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Sensuality and Salvation in Keith Kachtick's *Hungry Ghost*

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Abstract

This study paper rummages into Keith Kachtick's novel, Hungry Ghost (2003), which intricately intertwines themes of sensuality and salvation within the philosophical framework of Buddhism. It scrutinizes the transformative odyssey of Carter Cox, a 39-year-old libertine photographer unexpectedly forming a profound connection with a Buddhist mentor. Through the lens of Sallie B. King's Buddha Nature (1991) and Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's The Bodhisattva Vow (1991), it dissects the intricate conflict between sensuality and the pursuit of spiritual redemption. Kachtick employs a distinctive second-person narrative style, consistently addressing Carter as "you", a deliberate technique to channel Carter's Buddha nature. This manifestation of inner enlightenment grants Carter prescience, enabling glimpses into the future and insights into the minds of other characters, endowing the narrative with a quasi-third-person omniscience. This intentional narrative choice acts as a prism through which readers witness the potential repercussions of Carter's surrender to primal desires versus his embrace of his Buddha nature. The exploration reveals that, by contrasting these divergent paths, the narrative transcends traditional explorations of interpersonal conflict. It beckons contemplation on the profound implications of embracing higher consciousness among the alluring pull of sensual desires. Consequently, the novel emerges not merely as a tale of personal struggle but as a canvas showcasing the intricate interplay between individual choices, spiritual dilemmas and the transformative potential inherent within Buddhist philosophy.

Keywords: *Transformative journey, spiritual exploration, instinctual desires, moral dilemmas, dharma, and editation*

Introduction

In Kachtick's *Hungry Ghost* (2003), the connecting themes of sensuality and salvation form a captivating narrative tapestry. The author skillfully navigates the complex terrain of human desire, using sensuality as a lens through which characters grapple with their inner demons. As the protagonist embarks on a journey of self-discovery, Kachtick illuminates the transformative power of sensuality in the quest for redemption. Through rich and evocative prose, *Hungry Ghost* invites readers to explore the intimate spaces where desire and salvation intersect, challenging conventional notions of spirituality and urging us to embrace the visceral aspects of the human experience.

The novel immerses readers in a world where human desires and the quest for spiritual redemption entwine in intricate ways, posing a fundamental question about the compatibility of sensuality and salvation. The characters grapple with the complexities of their inner worlds, navigating the tumultuous waters of desire while simultaneously seeking a path toward salvation. This juxtaposition raises significant issues regarding societal norms, religious expectations and personal identity. Harvey argues that Buddhism does not reject sensuality outright but instead views it as a challenge to ethical living, a struggle vividly portrayed in Carter's character (155). The novel prompts an examination of how sensuality, often perceived as antithetical to spiritual growth, can be a catalyst for personal transformation and salvation. Addressing this central problem not only engages with the characters' struggles in *Hungry Ghost* but also invites a broader reflection on the intricate interplay between the physical and metaphysical dimensions of the human experience.

The exploration of sensuality and salvation raises essential questions about the interplay between desire, spirituality, and personal transformation in the narrative. How do the characters negotiate the tension between societal expectations, religious doctrines, and their desires, particularly in relation to salvation? In what ways does sensuality influence their journeys toward self-discovery and redemption, and how does it challenge or align with traditional views of spiritual growth? These questions are key to analyzing the evolving relationship between sensuality and salvation within the novel's themes.

In exploring the themes of sensuality and salvation in *Hungry Ghost*, the hypothesis posits that the novel operates as a transformative narrative where sensuality serves as a catalyst for personal growth and spiritual redemption rather than an impediment. Through the characters' encounters with sensuality, it is expected that the novel offers a reimagining of salvation, breaking free from traditional paradigms and encouraging readers to reconsider the intricate relationship between desire and spiritual fulfillment in the broader context of the human condition. The study holds significant implications for literary scholarship, cultural discourse and our understanding of the complex interplay between desire and spiritual redemption. This research contributes to discussions on spirituality and the human experience. By examining how sensuality is portrayed as a potential avenue for salvation, it challenges preconceived notions and prompts a reevaluation of the relationship between the physical and metaphysical dimensions of life.

This study rummages into *Hungry Ghost*, which intricately intertwines themes of sensuality and salvation within the philosophical framework of Buddhism. It scrutinizes the transformative odyssey of Carter Cox, a 39-year-old libertine photographer unexpectedly forming a profound connection with a Buddhist mentor. Through the lens of Buddhist principles, it dissects the intricate conflict between sensuality and the pursuit of spiritual redemption. Kachtick employs a distinctive second-person narrative style, consistently addressing Carter as "you," a deliberate technique to channel Carter's Buddha nature. This manifestation of inner enlightenment grants Carter prescience, enabling glimpses into the future and insights into the minds of other characters, endowing the narrative with a quasi-third-person omniscience. This intentional narrative choice acts as a prism through which readers witness the potential repercussions of Carter's surrender to primal desires versus his embrace of his Buddha nature.

The exploration reveals that, by contrasting these divergent paths, the narrative transcends traditional explorations of interpersonal conflict. Zürcher examines how Buddhist narratives often include dual endings to illustrate the consequences of divergent paths, much like Kachtick's approach in his novel (212). It beckons contemplation on the profound implications of embracing higher consciousness

among the alluring pull of sensual desires. McClure explores how postsecular fiction incorporates spiritual dilemmas into urban settings, a narrative strategy Kachtick employs effectively in *Hungry Ghost* (89). The novel emerges not merely as a tale of personal struggle but as a canvas showcasing the intricate interplay between individual choices, spiritual dilemmas and the transformative potential inherent within Buddhist philosophy.

Buddha Nature

Gethin describes Buddha nature as the foundation of Mahayana Buddhism, emphasizing its role as a latent potential within all sentient beings (239). In *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, Williams discusses how the Mahayana path balances physical desires and spiritual goals, mirroring Carter's attempts to reconcile his impulses (67). The notion of Buddha nature stands as a pivotal concept in East Asian Buddhism. The theory unequivocally asserts that every sentient being inherently possesses the Buddha nature, ensuring their eventual attainment of Buddhahood. This assurance extends not only to humans but encompasses all beings traversing the six destinies—be they hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, fighting demons, humans or gods—they are all destined for Buddhahood.

The possession of Buddha nature implies that we are inherently Buddhalike, embodying the essential attributes of a Buddha, namely wisdom and compassion. In essence, we are not just future Buddhas; we are Buddhas in the present. Buddha nature represents both the potential for realizing Buddhahood inherent in all beings and the immediate, complete Buddhahood that is already within our grasp. However, our awareness of this innate Buddha nature is obscured by "adventitious defilements," such as ignorance, hatred, fear and desire—commonly recognized as Buddhist vices. For Buddha nature theory, these defilements are considered adventitious or accidental, serving as temporary veils that conceal our intrinsic Buddhahood.

Liberating oneself from past karma and breaking free from the influence that defilements wield in shaping our reality is indeed achievable. As Rahula explains, the law of karma is impartial and operates independently of divine intervention, mirroring Carter's realization that actions lead to inevitable consequences (32). Once we rid ourselves of these defilements, our Buddha nature becomes accessible through direct experience. Unlike the transient nature of defilements, our Buddha nature is an inherent aspect of the human condition, a constant presence irrespective of whether we are actively aware of it. The ability of defilements to obscure our Buddha nature is contingent upon our willingness to let past karma dictate our lives. Through the practice of meditation and the performance of meritorious deeds, we can emancipate ourselves from the shackles of our karma and actualize our Buddhahood. In fact, our Buddha nature represents our authentic and intrinsic nature, constituting our true identity.

The theory of Buddha nature asserts that every individual possesses the inherent capacity to experientially realize their enlightened nature, a birthright inherent in all sentient beings. To rummage into the concept of Buddha nature, it is imperative to first explore the term "tathagatagarbha," with which it shares a close connection. The Sanskrit term *tathagatagarbha* is a compound of two words: *tathagata* and *garbha*. The term *tathagata* itself can be interpreted in two ways—either as *tatha* + *agata*, meaning "thus come," or as *tatha* + *gata*, meaning "thus gone". It serves as an epithet for a Buddha, signifying that the Buddha is both "thus gone" in realization from the cycle of samsara to nirvana and "thus come" from nirvana to samsara to work for the salvation of all beings. Collins highlights that nirvana is not an

annihilation of self but a transcendence of attachment, resonating with Carter and Mia's discussion about divine bliss (114). Thurman compares the Buddhist nirvana to other cultural visions of divine states, suggesting that both involve absolute freedom from suffering (99).

The term *garbha* carries dual meanings, referring to both "embryo" and "womb". For the same, *tathagatagarbha* can be understood either as the "embryonic *Tathagata*" denoting the nascent Buddha or as the "womb of the *Tathagata*", signifying that which possesses the essential attributes of the *Tathagata* in their fully developed form. The former meaning is often discussed as the "cause" of the *Tathagata*, while the latter is considered the "fruit" of the *Tathagata*. As the "fruit," it represents the culmination of the Buddha Path and is interconnected with terms such as *dharmakaya*, *nirvana*, perfect wisdom and realization.

Mahāyāna Buddhism: Bodhisattva

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, in his book *The Bodhisattva Vow* (1991) incorporates concept of Bodhisattva and the process of attainment of Buddhahood and Bodhisattva: the Sanskrit term 'Bodhisattva' is the name given to anyone who, motivated by great compassion, has generated bodhichitta, which is a spontaneous wish to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all living beings (1). The Sanskrit term "Bodhisattva" encapsulates the identity of individuals motivated by profound compassion and who have generated "bodhichitta". This term represents a spontaneous and altruistic wish to attain Buddhahood, not for personal liberation alone, but with the primary intention of benefiting all living beings.

The concept of Bodhisattva is deeply rooted in Mahāyāna Buddhism, which emphasizes the path of compassion and the aspiration to become a Buddha for the welfare of others. A Bodhisattva, driven by great compassion, is someone who dedicates himself or herself to the well-being and enlightenment of all sentient beings. The key element of a Bodhisattva's motivation is the cultivation of bodhichitta. "Bodhichitta" can be understood as the awakened mind or the mind of enlightenment. It is characterized by the genuine and selfless wish to attain Buddhahood, the state of perfect enlightenment, in order to lead all beings out of suffering and into the ultimate state of liberation.

The Bodhisattva path involves the practice of compassion, ethical conduct, patience, perseverance and the development of wisdom. Bodhisattvas engage in both mundane and transcendent activities to alleviate the suffering of others and guide them on the path to enlightenment. Every person can be enlightened and become a Bodhisattva, "since everyone has within their mental continuum the seeds of great compassion and bodhichitta, ……..it is possible for everyone to become a Bodhisattva" (1). Within the mental continuum of every individual, there exist latent potentials or seeds of great compassion and bodhichitta—the altruistic aspiration for enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Every individual can be awaken and can cultivate the qualities of a Bodhisattva. It asserts that the potential for awakening and becoming a Bodhisattva is present within everyone, that requires higher moral discipline,

> The Bodhisattva's moral discipline is a higher moral discipline and it is the main path that leads to the ultimate happiness of great enlightenment. In general, moral discipline is a virtuous determination to abandon any non-virtuous action. For example, if by seeing the disadvantages of killing, stealing, or sexual misconduct we make a firm decision to refrain from such actions,

> this is moral discipline. Similarly, the determination to refrain from lying, divisive speech, hurtful speech, idle gossip, covetousness, malice, and holding wrong views is also moral discipline. (1)

Significance of the Bodhisattva's moral discipline stands as a superior form of ethical conduct, positioning it as the primary path leading to the ultimate happiness of great enlightenment. It further provides a general understanding of moral discipline, describing it as a virtuous commitment to abstain from non-virtuous actions. The examples given illustrate the application of moral discipline in refraining from harmful behaviors and cultivating positive qualities. The moral discipline of a Bodhisattva is considered elevated and superior. This moral conduct goes beyond personal ethical standards and is oriented toward the altruistic goal of attaining enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. It involves a selfless commitment to ethical principles that contribute to the well-being of others.

Bodhisattva's moral discipline is not merely a set of rules but a transformative path leading to the ultimate state of happiness, which is enlightenment. By engaging in virtuous actions and refraining from non-virtuous ones, the Bodhisattva paves the way for spiritual progress and the realization of great enlightenment. The general definition of moral discipline is provided as a virtuous determination to abandon non-virtuous actions. Non-virtuous actions are those that cause harm, disrupt harmony and hinder spiritual progress. Moral discipline involves making a firm decision to refrain from such actions.

Specific examples of moral discipline are given, highlighting the commitment to abstain from actions such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive speech, hurtful speech, idle gossip, covetousness, malice, and holding wrong views. Each of these examples represents a category of harmful behavior that a practitioner commits to avoiding. It defines moral discipline as a commitment to abstain from harmful actions and provides examples to illustrate the breadth of ethical considerations involved in this practice. The ultimate goal is framed as the attainment of great enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Hungry Ghosts: All destined for Buddhahood

Carter Cox, a dissolute freelance photographer residing in New York's East Village with his melancholic dog and a repertoire of vices, finds himself yearning for a more meaningful artistic pursuit and a reformation of his womanizing and substance-abusing lifestyle. Despite his journeys to exotic locales capturing images of models and celebrities, Carter endeavors to align his actions with the teachings he learns from his Buddhist influences. Carrying with him a "seduction kit" comprising a chessboard, cigarettes, a deck of cards, and a Cormac McCarthy novel, along with a plethora of rationalizations for his ungentlemanly behavior, Carter's internal conflict unfolds. At a Buddhist retreat in upstate New York, he encounters Mia Malone, a twenty-six-year-old woman of beauty, intelligence and seriousness. A devout Catholic with an interest in other religions, Mia is resolute about preserving her virginity until marriage.

Carter is deeply captivated by Mia, drawn to her commitment to Catholicism, her appreciation for his struggle with Buddhism and her keen interest in the world. Despite her reservations, Mia tentatively agrees to accompany Carter on a five-night beachfront photo shoot in Morocco. As their souls teeter on the edge, their escapade swiftly transforms from the ocean into turbulent waters. In a romantic standoff, they find themselves in a series of mishaps, including a car crash, arrest, encounters with a

sadistic gendarme and an attempted escape from the country. This adventurous journey leads to the revelation that karma and the human heart operate in mysterious ways. *Hungry Ghost*, with its assured pace and narrative twists, emerges as a profound and sensual novel exploring themes of chastity and salvation. It promises to satisfy readers' cravings for both entertainment and literary excellence.

Carter Cox establishes a connection with a Buddhist mentor, Wolf, who guides him to a retreat where he encounters Mia Malone, a Catholic with an inclination towards exploring various religions. However, Mia's defining trait is her commitment to maintaining her virginity until marriage. The plot takes a twist when Carter, grappling with internal conflicts between his desires and conscience, invites Mia to accompany him on a North African photo shoot as his assistant. The central question becomes whether Carter will succumb to his impulses or adhere to his principles, creating a tension not just between the characters but within Carter himself.

Yet, the novel's standout feature lies not solely in its plot but in its execution. The narrative unfolds in the second person, addressing Carter as "you" throughout. In an interview post-release, Kachtick revealed his intention for Carter to be addressed by his Buddha nature. This Buddha nature, possessing foresight into the future and insight into other characters, bestows the narrator with traits reminiscent of a third-person omniscient perspective. Another distinctive aspect is the inclusion of two endings, aiming to provide readers a glimpse into potential outcomes based on whether Carter follows his "lower nature" or adheres to his Buddha nature (Beal).

In Buddhism, the concept of sensual pleasure is often associated with attachment and craving, which are considered sources of suffering. Buddhist teachings emphasize the idea that all things in the material world are impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha) and devoid of a permanent self (anatta). Sensual pleasures are seen as fleeting and ultimately unable to bring lasting happiness or fulfillment. The pursuit of sensual pleasure can lead to attachment, desire and craving, which are considered obstacles on the path to enlightenment. In Buddhist philosophy, the goal is to attain Nirvana, a state of liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth (samsara). To achieve this, practitioners follow the Noble Eightfold Path, which includes ethical and mental guidelines to cultivate wisdom, ethical conduct and mental discipline.

By overcoming attachment to sensual pleasures and understanding their impermanence, Buddhists believe one can break free from the cycle of suffering and attain a state of peace and liberation. One must know that he/she has to pay for his/her karma,-…..dutifully remind yourself about the cause-and-effect reality of karma, and the Buddha’s maxim that sensual pleasure is like saltwater: the more you indulge, the more the thirst increases (4). Every individual engages in a mental exercise, reminding himself/herself about the cause-and-effect reality of karma. As Gethin explains, the karmic cycle is both a burden and an opportunity for enlightenment, a duality that underscores Carter’s struggle to reconcile his indulgent past with his pursuit of spiritual redemption (101). This reflects the understanding that actions have consequences, reinforcing the importance of mindfulness and ethical conduct.

The reference is to the Buddha's maxim that sensual pleasure is like saltwater: the more one indulges, the more the thirst increases. This metaphor encapsulates the ephemeral and unsatisfying nature of sensory desires, emphasizing the wisdom of restraint. The passage illustrates the ongoing struggle to reconcile spiritual ideals with the challenges presented by worldly desires. In Buddhism, the relationship between the mind and the concept of self is an implied and complex topic, and it varies across different

Buddhist traditions. Generally, Buddhism teaches the doctrine of anatta, which means "non-self" or "no-soul." This doctrine asserts that there is no permanent, unchanging and independent self or soul.

From a Buddhist perspective, the conventional sense of self that we often cling to is considered an illusion. Instead of a fixed and unchanging self, Buddhism describes the mind as a continuum of ever-changing mental processes. These mental processes, including thoughts, feelings, perceptions and consciousness, are impermanent and interdependent. The absence of a permanent and independent self is a crucial aspect of the Buddhist understanding of reality.

Regarding the concept of Buddhist nature, especially in Mahayana Buddhism, there is the idea of Buddha Nature. Mia's rejection of the Buddhist disdain for materiality aligns with Mitchell and Jacoby's analysis that Mahayana Buddhism allows for a middle way between spiritual detachment and worldly engagement (198). Jackson and Makransky argue that contemporary Buddhist scholars emphasize inclusivity, a perspective mirrored in Mia's belief that God is 'quite literally, love' (46). Buddha Nature is considered the inherent potential for enlightenment within all sentient beings. It is described as a pure and awakened quality that is not tarnished by defilements. In this context, the mind is seen as having the potential to recognize and embody this Buddha Nature through spiritual practice and awakening.

While Buddhism negates the existence of a fixed, permanent self, it does acknowledge the dynamic nature of the mind and emphasizes the transformative potential inherent in all beings through the realization of their Buddha Nature. The relationship between the mind, self and Buddhist nature is deeply intertwined in the philosophical and contemplative aspects of Buddhist teachings. Wolf had explained that "to be mindful is to be full of Mind—Buddha Nature—your higher, omniscient Self. The nature of Mind is like pond water, …..unstirred, it remains clear" (4). Carter is often confused between his mind and desire, and blends them wrongly,

> For several tense moments you listened to each other breathing, your indecision palpable. "Do I want to be a bodhisattva or nibble on those Saxon breasts?" you asked yourself. "Couldn't we fuck mindfully?" Despite your bristly tumescence you refrained from touching her, and when she moved closer to the bed you took a protective step backwards. (7)

The quoted lines describe a moment of internal conflict and tension between the desire for sensual pleasure and the contemplation of a higher spiritual path, possibly that of a bodhisattva. The tone suggests a struggle between conflicting impulses, portraying an implied and internal dialogue within Carter. In this extract, the emphasis is on breathing that suggests a focus on mindfulness, perhaps indicating an attempt to bring awareness to the present moment, a key aspect of Buddhist practice.

The internal struggle becomes explicit with the question, "Do I want to be a bodhisattva or nibble on those Saxon breasts?" This juxtaposition reflects a dilemma between pursuing a path of selfless compassion and service (as embodied by a bodhisattva) and succumbing to more immediate sensual desires. The question implies a conflict between spiritual aspirations and the pull of carnal desires. Lopez notes that mindfulness in Buddhism involves awareness and non-attachment, themes that underline Carter's conflict between desire and his spiritual aspirations (122). The proposition "Couldn't we fuck mindfully?" introduces a somewhat ironic attempt to reconcile the conflicting desires. It suggests an awareness of the practice of mindfulness, even in the context of a sensual act. However, the use of explicit language adds a layer of tension and contradiction to the attempt at combining mindfulness with a physical act typically associated with desire and attachment.

The description of refraining from physical contact despite a "bristly tumescence" indicates a conscious effort to resist the pull of immediate gratification. The decision to take a protective step backward when the other person moves closer to the bed reflects a physical manifestation of the internal conflict, emphasizing a hesitancy to engage in the desired action. Carter is a womanizer and his sex desire is much stronger than his Buddhist nature (17) and complication between desire and mind is in the heart of the narrative. His mentor's words always guide him to his Buddhist nature,

> "All humans by nature are Buddhas, as ice by its nature is water," Christopher once said. "Buddhahood is like the sun, and the ego is like a dark cloud blocking the view. Even though you might not see the sun in the sky, it's always there, Carter. That's what 'Buddha' means—to have awakened to this truth. Everyone has the potential to become a Buddha. Everyone. Even you, love." (28)

Here, Christopher Wolf conveys a fundamental concept in Buddhism known as Buddha Nature. The analogy he uses is powerful and aims to illustrate the inherent potential for enlightenment within every human being. The comparison of all humans to Buddhas is framed by the analogy of ice and water, emphasizing a transformative understanding. The analogy of ice and water suggests that just as ice is essentially water in a frozen state, all humans are essentially Buddhas in a latent or unawakened state. This implies that the potential for enlightenment, or Buddhahood, is innate in every individual. The shift from ice to water symbolizes the transformative process of realizing one's Buddha Nature, where the frozen state of ignorance and delusion gives way to the fluidity of awakened understanding.

The analogy continues with the comparison of Buddhahood to the sun. Buddhahood is described as a radiant and constant presence, akin to the sun in the sky. However, the ego is likened to a dark cloud that obstructs the view of this luminous truth. This metaphor underscores the idea that enlightenment is ever-present but may be obscured by the clouds of ignorance, self-centeredness and attachment that constitute the ego. The statement, "That's what 'Buddha' means—to have awakened to this truth. Everyone has the potential to become a Buddha. Everyone. Even you, love," encapsulates the essence of the Buddhist teaching. The term "Buddha" is explained as one who has awakened to the fundamental truth of existence. Wolf extends this notion to affirm that everyone, regardless of their current state, possesses the potential to realize this awakening, emphasizing inclusivity and the universality of the path to enlightenment (28). The affectionate term "love" adds a personal and compassionate touch to the message, reinforcing the encouragement for the listener to recognize their own inherent Buddha Nature.

> "Karma is the Sanskrit term for action," he reminds everyone. Turn fuh auction. "The law of karma meticulously accounts for every thought, every word, every deed. This means that everything, absolutely everything, we do with our body or mind has a corresponding result. Our actions, good or bad, will eventually ripen into fruit—or the dreaded lurgy." (38)

Karma, originated from Sanskrit, is fundamentally about actions. That is to turn to action. The concept of karma in Eastern philosophies suggests that, every action, whether it's a physical deed, a spoken word, or a mere thought, contributes to one's karmic account. No action is without consequence. Every action, whether intentional or unintentional, will have repercussions. The consequences of our actions will manifest over time. "The dreaded lurgy" is likely a colloquial expression for negative

consequences or undesirable outcomes. Wolf seems to be conveying the idea that karma, as the law of cause and effect, takes into account every aspect of our actions—thoughts, words, and deeds. The consequences, whether positive or negative, will unfold in due course, akin to fruits ripening on a tree or the manifestation of undesirable outcomes, depending on the nature of our actions. Buddha nature, karma and results can be realized through meditation,

> Poetry is the silence between the words. Likewise, meditation is the emptiness—the openness—between the thoughts. Rest in that emptiness, and you're resting in your omniscient Buddha Nature. Allow Buddha Nature to rise naturally during your meditations, and Buddha Nature will teach itself. (39)

Wolf's statement draws a profound parallel between poetry and meditation, asserting that, much like the significance of silence between words in poetry, the essence of meditation lies in the emptiness and openness between thoughts. The advice is to rest in this mental emptiness, suggesting that within such stillness, one connects with their omniscient Buddha Nature—the inherent, awakened nature within every individual according to Buddhist philosophy. Thurman describes meditation as the space between thoughts, where clarity emerges—a principle reflected in Christopher Wolf's teachings to Carter about stillness (64). By allowing this Buddha Nature to naturally surface during meditation, Wolf proposes a self-guided process of learning and understanding. The quote encapsulates the idea that the quiet spaces in both poetry and meditation hold a profound wisdom, and by embracing the openness within one's consciousness, one can tap into a deeper understanding of their true nature.

Wolf's idea, "Making a vow takes strength, keeping a vow gives you strength (54)," resonates particularly well with the concept of the Bodhisattva vow in Buddhism. The Bodhisattva vow is a commitment taken by individuals aspiring to attain Buddhahood not only for their own liberation but also for the benefit and enlightenment of all sentient beings. Initiating this vow demands strength as it represents a profound dedication to selfless service and compassion. However, the true strength, as Wolf suggests, lies in the consistent practice of upholding the Bodhisattva vow. By steadfastly working towards the well-being and enlightenment of others, practitioners not only contribute to the welfare of the world but also cultivate a deep inner strength derived from the fulfillment of their altruistic commitment. The transformative power of the vow is reflected in the ongoing journey of compassion and selflessness, reinforcing the idea that the act of keeping such a vow becomes a continuous source of strength for the Bodhisattva practitioner.

> Whatever sustenance you drew from Christopher and Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche and the demure Miss Malone, has managed, in just seven nights, to give way to something rotten and hollow— and perhaps, you fear, beyond your control. You close your eyes and squeeze your temples, two or three of the more gruesome snapshots lingering in your brain like a septic stink. Regardless, your body still hungers for something. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." (57)

In this quotation, the narrator reflects on a shift in the emotional and psychological landscape, suggesting that the sustenance gained from influences like Christopher Wolf, Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche and Miss Malone has swiftly deteriorated into a sense of hollowness and decay within just seven nights. The use of vivid imagery, such as "something rotten and hollow," conveys a profound sense of internal disintegration and a fear that this unsettling transformation may be slipping beyond the

narrator's control. The act of closing the eyes and squeezing the temples signifies a desperate attempt to manage the overwhelming sensations, with disturbing images lingering like an inescapable stench in the mind. Despite this internal turmoil, there's a physical hunger (sex) persisting, possibly indicating a deeper craving or void that remains unfulfilled. The repetition of expletives, "Fuck, fuck, fuck," underscores the intensity of the narrator's distress and frustration, encapsulating the visceral and disconcerting nature of their current emotional state. This distress is intensified by the pornographic DVD (57).

For meditation, the narrator suggests Carter to have his “eyes shut, you place the palms of your hands together, bow your head, and whisper to that dimly flickering spark in your chest, “I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha” (62). The narrator describes a moment of contemplative and spiritual practice. With eyes shut, the individual assumes a posture of reverence by placing the palms of their hands together and bowing their head. This physical gesture signifies a humble and respectful acknowledgment. The whispered words express a formal declaration of taking refuge in the three fundamental aspects of Buddhism known as the Triple Gem. This recitation and physical gesture are part of a ritualistic act that signifies a deepening connection with the core tenets of Buddhist practice, providing a sense of spiritual grounding and commitment to the path. Sex and love are different things. Catholics regard marriage as a sacrament but sex as a hungry ghost, a sin. Buddhists also have the same notion about sex. Sex is a sin. Mai finds it contradictory because all religions agree that God is, all literally, love.

> I routinely hear or read, Carter, how we Catholics regard sex as Hungry Ghost having the nature of sin. How marriage can be a sacrament if sex is a sin, I will leave for others to determine. And I disagree passionately with the Buddhist notion that the world and the flesh are evil. Things cannot be evil. You Buddhists have it backwards: The work of heaven is material, the work of hell is entirely spiritual.
>
> “Any person who truly loves will go to heaven.” “Who then goes to hell?” “Someone who imposes hell on himself. Someone who says that he wants to have no part of God, no part of love, no part of joy. It’s all about the disposition of the heart, Carter. God is, quite literally, love.” (83)

In the above extract, Mia challenges common perceptions about Catholicism's view on sex and expresses disagreement with a perceived Buddhist notion. She rejects the idea that Catholics regard sex as inherently sinful, but not particularly in the context of marriage being considered a sacrament. She passionately opposes the Buddhist perspective that labels the world and the flesh as evil, asserting that things themselves cannot be inherently evil. Mia then presents a provocative reversal, claiming that, in her view, the work of heaven is material, while the work of hell is entirely spiritual, challenging conventional religious beliefs. However, she concludes with a more inclusive and compassionate perspective, stating that anyone who truly loves will go to heaven. The question of who goes to hell is answered with an emphasis on personal disposition, suggesting that hell is a self-imposed state for those who reject love and joy, highlighting Mia's belief in the fundamental nature of God as love. This dialogue captures an implied exploration of religious and philosophical perspectives on morality, love and the afterlife.

> "Yes. God is a being, not a thing. Man and woman are made in the image of God, not the other way around."
>
> "In my ear, heaven and nirvana sound more similar than different. They're realms. States of divine, transhuman bliss, where there's absolute freedom and no suffering. Buddhists believe that one reaches 'heaven' by dissolving the ego, the artificial self."
>
> "I don't believe that self can dissolve self. Who is capable of dissolving the self?"
>
> "A Buddha."
>
> "But you're not a Buddha."
>
> "Ahh—yes I am. And so are you. We're all potential Buddhas." (84)

In this dialogue between Mia and Carter, there is a philosophical exploration of the nature of God, the self and divine states. Mia starts by expressing the view that God is a being, emphasizing a personal and sentient understanding of the divine. She further asserts that humans are made in the image of God, emphasizing the inherent divinity within humanity. The conversation then shifts to a comparison between heaven and nirvana. Mia notes the perceived similarities between these concepts, describing them as realms of divine bliss characterized by absolute freedom and the absence of suffering. She introduces the Buddhist belief that reaching 'heaven' involves dissolving the ego, the artificial self. Carter, however, expresses skepticism about the idea that the self can dissolve itself. This skepticism leads to the introduction of the concept of a Buddha, someone capable of dissolving the self. Interestingly, Mia claims that she and Carter are potential Buddhas, challenging the conventional understanding of Buddha as a unique and enlightened figure. This statement suggests a shared belief in the potential for enlightenment and self-transcendence within every individual, Buddhist nature.

> Your heart is your Buddha Nature, you remind yourself. It's the voice speaking to you right now, reminding you that karma is in play at all times, in all places. Karma does not punish. It does not reward. But it always leads to either pain or joy. (196)

Here, Mia is advising Carter, emphasizing the significance of the heart as a representation of Buddha Nature. The notion of "Buddha Nature" aligns with certain Buddhist teachings that suggest an innate, awakened potential within every individual. By referring to the heart as Carter's Buddha Nature, Mia implies that there is a fundamental wisdom and compassionate nature within him. Mia goes on to connect this concept with the idea of karma, emphasizing that karma is constantly at play in all aspects of life. In Buddhism, karma refers to the law of cause and effect, suggesting that one's actions, thoughts and intentions have consequences. Mia clarifies that karma, in this context, is neither a form of punishment nor reward; instead, it is a force that naturally leads to either pain or joy.

By bringing attention to the heart as the voice that speaks to Carter, Mia is likely encouraging an awareness of Carter's inner wisdom and the moral compass that guides actions. The reminder about karma underscores the importance of mindful and intentional living, understanding that the choices made have consequences that contribute to either positive or challenging experiences. Overall, Mia's guidance encourages a holistic and mindful approach to life, rooted in an understanding of Carter's inner nature and the consequences of his actions.

Wolf expresses his views that we are our karma. We are omniscient Buddha Nature packaged in a body. Nothing more. Nothing less. Buddha Nature surfing a wave of karma from one lifetime to the next (199). Our actions, thoughts and intentions shape our existence and experiences. The consequences of our actions, both positive and negative, contribute to the fabric of our lives. Every individual possesses an inherent, enlightened nature known as Buddha Nature. This concept suggests that, within each person, there is a fundamental wisdom and potential for enlightenment. The use of the term "omniscient" emphasizes the all-knowing and awakened nature inherent in every individual. The enlightened nature within individuals navigates through the ebb and flow of the consequences of their actions across different lifetimes. Carter is very emotional and nearly breaks his heart when Mia says that she loves him but cannot live with him as a roommate. She wishes to love and live like a wife.

> "Come live with me, Mia. Come stay with me in New York."
> "Oh, Carter ... I can't do that. You should understand that by now."
> "Not even for the summer?"
> "Not even for the summer. I love you, Carter. I don't want to be your roommate." (318)

Carter, with a sense of vulnerability, declares that he meant his words and that he loves Mia with all his heart. Mia's response is equally sincere and emotional; her face softens, and tears well up in her eyes as she reciprocates the declaration of love. However, the tone shifts when Carter proposes that Mia come live with him in New York. Despite the depth of their connection and mutual love, Mia expresses hesitation, stating that she can't do that, even for the summer. She emphasizes her love for Carter but clarifies that she doesn't want to be just his roommate. She wants to be his wife. Only through marriage they can have better karma and better consequences.

Kachtick injects ambition and expansiveness into the narrative as Carter grapples, somewhat successfully, with merging his deepening commitment to Buddhism and his somewhat indulgent encounters with numerous women in his thirties, surpassing the number of times Mia has been kissed. This information is delivered in a bold and initially unconventional second-person voice. Carter adopts this approach in an effort to fully detach awareness from the hindering, ego-driven "I" that operates in terms of possession and desire, symbolized by thoughts like "may I unbutton your blouse now, please?" (14).

In his quest to cultivate a desire-free existence, Carter narrates his story, illustrating both his failures and successes in overcoming passions. The book seamlessly blends character studies with adventure and social commentary with spirituality. Despite, or perhaps because of, Carter's flaws as a libertine yet struggling dharma practitioner, he becomes entangled with Mia's formidable belief system, even though she inaccurately claims to volunteer with a "Jesuit nun." Carter's upbringing, steeped in a somewhat worldly and vaguely Christian environment, leads him to ponder existential questions like "Where was I before I was born? Why does my body feel like a guest house?" (51). His encounter with Mia takes place at a Tibetan retreat hosted in a former Catholic monastery upstate, where she "possesses the milky-white skin and praying mantis beauty of someone who haunts museum archives and listens to Chopin while baking bread" (65).

Kachtick faces the challenge of portraying a determined twenty-six-year-old, Mia, committed to waiting for Mr. Right. She views sex as a sacred act, deeming it worthwhile to wait and transform it into a sacrament. Mia disagrees with what she perceives as a Buddhist disdain for the material world and the physical body, expressing her belief that "the work of heaven is material, the work of hell is entirely spiritual" (83). This sentiment is underscored when she borrows one of Carter's cigarettes, signaling her own connection to the physical realm. Despite their differences, they engage in debates and discover common ground, moving into discussions about Thomas Aquinas, citing Thomas Merton and reflecting on St. Francis. Eventually, their conversations lead to a passionate encounter, leaving Mia uncertain whether Carter is a test or a gift from God (88).

The tension within Carter extends beyond the bedroom as he pursues a degree of courtship with Mia, while simultaneously engaging in relationships with others who are more compliant but less intriguing. Later, during their conflict in Morocco, Carter reflects on his attempts to balance pleasure and ethics: "You'd long fancied yourself as a talented juggler of pleasure and ethics" (216). However, this delicate balancing act proves unsustainable, forcing him to confront the warnings of his teacher, Wolf, a skillfully depicted and poignantly captured character. Wolf cautions Carter, particularly as a bachelor, about the perilous path where middle-aged lust leads inexorably into fear.

As the Buddha wisely taught, indulging in saltwater never truly satisfies one's thirst. Whether navigating the vibrant scene of a New York City nightclub, succumbing to the allure of Entenmann's cookies, seeking out adult DVDs or accumulating more gadgets, or engaging in pursuits like seducing tourists in Mexico or managing the caprices of a temperamental model or a self-absorbed windsurfer during a photo shoot, Carter confronts his inner demons. Even when these challenges present themselves in the guise of alluring figures with long legs, Carter acknowledges his struggles: "you're like an alcoholic who punishes himself by drinking more" (232).

The narrative takes a daringly imaginative turn, initially appearing to let Carter down but executing a deft fake-out and rescue. Carter pivots gracefully, both literally and metaphorically. While some aspects of the novel may stall for those without a solid understanding of Buddhism, Kachtick, being a committed Buddhist himself, endeavors to infuse his compassion into a narrative that simultaneously entertains and imparts wisdom. There's a noticeable shift to a more entertainment-focused mode, later in the story, perhaps compensating for the earlier discussions involving characters like Mia and his teacher, Christopher Wolf. Nevertheless, as a thoughtful tale demonstrating the complexities of right and wrong in various settings — whether in the intimacy of a bedroom or a bar, during a retreat or in moments of meditation — the novel effectively captures the challenges that a modern urban seeker, whether Catholic or Buddhist, may encounter when testing their faith against their actions.

The readers may find themselves perplexed about the direction of the plot when Mia and Carter reach Morocco. However, the second half of the story gains momentum, hurtling forward at a brisk pace. Tensions rise as spiritual conflicts collide with social dynamics, and the Third World clashes with the First (Murphy). Kachtick deserves commendation for his vibrant energy and narrative breadth. Through characters like Wolf, Mia and Carter, he skillfully crafts individuals for whom the reader develops a genuine concern, despite their inherent flaws. Rather than rendering them contemptible, their weaknesses endear them to the reader. Kachtick transforms our urban, disoriented, dehumanized, web-obsessed, consumer-driven culture, saturated with sex, drugs, and media hookups, into a narrative that rummages into moral dilemmas and the consequences of choices.

Conclusion

In this novel, sensuality is portrayed as a guiding force entwined with the pursuit of salvation. It explores the complexities of sensuality, not as an impediment to spiritual growth but rather as a path that leads the characters toward self-discovery and understanding. Carter confronts with his sensual desires and experiences a conflict between his worldly indulgences and his spiritual aspirations. Throughout the narrative, sensuality serves as a vehicle for self-exploration, prompting Carter to confront his inner demons and navigate the intricate intersections between pleasure and ethical choices.

Mia Malone adds another layer to the exploration of sensuality and salvation. Her commitment to maintaining her virginity until marriage reflects a different facet of sensuality—embracing physical intimacy within the context of a sacred and committed relationship. Mia's character challenges traditional notions of sensuality by intertwining it with religious convictions, highlighting the complexity of human desires. The novel suggests that sensuality, when approached with awareness and an understanding of its implications, can become a transformative force. It becomes a tool for characters to confront their inner conflicts, question societal norms and ultimately seek a path toward salvation.

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