

Interview with Diana Richardson

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Imago Spiegel: You are globally known as a Slow Sex teacher and author of many books. Together with your husband Michael you live in Switzerland and have been holding Making Love Retreats for heterosexual couples over nearly three decades. You grew up in South Africa and originally studied Law. How did you become ‘the Slow Sex person’?

Diana Richardson: Well, all I can say about my life is that it has just unfolded this way. I left South Africa when I was 25 after completing a 6 year law degree. I went on a holiday to Europe and just did not go back. I never really decided to leave. Of course, growing up in Apartheid was awful, and that made me more alert. And the reason why I chose law was that I wanted to do something for the under-privileged. I thought if I am a lawyer I can help. But while I was studying law somebody gave me a Shiatsu session. I found it fantastic and felt that this was what I wanted to do with my life. I got a little massage book and just started practicing on people that I knew very well. And I just knew how to do it. And it made me so happy.

Once I had my law degree, and had been in the law courts for a few months, it became clear to me that this would be a life of mind and thinking, whereas I wanted to live a life of heart and hands. During my holiday in the UK I was invited to live and work in a healing center, they wanted me to give massage, and train me.

During this time I discovered Osho; from then onward everything flowed and unfolded. After the UK I went to India where I met Michael (Raja), then we moved to Italy for 14 years. We were working in Austria, Holland, Germany, Italy, and then in 1999 we were invited by the Waldhaus Centre in Switzerland. Eventually we started doing groups in Switzerland exclusively. I would not have chosen Switzerland but I am so happy to be here.

It’s important for me to state that I just practiced and all emerged. It’s not like I studied, in fact I haven’t studied anything except through my body. Of course, I read a bit of Osho talking about Tantra, and I thought, wow, that sounds amazing but it was not very genital specific, whereas Barry Long is very genital specific. That’s why I combine the two sources. Through Barry Long I learned more about the penis and vagina because he talks so concretely about that and then after I practiced that for a while, I read Osho again and I was like ‘Oh now I understand what he is talking about’.

So, I’ve only studied in the sense that I read some Osho and listened to Barry Long hundreds of times.

But I have not had goals, and I think that’s important for people to know: that it was just personal exploration which evolved into more. So, it’s not like I went with a goal or intention to be a tantra teacher and write books.

Michael and I, we were just interested for ourselves, it was a personal exploration that then evolved into what we are doing today. We did not have any big intention to find something. It’s more that through experiencing one comes to understand things or has insights and revelations – ‘Ah boom, it’s like that!’. So, after many years of just making a lot of love a whole new picture kind of emerged.

Imago Spiegel: You and your husband Michael have been holding Making Love Retreats where heterosexual couples learn and experience Slow Sex since 1995. During this time you

have worked with thousands of couples. What are the experiences couples are looking for, why do they come?

Diana Richardson: People come for many different reasons but common ground is that people want more connection or bonding. Couples come to us after being together for 3 months, 3 years or 45-50 years. Our workshop seems to speak to a wide range of couples, also in terms of age range. The youngest couple we've had was 19 and 21, and the oldest we've had was 78 and 82. The man of 82 said at the end of the week that this had been the most important week of his life. This does point out how valuable it is to have some kind of a clarification around sex. Because the way we go about sex, nobody really explains it in a way that is helpful. Sexually we operate very much on what we think is instinct, but actually very often is conditioning or imprinting. Clarification is just great. Sometimes people come because they have difficulties in the sexual arena, sometimes one partner wants sex more often than the other or a woman loses interest in sex. Sometimes people think of separating because of sex, so they come to us as a last resort. I don't say that we fix everything. It does happen that some couples do separate after the group. But we do teach a lesson for life, not about their relationship, and if a couple separates, they've got a whole body of new knowledge and experience which they can bring into a new relationship to set it on a new track. Again, people come for many different reasons but it's mainly because they want to connect on a deeper level.

Imago Spiegel: In Imago therapy we also focus on helping couples to restore their connection. However, the routes we take seem to vary. You mainly work from the bodily experience and sexual connection whereas Imago therapy works on secure bonding experiences through dialogues, meaning verbal and nonverbal communication. What do you think?

Diana Richardson: Yes, we are taking different routes that lead to the same destination – restoring connection. We are very concretely dealing with sex so that's why the body is in the forefront. I'm sure the communication tools from Imago will support this bonding.

Imago Spiegel: What do you consider the most important thing about sex that you would like all people to know?

Diana Richardson: I think it's really good that people know there are alternatives to what we are imprinted with and what we see in the movies and, unfortunately, in the style porn displays. It gives people a wrong impression. We often hear from people, especially men 'My God, I didn't know another experience was possible.' And if they do have another experience, even if it is momentary, it can start a process.

And it is also important for people to know that the way you have sex influences the connection, the love. When you have sex in the way we propose it's actually very healing on many levels. We generally aren't aware of how many little injuries we have around sex. Of course, some people are heavily traumatized through sex but the rest of us, we also have injuries. For people who have experienced trauma Slow Sex is healing, integrating, and bonding. The more you know and understand about sex the more you gain confidence because sex is often a source of self-doubt.

I'd like to give an example: Premature ejaculation is quite prevalent and makes a man very insecure. He usually feels there's something wrong with him and becomes reluctant to

approach a woman because he might ejaculate even before he gets inside her or shortly after. Premature ejaculation is a result of getting overexcited. Now this is a strange idea: we think sex is about getting excited and building up intensity. This is what leads to the early ejaculation.

The whole approach in what we call Slow Sex is about reducing the sexual temperature, cooling down so that you can lengthen the experience.

I'd also like to state about the term "Slow Sex" that has recently been coined. It is good because it's eye-catching but actually really the accurate way of describing what we are teaching would be "Conscious Sex". Because slow is like a technique, and one might ask the question: how slow is slow? But if you are conscious when you make love you naturally slow down. Then there is no question of how slow is slow. And when you slow down you are more sensitive, you can feel more.

In conscious sex we become more and more aware of what we are doing, and how we are doing it. It's a process. This is an important point because clearly there is a kind of unwinding from a hot approach, and it takes time and patience. But it is extremely interesting.

Imago Spiegel: I often hear people – especially men – say that they like or even need to have sex to release stress and tension. On the other hand, sex itself is often a stressful issue between a couple, and especially women at times even experience some kind of physical shutdown after a period of shrinking desire. How do you view such developments? What do you think is happening?

Diana Richardson: Well, to take the first part, men stating they need to have sex, it really is like this: life is stressful and also men have a lot of pressure. That stress does build up in the sexual center. Now this is unfortunate in the sense that men then use sex to release their tensions, emotions even. And that is really a pity. It's much better to move the body, be active, shake it out, so that when you come to your woman, you are not in this needy state. Because women very easily feel used – and they are, very often. And this is also part of the reason why women shut down because they can sense when there is no real connection between the bodies and the hearts. Or the man is not really present, and they are just being used.

Also, women's bodies warm up for sex more slowly than men's bodies and this is really something that's different. But often when men want sex, they are kind of needy or they have an erection and are afraid to lose it, so they want to enter a woman quickly. Unless the woman is ready immediately this timing is not good for women, and it's much better for a couple to lie around and kiss and cuddle and wait for the woman's body to come up to the same temperature as the man. Of course, it's possible that in between a man loses his erection but if you stay present and connected an erection will usually return in love. That's no guarantee but there is also the possibility to start off by entering with a relaxed penis rather than an erect penis, which is explained in all my books.

Imago Spiegel: With reference to Barry Long you advise men not to enter a woman's body with an "emotional penis". What do you mean by that and why do you think this is so important?

Diana Richardson: Barry Long is really talking about a penis that wants something, that is needy, hungry, demanding. And so, he is not entering a woman with love and presence. It's

more that there is an agenda behind that. That's not helpful for the connection and for the love but rather results in disconnection and tension.

Imago Spiegel: In conventional sex people usually focus on increasing arousal more or less mechanically through increasing friction in order to reach orgasm, often drifting off into fantasies and being absent to themselves, their partner, the moment. In Slow Sex you encourage people to choose awareness and sensitivity over fantasies and sensation. How is such a shift possible and why would anyone want to miss out on big sensations?

Diana Richardson: The whole thing about Slow Sex – or tantric or conscious sex – is to be present. If you are in fantasy, you are not present. If you are working towards the peak – which is part of our imprinting – you're not present. So, it's to shift from being ahead of yourself to being in the here and now. And again, it's something that takes practice. One has to start observing 'Oops, I am working towards a peak' and you drop back into your body, relax and return to the present. And please note, relax does not mean collapse.

And yes, sensations are great but the thing is, if we totally rely on sensations for our sexual experience, we do slowly get insensitive. Then you need more and more sensation. We say in our workshops: it's a shift from sensation to sensitivity. It's about coming back to the senses and feeling the fine delicate things because eventually sensation just burns out and you become numb. And when you become sensitive, you do have amazing experiences that are unforgettable. You can always call them sensations but it's really from inside out. I like to use the word 'thrilling'. People tend to think of sex as exciting. If you start to change the whole frame it becomes thrilling which is different to exciting, it's more cellular, very uplifting.

This process does require maturity and interest because it is like an exploration, it invites you to use your body as your laboratory, going in there. Of course, when the pattern is for orgasm and ejaculation, you can't just switch it off. It is going to happen and you're still going to get the desire, and women, too, though usually not as strong as men. But then one has to start using the awareness: the moment you start to feel moving yourself towards the goal or the peak, you drop back into the present, into your body. And the thing is: people tend to think 'Oh, now I have to lie still, I can't move.' And that's not true. It's moving with consciousness, with awareness. It's a very different thing to moving in a mechanical way. And women can perceive the difference.

We often quote Osho: 'Tantra – or Slow Sex which is just Tantra re coined – denies nothing but transforms everything'. And that is through the awareness and it is so powerful. Slowly you start to disassociate from this drive as it were.

There is an ancient tantric sutra: 'When desire arises, you face it with your whole totality and relax completely.' So in the *very moment* that desire arises – not when you play with desire and try to stop it, then it is very difficult – the moment when you feel that switch you just relax completely. That sounds weird but what happens is that the vitality that was wanting to go out now inverts in the body, and then rises on a totally different level that really empowers your body.

It's important to say: we are not teaching ejaculation control because that's not healthy as one builds up tension and then represses it repeatedly. It can lead to congestion. We are suggesting to ejaculate when the urge is there, not to repress the urge. However, we suggest eye contact, also informing your partner you want to ejaculate/come. What we are more interested in is reducing the intensity in general, reducing the temperature so that the desire to 'come' doesn't really arise or if it does then one can keep relaxing. However, you have to

keep the sexual exchange interesting for yourself. A little excitement, and then relax, a little excitement, and then relax. So it's not like to switch off and lie there and expect the body to do it. We've got to tune into our body using our understanding and intelligence.

Imago Spiegel: Orgasm is usually referred to as fostering attachment because of its release of oxytocin. In *Slow Sex*, however, the connection between a couple is said to intensify also through not having orgasms. Why would that be?

Diana Richardson: I do understand that when you have an orgasm which comes with building up pressure and tension, oxytocin is not released. What is released is dopamine which has this short high. Then comes another substance called prolactin that takes us down. It's a bit like you take a sniff of coke, and boom! But very quickly you go down. So my understanding is that in that forced orgasm it's dopamine and prolactin that come into play. This pushed peak can be a pleasant experience but it is short and it has consequences. When things happen in a more relaxed way, then it's oxytocin because it's more to do with the wellbeing, expansion and feeling uplifted. Generally speaking, when we look at how we feel after the peak, there is often a sense of disconnection. People lose energy, it's like: it's over. Very strange, because you were just so involved, and then suddenly it's over and nothing is there anymore. So my understanding is that oxytocin arises really from expansion. And what we call orgasmic experiences – absolutely. But nothing is black and white. I am sure along the way, as you start more to relax in your body, oxytocin possibly comes into play.

Imago Spiegel: In your books you have described love keys such as eye contact, breathing, communication, genital awareness, touching without intention and the joy of love-making that can go on for many hours with no goal or intent other than staying present and relaxed. Are these the tools required for *Slow Sex*?

Diana Richardson: Yes, absolutely, these keys help us to be more in the present. Actually many of them can be used in daily life: to relax your shoulders, your jaw, your belly immediately brings you into the present. Eyes open is obvious because you don't go into fantasy but we do suggest you use your eyes in a more receptive way, letting things come into your eyes rather than stare outwards. And it really changes what you see when you adapt to a receptive or soft vision. Also breathing is a good way to stay present. Our body is our bridge to the present because the body exists in the present moment. So we use it like a bridge, we get into the body to get into the present. Any kind of body awareness, softening your body, relaxing tensions, eyes – mostly – open with receptive vision. These are all tools but not rules. But if you build those keys into your love making you will notice a shift in the quality of your experience.

Imago Spiegel: Other than conventional sex, *Slow Sex* does not necessarily involve an erection or vaginal fluid. However, it does focus on bringing the genitals together somehow, for instance inserting a soft penis into the vagina by using lubricants. Why is there such a focus on genital sex, and what do you think of other forms of sex?

Diana Richardson: For sure we need to broaden our concept of what making love means. It doesn't mean only penis in vagina. If any couple is together in the awareness, just being together, touching, this really does generate love. As far as oral or anal sex goes, it's back to

'tantra denies nothing but transforms everything'. So if you do it with more awareness, with more presence, not pushing the bodies, the awareness will transform the experience. So it's not against anything, it's about bringing more awareness into the situation. Because we're quite on a program, conventionally, we're doing things repetitively, we're not really here. And by being here, things start to shift.

Why we focus on the penis and vagina is because there is a subtle magnetism between vagina and penis that is very deep moving when you can access it. So it's very nice, if possible, to have the penis in the vagina. And I do think we have really lost the significance of penis in vagina because a lot of sex is to do with the clitoris, stimulating that way, getting excited. We tend to say, clitoris is good, but rather later in the procedure, not in the beginning. In the female body the sexual energy is raised in the breasts and it is over the breasts that one can tap into a woman's deeper sexual energy. That's why we teach women and men to hold a woman's breasts in a loving way, to open the upper body and create the possibility for a flow of energy into the vagina and open it. This is why a woman usually needs quite a bit more time than a man because her energy is raised in the upper part of the body, whereas the male energy is raised literally in the genitals, more in the perineum, the root of the penis. So generally speaking, a man's energy is raised very quickly and woman's relatively slowly. There is nothing wrong, it is simply a different magnetic setup.

Imago Spiegel: In your books this tantric concept of polarity plays a central role: masculine and feminine energy and their magnetic flow in each one of us as well as between a man and a woman. And these poles are, as you just described, rooted in biology: the genitals, the breasts or heart-region. How does your approach apply to people of the LGBTQI*community, especially when it comes to biological aspects? And do you know people working with Slow Sex and same sex couples?

Diana Richardson: Firstly, I want to address the tantric concept: It has been the understanding of tantra for thousands of years that each individual has male and female aspects which meanwhile has been proven to be true through chromosome study. So it's actually no more a concept, it's scientifically proven. And because each individual has male and female aspects, it means that they can circulate vitality within themselves. It's important to understand that regardless of your sexual orientation. This 'inner magnetic' setup is the source of the orgasmic expanded experience. It happens within you as an individual. However, it is true that with heterosexuals you've got this genital connection which brings in certain qualities.

You know, I am asked this question a lot. And what I'm saying these days is that we are waiting for a body of work from this community of people. I get criticized sometimes because my work is too heterosexual but what to do. This is my experience and this is the biological setup for reproduction, and we can play with that.

As far as LGBTQI* community goes, any two people who are more in the awareness, more present, less focused on the goal can create a fundamental shift in their relating. Basically, all the principles and most of the love keys can be applied. But I always say, as far as the genital aspect goes, adaptations need to be made.

About 30 years ago, I did a group in Mexico City with HIV-positive men, eight couples, and they all benefited so much from learning just to be present. They were blown away what a quality that brought into their connection. So I know it works.

I don't know people working with Slow Sex and same sex couples but I am sure there are.

Imago Spiegel: The emotional closeness and connection between a couple arises in your view naturally from the awareness and being present within oneself. When you are close to yourself, you state, an alchemy takes place that you naturally get closer to your partner. How would you explain that?

Diana Richardson: Well, the thing is: alchemy is alchemy. You can't really explain it but it is a reality and it has to be experienced. It just is like that. The closer you get to yourself on the inside, it seems to resonate with that same place in the other person. This is alchemy.

Imago Spiegel: Similar to Slow Sex Imago therapy encourages people to step into the unknown, show oneself vulnerable, be present. However, the concept of dealing with emotions seems to be rather different. In Imago dialogues, couples work on an empathic understanding of one's own triggers and those of one's partner to develop what is called a conscious love relationship. In your books you distinguish between an emotion (meaning the emotional state of being triggered) and a feeling. You suggest to recognize an emotion and then deal with it individually, not to attempt to understand it, not to talk it through with one's partner. Why do you consider understanding triggers for the emotions as not important or even hindering? Do you think people generally are simply able to identify an emotion and let it go without understanding what's happening to them and why?

Diana Richardson: I would say that what Imago is doing and what we are doing are not different, they are actually complementary. We are talking about the very moment you are triggered and you get emotional. Then there's no point in discussing what's going on, especially because one of the indicators of emotion is to argue and discuss, which is not helpful. We say – first, acknowledge that you are emotional. Then take some time for yourself and move your body. You deal with the emotion and then return to your partner when you have 'burnt up' the emotion. Possibly during this you might have an insight about what is being triggered, but our focus is really about how to deal with emotions from the moment you go into disconnection. Afterwards, for sure, you can talk about it as much as you like but not during the emotional phase. So that's why I think Imago and our approach do in fact work hand in hand.

However, we do generally suggest people don't try to understand their triggers because there's so many reasons why we get emotional. But if people like to talk through things more, no problem. Understanding can definitely be helpful. However, some people don't know, it's just like a fog, also fine. When you're in emotion, as already stated, we say you move your body in order to work the emotion out of your body. If you get an insight, well and good, but don't look for the why. Rather focus on processing, and moving through this emotional episode using your body. The more you catch yourself and identify the emotion, take responsibility, work through, come back to your partner, the shorter the emotional phases become. The triggers start to lose their power. Earlier on, Michael used to say things to me that would push my buttons, now I just laugh.

Imago Spiegel: You and your husband state that being a man basically means being present, having the capacity to be here. And that this is all a (heterosexual and loving) woman wants from a man: to be present with her and within her. This seems to be far from the dominant cultural construction of male identity. How do you get to this conviction?

Diana Richardson: Well, again through experience. And certainly, it has been an incredible gift to be with a spiritual master. Masters say that there are two pathways to God, to the Divine: meditation and devotion – meditation means presence, devotion means love. Yes, ‘presence’ is very far from the cultural construction of male identity. When we talk about this in our retreats, often men come to Michael and say, it’s such a relief to know that presence and to be present is their essential quality. And men do experience it. And for a woman, if a man is totally present inside her, the woman just opens up like a flower. However, it’s often hard to be present, we are usually caught up in thought. I think a lot of it stems from a lack of education. In schools, it is all about the mind and ambition and achieving, being successful, and we’re taught very little about the body. And so, we don’t have much connection to the body and to the present. Our body is the bridge to the present. Also, the performance pressure of men in sex is enormous. It’s a huge burden even though men accept the burden without even thinking about it. It’s a lot for them to keep together – having to get an erection, hold the erection, make sure not to come too soon etc. Men’s basic quality today is restlessness – he can’t be here, he’s got to be doing something, achieving something.

Imago Spiegel: If you say, men’s basic quality today is restlessness – what would women’s basic quality today be in your view?

Diana Richardson: Emotionality. And this phenomenon also can be a by-product of conventional sex. Women are labeled as emotional, hysterical but actually a lot of women’s emotionality has to do with how women have been treated in the past and still are, not feeling met in sex, rather being used or having sex as a duty. In conventional sex we build up tension and overcharge and then we discharge the overcharge. But there’s always this remnant of tension that remains in the system, and that makes men restless and women emotional. Like the spiritual masters say: When energy moves downward (which is what’s happening in conventional sex), tension is the by-product. And when energy moves upward (which is happening in tantric sex), silence is the by-product. So rather than discharging and pushing it out, it’s about embodying the energy, containing it, and you’ll see, you just feel more quiet, more fulfilled. That’s the thing with conventional sex, we don’t look at the consequences. We think it’s just normal. But when you start to make a shift, you do change as a person. And sex is at the foundation of our energy system. To bring sex to the forefront and become aware and conscious during sex is deepest work one can do on oneself. And then, the more present a man is, the more loving he becomes, and the more loving a woman is, the more present she becomes. So the male and female qualities within each individual become more balanced, more in harmony.

Imago Spiegel: As you said, in *Slow Sex*, a person’s presence and focus on his or her body sensations is fundamental. The sexual energy is said to transform to spiritual energy through awareness and observation. Is or can sex in your view be a meditative practice?

Diana Richardson: Yes, if meditation means being in the present, which it does, then what we are doing is bringing sex and meditation together. We can say, tantra is the union of sex and meditation.

Imago Spiegel: There have been efforts to recoin Slow Sex, taking on board the awareness based foundation but letting more or less go of the spiritual foundation, naming the concept for instance “Relaxed Sex”. What do you think of such developments?

Diana Richardson: Already the name Slow Sex is a step away from the spiritual aspect of Tantra. I’d say generally it depends on how things are taught. It’s about the inner work, and we are all a bit outward. Through going more inside ourselves, we are changing the direction, from outside to inside, and that is essentially a spiritual step. If things are taught in a way that it’s not just about the outer but the inner, it’s ok because people will then access the spiritual part, it’s like a by-product. I think it’s always good to do something about sex and awareness, because awareness creates love. If a couple is aware as they live their lives around each other, it makes their relationship much more sustainable.

Imago Spiegel: Do you consider Slow Sex to be peace work?

Diana Richardson: Participants often say this to us. And it’s true, because you bring more peace into the family arena if you feel peaceful and fulfilled. And it radiates outward from there. Basically, in the family, that’s where we can do something concrete.

Imago Spiegel: Thank you so much for taking the time and sharing your vast knowledge and experience!