

A narrow mind

Excerpt from *SD 60.6 Avassuta Pariyāya Sutta (S 35.202)*, An arhat is a master of his senses and mind by TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) © 2023.

2.1.1.1 Moggallāna’s teaching in **the Avassuta Pariyāya Sutta (S 35.202)** centres on the metaphor of the “water” element, whose characteristic is said to be “cohesive,” that is “sticky,” in the sense of holding matter together—like the electromagnetic force keeping the electrons attached to the atom, and the strong nuclear force keeping the protons and neutrons together in the nucleus. This is a literal meaning of “water.”

In the Sutta, Moggallāna uses **water** in a metaphorical sense to refer to sensuality—when we are caught up with seeing the pleasant (pulling in) and unpleasant (pushing away) aspect in sense-based experiences. In other words, our sense-based habits keep us gravitating onto the body, limiting our experiences only to what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted and touched. We are merely a body-bound being: very much like an animal existence.

2.1.1.2 The term **avassuta**, “leaking, flowing, being drenched (with sensuality),” refers to the effects of being a sensual person, that is, one fixated on the body and caught up with enjoying sensual pleasures. In Buddhist psychology, when sensuality is fully *body-bound* and *self-centred*, it is called **sexuality (kāma)**. Such a person may not *act* sexually (commit *methuna*, “pairing,” ie, meeting of bodies) or not appear to do so, but the sexuality can subtly play itself in one’s acts or speech.

A **sexual act (methuna)**, on the other hand, may be sensual or merely physical; the latter, in the sense, for example, that animals “do it” without thinking about it (not the way humans do it), biologically, with neither love nor emotions. Technically, according to **the Veḷu, dvāreyya Sutta (S 55.7)**, a “sexual act” is between a male and a female. One is said to “have affairs” (*cārittaṃ āpajjeyya*)¹ with another.

The conduct (that is, the affair) is wrong (micchācāra) when one is already married, betrothed, or “protected” in any way (by the state, relatives, etc; including the underaged, ie, those under the care of a family member), or is unwilling. In the last case, when the spouse is unwilling, a forced sexual act is regarded as *micchācāra*.²

The sexual act is “proper” (not breaking the 3rd precept) when it is between a husband and wife (that is, they are married or committed to one another), and both are willing partners done at a proper time in private. Hence, even between such a couple, it is wrong when one of them is taking the celibacy precept (to abstain from incelibacy). Understandably, it is also improper and wrong to commit sex acts during a meditation retreat, especially when the celibacy precept is being practised.

2.1.1.3 A monastic or avowed celibate who commits a sexual act breaks the precept. In the case of a monastic, he/she automatically falls from the state of being a monk or a nun. In other words, it is both of karmic and legal breach; it is an offence entailing “defeat” (*pārājika*).³

The Vinaya defines a sexual act (when committed entailing “defeat,” *pārājika*) as follows:

¹ This implies sexual acts (D 3:69,21; DA 853,3 *micchācāraṃ*, “misconduct”).

² **Veḷu, dvāreyya S (S 55.7)** @ SD 1.5 (1); **Sāleyyaka S (M 41,8/1:286 & 41.12/1:287 f)**, SD 5.7. This interpretation is updated to reflect current social conventions and realities.

³ SD 52.12 (1.2.1.1); SD 58.4 (2.1.1.3).

“When a monk, having entered upon the monks’ training and way of life, without first renouncing the training and disclosing his weakness,⁴ has sexual intercourse [genital, oral or anal],⁵ even with an animal, he is defeated [expelled]⁶ and not in communion.” (Pār 1, V 3:23,33-36; for nuns, V 4:213)

The Vinaya defines a sexual act as letting the male organ into another, even an animal, to the depth of a sesame seed (V 3:28). The rule is discussed in great legal detail in the Sutta, vibhaṅga of the Vinaya.⁷

It can only be briefly stated here that early Buddhism has very little to say about homosexuality and the various ideas of sexuality or gender today. The main reasons for the teachings and rules regarding sex are to protect the life of **renunciation and celibate practice** of dhyana meditation, as well as to protect **the family** as a wholesome institution that is able to support and nourish lay Buddhist living and practice. The rule of thumb then is respect for the person (the body and the being) and personal freedom, which are the values underlying the 3rd precept and precepts governing sexuality.

2.1.1.4 While “sexual act” refers to the actual indulging in sexual intercourse or some form of sexual activity, **sexuality** (*kāma*) refers to one’s attitude to the sexual act or to sex (maleness, femaleness, transgender, etc). Biologically, we cannot really separate “sexual act” and “sexuality”; broadly, the former is what we do and the latter is what we think of it. However, psychologically, we can study, define and accept sexuality for a better understanding and respect for the person, that is, our body and our being.

The sexual act, as a rule—some might say **aesthetically**—promises pleasure, that is, to totally enjoy the body for oneself, even when it involves others. Aesthetically, wholesome sexuality encourages communication and respect for self and others. **Biologically**, it is an act to procreate, to have children. However, **socially**, sexuality is often an expression or projection of one’s high social status, wealth or power, especially through having numerous partners, offspring, or for diversion.

With better education (especially medical and psychological insights) and weakening dominance of religion, gender-related issues are accepted, discussed and even resolved for individuals or groups. The Buddhist principal here is respect not only for the body but also the mind. Hence, Buddhists should work to provide the best wholesome conditions for the full development of those who consider themselves as being different from the dominant idea of sexuality.

2.1.1.5 We should therefore be especially aware of the psychological nature of sexuality (especially the act, but often enough also the attitude) when it is used as an expression of **power** over others, such as in molestation and rape. Strictly speaking, such a physical act is *bestial* (animal-like), an abuse of power against others (asura-like), or symptoms of unfulfilled life (preta-like), especially in religions or systems that structure themselves on a power hierarchy or religious authority.⁸

⁴ Basically, declaring he is sexually inclined and wants to leave the order (Pār 1.8.2-4 @ V 3:24-28).

⁵ The “3 orifices,” viz, the anus, the vagina or the mouth (Pār 1.9.2 @ V 3:29; V:B 1:121-124). The offence is committed when the male organ enters any of these orifices to the depth of a sesame seed (Pār 1.8.5 @ V 3:28).

⁶ Brahmali’s tr of *pārājika* (V:B 1:125).

⁷ Vinaya Eng tr: Brahmali (ed) & I B Horner (tr), *The Book of Discipline*, SuttaCentral, 2014:100-183, [V:B].

⁸ On the problem of abuse of minors by the Church (esp Catholic), see SD 60.1f (5.4.9.5 (2.2)).

Considering such situations related to sexual conduct, we can say that sex is the most selfish of human acts. With some wry humour, it can be said that sex is time-consuming, whereas the practice of Dharma is to free time to better ourselves. A wise lay practitioner than knows the time for sex and the time to abstain from sex to taste a pleasure that is even better than sex, “the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome states.”⁹

To prevent sexual misconduct and sexual abuse of others, there is **the 3rd precept**, the training rule against sexual misconduct. In spirit, this precept is to respect the person and freedom of others, that they have the right to say no to any sexual act or intimacy. Since any violation of this precept is rooted in *lust, hatred or delusion*, it has dire karmic consequences.

The Avassuta Pariyāya Sutta describes such an unwholesome act as that of one who is “leaking, flowing, or drenched” (*assuta*) with defilements (lust, hate or delusion), that is, of one who is unmindful and has a “**narrow mind**” (*paritta citta*; adj *paritta cetaso*). It is said to be “narrow” because the perpetrators are only concerned with themselves. They do not understand according to reality, how the mind is free and what true wisdom is. As a result, unwholesome states grow, bringing on suffering. [§11]

2.1.1.6 It should be noted that early Buddhism teaches us to see **sensuality** in the proper context of our life and humanity. Sexual misconduct is the misuse of our sense-based being—our human body—against others. Of course, the body (the 5 senses) cannot work by itself in sexuality; it is motivated and driven by the mind (rooted in lust, hatred or delusion).

Hence, there is **the 1st precept**, the respect for life, that is, to live and let live. This means that we should show love, compassion, gladness and equanimity. **Love** is respecting others as they *are* (according to their abilities and disabilities) and *for* what they are (according to their request or condition).

Compassion is to act on that love when those others fail, fail us or fall short of helping themselves so that they are able to regain their health, happiness and dignity.

Gladness is rejoicing in the goodness and successes that others deserve (and when they seem not to deserve it, we show compassion).

Equanimity is when we keep our mind and heart at peace, free from emotional reactivity, even when all the best of our efforts have not brought the results we expected or that the other party deserves. We have sowed the karmic seeds and we should allow time to work on the rest. Psychosocially, this is the meaning of having “an immeasurable mind.” [2.1.2.3]

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⁹ *Na kho aham tassa sukhasa bhāyāmi, yaṃ taṃ sukhaṃ aññatt’ eva kāmehi aññatra akusalehi dhammehi* (M:Ee 1:247,3; M:Ce 1: 584,4 and M:Se 1:458,5: *yantarā*, after which Se continues directly with *aññatr’eva*, omitting *sukham*). On the 2 kinds of pleasures—sensual pleasure and the joy of renunciation—see **Laṭukikōpama S** (M 66,21/1:455), SD 28.11; **Araṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 139,9.3/3:233), SD 7.8. On pleasure felt by the awakened mind, see **Uṇṇābha S** (S 51.15), SD 10.10.