

The Concept of Kāmarāga in Theravāda Buddhism

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Abstract

In general, the Pali Buddhist term 'Kāmarāga' is translated into English as 'sensuality'. It is a psychological phenomenon of the human condition, according to Buddhism, that also encompasses the natural tendencies of all human beings; thus, it cannot be a problem. Yet, Kāmarāga is considered a problem when it is clung to (upādāna) for the purpose of securing permanent happiness in life. However, sensuality should be treated as temporary happiness. According to the view of Buddhism, sensuality in modern societies has been understood in the wrong way.

The concept of Kāmarāga covered in the scope of this article is specifically in reference to 'sexuality', because it is the primary aim of many humans to obtain this experience. It's the natural tendency of any human being that sexual gratification grows along with maturity. Generally, the notion of sexual gratification is higher among humans. Many individuals think sexual experience is emblematic of supreme happiness. Buddhism sees sexual gratification and sexual experience as not being the supreme happiness of human existence. This article explores Kāmarāga (sexual gratification) in the Buddhist scriptures.

Keywords: Concept, Kāmarāga, Theravāda Buddhism.

Introduction

Desire is a psychological factor, and it has a wider range of meanings and conceptions. Kāma means desire, wish, and longing in Indian literature.¹ Kāma often connotes sexual desires and longings within contemporary literature, but the concept more broadly refers to any desire, wish, passion, longing, or pleasure of the senses – including aesthetic enjoyment of life, affection, and/or love, with or without sexual connotations. Desire, as viewed through the Buddhist perspective, has to be studied through both objective and subjective methods. In Buddhism, desire (kāma) has been basically understood as two principle concepts: subjective sensuality, sense-desire, and objective sensuality – the five sense-objects. In all enumerations of obstacles to perfection, or of general divisions and definitions of mental conditions, kāma occupies the leading position. It is the first of the five obstacles (nivāraṇa), the three esanās (longings), the four upādānas (attachments), the four oghas (floods of worldly turbulence), the four āsavas (intoxicants of mind), the three taṇhās, and the four yogas; kāma stands first on the list of the six factors of existence: kāmā, vedanā, saññā, āsavā, kamma, and dukkha, which are discussed with regard to their origin, difference, consequences, destruction, and remedy.² Kāma is most frequently connected with rāga (passion), with chanda (impulse) and gedha (greed), all expressing the active clinging, and impulsive character of desire. Kāma as sensual pleasure finds its most marked application in the sphere of the sexual³: kāmesu micchācārin, transgressing through lust, or violating the third rule of conduct is equivalent to abrahmacariyā, in chastity.⁴ In Buddhist Canon, the Buddha renounced sensuality in route to his Enlightenment.⁵ Some Buddhist lay practitioners recite daily the Five Precepts, a part of which is a commitment to abstain from “sexual misconduct”.⁶

¹Monier Williams, **kāma**, Monier-Williams Sanskrit English Dictionary, p. 271.

²A. iii. 410.

³L. P. N. Perera, **Sexuality in Ancient India: A Study Based on the Pali Vinayapitaka**, (Kelaniya: Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, 1993).

⁴S. iv. 343; kāmehi paricāreti “he enjoys himself with the charms of a woman”.

⁵See, for instance, *Dvedhavitakka Sutta* (MN 19).

⁶Kāmesumicchācāra.

Kāmarāga in the Buddhist Suttas

Typical of Pali Canon discourses, the Dhammikasutta⁷ includes a more explicit correlate to this precept when the Buddha enjoins a follower to observe celibacy, or at least to not have sex with another's wife. According to Buddhism, for an individual to affect his or her liberation, the flow of sense-desire must be cut off completely. However, while training, he or she must work with his or her motivational processes based on skillfully applied desire.⁸

The most common manifestation of sense-desire for most people is expressed through some level of sexual fantasy. Sexuality is so universal that it is often addressed in the Suttas. The Buddha explains sexuality on two important levels: the mythical and the psychological. The Buddha's explanation of the rise of sexuality is famously given in mythical language within the Aggaññasutta, humorously related as a sort of divine devolution and social evolution: how the gods become worldlings, and how these worldlings evolve socially.⁹ A psychological explanation of sexuality is found in the Saññogasutta. The Buddha shows how a woman or a man, on account of a preoccupation with their physical being, sees their differences, and on account of this perceived duality, desires what they see as lacking in either of them. As such, each, attached to her or his own sexuality, enters into sexual union with the other. The message of the teaching is that we are not merely sexual beings, and need to rise above our physical limitations to realize our mental and spiritual potential.¹⁰

Within the earliest monastic texts such as the Vinaya, male monks are explicitly forbidden to have sexual relations with any of the four genders: male, female, ubhatovyanjaṇaka, and paṇḍaka (the various meanings of these words are given below). Later, the Buddha allowed the ordination of women, yet forbade ordination to these other types of people, with exceptions given to a few particular types of paṇḍaka.¹¹ The Buddha's prescriptions against certain types of people joining the monastic saṅgha (ordained community) are often understood to reflect his concern for upholding the public image of the saṅgha as virtuous.

⁷Sn 2.14.

⁸Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Thought and Imagery in Theravāda Buddhism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 251.

⁹D. III. 80-97.

¹⁰A. IV. 57.

¹¹ For example, the Paṇḍakavatthu section of the Mahāvagga. 1:61, 68, 69.

In some cases, this is explicitly stated. Social acceptability was vital for the saṅgha, as it could not survive without the material support of lay society.¹²

The Basic Characteristics of Kāmarāga

The basic characteristics of sexual lust are clinging (upādāna) and multiplying (guṇa). It is the most prolific and most difficult of the three unwholesome roots (of lust, hate, and delusion) to overcome.¹³ Lust simply seeks to replicate itself: it is insatiable. In evolutionary terms, it is said that sexuality is nature's way of perpetuating life. But nature makes beasts of us and keeps us so, making us tear at each other with bloody tooth and claws, to procreate for the sake of our species' survival and proliferation. Sexuality is essentially a bodily instinct, a physical preoccupation. If we are preoccupied with our bodies, we will also be attracted to those of others. Then, we fall fully under the power of sexual preoccupation and proliferation. We become addicted to sexual pleasure because we know of no higher pleasure.¹⁴ The solution, therefore, is to have a taste of a greater pleasure, an inner bliss that is independent of the body; in short, meditative bliss.

It is not that sexuality is impure or evil, but that it keeps us within the rut of cyclic lives, within the realm of the physical senses, thus preventing us from enjoying bliss beyond the physical body and winning total liberation. The practitioner's moral training centers around the five precepts are as follows:

- (1) not destroying life – the value of life or the value of being;
- (2) not taking the not-given – happiness expressed through our ideas and owning things, this is the value of having;
- (3) not committing sexual misconduct – the value of freedom and respect for a person, this is the value of doing;
- (4) not speaking falsehood – the value of truth and beneficial communication, this is the value of seeing; and

¹²Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 390.

¹³A. II. 149f.

¹⁴M. I. 501-513.

(5) not taking strong drinks or intoxicants – the value of wisdom or the basis for a clear mind in preparation for mental cultivation, this is the value of mindfulness.¹⁵

Of special interest here is the third precept: abstaining from sexual misconduct (*kāmesu micchacārāveramaṇī*). This training rule reminds us that we should not fall into the rut of lust. More specifically, we must not cultivate a sense of gratification that is dependent on appropriating external objects (whether a person or thing). This consuming drive is rooted in an unconscious notion of duality, that we must have what is different from us.¹⁶ Buddhism does not view sex as being intrinsically evil. Even when the precept against sexual misconduct is broken, the person is not “punished” by any Buddhist law or authority. This precept, like the other four of the five precepts, constitutes natural morality. It is “natural” in that it is self-evident that we, and all beings, treasure our lives. No one wants to be exploited or violated by another. This precept is rooted in the respect for another person. A person has the right to say no to any kind of sexual contact. Even one’s spouse can rightly say no to having sex to the other, as neither is owned by another, and both are free individuals. Sex, however, becomes problematic when it is misused in the following ways, for example:

- (1) When forced on an unwilling partner (even a spouse who rejects the advance);
- (2) When done with an improper partner, such as another’s spouse or a minor;
- (3) As a self-empowerment through exploiting another, such as children and the disabled;
- (4) As an escape from real issues, such as difficulties or frustration arising from personal problems.

Sex is unwholesome in such cases because it is an act of exploiting another, of causing pain or unhappiness in the victim or those related to the victim. On a deeper psychological level, when we often or habitually feel a need for sexual gratification, it is likely that we are addicted to sex. Addiction means that we are never fully satisfied with it, and we keep on wanting it. This is mainly because we do not understand the true nature of sexuality, that it is merely a physical act that cannot fully gratify by itself. As such, we

¹⁵ On the 5 precepts, see *Sāleyyakasutta* (M 41); *Veḷudvāreyyasutta* (S. V. 352-356); *Bhayaverasutta* (A. III. 204-206).

¹⁶ For a psychological explanation, see *Saññogasutta* (A. IV. 57).

keep on wanting it. We cling to sexual pleasure (or any sensual pleasure, for that matter) because we are looking at only one aspect of it, that which we find attractive or because we have not tasted a greater bliss. This fatal attraction is the proverbial snake that keeps painfully biting its own tail. Each time we allow ourselves to be unwholesomely attracted to a sensual object, we are very likely to be caught in its rut. Lay Buddhists who are non-celibate, enjoying sense-pleasures (kāmabhogī),¹⁷ that is, anyone enjoying sense-pleasures and also desirous of living a moral and happy life should only indulge themselves in such pleasures within the limits of the five precepts. That is, they should know when to stop and avoid sexual misconduct (kāmesu micchācārā). In fact, such people, who enjoy sense-pleasures in a wholesome manner and yet do not neglect their spiritual development, are still capable of attaining stream-winning,¹⁸ fully awakening to spiritual liberation within seven lives at the most.¹⁹

The most important and interesting demonstration of these principles is found in the notation that among the disciples of the Buddha, one of the monks named Venerable Vaṅgīsa Thera had the foremost sexual gratification, which would arise whenever he saw beautiful women. In this article, I have intended to give some detailed accounts of Ven. Monk Vaṅgīsa Thera, specifically with regard to his sexual gratification in the Theravāda Buddhist texts. According to commentary by the (Vaṅgīsa) Ānanda Sutta, once when Venerable Ānanda was invited to the royal palace to teach the Dhamma in the maharajah's harem (*antonivesana*), he brought along the newly ordained Vaṅgīsa as his companion. When Vaṅgīsa saw the beautifully attired women in their fineries, he received them as a sign of beauty (*subhanimitta*), and that his mind became filled with lust.

The Visuddhimagga quotes Vaṅgīsa's verses, albeit in a different sequence, and says that he was overcome with lust when, soon after his ordination, while on his alms-round, he saw a woman. A Sanskrit version of the same story, along with the verses, is found in the Chinese Saṃyukta Āgama. Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga account is probably based on a very ancient source preserved in the Sanskrit tradition. It will be seen below, that verses of the (Vaṅgīsa) Ānanda Sutta are found in the Vaṅgīsa Theragāthā. Apparently, these verses are older since they arose in connection with the teachings given by Ānanda to Vaṅgīsa, and the verses of the Theragāthā later collected and arranged according to the elders' names.

¹⁷M. I. 491.

¹⁸M. I. 491.

¹⁹A. IV. 381.

Interestingly here, only the first verse (S 721 = Tha 1223) is spoken by Vaṅṅīsa, and the rest (S 722-726 = Tha 1224-1226) is spoken by Ānanda, but are included in the Vaṅṅīsa's Theragāthā. This is understandable, as they are personal instructions given to him.

Main Causes of Sexual Interest

The Alagaddūpamasutta gives a list of ten graphic images to illustrate the painfulness and the pointlessness of sense-pleasures, as follows:

(1) A skeleton, a fleshless, blood-smearred bone cannot satisfy the hunger of a starving dog;

(2) A piece of meat, for which birds of prey fight, unyielding, often meeting death or deadly pain due to their beaks and claws;

(3) A grass torch carried against the wind severely burns the carrier;

(4) A pit of burning coals, over which a man is dragged by others, then thrown into the flame and consumed by it;

(5) A dream of a beautiful landscape disappears when we awake;

(6) Borrowed goods, in which we foolishly pride ourselves, but are taken away by the owners;

(7) A fruit-laden tree [or fruits on a tree]: desiring fruits, but unable to climb, someone access it down, hurting us who is already in it.

(8) A butcher's knife and block [or executioner's block]: sense-desires cut off our spiritual development;

(9) A sword stake, sense-desires are piercing, causing wounds where there are none before; and

(10) A snake's head, sense-desires are a grave risk for our welfare, present, and future.²⁰

The Mahādukkhakkhandhasutta is a study of sense-desire (kāma),²¹ where the Buddha first defines it as our seeking to gratify the five physical senses, and he then goes on to show their disadvantages, as follows:

²⁰M. I. 130.

²¹Vbh. 256; Dhs-a. 62; it should be noted that kāma is used in a broad sense, that is, both as the subjective defilement (kilesa) or "sense-desire," and as the object of desire (vatthu) or "objects of sensual pleasure".

- (1) In seeking to earn a living, we have to tolerate bad weather, negative environments, etc.;
- (2) When we are out of work, we are distressed;
- (3) When we have accumulated wealth from our work, we may lose that wealth in various ways;
- (4) Quarrels and violence occur at all social levels and relationships on account of sense-desire;
- (5) Wars occur on account of sense-desire;
- (6) Stealing, robberies, kidnapping, etc., occur on account of sense-desire;
- (7) Such criminals suffer the pains of punishment and tortures on account of their sense-desire;
- (8) People misconduct themselves through body, speech, and mind on account of sense-desire, as a result of which they are reborn in suffering states.²²

Eradication of Sexual Interest

The Satipaṭṭhānasutta, in its contemplation of the mind (cittānupassanā), instructs us to be fully aware of a presence or absence of any form of lust²³:

When there is a sensual desire in him, he understands, ‘There is a sensual desire in me’. Or, when there is no sensual desire in him, he understands, ‘There is no sensual desire in me’. And he understands the arising of unarisen sensual desire, and he understands the letting go of arisen sensual desire, and he understands the further non-arising of the sensual desire that he has given up.²⁴

The passage then proceeds to deal with each of the other four hindrances in the same manner. The main idea here is to see sensual desire as it is and note its impermanence of both arising and of passing away. In the next step, we displace sensual desire with its

²²M. I. 85-87.

²³M. I. 59.

²⁴M. I. 60.

opposite, renunciation (nekkhamma).²⁵ Three suttas in the Tikanipāta deal with the overcoming of sensual desire. Namely²⁶:

Vitakkasutta (thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of renunciation),²⁷ Saññāsutta (perceptions of sensual desire, perceptions of renunciation),²⁸ Dhātusutta (element of sensual desire, element of renunciation).²⁹

Conclusion

Kānavirāga is the opposite of kāmarāga, which is a representation of “abandonment of lust”, or being free from lust. Abstaining from sexual misconduct (kāmesu micchacārāveramaṇī), this training rule reminds us that we should not fall into the rut of lust, that is, a sense of gratification that is dependent on appropriating external objects (whether a person or thing). This consuming drive is rooted in an unconscious notion of duality, that we must have what is different from us.³⁰ Buddhism does not view sex as being intrinsically evil. Even when the precept against sexual misconduct is broken, the person is not “punished” by any Buddhist law or authority. This precept, like the other four of the five precepts, constitutes natural morality. It is “natural” in that it is self-evident that we, and all beings, treasure our lives. No one wants to be exploited or violated by another. This precept is rooted in the respect for another’s person.

²⁵ Renunciation (nekkhamma) here refers to letting go of unwholesome states and modes of conduct.

²⁶ These suttas actually deal with the removal of the 3 constituents of wrong thought (micchā saṅkappa), i.e. sensual desire (kāma), ill-will (vyāpāda) and cruelty [violence] (vihimsā).

²⁷ A. III. 446.

²⁸ A. III. 446f.

²⁹ A. III. 447.

³⁰ For a psychological explanation, see Saññogasutta (A. IV. 57).

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