

## **Sex change**<sup>1</sup>

Scientists and psychologists have observed that as a man ages, his testosterone (male sex hormones) level drops, and he becomes influenced by his oestrogen (female sex hormones) in his body. As he becomes more feeling-centred than he was before, he cannot be expected to be as performance-oriented as he was. For this reason, too, older men tend to be kinder than younger men.

And older women tend to be crabbiest than young ones. This is because her oestrogen level is dropping. We could say that oestrogen is the “feel good” hormones. So a woman is likely to have a higher oestrogen level when she is young (hence, she is more friendly and approachable), while it is the other way around for men. This understanding is helpful and healing for opposite-sex couples as they age.

As such, it would be normal to see aging men have the urge to do more cooking or gardening, work around the house, even look after children, while the aging women may want to go back to school. And for a woman, as her oestrogen level drops, and she expects or demands that her oestrogen-rising man to remain as an over-achiever, money-maker and problem-fixer all his life, then she would be bending her man to a risky stress point, as this can be a cause of heart disease and other chronic, disabling illnesses. She would lose him well before his run-out date.

For a man to age gracefully means that he has to learn to be more like a woman as he ages. Instead of being more “macho” in his expression of love towards his wife, he should instead show more friendship and warm responses to her. After mid-life, as a woman stops receiving a man’s active generosity, she naturally begins to take more responsibility for herself. It is as if, they are switching roles.

In a young couple, it is likely that the man initiates things, while the woman has the right of veto. But after mid-life, these roles tend to reverse, or should. A mature woman must know what she thinks and wants. She must also listen to her man and cherish him as he is now in the “feeling” phase. So she asks him things like “How do you feel about retiring? What do you enjoy doing now?” He tells him, and she listens.

When the age-gap is wide (about 10 years or more), there may be difficulties. When he is older and she is younger, *both* are psychologically female, so that they need to negotiate over the biological urge for pleasure. As the man ages bodily, he sees sex less as performance but more as mutual appreciation. In her new role, the woman then is likely to be the initiator of mutual intimacies, and it benefits the man (and the couple) who understands this.

When she is older and he is younger, they must negotiate over the urge to control the other. As she reaches mid-life masculinity, the younger man is still psychologically masculine. If she continues to try to dominate him, then he begins to feel the stress and might seek solace elsewhere. She needs to give him space for his personal growth at this stage.

In a same-sex couple, too, the masculinity-femininity roles should be properly understood. In a working partnership, as a rule, one partner plays the masculine role (dominating, initiating, providing), while the other the feminine (patient, caring, accepting). Once the

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<sup>1</sup> This reflection has been inspired by Patricia Allen & Sandra Harmon, *Getting to “I do.”* NY: Quill (HarperCollins), 1994.

sexual attraction has fizzled out, problems easily arise when both partners fail to see this psychology of roles, and try to dominate one another. Sex may attract a couple, but only love keeps them together.

The Buddha, in **the Saññoga Sutta** (A 7.48), is way ahead of his time in his analysis of human sexuality and sexual roles. He declares that if we see ourselves as being merely sexual and biological beings, then we are stuck as such, never able to rise above our sexuality. We remain as evolutionary animals, struggling to perpetuate our species, or as asuras seeking to dominate another, or as pretas never getting enough of the pleasures we desire, or as devas drunk in blissful pleasures oblivious of what is to come.

On the other hand, if we are able to see that we are more than merely our biological set-up, our physical bodies and sexuality, then we, as women, would “rise above womanliness,” and we, as men, would “rise above manliness.”<sup>2</sup> We are then free from the bondage of body and sexuality, able to enjoy a higher and lasting pleasure, that is the basis for awakening and liberation.

The Buddha does not say that sex is bad or the physical world is evil. Sex and the world are “neutral,” as it were. “There is no sensuality in what is beautiful (*citra*) in the world. The thought of passion is a person’s sensuality.” (A 7.48). The eye, ear, nose, tongue and body are neither sensual nor sexual. It is how we regard them. We can only really enjoy them (feel them as sources of joy) when we see this. And when we have enjoyed them, we know that we do not need them any more.<sup>3</sup>

In short, we begin, as young people, by accepting our body and sexuality. We are not trapped in a female body, unless we think of it as being permanently feminine. We are not trapped in a male body, unless we think of it as being permanently masculine. Even our bodies must grow and change.

While sexuality is mostly the body, femininity and masculinity are mostly, if not all, mind. When the mind is calm and clear, we see our true selves better: we are more than merely sexual beings. We are more than merely bodies. We have both feminine and masculine energies.

We could say that feminine energy must *feel* good to do good; masculine energy must *do* good to feel good. We can and need to train ourselves both to do good and to feel good. Habitually *doing* good is called “moral virtue”; habitually *feeling* good is called “mental cultivation.” One helps the other to rise above the self so as to see wisdom. Hence, rising above sexuality and our bodies, we become our true selves, as spiritual beings of joy and light. And while we live so with love and our loved ones, our love is a lesson and joy to others.

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<sup>2</sup> A 7.48 = SD 8.7: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/8.7-Sannoga-S-a7.48-piya.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See **Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta** (A 6.63), SD 6.11: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/6.11-Nibbedhika-Pariyaya-S-a06.63-piya.pdf>