

**The Way of Whips and Chains:
BDSM as Life Path
– sasha, May, 2001**

for Lady Carol & Lady Kay

Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no—is what we mean by having a religion.

George Santayana, Reason in Religion

Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us.

Rainer Maria Rilke, Love and Other Difficulties

My sexual imagination has leaned toward servitude, bondage and corporal punishment since the age of seven or eight, as far back as I remember having sexual thoughts at all. Growing up in New York City, BDSM erotica and professional Dom(me)s were readily available; and I had my first real-life experiences in the Scene while I was in my twenties, long before microcomputers and the Internet had made it easy for people of our interest to find each other. I was married twice, became a father, became interested in martial arts and oriental philosophy, then in religious thought and philosophy in general; but all this time my sexual inclination remained a secret vice, well insulated from the rest of my life. It was not till I was in my forties that I began to notice parallels between these leanings and my readings in myth, anthropology, and comparative religion, only then that I began to feel that these fantasies both demanded and deserved to be taken seriously. Gradually, I ceased to be ashamed of them. By equal steps, as I opened up about them—to myself, to my second wife, and to my closest friends—I began to understand them in a new and positive light. This essay is the result. My purpose here is to set down what I think I've learned over these years about the Scene's religious and spiritual dimension.

1. Context

The linking of sex and pain with spirituality is not peculiar to BDSM. The Christian imagination, beginning with the image of crucified Jesus, is shot through with it, for example. But, in our game (or lifestyle) this three-way association is surely the central mystery. A brisk spanking across my lady's knee is not just foreplay—not just a way of commencing, embellishing and prolonging our love-making. At the same time, it has hardly ever been taken to a level that could be punishing; and when she is really angry with me, my lady finds other ways to make me feel it. More than sex-play and not true

punishment, the paddling feels quite different from either: some kind of profane ritual with both sexual and religious overtones. In the nature of ritual, it cannot be explained in words, but is communicated only in its own terms. Yet explanations are needed—to make our rituals intelligible to ourselves, to intimate friends outside the Scene who know what we are into, and to the world at large. The choice is either to give some public account of our cult, defend our sexual/spiritual activities and risk the consequences of coming out, or else to stay “in the closet.” There is no question but that the former is healthier.

My project then is to discuss BDSM as a “variety of religious experience¹.” Briefly, I think the most satisfying of our scenes play a role in our lives comparable to that of religious ritual and meditation, as well as sexual magic. An act of worship is performed: men and women attempt to connect to divinity and the sacred in a systematic and reliable way. What this actually means needs explanation though, because all these concepts—*religion*, *ritual*, *magic*, *worship*, *divinity* and the *sacred*—are anything but clear. Between the efforts of established churches to monopolize such words, and those of materialists and positivists to abolish them, it is not easy for modern-minded people to use them without embarrassment. As we’ll see, however, beneath the turbulence of religious politics each has a fairly precise meaning.

The stumbling block is to recognize and concede that divinity is a category of the human psyche and experience, not some lurking Ghost behind the fabric of the universe. This single issue has caused more intellectual confusion, more cruelty and more waste of life than any I can think of. Nor is consensus in sight. So I must take pains here to explain just what I mean in speaking of BDSM as a religion, and must ask my reader to put her own convictions aside for a moment, and try to follow me: What I am suggesting here is that all our gods and goddesses are human projections onto life, nature and the universe, but not less “real” or important to us for being so. They do not exist in the same sense that planets are seen to exist, but rather in the sense that constellations do. There is nothing superstitious about seeing or pointing out Orion or the Dipper, so long as we own them as our own constructions.

From that starting point, what I will offer is a discussion of BDSM’s theology for those who can accept that such discussion is neither meaningless, nor blasphemous, nor yet a form of research into the real nature of things. Theology—defined by my Oxford dictionary as “the rational analysis of a religious faith”—is a legitimate discipline and a profound one, but the word *faith* now, needs to be carefully understood. It does not mean belief in the literal truth and facticity of some religious doctrine. Nor is it mere clinging (in Mark Twain’s delicious phrase) to what you know damned well ain’t so. *Faith* is best understood as a cognitive ability or tendency or commitment: the ability to see things in a certain way, and the tendency or commitment to do so. There is an act

¹ In terms, then, that William James might have found intelligible.

of faith even in taking the time to read this page: some trust that you will find interesting meanings in the ink marks, that may prove helpful when you lay the page aside to get on with your life.

A comparable act of faith is involved when we project the categories of human sexuality and thought onto the natural world, seeing a Goddess behind its fertility, nurturance and cruelty or a God behind its order, logic, and law. Here too we find meanings; and we can scarcely help but rely on these (or other) systems of meaning, because without them, the choices of everyday life would be impossible. We cannot get ourselves across the street without some animal trust that familiar things will behave in predictable ways, that our actions will have predictable consequences and, above all, that our values are somehow anchored in and relevant to the natural order of things.

Just here we find the gap that science leaves to myth and religion: Science tells us more than religion ever did about the behaviour of objects and about the consequences of our actions, but nothing helpful about our values. Specifically, it cannot help us compose ourselves to face nature or other people without fear or shame or disgust. It augments political and economic power, but gives no guidance at all on how this power should be distributed and used amongst the individuals of a society. In sum then, being value-neutral, science and technology can increase our options but cannot tell us how to choose amongst them. They leave us at loose ends, uncertain what to do with ourselves. The further they advance, the more divisive and paralysing this uncertainty becomes.

Here some form of faith takes over (possibly, scientism—as distinct from authentic science), to supply the values without which knowledge and skill are useless. Faith comes in many varieties, and tends to bring people together in groups, while dividing such groups from one another. It needs to be nurtured and cultivated, and comes easiest when it is shared. Thus it is entirely possible—in fact, necessary—for rational people to find some form of faith, to give them a sense of direction, a sense of purpose, a source of value to make their lives worth living. At this level, faith and love are almost the same thing. What we put faith in, we can scarcely help but love; and to love something or someone, involves a certain faith that our love will be requited, or at least not abused or betrayed. For most of us, one of the readiest forms of love is sexual love; one of the most accessible sources of love is our sexuality. This brings us back to BDSM, which I propose to discuss here as a faith or cult (i.e. culture) or religion of sexuality—a cult that I discovered for myself as quite a young boy. Along with the cult of ideas and books and letters that I absorbed from my father, and the cult of aikido, a Japanese martial art that I fell into as a young adult, that of BDSM has sustained me all my life; and I at last feel able to discuss it alongside of, and on terms of equal dignity with the others.

In doing so, I'll be referring and drawing comparisons to several more respectable traditions of spiritual practice and religious thought:

- to the Christian tradition whose hostility to sexuality BDSM dissents from, and

- attempts to overcome;
- to the revived (or re-invented) Wiccan tradition which, like our own cult, recognizes and seeks to integrate the Dark Side, and understands Sex as the sacred energy of Nature;
 - to the tradition of Yoga, on the whole also sympathetic to sexuality, which rejects the dualist conception of mind and body, offering comprehensive and sophisticated methods for their integration;
 - to the Zen Buddhist tradition, from which I borrow the central notion of this essay—liberation, enlightenment (or whatever you like to call it).

My project is to locate our cult with reference to these four traditions. For convenience, and because it is my own situation, I write about a male submissive being worked and trained by a female Dominant, but this is only a convention, to avoid awkwardness with pronouns. Almost nothing I will say would have to be altered for some different combination.

A final introductory note: The words "spirit" and "spiritual" have acquired so much superstitious freight as to have become almost useless for serious discussion. I mean them quite simply, however, in the sense we use in speaking of a spirited musical performance, or a spirited horse. Spiritual work, as I understand it, aims at integrating mind and body (which are "not two," as a Japanese proverb exclaims). It aims at increasing vital energy, at raising, at clarifying and purifying consciousness, at healing and transcending one's own personal history and the human condition in general, to the extent this may be possible. Please forget any associations you have with religious emblems and rituals, with practices of self-denial and self-abnegation, with crystals, feathers, sticks of incense, or holy chants. At best, these are the tools of a spiritual technology: a means to distract, compose or focus the mind while something else is going on. The risk of using them, as with any technology, is that they readily become mere toys and fetish objects: ends and entertainments in themselves. The whips and chains of BDSM represent a very powerful technology of this kind. The risk of mistaking means for ends in our own cult is proportionately even greater.

Since I don't believe in ghosts, for me the words "spirit" or "soul" correspond roughly to the region of overlap between the body's vitality (its drives, desires and passions) and the mind's representations, dreams and intentions—our breath-rhythms and glandular secretions somehow linking these zones. The varied activities of BDSM all seem to play in this region; the Scene as a whole is one of the most direct and powerful means I know for exploring it. For that very reason, it is also one of the most difficult to teach or follow as a coherent Path—being extraordinarily demanding and threatening, on one hand, while collapsing readily into mere obscenity and self-indulgence. The person wishing to use our thing as a vehicle of spiritual development must find a sane balance amongst emotional forces that can be overwhelming.

2. Precedents and Distinctions

A man is strung up naked by the wrists while a woman stripes his back with a flogger. What is going on?

It depends on context, obviously. It could be torture of a prisoner for information. It could be torture voluntarily accepted as a test of will and endurance in what I'd call the athletics of pain. In the ante-bellum South, it could have been punishment of a delinquent slave by his mistress. Even today, it could be the legally sanctioned punishment of an offender. Or it could be punishment consensually endured by a submissive who has granted his mistress the right to discipline him in this fashion. On the other hand, it could be sex play—with or without the free consent of the victim. It could be a very intense, stress-relieving massage, or a sensual experience enjoyed for its own sake, without much heavy baggage. But finally, it could be some form of religious ritual—possibly without, but preferably with the victim's free consent. We are concerned only with the last of these possibilities.

If it is not safe, sane and above all, freely consensual it is (by definition) not BDSM but some different thing that we want no part of. If it is for sexual or recreational purposes alone, it is perfectly legitimate on its own terms and lots of fun for those (like myself) whose tastes run that way, but it is not what interests me here. If it is consensual punishment within a BDSM relationship it is likewise outside my scope. There are all kinds of reasons why two individuals may define their relationship in terms of "power exchange," but most of these are not my concern here. Nor am I concerned with the purely "psychedelic" uses of flagellation (or BDSM techniques in general), though these come nearer the mark. My sole concern here is with BDSM relationships and transactions practised consciously as what the Buddhists call a *Vehicle*, to lead the soul through a change of state.

The goal of this change has different names in different traditions, all seeming to refer to roughly the same experience. Buddhists call it *Enlightenment* or *Liberation*. Christians call it *Grace*, or *Redemption* or *Salvation*, or being *Born Again*. In Montreal, I once knew a Zen master from a Calvinist background who despised all these words, and liked that to say that meditation was for *getting to Massachusetts*. For BDSM people, *escape from the dungeon* would seem the appropriate metaphor; and this figure has a respectable pedigree from Plato's *The Republic*, where the soul's condition is likened to that of a prisoner, chained in a cave in dim torch light, seeing only the flickering shadows on the wall before him. The great question is: What would one see who found some way to break his shackles, and escape his soul's prison into the full light of day?

I am writing, then, about BDSM practised as a way to *Massachusetts*, or *out of the dungeon*, whatever exactly this means. By any name, the experience is full of paradox. It is said to be wonderful but, also nothing very special. It changes everything, but leaves everything the same. You must work hard for it, but must finally be given it: Nothing you do can earn it. The work is to prepare yourself to recognize and

receive the gift when it comes.

Now, the use and voluntary acceptance of spanking, whipping, bondage and related practices, not just as retribution but from religious, spiritual, therapeutic or reconciliatory motives is very ancient. In fact, the intimate connections between sexuality and aggression, between sexual surrender and submission, between voluptuousness and pain, are certainly older than our own species. Students of animal behaviour report intricate courtship rituals involving aggressive gestures, bracketed with signs that declare: "I'm only kidding; this is play". In the throes of sexual passion, many creatures will accept and seem to relish a degree of mauling that would otherwise be painful. Primate species are known to use presenting and mounting behaviour as an appeasement ritual—with social status and conflict resolution, rather than sexual expression, as the issue. When a baboon decides to resign an intimidation contest with a more dominant adversary, he turns round, drops his head and shoulders, and presents his bright pink arse. The winner usually responds by mounting the offered bottom, and asserting his sexual rights with a few perfunctory thrusts. Combat is averted through a very clear suggestion: "Make love, not war!". Or, in yet plainer English: "I will not resist; you may screw me as you please!"

When we come to the human animal, anthropologists and cultural historians report a bewildering variety of flagellation rituals for purposes of initiation, sacrifice, consciousness raising, fertility magic, healing and atonement. Nor are these purposes necessarily distinct. For example, the theme of sacrifice to the gods might well be present in rites directed at fertility or healing or the purification of warriors; A girl's menarche ceremonies might involve ritual flagellation conceived as fertility magic. The psychedelic effects of ritual pain would be present almost regardless of its application, so long as it was basically consensual. Thus, it seems likely that modern BDSM, in all its variety, is just a re-appearance of very old shamanic practices, themselves employed for purposes not always clear, or clearly distinguishable.

The sexual dimension of these practices we have to recognize and factor out, as best we can. Good sex is itself a psychedelic experience; yet there is much more to peak experience than sexual arousal and climax. Sex is one aspect of BDSM. But there is much more to BDSM than sex.

Today, as always, sex is a source of tremendous psychic energy for every form of magic aimed at "psyching people up" for work or war or buying sprees or anything else. But, for that very reason, if not properly channelled, it can represent a formidable threat to the established social order—especially to a pre-modern order, where kinship ties are paramount. Accordingly, flagellation rites have often been distinctly counter-cultural. Authorities tend to fear enthusiasm whipped up among the masses².

Not enough is known to reconstruct the history of such rites with certainty, and I

² See Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*, still very relevant and very readable.

am not a scholar in any case. All I would claim is that there appear to be strong continuities between those ancient practices and our own. If this is so, then BDSM as we know it is heir to a vexed religious heritage involving “pagan” nature worship on the Female side (so to speak), and monotheist word-and-law worship on the Male side. It has been head magic against belly magic, in Camille Paglia’s language: the fertile mind against the fertile womb. Thus we find ritual flagellation used in old pagan and neo-pagan ceremonies to kindle fire in the flesh. But we also find it used by hermits and monks to mortify the flesh, and by penitents to atone for fleshly sins. And we find it used on young people of both sexes in rites of passage and initiation, to underscore the meaning, duties and value of their new status, as something suffered and dearly paid for³.

In theological terms, modern BDSM should probably be seen as part of the contemporary neo-pagan revolt against a Christian order that was itself an uneasy synthesis of disparate monotheist and pagan traditions. One aspect of the neo-pagan revolt is a rejection of body-mind dualism. We know too much now about neurophysiology and the endocrine system to be happy with a theory of body, mind and soul as disparate substances.

3. Stages of Practice

Bodhidharma, who journeyed across the Himalayas to introduce Buddhism into China, wrote the following lines to characterize his teaching:

- A special transmission outside the scriptures.
- No reliance upon words or letters.
- Seeing into the nature of things.
- Direct pointing to the heart of man.

The practice of Zen and similar disciplines is not fundamentally a matter of doctrine. It is a special teaching beyond verbal exposition or explanation, cutting beneath conceptual thought to a visceral level of understanding.

Its stages are described in a famous sequence of verses and drawings, called *Ten Steps in the Taming of a Bull*, or more simply, *The Ox-Herding Pictures*. The Bull is that primal energy that animates and drives each one of us. Its relation to our conscious, civilized selves has long been recognized as something of a problem. Should it be allowed to run wild? In English we have an expression about “a bull in a china

³ It is odd, but apt when you think about it, finding the same flagellatory practices deployed on both sides of these issues. One striking theme of BDSM, recurring in its literature, is the unequal contest between mind and body—will and pain. Thus, what is sometimes called “the drama of punishment” is surely this: the mind’s struggle to endure and transcend, the meltdown of coherent identity in the agony of flesh. It will be one kind of ceremony if the patient’s will is allowed to win this contest with pain—quite another if his endurance is overcome and broken.

shop.” Should it be dominated, repressed and finally killed by the superior intelligence and self-discipline of the man? For a long time, the Western world believed so, and the Spanish bullfight represents that outcome. Should it be teased, provoked and played with as the ancient Cretan bull-leapers seem to have attempted? In Yoga and Zen practice, the desired outcome is a taming and re-integration with this bull, and the *Ox-Herding Pictures* show us the steps through which such reintegration most usually and safely is accomplished⁴.

- The first drawing is called “The Search for the Bull.” The man feels that something is missing, but does not know what it is or where to find it. He wanders through the world looking for something, he knows not what. In our terms, this is the stage of ignorance. About BDSM you know only that it is something involving whips, that some weird people do. Your life—in particular, your sex life—may be a little dull but you have no idea what would make it better. That you yourself might do, or be interested in BDSM has never occurred to you. You may not know there is such a thing. What you do know is that there is something you want or need that you are not getting. You are trying to figure out what that might be. Thus, perhaps without even knowing it, you are already on a quest, though not yet on a Path.
- The second drawing is called “Discovering the Footprints.” The man catches hints of that missing vitality, but has not yet seen or named it. But now, at least, there is a trail to follow. His searching becomes more focussed, more systematic. Again in our terms, this is the stage of self-discovery that culminates in coming out **to yourself**. You notice that certain ways of dressing turn you on, certain scenes in movies, certain passages in books. You do not know quite what to make of this kinky taste of yours, but have become aware that pictures, descriptions and implements of discipline grab your attention and make your pulse beat faster. This discovery is important as a clue to your dark side, to your repressed desire, and to the sources of your life’s energy. It may not feel that way at first but, without knowing it, you have actually made important progress. If you have the courage to recognize the clue you’ve found and follow where it points, you will no longer be wandering aimlessly, but on a Path at last. When you graduate from collecting BDSM erotica to chatting on the Internet, looking for a play-partner or visiting a professional Mistress, you are already at the third stage. A sad thing about our Scene is that so many people never get beyond the porn. They may flirt with the Scene for a lifetime, without recognizing it as something they want or need to do.

⁴ These pictures are easily available on the Internet and in books about Zen, so there is no need to reproduce them here. For example, see <http://www.zen-mtn.org/zmm/gallery3.htm> for the version I have relied on. The drawings are by Master Jikihara; the verses by Master K’uo-An.

- The third drawing is called “Perceiving the Bull,” and shows a picture of the bull’s hindquarters (how very apt!) poking out from behind a tree. It is well said that “Any path can be a Path,” but finding one’s own is no easy matter. But now, at last, this man’s search is over. He has found a practice that “turns him on,” as we say. Now he can recognize it, knows where to find it. In Zen, let’s say, or in a martial art, “perceiving the Bull” is more or less the same thing as joining a zendo or dojo and starting to practice. Once you know where your personal “bull” is to be found, it is straightforward to join the people already playing or working with it. For the Scene, when I was a young man such places were barely beginning to exist in a few metropolitan cities. Even now, they may be difficult to find or awkward to join. What do you do, for example, if you live in a town where there is no real privacy, or in a small city, where Scene people meet and play furtively, but have not yet organized a “munch?” What do you do if you are married to a rigidly “vanilla” partner who will not even discuss this interest of yours, let alone try to share it?
- In the fourth drawing, called “Catching the Bull,” the man actually lassoes the huge animal and tries to hold him. Finally, he comes to grips with what he has been seeking. He actually gets into a serious practice. But now the real struggle begins. It is one thing to do BDSM scenes for the turn on—from time to time, or even very frequently. Taking the thing seriously, to the point of trying to learn something from it, or to grow as a human being within it, is something else. It took me almost twenty years to make this transition; and though it is much easier today, with all the information and discussion available on the Internet, it is still no trivial step. Even where no longer underground, BDSM is definitely not respectable—not yet recognized by mainstream culture as an acceptable sexual inclination, let alone a spiritual path. Coming out of the closet, accomplished twenty years ago by the gay movement, still takes a lot of social courage. In this climate, the idea that BDSM might be a “Way” is just appearing on the horizon of the thinkable⁵.
- The fifth drawing is called “Taming the Bull.” Authentic practice has a double nature. On one hand, it seeks to liberate the *ki*, the vital energy of existence. On the other, it seeks to bring it under control—to tame and domesticate it, so to speak. In the Scene, as in martial arts and most other serious disciplines, this issue is especially critical. Which fantasies should be lived and which should be left as fantasy is something all players need to learn, since many things that are exciting to contemplate are too dangerous (or actually harmful) for acceptable play. The last thing a successful Dom(me) can afford to be is. . . an uncontrolled sadist. Flirting

⁵ See bibliography for a partial list of worthwhile books and web sites.

with and expressing your sadism, is one thing. Letting it take you over is something else. Correspondingly, subs must learn to keep their masochism under control, and may come to real harm if they do not. We all have to steer clear of minors—for ethical, not merely legal reasons, because young people cannot give valid consent. They are not yet sufficiently experienced or self-possessed to understand what they are consenting to. This may be a concern with some legal adults as well.

The need to domesticate one's personal Bull is in no way peculiar to the Scene. Martial arts people, especially those whose aggressive impulses brought them to the dojo in the first place, must learn to stay out of fights and avoid injuring their practice partners. People into macro-biotic eating must avoid pursuing their diets to the point of anorexia. People on any Path must learn not to bore their friends with its gruesome details.

A central point here is that the Scene's ethic of "Safe, Sane and Consensual" does not fully resolve the problem of taming the Bull—and would not do so, even if we had some coherent way of deciding which practices are sane and which are not. Some people I know have greatly enriched their lives and sexual relationships through their involvement in BDSM. Others have impoverished their lives. No Way is without its casualties, but it is part of the task of a competent teacher to keep these to a minimum. For years now, the Scene has been grappling with the problem of organizing competent instruction for beginners, and support systems for everyone. These things are not proving easy, although great progress has been made; and it is important that we get clear on where the problems lie.

- The sixth drawing is called "Riding the Bull Home." Here we have the image of the minotaur—the man and bull as one. The man sits on the beast's back playing his flute⁶, as the animal slowly wanders homeward. No guidance is needed. The bull can find the way for both of them. Here we have the image of perfect wholeness, perfect integration. For us, the idea might be of a Dom(me), charged with erotic power, and perfectly in command of it and of herself. Or it might be the sub all naked, poised and glowing who keeps a perfect dignity and self-possession as he is worked and used and "punished." Either way, "Riding the Bull Home" is a lovely image of what the Scene at its best can offer. In fact, of what every true Way offers: mind and body, conscious and sub-conscious, thought and desire, no longer quarrelling, but in harmony. It is a wonderful promise, but it is not the end of the story.
- The seventh drawing is called "The Bull Transcended." It shows the man inside his

⁶ Yes, you have a dirty mind—but the flute is in the picture!

thatched hut looking out its window, as the bull grazes peacefully near by. In some versions the animal has disappeared entirely. Its verse begins, “Astride the bull I reach home. I am serene. The bull too can rest.” The idea, I think, is that the man has travelled so far along the path, and is now so fully at one with it that there is no longer any separation between himself and his practice. BDSM is no longer so very special. It’s just something you do and are; something so thoroughly part of you that you’ve forgotten what it was like to be without it.

- The eighth drawing is called “Both Bull and Self Transcended,” and it is just an empty circle. The text (I quote one version in full) reads:

Whip, rope, person, and bull
all merge in No Thing.
This heaven is so vast,
no message can stain it.
How may a snowflake exist
in a raging fire?
Here are the footprints of
the Ancestors.

Sometimes likened to an abyss, sometimes to the summit of a high mountain, the Void can be a terrifying place. Nothing can live there, but the creatures of all dreams and nightmares are starkly visible. It is the background of every figure, the Emptiness in which all ideas (even the idea of Self) are formed.

A scary place it can be, but the Void is also the ground of creativity and peace and Being. Zen monks train to experience it by gazing at a blank wall, and counting breaths to empty their minds of conscious thought. Some BDSM people use bondage and sensory deprivation for the same purpose. This is the “peak” to which every path leads. From here on, (and this is still not the end of journey), BDSM is no different from any other practice: no more cruel, obscene or bizarre. Whether in a war zone, a whipping scene or a tea ceremony—what would we find but human souls and bodies?

- The ninth drawing shows a simple landscape with a tree and stream, and it is called “Reaching the Source.” Man and bull are not seen: There is just the natural world. Man and bull are at home in it, and could be anywhere.

From the mountain top, one can only descend again, to the lush valley. From the Void emerges Nature, the lovely, savage garden of terrors and delights. We are beyond good and evil; pain and pleasure. All opposites are alike as constructs of our own minds and bodies. In BDSM rituals, we confront this insight more starkly, more directly, than in anything I know.

- The tenth and last drawing is called “In the World” or “In the Marketplace.” The man, now grown elderly, jolly and rather plump, is back in society again. In some

versions he is surrounded by children. (But we must make sure these are of legal age.) Perhaps he is just playing with them, or perhaps he is teaching. One could not easily tell the difference. From one perspective, it is as if he had never been away. But what we see now is a man at peace not only with himself, but with society around him. If he was ever “in a closet,” he is now out of it; and he has found the place where he need not bend himself out of shape to please—where he can simply be himself, because his vital energy, his self-discipline and his ego—his sense of himself—are one. Society now moulds itself around him: Whatever he does is acceptable and accepted by society, because nothing such a person does can be forbidden.

The *Ox Herding Pictures* are the clearest expression I know of what it means to follow a spiritual practice, or Path. Taken together, they provide the best answer I’ve seen to the question “What is liberating about (so-called) “liberation?” Self-acceptance is a large part, but not the whole of it. The positive-thinkers who merely preach self-acceptance and self-esteem never face the problem that these are difficult to sustain without some basis in reality. By contrast, success in making friends with and taming your bull and riding him out of the closet is a very convincing basis for self-esteem—not only to one’s self, but also to others.

4. BDSM as a Practice

BDSM is sometimes seen as an “acting out” of childhood trauma or neurotic obsession; sometimes as an attempt at self-healing; occasionally as an effort at transcendence. I think this argument is sterile, for two reasons. First, the central issues at point in BDSM are not inherently neurotic, although compulsive fixation on them might be. Also, I see no reason why BDSM play, or any kind of play cannot or should not be engaged in expressive articulation, in healing and in transcending at the same time. Indeed, I think it is the nature of play—and of ritual, a special kind of play—to serve all these purposes together. In this section I’ll describe some of our practices as rituals of healing and transcendence; and, to introduce them, the following passage by Ernest Becker is worth quoting⁷:

Sadism and Masochism seem like frighteningly technical ideas, secrets about the inner recesses of man only fully revealed to practising psychoanalysts. Even more than that, they seem like rare and grotesque aberrations of normal human conduct. Both these suppositions are false. Masochism comes naturally to man, as we have seen again and again in these pages. Man is naturally humble, naturally grateful, naturally guilty, naturally transcended, naturally a sufferer; he is small, pitiful, weak, a passive taker who tucks himself naturally in a beyond of superior, awesome, all-embracing power. Sadism likewise is the natural activity of the creature, the drive toward experience, mastery, pleasure, the need to take from the world what it needs in order to increase itself and

⁷ *The Denial of Death*

thrive; what is more, a human creature who has to forget himself, resolve his own painful inner contradictions. The hyphenated word sado-masochism expresses a natural complementary of polar opposites: no weakness without intensive focus of power and no use of power without falling back on a secure merger with a larger source of power. Sado-masochism then, reflects the general human condition, the daily lives of most people. It reflects man living by the nature of the world and his own nature as it has been given to him. Actually, then, it reflects "normal" mental health.

What Becker says here about sado-masochism as a phenomenon of personality is true specifically of BDSM practices, which accept and assert in ritual what Becker puts into words. The raw material of our scenes are existential issues that vex and preoccupy our spirits—in fact, the same issues that religious ritual and doctrine have always had to deal with. They are issues that cannot be resolved and left behind—either because they are irreducibly a part of human experience itself (as Becker suggests), or because they are so closely woven into the fabric of a life history as to be inseparable from the whole personality.

A ritual models some aspect of the spiritual world: the world of human passion⁸; and, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has pointed out⁹, it serves doubly as model *of*, and model *for*. As a model *of*, it shows its participants and spectators what (it asserts) the world is like. As a model *for*, it teaches its participants and spectators how to behave individually and as a group: it sets a paradigm for social interaction.

Starting from such a notion of the BDSM scene as ritual, it becomes possible to treat BDSM as a full-blown religion within the definition Geertz provides:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an order of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Specifically, I'd suggest, BDSM can be approached as a counter-cultural religion that is frank and eloquent in at least one area—sexuality—in which many of the great world religions, especially the Abrahamic,¹⁰ Western ones, tend to be shame-ridden, oppressive and, in the last analysis, ignorant whereof they speak for want of sympathy for it. Also, unlike the Western, but like some Eastern religions, BDSM does not demand *belief*: it is grounded in practice and personal experience rather than in dogma, and its authority is that of the body itself. It is disreputable mainly because (like the old pagan religions)

⁸ I mean this word *passion* in its fullest sense, including strong emotion, sexual desire and love, but also pain and suffering (as when we speak of the Passion of Christ).

⁹ in his essay *Religion as a Cultural System*.

¹⁰ The Abrahamic religions are those—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—that claim the patriarch Abraham as founder. See Genesis, Chapters 12-25.

it competes directly with cults providing better basis for the mobilization and justification of political power, and because it is terrifyingly frank about matters that people generally prefer to keep hidden.

For serious consideration of BDSM as a religion, the central question must be: How are we to deal with the soul's "dark side"? Consign it to hell fire? Send it to a shrink? Repress it? Allow it (all unconsciously) to take over our lives? It is both a strength and a weakness of our game to be among the most direct routes known for exploring the soul's negativities. On one hand, BDSM has incomparable allure and fascination, and can offer most effective methods of practice. Less attractively, it has a way of pitting novices against some really dangerous monsters, with little preparation or supervision. We commonly think of these monsters—fear, anger, pride, shame, guilt, lust, greed, envy, and so forth—as dangerous and harmful *emotions*. But they are much more than that. As Becker hints, they are much better understood as pervasive *existential themes* that, one way and another, preoccupy much of life.

Consider the complex called *shame*—a feeling so unendurable that down through the history of Western society, men and women preferred to think of themselves as guilty to the point of meriting an eternity in Hell, rather than face up to our essential *smallness*¹¹. Primarily, *shame* is not so much an emotion as a perception and an issue: a sense of exposure or vulnerability arising out of a perception (whether correct or not) that one's identity is undermined or threatened in some way. An acute perception of this kind is likely to be accompanied by emotion but, in cases of mild or chronic shame, the issue may be so well compensated that the emotions experienced (if any) do not feel like shame at all. In any case, more important than emotion is the underlying issue itself: a self-understanding weighed and found wanting as against one's own sense of the expectations of others, or against one's own expectations.

A pioneering book on the psychology of shame¹² spoke of the absence of a language for communicating and resolving these feelings and issues:

It is not only that there is no adequate language of shame, of identity, of the deepest experiences of joy and grief. The present theoretical and pragmatic acceptance of aggression, prestige and power as central springs of action put still other barriers in the way of experiencing and communicating shame... Lack of a language contributes to the sense of estrangement. If, however, one can sufficiently risk uncovering oneself and sufficiently trust another person, to seek means of communicating shame, the risking of exposure can be in itself an experience of release.

¹¹ Indeed, it may not be too much to say that the substitution of *guilt* for *shame* is the essential move of all the Abrahamic religions, and perhaps of BDSM as well. It is much easier to think ourselves guilty of specific sins (which can be punished and forgiven), than to think ourselves essentially flawed and therefore hopeless.

¹² Helen Merrell Lynd's *Shame and the Search for Identity*, p.248

But surely, in all kinds of ways, a rich language of shame—and of such related issues as guilt, desire, power, fear and need for control—is just what our Scene provides. It gives no easy or automatic answers to any of these issues. Precisely what it does offer is a rich collection of symbols and a syntax, in which such issues can be expressed, shared and, perhaps, transcended. The elements of that syntax are well-known but, even so, it will be worth taking a few pages to review what I think of as the basic dimensions of BDSM experience.

The Positive Side of Pain

As already indicated, flagellation has a long history in rites of initiation, sacrifice, atonement, consciousness raising and pure erotic frenzy. Just why pain lends itself to such varied uses—is a complex question, quite beyond our scope. I have not seen any full explanation of the sacral uses of pain, and am content here to regard them as a mystery. While I don't enjoy stubbing my toe or hitting my finger with a hammer, I do like to get myself well spanked or whipped on a fairly regular basis, feel tense and "wired" if I have gone too long without such treatment, and consider that these sessions are good for my soul, though not particularly for my character. As an instrument of moral education, in all likelihood, the rod was never very effective. But, as an instrument for dissolving tensions, raising and focussing energies, entering a space of peace and grace, I can testify to its power. The crucial proviso is that the pain be accepted of your own will. You have to ask for this medicine—accept it willingly, at least. Forced on someone, it doesn't seem to work, is really counter-productive.

The use of pain in BDSM is too varied and complex even to hint at here. To dismiss its attractions with the word *masochism* is much like explaining the attractive powers of a bar of iron with the word *magnetism*. It pastes a label on the phenomenon without explaining a thing. The fact is this: Anciently it has been recognized that suffering can be a catalyst for spiritual growth, and it has often been inflicted and accepted for positive purposes. Toward the beginnings of an explanation of why pain lends itself to such use, I'd suggest that two of its prime characteristics seem to work in combination: pain's *authority*, and (in the precise, etymological sense) its *agony*: the soul's struggle to endure what is beyond endurance.

The authority is obvious: Pain compels attention, grabbing our minds and commanding us to do something, anything to turn it off. When we can do nothing at all and the pain just goes on and on, it becomes the most important thing in the world; and the one inflicting it becomes the most important person. The *agony* of pain is something more than tautology. *Agon* is the Greek word for contest—in this case between pain and will. In a good flogging, the ego struggles to maintain its integrity and coherence in a flood of sensation that ultimately makes coherence impossible.

With these two qualities in mind, the aptness of pain as an ingredient of ritual will be obvious. As Clifford Geertz puts it, "The essence of religious action is to imbue specific symbolic complexes with a 'persuasive authority.'" Add now that religion—*re-*

ligio—means literally a spiritual binding, and the connections become perfectly clear. The experience of pain carries the necessary authority, that of the vulnerable body itself tying the knot, as it were. The struggle of will (or endurance) with pain supplies the element of transcendence: getting outside, or above the ordinary. Time out of mind, ritual pain has been an element in the technology of the sacred because for its purpose nothing works better to dissolve the Ego for an experience of Something Else.

Geertz again:

The dispositions induced by religious rituals have their most important impact on the "every-day world of common-sense objects and practical acts" and produce a "distinctive style in the sense both of a dominant mood and a characteristic movement". Religion does not just describe the social order, it shapes it. There is a difference though between doing ritual and believing in everyday life ("religion pure" and "religion applied"). Man is changed after ritual and so is the common-sense world which becomes corrected and completed in various ways.

And now, Pauline Reage¹³:

Actually, both this flogging and the chain... are intended less to make you suffer, scream, or shed tears than to make you feel, through this suffering, that you are not free but fettered, and to teach you that you are totally dedicated to something outside yourself.

For its devotees at least, the whip gives an experience as close to pure reality as could be imagined—utterly compelling, with scarcely any room left for “interpretation,” and with all the authority in the world. No ironical detachment; just enough ego left to observe its own disintegration, or perhaps not even that. Only naked flesh, in its encounter with over-mastering, incontestable authority.

The Practice of Bondage and Sensory Deprivation

Bondage, blindfolding, gagging, and other sensory deprivation techniques are another important element of the BDSM syntax. Our senses and powers of speech and movement are so important to us that it is punishing to be deprived of them, even temporarily. Conversely, voluntary acceptance of deprivation in these areas has a long history as a technique of spiritual training and practice. The Zen monk who sits or kneels motionless in meditation, facing a blank wall, in effect, is using a kind of bondage technique. So is the Trappist monk who takes a vow of silence. Of course, the essence of such practices is not the silence or helplessness in themselves, but rather their *use* to create an interval of empty time in which to sharpen attention, still the mind, steady and deepen the breath, and generally, make room in the soul for an experience of something beyond your own preoccupations and ego.

Such practices point toward the eighth Ox-Herding Picture, *The Void*, to the significance of which we'll be returning later on. Meanwhile, there is an obvious question: What (if anything) do the BDSM techniques of bondage and sensory deprivation add to the classical practices? The obvious answer is their juxtaposition with control and power issues. The Zen monk learns to sit still; the sub learns to

¹³ *The Story of O* (p. 17)

endure bondage. Both, in the long run, are practising to relax, stop the tensing and fidgeting, quiet the inner chatter. In the BDSM version, however, the emphasis is on external constraint: The sub is required to find experience, freedom, opportunities for self-expression under constraint, make-believe oppression, by superior power. These external constraints do two things: Notoriously, they absolve the ego from responsibility for what happens, while sharpening the remaining senses to feel more keenly. This is the aphrodisiac, even psychedelic side of bondage. But the constraints do something else too, presenting issues of control and self-control as a kind of ritualized riddle for both the Dom(me) and sub to contemplate. In the Zen tradition, such a riddle is called a *koan*¹⁴. Its purpose is to bug the pupil with a question that cannot be answered in rational terms, but points toward a moment of insight. Here is a koan for BDSM:

“When you are completely trussed and gagged and blindfolded, what should you do?”

As *koans* go, this is really quite a good one. Take it seriously and work on it, and you might be surprised where it takes you.

The Practice of Obedience and Service

Obedience is another key element of the BDSM syntax, and it too presents a *koan*—that of free will. We encounter it whenever we look seriously for the ultimate reasons why anyone does anything. “Why did Bodhidharma cross the Himalayas?” is the famous version of this riddle. But it might just as well be, “Why did Napoleon march on Moscow?” Or “Why did

the Americans send Neil Armstrong to the moon?” Or, “Why did you get out of bed this morning?” Well . . . Why did you?

The practice of obedience raises this question implicitly by reframing it as a paradox: “I am not free. I am the devoted servant of my Mistress, and must obey her wishes. I gave myself to her freely, and do so again each day. Hence I am free—and my freedom is reaffirmed daily. Partly tongue-in-cheek, but partly in dead earnest, many subs (including myself) love to serve their Mistresses, love to be given little duties and chores to carry out, because it reassures us of our own identities, our place in the scheme of things. Giving My Lady her nightly foot massage is delicious for her, but grounding for me. Every night before going to bed, it reminds me (as we say) of “who’s who and what’s what.” It’s one of our rituals—the more effective because I perform it whether I’m in the mood for it or not.

Obedience is interesting for another reason: The concept of obedience as a virtue is a *koan* in its own right. Traditionally, along with poverty (which, as a spiritual virtue, meant not being excessively greedy nor dependent on material possessions) and chastity (which meant, precisely, “having the body in the soul’s keeping”), obedience was the last, and perhaps most difficult of the monastic vows. But what should we make of it today? It may have been good for the community (not to mention the abbot and the hierarchy above him) that monks should be obedient, but at that time it was believed as well to be good spiritually for the monks themselves. This belief was one reason, probably not the least important, why people entered convents and

¹⁴ Pronounced with two syllables: *ko-an*. “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” is among the best known. “Put your bottom up and I’ll show you!” is not an acceptable answer!

monasteries. A comparable feeling actuates very many subs today.

Now, I have no doubt that willfulness is dangerous, and that it is morally healthy (not merely comforting) not to need to have your own way all the time. Even beyond that, and Jean-Paul Sartre to the contrary, it is good to be capable of subordinating your own will to that of some other entity or group to which you feel you belong. As Rabbi Hillel suggested¹⁵, we all need to belong to something: not in the sense of being its chattel property, nor of being thoughtlessly expendable in its interests, but in the sense of being able to rely for our very identities upon its sponsorship, nurturance and/or protection—which will be impossible, obviously, unless we are also reliable to it. Group bonding, loyalty and social behaviour in general are crucial aspects of human biology, and the person damaged in these capacities is a crippled animal. Yet, obedience to authority is not a policy I would care to recommend unconditionally. In fact, knowing as we all do how authorities tend to behave, I have the most serious reservations in recommending it at all.

Obedience is a rational strategy if (but only if) you can expect to fare better as a valued member of a functioning group or team than as an individual acting in your own best interests. It is a virtue if and only if the authority you are obeying can be trusted to give wise and just orders. Beyond this, loving parents teach their children to be obedient to others so they may eventually be capable of obedience to their own selves. Obedience is the basis of discipline, and finally of self-discipline.

Where does this leave us? It's just my observation, but I think that—in one respect or another, for Dom(me)s and subs alike—almost all of us in the Scene are “challenged” in this area. If I'm not mistaken, difficulties with beloved authority figures are a good part of what drew us to this game in the first place. Further, I suspect, not the least of the reasons for BDSM's increasing appeal and popularity is that in real life a sense of secure belonging to any trustworthy group or authority—and an authentic sense of *honour*—is becoming harder and harder to find. All of us must serve, one way or another—and all of us do serve, if only our own sweet selves. The problem is to find someone or something worth serving; and for most people, bare self-interest just isn't enough.

Fantasy, Role-Play and Ritual

There is a chronic argument in the Scene whether BDSM is a role-play game we play, or a life-style we choose to live as an expression of what we are? Thus arises the *koan* of what is ultimately real. “Show me your original face before you were born!” the Zen Master demands. Are you basically a fairly “straight” individual enacting the role of a Dom(me) or a sub? Or are you “really” a Dom(me) or sub who sometimes passes as “straight”? Are you Confucius dreaming he is a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he is Confucius¹⁶?

Undoubtedly, some of us experience it more one way, and some the other; yet I think that in a basic sense, both perspectives are valid for all of us. If we think of BDSM as psycho-drama, as a role-playing game, then there still must be some reason why we are drawn to it. The issues at point are **our** issues, whether our scenes use

¹⁵ Hillel's *koan*: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself only, what am I?”

¹⁶ See the parable in Chuang Tzu.

make-believe or not. At the same time, not even 24-7 couples are in scene mode all the time: The exchange of power between them—the amplitude of their D/s polarization, if you will—is greater at some times than at others.

On a deeper level, it is possible that both perspectives are mistaken. “Fundamentally, all beings are without Self,” the Buddhists say. Perhaps the whole idea of separate individuality is an illusion.

I am too much a product of Western thought and society to take the “sparks of Cosmic Mind” idea very seriously, yet I think the Buddhists are right to this extent: Not only the Selves we project to others, but the Selves we think we know ourselves to be are constructs, artifacts, fabrications. Although we have long since become habitual to ourselves, forgetting why we took on these particular habits, they are—at least, in part—our own creations. In one sense, all of social reality is a game of make-believe. As Kurt Vonnegut said in *Mother Night*, “We become what we pretend to be.”

One aspect of a spiritual practice, I think, is the discovery that all reality is conventional and game-like, in a sense—a game not played by any very rigidly defined agent, but one for whose “play” we bear a varying degree of responsibility. Of course, our more earnest life-games are very much “for real”: utterly committed to the point that we go to our deaths when our social identities demand it ¹⁷.

It seems to me that BDSM relationships—those lived in the flesh, as distinct from the ones in fiction or in chat rooms on the Net—pose the *koan* of reality in the sharpest way. For it is by no means the case that all fantasies are “safely, sanely and consensually” playable; nor should we be strictly limited by our own desires and fantasies in what we do with our partners. There is, after all such a thing as accommodating a love partner—not to mention learning to be turned on by something because the partner you love desires it. The point I want to make is that the realm of imagination and that of in-the-flesh play are effectively different worlds, governed by different laws. Competent BDSM scening, as distinct from chat-room head games have to navigate in *both* of these simultaneously. This is certainly not easy; but learning to do so is another aspect of our Way: There are risks; but the rewards of success are high.

Two points are worth making here: The first is that BDSM is potentially a dangerous sport—comparable, say, to rock-climbing or white-water canoeing. The physical risks are easy to guard against; but the dangers to mind and spirit and *karma*¹⁸ are ultimately more serious. If you cannot distinguish play from reality—the hotly imaginable from the realistically desirable and do-able—you probably shouldn’t play this game.

Second, unless I miss the mark completely, BDSM as a Way entails commitments to self-knowledge, and to as broad a range of erotic experience as one is capable of processing and learning from. If this is correct, it seems to follow that anyone wishing

¹⁷ The classic discussion of the game-like elements of society and life is a book called *Homo Ludens*, i.e. “Man the Player,” by the Dutch sociologist and historian Johann Huizinga.

¹⁸ The word Sanskrit *karma* translates roughly as “the burden of the past,” and is used by Buddhists and Hindus to denote the weight of good and evil that one has accumulated, to be worked off in one’s next life. I use the word figuratively to suggest that BDSM will raise and intensify feelings desires and memories that in turn will have real consequences in our lives. It can liberate and enrich a life, I am convinced, but can have negative consequences as well.

to travel our Way should avoid defining himself prematurely. If the object is self-knowledge, then surely you should accept the limitations of a definition only with utmost reluctance. I am appalled, frankly, at the eagerness of BDSM novices, scarcely out of their teens, to paste labels on themselves, as sluts, brats, maso-Dom(me)s, sado-sub or what have you. Time enough for that after they have been living and playing for some years, perhaps with one partner, perhaps with dozens, and have actually gotten to know themselves a bit. It seems obvious to me that the more narrowly you define yourself early on in your BDSM career, the less chance you have either of finding a compatible partner, or of actually learning (over a lifetime) just who and what you are.

This mistake is especially common and serious in connection with players' self-definition as Top, or bottom, or "switch." There are people who think there is something wrong with being a switch—that you are insincere, or frivolous, or ignorant of your true nature. They insist that you are "really" one thing or the other—usually what would best suit their convenience. This is simply arrogant. No one has a right to define you to yourself in this way—least of all someone to whom you are in a submissive relationship.

It's perfectly OK to be a switch. It is more than OK while you are a beginner in the Scene, not yet committed to a single partner, and not yet sure where your inclinations lie. As a beginner, you should get as much safe experience as you can, limited only by prior commitments and by what you feel comfortable doing. If and when, after giving yourself the chance to learn and grow, you discover that you are really uncomfortable in either of the roles will be plenty of time to stop doing it. Practised as a Way, the object of this game is get to know yourself in all your fullness and contradiction, and in as wide a range as you can handle—not to fit yourself into pigeon-hole.

The Practice of Exposure and Reflection

One of the strangest aspects of the Scene is a pervasive quality of "mirror gazing:" a kind of auto-voyeurism involving a certain doubling of consciousness. The following passage (from an anonymous work of BDSM erotica) affords a particularly clear example of what I have in mind:

On this occasion, however, she was a blatant admirer of her own humiliation as she lay, watching her reflection over her shoulder. One of her hands moved caressingly down her own belly, the fingers entering between her thighs. Then, lost in contemplation of the rear view she offered herself in the glass, Lesley began to masturbate, breathing through parted lips.

Anton smiled, knowing beyond doubt which half of her paradoxical personality would triumph now. Whatever powers might be possessed by Lesley the liberated young woman with the dismissive manner, the lures of Eros would betray them all.

Presently she got up and drew the long low table before the mirrors. Across its centre she put the pillows from the bed to represent the leather bolster on the warden's sofa. Then she knelt on the table and lowered herself, face down, into the position in which she had been sadistically thrashed the night before.

Anton watched her closely. Once again Lesley gasped in panic and twisted, as if straining against her straps. Yet her hands were folded under her loins. As she viewed herself in the mirrors Lesley's fingers began to stroke gently over her clitoris.

Anton turned away and knew that Lesley had crossed the last frontier. Now she was both

Lesley the whipped girl but also Lesley who shared the sadists' pleasure of seeing herself whipped. When she was next flogged the pleasures of the torturer and the tortured would ensnare her equally. In a few month's more, her submission to her masters would be absolute.

The Gardens of the Night (p. 71) Anonymous

This Narcissus quality of rapt self-observation lies at the core of BDSM. The Dom(me)'s whip inflicts, not pain precisely, but a fascinating, second order **experience** of pain, reflected through the mirror of consciousness. Similarly, it is not helplessness the Slave experiences in his chains, but an **experience** of helplessness; not shame, but an **experience** of shame. Call this "detachment," if you like.

Especially, what BDSM people refer to as "humiliation", is nothing like the experience of humiliation in real life. What is called "humiliation"—and sought and cherished in our scenes—is a shameless encounter with the self as simultaneous spectacle and spectator. This looking-glass quality takes us to another level of complexity. To go through the looking-glass is to undergo a change of cognitive state from the immediate to the mediated, from direct experience to the experience of experience, from direct perception and interpretation to rumination and reflection thereon.

The sub desires to be exposed, to observe his exposure, and then to observe the resonance of this exposure reflected through the eyes of others. Such experience of experience is the first round of what philosophers call infinite regress. We need not stop at watching ourselves watch ourselves; we could try to watch ourselves watch ourselves watch ourselves, watch ourselves watch ourselves watch ourselves, and so forth, chasing our tails up an endless spiral. **All** scene experience being thus mirrored and re-mirrored endlessly, **none of it** carries the meaning these same events would bear in ordinary life.

The Dom(me)'s Practice

Dominance is much more than a fondness for being bitchy and/or demanding, giving orders, and whacking ass. Though these are valid dimensions of the role, it is possible to give good scenes without any of them. Fundamentally, it is a question of style. You become a Dom(me) by taking yourself seriously in that role—by acknowledging your own sexual power (and the power your lover is giving you), and by accepting the privileges and responsibilities of that power. There is no other absolute requirement. Thus, you can get started fairly easily, as soon as you feel ready to do so and can find a submissive partner to practice with. This low threshold is deceptive, however. The art itself is a very rich one—with room to take it as seriously as you want to, and to grow in it as far as you can.

Like the sub, a Dom(me) can do a scene, watch herself doing it, watch herself watching, and so forth. Unlike the sub, she cannot afford to lose herself in its spell, but must remain in control of it and of herself. This dual requirement—to keep the scene's energies and fantasies within the bounds of safe play while obtaining her own satisfaction—is perhaps the essence of the Dom(me)'s practice.

A fair amount of craftsmanship is needed; and a good Dom(me) should be meticulous in every aspect of her art. If she is sloppy in her technique or handling of the scene, she will lose the trust of her subs. If she is sloppy about safety or hygiene, she is simply incompetent. The gifts of devotion and vulnerability that her submissives bring her are matched by gifts of careful, skillful effort that she gives them in return.

Sensitivity and keen awareness are further qualities to cultivate. With practice, a Dom(me) becomes something of a mind reader—more precisely, a reader of subtle cues from her sub’s body. The latter should have a safe word, but almost never need to use it. His Dom(me) must see when he approaches his limit, and taper off or stop when he has had enough. She must see what her sub takes willingly and eagerly, and what he forces himself to take because she wants it. She must feel when to push his limits, and when not to.

As well, the Dom(me) should be imaginative and versatile, yet aware of her own limits. She has the humility to recognize that the power she draws on is not finally her own. As avatar of a goddess, an archetype, she borrows her power from somewhere beyond herself and is herself only its agent or channel. As such, she perceives her own limitations and shortcomings in her role. She tries to learn and improve. In the end, she serves the same goddess her sub worships, and that service is her own worship.

Finally, a good Dom(me), even a professional, brings love and compassion to her role. She will be working with people at their most vulnerable, and it is no more acceptable for her to harm her subs emotionally than to do so physically. A Dom(me) who takes out anger on her subs, or uses the Scene to express contempt, is just bad news.

A last point worth making about the Dom(me)’s art is that it characteristically puts her in a *teaching* role. Whether in fantasy or reality, almost any *persona* that the Dom(me) takes on stands to her sub in some kind of teaching relationship, if only that of teaching her lover how best to be pleasing and give pleasure. As a teaching art, however, **BDSM is one in which the raw material talks back:** It has needs and qualities and opinions of its own. It has predilections and resistences. It may rebel—either because it wants, through punishment, to be taught its limits, or because it has been exploited or abused and has had enough. Accordingly, when to indulge the sub and when to frustrate him, when and how to stretch his limits and when to respect them are crucial judgments for the Dom(me) to make—and that can only be made with the right kind of responsiveness and signalling from her partner. **BDSM is an art for two people working together.**

The Couple’s Practice

Whether on a part-time or a full-time basis, the BDSM power exchange works best in a love relationship once most of the real power issues have been resolved. It can also work well on a completely impersonal level—as when the scene is given as pure sacrament, or customized psychodrama by a professional Dom(me). My experience has been that with casual acquaintances the magic is hardest of all to bring off because real lives, egos and personalities keep getting in the way. Merely entering into a “playmate” relationship where one party agrees to bottom and the other to Top is enough to get a scene going, but not to weave the spell that makes it really satisfying. Something more is needed: to ground the submission and corresponding Dominance in some credible narrative of insurmountable superiority. Whether it be the relationship of child to parent, pupil to teacher, or worshipper to goddess, the magic works because a credible image of authority is successfully bonded with an image of love.

Pagan religions honour a divinity imminent in Nature and the material universe. The Abrahamic religions honour a divinity that transcends the material universe. Hindus and Buddhists honour a divinity (the spark of Cosmic Soul or Mindfulness) within themselves and others. That is the meaning of the *gassho*, that lovely Buddhist gesture

of respect, done by placing the hands palm-to-palm over the heart, fingers pointing up, and then bowing slightly with the head. What a 24/7 BDSM relationship does, in effect, is to get the sub focussed on honouring the divinity in his partner, while setting the Domme the exercise of finding or creating that divinity within herself. The desired effect is to link sexuality and daily life with religion, turning all three together into a conscious art form.

That BDSM couples are much like any other in requiring two people to adapt to each other's strengths and weaknesses and tastes and rhythms should scarcely need saying. We are presumably helped somewhat by the understanding up front that the submissive will do such adapting as his Dom(me) demands. But it would be completely wrong to imagine that BDSM couples are without their politics. Even in the bad old days, a chattel slave obeyed some orders more readily than others, and found some margin within his situation for procrastination, willful misunderstanding, evasion and appeasement. In a consensual power-exchange relationship, the sub can walk out of it at any time and is, in any case, much too valuable not to have his wishes considered—even when they are deliberately overruled as a matter of discipline. Moreover, when the sub is more experienced than his partner, he will probably find himself teaching her to some extent, however little he may want to. If she is a complete novice, he will have to “teach her the ropes” from the beginning—either by Topping her for awhile, or by “switching” and/or teaching from below. He must introduce her to the Scene and develop her abilities as a Dominant, while defining his own role to her as submissive. Given the number of hopeful subs around in proportion to the number of available and competent Dom(me)s, this is a common situation.

All in all, a certain amount of “Topping from the bottom” is only to be expected; and the phrase itself is foolish except as applied to insincere and manipulative submissives who actually seek to control their partners from the nominally subordinate position. It is much better to accept from the outset that a D/s couple will have its issues and even conflicts like any other—but that a mature and skilful couple will also have clear understandings as to the way these issues are to be negotiated, the prerogatives on either side, and the areas where obedience is owed. The result, hopefully, will be a level of intimacy scarcely possible where the balance of power is itself a matter for dispute.

Within reason, it is legitimate for the sub to teach his Mistress about his needs and preferences and feelings and, indeed, about anything else she wants or needs to learn that he knows more about than she does. It is part of a sub's practice to handle this communication in a properly respectful and deferential fashion, and part of the Dom(me)'s to allow and profit from such communication without compromising her over-all authority. Any executive needs precisely this skill: to accept briefings from her subordinates, listen and weigh their advice, provide for their genuine needs and take account of their feelings and preferences without allowing them to forget who has the final say and responsibility. An executive too insecure to keep these lines of communication open will soon find herself in trouble. Yet novice Dom(me)s, even those who understand and have the knack of blending authority with easy communication, face the following issue: BDSM automatically casts the Dom(me) as her sub's teacher and trainer. It is part of the role, but one she is ill-equipped to play, without a certain amount of training in the other part, and/or apprenticeship in her own. BDSM is just about the only art I can think of where it is possible to call yourself a Mistress or a Master without ever having been a pupil!

5. Teaching and Learning

If BDSM is to be offered as a spiritual path—comparable to Zen or Yoga, or a martial art—then competent teaching is needed. But the Scene is still very young, still just beginning to evolve its institutions and methods.

General ideas and information can be communicated in a group setting. BDSM toy-making can be taught like any other craft; specific techniques lend themselves to demonstration, and/or supervised practice in a workshop setting. But the real work of instruction must be customized to the individual or couple; accordingly, mentoring is the appropriate and necessary method. For BDSM as a Way, direct mentoring and small mentor-guided discussion groups are the only formats conceivable.

In teaching of this kind, there is rather less actual teaching than one might expect. Mostly the pupil is encouraged, helped and nudged along as necessary to develop as his own instructor and person. He is presented with challenges, problems of graded difficulty. The tools to meet these are left lying around in plain view. The teacher may demonstrate the use of these tools, suggest how they may be used, discuss some principles underlying their use. But she will never do the student's work for him. On the contrary. A clever teacher may deliberately put the student in a nasty bind—arranging the stakes to make him learn in self-defence, but seeming to create (and sometimes actually creating) unnecessary obstacles in his path. This seems callous, certainly manipulative, but it is sometimes necessary, and a kindness in the long run. Regardless of any instruction given, it remains the case that the pupil does most of the work himself, accepting and rejecting teaching on his own judgement and responsibility. The risk and achievement remain his. But at least there is someone around to offer feedback and suggestions as needed, and to keep danger to a minimum.

I emphasize the harshness and cunning of good teaching because most current pedagogy leans too far the other way, and because these aspects have special relevance for BDSM, which refines cruelty into an expression of love. But, of course, there is need for kindness as well as cruelty—in fact, for a carefully managed blend of both. Frustration must be cultivated, but kept to tolerable levels. Self-esteem must be nurtured, enhanced and balanced by humility—an all-but-forgotten virtue, toward which the Scene's "humiliations" point. A skillful teacher knows when to offer the tit and when to apply the rod, and has both modes available as needed.

Teaching Games

A student of knowledge aims at gaining day by day.

A student of the Way aims at losing day by day.

Lao Tzu

There are two kinds of learning. The positive kind, as Lao Tzu says, is a daily accretion. To promote and assist it, the teacher typically presents and demonstrates the material to be learned, building upon and adding to what is already known. Also, she confronts her pupil with a sequence of problems of graded difficulty, usually fairly artificial, but designed to increase the scope and complexity of tasks that he can handle. But the other kind of learning works more like subtraction. What Lao Tzu calls "the student of Tao," or "the Way," is encouraged and compelled to empty himself: to become simple and spontaneous in his activities, to concentrate his attentions on a single over-riding purpose and passion, to shed his existing structures of concept and habit. Actually, of course, the Way involves both kinds of learning. One needs a foundation

of good habits and fruitful concepts, before selective forgetting can be profitable. Lao Tzu identifies the Tao, or “Way,” with the negative phase of education, only because it is so often forgotten. He can take it for granted that life and society will teach the pupil all sorts of useful things—too many, in fact. He wants us to notice that the soul—the loving and love-manifesting life of a human being—also needs a region of emptiness.

A comparison suggests itself. In a famous puzzle, tiles inscribed with numbers from one to fifteen are arranged in a four by four frame. Since four times four is sixteen, a single empty space remains, where no tile is present. Into this space, from above, below and either side a tile can be slid—filling the existing gap, leaving an empty space where the moved tile came from, and rearranging the pattern of numbers. The object of the puzzle is to arrange the numbers into a prescribed sequence (e.g. to put them in order from one to fifteen, or from fifteen to one)¹⁹.

Now, what is significant for us is that rearrangement of the tiles is only possible because an empty space was left. If a sixteenth tile were present, there could be no moves and no puzzle; and so we are reminded of Lao Tzu’s comment that the usefulness of a bowl depends on the unfilled space within it—and, beyond that, of his general thought that “What is depends on what is not.” This Taoist idea of creative emptiness is just the point of the eighth Ox-herding Picture: a condition of inward availability from which everything is possible. How does one teach this? More precisely, what can a teacher do to bring the pupil to a point where he might discover and explore that space himself?

As it turns out, for this purpose there is no positive attitude or skill in which the pupil of any such discipline needs to be trained. What is required is a **negative** teaching, in which the ego is trained to get out of the Self’s own way. Its crucial trick was described very well by Alan Watts:

The common design of all these methods is now clear: they challenge the student to demonstrate the power and independence of his presumed ego, and to the extent that he believes this possible he falls into a trap. As the trap closes, his feeling of helplessness becomes more and more critical, just because his habitual sense of being able to act from his own centre has been so completely challenged. While the least identification with the observing ego remains, he seems to be reduced more and more to the role of an inert and passive witness. His thoughts, feelings, and experiences, appear to be a mutually conditioning series of events. Thoughts and feelings are conditioned by other thoughts and feelings, and the ego is cut down to a mute observer. Finally, as in the exercise of trying to concentrate only on the present, even its power to observe is challenged. Or perhaps its very passivity is challenged by the invitation to **be** passive, or simply to watch and accept what happens. But then, how is one to accept what happens when, among the things that are happening, there are feelings of resistance to life, of non-acceptance; or if it turns out that one is really accepting life in order to be one-up on it?²⁰

¹⁹ Interestingly, it can be proven that only half of the possible arrangements can be reached through a sequence of the moves described: If the tiles are laid in the frame from one to fifteen, then the reverse arrangement from fifteen to one will be impossible.

²⁰ *Psychotherapy, East and West*, Alan Watts.

We could scarcely want a better description of the state of mind of the sub, whose project nearly always involves a demonstration of the inviolability of his ego under an assault of shame and pain. But then, as Watts says, all that is necessary for a teaching game is that the Dom(me)–like a therapist or Zen Master “–take sides with the executive ego, in its efforts to observe and control the rest of the self. She need only exaggerate that relationship–push it to the point of absurdity, and beyond. If she can do this, then sooner or later, the sub must surrender to the impossibility of being one up on himself.”

The candidate for liberation is encouraged to withdraw from the hurley-burley of ordinary life—at least temporarily, or for a certain period of time every day—and to turn inward upon himself. His attention is directed away from events beyond the surface of his skin, and toward those of his own mind. He is made to focus on and notice the workings of his own sensations, consciousness, and mental process. For BDSM people, that self-awareness is usually a focus of erotic interest, present from the beginning of our Scene careers, and part of what drew us to this game in the first place. It’s connected with that phenomenon of “mirror gazing.” Our practice, like any other, is to push self-consciousness as far as it will go, and then a little farther.

Choosing a Mentor

When problems arise in a BDSM relationship, just finding a friend to talk to may be difficult. So let me start this section by saying flat off that I think almost every D/s couple could benefit from the involvement of a third party, whose role would vary according to that couple’s needs, but whom I’ll refer to as their *mentor*²¹ in any case. Partly by providing needed feedback, partly by teaching useful concepts and skills, partly just by listening, the mentor’s role is to facilitate their growth as a BDSM couple. He or she should be a sensitive and accurate reflector of the energies of their relationship, and should be someone both parties equally can trust. It follows that the sub should have an equal say in the choice of a mentor. This choice is “meta” to the scene relationship, and an area (like other aspects of contracting) where submissiveness does not apply.

At one extreme, with a very experienced and knowledgeable couple, the mentor would be little more than a “family friend” with the sole difference that he or she would potentially be privy to their issues, and would have duties of availability and even-handedness as well as friendship. It would be understood that either Dom(me) or sub could meet privately with the mentor to discuss anything whatever—without disloyalty to the other. It would be understood that the mentor, at his or her discretion, could call a three-way meeting to deal with any matter raised by either.

In this situation the mentor would function as an honest-broker: keeping lines of communication open; mediating conflicts of the sub’s rights and desires as against the Dom’s prerogatives (thereby assisting in the negotiation and re-negotiation of

²¹ BDSM literature tends to make a distinction between the roles of *mentor*, *trainer*, and *protector* but, as the term is used here, a mentor may be trainer and protector also. The task that interests me is that of guiding and facilitating an education in BDSM—whatever this takes, by whatever means it is done. Also, I write of the mentor as working with a couple. There is no necessity for this: Unattached Dom(me)s and subs have mentors also. But since I am writing of BDSM primarily as a Way for couples, the mentoring of individuals before they find lifestyle partners is not of interest here.

contracts); advising, loosely and non-bindingly, on choices of direction for the D/s relationship. In performing these functions, a good mentor can eliminate much of the need for "Topping from below"—otherwise inevitable, to some extent, in a consensual relationship.

At the other extreme, with a novice couple desiring a very intense relationship, the mentor might be a full-blown “spiritual director,” performing functions similar to those of a group therapist, *sensei*²², or *guru*. In this situation, the mentor would effectively be an arbitrator (not a just mediator) of differences, since disobedience would be grounds for terminating the mentoring relationship. He or she would give directions for practice, and ask for regular reports on results, imposing special training exercises or punishments. Especially with novice couples, the mentor would also have responsibilities **toward the BDSM community** for the couple’s progress in the Scene—making sure they at least understand the basics of safe, sane consensual play.

In choosing a mentor for BDSM, or anything else, the first thing to get clear is the nature of this very special relationship. As a disinterested third party, a mentor cannot be lover, Master or Mistress in the BDSM sense, and is not precisely a personal friend—though being a friend and doing the offices of friendship is certainly part of the job. A mentor is also not a teacher or tutor in the sense most of us are used to, but more like a traditional god-parent: The role is not so much to teach directly—though there may be a certain amount of this involved—as to assist you in teaching yourself: to be there for you as needed, and to aid you in acquiring the education you can handle.

Another crucial aspect of the mentor’s role is that of *witness* to the developing BDSM relationship, though not in the legal sense of this word. The point is not to testify about the events of that relationship, but simply to be a sympathetic, intelligent and comprehensive observer of its development. Anyone who has been fortunate enough to have a friendship endure from childhood or youth into middle age will understand the value of witness in this sense. **There is this other person who knows the story of your life.** With him or her, you can talk about the past without having to reconstruct it. Your friend was there, and has his own version of what happened—from a different perspective than yours, and the more valuable for that reason. “Binocular vision adds a dimension,” as Gregory Bateson once observed. Of course, an intimate couple performs this function for each other; but if things get rough between them, or even if they don’t, the presence of a neutral, informed third can be invaluable.

At point in good mentoring, in our field as in any other, are sensitivities, values and attitudes more than skills or knowledge. The role is to help you become the kind of person that a certain culture or teaching tradition values—modelling, demanding, encouraging the appropriate attitudes, and pointing you toward requisite skills and knowledge along the way. For BDSM, I’d see it as the mentor’s primary function to suggest, by precept and example, what our game can be and what its people can become. Other functions—protecting, teaching, training or what have you—are specific issues for the mentoring contract: If you want your mentor to take on a certain duty, and he or she agrees to do it, that is fine and may be very useful, but is incidental to the primary mentoring role.

Thus, the process of contracting with a mentor is at least as complicated as with a

²² The Japanese word for a teacher, *sensei*, is especially appropriate for the BDSM mentor. It means literally, “previous life”—that is, someone who has gone before and can offer some guidance on the Path.

new play partner: It is not just a question of likes and dislikes and limits, but of long-term goals and the kind of relationship you want to build as a couple. It will take time to work this out, and will evolve as experience and understanding are gained. At any given time, however, goals should be fairly clear; and it is part of the mentor's responsibility to keep them so. The mentor's prerogatives and methods, will, of course, depend on the goals and training sought.

Selection of a mentor should be made with caution, because a person in this role can do much harm as well as good²³. If possible, you want someone whose strengths will complement your own—whose interests and experience are compatible but much broader than your own, so that he or she can point toward lines of further development. You want a mentor to help you find something you feel is missing. Above all, you want someone whose integrity you can trust. As with all teaching, responsibility for what you learn remains with you in any case.

Some writings on this topic assume the mentor must be a Dominant, but I think this is mistaken. Since the position of a mentor is “meta” to the Scene relationship, he or she may be Dom(me) or sub or “switch.” A mentor should be comfortable and competent in any incidental roles and obligations that he or she accepts; but a mentor *per se* is not functioning as a Dom(me). The mentor's personal tastes are unimportant; he or she should have experience and a balanced sympathy for both roles.

For an individual or couple wishing to practice our game as a Way, the mentoring relationship will have special features. Correspondingly, a rather special mentor is needed. It is not just a question of being helped to find a more intense, contented, or generally satisfying game, but of being shown how to use the game for a definite purpose—as a vehicle for “taming the bull,” “awakening,” “liberation,” “second birth,” call it what you will. The process (described above) is, more than anything, a work of negative learning. You are progressively stripped of evasions, excuses and all that is ultimately unimportant, to be brought up against those things that actually are important to you. It is a deeply satisfying process in the long run, though often a frustrating and threatening one. Expect a love-hate relationship with any serious mentor.

6. Conclusion

What is for me the most intriguing aspect of our game has been touched upon at several points in this essay, but not explicitly developed anywhere. Like deep play of any kind, but with a stark, sexual glow characteristically its own, BDSM scouts the frontiers of cognition, and of identity itself.

We saw this, first of all, and most obviously, in its giving of permissions. Many persons and couples resist awareness of their authentic sexuality, contenting themselves with a standard, homogenized version bearing the moral equivalent of a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. By making the Dom(me) explicit keeper of the sub's fantasy life as well as her own, by granting her a blanket license to use him sexually in any way she pleases (within their pre-agreed limits), BDSM turns the bedroom into a “dungeon”—a magic chamber for confession and discovery. Issues of self-control, power, gender and *style* are all opened up for sexual exploration and communication.

²³

Several web sites discuss the nature of the mentoring relationship, and suggest things to look for and be careful of in choosing a mentor. <http://www.castlerealm.com/library/april98art.shtml> provides a useful checklist.

The challenge is know yourself and your lover as two distinctly individual sexual beings, honouring desire **as such**, postponing moral and prudential judgments. What you finally agree to do is not terribly important. What you allow yourselves to know about yourselves and each other really is.

The exploration and stretching of identity occurs too in BDSM's treatment of shame, guilt and other negative emotions. The challenge, once again, is to accept, work with and share the person we really are—not the one we think we should be, still less the one that others think we should be. At least in bed, with a lover, it should be safe to be spiritually naked, as well as simply unclothed. That's what lovers are for. BDSM provides a symbolic language in which the communication required for this is possible. It's left for us, of course, to learn to use that language effectively, to say and share what is needful.

The role of pain in what we do, what everybody thinks of first in connection with our game, is something of a red herring. For different couples it has differing prominence in their scenes. For most "lifestyle" couples, those most deeply and constantly in a BDSM relationship, pain is actually a rather small part of their game—both in its frequency of use and its intensity. The themes of devotion and obedience loom much larger, and are much more difficult, both for the sub to give and for the Dom(me) to earn and keep. Yet it would not do, either, to underestimate pain's role—as a kind of spiritual solvent and stain remover. Even a light spanking or flogging acts as a powerful symbol, invoking and reinforcing the submissive *persona*, and its connection to the Dom(me). At higher levels, pain temporarily dissolves the ego with all preoccupations and concerns. It becomes, while it is happening, quite simply the only thing of any importance in your world. After passing through the pain, it leaves you feeling cleansed and at peace: grounded in and reconciled to your own body.

Finally, in its whole structure, symbolism and practice, BDSM almost rubs our noses in the paradox of power and control, crucial for self-understanding and the image we cherish of ourselves. We encounter this paradox on several levels: In a properly contracted scene between consenting adults, who has ultimate power—Dom(me) or sub? Tethered to the bedposts, being taken by your lover, just how helpless are you really? Giving a flogging, when you have your sub almost jumping out of his skin, and he could use his safe word at any time but doesn't, what does "control" actually mean?

All cognition and all deliberate action involves a balance—or better, a continuous cyclic flow—between assertion and receptivity, Dominance and submission, to speak our language. To understand anything, we have to open ourselves to it, but then impose ourselves upon it with concepts acquired from culture and our own previous experience. To do anything at all, something as simple as making ourselves a cup of coffee or getting ourselves across the street, we must be obedient to what is happening around us, while keeping our purpose firm. We find this D/s cycle everywhere; and in this respect, BDSM is no different from what one learns in any martial art. Empiricist philosophy over-estimated the receptivity of cognition. Post-modern thought, at the other extreme, over-estimates the willfulness. As we can see now, both are far from the Way, losing sight of the ebb and flow of power behind all knowledge and activity. We do not simply take in the world as we find it. Neither do we simply impose our own interpretations upon it. We accept and assert by turns, often at the same time. In distinguishing, in separating out these twin phases of activity and relationship, all manner of play, healing and transcendence become possible.

Bibliography

In preparing this article, the following books and web sites were consulted:

In Print:

Clifford Geertz: *Religion as a Cultural System*

Anita Phillips: *In Defense of Masochism*

Simone Weil: *On Punishment*

Websites:

BDSM Overview and History

<http://www.tdl.com/~thawley/history.htm>

<http://www.sexuality.org/l/subnet/AboutBDSM1.html>

BDSM Spirituality

<http://www.ssswr.org/henkin.htm>

<http://www.bdsm-online.com/articles/spirit.htm>

<http://www.submission.net/AboutBDSM5.html#Spirituality>

<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/skc/shame/#masochism>

Mentoring

<http://www.castlerealn.com/library/apri98art.shtml>

<http://www.castlerealn.com/library/masterjohn.shtml>

<http://freeweb.pdq.net/feather/gallantrose/mentor.htm>

<http://www.adarkwhisper.com/sub/mentor.html>

Therapeutic BDSM: Therapy and Behaviour Modification

<http://www.submission.net/AboutBDSM4.html>

The BDSM Lifestyle: Game or Lifestyle?

<http://www.cuffs.com/stories/discTexts/jonjacobs.htm>

<http://homepages.ihug.com.au/~hachiman/thoughts.html>

Wicca, Paganism and BDSM

<http://members.density.com/absoluteds/wiccabdsm.html>