening, perhaps even enlightenment.

My mother and her good friend from the 1970s are, or at least some 30 years ago were more so, hippies. They were into such alternative staples as nuclear disarmament, whole foods, yoga and Eastern philosophy. After a particularly heavy night of drinking, so I'm told, my mother and her friend decided to go and see the Theravada monk Ajahn Sumedho talk in London (TODO: where exactly?). Long Por Sumedho, as he's now known, is a student of the late Ajahn Chah, who in turn was a student of Ajahn Mun and so on, all the way back to Siddhartha Gotama. It would seem the context of the hangover and Sumedho's reflections had a deep impact on the pair and so they returned with printed transcripts of some of his other talks. Many years later, after I had quit university, increased my drug intake, moved in with my girlfriend and started having a lot of domestic arguments, my mother gave me three books. Two were large tomes about counselling and psychotherapy and the other was a slim and humble picking from her Sumedho horde.

For the first time in my life, amongst all the angst and depression, I just sat there observing my breath, letting my experience simply be exactly as it was. It made a difference. I stopped taking any kind of intoxicants, I moved out and split up with my girlfriend, I went on a seven day silent meditation retreat and signed up to a Religious Studies degree. Meditation, or at least my fantasy of what meditation was, had given me hope. But then I went on another retreat and it was a nightmare. I was hallucinating mutilated babies and so had to leave early. I was scared that this new found path out of my suffering wasn't going to work. As a compromise I found a retreat centre that gave non-silent retreats, it seemed like a happy compromise. Perhaps I could work on the deeper issues coming up, but not so intensely. Nevertheless I met the same mental turbulence. I was ready to leave the retreat and by doing so I knew I was also contemplating leaving meditation practice. This was a terrible loss to consider, I didn't want to discover that my life was doomed to an unresolvable pain I had experienced as long as I could remember.

Before making the decision I decided to consult a fellow retreatant of my age who seemed unusually friendly and approachable. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon in June of 2004. We went to sit in the garden amongst the blooming flowers with hot cups of herbal tea. I presented to him my dilemma. He listened attentively but didn't really give any answers. At some point, slightly frustrated, I asked,

"But I need to know if I should leave tomorrow." Sunday was the day that new retreatants came and old ones left, so it was the ideal time to make the decision. His reply came,

"Can you just be with this, without adding anything to it or taking anything away?" It struck me as a valid question, so I turned to look at the flowers to consider it. However, as I did so, something strange happened. I was gazing at one flower head in particular, I think it

was echinacea, but from my own internal and private perspective I literally couldn't tell who was looking at it. Was it me or my companion? It was similar to that feeling of singing loudly at home when you think you're alone, only to walk into the living room to find your housemate reading a book. All I could muster was an awkward laugh.

"I think I better go for a walk." I said. I strolled for some hours along the wooded valleys of Devon's Dart river. I didn't leave the retreat the next day.

To recount this story is somewhat excruciating, much like being filmed having sex. I didn't tell anyone about it for years. Similar to my early days of meditation, I wanted to be sure it wasn't just hippy nonsense. However, even though I write about it now, I'm still not convinced. Describing my use of porn is embarrassing because it reveals an undesired vulnerability. Yet describing this life-changing experience is worse because it reveals a cherished pride. In using porn I'm merely a passive consumer, whereas this is more like producing it.

I remember in the months that followed I would, for the first times in my life, cry from happiness. Usually it was triggered by thinking of my garden friend -- I'd never felt love so deeply. To this day he is still one of my closest companions. I experienced a sobriety and strength unlike anything I'd known before. I still experienced terror at times, but I didn't take it so seriously, I had the patience to let it pass of its own accord.

One interpretation of the strange experience is that it was a sudden insight into the porn of *I*. Perhaps my existing understanding of *I-ness* up to that point was the unrealistic exaggeration of a filtered subset of the more digestible aspects of my identity such that it could be conceptually possessed and consumed with little to no thought. Though I must say, I'm none the wiser as to who I actually am, in a fundamental sense. In fact the practical effect is that I don't take myself, my sense of self that is, and all the angst around it, so seriously with such frequency any more.

I couldn't help but wonder whether what had happened to me was enlightenment. So much so that I would --and still do sometimes-- impose it on situations. For instance, if a friend asks my advice, it is the preexistence of my spiritual experience somehow radiating from my being that confers solace, rather than any considered response to the actual specifics of their quandary. However, I have no conclusive proof that I am enlightened. All I have is a roughly equivalent life event comparable to ambiguous and anecdotal descriptions I've read in esoteric texts. This of course begs the question as to what enlightenment actually is and how one goes about getting a reliable confirmation?

A year or so after this experience I attended a retreat led by a reputable Zen lineage-holder, who had been recommended as a possible teacher. However, by the beginning of the first day, I had already decided that I wouldn't become his student. In the preparations for the morning's ceremony he had shouted at his assistants for being too slow. Zen teacher's have a reputation for eschewing the peaceful spiritual stereotype, but to me this just came across as incredibly clichéd arrogance. The next day I had an interview with him, where, like the other retreatants, I discussed my choice of koan to study during the week. A koan is a traditional practice aide in the form of an impossible question such as, what is the sound of one hand clapping? The questions are derived from specific

incidents of enlightenment from the Zen records. In my interview the teacher remarked with a wry smile that I had made my choice because, unusually, both the characters in my koan were already enlightened. Though he didn't outright say it, in my mind I was in no doubt he was implying that both he and I were enlightened. I suspect he thought he was complimenting me, but instead my immediate response was outrage at his arrogance to assume I'd welcome being compared to him. In both the remainder of that interview and in one the following day, we argued. I left on the third day.

Of course, I could have totally misinterpreted the situation, after all I didn't outright ask, "do you actually think we're both enlightened?" Even if I didn't misread the situation, it may have just been his style and it was something he said to a lot of people. Either way, I was left feeling that his world, and therefore the world of enlightenment as he would like me to believe, was very much one I didn't want to be a part of. I know I can't take this incident as representative of the entirety of Buddhism, indeed, I've since met teachers who'd consider such behaviour crass. However, that even one reputable teacher would act in such a way irrevocably cheapens enlightenment for me. To make matters even worse, in recent years Zen has continued its infamy for scandal, where teachers, invariably male, abuse their power to get sex with students (TODO: example).

It all reminds me of a child placing a pen in their mouth to glimpse the feeling of smoking a cigarette. I can see it in myself, I want to be one of the cool enlightened people, so I take an experience that to me resembles enlightenment as much as a pen resembles a cigarette and pretend to be enlightened, just to see what it feels like. My concern is that because there's no unambiguous and widely accepted definition for enlightenment too many teachers have pens in their mouths and are convincing people they're really smoking.

There's a part of me that feels disrespectful for harbouring and expressing these thoughts. From one perspective I'm just a cocky and opinionated computer programmer, who's read some books, been on some retreats and had a strange spiritual experience. Whereas Buddhism is a sacred religion that has done far less harm than good for thousands of years. Enlightenment may well be an unparalleled perfection of consciousness, it's just that I'm making conclusions based on insufficient evidence. But another part of me feels it's all too easy to dismiss Buddhism's crowning insight. I went to a normal school in Britain -- I learnt about the big bang, evolution, the civil rights movement, the holocaust, religious war and misogyny in the name of God. I just can't ignore the alarm bells that Buddhism is ringing. Unless I loudly and unreservedly criticise Buddhism's glaring failures then it's as if my forebear's hard-fought lessons were for nothing. Someone has to put their foot down.

And so I shall. We're misunderstanding enlightenment in the same way someone believing porn is real misunderstands sex. This is just a less tactful version of Gotama's story of the person shot by an arrow. In hearing of the wonders of enlightenment we ask such questions as; "Does enlightenment end all suffering?", "Will people recognise that I'm enlightened?", "Can an MRI scan detect the specific regions of the brain activated in enlightened people?" I genuinely think these are interesting questions and I must admit that I reflect on them, but ultimately I know they're all bollocks. They're like watching porn

and wondering; "Am I bad at sex if I can't make a women ejaculate a watery substance half a metre in the air?", "Am I even sexually attractive if I can't get someone to have sex with me within fifteen minutes of meeting them?", "Can I die happy if I've never had a threesome?" All these questions serve as much purpose as refusing to have an arrow removed from your chest until the origin of the wood is confirmed by spectral analysis and radiocarbon dating. You would need only a few seconds to realise that 'enlightenment' for this wounded person is to shut up and act.

So to be clear, my suggestion is that even though enlightenment is conventionally advertised as an unsurpassable spiritual realisation, in practice what we most often find is the exploitation of normal personal growth for marketing purposes. Like sex, personal growth sits on a spectrum from the ugly, to the mundane and the profound. There's still room for the Hollywood fireworks of "perfect, boundless, undefiled consciousness" (TODO) and multiple orgasms, but they're exceptions rather than rules. Therefore, if we want to understand enlightenment then all we need do is understand personal growth, something that every single one of us, after just a few moments of existence, has experienced. In this sense, the idea that the spiritually impoverished West has yet to discover the subtle and hidden secrets of the wise East is romantic fiction. We have our own perfectly legitimate folklore of personal growth. It's the backbone of our culture, from children's stories to Shakespeare. To think we are spiritually naïve is a convenient deflection from confronting the all too tangible work that we know perfectly well needs to be done.

In film and television personal growth actually has its own celebrated term: character development. A script will often be acclaimed for writing a character that convincingly demonstrates that archetypal narrative arc of self-doubt, followed by failures and culminating in transformation during the darkest hour. In recent years, one of the most popular examples of this is the American TV series **Breaking Bad**. It follows the story of Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher cum murderous drug lord. In the first episode aired in 2011 (TODO: yeah?), White gives a seemingly mundane, but ultimately prophetic introduction to his class;

You see, technically, chemistry is the study of matter, but I prefer to see it as the study of change: Electrons change their energy levels. Molecules change their bonds. Elements combine and change into compounds. But that's all of life, right? It's the constant, it's the cycle. It's solution, dissolution. Just over and over and over. It is growth, then decay, then transformation." (TODO: cite)

Many episodes later his wife, Skyler, after hearing of a local drug-related murder, expresses concern that her husband is not safe. In what is one of the most well known and oft-quoted moments from the entire series, White replies fully embodied as his self-titled alter ego, Heisenberg;

I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks!

It's a hair-raising outburst. This is someone who has completely and unquestionably transformed. A part of you wants to, and vicariously does, celebrate in recognition of the universal potential all humans possess to discover their power. There is undeniably something beautiful about it. However, what is so skillfully implied through the writing and acting of this scene is the greater context of White's diagnosis of lung cancer. In effect what we are actually witnessing is the first congruous expression of White's true feelings. He is terrified, powerless and furious. Skyler is of course far from reassured.

I want to be a Heisenberg, yet I constantly find myself being a White. I want to be the one who knocks, to whom someone might say, "I've never been fucked like this before". Instead, truth be told, I'm scared, helpless and angry. Breaking Bad is so widely exalted by critics, not because of Heisenberg's unprecedented skill at producing and distributing large quantities of the purest methamphetamine, but because of the meticulous study of White's seemingly contradictory, multi-dimensional personality. As allegory, is this not all of us, whether 'enlightened' or otherwise? On the surface it may look like we're civilised, responsible and calm adults, but underneath we're boiling for attention, sneaking shortcuts and guiltily feeding our paranoias. As so many fellow viewers of the show have commented, your judgement of Walter White constantly vacillates between hero and villain. No doubt this is part of the reasoning behind the name, 'Heisenberg', the scientist famous for developing the Uncertainty Principle in quantum physics. In reality personal growth, character development and enlightenment are never so easy to pin down as either being perfectly good or perfectly bad.

Enlightenment worshipped as absolute perfection or the hero archetype detached from anything we recognise in everyday life, is at best amateurishly dull and at worst a manifestation of pathological denial. For me the climatic Breaking Bad scene, and just as importantly the series' entire narrative, is a study of personal growth more faithful than anything I've found in traditional Buddhist literature. Enlightenment as it should be, with nothing added nor taken away. To understand it you need not learn Pali, decipher esoteric teachings, spend ten years in a monastery nor possess male genitals. In fact it is merely a retelling of a narrative found as far away as fairy tales and as near by as our own life experiences. "Be careful what you wish for". "Absolute power corrupts absolutely". "Don't take things for granted". "The grass is always greener on the other side". Rather than profound character development, or enlightenment as some people call it, being a secret story we yearn to hear for the first time in a blaze of glory, it is, perhaps ironically, a story we've heard a million times already.

Tokyo

"Hello!" She gleams, then gives me a big hug. "Oh my god, I can't believe you waited! Thank you so much." We're at Tokyo Haneda airport, her flight has been delayed by eight hours.

"No, no, I went back to my apartment for the day."

"Oh that's good then, but really, thank you for being here. A guy on the plane had a heart attack. We had to land in Sweden to get him help. It was crazy." As she continues to offload the stresses of her intercontinental adventure, she notices she's been holding my hand longer than expected -- neither of us were single last time we met.

I lead the way to the airport express line station. It's my first time in Japan, but my third time at this station. I had arrived a few days earlier from Beijing, my first flight after having travelled the entire length of Europe, Russia, Mongolia and China by train. It's been ten life-changing months since I left home to see the world, a dream I've had for years. The second visit to this station was of course this morning before I knew about the flight's delay. My friend is Becky, a bright and sensual thirty-something woman I met through a mutual friend about two years ago back in the UK. She is here to work as a bondage model on a ten day training course run by her friends. So it made sense that I should try to overlap my existing plans to visit Japan with hers.

"Oops, here you are", Becky says handing me a 100 yen coin I'd dropped on the floor. "How much is that worth?"

I'm staring at the information board above the ticket machines, trying to find the fare. "Well 1p is about three quarters of a yen, so I guess that's worth about 75p." Suddenly I'm an expert on Japan.

"Oh, it's kind of like the Euro then." She says. We go to wait on the platform. "I can't believe we're in Japan!" She exclaims.

"I know. It's amazing. I love it here, it's so clean and organised. When it's busy everyone makes a perfect queue by each train door. I can't believe it."

"Really? That's so cute."

Our train arrives. We pretty much have an entire carriage to ourselves. Becky's still dazed and I think we're both a bit shy, certainly at least I am. We watch the city pass outside.

We drop Becky's things at my tiny apartment in the Ikebukuro district, then head to a nearby vegetarian-friendly restaurant.

"I can't believe we're in Japan!" Becky gleams from the other side of our table. We're sat by the window and so can enjoy both the spectacle of Tokyo's famous neon lights and the exotic sensory feast of Japanese food at various stages of consumption around us. The waitress comes and we point at various things on the menu. We're as excited as schoolchildren on a day trip.

Our eyes catch, but we don't look away. I can't believe my luck, here I am on the other side of the world with a woman who, apart from being beautiful and available, is a close friend who I know I can talk to about anything. Last time we'd met in Berlin a few months ago, we'd discussed everything from the taboo of sexual fantasies to facing fears in meditation practice. Her main income is from teaching yoga, which shows on her body. For a moment I let myself imagine her slimness and suppleness.

She smiles confidently and invitingly.

"So how's things with your ex?" She asks.

"Hmm, still pretty tough," I said. "I know I hurt her a lot and there's nothing I can really say or do to change that."

"Why, what did you do?"

"Oh nothing terrible. I think I was a bit insensitive in how I ended it."

"But she knew you were travelling when you met?"

"Of course. I tried to be as clear as I could about that."

"Hmm. Those kinds of situations are always going to be hard."

"Yeah." I reply, reminiscing for a moment. "And how about you?" I ask. Her ex is actually a good friend of mine and we'd already had some sobering conversations before she arrived about whether we should tell him that we were meeting.

"It's definitely over now. We had a big argument. All my stuff's still at his in Vienna though. God he's such an asshole." She stares out the window at nothing in particular.

Our food starts to arrive. Japanese cuisine is perhaps my favourite and this is the first time in my life, and Becky's, that we've eaten a bonafide Japanese meal. Miso soup of course, making its curious cloudy formations. Those little fried silver fish (I'm not so strictly vegetarian). Battered and fried vegetables, though I'm sure its proper name is tempura. Sort of smoky, marinated aubergine, I've never tasted anything like it, it's delicious.

Most of it is devoured in a few minutes. Then we continue picking at the remains in a more relaxed manner.

"So what do you wanna do now?" I ask. She already knows she's welcome to stay with me, but she has a bed with her friends at the workshop as well.

"I'm quite tired to be honest, let's go back to yours."

Even though there doesn't seem to be an obvious sense of romance in the air, we get ready for bed like we're a steady couple. I feel safe and happy. We get into bed and the thought of sex overrides my mind. I'm not particularly turned on, but I don't know what Becky expects.

"Well it's nice to have you here." I say laughing slightly awkwardly.

"Thanks, it's nice to be here."

Silence. The mattress is traditional Japanese, thin and lain directly on the floor. I notice the tiny green light of my phone's charger.

I reach to cuddle her. It's okay. We're on the same page, there's no rush and we just cherish the physical intimacy. Nothing much else happens. Our bellies are full. There's not a single sound from outside. I could lay like this for hours.

Over the next few days we enjoy some sightseeing; Shinjuku temple, tiny back-street, open-kitchened restaurants, XXXXX street where the women dress in bright plastic jewelry and makeup caricaturing little girls. Becky spends pretty much half her time with me and half her time at the workshop or with her friends. The workshop attendees do something social everyday and I often get invited. They're all mostly from Europe and in their twenties and thirties. There's just as much joking and silliness as there is serious discussion. In fact I get into a rather intense debate about the definition of religion with the workshop organiser, who is also one of Becky's best friends.

Although I was still given invites after that I didn't come along so often. Fortunately Becky is a devout and sober communicator, she would never leave feelings unspoken, from either me or her. We talked about me not feeling so included and whether there was a connection between that and us still not having had sex. We didn't really come to any conclusions, but as always I felt closer to her after we talked.

One evening everyone was heading to Tower One, Tokyo's (Japan's) tallest building, famous for its extraordinary 360 degree views of the city's urban landscape. I was visiting some programming contacts in another part of town I'd met through Twitter, so couldn't come right away. I worried that Becky thought it might be an excuse not to come, but it wasn't, I was engrossed in geek conversations with some of the most influential open source software developers in the world. As it turned out only Becky made it to the tower, so she took her time looking around the art gallery and I managed to meet her there still with a couple of hours or so before it closes.

I found her sitting at a video installation, intently watching a documentary about the symbolic significance of Japanese fabrics and clothing used in the previous generation. "Hello", I said and sat next to her.

"Oh hi," she replied with a smile. She carried on watching the film. I hooked my arm inside hers and started reading the subtitles trying to catch up. I'd missed the beginning, which meant it was harder to follow and so I didn't find it so interesting. Though to be honest I rarely find modern art galleries particularly stimulating.

We got up and meandered at that slow, reflective pace customary of gallery and museum visitors. I want to ask her how she is, but the aura of silence and her obvious enjoyment of the installations, usher me away from inquiring. However, I can't help but stew in the lack of verbal exchange, maybe she's avoiding me?

Eventually we get to the Observation Deck (TODO: is that it's actual name?), a corridor circumnavigating the entire perimeter of the tower, with nothing but high glass windows on the outside. It's dark now and the lights are off so that you can better appreciate the main attraction, the immensity of Tokyo city, geographically one of the largest urban areas in the world. The view is immediately and startlingly arresting, it's explicit and unadulterated city porn. I can't comprehend the sheer enormity of humanity gushing into my eyes. I could never meet all the people that go to make up the sea of apartments, shops, offices, factories, roads, railways and bridges in front of me, even if I met 50 of them every day for the rest of my life.

We make a full lap. We've still hardly spoken and it crosses my mind that maybe

Becky's ready to go home. "How are you doing?" I ask.

"Okay. And how are you?"

"Not bad. I had an amazing time with those people I met on Twitter."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, I met an actual contributor to the Linux Kernel and the organiser of Ruby Kaigu!"

"What does that mean?" She asks with a look of confusion.

"It means they're geek heroes of mine." I answer with a laugh.

"Wow, that's great Tom." She says with a big smile.

We carry on walking. I want to sit on the ledge by the windows because I seem to remember Bill Murray and Scarlet Johansen doing just that in the film *Lost In Translation*. I find a nice spot and set myself with my back to the glass so I can look sideways out across the expanse. I notice a light turn on in a room in a tower block, perhaps on the 50th floor.

"I imagine you must have met some famous people at Cambridge?" I ask.

"Hmm, yeah sort of, but they weren't really my heroes."

"Oh. I just imagine you rubbing shoulders with all these big guns everyday. You know I applied to go there? But didn't get good enough A-level results."

"Really? I didn't know that. Which college?"

"Robinson's, I think it was."

"Oh yes, I know. Good for the sciences."

"You did languages didn't you, French and Spanish?"

"Yeah, though I really only got fluent in Spanish from living in Argentina."

"You lived in Argentina!? For how long?"

"About six months."

"Where haven't you lived?"

Becky laughs. "I know, I move around a lot. I don't know if it's always good. I feel better when I just settle down in one place." She ponders for a bit. "I just can't see myself going back to Britain, I get so much more stimulation from being amongst different cultures. What about you? Are you getting homesick yet?"

I take yet another visual gulp of our Japanese vista. Becky switches her position, so that her back is against a beam and her right shoulder is against the window, now she doesn't need to strain her neck to look out. I remove my sandals as she has done and bring my feet up onto the sill next to hers. We're facing each other now, each with our own personal cityscape to enjoy. What Becky had just said resonates, I look at her and feel a kindred spirit. I feel at home, there's nowhere else I want to be.

"No, not yet." I say. "Of course I miss people and would love to see them again. But I could carry on for a few more years yet."

We sit in that exact spot philosophising about life until just before closing time.

A few days later I'm invited to an open evening at the bondage workshop. I'd actually attended an evening workshop with Becky in Berlin not long ago, so I knew roughly what to expect. For one thing it's certainly not about free and unhindered intercourse. Although bondage has its origins in pornography, today it enjoys a widespread following amongst

those interested in conscious sexuality. It is a medium through which to explore sex's big themes such as sensuality, power, vulnerability and skill, in a safe and potentially therapeutic environment. At least this is what all the participants of the workshop were there for.

The evening's format is a series of live performances, where partners demonstrate their learnings in front of everyone else. Being partners doesn't necessarily mean that you're in a relationship. You may simply enjoy the sensuality of being tied, much in the same way you enjoy the physical contact of a massage. The first performers are in fact a couple and I can sense the warmth between them. The peak of their rope dance is his suspension of her a good metre from the ground by three separate ropes. With impressive skill he pulls on each rope to position her like a puppet. First she is horizontal, then, like the skipper of sailing boat, he brings her shoulders up and stretches her back to reveal the curved feminine contours of her breasts, stomach and thighs through her floral dress.

My favourite performance is the third one, where the woman ties the man. He's good looking and well built with a barrel chest. He's confident enough to wear skin-tight leggings and nothing on his top. It starts with him in the middle of the room and her just watching him from the side with rope in her hands. His shoulders are rounded and his gaze is downward, I clearly feel his vulnerability. She's firm and aggressive with him. She quickly ties his hands behind his back and with a single rope suspended from the ceiling lifts his left thigh in the air so that he needs effort to balance. Holding the suspended rope, she pushes him, letting the rope slip slightly until he's on the floor. Her suspension is such that she has created a pulley system, with relative ease she is able to lift her partner's ninety or so kilo body almost completely off the ground. Again, the pose emphasises the sensuality of his body, the bulky, masculine musculature of his thighs and torso. To my surprise, though not hers, he begins to cry. Slowly she lowers his leg back to the floor. She brings his head into her lap and comforts him for as long as he needs. It's a genuinely moving and tender moment.

However the final performance is left to the resident master. He in fact lives here and has this open evening once a week for the general public, where he charges money for people to watch more traditional performances. One such member of the public arrived with me and is sat next to us in the audience. The resident master's partner is a perfectly beautiful young woman, though she appears European she is wearing a kimono. His rope skills are clearly highly developed, he skims through what appears to be ten or so varying styles of tying someone whilst standing. However, it soon becomes clear that this is nearer the pornographic roots of bondage. With the intensifying of his tying he rips open her kimono to reveal her naked breasts. He pushes her to the floor and she lets out a clear shriek. He lifts up her kimono to reveal her red, frilly knickers for all to see. She is starting to sob, though it's unclear if she is genuinely upset or acting. Without ceremony or grace he pulls down her kickers just enough to suck on her completely shaved genitals. His slurping is loud enough that I'm sure you can hear it next door. I get the impression that although the workshop attendees expected this, they are none too impressed. The workshop organiser turns to me and Becky with the widest eyes, as if silently screaming,

"Make it stop!" However, the master continues for a few more minutes until the woman is loudly crying. She receives no comfort, but as soon as the performance is over her tears stop.

Becky turns to me, "are you okay?"

"Yes, thanks." I reply with an awkward laugh. Then she gets up and asks the woman who had arrived with me the same question. They talk quietly for a while. I remember that Becky has run Tantric Spanking workshops and that she's no doubt sensitive to the potential reactions some people can have to witnessing such overt sexuality and emotion.

"Wanna come outside for a bit?" She asks me after making sure the visitor was okay.

"Sure," I answer.

We're on the roof and it's night. Tokyo's star-like city lights are visible around us, though not to the prominence afforded by Tower One. "What did you think of that then?" She asks.

"You know, I've watched a lot of porn but I've never actually seen it in real life. It's quite an eye opener. I loved that performance where the girl tied the guy, it was so sincere and tender. Moving in fact. But that last one, I mean, well it was just like a crude sledgehammer of porn."

"Ha yeah, I know what you mean. I just find that stuff a bit gross. You know she was faking those tears right?"

"Yeah I wondered about that."

When we go back downstairs everyone is getting ready to leave. The man who got tied is next to me putting on his shoes.

"I really, really loved your one." I tell him.

"Oh you think so? Thank you." He has the biggest smile on his face.

Back at my apartment Becky is picking out some clean clothes for after her shower. "So what's your favourite porn?" She asks.

"Oh." I reply as I start to think how to answer.

"Don't worry, you don't have to answer, I know it can be a very personal question", she stopped what she was doing for a moment to say this. I already knew I was happy, excited even, to answer, but the reassurance was welcome nonetheless. We'd shot the breeze with so many other seemingly taboo subjects that this was just another day at the office for us.

I describe the scene I had watched that day before my psychotherapy session. Even though that was some three years ago now, I can still clearly recall it.

"Oh that sounds hot, maybe we could role play it?" she suggested. This wouldn't be the first time we'd done this sort of thing, so it wasn't a surprise to hear. I knew that if we were to do it, all the factors would be discussed in great detail. How does it feel for each of us personally? How does it effect our relationship? Who holds the power? What exactly about this fantasy appeals? We would have ample time before and after to explore these questions as much as we both needed.

For me, it was an extraordinary position to be in, to be considering living out a fantasy. I recollected the first time, when I deliberated in fear for so long about opening up the unseen erotic parts of me. How can I ever get what I want if I'm not able to talk about what

I want?

True to form Becky and I discussed the specifics of what we were about to do. I'm a bit nervous but she suggests a visualisation exercise to get us in the frame of mind. The visualisation is something I recognise from the world of psychotherapy. I'm excited to begin. Here we are, two consenting adults, able to express and receive our deepest desires. There are no catches and no conditions. If at any point, for whatever reason, it doesn't feel right then we can stop.

What an exceptionally precious space to be in. To be fully accepted by another human. In many ways isn't this what we try to achieve, but implicitly, when we normally have sex? It's strange that we tend to share the intimacy of sex before we share heart-felt vulnerability. But now I feel a balance, of both emotional and physical intimacy. How could I feel any more free right now? I can completely let myself go, let my desires run wild. No need to censor myself or worry about how I might be perceived. We have complete trust. She wants me and I want her. There is nothing else in the universe now.

But a key ingredient is missing. I'm not aroused.

We're patient. I try not to let it get to me. Becky acknowledges it but doesn't give it much attention. We try some other things, but ultimately reality hasn't lived up to expectations. I certainly feel a little awkward. It takes some effort to not just run out the room. But we're still contained by the space that we had carefully given ourselves beforehand. There is opportunity to talk, or not talk and just be still in silence. It's not clear why exactly blood didn't flow as we hoped it would. We explore some potential reasons, but neither of us are actually that concerned and don't dwell on it long.

We spend the rest of the evening lying on bed, eating strange Japanese sweets, our feet in the air, giggling like schoolchildren to Louis CK doing stand up on Youtube.

Your Period

[Arguing for spiritual value as something that recurs over time rather than something that happens in a single moment]

‘Enlightenment’, if the word if has any value anymore, should be verb, something that is intentionally and regularly engaged with every moment, every day, every month, every year.

And Another Day At The Office

The moment before the alarm goes off I'm dreaming. At first I don't recognise the sound and its abrupt, intrusive ringing makes me slightly angry. I can't remember the dream, but it was certainly a different world to the one I've now found myself in. I take a few drowsy moments, fighting the gravity back into slumber, to adjust to my new surroundings.

I reach for my smartphone, first checking to see if anyone interesting has emailed, whatsapped, tweeted or facebooked. No one. Next I skim through the usual digital watering holes I tend to frequent and am caught by a seemingly greyscale image of a celestial body I've never seen before. It's Pluto, as photographed by the recently arrived New Horizons spacecraft. In the comments I learn that the image isn't greyscale and upon closer inspection notice that it has a slight yellowish hue. Although it may not seem dramatic, the photo is only a few hours old and I am amongst the first humans to ever witness this former planet in such detail.

Also in the comments someone has linked to the video of the moment the team controlling New Horizons make contact after it has been dormant to save power for the 8 years since leaving Jupiter. At first you see what seems like a normal, quiet control centre, people are standing and sitting around watching various monitors. Then suddenly the room erupts with cheers, hugging and scientists waving their hands in the air. I imagine New Horizons millions of kilometres away, alone in the dark expanse of interplanetary space. This whole project is one that will span nearly 19 years in total, including the planning, building and space travel. So for many of those involved this will be their life's work. All the video captures is the answer to a very simple question, "New Horizons, are you still there?" Unexpectedly I begin to cry.

I wipe the tears away and get dressed. There's still a good 45 minutes for meditation if I want it, but I only manage about 25 before I'm tempted by the thought of juice and a huge bowl of muesli with mango yogurt, sliced apple, banana and a squirt of honey.

I slip my laptop in my bag, put on my coat and head for the train station. Cashmere Lady isn't here today, maybe she'll get on at the next stop like she sometimes does. I've been wondering if she has a boyfriend. I'm actually too engrossed in reading up about the New Horizons mission to notice who gets on at the next stop.

Our inter-station rest between Montpelier and Stapleton Road is a normal five minutes. I'm sat on the other side from the view, all I can make out is an embankment and some brambles.

As we pull into Stapleton Road I notice a familiar face standing on the platform. It's my ex-girlfriend. Instantly our faces light up. She has a new boyfriend now, who I've not met properly, but he sounds really decent and I'm genuinely happy for them.

"Hellooooo! Fancy seeing you on the 8.56 to Temple Meads." She says, wrapping her arms around me and then sitting down in the seat next to mine. The '8.56 to Temple Meads'

is a bit of a joke of ours. In fact jokes on the whole are a bit of a joke of ours. We had endless playful arguments about who was funnier. We found it hilarious to dissect and bleed dry our various comedic moments like mercenary bounty hunters. We both loathed commuting and the sterile, impersonal corporate brand of the local train companies. So the '8.56' was a sarcastic honorific, as if I and the entire carriage had been looking forward to catching this train for months.

"Hello", I replied with a huge smile. "It's been a while, how are you?"

"Oh you know, okay." She said with a laugh and looking me straight in the eye. She was right, I knew exactly what she meant. We'd gotten to know each other as much as it is possible for two humans to know each other. We had cried, argued, laughed and dreamed together. We'd been there for each other in all our hopes and fears.

I nodded slowly, more in agreement than acknowledgement. I pulled my muscles to smile, but I'm not sure it looked like a smile, I was thinking about the rollercoaster of life.

"I'm off to a meeting at Bath Uni. I'm a lecturer now." She said with a slight look of amazement on her face. I'd already heard about her new job, but I think she'd only told me in email, so this was the first time in person she'd shared it.

"I know! That's fantastic." I replied with wide eyes. It really was fantastic, it made me so happy to hear. She'd given her heart and soul to her profession her entire adult life and there was absolutely no doubt she should be sharing her experience with the new generations. To top it off her best friend was also a lecturer there. Thinking of those two mischievous, endlessly silly, but deeply serious masters of their crafts inspiring teenagers was the most wonderful of thoughts.

We talked more about marking essays and the difficulty of having to respond to upset students that got lower grades than they'd hoped. We'd soon be arriving in Temple Meads, where we both had to change trains.

"Are you getting the 9.18 to Bath too?" She asked in such a way you'd think the Queen herself was going to be on it.

"Yes." I chuckled. "I can't wait."

You'd wonder why it didn't work out for us judging by how well we got on. It's certainly a question we asked ourselves. We tried, we really tried, our love for each other was abundantly clear. It's just that there came a time when the suffering had been too much for too long. Yet here she was right now in front of my eyes. I could almost pretend that nothing had changed. But why pretend anything? This moment was enough, we cherished each other and were still there for each other.

"But anyway, how are you in your little heart Tom?" She asked, pointing at my chest.

One of my overriding images of her comes from a time when we went for a summer holiday in Cornwall. We hadn't long been together, so we were still getting to know each other. We sat on the beach overlooking the sea drinking coffee. It was early evening, so the sun was low in the sky and more people were leaving than arriving. We were talking about our dreams for life and it was my turn to speak. She interrupted me for a second,

"Oh look! Look at that kid on the rocks."

"Where?"

"There, the little one dancing on the rocks!" I followed her pointing finger and about 50 metres away, slightly silhouetted by the sun was a toddler girl, no more than three years old. She was facing the sea with her hands in the air, dancing some kind of ad-libbed jig. You could just make out her parents trying to usher her along, probably to start making their way home, but the toddler just danced. It was a wonderful moment to behold such a free and joyful little creature celebrating the sun and sea. Often when I see a toddler girl, even now after all these years, I think of that moment and I imagine the toddler being my ex-girlfriend dancing uninhibited and in defiance of the boring adults.

I feel the toddler's presence in the silence after I'm asked how I am. I answer honestly. I share some difficult feelings and I share some happy ones. I'm touched. There are very few people who I can talk with like this.

On the 9.18 to Bath Spa we catch up on family and mutual friends. Time passes so quickly, I could stay on the train all day. We're still chattering intently as we pull into our destination.

"Well it was so lovely to bump into you, let's catch up again soon." I say. I have a bittersweet feeling. Each in our own ways we'd answered the question, "Are you still there?" Whether we'd bumped into each other on the train or not, the answer would have been the same.

"Yes please." She replies.

We step off the train, hug and say our goodbyes.

Notes

Notes

Chapter 2: Rule #34

...*the majority of Buddhist schools recognise an unbroken lineage of men*...

TODO: Dharmaguptaka, Charlotte Joko Beck, etc

...*patriarchy is suffering*...

See Gross, Buddhism After Patriarchy

...*The essence of Batchelor's critique*...

See Batchelor, After Buddhism, chapter 5, section 1.

> As Brahmanism came to be accepted as normative, elements of its worldview started to be taken for granted even among non-Brahmanic communities. Not only did the brahmins insist on their divinely ordained authority here and now, they also, in Johannes Bronkhorst's telling phrase, "colonized the past."³ They came to believe their own propaganda that Brahmanism had been the default philosophy and practice of Indians since the dawn of time. This was the environment in which Buddhism would have mutated from a pragmatic ethical philosophy to an Indian religion that competed with brahmins, Jains, and others for the allegiance and support of powerful, wealthy patrons. To realize their goals each school needed to make a compelling case that its particular version of truth was more credible than that of its competitors. Yet unlike both Brahmanism and Jainism, Gotama had never posited the existence of either a permanent ātman or a consciousness that observed and judged the world from an unconditioned standpoint. A transcendental subject provided the "view from nowhere" needed for making metaphysical assertions supposedly describing the nature of reality. (4) To make such truth-claims requires the adoption of a distanced stance. Otherwise, an opponent could dismiss whatever you say as merely the product of your own relativistic point of view. At a certain point, Buddhists must have felt obliged to adopt this rhetoric of truth.

...*This noble truth of suffering*...

See: Samyutta Nikāya 56: 11, Bodhi (2000), p. 1845.

...*This has led some scholars to believe that ariya-saccam*...

See: K.R. Norman (2003) p. 223.

...*This is tantamount to suggesting*...

See: Batchelor (2015) chapter 5, section 3.

...*This makes nirvana more like a verb*...

See: Batchelor (2015), chapter 5, section 7.

> Nirvana, therefore, does not refer to the attainment of a transcendent, absolute state apart from the conditions of life but to the possibility of living here and now emancipated from the inclinations of desire, hatred, and delusion. A life not conditioned by these instincts and drives would be an enriched one. No longer would one be the victim of paralyzing habits; one would be freed to respond to circumstances in fresh, unimpeded ways.

...*Rather than presenting Buddhism without beliefs*...

See: Wallace, B.A *Distorted Visions of Buddhism: Atheist and Agnostic*

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<http://fpmt.org/mandala/archives/mandala-issues-for-2010/october/distorted-visions-of-buddhism-agnostic-and-atheist/>

> Archived by archive.org on April 2nd 2016: <http://bit.ly/2cPhlJg>

...*the sheer volume of mainstream pornography*...

Chapter 4: I Am The One Who Knocks

...*I've not even mentioned Zen's infamy for scandals*...

For example see Genpo Roshi and his Big Mind teaching.

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