The Kama Sutra

From the Nighstand to the Temple

The *Kama Sutra* is a sacred text, written some 1800 years ago to allow the religious Hindu to experience God through delight in the physical world.
Warning!

This slide show explores the art that, through the ensuing centuries, has been used to illustrate the book. Some images are very explicit.

If you are offended by NC-17 rated eroticism, you can still safely view the first 14 slides. There will be a warning just before the final slides indicating that they are explicit. You can close out at that point without affecting your grade.
Hinduism maintains that life offers four noble pursuits – and pleasure is the first listed. The stories of the divine figures – like Lord Krisna at the right – are filled with their pursuit of pleasure, understood as models for our own lives.

Krishna and the Milkmaids. While the Bhagavad-gita presents Lord Krishna in a majestic, all-powerful way, later texts presented him as a playful lover. Here, when he comes upon the milkmaids bathing in the river, he snatches their clothes and flees up into the tree.
Vatsyayana, the author of the *Kama Sutra*, was a *brahmin*, a Hindu priest. As such, his interest was not in the lurid, but in the holy. If pleasure is one of the noble pursuits, it is a path to the knowledge of God, and as with the other paths (the productive life, the ethical life and the religious quest) it must be understood well if it is to bear sacred fruit.

*Radha is led to her wedding*
First, it must be understood in context: “pleasure” is not a simple synonym for “sex”. Pleasure includes the delights of poetry, music, colors, food, and much more.
One of the 330 million gods of Hinduism is Kama (the word means pleasure) – and each of the gods is a window into the Ultimate essence of all reality, Brahman. Kama, as the picture at the left presents, is within each of us, waiting to be unleashed.
But “pleasure” is an art, as difficult to master as the skills used by swordmakers, chefs, or other artisans. It is easy to see if we consider the appreciation of classical music. In order to fully appreciate a concerto, we need to work to know musical theory, acoustics, and the role of individual musicians and conductors.
Vatsyayana was not the first to recognize this – he writes that he is drawing on the works of many others before him. But his work is actually a full course on pleasure, meant to take its place alongside the teachings on ethics and on the scriptures.
Thus, the *Kama Sutra* will not shy away from sexuality. To do so would be to neglect the experience of Brahman that brings the greatest bliss – that is, a negative view of sexuality is actually an assertion that Brahman and bliss are somehow at odds with one another.
In the early chapter called “On the Arts and Sciences”, Vatsyayana notes that the Kama Sutra includes the discussion of singing, playing a musical instrument, dancing, painting murals, calligraphy, make-up, swimming, and much, much more.
There are simple common sense considerations that must be addressed if we are to experience that bliss. First, Hinduism has always maintained that human beings are not all the same. In countless ways, what is good for one is not for another.
Vatsyayana faced this early in the text. For two lovers to know Brahman through pleasure, they would have to be sexually compatible.
Men and women each have, he argued, three categories of physical make-up. Males may have small, average or large genitals, and females may be able to accommodate small, average or large male genitals.

For sexuality to be fully realized, the male and female should correspond. A male with large genitals with a female who can accommodate only the male with small genitals would present a difficult situation.

Vatsyayana is quite modest in his expression of very explicit subjects. In describing genital capacity, for instance, he notes simply that some women are female deer, some mares, and some elephants.

EMAIL THAT LIST OF ANIMALS TO ME BY MIDNIGHT THURSDAY FOR 25 BONUS POINTS.
Likewise, men and women each may have low, average or high sexual appetites. If the pair does not share a particular level, the tension between them may override the experience of pleasure.
The remaining images are very explicit.
This painting presents a man holding his partner’s nostrils during intercourse. Of course, this may simply be playfulness during lovemaking – an important element in and of itself. But it also alludes to the tantric tradition of mastering the energy that is contained in our breath.
In medieval Hindu culture, the harem was a reality for some in the nobility. This painting may be a reflection of that. However, it might also be stimulating erotic art, or even poetic representation – a man making love to one woman imagining being with others. Whether this would be an endorsement or simple statement of fact can’t be known.
Many of the paintings present sexual acts that simply are not possible. As such, they may point to something transcendent – “otherworldly” in Western speaking. The implication is that bliss realized shatters the limits of our everyday world.
There is no text in the Kama Sutra that remotely resembles this painting. It is unclear whether we should take it literally (although it is hard to imagine a positive experience in the next moment), or as poetic metaphor (the erotic suspension of the woman), or even possibly as comedy (the extremes we seem to want to go to).
Indeed, Hindu myth is often sexually frank, such as the story of Brahma and Saraswati that opened the Hinduism chapter.

But the distance between the text and the images – both in time (more than a thousand years) and in style (Vatsyayana was playfully coy) – should never be ignored.
Indeed, the images may be largely responsible for the near disappearance of the Kama Sutra. When Sir Richard Burton heard about the book, he wanted to be the one to translate it into English first. His quest for a Sanskrit manuscript, however, took years.

When he did get a copy, his translation suited the artwork more than Vatsyayana’s style. Burton went for the shock value.

Richard Burton published his translation of the *Kama Sutra* in 1883. He also published an English translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*.