

The Seekers Forum Transcript

A Play of the Senses: An Interview with Thomas Moore

May 2020



Mark: Thomas Moore, it's great to see you again. Thanks for joining us.

Thomas: Thank you for having me, Mark.

Mark: My pleasure. I'd like to talk to you today about pleasure, sensuality, and awakening spirituality. You've said that pleasure stops the world and prepares an individual to be more receptive to the nuances of the environment and to reverie and reflection. Can you talk a little bit more about the connection between sensory pleasure, carnal experience, and the wisdom journey?

Thomas: I think they're very important. Both of them are very important and important to keep together. That's the trick: to be able to be devoted to a sensual being in the world at the same time to be able to transcend that all. It's a paradox. On the other hand, I think that what pleasure does, it plays an important role and, as you said, to stop us from the busyness and all the activity that we're involved in. Like a normal pleasure if you just want to stop and I don't know, have a cup of tea or a cup of coffee or something, just to enjoy it for a while. That stops you.

In fact, I think that's a good example for me because I'm talking about things that are very simple. You can have lunch with a friend, things like that. Notice how often food is connected with pleasure. I've often felt that food is important for what you described as the sort of wisdom path or a transcendent point of view because being able to stop and enjoy something simple like that really does draw you into life. What life's about? It's not about how we understand it and do it right but that we go deep into it, and the pleasure will invite us into it.

Mark: Yet that runs contrary to so much of what we're taught about spirituality being about disconnection and detachment and not getting too caught up in the pleasures of the world.

Thomas: Well, Mark, I think that you and I both understand that we have to be contrary in order to get anywhere in this business.

Mark: That's true. Tell me, Tom, is there a relationship between shame and soul?

Thomas: Between pain and soul?

Mark: Between shame and soul.

Thomas: Definitely. Shame is a very deep feeling. It's like something that comes over a person and it doesn't seem to have an immediate reason, shame. Guilt is another thing. You can be guilty about something you've done or something that's happened but shame is not so clearly directed at something you've just done. Shame goes very deep and I think strikes at your identity. I think all of these emotions, things like shame, even guilt, all emotions – anger, longing, desire, lust – whatever they are, all of these emotions are really very important for the soul because they are the expression of soul, or the awareness that soul is present.

It's very easy to try to rationalize our emotions and not to really fully experience them. To be half in and half out, to have a feeling and then judge it as you're going. So many of us judge ourselves. That judgment is not good for the soul. It doesn't allow us to feel the emotion. The emotion is really important and shame is one of those, I think, that can do a lot for us because

it lets us know, at a very deep level, where we are disconnected or where there is a path is that we could still follow and go further, and benefit.

Mark: How would that relate, for example, to shame around sexuality or sensuality, and the desire to be wise?

Thomas: I think that shame around sexuality is not necessarily a bad thing. It's painful, I understand that, and it seems to indicate a lack of – obviously, it's a lack of comfort – but it lets you know that there's a certain direction to go. In all my work, what I do as a therapist, I always follow the rule I got from some of my friends around James Hillman: go with the symptom. Go with it, don't go against it. Don't try to be contrary to the symptom. If you're feeling shame, the thing to do there is to go with it, to move with it and see where it will take you.

Shame is not a bad thing. It can take you where you need to go. Maybe your sexuality needs what the shame can offer. It could be that you're not really aware of how deep your sexuality is and what it's asking of you, and the shame might lead you deeper into it actually. It depends how you handle it, what you do with it, but I think that it could be a good thing to go further. I know what I'm talking about because I was raised a Catholic, and I know what shame is around sexuality. I know it. Maybe that's why I write about it because I know it so well.

I know from my own experience that it helps a great deal to embrace that shame. Not to reason or delay or wish it weren't there but rather to embrace it; this is who you are. It definitely has a negative side to it but it can also take you to a very good place.

Mark: That's contrary to what we hear about shame being the onus that has no positive purpose, that it's like an infection you want to get rid of.

Thomas: Yes, because if you stand back and look at it from a distance, shame doesn't look very good. You look at someone who's feeling shame you say, "Why aren't they more comfortable sexually?" "Why don't they really be more sexual and not worry about that shame?" I don't think it works that way. You are who you are. Like for me, I grew up in a family that was not too comfortable with sex. I've got that in me and I have to deal with it. That's who I am and the shame is part of it. The shame lets me then be sexual in my own way.

Mark: Great. I'd like to talk about the body more deeply. You say that the body changes, teaches us about fate, time, nature, mortality, and character. It sounds like the body is the seat of the soul, the body is the source of wisdom. Could you say a little more about that?

Thomas: Yes. One of the reasons why we don't appreciate how much the body is an expression of soul is that we, in general, altogether, we tend to think of our bodies only physically. That's the way we deal with medicine. Medicine treats – if we have a physical problem, we are treated as almost as though we were this slab of meat, this object. That's how all medicine is generally. I'm sure there are some people you and I know that do it differently but generally speaking, physicians are trained to treat the body objectively and everything you read then is about the body and its chemicals.

Today, for example, an awful lot of people, professionals, are writing about matters of love and emotion and so on only from the brain's point of view. I think that's a terrible thing to do

to the body, to talk about the brain as though the soul is the brain. It isn't. The soul is something much more subtle and rich and interesting and has to do with meaning. If we look at the body that way, that it is a meaningful thing, the body is not just some suit we're in, some kind of thing that we crawl into to live our lives. We are the body in that sense.

I think if we looked at it that way, we might see that the body is more soulful. I always quote William Blake, the English poet, he said the body is the soul perceived by the senses in our time.

Mark: Beautiful.

Thomas: That's the exact quote from him. I think that's right. I always keep that in mind. The body is the soul perceived by the senses at our time. It's the soul you're looking at and you see the body. That makes a big difference.

Mark: It's so much more integrated a way of looking at it than we're trained to do.

Thomas: Without that, we're divided. We're split and we have this same old thing. It's been bothering us for several hundred years at least. The splitting, the soul and body, it's not a good thing to do.

Mark: Not a good thing at all. You talk about passion being the essential energy of the soul. Why do you think that passion gets such a bad rap in so-called spiritual circles?

Thomas: Passion? I'm surprised that it would because there are spiritual passions. People can be very passionate about spiritual things.

Mark: I think I'm talking about physical part.

Thomas: I know. Passion, in general, I think it would be good. I understand. The thing about the body and body's passions is that they bring our focus to the world we're in, to our relationship, to our physical desire, longings and needs, our physical history, and so on. From a certain point of view, it may seem as though our sexual passions take us away from our spiritual goals, and hopes, and intentions. I don't think that's true. When you start doing that, then you are purchasing your spirituality at the cost of your sexuality, of your body. That's not a good thing to do.

It's very bad because the only way to really get along in the spiritual life successfully is to be able to do it and live a physical life as well and live in the world. It's very easy to be a spiritual person because you want to escape the life in front of you and your physical life. It's very easy and it's hard to spot that when you're in your spiritual practices, that you're actually escaping, that you're trying to avoid something. I think that happens much more than we think. It's a very subtle thing.

What I'm saying is that the spiritual practice that is attained by repressing your sexual passion is not real, it's not complete because of what you've done with that. You have to do both. You have to be able to be a person. Who are you anyway? You are a person, you are somebody who has some sexual desire or longing or sensuality. That's who you are. Do you want to deny who you are in order to pretend that you're spiritual? That doesn't make any sense. The task is and this is why we started, the task is to be able to be really spiritual at the same time, live in a physical world. I think we have some excellent teachers who can guide us in that way. This is not a new idea. It's possible to be very physical.

I think, for example, going back to my Catholicism, I recently, in the past few years, I've translated the Gospels, which is interesting to me because I didn't think I'd go back to my life there, but I did. It made such an impact on me to find an approach to the Gospels that is not divided, does not slight the body. One of the things that was very clear to me doing this work so closely, was to figure Jesus is spending a lot of his time cooking and eating.

It's a very physical thing. But then he makes the great sacrament of his religion to be bread and wine, the first sign of his transcendence and his spirituality as he transforms in the story, he transforms water into wine at a wedding party. That's very much what we're talking about, pleasure in the body. How many spiritual leaders are worried about getting good wine for a wedding party? That, to me, indicates that we have capacity there. I think what happened was that the followers came along later, and they transformed the whole thing. They ignored that particular point and went on to be a moralist.

Mark: Went on to be what?

Thomas: Moralists.

Mark: Moralist, right. Well, they were uncomfortable.

Thomas: They were uncomfortable so they didn't buy it. They didn't accept the very teaching that was at the core of it all. What I felt, it was important to try to get back to what I see at least, as the essence of what's going on there.

Mark: I love what you say about anger being like an inverted lotus. That on the surface, you see the unbeautiful parts, but under the water, there are gorgeous blossoms, and that we need to develop an amphibious eye to appreciate the full meaning of such an unusual flower. To me, that says something about carnality in sexuality and sensuality as well. That what appears above the surface may be a mess but underneath, there's something treasured.

Thomas: Absolutely. When you think especially about our passions or as you say, carnality or our sexuality, one question you could ask is, "Who is it in you that is either afraid of or judgmental about your sexuality? Who is that?" If you could answer that question honestly and really probe it so you know what you're talking about, probe it for yourself who you are, then you may discover that that is a figure from your past then a self you have been in the past, or it could be a self you have been heavily influenced by somebody else like your parents or teachers or it could be a lot of different people.

A lot of people in the spiritual realm, it could be one of their teachers that influences them in a certain way. When you ask yourself what is it that stops you from being a really fully sensual, spiritual person, you may find that that person, that figure, is way up there somewhere. It's not really you living your life now but it's somebody else that's joining you, still speaking, because these people do still speak to us and still influence us.

Underneath that, is this beautiful sexuality, this life that you could be but on the surface of all these experiences you've had in life, that keep eating away and taking away your pleasure and your peace with your sexuality. We have to examine that and see who it is that's speaking, who it is that's interfering with our attempt to make our approach to meaning and wisdom to be very much in tune with our sexuality.

Mark: That's great. Can you talk a little bit about the beast and the angel? You say that every fall into ignorance and confusion is an opportunity to discover that the beast residing at the center of the labyrinth is also an angel. That's a little bit tied to what you were just saying. Could you elaborate a bit?

Thomas: That's a great image. A great image, I mean from the Greeks. They had this image that there was a labyrinth with a bowl at the center, and that beast was there, his name was Asteria. They called him Asteria which is a star, or it could be an image of an angel. I think that that's exactly that image for sexuality. It's at the core of our being. I think our sexuality is like it's 99% of who we are. It's there, engaged in everything in different ways.

I don't mean too narrowly, but our desire for pleasure, our being in our body and responding to our body sensations, wanting physical pleasure during the day. Simple things that I was talking about at the beginning, a cup of coffee, doesn't take much, feeling the sunshine on your body, that kind of thing. That's all so important to be able to feel yourself as a physical person. The sexuality is in our society especially, or maybe why it's always been bugging human beings is that we are afraid of it, it might take us in places that we're afraid to go to, it may be hard to deal with, difficult to moderate and to live and find living arrangements for it. Relationships can be difficult, sexual relationships can be difficult.

They're lots of things that make sex look like this beast that's at the center of the labyrinth, and it does look like a beast because people talk about it as animal, 'my animal sexuality,' it's my animal side or something. It really isn't. It's your angel's side. It is so connected to the meaning and the delight of being a human being. It is so connected to being able to express yourself not only to a sexual partner but also to every other person you encounter in the world by being there with some intimacy and some pleasure and maybe some even to the extent you can touch, even though today we have a lot of trouble with that. We have trouble with that whole Venusian role altogether.

The relationship between men and women where it is having some problems today especially is it's not just working that out between the genders but really about how do I get my sexuality in my physical body with its delights and wishes and desires? How do I get that to be so connected to my values and to being in the world in a positive way that I don't go around with a great deal of anxiety about it? That's a very difficult thing. In fact, I wonder if it's possible to do that today given our complexes and our neurosis about it today.

Mark: Isn't part of that our discomfort with the darkness and dark in general that we see the angel through this scam of darkness and that makes it into a beast? Can you talk a little bit about the importance of the dark and the appreciation of the dark in self-knowledge?

Thomas: The darkness can be relative first of all. What's dark for some people is bright for others. There is an element to some things, there are some things we share that we know are dark. The violence and things like that, they're pretty dark. Maybe there are some people who enjoy it but that's pretty crazy. There is a darkness that's part of life and it's silly to say that, it's so obvious. It's certainly part of our work on ourselves which is something we have to do, by the way. It's something that we are not naturally okay. We've all had influences and experiences that have made us somewhat neurotic. We're all neurotic in some way so we have work to do.

It's like we're all material. The alchemist called it prima materia, raw material, that is the stuff of becoming somebody. We have that raw material to work with and it is dark to us. It's

our darkness. As I said in my own experience, just to mention that, growing up in a wonderful family but were not comfortable with sex. Sex became dark, the darkness, something very hard to just own up to and just be. It'd take a lot of work. I think for a lot of people, sexuality, anger, you brought that up before, anger can be part of their darkness. They don't want to be angry and yet the more they repress their anger, the worse it gets, and they turn into rage. That's something.

Some people try too hard, I think, to be virtuous. They think that being full of virtue is what they're supposed to be doing and that image, that sense of self that's all virtuous creates a huge hidden shadow. It's very hard to trust someone who's solely interested in being virtuous because they haven't brought that shadow as another color. Some people are talking to me about metaphors for shadow. What I often think of is putting pepper in a recipe. It's like it's something dark. You mix it in so much. It's not like a cookie that's half chocolate and half of it is white or vanilla or whatever. It's not like that. It's like a casserole that has pepper in it.

You have that darkness, and it enters the whole thing, and it gives it some spice. You don't really even see it when it's there but it's there, you may taste it. I think that's what shadow is like if we could bring it in for our lives, and I think we tend to them like right and wrong and two opposites. It's not an opposite, it's a seasoning of life that really makes us real. It makes us real people.

Mark: Beautiful. You said something about repression and virtue. That real virtue can't be bought with repression, that real virtue is the rare innocence that comes from taking life on and owning your passions.

Thomas: Yes, that's right.

Mark: What do you mean in that context by innocence?

Thomas: By innocence? Well, I do think that especially Americans, they have this issue, that they want to be innocent. I think that's like a goal somehow. They like to feel innocent about - like if we do something even collectively, for a government does something that's pretty horrible, we try to do it in a way that we maintain our innocence.

Mark: What does that even mean?

Thomas: Other countries are evil, we think they are just evil and identify with being evil. We don't. We try to be innocent no matter what. That is not real innocence. Real innocence, I think, is more being who you need to be. If you need to be tough sometimes in your relationships, which is necessary, in your business, if you need to be less than truthful sometimes, I think we all get to that place at times, then we take that out; we recognize it and we're willing to do it, and we're willing to take the consequences and we're willing to be seen as someone who is not one of these obviously innocent people.

We have to give that up. There's some kind of reward in that feeling innocent. "I'm not guilty of anything," that feeling, rather than to take it out and say, "Yes, I had to do that," or, "This is who I have to be. This is who I am, I can't really change that." And to be that kind of a person who is not so great and not so pure. That then creates a real innocence. I think real innocence is that it's someone who has limits on what they do. Their shadow is limited, but they don't act it out all over the place. People who are innocent can act on it and don't even

know they're doing it because their feeling of innocence is like a bright light that just doesn't let them see their shadow.

A lot of people are doing terrible things to each other all the time, and they still feel innocent because they're not even aware they're being that way. There's an achievement of a kind of mature innocence, a knowing, sophisticated innocence where you're truly someone who goes about the world doing the best you can but knowing you can't do it perfectly and you're not aiming for that perfection.

Mark: There is real humility in that innocence.

Thomas: Yes, there's a kind of a real solid humility. Again, humility can be a pose that some people take because they don't feel they should be somebody who has some influence and power and needs and desires, that kind of thing. Real humility comes from being like the rest of us, being an ordinary human being, plan B person. Not the top variety but somebody a little bit lower on the chain.

Mark: Great. I just have a couple more questions. You talk about one function of love to cure us of an anemic imagination. I think that's a powerful phrase. A life emptied of romantic attachment and abandon to reason. How do we suffer from an anemic imagination? What are some of the symptoms of that and how can we address that?

Thomas: An anemic imagination is an imagination that hasn't been developed and tried. You don't have a broad imagination of what life could be or who you could be. Instead, you might try to be the person your parents always wanted you to be. As a therapist, I can tell you and I'm sure you know, Mark, that there's so many people are still, even in their 50s and 60s, trying to be who their parents wanted them to be and still following those parental rules and expectations. That's a clear indication there isn't much imagination about who you could be.

The image that guides your life is limited to this thing you were taught at a certain point in your life and you never grew out of it. You never really made an attempt to break out of. That's one thing I mean by a lack of imagination. Other things would be that as you go then, as you go through life, what you can do as you study life-- This is something that is a big thing for me is that so many people don't move anywhere. They're just doing the same thing day after day and they don't see that maybe they could develop as a person. I know a lot of people go to spiritual teachers to learn how to meditate better.

I'm at a different level. That doesn't impress me a whole lot. What impresses me is somebody who can look at the way they live and become more interesting, more complicated, a richer person as you go and your soul then comes forward to color who you are rather than to be that same old person or to be aiming at something, an image that you have for yourself that's all limited to your own concept. That's who you want to be. That's not really what it's about. It's about expanding and entering an unknown world and an unknown self where you really become somebody you didn't know you could be. That all comes from a bigger imagination that's stretching all the time.

Mark: Beautiful. Just one last question. I'd like to ask you about mysticism. You say that mysticism is a simple quality of everyday life, which is contrary to what most people think. In that simplicity lie its beauty and its importance, wonder tears open an otherwise closed cosmos. Could you just say a few words about how does wonder tear open the closed cosmos?

Thomas: It doesn't take much to be a mystic. I think that it starts by getting up in the morning and looking at the sun or feeling the sunshine, check out those clouds, what they're doing. Especially, the sky. This is in all teachings that the sky is one of the first places you can find your mystical self, or at night, looking at the stars; it sounds so trite maybe but that's something that you could really do and make an effort to go to a place where you can really see that night sky. That's one thing that can be done. I think your mysticism can also be found in cooking where you let yourself be absorbed with these natural materials that you're working with, with food.

You don't have to make a big deal of it. You just do it but you have some awareness along the line that you are somebody who is going to extend your sense of yourself every day through ordinary ways. I was a monk for a number of years, 13 years, and I know that for us, the physical world was like our ladder to the mystical heights. The ordinary things, taking walks was part of our life. Being in the library reading books and studying was part of our mystical life. I spent a lot of time in Ireland. The Irish monks were very good at this. For them, being a monk was a lot about study and about reading and writing.

As a writer myself, I see that's part of my mysticism. It depends how I do it, of course. If I do it to try to make a difference in the world, that's more mystical than just writing to make a few dollars. That's a whole different thing. It depends on your orientation but you could make your whole life quite mystical easily. I'm describing wonder. Not only about the great magnificent things like the sky. Like an amulet. What a fantastic thing. I was making an idea the other day, and I thought, wow, this is probably the best image for the sun. This is solar light brought down to my breakfast. This is the sun right here in this frying pan.

I think if you have that idea, if you can connect, this is an old, old teaching. As above, so below. You bring that world of the upper world that's all mysterious and mystical. Bring it down to your everyday experiences. That is the way to live a mystical life. You don't do it by just losing yourself up there in some extended notion of cosmos. You do it by being so connected to your daily life you see a connection between the vast infinity of your life in the most particular thing in your daily life.

Mark: Beautiful. Thank you so much, Tom. It's such a pleasure to talk to you.

Thomas: It's a pleasure to talk to you, Mark. I can talk to you, things happening. It's really great so I'm always happy to do that.

Mark: Thank you, sir. Have a wonderful day. I'll talk to you again soon. I hope.

Thomas: I hope so. Wishing you all the best. Bye.

Mark: Thank you. You too. Bye-bye.