

Methuna Sutta

The Discourse on Coupling

[The seven bonds of sexuality]
(Aṅguttara Nikāya 7.47/4:54-56)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2007

Introduction

1. The Methuna Sutta is a definitive statement on the early Buddhist conception of the “holy life” (*brahma, cariya*). Although *brahma, cariya* is often translated as “celibacy,” this is only one aspect of the holy life. Central as celibacy may be to the holy life, there are other even more vital aspects, and these are listed in the sutta as the abstaining from these seven “bonds of sexuality” (*methuna, saṃyoga*):

- (1) enjoying physical contact;
- (2) socializing (especially for the sake of entertainment);¹
- (3) lusting after the physical form;
- (4) distracted by pleasurable sounds;
- (5) delighting in frivolities with others;
- (6) approving of others indulging in physical pleasures; and
- (7) living the holy life for the sake of going to heaven.

These seven “bonds of sexuality” are so called because they still bind us to thinking about sexuality and sense-pleasures even though externally there is a façade of sexual abstinence and austerity.

2. The fact that the Methuna Sutta refers only to a heterosexual context, does not imply that it is not against other forms of sexual behaviour, especially homosexuality.² The point is that *all* forms of sexuality, overt and covert, any misuse of the senses, are to be avoided in the holy life, that is, when one has taken up monastic training or a religious life of celibacy.

In the **(Devatā) Samiddhi Sutta** (S 1.20), *sexuality* is said to be “time-consuming” (*kālika*), in the sense that it keeps us in the vicissitudes of samsara.³ The quest for the gratification of sexuality generates lust (*rāga*), greed (*lobha*) and covetousness (*abhijjhā*). Sexuality invariably entails sense-desire (*taṇhā*), and in this lustful quest, whatever that is perceived it as opposing would generate hate (*dosa*), ill will (*vyāpāda*) or aversion (*paṭigha*). All this feeds *bhava* (existence and becoming), and prevents us from seeing beyond the delusion (*moha*) that make it all appear worthwhile.

The Alaggadūpama Sutta (M 22), records how Ariṭṭha wrongly thinks that it is all right for monastics to indulge in sex since some of the sensual pleasures are permissible to lay-followers, even those who are stream-winners. The Buddha’s reply is very clear:

¹ Elsewhere, the word *asamsaṭṭha* is used in this context. This is a clear allusion to the character of the forest eremite, a wandering forest monk. The expression, “(he) lives socializing” (*samsaṭṭhā viharissanti*) occurs at **Anāgata, bhaya S 4** (A 5.80.5+6/3:109) = SD 1.10(3.4). The **Vinaya** eg disapproves of the nun Thulla, nandā “living and socializing [in close proximity]” with unwholesome lay companions (Saṅgh 9 = V 4:239); Thulla, nandā’s female probationer Caṇḍa, kālī “socializing with householders and householders’ sons” (*samsaṭṭhā viharati gahapati-nāpi gahapati, puttana pi*, V 4:293); the female probationer Caṇḍa, kālī who lived “in close proximity with men and youths” (*purisa, samsaṭṭha kumāraka, samsaṭṭha*) who were violent (V 4:333); monks should carry out an act of censure (*tajjanīya, kamma*) against monastics living “in the company of householders” (*gihi, samsaṭṭha*, Cv 1.4.1 = V 2:4). VA says that they were “mixed up” (*missī, bhūtā*) with the world: in terms of *the body*, they were pounding and cooking for householders, perfuming and adorning themselves, using garlands and chains; in terms of *speech*, they were acting as go-between, running errands (VA 915). Comy gives 5 kinds of socializing (*samsagga*): through hearing, seeing, conversing, eating with, and bodily contact (MA 2:143). For an example of a monk who is above such socializing, ie Puṇṇa Mantāni, putta, see **Ratha, vinīta S** (M 24.2/1:145 f) = SD 28.3.

² On homosexuality, see **Vakkali S** (S 22.87/3:119-124) = SD 8.8; also **Saññoga S** (A 7.48/4:57-59) = SD 8.7 Intro (2).

³ S 1.20/1:8-12 = SD 21.4.

“Indeed monks, it is impossible that one can indulge in sensual pleasures without sensual desires, without the perception of sensual desire, without the thought of sensual desire!”

(M 22.9/1:133) = SD 13

3. Early Buddhism does not regard sex, or any physical pleasure, as being “evil” in itself.⁴ In the **Mahā Vaccha, gotta Sutta** (M 73), for example, lay followers are referred to as “white-clad laymen who are brahmacharis,” that is, those who voluntarily keep to the rule of celibacy, in contrast with the laymen “who enjoy sense-pleasures” (*kāma, bhogī*). And both kinds of laymen are said to be capable of being accomplished in the Dharma.⁵

The third of the five precepts concern the training to abstain from sexuality (*kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhā, padamī*), that is, neither abusing the physical senses (that is, the body) and respecting the person of others. Married partners and those betrothed couples should be loyal to one another. Even in societies where marriage is loosely defined or undefined, sexuality is only healthy (physically and mentally) in the context of commitment to a partnership.

Sexuality between committed and loving partners should be a part of the process of mutual acceptance and healthy partnership, or better, the basis for a happy and productive family life. The third precept is based on the value of freedom, that our partner has the right to say no to sexuality, and this has to be respected. In this manner, both parties rise above their sexuality and accept each other unconditionally as being capable of awakening. Between healthy loving individuals, sexuality can be a meaningful expression of momentary selflessness. Otherwise, sexuality easily becomes the basis for the expression of *the most selfish of human emotions*.

4. In the Methuna Sutta, the Buddha defines **the brahmachari** as follows: “he lives the perfect and pure brahmachari life, unbroken, untorn [consistent], unmixed [not altering the rules], spotless,”⁶ and which applies to him, too [§1]. The usual and fuller stock is: “virtues dear to the noble ones, unbroken, untorn, unmixed, spotless, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, giving rise to concentration.”⁷

These are said to be the “**virtues dear to the noble ones**” (*ariya, kantāni sīlāni*),⁸ because, says the Saṃyutta Commentary, the noble ones do not violate the five precepts; hence, these virtues are dear to them (SA 2:74). They are said to be “**ungrasped**” (*aparāmaṭṭha*) in the sense that they are not kept to with craving or wrong view.⁹

The state contrary to that of the brahmachari’s moral virtue is stated as “the break, the tear, the mottle, the blotch of the holy life” (*brahmacariyassa khaṇḍam pi chiddam pi sabalam pi kammāsam pi*) [1§]. The epithets “broken” (*khaṇḍa*) and “torn” (*chidda*) is a cloth imagery: bad cloth is broken or torn; “mixed” (*sabala*) and “blotched” (*kammāsa*) refers to cows that have mixed patterns or blotched patterns on its hide. A good piece of cloth is “unbroken, untorn” (*akhaṇḍam acchidam*) and a good cow is “unmixed, spotless [unblotched]” (*asabalam akammāsam*) (DA 2:536; MA 2:400; AA 3:345)

5. The Methuna Sutta is related to a number of other suttas dealing with sexuality, with which it should be studied. Some of such suttas are listed here.

The Aggañña Sutta (D 27) uses *mythological* narrative to humorously explain how sexuality first arise when society re-evolves after the universe returns into being.¹⁰

The Sañña Sutta (A 7.48), explains in *psychological* terms how sexuality arises in a woman and in a man, and that they should rise above being mere sexual beings.¹¹

⁴ See esp **Nibbedhika Pariyāya S** (A 6.63.3/3:411) = SD 6.11.

⁵ M 73.13/1:493.

⁶ *Akhaṇḍam acchidam asabalam akammāsam paripuṇṇam parisuddham brahma, cariyam caratī ti.*

⁷ *Sīlāni akhaṇḍāni acchiddāni asabalāni akammāsāni bhujissāni viññūpasaṭṭhāni aparāmaṭṭhāni samādhi, samvattanakāni* (D 2:80, 3:245; M 1:322, 2:251; S 1:69, 5:408; A 3:134, 3:289, 290; Pm 1:44; Nett 56). See UA 268. For details, see Vism 1.143-161/51-58.

⁸ *Ariya, kantāni sīlāni*, S 5:364, 382, 386, 396, 408; A 3:36. SA says that the noble ones do not violate the five precepts; hence, these virtues are “dear” to them (*ariya, kanta*) (SA 2:74).

⁹ Vism 7.104/222; for details of noble one’s virtue is explained at Vism 7.101-106/221 f. See also UA 268.

¹⁰ D 27.16/3:88 = SD 2.19.

¹¹ A 7.48/4:57-59 = SD 8.7.

In the **Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3), the Buddha—in close reference to the seven bonds of sexuality of the Methuna Sutta—charges, in a *historical* perspective, that the brahmins of his time, unlike those of ancient times, live luxurious and abandoned lives.¹²

The “description of moral virtue” chapter of the **Visuddhi,magga** quotes the Methuna Sutta’s section on the seven bonds of sexuality in full.¹³

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The Discourse on Coupling

(A 7.47/4:54-56)

1 (Originated in Sāvattthī.)

The brahmachari [celibate practitioner]

Then the brahmin Jāṇussoṇī approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, the brahmin Jāṇussoṇī sat down at one side. Sitting thus at one side, the brahmin Jāṇussoṇī said this to the Blessed One:

“Does the Blessed One profess to be a brahmachari (*brahma,cārī*)?”

“Brahmin, if one speaking rightly were to say of anyone, thus:

‘He lives the perfect and pure brahmachari life, unbroken, untorn [consistent], unmixed [not altering the rules], spotless,’¹⁴ he, brahmin, would be speaking rightly of me.

For, I, brahmin, live the perfect and pure brahmachari life, unbroken, untorn [consistent], unmixed [not altering the rules], spotless.”

“But, master Gotama, what is the break, the tear, the mottle, the blotch of the holy life [brahmacharya]?”¹⁵

The seven faults of the false brahmachari

2 (1) Here, brahmin, a certain ascetic or brahmin, declares himself to be a total brahmachari.

For, he does not indulge in coupling [in sexual intercourse] with women.

*But he consents to being rubbed, massaged, bathed, and kneaded by women.*¹⁶ He relishes it, longs for it, and savours it.¹⁷

This, brahmin, is a break, and a tear, and a mottle, and a blotch of the holy life.

This, brahmin, is called one who leads the impure holy life, who is devoted to the indulgence of coupling. He is not freed from birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain: he is not freed from suffering, I say! [55]

3 (2) Furthermore, brahmin, a certain ascetic or brahmin, declares himself to be a total brahmachari. Nor does he indulge in coupling with women.

Nor does he consent to being rubbed, massaged, bathed, and kneaded by women.

*But he jokes with women, plays with them, jests with them.*¹⁸ He relishes it, longs for it, and savours it.

¹² D 3.2.8-20/1:104 f = SD 21.3.

¹³ Vism 1.144-150/51-53.

¹⁴ *Akhaṇḍaṃ acchiddaṃ asabalaṃ akammāsaṃ paripuṇṇaṃ parisuddhaṃ brahma,cariyaṃ caratī ti*: the contrary case is mentioned in the foll question at the end of this section. See Intro (4).

¹⁵ On “the break, etc,” see Intro (1).

¹⁶ *Api ca kho mātu,gāmassa ucchādana,parimaddana,nahāpana,sambāhanaṃ sādīyati*, ie rubbing powders into the body, massaging it with oils, bathing in perfumed water, kneading the limbs (DA 88, summarized); also at D 1:7,19; A 4:54,16; Nm 380,9.

¹⁷ *So tad assādeti, taṃ nikāmeti, tena ca vittim āpajjati*, as at A 1:267 f, 2:126-129, 160. The last clause also at D 2:253-256; A 4:54 f; Nm 34; Dhs 484.

¹⁸ *Api ca kho mātuḡāmena saddhiṃ sañjagghati saṅkīlati saṅkelāyati*.

This, brahmin, is a break, and a tear, and a mottle, and a blotch of the holy life.

This, brahmin, is called one who leads the impure holy life, who is devoted to the indulgence of coupling. He is not freed from birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain: he is not freed from suffering, I say!

4 (3) Furthermore, brahmin, a certain ascetic or brahmin, declares himself to be a complete brahmachari.

For, he does not indulge in coupling with women.

Nor does he consent to being rubbed, massaged, bathed, and kneaded by women, too.

Nor does he joke, play or jest with women.

*But he gazes and looks on eye to eye at women.*¹⁹ He relishes it, longs for it, and savours it.

This, brahmin, is a break, and a tear, and a mottle, and a blotch of the holy life.

This, brahmin, is called one who leads the impure holy life, who is devoted to the indulgence of coupling. He is not freed from birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain: he is not freed from suffering, I say!

5 (4) Furthermore, brahmin, a certain ascetic or brahmin, declares himself to be a complete brahmachari.

For, he does not indulge in coupling with women.

Nor does he consent to being rubbed, massaged, bathed, and kneaded by women, too.

Nor does he joke, play or jest with women.

Nor does he gaze or look on eye to eye at women.

*But he listens to the sounds of women through a wall or through a fence as they laugh, or talk, or sing or weep.*²⁰ He relishes it, longs for it, and savours it.

This, brahmin, is a break, and a tear, and a mottle, and a blotch of the holy life.

This, brahmin, is called one who leads the impure holy life, who is devoted to the indulgence of coupling. He is not freed from birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain: he is not freed from suffering, I say!

6 (5) Furthermore, brahmin, a certain ascetic or brahmin, declares himself to be a complete brahmachari.

For, he does not indulge in coupling with women.

Nor does he consent to being rubbed, massaged, bathed, and kneaded by women, too.

Nor does he joke, play or jest with women.

Nor does he gaze or look on eye to eye at women.

Nor does he listen to the sounds of women through a wall or through a fence as they laugh, or talk, or sing or weep.

*But he recollects his erstwhile laughing and chatting and playing with women.*²¹ He relishes it, longs for it, and savours it.

This, brahmin, is a break, and a tear, and a mottle, and a blotch of the holy life.

This, brahmin, is called one who leads the impure holy life, who is devoted to the indulgence of coupling. He is not freed from birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain: he is not freed from suffering, I say!

7 (6) Furthermore, brahmin, a certain ascetic or brahmin, declares himself to be a complete brahmachari.

For, he does not indulge in coupling with women.

Nor does he consent to being rubbed, massaged, bathed, and kneaded by women, too.

Nor does he joke, play or jest with women.

Nor does he gaze or look on eye to eye at women.

¹⁹ *Api ca kho mātuḡāmassa cakkhunā cakkhum upanijjhāyati pekkhati.*

²⁰ *Api ca kho mātuḡāmassa saddaṃ suṇāti, tiro, kuḍḍaṃ vā tiro, pākāraṃ vā hasantiyā vā bhaṇantiyā vā gāyantiyā vā rodantiyā vā.*

²¹ *Api ca kho yāni'ssa tāni pubbe mātuḡāmena saddhiṃ hasita, lapita, kīṭitāni, tāsi anussarati.*

Nor does he listen to the sounds of women through a wall or through a fence as they laugh, or talk, or sing or weep.

Nor does he recollect the previous laughing and chatting and playing with women.

*But he sees a householder or a householder's son being entertained, showered and serviced with the cords of sense-pleasures.*²² He relishes it, longs for it, and savours it.

This, brahmin, is a break, and a tear, and a mottle, and a blotch of the holy life.

This, brahmin, is called one who leads the impure holy life, who is devoted to the indulgence of coupling. He is not freed from birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain: he is not freed from suffering, I say!

8 (7) Furthermore, brahmin, a certain ascetic or brahmin, declares himself to be a complete brahma-chari.

For, he does not indulge in coupling with women.

Nor does he consent to being rubbed, massaged, bathed, and kneaded by women, too.

Nor does he joke, play or jest with women.

Nor does he gaze or look on eye to eye at women.

Nor does he listen to the sounds of women through a wall or through a fence as they laugh, or talk, or sing or weep.

Nor does he recollect the previous laughing and chatting and playing with women.

Nor does he see a householder or a householder's son being entertained, showered and serviced with the cords of sense-pleasures.

*But he lives the holy life aspiring for rebirth in one of the groups of devas, thinking, 'By this rule or vow or austerity or holy life, I shall become a deva or one amongst them.'*²³ He relishes it, longs for it, and savours it.

This, brahmin, is a break, and a tear, and a mottle, and a blotch of the holy life.

9 This, brahmin, is called **[56]** one who leads the impure holy life, who is devoted to the indulgence of coupling. He is not freed from birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain: he is not freed from suffering, I say!

The Buddha has overcome all bondage

10 And as long as I noticed that one or other of these seven bonds of sexuality²⁴ unabandoned in me, to that extent, brahmin, I did not claim to be supremely awakened in the peerless full self-awakening in this world with its gods, with its Māra, with its Brahmā, this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its rulers²⁵ and people.

11 But, brahmin, when I did not notice any of these seven bonds of sexuality unabandoned in me, to that extent, brahmin, I have claimed to be supremely awakened in the peerless full self-awakening in this world with its gods, with its Māra, with its Brahmā, this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its rulers and people.

12 And the knowledge and vision arose in me,

'Unshakable is the liberation of mind. This is my last birth. There is no more rebirth here'."

²² *Api ca kho passati gahapatiṃ vā gahapati,puttaṃ vā pañcahi kāma,guṇehi samappitaṃ samāṅgī, bhūtaṃ paricāriyamānaṃ.* The verb *paricāriyamānaṃ* here refers not just being "entertained" by the serving of food (which is a common sense), but also a clearly sexual connotation as well (Olivelle 1999:58 & n29): cf *paricārenti* at **Am-baṭṭha S** (D 3.2.10a/1:105 n) = SD 21.3.

²³ *Api ca kho aññatarāṃ deva, nikāyaṃ pañdhāya brahma, cariyāṃ carati iminā'haṃ sīlena vā vatena vā tapena vā brahma, cariyena vā devo vā bhavissāmi dev' aññataro vā 'ti.* Comy: That is, he wishes to become a deva, rajah or a deva, putra (lesser celestial being) (AA 4:32). The whole passage is stock: see D 3:239; M 1:102; S 4:180; A 4:18; cf A 9.72/4:459.

²⁴ "Bonds of sexuality," *methuna, samyoga*; see Intro.

²⁵ *deva*, here in the sense of "devas by convention" (*sammati, deva*), ie kings. The other 2 types of *deva* are "gods by rebirth" (*upapatti, deva*) and "gods by purification" (*visuddhi, deva*), ie the Buddhas, Pratyeka Buddhas and arhats (Nc 307 KhA 123).

Jānussonī takes refuge

13 When this was spoken, the brahmin Jānussonī said this to the Blessed One:
“Excellent, Master Gotama! Excellent! Master Gotama! Just as if one
were to place upright what had been overturned,
were to reveal what was hidden,
were to show the way to one who was lost, or
were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms,
in the same way, in numerous ways, has the Dharma been made clear by master Gotama.

“I go to tmaster Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May master Gotama remember us as lay followers who have gone for refuge, from this day forth, for life.”

— evaṃ —

Bibliography

Jothiya Dhirasekera

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