

## Buddhist Sexual Ethics – A Rejoinder

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Buddhism means many things to many people. To some, it offers wise and compassionate advice on how to lessen the suffering of modern lay life. To others, it is the path to Enlightenment that ends all suffering. Mr Higgins' article in the November issue of *Bodhi Leaf* refers to the former kind of Buddhism only. The Buddhism that leads to Enlightenment is somewhat different, as we will now show. The place of sexuality in Buddhism is made manifestly clear in the Buddha's First Sermon in which the Great Teacher proclaimed the famous Middle Way:

"One should not pursue sensual pleasure (kama-sukha), which is low vulgar, coarse, ignoble and unbeneficial; and one should not pursue self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble and unbeneficial. So it was said. And with reference to what was this said? The pursuit of the enjoyment of one whose pleasure is linked to sensual desire – low, vulgar, coarse, ignoble and unbeneficial – is a state beset by suffering, vexation, despair and fever, and it is the wrong way. Disengage from the pursuit of the enjoyment of one whose pleasure is linked to sensual desire – low, vulgar, coarse, ignoble and unbeneficial – is a state without suffering, vexation despair and fever, and it is the right way. The pursuit of self-mortification... is the wrong way. Disengagement from the pursuit of self-mortification... is the right way... The Middle Way discovered by the Tathagata avoids both these extremes... it leads... to Nibbana."

(Ven Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Buddha's words in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 1080f)

The Buddha's declaration that the pursuit of sensual pleasures, which include sex, lies outside the Middle Way is reinforced many times in the Sutta-pitaka. For example, in the Simile of the Quail, Sutta No 66 of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, the Buddha declares:

"Now, Udayin, the pleasure and joy that arises dependent on these five cords of sensual pleasure are called sensual pleasures – a filthy pleasure, a coarse pleasure, an ignoble pleasure. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should not be pursued, that it should not be developed, that it should not be cultivated, that it should be feared... (whereas the pleasure of the Four Jhanas). This is called the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of Enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, that it should not be feared." (ibid p.557)

Even in the time of the Buddha, some misguided people went around saying that sexual practice was not an obstruction to Enlightenment. The Buddha rebuked them strongly with the well known simile of the snake, comparing their wrong grasp of the Teachings to a man who grasps a venomous snake by the tail, out of stupidity, and suffers accordingly:

Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated how obstructive things are obstructive, and how they are able to obstruct one who engages in them? I have stated how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them. With the simile of skeleton... with the simile of the piece of meat... with the simile of the grasstorch... with the simile of the pit of coals... with the simile of the dream... with the simile of the borrowed goods... with the simile of the tree laden with fruit... with the simile of the slaughterhouse... with the simile of the sword stake... with the simile of the snake's head, I have stated how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them. But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp and injured yourself and stored up much demerit; for this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time." (The Buddha in the simile of the Snake, ibid p. 225)

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Indeed, the Buddha taught that sexual practises not only lie outside the Middle Way, but also that they are part of craving (Kama–tanha, the craving for sensual pleasure) described in the Second Noble Truth as the cause of suffering, they are attachments (Kama–upadana, `the attachment to sensual pleasure'), they are a hindrance to meditation (Kama–cchanda, the first of the Five Nivarana), they are defilement (kilesa) of the mind, they are a fetter obstructing liberation (the fourth fetter, Sanyojana, is Kama–raga `lust') and they have no part in the behaviour an Enlightened being is capable of). The Buddha realised that such Teachings would hardly be received enthusiastically by most, for He said shortly after the Enlightenment: "The world, however, is given to pleasure, delighted with pleasure, enchanted with pleasure. Truly, such beings will hardly understand the law of conditionality, the Dependent Origination (paticca–samuppada) of everything; incomprehensible to them will be the end of all formations, the forsaking of every substratum of rebirth, the fading away of craving, detachment, extinction, Nibbana." (Ven. Nyanatiloka's translation in *The Word of the Buddha*, p. 2) But then, it is better to be true than to be popular. Ven. Ajahn Chah, the teacher under whom we both trained for many years, similarly taught that sexual practises had to be given up if one aspired for Enlightenment. For example, I remember a Westerner coming to see Ajahn Chah once and saying that he was sexually active but without being attached to the sex. Ajahn Chah completely ridiculed the statement as impossibility, saying something like "Bah! that's like saying there can be salt which isn't salty!"

Ajahn Chah taught all who came to him, monastic and lay, that sexual desire is Kilesa (defilement of the mind), it is a hindrance to success in meditation and an obstruction to Enlightenment. He taught that sexual activity should be abandoned if one wants to end suffering. He would never speak in praise of sex. He would only speak in praise of letting go.

by Ajahn Brahmavamso

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