

Saññoga Sutta

The Discourse on Bondage

[On sexuality and disengagement]
(Aṅguttara Nikāya 7.48/4:57-59)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2003

Introduction

Origin of sexuality

In the **Aggañña Sutta** account of the re-evolution of the world, the beings who are reborn on earth, on gaining physical bodies, begin to see their external differences. This is how the sutta describes the origin of sexuality amongst humans:

16b And, Vāseṭṭha (and Bhāradvāja), those beings continued for a very long time feeding on this rice as their food and nourishment. And, Vāseṭṭha (and Bhāradvāja), as they did so, their bodies became coarser still and among themselves they noticed even greater differences in their looks. Then the female developed female organs,¹ and the male developed male organs. And the women became excessively preoccupied with the men, and the men with the women. Owing to this excessive preoccupation with each other, lust was aroused, and their bodies burned [with passion]. Because of this burning, **they indulged in sexual activity.** (D 27.16/3:88)

The ideas contained in the underscored sentence are elaborated in this Saññoga Sutta.

Nature of sexuality

Two points should be made clear here. First, that this is not a discourse against sex, but merely an analysis of the psychological process through which sexuality or the desire for sex arises. This is clearly stated in the **Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta** (A 6.63), with which the Saññoga Sutta should be studied:

3b There are these **five cords of sensual pleasures** (*kāma,guṇa*):

Forms cognizable by the eye that are desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensuality, delightful;

Sounds cognizable by the ear that are...delightful;

Smells cognizable by the nose that are...delightful;

Tastes cognizable by the tongue that are...delightful;

Touches cognizable by the body that are desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensuality, delightful.

—**Monks, these are not sensual objects (*kāma*), but in the Noble Discipline, they are called ‘cords of sensual desire’ (*kāma,guṇa*).**²

The thought of passion is a person’s sensuality:

There is no sensuality in what is beautiful (*citra*) in the world.

The thought of passion is a person’s sensuality:

What is beautiful in the world remain as they are.

So here the wise remove the desire for them.³ (A 6.63.3/3:411)

¹ DA: That is, those who were women in previous lives. Conversely, the others were men in their past lives.

² *Api ca kho bhikkhave n’ete kāmā, kāma,guṇā nam’ete ariyassa vinaye vuccanti.* This is an enigmatic statement whose meaning is clarified in the verse that follows. See foll n.

Abnormal sexuality

Secondly, it should be pointed out that although this sutta discusses what in modern lingo is called “heterosexuality”, the analysis here should be understood as referring to human sexuality as a whole, that is, including homosexuality and any form of sexual desire. The remarkable **Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta** (D 26), for example, makes this prophecy:

And among the generation whose life-span is five hundred years, three things increased: **abnormal lust, neurotic desire and deviant practices**, and in consequence people’s life-span decreased, their beauty decreased, and as a result, the children of those whose life-span has been five hundred years live, some for two hundred and fifty years, some for only two hundred years.

(D 26.17/3:70)

According to the Dīgha Commentary, here “abnormal lust” (*adhamma, rāga*) refers to incest, that is, “lust between mother and mother’s sister and father’s sister and mother’s brother’s wife and such improper situations” (*mātā mātucchā pitucchā mātulānī ti ādike ayutta-ṭ, ṭhāne rāgo*); “neurotic desire” (*visama, lobha*) refers to excessive greed by way of consuming things (*paribhoga, yuttesu pi ṭhānesu atibalava, lobho*, in other words, excessive materialism and consumerism); and “deviant practices” (*micchā, dhamma*) refer to sexuality “between men and men, women with women”. (DA 3:853)

Taken in their proper perspectives, these statements on sexuality refer to their abnormal (*adhamma*) manifestation, that is, going against the Third Precept, which basically is about respect for the freedom, for the person of another and for family and society. The fact that the Third Precept is against “sexual misconduct” (*kāmesu micchācāra*) conversely means that there is “proper sexual conduct”, or the positive precept of contentment, that is, being committed to one’s partner and the cultivation of lovingkindness and spiritual friendship—or, if one chooses, a celibate life (*brahma, cariya*) whether short-term, long-term or life-long.

A Buddhist hypothesis of homosexuality

This sutta gives some insight into the psychological nature of homosexuality. **A woman** (in a physical sense) is fixated on her own sexuality compares it with another’s sexuality similarly fixates on another’s sexuality through unskilful consideration (*ayoniso manasikāra*), that is, being not aware of or rejecting (repressing) the fleeting, unsatisfactory and insubstantial nature of the experience. **A man** similarly fixated on his own sexuality, compares it with another’s sexuality falls into the same condition.

In both cases—the woman or the man—when the person sexually fixates on another person’s sexuality, the former may often enough project onto the latter both female and male sexuality. In other words, this is a case of **gender-fused fixation**. This is evident, for example, in any homosexual relationship, especially of a sustained nature, where one partner invariably plays a “male” role and the other a “female” role. The relationship fails when one partner fails in this “half-role”: the relationship then is incomplete.

Like in any “normal” personal relationship, the homosexual couple will only be happy together when this partnership rises above merely satisfying sexual desire towards wholesome higher goals (especially aesthetic or spiritual ones)—in other words, when they go beyond treating one another as mere objects of sexuality (which also applies to a heterosexual relationship), but regard one another as true individuals capable of personal development and spiritual liberation.

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³ This verse, which explains the previous prose sentence, “plays upon the double meaning of *kāma*, emphasizes that purification is to be achieved by mastering the defilement of sensuality, not by fleeing [from] sensually enticing objects.” (A:ÑB 1999:302 n34)

The Discourse on Bondage

[57]

1 Monks, I will teach you a Dharma exposition on bondage and freedom from bondage. Listen to it, monks, pay close attention, I will speak.

And what, monks, is the exposition on bondage and freedom from bondage.

1. Womanliness

2 A woman thinks about herself⁴ in terms of her womanly faculty,⁵ her womanly ways,⁶ her womanly looks,⁷ her womanly pride,⁸ her womanly desires, her womanly voice, her womanly adornments.⁹ She is aroused by this and delights in it.¹⁰

Thus aroused, she considers others¹¹ in terms of a man's faculty,¹² his manly ways, his manly looks,¹³ his manly pride,¹⁴ his manly desires, his manly voice, his manly adornments. She is aroused by this and delights in it.

Thus aroused, she desires external union (with a man), and she desires the [physical] pleasure and [mental] joy arising on account of such a union. Monks, attached to¹⁵ her womanliness, she enters into union with men.

In this way, monks, a woman does not rise above her womanliness.

2. Manliness

3 A man thinks about himself in terms of his own manly faculty, his manly ways, his manly looks, his manly pride, his manly desires, his manly voice, his manly adornments. He is aroused by this and delights in it.

Thus aroused, he contemplates others in terms of a woman's faculty, her womanly ways, her womanly looks, her womanly pride, her womanly desires, her womanly voice, her womanly adornments. He is aroused by this and delights in it.

Thus aroused, he desires external union (with a woman), and he desires the pleasure and joy arising on account of such a union. Monks, attached to his manliness, he enters into union with women. [58]

In this way, monks, a man does not rise above his manliness.

⁴ "to herself," *ajjhataṃ*, lit "internally".

⁵ "womanly faculty," *itth'indriya*, lit "womanly sense-organ". Here referring to the physical features that make one a woman, that is, "womanliness". The term "femininity" usually refers to the psychological aspect of a woman, related to Jung's notions of *anima* and *animus*.

⁶ "womanly ways," *itthi,kutta*, eg seductiveness, coquetry, and wiles (AA 4:32). Many of such terms in this sentence and their cognates below are in the Pali singular, which however need to be rendered idiomatically into the English plural.

⁷ "womanly looks," *itth'ākappa*, ie her physical looks and how she is dressed (AA 4:32).

⁸ "womanly pride," *itthi,vidha*, ie her pride and conceit (AA 4:32).

⁹ "womanly adornments," *itth'alāṅkāra*. "adorning the head, the neck, the hands, the feet, the hips (*kaṭi*)" (*sīsū-pago gīvūpago hatthūpago pādūpago kaṭūpago*, V 4:340)

¹⁰ "She is aroused by this..." Here I have rendered *tattha* in the English singular, since such an unskillful person would attend to the features mentioned. In the cognate sentences below [4-5] *tattha* is rendered in the English plural, ie referring to the various physical features, to which the skillful person remains unattracted.

¹¹ "to others," *bahiddhā*, lit "outside (of herself)".

¹² "manly faculty," *puris'indriya*, lit "manly sense-organ". Here referring to the physical features that make one a man, that is, "manliness". The term "masculinity" usually refers to the psychological aspect of a man.

¹³ "manly looks," *puris'ākappa*, ie his physical looks and how he is dressed.

¹⁴ "manly pride," *purisa,vidha*, ie his pride and conceit.

¹⁵ "attached to," *sattā* (V 1:185; D 2:246; Nc 23, 34; Dh 342; J 1:376).

3. Freedom from bondage

And what, monks, is freedom from bondage?

4 A woman does not think about herself by way of her womanly faculty, her womanly ways, her womanly looks, her womanly pride, her womanly desires, her womanly voice, her womanly adornments. She is not aroused by them and delights not in them.¹⁶

Thus unaroused, she does not contemplate others in terms of a man's faculty, his manly ways, his manly looks, his manly pride, his manly desires, his manly voice, his manly adornments. She is unaroused by them and delights not in them.

Thus unaroused, she does not desire external union (with a man), and she does not desire the pleasure and joy arising on account of such a union. Monks, detached from¹⁷ her womanliness, she does not enter into union with men.

In this way, monks, a woman rises above her womanliness.

5 A man does not think about himself in terms of his own manly faculty, his manly ways, his manly looks, his manly pride, his manly desires, his manly voice, his manly adornments. He is not aroused by them and delights not in them.

Thus unaroused, he does not contemplate others in terms of a woman's faculty, her womanly ways, her womanly looks, her womanly pride, her womanly desires, her womanly voice, her womanly adornments. He is unaroused by them and delights not in them.

Thus unaroused, he does not desire external union (with a woman), and he does not desire the pleasure and joy arising on account of such a union. Monks, detached from his manliness, he does not enter into union with women.

In this way, [59] monks, a man rises above his manliness.

This, monks, is freedom from bondage.

This, monks, is the exposition on bondage and freedom from bondage.

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¹⁶ "She is unaroused by them..." Here I have rendered *tattha* in the English plural, since such a skillful person would not attend to any of the features mentioned. In the cognate sentences above [2-3] *tattha* is rendered as "this", ie referring to the attachment to the "pleasure and joy" attending to their preoccupation with sexuality.

¹⁷ "detached to," *asattā*. Cf "attached to" (*sattā*) in the cognate sentences above [2-3].