



What would the Buddha say about infidelity?

Whether you're a victim of infidelity or its perpetrator, dealing with the emotional upheaval that arises due to an extra-marital affair can be devastating. In such turbulent times, Buddha's wisdom can come to your rescue.

■ By Nancy O'Hara

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT CREATES suffering. Period. Whether we are the ones engaging in it or are the victims of it, everyone involved suffers. To understand just how corrosive and harmful this is to forming a true partnership and how it interferes with an intimate connection to another person, we only have to look at our own community and perhaps our own family and friends. Who doesn't know someone who has been affected by the misuse and abuse of sex? 2,600 years ago, Buddha, a human being just like you and me, knew how destructive such behaviour could be. The good news is that he also prescribed a way out of our suffering and offered us a clear path to liberation from our suffering and from our own misbehaviours.

The first of the five hindrances that Buddha warned us about is lustful desires. In the Dhammapada, a concise collection of Buddha's teachings, he said: "Lust and greed ruin the mind as weeds ruin fields." This is an image that we can all relate to and have probably, at one time or another, experienced for ourselves.

So, if we have been a victim or a perpetrator of infidelity, how can Buddhism help us today in the 21st century to understand, cope, and

deal with it? How can we move from ill-will, hatred or anger toward our self or our partner, to healing and forgiveness?

Being a victim of our partner's infidelity

Whatever we're feeling about this transgression, chances are we are feeling some level of anger and jealousy. The first step is to find our way out of this murky depth of distraction, so that we can see clearly what there is to do. If we get stuck in blaming, shaming and keeping the focus on someone else's faults, there is no way out for us.

Dealing with your emotions towards your partner

Begin practising mindfulness by taking the focus off the other person and turning your attention to your self and your feelings. Find a quiet place to sit, with as few external distractions as possible. Then turn your attention to your body, your breath and your inner landscape.

Take note of what keeps coming up:

"I hate him/her for doing this to me."

"I'm a fool for believing in him/her."

"I can't believe he/she cheated on me with *that* person."

How does your body feel? Where is the tension? Can you breathe into those places one by one and, every time you exhale, breathe out some relief?

Then start to remove the pronouns, the names and the specifics about this betrayal from your thoughts. How does it feel to admit hate or foolishness or worry? Then sit with just the feelings that are coming up; part the feelings from the individuals attached to them. Most likely there's some anger in there. How about fear? Are these feelings new to you or have you felt them before? Can you try to accept that you are feeling these things and make an effort to not act on them? Can you accept that these feelings are inside you and the actions of your partner simply triggered them? Can you believe that you have the power to ignite these feelings or not?

Mindfully meditating

Can you *feel* anger without *being* angry? Sit with this idea for a few moments, without feeding your emotions with a story. Notice what happens to the emotion if you just allow it to exist. You can practice this during the course of any day: first take note of your reaction to minor incidents, a pedestrian or co-worker being rude, traffic stalling when you're in a hurry, a slow moving line or late train. What is the feeling that arises? Impatience, anger, fear, worry, frustration? What do you say? How do you act? Then after some time passes, notice how you feel: helpless, out of sorts, tense, ashamed?

Let's go back to the initial feeling that got triggered when your needs were not met. If you can acknowledge that you had an expectation followed by disappointment followed by your particular set of feelings, then the real work of healing and self-empowerment can begin. Name the feeling, feel the feeling and don't give in to your

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habitual way of coping. Don't say or do anything, just sit with the feeling; breathe, notice and stay put. If you can begin to master these minor uncomfortable interactions, when it comes to the big ones like infidelity you'll be ready. It doesn't mean you won't be hurt like crazy, but you will be able to deal with whatever life brings you, with equanimity and understanding.

What if you're the one committing the infidelity?

As humans, we have a deep need to connect with others, to be intimate, to love and be loved. So when we meet the person with whom we want to spend our lives and we make a vow to be true to that person, we often tend to think "This is it! The end, we're committed, it's done!" And that is when the relationship can begin to break down. Think of this vow, this commitment to each other as a living, breathing thing that needs continual attention in order to survive. Too often we become lazy in relationships, both with ourselves and with others, so that one day we wake up and don't even know the person sleeping next to us or the person we've changed into. "It's his/her fault for making me stray from our marriage. If he/she paid more attention to me, spent more time doing what

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I want, this wouldn't have happened. I'm the one who initiates everything and I'm tired of it." Other-awareness often comes before self-awareness, which can help us to justify our bad behaviour.

Dealing with your emotions

So, first and foremost it is important to pay attention to every moment, day, word, exchange and action we take with our loved one. We must first become aware of our reactions to our partner and then learn to communicate, in a loving and respectful way, what it is we feel and what it is we need. If you're reading this and you have already moved into unfaithful behaviour, it is not too late to save your relationship.

You owe it to yourself and your partner to explore what happened and what can be done. But before you approach your partner, you will need to come clean with yourself about your actions. Investigate your history of relationships. Not just the one you're in, but the ones that came before. Can you see a pattern? How open and honest were you? If you can't be honest with yourself right now, you won't be able to be honest with anyone. This is a rigorous spiritual work, but it can lead to a satisfying, long-lasting, love partnership. Were you able to ask for what you needed and wanted from your partners? Or did you expect them to know? How did you give and

receive love from others? Be careful as you go through this self-exploration, not to shame and blame. And find a trusted friend, advisor or therapist to work with. You do not have to go through it alone.

If your relationship history includes a pattern of jumping from one relationship to the next to find the perfect person, you are not alone. Many of us do it. But that hole in you that you are trying to fill can never be filled by anyone else. That is not the solution to your loneliness and desire to be loved. Deep inside you know this to be true.

Sexual misbehaviour can affect those outside the relationship too

It is no coincidence that the third precept in Buddhism, after "do not kill" and "do not steal", is do not engage in sexual misconduct—do not misuse sex and give in to lust. It causes so much harm, so much suffering. Even spiritual communities and Zen Masters are not immune from this. My own *sangha* was blown apart as a result of the sexual transgressions of our teacher. His actions harmed every member in our community—not only the students that he took advantage of, but also the ones who defended him. But just as I can recover from his infidelity, so can he.

How to deal with extra-martial affairs the Zen way

The first noble truth of Buddhism tells us that we all suffer. Some suffering, like birth, death and illness cannot be avoided. The second noble truth tells us that our craving to have things different than they actually are creates much of our suffering. The third noble truth tells us that if we see things as they are and let go of craving and clinging, we can reduce our suffering. And the fourth noble truth offers us a path to liberation from craving, toward a compassionate life, free from suffering.

Following these philosophies does not mean that you or your partner will never cheat on you or misuse sex. What it does mean is that you have the power to care for yourself and to become aware of your reactions to whatever life brings you, and not act out on your own impulses. If you become honest with yourself and become willing to open up a dialogue with your partner about how to proceed, then—and only then—is there the possibility of healing. If you can be honest with yourself, then you have a better chance of being honest with your partner, even if you are the one misusing sex.

If we want to have a truly intimate connection with our partner, we must first have such a connection with our self and understand that sex is not love, nor is it the only path to intimacy. Healing from any sexual transgression that we experience requires some detachment, a great deal of self-love and moment-by-moment attention to what it is to be truly human. And then compassion and forgiveness of ourselves and others will follow in time.



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