

THE KAMA SUTRA

The purpose and the meaning of the *Kama Sutra* have been widely misconstrued throughout most of the Western world to be a text regarding the positions in sexual intercourse. Though the *Kama Sutra* does contain information about intercourse and the various ways of performing sexually, it is much more than that. It is a text about a certain way of living – “about finding a partner, maintaining power in a marriage, committing adultery, living as or with a courtesan, and using drugs” (Doniger and Kakar xi). This text describes in great detail the principles and rules (*sutra*) of love (*kama*). The *Kama Sutra* was originally composed in the ancient Sanskrit language of India. It is not known when the text was written and there is little information on its author, Vatsyayana Mallanaga. Clues as to the origins of this text are found within the writings but scholars have not come to a collective decision about the exact dates of authorship. Vatsyayana begins the *Kama Sutra* with an allusion to the four goals of life: *dharma*, *kama*, *artha*, and *moksa*. Righteousness, pleasure, wealth, and liberation respectively describe the terms used above. Vatsyayana explains that he wrote the *Kama Sutra* in order that others may learn about pleasure just as other texts such as the Dharma Sastras are used to learn about other goals in life.

The *Kama Sutra* belongs to a set of texts that are part of an erotic science known as *kamashastra* (the science of *kama*). Vatsyayana lays out particular guidelines and methods in this text that he believes to be the appropriate and standard ways of living, not just sexually, but more broadly sensual. Sensuality includes food, perfume, and music in addition to the obvious sexuality. Vatsyayana says that “because a man and a woman depend on each other for sex, it requires a method” (9). The *Kama Sutra* is therefore, a

text explaining methods required to please both the man and the woman in sexual intercourse. The text is mainly directed at men because men are supposed to be in power when it comes to sexual prowess. They must learn the techniques and processes involved in order to be successful.

The understanding of the text is a science because Vatsyayana's prose can be very obscure and mysterious. One must understand the connections that are being made within the text by being aware of the context and subject of the words. Because the text is written in *sutras* (similar to the English words 'sew' and 'suture') one can describe the *Kama Sutra* as having threads of meaning that are connected throughout the entire body of literature. Because of this ambiguity it is easy to understand why most people think of just sexual positions when they hear the name *Kama Sutra*. Most people do not understand the deeper meanings and religious significance behind sexual intercourse and the life of a woman and a man pursuing *kama*.

Vatsyayana produces information about sexual behaviour in the *Kama Sutra* which can be interpreted as merely guidelines. He is not stating in this text that one has to use a specific sexual position or that one must act in a certain way around one's spouse, he says that one 'should' act in a certain way or perform in a certain sexual manner. After describing one method of oral sex Vatsyayana states that "when a man has considered the region, and the time, and the technique, and the textbook teachings, and himself, he – or may not – make use of these practices (Mallanaga 69).

The pursuit of *kama* is the main focus of this text because Hindus believe that *kama* is one of the four main goals of life. This concept is related to the idea that pleasure is the most important pursuit of humanity. This way of thinking is related to the

philosophy of hedonism. The pursuit of pleasure is placed at the highest importance in hedonistic thinking. The *Kama Sutra* can be considered a hedonistic text because it portrays how men and women can strive to achieve the highest state of *kama* through desire and pleasure. He describes how to kiss, how to perform oral sex, how to win a virgin, and many other situations that would arise throughout one's quest for pleasure.

Although the *Kama Sutra* contains many books describing the acquisition of pleasure, it also has many books on other aspects of sexual relationships that are not quite as positive but can still be considered hedonistic. Chapters such as "Ways to Get Money from Him" (Mallanaga 142-145) and "Ways to Get Rid of Him" (Mallanaga 145-147) are surprising to people who only believe the *Kama Sutra* to be about sexual positions. The text contains many of these surprisingly harsh and blunt subjects that one would not expect to see in a book about love and lust.

One of these surprising subjects is homosexuality. In book five, Vatsyayana discusses female homoeroticism in the women who are part of a harem. The women of the harem have one husband shared by many so he explains how the females satisfy themselves sexually without the aid of a man. According to Vatsyayana, a woman may satisfy her sexual needs through the use of masturbation or homosexuality. A servant girl can dress up as a man and relieve the desires of another woman through the use of "dildos or with bulbs, roots, or fruits that have that form" (Mallanaga 126). The female plays a role as a man in order to fulfill sexual needs.

The concept of homoeroticism and the ambiguity of gender can be seen through the writings of other authors who are interested in this text as well. Walter Penrose discusses female homoeroticism and the ambiguity of fixed gender roles in his article

entitled “Hidden in History: Female Homoeroticism and Women of a “Third Nature” in the South Asian Past.” Penrose states that the Hindu religion allows “institutionalized gender variance” (4). This confirms Vatsyayana’s belief that women are allowed to act as men when their purpose is to relieve their desires. However there are a great number of stories that claim homosexuality is not something to be desired.

Ruth Vanita discusses the story of Bhagiratha’s birth to two women in her article entitled “Born of Two Vaginas”. According to this story, a child born as a result of female on female sexual intercourse results in the conception and birth of a lump of flesh or jelly. The child has no bones because a male was considered to be the one who contributes the bones to the baby. This story can be read in the *Sushruta Samhita*, written in the first century. Vatsyayana refers to this story in the *Kama Sutra* in the chapter entitled “Sexual Typology” (28-37). He agrees that sexual desire must be between a man and a woman because “the man is the active agent and the young woman is the passive locus” (Mallangaga 34). They complement each other in such a way that a woman and a woman could not.

There are numerous books in modern literature that claim to be influenced by Vatsyayana Mallangaga’s *Kama Sutra* but all that they entail is a detailed description of sexual positions and the pleasure that sex gives to men and women. The *Kama Sutra* does indeed include descriptions and pictures of sexual positions but it is not the main focus of the text. The text focuses on power in the relationship, methods in which to please your partner in ways other than sexual and just general advice on how to live a life in which *kama* is fully achieved.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

Vatsyayana, Mallanaga. Kamasutra. Trans. Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003

Penrose, Walter. "Hidden in History: Female Homoeroticism and Women of a "Third Nature" in the South Asian Past." Journal of the History of Sexuality 10.1 (2001) 3-39. 31 January 2009

Rodrigues, Hillary. Hinduism – The eBook. Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books, 2006

Vanita, Ruth. "Born of Two Vaginas: Love and Reproduction between Co-Wives in Some Medieval Indian Texts". A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 11.4 (2005) 547-577. 31 January 2009

Related topics for further investigation

Artha
Dharma
Moksa
Sushruta Samhita
Bhagiratha
Sanskrit

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kama_Sutra

<http://www.spaceandmotion.com/kamasutra.htm>

<http://www.liveindia.com/sutras/page1.html>

<http://www.tantraworks.com/KamaSutraTantra.html>

http://www.alternet.org/sex/86582/a_brief_history_of_the_kama_sutra/

Article written by: Sarah Sawatzky (March 2009) who is solely responsible for its content.