

# **Sacred Sex: Sexual Relations as Sexual Ritual**

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This paper explores some of the ways in which ritualization teaches us to be sexual beings.

Although there are many forms sexuality can take, it will focus on sexual expression in an emotionally committed relationship between two people.

I will start with a very brief outline of Tantrism and Sacred Sex. Then I will elaborate on that outline while discussing the unique nature of sexuality. Then I will integrate these into a discussion of rites of passage. I will conclude by looking at the ways in which sexual rituals are failing us in modern culture.

“Tantrism holds that the realm of sexual expression may serve as a vehicle for spiritual development and personal transformation.” (Voigt 214) Tantrism means different things in the East and in the West. Eastern Tantra is a philosophical system that can require a number of years of study under a master. Although sexuality is an important part of the Tantric Philosophy, it is one tool of many in the service of personal enlightenment. Western Tantra is much more accessible and focuses on the relationship between the two people and is frequently called “Sacred Sex,” which is the term I will use in this paper.

An exact definition of Sacred Sex does not exist, but there are certain characteristics many practitioners agree on. Some of them are:

- The creation of a ritual,
- Synchronized breathing,
- Sustained eye contact,
- Motionless intercourse,
- Sexual exchange without orgasm,
- Viewing one's partner as Goddess/God, and

Lack of a fixed goal (of orgasm.)

Sexuality is a unique human and cultural experience for a number of reasons, which include:

The nature of sexual energy,

Our ambivalence about our sexuality,

The level of participation demanded of sexual relations,

The intimacy and privacy of sexual relations, and

The fundamental creativity of sexuality

Freud believed that misdirected sexual energy is the cause of many, if not all, neurotic symptoms. Although other Depth Psychologists do not all agree with this view, there is a general agreement that it is a primary force in life. Although Freud and many others emphasize the necessity of sexual satisfaction, they do not specify that it be orgasmic. This distinction is essential for reconciling Sacred Sex with their thinking.

“To ritualize is to make (or utilize) a pathway through what would otherwise be uncharted territory. What if no pathways for our behavior had been blazed before we got here?” (Driver 14) Our culture’s ambivalence and discomfort with sexuality both impedes the development and obscures the existence of sexual pathways. As a result, we have a very poor map to help people explore the rich terrain of sexuality and integrate it into their lives.

Turner tells us that liminal personae “...elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.” (95) Because our culture is so ambivalent about sexuality, these networks of classifications are vaguely and awkwardly drawn. Thus, much sexuality that could be a part of regular life, like public displays of affection, is still considered very private.

Practitioners of Sacred Sex unabashedly recognize sexuality as a vital life force and, because they don’t have a fixed goal, are willing to follow the experience where it goes. Thus they are constantly constructing and reinforcing pathways in uncharted territory.

Rituals require participation. Although it's relatively easy to "fake it" in many rituals, the level of physical, spiritual and mental participation in sexual relations is much more obvious. Because it is impossible to have a deeply spiritual and emotional experience with a partner who is not engaged, the health of the relationship is critical for either partner to realize their sexual potential. Sacred Sex recognizes this through its emphasis on the relationship.

The space of sexual relations is unlike any others because it is not shared or experienced by any but the two who create it and most spaces are significantly different from each other. In rituals with more participants, the space is much more independent of any one participant and its collective nature teaches each participant how to create and live in this space by the example of the other participants. As a result, the experiences in the spaces have more in common and the spaces themselves are more alike.

"Every ritual has a divine model, an *archetype*..." (Eliade 198) For sexual relations, that archetype is the creation of the world, which means that the very essence of sexual relations is creativity. When we bring that perspective to Driver's invitation that we "... think of ritual, using a developmental perspective, not as some kind of eternal form but as the result of *activity*..." (15) we understand sexual ritual as the development of our creative impulses.

Participants in Kruse's research concur, making statements such as "...we create our life just magnificently, without specifying exactly how it's going to come to pass." (65), "I am sixty-two and I have just started playing the piano again." (65) and "We enter into a very creative space together." (65)

I believe rites of passage are a good way to look at Sacred Sex practices because of the profound effect they have on their practitioners. Therefore, I will now discuss Sacred Sex in terms of the five components van Gennep attributes to rites of passage (82)

Rites of separation from the usual environment,

Rites of incorporation into the sacred environment,

A transitional period,

Rites of separation from the local sacred environment, and

Rites of incorporation into the usual environment.

The separation from the usual environment occurs when the couple goes off by themselves.

This can be done with various levels of approval and acknowledgement by the group they are leaving.

If the group does not embrace sexuality, the collective persona prevents a clean departure, leaves with the couple and can linger with them as a sense of guilt.

In addition to physically leaving the usual environment, they must also psychologically leave it.

The couple needs to leave the room where they get dressed and the bed where they watch TV so they can spiritually arrive in the place where they love. This transition requires the ability to view the same space as both profane and sacred. For this reason, practitioners of Sacred Sex keep their reverence with them throughout the day. Some statements made to Kruse about how they do this include: “Not just in the bedroom, but with everything, in cooking our meals, sitting together at night, or getting into a bath in the tub, just so we have that time together, listen to music. It is bringing love into your whole life.”

(52) “Our bedroom is a holy place.” (55) “We have puja, puja meaning devotion. We have puja spots all over the house.” (55)

The incorporation into the sacred environment involves two transitions. The couple’s perceptions change so they are more aware of the holy and the space itself changes from profane to sacred. Sacred Sex uses a ritual ceremony to help with this transition, realizing that:

“Jointly creating a ritual can simultaneously celebrate and sanctify the sexual exchange. It puts partners in touch with their abilities to create together something unique and private, which may for some feel decidedly sacred. A simple ceremony provides a formal transition to intimate contact, highlighting the special attention and intention partners bring to each other.” (Voigt 216)

This ceremony is augmented by synchronized breathing, a body ritual. Although our class discussion of body rituals focused on the ability of bodily pain to cause intense experiences, we also noted that pain is a judgment we put on a sensation. So perhaps our body opens us to intense experiences any time it is brought to the limits of its own experience. Thus, the synchronized breathing

of Sacred Sex could be so transformational because "... successfully synchronizing the breathing as partners lie together in any position may touch the limits of the abilities of partners ...” (Voigt 216)

Sacred Sex practitioners realize it takes a while to get fully incorporated into the sacred environment. One observes that “One of the other practices that we use is that you don't get past what I call sex unless we are physically coupled for at least a half hour.” (Kruse 71)

Once fully incorporated into the sacred environment, there is a transition as the couple passes from an old way of looking at the world to a new way. It can be an initiatory passage or a renewable passage, such as attending church or Sacred Sex.

“Altered or transcendental states were described in a variety of ways by the contributing couples. Examples of these descriptions include the following: a loss of physical boundaries and a merging with one another; an experience of kundalini energy; an experience of having an altered sense of time; an experience of the feeling of being in a trance; and a more general feeling of being so blissful that the happiness was experienced as an altered state of consciousness. These altered state and mystical experiences all seemed to increase the bond in the couple and for some were stated to be life-changing events.” (Kruse 80)

Before looking at whether the space of Sacred Sex is truly liminal and then continuing with the steps involved with rites of passage, I'll discuss three ideas from modern physics which might explain how Sacred Sex changes the psychological space of the participants. They apply to motionless intercourse, sexual exchange without orgasm and intense concentrations of energy.

Voigt observes that “In Tantric practice, the purpose of avoiding or refraining from orgasm is to intensify the sexual-spiritual energy...so as to enable a more complete restructuring of sexual experience together.” (217) and one of Kruse's participants expresses the philosophy that “... the energy is there for you to transform yourself spiritually and become more evolved.” (69)

The Tantric belief that energy restructures experience is almost identical to Einstein's belief, expressed in the general theory of relativity, that mass restructures the nature of space-time because mass is the same as energy and space-time is the environment in which we have our experiences. A huge concentration of mass forms a black hole. Perhaps a huge concentration of sacred sexual energy acts as a psychological black hole.

Profane black holes have such strong gravitational fields that entities close to them have radically different perspectives on space-time than entities far away and if you could get close enough, the intense gravity would tear you apart. The liminal space that the couple shares near their joint psychological black hole could then be expected to be very different than that of the larger culture so much farther away. As the couple get closer to the energy concentration their previous ways of thinking would also get torn apart.

The Sacred Sex belief, as typified in the statement that “If I'm starting to get to my point of no return and I don't want to go there, then I'll just let that energy spread “(Kruse 68) is a fascinating extension of this metaphor because it signifies a transition from having the sexual energy within the couple to the couple being within the sexual energy. This corresponds to moving from the exterior to the interior of the black hole. The inner workings of a black hole are some of the most mysterious of modern physics and can only be described using imaginary numbers. So moving inside the sacred space time of the psychological black hole is moving into an intensely imaginal space.

Using the term “black hole” to describe a blissfully divine experience may seem strange because of our affinity for lightness. However, the term black hole was coined (by disbelievers) because no light can escape from the black hole, not because there is no light in it. So the black hole itself, because it captures all light, may be quite illuminated. It only appears dark to the outside world.

Motionless intercourse may be a sacred correspondent to Einstein's special theory of relativity, which states that two observers moving relative to one another are in different space-times and have fundamentally different experiences of reality. This is negligible at low speeds, but quite pronounced at higher ones. Since we don't have any way of measuring sacred, or psychological, speeds it's difficult to say how this factors into sexual relations. However, it does suggest that shared experience will be enhanced when the two partners bring “...a still point to sexual connection, contrasting with the perpetual motion characteristic of conventional lovemaking. “(Voigt 217)

High energy physicists use particle accelerators to create intense concentrations of energy that collide with elementary particles and split them into even smaller particles. There seems no end to this process of divisibility. We have gone from being convinced that electrons, protons and neutrons are the tiniest particles to contemplating string theory, which is probably not even the end. It appears that Freud worked with intense concentrations of sexual energy as he developed his theories, which split existing ideas into smaller components. Jung continued working with sacred energy and elaborated archetypes, which now seem to be the fundamental building blocks of psyche. Disputing the elementary and indivisible nature of archetypes is well beyond the scope of this paper, but if our experience of physics has any application to psyche, we may be at a stage similar to the periodic table of elements, with the archetypes corresponding to the chemical elements. I believe the energy generated by intense sexual experiences may form a cauldron of exciting new discoveries that will lead to the electrons, protons and neutrons that make up those archetypes and eventually to integration with string theory to incorporate both profane and sacred space-time.

I will now look at the space created and experienced during sexual relations in the context of the characteristics Turner ascribes to liminal spaces(102-103), which include:

Attributes of hierarchy are in abeyance,  
Anonymity,  
Submissiveness to the authority of the entire community,  
Silence, and  
Sexual abstinence.

In traditional sexual relations, the attributes of hierarchy are frequently not in abeyance, and power relations between the two participants are acted out. However, Sacred Sex practitioners view each other as divinities, which are on an equal footing, leading Kruse to observe that "...they did not engage in any of the characteristic power dynamics in which couples often engage."(82)

Anonymity is generally fostered by sexual relations, which encourage a loss of ego boundaries and a submersion into a we-ness. One of Kruse's participants noted that "When you love someone and you do not get lost in the lust of it, you're getting more lost in each other." (51) The Sacred Sex practice of eye contact further promotes this anonymity in union. Voigt observes that "Fixing one's gaze into a partner's eyes throughout all phases of the sexual exchange can lead to experiencing a merging of oceanic dimension." (217)

Whether one submits to the authority of the entire community depends on the concept of the entire community. Too often, our sexual relations are driven by media influenced ideas of what they should be, modified by mixed messages from moral and political leaders and the expectations of our peer groups. Although this may seem like an entire community, it is really a diverse and incompatible set of persona-shoulds. However, Sacred Sex draws its authority from the teachings of Tantrism, which is founded in the fundamental desire for union by the male and female energies. This is the authority of the collective unconscious, the true community of psyche.

The silence in meaningful sexual relations is the silence of the ego. Sounds may come from the unconscious as it experiences desire. They are not disruptive to the liminality but an expression of it. The Sacred Sex practice of concentrating on the breathing is a good way to enter a silent place and periodically return to a deep silence.

Sexual abstinence is clearly not an integral part of Sacred Sex practices. However, an exploration of why and what kind of sexual abstinence is important demonstrates that Sacred Sexual relations actually reinforce liminality. Turner, elaborating on the reasons for sexual abstinence, tells us that "...kinship, or relations shaped by the idiom of kinship, is one of the main factors in structural differentiation. The undifferentiated character of liminality is reflected by the discontinuance of sexual relations and the absence of marked sexual polarity." (104)

This suggests that sexual abstinence is a characteristic of larger liminal spaces because sexual intercourse always creates its own liminal space and is thus a disruptive force for communal liminal



spaces. Since this rite of passage is for the community of the two lovers, the structural differentiation it creates between the couple and the larger community is actually a valuable asset that reduces the couple's differentiation from each other by establishing a strong common bond. One of the participants in Kruse's study expressed the role of sexual relations this way: "The idea is that you try to go beyond the lust, and the only way you can do that is you have to go through the doorway, and the doorway is sex. But, the place you are really heading for is the inner temple." (71)

The rites of separation from the local sacred environment probably start after the peak sexual experience. Like ritual, Sacred Sex doesn't follow a plot and isn't about holding on, but letting go. It facilitates "... a restructuring of sexual experience by promoting breakdown of the usual conditioned and culturally reinforced parameters of sexual practices." (Voigt 216)

Because Sacred Sex is based on indirection, coming back from that experience involves mining that indirection for new ways of looking at our social identity as a couple. "We can, on the one hand, view orgasm as resulting from proper stimulation and effective technique and, on the other hand, understand orgasm as a product of deep relaxation and a profound level of contact between partners." (Voigt 215)

The rites of incorporation back into the usual environment suffer from the same ambivalence about sexuality as the rites of separation. There is usually no acknowledgement of the sexual encounter by the rest of society and thus no way for cultural pathways to be reinforced or built. I did not encounter any reference to Sacred Sex rituals that address this issue, probably because Sacred Sex focuses on the relationship of the two people and not the culture.

Sacred Sex practitioners come back, but they don't bring things to the larger culture. Although it appears common for practitioners of Sacred Sex to meet with other practitioners on a regular basis, and this forms a culture that has its own network of pathways, it is not the place where practitioners return to directly after their sexual encounters.

The hippie movement was a key factor in recasting the way our culture looks at sexuality. However, it has ultimately been a failure, according to Turner, because of a focus similar to that of Sacred Sex practitioners (who may include a lot of ex and current hippies.) “Hippies opt out of the status bound social order, acquire the stigmata of the lowly, dress like bums, itinerant in their habits and menial in the casual employment they undertake. They stress personal relationships rather than social obligations and regard sexuality as a polymorphic instrument of immediate *communitas* rather than as the basis for an enduring structured social tie.” (Turner 112)

Although Sacred Sex has moved beyond the emphasis on immediate gratification, it still doesn't offer much for the larger culture of non-practitioners. Perhaps integrating Sacred Sex with sublimation would be such an approach, for “A high degree of genital satisfaction, preventing energy stasis (and the reactivation of infantile, pregenital psychoneuroses), is necessary for genuine sublimative achievement.” (Manson 90)

I believe our sexual relations have reached the state of what Driver calls “...ritual boredom... a condition in which people have become fundamentally weary of the rituals available to them for giving their lives shape and meaning...” (7) He sees two causes for ritual boredom. Either “...the rituals ... have lost touch with the actualities of peoples lives and are thus arcane; or else the people have lost the ability to apprehend their very need of ritual, do not see what they are good for, and thus do not find them even potentially valuable.” (7)

Both apply to current sexual rituals. The sexual revolution has increased our awareness of the joy and potential for sexuality, which leaves our old taboo-laden approaches out of touch with our inner sense of possibilities. At the same time, our increasingly secular culture refuses to recognize the validity of ritual and therefore will not make conscious and revisit the old rituals which lie within.

However, the advertisers and product development people appreciate the power of ritual. The ubiquitous, in your face genitalia of our culture is full of sexual suggestions. All the elements are there, but the ritual is dead. Instead of sexual expression, we have sexual dogma.

I believe that Sacred Sex offers a new way of approaching sexuality in an enlivened ritual form. Although it has weaknesses, particularly in its emphasis on the relationship to the potential detriment of integration with the larger culture, it is much healthier than our current approaches, which teach us to be sexual customers instead of sexual human beings.

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