Spirituality and Intimate Relationships: Monogamy, Polyamory, and Beyond
Jorge N Ferrer
Tikkun; Jan/Feb 2007; 22, 1; ProQuest Religion
pg. 37



Spirituality and Intimate Relationships

Monogamy, Polyamory, and Beyond

by Jorge N. Ferrer

In Buddhism, sympathetic joy (*mudita*) is regarded as one of the "four immeasurable states" (*brahmaviharas*) or qualities of an enlightened person—the other three being loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), and equanimity (*upeksha*). Sympathetic joy refers to the human capability to participate in the joy of others, to feel happy when others feel happy. Although with different emphases, such understanding can also be found in the contemplative teachings of many other religious traditions such as the Kabbalah, Christianity, or Sufism, which in their respective languages talk about empathic joy, for example, in terms of opening the "eye of the heart." According to these and other traditions, the cultivation

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of sympathetic joy can break through the ultimately false duality between self and others, being therefore a potent aid on the path toward overcoming self-centeredness and achieving liberation.

Though the ultimate aim of many religious practices is to develop sympathetic joy for all sentient beings, intimate relationships offer human beings—whether they are spiritual practitioners or not—a precious opportunity to taste its experiential flavor. Most psychologically balanced individuals naturally share, to some degree, in the happiness of their mates. Bliss and delight can effortlessly emerge within us as we feel the joy of our partner's ecstatic dance, enjoyment of an art performance, relishing of a favorite dish, or serene contemplation of a splendid sunset. And this innate capacity for sympathetic joy in intimate relationships often reaches its peak in deeply emotional shared experiences, sensual exchange, and lovemaking. When we are in love, the embodied joy of our beloved becomes extremely contagious.

Jealousy in Monogamous Relationships

BUT WHAT IF OUR PARTNER'S sensuous or emotional joy were to arise in relation not to us but to someone else? For the vast majority of people, the immediate reaction would likely be not one of expansive openness and love, but rather of contracting fear, anger, and perhaps even violent rage. The change of a single variable has rapidly turned the selfless contentment of sympathetic joy into the "green-eyed monster" of jealousy, as Shakespeare called this compulsive emotion.

Perhaps due to its prevalence, jealousy is widely accepted as "normal" in most cultures, and many of its violent consequences have often been regarded as understandable, morally justified, and even legally permissible. (It is worth remembering that as late as the 1970s the law of states such as Texas, Utah, and New Mexico considered "reasonable" the homicide of one's adulterous partner if it happened at the scene of discovery!). Though there are circumstances in which the mindful expression of rightful anger (not violence) may be a temporary appropriate response—for example, in the case of the adulterous breaking of monogamous vows—jealousy frequently makes its appearance in interpersonal situations where no betrayal has taken place or when we rationally know that no real threat actually exists (for example, watching our partner's sensuous dance with an attractive person at a party). In general, the awakening of sympathetic joy in observing the happiness of one's mate in relationship with perceived "rivals" is an extremely rare pearl to find. In the context of romantic relationships, jealousy functions as a hindrance to sympathetic joy.

As jealousy dissolves, universal compassion and unconditional love become more easily available to the individual.

What are the roots of this widespread difficulty in experiencing sympathetic joy in the arenas of sexuality and sensuous experience? What is ultimately lurking behind such an apparently defiled behavior as jealousy? Can jealousy be transformed through a fuller embodiment of sympathetic joy in our intimate relationships? What emotional response can take the place of jealousy? And what are the implications of transforming jealousy for our spiritually informed relationship choices? To begin exploring these questions, we need to turn to the discoveries of modern evolutionary psychology.

Evolutionary Map of Jealousy

THE EVOLUTIONARY ORIGINS and function of jealousy have been clearly mapped by contemporary evolutionary psychologists, anthropologists, and zoologists. Despite its tragic impact in the modern world (the overwhelming majority of mate battering and spousal murders worldwide is caused by jealous violence), jealousy very likely emerged around 3.5 million years ago in our hominid ancestors as an adaptive response of vital evolutionary value for both genders. Whereas the reproductive payoff of jealousy for males was to secure certainty of paternity and avoid spending resources in support of another male's genetic offspring, for females it evolved as a mechanism for guaranteeing

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.



protection and resources for biological children by having a steady partner. In short, jealousy emerged in our ancestral past to protect males from being cuckolded and to protect women from being abandoned. This is why even today men tend to experience more intense feelings of jealousy than women do when they suspect sexual infidelity, while women are more likely than men to feel threatened when their mates become emotionally attached to another female and spend time and money with her. Modern research shows that this "evolutionary logic" in relation to gender-specific jealousy patterns operates widely across disparate cultures and countries, from Sweden to China, from North America and the Netherlands to Japan and Korea.

The problem, of course, is that many instinctive reactions that had evolutionary significance in ancestral times do not make much sense in our modern world. There are today many single mothers, for example, who do not need or want financial—or even emotional—support from their children's fathers, yet still feel jealous when their ex-partners pay attention to other women. And most contemporary men and women suffer from jealousy independent of whether they want children or plan to have them with their partners. As evolutionary psychologist David Buss puts it in his acclaimed book *The Evolution of Desire*, most human mating mechanisms and responses are actually "living fossils" shaped by the genetic pressures of our evolutionary history.

Our Genetic Instincts

INTERESTINGLY, THE GENETIC ROOTS of jealousy are precisely the same as those behind the desire for sexual exclusivity (or possessiveness) that we have come to call "monogamy." In contrast to conventional use, however, the term "monogamy" simply means "one spouse" and does not necessarily entail sexual fidelity. In any event, whereas jealousy is not exclusive to monogamous bonds (swingers and polyamorous people also feel jealous), the origins of jealousy and monogamy are intimately connected in our primeval past. Indeed, evolutionary psychology tells us that jealousy emerged as a hypersensitive defense mechanism against the genetically disastrous possibility of having one's partner stray from monogamy. In the ancestral savannah, it was as imperative for females to secure a stable partner who would provide food and protect their children from predators as it was for males to make sure they were not investing their time and energy in someone else's progeny. Put simply, from an evolutionary standpoint the main purpose of both monogamy and jealousy is to provide for the dissemination of one's DNA.

In a context of spiritual aspiration aimed at the gradual uncovering and transformation of increasingly subtle forms of self-centeredness, we can perhaps recognize that jealousy ultimately serves a biologically engrained form of egotism which we may call "genetic selfishness"—not to be confused with Richard Dawkins' "selfish gene" theory, which reduces human beings to the status of survival machines at the service of gene

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

replication. Genetic selfishness is so archaic, pandemic, and deeply seated in human nature that it invariably goes unnoticed in contemporary culture and spiritual circles. An example may help to reveal the elusive nature of genetic selfishness. In the movie *Cinderella Man*, an officer from the electric company is about to cut off the power at the residence of three children who will very likely die without heat—it is winter in New York at the time of the Great Depression. When the children's mother appeals to the compassion of the officer, begging him not to cut off the power, he retorts that his own children will suffer the same fate if he does not do his job. As I looked around the theater, I noted a large number of people in the audience nodding their heads in poignant understanding. We can all empathize with the officer's stance. After all, who would not do the same in similar circumstances? Is it not both humanely understandable and morally justifiable to favor the survival of one's own progeny over that of others? But, we may want to ponder, was the officer's decision the most enlightened action to take? What if by saving our only child we were condemning to death three or four children from another person? Should numbers be of any significance in these decisions? What course of action is most aligned with universal compassion in these admittedly extreme situations? Any effort to reach a generalized answer to these questions is likely misguided; each concrete situation requires careful examination within its context and from a variety of perspectives and ways of knowing. My aim in raising these questions is not to offer solutions, but merely to convey how tacitly genetic selfishness is embedded as "second nature" in the human condition.

Transforming Jealousy Into Sympathetic Joy

THE DISCUSSION OF THE TWIN evolutionary origins of jealousy and monogamy raises further questions: Can jealousy be truly transformed? What emotional response can take the place of jealousy in human experience? And how can the transformation of jealousy affect our relationship choices?

To my knowledge, in contrast to most other emotional states, jealousy has no antonym in any human language. This is probably why the Kerista community—a San Francisco-based polygamous group that was disbanded in the early 1990s—coined the term "compersion" to refer to the emotional response opposite to jealousy. The Keristas defined compersion as "the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves." Since the term emerged in the context of the practice of "polyfidelity" (faithfulness to many), it encompassed sensuous and sexual joy, but compersion was only cultivated when a person had loving bonds with all parties involved. However, the feeling of compersion can also be extended to any situation in which our mate feels emotional/sensuous joy with others in wholesome and constructive ways. In these situations, we can rejoice in our partner's joy even if we do not know the third parties. Experientially, compersion can be felt as a tangible presence in the heart whose awakening may be accompanied by waves of warmth, pleasure, and appreciation at the idea of our partner loving others and being loved by them in nonharmful and mutually beneficial ways. In this light, I suggest that compersion can be seen as a novel extension of sympathetic joy in the realm of intimate relationships, and particularly in interpersonal situations that conventionally evoke feelings of jealousy.

The reader acquainted with *Vajrayana* Buddhism may wonder whether such an extension is novel at all. Has not the transformation of jealousy into sympathetic joy been described in the tantric literature? Well, yes and no. In Vajrayana Buddhism, jealousy is considered an imperfection (*klesha*) associated with attachment and self-centeredness that is transmuted into sympathetic joy, equanimity, and wisdom by the power of the Lord of Karma, *Amoghasiddhi*, one of the Five *Dhyani* Buddhas (Buddhas we visualize in meditation). From the green body of Amoghasiddhi emanates his consort, the goddess Green Tara, who is said to also have the power of turning jealousy into the ability to dwell in the happiness of others.

At first sight, it may look as if the green gods and goddesses of the Buddhist

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

pantheon have defeated the green-eyed monster of jealousy. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that this perception needs correction. The problem is that the Buddhist terms translated as "jealousy"—such as *issa* (Pali); *phrag dog* (Tibetan); or *irshya* (Sanskrit)—are more accurately read as "envy." In the various Buddhist descriptions of "jealousy" we generally find illustrations of bitterness and resentment at the happiness, talents, or good fortune of others, but very rarely, if ever, of contracting fear and anger in response to a mate's sexual or emotional connection to others. In the *Abhidhamma*, for example, jealousy (*issa*) is considered an immoral mental state characterized by feelings of ill will at the success and prosperity of others. The description of the "jealous gods" realm (*asura-loka*) also supports this assertion. Though commonly called "jealous," the *asuras* are said to be envious of the gods of the heaven realm (*devas*), and possessed by feelings of ambition, hatred, and paranoia.

Discussing the *samsaric* mandala, Chöögyam Trungpa writes in *Orderly Chaos*, "It is not exactly jealousy; we do not seem to have the proper term in the English language. It is a paranoid attitude of comparison rather than purely jealousy . . . a sense of competition." As should be obvious, all of these descriptions refer to "envy"—defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "to feel displeasure and ill-will at the superiority of (another person) in happiness, success, reputation, or the possession of anything desirable"—and not to jealousy, which is a response to the real or imagined threat of losing one's partner or valued relationship to a third party. Since Buddhist teachings about jealousy were originally aimed at monks who were not supposed to develop emotional attachments (even those who engaged in tantric sexual acts), the lack of systematic reflection in Buddhism upon romantic jealousy should not come as a surprise.

Let us explore now the implications of transforming jealousy in our intimate relationships. I suggest that the transformation of jealousy through the cultivation of sympathetic joy bolsters the awakening of the enlightened heart. As jealousy dissolves, universal compassion and unconditional love become more easily available to the individual. Human compassion is universal in its embrace of all sentient beings without qualifications. Human love is also all-inclusive and unconditional—a love that is both free from the tendency to possess and that does not expect anything in return. Although to love without conditions is generally easier in the case of brotherly and spiritual love, I suggest that as we heal the historical split between spiritual love (*agape*) and sensuous love (*eros*), the extension of sympathetic joy to more embodied forms of love becomes a natural development. And when embodied love is emancipated from possessiveness, a richer range of spiritually legitimate relationship options organically emerges. As people become more whole and are freed from certain basic fears (e.g. of abandonment, unworthiness, or engulfment), new possibilities for the expression of embodied love open up, which may feel natural, safe, and wholesome, rather than undesirable, threatening, or even morally questionable. For example, once jealousy turns into sympathetic joy, and sensuous and spiritual love are integrated, a couple may feel drawn to extend their love to other individuals beyond the structure of the pair bond. In short, once jealousy loosens its grip on the contemporary self, human love can attain a wider dimension of embodiment in our lives that may naturally lead to the mindful cultivation of more inclusive intimate connections.

Human beings are endowed with widely diverse dispositions that predispose them toward different relationship styles: celibacy, monogamy, serial monogamy, or polyamory.

Social Monogamy as a Mask for Biological Polyamory

EVEN IF MINDFUL AND OPEN, the inclusion of other loving connections in the context of a partnership can elicit the two classic objections to nonmonogamy (or polyamory): First, it does not work in practice; and second, it leads to the destruction of relationships. (I am leaving aside here the deeply engrained moral opposition to the very idea of polyamory associated with the legacy of Christianity in the West.) As for the first objection, though polygyny ("many wives") is still culturally prevalent on the globe—out of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

853 known human cultures, 84 percent permit polygyny—it seems undeniable that with a few exceptions, modern attempts at more gender-egalitarian and open relationships have not been very successful. Nevertheless, the same could be said about monogamy. After all, the history of monogamy is the history of adultery. As H. H. Munro wrote, monogamy is "the Western custom of one wife and hardly any mistresses." Summing up the available evidence, David Buss estimates that "approximately 20 to 40 percent of American women and 30 to 50 percent of American men have at least one affair over the course of their marriage," and recent surveys suggest that the chance of *either* member of a modern couple committing infidelity at some point in their marriage may be as high as 76 percent—with these numbers increasing every year. Though most people in our culture consider themselves—and are believed to be—monogamous, anonymous surveys reveal that many are so socially, but not biologically.

The culturally prevalent belief that the only correct sexual options are either celibacy or monogamy is a myth that needs to be laid to rest.

In other words, social monogamy frequently masks biological polyamory in an increasingly significant number of couples. In her book *Anatomy of Love*, prominent anthropologist Helen Fisher suggests that the human desire for clandestine extramarital sex is genetically grounded in the evolutionary advantages that having other mates provided for both genders in ancestral times: extra opportunities to spread DNA for males, and extra protection and resources, plus the acquisition of potentially better sperm for females. It may also be important to note that the prevalent relationship paradigm in the modern West is no longer lifelong monogamy ("till death do us part"), but serial monogamy (many partners sequentially), often punctuated with adultery. Serial monogamy, plus clandestine adultery, is in many respects not too different from polyamory, except perhaps in that the latter is more honest, ethical, and arguably less harmful. In this context, the mindful exploration of polyamory may help in alleviating the suffering caused by the staggering number of clandestine affairs in our modern culture.

Furthermore, to disregard a potentially emancipatory cultural development because its early manifestations did not succeed may be unwise. Looking back at the history of emancipatory movements in the West—from feminism to the abolition of slavery to the gaining of civil rights by African Americans—we can see that the first waves of the Promethean impulse were frequently burdened with problems and distortions, which only later could be recognized and resolved. This is not the place to review this historical evidence, but to dismiss polyamory because of its previous failures may be equivalent to having written off feminism on the grounds that its first waves failed to reclaim genuine feminine values or free women from patriarchy (e.g. turning women into masculinized "superwomen" capable of succeeding in a patriarchal world).

Polyamory as a Path Toward Emotional and Spiritual Depth

BUT WAIT A MOMENT. Dyadic relationships are already challenging enough. Why complicate them further by adding extra parties to the equation? From a spiritual standpoint, an intimate relationship can be viewed as a structure through which human beings can learn to express and receive love in many forms. Although I would hesitate to declare polyamory more spiritual or evolved than monogamy, it is clear that if a person has not mastered the lessons and challenges of the dyadic structure he or she may not be ready to take on the challenges of more complex forms of relationships. Therefore, the objection of impracticability may be valid in many cases.

The second common objection to polyamory is that it results in the dissolution of pair bonds. The rationale is that the intimate contact with others will increase the chances that one member of the couple will abandon the other and run off with a more appealing mate. This concern is understandable, but the fact is that people are having affairs, falling in love, and leaving their partners all the time in the context of monogamous vows. As we have seen, adultery goes hand in hand with monogamy, and lifelong

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

monogamy has been mostly replaced with serial monogamy (or sequential polyamory) in our culture. Parenthetically, vows of lifelong monogamy create often unrealistic expectations that add suffering to the pain involved in the termination of any relationship—and one could also raise questions about the wholesomeness of the psychological needs for certainty and security that such vows normally meet. In any event, although it may sound counterintuitive at first, the threat of abandonment may be actually reduced in polyamory, since the loving bond that our partner may develop with another person does not necessarily mean that he or she must choose between them or us (or lie to us).

More positively, the new qualities and passions that novel intimate connections can awaken within a person can also bring a renewed sense of creative dynamism to the sexual/emotional life of the couple, whose frequent stagnation after three or four years (seven in some cases) is the chief cause of clandestine affairs and separation. As recent surveys show, the number of couples who successfully navigate the so-called four- and seven-year itches is decreasing every year. Mindful polyamory (i.e., practiced with the full knowledge and approval of all concerned) may also offer an alternative to the usually unfulfilling nature of currently prevalent serial monogamy in which people change partners every few years, never benefiting from the emotional and spiritual depth that only an enduring connection with another human being provides. In a context of psychospiritual growth, such exploration can create unique opportunities for the development of emotional maturity, the transmutation of jealousy into sympathetic joy, the emancipation of embodied love from exclusivity and possessiveness, and the integration of sensuous and spiritual love. As Christian mystic Richard of St. Victor maintains, mature love between lover and beloved naturally reaches beyond *(continued on page 60)*

Dear Swami

BY SWAMI BEYONDANANDA

DEAR SWAMI: The war in Iraq drags on. More than 600,000 civilians have died in Iraq since our invasion, as have more than 2,800 of our troops. Private companies are making money hand over fist, yet the Iraqi people don't even have basic services. Our fearless leader has instituted a stay the (inter)course policy, and no one seems able to stop him. I could go on.

My question is, where are the religious leaders in this country? I don't mean those in the thrall of the Religious Right. I mean those ministers in mainstream denominations, rabbis with conscience, Evangelicals who believe in Jesus' actual teachings, New Thought ministers, etc. Where are these people, and why aren't they standing up and speaking out? Is it about losing their nonprofit status, or something deeper?

—Ann Sadat, Putney, Vermont

DEAR ANN: Regardless of what our religious leaders are or aren't doing, most Americans are waking up to the sad realization that our President laid an egg in Iraq, and now the chickens are coming home to roost. Once again, we've had to learn that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(continued from page 36) can teach kids is self-control, partly because the number one cause of teenage deaths is a failure in self-control—drinking and driving for example—and also because as long as children have not mastered self-control they will not be able to get on with the other tasks of child development. The kid who is once again sitting in the principal's office for shouting out in class or bothering the student next to him is missing out on both academic and social experiences.

Kids need us to be there, without judgment. When I asked a large group of my sons' friends what single thing would lessen the stress in their life, they told me—without prompting—that they wanted to spend fifteen minutes with their favorite teacher, just hanging out. That's what quality time means—it's human being, not human doing. Research tells us that eating with our children five times a week dramatically cuts the likelihood of them being substance abusers. Other research tells us that a half hour of "floor time" with young children encourages emotional health. We need to hang out with our children, to "chill," to be the inviting, listening presence that encourages disclosure and reflection in our kids.

Kids need a sense of purpose. A child's first community is his or her family. Children should be encouraged, at an age-appropriate level, to contribute to their households. We need to pull back on micro-managing our kids' academic and athletic lives and make sure that they have a meaningful life within the family. Chores, family outings, dinners together with everyone participating in preparation or clean up, assure our children that they are both loved and needed by their families.

An Alternative to Materialist Culture

OUR MATERIALIST CULTURE teaches us that if we only get our kids the right things—the right clothes, the right schools—that they will be happy. Our culture is wrong. The thrill that we get from "stuff" is amazingly short lived. Even lottery winners, people whose lives have been radically altered by great sums of money, have been found to return to the same level of happiness they were at before their windfall within about eight weeks.

Of course we want our children to be happy. But in order to successfully navigate through life, kids need more than happiness. They need a strong sense of self, an internal home, where they can retreat to problem solve and heal when the going gets tough. Even if we could give our children a "perfect" childhood—no unhappiness, no distress, no failure—we would be sadly mistaken if we thought that they would then have a "perfect" life. The notion of perfection is a childhood fantasy, one we would do well to get rid of. If every time our toddler fell, we picked him up, we would be crippling him for life. He wouldn't learn how to fall down and find himself quite capable of getting up and starting out again. Every time we prematurely intervene for our children—call the teacher about a grade that doesn't seem right, or argue with the coach about why our child is sitting on the bench—we interfere with our child's ability to learn how to manage their own conflicts and disappointments. As our children grow, they carry themselves, not their parents, with them at all times.

The renowned pediatrician Dr. Spock said that a child who has not been bandaged has not been well loved. Part of being a parent is the very difficult job of watching our children struggle. It is an act of love that we are able to do this, and in the process we make sure that our children develop a healthy sense of self—the ability to be independent, capable, and connected to others.

Many children of privilege (as well as their parents) are disconnected and lonely. Our culture of materialism makes them lonelier, teaching them to replace people with things. They are vulnerable to the bankrupt values on TV shows like *My Supersweet Sixteen* or *Pimp My Ride.* Because of the pervasiveness of the media, we are all swimming in the same ocean of isolation and materialism. In that ocean, there is no safe harbor.

I've been on a book tour recently, and one day I found myself standing at the pulpit of an Episcopal church. It was awkward for a Jewish girl, accustomed to her home shul, but I found my sense heightened by the newness of the situation. I started talking, and when I hit the part of my speech about how important it is for a child to be connected, I had a moment of intense clarity. I looked around at the people sitting in the pews and realized that you can't walk out on the street and create a community. You can't stand on a corner with a placard saying, "I'm ready to be connected to other people."

The church I was standing in—and other faith- or community-based institutions that embody parents' values—can provide that kind of ready-made community for our kids. They can be our safe harbors.

Children need communities where they can learn shared values and make connections that are not based on their performance. Children need places where people value them for being who they are, not for what they do or how they perform. They need parents who love them just for being themselves. They need a life in which the essence of a person matters, a life based on values. They need an inner life, a reflective life; they need, as we need, a more spiritual life. ■

Madeline Levine, PhD, has been a practicing clinical psychologist for twenty-five years. She is the author of Viewing Violence, See No Evil, *and most recently* The Price of Privilege *(HarperCollins, 2006).*

(continued from page 43) itself toward a third reality, and this opening, I suggest, might in some cases be crucial both to overcome codependent tendencies and to foster the health, creative vitality, and perhaps even longevity of intimate relationships.

I should stress that my intent is not to argue for the superiority of any relationship style over others—a discussion I find both pointless and misleading. Human beings are endowed with widely diverse biological, psychological, and spiritual dispositions that predispose them toward different relationship styles: celibacy, monogamy, serial monogamy, or polyamory. In other words, many equally valid psychospiritual trajectories may call individuals to engage in one or another relationship style either

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

for life or at specific junctures in their paths. Whereas the psychospiritual foundation for this diversity of mating responses cannot be empirically established, recent discoveries in neuroscience support the idea of a genetic base. When scientists inserted a piece of DNA from a monogamous species of mice (prairie voles) into males from a different—and highly promiscuous—mice species, the latter turned fervently monogamous. What is more striking is that some people carry an extra bit of DNA in a gene responsible for the distribution of vasopressin receptors in the brain (a hormone associated with attachment bonds), while others do not, and that piece of DNA is very similar to the one found in the monogamous prairie voles. Although the implications of this finding for our understanding of human mating await further clarification, it strongly suggests that a diversity of relationship styles—both monogamous and polyamorous—may be genetically imprinted in humans.

Religious Decree on Sexual Behavior

I ADDRESS THE OBJECTIONS to polyamory because lifelong or serial monogamy (together with celibacy) are still widely considered the only or most "spiritually correct" relationship styles in the modern West. In addition to the traditional Christian prescription of lifelong monogamy, many influential contemporary Buddhist teachers in the West make similar recommendations. Consider, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh's reading of the Buddhist precept of "refraining from sexual misconduct." For the monks, this precept originally meant to avoid engaging in any sexual act whatsoever and; for lay people it was to not engage in a list of "inappropriate" sexual behaviors having to do with specific body parts, times, and places. In his book *For a Future to Be Possible*, Thich Nhat Hanh explains that the monks of his order follow the traditional celibate vow in order to use sexual energy as a catalyst for spiritual breakthrough. For lay practitioners, however, Thich Nhat Hanh reads the precept to mean avoiding all sexual contact unless it takes place in the context of a "long-term commitment between two people," because there is an incompatibility between love and casual sex (monogamous marriage is a common practice for lay people in his order). In this reading, Thich Nhat Hanh reinterprets the Buddhist precept as a prescription for long-term monogamy, excluding the possibility of not only wholesome polyamorous relations, but also spiritually edifying intimate encounters. (It is important to note, however, that "long-term commitment" is not equivalent to "monogamy," since it is perfectly feasible to hold a long-term commitment with more than one intimate partner.) In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama also assumes a monogamous structure as the container for appropriate sex in intimate relationships. Since reproduction is the biological purpose of sexual relations, he tells us, long-term commitment and sexual exclusivity are desirable for the wholesomeness of love relationships.

Despite the great respect I feel for these and other Buddhist teachers who speak in similar fashion, I must confess my perplexity. These assessments of appropriate sexual expression, which have become influential guidelines for many contemporary Western Buddhists, are often offered by celibate individuals whose sexual experience is likely to be limited, if not nonexistent. If there is anything we have learned from developmental psychology, it is that an individual needs to perform a number of "developmental tasks" to gain competence (and wisdom) in various arenas: cognitive, emotional, sexual, and so forth. Even when offered with the best of intentions, advice offered about aspects of life in which one has not achieved developmental competence through direct experience may be both questionable and misleading. When this advice is given by figures as culturally venerated as spiritual authorities, the situation can become even more problematic. What is more, in the context of spiritual praxis, these assertions can arguably be seen as incongruent with the emphasis on direct knowledge characteristic of Buddhism.

It may be worth remembering that the Buddha himself encouraged polyamory over monogamy in certain situations. In the *Jataka 200* (stories of Buddha's former births), a Brahmin asks the Buddha for advice regarding four suitors who are courting his four daughters. The Brahmin says, "One was fine and handsome, one was old and well advanced in years, the third a man of family [noble birth], and the fourth was good." "Even though there be beauty and the like qualities," the Buddha answered, "a man is to be despised if he fails in virtue. Therefore the former is not the measure of a man; those that I like are the virtuous." After hearing this, the Brahmin gave all his daughters to the virtuous suitor.

As the Buddha's advice illustrates, several forms of relationship may be spiritually wholesome (in the Buddhist sense of leading to liberation) according to various human dispositions and contextual situations. Historically, Buddhism hardly ever considered one relationship style intrinsically more wholesome than others for lay people and tended to support different relationship styles depending on cultural and karmic factors. From the Buddhist perspective of skillful means (*upaya*) and of the soteriological nature of Buddhist ethics, it also follows that the key factor in evaluating the appropriateness of any intimate connection may not be its form but rather its power to eradicate the suffering of self and others. There is much to learn today, I believe, from the nondogmatic and pragmatic approach of historical Buddhism to intimate relationships—an approach that was not attached to any specific relationship structure but was essentially guided by a radical emphasis on liberation.

As is well known, Judaism permitted and even encouraged polygyny ("many wives") for centuries until Rabbeinu Gershom (c. 960-1028) enacted an edict against marrying more than one wife, unless allowed on special grounds by at least 100 rabbis from three different countries. Interestingly, Rav Yaakov Emden explains, the reason for the ban was not moral or spiritual, but social. The edict was a reaction to the danger that having more than one wife could bring to the Jews in a Europe increasingly dominated by Christianity, which had been trying

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to abolish polygamy from about 600CE to 900CE. In short, the purpose of the edict was to protect the Jewish people from being attacked or even killed by resentful Christian fundamentalists. Furthermore, according to most authorities, the ban was supposed to have validity only until the end of the fifth millennium of the Jewish calendar, so it never actually had the force of an edict (*cherem*) after the year 1240CE, though it continued as a custom in many places. (Originally, the prohibition was also limited geographically to certain European countries and regions.) If the Torah and the biblical law permitted polyamory, if the rationale for the prohibition was contextual, and if the validity of the edict was supposed to last only until the year 1240CE, then the current observance of the Cherem Rabbeinu Gershom seems unjustified. Of course, in light of the modern reconstruction of Judaism carried out by Rabbi Michael Lerner and others (see Lerner's *The Jewish Renewal*), contemporary Jews may regard the traditional endorsement of polygyny and prohibition of polyandry ("many husbands") as a "sexist" trend of ancient Judaism and, consequently, may want to creatively explore more egalitarian forms of polyamory.

For a variety of evolutionary and historical reasons, polyamory has had "bad press" in Western culture and spiritual circles—being automatically linked, for example, with promiscuity, irresponsibility, inability to commit, and even narcissistic hedonism. Given the current crisis of monogamy in our culture, however, it may be valuable to explore seriously the social potential of responsible forms of nonmonogamy. And given the spiritual potential of such exploration, it may also be important to expand the range of spiritually legitimate relationship choices that we as individuals can make at the various karmic crossroads of our lives.

Beyond Monogamy and Polyamory

IT IS MY HOPE THAT THIS ESSAY opens avenues for dialogue and inquiry in spiritual circles about the transformation of intimate relationships. It is also my hope that it contributes to the extension of spiritual virtues, such as sympathetic joy, to all areas of life and in particular to those which, due to historical, cultural, and perhaps evolutionary reasons, have been traditionally excluded or overlooked—areas such as sexuality and romantic love.

The culturally prevalent belief—supported by many contemporary spiritual teachers—that the only spiritually correct sexual options are either celibacy or monogamy is a myth that may be causing unnecessary suffering and that needs, therefore, to be laid to rest. It may be perfectly plausible to hold simultaneously more than one loving or sexual bond in a context of mindfulness, ethical integrity, and spiritual growth, for example, while working toward the transformation of jealousy into sympathetic joy and the integration of sensuous and spiritual love. I should add right away that, ultimately, I believe that the greatest expression of spiritual freedom in intimate relationships does not lie in strictly sticking to any particular relationship style—whether monogamous or polyamorous—but rather in a radical openness to the dynamic unfolding of life that eludes any fixed or predetermined structure of relationships. It should be obvious, for example, that one can follow a specific relationship style for the "right" (e.g. life-enhancing) or "wrong" (e.g., fear-based) reasons; that all relationship styles can become equally limiting spiritual ideologies; and that different internal and external conditions may rightfully call us to engage in different relationship styles at various junctures of our lives. It is in this open space catalyzed by the movement beyond monogamy and polyamory, I believe, that an existential stance deeply attuned to the standpoint of Spirit can truly emerge.

Nevertheless, gaining awareness about the ancestral—and mostly obsolete—nature of the evolutionary impulses that direct our sexual/emotional responses and relationship choices may empower us to consciously co-create a future in which expanded forms of spiritual freedom may have a greater chance to bloom. Who knows, perhaps as we extend spiritual practice to intimate relationships, new petals of liberation will blossom that may not only emancipate our minds, hearts, and consciousness, but also our bodies and instinctive world. Can we envision an "integral *bodhisattva* vow" in which the conscious mind renounces full liberation until the body and the primary world can be free as well? ■

Jorge N. Ferrer, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of East-West Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco. He is the author of Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality *(SUNY Press, 2002) and co-editor of* The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies *(SUNY Press, forthcoming).*

HESCHEL FOR A NEW GENERATION

(continued from page 55) mirrors and feeds an abyss at the heart of the divine, a state of agonized estrangement *within* God. Only human action can restore the Bride to her supernal Husband, can *reunify* God through the raising up of the world.

Heschel integrates these existential and mystical teachings with prophetic outrage at social injustice. Heschel's God weeps over the state of the world, the unnecessary suffering sown in injustice, violence, and oppression. Justice, says Heschel "is not only a relationship between man and man, it is an *act* involving God, a divine need."

God *needs* us, to hear, to heed, and to respond. Redemption—restoration of the broken, weeping God—hinges on the degree to which we as human beings allow ourselves to commune with divine anguish in the face of suffering—and join in solidarity with the oppressed.

We are "wired" for empathy. Our moral grammar is innate, evolutionists tell us. And yet, Kitty Genovese: neighbors look on as a woman screams and is stabbed before their eyes.

For Heschel, our "wired" response to suffering is God operating within us. And our turning away—Pharaoh's hardened heart. The worst evil: indifference, callousness, paralysis.

My activism right now is difficult. I oversee the Rabbis for Human Rights Jewish Campaign against Torture. Sometimes

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.