

A Textual Analysis of Buddhist Sexual Ethics: Principles for Responsible and Healthy Lay Conduct

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Introduction

Sex has become one of the major needs for mankind because not only it provides enjoyment but also it ensures long-term species survival through genetic variation. It is not a basic need like water, food, and air, but it plays such a role as people do everything for sexual pleasure. As a result, many good and bad outcomes emerged in peoples' lives such as family problems, health issues, and unwanted children. So, there must be a responsible way and boundaries for people in fulfilling their sexual desire. Because it cannot be suppressed as sex is a natural part of human life that boosts well-being, lowers stress, and strengthens emotional bonds between partners. However, it requires a foundation of responsible sex, which means prioritizing mutual consent, emotional readiness, and safety measures like contraception and STI protection. Setting clear boundaries ensures that both partners feel safe, respected, and comfortable, making the experience healthy and fulfilling for everyone involved.

In the Buddha's teachings, there are many guidelines and limits for a responsible and healthy sexual life. By analyzing the Buddhist discourses, this research aims to present Buddhist principles for a responsible and healthy sexual life. If such restrictions are not there, the world becomes completely a mess. Sex is a powerful force in us all; in itself, it is neither good nor bad, but it can certainly create problems. That is the reason why people must control their desire in dealing with their lust.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

To analyze the Buddhist textual discourses regarding sensual and sexual behavior (kāma and methuna).

To identify the ethical limits and behavioral boundaries established by the Buddha for laypersons to prevent the destructive consequences of unregulated desire.

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To provide an analytical frameworks of Buddhist principles that can be adopted to ensure a responsible, healthy, and problem-free sexual life in contemporary society.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research methodology using a library approach. Authentic primary sources and secondary sources have been extensively used in data collection. Primary sources refer to early Buddhist texts such as the Pali Canon (*Nikāyas*), commentaries (*Atthakathā*), and sub-commentaries, while secondary sources consist of academic articles, journals, and books written by modern scholars. By using this comparative and textual analysis method, this research examines the Buddhist guidelines which can be practically adopted to ensure a responsible, healthy, and problem-free sexual life for contemporary lay communities.

Results

In the Pali Canon, under the word *kāma* (sensual desire), sexual behavior or enjoyment based on physical contact is widely denoted. The Pali word *methuna* specifically refers to sexual intercourse, behavior, enjoyment, and copulation. While for the Sangha (monastic community), sexual intercourse or any kind of sexual behavior is vehemently prohibited, the Buddha points out clear boundaries to be followed by the laity in seeking sensual pleasure.

In the Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta, the Buddha highlights three key factors that lead to the destruction of society: *Adhamma Rāga* (Unrighteous Lust: illicit, unrighteous, and unnatural sensual desires), *Visama Lobha* (Inordinate Greed: intense, unjust, and boundless greed), and *Micchā Dhamma* (Wrong Conduct / Deviant Values: misguided beliefs and improper behavior). The text specifically notes that when unrighteous lust increases among people, they commit improper sexual acts, even within family structures, leading to deep family crises, social decay, and genetic disorders among offspring.

Furthermore, the Sāleyya Sutta explicitly mentions categories of women one should not copulate with to avoid sexual misconduct. These include individuals protected by their mother, father, both parents, brother, sister, relatives, or clan as guardians. It further prohibits relations with a woman who is protected on principle, who has a husband, whose violation is punishable by law, or who has been garlanded as a token of betrothal. Modern interpretation connects these traditional protected categories directly to contemporary ethical frameworks, aligning them with mutual consent, individual autonomy, and legal age of consent. In the Sumaṅgalavilāsinī, the commentary clarifies that four criteria must be fulfilled to constitute sexual misconduct: a partner belonging to someone else, the explicit intention to have sex with the restricted group, the

effort to initiate sexual intercourse, and the resulting sexual contact through that effort.

Discussion / Conclusion

The findings show that peoples' desire can never be fulfilled, even with a shower of gold, as stated in the Dhammapada. Therefore, individuals tend to seek pleasure without any limit. This limitless desire for happiness with limited resources makes people more ignorant, addictive, and blind to their dignity, character, and responsibilities. Consequently, religions, cultures, philosophies, and law systems have historically imposed restrictions to manage this burning global problem. Modern scholars echo this; as Sri Dhammananda points out, man works and struggles hard for happiness but often ignores guidelines due to inherent craving, hatred, and illusion.

The Buddha never defines sexuality as an inherent sin or something to be utterly rejected by laypeople; instead, He emphasizes that one must maintain ethical values and self-control while pleasing sensual desires. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Buddha observes that no other single form so completely enslaves a man's heart as that of a woman, and vice versa. It is clear that if someone practices the third precept of the five precepts—abstaining from sexual misconduct—many societal problems including child abuse, rapes, unwanted children, miscarriages, and family breakdowns can be significantly reduced. Ultimately, the Buddha points out that one should have limits and responsibilities in seeking sex to guide an ethically valuable and harmonious society.

Keywords - Buddhism, Sexual Ethics, Third Precept, Misconduct, Responsible

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