

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bridging Worlds: Sexuality, Spirituality and Cultural Exchange in Luso-Hispanic and European Encounters with India

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Accepted version published on July 1, 2026

 <https://doi.org/10.26572/ghr2601501>

ABSTRACT

This paper critically explores the intersections of sexuality, spirituality, and cultural perception through the works of Jose Ignacio Cabezon and Ilija Trojanow, situated within the broader discursive framework of Luso-Hispanic and European engagements with India. Building on Cabezon's extensive analysis of sexuality in classical South Asian Buddhism, this work offers a nuanced understanding of how sexual ethics were perceived and practised in historical Indian Buddhist traditions. This comparative study immerses us in the idea of Maya – as both a type of ontological thinking and a philosophical conception in Buddhist thought – and raises the question: How do Cabezon's and Trojanow's interpretations of sexuality and spirituality engage with the Buddhist concept of Maya, in particular about desire, attachment, and the illusory nature of sexual identity? In order to answer this question, both authors use Maya to illuminate the process of self-discovery in India, where the transcendence of illusion-including that of sexual identity-becomes part of the spiritual journey toward enlightenment. This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how Buddhist epistemology reframes Western narratives of desire and spirituality, offering alternative frameworks for cross-cultural engagement.

Keywords: sexuality, spirituality, cultural perception, sexual ethics

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The interplay between sexuality and spirituality within Buddhist traditions presents a complex and often paradoxical relationship, particularly in the context of an obstacle to enlightenment, in which, in monastic traditions, celibacy is required. Buddhism often emphasises the transcendence of worldly desires, yet a nuanced understanding of Buddhist and spiritual discourses reveals that the term "Desire" can be seen as intrinsic to identity. Two significant works – Roebuck's translation of the *Dhammapada* and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* - offer a literary and westernised interpretation of an integral phase of self-discovery, fully addressing the cross-cultural dimensions of spiritual development through renunciation. These works intertwine the fictional journey of the putative Buddha and the reality of Gautama's own lived experience, seeking to reconcile the diversity of experience, the harmony of a unifying spirit, the security of religious dogma, and the anxiety of freedom with respect to enlightenment.

Despite extensive research on Nirvana or Enlightenment in Buddhist teachings, a critical gap remains in contemporary scholarly discussions of "Sexuality and Maya" in relation to Desire. At the same time, early traditions and scholarly interpretations reveal a more understanding of sexuality's role in the spiritual path, such as in Richardson's *The Heart of Tantric Sex*. Within the context of sexuality and spirituality, the concept of Maya occupies a central position in South Asian (Indian) philosophy and religious traditions, functioning as an ontological and epistemological category. *Maya* acts as an important lens through which the nature of desire was questioned- whether it is a mere distraction from the path of enlightenment or a transformative force that, when properly understood, can facilitate deep self-awareness. While dealing with the concept of Maya, where tensions between Eastern detachment and Western existentialism came forth and emerged as a critical point in the discussion of Desire and Maya within Buddhism, particularly in relation to Sexuality and Spirituality, in which Buddhist teachings seek to dissolve the self and transcend suffering, existentialism urges individuals to embrace the self and affirm suffering as the very condition of meaning. It shows how India becomes a space of self-discovery for Westerners, and the paradox arises when Western seekers reject materialism yet embrace desire, even as both traditions address human suffering and the nature of existence while offering contrasting solutions.

Both Cabezon's *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism* and Trojanow's *Gebrauchsanweisung für Indien* examine the Buddhist concepts of Maya and Desire as frameworks for understanding sexuality. Cabezon's work offers a historical and doctrinal basis for this idea, illustrating that while Buddhist monks initially viewed sexuality as an obstacle to be understood, Vajrayana considers it a crucial element in achieving enlightenment beyond desire. In a similar vein, Trojanow depicts India as a realm in which Western or European travellers face their own illusions about identity, spirituality, and sex. This paradox lies at the heart of his involvement with *Maya*: Desire is alluring, yet ultimately deceptive. In this way, this paper addresses a further question: does desire bind us to illusion or reveal our freedom? How does the concept of Maya function differently in Cabezon's sexuality in classical South Asian Buddhism and Trojanow's literary exploration in *Gebrauchsanweisung für Indien*? Does Tantra truly liberate desire, or does it simply reframe it within yet another set of constraints? This research employs a textual-historical method and a comparative analytical approach, incorporating visual and historical analyses of Khajuraho's sculptures to explore sexuality and desire. It examines Cabezon's Buddhist perspectives on sexuality alongside Trojanow's portrayal of Maya, using hermeneutics to decode cultural narratives.

Cabezón's notions on Sexuality in classical South-Asian Buddhism

Early Buddhist view on Desire:

The Buddha famously taught that life is suffering and they "located the source of this in desire, thirst or craving. The desire is unattainable because our thirst is unquenchable." (Nijjara 4). Sexual desire (*Kama-tanha*) can be understood as one of three types of craving (*Tanha*), as introduced in the earliest Buddhist texts of the Pali Canon, where craving for existence (*Bhava-tanha*) and craving for non-existence (*Vibhava-tanha*) are major components in the analysis of monastic perspectives, canonical texts, and historical contexts. Among these, sexual desire is especially examined in monastic discourses, where it is regarded as a hindrance to spiritual advancement.

It illustrates how the Vinaya, or monastic discipline, imposes a stringent ban on sexual activity, with celibacy (*Brahmacarya*) being a key characteristic of the lives of Buddhist monks and nuns. Cabezon defines all these codes in comparison to Christian codes: "they advocate strict celibacy, at least for those who are serious about salvation. Desire is, as Sartre once said, 'trouble.'" (Cabezón 93) Cabezón even compares it to Christian monastic codes, pointing out that both traditions promote strict celibacy for

those serious about salvation. This comparison raises the question: As a scholar rooted in Christian thought, does he acknowledge the unique Buddhist perspective, which views sexuality not as a sin but as a possible hindrance to enlightenment?

Abhidharma Analysis on Buddhist Philosophy

The Abhidharma teachings comprise a collection of texts and doctrines that open up new avenues for classifying the phenomenon of existence. The *Abhidharma Pitaka* outlines a system that serves as a philosophy, psychology, and ethics, all fused into an integrated framework aimed at liberation (*Moksa*). Cabezon explains further how Abhidharma traditions systematised sexual desire (Kama-raga) in a more pragmatic and context-dependent way. This system has been designated the "dhamma-theory" (dhammavada), in which the Suttas of "Buddhism speak of 'I' and 'You' of 'man' and 'woman' as they are concrete realities." (Charles. K 142) They further classify the 'Desire' in the form of 'I' and 'You', in which Kama-raga (sensual craving) is analysed as an afflictive mental factor (*Klesa*) that leads to attachment. This attachment arises furthermore through the desirable object, which gives rise to raga-citta (lustful consciousness), where one realises the impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anatta*) nature of all phenomena. "According to Buddhist scholastic literature, desire is intentional, a western philosophical term meaning 'to be directed towards an object'. Desire is always for some object" (Cabezon 103)

This attachment can be seen as a major obstacle in meditative practices, because according to *Abhidharma* teachings, "Celibacy fits in well with the general ascetic lifestyle, which consists in restraint of the senses for goals such as overcoming (*tanha*) or attainment of peace. *Nirvana*, the cessation of suffering, can be attained only through the complete eradication of craving" (Cabezon 112). In this way, the query arises: Why does Abhidharma revolve around the renunciation of Desire? This explains that the teachings provide a psychological explanation of why sexual desires arise and how they can be eradicated in order to attain Moksha or Enlightenment. In order to answer this question, Cabezon defines the concept of '*Maya*', which arises due to sexual desire and attachment, as they create the illusion of pleasure, which leads to lasting happiness. He further describes Buddhism as internalising *Maya* as a cognitive and existential delusion. In order to eradicate *Maya*, he elaborates, "Sacrificing one's sexuality is part of the price to be paid for gaining the exalted status called worthiness." (Cabezon 94) Overcoming *Maya* through wisdom "(panna) and insight (vipassana)" (Hseuh Li 07) leads to *Nibbana*.

Mahayana Buddhism- Desire and Compassion

While continuing the journey of Sexuality and Maya, Cabezon highlights "Different Buddhist philosophers identify the object of desire differently in different contexts." (Cabezon 101) Mahayana teachings take a more flexible approach, emphasising Upaya (skilful means), as they hold that there are ultimately no divisions between 'this' and 'that' or 'good' and 'bad'. They emphasise the practice of understanding the nature of this reality and its implications for how we construct our conventional, delusional reality. "Mahayana philosophy proclaimed that all aspects of existence are empty of their own being" (Anthony 53). The theory emerges from *the Bodhisattva Path* (David 56), which allows for engagement with the world without attachment, and "became less prominent towards the Attainment of nirvana than awakening to the true nature of reality" (Paul 5), i.e., bodhisattvas may live as householders while still working towards enlightenment.

It further illustrates that enlightened beings do not necessarily reject sensory pleasures but instead transform their relationship with them. He emphasized the illusory nature of worldly attachment, including sexual desires in *Vimalakirti Sutra*, which arises dependently (*pratityasamutpada*) through sensory experiences, emotions and suffering existence "the cause of desire as a misconceived image of the object" (Cabezon: 99). This leads to fabrication of mind and also suggests that it is neither to be indulged in nor absolutely renounced but seen as an empty inherent existence (Sunyata). For instance, Cabezon critiques dualistic thinking, highlighting 'The Surangama Sutra' (Cabezon 120), which marks a shift from strict renunciation to a more engaged spirituality. This approach proposes that practitioners can skillfully use desire to cultivate deeper awareness and transcend egoic attachment, rather than rejecting it outright. Cabezon, in this context, writes – "A single object can be pleasant for some and not for others. For an ascetic, a beautiful woman's body is a corpse; for a passionate man, it is an object of desire; and for a dog it is a morsel." (Cabezon 100)

Role of Tantric Buddhism in Sexuality and Desire

"The concept Tantra emerged from the combination of two words- 'tattva' and 'mantra' (Ngawang 7), where tattva refers to the science of cosmic principles and mantra refers to the mystic science and vibrations. Cabezon analysed – "the concept of union of wisdom and bliss, which male picturizes as a father (compassion) and female as a mother (wisdom) in intimate union." (Mumford 06) However, these sexual union metaphors are often misunderstood, which is why many people, instead of understanding the profound symbolism of compassion and wisdom in perfect union,

see only lust. *Vajrayana (Tantric Buddhism)* emphasises the idea that desire can be used to transcend itself, when the "Hevajra Tantra and Guhyasamaja Tantra" (Mumford: 6) reconciles that states sexual energy, properly channelled, can lead to enlightenment. The goal is to experience bliss without attachment, dissolving the illusion of duality.

In this way, Cabezon's study of sexuality in Buddhism reveals that sexual union (Karma mudra) can be seen as a meditative practice. He explores how different Buddhist traditions engage with sexuality, not just as repression but in relation to ethical conduct and meditative practices. "Tantra transcends completely the conventional idea of a man and a woman having a sexual relationship. It is about working with phenomena to bring about the extraordinary realisation of emptiness and Bodhicitta in order to liberate all beings from Samsara" (Pandit Antaryami 119). Moreover, Cabezon argues that Tantra's esoteric teachings were historically limited to advanced practitioners, as improper understanding can lead to moral corruption or hedonism disguised as spirituality. "Loveless sex causes people to treat each other as mere objects. It is animalistic, perhaps meeting some immediate, carnal appetite, but ultimately leaving people emotionally empty." (Cabezon 124) Maya here functions as a reminder that attachment to pleasure is a hindrance, but when experienced with detachment and mindfulness, it can be a vehicle for self-realisation.

Role of Maya in Trojanow's *Gebrauchsanweisung für Indien*

It is a travelogue (travel literature) that blends a European perspective on India, personal observations, cultural analysis, and philosophical reflections. Trojanow approached India and its culture not as a detached observer but as someone attempting to decode its complexities from within. In the chapter "Maya" of this travelogue, he engages with the Indian philosophical concepts of illusion, reality, and perception. At first, the author discusses the concept of Maya in relation to the preconceived notions that India is spiritual and the West is materialistic. He emphasised, "Spirituality is omnipresent." (Cabezon 92) However, the author concludes that Indian religiosity is a mirage, an oriental rainbow. Trojanow presents outsiders' perception of India as chaotic, overwhelming, and contradictory, mirroring the idea of *Maya* as something that distorts reality. His Idea of *Maya* oscillates between the traditional philosophical meaning and a more experimental cultural perspective. In this way, he visited the Khajuraho Temple, where he noticed the symbolism and Interpretation of temple architecture and explored multiple layers of meaning. The lowest level represents the animal world. The middle level corresponds to sensory pleasure and harmony. The topmost level signifies divine elevation. All these levels

reflect the Indian preference for cosmic balance, which is depicted through the male and female energies, i.e., *Yoni* (Feminine) and *Linga* (Masculine).

This aligns with tantric Buddhist philosophy, where sexuality is a means to transcendence rather than a barrier to it. He adds that those who only see sex themes certainly become prisoners of their urges. He depicts walls as a way for a soul to connect with another soul. (*Die Lehre von der Einheit des Körpers, der Seele und des Geistes*) (Trojanow 32). His take on Maya moves beyond metaphysics, illustrating how it manifests in social, political and everyday experiences. He explores how Western travellers encounter Maya in their own perceptions of India- expecting mysticism, exoticism and spiritual depth, only to confront contradictions, commercialised spirituality and cultural complexity. For instance, he shows – “ein niedliches Miniaturidol oder das Bild des Heiligen hält Bettler für, durch die *Eremiten mit Bettlerschalen Almosen im Tausch gegen Segen anbieten*. (Beggars hold image of the saint, through which hermits with begging bowl ask for money or something in exchange for blessing).” (Trojanow 38).

Analysis

The Role of Maya beyond Sexuality and Desire

Both Ilija Trojanow's *Gebrauchsanweisung fuer Indien* (specifically the *Maya* chapter) and Jose Ignacio Cabezon's *Sexuality in classical South Asian Buddhism* (specifically the *Desire and Human Sexuality* chapter) examine desire and illusion (*Maya*) in different yet overlapping ways. Cabezon, in his analysis of sexuality and desire in *Abhidharma, Mahayana* and *Vajrayana Buddhism*, examines how the body is both a site of suffering and transcendence depending on the tradition. He discusses how Buddhist monastic codes (*Vinaya*) often portray women and sensual pleasures as a source of illusion, leading monks astray. However, Tantric practices use desire and illusion consciously- as a means to transcendence while maintaining non-attachment.

On the other hand, Trojanow, in his reflections on Sexuality in the Khajuraho temples, suggests that India's cultural landscape embraces both Asceticism and Indulgence, and examines the everyday lives of people in the carvings on the walls, using the concept of “Maya” to discuss broader cultural and religious paradoxes, including sexuality. Furthermore, He highlights how people desire to belong to a community, which strengthens their attachment to religious identity. In this way, one can understand how both authors present Maya not merely as an abstract philosophical idea but as an active force shaping religious thought and political or patriarchal realities.

Khajuraho, Tantra and the Artistic Representation of Desire

Tantric Buddhist iconography, such as depictions of sexual union (Yab-Yum), is not meant to be literal but serves as a visual representation of metaphysical concepts. According to Cabezon, sexual union in tantric texts is symbolic, explicitly described as ritualised practices to break free from Maya by realising the illusory nature of dualistic thinking. On the other hand, Trojanow challenges, in the context of sexual representation in religious art like Khajuraho, the modern tendency to view such depictions as merely pornographic. He emphasised – “Those who see only sex here are surely prisoners of their desires: only a liberated gaze can recognise the true message, the teaching of the unity of body, soul and spirit. (*Wer hier nur Sex sieht, ist gewiss ein Gefangener seiner Gelüste, nu ein befreiter Blick kann die wahre Botschaft erkennen*) (Trojanow 36) He would likely argue that just as Khajuraho’s sculptures are misinterpreted as mere expressions of pleasure when they actually convey religious and philosophical ideas, Tantric Buddhist sexuality should also be understood within its esoteric and sacred framework rather than through a profane or secular lens.

Conclusion

The conclusion makes it clear that Jose Ignacio Cabezon shows classical South Asian Buddhism does not completely reject sexuality, but rather situates it within the context of monastic and lay ethics. On the other hand, Ilija Trojanow’s examination of *Maya* portrays illusion as a realm in which spirituality and sensuality coexist. This allows for an alignment of the notion of Maya with Nietzsche’s “will to power” (Nietzsche 67), which posits that illusions (*Maya*) are not merely falsehoods to be rejected but essential forces that give rise to human existence.

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