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Sexuality, Blasphemy, and Iconoclasm in the Media Age

The Strange Case of the Buddha Bikini¹

James Mark Shields

Sudhana saw the lay disciple Prabhūta upon a seat made of the precious gems and metals. She was a very young woman: beautiful, gentle, and fair to behold with the first touch of youth ... Her limbs were without ornament. Her petticoats and sari were white. Aside from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, no one comes to see her whom she does not overwhelm with her physical and mental superiority, the luster of her spiritual fire, her exquisite complexion, and her beauty.

The Harmony of the Young Sapling Sutra

There is virtually no other item of clothing linked with so many ideas, images and preconceived impressions. For the bikini belongs to the mythology of today that shapes our concept of reality. In much the same way as the speed of a motorcar bestows on its driver an intoxicating sense of power, and indeed just as a gold credit card has the power to avail its possessor of infinite possibilities, the bikini represents a blank screen open to a person's imagination ... So when a woman wears a bikini, she ... is wearing a magical thing, something that will transform her and turn her into someone else.

Patrik Alac 2002, *The Bikini: A Cultural History*

According to an oft-cited study of sex and advertising, "Every media consumer is alert to 'sex in advertising.' Its pervasive use and misuse are constantly before us, and typically elicit strong criticism" (Richmond and Hartman 1982, 53). Numerous studies over the past few decades (e.g. Ceb-rzynski 2000) have largely confirmed the truism that, at least within certain limits, "sex sells"—or, more correctly "sexiness sells"—and it is not hard to see why. Indeed, setting aside for the time being related ethical and gender issues, this fact itself requires little by way of further analysis. More interesting, though much less studied, is a question more germane to the present investigation: does *religion* sell?

A recent study investigating the question of whether "spirituality sells" found that, compared with sexuality, religious content in advertising is surprisingly infrequent: only one per cent of television and magazine advertisements (Moore 2005, 5). This may be due to the fact that, even more than

with sexuality, there are limits that must be negotiated—advertisers employing religious themes and images tread dangerous water. Perhaps sensitivity to what might be considered “blasphemous” is stronger today than sensitivity to what might be considered “obscene.” Having said that, in terms of the commercial use of sex, any limit is also a potential boundary that can be pushed and, short of a full-fledged consumer boycott, the surrounding controversy in itself frequently serves to increase attention to (and potentially sales of) the offending product. In a different and more provocative vein, extrapolating the work of James Twitchell, it may be that contemporary consumer culture has no need to adopt religious themes and images in selling products, because the culture of advertising already, in and of itself, performs the same functions as traditional religions (see Twitchell 1996). As Charles Taylor has argued, in order to succeed, religions require at least a partial commitment to the goal of “human flourishing”—even while they pursue goals that transcend worldly understandings of such (Taylor 2007). It follows that any attempt to proselytize must rely at least in part on themes and images that evoke, display, or promise worldly benefits, which is precisely the *modus operandi* of advertising.

Whatever the reasons for this relative lack, it is important to note the discrepancy in the treatment of Western and Asian religions in contemporary advertising. Moore notes that whereas Western religions are more frequently used to sell “cultural products” (books, magazines, films), Asian religions tend to be used to sell goods and services; whereas Western religious images tend to be historical, Asian ones are contemporary; and whereas, on the whole, ads containing images from Asian religions tend to be “respectful,” this is much less the case with ads containing images from Western religions, which are more likely to use humor to undercut or question the validity of Western religious beliefs or practices. On the whole, research has found that Asian religions, when represented in contemporary advertising, tend to be portrayed in a positive (if naïve or romanticized) light. And while Rick Moore misidentifies one of the Asian images, the yin/yang symbol, as being “Buddhist”—it is in fact Daoist or, at any rate, a pan-Chinese symbol that long pre-dates the arrival of Buddhism in East Asia—he nonetheless concludes that “Buddhism and Taoism are cool... Judaism and Christianity are not” (Moore 2005, 6–9, 11).

The Perfect Storm: Sexuality, Religion, and Commercial Advertising

In early 2004, popular American lingerie company Victoria’s Secret launched a new brand of bikini, in form little different from standard (revealing) Victoria’s Secret fare, but in content quite unique in that the swimsuit was adorned with traditional Buddhist iconography, including a prominently displayed Buddha image on the left breast. As Gregory Levine notes, the

swimsuit—called by Victoria’s Secret (2004) the “Asian Floral Tankini”—conflates the tropical lushness of South Asia with its presumably colorful spirituality (Levine 2005).² In other words, the exoticization of Buddhism appears as one feature of a more general exoticization of the tropical, sensuous Other—extending an orientalist motif that can be traced back in visual art to Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). The bright florid style is indeed fairly typical of Indian and south Asian religious art, though the iconography suggests a more specific Himalayan aesthetic, of the Nepalese or Tibetan sort.

The main image on the tankini top is a seated Buddha giving a combination of the “explanation” and “meditation” *mudras* (ritual hand gestures). The combination of these two gestures indicates that the Buddha is Shakyamuni—the “historical Buddha,” otherwise known as Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563–483 BCE). Further down on the torso is an image of Bhaisajyaguru—the “medicine Buddha”—who is always depicted holding a medicine jar in his left hand, his right hand upraised in the “gift-giving” *mudra*. The blue color of his robes indicates the lapis lazuli paradise over which he reigns. Finally, cut off at the model’s midriff, we glimpse an image of Tsongkhapa (also known as Je Rinpoche, 1357–1419), the founder of the Geluk or “Yellow Hat” school of Tibetan Buddhism (out of which emerged the lineage of the Dalai Lamas). His teachings emphasized the union of *sutra* (canonical writings, usually attributed to Gautama Buddha) and *tantra* (esoteric writings associated with the Vajrayana or tantric schools of Buddhism, the dominant form of Buddhism in Tibet), as well as the *vinaya* (monastic) code. Beyond being revered as a great teacher, his wisdom and compassion were such that he is sometimes called a “second Buddha,” or as an emanation of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom. Whether or not it is to Victoria’s Secret’s credit, these designs are accurate in their representation of traditional iconography. That is to say, despite the objections of some critics who decried the bikinis as lacking in aesthetic taste and proper representation, they are not in themselves misrepresentations, stereotypes, or caricatures, as one sometimes sees in Western commercialization of Buddhism. On the other hand, the verisimilitude of these images may be part of the problem, since any sacred status they accrue by virtue of being “correct” images makes them theoretically more prone to being “defiled” by the way in which they are reproduced and employed. Bernard Faure cites several cases in which “Asian icons, because of their verisimilitude, their mimetic quality, are able to arouse people” (Faure 1998b, 780).

Though there was little immediate response to the “Buddha bikini,” presumably because most regular consumers of Victoria’s Secret swimwear were not particularly concerned with the matter, within weeks protest began to emerge, initially coming from Asian-American and Asian Buddhists and Buddhist leaders. The response triggered a second wave of protest from non-Asian Buddhists in the USA and a few other Western countries, many of

whom chimed in with their fellow Buddhists about the “tactlessness” and “orientalism” of the suits and the offending company. Employing the internet as a source for protest, Buddhists worldwide launched a campaign against Victoria’s Secret.³ Against the growing barrage of criticism, the company discontinued the line, though they did not offer a recall of the sold products, and were initially hesitant to offer an apology to those who were upset by the Buddha bikinis. Indeed, in a public statement the company denied knowledge that the image on the suit was indeed “the Buddha,” and proceeded to pass the blame to the manufacturer, a Columbian company called OndadeMar. OndadeMar, in turn, discontinued its own version of the Buddha bikini, which it called the “Baby Buddha Bikini” (Figure 4.1), and promptly removed all offending images from its website (www.ondademar.com).



Figure 4.1 OndadeMar’s “Baby Buddha Bikini.” Image used with permission.



Figure 4.2 Detail of Abercrombie & Fitch's "Buddha Bash" t-shirt. Image used with permission.

The Buddha bikini was not, in fact, the first case in which commercialized images of the Buddha were the cause of controversy in the USA. In early 2002, trendy retailer Abercrombie & Fitch got into hot water for its new line of Asian-themed T-shirts, one of which was festooned with a stereotypical image of a pudgy Buddha wearing what (inexplicably) appears to be a Hawaiian *lei*, along with the words "Buddha Bash: Get Your Buddha on the Floor" (Figure 4.2).⁴

Presumably the humor lies in the similarities of the words Buddha and the slang term "booty," but members of the Asian-American Students' Association at Stanford University were not laughing: they demanded an apology and called for a boycott of Abercrombie & Fitch goods. The main criticism in this case, as voiced by spokesperson Michael Chang, was that the company was trading in outdated and offensive stereotypes of Asians, as well as, at least in the case of the "Buddha Bash" shirt, trivializing "an entire religion and philosophy" (Strasburg 2002). Though the company did eventually apologize and pull the shirts from its shelves, it insisted that people should not be upset, because Abercrombie & Fitch "makes fun of everyone," and was in fact marketing the shirts to young Asian-Americans as a kind of inside joke.

Unlike the case of the Victoria's Secret swimsuit, the main complaint against Abercrombie & Fitch was that it was peddling products with "racist" images (though it must be said that, of the various shirts under attack, the

Buddha Bash T-shirt was probably the *least* offensive in that respect). However, as with the Buddha bikini, the incorporation of religion into the mix certainly contributed to the perceived slight, because of the widespread perception that using religious images to sell products is a trivialization of something sacred and powerful. What this controversy lacked, however, was the element of sexuality—the final touch to an already explosive brew. In fact, Abercrombie & Fitch—a company that is “notorious for using men as sexual objects in their advertising” (Blair *et al.* 2006, 4)—seems to have purposely exaggerated the Buddha’s unattractiveness, in flat contradiction to the early Indian and southeast Asian tradition, which is at pains to emphasize the Buddha’s physical beauty and even, at times, his virility. Ultimately, unlike the relatively localized response to the Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirts, the Buddha bikini débâcle took on global proportions.

Let us examine the actual complaint in more detail. What, exactly, was it about the Buddha bikini that was so offensive to so many, especially Asian and Asian-American, Buddhists? The answer can be broken down into a number of broad categories. The first is simply a display of ignorance or lack of respect for Buddhism as a “foreign religion.” Along these lines, Kieu Dam Trang, one of the organizers of the campaign, criticized both companies for lacking “common sense” and “respect for religious differences,” and for being “inconsiderate” (cited by Aoyagi 2004, 1). This is the weakest level of complaint, since it does not malign the intentions of the swimsuit-makers, simply their lack of foresight, but it was perhaps the most common theme among reactions by Western Buddhists on the now-defunct Buddhist News Network. Moreover, the criticism of lacking respect for “religious differences” is interesting, since it seems to imply that, *unlike* Christians, Muslims, or Jews, Buddhists themselves would never allow such an irreverent display of their holy founders and/or deities. Perhaps a more accurate statement of this critique would be to say that Victoria’s Secret and OndadaMar showed a lack of respect for “religious similarities”—a recognition that Buddhists, too, might be sensitive to thoughtless use of images sacred to their traditions.

Once we get beyond the level of mere “disrespect”—once we delve into more substantive complaints about the Buddha bikini—the debate becomes fraught with contradictory, misleading, and frankly erroneous claims and assumptions about Buddhism, images, and sexuality. In short, from a cultural studies perspective, this is where things get interesting. For instance, Kodo Umezu, a “priest” of the Buddhist Churches of America (a name that in itself indicates the Westernization of Buddhism), locates the main problem with the Buddha bikini in the commercial aspect, noting that Buddha images “represent something very meaningful for many Buddhists,” and that “we [Buddhists] do not like these images to be used in a design” (Aoyagi 2004, 1). Underlying this complaint is the assumption that Victoria’s Secret is attempting to capitalize crassly on the recent cachet of Buddhism (and Asian

design more generally) in the West. Though the company may not have meant intentionally to malign Buddhism, it knew full well that it was appropriating “sacred” images and using them to sell products in order to make a profit.

But there may be something more at stake here. Reverend Kodo implies that it is not just the commercialization of the suits that is problematic, but the very idea of *duplication* of Buddhist images in any form of design. This puts it onto shaky ground as far as Buddhism goes, since the reproduction of Buddhist images—and the sale of such—has been part and parcel of Asian Buddhist traditions for centuries (Faure 1998b, 802). Indeed, in many Buddhist countries the reproduction of Buddhist images is one of the best ways to gain merit (*punya*), which will lead one to a better rebirth. Today in Japan, any visit to a Buddhist temple provides one with the opportunity to purchase a whole range of goods, including images of the various buddhas and assorted heavenly beings. While it is true, of course, that the buddha and bodhisattva images on sale in various Asian Buddhist countries are not generally plastered on provocative swimwear, we may be witnessing here an adoption by Buddhist critics such as Reverend Kodo of what might be termed a “Protestant” critique against image-worship and idolatry, rather than anything remotely “Buddhist.”

Within Buddhist ethics, intention plays a significant role. Indeed, though a number of scholars have noted that Buddhist ethics is difficult to classify in terms of classic Western ethical paradigms (e.g. Keown 1992; Harvey 2000), a focus on intention is one element that Buddhist ethics cannot do without. In Buddhism, as opposed to various other Indian religious systems such as Jainism, *karma* itself is intricately connected to intention—indeed, these terms can sometimes seem to collapse into one (Harvey 2000, 17). It is only fitting, then, that intention plays a part in the controversy surrounding the Buddha bikini. As noted above, many critics raised the point that Victoria’s Secret was clearly hoping to profit from trendy images, even ones that happen to be sacred to millions of Asians. If this were not enough, they managed to trump the effrontery of other merchandisers such as Abercrombie & Fitch by putting the image on a *bikini*—which, it may be assumed, is an item of clothing designed to flaunt sexuality (or cultivate insecurity) in women and inspire lust in males.⁵ According to this argument, then, all those involved in the making and distribution of the Buddha bikini are guilty of using “sacred” Buddhist images to encourage thoughts and behaviors antithetical to traditional Buddhist teachings. This sounds like a reasonable argument, and it is one that dovetails to some degree with feminist critics of the more general use of the sexualized female body to sell products—whether the target is men or women (Blair *et al.* 2006, 4). Yet it brings up a number of related concerns.

Clearly, the problem with the Buddha bikini runs more deeply than feelings of disrespect, or sensitivity to the commercial reproduction and sale of

Buddha images. The deeper issue lies in the fact that these images are on *bikinis*, and bikinis are, in our present global culture, understood as highly sexualized items of clothing—especially when displayed within the pages of a Victoria's Secret publication, the only mail-order catalogue that can make the claim of being as popular among men as women. Of course, depending on one's cultural background and politics—and perhaps, to a lesser degree, one's religion—bikinis can signify sexual liberation, sexual oppression, or sexual laxity. In the case of the Buddha bikini, not only are the Buddha images situated on a bikini, the bikini itself is displayed on the body of a swimsuit model—posed in a highly suggestive way. That is to say, there are actually two levels at which the problem of images arises: the printed cloth that makes up the bikini itself, and the printed page that displays the product on the body of the model.

The History of Buddhist Iconography, Iconoclasm, and Images of the Female Body

As with virtually all world religions, Buddhism at times has struggled with images—is it appropriate to depict sacred beings, and if so, what forms should these images be allowed to take, and to what uses may they be put? There have been periods in which anthropomorphic images of the Buddha are few—or even, in Chan/Zen streams, deliberately destroyed—and periods (much more common) in which the use and production of such images abound. In particular, the few centuries following the death of Siddhartha Gautama show a noticeable lack of figurative imagery—the Buddha himself is generally represented by symbols such as a footprint or a parasol. Scholars still debate the specific reasons behind such wariness (see Foucher 1917; Coomaraswamy 1927; Mus 1935; Gombrich 1966; Dehejia 1990; Huntington 1990). On one side is the idea that the very “humanity” of the Buddha, combined with his teaching of impermanence and widespread belief in his own “final nirvana” upon decease, meant that any visual depiction of him was conceived as a delusory and harmful grasping after something that had gone “poof” (e.g. Gombrich 1971, 112; Snellgrove 1978, 23–24). At the opposite end of the spectrum is the more familiar notion that the very awesomeness of the Buddha as a spiritually enlightened being renders any attempt at his physical representation hopeless at best, presumptuous at worst. Though the former seems to fit better with the early Buddhist teachings, the latter is, we might say, the more typically human response. And indeed, given what we know about the relatively rapid development of Buddhist devotion and worship, especially in the Mahayana, it may be the more plausible explanation.

At any rate, this an-iconic period appears to have ended by the first century BCE, and from that point on we see a flourishing of Buddhist images in architectural relief, sculpture, and cave paintings, first in India and Central

Asia, and eventually spreading via the Silk Road to China and East Asia and to southeast Asia via Sri Lanka (see Faure 1991, 148–78; 1996, 237–63). Most Buddhists—monks and laypeople alike—came to accept images as part and parcel of their religious practice. Besides being invaluable tools for visualization/meditation, religious icons were also the most effective way to spread the teachings, particularly to those—and they were the vast majority—who could not read the often impenetrable Buddhist texts (Faure 1998b, 799). Perhaps the most common early subjects of artistic representation were the stories of the past lives of the Buddha—the so-called “Jataka Tales.” These pre-Buddhist moral fables, rooted in Indian folk traditions, served as teaching tools to convey simple Buddhist values such as compassion and charity. Some of the most striking examples of Jataka-themed art can be found in the Ajanta caves in northern India, which were painted between the first and fifth centuries CE (Figures 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5).

It is hard not to be struck by the sensual nature of these images, not only the attention to color and the flowing lines, but the way the figures—both male and female—are portrayed. An early scholarly consensus was that the sensuality of especially the later Ajanta paintings is a clear indication of the growing “degeneracy” of Indian Buddhism into “crude” tantric practices. Though *tantra* may have played some role in the Ajanta aesthetic, it is more likely that the artists were continuing an already existent Indian sculptural tradition that emphasized the body—especially, but by no means exclusively, the female body—as an auspicious emblem of fertility and good fortune (see Young 2004, 30–31; also Faure 1998b, 789 n. 58).

In addition, the depiction of bodhisattvas, lesser deities, and holy figures in a sensual fashion has strong precedent within later Buddhist traditions, beyond India. Faure notes that, while standard depictions of the major buddhas (Jp. *honzon*) tend toward “valorized stillness,” icons of “distinct worthies” (Jp. *besson*) are frequently shown in a more dynamic fashion: “when they seem to be on the move, their movement often goes hand in hand with a certain sexualization.” Moreover, as opposed to the *honzon*, the *besson* are “more dynamic and clearly gendered (sometimes even quite explicitly, like images of the goddess Benzaiten, whose unclad body is distinctly feminine)” (Faure 1998b, 770). It seems clear that whoever created these famous images had little problem with depicting the human form in all its sensual glory.

Buddhism, Sex, and the Female Body

Students and practitioners of Buddhism in Western countries have long been informed that the Buddhist view of sex is that it is simply “no big deal” (e.g. Kornman 1999). Indeed, this is without a doubt one of the factors that drew so many young people to Buddhism (and Hinduism) in the ’60s and ’70s: the appeal of a religion that—so unlike Christianity—does not frown on sex, the body, or women.⁶ Yet, in the case of the Buddha bikini, it so happens that a



Figure 4.3 Detail of wall painting from the Ajanta caves, Ajanta, India, *ca.* 6th century CE. Image used with permission.



Figure 4.4 Detail of yakshi on East Torana of Great Stupa, Sanchi, India, *ca.* 1st century BCE–1st century CE. Image used with permission.



Figure 4.5 Sculpture of yakshi at Srirangam Temple. Image used with permission.

number of complaints focused less on the general issue of the duplication or commercialization of sacred images discussed above than on the *sexualized context* of the images, in a double sense: as an advertisement in a highly “sexualized” swimsuit catalog; and as sacred icons that, in the advertisement itself (and, presumably, on the consumer who buys the item), are in direct contact with a naked female body—and more specifically, with the most “sexualized” parts of that body—breasts and crotch (Faure 1998b, 778).⁷ Continuing a long and unfortunate, but nonetheless inescapable, history of misogyny in Asian Buddhist cultures, these body parts are continually referred to by critics of the bikini as “dirty,” “impure,” and “defiled.” One well-meaning (but perhaps naïve) Western Buddhist critic of the Buddha bikini suggested that Victoria’s Secret simply “apologize” by putting out another Buddha-theme swimsuit—albeit a more conservative one-piece with a single Buddha image over the heart.

Any serious study of Buddhism—whether Theravada, Zen, Pure Land, or even tantric—quickly complicates naïve, romanticized or simplistic assumptions about Buddhism, gender and sexuality (Paul 1985; Gross 1993; Faure 1998a; Young 2004). Despite the Ajanta Caves, early Buddhist writings tend to take a fairly dismissive view of sex and the body, which are more often than not viewed in terms of the attachment, suffering, and affliction that they can cause.⁸ Early Buddhist attitudes towards the female body, in particular, are laced with ambiguities and ambivalence—with the textual tradition tending towards conservative attitudes ranging from mildly sexist or patriarchal to outright misogynist (Paul 1985).⁹ While some of the ambivalence stems simply from the combination of a male-dominated *Sangha* (monastic assembly) that viewed sexuality itself—and female sexuality in particular—as a threat to spiritual progress, and a lack of specific prohibitions against women’s capacity for awakening, it is also important to note the lingering effect of pre-Buddhist (or extra-Buddhist) notions of women as symbols of fertility and cosmic creativity. Though early Buddhists relegated this aspect to the material realm—for example, the striking images adorning the caves, as well as the sculptural *yakshi* adorning the early *stupa* (burial mound, or structure containing relics) gates—this powerful positive aspect of the Buddhist “feminine” reappears with a flourish in Tibetan tradition, with the Great Mother Tara, and also in the transformation of the Indian male bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara into the East Asian Guan Yin/Kannon.¹⁰

In general, there appears to be much more acceptance of the female body in Buddhist images than in texts. Besides the figures in Ajanta, a good number of Buddhist images in India and East Asia depict positive female spirits such as *apsaras*, *yakshis*, *tennin*, *naginis*, and *dakinis* (Young 2004, 12). *Dakinis*, in particular, are often depicted naked to represent the truth, and are described as “highly insightful females who often act as messengers, reminders, and revealers to the student of Vajrayana” (Gross 1993, 108–9).¹¹ Moreover, far from being passive objects of the male gaze, *dakinis*, like

yakshis, have shape-shifting powers that they employ as a kind of iconographic *upaya* or “skillful means.” As Young puts it: “They are in charge of their images, through which they assert their roles as the source of men’s [and sometimes women’s] enlightenment” (Young 2004, 129).

These are not atypical. South Asian Buddhist (and Hindu) sculpture abounds with voluptuous and scantily clad female forms, visions that understandably shocked the pants off Victorian missionaries to these heathen lands. While it may be countered that these are more often than not spatially—and thus symbolically—peripheral to early Buddhist sacred sites, another typical sculptural representation within early Buddhism is a tableau depicting the birth of the Buddha in which the Buddha’s own mother, Queen Maya, is depicted as a *yakshi*—that is, a fertility spirit, nude, voluptuous, and life-giving.¹² This and other images of the Buddha’s birth are particularly noteworthy for the tension that exists between the emphasis on women’s bodies/fertility and a reluctance (reflected in the texts) to allow the pure Buddha baby to be born out of Maya’s “defiled” womb—thus, in most images, the infant Siddhartha emerges out of her side or, in some East Asian cases (where nudity is less acceptable), the sleeve of her garment. In some early images, the artist has chosen not to bother with depicting the infant at all, so that the viewer’s attention is fully focused on the body of Maya, flanked by her attendants (Young 2004, 24–41).¹³

Of course, modern feminists will have trouble swallowing the notion that the use of naked female bodies as fertility symbols is much of an advance in terms of religious egalitarianism, since such depictions may have the effect of relegating women to one particular aspect of life—however powerful or cosmically significant. Moreover, in Buddhist terms, it is hard to see such as anything less than a lingering essentialism regarding gender, however positively encoded.¹⁴ And indeed, there is little evidence that such iconography had a role in supporting the spiritual advancement of actual Buddhist women. Yet the argument could be made that it is this symbolic power, located largely if not exclusively in early Buddhist iconography, that allowed for the emergence of strong female figures in Mahayana and Vajrayana devotion—Tara and Guan Yin—even while female bodies and sexuality remained as a “threat” within the most prominent early Buddhist texts.¹⁵ In the Mahayana, images of women extend well beyond the “eternal feminine” triad of fertility, motherhood, and mercy to include bliss, instruction, friendship and, with the goddess Prajnaparamita, whose name implies the very “perfection of wisdom” itself, a goddess whose goal is to reveal this world for what it truly is. Not only is she lionized in the sutras as “the genitrix, the mother of all Buddhas” (*Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines*, cited by Macy 1977), Prajnaparamita is also, according to Gross, the “desired lover” of the Mahayana practitioner (Gross 1993, 76–77).¹⁶ Ironically, these more developed aspects of the Mahayana feminine ideal may have emerged precisely because both motherhood and fertility were largely confined in

Buddhism to the secular sphere. Indeed, as Paul notes, the great female characters of Mahayana literature are largely women who break with conventional social roles—nuns, of course, but also “married laywomen without children, prostitutes, or young unmarried women” (Paul 1985, 61).¹⁷

Once we move to the esoteric or tantric sects of Buddhism—found today mainly in the Himalayan countries of Tibet and Nepal, but also in Japanese Shingon—representations of the female body are taken well beyond the powerful but conceptually limited aspect of fertility. Tantric iconography is often explicitly sexual—most famously the *yabyum* embrace, which represents the union of male (compassion) and female (wisdom) principles.

Of course, such images are not *simply* erotic, but to imply, as most texts do, that they are *not erotic at all*, is to impose a conceptual dualism that is unwarranted.¹⁸ What exactly is this category of the “erotic” that is presumably too shallow or frivolous to be associated with “serious” religious art? Esoteric Buddhism is quite clear in teaching that the passions can and should be cultivated and channeled towards enlightenment, and we should bear in mind that the images that adorn the Victoria’s Secret Buddha bikini are clearly based on esoteric/tantric iconography. Although intentionality seemed to play a significant role in the criticism of the Buddha bikini, from a Buddhist perspective it is also important to note the way in which such images are understood and employed by the viewer. As Diana Paul rightly argues, “[i]n Buddhism both men and women were to regard evil as ignorance, a mental attitude. Evil was not an external object or force as it is in this text [‘The Tale of King Udayana of Vatsa’]. The concept of evil expressed in these verses consequently is not Buddhistic” (Paul 1985, 58 n. 68). Ultimately, as with so much else in Buddhism, their meaning is what we make of them.

A common theme among those who complained about the Buddha bikini was that there was no way that a company would even attempt to market a Jesus or Virgin Mary swimsuit. Yet, as we might expect from Moore’s results on comparative religion in advertising, this is not the case. The following are just a sampling of items that can be purchased via the internet (Figure 4.6).

The thong gives us a fairly standard WASPy/kitsch image of Jesus (together with the motto “Jesus was a liberal Jew”). Also noteworthy in this regard was a 2001 controversy surrounding an art exhibition in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which displayed a small collage of the Virgin of Guadalupe in a bikini—a floral patterned one, no less—which, according to Roman Catholic Archbishop Michael Sheehan, made the Mother of God look “as if she were a tart” (Associated Press 2001).

Granted, this is a somewhat different issue, since it involves questions of the limits of art and free expression and has little to do with commercialization—yet it does bring together issues of sexuality, media, and religion, as well as help put to rest the argument that Westerners—some Westerners—would never treat Christian holy figures in a way that might be insensitive to Christians. Indeed, blasphemy is a staple subgenre of modern Western art,



Figure 4.6 Kalacakra in yabyum embrace with Visvamata, 17th century. Image used with permission.

and recent studies of the use of religious motifs in US advertising indicate that, if anything, Western religions are more likely to be mocked or derided than their Eastern counterparts (Moore 2005).

More to the point, all this tit for tat betrays a highly questionable assumption or set of assumptions: that the treatment of religious imagery and icons is, or should be, equivalent across religions and cultures—and/or that outsiders should treat the images of other faiths in ways equivalent to

how they treat their own, regardless of the status or use of these images in their respective traditions. Buddhism is a complex and multiform set of traditions, and there is certainly no single correct answer to the way a specific image should be treated—yet we are left with the problem of respect. How far do the media or companies need to go to refrain from hurting the feelings of others?

Gregory Levine has argued that one lesson of the Buddha bikini controversy is that we should be wary of accepting the “anything goes monoculture” that is being foisted upon us by the media and big business, lest we find ourselves sliding down a “slippery slope” of commercial exploitation (Levine 2005). While Levine has a point, I believe the nature of the responses to the Buddha bikini tells us as much about contemporary Buddhism—or should I say *Buddhisms*—as it does about contemporary consumer culture. For one, the legacy of misogyny—the fear, mistrust, and loathing of women’s bodies and female sexuality—remains a deep if frequently unacknowledged element of Asian Buddhism. Second, like members of other world religions, modern Buddhists continue to struggle with issues of sacred representation in an age of consumerism and mechanical reproduction. And yet one unforeseen product of globalization may be a convergence of religious attitudes towards appropriate religious imagery, or perhaps a division that runs less along religious lines than between “liberals” and “conservatives” of all traditions. Third, for better or worse, Buddhists seem to have developed a global nonsectarian consciousness of being Buddhists—a sort of interlinked Buddhist *umma* (a Muslim term used to identify the entire Muslim community, in the broadest sense). How else can we account for the fact that the complaints about the Buddha bikini rolled in from virtually all Asian countries—even, or especially, those such as Vietnam and Thailand, whose Buddhist beliefs and iconographic traditions differ significantly from the tantrically inspired swimsuit?

Obviously, compared with more recent protests surrounding European cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, the case of the Buddha bikini is relatively tame in that, as far as I am aware, no-one was physically injured, and Victoria’s Secret’s reputation was only slightly sullied, even if one Vietnamese–Canadian Buddhist made a veiled threat that the honchos at Victoria’s Secret would ultimately suffer the same karmic fate as the Bamiyan Buddha-destroying Taliban. Yet the threats by Buddhist protesters were passionate and strongly-voiced, and the suffering caused by Victoria’s Secret to many Buddhists was evident. In the end, the highly “postmodern” image of a sensually posed Western swimsuit model adorned with tantric Buddhist icons poses a challenge for scholars and lay Buddhists alike to rethink not only the limits of the public and commercialized use of religious symbols, but also conventional attitudes within Buddhist traditions towards sex and the female body. Along these lines, a comment by Bernard Faure serves as an apt conclusion to this essay:

Our use (or abuse) of these [non-Western] icons may be not only the unavoidable outcome of modern commodity fetishism but also part of a Western pragmatic which consists in installing cultural fragments in another context (Malraux's *musée imaginaire*), reinscribing them in another structure, and thus establishing another circulation of power.

(Faure 1998b, 811)

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Notes

- 1 This is a revised version of a paper delivered at "World's Religions after September 11: A Global Congress," Montréal, Québec, September 15, 2006.
- 2 Despite the title of this article, the item in question is not actually a bikini but rather a tankini—a combination of a traditional bikini bottom and a tank top. Having noticed the Indian-sounding lilt of the word tankini, I broke the word down into its Sanskrit roots to discover that *tan* implies "to stretch," while *kini*,

meaning “dancer,” forms the base of the word *dakini*, defined as “a supernatural female with volatile temperament who serves as a muse for spiritual practice.” Though purely coincidental, this fortuitous etymological link provides an auspicious entry into some of the historical and iconographic issues at stake here. Citing corporate policy, Limited Brands—the parent company of Victoria’s Secret—refused to grant permission to reproduce an image of the tankini in this article. However, a simple online image search (“Buddha bikini”) will produce images used across the Web, presumably without permission. See, for example, Associated Press (2004), reprinted on ReligionNewsBlog.com on April 21, 2004.

- 3 This and other similar comments were taken from the “Buddhist News Network,” an online discussion located at www.buddhistnews.tv/current/bikini-reaction-230404.php. This link no longer works; it seems the Buddhist News Network is now “The Buddhist Channel” and located at <http://buddhistchannel.tv>. Unfortunately, the comments related to this story have been eliminated from the site. A petition posted on PetitionOnline.com (Lotus Le, n.d.) titled “Victoria’s Secret Lack of Respect for Religion” reads [original text remains unedited]:

To: Victoria Secret, President & CEO

We are shocked and disturb at Victoria Secret’s recent line of graphic swim wear. We are absolutely stunned to find the Buddha and Bodhisattvas images, two of the most revered Buddhas, were printed on swimming suits in the Victoria Secrets Catalog, name : “The Hot Issue swim 2004 Mexico”, item name: “Asian Floral Tankini” and item number: IR 173–444. Displaying the images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas on the swim suite currently markets through Victoria Secret Catalog is an appalling and serious insult to all Buddhism believers, not just in America, but also to over 500 hundred million Buddhists around the world. The lacking of respect for religion, as Victoria Secret has shown, also could be leading to a very regretful outcome while America, as a nation, is more than ever needing a united and determined effort for a religious tolerance and harmony. We understand fashion is made creatively; however it should never be permitted to make contempt of any religion. Let’s think of an ending if Victoria Secrets Catalog has used the spiritual founders other than Buddhas on the same swim suite. A simple ignorance, in many cases, would cause a mankind disaster. Considering the blatant lack of respect, we must then question the sensitivity and intelligence of every employee at every level responsible for designing and marketing the swim wear. We are forming this petition to let Victoria Secret and all other companies know how much business you can lose through religion insensitivity, not only from Asian American consumers but from all Americans with a social conscience. To help restore a mutual understanding and respect for religion, we truthfully ask Victoria Secret to immediately stop distributing the catalog, remove the product from the market, and recall all sold items. Victoria Secret’s promotion of Buddha images on their products, not only shows lack of respect for religion, but shows ignorant of history and is highly offensive.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned

As of January 10, 2008, there were a total of 10,587 signatories to this petition.

- 4 In the ad, Chinese characters to the left (somewhat obscured by the words “Buddha Bash”) can be loosely translated as “dangerous or indecent young woman”—or, perhaps more fittingly, given the alternative meaning of the first glyph as “festival”—“party girl.”
- 5 Patrik Alac gives the following “definition” of a bikini: “The bikini is a bathing costume that is narrow and in two parts, of a maximum area of 7 square inches (45 square centimetres), and not specifically intended for bathing. It can be sold in a matchbox, or folded easily into a handbag compact. It represents clothing for a woman such that she does not feel completely naked, yet leaves her sufficiently undressed to be irresistibly attractive to men” (Alac 2002, 16).
- 6 As is often the case with such interreligious comparisons—especially, though not exclusively, at the popular level—analysis of sexuality and gender issues in Buddhism is distorted by blindness to the forces of history and societal context. Whereas Western religions tend to be (negatively) judged in terms of actual history and “facts on the ground,” Buddhism is (positively) appraised by virtue of its ideals and certain decontextualized texts.
- 7 Faure cites Edmund Leach, for whom “works of art are not just things in themselves, they are objects carrying moral implications. What the moral implication is depends upon where they are” (Leach 1983, 244). As such, Faure argues, “what we call the loss of aura results in this case from the displacement of the icon from its religious context and not merely, as Walter Benjamin argued, from mechanical reproduction” (Faure 1998b, 778). The images on the Buddha bikini are, in a quite literal sense “profaned” (Latin *profanum*, to be placed outside the temple).
- 8 “The body, born from the field of karma, issuing from the water of desire, is characterized by decay. Disfigured by tears and sweat, by saliva, urine, and blood, filled with filth from the belly, with marrow, blood, and liquids from the brain, always letting impurities flow—bodies are the abode of impure teachings and ugly stench ... Having seen this, what wise man would not look upon his own body as an enemy?” *Lalitavistara* (Bays 1983, 314–15).
- 9 Paul repeats the common criticism (e.g. in Falk 1974) that early Indian Buddhism in particular holds a misogynist view of women as temptresses of monks, a view that Rita Gross (1993, 44–48) sees as “quite one-sided and incomplete,” in that the fear of sexual temptation on the part of all Buddhist monastics—whether monks or nuns—goes beyond a simple association with women and women’s bodies. According to Gross: “When the various stories of attempted seduction and temptation are analyzed, many variants and motifs, rather than a single theme of misogyny, emerge.” Gross concludes that while traditional Buddhism is undoubtedly androcentric, “it is not especially misogynist” (*ibid.*, 119).
- 10 Interestingly, in her discussion of Falk’s assertion of the “negative feminine principle” of early Indian Buddhism, Gross neglects the sculptural tradition in which positive and presumably archetypal female forms abound (see Young, 2004, xxi). In suggesting, *contra* Falk, that “the kind of archetypal, mythic and symbolic thinking that is so much a part of the feminine principle is entirely foreign to the thinking of early Indian Buddhism,” Gross seems to be privileging the textual tradition over that of early Buddhist material culture—or perhaps making an implicit assumption that material culture or ritual is not related to “thinking” (Gross 1993, 48).
- 11 Gross notes that *dakinis* are not simply a focus for male spiritual advancement, but can be—and are—frequently encountered by women as well. Also see Young 2004, 142, 224–25. Steven Hodge notes “The gloss (lit. Sky Dancer) is given for Dakini. This is inaccurate though very loosely based on the Tibetan translation of the term, *mkha'-gro-ma*, she who travels the sky. However, this rendering is based on a false Sanskrit etymology for an Indic word which is probably of Munda

- origin. It is likely that dakinis were originally tribal shamanesses who chanted, drummed and invoked spirits as suggested by cognate words” [“Talk: Dakini (Buddhism).” *Wikipedia*, 01:19, April 25, 2005. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Dakini\(Buddhism\).](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Dakini(Buddhism))]
- 12 “Casting Queen Maya in this pose directly connects her with these powers [of fertility], and it incorporates these chthonic powers into Buddhism. Statues and carvings of Maya, *yakshis*, and similar female images were included to empower early Buddhist sites with their auspiciousness. Consequently, these images are all about womanliness: they have large, full breasts and broad curving hips that stress fertility and stimulate male desire. They are a celebration of female biology, but they also carry powerful religious meanings as bestowers of fertility and wealth in all its forms” (Young 2004, 30).
 - 13 In distinction from Gross, Young’s analysis of the early Indian sculptural tradition allows her to posit a strong link between early Indian Buddhist traditions and later tantric affirmations of female sexuality (Young 2004, 113–14).
 - 14 At another level, as Faure (1998b, 787) suggests, such images may be as much the product of individual male fantasies as of a more generalized (and academically rendered) social imaginary.
 - 15 “Fools lust for women / like dogs in heat. / They do not know abstinence. / They are also like flies / who see vomited food. / Like a herd of hogs, / They greedily seek manure. / Women can ruin / The precepts of purity. / They can also ignore / Honor and virtue. / Causing one to go to hell / They prevent rebirth in heaven. / Why should the wise / Delight in them?” (“The Tale of King Udayana of Vatsu” [“*Udayanavatsarajaparivartah*”], *The Collection of Jewels [Maharatnakuta]*, assembly 29. T. v. 11. N. 310, pp. 543–47).
 - 16 This process of liberation may be said to culminate in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, in which Shariputra is reproved by the goddess for his blindness regarding gender essences: “I have been here for twelve years and have looked for the innate characteristics of the female sex and haven’t been able to find them” (Goddess chapter, *Vimalakirti-nirdesa-sutra*, quoted by Paul 1985, 230).
 - 17 Most famous of the Mahayana prostitutes is of course Vasumitra of the Flower Garland and Harmony of the Young Sapling sutras, who uses her physical charms as an *upaya* (skillful means, as in doing whatever it takes to bring about awakening) for the awakening and merit of the various beings who approach her. She is “beautiful, serene, and fair to behold ... Her hair was very black and her complexion golden. Her form in every limb and all limbs together were well proportioned. The glorious beauty of her features, form, complexion, and color exceeded that of celestial and human beauty in all the realms of desire” (Paul 1985, 159; also see Faure 1998a, 121).
 - 18 As Faure notes, even if we grant that tantric images should be seen as “merely a symbolic expression of the philosophical ‘conjunction of opposites’ ... it is obviously clear that such dialectical images lend themselves to a multitude of interpretations.” Furthermore, along with other motifs such as that of Guan Yin as a prostitute, such “sexualized” images “must have had a power of arousal that we no longer suspect” (Faure 1998b, 787).